

ALPHONSUS BONIHOMINIS'S CONVERSIONARY LETTER FROM RABBI SAMUEL TO RABBI ISAAC

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Introduction

The thirteenth century saw many changes in the way the Christian Church conducted missionary efforts. No longer were the traditional Pauline and Augustinian theories of tolerance towards the Jews acceptable. This change was partly due to the increased zeal of the mendicant orders, to the idea that the Jews were now deliberate disbelievers rather than ignorant, and to the spread of heresy within Christianity itself. Meanwhile, theologians made impressive strides in Christian theology to help combat heresy. They composed various *summae* that seemed to prove the innate rationality of the Christian faith (Chazan, *Church* 241). Mendicants and clergy alike hoped that if heretics and nonbelievers, Jews included, could put aside their prejudices, then they would realize the truth of Christianity and the falsehood of their faith.

The *Epistola Samuelis Maroccani* is a polemic piece centered upon a concern for the recipient's soul. Samuel of Morocco, an ex-rabbi from Fez, is writing a letter to Rabbi Isaac, the headmaster of the Rabbinical School and the Jewish synagogue in Subjulmeta in Morocco, in order to convince him of the errors of Judaism. According to the explicit of the version in the *Patrologia Latina*, the work was supposedly composed around the year 1000. F. Alphonsus Bonihominis of the Dominican order later claims to have translated the letter into Latin from the Arabic original while in Paris at the abbey of Saint Jacques in 1339. While modern scholarship agrees that Bonihominis was more than likely the translator, this has not always been the case.¹ By placing the *Epistola Samuelis Maroccani* within an overall historical context, it is possible to determine definitively whether the author of the epistle was in fact Jewish. A comparison of the main themes of the letter, especially those of exile and salvation, to historical Christian polemics and the Disputations of Paris and Barcelona is necessary to place the epistle into a particular genre of

anti-Jewish literature. Finally, an evaluation of the content of the epistle from the perspective of rabbinical literature strengthens further my conclusion that the *Epistola Samuelis Maroccani* was written, if not by Alphonsus Bonihominis, then by a Christian author in the fourteenth century for a Christian audience, which accounts, in part, for the work's extraordinary dissemination and popularity in the late Middle Ages.²

What makes the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel unique among writings is that it has two closely intertwined themes, namely exile and redemption. Why, Rabbi Samuel asks of Rabbi Isaac at the outset of the letter, are we Jews suffering in exile and dispersion from what seems to be the perpetual wrath of God? This exile by now has lasted for over a thousand years and seems to have no end. And what, he asks further, was the terrible sin that brought God's wrath upon us? We know, he says, that our forefathers worshipped idols, killed the prophets, and rejected the law of God. Yet for all those transgressions our forefathers were exiled in Babylon for only seventy years, after which God let the exiles back into their own land as predicted by our prophets, their sins having been atoned for. Hence, Rabbi Samuel claims, the Jews' current captivity cannot be blamed on the sins of their forefathers since they were atoned for by the seventy years of captivity. Furthermore, God does not punish twice for the same sin. It must then follow, Rabbi Samuel argues, that we Jews have sinned since the Babylonian exile, and that the sin for which we are being punished with an exile of more than a thousand years and without any prophets predicting an end must be many times greater than that of the forefathers. Throughout the first five chapters of the epistle, Rabbi Samuel repeats the central question in various forms and once more at the end of Chapter 5:

And, therefore sir, I keep asking, what is the sin for which we have been exiled for more than 1000 years, and we have neither prophet, nor king, nor priest, nor altar, nor sacrifice, nor anointing oil, or incense, nor purification, and we are despised and humiliated before the world and before God? (Migne 342)

The rest of the epistle deals with the answers, which Samuel finds in the prophet Amos: "Super tribus sceleribus Juda convertam vel transferam Israel, et super quarto non transferam eos, quoniam vendiderunt iustum

pro argento” (Amos 2:6 in Migne 342). According to the Jewish tradition, “the righteous one” was Joseph, son of Jacob, who was sold by his brethren to Egypt. Samuel has a different interpretation, however. He argues that the first of the three transgressions was the selling of Joseph. The second was the worship of the calf on Mount Horeb. The third transgression was the killing of the prophets for which the Jews were punished for seventy years in captivity.

