

Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam

Coercion and Faith in Premodern Iberia and Beyond

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On the Road to 1391? Abner of Burgos / Alfonso of Valladolid on Forced Conversion

Ryan Szpiech

The year 1391 has justly been interpreted as a major turning point in Iberian history. The riots and mass persecutions that swept from Seville across the peninsula produced a *converso* class whose uncertain place in fifteenth-century society precipitated religious and economic crises whose effects lasted for centuries. While historians have long agreed that 1391 was a decisive turning point, especially for Jews in Sepharad, recent arguments have begun to interpret the events of that year as a fateful culmination of trends that developed over the course of the fourteenth century. As Paola Tartakoff has argued, although the pogroms marked a rupture in many aspects of Iberian society, nevertheless, “important continuities bridged the periods before and after 1391.”¹ In searching for precedents, it is logical to consider the increase in the number of Christian anti-Jewish polemics in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century as a harbinger of shifting attitudes in Iberian society. No matter how resolutely we resist a teleological view of history, the confiscation and burning of the Talmud in Paris in the 1240s, the 1263 Disputation of Barcelona between Catalan rabbi Moses ben Nahman and the Dominican friar—and converted Jew—Pau Crestià, and the acerbic anti-Jewish polemics of Dominican friar Ramon Martí (d. after 1284) in the 1260s and 1270s all seem, in retrospect, to set the stage for increasing anti-Jewish hostility in fourteenth-century Iberia.

The most significant embodiment of that hostility manifested between the period of Crestià and Martí and the riots of 1391 is the Castilian convert Abner of Burgos, known after his conversion around 1320 as Alfonso de Valladolid (d. ca. 1347). Abner/Alfonso spent three decades after his conversion writing elaborate and sophisticated polemical arguments in Hebrew, which he addressed to his former Jewish co-religionists in Castile, and his writing provoked more responses by Jewish writers of the period than did that of any other Christian polemicist. Some of Abner/Alfonso’s disciples continued to copy and disseminate his arguments in the second half of the fourteenth century, and his work continued to wield influence in Christian polemics against Jews well

¹ Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, 138.

into the fifteenth century, including at the Disputation of Tortosa in 1413–14 as well as in the widely disseminated writings of the convert Pablo de Santa María in the 1430s.

Can the work of Abner/Alfonso in the 1320s–1340s and his disciples in subsequent decades be linked to the events of 1391? The historian of Iberian Jewry, Yitzhaq Baer, left no doubt of this in his response to the question. In Baer's opinion, "it was Abner who fathered that ideology of apostasy which was destined, about two generations after his death, to bring wrack and ruin upon Spanish Jewry."² The historian Yehuda Shamir followed Baer in claiming that Abner/Alfonso's writing "raised a religious debate that helped to shatter Judaism in Spain."³ David Gitlitz claims, "the principal tenets of [Abner/Alfonso's] reasoning...bear some direct responsibility for the violent events of 1391 and what followed."⁴ In what way can his writing, which was learned and esoteric and read mainly by fellow intellectuals and philosophers, be meaningfully linked to the forced conversions of 1391, which were perpetrated by Christian mobs and zealous preachers, most of whom had certainly never read his works? This question can be approached in two ways. On the one hand, we can take a historical perspective and ask if Abner/Alfonso's writing or actions led in some direct way to the unfolding of events in 1391. On the other hand, even if no direct causal connection can be established between his writing and later events, we can focus more directly on Abner/Alfonso's writings and ask if they defended or recommended the practice of forced conversion, whether on an individual or mass scale. These questions could be asked more broadly, not only about Abner/Alfonso but also about the entire anti-Jewish polemical tradition beginning in the twelfth century. In other words, were the riots of 1391 a natural culmination of medieval polemical writing, or were they the expression of a new and unprecedented element in Jewish-Christian relations in Iberia?

Because an examination of the roots and development of the 1391 riots would require much more space than is possible here, the question of Abner/Alfonso's direct influence—or that of his predecessors in the thirteenth century—on those riots will be left for future discussion. The goal of this article is to take up the second question: Does Abner/Alfonso himself ever endorse or recommend forced conversion, or do his ideas support it, at least implicitly? Could the perpetrators of 1391 have found support for their actions in Abner/Alfonso's writings if they had read them? For Baer, Abner/Alfonso's "ideology

² Baer, *A History of the Jews*, 1:330.

³ Shamir, *Rabbi Moses Ha-Kohen*, 1:40.

⁴ Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, 5.

of apostasy” expressed in Hebrew to Jewish readers was part of a general hatred of Jews that included explicit support for forced conversion. “Maestre Alfonso leaves no doubt as to his own solution to the Jewish problem. Bloody persecutions are the only means to redeeming them... The plan which the enemies of Israel were to carry out in its entirety in the year 1391 is outlined for the first time [in Abner/Alfonso’s polemical writing].”⁵ Baer’s claims have been very influential, and they have been repeated by numerous historians of the last half-century.⁶ Nevertheless, I argue that such claims are difficult to defend on the basis of Abner/Alfonso’s writing, where one finds contradictory recommendations. Although, on the one hand, he did indeed make statements about the value of social pressure and circumstantial coercion in order to facilitate conversion and prevent backsliding, on the other hand, his extensive arguments about the proofs of Rabbinical literature for the truth of Christian dogma are presented with attention to the importance of persuasion. In making sense of Abner/Alfonso’s position on forced conversion, I will first summarize Abner/Alfonso’s ideas about voluntary conversion, showing that he saw it as a logical result of better understanding of Jewish sources. He in fact argues at length that the individual Jew must learn to think about his tradition in new ways apart from what he has been taught, and in this he stresses the value of individual will and free choice. I will secondly examine the place of Abner/Alfonso’s philosophical views on free will to show that although he endorsed a determinist view of the universe, this determinism did not undermine his encouragement of individual choice of faith or justify the use of coercion in religion. I will then summarize Abner/Alfonso’s discussion of the legend of the twelfth-century forced “conversion” of Sephardic Qaraites by the Rabbanite majority, in which coercion is presented as a natural and recurring element within the Jewish community itself as part of its own defense of orthodoxy and tradition. Lastly, I will turn to Abner/Alfonso’s explicit statements about Christian coercion and force, showing that he makes numerous contradictory remarks both endorsing force and yet rejecting forced conversion, and even arguing that the Christianization of the Jews on a mass scale would undermine God’s plan to keep them “in captivity” until the end of history. I conclude that although Abner/Alfonso’s polemical writing is part of a general trend in

5 Baer, *A History of the Jews*, 1:353–54.

6 On the basis of Baer’s assertions, critics such as Ron Barkai have recently alleged that for Abner/Alfonso, “la única manera de acercar a los judíos, a la verdad y a la redención era por medio de ‘grandes castigos.’” Barkai, “Diálogo filosófico-religioso,” 23. Moisés Orfali likewise follows Baer to the letter, arguing that Abner/Alfonso endorsed “persecuciones sangrientas” as a solution to the “Jewish situation” in Spain. Orfali, *Talmud y Cristianismo*, 156.

anti-Jewish sentiment in Castile, nevertheless his writing does not explicitly support forced conversion and cannot be understood as an endorsement *avant la lettre* of the uprisings of 1391 or their aftermath.

1 Conversion and the Reading of Rabbinical Texts

Abner/Alfonso spent the three decades after his own conversion writing pro-Christian, anti-Jewish treatises in Hebrew. After publically embracing Christianity in the early 1320s, he finished his longest and most important work, *Moreh Zedeq* (*Teacher of Righteousness*), in which he includes the story of his conversion in fascinating detail. He subsequently wrote a philosophical treatise on the question of determinism and free will entitled *Minḥat Qen'aot* (*Zealous Offering*), and later a response to the attacks on his earlier work by his Jewish colleague Isaac Polqar, entitled *Teshuvot la-Meharef* (*Response to the Blasphemer*), as well as a few polemical letters and minor treatises on various themes. His works survive in a mixture of Hebrew original versions and medieval Castilian translations (probably made by him). Some works, such as the *Teacher* and *Zealous Offering*, now survive only in the Castilian version, while others (such as the *Response* and letters), survive in both Hebrew and Castilian.⁷

Abner/Alfonso's view of conversion and of his role as polemical author is evident in his direct appeal to his Jewish reader throughout the ten long chapters of the *Teacher*. The Christian voice in the text (the "Teacher" or *moreh*) says to the Jewish voice (the "Rebel" or *mored*):

If you are not used to studying the books of the sciences and knowing all that ancient books said about these profound and subtle things (Dan. 2:22) achieved by the studies of the great sages, *remove ill from your heart and pluck malice from your flesh* (Eccles. 11:10) and *make your ear like a mill hopper* (BT Ḥagiga 3b and Hulin 89a) in order to hear and submit to (*rresçebir e asufrite sobre*) those who know more than you do, and *incline your ear and hear the words of the sages, and put your heart according to my understanding* (Proverbs 22:17), and do not continue to argue and contradict their understandings. *Behold the honor of God* (Exodus 16:10), because *the place where you are standing is holy* (Exod. 3:5).⁸

7 For a summary of Abner/Alfonso's bibliography, see Carpenter, "Alfonso de Valladolid;" and Szpiech, "Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid."

