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GENDER AND JEWISH CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN MEDIEVAL  
FRANCE AND GERMANY, 1096-1450

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GENDER AND JEWISH CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN MEDIEVAL  
FRANCE AND GERMANY, 1096-1450

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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*Dedicated to the memory of my father, Andrew Lackner (1959-2017), who always  
believed in the importance of education and hard work.*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation argues that gender is an important tool of analysis in understanding Jewish conversion to Christianity in the High Middle Ages. It establishes that Christian sources describe Jewish women as malleable and easy to convert, with their male counterparts appearing as stubborn and in some cases hostile towards Christianity. Meanwhile, Jewish sources describe women as stalwarts of the faith, who are more willing to give up their own lives rather than convert to Christianity, and are willing to do so much more frequently than men. I argue that Christian sources are influenced by medieval ideas about gender, which included the idea that women were naturally more malleable than men. Meanwhile, Jewish sources, in response to the massacres and forced conversions that occurred in the Rhineland in 1096, attempted to portray a unified front of resistance to Christian influence, and this included elevating women to their status as the “corner pillars” of Judaism. Jewish sources minimize any record of Jewish conversion to Christianity, while Christian sources feature many prominent female converts, making it difficult to know whether Jewish men or women converted more regularly. Through an examination of both Latin and Hebrew administrative documents relating to conversion that feature the cases of 308 individual converts, I found that around 40% of converts to Christianity were female

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Jews were forcibly converted intermittently throughout the Middle Ages,<sup>1</sup> but many Jews also converted willingly and for practical reasons. This dissertation analyzes Jewish men and women who converted between 1095 and 1450. These willing conversions are often overlooked or minimized in the more lachrymose narratives of medieval Jewish-Christian relations. Joseph Shatzmiller has estimated that 10% of the Jewish community in Europe between 1200-1500 converted to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> While this is by no means an overwhelming population, it is significant enough that both Jews and Christians regularly discussed the issue, especially in the latter half of the Middle Ages. I examine not only the cases of actual conversion, but also how medieval Jews and Christians thought about and depicted Jews in their conversion to Christianity. Gender is an important category of analysis in examining Jewish conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages. It gives us more insight into the way that medieval Christians thought about the Jewish “Other.” Christians depicted Jewish women as easier to convert, while Jews depicted them as exemplary stalwarts of the faith who would stop at nothing to prevent their own conversion to Christianity. Neither of these constructions is an accurate representation of reality. Jewish women converted less frequently than their male counterparts, but they still converted on a regular basis, and many of them willingly.

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<sup>1</sup> The best-known example of this is the massacre of Jews in the Rhineland during the First Crusade, which is discussed below pp. 200. For more on forced conversion, see Marina Caffero, *Forced Baptisms: Histories of Jews, Christians, and Converts in Papal Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Shatzmiller, “Jewish Converts to Christianity in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500,” in *Cross-Cultural Convergences in the Crusader Period: Essays Presented to Aryeh Grabois on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Goodich et. al (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 297-318, p. 318.

## **The Historical Background of Medieval Jewish-Christian Relations**

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism during the Second Temple Period in Roman Palestine, but it eventually became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. In 313, under the rule of Constantine, the Roman Empire legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan, and Constantine himself converted to Christianity on his deathbed.<sup>3</sup> Christianity began to be officially supported by the Roman Empire, and Christianity rapidly spread throughout it. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the imperial religion, and this would be the new status quo for relationships between Jews and Christians. From Late Antiquity throughout the entirety of the Middle Ages, Jews lived as a minority people within an increasingly more Christian Europe. Jews now found themselves living within a world dominated by Christianity, and both Jews and Christians grappled with what this meant for centuries. Medieval Christians struggled with the presence of Jews within Christian society. Meanwhile, Jews struggled with what it meant to live within a predominately Christian society.

Church fathers of Late Antiquity struggled with how Jews should be treated in this new environment, and many of them had negative opinions about Judaism. They wrestled with whether Jews could be allowed to continue to live within Christendom as a minority, and whether and how they should be converted. John Chrysostom vitriolically commented on the issue of “Judaizers,” or those who claimed to be Christians but still practiced some aspects of Judaism. He expressed his hatred for both

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<sup>3</sup> *Edict of Milan*, in *Christianity in the Later Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), ed. and trans. David M. Gwynn, pp. 51.

the synagogue and the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup> Some early Church men used coercion and violence to convert the Jews. For example, in 418 bishop Severus of Minorca forcibly converted Jews in his diocese, and exhorted others to do the same.<sup>5</sup> A similar episode occurred in Gaul in the sixth century, where bishop Avitus of Clermont's actions led to the destruction of a synagogue and the eventual ultimatum of "convert or be expelled."<sup>6</sup> Some secular authorities also forcibly converted Jews, including King Chilperic I of Burgundy (539-584),<sup>7</sup> Frankish King Dagobert I (603-639),<sup>8</sup> and the Visigothic King Sisebut (562-621).<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, the idea that violence and forced conversion should be a normal part of the Jewish-Christian relationship was not the dominant perspective. Augustine of Hippo made the most influential statements about how Christians and the Church should treat Jews living among them. He argued that Jews should not be forcibly converted, nor should they be persecuted. He believed that at the end times the Jews would convert to Christianity, so there was no need to force them to convert. However, he also thought they should be left alone because their very presence validated

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<sup>4</sup> John Chrysostom. "Chrysostom and the Jews of Antioch," ed. and trans. James Parkes, in *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1934), pp. 163-166.

<sup>5</sup> While Bernhard Blumenkranz's argument against the historicity of Severus' letter was long held as the consensus, more recently scholarship by Scott Bradbury has rehabilitated the letter as a genuine historical source. See Severus of Minorca, *Letter on the Conversion of Jews*, ed. and trans. and with analysis by Scott Bradbury (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For his refutation of Blumenkranz's arguments, see p. 9-15.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1974), pp. 265-267. For more on this episode, see Brian Brennan, "The Conversion of the Jews of Clermont in AD 576," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 36:2 (October 1985), pp. 321-337.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Franks*, ed. and trans. Thorpe, pp. 347-348.

<sup>8</sup> He was reportedly encouraged to do this by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, who was undertaking similar policies in his own empire. See Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 216-217.

<sup>9</sup> His policy regarding the forced conversion of Jews was also supported by local Church officials, who approved of forced conversion at the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633, with Canon 57. For more on forced conversion during the Visigothic period, see Henriette-Rika Beneviste, "On the Language of Conversion: Visigothic Spain Revisited," *Historiein* 5 (2006), p. 72-87, pp. 75-77.



Christianity. He argued that anyone who had doubts about Christianity as a new upstart religion could be directed towards the Jews, whose books Christians also drew from. The presence of Jews proved the ancient lineage of Christianity which could help convince doubters of Christianity's legitimacy. Augustine also argued that Jews should not be allowed to have the same quality of life as their Christian neighbors;<sup>10</sup> later popes and canon lawyers interpreted that to mean that Jews should not serve in positions of power over Christians, meaning Jews should not own Christian slaves or be appointed to public office. Scholars have given the term "Augustinian Doctrine" or "Doctrine of Witness" to the idea that Jews should serve as "custodians" or "guardians" of the Old Law and should not be persecuted. Augustine's ideas about Jewish-Christian relations would prevail for much of the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup>

Popes further fleshed out the Augustinian doctrine, and actively attempted to protect Jews from violence and forced conversion. Gregory the Great started this tradition in 602 with a bull of protection for the Jews.<sup>12</sup> This bull established that Jews should be protected, allowed to practice their religion unmolested, and should not be forcibly converted. But it also confirmed that they should also exist in a lesser state than their Christian neighbors. For Gregory, making sure that Jews existed in a lesser state meant keeping them out of positions of power over their Christian neighbors. To this end, he forbade Jews to be appointed to public office or to own Christian slaves.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 18.46, ed. and trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), p. 77-79.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Augustine's thoughts on the place of Jews within Christian society and the impact that his writings had on Christendom ever since his own time, see Paula Frederiksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Gregory the Great, no. 28 in *The Apostolic See and The Jews* vol. 1, ed. Shlomo Simonsohn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988), p. 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 12, p. 10; no. 22, p. 18-19; no. 24, p. 20.

papal protection that Gregory extended would set a precedent, and it resulted in many popes of the Middle Ages protecting Jewish communities from their Christian neighbors, with popes threatening excommunication for anyone who violated the protective bull.<sup>14</sup>

In short, things were relatively peaceful for Jews in the Early Middle Ages, with a few exceptions.<sup>15</sup> While occasionally there were attempts at forced conversion as well as violence committed against them, the threat of excommunication wielded by the papacy for these actions was a successful deterrent of widespread attacks or attempts at forced conversion. Popes responded harshly and quickly when these things occurred. In some regions and times, Jews even seem to have received preferential treatment, and the various restrictions that were supposed to be placed on Jews according to the Church were directly ignored. In the Carolingian empire, despite the best efforts of the papacy to prevent it, Jews were appointed to positions within the government and freely employed Christian slaves and servants. This became the most pronounced under the rule of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious (814-840).<sup>16</sup> Louis even moved the market day from Saturday to Sunday to accommodate Jewish traders who could not work during the Sabbath. Jews even became important fixtures in towns, to such a degree that in 1071 Bishop Rudigar of Speyer tried to entice Jews to move to his city so that its

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<sup>14</sup> The most thorough study of these bulls, which all have the incipit of "*Sicut Iudeis*", is that of Solomon Grayzel "The Papal Bull *Sicut Iudeis*," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: NYU Press, 1991), p. 231-259.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the Visigoths, the ruling power in the Iberian Peninsula during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries issued several laws in the *Lex Visigothorum* limiting the rights of Jews. They were Arian Christians, and this could have played a role in their not adopting the Augustinian Doctrine. *Lex Visigothorum*, ed. S.P. Scott (Boston: Boston Book Company, 1910), Book V, 143-176 features an entire category of laws aimed at persecuting the Jews.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Bachrach, *Early Medieval Jewish Policy in Western Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 84-88.

renown “might increase a thousand-fold.” Rudigar granted the Jews who came to his city various privileges, among them the right to employ Christian wet-nurses, despite the papal prohibition against it.<sup>17</sup>

However, this Golden Age eventually came to an end. In France, widespread attacks occurred against Jews in the early eleventh century after the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In France, a rumor spread that Jews in the Holy Land had assisted him and Christians sought retribution for this.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the eleventh century during the First Crusade, some of the less well-organized armies attacked Jews on their way to the Holy Land.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars see these events as a watershed that brought about or indicated that a change had occurred in the way Christians thought of Jews. Robert Chazan has dismissed this, pointing out that despite the widespread nature of these attacks, Jews continued to prosper in medieval France and Germany.<sup>20</sup>

However, Chazan and others do believe a change occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that resulted in depictions of Jews and treatment of Jews becoming more negative.<sup>21</sup> . Scholars have different opinions about why this occurred, but they

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<sup>17</sup> The text can be found in translation in *Church, State, and Jew in the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert Chazan (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House Publishers, 1980), p.58-59.

<sup>18</sup> Adémar of Chabannes, *Chronicon Aquitanicum et Francicum*, ed. Jules Chavanon (Paris, 1897), p. 153. The idea that Jews were in league with Muslims was a common idea about medieval Christians. See Allan Harris Cutler and Ellen Elmquist Cutler, *The Jew as Ally of the Muslim* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> For the Jewish accounts of the massacrings of the First Crusade see *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades*, ed. and trans. Shlomo Eidelberg (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), p. 15-72, esp. p. 28-33. For a Christian account, see Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, ed. Susan B. Eddington (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), no. 27, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Scholars have different perspectives on why this happened, but most agree that this occurred at some point between the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. See Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval-Anti Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) for the argument that growing Christian awareness of the Talmud forever transformed Jewish-Christian relations. See Irven

agree that it did. Chazan has argued that the movement of Jews into the field of money-lending, as well as the various privileges that Jews were granted in contracts like Rudigar's, resulted in a great deal of resentment towards Jews and eventually led to the degradation of their status within Christendom.<sup>22</sup> Gavin Langmuir has described this change as a move towards "irrational thought" in which Christians no longer used theology to rationalize their toleration of the Jews, but developed fantastical myths to rationalize their negative treatment of them. These myths also expressed various anxieties about changes within Christianity, such as the doctrine of transubstantiation. Accusations against Jews included accusations of child murder, the consumption of blood, and desecration of the host.<sup>23</sup> Langmuir and others, most notably Miri Rubin, have pointed out that these fantasies were a way to externalize Christian anxieties about the new practice of transubstantiation.<sup>24</sup>

Jeremy Cohen has argued that the shift resulted from a realization that the "hermeneutical Jew" that the Augustinian Doctrine had created was no longer valid. According to Cohen, it became clear that this "hermeneutical Jew" did not align with living and breathing Jews when a Jewish convert to Christianity named Nicholas Donin

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Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2012) for the argument that the increasing reliance on and study of classical medicine caused Christians to think of Jews differently, because they had humors that were more "effeminate" and carried "marks of distinction" that made them naturally different than Christians. See Gavin Langmuir's twin volumes, *Toward a Definition of Anti-Semitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and *History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) for the argument that anxiety about Christianity resulted in new sensationalized constructions of the Jewish Other. See R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (New York: Blackwell, 1987) for the argument that the rising importance and power of bureaucrats led to this transformation.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotype and Modern Anti-Semitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 36-39.

<sup>23</sup> Langmuir, *History, Religion and Antisemitism* 298-299 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 298-299.

<sup>24</sup> Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

brought the Talmud to the attention of Pope Gregory IX in the thirteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

Donin claimed that the book contained slanders against Christ and Mary, and this resulted in the papacy attempting to seize, inspect, and burn the books throughout Europe. Cohen argues that the realization that Judaism had in fact evolved since the time of the Church Fathers came as a shock. Jews were not properly serving their purpose as “custodians of the Old Law,” by reading a post-Biblical text. This negated the protection of the Augustinian doctrine which resulted in poorer treatment of the Jews in Europe in the thirteenth century.

Irven Resnick has pointed to the flowering of medieval science as a major factor in the decreased status of Jews. R.I. Moore sees the degradation of the status of Jews as part of a larger society-wide “formation of a persecuting society” that affected other “others” within Christendom as well, including lepers, homosexuals, and heretics. For Moore, the increased centralization of both sacred and secular powers resulted in the creation of new bureaucratic offices whose duty it was to classify and describe the kingdom of their employer. In so doing, they classified certain groups as “deviant” such as Jews and heretics, eventually resulting in widespread and programmatic persecution of those groups and others.<sup>26</sup>

Jewish sources in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also expressed a greater concern and fear of Christian neighbors than is present in earlier sources. Jews began actively writing anti-Christian polemics for the first time during this period because of this increased tension. Hanne Trautner-Kromann has argued that polemic began to be

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Moore, *Persecuting Society*, p. 105-110.

produced because of increased anxiety and tension that developed because of the increasingly “persecuting society.”<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the reason, Jews began to appear as evil hostile adversaries in Christian artwork and literature, committing heinous acts of ritual murder and host desecration for the sole purpose of destroying Christianity. However, some constructions of the Jewish “other” were not so libelous. In medieval Christian literature, artwork, and hagiography, it is typically only Jewish *men* who commit acts of ritual murder, host desecration, and icon profanation. Jewish women frequently played a very different role in Christian sources – that of the willing convert to Christianity.

### **Gender and Conversion Studies**

The use of gender to better understand certain aspects of medieval religiosity is nothing new. Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* is one of the most important works in the field, as it established that the sanctity of medieval men and women was depicted differently based on gender stereotypes and expectations. Specifically, she argues that the sanctity of women was usually based in some way in food – either on the abstention from it or through miracles involving it, especially the communion wafer.<sup>28</sup> This is because food is something that was commonly associated with women in the Middle Ages, as they had direct control over it within the household. By applying similar methodology to the process of conversion for medieval Jews, I will

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<sup>27</sup> Hanne Trautner-Kromann, *Shield and Sword: Jewish Polemics against Christianity and the Christians in France Spain from 1100-1500* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), p. 193.

<sup>28</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.)

demonstrate that the way that both medieval Jews and Christians discussed conversion depended heavily on the gender of the convert.

Much of the discussion among modern scholars of medieval Jewish conversion to Christianity focuses on the sensationalized constructions of Jews in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries without considering the gendered nature of the Jewish “other.” They focus primarily on the negative depictions of male Jews and do not discuss the way that women are depicted at all. However, a few scholars have written about differences in the way that Jewish men and women were treated by Christians, pointing out, for instance that Jews women were treated more leniently in fifteenth-century inquisitorial cases.<sup>29</sup> Irvn Resnick has noted that Christian sources regularly describe Jewish women as attractive and Jewish men as ugly,<sup>30</sup> and a recent doctoral dissertation dedicated a few pages to discussing gendered constructions of Jewish conversion.<sup>31</sup> But none of these works only scratch the surface of how gender impacted the Christian perception of conversion; none of them discuss the way that Jewish sources confronted the issue.

Some scholars have taken a somewhat gendered approach to the conversion of Jews to Christianity, but mostly just in passing. William Chester Jordan, Judith R. Baskin, and Simcha Goldin have argued that Jewish men, especially young Jewish men, were far more likely to convert to Christianity than women, who were regularly and

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<sup>29</sup> Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, “Witchcraft, Magic, and the Jews in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1996), 419-433, p. 426-427.

<sup>30</sup> Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, 300-301.

<sup>31</sup> Chaviva Levin, *Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Medieval Europe: Encountered and Imagined* (PhD Diss.: New York University, 2006), p. 230-236 focus on this phenomenon.

inherently resistant to conversion.<sup>32</sup> I critique and analyze these arguments, arguing that these scholars are greatly influenced by the Jewish sources which depict women as the stalwarts of Judaism. Simha Goldin's book *Apostasy and Jewish Identity in Medieval Europe* contains a chapter on how women's conversion is depicted in Jewish sources,<sup>33</sup> but my research has led me to disagree with many of his conclusions. Goldin has argued that in Jewish sources it is "difficult to find any trace of willing female converts to Christianity"<sup>34</sup> and that "Women, more so than men, adhered to Judaism and were willing to make sacrifices, no matter the cost, to hold on to their religion."<sup>35</sup> He also contends that Jewish men and women are depicted in much the same way in the crusade chronicles.<sup>36</sup> I have found much more than a trace of female Jewish converts willing to convert to Christianity in both Christian and Jewish sources. I also argue that the crusade chronicles, while certainly depicting women more as equals to men more than most other medieval Jewish sources, still contain some gendered elements when the converts discussed within them are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Many scholars of Jewish conversion to Christianity have been influenced by the same narrative that many of the texts seek to employ: Jewish women

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<sup>32</sup> See for example William Chester Jordan, "Adolescence and Conversion: A Research Agenda," in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Notre Dame Conferences in Medieval Europe 10, eds. Michael Signer and John van Engen (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 77-94; Judith R. Baskin, "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 94-114, p. 107-108; Simha Goldin, *Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), esp. 26-37.

<sup>33</sup> Simha Goldin, *Apostasy and Jewish Identity in High Middle Ages Northern Europe: 'Are You Still my Brother?'*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 77-94. He also discusses the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity and makes similar claims, especially as it relates to those captured during episodes of forced conversion in his *Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 26-50.

<sup>34</sup> Goldin, *Apostasy*, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Goldin, *Jewish Women*, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-30.



were stalwarts of the faith, “cornerstones of Judaism,”<sup>37</sup> who were more resistant to conversion than their male counterparts. While it does seem that women converted less regularly than men, many women who converted to Christianity have been overlooked, and the strength of this narrative is overstated.

Steven Kruger has argued that gender had an influence on the way that Christians thought about Jewish conversion, and has even argued that Jewish women are more susceptible to conversion than their male counterparts from the Christian perspective. This dissertation lends further evidence to that claim. However, his explanation for this phenomenon contrasts with my own. In *The Spectral Jew*, Kruger argues that the idea that women are more likely to convert to men is “representative of a sort of gender reversal: where in Christianity it is the “fathers” of the church who most strongly recognize and speaks its truths, here it is the daughters...”<sup>38</sup> I argue that the idea that women were more susceptible to conversion was perfectly in line with medieval Christian gender norms. Medieval thinkers believed that women were more malleable than men, so it made sense that women were easier to convert to Christianity.

Other scholars have examined gender and conversion outside of the Middle Ages. In her analysis of conversion in early modern Germany, Elisheva Carlebach has argued that women were more difficult to convert than their male counterparts, often refusing to convert even when their husbands did. This led to one Jewish convert to Christianity writing a polemical text in which he described Jewish women as willing to

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<sup>37</sup> This term comes from Psalms 144:12, and is a phrase commonly invoked by medieval Jews to refer to women in the community. The Psalm reads: “We whose sons are as plants grown up in their youth, whose daughters are as cornerstones [lit. corner pillars] carved after the fashion of a palace.”

<sup>38</sup> Steven Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 85.

take their children's lives rather than allow them to convert, and possessing more hatred towards Christianity than their male counterparts.<sup>39</sup> In her discussion of medieval conversion, she also notes that a "pattern of male conversion and female resistance was the dominant pattern for married couples."<sup>40</sup> I present numerous accounts of Jewish women converting to Christianity, calling into question any idea that they were especially resistant to conversion in a way that men were not, while also pointing out that the way their conversions are depicted differs strongly from that of their male counterparts, in both Jewish and Christian sources.

Paola Tartakoff has examined Jewish conversion to Christianity in the medieval Crown of Aragon, and she found that circumstances surrounding conversions often varied depending on gender. The most prevalent of these was the fact that Jewish women seemed to convert to escape abusive husbands, while others merely used threats of conversion as a bargaining chip in an attempt to get a divorce.<sup>41</sup> I argue that this phenomenon was not only restricted to the Kingdom of Aragon between 1200 and 1391, as Jewish women in medieval France and Germany also seem to have used threats of conversion as a tool.

Karl Morrison has provided a detailed examination of conversion to Christianity in twelfth-century Europe, arguing that conversion narratives underwent a drastic shift towards the use of characteristically male elements. This includes images of converts as a "brotherhood of warriors" and "biblical scholars," which are inherently masculine

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<sup>39</sup> Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1750* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 182-184.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Paola Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250-1391* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 68-75.

images. Morrison does not examine Jewish conversion to Christianity very much in his book, focusing primarily on the autobiographical account of a Jewish convert to Christianity called Herman-Judah,<sup>42</sup> who he argues embodies the exclusively masculine ability of men to read and better understand scripture compared to their female counterparts.<sup>43</sup> However, Morrison is not interested in examining the conversion of Jews as a broader phenomenon, and is instead interested in close readings of specific narratives of conversion, like Herman-Judah's. However, his emphasis on the "masculine aesthetic" of conversion narratives does appear in some of the narratives of conversion discussed below.

Recently, Efraim Sicher's *The Jew's Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* has taken a closer look at the gendered nature of conversion. He analyzes the Christian trope Jewish women who are the daughters of evil and obstinate Jewish men. However, the book only spends a single chapter on the Middle Ages, and only traces conversion in literary sources, focusing specifically on tales containing evil Jewish fathers and young Jewish women who are "ripe for conversion."<sup>44</sup>

Sara Lipton has produced arguably the most important work to date on the gendered nature of the Jewish "other" in medieval Europe. She has noted the difference in the way male and female Jews are depicted in the accompanying art of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, arguing that images of male and female Jews served very different purposes. While males carry stereotypical signifiers of their religion and culture, the

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this figure and the debate over the historicity of his narrative, see 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).

<sup>43</sup> Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992) p. 51-56.

<sup>44</sup> Efraim Sicher, *The Jew's Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* (New York: Lexington, 2017), pp. 25-56 focus on the medieval examples of this narrative.

Jewish women do not look much different from the Christian women in the *Cantigas*. Lipton argues that in the *Cantigas*, women symbolize the Christian hope for the future conversion of the Jews while the men symbolize the antiquated and blind nature of Judaism.<sup>45</sup> Lipton contends that this a result of medieval thought about women, whose very nature supposedly made them receptive to suggestion and conversion, so no symbolism was necessary to convey the general receptiveness of Jewish women to Christianity.<sup>46</sup>

This dissertation aims to build on the work of Lipton, further establishing the gendered nature of the Jewish “other” within Christian texts and other cultural products. Jews and Christians both saw major differences between male and female conversion. Christian sources depict Jewish women converting easily and willingly, while male characters carry negative Jewish stereotypes. Meanwhile, Jewish sources minimize any mention of Jewish women who converting willingly, and instead depict Jewish women as stalwarts of the faith who are less willing to convert than their male counterparts. If one relied solely on Jewish sources, it would seem that men converted more frequently, while the reverse is true with Christian sources. I will examine and analyze these differences, explaining their existence from within both medieval Christendom and Judaism, while also exploring the rate of conversion of male and female converts from Judaism to Christianity.

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<sup>45</sup> Sara Lipton, “Where are the Jewish Women? On the non-Iconography of the Jewess in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*” *Jewish History* 22, (2008), 139-227, p.155.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

Furthermore, what Salo Baron labeled as the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history”<sup>47</sup> is alive and well in the discussion of Jewish conversion to Christianity. Most scholars focus either on the negative depictions of Jewish converts to Christianity or on forced conversion, while overlooking the fact that women are depicted in a different manner than their male counterparts, and willing conversions occurred with some regularity. There is a plethora of evidence to indicate that there were willing converts to Christianity throughout the Middle Ages, and especially between 1096 and 1450, and I want to draw attention to this fact to combat the lachrymose conception.

Through an analysis of several types of both Christian and Jewish sources, I reveal that the absence of gender as a tool of analysis has led to certain unique aspects of both the male and female experience of conversion being overlooked. The experience of male and female Jews who encountered conversion, and the way that they are discussed and depicted by those around them varies greatly depending on the gender of the convert.

Some scholars of religion have bemoaned a lack of research on gender and conversion, something that this dissertation seeks to rectify. In Lewis R. Rambo’s pioneering book on the anthropology of religious conversion, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, he discussed the future research that needed to be done on conversion. He noted that “[t]here are very few studies of women’s conversion experience... [and there are] important issues that need to be addressed: Do women experience conversion

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<sup>47</sup> Salo Baron spent much of his career combatting this perception of Jewish history, which he argues resulted in a distorted narrative of never ending persecutions for the Jews, especially during the Middle Ages. He first coined the term in Salo W. Baron, “Ghetto and Emancipation [originally published in 1928]” in *The Menorah Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, ed. Leo Schwarz (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973) p. 63, and would go on to combat it at various points in his magisterial multi-volume work Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 18 vols. 1952-1983).

differently from men? If so, what are those differences? To what extent are women's experiences distorted, denigrated, or denied by any patriarchal requirements of the conversion stereotypes?"<sup>48</sup> While Rambo wrote this twenty-five years ago, very few scholars have examined this in the context of medieval Jewish conversion, and not in any sustained fashion, with discussion on these topics limited to short articles or a few pages in a monograph. I aim to answer these questions in the context of the conversion of European Jewish women to Christianity in the High Middle Ages, arguing that indeed, the experience of Jewish women as converts was very different to that of their male counterparts due to the social construction of gender, and their narratives were certainly distorted depending on the goal of their authors. This is best represented by the fact that medieval Jewish sources try to minimize any mention of Jewish women who converted to Christianity, while Christian sources frequently depict women as the easiest and most desirable of all Jewish converts.

While Rambo is the sociologist whose work has had the greatest influence on the path of the arguments and research presented here, other anthropologists and sociologists of religion have also influenced this work. Peter G. Stromberg has argued in his analysis of modern converts to Evangelical Christianity, that the language of conversion narratives themselves is incredibly important in helping individuals reinforce their religious conviction.<sup>49</sup> While I cannot focus on narratives of conversion from the individuals who actually converted in most cases the way Stromberg is able to in his own research, many of the narratives involving Jewish conversion to Christianity

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<sup>48</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

or their resistance to it helped those who read or heard them better understand their own religious convictions.

Ines W. Jindra's *A New Model of Religious Conversion* answers Rambo's call to start examining conversion and gender.<sup>50</sup> Like other sociologists, Jindra focuses on much more recent cases of conversion, but many of his conclusions about gender and conversion also apply to Jewish conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages. In his analysis of 52 conversion narratives, he found that women's discussion of their conversion much more frequently discussed "gender-related background experiences." He discusses multiple instances where women saw conversion to cope with or improve a bad marriage,<sup>51</sup> or with being an outcast within one's own original religious community. Medieval conversion narratives also appear to emphasize the gender of female converts more than they do male converts, and the use of conversion as a form of escape is also a common thread between the modern conversions examined by Jindra and the conversions studied here.

Eliza F. Kent has also pursued research on gender and conversion. In *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* she has argued that Protestant missionaries in nineteenth-century India saw women as being more difficult to convert than their male counterparts, so they established special programs with the goal of bringing about the conversion of women.<sup>52</sup> Kent has gone on

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<sup>50</sup> Ines. W. Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 161-182.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

<sup>52</sup> Eliza F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004), p. 25.

to champion the use of gender in studying conversion, because doing so “...makes visible a great many facets of this complex phenomenon.”<sup>53</sup>

Chronologically, this dissertation concentrates on the period between 1096 and 1450. The year 1096 marks the date of the massacre of Jews in the Rhineland during the First Crusade. In clear violation of Church policy, this armies offered a “convert or die” ultimatum to the Jewish communities throughout the Rhineland. Following the crusades, and especially by the thirteenth century, Christian missionary efforts drastically increased, as do the records of converts. This is a time period where Christian hopes for Jewish conversion to Christianity drastically increased, while the Jewish community felt increasing tension from their Christian neighbors.

Geographically, I concentrate primarily on medieval France and Germany. This region of Europe had thriving and prosperous Jewish communities for much of the Middle Ages, which served as major centers of Jewish thought. Jews and Christians came into regular contact there, so there are more documents relating to Jewish conversion to Christianity are extant in that region.

I make several arguments about how medieval conversion occurred and how it was perceived, by examining differences in the way that male and female converts are treated in both Christian and Jewish sources. In doing so, it creates a more complete picture of the conversion of medieval Jews to Christianity. Most of the sources examined here were widely circulated and well-known, as sources of this type are the best at conveying what the general public thought, or at least was taught to thought,

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<sup>53</sup> Eliza F. Kent, “Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religious Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 296-326, p. 318.



about these converts. This dissertation is divided into two main parts, with the first part examining Christian sources and the second part examining Jewish sources. Because of the nature of this dissertation in its examination of a multitude of different sources in separate chapters, each chapter has its own brief introduction. In the conclusion, the information about all the converts examined within this dissertation is synthesized, allowing for a more general discussion of Jewish conversion to Christianity in the High Middle Ages. In all, this dissertation examines documents containing details about the conversion of 308 different individuals from 1096-1450, and examines several other documents that give us information about how medieval Jewish converts were treated by both Christians and Jews.

### **The Structure of This Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into two parts based on the type of sources each of the chapters examines. Following this introduction, Chapters 2-6 examine Christian sources, and chapters 7-9 look at Jewish sources. Chapter 10 provides a conclusion, including a baseline for the rate of male and female conversion from 1096-1450.

Chapter 2 examines papal documents to analyze papal policy towards Jewish converts to Christianity and its change over time. An examination of papal documents that deal with stipends for converts reveals several cases of Jewish women who converted on their own, and a quantitative analysis of these sources reveals that while Jewish women were in the minority, 40% of the converts featured in papal documents were women. Jewish men who converted to Christianity also appear in many documents that their female counterparts do not, with male converts asking for licenses to preach and approval of their continued service as doctors.

Chapter 3 examines sermon *exempla*, didactic tales that medieval preachers inserted into their sermons while preaching to popular audiences. Many of these tales contained stories that involved the conversion of Jews to Christianity. These stories informed the audience about the clear triumph of Christianity over Judaism, as well as heresy. However, male and female converts in these stories are depicted very differently. Many male Jewish characters in these tales convert, but only after committing stereotypical evil acts that medieval Christians often accused them of, such as ritual murder, host desecration, or summoning demons. A miracle prevents them from performing one of these acts, and this leads to their conversion. Meanwhile, Jewish women are very rarely depicted as taking part in these evil acts against Christianity, and instead convert due to their own introspection, interaction with an advocate, or witnessing a Marian miracle.

Chapter 4 examines how canon law dealt with the issue of Jewish converts to Christianity, revealing that many medieval canon lawyers allowed male Jewish converts to Christianity to continue living with their Jewish wives for a year, with the hope that he could convince her to convert to Christianity. The same lawyers did not allow Jewish women who had converted to Christianity to remain with their husbands, as they were concerned that they would easily be influenced by their husbands, who could return her to Judaism.

Chapter 5 examines Jewish converts to Christianity in the popular medieval hagiographical compendium, *The Golden Legend*. The *Legend* presents something of a counterpoint to sermon *exempla*, papal documents, and canon law, completely omitting stories about female Jews who converted to Christianity. Instead, male Jews appear

both as villains trying to thwart a saint, and as heroic figures who convert of their own volition. The intended purpose of the *Legend* is likely what led to such a different construction of male Jewish converts to Christianity. It was intended for a more educated audience, and the rhetorical purpose was vastly different than that of *exempla*. Hagiography does not seek to make an argument for the validity of Christianity; instead it argues for the sanctity of individuals. Many of these tales present Jews in a very positive light, and even the most negative depictions of Jewish converts to Christianity in the *Legend* are more positive than typical depictions of male Jewish converts in sermon *exempla*.

Chapter 6 provides some concluding remarks about Christian sources, proposing that male and female Jewish converts are treated quite differently in the High Middle Ages. It argues that an increased number of female saints and a resurgence of the cult of the Virgin Mary helped contribute to the idea that Jewish women were more pious than their male counterparts.

Chapter 7 examines the way that medieval Jewish legal authorities – the rabbis – dealt with the various issues that the conversion of a Jew to Christianity could create. While rabbis before the twelfth century were much more willing and enthusiastic about accepting Jews who had previously converted to Christianity back into the community, as tensions rose between Jews and Christians, rabbis treated converts more negatively. However, this more negative treatment is limited primarily to the way that the rabbis discuss male converts. Jewish women apostates' status improved as the Middle Ages wore on, as it became easier for them to return to the Jewish community and resume their own lives – even being allowed to re-enter married life with their Jewish husband.

This is because Jewish women were viewed as “corner stones” of the community, since halachically, Judaism is passed on to children through mothers. This focus on women as the conduits of Judaism led to them being allowed back into the community with much greater ease.

Chapter 8 examines the Hebrew chronicles of the First and Second crusades. These accounts highlight the actions of the Jewish community in the Rhineland, where many Jews are said to have taken their own lives rather than allow themselves to be converted to Christianity. Through a detailed examination of every individual who was willing to take their lives or allow themselves to be killed in the face of forced conversion, I argue that women, even in these sources where they are in many ways the most empowered, are still affected by the gender stereotypes in which the authors of these chronicles believed. Jewish women died passively more frequently than their male counterparts; and with one exception, they do not fight and attempt to kill the crusaders who are attacking them, while male Jews are reported doing this several times within the chronicles.

Chapter 9 looks at the *Sefer Chasidim*, a popular compendium of didactic tales for medieval Jews living in medieval Ashkenaz. Jewish converts to Christianity were a major focal point of the work. This source does not mention any independent women as converts to Christianity, further indicating a desire to minimize discussion on that topic. It also shows a great deal of ambivalence with how to deal with converts, indicating that Jews and their converted family members stayed in contact after they left the fold, even though they were urged not to.

Chapter 10 provides quantitative analysis examining the 308 converts that this dissertation examined. It reveals that in both Christian and Jewish sources, about 40% of the converts were female. It proposes that this is a reliable baseline for future studies examining the conversion of Jewish men and women from 1096-1450.

## Chapter 2: Jewish Conversion in Papal Documents, 590-1450

### Introduction

Papal documents are an invaluable source for medieval historians, often providing information about individuals and policies that simply would not be accessible without them. They serve as a good starting point for an analysis of Christian perspectives on Jewish conversion to Christianity. The writings of the medieval popes give us information about official papal policy regarding Jewish conversion to Christianity, and sometimes even give us a glimpse into the lives of individual converts. Of all the Christian sources examined here, papal documents have been the most thoroughly analyzed in the work of other scholars. Virtually any work on the Middle Ages, including on medieval Jewish-Christian relations, makes use of papal documents, as they provide an important foundation for understanding the events of the Middle Ages.

Solomon Grayzel was the first historian to attempt a detailed analysis of papal policy towards Jews in the Middle Ages. He wrote an important article analyzing the protective *Sicut Iudeis* bull; in it he argued that up until the thirteenth century, popes regularly issued bulls threatening excommunication towards those who might seek to harm or forcibly convert Jews. However, during the pontificate of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), a drastic shift occurred, and it became easier for Christians to get around the protection.<sup>54</sup> He also wrote and edited two books that analyzed various papal documents from the thirteenth century.<sup>55</sup> In the two volumes, he included both English

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<sup>54</sup> Solomon Grayzel "The Papal Bull *Sicut Iudeis*," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: NYU Press, 1991), pp. 231-259.

<sup>55</sup> Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century: A Study of Their Relations During the Year 1198-1254, Based on the Papal Letters and the Conciliar Decrees of the Period* (Philadelphia,

translations and the original Latin of papal documents written during the century. He dedicated an entire chapter to the issues of “The Church and Jewish Converts.”<sup>56</sup> He argued that the thirteenth century “was characterized by great efforts in that direction,”<sup>57</sup> and he noted that while the Church was opposed to forced conversion of Jews,<sup>58</sup> it was willing to offer various benefits to Jewish converts to prevent them from wanting to return to Judaism,<sup>59</sup> but this is where his discussion on the topic ends.

Edward A. Synan wrote the first general survey of papal policy towards the Jews that covered the entirety of the Middle Ages. *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages* is a pope-by-pope discussion of the various issues related to Jews that popes dealt with during the Middle Ages. Conversion is an issue that he mentioned briefly, especially during the pontificates of popes who were especially active on the topic,<sup>60</sup> but, since he was interested in a more general view of papal policy towards the Jews in the time period, he did not make any sustained argument about the topic of conversion.

Shlomo Simonsohn has provided not only a history of papal policy towards the Jews, but also an invaluable six-volume collection of papal documents in the original Latin that deal with various issues related to Jews and Judaism from 492 to 1555.<sup>61</sup> In

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PA: Dropsie College, 1933). His second volume, completing his survey of papal policy in the thirteenth century was published posthumously as Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century Volume II, 1254-1314*, ed. Kenneth R. Stow (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 13-21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 13-15.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 18-21.

<sup>60</sup> Edward A. Synan, *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages: An Intense Exploration of Judeo-Christian Relationships in the Medieval World* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). For his discussion of Gregory the Great’s policies towards Jewish conversion, see p. 47-49; for Honorius I, p. 57-59 for Pope Innocent IV, p. 111-112; for Pope Nicholas III see. P. 119-121.

<sup>61</sup> Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews: History* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991). For the other volumes, see Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), 5 volumes, 1988-1991. Simonsohn’s collection of papal documents is quoted extensively in this chapter, as a result future citations of it will be abbreviated

his history of papal policy, he included an entire chapter on Jewish conversion to Christianity, providing the most in-depth discussion on the topic to date.<sup>62</sup> While he provided more detail on the topics, and follows them all the way through into the mid-sixteenth century, Simonsohn did not provide much discussion on issues that had not already been confronted by Synan and Grayzel,. He focused his discussion on forced conversion and the various benefits Jews could receive after they converted to Christianity.

Most recently, Rebecca Rist wrote a survey of medieval papacy and the Jews.<sup>63</sup> In her book, she is most interested in examining the actual ways in which the papacy and Jews *interacted*, instead focusing on topics like papal protection of the Jews, the pope's actions following the First Crusade, and interactions between the Jews of Rome and the office of the papacy. Rist spends very little time on the actual issue of conversion.

While these publications are excellent and have allowed scholars to achieve a greater understanding on the topic of medieval Jewish-Christian relations, they are somewhat deficient when it comes to a discussion of Jewish converts in the Middle Ages, especially when it comes to using gender as a tool of analysis. Consequently, there are a few recurring elements within these documents that have so far been overlooked.

The papacy regularly wrote about the conversion of Jews to Christianity and the various issues associated with it. Between 590 and 1450, popes addressed the subject of

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to "ASJ 1:3, #1." This example refers to *Apostolic See and the Jews* volume 1, page 3, and refers to document number 1.

<sup>62</sup> ASJ:History, pp. 238-286.

<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Rist, *The Popes and the Jews, 1095-1291* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).



Jewish conversion in one form or another in 146 different papal letters. Many of these letters dealt more abstractly with various issues related to Jewish converts to Christianity, but many of them also give us some information about individual converts. In these 146 letters, 93 individual Jewish converts are mentioned. While this is a vast corpus of sources, they address five broad categories: forced conversion, relapsed converts, stipends and other inducements to convert, Jews who became churchmen or doctors after their conversion, and various issues related to marriage and conversion. While the topics of forced conversion and benefits offered to Jews who were willing to convert has been detailed by other historians, I intend to use these sources not only to outline papal policy towards Jews in the Middle Ages, I also seek to examine the various individuals discussed within these papal documents. Of all Christian sources, papal documents offer us the best opportunity to examine actual individual cases of conversion, as the sources regularly mention the names of individuals. This means it is possible to analyze not only the different ways in which medieval male and female converts were treated; but the large number of sources also makes it possible for quantitative analysis about whether male or female converts are featured in papal documents more regularly.

Unlike the other chapters in this dissertation, this chapter's geography extends out of the purview of France, England, and Germany. This is because the popes dealt with issues throughout Christendom, including in the Iberian Peninsula.

## The Forced Conversion of Jews, 590-1450

Augustine's position that Jews within Christendom should be tolerated and not attacked or molested had a lasting effect on medieval Jewish-Christian relations. Medieval popes regularly issued bulls ordering that Jews should not be attacked or molested in any way. These bulls sometimes applied to all of Christendom, and sometimes to specific regions. These bulls, known as *Sicut Iudeis* bulls, were issued dozens of times in the Middle Ages. In addition to affording protection to Jews on a regular basis in broader terms, popes also regularly addressed the issue of forced conversion within their letters. Of the 146 papal documents relating to the conversion of Jews between 590 and 1450, fifteen (about 10 %) of them deal with the topic of forced conversion.

The first record we have of a pope trying to prevent forced conversion is from the papacy of Gregory the Great (590-604)—a man who set a great many precedents for the papacy, not just regarding Jewish-Christians relations, but regarding virtually all aspects of papal policy. In June of 591, Gregory wrote a letter to the bishops of Arles and Marseilles, and ordered the censure of two bishops who had forcibly converted Jews.<sup>64</sup> He repeated Augustine's words, and noted that Jews should not be converted through force, but through the "sweetness of words." He also noted that forced conversion is not the best way to win souls, since if someone converted only through coercion, they would not be as faithful as someone who converts willingly.

Papal registers between the papacy of Gregory and the tenth century are rather sparse, but as soon as records become plentiful again, we have the next reference to

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<sup>64</sup> *ASJ* 1:4-5, #5.

forced conversion. In the late 930s, Pope Leo VII (936-939) wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz and the papal vicar in Germany, and ordered them to preach the Christian faith to Jews. In it, he explicitly stated that force should not be used to convert them. However, he missed the spirit of Gregory's words, because he wrote that the Jews should be expelled from Mainz if they refused to convert, an ultimatum no other medieval pope approved of.<sup>65</sup>

From the late eleventh century on, popes addressed the issue of forced conversion with regularity. In 1065, Pope Alexander II (1061-1073), wrote a letter to Landulf, who was then the lord of Benevento. In it, he admonished him for forcibly converting the Jews in his domain.<sup>66</sup> In the second half of the twelfth century, Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) issued a *Sicut Iudeis* bull, and he added a new privilege for the Jews: protection from forced conversion.<sup>67</sup>

While this protection from forced conversion was long a standard privilege that the papacy would grant in future *Sicut Iudeis* bulls, popes from the eleventh century on also argued that conversion, even forced conversion, meant that the individual had to remain a Christian. The first hint of this can be found in a letter by Anti-Pope Clement III (1080-1100), which was written between 1097 and 1098 to the bishop of Bamberg.<sup>68</sup> In it, he ordered him to pursue Jews who had converted to Christianity but had been permitted to return to Judaism. While the letter does not make it clear, this is likely a reference to the forced conversions and massacres of the First Crusade, which were

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<sup>65</sup> *ASJ* 1:32-33, #34; While popes in the later Middle Ages did support the decision of secular rulers to expel Jews, it was never in the context of a "convert or be expelled" ultimatum.

<sup>66</sup> *ASJ* 1:39, #39

<sup>67</sup> *ASJ* 1:51, #49.

<sup>68</sup> *ASJ* 1:42, #42.

followed by the Holy Roman Emperor allowing Jews who were forcibly converted to return to Judaism. This document also contained the first reference to the idea of lapsed converts, which would be an ongoing theme in papal documents from the eleventh century onward.

Clement III's letter implied that Jews who have converted, regardless of how that conversion was brought about, could not return to their former religion. This would not be a subject directly addressed by the papacy again until the early thirteenth century. In 1201, Innocent III (1198-1216) changed the way that Jewish converts were viewed in the Middle Ages. That year, he wrote a letter to Imbertus d'Aiguieres, the archbishop of Arles. In it, he repeated the oft-stated papal pronouncement that Jews should not be converted by force, but through the sweetness of words.<sup>69</sup> But he also stated that "if someone has been baptized, even through force, they must observe the Christian faith." In short, while Innocent viewed the process of converting Jews through force as regrettable, he believed that the change that the conversion brought about was irreversible. For Innocent, baptism left an indelible mark on the person who received it, regardless of the state of mind of the person as they were being baptized.<sup>70</sup>

This shift in papal policy, along with his strengthening of the papal inquisition at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, resulted in a shift in the focus of papal documents that dealt with matters of Jewish conversion to Christianity. A new common theme emerged: how to deal with lapsed Jewish converts. These were individuals who had converted in one way or another, but had either retained certain Jewish practices, or

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<sup>69</sup> *ASJ* 1:79, #76.

<sup>70</sup> For more on the legitimacy of forced baptism and the debate surrounding it, see Marcia L. Colish, *Faith, Force, and Fiction in Medieval Baptism Debates* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2015.) See also below, pp. 102-109.

reverted to Judaism altogether. In general, there is a major lull in how frequently popes address the idea of forced conversion following Innocent's letter in 1201, with the focus moving more towards the issue of lapsed converts as the Middle Ages wear on.

The next mention of forced conversion appeared during the papacy of Innocent IV (1243-1254), and it represented another shift in papal policy on the topic. Thomas Aquinas and others had since asserted that the conversion of Jewish minors against their parents' wishes was unethical, and that a child could only choose to convert to Christianity around the age of twelve.<sup>71</sup> This resulted in popes now addressing the issue of forced conversion from this perspective. Innocent IV wrote a letter to Thibaut I, the King of Navarre, in October of 1246. In it, he admonished the king for allowing the forced baptism of Jewish children to occur within his kingdom, and asked him to make more of an effort to protect Jewish children from this treatment. However, this specific reference to forced conversion would be the last one until the fifteenth century, as popes took more and more time to deal with the issue of lapsed Jewish converts. This was part of a shift away from concerns about preventing forced conversion itself to more of a concern about the souls of those Jews who were forcibly converted.

The next pope who would specifically reference forced conversion was Innocent VII (1404-1406), who wrote a papal bull on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1406 that confirmed several privileges for Jews, including protection from forced baptism.<sup>72</sup> In 1418, this protection was restated by Pope Martin V (1417-1431), though more specifically for Jews in Germany, Savoy, and Bresse.<sup>73</sup> He also specifically stated that baptism of Jewish

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Part 3, Question 68, Article 10. For more on Thomas Aquinas and his approach towards Jewish conversion to Christianity, see Chapter 3 below.

<sup>72</sup> *ASJ* 2:621-622, #560.

<sup>73</sup> *ASJ* 2:669-671 #591.

minors against the wishes of their parents was not allowed.<sup>74</sup> He reinstated this prohibition, in this case regarding Jewish minors in Germany and Venice, in 1421.<sup>75</sup>

The issue of the forced baptism of Jewish children was one that Martin considered very grave. In 1423, he wrote the only papal document of the period that dealt with the forced baptism of a child. In this letter, written to the bishop of Vicenza, Martin requested that the bishop investigate a complaint that was issued by a Jew named Solomonis of Montagnana, who claimed that his minor son, named Isaac, had been abducted and baptized against his will.<sup>76</sup>

Despite strong opposition to the idea that Jewish children should be converted against their parents' wishes, Martin also wrote a letter that seemed to run counter to this, or at the very least complicated it. In 1423, he wrote to the Archbishop of Narbonne, who was also the papal chamberlain in Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin.<sup>77</sup> In it, he mandated that two Jewish children had to be handed over to their grandfather, who had converted to Christianity. He specifically wrote in the letter that this should be done irrespective of the wishes of the parents of the children, running in direct opposition to his earlier stance that children should not be converted against the will of their parents. It may be that he reasoned that a grandfather was close enough to being a parent to make this decision, but it certainly represented some ambivalence about the policy on behalf of Pope Martin.

While forced conversion was vehemently opposed by the papacy in the early Middle Ages, over time it grew to merely be frowned upon. Innocent III's argument

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<sup>74</sup> More detail on this debate within the Church, in terms of canon law, can be found in Chapter 4.

<sup>75</sup> *ASJ* 2:695-697 #606.

<sup>76</sup> *ASJ* 2:717-718 #618.

<sup>77</sup> *ASJ* 2:724-72J #623.

that converts to Christianity had to remain Christian whether they were converted forcibly or otherwise marked a major shift. While popes continued to state that forced conversion should not be undertaken in protective *Sicut Iudeis* bulls, it ceased to be a major focus of the Apostolic See after Innocent's watershed letter in 1201. The same letter led to another major shift in papal policy, and that was a concern about relapsed converts.

### **Relapsed Converts, 1095-1450**

Because Innocent III stated that conversion was an irreversible process, this meant that Jews who had at one time or another converted to Christianity, either willingly or by force, could now be subject to the authority of the Church. As Christine Utterback has pointed out, Jews frequently allowed people who had converted to Christianity to re-convert and return to the community, so the concern about lapsed converts is based on a reality where Jewish communities were typically willing to accept the return of their former coreligionists.<sup>78</sup> This is also something that is discussed in detail in rabbinic *responsa*, something that will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

As mentioned above, while Innocent was the first pope to explicitly state that those who had once converted to Christianity must remain Christian, Anti-Pope Clement III had the distinction of first expressing this idea. In 1096 massacres and forced conversion of Jews occurred in the Rhineland. Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV

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<sup>78</sup> Christine Utterback, "'Conversi'" Revert: Voluntary and Forced Return to Judaism in the Early Fourteenth Century." *Church History* 64:1 (1995), pp. 16-28, p. 28. See also Paola Tartakoff, "Conversion and Return to Judaism: Christian Perceptions and Portrayals," in *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World*, ed. Yaniv Fox and Yosi Yisraeli (New York Routledge, 2017), p. 177-194, which argues that Jews sometimes took a very active role in encouraging apostates to come back to Judaism, and even tries to get some Christians to convert!

allowing Jews to return to their religion if they had been forcibly converted in 1097. Clement III expressed the opposite opinion. He ordered the bishop of Bamberg to pursue those Jews who had relapsed, and force them to return to Christianity.<sup>79</sup> This position was a bit of an aberration in its own time though, as it took more than 100 years for another pope to address the situation, which Innocent III did in 1201. While the issue did not become a common focus of the papacy until the thirteenth century, concern about lapsed converts is the largest sub-category of the 146 documents that deal with the conversion of Jews to Christianity, with a total of 40 documents addressing the topic between 1201 and 1450.