Therefore, that leaves the fourth transgression for which the Jews are in the present captivity, the selling of the “Just One” for silver. This then, Samuel concludes, is the sin for which the Jews have now been under punishment for more than a thousand years. If not Joseph, then who is the Just One? I am afraid and fear, Samuel tells Rabbi Isaac, that it is Jesus in whom the Christians believe, who according to the prophet Amos may be the Just One who was sold for silver. He finds, furthermore, that it may well be Jesus to whom various passages in the prophet Isaiah refer (343-44). He is terrified, furthermore, by considering Daniel’s prophecy regarding the dispersion of the Jews: “Postquam consummatae fuerunt sexaginta duae hebdomadae, occidetur Christus, et tunc veniet populus cum principe venturo, et destruet civitatem, et domum comminuet, et condemnabunt eam, et auferetur sacrificium, et consummabitur destructio perpetua” (344). The perpetual desolation to which the passage refers can be none other than the current exile in which the Jews now are because of the selling of Jesus. If the Just One was Christ, then this means that the Messiah has already come and fulfilled the many prophecies made concerning him and, therefore, the Jews remain in exile. Only those who believe in Christ will be redeemed, and those who do not believe in him and in his first coming will not be redeemed when he comes the second time in judgment (345-47). In the remaining chapters, Rabbi Samuel elaborates on the blindness and the ignorance of the Jews in their failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and on their consequent rejection by God. Instead, God has chosen the Gentiles, who did recognize Christ, to take the place of the Jews (351-55). The apostles have replaced the prophets; the Christian sacraments have replaced the Jewish sacrifices; in place of the Synagogue, God has elected the Church (355-61). Even the nation of Islam accepts Jesus, and in Chapter 27, the final chapter, Rabbi Samuel

presents the testimony of the Koran to support this stance. Chapter 26 of the epistle sums up Samuel's final conclusion:

I fear, Sir, that we apostatized from God and the faith at the first coming of his Just One, about whom all the sayings and prophecies concerning the Messiah, which we find in our books and in our Law, speak; and for this apostasy God has extended the length of our present captivity into eternity. And if now we wait and hope for some other redeemer than that Just [O]ne, it is without avail. (364)

In reading the Epistle of Samuel, one is struck by its tone as well by its use of rhetorical devices, both of which give the text what Limor calls an almost ceremonial nature (192). In contrast to much of traditional as well as contemporary medieval polemics, the Epistle of Samuel is a model of civility, respect, and personal admiration toward the recipient quite unlike the polemics of a Nicholas Donin or Paul Christiani, who showed open contempt for their adversaries. On the contrary, Samuel desires to be instructed by the receiver, to participate in his teaching, to share with the reader what is troubling him in the hope that Rabbi Isaac, the recipient, might strengthen him in the truth. Addressing Isaac respectfully as "*domine mi*" to whose wisdom and judgment he wishes to submit his concerns, and by identifying with the Jewish people ("our forefathers," "we Jews") in their suffering, Rabbi Samuel conveys sensitivity, sincerity, and genuine concern that greatly enhance the persuasiveness of his arguments.

The epistle shows a fixed and definite structure made up of regularly recurring formulas, phrases, and key words. Thus, the majority of the chapters begin with the formula, *desidero, domini mi*, or *paveo, domini mi*, and end with *attamen Dei sumus* or *sumus tamen Dei in omni eventu*. Limor has observed that these fixed formulas accustom the reader to a "semi-ritualistic rhythm," which leads up to an act of persuasion (191). In addition, a whole series of key words and phrases recur in various combinations in almost every chapter and ensure that the reader will constantly remember the haunting question at the core of the epistle and

will arrive at the inevitable answer at the end. The opening question, “[W]hy are we Jews afflicted by God with the captivity in which we now are?” and the constant repetition of its elements leading to a final resolution create a structure and tension not unlike that of the movement of a classical symphony. Throughout its development, modulations, and variations the initial theme is always recognizable until it reappears in the final recapitulation. By the use of the first person, both in the singular and in the plural, continually voicing the speaker’s fears, doubts, and anxiety, the reader is inexorably made a participant in the argument up to the point where he has to take the final step himself and reach the inevitable conclusion. As Limor has rightly pointed out, the Epistle of Samuel is, in fact, a perfect example of the Dominican art of persuasion (193).

The style and construction of the letter is simple and easy to follow, and the arguments are presented as if they were common knowledge. Rabbi Samuel begins by reaffirming that the Jews are subject to the anger of God for a great sin, but he wonders what that sin could have been. He moves from this introductory point to illustrate that their ignorance has made them blind to the sin, but because of it their observance to the Law is not satisfactory to God. At this junction, Rabbi Samuel explains what the sin was and why it must be true, even though the Jews do not believe. He moves lucidly from point to point, explaining how Christianity has replaced every fundamental aspect of their religion. Nevertheless, Rabbi Samuel does not vehemently blame his people for the deliberate killing of the Just One. Because of their ignorance they have had to suffer in their current exile, but they can make amends for their actions, thereby ensuring their salvation.

