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Jesus the Pharisee: Leon Modena, the Historical Jesus, and Renaissance Venice

Cristiana Facchini

Abstract

This article is devoted to Leon Modena's anti-Christian polemical work *Magen ve-herrev* (1643 ca.) as a useful source for the reconstruction of notions about the historical Jesus in the early modern period. In this work, Modena depicts Jesus in a sympathetic way, placing his religious activity against the backdrop of second Temple Judaism. Modena's Jesus is fully Jewish, and *Magen ve-herrev* offers different perspectives on the religious and historical context of Jesus' life, and on the development of Christianity. The text is interpreted not exclusively against the backdrop of Jewish anti-Christian polemics but as the result of an increasing interest in the history of Christianity and ecclesiastical history, mainly as a response to the religious strife that resonated in the Republic of Venice and its ghetto.

Introduction

In his catalogue *Bibliotheca Iudaica antichristiana* the Italian Catholic Hebraist Giambenardo De' Rossi (1742–1831) listed about 100 texts that he classified as belonging to a particular genre, namely anti-Christian Jewish polemical literature. The Italian abbot, a collector of *Judaica* and a biblical scholar, eventually left his great collection to the Palatina Library of Parma.¹

¹ Giovanni B. De' Rossi, *Bibliotheca iudaica antichristiana* (Parma: Ex Regio Typographeo, 1800); Benjamin Richler (ed.), *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma*

The *Bibliotheca* offers a quite insightful overview of anti-Christian Jewish works that did circulate quite widely at least since the late seventeenth century, when some Latin translations of infamous Jewish texts were produced.² De Rossi's list is in itself interesting because it records innovative texts that were compiled in languages other than Hebrew, and specifically in Portuguese and Spanish. His work must also be understood against the backdrop of the greatest bibliographical efforts of Christian Hebraists such as Johann Christoph Wolf, Biagio Ugolini, and Giulio Bartolucci, who had set forth a program of indexing and charting all literary production by the Jews.³ The process led to an increasing interest in historiography, which in turn influenced historical works, as the multi-volume *Histoire des Juifs* by the Huguenot exile Jacques Basnage.⁴ De Rossi's entry number 16 describes a manuscript he owned, *Magen ve-herav* (Clipeus et gladius), authored by Aryeh Yehudah, better known under the Italian Leon Modena. The manuscript was, according to De Rossi, 'unpublished and quite unknown',⁵ meaning that in difference to other Jewish polemical texts that were translated in the European vernaculars and into Latin, the one penned by Modena circulated only in Hebrew and through manuscripts, which were copied over the time. Nevertheless, this work captures, more than any other, the complex interaction between the rise of historiographical discourses and the cultural and religious atmosphere of late Renaissance Venice, a maritime city that was a mercantile and printing hub where interactions between different religious groups were indeed, intense.

This article is devoted to Leon Modena's anti-Christian polemical work *Magen ve-herav* as a useful, interesting source for the reconstruction of ideas about the historical Jesus in the early modern period. Before I offer some analytical insights into this unfinished text, I shall introduce a theme regarding the

(Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 2001); On this Italian Hebraist see: Fausto Parente, 'Per una storia dell'ebraistica italiana: Giamberto De' Rossi. Prime linee di una biografia', *Clio* 22 (1986), pp. 487–510; Giancarlo Bonola, "Con dolcezza e con riguardo". Il semitista parmense G.B. De Rossi e la conversione degli Ebrei nel Settecento', *Cristianesimo nella storia* IV (1983), pp. 367–435.

2 See especially Johann Christoph Wagenseil, *Tela ignea Satanae: hoc est arcani et horribiles Judaeorum Christum Deum et christianam religionem* (Altdorf: Schönnerstaedt, 1681).

3 See Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

4 Jacques Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs, depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent. Pour servir de continuation à l'histoire de Joseph*, 6 vols. (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1706–07); augmented and revised edition, 9 vols. (The Hague: H. Scheurleer, 1716).

5 De Rossi, *Bibliotheca*, pp. 23–24.

'historical Jesus' before H.S. Reimarus (1694–1768). Interestingly, many scholars of the early twentieth century who were not influenced by Albert Schweitzer had already highlighted the relevance of the historical depiction of the life of Jesus in the early modern period, before German theological and historical hegemony in the field construed a genealogy clearly focused on the great work of Reimarus. Since then, scholars have shown a tendency to place the rise of the "historical Jesus" against the backdrop of the European Enlightenment. Schweitzer listed many works but showed a strong critical attitude toward the ones that preceded Reimarus or were written outside Germany, such as in the case of Ernest Renan.⁶ Even less relevance was attributed to works by non-Christians, and especially the ones penned by Jews.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the relevance of historical knowledge about the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity before the path-breaking work of Samuel Reimarus.⁷ The Italian scholar of history of Christianity, Luigi Salvatorelli, had challenged Schweitzer's genealogy at the beginning of the

6 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Black, 1911). German editions: 1906 and 1913.

7 I refer to the articles of Mauro Pesce: 'The Beginning of Historical Research in the Modern Age', in Caroline Johnson Hodge, Samuel M. Olyan, Daniel Ullucci and Emma Wasserman, (eds.), *The One Who Sows Bountifully: Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013), pp. 77–88; for a longer version Mauro Pesce, 'Per una ricerca storica su Gesù nei secoli XVI–XVIII: prima di Hermann S. Reimarus', *Annali di Storia dell'esegesi* 28/1 (2011), pp. 433–464. A different and yet inspiring approach in Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *I Have Always Loved the Holy Tongue: Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* (Cambridge-London: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Anthony Grafton, 'Church History in Early Modern Europe: Tradition and Innovation', in Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Loutan (eds.), *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 1–30. The question is raised also by Jonathan Birch, 'The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus', in Keith Whitelam (ed.), *Holy Land as Homeland? Models for Constructing the Historic Landscape of Jesus* (Social World of Biblical Antiquity 7; Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2011), pp. 19–47; for the relevance of Hebraic sources Anthony Le Donne, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Revisionist History through the Lens of Jewish Christian Relations', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), pp. 63–86. If these are recent attitudes in historiography of early Christianity and the historical Jesus, one must recall the works of Baldassarre Labanca, *Gesù Cristo nella letteratura contemporanea straniera ed italiana. Studio storico-scientifico* (Torino: Bocca Editore, 1903) and Luigi Salvatorelli, 'From Locke to Reitzenstein: the Historical Investigation of the Origin of Christianity', *The Harvard Theological Review* 22/4 (1929), pp. 263–369.

twentieth century, claiming that the quest for the historical Jesus had to be dated back to John Locke,⁸ but he never took into consideration Jewish authors.

