

# The Hidden Jesus

## The Nazarene in Jewish Polemical Literature: The Case of the 16th-Century Text *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*

### ABSTRACT

This article traces the figure of Jesus that was hidden through the polemical and apologetic strategy of the text known as *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*), composed at the end of the 16th century by Lithuanian Karaite scholar Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594). Despite belonging to a Karaite group, Isaac ben Abraham often used rabbinic quotations and Jewish classical commentators. His material was therefore intelligible to the wider Jewish community and it was also accessible to non-Jews and Marranos. Indeed, this text was translated into Spanish, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Latin by the end of 17th century. *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was a privileged example of what Christians knew about Jewish anti-Christian literature and was read by significant European intellectuals and philosophers. This text circulated widely among European thinkers, becoming an important source of anti-Christian ideas among non-Jewish intellectuals. The influence of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* demonstrates how closely the Jewish and Christian worlds interacted and connected during the early modern period.

### KEYWORDS

Isaac ben Abraham Troki, *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, Jewish Polemical Literature, Quest for the Historical Jesus, Anti-Christian Work

### BIOGRAPHY

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The Jewish-Christian controversy, as it is known, includes reflection on the figure of the Nazarene. The richest and most systematic contributions by Jewish tradition to this discourse in the medieval and early modern period are found in Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature.<sup>1</sup> In this article I trace the figure of Jesus that was hidden through the polemical and apologetic strategy of the text *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*), composed by Lithuanian Karaite scholar Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594) at the end of the 16th century. The article reflects on this particular portrait of Jesus, which was read by leading European intellectuals and philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the extraordinary reception history of this text indicates that *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was for a long time a privileged example of what Christians knew about Jewish anti-Christian literature.<sup>3</sup>

Although Isaac ben Abraham Troki's biography remains a *desideratum*, we know that he came from a line of great Karaite scholars and became a leader of his own Karaite community in Troki (Lithuania),<sup>4</sup> one of the most important cultural and religious centers of Karaism in the 16th century.<sup>5</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham Troki was a prolific writer. His literary production covered liturgical poems that include *piyutim* (פיוטים), composed in a Turkic language with Hebrew script known as *karaim language*,<sup>6</sup> *derushim* (דרשים), a homiletic interpretation of the Bible, biblical commentaries and a treatise against the Rabbanite.<sup>7</sup> Although he belonged to a Karaite group, Isaac ben Abraham knew Talmudic literature well and often cited rabbinic quotations and Jewish classical commentators, an approach found in his main work, the polemical treatise against Christianity *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*.<sup>8</sup> This material was therefore intelligible to a wider Jewish community.

*Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was written in response to a specific need that emerged from social and cultural circumstances: according to its author, the people of Is-

1 For a general overview of Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature and its main themes see Schoeps 1963; Trautner-Kromann 1993; Krauss/Horbury 1995; Lasker 1999; Lasker 2007.

2 Popkin 1992, 159–181; Mulsow 2015, 32–38.

3 The author's in-depth study of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* will be published shortly. See Benfatto 2018.

4 Mann 1935, 715; 583.

5 Mann 1935, 566–574. Karaite Judaism is a Jewish religious movement characterized by the recognition of the Bible alone as its only authority. The Karaites therefore reject the Talmud and the rabbinical traditions. Recent scholarship (Polliack 2003, xvii–xviii) has defined Karaite Judaism as “a Jewish religious movement of a scripturalist and messianic nature, which crystallized in the second half of the ninth century in the areas of Persia-Iraq and Palestine [...] Karaism, in its spiritual essence and in the grain of its history, should be regarded [...] as one manifestation of the multi-faceted nature of Jewish culture and identity”.

