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# The Rhenish Chronicles and Christian Martyr Philosophy: Jewish Origins and Cultural Re-Appropriation

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David Warga

## The Rhenish Chronicles and Christian Martyr Philosophy:

### Jewish Origins and Cultural Re-Appropriation

The Christian religion was founded on a tradition of self-sacrifice, a custom sparked by the crucifixion of Jesus himself. As the Christian faith evolved and expanded throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages it consistently maintained this emphasis; devotion through self-denial has been a foundational pillar of popular Christian thought from the early evangelists to the late Medieval era. Within this vein of Christian morality Martyrdom, that is the practice of self-sacrifice, or more specifically the sacrifice of the body in the name of the divine, has held a position of undisputed prestige. With the rise of Christian power in the Western world, and the subsequent dominance of Christian culture over non-Christian European minorities, the Christian tradition of self-immolation was given a unique opportunity to influence thought beyond the peripheries of its own religious community. This potential for influence was especially relevant for the Western European Jewish community. This was a culture surrounded, governed, and exposed to Christian secular authority and religious theology from late antiquity onward. Some of the clearest examples of how Christian cultural influences effected European Jews can be found in periods of high inter-religious tension. In the year 1096, the initial expedition of the First Crusade, aimed at reclaiming Jerusalem from Islamic rule, moved across the German Rhineland. Here the Crusading host unleashed its religious fervor on the Jewish community, massacring or forcibly converting Jews in settlements from the northern Rhine River all the way down to the Danube.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of this devastation, Jewish writers in the Rhineland began composing venerative chronicles. These recounted the persecution and the plight of the Rhenish victims and, important for the purposes of this analysis, praised those who died rather than convert as martyrs. What role might the cultural influences of Christian martyr tradition have played in the way

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xvi.

the Rhenish Chroniclers portrayed the Rhineland persecutions? It is this question that prompts the following investigation.

In this paper, to be able to approach my thesis question, I will aim at addressing two more precise analytic questions: From the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, how might have Christian traditions and martyr philosophies impacted the theological status quo of the western European Jewish community? If Christian martyr influences did impact cultural and theological shifts in the Jewish community, how did those influences take effect in light of traditional Jewish influences? Addressing these prompts will demand a multistage analysis, investigating the Rhineland chroniclers themselves, as well as both the Christian and Jewish traditions to which they were exposed. Specifically, this investigation will be composed of three main components: A broad contextual Christian overview, aimed at isolating the central defining components of a western Christian theological perspective on martyrdom during the Crusader Era. This will provide a necessary Christian cultural context for my investigation. With this context established, I will then conduct an analysis of potential Christian martyr influences on the Rhenish Jewish writers themselves, specifically those writing in the decades immediately after the Rhineland massacres of 1096. This analysis will then be compared with one aimed at isolating the components shared by both Christian and Jewish martyr cultures before the crusader era, primarily concentrating on elements adopted from Jewish history (specifically the Hellenistic and Biblical contexts) by early Christianity and maintained up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, with these previous investigations established, I will present my conclusion.

### Christian Context

Martyrdom in the Christian tradition is a fluid concept. As Christianity transitioned from a persecuted minority to a dominating majority in late antiquity and the early middle ages, the term naturally needed to evolve with the shifting role of the Church on the world stage. This makes isolating a universal definition of martyrdom in the Western Church a difficult task, especially when considering martyrdom in context of the Crusader Era, when martyr themes were increasingly applied to military

ventures, and not just to passive victims of religious oppression.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this analysis however, there are several fundamental elements attributable to a Christian martyr identity, rooted in the early Church and maintained up to the Crusader Era, which will prove relevant to an investigation of the Rhenish Chroniclers. In their work *Witness to the Body: the Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, Michael Budde and Karen Scott persuasively outline a list of attributes unique to the Christian martyr identity, five of which will be particularly important to consider in light of the Rhenish Chronicles. These will be taken in light of secondary scholarship by authors Christopher Macevitt and H.E. Cowdrey, which reinforces the retention of Budde and Scott's elements in Crusader Era theology.

Firstly, martyrs held a particularly high level of prestige among the saints. This was because, in sacrificing their lives for the faith, they were closely emulating Christ, who himself was sacrificed on the cross.<sup>3</sup> This sacrifice merited them a level of authority that was widely recognized and consistently maintained throughout Church history. This is especially true in context of Crusader Era theology. While martyr veneration was coined in the early Church during the Roman persecutions, their place among the highest ranks of the saints was only further cemented as the Church became established in Europe. For example, from the Carolingian period onward, widely accepted devotions such as the Litany of Saints, a prayer to God and venerated Church figures, placed martyr-saints within the top five categories of sainthood, following the virgin, the angels, John the Baptist, and the evangelists and apostles.<sup>4</sup> A second important widely accepted element of the Christian martyr identity to be taken into consideration is that, in regards to the primary source of devotion, the Christian martyr's sacrifice is directed to the divine itself and not to religious doctrine. This is because, unlike Judaism, in which God

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<sup>2</sup> H.E. Cowdrey. "Martyrdom and the First Crusade," in *Crusade and Settlement. Papers Read at the First Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East and Presented to R.C. Smail*, ed. by Peter Edbury (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1985), 46-56.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Budde and Karen Scott, *Witness of the Body: the Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Cowdrey, "Martyrdom and the First Crusade", 46-47.

