

# WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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## CHAPTER TEN

### EXEGESIS OF THE BIBLE

After the Jews had produced the Bible, they started to explain it, and they have been doing this explaining ever since. Most of the innumerable books the Jews have produced during the last 22 centuries are concerned with explaining, elucidating, interpreting and expounding the Bible. The books of the Talmud, the Targums, the various *Midrashim*, the philosophic Philo to Maimonides, and others, are all in one way or another commentaries on the Bible.

Since the Jew has to live by the “Law of God,” every word, every iota of the Holy Scriptures was to serve as a sign post to direct his way in the complexities of life. Thus every word had to be unmistakably clear and well defined.

First came the Targum (Translation).

### THE TARGUMS AND EXEGESIS

For many centuries following the Babylonian exile the Jewish language was Aramaic. The Bible which, with some exceptions, was in Hebrew, was no longer well understood by the masses. It was thus necessary to translate it into the vernacular and to explain difficult passages.

Thus, on the Sabbath and Holy Days when a portion of the Hebrew Bible was read in the synagogue, one of the learned men — the Rabbi or an official translator (“Meturgeman”) — translated the Hebrew text into Aramaic and when necessary also often expounded it.

In countries where the Jews spoke Greek, they used the Septuagint, a translation made about 270 B.C., by seventy emissaries from Jerusalem for Ptolemy II, then king of Egypt. In Hebrew it is known as *Targum Hash-iv'im*, translation of the seventy, which is also the meaning of *septuaginta* (in Greek).

With the exception of this early translation which was written down, the Aramaic Targums were oral, like the “Oral Law.” It was after the destruction of Jerusalem and the second exile that the Aramaic Targums were written down. The best known Targum is that called *Onkelos* to the Pentateuch, and it is on the whole a literal translation.

The other Targums are generally paraphrastic. Such is the *Targum Yerushalmi* (The Jerusalem translation and Targum Jonathan). \*

**\* There are no sure data as to the authorship of the various Targums, nor as to the time of their authorship. It is surmised that “Onkelos” was written in the second century A.D.,”Jonathan” (to the Prophets) in the fourth century; “Yerushalmi” (or pseudo Jonathan) in the seventh century, and the others even later.**

Onkelos, whose translation bears his name, is said to have been a pupil of Rabbi Gamaliel and may have known Paul at the same school. The Targum Yerushalmi in its present form was written not earlier than the seventh century A.D.

The Targums shed much light on ancient Jewish Theology and exegesis, and often show that there was no difference between the New Testament interpretation and the rabbinic interpretation of certain Messianic passages in the Old Testament. It is only much later, in the Middle Ages, that the Rabbis found it necessary to interpret certain passages differently.

There is a marked tendency in the Targums to avoid anthropomorphisms. For example, for “**the Lord came down**” (Genesis 11:25) the Targum has, “the Lord revealed Himself.” The transcendence of God is emphasized by the employment of intermediate agencies like the *Memra* (the “Word” or the “Logos” — in Greek — as used by John: “**In the beginning was the Word**”), the “Shekinah,” etc. Or another example: Genesis 3:8 the Targum translates: “And they heard the voice of the Memra of God walking in the garden . . .” (We shall return to this subject in a later chapter dealing with the Trinity).

The Targums have served not only as a translation of the Scriptures but also as an explanation and exposition. When, however, there arose large Jewish communities in Europe, where Aramaic was no longer the Jewish vernacular, there had to be new commentaries on the Scriptures.

The greatest of the Commentators was *Rashi*, Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, famous also as the commentator of the Talmud, who lived in France (1040-1105). The commentary is usually printed below the Hebrew text. Jewish children began the study of “*Chumash with Rashi*” at an early age and this is still customary in the schools of Israel and is widely used in most Jewish schools in Diaspora.

Among the other notable exegetes of the Middle Ages whose works have been accepted as authoritative and sacred are:

**SAADIA**, Rabbenu Saadiah Gaon, born 892 in Egypt, died 942 in Babylon. A most revered Rabbi whose books have left an indelible impression upon Judaism.

**RAMBAN** ( **MAIMONIDES** ), is considered as a great commentator of the Bible, although his book, *More Nevochim*, was usually shunned because of its non-Jewish spirit. Yet, because of his other voluminous books which are strictly in the rabbinic spirit, he was often called “Second Moses.” Indeed, since Moses, son of Amram, no other Jew has wielded such an influence upon Judaism as has Moses, son of Maimon — known as “RMBM.”

**IBN EZRA** (Abraham), born 1093 in Spain, died 1167 in Rome; a Hebrew poet and one of the greatest Bible exegetes.

**KIMCHI**, or R'D'K (Rabbi David Kimchi), lived in France 1160-1235. Philolog and commentator.

**RAMBAN** — (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman), known also as Nachmanides, born in Spain 1194, died in Palestine in 1270. Revered as a great Rabbi and commentator of great renown.

**RABBI BACHYA** —ben Asher of Spain (in thirteenth century). His commentary on the five books of Moses became one of the most popular exegetical works.

**RALBAG** (initials of Rabbi Levi ben Gershon) died in 1344, recognized as one of the great exegetes.

**ABABBANEL** (Rabbi Isaac Abravanel), bom in Lisbon, Portugal, 1437, died in Venice, Italy, in 1508. He was one of the most famous authorities on Judaism, and one of the greatest exegetes.

**RABBI MOSES ALSHECH** of Palestine in sixteenth century, was the most prolific exegetical author on most of the Bible.

**YARCHI** in the twelfth century in France was another of the recognized great exegetes.

**THE PESIKTA, PHUCE D'RABBI ELIEZER**, and the **YALKUT** of the thirteenth century are Haggadic compilations and have been considered as sacred as the older Midrashim.

The **ZOHAR** on the Pentateuch (see **KABBALAH**) explains the Bible in the mystic way of the Kabbalah. This book has been kept by observant Jews, especially by the Chassidim, as very sacred, and is referred to as the *Holy Zohar*.

According to the expositors of the Bible, and of Judaism as a whole, the Word of God should be explained by four methods, known by their initials as "PaRDeS," i.e. Peshat Remez Derash Sod. The *Peshat* is the simple explanation, i.e. it means what it says, in plain language. *Remez* ("hints") is the allusion and allegorical sense. *Derash* is the way the Midrash expounds the Bible (the homiletical way) and *Sod* (mystery) is the way the Kabbalah interprets the Bible. Some of the exegetes used only one of these four ways, some used all the four ways in their exposition of the Bible. As a whole their exposition tallies with that of the Christian exponents. In modern times when Jews began to use the language of the land where they sojourned there were published translations into the vernacular, mostly in German and English.

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