A Jewish–Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia*

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In the year 339 CE, after unsuccessfully besieging the Roman stronghold of Nisibis, Shabur II, the Persian king, returned to his capital frustrated and financially strained. Temporarily set back, but unrelenting, Shabur was determined to raise funds in order to continue his campaign. According to two fifth-century Christian sources, the Martyrology of Shem' on bar Saba' e and the Narration of Shem'on bar Saba' e (both of which are probably variations of one tradition), Shabur turned to Shem'on, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the regional capital city, demanding a double poll-tax from the Christian community. The king, having just lost a battle to the Christian monarch of Rome, exacted his revenge on the Christians within his jurisdiction. The bishop, while professing his utmost loyalty to Persia protested, claimed that his constituents were too poor themselves to be able to comply. The king, in his fury, condemned the poor bishop to death. Following this church leader's martyrdom, a general persecution of the Christians ensued—continuing until Shabur's death in 379 CE.

These same documents, however, make a further claim—that the Jews used their supposed influence at court to provoke the king's ire against the Christians. The Jews allegedly insinuated to the king that Shem'on, as a Christian leader, was necessarily in cahoots with the Roman Emperor and was capable of betraying Persian government secrets to the enemy. Shabur's request for money was as much a financial burden as it was a ploy to test the Persian Christian's loyalty to the State.

While the claim that the Jews wielded any influence in Shabur II's court can be proven tenuous, the assertion that there were tensions between Jews and Christians in the Persian empire due to the Christians' persecuted state throughout most of Shabur's reign is more certain. Aphrahat, a Persian church leader writing in the mid-fourth century, several years into the persecution, even accused the Jews of proselytizing among the Christians. The Jews, he claims, insinuated that the persecution was proof that

* Based on a paper given at the AJS in 1993.
1 R. N. Frye, 'Political History of Iran under the Sasanians', Cambridge History of Iran 3.1:137.
God disapproved of the Christian faith. Clearly on the defensive, Aphrahat composed several demonstrations loosely in the genre of Christian *adversus Judaeos* to morally support his congregation in the face of physical persecution by the Persians and spiritual temptation from the Jews.

While Aphrahat addressed issues that ranged from ritual practice to theological belief and biblical exegesis, this paper concentrates on his discussions concerning chosenness and redemption. The goal of this paper is to draw out the crucial elements of these polemical confrontations, particular to Persian Mesopotamia, and to illuminate the Jewish side of the debate using Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* as a foil to the only contemporary Jewish texts available—the rabbinic literature.

**Scholarly Debates on Polemics**

The question of Jewish involvement in religious polemics—particularly against Christians—and missionary activities of the late ancient world has generated much scholarly debate, if not polemics of its own. Adolf Harnack,\(^4\) in the last century, suggested that Jewish Christian dialogues, written after the Bar Kokhba revolt, were literary fictions. By that time, he claims, the Christians had long given up hope in converting the Jews. Rather, *adversus Judaeos* treatises, including dialogue texts such as Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, were intended to provide support for wavering or oppressed Christians. More recently, David Rokeah,\(^5\) following Harnack’s line of argument, has conceded only that Justin Martyr represented the last real Jewish-Christian polemical writer. The later anti-Jewish writers, he claims, simply used the motifs of the *adversus Judaeos* debate in their polemic against the pagans, not the Jews.\(^6\) Marcel Simon, on the other hand, argues that the continued existence of *adversus Judaeos* texts proves that Jews and Judaism were persistent issues for the church.\(^7\) Simon demonstrates that the mere presence

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\(^4\) Adolf Harnack, ‘Die Altercatio Simonis Judaei et Theophili Christiani, nebst Untersuchungen über die antijudische Polemik in der alten Kirche’, *Texte und Untersuchungen* 1, 3 (1883).

\(^5\) David Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982). Rokeah attempts to differentiate between ‘polemic’ and ‘debate’ or ‘dispute’. In his understanding, a polemic is an actual controversy, a verbal battle in which each side hopes and fights for total victory. A debate or dispute is merely an exchange of words without any attempt at winning over the other side. Because the Jews never produced an *adversus Christianos* literature, Rokeah concludes that the Jews were not involved in the polemics of the ancient world after 135 CE. Any discussion of Christianity in the rabbinic texts is only dispute—for the entertainment, or benefit of its Jewish readers. I find Rokeah’s definitions and distinctions overwrought. Without them, however, his thesis falls apart, since he can easily define any rabbinic critique of Christianity as mere debate rather than polemic. H. Drijvers, ‘Jews and Christians at Edessa’, *JJS* 36 (1985): 89, n. 2; 101, n. 65 supports my contention that the debate—even into the fourth century—continued between the Christians and the Jews.

\(^6\) Rokeah, pp. 9, 78, 216.

of large, prosperous Jewish communities throughout the Roman East, and the attractions that these communities held for Christians, was cause enough for Christian leaders to polemicize against Judaism. While it is not clear that Jews actively encouraged Christians to participate in Jewish rituals and festivals in places like Antioch, they did not appear to discourage this phenomenon either.

In their opposing analyses of Jewish–Christian relations in the first few centuries of the common era, both Rokeah and Simon deal primarily with the Jewish and Christian communities of the Roman empire, by and large ignoring the possibilities of Jewish–Christian polemic across the Euphrates in Persia. Examining the Persian Jewish–Christian polemic opens a window into other facets of this debate.

Determining the character of Jewish participation in late ancient religious polemics (Roman or Persian), particularly anti-Christian ones, is made more difficult by the lack of Jewish adversus Christianos treatsises similar to the Christian adversus Judaeos. The rabbinic literature, whose primary focus is, of course, not Christianity, but rather the fashioning of a post-temple Judaism, is the only extant Jewish source from this period. Yet, indirect or oblique references to Christians and Christianity can be found imbedded in numerous rabbinic texts. Some, alluding to minim—heretics or sectarians that may have included Christians—have been discussed elsewhere. It has been noted there that many of these references involve Palestinian rabbis and locales—even when reported in Babylonian rabbinic literature.

