

## The Trial of the Talmud: Paris, 1240

By the early thirteenth century, European Jewish life was firmly rooted in the directives and doctrines of the Babylonian Talmud. Likewise by the early thirteenth century, the Catholic Church had become extremely powerful and was committed to exerting the fullest possible control over western Christendom. It was also increasingly well informed about Judaism and its Talmud, largely through learned converts. Initially, knowledge of the Talmud was used to mock Jews for their purported lack of religious sophistication. In 1236, however, an apostate named Nicholas Donin appeared at the court of Pope Gregory IX, claiming that the Talmud was much worse than simply foolish. Donin argued that, for many reasons, the Talmud was in fact harmful and thus intolerable in a Christian society. Pope Gregory sent Donin off throughout Europe in 1239 with a message to secular authorities and leading clergy: The allegations of Nicholas Donin were to be carefully investigated, and – if substantiated – the Talmud was to be destroyed and Jews were to be prohibited from using it.

Only one European ruler acted on the papal injunction, and that was the pious King Louis IX of France, who convened a trial of the Talmud in Paris. This unprecedented trial of the Talmud is richly reflected in a variety of sources – both Christian and Jewish – that are offered in English translation in this volume. From these diverse sources emerges a dramatic portrait of Christian accusations against the Talmud and Jewish rebuttals. While the Talmud was condemned by the Paris court and burned in large quantities, eventually Pope Gregory's successor modified the Paris findings and ordered that the Talmud simply be censored, with the offending passages removed. Thus, a major catastrophe for European Jewry was averted, and Europe's Jews could continue to ground their religious lives in talmudic ordinances and teachings.

# Mediaeval Sources in Translation

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MEDIAEVAL SOURCES IN TRANSLATION 53

# The Trial of the Talmud

## Paris, 1240

*Hebrew texts translated by*

JOHN FRIEDMAN

*Latin texts translated by*

JEAN CONNELL HOFF

*Historical essay by*

ROBERT CHAZAN



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## Preface

The trial and condemnation of the Talmud in Paris in 1240 was a truly frightening experience for the Jews of northern France and, in fact, for all the Jews of western Christendom. For the young Jewish communities of Christian Europe, the Talmud was the backbone of their Jewish existence. Now, for the first time, Christian Europe was introduced to the Talmud as an intolerable document via a convert from Judaism to Christianity, and the Talmud was in danger of disappearing from European Jewish life altogether. The Talmud was in fact officially condemned by the Paris jury in 1240, was publicly burned by the French authorities, and was formally prohibited by these same authorities. Had this stance been sustained by other European rulers, Jewish life would have come to an end in medieval Europe. Fortunately for ongoing Jewish existence in Christian Europe, Jewish leaders stepped in and convinced Pope Innocent IV that outlawing the Talmud, and the resultant prohibition of Judaism altogether, contravened fundamental Church policy and was thus illegitimate. Convinced by this argument, Pope Innocent IV altered the findings of the Paris jury and ordered censorship of the Talmud instead of outright prohibition. To be sure, censorship affected the future of the Talmud in the Christian West, as passages were excised in manuscripts and later in printed editions, but a censored Talmud was far better than no Talmud at all.

The sources for this harrowing and influential incident have long been known to the scholarly community but have not been available to a broader audience. This lacuna is addressed in the present volume, in which the relevant Christian and Jewish texts have been assembled and translated. We are very fortunate in having John Friedman's translation of the Disputation of Rabbi Yehiel and his fresh translation of Meir of Rothenberg's dirge. To these have now been added the Christian evidence: Latin letters, accusations, and confessions, translated by Jean Hoff. Both translators have worked through extremely difficult texts and provided lucid and accessible modern English versions: my warmest commendations to them. I am also grateful to Jean for her insight and for her many valuable comments on my essay and to Stephen Shapiro for the meticu-

lous and thoughtful copyediting he has provided. My deepest appreciation to Fred Unwalla at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, who has shepherded this complex volume through to publication with patience, sympathy, and intelligent understanding.

ROBERT CHAZAN  
*New York University*

This volume had its origins while I was preparing to teach a course on Jews in medieval Europe some years ago. In reviewing the materials relating to the infamous trial and condemnation of the Talmud in Paris in 1240, I discovered that the principal Hebrew source was not available in a modern translation. *The Disputation of Rabbi Yehiel of Paris* presented here was the happy result. In my translation of the Hebrew narrative I have sought to provide a rendition that will be useful to undergraduate classes, graduate seminars, and scholars working in English. Not only does the original work require proficient skill in rabbinic Hebrew, but it also demands familiarity with a wide variety of biblical and rabbinic sources. Only a thoroughly annotated translation identifying sources can do some justice to the text and at the same time prove an adequate resource for the university classroom.

Some might argue that the Hebrew report of the 1240 Disputation cannot be adequately translated, due to the extensive *melitza* (the use of biblical, rabbinic, and post-rabbinic quotations and references for rhetorical purposes). To be sure, this rhetorical style does present difficulties, and it is certain that all texts are best understood in the language of their composition; yet it is translation that provides readers with a window onto an otherwise unknown historical source. While reading this translation in English will not convey to students all the nuances of the original Hebrew, it can, especially with guidance, provide them with an ample understanding of the text and its contexts.

In the appendix to this volume, I have translated a second, related work: Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg's dirge on the burning of the Talmuds of thirteenth-century France by King Louis IX. Although my translation was carried out independently, I wish to acknowledge here the version of the dirge found in Susan Einbinder's *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* (Princeton, 2002).

I express my deepest thanks to the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University, whose Daniel Jeremy Silver Fellowship supported me during this



work; to the Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, North Carolina, which I have served for thirty years, for affording me periodic months of sabbatical time and constantly encouraging my intellectual life; to Susan Einbinder of my alma mater, the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, whose guidance was invaluable; to Kalman Bland of Duke University, without whose confidence and encouragement I could not have undertaken this work; to my ever insightful friend Joshua Weinstein, who helped me solve many difficult translation problems; and to Irit Kleiman of Boston University for her help with Old French. Thanks also to George Gopen and Ellen Mickiewicz of Duke for their insights. Finally, I am honored that Robert Chazan agreed, graciously and enthusiastically, to write the introduction to this volume: his masterly essay on the fate of the Talmud in medieval Europe distils a lifetime of work and should prove invaluable to scholars and students alike. And most important: deepest appreciation to my wife Nan, without whose love and sustenance I would never have begun this work.

JOHN FRIEDMAN

*Durham, North Carolina*

It was Robert Chazan who suggested that the translation of the Hebrew narrative would be considerably enhanced by the inclusion of the Christian evidence, specifically the sections now entitled Latin letters and Latin confessions. When I was asked to translate this material, I was extremely reluctant since it seemed unlikely that any translation of mine would be an improvement on the existing versions in Solomon Grayzel's *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (Philadelphia and New York, 1933–1989) and Hyam Maccoby's *Judaism on Trial: Jewish–Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (Rutherford, NJ, 1982). But my uncertainty about what I might contribute to the project changed to enthusiasm when I realized that there was no complete English translation of the Latin accusations. Thus began my own introduction to the world of the Talmud. It has been a fascinating journey, and I have learned much in process.

JEAN CONNELL HOFF

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