

**THE SUPPORT OF FAITH: SEIPHER EZER
HA-DAT OF RABBI ISAAC PULGAR (WHO
FLOURISHED IN SPAIN
DURING THE 14TH CENT.). EDITED FROM
THE HALBERSTAMM MS. NO. 94, WITH
AN ENGLISH INTRODUCTION**

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ISAAC PULGAR & GEORGE S. BELASCO

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Ibn Pulgar, Isaac ben Jose

“THE SUPPORT OF FAITH”

ספר עזר הדת

of

RABBI ISAAC PULGAR

(who flourished in Spain during the 14th Cent.)

Edited from the Halberstamm MS. No. 94, with an

ENGLISH INTRODUCTION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

IN¹ 1215 arose the order of Preaching Monks, the Predicants or Dominicans, founded by Dominic de Guzman (born 1170, died 1221). One of the chief aims of the order was to place at the disposal of the church the invaluable aid of skilled disputants, who should revive the drooping spirits of the faithful, and by the assaults of rhetoric and passion subdue the stubborn intellect of the unbeliever. Against their will, unoffending rabbis, men of books and of peace, were ferreted out from the safety of their obscurity, and forced to defend their religious teachings in the presence of kings and princes. The disputations of Rabbi Jehiel with Nicolaus, in Paris, in 1244; of Nachmanides with Friar Paul in 1263; of Meir ben Simon with the Archbishop of Narbonne, 1245; as well as others belong to this era, and were brought about by the activity of the Dominicans. Not trusting to themselves alone in this war of words, the ecclesiastical authorities called in the aid of some who had previously been Jews themselves.

Abner of Burgos, a profound Jewish scholar of the latter half of the thirteenth century, was one of a band of authors whose works and perhaps whose names are practically unknown outside a limited circle now, though at one time they occupied very greatly the thoughts of their contemporaries and immediate successors. They were, or represented themselves as, the disciples of Nachmanides². From the study of the mysteries of the Kabbala, wherein words and letters are made the foundations of mystic

¹ Reprinted, by kind permission, from the JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW.

² See Jellinek, *Beiträge zur Gesch. der Kab.*, pp. 48 and 49.

notions, and all things elude the grasp, the solid foundation of study passes away, and while all things can be easily proven, so too can all things be easily negated. Abner was not only a Talmudist and Kabbalist of repute, he was a *médecin*, too,—so at least says Carmoly¹, who at the same time sums up in a few sentences most that we know of Abner. According to this account, Abner was born at Burgos in 1270, but it was at Valladolid that he followed the practice of medicine. He died in 1346, in the seventy-sixth year of his age. It was as a man of sixty² that Abner left the faith of his fathers, and he became one of the most determined enemies of the religion he had discarded. From the stores of his extensive knowledge he wrote book after book wherein he exhibited, to the delight of his new patrons, and to the horror of his flesh and blood still strong in their allegiance to the citadel he had quitted, the weak points in the armour of Zion. While yet a young man Abner had composed several Hebrew works, among which is a commentary upon one of the writings of Ibn Ezra. His later works are devoted, however, to the defence of his new faith or to attacks upon Judaism. He put aside all that could remind him of Judaism, and he adopted the name of Alphonso after the reigning sovereign Alphonso XI. As a convert he wrote a book entitled ספר מלחמות מצוה (The Book of the Wars of Duty), directed against the ס' מלחמות ה' (The Book of the Wars of God) of Joseph Kimhi; another called ס' מנחה קנאות (The Offering of Zeal) in defence of the Christian religion, and ס' מרים (The Book of Miriam, i. e. Maria) for the same purpose. Other writings of Abner are the מורה צדק (The Righteous Teacher), *La Concordia de las Leyes* (The Agreement of the two Testaments), while he is credited with being the Alphonsus Bonhominis, who translated a polemical work from Arabic into Latin. Reggio in his edition of the בריית הקבלה, Goritiae, 1852, quotes a work of Abner's containing a number of criticisms

¹ See *Revue Orientale*, 1861, p. 519, quoting Ferrara, *Hist. gén. d'Espagne*.

