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« The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel de Fez, what kind of a new strategy against Judaism? »

Claire Soussen

dans *Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe: The Historiographical Legacy of Bernhard Blumenkranz*, éd. John Tolan, Philippe Buc, Martha Keil, Turnhout, Brepols, p. 131-146.

Introduction

The text I want to focus on with this article is not a recently discovered one, it is on the contrary well-known, often referred to but not so frequently quoted. The text is the so-called *Epistola Rabbi Samuelis de Fes (quam scripsit ad Rabbi Isaac magistrum Synagoge)* supposedly written in the end of the eleventh century. Bernhard Blumenkranz himself analyzed it, questioning its veracity, especially its date of composition and its real author. He devoted the better part of his article on *Alphonsus Bonihominis* in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*¹ to the *Epistola*, as the text was said to be a translation from Arabic to Latin by *Frater Alphonsus*, a Spanish Dominican in the first part of the Fourteenth Century. And this, the date of the translation of the opus, and moreover the person of its translator, is precisely one of the numerous reasons why the text is so interesting, raising many questions. It deserves a close analysis and an examination from different points of view. The superposition or confusion of times² concerning its redaction and the questions about its authorship make of it a very precious document, and a very rich source of information on the context and more precisely, on the quality of the relations between Jews and Christians at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It also informs us, in an indirect way, of the representations that the religious minority and majority had in mind one against the other. Presented as a correspondence between two persons, two Jewish scholars, it opens in fact a window on the whole society of the fourteenth century. If nowadays most scholars think that the text was not written by a Jew, but rather by a Christian apologist³, a close analysis of the shape and the content of the

¹ Bernhard Blumenkranz, art. « Alfonsus Bonihominis », in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jérusalem, 1971, t. 2, col. 607 and earlier G. Meersseman, « La chronologie des voyages et des œuvres de frère Alphonse Buonhombré o.p. », in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 10 (1940), pp. 77-108. About the success and diffusion of the opus in vernacular language, that is catalan, see Jaume Riera i Sans, « Literatura antijueva en Català: textos i difusió », in *Estudi General*, 1989, núm. 9, pp. 215-36 ; and Ora Limor, « The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco: A Best-Seller in the World of polemics », in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa eds, *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics Between Christians and Jews*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1996, pp. 177-94.

² In fact we could state that 3 periods of time are at stake with the *Epistola*: the supposed time of its composition: the eleventh century, the supposed time of its translation and in fact real composition: the first part of fourteenth century; and the time of its success or dissemination: the second half of the fourteenth and the fifteenth century. About the matter of dissemination, see Ora Limor, art. cit., pp. 177-79, more than 300 copies of the *Epistola* were produced till the end of the Middle Ages.

³ It is interesting to note that the editor of the text in the *Patrologiae Latinae*, vol. 149, col. 335-368, reprint of the edition of 1853, introduces Rabbi Samuel as born in Fes and converted to Christianity in 1085 in Toledo.

document reveal how rich and subtle this opus is and justifies the statement of Preachers of the end of the Middle Ages who consider it as the most effective tool to convert the Jews.

The angle I will adopt to analyze the *Epistola* is the following: I wonder in what way Rabbi Samuel's *Epistola* reflects the new strategy adopted by polemicists against Judaism from the second half of the thirteenth century, and how it renews the genre of medieval polemics.

I New polemics, devices and methods

Historians have long demonstrated that the art of polemics was renewed during the thirteenth century in different ways. Among them is the importance of language, that is the use of references in Hebrew or at least of quotations from the Old Testament in controversial arguments⁴. Polemicists also insist on the necessity of effectiveness so that the disputes have a favorable result, that is the conversion of the religious adversary⁵. Among the new aspects of Christian polemics, various devices are also used to persuade the Jews, of which we have a perfect example with the so-called *Epistola* of Rabbi Samuel.

1) A forgery

Christian polemicists had from the beginning used forgeries in their apologetics against the Jews. The so-called *Adversus Iudaeos* dialogues⁶ were usually inventions of their Christian authors, even if some specialists may have wondered if they did not reflect real controversies. It may have been the case, at least for the arguments of which we know that they had always been disputed (The Messiah as both God and human, the truth of the Trinity, or the Jews' unfaithfulness), but the most popular and influential of these texts are carefully-constructed literary works. Our text is not a dialogue but is presented as the translation of an old letter, *Epistola*, by a Moroccan rabbi, Samuel of Fes, to a Jewish authority of his time, Rabbi Isaac of Sijilmasa. The letter is in fact a disguised polemical work. Of particular interest are the

⁴ For example, Gui Terré, BnF, MSS lat, 16523, *Sequitur aliqua quaestio determinata ab eodem: Utrum principalis articulus fidei nostre, scilicet quod ponit Trinitatem in unitate essencie possit probari contra iudeos per scripturas receptas ab eis ?* fol. 83r: « Et ideo translatio necessaria est ad disputandum cum iudeis [...] Hanc autem translationem voluerunt habere studiosi hebreorum tanquam fructum sapientissimorum virorum et dato quod numquam apud eos haberetur tam non possunt ipsam negare ».

⁵ For example, at the same period, Nicolas of Lyra, BnF, MSS lat, 3644, *Questiones disputate per Nicolaum de Lyra contra Hebraeos*, fol. 1r: « Respondeo hic sunt duo videnda principaliter, primum est que sint scripture a iudeis recepte, secundum est utrum predicta per illas scripturas aprobari possint efficaci probatione ». See *Ibidem* fol. 3r: « [...] per eas possumus contra eos efficaciter arguere ».

