

HISTORY

The Fate of the Gentiles

Why did Medieval Jews envision divine punishment of Christians at the end of days?
Surprisingly, it's not just because Christians were always trying to kill them.

BY DAVID BERGER

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Der Seelen Wurzgarten, Ulm: Konrad Dinckmut, 1483 MUNICH DIGITIZATION CENTER

THIS ESSAY WAS ORIGINALLY PRESENTED IN HEBREW AT AN “EVENING of study” in Jerusalem convened on January 1, 1996 to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of the attacks on Jews by crusaders in the spring of 1096. When I began the presentation, I remarked that an Israeli historian whom I had called after arriving in Jerusalem commented on the Jewish penchant for commemorating catastrophes by saying, “You have arrived for the Festival of 1096.” I went on to say that years earlier, the American Academy for Jewish Research had held a conference commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the death of the Jewish courtier Hasdai ibn Shaprut counting from the first year when he might have died. So it is only appropriate that Jews should commemorate the terrible events of 1096 on the very first day of 1996 even though they had taken place in later months. Whatever the timing, the subject of that evening’s presentations remains tragically relevant.

The hostile attitude toward Christian society found in medieval Ashkenazic literature is quite well known and hardly needs to be demonstrated. Expressions of bitter animosity toward Christianity and its adherents are found throughout this literature, most especially in liturgical poetry, even before the catastrophe of the First Crusade in 1096. Israel Yuval has recently argued that these expressions of

animosity are not merely reactions to medieval persecutions, but rather are rooted in an ancient, more comprehensive worldview, associated with apocalyptic ideas about the ultimate redemption. However, he admits that the bloody incidents in 1096 certainly made this animosity harsher, and strengthened the Jews' desire for vengeance. The unprecedented attacks and the martyrdom of thousands of Jews became implanted in the collective, long term Ashkenazic consciousness, and they reinforced the feelings of revulsion toward the murderous enemy and his false religion.

The Hebrew chronicles that deal with these events are filled with curses and expressions of reproach toward the Christian faith and its founder. Such expressions are found not only during the emotionally charged time of the catastrophe itself; in the years following 1096, too, Ashkenazic literature contains many terms of extreme derision and degradation for all that Christianity considers sacred. This phenomenon is found most especially in polemical literature, which focuses primarily on the question of true religion.

Our point of departure here will be Ashkenazic polemical literature, as expressed in its three major representatives: *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (*Nizzahon Vetus*), and the disputation of R. Yehiel of Paris. However, our analysis will broaden from time to time, and we will deal with polemical literature from other areas and later periods, and other branches of medieval Jewish literature.

There are many dimensions to the image of "the other," but the first (often neglected

in scholarly literature) is the physical dimension. An oppressed minority tends to adopt and internalize the values of the general culture to a certain extent. The Jews of the Middle Ages attempted to resist this tendency as far as religious and spiritual values were concerned— but a strange, gripping passage from Yosef ha-Meqanne, which appears in a different formulation in Sefer Nizzahon Yashan, shows that on the aesthetic/physical plane, this process did affect the Jews:

“Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people” (Malachi 2:9). A certain apostate said to R. Nathan: “You Jews are uglier than any people on the face of the earth, whereas we are very beautiful.” He responded: “What is the color of the blossom of the shveske which are called prunelles, which grow in the bushes?” The apostate replied: “White.” The rabbi asked: “And what color is the blossom of the apple tree?” The apostate replied: “Red.” The rabbi explained: “Thus, we come from clean, white seed, so our faces are black; but you are from red seed—from menstruants—and therefore your faces are yellow and ruddy.” But the real reason is that we are in exile, as it says in the Song of Songs, “Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun has gazed upon me: my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard have I not kept” (Song of Songs 1:6). However, when I used to keep my own vineyard, I was quite beautiful indeed, as it is written, “And your renown went forth among the heathen for your beauty” (Ezekiel 16:14).

R. Nathan’s response is representative of the classic polemical approach arguing that an apparent defect is actually an asset: supposed physical inferiority is a direct result of ethical superiority. However, the author himself says that in fact, it is the exile that is truly responsible for the physical unattractiveness of the Jews. Either way, the Jewish partner in the debate is affirming the aesthetic judgment made by

the gentiles. Since the criteria for attractiveness are largely subjective, the Jews' agreement with the gentile assessment has deep psychological significance.

Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson already noted this point in connection with the parallel passage in Sefer Nizzahon Yashan. However, there is a major difference in that text:

The heretics [i.e., the Christians] ask: Why are most Gentiles fair-skinned and handsome while most Jews are dark and ugly? Answer them that this is similar to a fruit; when it begins to grow it is white but when it ripens it becomes black, as is the case with sloes and plums. On the other hand, any fruit which is red at the beginning becomes lighter as it ripens, as is the case with apples and apricots. This, then, is testimony that Jews are pure of menstrual blood so that there is no initial redness. Gentiles, however, are not careful about menstruant women and have sexual relations during menstruation; thus, there is redness at the outset, and so the fruit that comes out, i.e., the children, are light. One can respond further by noting that Gentiles are incontinent and have sexual relations during the day, at a time when they see the faces on attractive pictures; therefore, they give birth to children who look like those pictures, as it is written, "And the sheep conceived when they came to drink before the rods" [Gen. 30:38–39].

Sefer Nizzahon Yashan retains the same aesthetic judgment as Yosef ha-Meqanne; however, unlike Yosef ha-Meqanne, this author is unwilling to forego the consolation of reversing the gentile's argument even in his second explanation. Thus, the exile disappears entirely, and the second response provides a different version of the connection between physical ugliness and ethical beauty. Sefer Nizzahon Yashan is a very aggressive work; in other passages, it argues that Jews are superior even on the physical level: "This is the interpretation of the statement, 'You

have saved us from evil and faithful diseases,' in which we thank God for saving us from being afflicted with impure issue, leprosy and skin disease, as they are." The fact that this author, who is prepared to formulate surprisingly vigorous and aggressive arguments, sees Christian aesthetic superiority as a self-evident truth lends all the more significance to this phenomenon.

The same effort to turn a physical defect into a spiritual asset can be seen clearly in a unique passage which Marc Saperstein published from Isaac ben Yeda'ya's commentary to Midrash Rabbah. The author of this passage, who clearly suffered from a sexual problem, attributed this problem to all circumcised men. He writes as a general rule that circumcised men are unable to satisfy their wives' sexual needs; consequently, Jewish women do not receive much benefit from their husbands' presence and are willing to let them go study Torah and wisdom. This is not the case, however, with respect to the wives of the uncircumcised, whose husbands possess highly impressive sexual potency. Consequently, these men expend their time and energy in such activity and remain immersed in the vanity of the physical world.

These attempts sound pathetic to the modern reader, and they were probably not particularly convincing in the Middle Ages either. Now, from the isolated example of Isaac ben Yeda'ya, which deals with very private matters, it is hard to argue that many Jews considered themselves inferior to gentiles in their sexual ability. However, the sources about physical beauty appear quite convincing. In the consciousness of many Jews, ethical and spiritual superiority came at a very high physical and psychological price.

A famous passage in Isaac Polgar's 'Ezer ha-Dat reflects the same problem and the same tendency. The topic of this passage is the cause of the suffering of exile—a major, central issue that I shall not address here. However, when Polgar writes that Jews suffer under the yoke of the gentiles because they have forgotten the art of war due to their dedication to the study of Torah and wisdom, the Temple service, and the cultivation of the quality of compassion, he is attempting to transform physical weakness into an ethical-spiritual asset.

The authors of polemical literature were primarily interested in identifying the true religion, and such identification is not necessarily dependent on the ethical behavior of the community that believes in that religion. Nevertheless, polemicists in various regions and eras felt that there was a connection between a religion of truth and people of truth. R. Joseph Kimhi pointed to the ethical superiority of the Jews, and his Christian opponent (according to the Jewish record of the debate) was forced to admit that this was correct, but he countered with the response that even such ethical behavior was useless without the proper faith. A re-working of this passage appears in an Ashkenazic manuscript from the fourteenth century, which also includes considerable material from the school of Yosef ha-Meqanne and from the traditions that were incorporated into Sefer Nizzahon Yashan.

