The Tensions between Jews and Christians

as Reflected in Hayyun’s Commentary on Jeremiah

R. Joseph Hayyun was one of the most prominent leaders of the Jewish community of fifteenth-century Lisbon.[[1]](#footnote-1) Most of his literary activity dates to the 1460s and 1470s;[[2]](#footnote-2) it includes commentaries on books of the Bible,[[3]](#footnote-3) essays on various biblical issues and passages,[[4]](#footnote-4) and a commentary on Pirqe Avot.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In his time there prevailed great tension between Jews and Christians, including frequent public disputations.[[6]](#footnote-6) One of the harshest of them was the Disputation of Tortosa (1413), which affected the status of Judaism and the situation of the Jews severely.[[7]](#footnote-7) Decades later, in 1449, there was an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in his own city of Lisbon.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is difficult to determine whether the main instigator of the Tortosa disputation was the convert Joshua Lorki or Pope Benedict XIII, yet ‘In all the long and wearisome annals of medieval disputations, it would be hard to find another who, like him [Lorki], was transformed overnight from a Jew wrestling with doubts into a relentless apostate—one so cruel, untruthful, and devoid of human sentiment.’[[9]](#footnote-9) In the course of the disputation, Lorki did not balk at any means of carrying out his nefarious plans, not even the forgery of midrashim. There is evidence that various authorities, some of them ecclesiastical, asked the king to intervene on the Jews’ behalf, and that he alleviated the torment they were undergoing. One of the Jewish scholars who participated in this disputation was R. Joseph Albo, who later wrote his famous book *Sefer HaIkkarim*, which Hayyun mentions a number of times in his works.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A number of scholars have noted the great influence of this inter-religious tension on Hayyun’s Bible commentaries, manifested in a variety of ways. In these scholars’ opinion, Hayyun saw a need to encourage the readers of his commentary, who were groaning beneath the yoke of the Exile, and sought to infuse in them a hopeful expectation of the redemption and to encourage them not to abandon the faith of their fathers; he was therefore sometimes inclined to give his commentary some contemporary relevance.[[11]](#footnote-11) The purpose of this article is to lay out the influence of this tension on Hayyun’s commentary on Jeremiah, whether it was an overt reaction or the kind of suppressed, covert response to be expected among a Jewish minority in a country where most of the inhabitants were Christians.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The roots of the Jewish-Christian conflict[[13]](#footnote-13) lie deep in the process of the crystallization of consolidation of the Christian faith. These principles are based on the absolute negation of Judaism as a legitimate continuation of ancient Israel. Disputes between Jews and Christians began as early as the time of Jesus, before Christianity became a separate religion, when his disciples sought to attract followers to Christianity.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the Middle Ages, these disputations turned on questions of biblical interpretation and later on the reliability of Talmudic interpretation of the Bible and the meaning of various Talmudic midrashim.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The main points of controversy centered on the three following topics:[[16]](#footnote-16) (1) Who is the ‘true Israel’? The Christians argue that they are the ‘true Israel’ because they are ‘Israel according to the spirit,’ while the Jews are called ‘Israel according to the flesh,’ a status that (per the Christians) they acquired as a result of their crimes against God, including the killing of Jesus.[[17]](#footnote-17) (2) Basic Christian beliefs that contradict the principles of the Jewish faith, for example, the materiality of God[[18]](#footnote-18) and the belief in the Trinity – which contradict the belief in a single, immaterial God;[[19]](#footnote-19) and (3) the messiah and other eschatological issues – has the messiah come already or has he not? And is it still necessary to maintain the Torah and the commandments in line with Jewish tradition?[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Direct Confrontation**

The theological dispute naturally rested on how one interpreted the Bible, which both faiths treated as sacred.[[21]](#footnote-21) Jews wrote essays whose sole purpose was to challenge Christian interpretation of the Bible, and Christians of course returned the favor. Some Jewish exegetes integrated anti-Christian interpretations into their commentaries, sometimes (like David Kimhi[[22]](#footnote-22)) even in harsh language, while others (like Rashi[[23]](#footnote-23)) kept their criticism more subtle and only occasionally wrote direct criticism. Hayyun followed Rashi as well, preferring implied criticism[[24]](#footnote-24) and only rarely arguing with Christian interpretation directly. In his Jeremiah commentary, we find such direct criticism in just two places.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In Jeremiah’s prophecies of comfort about the eschatological future, it is said of the messiah, ‘In his days Judah shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure. And this is the name by which he shall be called: “The Lord is our Vindicator”’ (Jer. 23:6; English translations are taken from NJPS, adjusted when necessary). On the face of it, the messiah is being called ‘the Lord our Vindicator,’ and the biblical punctuation supports this interpretation. This verse was frequently cited by Christians as support for the incarnation. Hayyun, in his comment to the verse, rejects this interpretation in two ways. First, he explains that the expression is [מקווה שזה התרגום המדויק] a complete sentence, ‘the Lord is our Vindicator,’ and that it cannot be read to say that the messiah is himself ‘the Lord’:

Just as we cannot read the name of the altar ‘Adonai-nissi’ [Exod. 17:15] as calling the altar itself ‘Lord,’ or the name of the altar ‘El-elohe-yisrael’ [Gen. 33:20] to mean that the altar itself is God. The proof is that Jerusalem too will be called ‘the Lord is our Vindicator’ in Jer. 33:16.