6 Kizilov 2007.

7 Akhiezer 2006. The term “Rabbanite” indicates Jews who receive the Talmudic tradition and its teaching.

8 Schreiner 2002.

rael are constantly attacked by Christians and do not know how to defend themselves.<sup>9</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was marked by unique religious diversity, and each community, including the Jewish one, could take advantage of privileges and concessions. In the period when Isaac ben Abraham was writing, the city of Troki was part of this Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which had been established in 1569 by the unification of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with the political act of the Union of Lublin.<sup>10</sup> The Commonwealth was known as an *unicum* in Europe,<sup>11</sup> with religious minorities such as Armenians, Muslims, Orthodox, Hussites and Jews as well as several Protestant groups existing together in one territory.<sup>12</sup> The last of these had taken refuge there to escape persecution in their countries of origin, for the Commonwealth was an island of tolerance in the vast ocean of religious intolerance that was the rest of Europe. These confessional minorities enjoyed both religious and civil rights thanks to the Warsaw Confederation Act of 1573, which guaranteed religious freedom in the Commonwealth.<sup>13</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham's writings drew on his conversations with a range of individuals that included Catholic bishops, high officials of the state, military officers and distinguished scholars.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* we find reports of dialogues with Christians, Lutherans and members of the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>15</sup>

This text by Isaac ben Abraham has been accurately described thus: "All the controversy, the subject of endless duels since the beginning of Christianity, is here – so to speak – put in a nutshell."<sup>16</sup> While broadly speaking it has similarities in style, methodology and argument with earlier Jewish polemical literature, it also has features that made it particularly interesting and valuable, as we will see.

*Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was intended for limited, or at least controlled, circulation and contained a targeted and well-articulated attack on Christianity. The author provided his treatise with a long preface, composed of about 80 biblical quotations and rendered in rhymed prose.<sup>17</sup> The work is divided into two main sections, with 50 and 100 chapters respectively. Isaac ben Abraham's main argument tackles the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible that seeks to demonstrate that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. The first section addresses

9 Deutsch 1873, 6–8.

10 For more details: Davies 1982, 115–155.

11 Tazbir 1986, 187–188; Tazbir 1973; Davies 1982, 160; Lukowski/Zawadzki 2009, 99–100.

12 Baron 1976; Mann 1935, 553–697; Goldberg 1985; Waysblum 1952, 62–77.

13 Madonia 2013, 17–18; Grzybowski 1979, 75–96.

14 Deutsch 1873, 9–10.

15 Deutsch 1873, 168; 41; 40.

16 Waysblum 1952, 73.

17 Deutsch 1873, 6–13.

Christian interpretations of the prophecies contained in the Hebrew Bible, providing detailed responses as well as objections to Christian doctrine formulated by the author himself. The second section deals with supposed contradictions and errors in the New Testament, especially those involving Christological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and the prophecies, in other words, a major part of the *loci classici* in Christian literature about the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isaiah 7:14; Jeremiah 31:31; Zechariah 9:9). The focus of both sections is primarily on the character of the Messiah, aiming to reject the identification of the Messiah awaited by the Jews with Jesus of Nazareth. The author uses the entire first chapter to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was not the expected Messiah, which it proposes is evident from his pedigree (he was not a descendant of David), from his acts (he did not come to make peace on earth), from the period in which he lived (he did not come on the latter day) and from the absence during his existence of the fulfillment of the promises that are to be realized on the advent of the Messiah (e.g. at the time of the Messiah there is to be only one kingdom, one creed and one religion).<sup>18</sup>

The manuscript of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was completed by a disciple of Isaac ben Abraham after his death. His pupil Yosef ben Mordechai Malinowski (c. 1569–1610) took it upon himself to complete the indexes and he also added a preface.<sup>19</sup> In this preface, he argues that one can reach the truth by following two parallel and complementary paths: the first corroborates the claim, while the second refutes assertions contrary to that claim. For this reason the book is divided into two parts.<sup>20</sup>

In 1621 the Spanish rabbi and leader of the Sephardic congregation of Hamburg Isaac Athias (? – after 1626/7) translated *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* into Spanish.<sup>21</sup> Manuscript copies of this translation of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* were held subsequently by the Sephardi community in Amsterdam, as is confirmed by their presence in the *Ets Haim* library.<sup>22</sup> This collection also contains other Spanish translations as well as translations into Dutch, French and Portuguese.<sup>23</sup>

The first printed edition of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was a product of the Christian world. In the second half of the 17th century, Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705),<sup>24</sup> a polymath Lutheran theologian from Altdorf, pub-

