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Jesus in Jewish Polemical Texts: The case of Isaac b. Abraham's *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*

by *Miriam Benfatto**

Abstract

The Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature includes in its arguments the figure of Jesus. One of the main goals of this literature is to discredit certain attributes of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christian Messiah, which concern, for example, his Jewishness, his messiahship, and his divinity. The Jewish polemicists thus deconstruct the Christological figure and reshape an image of Jesus that needs to be considered by scholars both of the History of Christianity and History of Judaism. This paper wants to draw attention to the image of Jesus as portrayed in of Isaac b. Abraham of Troki's famous book Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah, to re-consider the controversial deconstruction of the Christological figure of Jesus from which it is possible to deduce a particular type of historical construction. The reconstruction of the figure of Jesus, however, is neither the intention nor the aim of this text, but to contribute to the understanding of the controversial purposes of the work.

Introduction

The challenge to contextualize Jesus of Nazareth in his time, place, and milieu, by examining his self-understanding as expressed in his words and deeds, and reconstructing his historical Jewish context, was undertaken by many scholars, both by those who were directly involved in research on the "Historical Jesus", as well as by those, who understood this challenge as an appeal to defend the Jewish religion, as those (Jewish) writers did, who regarded their philological and exegetical studies as a means for apologetic and polemical purposes. Particularly, the deconstruction of the Christological figure of Jesus of Nazareth served as a strong tool for their incontrovertible argument, as can be learned also from the well-known ספר חזוק אמונה *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* ("*Book of Strengthening the Faith*") by Isaac b. Abraham of Troki (16th century), which deals at length with the words and deeds of "Yeshu" (ישו) according to the New Testament gospels (און גליון),[1] primarily in order to refute and reject his messiahship as well as his divinity.

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1 Both the name used for Jesus (ישו) and the word used to designate the New

The following article focusses on Isaac b. Abraham of Troki's arguments against the Christological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in order to point out the relationship between the exegetical structure of the apologetic and polemical discourse, and the historical issues regarding the figure of Jesus. In this regard, it will be helpful to present in brief the cultural and religious background in which the text was written, along with some quotes taken directly from the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*. The last part will propose an analysis of the peculiar reinterpretation of Jesus as a 'historical figure', as it is described in the text, in particular in correlation to the polemical purpose of the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* and its historiographical value.[2]

1. *Isaac b. Abraham and his Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*

Isaac b. Abraham of Troki (c. 1533–1593/4),[3] a Karaite scholar and author of – *inter alia* – the polemical-apologetic book dealt with here, was born in

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Testament canon און גליון hide a pun: ישו is frequently marked in the text as an acronym (יש"ו) meaning "may his name and memory be erased" (ימח שמו וזכרו); on this curse formula see SOL STEINMETZ, *Dictionary of Jewish Usage: A Guide to the use of Jewish Terms* (Lanham / Boulder / New York / Toronto / Oxford, 2005), S. 39. The second term is the Greek word for gospel (εὐαγγέλιον), written with Hebrew characters, but understood as two words: און meaning "evil, falsehood, sinfulness," and גליון "scroll or sheet of paper, blank paper." In *Ḥizzuq Emunah*, it refers to the New Testament in its entirety. For their meaning in Talmudic literature, see: MORRIS GOLDSTEIN, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York, 1950), pp. 22 ff. See also: MARCUS JASTROW, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature* (New York, 1926), *s. v.*

2 On the value of Jewish polemic literature as historical source, see: D. BERGER, "On the Uses of History in Medieval Jewish Polemic against Christianity: The Quest for the Historical Jesus'," in: ELISHEVA CARLEBACH / JOHN M. EFRON / DAVID N. MYERS (eds.), *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series; Hanover, 1998), pp. 24-39; ELIEZER GUTWIRTH, "History and apologetics in XVth century Hispano-Jewish thought," in: *Helmantica* 35 (1984), pp. 231-242; ANTHONY LE DONNE, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Revisionist History through the Lens of Jewish-Christian Relations," in: *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), pp. 63-86; CARSTEN L. WILKE, "Historicizing Christianity and Profiat Duran's *Kelimat ha-Goyim* (1397)," in: *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016), pp. 140-164; CRISTIANA FACCHINI, "Yeshù ha-Notsrì. Leggere Gesù nelle fonti ebraiche di età moderna," in: MAURO PESCE and PINA TOTARO (eds.), *Gesù storico - Gesù ebreo. In Età moderna e Oggi* (Carocci / Roma, 2018, in press).

3 Scholars are not unanimous on *Isaac ben Abraham of Troki*'s dating. For

the Lithuanian town of Troki (today: Trakai). In 1569, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland formed one country, the *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów* (*Respublica of the Two Nations*), thanks to the Union of Lublin that formalized and replaced the personal and matrimonial union of the former two states. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was marked by extraordinary cultural and religious diversity and granted to all its inhabitant's religious freedom and tolerance, thus becoming a refuge for the persecuted.[4] Indeed, the "Warsaw Confederation" (1573) safeguarded religious freedom to all inhabitants.[5] On the same territory, coexisted Catholics, Armenians, Muslims, Orthodox, Hussites, several non-Catholic and Protestant (particularly Unitarian) movements and Jews,[6] as contemporary

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biographical information see: JACOB MANN, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, 2 vols. (New York, 1972), vol. II: *Karaitica*, pp. 726-727; I. BROYDÉ, "Isaac ben Abraham Troki," in: *Jewish Encyclopedia*, XII (New York, 1906), pp. 265-266; LEON NEMOY, "Troki, Isaac ben Abraham," in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd edition; Detroit, 2007), vol. XV, p. 1403; ABRAHAM GEIGER, "Isaak Troki: Ein Apologet Des Judenthums Am Ende Des Sechzehnten Jahrhunderts," in: [ABRAHAM GEIGER,] *Abraham Geiger's Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. by LUDWIG GEIGER, 5 vols. (Berlin, 1875–1878 [reprint New York, 1980]), vol. III (1876), pp. 178-223.

