

**A NOTE CONCERNING THE ORIGINS OF FLAVIUS MITHRIDATES'
"VETUS TALMUD"**

by *MOSHE IDEL*

Describing the importance of Flavius Mithridates' *Sermo de Passione Domini*, the late Professor Wirszubski wrote: "Viewed in historical perspective, this sermon with its ostensible disclosures of secret Jewish doctrines contained, as it were, in an esoteric 'vetus Talmud' may be considered representative of a new trend marking the transition from the mediaeval *interpretatio Christiana* of Talmudic texts perfected and systematized by Raymund Martini, to the Renaissance *interpretatio Christiana* of Kabbalistic doctrines used in the Pico della Mirandola."¹

According to Mithridates,² there was an "old Talmud", dating from 370 B.C., which was an esoteric book which the Jews were allowed to read only after having reached the age of forty. What seems to have been the most noteworthy feature of this phantasmal Talmud was its foretelling of Christ's sale, condemnation and crucifixion, as well as an allusion to the sacrament of the Eucharist. This note is an attempt to suggest which medieval Jewish sources might have influenced Mithridates concept of the "vetus Talmud".

The most important source of Mithridates' concept seems to be a disputation held in Paris in 1240 between R. Yehiel of Paris and the apostate Nicholas Donin de

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1. Ch. Wirszubski, ed., Guglielino Reimondo Moncada, *Sermo de passione domini*, Jerusalem, 1963, p. 28.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 19-28.

La Rochelle.³ The issue of the disputation was the nature of the Talmud; R. Yehiel responded to a list of thirty-five accusations which described the Talmud as blasphemous and antichristian. The main line of R. Yehiel's defence was a curious statement, occurring three times in the Hebrew texts of the disputation, that the Talmud has been in existence for more than 1,500 years, i.e. since circa 260 B.C.⁴ "The Rabbi (i.e. Yehiel) said, 'The Talmud is more than fifteen hundred years old.' He turned to the Queen⁵ and said, 'Your Majesty, please don't compel me to reply to his words (i.e. Nicholas Donin), since the Talmud is old and until now there have been no questions with regard to it. Behold, Hieronimus the priest of whom it is well known by all the priests that he knows our Law in its entirety and the whole Talmud would not have permitted it (i.e. the Talmud) to reach us if any fault had been found in it. Moreover, is it possible that until now there have been no distinguished priests and apostates like him (i.e. Nicholas Donin), and yet for the last 1,500 years there has been no speech nor language where their voice is not heard (Ps. 19:3)?'"

Let us begin with the description of the Talmud: the Hebrew phrase in "*ha-talmud yeshan noshan*" which we have translated as "the Talmud is old".⁶ There is only a slight difference between Mithridates' "*vetus Talmud*" and the Hebrew "*ha-talmud yeshan noshan*"; I suppose that R. Yehiel's phrase may have influenced Mithridates' Latin coinage. Both Mithridates' and R. Yehiel's datings of the Talmud are obvious anachronisms. R. Yehiel's motive for antedating the Talmud is clear enough — an antechristian document cannot include antichristian statements. Mithridates was certainly aware that the true date of the composition of the regular Talmud was ca. 500 C.E., but it seems that he interprets the discrepancy between R. Yehiel's dating and the usual one as a result of two different traditions: the first, concerning an old Talmud which is not antichristian; and a second tradition regarding a post-Christian Talmud whose authors are the "*recentiores Talmudistae*".⁷

Nevertheless, there is an obvious discrepancy between R. Yehiel's dating of the Talmud (260 B.C.) and that of Mithridates' (370 B.C.). I cannot explain this discrepancy satisfactorily, but it seems worthwhile to mention a tradition, known

3. On the disputation and the bibliography concerning it see Ch. Merchavia, *The Church versus Talmudic and Midrashic Literature (500–1248)* (Heb.), Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 227–290.

4. The translation is based on the text published by J.D. Eisenstein: *Ozar Wikuhim, A Collection of Polemics and Disputation* (Heb.), p. 82. A critical edition of the disputation is a desideratum, but the antedatation of the Talmud also occurs in the manuscripts consulted.