demands obedience via the medium of law, Christianity is a faith which demands direct obedience to God himself. This was a message related not only by Christ in the gospels, but by the evangelists as well, and stands widely un-refuted in Western Church doctrine.<sup>5</sup> A third important element of Christian martyr philosophy to consider in light of the Rhenish Chroniclers is that martyrdom was recognized by the Church as a triumph, not a travesty. By sacrificing his or her body to the divine, the Christian martyr succeeded in cleansing their soul of all sin, and had earned the right to directly enter paradise. Indeed, it is for this reason that the Church celebrates death anniversaries of martyrs as their true birthdays. This is a perspective that goes uncontested in the Western Church, and was affirmed not only by the earliest Church writers but by foundational thinkers for the Medieval Church, such as Augustine.<sup>6</sup> As I noted earlier, though by the time of the Crusades Church doctrine regarding martyrdom had undergone permutations to accommodate military interests, the early Christian emphasis on martyrdom as a death resulting from the profession of faith remained firmly intact by the Crusader Era. Though combatants who died for the faith were increasingly provided descriptions and privileges similar to those of martyr pedigree (it should be noted here, however, that official Church recognition of crusaders as martyrs was largely avoided<sup>7</sup>), Christians who died by nonviolently professing the Christian faith maintained a prestigious position in Christian martyr culture. This is widely reflected in Christian venerative literature all the way up to the Crusades. To point to one example of many, Francis of Assisi, the patriarch of the Franciscans, a popular Western Church order, is widely contended to have sought passive martyrdom during a missionary expedition to Egypt. Furthermore, his followers established a tradition of passive martyrdom at the hands of Islamic authorities well into the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> A final important element of Christian martyr philosophy to

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<sup>5</sup> Budde and Scott, *Witness of the Body*, 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Budde and Scott, *Witness of the Body*, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Budde and Scott, *Witness of the Body*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Macevitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World through Franciscan Eyes," *Catholic Historical Review* 97 (2011): 1-23.

consider for this analysis concerns the means by which martyrdom was achieved, specifically whether or not a self-inflicted death was permissible. Though recognized martyrdoms, from the earliest years of the Church and throughout the Middle Ages, often incorporated deaths which were actively sought out, direct suicide was never an accepted means through which to achieve martyrdom. Death by one's own hand was universally accepted by the Western Church as a taboo, and it was directly rejected by foundational Christian thinkers throughout antiquity and the Middle ages, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas.<sup>9</sup>

### The Rhenish Chroniclers

With a contextual overview concerning the essential components of the Christian martyr philosophy established, it is now possible to conduct a close textual analysis of the Rhenish Chronicles, specifically with an eye for how their prose may or may not be reflective of the Christian martyr tradition. For this analysis, I will be focusing on three major Jewish chronicles written in the decades immediately after the First Crusade: these include the writings of Solomon Bar Simson, Eliezer bar Nathan, and an anonymous source written with an emphasis on the massacre at Mainz. Bar Simson, about whom little is known, is dated to the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, somewhere around the year 1140 C.E.<sup>10</sup> Bar Nathan, a Talmudic Scholar from Mainz, also wrote his account in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, likely after that of Simson (given elements of his account appear to have been influenced by Simson's writing).<sup>11</sup> The anonymous account is of an unknown place of origin or date. There are some speculations as to its original place of composition, given its particular focus on the city of Mainz, however given its generally speculative context it should be regarded more as a supplement to Nathan and Simson.<sup>12</sup> This textual analysis will focus on the Rhenish chroniclers in context of the elements of Christian martyr tradition analyzed in the previous section: that is the religious prestige that the authors ascribe to the

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<sup>9</sup> Budde and Scott, *Witness of the Body*, 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Solomon Bar Simson, Eliezer Bar Nathan, and Mainz Anonymous. *The Jews and the Crusaders*, trans. Shlomo Eidelberg. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 73-75.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 95.

Rhenish martyrs, the way in which the chroniclers conceptualize the significance of the Rhenish martyrs (particularly in context of divinity and scripture), whether or not the chroniclers portray martyrdom as a triumph or tragedy, whether or not the acts of martyrdom described are treated as spiritually purifying professions of faith, and the way in which the chroniclers treat the topic of suicide.

In regards to the question of religious prestige, Solomon Bar Simson's account does appear to frame the Rhineland martyrs as divinely religious figures, with a level of prestige clearly comparable to Christian tradition. Throughout his account, Simson consistently refers to those killed in the Rhineland massacres as particularly loved by God, and deserving to dwell close to him. For example, Simson often makes frequent direct biblical comparisons when referring to the martyrs. In a revealing passage at the start of the chronicle, he ties the Rhineland martyrs directly to an example from the life of King David: "It is of such as these that King David said: 'bless the lord, ye angels of his, ye almighty in strength, that fulfill His word.'"<sup>13</sup> Like Simson, Nathan attributes the martyrs a similar religious prestige; he frequently provides biblical comparisons to his descriptions of the massacres. For example, when Nathan describes the massacre at Mainz, he claims that the victims made a sacrifice that surpassed all of those made by the Jewish people in the Torah itself: "they, too, greatly sanctified the name and now accepted upon themselves a death so awesome that it is not recorded in all biblical admonitions".<sup>14</sup> The anonymous Mainz chronicler paints a devout picture of the Rhenish martyrs as well, and also often describes the killings in light of Biblical parallels. For instance, in the anonymous account of the Mainz massacre, the author claims that the death of eleven Jews leaving the town's synagogue served to fulfill Biblical prophecy: "they [crusaders] rose up against them and slew eleven of them. This was the beginning of the persecution, fulfilling the Biblical verse 'And at my sanctuary shall you begin'".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 101.