4 MARC WAYSBLUM, "Isaac of Troki and Christian Controversy in the 16th Century," in: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 3 (1952), pp. 62-77; NORMAN DAVIES, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, 2 vols. (New York, 1982), vol. I: *The Origins to 1795*, p. 160. Among the refugees were also several Italians fleeing religious persecutions; for further information see: DELIO CANTIMORI, *Eretici Italiani del Cinquecento* (Torino, 1992); MASSIMO FIRPO, *Antitrinitari nell'Europa orientale del '500. Nuovi testi di Symon Budny, Niccolò Paruta e Iacopo Paleologo* (Firenze, 1977); DOMENICO CACCAMO, *Eretici italiani in Moravia, Polonia, Transilvania (1558–1611). Studi e documenti* (Firenze / Chicago, 1970).

5 The official transcript is printed in: *Konstytucyje, statuta i przywileje na walnych sejmach koronnych od 1550 aż do roku 1578 uchwalone* ("Constitutions, statutes and privileges adopted by the Elected Sejm of the Crown, from 1550 to 1578"), Kraków: M. Szarfenberger 1579. The original text of the document, written on parchment, is preserved in the *Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych w Warszawie* (Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw). An English translation can be found in: MANFRED KRIDL, WŁADYSŁAW ROMAN MALINOWSKI, JÓZEF WITTLIN and KRYSTYNA M. OLSZER (eds.), *For your freedom and ours. Polish progressive spirit from the 14th century to the present*, New York 1981, p. 18.

6 For information on the Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during 16th century see: SALO W. BARON, *A Social and Religious*

travellers already observed. The most interesting report on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, highlighting the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural character of the country, is certainly *A Relation of the State of Polonia and the united provinces of that crowne. Anno 1598, including also a summary of Polish history* written by the English diplomate and *Master of Chancery* Sir George Carew (1565–1612), who on behalf of Queen Elizabeth I Tudor (1533 /1558–1603) visited the country and compiled the *Relation* after return.[7]

Polish and Lithuanian Jews represented one of the largest – if not the largest – Jewish community existing in 16th century Europe.[8] Great waves of migration, due to the expulsions from Western European countries, ending up with the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, had transformed the area into an important Jewish cultural centre.[9] Within the Lithuanian Jewish community lived also a relevant group of Karaites. Karaites reject the oral law codified in the Talmud and the rabbinic tradition, following strict adherence to the Bible, considering it the only source of legislation. Recent scholarship recognizes the difficulty of defining this movement and suggests a definition that describes the Karaites as "a Jewish

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History of the Jews, 18 vols. New York 1952–1983, vol. XVI (1976): *Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion (1200–1650): Poland-Lithuania 1500–1600*; DANIEL TOLLET, *Histoire des juifs en Pologne du XVIe siècle à nos jours*, Paris 1992; JACOB GOLDBERG, *Jewish Privileges in the Polish Commonwealth. Charters of Rights Granted to Jewish Communities in Poland–Lithuania in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1985-2001).

7 The manuscript of the report is stored in the British Library (Ms. Royal 18 B. I; URL: http://www.bl.ukfcatalogues/manuscripts/HITS0001.ASP?VPath=c!/inetpub/wwwroot/mss/data/msscat/html/39653.htm&Search='Relation+of+thc+State+of+Polonia'&Highlight=T. – See the edition, *Res Polonicae ex archivo Musei Britannici – Sir George Carew's (Master in Chancery) Relation of the state of Polonia and the united provinces of that crown anno 1598*, ed. CHARLES H. TALBOT (Elementa ad fontium editiones, vols. 13 and 17; Roma, 1965-1967), esp. vol. I, pp. 64-74.

8 BARON, *A Social and Religious History* (note 6), p. 3.

9 For an overview of some particular aspects of the development of Polish Jewry, from the earliest settlements to the twentieth century see: CHIMEN ABRAMSKY, MACIEJ JACHIMCZYK, ANTONY POLONSKY, *The Jews in Poland*, Oxford 1986; TOLLET, *Histoire des juifs* (note 6); ANTONY POLONSKY, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 3 vols. Oxford / Portland, Oregon 2010-2012. – For the first Jewish settlements on the territories of Lithuania see: MASHA GREENBAUM, *The Jews of Lithuania: a history of a remarkable community, 1316-1945* (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 2-5.

religious movement of a scripturalist and messianic nature, which crystallized in the second half of the ninth century in the areas of Persia-Iraq and Palestine [...] Karaism, in its spiritual essence and in the grain of its history, should be regarded [...] as an integral stream of Judaism, or alternatively, as one manifestation of the multifaceted nature of Jewish culture and identity".[10]

During the 16th century, Troki had become one of the most important cultural and religious centres of Karaism.[11]

Thanks to this historical and cultural context, Isaac b. Abraham was able to meet with many personalities of various Christian groups and to read their works. This context created a unique chance of exchange of ideas and inspired some of the motives that led him to write the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*. In his introduction,[12] composed in rhymed prose, Isaac b. Abraham writes that his zeal to compile the book was aroused when he observed that God's great and sacred name was dishonoured (קנא קנאתי ליי׳ אלקי צבאות לחלול שמו הגדול והקודש) and the Jewish Law profaned[13] by those who constantly insult and dishonour the name of God (תמיד כל היום שמו ית׳ מנואץ[14]), i.e. the Christian

10 MEIRA POLLIACK, "Preface," in: MEIRA POLLIACK (ed.), *Karaite Judaism. A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, Leiden / Boston 2003, pp. XVII-XVIII. For further information see: NATHAN SCHUR, *The History of the Karaites* (Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, vol. 29; Frankfurt am Main / Bern / Berlin / New York / Paris / Wien, 1992); LEON NEMOY, *Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the Early Literature* (New Haven, 1952); BARRY DOV WALFISH and MIKHAIL KIZILOV (eds), *Bibliographia Karaitica: An Annotated Bibliography of Karaites and Karaism* (Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval, vol. 43 = Karaite Texts and Studies, vol. 2; Leiden / Boston, 2011). See also the recent work of MIKHAIL KIZILOV, *The Sons of Scripture: The Karaites in Poland and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (Berlin / Warsaw, 2015), especially for the updated bibliography. – A summary of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Karaite community can be found in: MIKHAIL KIZILOV, "The Arrival of the Karaites (Karaims) to Poland and Lithuania: A Survey of Sources and Critical Analysis of Existing Theories," in: *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 12 (2003/2004), pp. 29-45. – I would like to thank Dr Mikhail Kizilov, who very kindly sent me several articles and materials on this topic.

