

# GREGORY OF TOURS, HISTORY OF THE FRANKS

*Gregory served as bishop of Tours from 573 until his death in 594. He wrote many hagiographies, which he collected into three volumes: the Lives of the Fathers, the Glory of the Confessors, and the Glory of the Martyrs. He is best remembered, however, for his lengthy and rambling History of the Franks, which covers the period from St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) to the year 591. Switching back and forth between the family of Clovis and the various bishops of northern France, he tries to present the Merovingian era as a chapter in God's plan for Christianizing western Europe. In the two passages below, he describes the last four years of Clovis's life (r. 481-511) (Bk. II, ch. 35-42) and Gregory's own encounter with a Jew in the court of King Chilperic (r. 561-584) (Bk. VI, ch. 5).*

## **CLOVIS' LAST YEARS (BK. II, CH. 35-42)**

[II, 35] King Alaric II of the Visigoths, seeing that Clovis was overrunning one nation after another, sent ambassadors to him, saying, "Dear brother, it would be wise for us to meet-if you are interested, and God willing." Clovis agreed and rode to meet Alaric. They convened just outside the village of Amboise, which is on an island in the Loire river, in the diocese of Tours. They negotiated and settled upon a treaty of eternal friendship, which they celebrated with a shared feast, after which they both rode home in peace. At that time there were countless people in Gaul eager for Frankish rule.

[36] One consequence of this treaty, however, was that Bishop Quintinianus of Rodez fell from favor and was driven out by the people of his own city, who had long criticized him, saying, "If it were up to you, the Franks would be our lords!" It did not take long for their resentment to burst into open quarrel with the bishop, for the Visigoths who lived in the city were suspicious of Quintinianus' loyalties, and the rest of the townsmen went so far as to accuse him publicly of wanting to hand the city over to the Franks. And so, a plot was hatched to assassinate him. Quintinianus found out about it and fled one night, together with his most trusted attendants, to Clermont, where he was kindly received by St. Eufrasius, the bishop who had succeeded Aprunculus. Eufrasius was a native of Dijon. He gave Quintinianus fine lodgings amid fields and vineyards, insisting that "This diocese has ample resources to support us both-for the charity preached by the blessed Apostle [St. Martin] must be carried on by all of God's ministers." The bishop of Lyons also gave Quintinianus some property that he administered in Clermont. For more details regard-ing St. Quintinianus, the wrongs done to him, and the miracles performed by God through him, see the pertinent chapter in my Lives of the Fathers.

[37] "I cannot bear seeing Arians living in Gaul," Clovis announced one day to his ministers. "We're going to attack them, and with God's help we'll crush them and take over all their land." Everyone agreed with this idea, and so Clovis assembled his army and marched on Poi tiers. Along the way, some of his troops passed through the diocese of Tours, so Clovis gave an order that, out of respect for St. Martin, none of his men should requisition anything in the region

except fodder and water. It happened that one soldier came upon some hay belonging to an elderly, poor farmer, and the soldier said to him, "The king says we cannot take anything but fodder, right? Well, this hay is fodder; we won't be going against orders if we take it." Then he knocked the old man down and took his hay. When this was reported to Clovis, he pulled out his sword and executed the soldier on the spot. "We can give up any hope of winning this campaign if we offend St. Martin!" he declared. Thus, he made his point, and the rest of the army took nothing in the region after that. Then Clovis sent messengers loaded with gifts to the church of St. Martin, saying, "Go, and bring me back good tidings from God's house." And then he prayed, "O Lord, if you are on my side and wish to deliver into my hands the wretched [Arian] heretics who have shown themselves so hostile to you, then give us a sign as these messengers enter St. Martin's church, a sign that shows clearly your support for me, your servant Clovis."

The messengers set out, and as they had been commanded, they soon arrived at Tours; they entered the church exactly when the choir's soloist was singing the antiphon:

You girded me with valor for war,  
subjugated my opponents beneath me. You made my foes expose their necks to me; those who hated me I silenced. [Ps. 18.39-40]

When the messengers heard this, they gave thanks to God, made their vows to St. Martin, and returned gladly to report to the king.

