

BOOK DESCRIPTION:

ON "SEFER YOSEF HA-MEQANNE"

– WITH THE PUBLICATION OF A NEW CRITICAL EDITION – *

Of the polemical commentary of the Bible known under the name *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* and compiled by Joseph the Zealot or Joseph ben Natan Official, only the commentary on the Pentateuch has so far been published by Zadoc Kahn¹ who also wrote a study of this work.² His edition was based on two manuscripts, MS Paris³ and MS Hamburg.⁴

In 1935 Professor Ephraim Urbach of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem published a lengthy study under the title "*Études sur la littérature polémique au moyen âge*"⁵ in which he called attention to a third MS of the same work found in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Rome.⁶

Upon the suggestion of Professor Urbach, the present writer undertook the preparation of a critical edition of *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, published by the "Mekize Nirdanim" Society in Jerusalem, 1970. The edition is based on all available MSS.

The work of Joseph Official had, in addition to the name *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, other names, such as *Teshuvot ha-Minim*, *Nitzachon* and others. The name *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* was given to the book by later copyists.

The first part of the book, or the long introduction, consists of collections of consolation and messianic passages culled from all books of the

* Original Hebrew title: ספר יוסף המקנא לר' יוסף ב"ר נתן אופיצ'יאל; יוצא לאור לפי כתבי יד ע"י יהודה רוונטל. הוצאת מקיצי נרדמים, ירושלים תשל"ל.

Additional title page in Latin: Sepher Joseph Hamekane, auctore R. Joseph b. R. Nathan Official (Saec. XIII); ex manu scriptis edidit et notis instruxit Judah Rosenthal. Sumptibus Societatis Mekize Nirdanim, Hierosolymis MCMLXX (148 pp.).

¹ On Genesis in *Mi-Mizrah u-mi-Ma'arav*, ed. Brainin, IV (Berlin, 1899), pp. 17-25; On Exodus-Deuteronomy in *Festschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage A. Berliners* (Berlin, 1903), Hebr. section, pp. 82-90.

² *Étude sur le livre de Joseph le Zelateur*, REJ I (1880), pp. 222-246; III (1881), pp. 1-38.

³ Zotenberg *Catalogues des manuscrits hébreux et samaritains de la Bibliothèque Imperiale* (Paris, 1866), p. 114 (no. 722).

⁴ No. 187. See M. Steinschneider, *Catalog der hebraischen Handschriften zu Hamburg*, (Hamburg, 1878), pp. 71, 176.

⁵ *Études sur la littérature polémique au moyen-âge*. REJ C (1935), pp. 49-77.

⁶ No. 53. The MS once belonged to the Jesuit Collegio Romano. See Urbach, *ibid*, p. 51.

Bible by Rabbi Elijah. The bulk of the book was compiled by Joseph Official. Polemical works arranged in the order of the Bible were not new in Western Europe. Since the main purpose of such books was to repudiate the christological interpretations of the Church, and since christologies were usually arranged in biblical order, their refutations had also to be arranged in the same order. The book *Nitzachon Vetus*, an anonymous polemical work compiled in the second half of the thirteenth century which is similar in many respects to *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* and which was also written in biblical order can serve as an example.⁷

Over forty Jewish and twenty Christian disputants are mentioned in *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*. The greatest number of questions are, however, anonymous. The Christian as well as the Jewish arguments are taken from stock supplies on both sides, and were asked and answered for centuries. The questions usually start with "Heretics claim . . ." or "This is the answer to those who claim . . .", "A priest asked me . . .", "A Cordelier asked me . . .", "A Jacobin asked me . . .".

