

Rav Elia Benamozegh (1823-1900) A Forerunner of Christian-Jewish Dialogue

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This year 2023 marks the bicentennial of the birth of this important Italian and Sephardic rabbi. With this article, I would like to present his pioneering contribution to Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Elia Benamozegh was born in Livorno in 1823 to a family originally from Fez, which had given birth to prominent rabbis and mystics. Orphaned by his father at a very young age, his education was cared for by his maternal uncle Rav Yehudah Curiat by whom he was introduced to the study of Torah, Talmud, and the *Zohar*.

Initiated into a business activity that little suited his interests, Elia continued to study until in 1846 thanks to a scholarship he entered a *Bet ha-Midrash*, and from then on he was able to devote himself completely to Jewish studies, without neglecting culture in general, also appreciating new developments in science. His life, all dedicated to his wife and children, to teaching and disciples, to editing Jewish works in his printing house, to studying and writing, took place entirely in Livorno. So concentrated in one place and so poor in outward events, his existence ranged with the power of thought across centuries, cultures, and religions¹.

Benamozegh strongly emphasized his connection to the Moroccan Tradition: «This is therefore the Tradition to which I have the honour of reconnecting. This Tradition develops its roots in the Maghreb, and has never known interruption: the fathers have acquired merits for their sons, and the study has never died out in

¹ A. Guetta, *Filosofia e Qabbalah. Saggio sul pensiero di Elia Benamozegh*, tr. di B. Besana, *Thalassa De Paz*, 2000; L. Amoroso, *Scintille ebraiche. Spinoza, Vico e Benamozegh*, ETS, 2004; M. Cassuto Morselli e G. Maestri, *Elia Benamozegh nostro contemporaneo*, Marietti, 2017; C. Boulouque, *Une autre modernité. L'universalisme juif d'Elia Benamozegh*, tr. de A. de Saint-Loup et P.-E. Dauzat, CNRS, 2020.

their mouths»². Moreover, he participated in the events of the Italian *Risorgimento* and enthusiastically welcomed the birth of the Kingdom of Italy (1861) and the new possibilities it opened up for Italian Jews with the extension of the *Statuto Albertino* and the spread of emancipation.

This is the background that must be kept in mind in order to understand the spirit with which Benamozegh took the courageous decision to participate in the competition announced in 1860 by the "Alliance Israélite Universelle" in which he was asked to examine, from the point of view of dogmatics and morality, the elements that Judaism had transmitted to the religions that followed it. The work he intended to write was to comprise four parts: the first on dogma (in which he would deal with the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the abolition of the Torah); the second on worship (in which he would deal with everything that, having an evangelical origin, could be traced back to Jewish roots); the third on history (in which a Life of Jesus would find a place); and the fourth on morality.

However, the entire plan of the work could not be realised by the date set by the Alliance, and Benamozegh decided to send only the parts that were ready, on the origin of Christianity, the Trinity and morality. He therefore sent to Paris in 1863 a manuscript entitled *Essai sur l'origine des dogmes et de la morale du christianisme*. The jury decided to award the 'Part Three', which was published under the title *Morale juive et morale chrétienne*, the first two parts remained unpublished for 140 years³.

In writing those pages, he was filled with the conviction that he was about to grasp the thread that unites Christianity to Judaism, and that this thread would perhaps one day make it possible to prepare a revision of Christianity not on the basis of external criteria, but on the basis of a tradition of which Christianity itself constitutes an emanation: «I saw ever-widening horizons opening up before my eyes»⁴, writes Benamozegh in his preface to *Morale juive et morale chrétienne*.

The rabbi from Livorno believed that the oral Torah was as old as the written

² See the Introduction to his cousin Avraham Curiat's *Berit Avot* (Livorno 1862).

³ E. Benamozegh, *L'origine dei dogmi cristiani*, Marietti, 2002, 20162.

Torah and found in the New Testament confirmation of the thesis of the antiquity of *Hokhmah*, that science that can take the names of achromatism, esotericism, mysticism or Qabbalah depending on the preferences and idiosyncrasies of the times.