⁶ Among an enormous bibliography: Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Contra Iudaeos. Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christian and Jews*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1996 ; and more recently Sébastien Morlet, Olivier Munnich and Bernard Pouderon eds., *Les dialogues Adversus Iudaeos. Permanences et mutations d'une tradition polémique*, Actes du colloque international organisé les 7 et 8 décembre 2011 à l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, *Institut d'Études Augustiniennes*, 2013.

multiple devices it uses to persuade the Jews. Its real author is quite surely Alphonsus Bonihominis (Alfonso Buenhombre), who introduces himself as the translator of the opus. Doing so, he proves to be very clever, or at least very tactical and concerned with efficiency. He knows that the classical polemic is not successful, so he uses other ways to make it more convincing. Whereas famous theorists and polemicists of his time produce more classical works, like Ramon Lull with his *Liber de Gentili et tribus sapientibus* or Nicolas of Lyra's *Questiones disputatae contra Iudaeos*, Alphonsus Bonihominis presents his polemical work in the form of a letter. Doing so he produces a very subtle composition, mixing times and themes. In the different manuscripts or editions of the text the subtitle mentioned is: *Raby Samuelis tractatus indicans errorem judaeorum circa observantiam legis Mosaicae, et venturum Messiahm, quem expectant*⁷. Then comes the following precision about the translator: < Reverendo Patre Magistro Alphonso Bonohomine Hispano ordinis predicatorum. Circa annum 1339 ex Arabico in latinum translatum (Father Alphonsus Bonihominis of Spain from the order of the Preachers, who translated the text from Arabic into Latin, around the year 1339)⁸ >. In the introductory chapter of the letter, Alphonsus introduces himself and his work, elaborating the literary conditions of his composition (or supposed translation): conscious of his weakness he wants to help his order in its task and offers what he can: < Libellum hunc antiquissimum, qui nuper devenit ad manus meas et fuit in antea tot temporibus occultatus, nova translatione de Arabico in Latinum⁹ >. It should be noted that Alphonsus used the same strategy in another work: he composed an apologetical pro-Christian work that he pretended was his translation of an exchange of letters between a Jew and a Muslim.¹⁰

In this way, Alphonsus creates the conditions to avoid that his readers question the veracity of the text. The argument of the ancientness of the text gives to it a supplement of legitimacy and authority. The fact that it is presented as if it had been occulted may increase the mystery and the desire to read it; and most of all if the Jews wanted to dissimulate the letter, it implies that they considered it as dangerous or convincing, which proves its truth. The argument of ancientness of a text, or of its writing by a Jew, is often used in such demonstrations: in his

⁷ This is the case for example in the Budaer edition in 1753.

⁸ *Ibidem*: < Opus aureum omnibus Christi Fidelibus et scripturae professoribus appime utile ab admodum reverendo Patre Magistro Alphonso Bonohomine Hispano ordinis predicatorum. Circa annum 1339 ex Arabico in latinum translatum >.

⁹ *Ibidem*: < the translation from Arabic to latin of a very old book who came into my hands and had been for long occulted >.

¹⁰ On this work, the *Disputatio Abutalib*, see Antoni Biosca, "Alfonso Buenhombre", in *Bibliographical History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vols. 5 (Leiden, 2013), 67-70; John Toland, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York, 2002), 254-5.

*Tractatulus Venerabilis patris Nicolai de Lyra contra quendam Iudeum*¹¹, Nicolas of Lyra also uses this device to legitimize his work. He says: “a certain treatise written by a certain Jew came into my hands.¹² And in his *Questiones disputatae*, he justifies an explanation saying: “But afterwards, a little book came into my hands, written in Hebrew, the offered a solution to this problem.”¹³ In our case Alphonsus uses both arguments. He pretends the letter has been written: < in anno Domini millesimo sed translata de Arabico in Latinum [...] anno Domini 1338, tempore pontificatus Domini Benedicti Papae XI ¹⁴ >. We may wonder why the supposed date of the letter is the year 1000. It is hard to believe that the date is chosen by chance. Does it reveal a belief or a representation of the Christians about Jewish millenarianism? Does Alphonsus mix up the Jewish and Christian millenarianism? It may be an answer as the real purpose of the text as we shall see later, is the conviction of the Jews so that they convert to Christianity. The so-called author, Rabbi Samuel of Fes is himself a convert, or is about to convert, and sends a letter to a fellow rabbi, Isaac, considered as an authority of his time, pretending he wants to question him about important matters, but in fact, he exposes the arguments why he is about to convert¹⁵.

2) The theme of the language, the importance of the context

Besides the date, the language of the text is another important point. Alphonsus pretends he translated the letter from Arabic, and devotes a quite long development in his introductory chapter to that language. I mentioned above that the matter of the language is very important in the art of polemics, because Jewish and Christian scholars disagree about the translation of Scripture. Noticing the wrong translation of one another, they can't admit the statements and opinions about the quotations of the biblical text and reject their arguments. In our case, Alphonsus uses a device or a bias, pretending the text was written in Arabic. This device is a good reflection of the context as Alphonsus is a Spanish Dominican, pretending he discovered an old text dating from the era of Muslim domination of the Peninsula, when the spoken and written language of the Jews was Arabic. This device allows him to avoid two stumbling blocks: the rejection of his arguments because of a bad translation, and the suspicion about the

¹¹ *Tractatulus Venerabilis patris Nicolai de Lyra contra quendam Iudeum* [...], Anvers, 1634, prologue, colonne 1716.

