

ASDIWAL

Revue genevoise d'anthropologie
et d'histoire des religions

Comptes rendus

MIRIAM BENFATTO, *Gesù frainteso. La polemica ebraica anticristiana nel « Sefer ḥizzuq emunah » di Yiṣḥaq ben Avraham Troki (c. 1533-1594)*, Rome, Viella, 2022, 284 pages, ISBN: 979-12-5469-208

For full disclosure I should start by signaling that I served as an external reviewer for the author's dissertation, on which this book is based. Nonetheless, the publication of this important monograph on the *Ḥizzuk Emunah* (henceforth *HE*) and its author, the Karaite leader Isaac ben Abraham Troki (1533-1594) deserves to be signaled and applauded. The *HE* or « Strengthening of the Faith » was written in Lithuania in the late sixteenth century, on the eastern fringes of the European world yet at the same time a burgeoning center of Jewish life in the early modern and modern era. Troki or Trakai had long been a cultural hub, with a flourishing Karaite community. The *HE* nevertheless testifies to the constant exchanges and interactions between Rabbanites and Karaites, as its author made extensive use of rabbinic works and explicitly recognized the rabbinic tradition as an integral part of the Jewish cultural inheritance. Isaac ben Abraham also read Latin and Polish and, according to his own testimony, had regularly been called to debate with Christian scholars of various confessions. He also had knowledge of antitrinitarian sources, which he quoted in the *HE* in order to support his own arguments against the divinity of Jesus and the abrogation of the Mosaic commandments.

The *HE* was completed after Isaac's death, around 1594, by one of his students, Josef ben Mordechai Malinowski. It is divided in two parts. In the first, the author starts by refuting the arguments traditionally opposed to Jews in order to prove that they had lost the covenant after failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, then methodically comments on the biblical verses which, according to Chris-

tians, refer to the coming of Christ and confirm the messiahship of Jesus. In the second part, he meticulously works through the books of the New Testament, pointing, among other things, to the contradictions found in the gospels or their problematic use of citations from the Hebrew Bible. The aim of the author was not so much to attack Christianity as to provide Jews with arguments to oppose Christian missionaries. Indeed, the author's intent was to reinforce the faith of his coreligionists, lest they « mingle with the nations and adopt their customs and worship their idols », a citation from Psalm 106,35-36. But indeed, Isaac ben Abraham did so by turning to the Christian scriptures themselves, thus purposefully inverting a Christian strategy deployed ever since the Middle Ages, when Christian scholars began mining rabbinical texts in search for traces of the Christian truth. The work was a genuine tour de force. Very soon after it was completed it started circulating widely among both Jews and Christians. Manuscripts were translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Yiddish, Dutch, Latin, French and eventually English – although a modern edition and translation remains a desideratum.

Its first editor, the German polymath and orientalist J. C. Wagenseil, called it a « sinister and infernal » book; but his Latin translation also meant it was now available for all to read along with other polemical works published in Wagenseil's anthology of Jewish polemical texts, the *Tela ignae satanae* (2 vols., Altdorf, 1681). In an anonymous review of Wagenseil's *Tela*, the *HE* is described as « extremely dangerous, and the strongest book Jews have ever written against our Holy Religion,

and which thus deserve that Christians make their best efforts to refute it» (*Ouvrages des Savans*, March 1682, vol. 1, p. 99). In his *History of the Jews*, published in 1706, the Huguenot scholar Jacques Basnage echoes that judgment, writing that the *HE* «is one of the most dangerous books ever written against Christianity».

Despite that fact – if not on account of it – the work had a significant impact on the emerging field of biblical studies, and more generally on the history of ideas, as Benfatto demonstrates. The publication of Wagenseil's *Tela* marked the end of the work's clandestine circulation. Admittedly, Wagenseil's aim in publishing Jewish anti-Christian works was to support the mission to the Jews. In his view, one had to know the Jewish arguments against Christianity in order to open their eyes and bring them to the true faith. But could he really be blind as to what he had unleashed, providing Enlightenment thinkers with such a storehouse of weapons to use in their struggle against a hegemonic Christian discourse? The full load of Jewish polemics against Christianity was now brought to the surface. Discussions on the true nature of the miracles of Christ, among other things, became commonplace among eighteenth-century philosophers, who could also turn to the *Toledot Yeschu* or «Life of Jesus» to attack the gospel narrative and depict Jesus as a mere man. The *HE* played a non-negligible role in that context. Deist philosophers and freethinkers were eager to embrace the book's arguments against the divinity of Jesus, and its systematic deconstruction of the Christian reading of biblical prophecies. Voltaire mischievously declared that «the most determined nonbelievers have not said anything that one does not read in the *HE*». The influence of Jewish polemical works on Christian criticism of the Bible in the xviith and xviiith century is well-known, but the fact that Isaac ben Abraham also used Christian antitrinitarian authors shows that this was not a one-way process, as Christian skeptics also

found in this Jewish work, and the resurrected arguments of earlier authors rejecting Christian doctrine and insisting on the unity of God. Thus, the Venetian humanist Niccolò Paruta, who was perhaps himself already influenced by Jewish polemical sources (p. 114).

