"Most of the World Believes in the Torah": Polemical and Irenical Statements in Genesis Commentaries

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In the middle ages, before the 1170s, Jews in Christian Europe tended not to write openly about Christianity.[1] As Israel Yuval, Eliezer Touitou, Shaye Cohen, and others have argued, some Jewish Bible commentators wrote an implied anti-Christian polemic in their Bible commentaries.[2] These studies

1. For a discussion of polemical literature written by Jews in Islamic lands, see Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007).

2. For a discussion of anti-Christian polemic in Rashbam and Bekhor Shor, see Eliezer Touitou, "The Exegetical Method of Rashbam in Light of the Historical Reality of his Time," in *Iyyunim be-Sifrut Hazal ba-Miqra u-ve-Toledot Yisrael*, eds. Y.D. Gilat, et al. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1982) and Sarah Kamin, "The Polemic Against Allegory in the Commentary of R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, "*Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1983–84): 367–92 [Hebrew]. On Rashi, see Elazar Touitou, "Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1–6 in the Context of Judeo-Christian Controversy," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61 (1990): 183. For an alternative

typically focus on how Jewish commentators might in their commentaries indirectly refute Christian claims, or how they might use stories about different Biblical characters as a way of talking about Jewish-Christian relations. Israel Yuval's *Two Nations in thy Womb*,[3] for example, takes as its central image the Biblical struggle between Jacob and Esau and the way Jewish commentators often saw this struggle as a metaphor for the struggle between medieval Jews and Christians over the question of who is still the chosen people. My own book *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*[4] takes a similar look at how Rashi and the *Glossa Ordinaria* interpret the conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, and how each interpret that conflict in a way that sets them up as chosen by God, against the other. These works use the technique of decoding coded narrative: the use of coded non-Jewish figures for polemical purposes. Instead of writing openly about Christianity, or in similar cases about Islam, Jews might write about Esau, or Ishmael.

On examination of these stories, though, these pictures of the other are not entirely polemical. There are more positive ways that Jews and Christians wrote about each other, some implied rather than explicit. These positive statements can provide a resource for contemporary thinking about Jewish-Christian relations as well as nuance our understanding of medieval Jewish attitudes towards Christianity. One fascinating, evocative example is the twelfth-century Jewish commentator David Kimchi's interpretation of the purpose behind the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Like most medieval commentators,[5] he rejects the idea that it was a test in the sense that God needed to find out what Abraham would do, since of course God knows everything, and like many medieval commentators he preferred the idea that it was God demonstrating Abraham's greatness to other people. As opposed to other commentators who saw that the demonstration was for Abraham himself or for people of his time,

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approach, see Shaye Cohen, "Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation*eds. Hindy Najman & Judith H. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2004) 449–472.

3. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
4. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
5. Ramban makes the case particularly strongly.

Kimhi argues that it was to show Abraham's greatness to all the people in subsequent generations who would read this story in the Bible. As he writes:

והאמת כי הנסיון הזה להראות לבני עולם אהבת אברהם השלמה, ולא נעשה לאותם הדורות אלא לדורות הבאים המאמינים בתורה שכתב משה רבינו מפי האל ובספוריה שיראו עד היכן הגיע אהבת אברהם לאל; וילמדו ממנה לאהבה את ה' בכל לבבם ובכל נפשם.

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ובאמת קודם שנכתבה התורה וספוריה היה הדבר הגדול הזה מסור לזרע אברהם יצחק ויעקב כי יצחק מסר ליעקב ויעקב לבניו, ואחר שנכתבה התורה לבני יעקב נתפרסם הדבר בעולם יש מאמינים ויש שאינם מאמינים. והיום כמה שנים מיום שבטלה עבודת הצלמים והאלילים מאמינים רוב העולם בתורת משה רבינו ובספוריה, אלא שחולקים עלינו על המצות, שאומרים כי דרך משל נאמרו. ובהאמין רוב בני העולם הספור הגדול הזה הוא עדות גדולה על אברהם אבינו שהיה אוהב האל אהבה שלמה ותמה וראוי לאדם ללמוד הימנו דרך אהבתו.

And the truth is that this test was to make known to the people of the world Abraham's complete love for God, and was not done for that generation but rather for future generations who believe in the Torah that Moses our teacher wrote by God's word, and in its stories, that they will see to what extent Abraham loved God and will learn from it to love God with all their hearts and with all their souls.