Innocent III also created the papal inquisition, and while its express purpose was dealing with heretics, which would normally not include Jews, Jews who converted and relapsed began to be viewed as heretics. The first hint of this was given in a papal bull written by Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) around 1250, which ordered that relapsed Jewish converts be pursued as if they were heretics. In other words, they were to be pursued as if they had been born as Christians who now deviated from their original religion. And after all, from the papal perspective they *were* Christians, meaning that if they practiced Judaism they were heretics. The topic would next be addressed more clearly in a precedent-setting bull commonly known as the *Turbato Corde* bull. This letter, written by Pope Clement IV (1265-1268), was sent to the Dominican and Franciscan inquisitors throughout Europe.<sup>80</sup> So far, the primary job of the inquisitors had been to travel throughout Europe preaching against and uncovering those who were suspected of being heretics, and subsequently punishing them. This process involved

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<sup>79</sup> ASJ 1:42 #42

<sup>80</sup> ASJ 1:236-237 #230.



lengthy court procedures, questioning of people throughout the community, and sometimes torture. Clement IV's bull, written in 1267, gave the inquisitors another group whom they could pursue - "Judaizing" Christians - which referred to those who were Christians but practiced certain Jewish customs, such as observing the Sabbath or eating kosher. "Judaizing" Christians also referred to Jews who had converted, but returned completely to Judaism.

This was made more clear in a letter that was sent to the inquisitors by Pope Gregory X in 1274, which more directly referenced both "Judaizing Christians" and "relapsing Jewish converts."<sup>81</sup> This meant that Jews could now be questioned by the inquisition – including those who were not even suspected of being Christian at any time – to serve as witnesses. This gave the Church an authority it had never had over the Jewish community. Popes for the remainder of the Middle Ages had varying opinions on the practice. Some popes were aware of the strain that this new practice placed on Jewish-Christian relationships.

This ambivalence is best expressed by Pope Martin IV (1281-1285), who issued a new *Sicut Iudeis* bull in August 1281 that specifically limited the actions of inquisitors against Jews. He required the inquisitors to name the accusers of Jews, and to explain the reason that they were being questioned.<sup>82</sup> Just two months later, in October of 1281, Martin IV sent a letter to the bishops and archbishops of France that requested that they should assist the inquisitors in their task of pursuing relapsed Jewish heretics.<sup>83</sup> Apparently, the papacy had received complaints that churches were granting asylum to

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<sup>81</sup> ASJ 1:244-245 #236.

<sup>82</sup> ASJ 1:254-255 #248.

<sup>83</sup> ASJ 1:255-256 #249.

heretics and Jewish converts who had renounced Christianity. While this does not directly oppose Martin's *Sicut Iudeis* bull, it does indicate that while Martin thought what the inquisitors were doing was excessive at times, their duty of uncovering relapsed Jewish converts was important.

Letters written to inquisitors usually instructed them to actively pursue Jewish converts to Christianity who were still observing Jewish customs, and to treat them the same way that heretics were treated by the inquisition. Nicholas IV (1288-1293) wrote two such letters in 1288: one to the Dominicans and inquisitors in France,<sup>84</sup> and another more generally to all inquisitors in western Christendom.<sup>85</sup> In 1290, he specifically requested that the prelates of the churches in Arles, Aix, and Embrun assist inquisitors in their proceedings against relapsed Jewish converts.<sup>86</sup> In a letter to the inquisitors in the same region he made specific reference to Jewish converts who were allegedly observing Jewish rites<sup>87</sup> – indicating that not all of those in question were completely lapsed converts, but perhaps Jewish converts maintaining certain Jewish practices.

While Nicholas IV was firmly in favor of these practices, his successor Boniface VIII (1294-1303) revived the regulations of Pope Martin IV, indicating that perhaps he disagreed with the degree to which Nicholas IV used the inquisitors to pursue Jewish converts to Christianity. In June of 1299, he specifically stated that the Jews of Rome are *impotent*. This meant that Jews could not be subject to the work of the inquisition without not only the naming of an accuser, they also had access to normal legal defense

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<sup>84</sup> ASJ 1:265 #258.

<sup>85</sup> ASJ 1:267-268 #260.

<sup>86</sup> ASJ 1:271-272 #263.

<sup>87</sup> ASJ 1:273, #264.

procedures in such a case.<sup>88</sup> He made the same statement for the Jews of Comtat Venaissin.<sup>89</sup> It is worth noting that both the Jews of Rome and the Jews of Comtat Venaissin were living in territories which were directly governed by the papacy, which may indicate that in an ideal situation Boniface would have granted this right to all the Jews of western Christendom, but he knew it would not be feasible outside of the territories he governed.

While the papacy became divided following Boniface's death, both the popes in Avignon and the Popes in Rome continued their pursuit of relapsed Jewish converts. From Avignon, Pope John XXII (1316-1334) wrote a letter in August of 1317 to the inquisitors of France, and ordered them to find relapsed converts who were reported to be seeking refuge in churches.<sup>90</sup> A year later, he wrote a letter to the doge of Venice, and requested that he allow the inquisitors to pursue relapsed Jewish converts.<sup>91</sup> He repeated his request to the inquisitors of France in 1322.<sup>92</sup> However, John XXII, like Martin IV, expressed some degree of ambivalence about the practice. In January of 1328 the pope wrote a letter to the inquisitors of southern Italy in response to a complaint he had received from the archbishop of Trani, Bartholomeu Branaccio.<sup>93</sup> He heard complaints that the inquisitors had oppressed Jews and Jewish converts, and that consequently the church's financial interests were suffering. John told the inquisitors to first consult the archbishop before he pursued any Jews within his arch-diocese for the next two years.

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<sup>88</sup> *ASJ* 1:286-287 #279.

<sup>89</sup> *ASJ* 1:287 #280.

<sup>90</sup> *ASJ* 1:303-304 #295.

<sup>91</sup> *ASJ* 1:308-309 #298.

<sup>92</sup> *ASJ* 1:334 #318.

<sup>93</sup> *ASJ* 1:352-353 #336.

Another Avignon Pope, Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342) wrote a letter to the prelates of the church, and to the secular officials of Provence in July of 1338. He discussed a specific lapsed Jewish convert for the first time. All the letters discussed above addressed the issue of lapsed converts and “Judaizers” more broadly, and did not mention any specific individuals. In this case, the addressees were asked to assist an inquisitor named Jean de Badas in capturing a man named Alfonsus Dias of Spain, a relapsed convert from Judaism, who had escaped Spain and found refuge with a Jew in either Savoy or Dauphine.

The naming of specific relapsed converts became more commonplace as the fourteenth century wore on. Sometimes these letters did not involve inquisitors at all. In January of 1343, Pope Clement VI (1342-1352) wrote a letter to the bishop of Carcassonne about a rather complicated situation.<sup>94</sup> Apparently, a Jewish convert named Johannes de Lombers had been accused of being a relapsed convert by both clergymen and laymen in the diocese, but the bishop had ignored this and not issued a ruling one way or another. Clement requested that the bishop come to a conclusion about the accusations. Clement wrote a letter to the bishop of Montauban in 1347 about another controversy involving the same relapsed Jew, indicating that the bishop either ruled in favor of Johannes or chose to continue to ignore the pope in the case above.<sup>95</sup> This case was even more complicated. The pope ordered the bishop to hear the appeal of a man named Durand Ros. Another bishop named Gaucelin de Robacourt had ruled against Ros regarding a complaint against the notary and commissioner of Aymon de Caumont, who was also the inquisitor of Carcassonne. Ros and others claimed that

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<sup>94</sup> *ASJ* 1:384-385 #362.

<sup>95</sup> *ASJ* 1:394-396 #371.

Gaucelin had been influenced by the same Johannes de Lombert, who had forced others to retract the evidence given against the both of them. Thus, the pope asked that Robacourt's ruling be thrown out by the bishop.

Letters following the simple model of asking secular rulers to assist inquisitors continued as well. In 1356, pope Innocent VI (1352-1362) wrote several letters that expressed concern about relapsed Jewish converts, and asked inquisitors and secular leaders to cooperate in uncovering them. In May 1356 he wrote a letter to the doge of Venice, Giovanni Gradenigo, requesting that he assist the local inquisitor, Michael Pisani, proceed against relapsed Jewish converts.<sup>96</sup> He also wrote a letter to Pisani requesting that he do this.<sup>97</sup> He issued the same letter to Giovanni Gradenigo's successor, Giovanni Dolfin, in September of 1356.<sup>98</sup> In 1359, he asked Bernard Dupuy, a Franciscan and inquisitor in Provence, to seek out Jewish converts who were said to have reverted to Judaism.<sup>99</sup>

Urban V (1362-1370) would be the next pope to express a concern over lapsed converts. In June of 1364, he wrote a letter to several nobles in Provence, and requested that they assist the local inquisitor, Hugo de Cardillon. Urban was worried not only about "converted Jews who had reverted to Judaism" but also about "the Jews who had aided them," and he ordered punishment for both groups.<sup>100</sup> This reveals that even a Jew who had never been Christian could become the target of inquisitorial investigations, and could even receive punishment if it was believed that the individual

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<sup>96</sup>ASJ 1:405-406 #379.

<sup>97</sup>ASJ 1:406-407 #380.

<sup>98</sup> ASJ 1:407-408 #381.

<sup>99</sup> ASJ 1:409-410 #383.

<sup>100</sup> ASJ 1:422-423 #397.

had assisted a former Jew in returning to the fold. The dangerous part is that “assistance” is not explained clearly, and it is possible that any Jewish community that welcomed an individual back into the community – which was commonplace, as we will see in the chapter on Rabbinic *responsa* – could potentially be thought of as “aiding” the individual.

Sometimes references to lapsed Jewish converts appeared in letters with different goals than simply dealing with the problem of their existence. An example of this can be found in another letter of Urban V to the archbishop of Naples in February 1367 which ordered him to depose the abbot of St. Mary in Nardo, a man named Guillelmus. His rationale for this included many crimes, one of which was “allowing Jewish converts to return to Judaism.”<sup>101</sup> This kind of letter is not uncommon, as not all Churchmen agreed with the idea of not allowing converts, especially forced converts, to return to their former religion. In the famous inquisitorial trial of Baruch of Languedoc in 1321, those questioned mention an example of a clergyman who thought it was permissible for Baruch to return to Judaism – and the inquisitors disagreed, forcing Baruch to remain Christian.<sup>102</sup> This sort of situation could be what Guillelmus found himself in as well.

In the early 1370s there was a controversial case about a Jewish convert, and while the terminology “lapsed convert” was not used in the document, the individual’s status as a former Jew, and the distrust surrounding that fact, is what resulted in the controversy. In 1371, Pope Gregory XI wrote a letter to Peter Clasqueria, the

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<sup>101</sup> ASJ 1:433-436 #408.

<sup>102</sup> “The Testimony of Baruch the German,” in *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*, ed. and trans. Michael Goodich (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 40-50.

archbishop of Tarragona, and to Nicholas Eymerich, who was a Dominican inquisitor in Aragon. The pope requested that Nicholas punish one of his fellow Dominicans who was a Jewish convert – a man named Raimundus. The pope had heard reports that Raimundus was “publicly propagating sacrilegious doctrines.”<sup>103</sup> Two years later in 1373, Gregory sent another letter to Nicholas about Raimundus, this time noting that his books needed to be closely examined, and if anything objectionable was found, they should be burned.<sup>104</sup> Again, there is no clear reference to the fact that this man is a “lapsed” convert, but the way they are pursuing the accusations against him is very similar to the way that the Talmud was examined on papal instruction. So, while no clear reference is made to the “sacrilegious” doctrines of Raimundus, or to what is being looked for in his books, it was probably concern about him teaching practices that were “Judaizing” his audience.

Clement VII (1378-1394) wrote a letter to the inquisitor of Provence in 1387, and made the usual request that the inquisition pursue lapsed Jewish converts – though this time, the Jews in question returned to Judaism and fled the country, since at that time it was illegal for Jews to live in France.<sup>105</sup> However, he also responded to complaints about the inquisition from the Jews of Sens, Rouen, Rheims and Lyon by acknowledging that they could no longer be accused of crimes by Jewish converts to Christianity.<sup>106</sup> For several decades the papacy avoided the ambivalence it had shown in the earlier part of the fourteenth century with regard to Jewish converts, but Pope Benedict XIII (1394-1422), the last Avignon Pope, also wavered on the subject. In

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<sup>103</sup> *ASJ* 1:444-445 #418.

<sup>104</sup> *ASJ* 1:456-457 #430.

<sup>105</sup> *ASJ* 1:497-498 #467.

<sup>106</sup> *ASJ* 1:485-486 #457.

1410, he wrote to the abbot of Beata Maria de la Real regarding some Jewish converts in Majorca who had been accused of Judaizing. He instructed that they should be absolved – with a suitable penance – but after that they should no longer be bothered about the issue.<sup>107</sup> This approach was much more lenient than his predecessors. While he required that they remain Christian, he did not want them to be punished too harshly and wants people in the community to leave them alone. He likely had a concern that the way the community was treating them would have caused them to leave Christianity altogether. Alexander V (1409-1410), the pope in Rome in the same time period, did not express such concern, instead in a letter from 1409 he continued the practice of ordering inquisitors to pursue “Jews who try to induce Jewish converts to revert to Judaism.”<sup>108</sup> Pope Martin V (1417-1431) made the same request of the same inquisitor in 1418.<sup>109</sup> In 1435, Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447) wrote a letter to the inquisitor of France requesting that lapsed converts there be pursued as heretics.<sup>110</sup>

Martin V’s papal register give us one of the more intimate looks at an issue of lapsed conversion. This letter, written on July 1<sup>st</sup> of 1427, did not deal with the issue of the lapsed convert. Instead, this letter was a response to a petition by a female Jewish convert to Christianity named Alienora. Alienora relates that she and her husband had converted to Christianity together, but that her husband had returned to Judaism and she had chosen not to. Her petition to the pope asked that she be given the right to marry a Christian man, even though her marriage to her Jewish husband had not legally ended.

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<sup>107</sup> *ASJ* 2:571-572 #519.

<sup>108</sup> *ASJ* 2:658-660 #583.

<sup>109</sup> *ASJ* 2:667-669 #590.

<sup>110</sup> *ASJ* 2:824-827 #705.



The pope approved of this petition.<sup>111</sup> This letter gives us some insight into the issues of everyday life that lapsed conversion can affect, as this woman and her husband chose to split over Christianity – which Alienora apparently continued to believe in, even though her husband returned to Judaism. This is an interesting case, as it goes against the idea that when couples converted, women were typically the ones who refused to convert. In this case, Alienora chose to remain Christian in spite of her husband who returned to Judaism.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, most papal letters dealing with the idea of lapsed converts were orders to inquisitors to pursue them. Some popes expressed some ambivalence or misgivings about the process. Despite the strain that it apparently placed on the Jewish community, and indeed on Jewish-Christian relations in general, most saw it as necessary. As noted above, even popes who expressed some misgivings about the process and thought that inquisitors mistreated Jews or overstepped their authority in their pursuit of them, also ordered that lapsed converts should be pursued as if they were heretics. In fact, in the fourteenth century an even more dire shift occurred. Before the fourteenth century, Jews who were not suspected of being converts could not be punished by the inquisition – they could be questioned by the inquisitorial courts – but they could not be punished because technically as an individual who had never been Christian, they were outside of the authority of the inquisition. This of course changed, as popes became more and more concerned about lapsed converts, and the inquisition received papal authority to investigate and punish Jews who were suspected of assisting

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<sup>111</sup> *ASJ* 1:755-756 #647a.

lapsed Jewish converts in their return to the Jewish community.<sup>112</sup> The issue of lapsed converts is a reflection of Jewish-Christian relationship the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The strain between the two communities became greater and greater in these times, and Jews came to more and more frequently be viewed as enemies of the faith, who did whatever they could to undermine and even destroy Christianity. The increased focus on Jews, both lapsed converts and those who had never been Christian, was likely a product of the same concerns. Lapsed conversion was such an issue that popes frequently offered stipends and other benefits to converts to Christianity whose property had been confiscated by secular authorities following their conversion.

### **Keeping Converts Christian: Stipends and Other Incentives for Jewish**

#### **Conversion, 590-1450**

While medieval popes were universally opposed to the idea of forcibly converting Jews, they were in favor in convincing them to convert “by means of sweet words.” Gregory I, who was the first pope to borrow this language from Augustine, was also the first who offered Jews some special incentive to convert, feeling that monetary and material support fell into the category of “sweet words.” Such support was necessary because when Jews converted to Christianity they frequently had their material possessions taken away from them by secular authorities. Gregory reasoned that if the Church wanted Jews to convert, something had to be offered to help mitigate

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<sup>112</sup> Innocent III set a precedent for this as well, although not in the context of Jewish conversion to Christianity. In his decretal *Vergentis in Senium*, he argued that “defenders, harborers, and supporters, and believers in heretics” can receive the same treatment as heretics. This policy was eventually extended over Jews who assisted their former coreligionists in returning to the fold. See Walter Ullmann, “The Significance of Innocent’s Decretal *Vergentis*,” in *The Papacy and the Political Ideas in the Middle Ages* (London, 1976), pp. 729-741.

against the financial ruin that often resulted from their conversion. In a letter to the subdeacon of Sicily in 592, he suggested offering Jews there an exemption from taxation in exchange for their baptism.<sup>113</sup> Two years later, in 594, he wrote again to a deacon in Sicily, and suggested more specifically that Jews receive a reduction in land taxes if they convert to Christianity.<sup>114</sup> There was also a more specific case of him providing protection and support for a woman named Johanna, who was a Jew who had converted to Christianity and married a Christian man. He ordered that she be protected from molestation from the Jewish community, which she was apparently receiving because she had abandoned a betrothal agreement to convert.<sup>115</sup> From these three cases, we can see that Gregory wanted to entice Jews to convert to Judaism, and that he also felt that preventing Jews from being harassed by their former coreligionists was important, because it could potentially lead to a change of heart for the convert.

While Gregory set the precedent of offering special incentives for converted Jews, it did not appear again in papal registers until the twelfth century, when the issue began to become more prominent as rates of conversion increased. Both Jewish communities and non-Jewish secular leaders had policies in place that deterred Jews from converting to Christianity. These included the fact that converts would lose all their possessions and any right of inheritance from their Jewish family members. Because of this policy, supporting new Jewish converts was of great importance, because if they returned to Judaism their former property and status within the community would be restored. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) wrote the earliest

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<sup>113</sup> *ASJ* 1:7-8 #9.

<sup>114</sup> *ASJ* 1:11-12 #14.

<sup>115</sup> *ASJ* 1:6 #7.

document explaining this process in detail. Anselm received a letter from some of the parishioners of his archbishopric that asked what should be done regarding a recent convert to Christianity, since he and his family were now destitute following his conversion. Anselm's reply would have a lasting impact on the way that the Church dealt with Jewish converts to Christianity:

With the inmost affection of my heart I order you and beg you to take care of this Robert, with that joyful piety and pious joy with which all Christians ought to help and assist one fleeing from Judaism to Christianity. Let no poverty or other accident which we can avert cause him to regret having left his parents and their Law for Christ's sake. . . Do not let him and his little family suffer any harsh want, but let him rejoice that he has passed from perfidy to the true faith, and prove by our piety that our faith is nearer to God than Judaism is. For I would prefer, if necessary, that there should be spent in this all that belongs to me from the rents of the archdeaconry, and even much more, rather than that he who has fled out of the hands of the devil to the servants of God should live in misery amongst us. . . . For his misery both in victual and in clothing touches my heart. Please release me from this wound. <sup>116</sup>

Before Anselm's letter, popes had never offered money from the Church coffers to Jews to support them after their conversion. Gregory got the closest to doing so, but the most he ever did was offer some tax breaks. After Anselm's letter, it became a standard practice for the Church to give Jews money from its own coffers, and this appears to have been no coincidence, as popes even referred to the idea that without these stipends Jews would risk returning to their old ways.

The first pope to follow Anselm's example was Alexander III (1159-1181), who wrote two letters urging that two specific Jewish converts be offered prebends. The first of these he wrote in 1169 to the archbishop of Rheims and requested that a

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<sup>116</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, Epist. iii., cxvii, ed. Joseph Jacobs, in *The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records* (London, 1893), p. 12.

converted Jew named Petrus receive a prebend from the diocese of the same archbishop.<sup>117</sup> In 1173, he asked the archbishop of Tournai to do the same for a Jewish convert named Milo.<sup>118</sup> The case of this Milo is a complex one, as in 1174 Alexander was forced to write another letter to Tournai, this time to the chapter and the dean. He rebuked the church for refusing to do what he asked the year before. Alexander even accused them of discriminating against Milo because of his Jewish origins, and threatened excommunication if they would not support him.<sup>119</sup> This indicates the level of importance that Alexander III placed on the support of Jews who needed financial support. It also gives us a glimpse into the fact that converts were not always treated the same as their fellow Christians, and not everyone agreed with the Church's decision to give money to Jewish converts. On a related note, Alexander III wrote a letter in 1178 to the archbishops of Spain which ordered them to stop seizing the property of Jewish converts and allowing their Jewish descendants to inherit it,<sup>120</sup> as this was the sort of practice that frequently resulted in Jews being destitute, which was something that increased the likelihood that they would return to Judaism.

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) continued supporting Jewish converts with money that came directly from the Church, and he did so multiple times. In 1199, he wrote a letter to Gautier II, the bishop of Autun, and instructed him to lend aid to two former Jews within his community; a father and his daughter.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, in 1213, Innocent wrote a letter to the archbishop of Sens which requested that he offer some of

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<sup>117</sup> *ASJ* 1:52 #50.

<sup>118</sup> *ASJ* 1:54-55 #52.

<sup>119</sup> *ASJ* 1:55-56 #53.

<sup>120</sup> *ASJ* 1:57-58 #55.

<sup>121</sup> *ASJ* 1:76 #72.

the money from his office to a Jew named Isaac, whose wife and daughter were also specifically mentioned as in need of support from the archbishop.<sup>122</sup>

Innocent's successor Honorius III (1216-1227) continued this practice. In 1221, he wrote a letter to various officials at the church in Bonn and asked that a Jewish convert and his family be offered the money from a vacant prebend. The letter explicitly mentioned a husband and wife, but was not specific about the gender or number of children.<sup>123</sup> After Honorius III and Innocent III, the bulk of popes in the Middle Ages wrote at least one letter that attempted to secure funds for impoverished Jewish converts.

Gregory IX (1227-1241) put forth a concerted effort to provide Jews with stipends. In 1235, he wrote a letter to the provosts of the church of St. Thomas in Gran and ordered them to compel the abbot of Martinsburg to provide for two Jewish converts,<sup>124</sup> suggesting that he had encountered some resistance when it came to securing funds from the Church for Jewish converts to Christianity, just as earlier popes had. In another letter that does not directly refer to a stipend, Gregory approved the creation of a sort of halfway house for Jews. This letter, which he wrote in 1236 to two Jewish converts in Gran, approved the use of their house for destitute Jewish converts, and granted special protection to the inhabitants of the house.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>ASJ 1:98-99 #93.

<sup>123</sup>ASJ 1:115-116 #112.

<sup>124</sup>ASJ 1:155 #145.

<sup>125</sup>ASJ 1:159-160 #150; This was fairly unique in the Middle Ages, as no other pope would approve such an arrangement. However, some secular governments set up institutions where Jews who had recently converted to Christianity could live until they got their feet under them. The most notable of these is the *Domus Conversorum*, in England. For more on the *Domus* and its origins, see Lauren Fogle, "The *Domus Conversorum*: The Personal Interest of Henry III," *Jewish Historical Studies* 41 (2007), pp. 1-7.

Innocent IV (1243-1254) wrote a letter in 1250 to the official of Rheims which demanded that a Jewish convert named Mary be provided for by a vacant prebend in the city. In his letter, he noted that he first requested this from the cathedral at St. Denis, but he encountered great resistance to the idea and was forced to look elsewhere.<sup>126</sup> This shows us that, even as this became standard practice for the papacy, not all clergy agreed with the practice of offering converts money from the Church.

Urban IV (1261-1264) wrote two letters seeking support for converts. The first of these was more general, and was written in 1264 to the patriarch of Jerusalem. Urban requested that churches and convents in the city of Acre and its surrounding diocese offer to support both Muslim and Jewish converts to Christianity during the time that they are in catechism.<sup>127</sup>

Between 1265 and 1268, Clement IV wrote a letter to the bishop of Beauvais and suggested that he provide for two Jewish converts; a brother and a sister.<sup>128</sup> Clement IV's letter would be the last letter for a century to make specific mention of two Jewish converts in need of support, and the bulk of the other papal documents referring to support for Jewish converts throughout the rest of the Middle Ages would ask for more support on a larger scale, but from a different source: the general public. This was likely a response to the resistances that popes throughout the thirteenth century encountered when asking for Church funds to be given to Jewish converts. By asking for donations from the public, the pope was much less likely to encounter a similar problem.

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<sup>126</sup> ASJ 1:203-204 #196.

<sup>127</sup> ASJ 1:224 #219.

<sup>128</sup> ASJ 1:227 #222.

The first example of this shift in policy was during the papacy of John XXII (1316-1334), and it appears in a letter he wrote in 1320 to the bishop of Viterbo. In this letter, John moved away from the practice of requesting that a specific monastery or church support a Jew or a handful of Jews. Instead, he asked that the bishop grant a forty-day indulgence to all of those in the community who had supported Jewish converts to Christianity.<sup>129</sup> It is unclear as to why this shift in policy occurred. It could be that John realized that there was a way for Jews to be supported in the community without the coffers of the Church being touched, and that was with indulgences, which could motivate people within a community to use their own money and resources to support these individuals. Whatever the reason, this became the standard practice for the papacy from 1320 until 1450.

The idea that Jews be financially supported following their conversion also became less important to the popes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as popes wrote about the issue much three more times before the close of the Middle Ages. After John XXII, another pope did not address the issue until 1371, when Gregory XI (1370-1378) wrote a papal bull that was specifically intended for Christians living in the dioceses of Nimes, Conques, Valence, Avignon, Apt, and Sisteron. This bull made it known that any Christian who supports some Jewish converts to Christianity in these dioceses be offered an indulgence of one year and forty days.<sup>130</sup> In 1372, Gregory wrote a letter that referred to a specific Jewish convert named Petri, but instead of using the

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<sup>129</sup> *ASJ* 1:334-335 #319.

<sup>130</sup> *ASJ* 1:443-444 #417.



old practice of asking the Church in one form or another to support this man, he offered an indulgence of forty days to anyone who can support him.<sup>131</sup>

The last mention of this practice was made at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In 1400, Boniface IX wrote a letter to the diocese of Olmütz, and offered an indulgence to any Christian there who supported Jewish converts.<sup>132</sup> This letter also made specific mention of two Jewish converts to Christianity named Paul and Catherine, who are in desperate need of help from their new coreligionists.

However, on some rare occasions Jewish converts were still offered money from the Church. Benedict XIII (1394-1422) was the last pope to make extensive use of this policy. In 1415 he wrote a letter to the bishop of Orense and the abbot of Poblet and asked that they provide a Jewish convert named Odoardos Caporta with a yearly pension of fifty pounds.<sup>133</sup> Just a few days later, he wrote a similar letter to the bishop of Orense and the abbot of Benifaza, which asked that they provide a Jewish convert named Michael Mercer with a prebend from the office of the bishop.<sup>134</sup> Also in 1415, he sent a letter to the bishop of Orense and Elne and ordered that a Jewish convert and widow named Ursula March be granted an annual pension of twenty pounds.<sup>135</sup> He wrote several other such documents, an exhaustive list of which can be found below,<sup>136</sup> but he would be the last pope to make regular use of the idea that Jewish converts should be supported financially by the Church itself.

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<sup>131</sup> *ASJ* 1:452-453 #427.

<sup>132</sup> *ASJ* 1:529-530 #491.

<sup>133</sup> *ASJ* 2:588-589 #533.

<sup>134</sup> *ASJ* 2:591-592 #535.

<sup>135</sup> *ASJ* 2:603-604 #540.

<sup>136</sup> *ASJ* 2:589-590 #534, *ASJ* 2:602-603 #541, *ASJ* 2:604; *ASJ* 2:604-605 #542, *ASJ* 2:605-606 #543, *ASJ* 2:606 #544, *ASJ* 2:607 #545, *ASJ* 2:607-608 #546, *ASJ* 2:608 #547, *ASJ* 2:608 #548, *ASJ* 2:609 #549, *ASJ* 1:609-110 #550, *ASJ* 2:610-611 #555.

In other cases, popes tried to undo the secular laws that led to Jews losing their property upon their conversion in the first place. If this technique were successful, then the Church or the Christian community would not need to support converts out of their own pocket, because the converts would no longer enter the community as destitutes. While the attempts to eliminate these laws did not begin in earnest until the fourteenth century, there were two earlier popes who attempted to allow Jewish converts to keep their property after leaving the Jewish community.

The first pope to suggest this was pope Alexander III (1159-1181), who wrote to the archbishops of Spain and ordered them to cease confiscating the property of converts and giving it to their Jewish heirs.<sup>137</sup> A half-century later, Innocent IV tried to do the same thing. In 1245 he wrote a letter that accused Christians of treating Jewish converts poorly, and noted that they should not be taunted by their new coreligionists for their past. However, he also made it clear that the Jewish community gaining the property of converts was unacceptable, and ordered that this practice be stopped.<sup>138</sup>

It would be nearly 100 years before another pope attempted to eliminate this practice, but this time, it set a precedent that other popes followed. In 1320, John XXII wrote two letters which ordered that the converts in the papal territories should not have their property confiscated by secular authorities upon their conversion.<sup>139</sup> He issued one of these letters in June, and the other in July and used the exact same wording, indicating that perhaps the first letter was ignored by those who received it.

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<sup>137</sup> *ASJ* 1:57-68 #55

<sup>138</sup> *ASJ* 1:183-185 #173

<sup>139</sup> *ASJ* 1:315-316#303, *ASJ* 1:319 #306

The earlier forms of these letters only outline the idea that this practice should be changed in broad terms, but some of the later letters made mention of specific Jewish converts who should have the property they lost upon conversion returned to them. In 1363, Pope Urban V ordered that a Jewish convert named Petrus have the property he lost upon his conversion returned to him.<sup>140</sup>

This practice continued into the fifteenth century. In 1401 Pope Boniface IX wrote about a Jewish family that had recently converted and made specific mention of a man named Moses and his wife Berthlein, who also had some children.<sup>141</sup> He ordered the provost of the church of Herriden to make sure that they retained their property after their conversion.

### **Jewish Converts Who Became Affiliated with the Church**

Another common phenomenon within papal documents is the discussion of individuals who were Jewish converts who then became canons, monks, or licensed preachers. These are documents that only men could appear in, as these were not offices available to women.<sup>142</sup> There are of course the famous examples of this, such as that of Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani,<sup>143</sup> but these men were hardly unique in

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<sup>140</sup> *ASJ* 1:418-419 #393

<sup>141</sup> As is this case with many of these documents when multiple children are mentioned, it is only clear that there were at least two children because the plural form is used.

<sup>142</sup> There are however a few documents mentioning women who are placed in convents after their conversion. See for example *ASJ* 1:77 #7 and *ASJ* 1:98-99. These issues will be discussed below in more detail, p. 58.

<sup>143</sup> These two are both high profile Jews who converted to Christianity and subsequently turned their efforts towards missionizing the Jewish community. Nicholas Donin brought about the investigation into the Talmud in Paris in the thirteenth century and had a public disputation there with several French rabbis

their decision to convert to Christianity and then became closely affiliated with the Church. These two men were not even the only two Jewish converts who chose to turn their efforts directly against Judaism! However, references to these individual converts – other than to Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani - do not appear until the later Middle Ages, indicating that perhaps those two famous Jews-turned-Mendicants were exceptional in their own time.

The earliest reference to a Jew who became closely affiliated with and worked for the Church in one form or another is in 1361, when Innocent VI wrote a letter to John II of France concerning a Jewish convert named Guillelmus de Querceto. The pope granted a petition that the king had apparently submitted, which granted Guillelmus – mentioned as the Subdeacon of Cambrai – an additional benefice.<sup>144</sup>

In 1364, Urban V (1362-1370) wrote a letter to a Jewish convert named Johannes Cathalani of Anduze and granted him authority to preach to the Jews in synagogues with the purpose of bringing about their conversion.<sup>145</sup> This sort of letter became commonplace at the close of the Middle Ages, indicating that several recent Jewish converts wished to pursue this career path in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Urban's successor, Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) wrote a similar letter in 1371, this time to a convert named Johannes Alcherii in Avignon. Just as Urban did in his letter, Gregory permitted this Jewish convert to preach to the Jews in their

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including Rabbi Yechiel of Paris in 1240, and Pablo Christiani had a public disputation with Nachmanides in Barcelona in 1263. For more on Nicholas Donin and the disputation, see "Piero Capelli," Nicholas Donin, the Talmud Trial of 1240 and the Struggle Between Church and State in Medieval Europe," in *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten et. al, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 159-178. For more on the disputation in Barcelona in 1263, see Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>144</sup> ASJ 1:414-415 #389.

<sup>145</sup> ASJ 1:424-425 #399.

synagogues and attempt to bring about their conversion.<sup>146</sup> He would follow this up with a letter in 1375 to Henry II of Castille which demanded that he allow a Jewish convert named Johannes to force Jews to attend his sermons.<sup>147</sup> This time no reference is made to entering the synagogue. In 1395, Pope Benedict XIII (1394-1422) reaffirmed the same privileges to Johannes Alcherii of Avignon that Gregory XI granted him over twenty years earlier, indicating that for some this was his lifelong career.<sup>148</sup> In 1423, Martin V (1417-1431) wrote a letter to a Jewish convert named Fernandus of Saragossa which granted him 150 gold ducats derived from the former synagogue of the Jews in the community. In addition to granting this, Martin also notes that Fernandus is well-known for preaching to the Jews and helping bring about the conversion of several Jews.<sup>149</sup>

In other instances, certain privileges are granted to Jewish converts whose title in the Church is mentioned in passing. For example, in 1419 Pope Martin V (1417-1431) wrote a letter to a Jewish convert named Dyamante of Ostia, a Jewish convert who had been born as Salomon Avigdor of Arles. Dyamante is mentioned as being the canon and archdeacon of the church in Narbonne, and this letter confirms these titles upon him, as well as the title of master of medicine.<sup>150</sup>

While these types of converts were not the norm, they are excellent examples of individuals who converted due to theological reasons. Some, like Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani were on the extreme end of the spectrum, in that they actively

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<sup>146</sup> *ASJ* 1:443-444 #416.

<sup>147</sup> *ASJ* 1:460 #434.

<sup>148</sup> *ASJ* 2:553-554 #505.

<sup>149</sup> *ASJ* 2:721-722 #621.

<sup>150</sup> *ASJ* 2:683-684 #598.

attempted to persecute Jews after their conversion. But the majority seemed to merely have wanted to continue to study Christian theology, while others wanted to attempt to convert their Jewish brethren through preaching.

### **Jewish Doctors Who Converted**

In these 146 documents, there are four that discuss Jewish doctors who converted to Christianity. Medieval Jewish doctors, despite being banned from attending medical schools, were renowned for their medical ability. Joseph Shatzmiller has noted that despite various prohibitions against having Jewish doctors, many medieval Christians chose to anyway, because Jewish medical knowledge was viewed as vastly superior. This was in part because they had access to ancient medical texts that had been translated in Muslim Spain, important works which Christian doctors did not have the linguistic ability to read.<sup>151</sup> The conversion of Jewish doctors to Christianity was a great victory for Christendom. This is another type of document in which women could not appear, as they did not train as doctors while part of the Jewish community, and could not become doctors after they converted either.

In this small subset, there are four male converts who the pope orders should be given a test to examine their ability as doctors, and if they pass are to be given a Christian medical degree. This type of convert does not appear in the papal registers until the late fourteenth century, when in 1398 pope Boniface IX orders that a convert named Abraham Nicolai be given such an examination.<sup>152</sup> Fifteenth century popes

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<sup>151</sup> Joseph Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine and Medieval Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>152</sup> *ASJ* 1:517-518 #486.

would continue this practice, with Benedict XIII writing one such letter <sup>153</sup>, and Martin V writing two. <sup>154</sup>

### **Marriage and the Conversion of Jews in Papal Documents, 1159-1450**

Marriage was a common issue for medieval Jewish converts to Christianity. Popes wrote several letters that deal with the question of whether a Jewish marriage that was the result of the practice of *Yibbum* could continue to exist. <sup>155</sup> The frequency of the documents can give us some idea as to how frequently medieval Jews converted to Christianity with their spouse. *Yibbum* is the practice of a widow marrying her deceased husband's brother, if neither of them have children. This was somewhat scandalous from the Christian perspective, because under canon law, this type of marriage was too close in terms of "consanguinity," and would be considered incestuous, and thus would be annulled. The first pope to address this issue was Clement III (1187-1191), who in a letter to the bishop of Segovia noted that Jewish converts who had been married to a relative before their conversion did not need to be separated from their wives after they converted. <sup>156</sup> Clement's letter set a precedent, and there would be no pope throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages who would rule that such a marriage needed to be ended. This is likely because it was viewed as a major hurdle in getting a Jew to convert if they would have had to leave their spouse. This sort of dispensation was not something that was offered to other Christians, indicating that it was a unique policy adopted for Jewish converts.

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<sup>153</sup> *ASJ* 2:585-586 #530.

<sup>154</sup> *ASJ* 2:683-684 #598.

<sup>155</sup> *ASJ* 2:778 #662

<sup>156</sup> *ASJ* 1:65 #62.

Innocent III followed Clement III's example when he wrote a letter to the archbishop of Tyre in 1198 in response to his question about whether levirate marriages should continue to exist after conversion.<sup>157</sup> In it he confirmed that their marriages should be allowed to continue. Innocent did the same in 1201, this time in a letter to the bishop of Livonia.<sup>158</sup> Curiously, there is not another reference to the practice of allowing these marriages to continue until the fifteenth century, at which point the letters became more personal – usually referring to a specific couple. The practice also became even more liberal. In 1415, Pope Gregory XXIII wrote two letters dealing with the matter. The first he wrote in March to the official of Toledo,<sup>159</sup> and the second he wrote to the official of Tortosa in May.<sup>160</sup> In both, he ordered the official to allow two Jewish converts to wed who were too closely related under canon law. This is different from what Clement or Innocent did, as those marriages had already been undertaken. In this case, the marriages had been arranged and contracted, but had not yet occurred at the time of their conversion. This means this marriage which would normally be in violation of canon laws relating to consanguinity was performed as a sacrament within the Church, which had to be something of a rarity for a sacramental marriage in the Middle Ages. Gregory decided to still allow their marriage to occur, likely for the same reason that the levirate marriages weren't broken up to begin with: it would impede the conversion of these individuals. Gregory's successor, Martin V (1417-1431) made the same statement regarding an unmarried couple that had contracted their marriage in

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<sup>157</sup> *ASJ* 1:72 #68.

<sup>158</sup> *ASJ* 1:79 #76.

<sup>159</sup> *ASJ* 2:587-588 #532.

<sup>160</sup> *ASJ* 2:592-593 #537.



1419, this time in the diocese of Tarazona, and this time the letter is addressed to the couple: Leonardo and Yolanda de Sancto Angelo.<sup>161</sup>

In 1415 Pope Benedict ruled that following the conversion to Christianity of one member of a married couple, the couple could stay together for a year to facilitate the conversion of their partner. However, in 1417 the city of Genoa complained about this rule, noting that “the Jewish wives of the new converts should be separated from their husbands, since they don’t want to be converted and have had plenty of time for deliberation.”<sup>162</sup> The complaint made no mention of men who will not convert following the conversion of their wives, indicating that wives were more commonly resistant in these situations.

Overall, popes from the twelfth century onwards were very tolerant regarding marriages that had been contracted under *Yibbum*. They realized that asking people to convert and forced to leave their spouse due to Christian rules of consanguinity would be a major hurdle for conversion. Some popes even went so far as to allowing mixed marriages, viewing the Christian in the couple as a missionary of sorts who could eventually lead to the conversion of the other.

### **Independent Female Converts**

In addition to letters that mention women who converted along with a male family member, there is also record of Jewish women who converted to Christianity independently. While it is not a consistent occurrence, appearing only sporadically in the papal registers, these women have largely been overlooked. Scholars like Goldin

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<sup>161</sup> ASJ 2:684 #598a.

<sup>162</sup>As quoted by David Nirenberg in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2013), 226.

have claimed that there is “no trace of female Jews willingly converting to Christianity.”<sup>163</sup> In total, there are 6 single Jewish women who are mentioned as converting between 591 and 1450.

The first instance we have of this is a letter written by Pope Gregory I in 591 that mentions a Jewish convert named Johanna who is about to marry a Christian man. Gregory orders that the woman be protected from her former coreligionists, who have been reported harassing and taunting her because she was betrothed to be married to a Christian man before her conversion.<sup>164</sup>

In 1199, Innocent III, one of the first popes to give stipends to Jewish converts to keep them from returning to Judaism, sent a letter to the abbot and convent of St. Mary de Pre in Leicester, asking that a female Jewish convert simply referred to as “R.” be provided for with funds from the convent.<sup>165</sup>

In 1241, Pope Gregory IX wrote a letter to the abbess of Jouarre. In it, he notes that the convent several people under its protection, “one of whom was formerly a Jewess.”<sup>166</sup> Gregory tells the abbess that only the converted Jewish woman is permitted to receive the protection and stipend provided by the convent, and that the others are not approved by the papacy.

Similarly, in 1250, Innocent IV wrote to the official of Rheims instructing him to provide a prebend for a Jewish convert to Christianity named Mary.<sup>167</sup> Like in the case above, the pope notes that he first requested the archbishop of Rheims to deal with

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<sup>163</sup> Goldin, *Jewish Women*, p. 38.

<sup>164</sup> *AJS* 1:6 #7.

<sup>165</sup> *ASJ* 1:77 #73.

<sup>166</sup> *ASJ* 1:98-99 #169.

<sup>167</sup> *ASJ* 1:203-204 #196.

the situation, but the monastery of St. Denis was resistant to the request, indicating a degree of reluctance to trust and support Jewish converts to Christianity.

In 1408, Pope Benedict XIII wrote a letter about a Jewish convert to Christianity named Astruga. In the letter, he orders the inquisitors to investigate her, because she has been accused of heresy. No mention is made of any men in her family, making it probable that she converted alone.<sup>168</sup> Astruga is also notable for being the only female Jewish convert to Christianity who was specifically named as part of an inquisitorial investigation.

In 1427, Pope Martin V gave permitted a Jewish convert named Alienora to marry a Christian man. This was a complicated situation, because the woman had initially converted with her Jewish husband as well, but he had relapsed into Judaism while Alienora remained Christian.<sup>169</sup> In 1430, Martin allowed a Jewish mother and her adult daughter to retain their property after their conversion, under the condition that they would sell it back to the Jewish community and use the money they earned to move to a different city.<sup>170</sup>

These are the only clear examples of independent female converts we have records for in papal documents. While they do not appear with anywhere near the same regularity as male converts, it is important to acknowledge that this type of conversion did occur from time to time. In my examination of rabbinic *responsa*, discussed below, there are more examples of independent female converts to Christianity, so these six

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<sup>168</sup> ASJ 1:570-571, #518.

<sup>169</sup> ASJ 2:755-756 #647a.

<sup>170</sup> ASJ 2:792-793 #672.

papal letters are not an aberration. Jewish women did convert to Christianity, sometimes independently.

### **Jewish Conversion and Gender in Papal Documents, 1159-1450**

Papal documents and rabbinic *responsa* give us perhaps the best opportunity of all the documents studies in this dissertation for the examination of gender and actual conversion. This is because in the corpus of both, there are a massive number of individual converts mentioned. This is because of the nature of these types of documents, as both seek to deal with the various problems that were created by the issue of Jews converting to Christianity on a regular basis and at a personal level. In papal documents, as we have seen, these concerns could range from how to deal with the issue of marriage for converts, how to deal with lapsed converts, attempts to quell hostility towards converts, and special stipends that converts received to keep them within the Christian fold. Between 1159 and 1450, 94 individual converts are mentioned across 146 documents that mention Jewish conversion to Christianity. Technically, even more converts than this are mentioned – as sometimes reference is made to entire communities converting or simply a reference to “several” – these cases are not included in my count of 94 converts. These converts are only those who can be reliably counted, either because they are mentioned specifically by name, or a specific number of Jews is given in a case about Jewish conversion. This specific mention of individual Jews also gives us an insight into how gender factored in to the conversion of Jews between 1159 and 1450.

**Table 1: Rate of Male and Female Conversion in Papal Documents**

<b>Total Adult Converts:</b>	<b>Male Converts (Percentage):</b>	<b>Female Converts (Percentage):</b>
<b>84</b>	65 (78%)	19 (22%)

Of these 94 converts, 19 were female, 65 were male, and 12 were children who were not given any gender. Of the 84 adult converts, 22% of them were female, and 78% of them were male. However, before we can judge that these 72 converts are a good sample of the population of Jewish converts in this time period, there are a few caveats that need to be mentioned that skew the data. When specific converts are mentioned, there are two subsections of converts that can only be male. This includes the granting of medical degrees to Jewish doctors who converted and the granting of preaching licenses and church offices to converts. In these documents, four Jewish doctors have medical degrees conferred upon them, and eleven Jewish converts are granted preaching licenses or have Church offices conferred upon them. It was impossible in the medieval world for women to attain these positions. If we remove these 15 Jewish men from our calculations, we are left with 50 male converts, who make up 60% of the converts mentioned in papal documents, with the remaining 40% of the adult converts women. While this is a minority, and it does bolster the argument that Jewish men converted more regularly than women, the difference of the rate of their conversion is not as large as some studies of Jewish conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages would have you believe.

**Table 2: Gender and the Subjects of Papal Documents**

<b>Type of Document:</b>	<b>Male Converts</b>	<b>Female Converts</b>
<b>Stipends &amp; Inducements</b>	39	11
<b>Lapsed Converts</b>	3	1
<b>Marriage</b>	4	5

It is also important to analyze whether Jewish men and women appear in different types of papal letters. When looking at the 50 different Jewish converts who received an inducement to convert, 11 of these were women, while 39 of them were men. The two groups received stipends at roughly the same rate, with 65% of all mentions of female converts appearing in this type of letter. Meanwhile, 61% of all the male converts are mentioned in documents that deal with inducements. When it comes to specific mentions of Jewish converts who relapsed or are accused of returning to Judaism, three of them are male, and one of them is female. This amounts to 5.8% of the mentions of female converts and 4% of the male converts.

In these two types of letters, there is not a great difference between men and women. However, when it comes to letters dealing with the various issues related to the marriage of a convert or converts, a much higher percentage of women appear. Of the nine specific converts mentioned in these documents, 5 are female and 4 are male, amounting to 29% and 6.25% percent of the documents mentioning converts of each gender. This may indicate that women more frequently converted for love, as we have several examples of Jewish women converting independently and then seeking to marry a Christian.

It is also worth noting that while this number of 94 spans across an almost 300-year period, similar numbers are accessible when dividing the documents into centuries, indicating that perhaps the male-to-female ratio of Jewish converts was constant. While Gregory is the first pope to make a reference to a specific Jewish convert, he is not included in this count because his time is so far removed from the twelfth century. However, the next reference we have of specific converts is during the papacy of Alexander III, who wrote a letter mentioning one in 1169, so from that year it is possible to begin looking at the rate of conversion, as references to specific converts in documents become common after that. Between 1169 and 1300 there were 24 individual converts, and among them 20 (83.3%) were male and 4 (17.7%) were female. From 1300-1400 there were 11 individual converts, 8 of which were male (73%) and 3 (27%) were female. From 1400-1450, there were 39 individual converts, and among them 31 (79%) were male and 8 (21%) were female. The ratio of male to female conversion in papal documents remained the same throughout the Middle Ages, and this is a good baseline for future research on whether males or female Jews were more drawn to conversion.

## **Conclusion**

The writings of medieval popes indicate that they wanted to do everything they could to bring about the conversion of Jews, and this desire became stronger as the Middle Ages wore on. While early popes condemned forced conversion outright, acknowledging that this type of conversion did not result in a “true” Christian, pope Innocent III (1198-1216) and his successors decided to make those who were forcibly converted incapable of returning to Judaism without being charged with heresy. This meant that more Jews than ever were now living as Christians.

Popes were also willing to offer various inducements to converts. Both Jews and secular rulers often confiscated the wealth and property of converts, resulting in Jews ending up in desperate situations. Popes feared that these individuals would be tempted to return to Judaism, so something had to be done to remove this temptation. This began with Gregory I, who gave converts tax breaks, but the practice evolved over time. Beginning in the twelfth century popes started giving Jews money from Church offices, a practice that continued until the fifteenth century. However, in the fourteenth century it became more common to offer indulgences to Christians in specific communities in exchange for their support of converts. Other popes tried to attack the heart of the issue: laws that confiscated property from Jews. While two twelfth- and thirteenth-century popes tried this approach, fourteenth and fifteenth-century popes found more success with this method. Popes were also very concerned that Jews, even after they converted, would retain certain aspects of their Jewish practices, such as observing holiday or the Sabbath. In thirteenth century, converts suspected of such practices became the target of the inquisition.



However, there was one Jewish practice they allowed: *Yibbum* or levirate marriages. Popes agreed throughout the centuries that Jews who have already been married or contracted marriage with a relative who would be considered incestuous by Catholic standards, should be allowed to continue to be married to one another following their conversion. Once again, popes allowed this practice because they knew that if they didn't, it would serve as a major obstacle for Jews who wanted to convert to Christianity. If a Jew had to give up their spouse to convert, this would obviously be a major deterrent. Men and women both appear in papal documents, and while male converts appear as a majority, they do not appear as an overwhelming one.

Papal documents give us glimpses into the lives of individual converts in a way that other Christian sources are capable of. In the next chapter, conversion as it was imagined and encountered by many medieval Christians is analyzed, with an examination of Jewish converts who appeared in the various sermon *exempla* from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.

