

NOTES IN WAKE OF THE MEDIEVAL JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
POLEMIC

by MOSHE IDEL

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[*Sefer Nizzahon Yashan (Nizzahon Vetus): A Book of Jewish-Christian Polemic. A Critical Edition by Mordecai Breuer.*] [Ramat-Gan]: Bar-Ilan University Press [1978]. 198 p.

The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages. A critical edition of the NIZZAHON VETUS, with an introduction, translation and commentary, by David Berger. (Judaica. Texts and Translations. 4.) Philadelphia: JPS, 1979. xviii, 422 p., 164 p. [Added Hebrew title page.]

I

One of the interesting developments among recent generations of scholars is the intensive research in the literature of medieval Jewish-Christian polemics. Changes in the cultural climate in the West have made it possible for Jewish scholars to deal relatively openly with Jewish attacks on Christianity. In addition, the development of Judaica studies in Israel has undoubtedly contributed to the consideration of the subject in an atmosphere free from external pressure.

The Jewish-Christian polemic has been widely studied by such scholars as the late Judah Rosenthal, as well as Frank Talmage, David Berger, Daniel Lasker,

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Chaim Merhavia and Amos Funkenstein.¹ In recent years, one of the most important of the medieval polemics — the *Nizzahon Vetus* (below — *NV*) — has been the subject of intensive study by two important scholars, both of whom have prepared critical editions with introduction and detailed notes.

The edition of Mordecai Breuer is based upon that of the notorious Christian scholar, Johann Christoph Wagenseil, and amended against numerous manuscripts. In his edition, Breuer has made use of a similar but incomplete work by Adolf Posnanski from the beginning of this century. Included in the text are passages from MS. Rome (Biblio. Vittorio Emanuele 53, designated by parentheses), which do not appear either in Wagenseil or in other manuscripts.

The edition by David Berger also presents a Hebrew text based upon that of Wagenseil. However, Berger did not include the passages from MS. Rome, as he is of the opinion that the author of *NV* did not in fact use this manuscript, regardless of the fact that a good part of the material contained therein was in his possession (pp. 374–5). The Hebrew text is, however, accompanied by variant readings from all the other sources relevant to *NV*, both published and in manuscript form, as well as by an English translation, comprehensive notes, and detailed indices which themselves represent an important scholarly achievement.

With the exception of the exact composition of the text itself, both of these writers agree with Urbach² regarding the date of the text — the late 13th or early 14th century (Breuer, p. 22; Berger, p. 33) — and its author's venue in Ashkenaz (i.e., Franco-Germany).

II

Both authors directed their major effort towards revealing the sources upon which the *NV* drew — both the earlier Jewish polemics and the Christian

1. See bibliography of Rosenthal's work, edited by S.J. Ormann, *Kiryat Sefer* 52 (1977), pp. 578–602, esp. section on polemical literature, p. 601. Among the works of the other scholars mentioned, see: F. Talmage, ed., *The Polemical Writings of Profiat Duran* (Jerusalem, 1981); idem., ed., Yom Tov Lipmann Muelhausen, *Sefer ha-Nizzahon* (Jerusalem, 1983); idem., *HTR* 60 (1967), pp. 323–348; idem., *HUCA* 38 (1967), pp. 213–235; idem., *Immanuel* 13 (1981), 69–85; D. Berger, *PAAJR* 40 (1972), 34–47; D. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977); C. Merhavia, *ha-Talmud be-re'i ha-Nazrut* (Jerusalem, 1970); idem., *Tarbiz* 41 (1971), 95–115; A. Funkenstein, *Zion* 33 (1968), pp. 125–144.

