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*Historical Background of the Jewish-Christian Polemic  
Debate on Genesis*

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## ABSTRACT

Key words: Polemic, Christianity, Judaism, commandments, covenant, Vulgate, Renaissance, Septuagint, Torah, Genesis, Principles of Faith, revelation, Redemption, Holy Trinity, Essence of God, Unity of God, Incarnation, Messiah, Virgin Birth

Since Christianity appear on the stage of history there was a polemic between Christianity and Judaism. That polemic reflected period reality, sometimes is hidden and implied and sometimes is visible and aggressive. The struggle between the two religions; has taken different shapes and forms, both written and oral, and was based, on the Christian side, on two basic assumptions – that the physical existence of Jews must be preserved within Christian society, and that the destruction of the Jewish religious and national center and the Jewish exile are the punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus. For over a thousand years the argument between the two religions went on, mostly revolving around interpretations of the Bible. the Christians believed the Jews are "blind" to the true interpretation and meaning of their own holy scriptures, while the Jews claimed that the Christians are distorting the Bible, looking literally at what is supposed to be allegorical and vice versa. Every verse and prophecy was differently interpreted, and each religion rejected any interpretation different than its own. The main dispute was over the question which religion is the true faith.

According to the Jewish and the Christian outlook, all religious truths were given through revelations, and both religions are based on such revelations. The Jews claimed that the revelation of God to Israel on Mount Sinai was unique, and that is when the true Torah, both written and oral, was given to Israel and passed throughout the generations, and must not be changed. Christ's appearance on the stage of history does not change anything. The Christians did not dispute the historical event on Mount Sinai, but claimed that the Bible itself has foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus, the new messiah. Christianity is a monotheistic religion, believing in the second revelation, that of Jesus; God was disappointed with the Jews and has rejected them because of their sins, and so their temples were destroyed and they were exiled.

The topic issues of the debate like: Principles of Faith, the holy Trinity, Essence of God, God's unity and the commandments, the coming of the messiah, Redemption, Incarnation of God in flesh, the Virgin Birth, keeping the Torah law and others.

These principles are at the basis of both religions, and the argument is about the different interpretations.

A summary of the main subjects of the debate in the form of a table:

	<b>Christianity</b>	<b>Judaism</b>
The holy Trinity	Three entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit	According to Judaism, God is one and only.
The essence and unity of God	Three entities that are one	God is eternal. He was, He is, and He will be.
Incarnation of God in flesh	God incarnated in flesh and came down to this world to redeem humanity from its sins	God is amorphous, has no body or bodily form
The Commandments	The commandments were cancelled when the messiah, Jesus, came.	The Torah that was given on Mount Sinai, and everything written in it, are eternal.
The Coming of the messiah : Redemption	The Messiah already came, in the form of Jesus. Christians have already been redeemed.	The Messiah is yet to come and bring redemption with him.
The Virgin Birth	The son of God was born to the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit	God is amorphous, he existed before the world was created, and always will be.

Until the twelfth century, essays written against Jews contained biblical proof of the messianic nature of Jesus and the verity of Christianity, accompanied by evidence taken from the low political and social status of Jews, but still with no new reasoning. The Jewish character in these polemics was relatively constant – the Jews are blind and stubborn as thus only understand the literal meaning of the Bible, and cannot see the

foreshadowing of Christianity within it; they fail to comprehend that the commandments have no practical meaning, but rather a purely spiritual one; the exile is a collective punishment for not accepting Jesus; the Jews are the proof that the Christians did not invent the Bible and that the book is ancient, but the humiliation of the Jews testifies that the Christians are the chosen people, Verus Israel, and not the Jews. In the twelfth century there was a radical change in the Christian debate. The status of Jews deteriorated, and two factors became pivotal in Christian polemics: rationalism and the fact that Christians became acquainted with and began studying the post-biblical literature. As a result, Christians started to look for logical proof of the verity of Christianity. An example of such an attempt is the mass written by Anslem of Canterbury (1033-1109- *Cur Deus Homo- Why God Became Man*), which influenced polemic literature. Anslem emphasized the necessity of the embodiment of God in human form. He was one of the founders of western scholastics who used the philosophical-dialectal method in his writings in order to understand the essence of faith through reason.

