

TRANSLATION

KIMHI'S POLEMICS WITH CHRISTIANITY

BY FRANK TALMAGE*

THE KIMHI FAMILY

Among the families of Sages which went to Provence because of the persecution of the fanatical Moslem Almohades ("the Uniter") in Spain in 1148, was the Kimhi family: Rabbi Joseph (1105-1170) and his son Moshe (d. circa 1190). In the city of Narbonne, a centre of Jewish learning, they were grammarians and Bible commentators.¹ Rabbi Joseph, among the first translators of scientific literature from Arabic to Hebrew, wrote, in addition to interpretations of the Old Testament, the grammar books "*Sefer ha-Zikkaron*" and "*Sefer ha-Galui*". His son Moshe continued his father's tradition in writing Bible commentaries and books of linguistics, such as "*Mahalakh Shevilei ha-Da'at*" and "*Sefer Tahboshet*". The second son of Rabbi Joseph, R. David Kimhi (1160-1255), lost his father when he was a boy, and studied Torah and philosophy under his brother Moshe, whom he called "my brother, my

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ספר הברית וויכוחי רד"ק עם הנצרות, הוסיף מברא והערות אפרים תלמג; ספריית "דורות", הוצאת מוסד ביאליק, ירושלים, תשל"ד.

(F. Talmage, *The Book of the Covenant and Other Writings*, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 7-18. Apart from the text of "*Sefer ha-Berit*" the volume contains sections of Radak's commentaries on the Psalms (Ps. 2, 22, 45, 72, 87 and 110) and the disputation which is attributed to Radak.

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1) We have no information about their source of earnings. It appears that Rabbi Joseph was a professional teacher. Both he and his son (in the introduction to his commentary on the Book of Chronicles) mention his pupils, among them the well known Rabbi Joseph Ibn Zabara and Menachem Ben Shimon, author of commentaries on the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

teacher". As he himself says, he spent most of his life "teaching boys Talmud."² He became the most famous of the Kimhis and was known by the acronym of his name, RADAK. He was a pillar of medieval linguistics and Bible commentary. In his books "*Mikhlol*" and "*Sefer ha-Shorashim*," he arranged his father's and brother's discoveries as well as his own in the theory of language in a pleasant order and clear language. Like his father, Radak belonged to the rationalistic trend in Judaism. In his old age in 1232, he travelled to Toledo in Spain in order to lend support to the defenders of Maimonides in a controversy which flared up in Provence and in Spain about the latter's philosophical views. Radak's rationalistic tendency is reflected also in his inclusion of much philosophical material in his commentaries. This material is not systematically introduced, but is included to arouse the readers' interest in philosophical tradition and scientific literature. Through his simple approach and popular style, his commentaries became famous.

Just as the Kimhis were active in defending the rationalistic tradition in Judaism, so they defended Judaism in general against its oppressor, the Christian Church. It was for this purpose that Rabbi Joseph wrote "*Sefer ha-Berit*" ("Book of the Covenant"), to serve as a guide and aid for Jews who chanced to argue with Christians. We have yet to discover this work in manuscript; it is only known from the printed version found in the collection "*Milhemet Hovah*" (Constantinople, 1710).³ Most scholars are of the opinion that the composition is not of one piece, and that the last part is the work of a second author;⁴ even the first part may not be wholly that of Rabbi Joseph.⁵ There is no specific anti-Christian polemical work written by Radak, as there is by his father. But there can be no doubt that Radak was also interested in disputations with Christianity, since many arguments were included in his commentaries. He might have felt that in this manner he was providing a service to the disputants, since by and large the Christians would arrange the order of their *testimonia* to fit the order of the books of the Prophets, and the disputants had to answer in this order. Most of the material of this kind is included in his commentary to the Psalms; this material was even collected and published as a separate composition, "*Teshuvot ha-Radak la-Nozrim*" (Radak's Answers to the Christians").⁶

2) The introduction to "*Sefer ha-Shorashim*."

3) Reprinted by J.D. Eisenstein in "*Otzar ha-Vikkuhim*" (New York, 1922) in a distorted version full of errors. The book has also appeared in an English translation: *The Book of the Covenant*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972.

