

The Problem of Exile in Medieval Jewish–Christian Polemic¹

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The Jewish condition often encapsulated in the term exile played a major and to some degree exceptional role in exchanges between Jews and Christians in medieval and early modern times. A recurring observation in scholarly studies of the Jewish–Christian debate is that the issues in question would have concerned Christians even in the absence of a Jewish challenge. What is the evidence that the Messiah will die to atone for our sins? That God is triune? That He took on flesh in a human being? That He will be born of a virgin? In any serious internal Christian discourse, these and many similar questions would have demanded attention. The basis for these doctrines would have been sought and identified in pre-Christian Scriptural passages and their philosophical challenges addressed and resolved. On the other hand, setting aside a handful of particularly difficult Biblical passages, the sorts of challenges presented to Jews by their Christian

1. I lectured on this topic at the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies in 1985. With my permission, Ora Limor provided a succinct summary of that talk in her *Bein Yehudim le-Nozrim* (Ramat Aviv, 1993), vol. 3, pp. 89–90. I no longer have the text of that lecture, and I am pleased to have been afforded the opportunity to turn to the subject once again as a means of honoring a scholar of stunning breadth and astonishing erudition, whose learning is matched only by his graciousness and generosity of spirit.

interlocutors would not have troubled them or even occupied their attention as they pondered their own texts and beliefs in an environment that was not suffused by Christian theology and its advocates.

Jewish suffering in a seemingly interminable exile was very different. It pervaded the daily consciousness of medieval Jews and would have required explanation for psychological as well as intellectual reasons even if no Christians had ever raised the question. But raise it they did – repeatedly, insistently, triumphantly, even mockingly. Few issues in medieval religious polemic penetrated the Jewish psyche as deeply and distressingly as this one.

A full-scale Christian work analyzing the Jewish exile as evidence of God's rejection of the Jews and the consequent superiority of Christianity is the pseudonymous epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco, which has been characterized by Ora Limor as a "best seller" in the polemical genre. It is suggestive of the impact of this argument that "Samuel's" work was preserved in an extremely impressive number of manuscripts over a long period of time.² But the most direct evidence of the power of the argument emerges from its repeated citation in Jewish works. The eleventh-century Ashkenazic liturgical poem *Aqdamut*, recited on the festival of Shavuot to this day, contains precisely one exchange between the nations and Israel. The nations ask, "Who is your beloved, O fair one, that for his sake you are prepared to die in the lion's den?"³ In this early text, inspired by its midrashic source, we find an almost admiring puzzlement, but other Jewish texts quote Christian formulations that are uniformly more aggressive.

In a contemporary poem, Christians address Jews with the question, "You who are crushed, in what do you trust?"⁴ Jacob ben Reuben,

2. See Ora Limor, "Ha-Iggeret shel Shmuel ha-Marqani: 'Rav Mekher' be-'Olam ha-Pulmus," in vol. 2 part 1 of *Divrei ha-Congress ha-'Olami ha-'Asirile-Madda'ei ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 93–100.

3. The line is based on a midrashic text in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Shirata 3* noted in Jeffrey Hoffman, "Akdmut: History, Folklore and Meaning," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009): 161–183.

4. Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder ha-Selihot ke-Minhag Polin* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1965), #1, p. 21.

in his late-twelfth-century polemic *Milḥamot Hashem*, cites a Christian who asks how it is that the Jew does not draw the proper conclusion from the fact that “you and your brethren . . . are growing poor and lowly and weakened in full view, and you are becoming fewer every day . . . , while we are increasing to the point where our power has risen, our enemies are trodden under our feet, and those who love us are like the sun in its glory.”⁵ *Kaf ha-Qetoret*, a work probably written shortly after the expulsion from Spain, encapsulates the effect of this Christian contention with special poignancy:

[Christians exclaim], *He’ah He’ah* (Psalms 70:4), two words of mockery . . . , saying, “Your Messiah has still not come; when will he come?” In this way they embarrass the Jews over the length of the exile, and the Jews have no answer to this other than hope; the Christians laugh and say, “What you hope for has come to us.”⁶

While few Jewish texts are as candid as this one, various forms of the Christian argument proliferate in polemical works. Thus, the fourteenth-century Spanish author Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas quotes the Christian assertion that Jews are in exile in a servile and despised state because of the sin of the crucifixion, with specific reference to the agreement by the Jews at the time that Jesus’ blood would be on their heads and the heads of their descendants forever.⁷

5. *Milḥamot Hashem*, edited by Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), p. 5.