Indeed, Jewish contributions in this field of research were easily judged inadequate even when they became officially visible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the confrontation was quite lively throughout the nineteenth century, it reached a peak in the first half of the twentieth century, sifting through wars, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust.⁹ In this period, Jews were more visible and active; some of them became also quite famous and recognized in the field, such as Joseph Salvador, Claude G. Montefiore, and especially Joseph Klausner.¹⁰ These Jewish scholars, whose attitudes toward Judaism varied greatly, were not the first ones to offer an alternative interpretation of Jesus' life, providing information about ancient Judaism and his Jewish setting. There was indeed a much older and controversial tradition to which some of them paid attention, either by criticizing it or supporting it. It is certain that Leon Modena's work found some supporters among Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century. It was Abraham Geiger especially who restored Modena's interpretation of Jesus' biography and his evaluation of the rise of Christianity.¹¹

Magen ve-herev will be analysed here against the backdrop of the debate about the rise of historical writing in the early modern period, with a special focus on the question of the "historical Jesus". There are a number of reasons that justify a special treatment and discussion of *Magen ve-herev*, which is,

8 Salvatorelli, 'From Locke to Reitzenstein: the Historical Investigation of the Origin of Christianity'.

9 See Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, 'The Fiction of the "Three Quests": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7 (2009), pp. 211–253.

10 See Joël Sebban, 'Une controverse judéo-chrétienne dans la France du XIXe siècle: l'œuvre scandaleuse de Joseph Salvador', *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 43 (2011), pp. 117–133; Daniel Langton, *Claude Montefiore: His Life and Thought* (London – Portland: Valentine and Mitchell, 2002); Dan Jaffè, *Jesus sous la plume des historiens juifs du XXe siècle. Approche historique, perspectives historiographiques, analyses méthodologiques* (Paris: Cerf, 2009); Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Neta Stahl (ed.), *Jesus Among the Jews: Representations and Thought* (London – New York: Routledge, 2012).

11 The most vocal scholar who supported Modena's original view on Jesus was Abraham Geiger, the rabbi and scholar who founded Reform Judaism. See Abraham Geiger, *Leon Modena, Rabbiner zu Venedig (1571–1648), und seine Stellung zur Kabbalah, zum Talmud und zum Christentume* (Breslau: J.U. Kern, 1856). On this theme see also Cristiana Facchini, "'The Immortal Traveler": How historiography changed Judaism', in *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 20/1 (2018), pp. 111–134.

after all, a classical text that belongs to an established literary genre of polemical literature. The first reason lies in Modena's historical sensibilities that have been detected by many scholars.¹² The second one refers to a rising interest in early modern historical knowledge, which did engage with questions pertaining the life of Jesus, along with church and ecclesiastical history. Furthermore, a wealth of recent historical research has proved how influential Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature became in the early modern period, and how it found its way into Christian culture.¹³

Leon Modena and the Magen Ve-Herev (Shield and Sword)

Leon Modena (1571–1648) was one of the most learned rabbis of late Renaissance Venice.¹⁴ Leon was born in Venice where he spent most of his life as a renowned rabbi who actively interacted with Christian scholars of the time. He was a great polymath, eager to be recognized as a brilliant Jewish scholar within a society whose attitude toward Judaism was ambivalent at best. Despite the tragedies and problems of his own troubled life, Leon left an indelible mark on the world in which he lived: he extensively published in Hebrew and Italian, translating also from Christian sources when necessary. He was interested in theatre and music, and supported a quite strong image of Judaism as a rational religion. In his small autobiographical masterpiece, written in the

12 See especially Bezalel Safran, 'Leon da Modena's Historical Thinking', in Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (eds.), *Jewish Thought in Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 381–398; and Cristiana Facchini, 'Judaism. An Inquiry into the Historical Discourse', in Bernd-Christian Otto, Susanne Rau and Jörg Rüpke (eds.), *History and Religion: Narrating a Religious Past* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 68; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 371–392.

13 See especially Martin Mulsow, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680–1720* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Martin Mulsow, 'Joseph als natürlicher Vater Christi. Ein unbekanntes clandestines Manuskript des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts', in Martin Mulsow and Friedrich Vollhardt (eds.), *Natur* (München: F. Meiner, 2014), pp. 73–112.

14 The bibliography on Leon Modena is quite extensive. The best biographical reconstruction is still provided by Howard Adelman, *Failure and Success in the Seventeenth Century Ghetto of Venice: the Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571–1648*, PhD Dissertation (Brandeis University, 1985); Daniel Carpi (ed.), *The Life of Judah*, (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1985) (Hebrew); Mark R. Cohen (ed.), *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi. Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Emanuele R. Artom, Umberto Fortis and Ariel Viterbo (eds.), *Vita di Jehudà. Autobiografia di Leone Modena, rabbino veneziano del XVII secolo* (Torino: S. Zamorani, 2000).

form of a diary, the Venetian rabbi confessed his frustrations and his wish to fully become part of the *respublica litterarum*. In those pages, he listed with clear pride his many works, focusing especially on his relentless activity as a Jewish leader and his untiring cooperation with Christian scholars.¹⁵ He was a strenuous defender of his religious tradition, as his best-seller *Historia de' gli Riti hebraici* confirms.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that this famous small book was the result of many exchanges between him and different Christian authors and audiences of the time. Somehow it was the product of the interreligious encounters which were enhanced by a city like Venice.¹⁷

When Modena started his anti-Christian treatise, he had already written a relevant piece of critique on the *Kabbalah*. The *Ari nohem* (The Roaring Lion, 1639) is the first systematic criticism of the *Kabbalah* to be written in the modern age by a Jewish author.¹⁸ Leon started the *Magen ve-herav* (The shield and the sword) shortly afterwards, around 1643. In his diary (*Toledot Yehudah*) Modena indicates that he had been working on this text for some time, even though he was unable to finish it:

Then, as much as I have written at that time of my treatise against the Christians, *Magen va-herav*, and of my quarto size journal, in which I wrote memorandum notes for some things to be written in that treatise.¹⁹