¹² “quidam tractatus a iudeo quodam confectus venit ad manum meam” *Ibidem*.

¹³ “Sed postea venit ad manum meam quidam libellus hebraice scriptus ubi predicta ratio aliter soluitur” *Questiones disputatae*, fol. 8r.

¹⁴ Alphonsus Bonihominis, *Epistola*, ed. Budae, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*: < Unde ego particeps doctrinae tuae fieri desiderans, tibi expono exitus cordis mei, super illis quae Legis sunt, et Prophetarum, super quibus anxior cum timore. Quapropter recurro ad abundantem scientiam tuam, et sapientiam et mitto tibi libellum istum sperans per te Deo volente in veritate confirmari ac in dubiis declarari >.

veracity of the letter. Furthermore he adorns the Arabic language saying that it is the language of the best scholars, that is the most truthful ones and that:

among the Jews, the most famous are the ones that possess the science of Arabic letters, and whereas in ancient times they used them a lot, the modern ones, Jews and Christians, don't do so (because they don't know the language), and they only use the Arabic language to expose their secrets, the things they want to occult¹⁶.

that is, here, the truth of Christianity. And he adds: "I think that this is the reason why, this Jew, the author of that book, a convert, wrote the opus in Arabic and not in Hebrew"¹⁷. What is not so convincing in Alphonsus' argument is the reason why Rabbi Samuelis chose to keep it secret. Either he was convinced of the Christian truth and he decided to expose it to most of the Jews, or he was not and he would not have said anything. But Alphonsus decides to translate the letter so that most people can have an access to the reasoning. And then we find the old argument about matters of translation as he says that:

I will translate from the Arabic directly from Rabbi Samuel's text, rather than from saint Jerome translation, so that nobody can tell I add, or suppress or change anything in the text [...] so that if the Jews see the both texts, they can notice that the Arabic one and the Latin one don't differ¹⁸.

These special characteristics of the language, the great attention paid to the exact meaning of words and correct translation of sentences, especially from the Thirteenth Century, and the mixing up of times for the composition of the opus, proof that the *Epistola* is part of the new polemic.

Another proof of it stands in one theme developed to give force to the controversy: the insistence on the length of the Jewish sufferings.

¹⁶“Sciendum quod inter Judaeos multum gloriatur illi, qui Arabicarum litterarum obtinent peritiam. Tum quia illae litterae sunt in antiquorum Philosophorum usu satis copiosae; Tum etiam quia in eis, ut puto, paucis Judaeis paucioribus Christianis, notis scribunt confidentius secreta sua, quae volunt aliis occultare.” *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁷“Qua de causa, ut existimo Judaeus iste, licet cathecumenus, auctor hujus libri, non ipsum Hebraeo sermone, sed in Arabico annotavit” *Ibidem*.

¹⁸“Ego vero in transferendo ipsum auctoritates Bibliorum ab ipso Judaeo inductas, sic scripsi in locis suis in Arabico et Latino, non prout in nostra habentur translatione secundum beatum Hieronimum sed prout iste Judaeus eas scripsit quando composuit istud opus. Et hoc feci, ne aliquis mihi possit imponere, quod in contextu aliquid praesumpserim addere, diminuere vel etiam immutare [...] ut etiam judei, si viderint istum librum in utraque lingua conscriptum, tantum convincantur per eum, si viderent, quod auctoritates in Latino ad hoc descriptae in Arabico non discordarent.” *Ibidem*.

3) The length of Jewish Sufferings, a Powerful Argument

This theme in itself is rather classical. It is used by the Jews themselves as a mean of expiation for the rupture of Lord's covenant. But whereas in the Jewish texts there's always some hope behind the despair provoked by the sufferings (accentuated since the First Crusade¹⁹) (see for example Nachmanides and the *Vikuah*, studied by Professor Chazan, for whom: < (God) will gather the dispersed of Israel to the wilderness of the nations [...] and will bring Israel to their land, as did Moses [...] ²⁰), the Christian scholars present them as endless. This difference of analysis is also classical. But what is new in Alphonsus' *Epistola*, is the insistence with which he uses this theme. He insists on it all along the text and when he quits it for a while, he then comes back to it, few chapters later. He begins in the first chapter when he puts into Rabbi Samuel's mouth the following words:

Our punishment is endless [...] God has been punishing us for more than a thousand years and scattering us through the 4 parts of the world. Then whatever may happen, we are without God, because we have no excuse²¹.

And farther in the third chapter, quoting Daniel 9, he adds: "And this captivity, my lord, is doubtless the one that God, through the Prophet Daniel, calls *desolatio* as he says in chapter 9: 'Our *desolatio* will last till destruction and end of times' "²². Alphonsus compares the captivity of the Hebrews after the destruction of the first temple which lasted 70 years, but had an end, and the one of his fellows of the Middle Ages that has no end, because they know the truth, whereas the Ancients had an excuse, they did not know the truth. In chapter 4, Alphonsus goes on in that way underlining the endlessness of Jewish punishment as he says: "God doesn't forgive us as we are alive, and won't forgive us when we are dead"²³. That means that there is absolutely no hope, neither for a close future nor in heaven²⁴. This argument of an impossible redemption after death reveals the true nature of the author, a

¹⁹ Robert Chazan, *Jewish Suffering. The Interplay of Medieval Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, 1998 ; Shmuel Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrdom in the Pagan and Christian Worlds*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006 ; Simha Goldin, *The Ways of Jewish Martyrdom*, Turnhout, Brépols, 2008.