6. Paris ms. 845, p. 78b, quoted in Moshe Idel, “Ha-Yahas la-Nazrut be-Sefer ha-Meshiv,” *Zion* 46 (1981): 87 n. 73. It is noteworthy that a *seliḥah* recited on the third day of the ten days of penitence makes reference to the very same phrase from Psalms in the very same context: “They say ‘*He’ah he’ah*’” (Goldschmidt, *Seder ha-Seliḥot*, #64, p. 168). Note too Joseph Official, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1970), p. 16, where the author addresses Jewish readers directly with the exhortation that their hearts not be weakened by the question, “Where is your King and the Rock from which you were hewed?”

7. Yehudah Shamir, *Rabbi Moses Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and his Book ‘Ezer Ha-Emunah – A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy*

Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen, in his fourteenth/fifteenth century *Sefer Nizzahon*, cites a Christian affirmation of interminable Jewish punishment for the betrayal of Jesus based on the verse, “For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve, because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6).⁸ Finally, one Jewish polemicist ascribes this argument to his interlocutor as the Christian’s final, desperate effort to prevail after all his other arguments failed: “In any event, you Hebrews are exiled from place to place, while we worshippers of Jesus reside in our land in peace and quiet.”⁹

Beyond the intrinsic challenge of explaining this vexing reality, Jews were confronted by an additional difficulty. The standard Jewish response to the exilic condition saw it as a punishment for sin, but in the context of polemic with Christianity, invoking sin was awkward in the extreme. A significant, psychologically crucial theme in relevant Jewish works underscored the ethical as well as theological superiority of Jews to Christians. Two vigorous, explicit expressions of this conviction deserve special emphasis.

Joseph Kimḥi’s twelfth-century *Sefer ha-Berit* presents a paean of praise to Jewish morality. This is reinforced not only by assertions of the immorality of the Christian populace at large but by the affirmation that even priests who do not marry in fact engage in adulterous activities.¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere that such characterizations of priests in this and other Jewish polemics may reflect unease at the prospect of genuinely impressive piety exhibited by Christians.¹¹

(Coconut Grove, FL: Field Research Projects, 1972), part 2, pp. 42, 70. See too pp. 95, 100.

8. *Sefer Nizzahon*, ed. Theodor Hackspan (Nuremberg, 1644), #247, p. 136.

9. Elijah Ḥayyim of Genezzano, in Judah Rosenthal, “Vikkuḥo shel R. Eliyyahu Ḥayyim mi-Genezzano im Nazir Franziskani,” in vol. 1 of *Mehqarim u-Meqorot* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1967), 452. Robert Chazan points to the disturbing force of the argument from Jewish suffering and Christian triumph in *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181–186.

10. *Sefer ha-Berit*, ed. Frank Talmage (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1974), 25–28.

11. See inter alia, “On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Jewish Polemical

Ḥayyim ibn Musa, writing in fifteenth-century Spain, responded to Nicholas de Lyra's accusation that Jews are sinful by noting his failure to address Christian behavior. Ibn Musa proceeded to provide examples of hair-raising activities that exemplify what he says he saw on innumerable occasions during the forty years that he served in the courts of Christian kings and princes.¹²

How is it, then, that Jews suffer because of their sins when Christians do not? The need to overcome this impediment to explaining the reality of exile intensified the challenge to Jewish polemicists. The remainder of this essay will address the multiple strategies that they deployed in order to meet this challenge.