Nevertheless, Simon has demonstrated that despite the lack of Jewish anti-Christian texts, Jewish critiques of and responses to Christianity can be found in the rabbinic literature. Ephraim Urbach, as well, has suggested that certain rabbinic statements can only be understood in light of the Christian anti-Jewish polemic. Urbach, however, insists that the Jewish anti-Christian polemic was particular to Palestinian rabbis since Christianity was

with the Jews" as Sources for the Early Jewish Argument against Christianity', JBL 51 (1937), attempts to reconstruct, with some success, the Jewish anti-Christian polemic from the Christian dialogues with the Jews. Hulen asserts that while the church soon gave up trying to convert the Jews, the genre of adversus Judaeos literature proliferated due to the problems that the continued presence of the Jews caused the Christians (pp. 64, 70).

8 Simon, pp. 144 and 290.


10 See Simon, pp. 179–201 and Richard Kalman, 'Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity', HTR 87:2 (1994), pp. 155–169. I thank Dr Kalman for sharing a pre-publication version of this article with me.


12 Simon, chapter 7.

not as strong an influence in the Persian Empire. \(^{14}\) A study of Persian Christian anti-Jewish polemic in comparison to certain rabbinic texts indicates otherwise. I will show below how Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* illuminate rabbinic conceptions of chosenness and redemption. This comparative analysis uncovers the historical conflict between fourth-century Persian Christians and Jews as well as providing a more nuanced reading of the texts. It will become clear that Aphrahat’s writings are as much a key to understanding the rabbinic texts as the rabbinic texts are in understanding Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*.

**Historical Background to Aphrahat’s Polemic**

Before one can begin to illuminate the content of this particular confrontation in mid-fourth century Persian Mesopotamia, one has to understand its historical context. As mentioned above, when Shabur return unsuccessful from his campaigns against Roman Nisibis, he burdened the Christian community with an extra poll tax. It appears that the king clamped down on the Persian Christian community, not so much because he thought that they had the funds, but to test their loyalty to the State. As Christians, in a Zoroastrian kingdom, they had the dubious reputation of being friendly with the Romans—the Persians’ aggressive enemy—because the Romans were also Christian believers. Eusebius claims that Constantine had earlier warned Shabur against harming the Persian Christians—for all Christians were under his (Constantine’s) protection. \(^{15}\) Constantine’s death in 337 CE provided Shabur with an excuse to test the loyalties of the Persian Christians. The *Narration of Shem’on*, the more detailed of the two Shem’on hagiographies, elaborates on this claim:

[Shabur] put together reasons to subjugate them in a double tribute levied on all the Christians that were in the jurisdiction of Persia. And he wrote a letter from Beit Huzaye to the governor of Beit Aramaye thus: Immediately you see this order of our divine persons, in the writing of this leaflet, which was sent from us; arrest Shem’on, head of the Nasraye, and do not leave him until he signs the deed and accepts upon himself the double poll tax, and [agrees] to collect and take a double tribute from everyone of the people of the Nasraye that are in the land of us divine persons and is settled in our jurisdiction.

For to us divine persons there are tribulations and wars, while to them is ease and luxury, while in our own country they reside. But they are of the same mind as Caesar our enemy. To us is contest and to them is peace. \(^{16}\)

Shem’on loudly protested this offensive financial imposition, proclaiming his utmost faithfulness to the State. The bishop’s refusal to worship the

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16 *Narration of Shimon*, 4.
Zoroastrian deities that the Persians claimed protected the king and his kingdom, however, rather than his inability to pay the poll tax ultimately sealed his fate. What started as a political maneuver became a religious persecution. J. Duchesne-Guillemin has noted that when religion and politics became increasingly intertwined in the Sasanian empire, minority populations were oppressed. He comments, 'The whole history of the Sasanians can be envisaged in terms of the relation between the temporal and spiritual powers, which now support, now oppose one another.'\textsuperscript{17} When the priesthood and the king were close, the fanatical Zoroastrians had license to persecute minorities, as in the time of Kartir (mid-third century) and under Shapur II.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet, in the continuation of the Narration, the Jews and not the Zoroastrian priests are accused of calumniating against the Christians in Shabur's court. The Narration relates:

[The Jews] began to tell tales about the celebrated Shem'on by slander, saying, 'if the King of kings, Lord of all the earth, were to send great and wise letters from your majesty, with glorious presents and desirable gifts of your honor to Caesar, they would not be honorable in his eyes. But if this Shem'on should send to him one small and despicable letter, he would get up and worship and accept it in his two hands and its commands he would fulfill eagerly. And with these there is not a secret of your kingdom that he does not write down and make known to Caesar.'\textsuperscript{19}

This text asserts that the Jews convinced the king that Shem'on was not trustworthy since he and the Roman Caesar were co-religionists. Anything Shem'on requested, no matter how insignificant, the Romans would supply. In addition, the bishop regularly betrayed state secrets to the enemy. According to the Narration, this was a specifically Jewish accusation, not a ploy of the Magian priests, because the Jews were always 'out to get' the Christians. This passage actually opens with the statement that, 'the Jews then, a people who at all times are opposing our people—those who killed the prophets, and crucified the Messiah and stoned the apostles—they continually thirst for our blood'.\textsuperscript{20}

It is not clear how much influence the Jews had in the Sasanian period, though it was certainly less than they had wielded during the Parthian period. The centralized Sasanian government and its alignment with a state religion, Zoroastrianism, eliminated many of the privileges Jews enjoyed under the semi-feudal Parthian state.\textsuperscript{21} In addition, the historical accuracy