Background and Context

Polemic literature has been part of Christianity ever since it split from Judaism. For examples from the formative period of Christian polemics, the following overview will be confined to such classics as Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, Tertullian’s *In Answer to the Jews*, and Saint Augustine’s *City of God*. In one form or another, each of these works has formed part of the background for our epistle. In addition, the Disputations of Paris and Barcelona provide

evidence of a shifting away regarding the Jews. The object is to place the Epistle of Samuel within the context of, and in comparison with, past and contemporary Christian polemics against the Jews.

Traditionally, the treatment of the Jews had been based upon the writings of Saint Paul. In his letter to the Romans, righteousness before God is not achieved through man's own efforts but is God's gift (Romans 1:16-17); therefore, the broken relationship between God and the Jewish people is only temporary. In fact, it is part of God's plan for the salvation of the Gentile world. While Paul, missionary to the Gentiles par excellence, hopes that he may draw some of the Jews to Christ, it is God himself who in the end will take away Israel's sins, for his promise to Abraham and the forefathers is irrevocable.

However, in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr states that the essential condition for salvation is obedience to the law of God, which he calls a new law in contrast to the law of the Jews that was made obsolete with the coming of Christ (199-200). While the Jewish law was temporary and intended only for Jews, the new law is eternal and binding for everybody. In essence it is the same as the old, but it is superior because it omits the external requirements contained in the old law that were intended only to remind the Jews of God (203-04). Instead, the new law centers everything around what is essential, namely love for God and one's neighbor (246). However, the new law only clarifies what God has always required. In fact, those who lived well before Moses and those who kept the Mosaic law were also saved (217).

Tertullian goes further than Justin in arguing that salvation is not only determined by obedience to the new law but it also hinges upon conversion. Toward the end of his work, *An Answer to the Jews*, Tertullian connects the death of Jesus to the dispersion of the Jews as predicted by the prophets and in the Psalms.³ God has taken away their temple and, therefore, the validity of their sacrifices. In its place God has built churches to which people now flock. Tertullian does not believe that ignorance has anything to do with the Jews' unbelief. Rather, it is their obstinacy that causes them to remain blind and, therefore, second seed to the Christians (171-72). Since it has been sufficiently proven through the Scriptures and the prophets that Jesus was in fact Christ, it is not ignorance but deliberate disbelief that causes them to remain in their current exile.

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Augustine, on the other hand, takes a less austere stance with regard to salvation. As he explains in the *City of God*, the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world—and, he notes, there is indeed no place where they are not—is not a punishment for their sins. Rather, it is a testimony to us of their Scriptures, which they contribute wherever the Church of Christ is spread. God has not destroyed the Jews but dispersed them. The grace of God's compassion is sincere; in the words of St. Paul, "[T]heir offence is the salvation of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:11). Thus the Jews were dispersed by God, "because if they had remained in their own land with that testimony of the Scriptures, and not everywhere, certainly the Church which is everywhere could not have had them as witnesses among all nations to the prophecies which were sent before concerning Christ" (Augustine 389).

True to much of the polemical work written before the thirteenth century, the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel concerns itself with many of the issues raised in the classical works discussed above, which are centered upon the Augustinian theory of ignorant disbelievers. The epistle fits largely into this genre. Matters of theological dogma, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of Christ, are curiously absent. The major difference between the Disputations of Paris and Barcelona and the church fathers is that the Disputations were designed to prove the teachings of Christianity. In other words, the Disputations represent a defense of Christianity rather than a conversionary effort. In contrast, the main purpose of the epistle was to prove that Judaism had fallen out of favor with God and all Jews must convert to Christianity in order to obtain salvation. Beginning around the thirteenth century, Jewish converts to Christianity used the Talmud to argue against their former faith. One main factor thus separates our epistle from the Disputations, and that is the latter's attack upon the Talmud.

With the Disputation of Paris in 1240 we witness a fundamental shift in ideology. The sole purpose of the Disputation was to prove the inherent fallibility of the Talmud. These charges focused upon what was written and how the Jews viewed themselves and Christians. Nicholas Donin, who converted from Judaism in 1236, wrote a letter to Pope Gregory IX in order to bring to light the blasphemies of the Talmud (Rembaum 205). His intentions were not to convert the Jews, and he most likely cared

nothing for the souls of his former brethren. On the contrary, by condemning the Talmud he could suppress Judaism. His arguments center around five major categories: 1) the authority of the Talmud and rabbis; 2) hostility towards Christians; 3) blasphemies against God; 4) blasphemies against the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and, therefore, Christianity; and 5) the foolishness of the Talmud and its stories (Rembaum 16). Reacting to these wild accusations, Gregory IX called for a disputation in order to condemn the Talmud and Judaism as a whole. It is important to remember that the purpose was not to isolate Jewish deviations from biblical faith, but rather to bring to light various wrongs found in the Talmud (Chazan, "Condemnation" 22). R. Yehiel ben Joseph of Paris was called to respond to the accusations, as were Judah ben David of Melun, Samuel ben Solomon of Château Thierry, and Moses of Coucy (Maccoby 21).