The debate against post-biblical literature: Over the course of the twelfth century a few Christian scholars learned that the Jews have another sacred text, which guides them through everyday life, the Talmud. In 1239, a new factor was added to the Jewish-Christian debate, the Jewish Aggadah (legend) and Halacha (law). This literature became a central motif in Christian polemics from the twelfth century on. Converted Jews, having the knowledge of said literature, had a crucial part in the debates over the Talmud, Midrash and Chazal (our sages) writings, like Petrus Alphonsi (A Jewish author and physician who lived in Spain and converted to Christianity in 1106; he took upon himself the name Petrus after his teacher, and Alphonsi after King Alphonso, who attended his baptism. He was physician for Henry I of England) He wrote an anti-Jewish polemic, "Dialogus", written as an internal dialogue between Christian Petrus and Jewish Moshe. In this book he justified his conversion through logical justification, claiming that only Christianity is the faith of reason. Alphonsi used Talmudic excerpts to disprove Judaism, mainly because of the anthropomorphism of God, since Jews understand the writings literally. Later in the debate, he develops his philosophical theory to the level of proving the possibility of theology without divine materialism; he cites examples from Talmudic legends to show how absurd it is.

Christian knowledge of the Bible was based mainly on the Vulgate, St. Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible (4<sup>th</sup> AD). He began studying Hebrew in his youth, after his arrival to Israel in 385, and so he had command not only of Hebrew, but also of Latin and Greek, which was the spoken language in Christianity at the time.

Hieronymus points out that one of his most influential teachers was a Hebrew teacher, a Jew who converted to Christianity named Bar-Anina. He saw the Hebrew text as the very words of God, and thought that deepening his knowledge of this language will enable him to penetrate God's innermost intentions. Augustine [(354-430) the great church patriarch and bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He came up with the testimony doctrine which justify, the preservation of Jews within the Christian society] who lived at the same time but never, met him, commented: "Jerome had read all or almost all the authors of both parts of the world who had written anything before his time on the teaching of the Church".

It is interesting that until the time of Hieronymus, church patriarchs did not see great importance in the Hebrew version of the Bible. Despite the fact that Augustine objected to Hieronymus' new translation, since he worried it might harm Christians' faith in the *Vetus Latina*, the Latin version of the Hebrew Scriptures. He established a monastery in Bethlehem and devoted himself to Translating the Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin and interpreting it according to what was called "*Veritas Hebraica*". He started a new Latin translation, based on Origin's Hexapla (185-232) (The Hexapla has six columns: 1. The Hebrew version of the Bible; 2. Greek transcription of the Hebrew version; 3. Etymological translation to Greek according to Aquila; 4. Greek translation by Symmachus; 5. the Septuagint, edited and revised according to the Hebrew order of the verses; 6. Theodosius translation)

While working on it, he realized the amount of deviations in the Septuagint (The most important translation of the Bible which is a Greek translation. This is the oldest available translation of the Bible, and it was mostly or completely made in Alexandria, in the third century BC) from the Hebrew original, and therefore decided to create a new translation based on the Hebrew original. The term *Veritas Hebraica* was coined by him in the introduction to his essay *Quaestiones Hebraice in Genesim* (Hebrew Questions on Genesis). In this essay he compares Christian exegesis with the Hebrew version of the Bible and with Jewish exegesis. Hieronymus had a mystical attitude toward Hebrew, which he saw as the mother of all languages.



Translating the Bible according to the Hebrew original was seen as a revolutionary act, since the Septuagint was seen as an integral part of the Christian Holy Scriptures, the Septuagint, which was considered, until that point, a sanctified prophetic text. Hieronymus was accused of heresy and of attempting to justify Christianity, merely by translating from Hebrew.