8 "E agora tú, judío, ten mientes a estas palabras assumadas que te mostré aquí, si tú eres de los omnes entendudos que usaron mucho a trabajar en las çiençias verdaderas, e con lo

This passage is indicative of Abner/Alfonso's approach to Jewish sources throughout the text. Through the words spoken by the Christian Teacher to the Jewish Rebel, Abner/Alfonso encourages any Jewish reader who is doubting and confused to study more intensely the sages of his own tradition. He believes that, just as was the case in his experience, this study will naturally lead his readers to question their faith and possibly turn to his explanations as an alternative to mainstream Jewish teaching. He concludes:

And if one does not have a great understanding to know good and evil, and truth and falsehood, and is doubting about the issues, let him go to the sages to learn from them. And if he finds a contradiction among the sages, let him strive and work to understand by himself, and to open his heart⁹ to understand in their words (cf. Ḥagiga 3b) where the truth lies...a man should not remain doubtful about this important root [question] (*rrayz*) [of faith], for this is not among those things that can be forgiven... for the deception that a man can receive in it is not like material deception, but rather it is the deception of the soul, for him and for his offspring and for all those who follow him, they and their children and their children's children, [because] all of Israel is surety one for another.¹⁰

que otorgueste la postura que pusiermos en comienço del libro que será tu entençión en estas disputaciones a querer la verdat e serviçio de dios, non por manera de vençer nin de vanagloria, e verás la çertedunbre de la fe de los christianos en como es en la ffina de quanto más puede ser del cumplimento para endereçar al pueblo en este mundo e acarrearlos a la vida del otro mundo e a la gloria perdurable. E demás que es ffundada sobre las rrayzes que ffueron dicha[s] para ella en la Ley de Moysén e las prophecias e en los dichos de los ssabios e de los filósofos, como ya nonbré ssuso. E ssi tú non huseste a estudiar en los libros de las scienciās e ssaber todo lo que los antigos dixieron en estas cosas ffundas e sotiles, ado llegaron los estudios de los mayores sabios, rriedra sanna de tu coraçón e tuelle maliçia de tu carne e ffaza a tu oreja como la tolva del molino para rresçebir e asufrirte ssobre los que saben más que tú, e acuesta tu oreja e escucha palabras de los sabios, e tu coraçón pon a mi entendimiento, e non allegues adelante para porfiar e contradezir a sus entendimientos dellos..." See Abner de Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid, *Mostrador de Justicia*, 2:98; and the sole manuscript in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Espagnol 43, fol. 184r-v. (All subsequent references Abner/Alfonso's works will give the manuscript folio followed by the volume and page in the corresponding printed edition).

- 9 Mettman reads "...e abrá el coraçón para entender..." but it makes sense when read, as it appears in the manuscript, without the accent, i.e. "...and let him open his heart to understand."
- 10 "E si non a entendimiento largo para conoçer en el bien e el mal, e la verdat e la mintira, e está dubdando en la cosa, vaya a los sabios [a] aprender dellos. E si fallare contradición entre los sabios, punne e trabaje para entender por sí mismo, e abra el coraçón para entender e sus palabras dellos a qual cabo acuesta la verdat...E non deve ffincar omne

His primary goal here is not only to encourage others to explore their faith and come to understand the authorities of their tradition, but also to encourage them to seek truth from all corners and to be open to things that they might find from sources not accepted in Jewish tradition. He does not impugn the Jewish tradition as universally false, but instead encourages the Jewish reader to study more diligently, keeping what is true and discarding what is erroneous.

Ultimately, in the *Teacher* he urges his Jewish reader to work and study in search of the truth in order “truly” to accept and follow his *own* Jewish authorities. For example, after presenting a Christian argument based on the sayings of Rabbi Akiva, the Teacher says to the Rebel that, “I think that you also, Jew, know this, but that out of love of believing that you will win, pride forced you to go against your own teachers.”¹¹ In a roundabout way, the appeal is to become Christian by being a better Jew, that is, by adhering more to what Abner/Alfonso understands to be the meaning of the texts and traditions considered as authentic and authoritative within Judaism. At the same time, however, the Teacher does push the Jewish reader to think of himself as separate from his tradition, and to see his own understanding as capable of discerning truth above and beyond that of the authorities of his religion. The worst thing, in Abner/Alfonso’s view, is to “remain in doubt” because this is unforgivable, more so than striving alone to resolve doubts and converting, even if one is in error. He encourages the “understanding sage to study with care.”¹²

This is the first step in his overall goal of separating the Jew from his tradition. This appeal to him to “struggle and work to understand by himself” (*punne e trabaje para entender por sí mismo*) translates, beyond a veiled obsequiousness that flatters the Jew as being more intelligent than his community, into a call for the Jew be open to other, non-Jewish sources. He then introduces the possibility that true arguments could come from Christian polemicists such as himself. Near the end of chapter one (paragraph thirty-one), the Teacher encourages the Rebel to be open minded, not only to Jewish books but also to suggestions made by Christian readers:

dubdoso en esta grand rrayz, ca non es de las cosas que se pueden perdonar...ca el enganno que omne puede rrecebir en ello non es como enganno de aver, mas es enganno del alma para él e para su ssimiente e para todos los qui dél ssguieren, ellos e sus ffijos e hijos de sus ffijos fasta siglo, e que todo Israel sson fiadores unos por otros.” Abner/Alfonso, 184v / 2:99.

11 “E yo cudo que también tú, judío, conosçes esto, ssinon que por amor de cuydar vençer te forçó la soberbia de yr contra tus maestros.” Ibid., 252v / 2: 251.

12 “...sabio entendido a estudiar ssotilmientre...” Ibid., 33r / 1:53.

Thus, when you should find Christians who give some gloss of some verse that contradicts your opinion, do not pressure yourself to push it away or discard it for the reason that other [verses] do not follow that intention—as did many Jews did who composed books of disputations against Christians. Rather look first to see if the argument that they linked to the verse is confirmed as true through philosophical study or by the sayings of students of philosophy or the sayings of the sages of the Talmud or others who are authentic [authorities] among you.¹³

Not only does he encourage the Jew not to follow Jewish tradition of the rabbinic sages if he should find contradictions or points he does not agree with there. He also stresses the relativity of the categories of belief and heresy and says that the only basis on which to decide whom one ought to follow is not tradition, but personal understanding and reason:

It is known that whoever holds to a belief in the world will reason according to his nature as much as he can and will say that that [belief] is the most certain of all, and that all others are evil lies, and are completely heretical and idolatrous compared with it. There is no fitting criteria by which to choose the truth from among the lies except one's understanding and the weight of reason.¹⁴

It is ironic that part of this strategy of isolating the reader stems from Abner/Alfonso's rhetoric appealing to a sense of tradition in the Jewish community. Abner/Alfonso does not totally disparage Judaism or call for the Jew to leave it outright, as many polemicists traditionally did. Rather, he appeals to a Jewish notion of continuity and tradition by trying to spur his reader to take seriously his individual responsibility as a Jew endowed with reason.

13 "E por ende, quando fallares a los christianos que dieren alguna glosa de algún viesso tal que contradiga la tu opinión, non te apressures a enpuxarla nin a desecharla por parte de que non siguiessen los otros viessos asegund aquella entención, como lo fizieron todos los judíos que conpusieron libros de disputaciones contra los christianos, mas cata primero si aquella rrazón que arrimaron al viesso es confirmada por verdadera de parte del estudio filosófico o de dichos de los filósofos estudiantes o de dichos de los ssabios del Talmud o los otros abténticos entre vos." *Ibid.*, 40v / 1: 67.

14 "Sabida cosa es que qualque[quier] se pagar de una creencia del mundo razonará segund su natura quanto más pudiere e dirá que aquella es la más çierta de todas, e que todas las otras en comparación della son malas e mintrosas e heresías e ydolatrías conplidas. E non ay cosa conviniente para escoger la verdat de entre la mintira, sinon el entendimiento e el peso de la raçón." *Ibid.*, 37r/1: 61.

Part of the foundation of his argument against the Talmud is that the early Rabbis in fact knew that Jesus was the expected Messiah but refused to teach others what they discerned in scriptures and traditional authorities. This deliberate concealment by the original sages was then perpetuated by later Jewish leaders and handed down as tradition within the Jewish community. He appeals to the individual Jew as one who forms an essential part of a sacred chain of Jewish tradition, offering him the choice either to transmit truth or perpetuate falsehood, and he places the responsibility for the correct understanding of later generations of Jews on the individual Jewish reader's decision to sort out his own doubts about tradition. Citing Ezekiel 37:25, ("...and they shall dwell therein, they, and their children, and their children's children, for ever..."), he states that if each individual Jew does not sort out his beliefs about his own religion, his doubt would end up being a cause of future corruption, what he calls "a deception of the soul for him and for his offspring and for all those who follow him, they and their children and their children's children."¹⁵

In these arguments, Abner/Alfonso places great emphasis on the power of free choice. The implicit assertion is that, ironically, in order to preserve "Israel," the individual Jew must break away from it and find truth on his own, or else the legacy of his own doubt and misbelief will be perpetuated and amplified in later Jews. By manipulating the language of family and tradition to fit his call for a solitary search for truth, he asserts, citing the Talmud (BT Sanhedrin 9b–10a, 25a) that "every man is his own intimate relation and partisan and relative to himself."¹⁶ Thus it is through the individual's free choice to seek truth individually that the community remains faithful and true. He ends his appeal (found in the last paragraph of chapter six) by again citing the Talmudic dictum, "all of Israel is surety one for another,"¹⁷ a statement that turns the courageous free-thinking apostasy of one man into the saving grace not only for himself, but for all of Judaism. Through this subtle series of steps, Abner/Alfonso attempts to transform the capacity to choose apostasy from being a divisive and destructive force into being the only step capable of preserving Judaism.

