



Besmirching the Denominational Enemy Within and Outside

Counter-history or
Its Parody

EPHRAIM NISSAN
YOHANAN PETROVSKY-SHTERN

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PREFACE

This is one of a number of books, edited or co-authored or authored by myself for Palgrave Macmillan, about the subject of counter-biography or counter-history, such that some texts of denomination A try to besmirch some founding figure in denomination B. There are twists to that pattern, as we are going to see in the present volume, which indeed bears the title *Besmirching the Denominational Enemy Within and Outside: Counter-history or Its Parody*. The counter-history is by attackers, whereas its quite rare parody is by members of the group attacked.

The polemic may be against another group within the same religion as broadly intended, or another group within the same community as defined by faith, which may be for historical reasons if some subgroup within it has grown tepid, or trying to harmonise one's lifestyle and belief system to the dominant, hosting society.

It even happens that a faith community under attack tries to demolish the impact on itself by attackers, by parroting their arguments, or patterns in their attitudes. We are going to see how this was done in late antiquity, but consider that it has also happened with an immigrant community in New York City: an immigrant journalist, Gerson Rosenzweig, in his 1892 pastiche *Tractate America*, written in Hebrew in talmudic style, developed a trenchant satire on patterns he observed in the hosting society, as well on patterns within his own faith community. Rosenzweig began his masterpiece of Hebrew-language prose from America in cosmic grandeur, with the continents of the Old World obtaining from Heaven that, just as Moses had set apart cities of refuge for those guilty of manslaughter, a

continent of refuge be brought into being. Columbus discovers the place, and prays to heaven to be spared the place being given his own name, so it was called *Ame reiko*, “a vacuous/foolish people” in Aramaic. Rosenzweig then, merging a famous talmudic passage (about the Returnees from Babylonia who went to rebuild Jerusalem under the lead of Ezra the Scribe) with anti-immigrant rhetoric from New York newspapers, went on to list categories of undesirables. But he pointed out that the locals, too, fit the bill. The xenophobes were just similar undesirables who had come earlier. His readers would chuckle, and those not in the know would not even suspect.

Or then, take the Jewish apologist, philosopher, and physician Profiat Duran (b. Catalonia, c. 1350; d. Iberia? France? The East?, c. 1414/5), also known as Efodi, or Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, and, when he was forcibly converted in 1391, as Honoratus de Bonafide or de Bonafe. He escaped from Spain, and returned to his Jewish identity overtly. Among his other works, there is a satirical epistle which is a parody of a handbook for such Catholic clergy that was trying to convert the Jews (and from 1391, Spanish Jewry was living in fear, because of murderous riots that had pushed many to convert). Duran’s handbook was given the Hebrew title *Al tebí ka’avotéikha*, “Be Not Like Thy Fathers” (this wording occurs repeatedly in that text). It was sent to Don Meïr Alguades, who circulated it. At first, because of how cleverly ambiguous it is, the Catholic clergy did not realise it was tongue in cheek. They renamed it *Alteca Boteca*, and adopted it for their own purposes. However, Duran had made it a digest of hackneyed conversionist arguments, for which Jewish readers had ready answers, and the intent was to make them chuckle. When the clergy Duran was parodising realised it was a parody, they burned it publicly; they would have gladly burned Profiat Duran as well, had they laid their hands on him, but apparently he was nowhere to be found, so they burned him in effigy instead, *faute de mieux*.

One of the manuscripts to the epistle has an account on top which claims the epistle was written by Duran after the following incident: with a friend, David Bonet Bonjourno, he set out on a journey, intending to reach Palestine, but only reached Avignon, where the priest Paul of Burgos, a former Jew, convinced Bonjourno to become a true Christian. Duran was forced to return to Catalonia. Whereas some scholars consider this story implausible, it has been noted that in 1393 and 1394, Duran had moved assets to France from the then-Catalan city of Perpignan (upon the evidence of notarial ledgers from the latter), and that in 1394, Paul of

Burgos had attended in Avignon the conclave that elected the Antipope Clement VII.

Al tehi ka'avotéikha was not Duran's only text he wrote as a controversialist. As a physician, he knew Latin, so he had access to Christian doctrine in Latin, and he had also been indoctrinated as a forcible convert in 1391, and this enabled him to argue with Christian beliefs, rather than confining himself to just defending Jewish beliefs.