These two polemical works, as well as Milhemet Mizvah by R. Meir of Narbonne, an Ashkenazic compilation attributed to R. Moses of Salerno, the Tosafistic commentary Da'at Zeqenim on the Pentateuch, and Nahmanides' Sefer ha-Ge'ullah all view the expression “a degenerate nation” in Deuteronomy 32:21 as referring to

the Christians. In the words of Yosef ha-Meqanne: “If there were any nation more degenerate than you, it would be the one to subjugate us.” It is specifically in Ashkenazic polemics that special emphasis is placed on the sins of priests, monks, and nuns. As I have noted with great brevity in my introduction to the Nizzazon Yashan, it seems to me that this fierce attack flows from a feeling of Jewish discomfort in the face of religious self-sacrifice by gentiles. Of course, abstention from sexual life is problematic from the perspective of Jewish law and the Jewish worldview, but the impressive phenomenon of the ability of Christians to conquer their own natural drives in order to fulfill the will of their creator must have weakened, if only slightly, the Jewish self-image of absolute moral superiority to the degenerate gentile.

The Jewish argument that the Christian world was engaged in immoral behavior focused mainly on behavior that both Jews and Christians viewed as improper; this is typical polemical method. However, it is evident that Jewish condemnation of Christian immorality also rested on an additional consideration, to wit, the persecution of the Jewish people. And so—Christians believe in a false religion, defile themselves through abominable sins, and persecute the chosen people. What then will be their ultimate destiny? On the one hand, there is the personal destiny of each individual Christian after death; on the other, there is the collective destiny of “the Kingdom of Edom” and its inhabitants at the End of Days.

In general, the Ashkenazic polemical writers answered the question

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ASHKENAZ**

of the Christian's personal destiny very sharply indeed: a Christian is destined to hell. There is nothing innovative or surprising about this, but we should note the reasoning that is given for it: the Christian deserves this punishment not because he hates the Jews, but because he believes in the Christian faith. In certain periods, when the ideal of tolerance began to develop, some Jews began to consider Christians to be "righteous gentiles," who fulfill the seven Noahide commandments; however, Talmudic tradition includes the prohibition of idolatry among these seven, and in accordance with a straightforward understanding of this prohibition, it is hard to escape the conclusion that one who worships Jesus as a god commits idolatry.

Sefer Nizzahon Yashan reports a conversation between R. Nathan Official and a group of priests on the topic of the sin of the golden calf. According to the sharp formulation in this report—the version in Yosef ha-Meqanne is more moderate—R. Nathan emphasized that the generation of Moses received a harsh punishment because they made the error of believing that "the spirit of God" could enter as pure and clean a substance as gold. Yet the Christians do not understand to what degree:

"They will be judged and entrapped in hell. Why, an a fortiori argument applies here: They [the generation of Moses] erred in worshiping a clean thing like gold, and yet their iniquity was marked before God, who said, "When I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins"

728 Years After His Death, We Reassess the Ransom of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg

The great German Talmudist and poet was one of the shining lights of 13th-century Ashkenaz before he was kidnapped and held for an exorbitant ransom that he famously directed his community not to pay. Did they disobey him after his death?

BY EITAM HENKIN

Inscriptions From a Jewish Cemetery in Germany

Medieval stones offer a glimpse into the lives of 12th- to 13th-century Würzburg Jews, such as one who 'served the Lord with his sweet voice,' 'Asher known as Bonfil,' and 'lady Rosa,' who was 'like a rose between thorns'

BY SIMON SCHWARZFUCHS

[Exod. 32:34] and refused to grant them complete forgiveness. Certainly, then, you who err in saying that something holy entered into a woman in that stinking place, ... will certainly be consumed by “a fire not blown” [Job 20:26] and descend to deepest hell.”

In the Disputation of Paris, there is a discussion of this question that constitutes an exception that proves the rule. Nicholas Donin quoted a Talmudic statement condemning heretics (minim) to eternal hellfire. When R. Yehiel responded that the passage in question refers not to Christians but to people who deny the validity of the oral Torah, Donin pointed to Rashi’s comment on the passage, which considers the disciples of Jesus to be a classic example of “heretics.” R. Yehiel replied that there is no need to accept Rashi’s comment as determinative, but even if we do accept it, it is speaking of Jesus’ original disciples, who were Jewish, and therefore obligated to observe the Torah’s commandments. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, “will not suffer such a severe hell.”

The bishops went on to ask if Judaism believes that Christians could be saved through their religion. “The rabbi responded: ‘Let me tell you a way that you can be saved even through your faith. If you observe the seven commandments that you have been commanded, you will be saved through them.’ The bishops rejoiced, and responded: ‘Indeed, we have ten!’ The rabbi replied: ‘That is fine with me.’