11 MANN, *Texts and Studies* (note 3), vol. II, pp. 566-574.

12 All following Hebrew quotations are based on DAVID DEUTSCH's bilingual edition ספר חזוק אמונה – *Befestigung im Glauben* (Sohrau, 1865 [Leipzig, ²1873]). An – incomplete – list of editions and translations in: WALFISH and KIZILOV (eds), *Bibliographia Karaitica* (note 10), pp. 560-563 nos.6456-6484.

13 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 6. Allusion to 1 Kings 19:10.

14 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 7.

people (אומת הנוצרים).[15] For this reason, Isaac b. Abraham, recollecting the words of Rabbi El'azar,[16] recommended to study the Torah in order to know how to respond the fool (הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס).[17] Since from his early years he frequently was involved in debates with various Christian personalities and representatives of the Polish-Lithuanian society, he was well acquainted with Christian anti-Jewish polemics and had profound knowledge of their theological works (בהיותי בימי בחרותי יוצא ובא לפעמים בין השרים ויועצי ארץ בחצריהם. ובטירות' הבטתי וראה שיבושיהם בספריהם אשר חברו).[18] Recollecting his experiences and knowledge, Isaac b. Abraham decided to write down the discussions into a book "small in size, but great in quality" (ע"כ אמרתי אני בלבי עת לעשות ליי' ספר מעט הכמות ורב האיכות),[19] using concise words (יהיה דברי בו בקוצר ולא באריכות),[20] and entitling it "Strengthening the Faith" to make weak hands (ידים רפות) strong,[21] and to confirm the feeble knees (ברכים כושלות)[22] referring to Isaiah 35:3, and Job 4:3-4.[23]

The author divided the book into two parts: the first part, consisting of fifty chapters, concerns Christian objections to Jewish faith and Christian interpretation of the prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, complete with

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15 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 7.

16 For information on rabbinic and later Jewish sources of Isaac b. Abraham see: STEFAN SCHREINER, "Rabbanite Sources in Isaac of Troki's Sefer Hizzuq Emunah," in JUDIT TARGARONA BORRÁS and ÁNGEL SÁENZ-BADILLOS (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. Proceedings of the 6th EAJS Congress Toledo, July 1998, 2 vols. (Leiden / Boston / Köln, 1999), Bd. II: *Judaism from the Renaissance to Modern Times*, pp. 65-72; STEFAN SCHREINER, "Isaac of Troki's Studies of Rabbinic Literature," in: *Polin – Studies in Polish Jewry* 15 (2002), pp. 65-76; STEFAN SCHREINER, "Rabbinische Quellen im „Buch der Stärkung des Glaubens" des Karäers Isaak ben Abraham aus Troki," in:: *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 26 (1999), pp. 51-92.

17 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 7. The same statement is also found at the beginning of the ספר יוסף המקנא *Sefer Yosef Ha-Meqanne*, ed. JUDAH ROSENTHAL (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 16; cf. LUCA BENOTTI, *A Critical Edition of Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne', with an Introduction, a Translation and a Commentary*, PhD diss. Università Ca'Foscari (Venice, 2016), p. 2 (translation), p. 2 (Hebrew text).

18 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 9.

19 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 8.

20 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 8.

21 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 8.

22 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 8.

23 As Stefan Schreiner remarked: "Almost half of its text is composed of quotations from no less than seventy-three biblical verses" (SCHREINER, *Rabbanite Sources*, [note 16], p. 67).

detailed replies (החלק ה״א בטענות הנוצרים שטוענין אלינו ובראיותיהם שמביאים לדברי אמונתם והתשובות עליהן עם זכרון קצת מהטענות אשר גם אנוכי טענתי להם נגד אמונתם),[24] while the second part deals with the contradictions and mistakes found in the New Testament especially those related to passages in the Hebrew Bible (החלק ה״ב בהוראות ביטול סתירת דברי כותבי ספר האון גליון שלה׳).[25] The one hundred chapters of the second part are divided in sections, each section dealing with a different portion of the New Testament: In chapters 1 to 58 Isaac b. Abraham examines the Gospels (Matthew [1-27], Mark [28-31], Luke [32-40] and John [41-58]); in chapters 59 to 76 the Acts of the Apostles, and in chapters 77 to 98 the Epistles (a selection). The last two chapters (99 and 100) contain an analysis of the Book of Revelation. In the preface to the second part, Isaac b. Abraham specifies that, for most of the sentences quoted from New Testament, he decided to use the last edition of Szymon Budny's (1530–1593) Polish Bible, the so-called *Nieśwież Bible* (*Biblia Nieświeska*) published in 1572,[26] because it is the most accurate version:

העתקתי רוב אלה המאמרים מהעתקת המעתיק האחרון שימון בודני אשר העתיק הביבליא לנוצרים בזמנינו זה ר״ל בשנת אלף וחמש מאות ושבעים ושתים למניינם והוא היותר צודקת מהעתקת המעתיקים אשר לפניו.[27]

In the same preface, the author begins to reject the veracity and authenticity of the New Testament's words, saying that they were written 300 years after Jesus' death, at the time of Emperor Constantine (ידוע ג״כ שא״ג נכתב בימי הקיסר קוסטנטין לאחר ש׳ שנה למיתת ישו).[28] Furthermore, he points out the lack of harmony in the Gospels, their unreliability, saying that the evangelists Matthew and Luke: 'did not see with their eyes but only heard with the ears' (לא ראו בעיניהם ולא ידעו בידיעה נאמנה רק לשמוע אוזן לבד).[29]

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24 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 12.

25 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Introduction, p. 12.

26 *Biblia, to jest Ksiegi Starego i Nowego Przymierza*, vol. I: *Ksiegi Starego Przymierza*; vol. II: *Ksiegi Nowego Przymierza, kto pospolicie Nowym Te[stament]em zowa* (Nieśwież /Zasław, 1571-1572 = reprint in 2 vols. in: *Biblia Slavica*, Series 2: *Polnische Bibeln*, vol. III, ed. HANS ROTHE and FRIEDRICH SCHOLZ (Paderborn / München / Wien / Zürich, 1994].

27 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Second Part Preface, p. 283. Szymon Budny, reformer and leading theologian among the Lithuanian Unitarians, was one of the most erudite Christian Hebraist in his time.

28 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Second Part Preface, p. 283-284.

29 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Second Part Preface, p. 284.

