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The Early Opponents of the Kabbalah and the Role of Sceptical Argumentations: An Outline[1]

Introduction

Initiated by Gershom Scholem, academic research on Kabbalah has resulted in numerous studies, editions, and articles. Today, there is not only investigation into the major trends in Jewish mysticism, but also into minor branches and figures. The subtle irony of the title 'Major trends in Jewish Mysticism'[2] deals with the historiographical fact that Jewish mysticism was formerly considered a minor trend in Judaism. Meanwhile, the formerly minor trend of Jewish mysticism has been acknowledged as a major trend in Judaism. Nowadays, the welcome state of research in Jewish mysticism is so rich and differentiated that there is even focus on minor trends within this major trend.[3]

The emergence of the Kabbalah as a historical phenomenon in the High Middle Ages, that is, establishing many authors, producing numerous texts and creating a vibrant discourse,[4] evoked much less discussion, polemic, and criticism, let alone a counter-discourse, as it probably would be expected, at least from a modern, enlightened perspective.[5] The scholarly view of the Kabbalah tends to emphasise the

1 This first presentation of my research carried out at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Hamburg is deeply indebted to many talks and discussions with my colleagues there and our visiting fellows. I would especially like to thank Giuseppe Veltri, Racheli Haliva, and Patrick Koch.

2 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946; reprinted, New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

3 Cf. the overviews of scholarship on Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah in the twentieth century presented in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Moshe Idel, "Academic Studies of Kabbalah in Israel: 1923–1998: A Short Survey," *Studia Judaica* 8 (1999): 91–114; Peter Schäfer, "Jewish Mysticism in the Twentieth Century," in *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the 6th EAJS Congress, Toledo, July 1998*, eds. J. Targarona Borrás and A. Sáenz-Badillos, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 3–18; Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah Studies," *Encyclopaedia Judaica, second edition*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, vol. 11 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007): 681–692; Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010).

4 Cf. Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 (2003): 255–271.

5 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988), 190: between 1500 to 1800 'an open polemical attack on the Kabbalah was practically unheard of'; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1988): 250–251: 'It is a striking fact, which has curiously

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innovative aspect of kabbalistic ideas and motifs as well as the strange and fantastic character of their images and symbols. However, in their historical context, this innovation and strangeness were apparently not received as such by most of their contemporaries and recipients.[6] In contrast, there is much more evidence of a polemical and disclaiming literature against Christians[7] or Maimonideans[8] in this period.[9] According to Moshe Idel, two factors were responsible for the surprisingly small number of textual polemics and attacks on Kabbalah in the period of its emergence. Firstly, the study of Kabbalah was mostly limited to small circles such as families or teacher-student relationships. While the philosophy of Maimonides was always inextricably connected with his personality, the Kabbalah was differentiated in various groups led by broadly accepted and well-established scholars and powerful communal leaders. Secondly, and Idel stresses the greater importance of this point, in contrast to the teachings of Maimonides, many kabbalistic interpretations and also particularly its innovations were accepted as being more in continuity than in a sharp-cut rupture with older rabbinic traditions.[10] Accordingly, many kabbalists were also rabbinic and halakhic authorities. The self-image of the kabbalists—namely, that they presented merely Kabbalah, that is, a tradition of older secrets transmitted over a long period from generation to generation—was mostly undisputed. Both sides, the kabbalistic and the traditional rabbinic scholars, were agreed and shared the same discourse when they attacked the rational philosophers as their mutual

remained largely unnoticed by Kabbalah scholarship that the emergence of major Kabbalistic schools did not stir significant controversies in the Jewish milieus in which they arose.'

6 Cf. Hartley Lachter, "The Politics of Secrets: Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah in Context," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101.4 (2011): 505: 'For example, how are we to account for the strikingly odd fact that the radical and bold imagery found in zoharic literature was quickly regarded by some Jewish readers not only as an authentic and legitimate Jewish tradition but the secret core of Judaism itself?'

7 Cf. Hanne Trautner-Kromann, *Shield and Sword. Jewish Polemics against Christianity and the Christians in France and Spain from 1100–1500* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007).

8 Cf. Jacob I. Dienstag, "The *Moreh Nevukhim* Controversy—An Annotated Bibliography," in *Abraham Maimonides' "Wars of the Lord" and the Maimonidean Controversy*, ed. F. Rosner (Haifa: The Maimonides Research Institute, 2000): 154–200; Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy 1180–1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); Wolfram Drews, "Medieval Controversies about Maimonidean Teachings," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, eds. Görge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon 2004): 113–135.

9 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 251: 'The paucity of criticism [of Kabbalah] is surprising when compared to a parallel phenomenon, close both in time and location to the rise of Kabbalah: the attitude toward Maimonides' philosophy'; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Triune and the Decaune God: Christianity and Kabbalah as Objects of Jewish Polemics with Special Reference to Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne's Milhemet Mitzva," in *Religious Polemics in Context*, eds. Theo L. Hettema and Arie van der Kooij (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004): 172: 'Given how extensive the Jewish-Christian debate was, it is striking to note how little anti-Kabbalistic polemics we possess.'

10 See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 251–2; cf. Lachter, "Politics of Secrets," 505.

enemy. The most obvious example of this discursive coalition can be seen in the controversies about the philosophy of Maimonides, as may be seen below.

The main claims of the kabbalists concern various fields including epistemology, theology, cosmology, angelology, ethics, the duties of religious practitioners, the meaning of human actions, and so on. Thus, kabbalistic statements focus on, for instance, the knowledge of the inner life of the godhead, the emanation of God's essence to the earthly realm, the concept of the transmigration of the soul, the meaning of kabbalistic principles for halakhic decision-making,[11] the theurgic power of the fulfillment of the *miṣwot*, that is, the commandments, and the alleged 'real' meaning of the traditional texts, especially the Bible and the rabbinic *aggadot*. Hence, any opposition to Kabbalah comes from the different perspectives of different experts in the fields of rational philosophy, halakhic decision-making, biblical exegesis and rabbinic literature. Furthermore, criticism of specific kabbalistic claims was also formulated inside the kabbalistic camp. In other words, the historical development of the Kabbalah meant that there were already competing figures, schools and traditions by the second generation of known kabbalists.