In R. Joseph ben Nathan's account of the Disputation, R. Yehiel stresses that Donin's claims of hostility towards the Christians completely misrepresents the Talmud and its meaning. R. Yehiel reminds him that "gentile" does not necessarily mean "Christian." Furthermore, the work is a law code and must be understood within the context of a time period. It is possible that some of the laws found within the Talmud are no longer applicable (30). Concerning the blasphemies against God, Donin wanted to prove that it was a theological error to equate God the Father, as found in Christianity, with the God of Judaism. In other words, the Jewish God has "attributes that belong to other members of the Trinity, and therefore is not impassable." R. Yehiel convincingly retorted that the Christian idea of impassability was derived not from the Old Testament, but rather from Greek philosophy (35). Regarding the alleged Talmudic blasphemies against Jesus and Mary, R. Yehiel responded that the Jesus and Mary referred to in the Talmud were different from Jesus of Nazareth and the Virgin Mary. According to the Rabbi, the Talmud refers to someone named ben Stada or ben Pandira who was executed in Lūd. Furthermore, the Mary to whom the Talmud refers was Miriam, who was from Lydda and married to Pappos ben Judah (157). To counteract the accusations that the Talmud contains ridiculous stories, R. Yehiel explains that the book is composed of two parts. The first, the Halakhah, is concerned with legal matters. The second, the Aggadah, contains allegorical stories to be used as a guide for conducting one's life. These stories can be taken

literally, as some Christians do with those found in the Bible, or they could not be considered at all (154). Thus, very much unlike the epistle, the Disputation of Paris strove to prove the inherent flaws of Judaism through their own works. The epistle did not make use of the Talmud and, instead of being grounded in theological arguments, employed common sense to argue that the exile of the Jews was caused by the killing of Jesus.

The primary objective of the Disputation of Barcelona was to bring to light the errors of Judaism and by doing so leave the Jews no choice but to convert (Cohen 165). The assumption was that if a prominent rabbi converted, then others would follow suit. Unlike the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel, the Disputation of Barcelona used the Talmud and other Jewish writings to prove the validity of Christianity. Pablo Christiani, a Jewish convert and the principal Christian inquisitor, employed the Aggadah, even though it could be interpreted allegorically, in order to prove the divinity of the Messiah, his death and resurrection, and the replacement of the old laws by the new law (161). The Disputation, as recorded in the *Vikuah* of Nahmanides, raised the questions in sequence of whether the Messiah has already come, whether he was truly divine, whether he was born of a woman, and who practices the true law (Maccoby 103).

Christiani begins his argument by discussing the tenth verse of the forty-ninth book of Genesis and the Talmud (Sanhedrin 5^a), which says that Judah will have a scepter (a king) until the coming of Shiloh, namely the Messiah (106). Like the Epistle of Samuel, Christiani contends that the Jews no longer had a king among them; therefore, the Messiah had come. For even during the Babylonian exile, the Jews may not have had a king but they did have a ruler. Nahmanides, the principle Jewish respondent, retorts that the scepter did not pass away but is merely suspended from the Israelites. Furthermore, he says, the Jews believe Elijah will anoint the Messiah upon his arrival, which did not happen when Jesus came.

At this point, the debate turns to the question of whether or not the Messiah is divine. Christiani takes an interesting angle on this issue. He argues that the Messiah is Christ; yet at no point does he argue that Jesus was Christ. He hopes that by arguing that the Messiah had already come he would inherently prove Christianity's validity and at the same time exempt himself from defending the Messianic role of Jesus (Cohen 168).

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Nahmanides retorts that the Messiah is only a king, and therefore not divine. For him this is the real difference between Christians and Jews. He cannot accept a doctrine fundamentally lacking reason. Besides, the Psalms foretold that during his life the Messiah would rule from sea to sea. However, during Jesus' life he ruled nothing but rather ran from his enemies. In the end, Jesus fell into the hands of his enemies and could not save himself. How then could he be expected to save the souls of all those who believed (Maccoby 119)?

The question then arises whether the Messiah could be born of a virgin and what is the true law. Nahmanides claims that the Messiah will be completely human, having been born of a man and a woman, because Isaiah foretold that he would be from the stock of Jesse. However, Jesus was not born of the stock of Jesse, in other words a descendent of David, and even if he was, the Torah prohibited a son from inheriting through his mother. There must be a direct male link. The matter of the true law in actuality degenerates into a discussion on the Trinity. Nahmanides refutes the Trinity by stating that if God truly possessed the properties of wisdom, will, and power, He would not make them into a trinity. Rather, He would simply be one substance with three properties (145). In itself, Nahmanides claims that, like the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity is inherently illogical. This issue, however, is completely outside the scope of the epistle, because its purpose is not to prove the teachings of Christianity but rather to replace the old law.

