THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 08.2026.067
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2026-11706

ELEFTHERIOS DESPOTAKIS, Anti-Jewish Greek Texts in Late Medieval Crete: The Case of Manouel Savios and Angelos Gregorios (Byzantine Research Library 14). Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute of Historical Research 2026. 181 pp. – ISBN 978-960-371-112-4

• NICHOLAS DE LANGE, University of Cambridge (nrml1@cam.ac.uk)

The meat in this offering consists of two previously unpublished Greek texts, both arguing for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism; they are sandwiched between an introduction and an appendix. Each text is preceded by its own introduction, dealing in turn with the single manuscript in which the text is preserved, its scribe, the author, and the treatise itself.

The introduction sets the scene by describing the situation of Greek Orthodox and Catholic Christians and Jews in Crete in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This was a period of well documented tensions between Orthodox and Catholics, but little is known about relations between Christians and Jews, which the author accurately characterises as 'a generally peaceful but untrustworthy coexistence'. Emphasising that he intends his book as a contribution to the study of anti-Jewish literature in Greek, the author points out correctly that a knowledge of Hebrew is required to examine the Jewish literature. He refers to some Jewish texts, notably the *taqqanot* or bylaws of the Jewish community of Candia, which were edited in the early sixteenth century by the local rabbi and communal leader Elia Capsali, and which cast a good deal of light on the lives of the local Jews, including their relations with the Christians, from the early thirteenth century on. He is not acquainted with the latest works on this material, which would have considerably enriched his account.[1] Among the abundant Hebrew poetry from Crete we have a poetic lament on the Ottoman capture of Constantinople, penned by a well-known Jewish scholar of Candia, Michael ben Shabbetai Kohen Balbo.[2]

1. Notably ALEIDA PAUDICE, Between Several Worlds: The Life and Writings of Elia Capsali. Leiden 2010; MARTIN BORÝSEK, Jewish Communal Autonomy and Institutional Memory in Venetian Crete: A Study of Takkanot Kandiyah. Leiden 2023.

2. AVI SHARON, Michael ben Shabbetai Cohen Balbo (1420–?1484): A Hebrew Lament from Venetian Crete on the Fall of Constantinople. Dialogos 6 (2000) pp. 43–46.

It is clear from the Venetian archives that relations between Jews and Christians were complex and far from uniformly hostile.[3] It is interesting to note in this connection that the gateway to the extant synagogue in Canea carries a Hebrew inscription dated 1487 stating that the gateway was built and dedicated by one Eliano Cortese, for the ransom of his own soul and for 'the lives of my children and grandchildren'.[4] Eliano is not otherwise attested as a Jewish name, and Cortese only rarely, which suggests that the benefactor may have been a Christian. Although we have isolated examples of spiteful behaviour on the part of Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and oppressive actions by the Venetian authorities, including a form of ritual murder libel and the imposition of the ghetto, we should remember that there were wealthy and important Jews in Candia, who were well integrated and involved in local and international trade and owned grand homes in the capital, as well as farms in the fertile Messara plain in the south of the island.[5]

The author points to the need for further research on the extent to which this context reflects the literary production or manuscript reproduction of polemical works from both sides. (He might also have mentioned hostile elements in both Christian and Jewish liturgies, which are likely to have been more widely influential.) I know of one example on the Jewish side: in 1493 in Canea a Jewish scribe named Solomon copied a work entitled *The Book of Nestor the Priest*, which is a polemic against Christianity put in the mouth of a Christian priest converted to Judaism.[6] This text has a long history, going back to a source which exists in Arabic, but Solomon's text is unusual, in that it contains many quotations from the Old and New Testaments in Greek, and the work displays a good knowledge of Christianity. The date of 1493 is the *terminus ante quem* of this Greek adaptation, but we have no other means of determining where or when or with what purpose it was made.

Turning now to the texts, the first is entitled Λόγος κατὰ Ἰουδαίων, i.e.

3. This is well brought out in Rena N. Lauer, Colonial Justice and the Jews of Venetian Crete. Philadelphia 2019 (mentioned in the bibliography, but not otherwise laid under contribution).

4. Nicholas de Lange, Hebrew Inscriptions in the Etz Hayyim Synagogue, Chania. Bulletin of Judaeo-Greek Studies 25 (Winter 1999/2000) pp. 27–39.

