belief in the Trinity cannot be divorced from the wider context of Christian belief. The Trinity is not significant only in and of itself but because it provides the basis for another key element in Christian belief, the incarnation. Jews and Christians cannot agree on the incarnation. The incarnation ultimately also points to the Christian error in the understanding of the Trinity. The wider context of the theological structure thus informs the treatment of the individual component. Even if some particulars of faith could be agreed upon by Jews and Christians, the system in its entirety, the fuller theological context, must be taken into account. This prevents Jews and Christians from sharing their faith in the same God.

Milhemet Mitzva – Battling Kabbalah in the Context of Anti-Christian Polemics

Meir ben Simeon Hameili of Narbonne's *Milhemet Mitzva* is one of the most important Jewish anti-Christian polemics of the Middle Ages.[42] Rabbi Meir held several significant public and private debates with Christian officials, including Narbonne's archbishop, who later became Pope Clement IV.[43] The topics covered in his debates span the entire range of Jewish-Christian concerns, though one unique focal point is the discussions involving the rights of Jewish money lenders. Unfortunately, the work has never been edited or published in its entirety.[44] Only a single manuscript of the work is available.[45] In order to appreciate the present argument, a brief survey of the contents of the work is necessary. Part 1 of the work reports several dialogues and discussions of Rabbi Meir. Part 2 recapitulates most of the arguments of part 1 in the form of questions, posed on behalf of Rabbi Meir to his Christian

[42] On the work, see S. Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations in Thirteenth-Century Narbonne: Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College London, 22 October 1964* (London: Lewis, 1969); Idem, "A Disputation on Moneylending between Jews and Gentiles" in Me'ir b. Simeon's *Milhemeth Miswah* (Narbonne, 13th Cent.), *JJS* 10 (1960): 45–61; William Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue in Provence as Reflected in Milhemet Mizva of R. Meir ha-Meili* (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974); Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, ch. 4.

[43] See Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations*, 25 n. 32.

[44] Parts of the work have been published. Herskowitz published in his Dissertation Part 1 and part of Part 4. Part 2 was published by M. Y. Blau in *Shitat HaKadmonim Al Masechet Nazir, Zevachim, Arachin Utemura* (New York, 1974) and part 5 was published by him in *Sefer Hameorot* I (New York, 1964), 33–47.

[45] Parma 2749, De Rossi 155.

interlocutor. Following an initial series of 100 questions, an additional 40 and then a further 20 questions are presented. Some of the issues that come up in the questions concern the condition of the Jewish people and their present history, the continued relevance of Israel's election and the continued relevance of the Torah. It is, therefore, not surprising to see Rabbi Meir take up issues of Israel's history and former miracles performed on Israel's behalf as the subject of the third part of the work. The fourth part of the work addresses some of the other theological issues that had become subjects of Jewish-Christian polemic. It then returns once again to a report of Rabbi Meir's disputations with the Archbishop. The next part of Part 4 is introduced by the words: "I shall write here the words of the epistle that I wrote some time ago to disprove the words of those who speak falsely of God."[46] Here Rabbi Meir cites a polemical document written against the Kabbalists. This is the document referred to above, the only significant opposition raised against the Kabbalah during the first generations of its appearance. This document has been discussed by Gershom Scholem, who, however, did not publish the document in its entirety.[47] What follows in the *Milhemet Mitzva* has been previously described as various issues relating to prayer. Hence, scholars dealing with the work have tended to limit their attention either to the explicit dialogues with Christians, or to the anti-Kabbalistic polemic recorded in the work. The latter part of Part 4[48] as well as Part 5 are considered irrelevant to the Jewish-Christian polemic.[49] This raises questions regarding the overall purpose of the work. Siegfried Stein poses the question of the relationship between the diverse contents of the work as follows: "What then is the common denominator of the extraordinary mixture of subject matter in Me'ir b. Simeon's *Milhemeth Miswah*, here assembled at random? Like his Christian opponents, he was engaged in a battle on two fronts. Under the influence of rationalism . . . quite a number of Jews . . . had become indifferent to the observance of their ancestral traditions. Others were tempted by the hopes of economic

[46] Folio 229a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 240. The entire opening paragraph would seem to be an introduction that Rabbi Meir composed on the occasion of republishing the epistle, in the context of his later work *Milhemet Mitzva*. The passage concludes with the request: "May God agree with us for the good, and teach us a good teaching, Amen Amen Selah," thereby marking the conclusion of the introductory note.

[47] Herskowitz records the full text of the epistle.

[48] From page 235 onwards.

[49] Compare Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations*, 11.

advancement to become Christian. Others were ready to assimilate local gnostic teachings."[50]

According to Stein's presentation, the *Milhemet Mitzva* has more than one goal at hand. The title of the work means commanded war, i.e. a religiously sanctioned and mandated war. The war is an ideological war fought on two parallel fronts. The one front is that of Jewish-Christian disputation. The other is a range of spiritual problems plaguing the Jewish community. The various challenges of the day are thus reflected in the topics discussed in the *Milhemet Mitzva*. According to such an understanding, the work is not exclusively a work of Jewish-Christian polemics. These are part of a larger programme of struggling with the problems of the hour.[51] Stein's description of the book is at best apt for the first four parts of the work. The parts that follow the anti-Kabbalistic polemic do not fit such an understanding.