Unlike the 'Disputation of Paris, the scope of the Disputation of Barcelona reveals the same ideological goals as the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel in spite of the fact that this particular disputation and the epistle address very different topics. Again, the differences can be attributed to the different audiences. Why discuss the observances of the law when the audience is primarily composed of theologians and rabbis? Likewise, why have a discussion of the Trinity when the prospective audience more than likely would not understand?

The question remains, how does the Epistle of Samuel fit into the scheme of traditional polemics and the two Disputations? It is clear that the method of argumentation is more akin to those polemics of earlier Christian fathers than to the Disputations in both the subjects addressed and the intended audience. Like traditional polemics, the epistle strove to

prove the validity of Christianity by demonstrating how the new law has replaced the old. However, the Disputations defended Christian theology by using the Talmud and other Jewish works to prove the fallibility of the Jewish faith. The reason for the epistle's style of argumentation may have been to ensure the believability of the date of its composition. If the letter was written around the year 1000, as it is claimed, then it could not show the influence of contemporary ideas as seen in the Disputations. For instance, there could be no discussion of the Trinity and other dogmatic issues or use of the Talmud and other Jewish works, because these were contemporary ideas utilized by converts. Furthermore, the purpose of the letter must be kept in mind. The goal was to convert the Jews by showing them that the exile from which they suffered was caused by their killing of Jesus, whom they did not recognize as Christ. In order to connect Jesus with their exile, it must be shown how all the observances of the Law are no longer acceptable to God. The purpose of the epistle, like that of traditional polemics, was to prove the validity of Christianity by demonstrating God's displeasure with Judaism rather than, like the Disputations, by defending Christian theology. In the end, the Church's attitude ended up far from where it originally began. By the thirteenth century the Church was forced to defend its doctrine from outside attacks rather than prove its superiority. In the midst of this change was the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel, which took a new approach towards the conversion of the Jews by identifying with their suffering.

The Case for Christian Authorship of the Epistle of Samuel

The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel is addressed to a fellow rabbi and thus to a Jewish audience. The issues it raises, notably those of sin, exile, the Law and its observances and, ultimately, the salvation of the Jews, were certainly topics of rabbinical teaching.⁴ Yet nowhere does the supposedly rabbinic author of the epistle make reference in his arguments to the rabbinical tradition; instead, he builds his arguments on the traditional Christian interpretations of Old Testament prophets and, in the process, frequently misrepresents and misinterprets Jewish beliefs. That a learned Jewish scholar would be persuaded by the epistle's arguments seems most unlikely, as a brief survey of rabbinical teaching regarding the issues

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raised in the epistle will show. It is my contention, therefore, that this epistle was not written by a Jew but rather by a Christian; thus, Bonihominis was not, as he claims, the translator of the epistle but most likely its author.

The Idea of Sin

Already present in Tertullian, but more prominent following Augustine, the idea of original sin became the basis for the Christian doctrine of salvation. With the sin of Adam the entire human race sinned and became subject to the consequences, namely death. In contrast, the doctrine of original sin is entirely foreign to Judaism. (Epstein 9:423f [82^a n 1]). Furthermore, Judaic thinkers did not view sin in the same manner as did Christians. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo asserted that each man is punished for the sins he has committed in his lifetime, but not for those committed by his forefathers (James 37, 41). Instead, according to rabbinical teaching, each generation makes its own future (Neusner, *Ancient Judaism* 117-18).

To illustrate this point, rabbis would refer to the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah:

But if this man begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, and fears, and does not do likewise, who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or increase, observes my ordinances, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity. . . . The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:14-18, 20)

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In those days they shall no longer say: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But every one shall die for his own sin; each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

Here the Bible clearly states that people could not be punished for the sins of their fathers. The Talmud prohibited the punishing of a father for the sins of his children and vice versa (Epstein 12: 164 [27^b]). Therefore, the Christian argument that the continuing exile of the Jews was the punishment for the killing of Christ carried no legitimacy to a Jewish audience.

Exile

Directly connected with the idea of sin was that of exile, which was different from Christianity. While Christians considered exile punishment for the sin of killing Christ, Jewish writers were quick to note that they had been in exile long before Jesus of Nazareth was even born. Their dispersion began in the time of the Assyrian kings, Tiglath-Pileseer and Sargon, who originally exiled the ten tribes followed by the Babylonian exile of Benjamin and Judah. According to Philo, Israel's time of bondage in Egypt did not mean that God had abandoned His people. Rather, noted Philo, Amram, Moses's father, said that he would take his wife, have children, and prosper in their new homeland (James 100).