5. On their houses see Maria Georgopoulou, Venice's Mediterranean Colonies: Architecture and Urbanism. Cambridge 2001, pp. 197–200.

6. Daniel J. Lasker – Sarah Stroumsa, The Polemic of Nestor the Priest. Vol. 1. Jerusalem 1996, p. 94.

a discourse or argument against the Jews. (The Latin title given, *Disputatio contra Iudaeos*, is misleading in this respect.) The author is named as Manouel Savios, Protopsaltes of Crete. Little is known about him; as the editor explains, he seems to have occupied the position of Protopsaltes of Crete from ca. 1407 to 1449 or 1450, the latter date probably coinciding with his death. The work is preserved in a single manuscript in the British Library (Add. 34060 [Diktyon 39106]), a 15th-century miscellaneous collection of texts including several relating to Jews or Judaism. It is addressed at several points to an unnamed friend, who has, together with others, asked him to address an issue that has arisen in Crete, namely that some simple-minded Christians have been misled into turning away from the true Christian teachings towards 'Jewish errors' (Ἰουδαϊκαὶ πλάναι), putting forward the excuse that they were following Scripture. Manouel Savios, consequently, concentrates his arguments on the correct interpretation of key biblical texts, which he arranges under three headings, corresponding to his replies to the principal 'Jewish errors': (1) that God is three and one, and not only one; (2) that the Messiah is the son of God and divine, and will come to judge the coming age, and not an angel who will take on flesh and gather the Jews from the four corners of the world; and (3) that the Messiah has come and accomplished everything that is written in the law, the prophets and the psalms, whereas they are still waiting for him.

The 'Jewish errors' mentioned here certainly correspond to Jewish beliefs, except perhaps for the idea that the Messiah will be an angel in human form. It is not, however, obvious, to this reader at least, that the text is, as its heading suggests and as the editor believes, an argument against the Jews, rather than, as the author himself says, against the simple believers (ἁπλούστεροι, πιστεύοντες ἁπλῶς), who are also called 'transgressors' (παραβάται) and atheists (ἄθεοι), and on just one occasion apostrophised, rhetorically, as 'blind Jews' (ὦ Ἰουδαῖε τυφλέ). The association of the simple believers, who are over-literal in their interpretation of Scripture, with the Jews is as old as Origen (*Peri Archon*, 1.8). Savios shows no interest in the Jews in Candia or their activities, and he nowhere accuses them of attempting to corrupt or convert Christians. The editor, in an introduction to this text (p. 51), surely goes too far when he imputes to Savios the statement that some Cretan Christians had been converted to Judaism. The texts quoted do not support this claim, and, as he himself adds in a footnote, there is no documentary support for it. Had such illegal conversions taken place they would surely have been scandalous enough to leave some trace in the literature.

The remainder of the text is entirely taken up with arguments from scripture in favour of a trinitarian understanding of God, which occupy some ten pages of the edition, and breaks off abruptly at the point when the author proposes to tackle the other two questions. It is clear that the work was originally considerably longer.

The second text is headed Ἰουδαίων ἀπορίαι καὶ συλλογισμοί, and the author's name is given as Angelos Gregorios the Cretan, later named Athanasios the Monk. This text too is preserved in a single manuscript, now in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (MS Ludwig XV 2 [Diktyon 73355]), written c. 1510, containing an illustrated bestiary and a collection of theological texts by this author, who is also the scribe of the manuscript. The text is presented in the form of a series of short questions posed by an unnamed Jew, each followed by a lengthy reply by a Christian, who is sometimes named as Athanasios the Monk, interspersed with quotations from the writings of the Church Fathers, particularly from those directed against Judaism.

The editor terms this text a dialogue or disputation, but these terms are not entirely appropriate to it, particularly because it lacks the usual narrative framework or controversial dynamic. In some ways it is closer to the genre of *eratapokriseis*. The Jew puts questions which are pegs on which the author can hang replies. Many of the Jew's questions are familiar from the controversial literature, such as that the Messiah has not come yet (a point also anticipated by Manouel Savios). Whether Jesus was human or divine is a key topic returned to again and again. In this text the nature of the Trinity is not an issue.