- 15 Cecil Roth, 'Leon Modena and his English correspondents', *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 17 (1951–52), pp. 39–43; Cecil Roth, 'Leon Modena and the Christian Hebraists of His Age', *Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel Abraham* (New York: Press of the Jewish Institute of Religion, 1927), pp. 384–401; Howard Adelman, 'Rabbi Leon Modena and the Christian Kabbalists', in Marianne Cline Horowitz, Anne J. Cruz and Wendy A. Furman, (eds.), *Renaissance and Rereading* (Urbana – Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–286.
- 16 On this work see: Mark R. Cohen, 'Leone da Modena's Riti: a Seventeenth Century Plea for Social Toleration of Jews', *Jewish Social Studies* 34/4 (1972), pp. 287–321; Jacques Le Brun and Guy G. Stroumsa, (eds.), *Les Juifs présentés aux Chrétiens. Cérémonies et coutumes qui s'observent aujourd'hui parmi les Juifs par Léon Modène traduit par Richard Simon, suivi de Comparaison des cérémonies des Juifs et de la discipline de l'église* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1998).
- 17 Some remarks in Cristiana Facchini, 'The City, the Ghetto and Two Books. Venice and Jewish Early Modernity', in Cristiana Facchini (ed.), *Modernity and the Cities of the Jews*, in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, 2 (2011), pp. 11–44; a very accurate reading of this context in: Giuseppe Veltri and Evelien Chayes (eds.), *Oltre le mura del ghetto. Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia barocca* (Palermo: New Digital Press, 2017), pp. 47–119.
- 18 Yaacov Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 19 Cohen (ed.), *The Autobiography*, p. 176.

Further information can be gathered in the text written by his grandson, Isaac min-Haleviim, also known as Isaac Levi, who transcribed a version of it.²⁰ 'According to Levi, Modena had claimed that no Jew since Isaac Abravanel had gone to such lengths to defend the Jewish faith against its Christian opponents'.²¹ Although this work joins a quite remarkable tradition of anti-Christian literature, there are good reasons to think that Modena had a message of some originality to convey.

Yeshu Ha-Notzrì: The Nazarene

Magen ve-herev is preserved in several manuscripts. The text used for the purposes of this essay is the twentieth century printed edition of S. Simonsohn.²² As mentioned before, *Magen ve-herev* was composed around 1643, and it belongs to an established literary tradition of anti-Christian polemical texts written by Jews since the Middle Ages.²³ It is divided into five sections (*mahanot*), each in turn sub-divided into chapters (*ma'arakot*). The five sections (literally *fields*) bear enlightening headings indicating their polemical theme: 1. On original sin; 2. On the trinity; 3. On the incarnation; 4. On the virginity of Mary; 5. On the Messiah. These are classical themes, which constituted the doctrinal block of the theological controversy between Christians and Jews. Modena started with the discussion of the notion of "original sin", a Christian belief

20 For a description of this character in inquisitorial sources see Federico Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli. Clavicula salomonis e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVI e XVII* (Milano: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2002).

21 Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah*, p. 45. It refers to Shlomo Simonsohn, *Introduction*, in Shlomo Simonsohn, *Clipeus et gladius. Leonis Mutinensis tractatus antichristianus. Magen wa-herev. Hibbur neged ha-natzrut* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1960). This edition is based on the De Rossi ms.

22 Simonsohn, *Clipeus et gladius*. From now on: *Magen ve-herev* (as indicated by the transliteration of Guetta 2014, footnote 24). For the English translation of the *Magen ve-herev* see: Allen H. Podet, *A Translation of the Magen wa-herev by Leon Modena, 1571–1648* (Lewiston – Queenston – Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001). In some cases I offer an alternative translation of the text.

23 Hanne Trautner-Kromann, *Shield and Sword: Jewish Polemics against Christians in France and Spain from 1100–1500* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993); Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007); David Berger, *Persecution, Polemics, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

that according to him was introduced by Paul, but never appears in Jesus' teachings.²⁴

Three sections mentioned by the author are missing. They were to have tackled the themes of Christ's death and resurrection, of the eternity of the Torah, and of miracles. Modena's work thus joins an established tradition of religious polemics, but aims to be innovative and original. Not only does his treatise offer a series of answers to the most widespread themes of the polemic between Jews and Christians, it also presents a somewhat original theory of religious comparison, which takes on Christianity and Islam.²⁵

There are several very specific philosophical choices in the text. Alessandro Guetta has carefully extrapolated one of the philosophical principles employed by Modena to direct and interpret religious beliefs, which is based on Jewish medieval sources, quite inspired by Averroism.²⁶ Modena claims that:

Belief is not something which is spoken only in words, but something conceived of in the soul, in the belief that the thing exists outside of the mind contemplating it. It can refer to an order of things not found in nature (like the transformation of Moses' staff into a snake), but not one that goes against the intellect (as would be the case – for example – with simultaneous being and not being)... In the Torah of Moses, the founder of the first among religions, all the commandments concerned sensible or thinkable truths.²⁷

It is a quite remarkable statement, as it suggests the attempt to root the investigation of religious belief in rational reasoning, which pays tribute to medieval Jewish philosophical thought. Modena also refers to Christian sources, using Aquinas, who was central to the discussion of various religious dogmas such as that of "original sin"; a profound conflict on that subject had already arisen after

24 Alessandro Guetta, 'Leone Modena's Magen va-herev' as an anti-Catholic Apologia', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000), pp. 296–318; Alessandro Guetta, 'Anti-Catholic Apologetics in Leon Modena's Magen va-herev: a Comparative Reading', in David Malkiel (ed.), *The Lion shall Roar: Leon Modena and his World* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press/Ben-Zvi Institute, 2003), pp. 69–89 (Hebrew); Alessandro Guetta, *Italian Jewry in the Modern Era: Essays in Intellectual History* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), pp. 134–152, where the title is changed: Leon Modena's Magen we-herev as an Anti-Catholic Apologia, referring to Psalm 76,4, which is vocalized as 've/we'.

25 Talya Fishman, 'Changing Early Modern Jewish Discourse about Christianity: The Efforts of Leone Modena', in Malkiel (ed.), *The Lion Shall Roar*, pp. 159–194.