The Church in general looked askance at religious disputations with Jews or heretics, but was compelled to challenge these early Court Jews (Hofjuden). We hear of such challenges as early as the second half of the sixth century. In the year 581, a disputation took place between Bishop Gregory of Tours and a Jew called Priscus before the king, Chilperic. In 1106, Archbishop Odo of Cambrai held a disputation with a Jew from Senlis. We learn about the atmosphere of such disputations from the biography of Louis IX (1226-1270), which was written by a contemporary, Jean, Sire of Joinville (1224-1318). Jean describes the following incident. "He (St. Louis) told me that there was once a great disputation between clergy and Jews at the monastery of Cluny. And there was at Cluny a poor knight to whom the Abbot gave bread at that place for the love of God; and this knight asked the Abbot to suffer him to speak the first words, and they suffered him, not without doubt. So he arose and leant upon his crutch and asked that they should bring to him the greatest clerk (clergyman) and most learned master among the Hebrews; and they did so. Then he asked the Jew a question, which was this: 'Master', said the knight, 'I ask you if you believe that the Virgin Mary, who bore God in her body and in her arms, was a virgin mother, and is the mother of God?' And the Jew replied that of all this he believed nothing. Then the knight answered that the Jew acted like a fool when – neither believing in her, nor loving her – he had entered into her monastery and house. 'And verily', said the knight, 'you shall pay for it.' Whereupon he lifted his crutch and smote the Jew near the ear, and beat him to the earth. Then the Jews turned to flight, and

⁷ Published by Joh. Christopher Wagenseil in *Tela Ignea Satanae* (Altdorf, 1681), 260 pp.

bore away their master, sore wounded. And so ended the disputation.”⁸ We may assume with Professor Marcus that this Jew was either Nathan or his son Joseph Official.

It is of scholarly interest to trace the arguments forwarded by both sides to their sources and to investigate the spirit or atmosphere of the time. Most, but not all, of the Jewish arguments can be traced to Talmudic, Midrashic and early medieval exegetic sources. Some interpretations bear the imprint of the time. They can be traced back to the late twelfth and thirteenth century exegetical works such as *Hadar Zeqenim*, *Pa'aneach Raza*, or *Tosafot ha-Rosh*. Some interpretations may be traced to exegetical works which have not yet been published, such as *Sefer ha-Gan*. Some are probably genuine interpretations of Joseph Official himself. With some exceptions, the Christian arguments can be traced back to the works of the Church Fathers and later teachers and can be found in the large collection of the *Patrologia Latina* edited by Migne. Some evidently originated with the disputants themselves. Some of the arguments involving sophisticated answers and interpretations are probably those of converts who were familiar with the Jewish methods of interpretation.

The main topics of all medieval disputations, public or private, were: I) Christology or proofs from the Bible, and later even from the Talmud, that Jesus was the true Messiah; II) the abrogation of the Law with the coming of Jesus; III) the cancellation of the prophetic promises for Israel; and IV) the eternal condemnation of the Jewish people as punishment for the crime of the Crucifixion. Sometimes other basic Christian beliefs were discussed, such as the belief in the “*limbus patrum*”: according to Christian theology, all the souls of the righteous who died before the resurrection of Jesus, including John the Baptist, rested in the “*limbus patrum*” until they were released by Jesus himself. One of the proofs for this belief is the fear of Jacob, “Now I will go down to my son in Sheol” (Gen. 37:35). For Christian theologians this verse served as proof that even Jacob, who was a righteous man, was condemned to Sheol – limbus. The Jews answered that Jacob was afraid of having sinned because he did not prevent Joseph from slandering his brethren.

Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne contains a very large collection of christological passages which were discussed and refuted by the Jewish disputants. What strikes the reader of the book is the great degree of freedom in the discussions. The Jew did not avoid the challenge. On the contrary, he was always ready to accept it. This fact is especially surprising, since it was compiled after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, whose anti-Jewish decisions and measures are well known. This is the main reason why Graetz wanted to date this work as belonging to the end of the twelfth century.

⁸ See Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (Cincinnati, 1938), p. 41.

However, Zadoc Kahn proved that Graetz was wrong. Nathan and Joseph were thirteenth century scholars. Evidently life is stronger than ordinances and decisions of councils.

From *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* it is evident that the Officials answered their opponents with remarkable self-assurance and with a feeling of superiority in the understanding of the Bible.