5. The Queen seems to be Blanche, the mother of Louis IX; see Merchavia, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

6. The idiom *yeshan noshan* appears in Leviticus 26:10, and the King James rendering there is "old".

7. On "*reteres Talmudistae*" as opposed to "*recentiores Talmudistae*", see Wirszubski, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

before R. Yehiel's time, concerning two Jesuses, one of whom was born more than one hundred and ten years before Jesus Christ.⁸ Whether this tradition was known by Mithridates and whether or not it influenced his dating is a question which I cannot answer at the present time.

Finally, something should be said with regard to R. Yehiel's statement concerning the "distinguished priests and apostates" who did not attack the Talmud. It seems that this is exactly the position of Mithridates, himself a distinguished apostate, for in his sermon "the emphasis has shifted decidedly from refutation of Judaism to proof of Christianity."⁹

As regards the esoteric character of the "*vetus Talmud*", we must set aside considerations of R. Yehiel's influence and try first to learn something more about it from Pico della Mirandola and Konrad Summenhart. As Professor Wirszubski has shown, both were influenced by Mithridates:¹⁰ Pico knows that the seventy books mentioned in IV Ezra (ch. 14) contain the doctrine of the Kabbalah and that they may be studied only after one has reached the age of forty; Summenhart equates the Talmudic books¹¹ with the seventy secret books received by Ezra when he was head of the Great Assembly which flourished after the Babylonian captivity. No satisfactory explanation was given either for connecting the Kabbalistic books with Ezra and the Great Assembly or for the prohibition against reading them before the age of forty. It seems that Mithridates learned about the relationship between the elements mentioned above from a Jewish tradition which is already extant in the 14th century. An anonymous Kabbalist¹² writes just before 1400 that "the Great Assembly has agreed not to allow the secrets to be delivered to anyone who has not reached forty." "It is not a worthy practice to deliver this book into the hands of an ignoramus... and it is forbidden to deliver any of these secrets to any man younger than forty." "I have already written in the book which I have composed and which bears the name *The Most High God* that I excommunicate... anyone who shall deliver this book of mine and my book called *The Most High God* into the hands of a man younger than forty."

The first quotation speaks in Hebrew of *kenesiya raba*, an Aramaic term which differs from the usual Hebrew name of the Great Assembly, *kneset gedolah*. Nevertheless the literal meaning of *kenesiyah raba* is identical with that of *kneset*

8. G.A. Cohen, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah, The Book of Tradition by Abraham ibn Daud*. (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 21 and pp. 114-115; and J. Loeb, *Joseph Haccohen et les Chroniques Juifs*, (Paris, 1888), pp. 86-87.

9. Wirszubski, op. cit., p. 20.

10. Ibid., pp. 25-27.

11. Ibid.

12. Ms. Bibliothèque National Paris, Heb. 790, f. 87r. and 169r. On this codex see E. Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, Tel Aviv, 1976 (Hebrew), pp. 120-121.

gedolah. This assembly forbade the transmission of secrets, i.e. Kabbalistic secrets, and perhaps the handing over of Kabbalistic books as well. Apparently Mithridates merely made a connection between R. Yehiel's tradition concerning an old Talmud and the tradition regarding Kabbalistic secrets known by the Great Assembly. In spite of the basic difference between the Talmudic theology and the Kabbalistic theosophy, the Kabbalists interpreted both the legendary parts of the Talmud, i.e. Midrash, and the legalistic parts, i.e. *halakha*, as including allusions to Kabbalistic secrets. Both the Talmud and the Kabbalah were conceived as part of the oral law. Moreover, one of Mithridates' contemporaries, a Dominican friar named Fernand, seems to understand Talmud and "Cabala" — the second of which means tradition — as being synonymous:¹³ "*Simul Moysi date fuerunt duae leges, scilicet lex scripta qui sunt quinque libri Moysi, et lex oralis que vocatur ab eis Talmud et Cabala.*" Mithridates has added only one important feature which naturally cannot be found in genuine Hebrew sources: he considers that the old Talmud foretells Christianity, just as Pico in writing his *Oratio* will consider that the ancient esoteric Kabbalah foretells Christianity.

Our analysis of the concept of the "*vetus Talmud*" is based on the assumption that Jewish traditions known before Mithridates' time influenced him, and that his contribution, sometimes crucial, can be accurately evaluated only when the Jewish sources have been unearthed. In a Hebrew note¹⁴ I was able to show that Mithridates' evidence, adduced in Chaldean, concerning Christ's suffering on the cross could be a tradition dating before Mithridates' *Sermo*,¹⁵ and similarly that the numeral equivalence of the words *elohai neḥar ha-arez* and *Yeshu ve-Miryam* which was used by him was already known at the beginning of the 13th century.¹⁶

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13. See J. Loeb, "Polemistes Chrétiens et Juifs en France et en Espagne", *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 18 (1889), p. 232.