2. E.E. Urbach, "Etudes sur la littérature polémique en Moyen Age," *REJ* 100 (1935), pp. 49–77. Recently, A. Ehrmann has questioned the accepted dating, claiming that it was written during the period 1220–1242. See his article, "When was the Sefer Nizzahon Written?" *HTR* 71 (1979), pp. 154–157. Recently, an important manuscript containing material connected with *NV* was identified and discussed by W. Horbury, "The Basle Nizzahon," *Journal of Theological Studies* (N.S.), vol. 34 (1983), pp. 497–514.

conceptions found there. However, despite their considerable success in this respect, there are several subjects which have not been adequately dealt with. An example of one such subject is the following, a detailed analysis of which may well be of importance over and above the understanding of the text at hand:³

The Gentile continued his defiant questioning and asked: Why did the Holy one, blessed be he, begin the Torah with a *bet* and not with a different letter? Surely, he did so in order to make reference to the existence of two persons who are father and son, and it is also in reference to them that David said, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” [Ps. 22:2] Moreover, it is for this reason that you will find “the Lord God” as one name in a number of passages. And if you will ask, “Where is the trinity?” the answer is that the spirit was not included because it was intertwined in the two of them — in the father and son — and is a substance that is between them.⁴ Similarly, you say of the two attributes law⁵ and mercy that the attribute of grace mediates between them.⁶ One may respond to this: The reason he began the ten commandments with the word *anokhi*, which begins with the letter *aleph*, was to inform everyone that He is one and there is no second...” (Berger, p. 41, par. 3).

According to Berger, the conceptualization of the three attributes in this passage is “anomalous... Prof. Scholem wrote me that there is no doubt ‘that the Christian speaking there mixed it all up’” (p. 234). What we actually have here is an unorthodox description of the interrelationship among these three attributes.⁷ In the traditional Kabbalah, *ḥesed* (charity) is placed opposite *din* (stern judgment), while *raḥamim* (mercy) is intermediary or mediates between them; in the statement above, *ḥesed* is the mediator, while *raḥamim* is placed in juxtaposition to *din*. In fact, this tradition must be examined very carefully before rejecting it out of hand. It is difficult to assume that a Christian would make a statement based on what he claims to be a Jewish tradition if that tradition did not exist; it is even more difficult to understand how a Jew would repeat such a statement without saying that it was either a mistake or a misrepresentation, if that is what it was.

Indeed, study of Kabbalistic sources composed during the period of the *NV* and thereafter reveals the existence of a Jewish approach similar to that quoted here in the name of the Christian. In an anonymous commentary to the Torah, written under the influence or inspiration of R. Abraham Abulafia at the end of the 13th or the early 14th century, we read:⁸

3. Cf. Y. Liebes, “Christian Influences in the Zohar,” *Immanuel* 17 (1983), p. 47, n. 15.

4. “It is something which mediates between them” seems a preferable translation here.

5. Berger translates the Hebrew *din* as “law.” It seems to me that, in light of the juxtaposition of *din* and *raḥamim*, on the one hand, and the Kabbalistic underpinnings of the statement, on the other, “judgment” or even “severe judgment” is preferable here.

6. Should be “*preponderates* and mediates between them” (my emphasis — MI).

7. Breuer also sensed the alien nature of this perception (pp. 29–30), but the Kabbalistic literature to which he refers the reader does not actually provide an explanation.

8. MS. Oxford 1920, folio 16a. I shall discuss the nature of this anonymous work elsewhere.

What is stated in the midrash:⁹ With three attributes God created His universe, with the attribute of *din*, with the attribute of *rah̄amim* and with the mediating attribute, as is written (Ps. 50:1) “*El*, Elohim, YH (the Mighty One, God, the Lord) appeared and called to the earth,” for with one of them the world could not exist. For were there only the attribute of *din*, which is the name *elohim* alone, the world could not exist, and were it only with the attribute of *rah̄amim*, the name *YH*, then there would be no divine retribution. Therefore, He created it with *el elohim YH*, which is the combination, and of this it is written (Deut. 6:4), “Hear o Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One” — that is, whether in the attribute of *din*, whether in the attribute of *rah̄amim*, or whether in the mediating attribute, He is one. This is also what is written in the thirteen Divine attributes (Ex. 34:6): “The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and full of grace.” For the first divine name is read as it is written, and that is the attribute of *rah̄amim*, and the second is read as it is traditionally read, *Adonai*,¹⁰ which is the mediating attribute,¹¹ and *el* is the attribute of *din*. But when a man returns to God they are all mercies and they are all for the good.

