

Boundaries of Interpretation: From Augustine to Nicholas of Lyra or from the Hermeneutical Jew to a Hermeneutical Hebrew

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ABSTRACT. As individuals need to define the unknown in order to tame it, by accepting or rejecting it, when it came to “the unknown neighbour”¹, from the late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Church Fathers and theologians tried hard to build up an image of the Jew, from the perspective of what Christians considered to be their ongoing rejection of Christ. This paper follows the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance in the approach to the Jewish topic by two important figures of Christianity: Augustine and Nicholas of Lyra. Both their perspectives will be analysed according to the manner they influenced ethical and political decision-making processes, considering the fate of the Jews during the Middle Ages.

Keywords: *Theologia*, *Jews*, *Hermeneutics*, *Augustine*, *Nicholas of Lyra*, *Plato*.

Augustine and *Theologia*. The creation of the programme of a science²

The late Antiquity came up with the problem of a new science arising at the horizon: Theology. Its name comes from the Greek *Theologia*, a composed word, made up of two other items: *theos*, meaning God, and *logia*, a derivation from *logos*, a word with a broad range of meanings: word, reason, discourse, order etc.

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¹ The topic relates to the title of Wolfram Drews' book, *The Unknown Neighbour. The Jew in the Thought of Isidore of Seville*, Brill, Febr 2006.

² The title is a paraphrase to a sentence from the article of Alexander Baumgarten, “Când și cum se nasc umanoarele?”, *Dilema*, 23.10.2024 <https://www.dilema.ro/tema-saptaminii/cind-si-cum-se-nasc-umanoarele>: “Therefore, Augustine creates the programme of a science”.



Its origins lie in the Ancient Greece, where it was connected to philosophy. Plato was the first to speak about this concept. According to Paula Fredriksen, "Platonists detected the effects of a single, transcendent deity, the ultimate source of everything else"³. It is true that Fredriksen speaks about Platonists and not about Plato and if we read *The Republic*, we'll find out that Plato uses *theologiai* in plural, meaning "discourse on Gods", namely "right speech about the gods", as the English translation by Shorey from 1969 reads, or "teaching about the gods", as the Romanian translation by Andrei Cornea from 2022 has⁴.

Later on, Plato develops the rational/natural theology in Book X of *The Laws*. Here Plato argues in a rational way against the atheists and in favour of the existence of the Divine, while praising the sovereignty of the soul over body and flesh⁵, an idea that will be retrieved in a different manner in Plotinus. Notably, Plato uses here the singular for God (θεόν)⁶.

Subsequently, Aristotle divided theoretical philosophy into *mathematike*, *physike* and *theologike*. The last one corresponds to what was later called metaphysics which included the discourse on the nature of the divine⁷.

But the one who "creates the programme of a science" is Augustine. He builds up the "Christian Science", by taking over an idea from Plotinus and applying it.

He produces a program of reading the world, from a semiological perspective, claiming that the world is made up of things and signs, and if we consider that the world is only about things, then we are pagans and we never understood its transcendent horizon, but if we treat the things as signs, then the love and the longing for what lies beyond (this means the territory where these signs are aiming) arouses inside us.⁸

³ Fredriksen, Paula, *Augustine and the Jews. A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p.42.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 379a (*The Republic*, Volume I, Books I-V, with an English Translation by Paul Shorey, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, p. 182; *Opera integrală*, Volumul III, traducere, introduce și note de Andrei Cornea, Humanitas, București, 2022, p.111).

⁵ Plato, *The Laws*, II, with an English translation by R.G.Bury (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd MCMLXXXIV, p. 339, *Laws*, Book X: "... then it would be a most veracious and complete statement to say that we find soul to be prior to body, and body secondary and posterior, soul governing and body being governed according to the ordinance of nature".

⁶ Idem, p.361.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I,2,983a; VI,1,1026a.

⁸ Baumgarten, Alexander, "Când și cum se nasc umanoarele?", *Dilema*, 23.10.2024 <https://www.dilema.ro/tema-saptaminii/cind-si-cum-se-nasc-umanoarele>. (*Prin urmare, Augustin nu face decât să preia o teorie plotiniană și să o aplice. El produce un program de lectură a lumii*

Alexander Baumgarten's article from *Dilema* gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issue of the "birth" of theology as a science and on its "father". The suggestion the author made, that the programme of this science was created by Augustine, sent me to the way this Father of the Church built up his discourse and raised the question of what he really knew when he put the first brick in the wall of the Catholic thought, when turning it into a science⁹, and what he thought he knew after all. He approached the topic of monotheism, by trying to rely on the authority of Greek philosophers:

These philosophers, as we have seen, have been raised above the rest by a glorious reputation they so thoroughly deserve; and they recognized that no material object can be God; for that reason, they raised their eyes above all material objects in their search for God. They realized that nothing changeable can be the supreme God [...] It is because of his immutability and this simplicity that the Platonists realized that God is the creator from whom all other beings derive, while he is himself uncreated and underivative.¹⁰

Nevertheless, his approach to the Greek theology was not very precise, as David Nirenberg notices, because "these philosophical ideas are not obviously compatible with Judaism or Christianity".¹¹ Moreover, he had to face not only the

dintr-o perspectivă semiologică spunînd că lumea este alcătuită din lucruri și semne, iar dacă considerăm că lumea se reduce la lucruri sîntem niște păgîni și n-am înțeles niciodată orizontul ei transcendent, dar dacă tratăm lucrurile drept semne, atunci se naște în noi iubirea și dorul de ceea ce este dincolo, adică de teritoriul la care trimit semnele astea.) The English translation belongs to the author of this article.