26 Guetta, 'Leone Modena's Magen va-herev', p. 302.

27 Guetta, 'Leone Modena's Magen va-herev', p. 302. Translation of Guetta.

the Protestant Reformation, and had occupied a lot of space at the Council of Trent.²⁸ Guetta also identified the presence of anti-Trinitarian notions derived from authoritative exponents of these Christian groups, particularly Niccolò Paruta. Anti-Trinitarian sources were incorporated in the *Hizzuk emunah* of the Karaite scholar Isaac of Troki (1533–1594), who is briefly mentioned in the *Magen ve-herav*.²⁹ Modena departs from the most widespread and aggressive tradition of the *Toledoth Yeshu*, which purported Jesus' life according to a parodistic counter-narrative of the Gospel.³⁰ Modena clearly suggests that this prosaic and grotesque tradition has nothing to do with his own interpretation.³¹

Modena does not only offer an exegesis of New Testament materials, or pinpoint a philosophical process for establishing the plausibility of religious beliefs, but he also presents historical identification by combining an analysis of the text and its content with an eyewitness account, which is central to

28 The *Istoria del concilio tridentino* of Paolo Sarpi was published in London in 1619 under a pseudonym, Pietro Soave Solano. Modena might have been acquainted with Sarpi, as many sources might indicate. See *Magen ve-herav*, p. 12, where he underlines discussions described by Sarpi at the Council of Trent. For some references see: Paolo Sarpi, *Istoria del concilio tridentino*, Corrado Vivanti (ed.), 2 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 1974); David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). A different evaluation of Sarpi's work: Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, 5 vols. (Tübingen: WBG, 2017).

29 Guetta, 'Leone Modena's Magen va-herav', p. 308.

30 On the *Toledot Yeshu* there is an increasing scholarly interest: Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902); Samuel Krauss, *The Christian-Jewish Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789*, William Horbury (ed.) (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996); Jean-Paul Osier, *L'Evangile du Ghetto ou comment les Juifs se racontaient Jésus* (Paris: Berg, 1984); Riccardo Di Segni, *Il Vangelo del Ghetto* (Roma: Newton Compton, 1985); Michael Meerson, Peter Schäfer and Yaacov Deutsch, (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2011); Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer, (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014); some remarks also in Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

31 *Magen ve-herav*, p. 43, note 2 (English, pp. 94–95). The translation is slightly changed: 'Stories about these things, I have seen circulating among us, [that narrate] about his youthful sins, the transgressions of his life, and how he was a miracle-worker (*po'el ha-nissim*), and about his death. *It is to me clear that everything told is mockery and lies*, composed by some man who was opposed to him'). It is a very important statement, and criticism Modena addresses to some of his Jewish fellows. References to *Toledot Yeshu* appear quite often in archival material from the Inquisition. See Marina Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012); Cristiana Facchini, 'Il Gesù di Leon Modena. Per una storia materiale e urbana del Magen we-herav di Leon Modena', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 35/1 (2018), pp. 163–187.

historical theory in the early modern age. Indeed, in the ninth chapter of the third part – *My discussion of the story of the Nazarene* – he writes that ‘only after an examination of their books and our books did I extrapolate a rule, which from my point of view is true and solid, as though (*keilu*) I were of his generation and had been close to him.’³² I have described this attitude elsewhere, as part of a general “autoptic paradigm” that is shared by many scholars in the early modern period.³³

Having established the principle of observation, Modena introduces Jesus:

Very often I have thought to myself I would tell and clarify the origins and development of the actions of the Nazarene. And what the intention was of his *words and his preaching*, and which *actions were aimed at his glorification* and his magnification, and in particular *what he intended with himself*, when he described himself as the *son of God*.³⁴

In order to place Jesus in his own context, Modena provides a brief description of the history of the Second Temple (*bet ha-sheni*), explicitly mentioning the sources he uses: the (Sefer) *Yosippon*,³⁵ a Hebrew version of Flavius Josephus’ works, and a chapter of a text that played a controversial role in Catholic tradition, namely the *De republica hebraeorum* by Carlo Sigonio.³⁶ In the fifth book,

32 *Magen ve-herev*, pp. 43–44. Translation is mine.

33 Widely used in the accounts written from the Americas. See Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: from Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 51–55. The notion of “autoptic paradigm” is taken from Sara Miglietti, ‘*Tesmoings oculaires*. Storia e autopsia nella Francia del secondo Cinquecento’, *Rinascimento* 50 (2010), pp. 1–40.

34 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 43 (English p. 94).

35 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 44. Modena mentions the ‘*ha-Yosippon*’, without clarifying which version, the Hebrew one which was edited in the Middle Ages, or the version by Flavius Josephus that circulated in the early modern age and was translated in many vernaculars, in Latin and Italian. See Silvia Castelli, ‘Josephus in Renaissance Italy’, in Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (eds.), *A Companion to Josephus* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 401–413; and Saskia Donitz, ‘Sefer Yosippon (Josippon)’, in Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (eds.), *A Companion to Josephus*, pp. 382–389.

36 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 44. In the text it reads as Carlo Sefinio (Sifinio) and the title *De republica hebreorum* [sic] in Latin with Hebrew characters (p. 44). On Sigonio and his misfortunes: Paolo Prodi, *Profezia contro utopia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013); Fausto Parente, ‘Il *De Republica Hebraeorum* di Carlo Sigonio (The *De Republica Hebraeorum* – by Carlo Sigonio)’, *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 3 (2010), pp. 423–459; Guido Bartolucci, *La repubblica ebraica di Carlo Sigonio. Modelli politici in età moderna* (Firenze: Olschki, 2007); *L’Écriture*

Sigonio describes a variety of figures in ancient Jewish society, in particular those which he calls “interpreters of the law”.³⁷ In the eleventh chapter of the fifth book, Sigonio gives a detailed description of the “Jewish sects”, divided into seven groups, where he combines information provided by Flavius Josephus with that given by Epiphanius:

Know, there were among the Jews at that time, close to the end of the second commonwealth, many sects, all of which acknowledged the Torah of Moses, but divided as to its interpretation and its commandments. There were Pharisees and Scribes, which are our Sages, from whom came the Mishnah. Apart from them, there were the Sadducees, the Boethusians, the Essenes, and many besides them.³⁸

All of the many sects active in ancient Jewish society acknowledged the authority of the Torah, although they disagreed on how its commandments should be interpreted.³⁹ The “Nazarene”, in Modena’s version, selected the “true sect”, namely that of the Pharisees (*ket ha-perushim*), in “everything they said regarding beliefs, and all of their actions”. To support this claim, Modena uses the

sainte au temps de Spinoza et dans le système spinoziste, ed. by Groupe de recherches spinozistes (Paris: Presse de l’Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1992). As for many other books written in the Italian lands, *De republica Hebraeorum* was, in fact, reprinted many times and was obviously read even if not accepted by the counter-reformed Church. See William McCuaig, *Carlo Sigonio: The Changing World of the Late Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); for the English translation: Peter Wyetzner and Guido Bartolucci (eds.), *Carlo Sigonio, The Hebrew Republic* (Jerusalem – New York: Shalem Centre, 2010).