It should be pointed out that not only is there a similarity between the ideas stated here and the statement in *NV*, in that both sources speak of three attributes, unlike most classical midrashim. Here, the third attribute is defined precisely as it is in *NV*: as “intermediate.” Furthermore, the other designation of this attribute, *mazug* (mediating) appears again in another discussion concerning the three attributes found in a Christian text relying upon the Kabbalah written in the same generation as the *NV*, in a text by Abner of Burgos (ca. 1270–1340).¹² Abner, like the above quotation, relies upon the same verse in Psalms as interpreted in *Midrash Tehillim*,¹³ basing his own christological doctrine upon a Kabbalistic understanding of said midrash.¹⁴ From this, it follows that it is not impossible that

9. I did not find this midrash, or any like it, in the Jewish sources. However, the attribution of this triune conception to a Hebrew source itself indicates, to my mind, the existence of such an approach. Cf. *Midrash Tehillim* on Ps. 50:1.

10. It is possible that the verse quoted from Exodus should be compared to Ps. 86:15, “You, Lord, are a God who is merciful and forgiving.” The word *Adonai* appears immediately before “a God who is merciful and forgiving,” exactly like the second *YH* in the verse in Ex. 34, which is read as *Adonai*.

11. This interpretation is totally different from the usual Kabbalistic approach, in which the name *Adonai* denotes the lowest *sefirah*, that of *Malkhut*, while the mediating or middle *sefirah*, *tiferet*, is designated by the Ineffable Name. However, one could argue that the second name, which is interpreted as *Adonai*, is also the Ineffable Name. However, it seems to me that it is precisely its interpretation as the name *Adonai* which, according to this anonymous author, transforms it into the designator for the “mediating attribute.”

12. See Y. Baer, “The Qabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos” (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 27 (1958), pp. 278–289.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–280, and note 3. While the term “blend” (*mizug*) does not appear in Abner in this specific context, but slightly later, there is nevertheless no doubt in my mind that the Christian author found the doctrine of the mediating attribute in this context in the source from *Midrash Tehillim* which he had, similar to the quotation from the anonymous author we quoted above.

14. Abner, unlike the anonymous Kabbalist, alludes to the three *sefirot* of *ḥokhmah – binah – da’at*, in wake of *Midrash Tehillim*.

both Abner and the anonymous kabbalist quoted above based themselves upon an ancient Jewish tradition, which not only spoke about these three attributes in a general manner, but in which one attribute is referred to as an intermediate or performing some similar function, even if it does not use this specific terminology.¹⁵ Before discussing Abner's passage, one should note that the quotation from *NV* indicates the polemical use by Christians of Jewish, and possibly kabbalistic, approaches in Franco-Germany prior to the parallel phenomenon in Spain.¹⁶ In any event, Abner is of the opinion that the three attributes of *ḥokhmah* (wisdom), *binah* (intelligence / understanding) and *da'at* (knowledge) allude to the trinity.¹⁷ Further on he writes:¹⁸

It is inconceivable, as some of the commentators contend, that these three attributes are *din*, *raḥamim* and another one which is a synthesis of the two, as in their words it is not proper for *ḥokhmah* to be related exclusively to *raḥamim* or to *din* or to the intermediate attribute. This is also true of *tevunah* (understanding) and *da'at*,¹⁹ neither one of which belongs exclusively to any one of the three more than to the others. Furthermore, the intermediate attribute should by rights be associated with that name which refers to multiplicity, rather than either to *din* or to *raḥamim* alone, from which it was fused. For this reason, the name *elohim*, which indicates multiplicity, should be associated with the intermediate attribute, rather than with *din* or *raḥamim*, and should not be associated with the attribute of *din* alone, which is one of the two extremes(!). Yet such is not the case according to the sages of the Talmud or the elders of the language... Yet being that the name *elohim* indicates multiplicity, it is appropriate that it be associated with the intermediate attribute, as stated