…

And truly, before the Torah and its stories were written down this great thing was passed on to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because Isaac told it to Jacob and Jacob to his children, and after the Torah was written for the children of Jacob the thing was made known in the world, and there were those who believed and those who did not believe. Today, some years after the worship of idols and statues has been abolished, most of the world believes in the Torah of Moses our teacher and in its stories. They only disagree with us about the commandments in that they say that they were given to us by way of parable. And the belief of most of the world in this great story is a great proof of Abraham, that he loved God with a whole and overwhelming love, and a person should learn from him the way of his love. (Kimhi on Genesis 22:1)

When he writes that 'most of the world' believes in the Torah and its stories, he is clearly speaking out of a context, twelfth century Provence, in which 'most of the world' of which he would be aware is Christian. Second, he completely accepts that Christians see Abraham as a teacher of faith and learn from him to love God. Not only that, but to him God's purpose in the near-sacrifice of Isaac was not only to teach faith to Jews but to teach faith to Christians as well. Finally, he sees the way Jews read the Bible and the way Christians read the Bible as not that different from one another. The principle

difference is that Christians read the laws of the Torah as a parable, *al derekh mashal*. He presents Jewish-Christian difference as a kind of reasonable difference of opinion, a matter of simple difference in application of hermeneutical strategies. In any case Abraham is an example of faith for everyone.

Comments like this are what I would like to call irenical statements or irenical interpretations. If polemical interpretations are retelling of biblical stories in ways that reject the claims of another religion, irenical interpretations, in contrast, are interpretations that make room for another religion and its reality in its retelling of biblical stories. Like polemical interpretations, irenical interpretations can be explicit or implicit. Just as there is a wide range of kinds of polemics, ranging from simple argument and refutation to complete dehumanization and demonization, so too irenical comments can differ in intensity as well from full-scale legitimation of another community to statements that there might be some good in them.

Sometimes the same author will write both polemical and irenical exegesis. David Kimhi also wrote commentaries elsewhere that are clearly intended to refute Christian claims. For example, in his commentary on Psalms 2:7, "The Lord said to me, 'You are My son: This day I have given birth to you.'" Kimhi writes:

רד"ק תהלים פרק ב פסוק ז
. כלומר: המלך הזה לי הוא, ובני
הוא ועבדי הוא, ושומע אלי. כי כל
מי ששומע לעבודת האל יִקָּרֵא בנו,
כמו שהבן שומע אל האב ומזומן
לעבודתו. וכן בנים אתם לה'
אלהיכם (דברים יד, א), אני אהיה
לו לאב והוא יהיה לי לבן (ש"ב ז,
יד), ואמר: בני אל חי (הושע ב, א).

It is as though to say, "This king is Mine and he is My son and servant and obeys Me" — for everyone who is obedient in the service of God He calls His son, just as a son obeys his father and is ready for his service. And so (in the verse) "ye are sons of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1), and "I will be his Father and he shall be My son" (2 Sam. 7:14); and it says (Hos. 2:1), "the sons of the living God."

Here Kimhi uses comparison with other biblical passages to present an argument that this passage in Psalms does not refer to Jesus but can refer to any human king, or to anyone who serves God. As in the above passage, he does not explicitly refer to Christianity or Christian exegesis, but it is clear that he is responding to it here and presenting an alternative. Irenic and polemical exegetical moves, then, do not necessarily contradict with each other. Kimhi can argue that Christians misinterpret Psalm 2 while at the same time appreciating their correct understanding of Abraham's example of faith.

In interpretations of Genesis, Jewish commentators will sometimes use these stories to think about Jewish-Christian relations. Here I will consider three ways in which this happens:

1. Statements about 'the nations', made by commentators who lived in predominantly Christian countries, and in particular statements about 'nations in our time' or 'the nations around us', which make it absolutely clear that they are talking about Christians.
2. Interpretations of characters who are regarded by exegetes as symbolic ancestors of the Christian world. The most obvious example of this would be Esau, who was in midrashic literature often used as a stand-in for Rome. In medieval times Esau became the coded way that Jews spoke about Christians and Christianity. Esau is a very complex character in medieval Jewish commentaries, often portrayed as one of the worst villains but sometimes as righteous, or even, as we will see, as the father of prophets.
3. Interpretation of characters who are coded as non-Jewish or generically human, done by interpreters who are living in a Christian society. A key example would be Noah, who made the covenant with God that is understood by Jewish commentaries to be the universalistic covenant, the covenant that applies to all nations, and therefore is the example of a righteous person outside of the particular Jewish covenant. Midrashic and medieval commentaries struggle with Noah's righteousness, and compare his virtue to that of Abraham.

Because so much attention has been paid to rabbinic polemics against Noah and Esau,[6] it is revealing to see the positive tropes in the rabbinic encounter with these figures. These motifs suggest some positive models that Jews could use to think about Christianity in the middle ages.

