

2 ❦ ON THE USES OF HISTORY IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH POLEMIC AGAINST CHRISTIANITY: THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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“History” is not a simple term, and the uses of “history” are even more diverse than its meanings. Historical investigation can mean the critical examination of sources, often with a measure of empathy, always with a skeptical eye, to refine our image of the personalities and events of the past. But it can also be a didactic enterprise, accepting of unscrutinized data, highlighting heroes and villains, mobilizing past and present in the service of an overarching end. It is a commonplace that the first approach is most characteristic of post-Enlightenment historiography, while the second was the hallmark of the medieval mind.

Like most commonplaces, this one is essentially true. At the same time, the boundaries between the approaches are hardly impermeable. We have long abandoned—perhaps too eagerly—the historicist fantasy that contemporary historians work in a rarefied atmosphere of wholly objective truth. With respect to the Middle Ages, we will indeed search in vain for a systematic application of critical historical perspectives, but some intellectual challenges produced insights foreshadowing the historiographical orientation that became increasingly evident first during the Renaissance and ultimately in modern times.

Within a Jewish context, critical comments by biblical exegetes, debates about the antiquity of kabbalistic works, historical reasons proposed for the commandments, and halakhic approaches to changing conditions have sharpened our awareness of medieval sensitivity to textual, theological, and social change. Jewish polemic against Christianity is a particularly promising field for the pursuit of this inquiry. Christianity emerged out of Judaism in historical times; its founder was a Jew; its sacred text is largely a collection of purportedly historical narratives about that Jew and his immediate successors; its fundamental claim speaks of the end of one age and the birth of another; it pointed to the historical condition of contemporary Jews as a confirmation of that claim, while Jews pointed to the unfolding of history in a patently unredeemed world as its most effective refutation. We usually identify exegesis and philosophy as the core of the Jewish-Christian debate, but the role of history was no less central.

This role took many forms. Historical context could help determine the plausibility of a scriptural argument; historical analysis could shed light on talmudic references to Jesus and to Gentiles; the history of the Jewish people in exile demanded explanation—often theological but sometimes naturalistic; the larger pattern of history might reveal the character of the age in which medieval Jews and Christians lived. While I hope to examine all these issues and more in a fuller study, this essay will concentrate on a basic concern of many Jewish polemicists, which can be described without serious anachronism as the search for the historical Jesus. From late antiquity through the early seventeenth century this quest moved from hostile legends to unsystematic criticisms, both naive and penetrating, and finally produced flashes of genuine historical reconstruction. In the course of their investigations, Jews honed their sense of historical skepticism while remaining checked by an invisible hand that prevented them from taking steps that sometimes appear self-evident to the modern eye. An inquiry into both the breakthroughs and the inhibitions of these polemicists can provide a fascinating look at the historical *mentalités* of medieval and Renaissance Jews.

Medieval Jewry was heir to two sets of internal sources about Jesus: a handful of scattered remarks in rabbinic texts and the various versions of the counter-Gospel known as *Toledot Yeshu*.¹ There is little we can say about the image of Jesus held by early medieval Jews, although there is no reason to doubt that many of them accepted as simple truth *Toledot Yeshu*'s depiction of an idolatrous enticer and bastard sorcerer who was hanged from a stalk of cabbage.²

By the twelfth century, when European Jews began to write polemical works, they had far more information, which made their task easier in some respects and more complex in others. Polemicists were familiar with at least parts of the New Testament, and they were also in possession of a short Jewish work written in Arabic by an unknown author and translated into Hebrew as *Sefer Nestor ha-komer*.³ *Nestor* already contains, in however embryonic a form, some of the key points about Jesus that Jewish polemicists were to make for the remainder of the Middle Ages and into modern times.

The relationship of Jesus to Judaism is most critically defined by two issues: his attitude toward the laws of the Torah and his own self-perception. While *Nestor*, which is a work containing several redactional layers, criticizes Jesus for violating the Law and asserting that he and his Father are one, the most sustained passage argues for his loyalty to the classic positions of Judaism with respect to both points. In his programmatic declaration in Matthew (5:17–18), Jesus affirmed that the Torah must be observed, and in several other passages he made it perfectly clear that he did not consider himself God. Thus, he maintained that he did not know the time of the resurrection because such knowledge is confined to God alone (Mark 13:32), and he refused to be called righteous because such a term is reserved for God (Mark 10:18). “Know,” continues *Nestor*, “that you have deviated greatly by forsaking the deeds which he performed: circumci-

sion, Passover, the Sabbath, the great fast, the ten commandments, indeed, all the commandments.”⁴

Despite this approach and its manifest polemical utility, Jews could not readily embrace the simple proposition that Jesus was a perfectly good Jew. First of all, Jewish tradition itself spoke of his sinfulness and well-deserved execution. Second, both psychological and polemical reasons impelled Jews to criticize Jesus rather than embrace him. Finally, the New Testament material, with which Jews were increasingly familiar, presented a bewildering array of conflicting evidence, particularly with respect to the law but to some degree even with respect to the question of divinity. Not only did this create genuine historical perplexity; it presented an opportunity for criticizing the Christians’ sacred text no less tempting than the chance to denounce its hero.

The polemicists of Northern Europe made no attempt to produce a coherent portrait of Jesus but were satisfied with ad hoc criticisms. The critique of the New Testament in the standard version of Joseph Official’s thirteenth-century polemic consists of a series of snippets.⁵ The more elaborate discussions in the *Nizzahon Vetus* and an alternate version of *Yosef ha-mekanne* are far more interesting, not only because of the richness of the argumentation but precisely because they confirm the narrow focus and the absence of any effort to come away with a comprehensive picture.