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 1, art.2, Obj. 2: "On the contrary, Augustine says (De Trin. xiv, 1) "to this science alone belongs that whereby saving faith is begotten, nourished, protected and strengthened." But this can be said of no science except sacred doctrine. Therefore, sacred doctrine is a science." (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Edwin Clemenz, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, p. 7, https://www.academia.edu/45424404/Summa_Theologica), and Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIV, 1: "That this is the wisdom of man, which we have already explained in the twelfth book of the present work, is proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture in the book of Job, the servant of God, where we read that the Wisdom of God said to the man: "Behold, piety is wisdom, but to abstain from evil, knowledge" [cf. Job 28:28]. But some have also translated this Greek word epistēmē, as disciplina, which has certainly taken its name from discendo, and for this reason can also be called "knowledge." For everything is learned in order that it may be known." (Augustine, *On the Trinity, Books 8-15*, Edited by Gareth B. Matthews and Translated by Stephen McKenna, Cambridge University Press 2003 (Virtual Edition), p. 137).

¹⁰ Saint Augustine, *City of God. Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, pp. 307-308 (8.6).

¹¹ Nirenberg, David, *Anti-Judaism. The History of a way of thinking*, Head of Zeus Ltd, London, 2013, p. 95.

challenges the Greek philosophy were posing to him, but also the complexity of the early Christian society. This was the climate where he built up his discourse.

Further on, it seemed challenging to see the way this discourse influenced the perception of the Jews and consequently, the relations of the Gentiles and later, the Christians with them.

In a period of struggles for affirming the Christianity and the rising Church in the old Roman Empire, it was necessary to have a "science" that would consolidate the power of the new faith. How can one prove that this new faith is superior to the old ones? How could it gain so much respectability, as to rule over the others? Most probably, by building up a programme of science out of it.

As Paula Fredriksen notices, "theology differs from other types of religious thought in its efforts to be systematic [...] To be « religious » requires belonging to some sort of community, but to be « theological » requires an effort at systematic thought."¹²

"The systematic thought" was needed to build up a sound construction. The new religion, expressed by the texts of the New Testament, needed a serious validation and this couldn't come from anywhere else than the Old Testament, where the prophecies were the supposedly undeniable argument that Jesus was the Messiah and that Christianity was the only valid, acceptable faith. It was also the only religion meant to rule the world. It was not only about faith, but about power as well. But there was one problem left unsolved. The Old Testament was the book of the old religion from the Christian point of view, the book of the Jews who were still attached to this old religion and reluctant to accept the new one. Moreover, they rejected the Christ as a false Messiah and were still waiting for the real one to come. However, this was not a problem in the time of Augustine, when people were more tolerant in matters of faith, but it could become one since the Gentiles were still pending between the two religions, Judaism and Christianity¹³. And even Christianity was not yet a unique, dogmatic denomination. There were too many factions, dividing the alleged truth among them. In this perspective, a righteous and unique reading of The Old Testament was imperiously necessary. This reading should have taken distance from the Jewish Scriptures, underlining the importance of supersession, the fact that the new religion would replace the old one. According to Paula Fredriksen, turning the Old Testament (in fact, The Jewish

¹² Fredriksen, Paula, *Augustine and the Jews. A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p. 51.

¹³ Cohen, Jeremy, *The Friars and The Jews. The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1983, p. 19: "On the one hand, he [Augustine] witnessed the still frequently successful cases of Jewish proselytization among Christians..."

Scripture) into a Christian book “required strenuous efforts and reinterpretation”¹⁴. Fredriksen claims that those efforts characterized the sermons and commentaries of that period.¹⁵

As one of the main subjects of this study is Augustine, it will focus on his interpretation of the Old Testament and of the way he assumed that the Jews were reading it, and it will aim to explore the way he tried to justify the Christological argument through the reading of the Old Testament which laid the basis of his theology, emphasising the way Jews allegedly failed to understand it.

It is to be noted the fact that Augustine drew on two lines of thinking when it came to Jews. These two lines originated in his two most important debates: the one with the Manichees and the other with the Donatists.

The Manichees were following the line of Marcion, who had had a strong inclination to anti-Judaism. They claimed that the God of the Old Testament who created the material world, with the sufferance and all the evils within, was bad. This God of the Genesis was the great Archon Saklas, a hypostasis of The King of Darkness¹⁶. Following this narrative, it was obvious that there was the risk to remove all authority from the Old Testament, to compromise the basis of the New One, cancelling prophecies altogether with the Christological argument. Noticing the danger¹⁷, Augustine built up his argument against Faustus the Manichean from the defense of the Jews and their books. He claims that Jews understood the Scriptures only fleshly and not spiritually, but this literal understanding was necessary in order to give their words a prophetic meaning through the allegorical reading of the Christians:

Augustine now argued the opposite. “The Jews were right to keep all these things” – immersions and seasons and food laws and *most* especially blood sacrifices and circumcision – because only in so doing could they have enacted the Law by their behavior, in the flesh, within historical time (*c. Faust.* 12.9). In this way, the whole people of Israel stood as a prophet foretelling the coming in the flesh, the suffering in the flesh, and the redemption of the flesh through the truly incarnate Christ (4.2, 13.15, 22.4, 26.8, and frequently elsewhere).¹⁸

¹⁴ Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Culianu, Ioan Petru, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, Nemira, 1995, p.227. See also Fredriksen, Paula, op. Cit., pp. 110-112.