The *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* was completed and subsequently published by Isaac b. Abraham's student Joseph b. Mordechai Malinowski (d. after 1610)[30] right after his teacher's death, as we can read in Malinowski's preface of the book.[31] The text of the book that circulated among Jews in various countries reached a wider audience not least thanks to its Latin translation made by Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705).

Wagenseil published his translation 1681 in his book, to which he gave the title *Tela Ignea Satanæ* ('Satan's fiery darts') in allusion to the Epistle to Ephesians 6:16, a book that includes other Jewish polemical and apologetic texts as well.[32] As we read on its title page, it contains 'secret and horrible unpublished books of the Jews against Christ God, and the Christian Religion', which Wagenseil collected and translated into Latin, *inter alia*: the *Carmen Memoriale*, that is, זכרון ספר הניצחון of R. Yom-Tov Lipman-Muhlhausen (14th/15th c.); the ספר ניצחון ישן, *Old Book Nizzachon* of an unknown author; the *Acts of the [first] Disputation [of Paris]* (1240) between R. Yechiel of Paris (d. 1260/64) and the Franciscan monk Nicholas Donin (d. after 1263); the *Acts of the Disputation [of Barcelona]* (1263) between R. Mose b. Nachman (1195–1270) and Fra Pablo Christiani (13th c.), and Fra Raymundus Martini (1220–1285); the Book *Chissuk Emuna* of R. Isaac and the Book *Toldos Jeschu*. Wagenseil reports that he 'thrust them into light, after having collected them and dug them out of hidden places in Europe and Africa, and bringing them to the faith of Christian Theologians, that they more properly consider those things, which may help to converting that wretched Jewish race' (*ex Europæ Africæque latebris erutos, in lucem protrusit, THEOLOGORUM CHRISTIANORUM fidei, ad tanto rectius meditandum ea, quæ converisonem miserrimæ gentis Judaicæ juvare possunt, illos committens commendansque*).[33]

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30 On Joseph ben Mordechai Malinowski see PIOTR MUCHOWSKI and ARIE YARIV, "Yosef ben Mordekhay Malinowski: On the Date of his Death," in: *Karaite Archives* 2 (2014), pp. 91-108.

31 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Student Preface, pp. 1-6.

32 The complete reference of the book is: [JOHANN CHRISTOPH WAGENSEIL] *Tela Ignea Satanae: hoc est arcani & horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christvm Devm & Christianam Religionem Libri ΑΝΕΚΔΟΤΟΙ. Additae sunt Latinae interpretationes et dvplex confvtatio / Joh. Christophorvs Wagenseilivs ex Europae Africaeque latebris erutos in lucem protrusit theologorum Christianorum fidei ad tanto rectius meditandum ea, quae conversionem miserrimae gentis Judaicae iuvare possunt illos commitens commendansque*, 2 vols. (Altdorf, 1681; reprint Farnborough, 1970).

33 On the genesis of Wagenseil's book see, PETER BLASTENBREI, *Johann Christoph Wagenseil und seine Stellung zum Judentum* (Erlangen, 2004).

But Wagenseil's hopes for conversion of the Jews were not fulfilled, for more than a century later Thomas Jarrett, a correspondent of the 'London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews',[34] could write from Madras (today: Chennai) to the central missionary body about some objections that the Jews forged against Christianity':[35] After listing to them, Jarrett says, 'it is from the book termed חזוק אמונה Hizzook Emoona, i.e. strong faith - they chiefly derive their objections and arguments against Christianity,'[36] and concludes his letter asking for 'a translation of the most important articles in the following books - Hizzook Emoona [...].'[37]

Anyway, Wagenseil in his *Tela Ignea Satanæ* depicts the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* – which in its original frame of reference was an apologetic work – as a purely polemical text, causing Isaac b. Abraham's ideas to become widely known among Jews and Christians as well. Other translations have ensured that the text circulated further on: Moses Mocatta (1768–1857) in 1851 translated Isaac b. Abraham's text into an abridged and toned-down English version,[38] whereas David Deutsch (1810–1873) published a translation of the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* into German together with a revised Hebrew text based on the study of several manuscripts. This edition was first published in 1865 and again in 1873 with the title *Befestigung im Glauben*.[39]

Since the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* was one of the best known Jewish polemical works, it did not evade Catholic censorship: the text was put on the mid-18th century Italian index of prohibited books *Norme per la revisione de libri composti dagli Ebrei* ("Rules for the Revision of Hebrew Books written by the Jews") by Giovanni Antonio Costanzi. In this index, the book is described as follows: "l'opera tutta è una peste contro il nuovo Testamento, e contro i Dogmi della Fede Cristiana, e di più vedesi ancora tradotta in Lingua Tedesca, e nella Spagnola, scritta però co' caratteri Ebraici" ("The work in its entirety is a plague against the New Testament, and against the dogmas of Christian Faith; furthermore, it has been translated in German and in Spanish, but it is written with Hebrew characters").[40]

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34 Marc Waysblum mentioned the presence of the text in India, unfortunately without providing references; see: WAYSBLUM, "Isaac of Troki" (note 4), p. 62.

35 *The Jewish Expositor and Friend of Israel: containing Monthly Communications Respecting the Jews and the Proceedings of the London Society*, vol. V (London, 1820), p. 431.

36 *The Jewish Expositor* (note 34), p. 433.

37 *The Jewish Expositor* (note 34), p. 434.

38 MOSES MOCATTA, *Faith Strengthened* (London, 1851; reprint New York, 1970).

39 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12).

40 The *'Norme per la revisione de libri composti dagli Ebrei'* is an unpublished index,

Moreover, Isaac's book has influenced eminent thinkers and philosophers, such as Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jacques Basnage (1653–1723), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Voltaire (1694–1778), Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), and Paul-Henri Thiery d'Holbach (1723–1789).[41]

2. *The Main Subjects of Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*

The main subjects of the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* are linked to the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, involving some Christian doctrinal issues. Indeed, Isaac b. Abraham's main argument addresses the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible that seeks to demonstrate that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. He in turn wants to prove that New Testament authors and Christian interpreters contradict what the prophets said about messianic expectations, and his answers to Christian assertions are the results of his philological and historical analyses. Most of his attention is dedicated to the critique of the doctrine of Trinity and divinity of Jesus, using passages from New Testament in general, and Jesus' own words in particular that attest also to his humanity and Jewishness.