The destruction of the first temple and the Babylonian exile, which lasted from 586 BC to 450 BC, was the most important trial the Jews had faced in their history (Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* 3). But while in exile the Jews continued to retain their own jurisdiction; they were not forced to live in ghettos nor were they subjected to religious persecutions. In fact, some Jewish officials rose to high positions within the royal court, and many families remained in Babylon even after they were allowed to return (Trepp 16; Neusner, *Way* 7). However, the Jews knew their exile would last a very long time, as it was written in the book of Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.

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Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priest my ministers. (Jeremiah 33:19-21)

The Lord told them to build homes and have children. What is more, they were to work for the welfare of the city. Based upon Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the Jews knew they were not being punished for their fathers' sins. Thus, their current exile had nothing to do with the killing of Jesus. As Joseph Caspi (b. 1279) and Isaac ben Moses Levi (late fourteenth-early fifteenth century) contended, the Jews were exiled for the breaking of the covenant, and nothing more (Cohn-Sherbok 147, 159). The persecutions they faced, whether in the present or in Biblical times, took place because of their lapse in following the law and their lack of faith. Judaism looked at the Bible not as a book of history that was to be dated, but as a guide for living in the present. Therefore even though the words of Jeremiah referred to the Babylonian Captivity, they were seen to apply to the present.

For the most part, Judaism looked upon the exile not so much as a punishment, but rather as a task. The Jews saw their dispersion as an opportunity to spread the word of God to all peoples and bring them into the fold (17). In God's eyes they were special; they were the elect who were subjected to His covenant (Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* 33). Therefore just like a loving but strict parent, God would punish the Jews for their sins far more harshly than other peoples (Neusner, *Introduction* 514). Yet in the end, Israel as a nation, even if dispersed, would endure.

The biggest contention between the Christians and Jews was over the book of Isaiah, particularly the fifty-third chapter, which is also known as the "Songs of the Servant of the Lord."⁵ The reason for the contention lay in two distinct interpretations of Isaiah. The individualist interpretation saw in the servant a particular person. Taking on the role of the Messiah, this servant of the Lord suffered for the sins of others, thereby saving Israel from exile and the gentiles from idolatry. The collectivist interpretation maintained that the servant referred to Israel as a nation. They were suffering for their sins and also bringing spiritual redemption to the gentiles. The death and resurrection of the servant was seen as a metaphor for the exile and redemption of the Jewish people (Kaufmann 129, 132-34). Christians saw this passage as undeniable proof that Jesus was the Messiah. From the standpoint of the Jews, however, if the individualist interpretation was to be accepted, Jesus did not fulfill it because the Jews continued to remain in exile. Furthermore, if Jesus was divine, what sort of death could God have suffered and how would His appearance have changed (Berger 115)? If the collectivist interpretation was accepted, then the passage did not refer to Jesus, but rather to the nation of Israel in exile.

For the most part, rabbis contended that the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah should be viewed from a collective perspective. R. Abraham ibn Ezra and R. David Qamhi took the position that the person who "was springing up before him like a root out of the dry earth" was Israel before God. The one who "was despised and ceasing from men" referred to Israel during their exile (53:2-3). In other words, they held no status among men. For while in exile, the Jews were in no position to open their mouths; they were to keep silent and endure their hardships, always remembering they were performing this service for their God (53:7-9; Driver and Neubauer 44-47, 50-53). Moses ben Nahman referred to these verses in the same manner; however, he took the individualist interpretation and felt that the person referred to was Moses. He fulfilled the prophecy because he brought the Israelites out of Egypt (80-82).

For Judaism, then, the idea of exile was viewed not so much in a negative light, but rather as a challenge for self-improvement. It is a trial given by God to spread His word to the unbelievers; therefore, in order to atone for their sins as well as for those of others, they must endure these

hardships. As the Talmud notes, Jews continuously broke God's covenant, thereby remaining in exile.⁶ But in no way is dispersion linked with the death of Jesus. God had not abandoned them and it was only a matter of time until He rewarded them for their obedience and perseverance.

Salvation

For Christians, salvation means forgiveness of sin and eternal life after death, which is made possible by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the divine savior, and which is attained by individuals through faith and the sacraments. The Jewish religion, on the other hand, focuses on the salvation of the entire Jewish people, i.e., the end of dispersion and the return to the land of promise, the beginning of the Messianic Age, initiated by the coming of the Messiah. Sin, suffering, atonement, and salvation are, therefore, closely related themes in Judaism. Salvation must be attained through sanctification, and the Messiah's coming will depend upon Israel's faithful obedience to the Torah and nothing else (Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* 141). And that, according to Philo, means to imitate God in one's everyday life (James 116). Essentially, the key to atonement is to love God and to follow all the laws of the Torah. Thus for the Jewish population, salvation is a social and political concept. It could only be attained through society's efforts to improve itself (Cohen 53). Not until that has been attained would the age of the Messiah begin. Therefore, there is no need for a man, referred to by his followers as Christ, to rescue them, because salvation is not an individual matter, but rather one that concerns an entire society.