2 Free Will and Determinism

In the context of this focus on individual choice, the philosophical question of free will and determinism plays a central role. In modern scholarship, Abner/

¹⁵ Ibid., 184v / 2:99.

¹⁶ "Todo omne es çercano e vadero e pariente de ssí mismo." Ibid., 43r/1:35.

¹⁷ "Todo Isrrael sson fiadores unos por otros." Ibid., 184v / 2: 99, a translation of "כל ישראל כבז"ע"רבים זה בזה" Sifra Beḥuqqotai 7:5 [on Lev. 26:37]; (BT Shevu'ot 39a; Sanhedrin 27b).

Alfonso's name has become so closely associated with a theory of absolute determinism that this has often come to be seen as his primary belief and teaching, although it is, in truth, only one aspect of his overall argument in favor of the truth of Christianity. Abner/Alfonso's views as expressed in the *Teacher of Righteousness* differ slightly in focus from his later views in such works as the *Response to the Blasphemer* and the *Zealous Offering*, in part because the primary topic of the *Teacher* is the Messiah, while the latter works were written in response to the attacks made by his former colleague Isaac Polqar on those messianic ideas. All of his surviving works, however, from no matter what period, affirm the same basic belief that the events that occur in time are predetermined to happen because God's omniscience necessarily encompasses all future possibilities. While a full treatment of Abner/Alfonso's philosophy of determinism is not necessary here, a discussion of forced conversion requires a basic outline of his philosophical views. In particular, it is necessary to consider Abner/Alfonso's views about free will as expressed in the *Teacher*, where he also treats the question of conversion in most detail.

In the *Teacher*, Abner/Alfonso approaches this issue repeatedly in terms of the chronology of the coming of the Messiah. In paragraph thirty-nine of chapter seven, he reflects on the Talmudic statement (BT *Hagigah* 12b) that the *Arabot* mentioned in Psalm 68:5 (which Abner/Alfonso, following Maimonides, equates with the outer sphere of the cosmos) contain "...the spirits and souls of those that are yet to be born." Such future souls exist only in potential, but they do already exist in a real way because God has created them along with the rest of the universe. In the same manner, just as God conceived and always knows individual souls potentially before they are actualized in temporal creation, God knows all other things from an eternal point of view as well. Man should not think "that God knows generalities and species in terms of their universal material but does not know individuals, but rather [one should think] that all individuals are known by God both in substance and in accident."¹⁸ Because God knows all individual things eternally, God's actions are not bound by any events on earth or in creation.

Because God has eternal and complete knowledge, he knows both accident and essence, and he knows all things at once and not partially or seriatim: "All things and the order of their being, one after the other, are known and

18 "...Esto es porque non entre en voluntad de omne que Dios ssabe las generalidades e las especies de parte de la materia universsal dellas, e que non ssabe los individuos, sinon que cada individuo, tan bien de sustançias como de asçidentes, todo es conocido ante Dios." Ibid., 228r/2: 193.

understood [by God] all at once.”¹⁹ As he states in the *Zealous Offering*, “God knows all things particularly with an eternal knowledge,”²⁰ and as a result he knows the future of all things including man’s individual actions in the future. Colette Sirat explains the upshot of this belief, stating “man chooses between alternatives, but this choice is not free, for it depends on necessary laws. In fact, if human choice were free, God could not know human decision until the last moment, because it would be unforeseeable, even for man, until the last moment. He would thus not be omniscient.”²¹ The implication of God’s eternal knowledge of individual accidents is that God is never subject to contingency but is always the ultimate first cause of all things. Determinism is thus necessary to maintain the unity of God, for if God’s creation were multiple and not all resulting from the same ultimate cause, then there would be things outside of God’s ultimate control. Because God is omnipotent as well as omniscient, this is impossible. Abner/Alfonso describes this theological belief about God’s characteristics (being omnipotent, omniscient, eternal) in Aristotelian terms as a First Cause. He writes, “God is the primary agent of the entire world in general, and is also the primary form, that is, the agent of all individuals in the world, just as the form is agent of all individual things of which it is form. And [God] is also the primary will, that is the final intention and cause and, with all that, he is only one thing.”²² Because humans cannot see the full chain of cause and effect that leads to them, they have the experience of seeming to be a primary cause when, in reality, they are always moved to act by external causes. While in the *Teacher*, this view is more directed toward a discussion of the Messiah and Christian truth than in his later works such as *Zealous Offering*, the philosophical explanation is essentially the same in both works.

Although some of Abner/Alfonso’s readers—most notably Ḥasdai Crescas in the early fifteenth century—were influenced by his views, a number of contemporary rivals accused him of professing determinism only as a way to

19 “Ca todas las cosas e el ordenamiento de ssu ser, unas después dotras, sson conocidas e ssabidas a Dios en un tajamiento.” *Ibid.*, 227v/2: 192.

20 “Dios tien mientes particularmiente en todas las cosas, e con ssu ssaber eterno.” Abner de Burgos/Alfonso de Valladolid, *Ofrenda de Zelos*, 20. Manuscript in Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. “Lat. 6423.” fols. 3vb–4ra.

21 Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 309.

22 “...es Dios obrador primero a todo el mundo en general, e es otrosí forma primera, quiero dezir obrador a todos los individuos del mundo, como que la forma es obrador de todos los individuos de las cosas de que es forma. E es otrosí voluntad primera, que quiere dezir entención e causa final; e con todo esto es una cosa solamiente.” Abner/Alfonso, 121v/1: 231–32. On the relation between his determinism and his Trinitarian views, see Sadik, “Trinity and Determinism in the Thought of Abner of Burgos.”

justify his own conversion after the fact.²³ In his *Ma'amar ha-Beḥirah* (*Treatise on Free Will*), allegedly composed against Abner/Alfonso's ideas as expressed in the *Zealous Offering*, Moses Narboni asserted pointedly that, "when [Abner/Alfonso] saw that what he had done was wrong even according to philosophy... he tried to absolve himself of guilt by preaching an all-embracing determinism, claiming that everything was pre-ordained."²⁴ Similarly, Isaac Polqar fiercely attacked Abner/Alfonso's conversion, beginning his *Teshuvat Apikoros* (*Response to the Heretic*): "I will eulogize and lament for one who sought great science and hidden wisdom, which is grand and lofty and (then) turned to engage in empty things and dreams."²⁵ Some modern historians of Abner/Alfonso's philosophical ideas (apart from his theology) have gone beyond the critiques of his medieval contemporaries and linked his philosophical views on determinism and free will not only to his own conversion but also to his alleged opinions about the forced conversions of others. Colette Sirat concludes her analysis with a damning verdict: "Not only does Abner of Burgos—Alfonso of Valladolid—affirm absolute determinism, [but] he also gives a definition of will that justifies in advance the forced baptisms and all the tortures of the Inquisition reserved for the *conversos*."²⁶ We can evaluate this claim in two ways; first, by asking if Abner/Alfonso's views constitute "absolute" determinism; and second, by and considering to what extent his view of the will supports forced baptisms like those seen in 1391 or the use of coercion in the fifteenth century.

Although many scholars have summarized Abner/Alfonso's philosophy of determinism, few have elaborated on the role that experience plays for Alfonso in defining the meaning of one's intentions. Abner/Alfonso insists that, despite the reality that all things are predetermined and humans do not act freely, nevertheless the *impression* of free will does exist for everyone. Indeed, without it, there would be no rightful divine reward or punishment for human action. He states clearly that:

Every man will always have the power of his free will. If he desires, he will do good works, and if he does not desire to, he will not do good works.

23 On Abner/Alfonso's influence on Hasdai Crescas, see Ravitzky, "Crescas' Theory of Human Will;" Baer, "*Sefer Minh'at Qenaot* of Abner of Burgos."

24 Hayoun, "L'Épître du libre arbitre de Moïse de Narbone," 149.

25 Hecht, "The Polemical Exchange between Isaac Pollegar and Abner of Burgos/Alfonso of Valladolid," 327 (translation on 94). Manuscript in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Ms. "De Rossi 533" (Ms. 2440), fol. 1a.

26 Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, 312. Maurice Kriegel affirms also that Abner/Alfonso "avoir préconisé l'emploi de la force comme moyen de 'persuasion.'" Kriegel, "Paul de Burgos et Profiat Duran déchiffrent 1391," paragraph 10, n. 48.

