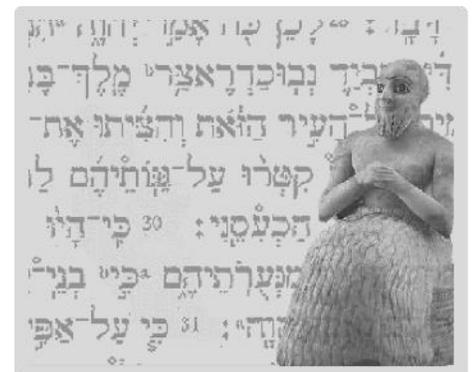


## Medieval Jewish Exegesis of Psalm 2

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# MEDIEVAL JEWISH EXEGESIS OF PSALM 2\*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 2 is one of the most controversial chapters in the book of Psalms. S. Gillingham points out that the interpretations of this psalm, as well as of Psalm 1, “increasingly divided Jews and Christians over the first twelve hundred years of the Common Era.”<sup>1</sup> Several partial analyses on how ancient and medieval Jewish exegetes interpreted this psalm have been conducted. The interpretations of Psalm 2 in early Judaism, including Rabbinic literature, form part of the study by S. Janse on the reception history of this psalm.<sup>2</sup> In her book on the history of interpretation of psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian tradition, Gillingham dedicates an entire chapter to Rabbinic and Medieval exegesis, in which she examines some details of the explanations of Rashi, Maimonides, Jacob ben Reuben, David Kimhi, and Abraham ibn Ezra on the first two psalms.<sup>3</sup> The anti-Christian comments of Jacob ben Reuben and David Kimhi on Psalm 2 are also analyzed by R. Chazan in the context of medieval Jewish and Christian controversies.<sup>4</sup> Some particular explanations of-

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<sup>1</sup> S. Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 94.

<sup>2</sup> S. Janse, “*You Are My Son*”: *The Reception History of Psalm 2 in Early Judaism and the Early Church* (Leuven-Paris-Walpole: Peeters, 2009), 51-75.

<sup>3</sup> Gillingham, *A Journey*, 68-94.

<sup>4</sup> R. Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 235-241.

ferred by Rashi of this psalm have been studied by Grossman,<sup>5</sup> Signer,<sup>6</sup> Harris,<sup>7</sup> and Lasker.<sup>8</sup>

It is the purpose of this article to make an extensive and comparative analysis of the most important medieval Jewish exegetes who wrote commentaries or explanations on this psalm, namely, Saadiah Gaon, Yefet ben Eli, Salmon ben Yeruham, Rashi, Josef Bechor Shor, Abraham ibn Ezra, David Kimhi, Jacob ben Reuben, Menahem ha-Meiri, and Isaiah of Thrani. The comparison and contrast of the explanations of these authors will show that medieval Jewish exegesis of this psalm, far from being unanimous, led to a diversity of viewpoints on the references in the psalm to historical or eschatological figures, nations, and kingdoms, and on the place of Psalm 2 within the book of Psalms.

## 2. THE HISTORICAL AND/OR ESCHATOLOGICAL REFERENCES OF PSALM 2

### 2.1. RABBINIC LITERATURE

In the Talmud, this psalm is cited in the context of the future coming of the Messiah, and specifically of the wars against Gog and Magog preceding that event. The nations that rage against Israel and the peoples who mutter in vain are the idol-worshippers who will be against the Lord and His Messiah when the battle of Gog and Magog comes at the end of times.<sup>9</sup> Ps 2:7–8 is interpreted as the words of God that will be addressed specifically to the Messiah, the son of David.<sup>10</sup>

The interpretation of Psalm 2 in *Midrash Tehillim* is clearly Messianic. It also refers to the future wars of Gog and Magog: “Even in the time-to-come, Gog and Magog will set themselves against the Lord and His anointed, only to fall down.”<sup>11</sup> David foresaw the final battle and considered that the fight of the nations would be in vain. With regard to the “son” mentioned

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<sup>5</sup> A. Grossman, “Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms and the Jewish-Christian Polemic,” in D. Rappel (ed.), *Sefer Ha-Yobel Le-Moshe Ahrend* (Jerusalem, 1996), 59–74 [Heb.].

<sup>6</sup> M.A. Signer, “King/Messiah: Rashi’s Exegesis of Psalms 2,” *Proof-texts* 3 (1983), 273–284; idem, “God’s Love for Israel: Apologetic and Hermeneutical Strategies in Twelfth-Century Biblical Exegesis,” in M. A. Signer and J. V. Engen (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 123–149.

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Harris, “Rashi and the ‘Messianic’ Psalms,” in C. Cohen et al. (eds.), *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 845–862.

<sup>8</sup> D. Lasker, “Rashi and Maimonides on Christianity,” in E. Kanarfogel and M. Sokolow (eds.), *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought Literature and Exegesis* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 3–21.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Abod. Zar. 3b. See also Ber. 7b.

<sup>10</sup> Sukkah 52a.

<sup>11</sup> W.G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 35.

in Ps 2:7, different interpretations are given. In *Midrash Tehillim* 2:9, although the use of this word is taken as a reference to the children of Israel, it also refers “to the lord Messiah,” in whom all the promises mentioned in the psalm will be fulfilled. The expression “*today I have begotten you*” (Ps 2:7) is interpreted in the midrash literally: “On the very day of redemption, God will create the Messiah.” Ps 2:8 is explained as part of the conversation between God and the Messiah in which God promises the Messiah dominion over the nations, because the nations are already part of the Messiah’s inheritance.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the Targum on Psalm 2, Janse sustains that, although a Messianic tendency is evident in the Targum of the Psalms, a non-Messianic interpretation is offered in the translation of Psalm 2.<sup>13</sup> According to S. Gillingham, however, the eschatological connotations of the Targum of Psalm 2 are clear.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2. SAADIAH GAON

The Messianic interpretation of Psalm 2 is clear in the case of Saadiah Gaon. In his long introduction to his commentary on Psalms, Saadiah includes a translation of the first four psalms accompanied by a complete commentary on each of them. On Psalm 2, he affirms:

The second Psalm is a threat to those who rebel against the Lord by practicing heresy and committing sins, and it refers particularly to those who will rise up against the anointed of the Lord on earth.<sup>15</sup>

After explaining the meanings of the difficult words of the psalm, Saadiah affirms that “the object of this chapter is to remind readers of the vengeance that will befall the unbelievers,” and adds that the psalm describes the action taken by the unbelievers to cast off the commandments of the Lord and his anointed. According to him, the word *bonds* in the expression *let us break their bonds* (Ps 2:3) refers to such commandments. The rest of the psalm expresses the intentions of the anointed to subjugate and defeat those who will not accept the true religion.<sup>16</sup> The expression *I have set my king on Zion* (Ps 2:5) was problematic for some medieval Jewish exegetes for, if taken literally, it would imply that God has a king to whom He should be subservient. Saadiah Gaon follows his principle that actions associated with God in Scripture should be directed towards His creatures and explains that this sentence is pronounced by the Messiah to inform the nations that God, who dwells in Zion, is the Messiah’s king.