## Chapter 3: Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Medieval Sermon

### *Exempla*

#### **Introduction: The State of Preaching in the Thirteenth Century & The Rise of the Exemplum**

The birth of popular preaching is of important for discussing how various ideas about Jews and their conversion spread throughout Europe. For centuries, preaching was largely clerical and private. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Church placed greater importance on preaching to popular audiences<sup>171</sup> and subsequently public sermons became a form of mass communication that was controlled and cultivated by the Church.<sup>172</sup> Because of the increased importance of preaching, several preachers and theologians wrote theoretical works about preaching in the thirteenth century. The Church's reform of preaching led to the sermons of the thirteenth century became somewhat standardized. Friars developed training programs for preachers<sup>173</sup> and preachers' handbooks, or *artes praedicandi*, put forth models for preachers to follow in their sermons to most effectively deliver their messages. These handbooks taught preachers the best way to deliver their sermons to popular audiences.<sup>174</sup> The use of didactic illustrative stories called *exempla* was a central strategy in the *artes*

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<sup>171</sup> Phyllis B. Roberts, "The *Ars Praedicandi* and the Medieval Sermon" in *Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 41-62, pg. 42.

<sup>172</sup> This has been argued by many scholars of Medieval sermon studies, but most especially by David d'Avray in *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture without Print* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>173</sup> David Jones, *Friars' Tales: Thirteenth Century Exempla from the British Isles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>174</sup> Yuichi Akae, "Between *artes praedicandi* and Actual Sermons: Robert of Basevorn's *Forma Praedicandi* and the Sermons of John Waldeby, OESA," in *Constructing the Medieval Sermon*, ed. Roger Andersson, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 9-32, pg. 10.

*praedicandi*. Alexander of Ashby, a thirteenth-century English theologian who wrote a text called *De modo artificioso praedicandi*, urged preachers to use *exempla* because he believed that it was more likely that the audience would go home thinking about the sermon if they did.<sup>175</sup> Thomas of Chobham, another thirteenth-century Englishman, stressed the use of *exempla* even more, noting that the use of them “secures the benevolence of the audience and their attention.”<sup>176</sup> Jacques de Vitry noted that *exempla* were effective at keeping the crowd awake during otherwise boring sermons.<sup>177</sup> The most popular and copied *artes praedicandi* of the Middle Ages was that of Richard of Thetford, who recommended the use of *exempla*, even providing a bibliography of these collections for his readers.<sup>178</sup> The *artes praedicandi* taught preachers to develop thematic sermons,<sup>179</sup> and an *exemplum* was often inserted into each of the sermons that suited the theme on a given week.<sup>180</sup>

Like preachers’ handbooks, collections of *exempla*, or illustrative religious stories, became popular for the first time in the thirteenth century. These stories were popular with their audiences too, and would remain so until the fifteenth century.<sup>181</sup> These were religious tales that sought to drive home a moral to its audience. The function of these tales as David Jones describes it was “to seize and retain the attention

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<sup>175</sup> Ashby’s *artes praedicandi* is thus far unpublished and is only in manuscript form, but his entire philosophy about the use of *exempla* is quoted in Latin in by Fritz Kemmler in “*Exempla*” in *Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s ‘Handlyng Synne.’ Studies and Text in English 6*. (Tübingen: G. Narr Publishing, 1984), 71.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>177</sup> As quoted by Jacques Berlioz, “Le récit efficace: l’exemplum au service de la predication (XIIIe-XVe siècles), *Mélanges de l’école Française de Rome*, 1980, pp. 113-146, p. 121.

<sup>178</sup> Kemmler, *Exempla*, 84.

<sup>179</sup> Akae, “*Artes praedicandi*,” 10.

<sup>180</sup> Jacques Berlioz, “Introduction à la recherche dans l’exempla médiévaux”, in *Les Exempla Médiévaux: Introduction à la recherche, suivie de tables critique de l’Index Exemplorum de Frederic C. Tubach*, ed. Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Garae: Carcassone, 1992), 15-74, p. 19.

<sup>181</sup> Jacques le Goff, “Introduction,” in *Les Exempla médiévaux: Nouvelles perspectives*, ed. Jacques le Goff and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 11-17, p. 13.

of a preacher's congregation, and the lesson imparted in the narrative was an important part of his strategy to teach his hearers to be better Christians."<sup>182</sup> Peter van Moos has described *exempla* as illustrative stories that "seek to manipulate the soul," which he argues makes the *exempla* markedly different from other genres of illustrative stories.<sup>183</sup> In short, preachers intended these stories to make a lasting spiritual impact on their popular audiences in a way that a more traditional sermon could not.

*Exempla* are useful because they are one of the few medieval sources that give us some insights into what ideas the Church and churchmen wanted to impart on the Christian masses. These stories contained a variety of subject matter, but most typically depicted the lives of saints or events that were supposed to have occurred in the recent past, either in the local community or abroad.<sup>184</sup> Occasionally preachers even told the stories as if they had witnessed them first hand. Some *exempla* even included the names of figures from local history that the audience would have known.<sup>185</sup> Sarah Lamm has argued that these sermons served to disperse ideas held by the clergy to the laypeople of Europe, and that these sermons were one of the most important conduits for the spread of various stereotypical images of Jews, as well as Muslims.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Jones, *Friar's Tales*, 14.

<sup>183</sup> There are also two other popular genres of illustrative stories in the Middle Ages called *casus* and *similitudes* that are somewhat similar to *exempla* in that they tell a story for a rhetorical purpose. However, a *casus* typically aims to create doubt about a religion, and similitudes do not have any spiritual aim, merely aiming to prove points about logic and philosophy. For the most cogent discussion on the difference between the various illustrative genres from the Middle Ages, see Peter van Moos, "L'Exemplum et les *exempla* des prêcheurs," in *Les Exempla médiévaux: Nouvelles Perspectives*, ed. Jacques le Goff and Mary Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris: Honoré Champion éditeur, 1998), 67-81, p. 81.

<sup>184</sup> Berlioz, "Le récit efficace," 119.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>186</sup> Sarah Lamm, "Muslims and Jews in Exempla Collections: A Case Study on Stephen of Bourbon's *Tractatus de Materiis praedicalibus*," *Al Masaq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* vol. 21:3 (2009), 301-314.

Collections of *exempla* typically contained multiple books and chapters divided thematically, allowing a preacher to search for the best *exemplum* depending on the topic of his planned sermon. These texts circulated throughout Europe in the hands of international traveling preachers throughout the continent.<sup>187</sup> The most famous collections that have are Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum* and Jacques de Vitry's *Sermones Vulgares*, both of which were medieval best-sellers. Due to their popularity, they have received a great deal of scholarly scrutiny.

*Exempla* certainly existed before the thirteenth century, most notably in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.<sup>188</sup> However, these *exempla* were primarily meant to be read, not preached. There are not many extant *exempla* collections before the thirteenth century, when dozens appear. Jacques Berlioz has argued that the popularity of the *exempla* in the thirteenth century resulted from the Church's top-down overhaul of preaching. The Church was worried about the various upheavals occurring in Christendom in the late twelfth century, such as heresy and general demographic change. This resulted in a concern about the religiosity of the general public.<sup>189</sup> With their popular appeal and often-entertaining subject matter, *exempla* could simplify preaching and theology while disseminating important messages about Christianity to the masses through which preachers could try to prevent the rise and growth of heresies. As Larry Scanlon has put it, "through the sermon *exemplum*, the Church attempted to

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<sup>187</sup> Berlioz, "Introduction", 19.

<sup>188</sup> Bruno Judic, "Grégoire le Grand et la notion d'*exemplum*," in *Le Tomere des exemples: Exempla et médiation culturelle dans l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu, et. al (Rennes: University Press of Renne, 2010), 131-144. The *Dialogues* themselves are available in many editions. The most recent one in English is Saint Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great* ed. and trans. Edmund G. Gardner (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2010).

<sup>189</sup> Berlioz, "Le récit efficace", 116.

establish its ideological authority among subordinate classes it had previously largely ignored.”<sup>190</sup>

Jews appeared regularly in Christian writings in the High Middle Ages, and *exempla* were no exception to this rule. However, scholarship on the topic is somewhat sparse. Most of the work that scholars have produced focuses largely on the sensationalized and negative image of the Jew that appears in many of these stories. Joan Young Gregg<sup>191</sup> and Ivan Marcus<sup>192</sup> have both noted that Jewish characters were not uncommon in sermon *exempla*, and that they served a variety of purposes. Gregg focuses primarily on the fantastical constructions of the “other” as an enemy of Christianity, and Marcus’ article focuses only on the work of Caesarius of Heisterbach. While Marcus does note in passing that the Jewish women in Caesarius’ work reflect “certain stock observations which reflect cultural stereotypes,” he does not go beyond discussing the stereotypical attractiveness that Christians often attributed to Jewish women,<sup>193</sup> as he is more interested in the general image of Jews in Caesarius’ *Dialogus Miraculorum*, not the topic of conversion. Cesário Bandera wrote a short article on the Jews that appears in Thomas of Cantimpré’s *Bonum Universal de Apibus*, but as a literary critic his primary concern is with Thomas’ description of an act of a ritual murder, which Bandera describes as an interesting insertion of a persecutory text into a

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<sup>190</sup> Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>191</sup> Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 128-170 deal specifically with the Jewish ‘other,’ including Young’s own analysis of their role in *exempla*, as well as translations of a number of *exempla* featuring Jewish characters.

<sup>192</sup> Ivan Marcus, “Images of Jews in the *exempla* of Caesarius of Heisterbach,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jew and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen, (Wiesbaden: Harrowitz Publishing, 1996), 247-256.

<sup>193</sup> Marcus, “Images of Jews,” 249.

mythical text.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, Jacques le Goff has published an article on the role of Jews in a collection called *Alphabetum Narrationum*, but as this article is in a collection on racism throughout history, he focuses solely on the sensationalized constructions of Jews as host desecrators and Christ-killers.<sup>195</sup>

Most of the work on *exempla* has overlooked the fact that not all Jewish characters serve as enemies to the Christian faith. As is noted briefly by Steven Kruger in *The Spectral Jew*, Jewish women served as willing converts to Christianity in some sermon stories. For Kruger, this supports his argument that Christians saw gender roles within Judaism as reversed.<sup>196</sup> I argue instead that both Jewish men and women are fulfilling their expected gender roles within these stories, with men appearing as stubborn and easy to anger, and women appearing as malleable figures who are easy to influence.

If, as Berlioz has argued, the popularity of *exempla* was related to concern about heresy, then the archetype of the Jew converting to Christianity would strengthen the position of orthodox Christianity. The Jewish characters in these stories are converting to the *true* faith, not to one of the various heresies in Medieval Europe. However, while it is logical that the authors of these stories would depict the conversion of Jews, it is not so clear why preachers chose to depict Jewish women as converting easily and not Jewish men.

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<sup>194</sup> Cesáreo Bandera, "From Mythical Bees to Medieval Anti-Semitism," in *Violence and Truth: On the work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 209-226.

<sup>195</sup> Jacques le Goff, "Le Juif dans les *exempla* médiévaux: le cas de l'*Alphabetum Narrationum*," in *Le Racisme: mythes et sciences*, ed. Maurice Olender (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1981), 209-220.

<sup>196</sup> Steven Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 85.

While Jewish men do convert in sermon stories, it is most often only after they have committed some sort of heinous act against Christianity such as theft of the Eucharist or murdering a small Christian child, only for a miracle to convince him of his wrong-doing. Frequently, Jewish men commit subversive or destructive acts against Christians or Christianity in the stories and a miracle reverses the action, but the Jew or Jews do not convert, even after witnessing the miracle.<sup>197</sup> Women very rarely play this role. These binary constructions of Jewish men and women stand in stark contrast to the reality of Jewish religious conversion in the Middle Ages, as we saw in chapter one, in which both Jewish men and women took part, with men converting more regularly. To fully express the gendered nature of these conversions, this chapter is divided into three major parts. First, it examines those *exempla* featuring the conversion of Jewish men to Christianity. Then, it will address those stories featuring the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity. Lastly, it addresses the stories that best express the gendered nature of conversion – stories that feature both male and female Jewish characters

### **The Conversion of Jewish Men in Sermon Exempla**

The typical *exemplum* that features a male Jew converting to Christianity discusses a male Jew or a group of male Jews committing an evil act that directly opposes or tries to harm Christianity. When their attempt to subvert Christianity is reversed or hindered by a miracle, the Jew or Jews convert. Even if a Jewish male does

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<sup>197</sup> See for example, Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. T.F. Crane (London: Folklore Society, 1890), p. 124-125, no. 296. In this *exemplum*, a Jewish moneylender tries to force a Christian who has come under hard times to blaspheme against the Virgin in exchange for wealth. The man refuses, and is subsequently rewarded with wealth and an appearance from Mary herself. Nothing is said of the Jew who tried to get the Christian to sin.



not commit an evil act, he usually needs to witness a miracle to convince him to convert, making his conversion the result of external stimulus and divine intervention.

### *Positive Depictions*

Before discussing the myriad examples of these malicious male Jewish characters, which do make up the bulk of stories, it is important to note that not all Jewish men who convert to Christianity in *exempla* fit this role. The most popular story that depicts a male convert to Christianity in a more positive light, which has much earlier origins in Pope Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*<sup>198</sup>, is the story of the Jew who crossed himself in the presence of demons. Jacques de Vitry's very popular early thirteenth-century *Sermones Vulgares* took Gregory's story and modified it into a sermon *exemplum*,<sup>199</sup> and the popularity of that collection led to it being included in many other less widely circulated collections, with the British Library alone holding eight manuscripts that contain the story, ranging from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century.<sup>200</sup> In this story, a Jewish man was traveling from one city to another, but when night was imminent, he had to find somewhere to shelter himself. He chose a building that is usually described as a pagan temple. There, he is awoken in the middle of the night by the whispers of demons, who he overheard plotting something. In some versions of the

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<sup>198</sup> Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great* ed. and trans. Edmund G. Gardner, (New York: Evolution Publishing), p. 113-116.

<sup>199</sup> Sermon CXXXI in *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane. Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967, pg. 59. The fact that the basic elements story date back to the sixth century could be why the male Jewish character is depicted so much more positively than his thirteenth-century and later counterparts.

<sup>200</sup> London, British Library, Additional MS 44055 fol. 65b; London, British Library, Arundel MS 231 fol. 201b; London, British Library, Harley MS 273 fol. 153 col. 2-f. 154; London, British Library MS Sloan 2478, fols. 6b-7; London, British Library, Burney MS 361 fol. 147b; London, British Library, Harley MS 463 fols. 12-12r; London, British Library, Harley MS 128 fols. 46b-47.

story they are discussing how they will kill a local bishop,<sup>201</sup> in others they are described as deciding how they will attack the Jewish man in the temple.<sup>202</sup> In all versions, the demons realized the Jew was listening, and decided to attack him. The Jewish man was stricken with fear, and instinctively made the sign of the cross to protect himself. At this, the demons are forced to halt their attack, commenting that “The vessel which had been empty is now marked. Now we cannot harm him.” The Jew then proceeded to his destination and converts to Christianity. There are slight variations on this story depending on the manuscript, but the core elements of the story remain the same. Of the *exempla* discussed here that appear in numerous sources, it is perhaps the one that remains the most consistent. The story served the purpose of showing that Judaism was wrong in an obvious fashion – demons can attack and harm Jews, but not Christians. This story was likely intended to strengthen the faith in those who listened, and to allay any doubts people in the audience might have had about the accuracy of Christianity.

Another popular story was that of the Jewish man who is captured by thieves. The most popular collection that this story appeared in is likely John Mirk’s fifteenth-century *Festial*, but it is an older story, as it appears in one thirteenth-century and one fourteenth-century manuscript, though these collections have unknown authors.<sup>203</sup> In this story, we again have the motif of a Jew who encountered danger while he was travelling. In this case though, the danger wasn’t demonic, it was other people. The

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<sup>201</sup> BL Harley MS 463 f. 12-12r; BL Harley MS 128 f. 46b-f.47

<sup>202</sup> BL Add MS 44055 f. 65b; BL Arundel MS 231 f. 201b; BL Harley MS 273 f. 153 col. 2-f. 154; BL MS Sloan 2478, f6b-f7; BL Burney MS 361 f. 147b.

<sup>203</sup> *Festial*, #57; London, British Library, Add MS 15833 fols. 138-138b; London, British Library, Harley MS 2250 fol. 87 col. 2

Jew, who in one manuscript is named as Jacob from London,<sup>204</sup> was attacked and robbed by thieves in the countryside and tied to a tree. He was in danger of dying of thirst or starvation when the Virgin Mary appeared to him and released him. After witnessing this miracle, he returned home and converted Christianity. As Adrienne Boyarin has pointed out, Marian miracles and Jews frequently appear together, especially in English sources,<sup>205</sup> and this is a good example of that. The story shows that Mary had a special affinity for Jews. She did what she could to protect this man and bring him to Christianity – a theme we will see recurring. However, this is the only example of a male Jew being the recipient of a Marian miracle that is not a response to his own evil actions.

The final *exempla* featuring a more positive depiction of a Jewish man who converts to Christianity was not especially popular, and as far as I know appears in only one fifteenth-century manuscript that has not yet been discussed in scholarly literature.<sup>206</sup> In this story, a Jewish man had several Christian friends who constantly attempted to get him to go to church with them. Eventually, the Jew begrudgingly went, but he did not feel that the experience would change his beliefs in any way. Once he was there, he saw his friends taking communion, and witnessed a miracle. Instead of seeing them eat the communion wafer, the Jew saw the wafer transform into the form of a “bloody child” which he witnessed his friends eating. The Jew converted to Christianity immediately, and took communion that same day. This story is a fascinating one, because the miracle in it is incredibly grisly. While a Jew being saved

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<sup>204</sup> BL Harley MS 2250 f. 87 col. 2

<sup>205</sup> Adrienne Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2010).

<sup>206</sup> London, British Library Harley MS 4196, fol. 101b.

from demons by making the sign of the cross, or being released by the Virgin Mary would be obvious motivators for one's conversion to Christianity, the idea that witnessing Christians eat a bloody child would lead to his conversion is a little less plausible. This story was written from such a biased Christian perspective that the reaction to the miracle itself is a Christian one – not a Jewish one. A Christian witnessing a miracle like this would help convince him or her about the doctrine of transubstantiation. A Jew who witnessed this on the other hand would likely be frightened.

Of the twenty-one unique *exempla* examined here,<sup>207</sup> the three above are the only ones that depict a Jewish man who converts to Christianity in the absence of some malicious act on his part. These stories are not typical of *exempla* featuring Jewish men who convert to Christianity, and while the first two were quite popular, when examined in the context of the eighteen other stories that are discussed below, it becomes clear that these stories were outliers rather than exemplars for how Jewish men converted to Christianity in sermon *exempla*. While the remaining stories I discuss in this chapter do uniformly feature Jewish men converting only after committing some heinous crime against Christianity, there are certain recurring stock characters that allow for the other stories about Jewish men who convert to Christianity to be grouped into four categories. These male Jews are either (proto)-host desecrators, icon profaners, evil moneylenders, or murderers.

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<sup>207</sup> Overall I have identified 21 stories that have their own narrative. In other words, there are many more than 21 total stories – but there are only 21 different permutations of these stories. There may be minor differences between the different versions of these stories, but the basic narrative elements remain the same.

*As Failed Host Desecrators and Icon Profaners*

The most common of these stock characters was that of a male Jew or Jews as failed host desecrators or icon profaners. Host desecration is the act of attempting to destroy or otherwise harm the communion wafer. Icon profanation is the act of attempt to destroy or otherwise harm (in most cases) an image of Christ. While these two accusations are somewhat different, they come from a similar train of thought. As Jeremy Cohen has shown, both of these accusations result from the idea that Jews are Christ-killers, with both actions involving Jews reenacting the supposed act of crucifying Christ.<sup>208</sup> Miri Rubin has established that accusations of host desecration were a result of Christian anxiety about the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was established in 1215.<sup>209</sup> This accusation of host desecration was first brought against Jews in 1290 in Paris, but in *exempla* we can find some examples of proto-host desecration dating from between 1215-1290, lending further credence to Rubin's argument. In these stories, Jews stole the wafer with the intention of harming it, but a miracle interfered and prevented it, leading to his conversion.

The most popular *exempla* featuring host desecration appears in the early thirteenth-century in Hugo von Trimberg's collection *Das Solsequium*,<sup>210</sup> which is also extant in at least four other manuscripts from as late as the fourteenth century.<sup>211</sup> In this story, a Jewish man disguised himself as a Christian and entered a church during communion. After he received the wafer in his mouth from the priest, he left the

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<sup>208</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 119-142.

<sup>209</sup> Rubin, *Gentile Tales*.

<sup>210</sup> Book I, Exemplum 32, in *Das "Solsequium" des Hugo von Trimberg: Eine Kritische Edition* ed. Angelika Strauss. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag Publishing, 2002, page 148-149.

<sup>211</sup> BL Add MS 15833 f.141; London, British Library, Harley MS 1288, fol. 47

church, intending to cause some undefined harm to the wafer. However, when he spat the wafer out into his hand, “God in the form of a small boy smiled up at him.” The Jew was frightened by this, and buried the wafer in the church’s cemetery. After a few hours, the Jew’s guilt got the better of him and he went to the bishop and told him what he did, leading him to where he buried the wafer. The Jew dug the wafer back up, where it was found to still be in the form of a baby, who is unharmed and happy. Following this miracle, the Jew converted to Christianity. This story obviously served to bolster the idea of transubstantiation in the Christianity community – it indeed proved that the wafer was the literal body of Christ – and it also establishes Jews as especially curious about the communion wafer, which resulted in more direct accusations of host desecration. This type of Jewish curiosity about the wafer also served to further establish the validity of transubstantiation.

One example of this can be found in two popular fourteenth-century *exempla* collections. One of them is the French *Ci Nous Dit*, the other the English *Alphabetum Narrationum*. The fact that this story appeared in two vernacular collections is a good indication of its popularity. In this story of host desecration, a Jew obtained the Eucharist after bribing a Christian woman to steal it for him. After he examined the wafer, he decided to destroy it. After some consideration, the Jew decided to feed it to his dog. However, when the Jew attempted to get his dog to eat the wafer, the dog instead bowed in front of it. The Jew was dumbfounded by this, and decided instead to throw the wafer into the fire. However, when he tried to, his dog attacked him to prevent the destruction of the wafer. The Jew finally gave up on his attempt to destroy the wafer and decided to convert to Christianity. There is also a slightly different and

less popular variation of the story that instead involved a Jew attempting to get pigs to devour the wafer. When the notoriously ravenous animals were uninterested in doing so, and even went out of their way to prevent the Jew from picking up the wafer, he decided to convert to Christianity.<sup>212</sup> In another story, the Jew did what Jews were accused of doing in the accusation from Paris in 1290 – he stole the wafer and stabbed it, attempting to destroy it. However, blood shot forth, leading to the Jew to convert to Christianity.<sup>213</sup>

Tales featuring a Jewish man or men profaning icons and then converting to Christianity after they witness a miracle are even more common than those featuring host desecration or proto-host desecration. Of the twenty-one unique *exempla* discussed here, the most common is the story of a group of Jews, usually in Beirut, who stole a crucifix and stabbed it repeatedly.<sup>214</sup> The story is in one of the most popular thirteenth-century collections, Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*, and in the most popular fifteenth-century collection, John Mirk's *Festial*. In addition to the story appearing in these more famous texts, it also appears in seven lesser-known *exempla* collections dating from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century. After the Jews stole the cross and stabbed it and it shot forth blood, causing them to convert. Other versions of the story have it happening a little closer to home, such as in Spain,<sup>215</sup> or are more general, only stating that it happened "somewhere in the orient."<sup>216</sup> But the core

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<sup>212</sup>London, British Library Add MS 11284, fol. 35r

<sup>213</sup>BL Add MS 11284 f. 35

<sup>214</sup>Caesarius, *Festial* 252; London, British Library Add MS 35112, fols. 20-21; London, British Library Add MS 41069, fols. 49-50; London, British Library Egerton MS 2947 fols. 53f.-53b (an image of Mary holding Christ in this one); London, British Library Add MS 32678, fols. 71f.-74f.; BL Harley MS 2250 f86b col.2-f87 col.1; BL MS Sloane 2478 (f 34b-f.35); London, British Library, Add. MS 27336 fol. 54

<sup>215</sup>Add MS 27336 f. 56-f. 56b

<sup>216</sup>BL Add MS 33956 f. 45

elements of the story are the same. There is however one unique version of the story I would like to discuss.

In one fourteenth-century telling of the story, a Jew not only attacked an image of Christ, but also an image of Mary.<sup>217</sup> The story appears in a section of *exempla* on Marian miracles as well, indicating that the central miracle of the story is not Christological. This is unique among all the versions of this *exemplum* – because the image of Christ is also not a crucifix or a statue of Christ, but a statue of the Virgin holding the Holy Child. The story clearly evokes other versions of the story – it takes place in Beirut for example – but it has additional significant differences. Like in all versions of the story, the statue miraculously bled when the Jew tried to harm it, but in this version, the Jew tried to stop the bleeding with a cloth. Then, the cloth performed a series of amazing miracles, healing several Jews in the community from terrible diseases. This resulted in the collective conversion of Jews in the community.

#### *As Evil Moneylenders or Pawnbrokers*

One of the most common male Jewish convert stock characters to appear in medieval *exempla* is that of the Jewish moneylender or pawnbroker who tried to use his position to commit various evil acts against Christianity. In one of the more widely circulated stories, which has been named “The Merchant’s Surety” by Adrienne Boyarin,<sup>218</sup> a Christian pawned a statue of the Virgin to a Jew and then used the money to go overseas. The Christian then realized that the date of his payment had drawn near,

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<sup>217</sup> BL Egerton MS 2947 f.53-f. 53b

<sup>218</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this story in its Marian context, especially as it appears in the writings of William of Malmesbury see Adrienne Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 29-30.



put his money in a chest and prayed it would make its way to the Jew over the sea. Miraculously, the payment got there, but the Jew refused to return the statue. When Christians arrived to search the Jew's home and took back the statue, they could not find it until the statue miraculously "opened its mouth and spoke the truth, exposing the chest under the bed of the Jew." This miracle caused the Jew to convert.<sup>219</sup>

A villainous Jewish usurer can also be found in an *exemplum* written by Jacques de Vitry, in which a gambler who lost much of his money is tempted to sin in exchange for wealth.<sup>220</sup> In the story, a debt-ridden Christian gambler went to visit a Jew who tells him to "Deny Christ and his mother and the saints, and I will make it so that you will have more money than you had before." The Christian considered doing so because of his problems, but he was overcome by his guilt and refused, stating that his love of the Virgin Mary was too great for him to consider such a proposition. Days later, the gambler was walking the streets of his city when an image of the Virgin Mary bowed to him and spoke. When she asked what he had done for her he said: "A certain Jew wished to make me wealthy if I would deny holy Mary, but I have preferred to remain a

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<sup>219</sup> There are multiple versions of this story, indicating its popularity. The earliest version seems to be that found in William of Malmesbury's (d. 1143) *Liber de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae*, which has been published as *El Libro 'de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae' de Guillermo de Malmesbury*, ed. Jose M. Canal, (Rome, 1968), pp. 132-136, no. 32. A version of it can also be found in Hugo von Trimberg's thirteenth-century *Das Solsequium*, which has been published as *Das "Solsequium" des Hugo von Trimberg: Eine Kritische Edition*, ed. Angelika Strauss. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag Publishing, 2002, Book II, pp. 169-170, no. 5. In Hugo's version, it is an icon of Jesus, rather than the Virgin, and the statue is pawned because a man has gone broke due to his sins and is in desperate need of money, but the core elements remain the same. Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. 1240) also includes a version of the story in his wildly popular *Dialogus Miraculorum*, published as *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange, 2 volumes. Brussels: H. Lempertz and Company, 1851, Book III, p. 70, 194-195. Its latest appearance is in the vernacular in the fourteenth-century French *exempla* collection *Ci nous dit*, published as *Ci nous dit: Recueil d'exemples moraux* [2 volumes], ed. Gérard Blangez (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1979-1988), vol. 2, p. 199, no. 694.

<sup>220</sup> Jacques de Vitry, #296, in *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Crane (Liechtenstein: Kraus reprint Limited, 1967), p. 124-125.

poor man than to deny her.” Upon hearing this, Mary granted the man “exceeding wealth.” When the Jew heard of this, he converted to Christianity.

*As Demoniacs or Sorcerers*

Other stories depict Jewish men as sorcerers capable of conjuring devils and demons,<sup>221</sup> and when they do, it is usually to harm Christians. One story features a Jew who was both a money lender and a sorcerer, so it serves as a nice transition between the two categories. This *exemplum* can be found in a collection of *exempla* from the thirteenth century with no known author or compiler, and it bears some striking similarities to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*.<sup>222</sup> In the story, a Christian had fallen on hard times due to his excessive gambling, so he went to a Jewish moneylender hoping to secure a loan. Instead of receiving a loan, the Christian got something more – the Jew magically restored his wealth. The Jewish moneylender told him he has seven years to pay him back. In the meantime, the Christian impregnated the Jew’s daughter, at which point the girl revealed that her father is capable of summoning demons that will find out about their situation and kill the Christian. After he heard this, he ran away in fear of the Jew’s powers – but only after he stole some of the Jew’s wealth. While on the run, the Christian encountered a hermit who he confessed to. The hermit advised him to do penance for his sins. Meanwhile, the Jewish moneylender summoned

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<sup>221</sup> For more information on Christian perceptions of Jews as having magical abilities, see Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Jewish Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939). For about how medieval Christians associated Jews with the devil and demons, see Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1935).

<sup>222</sup> This similarity and the possible influence that it and other similar folktales may have had on Shakespeare is discussed in Beatrice D. Brown, “Mediaeval Prototypes of Lorenzo and Jessica,” *Modern Language Notes* 44, no. 4 (April 1929), p. 227-32.

demons to tell him who robbed him and where he can find him, at which point the demons replied that “[we] only have power over Jews, Saracens, and heretical Christians.”<sup>223</sup> In other words, these demons had no power over good Christians, and because of the young man’s confession, the demons could no longer do anything to harm or torment him. The young Christian man then returned to the Jew’s home and returned the money he stole. This, combined with the fact that his demons could not harm the young man, led the Jewish moneylender to convert to Christianity. No further mention is made of the daughter who the Christian impregnated in this *exemplum*, though it may be safe to assume that she converted along with her father and perhaps even married the Christian.

Another thirteenth-century English collection of *exempla* tells of a Jewish man who invited a priest to his home.<sup>224</sup> The invitation was not one of hospitality though, as the Jew openly told the priest that he will prove to him that Mary was not a virgin. The priest accepted this request, and brought a communion wafer with him. Once at the dinner, the Jew conjured up an image that he claimed to be the Virgin, and this apparition told the priest that she was not a Virgin and that Jesus Christ was not the son of God. At this, the priest revealed the communion wafer from beneath his robes, and the apparition immediately proved itself to be a demon, who fled away so quickly and with such force that the roof of the Jew’s house was torn off. After he saw that his sorcery was no match for the Eucharist, the Jew, along with his household, chose to convert to Christianity.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> London, British Library, MS Royal 7 D. 1, f. 12.

<sup>224</sup> London, British Library Royal MS 8 B IV, fols. 88-f-89.

<sup>225</sup> BL Royal MS 8 B IV f. r88-v89.

In a similar story, a Jew summoned a demon to attack a bishop. The Jew and the demon hid together in an alley way planning to ambush the bishop on the streets, but when the bishop walked by, the demon could do nothing but bow to him. This Jew's mastery over demons is no match for a priest, and when he saw this, the Jewish sorcerer converted to Christianity.<sup>226</sup>

### *As Child Murderers*

Sometimes Jews in these stories are even willing to harm or kill Christians,<sup>227</sup> but a miracle reverses their actions. Caesarius of Heisterbach wrote of a group of Jewish men who murdered a Christian boy “who sang the responsory every day in a most beautiful voice outside of the church.” The Jews, who owned and worked in a nearby vineyard were unable to endure hearing this singing every day, and eventually “lured him to their vineyard and murdered him.” As they left the scene of their crime, they heard the boy singing again, and stated “Behold, we hear the boy whom we killed living.” Following this miracle, the Jews converted.<sup>228</sup> Caesarius' story was repeated with minor changes in several other collections as well, including more a more dramatic ending where the boy sprung to life at his own funeral and began singing.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> London, British Library, Harley MS 4403 fol. 69r; London British Library, Royal MS D, fol. 32r.

<sup>227</sup> *Exempla* involving Jews murdering Christian children were likely inspired by the accusations of ritual murder and blood libel. Accusations that Jews murder Christian children were born in 1147 in in Norwich, where the local Jews were accused of killing a young boy named William as part of their Passover celebration. William was subsequently venerated as a martyr and a saint. This accusation spread rapidly throughout Europe, and was a major issue in medieval Jewish-Christian relations. This accusation evolved over time, eventually adding that the Jews also needed to consume the blood of a Christian child during the holiday. For more on the tale and its spread throughout Europe see, John M. McCulloh, “Jewish Ritual Murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the Early Dissemination of the Myth,” *Speculum* 72:3 (1997), p. 698-740.

<sup>228</sup> Caesarius of Heisterbach, “Exemplum 83,” in *Erzählungen des Mittelalters*, ed. Joseph Klapper (Breslau: Verlag von M. & H Marcus, 1914), p. 301.

<sup>229</sup> London, British Library Add. MS 11579 fol. 5b; BL Add MS 27336 f. 7-f8b

These stories show the power of Christianity in the face of Jewish perfidiousness and evil, revealing that it is even possible for a Jew with hate for Christianity in his heart to be swayed towards the Truth by the power of Christian miracles. These stories stand in stark contrast to the typical story about the conversion of a Jewish woman to Christianity. Jewish women were very rarely depicted as committing crimes against Christianity in *exempla* that featured their conversion. While a miracle may help the woman decide to convert, miracles were much less of a necessity in *exempla* featuring the conversion of women. Jonathan Elukin has argued that miracles were necessary in post-1000 conversion narratives because they added more legitimacy to the conversion of Jews who were viewed with a great deal of suspicion.<sup>230</sup> Many of the *exempla* featuring Jewish women do not follow this model, with many Jewish women converting without the aid of a miracle. When a story that tells of the conversion of a Jewish woman does feature a miracle, the author commonly makes the point that the Jewish woman was more receptive to the message the miracle contained than a Jewish man was. Meanwhile, Jewish men almost exclusively follow Elukin's model, as the *exempla* that tell of their conversion almost always also feature a miracle.

### **The Conversion of Jewish Women in Sermon Exempla**

There are also various repeated thematic elements in sermon *exempla* featuring the conversion of Jewish women. The female stock characters can be divided into two

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<sup>230</sup>Jonathan Elukin. "The Discovery of the Self: Jews and Conversion in the Twelfth Century." In *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Notre Dame Conferences in Medieval Studies, no. 10, eds. Michael A. Signer and John van Engen. South Bend, IN (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 63-76.

broad groups: 1) Young Jewish women with an innate desire to convert and leave their families, and 2) Jewish women who are helped by Marian miracles in a time of need.

*Young Jewish Women with Innate Desires to Convert*

In these stories the young women typically converted in secret and blatantly rejected their families. Two of these are in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*,<sup>231</sup> which was one of the most widely circulated *exempla* collections. In one of these stories,<sup>232</sup> a young Jewish woman who Caesarius describes as "imbued by divine disposition to the Catholic faith" abandons her family, converted to Christianity and enters a convent. Her family became enraged and eventually found her and confronted her. She refused to answer to any name other than the one she received after her baptism and she told her family that she could not stand their "Jewish stench." This indicates that she has completely moved on from her Jewish family, so much so that she can sense a physiological difference between Jews and Christians. Moreover, the story makes it clear that no miracle was required to prompt the girl to convert. She is simply aware that Judaism is the incorrect faith, and Christianity is the right one.

Caesarius also wrote of a young Jewish woman he described as "burn[ing] with a desire" to convert to Christianity.<sup>233</sup> Eventually this desire became so great that she went to the local bishop and told him that she wanted to become a Christian, so he baptized her. After the conversion, she asks that he protect her from her father and

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<sup>231</sup> From here on the text will simply be referred to as *DM*. Page number and volume numbers are from Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum / Dialogus Über Die Wunder*, 5 vols., ed. Horst Schneider (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

<sup>232</sup> Caesarius, *DM*, Bk. II, Chapter 25, vol. 1, p. 456-464.

<sup>233</sup> Caesarius, *DM* Bk. II, Chapter 26, vol. 1, p. 464-467.

mother who she believed would try to convince her to come back to Judaism. The bishop assigns a guard to protect her, but the mother manages to find her anyway. The young woman's mother confronted her and told her she had to come home and renounce Christianity. The mother described a ritual that would wash away her baptism,<sup>234</sup> but the daughter spat in her face and ran away. Just as in the previous *exemplum*, the daughter has not only rejected Judaism, but also rejected her family in an antagonistic manner. These stories would have reinforced to their audience that Jews and Christians are not the same and should be kept apart, an important aspect of canon law in the thirteenth century,<sup>235</sup> while also edifying Christianity with the story of a young Jewish girl who is infatuated with the divine faith. Like the story told immediately before it, this young woman did not need a miracle to convince her to convert.

A similar story is in Thomas of Cantimpré's *Bonum universal de apibus*, which was composed in the mid-thirteenth century. Thomas described a young Jewish girl named Rachel who gave food to beggars and loved to hear the name of the Virgin Mary.<sup>236</sup> Eventually, a priest who could see her "divine future" approached her and asked her if she wished to convert. The young girl said she does, but only if he will first teach her everything about being a Christian. She began learning a great deal about Christianity from this priest. Eventually, her family discovered her clandestine

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<sup>234</sup> The mention of this ritual seems to be based on reality to some degree on reality, as starting in the twelfth century, when Jews allowed converts back into the community, they required them to undergo a ritual. For more on this see, see below p. 184-187.

<sup>235</sup> See for example, "The Synodical Rules of Odo (ca. 1200)," in *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth century*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Solomon Grayzel (New York: Herman Press, 1966), 301.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas of Cantimpré, *Bonum universal de apibus* (Balthazar Belleri: Douai, 1627), Book 2, Chapter 29, *exemplum* 20, pp. 295-299. The story can be found in its original manuscript form in the British Library MS Add MS 10433 f. 38r (col. 2)-f.39r (col. 1).

behavior, and attempted to separate her from the priest by marrying her to a Jewish man in the Rhineland. Rachel ran to the priest in tears and he agreed to convert her, and the priest gave her the name of Catherine and placed her in a convent. Years later, a member of her family disguised himself as a Christian and tracked her down wanting to speak with her, and told her that “the words of your family are more important than the words of sermons.” She repeatedly refused to reply to him despite his begging and promises of gifts, and he eventually gave up and left. When other nuns had family visit them, Catherine spoke to a portrait of the Virgin Mary, and described herself as an orphan whose only mother was Mary.

In each of the above stories, a young woman is described as having a great and even innate desire to convert to Christianity. When confronted with a choice between their family members and their new faith, each of them chooses the latter. This type of *exempla* was likely a powerful tool for the preacher, as it asserted the fact that even some Jews, in this case three young women, know that their faith is the incorrect one so they seek out conversion. Unlike their male counterparts, none of these young women needed miracles to convince them to convert, instead they were blessed with special spiritual knowledge that allowed them to seek out the true faith.

### *Jewish Women with an Affinity for the Virgin*

The third *exemplum* discussed above also touches on another common theme within *exempla* featuring the conversion of Jewish women. Rachel, the young Jewish girl who converted and entered a convent, was described in the beginning of the story as “loving to hear the name of the Virgin” and at the end of the story, after she rejected her family,



she claimed that “the Virgin is [her] only mother.” The special affinity for the Virgin that is expressed here is common in stories about the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity. And, in cases where Jewish women converted following a miracle, the miracle is usually Marian. Additionally, Mary was believed by some to have a special affinity for Jews. William of Malmesbury wrote in the eleventh century that “Mary labors endlessly for the conversion of her people,” and this is the reason why Marian miracles are so common in Jewish conversion stories.<sup>237</sup> We saw one example of this with Jewish men above. However, these miracles occurred in stories of the conversion of Jewish women more frequently. These miracles were also very different from those that led to the conversion of Jewish men, as the women in the stories do not first commit a crime against Christianity that is reversed by a miracle. For Jewish women, miracles seem to occur during their own times of need.

In Heineman of Bonn’s early thirteenth-century *Viaticum narrationum*<sup>238</sup> there is a story of a Jewish woman experiencing an especially painful childbirth. In her pain, she called out to the Virgin Mary, who helped her get through the birth. However, her baby died shortly after his birth. The Virgin miraculously revived the baby and the woman converted to Christianity, bringing her child with her.<sup>239</sup> This story was popular

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<sup>237</sup>William of Malmesbury, *Liber de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae*, which has been published as *El Libro ‘de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae’ de Guillermo de Malmesbury*, ed. Jose M. Canal, (Rome, 1968), p. 136.

<sup>238</sup> Heinemann of Bonn, *Das Viaticum Narrationum des Henmannus Bononiensis*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935) p. 59, no. 39.

<sup>239</sup> A similar version of this story also appears in a poem in the thirteenth-century *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, *Cantiga 89* in *Cantigas de Santa María. Edición facsímil del Códice T. I. I. de la Biblioteca de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Siglo XIII* (Madrid: Edilán, 1979). It is unclear as to which came first, as both are simply dated to the late thirteenth century. Regardless, this story was one of the most popular conversion narratives in the time period.

enough that it also appeared in lesser known collections as well, with very few changes.<sup>240</sup>

In *Le Tombel de Chartrose*, an early fourteenth-century French *exempla* collection, there is a story of a young Jewish woman in Castille who was accused of adultery.<sup>241</sup> The court convicted her of the crime, the punishment for which was execution by jumping off a cliff. Just before her execution, she called out to the Virgin Mary and promised that she will live the rest of her life for the Virgin if she survives. The Virgin saved her from her fall, which all the Christians in the community witnessed, and the woman was baptized and lived the rest of her life as a good Christian.

In these stories, Jewish women endured a hardship of some kind and called out to the Virgin, who miraculously helped them. While the women in these stories were somewhat different than the young women discussed above because they only converted after they are the beneficiary of a miracle, there are some similarities. In two of the three stories, the women called out to the Virgin on their own, indicating that they believed that the Virgin would help them, even though neither of them had converted to Christianity at the moment of their hardship. The women in these stories did not pray to God and ask for his help as would be expected of a Jewish woman, instead they prayed to Mary. The Jewish women in *exempla* possess a special knowledge that their male counterparts do not: they know that Christianity is the correct faith, and they are willing to turn to it in a time of need.

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<sup>240</sup> BL Add MS 44055 f. 50

<sup>241</sup> *Tombel de Chartrose*, ed. Audrey Sulpice (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2014), no. 24, pp. 567-575. A version of this story can also be found in *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, and appears as Cantiga 107.

### **Jewish Men and Women Together**

From the several *exempla* discussed above, it becomes clear that the conversion of male and female Jews to Christianity was depicted differently. While men usually only converted after committing some heinous act against Christians or Christianity, women converted in much more benign circumstances – either because of an innate desire to convert to Christianity or because they were helped by the Virgin Mary in their time of need. While men and women appeared separately in *exempla*, as the examples above indicate, there are also several examples of Jewish men and women who appeared in the same stories that conclude with Jewish conversion. While the above examples effectively establish the gendered nature of Jewish conversion to Christianity in these sources, *exempla* containing both males and females are the best place to observe this. While it may be possible to dismiss some of the above examples by pointing out that different compilers and authors wrote or assembled the *exempla*, meaning that perhaps one author only wrote about a male convert to Christianity (such as in the case of Jacques de Vitry), stories that feature characters of both genders being confronted by conversion obviously represent the thoughts and the ideas of the same individual, and the popularity of the stories discussed below reveals that these ideas were widespread. In these stories, we will see many of the same motifs we saw above – male Jews who seek to destroy Christianity and Jewish women who convert as the result of miracles – only we will see them appearing in the same source.

One example of this can be found in Thomas of Cantimpre's *Bonum Universale De Apibus*.<sup>242</sup> Unlike most of the other stories covered here, the main character of this tale is a Christian woman, and one of her many holy acts is affecting the conversion of a Jewish woman. This story begins with wars destroying a convent in Germany, and a young nun named Agnes was forced to move back to her home. There, she encountered her extremely violent father who also raped and impregnated her.<sup>243</sup> After giving birth, a monk who claimed to know of the incestuous origin of the baby appeared to her and told her to throw the baby in a nearby pond. She thought about it, and eventually "allow[ed] shame to overcome maternal love" and threw the baby in the pond. The monk revealed himself to be the devil, and attempted to convince her to drown herself as well. Agnes responded by invoking the name of the Virgin, and the devil disappeared. In grief, Agnes traveled to a different village and finds work as a wet-nurse working for a Jewish woman named Sarah. Agnes worked and dwelled there for five years, fasting and eating hardly anything. She also told Sarah about Christianity and over time these "edifying and effective words entered into her heart." Agnes taught Sarah the Lord's Prayer and how to invoke the name of the Virgin Mary. Eventually, she went to the pope for her confession and absolution for the crime she committed against her child. Following this, she returned to Sarah's home where Sarah's husband had discovered that Agnes had "perverted his wife." Filled with rage, the Jewish man stabbed Agnes to death. Sarah cried until she fell asleep, and received a vision of the Virgin Mary reviving her friend. When she woke up, her friend was alive and her

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<sup>242</sup> Thomas of Cantimpré, *Apibus*, Book 2, Chapter 29, *exemplum* 22, pp. 303-304. It can also be found in the British Library MS Add MS 10433 f.39r (col. 1)-f.39v (col. 1).

<sup>243</sup> *Ab eo violente oppressa, mox impraegnata fuit*

wounds healed. This miracle scared the husband away. Sarah became a Christian, changed her name to Gertrude, and moved to Cologne with Agnes and her children. As many of the stories in this section do, this story neatly encapsulates what this chapter has argued thus far. Sarah-Gertrude's husband is depicted as evil and violent, while Sarah-Gertrude herself is depicted as receptive to the ideas of Christianity. An element that we will see recur is that not all men in stories featuring both Jews and Christians convert after their evil act is reversed by a miracle. This is very different from the way that Jewish men in the stories solely featuring male Jewish characters are depicted. While characters in those stories may have done heinous things, they convert after a miracle reverses it. Sarah-Gertrude's husband runs away when he witnesses the miracle, and does not convert with his wife.

One of the most popular *exempla* of the Middle Ages is a story that is commonly known as "The Boy and the Oven."<sup>244</sup> The earliest version of this story dates to the sixth-century writings of Gregory of Tours,<sup>245</sup> but it exploded in popularity with the advent of popular preaching, perhaps indicating that the story was especially effective for the preachers who used it. In this story, a Jewish boy who was out playing with his

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<sup>244</sup>Various versions of this *exemplum* can be found in the following list which is by no means exhaustive: *Liber de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae*, which has been published as *El Libro 'de laudibus et miraculis sanctae mariae' de Guillermo de Malmesbury*, ed. Jose M. Canal, (Rome, 1968), pp. 137-138, no. 33.; Hugo von Trimberg, *Das "Solsequium" des Hugo von Trimberg: Eine Kritische Edition* ed. Angelika Strauss (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag Publishing, 2002), Bk II, Ex. 4, pg. 168-169; *Ci nous dit: Recueil d'exemples moraux* [2 volumes], ed. Gérard Blangez (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1979-1988), vol. 2, no. 439; Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones Vulgares*, ed. T.F. Crane (London: Folklore Society, 1890), p. 236; It can also be found in numerous unpublished manuscripts. Paris BnF lat. 16481; London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra C. X, fol. 101b, Caesarius; BL Add MS 44055 f. 67-67b; London, British Library, Egerton MS 2891 fols. 94b-95 (South English Legendary), London, British Library, Add. MS 22557 fol. 43; London, British Library, Add. MS 33956, fol. 45; BL MS Cleopatra Cotton X f. 100b-102; London, British Library, Royal MS 20 B XIV; London, British Library, Egerton MS 261 fol. 5v (only first 29 lines preserved); Add MS 27336 f. 56-f. 56b. For more on this tale and its many variations over the years of the Middle Ages, see Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 7-39.

<sup>245</sup>Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs* ed. and trans. R. Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), p. 29-32.

Christian friends, followed them into church for communion. He told his parents of this when he arrives home for dinner, and his father is immediately thrown into a rage. In his anger, he picked up his son and throws him into the oven that was still lit from preparing dinner. The boy's mother wept loudly at her husband's actions, which caused the neighboring Christians to come running to the house just in time for them to see the boy miraculously saved by an appearance of the Virgin. In some cases, the father is also miraculously burned alive in the boy's place, or the angered Christians throw him into the fire after the boy is saved. In other versions, he is merely chased away by the Christians never to be seen again. In every version of the story, the boy is unharmed thanks to a miracle, the mother is distressed at the father's actions, and the father is forcibly removed from the family and is not mentioned as converting. Subsequently both the boy and the mother convert to Christianity. The father in this story stopped at nothing to subvert Christianity, even if it meant killing his child. As many of the stories featuring both Jewish men and women do, this story casts Jewish men as clear enemies of the faith, while also showing some hope for the future conversion of the Jews, not only in the child but also in the adult Jewish woman who stands in stark opposition to her evil husband who wants to destroy Christianity. Moreover, this story also contains the common element of a Marian miracle leading to the conversion of a Jewish woman.

Other stories feature the more common male stock characters we discussed above, such as host desecrators. In the fourteenth-century collection *Ci Nous Dit*,<sup>246</sup> a Jewish man bought the host from someone and takes it home. After trying to think what evil thing he wanted to do to it, he decided to throw it in his boiler. The host

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<sup>246</sup> *Ci Nous Dit*, ed. Blangez, vol. I, No. 146, p. 148.

began to bleed in the boiler and eventually the Christ child appeared. The man's wife is convinced by the miracle to convert to Christianity, and she takes her son with her, but the man continued to deny Christianity. As was the case above and in the story of Sarah/Gertrude, a boy and his mother converted when a miracle prevented a violent anti-Christian action that the family patriarch tried to commit, and the father failed to convert even after he witnessed the miraculous reversal of his actions.

In some stories, it was a young Jewish woman who converted after the actions of her father. Caesarius wrote one such *exemplum*<sup>247</sup> that was very popular, appearing in several other collections as well.<sup>248</sup> Instead of featuring a Jewish woman as the main character, this story focused on a young clerk who is interested in an attractive Jewish girl. The Jewish woman wanted to be with the clerk, but she noted that it was not possible because her father watched her too closely. They decided that the only day that the two could be together is Passover, a day on which a "flow of blood" weakened Jewish men.<sup>249</sup> The Jewish woman and the clerk have sex, but her father caught them. He is enraged, and threatened to kill the Christian, until he recognized him as a relative of the bishop and realized that rash action on his part would likely result in his own death. The next day, the clerk went to repent for his sins, and at the same time, the Jews of the community formed a mob and entered the church. However, through a miracle, they were unable to speak, and the bishop forgave his relative. The text does not make it clear if it was a result of the miracle or simply because she was in love with

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<sup>247</sup> Caesarius, *DM* Bk. II, Chapter 23, vol. 1, p. 446-452.