In discussing the New Testament, the *Nizzahon Vetus* repeatedly maintains that Jesus denied he was divine; in other sections of what is admittedly an anthology, the author reiterates on several occasions that Jesus made himself into a god.⁶ In one passage where the polemicist points to Jesus’ use of the term “son of man,” his point is not primarily that Jesus had no pretensions to divinity. It is, rather, that if Jesus were God, it would have been wrong of him to use this term. In fact, the passage continues, Jesus would be lying in his assertion (Luke 9:58) that he has no place to lay his head, when the Psalmist testifies that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1), and Jesus himself said elsewhere, “Dominion is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18).⁷ To the extent that this text, which also appears in modified form in both versions of *Yosef ha-mekanne* and in another Ashkenazic collection,⁸ presents a straightforward argument, it is not that Jesus did not consider himself divine but rather that, for someone who claimed to be God, he made some peculiarly inappropriate remarks.

An even less clear but nonetheless similar impression emerges from a different discussion in the standard text of *Yosef ha-mekanne*, which cites two New Testament verses in which Jesus appears to deny his divinity: the above-cited statement in Mark that only God can be called good and a verse in John (probably 12:49). The author’s formulation does not address Jesus’ self-perception. Rather, he asks why Jesus would say these things if he was God (not if he thought he was God), much as he goes on to ask why he was hungry and thirsty if he was God.⁹

With respect to the law, the fullest array of Northern European arguments appears in the *Nizzahon Vetus*. On the one hand, we are repeatedly presented with the evidence of Matthew 5:17–18 that Jesus declared his intention to complete

(*lehashlim*) or to fulfill (*lekayyem*) the law, not to destroy it. The author argues that the Christian assertion that the new covenant of Jeremiah replaces the old Torah contradicts the Gospel passage. Despite this, Christians maintain that Jesus “caused the Torah of Moses to be truncated by abolishing circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and many commandments.”¹⁰ The same Matthean passage, reinforced by the author’s version of Luke 16:17 (“Even if heaven and earth shall pass, the words of Moses and the other prophets shall not pass”), refutes the antinomian Christian interpretation of Isaiah’s declaration that God hates the Jewish festivals (Isa. 1:14); Jesus, after all, “accept[ed] the Jewish religion—circumcision, the Sabbath, indeed, the entire religion—all the days of his life.”¹¹ Jesus’ circumcision along with his observance of the Sabbath and festivals (“for he did observe all these commandments”), particularly in light of his statement in Matthew, surely establishes a precedent that Christians should follow.¹²

Elsewhere, however, the *Nizzahon Vetus* presents a rather different picture. In discussing the assertion that baptism has replaced circumcision, the author begins with his usual response that this would contradict Matthew. He continues, “It would follow, then (*nimza*), that Jesus annulled the law of Moses and thereby gave the lie to his own Torah where he wrote, ‘Not one thing will pass from the Law,’ for he added and diminished from the law in several places” (emphasis added).¹³ This appears to go further than the earlier citation, which said only that Christians attributed such deviations to him.

Other passages surely go further. In a discussion that also appears in both versions of *Yosef ha-mekanne*, the *Nizzahon Vetus* uses one of the most clearly nomian passages in the Gospels as a foundation for an attack on Jesus for his violations of the law. After curing a leper, Jesus instructs him to bring a sacrifice of purification “as Moses has commanded in the Torah” (Matt. 8:4). One expects a Jew to pounce on this passage as further evidence of Christian failure to emulate Jesus’ devotion to the Torah. But the Northern European polemicists find themselves in a particularly churlish frame of mind: “Now, I am surprised at his commanding the leper to go to the priest and bring his sacrifice. Once he was cured by Jesus why should he have to go to the priest? Moreover, from the time of his birth we don’t see that he commanded the observance of any other commandments in the Torah, such as those regarding the Sabbath, circumcision, pork, and the mixing of species, and several others which, in fact, he permitted people to transgress after his advent. Indeed, even this commandment was not observed from that day on.”¹⁴

Shortly thereafter, the author criticizes Jesus for permitting work on the Sabbath by justifying his disciples’ plucking of corn (Matt. 12:1–12) and asks how this squares with his instructions to the leper.¹⁵ Finally, along with one version of *Yosef ha-mekanne* and the above-cited Ashkenazic collection, he objects to Jesus’ instructing a man to carry his bed on the Sabbath.¹⁶ Thus, as in the case of Jesus’ self-perception, the polemical need, or even whim, of the moment appears to prevail. Jesus is a loyal adherent of the law, a man awash in contradiction, or a systematic, committed violator.

It is tempting to proffer the highly tentative suggestion that this is precisely the sort of approach we should expect from Ashkenazic Jews in the High Middle Ages. The genius of this culture did not lie in integrative works. Its relative lack of interest in philosophy left its literature even more focused on exegesis, whether biblical or talmudic, than that of other Jewish centers. Even in works whose primary purpose was harmonization of conflicting evidence drawn from a vast corpus, broad applications were often avoided in the absence of a concrete motivation. The ad hoc character of Ashkenazic pronouncements about Christianity has been analyzed in Jacob Katz's classic discussion, and this is only one example of a wider phenomenon.¹⁷ In our context, the search for contradictions that so characterized the initial step of the Tosafist approach to the Talmud became the final step as well. There was no motive for Jews to seek the concord of discordant passages in the New Testament even on an ad hoc basis, and Northern European polemicists evince little interest in penetrating the psyche of Jesus of Nazareth.