Noah

Noah is, as the patriarch of the only family to have survived the flood, the

6. For rabbinic polemics around Esau, see Carol Bakhos, "Figuring out Esau. The Rabbis and Their Others," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58:2 (2007): 250–262, and Gerhard Langer, "'Brother Esau?' Esau in Rabbinic Midrash" in *Encounters of the Children of Abraham from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed.s Antti Laato and Pekka Lindqvist (Leiden:Brill, 2010).

ancestor of all humans. In Rabbinic thought God made a covenant with Noah that is separate from God's covenant with Abraham. Since non-Jews are not included in the covenant with Abraham, for them the primary covenant is that with Noah. *Sanhedrin* 56a-57a outlines seven laws given to Noah:

תנו רבנן שבע מצות נצטוו בני נח דינין וברכת השם ע"ז גילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים וגזל ואבר מן החי.	Our Rabbis taught: Seven commandments were given to the children of Noah: Laws, cursing God, idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, murder, theft, and eating the limb of a living animal.[7]

These seven laws of Noah are the basis for the rabbinic idea that Jews do not have an exclusive monopoly on righteousness. According to the *Tosefta* in *Sanhedrin* 13:2, the righteous of the Gentiles have a share in the world to come, and following these laws would make a Gentile righteous.

Noah himself, as a character, is another location for rabbis to think about the actual or potential goodness of non-Jews. In *Genesis Rabbah* 30:4, the repetition of Noah's name shows that he is righteous, because it is parallel to God's repetition of Abraham's name when he calls him. The *midrash* then raises the objection that, if this is the case, Terah the father of Abraham would also be considered righteous (Genesis 11:27) and concludes that yes, Genesis 15:15 indicates that both Terach and Ishmael are righteous: Terach because Abraham is told that in death he will go to his fathers (so he and his father must be in the same place), and Ishmael because Abraham is told that his old age would be good, indicating that Ishmael would repent.

Genesis Rabbah frequently compares Noah to Job. To the Rabbis, they are parallel figures. Both are righteous non-Jews, and both saw their worlds destroyed. *Genesis Rabbah* 26:7 sets out that the descriptions of the wicked in the book of Job are about the generation of the flood, and the rabbis then use the book of Job consistently and frequently as an intertext to shed light on the flood story. Quotes from Job are brought in as parallels eighteen times in the Noah story[8], to illuminate Noah's virtue and the destruction of the flood as well as the wickedness that brought it on. Noah also has similarities to Moses, as a parallel leader of his people (*Genesis Rabbah* 32:3). According to

7. This discussion also appears in *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 8:4 and *Genesis Rabbah* 34:8.
8. *Genesis Rabbah* 26:7, 27:3, 28:1, 28:7, 28:8, 29:1, 29:2, 29:7, 31:1, 31:4, 31:5, 31:6, 31:12, 31:13, 33:5, 34:7, 36:1, 36:2.

Genesis Rabbah, Noah warned his generation that the flood was coming to try to bring them to repentance, and did so out of his own initiative, even though he was mocked by his contemporaries, building the ark by day so that people would know the threat was serious (*Genesis Rabbah* 32:8). He did this for 120 years — the length of the life of Moses (*Genesis Rabbah* 30:7).

Genesis Rabbah also compares Noah with Abraham. Like Abraham, Noah was tested by God. *Genesis Rabbah*'s discussion of Noah being tested is nearly word for word identical with its discussion of Abraham's test in the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:

כְּתִיב ה' צַדִּיק יִבְחָן וְרָשָׁע וְאוֹהֵב חָמָס שָׂנְאָה נַפְשׁוֹ (תהלים יא, ה): אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן הַיּוֹצֵר הַזֶּה אֵינוֹ בּוֹדֵק קַנְקַנִּים מְרוֹעָעִים, שֶׁאֵינוֹ מַסְפִּיק לָקוּשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם אַחַת עַד שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹבְרָם, וּמִי הוּא בּוֹדֵק בְּקַנְקַנִּים יָפִים, אֲפִלּוּ מַקִּישׁ עֲלֵיהֶם כַּמָּה פְעָמִים אֵינָם נִשְׁבָּרִים, כָּךְ אֵין הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְנַסֶּה אֶת הָרְשָׁעִים אֶלָּא אֶת הַצַּדִּיקִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ה' צַדִּיק יִבְחָן, וּכְתִיב (בראשית כב, א): וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם, אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בֶּן חֲנִינָה הַפִּשְׁתָּנִי הַזֶּה בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהַפִּשְׁתָּן שֶׁלּוֹ יָפָה כָּל שֶׁהוּא כּוֹתְשָׁהּ הֵיא מִשְׁתַּבַּחַת וְכָל זְמַן שֶׁהוּא מַקִּישׁ עָלֶיהָ הֵיא מִשְׁתַּפֶּנֶת, וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהַפִּשְׁתָּן שֶׁלּוֹ רָעָה, אֵינוֹ מַסְפִּיק לָקוּשׁ עָלֶיהָ אַחַת עַד שֶׁהֵיא פּוֹקַעַת, כָּךְ אֵין הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְנַסֶּה אֶת הָרְשָׁעִים אֶלָּא אֶת הַצַּדִּיקִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ה' צַדִּיק יִבְחָן, אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר מָשָׁל לְבַעַל הַבַּיִת שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ שְׁתֵּי פָּרוֹת אַחַת כֹּחָהּ יָפֶה וְאַחַת כֹּחָהּ רַע, עַל מִי הוּא נוֹתֵן אֶת הָעֹל לֹא עַל זֹאת שֶׁכֹּחָהּ יָפֶה, כָּךְ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מְנַסֶּה אֶת הַצַּדִּיקִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ה' צַדִּיק יִבְחָן, ה' צַדִּיק יִבְחָן זֶה נֹחַ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לְנֹחַ

