

St. Louis and the Jews of France, before 1270 CE

LOUIS IX (1226-1270), grandson of Philip Augustus and King of France, was an ideal medieval king: he was chivalrous, religious, ascetic, and hostile to Jews. In spite of the fact that this opposition worked to his own disadvantage he opposed the money-lending activity of his Jewish subjects; he sanctioned laws against them, and eventually even ordered their expulsion. It is to be questioned, however, if the edict of expulsion was actually carried out.

The saintly Louis was very eager to convert the Jews and to this end encouraged disputations between the Synagogue and the Church. It was hoped at these theological tournaments to convert some Jews, or at least put them to shame and thus convince irresolute Christians of the truth of Christianity and of the vileness of Judaism.

Jean, Sire de Joinville (1224-1318), an intimate friend of Louis, has, in his old French history of St. Louis, preserved for us an anecdote which throws a great deal of light on the King's attitude toward the Jews.

He [Saint Louis] told me that there was once a great disputation between clergy and Jews at the monastery of Cluny. And there was at Cluny a poor knight to whom the abbot gave bread at that place for the love of God; and this knight asked the abbot to suffer him to speak the first words, and they suffered him, not without doubt. So he rose, and leant upon his crutch, and asked that they should bring to him the greatest clerk [clergyman] and most learned master among the Jews; and they did so. Then he asked the Jew a question, which was this: "Master" said the knight, "I ask you if you believe that the Virgin Mary, who bore God in her body and in her arms, was a virgin mother, and is the mother of God?"

And the Jew [probably Nathan or Joseph Official, famous controversialists] replied that of all this he believed nothing. Then the knight answered that the Jew had acted like a fool when-neither believing in her, nor loving her-he had yet entered into her monastery and house. "And verily," said the knight, "you shall pay for it!" Whereupon he lifted his crutch and smote the Jew near the ear, and beat him to the earth. Then the Jews turned to flight, and bore away their master, sore wounded. And so ended the disputation.

The abbot came to the knight and told him he had committed a deed of very great folly. But the knight replied that the abbot committed a deed of greater folly in gathering people together for such a disputation; for there were a great many good Christians there who, before the disputation came to an end, would have gone away misbelievers through not fully understanding the Jews. "And I tell you," said the king, "that no one, unless he be a very learned, clerk, should dispute with them; but a layman, when he hears the Christian law mis-said should not defend the Christian law, unless it be he



with his sword, and with that he should pierce the mis-sayer in the midriff, so far as the sword will enter.

Source: Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791*, (New York: JPS, 1938), 41-42

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