We see that even when R. Yehiel was under severe pressure, he refused to say

Angle of Deflection

Why the greatest Halakhic writing remains persuasive for centuries

BY HAYM SOLOVEITCHIK

explicitly that Christians have a share in the world to come. He began by saying that the Christians may have a slightly cooler hell than the actual followers of Jesus (who were apostate Jews), and then went on to point out that observance of the seven Noahide commandments are a medium through which gentiles can save their souls, but he avoided an explicit statement as to whether or not a Christian violates one of those commandments, to wit, the prohibition of idolatry, by virtue of his Christianity; he leaves it to the bishops themselves to issue a ruling in their favor.

However, Meir ben Simon of Narbonne was not deterred from confronting the question directly and explicitly. In his book *Milhemet Mizvah*, he reports that a Christian asked precisely the same question that the bishops asked R. Yehiel. In this debate, the Jew responds to the Christian that the gentiles are obligated to observe the seven Noahide commandments, one of which is to believe:

that the universe has a creator, who is one, true, primeval, and without beginning or end, and that he watches over all his creations, to repay the actions of each one.” The Christian responded: “Yes—we, too, believe that.” The Jew said: “And yet, if you were to ask one who believes this who this creator is and he would say that he is a certain man, born of a woman, who has undergone all bodily vicissitudes including death, such a believer would be one who denies the creator of the universe if his assertion is untrue, and he would be condemned to hell.

The picture is much more complicated when we look at the question of the collective destiny of the gentiles at the end of days. Yuval’s article paints a sharp, almost polar contrast between the “avenging redemption” in Ashkenazic

eschatology versus the “conversionary redemption” in Sephardic eschatology. The Jews of Ashkenaz looked forward to a divine campaign by the Master of the Universe wrapped in his royal robe drenched in the blood of generations of martyrs, a campaign that would visit utter destruction upon all the nations. By contrast, Jews of other regions looked forward to a mass conversion of all residents of the world.

In a critical response to Yuval’s position, Avraham Grossman pointed to Ashkenazic sources that describe conversion at the end of days; he concluded that Yuval’s article does identify a genuine, significant contrast but characterizes it too sharply. In a response to Grossman’s review, Yuval clarified his position. When all the dust settled—after the initial article, the critique, and the rejoinder—there emerged a conclusion apparently acceptable to both scholars: although the emphasis on vengeance was much stronger in Ashkenaz, even there the avenging redemption was considered only the first stage of the eschatological process; the second stage is that of the conversionary redemption.

There is certainly a large degree of truth in this conception. Nevertheless, I believe that with respect to a number of fundamental points, it requires clarification, expansion, and qualification. If the impression created by Yuval’s initial article was too strong, I think that the position emerging from the subsequent exchange is too mild. In the overwhelming majority of sources, there is no true universal conversion that turns the gentiles at the end of days into “an inseparable part of the Jewish people.” The remaining gentiles do adopt a belief in one God, but they remain separate from and inferior to the Chosen People, accept its authority, and serve it. Some sources even speak of the total destruction of an entire sector of the human race, rather than just the death of many gentiles.

In another Talmudic passage, we find the position that became the predominant one among medieval Jews:

“Ulla contrasted two scriptural verses: It is written, “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord will wipe away tears from off all faces” (Isaiah 25:8); yet it is also written: “For the child shall die a hundred years old” (ibid. 65:20). There is no contradiction—this verse [stating that people will be immortal] refers to the Jewish people, and the other verse [stating that people will die only at a ripe old age] refers to the nations of the world. But why will the nations of the world be there? As it is written [or “This refers to those of whom it is written”]: “And foreigners shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers” (ibid. 61:5).

The first half of this passage is cited in the Disputation of Paris as an example of contradictory verses in Scripture that force us to turn to the Talmud for a resolution. The second half appears at that point in the margin of the Hamburg manuscript, though with no explicit reference to our question. In any event, this is a Talmudic passage that explicitly poses the question of whether the gentiles will survive at the end of days, and it answers that they—or some of them—will remain alive in order to serve the Jewish people.