\textsuperscript{17} J. Duchesne-Guillemin, 'Zoroastrian Religion', \textit{Cambridge History of Iran}, \textit{(CHI)} 3(2): 874.
\textsuperscript{18} J. Duchesne-Guillemin, pp. 874–906.
\textsuperscript{19} Narration, 12.
\textsuperscript{20} Narration 12.
\textsuperscript{21} Isaiah Gafni, \textit{Yehude Bavel ba-tekufat ha-talmud: haye ha-hevra veha-ruah} [The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1990), pp. 36–38. Gafni points out that the Parthians often came to the aid of the Hashmonean kings, and that Parthian Jews fought diligently against the Roman invasions (pp. 26–28). J. Neusner even claims that the Parthians used Jews in their diplomatic corps. See his article in the \textit{CHI} 3(2): 913.
of the *Narration* and *Martyrology* of Shem'on comes into question due to other passages that clearly reflect the effects of the Emperor Julian's reign, on the one hand, and the artificially constructed narrative parallels between the trials and deaths of Jesus and Shem'on, on the other. The narrator creates an historical parallel between the destruction of Jerusalem some years after Jesus' condemnation and death by the Jews of Jerusalem and one otherwise unrecorded Persian anti-Jewish persecution twenty-four years after Shem'on's death—during Julian's short, but active reign. There, the Persians persecuted the Jews for following a false messiah who called the Jews to fulfill Julian's plan to rebuild the temple. According to the Shemon texts this was part of God's divine plan to punish the Jews for condemning Shem'on to the authorities just as Jerusalem was earlier destroyed (by God with the help of the Romans) because the Jews had condemned Jesus. While this particular persecution is not noted elsewhere, the fact that it suits the narrator's purposes (of paralleling the martyrdoms of Jesus and Shem'on) one has to question the involvement of Jews at all in Shem'on's death. If the parallel Jewish disaster during Julian's reign is fictitious, every other allusion to Jews is equally suspicious. There are other passages which also evince the narrator's penchant for paralleling Shem'on's martyrdom with Jesus' including the supposed date of Shem'on's martyrdom—the 14th of Nisan, the eve of Passover.\(^\text{22}\)

Furthermore, much of the *Shem'on* texts are concerned with Shem'on's trial before the Zoroastrian priesthood. The exasperated magians, after questioning Shem'on about his faith and loyalty to the Persian king, condemn him to death for refusing to worship the Zoroastrian deities who protect the king and his subjects. This refusal is tantamount to treason and deserving of death. The lengthiness of these theological debates seem to imply that the Shem'on's true accusers were the magians and not the Jews.

Ultimately, due to this document's late date and the questionable character of Jewish influence within the Sasanian kingdom, it is not likely that the Jews were actually involved in the instigation or execution of the physical persecution (i.e. to the death) of Shem'on or the Christians in Shapur II's reign. However, other sources suggest that the Jews during this time spiritually persecuted the beleaguered Christian community by seeking converts from their midsts, or at least by undermining the beliefs of the faithful. A polemic against Christianity—echoes of which are heard in the rabbinic literature—stimulating Aphrahat's anti-Jewish refutations may well have been the outcome of this spiritual persecution.

I believe that Aphrahat, finding himself and his community troubled by this Jewish spiritual onslaught, retaliated in kind. Writing in the 340s—at the height of the Persian persecution of the Christians—he composed nine demonstrations against the Jews. Not much is known about Aphrahat, except for what he shows us himself. He was clearly an educated man with a vast knowledge of scriptures. He was a minister of the church—

\(^{22}\) Paralleling a famous martyr's death with Jesus passion was popular among early Christian hagiographers. See for instance the 'Martyrdom of Polycarp'.
perhaps even a bishop—for he uses his position to criticize other bishops and church leaders.\textsuperscript{23} While some sources indicated that he hailed from northern Mesopotamia, his writings show that he was involved in the politics of the church in the south as well.\textsuperscript{24} Aphrahat’s Demonstrations are one of the only surviving mid-fourth-century Syriac-Christian commentaries on the behavior of one of the largest Jewish populations at the time, the Mesopotamian/Babylonian communities.

In these exposes Aphrahat instructs his congregants how to defend, or fight back against Jewish theological arguments—a number of which he claims to have heard directly from Jews. Several times in the Demonstrations, Aphrahat instructs his readers how to defend against the Jewish onslaught because ‘they [the Jews] alter and weaken the minds of those simple and common people who are attracted and captivated by their disturbing argument’.\textsuperscript{25} Parrying with his opponent, Aphrahat accuses the missionaries of ‘speaking foolishly in disputation’\textsuperscript{26} while being deceived of the truth. Not only is each reader encouraged to ‘defend a pressing matter and to give answer so that [he] will strengthen the mind of whoever listens so that he will not be deceived by their [the Jews] seditious arguments’,\textsuperscript{27} but also to know ‘what is right to say against [the Jews]’ and how to ‘defend against the Jews’\textsuperscript{28}

It appears that the anti-Jewish polemic which Aphrahat presents in his compositions was one-half of an on-going conversation between Jews and Christians in Mesopotamia at the height of the Persian persecutions on the subject of true faith. The other half, as will become evident, can be found in the rabbinic writings. Whether or not these particular issues were actually discussed—exactly in the way Aphrahat describes—cannot be definitively answered from the evidence available, but rather it can be suggested that conversations of these sorts was instigated or at least intensified due to the crisis within the Christian community.

It has been postulated that Aphrahat did not actually polemicize against Jews, or at least not rabbinic Jews, but composed his Demonstrations strictly for internal consumption. Marie-Joseph Pierre suggests that any seemingly ‘Jewish’ passages, or influences in Aphrahat’s writings were inheritances from Jewish-Christians, or former Jews within his community and that Aphrahat’s polemic is really directed against these non-orthodox elements within his

\textsuperscript{23} See Demonstration 14 where he address the other bishops as equals.

\textsuperscript{24} A late manuscript of the Demonstrations notes that the author was ‘the sage Aphrahat who is Mar Jacob bishop of Mar Mattai’. See the introduction to J. M. Pierre, Aphraates ‘Les Exposés’, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988 and 1989), 1:35, and J. Parisot’s introduction to ‘Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes’, in Patriologia Syriaca, ed. R. Graffin, 3 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894 and 1907), 1:xii. Mar Mattai was a monastery on or near Mt Elphaph in northern Mesopotamia. Demonstration 14 is probably directed at the bishops or clerics of Seleucia-Ctesiphon who were fighting among themselves for control of this key bishopric.

\textsuperscript{25} Demonstration 18:1.

\textsuperscript{26} Demonstration 15:8.

\textsuperscript{27} Demonstration 19:12.

\textsuperscript{28} For example, Demonstrations 17:12, 18:12.
church. However, Aphrahat never mentions these not-properly-Christian members, but rather he constantly criticizes Jews, especially Jewish sages and teachers. Not once does he admonish members of his church for following other, misguided Christians, but only for listening to the Jews.