He goes on to write explicitly against the Christian interpretation, clarifying that it must be interpreted in this way even though that requires reading the verse against the punctuation: ‘That is what they shall call the Lord: Our Vindicator.’ To quote him: ‘In order to stifle the heretics, we may actually interpret it to say that the name of the messiah is “Vindicator” and that it is the Lord who is calling him that (even though the punctuation contradicts this reading).’[[26]](#footnote-26)

Another place in the Jeremiah commentary where Hayyun criticizes Christian interpretation is in his comment on the prophet’s rebuke ‘But if you say “the burden of the Lord”’ (Jer. 23:38). Hayyun first cites Rashi’s interpretation of the verse:

The Sage Rashi (of blessed memory) interpreted this prophecy differently,[[27]](#footnote-27) but the gist of his words is that since these prophecies were given obscurely, the false prophet and the priest and the people all requested of the prophet that they should explain to him ‘the burden of the Lord’ – that is, the obscure language that was spoken to the prophet – and not that the prophet himself should first tell them the meaning of the prophecy explicitly. They therefore called the prophecy a ‘burden’ because of its obscurity, since such a prophecy is quite burdensome to understand.

Subsequently, Hayyun explains the reason they wanted the prophet to recite the prophecy without first establishing its meaning:

What they intended was that they wanted to overturn it and interpret it in opposition to the truth, just as the scholars among the Gentile nations today do with regard to the prophecies. Do you not see that even with regard to the verse ‘Hear, O Israel!’ [Deut. 6:4], so incredibly precise about God’s unity, they have tried to use it to vindicate the Trinity, as Maimonides of blessed memory explained.[[28]](#footnote-28) The prophet therefore warns them and their friends not to ask this of the prophet and not to seek to know anything but the meaning of the prophecy as the prophet himself clarifies it.

In this way Hayyun fashions a parallel between the false prophets and the Christian scholars, who in his opinion overload the Scriptures with misinterpretations and in so doing twist their true meaning.

**Adherence to the Plain Sense against Allegorical Christian Interpretation**

Since one of the cornerstones of Christian theology is the denial of the validity of the laws of the Torah, there was an urgent exegetical need to settle for the Christian believer the contradiction between the sanctity of the ‘Old Testament’ and the negation of what it commands. The solution was found by the use of a method of allegorical interpretation, which explains the text symbolically and not in accordance with its plain sense, and by so doing making it possible to discover in the text allusions and symbols to Christian beliefs.[[29]](#footnote-29)

According to a number of scholars, the overall Jewish response to this kind of interpretation was a general consolidation of interpretative rules that emphasize context and linguistic meaning.[[30]](#footnote-30) This method was different not only in the Christian exegetical methodology but also from the accepted way of Biblical exegesis in Jewish houses of study, where students occupied themselves not with the plain sense but with midrash; this, of course, ignores both context and linguistic accuracy. These scholars viewed Rashi’s methodological statements about his use of midrash to settle the biblical text by ‘a phrase well-turned’ (Prov. 25:11), that is, fitting in with the context and the language, as a response to Christian non-contextual interpretation.

Other interpreters followed this same exegetical method. Kimhi, for example, generally kept his interpretation of the text subject to the biblical context and the rules of language, whether or not he explicitly noted that his motivation was the rejection of Christological interpretation.[[31]](#footnote-31)

It is possible to say about Hayyun too what scholars have written about Rashi and others. Even though Hayyun says little explicitly about his methodological principles, he several times repeats the obligation to adhere to the context and the linguistic meaning. Hayyun asserts this principle twice in his introduction to his Psalms commentary:[[32]](#footnote-32)

Says Joseph, son of the ~~Prince~~ Presidant Abraham Hayyun (may he rest in peace): I have seen fit to interpret this book, the book of Psalms, extensively. For no sufficient explanation has reached us here in our region that would enable us to understand it completely, since the words of this book are extremely profound, both substantively and linguistically. (Introduction, beginning)

Thus when I, Joseph the son of the ~~Prince~~ [president – [צריך להיות הנשיא כמו למעלה my master Abraham ibn Hayyun (may he rest in peace) saw how great and how beautiful this book was, I determined to explicate it, if God would be so good as to permit me. For in this region of ours there has not reached our hands anything but that which Rashi (of blessed memory) and Abraham Ibn Ezra and David Kimhi (of blessed memory) have explained. But none of the three of them managed to understand the words of this book completely because its content and language are so profound. (Introduction, end)

It goes without saying that adherence to the context and language of the text supplants allegorical, non-contextual exegesis. To be sure, Hayyun did not point out that this was a response to Christian exegesis, but we have already seen that he almost never directly contradicts Christian interpretation; he prefers to contradict it indirectly.