4) It appears that these additions are the work of a thirteenth century author. The author twice mentions the "more than twelve hundred years of our exile". cf. H.H. Ben Sasson, *Yehud am yisrael le-da'at benei ha-me'a ha-shteim esrei*, Jerusalem, 1971, p. 86, note 215.

5) Among the "corrections" included in the text: (a) a citation from the disputation of Nahmanides in Barcelona, cf. *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, Jerusalem, 1963, Volume II, p. 317; (b) a section attributed to Rabbi Yitzhak ha-Levi, identified as Rabbi Yitzhak Bar Yehuda ha-Levi, the author of "*Pa'nah Raza*," who lived at the end of the 13th century. He might perhaps be identified also as Rabbi Yitzhak ha-Levi, Rashi's teacher.

6) Was printed for the first time as a supplement for "*Sefer ha-Nizzahon*" by Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman, Mühlhausen, 1867.

Other polemical compositions have been attributed to Radak, especially "*Wikku'ah ha-Radak*" ("The Disputation of Radak"), which is included in "*Milhemet Hovah*". This composition was apparently attributed to Radak because of its introduction which is based on his commentary of the Psalms, which is divided into two parts: a) A short disputation between a Jew and a Franciscan monk about the coming of the Messiah; b) A second, longer disputation on several questions of belief and doctrine. From the non-Hebrew expressions and the citations, we may conclude that the composition was written in a period contemporaneous with or close to that of Radak, at the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th century, and was written, or at least finally edited, in Northern Italy.⁷

MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS DISPUTATIONS

From the beginning of Christianity, there had been a permanent dialogue between Christianity and its mother religion, Judaism. Prominent in the literature from Talmudical times onwards, are accounts of challenges to Christianity, and of attacks of its beliefs and doctrines. On the other hand, the church felt an obligation to bring the Jews into its fold. In medieval Europe, the Jews were in constant touch with Christians prepared to argue with them, whether in personal conversations or in public religious disputations in the courts of kings and bishops. It sometimes happened that the Christian representatives convinced the Jews to reject the law of their fathers. Rabbi Joseph tells of seeing, "that men who broke away from our people supported a false prophecy . . . and their foolishness tempted them to overturn the words of the living God, which are the words of the prophets and to connect them with the belief in Jesus." For those who were not trained in polemics and were not acquainted with the principles of the Christian faith, there was thus a need for a type of literature to guide the disputant, and to serve him as a model. Thus writes Rabbi Joseph, "One of my pupils asked me to collect all the revelations and prophecies in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings which answer the apostates and heretics who argue against our religion." Radak writes, at the end of his exposition of Psalm 2: "I have hereby instructed you, what you should answer from this Psalm, and you may add your wisdom in line with these words."

The medieval disputations always revolved around the nature of God, the meaning of redemption, sacramental spirituality, and practical commandments. The rival parties each had their firmly held positions on these issues, yet both of them believed that the truth was to be learnt from the Holy Scriptures. Exegesis was for the people of those days — Jews as well as Christians — the best and holiest way of demonstrating the truth — whatever truth it was. Thus the Jewish-Christian disputations consisted of theoretical discourses and rational and logical argumentations mixed with exegetical expositions and grammatical niceties. Whether the one type of argument or the other prevailed, both were necessary to the disputation. This is

7) See this author's "An Hebrew Polemical Treatise: Anti-Cathar and Anti-Orthodox" *Harvard Theological Review* LX (1967) pp. 323 ff.