While the prestige with which Simson treats the Rhineland massacres is conceivably similar to Christian tradition, his account differs when it comes to the way in which the martyrdoms are framed in light of divinity and scripture. Throughout the chronicle, Simson's descriptions of Jewish deaths are often brought in direct context of Biblical law, in addition to devotion to God. For example, during the massacre at Mainz, Simson claims that the martyrs declared devotion to the lord specifically because of his provision of the Torah to the Jewish people, stating: "blessed be he and blessed be his name, who has given us his Torah and has commanded us to allow ourselves to be killed and slain."<sup>16</sup> Again, Nathan's account largely parallels the sentiments reflected in Simson. As with Simson, Nathan often frames the Rhenish martyrdoms within a reference to the Torah. Take his account of the massacre at Worms. Before he describes the massacre, he first makes sure to note that it happened on the anniversary of the Israelite's reception of the Torah on Mt. Sinai: "On the new moon of Sivan, the very day on which Israel had arrived at Sinai to receive the Torah, those Jews who were in the court of the bishop were subjected to great anguish and the enemy dealt them what they had dealt the others, tormenting them and putting them to the sword."<sup>17</sup> The anonymous author is also careful to frame martyrdom in context of both the divine and Jewish law. Many of the individual deaths described in this account are prefaced by a declaration of faith to both God and scripture by the martyr. A telling example of this trend can be found in a murder during the massacre at Worms, when a martyr named Mina declared divine and legal obedience before being executed: "Heaven forbid that I should deny God-on-high. Slay me for him and his holy Torah, and do not tarry any longer."<sup>18</sup>

On a general level, Simson's account paints the loss of the Rhenish martyrs as tragic, at least when discussing the affair as a whole. At multiple points in the chronicle, Simson contends that the Rhineland massacres were a deserved curse put on the Jewish people by God. During his description of

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<sup>16</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 105.



the massacre at Mainz, for instance, Simson feels its necessary to add that it was a collective punishment: “yet, it must be stated with certainty that god is a righteous judge, and we are to blame.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, while on a collective scale Simson frames the Rhineland massacres as a travesty, his descriptions of individual martyrs can often take on positive attributes which appear particularly compatible with the Christian martyr tradition, especially the notion that a martyrdom is a triumphant accomplishment which cleanses the soul and earns the martyr eternal salvation. This perspective is often relayed in the quotes Simson attributes to the victims. Take again the Mainz massacre. Shortly before their death, Simson claims that the Mainz community declared in unison “happy are we if we fulfill His will, and happy is he who is slain or slaughtered and who dies attesting to the Oneness of his name.”<sup>20</sup> Just as with Simson, Nathan and the anonymous account tend to refer to the Rhineland massacres collectively as a tragedy and individually as triumphant. In the introduction of Nathan's account he proclaims that the Rhineland persecutions were, as whole, a tragedy unlike any experienced in Germany before: “much hardship and adversity befell us, the like of which had not occurred in this kingdom from the time it was established till the present.”<sup>21</sup> When Nathan describes individual massacres, however, he often describes the victims as eager to go to their deaths. In his account of the destruction of Xanten, he claims that all of the martyrs killed died happily: “as a man rejoices when he finds his booty, so were they joyous and eager to serve our God and sanctify his name, and thus they did they, too, sanctify him by their sacrifices.”<sup>22</sup> In the anonymous account, the author often intercedes between individual massacre accounts to make lamentations about the Rhineland persecutions as a whole. In between two massacre descriptions at Mainz, the author breaks from the story to protest the plight of the Jewish people: “Wilt thou restrain thyself for these things, O Lord? Yet, with all this, His great wrath did not turn away from us.”<sup>23</sup> However, the accounts of the murders themselves take on a

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<sup>19</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 110.

triumphant tone. Immediately preceding this lamentation, the author describes the killing of several Jews seeking refuge in the courtyard of a church. Here the account states the victims declared they were eager to be killed, claiming that they yelled in unison: “happy is he who is slain or slaughtered and who dies attesting to the Oneness of His name.”<sup>24</sup>

The characterization of death as a profession of faith is another stark similarity between the martyrdoms described in Simson's account and the Christian tradition. Most of the martyrdoms in Simson's account are immediately preceded by a recitation of the Shema (the Jewish declaration of faith). In many cases, it is specifically because of a declaration of faith that the martyrs are killed, such as when a martyr was given the opportunity to apostatize to Christianity and be spared. One instance exemplifying this trend can be found in Simson's account of the death of one David, son of Nathaniel, who was offered the opportunity to live if he was willing to convert, to which he responded by professing the truth of the Jewish faith, saying to the crusaders: “you are the children of whoredom, believing as you do in a god who was a bastard and was crucified. As for me, I believe in the everlasting God who dwells in the lofty heavens.”<sup>25</sup> Just as with Simson, most of the Martyrdoms described in Nathan's account are described as the direct result of a profession of faith, and a refusal to apostatize. Take his account of the attack on Speyer, where ten Jews were killed. When describing their deaths he specifically emphasizes that they were killed for refusing to apostatize: “the foe attacked the community of Speyer and murdered ten holy souls who sanctified their creator on the holy Sabbath and refused to defile themselves by adopting the faith of their foe.”<sup>26</sup> The anonymous account also often frames martyrdoms as the direct result of a declaration of faith, and refusal to convert. Take the death of one Isaac, son of Daniel, killed at the church courtyard in Mainz, who asked to have his throat slit rather than convert: “There was still some life left in his frame when they said to him: 'you can still be

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<sup>24</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 109-110.