In Sefer Nizzahon Yashan, which serves, as we shall see, as a source of the most extreme form of the idea of apocalyptic vengeance against the gentiles, we find a sharp passage about the servitude of the gentiles. As a reflection of the self-image of Ashkenazic Jewry, this passage is remarkable, for it describes a situation of Jewish social and economic superiority at the present time, i.e., in thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, and presents this “fact” as self-evident. However, the passage does not limit its discussion to the present; it clearly refers also to the future, when the

gentiles will continue (!) to serve the Jewish people. In the merit of their servitude—and in this merit alone—they will have some “slight hope”:

“They bark their assertion that it is improper for the uncircumcised and impure to serve Jews. Tell them: On the contrary, if not for the fact that they serve Jews they would have been condemned to destruction, for it is written in Isaiah, “Arise, shine, for your light has come For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted” (Isa. 60:1, 12). On the other hand, as long as they serve Israel they have some hope, as it is written, “And strangers shall stand and tend your flock, and the sons of foreigners shall be your farmers and vintners” (Isa. 61:5); consequently, they should serve us all the time, so that they may fulfill the prophecy, “The elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). It was for this reason that the Torah said, “You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you shall give it to the stranger that is in your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a gentile” (Deut. 14:21). The Torah told us to sell such meat to gentiles because they will serve us, and God does not withhold the reward of any creature. This, in fact, is what we do; we give over to them the animals which are ritually unfit for our use, and we sell them the hind portions of animals for this same reason.”

The hope that the gentiles would serve the Jews can be found outside Ashkenaz as well. In Grossman’s above-mentioned article, he cites a salient example from R. Saadya Gaon’s philosophical work, which asserts explicitly that “those who correct their behavior by entering into the Torah of Israel” will serve the Jews at the end of days “in their homes ... in city and village work, ... in the fields and in the wilderness ... The rest will return to their own land, but under the dominion of the Jewish people.”

As Grossman noted, Rashi’s commentary on Isaiah 14:1 does speak of true

proselytes, but it is clear that these individuals are not to be identified with the totality of the gentiles who remain during the final phase of the redemption. On the contrary, the following verse informs us that after the conversion of these gentiles, the remaining nations will take the Jewish people “to [the Jews’] own territory, and the Jewish people will take them as an inheritance upon God’s land, as male and female slaves, and they will plunder those who had plundered them, and dominate those who had oppressed them.”

I must emphasize that the question that I am raising is not the central point in the articles by Yuval or Grossman. Yuval is interested in the contrast between the sources that foresee the destruction of the gentiles and those that foresee their acceptance of the faith of the Jews, and Grossman is interested in proving that even the Ashkenazic vision of the redemption does not affirm that the gentiles will be totally destroyed. In neither case is the nature of the “conversion” the central point; indeed, from a narrow vantage point, it is not relevant at all to their concerns. However, there is no doubt that this question is of great importance for a deep understanding of the relationship between the Jews and their neighbors, and a reader who has been following the scholarly exchange sparked by Yuval’s initial article will be exposed to an inaccurate impression that envisions the utter erasure of the boundaries between Israel and the nations at the end of days. In fact, the Jews of the Middle Ages felt at the deepest level of their consciousness that the uniqueness of the Jewish people would remain.

According to the common conclusion that Yuval and Grossman have reached at the

current state of their exchange, even the Ashkenazim did not hope for the total destruction of all gentiles. In Grossman's words: "The Jews did not believe that all of their gentile neighbors were destined to be wiped out. There was a core of good people ensconced among them, who would ultimately convert to Judaism, either personally or through their descendants."

Here, too, I think that there are sources meriting renewed attention that will not undermine this assertion entirely but will add a sharper and more hostile perspective. Let us begin with a passage from the Tanna de-Bei Eliyyahu:

I was once traveling from one town to another, and I found a certain old man. He asked me: "Master, will there be gentiles at the time of the Messiah?" I told him: "My son, all the nations and kingdoms that tormented and oppressed the Jewish people will come and see the happiness of the Jews, and turn to dust, and never return, as it is said: 'The wicked shall see it, and be grieved' (Psalms 112:10); and it is said: 'And you shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen' (Isaiah 65:15). And all the kingdoms and nations that have not tormented or oppressed the Jews will come and serve as farmers and vineyard-keepers for the Jews, as it is said: 'And strangers shall stand and tend your flock, and the sons of foreigners shall be your farmers and vintners ... and you shall be called the Lord's priests' (Isaiah 61:5-6); and it is said: 'For then will I turn to the people a pure language' (Zephaniah 3:9); and it is said: 'And he will call his servants by a different name' (Isaiah 65:15)—these verses refer to those gentiles worthy of living in the time of the Messiah. You might think that because they are going to remain alive in the time of the Messiah, they will also merit the World to Come. You must, therefore, set aside the words I have just spoken and give heed to the words of the Torah, which are more severe than the words that I have just said. The Torah says: 'No uncircumcised individual shall eat of [the paschal sacrifice]' (Exodus 12:48). If this is so of such a minor matter as the paschal sacrifice, surely it should be so of the World to Come, which is the holiest matter of all. No uncircumcised individual shall ever, ever eat in it, nor

ever, ever, dwell in it.”