Following the anti-Kabbalistic discussion, Rabbi Meir's discussion can be divided into two. The remainder of part 4 discusses questions regarding the appropriateness of praying via intermediaries, both angelic and human. Part 5 is a theological commentary on a number of key Jewish prayers. Hameili here discusses the first verse of the Shema, proclaiming God's unity, as well as the liturgical response, "Blessed is the name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever." In addition, a series of prayers whose recitation is only carried out in public, in a *minyan*, a quorum of ten adult males, are commented upon. These include the first verse of the *Kedushah*, in which the trishagion appears, the *Kaddish, Barchu*, and the prayer incorporating the 13 divine attributes of mercy.

Why did R. Meir include a discussion of all these prayer-matters in this work? The description of the work as a two-pronged battle for the integrity of the faith of the community, battling concerns both external and internal, does not adequately describe the contents of the work.[52] The possibility that we have a random collection of this and that, with the main focus of the work, as expressed in its title, upon inter-religious polemic, is obviously unattractive. Rabbi Meir emerges as an

[50] Stein, *Jewish-Christian Disputations*, 9.

[51] A similar understanding, though not as clearly articulated, seems to inform Merhavya's discussion. See H. Merhavya, "Concerning the Date of R. Meir ben R. Simeon's Milhemet Mizva," *Tarbiz* 45 (1975/76): 296 (Hebrew). This is also how Herskowitz presents the work, see *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 80.

[52] Stein, *Jewish- Christian Disputations*, 25 n. 34, does draw attention to the fact that in the fifth part of the work we find an implicit rejection of the belief in the Trinity. This, however, does not affect his overall presentation of the work.

author of considerable literary skills, who is able to present an extended argument and to tastefully structure his work. This is not the only work he composed.[53] If indeed the fifth as well as the latter part of the fourth part of the work is not related to the primary focus of *Milhemet Mitzva*, surely the author could have incorporated these discussions of prayer matters into one of his talmudic commentaries.[54] Surely those discussions are more appropriate in the context of his commentary on the talmudic tractate *Berakot*, which discusses matter of prayer, than they are in the context of a work apparently devoted to a polemic with Christianity. It seems, therefore, that a different logic should be sought, that would enable us to account for the work as a whole.[55]

What I would like to propose is that the entire work is indeed one sustained battle. The object of that battle is Christianity. On account of the battle waged against Christianity the book is rightly called *Milhemet Mitzva*. The different components of the work should be seen in light of its wider purpose. Let me suggest first how the materials in the fifth part of the work fit within such a program. Having spelled out his theological arguments in the earlier parts of the work, especially in parts 1–3, Rabbi Meir approaches the same subject matter from another angle that of liturgy. Rabbi Meir is concerned that the Jewish prayers should be correctly interpreted, and not be open to misleading interpretations offered by the Christians. He wisely reserves this part of his discussion to the latter part of the book, since indeed the polemic is here less explicit. It seems the author intentionally avoids reference to other possible interpretations of these prayers, perhaps in order to prevent his reader from even entertaining such thoughts in prayer. While the polemical function of this part is not explicitly stated, it emerges clearly from an examination of the liturgical texts upon which Rabbi Meir chooses to comment. Had this part of the work simply been a

[53] See "Meir Ben Simeon Ha-Me'ili," *EncJud* 11:1256–57.

[54] That Part 5 was indeed published by Blau as though it were an introduction to tractate *Berakot* proves the point.

[55] A work that seems to fit the description of a battle happening on the internal alongside the external front is *Sefer Nizahon*. See Yisrael Yuval, *Kabbalisten, Ketzer und Polemiker: Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism* (ed. Karl E. Kroetzinger and Joseph Dan; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), 162. As Yuval suggested to me in conversation, the systematic reference to multiple sects or heretical possibilities, including some with which the author probably never came into contact, suggests that a certain type of polemical attitude is characterized by the systematic exploration, perhaps expunging, of multiple errors, both within and without.

commentary on significant Jewish prayers, we would have expected the author to comment upon the most important of Jewish prayers—the Amidah. Its absence from the catalogue of prayers upon which he comments suggests that there is some criterion upon which the selection of prayers commented upon is based. I would argue that this criterion is that either all or most of the prayers selected are relevant to the Jewish-Christian polemic.

The first prayer upon which Rabbi Meir comments is the Shema. In this discussion, he explains the multiple appearances of God's name in the Shema, curiously enough—three times.[56] The explanation offered by Rabbi Meir is far less important than the interpretation that it implicitly seeks to undermine the Trinitarian understanding. That Christians anchored the concept of the Trinity in the verse proclaiming God's unity by reference to the threefold mention of God's name is well attested.[57] Against such usage, the polemical function of the interpretation offered by Hameili is obvious.[58] The liturgical response following the recitation of the Shema's first verse could be accounted for as a continuation of the author's treatment of the same subject matter. However, here too we find Christian uses of this text,[59] and Hameili's commentary upon this verse seems to fulfil a similar function to his interpretation of the Shema.