One of the main opponents of the translation was Augustine with whom Hieronymus had a long correspondence which implies that church authorities did not agree with his project. When he asked "what new truth can be achieved through a new translation"? Hieronymus replied "what new truth can be achieved through a new interpretation"? One of Hieronymus' most severe claims to Augustine was – how can you (Augustine) prefer a translation done by a Jew, Theodosius, over a translation done by a Christian like me? In general, according to Hieronymus, the correct translation and interpretation of the Bible can only be clear, true and proven when Jesus Christ, the Messiah, came.

The translators of the Septuagint did not know of the coming of Jesus, and therefore could not understand God's words in the Holy Scriptures. The coming of the Messiah gave the key to the true understanding of the Holy Scriptures. The better we understand the better can we translate. Hieronymus criticizes not only the Latin translation of the Bible, but also the Septuagint, which, according to him, is not faithful to the original. Even though Augustine highly regarded Hieronymus as a theologian, he doubted his ability to produce a translation better than the Septuagint, which he believed was written under divine influence and saw it as sanctified.

### The Influence of the Hieronymus Translation

Augustine's fear of a reaction of Greek speaking believers came true, and the Hieronymus Translation ultimately resulted in a split of Christianity into Greek Christianity which, in Eastern and Southern Europe continued to rely on the Septuagint, and Latin Christianity, which, in Western Europe relied on the Vulgate and on Latin. The Hieronymus translation had great influence in all fields of life across Europe, including the Jews, and over the lives of those who had contact with them. In the sixth century it was named Vulgate, meaning 'common and/or accepted edition', but only in 1545 in the Council of Trent, it was granted the status of 'Textus Auctoritate Plenus', as a reaction to Luther's translation, whose ideas began to undermine the strength of the Catholic Church. [(Martin Luther 1483 –1546) was a German monk, former Catholic

priest, and seminal figure of a reform movement in 16th century Christianity, subsequently known as the Protestant Reformation]

The Hieronymus translation accompanied the 'Victorious Christian Church' and assisted the formation of Western society and culture and the formation of European consciousness. The fact that all Christian intellectuals could rely on a single book, which was written fluently and was faithful to the original, which had a large body of interpretation that was created around it for centuries, made an intellectual-theological debate possible.

Hieronymus put great effort in this mission of translating the Old Testament from Hebrew and Aramaic, for about fifteen years. This creation is the crowning glory of his life which was devoted to the study of the Holy Scriptures. The book of Genesis, which is the topic of this paper, was one of the last books he translated, when he was already experienced in the work of translation. In his preface to the Book of Genesis Hieronymus claims that the translators of the Septuagint are not considered prophets and that the legends told of them are meaningless, and brings as evidence the fact that Josephus does not mention the Septuagint at all. The Vulgate appeared fairly late in Christian history, around the year 400. Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, converted to Christianity in 312.

The Jews claimed that Hieronymus' proficiency in Hebrew enabled him to translate the Bible in a sophisticated manner that could be used for Christological needs.

The Jewish response centered on what they perceived as the Christian distortion of the Bible based as it were on allegorical reading of that which should be taken literally and a literal reading of that which should be taken allegorically. Already in Rabbinic literature which, might be possible to identify the hidden controversy.

Christianity claims that since the Jews were exiled from their country because of their sins over God. They were humiliating, oppressed, persecuted and despised compared with Christianity which flourishing and thriving, there are claims that the proof of God's old covenant is violated and it was renewed with the real Israel that is the Christian Church. Jewish suffering will continue in this world forever because they don't embraced the true faith. That polemic was intensified over the years culminating in the 12th century onwards (first Crusade 1096) Books were written on both sides debate.

This debate has created a literary genre, Polemic Literature. Christian writers referred to these essays as *Adversus Judaeos*.

The first book of the genre was written in the second century by Christian scholar Justin Martyr (100-165). It was the first significant contribution to the Christian argument against Judaism

Jewish literature also developed a genre of argumentative writings against Christianity, called "Victory Literature"; there is no evidence of this genre until the twelfth century. One of the famous polemics from the Jewish side was "The Book of the Covenant" by Rabbi Joseph Kimhi (1105-1170).

