

Petrus Alfonsi

Pedro Alfonso, Pierre Alphonse

DATE OF BIRTH Second half of 11th century

PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown

DATE OF DEATH Unknown; after 1116

PLACE OF DEATH Unknown

BIOGRAPHY

Petrus Alfonsi is one of the key actors in the transmission and assimilation of Arabic scientific, literary and religious texts and ideas to Latin Europe in the early 12th century. His impact is attested in the survival of roughly 160 manuscripts of his works, in the frequent use made of them by key authors from the 12th century to the 16th, and in their wide diffusion through early printed editions.

Petrus Alfonsi was born Moses, a Jew from al-Andalus. He was educated in Hebrew and Arabic; his writings show familiarity with the Talmud, with texts of Arabic astronomy, medicine and philosophy, and with the Arabic wisdom traditions. Moses converted to Christianity, and the first date associated with his life is that of his baptism, on June 29, 1106, in the cathedral (and former mosque) of Huesca. He explains that he took the name Petrus in honor of St Peter and Alfonsi in honor of his godfather, King Alfonso I of Aragon. This probably indicates that he played a role in Alfonso's court, perhaps as royal physician and astrologer.

At some point between 1110 and 1116 Alfonsi went to England, where he taught astronomy, and in 1116 produced his *Tabulae astronomicae* ('Astronomical tables'), a somewhat flawed Latin version of al-Khwārazmī's *Zīj al-Sindhīd*, a set of astronomical tables with accompanying 'canons' or explanatory texts. Two of his students in England are known by name: Walcher of Malvern and Adelard of Bath. Walcher composed a text on how to predict eclipses, based on the teachings of Alfonsi, and Adelard revised and improved Alfonsi's Latin version of al-Khwārazmī's text. According to one manuscript of Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis* ('Clerical instruction'), he served for a time as royal physician to King Henry I of England. Sometime in the 1120s, it seems, he was in France, as he wrote an *Epistola ad*

peripateticos in Francia ('Letter to the peripatetics in France'), in which he complains of his lack of students, professes his expertise in the art of astronomy, and lambastes Latin intellectuals for preferring the study of grammar and logic to the 'hard science' of astronomy.

The works of Petrus Alfonsi provide a fascinating glimpse at how the Latin West adapted and transformed the intellectual and cultural legacy of the Arab world. The historical Alfonsi himself imported new texts and new ideas into England and France: the aphorisms and fables of the eastern Wisdom traditions, astronomical texts and knowledge, and his own interpretations of the Qur'an and Talmud suffused with Hispano-Arab religious polemics. He shaped this knowledge to fit the needs and desires of his pan-European Latin readers. His rationalistic religious disquisitions reflect the concerns of the theologians of the 12th-century renaissance, of faith seeking understanding. He passionately defended astronomy and affirmed that the study of nature could reveal God's designs for creation. And the moral aphorisms of the *Disciplina* are directed to the edification of a proud new educated clerical elite.

His readers, copyists and continuers were to perpetuate the process of 'naturalization' of the Jewish and Arabic elements of Alfonsi's thought, using the *Dialogues* to inform a new, harsher anti-Judaism, mining the *Disciplina* as grist for their sermon tales and instructive fables.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogi contra Iudeos* (see list of editions and translations below)

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dialogi contra Iudeos, 'Dialogues against the Jews'

DATE 1110

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Latin

DESCRIPTION

In 1110 Petrus Alfonsi composed his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* ('Dialogues against the Jews'). He wrote the *Dialogues*, he says, because Jews accused him of having abandoned his former faith out of contempt for God's law, misunderstanding of the prophets, and lust for worldly gain. The *Dialogues* are his response to these accusers; he seeks to 'destroy their objections with reason and authority'. These *Dialogues* do not pretend to be the record of a real debate; he tells us that he has given the name Moses to the Jewish debater because that was his own name as a Jew; he gives the Christian debater his new name, Petrus. The twelve *Dialogues* fall into three parts: in the first, an attack on Judaism (*Dialogues* I-IV), Petrus 'proves' to Moses that Judaism is no longer valid, that Jews 'obey the law only in part, and that part is not pleasing to God'. Much of his argument turns on rationally- and scientifically-based attacks on the Talmud.