14. "Two Notes on R. Yair b. Shabbtai's 'Herew Piphioi'", (Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer*, 53:1 (1978), p. 214.

15. For Wirszubski's analysis see op. cit., pp. 35–36 and p. 117.

16. "Two Notes", p. 214, n. 14.

SUPPLEMENTARY APPARATUS TO MOSHE IDEL'S "THE ATTITUDE TO CHRISTIANITY IN *SEFER HA-MESHIV*"

(Immanuel 12, p. 77–95)

9. See note 79 passim. Compare the mystical and messianic atmosphere, accompanied by anti-Christian rites, found among the *conversos* immediately after the Expulsion, as it was described in the document edited by H. Beinart, "A Propheying Movement in Cordova in the years 1499–1502" (Heb.) in *Yitzhak F. Baer Memorial Volume*, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 190–200.
16. See H. Levy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, Paris, 1978, pp. 247–248. G. Vajda, *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, Philosophe Juif Marocain*, Paris, 1954, p. 54 n. 2. The ancient elements appearing in the visions found in *Sefer Ha-Meshiv* are worthy of a separate study. For the time being, see the discussion below on the similarity between Jesus' attempt to ascend on high and his fall, and the attempt of Satan, described in apocryphal sources. On the link between Amos of No and the Egyptian god Amon, see my lecture "The Origin of Alchemy according to Zosimos and Hebrew Parallels," *Symposium on Philosophy and Religion in Late Antiquity, Jerusalem, March 1981*.
- 26a. Genesis 49:23.
32. On Jesus and Mohammed as two devils in charge of Christianity and Islam see *Sefer Ha-Peliah*, Korez, 1784, fol. 20b.
33. See John 8:44. According to Baer, "at no time during this epoch of unbridled diabolism did the Jews identify their temporal enemies with the figure of Satan, as was done in Christian dogmatics to the foes of the Church." Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, Philadelphia, 1966, vol. II, p. 425.
34. See J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1961. See also R. Bonfil, "Satan and the Jews in Medieval Christian Consciousness," (Heb.) in S. Almog, ed., *Sinat Yisrael le-doroteha*, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 113–122, idem, p. 122 for additional bibliography.
35. On the relation between these two works, see my forthcoming paper, mentioned in note 1 above. On anti-Christian material in *Kaf Ha-Qetoret*, see G. Vajda, "Passages Anti-Chrétiens dans Kaf Ha-Qetoret", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* CXCVII (1980), pp. 45–58. [Below, Vajda, "Passages"]. In his paper, Vajda did not deal with the relations between *Kaf Ha-Qetoret* and *Sefer Ha-Meshiv*, the latter being one of the most important sources of the anti-Christian attitude of *Kaf Ha-Qetoret*. In this book, as in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, we can discern the use of ideas stemming from *Sefer Toldoth Yeshu Ha-Noşri*: see Vajda, "Passages", p. 49 n. 13.
36. Paris MS 854 fol. 48a. See also Vajda, "Passages", p. 48 and p. 54. In this passage, there is a misunderstanding of the conception of *Sefer Ha-Meshiv*, which grants a positive role to Christianity in the eschatological process, while in *Kaf Ha-Qetoret* it is described as Gog and Magog. This difference may be due to terror of the generation of the Expulsion from Spain.
49. In *Kaf Ha-Qetoret*, Paris MS. 845, fol. 22b–23a, there is the claim that the Messiah son of Joseph must die in order to atone for the sin of Jerusalem. This point is already found early in the Kabbalah. See *Zohar* II 120a and *Zohar* III 276b (*Ra'ya Mehemna*).
79. Ibid, p. 294, n. 59–60. While discussions of the return of *conversos* to Judaism as a fact of eschatological significance also appear in *Sefer Ha-Meshiv* — see the passages printed by G. Scholem, *Ha-Maggid* (above, note 1), p. 80 and his comments on p. 81 — a very positive evaluation of the *conversos* also appears in *Kaf Ha-Qetoret*. See Paris MS. 845, fol. 149b and Vajda, "Passages" (op. cit., n. 35), p. 56–58.