¹⁷ Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p.125: “Read in the light of Ambrosian allegory, the old Jewish texts revealed Christ and his church. The Manichees had it all wrong. The Old Testament, understood spiritually, really was a Christian book”.

¹⁸ Fredriksen, Paula, “Augustine and «Thinking with» Jews: Rhetoric Pro- and Contra Iudaeos”, in *Ancient Jew Review*, february 13, 2018, <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2018/2/3/augustine-and-thinking-with-jews-rhetoric-pro-and-contra-iudaeos>.

According to Fredriksen, Augustine had used a similar argumentation in his prior debate with Jerome on the topic of the interpretation of the Scripture:

Augustine asserted against Faustus regarding the Old and New Testaments what he had asserted against Jerome regarding Galatians: scripture had to be read and understood *ad litteram* and *proprie*.¹⁹

Besides, the books and the ongoing rituals of the Jews would have an educational role for Christians in order not to forget their own sins. Therefore, Jews would be for Christians like *capsari*, the slaves that carried the books for the pupils during Antiquity.²⁰

On the other hand, he seemed to regard the Church and the Synagogue both related to the Christ in a way that would make them part of one big family, as Augustine himself points out in his treatise against Faustus the Manichean (while the Church was the bride of Christ, the synagogue was his mother):

*... reliquisse etiam matrem synagogam Iudaeorum, Veteri Testamento carnaliter inhaerentem, et adhaesisse uxori suae sanctae Ecclesiae...*²¹

*Cum autem dicitur de patre esse sororem Christi Ecclesiam, non de matre, non terrenae generationis quae evacuabitur, sed gratiae coelestis quae in aeternum manebit, cognatio commendatur. Secundum quam gratiam genus mortale non erimus, accepta potestate ut filii Dei vocemur et simus. Neque enim hanc gratiam de Synagoga matre Christi secundum carnem, sed de Deo patre percepimus.*²²

Still, this benevolent attitude of Augustine towards the Jews is not without a bit of malice, as long as he sees the Jews similar to ancient slaves, turning them into slaves to the Christians. But departing from this “defending line”, which was the basis of “the doctrine of «the Jewish witness»”²³, drawn out from his controversy

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Filoramo, Giovanni, *Crucea și puterea. Creștinii, de la martiri la persecutori (La Croce E Il Potere. I cristiani da martiri a persecutori)*, Humanitas București, 2022, p. 399. See also Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., pp. 319-324 (p. 321: “«The Jews serve us, as if they were our *capsarii* carrying *codices* for us to study», he says in his sermon on Psalm 40. [...] The law and the prophets universally speak about Christ; the Jews, reading wrongly, unwittingly carry these books that they think are theirs but that actually belong to the church. In this way, the Jews help the church to spread the gospel”.

²¹ Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 12, 8, PL 42, p. 257.

²² Idem, 22, 39, p. 425.

²³ Cohen, Jeremy, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 23-66 (*Chapter 1 The Doctrine of the Jewish Witness*), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt4cgfv.7>.

with the Manichees, he makes no big effort to define the Jews or to label them in an insulting way. This will come later, during the long and tough struggle he will be having with the Donatists²⁴. This is the moment when the difference between things and signs has to be made, when the importance of the symbol takes the discourse to a new level. Wherein Augustine proves that he also can excel in the rhetoric *adversus Iudaeos* as well as his more aggressive forerunners, Justin, Origen and Jerome²⁵. He complains, like the others, of the Jews being rednecks, stone-hearted, fleshly, with carnal practices²⁶. It becomes obvious for him that they are the people of the things, of the material world, while the Christians are the people of the signs, of the spiritual world. The former belong to the city of this world, while the later to the City of God, as he writes down in his greatest work, *City of God*:

Those who are Israelites only by physical descent, and not by faith, are a part of that godless city; they are also enemies of this great king himself, and of his queen. For Christ came to them; but he was slain by them; and so he became instead the Christ of the other men, men whom he did not see in his incarnate life.²⁷

His discourse becomes more and more aggressive in the commentaries on psalms, in the sermons and the tractates on the Gospel of John. The Jews gradually became "our enemies", "enemies of God" and "enemies of the truth"²⁸, subsequently

²⁴ Brown, Peter – *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*, A New Edition with an Epilogue, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000, pp. 207-221, the chapter *Ubbi Ecclesia?* talks about the Donatist "issue", presenting the Donatists as a schismatic rather than a heretical sect, which focussed on the moral purity of its members and the interaction had by Augustine with them, which led to fervent debates, after he had detected the danger that had laid under their rigor.

²⁵ Shaw, Brent D., *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 274-275: "When preaching on this theme, it has been aptly noted, he could be as hateful and vicious as any Chrysostom". See also note 53 on this topic: "Fredriksen (2001), p. 129, referring, rightly, to the work of Efroymson (1999): «On this topic... not the least in his sermons on John's Gospel – he can be as hateful, hurtful and vicious as Chrysostom, Cyril, or any other father of the Church»".

²⁶ Fredriksen, Paula, op. cit., p. 311: "A glance at the subject index under *Jew* or *Judaism* in any volume of Augustine's sermons reveals the familiar themes of *adversus Iudaeos* invective: Jews are blind, hard-hearted, fleshly, stubborn, and prideful; they murdered Christ; they are exiles; they carry the church's books; they are saved only by conversion." The last affirmation is really surprising, taking into account "the doctrine of the Jewish witness", where Augustine insisted upon preserving and protecting the Jewish practice.