It is written, "God tests the righteous, and the wicked and lover of violence His soul hates" (Psalms 11:5). Rabbi Yochanan said, this potter does not check damaged vessels, that it is not possible to hit them once without breaking them, instead he hits good vessels, that he can hit many times without them breaking. Thus God does not test the wicked, only the righteous, as it is written, "God tests the righteous", and it is written "God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). Rabbi Yosi ben Hanina said, when this flax worker knows that his flax is good, it improves when he beats it and shines when he hits it. When he knows that his flax is bad, he is unable to hit it even once before it breaks. Thus God does not test the wicked but only the righteous, as it is written, "God tests the righteous". Rabbi Eliezer said: this is like an owner who had two oxen, one strong and one weak, he places the yoke on the one that is strong. Thus God tests the righteous, as it is written "God tests the righteous."
"God tests the righteous" — this refers to Noah, as it is written, "God said to Noah." (Genesis 7:1)

This is nearly word for word identical with *Genesis Rabbah* 55:2 and the beginning of 55:3, with the only changes being replacing 'Abraham' for 'Noah' and Genesis 22:1 for Genesis 7:1.

Not all the comparisons with Moses and Abraham are completely positive. Genesis Rabbah 30:9 asks the question: was Noah righteous only in comparison to his wicked generation, or would he have been considered righteous even by the standards of a righteous generation? The matter is left open to debate:

בְּדוֹרָתָיו, רַבִּי יְהוּדָה וְרַבִּי נְחֶמְיָה, רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אָמַר בְּדוֹרָתָיו הָיָה צַדִּיק, הָא אִלּוּ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה אוֹ בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל לֹא הָיָה צַדִּיק. בְּשׁוּק סְמַיָּא צָוְחִין לַעֲוִירָא סַגֵּי נְהוֹר, מָשָׁל לְאֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ מַרְתֵּף אֶחָד שֶׁל יַיִן, פָּתַח חָבִית אַחַת וּמְצָאָהּ שֶׁל חֹמֶץ, שְׁנָיָה כֵּן, שְׁלִישִׁית וּמְצָאָהּ קוֹסֶס, אָמְרִין לֵיהּ קוֹסֶס הוּא, אֲמַר לְהוֹן וְאִית הָכָא טַב מִינָּהּ, אָמְרוּ לֵיהּ לָא. כָּךְ בְּדוֹרָתָיו הָיָה צַדִּיק הָא אִלּוּ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה אוֹ בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל לֹא הָיָה צַדִּיק. רַבִּי נְחֶמְיָה אָמַר וּמָה אִם בְּדוֹרָתָיו הָיָה צַדִּיק, אִלּוּ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה אוֹ בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה, מָשָׁל לְצָלוֹחִית שֶׁל אֲפָרְסְמוֹן מֻקֶּפֶת צְמִיד פָּתִיל, וּמֻנַּחַת בֵּין הַקְּבָרוֹת, וְהָיָה רֵיחָהּ נוֹדֵף, וְאִלּוּ הָיָה חוּץ לַקְּבָרוֹת עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה.

"In his generations." Rabbi Yehudah said, in his generation he was righteous, but if he had lived in the generation of Moses or Samuel he would not have been righteous. In the street of the blind the one-eyed is called sighted. This is like one who had a wine cellar, he opened one barrel and found vinegar, then a second likewise, and a third was going off. They said to him, "This wine is spoiling!" He replied, "Is there anything better?" They said, "No."
Rabbi Nehemiah said, in his generation he was righteous, if he had lived in the generation of Moses or Samuel he would have been even more so. This is like something fragrant left in a graveyard, and it still smells good, if it were left outside of the graveyard it would smell even better.