This is in accordance with how things are in the nature of men...If it were not for [the experience of free choice], there would be no need of any Law, old or new, nor would there be punishment or reward or a Day of Forgiveness, and all of those prophets and sages whom I named would be false [prophets] and liars.²⁷

Yet how can a person have free will if God knows what he or she will choose beforehand? Abner/Alfonso's theory can be categorized as a "compatibilist" view, as Manekin explains, which "views determinism as compatible with the moral appropriateness of praise and blame."²⁸ Abner/Alfonso's compatibilist view reconciles the concepts of divine omniscience (which implies, for him, God's prescience about all things) and absolute divine justice (implying, philosophically, a need for the experience of free will) by arguing that man does not share God's eternal knowledge of individual actions. Thus man *experiences* all choices and makes all decisions in a way that, from his worldly and temporal perspective, amounts to free choice. As he states in the *Zealous Offering*, "It is fitting that we do works like one who believes that works are given to man and to his will [to do] and that he will have punishment and reward for them."²⁹

At the same time, apart from the teaching that each person is responsible for his or her choices because he has the experience of having made them freely, Abner/Alfonso also claims that people are also to be held accountable for actions done under compulsion. Importantly, this applies not only when people are compelled without their knowledge, but also when they are fully aware that they are being compelled, a phenomenon he compares to feeling the effects of medicine or poison one is forced to take.³⁰ This aspect of his argument

27 "Sienpre será el poder de todo omne a su a[l]vedrio libre e dado en su mano; que si quisieren, fará[n] las bonas obras, e ssin non quisieren, non las farán. E esto segund que es tal en la natura de los omnes...E ssinon por esto, non ovieran mester ninguna Ley, nin vieja nin nueva, nin abría y pena nin galardón nin Dia de Perdones, e sserían todos aquellos prophetas e sabios que nonbré falsos e mintrosos; e esto conocido es a todo el qui quisiere otorgar la verdat." Abner/Alfonso, 274v/2:303.

28 Manekin, *Medieval Jewish Philosophical Writings*, xxvii.

29 "Lo conveniente es que fagamos obras del qui cree que las obras sson dadas al omne e a ssu alvedno, e avrá pena e galardón por ellas." Abner/Alfonso, *Ofrenda de Zelos*, 25b / p. 56.

30 "E el qui dize que, ssi el omne ffuesse fforçado de vir tud susana en ssus buenas obras non sseria guysado de darle buen galardón por ellas, es tal como el que dize que ssi el omne ffuesse forçado de la virtud del entendimiento para creer e otorgar las causas e las rrazones de la Ley e de los mandamientos, non ssería guysado de darle buen galardón por ella. E como el que dize que, ssi el doliente ffuese forçado por el fisico, o el ninno por ssu padre, a beber el axarop de la melezina, non sseria guysado que aprovechasse. E en tal guisa el que dize que, ssi el omne ffuesse fforçado de virtud susana para fazer las malas

seems to contradict his claim that one can be judged despite being predetermined to act because one has the experience of choosing freely. Can one also be judged even when one no longer has that experience, and feels one's choices are not actually choices? Abner/Alfonso states clearly that he can, although knowledge and consent can augment or mitigate one's culpability. He explains:

Consequences (*rretribuciones*) follow works, even if the works are forced by something, and [this is so] all the same whether it be by higher virtue, such as by one's understanding, or [by a lower one such as] his ignorance. However, it might be that understanding and ignorance will augment or decrease consequences insofar as they cause an increase or decrease in works.³¹

Thus although one is responsible for actions even when one knows one is being coerced, there may be more of a punishment or reward for one who knows he does not act freely. Abner/Alfonso does not develop this point, however, and his argument about unintentional action seems to contradict his claims about the basis of divine justice in people's experience of freedom.

In any case, the upshot of the claim that "consequences follow works, even if the works are forced by something" is that forced conversion to Christianity may well be considered legitimate insofar as it binds the convert to a new law with or without his will. Abner/Alfonso's claim calls to mind the oft-cited precedent of the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 (canon 57). It ruled that Jews ought not to be forced to convert, but also include the contrary ruling that those Jews already forced under the reign of Sisebut "must be held to the faith even if they received it by force and necessity."³² While Abner/Alfonso does

obras, non seria guisado de darle pena por ellas, es tal como el que dize que, ssi el omne non sopiesse la rrazon por que ffueron deffendidos los peccados, o que non connojiessse la maldat dellos, non sseria guisado de padesçer pena por ellos. E como el que dize que, ssi el omne fuesse forçado para beber la poçonia, o que non oviessse connoçido la ssu maliçia, non seria guysado de padesçer danno quando la beviessse. Mas todo esto es ffalso, porque las rretribuciones ssiguen a las obras, maguera que las obras ssean forçadas de qualqnier cosa, que ssea tan bien de la virtud susana como del entendimiento del omne o de su nesçiedat, ssinon que puede sseer que el entendimiento o la nesçiedat le farán ennader o menguar en las rretribuciones de la parte que fazen ennader o menguar en las obras." Abner/Alfonso, *Ofrenda de Zelos*, 23c-d/p. 52.

³¹ Abner/Alfonso, *Ofrenda de Zelos*, fol. 23d/p. 52. See above, n. 30.

³² "De iudaeis hoc praecipit sancta synodus nemini deinceps ad credendum vim inferre." "Oportet ut fidem etiam quam vi vel necessitate susciperunt tenere cognatur." For these texts from Toledo IV, see Vives Gatell, *Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos*, 210 and 211, respectively. For one discussion of the canon, see Colish, *Faith, Force and Fiction*, 246.

not cite this or any other ecclesiastical precedent, we can assume that he would not disagree, because for him, humans are always acting under some form of necessity, although their knowledge of those determining factors varies. Moreover, just as the ruling at Toledo affirms two contradictory positions about the legitimacy of forced conversion of Jews, Abner/Alfonso explicitly proffers two contradictory positions about the justice of being held accountable for forced actions.

The position that one is to be judged for one's actions even when one is cognizant of acting under force or necessity disproves the claim, made by some of Abner/Alfonso's critics, that he upheld his determinism in order to exonerate himself from his actions. Although he did affirm that God knows all particular future contingencies before they occur, he nevertheless does not hold that humans are not affected by their will to choose. Indeed, this is the case even when those choices are forced—as he believes they always are—by a higher power, and one's knowledge of this necessity does not abrogate one's responsibility. Even though God can see, from an eternal, omniscient perspective, what will happen before it does happen in time, a person's *experience* that what he does is the result of his own free choice in that moment allows God to justly reward and punish him for his actions. In the *Teacher*, in fact, Abner/Alfonso, goes to great lengths to insist that a lack of belief in reward and punishment was one of the deficiencies of the “old” Law of Moses, justifying the need for the new Law of Jesus. Moreover, he specifies that “receiving this new law and the peace that follows from it” is a grace that “is poured out upon them on account of [their] free will.” (*es decolgado en ellos ssin dubda por parte del libre aluedrío*).³³ Although on a philosophical level, God knows all particulars, including those of future choices, that knowledge is on a plane of eternal knowledge and does not interfere with the contextual unfolding of events according to the experience of chance and the initiatives of the individual will. And even if one

33 Abner/Alfonso, *Mostrador de justicia*, 280r/2:318. He says of Jews before the coming of Jesus, “non tenían aquellos omnes que ssería para aver pena nin galardón por sus obras en este mundo, pues que la Ley de Moysén non dio fiuza desto...E esto ffue otrossí rrayz de la rrazón por que ovo a sser Ley nueva después de la primera, segund que ya dicho es;” *Ibid.*, 94r/2:177. Also, he says “E de lo que ya escriuí en rrazón de la Ley nueua se prouará que ffue prometida esta paz paral tienpo del Christo, porque los omnes ante de aquello non temían a Dios, porque non ffallauan logar para la pena e el galardón por los mandamientos en este mundo, segunt gelo prometiera la Ley de Moysén...E para esto auía el Christo a uinir, quiero dezir para mostrarles que Dios tenía mientes en este mundo e que dará la pena e el galardón por los mandamientos al mundo de las almas...Mas rreçibir ellos aquella rrayz e la paz que sse ssigue dende es decolgado en ellos ssin dubda por parte del libre aluedrío;” *Ibid.*, 279v–280r/2:317–318.

knows that one acts under the necessity of fate, one is still responsible for one's choices. This argument has important consequences for his argument about conversion, including forced conversion. Because of the fact that he appeals to his reader to take control his own destiny and search for truth freely apart from his own tradition, he views the will to convert as critically important for the future of one's salvation and for that of one's offspring and followers. As the Christian Teacher tells the Jewish Rebel, one cannot be forgiven for "remaining doubtful."³⁴

3 The Legend of the Forced Conversion of the Castilian Qaraites

Such passages make it clear that, for Abner/Alfonso, the individual will, which humans experience as free and for which they are rewarded or punished in the afterlife, cannot be ignored in religious belief. Because of the importance of experience and intention, he is also interested in the influence of context on how people experience their sense of choice. In the first chapters of the *Teacher*, he pays careful attention to numerous factors that inhibit the decision to convert. For example, when considering why the sages of the Talmud (who, he claims, knew Jesus was the awaited Messiah) did not convert, he notes that knowledge of the truth is only one factor: "There are many other things that can impede a man from leaving the law he is used to for a different law, even though he see with good understanding that he ought to do so."³⁵ He then lists twelve specific factors, which include practical issues such as the fact that it is hard to change one's habits, hard to dishonor one's relatives, hard to move to a new community and live among strangers, hard to leave one's family and possibly one's career, hard to admit one has been wrong, and even hard to take off one's clothes in public to get in the baptismal font.³⁶ This discussion makes evident that Abner/Alfonso considered the practical difficulties surrounding conversion.