The concentration on specific texts coupled with the absence of a wider perspective stands in sharp contrast to Maimonides' approach to the history of deviations from the true faith. In his account of Christianity and Islam in *The Epistle to Yemen* and more strikingly in the history of idolatry in his code, Maimonides is interested precisely in the large picture, the critical deviations, and the underlying causes.¹⁸ It matters little if he can point to specific evidence for his contentions; a verse here, an aggadah there constitute sufficient building blocks for a structure that rests upon ideology and theory far more than on texts and testimony. Maimonides' vistas are too broad; his historiographic weaknesses are those of a philosopher. The vistas of the Northern European polemicists are too narrow; their drawbacks are those of legists and exegetes.

The earliest European Jewish polemic, the Provençal *Milhamot ha-Shem* by Jacob ben Reuben, also attempts no resolution of key contradictions, but it does not fall prey to inconsistency in quite the same degree and reflects a somewhat greater concern with understanding Jesus. From a polemical perspective, it is difficult to decide which is better—to fault Jesus himself for self-contradiction or to question the reliability of Christian tradition and the basis of Christian practice by emphasizing his devotion to the law. Jacob resolves the problem by doing both. Like his successors in the North, who may well have borrowed the argument from him, he criticizes Christians for saying that Jesus did not come to add to the law or to change it and then citing Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant to defend precisely such a change. Elsewhere, he blames Jesus for inconsistency, but he does not leave this as an ad hoc assertion here and there. Rather, he views Jesus neither as an uncompromising upholder of the law nor as an antinomian ideologue. Inconsistency is precisely what characterizes him. In the very same sermon in which he declared the law eternal and unchanging, he changed it, and such vacillation is evident in other passages about the law as well as in his changing position regarding the public revelation of his miracles. With respect to the law, "he did not maintain a single stance but rather followed a variety of

approaches,” and with respect to self-revelation, “no one can determine his position because whatever he said on one occasion he contradicted on another.”¹⁹

In the fourteenth century a work partially dependent upon *Milhamot ha-Shem* reflects the persistence of this tension even as it reaffirms Jesus’ observance of the law. Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas also responded to the Christian interpretation of Jeremiah’s “new covenant” by pointing to Jesus’ exhortations affirming the eternity of the law, but he translated “I have not come to destroy but to fulfill [plerosai; *adimplere*]” as “I have not come to take away but to add [lehosif].” Thus, Jesus may have added to the law by requiring baptism in addition to circumcision, but he never abolished the earlier obligation. Moses’ comment that Jesus observed “many” of the commandments of the Torah may also reflect some reservations about his full commitment, although there is no question that the fundamental thrust of the passage ascribes to him a deep loyalty to the Torah.²⁰

The breakthrough toward a Jewish picture of Jesus that attempted to account for all the New Testament evidence in a coherent fashion came at the end of the fourteenth century in Profiat Duran’s *Kelimat ha-goyim*, which reflects a maturity that owes much to the accumulation of polemical experience, the cultural breadth and sophistication of Spanish Jewry, and the stellar qualities of the author. For the first time, a Jewish polemic reflects more than just extensive familiarity with Christian sources; it handles those sources with a sense of confidence and command.²¹ With respect to the law, Duran was not content to point to the well-worn passage from the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfill. (Duran, like *Nestor ha-komer* and one passage in the *Nizzahon Vetus*, translates *adimplere* as “to complete” (*lehashlim*), which stands somewhere between “to fulfill” and Moses ha-Kohen’s “to add”). He made a concerted, impressive effort to explain all contrary evidence from the Gospels to accord with his portrait of a nomian Jesus. To take a particularly difficult example, the assertion that what goes into the mouth does not defile a man (Matt. 15:11) cannot mean that forbidden foods are permitted, since we can prove that Jesus’ own disciples refrained from eating such food (a historical argument of continuing relevance). Rather, Jesus must have meant that the food is not intrinsically unclean; it is only the divine command that renders it so.²²

Profiat Duran’s proof texts that Jesus advocated observance of the law include the verse in which he instructs his disciples to do what the scribes and Pharisees say because they sit on the seat of Moses (Matt. 23:2–3); the passage, however, is not explicitly utilized to make the point that Jesus has thereby endorsed the oral as well as the written law.²³ Influenced by *Kelimat ha-goyim*, R. Simon Duran repeated the citation in his *Keshet u-Magen*, again without drawing the explicit conclusion about the oral law, although several lines later he argued that Jesus’ disciples were scrupulous even about rabbinic injunctions.²⁴ Simon’s son Solomon, however, took this development to its logical conclusion in a highly charged context. His *Milhemet mizvah* is devoted to a defense of the Talmud against an increasingly dangerous Christian attack. Here the citation from

Matthew demonstrates that an attack on the Talmud is an attack on Jesus himself, and Solomon proceeds with additional arguments that the oral law underlies several of Jesus' legal dicta.²⁵ The contradictory New Testament passages of Joseph Official and the *Nizzahon Vetus*, the inconsistent Jesus of *Milhamot ha-Shem*, and the partially nomian figure of Moses ha-Kohen have given way to a Jesus thoroughly committed to the written and oral law so cavalierly rejected by his putative medieval disciples.