The present book comprises two clusters of chapters: "Antiquity to the Middle Ages: An Iranic Locale, Outside Views"; and "Modern Contexts: Otherworldly Counter-Biography of the Other and the 'Enemy Within'". The first cluster begins with a parenthesis in the history of the pre-Islamic Sasanian (Sassanian) dynasty of the Persian Empire, which comprised Iranic and Aramaic areas, i.e. Iran and Mesopotamia (*AnEran*, i.e. the non-Iranic area of the Persian Empire). For a while, the Mazdakites, followers of Mazdak, seized power, or almost, and the Emperor sided with them. This resulted in social upheaval. It is not even clear what they preached, wanted, or practised, because all information that has come down is found in hostile sources. For example, it is claimed that theirs was a communist doctrine (and in Communist Eastern Europe there were scholars who took this at face value), and it was also claimed that they held even women in common. But then consider "But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the bourgeoisie in chorus", as Marx and Engels wrote in their *Manifesto*. There were similar accusations, in fact groundless charges, in an anti-Christian pamphlet from 1860s China, and this is briefly addressed in the same chapter.

The second chapter is about an elusive arch-heretic from Judaism, "Hiwi" from Balkh in northern Afghanistan, who was active in Iraq in Caliphal times. Even what his actual name was is unclear. I claim that the spelling "Hywy" stands for *Həyyāwī*, an Iraqi Jewish endearing form of the Aramaic name *Hīyyā*. It became a clearly Jewish form of the name. In writing, for centuries, one would formally write *Hīyyā*, and that endearing form, with an Arabic diminutive suffix with a medieval feel to it, was (I claim) actually much older. Why did I find the onomastic situation clear, when scholars both premodern and modern did not manage to? My own father and one of my maternal uncles were called *Həyyāwī*. I was even able to reproduce and discuss snippets of how they were named in official documents from both Iraq and Israel, which was sometimes in a distorted way. The chapter, however, is not confined to onomastics, even though it makes a substantial contribution to that discipline about a vexed question.

The chapter also tries to clarify what “Ḥiwi”’s doctrines were, and the affinities of the format in which he presented them. Is it true that he was “the Jewish Marcion”? He presented arguments against the Hebrew Bible, in both substance and format rather akin to the substance and format of Carpocratian and Marcionite arguments against Scripture, Marcion’s *Antitheses*, Apelles’ *Syllogisms*, and the so-called isagogical or philological genre of the “questions and answers” (*erotapokriseis*).

The third chapter is “Poor Pharaoh, Wicked Moses: The “Letter of Haman”—A Rabbinic Parody of Anti-Jewish Counter-History”. It is what it says on the tin. That chapter discusses that parodic text the way it appears in *Midrash Esther Rabbah*. I also contrast this to a modern parallel: Solzhenitsin’s complaint about what the so good, so lovely Tsar (Czar) did to Russia and to the Jews in particular, and what they supposedly did to him out of ingratitude, in Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern’s corrosive reception in a review article he published. In the same chapter, I also discuss Gerson Rosenzweig’s parroting in 1892, on the first page of his pseudo-talmudic satire *Tractate America*, the *topos* of the “sewers of Europe” from anti-immigrant rhetoric in the New York press. And then the chapter turns to how the Book of Esther and its Jewish *dramatis personae*, Mordecai and Esther, were besmirched by a liberal author from Genoa, Cesare Cabella, in 1869, in a critical review of a work by a Catholic clergyman whose own view of Esther and the Book of Esther was favourable. To Cabella, putting the Book of Esther or a sympathetic work based upon it in the hands of teenage girls at school is an attempt on their virtue, offering to them as a model despicable behaviour which Cabella read into the actions of those two heroes of the story.

In that same chapter, after a general preamble, *Midrash Esther Rabbah* is considered among other midrashic works on *Esther*; then the medieval versions of the “Letter of Haman” are considered, projecting back onto biblical times the Jewish medieval experience of being demonised. A subsection shows Haman arguing for the extermination of the Jews, the way he is imagined in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Megillah* 13a. Two sections deal, in turn, with Moses and with Joshua in the “Letter of Haman”. A subsection is devoted to a perceived need for early rabbinic authors to respond to hostile, delegitimising Hellenistic claims about “Joshua the Robber”, the way in early Byzantine times Procopius of Caesarea claimed he had seen an ancient inscription in North Africa describe Joshua.