However, since from the very beginning the Kabbalah was neither totally undisputed nor flourishing without any opposition,[12] it is rather surprising that no monograph devoted exclusively to the opponents of the Kabbalah and the history of this opposition has been published so far.[13] Of course, several articles or book chapters have already been written on specific figures and texts, and I am gratefully relying on these contributions,[14] but nevertheless, a comprehensive overview and discussion of these phenomena in the period from the emergence of the Kabbalah until the seventeenth century when Leon Modena (1571–1648) composed his *Ari Nohem* ('Roaring Lion') is still to be written. Concerning this desideratum, I would like to initiate this research focus in the scholarly world by presenting a couple of case studies concerning the early opponents of the Kabbalah. The purpose of my research project is less to write a comprehensive history of the early opponents of the Kabbalah and

11 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 191–193; Meir Benayahu, "Kabbalah and Halakhah—A Confrontation" [in Hebrew], in *Daat. A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 5 (1980): 61–115; Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, Its Various Faces and Social Relevance* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986); Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalisation of the Commandments in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Alfred Ivry, Allan Arkush and Elliot R. Wolfson (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998): 311–360; Saverio Campanini, "Talmudisten versus Kabbalisten? Der Streit um die Hermeneutik der Gebote im mittelalterlichen Judentum," in *Das Gesetz—the Law—la loi*, eds. Andreas Speer and Guy Guldentops (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014): 263–277.

12 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 68: 'unceasing opposition of some individuals.'

13 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 2: 'No elaborate and detailed survey of the nature and history of this religious movement is known, however, until the period of the Renaissance'; Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, 618: 'A related and extremely interesting project would be a volume that collects anti-kabbalistic polemics [...].'

14 See the references given in the footnotes throughout this article.

more to focus on the sceptical, anti-sceptical, and non-sceptical modes or strategies of argumentation of selected authors and texts in specific discourses. In the case studies, the relevant texts will be translated into English and the claims and arguments will be studied carefully. However, another purpose of my research is the reconstruction of the historical context and the specific discourse in which these authors were engaged. Thus, the focus will not only be the critical discussion of the various figures, circles and schools of the Kabbalah as well as their corresponding claims and arguments, but also the kabbalistic reaction to this criticism. A fairly long-term agenda of this research proposal also includes more minor and less-known figures and texts, as well as more evidence from the manuscript tradition.

In the following outline of my research proposal, various sources providing evidence of the early opposition to the Kabbalah will be briefly surveyed. Subsequently, the systematic importance of several philosophical arguments formulated by Maimonides for any criticism of Kabbalah and, more generally, the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah will be discussed. Finally, some first thoughts concerning the role of sceptical arguments in the opposition to the Kabbalah will be presented.

Evidence of Opposition to the Kabbalah: The Sources

There is some evidence of opposition to the Kabbalah found in a relatively small number of texts written mostly by known authors from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Here follows a very brief survey of the sources I am familiar with so far, although this list is certainly incomplete.[15] When the Kabbalah started to emerge in Provence, its first known opponent appeared almost immediately: the talmudist Meir ben Simon ha-Meʿili of Narbonne, who was a contemporary of the first known kabbalistic author, Isaac the Blind, in the first half of the thirteenth century. In an epistle included in the end of his anti-Christian polemical work *Milḥemet Miṣwah* ('War by Commandment') written around 1230–35, he criticised the Kabbalah and, in addition, made what was probably the very first reference to the supposed first known kabbalistic book, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* ('Book of the Brightness'), attributed pseudepigraphically to Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKanah.[16] In fact, Meir ben Simon to-

15 For additional evidence see Jordan S. Penkower, *The Dates of Composition of The Zohar and The Book Bahir. The History of Biblical Vocalization and Accentuation as a Tool for Dating Kabbalistic Works* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010): 64–66.

16 This passage was translated by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press, 1990), 398–400. The Hebrew text is found in MS Parma de Rossi 155 (2749), fol. 230b, and was published in a slightly abridged form by Gershom Scholem, "Teʻudah ḥadašah le-rešit ha-qabbalah" [Hebrew], in *Sefer Bialik*, ed. Yaʿakov Fikhman (Tel Aviv: Hoṣa'at va'ad ha-yovel uve-hištatfut hoṣa'at omanut, 1934): 146–150, here 146–149, reprinted in Gershom Scholem, *Studies in Kabbalah*, ed. Yosef ben Shelomo, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1998): 7–38; cf. furthermore Heinrich Gross, "Meïr b. Simon und seine Schrift Milchemeth Mizwa," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 30

gether with his father-in-law, the talmudist Meshullam ben Moses of Bèziers, not only condemned but also expelled the kabbalists from Languedoc, where Kabbalah emerged first.[17]

Not surprisingly, the main opposition to the Kabbalah was formed by philosophers who belonged to the Aristotelian–Maimonidean tradition. In particular, several Jewish Averroists contributed polemics against the Kabbalah in their works. Chronologically, the first was the physician, philosopher, and translator Jacob ben Abba Mari ben Simson Anatoli (ca. 1194–1256), who, in a small passage in the introduction of his *Malmad ha-Talmidim* ('Teacher of the Disciples' or 'Goad to the Students'), mentioned the 'Account of the Chariot' and those scholars who combined this topic with the names of God. This verdict is probably also directed against kabbalists whom he mentioned some lines earlier.[18] In the second half of the thirteenth century, Isaac Albalag wrote a few lines against kabbalists as esotericists in his commentary on the Hebrew version of Al-Ghazali's 'Intentions of the Philosophers' (*Kawwanot ha-Filosofim*), entitled *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot* ('Book of the Rectifying of the Doctrines').[19] Next came Isaac ben Joseph ibn Polqar (second half of thirteenth century—ca. 1330) who devoted a passage in the fourth chapter to the criticism of Kabbalah in his polemical work *'Ezer ha-Dat* ('In Support of the Religion').[20] The physician, philosopher, and exegete Moses Narboni (before 1300–after 1362) criticised Kabbalah in his commentary on Maimonides' 'Guide'.[21] In the first half of the fifteenth century, this commentary was studied in a circle of Jewish scholars in Prague, among them Rabbi Menahem bar Jacob Shalem, who harshly attacked the kabbalists for not using their intellect.[22] The philosopher Samuel ibn Seneh Zarza (second half of the fourteenth

(1881): 295–305, 444–452, 554–569; Adolf Neubauer, "The Bahir and the Zohar," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4 (1892): 357–360; Goshen-Gottstein, "The Triune and the Decaune God," 165–200.

17 Cf. Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture. Jewish Interpretation and Controversy in Medieval Languedoc* (London: Routledge, 2009): 2–3.