It is not entirely clear that *Genesis Rabbah* sees Noah as outside the Jewish people and as an example of non-Jewish righteousness. In *Genesis Rabbah* 32:5, there is a debate about the nature of the sin of the generation of the flood:

אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאי הֵן עָבְרוּ עַל הַתּוֹרָה שֶׁנִּתְּנָה לְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, לְפִיכָךְ (בראשית ז, ד): אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לָיְלָה. אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי הֵם קִלְקְלוּ אֶת הַצּוּרָה שֶׁנִּתְּנָה לְאַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, לְפִיכָךְ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לָיְלָה. (בראשית ז, ד):

Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai said, they transgressed the Torah which was given at forty days. Therefore "forty days and forty nights" (Genesis 7:4). Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai said, they corrupted the human form that was shaped at forty days, Therefore "forty days and forty nights" (Genesis 7:4).

There are two alternatives here, one in which the sin of the flood was in their violation of the Torah, which assumes that they in some sense had it, and the other is that their sin was in corrupting their human nature. The first seems to assume that the Torah is in some sense necessary for all peoples, the other

imagines that it is possible to be virtuous simply by behaving in accordance with human nature.

Not all midrashic collections are so positive in their approaches to Noah, and in *Midrash Tanchuma* Noah is a much more ambiguous figure. It is critical of Noah in suggesting that, of the seventy nations that were descended from Noah, none took his name (Noah 2), and it criticizes Noah's decision to grow grapes and drink wine (Noah 13). He is less righteous than his son Shem, who is specifically seen as proto-Jewish and a Torah scholar, and because Shem was more righteous he was the one to offer the sacrifices (Noah 9). On the other hand, Noah is described as being like other virtuous figures in biblical history, David, Isaiah, and Job and Daniel's comrades Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego (Noah 10 and 11).

Rashi's attitude towards Noah is generally positive and closer to that of *Genesis Rabbah* than to that of *Midrash Tanchuma*. In his comment on 6:9 he quotes both opinions from the *midrash*, that Noah was only righteous compared to his generation (and not compared to Abraham) and that Noah is objectively righteous and would have been even more righteous in a more righteous generation.[9] He also compares Noah negatively to Abraham, by observing that God walked with Noah, indicating that Noah needed God's support, but Genesis 24:40 says of Abraham that he walked before God, indicating that he was righteous even without God's help.

Despite this, Rashi considers Noah righteous. He applies Prov. 10:7 to Noah, considering him a righteous man whose memory is for a blessing, and whose true offspring are his good deeds.

Unlike Rashi, the fifteenth-century Italian exegete Seforno considers Noah completely righteous and rejects the idea that Noah could have done better. As he writes on Genesis 6:9, "Noah walked with God. He walked in His ways, doing good to others and reproving his contemporaries, as our Sages tell us."[10] On the other hand, his household was not. As Seforno writes, "For it is you that I have seen to be righteous: You, not your household, nevertheless you and all your household I will save for your sake." (Seforno on Genesis 7:1)

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9. In *Genesis Rabbah* this passage places Noah in the generations of Moses and Samuel, while Rashi places him in the generation of Abraham.
10. Seforno cites as a source here Berossus the Chaldean, a Hellenistic Babylonian historian from the 3rd century BCE. This indicates, for Seforno, that Noah is a figure of universal history.

Noah is generically non-Jewish, rather than particularly Christian, and he is only relevant here because, to medieval Jewish commentators living in a Christian world, the generic non-Jew is Christian. Christian exegesis, though, does associate him with Christianity. The second-century Christian theologian Justin Martyr, who wrote one of the first anti-Jewish polemics in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, uses Noah as biblical evidence that one can be a good person without observing food laws and circumcision (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 92). Although Justin is writing polemically, his argument is parallel to that of the rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* who saw Noah as perfectly virtuous, and the possibility that the generation of the flood could have been righteous just by living according to their 'human features'. Justin also presents Noah as a type of Christ (*Trypho*, chapter 138).