While some of the arguments put forward are well-worn, some are unusual and even surprising. An example is in the discussion of Genesis 49:10, 'There will not be lacking a ruler from Judah or a guide from his thighs until (he) comes to whom it is reserved; and he is the expectation of the nations'. (This form of the text, reading ἕως οὗ ἔλθῃ ᾧ ἀπόκειται, rather than the usual ἕως ἂν ἔλθῃ τὰ ἀποκείμενα αὐτῷ, can be traced right back to the beginning of Christian-Jewish dialogue, being close to the variant cited in Justin, *Dialogue* 120.3.) The Christian argues, conventionally, that the Jews no longer have a king or a high priest, since Jesus was the promised Messiah. The Jew, remarkably, goes on the attack at this point, alluding to the Ottoman victory and the ending of the line of Byzantine rulers: 'Where is the kingship of you Christians? You are like us.' The Christian attempts to parry this thrust: 'The Italians and Latins have the lordship and kingship now as Christians, and they profess and worship Christ as true God, as we

do too.' The Jew, however, refuses to accept this reply, saying, 'I am not talking about them, but about you Greeks.' This compels the Christian to change tack, and argue that what is at issue is not the worldly kingship: 'We Greeks have the church… which is the foundation and salvation of our Christian faith'. There follow lengthy quotations from Ps.-Athanasius, *Questions to Antiochus the Dux*, John Chrysostom, and a more recent author, Matthew Blastares.

This exchange raises a fundamental question about this text and others of its kind: to what extent are they conventional exercises in a well-worn genre, or how far do they reflect real-life discussions between Jews and Christians? The authors are clearly well versed in the tradition of Greek Christian *adversus Judaeos* writing, particularly Angelos Gregorios, who quotes extensively from this literature. The same Jewish objections come up repeatedly, and the answers tend to be similar. But the Jewish taunt that the Christians have lost the kingship is a new one, inspired by recent events, and demands an apologetic effort on the part of the Christian respondent. It is tempting to hear an echo here of an authentic Jewish argument.

I have not been able to check the edition against the manuscripts, but I can venture some comments. Both texts seem to have been very lightly edited; the editor could have been much bolder, as in many places the printed text presents obvious errors. Whether these are due to the scribes or the editor I am not in a position to judge. To take some examples at random from the text of Angelos Gregorios: at line 52 the Jew says Πρὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν Ἰουδαίων ὅλως ἐξέλιπε; as he goes on to say that Herod was king at the time, it looks as though οὐκ has fallen out before ἐξέλιπε. At line 509 ἔδει ὡς ὑπεράγαθον ὢν τὰ should surely read ἔδει ὡς ὑπεράγαθον ὄντα, and at line 516 ἐπὶ ἐξ ὑμῶν should be ἐπεὶ ἐξ ὑμῶν. There are many similar mistakes. The very light critical apparatus is mostly confined to indicating where words have been written in the margin or above the line; an exception is in Biblical or patristic quotations, where the editor has chosen to follow printed editions in the body of the text, and relegate the readings of the manuscript to the apparatus. A second apparatus indicates the source of quotations. Here too there are errors; e.g. on p. 62 for 'Ps. 180' read 'Ps. 118'.

The Appendix is in three parts. The first gives the Greek text of an unidentified disputation (Διάλεξις) between a Jew (or rather Jews) and a Christian, found in a manuscript in Lambeth Palace Library (MS 2794 [Diktyon 39902]). This short work is discussed briefly in the body of the book on

p. 27, where the scribe is identified as a Cretan priest, Manouel-Matthaios Trapezountios. Part 2 gives the Latin text, with summaries in English, of ten documents from Crete, now in the Venetian archives, which are referred to in the introduction to the text by Manouel Savios. Part 3 shows specimens of the handwriting of Angelos Gregorios from three different manuscripts (see p. 80).

The book ends with a substantial bibliography and indexes of manuscripts and names.

This is a very useful addition to the literature on Venetian Crete in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, particularly rich in insights on the Orthodox church and its anti-Jewish culture. It is a pity that a number of errors have not been corrected, and that the author or publisher did not take the necessary steps to improve the standard of the English.

Keywords

Venetian Crete; religious polemic; *adversus Iudaeos*