18 See Jacob ben Abba Mari ben Simson Anatoli, *Malmad ha-Talmidim* [Hebrew], ed. L. Silbermann (Lyck, Prussia: Ḥevrat Meqitze Nirdamim, 1866): introduction, 6a.

19 See Isaac Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun Ha-De'ot* [Hebrew], ed. Georges Vajda, (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973), 38; cf. Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 238–243.

20 See Isaac Polqar, *Ezer HaDat. A Defense of Judaism*, ed. Jacob S. Levinger (Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1984); cf. Carlos del Valle, "La critique de la Qabbale chez Isaac ibn Polgar," in *Expérience et écriture mystique dans les religions du livre*, eds. Paul B. Fenton and Roland Goetschel (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 131–141; Racheli Halevi, *Isaac Polqar—A Jewish Philosopher or a Philosopher and a Jew? A Study of the Relationship between Philosophy and Religion in Isaac Polqar's ʿEzer ha-Dat [In Support of the Religion] and Teshuvat Apikoros [A Response to the Heretic]* (typescript, PhD McGill, Montreal, 2015).

21 Cf. Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press): 68, n. 2.

22 Cf. Ephraim Kupfer, "Concerning the Cultural Image of German Jewry and its Rabbis in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 42 (1972–73): 123–124; Tamás Visi, *On the Peripheries of Ashkenaz: Medieval Jewish Philosophers in Normandy and in the Czech Lands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Olomouc, 2011), 223–228.

century) wrote a passage against the authenticity of the kabbalistic classic *Sefer ha-Zohar* ('Book of the Splendour') in his commentary on the Pentateuch entitled *Sefer Meqor Ḥayyim* ('Book of the Source of Life').[23] The physician and Aristotelian philosopher Judah Messer Leon (ca. 1420/25–ca. 1498) also criticised several kabbalistic claims.[24] In 1466, a controversy about the veracity of the transmigration of the soul took place in the Cretan community of Candia, involving the Aristotelian philosopher and Rabbi Moses ben Samuel ha-Cohen Ashkenazi (second half of the fifteenth century) and the philosophically trained kabbalist and Rabbi Michael ben Shabbetai ha-Cohen Balbo (1411–after 1484).[25] A few passages written by Elijah Delmedigo (ca. 1458–ca. 1493), particularly in his *Sefer Beḥinat ha-Dat* ('The Examination of the Religion'), also attacked the kabbalists as a specific sect.[26]

Not only philosophers but also halakhic authorities, such as Menahem ben Solomon ha-Meiri of Perpignan (1249–ca. 1310),[27] Isaac ben Sheshet (1326–1408),[28] Elijah Mizrahi (ca. 1455–1525/6)[29] and Solomon Luria (1510–1573),[30] to mention just a few,[31] criticised the claims of the kabbalists regarding the reasoning of Halakhah in their responsa.

Aside from known authors who were engaged as opponents of the Kabbalah, unknown authors also transmitted treatises under pseudonyms. For instance, probably in the fourteenth century, a Spanish Jew living in Italy (where he came into contact with Ashkenazi Jewry) wrote a satirical polemic against the alleged inability of Ashkenazi rabbis to be skilled in philosophy, logic, and rhetoric entitled *Sefer ʿAlilot De-*

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23 See Samuel ibn Seneh Zarza, *Sefer Meqor Ḥayyim* (Mantua 1559), fol. 118b (*Parašat Ki Teṣe*).

24 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 2: He 'accused the Kabbalists of attributing corporeality, change, and plurality to God.'

25 Cf. Kupfer, "Concerning the Cultural Image," 125–130; Ephraim Gottlieb, "The Transmigration Debate in 15th Century Candia" [in Hebrew], in idem, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1976): 370–396; Aviezer Ravitzky, "The God of the Philosophers Versus the God of the Kabbalists. A Controversy in 15th Century Crete (Heb MSS Vatican 105 and 254)," in *Studies in Jewish Manuscripts*, eds. Joseph Dan and Klaus Herrmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999): 139–170; Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth. Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 41–70.

26 See Elijah Delmedigo, *Sefer Behinat HaDat of Elijah Del-Medigo. A Critical Edition with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* [in Hebrew], ed. Jacob Joshua Ross (Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1984); Giovanni Licata, *La via della ragione. Elia del Medigo e l'averroismo di Spinoza* (Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2013); cf. Kalman P. Bland, "Elijah del Medigo's Averroist Response to the Kabbalah of Fifteenth-Century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1.1 (1991): 23–53.

27 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 66.

28 See Isaac ben Sheshet, *Še'elot u-Tešuvot* (Constantinople, 1546/7), no. 157.

29 See Elijah Mizrahi, *Še'elot u-Tešuvot* (Jerusalem: Darom, 1938): 11; cf. Rachel Elior, "The Dispute over the Status of Kabbalah in the Sixteenth Century" [in Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 178–181.

30 See Solomon Luria, *Še'elot u-Tešuvot* (Lublin, 1599), no. 98, fol. 68a.

31 For additional evidence see Benayahu, "Kabbalah and Halakha."

varim ('False charges', literally 'Pretext of Words') under the pseudonym Palmon ben Pelet.[32] The treatise favors rational philosophy over the alleged Ashkenazi obsession with halakhic casuistic and methods like *pilpul*, but also with Kabbalah, magic and superstition. The author's conclusion is that this failure of the Ashkenazi rabbis is the reason for the ongoing exile of the people of Israel.[33]

In 1639 the first full-fledged critique of Kabbalah was written by the Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena in his *Ari Nohem*, which is devoted exclusively to this topic.[34] Marking the final point of the present survey, his book compiles and quotes many but not all of the anti-kabbalistic sources and arguments mentioned so far.

In a discourse of kabbalistic and anti-kabbalistic criticism and polemic the respective other side is often quoted or paraphrased. A closer look behind the polemical and often distorting description of the claims of the enemy might reveal some evidence of historical value. Thus, kabbalistic detractions of or attacks on rational philosophy can provide the historian of ideas with matters of dispute.[35] An intriguing example among others of kabbalistic criticism of the philosophical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, in this case refuting Samuel ibn Tibbon's rationalisation of creation, can be found in *Mešiv Devarim Nekhoḥim* ('Response of Correct Answers') written by Jacob ben Sheshet in Catalonia around 1240.[36]

Furthermore, one may add, it may be presumed that much of the textual evidence of the opponents of the Kabbalah was suppressed by kabbalists and therefore either survived in manuscripts alone or even is now completely lost.[37] This evidence is not only attested in manuscripts of works produced by the opponents of the Kab-

32 See Michael Ben Reuven, ed., "Sefer ʿAlilot Devarim" [Hebrew], in *Ozar Nechmad. Briefe und Abhandlungen jüdische Literatur betreffend*, vol. 4, ed. Ignaz Blumenfeld (Vienna: Verlag von Jacob Schloßberg's Buchhandlung, 1863): 177–178 (introduction); 179–195 (text); 196–214 (commentary).

