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# Rabbinic Hermeneutics of Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemics

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**RABBINIC HERMENEUTICS OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH-CHRISTIAN POLEMICS**

*Asher Finkel, Ph.D.*

During the period of the Crusades (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> centuries) two great Talmudists lived in Spain, Maimonides of Cordova (1135-1205) and Nahmanides of Gerona (1195-1270), when Palestine was in Christian hands and the Jews of continental Europe faced forced conversion or death. Northern Spain was under the rule of Catholic kings but the south was in Islamic hands. The fanatical Almohades, the proclaimers of Allah's Unity, invaded Southern Spain from North Africa, and they meted harsh treatment of Jews, to embrace Islam or face the sword. Thus, Maimonides as a young man and his family fled, enduring great hardship through their journey to the Holy Land. Maimonides finally settled in Cairo, Egypt, becoming the chief physician of the great Saladin. Nahmanides, however, remained in Gerona most of his life, enjoying a wide reputation as a rabbinic scholar par excellence. At his old age, he was invited to face a public debate in Barcelona in 1265. He faced a challenge by a converted Jew to Christianity, whose name was Raymond de Pinaforte. At the behest of the Dominicans, the rabbi was invited to the Disputation in the presence of king James of Aragon. He was successful in the debate and the king rewarded him with gold pieces, which were recorded in a Jewish banker's account. He was then asked to leave for Palestine, where he lived his last two years of his life. Nahmanides penned his own account of the "Debate," as well as the homilies he preached at that time, on the "Immutable Torah," and on the "Redemption" prior to his departure. In Palestine, he completed his masterful commentary to the Pentateuch that was based on hermeneutical tetrachotomy of PaRDeS. From these works I gather his position on Christianity and its scriptures, his theological view on the historical development of religion, as well as his application of exegetical and analytical determination. As for Maimonides, I shall draw on his legal writings, philosophical Guide, epistles and Responsa. A given distinction emerges between the two as to their acquaintance with the host religions of the Iberian Peninsula, but a common understanding is shared on rabbinic interpretation and phenomenology with distinct positions.

Christian Europe at the time of the Crusades perceived the Jews as deicidal people who, as usurers, profit from their neighbors' indebtedness, but the Church officially protected them as "witness people" to the veracity of their faith. North of Spain, the French monarchy and the Dominicans accused the rabbis of anti-Christian teachings, which were claimed to be recorded in their Talmudic writings. Thus, the Dominicans challenged the Tosaphist school of rabbis in Paris to a Disputation. Four of their masters were headed by the renowned Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, who faced a Karaite convert to Christianity in the event. A Karaite is an anti-rabbinic Jew who viewed the Talmudic tradition negatively. His name was Fr. Nicholas Donin and the debate was recorded by the Tosaphist Rabbi Yehiel. The difference between the two disputations is marked by the French accusatory posture and the Spanish open attitude. In Paris, the Rabbinic writings were condemned as blasphemous and the Talmud was put to fire. Following the debate carloads of Talmudic works were burned by official decree, to which Rabbi Yehiel wrote a moving Elegy. Eventually all rabbinic works were censored and no valuable

Talmudic manuscript of the entire work remained from the past except for the München Codex. One can lament the great loss to contemporary scholarship, which misconstrued and misconceived its significant testimony to past events, especially to Jesus and the disciples. In the past years, I demonstrated at the Congress, the problem of Christian scholarship that uses European texts of the Talmud for examination of early Christianity. The only material still available from early times comes from Islamic countries, where such concern about blasphemy against Christianity did not exist.