reflected in the attitude towards the Hebrew Holy Scriptures, called by the Christians the “Old Testament.” They interpreted them as a kind of prophetic prelude to their New Testament, and everything that was to occur in connection with the appearance of the Son of God was anticipated in the historical events related in the “Old Testament.” Thus Radak mentions that the Christians interpret the Scriptures in a “spiritual” way (*spiritualiter*), whereas the Jews do it in a “corporeal” way (*corporealiter*) which is in the eyes of the church an erroneous understanding of the text. Rabbi Joseph Kimhi speaks of two ways of interpretation, one according to the “letter” (*litera*) and the other “figurative” (*figura*), according to which the event mentioned in the “Old Testament” is an allegory of the New Testament happenings.⁸ Thus in the composition before us, we find discussions of the classic Christological proof texts for the Christian claim, such as parts of the book of Psalms (Ps. 2, 22, 45, 72, 87, 110); Isaiah 9:6 by which Christianity tried to prove that Jesus was born of a virgin; Daniel 9:22, which was interpreted to show that Jesus was the Messiah; Genesis 49:10, from which it was derived that Shilo the messenger was Jesus, with whose appearance the dominion of Israel was nullified. The Jews, on the other hand, stood firm, on the basis of the Scriptures, against the concepts of the Trinity; the Virgin Birth; the original Sin which Adam had committed and with which he supposedly had contaminated all mankind; the descent of Jesus to hell, in order to save the souls of the righteous, who before his coming had descended to hell because of Adam’s sin; the mediation of the saints of the church between man and God, and abolition of the commandments of the Torah, etc.

On the Jewish side, the emphasis of these compositions was on the rationality of Judaism and the irrationality of Christianity. Jews apparently had heard the fideistic argument, “Whosoever wishes to believe will not question the words of Jesus.” In contrast, the Jews directed their interlocutors to religious rationality by asking: “Why do you not view your belief reasonably and honestly? For an intelligent man wants to be sure that he does not err in matters of faith, for these are the root of everything. But you believe in quite different things, which the intellect cannot justify.” And thus when they hear the arguments of their opponents, our authors exclaim: “God save us from such a faith which the intellectual cannot bear!” For true belief must be compatible with human reason . . . “The root of faith is planted by the streams of waters of reason and understanding through wisdom and proper knowledge.” Thus all Christian beliefs are examined according to the criterion of reason, and Rabbi Joseph writes, in opposition to the Christians: “My intelligence will not allow me to detract from the greatness of God . . .”⁹ In general, Jews must not stray from the “path of truth” or the “path of reason” in the hope that “the eyes of the blind will open and they will say: our fathers inherited a lie, a worthless vanity.”

8) Re “figura see: E. Auerbach, “Figura,” *Archivum Romanicum* XXII (1938), pp. 436-89. About the methods of the Christian exegesis in the Middle Ages in general – see B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1952.

9) He even uses Jewish philosophical literature prior to his time and in one place he refers to the book “The Duties of the Hearts” (*Hovot ha-Levavot*) by Rabbi Bahya Ibn Paquda. As it is known Rabbi Joseph translated this book from Arabic into Hebrew.

Indeed, the issue of the inheritance of the divine election was an important point in disputes of this kind. To the modern man the strains of the dispute on this question have an ironic tone. The church claims from its beginning: "I am the true Israel (*verus Israel*) and to me and my children was given the election, and the lineage of the Patriarchs, and the blessing," which were removed from the synagogue — i.e. "Israel according to the flesh" in the church's terminology — because of their rejection of Jesus, and the Jews claim: No, you cannot be Israel, not in name, not in language, not in the heartfelt identification with the real historical past, and not in the present reality.¹⁰ And they went further to argue, that not only is the name important, but also the way of life, for Israel is characterized by behaviour which is suitable to Israel. Thus social criticism gained an important place in the history of religious polemics. In "*Sefer ha-Berit*", the apostate claims; "you have no faith, no works, no power and no sovereignty, for you have lost all." If the believer has no answer for the loss of sovereignty from Israel, he makes a detailed list on the order of the ten commandments and does not emphasize, as does the Christian; "the precepts of the heart," "self," and "you have not," but instead "practical commandments." Rabbi Joseph expounds at length on the raising and educating of children among the Jews, claiming that parents prevent their sons from uttering obscenities and their daughters from appearing outside licitiously, like the daughters of the Gentiles who stand on every corner," Most important: "from the time they are little until they are big, they raise them in the study of the Torah." The anonymous compiler of the additions to "*Sefer ha-Berit*" adds that "We have not forgotten His Holy Torah, since even women know the duties and the laws, and are expert in the niceties of biblical exegesis." All this — the character of the Jews, the raising of their children in the ways of the Torah, their mercy towards their brothers, their hospitality and their forgoing interest on loans, etc., — all this stands out even more in comparison to the behaviour of the Christians who "rob men on the roads and hang them, and in some cases poke out their eyes," and who got out "on the roads to receive guests not to honour them but to deceive them and to take from their food." Moreover, if the Christian accuses the Jews of lending with interest, the Jew answers: "You who have stopped taking interest sell to your brothers merchandise on time payment at multiple price." The aim of these words, which were heard not only from the Jews but also from certain Christian circles against the nobility class, was to inflict the maximum sting on the Christians at their weakest point. Even if the Christian claims that among the Christians there are those "people who withdraw from the world and its pleasures and live in forests and deserts in mortification all their lives," the Jew answers that "each of those are only one in a thousand or ten thousand, and the rest are defiled by ways of the world."¹¹