When Clovis and his army reached Vienne, they could find no way to cross the river since it was swollen from heavy rains, and so he prayed that night that God would show him a way across. The next morning, as it happened, a large doe appeared and entered the river. Everyone recognized that this was a heavenly sign, and that they could follow the doe across the river. Once on the other side, Clovis marched toward Poitiers. They made camp one evening and saw a pillar of fire rise from the local church of St. Hilary and advance toward them. To everyone this appeared a clear sign that that blessed saint was adding his support to Clovis' campaign to rout the heretics, against whom St. Hilary had himself done battle in defense of the faith. Clovis instantly gave orders forbidding any looting by his men as they passed through the region-and indeed no one took from anyone.

On the outskirts of Poitiers at that time there lived a saintly and God-fearing man named Maxentius, who, although the abbot, lived in seclusion from the rest of his monastery. It would be pointless to mention the name of the monastery at that time, for it is now known only as the Cell of St. Maxentius. When the monks there saw the approach of some Frankish soldiers they hurried to their abbot and begged him to come out and bless them. He took such a long time in coming out of his cell that the monks grew frightened and forced his door open; then they pushed him out into the open. Maxentius walked fearlessly up to the troops, presumably to ask them not to harm the monastery, when all of a sudden, a soldier drew his sword and swung it at Maxentius' head-but his arm froze in mid-air, right by the abbot's ear, and the sword

clattered to the ground. The soldier instantly threw himself at the saint's feet and begged forgiveness. His companions, seeing all of this, raced back to the main army filled with dread that they would have to pay with their lives for such an offense. The saint, meanwhile, rubbed the soldier's arm with holy oil and made the sign of the Cross over him, and instantly the man recovered. Thus, thanks to Maxentius, the monastery escaped unharmed. Maxentius performed many more miracles in his lifetime, as any reader who is interested may find in my Life of Maxentius. But this particular event occurred in the fifteenth year of Clovis' reign.

Soon thereafter, Clovis met King Alaric [II] and his army of Visigoths on the battlefield at Vouille, about ten miles from Poitiers. After several volleys of javelins, the soldiers fought hand to hand; in the end the Visigoths fled (as they so often did), giving the victory to Clovis, who had God on his side. (One of Clovis' allies in this fight was Chloderic, the son of Sigibert the Lamé. Sigibert had been lame ever since being wounded in the knee in a battle against the Alarnanni at their fortress at Zulpich.) Clovis killed Alaric. Just as the Goths were fleeing, however, two of them turned and rushed suddenly at Clovis, one on each side, and struck him with their spears. Fortunately, thanks to his stout leather corselet and his speedy horse, Clovis escaped-but he very nearly died.

A large contingent from Auvergne, under the jurisdiction of Apollinaris, took part in this battle but their commanders (all of senatorial rank) were all killed.

Alaric's son, Amalaric, escaped and made it all the way to Spain, where he ruled wisely for many years. Clovis, meanwhile, sent his own son, Theuderic, to Clermont, passing through Albi and Rodez on the way. Theuderic brought every place he passed by under his father's rule, and thus all the lands between the Visigoths and the Burgundians came to belong to Clovis. Alaric II had been king for twelve years. Clovis spent the winter in Bordeaux, seized all of Alaric's treasure at Toulouse, and then advanced to Angouleme-where God showed him such favor that the city's walls collapsed of their own weight when Clovis merely looked at them. Clovis drove the Visigoths from the city and took command. This was the culmination of his victorious campaign, and afterward he returned to Tours where he bestowed countless gifts upon the church of St. Martin.

[38] One day some letters arrived for Clovis from the [Byzantine] emperor Anastasius I [r. 491-518], conferring the title of consul on him. There was a ceremony in St. Martin's, where Clovis stood and assumed a purple tunic and the military robes [of the empire] and crowned himself with a diadem. Then he mounted his horse and rode among the people, showering them with gold and silver coins, as he progressed from the doorway of St. Martin's to the cathedral at Tours. From that day forward he was addressed either as "consul" or "augustus." After Tours he went on to Paris, which he made the seat of his government. His son Theuderic accompanied him.

[39] After Bishop Eustochius of Tours died, Licinius was ordained his successor-the eighth bishop after St. Martin himself. The war I described just above took place during Licinius' episcopacy, and it was in his time too that Clovis came to Tours. Licinius is reported to have spent time in the east and even to have visited the Holy Land; some say he went all the way to

Jerusalem and saw the very site of Our Lord's death and resurrection, about which we have read in the gospels.

