

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

PETER THE VENERABLE AND THE JEWS*

by

Yvonne Friedman

It was a well-established fact, so it seemed, that the 12th century witnessed an aggravation of hostility of the Latin West towards Jews and Judaism. Recently, some well-known medievalists have maintained, on the one hand, that the deterioration of the attitude of Christians towards Jews preceded the First Crusade (at the end of the 11th century), and on the other hand, that between the First and Second Crusades, a kind of *détente* reigned over the mutual relations between the Church and the Jews. A conspicuous example of this *détente* was Peter the Venerable, the last "giant" of Cluny. Dom LeClerq went so far as to speak of Peter's "love" of the Jews. In a work presented to Bar Ilan University, Ms. Yvonne Friedman, in a meticulous study, has sifted through the writings of the last great abbot of Cluny in order to verify whether or not the example of Peter supports this claim.

Ms. Friedman shows that it does not. If Peter the Venerable, in spite of his minimal originality, differs from his contemporaries who were hostile to the Jews and Judaism, it is rather in what he adds than in what he omitted or palliated. Agobard, while recommending (!) hatred of Jews, also set limits. Peter cited his predecessor without reservations (p. 21). What Peter "supplied" was the image of the Jew, enriched by theft, who ought to be squeezed for the noble needs of Christianity (p. 23). As for the violence of the language reserved for the Jews, it is difficult to sense any inspiration of "love". It is necessary to make allowances for rhetoric, when Peter seems to cast doubt on Jews as human beings (Ms. Friedman here seems almost to succumb to the temptation of literalism), but it remains useless to "justify everything by its context", as it is said, or by its "literary genre". In order to enjoin hatred of Jews, Peter in vain hid behind a verse of Psalms; it would be a mockery and dishonest to excuse him of doing so. Wouldn't it thus always be possible to "drown" the Gospels in "context"? Peter was no innovator when he identified the "historical" or "theoretical" Jew (the expressions used by the author) and the contemporary Jew. But he insisted that the Jews must be punished for killing Christ, and went so far as to exclaim: "What holds back the hand of our people from spilling your

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blood, if not the precept: thou shall not kill.” (Quoted several times by Ms. Friedman.)

Peter did not refer only to the Scriptures in his polemics against the Jews. He intended to show and demonstrate the thorough odiousness of the Talmud. According to Peter the Venerable, for the Jews the Talmud replaced the Scriptures. The author claims – falsely, we believe – that Peter said the same about the New Testament for the Christians. Thus the Talmud and the New Testament form the two branches of a single alternative. It is understandable that the monk of Cluny would be implacable towards whatever, in his eyes, prevented the Jews from acknowledging Christ. But Peter the Venerable knew the Talmud only at second hand; he failed to recognize its true nature (he completely ignored the *Halakhah!*), and based his critique on two *aggadoth*. In doing so, he gives a striking example of the very thing for which he reproaches the Jewish reading of the Scriptures: patently literalistic interpretation.

The concise and carefully thought-out work of Ms. Friedman carries, on the whole, conviction. Perhaps it would have been desirable to have conducted a more careful literary analysis, to grasp what the texts reveal and what “fashioned” them, than to emphasize or comment upon what Peter says. But, without any possible doubt, medievalists and historians of the “dialogue” and polemic between Jews and Christians, should be grateful to Ms. Friedman for her fine work, which invites them to be less hasty in their reassuring re-examinations.¹

Summary of research by Michel De Goedt

Translated from the French by Daniella Saltz.

¹ The translation of the texts of Peter the Venerable is, in general, faithful and precise. We have, all the same, noted several weaknesses: for example, p. 25 (text cited in note 3), *velut iterum crucifigendum* is given an erroneous meaning; p. 102 (text cited in note 1), the translation is misinterpreted.