²⁰ Quotation from Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 207.

²¹ "quare ergo nostra poena esset sine termino [...] et nos punivit jam sunt mille anni et ultra et punit et dispersit nos per quatuor partes mundi. Tamen quicquid contingat, Dei sumus in omni eventu, quia nulla est excusatio super dicta" *Epistola*, ed. Budaë, p. 7.

²² "Et haec captivitas, Domine mi, sine dubio est illa quam Deus per Danielis prophetae vocat desolationem cum dicit cap. 9 'Usque ad consummationem et finem perseverabit desolatio etc' " *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²³ "Deus non miseretur nostri in vita, cum in eodem peccato perseveremus, sic etiam nec miserebitur mortuis ex nobis" *Ibidem*, chap. 4, p. 13.

²⁴ About suffering and exile see Ora Limor, art. cit., pp. 190-191.

Christian scholar. Indeed if the Jews often postpone the time of their liberation, they never speak of a time after death, even if otherwise the belief in the *Olam Ha-Baa* is very important. Jewish scholars can imagine salvation for the following generations, that is a real future, which allows them to hope, in spite of the difficult times²⁵. So, the argument of an impossible hope, even for the following generations, is really despairing for Jews and a good angle of approach from Alphonsus. Then chapter 5 explains that the Covenant between God and Abraham has been irremediably broken and that the Jews wait in vain²⁶.

4) The use of Reason

A last point indicating that the *Epistola* is part of the new polemics is the use of Reason. Since the Thirteenth Century, the argument of Reason, *Ratio*, is often used in controversial works, either in Jews' mouth or in Christians' one. The goal of polemicists is then to prove their truth in reason. As Ramon Marti wants to demonstrate *rationes Christianorum* and *nequitiae judeorum* in his *Pugio Fidei*, Jewish polemicists also use reason to deny the Christian truth. Among lots of examples we can quote Meir bar Simon's appeal to reason to criticize the Christian dogma about Trinity²⁷. In the *Epistola*, Alphonsus tries to demonstrate in reason one of the most important dogmas of Christian thought, the ascension of Jesus. He develops his argumentation through Rabbi Samuel. Rabbi Samuel has been convinced by the truth of the dogma and then tries to convince Rabbi Isaac. This is the same device that is used as mentioned above (Alphonsus pretends that a Jew is speaking), but here the interlocking of the reasoning is really striking and admirable. He then uses the usual Jewish responses and contradicts them saying:

If it seems hard to believe that a man with a body went up to heaven, listen to the authorities and examples that we have from our Scriptures. As David the Prophet said: 'Ascendit Deus in altum et salvabit captivitatem.

²⁵ Cf. Robert Chazan, *Fashioning... op. cit.* p. 225 quoting Meir bar Simon de Narbonne.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, *Epistola*, *Patrologia Latina* 149, chap. 5, col. 341: < Sicut etiam Deus verus et gloriosus promisit Abrahae et semini suo terram illam in aeternum possidendam, et frequenter perdiderunt eam propter peccata sua et frequenter restituit illis Dominus usque ad ultimam vicem qua perdiderunt. Jam sunt mille anni ; et ultra, et jam non est spes recuperandi eam, quia manemus omnes in eodem peccato, propter quod terram nostram perdidimus > .

²⁷ Cf. Robert Chazan, *Fashioning... op. cit.*, p. 267: < With regard to this, there is a true reply grounded in reason. For while you bring a proof from one of the created things that is one and simultaneously three, bring a proof from one of the created things that is one and five or one and ten or even more > .

and then follow numerous quotations about ascension whose conclusion is that: “These authorities convince me that Christ was exalted in his body up to heaven”²⁸. Rabbi Samuel goes on saying that even if it is hard to believe, many examples from the Torah or the Prophets prove that God brought up a few holy men into heaven, with their body and soul²⁹. Here we have an illustration of the classical debate of the twelfth and thirteenth Centuries of the compatibility between faith and reason. For example, he quotes Moses and says that he no doubt acceded body and soul together, to heaven. To strengthen his reasoning he says that up to his era (the 14th Century) nobody knows where Moses’ grave is located. That means in Alphonsus’ mind, that there is no grave as God brought Moses up to heaven and kept him with him³⁰. But as a scholar of his time, he is aware of the objections that one could oppose to him and especially on a scientific basis. He is preoccupied with very pragmatic considerations as he says:

We must not consider that air which is a very light and subtle material cannot carry bodies as big and heavy, because we know that the water which carried the bodies of the sons of Israel as they went out of Egypt, was like air³¹.

The basic physical argument, which consists in saying that a body can’t be lighter than air and then can’t rise up, is not acceptable and there, the last argument is a matter of faith and miracle. The limits of the use of reason always consist in faith. And finally, Alphonsus/Samuel regrets that the Jewish faith is selective as he says: “Therefore, we must believe that the bodies of those saint men did rise up, but we don’t believe that Jesus went to heaven”³². All these arguments show that Alphonsus Bonihominis is part of the new polemics. In the same time, Alphonsus also practices the traditional ones.