Before addressing the question frontally, Jews argued that whatever the ultimate explanation, the one proffered by Christians could not be correct. It was, after all, predestined that Jews kill Jesus; this was the very purpose of his coming into the world. How, then, could Jews justly be punished for doing so? Some Christians addressed the problem by denying that the Jewish actions were predestined; God knew that they would perpetrate this deed of their own accord. Ibn Musa, however, quoted Vincent Ferrer to the effect that Mary asked Jesus to do four things that the latter said were impossible to fulfill. One of these was that his death should not be at the hands of the Jews.¹³ Thus, the involvement of Jews was indeed predestined.

Moreover, the Jewish argument could be formulated even more sharply without the need to invoke predestination. Christian theology,

Literature," in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 115–117.

12. *Sefer Magen va-Romah ve-Iggeret li-Beno*, ed. A. Posnanski (Jerusalem, 1969/70), 83. It is of considerable interest that Naḥmanides, in a context where the observation was of no particular relevance, made a point of asserting that Christians engage in forbidden sexual activity. See *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. H.D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 1, p. 311. In a forthcoming article to appear in *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* ("Ummat Edom ha-'Adinah: Gishot Yehudiyot Mishtannot la-Tarbut ha-Nozrit bi-Sefarad be-Shilhei Yemei ha-Beinayim"), Eric Lawee points to several surprisingly positive Jewish assessments of Christian behavior in late medieval Spain.

13. *Magen va-Romah*, p. 47.

said some polemicists, requires the affirmation that killing Jesus was a praiseworthy act. “Those who fulfilled his will . . . are the righteous men, while those who did not touch him are wicked. Indeed, it is amazing that you call those who hanged him evil men and sinners.”¹⁴ Though Augustine had dealt with this by insisting that the Jews’ intention was evil, some Jews argued that Christians cannot know this. On the contrary, perhaps the Jews killed him precisely because they heard him say “that the salvation of the world depends upon his death.”¹⁵ Finally, even if Jewish involvement was sinful, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do.”¹⁶

Despite the difficulty of identifying Jewish sin as the explanation for the exile, there was no avoiding its primary role. That role, however, was re-examined through the prism of numerous intriguing strategies.

Analyses of the question often began with the premise that the most serious theological transgression is idolatry. Jews no longer violate this prohibition, but they did in the past, and we know from the biblical account of the golden calf that God would visit this sin upon future generations when they transgress.¹⁷ Thus, lesser transgressions can lead to disproportionate punishment. Moreover, repeated sin of any kind results in more severe punishment than the nature of the sin itself would dictate; this is evident from the Talmudic assertion

14. *Nizzahon Vetus*, in David Berger, *The Jewish–Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1979), English section, 136.

15. So *Sefer ha-Berit*, p. 64. For these and other references, see my discussion in *The Jewish–Christian Debate*, pp. 293–294. (To these references, add the report in *‘Ezer ha-Emunah*, p. 37, of a Christian assertion, following Augustine, that even though the crucifixion took place in accordance with Jesus’ will [*bi-retsono*], the intention of the Jews was evil.) I noted there the parallel Jewish problem. Jewish suffering is a divine punishment for sin. What, then, justifies the Jewish expectation that Christians will be punished for inflicting that suffering? One answer, based on Zechariah 1:15, was that Christians had carried out this mission with excessive zeal.

16. *Sefer ha-Berit*, 64–65; *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, 136.