The Shema and its liturgical response are the only prayers upon which Rabbi Meir comments the recitation of which is not limited to a public context. The remainder of Part 5 examines prayers that are recited only in public. This criterion is itself of great interest. It suggests a method of ascertaining what are core or essential prayers through the criterion of public performance. Those prayers that can be recited only in public possess greater significance, possibly because of an association of the public recitation with the sanctification of God's name.[60] Sanctification of God's name is the traditional category for martyrdom. The content of those prayers may thus be of particular significance because it might correspond to principles of faith that justify

[56] Deut 6:4.

[57] Raymon Martin also offers this reading of the Shema, see *Pugio Fidei* (Farnborough, 1967), 484, 494. Compare *Teshubot Harashba* 1, 214, and see Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 255ff. See also Leon Arye Feldman, "The Rashba's Responsum to a Gentile Sage Regarding Faith in the Unity of God," *Sinai* 100 (1987): 636–41 (Hebrew).

[58] Hameili cites Deut 6:4 as part of his argument for the heresy of the Kabbalists. See folio 213a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 244.

[59] See Baer, *The Qabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos*, 288.

[60] See Blau, *Sefer Hameorot* to *Berakot*, 42.

martyrdom. However, the polemical purpose behind addressing these prayers is even more transparent. The most obvious case is the trishagion. The trishagion obviously invites a Trinitarian reading. Rabbi Meir's commentary upon the threefold mention of Holy with regard to God, in Isaiah 6:3 is obviously designed to invalidate such an understanding.[61] His commentary on the Kaddish takes up issues that found expression in earlier parts of the work, in the dialogue between himself and the Christian representative. Repeatedly in the dialogues we find mention of Israel's historical condition and its relevance or irrelevance to accepting the truth of Christianity. In his commentary on the Kaddish, Rabbi Meir refers to issues relating to Israel's present historical state, as well as to its messianic hopes and aspirations. I am uncertain as to the polemical content of the *Barchu* and the thirteen attributes of compassion. My thesis would not be undermined even if these two prayers did not serve an explicitly anti-Christian polemic. Having discussed a number of publicly performed prayers whose interpretation is relevant to the anti-Christian polemic, Hameili sees fit to address the entire category of publicly recited prayers. The discussion of the thirteen attributes could easily be integrated into his overall concerns, as talk of a multiplicity of divine attributes is a matter which he must keep under strict control, because of possible misuse by a Christian opponent.[62] Further research may indicate that the *Barchu* prayer too was susceptible to theological misreadings.

The fifth part of *Milhemet Mitzva* serves the purpose of the entire work, even though this is not highlighted in the discussion itself. I believe the same is true for the fourth part of the work as well. The earlier part of Part 4, from folio 179 to 228, clearly serves issues of the Jewish-Christian dialogue raised elsewhere in the work. Folios 214–228 are, in

[61] Rabbi Meir explicitly struggles with a trinitarian reading of the trishagion in the first part of *Milhemet Mitzva*, (Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 17), as well as in the second (edited by Blau in *Shitat HaKadmonim Al Masechet Nazir, Zevachim, Arachin Utemura*, 323).

[62] Rabbi Meir invokes the thirteen attributes as part of his presentation of God in his introduction to the second part of *Milhemet Mitzva* (Blau, *Shitat HaKadmonim Al Masechet Nazir, Zevachim, Arachin Utemura*, 306). In that context it seems the attributes of compassion enable him to maintain Israel's relationship with God, despite their sin and exile. The conclusion of the fifth part of the work invokes the 13 attributes in prayer, asking for Israel's redemption. (See Blau, *Sefer Hameorot*, 47). It is possible that the polemical appeal to the 13 attributes is related to the battle over Israel's present historical status.

any event, a report of a dialogue the author had with the Archbishop. Folios 228 to 240 should also be read as serving the cause of the anti-Christian polemic. It is here that the author's attack upon the Kabbalah is found. Folios 229a–232b are the famous epistle, discussed by Scholem and by others.[63] The section immediately following this, up to 235b, is introduced as follows: "Although we have agreed not to spend more time on these matters, [and it is sufficient[64]] for every enlightened person[65] what we have written above, we saw it useful to explain how their words can be disproven from what we have found in the well prepared commentary of the Talmud that we have, and thereby are shut up all the external *Haggadot* that they bring to support their wicked faith, which they peg on to the sages of the Talmud perish the thought that they share in such wickedness." The author clearly intends to carry on his anti-

[63] Scholem originally published excerpts from the epistle in a Hebrew article: "A New Document Concerning the History of the Beginning of Kabbalah," *Sefer Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1934), 141–62. This article was recently republished and updated in *Mehkerei Kabbala (l)* (ed. Y. Ben Shlomo; Tel-Aviv, 1988), 7–38. I refer to this edition of the article. The only other author who treats the epistle and the circumstances surrounding its composition is Sendor, *The Emergence of Provencal Kabbalah*, 171–74.

[64] The Hebrew *'lll* may have been omitted here.