15. There is reason to believe that the position arguing the existence of three attributes is of great antiquity. Compare the Philonic scholars: Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), I: 224–226; E.R. Goodenough, *By Light! By Light!* (New Haven, 1935), pp. 136, 203, 368. The subject requires careful investigation. In any event, the conclusions of Baer (*op. cit.*, p. 281, n. 7) and Liebes (*op. cit.*) that the use of a trinitarian concept is the result of Christian influence on the Kabbalah, while it makes sense, is not necessarily true of all Kabbalistic texts. [See note at end]

16. See on this Y. Liebes (*op. cit.*), pp. 57–58, n. 56. It should be noted that in MS. Vittorio Emanuele No. 56, in Rome, containing material relating to the sources of *NV*, there is one page (20b) giving Kabbalistic reasons for the *mizvot*, but it is difficult to ascertain whether this is mere chance; the Kabbalistic material is written in a different hand than the polemical material, and is related to the Spanish Kabbalah of the late 13th century.

Likewise, one ought to stress the words of a Jewish polemicist who wrote that Pablo Christiani, who debated Nahmanides in Barcelona, “revealed the secrets of the Torah and was expert in the *aggadot* found in our Talmud” (Urbach, *op. cit.*, p. 56, quoting MS. Vittorio Emanuele). As this refers to an apostate Jew, it is possible that we have here a reference to the use of Jewish esoteric doctrines as a polemical weapon already in the mid-13th century. In any event, there is a resemblance between Abner of Burgos' usage of the Kabbalah (see below) and that of Paulus de Heredia — both of whom were apostates — and the testimony of Pablo Christiani. Cf. note 36 below.

17. Baer, *op. cit.*, pp. 280–284.

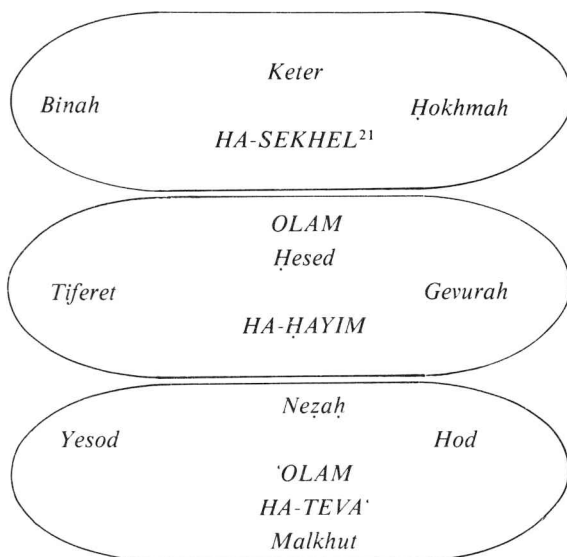
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 284–285.

19. This *sefirah* is parallel to the Holy Spirit and mediates between *ḥokhmah* and *binah* or between the father and son. See Baer, *op. cit.*, p. 281. It should be emphasized that we find here the Kabbalistic conception of the *sefirah* of *da'at* mediating between *ḥokhmah* and *binah* — significant evidence of the existence of this *sefirah*.

by the sages of the Kabbalah. And because of its synthetic character, it includes the attribute of *din*, it would be appropriate to attribute to it the aspect of *din*, to which the Talmudic sages refer. In any event, one cannot escape the fact that these three names indicate three attributes within the Divinity, blessed be He, as the Christians say.

Let us concentrate upon those aspects of the above passage which are relevant to our discussion. First, reference is made to three attributes — *raḥamim*, *din* and an intermediary attribute — which, according to Abner, have trinitarian implications. Second, that, as in the previous citations, *din* and *raḥamim* are counterposed to one another, as they are in the early midrashic texts, though not in most kabbalistic writings; however, an “intermediate attribute” is added to them, which is parallel to *ḥesed* in the above passages. Abner stresses the point that this third attribute is hinted at by the “sages of the Kabbalah.” From this, we may conclude that the words of the Christian quoted in *NV* may well be based precisely upon a Kabbalistic conception. However, it should be pointed out that Abner of Burgos does not relate his three attributes to the *sephirot* of *ḥesed – gevurah – tiferet*, but rather to the three higher *sephirot* of *ḥokhmah – tevunah – da’at*. However, this does not seem to weaken the parallel with the arrangement found in *NV*.