Moreover, he carefully crafted his rhetoric in the *Teacher* to appeal to a Jewish reader as if he spoke from within the Jewish tradition. He explicitly discusses his understanding of the process of conversion as a result of persuasive argument, stating, "Because the contrary Jew believes he is right and is firm in

34 "...ca dél es echado sobre todo omne para escoger en el bien e en la gloria perdurable para él e para su simiente [e] para sus parientes... E non deve ffincar omne dubdoso en esta grand rrayz, ca non es de las cosas que se pueden perdonar;" Ibid., 184v/2: 98–99.

35 "Ay otras muchas cosas que detienen al omne de ssalir de su Ley en que huso a otra Ley forana dél, maguera que biesse por bon entendimiento que lo deuía fazer." Ibid., 29v/1:46.

36 Ibid., 29v–30r/1:46–47.

his arguments, it is necessary to confront him gently (*mansamient*) and to pull him from those arguments little by little, as is fitting for man's nature. It is necessary to convince him (*convencerle*)...in this is the core of my words in this book."³⁷ Such words are in keeping with the spirit of the recommendation of Dominican Master General Raymond of Penyafort in the thirteenth century, who was influential in the organization of the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263 and in the subsequent career of Ramon Martí. Citing Gregory the Great, he states in the *Summa de Paenitentia*, "Jews as well as Muslims should, as Gregory says, be provoked to take up...the Christian faith with authorities and soothing reasons, rather than harsh ones. They should not be compelled, because forced service does not please God."³⁸ Abner/Alfonso's extensive arguments and abundant textual proofs, coupled with his pseudo-Jewish rhetoric and general lack of references to Christian polemical texts and traditions, all suggest that he approached conversion as a willful decision taken by a believer rather than something that could be unilaterally imposed.

Such arguments concern Abner/Alfonso's views about how to evangelize and convert fellow Jews on an individual level. Throughout the *Teacher*, he speaks through the voice of the Teacher to address his former friends and colleagues in the guise of the Rebel, whom he addresses in the singular second person *tú*. Similarly, in his *Response*, he speaks in his own voice to a single interlocutor, Isaac Polqar, also addressed in the second person. When he speaks about the circumstances that prevent Jews from accepting arguments in favor of Christianity, he speaks about individual believers. Yet there is another aspect to his discussion of Jewish conversion in which he speaks about Jews as a people, and in these passages his discussion of conversion on a collective level is different from the individual-focused rhetoric that dominates his writing. It is in these that Abner/Alfonso makes remarks specifically dealing with the question of forced conversion and coercive pressure in religion.

One important example of such language is in a story told about an event that, according to legend, took place in the late twelfth century under the reign of King Alphonse VIII.

37 "Porque el judío contradezidor tiénese por sseguro e por mucho efforsado en ssus rrazones, es mester de venir contra él mansamient e tollerle de aquella razón poco a poco, segund que conuiene a la natura de los omnes. E es mester a conuencerle... E en esto sse enfierra la rayz de mis palabras en este libro." *Ibid.*, 41r/1:68.

38 "Debent, sicut ait Gregorius, tam iudaei quam sarraceni auctoritatibus, rationibus et blandimentis, potius quam asperitatibus, ad fidem christianam de novo suscipiendam provocari, non autem compelli, quia coacta servitia non placent Deo." Penyafort, *Summa de Paenitentia*, 309.

It was not long ago that these Castilian Jews and most of the Jews of Spain were

Sadducees and Heretics... so wrote Moses of Leon in the letter he composed in order to contradict the Sadducees, in which he said that it was the year 4938 of creation [CE 1178] in which they converted (*sse tornaron*) to believe in the faith they now have in the Babylonian Talmud, not by their own free will (*voluntad*), but rather because of the uproar there was between Sadducees and Pharisees in the town of Carrión... There were among the Pharisees three honored men who often complained that the law was not being observed among the people, and [they complained] so much that one of them became zealous for God and lit candles publically on the Sabbath. And that was not the custom of the Sadducees... and there was a great outcry in the Jewish neighborhood, because people thought that he had violated the Sabbath. And the news of this arrived to the head rabbi of the Sadducees, who lived in Burgos, and he ordered him to be arrested. And so the Sadducees and Pharisees had to go to the king Don Alphonse. And among the Pharisees there was one Jew, physician of the king, named Joseph Ibn Alfacar, from Granada. And the king did what he wanted, and so the king ordered all the Sadducees to turn to the Law of the Pharisees, and so they all converted, against their will (*sse tornaron todos, a pesar dellos*), to this Pharisee Law, which they now follow. By such accidents as these the Jews in each age turn from one belief to another and they wander in exile like sheep without a shepherd, ever since they left the true shepherd...³⁹

39 "E poco tiempo a passado que estos judíos del rregno de Castiella e de los más de la Espanna eran todos çaduços e erejes... E assi escriuió Rrabí Mosse de León en la epstola que compuso para contradezir a los çaduços, e dixo en ella que desde la era de quarto mill e nueuecientos e xxxviii annos de la creación del mundo que sse tornaron todos aquellos judíos a creer en esta creençia en que están agora del ssu Talmud de Babilonia, non por ssu voluntad dellos, ssinon por rruydo que ouo entre los çaduços e los frariseos, unos con otros, en la villa de Carrión... E auía [entre] los ffariseos tres omnes onrrados que ssienpre tienen quexa que non sse conplía la Ley entrellos, tanto que tomó zelo el uno dellos por lo de Dios e ençendió candela publicameient para ssabado. E non era assí el uso de los çaduços ... E entró grand rroydo en el aljama, porque touieron que aquel omne quebrantó el sabado. E llegaron las nueuas al rrabe mayor de los çaduços, que moraua en Burgos, en mandól prender. E ssobre aquello ouieron de yr al Rrey Don Alffonso los çaduços e los ffariseos. E parósse por los ffarisseos un judío, ffísico del Rrey, que auíe nonbre Rrabí Yoçe ben Alfacar, que vienera de Granada. E ffizo e Rrey lo que él quiso, en que mandó a todos los çaduços tornar a la Ley de los fariseos. E entonçe sse tornaron todos, a pesar dellos, a esta Ley de los fariseos, que agora tienen. E por tales asçidentes como estos sse tornan los judíos en cada tiempo de una creençia a otra... andan deserrados

The “Pharisees” of whom Abner/Alfonso here speaks are Jews of the Rabbanite tradition—the standard majority—while the “Sadducees” are Qaraites, the Jewish sect that flourished in the Islamic Middle East starting in the ninth-century Iraq, teaching a strict Biblical fundamentalism that rejected all rabbinical insights and writings, including the Talmud and all Midrash. The Qaraites, who were commonly called “Sadducees” (*Zaduqim*) in medieval Hebrew sources, seem to have lived in Islamic al-Andalus in the eleventh century, although the extent of their presence is uncertain because they are not mentioned at all in contemporary historical sources.⁴⁰

Abner/Alfonso’s anecdote about the Qaraites is one of various similar stories about them told by Jewish writers in medieval Iberia (most notably the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* of twelfth-century writer Abraham Ibn Da’ūd, which Abner/Alfonso knew, and an anecdote by Joseph ben Todros), but this reference in the *Teacher* is the latest by far, appearing long after the events it relates. The language that he uses is unique in the surviving documentation, for none of the other sources speak of a *forced conversion*. Joseph ben Todros, the son of Cabbalist Todros ben Joseph ha-Levi Abulafia (courtier in the court of Alphonse X), claims that his father had confronted the Qaraites, seeking to “remove from our provinces the abominations of the heretics until he succeeded in destroying their fortresses and pulled down to earth their glory.”⁴¹ Similarly, Abraham Ibn Da’ūd states that Judah ben Joseph Ibn Ezra, tax collector for Alphonse VII of Castile, “requested for the king to forbid the heretics to open their mouths throughout the land of Castile, and the King commanded that this be done.”⁴² By contrast with these, Abner/Alfonso emphasizes that the king *ordered* the Qaraites to convert (or “turn,” “mandó a todos...tornar”),⁴³ thus making explicit reference to the forced nature of their conversion. This sense is emphasized again in the next sentence when it is repeated that, “they all *turned, against their will*, to this law of the Pharisees” (*sse tornaron todos, a*

como ovejas sin pastor, desde que dexaron el pastor verdadero...” Abner/Alfonso, *Mostrador de justicia*, 330r/2: 422. The irony of Abner/Alfonso’s assertion that the Jews are in exile because they convert with each new age (and so they should convert to Christianity) seems lost on him, judging by his discussion. For a study of this anecdote, see Szpiech, “L’hérésie absente.”