[65] The term used here, משכיל "enlightened one" is significant. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 224, has noted that the term is used in philosophical circles to designate the adherents of philosophical culture, whereas among the mystics it denoted esotericists and illuminati. Rabbi Meir's use of the term is thus part of the polemic he holds against the Kabbalists, concerning the identity of the true *maskil*. It should be noted, however, that Rabbi Meir's usage of the term is far more significant than this passing mention. The term echoes Daniel 12:3. This verse is cited twice by Rabbi Meir. The original anti-Kabbalistic epistle concludes by quoting this verse. So does the fourth part of the work, which, as I am about to demonstrate, expands the anti-Kabbalistic argument. Both the conclusion of the original epistle, and the conclusion of the revised and expanded version of the anti-Kabbalistic polemic in the edited text of *Milhemet Mitzva*, conclude by the citation of the same verse, referring to the enlightened ones, who will be resplendent as the splendour of the sky. Why is the verse quoted? One possibility would be that the latter part of the verse, also quoted in both places, is intended: "those who turn many to righteousness." A polemicist who protects the faith may be considered as one who protects others from error, and is therefore one who turns others to righteousness. However, in view of the common usage of *maskil* it seems Rabbi Meir is polemically suggesting that true knowledge of God lies with Rabbi Meir's school, rather than with the Kabbalists. One cannot avoid noting that the most significant Kabbalistic work, the Zohar, takes its title from the very verses used as the concluding motto of the first attack on the nascent religious movement. The choice of title of the Zohar has curiously received little explanation. Could there also be a polemical intent in highlighting Daniel 12:3 as the Zohar's motto? Such a possibility does not exclude the description of Liebes in "Zohar and Eros," *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 73ff.

Kabbalistic polemic. Having cited a document he wrote at some earlier point, he now further expands the battle waged against the Kabbalists. The discussion in folios 232b–234a touches upon the interpretation of specific talmudic texts, that were subject to interpretations considered by Rabbi Meir to be heretical. From page 234a a new element in the anti-Kabbalistic polemic is introduced. The anti-Kabbalistic polemic, as expressed in the epistle, had two foci, faith and prayer. Rabbi Meir is outraged by the Kabbalistic doctrine, and in particular by the way in which the Kabbalists pray to different Sefirot. Directing prayer to different Sefirot, under changing circumstances, is seen by him as close to idolatry, as we shall see. Prayer to the Sefirot is akin to prayer to some other being apart from God. While Rabbi Meir accepts the existence of the Sefirot,[66] he does not recognize them as divine, and is opposed to prayer being directed to them. The concern over not addressing prayer to any being except God is the subject matter of the discussion beginning on folio 234a. This discussion then runs through to the end of the fourth part of his work.[67] Rabbi Meir discusses the inappropriateness of directing prayers to angels, to human beings, or to any form of intermediary. The discussion, while not explicitly directed against either the Kabbalists or the Christians, obviously grows out of his understanding that both groups direct prayer to a being apart from God, and hence they are to be condemned.[68]

Having completed his discussion about to whom prayer should be directed, Rabbi Meir then turns to the fifth part of his work, and examines actual prayers and their proper theological understanding. We see a clear structure to the work, moving from direct polemics to concealed polemics, through an examination of prayer. Between the two themes is found the polemic against the Kabbalists and their form of prayer, which bears a great affinity to that of the Christians, and is, therefore, condemned. Viewing the work as a whole leads to the

[66] See folio 230a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 243.

[67] That the remainder of the fourth part is related to the anti-Kabbalistic attack can be reinforced by the fact that Daniel 12:3 is cited both at the end of the epistle and at the end of the fourth part. When Rabbi Meir reintegrated the epistle in *Milhemet Mitzva* he developed and expanded the themes, but retained the same coda, which now appears twice in the work.

[68] The role of prayer and worship, rather than mere theological disagreements regarding the nature of God, as defining the Jewish-Christian divide, at its formative stage, is the theme of Larry Hurtado's *One God, One Lord, Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

conclusion that Rabbi Meir ben Simeon's attack on the Kabbalah is part and parcel of his anti-Christian polemic. It also provides us with a novel perspective upon this sole case of early anti-Kabbalistic polemic. Until now we have noted, along with Idel, the relative lack of anti-Kabbalistic polemic in the earliest generations of the Kabbalah's appearance. We may now go a step further and suggest that even where such a polemic is found, it exists primarily on account of Christianity, which is the main object of polemic, and due to perceived similarities between Christianity and the Kabbalah.[69] Had our author not been involved in anti-Christian polemics, even this singular polemic against Kabbalah may have not taken place.[70] To enforce this argument, we must take a closer look at the anti-Kabbalistic part of *Milhemet Mitzva*. We have already noted that this part contains an earlier epistle, that was incorporated into the present context during the editing of the work. That in its present context the anti-Kabbalistic epistle serves the cause of the Jewish-Christian polemic

[69] Scholem, in his discussion of the epistle, p. 21, sees Rabbi Meir's attack in the context of struggles against the dualism of the Cathars. So does Joseph Shatzmiller, "The Albigensian Heresy as Reflected in the Eyes of Contemporary Jewry," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Haim Hillel ben Sasson* (ed. M. Ben-Sasson et al.; Jerusalem, 1989), 351–52 (Hebrew). It seems to me that Christianity proper, and not the Cathars, are the context in which Rabbi Meir's polemic takes place.