37 Carlo Sigonio, *De republica Hebraeorum libri VII*, Bologna, 1582. In book V Sigonio describes different Jewish sects (groups) (chap. 11, *De septem Judaeorum haeresibus*).

38 ‘*Bahar ha-notzri ha-’amittit, we-nimshekh aher ket ha-perushim*’. *Magen ve-herav*, p. 44. (English, p. 95). On the history and interpretation of this group see: Albert I. Baumgarten, ‘The Name of the Pharisees’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102/3 (1983), pp. 441–428; Anthony Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2001); Günther Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1995). See also: Epiphanius, *Panarion* see *Epiphanius I. Ancoratus und Panarion Haer. 1–33*. Karl Holl, Marc Bergemann, Christian-Friedrich Collatz (eds.), Vol. I/1, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013). Frank Williams and Karl Holl (eds.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: De Fide. Books II and III* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013).

39 *Magen ve-herav*, p. 44 (English p. 96). Translation has been changed.

verse of Mt. 23:2–3.⁴⁰ “It is found that not only did he acknowledge the written Torah but also the Oral Torah (*torah she be-al-pe*)”, Modena writes.

In this short chapter, Modena presents Jesus as a follower of one of the hegemonic groups of the Second Temple period, which, according to the Jewish master narrative, would play the most important role in disseminating the oral Torah, which converges in the Mishnah and in the other rabbinical scriptures. Modena takes great care to highlight the different components of the Judaism of the Second Temple. Jesus does not belong to groups that Modena often defines as schismatic, in keeping with the themes circulating during this period, such as the Sadducees or the Samaritans.⁴¹ Modena explains the success of Jesus by his total adherence to Jewish culture; otherwise he would have generated conflict right from the start, undermining the formation of a movement:

And thus it persisted for him for some time. For were it not so, were he to have sought to alter a trifling thing from the Torah, no man would listen to him, and all of them would have been his pursuers and his adversaries. Therefore he spoke always for its establishment ‘I have not come to modify the Torah but to fulfil the Torah’.⁴²

If Jesus followed the written and oral Torah, how then can we explain the friction between followers of Jesus’ movement and the Pharisees, which recurs so frequently in the canonical Gospels? The conflict emerges slowly, and hinges upon the question of certain specific rituals which are not found in the Law of Moses, but which were deduced from it.

However, in a few small things that he used to say, he began to challenge them and to criticize them regarding matters that were not binding law

40 The textual traditions are quite different. Modena presumably used the Vulgate version, but we do not know this for certain as this was a Hebrew manuscript not necessarily intended for printing. “Then Jesus addressed the crowd and his disciples saying: the scribes and Pharisees are seated on the throne of Moses. Do and observe what they tell you (but do not do what they do, for they speak and do not act)”. The use of Matthew’s gospel in anti-Christian polemics has been analyzed by Christoph Ochs, *Matthaeus Adversus Christianos: The Use of the Gospel of Matthew in Jewish Polemics Against the Divinity of Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2013).

41 Modena described Jewish sectarians in his *Historia de’ gli riti hebraici* (Paris, 1637). This is the first edition published in Paris by the Catholic scholar, Jacques Gaffarel. The fifth section of the book is devoted to Jewish heretics (*De’ gli heretici Hebrei*).

42 *Magen ve-herav*, p. 44 (English, p. 96). Translation has been slightly changed. Matthew 5,17 is translated in Hebrew: ‘Ani lo ba’ti leshanot ha-Torah, ele lemallet ha-Torah’.

from Moses on Sinai, nor authentic tradition from the earliest teachers, but rather deduction from them.⁴³

In this case, the focus is on the practice of handwashing (*netilat yadaim*) and the blessing that is spoken before meals. These, according to Modena, were the problems, which caused conflict with the Pharisees, who began to suspect that Jesus and his followers were another group of rebels, similar to the Sadducees or the Boethusians. So, what the Pharisees feared was Jewish sectarianism, a problem that Modena feared in his own times, as it resurfaced in the many conflicts among the Jews in Venice, Amsterdam, and Hamburg.⁴⁴

When hermeneutical conflict over ritual practices arose, Jesus overreacted, according to Modena, by seeking to prove his greatness, both to his disciples and to his detractors. Thus he began to describe himself as the “son of God”, but never did he say he was God, because he knew for certain that such a claim would never have been accepted by the Jews of his day.

I have no doubt that the Nazarene never intended by himself to express that he was God, or part of God, as the Nazarenes [Christians] of today claim and believe. Rather, we must judge based on his ways, upon the manner in which he acted, and upon the words he uttered, that it never came to his heart, and never crossed his mind, to behave as God. Because he was no fool, and understood his situation, and saw that those who aimed to be divinities had always been powerful Kings, as our teachers, their memory be for a blessing, enumerated: Pharaoh, Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, and Yoash, and Alexander the Great.⁴⁵

Modena explains that in the ancient world, the divinisation of humans was linked to power and wealth. Even Muhammad, leader of the “Ishmaelites”, a great warrior and magnificent lord, ‘never filled his heart with such pride as to imagine himself to be God.’⁴⁶ People of humble origins cannot be attracted

43 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 44 (English, p. 96).

44 Very general depictions of these questions are to be found in Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Joseph Kaplan, ‘Karaites in Early 18th Century Amsterdam’, in David Katz and Jonathan Israel, (eds.), *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 196–236; Marina Rustow, ‘Karaites Real and Imagined: Three Cases of Jewish Heresy’, *Past and Present* 197 (2007), pp. 35–74.

45 *Magen ve-herev*, pp. 44–45 (English pp. 97–98). Translation has been changed.