18 Deutsch 1873, 30–38.

19 On Yosef ben Mordechai Malinowski's biography see Muchowski/Yariv 2014.

20 Deutsch 1873, 1–6.

21 One copy of Isaac Athias' translation can be found at the Talmud Torah Library of Livorno; Perani 1997, n. 57.

22 Fuks 1975, n. 188, 192, 211, 212, 217, 222.

23 Fuks 1975, n. 188, 222 (Spanish); 211 (Dutch), 212 (French), 217 (Portuguese).

24 For further biographical details see Werner 1943, 438; Roth-Scholtz 1719; Zohn 1954, 35–40; Schoeps 1952, 67–68, 146, 153–154; Blastenbrei 2004.

lished *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* as well as other anti-Christian works. Published in 1681, the *Tela Ignea Satanae* (*The Fiery Arrows of Satan*), a title that makes reference to Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6:16: "In addition to all these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one") is a well-known anthology of anti-Christian Jewish works translated into Latin.<sup>25</sup> This two-volume work contains six Jewish texts: the *Carmen Memoriale* of R. Lipmannus, the *Old Book Nizzachon* by an unknown author, the *Acts of Debate* of R. Jechielis with a certain Nicolaus, the *Acts of Debate* of R. Moses Nachmanes with Brother Paul Christian and Brother Raymundus Martinis, the book *Chissuk Emuna* of R. Isaacus and the book *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>26</sup>

Wagenseil wrote of these texts that he "thrust them into light, having collected them and dug them out of hidden places in Europe and Africa, and bringing them to the faith of Christian theologians, that they more properly consider those things, which may help to convert that wretched Jewish race".<sup>27</sup> Wagenseil strongly believed that it was necessary to devote particular energies to the refutation of the text by Isaac ben Abraham, claiming there was no more dangerous Jewish work that confirmed the errors of the Jews. *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, which Wagenseil described as "sinister and infernal childbirth conceived at half of the last century",<sup>28</sup> was considered particularly dangerous because it was easily accessible and relatively recent.

Some of the translations, such as those into French, Spanish and Latin, provided Christians with access to the text. The *Tela Ignea Satanae* attracted the attention of a number of defenders of Christianity, who saw the work by Isaac ben Abraham Troki as a strong attack on their faith. While the manuscript form of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* continued to circulate for centuries in both Jewish and Christian worlds, the printed version arrived in the libraries of European intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> They included Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), often acknowledged to have been amongst the first scholars to have reconstructed the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth from a historical viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> Reimarus was a distinguished Enlightenment philosopher and one of the most significant bibli-

25 It is possible to read *Tela Ignea Satanae* thanks to Google Books. See <https://books.google.it/books?id=Ti5IAAAAcAAJ&hl=it&pg=PP9#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 23 July 2018].

26 On *Toledot Yeshu* see Daniel Barbu's contribution in this issue.

27 Wagenseil 1681, title page. The translation from Latin is mine.

28 Wagenseil 1681, page not numbered [1].

29 Some examples are Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jacques Basnage De Beauval (1653–1723), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Voltaire (1694–1778) and Paul-Henri Thiery d'Holbach (1723–1789). For further information see Benfatto 2017.

30 The starting point of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" is traditionally attributed to Reimarus, though recent scholarly inquiry has called this into question. See Pesce 2011, 2017a, 2017b; Facchini 2018; Bermejo Rubio 2009. The contribution by Reimarus to biblical philology and European intellectual thought has been scrutinized in great detail. See Mulsow 2011; Groetsch 2015.

cal critics in 18th-century Germany. He was professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages at the *Gymnasium illustre* in Hamburg from 1727 and, as pointed out by recent scholarship, also a significant antiquary, orientalist, theologian and man of letters.<sup>31</sup> Reimarus is often known via Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) as the herald of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer published his *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (*From Reimarus to Wrede. A History of the Research on the Life of Jesus*) in 1906; the English translation was entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. According to Schweitzer and his successors, Reimarus clearly distinguished between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian dogmatic tradition and thus established an unbridgeable gap between the historical Jesus and the divine Christ. He also recognized that Jesus was a Jew and remained a Jew until his death, admitting Jesus' original Jewishness. Reimarus' works were published posthumously and anonymously by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), in fragments, between 1774 and 1778.<sup>32</sup> Most important in launching critical research on the subject was *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (*On the Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*), published in 1778.