In Barcelona, the Christian king invited Nahmanides to respond freely to the questions in order to clarify the rabbinic testimonies to Jesus and his claims in the debate. Nahmanides exhibited a reading knowledge of Christianity from their texts and he was able to distinguish from memory the wording given Talmudic texts as quoted by his opponent. He even enjoyed private conversation with the monarch at the forum. In contrast, Rabbi Yehiel of Paris was seeking ardently to clarify the meaning of the witness to Jesus in the original uncensored text, but it fell on deaf ears of his opponent who was in his former years raised with a bias against the rabbis and their tradition. Not so with Nahmanides, whose opponent was a former Jew who studies with the rabbis and some even claim that Raymond was his former student. Nahmanides could show how his challenger misunderstood the Talmudic tradition. Fr. Raymond was seeking to demonstrate that there is a Talmudic witness to the historical Jesus in view of his coming as a Messiah, who teaches the resurrection and that he was assumed into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. Nahmanides, in turn, was able to point out how the students of the Talmud should be cautious with the historical and literary examination of a given quote. Its meaning can only be gained from the intertextual understanding and phenomenological signification. Nahmanides however did not seek to question Christian faith and its view of Jesus according to their Scriptures. In this respect, he shared a common understanding with his Tosaphist colleagues of Paris. For in their view Christianity is not an idolatrous religion due to its Trinitarian faith. This position was advanced by the Muslims due to Mohammed's simplified depiction of partnership in God and the purity of oneness in God. The Tosaphist saw historically the Christians to be "fearers of God" as Luke refers to Biblically oriented gentiles in his days. They accept the principles of biblical faith, namely the belief in the Creator and the Provider, whose words are preserved in the Torah of Moses and who believed in resurrection and the world to come. Christian gentiles received this faith from their Jewish Messiah. However, they also believed Jesus to be a preexistent savior, who is the Son of God to whom they address their prayer. Such a view for "fearers of God" is not idolatrous, for they are compared to the Noahides in the rabbinic view of religion. The Noahides as "fearers of God" abide by the seven principles of universal law in the Torah. However Jews are bound covenantally, by 613 commandments which come to limit their worship to God alone, as their heavenly Father.

In contrast Nahmanides and the Tosephists' position, Maimonides, who lived in the Islamic world, viewed Christianity differently. He read Islamic works, and he wrote his epistles, manuals, commentary and philosophy in Arabic. He learned all about the Islamic faith and praxis from his neighbors, and he advanced the same opinion that was held by Muhammad in the Quran: that Christianity is idolatrous. Christianity was seen to profess a faith in a triune God, which in Arabic represents "shirk" or partnership with a transcendental God in His essence. Although contemporary rabbinic writers on Islam, for example Abraham Iben Ezra, pointed out that Muhammad's religion itself was affected by pagan worship. They noted idolatrous features at the "Haij," when Islamic pilgrims to Mecca cast stones at Mina. This was the ancient practice in honor of "Mercurius," who was identified earlier with Hermes. Maimonides, in his Code (Forbidden Food 11:7) and in his responsum to Obadyah the proselyte,

decided differently from the prevailing view of Islam in his days on the purity of God's unity, determining that it is monotheistic.

Due to his close acquaintance with Islamic works, he therefore also recognized Islamic teachings as antithetical to Judaism, which is based on the truth of the Torah. Muhammad in the Quran (Sura Baqara) categorized the "Tawrat" or the Jewish Torah as "tahrif," i.e., it was corrupt in its depiction of God's revelation. This doctrinal view of Islam comes to dismiss the anachronisms found in the Qumran regarding persons or events in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, e.g., the reference to Maryyam as the sister of Moses and at the same time the mother of Jesus (the historical discrepancy of 1200 years). In light of this, Maimonides determines in his responsum (#367) that a Muslim should not be taught his Scriptures by a rabbi since he denies their veracity. However, a rabbi can teach his Torah to a Christian believer, who shared his view of divine revelation. Islam, therefore, fails to accept Torah Judaism but Christians and Jews share a common Biblical view and religious values, in TaNaKh.

Indeed, Maimonides and Nahmanides were guided by their historical approach to religion, from polytheism to monotheism, as they were seeking to identify the theological relationship of these three faiths. This was necessary to determine in light of God's redemptive history for humanity that will end with the universal embrace of biblical faith. The prophet Isaiah (11:9) describes the eschatological realization to be "when the earth will be filled with the intimate knowledge (Da'at) of God as the water covers the sea." Accordingly, Maimonides begins his masterful Code of Jewish religion with what determines the true knowledge of theism and concludes his work with the final Messianic coming that heralds the Isaiaic eschatological promise for humanity. Nahmanides too views the promise of universal acceptance of Biblical theism as the eschatological event. Human history evolves from a denial of polytheism and magic to the embrace of Biblical consciousness and its absolute values. Thus, both Maimonides and Nahmanides view pagan religions to be rooted in personification of nature, and mythopoeic thought, that in Greco-Roman times was rooted in astral worship. However, Nahmanides departs from Maimonides' account of the historical development with the introduction of another stage that was based on human acknowledgement of a surreal realm of angels or divine agencies that guided their worship and prayer. This is a crucial distinction in the determination of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

