Beyond the Scope of Philosophy and Kabbalah

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Abstract: The turn of the thirteenth century is a formative period for the historiography of medieval Jewish thought. These years saw the dissemination of the Hebrew translations of the Maimonidean corpus, alongside the simultaneous appearance of the first Kabbalistic treatises, in the same geographical regions. This concurrent appearance led scholars to examine Jewish theological discourse mainly via two juxtaposed categories: “Philosophy” and “Kabbalah”. In this paper, I will return to that formative moment in order to demonstrate that exploring Jewish history of ideas beyond the scope of these categories could be very advantageous in improving our understanding of both categories and the Jewish theological inner-dynamics in this period as a whole. I will draw attention to a contemporary theological attitude, which is neither Kabbalistic nor philosophical, which I will define as a medieval form of Jewish binitarianism. My argument in this paper will be composed of two parts—first, outlining the nature of this medieval Jewish theological trend, and second, showing how a precise definition of this belief within its context alters crucial notions and understandings in the common scholarly historiography of medieval Jewish thought.

Keywords: medieval Jewish thought; Kabbalah; Maimonides; binitarianism; Jewish mysticism; Metatron

1. Introduction

In the second half of the twelfth century, with the translation of Judeo-Arabic treatises into Hebrew, new philosophical and theological notions and insights reached Provence and Catalonia and were integrated into the thought and work of many Jewish writers who were active at the time in that area. These new attitudes sustained and reinforced earlier perceptions of a transcendent God and introduced new terminologies such as Causa Causarum ['Ilat ha'Ilot or Sibat haSibot] to describe Him (Klatzkin 1930). The dissemination of these perceptions as well as the dissemination of Maimonides’ writings in the early thirteenth century generated the well-known debates over the interpretation of Maimonides (d. 1204) philosophy, causing turbulence in the rabbinic world in those regions (Ben-Shalom 2017; Halberstam 1875; Hames 2000; Grossman 1971; Shatzmiller 1969; Shohat 1971; Silver 1965).

Concurrently, and in the very same region, the Kabbalistic literature emerged. This parallel momentum has prompted scholarly reflections about the relation between the two theological approaches: “Maimonidean philosophy” and “Kabbalah”. Concerning this subject, the essential issue is whether Kabbalistic literature should be seen as a mythical, mystical, and symbolic response to the rise of Jewish philosophy, which was perceived as having a more rationalistic agenda. At first glance, it is tempting to present an oppositional description: “philosophy” versus “Kabbalah”. Nevertheless, as many scholars have demonstrated in recent years, a careful reading of the sources reveals a complex picture, which is difficult to reduce to a simple contrast (Afterman 2016; Ben-Shalom 2014, 2017; Dauber 2009, 2012; Huss 2001; Idel 2004; Lorberbaum 2011; Wolfson 1994, 2008).

Although this recent trend has tempered the definitive boundaries between kabbalah and philosophy, current scholarship still depends on these designations to categorize the two main paths from which Jewish theology in this period and region is examined. This
Religion scholar consensus entails two main deficiencies—first, both “philosophy” and “Kabbalah” are generic terms, each of which refers to a variety of sages, compositions and attitudes. Sometimes, the differences between the Kabbalists themselves or the philosophers themselves are greater than their common denominator. The second flaw is that the use of these two categories does not help us discern and identify additional theological trends that do not belong to either of them. In what follows, I will attempt to pursue the latter point in detail.

In this paper, I will draw attention to another contemporaneous theological attitude, which is neither Kabbalistic nor philosophical. This theological attitude elicited criticism from both Kabbalists and the philosophers and I will define it as a medieval form of Jewish binitarianism. By binitarianism, I refer to a belief in two complementary divine powers, an upper one and a lower one. This divine structure differs from a dualistic divine structure, in so much as it is not composed of two opposing forces that are in conflict one with the other, such as good and evil.

The medieval form of binitarianism that I will analyze developed in the first part of the thirteenth century in Provence, Catalonia, and Castile, was influenced by medieval philosophical terminology, and did not include any sefirotic contents. The godhead was composed of an upper part designated as Cause of Causes ['Ilat ha'Ilot or Sibat haSibot], and a lower part designated as “Minister of the World” [Sar-ha'Olam] or Metatron. It diverged from earlier Jewish binitarian structures both in its use of philosophical terminology and in its consequent theological ramifications. The main innovation of this attitude is that it forbade the worship of God because of its impersonal nature and instructed that prayer be devoted solely to the lower part, a mediator, namely to the Minister of the World.

My objective in this paper is two-fold: first I will outline the nature of this specific kind of binitarianism. Then, I will show how a precise definition of this attitude changes crucial points in the common scholarly historiography of medieval Jewish thought.