²⁷ St Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, p. 748.

²⁸ Shaw, Brent D., op. cit., p. 272.

they are called “raging Jews” (*Iudaei saevientes*)²⁹, to eventually become “wolves” and “children of the Devil”.³⁰ One has to notice that this type of rhetoric appears mainly in the anti-Donatists sermons.

It is quite a difference from Augustine’s previous position, when he developed “the doctrine of the Jewish witness”. Maybe we should recall the fact he was a great rhetor and that he used arguments pro and contra for rhetorical purposes. But what it is of interest for this paper is what exactly did Augustine know about Jews. Actually, the Jews of his lectures do not seem to be historical Jews. They seem rather drawn out of the Scriptures, where Augustine learned about them, so they were rather what Paula Fredriksen named “hermeneutical” Jews. In other words, they were constructs or rather rhetorical constructs, used to deconstruct the arguments of the opponent in the debates. This is the rhetoric of “not even the Jews would do that”. As Fredriksen notices,

« Hermeneutical » Jews peopled the tropes of traditional ecclesiastical rhetoric *contra Iudaeos*, serving to damn perceived competitors whether Jewish or (far more often) Christian and gentile: we see them displayed particularly in Augustine’s anti-Donatist sermons. The « Jews » of Augustine’s *pro Iudaeis*, anti-Manichaean arguments were no less a rhetorical construct, there deployed positively.³¹

The fact is that, according to Brent Shaw, Augustine’s knowledge of Jews, as a community or as a people, comes mostly from the Bible rather than from the direct contact with the African Jewish communities, but it is of consequence for the real Jews:

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 274, where Shaw quotes from Augustine’s Sermon 284.5-6: “As he hung on the cross, the Jews raged madly... they raged wildly, barking around him like dogs, they insulted him as he hung on the cross, like crazy madmen they raged around that one good doctor who had been sent to heal them.” (*Adducet Iudaeos, non iam aduantes, sed saevientes: vasa sua possidens clamabit linguis omnium Crucifige! Crucifige!... Pendebat in cruce, Iudaei saeviebant... Illi saeviebant, illi circumlatrabant, illi pendenti insultabant; quasi uno summo medico in medio constituto, phrenetici, circumquaque saeviebant*).

³⁰ Ibidem, op. cit., pp.298-299. See also n.173, regarding Augustine’s Sermon 89.1, from p. 299: *Sed nescio ubi tamquam a lupis depraedati latebant in vepribus; et quia latebant in vepribus, ideo ad eos inveniendos non pervenit... illi occiderant... et credentes sanguinem biberunt quem saevientes fuderunt*.

³¹ Fredriksen, Paula, „Augustine and „Thinking with” Jews: Rhetoric Pro- and Contra- Iudaeos”, *Ancient Jew Review*, Febr 13, 2018, <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2018/2/3/augustine-and-thinking-with-jews-rhetoric-pro-and-contra-iudaeos>.

Although much of the rhetoric is directed against a model of "the Jews" taken from the biblical texts, it is clear in a sufficient number of instances that the condemnation of the whole people applies to the Jews of Augustine's own day and for the same basic reason: their obstinate rejection of the truth.³²

The Jews who appear in his late homilies are considerable distinct from those who were involved in the "doctrine of the Jewish witness". Even Fredriksen remarks that Augustine's Johannine Jews seem a different tribe from the one encountered in *Against Faustus*.³³ Anyhow, both kinds of Jews were figures of the rhetoric he used in the debates against various opponents (Jerome, Manichees, Donatists etc) and all this consisted in what was called "an Augustinian theology of Judaism."³⁴

From book to life, from what one thinks he knows to what everybody learns from him and becomes the truth for the next generations, it was only one small step. Consequently, in the next centuries, the status of Jewish people changed. Their situation declined progressively. Augustine's "hermeneutical" Jews became the official enemy. As Cohen noticed, Augustine's approach to Jews and Judaism "determined the basic stance of virtually all early medieval Christian polemics against the Jews."³⁵

The eleventh century brought about the first Crusade, with the first major massacre of the Jews³⁶. It was followed by the second Crusade, as bloody as the first one for the Jews and the way it was "unleashed" towards the Jews made James Carroll claim that:

The theology of anti-Jewish hatred could not be more clearly stated. Its meaning could not have been more firmly grasped than it was then by the Jews of Mainz³⁷.

³² Shaw, Brent D., *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 286.

³³ Fredriksen, Paula, op.cit., p. 305.

³⁴ Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p.19.

³⁵ Idem, p.20

³⁶ Carroll, James – *Constantine's Sword. The Church and the Jews*, A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. New York, 2002, pp.237-245. The chapter 24, *The War of the Cross*, presents the topic of the first crusade from the point of view of its first victims and it opens up with a passage from *The Hebrew First Crusade Chronicles: S*, cited by Chazan, *European Jewry*, 225: "[...] They said to one another: «Behold we travel to a distant land to do battle with the kings of that land.' We take our souls in our hands' in order to kill and subjugate all those kingdoms that do not believe in the Crucified. How much more so (should we kill and subjugate the Jews, who killed and crucified him». They taunted us in every direction. [...]"

