In 1985, in his book *The Jews of Byzantium*, Steven Bowman writes: “Unfortunately, our sources are such that it is difficult, if not impos-
sible, to examine the interaction of Jews and Christians and the con-
tributions of the former to Byzantine society. (...) Further research,
especially into the intellectual story of latter-day Byzantium, may well
uncover what we suspect to be a mutual give and take among Jewish
and Christian scholars. Too little work has been done, however, to do
more than estimate the contact, let alone delineate its results.”¹

Twenty years later, Anne Tihon, in a symposium on the subject
of Byzantine scholars, said: “The Jewish influence on the Byzantine
scholarly world of the fifteenth century is a phenomenon still poorly
known, poorly studied, and poorly explained.”²

I do not pretend to meet the expectations of these scholars. Much
research is still needed, mainly involving manuscripts, to begin defin-
ing the cultural exchanges between both communities in the last cen-
turies of Byzantium. But a first step, it seems, should be an inventory:
what do we know about these exchanges? That is what I intend to
provide in this article, hoping that this work will clear the field for
future research.

I. Wrong Tracks

The first thing necessary when clearing a field is to sweep away the
wrong tracks. Some of these illusive tracks are the so-called dialogues
between Jews and Christians about religion. I do not know whether
such dialogues exist in Jewish sources. I will limit myself to Christian

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² A. Tihon, “Astronomy between Ptolemaeus, Persia, the Jewish World and the
sources, based on the catalogue made by Külzer in 1999. What kind of Jews are found in these texts?

In 1310, Andronicus Comnenus Doukas Palaeologue, the nephew of Emperor Andronicus II, wrote Dialogue of a Christian with a Jew, which was published in a Latin translation. According to his account, Andronicus relates some discussions that he had in Constantinople, Orestias, and Thessaly, with Jewish “scholars and lawyers” who asked him about Christianity. He says too that in Orestias he had occasion to read a “Jewish book,” by a lawyer called Elias, which contained the genealogies of Mary and Joseph. Many questions arise from this statement, for example, did this Elias from Orestias ever exist? In which language was the book written? If it was in Hebrew, did Andronicus read it himself (which would suggest that he knew that language), or had it been translated by Elias? Possibly his account echoes real meetings, but it is difficult to measure the part played by literary reconstruction.

It is easier to dismiss the Jew Xenos in the Discourses against the Jews of John Cantacuzenus. The emperor presents this Xenos as a Pharisee of the tribe of Judah, whom he met in Mistra. Three elements make us doubt his existence: his name, Xenos (the Greek word for “stranger”, which is rather strange), his definition as a Pharisee, a notion alien to the Romaniote Jews (but we could think of a Rabbanite Jew) and the mention of the tribe of Judah. Theophanes of Nicaea, a contemporary of Cantacuzenus, who also wrote a Contra Iudaeos, indicates that the Jews of his time have nothing in common with those of the Bible, mainly because they do not even know to which tribe they belong. Lastly, Cantacuzenus’s Jew asks for baptism at the end of the

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4 PG 133, 795–924.

5 “Sophistais kai nomothési”: in Greek in a footnote (PG 133, 795).


7 Cf. C. Soteropoulos, Iôannou VI Kantakouzénou kata Ioudaiôn Logoi ennêa (Athènes, 1983).