33 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 66: Josef ben Meshullam (?), written in 1468. This name is mentioned in the first sentence of the commentary; see "Sefer ʿAlilot Devarim," 196; Israel M. Ta-Shma, "Hekhan nitḥabber Sefer ʿAlilot Devarim" [Hebrew], in *ʿAlei Sefer* 3 (1977): 44–53: German origin; Jacob J. Schacter: "'Al Sefer 'Alilot Devarim" [Hebrew], in *ʿAlei Sefer* 8 (1980): 148–150; Robert Bonfil, "Sefer ʿAlilot Devarim: Pereq be-toledot he-hagut ha-yehudit ba-meah ha-14" [Hebrew], in *Eshel Be'er Sheva. Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1980): 229–264: Spanish author in Italy named Rabbi Josef Tov-Elem; cf. also Israel Jacob Yuval: "Magie und Kabbala unter den Juden im Deutschland des ausgehenden Mittelalters," in *Judentum im deutschen Sprachraum*, ed. Karl-Erich Grözinger (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991): 173–176.

34 See Leon Modena, *Ari Nohem*, ed. Nehemiah S. Libowitz (Jerusalem: Darom, 1929); cf. Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah. Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

35 Cf. Hartley Lachter, "Kabbalah, Philosophy, and the Jewish-Christian Debate: Reconsidering the Early Works of Joseph Gikatilla," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16 (2008): 1–58.

36 Jacob ben Sheshet, *Mešiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968); cf. Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* (Paris: Mouton, 1962).

37 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 1–2: '[...] it does seem that once there was more anti-Kabbalistic material than is extant in the surviving documents.'

balah but also by the kabbalists themselves. One example of this phenomenon is the kabbalist Avigdor Kara (1389–1439) who collected the attacks and polemics of his enemies.[38] Another example may be found in MS Cambridge Add. 673,1, fol. 13a-55a (Reif 846), attesting a text entitled *Ohel Mo'ed* ('Tent of Meeting') that was attributed to the kabbalist Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi. According to Scholem, this manuscript was '[...] written by an unknown kabbalist before 1500—in Italy or even still in Spain—in order to defend the Kabbalah against its detractors.'[39] So, besides the few above-mentioned printed editions of genuine works written by the opponents of the Kabbalah, there are more texts to be found in other editions, but first and foremost in manuscripts.

Maimonides and the Relationship of Philosophy and Kabbalah

One major kind of opposition to the Kabbalah is certainly presented by Jewish philosophers, especially those who were indebted more or less to the philosophy of Aristotle. The basics and main arguments of any philosophical criticism of the Kabbalah are already provided by Maimonides, despite the fact that he lived some years before its first emergence. It is well known that the philosophy of Maimonides is deeply engaged with Aristotle as he was transmitted and revised in the Arab tradition. The commentaries of Averroes on various works of Aristotle are especially important for the later Jewish reception inside the Maimonidean camp. Menachem Kellner's monograph 'Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism' is a very useful starting point for my research and in the following I would like to present his main arguments.[40] In general, Kellner tries to understand the philosophy of Maimonides as a blueprint for any philosophical criticism of the mystical and kabbalistic stance.[41] Kellner's 'proto-kabbalistic' examples to which Maimonides was sensitive and critical include the Heikhalot literature, the *Sefer Yeṣirah* ('Book of Creation') and the Jewish magical tradition.[42] Kabbalistic interpretations of the Heikhalot literature and commentaries on the *Sefer Yeṣirah* were decisive for the development of the Kabbalah. It is likely that Jewish magic became prominent as 'Practical Kabbalah' later on.

38 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 280, n. 3: 'R. Avigdor Kara, a fifteenth-century Kabbalist in Prague, who possessed longer critical works on Kabbalah that are apparently lost.' In the same footnote, an edition of this text prepared by Idel and Frank Talmage was announced. It has not yet appeared in print due to the premature passing of Talmage.

39 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 67. Note the mistake concerning the manuscript, *ibidem*, 78: 'Ms Jerusalem'!

40 Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).

41 Cf. Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990): 34.

42 Kellner, *Maimonides*, 18–25.

In his 'Guide of the Perplexed', Maimonides tries to define anew the so-called 'Mysteries of the Torah' (*Sitrei Torah*) already discussed in rabbinic literature. His definition and interpretation of these mysteries differ completely from the dominant trends of the former and contemporary Jewish tradition so far. As always, he presents a philosophical, that is, Aristotelian, explanation for these matters. When it comes to the ancient Jewish secret topics, the so called 'Account of the Beginning' or 'Account of the Creation' (*Maʿaśeh Berešit*), and the 'Account of the Chariot' (*Maʿaśeh Merkavah*), Maimonides states unmistakably concerning the latter in the introduction to his 'Guide' 3:[43]

> [...] the knowledge of this matter has ceased to exist in the entire religious community, so that nothing great or small remains of it. And it had to happen like this, for this knowledge was only transmitted orally[44] and has never been set down in writing.

Emphasising the esoteric character of the 'Account of the Chariot', Maimonides disclaims or at least neglects the entire Heikhalot literature focusing mainly on this subject, which he definitely knew.

Maimonides' sharp attack on magical practices, which were well attested in his own Jewish community, is a clear indicator of his general attitude towards any so-called 'secrets' concerning the names of God.[45] Thus, we read in his 'Guide' 1:61:

> All the names of God, may He be exalted, that are to be found in any of the books derive from actions. There is nothing secret in this matter. [...][46]

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43 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 415; the following Hebrew translations of the *Guide* were consulted as well: Moshe ben Maimon, *Sefer Moreh ha-Nevukhim* [Hebrew], trans. Samuel ibn Tibbon, ed. Yehuda ibn Shmuel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1987); Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed. Hebrew Translation from the Arabic, Annotations, Appendices, and Indices* [in Hebrew], trans. Michael Schwarz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002).