17. For an example of this argument in a polemical work, see Mordecai ben Joseph of Avignon, *Maḥaziq Emunah*, ch. 3, Vatican ms. 271, p. 10a.

that the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred.¹⁸ When one combines the idolatry of the past with the ongoing sins of the present, a persuasive explanation purportedly emerges. Benjamin of Rome (fifteenth century) asks why Jews, who do not worship idols, are in exile, and he provides the following response:

Because the sin [of idolatry] has not been expiated (*nitmareq*) . . . to this day. In accordance with the number of years that they worshipped pagan deities (*be'alim*) so they will serve strangers in alien lands . . . even though we do not pursue idolatry. For we were exiled from our land as a result of the sin of our fathers and tarry in exile because of our own sins like baseless hatred until the appointed end, since baseless hatred is considered as serious as idolatry.¹⁹

Sarah Kamin pointed out that Rashi, in his commentary to Song of Songs 6:12, asserted that Jews became subject to other nations as a result of the baseless hatred and divisiveness that developed during the Hasmonean period, leading to the civil war between Hyrcanus and Aristobulus that brought the Romans into Israel. His transfer of the impact of baseless hatred to a period earlier than the destruction of the Temple and his failure to mention its destruction at all results, she suggests, from an effort to avoid addressing the Christian explanation of that fateful event.²⁰

18. *Magen va-Romah*, p. 102.

19. "Teshuvat ha-Nozrim," ed. Shlomo Hanokh Degel Zahav, *Kovets 'al Yad* 15 (1899): 16. Elijah Hayyim of Genezzano (p. 448) also remarked that although there was no idolatry in the Second Temple period, there were a variety of other transgressions. The standard affirmation of sin as a cause of exile also appears in Solomon de' Rossi's thirteenth-century *'Edut Hashem Ne'emanah*, ed. Judah Rosenthal, vol. 1 of *Mehqarim u-Meqorot*, 397–398, and *Sefer ha-Berit*, 63. That exile serves to expiate or atone for the sins of Israel also serves to make suffering at least marginally more palatable, and this partial consolation makes its appearance in one version of the *Nizzahon Vetus* (*Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, ed. Mordechai Breuer [Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1978], 190) and in *Mahaziq Emunah*, chapter 3, p. 10a.

20. "Perush Rashi le-Shir ha-Shirim ve-ha-Vikkuaḥ ha-Yehudi-Nozri,"

The search for biblical evidence that Jews suffer for the sins of their fathers could sometimes be straightforward, but it could also involve daunting challenges. Jeremiah declared (31:29–30) that in the future, people will no longer say, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge. For a man shall die for his own wrongdoing...” One can read this as an assertion that in the present people do die for the sins of their fathers. However, a virtually identical verse appears in Ezekiel (18:2) as the introduction to a lengthy, impassioned passage vigorously denying that children are punished for their parents’ transgressions. It is very difficult to read that passage as anything other than an assertion that people who take such a position even with respect to the pre-messianic age are profoundly mistaken, though this must of course be set against the classic verse that God visits the sins of the fathers on their sinful descendants. At the same time, that verse is limited to a few generations, and R. David Kimhi, in his commentaries to Jeremiah and (more fully) Ezekiel, greatly reduces the intergenerational effect of the sour grapes.

Nonetheless, Moses ha-Kohen understood the verse in question as a statement of unqualified theological truth. In his formulation, “Moreover, [our fathers] sinned before Him, worshipping idolatry and engaging in other transgressions, as a result of which we are in exile, as it is written, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’”²¹ Similarly, the contemporaneous Shem Tov ibn Shaprut cites the verse in Lamentations (5:7), “Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we suffer their sins,” whose meaning was a point of contention among Jewish commentators, as a straightforward affirmation of a reason for exile.²²

These versions of the classic nexus between exile and transgression may have succeeded in mitigating the severity of Jewish sin while

Shenaton la-Miqra u-le-Heker ha-Mizrah ha-Qadum 7–8 (5743–5744): 222–224. She notes also Rashi’s characterization of the exile as a time of sanctification of God’s Name through learning and self-sacrifice.

21. *Ezer ha-Emunah*, 96.