Reimarus was familiar with *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, and we should consider the influence that this text may have exerted on his approach to the study of the New Testament and early Christianity. Reimarus had at his disposal the *Tela Ignea Satanae* composed by Wagenseil and also the bibliographic work *Bibliotheca Hebraea* by his master, the renowned Hebraist Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739),<sup>33</sup> along with various treatises attacking Isaac ben Abraham Troki's text.<sup>34</sup>

Today the most accurate edition of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* is the work of the Silesian rabbi David Deutsch (1810–1873), who published a translation into German together with a revised Hebrew text based on the study of several manuscripts. This edition was published first in 1865 at Breslau and then again in 1873 with the title *Befestigung im Glauben* (*Strengthening in the Faith*).<sup>35</sup> Deutsch was an exponent of that Orthodox Judaism which opposed the ideas of Reform Judaism, and he tried in various ways to fight the advance of the doctrines that were gradually spreading. On several occasions Deutsch spoke out in favor of Orthodoxy, protesting, for example, at the nomination as rabbi of Breslau of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), a principal exponent of Reform Judaism, and composing a critical response to Geiger's famous pamphlet *Ansprache an meine*

31 Mulsow 2011.

32 Alexander 1972; Parente 1977.

33 Wolf 1715–1733.

34 In his monumental library we can find works by Richard Kidder (1633–1703), *A Demonstration of the Messiah*, and Johann Müller (1598–1672), *Judaismus oder Judenthumb*. See the catalogue of Reimarus' library: Scheteling 1768, 73, 113.

35 Deutsch 1873. The Hebrew text of this edition is the base text for all quotations in this article, translated by me.

*Gemeinde* (Address to my Community), published in Breslau in 1842.<sup>36</sup> He was, however, in agreement with Geiger on the value of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*; the latter dedicated an essay to its author in 1853 entitled *Isaak Troki. Ein Apologet des Judenthums am Ende des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (*Isaac Troki. An Apologist of Judaism at the End of the Sixteenth Century*).<sup>37</sup> Geiger was probably the first scholar to deal extensively with Isaac ben Abraham from a scholarly point of view. In his work, the anti-Christian polemics of Isaac ben Abraham was compared with the work of the German philosopher David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874),<sup>38</sup> who in 1835 had written his most famous theological and critical book, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Edited*), on the life of Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

## THE NAZARENE ACCORDING TO JEWISH POLEMICAL DISCOURSE

What could Reimarus and others read about Jesus in *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*? What image of Jesus does this text give and what does it hide? Understandably, Isaac ben Abraham Troki did not present Jesus through a critical approach based on historical reconstruction; rather, he tried to retrace the figure of Jesus by deconstructing the theological and Christological narratives. The historical figure of Jesus is hidden by his polemical perspective, with Isaac ben Abraham focusing his discussion on what the Nazarene was not or did not do. For example, according to his interpretation, the Nazarene was not God, nor was he the Messiah and the promoter of a new religious law. Here in following Isaac ben Abraham's arguments, we will focus on evidence related to New Testament accounts, leaving aside Hebrew Bible proofs and unfulfilled prophecies.

Isaac ben Abraham proposed that the New Testament provides several proofs against Jesus' divinity, and consequently also against the theological concept of the Trinity.<sup>40</sup> For his exploration of this point, the author carefully studied the writings of Nicholas Paruta (c. 1530–1581), Martin Chechowiz (c. 1532–1613) and Simon Budny (c. 1530–1593), the leaders of Unitarianism in Poland.<sup>41</sup> The Unitarian Church grew out of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and had taken shape in Poland and Transylvania in the 1560s. The

