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Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud:
A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack
on Rabbinic Judaism

The Jewish-Christian debate underwent a momentous transformation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From time immemorial, Jews and Christians had argued about the alleged Christological meaning of verses in the Hebrew Bible, and in the high middle ages Jews began to exhibit growing sophistication in their philosophical critique of the central dogmas of Christian faith. Since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries mark the maturation of the philosophical debate, their centrality to the history of polemic could well be defended on this basis alone¹. Nonetheless, these centuries were also marked by the growth of another, more innovative approach, which was fraught with acute danger for medieval Jewry. Christian polemicists began to study the Talmud.

Adumbrations of the Christian use of Rabbinic literature can be found before the thirteenth century, but these are at best a faint, barely audible accompaniment to the main themes of the debate, and in most polemics they are nowhere to be found. In the 1230's, however, Nicholas Donin began to press a threefold assertion: The Talmud contains absurdities, insults against Christians, and blasphemies against Jesus. His further assertion that it is another law replacing that of the Bible had potential consequences of the

The writing of this article began and ended under dramatically different circumstances. Most of the text was written when I was teaching, on two weeks notice, at the inaugural semester of the Moscow yeshiva founded by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, which opened as the first officially recognized institution of higher Jewish education in the Soviet Union (The Judaica Section of the Academy of World Civilizations). The last few pages of text were written on the plane returning to New York, slightly after the deadline for submission of the preliminary version before the conference. The only relevant books available to me were the Bible, the Talmud, and *Ezer HaEmunah*, although the inspiration provided by the extraordinary devotion of the yeshiva's students was more than sufficient compensation.

The footnotes, on the other hand, were written in the fall semester of 1989 when I was a fellow in the Eden-like environment of the Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia. It is a pleasure to thank the administration and staff of the Institute and of its library for providing the conditions for a rare and rewarding experience.

1 See Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, New York, 1977.

highest magnitude, but the real impact of that argument appears to have been contained and is in any case peripheral to our present concerns². Several decades later, Pablo Christiani refined and popularized an array of arguments purporting to demonstrate the truth of Christian dogmas from the Talmud itself. However disparate the two approaches may appear, medieval Christians did not regard them as contradictory: Rabbinic texts, despite their theological obtuseness and hostility toward Christianity, preserved elements of the ancient, pre-Talmudic traditions which, like the Hebrew Bible itself, affirmed the validity of Christian beliefs.

In his confrontation with Donin, R. Yehiel of Paris denied the identification of the Talmud's Jesus with that of the Christians, distinguished between the Gentiles of old and the Christians of today, and even remarked briefly that the *aggadah*, or non-legal material in Rabbinic literature, does not have the same binding force as Talmudic law³. The key points, however, were not fully developed, and it was left for later Jews to pursue the argument against an increasingly sophisticated Christian attack. The issue of *aggadah* was especially critical in dealing with Pablo's approach, and Nahmanides proffered the famous and controversial classification of Rabbinic texts in which *aggadot* are merely *sermones* that can be accepted or rejected at the discretion of the reader⁴. Nahmanides himself, though he clearly legitimated the simple rejection of an *aggadah*, also spoke of deeper meanings, which often enabled the Jewish polemicist to deflect a Christian argument without imputing error to the Talmudic sages.

With respect to Donin's attack, the crucial issue was the distinction between ancient Gentiles and medieval Christians, and this point achieved its fullest development outside the context of polemic. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, R. Menahem HaMeiri of Perpignan built upon the scattered, *ad hoc* remarks of various earlier halakhists and established a

2 See Ch. Merchavia, *HaTalmud BiRe'i HaNazrut*, Jerusalem, 1970; Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, Ithaca, 1982; Joel Rembaum, "The Talmud and the Popes: Reflections on the Talmud Trials of the 1240's," *Viator* 13 (1982): 203 - 223; Robert Chazan, "The Condemnation of the Talmud Reconsidered," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988): 11 - 30; cf. also my brief review of *The Friars and the Jews* in the *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 93.

3 *Vikkuah Rabbenu Yehiel MiParis*, ed. by S. Gruenbaum, Thorn, 1873. The point about *aggadah* is on p. 2.

4 *Kitvei Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, ed. by C. D. Chavel, Jerusalem, 1963, I, p. 308; Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. by Isadore Twersky, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, pp. 20 - 22; my review of "Maccoby's Judaism on Trial," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1986): 253 - 57 (esp. 254 - 55); Marvin Fox, "Nahmanides on the Status of Aggadot: Perspectives on the Disputation at Barcelona, 1263," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989): 95 - 109. For a general discussion of attitudes toward *aggadah*, see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1980, pp. 1 - 20.

category which he called “nations bound by religious mores”; the central thrust of this classification appears to be that these nations behave in a civilized fashion, but HaMeiri also asserted that they are free of idolatry. In the case of Christians, he explicitly maintained that although they have an erroneous conception of the Deity, they are monotheists nonetheless. While HaMeiri did not extend the practical halakhic consequences of his distinction much beyond established precedent, he spoke with a passionate conviction which is absent from his sources and creates a powerful impression of sincerity. Moreover, HaMeiri appears concerned with more than the unpleasant economic consequences that would result from applying certain Talmudic regulations to medieval Christians; he was also motivated by a sensitivity to the moral problem inherent in a legal code that forbids the returning of a lost item to a Gentile and permits the retention of funds that came into one’s possession because of miscalculation by a non-Jew. Such regulations, he argued, were never intended to apply to civilized monotheists and are hence irrelevant in contemporary practice⁵.