22. *Even Boḥan*, unpublished critical edition by Libby Garshowitz, chapter 5, p. 231.

retaining its impact, but they did not address the vexing question of the contrast between the condition of the Jews and that of their morally deficient Christian oppressors. Indeed, the less serious the sinfulness of contemporary Jews, the more puzzling it is that the truly iniquitous Christians go unpunished. A remarkable example of the lengths to which Jews felt impelled to go in order to meet this challenge appears in R. Isaac Arama's *'Aqedat Yitzhak* and *Hazut Qashah* (fifteenth-century Spain). We have already seen that the first transgression that came to the Jewish mind in an effort to account for exile was idolatry. At first – and even second and third – glance, Christianity met the medieval Jewish criteria for what was called *avodah zarah* (literally “foreign worship”), a term that I once defined – though with immediate qualification – as the worship or formal recognition as God of an entity that is in fact not God. Rabbinic sources make it clear that even non-Jews are bound by the prohibition against *avodah zarah*. Despite this – and precisely in the context of explaining the difference between the Jewish and Christian condition in medieval Europe – Arama asserted that “the nations are not commanded to distance themselves from *avodah zarah*, and not one of them has ever been punished for it unless he converted to Judaism.”²³

A much weaker assertion along similar lines was proposed by Mordecai of Avignon, who noted that Jews are bound by far more commandments than Gentiles and are consequently considerably more likely to sin.²⁴ This suggestion is theologically unproblematic, but the perception that Jews are indeed more sinful than Christians even if their overall moral profile is superior did not sit well with the usual self-image that was psychologically so important to Jews.

The problem of exile can be perceived as a manifestation of the larger problem of theodicy, and some polemicists addressed the question of Jewish misery versus Christian success by borrowing a widespread approach to the question of individual suffering: The

23. *'Aqedat Yitzhak*, chapter 88, p. 16a; *Hazut Qashah*, chapter 12, p. 32b. Both works edited by Hayim Yosef Pollak (Pressburg, 1849).

24. *Maḥaziq Emunah*, chapter 3, p. 9b.

righteous suffer in this world so that they can receive unalloyed reward in the world to come. This theme appears as one element in Moses ha-Kohen's explanation of exile. For him, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the righteous of Israel, but for at least part of the discussion, I think it is fair to say that they represent all of Israel. The reason that they suffer, he says, is "to punish them in this world for the small number of sins that they have committed... and to facilitate their meriting greatness... in the world to come."²⁵

The straightforward affirmation that Jews suffer for this reason also appears in a thirteenth-century Ashkenazic compendium.²⁶ The argument appears with theologically unusual, even peculiar twists in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italian polemics. Elijah Ḥayyim of Genezzano told his Christian interlocutor that Christians believe that the Jewish soul dies along with the body. This means that Jews suffer both the punishment of the body in exile and that of the soul in hell after death [thus, "dies" does not mean "perishes" – DB] – "and this is not the sort of justice meted out by a just judge."²⁷ Yair ben Shabbetai da Correggio asserted that since a person cannot be expected to merit double reward, it follows that one who is destined to receive reward in the next world will suffer in this one.²⁸

The approach that saw the question of exile as one instantiation of the problem of theodicy enabled Jews to say that the reason for it,

25. *Ezer ha-Emunah*, 74–75.

26. "Vikkuaḥ Dati bein Ḥakham be-Shem Menaḥem u-bein ha-Mumar ve-ha-Nazir ha-Dominqani Pablo Christiani," ed. Judah Rosenthal, *Hagut 'Ivrit ba-America*, ed. M. Zohori, A. Tartakover, and H. Ormian (Tel-Aviv, 1974), 71. The ascription in the title is misleading. See *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 36 n., 104.

27. P. 438. When the Christian, according to Elijah, resorted to the Jewish exile after his other arguments failed (see note 8 above), Elijah responded (pp. 452–453), "It is sufficient that my arguments have caused you to reach a point where you can only take pride in passing goods, which is the opposite of your initial boasting about attaining life in the world to come."