[40] While living in Paris Clovis sent a secret message to Sigibert's son, Chloderic. He wrote, "Your father is old and lame in one leg. When he dies his kingdom will pass, rightfully, to you and my alliance will come with it." Chloderic was thus tempted by a lust for power and began to plot his own father's death.

One day Sigibert exited the city of Cologne and crossed the Rhine river, since he wanted to walk in the forest at Buchau. In the middle of the day, he took a nap in his tent, which is when Chloderic loosed assassins on him. Having murdered his father, Chloderic then took possession of the realm. But by God's judgment, Sigibert's killer fell into the very trap he had laid for his father. He dispatched messengers to Clovis to announce Sigibert's death-"My father is dead," he wrote, "and I have seized both his kingdom and his treasure. Send messengers of your own to me, and I will gladly bestow upon you anything you desire from this treasure." To this Clovis replied, "Thank you for your good will. Please do show your treasure to my messengers-but you may keep it all."

When the messengers arrived, they examined all the treasure that Chloderic was eager to show them. "This was the chest in which my father kept all his gold coins," boasted Chloderic. Clovis' men replied, "Plunge your hand down to the bottom of the chest, so we can see how much is there." And as soon as Chloderic leaned forward to do so, one of the Frankish envoys raised his double-sided axe and split his skull with it. Thus did the wretch Chloderic share his father's fate.

After Clovis heard that both Sigibert and Chloderic were dead he traveled to Cologne himself and ordered all the town's inhabitants to assemble. "While I was boating down the Scheidt river, Chloderic, the son of your king, conspired against his own father and spread a rumor that I was the one who wanted him dead. Sigibert fled through the forest at Buchau, but Chloderic's assassins caught up with him and killed him. Then when Chloderic was showing off his father's treasure, he too was murdered-by whom, I don't know. I am not responsible in any way. I have no interest to murder any of my fellow kings, for regicide is a terrible crime. But things have happened in this way, I advise you to make the best of the situation by turning to me and putting yourself freely under my authority."

The people, hearing him, pounded their shields and roared their approval, then they raised Clovis up on a shield and acclaimed him their king. This is how he acquired Sigibert's kingship, treasure, and people. With every passing day God inspired more and more people to submit themselves to Clovis, who consequently grew enormously in power-for he always walked before God with an upright heart and did whatever was pleasing in His sight.

[ 41] Clovis' next victim was Chararic. This fellow had been asked to help Clovis during his struggles with Syagrius, but he had remained neutral. He gave aid to neither side, preferring to wait to see who would win before declaring allegiance, and this is why Clovis now moved against him. He cleverly trapped Chararic and threw him in prison. He ordered both Chararic

and his son to be tied up, then had their hair cut off, with the subsequent order that they be ordained as priest and deacon, accordingly. At this, Chararic burst into tears and cried out, "All you have done is cut leaves from a tree that is still green and thriving; they'll soon grow back, larger than ever! Death to the man who has done this to me!" Clovis heard about this, and so he had their heads cut off too, and after they were both dead, he seized their kingdom, treasure, and people too.

[42] The king at Cambrai at that time was Ragnachar, a man so lost to lechery that he could not even leave the women of his own family alone. He had a counselor named Farro who defiled himself with the same filthy habit. It was said of this man that whenever Ragnachar had anything-whether food, gift, or anything else-placed before him, he would proclaim "It's good enough for me and Farro!" This put all the Franks in their retinue in a great rage. And so Clovis bribed Ragnachar's bodyguards with arm-bands and sword-belts that looked like gold but were really just cleverly gilded bronze, and with these he hoped to turn Ragnachar's men against him. Clovis then sent his army against Ragnachar; and when Ragnachar dispatched spies to bring back information on the invaders and asked them upon their return, how strong the attackers were, they replied: "They're good enough for you and Farro!" Clovis himself finally arrived and arranged his soldiers for battle. Ragnachar watched as his army was crushed and tried to sneak away, but his own soldiers captured him, tied his hands behind his back, and brought him-together with Ragnachar's brother, Ricchar-before Clovis.