Esau

Esau is more particularly Christian to Jewish exegetes. He is also a much more problematic character. In early Rabbinic exegesis, starting from the second century, Esau is associated with Rome, that is, pagan Rome. As *Genesis Rabbah* puts it, when Isaac promises Esau "the fat places of the earth" in Genesis 27:39, this refers to Italy (*Genesis Rabbah* 67:6). In the medieval commentaries, the association of Esau with Rome continued. Rashi repeats *Genesis Rabbah's* identification of the place promised to Esau with 'the Italy of Greece', that is Rome (Rashi on Genesis 27:39). Starting from the fourth century, however, Rome was associated with Christianity, and in continuing to associate Esau and Rome, Jewish exegetes from the middle ages associate Esau with Christianity as well. In contrast, Christian exegetes such as Ambrose of Milan tended to associate Christianity with Jacob and Judaism with Esau.[11]

Medieval Jewish exegetes saw the relationship between Jacob and Esau as having relevance to their own times. For example, the thirteenth century exegete Nahmanides wrote in his introduction to Genesis 32, "Everything that occurred between our father and his brother Esau will occur always to us [in our relations] with Esau's sons." That is, he saw the relationship between Jacob and Esau as reflecting the relationship that evolved between Judaism and Christianity. For him this was an example of the principle that מעשה אבות סימן לבנים, that the deeds of ancestors are reflected in their descendants.

11. Yuval, *Two Nations*, 19.

Ibn Ezra takes a more nuanced approach. To him, Jews in Christian lands were not exactly under the rule of Edomites, since there is no genealogical connection between Edom and the kingdoms of Europe. Rather, as he explains, the Edomites were the first believers in the truth of Christianity, and they taught it to Constantine, who made it the religion of Rome, and that is the reason for the association of Christianity with Edom.[12]

Most medieval commentaries take a negative approach to Esau. Rashi writes, for example, that Esau deceived his father by pretending extreme piety when he was in reality a notorious sinner. But there are also more positive ideas about Esau, sometimes in the same commentaries. For example, even Rashi, who normally writes very negatively about Esau, writes on Genesis 17:6 that the meaning of the prophecy that Abraham will be the father of many nations is Abraham will be the ancestor of the people that will descend from Isaac, and also the ancestor of the people that will descend from Esau. The descendants of Esau were also prophesied and announced by God to Abraham.

One writer who writes Esau in a more consistently positive way is the twelfth century French Jewish bible commentator Rashbam (Rabbi Solomon ben Meir), who may have been in conversation with Christian exegetes from the school of St. Victor.[13] When Esau comes to meet Jacob with 400 men in Genesis 32:7, Rashbam writes that, although Jacob was afraid that Esau was threatening him, the four hundred people were really there to honor him, because Esau loved Jacob despite everything and was happy that he had returned. Given that the last time Esau had seen Jacob was when Jacob had deceived his father to take the blessing, the picture we get here of Esau is one who values family so much that he is willing to move past discord and conflict.

Elsewhere, Rashbam connects Esau explicitly to Christianity. When Esau is born he is covered in a hairy mantle (אדרת שער), and Rashbam explains that this is like the hair-shirts worn by priests. So Rashbam both described Esau in positive terms and connects him explicitly to Christianity.[14]

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12. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 27:40. This comment is absent in some printed editions but is present in the *Vat. Ebr.* 38 manuscript. (Strickman & Silver, 271)
13. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 155–6.
14. Rashbam's term for Christians here is התועים, those who err. So even though he sees Esau in more positive terms, and associates him with Christianity, this clearly does not indicate agreement with Christian teaching.

One exegete who completely exonerates Esau from any wrongdoing is the 11–12th century poet and exegete Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra's Esau endangered his life daily, hunting to bring food for his poverty-stricken[15] family. He had no use for the birthright — that is, the double inheritance given to the firstborn — because the dangers of hunting left him with no expectation that he would outlive his father and in any case there was nothing to inherit (Ibn Ezra on Genesis 26: 31 and 34). When Esau and Jacob reunite, Ibn Ezra's Esau has only good intentions towards Jacob, the proof being that he weeps like Joseph will when reunited with his brothers in Genesis 45:15 (Ibn Ezra on Genesis 33:4). This comparison of Esau with Joseph situates him firmly as a good, if complex, character who is an important part of Jacob's family.

Ibn Ezra notes the parallels between Jacob and Esau. He states that they were buried on the same day, and he interprets Esau's marriage to a relative in Genesis 28:6–9 as a response to Isaac's command to Jacob, which Esau saw as directed at both of them.