Jacob Neusner, on the other hand, has suggested that the Jews in question were not rabbinic Jews, but ‘Yahwistic’ Jews who were unfamiliar with rabbinic Judaism. Accordingly, Aphrahat’s description of Judaism is more suited to a biblical construct of Judaism than a rabbinic one. However, a comparison of Aphrahat’s writings to certain rabbinic passages clearly demonstrates a familiarity with rabbinic argumentation and biblical exegesis as will be shown below.

While it is clear that Aphrahat’s arguments were meant to counter Jewish arguments from outside his community, the Christian attraction to Judaism from within his congregation continued due to its deep Jewish roots. Most scholars concur that the Persian Christian community was first evangelized in the second century by Jewish-Christians from Palestine, and in part populated by Jewish converts. More dynamic Christian communities, however, were established in northern Mesopotamia, where the Jewish communities were smaller, than in southern Mesopotamia where the Jews were more numerous. Nevertheless, some uneducated Persian Christians, with Jewish blood in their background, hounded by the Magian priests, opted to save themselves from Shabur’s persecution by ‘backsliding’ into Judaism. Even the non-Jewish convert to Christianity may have sought a haven in Judaism, another monotheistic salvation religion with similar roots to Christianity. The Jews, for their part, might have seen this instance as a chance to regain souls lost a generation or two before to the increasingly competitive Christian faith.

Furthermore, there are indications in the rabbinic writings that converts abounded in Mahoza, a suburb of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the hub of the Persian persecution at around this time. A talmudic legend relates that when:

R. Zeira lectured in Mahoza: ‘a proselyte is permitted [to marry] a bastard’, [the audience all pelted him with their citrons [etrogim], [to which Rava responded]: ‘Is there anyone who says a thing like that in a place where there are proselytes?!’ Then Rava lectured in Mahoza: a proselyte is permitted [to

29 M. J. Pierre 1:115.
33 Gavin, pp. 31–32.
marry] the daughter of a priest', [the audience] presented him with silks.  

While the historicity of this particular event cannot be determined, the fact that some rabbis associated Mahoza in the time of Rava (mid-fourth century) with large numbers of converts is significant because it parallels the most devastating years of the Persian anti-Christian persecutions (341–379 CE). 

In addition, there is abundant evidence from rabbinic literature that the rabbis were equally concerned with the same problematic issues that provoked Aphrahat. An in-depth comparison of the issues that Aphrahat addresses with certain rabbinic passages illuminates these Jewish–Christian 'conversations'. Using Aphrahat as a guide one can see that many of the issues that Aphrahat addresses and responds to are discussed, or 'answered' in the rabbinic texts. Sometimes, Aphrahat merely cites an older Jewish or rabbinic argument—that he then refutes, but at other times there is evidence of an actual 'conversation' or exchange of ideas, biblical exegesis, or even theology between the two communities as they fought to extend or defend their spiritual territory. These 'conversations' add weight to the argument that the Jews actively participated in fourth-century religious debates, or even instigated them.

**Persecution and Chosenness**

In his 'Demonstration on Persecution', Aphrahat counters a perceived Jewish argument that the Persian anti-Christian persecutions were a negative sign from God. Aphrahat relates:

'It happened one day that a man who is called 'the sage of the Jews' asked me and said, 'Yeshu who is called your teacher wrote to you thus: "If there shall be in you faith like one seed of mustard, you will say to this mountain, 'move', and it will move from before you; and even, 'lift up', and it will fall into the sea, for it will obey you."' [Mt. 17:19; 21:21] 'And thus', [he continued], 'there is not among all of you one wise person, whose prayer is heard, and who asks God that your persecutions should cease from you.'

A Jewish sage, whoever he may be, questions the validity of Aphrahat’s faith and supports his supposition with a Gospel verse. If the Christians believed correctly, God would protect them. Yet, God persecutes them through divine agents, the Persians; obviously God does not listen to Christian prayers, for their beliefs are ill conceived. Emphasizing the opponents' downtrodden state as a manifestation of divine rejection was of course a tactic used by many Christian polemicists against the Jews after 70 CE. Aphrahat cites this 'proof' himself in other demonstrations. Here, nevertheless, it is used by the Jew against the Christians.

While the sage's claim that the Christians have no faith, or that God does not hear their prayers, infuriates Aphrahat, his reply does not defend the Christian interpretation of the gospel verse quoted by the Jew. Instead,
Aphrahat reverses the accusation: the Jews have the wrong faith and God no longer listens to their prayers. He supports his argument with other proof-texts from the Hebrew bible. However, before he constructs his own argument that God does not listen to Jewish prayers—based on his reading of Isaiah 43:2–3—Aphrahat demonstrates his acquaintance with Jewish exegesis. He relates that:

Then even I [Aphrahat] asked him [about] the words from the law and the prophets. And I said to him, ‘you are convinced, even when you are dispersed, that God is with you’. He agreed with me, [saying] ‘God is with us, for did not God say to Israel, “Even in the land of your enemies I have not left you and I have not annulled my covenant with you?”’ (Lev. 26:44).36

Aphrahat’s Jewish sage interprets Leviticus 26:44 clearly within a rabbinic framework, for this biblical verse is cited several times in the rabbinic writings to substantiate the very same argument that ‘God is with us’. This in and of itself adds weight to the theory that Aphrahat was familiar with rabbinic arguments and therefore must have been in conversation with rabbinic Jews. The Palestinian targums to Leviticus and Midrash Esther Rabbah elaborate on this verse, always connecting God’s promise to the particular historical situation. The text from Esther Rabbah is as follows:

Samuel opened with the text: ‘And yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor spurn them so as to destroy them, breaking my covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God.’ (Lev.26:44). ‘I did not reject them’ in Babylon; ‘nor did I spurn them’ in Media. ‘To destroy them’ in Greece. ‘breaking my covenant with them’ when subject to the kingdom of wickedness [Rome]. ‘For I am the Lord their God,’ in the time to come. R. Hiya taught, ‘I did not reject them’ in the days of Vespasian; ‘Nor did I spurn them’ in the days of Trajan. ‘To destroy them’ in the days of Haman. ‘breaking my covenant with them’ in the days of the Romans. ‘For I am the Lord their God’ in the days of Gog and Magog.37