To conclude our discussion of this point, there follows a diagram of the ten *sephirot*, found in the margins of Rabbi Samuel ibn Motot’s *Sefer Tehillot Adonai*:²⁰



20. MS. Oxford 1648, f. 5a–b. Regarding this author and his treatise, see: Georges Vajda, “Recherches sur la synthèse philosophico-Kabbalistique de Samuel ibn Motot,” *AHDLMA* 27 (1960), pp. 29–63.

21. The reference is to the “world of the intellect,” which includes the first three *sefirot*. The next three — *ḥesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet* — belong to the “world of life,” while the last three form the “world of nature.” For this division of the *sefirot*, see Vajda, *op. cit.*, p. 36, n. 28.

There is no doubt but that, according to this arrangement, *hesed* is intermediary to *gevurah* and *tiferet*.²²

We must now turn to the other aspect of the quotation from *Nizzahon Vetus* cited above: namely, the definition of *ruah* (spirit) as intermediate between them, and as referring to the Father and Son. While this is clearly a Christian approach, it should nevertheless be compared with a passage from a treatise from 12th or early 13th-century Franco-Germany, the *Commentary to Sefer ha-Yezirah* attributed to R. Saadyah Gaon, but in fact written by one of the *Hassidei Ashkenaz* (members of an ethical-pietist social movement within medieval German Jewry).²³ There, we are told:

The cloud longs to rise, as do all things derived from fire, while water longs to go down, as do all things derived from the female. Then *ruah*, which is intermediary to these two and combines both male and female, lifts |the water| up to the clouds.²⁴

Is the use of the term “intermediary” in conjunction with *ruah* in both of these texts coincidental? The *Commentary to Sefer ha-Yezirah* continues the concept of *ruah* or “air” found in *Sefer ha-Yezirah* 3:2, in which it is seen as “preponderating” or “mediating” between fire and water. If there is any connection between the phraseology of the Christian quoted in *NV* and the *Commentary*, then the latter is likely to be the source of the former, if only on linguistic grounds.

It is interesting to note that the aforementioned *Commentary* was written by a member of the so-called circle of the “Special Cherub,”²⁵ that school within *Hassidei Ashkenaz* which had already merged with the Spanish-Provencal school of Kabbalah by the end of the 13th century.²⁶ Is it possible that the passage from *NV*, which may well contain elements from both these schools of thought, is based upon sources in which motifs from both of them are still in conflict? In any

22. This diagram should be compared with the one found in *Sefer ha-Gevul* by R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, MS. Jerusalem 803921, folio 35a, in which there is a silver-colored circle, symbolizing *hesed*, drawn between the circle in which is written “red tending towards white,” i.e., *tiferet*, and one in which is written “gold,” symbolizing *gevurah-din*.

23. See J. Dan, *Torat ha-sod shel Hassidut Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 60, n. 4.

24. *Sefer ha-Yezirah* (Jerusalem, 1965), f. 45a; cf. the remarks in the introduction to the *Commentary on Sefer ha-Komah* by R. Moshe b. Eleazar ha-Darshan: “And the glory of God is intermediate (*memuza*) between them” (reprinted in G. Scholem, *Les origines de la Kabbalah* (Paris, 1966), p. 219. In fact, the term *memuza* in the sense of mediation is characteristic of the circle of the Special Cherub, belonging to their particular terminological style. The expression, “the spirit which is intermediary between them” (*ha-ruah ha-metavekh beneyhem*) is found frequently in the *Commentary to Sefer ha-Yezirah* of R. Elhanan ben Yakar; see J. Dan, *Iyunim be-sifrut Hassidut Ashkenaz* (Ramat Gan, 1973), pp. 32–33.