On the controversial expression “*You are my son, today I have begotten you*” (Ps 2:7), Saadiah Gaon proposes a figurative mean-

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<sup>12</sup> Braude, *Midrash on Psalms*, 41–42.

<sup>13</sup> Janse, “*You Are My Son*”, 46–49.

<sup>14</sup> Gillingham, *A Journey*, 74–76.

<sup>15</sup> Y. Kafih, *Tehillim im Targum u-Perush ha-Gaon Rabbenu Saadiah*, (Jerusalem: Ha-Tehiah, 1966), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Kafih, *Tehillim*, 46–47.

ing: “he is my honored” or “he is my distinguished,” and explains that it is a way of conferring honor or distinction on the Messiah. This figurative meaning is, according to Saadiah, a normal use in Scripture, as in “you are children of the Lord your God” (Deut 14:1), “children unworthy of Him” (Deut 32:5), and similar others.

Regarding the word יִלְדֶתִיךָ, generally translated as *I have begotten you*, Saadiah interprets the root לִד not in the sense of ‘begetting,’ but in the sense of ‘bringing forth,’ ‘creating’ or ‘forming,’ as in “before the mountains were brought forth (יִוֹלְדוּ)” (Ps 90:3).

Having affirmed that the book was revealed to King David, Saadiah sustains that “as a result, you will find several of its headings relating to events that befell him after his anointment, some before he came to rule, and some subsequent to that.”<sup>17</sup> He then lists the psalms related to historical events—3, 34, 52, 54, 56, 59, 60, 63 and 142—but Psalm 2 is not mentioned among them; it is clear, therefore, that for Saadiah this psalm is not connected with any historical event of David.

Saadiah Gaon’s universal conception of this psalm is confirmed by his citation of the expression *Let us break their bonds asunder* (Ps 2:3) in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. According to him, this expression is pronounced by individuals of any nation and religion who think that they are neither subject to the fulfillment of God’s commandments and prohibitions—referred to in the psalm with the word *bonds*—nor to His promises of reward and punishment.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.3. THE KARAITES

The Karaites Salmon ben Yeruham and Yefet ben Eli interpret that this psalm refers to the Messianic times, and specifically to the wars of Gog and Magog. Salmon ben Yeruham affirms:

This psalm contains part of the events related to Gog and Magog, the particular nature of Israel, the mention of the Messiah and of Zion, the invitation to the kings of the earth to proclaim the unity of God and to adopt the religion of the truth, the threat to those who disobey, and the protection of those who obey.<sup>19</sup>

Yefet ben Eli dedicates a part of his commentary on Psalm 3 to what he calls “matters concerning the enemies mentioned in this book.” He starts with David’s personal enemies, and next surveys “the enemies of Israel and of the righteous servant,” classi-

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<sup>17</sup> Kafih, *Tebillim*, 27 and M. Sokolow, “Saadiah Gaon’s Prolegomenon to Psalms,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 51 (1984), 131–174 (153).

<sup>18</sup> Saadiah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. S. Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 15–16.

<sup>19</sup> J. Alobaidi, *Le commentaire des Psaumes par le qaraïte Salmon ben Yeruham: Psaumes 1-10* (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 1996), 329–330. See also J. Shunary, “Salmon Ben Yeruham’s Commentary on the Book of Psalms,” *JQR* 73 (1982), 155–175.

fyng psalms by the number of enemies to whom they refer. Psalm 2 is one of the psalms in which only one enemy is mentioned: Gog.<sup>20</sup> Yefet ben Eli thinks that Gog is referred to here, because he will be the last king to be defeated at the end of times.<sup>21</sup> However, Gog is not alone. Yefet explains that the plural *nations* and *peoples* in Ps 2:1 refers to the kingdoms and peoples who will follow Gog in the battle against the people of the Lord<sup>22</sup> and the Messiah. Yefet remarks that the Messiah mentioned in Ps 2:2 is the Messiah, son of David, not Elijah or the Messiah, son of Joseph.<sup>23</sup> Eissler explains that Yefet wants to stress that Psalm 2 refers to the very last days of the end of times, when the Messiah, son of David, will appear. According to Salmon ben Yeruham, however, Psalm 2 refers to the situation before the arrival of the Messiah, son of David: the kings and princes of Ps 2:2 conspire to destroy Israel completely before the Messiah appears. Yefet ben Eli explains that the verse “let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us” (Ps 2:3) is pronounced by Gog and his allies, expressing their desire to be free from the yokes that the Messiah has put on the necks of his enemies. With this sentence, Gog and his allies want to express their decision to destroy the Messiah and the people of the Lord.

Ben Yeruham states that the king mentioned in Ps 2:6 is the Messiah, a descendant of king David, who will be set by God on Zion. According to Yefet ben Eli, the passage that runs from Ps 2:7 to the end of the psalm are the words of the Messiah who transmits the decree of the Lord: the Messiah will eventually dominate all the nations of the world with his power. According to Ben Yeruham, however, the expression “I will tell of the decree of the Lord” (Ps 2:7) is pronounced by Israel, who expresses honor and grace to God for having informed them of the coming of the Messiah. Ps 2:9 is addressed to the Messiah, who will destroy the enemies with his scepter.

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<sup>20</sup> U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 94. According to Yefet ben Eli, Gog alone is the enemy referred to in Psalms 2, 27, 40, 48, and 68.

<sup>21</sup> For Yefet ben Eli’s comments on Psalm 2, see L. Barges (ed.), *Rabbi Yapheth Ben Heli Bassorensis Karaïtae in Librum Psalmorum* (Paris: Institutii Regii Franciae Typographi, 1856), 92–118. For an edition and German translation of Yefet ben Eli’s commentary on Psalm 2 based on a Paris manuscript, together with an analysis and a comparison with Saadia Gaon’s interpretation, see F. Eissler, *Königpsalmen und karäische Messiaserwartung: Jefet ben Elis Auslegung von Ps 2.72.89.110.132 im Vergleich mit Saadja Gaons Deutung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 31–115, 480–507. On Messianic time according to Yefet ben Eli, see A. Schenker, “Die Geburtswehen der messianischen Zeit nach Japhet ben Eli,” *Bulletin d’études karaïtes* 2 (1989), 39–48.

<sup>22</sup> Yefet ben Eli interprets “against the Lord” (Ps. 2:2) as “against the people of the Lord.”

<sup>23</sup> The karaites derived from Qumran the belief in the two Messiahs: the Messianic priest and the Davidic Messiah, N. Wieder, “The Doctrine of the Two Messiahs among the Karaites,” *JJS* 6 (1955), 14–25.