The Gospels speak of the mysteries hidden in the parables and accessible only to the disciples and announce that the secrets will be revealed⁴. The one who above all took on the task of revealing them was Shaul/Paul of Tarsus, who in 2Cor 12,2-4 describes his ascension into the third heaven, the similarities of which Benamozegh shows with the entry into *Pardes*⁵. However, in his work of popularization the Apostle to the Gentiles made a reduction and simplification that are the speculative equivalent of that abolition of the Law of which we shall speak in a moment.

In 1Tim 1,3-4 Shaul/Paul addresses his disciple exhorting him not to devote himself to «fables and endless generations», which according to Benamozegh corresponds exactly to the «innumerable emanations of the *Sefirot* and the aeons, their divisions into families, parents, children, brothers, sisters, spouses»⁶. Shaul/Paul prefers to focus on those *Sefirot* that will give rise to the Christian Trinity (*Hokhmah*, *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*) and especially on *Tiferet*, the central *Sefirah* in which all the six lower *Sefirot* are enclosed, with the exception of *Malkhut*.

The Trinity and the Incarnation (*Tiferet's* eternal incarnation in *Malkhut*)⁹ are originally Jewish concepts that later underwent developments and alterations in non-Jewish circles: «Since we consider the dogma of the triplicity of persons to be one of the greatest and most baleful departures from Kabbalistic orthodoxy, let us see if, once it has been denied, Christianity will change its appearance entirely, strip itself of what is contrary to Judaism, it will lay aside those borrowed garments, those shreds of paganism, which made it unrecognizable to its parents,

⁴ *Id.*, *Morale ebraica e morale cristiana*, Marietti, 2017, p. 5.

⁵ Mt 13,11; Lc 8,10; Mc 4,11-12.

⁶ Mt 10,26-27; Lc 8,16-18, Mc 4,21-23.

⁷ E. Benamozegh, *L'origine dei dogmi cristiani*, cit., pp. 99-103.

⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁹ *In the reformulation of Parsufim we have: Abba (Hokhmah), Imma (Binah), Ben (Tiferet), e Bat (Malkhut).*

which caused it to be expelled from the paternal home, which produced and perpetuated the divorce, the enmity, the fratricidal struggle between Judaism and Christianity, of which the world still mourns today¹⁰.

But the biggest problem in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is the alleged abolition of the Law, for which Benamozegh held Shaul/Paul himself to be most responsible. What was the line the early Christians should have taken? Between the two extreme solutions of Yaaqov/James who wanted to make the Torah obligatory also for the Gentiles and Shaul/Paul who wanted to abolish it for all, there is the third way: Mosaicism for Israel and Noachism for the Gentiles¹¹.

In holding Shaul/Paul responsible for the abolition of the Law within Christendom Benamozegh was influenced by a long exegetical and theological tradition, which continues to exert its influence to this day. In recent years, however, this tradition has begun to be challenged. The letters of Shaul/Paul are of extraordinary linguistic and conceptual complexity, and this has allowed for a number of misunderstandings. Examples could be many, but I will limit myself to two passages.

Let us begin with Rom 8,2, where the apostle states: «For the Torah of the spirit of life in the Messiah Yeshua has delivered you from the law of sin and death». Here Shaul/Paul is not contrasting the new spiritual law with the Torah: the misunderstanding arises from the fact that he uses the term *nomos* both to refer to the Torah and to refer to the law of sin. The law of sin is sin itself, the structure of sin, from which those who are in the Messiah according to Shaul/Paul have been delivered. In Rom 10,4 we find the sentence «*telos gar nomou Christos*» which does not mean that Christ is the *end* of the Law but that the Messiah is the *goal* of the Torah. There is a big difference!