40 For a summary of the bibliography and all known references to Qaraites in Iberia, see Rosenthal, “Qaraites and Qaraism;” Lasker, “Karaism in Twelfth-Century Spain;” and Szpiech, “L’hérésie absente,” n.3.

41 Rosenthal, “The Talmud on Trial,” 64–67.

42 Ibn Da’ūd, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah*, 99; H. 72.

43 The word used in Castilian is “tornar,” surely a translation of what was in the original Hebrew version *lashuv*, whence the Greek calque *epistrepho* and the Latin *converto* derive.

pesar dellos, a esta Ley de los fariseos).⁴⁴ Abner/Alfonso's claim that the Rabbanites forced the Qaraites is the basis of his subsequent statement that Jewish faith is inherently mutable. The forced conversion of the Qaraites is typical of the sorts of things Jews have often undergone, for "by such accidents as these the Jews turned in every age from one belief to another..."⁴⁵ The story of Jews converting Jews not only signals the chaos of Jewish belief and the Jewish need of spiritual leadership; it also seems to provide a precedent to justify future Jewish conversions to Christianity.

Moreover, the story of the forced conversion of the Qaraites is in keeping with Abner/Alfonso's general support of using Christian royal power to intervene in Jewish affairs. In this story, two Jewish groups went to the Christian king when they could not agree on how to celebrate the Sabbath, even though this conflict was entirely internal to the Jewish communities. A decade and a half after the *Teacher of Righteousness* was written, Abner/Alfonso began a public campaign against the Jewish use of the *birkat ha-minim* ("blessing of heretics" prayer) in Jewish services. The *birkat ha-minim*, ascribed to first-century rabbi Samuel ha-Katan (BT *Berakhot* 28b), is included as the twelfth of the eighteen blessings in the weekly *Amidah* prayer liturgy. The prayer has undergone numerous transformations, and was often directed in the Middle Ages against Christians ("For the apostates let there be no hope...Let the Christians and Heretics be destroyed in a moment"),⁴⁶ drawing the ire of Pope Gregory IX in 1239.⁴⁷ Abner/Alfonso refers to the prayer in three places in the *Teacher*,⁴⁸ and is known to have also attacked it in his previous, now-lost work, *Sefer Milhamot Adonai* (Book of the Wars of the Lord).⁴⁹ Abner/Alfonso's public criticism of the blessing led to the promulgation of an edict by King

44 In a version of this account that is quoted in Latin in the vast polemical anthology *Fortalium fidei* of Franciscan Alonso de Espina, this reading of "a pesar dellos" to mean "against their will" is confirmed. As Espina translates Abner's words, "Conversi sunt...non voluntarie sed violenter" ("they converted, not willingly but through violence"). Espina, *Fortalium fidei*, 130rb.

45 "E por tales asçidentes como estos sse tornan los judíos en cada tienpo de una creença a otra... e andan deserrados como ovejas ssin pastor, desde que dexaron el pastor verdadero..." Abner/Alfonso, 330r/2: 422.

46 For the history of the prayer, see Langer, *Cursing the Christians?* For its criticism by Christian writers, see Dahan, "La prière juive," 445–48.

47 "In singulis diebus ter in oracione quam digniorem asserunt ministris ecclesie, regibus et aliis omnibus, ipsis Iudeis inimicantibus maledicunt." Loeb, "La Controverse de 1240 sur le Talmud," 3:50–51.

48 Abner/Alfonso, *Mostrador de Justicia*, 169r / 2: 65; See also chapter six, para. 30 (169r / 2: 65), chapter ten, para. 7 (300r / 2: 363), and chapter ten, para. 22 (335r-v / 2: 432).

49 Espina, *Fortalium fidei*, book III consideratio VII (148v-a). See also Valle Rodríguez, "El Libro de las batallas de Dios de Abner de Burgos," 114.

Alphonse XI of Castile, dated February 25, 1336, banning its repetition by Castilian Jews, and this was reaffirmed by King John I in 1380.⁵⁰ While the degree to which this ban was enforced is not clear, numerous contemporary Jewish writers mention Abner/Alfonso's actions with scorn.⁵¹ Although this does not constitute an endorsement of forced conversion, it does suggest, especially in light of his anecdote about the intervention of the Christian King in the debate between Qaraites and Rabbanites, that Abner/Alfonso was not opposed to the use of Christian power to control or limit Jewish beliefs and practices. In marked contrast to the rhetoric of persuasion and proof employed when discussing the conversion of individual Jews, his language when speaking about Jews as a group seems to allow for coercive intervention and control, whether it concerns issues of Jewish behavior in Christian society (the *Birkat ha-Minim*) or theological issues internal to Jewish life (the prohibition of Qaraism).

4 Forced Conversion and the Role of the Jews in Christian Salvation History

Apart from these anecdotes, there are several passages in which Abner/Alfonso explicitly addresses the idea of facilitating conversion through pressure or coercion, although he does not explicitly speak of mass movements. In various passages, he endorses "belief" before "understanding," giving the example of the Ten Commandments (given to be received and fulfilled first, and understood second) and the verse from Exodus 24:7, "We will do and we will hear" (*na'aseh ve-nishma*). About Isaiah 43:10 ("...that you may know me and believe me and understand that I am He"), he observes that, "he said 'believe' before 'understand' because it is necessary in marvelous and amazing things that man believes them before he understands them."⁵²

He does concede that, "the way of this belief, which goes before understanding, [may] seem very hasty, if one thinks of the many, many great sages and the many groups of men who first received the arguments of the Law were not so foolish and blind of heart as to leave off all other beliefs in which they were born." Nevertheless, eventually "a great need forced the sages (*el grand mester*

⁵⁰ Baer, *A History of the Jews*, 1: 375.

⁵¹ For Samuel Ibn Sasson's account of Abner's charges, see Brann, Sáenz-Badillos, and Targaron, "The Poetic Universe of Samuel Ibn Sasson," 80–81. For an representation of the argument by Moses ha-Cohen of Tordesillas in *Ezer ha-Emunah*, see Shamir, *Rabbi Moses Ha-Kohen*, 2: 136.

⁵² "Ca dixo 'creades' ante que 'entendades' porque es mester en estas cosas maravillosas e aprovechables que las crea el omne ante que las entienda..." Abner/Alfonso, 183v / 2: 97.

los forçó) to receive [new ideas], at which time they found in those arguments the true intended meanings.”⁵³ In such cases, it is better that men be pushed by circumstances into a new faith because, if they are left to figure everything out before conversion, they will never act. We can recall Abner/Alfonso’s list of the twelve things that keep men from conversion “even though they see through good understanding that they should do it.”⁵⁴ Of those twelve factors impeding conversion, “The tenth thing is the lightness of the oppression of captivity and the kindness which their masters show them in captivity, for this makes them remain in their rebellion, according to what Solomon said, ‘The wise will be conquered with a few words and the fool with a whip.’”⁵⁵ Abner/Alfonso repeats this refrain in a longer passage in the *Teacher* that again addresses the use of force. This, in fact, is the passage that served Abner/Alfonso as the basis of a similar, abbreviated passage in the *Response* that Baer quoted as the proof of his remarks.⁵⁶ Abner/Alfonso says:

There have to be more trials and poverty (*tribulaçiones e pobredad*) than there are now, and they [the Jews] have to despise the faith they have, since hardships and trials will force them (*la pena e las tribulaciones los forçarán*) to pay more attention to the reasons that they have for their faith in order to know the reason for the ill which befalls them. This is as King Solomon says, “the rod and reproof impart wisdom” [Proverbs 29:15]. For then, knowledge and shall be in harmony in the heart of man.

53 “E la manera deste creer, que es dante que el entender, es muy liviano, quando se diere el omne a pensar que cuántos e cuántos de los grandes sabios e cuántas muchas conpan[n] as de omnes que recibieron a primero las rrazones desta Ley non eran todos tan neçios e tan ciegos de corazón que dexasen todas las otras creençias, en que nacieron e que avían usado ante desto... sinon que fue porque el grand mester los forçó a los sabios dellos para los rresçebir. Con que fallaron en aquellas rrayzes meollos verdaderos, preciados más que toda cosa, lo que non fallaron tal en [las] rrayzes de las otras Lees, e que son, como lo que prophetizó Daniel, pena e ensay [sic] e escarmiento con que se pueden apurar e enblanqueçer e esmerar muchos, e que non lo entenderán todos los malos, e los entendidos lo entenderán. E despues de que husare omne grand tienpo a creerlos en esta manera, entonce abrá poder por pescudar encubiertamient e omildosamient de los sabios de la teología de los christianos, para saber cuál fue aquel grand mester e cuáles son aquellos meollos onrrados más que toda cosa.” *Ibid.*, 183v–184r / 2: 97.