25. Dan, *Torat ha-Sod*, pp. 53 and 156–168; cf. his article in *Tarbiz* 35 (1966), 349–372.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 252 ff.

event, it should be noted that R. Shem Tov ben Simhah ha-Kohen, who is thought to have been an Ashkenazi author, was well-versed in the literature of the “Special Cherub” circle.²⁷

III

There is another discussion in the *Nizzahon Vetus* which may well reflect a certain connection with the Kabbalah, although this point is inconclusive. In that passage, one of the reasons given for the physical fairness and beauty of the Christians, in contrast to the ugliness of the Jews, is the following: “...Gentiles are incontinent and have sexual relations during the day, at a time when they see the faces on attractive pictures; therefore, they give birth to children who look like these pictures, as it is written, ‘And the sheep conceived when they came to drink before the rods’ [Gen. 30:38–39].” (Berger, p. 224, par. 238; Heb., p. 159) The sources cited by Berger for this only relate to the giving birth to beautiful children during the daytime (*Ibid.*, p. 340), while the main point of the argument is that the beauty of the child is related to the perusal of “faces on attractive pictures.” A passage from the *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Naso*, par. 7) would appear to reflect a similar approach:

It is told of a king of the Arabs who asked Rabbi Akiba: “I am an Ethiopian and my wife is an Ethiopian, and she bore me a fair child. Therefore, I will have her killed, because she whored.” He asked him: “Are the images in your house black or white (i.e., fair)?” He answered: “White.” He said to him: “When you were having sexual relations with her she was looking at them, and she gave birth to a child like them. And if you think that this is surprising, you may learn it from the sheep of Jacob, which conceived before the rods, as it is written, ‘And the sheep conceived before the rods.’”

A passage in the famous *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*, spuriously attributed to R. Moses ben Nahman, may well furnish the link between this midrash and the passage in *NV*. There, we read:

That woman who bore a black child, and she and her husband the king were fair and very beautiful; and the king intended to kill her until a wise man came who told him: “She may have thought about a black man while having sexual relations.” And they looked into the matter and found that there were black forms in the pictures in that room in which they had sexual relations; she said that she was looking at them and pondering upon them during the sexual act. And this is exactly as in the case of the rods.²⁸

In this passage, we find the combination of “fair” and “beautiful,” as in *NV*. Moreover, in one of the manuscripts of the *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* it states that the woman “made an agreement with him to imagine beautiful pictures and think pure thoughts”!²⁹ While there is no mention here of “looking at pictures,” the

27. *Ibid.*, p. 255 ff. We do not as yet have any authoritative information regarding either the time period or locale to which R. Shem Tov belonged.

28. *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1964), II: 331–332.

29. See the variants cited by Chavel from the *Menorat ha-Maor*, *op.cit.*, p. 331.

actual phrase “beautiful pictures” is common both to the *Iggeret* and to the *NV* (Berger, *op. cit.*). Likewise, it should be noted that, while the midrash only refers to the ponderings of the queen, the passage in *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* speaks of an agreement between the woman and her husband to meditate upon “beautiful pictures”; this is in accord with the passage in *NV* which does not specifically refer to the woman’s actions.

IV

In two places, the author of *Nizzahon Vetus* claims that Mohammed is considered by the Muslims to be God, just as Jesus was so considered by the Christians: “...no name of a foreign god shall be mentioned, not that of Jesus nor that of Muhammed...” (Berger, p. 97, par. 80; Eng., p. 53); “...concerning the divinity of their god Muhammed...” (Berger, p. 110, par. 92; Heb.: p. 63).³⁰ This seems to be one of the characteristic expressions of the polemical tradition of Ashkenazic Jewry. For example, an anonymous text argues the following: “‘You shall have no other gods...’ is *gematria* [by also including the letters] for ‘Jesus and Mohammed,’”³¹ while the *Sefer Arugath ha-Bosem* states: “This is Mohammed, who made himself into a god and in whom the Ishmaelites believe.”³² In yet another place we read, “I have heard that thus one prays to vanity and emptiness, for in *gematria* “Jesus and Mohammed” are *ilem* (deaf-mute), so that all who believe in the two of them bow down to vanity and emptiness.”³³ It is worthy of note that, in contrast with the use of *gematria* which characterized the polemical approach of *Hasidut Ashkenaz* from the beginning of the 13th century, the author of the *NV* has almost completely refrained from this practice, as is very obvious in the texts dealing with Jesus and Mohammed. This may be due to the fact that the author was in fact not associated with any of the mystical groups of 13th century Ashkenaz, but only occasionally borrowed their concepts, without needing to utilize their particular methods of interpretation.³⁴ There may even be a connection between this restraint and the purpose of the book. He intended to place at the disposal of the Jews ready-made answers to