10) "*Sefer ha-Berit*" ends with a fragment of a paragraph that deals with this question.

11) About the social criticism in "*Sefer ha-Berit*" in particular and in the 12th century in general, see the above article by H.H. Ben Sasson.

It is difficult to determine if "*Sefer ha-Berit*" is the protocol of an actual disputation or if it is an imaginary conversation composed only for guidance. In comparison with a contemporaneous work, "*Milhamot ha-Shem*" ("The Wars of the Lord") by Rabbi Jacob ben Reuven, it appears that "the disputation in "*Sefer ha-Berit*" is not an actual one and that the questions are typical routine ones."¹² However, the composition shows traces of a real disputation. The two disputants burst into shouts expressing their lack of patience and the tension between them: "Be quiet!"; "All these tiresome words!"; "I've heard enough!"; "How many times do I have to hear these questions . . . be quiet and let me ask my questions." We must also not ignore the subsurface of non-Hebrew expressions which shows through the Hebrew style of the author.

"VIKKUAH HA-RADAK" AND THE ALBIGENSES

In the 12th and 13th century the Jews witnessed the conflict that raged between the Catholic Church and the Albigensian heretics¹³ or the Cathari.¹⁴ Some scholars think that this heresy was a reappearance of ancient dualism such as that preached by Marcion, who saw in Jesus the incarnated good God, and in the God of Israel – the evil God. According to the charges against them they considered the material world as fundamentally evil, a prison of the pure soul, while it was man's task to liberate the soul from the shackles of the body to return her to her origin. They forbade eating meat and drinking wine, and their opponents even attributed to them the idea that bearing children was confining more pure souls to the prison of the present world. The tension between these heretics and the Roman Church increased until it reached a climax, in the declaration of a crusade against the Albigenses at the beginning of the 13th century.¹⁵ By this, a three-sided confrontation developed between the Catholic Church, the heretics and the Jews. In the disputation attributed to Radak, one can see clearly the impact of this confrontation.¹⁶ Thus the Jew battles against both camps at the same time and exploits the controversy between the orthodox and heterodox in order to gather arguments against one side and the other. Most interesting is the Church's ambivalent approach to the "Old Testament", when, on the one hand she is compelled to defend it over and against the heretics and, on the other, when, over and against the Jews, she must point to its lower rank. The disputation contains the following elements:

12) J. Rosenthal "*Milhamot ha-Shem*" Jerusalem, 1963; pp. XXII.

13) Albigenses – the townspeople of Albi.

14) Cathari – the pure ones.

15) About the Albigenses see A. Borst, *Die Katharer*, Stuttgart, 1953 (which includes additional bibliography).

16) For a detailed discussion, see this author's above-mentioned article.

A) Arguments against the Cathari: a considerable number of them, especially the most extreme, did not recognize Jesus's corporeality, in accordance with their view of the evil nature of matter, but they believed that he was Spirit only. Nor only that, but there were also those who argued that the same was true for Mary, his mother. This is the reason why they did not agree that Mary actually conceived in a natural way. Instead they maintained that Jesus entered Mary's womb through her ear where he stayed until the time of "birth." It seems that the adversary of our author did not believe in Jesus' complete incorporeality. In spite of that he held the belief of the "aural" conception.