2. Literature Review

The form of Jewish binitarianism, which I will depict in this paper, is a medieval development of earlier Jewish attitudes, which can be found in Jewish and non-Jewish sources from late antiquity onwards. In the past thirty years, many scholars of Jewish and Christian theology have carefully examined the role of the notion of binitarian godhead in Jewish sources mostly in late antiquity. In this respect, special attention was given to the relations between Jewish binitarian attitudes in late antiquity and early Christianity (Bar-On and Paz 2017; Boyarin 2004; Fossum 1985; Hurtado 2005; Schäfer 2012; Schneider 2012; Segal 1977; Stroumsa 1983). In the middle ages, Jewish binitarianism was examined in various contexts such as Karaite sources (Wolfson 1960), the attitude toward the divine glory (kavod) in writings of Sa’adia Gaon (d. 942) (Altmann 1969) and the writings of the German Pietists (Dan 2011; Abrams 1995; Idel 1993), the position of the Unique Cherub in writings of the Unique Cherub circle (Ben Shahar 2011), and the status of the intellect in Neoplatonic Jewish writings (Wolfson 1990). Likewise, scholars discussed the role of Metatron or the Shekhinah as part of binitarian structure within the realm of the Kabbalistic literature in the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries (Abrams 1994, 1996, 2012; Idel 1993; Meroz 2020; Weiss 2015).

To the best of my knowledge, only two scholars have drawn attention to the possible existence of this medieval binitarianism that developed independently from the Kabbalistic theosophy in the first part of the thirteenth century in the very regions in which the first Kabbalistic treatises appear. Moshe Idel in his book about sonship and Jewish mysticism wrote an appendix whose title is punctuated with a question mark: “Enoch the Righteous, and was there a Cult of Enoch/Metatron in the Middle Ages?” Based on the examination of a text regarding the worship of Metatron, Idel raises a question, with no conclusions, concerning the very existence of a medieval binitarian approach, which was independent of Kabbalistic theosophy (Idel 2007, 1993). In my Hebrew book, “Cutting the Shoots”, about the worship of the Shekhinah in the medieval Kabbalistic literature, I reached a similar
conclusion based on a different line of investigation. By reading Kabbalistic texts from the second part of the thirteenth century and the early fourteenth century, I demonstrated that the prohibition, pronounced by medieval Kabbalists, concerning the worship of the Shekhinah, which they designated as a heresy of “cutting the shoots”, should be understood as a conservative reaction to the contemporary reality in which some Jews worshipped the Shekhinah (Weiss 2015).

3. Medieval Binitarianism

In the first part of the thirteenth century, one can find a few depictions of Jews that prefer to worship a mediator rather than God, because of His impersonal and remote nature. An interesting text that reveals the theological discourse that accompanied the development of this unique approach depicts the worship of the Minister of the World instead of God (Abrams 1994; Idel 1993, 2007; Meroz 2020; Scholem 1948; Weiss 2015, 2018b). This is a layered text whose earlier stratum is not connected to Kabbalistic theosophy (Weiss 2018b). The first part of the text, most of which is related to the early layer, includes a discussion regarding the legitimacy of directing prayers to the Cause of Causes. This section clearly states that as God is remote, there is no point in worshipped Him and therefore all prayers should be directed solely to the Minister of the World:

It has been received from the mouths of our masters that Metatron, Minister of the Face, whose name is that of his master, is Enoch ben Yered, [. . . ] And some err regarding his essence [or: in our generation] when they pray [to him], saying that being impure and inferior, praying to the Cause of Causes [‘imat ha’ilot] would be unthinkable. And given that this minister is in charge of all of the mundane matters [sar murshe ‘al ‘inyanei ha’olam] - let us pray to him. And these words are phantasm, may the spirit of those who act in this way expire, since it has become clear to us that the providence of the Holy One, blessed be He, is found in the particulars as in the universals alike, in what regards men, and He, blessed be He, is plentiful of grace, so why would those damned ones say that we ought not pray to Him? But He, exalted be He, hears prayers and becomes appeased in pleas and refrains from judging according to the [stern] judgement. [. . . ] And following the good path and the path of life [means] praying to the Master of All alone, may He be exalted, who is Cause of all Causes [‘imat kol ha’ilot and Sibat kol haSibot]. (Weiss 2018b, p. 204)

The purpose of the author is to repudiate the worship of the Minister of the World. In what follows, I will show that the way in which this worship is presented corresponds to a very specific set of theological assumptions, which surprisingly shows an assimilation of Maimonidean discourse.

The author of the above cited text accuses certain unidentified people of worshipping the Minister of the World instead of God. He says that those people do not believe in the individual providence of God with regard to the actions of humans in the material world, thence they see no reason to worship God Himself but rather only a mediator. The author, unlike these people, believes that God does watch over individuals and therefore, one is obliged to worship Him directly and says: “it has become clear to us that the providence of the Holy One, blessed be He, is found in the particulars as in the universals alike, in what regards men”.