Conclusions

Judaic beliefs concerning sin, exile, and salvation are very different from how Bonihominis presented them in the epistle. Bonihominis based the reason for their current exile on the selling, i.e., the killing, of Jesus by the Jews, which was a far worse sin than that of their forefathers. But because the Old Testament does not explicitly state that the Messiah is divine, Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Furthermore, the Christian notion contradicts the essential nature of God, namely His unity, incorporeality, and immutability. The whole concept of the Messiah is

different in Judaism than in Christianity. Jews, unlike Christians, do not view his role as a spiritual one. Rather, it is a political role in which a human being will unite the Israelites under one person in the name of God and regain for them the Holy Land. The basic precept is that the Messiah will fulfill the prophecies of God, none of which were fulfilled by Jesus. Furthermore, Jeremiah and Ezekiel explicitly say that the sins of the forefathers were not to be visited upon sons. People, rather, are responsible for atoning for their moral shortcomings. Likewise, people are punished for their own sins and not those of others. Therefore, even if Jesus were the Messiah, the present generation cannot be held responsible for wrongs committed by their ancestors.

Dispersion also was understood by the Jews rather differently than in the Epistle of Samuel. More often than not, it was seen to be a sort of "trial by punishment" given by God. The Jews were stripped from their homeland for breaking the covenant. In order to pay retribution they were scattered across the world with the task of spreading the name of God among all people. They knew their exile would be long because it was foretold by Jeremiah, who instructed the Jews to build houses, marry, and work for the good of their new home. The punishment would last as long as the Jews collectively continued to break their covenant with God and live in moral lapse. Therefore, they did not view their exile as a continuation of punishment for the sins of their forefathers, but rather as punishment for their own sins.

To attain salvation and expedite their return to the Promised Land, Jews must follow the observances of the Law, thereby keeping their covenant with God. These observances were meant to help a person attain moral perfection, which, as stated above, will bring salvation when completed by all the Israelites. The Sabbath was designated as a day of rest in order to reaffirm God's unity. Also, sacrifices were to be offered to God as atonement for sins. Bonihominis's argument against sacrifices was that they were aesthetically unpleasing to God, and, therefore, He has rejected them in favor of the Eucharist. As Maimonides pointed out, however, Jews could offer bread or even flour, if necessity dictated, instead of animal sacrifices, for God found them all acceptable (360). Christians often viewed circumcision in a negative way, seeing it as a symbol of Jewish exile. Yet, the purpose of circumcision was to bring all

Jews into a community of faith and reaffirm that they were the chosen of people of God, because they were the direct descendants of Abraham, whom God had told to circumcise all His people.

Would a Jew have been persuaded by the arguments presented by the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel? Is it possible that Bonihominis's claim is true and that he was merely the translator of the work? By taking the opus at face value it is reasonable to believe that somewhere, stored in the corner of some archive, there is a lost Arabic manuscript. I do not think, however, that that manuscript will ever be found, because it most likely never existed. In trying to answer the question of authorship it has seemed important to view the epistle's arguments against the alleged author's Jewish background. That a learned rabbi or Judaic scholar would neither have made reference to, nor shown his familiarity with, traditional rabbinic teaching regarding sin, exile, and redemption seems most unlikely.

The same unlikelihood applies to the alleged audience of the epistle. Rather than for a rabbi or Jewish scholar, it was meant for Christians and recent converts from Judaism to strengthen their faith. As was a frequent practice at the beginning of the thirteenth century, many polemical writings were actually apologetical works intended to defend Christianity against outside attacks. There is no reason to view this text any differently. The common-sense arguments do suggest that it could have been used to convert poor or ignorant Jews by demonstrating that all the evils the Jews have suffered began with the death of Jesus. As I have tried to show, however, any Jew familiar with rabbinical teaching would not have been swayed by the epistle's argumentation. Therefore, this work should be seen more as an apologetical piece than one with the intention of persuading conversion.