³⁷ Ibidem, p.261

The *contra-ludaeos* rhetoric infested the new-born universities. In the middle of the thirteenth century (1242) there took place *The Disputation of Paris*, also known as *The Trial of the Talmud* and thousands of Hebrew manuscripts were put at the stake³⁸. No matter how little the Christian scholars knew about the Hebrew culture, they learned even less about it, as time passed. Nevertheless, things started to look different when a new scholar appeared, changing a lot of what older theologians had taught about Jews and The Old Testament and coming up with a new interpretation of the prophecies.

Nicholas of Lyra. The war of the hermeneutics

In 1332 the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra completed his most important work, *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam*.³⁹ Started in 1322, the work aimed to a new vision of The Old and New Testament, taking into account the writings of some Jewish scholars, especially Rashi⁴⁰. A new programme of „reading the world“, departing from Augustine, Jerome and Thomas Aquinas, laid the foundation of this theology that sums up the efforts of thought of both Christians and Jews.⁴¹ According to this new perspective, one has to explain why Jews were still firmly rejecting the Christ, while they were still alive and God apparently delayed their punishment. It became a necessity to convince them and especially the heretics that Jesus was the true Messiah. The main issue was to prove the unbelievers that Christ had already come and his advent could have been obvious to Jews by the prophecies. According to Deana Copeland Klepper:

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 309, also Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., pp.60-76, Chapter 3, *The Attack on Rabbinic Literature, The Condemnation of the Talmud*.

³⁹ There is a debate regarding the year Lyra accomplished his work. According to Deana Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers. Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press Philadelphia, 2007, *Postilla* was written between 1322 and 1332 (p 9). On the other hand, Sarah Bromberg in her article, „Exegetical Imagery for King Manuel I of Portugal: Solomon's Temple in Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla*“, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2.77 (2014), pp. 175-198, Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH München Berlin, claims that: „By 1333, Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349), a Franciscan exegete at the University of Paris, completed the *Postilla super totam bibliam*...“.

⁴⁰ Rashi is the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itzaki, born in 1040, in Troyes, one of the most important exegetes of the Bible and Talmud. According to Louis Finkelstein, „To this day, it is impossible to study Talmud without recourse to Rashi's commentary, which has become a classic in its own right“ (see Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963, p. V).

⁴¹ Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p.175: “[...] Nicholas decries the scribal corruptions of the text of the Vulgate as well as the distortions of meaning which invariably appear in any translation, justifying the need to resort to *hebraica veritas*“.

Quite a number of Franciscan scholars in the late 13th and early 14th century began to ask questions concerning the possibility of proving Christ's advent, or similar theological truths, by means of Jewish Scripture or prophetic texts.⁴²

Thus, Jews could be persuaded to accept the Christian truth, the only acceptable theological truth from Christians' point of view, by means of the science that rationalised the beliefs, by means of what they thought it was knowledge and the opposite to ignorance. Persuasion was necessary, because forced conversion was forbidden by Augustine's "doctrine of the Jewish witness".

Among the scholars with interest in this topic, Lyra stands out. Unlike Augustine and the late thirteenth century Franciscans "who saw themselves as anti-Thomistic Augustinians"⁴³, Lyra claims that the Jews were not ignorant when they rejected Jesus. They knew who he was, but, from different reasons, they chose not to accept his truth. He brings up Aristotle's *Nichomachian Ethics* in his argumentation and introduces the notion of "incontinence" as moral weakness, drawing thus a line between intentional immorality and intemperance.⁴⁴

Klepper explains the phenomenon as it follows:

Where the intemperate man adheres to a false moral code, the incontinent man knows right from wrong but, swept away by passion, fails to transform his habitual (universal) knowledge to actual knowledge in a particular situation, and so he pursues a course of action that he would otherwise know is morally wrong.⁴⁵

Considering himself a very good expert of Hebrew⁴⁶, Lyra assumed his knowledge of the Jews' language and their writings would allow him to estimate their "incontinence". And he made use of the prophecies, in order to prove that they could be literally interpreted, that even if Jews hadn't had access to signs, but only to things, because of their carnal nature, they still could have understood the deeper meanings of the scriptural texts. It was just their obduracy that made them not only reject the truth, but even corrupt the texts, in order to hide the

⁴² Klepper, Deana Copeland, *The Insight of the Unbelievers. Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2007, p. 63.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 87.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ See Klepper, Deana Copeland, op. cit., p. 32: "Nicholas of Lyra's renown as a Hebraist surpassed that of virtually all of his predecessors and contemporaries. By the time of the Reformation, Nicholas, «the second Jerome», was one of the very few medieval Hebraists whose name was still familiar."

prophecies.⁴⁷ His polemical nature in this matter is more than obvious, as his modern biographer Henri Labrosse notices:

Nicholas is a polemicist above all. To convince the Jews [of the truth of Christianity] – that is his constant preoccupation, the constant and definite goal of all his work.⁴⁸

There are several examples of the way Lyra chose to read the Jewish texts, in order to force through the proves of the Christian truth from the Jewish Scriptures and, as also Klepper noticed, his approach to the topic shows the influence of thirteenth-century Dominicans (Paul Christian and Raymond Martini), “who used rabbinic traditions to prove the truth of Christianity to Jews in forced sermons and disputations.”⁴⁹

The most important issue to prove, in fact, was the dual nature of Christ. By the early fourteenth century, before the *Postilla*, Lyra had had a series of quodlibetal questions on “whether the Jews perceived Jesus to be the Christ promised to them, which does not appear to be the case”⁵⁰ and “whether from Scriptures received by the Jews it is possible to prove effectively that our Savior was both God and man”⁵¹. Those questions were developed in the two anti-Jewish Treaties: the first one – *Questio de adventu Christi/Quodlibetum de adventu Christi* – originated in a scholastic discourse from 1309⁵², and the second one – *Responsio ad quendam Iudeum ex verbis Evangelii secundum Matheum contra Christum nequiter arguentem* – completed in June 1334⁵³.