As noted above, Isaac b. Abraham examines Christian objections to Jewish religion, refuting Christian interpretation of several passages from the Hebrew Bible, and also discusses sections from the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles and Book of Revelation, underlying time and again their inconsistencies. The focus of both sections is primarily on the character of the Messiah, in order to reject the identification of the Messiah awaited by the Jews with Jesus of Nazareth. The recognition of humanity and Jewishness of Jesus is useful and functional for the author's intent. The hermeneutic method of Isaac b. Abraham aims at demonstrating the incompatibility of the human characteristics of Jesus with Christian divine connotations: the virgin birth, the Trinity doctrine and Jesus' divinity.

3. *The Exegetical Method of Isaac b. Abraham Troki*

In his exegetical analyses, Isaac b. Abraham focuses on the demonstration of the mistakes, made by the Christians, on the interpretation of the biblical

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and I have consulted in the 'Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith', Santo Officio, Stanza Storica, BB3, i, s. n.

41 For a brief overview of the reception of Isaac's work, see MIRIAM BENFATTO, "Il Gesù di Hizzuk Emunah: fra ricostruzione critica e costruzione polemica," in: ADRIANA DESTRO and MAURO PESCE (eds.), *Texts, Practices, and Groups: Multidisciplinary approaches to the History of Jesus Followers in the first two centuries* (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 807-827.

Christological *loci classici*. Again and again, he criticises the ways the authors of the Gospels cited words and verses of the Hebrew Bible, for they took them out of their context, thus falsifying their content and meaning. The author combines traditional polemical subjects, derived from previous medieval works,[42] with his own ideas and analyses. In his hermeneutical and methodological strategy, Isaac b. Abraham sees the New Testament fulfiling a double task: on the one hand, excerpts from the gospels are harshly criticized and discarded for providing inacceptable, false interpretations of the Hebrew Bible; on the other hand, they are used as positive supports in his attacks at Christian religion and the messianic status of Jesus. Firstly, Christian interpretation are challenged with a rational evaluation of the proofs they present to support their convictions, especially the interpretation and use of quotes from the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament. Secondly, the analysis of the words and deeds of Jesus reported in the Gospels is used by Isaac b. Abraham to point out his activities and his teaching, in order to explain and illustrate how Jesus saw himself and his mission. Therefore, these exegetical strategies involve main central Christian beliefs, like the doctrine of the Trinity,[43] Jesus' divinity and his messiahship. With the aid of some examples it is possible to inspect the results of these exegetical techniques and show how this type of textual exegesis, that treats the New Testament as a historical document, enhances historical representations.

3.1 *Doctrine of Trinity and Jesus' Divinity*

According to the Christian interpretation, the plural term *Elohim* would admit the possibility of conceiving a plurality within the divine nature of God. This strategy is employed as a proof for the Trinity. Isaac b. Abraham refutes this use by discussing and comparing it with passage from the Hebrew Bible. In the ninth chapter of the first part, the author criticizes this interpretation, explaining that the term *Elohim* encompasses different meanings

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42 See the inestimable work by DANIEL J. LASKER, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977; reprint 2007). I'm now working on differences and similarities between *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* and others previous Jewish polemical works.

43 The analysis and the refutation of the Trinity doctrine is influenced by the works of anti-Trinitarian / Unitarian authors, such as Niccolò Paruta (d. 1581), Marcin Czechowic (c. 1523–1613), and Szymon Budny (1530–1593), cf. RÓBERT DÁN, "Isaak Troky and his Antitrinitarian sources," in: RÓBERT DÁN (ed.), *Occident and Orient: A tribute to the Memory of Alexander Scheiber* (Leiden / Budapest, 1988), pp. 69-82.

and it does not refer solely to God, but also to the angels, the judges and other human authorities/leaders:

ידוע לכל יודעי הל׳ עברית כי שם אלקים משותף הוא להש״י ולמלאכים ולשופטים מבני אדם ומנהיגים וע״כ נאמר לכתחילה נאמר על הש״י כמו בראשית ברא אלקים ונאמר על המלאכים כמו מות נמות כי אלקים ראינו אחד אמרו אז ידע מנוח כי מלאך יי׳ הוא שופטים פ׳ י״ג ונאמר על השופטים מבני אדם כמו עד האלקים יבא דבר שניהם אשר ירשיעון אלקים ישלם שנים לרעהו שמות כ״ב.[44]

It is well-known to all those knowing the Hebrew language that the name *Elohim* includes God's name, angels, human judges, and authorities; therefore, referring to God: "in the beginning God created"; referring to angels, Manoah said: "we shall surely die, because we have seen *Elohim* after he found that he had perceived an angel of God (Judges 13); referring to humans judges: "to the *Elohim*, whom the *Elohim* shall condemn, he shall pay double unto his neighbour" (Exodus 22).

Having explained that the word *Elohim* has a different meaning in Hebrew, the author rejects the Trinitarian interpretation of the first verse of Genesis as a misunderstanding: Hebrew grammar, in fact, doesn't support the idea that *Elohim* refers only to a plurality. The real meaning of the use of the plural form is to represent authority and power. The Hebrew language admits this particularity, like many other languages, and this is called by linguists 'plural of majesty' or fullness. Isaac b. Abraham starts with a *Leitmotiv* of Jewish apologetic literature, and continues with an analysis of several sentences from the Gospels. Indeed, the New Testament itself provides further proofs against the Trinitarian thought. Isaac b. Abraham cites a passage from the Gospels to show that Jesus himself did not consider himself equal to God, but only as someone sent by God:

כתב מרקוש בפ׳ י״ג פסוק ל״ב אותו היום והשעה ההיא אין מי שיודע לא המלאכים שבשמים ולא הבן אלא האב לבדו עכ״ל הנה גם בזה המאמר הוכיח שהאב והבן אינו אחד שאין הבן יודע מה שהאב יודע וכן יוכיח שאין אלק אחר שאין יודע עתידות וכן לא מצינו בא״ג הוראה מבוררת אמונת השילוש כפי מה שמאמינים הנוצרים וכן לא מצינו בשום מקום שישו עצמו יקרא אותו אלק אבל הוא מיחס האלקיות והכח והיכולת אל האל ית׳ רק קרא את עצמו שלוחו של מקום כדכתיב במטיאש פרק י׳ פסוק מ׳ ז״ל מי שמקבל אתכם מקבל אותי ומי שמקבל אותי מקבל אותו אשר שלחני[45].