To reinforce the contrast between contemporary Christians and the founder—or presumed founder—of their faith, the later polemicists also portrayed a strongly “Jewish” Jesus with respect to the question of his self-perception. We have already seen the contradictory assertions of some of the Ashkenazic authors on this issue. Here too, Profiat Duran resolved the issue in favor of the option that is most compatible with traditional Judaism, and he provided an overarching explanation to account for any contrary evidence. Jesus, we know, used poetic language and spoke in parables. Through a careful examination of specific texts, Duran concluded that when Jesus said that he and his Father were one or called himself Son of God, he meant to affirm nothing more than a special relationship with God, not to describe himself as “the First Cause and Creator of the world.”²⁶

More subtle shifts in matters of detail also demonstrate Duran's changing emphasis. Jewish polemicists had regularly pointed to the story of Jesus' cursing the fig tree when he discovered it had no fruit as evidence that he could not have been divine. The primary argument, of course, was that God would have known from the outset that he would find no fruit. Several polemicists added the rather amusing point that the curse contradicts Jesus' exhortation to love one's enemies, and Meir of Narbonne argued that instead of making the tree wither he should have commanded it to produce fruit.²⁷ Although one manuscript tradition of *Kelimat ha-goyim* contains the standard argument about Jesus' ungodlike ignorance, Duran's first (and perhaps only) use of this story is to argue that the disciples' amazement at the miraculous withering of the tree demonstrates that they did not believe that Jesus was divine.²⁸ Duran was surely interested in showing that Jesus was not God, but he was more interested in the historical assertion that neither he nor his disciples thought he was.

Simon Duran cited the arguments from Jesus' ignorance and the disciples' amazement in one breath,²⁹ and his general treatment of Jesus is more complex and more problematic than that of *Kelimat ha-goyim*. Simon attempted a fairly ambitious reconstruction of Jesus' life and ideas, utilizing rabbinic as well as Christian sources. The methodology is essentially that rabbinic information is always correct, that in many important matters the Jewish sources correspond to what we learn from Christian works, and that instances of irreconcilable difference reveal errors in Christian tradition. After all, he says, even the reports of Jesus' disciples in the Gospels “are not in agreement with respect to all matters; there is contradiction and difference among them whether as a result of forgetfulness or as a result of the desire to make matters look more attractive.”³⁰

Occasionally, this approach can yield flashes of very interesting historical

skepticism. Simon describes the connection that Christians made between Micah 5:1 and Jesus' presumed birth in Bethlehem, shows that the verse cannot refer to this, and then argues that the rabbinic name "Jesus of Nazareth" indicates that he was not born in Bethlehem at all. The force of the rabbinic evidence here seems weak, and it appears that Simon uses it as a peg on which to hang a skeptical look at the Gospel report. Later, he argues that talmudic sources indicate that Jesus indeed went to Egypt but not under the circumstances described in Matthew 2. Finally, Simon expends considerable effort to reconstruct Jesus' lineage and associations utilizing the full array of sources at his disposal. In this discussion, the primary purpose of New Testament citations is not to criticize them but to use them constructively to buttress and clarify rabbinic sources. The result has much in common with Christian efforts to harmonize the Gospels, except that one set of sources is in the final analysis not authoritative.³¹

The effort to coordinate rabbinic and Gospel evidence in the context of a "Jewish" portrayal of Jesus' views raised the question of how to assess his overall character and mission. Needless to say, the assertion that he observed the commandments and did not consider himself God was by no means sufficient to generate an enthusiastic evaluation, and it was hardly feasible for medieval Jews—for reasons both emotional and talmudic—to produce a literature of *laudes Jesu*.

For Jews like the Durans, one solution was to depict Jesus as a pietistic fool (*hasid shoteh*). Jacob ben Reuben had already described him as an ignoramus preaching to ignoramuses. Isaiah 30:20, which speaks of a presumably great teacher, cannot, said Jacob, refer to Jesus, who taught "rustics and fishermen because he was as devoid of understanding as they."³² To Profiat Duran, the ignorance of Jesus and his disciples is evident from the many errors in their citations of the Bible as well as from Jesus' apparent belief that reward and punishment in the afterlife are physical.³³ The balance between a Jesus who did not affirm the key theological errors of Christianity but was nonetheless very far from a role model appears in particularly striking fashion in Duran's analysis of a lengthy passage in John (6:47–66) in which Jesus promises eternal life to whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood. "Although this statement points to his foolishness and insanity, as the Jews indicated—and, in fact, many of his students were taken aback by it—it does not necessarily follow from it that the intention was that they actually eat his flesh and drink his blood."³⁴

Simon Duran repeated Profiat's assessment, citing the same evidence of errors in biblical citation, and described most of the Sermon on the Mount as a quintessential example of pietistic foolishness.³⁵ A century and a half later, Yair ben Shabbetai da Correggio was prepared to regard Jesus as a learned man who had studied with R. Yehoshua ben Perahiah but continued to insist on the ignorance of his disciples: "If he taught wisdom to his students, a negligible number actually absorbed it, because they were not men of culture."³⁶

An ignorant, foolish, even insane Jesus may have satisfied the psychic needs and resolved some of the historical questions of medieval Jews, but a key problem remained unresolved. Ignorance, foolishness, and insanity are not grounds

for execution. Since the Talmud as well as the Gospels assign responsibility for Jesus' execution to his own people, Jews were impelled not only to acknowledge responsibility but to argue that the decision was justified. What did a man who observed the Torah and never claimed to be divine do to deserve his fate? For the compartmentalizing polemicists of thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, this was no problem. Not only was Jesus a sorcerer; he also claimed to be God. In other contexts, as we have seen, they said that he disclaimed divinity, but this was not the place for that position. As it happens, however, it was precisely a Jew from thirteenth-century France who opened the door to a different, if highly problematic solution—and then refrained from walking through that door with more than one foot.