Another positive perspective on Esau's influence is through one of his sons, Eliphaz, who is mentioned in the genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36:10–12. Eliphaz is, by coincidence, also the name of one of Job's three friends in the book of Job. To the Targum Yonatan, written in the eighth century or somewhat later, the coincidence of names indicates that it is the same person, that Eliphaz of the book of Job was in fact Esau's son (Targum Yonatan on Genesis 36:12). Eliphaz in the book of Job is presented as a wise and thoughtful person, if perhaps over-eager to assert that suffering is a result of sin. In the Talmud he is far more than that. According to the Talmud in *Bava Batra* 5b he's one of the seven prophets of the nations. The evidence for this is given in *Bava Batra* 16b, which explains that since Job's friends arrived immediately they must have known of his suffering through prophecy.[16]

The idea of Eliphaz as a righteous ancestor of Rome is picked up by the fifteenth century Spanish-Jewish exegete Abarbanel, who was the treasurer of King Alphonso of Portugal and then worked for Queen Isabella of Castile and coordinated provisions for her armies, although despite his value to the

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15. Ibn Ezra imagines Isaac's family as poor in his old age, despite all Abraham's wealth and the flocks that Isaac had in his youth. For more on Ibn Ezra's interpretation of Esau, see Reuben Aharoni, "Why Did Esau Spurn the Birthright? A Study in Biblical Interpretation," *Judaism* 29:3 (Summer 1980): 323–331.
16. This story also appears in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:2.

monarchs he was not able to prevent the expulsion of Jews from Spain. He also was in conversation with Christian exegetes about biblical interpretation and in one particular case he takes the unusual step of saying that he finds their explanations more convincing than rabbinic interpretation. He writes on his commentary on Genesis 10:1:

ואמנם בני יפת שמהם באו היונים והרומיים מה נאים מעשיהם של אומה זו ומנהגם ומדיניות' ואופני הנהגתם ובגבורתיהם וכלם יפי תאר ויפי מראה צחו מחלב אדמו עצם מפנינים ...

The children of Japeth, that from him come the Greeks and the Romans, how pleasant are the deeds of this people and their customs and their countries and their ways of being and their heroism, and all of them are beautiful, "their faces are whiter then milk, their bones ruddier than rubies" (Lamentations 4:7)…

ואמנם בני עשו הם אשר הביאו החכמות לרומיים וליונים בני יפת כאשר מלך עליהם צפו בן אליפז וזרעו אשר חכמו מאד מאד בחכמת האצטגנינות ובשאר החכמות ומפני זה לא נמצאו החכמות באומות אחרות מבני יפת זולתי באלה השתים יונים ורומיים אשר בזמן ההוא היו לעם אחד ושפה אחת היתה לכלם.

It is the children of Esau who brought wisdom to the Romans and Greeks of the children of Japheth, when Tzepho son of Eliphaz and his descendants ruled over them, who were very very wise in astrology and all forms of wisdom, and because of this you will not find wisdom in any other nation of the children of Japheth other than those two, the Greeks and the Romans, who in that day were one nation with one language. (I Kings 8, reply to the sixth question)

Abarbanel thus completely transforms the association between Rome, and by extension Christian Europe, and Edom. Instead of a sinful father begetting a sinful nation, a wise, prophetic leader founded the wisest nation on Earth.

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno used pilgrimage imagery in his understanding of the relationship between Jacob and Esau. The only time in his interpretation of Genesis that he describes a patriarch as going on a pilgrimage to a sacred site is Jacob in his meeting with Esau, when Jacob is returning from exile and goes to meet Esau with gifts. Seforno writes on Genesis 32:21:

"I will face him." This is the accepted manner of appearing before lords, as we find "all your males will appear before the Lord…and none shall appear before the Lord empty-handed." (Exodus 34:23 and 20) Thus he says to Esau after this, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10), since the custom when visiting lords is to bring them gifts.

אראה פניו דרך הבקור הראוי לשרים כענין יראה כל זכורך את פני האדון. ולא יראו פני ריקם. וכן אמר לעשו אחר כך כי על כן ראיתי פניך כראות פני אלהים. כי המנהג לפקוד את השרים במנחה עם ראיית פניהם:

Jacob related to Esau as we are commanded to relate to God during pilgrimage, which is also how it is appropriate for us to relate to princes.

Esau, to Seforno, is representative of the non-Jewish, presumably Christian, other. In his commentary on Genesis 25:23, Seforno writes that the reason that Jacob and Esau struggled in Rebecca's womb is "because they are destined to become two nations with opposing ideas about religion" (נבדלים בדת). In his commentary on Genesis 33:4 Seforno writes that we are obligated to relate to "Esau" while in exile with submission and gifts, and if the Jews had related to the Roman conquerors this way the Temple would not have been destroyed.

To Seforno, not only is it right for Jacob to submit to Esau, it is what Isaac intended from the start. Seforno interprets that Isaac's intention was to give Esau the blessing that he should rule over his brother. If Esau were taking care of the responsibility of rule, Jacob could have time for Torah study. And as Seforno writes in his comment on Genesis 27:20, it would be better for Jacob to be under the rule of his brother than that of any other nation. The interesting implication here is that the submission of Jews to Christian rulers in Europe not only isn't tragic, it's what should have happened all along.