He then launches into an attack on Islam (*Dialogue* V), in which he presents Muḥammad as a fraud and a pseudo-prophet, and Muslim rituals (such as ablutions, fasting and pilgrimage) as sullied by their pagan origins. His polemics closely follow those of the *Risālat*

al-Kindī (q.v.), insisting on Muḥammad's violence and on the sordid details of his sex life (his polygamy, his relationship with Zaynab). He claims that Muslim ritual ablutions and the pilgrimage rites at Mecca are in fact survivals of pagan idolatrous devotions to Venus.

In the final section (*Dialogues* VI-XII), Petrus attempts to prove the basic doctrines of Christianity to Moses, or at least to show how they do not contradict either reason or the Old Testament. By the end of the exchange in the *Dialogues*, Moses is convinced and tamely converts to Christianity.

Alfonsi's *Dialogues* brought several important new elements to anti-Jewish polemic in Latin. First was his attack on the Talmud, a text unknown to most previous Latin authors. This shift in focus to the rich accumulation of Jewish exegesis and teaching, as well as contemporary Jewish practice, moves the arena of dispute from abstractions about Old Testament Judaism into a face-off between living communities. Second was his use of scientific and philosophical arguments to attack the beliefs of Jews and Muslims. This was a strategy common enough in interreligious polemic in al-Andalus and the rest of the Arab world but new to Latin Christendom. Its rhetorical as well as logical purpose was to show the irrationality of the rival religion. Third was Alfonsi's idea that, because of their espousal of the unreasonable and anti-biblical tenets of the Talmud, Jews were no longer faithful to their divine covenant, and that contemporary Judaism was a heretical deviation from classical Judaism. The previous consensus among Christian anti-Jewish polemicists was, on the contrary, that Jews erred in their literalist readings of holy writ and in clinging obstinately to the Old Law instead of embracing the New (Christian) Dispensation. These charges were to contribute to an intensification of anti-Judaism in Christian Europe and charges of moral 'contumacy', the perverse election of evil over an unmistakable good.

The surging popularity of Alfonsi's work within Iberia and well beyond the peninsula furthered an increasing tendency to link anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim polemics: whereas earlier anti-Jewish polemicists had for the most part contented themselves with arguing for Christian interpretations of the Torah and the Prophets, Alfonsi focused on the Talmud and the Qur'an as two illicit pseudo-revelations which formed the bases for two heretical doctrines. Both Talmud and Qur'an, for Alfonsi, could be attacked through scriptural and rational-scientific argumentation, and certain key elements of Christian doctrine, in particular the doctrine of the Trinity, could be proven. The

Muslim or Jew, as long as he allowed himself to be rational, could be brought to the Christian truth, as is Moses in Alfonsi's *Dialogues*. This conflation of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim argumentation and an increasingly terse Christian insistence on the irrationality of both rival faiths represent a crucial turning-point in Christian portrayal of Islam and Judaism in medieval Europe.

SIGNIFICANCE

The *Dialogues* became the most widely read and used of any medieval anti-Jewish text; they survive in 63 manuscripts, with sixteen additional manuscripts containing variant or abridged versions of the text. The *Dialogues* were already popular in the first quarter of the 12th century at the Parisian abbey of St Victor, whose canons took particular interest in Alfonsi's presentation of Jewish scriptural exegesis. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the *Dialogues* were found principally in Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in France and England.

The *Dialogues* also proved popular among those interested in Islam; some scribes recopied only the anti-Islamic chapter of the *Dialogues*, and Humbert of Romans (q.v.), master general of the Dominican order (1254-63), in his *Tract on the preaching of the Crusade*, recommends it alongside the Latin translation of the Qur'an as essential reading for understanding the religion of the adversary. Dozens of medieval writers on Islam based their descriptions of Muḥammad's life, of Muslim law, and of the pilgrimage rites at Mecca on Alfonsi's *Dialogues*, including Petrus de Pennis, Marino Sanudo, and Jacobus de Voragine (q.v.) in his *Legenda aurea* ('Golden legend'). A Castilian translation of the anti-Islamic chapter of the *Dialogues* was inserted into the edition of the *El viaje de la Tierra Santa* (Zaragoza, 1498), a Spanish version of Bernard of Breidenbach's 15th-century narrative of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Throughout the Middle Ages, the *Dialogues* remained an important source of information and polemics about Islam for European readers.

MANUSCRIPTS

In all, 63 medieval manuscripts are known (described in Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi*, pp. 182-98).

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

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