[70] The claim that anti-Kabbalistic polemic is really fuelled by anti-Christian polemic is also born out by an examination of the anti-Kabbalistic polemic of the Italian Renaissance. Idel has pointed out that the two figures involved in this anti-Kabbalistic polemic, R. Elijah del Medigo and Rabbi Yehuda Arye of Modena, both do so on account of the growing appropriation of Kabbalistic thought by Christians and the spreading of Christian Kabbalah, along with its missionary program. See, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, 2–5. Idel's argument is based on David Ruderman's work, *The World of a Renaissance Jew* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), 52–56. See further Howard Edelman, "Rabbi Leon Modena and the Christian Kabbalists" in *Renaissance Rereading* (ed. M. C. Horowitz et al., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–86.

Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Jerusalem, 2000), 117 (Hebrew), raises the possibility that Rabbi Meir's anti-kabbalistic polemic may be a reaction of the Maimonidean camp to the spread of Kabbalah. Halbertal's suggestion is not based on a reading of the anti-Kabbalistic polemic, but on his own documentation of Rabbi Meir's philosophical orientation in other works. However, as Halbertal himself points out, it is not clear that Rabbi Meir should be classified as a Maimonidean thinker. I therefore prefer to account for this unique anti-Kabbalistic polemic in the context of the document in which it appears, an anti-Christian polemic, rather than in the context of the anti-Maimonidean polemic, that informs other works of the author. Clearly, the anti-Christian, as well as the anti-Kabbalistic polemic, are both nestled within a philosophically oriented world view.

does not mean that the original composition of this epistle was motivated by similar concerns. I believe a closer look at the epistle will suggest that already here our author links Kabbalah and Christianity together as related phenomena, worthy of condemnation. This epistle is shrouded in mystery. At its core is a reference to a particular event, that much troubled the Jewish community of Narbonne. Rabbi Meir, under the authority of the greatest local leaders, composed this epistle in reaction to this unique event. What could have been the event that led to such an extreme reaction? The answer must be conjectural. Two conjectures have been put forth. The one by Gershom Scholem makes greater sense. Scholem raises the possibility that the event that led to the composition of the epistle was a case of apostasy, apparently based upon exposure to Kabbalistic teaching. The Kabbalah was just beginning to spread and to be taught publicly. Apparently, already at this early point in its dissemination, the particular Kabbalistic teachings had an adverse effect, leading to the conversion to Christianity of an ill-prepared Kabbalistic student.[71] If Scholem's conjecture is correct, then the initial impulse for composing the only anti-Kabbalistic polemic is related to the Kabbalistic-Christian associations.

That Christianity looms large in Rabbi Meir's mind as he composes the epistle can be seen from the epistle itself.[72] In describing the Kabbalists, Rabbi Meir refers to the relationship between the Sefirot and the En Sof in terms of משתף שמים ודבר אחר putting together the name of God with that of another being. "And he who puts together

[71] An alternative hypothesis is put forward by Sendor. Sendor, *The Emergence of Provencal Kabbalah*, 171–74, relates the mysterious event to the polemic over the burning of Maimonides' works. In this context, the Kabbalists' works were, or were nearly, handed over to the inquisition for inspection and eventual burning. Sendor's suggestion makes sense as a way of accounting for R. Isaac the blind and Rabbi Asher ben David's concerns. I fail to see how his suggestion accounts for the great concern of the Jewish community of Narbonne, whose concerns are reflected in the epistle. The epistle constitutes an out and out call for burning, or getting rid of, Kabbalistic books. The fear of that happening could not possibly be the event that led to the composition of the epistle. Joseph Shatzmiller, "The Albigensian Heresy," 352, raises the same possibility as Sendor. According to him, the Narbonne scholars feared that once the Christian authorities became involved in the burning of Jewish heretical works, the fire would spread to other works as well. For this reason they hastened to burn these books themselves. I find the suggestion unconvincing.

[72] Sendor, *The Emergence of Provencal Kabbalah*, 165, has already sensed the comparison with Christianity in the epistle. However, according to him the reference is veiled. Hence, the quote he offers in note 129 does not explicitly address the affinities with Christianity.

the name of God except for one[73] ought to be uprooted from the world. This is the religion which all Israel must believe, and whoever deviates from it is a sectarian and a heretic."[74] God would be the emanator, the En Sof. The other thing would be the Sefirot, according to Rabbi Meir—God's creatures, rather than expressions of the Godhead. Now, the expression "putting together God's name with that of another being" is the standard way in which Christianity is spoken of. In justifying and in coming to terms with the idolatry of Christianity, the native category that Jews adopt is that of "putting together." The understanding is that along with God the creator, the Christians invoke the name of another being, Jesus, a human being. Hence, the application of the talmudic principle of praying or joining God's name to that of another being.[75] The application of this same principle to the Kabbalists suggests that the same theological problem posed by Christianity is also posed by the Kabbalah. From this perspective the two are indistinguishable. Kabbalah is as dangerous and as mistaken as Christianity.