²⁸“Si autem tibi videtur forte durum credere, domine mi, quod homo corporeus ascendit in celum, audi auctoritates et exempla que mihi occurrunt de scripturis nostris. Et super hoc dicit David propheta de illo: ‘Ascendit Deus in altum et salvabit captivitatem...’ [...] Et hee auctoritates occurrunt mihi ad probandum exaltationem Christi corporalem usque ad celum *Epistola*, PL 149, Chap. 13, col. 349.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, col. 349: < Et hoc est propter considerationem nam in lege et in prophetis invenimus quod Deus verus et gloriosus assumpsit de terra et elevavit plures sanctos viros patres nostros et si de istis non dubitamus de ascensione istius iusti in corpore et anima cui magis scriptura perhibet [...] >.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, col. 350: < De Moise etiam non est dubitandum quin sit in coelo in corpore et anima, ut dicitur Deut. xxxiiii dixit Deus ad Moisen: ‘Ascende in montem nocte et morere ibi, et ascendit in montem et mortuus est. Et nescivit homo sepulchrum eius usque in hodiernum diem’. Et quid significat quod sepulchrum eius est ignotum in terra, cum ipse fuerit propheta maior et sanctior aliis, nisi quod Deus resuscitavit eum et assumpsit eum in corpore et anima [...] >.

³¹“Nec nos debemus mirari supra hoc, quod aer iste levis et subtilis posset portare corpora tam grossa et ponderosa, quia nos scimus quod aqua, quae est in raritate similis aeri, quando placuit potentie omnipotenti portavit corpora filiorum Israel in eorum exitu de Aegypto.” *Ibidem*, col. 350.

³²“Unde cum oportet nos esse credentes de elevatione corporea dictorum sanctorum, cur sumus increduli de elevatione istius iusti.” *Ibidem*.

II The manipulation of traditional polemical themes

1) Jesus as both God and human

This theme is indeed one of the most frequently disputed between Jews and Christians. Beside the Trinity which is a stumbling block of the controversial debate, the real nature of Jesus is another tough one. For the Jews there is only one God, and he is absolutely not human (even if there are lots of explanations about the creation of the man in the image of God). And linked to that question is the one of the Messiah. For the Jews, the Messiah is human and not divine. For the Christians who consider Jesus as the Messiah, the Messiah on the contrary is both God and human, which the Jews cannot accept. This argument has been disputed for ages and the polemicists always try to renew it. This theme, that is the refusal of the Jews to recognize Jesus as messiah, legitimates the theology of substitution. As the Jews did not accept that the Messiah had come, they prove to be unfaithful to God's message and no longer deserve to be God's People. In the *Epistola*, Alphonsus quotes Zacharia 14. 4, saying that the One evoked must be Jesus, because the Jews deny that God is human, or has a human shape, and still the Vulgate has: < Et egredietur Dominus et stabunt pedes eius in die illa super Montem Olivarum [...] ³³ >. Alphonsus adds through Samuel's mouth: "And we, my friend, don't say that God in his being and in his nature has either feet or flesh, or whatever evokes the body, now having feet means that the creature is human" ³⁴ >. Which means that the word Dominus in Zacharia designates Jesus as Messiah. He then adds a quotation to Psalm 49, in which the body of an entity is evoked, of which the Jews say that it does not designate God, but the Christians say that it does ³⁵. And it is precisely the Nature of Jesus that is argued here, and the subject of corporeal God. We can compare this very mild reference to the Jewish arguments on that matter with the opinions or sentences pronounced by other Jewish polemicists which seem much more violent. For example In his *Milhamot Ha Shem*, Jacob ben Reuben evokes the corporeality of God or precisely of Jesus considered as divine in these terms: < Christians' faith is not true as they say that God who created them is born of a women and was raised in a cradle and accepted to be put on the cross for the salvation of God's

³³ Zacharia 14. 3-4, Vulgata edition. The hebrew text also speaks of God.

³⁴ "Et nos domine non dicimus quod Deus in essentia sua et natura habet pedes, nec carnem, nec ista quae corporis sunt, sed habere pedes convenit omni creaturae corporae" *Epistola*, PL 149, Chap. 10, col. 346.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, < Dicit etiam David propheta quod supra allegatum est, loquendo de secundo ejus adventu: 'Ignis in conspectu ejus exardescet et in circuitu ejus inflammabit (Ps XLIX)'. Sed domine non dicimus quod Deus sit circumscriptus, quod aliquid posset esse in circuitu ejus, in quantum Deus >.

creatures [...]»³⁶ ». We find the same arguments in Joseph Kimhi's *Sefer Ha-Berit* as he says « For who can believe, that the Holy-One, blessed be he, entered the womb of a woman and took on flesh ? »³⁷ ». The Jewish commentators feel some disgust as they think of God's corporeality. In our case, Alphonsus recalls that the Jews don't agree with that dogma, but doesn't quote the exact sentences they formulate. We understand why.

2) The long list of Jewish sins and its consequences: the rupture of the Covenant
Another theme frequently disputed in the classical polemics consists in a long list of Jewish sins. This theme justifies, as we said, the reprobation of the Jewish People. Alphonsus like lots of other polemicists uses this theme and seeks in the Old Testament the scriptural proofs of the Jewish sins. Parallel to the genealogical succession of important figures of the Jewish People, he stands the list of their sins, even for the most symbolic ones:

Moses also sinned during the episode of the water in the desert and then did not deserve to enter the Promise Land (Nb. 20). Aaron also sinned and wears the weight of the sin. Eli the Priest sinned [...] and his descendants lost the priesthood [...]. Even if a promise is made for ever, the sin breaks the promise, and then the carnal descendant of King David has lost the terrestrial realm³⁸.