44 Translated by Pines as 'from one chief to another'; Schwarz, 427, reads 'from mouth to ear.'

45 Cf. Harvey Spencer Lewis, "Maimonides on Superstition," *Jewish Quarterly Review* [OS] 17 (1905): 475–488; Bezalel Safran, "Maimonides' Attitude to Magic and to Related Types of Thinking," in *Porat Yosef—Studies Presented to Rabbi Dr. Yosef Safran*, eds. Bezalel Safran and Eliyahu Safran (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1992): 92–110; Dov Schwartz, *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought*, trans. David Louvish and Batya Stein (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005): 27–54; idem, *Amulets, Properties and Rationalism in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2004), 21–34; Marc B. Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakha and Superstition," *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 61–108; Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides and His Disciples on Linguistic Magic and 'the Madness of the Writers of Amulets'" [in Hebrew], in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: A Jubilee Book in Honour of Yosef Ahituv*, eds. Abraham Sagi and Nahem Ilan (Ein Zurim: Ha-Qibbuṣ ha-Me'uḥad, 2002): 431–458; Yuval Harari, "Leadership, Authority, and the 'Other' in the Debate over Magic from the Karaites to Maimonides," *The Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 2 (2007): 90–101; Yossef Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah: The Mystical and Magical Interpretation of Maimonides in the Later Middle Ages," *Daat. A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 64–65 (2009): 5–39.

46 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 147; Schwarz, 155, reads the last sentence as 'This is a known matter.'

> Do not think anything other than this and do not let occur to your mind the vain imaginings of the writers of charms[47] or what names you may hear from them or may find in their stupid books, names that they have invented, which are not indicative of any notion whatsoever, but which they call the *names* and of which they think that they necessitate *holiness and purity* and work miracles. All these are stories that it is not seemly for a perfect man to listen to, much less to believe.[48]

The four-letter-name of God, the tetragrammaton, is the only exception from this insofar as it 'gives,' in his own words, 'a clear unequivocal indication of His essence.'[49] The uniqueness and transcendence of the essence of God expressed by the tetragrammaton is 'in such a way that none of the created things is associated with Him in this indication.'[50] In the same chapter it is written:[51]

> As for the other names, all of them, because of their being derived, indicate attributes; that is, not an essence alone, but an essence possessing attributes. For this reason they produce in one's fantasy the conception of multiplicity; I mean to say that they produce in one's fantasy the thought that the attributes exist, and that there is an essence and a notion superadded to this essence.

This passage seems to be perfectly fitting as a possible argument against the essentiality of the sefirotic system of the theosophical Kabbalah. Accordingly, the sefirot would then be nothing but a product of 'one's fantasy' without any essence by themselves. In accordance with this possible argument is probably the following verdict from Maimonides towards the end of the 'Guide' where he interprets the famous parable about the ruler and his subjects who try to enter the ruler's habitation. In his interpretation, Maimonides distinguishes various classes with regard to their ability to obtain knowledge and to speculate about matters of natural science and metaphysics. There he says:[52]

> As for someone who thinks and frequently mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of his reliance on the authority of somebody else, he is to my mind outside the habitation and far away from it and does not in true reality mention or think about God.

Thus, his main argument concerning knowledge of God is not to rely on somebody only because he is, at least in his circle, an accepted authority in these matters. In contrast, it must be emphasised that, for the Jewish philosophers standing in the Aristotelian tradition, God is first and foremost intellect, that is, in this specific

47 Another translation would be 'amulets'.
48 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 149; cf. also *Guide* 3:37 (*ibidem*, 540–550); idem, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah* 11:10–16 and *Hilkhot Tefillin* 5:4.
49 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 147.
50 *Ibidem*, 148.
51 *Ibidem*.
52 *Ibidem*, 620.

case, the active intellect. If human beings are created in the image of God, then human knowledge of God is possible by means of reason. This kind of Aristotelian rationality is completely opposite to the claim of knowledge concerning God's nature as it is executed by most kabbalists.

However, the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah is not that simplistic, like one of two clearly distinct and opposite entities as they seem to be in modern eyes.[53] In other words, Kabbalah is itself heavily influenced by certain philosophical ideas such as, for instance, the Neo-Platonic concept of emanation or the idea of celestial hierarchies. Besides this, a socio-intellectual factor is also relevant here. In a recent study, Jonathan Dauber emphasised his thesis that 'a major factor that led to the development of Kabbalah was the adoption by the first Kabbalists of a philosophical ethos [...] in which a sort of meta-reflection on classical Jewish texts and, in particular, the investigation of God as the height of that reflection, was accorded great religious significance.'[54] But more essential is the fact that the medieval concept of *devequt*, that is, adherence or cleaving to God, mainly focusing on the deeper meaning and essence of biblical prophecy, is phenomenologically very similar both in Maimonides' ideal of intellectual worship and in the kabbalistic description of mystical ecstasy.[55] Furthermore, even the philosophy of Maimonides himself was adopted in various manners by kabbalists.[56] The most impressive and probably irritating example

53 Cf. Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 31–79; Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Philosophy and Kabbalah: 1200–1600," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 218–257; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, eds. Görge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004): 209–212; Sandra Valabregue, "Philosophy, Heresy, and Kabbalah's Counter Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 109.2 (2016): 233–256.

54 Jonathan Dauber, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 3.

55 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 138–142; idem, *Origins*, 413; idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971): 205; Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 76–78; Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings," 211 and 221–237; David R. Blumenthal, "Maimonides' Intellectual Mysticism and the Superiority of the Philosophy of Moses," *Studies in Medieval Culture* 10 (1977): 51–68; idem, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988): 1–16; see more recently Adam Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2011).