Mark wrote in chapter 13, verse 32: "its sign and the day and that hour nobody knows, not the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father

44 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 9, p. 78.

45 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 10, p. 85. A similar objection can be found in II, cap. 19, pp. 298-299.

alone". Also this passage confirms that father and son are not one, since the son does not know what the father knows. Herein he also confirm that he is not God, since he does not know the future; nor do we find throughout the gospels any evidence to show the belief in a Trinity as a Christian belief. And we also do not find in any place that Jesus calls himself God, whereas he attributes divinity, strength and ability to the true almighty God. He only called himself his messenger, as it is written in Matthew, chapter ten, verse forty: "whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me".

The statements of Jesus reported in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew do not contain any clear proof for the Trinity: it seems that Jesus himself did not hold to any Trinitarian understanding of himself. The author bases his argument on the reports brought by the Gospels. In Isaac b. Abraham's opinion, even the authors of the New Testament have an opinion that disproves the Christian's position on Trinity.

Moreover, the use of the expression "Son of Man" is perceived as evidence for Jesus' humanity and for his self-understanding as a merely human being, as his words in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke demonstrate:

כתב מטיאש בפ' י"ב פסוק ל"ב מי שידבר דבר נגד בן אדם יכופר לו אבל מי שידבר נגד רוח הקדש לא יכפר לו לא בעה"ז ולא בעה"ב עכ"ל תמצא ג"כ זה המאמר במרקוס פ"ג פסוק כ"ח ובלוקש פ' י"ב פסוק י"ט הנה בזה המאמר האנשים האלה הוכיחו בבירור שאין רוח חקדש והבן אחר א"כ אין הג' אחד וכי ישו הוא בן אדם ולא אלק כפי אמונתם הכוזבת כאשר זה ידוע למבינים[46].

Matthew wrote in chapter 12, verse 32: "whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, not in this world, nor the coming world". You can also find the same in Mark three, verse twenty-eight and in Luke twelve, verse nineteen [sic!]. Here, with this passage, these peoples clearly confirm that the Holy Spirit and the Son are not one, thus it follows that three are not one, and since Jesus is called the Son of Man, he then is not God, according to their false belief, which is obvious to the understanding.

As mentioned above, the second part of *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* analyses numerous sections from several books contained in the New Testament. Isaac b. Abraham often repeats objections outlined in the first part, but more precisely, citing lengthy paragraphs and commenting on them extensively. It is the case of the "Son of Man" topic that is repeated in the second part

46 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 10, p. 84-85. The same topic can be found in II, cap. 16, p. 297

of the work, in particular in the section devoted to the refutation of the Gospel of Matthew:

פרק ח׳ פסוק י״ט ויבא חכם אחד ויאמר לישו אני אלך אחריך לכל מקום אשר תלך ויאמר ישו אליו לשועלים יש חפירות ולעופות השמים יש קינים אבל אני בן אדם אין לי מקום להשים את ראשי עכ״ל ותמצא זה ג״כ בלוקש פרק ט׳ פסוף נ״ז גם זה המאמר סותר אמונתם שמאמינים שהוא אלקים ואם היה הוא אלקים כדבריהם למה היה קורא עצמו בן אדם[47].

(Matthew wrote in) chapter 8, verse 19: "And a certain scribe came, and said to Jesus: I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus answered him: the foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but I am the Son of Man and I don't know where to lay my head". You can also find the same in Luke, chapter nine, verse fifty-seven. Also, this passage is a contradiction of their faith, believing that he (Jesus) is God. If he was God, as they say, why call himself Son of Man?

Chapter ten of the first part of the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah* ends with another refutation of the Trinity: Here, Isaac b. Abraham gives an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer "Our Father", which Jesus taught his disciples:

וכן הענין מובן היטב מהתפלה אשר הורה ישו לתלמידיו הנקרא בלשונם פאטר הכתוב במטיאש פ״ו שלא גזר להתפלל אל השילוש רק לאל אחד והוא אלקי השמים כדכתיב שם זהו הנקרא בלשונם פאטיר אבינו שבשמים יתקדש שמך יבא מלכותך יעשה רצונך בארץ כאשר בשמים ותן לנו היום לחם חקינו ומחול לנו חובותינו כמו שגם אנחנו מוחלים לחייבים אלינו ואל תביאנו לידי נסיון ותצילנו מכל רע אמ .הנך ראית שלא הורה להתפלל לעצמו שהוא הבן כדבריהם ולא לרוח הקדש רק לאביו שבשמים אשר אין מלבדו[48].

A quite clear matter come from the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, called in their language *pater*, written in Matthew, chapter 6, where he did not decree to pray to the Trinity, only to one God, and he is the God of heaven, as it is written there, called in their language pater: "our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, come your kingdom, your will be done in earth as in heaven, give us today the bread that is needful for us and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but save us from evil, amen". From this you can see that he did not instruct them to pray him, who according to them is the Son, and also not the Holy Spirit, but only to his father in heaven, to whom there is no equal.

Consequently, Jesus' own teaching proves that one should to pray to the Father alone. By not mentioning the Holy Spirit and himself, he asserts that Trinitarian thinking is far from him.

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47 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), II, cap. 12, pp. 294-295.

48 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 10, pp. 85–86.

Isaac b. Abraham concludes the discussion of passages from the New Testament arguing that the belief in Trinity is not in agreement with Jesus' own words. In addition to that, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane demonstrates that Jesus is not divine:

כדכתיב במטיאש פרק כ״ו פסוק ל״ט וזה לשונו וכאשר עבר ישו מעט מהם נפל על פניו ויתחנן ויאמר אבי אם יהיה מן האפשר שיוסר זה הכוס ממני אבל לא כאשר אני רוצה אלא כאשר אתה רוצה עכ״ל וכן אחר שנתפס צעק בקול גדול ויאמר אלי אלי למה עזבתני כדכתיב שם פ׳ כ״ז פסוק מ״ו וזה המאמר ג״כ מוכיח שהאב והבן אינו אחד אחר שאין רצון האב ברצון הבן ואם ישיב הנוצרי ויאמר שלא מרצונו אלא בעל כרחו עשו לו מה שעשו אזי נאמר לו א״כ איך אתה קורא אותו בשם אלקים אחר שהוא סובל יסורים בהכרח ולא יכול להציל עצמו מיד אויביו ואיך יציל הבוטחים בו[49].