36 Brocke/Carlebach 2004, 247; Norden 1902.

37 On this topic see Heschel 1998.

38 Geiger 1853; Heschel 1998, 131.

39 On Geiger's interest in Jewish polemical literature, in particular by Rabbi Leone Modena, see Facchini 2018.

40 On this point the author was influenced also by contemporary antitrinitarian intellectuals. See Dán 1988, 69–82.

41 Firpo 1977; Cantimori 2009.

members of this community recognized the unity of God, rejecting the Trinity and also the doctrine of Original Sin.<sup>42</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham cites and translates into Hebrew passages from the Gospels to show that Jesus did not consider himself equal to God, that he was aware of his human condition. This identity is evident in the epithets for Jesus and his self-appellations. Chief among these is “son of man”, a term that according to Isaac ben Abraham was intended not as a Christological title, as Christians said, but as synonymous with “man” and was used by Jesus as a circumlocution, to indirectly allude to himself (e.g. Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:28–29; Luke 12:10):<sup>43</sup>

Matthew wrote in chapter 12, verse 32: “whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, not in this world, nor in the coming world”. You can also find the same in Mark 3, verse 28 and in Luke 12, verse 19 [sic.]. Here, with this passage, these people clearly confirm that the Holy Spirit and the Son are not one, thus it follows that three are not one, and since Jesus is called the Son of Man, he then is not God, according to their false belief, which is obvious to the understanding.<sup>44</sup>

In order to support his claims, Isaac ben Abraham also cites other epithets that suggest either simply Jesus’ humanity (as a man) or a lack of coincidence with God (e.g. John 8:40; Matthew 10:40).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Jesus is characterized by features that denote his very human nature: his ignorance and limited authority are a clear indication of his distance from divine attributes (e.g. Mark 13:32).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13)<sup>47</sup> was definitive proof for Isaac ben Abraham: Jesus teaches his disciples to pray neither to the Holy Spirit nor to the Son, but only to the God of Heaven, that is the God of Israel:

42 Wilbur 1952.

43 Matthew 12:32: “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”; Mark 3, 28–29: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”; Luke 12:10: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven”. All the biblical quotations that are not in Isaac ben Abraham’s text come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989.

44 Deutsch 1873, 84–85. See also 294–295. The translations from Hebrew are all mine, including quotations from the Gospels.

45 Deutsch 1873, 85. John 8:40: “but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did”; Matthew 10:40: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”.

46 Deutsch 1873, 85. Mark 13:32: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”.

47 Matthew 6:9–13: “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one”.



A quite clear matter comes from the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, called in their language *pater*, written in Matthew, chapter six [verses 9–13], where he did not decree to pray to the Trinity, only to one God, and he is the God of heaven, as it is written there, called in their language *pater*: “our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, come your kingdom, your will be done on earth as in heaven, give us today the bread that is needful for us and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but save us from evil, amen”. From this you can see that he did not instruct them to pray to him, who according to them is the Son, and also not to the Holy Spirit, but only to his father in heaven, to whom there is no equal.<sup>48</sup>

For Isaac ben Abraham this evidence indicates that the concept of the Trinity was foreign to Jesus and, moreover, this passage highlights Jesus’ deep belief in Jewish monotheism.

The author also highlights the attitude of those who were close to Jesus. His family perceived his behavior as inappropriate and deviant (Mark 3:31–35; Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21; John 7:5):<sup>49</sup>

Mark, chapter three, verse 31 [–35]: “And his mother and brothers came and were outside, and sent for him, requesting to see him. And a great number of them were seated around him; and they said to him: See, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you. And he said in answer: Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around at those who were seated about him, he said: See, my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s pleasure, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”. You can also find the same in Matthew, at the end of chapter 12; in Luke chapter 8, verse 19. From this you can see that his own mother and brothers, seeing that he incited and tempted simple people, they did not want to enter into the house, but sent him to call from outside, to prevent him from perpetuating this behavior. He did not listen to their voice, and he did not want to go out to them, since they too did not listen to his voice. The same occurs in John, chapter 7, verse 5, where we can read that neither of his own brothers believed in Jesus.<sup>50</sup>

Most of the arguments related to Jesus’ possible Messiahship come from demonstrating that the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible were not ful-

48 Deutsch 1873, 85–86.

49 Matthew 12:46–50: “While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you’. But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’”; Luke 8:19–21: “Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you’. But he said to them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it’”; John 7:5: “For not even his brothers believed in him”.