"Why have you disgraced our Frankish people by allowing yourself to be tied up?" asked Clovis. "It would have been better for you if you had died in battle." And with that, he lifted his axe and split Ragnachar's skull. Then he turned to his brother Ricchar and said, "And as for you, if you had stood by your brother's side he would not have been bound in this way." And he struck Ricchar with another blow of his axe and killed him. When these two were dead, the bodyguards who had betrayed them discovered that the golden gifts they had received from Clovis were fake. It is said that when they complained of this to Clovis, he answered, "That is all the gold a man should expect when he willingly lures his own ruler to death," adding that they should be grateful for escaping with their lives instead of being tortured to death for having betrayed their masters. Hearing this, the men begged for mercy, asking only for their lives. Now both of these kings, Ragnachar and Ricchar, were relatives of Clovis; so was their brother Rignomer, whom Clovis had put to death at Le Mans. Then, having killed all three, Clovis took over their kingdoms and their treasuries. He carried out the killing of many other kings and blood-relations in the same way-of anyone, really, whom he suspected of plotting against his realm-and in so doing he gradually extended his control over the whole of Gaul. One day he summoned an assembly of all his subjects, at which he is reported to have remarked about all the relatives he had destroyed, "How sad it is for me to live as a stranger among strangers, without any of my family here to help me when disaster happens!" But he said this not out of any genuine grief for their deaths, but only because he hoped somehow to flush out another relative whom he could kill.

## **GREGORY AND THE JEW (BK. VI, CH. 5)**

King Chilperic, who was then still at Nogent-sur-Marne, sent his baggage train ahead while he made the rest of his plans to travel to Paris. I had gone to pay my respects before he left, and while I was visiting him a Jew named Priscus came in. This fellow was on familiar terms with the king, having been an agent on his behalf in some commercial ventures. Chilperic placed his hand on the Jew's head, in a gentle manner, and said to me, "Come, bishop! You lay your hand on him too!" Instantly the Jew pulled away. "O faithless and perverse generation!" the king quoted [Matthew 17.17], "why can't you accept what was promised to you by your own prophets? Can't you see that the mysteries of the Church were foretold by the sacrifices of your own people?"

The Jew answered, "God has no need of a son! He never had a son, and He does not have any partner in His kingdom! Indeed, He Himself said, through Moses, 'See now that I, I alone, am he, and there is no god besides me. It is I who bring both death and life, I who inflict wounds and heal them.'" [Deut. 32.39]

The king responded, "But God brought forth, by His Spirit, His own eternal Son from a womb—a Son no younger than Himself in time, and no lesser than Himself in power. For God said, 'From the womb of the morning-star have I begotten you' [Psalm 110.3]. This Son, born at the beginning of time, He later sent to heal the world. Your own prophet has declared, 'He sent His word and healed them.' And as for your other claim, that God never had a Son, listen to another of your prophets, who put these words in His mouth: 'Shall I bring a mother to the point of birth, and yet not let her child be born?' He said this in regard to the people born in Him by faith."

The Jew answered, "How is it possible that God should be made man, or be born of a woman, or submit to lashing, or be condemned to death?"

At this point the king grew silent, so I took up the debate myself. "God's becoming man, as the Son of God," I said, "was the result of our needs, not His for if He had not become man, then He could not have saved us from the prison of sin and servitude to the Devil. And now, as in the story we've both read of David slaying Goliath, I'll run you through with your own sword, pulling my proof not from the Gospels or the writings of any apostle (none of which you would accept) but from your own Scriptures. Listen to this, one of your own prophets prophesying:

He is both God and man, and who has known him? "And also, by the same: Such is our God; and no other is to be compared to him; He has uncovered the whole way of understanding, and has given her to Jacob, his servant, to Israel, His beloved.

Afterwards did He show Himself upon earth and conversed with mortals. [Baruch 3.37-38] "And here is proof that He was born of a Virgin, from another of your prophets:



Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, And shall call him Emmanuel, "God is with us."  
[Isaiah 7.14]

"Still another prophet showed beyond doubt that He would submit to being lashed:  
They pierced my hands and feet and divided my garments among them. [Psalms 22.17] "In  
another place this same prophet says:  
They gave me poison for my food; And for my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink [Psalms  
69.22]

"And finally, to show that it would be through the Cross that He would restore the world  
(long lost to Satan) to His Kingdom, the same prophet David says: The Lord reigns from a tree.  
[Psalms 96.10]

"But this doesn't mean that He did not reign before [the Crucifixion], together with the Father.  
Instead, it means that He accepted a new and unprecedented dominion over the people whom  
He delivered from slavery to Satan."

