Abelard and the Jews

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As a number of scholars have noted, there is a great deal of complexity and ambivalence in Christian views about Jews and Judaism in the Middle Ages. On the one hand, Christians worship the same God as the Jews; God’s revelation had been to the Jews and salvation had come through the Jews in Jesus. Moreover, as Jeremy Cohen points out, the survival of the Jews is a proof of the truth of Christianity because a proof of its roots, of the law given to Moses which Jesus lived by and interpreted.1 On the other hand, Jews reject Jesus as divine, God as triune, and the ‘new law’ in the gospels. In terms of complexity and ambivalence on the Jews, Abelard is no exception and, true to his way of dealing with other issues, he tends toward extremes. While working on other aspects of Abelard’s works over the years, I had been struck, even shocked, by the coexistence of seemingly contradictory attitudes toward the Jews in his theologies. For, on the one hand, Abelard enthusiastically cites evidence on the ways in which the triune nature of God is clearly, even indisputably, laid out in Hebrew scripture, thus including Jews in those with natural knowledge of the Trinity. On the other hand, however, Abelard moves directly from this observation to invective against the Jews, excoriating them for failing to recognize the truth so clearly laid out for them.2 Cohen’s work sent me back to Abelard and to works beyond the theologies in order to understand the particular kind of complexity and ambivalence in Abelard’s attitude toward Jews and Judaism. My topic, like Cohen’s, is the ‘hermeneutical Jew,’ that is, “the Jew as constructed in the discourse of Christian theology” in Abelard’s work rather than any actual encounter with Jews or any concrete effects from Abelard’s work on Jews in the period.3

I begin with Abelard’s theologies, where Abelard compares the Jews to the philosophers both in knowledge of the divine nature and the Trinity, as well as

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3 Cohen, Living Letters, 2–3.
in their ethical principles and behavior.\footnote{Abelard essentially rewrote and reworked his work of systematic theology a number of times in response to condemnations and criticisms. I refer here to the three main rewritings, known as the Theologia 'Summi Boni' [TSB], Theologia Christiana [TC], and Theologia 'scholarium' [TSch]. Buytaert's critical edition notes the passages in common between the different versions. For their dates of composition, see Mews, "On Dating the Works of Peter Abelard," Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge 52 (1985), 73–134.} I turn next to Abelard’s Collationes in the dialogue between the Philosopher and the Jew, connecting and comparing it to the Commentary on Romans; both these texts are concerned as well with the comparison between Jews and gentiles in relation to reason and righteousness. An examination of these texts and the role of Jews and Judaism as Abelard understands them show, first, that Abelard’s reflections on the Jews are reflections of his own thought and, second, that they have a role to play in the shifting ground of Christian anti-Jewish polemic in the twelfth century. Abelard’s Commentary on Romans and his Collationes are struggling with the same issues and with the same ambivalence about the Jews and their relative goodness compared to the gentiles, the same problematic that motivates the discussion of the Jews in his theologies. Paul’s letter to the Romans compares the situation of the Jews and gentiles on the gap between their knowledge of and righteousness toward God.

I will argue, first, that the different versions of the theology show some changes of tone and emphasis and that it is the drive to use and defend reason, dialectic, and pre-Christian philosophical sources that shifts Abelard’s view of the Jews. Abelard moves between equating the position of the Jews and the philosophers and \textit{ethnico}s and fairly clearly downgrading the Jewish position vis-à-vis that of the philosophers in ways that are more negative toward the Jews than some of his sources, like Augustine and Origen. In the Collationes, I concentrate on Abelard’s presentation of the Jew, in which the most fascinating and original part is Abelard’s attempt to inhabit the point of view of a Jewish thinker responding to the Philosopher’s criticisms. Abelard has been assessed as remarkably tolerant, even pluralist in these passages. I argue that, on the one hand, Abelard does attempt to give a sympathetic picture of the Jewish perspective but that, on the other hand, he presents the Jew as holding views that place him in dialogue with Abelard’s own views and criticizing him in terms of his own moral theory. What is perhaps more interesting about the Collationes, I want to suggest, is that all three participants are largely Pauline; it is as if Abelard has taken Paul’s letter to the Romans and imagined it as a dialogue. By this I don’t mean that the Jew and Philosopher agree with Paul’s conclusions but that they, along with the Christian, operate in an orbit of