**Indirect Confrontation**

Even though Hayyun kept his criticism of Christian exegesis and theology beneath the surface, it is almost certain that his allusions were clear to his readers. In what follows, we shall look at a number of examples from his commentary on Jeremiah.

**The Torah is Not New**

With regard to Jeremiah’s demand that the people of his generation keep the commandments of the Torah and heed the true prophets, ‘abiding by My Teaching that I have set before you, heeding the words of My servants the prophets whom I have been sending to you persistently’ (Jer. 26:5), Hayyun wrote this:

‘Abiding by My Teaching’ *means* ‘heeding the words of My servants the prophets.’ That is because if you heed and accept their words, you will immediately begin to abide by My Teaching, for they are not inventing some new Torah; all their words and prophecies are devoted to nothing but strengthening *My* Torah.

Jeremiah’s demand that the people abide by the Torah and the words of the prophets is straightforward and does not call for explanation of any kind. The commandment to abide by the Teaching of the Lord and to heed his prophets appears elsewhere in the Torah. Yet Hayyun sees fit to load his exegesis of this verse additional meaning, thereby rejecting the Christian claim that a ‘new covenant’ and a ‘new Torah’ have been given, a criticism that is repeated in his commentary at numerous opportunities.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hayyun creates a link between these two commandments that negates the possibility of there one day arising anyone who might alter or annul the rulings of the Torah, thus strengthening his readers’ faith in the eternal validity of the Torah.

**The Rejection of Materiality**

In a number of places in his commentaries, Hayyun explains expressions that would seem to describe God in material terms as anthropomorphism.[[34]](#footnote-34) Some examples: In Jer. 32:41 God says, ‘with all My heart and soul.’ Hayyun comments, ‘The Torah is speaking here in human language.’ In Jer. 42:10 God says, ‘I regret the punishment I have brought upon you.’ Again Hayyun says, ’The Torah is speaking here in human language; for “God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind” [Num. 23:19].’ And the opposite is also true. In prophecies like ‘they shall serve the Lord their God and David, the king’ (Jer. 30:9), where it seems there is a prophetic command to worship flesh and blood, a man born of woman, Hayyun clarifies that this is not a matter of worshiping David but of subjugation to the kingship of the dynasty of David: ‘“they shall serve … David” means in service of the kingdom, not in worship as one serves God.’[[35]](#footnote-35)

**The Exile is Temporary**

In order to encourage his readers, Hayyun emphasizes in a number of places that the exile is temporary and that the promised redemption will most certainly come, no matter how long it is deferred. He did the same in a number of verses in Jeremiah that might otherwise be interpreted as meaning that God has abandoned Israel permanently so that they can no longer have any hope of revival or redemption. Some examples: ‘For you have kindled the flame of My wrath, which shall burn for all time’ (Jer. 17:4); ‘So will I smash this people … so that it can never be mended’ (Jer. 19:11); ‘Your injury is incurable, your wound severe’ (Jer. 30:12). In all these verses Hayyun explains that the wound and the injury, though indeed severe and long-lasting, are *not* permanent. In his comment to 17:4, he says, ‘“Forever” does not mean “eternally”; it simply means “for a long time”, as in “he shall serve him forever” [Exod. 21:6] and “he shall remain there forever” [1 Sam. 1:22] and the like.[[36]](#footnote-36) On 19:11 he remarks, ‘“And they said further” does not mean “eternally”, since He has already said that He would “cure you of your wounds”.[[37]](#footnote-37) It simply means “a very long time”.’

Hayyun seeks to comfort the Jews who are heartsick in the exile, telling them that the situation of Israel in exile is likened to cutting fruit off a tree: the tree’s roots are still planted deep in the soil, and its splendid foliage will grow back. Here, he explains the similes of Jer. 8:13, where Israel’s exile is likened to cutting grapes from the vine and figs from the tree:

‘I will make an end of them … No grapes left on the vine, No figs on the fig tree’ – the image of cutting is doubled to say that it will indeed be very great … they will be cut off as grapes are from the vine and figs from the tree. The fruit is removed and even the branches may be pruned, but the root remains firmly fixed; just so will they be cut off, men and women and children; priests, Levites, and ordinary Israelites, and yet their roots will remain firmly fixed. This is the seed of Israel, for He will not ‘reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them’ [Lev. 26:44] …

He likens their devastation to the devastation of the vine and the fig tree, whose fruit is more prized than any other, as does Hos. 9:10, ‘I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; your fathers seemed to Me like the first fig to ripen on a fig tree.’ Physicians call these the princes of fruit, and they too were princes over all the nations.