<sup>248</sup> London, British Library, Harley MS 219, fols. 15-15b (15<sup>th</sup> century, Odo of Cheriton named as the source), London, British Library, Add MS 9906, fol. 64

<sup>249</sup> This may either be a reference to the medieval Christian belief that Jewish men menstruated, or to the idea that Jews suffered excessive bleeding every year just before Easter as punishment for making Christ bleed. For more on the medieval Christian idea that male Jews menstruated, see Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, p. 182-185.

the clerk, but in the end the young Jewish girl was “carried to the Faith” with no mention of anyone else in the mob converting. In some versions of the story she and the clerk get married, but in other versions she becomes a nun. While it is unclear whether the miracle convinced the Jewish woman in this story to convert, the fact that she is the only one to convert is still notable. While the other Jews in the story all experienced a miracle, the rest are apparently not moved to convert. Stories such as this enable the author and the preacher to both hope for a future in which Jews convert to Christianity while simultaneously pointing out the stubbornness and perfidiousness of the Jews. This story reinforces the idea that Jews should not enter churches for any reason as decreed by various church councils in the thirteenth century,<sup>250</sup> while also reinforcing the importance of confession. Like all of these stories of conversion, it also further strengthens Christianity’s position in opposition to Judaism and heresy.

There are also stories that featured typical male stock characters that also featured young Jewish women who are willing to convert. For example, there is one *exemplum* that is based at least in part in the one discussed above – a clerk and a Jewish woman fell in love and had sex secretly. In this case, the Jewish father was aware that his daughter has slept with a Christian but he was not sure who. Instead of storming into the church like the Jews in the more widespread story, this Jewish man showed himself to be a sorcerer, and summoned demons and asked them to tell him who was sleeping with his daughter. The demons told him they are unable to answer his question, because they could not do anything to individuals who have confessed. The

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<sup>250</sup>See for example, “The Council of Oxford (1222)” in *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Grayzel, p. 315.



daughter walked into the room during this exchange, was frightened by her father's company, converted to Christianity and married her lover.

### **Conclusions & Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative evidence further relates how gendered *exempla* were in their discussion of Jewish converts to Christianity. First, it is important to catalogue roughly how many Jews converted in the stories above and what gender they were. At least one Jew converts in each of the twenty-one stories analyzed above. In six of them, a Jewish woman converts on her own. In an additional three a Jewish woman converts with her children, in the absence of her husband. That is a total of nine female Jewish converts to Christianity. In the remaining twelve stories, at least one male converts to Christianity. An examination of how many individual collections contain the conversion of men and women is also necessary, as it can indicate which type of conversion was the most popular. There are thirty different sources, both published and in manuscript form that contain at least one story featuring the conversion of a Jewish woman in the absence of any other members of her family. Meanwhile there are thirty-eight different collections that feature at least one *exemplum* that has a male Jewish character who converts to Christianity. While males hold a slight edge in terms of the sheer number of conversion *exempla*, a thematic analysis indicates just how different these narratives were depending on the gender of the convert.

**Table 3: Routes to Conversion for Male and Female Jews in *Exempla***

	Total Sources	Male	Female
<b>Conversion</b>	21 narratives	12	9
<b>Evil Act</b>	38 collections	28	0
<b>Icon Profanation</b>	9	9	0
<b>Murder</b>	2	2	0
<b>Host Desecration</b>	7	7	0
<b>Evil Moneylenders</b>	3	3	0
<b>Sorcerers</b>	7	7	0
<b>Absence of Evil Act</b>	12	3	9

In the thirty-eight sources featuring the conversion of one or more male Jews to Christianity, the Jews convert as the result of a miracle that reverses an evil act they committed twenty-eight times, making up a strong majority of the sources featuring the conversion of male Jews. These numbers can be further broken down into the categories discussed above. Nine of them feature a Jew or Jews profaning an image of Christ, two of them feature Jews murdering Christians, seven of them feature host desecration or proto-host desecration, three of them feature evil Jewish moneylenders, and seven of them feature demoniac Jewish characters. Of the twenty-one unique stories discussed above, these account for eight of them. In the remaining ten sources and three unique stories, Jewish men convert in the absence of any sort of evil act, and as the result of a miracle. This means that when Jewish men do convert in *exempla*, they commit an evil deed in 73.6 percent of their appearances. While Jewish men did

appear as positive characters even before their conversion, they appeared as characters who initially wanted to cause harm to Christians or Christianity most the time.

This reliance becomes even more obvious when Jewish men who convert are compared to their female counterparts. In the thirty sources and nine unique stories featuring the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity, Jewish women do not appear even once as wanting to destroy or harm Christianity at any point in the narrative. This means that Jewish women in these stories convert only as the result of a miracle that reverses an evil deed an astounding 0 percent of the time, a stark contrast from their male counterparts. Things get even more lopsided when one begins to consider the male Jewish characters who appear in *exempla* that focus on the conversion of a female Jew. If a male Jewish character does appear in an *exemplum* alongside a female Jew who eventually converts, he does not convert, and indeed the evil deed of the Jewish male leads to the conversion of the Jewish woman, perhaps the best indicator of the gendered differences in these narratives. This is the case in all the stories discussed above featuring both male and female characters, and makes up a sizable chunk of stories featuring the conversion of Jewish women to Christianity. In three of the nine unique stories this occurs, and in fifteen of the thirty different collections.

These stories of Jewish women who converted to Christianity, just like those about Jewish men who converted to Christianity, served to strengthen the position of the Church in the face of heresy. However, while the stories about Jewish men seek to show that the power of Christian miracles and the direct intervention of God on the part of Christianity can convince Jews to convert, the stories about Jewish women instead aim to show that many Jews, especially women, secretly want to convert to Christianity

because they know it is the True Faith. Both stories show that Christianity is more powerful than Judaism, and in a very gendered fashion.

## Chapter 4: Canon Law & The Conversion of Jews to Christianity

### Introduction

Next, we will examine Christian discussions of how Jewish conversion interacts with canon law. Specifically, the way in which canon law treats the idea of Jews converting to Christianity, as well as the converts themselves. Canon law does not usually provide us with accounts of individual converts the way papal documents do, but medieval legal treatises provide more detailed discussions about how Jews and Jewish converts should exist within Christendom. Perhaps the most influential canon law text of the Middle Ages, and thus a logical starting point, is Gratian's *Decretum*, which was composed around 1150. Gratian was a professor of theology at the University of Bologna, and the name that he gave the work is more indicative of the work's purpose: *Concordia discordantium canonum* – or, the harmony between discordant canons. In the millennium since the founding of the Church, many different ecclesiastical legal rulings had been made, and in the *Decretum*, Gratian wanted to find a way to make the entire body of canon law work together. In other words, Gratian's *Decretum* includes various legal texts from Gregory the Great onward, sometimes contradictory ones, and attempts to reconcile these contradictions based on his own readings of the various texts. Gratian's text was so influential and effective that it was used by the Church for almost 800 years as part of the *Corpus juris canonici*. It was also used as the standard textbook at the law schools of medieval universities, so the arguments and ideas presented within it spread throughout Europe much in the same way that *exempla* did, though primarily to a learned audience.

Gratian started a revolution of sorts. Canon law became a much greater focus of churchmen in general, and several canon lawyers ascended to the papal see in the thirteenth century as greater and greater emphasis was placed on canon law by the Church. One of these canon lawyers-turned-pope, Pope Gregory IX, would order the next major compilation of canon law: the Decretals of Gregory IX. These were compiled almost 100 years after Gratian completed his work, in the year 1230. Despite the name, the decretals were not composed by Gregory himself, but by his chaplain, confessor, and friend, Raymond of Penaforte. Gregory's Decretals and Gratian's *Decretum* would go on to be the most influential canon law texts of the Middle Ages, as they were used in both the practice and teaching of canon law. As with the *Decretum*, there were many who wrote commentaries on Gregory IX's Decretals after its creation. The last major text we will look at is Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, which was completed in 1274. In it, Thomas uses the lens of philosophy for theological discussions, discussing many issues of canon law and other rulings of the Church in the centuries before.

In the thirteenth century, canon lawyers became more focused on the Jewish community and on the issue of conversion than it ever had been. Popes began punishing Jews with a new weapon: indirect excommunication. Popes obviously could not excommunicate Jews or threaten excommunication the way they could with fellow Christians, but they could tell all Christians to avoid any type of interaction with a Jew within the community.<sup>251</sup> This was obviously disastrous, as Jews had to do business

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<sup>251</sup> Interestingly, no detailed discussion of indirect excommunication exists. Some have discussed it in passing, such as Synan in his *Popes and the Jews*, p. 101-102. But major monographs such as Elizabeth Vodola's *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) completely ignores the practice. This is a promising subject for future research. For examples of indirect

with their Christian neighbors. The Church even made attempts at regulating Judaism, and attempted to eliminate Jewish post-biblical texts, especially the Talmud.<sup>252</sup>

There is a surprising paucity of work on how medieval canon law treated the Jews. James Brundage has written extensively on the topic of medieval canon law, and some of his work has discussed the way that Jews are treated in it. He has argued that in the thirteenth century canon law for the first time began to be used in relation to non-Christians, but he does not attribute this change to a difference in Christian perception of the Jews. Instead, he argues that “Jewish populations...tended to be relatively small, stable; and peaceful. They posed no military threat to Christian rulers.” He argues that the increased focus on the Jewish community within the work of canon lawyers is a result of deep-seated concerns about the threat of Islam.<sup>253</sup>

Walter Pakter is the author of the only monograph that exclusively looks at medieval canon law on the Jews, and it is something of a foundational text for those interested in topics relating to canon law and the Jews.<sup>254</sup> While the book is a trove of information when it comes to the various ways in which canon law oppressed Jews in the Middle Ages, it spends very little time discussing how canon law treated Jewish converts to Christianity, only mentioning in passing that their conversions were sometimes not considered genuine.<sup>255</sup>

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excommunication threatened or carried out against Jews in the Middle Ages, see [add all the papal letters that mention it later]

<sup>252</sup> This has been examined in the most detail by Jeremy Cohen in *The Friars and the Jews*. For more on how the Church justified this using canon law, see Benjamin Kedar, “Canon Law and the Burning of the Talmud,” *Bulletin of Medieval Canon Law* 9 (1979), 79-82.

<sup>253</sup> James Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995), 163.

<sup>254</sup> Walter Pakter. *Medieval Canon Law and the Jews*. Ebelsbach: Verlag, 1988.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

John Gilchrist has analyzed the way that Jews were treated in canon law during the period of the First and Second Crusades. In doing so, he argues that the way canon law treated the Jews before and after the watershed event of the Crusades did not differ greatly, further strengthening the argument of other historians that the lives of Jews did not change drastically after the First and Second Crusade.<sup>256</sup>

Rowan W. Dorin has noted that fifteenth-century canon lawyers began reinterpreting older canon law in a manner that was much harsher for Jews. He primarily focuses on the law of *Usurarum Voraginem*, which was issued by the Second Council of Lyon in 1274. This was a law that prohibited individuals from providing housing for foreign usurers, and until the fifteenth century this did not include Jews, but by the fifteenth century popes began threatening excommunication to those who provided housing for Jewish moneylenders.<sup>257</sup>

The one work that does examine the issue of converts as they appear in medieval canon law is Brundage's article on canon law and intermarriage between Christians and Jews, in which he discusses the various canon laws that required Jews and Christians to avoid any type of intimate relationship. Despite the law, though, he uncovers several instances of Jews and Christians entering intimate relationships, with the Jewish member of the couple eventually converting to Christianity in order to marry the Christian.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> John Gilchrist, "The Perception of Jews in the Canon Law in the Period of the First Two Crusades," *Jewish History* 3:1 (1988), pp. 9-24.

<sup>257</sup> Rowan W. Dorin, "Once the Jews have been Expelled": Intent and Interpretation in Late Medieval Canon Law" *Law and History Review*, 2016, 34:2, pp. 335-370.

<sup>258</sup> James Brundage, "Intermarriage between Christians and Jews in Medieval Canon Law," *Jewish History* Vol. 3 No. 1 (1988), pp. 25-40.



While all this work is important and enlightening to come to a better understanding of Jewish-Christian relations in the Middle Ages, and the legal underpinnings that affected them, very little work has been done on the issue of Jewish conversion to Christianity in canon law. Canon lawyers began to have more active legal discussions about Jewish conversion to Christianity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, just as they began to become more interested in what kind of power the Church could wield over non-Christians.

Not all canon lawyers of the Middle Ages agreed with one another, and I will discuss these dissenting opinions, and the opinions that prevailed. In this chapter, we are going to examine different areas of canon law that discuss the conversion of Jews. Issues relating to Jewish conversion in canon law that appear the most frequently are: whether Jewish children should be taken away from their parents and baptized, forced conversion and what constitutes a “forced” conversion, and what should be done when one partner in a Jewish marriage converts and the other does not. The last of these is especially relevant for our discussion of gender and the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

### **Forced Conversion**

Just as papal documents often dealt with the idea of forced conversion, so too did canon law. Canon law throughout the Middle Ages is almost universally opposed to the idea that Jews should be forcibly converted. Gregory the Great and Augustine had both been opposed to the idea, and their writings carried great weight throughout the Middle Ages. In addition to the papal letter that Gregory sent to the Bishop of Arles that is discussed above, he also sent a letter to the bishop of Naples on the topic of

forced conversion. Gratian included this letter in his *Decretum*,<sup>259</sup> preserving this idea and presenting a specific case for future canon lawyers to refer to when arguing that Jews should not be converted by force. In this case, Gregory noted that the Jews of Naples had reached out to the papacy claiming that some of the community had been forcibly converted. Gregory argued that if this is true, those who did it are acting “in vain,” and that such conversions are useless because they cannot be completely faithful. Just as he did in the papal document discussed above, he argued that Jews should be converted “by gentle means rather than by harsh means,” and that Jews are to be “convert[ed] by admonitions without permitting them to be disturbed again concerning their observances.”

This basic idea held for centuries, but it did evolve over the centuries. Just a few decades after Gregory’s letter, in 633, the Fourth Council of Toledo was dealing with forced conversions, and Gratian made sure to include their ruling just two sections after Gregory’s.<sup>260</sup> The council agreed that “Jews are not to be forced into the faith,” and that they should be “persuaded and not compelled” to join the faith. But it makes one major statement that is not something Gregory mentioned, stating that “once converted, they...may not be permitted to leave it...” even going so far as to say that “they be forced to uphold the faith which they accepted under duress or by necessity.” The rationale for this is that if one allows a forced convert to return to their own faith, “the name of the Lord [could] be brought into disrepute.” The churchmen at this council, which was probably overseen by the famous Isidore of Seville, concluded that the

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<sup>259</sup> Part I, Distinctio XLV, Canon III.

<sup>260</sup> Gratian, *Decretum*, Part I: Distinctio XLV, Canon V, in *Corpus Iuris Canonici* v. 1, edited by Emil Ludovic Richter, (Graz: Akademische Druck, 1959).

process of baptism – regardless of how it happened - created a permanent connection between the baptized and the Lord, one that cannot be severed regardless of the reason for conversion.

In later centuries, this sort of ambivalence would continue. As we saw above, Jews who converted to Christianity, no matter how their conversion occurred, came to be considered Christians, and if they attempted to revert to Judaism, they were considered heretics. Innocent III would be the first to add some nuance what exactly counted as “forced” conversion. He wrote in 1199 to the Bishop of Arles regarding what to do about forced conversions, Innocent III laid out his argument that would go on to appear in the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX. Innocent’s discussion of the topic would have lasting impacts on how the conversion of Jews was viewed in the Middle Ages, and it is worth presenting the entire letter here:

It is true that it is contrary to Christianity to force anyone, always against his will and against his total opposition, into receiving and practicing Christianity. Wherefore some, without absurdity, distinguish between unwilling and unwilling and between coerced and coerced: that he, forced violently through fear and punishment, who received the sacrament of baptism to avoid harm to himself, such a one, just like the one who comes to baptism in bad faith, receives the imprint of the Christian character; and since he gave consent as if conditionally, though not absolutely, he is to be held to the observance of the Christian faith. It is in this context that the decree of the council of Toledo should be understood, in which it is stated that he who long ago had been forced into Christianity, as happened in the time of the most religious king Sisebut, because it is already undisputed that they had united with the divine sacraments and the grace of baptism, been anointed with chrism and had shown themselves as partakers of the body of the Lord; for it is proper that they should be compelled to hold to the faith which through necessity they accepted, lest the name of the Lord be blasphemed and the faith they had undertaken should be held as vile and contemptible. But one who never consents and is unwilling in the absolute sense received neither the reality nor the character of the sacrament because it is more to dissent strongly than to give minimal consent, just as he

who shouts out his dissent incurs no guilt when forced violently to offer incense to idols.<sup>261</sup>

In other writings that are preserved in papal registers, Innocent III similarly argued that Jews who had “*obex contrariae voluntatis*” regarding their conversion to Christianity, could return to Judaism. In this letter preserved in the *Decretales*, he gives a longer explanation, noting that no matter how one is converted that the convert received “the imprint of Christian character,” implying that regardless of the will of the person, the conversion to the new faith still occurs. He argues that “minimal consent” is sufficient for conversion, but that to “dissent strongly” and to be “unwilling in the absolute sense” can prevent the conversion. However, the problem is that it isn’t clear what exactly constitutes this. Translated literally as a “barrier of a contrary will,” Innocent’s use of the term implied that this “barrier” indeed prevented the baptism from performing its usual function of creating a permanent conversion to Christianity as a result of the act. Later canon lawyers and popes would have a very restrictive idea as to what constituted this barrier. In 1277 Nicholas III concluded that Jews who had been converted under threats of death, concluded that they could not return to their Jewish practices because they were not “absolutely and precisely coerced” into accepting the faith. The implication here is that if they *had* been coerced in such a manner, they could have returned to their faith. For Nicholas, a threat of death was not enough of a reason to create the “barrier” that Innocent described. Indeed, Pope Innocent III created this window through which Jews could be allowed to return to their faith, but there is not any record in canon law or papal documents from the thirteenth century on indicating a time when a pope allowed Jews who were converted, forcibly or otherwise,

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<sup>261</sup>*Decretales*, Part 3: Distinctio 42, Canon 4.

to return to their previous faith. By the sixteenth century, a more direct example of what Innocent meant is given by the jurist Marquardus de Susannis' in his text *De Iudaeis*. He quoted from the *Decretum* stating that the illegal and violent form of baptism refers "only in the case of direct compulsion, such as when one is brought to the baptismal font with his hands and feet tied, and forcibly immersed over the sounds of his protests."<sup>262</sup> This image implies that Jews had to resist in absolutely every way they possibly could.

When we do have examples of Jews returning to their faith, it is because of the intervention of secular leaders. For example, following the forced conversion of Jews during the massacres in the Rhineland during the First Crusade in 1096, Pope Urban II expressed regrets that the forced conversions had occurred, but insisted that the Jews who had been victims had to remain as Christians. In 1097, Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV allowed the Jews who had suffered forced conversion to return to their faith, directly defying the pope.<sup>263</sup>

Thomas Aquinas weighed in on the issue as well, citing Augustine and reasserting the idea that Jews should not be forcibly converted, but he goes one step farther, and uses a mode of argumentation that is unique to Thomas Aquinas:

Among unbelievers there are some who have never received the faith, such as the heathens and the Jews: and these are by no means to be compelled to the faith, in order that they may believe, because to believe depends on the will...even if [the Christians] were to conquer them, and take them prisoners, they should still leave them free to believe, if they will.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Marquardus de Susannis, *Tractatus de Iudaeis et aliis infidelibus*, III,ii.7, Venice: 1558, p. 133.

<sup>263</sup> Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* vol. 4, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 106

<sup>264</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, ii, q. 10 art. 8 with the *Commentary* of Cajetan, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Leo XIII (Rome: 1882), VIII, p. 89.

As is typical for Thomas, he did not just give theological reasons for Jews to not be converted, he sees the idea of forced conversion as being completely useless for a practical reason: belief is dependent upon will. Thus, Thomas is directly opposed to the idea of forced conversion, even seeming to imply that there is no point in making someone who is forcibly converted remain Christian, because they will never believe. This runs in direct opposition to the writings of those who came before him, who deemed it necessary for those who were forcibly converted to remain in their new faith.

John Duns Scotus was in direct opposition to this idea a generation after Aquinas, arguing that the forced conversion of Jews as a lesser evil than allowing them to continue living as infidels.<sup>265</sup> For the remainder of the Middle Ages, these two perspectives would be championed by different thinkers.

Commentaries on Aquinas would further elaborate on the rationale for why Jews shouldn't be forcibly converted. Thomas Cajetan, a sixteenth-century commentator, still saw the issue as important, noting that the reason people should not be converted to Christianity is because such a conversion results in their "servile, rather than voluntary, conversion, and hence in sacrilege." He even goes so far as note that "It certainly is a greater evil to live secretly as an unbeliever...than to live freely as an infidel,"<sup>266</sup> an idea that directly counters the rationale of earlier thinkers who ruled that Jews remaining reluctant Christians was a lesser evil than allowing them to return to their original faith. He also tackles one of the other arguments of his predecessors: that the offspring of such forced converts would be genuine in their conversion, arguing that

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<sup>265</sup> John Duns Scotus, *Questiones in librum quartum Sententiarum*, dist. 4 q. 9 in *Opera omnia* (Paris, L. Vives, 1895), XVI, p. 487.

<sup>266</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, 89-90.

their children would in fact be taught in the original faith of the forced converts.<sup>267</sup>

Salo Baron has argued that this conclusion is perhaps drawn by Cajetan because of his experience with *Conversos* in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>268</sup>

### *The Forced Conversion of Children*

Though certainly related to the issue of forced conversion, the issue of whether the children of Jews could be taken away from their parents and converted to Christianity took on a separate legal discussion. Pope Innocent III, in the same 1201 letter discussed above and included in the *Decretales*, also made special mention of children. While, as always, the Church remained opposed to the idea of forced baptism, Innocent noted that children who are baptized against their or their parents' wishes also had to remain Christians "even more staunchly than adults." Innocent goes on to argue for the indelible nature of baptism, noting that regardless of the feelings of the convert "the act must be considered valid, for it redeemed them from the original sin." He also argued that after a generation or two, the children of those who were forcibly converted would be genuine Christians.<sup>269</sup>

Thomas Aquinas was against the practice of converting children who had not yet reached the age of reason, again, using more than just theology to support his reasoning:

If, however, they have not yet the use of free-will, according to the natural law they are under the care of their parents as long as they cannot look after themselves. For which reason we say that even the children of the ancients 'were saved through the faith of their parents.' Wherefore it would be contrary to natural justice if such children were baptized against their parents' will: just as it would be if one having the use of reason were baptized against his will.

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>268</sup> Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. IX, p. 12. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

<sup>269</sup> Grayzel, *The Church*, p. 14.

Moreover, under the circumstances it would be dangerous to baptize the children of unbelievers; for they would be liable to lapse into unbelief, by reason of their natural affection for their parents. Therefore, it is not the custom of the Church to baptize the children of unbelievers against their parents' will.<sup>270</sup>

For Thomas, the will of the parents is important when it comes to the forced conversion of children, just as it is with the forced conversion of adults. Jennifer Hart Weed has effectively argued that Thomas also opposed the idea that the sacrament of baptism left an indelible mark on anyone on whom it was performed, regardless of their will – instead, Thomas believed that the sacraments were ineffective on the unwilling.<sup>271</sup>

Despite the opposition of Thomas Aquinas to the idea, other jurists of the Middle Ages championed the idea that Jewish minors should be taken from their parents and converted. John Duns Scotus is perhaps the most zealous in this desire, which Baron describes as the “indiscriminate Christianization of all Jewish minors.”<sup>272</sup> Interestingly, Duns Scotus referred to Aquinas in his reasoning, arguing that after these children are baptized, they should be forcibly removed from their parents' home and put in a Christian environment for education in order to avoid the kind of relapse that Aquinas discussed in his own discussions of forced conversion.<sup>273</sup> Duns Scotus seemed to think that he knew better than Aquinas, and that his way of doing things could prevent the kind of relapse Aquinas said was inevitable with forced conversion of children.

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<sup>270</sup> *Summa*, IIIa 68. 10.

<sup>271</sup> Jennifer Hart Weed, “Augustine on the Forced Conversion of Jews: Belief, Will, and Toleration,” in *Jews in Medieval Christendom: Slay Them Not* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), eds. Kristine Utterback and Merral Price, pp. 129-146.

<sup>272</sup> Baron, *Jews* vol. IX, p. 16.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



While the Church itself adopted the Thomistic perspective rather than that of Duns Scotus, individual churchmen through the Middle Ages and beyond would continue to make arguments about the forced conversion of Jewish children. In the early sixteenth century in Germany, Ulrich Zasius wrote that “The prince or anyone else in authority over Jews not only may, but he ought to cause, Jewish children to be baptized...Not only a prince and the like, but any good Christian may, and ought to, under circumstances, baptize a child of a Jew or heathen without parental consent.”<sup>274</sup>

### **Gender and Conversion in Canon Law**

Of all the different aspects of medieval canon law as it relates to the conversion of Jews, the area where we can get the most information about gender is in the detailed discussions that canon lawyers had with one another about what should be done when one partner in a Jewish marriage converts to Christianity, but the other does not. This is because this is the one area of canon law where cases involving both Jewish men and women are discussed, as in some instances a male Jew is the convert to Christianity, and in others a female Jew. Luckily, this was a topic that was of great concern to medieval canon lawyers, and an analysis of these plentiful attacks in the context of gender is not something that has been done before. In the *Decretum*, Gratian includes about twenty different rulings that discuss prohibitions on sexual or marital contact between Christians and Jews. This presented something of a problem, then, when one member of a married couple converted to Christianity, but the other chose not to.

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 17.

Especially by the latter part of the Middle Ages, there are several instances of this. So, by the end of the thirteenth century, there were several more legal discussions about intermarriage between Jews and Christians.

The earliest reference to intermarriage in Christianity can be found in the seventh chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul expressed a great deal of tolerance regarding the issue stating in verses 12-15:

If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she is willing to go on living with him, he should not divorce her; and if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he is willing to go on living with her, she should not divorce her husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband.<sup>275</sup>

Paul believed that interfaith couples were fine, even noting that one member of a marriage practicing Christianity is enough to make their union a holy one. This is a fairly progressive attitude, but the reason that Paul decided to allow such intermarriage is also stated in the same letter, when he notes that if the marriage were not made holy through the faith of one of the partners, "your children would be unclean, whereas in fact they are holy."<sup>276</sup> It is important to Paul that the children of any marriage involving one Christian be considered "holy," or in other words, Christian. This is likely a result of the environment in which Paul was writing, as he was struggling to spread Christianity through the world, and in a sense, he was willing to take any Christian he could get, even if both parents of a child were not Christians. In some cases, it may have been especially hard for people to find spouses who believed Christ was the messiah, because the religion was in its infancy and there just were not enough Christians

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<sup>275</sup> 1 Corinthians 7: 12-15.

<sup>276</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.

around. This more progressive attitude towards intermarriage would disintegrate as soon as Christianity became the dominant religion and culture in Europe. Once most people were Christians, the authorities in the Church begin concluding that Christians needed to marry their coreligionists, and not those who were from outside the faith. This attitude is present in the thought of Christian churchmen by the period of the church councils of Late Antiquity.

In the early fourth century, the Council of Elvira ruled that Christians who had sexual relations with Jews would be excommunicated.<sup>277</sup> Later councils came to similar conclusions, but made more specific references to intermarriage. Gratian made sure to include rulings from some of these early councils. He includes a ruling from the Fourth Council of Toledo (633) that “Jews who hold Christian girls in matrimony should be admonished by the bishop of the city that, if they wish to remain with them, they must become Christians.”<sup>278</sup> If they do not wish to become Christian even after being told this, the couple must be separated because “an infidel cannot remain in union with one who has already been brought into the Christian faith.” This is something that stands in direct opposition to the words of Paul, who argued that interfaith marriages were perfectly fine. Additionally, the canon states that children who are born from this type of interfaith marriage should follow the faith of their mother, not that of their Jewish father. It concludes by noting that “children who are born of infidel women and Christian men are to follow the Christian faith.” This aspect of the canon is more in line with Paul’s thinking, as he implied that the children of interfaith marriages should always be considered Christian.

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<sup>277</sup> *Council of Elvira*, canon 16.

<sup>278</sup> Gratian, *Decretum*, C. 1. Q. 4 c. 7

While this canon does make mention of children who have a Jewish mother, this statute never discusses situations wherein a Jewish man is married to a Christian woman. Jewish men should not be married to Christian women, but this canon implies *ex silentio* that Jewish women could be married to Christian men, and this type of marriage did not need to be targeted by the clergy of their city. Gratian himself does not attempt to explain exactly why this double standard exists, and later commentators on this subject would attempt to address it themselves. Robert of Flamborough, a commentator on the *Decretum* recognized that not all situations were addressed by the above, and stated very clearly that he thought that a marriage was dissolved when one member of a couple converted.<sup>279</sup>

Pope Innocent III issued the decretal *Quanto te* in 1199, arguing that a convert to Christianity could remarry if his spouse remained completely opposed to the idea of becoming a Christian, and refused to go on living with the convert.<sup>280</sup> This ruling opened a lot of space for Jewish converts to Christianity to go on living with their Jewish spouse, in a way that is not suggested in the *Decretum*. If the Jewish spouse was not hostile towards their spouse's new faith, they could go on living together, according to Innocent.

Johannes Teutonicus Zemeke, a thirteenth-century commentator of the *Decretum* sought to explain why exactly the case of a female Jew and a Christian man is not discussed in the above example. Noting that: "If a woman is converted...she should leave her husband, lest he recall her to her former error. But not so if a man is converted, for women are more easily influenced by a man than the other way

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<sup>279</sup> Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Penitentialis* 2.36, ed. Firth, pp. 77.

<sup>280</sup> 3 Comp. 3.20.2, *Quinque Compilationes Antiquae*

around.”<sup>281</sup> For Johannes, it simply made sense that Gratian does not discuss relationships with a male Christian and a female Jew. For Johannes, certainly, and perhaps even for Gratian – the idea of a Christian man being with a Jewish woman was appealing, as the naturally malleable nature of women could be exploited by the Christian man to eventually draw her into the Christian fold.

By the thirteenth century, anxiety about the possibility of interfaith relationships became more prevalent. Concern about sexual and even marital relationships between Jews and Christians were ultimately the reason that Pope Innocent III’s Fourth Lateran Council decided to require Jews to wear distinguishing clothing, as the 68<sup>th</sup> canon states:

In some provinces a difference in dress distinguishes the Jews or Saracens from Christians, but in certain others such a confusion has grown up that they cannot be distinguished by difference. Thus it happens at times, that through error, Christians have relations with the women of Jews or Saracens, and Jews and Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, that they may not, under pretext of error of this sort, excuse themselves in the future for the excesses of such prohibited intercourse, we decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other people through the character of their dress.<sup>282</sup>

Canon lawyers became more and more influential throughout the thirteenth century, and popes began issuing collections of their decretals, most notably Pope Gregory IX and Innocent IV, the latter having spent his career as a canon lawyer before rising to the papal see. They both dealt with the issue of intermarriage. In his *Decretales*, Gregory IX ruled that if there were children of mixed marriages, the child should live with the Christian parent. He cited a letter discussed above, in which he was

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<sup>281</sup> As quoted by James Brundage in “Intermarriage between Jews and Christians in Medieval Canon Law,” *Jewish History* 3:1 (1988), 25-40. His English translation is on p. 29, and the original Latin on p. 38.

<sup>282</sup> Lateran IV 1215, Canon 68.

responding to the question of what to do with the child of a married Jewish couple when the husband had converted to Christianity and his wife had refused to do so. Gregory allowed the father to take his son away from his Jewish mother.

### **Conclusion**

Medieval canon lawyers were very interested in the topic of Jewish conversion to Christianity. The topic of forced conversion, especially as it related to the conversion of Jewish minors, was one of the most hotly contested issues. Some argued that it was permissible to forcibly convert Jewish children. Others, led by Thomas Aquinas, argued against this position. In the end, Aquinas' perspective on most of these issues was adopted as the official position of the Church, and as we saw in our discussion of papal documents above, popes were fairly consistent in trying to prevent the forced conversion of Jews who were both adults and minors.

Canon law also gives us some insight into how medieval Christians thought about gender and religious conversion. Women were viewed as inherently more malleable and thus easier to convert than their male counterparts. This is most clearly stated in the argument that if a Jewish man converts to Christianity and his wife does not, their marriage is permitted for a certain amount of time, since it was believed that he could eventually convince his wife to convert. Meanwhile, if a Jewish woman converted and her husband did not, their marriage could not continue, as it was believed that the woman would eventually return to the faith of her husband. In, short, these legal discussions reveal that these medieval thinkers felt that the gender of a convert had a direct impact on the conviction of that convert.

## Chapter 5: The Conversion of Jews in *The Golden Legend*

### Introduction

So far, we have encountered documents that enable us to learn something about how medieval Christians thought about Jewish conversion to Christianity and gender through the examination of how male and female Jews are depicted in them. This chapter examines Jewish conversion in *The Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century hagiographical compendium. Hagiography or “holy writing” refers to texts that purport to tell of the sanctity of a certain individual. Called *vitae* or “lives” in the Middle Ages, these texts were important in spreading word about a particular saint, and even played a role in the official canonization of saints by the Church. These texts contained not only biographical details about the individual saint, but also posthumous miracles that were claimed to be performed by these saints, with some volumes completely dedicated to these posthumous miracles.

*The Golden Legend* presents something of a counterpoint to the sources above, especially sermon *exempla*. It only contains the conversion of male Jews, and the paths that male Jews take in the *Legend* are much different than in other sources. Jewish men who convert in *The Golden Legend* very rarely appear as those who are trying to cause harm to Christianity, and in general appear as more fully developed characters than their counterpart in *exempla*. Jews appeared in Christian hagiography almost from its inception. The conversion of Jews appears on occasion in hagiographical texts, especially beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Texts from that period depict saints who sometimes performed miracles during their lifetimes that lead to the conversion of Jews. Sometimes the conversion of Jews also was the result of a

posthumous miracle. Other times, instead of appearing as a full-blown miracle that a saint performed, the conversion of Jews in hagiography appeared as one good deed among many that saints performed during their lifetime. The fact that the occurrence of Jewish conversion appears as a “miracle” or at the very least as a great deed performed by the saint is itself noteworthy, as it reflects the idea that Jews are stubborn and difficult to convert, since it is viewed as such an impressive act during the lives of saints.

In general, Jews appeared rather infrequently in saint’s lives before the twelfth century, though, as Thomas Renna has pointed out, Jews in these texts are almost never clearly distinguishable from Biblical Jews.<sup>283</sup> The fact that Jews began appearing more regularly in hagiographical texts in the twelfth century is reflective of a general trend where Christians became more preoccupied with Jews in general – something discussed above regarding *exempla* as well. Once Jews did start appearing in hagiographical texts, it was not uncommon for them to appear as converts, and they ceased appearing only as Biblical Jews. This chapter focuses on *The Golden Legend*, which was the most popular hagiographical collection of the Middle Ages. Jewish characters are not an uncommon occurrence in *The Golden Legend*. The text was compiled by Jacobus de Voragine (1230-1298), the archbishop of Genoa. Unlike most hagiographical texts, the *Golden Legend* was extremely widely circulated, and can be described as a medieval bestseller, because over one thousand manuscripts of the text still exist, indicating the text’s enduring and massive popularity.<sup>284</sup> It’s popularity was not fleeting either, as it

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<sup>283</sup> Thomas Renna, “The Jews in *The Golden Legend*,” in *Christian Attitudes Towards Jews in the Middle Ages: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Frassetto (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 137-151.

<sup>284</sup> Jacques le Goff, *In Search of Sacred Time: Jacobus de Voragine and the Golden Legend* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 3.



was printed in 1483 as one of the first books to be mass produced following the introduction of the printing press to the west.<sup>285</sup> The text was not only popular – it was massive. It contained the lives of almost 200 saints, ranging from the Biblical period up to Jacobus’ own time, as well as miracle stories associated with important events such as the discovery of the True Cross. The vast size and popularity of this text makes it an excellent one to examine, as its popularity can allow us to assume, at least to a degree, that the ideas presented within the text are at least somewhat reflective of society overall. If the text were objectionable to society, it would not have been so popular, meaning *The Golden Legend* is as close as we can get to a hagiographical text that represents popular culture.

Despite the popularity of the text and the large number of published studies of it, the topic of Jews in *The Golden Legend*, much less the Jewish converts within the text, have not been studied in any detail. Thomas Renna’s general outline of the various ways that Jews appear within the *Legend* is the most detail that any scholar has gone into, so this study of the ways in which Jewish converts appear in the text is the first of its kind. Many of the male Jews who appear in these texts stand in stark contrast to the Jewish characters in sermon *exempla*. They do not only serve as villains seeking to destroy Christianity, they also appeared as friends of saints, and sometimes even took on the role of the hero. *The Golden Legend* contains Jewish men who convert to Christianity willingly, presenting its readers with a much different path to male Jewish conversion than that presented in *exempla*.

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<sup>285</sup> Pierce Butler, “Legenda aurea = Légende dorée = Golden Legend: a study of Caxton's Golden legend with special reference to its relations to the earlier English prose translation,” PhD Dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1899, p. 11.

### **Positive Depictions of Male Jewish Converts in the *Legend***

I will start by discussing a category that one sees very little of in the discussion of *exempla*, but which are quite common in the *Legend*: male Jews who are not depicted as evil at all and converted after witnessing a miracle. One of the more famous examples of this can be found in a posthumous miracle in the *Vita* of St. Nicholas.<sup>286</sup> In the story, a Jew lent money to a Christian, and the Christian swore an oath on an altar dedicated to Saint Nicholas that he would return the money as soon as he could. The Christian failed to ever pay back the Jew, and eventually the Jew took legal action, and both the Jew and the Christian were called to court. The Christian brought a hollow staff with him to the trial, and filled it with the money he owed the Jew. Before swearing in front of the court that he had given the Jew the money owed him, he handed the Jew his staff. This deception allowed the Christian to avoid lying outright – because indeed, the Jew was in possession of the money he owed him at the time the Christian swore his oath. The court believed the Christian, and he took his staff and went on his way. On his walk home, he was hit by a cart, which killed him and shattered the staff, spilling the hidden money all over the road. Shortly thereafter, the Jewish moneylender arrived at the point in the road where the man had been killed. When he asked what happened, the Christians there told him, and told him that he should collect the money from the ground. The Jew disagreed, saying that he would only do so if the man who had perjured him was brought back to life, and not only that – he would also convert to Christianity if such a miracle occurred. After he said these words, the perjurer was

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<sup>286</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “Saint Nicholas,” in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* vol. 1, ed. and trans. William Granger Ryan, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 21-27; the miracle of St. Nicholas, the Perjurer, and the Cart can be found on p. 25.

revived, the Jew collected his money, and he converted to Christianity. All of this was done as a miracle of Saint Nicholas, whose altar the Christian had sworn on.

This type of character is unthinkable in an *exemplum*. Jewish moneylenders there appeared as villainous figures, but the Jew in this story is not the villain – it is the Christian perjurer who lied under oath and was punished for it. What’s more, the Jew was unwilling to collect his money immediately, instead he felt bad for the man who had died, even though he had tried to cheat him out of the money that was owed to him.

One of the most positive representations of Jews in *The Golden Legend* is in the life of St. Basil.<sup>287</sup> When Basil was on his deathbed, he called for the help of his Jewish friend and physician, a man named Joseph. Joseph checked his pulse and grimly concluded that he would be dead in the very near future, not seeing the sunrise on the next day. Basil, who is described as “having a great love”<sup>288</sup> for Joseph, in part because he had seen in a vision that he will convert, challenged Joseph’s prediction. Basil claimed that he would live to see the sunset, and that if he does, Joseph should convert to Christianity. Indeed, Basil lived several hours longer than Joseph had predicted, and he even overcame his weakness for long enough to rise out of the bed, go to the church one last time, and baptize Joseph.<sup>289</sup> This story shows us a much more complete depiction of a Jewish character than most medieval Christian stories. The story implies that Basil and Joseph have a long-standing friendship, and that Joseph is greatly respected in the community for his skills as a doctor. The Jew in the story was not described, as some Jewish doctors were in other stories, as being a sorcerer or in league

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<sup>287</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “Saint Basil, the bishop” in *Golden Legend* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Ryan, p. 108-112; his Jewish physician and the miracle that brings about his conversion are on p. 112-113.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

with the devil, he was just a doctor who happened to be Jewish, but is otherwise a good man. This story is more reflective of the reality of Jewish-Christian relationships in the Middle Ages than *exempla* are, where Jews (especially Jewish males) seem to be reviled by the Christian community. Jews regularly served as doctors, despite numerous prohibitions, with some even serving high ranking churchmen, including popes.<sup>290</sup> Joseph in the story is also not described negatively, even before he chose to convert to Christianity. He immediately acceded to St Basil's challenge, and converted without issue once Basil is victorious.

We have another example of the conversion of a Jew in the *vita* of Saint Nazarius.<sup>291</sup> Nazarius was a martyr who died during the persecutions of Diocletian, but his early life is the most relevant of our purposes.<sup>292</sup> He was born into a mixed marriage, with his father a Jew and his mother a Christian. In his early life, around the age of nine, he began to observe the differences in the religion of his parents, with the main difference he noted being that "his mother followed the law of baptism and his father the law of the Sabbath." He began to ponder which one he would choose for himself, and his parents competed with one another in an attempt to sway him towards their faith.<sup>293</sup> According to the *vita* "divine will" intervened and he chose the religion of his mother and was baptized by Pope Linus himself. His Jewish father was still unwilling to give up, and explained to him that it was dangerous for him to be a Christian, and that he could face execution. Nazarius ignored his father's urging, and in

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<sup>290</sup> For more on Jewish physicians and their services to medieval churchmen and Christian society in general, see Joseph Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine, and Medieval Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>291</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, "Saints Nazarius and Celsus," in *Golden Legend* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Ryan, pp. 18-21.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

fact began preaching for Christ publicly. This put Nazarius in grave danger, and his mother and father together urged him to leave Rome for a city where it was safer for him to be a Christian. Nazarius then traveled to Genoa and then Milan to preach the Christian faith, but when the Roman prefect heard about this, he was forced into exile. For reasons the *vita* is not clear about, he eventually returned to Rome, where he found his father who now had converted to Christianity, and claimed that “Saint Peter had appeared to him and counseled him to follow his wife and his son.”<sup>294</sup> After his return to Milan, Nazarius was beheaded and became a Christian martyr.

This story has several interesting elements when put in the context of the thirteenth century. One of these is that it depicts a child of a mixed marriage who is conflicted about what route he should choose when confronted with both Judaism and Christianity. While the story is set in the Roman period, it is very interesting that Jacobus de Voragine decided to include a story of mixed marriage, especially considering that it was illegal in medieval Europe. Nazarius is not depicted as negative in any way, and indeed, a term often used to describe the decision of young women in *exempla* to convert to Christianity is used, the idea of “divine will” or “divine imposition” is what sways him towards Christianity. Nazarius is obviously not an evil Jewish character, but neither is his father. While his father wants him to remain a Jew, his main motivation in getting him to become a Jew, especially after he chooses Christianity, is his love of his son and his desire to keep his son safe. His intention is not to belittle or harm Christians. A Jewish father being depicted this way runs in direct opposition to the Jewish fathers of sermon *exempla*, who are enraged by their children

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

having anything to do with Christianity, and are willing to murder their own children or summon demons to put an end to such a thing.

Moreover, this Jew is obviously married to a Christian woman, and while they certainly had a lively debate about Judaism versus Christianity in front of their son, the two parents seem to have had a stable and loving relationship despite their different faiths. This is the kind of story that is all but unfathomable in *exempla* – a male Jew being happily married to a Christian woman runs counter to everything we saw about Jewish family patriarchs in the story above, where the norm was a Jewish man not only disowning and being indifferent to his converted child or family member, but a Jewish man who attempted to murder his converted family member. This father continues to love and nurture his son even after his conversion, offering us another more realistic and three-dimensional view of a Jewish character. While the father does eventually convert to Christianity, this episode is rather hastily added to the story and told in just a few lines, perhaps to allay anxieties people may have had about the interfaith marriage that the story began with.

While Nazarius is depicted as clearly having a Jewish father in the earlier manuscripts of *The Golden Legend*, including those thought to be the most faithful to Jacobus of Voragine's earliest work, it is worth noting that a later manuscript, with intentionally abbreviated versions of the stories in the *Legend*, completely omit his Jewish origins, instead beginning his story at his martyrdom with Celsus, with little to no information about him other than his being a "good Christian."<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> BL Add MS 41069, f. 16r.

There even seem to be more sympathetic spins on certain tropes that were commonly used to imply that Jews were evil in one way or another. One place we see this is in a story contained within the section of the Legend called “Saint Peter in Chains.”<sup>296</sup> In this tale, Jews are associated with the devil, but not in the way that one usually sees in medieval thought. Instead of the Jews being allied with the devil, the Jews are instead easily tricked by the devil, and the story conveys sympathy for the Jews. In this story, the devil appeared on the island of Crete “in the guise of Moses” and called all Jews together and led them to a mountaintop near the sea.<sup>297</sup> Since he appeared as Moses, he claimed that he would divide the sea and the Jews would be taken to the Promised Land. The Jews believed him, and many fell to their deaths off the mountaintop. Those who did not die, though, are described as “receiv[ing] the grace of baptism.”<sup>298</sup> The Jews in this story are not villains who are allied with the devil, they are individuals who were easily duped by him. This still conveys a message of the accuracy of Christianity and the foolishness of Jewish faith, but it does it in a far more sympathetic way than non-hagiographical stories featuring Jews and the devil.

One of the few positive depictions of a Jew who converts to Christianity that found its way into sermon *exempla* by way of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, also found its way into a list of miracles related to the Cross in the *Legend*: the story of the Jew who crossed himself.<sup>299</sup> In this version, the Jew as usual sought shelter in a Temple of Apollo, but there are some differences, even from Gregory’s version which Jacobus

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<sup>296</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “Saint Peter in Chains,” in *Golden Legend* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Ryan p. 34-39

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>299</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “The Exaltation of the Holy Cross,” in *Golden Legend* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Ryan, p. 168-173, pp. 172-173.

claims to cite, and these differences resulted overall in an even more positive depiction of the Jewish character. The Jew crossed himself immediately upon entering the Temple of Apollo in this version, rather than waiting to be attacked by, what were in this case, “evil spirits.” In other versions of the story, it is possible to think of the Jew making the sign of a cross as a sort of last resort to avoid being harmed, but in this version, he sensed that such protection may be necessary before even seeing the spirits. When he is awoken by the spirits, the Jew heard them talking about the various temptations they have placed upon Andrew, the bishop of Fondi. The spirits noted that they had been visiting Andrew and tempting him to commit carnal sins with a nun who he was allowing to live with him. The spirits then realized they are being listened to, and attempted to attack the Jewish eavesdropper, and state the common line between all the different versions of the story: “He is an empty vessel indeed, but it is sealed!”<sup>300</sup> Once the spirits dispersed, the Jew traveled to Andrew to tell him what he heard, after which Andrew removed the nun from his home, and converted the Jew to Christianity. In this version, the Jew performed an important and heroic role: preventing a bishop from giving into temptation, and the miracle of the cross that protected him convinced him to convert.

Other Jews perform very important roles in the history of Christianity, and are shown to be heroic figures. The best example of this is found in a story that at first features St. Helena as the main character: “The Finding of the Holy Cross.”<sup>301</sup> However, part way through the story, she met a Jew who himself becomes the focal

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>301</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “The Finding of the Holy Cross,” in *Golden Legend* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Ryan, p. 277-283.



point of the story from then on.<sup>302</sup> In this story, a Jew named Judas is instrumental in helping Helena find the True Cross, and he converted to Christianity and became saint himself, taking on the name Quiriacus. He is one of very few post-biblical saints to be specifically mentioned as starting his life out as a Jew.

The story begins with Helena calling together the Jewish scholars in the region to interrogate them about potential locations for the cross. Judas was one of these scholars, and he related to the other Jews gathered there that he knows its location because his father told it to him. He told them that his grandfather had said that if anyone came looking for the cross, he should show it to them, because Jesus was in fact the son of God. Judas explained his own bewilderment at the suggestion, and asked why it was that Jesus was crucified if he really was divine, to which his grandfather replied:

God knows...that I was never in their counsels and often spoke against them. But because Christ denounced the vices of the Pharisees, they had him put to death on the cross. He rose again on the third day and ascended to heaven as his disciples looked on. My brother Stephen believed in him and the Jews in their madness stoned him to death. Be careful therefore, my son, and do not rashly blaspheme him or the disciples.<sup>303</sup>

This quote is quite remarkable in terms of a discussion of the role of the Jews in the death of Christ. In the Middle Ages, and especially by the thirteenth century, Jews were blamed collectively for his death, and indeed some theologians argued that Jews were aware of Christ's divinity and killed him anyway.<sup>304</sup> The latter part of that is still maintained: it is stated that the Pharisees did not kill him because they did not believe

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<sup>302</sup>Ibid., Helena and her episode with the Jewish Scholars and with Judas specifically are told on p. 280-284.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>304</sup> For more on the idea of Jewish deicide and its place in medieval Christian thought, see Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

he was the son of God, rather it was because they were concerned that he pointed out their vices. The important thing here is that this story shows that *only* the Pharisees are responsible for the death of Christ, not the Jews collectively. Indeed, Judas' grandfather was the brother of St Stephen, and even though Judas' grandfather himself never converted, he noted that he directly opposed the Pharisees. This established the good character of Judas' family from the beginning of the story.

However, Judas was at first reluctant to inform Helena of the location of the cross, despite the knowledge he had. This was because his grandfather had also informed him that the Jewish people would cease to exist after the True Cross was found. Because of his refusal to guide Helena to the Cross, he was imprisoned in a pit without food for a week. Thereafter, he agreed to take Helena there. Once he believed he was in the general location, he knelt and prayed. When he did, the ground opened and a sweet smell emerged from it, indicating the location of the True Cross. The devil then appeared in the sky and berates Judas, and the devil's monologue served to further elevate the heroic status of this Judas:

O Judas, why have you done this? My Judas did just the opposite: I pressed him and he betrayed his master, and you, despite my interdict, have found the cross of Jesus! Through the other Judas I gained the souls of many; through you I seem to be losing those I gained. Through him I reigned among the people, through you I will be expelled from my realm. But I will pay you back in turn: I will raise up another king against you, a king who will abandon the faith of the Crucified and by torture will make you deny the Crucified!<sup>305</sup>

While Judas' family was shown to have opposed the Pharisees, Judas' actions have negated those of the villainous Judas Iscariot from the Bible. At the time that the devil appeared to Judas, he was still Jewish, and this is very important because at this

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<sup>305</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, "Holy Cross," in *Golden Legend*, p. 282.

point, because he chose to help Helena, he is depicted as the opposite of Judas Iscariot, making him a hero. Before the devil's beratement of him, he converted to Christianity and took the name Quiriacus. The devil's pledge to him was not an empty one, though, and a few years later during the reign of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, Quiriacus was martyred. This story very clearly shows that not all Jews sought to destroy Christianity. Quiriacus' martyrdom does not come at the hand of Jews, it comes at the hands of a pagan emperor. There is not a single Jew in the story who strove to harm Christianity; instead we have a Jewish hero who helped St Helena recover the most important relic in all of Christendom who became an important saint.