It is well known that when R. Yehiel of Paris was confronted in 1240 with the argument that the Talmud should be banned partly because of blasphemies against Jesus, he maintained that the Jesus of the Talmud and the Jesus of the Christians are two different people. The actual presentation, however, is far more complicated. R. Yehiel was initially confronted with a talmudic passage about a "Yeshu" who is punished in the afterlife with boiling excrement for mocking the words of the sages. Because the passage does not say "Jesus of Nazareth" (*Yeshu ha-Nozri*) and does not mention the latter's more serious sins, R. Yehiel denies that the two are one and the same. He then responds to a talmudic citation about the execution of Jesus of Nazareth for sorcery and for leading Jews into idolatry with a concession that this is the Christian Jesus. However, in the discussion of yet a third passage he concludes, on the basis of chronological considerations, that the Christian Jesus is never mentioned in the Talmud at all. Now, if his argument that the Jesus of the boiling excrement is not the Talmud's Jesus of Nazareth still stands, then R. Yehiel has not two Jesuses but three, two of whom came from Nazareth, and this is in fact strongly implied in the Christian response recorded in the Oxford manuscript of the Hebrew text and is explicitly stated in the Moscow manuscript.³⁷

This position would have made it possible to argue that the the execution of the Christian Jesus was primarily the responsibility of the Roman authorities or that only a handful of Jews were involved; in short, all the options of modern Jewish apologetics became available once rabbinic statements about Jesus' villainy and execution had been made to vanish into thin air. But R. Yehiel does nothing of the sort, and the edited Hebrew version retains his initial statement about the Christian Jesus as an inciter to idolatry. Whatever one thinks of the sincerity of the multiple Jesus theory, R. Yehiel found a way to neutralize some dangerous rabbinic statements, and yet the essential Ashkenazic evaluation of Jesus remains even in the text of this disputation.

In the fourteenth century, Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas made much stronger use of the theory of the two Jesuses in defending Judaism and the Talmud against renewed attack. For Moses, the lack of identity between the Talmud's Jesus and the hero of the New Testament is demonstrated not only by the chronological problem raised by R. Yehiel but by an additional, striking point.

The Jesus of the Talmud erected a brick and bowed to it (B. *Sanhedrin* 107b), while the Jesus of the Gospels was an uncompromising monotheist!³⁸

And so we return to our original question. Why was an observant Jew who made no claims of divinity executed by Jewish authorities?

Profiat Duran addressed this question only in passing as part of his argument that Jesus did not annul the law. “If the crucifixion stories about him are true, you will find that they condemned him to death not for destroying the Torah but for saying that he is the son of God and the Messiah.”³⁹ Duran, who was not a halakhist, does not seem disturbed by the fact that these accusations in themselves—given the assumption that “son of God” was not meant literally—do not clearly generate a death sentence according to Jewish law.⁴⁰ It would be much too facile to solve this problem by suggesting that Duran’s declared methodology of refuting Christianity from its own sources (*ke-fi ma’amar ha-omer*) means that he really did not believe what he said about Jesus and that his ultimate loyalty was to the talmudic reports about an inciter to idolatry. His entire discussion of the historical development of Christianity, which is beyond the purview of this essay, shows that he took New Testament evidence seriously and that he regarded both idolatry and the rejection of the law as later developments. In discussing when Jesus lived, he accords rabbinic tradition great respect but does not appear unequivocally bound by it. Thus, after examining Christian sources, he concludes that the statement of the “true sages” (*hakhmei ha-emet*) that Jesus was a student of R. Yehoshua ben Perahiah “appears [*yera’eh*] to be the truth.”⁴¹ I suppose one could insist on a literal translation of *yera’eh emet* as “is seen to be the truth,” but I doubt very much that this is correct. In the final analysis, Profiat Duran’s Jesus is that of a critical reading of the Gospels, not of a straightforward reading of the Talmud.

R. Simon Duran, who was a preeminent halakhist, could not avoid the question of Jesus’ capital crime, nor could he marginalize talmudic traditions, and the problem appears to have created a tension in his image of Jesus almost reminiscent of earlier Ashkenazic contradictions. In a lengthy passage borrowing many of Profiat Duran’s arguments, Simon maintained that Jesus made no claim of divinity and that the term “son of God” means the most exalted of men.⁴² In his general reconstruction of Jesus’ biography, however, the emphasis differs. There, the New Testament report that Jesus was executed for describing himself as the son of God is connected with the talmudic assertions that he led Israel astray (*hesit ve-hiddiah*, which is really a *terminus technicus* for encouraging idolatry) and that he set up a brick to which he bowed. This rabbinic report, which does not contend that Jesus claimed divinity for himself, is the historical truth, while the Gospel assertion that he was executed for claiming to be the son of God is a confused reflection of his condemnation for incitement to idolatry.⁴³ Through the miasma of New Testament misunderstanding, one can nonetheless glimpse the kernel of truth that reinforces talmudic tradition.