Salmon ben Yeruham considers that the son, in the expression “*You are my son, today I have begotten you*” (Ps 2:7), refers to the people of Israel, who express honor and distinction to God as a son does to his father. He quotes some biblical verses in which the people of Israel collectively have been addressed as the son of God, as in “I have become a father to Israel” (Jer. 31:9) and in “children of the living God” (Os. 2:1).

Yefet ben Eli translates “*You are my son*” as “You are my friend,” and follows the Targum in interpreting that it means “you are as dear to me as a son to his father.” *Today I have begotten you* is an allegory for the power and rank of the Messiah in the final days: “I will reveal your Messianic power and rank to you, who have been of no importance for the nations during the exile. Today, however, your power and rank have been indeed revealed.”<sup>24</sup> The idea that the people of the world paid no attention to the Messiah during the exile is coherent with the negative concept of the exile by the Karaite “Mourners of Zion.” Yefet ben Eli, one of the “Mourners of Zion”, regarded the people of Israel in exile as trapped in a prison. The coming of the Messiah means the final elimination of exile and the return of the people of Israel to Zion forever.<sup>25</sup>

To support their interpretations, both Salmon ben Yeruham and Yefet ben Eli connect the content of Psalm 2 with the prophecies of Ezekiel contained in chapters 38 and 39 describing the defeat of Gog in Messianic times. According to Salmon ben Yeruham, the many peoples gathered to fight against Israel (Ps 2:1) are the same as Gog’s horde assembled “to carry off plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, etc.” (Ezek 38:13). Contrary to all the other exegetes who render Ps 2:5 literally, Ben Yeruham interprets “he will speak to them in his wrath” as “he will bring a pestilence on them” and relates it to “with pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgement with him [Gog]” (Ezek 38:22). Yefet ben Eli relates Psalm 2 with this section of the book of Ezekiel without citing any specific verse.

In his commentary on the Servant section of the book of Isaiah (Isa 52–53), Yefet ben Eli describes the events that will take place in Messianic times. He affirms that, at those times, the Messiah, coming from the north, will reach the land of Israel, during a time of distress; he will be anointed by Elijah, when the wrath of the Lord is revealed; he will send his troops to every place and obtain victory; then, the Israelites will be tranquil. Yefet then says, “when their news reaches [the nation of] Gog, however, they will break out and start an alliance, as he said *against the Lord and His Messiah* (Ps 2:2).”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Yefet ben Eli’s comments on the Servant section support his arguments

<sup>24</sup> F. Eissler, *Königspsalmen*, 498–99.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Erder, “The Negation of the Exile in the Messianic Doctrine of the Karaite Mourners of Zion,” *HUCA* 68 (1997), 109–140.

<sup>26</sup> J. Alobaidi (ed.), *The Messiah in Isaiah 53: The Commentaries of Saadia Gaon, Salmon Ben Yeruham and Yefet Ben Eli on Is 52:13–53:12* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 127 and 186.

that Ps 2:2 describes the alliance of the nation of Gog with other nations to try to defeat the Messiah.

The Karaite interpretation of Psalm 2 as referring to Messianic times reflects the context in which Salmon ben Yeruham and Yefet ben Eli lived. They were two of the Karaites who, in the tenth century, emigrated to Jerusalem in the hope that the end of times was approaching. The Psalter was seen by the members of the Karaite community of Jerusalem as a prayer book intended to hasten the coming of the Messiah. In his commentary on Psalm 46:1, Yefet ben Eli presents the Karaite community as “the shoshanim”, the “Mourners of Zion” and the “Terebinths of Righteousness” anxiously expecting the coming of the Messiah.<sup>27</sup>

#### 2.4. RASHI

Rashi begins his commentary on Psalm 2 by quoting the opinion of the sages that this psalm refers to the King Messiah; however, he interprets it differently.<sup>28</sup>

According to its basic meaning and for a refutation of the Christians it is correct to interpret it as a reference to David himself in consonance with what is stated in the Bible, “when the Philistines heard that Israel had anointed David as king over them” (2 Sam 5:17), “the Philistines gathered their troops” (1 Sam 28:4), and they fell into his [David’s] hand. It is concerning them that David asked: “why do nations assemble so that all of them are gathered together?” (Ps 2:1).

As A. Grossman sustains, Rashi was against the Messianic interpretation of this psalm because such interpretation supports the Christian view.<sup>29</sup> In consequence, Rashi preferred to look back to Israel’s history and found a historical episode which the psalm connects with. According to Rashi, this psalm is a reference to the biblical episode in which David was anointed as king over Israel and the ensuing rebellion of the Philistines (2 Sam 5:17–25). Rashi’s comments on Ps 2:6 imply that the king enthroned on Zion (Ps 2:6) is David, appointed by the Lord to reign on Zion. Verse 7 is interpreted as the words pronounced by David when he accepted the decree of the Lord that he would be king: “This is an established decree, and one that I have received to tell this and to make this known.” The expression *aské of me* (Ps 2:8) is interpreted as the words of the Lord to king David: “Pray

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<sup>27</sup> D. Frank, *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 166.

<sup>28</sup> For the text of Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms, see M. Cohen (ed.), *Mikra’ot Gedolot ‘Haketer’: Psalms* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), 4–9. For an English translation, M. I. Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 177–79.

<sup>29</sup> Grossman, “Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms,” 61–62; see also A. Grossman, *Rashi* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2014), 129–130.

to Me whenever you are about to wage war against your enemies.” Rashi also explains that David received God’s message contained in Ps 2:7–9 “through the agency of the prophets Nathan, Gad, and Samuel.” According to Rashi, the words of the Lord containing a prophecy can only be received by human beings through a prophet.

As stated by D. Lasker, Psalm 2 is one of the two cases in Rashi’s commentary on Psalms in which he explicitly refers to the Christians and provides an alternative interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

Against the literal meaning of *you are my son* (Ps 2:7), Rashi provides two figurative interpretations: first, the expression “son of God” refers metaphorically to David as “the head of Israel, which is referred to as sons of God,” as in “My son, My first-born son” (Ex. 4:22); second, the word ‘son’ means ‘dear’ in this case and is used to refer to David as one of the kings of Israel who were dear to God.<sup>31</sup> Rashi adds that the expression “son of God” is also used in this sense to refer to king Solomon in 1 Chr 17:13. Rashi’s comments are not intended to avoid an anthropomorphic image of God, but to respond to the Christian interpretation of this verse as a proof of the identification of the Messiah with the anointed king of Israel and the second person of the trinity, namely, the son of God.<sup>32</sup>

However, in his interpretation of verse 10, Rashi adopts a point of view that changes his historical perspective. Regarding the expression *and now, you kings, be wise; be warned, you judges of the earth*, Rashi affirms:

The prophets of Israel are merciful people, who admonish the nations of the world to turn away from their evil, for the Holy One Blessed be He welcomes both evil people and good people.