Here the logic of the reasoning is striking and leads to the only possible conclusion: the end of the Covenant and, once again, the hopelessness of the Jews' situation:

Whereas God promised Abraham and his descendants the eternal possession of the Land, they lost it several times because of their sins and God gave it back to them until their final sin when they lost it again. A thousand years have passed, and there is no hope to get it back³⁹.

And then in a very subtle way, Alphonsus/Samuel comes back to the present era as he says "because we altogether are staying in that sin, for which we lost our land". It is a way of maintaining the sin through history on the Jewish People and forbidding them to ask for the

³⁶ H. Trautner Kromann, *Shield and Sword, Jewish polemics against Christianity and the Christians in Spain and France from 1100-1500*, Tübingen, 1993, p. 50.

³⁷ Cf. Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

³⁸« Peccavit enim Moses ad aquas contradictionis et terram promissionis non meruit (Deut. 22). Peccavit ipse Aaron et portavit poenam (Num. 20). Heli sacerdos peccavit [...] et posteritas ejus sacerdotio privata est [...] hujusmodi promissa intelliguntur semper, nisi propter peccata non mereantur accipere, ut patet in regno David, quod carnalis posteritas ejus privata est regno.» *Epistola*, PL 149, col. 341.

³⁹«Sicut etiam Deus verus et gloriosus promisit Abrahae et semini suo terram illam in aeternum possidendam, et frequenter perdidit eam propter peccata sua et frequenter restituit illis Dominus usque ad ultimam vicem qua perdidit eam. Jam sunt mille anni; et ultra, et jam non est spes recuperandi eam. ... quia manemus omnes in eodem peccato, propter quod terram nostram perdidimus.» *Ibidem*.

Promised Land. We see here another mixing up of times, between an ancient past and the real present. The use of the question of sin is very clever because it is completely assumed by the Jews themselves in their theology. Judah ha Levi for example in the Eleventh Century, turns the argument back in his *Sefer Ha Kuzari*, and makes of the Jewish sins and the sufferings they bring a kind of condition to prove their being chosen by God. Doing so, he goes very far. Most of the other Jewish scholars use the theme of Jewish sins for ages, in a milder way: they make of it an excuse to accept the idea of exile and diaspora⁴⁰. It is then a key of explanation, the only way to accept a tough fate. All themes are linked and open on another classical theme: the substitution of the Jews by the Christians as God's chosen people.

3) The theology of replacement

Supersessionism (or the theology of replacement) is indeed only the logical consequence of the classical statements of Christian polemics. As the Jews were unfaithful, God chose another people, and initiated a new Law. Bernard Oliver in his *Contra cecitatem Judeorum* in the beginning of the fourteenth century expresses it this way: "The authorities of the Old Testament state that the Old Law had to end"⁴¹. He goes on saying that "As long as the Law of the Chosen People was effective, the sign by which they distinguished from the others had to last, but once the Law was over, the sign was also"⁴². This argument is developed by all the polemicists, and Alphonsus is not an exception. But once more, what is striking is the tone he uses to make it convincing. He insists on the hate felt by God towards the Jews, as previous polemicists (among them, Bernard Oliver) lay out the substitution as a result for a breaking off a contract (the one of the Covenant). Alphonsus says through Samuel's mouth: "I am afraid, my friend, that God is furious at us and our Law forever"⁴³. And then farther: "If God rejects us and has no pity for us as it is the case since one thousand years and more, is it worth it for us to have a Law, circumcision and Sabbath?"⁴⁴. Once more the reasoning seems to be very logical. And then Alphonsus quotes Isaiah 26. 3 saying that the prophecy (*Vetus error abiit*) has come true: "What is old, but our Law which was removed with its king, sacrifice,

⁴⁰ See for example Robert Chazan, *Jewish Suffering. The Interplay of Medieval Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, 1998 ; and David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, pp. 36-37.

⁴¹"ostenditur per auctoritates Veteris Testamenti (quod) lex vetus debebat cessare." Bernardus Oliver, *Contra Cecitatem Judeorum*, ed. F. Cantera Burgos, Madrid-Barcelona, 1965, p. 67.

⁴²" quamdiu lex duravit que solum uni populo precipiebatur, debuit durare signum quo ille populus ab aliis gentibus distinguebatur et lege cessante eciam signum debuit cessare" *Ibidem*, p. 116.

⁴³" Timeo domine mi de lege nostra que furoris iram habet in perpetuum" *Epistola*, PL 149, chap. 23, col. 362.

⁴⁴" Et si Deus proiecit nos et non miseretur nostri ut experti sumus iam sunt mille anni et ultra, que utilitas est nos habere legem circumcisionem et sabbatum ?" *Epistola*, PL 149, chap. 15, col. 352.

incense and altar?”⁴⁵. And to prove it and support the idea of the new election he says: “And those people purified by faith have their fast and the rules of the new Law”⁴⁶. And then Alphonsus/ Samuel expresses his anxiety:

I fear, my friend that God rejected us and our sacrifice from him and agreed the sacrifice of the peoples: “Then for God the Peoples’ sacrifice is purer than our sacrifice” [Malachi 1. 10-11]⁴⁷.

And quoting the very violent words of Isaiah 1. 15⁴⁸, Alphonsus/Samuel considers that God’s rejection of Israel is permanent: “The abomination of our sacrifice to God means nothing but the replacement of our carnal sacrifice by a spiritual one”⁴⁹. Then after having demonstrated Israel’s rejection by God and the fact that it has been lasting for more than a thousand years and that it is to be lasting forever, a logical conclusion must follow: the necessity for the Jews to convert. That is what we will examine now.