Thus, Profiat Duran’s assertion that “son of God” in the Gospels does not denote that divinity is a key element in the depiction of Jesus as a monotheist who never condoned idolatry. Simon Duran, while accepting his predecessor’s un-

derstanding of the Gospels' "son of God," sought what was for him the best of both worlds: a Jesus who never endorsed the Christian doctrine that he himself was God (a position confirmed by both Talmud and Gospels) but who incited Jews to worship a different, old-fashioned form of idolatry (the stone cult that the Talmud calls *Merqulis*) and who worshipped it himself—all this while affirming the eternity and inviolability of the Torah! In Simon Duran's case it may be that the assertions of Jesus' devotion to the law are indeed a purely tactical use of Christian evidence. ("We have cited their words verbatim to speak for us against those who believe in him by demonstrating that they have been untrue to Jesus' intention").⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it is hard to come away from much of *Keshet u-magen*, including the discussion of the apostles, without assuming that Duran was serious about the argument that Jesus observed the law, and this is a position that is very difficult to square with his endorsement of the talmudic account of an inciter to idolatry.

As the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance and early modern times, access to historical sources, interest in history, and a critical sense of the past changed the face of at least some historical literature. It is hardly necessary to say that among Jews, the quintessential example of these developments is the sixteenth-century Italian scholar Azariah de' Rossi, and it should come as no surprise that the next level of sophistication in the polemical reconstruction of the historical Jesus was reached by an Italian Jew of the seventeenth century.

Leone da Modena's *Magen va-herav* reflects philosophical sophistication, thorough familiarity with Christian literature, and an unusual degree of historical acumen. This last characteristic is manifest in Leone's analysis of the development of Christian doctrine, which cannot detain us here, but it is also evident in a brief chapter that attempts to paint a portrait of Jesus' beliefs and the unfolding of his career. Like Simon Duran, Leone tells us that he will utilize Christian and Jewish sources to produce his reconstruction, but the difference in both methodology and conclusions illustrates strikingly the differences of time, place, and author.

Leone begins with a vehement dismissal of an unnamed Jewish version of Jesus' career, which is surely *Toledot Yeshu*. "For various reasons, it is a disgrace for any Jew to believe it." He goes on to say with great confidence that from perusing "our books and theirs," he has attained an understanding of Jesus "which I believe to be as firmly true as if I had lived in his generation and sat with him." Jesus observed the Torah. If he had not done so, he would have had no credibility at all in that society. Rather, he rejected a number of minor practices, one of the first of which was the ritual washing of hands with a blessing, which probably accounts for a talmudic statement that whoever is lax with respect to this ritual is uprooted from the world (*Sotah 4b*).

We must remember, continues Leone, that this was a period of sectarian diversity, which has been described in historical works ranging from *Josippon* to Caroli Sigonii's *De Republica Hebraeorum*.⁴⁵ That Jesus himself identified with the Pharisees, who were the bearers of the true tradition, is evident from his statement that they sit on the seat of Moses. Despite this indication that he acknowl-

edged both the written and the oral law, his minor deviations alarmed the Sages, who feared that Sadducees, Boethusians, Essenes, and others would soon be joined by an additional sect. In response to their opposition, Jesus strengthened himself by claiming the mantle of son of God. This is not a claim of divinity but of a status higher than that of the prophets. Jesus was no fool; he knew perfectly well that even the masses would have stoned him had he made the preposterous assertion that a man who was seen to eat, drink, sleep, and defecate was God. He certainly could not have anticipated the incredible truth: that after his death people would actually concoct arguments to affirm such absurdities.⁴⁶

For all its spirited partisanship, this is serious history. It attempts to account for all the evidence; it utilizes secondary as well as primary historical literature; it dismisses contemptuously the fantasies of *Toledot Yeshu*; it examines historical context; it speculates in sober, informed fashion about the possible motivations, concerns, even the personal development of the major protagonists. Leone really cares about understanding the hero of the Gospels, so that his Jesus is not a stick figure; he has a texture that even Profiat Duran's Jesus lacks.

In light of Azariah de' Rossi's well-known skepticism about some historical material in the Talmud, the role of rabbinic traditions in Leone's reconstruction is particularly intriguing. He declares that he reached his conclusions on the basis of "our books and theirs," but the only Jewish material explicitly cited is *Josippon* and a single talmudic reference to washing one's hands. Even if we recognize the relevance of other rabbinic sources to his portrait of sectarianism, the absence of any reference to R. Yehoshua ben Perahiah's idolatrous student or to the man executed for sorcery and incitement to idolatry is striking. When Simon Duran produced a portrait of Jesus on the basis of our books and theirs, these talmudic passages took center stage. Unless we assume that Leone endorsed the two-Jesus theory, which strikes me as improbable in the extreme, he has silently rejected the historicity not only of *Toledot Yeshu* but of the major rabbinic sources as well.⁴⁷

Whatever one thinks of the number of Jesuses in antiquity, no one can question the multiplicity of Jesuses in medieval Jewish polemic. Many Jews with no interest at all in history were forced to confront a historical/biographical question that continues to bedevil historians to our own day. Once the issue was joined, it produced a series of analyses that reflect profound differences among varying Jewish centers in different periods, and it demonstrates a development in which Jews who deal with history in grudging, limited fashion, as if compelled by the proverbial demon, give way to polemicists who, within the limits of their time, seem inspired by the historical Muse.

Notes

1. For a list of the rabbinic passages, see H. H. Ben Sasson, "Disputations and Polemics," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 6: cols. 81–82. The standard collection and discussion of

Toledot Yeshu material remains Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach Jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1902).