28. *Herev Pifiyyot*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1958), 105.

along with the ways of God writ large, is inscrutable. Indeed, even the prophets wondered about the length of the exile (Psalms 74:1, 10; 77:8–10; 80:4–7).²⁹ Since the larger question of theodicy challenges Christians as much as it does Jews, the acuity of the anti-Jewish argument was largely blunted. Moreover, an additional strategy was mobilized to make the argument that Christians are, as it were, in the same boat as Jews with respect to this matter, indeed, that they face an even more challenging question. Why did God wait so many thousands of years to send Jesus to redeem all those who languished in hell? As terrible as the twelve-to-fifteen-hundred-year Jewish exile may be, it is hardly the equivalent of four thousand years of torment in the fires of hell. When Christians are asked about this, says ibn Musa, they respond that Jesus came at a time determined by his will. Similarly, we Jews can say that the Messiah will come at the time determined by God's will.³⁰

The approach that attempted to place Christians in the same boat as Jews also took the form of comparing Christian temporal success or failure with that of Islam. Muslim rule is more extensive than that of Christianity; Muslim control of the holy sepulcher and the failure of the crusades underscore the discomfort that Christians ought to feel when they cite Jewish exile and subjugation compared with Christian triumph as evidence of the truth of Christianity.³¹

One atypical Jewish approach attempted to deal with the problem

29. *'Edut Hashem Ne'emanah*, 398. The explicit connection with theodicy appears in the Adler manuscript, p. 396, n. 21. For the affirmation of inscrutability, see Elijah Hayyim of Genezzano, 447–448, and *Herev Pifiyyot*, p. 105.

30. *Magen va-Romah*, 92–92, 100–101. The point about the duration of Jewish exile compared with that of the far more intense suffering of innocents in hell was also made by Isaac Arama. See *'Aqedat Yitzhak* chapter 88, p. 15b; *Hazut Qashah*, chapter 12, p. 32b. See also Yom Tov Lipmann Mühlhausen's *Sefer Nizzahon*, p. 13. For the question about the delay in Jesus' advent without reference to exile, see *Sefer ha-Berit*, 62. See too *Herev Pifiyyot*, 74, 104–105.

31. For extensive references, see my commentary in *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 269–271. That commentary was restricted to works composed through the thirteenth century. In the later *Magen va-Romah*, we find the argument

by minimizing the severity of the exile. It is better to suffer a lengthy but bearable exile “under the rule of many masters among whom there is a certain good quality of kindness” than it would be to suffer a shorter exile analogous to that of Egyptian bondage.”³² The success of many Jews even in their exilic state created a psychological/theological challenge, even a dilemma, for Jews. On the one hand, recognition of this reality would alleviate the psychic pain of exile; on the other hand, Jews were *supposed* to be suffering in exile. For Christians, too, Jewish success presented a similar challenge, and Bernard of Clairvaux dealt with it by asserting that the Jew, unlike the Christian, has the right to temporal riches, for he “received the promise of a temporal reward.”³³

Some Jews embraced the connection between the narrative of Jesus’ career and the exile; however, it is not that the Jews killed Jesus – it is that they produced him. Among the sins in the days of the Second Temple that caused the exile are “matters of religion” in the form of “the sect of the Sadducees” and “the sect of Jesus.”³⁴ We suffer exile because we produced Jesus and continue to produce many apostates to this day.³⁵ An unusually creative expression of this explanation was formulated in an obscure fragment by a Nathaniel ben Nehemiah Kaspi.

A certain heretic asked R. Nathan ben R. Meshullam: “Why did God lengthen this exile for you more than the Babylonian exile, which resulted from the most severe sin, namely, the sin

that Christians do not control the holy sepulcher twice in separate contexts (pp. 71, 103).

32. *Herev Pifiyyot*, 104.

33. *St. Bernard’s Sermons for the Seasons and the Principal Festivals of the Year* (Westminster, MD: Carroll Press, 1950), vol. 3, p. 338. See my “The Attitude of St. Bernard of Clairvaux toward the Jews,” in *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 253.