46 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 45: ‘lo mal’o libo le-yahas le-etzmo elohut’.

by such a prospect, except for those who, being humble and very isolated (*be-perishut rav*) might become close to the experience of prophecy.⁴⁷

Modena knew that the argument of Jesus' humble origins had often been used to discredit his mission, as we may find for example in many polemical treatises of the Middle Ages, and more recently in the *Hizzuk emunah*.⁴⁸ However, equally common was the notion that humbleness and social marginalization might indicate experiences of prophecy.⁴⁹ This is a very sensitive remark, which indicates Modena's interest in explaining ancient Judaism and the rise of Christianity with a sort of phenomenological eye that clearly overshadows the polemical feature of his text. His comparative approach is used in his polemical work in order to define the nature of monotheism, in its three different historical manifestations: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam positioning Christianity as the least perfect one.

Equally relevant are his remarks about the substantial difference between *what Jesus did and believed and what Christians of later generations understood or deduced*, particularly when they sought to give meaning to the dual nature of Christ. And so, he writes, 'they wrote remote deductions, which his followers adopted for themselves, a long time after his death'.⁵⁰ Therefore, this text collects conflicting theological themes that were often at the core of inter-religious and intra-Christian polemics in the first centuries, some of which were rekindled against the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation. Modena seems to support, in his polemics, some arguments which were disseminated by anti-Trinitarian groups, according to which the most authentic form of Christianity was misinterpreted and betrayed by later theological developments.⁵¹

There are other aspects worth focusing on, such as the techniques of exegesis and textual analysis intended to highlight the different opinions offered by the canonical Gospels. In general, the theme, which lends itself the most to this observation are the stories about Jesus' genealogy linked to the Davidic kinship, which do not appear in all the Gospels. The purpose is to downplay the link between narratives of Jesus' genealogy and King David, and to highlight the most obvious discrepancies and contradictions between the various

47 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 45: 'ele be-perishut rav, lihiot muhzak le-navi ve-lo ioter'.

48 See Miriam Benfatto's article.

49 See e.g. Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

50 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 45 (English p. 99).

51 For an interesting anti-Trinitarian text with similar approaches to early Christianity see Martin Seidel, *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae. Un tratado clandestino del siglo XVII*, translated and edited by Francisco Socas and Pablo Toribio (Madrid: CSIC, 2017).

accounts. Modena is puzzled by the different accounts in Luke and Matthew, and then wonders:

So, one should say that they did not know and did not understand the genealogy of his family. Rather, after they took it upon themselves to say of him that he was the Messiah, they tried to continue the continuity of seed in a way that came up to their imagination, with the result he must have come out of the seed of David. And one group of them found puzzling what another group did not....⁵²

Usually anti-Christian polemical literature functions as an anti-harmony form of reasoning, in that its main goal is to highlight discrepancies, contradictions, and inaccuracies among the canonical Gospels. It is no surprise, as Mauro Pesce suggests, that harmonies were produced in great number in this period, the one by Blaise Pascal being one of the most remarkable ones.⁵³

Another theme subjected to the historicising gaze is the notion of the Messiah, an ever-present *topos* in polemical literature.⁵⁴ There is no doubt that in this case, Modena adopts a minimalist interpretation. According to Modena, Jesus could not think that he was the Messiah because at the time of the Second Temple, there was no need for such a figure. At the time of the 'Second Temple, when Jesus lived, Israel was not awaiting a Messiah, because the prophets had not promised a messianic saviour unless there was a need for one'.⁵⁵

So it is appropriate to consider that in the days of the second temple, when the *Nazarene* came, Israel was not looking for the Messiah, for the prophets only promised a Messiah as a savior to Israel if they should be in need of him, as now, when because of our sins we are enslaved and exiled from upon our land, according to the words of the faithful shepherd (Deut. 4,25) and all come after that. Behold, it was prophesied that they would sin and that they would be punished with exile and slavery and

52 *Magen ve-herav*, p. 53 (English p. 121). Translation has been slightly changed.

53 Mauro Pesce, 'The History of Research on the Historical Jesus before Reimarus', in Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce (eds.), *Texts, Practices, and Groups. Multidisciplinary approaches to the history of Jesus' followers in the first two centuries. First Annual Meeting of Bertinoro (2–5 October 2014)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), pp. 793–806.

54 For a history of Jewish messianism see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994). Relevant insights in Stahl (ed.), *Jesus among the Jews*.

55 *Magen ve-herav*, p. 68. 'beyemei beit sheni kesheba ha-notsri, lo hayyu Yisrael metsapim lemashiah, ki lo hevtihu hanevi'im *mashiah moshiah* le-Yisrael'.

after that they would be redeemed. That for all the prophets, the good news of the redeemer was that he was to gather up the exiles, and collect the dispersed of Israel and the scattered of Judah, to magnify their kingdom over every nation and language, and to build Jerusalem and its dominion on their foundation, but at that time they were still united, and the city and sanctuary standing. *And for that reason one cannot say that then they were looking for a Messiah, saviour, and redeemer, for all the prophets said that he would come and reveal himself at the end of days.*⁵⁶

According to Modena, biblical prophecy was clear in providing clues about the Messiah: it spoke to the exiles who had been reduced to political captivity due to their sins, according to the logic of the book of Deuteronomy, which Modena adhered to and was reworked also by Maimonides.⁵⁷ Moreover, in order to wait for a final redemption, the “end of all time” must be imminent, but even these historical conditions required specific characteristics according to Jewish tradition. The biblical chronology did not indicate the imminent end of time in the era of Jesus,⁵⁸ no text suggested that his times were those indicated by the ancient prophecies. According to Modena, Jews were expecting a powerful king, one capable of liberating them from the Roman domination. ‘Rather – he insists – they were looking for a king who would be extremely successful, who would magnify the kingdom of Israel all over the world.’⁵⁹

The very human Jewish Jesus of Modena, aligned with some images rooted in the medieval tradition, is no eschatological preacher, waiting for the imminent kingdom of God. No “apocalyptic” imagery is used by Modena.⁶⁰ This topic requires of course a deeper analysis, as the notion of the Messiah is at the very core of the Jewish-Christian confrontation. It is not surprising that Modena refers to Don Isaac Abravanel, who had compiled an important trilogy

56 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 68 (English pp. 162–163). Use of Deut. 4:30; Isa. 2:2; Mal. 3:12.

57 Modena, *Magen ve-herev*, p. 68. For some references on the notion of Messianism in Maimonides see: Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

58 Biblical chronology was of great interest for Jews and Christians, both for antiquarian and theological reasons. On the relevance of this discipline see Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Justus Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–1993). Different Jewish traditions often clashed over the calculation of the end of times. Joanna Weinberg (ed.), *Azariah De’ Rossi. The Light of the Eyes* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2001).