We see then that according to the first approach cited here, the more “liberal” one, the nations that have oppressed the Jews will completely perish; and according to the second, more severe approach, all of the gentiles—or perhaps only all of the uncircumcised gentiles—will disappear from the world.

It is true that we have seen above that the author of Sefer Nizzahon Yashan does speak of a “slight hope” for the gentiles who will serve the Jewish people, but the book is largely an anthology of anti-Christian arguments from various sources, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that whoever wrote our passage looked forward to the total destruction of all the gentiles. The author no doubt recited Ve-ye’etayu kol le-ovdekha, an Ashkenazic hymn that looks forward to universal recognition of the God of Israel at the end of days, in the High Holiday service, but when he wrote these lines, this element of the eschatological vision disappeared entirely from his consciousness.

Though the expectation that all the gentiles would be utterly destroyed was rare even in Ashkenaz, the hope for the total destruction of the Kingdom of Edom, i.e., Christendom, was undoubtedly quite common—and not just in Ashkenaz. We find the following in a passage in Sefer Nizzahon Yashan that is partly parallel to the one we have just cited:

“You have no shame in saying of him who spoke and the world came to be, of him who lives forever, that he accepted death and suffering for you. Why, Moses said in the name of God, “Lo, I raise my hand to heaven and say: As I live forever . . .” (Deut. 32:40), and David, Elijah, and Daniel all swore by the life of God. Moreover, it is written, “See then, that I, I am he;

there is no god beside me” (Deut. 32:39); yet you say that he has a partner, that there are two, nay, three gods. Know clearly that God will exact revenge from you, as it is written, “For the Lord will vindicate his people and take revenge for his servants ... O nations, acclaim his people! For he will avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut. 32:36, 43). And Jeremiah said, “But fear not, O my servant Jacob, and be not dismayed, O Israel ... for I am with you; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven you, but I will not make a full end of you” (Jer. 46:27–28; 30:10–11). Furthermore, he promised us, “But fear not, O my servant Jacob, and be not dismayed, O Israel, for, behold, I will save you from afar off and your seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return and be in rest and at ease, and none shall make him afraid” (Jer. 46:27; 30:10), but none of the house of Esau shall remain or escape (cf. Obadiah 1:18).”

Here, too, we find a description of total destruction, but this time it is specifically directed toward the House of Esau. In this context, we should pay attention to the full citation from Jeremiah: “all the nations whither I have driven you.” It is difficult to conjecture what the author’s attitude might have been regarding the fate of the inhabitants of the Lands of Ishmael to which God had driven Jews—it is doubtful that the question entered his mind when he wrote these words—but it is clear that he did not believe that the gentiles in the far-off islands, where no Jews lived, would be destroyed. To resort to a formulation in *Ve-ye’etayu kol le-ovdekha*, those straying peoples who will learn wisdom at the end of days “will tell of your righteousness in the islands”—but not in Europe. In the Christian world, there will be total destruction.

This position also appears explicitly in Sephardic sources from the late Middle Ages. Simon ben Zemah Duran writes that the prophets envisioned “the destruction of each of these religions [Christianity and Islam] ... in a manner commensurate

with the degree that it has strayed from the truth. For regarding the Christian nation, which pronounced blasphemies against God, the verse says: “And the House of Jacob shall be a fire ... and not leave any remnant of the House of Esau” (Obadiah 1:18) ... But we are assured that the Muslim nation, which has humiliated our people and cast truth to the ground, will be humiliated before us as its mother [Hagar] was humiliated before our mother [Sarah].”

He goes on to present a long list of scriptural verses reporting how the nations will be abased before Israel at the end of days.