<sup>25</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 80.

saved if you agree to change your religion.' Having already been strangled, he could not utter a word from his mouth, so he gestured with his finger to say: 'cut off my head.' And they slit his throat."<sup>27</sup>

In regards to suicide, Solomon Bar Simson's account is clearly permissive. A large proportion of the deaths in his chronicle are self-inflicted. Simson reveres them as pious, and directly refers to their sacrifice as an act of religious sanctification. Take Simson's account of the massacre at Speyer, where he professes the piety of a female suicide: "there was a distinguished, pious woman there who slaughtered herself in sanctification of God's name."<sup>28</sup> Nathan also clearly legitimizes suicides as pure and sanctifying acts. His description of a mass suicide at Cologne, overseen by one Levi, son of Samuel, provides a good example: "Levi brought there with him: men, women, and children, grooms and brides, old men and women, who slaughtered themselves and exposed their throats for their heads to be severed in sanctification of the One name."<sup>29</sup> Finally, suicide is treated by the anonymous chronicler as a valid means for achieving martyrdom as well. When suicides happen in this account they are often directly described as consecrations of the one God. A good case example is Samuel, son of Mordecai, who commits suicide at Mainz. The anonymous chronicler directly describes the act as a sanctification of God's name: "Another man was there, Samuel the Elder, son of Mordercai. He, too, sanctified the name. He took his knife and plunged it into his stomach, spilling his innards onto the ground."<sup>30</sup>

All three of these authors seem to present similar sentiments regarding the Rhineland martyrs. These sentiments reflect two major moral divergences from Christian standards. Firstly Simson, Nathan, and the Mainz chronicler all repeatedly ground the Rhineland martyrdoms within a framework of equal devotion to both God and religious law. Secondly, all three of the accounts directly credit suicide as a valid means of achieving martyrdom. These two factors speak to a martyr philosophy with

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<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Simson, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Nathan, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 113.

some attributes clearly distinct from Christian traditions of thought. However, these two differences aside, the chroniclers also reflect sentiments which present some remarkable parallels to Christian standards. Firstly, the chroniclers all attribute the martyrs with a supreme level of religious piety, and frequently describe them within Biblical contexts. Secondly, though the chroniclers tend to describe the massacres collectively as travesty, their descriptions of specific martyrs parallel Christian standards. Just as in Christian theology, the chroniclers describe individual martyrdoms as triumphs which serve to cleanse the soul and ensure eternal salvation. Finally, just as in the Christian context, the Rhineland martyrdoms are often specifically framed as declarations of faith. That is, as active decisions to uphold piety in the face of death, even when apostasy would ensure survival.

### The Chronicles in Scholarship

These three general parallels, however, only scratch the surface when considering the stark similarities to Christian tradition uncovered by modern scholars. In the last three decades academic investigations into the prose of the Rhenish chroniclers, like that of Eva Haverkamp, have yielded compelling evidence that writers such as Solomon Bar Simson and Eliezer Bar Nathan, beyond merely emulating Christian martyr themes, actually structured portions of their accounts with the intention of mirroring contemporary Christian hagiographies. Additionally, scholars such as Avraham Grossman and Robert Chazan have presented evidence that logically fits these Christian parallels into their greater historical context. They point to evidence that strongly suggests that, by the time of the Chronicles, the German Jewish community was in a social position particularly exposed to Christian theology. This is because, in the years leading up to the composition of the Rhenish Chronicles, the European Jewish community was gradually coming into closer contact with Christian community and, as a result, was interacting with Medieval Christian religion (whether it be positive or negative) more often than ever before.

In her article "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", Eva Haverkamp makes a compelling argument that the prose of Simson's account presents an incredibly

similar parallel to Christian texts, largely associated with a popular contemporary program of veneration known as the Thebean Martyr Cult. This movement venerated a legion of Roman soldiers who, in the third century C.E, were executed en-masse for refusing to persecute Christians in an area close to Xanten, one of the towns that would later undergo persecution during the Rhineland massacres.<sup>31</sup> By the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Thebean cult had reached an epoch of popularity (thanks to the work of one archbishop Norbert), and would have been well known by both Jews and Christians in both Metz (where Simson was writing) and Xanten.<sup>32</sup> In her analysis, Haverkamp uncovers some astonishing similarities in rhetoric, transliterated terminology, and theological emphasis between Simson, Nathan, and the Thebean hagiographies. In particular, Nathan and Simson's accounts present elements emulative of a Christian hagiographer of the Thebean Legion by the name of Sigebert of Glemboux, who was known to have had close interactions with the Jews of Metz, Simson's home town.<sup>33</sup> For example, like Sigebert's account of the Thebean martyrs, both Simson and Eliezer refer to Xanten through a transliterated Latin name, often referenced to the town specifically in memory of the Thebean Martyrs.<sup>34</sup> Simson also often attributes biblical descriptions to the Xanten martyrdoms that closely reflect those found in Sigebert's account, such as the motif of lambs festering in blood.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, in Simson's account, he situates the final massacre of the Jewish community in a location that directly faces the location of the Thebean martyrdom, separated only by 50 meters.<sup>36</sup> Stark similarities like these strongly suggest that the Rhenish chroniclers, in addition to reflecting general Christian martyr themes in their prose, were also directly influenced by contemporary martyr literature.