In *Questio de adventu Christi – Libellus contra perfidiam iudeorum*, Lyra focussed his efforts on proving the trinitarian nature of God. For this purpose, he makes some allegations on the use of the plural *Elohim* in the Jewish Scripture. Therefore, he claims that whenever the word *Elohim* appears, even if it is a plural name, it is used with the verb in singular. As, again Klepper noticed,

⁴⁷ Hailperin, Herman, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pennsylvania, 1963, pp.169-170. Quoting from Lyra's second Prologue to the *Postillae*, Hailperin says: “«The Jews have corrupted a few of these for defending their error, as I have, in part, declared in a *Quaestio de divinitate Christi*, and I will declare it [in this work] more fully when such places appear – God granting.»”. See also Deeana Copeland Klepper, op. cit., p. 108.

⁴⁸ Apud Cohen, Jeremy, op.cit., p. 177 (Labrosse, *Oeuvres*, p.377).

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p.91.

⁵⁰ Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p. 85.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p.89.

⁵² See Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p.8 and Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p.180.

⁵³ Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 185.

In answer to the Jewish objection that whenever the name *Elohim* appears in relation to God it must be interpreted in the singular, Nicholas introduced a series of examples where the name *Elohim* was used with intentional plurality to speak of God and no other.⁵⁴

In this way, he concludes that the hidden meaning of this construction is that there is a plurality of persons in the essential unity of the divinity.⁵⁵ And, next, he accuses the contemporary Jews of distorting the meaning of the ancient text, because they deny the plural meaning of *Elohim*. So, he assumes that the "said excuse is false" (*praedicta evasio est falsa*).

Hence it is clear that is not against the intention of the ancient Hebrew doctors that some plurality might be replaced in God or the Gods while the unity of the deity is still preserved, which unity the Catholics most truly affirm. This last response, which as has been seen, contains the truth, later Jews distort, saying that divine knowledge, goodness, and power are those three properties in which God created the world... But this response is not reasonable.⁵⁶

Moreover, when he analyses the messianic prophecy in the *Probatio* section from the manuscript (see supra), he claims that the divinity was represented by the Tetragramm in the Hebrew text (translated by him with *Dominus* in Latin), and replaced by the Jews, when read, with *Adonai* and *Elohim*, because the Jews would have corrupted the text, by introducing names that could be also used for dignitaries and upper class people, in order to hide the real meaning of the Tetragramm, which, according to Lyra, when he reads *The Lord, our Righteous Savior (Dominus iustus noster)*, is referring to Jesus Christ himself.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra perfidiam Iudeorum*, included with *Biblia... cum postillis Nicolai de Lyræ*, edited by Sebastian Brent and printed by Johannes Froben&Johannes Petri, Basel 1498: "*Hebraica veritas sic habet: In principio, creavit heloym celum et terram etc. Heloym est nomen plurale huius nominis hel vel helo quod significat Deus in singulari; et hoc satis patet scientibus proprietates idiomati hebraici per hoc autem quod nomen plurale divinum conjugitur cum verbo singularis numeri cum dicitur: Creavit heloym ac si diceret. Creavit dii ostenditur in Scriptura quod in Deo est aliqua pluralitas in unitate esentie; que talis modus loquendi semper in veteri testamento invenitur de Deo et de nullo alio. Ex quo patet quod aliqua pluralitas personarum in unitate divine esentie est que nulla alia invenitur natura; et hoc est pluralitas personarum in una simpla esentie que inpredicto modo loquendi designatum per verbum singularis numeri conjunctum nomine plurali.*"

⁵⁶ Lyra, Nicholas of, *Biblia*, 6:276A, apud Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 181.

⁵⁷ Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra perfidiam Iudeorum*, included with *Biblia... cum postillis Nicolai de Lyræ*, edited by Sebastian Brent and printed by Johannes Froben&Johannes Petri, Basel 1498: "*Si autem non possunt haberi antike biblie non corrupte, recurrendum est ad alias translationes quas iudei*

But one of the most outstanding examples of the way Lyra's knowledge of Hebrew came to his aid in finding hidden testimonies of the mystery of Incarnation is the one referring to Isaiah, 9:5-6:

"For a child has been born to us,
A son has been given us,
And authority has settled on his shoulders.
He has been named
"The mighty God is planning grace;
The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler" –
In token of abundant authority
And of peace without limit..."⁵⁸

Versus:

"For to us a child is born,
To us a son is given;
And the government will be upon his his shoulder,
And his name will be called⁵⁹
«Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace».
Of the increase of his government and of his peace
There will be no end..."⁶⁰

First of all, Lyra makes a confusion between the grammatical tenses of verb *to call* (*liqro* (לקרָא) in Hebrew), because he disregards the structure, named *vav-coverisive* or *vav-consecutive*. This one is a grammatical construction, mostly used in Biblical Hebrew, by prefixing a verb with the conjunction *vav* (ו) in order to change the text. Thereby, even if the form of the verb is *iqra* (יקרָא) in Hebrew,

rationabiliter negare non possunt. Et primo deprehenditur per translationem LXX interpretum que sic habet ut translatio Hieronymi; ut pertinet per officium ecclesiasticum quod de ista translatione assumptum est, in que quodem officio sic ponitur ista auctoritas. In diebus illis saluabitur Iuda; et Israel habitabit confidenter; et hoc est nomen quod vocabunt eum Dominus iustus noster. Ex hoc patent que nomen domini Tetragrammaton ad Christum refertur; "In hebraico ponitur heloyim; et consimilia habentur in pluribus locis et similiter habetur de hoc nomine adonay; quod imponitur ab universali presidentia et ideo bene dicitur in Scriptura de potentibus et regibus; non autem ita est de nomine domini Tetragrammaton quod significat divinam essentiam nudam et puram..."