After all, a disciple is no more than his master, and how could Shaul/Paul have proclaimed the abolition of the Torah when Yeshua had explicitly stated: «Do not think that I have come to abolish the Torah and the Neviim. I have not come to abolish them but to spread them in their fullness. For Amen I say to you that until

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹¹ E. Benamozegh, *Il mio Credo. Israele e Umanità*, Castelveccchi, 2023, p. 106.

the heavens and the earth pass away, not even a *yod* or a *tag* will be erased from the Torah, until all things are fulfilled. Therefore he who shall undo the smallest of *mitzvot* and so teach men shall be the smallest in the *Malkhut ha-Shamayim*, and he who shall do and teach them shall be called great in the *Malkhut ha-Shamayim*» (Mt 5,17-19).

After the “New Perspective on Paul” a new stream of studies has emerged in recent years, which is called “Paul within Judaism”. Here is what Mark D. Nanos, one of its exponents, writes: «My publications to date have focused on the (re)interpretation of Paul’s letters. The working hypothesis I am testing involves reading Paul’s letters as if written by a Jew who remained Torah observant after he became convinced that Jesus was the Christ, and of a calling to take that message to the nations. So far this proposition has been confirmed by my research on these letters»¹².

The mystical experience on the road to Damascus was never described by Shaul as a *conversion*: he was never converted, but was called, following the example of the prophet Yirmyah/Jeremiah, to be *navi la-goyim*, a prophet to the nations. There is no devaluation of Torah and *mitzvot* in favour of faith in his letters, but in the short time that in his view remained, he believed that the peoples were not bound to observe the covenant of Moshe and found in Abraham the father of the circumcised and uncircumcised¹³.

Since, as we have said, the issue of the abolition of the Torah was considered by Benamozegh to be the main problem in Jewish-Christian relations, one cannot fail to emphasize the importance of these new perspectives.

In his letters, Shaul/Paul always distinguishes between *Theos* [Eloqim] and *Kyrios* [Ha-Shem] on the one hand and *Christos* on the other: it is not to him that the deification of the Messiah goes back. It is not He the one who introduced the

¹² www.marknanos.com. Cfr. M.D. Nanos – M. Zetterholm (eds), *Paul within Judaism. Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Fortress, 2015; M.D. Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism*, Cascade, 2017.

¹³ *This is the perspective of our Jewish reading of his letters: Nuovo Testamento. Una lettura ebraica*, vol. 2, Castelvechi, 2021.

shituf, the partnership.

It must also be borne in mind that although the Apostle of the Gentiles had a preponderant place in the formation of the Church of the Gentiles (*Ecclesia ex gentibus*) in the 1st century there were other figures, even more authoritative than him, such as Yaaqov/James who emphasized the indissoluble link between faith and works. Together with the Letter of Yaaqov, the *Didache* constitutes an extraordinarily important document of the first phase of the messianic Jewish movement, when the Gentiles were included in the history of salvation, without claiming to replace Israel.

Of course, the question of Jesus' messianism remains open, but freeing this question from many of the theological superstructures that have been added to it can only help to improve relations between Jews and Christians.

Awareness of what a mortal danger Christianity has posed to Judaism (through what Jules Isaac called the teaching of contempt - culminating in the myth of the decedent people -, the replacement theology, and concomitant discriminatory and persecutory practices) does not lead Benamozegh to disavow the value of Christianity and its morality: «A thousand generations have sheltered under its hospitable roof, a thousand sufferings, a thousand sorrows have found in it an almost divine relief: a thousand virtues have spread throughout the world, communicating everywhere the courage to do good and the terror of doing evil; a thousand geniuses have bowed their foreheads before it: let us also bow before this masterpiece of a handful of Jews, before this branch of the great tree of Israel grafted onto the trunk of the Gentiles. Let us recognize in it the imprint of Judaism, the spirit of the patriarchs, the prophets, the rabbis»¹⁴.

Benamozegh was aware that he was dealing with a dangerous discourse, but, as he wrote, alongside the danger there is hope: «In the same way that the Jews who founded Christianity passed through it, in our opinion, there is nothing more natural than for other Jews to pass through it in their turn, and the latter passage proves the former; but it is like a bridge thrown over the abyss, over which one can

¹⁴ E. Benamozegh, *L'origine dei dogmi cristiani*, cit., p. 69.

pass, but also *return*»¹⁵.