In the 1370’s, a Spanish Jew named Moses HaKohen of Tordesillas was confronted by the new Christian critique of the Talmud in all its force. By this time, Christian polemicists had begun to absorb and apply the arguments in Raymond Martini’s massive, late-thirteenth-century *Pugio Fidei*, and the works of the learned Jewish convert Abner of Burgos had become a major force in Jewish-Christian relations. Moses HaKohen had participated in a disputation forced upon the Jewish community of Avila, and subsequently wrote a polemical work entitled *‘Ezer Ha-Emunah (The Aid of Faith)* which no doubt reflected some of the arguments in the public disputation. The most important part of his work, however, bears no relation to that disputation. He informs us that a Christian student of Abner of Burgos approached him with a demand that he respond in private to a series of criticisms of Talmudic Judaism. Should he refuse, the Christian would preach a sermon that would be attended by both Christians and Jews in which he would impute “to the Jews every evil in the world in the presence of the Christian audience; he would list all the objectionable *aggadot* in the Talmud, and indicate that we curse them every day.” Moses, then, was presented with an “offer” he could not refuse, and the final section of *‘Ezer Ha-Emunah* is the first large scale example of a Jewish response to the mature Christian attack on the Talmud⁶.

5 See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, London, 1961, pp. 114 - 28; Ephraim E. Urbach, “Shitat HaSovlanut shel R. Menaḥem HaMeiri – Meqorah u-Migbeloteha,” in *Peraqim beToledot HaHevrah HaYehudit Bimei HaBeinayim U-Va’et HaHada-shah – Muqdashim LiProfessor Y. Katz*, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 34 - 40; J. Katz, “‘Od ‘al Sovlanuto haDatit shel R. Menaḥem HaMeiri,” *Zion* 46 (1981): 243 - 46; Yaaqov Blidstein, “Yaḥaso shel R. Menaḥem HaMeiri LaNokhri – Bein Apologetiqah LeHafnamah,” *Zion* 51 (1986): 153 - 66.

6 The text was edited in part II of Yehudah Shamir’s dissertation, *Rabbi Moses*

Though the primary context of this discussion is the threat to reveal an intolerable level of hostility to Christians, Abner's student utilized the full range of Christian approaches to the Talmud, including the discovery within its pages of support for Christian doctrine. Thus, we find the midrashic passage already cited by Pablo that the Messiah was born on the day of the Temple's destruction (*Lamentations Rabbah* 1:16, #51), a passage that presumably demonstrates that he must have already come, reinforced by the Rabbinic statement, made so many centuries ago, that he has been sitting in the gates of Rome (*B. Sanhedrin* 98a). Indeed, says the Christian, the Talmud even has positive things to say about Jesus himself (*Yer. 'Avodah Zarah* 40d)⁷. The contention that the Talmud can be scrutinized for doctrinally useful assertions despite its essential falsehood comes into bold relief when the Christian cites the famous view of R. Hillel that "Israel has no Messiah, for he has already been consumed in the days of Hezekiah" (*B. Sanhedrin* 99a). The second half of the statement, we are told, is untrue, but the first half demonstrates that Jews should abandon their vain hope that the Messiah is yet to come⁸. Moreover, the Christian cites several Messianic calculations in the Talmud which point to a period nearly a millennium earlier than the fourteenth century (*B. Sanhedrin* 97a - b)⁹.

The most interesting argument that the Talmud undermines belief in the future advent of the Messiah comes in the citation of two enigmatic passages from *Sanhedrin* (98a and 97a). The first of these asserts that "the son of David will not come until someone searching for a small fish for a sick person will be unable to find one," while the other says that he will not come until pockets will have been emptied of their very last penny¹⁰. Moses' adversary argues that neither of these conditions could ever be met, and therefore the Talmudic passages must be hinting at a message that differs from their superficial meaning: "Just as all this cannot happen, so the Messiah cannot come." Since the major Jewish line of defense was to explain *aggadot* non-literally, it is striking to find a Christian polemicist exploiting precisely such an approach, even if only to a very limited degree.

Abner's student goes on to cite Talmudic remarks that express what he regards as objectionable beliefs or which reflect badly on the status of Jews. Thus, the Rabbis assert that God encourages belief in idolatry so that He

Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and his Book 'Ezer Ha-Emunah - A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy, Coconut Grove, Florida, 1972 (henceforth E. H.). Part I, which contains Shamir's analysis, was later republished with the same title (Leiden, 1975); on the marginal value of this analysis, see Daniel J. Lasker's review, *Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter* 20 (June, 1977): 22, 24. The threat by Abner's student is described in E. H., p. 127.