At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and early 12<sup>th</sup> century showed signs of an intellectual renaissance in west Europe, this was followed by changes, like the emerging of universities and the development of rationalism.

There were many reasons for this change, including a spiritual revival, social and political developments like the investiture, the crusades, the inquisition, the beginning of urbanization and new economy, all brought to a contribution to the development of a new kind of Christian -Jewish debate.

The cultural advancement in this period, the theoretical and intellectual achievements and the social climate of scholarship and inter-religious dialogue based on literal meaning of the Bible, all influenced the quality and intensity of the debate directly. Until the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, mainly monks studied the Bible, and there was little contact between the scholars and the outside world. This changed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when new schools were built in city centers and naturally, the scholars began to have contact with their surroundings.

It must be stressed that the debate against Judaism was crucial for Christianity, because it could not be defined without Judaism; Christianity grows from Judaism and wishes to interpret Jewish texts; the Jews, on the other hand, do not depend upon Christianity in order to define themselves and their theological identity. And so, the polemics are primarily a crucial Christian need.

Public debates were held between the Christian-Jewish scholars, when the challenge usually comes from the Christians. That fact forced Israeli Sages to respond not always by voluntary .The strengthening of the Church at that period led to religious coercion on other nations also. The pressure on Jews in those countries to convert to Christianity became more pronounced. Burning The Talmud in Paris (1242) .Persecution and deportation were the lot of Jews at this turbulent period. During this period,

R'ashi (1040-1105) from northern France was the greatest interpreter of the Bible and Talmud who ever lived. R'ashi made a real revolution in Biblical exegesis. His Interpretive method was used as leverage to his students and his descendants. Until R'ashi the era Rabinic midrashic interpretation was mainly. His method was accepted immediately in all communities of Israel gained widespread popularity, France and Germany first and then in the Jewish world. The method was characterized by combination of simplify the text and homily exegesis. What caused this turn? Does the historical events or Jewish internal reasons perhaps? These questions had been treated by many researchers. There's no consensus on the answers to these questions. Engage these questions in this work. We shall try to show how R'ashi was influenced by an historical events in his exegesis as well as subsequent commentators. As is well known medieval Christian biblical knowledge was based primarily on Vulgate Jerome's Latin translation of Bible. This challenge, the French commentators Jews mobilized like, R'ashi, Rashbam (1080-1160) and Radak (1160-1235) and so forth.

We chose to focus on these commentators because they had deep knowledge of Hebrew grammar, dealt with simplistic interpretation of the Bible, and to a certain extent, distanced themselves from Chazal's interpretations to different degrees, and therefore were able to give a linguistic reply to Christian challenges to their commentary, and to their translations.

The paper will focus on comparison, which will be the main tool of research. The paper will compare the Vulgate, from the fourth century AD, according to which all theological essays of the period were written, with the commentary of R'ashi, Rashbam, and Radak from the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will try to show that these commentators indeed debated with Christianity, not always explicitly, but rather in hints in their commentary that refute Christian interpretation and identify the versions in the Vulgate translation that were affected by Christianity.

Our basic assumption is that the three commentators directed their commentary, among other things, to implicitly refute early Christian commentary, the Vulgate – Hieronymus' Latin translation of the Old Testament.

The investigation will focus on the interpretive of textual aspects: elements linguistic and polemic. The goal is to discover from the interpretation of Vulgate and Jews Interpretive northern France during the 11-13 century called the Renaissance of the 12th century, the polemic between Christianity and Judaism. We would like to focus on Genesis mainly.

One must remember that Rashi's interpretations of the Torah, which were directly affected by the events of his time, are not a simple matter, there are hardly any explicit hints, and often the interpretation can only be found through a dual analysis. This is the most interesting thing here, since if the polemic was explicit, there was no research challenge. Since this is not the case, there is great interest in finding these historical hints in his interpretation, and they have an accumulative nature that eventually leads us to see that indeed, Rashi and the following commentators debated with Christianity. Genesis is chosen because Jerome's Interpretation was based on the Septuagint. Our choice of the book of Genesis emerges mainly from the controversy between researchers as to the approach of French commentators to the Jewish-Christian polemic debate. There is an agreement as to their interpretations of the Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings) that they did refer to the polemic debates, but not about the Torah, and specifically not about the book of Genesis., whereas according to Christianity, the book of Genesis and the story of creation were clear foretelling of the basic Christian dogmas like the Holy Trinity, the Original Sin, the Fall of the Angels and in general, the theology of the cosmos. In this research, we try to show that all three commentators referred in their commentary of the book of Genesis, which is the focus of the research of Christian exegesis.