⁵⁸ JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, Philadelphia, 1999.

⁵⁹ Here, Lyra's text reads *vocabitur*: "Et vocabitur nomen eius de ante admirabilis consilio deus fortis..." (Nicholas of Lyra, *Contra Perfidiam Iudaeorum*, op. cit.).

⁶⁰ Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%209%3A1-6&version=NIV>.

which means *will call*, the presence of the *vav* in front of the verb (*veiqra* – ויקרא) will change the future into past and should be translated with *he has been named*, as in the JPS translation, and not *his name will be called*, as in the Christian tradition, as we find it on Bible Gateway. Besides, Lyra makes another confusion regarding the vocalization of the word *veiqra*, claiming that it should have been read *veiqru* instead of what he thought it was distorted by Jews in the Masoretic Text, where they read *veiqro* (*they will call him* instead of the Masoretic *he will call him*).⁶¹ The whole point of this discussion is targeting in fact the same debate he had so far, in proving that the entire prophecy was about Jesus Christ and not Hezekiah, as the Jews were asserting.

Still, the most stunning reading key for this fragment is yet to come, when he analyses the last two lines of it, when it comes to *the increase of his government and of his peace*.

The Hebrew word for *to increase* (or *to multiply*, as in the Latin text of Lyra, the word is *multiplicabitur*) is *lemarbeh* (למרבה), spelled with the Hebrew equivalent of “m”, named “mem”. There are two types of “mem” in the Hebrew orthography, an usual one, which is open, that should be used at the beginning or in the middle of the word, and the one called “mem sofit”, a closed form, which is used at the end of the word. In the modern Tanakh, one can find both forms of the word *lemarbeh*, with open mem (see above) and with the closed one (mem sofit), spelled differently (למרבה). Their presence at the same time indicates the options *ketuv* and *qere* that engage first the writing of the option *ketuv*, without vocalization and then of the option *qere*, with vocalization.

Lyra claimed in his *Quaestio de adventu Christi – Probatio incarnationis Christi* that he found only the second form of the word, the one with the unusual mem sofit in the middle. And that made him conclude that it was a way to point out that Christ was to be born from a closed virgin, against the manner of nature, which was obviously a prophecy, one that the Jews failed to understand, or, rather, according to his Aristotelian theory of incontinence, they failed to accept it.

*Men clausa semper ponitur in fine dictionis, men autem aperta in principio et in medio, hoc autem ut dictum est ponitur men clausa in medio dictionis contra naturam litere et modum scribendi, ad denotandum que Christus de quo loquitur propheta erat nasciturus de Vergine clausa contra modum nature et que mysterium incarnationis erat clausum et secretum, sicut enim poete per figuras grammaticales signant aliquod subtiliter intellegendibus.*⁶²

⁶¹ Apud Cohen, Jeremy, op. cit., p. 184.

⁶² Lyra, Nicholas of, *Contra Perfidiam Iudaeorum*, op. cit.

If theology was supposed to make an effort at systematic thought, then definitely Lyra made a lot of effort to establish messianic references and to forcefully link a questionable matter of orthography to a prophetic meaning. It is hard to find out exactly what the Hebrew writer had in mind when he slipped the *mem sofit* in the middle of the word, but most probably, according to some scholars, there is a possibility that the word was a contracted form of two other words, one of them ended in *mem sofit*, forgotten afterwards in the middle of the word⁶³.

Nevertheless, the effort made by Lyra to force a possible grammatical error into a theological argument and to prove, in that way, the obduracy and the incontinence of the Jews remains one of the most debatable ways to prove one's knowledge and a certain boundary of interpretation. Not to mention that the scholars who studied his works in the modern times seriously questioned Lyra's abilities of understanding Hebrew and the Jewish Hermeneutics of the Scripture.⁶⁴

Conclusions

Man has always tried to fill in the gaps in his understanding of the surrounding world. Since the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, he thought that getting to know everything would make him equal to God. Knowledge was power, eternal life. Ignorance was weakness, the mortal condition of the humankind. Terrified by the unknown, he tried to put the right questions in order to decipher it. But what happens when the questions are wrong, seeking for an escape goat?

It is in the human nature to search for the truth, to question everything and to try to get the answers. By making efforts at our thoughts, we invented science. But what happens when the answers become more important than the

⁶³ I asked references to professor Francisca Băltăceanu, one of the two Romanian translators of the Hebrew Bible, and she consulted Ovidiu Pietrăreanu, lecturer at the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest and also a member of the focus group for Biblical Hebrew in New Europe College. He gave me the explanation presented in the body text, according to a pdf document, published by the orthodox Judaic organization Dirshu (here is the link to the document: <https://www.dirshu.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/%D7%91%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%93-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%95.pdf>).