The second cluster of chapters, “Modern Contexts: Otherworldly Counter-Biography of the Other and the ‘Enemy Within’”, only comprises two chapters. Of these, the first is by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern. It deals with how, in the late 1820s, in the Tsarist Empire, Jewish books were examined by a censor, himself a Jewish adept at Enlightenment who had little patience with mysticism, and who tried to ban books of a mystical leaning. Then, the chapter zooms in on a particular book by the mystic Haim Vital (1543–1620), and how his *Book of Visions* represented founders of other religions. The last section in Petrovsky-Shtern’s chapter was written by myself, and it looks for late antique antecedents, and also signals a motif in how Dante was represented, soon after his death, by poets who had befriended him, but one of whom had a stern opinion of both Dante’s salvational prospects and those of another acquaintance who had recently died, Manoello Giudeo, i.e. Immanuel of Rome. That “friend” of theirs immersed both Dante and Manoello, side by side, in a sea of excrement, and an antecedent for that is found in Dante’s own *Inferno*.

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern’s chapter, the fourth, begins with the interception of Hasidic books in Grodno in 1822, and then the focus shifts to Wolf Tugendhold, Jewish books’ censor, and to his role in the banning of Kabbalah and Hasidic books. The next section is concerned with Haim Vital (1543–1620), Isaac Luria’s foremost disciple, and Haim (Ḥayyim) Vital’s *Book of Visions*: a unique mystical diary. Then the discussion turns to Haim Vital’s self-image in that book, and next to how he represented Christianity and Islam through their respective founders. The discussion then returns to Wolf Tugendhold, and to Nicholas I’s regime trying to promote Enlightenment among the Jews, and to discourage Kabbalah. The next section is concerned with the fate of Haim Vital’s *Book of Visions* after the 1820s. The Hebrew text of the passages relevant to other denominations is reproduced. Then the last section (by myself) traces related narratives in the Babylonian Talmud, and signals typological affinity in Dante’s *Inferno* and in how Bosone, who knew Dante personally, applied the same motif to Dante’s soul.

The last chapter in this book is about Jewish hostile representations of prominent exponents of the Berlin Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), especially the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and the educational reformer Hartwig Wessely. As not infrequently with controversies in the religious domain, it is not simple to decide whether to laugh or to weep. But there were intervening circumstances, independent of Mendelssohn’s and Wessely’s own behaviour, that elicited in response very unfavourable

attitudes to those two cultural figures, for the very reason that they had become iconic. For example, Joseph Mendelssohn, Moses Mendelssohn's nominally still Jewish son (his siblings had converted), badly damaged his father's reputation, by passing his own ideas as though they had been those of Moses Mendelssohn.

That same fifth chapter begins indeed with an introduction to Moses Mendelssohn, and to attitudes to his memory. The second section deals with the Berlin Haskalah movement, and other branches of the Jewish Enlightenment. The third section is concerned with Naphtali Hertz (Hartwig) Wessely and his controversial proposal of reform in Jewish education, as part of Josephinism in the Holy Roman Empire. The fourth section is about the peculiar Isaac Satanow (Satanov, Satenow, Satenof), who joined the Berlin Enlightenment but was also interested in mysticism. The fifth section turns to a social phenomenon: the wave of baptisms among Berlin Jews between 1770 and 1830. In the sixth section, the evolution of David Friedländer is considered: from Moses Mendelssohn's closest disciple, to extreme Enlightener advocating an end of Jewish education, an end to Jewish knowledge, and "dry" yet not wet baptism. The seventh section considers the hostile reception of Moses Mendelssohn especially in Eastern Europe, and what was held against Moses Mendelssohn by rabbinic opponents of the Haskalah. The eighth section turns to a factor that reinforced such a negative reception, namely, to how Joseph Mendelssohn, Moses Mendelssohn's non-practising yet unconverted son misrepresented his father's motivations (so they would befit Joseph's own ideals), and unwittingly confirmed some of the most damning claims later made against the father in Eastern Europe.

For that matter, Friedrich Nietzsche's last book was edited in an inauthentic way by his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, that combined texts and imbued the whole with her own deplorable ideas, both nationalist and antisemitic, which he would have disapproved of (upon the evidence of his more than once breaking with individuals because they entertained such views), but became associated with his reception. She chose to contradict or obfuscate his stated opinions when they disagreed with her own views. And what further damaged his anyway damaged reputation was the use the German far right made of his concept of the *Übermensch* (Superman), applying it to racial superiority. Which does not mean Friedrich Nietzsche was not both antisemitic and anti-Judaic (as a foundation for his anti-Christianity), which he definitely was, according to the recollections of his close friend Franz Overbeck in his memoirs.