7 E. H., pp. 153, 156, 154 - 55.

8 E. H., p. 131.

9 E. H., pp. 132 - 33.

10 E. H., p. 133.

might punish idolaters (*B. 'Avodah Zarah* 55a), and they allegedly understand the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 as a sacrifice to a power other than God (*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 46). One Talmudic sage said that from the time the Temple was destroyed, an iron barrier has separated the people of Israel from their Father in heaven (*B. Berakhot* 32b), and another passage maintains that whoever persecutes Israel attains the highest office (*B. Gittin* 56b and *B. Sanhedrin* 104b)¹¹.

All these arguments, however, are secondary to the crucial assertion: The Talmud is replete with passages that reflect such hostility toward Christians that the toleration of Jews in a Christian society must be called into the most serious question. Because of the important work of Jeremy Cohen, we have become accustomed to regarding the "other law" argument as the most dangerous to the fundamental toleration of Jews; if Jews do not really observe the Hebrew Bible, one of the standard rationales for tolerating them would be jeopardized. On the other hand, the arguments from blasphemy and the like, however threatening they may have been, could be dealt with in the final extremity through the censorship of a handful of Talmudic texts. In fact, however, if Jewish security was not seriously undermined by these attacks, the Jewish *sense* of security certainly was. Of the various factors that may have motivated the later Luther to advocate hair-raising forms of persecution against Jews, I am persuaded that an important consideration was his reading of Margaritha's *The Whole Jewish Faith*, which detailed attacks against Christianity in Jewish texts and ritual¹². In our case, Moses HaKohen's adversary explicitly and repeatedly raised the question of Christian toleration of people who curse and deride the majority faith; the threat raised at the outset of the discussion was never allowed to fade.

The list of the Talmud's offenses included a variety of disturbing allegations. While Christians actually pay a higher fine for assaulting a Jew than for

11 E. H., pp. 146, 148, 157, 143.

12 The point is not merely that Luther used Margaritha but that the material in *The Whole Jewish Faith* may have helped transform his attitude toward the Jews. For a survey of the literature on Luther and the Jews, see Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten*, Munich, 1972, and for a recent analysis see Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531 - 1546*, Ithaca, 1986. See also the studies of Heiko A. Oberman, which tend to emphasize the continuities in Luther's stance (*The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 93 - 137; *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, New Haven and London, 1989, pp. 292 - 97). For the argument that Luther changed his position on the Jews primarily because of the impact of new information, see Gerhard O. Forde, "Luther and the Jews: A Review and Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Luther, Lutherans, and the Jewish People: A Study Resource*, 1977, prepared by the American Lutheran Church, pp. 6 - 20. Despite the apologetic context of the publication (which does not mention Margaritha), and despite the undoubted relevance of other considerations, the argument deserves to be taken seriously.

striking a fellow Christian, the Talmud says that a Gentile who hits a Jew is guilty of a capital offense (*B. Sanhedrin* 58b) while a Jew who strikes a fellow Jew would clearly be treated less harshly. Such discrimination also extends to liability for damage to property (*M. Bava Qamma* 4:3) and to the ruling that the obligation to return a lost item is applicable only if the owner is a Jew (*M. Makhshirin* 2:8; cf. *B. Bava Mezi'a* 24a - b). The Rabbis maintain that the best of the Gentiles deserves to be killed (*Yer. Qiddushin* 66c). Jews dare to call Christian holidays “days of catastrophe” (e. g., *M. 'Avodah Zarah* 1:1) while living in Christian lands; they curse Christians, their Churches, their governments, even their cemeteries (*B. Berakhot* 58b). The blessing upon seeing a Jewish king is “Blessed is He who has granted a portion of His glory to those who fear Him”; for Gentile kings the final phrase becomes merely “to flesh and blood” (*B. Berakhot* 58a). Jews are told not to rent homes to Gentiles (*M. 'Avodah Zarah* 1:8) and not to sell arms to the very people who protect them (*Tos. 'Avodah Zarah* 2:4). They compare Gentiles to dogs (*Mekhilta Mishpatim* 20) and assert that the contamination that the primeval serpent inserted into Eve was eliminated from the Jews at Sinai but not from other nations (*B. 'Avodah Zarah* 22b and *B. Yevamot* 103b)¹³.

It is evident from this summary that the Christian attack was based upon both the legal and the non-legal material in the Talmud – upon the *halakhah* as well as the *aggadah*. Hence, if the labeling of this section of the book as “the debates concerning the *aggadot*” is the work of Moses himself rather than of a copyist, it is particularly interesting. Although Moses never denies the authoritativeness of Talmudic *halakhah*, he would like to create the impression that the entire dispute revolves around passages that do not stand at the center of the Talmudic corpus. The question of the binding force of *aggadah* had been introduced into the Barcelona disputation by Nahmanides in an effort to undermine the fundamental thrust of Pablo’s argument. The issue, however, is an extremely sensitive one, since the Jewish polemicist runs the risk of vanquishing his Christian opponent only to discover that his Jewish audience has lost respect for the Talmudic rabbis. Moses HaKohen’s polemic is an early, revealing example of the delicate line that Jews had to tread in confronting an extraordinarily complex challenge.