As is his wont, Hayyun squeezes every possible meaning out of the verse.[[38]](#footnote-38) He explains that only the fruit is cut off; the roots remain planted. In addition, he notes that the comparison to grapes and figs is not idly chosen; it expresses the superiority of the Jews to all the other nations since, even in exile, they attain princely stature.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Hayyun does not ignore the difficulties of exile and the low state of the Jews. He sees in the prophecy ‘I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, a disgrace and a parable, a byword and a curse in all the places to which I banish them’ (Jer. 24:9), in which four different synonyms repeat the depths to which Israel will fall, a precise reflection of the situation of the Jews in his own time:

A disgrace – for everyone treats them with contempt, saying all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ or by saying they were ungrateful and abandoned their God, who had done so many good things for them, and were therefore exiled for their transgressions.

A parable – for many people from the other nations got a parable out of this, with the moral that they themselves should not abandon their idols lest they do to them what the God of the Jews did to them.

A byword – a saying, as in the related verb ‘you shall *repeat* them to your children’ [Deut. 6:7], for everyone will speak about them and about the great evil that has come upon them.

A curse – everyone will hate them so much that they will curse them.

Evidently what Hayyun intends is to teach his readers that the exile in which they are living has already been described in the words of the prophets, thereby strengthening their hearts in that all was done by complete divine providence and not, God forbid, that God has abandoned his people.

**Prophecies of Comfort for the Days of the Messiah**

The prophecies of comfort in the book of Jeremiah are concentrated in chapters 30–33. Hayyun divides these into seven separate prophecies.[[40]](#footnote-40) In his view, all but one of these are not directed at comforting those who were exiled to Babylonia or at the building of the Second Temple, but at the future days of the messiah. It is reasonable to assume that what motivated Hayyun to interpret them as referring to the days of the messiah and to assert that they have not yet been fulfilled was to oppose the Christian claim that the messiah had already arrived.[[41]](#footnote-41) Prophecy 57 as well (Jeremiah 32), which according to his interpretation was about the exile to Babylonia, as he understands it has four verses that refer to the days of the messiah (32:38–41). When we look closely at those verses we see that they could easily be explained according to Christian theology as expressing the revelation of their messiah and the foundation of their religion:

They shall be My people, and I will be their God. I will give them a single heart and a single nature to revere Me for all time, and it shall be well with them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them and that I will treat them graciously; and I will put into their hearts reverence for Me so that they do not turn away from Me. I will delight in treating them graciously, and I will plant them in this land faithfully, with all My heart and soul.

Hayyun had trouble connecting this prophecy to the Second Temple era since during that period some Jews were still in exile. He therefore explained them as relating to the days of the messiah, justifying his words as follows:

It is obvious from what is going on in this section of the prophecies of comfort that it relates to the future since in the Second Temple period free will was not eliminated, nor did He give them a new heart, or a single heart and a single path; in fact, there were many murderers among them, as we read in Josippon. Jannai killed all the Sages of Israel, and so did Herod. There was great hatred and innumerable cases of slanderous gossip. Then there is His statement ‘I will not turn away from them,’ when He has once again turned away and left them to destruction, and His statement ‘that they do not turn away from Me,’ when they have in fact turned away from Him and perished because of their transgressions.

In the previous prophecy, Hayyun supports his interpretation that this prophecy is about the future and has not yet come to pass with three pieces of evidence:

‘Thus said the Lord: The people escaped from the sword found favor in the wilderness’ [Jer. 31:1]. This prophecy, as far as the end of v. 19, also refers to the future. Proof of this is found in the words ‘A cry is heard in Ramah—Rachel weeping for her children’ [v. 14], and of the Lord’s saying to her, ‘Restrain your voice from weeping … there is hope for your future … Your children shall return to their country’ [v. 15]. Yet Ephraim and Manasseh, who were her children, did not return in the redemption from Babylonia.

So too ‘Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me … My thoughts would dwell on him still’ [v. 19]. Again, Ephraim did not return in the redemption from Babylonia.

So too ‘I will gather them from the ends of the earth’ [v. 7]—they did not in fact come to Jerusalem in those days from the ends of the earth.

The interreligious tension and the mounting pressure on the Jews in the Christian kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, along with the prolongation of the exile, caused many of them to forsake their heritage and convert. Hayyun, the head of the Jewish community of Lisbon, saw that he had an opportunity to keep up their spirits. He therefore tried even in his commentaries to the Bible to strengthen them, more often indirectly but on rare occasions openly, by adherence to the plain sense of the text.