M. Signer bases his argument on this text to prove that Rashi interprets this psalm also as a prophecy of future events. Signer assumes that, according to Rashi, a psalm written for a specific historical occasion also has also an additional message for future generations: the Jewish prophets who ask the kings to be wise bring the message that God will accept the gentile nations if they turn from their evil. The psalm then becomes both a narrative of Israel’s deliverance through David in the past, and a message from Israel’s prophets to the gentile nations for the future.<sup>33</sup>

As Signer remarks, Rashi goes back to the eschatological interpretation of the sages in verse 10 by introducing another narrator, “the prophets of Israel,” an innovation by Rashi. The

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<sup>30</sup> The other case is Psalm 21; see D. Lasker, “Rashi and Maimonides on Christianity,” in E. Kanarfogel and M. Sokolow (eds.), *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought Literature and Exegesis* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 3–21 (8–9).

<sup>31</sup> This interpretation is based on the Targum of Psalms. In the Targum “you are my son” is translated by “you are as dear to me as a son to a father.”

<sup>32</sup> Lasker, “Rashi and Maimonides,” 11.

<sup>33</sup> Signer, “God’s Love,” 130–31.

prophets of Israel are also the speakers in verse 11, which Rashi explains as a rebuke to the kings of the world.<sup>34</sup>

Rejoice with trembling. When there arrives that trembling, concerning which it is written “trembling has taken hold of the godless” (Isa 33:14), you will rejoice, and you will be happy if you will have served the Lord.

Signer adds that the rabbinic exegesis of Isa 33:14, cited by Rashi here, explains the verse as referring to the day of God’s judgment against the idolatrous who simultaneously “hear” the biblical verse within a narrative context.<sup>35</sup>

In my opinion, Rashi’s comments on Psalm 2 can be divided into two parts. In the first part (verses 1–9), Rashi adopts a historical-contextual approach, and explains the connections between the psalm and the historical episode of David and the Philistines by citing verses mainly from 2 Sam 5 and 1 Sam 28. In the second part (verses 10–12), Rashi connects the verses of the psalm with other biblical texts referring to the eschatological future. The expression *rejoice with trembling* (Ps 2:10) is connected by Rashi with Isa 33:14, a text that is not only understood in an eschatological context by the sages, but also by Rashi himself, as can be deduced from his commentary on chapter 33 of Isaiah.

In his comments on Ps 2:12, Rashi clearly demonstrates his eschatological conception of the second part of the psalm by connecting the expression *your way be doomed* (Ps 2:12)—also addressed to the kings of the world—with “but the way of the wicked is doomed” (Ps 1:6), which he clearly assigns to the future Day of the Judgment.

*The way of the wicked* (Ps 1:6) is hateful in His eyes so that He removes it from His presence, therefore there will be no resurrection for the wicked on the Day of the Judgment, nor are *the habitual sinners* (Ps 1:1) to be listed in the assembly of the righteous.

Some of Rashi’s comments on this psalm were cited by Nicholas of Lyra. Regarding the sentence *you shall break them in pieces like a potter’s vessel* (Ps 2:9), Lyra cites a comment by Rashi which is not found in the editions or manuscripts of Rashi. According to Lyra’s citation, Rashi interprets this sentence as referring to David’s defeat of the Ammonites in Rabbah and in the other cities of the Ammonites, as appears in 2 Sam 12:29-31.<sup>36</sup> Lyra then uses Rashi’s citation of the Messianic interpretation of this psalm in rabbinic literature as proof that “according to the ancient doctors of the Hebrews” this psalm refers to Christ. Lyra contrasts the Messianic interpretation of the sages with the historical perspective of Rashi and other authors to conclude that the latter are wrong. Lyra, however, coincides with the Jewish interpreters who attribute the authorship of this psalm to David.

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<sup>34</sup> Signer, “King/Messiah,” 276–77.

<sup>35</sup> Signer, “King/Messiah,” 277.

<sup>36</sup> H. Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), 177, 318 note 308.

He bases his case on the citation of this psalm in Acts 4:25–26 in which it is explicitly mentioned that it was written by David.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.5. JOSEPH BECHOR SHOR

The Hebrew text of Joseph Bechor Shor's commentary on Psalm 2 was collected by a Jewish polemicist named Joseph the Zealot, and it is preserved in a Paris manuscript of the 13th century.<sup>38</sup>

Bechor Shor explains the whole psalm, and not only a part of it, within the context of the episode in which the Philistines went up to fight against David, when they heard that he had been anointed king over Israel, as is stated in 2 Samuel 5. Bechor Shor is more precise than Rashi in remarking on the parallels between the verses of the psalm and the details of the episode, providing information not included in the biblical text. According to Bechor Shor, the Philistines in the psalm are called *peoples* (Ps 2:1) in the plural, for they had five satraps, meaning to say that they were a diverse people with five diverse leaders. The words of the Lord to terrify the nations and the peoples in Psalm 2:5–6 refer to the words of the Lord to David encouraging him to fight against the Philistines (2 Sam 5:19.24).

Joseph Bechor Shor explains the expression “*I have set my king on Zion*” (Ps 2:6) as follows.

I have set David, who is *my king*, the king who belongs to me (מֶלֶךְ שֵׁשׁ לִי). Just as from נְשִׂיא ‘prince’ can be said נְשִׂיאִי “my princes” (Ezek 45:8), and from עֶבֶד ‘servant’ can be said עֶבְדִּי “my servant” (Isa 41:8 *et passim*), so also from מֶלֶךְ ‘king’ can be said מַלְכִּי ‘my king.’

Bechor Shor wants to avoid the idea that God is subservient to king David by explaining that David's kingship belongs to God. He also cites other examples to prove that anthropomorphisms are normally used in Scripture.

Joseph Bechor Shor interprets the expression *I have begotten you* as “I have magnified you,” and explains that it refers to the promise of God to king David to make a great name for him, as stated in 2 Sam 7:9. He quotes two biblical verses in which the root יָלַד has the meaning of “magnifying,” “making great,” as in “before the mountains were made great (יָלַדוּ)” (Ps 90:2), and “shall a nation be magnified (יִלְדֶה) in one moment?” (Isa 66:8).

The command *ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage* (Ps 2:8) is equivalent to God's command to David to take His advice when he would make war with the Philistines, as stated in 2 Sam 5:19. The words *serve the Lord with fear* (Ps 2:11) are the

<sup>37</sup> Hailperin, *Rashi*, pp. 178–79.

<sup>38</sup> M. Liber, review of *Joseph Bechor Schor: Ein nordfranzösischer Bibelerklärer des XII. Jahrhunderts*, by Nathan Porges and Julius Guttmann, *REJ* 58 (1909), 307–314 (309–310). On Joseph the Zealot, see Z. Kahn, “Étude sur le livre de Joseph le Zélateur, recueil de controverses religieuses du Moyen Age,” *REJ* 1 (1880), 222–246; 3 (1881), 1–38. Bechor Shor is considered by Joseph the Zealot mainly as a commentator of the Psalms.

same as David's warning to the Israelites to serve the Lord with fear. The words *נשקו בר* (Ps 2:12) are interpreted as David's words to the Israelites asking them to arm themselves with purity so that God would not be angry.