⁶⁴ Ari Geiger, "A student and an opponent. Nicholas of Lyra and his Jewish sources", in Gilbert Dahan éd., *Nicholas de Lyre, Franciscain du XIV^e siècle exégète et théologien*, Paris, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2011, pp 167-203, here pp185-187. See also Klepper Copeland, Deeana, op. cit., p.125, talking about Paul of Burgos' critique of Nicholas of Lyra's works: "He defended the traditional interpretations of Jerome and the *Glossa ordinaria* over Nicholas and Rashi, often by arguing that Nicholas did not properly understand the sense of the Hebrew".

questions and the questions aren't seeking for the truth, but are forced into the convenient answers? What happens when ignorance is not replaced by knowledge, but by a pale imitation of it and what happens when instead of asking questions as a means to reach an answer, one asks them in order to justify a preexisting one? What happens when we are convinced of our truth, when we don't doubt anymore? These are just some of the questions this study sought to raise.

In order to do that, it took into account the way two of the most important figures of Christian theology – “the greatest philosopher of Antiquity”⁶⁵ and “an important Franciscan Hebraist and Bible scholar”⁶⁶. The latter's main work, *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam* was to become, along with the *Glossa ordinaria*, “the most widely used Christian reference work on the Bible”⁶⁷. The paper tried to analyse, from the perspective of the Jewish topic, their efforts in building up a science – the former – and in taking this science to a new level – the latter. How much they succeeded and how much they failed are questions that remain open for further debates. For now, we can only notice that both Augustine and Lyra are a long way from Descartes, from *dubito, ergo cogito*. Moreover, they don't allow themselves to doubt. Their science needs firm answers, not unanswered questions. The former has a Church and a religion to strengthen; the latter has a Church that needs to eliminate all doubt. In both cases, Jews are needed not for missionary purposes, but for pedagogical ones and as a guidance of the Christian community.⁶⁸ Besides, as we saw at Brent Shaw, Augustine had little contact with the African Jewish community. As for Lyra, it is hard to say how many Jews he really met, as long as, by 1334, most of the French Jewry had been expelled from the realm.⁶⁹

Augustine uses “the hermeneutical Jews” as rhetorical arguments, in order to attain his purpose, by winning the debates with the several factions (sects and heresies) that threaten his new born religion. Lyra uses them in scholastic disputations and here we have a valid point of view from Herman Hailperin, connected to the topic of this paper:

Lyra, it seems, faced the question: How far can one go in the application of logical argument for proof of religious truth? Labrosse, *op. cit.*, p.180, n. 2, points out that Lyra gives evidence of a remarkable grasp of the relative value of logical

⁶⁵ Arendt, Hannah, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Edited and with an Interpretive Essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, april, 1998, p.

⁶⁶ Klepper Copeland, Deeana, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁶⁸ Cohen, Jeremy, *op. cit.*, p.187.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 186-187.

reasoning as applied to religious beliefs. “Nicolas is fully aware of this difficulty, and this is even one of the objections he raises that if one could prove the truth of the Christian religion in an absolute manner, one could not bear to see educated Jews – thoroughly virtuous and in good faith – to live and to die in the Jewish religion. Nicolas declares that a distinction ought to be made between an evident demonstration and a sufficient demonstration. In religious matters an evident demonstration is not possible. We have to be satisfied with a sufficient demonstration.

Labrosse has here in mind Lyra’s *Postillae* on Matthew 21:46, and on the Epistle to the Hebrews 1:5.⁷⁰

It becomes obvious that one of the biggest problems of the Christianity was how to claim supremacy and keep good relations with another monotheistic community, without coming in contradiction. That’s why, according to Nirenberg,

“Jews” multiplied as negative types in Christian writing, and the living Jew (as opposed to the prophets of the past) became in the Christian theological imagination the enemy of Christ.⁷¹

Thus, even though he’s aware of the difficulty of proving the Christian truth, as his modern biographer said, yet, Lyra uses the Jewish texts and the Jews’ language only to make them adhere to his truth, the only one acceptable, the only one not questionable. He lives not even a century later than another scholar that used Hebrew and Jewish texts, but only to be part in the process of burning the Jewish books. We are talking about William of Auvergne, scholar at Sorbonne, before Nicholas of Lyra. While Lyra quoted Rashi, Auvergne quoted Maimonides. The former won’t take part in putting books at the stake, but his texts will be used one day in the build-up of the antisemitic discourse of Martin Luther⁷².

⁷⁰ Hailperin, Herman, op. cit., p. 287, n. 47.

⁷¹ Nirenberg, David, op. cit., p. 91.

⁷² Martin Luther’s *On the Jews and their Lies* (edited and introduced by Thomas Dalton PhD, New York, London, Clemens&Blair, LLC, 2020), one of the most virulent anti-semitic treatises, appeals several times to Lyra’s authority and it would be useful for this study to quote a phrase from the very first chapter of it: “Those two excellent men, Lyra and Burgensis [Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos], together with others, truthfully described the Jews’ vile interpretation for us 200 and 100 years ago, respectively. In fact, they refuted it thoroughly.” And probably, nowhere else does the connection between the two appear more obvious than in this punning rhyme from the sixteenth century that became famous: *Si Lyra non lirasset, Lutherus non saltasset*.

Taking into account the similarities between Lyra and Auvergne, it may be appropriate to end with a quote from Auvergne's monography, written by Lesley Smith, which underlines the main idea of this paper, showing not only the boundaries of interpretation, but the traps of misused knowledge, as well:

He cites Maimonides, but regards him as belonging to a childish people. He reads Greek and Arab texts that the Church believed to be dangerous for students, but has a part in burning the books of scholars of another faith. None of us is consistent.⁷³

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