56 Cf. Jacob I. Dienstag, "Ha-Rambam ve-ḥokhmei ha-qabbalah" [Hebrew], in *Maimonides, His Teachings and Personality: Essays on the Occasion of the 750th Anniversary of His Death*, ed. Simon Federbush (New York: The Cultural Department of the World Jewish Congress and the Torah Culture Department of the Jewish Agency, 1956): 100–135; idem, "Maimonides and the Kabbalists: Bibliography" [in Hebrew], *Daat. A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 25 (1990): 54–94, 26 (1991): 61–96; Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings," 209–237; idem, "*Via Negativa* in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 393–442; Jonathan Dauber, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," in *The Cultures of Maimonidean-*

of this, at least from the perspective of a 'pure' philosopher, is certainly Abraham Abulafia's system of ecstatic Kabbalah based on Maimonides' 'Guide'.[57] Other examples of kabbalists heavily attracted to the rational philosophy of the kind of Aristotle, Averroes and Maimonides include Joseph ben Abraham ibn Waqar (fourteenth century),[58] Abraham ben Meir de Balmes (ca. 1460/70–1523),[59] and, much later, Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900).[60] While he also acknowledged this specific philosophical tradition, the Italian Renaissance kabbalist Yohanan Alemanno (ca. 1435–after 1504) was first and foremost affected by Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources.[61] On the other hand, there are many philosophers who were, at least from a modern perspective, deeply influenced by certain magical, mystical or kabbalistic ideas and who were trying to reconcile or at least to combine both approaches, such as the son of Maimonides Abraham ben Moshe ben Maimon (1186–1237),[62] Isaac ibn Latif (ca. 1210–1280)[63] or Hillel of Verona (ca. 1220–ca. 1295).[64]

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ism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 57–88; Moshe Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and his School and Some Reflections," in *Between Rashi and Maimonides. Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, eds. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2010): 131–164.

57 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 126; Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); idem, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 54–70; idem, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197–226; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000).

58 Cf. Steven Harvey, "A 14th Century Kabbalists' Excerpt from the Lost Arabic Original of Averroes, Middle Commentary on the Physics," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 219–227.

59 Cf. Brian Ogren, "Sefirotic Depiction, Divine Noesis, and Aristotelian Kabbalah: Abraham ben Meir de Balmes and Italian Renaissance Thought," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104.4 (2014): 573–599.

60 Cf. Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah. Elijah Benamozegh and the Reconciliation of Western Thought and Jewish Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

61 Moshe Idel, "The Study Program of R. Yohanan Alemanno" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 48 (1979): 318–322; idem, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): 186–242.

62 Cf. Paul B. Fenton, "Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237): Founding a Mystical Dynasty," in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, eds. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998): 127–154.

63 Cf. Sara O. Heller Wilensky, "The 'Guide' and the 'Gate': The Dialectical Influence of Maimonides on Isaac Ibn Latif and Early Spanish Kabbalah," in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture. Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988): 266–278; eadem, "Isaac Ibn Latif: Philosopher or Kabbalist?," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967): 185–223.

64 Cf. Hillel von Verona, *Über die Vollendung der Seele*, ed. Yossef Schwartz and trans. together with Alexander Fidora (Freiburg: Herder, 2009); cf. especially Hillel's concept of the magical power of one's active intellect, see the introduction by Schwartz, *ibidem*, 24–29.

Also, from a historiographical perspective there is an interesting point of relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah. Several scholars even see the emergence of the Kabbalah as a reaction to Maimonides and his philosophical claims, especially concerning ancient Jewish esoteric matters such as the so-called 'mysteries of the Torah'.[65] Both sides, the rational philosophers as well as the kabbalists, share the general assumption that beneath the literal surface there is a deeper meaning in the biblical and rabbinic literature, and both agree that this hidden dimension is destined only for the 'happy few'. Therefore, the results of their investigations have to be concealed in an esoteric manner.[66] Hence, for example, the Castilian kabbalist, Todros ben Joseph Abulafia (1225–ca. 1285), wrote in his *Šaʿar ha-Razim* ('The Gate of Secrets') concerning the esoteric approach in the highest esteem of Maimonides while paraphrasing the relevant passage in the introduction of his 'Guide'.[67] The hermeneutics of esotericism in both camps are established by literary strategies as well as social restrictions of transmission and instruction.

However, the negative theology of Maimonides is the direct opposite to the detailed sefirotic theosophy as described, for instance, in the *Sefer ha-Zohar*. In both approaches, the philosophical and the kabbalistic, the central question is 'what can a human being know about God?' Whereas Maimonides restricts himself, or more general, human knowledge of God, to statements about what God is not, alleged knowledge of God is abundant in kabbalistic literature—even when the absolute inconceivability of the highest and most transcendent stage of God's inner world, that is, the *Ein Sof*, is considered by many kabbalists. Facing God makes Maimonides be silent, but, in contrast, so to say, many of the kabbalists loquacious.[68]

While the ecstatic and theurgic aspects of ritual praxis are intertwined in Kabbalah, Maimonides' concept of intellectual union with God would only agree with the former but not the latter aspect.[69]

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65 Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, vol. 7 (Leipzig: Leiner, 1897): 59–82, and the appendix *ibidem*, 385–402; idem, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894), vol. 3, 547–558; cf. Scholem, *Origins*, 7; Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 33; idem, *Kabbalah*, 253.

66 Concerning the difference between both approaches, see Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude towards Jewish Mysticism," in *Studies in Jewish Thought. An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981): 203; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 38–93; idem, "Beneath the Wings," 217–221.

67 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 11–12; see Todros ben Joseph Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-Razim*, ed. Michal Kushnir-Oron (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1989): 46; cf. the introduction by Kushnir-Oron *ibidem*, 30–31; Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings," 217. On more examples of other early kabbalists attesting the (alleged) affinity between their teachings and those of Maimonides, see *ibidem*, 221–237.

68 See *Guide* 3:51 (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 620–624); cf. *Guide* 1:50 (*ibidem*, 111–112); 1:59 (*ibidem*, 140); cf. Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013): 132–249. In contrast see Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings," 233–237!

69 Cf. Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings," 231.

This differentiation focuses mainly on the issue of anthropomorphic descriptions of God as found in the biblical and rabbinic literature. In his explanation of God's essence, Maimonides purges the Jewish God from the anthropomorphism that was introduced in the Holy Scriptures only in order to speak to the common people in their language. In contrast, the kabbalists interpret the anthropomorphic image of God as essential and as an adequate expression of the living God. It is likely that Maimonides' reasoning of the commandments, his rationalistic explanations of the narrative passages in the Hebrew Bible and the later rabbinic literature as well as his emphasis on the human intellect are contrary not only to most statements in the older Jewish traditions but also to the different kabbalistic presuppositions and claims. So, it is not surprising that many philosophical opponents of the Kabbalah relied on Maimonides and his followers. In particular, several major philosophers belonging to the camp of the Jewish Averroists were explicitly critical of the Kabbalah. Furthermore, the role of kabbalists in the Maimonides controversies has also to be studied in this regard.[70]

It must be emphasised that the philosophically grounded opposition to and criticism of the Kabbalah is not the only possible method. Thus, many non-philosophical and traditional talmudic and halakhic authorities were also doubtful, polemical and critical towards the kabbalistic approach and its claims especially when it came to halakhic matters. Thus, the kabbalistic books of *Ṭaʿame ha-Miṣwot* ('Reasons for the Commandments'), that is, the reasoning of the commandments and their observance by kabbalistic explanations, were highly disputed by rabbinic authorities who were not in favor of the Kabbalah.