Just as these rabbis connect Lev. 26:44 to the historical situation in second-century Roman Palestine, so too our ‘Sage of the Jews’ connects it to fourth-century Persia. Furthermore, the Babylonian Talmud repeats Samuel’s rendition, while making a few changes; the kingdoms mentioned there, in order, are the Greeks, the Babylonians, Haman and the Persians. In addition, a baraita is added to the Babylonian passage:

‘I did not reject them’ in the days of the Chaldeans when I appointed for them Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ‘Nor did I spurn them’ in the days of the Greeks when I appointed for them Simon the Righteous and Hashmonai and his sons and Mattathias the High Priest; ‘To destroy them’ in the days of Haman when I appointed for them Mordechai and Esther; ‘breaking my covenant with them’ in the days of the Persians when I appointed for those of the house of Rabbi [Judah the Prince] and the Sages of the generations. ‘For I am the Lord their God’ in the time to come, when there will be no nation or people who will be able to rule over them.38

36 Demonstration 21:2.
37 Esther Rabbah, petihta 4.
38 BT Megillah 11a.
The verse from Leviticus, which in the biblical text has no historical context, is given one in the targums and midrash. Not only was God present in all those places where the Jews have lived and suffered (both biblical and post-biblical), but God will continue to be in all the places in the future—up until the end of days. The passage from the Midrash Esther Rabbah clearly reflects a Palestinian milieu since the final kingdom mentioned is Rome. While the Babylonian talmudic text does not mention Rome, but rather Persia, one might suppose that the rabbis changed the text to support their political situation in Sasanian Persia. Especially noteworthy is the change in the sentence, "breaking my covenant with them" in the days of the Persians when I appointed for those of the house of Rabbi [Judah the Prince] and the Sages of the generations. Rabbi Judah the Prince was a Jewish leader in third-century Palestine, under Roman hegemony. The text should read 'in the days of the Romans'. And indeed, in the medieval manuscripts the text has 'Romans' instead of 'Persians'. This passage was probably changed or censored in the Medieval period in order not to offend the Christian authorities. While the probability of a late textual correction eliminates the possibility of fourth-century Babylonian rabbis changing the Palestinian text, it indicates a later generation's awareness that things were not always perfect in Persia.

Nevertheless, Samuel's quotation and the additional baraita, while both referring to Rome, were repeated in the Babylonian talmudic text. The repeated historical contextualization of the biblical verse must have made an impression on the Babylonian rabbis as well, for the sentiment of the midrash is summed up in this Babylonian talmudic passage: 'In every place that they are exiled to, the Shekhinah [God's presence] is with them.'

Finally, since Aphrahat's sage quotes the same verse from Leviticus, Aphrahat was obviously aware that it was used to support the Jewish argument for God's continued favor even in the diaspora—even in fourth-century Persia. The Palestinian targums, from which perhaps this interpretation originated, were read and studied in the Babylonian schools and synagogues. While Aphrahat's 'Sage of the Jews' cannot be precisely determined, any synagogue attending Jew could have been taught this rabbinic reading of Leviticus. In addition, it has been shown that many early midrashic and targumic traditions were repeated in the Babylonian writings—an instance of which is seen here—often for purposes different or beyond the aggadah's original use. The later, Babylonian rabbis simply re-apply this passage to their own

39 In the talmudic texts Rome often referred to Christiandom. The manuscript variations can be found both in the Dikduke Sofrim and Ein Yaakov.
40 BT Megillah 29a
42 Shama Friedman, in his article 'Literary Development and Historicity in the Aggadic Narrative of the Babylonian Talmud: A Study based upon B.M. 83b–86a', in N. Waldman, ed., Community and Culture: essays in Jewish studies in honor of the ninetyieth anniversary of the founding of Graetz College 1895–1985 (Ardmore, PA: Seth Press, 1987), pp. 67–80, has shown that when a Palestinian aggadah is incorporated into the Babylonian text, the Babylonian authors
socio-historical situation. Many a Jew, rabbi or not, would have been aware of Leviticus 26:44 and its exegetical implications, and it is more than likely that Aphrahat learned about this particular interpretation, as he claims, in conversation with a Jew—who was possibly even a rabbi.

Redemption

Another issue debated among Jews and Christians was the question of redemption which was closely related to that of chosenness because the greatest Jewish ‘proof’ of chosenness, lay in the scriptural prophecies of a final redemption. In the End of Days God was supposed to redeem the divinely chosen people. This redemption included the ingathering of the exiles and the return to Jerusalem. This concept was implied in the passages cited above when ‘For I am the Lord their God’ of Leviticus is interpreted to mean that God will be with Israel during the great battle at the end of days—‘Gog and Magog’—and ‘in the time to come, when there will be no nation or people who will be able to rule over them’.

Quoting from Deuteronomy and the Prophets the rabbis further support their beliefs and hopes for redemption. For instance they write:

In the time to come, however, '[e]ven if your outcasts are at the corners of the sky from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there he will fetch you.' (Dt. 30:4).43 ‘And God will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.’ (Is. 11:12). Isaiah in the same strain says, ‘And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with shouting to Zion, crowned with joy everlasting. They shall attain joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing flee.’ (Is. 35:10).44

Without much commentary the authors of this midrashic passage marshal several biblical verses to support their argument that God has promised a future redemption.

Against this assertion of a future redemption Aphrahat insists that the prophesies of which the Jews speak have already been fulfilled:

I shall persuade you that Israel was saved two times, once from Egypt, the second time from Babylonia. For Isaiah said, ‘The Lord will stretch his hand a second time to acquire the remnant of his people that remains in the land of Assyria, Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, Hamath, and from the distant islands.’ (Is. 11:11). Now if they were destined to be gathered together and redeemed, why did Isaiah say that the Lord would stretch out his hand a second time and acquire the rem-

43 It is not clear from the rabbinic texts whether the rabbis expected a full physical redemption or something else ‘in the time to come’ when the Messiah should arrive.