34. Elijah Hayyim of Genezzano, 448.

35. *’Edut Hashem Ne’emanah*, 396–397. Benjamin ben Moses of Rome (loc. cit., above, note 18) describes the exile as a test to see who will remain loyal to Judaism (Ezekiel 20:38; Daniel 12:10; Zechariah 13:9).

of idolatry?” He replied: “During the period of the First Temple they made icons and sacred trees from material that does not last, and so he punished them with an exile of seventy years. But in the period of the Second Temple, they made idolatry on their own (or of themselves – *me-‘atzmam*), among them Jesus of Nazareth . . . All his students – the saints – applied the prophecies of the prophets to him and made him an established, accepted god for his worshippers. Because they [Jews] set up an established idolatry, [God] placed them [emending *qeva’uhu* to *qeva’um*] in an established, lengthy exile until the time [emending the manifestly erroneous *תא* to *תע*] of the end.”³⁶

It is, I think, appropriate to call this explanation unusually creative, but it is no less appropriate to call it forced. The need for such creativity is symptomatic of the discomfort Jews felt in dealing with the reality of exile in a polemical context.

The ultimate resolution of this problem was to come at the end of days, when Jewish suffering would be transformed into triumphant joy and Christians would be either destroyed or subjugated. The Jewish response to the challenge in *Aqdamut* reads as follows: “What significance is your greatness compared to that praise – the greatness that He will bestow upon me when the Redemption shall come? When He shall bring light to me, and you will be covered in shame, when His glory shall be revealed in strength and pride. He shall pay the haters and foes back in kind, and bestow vindication upon the beloved nation.”

This expectation, which went to the heart of the Jewish psyche, naturally found expression in polemical works. Moses ha-Kohen stressed that Christians and other nations would be punished at the end of days.³⁷ Mordecai of Avignon asserted that the nations of the

36. From *Sefer Lequtot ‘al ha-Torah*, in Abraham Berliner, *Peletat Soferim* (Breslau, 1872), 34 (Hebrew), reprinted by Rosenthal as Appendix 1 of *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, 139.

37. *‘Ezer ha-Emunah*, 39 (citing Joel 3:1, 3, 7–8).

world would go down to hell,³⁸ which, like the argument that exile is punishment in this world that enhances reward in the world to come, is an assertion that normally characterizes the destiny of individuals but is applied here to the fate of nations. In the same passage where he stressed that suffering enhances Jewish reward in the world to come, Moses ha-Kohen affirmed that it “facilitates their meriting greatness . . . and exalted status in the future era of this world in the eyes of all the nations, as it is written, ‘Only you have I chosen among all the nations of the world; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities’ (Amos 3:2). Solomon too said, ‘Those whom He loves the Lord chastises’ (Proverbs 3:12).”³⁹

The most striking formulation of this expectation actually transformed it into an explanation for the length of the exile. God has allowed this exile to endure for so long because He intends to effect the utter destruction of the gentiles when it comes to an end. For this to be a just act, He has to wait, as we learn from His affirmation to Abraham regarding the sin of the Amorites in the covenant detailed in Genesis 15, until the full measure of gentile sin has been filled. Thus, every extra moment of the Jewish exile is another nail in the Christian coffin.⁴⁰ It is difficult to imagine that Jews felt that their interminable exile was worthwhile so that the destruction of their oppressors should be assured, but this understanding – if they actually internalized it – might have supplied a modicum of convoluted consolation. However that may be, this was a sharp and unanticipated weapon in the Jewish polemical arsenal.

38. *Maḥaziq Emunah*, 8b.

39. *‘Ezer ha-Emunah*, 74–75.

40. *Nizzahon Vetus* in *The Jewish–Christian Debate*, 227 (citing Jeremiah 46:28), *Magen va-Romah*, 121. The range of medieval Jewish views regarding the eschatological destruction, subjugation and/or conversion of gentiles has spawned a scholarly literature replete with controversy beginning with Israel Yuval’s article, “Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-‘Alilah,” *Zion* 58 (1993): 33–90. For my approach to this question, see “On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazic Polemical Literature,” in *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 120–138.