From a systematic perspective, several topics of dispute can be added to those already mentioned. Firstly, for instance, the pseudo-epigraphical attributions of kabbalistic texts to rabbinic authorities and the asserted old age of these texts have been questioned since the beginning. Since the truth of kabbalistic claims[71] is usually not reasoned by rational argumentation and logic, the assertions of venerability and continuous tradition are crucial for the kabbalists. Hence, the proof of missing evidence of authorship or an interrupted chain of tradition is a common strategy to discredit kabbalistic self-legitimation. Another concept to be disputed is the prophetical or mystical approach of the adept to knowledge. Thus, the possibility of prophecy in post-biblical times and the mystical union with God were also questioned by the anti-kabbalists. One of the main targets of the opponents of the Kabbalah was Prac-

70 Cf. Scholem, *Origins*, 393–414; I am not convinced by the conclusions of José Faur, "Anti-Maimonidean Demons," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6.1 (2003): 3–52. The sources of the controversies are collected by Solomon J. Halberstam, ed., "*Milḥemet ha-Dat. Qevuṣat mikhtavin be-ʿinyane ha-maḥloqet ʿal devar sefer ha-moreh veha-mada*" [Hebrew], *Jeschurun. Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 8 (1875), ed. Joseph Isaac Kobak (Bamberg: Druck der Max G. Schmidt'schen Officin, 1875): 17–56 and 89–170.

71 Kabbalists introduce their statements rather often as given, i.e., 'by the way of truth' (*ʿal derekh ha-emet*).

tical Kabbalah, that is, Jewish magic, superstition, and manipulations of divine names. In this case, linguistic scepticism concerning the alleged power of the Hebrew language would be effective. Furthermore, the alleged causality between macro- and microcosmic structures, which is so prominent in neo-Platonic, astrological, magical and kabbalistic concepts, was refuted by many Aristotelian opponents of the Kabbalah. However, the main difference between the (theosophical) kabbalists and their philosophical critics lies in the ideas and statements concerning the knowledge of God. Particularly, the concept of ten sefirot as a description of the inner life of the Godhead was sometimes disputed by authors of various camps as being against the central monotheistic idea of one impartible God. In this regard, the polemics against Christianity, especially the Christian theologoumenon of the Trinity, and the Kabbalah of the sefirot, were paralleled by some authors.[72]

Besides systematic reasons, that is, inner intellectual argumentation, encouraging opposition to the Kabbalah, external reasons emanating from the realm of political and social agenda are also important. At least two historical phenomena by the turn of the sixteenth century are decisive for the growing criticism of the Kabbalah:

1. The printing of kabbalistic books and the related increasing publicity of kabbalistic ideas.
2. The emergence of a Christian Kabbalah stating that the Jewish Kabbalah is evidence for Christian theological essentials and concepts such as the Trinity.

Of course, both of these mentioned phenomena are related to one another. In particular, the printing of the *Zohar* was heavily disputed by Jewish scholars.[73] Another example of controversy was the Latin translation of Jewish kabbalistic texts prepared by or for Christian kabbalists. In addition, the expulsion from Spain and Portugal played a major role in the dissemination of sefardic Kabbalah in Italy, Ashkenaz and the Ottoman Empire. In this turbulent period, apocalyptic and messianic expectations led to religious-political movements and turmoil; the Reformation and the

72 Cf. Goshen-Gottstein, "Triune and Decaune God," 165–172.

73 Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 70–71: 'At first no opposition was roused—neither when Recanati's book was produced in Venice (1523) nor when several other books came out in Salonika and Constantinople—although these works did not receive the *haskamah* ('approval') of the rabbinic authorities. However, when the printing of the *Zohar* itself and the *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (1558) was contemplated, the plan gave rise to bitter arguments among the Italian rabbis [...]'; Isaiah Tishby, "The Controversy About the *Zohar* in Sixteenth-Century Italy" [in Hebrew], *Perakim* 1 (1967/8), 131–182 (reprinted in idem, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches: Researches and Sources*, vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982], 79–130); Joseph Hacker, "A New Epistle on the Publication of the *Zohar* in Italy" [in Hebrew], in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1994): 120–130; Boaz Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of its Symbolic Value* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute and The Bialik Institute, 2008): 227–232; Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, 574–575.

German Peasants' War could be mentioned as examples on the Christian side, and the messianic upheavals of Asher Lemlein or David Reubeni and Solomon Molkho on the Jewish side. The contribution of kabbalistic ideas to these events was obvious even in the eyes of the contemporaries. There was therefore a need for some kind of reaction to these dangers. In the wake of Renaissance humanism, philology was acknowledged as an important tool for the detection of Hebrew studies. Christian Hebraists established their new discipline at universities and contributed to the modern scholarship of Jewish studies including research on kabbalistic texts from their perspective.[74] These are some of the main historical events leading to an increasing criticism of Kabbalah.

Opposition to Kabbalah and Scepticism

The question of whether there is a specific kind or even a tradition of Jewish scepticism is a rather recent one in the academic discourse, and only a few contributions have been presented up until now.[75] Regarding this fact and, in addition, due to the rather early stage of my research, the following considerations focusing on the relationship between the opposition to Kabbalah and scepticism can only be preliminary.

The literary genres of the various texts written by the early opponents of the Kabbalah and mentioned here so far include epistles, sermons, commentaries, responsa, and philosophical as well as satirical polemics. Nevertheless, despite this generic di-

74 Cf. Gershom Scholem, "Die Erforschung der Kabbala von Johannes Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart," in idem, *Judaica 3. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973): 247–263; on this see Saverio Campanini, "Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah," in *Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). In memoriam*, ed. Joseph Dan, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem = Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 21, 2007): 13*-33* (English Section); Stephen Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); idem, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660). Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 103–106; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280–1510. A Survey* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 227–235.