As it is written in Matthew, chapter 26, verse 39, and this are its words: "and when Jesus going a little farther, he threw himself upon the ground, beg and say: if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me, nevertheless not what I will, but as you will". Then, he was caught, he cried with a loud voice saying: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As is written there in chapter twenty-seven, verse forty-six. And this passage likewise proves that Father is not one with Son since the will of the Father is not the will of the Son. And if the Christian should reply and say that it was not according to his will, but what they did to him was done by force, then it is said to him: if this is the case how can you call him God since he suffered torments against his will, that he should not be able to safe himself from the hands of the enemies? And how will he be able to safe those who trust in him?

Since God did not heed Jesus' request, and since Jesus exclaimed on the cross that God had left him, it is evident that the Son and the Father are not one.

The inconsistency of the Trinity doctrine is further confirmed by Jesus' temptation, as it is narrated in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Isaac b. Abraham cites these verses and asks rhetorically:

כי איך השטן ינסה לאלקים ואיך לא ייראה מבוראו בהיותו נברא מנבראיו איך יהיה מן האפשר ג״כ שהנברא יכריח ג״כ את בוראו ויוליכהו למקו׳ אשר ירצה על כרחו זה הדבר לא יסבלהו השכל[50].

How could Satan tempt God? And how is it that he would not be afraid of his creator, since he was created of his creations? How could it be possible that the created should coerce its creator and also lead him to a place against his will? Such matters reason cannot tolerate.

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49 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 47, p. 276. The same topic can be found in II, cap. 26, p. 306.

50 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), II, cap. 7, p. 290.

The author here does not use the account to re-emphasize Jesus' humanity, but outright rejects it as irrational and reproaches the entire story: if Jesus would have been God he could not have been coerced.

3.2 *The Messiahship of Jesus*

The exegetical method of Isaac b. Abraham follows an analogous scheme when he referred to Jesus' messiahship. Along with the Trinity doctrine, the issue of Jesus' Messiahship is the most discussed, representing the leading thread of whole *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*. The rejection of any messianic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as prophecies fulfilled by Jesus is crucial. Drawing attention to the context of these prophecies, Isaac b. Abraham refutes the idea that they are fulfilled in Jesus, e.g., as it is the case in his nativity story told in the Gospels. In chapter twenty-one of the first part, he quotes Isaiah and comments on the Christian interpretation of the prophecy:

לכן יתן אדני הוא לכם אות הנה העלמה הרה ויולדת בן וקראת שמו עמנו אל ישעיה ז׳ ומה שמביאים ראייה על אמונתם מזה הפסוק באמרם הנה הנביא ייעד שישו נוצרי נולד מנערה בתולה מבנות בני ישראל בלתי זיוג האנושי אלא ברוח הקדש כפי מה שכתוב בא״ג במטיאש פ״א[51].

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, an *'almah* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, Isaiah 7. They bring proof for their faith from this verse, by saying that the prophet had designated that Jesus the Nazarene was to be borne by a young virgin girl, daughter of the children of Israel, without human involvement, but only the Holy Spirit as it is written in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 1.

The author responds with a long discussion that employs the context of Isaiah and many other passages from the Hebrew Bible to refute the idea that Jesus is the child that Isaiah speaks about in his prophecies.[52] In addition to that, Isaac gives an exegetical summary of the right interpretation

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51 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 21, p. 132. Isaac b. Abraham deals with Messianic prophecies in many places, e.g.: II, 13, p. 295.

52 For the interpretation of Isaiah 53 (Suffering Servant), see: STEFAN SCHREINER, "Jes 53 in der Auslegung des Sepher Chizzuq Emunah von R. Isaak ben Avraham aus Troki," in: BERND JANOWSKI and PETER STUHLMACHER (eds.), *Der Leidende Gottesknecht. Jesaja 53 und seine Wirkungsgeschichte mit einer Bibliographie zu Jes 53* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, vol. 14; Tübingen, 1996), pp. 159-195. English translations: BERND JANOWSKI and PETER STUHLMACHER (eds.), *The Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christians Sources*, translated by Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, Mich. / Cambridge, U. K,

of the term *'almah*, that, depending on its context, means young woman or maiden, as can be learned from other biblical passages, e.g., Gen. 24:14-18, Ruth 2:5 and Exod. 2:8.

The proofs against the divine nature of Jesus conversely lead to the affirmation of his humanity. Isaac b. Abraham accuses the Christians themselves of attributing divine epithets to Jesus without his permission: this line of reasoning became a standard argument to demonstrate the inconsistencies between Christian doctrines and the teachings of Jesus:

הוא אינו קורא את עצמו בשם אלקים בשום מקום אלא קורא את עצמו בשם בן אדם ובשם איש כמוזכר בא"ג במקומות רבים אבל אתם מיחסים לו האלקות וקוראים אותו בשם אלקים מה שלא צוה אתכם.[53]

He does not call himself God anywhere, but he calls himself by the name "Son of Man" or by the name "man" as mentioned in the gospels in many places, but you had assigned to him divinity and you have called him with the name of God, which you were not allowed to do.

3.3 *The Jewishness of Jesus*

The emphasis on Jesus' humanity also involves the traits and peculiarities of his religious behaviour. These traits do not correspond to Christian doctrine and morality, but are closely linked to the idea of a Jewish Jesus. Isaac b. Abraham attempts to make clear the incongruity between New Testament sentences and Christian successive rendering. For example, he says that Jesus did not want to be regarded as author or giver of a new law, but rather admitted the lasting validity of the Mosaic Law:

ידוע ומפורסם לכל שהנוצרי' אומרים שהא"ג הוא תורה חדשה נתונה להם מישו הנוצרי אבל אנחנו לא מצינו בשום מקום באון גליון שיאמר שנתן ישו תורה חדשה אמנם מצינו ההפוך שהוא בעצמו צוה לשמור המצות הכתובות בתורת משה ואומר עליה שהיא נצחית קיימת לעד לעולם ושאי אפשר לה להבטל בשום זמן מהזמנים.[54]

It is renown and popular that Christians said that the Gospel is a new law given to them by Jesus the Nazarene, but we do not find anywhere in the gospel that Jesus gave them a new law, indeed we find the contrary: (Jesus) himself ordered to observe the commandments written in the law of Moses and said this is eternally valid and never to invalidate.