2. Later Jews quite familiar with the Gospels had no trouble accepting this information at face value. See the *Nizzahon Vetus* (henceforth N.V.) in my *Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979; reprint, Northvale, N.J., 1996), sec. 202, p. 202 (English)=141 (Hebrew); sec. 205, pp. 203-4 (English)=142 (Hebrew), and my notes to both passages.

3. Daniel J. Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Qissat Mujadalat al-Usqf and Sefer Nestor ha-komer* (Jerusalem, 1996). On the impact of this work, see Joel Rembaum, "The Influence of *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer* on Medieval Jewish Polemics," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978): 155-85.

4. On violations of the Law, see *Nestor*, paragraphs 127, 135. On the identity of Jesus and his Father, see paragraphs 68, 145, and cf. the assertion in paragraph 150 that he contradicted himself on this point. On Jesus' loyalty to the positions of Judaism, see paragraphs 35-57, 63, 105. I have translated a version of paragraph 63 (on circumcision, Passover, etc.) which appears only in the Hebrew section (p. 124) of Lasker and Stroumsa's edition.

5. *Sefer Yosef ha-mekanne*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1970), 125-38.

6. N.V., sec. 194, p. 200 (English)=138-39 (Hebrew); secs. 197-99, p. 201 (Eng.)=140 (Heb.); sec. 207, pp. 204-5 (Eng.)=143 (Heb.). Contrast with sec. 9, p. 46 (Eng.)=7 (Heb.); sec. 50, p. 75 (Eng.)=34-35 (Heb.); sec. 67, p. 86 (Eng.)=44 (Heb.). On N.V. as an anthology (at least in part), see my discussion, *Jewish-Christian Debate*, 35-36. For the alternate version of the *Yosef ha-mekanne* critique of the New Testament, see Judah Rosenthal, "Bikkoret yehudit shel *Ha-Berit ha-hadashah* min ha-meah ha-yod-gimel," in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History, and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev*, ed. Charles Berlin (New York, 1971), Heb. sec., pp. 123-39.

7. N.V., sec. 168, p. 181 (Eng.)=119 (Heb.).

8. *Sefer Yosef ha-mekanne*, 132; *Kiev Festschrift*, 125 (without the reference to Matt. 28:18). By "another Ashkenazic collection," I refer to the nonphilosophical section of *Liqqutei R. Mosheh ben Shlomoh mi-Salerno*, unpublished edition by A. Posnanski, p. 35 (including the reference to Matt. 28:18). I am now convinced that this section of the work, which differs dramatically from the philosophical material published by S. Simon (*Mose ben Salomo von Salerno und seine philosophischen Auseinandersetzung mit den Lehren des Christentums* [Breslau, 1932]), is a Northern European polemical mélange.

9. *Sefer Yosef ha-mekanne*, 134. Cf. p. 54 for an indication that Jesus did claim divinity.

10. N.V., sec. 71, p. 89 (Eng.)=47 (Heb.). The verse about not coming to destroy the law was also cited by Meir of Narbonne, Parma MS, 4a, and "Moses of Salerno," Posnanski MS, 33. Peter Damian's *Dialogus inter Judaeum Requirentem et Christianum e Contrario Respondentem* (pt. 2 of his *Antilogus-Dialogus*) begins with a series of ten Jewish questions, each of which is prefaced by the phrase, "If Christ did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it" (PL 145:57-59). However, as I showed in detail in "St. Peter Damian: His Attitude toward the Jews and the Old Testament," *Yavneh Review* 4 (1965): 99-104, this section of Damian's polemic is borrowed from an essentially exegetical work by Isidore of Seville (*Quaestiones in Leviticum*, PL 83:336-39); it consequently proves nothing about actual Jewish citations of this verse.

11. N.V., sec. 79, p. 96 (Eng.)=52 (Heb.).

12. N.V., sec. 158, p. 173 (Eng.)=110 (Heb.), and see also sec. 184, p. 191 (Eng.)=129 (Heb.), and sec. 221, p. 215 (Eng.)=150 (Heb.).

13. N.V., sec. 157, p. 172 (Eng.)=109-10 (Heb.).

14. N.V., sec. 166, p. 178 (Eng.)=p. 116 (Heb.). See too *Sefer Yosef ha-mekanne*, 131; *Kiev Festschrift*, 129. Cf. *Nestor ha-komer*, par. 127.

15. N.V., sec. 171, pp. 182-83 (Eng.)=120 (Heb.). Cf. Meir of Narbonne's citation of

the leper story as contradicting the Christian assertion that Jesus annulled the commandments (*Milhemet mizvah*, Parma MS, 97b).

16. N.V., sec. 169, p. 181 (Eng.)=119 (Heb.); *Kiev Festschrift*, 125; "Moses of Salemo," Posnanski MS, 40.

17. See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York, 1961). Also see Haym Soloveitchik's comments in *Halakhah kalkalah ve-dimmuy 'azmi* (Jerusalem, 1985), 36, and for a somewhat later period, the discussion on pp. 79–81, where he speaks of "halakhic federalism." See also his possibly relevant observation in "Can Halakhic Texts Talk History?" *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 155, n. 2. Though the sources analyzed there are primarily Ashkenazic, the issue is the tendency of law, not just Ashkenazic halakhah, to "prefer local definitions"; still, a culture trained primarily in law is more likely to reflect this orientation in other contexts.

18. Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen*, in Abraham Halkin and David Hartman, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia, 1985), 98–99; *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah* 1.

19. Jacob ben Reuben, *Milhamot ha-Shem*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1963), 81, 146, 148–49; cf. 151, 152–53. Joseph Kimhi's *Sefer ha-berit* was written at about the same time as *Milhamot ha-Shem* and hence shares its distinction as a pioneering work.