Not a single reference to the Messianic interpretation, nor even an allusion to it, is found in Bechor Shor's commentary. As in the case of Rashi, it is most probably intended as a reaction against the Christian interpretations of Psalm 2. According to Hailperin, part of Nicholas of Lyra's quotation of the interpretation of Psalm 2 in the name of "the modern Hebrews" coincides with Bechor Shor's commentary.<sup>39</sup>

The historical-contextual perspective of the exegesis by Rashi and Bechor Shor on Psalm 2 has to be understood in the context of the frequently polemical relationship between Judaism and Christianity that existed in Northern France at the time.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.6. ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

In his two commentaries on Psalm 2, Abraham ibn Ezra proposes the two possible explanations as to who this psalm refers to: King David or the Messiah.<sup>41</sup> In his first commentary, written in 1140–1143 in Rome or Lucca,<sup>42</sup> Ibn Ezra simply affirms that the words contained in Ps 2:1 "are the words of one of the prophets–poets about David or about the Messiah." In his second commentary on this book, written in 1156 in Rouen, northern France,<sup>43</sup> he mentions the two possibilities, and adds that, if it refers to David, it was probably composed on the day he was anointed. In his second commentary on Ps 2:2, Ibn Ezra affirms,

If we accept the opinions of those who say that this psalm was composed by a poet in honor of David or that David prophesied about himself, then we must explain our verse as speaking of the many nations that Scripture tells us were under David's hand.

Ibn Ezra firstly poses the question regarding the authorship of Psalm 2. In his two comments on Ps 2:1, Ibn Ezra explicitly affirms that this psalm was written by one of the poets or singers at the service of king David. He observes that verses 7–9 may contain the actual words of David—basing himself on the fact

<sup>39</sup> Hailperin, *Rashi*, 176–77, 317 note 302.

<sup>40</sup> R. A. Harris, "Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis," in A. J. Hauser and D.F. Watson (eds.), *History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 163.

<sup>41</sup> The text of Ibn Ezra's fragmentary first commentary on Psalms was edited and translated in Simon, *Four Approaches*, 308–329. For the text of Ibn Ezra's second commentary on Psalms, see Cohen, *Haketer*. For an English translation, see H. Norman Strickman (trans.), *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the First Book of Psalms: Chapters 1–41* (New York: Yashar Books, 2006), 12–26.

<sup>42</sup> S. Sela-G. Freudenthal, "Abraham Ibn Ezra's Scholarly Writings: A Chronological Listing," *Aleph* 6 (2006) 13–55, here 18 and 26–27.

<sup>43</sup> Sela-Freudenthal, "Abraham Ibn Ezra," 21 and 44.

that these verses are written in the first singular person—or may be the words of the poet speaking on behalf of David. Therefore, the statement “that David prophesied about himself” is not Ibn Ezra’s opinion, but it is cited here as the opinion of others.

From the literal meaning of the plural *nations, peoples, kings* and *rulers* (Ps 2:1–2), Ibn Ezra concludes that these words do not refer to any nation in particular, but to “the nations around Jerusalem who fought against him [David], like the Arameans, Edom, Philistines, and Amalek,” as explicitly mentioned in his first commentary. Ibn Ezra’s comments are intended to make evident the lack of grammatical consistency of those who interpret that these verses refer to the specific episode of the war of David against the Philistines.

In addition to this, Ibn Ezra clearly affirms that he prefers to interpret these verses as referring to the Messiah. The use of the plurals *nations, peoples, kings* and *rulers* is what led him to prefer the eschatological interpretation of the psalm, for it is in accord with the literal meaning of the text. Ibn Ezra explains that, in the future Messianic times, the nations of the world that have not been able to follow the basic laws of the Torah will be against the Lord, and his anointed, the Messiah, because “they will not want to decrease before him, accept his discipline and pay him tribute.”

Abraham ibn Ezra interprets the expression “*You are my son*” in a figurative way, as the Lord’s command to serve Him as a son honors his father. Ibn Ezra does not give any explanation of the meaning of the expression *I have begotten you*; he simply relates it to the verse “the Rock that begot you (יִלְדֶךָ)” (Deut 32:18). In his comments on the latter verse, Ibn Ezra means to say that Scripture speaks of God as begetting Israel metaphorically, because Israel “came from God, for everything comes from God’s might.”<sup>44</sup> Ibn Ezra seems to interpret *I have begotten you* in the sense of creation, but definitely without implying a biological conception.

Ibn Ezra’s preference for the Messianic interpretation must be understood within the context of the explanations of this psalm by the Jewish exegetes in northern France. In this case, Ibn Ezra prefers to offer a critical view of these exegetes, for their interpretations are not based on the literal meaning of the text.

## 2.7. DAVID KIMHI

According to David Kimhi, this psalm clearly refers to the episode of the rebellion of the Philistines against king David.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (trans.), *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch: Deuteronomy* (New York: Menorah, 2001), 251.

<sup>45</sup> For the text of David Kimhi’s Commentary on Psalms, see Cohen, *Haketer*. For an English translation, see R.G. Finch and G.H. Box (trans.), *The Longer Commentary of R. David Kimbi on the First Book of Psalms (I-X, XV-XVII, XIX, XXII, XXIV)* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan, 1919).

Kimhi explains every detail of each verse in this psalm in connection with this episode. The expression *they think vain things* (Ps 2:1) means that, since the Philistines had defeated Saul in his final battle and had inflicted heavy casualties on the people, they were saying proud things when they again came to attack Israel. The kings and rulers of the earth mentioned in verse 2 are “the satraps of the Philistines”. Kimhi justifies that they are called “kings” or “rulers” because they were so arrogant that they imagined themselves as kings. He adds that “possibly also there were assembled with them other kings from the nations.” The reason that they were against the Lord and against his anointed (Ps 2:2) is that the Philistines “knew that David was king by the appointment of the Lord, and Samuel the prophet of the Lord had anointed him king.”

The expression *He will speak to them in his wrath* (Ps 2:5) means that God spoke to the Philistines in His wrath, when He heard their words and saw their arrogance. God’s decision to make David *king on Zion* (Ps 2:6) is related to the episode when God addressed Samuel to inform him that he has chosen a king “for Himself” from among Jesse’s sons (1 Sam 16:1).

The reference to Zion in verse 6 is once again interpreted as a reference to an episode in David’s life:

The stronghold of Zion was not conquered until David came to subdue it, therefore Zion with Jerusalem is called ‘the city of David’; and after he had subdued it, the Philistines gathered together to fight against him.