III The *Epistola*, what for?

1) Millenarianism, an important issue

Before examining the matter of conversion we must recall few themes, of which one is very important: millenarianism. The theme of the < thousand years > comes back very often through Alphonsus/Samuel reasoning. It may reflect a confusion or mixing up of themes in Alphonsus’ thought, but also the consciousness of the importance of this theme in Jewish spirituality. What is interesting and amusing is that Alphonsus confuses the Jewish and Christian computations. He asserts that Samuel wrote his *Epistola* after one thousand years of the Christian era, underlining that the waiting time of Jews for the messiah is over, and nothing has changed or happened; (which proves that the Jews wait in vain and are wrong) but the Jews have another system of computation. That system is expressed by Nachmanides,

⁴⁵“ Et quid est antiquum, nisi lex nostra quae recessit a nobis , domine mi, cum rege, cum sacrificio, cum incenso et cum altaribus ” *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ “Et ipse gentes purificate per fidem habent ieiunia sua et observantias legis nove et habent cuncta.” *Ibidem*, PL 149, chap. 18, col. 355.

⁴⁷“Timeo domine mi quod Deus eiecit nos a se et sacrificium nostrum et acceptavit sacrificium gentium sicut dixit per os Malachie prophete cap. 1^o: ‘Non est mihi sacrificium voluntas dicit dominus neque sacrificium vestrum [...]’. Ergo apud Deum sacrificium gentium est mundus quam sacrificium nostrum.” *Ibidem*, chap. 20, p. 277.

⁴⁸ Isaïe 1. 15: < Si elevatis manus vestras ad me: avertam vultum meum a vobis. Et si multiplicaveritis orationem, non exaudiam quoniam manus vestre plene sanguine sunt et omni sacrificium vestrum sicut cadaver fetidum [...] >.

⁴⁹“ Sed abhominatio de sacrificiis apud Deum nihil aliud significat nisi mutationem sacrificii nostri carnalis et grossi in sacrificium iustus iusti Domini spirituale et subtile.” *Ibidem*, chap. 21 p. 280.

among others, in his *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah* analysed by professor Chazan⁵⁰. Quoting Daniel 9. 24-27, so often commented upon by exegetes et theologians, Nachmanides says that prophecy has not ended and postpones to a last exile, which has not begun, the building of a third temple ; whereas Alphonsus gives a much more classical explanation of the words « Postquam consumatae fuerunt 62 hebdomadae » saying:

There is no doubt that the destruction of the eternal desolation means our captivity, for the past one thousand years. And God said through the prophet's mouth that there will be an eternal desolation after the murder of the Christ, as is our desolation after Jesus was killed⁵¹.

We notice here the very different perspective of those explanations: hope in Nachmanides; despair in Alphonsus. When Alphonsus/Samuel leads back the Jewish People and makes them consider the end of an era, Nachmanides offers a future perspective and leads his fellow Jews to that future. He goes even farther as he quotes Daniel 12. 11-12 and establishes a precise date for the advent of the Messiah, that is the year 1358. We must recall that Nachmanides writes in the 1270s and that Alphonsus produces his so-called translation in the 1330s. Then the perspective and the hope given by Nachmanides, are still allowed when Alphonsus writes. We can't imagine that Alphonsus doesn't know Nachmanides' works even if he doesn't have direct access to them. There is a real emulation around these themes and the notions of hope and despair are effective as the question of the perpetuation of the Jewish People is at stake and as the assaults to convert the Jews are more and more insistent. Which leads us to an important question, a question that we can often wonder: who read the *Epistola*, for whom was it produced⁵² ? And once again the question of its real author is set up. Written in Arabic or in Hebrew as Alphonsus pretends, it could be intended to a Jewish readership. We know, and I will focus on that theme in a moment, that the matter is more and more sensitive in the first third of the fourteenth century, and that such a correspondence between two scholars was plausible. Written in Latin it couldn't be intended to a Jewish readership, but to a Christian one, to whom Alphonsus the scholar would like to give the keys to dispute with the Jews. We know examples of that kind with Ramon Marti sixty years before. The form of the exercise

⁵⁰ Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish identity in medieval western Christendom*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁵¹« Et non est dubium, domine mi, quin destructio desolationis perpetuae sit captivitas in qua sumus, jam sunt mille anni. Et aperte dicit Deus per prophetam quod erit desolatio perpetua post occisionem Christi, sicut est desolatio nostra postquam Jesus fuit occisus.» *Epistola*, Chap. 8, PL 149, col. 344.

⁵² Jaume Riera i Sans, « Literatura antijueva en Català ... » *op. cit.*, p. 215 also raises that question. The very few Latin manuscripts of the opus indicate that the readers were not numerous. The later translation in Catalan has the reading of the opus increased.

would have changed, becoming more subtle, even if Ramon Marti was a very clever and literate polemicist, but the goal would have stayed the same: provide convincing arguments to make effective polemics.

2) What about conversion?