A close examination of the prose of the Rhenish Chroniclers reflects stark thematic parallels to the Christian martyr tradition, and these taken in conjunction with the presence of structural emulations

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<sup>31</sup> Eva Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion," *Jewish History* 23, 1 (2009): 326.

<sup>32</sup> Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", 325-326.

<sup>33</sup> Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", 327-328.

<sup>34</sup> Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", 329.

<sup>35</sup> Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", 327.

<sup>36</sup> Haverkamp, "Martyrs in rivalry: the 1096 Jewish martyrs and the Thebean Legion", 329.

of Christian hagiography, uncovered by Haverkamp, strongly imply the incorporation of Christian martyr traditions into the Rhenish Chroniclers' own martyr philosophy. Furthermore, this conclusion is especially viable given the greater historical-cultural context of the Rhenish chroniclers, just after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is widely accepted in the scholarly community that, beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Jewry in Western Europe saw a rapid population expansion, which ran parallel to a larger period of economic growth in the wider European community. This is reflected in greater stabilizing trends across Western Europe as a whole, such as the solidification of far reaching trade routes, the consolidation of larger, more cohesive political units, and the expansion of urban centers across the European interior.<sup>37</sup> This economic expansion and stabilization, just as it benefited the Christian world, so too brought new economic opportunities to its Jewish communities, which in turn brought them into closer interaction with their surrounding Christian neighbors. For example, there is ample written evidence from the period to suggest a growing Jewish presence in travelling trade jobs, as well as specialist positions such as teachers, which incorporated extensive interactions with both secular and clerical Christian communities in urban hubs stretching to the farthest reaches of the European periphery. There are accounts from across Europe and Britain from this period that attest to these interactions, such as that of one English monk Gilbert Crispin, who mentions financial squabbles between his town's abbot and Jewish traders from Mainz.<sup>38</sup> Even more reflective of the potential for specifically theological Christian-Jewish interactions, the 11<sup>th</sup> century saw a rise in accounts attesting to an increase in travel among renowned Jewish theologians to urban hubs across Europe. One of the most famous of these, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (a biblical commentator better known as the Rashi), travelled across Germany to study at newly minted academies in Mainz and Worms.<sup>39</sup>

This growing trend in Jewish-Christian interaction implies that the Jewish community of

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 11-13.

<sup>38</sup> Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, 18.

Germany was in a comparatively extroverted disposition that was more susceptible to interaction, whether it be positive or negative, with Christian theological influences, and recent scholarship has provided evidence that this is indeed what happened. Authors such as Avraham Grossman have pointed to a large collection of literary evidence, spanning the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which suggest Christian influences had begun to invoke theological reactions in Jewish society that had never been seen before. Accounts from the early decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century suggest that there was an exceptional influx in the rate of Jewish conversions to Christianity, even amongst the most religious segments of the Jewish social structure. The children of the renowned sage Gersham Meor Ha Golah, for example, apostatized during this period.<sup>40</sup> This wave of conversions was significant enough that it prompted a backlash in the Jewish intellectual community. This was visibly reflected in an increased emphasis on literature that condemned apostasy, and encouraged resistance to foreign influences. Some examples of this include the wide dissemination of the Book of Jossipon, a Latin to Hebrew translation that recounted the Jewish war against the Romans at the end of the Second Temple Era, and a rise in the popularity of the Aggada, an extra canonical collection of religious commentaries that often promoted suicide as a valid, or even in some interpretations required, alternative to religious profanation.<sup>41</sup>

#### Pre-Christian Context

Given that the Rhenish chronicler's wrote at a time immediately following a period of rapid growth for the Jewish community, which pushed it into closer proximity to Christian culture, and given the evidence that this proximity did influence large scale Jewish theological movements and countermovements in direct response to Christian interaction, and finally, given the evidence from the prose of the accounts of the Rhenish chroniclers', which suggest parallels with general Christian martyr elements, as well as Christian martyr hagiography, I conclude that Christian martyr traditions did likely

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<sup>40</sup> Avraham Grossman, "The Cultural and Social Background of Jewish Martyrdom in Germany in 1096," In *Juden und Christen zur Zeit der Kreuzzuge*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Sigmarigen: Thorbecke, 1999), 75.

<sup>41</sup> Grossman, "The Cultural and Social Background of Jewish Martyrdom in Germany in 1096", 81-82.