59 *Magen ve-herev*, p. 69 (English p. 165).

60 The Christian Jesus, besides being always the Christ, is often an eschatological figure. Some remarks in Pesce, ‘The History of Research’.

on messianic beliefs, working extensively on biblical history.⁶¹ His works were well known to Christian scholars, and appeared very soon in the Index of the Prohibited Books of the Catholic Church.⁶² Moreover, Modena dealt with messianic ideas in some of his other work, the Italian *Historia de' gli riti hebraici*, where he tries to offer a constructive criticism of *Synagoga Judaica* of the Christian Hebraist, J. Buxtorf. In this work he carefully avoided to enter a confutation on this notion, which occupies a relevant place in Buxtorf's treatise.⁶³

There is more. According to Modena, the aim of the mission of Jesus is unclear. The account about John the Baptist is a meaningful in this regard, as the Baptist appears as a complicated figure in the Gospels' narrative.⁶⁴ For Modena it is clear that the writers of the Gospels did not understand the relationship between the Baptist and Jesus. The uncertainty of the evangelists is no mere coincidence, as it indicates the lack of clear signs as to the identity of a saviour.

And the *Evangel* brings the story there, that there will be someone who comes before the messiah, a great prophet like Elijah, to cause the people to repent, to prepare them for redemption through a king who will fight the battles of the Lord and save them as mentioned. And when they saw John the Baptist strive to make the sinners repent, through immersion in

61 The works of Isaac Abravanel, *Ma'ayenei ha-Yeshuah* ("The Wellsprings of Salvation"), *Yeshu'ot Meshiho* ("The Salvation of His Anointed"), and *Mashmi'a Yeshu'ah* ("Announcing Salvation") were all composed at the end of the fifteenth century, when Don Isaac was an exile in Italy. On his humanist erudition see: Isaac Baer, 'Don Isaac Abravanel and his Relation to Problems of History and Politics', *Tarbiz* 8 (1937), pp. 241–259 (Hebrew); Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Cedric Skalli, 'Don Isaac Abravanel and the Conversos: Wealth, Politics, and Messianism', *Journal of Levantine Studies* 6 (2016), pp. 43–69; Ram Ben Shalom, *Medieval Jews and the Christian Past: Jewish Historical Consciousness in Spain and Southern France* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016).

62 Marina Caffiero, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012).

63 See Facchini, 'Judaism. An Inquiry into the Historical Discourse'. Ead., 'The City, the Ghetto and Two Books. Venice and Jewish Early Modernity', pp. 11–44; Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

64 Edmondo Lupieri, *Giovanni Battista tra storia e leggenda* (Brescia: Paideia, 1988); Edmondo Lupieri, *Giovanni e Gesù. Storia di un antagonismo* (Roma: Carocci, 2013); Dale C. Allison, 'The Continuity between John and Jesus', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1 (2003), pp. 6–27; Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 204–220; Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, 'Why is John the Baptist Used as a Foil for Jesus? Leaps of Faith and Oblique Anti-Judaism in Contemporary Scholarship', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013), pp. 170–196.

the Jordan to purify them apart from the sign of purity of the heart in the act of repentance, they thought, some of them, who knows, this might be the messenger, and they sent to ask if it was so, but not to ask whether he was the Messiah.⁶⁵

Modena's interpretation of the character of the Baptist is indeed specific. Although he devotes only few lines to the Baptist, he clearly indicates that John and Jesus are similar figures and that John's religious function resembles the image of Elijah. According to Modena, The Baptist is a *worker of repentance*, while little or nothing is known about Jesus, with no clear sign as to whether he is either the Messiah or the saviour of souls indicated in certain Gospel narratives. 'From all this it is seen, that from the point of view of the times as well one cannot say that the *Nazarene* was appropriate to be the Messiah who was hoped for and was promised by the prophets'.⁶⁶

It is worth to briefly mention that the rational interpretation of Modena is also meant to criticize those current interpretations of the Christian Kabbalah that were using Hebraic literature to confirm Christological interpretations.⁶⁷ There is no space to explore this line of inquiry, but critical references to Pietro Colonna Galatino (1460–1540) in Modena's text are meaningful in that sense.⁶⁸ A member of the order of the Friars Minor, Galatino completed his *De arcanis catholicae veritatis* in around 1516 and it was published in 1518.⁶⁹ The work reached a huge success and was republished several times (Basel 1550, 1561; Paris 1603; Frankfurt 1572, 1603, 1612, 1676). Galatino belongs to a Christian intellectual current that made ample use of Hebraic and kabbalistic sources in order to sustain Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. Furthermore, his use of kabbalistic notions supported anti-historical interpretation of theological themes. At the beginning of the seventeenth century his work started to be scrutinized by Protestant philologists who accused him of being a forger. Indeed, one could suggest that Leon's historical interpretation of Jesus and early Christianity, among other things, runs against this strong line of anti-historical Christian use of the Kabbalah.⁷⁰

65 *Magen ve-herrev*, p. 70 (English p. 167). It is a very dense phrasing in terms of religious notions. The translation has been slightly changed.

66 *Magen ve-herrev*, p. 70 (English p. 167).

67 Adelman, 'Rabbi Leon Modena and the Christian Kabbalists'.

68 Guetta, 'Leon Modena's Magen va-herrev; Facchini, 'Il Gesù di Leone Modena'.

69 François Secret, *I cabbalisti cristiani del Rinascimento*, Milano 1985; J.L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance*, New York, 1944.