44 Numbers Rabbah 23:14. While this midrash was not edited until the eleventh century, it contains texts from earlier periods. While this particular passage is most likely Palestinian, it is also possible that the traditions was known in Babylonian in the years before the text was edited. See also BT Megillah 17b, 29a, Pesahim 88a, Ta’anit 8b.
nant of his people that remained? If there were still a salvation for them, Isaiah should have said, ‘God will stretch out his hand a third time to acquire the remnant of his people’, and not say ‘a second time’. Aphrahat, with the support of Isaiah 11:11 (‘The Lord will stretch out his hand a second time’), claims that the second redemption has already taken place—when the Jews returned from Babylonia. Here lies the basic difference in Jewish and Christian interpretation of future redemptions as understood from Isaiah 11. The rabbis, leaning on the next verse, Isaiah 11:12 (‘Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the earth . . . the Lord your God will gather you’), insist that the second redemption/ingathering has yet to come. The return from Babylonia was not a true redemption, comparable to the Exodus from Egypt (the first redemption), leaving the second redemption predicted by Isaiah sometime in the future. The following midrash solves the inherent implication of Isaiah 11:11—that the second redemption was in the past in this way:

Nahman son of R. Hisda gave the following exposition. Why is it written, ‘Thus said the Lord to his anointed one [le meshiḥo], to Cyrus, “whose right hand I have grasped?”’ (Is. 45:1) Now was Cyrus the Messiah? [No!] Rather the Holy Blessed One, said I have a complaint on your behalf against Cyrus. I said, ‘He shall build my house and gather my exiles,’ (Is. 45:13) but he [Cyrus] merely said, ‘Whosoever there is among you of all this people let them go up’ (Ezra 1:3). There is a problem in interpreting Isaiah 45:1, which appears to name Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed the Jews to return from exile, as God’s Messiah, or messenger. The rabbis wonder why the text has both ‘to his anointed one’ and ‘to Cyrus’ in the same sentence. If Cyrus and the ‘anointed one’ were one and the same there would be no need to mention both. Assuming, as the rabbis do, that no word in the text is superfluous, the ‘anointed one’ must be someone other than Cyrus. Therefore the rabbis understand from this verse that God was talking to the Messiah-to-come about Cyrus at the time of the Babylonian return. The second physical ingathering, which will be lead by the Messiah, would include all Jews wherever they lived. Cyrus, the instigator of the Babylonian return, was not the prophesied redeemer because he did not lead the Jews out of exile—as Moses did—but merely permitted them to return. God said, ‘gather my exiles’, but all Cyrus did was say, ‘whosoever there is among you of all this people let him go up’. Nor did all of the Jews return from Babylonia, thereby eliminating the possibility of a full ingathering. Therefore the second redemption, as predicted in Isaiah, had not yet happened.

45 Demonstration 19:7.
46 BT Megillah 12a. This particular midrash is not found anywhere else.
47 The rabbis’ ambiguous phrase that the ingathering will occur ‘in the time to come’ leaves some question as to whether or not they meant some time in this life—or in the next. It is even harder to determine to which Aphrahat alludes—this life or the next, but since he does not connect the Messiah to the Jewish hopes of an ingathering one might conclude that he understands the Jews to believe in a physical redemption in this life.
Rejection

Another tactic open to Aphrahat—and certainly not unique to him—solves both the issues of chosenness and future redemption. In answer to the Jewish claim that Christians were not among God’s chosen people, Aphrahat asserts that not only are the Christians among the Chosen People—they are the Chosen People. It is true, he would say, that the Jews once were God’s chosen—but God has since rejected them in favor of the Christians, the Gentiles, the nation from among the nations.

Focusing on certain Prophetic verses, Aphrahat interprets God’s relationship with the Jews in direct opposition to rabbinic exegesis: God rejected the ‘people’ [the Jews] and replaced them with the ‘peoples of the nations’ [the Christians]. A Christian, however, who did not have the benefit of Aphrahat’s religious education, might be confused or even convinced by Jewish understandings of chosenness. In order to combat this problem Aphrahat explains the situation to his readers:

When he [God] saw that they [Israel] did not listen to him, he turned to the peoples [the Gentiles who become Christian], and said to them ‘Hear O peoples, and know O congregation which is among them, and you will hear, O land, in its fullest.’ (Jer. 6: 18–19). And when he saw that they [the Jews] presumptuously rose against him and shamelessly responded to his word, then he left them as he had prophesied, and said, ‘I have left behind my house. I have abandoned my inheritance. I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of his enemies. And in his place a speckled bird has become my inheritance.’ (Jer. 12:6–9). And this is the congregation which is from the peoples which has been gathered from among all the languages. So that you will know that truly he has left them Isaiah again said concerning them, ‘You have abandoned your people, the house of Jacob.’ (Is. 2:6). 48

When the Jews ceased listening to God, God turned to the peoples, the Gentiles, calling on them as a replacement for God’s originally chosen people. Aphrahat understands the ‘speckled bird of prey’ to be the Christian community which came from the nations of the world, since this bird has many spots on its coat, each representing one of the many peoples that heard the divine call when God rejected the sinful Jews. 49

Perhaps acknowledging this Christian interpretation and the attraction that the Jewish argument held for some Christians, a rabbinic passage on Isaiah 43 notes:

And thus ... even the peoples of the world ask to come under the wings of the Shekhinah [God’s presence] at the hour when Israel is doing God’s will. 50

48 Demonstration 16:2–3.
49 The call of the Gentiles is a popular theme in patristic literature based on the example of Paul in Romans 11:11. Paul, however, never claims that the Jews were rejected, in fact he insists on the opposite (Rom.11:1). The Gentiles have been called to provoke the Jews into believing. A favourite verse of Aphrahat’s, Dt. 32:21, ‘I shall provoke you with a people which is not a people and with a foolish nation I shall anger you’, used by Paul to illustrate his point (. 10:19; 1 Cor. 10:22), helps Aphrahat support his theory of rejection (Dem. 16:1).
50 Aggadat Bereshit, Buber p. 33.
The ‘peoples of the world’ might allude to converts, perhaps even Christian converts, crossing over to Judaism when that religion and its members appeared to be under divine protection. The Jews claim that God grants them protection because they continue to follow the commandments—the ritual law.\(^5^1\) This would be an ironic twist on Aphrahat’s definition of the ‘peoples’. For Aphrahat the ‘peoples’ come to God through Christianity—for the rabbis they can also come to God through Judaism. There is also a chance that this remark comments on the Gentile Christian attempt to usurp divine chosenness from the Jews—exactly what Aphrahat claims has happened already.