The analogy to Christianity emerges not only from the categories used by Rabbi Meir. It is explicit in his words. Horrified at the Kabbalistic teachings, Rabbi Meir makes the following statement, comparing them to the teachings of Christianity: "Are there in our times in all the false beliefs of the nations deniers of God's unity more than these."[76]

[73] Rabbi Meir here deviates from the talmudic expression, as found in *b. Sukkah 45b*. Scholem translates the text as though Rabbi Meir quoted the Talmud, which in fact he paraphrases. Scholem's translation is: "He who puts together the name of God and some other thing." See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 399.

[74] p. 230b, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 243, English translation in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 399. I have maintained Scholem's translation of כופר ומין as sectarian and heretic. Note that in referring to the nations of the world, in the following quote, following my emendation, Rabbi Meir uses the same term כופרים. Note the use of מינות in the introduction to the reissue of the epistle, 229a. Rabbi Meir applies the range of derogatory categories at his disposal, without making fine distinctions between the various terms.

[75] See Jacob Katz, *Between Jews and Gentiles* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bi'aliq, 1960), 163ff. (Hebrew).

[76] This explicit reference was not noted previously due to a scribal error. Scholem, correctly, read the Hebrew as: האם יש בזמננו זה בכל הבלי אמונות האומות ספרים ביחוד השם יתברך יותר מאלה. Syntactically the sentence is impossible. Only through a change of syntax did Scholem arrive at the following translation: "Do there exist in our times, even among the religions of the Gentiles, books on the unity of God more worthless than these?" ספרים seems mistaken. The solution seems obvious. The Hebrew here should read כופרים and not ספרים. An examination of the manuscript shows that the ס in the manuscript conforms precisely to the scribe's way of writing כ and ו. Herskowitz is of no help here. He simply omitted the word from his transcription. See *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 245. On the present state of the nations, belief as violating God's unity, see fol. 21b, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 31. Joseph Shatzmiller, "The Albigensian Heresy," 350 has taken the reference to books out of context, and related it to the Mishna and Talmud, which are discussed earlier by Rabbi Meir, but certainly not in the present context.

I understand this argument to express the same sentiment expressed by Abulafia when he presents Sefirotic Kabbalists as worse than Christians, because the number of divine aspects they recognize is greater than that recognized by the Christians.[77]

The theological heart of the debate concerns the relationship between the one and the many. Rabbi Meir is unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that the many aspects of God are one with God, thereby preserving the concept of divine unity. For him the Kabbalistic teaching violates the belief in the unity of God, substituting the many for the one. "For they have chosen many Gods,[78] and they say in their unreason that they are all connected with one another and all is one."[79] The problem of the relationship of the one and the many is fundamental both to Christianity and to Kabbalah. Rabbi Meir's critique of the Kabbalists obviously applies to his critique of the Trinity as well.[80] "For the creature must not be associated with its creator, nor matter with its molder, nor the emanated with the emanator, saying for example that His unity is not

[77] The introduction to the epistle, on 229a, describes the Kabbalists as "wise in their own eyes, inventing matters from their own heart, and leaning towards heresy (ונוטים לצד מינות). This too may be a reference to Christianity. In the context of the author's attacks, various terms are employed to describe his opponents: מין, כופר, פוגר עבודה זרה. It may be that in the present context one should not hold on to steadfast distinctions between these categories. For a sweeping usage of idolatry, that would apply equally to Kabbalists and to Christians, see folio 234a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 250.

[78] Scholem reconstructs the text as אוו, desired. The text reads אוי, which would be translated as: "Woe unto the many gods." See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 399, n. 83.

[79] 231a. English translation from Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 399.

[80] There is actually surprisingly little criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity in his work. Of the 160 questions in part 2, only one is devoted to the Trinity, bringing out the logical paradoxes implied by faith in the Trinity. Question no. 50 of the first set is devoted to the Trinity. See Blau, *Shitat HaKadmonim Al Masechet Nazir, Zevachim, Arachin Utemura*, 322ff. The same is true for the first part of the work. The same arguments are brought in fol. 30a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 72. Most of his anti-Christian polemic focuses upon interpretation of scripture, both Jewish and Christian, and on an examination of the life of Jews and Christians. This observation is significant for a classification of types of Jewish-Christian polemics.

perfect, and only together with them is all one."[81] For Rabbi Meir the same theological problem is posed by any admixture of another being to God, regardless of what the ontological status of that being is, and how high a place it occupies in the ladder of created beings.

That the battle against Kabbalah is part of the larger battle against Christianity emerges also from the concluding prayer, which Rabbi Meir offers at the end of the discussion of proper and improper forms of prayer, a discussion that grows out of the concerns already stated. Rabbi Meir concludes this section of *Milhemet Mitzva* with the following prayer: "May God in his compassion turn the heart of those who worship any besides Him to serve Him, and to know and to believe in His unity, and all will call His name, as it says, "For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name, and serve Him with one accord," Amen Amen Selah."[82] Had the previous discussion been relevant only to Kabbalists, Rabbi Meir would not have quoted as part of the concluding prayer Zeph. 3,9. The verse speaks of turning the nations to the knowledge and service of God. That the anti-Kabbalistic passage concludes with a prayer for the conversion of the nations reinforces the understanding that Rabbi Meir deals with the Kabbalah because he understands it to pose the same theological problem as Christianity.