Kimhi explains that King David is called “the son of God” (Ps 2:7) because the day he was anointed as king of Israel by Samuel, God chose him as a son. Kimhi understands ‘son’ in the expression “the son of God” (Ps 2:7) in the sense of ‘obedience’, not in the sense of ‘kinship,’ and justifies it as follows: “everyone who is obedient in the service of God, He calls His son, just as a son obeys his father and is ready for his service.” *I have begotten you* means that “on that day there was born in him (David) the spirit of God.” Kimhi relates this sentence to the episode in which David was anointed as king by Samuel “and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13). He adds that “from that day onward, he gave expression to songs and psalms by the Holy Spirit, which was born in him and imparted to him by God.” David Qimhi rejects the interpretation of *I have begotten you* in the sense of ‘creation’.

The idea that the nations are David’s heritage, according to Kimhi’s interpretation of verse 8, is related to the words that God addressed to David through the prophet Nathan in which God proves to David that He had got rid of the enemies facing him and had made for David a great name (2 Sam 7:9). The fact that the Edomites became servants of David after being defeated by him (2 Sam 8:14), as did the Arameans from Damascus (2 Sam 8:6), also proves that the nations are David’s heritage.

Verses 10–12 are interpreted by Kimhi as the words of David to the kings who came to fight against him:

*Now therefore, O kings, be wise and know that you have no power to nullify God's decree, since it was He who commissioned me to be king. And how do you dare to meet together against the Lord? Be wise and give heed, for you are unable to nullify the Lord's decree.*

Kimhi's motivation to choose a historical-contextual interpretation of Psalm 2 is to avoid the Christian Messianic interpretation of the psalm. The last part of his commentary on Psalm 2 contains a long anti-Christian discourse in which Kimhi, by using philosophical and exegetical arguments, rejects the Christian interpretation of the verse "*You are my son; today I have begotten you*" (Ps 2:7). According to him, this expression must not be taken literally but figuratively. Kimhi also argues that if Jesus is taken to be divine, then he would not need to smash the nations to make them his domain, as inferred from Ps 2:8–9.<sup>46</sup> As Kimhi himself affirms at the end of his commentary on Psalm 2, all these anti-Christian arguments are intended to serve the Jews in their polemics against the Christians. In his own words, "I have taught you what to reply to them in this psalm, and you can add your own response following the tenor of these words."

Kimhi, however, admits that this psalm has been interpreted as eschatological in the Talmud and, at the end of his commentary, he affirms that, even though this psalm can be interpreted in a Messianic sense, the best explanation is that it refers to an episode in David's lifetime. Nevertheless, Kimhi does not reject the Messianic interpretation because it is part of the Jewish tradition.

### **2.8. ISAIAH OF THRANI**

The Italian halakhist of the 13th century, Isaiah of Thrani, clearly interprets Psalm 2 as referring to king David and the events related in 2 Sam 5. The Philistines gathered to fight against king David, but he was able to defeat them several times with the help of God. Their counsel and conspiracy were in vain, for they were unable to nullify God's decree of salvation. Not a single reference to Messianic interpretations is found in Isaiah of Thrani's commentary on this psalm.<sup>47</sup>

Isaiah of Thrani's historical interpretation of Psalm 2 must be understood as a rejection of the Christian Messianic view. Even though polemical comments are not very frequent in Isaiah of Thrani's exegesis, some of his interpretations are clearly anti-Christian. Isaiah of Thrani explains that Psalm 21 was a prophecy written by David referring to king Hezekiah. Hezekiah will rejoice in the future when Senacherib is defeated before him. At the end of his commentary on Psalm 21, Isaiah of Thrani sustains that his interpretation of the psalm is useful "as a response to the heretics," a clear reference to the Christians. As in the case of Psalm 2, Isaiah of Thrani preferred to identify the king in

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<sup>46</sup> Chazan, *Fashioning*, 239–241.

<sup>47</sup> For the text of Isaiah of Thrani's Commentary on Psalms, see Cohen, *Haketer*.

Psalm 21 with a historical figure from the history of Israel as a response against the Christians, who identified the king with Jesus, who was made king of the world by the Lord.<sup>48</sup>

### 2.9. MENAHEM HA-MEIRI

The 14th century Provençal exegete, Menahem ha-Meiri, interprets this psalm as referring to the anointment of David as king of Israel and the subsequent rebellion of the Philistines. Ha-Meiri also affirms that, according to most exegetes, the author of the psalm—either David or one of his poets—praises God for all the wonders and victories over the Philistines at the beginning of David’s reign (2 Sam 5:17–20).

Menahem ha-Meiri’s comments on this psalm mainly follow David Kimhi’s interpretations. He coincides with Kimhi in explaining that *the kings of the earth* (Ps 2:2) are the satraps of the Philistines, who are called *kings* for, in their pride, they imagine themselves to be kings. Ha-Meiri also coincides with Kimhi that the *anointed* of verse 2 is none other than David, “who was anointed by God’s command.” Verse 6 are the words of David speaking of himself: “How do they [the Philistines] dare to be against me, if I am one of the servants of the Lord, and have transmitted and professed the unity of God, and have raised and exalt his kingdom on Zion!” Verses 10–12 are the words of David or one of his poets on his behalf, as if David was addressing his own enemies.

Menahem ha-Meiri gives two interpretations of the expression “*I have set my king on Zion.*” The first of them suggests that these are the words of the poet, as if God was saying, “How do they [the Philistines] dare to destroy David’s kingdom, when I have made him king!” The expression *my king* means “the king who is Mine, that is, he is king and he is Mine.” As in the case of Bechor Shor, Menahem ha-Meiri provides this interpretation to avoid interpreting that God is subservient to a human king.

In his second interpretation, Ha-Meiri explains that the words “*I have set my king on Zion*” are David’s words. David means to say: “How do they [the Philistines] dare to be against me, if I am one of the servants of the Lord, have transmitted and professed the unity of God, and raised and exalted his kingdom on Zion!” In this case, *my king* refers to God, to whom David is subservient.

According to Menahem ha-Meiri, “*You are my son*” means: “I have made you [David] special as a king before me, just as a son is special to his father to serve and love him.” He also explains *I have begotten you* in the sense of “making great” and “forming”: “I have made you great and I have formed you on the side appropriate for you.” Menahem ha-Meiri then cites verses in which the root לָדַד has the sense of “creation,” as in “before the mountains were created (וְלִדְדוֹ)” (Ps 90:2), or the sense of “making great,” “bringing up” as in “the Rock that made you great (וְלִדְדוֹ)” (Deut 32:18). He adds that both expressions can also refer to the day when the spirit of prophecy was

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<sup>48</sup> Cohen, *Haketer*, 24–25.

enkindled within king David, as stated in “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13).

However, at the end of his commentary on this psalm, Menahem ha-Meiri admits the eschatological interpretation of this psalm.

Our sages, of blessed memory, interpreted that the whole psalm refers to the future redemption of the King-Messiah, and that *why do the nations assemble?* (Ps 2:1) refers to the wars of Gog and Magog. The whole psalm should be interpreted according to this meaning and, in my opinion, *happy are all who take refuge in Him* (Ps 2:12) means that, although the time is prolonged and the nation is desperate, happy are those who, coming from every place, take refuge in Him, and attain the time.