50 Deutsch 1873, 308.

filled either during Jesus' lifetime or after his death.<sup>51</sup> The author affirms that Jesus believed he was the Messiah, evident in what he said (John 17:3),<sup>52</sup> but Isaac ben Abraham recognizes that elsewhere Jesus openly challenged his Messianic identity (Matthew 10:34).<sup>53</sup> According to Isaac ben Abraham, the Messiah is a human figure, descended from the paternal Davidic line. He will save and gather all the Jews, ruling over them.

The contradiction in Jesus' self-understanding does not undermine the polemical power of the work: the author's intent seems to be focused on discrediting the Gospel accounts for their discordances. We find a similar kind of incoherence when the author deals with topics related to Mosaic Law. The Christian argument underlined that Jesus had brought about a new law, but according to Isaac ben Abraham, Jesus was largely a devoted Jew who followed Mosaic prescriptions. The argument is so central to the author that he anticipates his main conclusion in the presentation of the second part, recording:

it is renowned and popular that Christians said that the Gospel is a new law given to them by Jesus the Nazarene, but we do not find anywhere in the Gospel that Jesus gave them a new law, indeed we find the contrary: (Jesus) himself ordered the commandments written in the law of Moses be observed and said this is eternally valid and never to be invalidated.<sup>54</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham cites Jesus' own words from the Gospel accounts (e.g. Matthew 5:17–19)<sup>55</sup> to reinforce his conviction:

A Christian opinion against divine law reports that the Mosaic Law was not established to last forever, but only for a limited period of time, up until [the coming of] Jesus, who would then abrogate the Mosaic Law and give to his disciples and followers a new law, which freed them from the commandments and ordinances of Mosaic Law. [...] Response: this claim is not true and also their gospel refutes their words because we can find in Matthew, chapter 5 verse 17 and following, that Jesus said these words to his disciples: "think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfil".<sup>56</sup>

51 Deutsch 1873, 30–38, 45–66.

52 Deutsch 1873, 326. John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent".

53 Deutsch 1873, 295. See also 300. Matthew 10:34: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".

54 Deutsch 1873, 283.

55 Matthew 5:17–19: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven".

56 Deutsch 1873, 124. See also 293, 296.

Furthermore, Jesus' religious behavior demonstrates how he respected mosaic precepts on several occasions (e.g. Luke 2:21; Matthew 6:9–13),<sup>57</sup> as did his first followers after his death (e.g. Acts 15:20; 16:3; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5).<sup>58</sup>

Jesus and his disciples followed religious practices to which every Jew is committed, such as circumcision or observance of Shabbat. Jesus' Jewishness is also supported by his proclaimed monotheism: Jesus addresses the God of Israel during his prayer in times of difficulty (Matthew 26:9–46; Mark 14:35; Luke 22:41).<sup>59</sup> Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane demonstrates this point particularly well:

As it is written in Matthew, chapter 26, verse 39, and these are its words: “and when Jesus went a little farther, he threw himself upon the ground, begged and said: if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me, yet not as I will, but as you will”. Then, he was caught, he cried with a loud voice saying: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” As is written there in chapter 27, verse 46. And this passage likewise proves that the Father is not one with the Son since the will of the Father is not the will of the Son. And if the Christian should reply and say that it was not according to his will, but what they did to him was done by force, then it is said to him: if this is the case how can you call him God since he suffered torments against his will, that he should not be able to save himself from the hands of the enemies? And how will he be able to save those who trust in him?<sup>60</sup>

57 Deutsch 1873, 124; 84–85. Luke 2:21: “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb”; Matthew 6:9–13: as above, n. 47.

58 Deutsch 1873, 124–125. Acts 15:20: “but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood”; 16:3: “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek”; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord”.

59 Deutsch 1873, 301–302; 306. Matthew 26:39–46: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’. Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’. Again he went away for the second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done’. Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand’”; Mark 14:35: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him”; Luke 22:41: “Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed”.