² Wolf, IV, p. 786.

of the decisions of the Tur, *Hoshen Mishpat*, see XIII, pp. 51, 193. Bedarride says Abner that wrote a book in Spanish on the plague¹. Abner went further than this. He presented charges against the Jews before the king in regard to their prayers, and a public investigation of the matter was held at Valladolid.

These attacks of Abner met with many a rejoinder², and of these the following may be called to mind: Joseph Shalom, Isaac Nathan, Moses Narboni in his *חזקתה* in *מאמר הכוזבה* § 14, Moses Cohen Tordesillas (1375) in his *ענין האמת*, and Isaac of Acco in *מסורת עינים*³. The *שלשלת הקבלה*, ed. Venice, 1587, p. 56, gives an account of an interview between Abner and Nachmanides, when the latter discomfits his opponent with an apt quotation from the Bible. Another rejoinder to Abner's attack is the *Ezer ha-Dat* עזר דתה (the Support of Religion) of Pulgar, the subject of the present notes.

The MS. of the *Ezer ha-Dat*, of the Montefiore College, Codex 94 (in the recently published *Catalogue of the Montefiore MSS.* the MS. of the עזר דתה bears the number 285), is a small 8vo volume of 91 leaves, written on both sides of the leaf, in a Spanish hand. It belonged formerly to the valuable Halberstam collection, which Dr. Gaster's care and foresight secured for the use of students in England. It is interesting to note that the MS. was formerly the property of a convert to Judaism, for on a fly-leaf we find the following אמי הקטן והצעיר אברהם בן אברהם אבינו *liber est meus, est Deus illum querit hoc Nominerit Abraham natus Prinze*. The MS. is clearly written, and shows by the notes on its margin that it has been read with care, for we meet with glosses and suggestions that seem to be in the handwriting of Prinze himself. Graetz's quotations from the *Ezer ha-Dat* are from the Breslau

¹ *Juifs en France*, &c., p. 201.

² See Steinschneider in *E. and G.'s Encycl.*, p. 410; and Kayserling, *Sephardim*, p. 327.

³ See Jellinek, *Beiträge*, p. 48.

Codex, No. 53. A part of the work has been printed in the ספר שו"ת of Ashkenazi, Frankfurt am Main, 1854 (corresponding with ff. 28 b-41 a of the Montefiore Codex). Another and much smaller fragment appeared in the *Revue des Études Juives*, 1889, p. 64 (corresponding with ff. 74 a-76 a, and ff. 77-80 of the Montefiore MS.). With the exception of a line or two in Graetz's *Geschichte*, vol. VII, p. 443, nothing else has appeared in print of this valuable and interesting contribution to a literature, which to the present day stands second to none in holding its own in the affections of readers and students¹.

The author of the *Ezer ha-Dat* was Rabbi Isaac Pulgar, or more fully Isaac ben Joseph ben Pulgar, of whose personal history but little is known². The usual authorities quote each other, but add little themselves to the scanty stock of information. Graetz tells us that Pulgar was a common family name in Castille, and quotes a Fernando Pulgar, who was secretary of Ferdinand and Isabella, and author of a royal chronicle. Ibn Shaprut calls our author ר' יצחק בן מליקר, and Steinschneider, Isaac Ibn Polgar. Here I follow Graetz, and adopt the form Pulgar. As has been said little is known of Pulgar, but an attentive study of his work reveals him as a profound scholar with wide attainments, in touch and sympathy with the busy life around him, and possessing an intimate knowledge of almost every branch of science then cultivated. His knowledge of Talmud is thorough, and this is especially seen in the Dialogue on Astrology, wherein Pulgar is called upon to square contradictory passages from the Talmud in regard to that pseudo-science. He possessed likewise an excellent acquaintance with

¹ If Alphonse died in 1346, at the age of seventy-six, and if it was as a man of sixty that he left Judaism, I think we may for all necessary purposes assume that the *Ezer ha-Dat* was composed somewhere about 1335 to 1345.

² Carmoly, *R. G.*, I, p. 327; Wolf, I, p. 687; compare also Steinschneider's *Pseudepigraph. Literat.*, p. 32.