A similar distinction between Edom and the other nations is made in R. Isaac Abravanel’s *Ma’yenei ha-Yeshu’ah*; however, for exegetical reasons, he includes Ishmael as well in the group that will be totally destroyed. The main target of God’s wrath is Christianity: “The ultimate decree against [the people of Rome, the Fourth Beast in Daniel’s vision] will be not on account of their evil deeds, but on account of the strange and harsh words and beliefs that the small horn [in Daniel’s vision], which refers to the Pope, and the sect of the priests of Jesus, pronounce against God, may he be blessed.” Abravanel continues with a stunning interpretation of Psalm 50:16–23, a passage which he understands as being an admonition to Christian Edom: “Who are you to declare my statutes, or express my covenant in your mouth, seeing that you hate instruction, and cast my words behind you?” (verses 16–17). The Christians will be punished for their perversions of the scriptures, for casting the words of the prophets that refer to the future redemption “behind them,” that is, for interpreting them as referring to the past (!). A further punishment will befall them because “You speak against your brother; you slander your mother’s son” (verse 20), i.e., they have persecuted the Jewish people, which is

called Edom's brother. However, Scripture continues, "These things you have done, and I kept silent. You thought that I was altogether such a one as yourself: I will reprove you and confront you with charges" (verse 21). The "great punishment" will befall Edom on account of the second, "truly monumental sin—that they have spoken against God by attributing humanity and corporeality to him, as if he were one of us." The first three beasts in Daniel's vision are punished in careful proportion and measure, but the fourth beast, Edom, is punished with "utter extinction," "to be destroyed to the very end." "The Kingdom of Rome—the nation of Edom and the nation of the Ishmaelites who have entered under their governance—will all perish from the face of the earth, and those nations will be totally destroyed."

The Muslims are completely innocent of the decisive sin that causes the destruction of Edom. However, to their great misfortune, Abravanel is forced to include them in "the Kingdom of Edom," for Daniel's vision includes only four beasts, and not five. It is this exegetical difficulty that sends them to their destruction.

The presence of a vision of vengeance and destruction alongside a vision of subjugation and recognition of the faith of Israel expresses a tension between two types of prophecies, two traditions, and two psychological needs. On the one hand, there is the desire for radical, absolute, ultimate vengeance against the oppressor; on the other hand, there is the desire to see one's opponent admit his error not for a passing moment but for untold generations. Apparently, the yearning for vengeance occasionally became so powerful that it led to a willingness to forego the desire for

an ongoing admission of error entirely. The most prevalent solution, which took varied forms, envisioned the destruction of entire nations or many individuals of those nations, and the survival of the rest in a more or less inferior status, after they recognize that the Lord, God of Israel, is king, and his rule dominates all. Medieval Christian theology viewed the Jews as unwilling witnesses to the truth of Christianity, whereas the Jewish messianic vision viewed the remaining gentiles of the end of days as willing witnesses to the truth of Judaism.

Though we have focused here on hostile relations, we should not forget that there were also friendly relations in daily life that left their mark even on Ashkenazic polemical literature, especially *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, and certainly on other genres of literature. Jews and Christians alike were delighted to discern the defects in the other group, but they also, however unwillingly, saw the positive characteristics as well. In the downtrodden Jewish community, both their self-image and their image of the other were formed out of deep personal struggles, and their visions of the ultimate fate of the gentiles reflected a range of theological, exegetical, historical, and psychological considerations that arose out of the depths of the soul of an exiled people. The ironclad faith that the Jew would ultimately be victorious at the end of days made it possible for an oppressed minority to maintain itself even in its contemporary condition. An examination of the various paths that this faith took can help us understand the remarkable phenomenon that manifests itself before our eyes—not the survival of the gentiles at the end of days, but the survival of the Jews in medieval Europe.

About three years after the publication of this article, Reuven Kimelman's excellent study of the mystical meaning of the Lekhah Dodi prayer appeared (Lekhah Dodi ve-Qabbalat Shabbat: ha-Mashma'ut ha-Mistit [Jerusalem, 2003]). Kimelman, who had not seen my article, devoted a chapter to the stanza beginning, "You shall burst forth to the right and to the left," arguing that it expresses the expectation that Esau and Ishmael will convert to Judaism at the end of days.

My first impression was that the sources that he cites provide a body of evidence demonstrating that the expectation of full conversion was more common than I had thought. More careful examination, however, reveals that the dominant view in those sources is precisely that of the texts that I had analyzed: the nations of the world will recognize the validity of Judaism without full conversion and persist in a state of subordination to Jews.