Some words about the dating of the epistle and of *Milhemet Mitzva* are also relevant for our discussion of polemics and its context. We lack a precise date for the composition of the epistle. Scholem first dated it between 1235 and 1240.[83] In a later work the dating was shifted to 1235–1245.[84] This difference could be significant. Rabbi Meir ben Simeon's epistle concludes with a call to burn, or eliminate, the Kabbalistic works. "Seek and examine well, and if they [their books] are in your midst burn them from the land,[85] that they should not be an obstacle to you, and seek well for them, because we too burned those that were found in our

[81] 230b, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 245. I have deviated from Scholem's translation, because Scholem truncated a quote before the end of a phrase. The phrase in its entirety reads: רק עמהם תכל אחד. Scholem omitted the last two words, and added the first two to the previous sentence.

[82] Folio 235b, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 253.

[83] *Mehkerei Kabbala*, 12 and 14.

[84] *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 397.

[85] The Hebrew בערו can be rendered either as burning or disposing of, following this same double usage in Mishna Pesahim 2,1 concerning the burning or disposing of leavened bread on Passover eve.

midst."[86] Book burning cannot be seen as an isolated event. It is around this time that two major episodes in Jewish history take place, in which either the fact or the rumour of book burning play an important role, the one is the burning of the works of Maimonides,[87] the other is the burning of the Talmud following the Paris disputation. Any dating of the epistle from 1235 onwards would enable us to consider the call for burning the Kabbalistic works as an echo, if not a reaction, to the burning of the philosophical works. Dating the epistle at the later end of the spectrum suggested by Scholem would offer a different kind of historical resonance. The kind of violence inflicted by the Christians against the Jews is now turned towards those within the Jewish community who are seen as Christian-like: the Kabbalists.

A further and more significant consideration relates to the composition of *Milhemet Mitzva*. One must consider not only the date of the original composition of the epistle, but also the date of its reissue. Rabbi Meir makes a conscious choice in including the epistle in this new work, and this choice too must be considered against the background of its time. *Milhemet Mitzva*, according to the research of Merhavia, was edited around 1270. The 35 year time span is significant. We saw above that Scholem invoked the great authority of Nahmanides as a force in silencing attacks on the Kabbalah. By 1270 the authority of the Kabbalah would have been solidly established, in a way it was not 35 years earlier. To republish the original anti-Kabbalistic polemic, some 30 years after its original publication, and to add to it further refutation of Kabbalistic doctrine, as Rabbi Meir does on that occasion, is not at all self evident. If indeed the spread of Kabbalah was such that the authority of figures like Nahmanides should have silenced criticism of the Kabbalah, the publication of Rabbi Meir's critique of the Kabbalah at such a late date can only be accounted for on the grounds of the antiChristian polemic that it served. So great and pressing was the need to combat the Christians, that even as late as 1270 an anti-Kabbalistic polemic could be published.

Recognizing the anti-Kabbalistic polemic as part of the anti-Christian polemic allows us to make some interesting observations. First, it is worthwhile comparing the tone of the two polemics. The anti-Christian polemic is extremely civil, polite and matter of fact. No strong language

[86] 232a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 246.

[87] See A. Shohat, "Concerning the First Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides," *Zion* 36 (1971): 27–60 (Hebrew).

is used, no derogatory expressions. By contrast, the epistle is full of acrimony and vitriol.[88] The difference in tone between the epistle and the rest of the work deserves attention. It may be that the epistle reveals Hameili's natural style, which must be curbed for considerations of propriety in speaking to the Christian majority. However, we should also note that the epistle is not simply an exchange of ideas. It is a call to burn or eliminate books. It is sent out to communities with a specific goal in mind. Most important, it is a battle fought on home ground. It is an internal battle within the Jewish world over the legitimacy of a particular Jewish world view. Unlike the battle with Christianity, that is recognized an outsider and in that sense less of a threat, the Kabbalists pose a threat from within. The battle against them is, therefore, more fierce.

The opening page of the epistle, not quoted or analyzed by Scholem, is also of interest, when considering the epistle in the context of its final home the work as a whole. The epistle opens with a description of Israel's present historical condition.[89] In poetic verse Rabbi Meir narrates Israel's current state of exile. The entire polemic is situated in the context of Israel's sins, sufferings and exiles. The reader of *Milhemet Mitzva* is aware of the central position of Israel's history and its witness, or perhaps non-witness, to the question of the ultimate religious truth. The opening of the reissued epistle sounds a contextually suitable note.

Interesting also is the use of similar arguments in the anti-Christian and anti-Kabbalistic discussions. Following mention of Israel's exile, Rabbi Meir expands the woes of history from the historical suffering of the people to the harm that has befallen tradition itself. The problem of *Machloket*, disagreement among scholars of the Torah, is presented as part of the ills that have befallen Israel. However, there is a remedy: majority of opinion. Rabbi Meir stretches the power of decision by majority from its true halachic context in matters of the law to matters of theology.[90] Jewish faith, like Jewish law, should be determined by majority opinion. This opens the gate for him to attack the Kabbalists.