20. 'Ezer ha-emunah, ed. Yehuda Shamir (*Rabbi Moses Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and His Book 'Ezer ha-emunah—A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy, Part II* [Coconut Grove, Fla., 1972]), 93. Moses' translation of *adimplere* is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Jacob ben Reuben twice asserted that Jesus declared that he had not come to add to the Torah of Moses (*Milhamot ha-Shem*, 81, 148). There are two readings of the talmudic citation of this passage (*B. Shabbat* 116b): either "I have not come to take away from the Torah of Moses or (*ve-lo*) to add to the Torah of Moses" or "I have not come to take away from the Torah of Moses but (*ella*) to add" to it. The first version, which corresponds to Jacob ben Reuben's citation, is also quoted by Simon Duran in his *keshet u-magen* (see n. 24, below), 4.

21. *Kelimat hagoyim*, in *Kitvei pulmus li-Profiat Duran*, ed. Frank Talmage (Jerusalem, 1981). Eleazar Gutwirth, in an article which makes the general point that polemic helped produce a critical historical sense, discussed *Kelimat ha-goyim* as his prime example; see "History and Apologetics in XVth Century Hispano-Jewish Thought," *Helmantica* 35 (1984): 231–42, which also contains several observations about Simon Duran. For a discussion of the context that produced Duran's approach, see Jeremy Cohen, "Profiat Duran's *The Reproach of the Gentiles* and the Development of Jewish anti-Christian Polemic," in *Shlomoh Simonsohn Jubilee Volume* (Tel Aviv, 1993), 71–84. Cohen's well-argued thesis, which sees Duran's approach as a response to Raymund Martini's *Pugio Fidei*, is, I think, partly correct, but I would formulate the polemical context somewhat differently.

22. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 24–25. (The discussion continues through p. 34.) Needless to say, my encomium to Duran does not mean that I necessarily endorse his interpretation.

23. *Ibid.*, 25.

24. Simon ben Zemah Duran, *Keshet u-magen: A Critical Edition*, ed. Prosper Murciano (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1975), 3–4; cf. 45. To preserve consistency of transliteration, I will be citing this edition as *Keshet u-magen*.

25. *Milhemet mizvah*, appended to *Keshet u-magen*, Makor reprint (Jerusalem, 1970), 28b–29a.

26. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 7 (full discussion on pp. 4–10).

27. *Milhamot ha-Shem*, 151; *Kiev Festschrift*, 126; Meir's *Milhemet mizvah*, Parma MS, 90b, 220a–b; N.V., sec. 181, pp. 188–89 (Eng.)=126–27 (Heb).

28. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 5.

29. *Keshet u-magen*, 24.

30. *Ibid.*, 16.

31. *Ibid.*, 15–21. I hope to examine the mixture of skepticism and credulousness with which Jews approached Christian sources on another occasion.

32. *Milhamot ha-Shem*, 96.

33. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 49–59, 20–21, 24. See also p. 40 for the assertion that John the Baptist, like Jesus, was a *hasid shoteh*. Gutwirth's suggestion ("History and Apologetics," 237) that the term "may reflect an association with the historical sect of 'hasidim' in talmudic times" seems to me highly improbable.

34. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 39.

35. *Keshet u-magen*, 38–39, 56–61.

36. Yair ben Shabbetai, *Herev pifiyyot*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1958), 65.

37. *Vikkuah R. Yehiel mi-Paris*, ed. R. Margaliyyot (Lwow, n.d.), 15–17.

38. 'Ezer ha-emunah, 141–42. Cf. my "Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack on Rabbinic Judaism," in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden, 1992), 128.

39. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 25, a statement repeated by Simon Duran in *Keshet u-magen*, 4. (The reference is to the account in Matthew 26:63–66.) Elsewhere, Profiat Duran maintained that Jesus considered himself superior even to Moses (4). Again, cf. the reiteration of this passage by Simon Duran, *Keshet u-magen*, 25.

40. See my remarks in "Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography: Yehezkel Kaufmann's Account of Jesus and Early Christianity," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. Leo Landman (New York, 1990), 167:

Kaufmann argues that Jesus could properly have been executed as a false prophet, even according to Mishnaic law, for refusing to provide a sign authenticating his messianic claims. In fact, a person who refused to provide a sign might well forfeit his right to be believed, but he would not forfeit his life. Only a prediction or sign that did not materialize would be grounds for execution, and nothing in the sources indicates that this had occurred. If Jesus claimed to be the Messiah but refused to produce a sign, the only evidence strong enough to justify his execution would be the fact that he died without redeeming the world. Jews presented that evidence to the court of history, but it was too late to present it to a court of law.

41. *Kelimat ha-goyim*, 63. This discussion makes it perfectly clear that Duran gave no precedence to a theory of two Jesuses.

42. *Keshet u-magen*, 22–25.

43. *Ibid.*, 13–15.

44. *Ibid.*, 4.

45. Bologna, 1582.

46. *Magen va-herav*, 43–45.

47. Because Profiat Duran's work explicitly focused on Christian sources exclusively, his ignoring of the crucial talmudic assertions is considerably less striking than Leone's. I am not suggesting that dismissing rabbinic material is the mark of a good historian. What is genuinely significant, however, is the transformation that allowed a rabbinic figure to place all the sources, including those in the Talmud, into the crucible of critical historical assessment.

Jewish History *and* Jewish Memory

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