have a strong influence over the Jewish martyr philosophy reflected in the Rhenish Chronicles. With this established, the question still remains as to the ultimate roots of the Christian influences themselves. Being that Christianity is a tradition born directly out of Judaism, it is certainly possible that the martyr elements in the Rhenish Chronicle's which are reflective of Christian tradition may have themselves been appropriated from earlier movements in Jewish thought. To address this possibility, I will conduct a theological overview of the extensity or dearth of Christian compatible martyr elements in both Biblical and Hellenistic contexts. In particular, this analysis will consider the Pre-Christian sources in light of the five elements considered in my analysis of the Rhenish Chronicles: the religious prestige ascribed to martyrs, the way in which the significance of martyrs are conceptualized in relation to divinity and scripture, the presentation of martyrdoms as triumphant or tragic, whether or not acts of martyrdom are treated as spiritually purifying professions of faith, and whether suicide is validated or invalidated as a legitimate means to attain martyr status. Analyzing a pre-Christian Jewish perspective of martyrdom, if there truly is one, is a potentially gargantuan task. In order to effectively and efficiently isolate the concepts from this context which need to be considered in light of the Christian framework, I will be focusing on the themes which are directly applicable to the elements identified in my overview of Christian martyrology. There have been a large number of works in recent scholarship which have addressed martyrdom in Jewish pre-Christian contexts. For this analysis I will be primarily drawing from two theological overviews, which have addressed Pre-Christian Jewish self-sacrifice in context of later, largely Christian conceptions of martyrdom: a chapter by Marc Brettler in a greater work on martyrdom and theology, titled *Sacrificing the Self*, and an analysis by Lena Roos in her book *God Wants It*. Additionally, I will conduct a close reading of an influential Hellenistic-Jewish text, *The Jewish War* by Josephus Flavius, which encapsulates the elements I will identify in my overview.

The Old Testament is a particularly challenging work to analyze when considering the theme of self-sacrifice, specifically in context of martyrdom ideals. In regards to terminology, the Old Testament never uses a name that parallels a martyr definition. While the Rhenish Chroniclers themselves utilize



Biblical terminology in their description of the Rhineland martyrs, they apply it in ways far disparate from the Old Testament context. A primary example of this is the term *Kiddush Hashem*, roughly meaning sanctifiers of the name of God. This was the name most commonly attributed to the Rhineland martyrs in all of the Rhenish Chronicles, and its roots lie in the Old Testament, specifically the Book of Ezekial. However, the way the Rhenish Chroniclers use the term is drastically different from its meaning in Ezekial. In the book of Ezekial, the term is applied to God himself, usually when he performs a miracle that saves the nation of Israel. In this context, believers in God's name do not actively participate in sanctification or self-sacrifice, but merely observe passively.<sup>42</sup> While there is no clear parallel to martyrdom in the Old Testament in regards to terminology, there are instances that, in specific context of the Christian framework and the Rhenish Chroniclers, seem to reflect some similarities to martyr themes.

There are multiple occasions in the Old Testament where an individual sacrifices them self in religious devotion, however, most often the way in which these deaths occur only vaguely reflect individual martyr elements, and are usually missing the core themes necessary to consider them apt comparisons to the Rhenish Chroniclers or the Christian context. For example the stories of Saul, who falls on his sword to avoid capture at the hands of Gentiles, and Samson, who pulls a temple down on himself and a horde of Philistines, are often quoted examples of potential Old Testament martyrdoms. Both actively choose death in the name of their faith.<sup>43</sup> The similarities, however, do not extend far beyond this. Both of these acts are missing core elements reflected both in the Christian context as well as the Rhenish Chronicles. For instance, neither of these examples give any indication that sacrifice merited a reward in the afterlife, or that it cleansed the soul of sin.<sup>44</sup> One of the only examples in the Old Testament that potentially reflect martyrdom in its full meaning comes in the last section, The

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<sup>42</sup> Marc Brettler. "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?" In *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, ed. Margaret Cormack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>43</sup> Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?", 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?", 5-6.

Book of Daniel. Here we see triumphant and prestigious examples of willing self-sacrifice, resulting from professions of faith to God and refusals to profane his name, which were brought in conjunction with an eternal reward. These elements, though present in the book, are separated between individual acts. For instance, in chapter three there is a story concerning three of Daniel's friends. After refusing a command by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow before idols, they are thrown into an oven, only to emerge unharmed. Subsequently, they are praised as holy by the king.<sup>45</sup> While here there are loosely reflected a number of components with potential parallels to the Christian framework, such as prestige, a profession of faith, triumph, and an intention directed to the will of God, there is still not an explicit mention of eternal reward. This element does, however, emerge in the final chapters of the book. Here, there exist statements which seem to imply the promise of an afterlife for the pious. Though contested, these statements have been contended by some biblical scholars, such as William Frend, to have proto-martyr elements.<sup>46</sup> To give a cogent example, in Brettler's analysis of the final chapter of Daniel, he aptly points to a passage that directly implies an eternal reward for those who commit pious acts in defense of the Jewish faith: "those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever."<sup>47</sup>

While, taken comprehensively, the Book of Daniel does incorporate a host of elements roughly parallel to my established martyr framework, these similarities appear separately, and are never concisely incorporated into one act of self-sacrifice. The Hellenistic era, in which Jewish polities in Palestine came under Greek and Roman dominance, provides much more concise textual evidence, which speaks to a direct influence on Christian martyr culture and an indirect influence on the Rhenish Chroniclers (as I will show below), and which more comprehensively incorporates all core elements of the Christian martyr framework. Additionally, the potential that the texts from this period influenced

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<sup>45</sup> Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?", 13-14.

<sup>46</sup> Lena Roos, "The Origins of Jewish Martyr Texts," In *God Wants It!*, ed. Lena Roos (Belgium: Turnhout, 2006), 60.