1. His dates of birth and death are unknown, though some reasonable guesses have been made. On these, see Yohanan Kapah, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Commentary on Psalms of R. Joseph Hayyun, Head of the Rabbis of Lisbon* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2016), p. א n. ו. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Hacker, ‘R. Joseph Hayyun and the Generation of the Expulsion from Portugal,’ *Zion* 48 (1983), pp. 273–80 (in Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, and three of the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Esther). We have manuscripts of all his biblical commentaries except for those on Isaiah, Proverbs, and Lamentations. To date, critical editions of the commentaries on Ezekiel, Hosea, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, and Psalms have been published. I recently finished editing the Jeremiah commentary. The sources for that commentary to which I refer in this article are based on that edition. Since it is expected to appear shortly, I will cite the commentary referring to chapter and verse rather than to the manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All these essays have been published in Abraham Gross, *R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun: Leader of the Lisbon Jewish Community and His Literary Work* (in Hebrew) (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), pp. 193–287. I have published the essay “Maggid Mishne” in a critical edition in Yohanan Kapah, ‘R. Joseph Hayyun’s “Maggid Mishne”: A New Edition,’ *Shnaton* 25 (2017), pp. 311–41 (in Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This has been widely circulated, having so far been published in three editions; see Kapah, ‘Introduction,’ p. ו n. ג. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Many such disputations took place in the Middle Ages, most often at the initiative of the Church, although ‘contrary to widespread opinion, it was not always the Christians who initiated the disputations. More than once, at least up to the time of the Second Crusade in the middle of the twelfth century, it was the Jews who invited their neighbors to dispute’ (Elazar Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion:* *Studies in the Pentateuchal Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir* [in Hebrew] [Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003], p. 39 n. 31). Two additional important disputations were the Disputation of Paris (1240) and the Disputation of Barcelona (1263). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The disputation began on 7 February 1413 and concluded in November 1414. As early as March many Jews began to arrive in Tortosa, at first individually but eventually in groups, announcing their intention to convert, among them even some in leadership positions (see Yitzhak Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. Louis Schoffman, Lotte Levensohn, and Hillel Halkin [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961–1966], vol. 2, pp. 210–11; Jeremy Cohen, ‘Tortosa in Retrospect: The Disputation as Reported in Solomon ibn Verga’s Shevet Yehudah,’ *Zion* 76:4 (2011), pp. 417-452 (in Hebrew). [\*\*Perhaps now refer to his English article in JQR 2013 or Chapter 2 of his 2017 book?\*\* אם אתה סבור שזה עדיף, בסדר גמור] For a description of the pogroms against the Jews of Spain and Portugal prompted by the preaching of the Dominican friar Vicente Ferrer, and the conversions that resulted, amounting to hundreds of thousands, see Yechezkel Shrage Lichtenstein, *Suicide – Halakhic, Historic, and Theological Aspects* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008), pp. 272–85. According to Baer (pp. 210–11, 224) this disputation brought the communities of Aragon and Castile to the brink of destruction, though Jeremy Cohen (pp. 440–41) downplays the responsibility of this disputation for that. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gross, *R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun*, pp. 18, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2, pp. 208–9. Joshua Lorki (also called Hieronymus de Sancta Fide or Gerónimo de Santa Fé) was Benedict XIII’s physician (ibid., 171). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On this, see Kapah, ‘Introduction,’ p. ג n. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In the opinion of Gross, *R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun*, pp. 39–40, Hayyun was definitely aware of Christological exegesis; this emerges from his commentaries on the Psalms and on Jer. 23:38, yet he generally chooses to respond to such interpretation in disguised form, as in his comment on the verses ‘the Lord said to me, “You are My son”’ (Ps. 2:7) and ‘Do not kill them lest my people be unmindful’ (Ps. 59:12). In these verses Hayyun ‘diverts the words from their national dimension to the personal-biographical dimension of David’ without relating explicitly to their classic Augustinian-Christian interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Oded Yisraeli writes in the same vein with regard to Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah: ‘Every author is, willy-nilly, working in a particular cultural and religious environment, of which he himself is to a great extent the product … even with regard to the anti-Christian “antibodies” with which Nahmanides’ writing was, knowingly or unknowingly, saturated. In given historical circumstances, commentary itself demands – albeit at low voltage – a continual dialogue with the regnant alternative Christian interpretation, whether or not the Jewish faith was threatened. Echoes of the Jewish-Christian dialogue should, therefore, not be viewed as one of the “standard destinations” of a biblical commentator but as a reflection of his cultural and religious environment and intellectual horizons’ (Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moses b. Nahman: An Intellectual Biography* [in Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020], p. 293). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Not for nothing is it customary to call the disputations ‘polemics,’ a word that derives from the Greek word for war. Sometimes, the disputations diverged from the normal course of dialogue and turned into an extremely violent war of opinions. If at first the Jews were willing enough to participate in the disputations, with the rise in the power of the Church, the disputations became a heavy burden on the Jews, with disastrous consequences. See Yaakov Raphael Garzon, ‘Translation Criticism of the Vulgate in the Medieval Polemic Writings of the Kimhi Family: Modern Translatological Insights,’ M.A. thesis (in Hebrew), Bar-Ilan University, 2004, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Judah David Eisenstein, *Otzar Vikuhim* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: s.n., 1969); Garson, *Translation Criticism*, p. 19; Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, p. 34; Yaakov Raphael Garzon, ‘The Vulgate and Early Christian Interpretation of Genesis in Light of Medieval “French” Jewish Interpretation: Linguistic and Polemic Aspects in the Interpretations of Rashi, Rashbam, Radak, and Hizkuni,’ Ph.D. diss. (in Hebrew), Bar-Ilan University, 2009), pp. 9–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Amos Funkenstein, ‘Changes in the Patterns of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the 12th Century’ (in Hebrew), *Zion* 33 (1968), pp. 125-144. Various trends in the disputations began to develop; see Jeremy Cohen, ‘Towards a Functional Classification of Jewish anti-Christian Polemic in the High Middle Ages,’ in Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (eds), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), pp. 93–114; Ora Limor, ‘In the Palace of Barcelona and the Market of Majorca – Towards a New Typology of Religious Disputations in the Middle Ages’ (in Hebrew), *Pe’amim* 94-95 (2003), pp. 105-34; Ram Ben-Shalom, ‘Between Official and Private Dispute: The Case of Christian Spain and Provence in the Late Middle Ages,’ *AJS Review* 27 (2003), pp. 23—72. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Garzon, ‘Translation Criticism of the Vulgate,’ p. 22. Moses A. Shulvass (*Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* [in Hebrew] [New York: Histadruth Ivrith of America, 1955], p. 192) quotes R. Elijah Levita (Bahur): ‘It is well known that most of the disputation between us and them is with regard to the messiah, whether he has already come or is yet to come, and on the length of the exile and redemption, and on heaven and hell.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Christianity (Paul) asserted that the Christians are the true Israel, God’s Israel. The Christians are the members of the faith, the spiritual children of Abraham to whom the promise was given, and they are therefore God’s chosen, both individually and as a group. Israel according to the spirit has, in the historical process of putting the world back in order, dispossessed Israel according to the flesh’ (Moshe Rachimi, ‘The Commentary of R. Obadiah Sforno on the Torah: Rules and Tendencies,’ Ph.D. diss. [in Hebrew] [Bar-Ilan University, 2006], p. 29; see the sources there). What motivated Paul to develop this theory was the desire to bring pagan communities under the wings of Christianity (see David Rokéah, ‘Early Christian-Jewish Polemics on Divine Election,’ in Shmuel Almog and Michael Heyd [eds], *Chosen People, Elect Nation, and Universal Mission: Collected Essays* [in Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1991], p. 83). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This view relies on the verses ‘a child has been born to us’ (Isa. 9:5) and ‘they become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24). The material and yet divine nature of Jesus is one of the mysteries of Christianity established at the Council of Nicaea (in 325), at which the principles of Christianity were detailed, among them that of the Incarnation. According to the belief, Jesus, who was both the only son of God and God himself, entered by means of the Holy Spirit into Mary in order to redeem humanity, and thus became flesh and blood. The Messiah and God are one. God takes on material form in the Eucharist – a sacrament performed at a ceremony at which the body of Jesus is eaten, and his blood is drunk. The origin of the commandment to do this is the Last Supper, at which Jesus distributed bread and wine among his disciples and told them they were eating his body and drinking his blood. The body of Jesus was understood by the Christians as the new Temple, embodied in the Church, which in this way received its status of supreme holiness (Garzon, ‘Translation Criticism of the Vulgate,’ p. 24 n. 39; Ora Limor, *Jews and Christians in Western Europe* [in Hebrew] [Tel Aviv: Open University of Israel, 1993], vol. 1, pp. 114–8, 150; ibid., vol. 3, p. 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The belief in the Trinity is one of the principles of Catholic Christianity. According to this belief, the divine is realized in one God with three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Jews can ‘accept’ two of the three persons, the Father (= God) and the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the verse ‘when God began to create’ (Gen. 1:1), alluding to the Father, and ‘the spirit of God sweeping over the water’ (Gen. 1:2), alluding to the Holy Spirit. The belief in the ‘son,’ by contrast, is considered idolatrous by Jews and, as such, irreconcilable with logic (Garzon, ‘Translation Criticism of the Vulgate,’ p. 24 n. 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See for example the language of Nahmanides in ‘The Disputation at Barcelona’: ‘Thus, we agreed to speak first on the subject of the Messiah, [that is], whether he had already come, which is the belief of the Christians, or was still to come, which is the belief of the Jews. Afterwards, we would discuss whether the Messiah is really G-d or is really mortal, born of a man and a woman. We would then discuss that the Jews hold the true Torah, or whether the Christians fulfill it’ (in *Writings and Discourses*, trans. Charles B. Chavel [New York: Shilo, 1978], p. 658 #6. Compare this words to the anonymous Latin report of the disputation: ‘Friar Paul proposed to the said rabbi, that, with the aid of God, he would prove from writings shared and accepted by the Jews the following contentions, in order: that the messiah, who is called Christ, whom the Jews anticipate, has surely come already; also that the messiah, as prophesied, should be divine and human; also that he suffered and was killed for the salvation of mankind; also that the laws and ceremonials ceased and should have ceased after the advent of the said messiah’ ([https://web.archive.org/web/20060907082559/http://medspains.stanford.edu/demo/barcelona/disputation.