As Thomas Renna has pointed out, the Jews in *The Golden Legend*, and in hagiography in general, do not serve the same purpose as their counterparts in *exempla*.<sup>306</sup> While I think Renna's assertion is a bit too broad, there are indeed examples of these more positive depictions of male Jews in the *Legend*. While *exempla* often have, broader messages associated with them other than the conversion of a Jew, the main goal behind the *exempla* featuring Jewish conversion seems to be to point out the truth of Christianity in the face of other religions – especially in the face of heresy. That is not the goal in hagiography -- hagiography is intended to present exemplary figures in a similar way that *exempla* often do, but the target audience of hagiography is not the same as the audience for *exempla*. Hagiography was not something that was recited out loud on a regular basis as part of a sermon that was intended to fortify the faith of those who were listening. Instead, hagiography is meant to be consumed by those who are already firm in their faith, and enjoyed reading or hearing stories of those

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<sup>306</sup> Renna, "Golden Legend," p. 138.

famous figures from the religion's past who achieved the ultimate form of Christianity. The characters in hagiography are not always intended to be exemplars – people were not encouraged to take the extreme actions some of these saints make, such as fasting for incredible periods of time or living an ascetic lifestyle – these are figures that Christians are meant to venerate for their extreme devotion to God, but they are not supposed to replicate their lives. This is a key difference between these two types of texts, and the depictions of Jews within hagiography are often much different. These texts aim to educate people about holy figures, and if one converted a Jew at one point or another, it is not the focus of these texts. As we saw above, Jews frequently appeared as three-dimensional characters within these stories, rather than appearing solely as villains aiming to destroy Christianity. Jewish males in these stories do not appear as purely evil and insidious as they do in sermon stories, instead, they seem to be regular people who just happen to be Jewish. Indeed, a Jew is not the villain in the miracle of Saint Nicholas and the Cart – instead, the Christian is the villain. Not only that, but once a miracle occurs and prevents the Christian from succeeding in his crime – in this case perjury – a Jew chooses to convert to Christianity. This is the exact opposite of the case of *exempla*, which feature Jews committing evil acts against Christianity that fail due to the intercession of a saint.

### **Villainous Jews Who Convert in the *Legend***

We do also find Jews in the *Legend* taking on a role like their role in *exempla*. In the same *vita* of St. Nicholas discussed above, indeed immediately following the

story of the perjurer who was hit by a cart and then resurrected, is another posthumous St. Nicholas Miracle that culminates in the conversion of a Jew.<sup>307</sup> This time, though, the depiction of the Jews is not nearly as positive. This Jew was a merchant who witnessed the miracle of the resurrected perjurer, and decided to order a statue of St. Nicholas to put in his home since he was impressed by the miracle. He asked this statue to watch over his home and his goods in his absence. One day, while he was gone, thieves broke into his home and stole his goods. When he arrived home, he cursed the statue of Nicholas and attempted to destroy the statue, but it was left miraculously intact. Meanwhile, St. Nicholas appeared to the thieves, bloodied and bruised, and told them that they needed to return the goods to the Jew. Nicholas said that he had been punished by the Jew for their crime. This frightened the thieves into returning the goods to the Jew, who converted to Christianity after hearing of the miracle, and the thieves are noted to have “returned to the path of righteousness.”<sup>308</sup>

This is a little different than the other Jewish convert who converts due to a miracle of Nicholas in his *Vita*, because we see the familiar pattern of the Jew attempting to commit an evil act against Christianity, in this case a statue of St. Nicholas. However, this character is still considerably more well-developed than those we saw in the *exempla*. This Jew apparently has some degree of belief in the power of St. Nicholas, since he trusts the statue to watch over his goods. While he is disappointed in Nicholas’ failure to protect his goods, once it is revealed to him that Nicholas’ intervention resulted in the return of his goods – meaning he did protect them

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<sup>307</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “Saint Nicholas,” in *Golden Legend* vol. 1 ed. Ryan, p. 21-27; this miracle and subsequent conversion of a Jewish character appears on p. 25-26.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

-- he is convinced enough of the power of the saint to convert to Christianity. Even though the Jew in this story shows some degree of the evil nature of male Jews that is discussed above in *exempla*, this character is still far more three-dimensional than the ones described in the story above. While this Jew displays the same out of control temper that many of the characters in *exempla* display, he does not seem to become enraged for as singular of a reason as the Jews in *exempla*, who become enraged with Christians very easily. He was not just angered by the mere presence of Christians, a traumatic event – the theft of many of his possessions – was what sends him into a rage, a reaction that many people would very likely have, whether Jew or Christian. And indeed, it could be argued that the Jew in the story is not even the primary villain, and perhaps is not a villain at all. The Christians who stole his goods are the real villains – they doubt the power of Saint Nicholas too, even after he appeared to them, until he managed to convince them of his power. But in the end, the saint proved that even though the Jew had beaten him, that he still saved the day by retrieving the Jews' goods from the thieves.

A more villainous Jew also appears in the life of Saint Silvester.<sup>309</sup> The *vita* tells of a time when Silvester was debating Christianity with eleven Jews in front of the Roman emperor. He defeated each of them one-by-one without much difficulty, seemingly winning over even the Jews in the audience, who had applauded and cheered him after he had defeated each of them. Even the pagan emperor was impressed with Silvester. However, there was a twelfth Jewish master left for Silvester to debate, Zambri, who remained unimpressed with Silvester's argumentative skills, and stated

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<sup>309</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, "Saint Silvester," in *Golden Legend* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Ryan, p. 62-71.

that those in attendance “are beguiled by the ambiguous word games” of Silvester.<sup>310</sup> Zambri decided not only to rely on words, but to prove that he had intimate knowledge of God. He claimed to know his name, saying that he can whisper this secret name of God to a bull, and the animal will drop dead due to the power of the name. A bull was brought in, and Zambri whispers in its ear and it immediately died.<sup>311</sup> Those in attendance were impressed with Zambri’s feat, but not Silvester. Silvester asked Zambri to bring the bull that he killed back to life, arguing that God has power not only over death but also over life, and if he had indeed used the name of God to kill the animal, he should be able to resurrect it with the same name. Zambri claimed it does not work that way, and when Zambri said he could not revive the animal, Silvester accuses Zambri of using the name of a demon, not of God. Zambri, still not impressed, told Silvester to revive the bull instead, and when Silvester does, everybody in attendance was convinced to convert, including Zambri and the emperor.<sup>312</sup>

The first eleven Jews who debate with Silvester are depicted in a much more positive light than Zambri, and merely present logical arguments based on their own belief to counter Christianity. Once Silvester proves them wrong, they simply concede that fact instead of responding with aggression.<sup>313</sup> So even in this story, only one of the Jews is depicted in a villainous manner. Zambri fills the role of a somewhat more villainous Jew, but even the more villainous Jews in the *Legend* do not seem to be quite as evil as those who appeared in the *exempla*. Zambri does not seek to directly and

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., Zambri is introduced on p. 69 and remains Silvester’s primary foe until the end of the *vita* on p. 71.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 65-69.

physically harm Christianity, he only wants to win a debate against a Christian and prove that Christianity is wrong. The fact that Zambri is convinced to convert after the bull is revived shows us a lack of the obstinacy we see among Jewish men in *exempla*.

The tale in the *Legend* that features the most archetypical Jewish villain is the *vita* of Saint James the Greater.<sup>314</sup> There, a Jew named Hermogenes is described as a “sorcerer who was allied with the Pharisees” who was upset with the teachings of James.<sup>315</sup> He is represented very similarly to the way that Jewish sorcerers and demoniacs in *exempla* are. Because of his concerns about James he sent his disciple, Philetus, to convince him to stop preaching the word of Christ. To Hermogenes’ surprise, Philetus returns and has converted to Christianity. Hermogenes then used his magic to mystically restrain his wayward disciple, and claimed that James would be incapable of breaking such a spell. Philetus informed James of his capture, and James sent him a cloth that he claimed will break the spell. Hermogenes was incredulous and allowed Philetus to touch the cloth, upon which Philetus’ invisible restraints were removed, and Philetus retreated. Further angered, Hermogenes summoned a host of demons to fetch both Philetus and James. The demons reach James, but once there they screamed out in agony and apologized to James. James is confounded by what is happening, and the demons explained they were sent by Hermogenes, but that an “angel of the Lord” prevented them from harming James, and the angel was burning them with divine flame for their transgression. James asked the angel to let the demons go, and then he commanded the demons to fetch Hermogenes, but to make certain that they do not harm him. The demons brought him, and expressed their desire to harm him

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<sup>314</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “James the Great” in *The Golden Legend* vol. 2, ed. and trans. by Ryan, p. 3-10.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, James’ mystical duel with Hermogenes is featured on p. 4-5.



greatly, but informed James that they cannot harm anyone while in his home. James ordered the demons to free Hermogenes, and told him that he can leave because as James puts it, “it is not in our religion to convert others against their will!”<sup>316</sup> Hermogenes was relieved to be free, but fearful that the demons will harm him out of anger because he sent them to do something that led to them being harmed, so he asked James to give him something that will protect him. James then gave Hermogenes his staff, and told him to throw his books of magic into the sea, and Hermogenes obliged him. Hermogenes then converted to Christianity. When the other Jews in the community heard of his conversion, they are enraged, and their actions eventually led to the martyrdom of St James.<sup>317</sup>

This story contains the most negative depiction of a Jew within *The Golden Legend*, and in it we see several familiar tropes such as a Jew attempting to cause harm to a Christian with his abilities as a sorcerer, only to convert when his attempt is thwarted by a miracle. By the conclusion of the story, we also have Jews, as a collective group that is enraged by the victory of James over Hermogenes, bringing about the martyrdom of a Christian.

There are however two stories in the *Legend* that depicted Jews in a similar style as the *exempla* do; as easily angered in the face of Christianity and willing to commit violent and unspeakable acts against it. In the same collection of miracles related to the cross that features a version of the story of the Jew who crossed himself, there are also two stories featuring Jews as icon profaners, appearing very much in the same way as

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

they do in *exempla*.<sup>318</sup> In the first,<sup>319</sup> a Jew in Constantinople snuck into Hagia Sofia and used his sword to attack an image of Christ that then gushed blood all over him. In fear, he seized the image and threw it down a well. However, he was spotted by a Christian man who was alarmed to see him covered in so much blood, and who accused him of murder as a result. The Jew responded that he stabbed an image of Christ that gushed forth blood, and noted that “Truly the God of the Christians is great, and everything confirms faith in him,”<sup>320</sup> and the Jew converted as quickly as he could.

In the second, which takes place in “Berith, Syria,”<sup>321</sup> a Christian was renting a home and hung a picture of Jesus crucified on the wall facing his bed. He decided to move when his rent was up, and a Jew began renting the house. One day, the Jew invited one of his coreligionists over for dinner, and the guest saw his host’s painting and “Trembling with anger he threatened his host,” demanding why he would want to put such a thing in his home. The host replied that he had not even noticed the painting, and his guest left to gather up the Jews of the community to make charges against the Jew for having such a painting. An angry mob assembled, attacked and expelled the man from his home, and then threw the picture on the ground and trampled it and “renewed upon it all the indignities of the Lord’s passion.”<sup>322</sup> This included the use of a lance, at which point the image bled and they were amazed. They then went to the bishop of the city, described what happened and all converted to Christianity because of the miracle.

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<sup>318</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, “The Holy Cross,” p. 170-171.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170-171.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>321</sup> Likely a corruption of Beirut, which was the location of many of the icon profaning miracles discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

These two stories though, are outliers when looked at the way Jews are depicted in *The Golden Legend* more broadly. For the most part, Jews in hagiography seem to much less frequently suffer from the more negative depictions we have discussed in *exempla*. Most of the negative depictions of Jews, such as that of Hermogenes, are not as monolithically negative as that of Jews in sermon *exempla*. Hermogenes never makes it clear what he wants to do to Saint Stephen, never stating that he wants to kill him or even harm him. Indeed, he even asks his demons to bring James to him, but not to harm him.<sup>323</sup> He does want to show himself to be more powerful than Stephen, but this is still not as negative as the depiction of male Jews in *exempla* who explicitly state their wanting to commit crimes against Christians or Christianity, and indeed sometimes do, before a miracle that reverses or prevents their action leads to their conversion to Christianity.

### **Conclusion: Why Does the *Golden Legend* Have More Positive Depictions of Male Converts?**

There are several reasons that Jews might have appeared more positively than they do in *exempla*. The Jews who appear in *The Golden Legend* seem to be a closer reflection of some of the realities of the thirteenth century than sermon *exempla*. Most of the Jewish characters are three-dimensional and do not seek to destroy or harm Christians or Christianity, and all of them convert.

This could be related to the different goals of the *Legend* as opposed to that of sermons. Popular preaching emerged with a primary goal of combatting heresy in the

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

thirteenth century, so Jews regularly serve as stand-ins for heretics in the stories in which they appear, and *exempla* were also sometimes targeted at Jewish audiences themselves, making them perhaps more combative in nature. While they may not appear with the express purpose of representing heresy, the goal of the stories *was* to convince Christians that orthodox Christianity was the correct faith, and the Jews who convert to Christianity in sermon stories are often serving the purpose of proving Christianity to be the true Faith. At the time, heretics were viewed as potentially bringing about the destruction of Christianity. Jews are depicted in a similar fashion in *exempla*. However, they consistently failed to bring about such destruction, and in the end those Jews who sought to destroy Christianity became a part of it because of an expression of the might of the True Faith – a miracle.

Meanwhile, the purpose of hagiography, while having some parallels to that of *exempla*, is different. The stories, for the most part, do not have as grand of rhetorical purposes. They do not seek to be didactic to quite the same degree the *exempla* do. While the characters in hagiography are meant to serve as exemplars for all of Christendom in a sense, their sanctity is not something Christians are expected to be able to emulate, since saints are the absolute holiest people of them all. The Jews in these stories are not placed there as analogues for heretics – they are simply Jews who happen to encounter an individual saint, or who are affected by saintly miracles. Additionally, *The Golden Legend*, while a best seller, did not have as popular of an audience as *exempla* did. It would have been something that primarily interested the elites who were literate, which perhaps meant that the characters could afford to appear as more nuanced complete characters, while characters in the *exempla* could not

because the preachers may have felt that the audience would not have gotten the correct message from the tale if the Jewish characters were depicted in a more positive light.

Additionally, *exempla* and hagiography have a different literary focus as well. *Exempla* seem to be completely plot-driven, with the primary focus being on the events that are being described. Indeed, sometimes the names of the characters are not even revealed, indicating how unimportant these names are. Meanwhile, hagiography is much more character-driven by its very nature. The focus of these stories are human saints. Their lives are explained in detail, so their interactions with people, Jew or otherwise, are much more detailed.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the *Legend* is that it leads to the more complete and positive depiction of Jews is the fact that most of these stories are set in the distant past. Characters like Nazarius' father – a Jew married to a Christian who loves his son even after his conversion – may only have seemed plausible to medieval Christians if they were set in the distant past. This great historical distance between the *Legend* and most of the stories it tells allows for Jewish characters from a time gone by, rather than allowing for Jewish characters from the contemporary period. So, both *exempla* and *The Golden Legend* depict Jewish characters who convert to Christianity, but they depict them in entirely different settings. While *exempla*, by their very nature as approachable stories that your average medieval Christian could relate to, are intended to be stories set in the recent past, and in usually in a nearby location, the stories of the *Legend* do not have such a contemporary setting. There is one major exception to this, though – the story of the Jewish moneylender who is tricked by the Christian perjurer. This story is probably set in at least the eleventh century, based on its

inclusion of a Jewish moneylender – a role Jews did not take on in large numbers until the late eleventh century at the earliest.

All of this results in most individuals in hagiography, including Jews, appearing as more realistic characters, resulting in Jews who have the capacity to be heroic, Jews who are the friends of Christian saints, and Jews who are described as victims of Satan's trickery, and so forth.

## Chapter 6: Gender and Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Christian Documents

Sermon *exempla* present stories that seem to indicate that women were easy to convert and much more amenable to the idea of Christianity by their very nature, while the other documents we examined do not deliver the same message. *The Golden Legend* does not feature even one story of the conversion of a Jewish woman to Christianity. Papal documents indicate that while a sizable minority of converts to Christianity were women, they were still in the minority. We also see within canon lawyers' discussions of marriage that indicate that there were instances where either the male or the female member of a married couple might convert, when the partner does not. What we have uncovered in the first half of this dissertation runs counter to one of the major prevailing opinions in the scholarship: that, as noted by Judith Baskin and Simcha Goldin, Jewish women hardly converted at all in the Middle Ages, as they were "stalwarts of their faith," with their male counterparts making up the majority of apostates by far. And while the sources discussed above do not indicate that women converted at a high rate, they did convert relatively frequently. Indeed, the papal documents probably result in a somewhat skewed perspective too, because many of the documents that mention individual converts discuss Jewish doctors who converted to Christianity who want to have a medical license given to them, or Jewish converts to Christianity who became preachers or other Churchmen and needed to receive permission to do so. Women were not capable of achieving either of these positions in the Middle Ages. Suffice it to say, women converted to Christianity – at a lower rate

than their male coreligionists, but they still converted and we have many cases of that above.

There still remains two major questions though: why are women who are presented in *exempla* who convert to Christianity depicted as so much more amenable to Christianity and as easier to convert? And why did canon law assume that women were at more of a risk of relapsing into their husbands' religion if they were allowed to stay together? The remainder of Part I analyzes why it is that *exempla* the places where most medieval Europeans would have encountered the idea of a Jewish convert, depict Jewish women so differently than the other sources do.

### **Varium et Mutabile Semper Femina: Medieval Gender Assumptions**

In her recent doctoral dissertation, Chaviva Levin argued that Jewish women as they appeared in the Christian imagination were “free of the misogyny directed at Christian women.”<sup>324</sup> While it is clear Jewish women are often depicted in a positive light, it is difficult to argue that depictions of Jewish women who converted to Christianity were not in fact a product of misogynistic attitudes towards women in the Middle Ages. Medieval scientists and physicians asserted that women were weaker because they had cold and wet humors, making them generally more vulnerable and easily seduced. This line of thinking goes back to the classical period. Virgil may have most succinctly stated these beliefs in *The Aeneid* when he wrote “Woman is always fickle and malleable.”<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Levin. *Jewish Conversion*, 231.

<sup>325</sup> *Varium et mutabile semper femina*, *The Aeneid* Book IV, lines 569-571.



Because women were considered malleable and easy to manipulate, medieval Christians viewed women as generally more open and susceptible to outside influence than men, meaning it was easier for them to have close relationships with both Christ and the devil.<sup>326</sup> As Joan Cadden has noted, medieval people thought of “women’s moral, intellectual, and sexual characteristics” as “inextricably linked as correlative effects of their collective constitution.”<sup>327</sup> This meant that it was very difficult for medieval women to escape the image of vulnerability and malleability, as medieval people viewed it as simply part of being a woman. Medieval women were viewed as empty vessels that could easily be filled and seduced with outside ideas. Jewish women were not free from this same assumption.

Some of the most widely read authors of the Middle Ages supported this line of thinking.<sup>328</sup> Isidore of Seville lived in the seventh century, but his *Etymologies* were one of the most widely distributed and most read texts throughout the Middle Ages. In it, he argues that women were under the power of men because “they are quite often deceived by the fickleness of their minds.”<sup>329</sup> Gratian, a twelfth-century canon lawyer famous for his *Decretum* also weighed in on the subject, stating that “women are more susceptible to sexual corruption than men.”<sup>330</sup> Albertus Magnus, a prolific writer in the natural sciences and thirteenth-century German bishop, wrote a great deal on gender

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<sup>326</sup> Dyan Elliott, “Gender and the Christian Tradition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in the Middle Ages* ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras ,21-35 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35.

<sup>327</sup> Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 185.

<sup>328</sup> Elliott, “Gender and the Christian Tradition,” 32.

<sup>329</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, ed. and trans. by Stephen A. Barney et. al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), IX.vii.29, p. 212.

<sup>330</sup> As quoted by Joyce E. Salisbury in “Gendered Sexuality,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (London: Routledge, 1996), 81-102, p. 86-87.

and sex in the Middle Ages. One of the questions he answers in *Quaestiones de animalibus* is whether women or men are more suited for “proper behavior.” In it, he writes “a female’s complexion is moister than a male’s, and it belongs to a moist complexion to receive [impressions] easily but to retain them poorly. For moisture is easily mobile and this is why women are inconstant and always seeking after new things.”<sup>331</sup> Because of this more vulnerable disposition, some preachers even mentored women and wrote special sermons for them due to concerns about the women in their flock.<sup>332</sup> As the *exempla* discussed above demonstrate, in the medieval mind it logically followed that women had a greater chance for leaving their religion due to their inconstancy and malleability. This meant that Jewish women would theoretically convert more easily than Jewish men. Some canon lawyers also seemed more concerned that Jewish women would relapse more frequently than their male counterparts because of this inherent malleability. However, as indicated in the discussion of papal documents, this does not seem to reflect reality, with men converting more frequently than their female counterparts.

Because of these ideas about women, Christian women are regularly depicted as either possessed or doing the bidding of the devil, and *exempla* are not free of this image. Joan Young Gregg has noted that Christian women in *exempla* regularly appear as possessed or as servants of the devil – a role men very rarely serve.<sup>333</sup> Women were more vulnerable to the devil for the same reason that they were more vulnerable to

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<sup>331</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Questions Concerning Aristotle’s On Animals*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Kitchell and Irven Resnick (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2008), BK. XV, q. 11, p. 454.

<sup>332</sup> Nirit Ben-Aryeah Debby, “The Preacher as Women’s Mentor,” in *Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig (Boston: Brill, 2002), 229-254.

<sup>333</sup> Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, from 83-164, Gregg analyzes the use of women in medieval sermons and includes translations of a number of sermon stories.

conversion – they are easily influenced and fickle. For example, in addition to writing the stories about Jewish women that are susceptible to conversion to Christianity discussed above, Caesarius of Heisterbach also wrote one story about a possessed woman and another about a woman who confessed to having sinned with the devil for six years of her life.<sup>334</sup> He wrote another story about a possessed woman who could only be cured through contact with Jesus Christ’s crown of thorns.<sup>335</sup> *Speculum Laicorum*, a popular thirteenth-century *exempla* collection from England, contains a story of an old woman who does the bidding of a devil in breaking up a couple.<sup>336</sup> In another story from an anonymous fourteenth-century manuscript held by the British museum, a devil enters a woman in the form of a toad and torments her<sup>337</sup>, perhaps a direct reference to the moist and cold nature of women and their resultant malleability. In this case, the woman is the perfect “environment” for a frog, who also happens to be a devil. Another fourteenth-century manuscript from the British museum tells the tale of a possessed woman who pretended to be a bishop.<sup>338</sup> In addition to appearing in *exempla* in this way, women were similarly depicted as servants to the devil in late medieval artwork,<sup>339</sup> and they were also considered by inquisitors as more likely to be witches because of this natural weakness to suggestion and seduction.<sup>340</sup>

The influence of the above ideas can even be found in the writings of some medieval canon lawyers who discussed what should occur if one member of a non-

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<sup>334</sup>Caesarius, Book 5, Chapter 13, in *DM*, vol. 3, p. 998-1000.

<sup>335</sup>Caesarius, Book 3, Chapter 9, in *DM*, vol. 2, p. 532-534.

<sup>336</sup>*Speculum Laicorum*, ed. J. Th. Welter, (Paris: A. Picard, 1914) p. 92, no. 472

<sup>337</sup>British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra D. viii, f. 1110b.

<sup>338</sup>Herbert, *Catalogue of Romances*, p. 586, no. 60.

<sup>339</sup>Christina Grössinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>340</sup>Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Plymouth: Rowman and Little Field, 2011), 214

Christian married couple converts. As mentioned, Johannes Teutonicus Zemeke, a thirteenth-century commentator of Gratian's *Decretum* wrote "If a woman is converted...she should leave her husband, lest he recall her to her former error. But not so if a man is converted, for women are more easily influenced by a man than the other way around."<sup>341</sup> Johannes' writings shows, perhaps most directly of any medieval source, that ideas about gender were influencing the way that medieval Christians viewed conversion.

### **The Shift in Female Sanctity and the Marian Cult**

Medieval misogyny was not the only factor resulting in the more positive constructions of Jewish women as described in these *exempla*. An additional factor that likely influenced the events in these stories is the fact that there was a major change in Christian women's religiosity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, the increasing restrictions placed on women played a major role in this, as did the idea that women were more appropriate vessels for mystical visions and direct communication with saints and Gods, due to their vulnerable and malleable nature. Before the twelfth century, religious women could be ordained and gained certain privileges, such as the ability to preach in a convent, and various other pastoral duties – so long as they were duties focused exclusively on women. Most female saints before this period were those directly connected to the institution of the Church, either as nuns or abbesses. However, this changed in the twelfth century when increasingly strict restrictions were

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<sup>341</sup> As quoted by James Brundage in "Intermarriage between Jews and Christians in Medieval Canon Law," *Jewish History* 3:1 (1988), 25-40. His English translation is on p. 29, and the original Latin on p. 38.

placed on women, and only men could be ordained from the twelfth century onward, taking away any sort of pastoral ability from women. This resulted in the flowering of a new kind of feminine religiosity among medieval Christian women. Mysticism -- including visions and very frequently including close relationships with the Virgin Mary -- became the common means by which religious women could be seen as pious.<sup>342</sup> Despite the fact that women had been forced out of certain privileges within the Church, they created new paths for themselves through which they could still be spiritually important. In the wake of these changes in the thirteenth century, the proportion of female saints increased drastically, from 11 percent of all saints to 22.6 percent of all saints.<sup>343</sup> This means that the new role that women had carved out for themselves was more popular than their previous one, when they were still capable of receiving ordination.

Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out that the spirituality of Holy Women of the later Middle Ages differed greatly from their male counterparts in many ways. While Bynum's most important argument is that the spirituality of medieval female saints revolved around food -- with miracles involving food, the Eucharist, and fasting being of central importance. While this argument is an important one, it does not appear that the depictions of Jewish women mentioned in the *exempla* above follow this pattern. However, one of her tangential arguments does seem to be reflected in the women discussed above. In general, medieval laywomen were canonized as saints

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<sup>342</sup> Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, "Introduction," in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c. 1100-1500* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011) p. 1-9.

<sup>343</sup> Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 220.

much more frequently than their male counterparts.<sup>344</sup> It could be that this sort of ideology – that regular women had a greater capacity to be holy than their male counterparts – resulted in Jewish men and women being depicted so differently in sermon *exempla*.

Just as women’s spirituality changed its shape in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, so too did the cult of the Virgin, whose increase in popularity was likely directly related to the creation of a new form of female piety. Luigi Gambero has referred to the twelfth and thirteenth century as a “Golden Age of Marian Doctrine” because for the first time “Mary became the center of attention” for men and women throughout all of Christendom.<sup>345</sup> While she was venerated long before the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, her role changed greatly thereafter. She became an important intercessory figure that had who was willing to intervene for man on earth, redeeming sinners and saints alike.<sup>346</sup> She also served as a role model, especially for Christian women.<sup>347</sup>

However, her transformation does not end there. Adrienne Boyarin has argued that in England, Mary had a “special dominion” over the Jews, and I think that dominion can be extended beyond England based on the sermon *exempla* discussed above.<sup>348</sup> Mary’s identity as a Jew and an intercessory figure for the Jews became more central in the later Middle Ages, and as William of Malmesbury pointed out she came to

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<sup>344</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 51.

<sup>345</sup> Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin in the Thought of Medieval Theologians*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Publishing, 2005), p. 105.

<sup>346</sup> Mark. A Hall, “Wo/men only? Marian Devotion in Medieval Perth,” in *The Cult of the Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland* eds. Steve Boardman and Ella Williamson (Rochester NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), p. 105-124, pp. 107.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>348</sup> Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin*, p. 18.

be viewed as “laboring endlessly” to bring about the conversion of her people.<sup>349</sup> Boyarin argues that Mary’s status as both Jewish and Christian makes her a logical intercessory figure and conversional catalyst for Jews.<sup>350</sup> The character of a female Jew who converts to Christianity was one of the stories of Jewish conversion that medieval Christians encountered the most frequently, but they are not a reflection of a reality where Jewish women convert to Christianity more frequently than their male counterparts. Instead, it simply made sense to the listeners of the *exempla* discussed above that the Virgin would intervene in the affairs of Jewish women because Mary herself had been both a woman, and a Jew.

The conversion of Jews to Christianity was a major focus of the Church and the whole of Christendom. Overall, women converted less frequently than their male counterparts, though they made up a sizable minority. Despite this, ideas about gender and medieval women resulted in the popular idea that women were easier to convert than their male counterparts.

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<sup>349</sup> Malmesbury, *laudibus*, p. 59, no. 39.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

## Chapter 7: Apostates and Apostasy in Rabbinic *Responsa*

### Introduction

One of the best sources for examining any issue related to medieval Jewish history are rabbinic *responsa*, also referred to using the Hebrew *teshuvot*. These are valuable sources because they are the writings of greatly respected rabbis as they responded to important questions that were sent to them from Jews throughout Europe, and sometimes from even farther away than that. They had to give legal rulings on all manner of topics. Someone, usually another rabbi, would send their question to a rabbi who was viewed as one of the most brilliant in the region, who would respond by citing precedent and explaining the proper handling of a situation.

This chapter analyzes the rulings of medieval rabbis on various issues involving conversion. This chapter focuses on rabbis who wrote *responsa* between 1100 and 1450. During any given time, there were several rabbis in medieval Europe considered to be the most educated and the most brilliant, whose rulings on issues impacted the entire Ashkenazi Jewish community of the Middle Ages. Rabbis were presented with questions on how Jewish law should be applied in a multitude of situations. The questions submitted to these *de facto* heads of the Jewish community almost always came from other rabbis, who needed to consult someone with a greater mastery of Jewish law than themselves. The answers to these questions were not confidential. While the original author of the question eventually received it, the letter was opened and copied at most Jewish communities on the route between the rabbi's town and the town of the person



who asked the question.<sup>351</sup> They were often compiled within compendiums in various Jewish communities, this is largely why so many are extant today. The practice of copying *responsa* resulted in them having a much broader impact than a simple correspondence would have had, and the rulings of these rabbis have stood the test of time, with many of them still being referenced today by modern Jews.

This chapter focuses on the *responsa* of European rabbis who are generally referred to as the *Rishonim* (lit. “the first ones”). These were rabbis who were active in Europe from about 1050 to 1500, with the most activity coming from northern France and Germany.<sup>352</sup> In some cases, the actual question asked of the rabbi is preserved within the extant documents, but most of the time we are required to reconstruct the question based on the rabbi’s response. In any case, *responsa* provide us with an excellent window into the lives of medieval Jews, as the questions asked of rabbis involved discussing detailed case histories. These sources are excellent for giving us a glimpse into the lives of individual converts.

While this chapter primarily focuses on the *Rishonim*, it more briefly discusses rabbinic rulings on topics relating to Jewish converts before the eleventh century. The *Rishonim* were not simply making rulings without having the work of earlier rabbinic authorities in mind, so it is important to discuss the work of their forebears as it directly influenced them. Before the eleventh century, the center of Jewish rabbinical thought was

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<sup>351</sup> Collette Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 70.

<sup>352</sup> While both of German and French rabbis were very influential in medieval Europe, the French Talmudic school was the dominant one from the twelfth century on, with many of its members traveling throughout Europe and spreading their influence. See Rami Reiner, “From Rabbenu Tam to R. Isaac of Vienna: The Hegemony of the French Talmudic School in the Twelfth Century,” in *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries): Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Speyer, 20-25 October 2002*, ed. Christopher Cluse (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols), pp. 273-283, p. 273.

in the Babylonian cities of Sura and Pumbedita. These two cities both had Talmudic Academies, and the heads of these academies were viewed as the greatest rabbis in the world, answering questions from Jews from all over the world. The heads of these academies were referred to as *geonim* (lit. “the brilliant ones”). They were active from about 650 to 1250, but their level of importance in the Jewish community began to decline in the early twelfth century. The primary duty of these *geonim* was to study and interpret rabbinical texts such as the Talmud and the Mishna.

There are several different recurring issues in the *responsa* literature that relate to Jewish converts to Christianity. This chapter analyzes those various topics in chronological order, arguing that there was a profound and negative shift in the way that medieval rabbis viewed converts following the massacres of the First Crusade in 1096. However, I also argue that while the treatment of male apostates drastically shifted at the end of the eleventh century, female converts were treated much more leniently than their male counterparts, and are even described in different terms by both the rabbis who composed the *teshuvot* and the writers of the *she’elot*. The *responsa* literature also presents us with several detailed case studies on individual converts, from which we can extrapolate more information about the actual rate of conversion of male Jews as opposed to their female counterparts. In making this argument, I discuss six topics that frequently came up in the writings of rabbis from the eleventh century to the beginning of the sixteenth. The first of these examines whether apostates could take part in various Jewish rituals related to marriage, including granting a woman a divorce and performing *halitzah*. The second issue is whether and how repentant apostates returned to the Jewish community. The third is whether apostates can be lent money at interest by Jews. The

fourth examines whether apostates can be trusted as witnesses. The fifth issue is whether apostates could inherit from their Jewish relatives. The final issue topic examined here is the use conversion as a threat. For each of these issues, the rulings relating to them in the Talmud and the rulings of the *geonim* are briefly discussed, before delving into the work of the *rishonim* in more detail.

### **Freeing Agunot: Jewish Apostasy, Divorce, and Halitzah**

One of the biggest issues was whether converts could take part in various Jewish rituals relating to marriage. Jewish marriage involved the signing of a *Ketubah*, or a bill of marriage, that outlined the various privileges each member of the new couple would obtain. This included a payment of a certain amount of money to the wife if her husband divorced her. One of the frequent issues that emerged was whether a convert was required to pay his wife the sum of money required by the *Ketubah*.

Medieval Judaism, unlike medieval Christianity, had a religious form of divorce. This involved the writing up of a bill of divorce referred to as a *get*. This document had to be written by the husband and he had to initiate the divorce. Medieval Jewish women could not initiate divorce in most situations, though they could turn to the *beth din* if the situation with her husband was so extreme that it was putting her in grave danger. Some women also used creative methods to bring about divorce, such as refusing to observe proper dietary laws or immersing herself in the *mikveh*<sup>353</sup> After a *get* was issued, both

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<sup>353</sup> Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, p. 231-252.

parties were free to remarry. Without a *get* however, Jewish women could not remarry. A common issue that emerged was that of a husband converting to Christianity without his wife. Medieval rabbinic authorities had to decide whether a man who had left the fold had the ability to write a *get* despite his conversion, and what to do about *agunot* (lit. chained ones), or women who were stuck in a state of being married to someone who is absent.

There was one other Jewish custom that raised problems when husbands converted, and this was the practice of *Yibbum*, or levirate marriage. This practice dates to the Bible,<sup>354</sup> and required that if a woman became a childless widow and her husband had an unmarried brother who also had no children, they would get married. This arrangement was not required of the brother, as he could initiate another ceremony, referred to as *Halitzah*, another practice outlined in the Bible.<sup>355</sup> This ceremony indicated that the brother did not want to marry his brother's widow, and would allow both to be free to marry other people. Once again, though, a woman could not initiate *Halitzah* or reject her *Yavvam* (brother-in-law) if he chose to marry her. This became an issue when the brother-in-law in question was a convert to Christianity. These issues revolved around one central question: how much of the convert's Jewish identity is retained? Can they still take part in Jewish rituals? Non-Jews normally could not take part in *Ketubot*,

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<sup>354</sup> *Deuteronomy 25:5-6*, "If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

<sup>355</sup> This is also a tradition that dates to the Bible, *Deuteronomy 25:7-10*, "However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say 'My husband's brother refused to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me.' Then the elder of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, 'I do not want to marry her,' his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, 'This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line.'

*Gittin*, *Yibbum*, or *Halitzah*, but for much of the Middle Ages, male Jewish converts were permitted to do so in order that their ex-wives or sisters-in-law could be permitted to remarry within the Jewish community.

Many scholars have argued that medieval rabbis continued to view apostates as Jewish, or at least Jewish enough, to perform the ceremonies and acts discussed above.<sup>356</sup> While I do not disagree with this – in fact, it is quite difficult to, as some rabbis specifically wrote that they felt that way -- I would like to argue that a major factor that led to Jewish converts continuing to be viewed as “Jewish enough” for these rituals was because it was what was the most beneficial for Judaism in the long run. It ensured that women would not end up in situations where they could not remarry.

One of the biggest concerns in *responsa* on this topic is the fate of *agunot*. This term was used to describe women who were in a state of limbo because they were still married to their husband for one reason or another, but their husband had been unable to sign a *get*. In the Talmud, this usually resulted from a woman’s husband dying while away on business. If there were no witnesses to testify that they had seen him dead, the woman was stuck in a marriage with a man who may never return.<sup>357</sup> However, for Jews in medieval Christian Europe, a new type of *agunah* emerged, one who was the result of the conversion of their husband to Christianity. It was also possible for women to become *agunot* in situations when their brother-in-law was a convert, and thus could not perform *halitzah*. While the opinions of medieval rabbis on many of the issues that relate to *Ketubot*, *Gittin*, *Yibbum* and *Halitzah* changed over time, one thing remains consistent

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<sup>356</sup> Ya’akov Katz, “Af al pi Shehata, Israel Hu [Even Though He Has Sinned, He Remains an Israelite],” *Tarbiz* 27 (1958), pp. 203-217; Simcha Goldin, *Apostasy and Jewish Identity in High Middle Ages Northern Europe: ‘Are You Still My Brother?’* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 22.

<sup>357</sup> b. T. *Gittin* 26b.

for almost all of them: whatever must be done to ensure that a woman is not an *agunah* should be done. If a woman is made an *agunah* following the apostasy of her husband or brother-in-law, it could be a force that causes the apostasy of the woman as well, so allowing women to be free of their converted husbands or brothers-in-law was of grave importance.

### *Divorce*

The Talmud is fairly lenient on the subject of apostates and their personal relationships, arguing that apostates continue to have the ability to marry Jewish women, and they also continue to have the ability to perform *halitzah* and grant divorces to Jewish women.<sup>358</sup> This is an extension of the Talmudic phrase that “Even though he has sinned, he remains a Jew,”<sup>359</sup> which is used to help explain why even Jews who have left the community for one reason or another are allowed to continue to have relationships with their former coreligionists.

The *geonim* were also confronted with this issue. Natronai ben-Hilai was asked in the ninth century whether a Jew who had converted to another religion could halachically divorce his wife. Natronai expressed concern for the woman involved in the scenario, and noted that she would become an *agunah* if they did not allow this man to divorce his wife, and eventually concluded that “Since he married her lawfully, he can dissolve the marriage by means of a religious divorce.”<sup>360</sup> For Natronai, it was important to err on the side of caution when it came to issues that could lead women to be placed in situations

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<sup>358</sup> b. T. *Ketubot* 30b.

<sup>359</sup> b. T. *Sanhedrin* 44a.

<sup>360</sup> *Teshuvot HaGeonim*, ed. Simha Assaf (Jerusalem, 1942) no. 5.

where they were unable to escape a marriage due to their spouse's conversion. One common issue that was interconnected with much of the discussion was what level of Jewishness an apostate maintained. Natronai did not simply think that these individuals remained Jews in every sense, as the rabbis of the Talmud do; instead, his major concern was what might happen to the woman if he did not give this man the ability to divorce his wife after his conversion. This set a precedent that would continue through the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the *gaon* who had the greatest impact on the *Rishonim* was Sa'adia Gaon (882-942). He wrote a *responsum* that most clearly stated the Geonic opinion that Jewish converts could continue to be viewed as Jewish in relation to marriage, divorce, *halitzah*, and *yibbum*. He wrote this *responsum* after he received a question about whether a certain child should be considered Jewish. In this case, a Jewish man and woman both apostatized, got married and bore a child as gentiles. However, the father eventually reverted to Judaism and formally divorced his wife. Sa'adiah had to decide on the Jewish status of the child. In the end, he concluded that the child was a *mamzer*<sup>361</sup> and the conversion of the child's father made no difference. He explains his rationale as follows:

The law regarding an apostate...has two aspects: for certain *mitzvot* such as benedictions and common courts and the like, we examine whether they observe the Sabbath [to determine if they are still Jewish, if they do not observe the Sabbath, they are apostates] but as regards marriage, divorce...*halitzah* and other things like them, we examine whether he was conceived and born to a Jewish mother. In short, for *mitzvot*, decide [their Jewishness] according to Sabbath observance, for personal status, decide according to birth.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> This term is normally used to refer to someone who was born when their parents were out of wedlock.

<sup>362</sup> Sa'adiah Gaon, as quoted by Gerald Blidstein, "Who Is Not a Jew? – The Medieval Discussion." *Israel Law Review* 11:3 (1976), pp. 369-390, p. 381.

Because the child's mother was not Jewish at the time of his birth, and had been raised in a gentile household, Sa'adiah did not consider the child to be Jewish. This rationale, explained that apostates could be considered Jewish in contexts relating to marriage. This continued to be debated by the *Rishonim*, who had to deal with this issue on a regular basis. Sa'adiah left the door open for converted Jewish men to help their former wives or sisters-in-law resume their lives, and not become *agunot*.

The *Rishonim* continued discussing this topic. Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, a French rabbi better known from his abbreviated name Rashi (1040-1105), and arguably the most influential of the *Rishonim*, did not differ from the *Geonim* in his discussion of converts and *Gittin*. Like Natronai and Sa'adia, he thought it was important to ensure that women did not end up trapped in a marriage as an *agunah*. He also restated the idea that apostates were considered differently concerning personal status, and noted that "in case of divorce and *halitzah*...he [an apostate] is completely a Jew."<sup>363</sup> This set a precedent that most of the *Rishonim* enforced. Many later rabbis came to the same conclusions, citing both the *Geonim* and Rashi when they ruled that an apostate could sign a *get*. This included rabbis throughout the High Middle Ages and from varied geographies. Rabbis from later centuries such as Moses b. Isaac ha-Levi Mintz, a fifteenth-century German rabbi<sup>364</sup> and Isaac b. Moses of Vienna (1200-1270), ruled in the same way Rashi did<sup>365</sup>

One of the more interesting *responsum* on this topic focused on the technical details of the signing of the *get*. It was unclear what name the apostate should use when

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<sup>363</sup> Rashi, from *A Treasury of Responsa* ed. and trans. Samuel Freehof (Jerusalem: Ktav, 1973), p. 20—21.

<sup>364</sup> *She'elot u-Teshuvot Rabbenu Mosheh Mintz*, ed. Yonatan Sheraga Domb (Jerusalem: Mekhon, 1991), no. 11.

<sup>365</sup> *Teshuvot R. Or Zarua*, ed. J. Rosenberg (Jerusalem, 1960), no. 45.



he signed the document. Should it be the name he was born with, or the name he took following his conversion? This discussion first appears in the *responsa* of French rabbi Jacob b. Meir (1100-1171), also known as Rabbenu Tam. Yom Tov of Joigny (d. 1190), a fellow French rabbi and former student of Tam's, had ruled that a divorce was invalid because the *get* only contained the ex-husband's Christian name, and not his Jewish name. He wanted to check in with Tam to make sure he did the right thing, indicating that he had some trepidation about his decision. Rabbenu Tam, in a very long *responsum*, excoriated the ruling of Yom Tov, which he described as "far-fetched and forced" and described him "as one who is gathering sheaves in the valley of the shades."<sup>366</sup> He directly charged him with causing "a daughter of Israel to become an *agunah*" while he rested his "decision upon an exaggerated or meaningless reason." He even remarked that Yom Tov must have "rancor in [his] heart against the parties," as there is no other logical reason he would have come to this confounding conclusion. Rabbenu Tam argued that small technicalities should not undo a *get*, and that any name by which people recognize the man was a suitable name to place on the document. He explained that there is also precedence for this in that "more than twenty divorces from apostates were made in Paris and they wrote only their Jewish names in them." Tam hinted at having encountered similar situations before, and noted that "many men have raised objections to a divorce and have been unable to repair the damage they have done." Tam even included a brief aside at the end of the *responsum* to be read by the girl's father. In it, he apologized for Yom Tov's mistake and urged him to find a suitable husband for his daughter who is now

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<sup>366</sup> Jacob b. Meir, "Divorce from an Apostate," ed. and trans. Freehof in *Responsa*, p. 37-40. This is a verse from Isaiah 17:5, which Rabbenu Tam uses to insult Yom Tov, essentially claiming that he is doing work and complicating things that are completely unnecessary, just as gathering leaves for shade in a valley of shade would be unnecessary.

permitted to remarry.

This is one area where there is very little movement over time on the subject. Most of the *Rishonim* followed Rashi's rulings about the ability of an apostate to sign a *get*.

There was not complete agreement on this, though, and some rabbis offered dissenting opinions about whether an apostate could sign a *get* and have the divorce be meaningful. R. Nathan of Rome (1035-1106) ruled that an apostate could not divorce his wife. If he wanted to divorce her and convert, he had to make sure to divorce her before he left the fold, or his ex-wife would be trapped as an *agunah*.<sup>367</sup> However, his opinion was in the minority, and was not one expressed by rabbis whose spheres of influence were far larger than his. Overall though, rabbis sought to make a woman's path to divorce as easy as possible in the face of the conversion of her husband. Most of the rabbis who ruled in this manner specifically noted that a woman becoming an *agunah* is something that must be avoided at all costs, even if it meant they had to ascribe some aspect of Jewish identity to the male apostate.

### *Halitzah*

If a widow was childless, and her brother-in-law was childless and unmarried, she had to marry him, unless he chose not to marry her. If the brother-in-law was an apostate, she was of course barred from marrying him, but she also had to receive his release through *halitzah* so that she could remarry. Issues of divorce are consistent and clear cut in the High Middle Ages, with all the most influential rabbis coming to the

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<sup>367</sup> The actual text of the *responsum* has unfortunately been lost, and we only know the details about it from others citing it. See for example, the work of the nineteenth century Rabbi Meir HaKohen who mentions this ruling in his commentary on the responsa of Maimonides. *Teshuvot Maimoniyyot Ishut*, #12.

same conclusions. However, *halitzah* triggered many more debates, and rabbis had drastically different opinions on this matter.

The *Geonim* were rather strict when it came to *halitzah*, and came to a much different conclusion about it than the sages of the Talmud. R. Paltoi bar Abbaye (d. 857) ruled that if a woman's brother-in-law converted before granting her a divorce she had to "remain an *agunah* forever" because the individual could no longer perform the ceremony.<sup>368</sup> Similar opinions, which argued against the status of the apostate as a Jew for the purposes of *halitzah*, were shared by most of the other *Geonim*.<sup>369</sup>

As was the case with most halakhic issues, the most influential of the *Rishonim* to rule on this topic was Rashi. In this case, Rashi disagreed heavily with the *Geonim*. He was quite lenient in his rulings, and he attempted to explain how it was possible that someone who was no longer part of the community could possibly perform this Jewish ritual. He received a question that asked what should be done if a woman's husband had died, and he had a brother-in-law who was single and childless, but also an apostate. Did they need to perform *Halitzah*? Rashi quoted the Talmud, stating "Even though he has sinned, he is still a Jew."<sup>370</sup> He laid out his rationale, and repeated that when it came to matters like marriage and *halitzah*, the man was still a Jew and "...his marriage [was] a valid marriage, and his *halitzah* a valid *halitzah*." He specifically notes that the rulings of the *geonim* made no sense and "contradict one another," and insisted that *halitzah* is required even in situations where the brother was an apostate even at the time of the

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<sup>368</sup> R. Poltoi Gaon, in *O.H. Yevamot*, pt. I, p. 34, #77.

<sup>369</sup> See for example, R. Yehudai Gaon, *Bet nekhot ha-halakhot, o, Toratan shel rishonim: yekhalkel divre halakha u-she'elot u-teshuvot shel rabotenu ha-ge'onim ha-ḳadmonim* (Jerusalem, 1966), p. 60 and R. Sherira Gaon, *Teshuvot haGeonim* (Jerusalem, 1967), no. 96, pp. 12-13.

<sup>370</sup> From Freehof, *Responsa*, p. 19-20.

marriage. This is reflective of Rashi's general view that some degree of Jewishness is always maintained by those who were born Jewish, regardless of their status as apostates. While Rashi's rulings on divorce became the dominant view held by medieval European rabbis, this time Rashi's view would come under fire, with later *Rishonim* turning back to the *Geonim* and countering Rashi's arguments. This resulted in a great deal of confusion throughout the later Middle Ages.

Rabbis from the thirteenth century on wanted to prevent women from encountering apostates, and departed from the idea that an apostate could perform *halitzah*. R. Isaac *Or Zarua*<sup>371</sup> (1200-1270) and his son, R. Hayyim b. Itzhak Or Zarua (d. 1300), disagreed with Rashi's perspective on the issue. Hayyim received the following question:

At the time that A married L, his brother B, was an apostate. A died childless. Is L bound to receive *Halitzah* from B? Or is she not bound to B? Would you please explain your father's opinion concerning this case, as it seems unclear. The reasoning of those who espouse the lenient view, is not quite clear, while the reasoning for the stringent view is very clear.<sup>372</sup>

The author of this question was aware of the debate within the community, and was not certain which of the views make the most sense, and appealed to Hayyim to help clarify some of his father's earlier rulings. In his *responsum*, Hayyim notes in no uncertain terms that his father held the opinion that if the man was an apostate at the time of the marriage, then the woman is not bound to him through *Yibbum*. This, he reasons, is because "a marriage is contracted only with the consent of the Rabbis.... [they] would never agree to a marriage that binds a woman to a levir who is an apostate." This still allowed the woman to avoid becoming an *agunah* who had to wait for a man to perform

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<sup>371</sup> R. Isaac is referred to as *Or Zarua*, as it is an important legalistic text he composed.

<sup>372</sup> *Teshuvot R. Or Zarua*, No. 43.

*halitzah*, but used much different logic than Rashi, in fact arguing that the man cannot perform *halitzah* or be considered a *Yavvam*, because he is a convert. While Rashi argued that an apostate maintained some part of their Jewish identity as it related to their personal status, *Or Zarua* and Hayyim argued that the man's apostasy has removed any part of his Jewish identity that would require he perform *halitzah*.

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (1215-1293) received a variation on this question as well. He received a very brief question that noted that a husband had died childless and he had two brothers who were also childless.<sup>373</sup> One of these brothers, who lived nearby, was an apostate. The other brother was Jewish, but lived "in a distant land." Unlike his predecessors, Meir did not choose a path that made it easy for the woman to avoid becoming an *agunah*. He replied that "Since the other *Yavvam* is a Jew, the widow should not accept *halitzah* from an apostate." It is not surprising that Meir wanted this woman to avoid contact with an apostate, as R. Meir was quite strict towards male converts, but in this case his ruling almost certainly led to the widow becoming an *agunah*. Earlier rabbis strove to avoid this by any means necessary, even if it meant taking *halitzah* from an apostate. Still, it is likely that if the only brother was an apostate he would have permitted the *halitzah*; but the fact that he demanded that the *halitzah* be performed by a brother who may never be seen again was a problem for this widow.