Emphasizing the chosen status of Christians, despite the persecutions and what the Jews said, Aphrahat hoped to encourage his oppressed flock. Although Aphrahat did not wish to see his community physically destroyed by the Persians, at the same time he wanted to discourage religious defection from Christianity (and hence show a spiritual victory to Judaism—the eternal opponent). Much to Aphrahat’s dismay the rabbis’ defence—that they were still the true chosen people—appears to have been a particularly troublesome one among his congregants. In addition to the various exegetical prooftexts the Jews could marshal for such an assertion, the very fact that the Jews thrived while the Christians suffered supported the Jewish case. Nevertheless, the rabbis prepared responses to Christian accusations like Aphrahat’s. The following midrash can be understood in light of the Christian argument that God had abandoned the Jews for their sins:

The Holy Blessed One, said to Hosea, ‘Your children have sinned’, to which he should have replied, ‘They are your children, they are the children of your favorite ones, they are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; take pity on them.’ It is not enough that he did not say thus, but he said to God: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! The whole world is yours; exchange them for a different nation.’ Said the Holy Blessed One, ‘What shall I do with this old man? I will order him: “Go and marry a harlot and conceive children of harlotry”; and then I will order him: “Send her away from thy presence”. If he will be able to send [her] away, so will I too send Israel away ...’

After two sons and one daughter were born to him, the Holy Blessed One, said to Hosea: ‘Should you not have learned from your teacher Moses, for as soon as I spoke with him he separated from his wife; so should you also part from her.’ ‘Sovereign of the Universe!’ pleaded he: ‘I have children by her, and I can neither expel her nor divorce her.’ Said the Holy Blessed One, to him: ‘Then if you, whose wife is a harlot and your children are the children of harlotry, and you do not know whether they are yours or they belong to others, yet you feel thus; then Israel who are my children, the children of my proven ones the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; one of the four possessions which I have acquired in my world ... Yet you say, “Exchange them for a different people!”’

As soon as he [Hosea] perceived that he had sinned, he arose to supplicate mercy for himself ... Then God began to bless them ... and it shall come to

\(^{51}\) Since this midrash, however, cannot be dated exactly, for it was probably composed in Palestine, but redacted in Babylon a few centuries later, one can never be sure to whom the rabbis referred in this passage.
pass that, '... instead of that which was said unto them: 'You are not my people', it shall be said unto them: 'You are the children of the living God.' (Hosea 2:1).\(^{52}\)

In this midrashic passage, based on Hosea 1, God teaches the prophet a lesson. The children of Israel have sinned and God calls on Hosea to reprimand them. Instead Hosea tells God to disown them. In anger God commands Hosea to marry a harlot (Hosea 1:2). After some years God commands Hosea to divorce his wife because of her licentious ways. Hosea replies that he cannot because he is her husband and father of her children. Likewise, God points out, is God to the children of Israel. How can Hosea suggest, therefore, that God divorce them just because they have sinned? The passage ends with a reaffirmation of God's blessing upon the children of Israel—based on other verses from Hosea 2.

While this particular passage exists in a shorter form in the Targum Jonathan to the Prophets, it appears only once in the Babylonian rabbinic literature.\(^{53}\) In BT Pesahim the rabbis repeat the basic targumic plot line, but embellish it with other scriptural citations that support the midrash's theme. The repetition of this older Palestinian interpretation, may give a clue to its importance. The rabbis, needing a strong defence against Christian claims, might have recalled this particular midrash at this time (mid-fourth to fifth centuries) because the Christians still (or again) declared that God had rejected the Jews and had chosen a new people—the Christians.\(^ {54}\)

The Jewish belief, emphatically repeated here, is that no matter how bad the Jews have been, God will never desert them. This is not to say that they have free reign to sin, but that whatever they do, God will forgive them in the end. God is joined with Israel for better or for worse because they, the Jews—the true Israel— are God's children through the divine promise to Abraham.

Hosea, in this passage, at first suggests to God that if Israel has been unfaithful, God should simply give them up and chose another. This is exactly what some Christians, like Aphrahat, say that God did: God rejected Israel and chose the Christians, who are the true Israel. God chastises Hosea demonstrating that if Hosea, whose children are the offspring of harlotry, is reluctant to send away his own children, how can God? Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are God's children and God cannot reject them—no matter what. When Hosea begs for forgiveness, God instructs him to ask forgiveness for all of Israel, which God grants in answer

\(^{52}\) BT Pesahim 87a–b. In some versions of the Bible this last verse is Hosea 1:10.

\(^{53}\) Targum Jonathan is a Palestinian targum to the prophets, one of the earliest translations of the Bible into Aramaic. It was most likely composed or collated over the centuries from the time of the Herodian dynasty to that of the Sasanian, although most of it was probably written around the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 133–135 CE. On the historical background of this targum see L. Smolar and M. Auerbach, 'Studies in Targum Jonathan to the Prophets', and P. Churgin, 'Targum Jonathan to the Prophets', both in Library of Biblical Studies, ed., H. M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1983), pp. 63–148, 237–279. See also the targum text of A. Sperber, The Bible in Aramaic (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), vol. 3: Targum Jonathan, the latter prophets, pp. 385–6. Smolar and Auerbach see this whole passage as a halakhic discussion of proper marriage patterns. Hosea was reprimanded by God for thinking that God could divorce the children of Israel, p. 42.

\(^{54}\) See note 42 above on the use of Palestinian midrashim in Babylonian literature.
to Hosea’s reworded prayers—blessing the children of Israel and reaffirming their chosenness.