The research part of the paper will include three parts. The first will deal with the story of creation, the second with the creation of man and the story of Noah, and the third will deal with the forefathers of the Jewish Nation. In each of the parts we will focus on several excerpts from the book of Genesis, whose interpretation was controversial. We will quote the commentary of Chazal, Rashi, Rashbam, and Radak to each of the excerpts, and compare them to the Vulgate and the Septuagint, while looking at polemic essays, like "Nizzahon Yashan"(An anonymous essay, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Ashkenaz, The book was published in 1681 by Johann Christof Wagenseil (1633-1705))

"Book of the Covenant", (A book from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, written according to its author Rabbi Joseph Kimhi, to be used as a guide to Jews arguing with Christians)

"The Dialogue between Justin Martyr and Trypho" (The dialogue with Jewish Trypho was written by the Christian scholar Justin Martyr (100-165) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Justin Martyr was a Christian philosopher and martyr, one of the first Christian apologetics. Born a pagan in Nablus, he was executed in Rome for being a Christian, hence his name, Martyr, for dying because of his faith) and "Joseph HaMekane"(The book was written by

Rabbi Joseph Official in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) in an attempt to show whether these segments and subjects were a focus of the debates against Christians.

**Rashi-** Rabbi Shelomo Itzhaki (1040-1105) was born in Troyes, in Northern France. The greatest interpreter of the Bible and Talmud who ever lived: Rashi's first and foremost project was his commentary on the Talmud, which became the cornerstone of the study of Babylonian Talmud. Rashi's students established a school known as the "Literature of Rashi's School". Of particular importance is the formation of the "Peshat School"

This form of Biblical commentary, which seeks after the literal, grammatical meaning of the text, won over the older school of Midrashic interpretation. He was the first who invented a new method of interpretation. The method was characterized by combination of simplify the text and homiletic exegesis. Rashi made a real revolution in biblical exegesis his method was used as leverage to his successors. In Rashi's days, no translations of the Talmud to Hebrew or to any other language existed. Rashi's commentary raised an enormous and unique contribution to the study of Judaism.

Rashi was a polemical writer and that his commentaries reflect the events of his time Rashi was familiar with Christian arguments from the Talmud and a rich tradition of Midrash literature. In Rashi's commentary on the Bible, a strong hostility is displayed towards Christianity. He interpreted many sources referring in a general way to the enemies of Israel as specifically referring to Esau, and through him to Christianity.

**Rashbam-**Rabbi Shemuel Ben Meir (1080-1160) was born in Ramerupt –France.

He is most commonly recognized as Rashi's grandson and the eldest brother of Rabbenu Tam. Rashbam is in fact one of the most significant figures of North-France Jewry during the middle ages, as an interpreter of the Bible and as a Tosafist, and interpreter of the Talmud. Rashbam was the greatest of the peshat (literal meaning) interpreters in medieval Northern France. He bested all the commentators of his generation in unearthing the depths of the Bible's literal meaning. In his commentary on the Torah he testified that he was aiming to complete the work of his grandfather. Rashbam did not occupy himself with philosophy or mysticism, and so his commentaries do not incorporate Kabalistic "Sitrey Torah" (secrets of the Torah) like those by the Spanish scholars. Twice in his commentary on the Bible he mentions the Vulgate, that is to say,

he held debates with Christian scholars on interpretations of the Bible, which means that he knew the Vulgate well. Rashbam defined some of his interpretations as interpretations "to answer to the heretics", and his intention is clear, that these are anti-Christian interpretations.