As the Middle Ages wore on, feelings of animosity towards converts became greater, and the idea of forcing a woman to approach an apostate for assistance in changing her status from that of an *agunah* became a hard pill to swallow. Many rabbis

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<sup>373</sup> Irving A. Agus ed. and trans, *Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg: His Life and Works as Source for the Religious, Legal, and Social History of the Jews in the Thirteenth Century* (New York, 1947), p. 392, No. 387.

from the thirteenth century and later adapted Or Zarua's approach and argued that *Halitzah* was completely unnecessary for apostates to perform, because a marriage between a Jewish woman and an apostate could never take place in the first place. Thus, the need for *halitzah* was negated by the husband's apostasy. This view was first expressed in the *Tosafot* of thirteenth-century Germany rabbi, Abraham of Regensburg. He attempted to frame the issue of *halitzah* as separate from that of divorce, and argued that women are the initiators of *halitzah*. He argued that divorce is only legitimate for apostates because they were the ones who initiated the action, whereas the potential for *halitzah* was initiated by the wife upon the marriage of her husband; thus *halitzah* was never even an option, so these women could immediately remarry.<sup>374</sup>

While this idea was present in *Tosafot*, something only the very learned read and were aware of, it was also communicated through *responsa*, which had a wider audience. R. Baruch b. Samuel of Mainz (d. 1221) agreed with this approach, and while he presented a somewhat different rationale, he still concluded that *halitzah* from an apostate is never necessary. Baruch, looking back at the rulings of rabbis such as Or Zarua, who argued that the time that the *Yavvam* converted to Christianity was relevant in determining whether *halitzah* was necessary, chose a different time at which it was no longer necessary for an apostate to perform *halitzah*. Instead of looking at whether the *Yavvam* had apostatized at the time of the wedding, it only mattered whether he was an apostate at the time of his brother's death. If he was an apostate when his brother died, the woman

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<sup>374</sup> Ephraim Kanarfogel examines this *Tosafah* in much more detail in "Changing Attitudes Towards Apostates in Tosafist Literature: Late Twelfth-Early Thirteenth Centuries," in *New Perspectives in Jewish-Christian Relations*, eds. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schechter (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 297-327, p. 307.

was free from needing *halitzah* from her brother-in-law.<sup>375</sup> By the fifteenth century, Austrian rabbi Israel Isserlein (1390-1460) had given up the pretense that anything about the converts was Jewish enough to perform *halitzah*, arguing that their status as a Jew had essentially been revoked after their apostasy.<sup>376</sup>

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, most rabbis agreed that *halitzah* could be performed by an apostate. However, they disagreed on some of the details. Some were in Rashi's camp, which allowed for any apostate to perform *halitzah*, and indeed required that an apostate perform *halitzah* or the woman could not remarry. However, by the thirteenth century, most medieval rabbis agreed that *halitzah* is only required if the apostate had already been one at the time of the marriage. Over time, rabbis formulated ways to help widows avoid having to approach their apostate *Yavvam*, by arguing at first that if the man was an apostate when her husband died, she did not need to perform *halitzah*.

### **Mourning Apostates**

Another common issue that rabbis regularly confronted was how one should behave upon the death of an individual who left Judaism for Christianity. In Jewish tradition, there are very specific instructions on how to mourn for the death of loved ones. This includes the recitation of specific prayers, a special burial ceremony, and the tearing of one's own clothing as an expression of grief. There is also a period of time called a *Shivah*, during which the deceased individual's loved ones do not do any sort of work. This includes abstaining from bathing and shaving, and they remain in a seated position to accept visitors who come to support them. Many of the individuals who converted to

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<sup>375</sup> *Maharam Mintz*. No. 12.

<sup>376</sup> Israel Isserlein, *Terumaht ha-Deshen* ed. Shmuel Taitatsak et. Al. (Jerusalem, 2016), #223

Christianity were still loved by their families, and there were several different questions submitted to rabbis about what was permitted in remembrance of the death of a family member who was an apostate. *Responsa* on this topic convey a great deal of anger on the part of the rabbis who write them, giving us insight into how converts leaving the community could impact the individuals. The very existence of these *responsa* indicates the difficult conflict that medieval Jews had to deal with upon the conversion of their own family members, as many of the questions describe situations of a recently lost loved one who was no longer a Jew, but whose loss was still mourned.

This is another issue where there is not a great deal of variation between the *Rishonim*. All of them agree that one should not mourn an apostate, though in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this was expressed more vehemently. However, there was one anecdote that the *Rishonim* had to contend with in their attempts to make the claim that apostates should not be mourned. Gershom b. Judah, one of the first *Rishonim* who had been the leading authority in Jewish law during his lifetime (960-1040), had a son who converted to Christianity and subsequently died. When his son died, he not only observed the usual one-week mourning period of *Shivah*, he mourned for 14 days. Those questioning whether it was correct to mourn for an apostate often referred to Rabbenu Gershom in their query, so medieval rabbis had to come up with various reasons why he behaved as he did for their rulings on the topic to have any validity.

Rabbenu Tam was asked whether a small child should be mourned if he and his parents had converted to Christianity. On other issues, rabbis were more lenient about individuals who converted at a young age, before such a conversion could have been his or her own decision. In this case, though, Rabbenu Tam insisted that the child's death



should not be mourned.<sup>377</sup> Most rabbis throughout the Middle Ages agreed with this sentiment, including German rabbi Yaakov b. Moshe Levi Moelin (1365-1427), and French rabbi Abraham b. David of Posquiere (1125-1198).<sup>378</sup>

*Or Zarua* felt the same way, providing a reference to the Talmud to support his decision. Sanhedrin 47a described not mourning for the death of the wicked, and *Or Zarua* contended that those who apostatize were among the wicked.<sup>379</sup> *Or Zarua* argued that the reason Rabbenu Gershom mourned was not because of his son's death alone, instead it was because his son had not returned to Judaism before his death.

R. Meir of Rothenberg angrily expressed his opinion on this topic, providing some graphic imagery that described the punishment that these apostates undergo in the afterlife:

[there] certainly [should be] no mourning period observed for a *meshumad* whose misdeed is never expiated. For it is said that even when all the fires of *Gehinnom* are doused, those burning for a *meshumad* are never doused. And to him the verse applies, "And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have rebelled against Me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."<sup>380</sup>

R. Meir did not mince words in his response. He felt that a convert should never be mourned, and he even goes so far as to imply that the punishment that *Meshummadim* experience in *Gehinnom* was worse than it is for other people. While it was believed that the fire in *Gehinnom* will one day be doused, that fire will continue for anyone who converted. It is worth noting that R. Meir did not make a point to delineate how one

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<sup>377</sup> This is unfortunately not a ruling that has survived in its original form, but it is referred to by *Or Zarua* in *Sefer Or Zarua* v. 2, #428.

<sup>378</sup> Abraham b. David of Posquieres, *Teshuvot u Fesakim*, ed. Yosef Kafah (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1964), no. 126.

<sup>379</sup> *Sefer Or Zarua* v. 2 #428.

<sup>380</sup> Meir of Rothenburg, "A *Responsum* of Meir of Rothenburg," in *The Responsa Anthology* ed. and trans. Avraham Finkel (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1990), pp. 19-20, p. 20.

should behave depending on the mode of their conversion – for him, whether they were forced to convert or converted willingly, they should not be mourned. At the end of his diatribe about the sinfulness of apostates, R. Meir noted that “Although Rabbenu Gershom mourned his son for a fortnight, he did not do this out of halakha, but out of his intense grief.”<sup>381</sup> This makes this *responsum* somewhat ambivalent, despite the language conveyed in the bulk of R. Meir’s writing on this topic. While he noted that it is not something that should be done according to Jewish law, he acknowledged the fact that intense grief can lead to people mourning apostates anyway, since even one of the greatest rabbis of the Middle Ages grieved after the loss of his apostate son!

### **Converts Who Return to Judaism**

Rabbis also dealt regularly with the issue of how someone who had converted to Christianity should be treated if they returned to Judaism. While it was technically illegal according to the Church from the start of the thirteenth century onward,<sup>382</sup> many converts returned to Judaism at some point during their lives. Until the period of the First Crusade, it was quite easy for converts to return to Judaism. This was the most common with forced converts, but those who had converted willingly also sometimes returned. This return created many questions and logistical issues. Should they be allowed to resume life as normal? Is there some type of ritual they must undergo? Could they be trusted as

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>382</sup> As discussed in Part I, in 1201 Pope Innocent III ruled that any type of conversion – willing or otherwise – permanently made an individual Christian, so anyone who returned to Judaism after any kind of conversion was technically heresy, and the Inquisition could pursue them. See *ASJ* 1:80-81 #70.

witnesses? As the Christian world became increasingly intent on driving Jews out of Europe either through conversion or expulsion, medieval Jews, including rabbis, became increasingly wary of former apostates, and it became more difficult for them to return to Judaism.<sup>383</sup> However, while things became more difficult for male apostates who wanted to return to Judaism, I argue that, when examining the ways that rabbis dealt with male and female returning apostates, the trend points in the other direction for women. Women had a harder time returning to Judaism at the beginning of the period of the *Rishonim*, but by the thirteenth century could return to Judaism, even if they left in seemingly scandalous situations, while their male counterparts had a more difficult time returning to the Jewish community.

### *The Return of Male Apostates*

While the novel part of my argument focuses more on the way women who were returning to Judaism were treated, it is necessary to first establish the process by which their male counterparts returned to Judaism and the various debates related to it. Jacob Katz argued that medieval Jews viewed Jews who had apostatized still as their “brother,” citing the Talmudic phrase that “Even a Jew who has sinned...is still a Jew.”<sup>384</sup> He argued that this quote was a driving force in the way that medieval Jews thought about apostates, and that Jews did everything they could to leave the door open for their return, with that individual never losing their Jewishness. This meant that all Jews had to do to return to

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<sup>383</sup> This has been most eloquently argued by Ephraim Kanarfogel in “Returning to the Jewish Community in Medieval Ashkenaz: History & Halakha,” in *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature: Presented to Dr. Bernard Lander* vol. 1, ed. Michael A. Shmidman (New York: Touro College Press, 2007), pp. 69-98.

<sup>384</sup> Katz, “Af Al Pi She-Hata,” p. 22.

the community was simply state a willingness to return. There was no probationary period or special ceremony. When Rashi was asked whether there should be a trial period for a returning convert, or if their wine should be considered kosher, he replied that no trial period was necessary and the returned convert's wine was immediately permissible.<sup>385</sup> This indicates that returning to Judaism was quite simple in the first part of the eleventh century. However, more recently, Ephraim Kanarfogel has argued that while this was certainly true during the time of the early *Rishonim* such as Rashi, by the thirteenth century medieval Jews asked for a little more from their former coreligionists who wanted to return to the fold.<sup>386</sup> This included special ceremonies involving the immersion normally only required for neophytes, and in some cases the presence of the *beth din*<sup>387</sup> to convey official Jewish status on to this individual. This ritual, with very few exceptions, was performed on male Jews wishing to return to the fold. As we will see, discussions about women returning to Judaism during the later Middle Ages had a much different focus.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ashkenazi rabbis moved away from this open-door policy, and began to require a ritual form of immersion from returning apostates. As Kanarfogel has argued, most of the Tosafists required this for them to re-enter into the community. This requirement resulted from increasing tension between Jews and their Christian neighbors, and to quote Kanarfogel, Tosafists "...perceived the existence of a larger gap between Jewish and Christian societies that had to be traversed

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<sup>385</sup> *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Elfenbein, p. 85.

<sup>386</sup> Kanarfogel, "Returning," p. 70.

<sup>387</sup> The *beth din* was and is a rabbinical court in Judaism. It was typical for them to oversee many religious ceremonies, including divorce, *halitzah*, and the conversion of gentiles to Judaism. For Kanarfogel, this is further proof that those who returned to Judaism were being treated just as neophytes were.

by the returning apostate than did Rashi...”<sup>388</sup> As a result, they required a ceremony that was akin to a reverse baptism. While Jewish sources are somewhat vague about what this process entailed, only noting that it involves the shaving of the hair, the clipping of the nails, and immersion in water, we have a very detailed account of this process in Bernard Gui’s *Practica Inquisitionis*:

The rite or mode of the Jews in rejudaizing baptized converts who return to the vomit of Judaism is as follows: He who is to be rejudaized is summoned and asked by one of the Jews present whether he wishes to submit to what is called *tymla* (=tebila) in Hebrew, which in Latin means whether he wishes to take a bath or washing in running water, in order to become a Jew. He replies that he does. Then the Jew who presided says to him in Hebrew *Baaltussuna* (=baal-teshuba) which means in Latin, ‘you are reverting from the state of sin.’

After this he is stripped of his garments and is sometimes bathed in warmed water. The Jews then rub him energetically with sand over his entire body, but especially on his forehead, chest, and arms, that is, on the places which, during baptism received the holy chrism. Then they cut the nails of his hands and feet until they bleed.

They shave his head, and afterwards put him in the waters of a flowing stream, and plunge his head in the water three times. After this immersion they recite the following prayer: ‘Blessed be God, the Lord eternal, who has commanded us to sanctify ourselves in this water or bath which is called *tymla* in Hebrew.’

This done, he emerges from the water, dons a new shirt and breeches, and all the attending Jews kiss him and give him a name, which is usually the name he had before baptism.

He who is rejudaized is required to confess his belief in the Law of Moses, to promise to keep and observe it, and to live henceforth according to it. Similarly, that he renounces baptism and the Christian faith, and that henceforth he will neither keep nor serve it. And he promises to observe the Law and repudiates baptism and the Christian faith. Afterwards they give him a certificate or testimonial letter to all other Jews so that they may receive him, trust him, and assist him. From then on, he lives and acts as a Jew and attends the School, or Synagogue, of the Jews.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Kanarfogel, “Tosafists,” p. 300

<sup>389</sup> Bernard Gui, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*, ed. Celestin Douais (Paris, 1886), 288-289; Translation from Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, “The Inquisition and the Jews of France in the Time of Bernard Gui,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 63:3 (1970), pp. 317-376, p. 363-364.

While this account has to be read somewhat speculatively given its source, the fact that Jews felt that baptism needed to be washed away from those who had been converted is present in Jewish sources as well, with Jews regularly referring to “putrid waters,” implying that it leaves a lasting “smell” of sorts on those who enter the baptismal font, so Bernard Gui’s account that the Jews most vigorously washed the places that are also made the most contact with during baptism makes sense. In addition to the fact that Jews now had to undergo this rather rigorous ritual, there are many indications that males who returned to Judaism are viewed with a degree of caution, and are not entirely trusted by their coreligionists.

R. Hayyim Eliezer (late thirteenth century), the son of Isaac b. Moses *Or Zarua* of Vienna, was asked whether the testimony of forced converts who had partaken of non-kosher meat during their time as Christians could be considered reliable witnesses for a murder they witnessed while they were still Christian. They claimed that they saw the dead body of a man who had gone missing. Their testimony was important, because if it were considered reliable, it would allow his widow to remarry and avoid the status of an *agunah*. He replied by saying “Although these forced converts formerly partook of non-kosher food, they are believed to be telling the truth, since they have now returned to Judaism.”<sup>390</sup> While he enforced the idea that these reverted Jews are indeed fully Jewish, the fact that the question had to be asked in the first place means that those within the same community as these Jews were not entirely certain if they should trust their testimony.

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<sup>390</sup> Noah Goldstein, “Rabbi Hayyim Eliezer Ben Isaac Or Zarua, His Life and Work, And a Digest of His Responsa,” (Ph.D. Diss., Yeshiva University, 1959), p. 117, no. 33 (91).

### *The Return of Female Apostates*

Issues relating to female apostates who wanted to return to Judaism had a different focus than discussions about male apostates. There were very few questions about whether a female apostate had to go through the ritual immersion that male converts began having to take part in during the twelfth century. Instead, there was a focus on whether Jewish women who returned from apostasy were permitted to marry. One of the major differences between the way male and female converts are discussed in the *responsa* literature is in the discussion of forced converts who returned to Judaism. This is because of a Talmudic ruling that if a woman was sexually violated during her time in the captivity of gentiles, she was not able to marry a member of the Jewish community if she returned to the fold. A woman held captive was considered either a *shevuyah* or a *nihbeshet*. A *shevuyah* was a woman who was held for ransom. In these cases, it was believed that the woman would not have been sexually violated by their captors, since they were interested in receiving payment for them. A *nihbeshet* was a woman who was held captive and whose life was in danger. If a woman had no witnesses to attest she was not violated, then it was assumed she had been violated since in such a dire situation she would have been willing to offer herself sexually to her captors to save her life.<sup>391</sup> In this case, she would not be permitted to any Jewish man, including her husband.

If she had already been married at the time of her captivity, she was not allowed to return to living with her husband, so it was possible for her marriage to be annulled.<sup>392</sup> This issue is a common one in the rabbinic *responsa* of the later Middle Ages, since instances of forced conversion increased substantially beginning with the massacres of

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<sup>391</sup> B. Ketubot 26b.

<sup>392</sup>B. Ketubot 27b.

the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century, leaving women in a difficult situation. Many rabbis did everything they could to allow female apostates back into the community, despite the rulings presented in the Talmud.

Rashi ruled quite strictly regarding women who had remained Christians for long periods of time; he still accepted them back into the community, though it was difficult for them to marry Jewish men after their return. In one instance, he allowed a woman who returned to Judaism to sign a *get* and obtain a divorce from her husband even though her husband had since married another woman many years prior following his first wife's conversion. While he allowed her to technically be divorced from her Jewish husband, he also stated that "her time as an apostate prohibits her from her husband."<sup>393</sup> His rationale for letting her sign the *get* had nothing to do with really trying to assist the woman, it was done so that her Jewish husband would not simultaneously be married to two women, since bigamy had been outlawed in Ashkenaz since the eleventh century.<sup>394</sup>

While many of these cases involve forced conversion, there are also instances of women who converted willingly, only to return later. In some cases, Jewish women returned to Judaism with Christian husbands, showing how open and eager some rabbis were to allow Jewish women back into the community. Rabbenu Tam, for example, allowed a Jewish woman to return to the fold who had apostatized after his husband had divorced her when he found out she was having sexual relations with a Christian man. She even returned to Judaism with her Christian lover, who she married.<sup>395</sup> While it is not explicitly stated in the *responsum*, it is probable that the man she returned with was

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<sup>393</sup> *Tesuvhot Rashi*, no. 96.

<sup>394</sup> Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p.116.

<sup>395</sup> E.E. Urbach, *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1980), 1:82.



the same Christian she had a relationship with prior to her conversion. Because of rulings like this, Rabbenu Tam was perhaps the most lenient of all the *Rishonim* when it came to allowing women to return to Judaism. As Rami Reiner has noted, Rabbenu Tam also allowed a woman who was returning to Judaism to return to her marriage with her husband, despite the fact that she admitted to sexual relations with a Christian during her time as an apostate. He argued that since the woman was converted under force, it made any other act that occurred as a result of that conversion non-willful.<sup>396</sup> Not everyone agreed with this approach, though. In the thirteenth century, Isaac b. Mordekhai of Bohemia argued that if a woman converted to Christianity and married a Christian, and then returned to Judaism with her Christian husband who chose to convert to Judaism, she is not permitted to her husband, as he is now required to follow *halakha*, which states that Jewish men are not permitted to Jewish women who have had sexual contact with gentiles.<sup>397</sup> This case is quite strange, in that even though the man who was born a gentile had since converted to Judaism, the fact that his wife had contact with him when he was a gentile meant they could no longer be together.

In the thirteenth century, there was a major argument between rabbis about whether female captives could marry Jewish men upon their return to Judaism, and the detailed discussion between these rabbis that remains gives us great insight into the rationale for allowing these women to return and marry Jewish men despite Talmudic passages that forbade it. Several rabbis weighed in on a situation involving a young woman who had been forcibly converted to Christianity, but later escaped, and the

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<sup>396</sup> A. R. Reiner, "Rabbenu Tam Veh-Bnei Doro," Ph.D. Dissertation, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>397</sup> Kanarfogel, "Returning Apostates," p. 160-161.

community wanted to know whether she could marry a Jewish man. This woman's case emerged as a result of an attack on the Jewish community of Frankfurt in 1241, during which hundreds of Jews were killed and twenty-four were converted under duress.<sup>398</sup> This woman was one of those twenty-four, but she managed to escape and return to Judaism, only to find out that the man she was betrothed to was now married to another woman. This created a question as to what should be done regarding their betrothal and the current marriage of the man the captured woman had been betrothed to.

While it is unclear exactly how many rabbis commented on this situation, the writings of five highly respected German rabbis, and the discussion between them, have been preserved: R. Yitzhak Or Zarua, R. Yehudah ha-Cohen, R. Meshullam b. David, R. Hayyim b. Yitzhak Or Zarua, and R. Shmuel bar ha-Levi.<sup>399</sup> All but Isaac Or Zarua ruled on the side of the woman. R. Yehudah was the rabbi to whom the question was initially sent, but he was so angered by the wrong done to this woman that he wrote to all of the other "sages and teachers" that he knew so that there could be several rulings on the topic to establish that the behavior of the man in this situation was unacceptable.<sup>400</sup> The rabbis who ruled in her favor all made the argument that the status of this woman can neither be defined by the Talmudic terms of *shevuyah* or *nihbeshet*. This woman constantly fought to be freed from her captivity and never accepted Christianity, so while she was captured, she never gave in to her captors in any way. Somewhat paradoxically though, these four rabbis all agreed that this woman was never violated, because Christians who held

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<sup>398</sup> For more on this event, see Rachel Furst, "Captivity, Conversion, and Communal Identity: Sexual Angst and Religious Crisis in Frankfurt, 1241," *Jewish History* 22, No. ½, The Elka Klein Memorial Volume (2008), pp. 179-221.

<sup>399</sup> *Teshuvot uPsakim, Responsa et Decisiones*, ed. E. Kupfer (Jerusalem 1973), no. 170, p. 282-289.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

captives were interested in maintaining the chastity of the women that they convert. So, while they argued that the woman is neither a *shevuyah* or *nihbeshet*, her status is most similar to that of a *nihbeshet*, only instead of her captors not threatening to kill her or violate her because they wanted to receive a monetary payment of some kind, in this case the payment would have been the ultimate conversion of the woman. Still, these rabbis wanted to make it clear that the Mishna in this case was deficient, and should not be relied on to come to conclusions about the status of women captured by Christians in the later Middle Ages, as times had drastically changed.

Or Zarua however, disagreed with this argument, and felt that the woman was a *shevuyah*. He took issue with the argument that medieval Christians were as delicate with the women they captured as the others claimed, arguing that if the woman was threatened with death or conversion, it was entirely possible that she offered sexual favors so as to postpone the ultimatum, and that without reliable witnesses it should be assumed that she is not permitted to the man to whom she was betrothed.<sup>401</sup> This meant that women who were taken captive by gentiles would be unable to remarry if there were no witnesses present to testify that they had not been violated.

Or Zarua's own son, R. Hayyim, disagreed with him along with the three other rabbis. In the end, the argument proposed by the other four rabbis won out with most other Ashkenazi rabbis in the Middle Ages concluding that these women should be permitted to return to their husbands or their betrothal agreements in most situations in which they had been held captive by Christians.

Throughout his career, R. Hayyim b. Isaac Or Zarua continued to oppose his

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<sup>401</sup>*Teshuvot*, ed. Kupfer, p. 286.

father's rulings on captive women. We know this because of how he responded to a question about a woman who was kidnapped at the age of 2 and forcibly converted, but managed to return to Judaism at the age of 11. She then married a *Kohen*, but the local rabbi was concerned about this, and wanted to know whether it was permitted for her to marry a priest. Talmudic law expressly stated that no woman who had been held captive by an enemy can marry a man of priestly lineage, and yet, Or Zarua argued that she can in fact marry this man, because she was kidnapped at such a young age that she was "too young for sexual relations." He bolstered his argument with the usual statement that Christians did not violate their Jewish captives and indeed "intensely watch their virginity, in order that they be fit for marriage."<sup>402</sup> This *responsum* not only makes it clear that Or Zarua thought these women could marry, he also makes a new decision about these women – making it clear that returning female apostates, in some situations at least, could even wed *kohanim*.

He took this to an even greater extreme in another ruling concerning a woman who was held captive by Christians who was permitted to marry a priest. In this case, though, the woman was twenty years old when abducted and was described as remaining with the Christians for nine years. Hayyim argued that Christians do not violate their Jewish captives, and permitted her marriage.<sup>403</sup> In this case it is even more surprising that the woman is allowed to marry a priest, because she was converted in adulthood and spent the ages of twenty to twenty-nine with Christians, instead of ages 2 to 11 as is the case in the *responsum* above. It is highly unlikely that a woman of this age was simply held captive for these nine years, and never married a Christian.

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<sup>402</sup> Hayyim Eliezer Ben Isaac Or Zarua, no. 33 (91), p. 117-118.

<sup>403</sup> *Responsa* of Hayyim b. Rabbi Isaac, no. 103

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg received a question about a group of female forced converts that effectively illustrates the difference between male and female forced converts and the way that the Jewish community perceived them. The question was, “Are the women among the group of forced converts from Rockenhausen, who escaped from their captors, permitted to resume their marital relations with their husbands?”<sup>404</sup> This question noted that there were of course other forced converts as the women were “among the group of forced converts”, but it does not express concern about the sexual activity of the males who were forcibly converted, as is this was not an issue halachically. Interestingly, R. Meir, who as we have seen was rather strict in his rulings about the apostasy of men, dealt with this issue much more leniently:

Nowadays that the gentiles are very powerful, and ordinarily, a Jewish woman who was held captive by them, even only for the purpose of extortion, is not permitted to live with her husband [because it is possible she was violated by her captors]. But, since in this case many Jews were held captive together, they are now able to testify which women were violated by their captors; such women who can furnish this testimony, even by a single witness and even by a woman witness, are permitted to resume their marital relations with their husbands. The fact that the captives did not give their lives for their religion does not disqualify them as witnesses. Although a Jew is enjoined to choose death rather than be forced to worship idols, should he violate this law he would not become disqualified as a witness, though he would be guilty of having committed a sin. Moreover, according to the account given by the captives, they never actually embraced Christianity, but merely listened without comment to the priests’ recitation of his senseless ritual in the presence of the gentiles. Thus, the captive never committed a sin; for a Jew is not enjoined to choose death rather than allow the Christians to deceive themselves into believing that they have converted him.<sup>405</sup>

Even R. Meir, whose time as an author of *responsa* embodied a marked shift towards more negatives views of those who had converted to Christianity, expressed

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<sup>404</sup> Meir of Rothenberg ed. Agus, No. 241, p. 279-280, p. 279.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 279-280.

lenience towards women who had done so, and while he does not say it, like many of his predecessors he was attempting to prevent these women from becoming *agunot*. R. Meir apparently had also received eyewitness testimony about the incident in Rockenhausen, and that further enabled to him to act leniently towards the Jewish women. It is also worth noting that R. Meir's stricter rulings, that indicated that converts in no way retain part of their Jewish identity, only applied to instances of willing conversion. Forced converts, especially those that return to Judaism, are a different matter entirely. This *responsa* also further establishes that normally in situations like these, the Jews are encouraged to commit *Kiddush ha-Shem* rather than allow themselves to be converted, but also notes that it is permissible to deceive the Christians into thinking they had converted, provided that they never actually do.

While most rabbis agreed that Jewish women who were converted, especially forcibly, could return to Judaism if they managed to escape their captors, some rabbis did not do so quite as enthusiastically. R. Asher b. Yehiel allowed women in these situations to return to Judaism, but when he did so he also made it clear that the optimal choice that women can make when faced with forced conversion is *Kiddush ha-Shem*. In other words, from R. Asher's perspective, women should take their own lives before allowing themselves to be converted – but if they did not have the piety or the will to do so, they could be allowed to return to Judaism.

## **Apostates and Economics**

### *Money-lending*

From the twelfth century on, Jews regularly served as money lenders in medieval

Europe. This was a niche they could effectively fill, because the Church forbade Christians from lending money at interest to other Christians.<sup>406</sup> As in all societies though, there were still individuals in need of loans, and Jews could offer these loans, with support from secular leaders. However, just as Christians were not to loan money to other Christians at interest, Jews were also forbidden from lending money at interest to “their brother” which medieval rabbis interpreted as meaning other Jews. One of the best ways for us to examine the evolution in just how “Jewish” apostates were, is to examine the various rulings that the *Rishonim* made on whether it was permitted to lend money at interest to an apostate. Do they continue to be considered the “brother” of other Jews, or have they lost that status because of their conversion?

Once again, Rashi is one of our earliest sources in this category, and once again he conveys a stance towards apostates that indicates that they remain a part of the Jewish community. In this case, he was asked whether it was permissible for Jews to take interest on loans from apostates within the community. Normally, Jewish law forbids the taking of interest from other Jews, much in the same way that it was forbidden between Christians. The heart of this question is whether an apostate remains part of the community or not. To this, Rashi replies that “It is forbidden to take interest from a Jew who has become an apostate, for he is still called ‘my brother.’”<sup>407</sup>

However, Rashi’s own grandson, Rabbenu Tam, was one of the first to disagree with this opinion. He argued that there is no requirement to be concerned economically

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<sup>406</sup> While this was the rule in practice in the Middle Ages, it is worth noting that certain groups had no problem violating it by the later Middle Ages. The Lombards chief among them. For more on the Lombards and other Christian bankers, see Raymond de Roover, *Money, Banking and Credit in Mediaeval Bruges* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 2013). By the Renaissance, Christian bankers were some of the most powerful people in all of Europe.

<sup>407</sup> Rashi, “Taking Interest from an Apostate,” ed. and trans. Solomon b. Freehof, in *A Treasury of Responsa*, p. 20-21

about one who is no longer your brother, and apostates are certainly no longer part of the Jewish community that deserve to have the good-will of the Jewish community extended to them.<sup>408</sup>

Ri further elaborates on this topic, noting that the kind of apostates<sup>409</sup> discussed in the Talmud are not the same kind of apostates that Jews in his time were dealing with. He states that apostates of his time are “complete gentiles” who will never return to Judaism or ever have Jewish children. For him, there is no need to be concerned about the well-being of such an apostate, so lending at interest to this individual is perfectly in line with *halakha*.

### *Inheritance*

Complications with inheritance created by apostasy also caused medieval rabbis a great deal of concern. Normally, inheritance within medieval Jewish communities was straightforward, with heirs being the male children of a married couple. But in some situations, the individual that would have normally inherited their parent’s property and money would be an apostate.

The Talmud clearly states that if a Jew becomes a gentile, he can inherit from his father. R. Hiyya bar Avin is credited with this ruling, which he based upon the fact that Esau was given Mount Seir as part of his inheritance.<sup>410</sup>

Before the ninth century, issues of apostates’ inheritance were not really addressed, and because the Talmud so emphatically stated that non-Jews could inherit from their Jewish family members, earlier *Geonim* probably did not see any reason to

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<sup>408</sup> Jacob ben Meir Tam, *Sefer ha-Yasher le-Rabenu Tam: Helek ha-she’elot veba teshuvot*, ed. Ferdinand Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1959), p. 434 no. 743.

<sup>409</sup> Urbach, *Tosafot*, p. 204.

<sup>410</sup> b. *Kiddushin* 18a



debate the issue. But in the ninth century, R. Zadok ruled that apostates should never inherit. His successor, R. Natronai was asked why R. Zadok had ruled in this way, and R. Natronai supported the conclusion that apostates do not inherit from their families, and provided a great deal of evidence in doing so. He argues that when God gives the land of Canaan to Abraham he states: “To you and your offspring I will give the land...” R. Natronai comes up with the novel argument that apostates, while technically the “offspring” of their father, have “turned their back on Israel...and on their family...” and thus they are no longer part of the line of inheritance of the Jewish people.<sup>411</sup> This shift in policy likely had to do with the increasing conversion of Jews to Islam in the world of the *Geonim*, and by creating a new interpretation of a centuries old Talmud tractate, they were creating a punishment for those Jews who chose to convert to Christianity.

The *Rishonim* do not disagree with the rulings of the *Geonim*, as they were confronting the same issues with Christianity that the *Geonim* were confronting with Islam. They do introduce some new arguments and details about why apostates do not inherit from their Jewish parents. Rabbenu Gershom was the first of the *Rishonim* to state his support for the rulings of the *Geonim*, stating that the argument presented by the *Geonim* “came from heaven.” Gershom, wanting to directly address the Talmudic idea that Jews who had become gentiles could inherit from their Jewish relatives, presented a new argument: Jews who had apostatized were not gentiles in the traditional sense, because their religious identity was murky. He argued that they are neither gentile nor Jew, so they are unable to inherit from their Jewish family members.

Hayyim b. Isaac Or Zarua, was asked what should be done about an inheritance

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<sup>411</sup> Blidstein, “Who is Not a Jew?” 382-383.

when an entire family was killed in a “riot and massacre,” and the only child who survived was a daughter who apostatized.<sup>412</sup> He cites the common opinion that “As an apostate, [she] forfeits her rights as an heir” except that “she has the power to transmit her property to her Jewish heirs.”<sup>413</sup> This means that while she is allowed to give her property back to her Jewish family upon her death, she cannot inherit property from the same family. In other words, property that an apostate acquired while an apostate could still be passed on to their Jewish heirs. Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg received a very similar question, and replied in like fashion.<sup>414</sup>

In another of his rulings, Hayyim presents an interesting course of action regarding an apostate’s inheritance, indicating some outside-the-box thinking when it came to *halakha*. In this case, a man left money with another man for safekeeping, but subsequently died, and his only heir was an apostate. The author of the question asks whether the man who is safeguarding the money should give the money to the apostate heir. Hayyim replies that he should not give him the money, but he should “continue to safeguard it, awaiting the time that [the apostate son] might repent and return to the fold.”<sup>415</sup> He goes on to say that if the heir dies without ever returning to Judaism, the money should be given to his Jewish heirs. Or Zarua’s ruling that money should be safeguarded in case an apostate returns is a unique one, and was probably a way for the community to tempt this apostate to return to the community. It is not something any other *responsa* I have encountered have suggested.

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<sup>412</sup> The question does not make it clear whether she is a forced convert, but given the fate of the rest of her family, it is probably safe to assume that she converted to avoid her own death.

<sup>413</sup> Hayyim b. Isaac Or Zarua 139, p. 136-138

<sup>414</sup> R. Meir of Rothenberg, *Teshuvot Rabbenu Gershon Me’or HaGola*, ed. Shlomo Eidelberg (New York: Yeshiva University, 1955), no. 58, pp. 134-135.

<sup>415</sup> Hayyim Or Zarua, 91 (224), p. 173-174.

All in all, medieval rabbis wanted to prevent apostates from having access to the money that would be accorded them in normal inheritance, and they found multiple ways to prevent apostates from inheriting from their fathers, with very little dissent from other rabbis on the issue.

### *Business*

Hayyim Or Zarua also received a question regarding what should be done if one member of a business partnership converts to Christianity, and then returns to Judaism later. In this example, the business partners happen to be former spouses, and they worked together as moneylenders. Before the husband converted to Christianity, he had lent money to gentiles. Eventually, he returned to Judaism “after many years,” and he attempted to extract profits from those accounts from his wife. Or Zarua replied that the man “forfeited his rights to the property that was in the possession of L when he apostatized;” he goes on to give a more general ruling that would be useful for future cases like this one, noting if a Jew “used an apostate’s money for business purposes...[t]he profit belongs to the Jew and not to the apostate.”<sup>416</sup>

Hayyim Or Zarua was not always completely against the idea that money from the community could eventually be given to someone who had apostatized, but this was only in cases when the community thought that the individual might someday return to Judaism. He makes this clear in his ruling on a case in which a father gave money to another party for safekeeping, and subsequently died, but his son apostatized before he received his inheritance. The author of this question was unsure what to do with the

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<sup>416</sup> Hayyim Or Zarua 83 (190), p. 173-174.

money, openly asking whether it should be returned to the apostate. To this, Hayyim presents another nuanced answer:

There is a difference of opinion regarding property of an apostate. I maintain, however, that B should continue to safeguard it, awaiting the time that C might repent and return to the fold. It is not directly permissible for B to spend the money or seize it for his personal use. However, if B had already done so, it can no longer be exacted by judicial process.

If C had never returned to Judaism, but died, the money should be returned to his Jewish heirs, since it is the unanimous opinion of the Rabbis, that an apostate retains the power to transmit his property to his Jewish heirs. If B Wants to act with equity, he should return the money to C's heirs, after C's death, even if B had spent the money or seized it for his personal use.<sup>417</sup>

Despite how strict he is on other issues of apostates and inheritance, it is somewhat surprising to see him being a little more lenient towards the apostate in this case. Instead of simply saying that the apostate has “forfeited their right” to the money, and he does on numerous other occasion, Hayyim insists that the money that was left to “B” to safeguard, should continue to be safeguarded, just in case “C” returns to Judaism. He does offer a loophole though, when he suggests that if “B” has already dipped into the funds that were left to him, there really is not anything that can be done. Finally, even if C never returns to Judaism, his heirs should inherit the money – provided that they are Jewish.

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg also received several questions regarding inheritance and apostates, one of which is very similar to the first *responsa* of Hayyim b. Isaac Or Zarua discussed above. A riot had occurred, during which a Jewish married couple were kidnapped, and the daughter apostatized. The whereabouts of the married couple were unknown, but both had surviving brothers. The question asked who should inherit

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<sup>417</sup> Hayyim Or Zarua 91 (224), p 173-174

from the married couple. R. Meir rules, echoing the same language that *Or Zarua* used that, that “An apostate forfeits his rights as an heir, although he has the power to transmit his property to Jewish heirs.”<sup>418</sup> He goes a little further though, giving the daughter the chance to inherit, if she is a minor and returns to Judaism after reaching the age of adulthood.

### **Apostasy as a Bargaining Chip for Jewish Women**

While we have seen in multiple cases above that rabbis treated Jewish women who converted to Christianity with more lenience than their male counterparts when they wanted to return to Judaism, there is a small category of *responsa* related to conversion which primarily feature women: *responsa* that mention an individual’s threat to convert to Christianity. This is something that Paola Tartakoff has effectively described in the Iberian Peninsula in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, though she has uncovered several cases of women following through with their threat to convert to escape marriages or communities that are hostile towards them.<sup>419</sup> Conversely, in the *responsa* of the *Rishonim*, women threaten to convert, but I have not found any evidence of women going through with conversion after one of these threats was reported. Instead of going through with conversion, these women used the threat of becoming Christian as a sort of bargaining chip to control situations that women would normally be unable to influence. This is likely because, as we have seen, women in the community had a much more difficult time escaping difficult situations than their male counterparts, especially when it came to marriage. One excellent example of this is a woman who is in a marriage that

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<sup>418</sup> Meir of Rothenberg, ed. Agus, No. 686, p. 616-617.

<sup>419</sup> Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, p. 75.

she no longer desires to be a part of. While the ability for women to divorce their husbands greatly improved, especially in the thirteenth century,<sup>420</sup> it was still no easy proposition. Threats of apostasy are one of the few ways in which women could coerce the community into helping them out of an otherwise impossible to escape situation.

The first reports of this phenomenon begin to appear in the thirteenth century, when R. Meir of Rothenberg received two different questions that involved women who threatened apostasy, though in both cases the issue is only mentioned in passing. This is because in both cases, the women were embroiled in scandals and were left with very few options to escape them. These *responsa* focus instead on the scandal that the woman was trying to escape through a threat of conversion, and what punishment she should receive.

The first of these involved a woman who gave birth to a child twelve months after her husband had left on a business trip.<sup>421</sup> Various witnesses accused her of adultery, including some of the rabbis in the local community, who claimed that during the holiday of *Shavuot*, one of the rabbis entered her house with the intention of performing the *Kiddush* and found her with “gentiles, loafers, who caroused with her and embraced her.”<sup>422</sup> She also was adamant that she was not pregnant, even when she was well into her pregnancy. Eventually, she gave birth to a child that many of her neighbors were convinced was the child of a gentile. Things were so bad and the community had such a negative opinion of her that her own father appeared in the *Beth-Din* and asked the rabbis “to allow him to put his daughter to death by drowning her,” because she was “an incorrigible harlot who bore a bastard daughter by a gentile.”<sup>423</sup> The court was shocked

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<sup>420</sup> Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, p. 274.

<sup>421</sup> Meir of Rothenberg ed. Agus, No. 246, p. 283-285.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

by this and asked if he had considered some less severe means of getting his daughter under his control, and to this the father “answered that whenever he reproved her, she threatened to apostatize altogether and pleaded that she was not the first woman who ever sinned.”<sup>424</sup> The father notes that she even left the house several times with the intent of converting, but her mother managed to convince her to return home on those occasions.

In his response, Meir does not even mention the fact that this woman had threatened conversion and even seemed to be on the verge of choosing this route. However, he is very lenient with this woman’s situation, and this may in part be because of her threats to convert.<sup>425</sup> He argues that the testimony of the three rabbis in the town only count as the testimony of a single witness because they were all related. He also cites a Talmudic passage that notes that sometimes babies spend twelve months in their mother’s womb, and thus there is “no proof of her depravity.”<sup>426</sup> He does note, however, that if her husband believes these witnesses, then he is permitted to divorce her, even against her will. In this case, the woman in the situation is completely marginalized, and she has very few options to escape the fact that she has been ostracized from the community, as it indicated that only her mother still cares for her. Her alleged act of adultery and the bearing of a child of a gentile was enough for the community to completely turn against her. If her own father was asking for permission to murder her, it is not difficult to imagine the extreme anxiety that this woman was experiencing for her actions. Conversion, and the threat of conversion, were the only ways that this woman had to escape the scandal she was accused of. Unfortunately, as is the case with many of

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>425</sup> Though as we have seen in other cases, Maharam practices a great deal of restraint when dealing with women and apostasy, so it could be a further reflection of this trend.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 285.

these *responsa*, we only see a brief glimpse into the life of this woman, and the outcome of her situation is not recorded anywhere, though it is possible that Meir's diplomatic handling of the situation was enough to defuse all the hostility other members of her community felt towards her.

Meir also received a question from the Jewish community of Regensburg, about a woman named Leah who “rebelled against her husband,”<sup>427</sup> and when she was threatened that she would lose her *ketubah* and her dowry, and was told that her divorce would take years she “threatened, among other things, to go and live among the gentiles.”<sup>428</sup> The author notes that Leah's behavior is a bad example for the other women of Regensburg, who are already “arrogant in their relations with their husbands,” thus, he felt that Leah should be punished severely for her behavior, suggesting that they allow her husband to remarry but wait several years to grant her freedom from the marriage. The author wants Meir to let him know if this punishment is warranted. In this situation, the woman was in a marriage that she no longer wants, and while her reasons for wanting to escape this situation are unknown, her willingness to convert indicates how desperate she was. Additionally, the economic issues that would have affected her – the loss of her dowry and her *ketubah* – could also effectively be remedied by conversion. As we saw above, the Church had a policy of sometimes providing stipends for Jewish converts who found themselves in situations just like Leah's.

Meir replied that the punishment outlined by the rabbi of Regensburg is problematic, and noted that the punishment itself could lead her to apostasy: “we should

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<sup>427</sup> Meir of Rothenberg ed. Agus, No. 317, p. 340-341, p. 340.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 341.



not permit the husband to remarry before he divorces his rebellious wife.”<sup>429</sup> He finds a compromise that prevents the man from being married to two women at once, noting that the husband would only receive “a limited amount of money [from the dowry and *Ketubah*], and that they would issue a *Gett* that was effective for the husband immediately, but would take 12 or 24 months to go into effect for Leah. This means that Leah would not be left completely destitute, but she would still be in the position of an *Agunah* for one or two years. Meir even noted the possibility that this woman may have a reason to want to get out of this marriage when he wrote that “If, however, Leah had good reason to detest her husband, she should be dealt with more leniently.”<sup>430</sup> Despite the threats levelled by this woman that involved one of the greatest sins imaginable for medieval Jews, Meir continued his characteristic lenience towards women, practicing empathy and attempting to point out that perhaps there is a reason she wants out of this marriage.

This phenomenon continued in the fourteenth century, as Maharil also received a question that involved a Jewish woman who had claimed to have converted to Christianity but who had not actually done so.<sup>431</sup> He was asked what should be done about this woman, who, becoming frustrated with her marriage, claimed that she had converted to receive a divorce from her husband. Maharil responds that by claiming to have converted she did not actually transgress, provided she did not actually convert. He also noted that if the woman was as unhappy as reported, she should attempt to build a case for the *beth din* to force her husband to divorce her, depending on the situation.

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>431</sup> *Tshut Ya'akov Molin-Maharil*, ed. Y. Satz, Jerusalem, 1977, #76.

This continued to be a problem for the last of the *Rishonim* too. In the fifteenth century, Italian rabbi Maharik (1420-1480) received a *she'elah* that involved a woman threatening to convert.<sup>432</sup> This case shows that bad economic situations could also lead to a threat of conversion. The person who wrote the *she'elah* was a man named Hacham b. Yehiel Cohen, an innkeeper who lived in Pavia with his wife and children. He relates that things with his business are not going very well, and that his wife desperately wants them to give up on the business and move somewhere else. He refused her on multiple occasions, and this eventually culminated with her abandoning her husband and children to hide in the home of a Christian neighbor, where she declared that she wanted to convert to Christianity. Eventually, Hacham heard about this, begged her to return and she still refused. At this point, the Church became involved and the Vice-Bishop came up with an interesting solution. He wanted to make sure that she was converting for the right reasons, and concluded that she would be sent to a convent for forty days and decide whether she wanted to convert at that time. Hacham's wife agrees to this, but after only one night in the convent she returned home because she was fearful that she would not be able to return to living with her husband when she returned. Hacham's wife clearly never had the intention of converting, and was merely trying to find a way to convince her husband to move away and leave his failing business behind him.

If we expand our purview to also include rabbinic authorities in Christian Spain, there are several more *responsa* that indicate a similar phenomenon there, though the actual conversion of these women occurred more regularly there. For example, R. Yom

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<sup>432</sup> Joseph Colon, *Sefer She'elot u-teshuvot Maharik ha-yeshanot*, ed. Elyakim Shlezinger (Jerusalem: Makhon Torani-sifrutit Oraita, 1988) no. 160, quotes in English from Jeffrey Robert Woolf (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1991) p. 167-168.

Tov Avraham Ishbili received a *responsum* about a Jewish mother and her four children who all apostatized because they had been banned for five years from the town of Daroca for various offenses they committed against the townspeople.<sup>433</sup> Paola Tartakoff has examined many cases of women who converted in order to escape abusive marriages in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>434</sup> Sarah Ifft Decker has analyzed what she calls “creative manipulation of the law,” that she discovered through a close reading of Iberian *responsa*, where some men and women seem to have worked together to apostatize at the same time so they could both escape their marriages, and then moved to a different Jewish community where they could marry one another.<sup>435</sup>

Elisheva Carlebach has noted that later rabbis had to contend with this overly lenient stance towards individuals who threatened to convert. In Germany in the sixteenth century, people had interpreted Maharam’s *responsa* as indicating that Jews should treat those who sin leniently, lest they be pushed out of Judaism forever. However, R. Yair Hayim Bacharach pushed back against this, arguing that if sinners are not adequately punished then Jews behaved “contrary to their faith.”<sup>436</sup>

While in the *responsa* literature there is not any clear-cut case of a male either threatening to convert or actually converting to Christianity to escape the Jewish community in a manner similar to the situations discussed above, there is one *she’elah* that Maharam received that may hint at a similar phenomenon of men pretending to

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<sup>433</sup> Yom-Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, *Kitve ha-Ritba: Sefer Ha-Zikaron, Hilkhote Berakhot, Teshuvot*, ed. M.J. Blau (New York, 1963), #159

<sup>434</sup> Tartakoff, *Between Jew and Christian*, p. 68-75. See also, Tartakoff “Testing Boundaries: Jewish Conversion and Cultural Fluidity in Medieval Europe, c. 1200-1391,” *Speculum* 90/3 (July 2015), p. 728-762.

<sup>435</sup> Sarah Ifft Decker, “Conversion, Marriage, and Creative Manipulation of the Law in Thirteenth-Century *Responsa* Literature,” *Journal of Iberian Studies* 6 (2014): 42-53.

<sup>436</sup> As quoted by Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale), p. 31.

convert. In this *responsa*<sup>437</sup> Maharam is asked whether a Jewish man who the author describes as “...an apostate [who] later returned to Judaism, but not wholeheartedly...one of those despicable creatures who wander from town to town and alternately appear as Jews or as fanatical Christians”<sup>438</sup> can serve as a witness. In his response, Maharam recognizes the same type of apostate that the author of the *she’elah* referred to, noting “He and others of his kind call themselves Jews in order that people should give them food, and that they should have a chance to steal and indulge in their base appetites.”<sup>439</sup> Maharam does not practice the same kind of leniency that he did towards the Jewish women above who threatened conversion, but this may perhaps be because this individual is constantly converting back and forth. However, the reason he gives for this man appearing to be a Christian in one city and a Jew in another is that this man, and others like him, want people to feed them. While Meir does not seem to have much empathy, he does note that there are many other Jews who alternately claim to be Jewish or Christian for the same reason, which amounts to poverty. This individual, and the others like him, seem to choose whatever religion they feel will guarantee some charity for them depending on the city that they live in, by Maharam’s estimation. Like the women discussed above, these men were in situations outside of their own control, and they were using conversion as a tool to avoid potential starvation.

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<sup>437</sup> This *responsa* is also discussed below, in the section on whether apostates should be trusted as witnesses. The *she’elah* asks whether the man in question can be treated as a reliable witness.

<sup>438</sup> Maharam, ed. Agus, #253 (p. 289-291), p. 289.

<sup>439</sup> Maharam, ed. Agus, #253, p. 291.

## **Conclusion: Why are Men and Women Treated So Differently in the Responsa of the Rishonim?**

Overall, the rulings of medieval rabbis regarding apostates became increasingly hostile starting in the twelfth century. While Rashi was adamant that Jews who had left the fold “remained Jewish,” after the events of the First Crusade and the increasing pressure that Jews felt from their Christian neighbors, those Jews who had left the community, especially those who had done so willingly, came to be viewed more and more negatively. While Rashi considered these people to still be “brothers” of Jews, and left the door completely open for apostates to return to Judaism, many later rabbis only left the door ajar. Rashi argued that one could not lend money at interest to apostates, could still drink the wine of apostates, that apostates could serve as reliable witnesses, and was very forgiving when it came to apostates who returned to the fold, as he did not require any sort of special ceremony upon their return. From the twelfth century on, other rabbis disagreed with this approach, and in the end only allowed male Jewish apostates to retain their “Jewishness” when it came to needing their assistance to free a woman from being an *agunah*. Most rabbis ruled that since these apostates were no longer “brothers,” Jews could lend money to them at interest, that their wine and other food was forbidden, that they could not serve as witnesses, and required them to go through the same ceremony of conversion that was required of neophytes. They were also viewed warily by rabbis and by the community in general.