The original targum text may actually reflect an earlier conflict with the Christians in second-century Palestine, when the church was first struggling to define itself as separate and opposed to the synagogue. Eugene Mihaly has demonstrated, in reference to a similar discussion in Sifre55 on Deuteronomy concerning the election of Israel, that the second and third century Palestinian rabbis did polemicize against Christianity in their writings.56 The particular selection that Mihaly interprets is a refutation of the Christian claim that God rejected the Jews because they were unworthy. The rabbis answer that God cannot and would not do such a thing, because of God’s promise to Abraham.

In fourth-century Persia, Aphrahat argues, citing the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, that the sinful Jews had lost their chosenness. He writes, ‘And when [God] saw that they [the Jews] presumptuously rose against him and shamelessly responded to his word, then [God] left them as [Jeremiah] had prophesied.’ The midrash on Hosea, which was probably composed in the same milieu as the one cited by Mihaly, is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud in response to this particular Christian anti-Jewish polemic. The rabbis, searching for supporting material to prove their assertions of validity in the face of Christian criticism, re-use this earlier text—strengthening it with other biblical references. While Aphrahat claims that the Jews were disinherited for their disobedience, the rabbis insist that despite the Jews’ sinfulness, God cannot replace them for God’s promise to Israel is irrevocable. In response to Hosea’s suggestion of exchanging the sinful Jews for another nation, God answers,

‘Then if you, whose wife is a harlot and your children are the children of harlotry, and you do not know whether they are yours or they belong to others, yet you feel thus; then Israel who are my children, the children of my proven ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’

How can God disinherit his own children? The idea that God, after his covenant with Abraham, would even consider going back on his word was absurd in the eyes of the rabbis.

In retaliation, Aphrahat can only give some support from the New Testament, since such prooftexts would be wasted in disputation with Jews

55 Sifre is a tannaitic midrash probably edited in the third century. This is the text of Piska 312: For the portion of the Lord is His people (Dt. 32:9). A parable: A king had a field which he leased to tenants. When the tenants began to steal from it, he took it away from them and leased it to their children. When the children began to act worse than their fathers, he took it away from them and gave it to (the original tenants’) grandchildren. When these too became worse than their predecessors, a son was born to him. He then said to the grandchildren, ‘Leave my property. You may not remain therein. Give me back my portion, so that I may repossess it.’ Thus also, when our father Abraham came into the world, unworthy (descendants) issued from him, Ishmael and all of Keturah’s children. When Isaac came into the world, unworthy (descendants) issued from him, Esau and all the princes of Edom, and they became worse than their predecessors. When Jacob came into the world, he did not produce unworthy (descendants), rather all his children were worthy, as it said, And Jacob was a perfect man, dwelling in tents (Gen. 25:27).

who do not believe in that text’s sanctity, or even on Christians who found the Hebrew Scriptures more weighty than the Christian texts. Aphrahat’s declared purpose, however, is not only to provide material for the debate but also to supply moral support for the contestants:

This short record I have written to you concerning the peoples, because the Jews boast and say, ‘we are the people of God and the children of Abraham’. But we shall listen to John [the Baptist] who said, when they boasted [saying] ‘we are the children of Abraham’, then John said to them ‘you should not be haughty and say, Abraham is father to us, for from these very rocks can God raise up children for Abraham’ (Matt.3:9).57

John the Baptist refutes the Jews’ exclusive claim to chosenness and to Abraham, as reflected in the Hosea targum above: ‘They are Thy children, they are the children of Thy favored ones, they are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Hence, a believing Christian should be wary of such Jewish claims because God need not be beholden to sinful humans and had forewarned the Jews of their demise through the prophets.

Conclusion

Ultimately we cannot determine whether Aphrahat ever debated face to face with a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi. Yet, several times in the Demonstrations Aphrahat mentions a Jewish sage that he has encountered or cites Jewish arguments that he has heard. While many historical details are now lost, one can sense from Aphrahat’s concerned answers that some people in his community had experienced encounters with Jews that had included informal religious discussions or debates. Some, greatly impressed or disturbed by the Jewish argumentation, turned to Aphrahat for better understanding. If the Jews could ‘prove’ their exegetical readings of Scripture by virtue of their unharrassed state in Persia, perhaps they were right in saying that God did not hear Christian prayers? Unfortunately for the historian one does not find similar Jewish documents explicitly portraying Jewish perceptions of this situation. Nevertheless, by examining Aphrahat’s citations in comparison to certain rabbinic passages it can be determined how these polemics were carried out. Perhaps a Jew, just returning from hearing a sermon in synagogue about the Chosen People, encountered a Christian and struck up a conversation. Using a midrash she had just heard, the Jew convinced the Christian that his reading of the text was faulty. The Christian, now deeply distressed, returned to his leader, Aphrahat, looking for answers and consolation. While the grounds for debate before the persecutions were more or less equal, the extra pressures of physical oppression may have been too much for some Christians who chose to accept the Jewish interpretations as a means to salvation.

The rabbinic texts discussed in this paper support the assertion that Jews, particularly rabbinic Jews, actively participated in a polemic with the Christians during Aphrahat’s lifetime—at the height of the Persian anti-Christian

57 Demonstration 16:8.
persecutions. Although the Jews did not leave for us an adversus Christianos treatise resembling Aphrahat's adversus Judaeos, echoes of their complaints against Christianity and proselytizing tactics can be heard in these passages. Aphrahat's writings provide an historical setting for these Jewish-Christian polemical confrontation. It is plausible that the rabbinic passages that respond to Christian exegesis were used by the Jews (and the rabbis) in their spiritual mission to the Persian Christians in their time of crisis. The relatively peaceful status of the Jewish community might have enticed some Christians into Judaism—especially when encouraged by Jews who flaunted their political security. Aphrahat's anti-Jewish polemic was written, at least in part, in answer to an alleged Jewish missionary onslaught against Christians during the persecutions.

Establishing the existence of fourth-century Jewish-Christian polemical conversations not only illuminates the areas of conflict between Jews and Christians in Persian Mesopotamia, but it also determines how the external political situation influenced these confrontations. In addition, it allows one to reflect on the nature of rabbinic reactions to Christianity. While some scholars assert that the rabbis had little interest in the claims that Christians made against Jews and Judaism (and hence concluding that the Jews were not involved in the polemics against other religions at this time), my studies have shown that there was much interaction between Jews and Christians in these years—including rabbinical counter attacks against Christianity.