Benfatto's book is divided in three parts, even if the table of contents does not reflect this. The first (pp. 33-85) addresses the historical, political, and religious context in which the work was written, including what we know about its author; the second (pp. 87-159) offers an in-depth analysis of the *HE*, its objectives, its sources, its treatment of Christian scriptures and its description of Jesus; and the last (pp. 160-209) discusses its reception and impact, as mentioned, not least among the first scholars who sought to historicize Jesus and critically engage with the New Testament, starting with Hermann S. Reimarus.

Here one may suggest that the discussion could have been organized somewhat differently, distinguishing between the different uses of the text by Jews, Christian missionaries, scholars, or freethinkers, rather than following the destiny of the work chronologically, although Benfatto does discuss how the *HE* was put to work, for instance, by the English skeptic Anthony Collins. As she notes (p. 179), the latter distinguishes himself from other readers of the work, using it «to demonstrate the inconsistencies of Christian doctrine» and by and large adopting its strategy and exegetical arguments in order to refute the idea that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. D'Holbach would later refer to Collins, who, according to him «had proven most clearly that none of the Old Testament prophecies can be applied literally to Jesus», and who, in support of his arguments, had used those works composed by Jews and published by Wagenseil, in particular the *HE*.

To those who wonder «Why the Hizzuk Emunah?», Voltaire offers a clearcut answer: «Isaac [ben Abraham] is methodical and an

excellent dialectician – never did error have greater support». The work, as Benfatto notes (pp. 90-91), was conceived like a manual, each chapter dedicated to a specific verse or question. The author clearly wanted the book to be of practical use. The work is also remarkable for its critical reading of the New Testament, debating the dating of the gospels and insisting on the fact that Jesus and his first disciples were Jews who by and large abided to the Mosaic commandments. Perhaps one could describe the *HE* as one of the first works of New Testament scholarship?

One may regret the absence of indices, but Benfatto's book certainly is no less a tour de force than the work it sets to analyze and situate both within its original context, carefully reconstructing the lively religious and intellectual dynamics of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the *xvith* and *xviith* century, and within the successive contexts which forged the destiny of *HE* in Western intellectual history.

DANIEL BARBU

Université Paris Sciences & Lettres/CNRS

YANN BERTHELET, BRUNO ROCHETTE éds., *L'Astrologie et les Empereurs romains. 150 ans après Cumont*, Liège, Presses universitaires de Liège (« Série Histoire », 5), 2022, 176 pages, ISBN : 978-2-87562-318-8.

Ce volume rassemble les interventions ayant eu lieu durant un symposium de deux jours (20-21 juin 2018) à l'université de Liège, intitulé « Les astrologues dans l'entourage des empereurs romains, des Julio-Claudiens aux Sévères. Colloque international organisé à l'occasion du 150^e anniversaire de la naissance de Franz Cumont ». L'ouvrage s'articule en trois parties thématiquement organisées : une analyse historiographique des travaux de Franz Cumont, l'astrologie comme appui du pouvoir impérial, et enfin l'attitude des empereurs et des législateurs romains vis-à-vis de cette discipline.

L'introduction rédigée par Yann Berthelet et Bruno Rochette interroge le sens des mots latins *astrologia* et *astronomia*, en soulignant combien la frontière existant entre ces deux termes demeure poreuse dans l'Antiquité. Les auteurs présentent également la structure logique de l'ouvrage.

La première partie est constituée de deux articles consacrés à la méthode de travail

de Franz Cumont. Bruno Rochette retrace le cheminement qui a amené ce dernier à unir astrologie et religion en mettant en évidence la « doctrine » de la religion astrale. Celle-ci se fonde sur l'idée que les divinités sont liées aux étoiles, et que le bonheur ne réside pas sur terre : il faut le rechercher dans le retour de l'âme au ciel après la mort. Dans son texte, l'auteur passe en revue les principales étapes historiographiques de l'étude de l'astrologie. Il souligne l'importance de l'école allemande qui, marquée par les personnalités de Franz Boll, Carl Bezold et Wilhelm Gundel, a permis de faire grandement évoluer les connaissances sur cette pratique. C'est dans ce sillage que s'insère Franz Cumont. Son intérêt pour l'astrologie fait de lui un des instigateurs du *Catalogus Codicum Graecorum Astrologorum* (CCAG). Rochette décrit ensuite les différentes étapes qui ont caractérisé l'étude de l'astrologie au prisme de la religion¹. Entre 1906 et 1911, Franz Cumont développe son idée du mysticisme astral, *i.e.* la contempla-

¹ En 1912, Franz Cumont inscrit l'astrologie dans l'histoire des religions, et non plus uniquement dans celle des sciences. Cf. FRANZ CUMONT, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, New York, 1912, p. xviii : « *This pseudo-science is in reality a creed.* » Il s'agit d'un important changement de paradigme.