The same crisis that led to an increasing amount of hostility and suspicion towards male apostates, also led to a more lenient approach when it came to female apostates. Rashi was strict in his ruling that female apostates who had lived among

Christians, especially for longer periods of time, could no longer marry Jewish men in the community. He did allow for them to return, but they would be trapped in the status of an *agunah*, an unmarried and unmarriageable woman. While the events of the First Crusade and the subsequent increase in tension between medieval Jewish and Christians resulted in male apostates being viewed more negatively, female apostates could return to Judaism without having to worry about becoming an *agunah*. There were certainly indications dating back to the *Geonim* that *halakha* was often interpreted more leniently for the sake of women. *Geonim* and *Rishonim* almost universally agreed that formerly Jewish apostates could take part in the writing of a *Get* and in the ceremony of *Halitzah*, even though in many ways they were no longer Jewish. However, as I have argued, the rationale behind this was not only to preserve the “Jewishness” of these men, it was due to a fear that women would end up as *agunot*. Likewise, when it came to allowing women who had apostatized back into the community, medieval rabbis did some acrobatics with *halakha*, arguing that the ruling in the Talmud no longer applied to their own time, because Christians who hold women captive do not violate women that they hope to convert to Christianity. This resulted in some rather interesting cases, including several where Jewish women converted to Christianity, married a non-Jew, and returned to the community with their husband, who then converted to Judaism.

Rabbis treated male medieval apostates very differently than their female counterparts. Male Jews were viewed much more frequently as an enemy. This is likely because of the phenomenon of Jews who converted to Christianity and then became very focused on trying to bring about the conversion of the Jewish community. At the same time, women within the Jewish community came to be more safeguarded

and were given more rights within the community as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries wore on. Simcha Goldin has argued that this is because of increasing concern about the conversion of Jewish women, without whom there can be no Jewish future, since Judaism is passed on to children through their mother.<sup>440</sup> This same movement to try to increase the status of Jewish women within the community also resulted in an eagerness to accept Jewish women who had converted to Christianity to come back into the community, without it being necessary for them to go through any of the difficulties that were then required of their male counterparts. Indeed, previous rulings about whether women who had been captured by Christians could return to their husbands became more lenient, and they were more frequently allowed to do so.

Individual men and women who converted to Christianity appear in rabbinic *responsa* at very similar rates. In all, this chapter analyzed the cases of 31 individual converts, with 16 of them being male and 15 of them being female. These numbers are much closer together than the rate of conversion we saw in Christian documents.

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<sup>440</sup> Simcha Goldin, *Jewish Women in the Middle Ages: A Quiet Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 34.

## Chapter 8: Gender and Jewish Resistance to Conversion in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusade

### Introduction

In the year 1095 at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II gave an impassioned speech<sup>441</sup> calling for Christians to form an “armed pilgrimage” whose purpose was march East and assist the Byzantine Empire in fending off attacks by Muslim powers in the region. In addition to this goal, Urban also urged these armed pilgrims to make it safe again for Christians to make pilgrimages to the city of Jerusalem. While Christians had no trouble making pilgrimages to Jerusalem even after the Muslim conquest of the territory in the seventh century, in the year 1071 a new Islamic power emerged: the Seljuk Turks. Between 1071 and 1095 they had managed to capture all of Asia Minor from the Byzantine Empire. While it was generally Muslim policy not to persecute Christians, Jews, or Zoroastrians<sup>442</sup> the Seljuk Turks were less generous in practicing this tolerance than their predecessors. From a Christian perspective, this meant that the territory needed to be returned to Christian hands so that pilgrims could be protected. With these two goals in mind, Urban’s powerful speech motivated people throughout Europe to go east

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<sup>441</sup> There are four extant versions of Urban II’s speech at Clermont, and none of them make mention of attacking Jews. All four of these speeches can be found in *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S.J. Allen and Emily Amt (Toronto: University of Canada Press, 2014), p. 34-42. This includes the versions of Fulcher of Chartres, Robert the Monk, Baldric of Dol, and Guibert of Nogent.

<sup>442</sup> The idea of this toleration is even present in the foundational text of Islam, the *Quran*, stated most clearly in Sura 2, aya 62, which is translated by Muhammad Sarwar as: “However, those who have become believers (the Muslims), and the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans who believe in God and the Day of Judgment and strive righteously will receive their reward from the Lord and will have nothing to fear nor will they be grieved.” This policy had historical precedent as well, dating to the late seventh century text the “Pact of Omar,” which stated the various agreements between Muslims and *dhimmi*s (believers in the God of Abraham that are non-Muslim) under the caliph Omar. It included fair treatments of these people, but also contained some limitations placed on these people, such as not being able to wield swords or ride horses. For more see “The Pact of ‘Umar,” in Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 157-158.



and fight Muslims for the sake of their Christian brothers there, and to make pilgrimage to the Holy Land safer. This First Crusade would go on to be a success, with the crusaders managing to capture the city of Jerusalem in 1098, setting up several kingdoms along the eastern Mediterranean.

However, some Christians heard Urban's speech – which made no mention at all of Jews – and concluded that if they were supposed to go east and battle with and kill non-Christians, then those non-Christians at home should also be dealt with. Before the official departure date of the crusade, a group often referred to as “The Popular Crusade” or “The People's Crusade” departed. The people involved in this crusade chose to attack Jews, especially along the Rhine River. The most infamous of these groups was led by a man named Emicho of Floheim, who made a point of attacking Jews along the way. In all, thousands of Jews were killed during the Spring of 1096 by the popular crusaders. These events were harrowing for Jews in the region, who up until this point had lived fairly prosperous lives without too much hostility from their Christian neighbors. Jews recorded these events in detail, with three major chronicles of the First Crusade being in wide circulation during the Middle Ages. While there is some contention regarding the historicity of these sources,<sup>443</sup> it is unnecessary for us to get involved with that discussion

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<sup>443</sup> Robert Chazan has asserted that the chronicles can be relied on as at least somewhat representative of the events they discuss, since they are based on eyewitness testimony in *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, p. 41-44., this disagreed with an earlier assertion by Ivan Marcus, who, in his article “From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusading Riots,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), pp 40-52, argued that the texts are literary in nature and should not be assumed to be based on historical fact. Marcus wrote a scathing review of Chazan's book (*Speculum* 63:3, 1989, p. 685-688) in which he reiterated that Chazan's approach of the texts is problematic, stating that Chazan treats them as chronicles when, in reality “these texts are not documentary records...They are highly edited, rhetorically colored, and liturgically motivated literary reworkings of circular letters and oral reports...” Chazan has since responded by writing a book that critically analyzes the potential sources of the crusade chronicles in *God, Humanity, and History: The Hebrew First Crusade Narratives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). He also includes a direct discussion of Marcus' criticism of his work on p. 23.

here, as the texts are being analyzed to come to an understanding of how medieval Jews in Ashkenaz thought of conversion and gender. It is not necessary to prove the historicity of these sources if the text is examined in this way, because regardless of one's perspective on the issue, the texts reflect twelfth and thirteenth-century *mentalités* about forced conversion. These chronicles were a form of popular literature for Jews of the Middle Ages, and bolstered Jewish identity in a difficult time. The popularity of these texts allows us to use them as a reflection of prevailing ideas among Jews during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The chronicles have been translated into English in a critical edition by Shlomo Eidelberg,<sup>444</sup> and into German by Eva Haverkamp, who also reproduced the Hebrew from various manuscripts.<sup>445</sup>

Of the three chronicles, the longest and most detailed is the Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson, which most historians believe to be based at least in part on eyewitness accounts. It is over three times as long as any of the other chronicles. It was completed in 1140, about 55 years after the events. The text concludes with the words “Up to this time, in 4900 [1140], have I, Solomon bar Simson recorded this occurrence in Mainz. Some have questioned whether only the final narrative was composed by Solomon. At any rate, the chronicle has retained its name, despite some doubts about the actual author or authors.

Much more is known about our next author, Rabbi Eliezer bar Nathan. He was a

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<sup>444</sup> *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades*, ed. and trans. Shlomo Eidelberg (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1977).

<sup>445</sup> *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs*, ed. Eva Haverkamp. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Hebräische Texte aus dem mittelalterlichen Deutschland*, vol. 1 (Hannover, Hahnsche, 2005). In addition to providing both the original Hebrew and her German translation, Haverkamp also provides a detailed analysis about the creation of the chronicles, and provides side-by-side comparison of the language used in the chronicles. Her linguistic analysis of the text revealed that the Mainz Anonymous is very likely one of the sources used by Solomon bar Simson, and that there is a lost text “Phi” that the Mainz Anonymous was based on.

prominent Tosaphist scholar who lived from 1090 until 1170. He wrote many *responsa* and was well known throughout the entire Jewish world because he traveled a great deal. He is perhaps best known for his liturgical poetry. His chronicle was much shorter than that of Solomon; only his account of Cologne had the same amount of detail. However, Eliezer brought his skills as a poet into his chronicle, including five poems lamenting the events of the First Crusade. Despite its shorter length, Eliezer's chronicle was more popular than Solomon's, with four manuscripts extant, most likely due to the fame of its author.

The final chronicle of the First Crusade is that of the Mainz Anonymous, called "The Narrative of the Old Persecutions." So called because the identity of the author is unknown, and because the chronicle spends a great deal of time on the events in Mainz, the date this chronicle was composed is also in doubt. The name of the text implies a later date of composition than the other texts, which seem to have been based at least in part on eyewitness accounts. Within it there is an accusation of Jewish well-poisoning, an accusation that only became commonplace during the period of the black death in the fourteenth century. This strange episode notwithstanding, most scholars believe it was composed by the end of the twelfth century at the latest, still making it the most recent of the three major chronicles of the First Crusade.

Another chronicle discussed here is Ephraim of Bonn's *Sefer Zechirah*, which was composed at the end of the twelfth century or in the very early thirteenth century. Ephraim wrote about the events of the Second Crusade, which unfortunately also resulted in some attacks on the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz. Ephraim, like Eliezer, was a well-known figure in the Ashkenazi Jewish community of his time, and his chronicle was

also quite popular. Like his predecessor, he was well-known for his skills as a poet, and he included poems within the text of his chronicle in a similar fashion to Eliezar. While it related different events than the other three chronicles, it was very much a continuation of the tradition of writing about persecutions at the hands of Christians. It is also unique in the sense that Ephraim himself witnessed some of these persecutions when he was 13, something none of the other authors of the chronicles could claim.

All four of these chronicles went to great lengths to describe the efforts that Jews made to prevent themselves from being converted to Christianity. They all included instances of both men and women choosing to take their own lives and the lives of their family rather than allow themselves to be converted. Because of the inclusion of many women, it is possible to use these chronicles to determine what role gender played in the discussion of forced conversion, or at the very least, in depictions of it.

These chronicles have been the focus of intense research for over a century, and mark a particularly traumatic event in Jewish history. Some twentieth-century scholars of the crusades saw these massacres as a prelude to a traumatic event in Jewish history in their own time: the Holocaust, despite the fact that these events are separated by almost 900 years.<sup>446</sup> David Nirenberg has pointed out that some much more recent Holocaust historians frame the event in a similar manner.<sup>447</sup> While it is problematic to attempt to connect two events that are so far apart, clearly the massacres of the First Crusade are still a major part of the Jewish psyche. Yosef Yerushalmi considered the texts to be

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<sup>446</sup> For a discussion of this type of thinking, see Daniel P. Franke, "The Crusade and Medieval Anti-Judaism: Cause or Consequence?" ed. Alfred J. Andrea and Andrew Holt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015).

<sup>447</sup> David Nirenberg, "The Rhineland Massacres of Jews in the First Crusade: Memories Medieval and Modern," in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. Gerd Althoff et. al, (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2002), pp. 279-310.

unique because it was one of the few examples of Jewish historical writing in the Middle Ages, and he argued that the extreme trauma of the events led to them being recorded.<sup>448</sup> One of the overarching themes of recent research is the idea that the Jews were influenced by their Christian neighbors, and took action during these massacres in a way that was meant to directly oppose various aspects of Christian thought, while also conveying that Judaism is superior to Christianity. While traditional Jewish imagery is used throughout the chronicles, such as comparing those who died and sacrificed their children to Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, Christian imagery is also used by the authors of these chronicles, for polemical purposes.

Jeremy Cohen has pointed out that many of the characters within the chronicles are meant to directly counter important Christian images. He has argued that the way many Jews are depicted in the chronicles was intended to directly counter Jesus. For example, many of the martyrs in the chronicles were depicted as having their clothes removed and stolen, and the chronicles also made use of the image of Paschal sacrifice, which Cohen suggested to Cohen that for the authors of these chronicles "...the Jewish martyr, not Jesus, was the genuine paschal lamb..."<sup>449</sup> Meanwhile, some of the female characters are meant to directly oppose the Holy Mother Church and the Virgin Mary.<sup>450</sup>

Shmuel Shepkaru has argued that the crusade chronicles reflected a degree of Christian influence, because some of the Jews in the chronicle discussed immediate rewards in heaven for their martyrdom. This was what crusaders were awarded if they

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<sup>448</sup> Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 37-38.

<sup>449</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp.63.

<sup>450</sup> He discusses this in the most detail when discussing Sarah of Mainz. See *Ibid.*, p. 106-129.

died in battle. This was a way for the Jews who died to say that their way of martyrdom was superior to that of the crusaders. These chronicles were groundbreaking in their discussion of rewards for martyrs, as earlier reference to martyrs' rewards in heaven were vague.<sup>451</sup> Appropriation of Christian imagery is perhaps most evident in Xanten, where a rabbi delivered an impassioned speech about the material rewards that the martyrs would receive after they took their own lives or allowed themselves to be killed by the crusaders. Eva Haverkamp has effectively argued that Solomon bar Simson likely constructed his ideas of martyrdom in direct opposition to the Christian martyrs of the Theban Legion. One of the Theban martyrs, Victor of Xanten, had a tomb that was a major pilgrimage site within the city. She has argued that Solomon bar Simson wrote his chronicle "as a rival to the story of the Theban martyrs."<sup>452</sup>

Some work has already been done on gender in these chronicles. Many scholars have argued that Jewish women in these chronicles behaved in a way that defies gender stereotypes. Mordechai Breuer has attributed women's zeal during these events to the fact that they were unlearned, and made use of "ritual instinct" during the events. In other words, he has argued that women killed themselves and their children in a form of religious ecstasy that ignored *halakhic* norms.<sup>453</sup> However, there are some problems with this argument, especially because Jewish men, who were more educated, took the same kind of actions as their female counterparts.

Shoshanna Gershenzon and Jane Litman have argued that the Jewish women who

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<sup>451</sup> Shmuel Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 198-199.

<sup>452</sup> Eva Haverkamp, "Martyrs in Rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Theban Legion," *Jewish History* 23 (2009), pp. 319-342, pp. 334.

<sup>453</sup> Mordechai Breuer, "Women in Martyrologies [Hebrew]," in *Facing the Cross: The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography*, ed. Yom Tov Assis, et. al, Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001, pp. 141-149.

appear in these texts are completely “degenderized” and as a result there is little difference between the actions of men and women within the text.<sup>454</sup> While I do not disagree with the basic premise that women and men appear in a similar manner within the text, I think it is problematic to describe the way that all of the women are depicted within these four chronicles as completely free of gender stereotypes that were typical of the time period. While there are certainly some passages that indicate a very active role for women in the events of the First and Second Crusade and one can find specific instances of individual women appearing as somewhat “degenderized,” a close examination of the text and quantitative analysis of it reveals that women and men, when examined broadly within these texts, do appear to follow some of the gender norms of the time. Women appeared more frequently as passive in their resistances. They more frequently allowed themselves to be killed by the crusaders than their male counterparts. Men are depicted taking a more active role in their resistance. They are more frequently depicted as killing themselves, antagonizing the crusaders, or taking up arms against the Christians.

Ivan Marcus has argued that there are two different types of texts within these chronicles: martyrologies, and political texts. In the martyrologies, women are depicted as equals of their male counterparts, who can perform priestly sacrifices despite their gender. However, in political narratives men are the dominant figures.<sup>455</sup>

Susan Einbinder has perhaps done the most work about the way Jewish women are depicted during the massacres of 1096, though she bases her work on poetry inspired

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<sup>454</sup> “The Bloody ‘Hands of Compassionate Women’: Portrayals of Heroic Women in the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles,” in *Crisis & Reaction: The Hero in Jewish History, Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Symposium of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization*, ed. Menachem Mor (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1993), p. 73-92.

<sup>455</sup> Ivan Marcus, “Politics,” p. 45.

by the chronicles not on the chronicles themselves. She has noted that the role of women within these texts – especially in the chronicles of Eliezar ben Nathan, Solomon bar Simson, and the Mainz Anonymous, take on very active roles in their resistance to conversion.<sup>456</sup> While this is true to an extent, women do not seem to be completely free from gendered descriptions, although the chronicles do show women as uniquely active female martyrs.

Many scholars have discussed the various patterns of resistance to conversion in these chronicles. These four broad categories are: 1) those who died passively at the hands of the crusaders, 2) those who actively antagonize the crusaders, beyond simply refusing to convert 3) those who chose to actively take their own lives and in some cases the lives of their families, and 4) those who attempted to fight or kill crusaders or other Christians and lost their life in the process. My contribution to this discussion is a quantitative analysis based on the gender of those who lost their lives while resisting conversion. While women did at times take actions that could be considered more masculine than the norm in the eleventh-century Jewish community, a quantitative analysis of every individual mentioned with the chronicles reveals that for the most part, men and women behave according to contemporary gender norms. This chapter will examine how men and women behaved alone when faced with the “convert or die” ultimatum, as well as how they behave when they were in groups of mixed gender.

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<sup>456</sup> Susan Einbinder, “Jewish Women Martyrs: Changing Models of Representation,” in *Turn It Again: Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory*, ed. Sheila Delany (Asheville, North Carolina: Pegasus Press, 2004), p. 97-118. Einbinder also argues that these more active female martyrs are a short-lived motif in tales of Jewish martyrdom, and that by the time *Piyyutim* based on the events of the First Crusade were recorded, women in these roles appeared much less frequently.



## **Jewish Men Who Died Passively**

The first individual man whose name was specifically mentioned in Solomon's chronicle, is R. Isaac b. Moshe of Worms. Isaac, nicknamed the "uprooter of mountains, who had been seeking shelter in the bishop's courtyard in Worms, and when the crusaders managed to get into the courtyard, Isaac was mentioned as a man of "perfect piety," who "extended his neck and was the first to be decapitated."<sup>457</sup>

Other men described as dying passively in these chronicles include a man named Moshe b. Helbo and his two sons (Worms),<sup>458</sup> Samuel b. Naamon (Worms),<sup>459</sup> R. Yekuthiel and his son (on the road outside Mainz),<sup>460</sup> Yuda b. Abraham (Eller),<sup>461</sup> and Samuel b. Asher and his two sons (Neuss),<sup>462</sup> and "eleven holy men" of Speyer.<sup>463</sup>

## **Jewish Men Who Took Their Own Lives or the Lives of Their Children**

Other men took more active roles in choosing death over conversion. One intriguing example of this is another man from Worms, named Jacob b. Sullam, a man who is described as "not of distinguished lineage, and whose mother was not of Jewish origin."<sup>464</sup> Normally this sort of thing would be something of an insult, as his lack of a mother who was Jewish halachically meant that he was not Jewish. Jacob was aware of this though, and the last words he utters reflect this. Apparently, "He called out in a loud voice to all of those who stood about him, saying 'Until now you have scorned me, now

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<sup>457</sup> Solomon, p. 31.

<sup>458</sup> Solomon, p. 37

<sup>459</sup> Solomon, p. 39

<sup>460</sup> Solomon p. 47

<sup>461</sup> Solomon, p. 54

<sup>462</sup> Eliezer, p. 86

<sup>463</sup> Mainz Anonymous, p. 100-101.

<sup>464</sup> Solomon., 37.

see what I shall do!,' and he took the knife which he was holding in his hand and thrust it into his neck in front of all, and he slaughtered himself in the name of the Mighty of Mighties..."<sup>465</sup> Jacob, even in his last moments, wants to capture the attention of the other Jews, who have apparently scorned him his whole life, and proves his steadfastness in Judaism by taking his own life in a rather violent manner. This anecdote may have been included in the chronicle because it expresses a need for a unified front in the face of Christianity, even meaning those of dubious Jewish heritage should be accepted. Others like Jacob may well be willing to go to great lengths in the name of their religion. Indeed, after Jacob takes his own life, it creates something of a domino effect, as two other men who witnessed his death also openly announce their intention to kill themselves and did so. Jacob b. Sullam is similarly described as killing himself in the face of conversion.

### **Jewish Men Who Antagonized the Crusaders**

Other Jewish men brought about their deaths at the hands of the crusaders in a more aggressive manner, rather than just allowing themselves to be killed or taking their own life. Most of these examples involve an exchange of dialogue between the Jew or Jews who are being told to convert, with the Jew or Jews saying things or taking actions that would be viewed as blasphemous by their Christian captors, which resulted in enraging the Christians who then killed the Jew or Jews. Women appear in this role much less frequently than their male counterparts. One example of this is David b. Nathaniel the *Gabbai*, in Worms, who had found shelter in a gentile neighbor's home along with

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<sup>465</sup> Solomon, 37.

his family. He eventually realized that his death was imminent, and he asked the gentile neighbor to tell those assembled outside the house to come inside. A priest who was with the crusaders was excited about this, and assumed that this meant that he would convert along with his family. This would be an especially big victory too, because David was “such a distinguished Jew” according to the priest. The priest then assembled “thousands” of people to hear what David had to say. However, he shocked everyone assembled there by saying things that would have greatly offended Christians at the time, and antagonizing them:

You are children of whoredom, believing as you do in a god who was a bastard and was crucified. As for me, I believe in the Everlasting God Who dwells in the lofty heavens. In Him have I trusted to this day, and I will do to do so until my soul departs. Moreover, I know the truth: if you slay me, my soul will abide in the garden of Eden – in the light of life. You, however, will descend to the deepest pit, to eternal obloquy. To Gehinnom [Hell] are you and your whorson God are condemned, and to boiling excrement will you be consigned.<sup>466</sup>

Obviously, the Christians who heard this were outraged, and killed not only David, but also the rest of his household, which was likely David’s intention in the first place. In total, there are six men in the chronicles who take this approach. Other men who antagonized the crusaders are Abraham b. Asher (Worms),<sup>467</sup> Isaac b. Elyakim (Cologne),<sup>468</sup> Natronai b. Isaac (Xanten),<sup>469</sup> Asher b. Joseph and a young man named Meir (Trier),<sup>470</sup> and Abraham Yom Tov (Trier)<sup>471</sup>.

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<sup>466</sup> Solomon, p. 39.

<sup>467</sup> Solomon, p. 47.

<sup>468</sup> Solomon p. 50; Eliezer p. 85.

<sup>469</sup> Solomon, p. 58.

<sup>470</sup> Solomon, p. 65

<sup>471</sup> Solomon, p. 65.

## Jewish Men Who Fought the Crusaders

Some Jewish men did even more than antagonizing crusaders to bring about their death, and instead actively took up arms and fought the invaders to the death in order that they protect their homes and their families. This is another role that women very rarely appear in.

In the Chronicle of Eliezer ben-Nathan, the first named individual who lost his life in Worms is a man named Simha ha-Cohen. Simha was captured and was being dragged to the church and “he remained silent until he arrived there. When he arrived there, he drew a knife from his sleeve and slew a knight who was a nephew of the bishop. They immediately cut his body to pieces.”<sup>472</sup> While other Jews in the community were using their knives to kill themselves or one another in *Kiddush ha-Shem*, Simha chose to turn his knife not on himself, but on his Christian captors, even managing to kill one of them before he was killed in turn. Simha’s story is also told in the Mainz Anonymous, where he appears even more aggressive. Instead of simply waiting to draw his weapon to fight the crusaders follow the “convert or die” ultimatum, his actions are premeditated. According to the Mainz anonymous, he was even more successful in fighting them, too, managing to kill three of them.<sup>473</sup>

Other men whose deaths came about while fighting the crusaders during the First Crusade include Rabbi Kalonymus of Mainz,<sup>474</sup> R. Menahem b. David (Mainz).<sup>475</sup> The *Sefer Zechirah* also describes men who fought the crusaders during the Second Crusade,

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<sup>472</sup> Eliezar, p. 82.

<sup>473</sup> Mainz Anonymous p. 104.

<sup>474</sup> R. Kalonymus is described as putting on armor and wielding weapons in the Mainz Anonymous (p. 108), while Solomon bar Simson describes him as attempting to murder a bishop who had promised safety for he and his family but recanted on the deal (p. 44-46).

<sup>475</sup> Mainz Anonymous, p. 109.

namely Samuel b. Isaac (Worms),<sup>476</sup> and two unnamed brothers (Worms).<sup>477</sup>

### **Women Who Took Their Own Lives or the Lives of Their Children**

Women in these chronicles are less frequently depicted as active participants in *Kiddush Ha-Shem*. However, there are some women who willingly took their own lives or the lives of their children in the face of the “convert or die” ultimatum. It is of note that both the chronicles of Eliezer ben Nathan and Solomon bar Simson describe a woman as the first individual to take her own life during the First Crusade in the face of the “convert or die” ultimatum.<sup>478</sup> Neither chronicle offers any additional details about her woman, but both note that her actions served as an exemplar for others. There are no other examples of Jewish women who take their own lives during the First Crusade.

Like their male counterparts, Jewish women in the crusade chronicles also take the lives of their children. The most well-known and detailed example of this is that of Rachel of Mainz.<sup>479</sup> Rachel and her four children had managed to remain hidden for a time, but she eventually realized that they would not be able to remain hidden much longer. At this point, Rachel states “Four children have I. Have no mercy on them either, lest those uncircumcised ones seize them alive and raise them in their ways of error.” She then slaughtered her four children, with the chroniclers using language that evokes several important Jewish literary figures. This includes the biblical Rachel, Abraham during the

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<sup>476</sup> *Zechirah*, p. 125.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>478</sup> Solomon bar Simson, p. 22; Eliezar ben Nathan, p. 80.

<sup>479</sup> Solomon bar Simson, p. 35

*Akedah*, and the Mother and Her Seven Sons.<sup>480</sup> She then waited for the crusaders to come and kill her. While her own death was passive, she took an active role in ensuring that her children would not be captured and converted. Other women who took the lives of their children include Mistress Gentile and Rebecca (Mehr).<sup>481</sup>

### **Women Who Died Passively**

Women died passively more regularly than their male counterparts.

Sometimes, they are depicted doing so in groups. One group of women in Mainz is described as doing everything they can to avoid conversion after they are captured and the crusaders attempt to drag them into a church and forcibly baptize them:

There were other saintly women with them who also sanctified God's Name. These pure souls were brought before the churchyard, where the enemy attempted to persuade them to submit to baptism...the women refused to enter the edifice of idolatry, rooting their feet on the threshold, unwilling to enter and inhale the odor of offensive incense. When the errant ones saw that the women stood firm against the abomination, and, what is more, that they remained true with all their heart to the living God, they fell upon them with axes and smote them. Thus the saintly women were slain in sanctification of God's name.<sup>482</sup>

Many other women in the chronicles are described as dying passively at the hands of the crusaders. This includes Mistress Guta and Skolester (Mainz),<sup>483</sup> Rebecca (Cologne)<sup>484</sup>, an unnamed "pious woman," (Cologne),<sup>485</sup> Mina (Worms),<sup>486</sup> and "the daughter of a distinguished family" (Worms).<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> For more on this symbolism and how it relates to Rachel of Mainz, see Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 111-117.

<sup>481</sup> Eliezar b. Nathan, p. 85.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>485</sup> Eliezer, p. 85.

<sup>486</sup> Mainz Anonymous, p. 105.

<sup>487</sup> Solomon, p. 65-66.

## Women Who Died Fighting the Crusaders

Above, it was noted that all four of the chronicles applauded the actions of Jewish men who either sought to kill or successfully killed Christians and lost their lives as a result of this action. There is very little record of women taking similar actions during the events of the attacks on the Jewish communities during the First and Second Crusade. There are a few places where an argument could perhaps be made that women were performing a similar role. For example, in Solomon's chronicle the women of Worms who were hiding in the bishop's chamber, along with the men in the chamber, slaughter their children rather than allow themselves to be forcibly converted. Following this, Solomon makes a point to note the actions in particular of "righteous women" who were there, indicating that men did not take part in the actions which are described as "hurl[ing] stones from the windows on the enemy, and the enemy threw rocks back at them. The women were struck by stones, and their bodies and faces were completely bruised and cut."<sup>488</sup> This is the closest women come to actively attacking their attackers during the events chronicled in these texts, and it differs a great deal from the way that men who died fighting the crusaders are described. Many of the men who killed Christians went out of their way and performed a pre-meditated act – especially in the cases of Simha ha-Cohen and Rabbi Kalonymus. Those men are also specifically mentioned, and have a much longer narrative told about them, instead of simply mentioned as "righteous men." However, to some extent, it does seem like these women were at this point trying to inflict whatever pain and difficulty they could on the

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<sup>488</sup> Solomon, p. 35.

crusaders, in a similar way to Simha ha-Cohen and Rabbi Kalonymus, who knew they were going to die anyway and chose to attempt to take some of their attackers with them. These women had already sacrificed their children, indicating that they knew they had no hope of getting out of the situation, as this action was only taken by Jews when they knew they had no hope of escaping death or capture. So their decision to attack the Christians on the street below, after already accepting their fate, does fall in line with the way the men who died fighting the crusaders are described. In the end, though, there is only this one instance of Jewish women taking physical aggressive action against the crusaders, while there are several instances of Jewish men doing the same.

**“The Wives Are Inciting their Husbands to Remain Firm in the Defiance of the Crucified One”**

Solomon bar Simson’s chronicle includes one very important passage that directly addresses the issue of conversion and gender. In it, the crusaders complain about the difficulties of converting Jews, and blame it on their wives:

The enemies said to one another: ‘All this is because the wives are inciting their husbands to remain firm in their defiance of the crucified one.’ The officers came and each one seized the hands of the women, striking and inflicting wounds upon them, and led them to the idolatry in order to defile them. Then they ordered children snatched from their mothers’ bosoms, thereby fulfilling what is written: ‘Thy sons and thy daughters shall be given unto another people’ And the women lifted up their voices and wept.

If this chronicle can be taken at face value, this indicates that at least some Christians viewed women as more difficult to convert than their male counterparts, and



indeed, indicates that women were steadfast in their faith to such an extent that they could prevent their husbands from converting. Even if this passage cannot be believed at face value, it indicates that the author of the text, Solomon bar-Simson, wanted women to receive some credit for the events of the crusade, and indeed, he may have wanted this text to serve the purpose of strengthening the convictions of Jewish women in general.

Because of the defiance that these women have instilled in their husbands, the crusaders attempted to forcibly convert them and took the children of these women away from them. It was also revealed that the crusaders took some special precautions, for they knew from experience some of the things that these women might do in the face of forced conversion. They closed the well where they were imprisoned, so that the children of the women could not be thrown into them, and they did not allow the women to go anywhere where they might possibly commit suicide by jumping off a high structure. They also made sure that guards were with them all day so that they could not begin killing one another.

There are several other passages in these chronicles that portray Jewish women as the most aggressive in their resistance to conversion and in their willingness to die. In these passages, women's actions push men towards being more stalwart in their faith.

Another episode in Worms establishes women as especially pious in comparison to their male counterparts. In this case, men and women were together hiding in the gatehouse of the bishop of Worms' courtyard. Eventually, the crusaders found them there. The Jews there were in possession of a Torah scroll, and when the crusaders arrived they ripped it to shreds in front of the Jews. The women in the courtyard reacted to this

more quickly and zealously than their husbands, and urged their husbands to action:

When the holy and pure women, daughters of kings, saw that the Torah had been torn, they called in a loud voice to their husbands: ‘Look, see the Holy Torah – it is being torn by the enemy!’ And all the women said, in one voice: ‘Alas, the Holy Torah, the perfection of beauty, the delight of our eyes to which we used to bow in the synagogue, honoring it; our little children would kiss it. How has it now fallen into the hands of the uncircumcised ones?’<sup>489</sup>

Solomon then noted that the actions of these women brought about a response in their husbands by beginning the actions taken by the Jewish community with “When the men heard the words of these pious women, they were moved with zeal for the Lord our God, and for his Holy and precious Torah,”<sup>490</sup> implying that without the outburst of the women in the gatehouse, the men would not have responded as they did. The men all began rending their garments because of the destruction of the scroll, but their response does not end there. Eventually, they responded violently to the presence of the crusaders in the room:

They found one of the errant ones in the room, and all of them, *men and women* [emphasis mine], threw stones at him till he fell dead. When the burghers and the errant ones saw that he had died, they fought against them; they went up on the roof of the house in which the children of the Sacred Covenant were; they shattered the roof, shot arrows at them, and hurled objects at them, and pierced them till they were completely annihilated.<sup>491</sup>

The destruction of the scroll, coupled with the words of the women in the room, resulted in something that is rare in the crusade chronicles: the Jews attacked a Christian and killed him. This of course results in the eventual death of all those in the gatehouse, but Solomon makes it clear in this passage that the women are those who are most

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 37.

offended by the destruction of the Torah scroll, at least at first, not their male counterparts.

### **Those Who Converted During the Massacres**

While the chronicles primarily focused on those who resisted conversion, there are a few instances where those who converted to Christianity were discussed. Many Jews converted during the events of the First Crusade. It is best indicated by the fact that the Holy Roman Empire, Henry IV, issued an edict, against Anti-Pope Clement III's wishes<sup>492</sup> allowing "those Jews who were forcibly converted to return to their former religion."<sup>493</sup> Other records exist indicating that certain medieval Jewish converts to Christianity were converted during the Rhineland massacres in 1096, the most notable instance of this being William of Flaix, who went on to become a prolific writer and monk.<sup>494</sup> While there were brief mentions of those who were forcibly converted to Christianity within these chronicles, including entire communities, discussion of Jews who converted instead of allowing themselves to be killed or taking their own lives are very brief, and the majority of those examples involved the individuals committing suicide following their conversion.

One of the more prominent forced converts appears in both Eliezer ben Nathan and Solomon bar-Simson's chronicles, and it is an anecdote about a man named Isaac

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<sup>492</sup> As an Anti-Pope, he was very much opposed to the Holy Roman Emperor having any sort of say over religion, so his opposition of the policy of allowing Jews to return to their former religion was probably at least partly political. Clement wrote a letter specifically to the bishop of Bamberg voicing his concern over the issue. See *ASJ* 1:42 #42. The other pope at the time, Urban II, was silent on the issue.

<sup>493</sup> Baron, *Social and Religious History* volume 4, p. 106.

<sup>494</sup> For more on William, see Jessie Sherwood, "A Convert of 1096: Guillaume, Monk of Flaix, Converted from the Jew," *Viator*, 39 (2008), pp. 1–22; and Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Guibert of Nogent and William of Flay and the Problem of Jewish Conversion at the Time of the First Crusade," in David Engel et al. (eds.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 9–28.

the Levite who was forcibly converted.<sup>495</sup> In Solomon's chronicle, this man was forcibly converted in Neuss, while in Eliezer's, it happened in Eller. Apart from where his conversion occurred, they agreed on most points about this episode.

There was another pious man there by the name of Isaac, the Levite. He was subjected to intense torture. Seeing him in such pain, they profaned him against his will, for he was utterly insensible as a result of their beatings. He regained consciousness and three days later returned to Cologne. He entered his house, paused there a while – just an hour – and then went to the Rhine River and drowned himself...He floated on the water as far as the village of Neuss, and there the water cast him ashore, near the pious man, Master Samuel (see above), who had been slain in Neuss; and the two pious men were buried together, on the bank of the river, in one grave. They sanctified the Name of Heaven for all to behold.<sup>496</sup>

Isaac was converted while he was unconscious following extreme torture. When he regained consciousness, the first thing he did was go to Cologne, briefly visit his house, and then he chose to throw himself into the Rhine where he drowned. Eliezer makes a point of noting that even though he was converted, it was forced, and his actions were just as much of a "Sanctification of the Name of Heaven" as the actions of others. Isaac's body ends up washing ashore right next to the body of Samuel, who was slain by the crusaders near the banks of the Rhine.<sup>497</sup> For Solomon, this means that the death of Isaac was just as meaningful and holy as the death of those who were slain by crusaders instead of converting, and the case of Isaac, a forced convert who was so

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<sup>495</sup> Solomon, p. 50-51; Eliezer, p. 87.

<sup>496</sup> This is Solomon's telling of events. Eliezer's is similar enough I did not want to include it in the body of this work, the only major difference being that Eliezer leaves out the discussion of where Isaac's body ended up. Here is Eliezer's version: "There was a pious man there named Isaac the Levite, whom they subjected to great torture, defiling him against his will, as he was unable to resist, being senseless from their beatings. He later regained consciousness, and three days later he returned to his home in Cologne, lingered there a short while, and then went to the Rhine river and drowned himself."

<sup>497</sup> The discussion of Samuel ben Asher is quite brief, with Solomon only writing "The pious Samuel, son of Asher was there, and he and his two sons were slain on the banks of the Rhine." (p. 50).

distraught about his conversion that he chose to kill himself, is held up as the type of action other Jews should take should they find themselves in a similar position.

Other Jews are also describe as taking their own lives after undergoing conversion. Two men named Isaac and Uri are described as working together. Isaac converted without resistance, but severely regretted this decision. Uri, another individual who converted, helps him burn his house down with them inside of it.<sup>498</sup> No mention of women who converted to Christianity is made in any of the four chronicles. However, it is very likely that women converted alongside men.

### **Conclusions and Quantitative Analysis**

There are various categories that can be used to describe the different actions that people took according to these chronicles. The narrative of these varying paths indicate that, for the most part, men and women took very similar actions during the crusades. However, it is important to look at how frequently the authors used these various archetypes to create a complete, or at least more complete, picture of the way in which gender appears in these chronicles. Women may appear taking active actions in the chronicles, such as actively killing themselves or their children – just as men appear in these chronicles, but it is important to discover whether men or women appear more regularly taking these specific actions, and also to discuss in general, whether men or women appear more frequently within these chronicles. Through this quantitative analysis, a better understanding can be achieved than is possible through just pointing out that women appear taking similar actions to their male counterparts. It is important to

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<sup>498</sup> Solomon, p. 40.

note that due to the nature of these chronicles, it is difficult to argue that the numbers below are simply a reflection of the realities of conversion during the First Crusade. However, these numbers are at least a reflection of the way that the authors of the chronicles thought about conversion and gender.

*Who Appears More in These Chronicles?*

**Table 4: Male and Female Characters in the Chronicles**

<b>Chronicle:</b>	<b>Total individuals:</b>	<b>Men:</b>	<b>Women:</b>
<b>Solomon</b>	61	42	19
<b>Mainz Anonymous</b>	13	10	3
<b>Eliezer</b>	21	12	9
<b>Totals:</b>	112	70	34

To come to some conclusions about whether men or women were more likely to be resistant to conversion according to the crusade chronicles, I did a close reading of these chronicles, and counted each individual passage that told of an episode in which a Jew or Jews who died during the attack on the Rhineland in 1096. Then, I counted the number of passages that featured exclusively male and exclusively female Jews losing their lives, and the number of passages which featured a group of mixed gender losing their lives. I also looked for “countable individuals.” These are individuals who are either specifically named, or are occurrences when the author refers to a specific number of people of one gender or another dying. In total, these chronicles discuss 112

individuals who were either forcibly converted, had their lives taken, or took their own lives in the face of conversion.

Solomon Bar-Simson's chronicle has 43 different episodes involving the death of a Jew or Jews, within these, there are 78 countable individuals who resisted conversion in one way or another. Of these 43 passages, 17 (40.4%) of them feature only males losing their lives. 9 of them (21.2%) feature only women losing their lives, and 17 (40.4%) featured the death of men and women together. These means that in total, 26 (60.5%) of the episodes feature the death of at least one woman, while 34 (80.1%) featured the death of at least one man. In Solomon's chronicle, there are 78 countable individuals. Of these, 22 (32%) are women and 48 (68%) are men.

Eliezer ben Nathan's chronicle is much shorter, and as a result features only 16 passages relating the deaths of Jews during the First Crusade. Of these, 5 (23.8%) are about only males, and 3 (14.2%) are about the deaths of only females. The remaining 8 (50%) of the chronicle's discussions of those who died focus on groups of mixed gender. This means that 11 of the 16 passages mention the death of at least one woman, while 13 of the 16 passages feature the death of at least one man. There are 21 countable individuals in Eliezer's chronicle. Nine of them (38%) are female, and twelve are male (72%).

In the Mainz Anonymous' *Narrative of the Old Persecutions* there are 17 different episodes involving the death of at least one Jew. Of these, 5 (29.4%) of them feature males exclusively, and 4 of them (23.5%) feature females exclusively. The remaining 8 (47.1%) feature individuals of both genders. This means that of these 17 instances of Jews dying during the massacres, 12 (70.6%) feature women and 13 (76.5%) feature men.

There are 13 countable individuals mentioned in the Mainz Anonymus. Three of them (23%) are women and the remaining 10 (77%) are men.

*Is there any difference in the way their deaths are depicted?*

In addition to simply examining the number of men and women whose deaths are described in these four chronicles, it is also important to examine the *way* in which they died. Using the various categories outlined above, this type of examination can further illuminate whether the individuals described in these chronicles were “degenderized.” If they are, men and women’s path to death and the frequency with which those types of deaths occurred would remain more or less the same. Just as we did above, we will first examine these numbers in each individual chronicle. In Solomon bar-Simson’s chronicle, which features 43 different episodes in which one or more Jewish individuals are killed, all the different modes of death are present. It is useful to divide the types of deaths into two broad categories, as this can help us better understand how gender is depicted in these chronicles. Given the accepted gender norms of the time, women were thought to inherently be more passive than their male counterparts, so looking at these two types of actions in the chronicles can help us understand whether women in these chronicles are completely free of gender stereotypes. Passages featuring only men and only women taking these actions are examined, as well as passages featuring groups of Jews of both genders.



### *Active Deaths*

First, we will look at active actions taken by Jews in these chronicles. These types of actions all involve the individual bringing about their own death or the death of another, rather than simply being killed by the crusaders. The first of these categories will be that of Jews who kill their own family members to avoid forced conversion or death at the hands of the crusaders. Solomon includes three passages in which one or more woman kills their child or other family member to avoid their conversion, while it features five passages featuring men doing the same thing. This means that 33% of the time that women appear alone in Solomon's chronicle, they appear sacrificing their children or other family members and 29% of the time that men appear in the absence of women, they are sacrificing their children or other family members. One might think that women would appear more in this role, given their role as caretaker for the younger children, and they do, but it is not by an especially wide margin.

Another form of active death is the actual taking of one's own life. It does not matter what instruments or actions are used, but if an individual physically causes the loss of their own life, this is an active action. Solomon only includes two passages in which women take their own lives, while he includes eight featuring men doing the same. There is a much larger difference here, with only two women who take their own lives in the absence of males, and eight men doing the same. These means that when men appear on their own, they take their own lives almost half (47%) of the time, while women only take this action 22% of the time.

We can add to these numbers the passages in which men and women appear together taking these actions. In five passages, Solomon describes Jews of both genders

killing their children or other family members, and he includes no passages in which Jews collectively kill themselves. While it is important to note that men and women took some of these actions together, the overall difference between the two groups remain the same. Overall, in Solomon's chronicle, men took more active paths to their own deaths than their female counterparts did. But do these numbers remain the same in the other, shorter chronicles?

Eliezer includes one passage involving a woman slaughtering her own children, and four featuring men doing the same. He also includes only one passage of a woman actively taking her own life, and three featuring men doing the same. The Mainz Anonymous includes zero instances of women actively taking their lives, and one featuring a man taking his own life, and the *Sefer Zechirah* includes one passage of a woman actively taking her own life, and three featuring men doing the same. Men are described as taking their own lives half the time that they appear, while women are described taking their lives much less frequently.

### *Passive Deaths*

The other broad category we can examine is passive deaths. This includes any death in which the individual or individuals chose to allow themselves to be killed by the crusaders, rather than taking action to end their own life. In Solomon's Chronicle, five of the nine women or groups of women who lost their lives did so by allowing the crusaders to take their lives, while eight of the seventeen men or groups of men who lost their lives did so passively. There a slight difference when looking at the percentage of women and men who did this, with 80% of women choosing a passive route and 53% of

men doing the same. While this is not a massive difference, it does indicate that women in the chronicles could not completely escape stereotypes about women during the time period.

### *Who Resisted Conversion More?*

In the chronicle of Solomon bar-Simson, three different passages feature a woman or women explicitly resisting conversion in the absence of men.<sup>499</sup> 33% or one-third of all passages that feature a woman or women alone, feature the individual or individuals explicitly choosing to resist conversion through one mode or another. Meanwhile, there are six passages that feature men resisting conversion in the absence of their female counterparts. This means that 35% of the time that men are featured on their own, they are resisting conversion, indicating that for Solomon, resistance to conversion was not particularly gendered. When looking at the instances where Solomon wrote about groups of mixed gender who expressly resisted conversion, it only amounts to 17.6%.

This rate is not the same in the other chronicles though. As has already been noted, the other chronicles are much shorter and include much less detail, making it more difficult to get a complete picture about those involved. In general, Eliezer does not expressly note that individuals died resisting conversion nearly as much as Solomon did. In total, he only includes two passages where this is the case, and both feature men. The Mainz Anonymous includes one passage featuring a woman who is mentioned as resisting conversion, and includes two passages featuring men who did

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<sup>499</sup> Solomon Bar-Simson, p. 42; p. 46.

the same. The *Sefer Zechirah* follows this same pattern – only noting two examples of women who expressly resisted conversion, and one man who did the same. Resisting conversion is something that Jewish men and women did at more or less the same rate in these chronicles, indicating that the authors of these texts did not share the perspective of their Christian counterparts in the same time period – Jewish women in these incredibly popular texts are not depicted as malleable and easily converted, they are depicted as just as resistant to conversion as their male counterparts.

Additionally, while there are a handful of passages that relate to the fate of forced converts, none of these passages deal with women, perhaps supporting the idea that women were more willing to take their own lives rather than allow themselves to be converted. However, as we saw above, the paths that women took to their deaths most frequently was a passive one, while men more frequently took an active role in their death, indicating that to some degree, gender played a role in the way that women appear in these chronicles.

#### *Gender and Conversion in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusade*

While more men than women are discussed in these chronicles, women still have a very prominent role and their piety is elevated and praised just as much as that of their male counterparts. In some cases, they are even described as being more pious or stalwart in their faith than their male counterparts, encouraging the Jewish men in the community to follow their lead in resistance to conversion. In all three of these chronicles, women appear or are mentioned in more than half of the passages that discuss the death of Jews within the Rhineland community. Women had a prominent role in these narratives, and while not quite as prominent as that of their male counterparts, the roles these women

serve are sometimes of great importance. The clearest example of this is the woman in Mainz who is described in both Eliezer ben Nathan's and Solomon bar-Simson's chronicle as the first person to choose Kiddush ha-Shem over being murdered by a Christian or forcibly converted. In the narrative, this shows that all others who chose death during the Rhineland massacres were emulating this one pious woman. Other women are specifically noted for their great resistance to forced conversion, such as the women in Worms who were physically dragged to a church, but refused to go in so vehemently that they were killed by their Christian captors. Perhaps the most striking thing about these narratives of resistance to conversion, is that women are depicted, for the most part, as the equals of their male counterparts. Women are equal participants in the events at hand, this is conveyed especially well in the instances where men and women resisted conversion together by choosing to take their own lives and the lives of their children.

However, while it possible to broadly argue that the women who appear in these chronicles are elevated above their gendered stereotypes, a close examination of all the women who appear in these chronicles indicates that stating that the Jewish women who are completely "degenderized" in these texts is somewhat problematic. Women appear considerably less frequently than their male counterparts. Women do frequently appear as actively taking their own lives or the lives of their children, but they do so at a lower rate than their male counterparts do, and many women died passively at the hands of crusaders. Women also much less frequently antagonized the crusaders, and very rarely attempted to fight the crusaders, two things that men are depicted doing several times throughout the chronicles. These trends all make perfect sense when accounting for

medieval perceptions of gender.

However, on the whole it is fair to say that the women appear as staunch opponents of Christendom, who serve just as great of a role as their male counterparts. Any medieval Jew who read these texts in private or heard them read aloud would have heard tales of both men and women who are described as incredibly pious and are extremely active in their resistance to forced conversion, indicating that women's ability to resist conversion was viewed, within the Jewish community who read these texts, as just as strong as that of their male counterparts.

There are several reasons that women in these texts are such staunch opponents of conversion to Christianity. The first of these is that the authors of the text clearly intended to present the Jewish community of the Rhineland as a united front in the face of the "errant ones" who are intent on destroying them. Other scholars who have examined, specifically, the role of women in the chronicles, have pointed out that there are a great deal of similarities between the depictions of Christian and Jewish holy women in the same time period. Shoshanna Gershenzon and Jane Litman have specifically pointed out that certain images are evoked in the chronicles that would normally be preserved for men. One of these is through the constant references to the role of Abraham during the *Akedah*, which appears throughout the text in reference to both male and female Jews resisting conversion.<sup>500</sup> They have compared this with the fact that Christian holy women of the time period similarly were associated with masculine images in their actions, such as being compared directly to the crucified Jesus for their ascetic actions.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup>Shoshanna Gershenzon and Jane Litman, "The Bloody 'Hands of Compassionate Women': Portrayals of Heroic Women in the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles," in *Crisis and Reaction: The Hero in Jewish History*, ed. Menachem Mor (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1993), pp.73-91, pp. 79.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

It is likely that a combination between a newfound need to present a Jewish community that was suddenly under siege by its Christian neighbors, as well as an exposure to the religiosity of those same Christian neighbors, resulted in the women of the crusade chronicles appearing as active, daring, and willing participants in preventing their own and their children's conversion to Christianity.

## Chapter 9: Jewish Conversion to Christianity in *Sefer Chasidim*

### Introduction

*Sefer Chasidim* (The Book of the Pious) was composed by Yehudah ha-Chasid (Judah the Pious), the most prominent member of the influential *Chasidei Ashkenaz* movement, which was active from 1150-1250.<sup>502</sup> This movement stressed the importance of the Jewish faith in the everyday life of the Ashkenazic Jewry. Judah was born around 1150 in Speyer, a city that had twice been targeted by Crusaders in the half-century before he was born. Judah and the other *Chasidei Ashkenaz* were influenced by the reality of the tense relationships between Jews and Christians, which worsened considerably in the twelfth century in the wake of the massacres of the First and the Second Crusade, alongside the further development of the ritual murder myth. Judah wanted Jews to turn to their faith to help strengthen them in the face of the very real problems confronting Jews in Christendom.