Some polemicists saw the exile as an instrument for preparing the world for the eschatological acceptance of Judaism, an approach that Amos Funkenstein called the missionary explanation.⁴¹ A related, especially striking explanation of Jewish suffering in exile was paradoxically both widespread and extremely rare. Rashi believed that the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53 is the Jewish people and that Jews suffer to atone for the sins of the nations of the world. This can be seen as a creative though problematic explanation of exile. Many biblical commentators followed Rashi, and in that sense the explanation is widespread. I do not believe, however, that Rashi proffered this explanation because he saw it as an attractive and useful theological approach. Rather, he was impelled by what struck him as the straightforward meaning of these difficult verses. Thus, my assertion that this widespread explanation is rare rests on the fact that it appears almost exclusively in commentaries to Isaiah 53 or efforts to deal with that chapter in polemical works. This is not what Jews say when confronted with our problem in other settings.⁴²

With the waning of the Middle Ages, we begin to find naturalistic explanations of exile. Isaac Polgar maintained that the exile resulted from the Jews’ forgetting the art of war because of their concentration on the Torah and its commandments.⁴³ Isaac Nathan wrote a remarkable work in which he outlined virtually insurmountable obstacles to redemption, many of which are rooted in unsavory traits that penetrate

41. *‘Edut Hashem Ne’emanah*, 399–400; *Magen va-Romah*, 97; Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 205.

42. I hope to address this matter in a forthcoming article for a *Festschrift* honoring Prof. Daniel J. Lasker.

43. *‘Ezer ha-Dat*, ed. J. Levinger (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 1984), part 1 section 5, pp. 55–56. See my discussion in “On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles” (note 39), 114–115, where I note Shlomo Pines’s observations regarding connections with Maimonides and Spinoza and point to the similarity between Polgar’s position and affirmations in Solomon ibn Verga, *Sefer Shevet Yehudah*, ed. Azriel Shochat and Yitzhak Baer (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1947), 44 and elsewhere.

to the core of the Jewish character. Only thoroughly miraculous divine intervention will succeed in overcoming these obstacles. Isaac makes no reference to Christian arguments and depicts the Jews themselves as despairing of an end to the exile, but Ram ben Shalom, who published and analyzed Isaac's work, considers it overwhelmingly likely that the ubiquitous Christian challenge regarding this issue played a role in Isaac's decision to address it.⁴⁴

Solomon ibn Verga proffered some of the standard theological approaches – Israel is held to greater account because of its chosenness (Amos 3:2), the sins of ancestors are visited upon their descendants – but he then provided a transition to explanations that are primarily naturalistic. When “great merit” does not exist, nature prevails, and Jews are persecuted because their killing of Jesus evokes anger among his worshippers, who also resent their refusal to socialize with their gentile neighbors, their financial success, interest in Christian women, haughtiness and thirst for power.⁴⁵ These affirmations are hardly to be recommended for polemical use, but they are of great interest as we discern the dawn of novel sensibilities that were to mark the onset of a new age.

44. Ram ben Shalom, “*Magdil Yeshu‘ot*: Al ha-Sibbot le-Hitmahmehut ha-Mashiah u-Massah Biqqortit Ḥasrat Taqdim al ha-Ḥevrah ha-Yehudit,” *Tarbiz* 72 (2003): 259–293. See especially pp. 269–274 and p. 273, n. 37, where he notes the dependence of this section on Limor's summary of my lecture in her *Bein Yehudim le-Nozrim*).

45. *Shevet Yehudah*, 127–128. For an analysis of ibn Verga's views of exile, see Jeremy Cohen, *A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, Shevet Yehudah, and the Jewish–Christian Encounter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 19–20, 26, 142, 157.

*“In the Dwelling of a Sage
Lie Precious Treasures”*



Essays in Jewish Studies in
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EDITED BY

Yitzhak Berger and Chaim Milikowsky



The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press

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