According to Maimonides the angelic reality is separated from the astral reality as the former relates to God the creator and the latter to the physical world. He introduces the Aristotelian distinction between a world of form and matter and a world of pure forms. The astral reality enjoys form and matter as the sublunar world does. The astral system is in a perpetual motion by their circular movements but the earthly reality is composed of four basic elements in a perpendicular motion. Therefore it is finite and perishable. Not so with the angelic reality that provides humanity with the prophetic access to the divine presence in a realm of pure forms. Worship of God is to be directed only to the Creator, who he is so acknowledged by the angelic hosts. God alone remains beyond matter and form and thus, partnership with God is forbidden. However, Nahmanides recognizes that the introduction of angelic reality in Christian worship is not idolatrous when it claimed the ascent of Jesus to heavenly pleroma of angels. There he sits at the right hand of the divine throne, as the Metatron is portrayed in mystical writings of early Judaism. These mystical writings, Hekhalot, Nahmanides studied in pursuit of Franco-Spanish kabbalah. Thus, the gentile Christians who are the "God-fearers" can address Jesus as their heavenly intercessor but not the Jews in their prayers. Since they are to be directed to God alone, the Christian apocalypticist in Revelation (4, 5) also describes a scene of celestial worship in the angelic realm with

their hymn addressed to Jesus the Lamb. For early Jewish Christianity knew about the angelic hymns relating the worship in Heaven to the earthly Temple worship (see Dead Sea Angelic Hymns).

Nahmanides distinguished between the Christian view of the second advent of the Messiah who already came and the Rabbinic view of how the eschatological Messiah was previously conceived by God, to be introduced to humanity in the end time. This distinction between "came" (Ba') and "conceived" (Nolad) is pointed out by Nahmanides in his debate with Fr. Raymond. At this debate, he also discussed the Trinitarian faith with the King James in private. The King related to him what the priests taught him about the training like three things, color, bouquet and aroma determine wine. Nahmanides responded politely that these attributes are but accidents, distinct from the determination of God's essence. He adds in, Jewish theology the essential attributes such as life, knowledge, power and will are congruent with God's very being. Thereby, he suggests for a Jew no distinction can be made but for a Christian fearer of God, who accepts a triune reality, it remains but a mystery in their theology. This is how he ended his debate after he established that such matters that border on the mysterious do not bind the Jew. Jewish life of Biblical faith is governed by the norms of merciful nature and proscriptive action. These works bind the Jew to God covenantly. Therefore the legal determination of the Torah results in a binding decision, but the Aggadic material of Talmudic writings represents only opinions. Nahmanides points out that such opinions do not come to question the very praxis of rabbinic life. In light of the distinction, faith positions on Messianic coming, resurrection and the world to come can be shared with Christians, but do not enjoy the same formulation. This can be illustrated with those who seek to determine the Danielic prediction of Messianic final coming. The exact date can not be known for it remains a secret held by God only. Interestingly, Jesus too pointed this out to his own disciples following his death (Acts 1). In Nahmanides' view there are two avenues of faith guiding biblically oriented people, the Jewish and the Christian. gentiles

Maimonides also concludes there are three avenues of faith leading to the messianic coming. Christianity and Islam following Judaism are instrumental in leading humanity to the Messiah who will establish the heavenly kingdom on Earth. Rabbinic position on reemptive history is that Abraham was the first to embrace the Biblical faith, which now is spread throughout the world by Christianity and Islam. However, Israel in their host countries remain a "suffering servant" in the collective sense. The pangs of Messianic coming represent the suffering of Israel in the last two millennia. Whereas Christianity refers to Jesus as the "suffering servant," who is the only one who came to remove the sins of the world. In Christian thought the one has coalesced with the many, but the concept of Messianic coming is shared by both, not his identity

A close examination of rabbinic polemics reveals how Judaism in Medieval time viewed the religions of their neighbors in their exile from their land. Contemporary studies of the Jewish-Christian dialogue need to include these distinctions in their understanding and not simply offer general observations.

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