The Jew then replied, "But why would God need to suffer these things?"  
"I have already answered you," I said. "Mankind was innocent at Creation but was tricked by the  
Ser-pent's guile and led to break God's commandment. Thus, he was cast out of Paradise and  
condemned to suffer on the earth. It was only by the death of Christ, God's True and Only Son,  
that man was reconciled to God."

The Jew asked, "But couldn't God have sent more prophets or messengers to call mankind back  
to the path of salvation? Why did He Himself have to be humbled in the flesh?"

I retorted, "Mankind was inclined to sin from the very beginning of time. The Great Flood, the  
destruction of Sodom, the plagues on Egypt, the miracle of the parting of the sea and the river  
Jordan-none of these were enough to frighten mankind into obedience. He kept on resisting  
God's word and refusing to believe the prophets. More than that, he even killed the prophets  
who were preaching repentance! No, if God Himself had not come down from heaven, man's  
salvation would never have happened. We were reborn by Christ's baptism, cured by His  
wounds, raised up by His Res-urrection, and glorified by His Ascension. Your own prophet  
declares the necessity of God's coming to heal us:

He bore the punishment that makes us whole, and by his wounds we were healed. [Isaiah 54.5]  
"and he continues: He bore the sins of many and interceded for the transgressors. [Isaiah 53.12]  
"and:

Like a lamb led to slaughter, Or a sheep silent before shearers He did not open his mouth.  
Seized and condemned, he was taken away. Who would have thought any more of his destiny  
"and: The Lord of Hosts is his name. [Isaiah 54.5]

"This is the One of Whom Jacob speaks-the very Jacob whom you proudly claim as your  
ancestor-when he blesses his son, Judah; for in addressing Judah, it is as though he is  
addressing Christ, the Son of God, in person:

You, Judah, shall your brothers praise the sons of your father shall bow down to you. Judah is a lion's cub, You have grown up on prey, my son.

He crouches, lies down like a lion, Like a lioness-who would dare rouse him? .. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth are whiter than milk. [ Genesis 49.8-9, 12]

"And even though Christ Himself said, 'No one takes [My life] from me, but I lay it down on my own,' the apostle Paul wrote, 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'"

In spite of all my proofs, this wretched Jew was unyielding and showed no sign at all of believing me; instead, he just stood there in silence. King Chilperic recognized that he would never be made to feel remorse, no matter what we said, and so he turned to me and said that he had to leave but wanted my blessing first. "Bishop," he said, "I will say to you the words Jacob said to the angel: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'" [Genesis 32.26] And as he said this, he ordered water to be brought to him. We both washed our hands, and I said a prayer. Then I took some bread, gave thanks to God for it, and received it along with the king. We drank some wine and wished each other Farewell as we departed. Chilperic mounted his horse and set off for Paris, together with his wife, children, and all the members of his household.<sup>1</sup>

Compare the biblical passages as translated by the Jewish Publication Society, noting first that the book of Baruch is not accepted in the Jewish canon.

Isaiah 7.14: "Assuredly, my Lord will give you a sign of His own accord! Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him 'Immanuel.'"

Psalms 22.17: "Dogs surround me; a pack of evil ones closes in on me, like lions [they maul] my hands and feet." Psalm 69.22: "They give me gall for food, vinegar to quench my thirst."

Psalms 96.10: "Declare among the nations, 'The Lord is king!' The world stands firm; it cannot be shaken; He judges the people with equity." Isaiah 54.5: "For He who made you will espouse you- His name is 'Lord of Hosts.' The Holy One of Israel will redeem you- He is called 'God of all the Earth.' "

Isaiah 53.12: "Whereas he bore the guilt of many and made intercession for sinners.

" Genesis 49.8-9, 12: " You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the nape of your foes; Your father's sons shall bow low to you. Judah is a lion's whelp; On prey, my son, have you grown. He crouches, lies down like a lion, Like the king of beasts-who dare rouse him? ... His eyes are darker than wine; His teeth are whiter than milk."



## Document Questions

1. In the High and Later Middle Ages, disputations were formal debates between Christian and Jewish theologians. Although Gregory's encounter with a Jew in the court of King Chilperic occurs centuries before the first recorded disputations, how is it a type of disputation? How is the Jew portrayed? Who wins the debate?
2. Gregory of Tours was an accomplished hagiographer, a person who wrote biographies of saints, martyrs, and other holy people. What elements from this excerpt of his life of Clovis resemble a hagiography?
3. How does Gregory portray Clovis?