75 Cf. Giuseppe Veltri, "Principles of Jewish Sceptical Thought, The Case of Judah Moscato and Simone Luzzatto," in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th-17th Centuries*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 15–35; idem, "Do/Did the Jews Believe in God? The Sceptical Ambivalence of Jewish Philosophy of Religion," in *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, vol. 2, eds. Ra'anan S. Boustan, Klaus Herrmann, Reimund Leicht et alii (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013): 717–732; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Scepticism and the Philosopher's Keeping Faith," in *Jewish Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century. Personal Reflections*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014): 481–515; Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni, "Alcune considerazioni sulla sospensione del giudizio e il silenzio nella tradizione ebraica scettica," in *Seconda navigazione, Omaggio a Giovanni Reale*, eds. Roberto Radice and Glauco Tiengo (Milan: Bompiani, 2015): 745–757.

versity, all the texts share one common goal, that is, opposition to Kabbalah, or at least certain kabbalistic claims, texts or figures. Hence, the main feature of the selected texts is polemicising against contrary positions. In this sense, the opponents of the Kabbalah were anti-kabbalists without assuming automatically from the starting point that they all belonged to a kind of anti-kabbalistic school or tradition. The *a priori* of any polemic is that the knowledge of the adversary is necessarily wrong and his claims have to be refuted and disproved. Thus, the front line evoked by a polemic seems to be very clear-cut. In this regard, any statement intended for a polemical purpose seems to be not a sceptical one at all. In contrast to a sceptical enquiry, discussion or open-ended dispute, or to be more specific, in the tradition of Sextus Empiricus even without any intention or purpose, the intention of polemics is from the very beginning to affirm only the truth of one side, that is, that of the polemicist. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that rather often the adversary is only a cardboard character without any immediate historical validity.

It is not simply that every doubt of kabbalistic claims leads automatically to an elaborate scepticism in the sense of the corresponding philosophical schools going back to the Ancient Greeks (Academic and Pyrrhonic scepticism). In this sense, even philosophical criticism of the Kabbalah is very often, especially in the camp of Jewish Averroists, anti-sceptical and dogmatic insofar as the final truth of their philosophical claims of knowledge is obviously hardly in question. In general, any assertion without substance is subject to sceptical philosophy. It is not the content of a claim, but rather the reasoning of it that is in question in sceptical enquiry. Thus, the criticism of methodology characteristic of any modern science was developed by the sceptical approach. However, this kind of sceptical enquiry alone does not make a sceptical philosopher into a philosophical sceptic. The former corresponds as an ideal to any modern scholar; the latter would generally doubt the possibility of any certainty concerning truth and reasoning at all.

What is indeed criticised by the rational philosophers is the often-missing argumentation by reasoning in the Kabbalah. In addition, the scepticism that is to be found in these anti-kabbalistic texts is expressed as a doubt of authority as a source of knowledge leading eventually to a kind of social or political scepticism. However, all the anti-kabbalistic protagonists mentioned here so far sowed the seeds of doubt against kabbalistic claims and, first and foremost, against the authority of kabbalists and their texts. Implanting scepticism in the camp of the adversary towards any of his claims, especially those which are not provided with reasoned argumentation, is a subversive literary strategy. Sometimes, these seeds need rather a long time to become fruitful plants. Thus, the main arguments against kabbalistic claims were transmitted or reinvented, collected and systematised, and led eventually in the period of the Haskalah, that is, the Jewish Enlightenment, to a rigorous scepticism concerning irrational claims and an almost complete condemnation and denial of the

Kabbalah.[76] So, for instance, the greatest Jewish historian of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), was not only an expert in the field of Kabbalah in his time, but also one of the most fiery zealots against the Kabbalah.[77] Along with this development, or better despite this general attitude of damnation and neglect towards Kabbalah, the modern scholarship on Kabbalah began with a few scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. One major characteristic of any modern scholarship is obviously the sceptical attitude towards claims of eternal or absolute truth leading finally to scepticism of methodology. Thus, in the modern scholarship on Kabbalah the critical tools of textual philology and historical hermeneutics were introduced, provided mainly by the arguments of anti-kabbalists especially against the authenticity of the *Sefer ha-Zohar*.

The main sceptical philosophical arguments against kabbalistic claims of knowledge about the inner life of God can already be found in Maimonides' writings as presented above, especially in his Negative Theology. The sceptical reading of the *Guide* acknowledges that the limits of human language and cognition lead eventually to silence concerning the possibility of metaphysical knowledge of God.[78] All that can be said concerning God is about his actions in this approach. Thus, the question of where exactly the border lies between the human ability to describe or even to define God on the one side and the necessity to be silent concerning him on the other side differentiates Maimonidean philosophy from Kabbalah.

The evidence for a sceptical epistemology of Maimonides was discussed in an article written by Hannah Kasher.[79] Concerning the certainty of conclusions, two sources of knowledge, namely generally accepted opinions and traditions, are not self-evident because they rely only on the social environment and testimony. In this regard, the assertion that Kabbalah is indeed an old tradition, as the literal meaning of the term suggests, was particularly doubted by the opponents.

The Christian adaptation, discussion and enhancement of kabbalistic texts, their symbols and exegetical methods in order to show evidence of the truth of Christian

76 Cf. Christoph Schulte, "Haskala und Kabbala: Haltungen und Strategien der jüdischen Aufklärer beim Umgang mit der Kabbala," in *Aufklärung und Esoterik*, ed. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1999): 335–354.

77 Cf. Peter Schäfer, "'Adversus cabbalam' oder: Heinrich Graetz und die jüdische Mystik," in *Reuchlin und seine Erben. Forscher, Denker, Ideologen und Spinner*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Irina Wandrey (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2005): 189–210.

78 Cf. Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1979): 89–100; Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013): 301–311; Josef Stern, *Matter and Form*, 132–249.

79 Cf. Hannah Kasher, "Maimonides: Halakhic Philosopher or Philosophical Halakhist? On Sceptical Epistemology and Its Implications," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, eds. Görge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon 2004): 51–63.

theology in Jewish sources shows very clearly the limits and the danger of the Kabbalah in the eyes of some Jewish scholars in this time.[80] The crucial argument of Jewish criticism of the Kabbalah might be something like the following: when, by means of kabbalistic exegesis and hermeneutics, Christian theologoumena such as Jesus' sonship of God and the Trinity will be approved even in the Hebrew Bible, then there must be something essentially wrong with this kind of exegesis, that is, Kabbalah itself! Or, more generally, if two opposing truths were reached by one method, then the state of sceptical *isosthenia*, that is, the indistinguishableness of which is true, is attained. The only solution to this epistemological dilemma would be methodological criticism. This kind of methodological criticism eventually evoked the beginning of modern scholarship of Kabbalah.

80 Cf. Moshe Idel: "Jewish thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah," in *Christliche Kabbala*, ed. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2003): 49–65.