Did Rashbam have a command of Latin and was he familiar with Christian sources? There is no doubt about it. He only mentions Latin by its name, once and in other times refers to it as "a foreign language". Christians believed that the Jews, because of their insistence on the "letter" of the text, were unable to reach a full understanding of the Bible. Rashbam's commentary on the Torah is aimed against this Christian doctrine.

**Radak-** Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) was born in Narbonne, Southern France, to a family of Hebrew grammarians. He is the most famous of the Kimhi family.

Radak is considered a great linguist and one of the pillars of Bible exegesis in the middle ages, to the point that it was said about him that "if there is no Kimhi, there is no torah".

Radak was a sworn rationalist, and for this reason he came to Spain, to assist Rambam's pupils in the dispute that was created by his rationalistic writings. Like his father, Radak was part of the rationalistic school of Judaism, and his rationalistic tendency is reflected in his interpretations, in which he refers to philosophical writings. As much as the Kimhis were active in defending the rationalistic tradition within Judaism, they also defended Judaism from Christianity.

In Radak's interpretations, he debates with Christianity, whether explicitly or implicitly. Radak's commentary is based on the simplistic approach, and is fixed tightly into principles of grammar, nikkud (Hebrew vowels marks) word meanings.

Rambam(Moïse Maïmonide-Spain 1138- 1204) influenced Radak, through his two great creations – Guide of the Perplexed and Sefer ,Yad Hahazaka (Book of Jewish Law) and especially in the subjects of prophecy and faith. The rationalistic side is very prominent in his interpretations, and ideas related to science and philosophy, like medicine, physics, prophecy, knowing God, and the observation of the commandments are scattered in his commentary.

As these significant French commentators declared that, their goal in interpretation is a simplistic exegesis of the scripture. Their interpretations will be analyzed in comparison with Christian interpretations, in order to recognize the polemic aspects found in them.

At the same time, they were compared to polemic literature like 'Sefer Nizzahon Yashan', 'Book of the Covenant', 'Yosef HaMekane', and the Dialogue between Justin and Trypho, to see whether these issues arose in debates with Christianity. We saw that the Jewish commentators relied on the same Midrashim (homiletics) by Chazal (our sages) when they needed, Midrashim in which the interpretations were 'to reply to the heretics'. In this research, we did not look into each and every word in the segments we chose, but rather looked at the general spirit in which the translation and interpretation were done, and what it implies.

If we take the Vulgate as an example, the research shows that the total of the translated segments we quoted point to a, Christological interpretation. Hieronymus sometimes used Jewish translations, like the Onkelos translation (the main translation of the Torah into Aramaic is attributed to Onkelos the convert) which reflects Chazal's approach, and post-biblical literature, in order to convince that his translation is faithful and adheres to the original. This served his Christological goals. For example, we have shown that both Hieronymus and Rashi follow Chazal in interpreting the word Shiloh (Gen. 49:10) as meaning the Messiah. However, the theological conclusions this interpretation leads to are different. Hieronymus refers to the Messiah that already came, Jesus, whereas Rashi and Chazal speak of the Messiah who is yet to come.

Rashbam went further in his interpretation and claimed that Shiloh is the name of a place, and that this prophecy had already come true, thus depriving the verse of its messianic meaning. Another prominent example discussed in the paper is the word 'spirit', which in Hebrew has two meanings – 'wind, air movement', and 'amorphous spirit'. We saw that the 'spirit of God' (Gen. 1:2) is translated by Hieronymus as *Spiritus Dei*, which implies to the Holy Spirit, although he did not write so explicitly. Rashbam, who understood that this translation can be associated with spiritual meanings, a thing to which, he objected. Another example can be seen in Genesis (25:22) "why am I [like] this"? Hieronymus translates this verse *mihi futurum quid necesse fuit concipere* - "what need was there to conceive". This translation hints to his negative attitude toward sex and pregnancy, which adheres to the attitude of Christianity. An echo of the polemic debate can be also found in the interpretations of French commentators, revolving around faith, which is a central component of Christianity, and actions, that is, commandments, which are a central component of Judaism. In Judaism, faith is one of the commandments; the debate revolved around the question of which approach is



better. Genesis 15:6, "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him as righteousness". Christianity emphasized the first part of the verse, "He believed in the Lord", that is, the faith in Jesus is the essence, which is more important than the commandments. French commentators, however, emphasized the second part of the verse, "accounted it to him as righteousness", that is, keeping the commandments of the Torah is the essence, whereas faith in God is taken for granted. The conclusion from this is that in spite of the similar and at times even identical interpretation of Hieronymus and Chazal and the French commentators, the theological conclusions derived from this interpretation are different.