60 Deutsch 1873, 276.

As we have noted, the image of Jesus is not allowed to negate the polemical discourse that guides the author in his analysis of the New Testament. Thus Isaac ben Abraham can note that Jesus acknowledged the validity of the Law of Moses but elsewhere emphasize that Jesus denied the eternal validity of the Torah. Indeed, Isaac ben Abraham also points out an episode in which Jesus declared the Law and Prophets superseded by the arrival of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16).<sup>61</sup>

## CLOSING REMARKS

In this article I have offered a reading of the image of Jesus as it emerges from the writings of a Jewish/Karaite thinker who was primarily moved by a wish to deconstruct the Christological figure. Despite some contradictions in Jesus' self-understanding and his relation with the Law, the image of the Nazarene hidden under the polemical discourse was, Isaac ben Abraham proposed, that of a Jewish man who followed Jewish religious prescriptions and asked his followers to do the same, which they did. Jesus did not believe he was God or the Messiah described in the Hebrew Bible. For Isaac ben Abraham Jesus was a Jew, but not a good Jew.<sup>62</sup> These polemical themes and needs created a particular historical perspective and presented an opportunity for a thorough reading of the Christian texts.<sup>63</sup> In deconstructing the figure of Christ, the polemicist unearthed Jesus and his world, thereby highlighting his historical being. Precisely this image has attracted scholars of ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

Such polemical literature may have unintentionally created historical images of Jesus that would become influential among Christian scholars. In the Christian world *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was well known largely as a result of its translation into Latin by Wagenseil, but manuscript versions also contributed significantly to its diffusion. For example, Spanish manuscript translations of the text circulated among eminent European intellectuals,<sup>64</sup> including English freethinker Anthony Collins (1676–1729) and Voltaire (1669–1778).<sup>65</sup> Collins was

61 Deutsch 1873, 296. Matthew 11:13: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came”; Luke 16:16: “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force”.

62 This characterization is not unusual in Jewish polemical literature. For example, in the *Kelimat ha-Goyim* (*The Shame of the Gentiles*), the work of Jewish polemicist Profiat Duran (c. 1350–1415), we can read that Jesus, like John the Baptist, was described as “fool pious” (חסיד שוטה). See Talmage 1981, 40.

63 On the value of Jewish polemical literature on this theme, see Gutwirth 1984; Cohen 1993; Berger 1998; Del Valle Rodríguez 2010; Le Donne 2012; Wilke 2016; Facchini 2018.

64 The first Spanish translation that we know of bears the title *Fortificacion de la Fè* and was prepared by Sephardic rabbi Isaac Athias (?–after 1626/7) in 1621. Copies of this translation can be found at the Talmud Torah Library in Livorno (Ms. 57) and in the Russian National Library in Moscow (Ms. Guenzburg 823).

65 Tarantino 2007, 257; Havens/Torrey 1959, 256.

influenced by this kind of literature in his literary purposes: both the skeptical tradition and anti-Christian Jewish literature flowed into Collins' works as "useful tools to undermine every rational, philological and historical justification of Christian revelation and to denounce the imposture of the churches".<sup>66</sup> He cited *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* in his famous work *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) when he gave examples of books against the Christian religion written by Jewish authors.<sup>67</sup> Collins' work is documented as present in the impressive library of his contemporary Voltaire, who did not hesitate to define the English freethinker as "one of the most terrible enemies of Christian religion".<sup>68</sup> The French philosopher referred to Isaac ben Abraham's text in his famous *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, under the entry "Prophecy". Voltaire asserted that *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was one of the most dangerous Jewish books, one in which it was possible to find horrible profanations against Christian prophecies, and he furnished examples and demonstrated a very good knowledge of the text.<sup>69</sup>

These few selected examples demonstrate that despite censorship this type of Jewish literature, criticism and polemical content circulated widely. It may have influenced European thinkers in various ways, becoming, for example, an important source of anti-Christian ideas among non-Jewish intellectuals and contributing to undermining respect for Christian theology, the Gospel and the authority of the church.<sup>70</sup>

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66 Tarantino 2007, 78. The translation from Italian is mine.

67 Collins 1724, 82; Tarantino 2007, 110–111.

68 The quote comes from a letter by Voltaire of 1767 that read in French: "un des plus terribles ennemis de la religion chrétienne". See Tarantino 2007, 75.

69 Voltaire 1843, 367–368. See also Szechtman, 1957.

70 Popkin 1992 and 2007.

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