54 “...maguera que biesse por bon entendimiento que lo devía fazer.” *Ibid.*, 29v / 1: 46.

55 “E la cosa dezena es la liviandat de la premia de la captividat e la piadat que les ffazen los ssennores que los tienen en captivo. Ca esto los ffaz tener en la su rrevellia, segund dixo Ssalamón... ‘Vençerá al ssabio con poca palabra, e al loco con el açote.’” *Ibid.*, 30r/1: 47.

56 Baer did not reference the longer text in the *Teacher* from which this passage in the *Response* is drawn. The passage strings together numerous passages spread over a number of pages. The full range Baer’s text is drawn from Parma ms. 58a–60b, which corresponds to *Teacher*, chapter seven, paragraph thirty-seven (223v–225v / 2: 186–188).

Another verse says, “One does not punish a slave with words, because he understands and does not respond” [Proverbs 29:19]. And it says in the *Book of Ben Sira*, “To the wise man with a few words, and to the fool with whips.”⁵⁷

In these and similar statements, it would seem that some sort of coercion formed part of Abner/Alfonso’s idea of how to deal with the Jews as a collective. He seems to encourage social pressure—trials, taxes, royal decrees—with the ultimate intention of pushing recalcitrant Jews to give in to their doubts rather than suppressing them for circumstantial reasons.

Yet, as Baer notes, in some places, Abner/Alfonso speaks about the Jews collectively in chillingly hostile terms. He employs the language of Zechariah (11:4) in claiming that those who survived the exile in Babylonia “have already been excluded from the category of Israel and that salvation remains for those few of them who have separated themselves from them.” They are “the wicked ones who will not have any remedy in the future. Instead, [they will be], as the prophet called them, ‘sheep meant for slaughter.’”⁵⁸ These Jews are “sheep for the slaughter, because there is no benefit from their milk or fleece or rams [for breeding]. They exist only to be killed and wiped out.”⁵⁹ These “sheep for the slaughter” faced persecutions from every nation, but their offspring live on in the Jews of the present. At the end of the *Teacher*, the Teacher says to the Rebel that he and Jews like him are like animals that serve no purpose and cannot

57 “E aquellas son las palabras que muestran que an [a] aver tribulaçiones e pobredad más de lo que agora tienen, e que an a despreciar en la fe que tienen. Ca la pena e las tribulaçiones los forçarán para tener mientes mejor en la razon de la fe que tienen para saber por qué es este mal que les viene, e esto segund lo que dixo el rre Salamon: ‘La verdasca e la affruenta dan sapiençia.’ Ca entonçe concordarán en el coraçón del omne el saber e la voluntad en uno. E dixo otro uiesso: æCon palabras no se castiga el sieruo, ca entiende e non rresponde.æ E dize en el Libro de Benzira al sabio con pocas palabras e al loco con açotes.” Abner/Alfonso, 223v / 2: 186. This reference is to the medieval *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, derived from *Midrash on Proverbs*, 22:6. The original refrain (“To the wise, a hint [ramez]; to the fool, a fist [kurmeza]”), quoted correctly in the Hebrew version of the *Response*, is altered in the same way in both the Castilian *Response* and in the Castilian *Teacher*. The Castilian of the text in the *Teacher* matches that of the Castilian *Response*, but does not literally translate the original phrase from the Hebrew *Response* (or, one assumes, the original Hebrew *Teacher*).

58 “הם הרשעים אשר לא היה עתיד להיות להם שום תקנה. אלא כמו שקראם [כך כתוב] הנבוא” (צאן ההרגה) (34b / Hecht 393). Hecht reads Abner/Alfonso’s exegesis of Zechariah by noting “perhaps Abner/Alfonso is presenting a justification for the persecution of Jews within Christendom;” Hecht, “The Polemical Exchange,” 219 n. 621.

59 “Por eso son ouejas de la matança, que non las tienen para aprouecharsse de su leche nin de ssu velloçino nin de ssus corderos, ssinon que las tienen para matar e astragar ssola-mient.” Abner/Alfonso, 244r / 2:229).

even be moved by force: “You all are like sick asses who have given up to death, for whom spurs do not do much good, and whose owners no longer want to make use of them.”⁶⁰

The language of these prophecies and the condemnation of the Jews overall as “sick asses,” as well as Abner/Alfonso’s general endorsement of the use of royal power in Jewish affairs, all would seem to support the use of coercion and/or violence in eliminating or forcing the Jews to convert. Nevertheless, Abner/Alfonso is explicit that the forced conversion of all of the Jews is not part of God’s plan for history. He argues that because God is just, the righteous will be saved, and the unrighteous will be kept apart as a group and together will form a central place where sins can collect in order to spare the majority of the righteous. In a striking passage, he compares Jews to bodily organs such as the gall bladder, spleen, bladder, or large intestine, which keep harmful substances from damaging the rest of the body.

God is angry with the Jews, and will never accept them back...since nature must be [so], there must be good things and evils in the world. God takes care to separate them in order to keep from evils his friends who keep the true law, giving them good things [instead]. Thus there must be among them men set apart so that all of the evil things, or most of them, come to them, in such a way that good [people] are preserved or freed from those evils, just like the gall bladder or the spleen or the bladder for urine or the large intestine are kept apart from the other members so that yellow bile (*colera*), black bile (*malenconia*), urine (*orina*), and feces (*digestion*) are kept apart there, and the other members are freed and kept clean of them. If it were not for this, the other members, and the whole body, would be mixed up and corrupted by the evil of those by-products (*sobejanas*) that would mix with them. In this way, the Jews are a people in which sins and evils are gathered...⁶¹

60 “Sodes como los asnos enfermos e acostados a la muerte, [que] los agujones non ffazen mucho pro a ellos, e que ssus duennos non an voluntad para sservirse dellos ya más...” Abner/Alfonso, 339r / 2: 439.

61 “Dios está ya ssannudo sobre los judíos, e nunca más los rresçibrá....porque la natura endebda el sser, endebda en el mundo bienes y males, e que Dios tiene mientes a departir entrellos a escapar de los males a ssus amigos que tienen la Ley verdadera e darles los bienes. Por ende es mester que ssean entre ellos omnes apartados para en que sse alleguen todos los males, o los más, en guisa que los bonos ssean escapados e liurados de aquellos males, assí como que la bolssa de la fiel e el baço e la bolssa de la orina e el estentino fondonero sson aparejados de entre los otros miembros para en que sse allegue apartamiento la cólera e la malenconía e la orina e la digistión, porque ssean los otros miembros liurados e alinpiados dellos; ca ssinon por esso, serían los otros miembros, e el cuerpo

In a way, this argument concedes (albeit in polemical terms) a “function” to Jews in God’s plan for the world. In Abner/Alfonso’s strange accounting, perhaps not unconnected with his idiosyncratic determinism, sin in the world is conceived of as a finite quantity, which must be distributed somewhere. Forcing Jews to convert or destroying them through violence would lead to the world’s evils being distributed to some other group.

If the Jews were to have such bad and strong tribulations that they had to turn (*tornar*) to the law of the Christians or the Moors, or if they were wiped out from the world, those evils would, by their nature, devolve onto (*tornarsse-yan...a*) the Christians and the Moors, and these would lose the benefit and divine protection that they have because they believe in Christ. But now, since the Jews are set apart in all places, not all of the Christians or the Moors will stumble into their sins.⁶²

Abner/Alfonso thus offers a vision of the role of Jews in God’s salvific plan that is similar to but not at all identical with Augustine’s theory of Jewish witness. Jews have an important role in history, not as witnesses to other Christians, but as bearers of the lot of evil in the world. In addition, not only do Jews keep the bad quantity of sin from being allotted to good Christians and Moors, but they also serve as instruments of punishment by which bad people can be punished.

It is necessary that God keep the Jews in the world, just as he keeps the devils, so that they can be arms of his wrath and messengers of his anger in order to make bad Christians and Moors (who deserve it) trip and fall into punishment...See now how great and marvelous are the works of God, who chose the people of Israel from among the other nations, for his service both in substance and in accident.⁶³

todo, coffondidos e corruptos por la malicia de aquellas ssobejanias que sse mezclarían con ellos. E assi los judíos sson gente para en que sse ayunten los peccados e las malicias...” Ibid, 338r-v / 2:437–38.

- 62 “E si los judíos ouiessen tribulaçiones tan malas e tan fuertes por que ouiessen todos a tornar a la Ley de los christianos o de los moros, o que ffuessen astragados del mundo, tornarsse-yan aquellas malicias por ssu natura a los christianos e a los moros, e perderían ellos el prouecho e la guarda diuinal que an porque creen en el Christo. Mas agora, que los judíos sson fallados en cada logar apartados, non entrepeçarán todos los christianos e los moros en ssus peccados dellos.” Ibid, 338v / 2: 438.
- 63 “Mester es que mantenga Dios a los judíos en el mundo, como mantiene a los diablos, para sser armas de ssu sanna e menssageros de su yra para ffazer entrepeçar e caer en pena a los malos christianos e moros, que lo mereçen, e meterles tentaçiones e dudas en

The Jews have a clear place in the world. They are vehicles for salvation “in substance” because Jesus and other righteous sages were born among them and “in accident” because he keeps “the bad among them” in order to curse and punish the wicked of the world. He affirms that Jews are, on the whole, essentially good, and the function of some of them as bearers of evil is due to their mistaken opinions and misguided will, not their essence.

