“Israel Has No Messiah” in Late Medieval Spain

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Rabbinic messianic dicta presented medieval Jewish scholars with unique problems and special opportunities. Like other non-legal exegetical (midrashic) and non-exegetical (aggadic) rabbinic pronouncements, these dicta could seem bizarre or irrational when taken literally. And like these others, messianic midrashim and aggadot were open to textual manipulations which could transmute their meanings and point them in new directions. Unlike other such sayings, however, messianic midrashic and aggadic dicta were, from around the mid-thirteenth century, invoked by Christian missionaries to prove the truth of teachings of Christianity. At the same time, they served as a basis upon which various post-rabbinic Jewish savants tried to “calculate” the time of the (in their mind) true Messiah’s coming. Finally, a


2 This innovation in Christian anti-Jewish polemic has been traced to the twelfth-century Alan of Lille (Amos Funkenstein, “Ha-temurot ba-viqqula sh-ben yehudim le-no~erim ba-me’ah ha-shtem eretz,” Ziqo 35 [1968]: 141–42). For a similar tendency in an early thirteenth-century Spanish anti-Jewish polemicist seemingly influenced by Alan, see Lucy Kristina Pick, “Christians and Jews in Thirteenth-Century Castile: The Career and Writings of Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada, Archbishop of Toledo (1209-1247),” (Ph. D. diss., University of Toronto, 1995), p. 214 (and for Alan’s likely influence on Roderigo pp. 167–70, 184). These precursors notwithstanding, it was not until the mid-thirteenth century that argumentation using christological interpretations of rabbinic texts became a staple of the Christian attack, the most famous case being Pablo Christiani’s deployment thereof at the 1263 “disputation of Barcelona.” See on this and related developments Jeremy Cohen, The Friscos and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Robert Chazan, Daggers of Faith: thirteenth-century Christian missionarying and Jewish response (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); idem, Burhinos and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

3 For various medieval efforts in this direction, see Abba Hillel Silver, A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel: From the First through the Seventeenth Centuries (1927; reprint with a new preface by the author, New York: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 36–150.
challenge which, more than their non-eschatological counterparts, messianic midrashim and aggadot posed to medieval thinkers was the difficulty of eliciting from them a unified and coherent rabbinic stance towards crucial questions concerning the "how" "when" and "why" of Israel's redemption. In the words of Ephraim E. Urbach:

Possibly in this sphere, more than in regard to any other theme, there is evident the independent approach of the Sages, which finds expression in a variety of views and conceptions. At times this diversity leads to differences of opinion and reaches down to fundamentals. It is not confined to divergences within the framework of the generally accepted system of concepts, but reaches antitheses that imply the complete negation of one doctrine by the other. Needless to say there are also not wanting intermediate and harmonizing attitudes.

Efforts by medieval Jews to interpret rabbinic messianic sayings must be understood within several contexts, then, the most important being the diverse and manifold forces that generally shaped interest in and approaches to rabbinic Judaism's nonlegal legacy in different times, places, and schools; the specific exegetical, theological, and eschatological teachings of individual scholars, and, at times, the immediate (or remote) historical circumstances in which interpretations of these sayings were undertaken.

The following essay traces the fate of an especially enigmatic messianic aggadah in late medieval Spain in order to illustrate the potential complexity of medieval interpretation of rabbinic texts. The number of Hispano-Jewish writers who, from the mid-thirteenth through early sixteenth centuries, grappled with the assertion of the Palestinian amora R. Hillel that "Israel has no Messiah because they have already consumed him in the days of Hezekiah" is striking in and of itself. More so is the great variety of literary and intellectual settings and, sometimes, drastically altered historical circumstances in which they did so. In consequence of this variety, a survey of some late medieval Spanish representations and interpretations of R. Hillel's dictum brings into sharp relief both the complexity of the operations of interpretation performed on this dictum and the heterogeneity of the conclusions which it inspired or was adduced to support. This survey also confers other

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