David Kimhi finds a similar interpretation of Genesis 25:23, where Rebecca is given the prophecy that of her two children '*rav yaavod tzair*', the older will serve the younger. The most usual translation of this is that Esau will serve Jacob. David Kimhi, however, points out that if you read it as poetry the meaning could in fact be the opposite: the older, the younger will serve him. In other words, that Jacob will serve Esau.

Despite the prevailing negative treatment, there is one positive tradition about Esau that is very common, even in commentaries that generally write about him extremely negatively, and that is that he excelled in how he fulfilled the commandment of honoring his father. In the tenth century *midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:15, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says that even though

he had himself honored his father more than anyone, Esau honored his father even more, as Esau would dress in fine clothes to visit his father.

This idea appears even in commentaries that overwhelmingly interpret Esau in negative terms. Jacob ben Asher, also known as Ba'al ha-Turim (13–14th century, Germany and Spain), wrote one of the harshest medieval interpretations of Esau, describing him as an idolater and as the ancestor of Rome who was responsible for the destruction of the Temple. But, even in this interpretation, Esau did have the virtue of honoring his father. On Deuteronomy 2:5, which states that God gave Mt. Seir to the descendants of Esau he writes that this is בשביל מצות כיבוד, that God granted the Mt Seir to Esau's descendants "because he fulfilled the mitzvah of honoring (his father)." Even the *Zohar*, the thirteenth century work of mystical biblical interpretation whose take on Esau is generally very strongly negative, speaks powerfully of Esau's respect for his father. In its interpretation of Genesis 27:34 it writes:

פתח רבי ייסא ואמר (מלאכי א:ו) בן יכבד אב ועבד אדוניו, בן, דא עשו. דלא הוה בר נש בעלמא דיוקיר לאבוי, כמה דאוקיר עשו לאבוי. וההוא יקירו דאוקיר ליה אשליט ליה בהאי עלמא.

Rabbi Yisa said,, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master" (Malachi 1:6). "A son" is Esau, for there was no person in the whole world who honored his father as Esau did, the honor with which he honored him caused him to rule this world. (*Zohar Toldot* 146:4)

Although Esau is otherwise despicable, his virtue in honoring his father was rewarded by his descendants having power in this world.

I call statements like these, that contrast with polemical statements, irenical because they are interpretations that are about making peace, in this case making peace with the reality that Jews are in a situation of being a minority in exile under someone else's rule. At least Esau has this one virtue, that he honors his father, and because of that his rule over the world is not completely undeserved.

This paper focuses on two particular examples in Genesis, Noah and Esau, but other key examples of righteous characters who are not Jewish include Jethro and Job. Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, is a priest of Midian. Some commentators attempt to turn him Jewish by explaining that he converted when he joined Moses before Sinai, but to others he is an example of a righteous

non-Jew who is a fellow traveller with the Jewish people.[17] Also importantly, Job who lived in the land of Utz is understood by many commentators as being not Jewish and also as having nothing to do with the Jewish people.[18] He worships in a not particularly Jewish way, offers sacrifices outside the Temple even though his story is being written fairly late, and when Job in his speeches gives examples of suffering in the world, none have anything to do with Jewish suffering, so it seems logical to conclude that Job was a non-Jewish character and most commentators interpret him that way. And yet he is the example of the most righteous person who ever lived.

Interpretation of characters who are coded as non-Jewish, or specifically as Christian, can be a powerful way of thinking about what it means to be a Jew in a predominantly Christian society. We can use some of the same techniques that have been used to find Jewish anti-Christian polemical statements in commentaries on Genesis to also find Jewish pro-Christian irenical statements. Just as there are Jewish commentaries that speak disparagingly of the nations around them, there are those that consider them extraordinarily wise, to have learned from the example of Abraham and to have their own prophets. Just as negative interpretations of Esau were sometimes a way for Jews to talk about the hostility between them and the Christians around them, positive interpretations of Esau could be a way of seeing the good in where they find themselves. These different ways of thinking about characters open up possibilities for thinking about Jewish-Christian relations, in medieval times and in the present, in more complex and more positive ways.

17. Commentators who read him as a convert include Rashi and Ramban in their comments on Exodus 2:16 and 18:1 and Seforno on Exodus 18:12. Jethro's conversion, if it happens, takes place either before or after *Matan Torah*, and commentators all read him as a righteous person prior to this when Moses marries his daughter.

18. For example, Maimonides writes in *Iggerot HaRambam*, *Iggeret Teiman* 68, that Job, Zophar, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Elihu are all considered prophets and are non-Jews.