2004), pp. 418-461. – I would like to thank Prof S. Schreiner for his kindness in sending me bibliography on this topic.

53 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, 49, p. 278.

54 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), Second Part Preface, p. 283.

The author argues that even the Gospels refute this opinion established later in Christianity. Jesus' own words, quoted in Matthew, document that, and how, he demanded the observance of the Mosaic Law, just as he respected it:

ומה שטוענין הנוצרים עוד כנגד התורה האלקית באמרם שתורת משה לא היתה נצחית רק זמנית עד בא ישו אשר בטל ונתן קץ וסוף לתורת משה וצוה לתלמידיו ולכל הנקראים בשמו התורה החדשה אשר עשה אותם חפשי מכל המצות והאזהרות הכתובות בתורת משה והסבה בזה [...] התשובה אין האמת אתם גם בזאת הטענה כי אפי' הא"ג שלהם סותר דבריהם כי מצינו במטיאש פרק ה' מפופק י"ז ואילך מאמר ישו לתלמידיו וז"ל אל תחשבו שבאתי לבטל התורה או הנביאים לא באתי לבטל כ"א לקיים באמת[55].

A Christian opinion against divine law reports that the Mosaic Law was not established to last forever, but only for a limited period of time, up until (the coming of) Jesus, who would then abrogate the Mosaic Law and give to his disciples and followers a new law, which freed them from commandments and ordinances of Mosaic Law. [...] Response: this claim is not true and also their gospel refutes their words because we can find in Matthew, chapter five verse seventeen and following, that Jesus said these words to his disciples: "think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfil".

Commenting on Acts of the Apostles 16:3, in which is written that the disciples of Jesus followed the practice of circumcision, the author also brings proofs of the religious behaviour practiced by Jesus' first followers.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

Considering the excerpts examined above, it is possible to reconstruct a portrait of Jesus deprived of the typical attributes given to him in Christian theology, a portrait, that, in several ways, follows the tendency of previous medieval Jewish polemical texts. Isaac b. Abraham was able to concentrate in a "book small in size" a good deal of Jewish-Christian dispute, providing a very accessible and clear summary for his fellow Jews, and equipping them with the results of his philological analysis based on – his study of – the Hebrew Bible and the New testament.

Isaac b. Abraham employs biblical, historical and philological knowledge and methodologies. The knowledge of biblical materials allows him to contextualize the controversial passages cited in the Christian canon in order to elucidate their proper meaning. This occurs both in relation to the scriptural passages, and to the wider Jewish religious and theological definition. The

55 ספר חזוק אמונה (note 12), I, cap. 19, pp. 123-124. The same topic can be found in II, cap. 10, pp. 293-394.

methodological approach uses historical and philological criteria, which depend on the need to defend Jewish faith and reject the Christian interpretation of the Messianic prophecies. It is clear that the set of hermeneutical strategies employed by Isaac b. Abraham is closely linked to the apologetic purpose of the work. It is not possible to trace a specific intent aimed at analysing the figure of Jesus within *Ḥizzuq Emunah*, nevertheless it could be interesting to consider the connection between its polemical aim and the historical reconstruction, in order to explore the link between exegetical method and Jesus' historicization.

Isaac b. Abraham does not present a reconstruction of Jesus' words and experiences following a critical perspective of historical reconstruction; specifically, he is not trying to retrace "positively" Jesus as a historical character, but rather "negatively", deconstructing his theological and Christological aspects. This reconstruction serves the purpose of strengthening the polemical approach by providing a useful tool to refute the claims put forward in the New Testament. As such, the relation between the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*'s apologetic reconstruction and its critical deconstruction is connected to the evaluation of the historical perspective of Jesus' figure. This historical perspective represents an essential instrument for the polemical scope of his work. Indeed, the exegetical method is related to Jesus' historicization as the deconstruction of the figure of the Messiah is based on a historical and philological analysis of passages of the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

Isaac b. Abraham also demonstrates that there is discrepancy between who, and what, the historical Jesus was and what his followers said about him and proclaimed.[56] The observation of this discrepancy was already the starting point of a prolific branch of New Testament and historical studies inaugurated once by Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), who generally is considered to have been the pioneer of what was called the "Quest for the Historical Jesus". According to most of the academic debates,[57]

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56 Abraham Geiger pointed out that Isaac ben Abraham distinguished between the messages of Jesus on the one hand and Christian religion, dogma and Church on the other. See: GEIGER, *Isaak Troki, ein Apologet des Judenthums* (note 3); see also, SUSANNAH HESCHEL, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998).

57 Four examples may suffice here: ALBERT SCHWEITZER, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen, 1906); WERNER GEORG KÜMMEL, *Das Neue Testament. Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (Freiburg, 1958); CRAIG A. EVANS, *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated*

Reimarus was the first scholar who clearly distinguished between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian faith and tradition; thus, it was he who established an unbridgeable gap between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. He also recognized that Jesus was a Jew and remained a Jew until his very end, therefore, he not only admitted, but insisted on Jesus' original Jewishness. Reimarus was familiar with the *Sefer Ḥizzuq Emunah*, and we should take into consideration the role and influence that this book exercised on his approach to the study of New Testament.[58] In addition to that, it should not be overlooked that the emerging critical and historical spirit likewise contributed to the creation of an atmosphere and way of thinking based on 'esteemed objectivity' that intentionally sought to distance itself from the 'dark' Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the emerging historical awareness (including its sceptical component) and the instruments it used to establish itself, can also be traced to controversial discourses, to which Isaac b. Abraham's book made such a substantial contribution.[59]

Bibliography (New Testament Tools, Studies, and Documents, vol. 24; Leiden, 1989); GERD THEISSEN and ANNETTE MERZ, *Der Historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen, 1996 [[4]2011]).

58 Cf. HERMANN SAMUEL REIMARUS, *Vindicatio dictorum Veteris Testamenti in Novo allegatorum* (Göttingen, 1983), p. 49; *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, ed. GERHARD ALEXANDER, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), vol. II, p. 268.

59 Cf. RICHARD H. POPKIN, *Disputing Christianity. The 400-Year-Old Debate over Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki's Classic Arguments*, ed. by Peter K. J. Park, Knox Peden, and Jeremy D. Popkin (Amherst, N.Y., 2007).