Moses begins with an affirmation of faith in all of Rabbinic literature which becomes steadily more ambiguous as his discussion continues and ultimately encompasses sharp disagreements with Rabbinic assertions. “I believe,” he writes, “that all the words of the sages are true. Nonetheless, the Talmud is not a homogeneous work.” The Rabbis said that one does not refute *aggadah*, and the reason is that there is no point in disagreeing with material that does not contain binding instruction.

Moses continues with an interesting typology of *aggadot* and an even more interesting application of that typology. 1. Some *aggadot* result from the

¹³ E. H., pp. 134, 154, 134 - 36, 144 - 45, 151, 144, 154.

teacher's desire to lift his students' spirits before teaching them. 2. In other cases, he needed to wake them up by making astonishing remarks, as in the observation that a single Jewish woman during the Egyptian bondage would give birth to six hundred thousand children (*Mekhilta Beshallah, Massekhta deShira* 9). 3. A rabbi may have wished to make a profound observation inappropriate for the masses, and so he cloaked it in a parable that would be taken literally by the ignorant and figuratively by the wise. For such a genre, no less a work than the Song of Songs serves as a legitimating precedent. 4. A sage who had a dream bordering on divine inspiration would sometimes recount the experience as if he had been awake. 5. Finally, the Talmud contains extravagant stories and assertions that may have a deeper meaning or may simply be exaggerations along the lines of the Scriptural passage that speaks of the cities of Canaan as "large and fortified to the heavens" (Deuteronomy 1:28)¹⁴.

This typology is followed by a carefully calibrated, almost exquisitely poised formulation: "With respect to all these *aggadot* that I have mentioned, if it is an *aggadah* that appears reasonable, I will believe it as is; if, on the other hand, it is highly unreasonable, then if I wish I will defend its wisdom by believing that its author intended a meaning that eludes me, and if I wish I will not believe it, since the author may have said it for one of the reasons that I have listed above."¹⁵ The key point here is that disbelief is not disbelief and error is not error. The decision not to believe is specifically placed within the framework of the author's typology, and none of his categories include error or even genuine falsehood. Neither exaggerations nor parables nor intentionally astonishing statements are unqualifiedly false, and prophetic dreams are among the highest forms of truth. The analogies to the Song of Songs and the verse in Deuteronomy demonstrate even to Christians that the word of God itself contains surface falsehoods; rejection of the literal meaning of a text hardly undermines its standing and authority. At this stage, Moses' concession is no concession at all.

Nevertheless, as the discussion progresses and becomes more specific, the willingness to reject *aggadot* gradually grows until it reaches remarkable proportions. A particularly striking aspect of Moses' argument is that he will oppose an aggadic statement to a biblical one and triumphantly assert that the aggadic passage stands refuted. In the context of Christian arguments about the absurdity of the *aggadah*, such an approach appears self-defeating, but where Christians cite the Talmud to demonstrate Christianity or refute Jewish beliefs, this is an argument of great, ironic force. In the final analysis, do Christians prefer the Bible or the Talmud?

The first, relatively moderate example of this argument comes in response to the Christian citation of a Talmudic passage describing the names in Isaiah

14 E. H., pp. 128 - 29.

15 E. H., p. 129.

9:5 as names of the Messiah. Since medieval Jewish exegesis avoided a Messianic understanding of a verse that arguably spoke of a child named “Mighty God” and “Eternal Father,” this passage gave considerable aid and comfort to a Christian polemicist. Moses refutes the argument in predictable fashion by pointing to an alternative Rabbinic position and arguing that even the cited view does not require belief in the Messiah’s divinity. But he also maintains that “even if the *aggadah* were as you say, I should surely believe the prophecy of Isaiah including the verses in that very same passage which indicate without a doubt that this was said of Hezekiah rather than the aggadic statement of a Talmudic sage.” Similarly, in response to Christian citations of Talmudic statements suggesting that the Messiah must already have come, Moses provides alternative interpretations, but he also suggests that the citations are in any case irrelevant in light of biblical evidence that the Messianic age is yet to be¹⁶.

Later in the work, Moses cites biblical verses to undermine the Talmudic observation that the persecutors of Israel attain the highest office even though that observation was itself buttressed by the citation of Lamentations 1:5. In this case, however, the tactic was reinforced by another clever but forced assertion. In *B. Gittin* 56b, the deceased Titus, in the midst of his richly deserved suffering in the afterlife, advises a questioner that despite Israel’s pre-eminence in the world to come, joining the Jewish people is too difficult. The sensible course, then, is to attain high station in this world by persecuting them. Moses quotes a series of verses to demonstrate that oppressing Israel brings punishment even in this world, but he formulates this as a refutation not of the Talmud but of Titus. “I should surely believe the prophets rather than the wicked Titus, who was our enemy and destroyed our Temple and our city.” The problem, as Moses is well aware, is that R. Yoḥanan and not Titus made the identical remark in *B. Sanhedrin* 104b. In an aside to the reader, Moses suggests that if a Christian should quote the latter passage, he should be told that R. Yoḥanan was discussing the past rather than the present or future. The persecutors of Israel “attained” – not “attain” – the highest rank (*kol hamezer le-Yisrael na’asah* – not *na’aseh-rosh*). This ploy was unavailable to Moses in dealing with the passage in *Gittin* since Titus was currently giving advice on the basis of this verse; in *Sanhedrin*, where the refuted party would have to have been R. Yoḥanan, it was available, and Moses did not hesitate to use it¹⁷.