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20060907082559/http:/medspains.stanford.edu/demo/barcelona/disputation.html), accessed 24 June 2021). The agenda of the disputation in Barcelona is common to both versions: whether the messiah has already come; the nature of the messiah, whether divine or human; on the suffering and death of the messiah; must the Torah and commandments still be kept? The text of the disputation written by Yair b. Shabbetai da Correggio – *Herev Pipiyot* (‘The Double-Edged Sword’) – deals almost entirely with this topic; see p. 8 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The fact that adherents of both religions studied the same texts influenced biblical interpretation in many ways, even with regard to the names of biblical books. In a number of places Hayyun refers to the book of Samuel as Kings (obviously under the influence of the Septuagint). For example, he identifies the location Geruth Chimham (Jer. 41:17) based on Samuel: ‘At Geruth Chimham – In the opinion of Targum Jonathan this is a location, or a region, that David gave to Chimham son of Barzilai the Gileadite after returning from the war with Absalom, as described in Kings.’ This reference to ‘Kings’ is of course really to 2 Sam. 19:37–39. This phenomenon occurs just once in the Jeremiah commentary, but a number of times in the commentary to Psalms, at 51:1–2, 54:1–2, 55:1–2, 55:5, 57:1, 119:41, 132:6, and 142:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Apparently, there was a great demand for Kimhi’s commentary to Psalms, as it was one of the first Hebrew works printed (1477). It could be that the polemical style of the commentary was responsible for this, just as that may have been responsible for its being expunged from the Rabbinic Bible of Jacob b. Haim (1524–5). Even in editions where it did appear, not just polemic passages but also many passages cited in the name of his father and other scholars were expunged (Menahem Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ in Mikra’ot Gedolot HaKeter, *Psalms 1* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), p. כ). On Kimhi as controversialist, see further Frank Talmage, ‘An Hebrew Polemical Treatise, Anti-Cathar and Anti-Orthodox,’ *HTR* 60 (1967), pp. 323–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As in his commentary to Psalms 2 and 21, where he departs from the rabbinic interpretation that these psalms are about the messiah, since this might have obliquely given aid and comfort to the Christian interpretation. If everyone agreed that these psalms were about the messiah, it would be easier for Christians to interpret them as referring to their own messiah, Jesus (Avraham Grossman, ‘Rashi's Commentary to Psalms and the Jewish-Christian Polemic,’ in Dov Rappel [ed], *Studies in the Bible and Education Presented to Professor Moshe Ahrend* [in Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Touro College, 1996], p. 61). ‘In Rashi’s hands, the psalms became a powerful weapon in the exiled Jewish nation’s struggle for survival’ (ibid., p. 67). See further Rashi’s comments to Gen. 1:27 and 6:6, to Dan. 2:10 and 11:14 (per the manuscripts), and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. All scholars of his commentary remark on this, but they disagree on his motivation. Was this simply the style that Hayyun found most comfortable; or was it that he decided, because of the vastness of the undertaking, that one should not engage in it unless one was a scholar who had carefully prepared himself for the task; or had he decided to implement a strategy of killing them with kindness, deciding to accentuate the positive? See, respectively, Gross, *R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun*, pp. 39–46; Yohanan Kapah, ‘R. Joseph b. Abraham Hayyun’s Commentary on Psalms: Analysis of His Interpretive Method, with an Explicated Critical Edition of Selected Psalms,’ Ph.D. diss. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 5771), pp. 201–31; Elitzur (above n. 3), pp. 220–25. [\*\* I could not find another reference to Elitzur. Perhaps Elitzur Yossef 2016 Bar-Ilan PhD “The Exegetical Method of Rabbi Joseph Hayyun in his Commentaries on the Bible”? \*\* יוסף אליצור, פירוש ר' יוסף חיון לספר הושע: הפירוש להושע, מבוא לשיטתו ומצע למחקר המשך, עבודה לשם קבלת תואר מוסמך, טורו קולג', ירושלים תשס"ו] [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In his Psalms commentary Hayyun confronts the Church (and the Muslims as well) just once. On Ps. 43:1, ‘Vindicate me, O God, champion my cause against faithless people; rescue me from the treacherous, dishonest man,’ Hayyun writes, ‘“Faithless people” is an allusion to the Ishmaelite nations, who sanctify and purify themselves and display themselves as holy, yet they commit adultery, theft, and robbery. “The treacherous, dishonest man” describes the nations of Edom, who are treacherous and dishonest, and who grieve us with verses from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, claiming that our messiah has come, that God is three-in-one, that He cohabited with a woman, and the like. They are indeed dishonest – for courts are corrupt, convicting the innocent and acquitting the guilty.’ In one of the two versions of the commentary the whole passage has been censored; in the other, only the criticism of the Christians was censored. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hayyun’s attitude to the punctuation marks differs little from that of his predecessors (on the attitudes of the Sages, Saadia, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Kimhi, Nahmanides, Gersonides, and Sforno to the punctuation marks, see Simcha Kogut, *Correlations between Biblical Accentuation and Traditional Jewish Exegesis: Linguistic and Contextual Studies* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994, 1996]). Like them, Hayyun hardly ever mentions the punctuation marks explicitly. Most of the time his interpretations do match the punctuation, yet he does sometimes interpret against the punctuation without mentioning that he is doing so. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Rashi’s comment to Jer. 23:36, where the same expression is used. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Maimonides, ‘The Essay on Resurrection,’ in *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, trans. Abraham Halkin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985), p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ *Psalms 1*, p. יב; Limor, *Jews and Christians in Western Europe*, vol. 3, p. 200. Limor cites as an example the Christian allegorical interpretations of the story of the binding of Isaac as a proleptic description of Jesus’s crucifixion. See further the many examples in Garzon, ‘The Vulgate and Early Christian Interpretation of Genesis,’ pp. 27, 97–332. A turn away from this exegetical method and toward plain-sense exegesis occurred at the end of the eleventh century, subsiding toward the end of the twelfth century. On this and on the reasons for it see Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, pp. 17–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See (e.g.) Avraham Grossman, ‘Religious Polemics and Educational Trends in Rashi’s Commentary to the Torah,’ in Moshe Ahrend, Ruth Ben Meir, Gabriel. H. Cohen (eds), *Pirkei Nechama: Prof. Nechama Leibowitz Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 2001), pp. 187–205; ibid., *The Early Sages of France: Their Lives, Leadership and Works* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), pp. 465–68; Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ *Psalms 1*, p. יג. Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, pp. 34–46, agrees with this assumption but thinks the main flowering of biblical interpretation in France stems from the twelfth-century Renaissance. See further on this Limor, *Jews and Christians in Western Europe*, vol. 4, pp. 58–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. On Kimhi, see Frank Talmage, ‘An Hebrew Polemical Treatise,’ pp. 323–48 and Maaravi Perez, ‘On the Exegetical Methodology of R. David Kimhi,’ *Beit Mikra* 163 (July-September 2000), pp. 305–28. With regard to other exegetes, see (e.g.), on Rashbam, Touitou, *Exegesis in Perpetual Motion*, pp. 169–76 and Ronela Merdler, ‘Dayyaqut me-Rabbenu Shemuel: Rashbam’s Grammatical Commentary on the Bible and Its Exegetical Contribution,’ in *Shnaton* 14 (2004), pp. 241–55; on Hizkuni, Sara Japhet, ‘Hizkuni’s Commentary on the Torah: Its Character and Aims’ in M. Bar-Asher (ed), *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift: Collected Papers in Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1992), pp. 91–111, reprinted in Japhet, *Collected Studies in Biblical Exegesis* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2008), pp. 364–382; and Charles Chavel, ‘Introduction,’ in *Hazzekuni: The Torah Commentaries of Rabbenu Hezekiah b”r Manoah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1981). With regard to Ibn Ezra, scholars disagree: Did Jewish-Christian disputation have any influence on his commentary whatsoever (Cohen, ‘Introduction,’ *Psalms 1*, p. כו–כז) or did he perhaps devote more space to it in his commentary than scholars have so far thought (Moisés Orfali, ‘R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Jewish-Christian Polemics,’ *Te’udah* 8 [1992] pp. 193–205 [at p. 205])? [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Methodological statements are infrequent in Hayyun and must therefore be gleaned from his overall commentaries. In his introduction to the Psalms commentary he wrote that he had elucidated the appropriate way of interpreting the Bible in his commentary to Isaiah, but unfortunately this commentary is no longer extant. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For example, in his comments to Ps. 119:152, 85:11, and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See above n. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The expression ‘they shall serve the Lord their God and David, their king’ obviously requires interpretation even independent of its relationship to Christian exegesis. Yet while Kimhi deals only with the anachronistic question of *how* one is to serve David after his death, Hayyun pays attention also to the *nature* of this service. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Compare his interpretation of this word elsewhere: ‘“Eternal love I conceived for you then, therefore I continue My grace to you” [Jer. 31:2] – He told me that His love for you is not temporary and might one day cease, but that it is an eternal love that will go on forever.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Jer. 30:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. On this see Gross, *R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun*, pp. 68; Kapah, ‘Introduction,’ pp. 169–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. In Hayyun’s own time many Jews did attain princely stature; we need mention only Don Isaac Abarbanel and Abraham Seneor, both of whom were extraordinarily rich and connected at court. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Prophecies 52–58 (according to his analysis that the book has a total of 80 prophecies). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Christian scholars concentrated most of their efforts on finding proofs that certain prophecies of redemption had already been fulfilled. See, for example, the words that Hayyun cites in the following comment, in the name of Rashi: ‘See, a time is coming—declares the Lord—when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate’ [Jer. 31:37]. This too is a prophecy about our future, the proof being the boundaries of the city. For in the Second Temple period the city was not built to those limits. Rashi said just this: “This prophecy is still to come, in the final redemption, despite what the heretics say. For it did not take place in the Second Temple period”.’ See further at the beginning of Nahmanides in ‘The Disputation at Barcelona,’ p. 658 #7: “Fray Pul commenced by asserting that he would prove from our Talmud that the Messiah, whom the prophets foretold, had already come.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)