<sup>47</sup> Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?", 15.

the early Church is strongly supported in early Christian primary source evidence. The Maccabean books, for example, were embraced and honored by the early Church, and receive plentiful mention from foundational Christian writers. Augustine claims that the Church should revere II and IV Maccabees specifically because of their depiction of pre-Christian martyrs.<sup>48</sup> Looking at the period in its entirety, there is a wide range of popular Hellenistic sources that easily parallel my established fundamental Christian martyr elements. A triumphant death, resulting from a direct profession of faith, which serves to cleanse the soul of sin and win eternal life, is reflected in multiple histories from the Hellenistic period, such as II Maccabees, written under Greek rule. Take, for example, a story of seven brothers, who choose execution rather than profaning Jewish law by eating pork, and declare that their sacrifice and faith in God will earn them eternal life. These same elements are largely recreated in a later rendition of the story in IV Maccabees.<sup>49</sup> During Roman rule, texts such as *The Assumption of Moses* contain martyrdoms with elements parallel to the Christian and Rhenish contexts as well, such as the story of Taxo, who chooses to starve to death in a cave rather than commit idolatry under Roman persecution.<sup>50</sup>

The potential for the influence of these texts is supported, not only by the similarities they share in Martyr rhetoric with the Christian and Rhenish contexts, but by the extensiveness with which they were preserved by Christian writers in Latin, and then reappropriated by European Jewish writers. I think one source that best emphasizes this trend can be found in the writings and translations of Josephus Flavius. Josephus was a Hellenistic Jewish chronicler writing under Roman rule during the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. He composed a chronicle of Jewish history stretching from the biblical period all the way up to the Jewish and Roman Wars. His writings were widely distributed in the Medieval Christian world where they, as with many other pieces of Roman era Jewish literature, were copied in their

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<sup>48</sup> Roos, *God Wants It!*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Roos, *God Wants It!*, 63-64.

<sup>50</sup> Roos, *God Wants It!*, 67.

original Latin. While the story was commonly known among the Christian community, The European Jewish community did not have easy access to it, being that Latin literacy was fairly rare.<sup>51</sup> This, however, changed in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, when an Italian Jewish writer by the name of Jossipon (or Josephus Gorionides in Latin) translated Josephus into Classical Hebrew.<sup>52</sup> Jossipon's translation quickly became popular in Jewish communities throughout Europe, especially in Germany. As a part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century backlash among Jewish theologians against Jewish to Christian apostasy, the book was copied en masse by prestigious rabbinical scholars, such as Gersham Meor Ha Golah.<sup>53</sup> By the time the Rhenish Chronicler's wrote, Josephus's works would have been well integrated into the German-Jewish literary canon. Furthermore, a close analysis of Josephus work, specifically his account of the martyrdoms at Masada, where a rebelling faction of Jewish militants known as the Sicarii committed suicide to evade Roman capture, reveals astonishingly close similarities to both the Christian Martyr framework and the Martyr rhetoric of the Rhenish Chronicler's themselves.

According to Josephus's account, the suicides at mount Masada occurred during the final stages of an extended siege by the Roman army, who had slowly built a dirt ramp up the side of the mountain to gain entrance into the Jewish defenses.<sup>54</sup> The night before the Romans entered Masada, the leader of the Sicarii, a rebel by the name of Eliezer, gave a speech to the resisters, urging them to kill their wives and children and commit suicide rather than be captured by Roman forces. The rhetoric of this speech closely parallels themes I have identified from the Christian framework, as well as the Rhenish accounts of the Rhineland massacres. Like the Christian framework and the Chroniclers, Eliezer describes suicide as an act of faith that would serve as a sacrifice for God, and which would cleanse the rebels of past sin. Eliezer claims that the reason they were losing to the Romans was because the Jewish people had strayed from a righteous life and had sinned against one another, and that

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<sup>51</sup> Louis Feldman and Gohei Ata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987.), 386.

<sup>52</sup> Feldman and Ata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, 387.

<sup>53</sup> Grossman, "The Cultural and Social Background of Jewish Martyrdom in Germany in 1096", 81-82.

<sup>54</sup> Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, trans. H.J. Thackeray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 592-593.

committing suicide would serve as a repayment for this. This comes towards the beginning of Eliezer's speech, when he states: "all this betokens wrath at the many wrongs which we madly dared to inflict upon our countrymen. The penalty for those crimes let us pay not to our bitterest foes... but to God with our own hands."<sup>55</sup>

Like the Rhenish Chroniclers' description of the Jewish community at the hands of the crusaders, Eliezer describes the position of the Jewish people under Rome collectively as tragic. However, in a manner similar to both the Rhenish Chronicler's and the Christian tradition, he paints individual sacrifices as triumphant. In the introduction of his speech, Eliezer states that the misfortunes of the Jewish community under Rome was a travesty, and that it signified that God had collectively condemned the Jewish people. He declares that "we ought, I say, to have read God's purpose and to have recognized that the Jewish race, one beloved of Him, had been doomed to perdition."<sup>56</sup> However, when Eliezer discusses his and the rest of the Sicarii's impending death, he describes it as a salvation from worldly troubles. When he notices that some among the Sicarii do not seem eager to go to their death, Eliezer encourages them by declaring "we have been continually taught by those precepts, ancestral and divine... that life, not death, is man's misfortune. For it is death which gives liberty to the soul and permits it to its own pure abode."<sup>57</sup>

It is also important to note that in this statement, similarly to the Chroniclers and dissimilarly to the Christian context, Eliezer frames self-sacrifice not only as a teaching of God, but one created by tradition and law. He establishes this context by stating that his proposition, to self-sacrifice, was taught both by the "ancestral" and the "divine". Additionally, in this same proclamation we also see the triumph of death painted in context of an eternal reward. This is implied by Eliezer's statement that death allows the soul to travel "to its own pure abode." This theme emanates throughout Eliezer's

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<sup>55</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 599.