Much work has gone into the present volume. Arguably, its value is not just within the boundaries of the main subjects of its chapters, chapters which each provide much discussion of those subjects, but also in how one can draw parallels to other situations in the history of ideas. Some such parallels are stated explicitly in this book. Potentially, the various topics to which the chapters are devoted are also illustrations for something else, across which our present readers may come in their own research. Hopefully, this book will help them to be in a suitable position to more promptly detect patterns and specific instances of those patterns.

London, UK

Ephraim Nissan

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Huns in Pannonia had been], or the Crusades, ultimately have less relevance than the old tradition of Saint-Denis, undoubtedly based on archives which have since disappeared, which traced back the entry into the treasury of the abbey of Saint-Denis of this ‘Solomon cup’ as a gift from Charles the Bald in 877. The work also seems to have left a trace of its prior passage in the Carolingian imperial treasury, since it undoubtedly inspired the goldsmith who, under Charles the Bald (843–877), provided a famous serpentine paten [i.e., plate for holding the bread during the Eucharist] (Louvre Museum) with a border highlighted by a cord of garnets, unique in Carolingian goldsmithing but with a visual effect very close to that of the cut. That the ‘wonder of the wonders of Sassanid art’ had reached France in 801 among the gifts offered to Charlemagne by the caliph Harun al-Rashid was perhaps not just a myth...” [“Ainsi, les hypothèses modernes de provenance, via Byzance, le ring des Avars ou les croisades, ont-elle[s] finalement moins de pertinence que la vieille tradition dyonisienne, reposant sans doute sur des archives disparues depuis, qui faisait remonter l’entrée dans le trésor de l’abbaye de Saint-Denis de cette «tasse de Salomon» à un don de Charles le Chauve en 877. L’œuvre semble d’ailleurs avoir laissé une trace de son passage préalable dans le trésor impérial carolingien, puisqu’elle inspira sans doute l’orfèvre qui, sous Charles le Chauve (843–877), pourvut une célèbre patène de serpentine (Musée du Louvre) d’une bordure soulignée d’un cordon de grenats, unique dans l’orfèvrerie carolingienne mais d’un effet visuel très proche de celui de la coupe. Que la «merveille des merveilles de l’art sassanide» fût parvenue en France en 801 parmi les présents offerts à Charlemagne par le calife Harun al-Rachid n’était peut-être pas qu’un mythe...”] (*ibid.*, p. 743). With thanks to Mme Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, Conservateur en chef au département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, Bibliothèque nationale de France

Another photograph of the Sasanian gold cup in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, previously attributed to one of the Sasanian kings whose name was *Khosrow*, but attributed instead by Inès Villela-Petit (2014) to King Kavād I. With thanks to Mme Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, Conservateur en chef au département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, Bibliothèque nationale de France. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabinet_des_M%C3%A9dailles#/media/File:Coupe_de_Chosroès.JPG

Fig. 6

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shot with countless arrows; other stories specify other torturous methods of execution. Anushiravan then proceeded to implement his own far-reaching social and administrative reforms. The Mazdakite ruler of al-Hirah was also overthrown and the previous king restored to power” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mazdak>)

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	Reformed Christian. Felix was recognised early as a musical prodigy, but his parents were cautious and did not seek to capitalise on his talent. [...] After a long period of relative denigration due to changing musical tastes and antisemitism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, his creative originality has been re-evaluated. He is now among the most popular composers of the Romantic era”	343
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PART I

Antiquity to the Middle Ages: An
Iranic Locale, Outside Views



Mazdak, Mazdakism, and the Mazdakite Parenthesis in Sasanian History

Ephraim Nissan

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with a religious and social movement, the Mazdakite religion and egalitarian social doctrine,¹ sharply dualistic (similarly to both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism), and associated with a social revolution or rather a period of disorder in the Sasanian (= Sassanian) Empire (comprising Iran and Mesopotamia). The Mazdakites are claimed to have advocated, or even enforced, the sharing of not only wealth, but also women. However, it is unclear how accurate such claims are, as they come from hostile sources. (Examples of groundless charges are given in the two parts of Sect. 3 in this chapter.) The temporal framework is both during the two reigns of the reformist king Kavad I (488–496, 499–531 CE, also known as Qubādh;—see Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7), at which time the ideology was presumably being promoted by Mazdak (who was not its originator, and apparently oversaw its revival), and during the reign of that king’s successor, which was when a revolt led by Mazdak erupted and was repressed. (Mazdak is also known as Mazdak the Younger.)

¹See, e.g., Kreyenbroek (2012), Yarshater (1983, 2005), Sundermann (1977), and Shaki (1978).



Fig. 1 A gold dinar of Kavād I



Fig. 2 A drachm of Kavadeh I