In this passage, then, Moses was not willing to reject the words of a Talmudic sage on the basis of biblical evidence. Elsewhere, however, he does – or almost does – precisely that in surprisingly sharp fashion. In *Berakhot* 32b, R. Eleazar cites Ezekiel 4:3 to demonstrate that since the destruction of the Temple an iron barrier has separated Israel from its Father in heaven. Since

16 E. H., pp. 130, 133.

17 E. H., pp. 143 - 44.

the proof-text refers to a barrier outside the city of Jerusalem and not to a partition between God and Israel, "R. Eleazar," says Moses, "could not legitimately adduce the slightest evidence for his position from this verse, not even by way of an *asmakhta* [i. e., a biblical citation utilized to support a point without reference to the straightforward meaning of the verse]." He softens the blow slightly as he continues, but only after reiterating his thorough, unequivocal rejection of the Talmudic rabbi's exegesis: "This verse, then, constitutes no evidence whatsoever for R. Eleazar's statement ...; but since I am concerned with his words and with his honor, I will explain his statement, but in a way that deviates from his own reason." Thus, we do not quite have the rejection of a Rabbinic statement on Scriptural grounds, but we do have the rejection of a Rabbinic interpretation of the Bible on the grounds that it cannot be sustained by a careful examination of the text. And despite Moses' effort to explain R. Eleazar's essential statement, the reader surely finishes the discussion with the unmistakable impression that rejection of that statement is a viable, legitimate option¹⁸.

Finally and remarkably, Moses is prepared to utilize the Bible to reject even the sort of *aggadah* that the Christian cites to demonstrate the objectionable beliefs in the Talmud. As we have already seen, this appears to be a self-defeating concession to the Christian argument. Apparently, however, Moses regarded such an attack primarily as an effort to attribute these beliefs to Judaism itself, and he was therefore prepared to disassociate himself from them with a vigor that is almost heedless of the impact upon the Talmud.

Moses' Christian interlocutor had cited the Talmudic assertion that God encourages idolaters in their folly so that He may destroy them. Moses begins his reply with the standard remark that *aggadot* have no legal consequences and often represent the opinion of a single scholar. In this case, he continues, he does not believe this *aggadah* in accordance with its plain meaning because it contradicts the Bible, "and I believe the words of Jeremiah and David rather than the *aggadah*." Again, "How can I abandon belief in the words of a prophet of God and believe an *aggadah* that says the opposite of the prophecies?" What follows is a telling example of the inner turmoil caused by this issue. Moses had begun by denying his belief in the "plain meaning" of the *aggadah*, and continued with the very strong language contrasting the Talmudic statement and the Bible. Under the impact of his argument, he then allows himself to make the remarkable assertion that the Talmudic rabbi said "something improper" (*davar shelo kehogen*). Immediately, however, he continues with a partial defense of the "improper" statement; on various occasions, after all, the Bible tells us that God helps the already wicked on their road to disaster¹⁹. Is the statement, then, improper? Is it true? Does it have a deeper meaning? Does it contradict the Bible? At various points in a

18 E. H., pp. 157 - 58.

19 E. H., pp. 146 - 47.

very brief passage, Moses appears to give an affirmative answer to all these questions. Clearly, he preferred transparent and logically dubious tergiversations to the painful alternatives of a full defense or a candid rejection of this *aggadah*. The strategy asserting that *aggadot* are not binding while nonetheless attempting to explain each problematic passage was sensible and often effective, but it did not always obscure the tensions that beset Moses both as a polemicist and as a believing Jew.

Whatever the difficulties raised by Christian citations of Talmudic passages to demonstrate either Christian truth or Rabbinic error, they do not compare in their level of danger with allegations of extreme hostility toward Gentiles (read: Christians) in classical Jewish texts. For the most part, such passages were halakhic rather than aggadic and could consequently not be dismissed as non-authoritative. The central Jewish response, then, rested on the distinction between ancient pagans and medieval Christians, and Moses utilized this approach in a consistent, extreme, and intriguing fashion.

The terms "Gentile" (*goy*) and "Noahide," he says, do not apply to Christians, who are called *Nozrim* and not *goyim*²⁰. On one level, this is simply a linguistic assertion, which gains credibility from the fact that Christians occasionally used the term Gentile to mean a non-Christian. Thus, when Moses transliterates the word Gentiles into Hebrew as the proper translation of *goyim*, he is, I think, consciously evoking this Christian usage. The assertion that "Noahide," whose plain meaning is clearly inclusive, refers only to non-Christians is even more difficult to defend. On one occasion, Moses makes it with no effort at a reasoned argument; elsewhere, he notes the Rabbinic observation that the Noahides violated their commandments, and he may be implying that Christians observe these obligations and are hence excluded from the Talmudic category²¹. Nonetheless, even in that passage, the assertion that Noahides are called Gentiles (and hence non-Christians) is apparently made independently of this implicit argument. If the Talmud meant *Nozrim*, it would have said so.