We do not intend to say that the commentators only intended to debate, but rather that in addition to interpreting the text, they were able to hide the polemic intent in their writings. This can be proven by the fact that their interpretations were sometimes used in religious debates. For example, in his interpretation of Genesis 1:1 Rashi asks: "Now for what reason did He commence with "In the beginning?", and in "Sefer Nizzahon Yashan" the author writes "why did God open his Torah with the words "in the beginning"?" in another example, the believer uses Rashi's claims in the story of Abraham and the angels. Another example is the use of recurring expressions which were used by French commentators in order to refute meanings that imply to the personification of God and his behavior. For example: 'the Torah spoke the language of men' (Rashi's and Radak's interpretations of Gen. 6:6).

For example: in Genesis 1:26, in creating man, "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness". The use of the verb in plural (let us make) helped Christians prove their faith in the Holy Trinity. Rashi therefore quotes the Midrash: Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the heretics to rebel, Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one. Had it been written: "I shall make man," we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself. And the refutation to the heretics is written alongside it [i.e., in the following verse:] "And God created," and it does not say, "and they created".

Another example is: The unity of God: one of the basic principles of Christian faith is the faith in the Holy Trinity, that is, that God is composed of three entities - the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. Here Rashi explicitly refutes the faith in the Holy Trinity, and adds that even though there is room to err, God still chose this ambiguous

wording in order to convey an important message – that a great man should consult and receive permission from a smaller one.

At times, Rashi interprets explicitly. In several interpretations he uses the term *minim* (heretics). This term precedes his time, and was used by Chazal to refer to heretics; Rashi uses this term to refer to Christians. At times, however, the reference is implied, and we should point out that when Rashi does not explicitly refer to Christian claims, it is difficult to prove that he had a polemic intent. However, the extensive use of certain claims, the choice of a certain Midrash that was not necessary for the interpretation, or the editing of the Midrash in a certain manner can all prove our claim, that Rashi did not only intend to simplistically interpret the Bible, but also added layers of Midrash and interpretation of his own, which stem from a polemic intent. This intent and these responses were necessary to Jews of his generation, who lived under the shadow of Christianity. One must remember that the Midrashim were written in an earlier period and against a different backdrop. There is a gap of centuries between the time of Chazal and the time of the French commentators. Some of the Midrashim were indeed written in Israel under Roman occupation, but Christianity was still persecuted at the time. In the middle ages, Christianity is already an established religion.

It is therefore natural that there will be differences between Chazal's interpretations and the French commentators' interpretations. This difference, explains the fact that the Midrashim Rashi chose, which seemed most fitting, were somewhat edited and changed, in both wording and content. He omitted some of the debates between the scholars, added and subtracted some words in order to adapt the text to the time and to different emphases. In the Midrashim, the tone and content are a lot more explicit and blunt than in the writings of French scholars, for obvious reasons.

Another example is the fact that they avoid criticizing the nation forefathers and defend them, unlike Christian commentary, which emphasized deficiencies in their actions. This stands in contradiction with the tendency to find deficiencies in characters of foreigners in the Bible, like Noah, Lot, Esau, Ishmael, and others.