The rabbi from Livorno believed that a reformation of Christendom was possible through a true path of *teshuvah*, after which Christianity «will strip itself of all that is contrary to Judaism, it will lay aside the borrowed garments, those shreds of paganism that made it unrecognizable to its parents, that caused it to be expelled from the paternal home, that produced and perpetuated the divorce, the enmity, the fratricidal struggle between Judaism and Christianity, which the world still mourns today»¹⁶.

The *teshuvah* will be, as Malakhi/Malachi, the last of the prophets, describes, a return of the hearts of the children to their fathers and of the hearts of the fathers to their children (MI 3:24), «that is, of Judaism and the religions that were derived from it»¹⁷.

This *teshuvah* is ongoing, with the progress of Jewish-Christian dialogue in recent decades. I believe it is no coincidence that it was precisely the disciple of one of his disciples, Rav Elio Toaff, who welcomed John Paul II to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986: after nineteen centuries, the Pope returned to the kind of building where Yeshua/Jesus used to go every day. In 1993 diplomatic relations were established between the Holy See and the State of Israel. In 2000 John Paul II traveled to Israel and Jerusalem, visiting Yad Vashem and laying his request for forgiveness at the Kotel: «God of our fathers, Thou hast chosen Abraham and his descendants that Thy Name might be brought to the Gentiles: we are deeply grieved at the behaviour of those who throughout history have made these Thy children suffer, and asking Thy forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to an authentic fraternity with the people of the covenant».

The Messiah sits at the gates of Rome¹⁸. The Maharal of Prague interprets the passage to mean that the Messiah will arise when Edom will do *teshuvah*¹⁹.

¹⁵ *Id.*, *Théosophie, presso l'Autore, Livorno 1897*, p. 7.

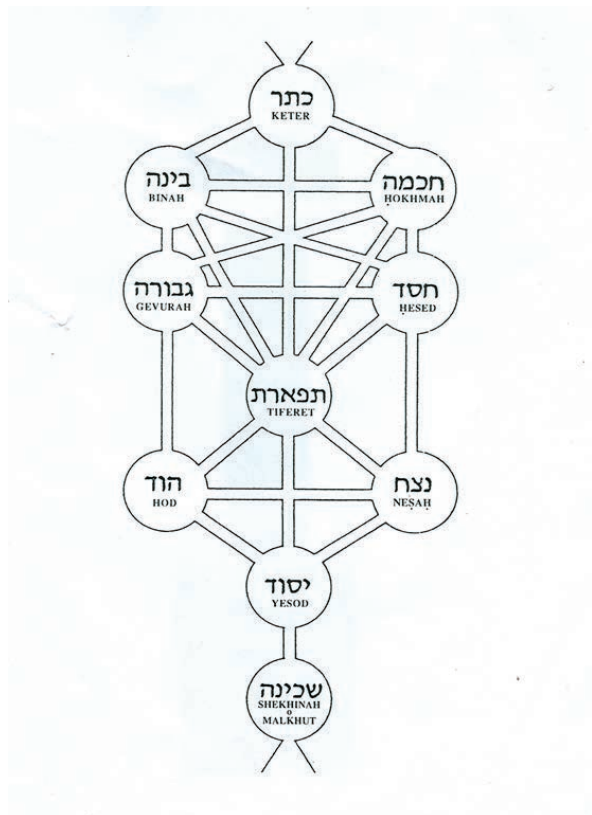
¹⁶ *Id.*, *L'origine dei dogmi cristiani, cit.*, p. 187.

¹⁷ *Id.*, *Il mio Credo. Israele e Umanità, Castelvecchi, 2023*, p. 44.

¹⁸ *Sanhedrin*, 98a.

¹⁹ *Nesah Israel*, cap. 28; cfr. B. Gross, *Le messianisme juif dans la pensée du Maharal de Prague*, Albin Michel, 1994.

He was born two centuries before his time, it was said of Elia Benamozegh, and it is precisely on the bicentennial of his birth that we want to pay tribute to this great forerunner of Jewish-Christian dialogue, whose writings are still not as well known and studied as they deserve to be.



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