B) As a result of the belief in the incorporeal nature of Jesus, the extreme Cathari believed that Jesus was not nourished from Mary's blood while in her womb and that he did not eat or drink after his birth. Our author is convinced that the menstruation flow serves as a source of nourishment for the embryo and of the mother's milk and that it contains a harmful element: for that reason a human baby is born weak and helpless in contrast to animal cubs emerging from their mothers' wombs sufficiently developed. Therefore, argues the Jew, if Jesus was free from the need to be nourished from blood and milk he should have been born grown up and not as a baby depending on his parents to look after him.

C) According to the dualistic tradition based on the Patristic literature, Adam was promised that he would be redeemed five and a half days after his sin, that is to say, 5,500 years in the heavenly calendar (according to Psalm 90:4). All that is made to fit the calendar calculations of the Christian chroniclers of those days, who dated the birth year of Jesus at 5,500 since the creation.

D) Anti-Catholic arguments which were voiced both by Jews and Cathari concerned the following points:

1) Jesus' descent from the house of David according to the New Testament. According to the church tradition, Jesus was considered to be one of the descendants of David because of his birth from Mary. Yet the New Testament does not say so explicitly, but traces only Joseph's pedigree to King David. (Matthew 1:16; Luke 3:23). If Joseph was but a stepfather of Jesus, it was up to the Christian theologians to prove that Mary too belonged to David's family, and indeed they claimed that it was a Hebrew custom that a woman should be married to a man from her father's family, according to the example of Zelophehad's daughters (Numbers 27:1-11). In the anti-Christian polemical literature, both the Jews and the Cathari exploited this difficulty. The first – to prove that Jesus did not descend from the house of David and the latter to prove that Mary was not a woman at all but an angel who bore a pure spirit.

2) The descent of the Messiah to hell. According to the tradition of the church, Jesus descended to hell in order to rescue the souls of the Patriarchs and the righteous who had lived before his coming. Both the Jews and the dualists opposed this idea. The former – in order to reject the belief that the Patriarchs went to hell, and the latter – to reject the possibility that the Patriarchs, the heroes of the corrupt "Old Testament," deserved a redemption.

3) Denunciation of John the Baptist. John the Baptist, who according to Church tradition established material baptism through water, was seen negatively by the Cathari who tried to add sins to this major one: On the basis of a passage in the Gospel, the heretics argued that John failed in his belief in Jesus and that he was not worthy of the respect due to Jesus' followers.¹⁷

4) Divinity of Jesus. The Jews as well as the dualists rejected the idea of Jesus' divinity. The Cathari, like our author, argued that the term "Son of God" is only a metaphor, as there could not be a shared substance but only a spiritual likeness.

5) The Christian church recognizes the *Tanakh* or the "Old Testament" as legitimate divine revelation, but of secondary importance compared to the New Testament which has priority. In that way it was possible to interpret the *Tanakh* in the spirit of the new revelation. In the eyes of the Jews and the Cathari, the Catholics are halting between two opinions. The Cathari who saw the *Tanakh* as a product of the evil God, tried hard to reject it altogether, while the Jews tried to prove that it is everlasting and will never be abolished.

E) Another argument which was directed at the same time against the orthodox Christians and the heretics, concerns Lucifer,¹⁸ the angel, who according to the Christians fell from heaven and became Satan. In the belief of a considerable number of dualists, God had two sons: Jesus and Satanel. The latter was cast out from heaven because of his arrogance and then created the present world. Here the Jewish disputant brings arguments which are directed against the Catholic faith and the Catharic faith.

17) See Matthew 11:2-10. According to Jerome, John did not doubt Jesus' messiahship, but he asked whether Jesus himself would go down to hell in order to redeem the souls of the righteous men, or whether he would send a messenger.

18) "Lucifer" which means "the light carrier" is the translation of הליל בן שחר in Isaiah 14:12.