Therefore, Menahem ha-Meiri concludes that both interpretations—that it refers to king David and that it refers to the future Messianic times—are valid.<sup>49</sup> The fact that David Kimhi was the main source of his comments on Psalm 2 and that Kimhi opened the possibility of interpreting this psalm in a Messianic tone is what led Menahem ha-Meiri to arrive at such a conclusion. In addition to this, Ha-Meiri’s acceptance of the Messianic meaning of Psalm 2—with all its Christological implications—can also be understood in consonance with his positive theological attitude toward Christianity, a unique position in Medieval rabbinic literature. In various statements scattered throughout his commentaries on the Talmud, Ha-Meiri sustains that Christians are not idolaters, and affirms that adherents of the Trinity are believers in the doctrine of Divine Unity.<sup>50</sup> Such a positive view of Christianity, together with the acceptance of the rabbinic tradition and Kimhi’s viewpoint, is what led him to accept the Messianic implications of Psalm 2.

### 2.10. JACOB BEN REUBEN

Psalm 2 played an important role in Medieval Jewish polemical writings.<sup>51</sup> In Jacob ben Reuben’s *Milhamot ha-Shem*, this is the very first psalm cited in the third chapter, which is devoted to Christian arguments drawn from the book of Psalms and Jewish replies to those arguments.<sup>52</sup> Against the Christian interpretation that Ps 2:7 refers to Jesus as the son of God, Jacob

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<sup>49</sup> For the text of Menahem ha-Meiri’s Commentary on Psalms, see Cohen, *Haketer*.

<sup>50</sup> J. D. Bleich, “Divine Unity in Maimonides, the Tosafists and Me’iri,” in L.E. Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 237–254.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the use of this psalm in the classical polemical text entitled *Nizzahon Vetus* in D. Berger (ed.), *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 137.

<sup>52</sup> J. Rosenthal (ed.), *Jacob Ben Reuben: Milhamot ha-Shem* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), 63–65. On Jacob ben Reuben’s analysis on Psalm 2, see Chazan, *Fashioning*, 236–38.

ben Reuben's Jewish spokesman argues that there are a number of biblical figures designated as sons of God, such as David, Solomon, or the entire people of Israel. As has been shown before, this argument had already been used by Rashi. The expression "son of God" is applied to David as deduced from "He shall cry to me: 'You are my father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation'" (Ps 89:27), and "I will make him the firstborn" (Ps 89:28). In the context of Psalm 89, God is referring to king David. If interpreted literally—Jacob ben Reuben argues—David would appear to be God's firstborn, which is absurd. The expressions referring to the sons of God in the Bible are nothing more than poetic imagery. If they are interpreted literally, he adds, then God had several sons, and Jesus was clearly not His firstborn. Ben Reuben concludes that this argument is "absolutely crazy." He also argues that if Jesus is viewed as divine, then he would not need the domain promised to him in Ps 2:8.

Jacob ben Reuben explains that the author of the psalm, King David, speaks simply of himself. God has proclaimed him as his son and has fashioned him as king, delivering the nations into his—David's—hands. At the end of the psalm, the kings of the nations, whom God has made subservient to David, recognize God's dictates. No reference to a Messiah is found in Jacob ben Reuben's explanation of Psalm 2. David alone is the human chosen by God to serve as king and ruler over the nation.

### 3. THE PLACE OF PSALM 2 IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

In the history of Jewish exegesis, several observations were made to connect Psalms 1 and 2. The connection between these two psalms is especially relevant for the authors who interpret Psalm 2 in a Messianic sense.

According to the Karaite Salmon ben Yeruham, Psalm 2 is the logic continuation of Psalm 1, because Psalm 1 deals with the retribution of the wicked and the reward of the righteous, and Psalm 2 deals with the insolence of the wicked and their offense against God and his Messiah. Ben Yeruham also provides a thematic connection between Psalms 2 and 3: the former deals with the assembly of the enemies of Israel under the leadership of Gog to fight against Israel, and the latter includes the response of Israel to such enemies when redemption arrives: *I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around* (Ps 3:7).<sup>53</sup> The *thousands of people* in Psalm 3 are the same as *the kings of the earth* in Psalm 2 who are in opposition to the people of Israel and the Messiah. According to Salmon ben Yeruham, Psalm 3 is a prophecy written by David to inform not only of an episode on his own life—David's flight from his son Absalom—, but also of the future redemption of the people of Israel. The enemies mentioned in the psalm are those who will be against Israel at that time. By connecting chapters 2 and 3, Ben Yeruham wants to make clear that the first three psalms of the book of Psalms form a consistent unit referring to the future Messianic times.

<sup>53</sup> Alobaidi, *Le commentaire des Psaumes*, 350 and 355.

Yefet ben Eli also gives a thematic connection between Psalms 1 and 2. The “wicked” mentioned in Ps 1:4–6 are the “nations” mentioned in Psalm 2:1 that will be destroyed in the war against Gog at the end of times. The end of Psalm 1 deals with God’s protection of the righteous and His punishment of the wicked, and Psalm 2 deals with God’s punishment of Gog, His rejection of false religions, and the submission of all the nations to the power of the Messiah and the Lord.<sup>54</sup>

Yefet ben Eli also explains that Psalm 2 is placed before Psalm 3 because in both psalms two similar situations are compared: Psalm 2 refers to a national danger in the future and Psalm 3 refers to a personal danger in the present. He adds that the editor of this book (*mudawwin*) arranged these two psalms in this order, not only because of the seriousness of the two dangers, but primarily so that we would “compare the incident of Absalom with that of Gog.” Yefet concludes that there are similarities “between the case of Israel and Gog (Psalm 2) and what happened to David at the hands of Absalom (Psalm 3).”<sup>55</sup>

Saadia Gaon connects psalms 1 and 2 due to the common theme between them.<sup>56</sup> His interpretation as to why Psalm 2 is placed after Psalm 1 is based on the explanation of the sages: Psalm 1 begins with *happy* (Ps 1:1), and Psalm 2 ends with *happy* (Ps 2:12). But Saadia Gaon is more specific in affirming that the wicked of Psalm 1 are those who rebel against the Lord and his anointed of Psalm 2. In his opinion, Psalm 1 must be interpreted eschatologically as dealing with the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked in the world to come, when the day of the Lord comes and the exile of the people of Israel finishes. The reward promised to the righteous in Psalm 1 is compared with the eschatological verses of Malachi, “they shall be my special possession on the day when I act” (Mal 3:17), Zephaniah, “wait . . . for the day when I arise as a witness” (Zeph 3:8), and Isaiah, “I am the Lord, in its time I will accomplish it quickly” (Isa 60:22). Saadia Gaon’s eschatological interpretation of Psalm 1 is in consonance with his Messianic interpretation of Psalm 2. Saadia’s explanation of the connections between Psalms 2 and 3 also resembles that of the sages: Psalm 2 is about the people who joined together to be against the Lord and his anointed, and an example of such actions is found in Psalm 3, which deals with Absalom and his companions when they rose up against David.