In Paul's period, Christianity saw Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as its forefathers. Paul attempted to create a 'spiritual' connection between Christianity and the forefathers, as a substitute to the biological connection Judaism had with them. One would assume that the attempt to create a spiritual connection with the forefathers did not enable Christians to present them as sinners; if the forefathers are sinners, and are not perfect, then

Christianity cannot be an ideal, perfect faith. Therefore, Paul developed a different trend in Christian theology, which emphasizes the element of faith in Abraham, and the element of choice in Isaac and Jacob. He tried to establish a spiritual connection with the forefathers. This debate also affected the attitude of Chazal in the issue of the sins of the forefathers. The debate with Christianity presumably created a critical approach to the forefathers. Against the claim that the Jews sinned and God abandoned them, Chazal claimed that sin does not lead to the abandonment of God, seeing as the forefathers sinned and remained his chosen people. The influence of the Jewish-Christian polemic debate on Jewish commentary on the sins of the forefathers can be seen in the middle ages as well. French scholars of the 12<sup>th</sup> century were exposed to severe criticism of the forefathers from Christian clergymen. This reality obligated them to take an approach that contradicted Chazal, just as Christians changed their claims. Jews returned to apologetics and defended the nation forefathers. According to Origen, (185-254- was a scholar and early Christian theologian who was born and spent the first half of his career in Alexandria) Christianity presents the forefathers as they should be presented, whereas Judaism, with its literal interpretation, defames them. Origen is aware that the literal interpretation creates a problem to the characters of the forefathers, as they could not have acted in such manners, and therefore the allegorical interpretation is necessary.

There is no doubt that Rashi was a pioneer French commentator, who led the way for his followers in responding to Christian challenges. As difficult as it is to find polemic aspects in the explicit segments that were discussed, it is even more difficult to find an explicit reference to the Vulgate and to Christianity.

Although the word 'Christians' can be found only once, in Rashbam's interpretation of Genesis 49:10, expressions like 'and this to reply to the heretics', 'Edom', 'Esau', 'Nations', which all referred in Chazal's literature to the polemic debate with early Christianity, can be found in few interpretations of the French commentators. For obvious reasons, Rashi does not explicitly write that he refers to Christians.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, it is difficult not to see French commentators' works which dealt with this work, as having a polemical trend towards Christianity.

Although they did not expressly state their intentions and did not publicly announce them, the fact that their writings, were as censored in itself, indicates, its polemic

context. We know for instance that the printed version is not identical to the one Rashi himself wrote.

It is our conclusion that Rashi's initial aims were indeed purely interpretational. However, with the vicissitudes of his time he could not avoid incorporating polemic, pedagogical and other trends in a measurable, deliberate and implied manner. Rashi knew well how to hide his intentions, and had reasons to do so.

Our research here shows about Rashbam as well, that the conclusion is that indeed, he does not declare that his overall interpretational conception was written for polemic purposes, but his commentary of the Torah, both in its simplicity and in its overall interpretational approach, is an expression of his attempt to defend his people in debates with Christians. This is definitely assisted by the connection between his extreme adherence to the simplistic interpretation of the scripture and the needs of the religious debate. This can be seen in several places, where he binds together this tendency with the simplistic interpretation of the writing, as in "as a simplistic reading and an answer to the heretics", or "according to the customs of the land and to answer to the heretics". Another testimony can be found in his tendency to defend the acts of the forefathers from criticism.

In this paper we have shown that his approach regards the basic subjects that arose in the debates between Jews and Christians. We can say, with a fair amount of certainty, that Rashbam's commentary is deeply rooted in the historical reality of his time, that is, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance of Western Europe.

We also saw that despite the fact that Radak's commentary is based on a simplistic interpretation of the scripture, he does not avoid quoting Chazal's Midrashim that match his views and his polemic intent against Christianity, even when the text does not make this necessary. His interpretation is characterized by conciseness, relevance, in his fluent Spanish Hebrew, in his rationalistic and Scholastic approach, which is so close to our world. He had command of the language of the original (Hebrew) and its grammar, and presumably also knew Latin, as he could accurately point out the origin of errors in the Latin translation of the Bible.

We also learned that Hieronymus' Vulgate translation, in spite of his declaration to reliably adhere to the Hebrew original, was only faithful in most cases, and not in all. In spite of his command of Hebrew, at times Hieronymus had to use translational and grammatical tactics in order to convey the Christian theological message.

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