Harry A. Wolfson remarked in his introduction to the revised edition of the book "*As Others Saw Him*" by Joseph Jacobs (1925) as follows: "Throughout the history of religious controversies between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages, Christianity was on the defensive. The Christians considered themselves called upon to prove the claims they made on behalf of Jesus by endeavouring to show that the vague prophetic promises were all fulfilled in Christ. The Jews had no counter-claims to make, they simply refused to be impressed. As the historical custodians of the Bible text, as well as of its interpretation, they were rather amused at the confidence with which the erstwhile pagans interpreted at their own pleasure the mistaken Scriptures quoted from the Vulgate." The Jewish disputants in *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* also try to prove to their opponents that the translations of the Vulgate are faulty and not borne out by the plain meaning of the text.

The Jew usually did not initiate the discussion. He was challenged, and he dared to talk back quite vigorously. Some of the answers were quite insulting, and we may doubt whether the Jews dared to express themselves in such a manner in public, or even in private. Some arguments were probably meant for internal consumption and for circulation among Jews only.

The close familiarity of the Officials with Christian rites and liturgy is surprising. An important chapter by itself is the part containing a systematic criticism of the New Testament. Jewish criticism of the New Testament is older than *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* and some of its traces can be found in the Talmud and Midrash. They were collected and dealt with by a number of scholars. The most important of them is the collection "*Jesus and Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*" by R. Travers Herford. The anonymous polemical tract *Nestor ha-Komer*, which probably goes back to the Middle Ages, contains a number of contradictions found in the New Testament as well as a number of objections against Christian beliefs and dogmas.⁹ A tenth century philosopher, David Ibn Merwan Al-Mukammis composed two anti-Christian books and compiled a collection of fifty difficulties found in the New Testament. The books of Al-Mukammis are lost. Chapter XI of *Milchamot Adonay* by Jacob ben Reuben (Spain/Provence, 12th and 13th centuries) contains a systematic criticism of Matthew.¹⁰ The anonymous

⁹ See my bibliography in *Areshet II* (1960), p. 173 (no. 193). See also REJ V (1882), 202-3, XVI (1884), 300.

¹⁰ See my edition of *Milchamot Adonay* by Jacob Ben Reuben, pp. 141-156.

Nitzachon Yashan (Nitzachon Vetus) contains a systematic criticism of the Gospels, but *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* contains a much larger collection of difficulties found in the New Testament. Various catalogues of Hebrew MSS list collections of christologies written in Hebrew by converts to Christianity¹¹ as well as collections of questions or difficulties against the New Testament and Christian beliefs and practices compiled by Jewish polemicists.¹²

It is necessary to add that the collections of questions or difficulties in the New Testament which grew from century to century served as a basis for large lists of "aporiai" collected by heretics through the ages. We find them later in the works of the Unitarians of the sixteenth century in Poland, such as Daniel Bielinski¹³ and in the works of Jewish polemicists such as Isaac of Troki.¹⁴

Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne is also of importance for the history of Hebrew translations of the New Testament. We witness a sudden emergence of such translations in the thirteenth century, which were probably the work of Jewish converts to Christianity. *Milchamot Adonay* of Jacob ben Reuben, the anonymous *Nitzachon Yashan (Nitzachon Vetus)* and *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* contain large excerpts from the New Testament in Hebrew.

In summary, we may say that *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* sheds light on Jewish-Christian relations as well as on Jewish-Christian polemics and Jewish and Christian polemical exegesis of the thirteenth century in Germany and France. The book reflects an atmosphere of relative tolerance. The Jew is challenged, he is able to accept the challenge and to answer with a counter-challenge.

(Described by Prof. Judah Rosenthal)

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¹¹ The convert Marco Raphael (Venice, 16th century) compiled such a collection. See A. Neubauer, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford, 1866), p. 744 (no. 21460). Cf my edition of *Milchamot Adonay* by Jacob ben Reuben, p. XXI, 186, no. 2.

¹² See my bibliography in *Areshet II* (1960), p. 174 (nos. 20, 201, 202); p. 175 (nos. 203-212); p. 178 (no. 224).

¹³ See *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, II (Kraków, 1936), p. 45. Cf my study *Marcin Czechowicz and Jacob of Belzyce* in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XXXIV (1966).

¹⁴ See the edition of *Chizzuq Emunah* of David Deutsch (Breslau-Sohrau), 282-354 Isaac of Troki compiled one hundred questions in the second part of his book.