70 Cristiana Facchini, 'Historicizing Jesus: Leon Modena (1571–1648) and the Magen va-herrev' in *Proceeding of the 2nd Annual Meeting on Christian Origins*, eds. Adriana Destro, Mauro Pesce (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

Concluding Remarks

Modena's work has been analysed by many scholars, and since the nineteenth century his historical insight has gained some relevance especially among Jewish historians. Some of them have focused on the innovative perspective Modena offers against the background of a literary genre that seems to be quite repetitive, and accordingly unable to innovate. In fact, Alessandro Guetta and David Berger have addressed, in different ways, the relevance of Modena's tractate in defining some new features of the Jewish Jesus, whose Jewishness is detectable in many previous works composed in the Middle Ages, but whose negative or marginal behaviour seems to play a more relevant role. Even in Profiat Duran's quite elaborate text, Jesus is a bit of a magician and a holy fool, whereas in Modena's account text he is a Pharisee, even if not a convinced one.⁷¹ We can quite agree with David Berger, who aptly observes that 'Leone really cares about understanding the hero of the Gospels'.⁷²

Guetta was one of the first ones to refer to the historiography of the 'historical Jesus', noticing that Luigi Salvatorelli had claimed that scholarship on the historical Jesus started with John Locke.⁷³ Guetta, unlike other scholars, seems quite confident in claiming that Christian intellectuals were late comers as historians of the historical Jesus, that is, precisely, a Jewish Jesus. 'What the Christians came to only very late and with much hesitation, was relatively easy for a believer in the only non Christian religion extant in pre-modern Europe'.⁷⁴ Members of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* shared a similar perspective. Among them, Abraham Geiger in the nineteenth century devoted much attention to anti-Christian Jewish accounts where depictions of Jesus and early Christianity appeared. It is no surprise that he wrote extensively on Isaac Troki, Profiat Duran, and Modena, whose historical insight he deeply appreciated. Geiger suggested that Modena's Jesus bore all the features that Reimarus had described in his masterpiece.⁷⁵ Although it is certainly true, as Susannah

71 On Profiat Duran's important critique of Christianity see Carsten Wilke, 'Historicizing Christianity and Profiat Duran's Kelimat ha-Goyim (1397)', *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016), pp. 140–164.

72 David Berger, 'On the Uses of History in Medieval Jewish Polemic against Christianity. The Quest for the Historical Jesus', in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), p. 157.

73 Salvatorelli, 'From Locke to Reitzenstein'.

74 Guetta, 'Leon Modena's Magen va-Herev', pp. 309–313.

75 Abraham Geiger, 'Review of D.F. Strauss, Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes', *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* 1 (1862), pp. 65–68. Quoted also in Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*, pp. 131, 272 footnote 16.

Heschel claims, that Geiger's Jesus was to counter the hegemonic discourse of Protestant theologians, it is also true that Geiger appropriated Modena's perspective and was truly convinced that the Venetian rabbi conveyed a rather innovative image of the Jewish Jesus.

As historians we may ask why Modena depicted Jesus in such a friendly way, while attempting to describe the development of Christianity as a form of betrayal of Jesus' original message. Talya Fishman suggested that Modena's anti-Christian text was addressed to *conversos* of Iberian descent who might be willing to revert to Judaism. She claimed that this account was more palatable for them, making the Jewish Jesus a figure that would resonate with their existential condition.⁷⁶ Yet, this does not explain this change in perspective and the historical sensibilities he deploys in many of his works.

I want to briefly suggest that we seriously consider how during the early modern period discourses on early Christianity and church history multiplied as a by-product of the interaction of religious conflict and the relevance of humanist philology. There were indeed many attempts to write historical accounts of the rise of Christianity both during the Renaissance and after the Reformation. Anthony Grafton has claimed that the discovery of the Jewish Jesus is the result of Renaissance scholarship, stemming from a combination of theological conflict, textual criticism, and antiquarianism. Calvinist and Catholic scholars engaged in a thorough articulate discussion about the Jewish ritual context of the life of Jesus, starting from the analysis of the resemblance of the Jewish Seder and the last supper.⁷⁷ These discussions became increasingly relevant in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Modena did, indeed, actively interact with Catholics and Protestants when he wrote his best seller *Historia de' gli riti hebraici*, which was to be used as a source for

76 It is a fascinating perspective, which deserves to be taken into consideration and properly analyzed. Recent research has challenged this interpretation claiming that Spanish and Portuguese anti-Christian literature was different in structure and aims, and that it may have indeed influenced Modena, Karoly D. Dobos, 'The Impact on the Conversos on Jewish Polemical Activity in Baroque Italy. Was Yehudah Arie' mi-Modena's Magen va-herav destined for a Converso's Audience?' *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 33/2 (2016), pp. 413–434.

77 I refer to a lecture I attended at the RSA in New York in 2014. For different versions of the lecture see Anthony Grafton, *How Jesus celebrated Passover*, Bard Graduate Center, 12 October 2011. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqFPv2n9000> [accessed 3 February 2018]; Anthony Grafton, *How Jesus celebrated Passover: Early Modern Views of the Last Supper*, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies Harvard University, February 13, 2012. Online: <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/video/how-jesus-celebrated-passover> [accessed 3 February 2018].

the Jewish setting of many ritual practices mentioned in the Gospels.⁷⁸ When he compiled his anti-Christian treatise he had in mind the polemical tradition of Jewish literature, but he also enjoyed the culture of the city and Republic of Venice, where religious ideas of different Christian groups circulated and crossed the port city. It is no secret that Modena interacted with the official theologian of the Republic of Venice, Paolo Sarpi, and with his secretary and biographer Fulgenzo Micanzio, when Venice was on the edge to join the Calvinist front.⁷⁹ Many of his insights might well reflect these types of encounters. The city itself should be considered a religious laboratory, where intellectual confrontation among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews nurtured scholarly debates about many relevant topics, among which the history of early Christianity.⁸⁰ The notion of a Jewish Jesus was no surprise: what it implied from a theological perspective, both for Christian and Jews, is a different question and another story.

78 See the interpretation of Richard Simon in his French translation of the text. Richard Simon, *Comparaison des Cérémonies des Juifs et de la Discipline de l'Église*, in Modena, *Les Juifs présentés aux Chrétiens*, pp. 142–245.

79 See: Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi*; Paolo Frajese, *Sarpi scettico. Stato e chiesa a Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994); Stefano Villani, 'Uno scisma mancato: Paolo Sarpi, William Bedell e la prima traduzione in italiano del Book of Common Prayer', *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 53/1 (2017), pp. 63–111.

80 I refer here to the idea of Venice as the most tolerant city of the Renaissance described in Bodin's work *Heptaplomeres*. See Cristiana Facchini, 'Voci ebraiche sulla tolleranza religiosa. Pratiche e teorie nella Venezia barocca', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 30/2 (2013), pp. 393–419; Veltri, Chayes (eds.), *Oltre le mura del ghetto*; Evelien Chayes, 'Crossing Cultures in the Venitian Ghetto. Leone Modena, the Accademia degli Incogniti and Imprese Literature', *Bollettino di Italianistica* 2 (2017), pp. 62–88.