Moses' argument, however, goes well beyond language. One of the central contexts in which halakhists had distinguished between the Gentiles of the Middle Ages and those of the Talmudic period concerned the prohibition against doing business with non-Jews on their holidays. Jacob Katz has argued persuasively that the permissive rulings on this issue before the Meiri involve *ad hoc* assertions that do not reflect a fundamental reevaluation of Christianity²². Moses HaKohen, however, did not read Katz's work, and he responds to the Christian complaint that Jews call Gentile holidays "days of catastrophe" by reference to halakhic authorities who excluded medieval Christians from this prohibition.

20 E. H., pp. 134 - 35.

21 E. H., pp. 134, 154.

22 *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, pp. 33 - 36, 44 - 45.

He begins by pointing to a Talmudic remark that “Gentiles outside the land of Israel are not idolaters but merely follow the custom of their ancestors” (*B. Hullin* 13b). In the standard text of the Talmud, the word “Gentiles” in this passage in *nokhrim*; Moses, however, quotes it as *goyim* and explicitly refers it to Christians. The irony in this quotation is therefore nothing less than excruciating. The linchpin of Moses’ fundamental approach has been that the term *goyim* necessarily excludes Christians, while here he could not resist citing an extremely tempting Talmudic passage where he must ignore, indeed contradict, the core of his argument²³.

Moreover, says Moses, Rashi explicitly asserted in this context that Christians are not idolaters. Thus, the permissive halakhic ruling becomes the basis for a theological reevaluation of Christianity on the grounds that such a reevaluation must have been the basis of the ruling. Moses then continues with an argument which, in a different form, plays a key role in a famous ruling of the Tosafists. Christian holidays, he says, are dedicated to “the disciples of Jesus and those who accepted suffering or death for his faith. You do not, however, render them divine by believing in them; rather, you believe in God alone.”²⁴ Until the last phrase, this argument is analogous to the Tosafist assertion that a Jew needn’t be concerned about entering a business arrangement that may lead a Christian to take an oath. Christians, after all, swear in the name of saints to whom they ascribe no divinity²⁵. *Tosafot*, however, raises the further question that Christians also swear in the name of God while having Jesus of Nazareth in mind. Here the Tosafists provide the dual reply that Jesus is not named explicitly and the intention is in any case to the Creator of heaven and earth. The second part of the answer cannot apparently stand on its own; had Jesus been mentioned explicitly, Jews would have been forbidden to bring about such an oath. Elsewhere, I have described this tension-laden position as the perception of Christianity as idolatrous monotheism or monotheistic idolatry²⁶. Moses’ discussion certainly retains some of this tension. Though Christians serve God alone, he considers it important to note that the holidays are dedicated to saints rather than to Jesus. At the same time, the phrase “You believe in God alone” is consid-

23 E. H., pp. 35 - 36. One could imagine an assertion that if the *goyim* outside of the land of Israel are not considered idolaters, this is true of Christians *a fortiori*. Moses, however, would probably have been puzzled by the suggestion that genuine idolaters somehow cease to be idolaters because of a change of location.

24 E. H., p. 136.

25 *Tosafot Sanhedrin* 63b, s. v. *asur* ; *Tosafot Bekhorot* 2b, s. v. *shemma*. The best text of the passage is in R. Yeruham b. Meshullam, *Sefer Toledot Adam VeHavvah*, Venice, 1553, 17:5, p. 159b.

26 See my “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. by Leo Landman, New York, 1990, p. 152.

erably stronger than *Tosafot*'s "their intention is to the Creator of heaven and earth." It is, in fact, so strong that the reader is left wondering about the need to make the point about the saints at all.

Elsewhere, Moses' assertions of Christian monotheism are so emphatic that they evoke the most extreme passages in the Meiri. The Talmudic curse against pagan Temples, he says, has no application to Christian Churches because "you do not worship idolatry, as I have already written. In your houses of worship, you pray to God alone, for Jesus said..., 'You may not bow down to another God,' and he also said, 'And Him shall you serve.' And the truth is that you are careful about idolatry."²⁷ It is a matter of no small interest that Jewish polemicists who cited such remarks by Jesus generally did so to attack contemporary Christianity for failing to heed the admonitions of its founder; here we find precisely the reverse.

Moses then goes even further. Katz regards the Meiri's insistence that Jewish heretics are worse than Jewish converts to Christianity as the most remarkable assertion that he makes, one with "no parallel in the whole of mediaeval Hebrew literature." In *'Ezer HaEmunah*, the same argument is made – at least implicitly – to deflect the allegation that the curse against heretics in the Jewish liturgy is directed against contemporary Christians. Moses' antagonist first cites the text as "Let there be no hope for the apostates (*la-meshummadim*), and let the informers (*malshinim*) be destroyed in a moment"; he comments that the first clause refers to Jewish converts to Christianity and the second to Christians, whom Jews call heretics (*minim*) and enemies. Later, Moses himself cites the second clause as "Let the *minim* be destroyed in a moment," which is almost certainly the correct reading in the earlier citation of this passage as well. In his response, he argues that although *meshummadim* indeed refers to converts in popular parlance, its proper technical meaning is Jews who habitually commit certain transgressions, as in the phrase, "a *meshummad* with respect to that transgression." The technical term for a convert is a *memir*. In other words, a habitual sinner deserves to be cursed; a convert to Christianity does not.