One quotation in Kimelman's chapter does appear to look forward to full conversion. The late-thirteenth-century R. Moses of Burgos writes, "All the nations will return to the worship of our Creator may he be blessed and convert so that they will come under the wings of the divine Presence, observing his Torah and serving him wholeheartedly as one ... for they will all convert for the sake of the Lord, the Eternal God." All the other sources, however, though often using the terms conversion or union with Israel, tell a different story.

Thus, R. Bahya ben Asher in his commentary to Deuteronomy 30:7 asserts that Edom and Ishmael "are destined to join us by converting and becoming one nation, and it is not even necessary to say that the authority and the kingship will return to

us.” Kimelman’s paraphrase merely underscores the tension in this position. “All,” he writes, “will convert, and Israel will rule.” Shem Tov ben Shem Tov appears to maintain that only Ishmael will convert “because they are closer.”

In *Mashmia Yeshu‘ah*, a work of messianic theory, Abravanel was removed from the immediate impact of Daniel and was consequently liberated to follow moral logic to its proper conclusion. Thus, he makes a striking observation about the prophet’s famous assertion, “Then I will make the nations pure of speech so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord” (Zephaniah 3:9). The verse, he says, does not say “all the nations.” The reason for this is that “the nation of Edom is not included in this promise, for they are the enemies of God and his Torah and will not see the [open manifestation] of God’s majesty. But the other nations from the descendants of Ishmael who did not pervert the fundamentals of the Torah as much—they will be granted the merit of accepting the divine faith.” He makes clear, however, that they too will not reach the level of the Jewish people.

Abravanel even asserts that pagans will recognize the truth and survive at the end of days. What is particularly striking about Abravanel’s affirmation that pagans will embrace the true faith is that his argument for the destruction of Edom—expressed more fully in *Ma’yenei ha-Yeshu‘ah*—was that Christians reject pure monotheism in favor of an essentially idolatrous belief. By this criterion, pagans too should suffer utter annihilation, and yet they will not. “Innocent” idolatry is one thing; the idolatry of “the enemies of God and his Torah” is quite another. Pagans never recognized the God of Israel; Christians did—and turned him into a human being, perverting Scripture along the way. Thus, even the vision of masses of pagans acknowledging the true God cannot mitigate Abravanel’s vengeful vision of the fate

of Christians.

As we conclude, it would be appropriate to turn to the greatest Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages to underscore the presence of the most universalist option. The last two chapters of Maimonides' monumental code *Mishneh Torah* address the messianic age. In those chapters, he makes several relevant assertions about the destiny of gentiles. First, the Messiah's purpose is "to repair the world so that the nations will serve God together, as Zephaniah states, "For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him with one purpose." Second, a key function of Christianity and Islam is to familiarize non-Jews with the Torah so that they will more readily recognize the truth of Judaism when the Messiah comes. Third, Isaiah's famous prophecy that the wolf will dwell with the lamb refers to the wicked nations who will "all return to the true religion (*dat emet*) and no longer steal or destroy. Rather, they will eat permitted food at peace with Israel." Finally, "the Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the Messianic era in order to have dominion over the entire world, to rule over the gentiles, to be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to involve themselves in Torah and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances."

There is a scholarly debate as to whether the nations' embrace of the true religion means that they will become full-fledged Jews (note their eating permitted food) or adherents of the Noahide code that governs gentiles (note that the nations are still distinguished from Israel). What is clear is that Maimonides' eschatological vision anticipates neither the widespread destruction of gentiles nor their subjugation. Nonetheless, even the stature of the medieval Moses could not sweep away

expectations that emerged from both texts and powerful psychic forces.

This presentation is intended in substantial measure to provide the background that illuminates the extent and significance of recent developments in Jewish attitudes toward Christianity. In 2015, I wrote an article in Tablet entitled “Vatican II at 50: Assessing the Impact of ‘Nostra Aetate’ on Jewish-Christian Relations,” where I discussed not only the transformation in Christian approaches to Judaism but recent Jewish statements advocating interfaith amity and expressing largely positive assessments of Christianity and its values. One of these, which I had a role in formulating, was issued by three mainstream Orthodox organizations: The Conference of European Rabbis, The Rabbinical Council of America, and the Israeli Rabbinat. While it maintains uncompromising fealty to Jewish theological evaluations of Christianity, the contrast between the tone and content of that document and the medieval Jewish views limned in this article is striking and instructive.

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David Berger is the Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Distinguished Professor of Jewish History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University.