30. Cf. par. 93 (p. 111; Heb.: p. 64); 101 (p. 117, Heb.: p. 680); 227 (p. 217; Heb.: p. 152).

31. See Menashe (Manfred) R. Lehmann, “Remazim le-oto ish ule-Muhamed be-ferushehem shel Hasidey Ashkenaz,” *Sinai* 87 (1980), p. 34–40. Compare with the tradition preserved in *Sefer ha-Peliyah* (Koretz, 1784), f. 20b: “When our forefathers sinned by forgetting the Holy Name, he gave them over into the hands of two messengers to cause them suffering — the gods of Edom and Ishmael, the two devils, Jesus of Nazereth and Mohammed.” Here too, as in the Ashkenazic sources, Mohammed is considered the god of Ishmael, despite the demonic characterization.

32. Ed. Urbach (Jerusalem, 1963), III: 333.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 468, and n. 17 there.

34. Both the mainstream of Ashkenazic hasidism, centered around R. Judah he-Hasid and R. Eleazar of Worms, and the Circle of the “Special Cherub,” made extensive use of *gematria* as one of the major methods of proving their theological stand.

refute the arguments of the Christians by direct examination of the plain meaning of Scripture, making it possible to debate with Christians who were not versed in Hebrew. Furthermore, from one of the first passages of the *NV* it seems that it is precisely the Christian who makes use of the technique of combining letters, whereby he derives the trinity from the word *bereshith* ("in the beginning").³⁵ In light of the fact that this technique could thus be a two-edged sword,³⁶ it was preferable that the Jew not resort to it for polemical purposes, but rely instead upon a confrontation based upon the literal meaning of the Biblical text. Indeed, the author makes a clearly noticeable effort to answer the Christian on the basis of a literal understanding of the verses,³⁷ showing that they are not only unrelated to the content which Christianity tries to read into them, but that they specifically refute the Christian approach.³⁸

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35. Berger, par. 2 (p. 41, Heb.: p. 3); cf. Liebes, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–57.

36. For the *gematria*: "Jesus + Miriam = *elohei nekhar ha-arez* (the God of the strangers of the land)", used by Paulus of Heredia and based upon Ashkenazic sources, see M. Idel, "Two Notes on R. Yair b. Shabetay's *Herev Piphiot*" (Heb.), *Kiryat Sefer* 53 (1978), p. 214. For the proof of the trinity based upon various combinations of the letters of the Ineffable Name of God see: Petrus Alphonsi, *Dialogi, Patrologia Latina*, vol. 157, f. 611. For its use in the Muslim-Jewish debate, see: M. Perlmann, "Samu'el al-Maghribi — Ifham al-Yahud," *PAAJR* 32 (1964), p. 46.

37. See I. Ta-Shma, "*Sefer ha-Maskil* — an Unknown Hebrew Book from the 13th Century" (Heb.), *Mehkerev Yerushalayim be-Maḥshevet Yisra'el* 2 (1983), p. 422, and n. 16 there.

38. See, i.e. (in Berger, par. 36, p. 65, Heb.: p. 25), the acceptance of the fact that the "wood" which Moses threw into the bitter waters was indeed the Cross, as the Christians claim, but with the inversion of the role of the wood into the cause of the waters' bitterness rather than that which sweetened them. The partial acknowledgment of the Christian claim in order to refute it is also found in connection with Deut. 13:7 (see Liebes, *op. cit.*, p. 64, n. 74).

Supplementary note [to note 15 above]: Cf. Profiat Duran's remark in his polemical work, *Sefer Kelimat ha-Goyim*, ed., F. Talmage (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 12 and n. 10.