<sup>56</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 597.

<sup>57</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 601.

speech, and is reinforced by Josephus himself. Before this quote, Josephus briefly intercedes to inform the reader that Eliezer's intention was to urge the Sicarii to sacrifice themselves with the promise of eternal salvation: "he [Eliezer] roused himself and, fired with mighty fervor, essayed a higher flight of oratory on the immortality of the soul."<sup>58</sup>

Just as with the attitudes reflected in the Rhenish Chronicles and the Christian context, Eliezer's rhetoric also seems prone to frame self-sacrifice as a prestigious death, one that earns the individual a place that is particularly close to God in the afterlife. A good example of this can be found just after Eliezer's promise to the rebels of a reward from God for their suicide. After assuring the Sicarii of an eternal reward for their sacrifice, Eliezer states that their souls will live in close kinship with God for eternity: "while enjoying in perfect independence the most delightful repose, holds converse with God by right of kinship."<sup>59</sup>

Finally, an obvious element that must be noted, which reflects a similarity with the Rhenish Chroniclers and a dissimilarity with Christian tradition, is that Eliezer glorifies suicide and frames it as a pious act. The purpose of his speech was to encourage his fellow Sicarii to kill their families and to commit suicide, and to validate suicide as a noble death he uses a wide range of evidence. In one particularly interesting stream of thought, he points to the noble suicides of pious but non-Jewish thinkers, particularly in India, as examples which should be emulated. For instance, after Eliezer assures the Sicarii of the eternal reward that will follow their deaths, he notes that respectable philosophers in India were known to commit suicide for the purpose of reaching an eternal after life: "we really need an assurance in this matter from alien nations, let us look at those Indians who profess the practice of philosophy. They, brave men that they are, reluctantly endure the period of life... but hasten to release their souls from their bodies."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 601.

<sup>59</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 603.

<sup>60</sup> Flavius, *The Jewish War*, 605.

What the evidence I have presented from the Pre-Christian Jewish context has shown is that there is a high likelihood that Jewish literature from the Hellenistic and potentially (though to a lesser degree) Biblical contexts influenced the development of the Christian martyr tradition. Hellenistic Jewish martyr texts were popularly incorporated into early Church theology, and reflect core martyr concepts that the Church retained all the way up to the Crusader era. While these texts do have some elements that differ from the Christian take on martyrdom (such as permissiveness surrounding suicide and a dual emphasis on both the law and the divine) they also reflect a close similarity with important core themes of the Christian framework, such as the attribution of high religious prestige, the role of sacrifice as a soul purifying profession of faith, and the treatment of sacrifice as triumphant, specifically given the promise of an eternal reward. This supports the notion, established in my Hellenistic Jewish theological overview, that the Christian influences which impacted the Rhenish Chroniclers' martyr philosophy likely themselves developed, at least in part, from earlier Jewish traditions. In this same vein of thought, the fact that Hellenistic Jewish texts like Josephus reflect all of the core martyr elements presented in the Rhenish Chronicles speaks to the role of Christian tradition in Jewish rediscovery. By preserving these texts, Christian culture served as a medium through which the German Jewish community reincorporated earlier Jewish literary traditions.

### Conclusions

What role might have the influences of Christian martyr tradition played in the way the Rhenish Chroniclers viewed the Rhineland massacres? My examination of the Rhenish Chronicles strongly suggests that the Christian martyr tradition had a deep and multifaceted impact on the way the chroniclers portrayed the act of self-sacrifice. The prose of the Rhenish Chronicles reflects themes that largely parallel core elements of the Medieval Christian martyr tradition. Additionally, several of the chroniclers structured their narratives in ways that strongly resemble contemporary Christian hagiographic martyr literature. Furthermore, the presence of these influences logically fits within the Rhenish Chronicles' greater historical context, given they were written during a period when Christian

theological influences were in closer contact with the German Jewish community than in any earlier Medieval context.

If Christian influences did have a significant impact on the Chroniclers' conception of martyrdom, how might have those influences themselves been related to martyr traditions established in the pre-Christian Jewish tradition? In regards to this question, my analysis suggests that Christian martyr culture impacted the chroniclers' communities in two particular ways: they introduced the German Jewish communities to cultural martyr elements unique to Christianity alone, and they re-introduced the communities to previously lost Jewish martyr traditions, largely from the Hellenistic era. The impact of unique Christian influences is reflected in the Rhenish emulation of contemporary Christian literary elements. The reintroduction of earlier Jewish influences is reflected in two ways. Firstly they are reflected through the Rhenish implementation of core martyr elements that were used in pre-Christian Jewish literature, and later appropriated by the Christian tradition itself. Secondly, they are also suggested by the close thematic similarities between the Rhenish Chronicles and Hellenistic Jewish literature that had recently been reintroduced to the German Jewish society, via the medium of Christian literature. To put my conclusion concisely, I contend that the Christian tradition did have a deep impact on the martyr philosophy of the Rhenish Chroniclers. This influence, while introducing some cultural elements unique to Christian tradition, also allowed the Chronicler's to re-access the martyr traditions of an earlier Jewish origin, both through Jewish inspired elements of the Christian tradition itself and through the literary preservation of earlier Jewish culture.

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