It is hoped that the present study has contributed to resolving why the author of the Epistle of Rabbi Samuel must have been Christian. Bonihominis constructed his arguments in a manner that would place the letter two centuries earlier. He based his epistle generally on the ideas and philosophies of the church fathers, such as Saint Paul, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Augustine. By demonstrating genuine concern for the reader's salvation and putting forth arguments based upon common sense, there is no obvious reason to suspect that it was written by a Dominican friar and, therefore, made Bonihominis's claim that the epistle was written

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around the year 1000 by a rabbi the accepted opinion. However, this examination of the epistle's arguments, viewed within the context of patristic and medieval Christian polemics as well as against the background of rabbinical literature, has, I hope, given support to the contention that a rabbi did not write this treatise. Ideas of the Messiah, sin, exile, salvation, the Law, and its observances as presented in the epistle reveal no "inside" knowledge of the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, only Alphonsus Bonihominis knows whether or not he was the author of this text.

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Notes

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Otto Gründler and Dr. Robert Schneider for their guidance and suggestions.

¹See Blumenkranz, "Alphonsus Bonihominis"; Williams, 228-30; and Limor, 184-85. According to Williams, until Moritz Steinschneider's article in the mid-nineteenth century in the *Bodleian Catalogue* there seems to have been little debate that Rabbi Samuel was indeed the author of the epistle. Steinschneider argues that the name Rabbi Samuel was taken from Samuel ben Jehuda ibn Abbas, a Moroccan and Spaniard, who converted to Islam from Judaism in 1163 and afterwards wrote *Ifhum al-Yahad* against his former faith. The basis of his argument is that both Samuels originated from Fez, both left Judaism, and both wrote against their former faith. Yet he admits that Samuel ibn Abbas's letter and that of Rabbi Samuel have very little in common. Steinschneider also believes that Bonihominis was actually Abner of Burgos, later known as Alphonsus of Valladolid, writing under a pseudonym. The forger, who he contends was Burgos, based his work upon that of Samuel ibn Abbas. However, Burgos and Bonihominis could not be the same man since a great deal is known about Bonihominis's adult life and travels thanks to the work of Meersseman. Williams is not convinced by Steinschneider's theory because it fails to explain why Rabbi Samuel's letter was placed one hundred years before that of ibn Abbas. Furthermore, Steinschneider gives no reason why the forger wrote the document first in Arabic and then in Latin. Finally, Steinschneider does not explain why Bonihominis would have translated the Biblical texts into Arabic in such a way that they do not correspond to the Vulgate text of the fourteenth century. In the end, Williams disagrees with Steinschneider's conclusions and argues that the text was indeed composed in 1072 and translated into Latin in 1339. Blumenkranz and Limor believe the epistle was the work of Bonihominis, who either simply attached a common Jewish name to the treatise or may have been influenced by the *Ifham al-Yahud*. Yet according to Limor (184 n 32), Blumenkranz earlier accepted Bonihominis as the translator in his work "Jüdische und christliche Konvertiten im jüdisch-christlichen Religionsgespräch des Mittelalters," *Judentum im Mittelalter: Beiträge*

zum christlich-jüdischen Gespräch, ed. P. Wilpert (Berlin: *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 4, 1966) 271.

²See Limor, 179-80. The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel experienced extraordinary popularity during the later Middle Ages, which can be seen in the frequency of reproduction and transmission. To date, there are 264 known Latin manuscripts, two edited Latin editions, one Armenian translation, twenty-four German, one Greek, thirteen Spanish, seven Italian, and two edited Italian translations. Furthermore, there are two English editions; one, printed in 1885 by the London Society House, is currently housed at Harold B. Lee Library on the campus of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. In all, fifty manuscripts date from the fourteenth century, 195 from the fifteenth century, three from the sixteenth century, two from the seventeenth century, one from the eighteenth century, and one from the nineteenth century. In addition to the manuscripts and translations, there are thirteen incunabula editions dating from 1475 to 1499 and eleven between 1500 and 1600. Copies of the epistle can be found all over the world. According to Limor, Germany and Austria alone hold 131 reproductions; forty-four can be found in Italy, twenty in France, thirteen in Spain, twelve in England, twelve in former Czechoslovakia, seven in Poland, two in the United States, and one in Jerusalem.

³Tertullian 169; Micah 5:2; Isaiah 1:7, 65:2; Daniel 9:26; Psalms 22:6-17.

⁴I will concentrate my focus upon the ideas of sin, exile, and salvation.

⁵Consider, in particular, verses 2-3 and 7-9, because this is what the epistle focuses upon: For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. . . . He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his

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grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

⁶See Epstein 1 (*Berakoth in the Babylonian Talmud*): 39 (8^a), 345 (56^a); and 11 (*Shabbath in The Babylonian Talmud*): 152 (33^a). In the *Berakoth*, Resh Lakish says that exile will be brought on those who do not go to the Synagogue when there is one located in the town. The *Shabbath* further states that exile will come to those who committ crimes such as incest, idolatry, and nonobservances to the years of release and jubilee. Yet Bar Hedyā reassures Jews in the *Berakoth* that it is exile that makes atonement for the sins they have committed.

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