Conversion is precisely at stake around the *Epistola*, in the context of fourteenth-century Dominican apologetics⁵³. The so-called letter is part of a group of texts produced during the same era, of different forms and genres, but whose goal is to convince the Jews to convert. As Ramon Marti expresses it in his *Pugio Fidei*⁵⁴, he works for his brothers, to give them some arguments in their task of missionizing towards the Jews. It is clear when one reads the *Pugio* that the treaty could not be handled by an average Preacher and even by an average Jew who couldn't argue on the basis of Ramon⁵⁵. However, even if those texts and arguments couldn't be really used in the everyday life of the controversy, it shows that the atmosphere had changed and that there was emulation around the idea of conversion. And we know precisely that since the Barcelona disputation in 1263, the Preachers had obtained from King James the 1st the right to preach in the synagogues and that there were free disputations organized by clerics, in towns or elsewhere⁵⁶. And we also know that some Jews did convert, even before the pressure of the years 1348 and 1391. I already said that the Jewish polemics reflects the higher pressure felt by the Jews and that a scholar like Meir ben Reuben clearly writes to prevent his coreligionists from the will to convert⁵⁷.

The theme of conversion is present by two means in the *Epistola*: an implicit one, as Rabbi Samuel suggests that the Christians are right and that the Jewish scriptures demonstrate that the Christians are the new Chosen People. It is also present explicitly in the 19th chapter

⁵³ Jaume Riera i Sans, « Literatura antijueva en Català ... » *op. cit.*, p. 217 explains that this is much more the case around the 1400s' and thinks, with other scholars, that the opus must have been translated from Latin to Catalan in the end of the fourteenth century. Preachers of that time considered that the *Epistola* was the most useful text to convince the Jews because it was not too complicated. At that time, people were familiar with the themes of conversion because of the Friars' preaching and then they were very receptive to that kind of polemics.

⁵⁴ Raymond MARTIN, *Pugio Fidei*, éd. J. de Voisin, Paris 1651, *Incipit*.

⁵⁵ Ora Limor, *art.cit.*, p. 193-194 explains that the copies of the *Epistola* are often preserved in manuscripts possessed by monasteries or Preachers' convents. The goal of such an opus was predication and conviction of the Jews. We must add that whereas an opus as the *Pugio Fidei* had the same goal but was too subtle for an < average > Preacher, the *Epistola* was easier to handle, which explains the enormous numbers of copies preserved and the fact that he was considered as an efficient tool.

⁵⁶ See Claire Soussen, *Iudei Nostri. Juifs et chrétiens dans la Couronne d'Aragon à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Toulouse, Méridiennes, 2011, p. 170.

⁵⁷ Cf. Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity...op. cit.*, p. 344, quoting Meir de Narbonne: < Now it is known to every sage of intelligence and understanding who might wish to join in teachings and faith with another or with others who are not of his belief and faith must surely investigate [...] If he sees that his behavior is better than their behavior, he will not change good for bad >.

whose title is *De electione Apostolorum loco Prophetarum*, as Alphonsus/Samuel comments Malachie 3. 6: < Et convertet cor patrum ad filios et cor filiorum ad patres [...] > saying:

As, my friend, our sons came before us to God's faith, if our hearts converted to them, their hearts would convert to us. And as God said 'There will be one people and one God' then we mustn't understand another conversion than from unfaithfulness to the faith and teaching of the one who is the master of salvation of those who believe in him.

The reasoning is quite complex, but farther, Alphonsus is more direct:

But those faithful sons, sent through the whole world stood in front of God instead of us after God killed Israel and our name, and thanks to them, the first Law is renewed in accordance with Melchisedech who changed the sacrifice for God to bread and wine⁵⁸.

The sentence is very clear, the conversion is from the Old Law to the New One, and after a long demonstration, it seems to be the only possible issue.

Conclusion.

All these elements show that the *Epistola* is fully part of the polemics of the Fourteenth Century. Alphonsus/ Samuel writes to persuade the Jews to convert, using a device to be more convincing: he pretends that the author is a Jew. But the themes he uses, his tone, his appeal to Reason contradict the story he tells about the context of the letter. On the contrary, the immediate context of Spain in the Fourteenth Century perfectly fits with the opus. The Preachers' mission and the growing pressure on the Jewish communities are well reflected, even if in an indirect way, through the *Epistola*. We could have developed the demonstration from the themes that the opus doesn't mention, the main themes of the Christian dogma, to show that Alphonsus, a Preacher preoccupied with efficiency, is its real author. Indeed, the traditional polemics that used to handle these themes to persuade the Jews never succeeded. It is a distinctive point of the new polemics to adapt to its audience, to speak to the Jews from a Jewish point of view, without using the arguments of the *Christiana Veritas*, to which the

⁵⁸“Cum ergo, domine mi, filii nostri venerunt antequam nos ad fidem Dei, si corda nostra convertantur ad filios, corda eorum converterentur ad nos. Et sicut dicit Deus altissimus 'Erunt populus unus, animus unus in deo glorioso et victorioso' quia non debemus intelligere illam conversionem, nisi de infidelitate ad fidem et doctrinam illius iusti qui est magister salutis eorum qui credunt in eo [...] Sed isti fideles filii sic proiecti vel missi per universum mundum, surrexerunt coram deo nostro, postquam Deus occidit Israel et nomen nostrum [...] et per istos innovata est lex prima secundum ordinem Melchisedech qui sacrificium deo instituit in pane et vino.” *Epistola*, PL 149, Chap. 19, col. 357.

Jews have always been hermetic. By contrast the Jews should have been receptive to the discourse about fate and redemption at a time when their present and future looked increasingly bleak. That is precisely what was at stake in Rabbi Samuel's/Alphonsus Bonihominis' *Epistola*.