[88] To be fair to Rabbi Meir, some of the additions he makes to the epistle in the 1270 reissue (folios 235–40) are much more civil and reminiscent of the tone of his conversations with the Christians. This is not true, however, of the opening paragraph introducing the epistle, on p. 229a, which by its contents seems to be a later composition, probably contemporaneous with the discussion found in folios 235–40.

[89] The text is cited in Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 241.

[90] Note the wonderful expression וגלו פניהם שלא כהלכה באמונת השם יתברך (folio 229b, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 242).

The grounds of authority based upon which he attacks the Kabbalists is thus dissent from majority of opinion. The authoritarian grounding of his argument is, once again, more suitable to the time of the composition of the epistle than it is to the time of its reissue. It is interesting to note that the notion of theological decision by majority decision appears also as part of the Jewish-Christian disputation. In the context of a Jewish-Christian argument, the Christian proponent suggests that Christians are the majority now, and hence Jews should accept Christianity, as the Jewish law mandates following the majority decision.[91] Rabbi Meir responds by saying that indeed the law should be followed, but the decisive point in time should be the time in which Jesus operated. The 71 members of the Sanhedrin outnumber the 12 apostles. In both cases, the talmudic decision making process has been stretched to incorporate disputed issues, both between Judaism and Christianity and between the Judaism espoused by Rabbi Meir and the nascent Kabbalah.

Postscript – Contemporary Polemics

The suggestion that the anti-Christian polemic shapes the conditions for internal Jewish debates, developing greater sensitivity to particular issues, and thereby creating particular intra-religious frontiers for polemics, is born out by a fascinating polemic that has taken place over the past decade. David Berger is a Rabbi and scholar involved in the Jewish debate with Christianity.[92] His academic study of the Jewish-Christian debate has not been limited to the history of the debate. Berger has also written a contemporary polemical work, designed to refute the work of various Christian missionary groups.[93] Over the past decade Berger has been actively involved in a campaign against a dominant movement within Lubavitch Hassidism. Lubavitch Hassidism stirred great messianic expectations in the 1980s and early 1990s, expectations that revolved around the figure of the late Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson. Despite the latter's death, a large segment of his followers continued to maintain that he was the Messiah, thus espousing a belief in a dead Messiah. The analogy with the early Christian movement is obvious.

[91] Fol. 60a, Herskowitz, *Judaeo-Christian Dialogue*, 139.

[92] He is the author of *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979).

[93] David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and "Jewish Christianity"* (New York: KTAV, 1978).

The analogy, moreover, extends to additional developments in the belief of some of the Hassidim. A small, perhaps fringe group, expanded the formula used by many of the Hassidim: "Long live our master, our teacher and our Rebbe, the King Messiah Forever," by adding to it "and our creator," thus ascribing divine status to the deceased master. Berger noted that this constitutes a dangerous parallel with early Christianity's deification of its deceased Messiah.

Berger has been involved in a campaign to delegitimate those Lubavitch Hassidim whose faith has become so similar to Christianity. He has written numerous letters to rabbinical authorities and boards, published articles, and I am told he is in the process of writing a book on the subject. His campaign has met with little success. The Lubavitch Hassidim continue to be considered by virtually all rabbinical circles as mainstream and legitimate, even if they do espouse an oddball messianic belief in their deceased master.

Contemporary developments within Lubavitch Hassidism are particularly instructive for the scholar of religion. They show how easily early Christianity could have been considered a Jewish movement, despite its belief in the identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. The boundary between being in and being out does not depend on the nature of messianic belief, either in the case of early Christianity or in the case of the Lubavitch Hassidim. That the Lubavitch Hassidim continue to be seen as normative and as part of Orthodox Jewry points to the sense of context, of which I spoke above. Their overall affiliation with the values and lifestyle of Jewish Orthodoxy leads to their being considered a part of that world. Within this overall context they are defined as part of the group, and hence as legitimate. Particular ideas to which they subscribe can be rejected, overlooked or laughed at. But they do not affect their basic legitimacy, nor do they occasion serious polemic.

It is significant that a serious intra-Jewish polemic against this group is carried out by a scholar and practitioner of the Jewish-Christian polemic. Berger is fully aware of the relationship between the two polemical frontiers. If Lubavitch Hassidimic theology is recognized as valid, that would undermine part of Judaism's traditional objection to Christian theology. Having drawn the border between insider and outsider along the lines of the traditional Jewish-Christian debate, Berger is forced to extend those boundaries internally as well. The scholar who confronts Christianity on the outside develops a different sensitivity and a particular agenda, that translates internally as well. One may say that in such a case

the horizons of context have been expanded from the internal context of the Jewish community to the wider context of Jewish-Christian relations. Following such expansion, a battle against a movement within Judaism, that resembles Christianity too closely, ensues. This was, I suggest, the dynamic that led to Rabbi Meir ben Simeon's polemic against the Kabbalah. We see this dynamic repeated in our own times.