The connection between psalms 1 and 2 is not a matter of concern for the exegetes who interpret Psalm 2 as referring to a historical episode in David’s lifetime.

In his introduction to his first commentary on Psalms, Abraham ibn Ezra cites the opinion of Saadia Gaon that there is a close thematic link between Psalms 2 and 3, but rejects it

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<sup>54</sup> F. Eissler, *Königpsalmen*, 33–36.

<sup>55</sup> Simon, *Four Approaches*, 96–97.

<sup>56</sup> Kafih, *Tehillim*, 38; Sokolow, “Saadia Gaon,” 173–74; Simon, *Four Approaches*, 30.

arguing that Saadiah's opinion has no substantial textual basis to support it.<sup>57</sup>

Ibn Ezra sustains that there is neither any thematic sequence nor a chronological order in the book of psalms. He cites the rabbinic dictum "There is no chronological order in the Torah"<sup>58</sup> to conclude that "every psalm stands by itself," that is, every psalm is autonomous. In Ibn Ezra's view, the proof of every psalm's autonomy lies in the fact that they were written by many poets over an extended period of time. The editors wrote the psalms in the order they found them, without any fixed editorial principle to guide them.<sup>59</sup> As U. Simon points out, Ibn Ezra has two reasons for not linking the psalms: the lack of chronological order and the absence of conclusive linkages in the text of the psalms themselves.<sup>60</sup>

David Kimhi rejects the opinion of the sages that Psalm 2 is part of Psalm 1, basing his argument about the order of the psalms on the arrangement of these psalms in some manuscripts. As S. Gillingham observes, psalms 1 and 2 are in fact united in several Kennicott manuscripts and in some of De Rossi versions, but they are separated, for example, in the Codex Leningradensis.<sup>61</sup> Kimhi's observations prove that, in the manuscripts he consulted, these two psalms were separate.

Kimhi also recognizes that we do not know why the psalms are arranged in this order, and arrives at such a conclusion basing himself on the fact that the psalms referring to historical events are not placed in chronological order.

However, in his commentary on Psalm 3, Kimhi tries to find a thematic link between Psalms 2 and 3, given the fact that both psalms refer to two similar historical situations happening in king David's times.

It is possible that this Psalm (3) is connected with the preceding one (2), because the Philistines had come against David to contest his right to the kingdom and fight with him; and, in consequence, Absalom his son proposed to take the kingdom from his father and kill him, but David conquered all and was left in possession of the kingdom.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Comparison and contrast of the medieval Jewish exegetes on Psalm 2 demonstrates that there are two opinions regarding what situation or to whom the psalm refers to. The exegetes living in Muslim countries, such as Saadiah Gaon and the Karaites Yefet ben Eli and Salmon ben Yeruham, consider that this psalm refers to Messianic times, and specifically to the wars of Gog and Magog preceding the coming of the Messiah. In the case of the Karaites, the Messianic interpretation is particularly relevant for

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<sup>57</sup> Simon, *Four Approaches*, 316–17.

<sup>58</sup> *Sifre' be-ha'alotekha* 64.

<sup>59</sup> On Abraham ibn Ezra's ideas on the Book of Psalms, see Simon, *Four Approaches*, 145–295.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>61</sup> Gillingham, *A Journey*, 69.

it proves that the tenth century Karaite community of Jerusalem was expecting the imminent coming of the Messiah. These exegetes follow the rabbinic tradition, which interpreted Psalm 2 in a Messianic sense. Not a single reference to any historical event from Israel's past is found in these exegetes.

The exegetes living in a Christian environment tried to avoid the Messianic implications of Psalm 2. The interpretation of Rashi, Joseph Bechor Shor, David Kimhi, and Isaiah of Thrani that Psalm 2 refers to David's anointment as king of Israel and to the rebellion of the Philistines against him is intended to reject the Christian Messianic interpretation of this psalm. These exegetes consider that if Psalm 2 speaks of an episode in the biography of King David, a figure of past times, it is difficult for Christians to use this text in polemics with Jews or use Jewish exegesis for their own exegetical interests. The historical perspective of the Jewish exegetes seeks to prove that David's episode coincides with the descriptions in Psalm 2. Rashi, however, considers that the second part of the psalm contains prophecies for future events. At the end of his commentary on Psalm 2, David Kimhi leaves the door open to an eschatological interpretation of the psalm.

Although Jacob ben Reuben rejects the Messianic interpretation of Psalm 2, he, however, does not connect it to any episode of David's life.

In his commentaries on Psalm 2, Abraham ibn Ezra presents both possibilities without clearly deciding which is more correct. Ibn Ezra's ambiguity can be considered part of an exegetical strategy of presenting the different possibilities of interpretation open for discussion. Ibn Ezra defends the eschatological interpretation of the psalm basing himself on the literal meaning of the words *nations*, *peoples*, *kings*, and *rulers*, which can only refer to the nations and rulers of the world in the future Messianic times.

Abraham ibn Ezra comes from a Muslim background where the Messianic implications of Psalm 2 present no problem. He, however, is conscious of the danger of such an interpretation for Jews living in contact with the Christians, and displays his customarily critical attitude to biblical interpretation (and to the lack of consistency of biblical interpreters) and his faith in the principles of literal meaning.

Menahem ha-Meiri considers that both interpretations—that it refers to king David, and that it refers to the future Messianic times—are valid. The fact that it was interpreted as Messianic by the Sages substantiated his authoritative argument for maintaining the Messianic significance of Psalm 2. The influence of Kimhi on Menahem ha-Meiri and his positive view of Christianity were also decisive in Ha-Meiri's admission of the possibility of interpreting the psalm in a Messianic sense.

In order to reinforce their arguments that Psalm 2 refers to Messianic times, the Karaites and Saadiah Gaon tried to find thematic connections between psalms 1 and 2. According to these authors, Psalm 2 is the logic continuation of Psalm 1, because the wicked people mentioned in Psalm 1 are the same people who

rebel against the Lord and the Messiah in Psalm 2. Saadiah Gaon's eschatological interpretation of Psalm 1 is in consonance with his Messianic interpretation of Psalm 2.

The connection among psalms is not a matter of concern for the exegetes who interpret Psalm 2 as referring to a historical episode in David's biography. The idea that psalms 1, 2, and 3 are three independent psalms is defended by David Qimhi, Menahem ha-Meiri, and especially Abraham ibn Ezra. Menahem ha-Meiri and David Qimhi, however, tried to justify the connections between the psalms made in the Talmud. The most radical view against there being any connection among the psalms is given by Abraham ibn Ezra, who clearly affirms that "every psalm stands by itself" and rejects any speculation on their order.