God did not create anything which is not good in itself...and so the Jews are in the world as part of absolute good, like other gentiles, and like serpents, scorpions, lions, and bears, but they are bad in terms of their opinions...and thus the sages of the Talmud who gave reasonable words to support certain opinions, and who remained Jews, were of the lineage of absolute good, but were bad in terms of their will and their works, since they did not want to do as they understood.⁶⁴

Since Jews, even bad Jews, have a place in God's salvific plan, they should not be converted en masse, because that would both remove the place where evil is collected and also end the captivity of the Jews that they are to bear for the rest of history for their sins. The Teacher tells the Rebel, “The curse and everlasting captivity that was cast upon you is that you have tribulations with gentleness and without a great harshness. For if you had captivity with great harshness in such a way that you could not endure or that you were wiped out

ssu fe, por amor de astragarlos del mundo. ¡E ued agora cuánto grandes e cuánto maravillosas sson las obras de Dios, que escogió en la gente de Isrrael para ssu seruicio de entre las otras gentes por essencia e por asédente! Ca en ellos ffue la ssaluacion sustancialmientras a todo el mundo, en que ffizo nacer en ellos el Christo e los otros justos que nacieron e que nacen en cada tienpo para confirmar la ssu ffe e la ssu ssaluacion. E otrossí en ellos es la ssaluación por asédente, en que mantiene a los malos dellos en guisa que ssean por maldición e por jura, para castigar e dar pena con ellos a los peccadores que quiere castigar e ffazerlos tornar con penitencia e darles ssaluacion en la postrimería, en general o en particular.” Ibid., 338v–339r / 2:438. Essentially, God chose the Jews to be the people among whom Christ would be born; in accident, God chose the Jews by maintaining “a los malos dellos” (i.e. those who do not accept Jesus) “para castigar e dar pena con ellos a los peccadores que quiere castigar e ffazerlos tornar con penitencia e darles ssaluación en la postrimería;” Ibid., 338v–339r / 2: 438.

64 “Non crió Dios cosa que non ssea bona en ssí...e assi los judíos sson en el mundo de parte del bien ssoluto, como los otros gentiles, e como las sserpientes e los escorpiones, e como los leones e loss ossos, sinon que sson malos por parte de las sus opiniones...e assi los sabios del Talmud que dixieron palabras de rrazón para conffirmar las opiniones çiertas, e ellos ffincaron judíos, ffueron del linage del bien ssoluto, sinon que ffueron malos por parte de la voluntad e de las obras, que non quisieron fazer como lo entendia[n].” Ibid., 342v / 2:444.

with one blow, in this way your dishonor, which was to be ongoing, would be ended.”⁶⁵ Many rabbis have despaired, and many Jews today continue to suffer, because God does not impose enough suffering on the Jews to bring them to turn to salvation. But

without a doubt, God spared you that hard rod that could give wisdom and turn you to good. This was for all time because it was not God’s will to give you salvation or to take from you the universal and eternal dishonor that he sentenced you with...as long as you do not have upon you that hard rod, that will be a great proof to the wise to understand that God abhors you.⁶⁶

5 Conclusion

In his polemical oeuvre, Abner/Alfonso elaborates a complex theory of Jewish identity in the context of Christian soteriological history, presenting what seem to be contradictory statements. Although it seems logical, in retrospect, to see Abner/Alfonso’s conversion and polemical career as a preamble to the events of persecutions of 1391 or those of Inquisition that followed in the century after, there are abundant reasons in his works to call that interpretation into doubt. In considering those reasons, it is useful to distinguish between the evangelical, philosophical, social, and theological aspects of his ideas, and between his statements about Jews as individuals and the Jewish people as a whole.

On an evangelical level, he pays careful attention to the psychology of individual conversion and offers elaborate arguments and appeals intended to convert his readers with textual proofs. In his dealings with Jews as individuals, both in his early writing in the *Teacher* and in his late writing in the *Response*, he seems in most places to be opposed to the notion of forced conversion, arguing that Jews must be approached “gently (*mansamient*).” As he explicitly

65 “Esto es de la maldición e captiuidad perdurable que ffue sse[n]tenciada ssobre uos en que ayades las tribulaciones con manssedunbre e ssin grand graueza. Ca ssi la ouiesedes con grand graueza, en guisa qu las non pudiesedes sofrir o que ffuessedes astragados en vna uegada, sería la uuestra desonrra otrossí acabada, que auie a ser perdurable.” Ibid., 336v / 2:434.

66 “Ssin dubda que tuelga Dios de ssobre uos aquella uerdasca dura que uos podría dar ssapiencia e tornar a bien; e esto en todo tienpo que no ffuere voluntad de Dios de uos dar saluación nin toller de uos la desonrra vniuersal e eterna que puso por ssentencia sobre uos...Pues demientra que uos non ouierdes aquella verdasca dura, sserá aquello gran prueua a los entendidos apra entender que Dios uos aborresçe.” Ibid., 337v / 2:435–36.

states, “It is necessary to convince him (*convencerle*).” In light of such appeals, it seems incorrect to claim, as Baer does, that Abner/Alfonso maintained that, “bloody persecutions were the only means of redeeming” the Jews.

On a philosophical level, Abner/Alfonso maintained a compatibilist determinism that both viewed all events as predetermined and also sought to justify divine justice in judging human choice by insisting on the legitimacy of the experience of individual freedom and the culpability of unintentional sin. Sirat’s claim that Abner/Alfonso’s philosophy “justifies in advance the forced baptisms and all the tortures of the Inquisition reserved for the *conversos*” is misleading in that it does not account for Abner/Alfonso’s constant insistence on the validity of reward and punishment for individual choice. The determinism that Abner/Alfonso professed did not absolve anyone, including himself, of the consequences of a decision to convert or resist conversion, nor did it necessarily justify the use of force or violence in trying to bring such conversion about.

At the same time, on a social level, Abner/Alfonso clearly does seem to approve of the imposition by Christian rulers of legal restrictions on Jewish behavior, including even the forced “conversion” of Castilian Qaraites, and this point seems to be at odds with his elaborate argumentation designed to convince his free-thinking readers. He states, “there have to be more trials and poverty than there are now” because these will “force them” (*los forçarán*) to reconsider their faith. Yet even trials are not enough, because Jews are like “sick asses” that do not even respond to spurs and goads. Abner/Alfonso does not seem opposed to supporting forced intervention by Christian rulers, and he describes such intervention as common for Jews throughout history. In his story of the forced conversion of the Castilian Qaraites by the order of the Christian king, he concludes, “by such accidents as these the Jews turned in every age from one belief to another...”⁶⁷

Finally, on a theological level, Abner/Alfonso maintains that the resistance of Jews to conversion—both to the appeals of persuasion and to the goads of force—is itself predetermined as part of God’s ultimate will for Christian history. The Jewish people have an ongoing place (albeit negative) in God’s salvific plan, and thus their forced conversion or violent destruction is not desirable because it would interrupt that plan. Such force or violence would not only make the evils of the world pass onto the Christians (and Moors), but

67 “E por tales asçidentes como éstos sse tornan los judíos en cada tienpo de una creencia a otra... e andan deserrados como ovejas ssin pastor, desde que dexaron el pastor verdadero...” Ibid., 330r / 2: 422.

would also take away God's tool for correcting those non-Jews who sin.⁶⁸ Moreover, such upheaval would undo the Jews' own captivity that was ordered as a punishment on the Jewish people until the end of time. Sparing individuals the trials and violence that would force them to apostatize is in fact a form of punishment, and it serves as proof that God has rejected the Jews as the true Israel by predetermining them not to convert.

To be sure, as Tartakoff reminds us, "the events of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries magnified Jewish and Christian competition for, and repudiation of, Jewish converts, intensifying preexisting behaviors and patterns of thought."⁶⁹ And it is equally true that Abner/Alfonso's polemics represent one of the most elaborate and influential expressions of those patterns of thought. Yet to conflate the popular anti-Judaism that led to the riots of 1391 with Abner/Alfonso's elaborate and idiosyncratic polemical arguments is to risk misunderstanding the real messages of his work: the truths of Christianity are explained in the writings of the Jews themselves, and they only need study more carefully to find those explanations. To that end, one ought to try and convince them with persuasion and textual proofs. In Abner/Alfonso's view, forcing the Jews to convert through violence or coercion, while permissible in medieval social terms and in theory desirable because of its supposed efficacy in constraining Jewish error and sin, should be considered to be incompatible with the strategy pursued by God precisely because it would both offer Jews a salvation that they do not deserve and also upset the natural order of His salvific plan.

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68 On Abner/Alfonso's curious attention to Muslims, whom he treats as a counterpoint to Jews, see Szpiech, "Rhetorical Muslims," 166–69; and Szpiech, "Alfonso of Valladolid/Abner of Burgos."

69 Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew*, 138.

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