As for the *minim* who should be destroyed in a moment, this refers to those "who do not believe in the Creator, who deny reward and punishment, hell and heaven, and who possess no Torah and commandments. You, on the other hand, have a powerful faith in the Creator; the difference is only that you believe in the trinity, which we reject in favor of absolute unity. Moreover, you are the possessors of Torah and commandments." This is a passage that could have been (and may have been) taken directly from the Meiri, who also spoke of Christianity as a non-idolatrous religion which is flawed by a misunderstanding of the precise nature of God²⁸. The Meiri's position remains more significant because of its chronological priority, its

27 E. H., p. 137.

28 See E. H., pp. 136, 138; *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, pp. 121 - 24.

distinguished provenance, and its non-polemical context, but Moses' work reflects the impact and polemical utility of this approach. I am also inclined to think that despite the implausible arguments that occasionally emerge in the discussion, we are dealing with a position which Southern European Jews had begun to internalize and which – at least in its fundamental outlines – Moses sincerely believed.

In some contexts, Moses limits the definition of "Gentile" even further by referring to the seven nations of ancient Canaan. The Talmud had derived a prohibition against selling homes to Gentiles in the land of Israel from Deuteronomy 7:2, which indeed refers to the Canaanites, and proceeded to add a Rabbinic prohibition against rentals as well. Moses' interlocutor cites the passage without the limiting condition about the land of Israel. Moses points out the condition, notes that the matter is disputed in the Talmud itself, and then argues that the biblical context requires us to restrict this law to pagans of the past. The reasons that the Rabbis cite for this prohibition, says Moses, are that the Gentile brings in idols and that the home would then be without a *mezuzah*. Although the first explanation would appear to apply to all idolaters and the second to all non-Jews, Moses nonetheless quotes these reasons and immediately asserts, "You have, then, clear evidence that all these matters were said only about the seven idolatrous nations." The biblical context and the polemical need are more than sufficient to sweep aside all ambiguity²⁹.

Moses proceeds to introduce the seven nations even into a context where the supporting biblical argument is considerably less clear. The Bible recommends that non-kosher meat be given to dogs or sold to Gentiles. Since the type of meat given to the former is regarded as superior to the type sold to the latter, a Rabbinic text draws the apparently logical conclusion. Moses' outraged antagonist asks why the Jews do not delete such a passage from their literature in order to save themselves from acute danger. Here again Moses is not content to refer the remark to ancient idolaters in general. Both the Bible and the Rabbis, he says, were discussing the people who are called *Cananeos*. It is impossible not to speculate that the sudden use of the Latin term may be intended to underscore the relationship between Canaanites in particular and dogs (*canes*). That the biblical Canaanites, who were marked for destruction, were the intended recipients of this food is far from self-evident, but the genre that we are examining is hardly disinterested biblical exegesis³⁰.

29 E. H., pp. 145 - 46. See *B. 'Avodah Zabrah* 20a, 20b - 21a. Had Moses omitted the two reasons that he cites and restricted himself to the concern that rentals might lead to sales, his argument that the law is restricted to Canaanites would have been far more plausible and effective.

30 E. H., pp. 151 - 52, footnoted passage. See Exod. 22:30 and the *Mekhilta* there; Deut. 14:21. Cf. the *Nizzahon Vetus* in my *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, 1979, Nr. 212, Eng. sec., p. 207 = Heb. sec., p. 145, where the author applies the biblical text to contemporary Christians with a sense

Whatever the plausibility of Moses' biblical argumentation, the emphasis on the Bible which we saw in the discussion of *aggadah* persists in these passages as well. It is his standard practice to demonstrate that the rabbinic statements under attack are supported by proof-texts, and all biblical proof-texts obviously predate Christianity³¹. Since the Rabbis must have referred to the same people that the biblical author had in mind, Christians are consistently and conveniently excluded.

Finally, no list of Talmudic passages offensive to Christianity could be complete without reference to the assertion in *B. Gittin* 57a that Jesus is being punished in boiling excrement. Here, Moses' response is of extraordinary interest. First, he proffers the old argument of R. Yehiel of Paris that the chronological context of the Talmudic discussion of Jesus demonstrates that the Rabbis were not referring to the founder of Christianity. Not only did this Jesus live too early; he was executed in Lydda rather than Jerusalem. Moses then produces a response which fits perfectly into his own extremely positive evaluation of the theology of Christianity and of Jesus, but which is simply startling to the reader of earlier Jewish polemic. The Jesus of the Talmud erected a brick and bowed to it (*B. Sanhedrin* 107b [uncensored version]); the Jesus of the Christians, as Moses has already noted, was an uncompromising monotheist who insisted on the worship of God alone. Moses proceeds to further attenuate the impact of the passage by assigning a symbolic meaning to the medium of Jesus' punishment. If Jesus is not Jesus and boiling excrement is not boiling excrement, there is not much left for Christians to criticize³².