Judah eventually moved to Regensburg, where there are records of both Jews and Christians admiring him for his piety. One Christian official, the Duke of Regensburg, actively sought his advice. While in Regensburg, Judah composed the *Sefer Chasidim*, which is a unique text in the corpus of sources created by medieval Jewish thinkers. Most medieval Jews who chose to compose works composed only very scholarly literature. That is primarily what Judah was interested in too, but the

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<sup>502</sup> While most scholars agree that Judah wrote the second half of the *Sefer Chasidim*, there is some debate about the first 152 passages of the text and who composed them. Ivan Marcus has noted that there is a great deal of interpolation in the text and that those passages need to be used with some caution as representative of German Jewry in the thirteenth century. See Ivan Marcus, "The Recensions and Structure of 'Sefer Hasidim,'" *Proceedings of the American Jewish Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978), pp. 131-153. Haym Soleveitchik has pointed out numerous linguistic and moralistic inconsistencies between the first and second half of the book, and has argued that there are at least two separate authors. See Haym Soleveitchik, "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: *Sefer Hasidim* I and the Influence of the Hasidei Ashkenaz," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92:3 (2002), p. 455-493.



*Sefer Chasidim* is clearly intended for a more popular audience. The massive text is composed of over 1000 different passages that primarily consist of concrete examples of things that have occurred in the Jewish community, and how Jews should respond when they encounter these issues. These passages are like the Christian *exempla* discussed above; they strive to make it easy for Jews to understand the important rhetorical and theological points that Judah was trying to make. While he makes references to rabbinic literature, he does not dedicate lengthy sections of the book on their interpretation, instead opting to focus more on helping Jews understand how they should behave in their everyday lives. There is some disagreement within the scholarly community about the level of influence the German pietists had on the Ashkenazi Jewish community. Haym Soleveitchik has argued that they were not influential at all, with their ideas never really expanding outside of the small community of pietists.<sup>503</sup> However, Ivan Marcus has argued that the pietists were quite influential, though the ideas of Judah the Pious and other pietists had to be reinterpreted and popularized by Eleazar of Worms.<sup>504</sup> Marcus' argument is supported by the fact that in 1538 it became one of the first Hebrew books to be printed.<sup>505</sup> However, regardless of how popular the text and movement were, most scholars agree, as Peter Schäfer has noted that *Sefer Chasidim* is "...a uniquely rich source on the spiritual and cultural life of Ashkenazic Jewry in Central Europe, particularly regarding the daily lives and behaviors of the Jews

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<sup>503</sup> Soleveitchik, "Piety and Pietism," p. 455-493.

<sup>504</sup> Marcus, *Piety*, pp. 109-130.

<sup>505</sup> Joseph Skloot, "Printing, Hebrew Culture, and Sefer Hasidim," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2017.

in the *Shum* communities, and not least, their lives in relation to their Christian surroundings.”<sup>506</sup> One of the issues it confronts is religious conversion.

The introduction of the book notes that it is for everyone within the Jewish community, and not just scholars since it notes that many Jews “do not know what to do and what to avoid and are unable to do their own research to learn how to do the Creator’s will.” While some Jews could dedicate their time to studying the Talmud and the works of Rashi, most Jews did not have the level of literacy or education necessary to do that, and some simply did not have the time because they needed to work to support their families. It then goes on to specifically state: “This is the reason that *Sefer Chasidim* was written: so that all those who fear God and those returning to their Creator with sincerity may see, know, and understand what they should do and what they should avoid.”<sup>507</sup> This makes the *Sefer Chasidim* something of a Jewish analogue to sermon *exempla*. The text was meant to clearly convey to the public the point of view of the German pietists.

Scholarly have done considerable work on the *Sefer Chasidim*, because it is such a unique text. Excellent critical editions of the texts have been printed in the original Hebrew and in English translation, making it easy for scholars to access it. It is difficult to find any book on the history of medieval Jews that does not make use of the plethora of passages on a variety of topics relating to daily Jewish life. While many scholars find the *Sefer Chasidim* to be a great treasury of information on thirteenth-century

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<sup>506</sup> Peter Schäfer, “Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages: *The Book of the Pious*,” in *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries): Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Speyer, 20-25 October 2002*, ed. Christopher Cluse (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), pp. 29-42, p. 32.

<sup>507</sup> *Sefer Chasidim*, ed. and trans. Finkel #1 (1); for more on the argument that this text was intended for a public audience, see Yitzhak Baer, “The Religious-Social Tendency of the *Sefer Hasidim* [in Hebrew]” vol. 3, p. 4-15.

Ashkenaz, there has been only one monograph written about it. Simon Kramer's *God and Man in the Sefer Hasidim* intends to serve as an introduction to the text for its readers, and argues that one of the central goals of the *Chasidei Ashkenaz* was to help common people better understand Jewish law and thought, and the *Sefer Chasidim* did an excellent job of attaining that goal.<sup>508</sup> Other monographs have discussed the pietistic movement that produced the *Sefer Chasidim*, and use it as an important primary source for understanding this group.

Despite all the work that has been done on it, until now there really has not been a sustained discussion of the way in which converts appear in it. Some scholars have mentioned certain episodes of conversion within the *Sefer Chasidim*,<sup>509</sup> but no one has analyzed the converts in the text as a single group. H. Soleveitchik wrote an excellent article on the themes within the *Sefer Chasidim*, but somehow managed not to mention conversion at all, despite it being one of the most frequent subjects of the passages in it.<sup>510</sup> Peter Schäfer has written an article on Jewish-Christian relations within *Sefer Chasidim*, and does spend a few pages on the issue of conversion, and uses the several passages on the topic to argue that “voluntary conversion must have been relatively frequent...” in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz.<sup>511</sup> Simcha Goldin has provided the most detailed discussion of converts in the book so far, when he spends a few pages of

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<sup>508</sup> Simon Kramer, *God and Man in the Sefer Hasidim* (New York: Block, 1966).

<sup>509</sup> Just a few examples: Irven Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages*, p. 261, which comments on the creation of derogatory names for converts to Christianity; Ya'akov Katz in *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* comments on an instance where an apostate is allowed to contribute to a Jewish charity, p. 75; Similarly Anthony Bale in *Feeling Persecuted: Christians, Jews, and Images of Violence in the Middle Ages* discusses another helpful apostate who runs into a burning building to save one of his former coreligionists' books, p. 180; More information on all of these passages can be found below.

<sup>510</sup> Haym Soleveitchik, “Three Themes in *Sefer Hasidim*,” in *AJS Review* Vol. 1 (1976), p. 311-357.

<sup>511</sup> Peter Schäfer, “Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages,” p. 36-38.

*Apostasy and Jewish Identity in Medieval Europe* arguing that Judah saw converts who attempted to return to Christianity as eternally “blemished” even after their return to the fold.<sup>512</sup> As we will see, there are statements within the *Sefer Chasidim* that indicate his concern about the convictions of Jews who returned to the fold, but he also expressed a great deal of ambivalence towards Jewish converts to Christianity and those who return. Sometimes the *exempla* are very stern in their portrayal of these situations, such as when he tells Jews they should not mourn the death of converts. Other times, the *exempla* seem to acknowledge that converts put great emotional strain on their former families, who desperately want to see their relatives again.

Judah frequently addressed how converts to Christianity should be treated by the Jewish community and whether they should be allowed back into the community. In this chapter I will provide an exhaustive list and analysis of the passages that mention conversion within the *Sefer Chasidim*. Because this text was as popular as it was, it serves as a good source for understanding how Jews dealt with the conversion of their former coreligionists, while also conveying the idea of one of medieval Europe’s most influential Jewish figures. Because of the case histories that Judah uses, we can also get an idea of some actual instances of how Jews interacted with apostates.

In total, there are thirty different passages within the *Sefer Chasidim* that address the topic of Jewish converts to Christianity, making it one of the topics that it most frequently addresses. In Avraham Finkel’s critical edition, he arranged the book into categories, which allows us to see how much of the book focuses on conversion in comparison to other topics. Only passages which address death and the afterlife, of

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<sup>512</sup> Goldin, *Apostasy and Jewish Identity*, p. 95-98.

which there are 42, appear more frequently than passages that deal with conversion or apostates, indicating just how pressing the issue of conversion was for Judah and his contemporaries. This indicates that Judah certainly viewed conversion as a problem, since he wanted to voice his opinion about the issue to the masses.

Examining this text through the lens of gender is not an easy task, as it is mostly just an *argumentum ex silentio*. We are not given the opportunity that other sources give us to examine enough sources discussing male and female conversion to come to any solid conclusion about how gender and conversion are related. *The Sefer Chasidim* makes mention of only one female convert, and she is mentioned as converting with her husband, without even a single detail beyond that. However, women do appear in the text in other contexts.<sup>513</sup> As is consistent with other medieval Jewish texts that mention converts, episodes featuring female converts are minimized. However, in examining all the passages in the *Sefer Chasidim* it is possible to come to some conclusions about how medieval converts were viewed by the pietists, as well as how the pietists wanted the general public to think about converts. Additionally, the *Sefer Chasidim* illustrates that there was a great deal of ambivalence towards Jewish converts to Christianity. Family members tended to stay in contact with their converted relatives despite prohibitions against it, and even Judah expresses contradictory opinions on how converts should be thought of and treated by their family members.

There are several different issues of conversion that are addressed in the *Sefer Chasidim*, and they are very similar to the issues we encountered in the *responsa*

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<sup>513</sup> For a discussion of some of the women within these texts and how they are portrayed, see Judith Baskin, "From Separation to Displacement: The Problem of women in the Sefer Hasidim," *AJS Review*: 19:1, pp. 1-18.

literature. The 30 different passages about conversion in the text are about forced conversion, repentant apostates, relationships between Jews and apostates, and the concept that apostasy could be a punishment for one's sins.

### **Forced Conversion**

Judah, whose parents most certainly lived through the massacres of the Second Crusade, addressed the issue of those who convert to Christianity under threat of death. He had a rather strict judgment regarding those who encouraged the community to convert rather than allow themselves to be killed, indicating that *Kiddush ha-Shem* is the preferred route one should take when faced with this ultimatum:

Some people who lead others astray receive their punishment after their deaths. This is precisely what happened to a man who served as the rabbi of a community. When the members of his community were offered the alternative of either converting or being killed, he advised them to convert and afterwards to return to Judaism. And so he and the entire community converted to Christianity. When things settled down, they all returned to Judaism. Nevertheless, since the rabbi had counseled his flock to defect from the Jewish faith, his offspring all became apostates, and he is being punished as though he was the one who had caused them to sin.<sup>514</sup>

While Judah was willing to forgive most people who return to Judaism, he was uncompromising in his opinion of those who encouraged people convert rather than take the route of *Kiddush ha-Shem*. The man Judah discussed would receive punishment in the afterlife, and his offspring were all going to be considered apostates

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<sup>514</sup> #615 (197), p. 349-350

due to his actions. Having your offspring declared apostates was a very harsh judgment, essentially banning the man's family from the community in perpetuity.

Judah also discussed other episodes of forced conversion. In one passage, he mentioned an event that very well may be something that happened during the massacres of the First or Second Crusades, though he is not specific about when it happened:

It happened once that the gentiles issued a decree compelling the Jews to abandon their religion, forcing them to baptize, to forsake *Hashem*, the God of Israel, and convert to Christianity. The Jews all fled from their hometown. Now there were a number of nobles who professed to be friends of the Jews. These nobles told them, 'Come into our castle. We'll protect you from your enemies.' When the Jews accepted the invitation, and entered the castle, the nobles killed them all.<sup>515</sup>

Here, Judah discouraged Jews from trusting Christians during these times of persecution, as they could very well betray you. This is certainly something that is discussed in the Hebrew crusade chronicles as well, which regularly featured both churchmen and nobles who at one moment are willing to protect the Jews, and in the next moment attempt to get them to convert. Between his disparagement of those who urge others to convert to Christianity to avoid death and his warning against trusting Christians, it is safe to say that Judah's preferred reaction to forced conversion was *Kiddush Ha-Shem*.

### **Repentant Apostates**

Judah also provided several examples of Jews who converted to Christianity and then later wanted to return to Judaism. Like the *responsa* literature from the same time period, Judah did not see those who want to return to Judaism in a positive light:

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<sup>515</sup> #628 (697), p. 355-356.

A man converted to Christianity. Years later he asked the Jewish community whether he could repent and return to Judaism. “But I am not a rich man,” he explained. “Since the Christians trust me, I plan to abscond with a large fortune, run away, and live as a Jew again.” The rabbi replied, “Since you want to rejoin the Jewish faith, don’t steal or misappropriate money from anyone, including the gentiles.” Another rabbi said, “He will be better off if we don’t advise him as to what we should do. Because if our recommendations [to return to Judaism] will land him in trouble, he will immediately tell the gentiles that he was acting on the advice of the Jews, and we’ll all be in grave danger. Therefore, let’s not talk to him at all.” What the rabbis feared actually came to pass. When he got caught, he blamed it on the Jews. The Jews narrowly missed being murdered by the Christians. To save their lives, they were forced to pay a large ransom.<sup>516</sup>

This man regretted his conversion to Christianity, and wanted to steal from the gentiles before he returns to Judaism so that he will no longer be poor. Obviously, a rabbi replied that he shouldn’t take this action, and another rabbi even said they should just ignore the question posed by this man because of the danger he could bring upon the Jewish community. It is unclear whether the rabbis replied to this man telling him that he shouldn’t steal from the gentiles, or if they just ignored him. Whatever the case, the man chose to steal and attempt to return to Judaism, but he was caught. Following this, the Christian community collectively blamed the Jewish community, and the Jews managed to save their lives only through a massive bribe.

Another passage within the *Sefer Chasidim* expressed concern about those who return to the Jewish community after spending time as Christians:

The prominent members and rabbis of the community know that there is an apostate in town who sincerely wants to repent. If he runs away from the Catholic clergy, the Jewish community will be imperiled, because the gentiles will say ‘The Jews helped him escape.’ In such a case, a repentant apostate is permitted to deceive the Christian clergy. He may tell them that he is going on a

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<sup>516</sup> #616 (198), p. 350



pilgrimage to a distant shrine. He may wear a crucifix until he leaves the area where he is known. He may do this so that the Jews will not be blamed.<sup>517</sup>

In this case, the man who converted does not intend to rob the Christians before he returned to the community, and he is treated much more leniently. This man was apparently still living in the same town he lived in before his conversion, but the rabbis recommended that he not return to Judaism within the town. Instead, he is advised to disguise himself as a pilgrim to get away from the area where he had lived, and once he encountered a new Jewish community he should return to Judaism there. Just as in the example above, the motivation for these efforts is to help the Jews avoid being blamed for this man's return to Judaism. This passage shows an understanding that Jews were not allowed to return to Judaism on a regular basis according to canon law, the Jews of Ashkenaz formulated a way around this, through deception.

### **Relations with Apostates**

Judah included several discussions of how Jews who converted to Christianity should be treated by their former coreligionists and family members. In one passage, he presented a lenient policy towards those Jews who want to return to Judaism.

Regarding an apostate that wants to return to Judaism, he noted that “[i]f an apostate returns to Judaism and takes upon himself to do *teshuvah* according to the instructions of the rabbis, then from the moment he commits himself to this we are permitted to drink wine with him and count him as the tenth man in a *minyan*, provided he behaves like a Jew.” This policy was typical of Ashkenazi rabbis, as Ephraim Kanarfogel has

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<sup>517</sup> #617 (198), p. 350

shown.<sup>518</sup> Allowing former Jews easy access to their old faith made it more likely that they will return to it, and the increased rate of conversion made it more important to accept Jews back into the fold. Immediately upon returning, the Jew was treated as a full member of the community; if he was not, he could not be counted towards the *minyan*, and his wine would be considered undrinkable.

In another passage, Judah discussed the general view of other rabbis that “apostates deserve the death penalty,” and confronted a question that was likely posed on a regular basis after people learned of this idea: “why is it that apostates continue living for many years?” Judah’s response to this was a simple one: “They are allowed to do their misdeeds, and they will receive their punishment in the World to Come.”<sup>519</sup> Clearly apostates are viewed as major sinners, and they should be thought of in the same way that those who have committed major crimes have, since they were deserving of the death penalty.

He also included several passages that indicate a complete rejection of the apostate from the community. In the first of these, he discussed what should be done if someone had a good interpretation of a Torah passage, but subsequently converted to Christianity:

If someone originated a novel insight on a Torah passage and subsequently converted to Christianity, you should not mention his name when you repeat the insight. And if someone does attribute the Torah commentary to the apostate, he should not append the phrase “may his memory be a blessing,” because if an apostate did a good thing, by rights you should not derive any benefit from it...If an apostate wants to build a synagogue or commission a scribe to write a sefer Torah, you should ignore him, and you should not accept his offer. And so it says, “Lawlessness has grown onto a rod of wickedness, [accept] nothing from

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<sup>518</sup> #622 (203), p. 353.

<sup>519</sup> #625 (408), p. 354.

them.” Sometimes a wicked man will do a favor for a righteous man, but in the end the righteous man will lose the equivalent of what he benefitted.<sup>520</sup>

Judah argued that no matter what an apostate has done for the Jewish community, their contributions should be rejected or erased. If they did something while they were still Jewish, such as providing a new interpretation of a holy text like the Torah or the Talmud, their contribution should not be noted after their conversion – and most certainly, the normal phrase *zichrono livrachah* (to his memory), should be left out when discussing an apostate. He also argued that if an apostate wanted to contribute or donate something to the Jewish community, their advances should be ignored or rejected. This seems to be over a concern that the involvement of this apostate with the community could lead to the “righteous” within the community becoming tainted through the involvement of the apostate.

However, Judah was somewhat inconsistent in his discussion of apostates, sometimes offering a more liberal interpretation that allowed for apostates to interact with the Jewish community. In one passage, he discussed whether apostates should be allowed to donate or otherwise contribute to the Jewish community, including a specific discussion of an apostate who wanted to help fund the creation of a new Torah scroll, similar to what Judah rejected outright in the passage above:

An apostate said to a Jewish congregation, “Hire a scribe at my expense to write a *Sefer Torah* from which to read in the synagogue.” Such an offer should not be accepted, because later on he may say, “Give me back my *Sefer Torah*,” and also, because the *Sefer Torah* would be a source of humiliation to the apostate’s family. But if most of the costs of writing a scroll were paid by the congregation, whereas the apostate contributed only a small part, then he may be allowed to participate. However, if there is a possibility that later on the apostate or his gentile heirs will demand the shared he contributed, don’t let him participate. Sometimes, an apostate’s family feels gratified [by his gift], when

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<sup>520</sup> #637 (938), p. 360.

people say ‘Although he’s an apostate, deep in his heart, he is still a Jew.’ If such is the case, his offer may be accepted.’

Surprisingly, Judah did not simply reject the idea that an apostate should be allowed to donate to the Jewish community, and he offered a very nuanced approach to this issue. He did not want apostates to donate an entire sum that leads to the creation of the *Sefer Torah*, but he was fine with them helping fund the creation of it, if the Jewish community paid the majority of the money towards the scroll. He also did not want someone to donate if they were going to have heirs who demand the return of their money after his death. While he did only allow for it in a very specific set of circumstances, he was still willing to allow someone who is no longer part of the community to contribute funds to help commission one of the most important items in the synagogue: the Torah. He even noted specific responses that people have had to the donations of apostates, indicating that he had encountered this issue more than once. He noted that some people, especially the family of the apostate who has remained within the community, were very happy with this type of donation, going so far as to state that the apostate is “still a Jew” deep in his heart.

In another passage where he expressed more ambivalence about converts, Judah answered whether Jews should pray for gentiles and apostates:

If a gentile did favors for the Jews, we may pray for the peace of his soul. Likewise, if an apostate did favors to the Jews, we may pray that he be judged leniently in the Heavenly Court. In this context, we read in the Gemara that Rabbi Yochanan said about Charvonah, “May he be remembered for good,” because he spoke out against Haman. But we should not pray for a wicked gentile or a malevolent apostate...If the father and mother of a tzaddik caused others to sin, the son should not pray for their souls.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> #633 (790), p. 358.

Again, Judah displayed a great deal of nuance in how apostates should be thought of by his readers. Here, he noted that it is perfectly fine to pray for “lenience in the Heavenly Court,” for those apostates who have done “favors for the Jews.” He referenced Rabbi Yochanan, who in the Jerusalem Talmud is quoted saying that Charvonah should be remembered in a positive manner.<sup>522</sup> Charvonah was a gentile in the Book of Esther who pointed out to King Ahasuerus that Haman had built gallows to execute Mordechai,<sup>523</sup> and most Jews of the time would have been familiar with him because he was mentioned during the celebration of Purim as a righteous gentile who helped the Jews rid themselves of Haman. Judah did point out that “malevolent apostates” should not be prayed for, but he does leave the door open for Jews to pray for *some* apostates.

In another passage, Judah wrote about an apostate who is depicted quite favorably:

It happened that on a Shabbat a fire broke out in the house of a Jew. An apostate who saw the blaze said to the Jew, “Hand me your holy books. I want to carry them outside and save them from the fire. “When the Jew did not hand him the books, the apostate took the books himself and rescued them.<sup>524</sup>

In this passage, a Jew’s house was burning down on the Sabbath, and because of the various prohibitions on the Sabbath, the Jew was unable to get his holy books out of the house.<sup>525</sup> An individual who was referred to as an apostate volunteered to help the Jew get his books out of his house, knowing that the Jew could not do so without desecrating the Sabbath. Judah stressed that this was permissible, given the

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<sup>522</sup> J. T., Megillah 3:7.

<sup>523</sup> Esther 7:9

<sup>524</sup> #635 (859/860), p. 359.

<sup>525</sup> Jews are allowed to violate the prohibitions of the Sabbath only over matters of life and death. While a house burning down is a dangerous event, if the man’s family was out of the house, it would have been a problem for him to re-enter the house to save some of his possessions, whether they are holy books.

circumstances. This passage displays cooperation and caring that continued to exist between individuals who are no longer Jews and their former religious community, even after their conversion. This is especially interesting because Judah also regularly writes about avoiding contact with apostates, but he is hardly consistent in his discussion of this.

Immediately following his discussion of the apostate who helped the Jew to save his books, Judah wrote about another apostate who was willing to help the Jewish community:

In the event of a *met mitzvah* [the death of someone who had no friends or family], if no one is willing to take care of the burial, but an apostate is offering to bury him, he should not be turned down. However, if the deceased has sinned so gravely as to be barred from receiving a Jewish burial, then the apostate should not be given permission to bury him. But if the apostate buries the deceased on his own initiative, we should let him have his way.<sup>526</sup>

A *met mitzvah* is a *mitzvah* that is of greater importance than most *mitzvot*.

One way we know this is that individuals who are *kohanim* (descendants of priests), are normally excused from any task involving contact with the dead as part of maintaining their priestly purity. This is not the case with the *met mitzvah*, though. Even *kohanim* are required to perform this if they encounter an abandoned body.<sup>527</sup> This is why it is interesting that Judah was willing to allow an apostate to take care of the burial of someone who had no friends or family. While he does stress that this should only be the case “if no one else is willing to take care of the burial.” He also stressed that someone who committed sins in their own life should not be allowed to be given a Jewish burial. While it is difficult to know exactly what prompted Judah to write about

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<sup>526</sup> #635 (860), p. 359,

<sup>527</sup> This is especially noteworthy because priests are normally forbidden from undertaking any task that involves contact with dead bodies, this includes not being able to attend funerals.

this case, it is probable that it originated from people who had family members convert and were left alone. Eventually, that individual would have died alone, and the apostate who was related to the individual would probably have asked to bury the individual. Even if the two individuals were not related, it is possible that they were friends before the deceased's conversion, and the apostate continued to care about that individual and wanted to bury them due to their past relationship, as it was unlikely that a random apostate would ask to bury someone that they never knew. In Finkel's translation, he has gone so far as to argue that this text "proves that we are not required to shut out an apostate completely and treat him as an outcast,"<sup>528</sup> as was suggested by some other medieval texts on the subject.

Family members becoming apostates also created various problems. One of these is that, generally, when someone is called up to read the Torah, they are referred to as the "son of" their father. However, Judah made it clear that if someone's father is an apostate, their name should not be used:

When a person whose father is an apostate is called up to the Torah, we do not call him by his father's name. If he is a bridegroom – and a bridegroom is called to the Torah on the Shabbat before the wedding – or if he is required to sign a document, he uses his grandfather's name. If both his father and grandfather are apostates, he is called by his great-grandfather's name.<sup>529</sup>

Judah stressed that the name of an apostate should not be mentioned, and instead the name of the person's closest Jewish male relative should be used. This was not an uncommon problem for Judah's contemporaries. This expressed a complete rejection of apostates as members of the Jewish community following their conversion.

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<sup>528</sup> *Sefer Chasidim*, ed. Finkel, p. 359 n. 18.

<sup>529</sup> #634 (791), p. 358.

In another passage discussing how the names of converts should be dealt with, Judah went a little bit farther, noting that they should be referred to “with a derogatory nickname”:

For example, if his name was Avraham [אַבְרָהָם], we call him Afram [אַרְפַּא, literally “dust” or “ashes”] or something similar. We do this even to a *tzaddik*, if the Christians venerate him – like Shimon Kipah<sup>530</sup>, who was a righteous man but the Christians appropriated him – venerated him as one of their saints, and gave him the surname Peter. Even though he was a righteous man, the Jews gave him the nickname of *Peter Chamor* (donkey).<sup>531</sup>

Here, Judah provided an interesting guide to how to come up with a derogatory nickname for those who have converted. In his example of Avraham, the *Bet* was changed to a *Pe* and the *Heh* is dropped entirely to transform the name into “dust.” This sort of name was chosen to indicate how little the individual mattered to the Jewish community, and may have even been used to convey the idea that the individual may as well be dead.

Judah also directly addressed the topic of what one would do when an apostate dies, which further establishes the idea that those who convert to Christianity should be thought of in the same way as the deceased:

We should not weep over the death of a Jew who converted to Christianity, and we should not eulogize him. Jeremiah says, “Do not weep for the dead, and do not lament for one who abandoned God’s Torah and became an apostate, for he shall never come back.” But if he repented before he died, we do weep for him. When someone converts to Christianity, he should be mourned as though he had died. After all, when a body is lost we mourn the deceased. Surely we should mourn when both one’s body and soul are lost.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> This is a term frequently used in Hebrew texts to refer to St. Peter. Interestingly, he is viewed as a *tsaddik* by the Jews, the only problem is that he is also venerated by Christians.

<sup>531</sup> #138 (191), p. 85.

<sup>532</sup> #138 (190,) p. 85.



Judah stressed that one should not mourn when a convert to Christianity dies, instead the time of mourning for a convert was immediately after their conversion to Christianity. This form of mourning should be the same as mourning for someone who had died because their soul had been lost due to their apostasy. While some of Judah's other passages seem to take the approach that Jews who have converted are no longer part of the community, this passage indicates that apostates were dead to the Jewish communities of medieval Ashkenaz, or at least that Judah wanted them to be.

Judah also used Gematria, a Kabbalistic technique wherein Hebrew letters are given numerical values to find hidden secrets within the text of the Bible and other important books, to provide some more insights regarding apostates and how they should be viewed by the community:

In the verse, “תוֹעָה, מִדְרֶךְ הַשְׁפָּל בְּקֶהֱל רְפָאִים יָנוּחַ--אָדָם.”<sup>533</sup> the phrase, ׀רדמ הוּת מדא, “a man who strays from the path” has the numeric value of 784. Significantly the word דמתשמ,<sup>534</sup> also has the numeric value of 784. In other words, a man who deserts Judaism strays from the path of understanding and will rest in the company of ghosts.<sup>535</sup>

It was common for Jews to use Gematria to attempt to better understand the meanings of words, and in this case the goal was to better understand what the Bible said about the fate of individuals who converted. Judah noted that the numerical value that this Biblical passage has and of the word *Mishtamed* are the same. This means that there was a hidden message behind the passage. For Judah, this was enough to indicate that the passage was meant to provide commentary on converts and their fate, even

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<sup>533</sup> This quote comes from Proverbs 21:16: “The man that strays from the path of understanding will rest in the company of ghosts.”

<sup>534</sup> One of many terms using the Hebrew root “דמש”, which has to do with destruction, that is used to describe a convert. *Mishtamed*, literally means “one who is destroyed,” showing on a linguistic level that converts were viewed quite negatively, as “destroyed” individuals following their conversion.

<sup>535</sup> #636 (938), p. 359.

though the verse itself did not say so directly. He has illuminated the hidden message within the verse for his audience. Those who converted to Christianity are doomed by doing so, and “will rest in the company of ghosts.”

In other passage, Judah elaborated a little bit more on what people should do when a member of their family converted to Christianity. Judah related a story of a convert to Christianity that is intended to warn people away from having continued contact with their relatives after they leave Judaism:

A young man mingled with the gentiles, adopted their way of life, and converted to Christianity. In an attempt to win him back to Judaism, his parents offered him large sums of money.

The rabbi warned them, “Stop indulging your son. You’ll come to regret it! Your wayward son will only get worse. I have heard that he is making plans to entice his brothers and sisters to mingle with the gentiles. I also was told that he brags that when he was still at home, he often threw pieces of non-kosher meat into the soup pot. Abandon this apostate son to the gentiles; and let him live among them rather than have him seduce others to sin and cause them to eat forbidden foods.” And so the prophets say, ‘Ephraim is addicted to images – let him be.’ Keep him at arm’s length rather than reach out to him. He will only corrupt others and get them addicted to worshipping images, God forbid.<sup>536</sup>

Once again, Judah addressed relationships between Jews who have converted to Christianity and their family that did not leave the fold. In this case, the family attempted to bring him back to Judaism by bribing him, but they are discouraged from doing so. Here, it was clearly stated that one must cut off all contact with their relatives who have converted, and “abandon them to gentiles.” Judah tried to scare people away from this practice by noting that in this case, the son was attempting to make the family sin in two separate ways. First, he discussed something that apparently actually came to pass – the son was putting non-kosher meat into the family’s cooking pot, apparently

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<sup>536</sup> #322 (188), p. 180.

attempting to get his family to violate one of the major laws of Judaism. The second thing did not come to pass, but he warned that if they continue to have contact with their son that he might convince them to convert as well. This is not dissimilar from the concerns of Christians that contact with Jews might lead to the conversion of Christians due to the “perfidity” of the Jews. This passage indicates that some Jews within the community were doing two things when their family members converted. They attempted to get them to come back to Judaism, and the other is continuing to have contact with them – even having meals in the family home with them – after the individual had converted. Both practices are soundly rejected by Judah in his discussion

### **Apostasy as a Punishment**

In addition to specific references to conversion, Judah also made several passing references to conversion when discussing other topics. We have already discussed two instances where this is mentioned, both involving men who led their communities “astray” when they exhorted the people of their community to convert under duress rather than allow themselves to be killed. Judah mentioned that these men’s family lineage is forever blemished for this action, and all his children are considered apostates whether he returned to the fold.<sup>537</sup>

In another passage, Judah exhorted his readers to avoid occult practices, specifically the “conjuring up of angels and demons or uttering magical incantations.”<sup>538</sup> He noted that one who does these things will inevitably “come to a bad end.” Instead, he urged Jews to trust fully in God, and not believe in these other

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<sup>537</sup> #628 (697), p. 355-356; #615 (197), p. 349-350

<sup>538</sup> #623 (205), p. 353-354.

practices. Later, in his discussion of these practices, he explained what he means by a “bad end.” He mentioned three possible punishments for these practices: “[t]here were many people who engaged in these things and many sought answers. They or their children either lost their money or converted to Christianity, or fell victim to cholera.” To frighten his readers away from such practices, he included the conversion to Christianity alongside being infected with cholera and losing all their money. This shows us in no uncertain terms that the conversion of Jews to Christianity was viewed as a great loss, on par with poverty and death from cholera.

Judah also includes an additional passage about how occult practices can lead to the conversion of one’s ancestors:

If a Jew converted to Christianity – not for the usual reasons, such as wanting to live promiscuously or wanting to indulge in forbidden foods because he was a glutton – then you can be sure that either he or his ancestors dabbled in conjuring spirits or in driving out demons through exorcism. The apostate was led astray, and the ancestor who engaged in these occult practices is punished for it.<sup>539</sup>

Despite the brevity of this passage, it contains a lot of information about Judah’s perspective on converts. In discussing “the usual reasons” one converts, he mentioned promiscuity and gluttony as common reasons for individuals to convert to Christianity. He does not acknowledge that one deciding to convert to Christianity for spiritual reasons is a “usual” reason for conversion, just like the authors of rabbinic *responsa*. While it is not clear what modes of conversion he was referring to as “not usual,” it is probable that he was discussing those who chose to convert to Christianity for theological reasons, something he viewed as an aberration that can only be explained by

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<sup>539</sup> #110 (204), p. 361.

looking back at the actions of their ancestors. He argued that either the individual who converted or their ancestors likely took part in the occult practices of conjuring spirits and exorcism. The latter of these was a common Christian practice at the time,<sup>540</sup> so there may be a direct correlation between one's belief in exorcism and one's decision to convert to Christianity.

Judah also addressed the topic of anger, stressing that he wants people to keep it under control because “anger gives rise to error.” He used the example of Moses, who once became so angry with the commanders of the army that he “fell into error and forgot the laws concerning the cleanings of impure vessels belonging to gentiles.”<sup>541</sup> Judah extrapolated this, and wrote that “it is forbidden to tear one's clothes or break dishes in anger.” He went on to state that one who does these things was “considered an apostate, because this is the way of evil inclination; today it [anger] says, “Do this,” and the next day it will tell you, “worship idols.” Judah saw anger as something that makes an individual unable to control themselves. He believed that too much anger could lead to someone becoming an apostate. This sort of passage would certainly have been a useful one for family members to refer to if they had someone in their family who had an anger issue, as the idea that anger could eventually lead to apostasy would certainly lead to the individual making more of an effort to control his outbursts.

Judah also discussed what the afterlife would be like, and took the time to discuss one event that “occasionally” occurs – individuals in *Gehinnom* could “peek through holes and cracks” into *Gan Eden*:

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<sup>540</sup> For more on the practice of exorcism, its origins, and where it fits into medieval Christian theology, see Francis Young *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (Cambridge: Palgrave MacMillan 2016).

<sup>541</sup> #322 (188), p. 180.

In *Gan Eden*, the righteous are sitting clothed in splendid spiritual garments enjoying many delights. The wicked are standing outside, looking at them from after. Unmitigated evildoers are not allowed to come close and have direct knowledge of the delights of *Gan Eden*. They only learn about it from hearsay. Occasionally, they received permission to surround the *tzadikim* and peek at them through holes and cracks, as it says, “The wicked roam on all sides.” And the *tzaddikim* looked at the wicked. If it would be painful for a *tzaddik* to see his son, brother, or other relative in *Gehinnom*, he may not come close to look at him. But there are *tzadikim* who are unaffected if they see their father, son or brother in *Gehinnom* if those relatives had converted to Christianity, because they rightfully belong there. These *tzadikim* may view their apostate relatives, as long as they are not saddened by what they see, because in *Gan Eden* there can be no anguish.<sup>542</sup>

This passage once again noted that there is an ultimate punishment for those who converted, an eternity in *Gehinnom* for being “unmitigated evildoers.” The fact that Judah wrote specifically about *Tzadikim* in *Gan Eden* seeing their relatives who converted to Christianity gives us an indication of why he was motivated to write this passage. We have already seen through other passages of *Sefer Chasidim* that people within the Jewish community often did not want to cut ties with their family members who had converted, or at the very least had a difficult time doing so. It makes sense that individuals who remained Jewish while someone in their family converted would be concerned about seeing their relative in *Gehinnom* during the afterlife. Judah tried to allay these fears, by noting that “If it would be painful for a *tzaddik* to see his son, brother or other relative...he may not come close to look at him.” So if it was difficult for someone to see the fate of their loved ones, they did not have to worry about it all. He also noted, though, that some *tzaddikim* “are unaffected” by seeing their relatives, especially in instances where the individual ended up in *Gehinnom* because of

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<sup>542</sup> #162 (1130), p. 103.

conversion. This was because those individuals “rightfully belong there” due to their conversion.

In another passage, whose main purpose was to encourage people to consult with rabbis rather than reaching their own conclusions about Judaism, apostasy of one’s family is mentioned as a punishment for failing to do so:

There once was a man who, whenever the word **היעשר** (the wicked ones), occurred in prayers, would skip it. For example, in the verse, “God watches over all who love Him; but all the Wicked he will destroy,” he omitted the word “wicked.” When asked why he did this, he said with excessive piety, “I consider myself an evildoer. So how can I pray for bad thing to happen to the wicked?” In the course of time, this man’s children all became totally corrupt and converted to Christianity. Scripture says of this man, “Don’t overdo goodness.” Now, you may counter, “It says that ‘God judges people by their intentions,’” and this man’s intentions certainly were commendable. Then why was he punished? He was punished because he should have consulted the devout and wise men in his town. They would have answered him, “Look at David. He had a bad son, Absalom; yet that did not stop him from saying, ‘all the wicked He will destroy.’” When people asked him, ‘How can a father who has a wicked son pray that God should destroy all the wicked?’ David replied, ‘I declare the praise of God. As for evildoers, May God do to them whatever He wants.’ By the same token, does it make sense for a person whose children are apostates not to recite the Birkat haMinim, the curse against apostates? Of course, he must say it.” Scripture denounces this man’s attitude in the verses, “Don’t act the wise man to excess” and “Don’t rely on your own understanding.”<sup>543</sup>

The main offense of this man was avoiding talking about God destroying the wicked. He reasoned that he, along with most people, were evil doers and thus could be counted among the wicked, so he felt that it made sense to leave this part of the prayer out. Judah claimed that this man is practicing “excessive piety” in his interpretation, and that he should have consulted “the devout and wise men in town,” and because he did not, his “children all became totally corrupt and converted to Christianity.” In addition to discussing this man’s specific case as an example of what could happen to

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<sup>543</sup> #638 (1013), p. 360-361.

someone by making changes to how they pray without consulting someone who knew better, the passage also concluded with an interesting parallel. Judah's other example was that of the *Birkat haMinim*, a curse against heretics. He noted that if someone had children who are apostates, they should still be reciting this blessing. This curse was vehement in its disapproval of apostates:

For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the Christians and the apostates be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with righteousness. Blessed art though, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.<sup>544</sup>

With this curse asking for the destruction of the apostates, it is understandable that some Jews who had members of their family convert would have a difficult time reciting this about their own family members, who they still cared about. This indicates that in addition to people like the man who chose not to discuss the “wicked” in his prayers, people were likely asking Judah and other rabbis of the time if they could avoid reciting the curse against heretics since their own children were among this group, and they would have had a hard time wishing for their destruction. So, this story both gives us an example of conversion of one's family as a punishment for not behaving in the way proscribed by the rabbis, and also gives us another example of a frequently recited curse against apostates that some people wanted to avoid reciting due to their personal relationships with some of the very people they are supposed to be cursing.

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<sup>544</sup> There are other forms of this curse as well, this version is from the Cairo Genizah, and makes explicit reference to Christians, and likely would have been the form that was used in Medieval Ashkenaz. The recitation of this curse was contentious in the time, and by the twelfth century Christians became aware of its existence, and it was brought up in many disputations as a point of contention between the two religions. Israel Yuval talks about the curse in detail, and the debate surrounding it, in Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 116-118. For a discussion of the origin of this curse, see Yaakov Y. Teppler, *Birkat haMinim: Jews and Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) and Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat Ha Minim* (New York: Oxford, 2012).



## Conclusion

It is difficult to comment on how gender affected the depictions of conversion that appear within the *Sefer Chasidim*. This is because all the examples of apostates within the text happen to be male. This means that the only argument one can make regarding gender in this text is through an *argumentum ex silentio*. The fact that no female converts are mentioned at all is certainly interesting, especially because female converts are found in plentiful numbers in many of the other texts we have examined, including Hebrew sources like rabbinic *responsa*. Juxtaposed with other sources, it is possible that the *Sefer Chasidim* intentionally leaves out examples of female converts, wanting to further promote the image of Jewish women as “stalwarts of the faith,” as we saw in crusade chronicles. If all the examples of specific converts in the text are apostates, it gives the impression that only men are interested in converting to Christianity, but this was certainly not the case.

The *Sefer Chasidim* does inform us about how converts were treated on a day-to-day basis more than any of the other sources examined here. Judah included several passages about cutting family and friends who converted to Christianity out of their lives, indicating that for many Jews, someone in the family becoming an apostate did not mean the end of their relationship altogether. Judah himself expresses some degree of ambivalence about apostates too, depicting some in a positive light, such as the man who runs into a burning building to rescue a Jew’s books, or apostates who are allowed to contribute to various Jewish charities. In short, *Sefer Chasidim* presents a microcosm of the way in which medieval Jews thought about conversion. They were badly hurt by

the conversion of their friends and family, so they create derogatory names for them or treat them as if they do not exist, but many still want to reach out to their old family members and not lose the relationship entirely. Even Judah, whose primary message seems to be to avoid converts, does not uniformly speak negatively of the Jews who apostatize.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion: Gender and Its Impact on Conversion and Its Depictions

Jews from all walks of life converted to Christianity in France and Germany in the High Middle Ages. While conversion had been present since the time of the Roman Empire, it became more of a focal point of Jewish-Christian relations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when papal-mandated programs began missionizing specially for the Jews. Through the examination of documents containing both imagined and historical conversion of the Jews, we find that Jews, both male and female, converted to Christianity for a variety of reasons. These converts were diverse, and thus any general statement about the conversion of Jews during the Middle Ages is problematic. Nuance is important in describing the phenomenon. In our historical sources, we find Jews who both converted to Christianity and resisted conversion under threats of violence. We also find Jews who converted to marry Christians, Jews who converted for upward mobility and for genuine theological reasons. Some Jews even converted to escape being ostracized by the community. This discussion of a wide variety of sources shows us that Jewish conversion to Christianity is not something that can be summed up by stating that “Jewish women were more resistant to Christianity,”<sup>545</sup> or “Jews were attracted to conversion primarily because of upward mobility.”<sup>546</sup> In the chapters above there are hundreds of individuals who encountered conversion to Christianity in one way or another, whether they voluntarily converted to Christianity or were given the

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<sup>545</sup> Judith R. Baskin, “Jewish Women in the Middle Ages,” in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 94-114, p. 107-108; Simha Goldin, *Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), esp. 26-37.

<sup>546</sup> Jordan, “Adolescence and Conversion,” p. 90.

“convert or die” ultimatum and chose the former option. With such a large number of individuals, it is important to remember that each of them had their own individual contexts.

However, certain patterns can be discerned and observed, especially when it comes to gender, but these patterns are not something that can universally be applied to each individual convert. Instead, these patterns give us a wider view of conversion, and give us an idea as to how medieval people thought about both gender and the conversion of Jews to Christianity, as well as giving us some degree of demographic and sociological information about these converts.

Gender played a major role in the way that some of these imagined conversions occurred, and had an impact on the way that more “historical” conversion was recorded. Christian sources emphasized Jewish conversion to Christianity in some of its most popular literature: sermon *exempla* and hagiography. In sermon *exempla*, Jewish women were the ideal converts to Christianity. Some converts are depicted as having a genuine epiphany that results in their conversion, while others convert after witnessing a Marian miracle. Meanwhile, their male counterparts follow a narrative wherein they commit an evil act against Christianity that, once reversed by a miracle, resulted in their own conversion. Meanwhile, while hagiography contains many Jewish converts, the Jews depicted within hagiography present something of a counterpoint to sermon *exempla*. Only men convert in *The Golden Legend*, and they are depicted in a much more positive light. This is due to a vast difference in the audience and goals of these two types of devotional literature: *exempla* were intended for the general public, while hagiography was something intended for a more educated audience. Additionally,

many of the stories of Jewish conversion in the *Legend* are set in the distant past, while *exempla* are set in the recent past. This difference in setting contributed to the major differences in the way these male converts were treated.

Christian canon law also presents something of a counterpoint to *exempla* while also agreeing with the general premise that Jewish women were easier to convert to Christianity than their male counterparts. There was a great deal of concern about any relationship that involved a Christian woman (whether converted or not) and a Jewish man, because the woman in the relationship was believed to be malleable and easily influenced by her husband. Meanwhile, Christian men were encouraged to stay in relationships with their Jewish significant others, at least for a little while, because it was believed they could convince them to convert to Christianity.

Papal documents present us with the most reliable Christian source of historical Jewish conversion to Christianity. This is because these documents did not typically serve a didactic purpose the same way that *exempla* and hagiography do. Many of them relayed rulings of the pope regarding various issues related to Jewish conversion to Christianity, and in some cases actual information about individual converts. Papal letters granting or requesting stipends or prebends for Jewish converts to Christianity provide the most detail about individual converts. Here we find both male and female converts, including women who seem to have converted on their own. Papal policy towards the Jews evolved with time as well, with early popes ruling more strongly in favor of Jews in cases of forced conversion, but by the thirteenth century Jews who had forcibly been converted were forced to remain Jewish. This in turn resulted in inquisitorial efforts that focused on converts who maintained some aspect of their

Jewish culture. Most of the individuals who became the target of the inquisition were men. From 1200 to 1450, there is only one record of a woman who became the target of the inquisition. This is another sign that Jewish men were much less trusted than their female counterparts.

Jewish documents also confront the issue of conversion with regularity, indicating anxiety about increasing Christian successes when it came to converting Jews. The crusade chronicles offered medieval Jews of both genders a model of how conversion should be resisted, depicting its heroes and heroines taking their own lives, the lives of their family members, or allowing themselves to be killed by the crusaders. They did all this to avoid being converted. Women appear in a very active role in these chronicles, but they are not completely free of gender stereotypes. Male Jews are depicted taking up arms against the crusaders, and they more frequently take an active path to their own death than their female counterparts. This does not discount the fact that women also took their own lives in these chronicles. When looking at all of those who resisted conversion in the chronicles quantitatively it is revealed that women still maintained some degree of passiveness as a result of their gender.

Rabbinic *responsa* frequently confronted the issue of conversion too. This is because it created many issues within the legal framework of Judaism. This was the most problematic in cases where a husband converted to Christianity without his wife. This gave the woman the undesirable status of an *agunah*, meaning that she was essentially not married, but she could also not re-marry. Most rabbinic authorities did everything they could to help prevent women from slipping into this state, in part due to a fear that the woman might also convert because of it. As the Middle Ages wore on, it

became more difficult for men who had converted to re-enter the Jewish community, but it never became more difficult for their female counterparts. This is because women were valued highly within the community as the conduits of Judaism, and indeed, much of the halakhic discussion about what ceremonies male converts could take part in revolved around the desire to help prevent women from becoming *agunot*. Men could formally divorce their wives and take part in the ceremony of *halitzah* even though they had left the community. Moreover, while we know that Jewish women converted to Christianity too, rabbinic literature is almost silent on the issue, only discussing those women who were forcibly converted and held captive. Like the crusade chronicles, *responsa* wanted to preserve the image of women as defiant in the face of forced conversion. Rabbinic *responsa* also helped further establish the various difficulties that families went through when their loved ones converted. Many Jews struggled with the idea of not mourning the loss of a loved one who had converted or completely severing them from the community.

The *Sefer Chasidim* continues this trend of suppressing the discussion of Jewish women who converted to Christianity. Even though he discussed various aspects of conversion at length within his book, Judah ha-Chasid mentioned only one woman who converted to Christianity, and she did so with her husband. The *Sefer Chasidim* offers us more information about relationships between converts and their families that remained Jewish, frequently discussing why people should not stay in contact with their family members who apostatized.

Throughout this dissertation, I have provided statistics and demography about converts or those who resisted conversion. However, thus far I have discussed these

numbers only within the specific type of document that the chapter analyzed. In this conclusion, I am going to analyze the different types of documents against one another. This bird's eye view of Jewish conversion to Christianity in the High Middle Ages forms what I hope is a useful baseline for future studies of Jewish conversion to Christianity. The application of some of the tools from gender studies allowed some new observations about Jewish conversion to Christianity in the Middle Ages, and I think the continued use of those tools is necessary to arrive at the most nuanced discussion of conversion as possible. In the chapters above, the quantitative analysis focused some on the raw numbers and on the gender of the converts, but also discussed the ways that these converts, or those who resisted conversion, appeared based on their gender. While this nuanced discussion is the most important in helping us understand medieval ideas about gender and conversion, discussing the number of individual converts and their gender can be useful in helping us to establish a demographic baseline for future studies on the topic.

**Table 5: Rate of Jewish Conversion to Christianity, 1095-1450**

	<b>Total Converts</b>	<b>Jewish Sources</b>	<b>Christian Sources</b>
	308	171	137
Male	222	122	100
Female	86	49	37

This dissertation examined the cases of 308 converts, or those who resisted conversion, between 1096 and 1400 – that is, converts who are mentioned by name or in specific enough language to be sure of their gender and number. Some of these



converts were at least semi-fictional, such as the 21 in sermon *exempla* and the 24 in the *Golden Legend*. However, there are 92 individual converts mentioned in papal documents during the time period, and these individuals' existence is much more certain. Overall, this dissertation examined the cases of 137 individual converts to Christianity in Christian documents. If we include the semi-fictional sources, 100 (72%) of these converts were male, while 37 (28%) were female. 171 converts or individuals who encountered conversion appeared in the Jewish sources examined above. 122 (71%) of them were male, and 49 (39%) of them were female. Overall, of the 308 total converts whose cases were discussed above, 222 of them were male (72%), and 86 (28%) were female. While there are some types of sources that skew the results in one way or another – such as the *Sefer Hasidim* which mentions only one female convert, and the *Golden Legend* which doesn't mention any female converts, the fact that the percentage of converts who were women is roughly the same across such a broad variety of sources, and despite other differences that exist in the way that Jewish converts are depicted by both Jews and Christians, means that the number presented here may present reliable demographic information on the rate at which Jewish men and women encountered the issue of conversion in the Middle Ages.

It is also worth examining who is described as resisting conversion more frequently, to examine whether Jewish women were the stalwarts of the faith they were held up as by Jewish authors. This is something we encountered in crusade chronicles, where almost all the individuals featured in them were resisting conversion. The only individuals in the chronicles that are mentioned as forcibly converting are males. Overall, the chronicles feature 33 women who resist Christianity by losing their life in

one mode or another, and 75 men. This still leaves women far behind their male counterparts in terms of numbers, and while there are men who convert in the chronicles, which technically means that a greater percentage of men than women converted, it is not in significant enough of numbers to indicate a major difference between the two.

While women were certainly in the minority as converts to Christianity, almost one third of the converts examined in this dissertation were female. They were not some small, statistically insignificant portion of converts to Christianity. Even Jewish sources mentioned female converts to Christianity, though they do minimize discussion about female converts who willingly converted, instead focusing primarily on those who were kidnapped or otherwise forcibly converted. While women may have been more stalwart in their refusal to convert to Christianity, and their male counterparts were more willing to convert, this does not mean that no women converted willingly or otherwise during the Middle Ages.

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