The assertion that the Talmud attacks Christians in general and Jesus in particular goes back, as we have seen, at least to Nicholas Donin. *'Ezer HaEmunah* testifies to the sharpening of this assertion by the addition of the allegation that Christian kings are a particular object of attack. Yosef Yerushalmi has pointed out the special role played by the royal image in the consciousness of late medieval Iberian Jewry. Jews came to recognize that their one source of protection in the face of an increasingly hostile populace was a sympathetic king³³. In light of this development, the danger of this new charge can scarcely be exaggerated.

of dismissive superiority remarkable even for that work; see also the notes ad loc. (p. 329). For a humanitarian explanation arguing that the non-kosher food given to dogs is unhealthful to human beings, see Ibn Ezra's citation (to Exod. 22:30) of an earlier Moses HaKohen.

31 See, for example, the two citations in E. H., p. 154, and cf. p. 140.

32 E. H., pp. 140 - 43.

33 *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the Shevet Yehudah*, Cincinnati, 1976, esp. pp. 35 - 66. Note too A. Gross's observation that late medieval Iberian exegetes of the Book of Esther tended to view Ahasuerus favorably in light of their general attitude toward royalty. See his "Hishtaqqefut Gerushei Sefarad u-Portugal bePerush Megillat Ester," *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of*

Moses' antagonist makes a special point of maintaining that the curse against "the wicked kingdom" is aimed at Christian kings³⁴. He distinguishes, as we have seen, between the blessings recited upon seeing a Gentile and a Jewish king³⁵. In the passage concerning Gentiles and dogs, he goes out of his way to say, "Thus, you have regarded us as dogs, and this includes our king."³⁶ For his part, Moses not only responds to such explicit charges; he too introduces references to the king where there appears to be no compelling need to do so. The Christian use, or misuse, of the Rabbinic statement that the best of the Gentiles should be killed can once again be traced to Donin, and Moses deals with it in standard fashion. But his initial reaction – and one suspects that it is based upon such a Christian understanding of the statement – is that Jews are suspected of wanting to kill the king, who is the best of the Gentiles³⁷. He consequently asserts that it is inconceivable that Jews should want to do this. Not only does the Mishnah instruct us to pray for the welfare of the kingdom; without the protection of the king, we are subject to slaughter and despoliation.

"God forbid," Moses writes elsewhere, "that we should curse our king, who serves as our shield, protector and savior from all adversity, for the Jews have no salvation except from the Creator, may He be blessed, and from the kings and princes. If we were in the hands of the masses who would be without fear of the king and princes, we would not have the slightest hope of survival or salvation."³⁸ Even though God has placed a barrier between Himself and His people, he has inspired kings and princes to feel compassion toward us³⁹. As for the blessings, here too the Talmud is speaking about ancient pagan kings; indeed, since the blessings for Jewish and Gentile rulers were presumably introduced simultaneously, the latter blessing must have been intended for Gentiles who ruled at a time when there were also Jewish kings⁴⁰. Did Moses really recite the blessing, "Who has granted a portion of

Jewish Studies, 1986, sec. 2, vol. 1, p. 155. A similar phenomenon was pointed out in a recent Master's thesis by my student Hershel Bessin on R. Joseph Hayyon's commentary to Esther (Bernard Revel Graduate School, Yeshiva University, 1989).

34 E. H., p. 134.

35 E. H., p. 144.

36 E. H., p. 151.

37 E. H., p. 134.

38 E. H., p. 136: cf. also p. 134. Note too the sentiments expressed by the Ashkenazic author of the *Nizzahon Vetus*, who refused to admit that Jeremiah's curse (17:5) against anyone "who trusts in man" could refer to anything other than the attribution of divinity to a human being. It is, after all, impossible not to place one's reliance on kings and princes. Despite the polemical usefulness of the argument, the underlying sentiment seems real enough. See *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, Nr. 67, Eng. sec., p. 86 = Heb. sec., p. 44.

39 E. H., p. 158.

40 E. H., p. 144.

His glory to those who fear Him” (rather than “to flesh and blood”) when seeing Christian kings? Despite my inclination to regard his position as essentially sincere, that would be scanned.

‘Ezer HaEmunah is not a great polemical work, but it is an exceedingly important one. Few books illustrate so well the transition from an assertive, confident, sometimes almost celebratory Jewish polemical literature to one of fear, defensiveness, and caution. Ashkenazic polemic in particular had almost reveled in the sharp denunciation of Christians and their faith, and the far more polite disputation of Nahmanides is still marked by the boldness and serene confidence not only of a great man but of an age which is just beginning to feel the cutting edge of a new and deadly attack. In the fourteenth century, Iberian Jews were faced with a massive paradox that they could not exploit. Hostile, intolerant Christians attacked Jews for being hostile and intolerant. It is not a pleasant sight to watch Moses HaKohen’s attempt to reevaluate Talmudic material while conceding by his silence – and sometimes by more than silence – the kindness and benevolence of late medieval Christian society. And this paradox may be eclipsed by an even greater one. The pressures of the new Christian attack may well have been instrumental in broadening and deepening a sincere Jewish reinterpretation of sacred texts in a direction that created a genuinely more positive attitude toward the religion of the oppressor. The transition so painfully evident in *‘Ezer HaEmunah* is a transition not only in the history of polemic but in medieval Jewish history at large. Rarely has a polemical work so captured the spirit of an age.

Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter

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