Our text is interesting because of its depiction of this unique binitarian belief, but the problem of individual divine providence, which is specifically referred to, is well known as it accompanied the controversy over Maimonides’s philosophy in the first half of the thirteenth century (Dienstag 1988; Schwartz 1995). In “the Guide of the Perplexed”, Maimonides argues that the possibility of an individual divine providence pertains only to human beings, and that this possibility depends on one’s intellectual and philosophical achievements (Guide of the Perplexed 3: 17, 18, 51; Dienstag 1988; Kogan 1989; Reines 1972). Nevertheless, the Aristotelian interpreters of Maimonides, led by Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. 1230), rejected this approach saying that Maimonides meant only to delude the masses
According to them, individual providence of God is impossible; at most, it is possible that the pious and studious are not distracted by material matters and hence the events of the material world have no influence on them for better or worse.

The ramifications of ibn Tibbon’s attitude are no less than dramatic as they could bring about the destruction of the very foundations of Jewish religious life. Without providence, there could be no justification for the observance of the commandments, nor a system of retribution. Moreover, the daily prayers—the connection between the believers and God, would be thwarted. Therefore, it is not surprising that in this period, this radical attitude was criticized by many sages including Talmudic interpreters and Kabbalists but also those who were considered to be Maimonidean thinkers. All of them accentuated its destructive consequences and the great danger it entailed for the very existence of religious life. Thus, for example, two relatives of ibn Tibbon himself, his son Moses (d. ~1283) (Diesendruck 1936) and his son in law Jacob Anatoli (d. 1258) (Schwartz 1995) both Maimonidean philosophers in their own right, harshly censured this view. They said that the individual providence of God does exist with regard to human acts in the material world and therefore one must pray to Him. This is how Anatoli expresses his criticism when he interprets the value of saying the morning blessings every day:

And their saying ‘blessed be thou who hast mercy on the earth’, is intended to inform us that He casts His providence over the lower world […] as it is written: ‘For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth’ [2 Chron. 16:9], unlike the words of the wicked heretics who say that the Lord has forsaken the earth. (Anatoli 1866, pp. 64b–65a)

Like Moses ibn Tibbon and Anatoli, the early Kabbalists also criticized this approach. According to them, this attitude denies the connection between God and humans as it is manifested in the daily prayer. Asher ben David (first half of the 13th century), one of the earliest Kabbalists, articulated his criticism in the following manner:

There are yet other sects in the world, people whose exaggerated depth of thought brings them to perplexity, and they delve into inquiries regarding the Cause of Causes [Ilat ha’Ilot], thus preventing humans from praying. (Abrams 1996, p.135)

Ben David is succinct, but it is not difficult to understand his message. He criticizes here a few theological attitudes, mainly that of radical interpreters of the “Guide of the Perplexed”. He says, ironically, that “their exaggerated depth of thought” leads them to “preventing humans from praying”. These people delve into questions regarding God’s nature and because they think that God is in essence distant from humankind there is therefore no reason to pray to Him. Ben David is not arguing theoretically against these thinkers; instead, he states that their philosophical assumptions have practical consequences that undermine the foundations of religion. Like ben David, Nahmanides (d. 1267) Azriel of Gerona (first half of the 13th century) and Jacob ben Sheshet (first half of the 13th century) say that according to the Aristotelian attitude, prayer has no meaning since God does not listen to human beings. Ben Sheshet says that the consequences of their attitude is that prayer has at most a psychological function: “[According to the Aristotelian interpreters of Maimonides] there is no purpose to prayer short of purifying the thought” (Gabay 1989, p. 116).

In light of this consensus shared by Jewish sages against ibn Tibbon’s approach, we can better understand the unique character of this medieval form of binitarianism and its clear differentiation from sefirotic theosophy. As part of the discourse about the providence of God, there were certain people who accepted in one way or another the notion of an impersonal God and the lack of individual divine providence. They believed that God is indeed remote from humans and therefore one should worship a mediator, the Minister of the World. Therefore, the author of the text about the worship of the minister of the world says that he, unlike them, does believe in individual providence of God with regard to humans.
There is no doubt that neither Maimonides nor his Aristotelian interpreters could endorse such an attitude. Maimonides himself vehemently objected to any kind of worship of mediators, which he defined in his “Laws of Idolatry” as well in his other writings as clear-cut idolatry (Kellner 2007). This binitarian approach is, hence, an outcome of a simplistic understanding of the radical notion of an impersonal God.

The early Kabbalists who lived in the first half of the thirteenth century would have regarded this medieval form of binitarianism as a heresy for two reasons. First, such a belief denies the providence of God over individuals, an issue which I have just demonstrated that they explicitly criticized. Second, a worship of the Minister of the World as a separate entity was considered by them to be the heresy of “cutting the shoots”. For this very reason sages like Nahmanides (Israeli 2019) Asher ben David, Azriel of Gerona, Ezra ben Solomon and Jacob ben Sheshet rejected any worship of angels as idolatry (Weiss 2020), as Asher ben David says: “And therefore, man is not allowed to ask his needs from any power nor from any angel” (Abrams 1996, p. 81). To put it differently, I would like to accentuate the clear difference between the early Kabbalistic theosophy and this binitarian attitude, which took opposite directions in solving those theological problems. On the one hand, the early Kabbalists objected to the philosophical assumption that there is no individual divine providence, and they say that a worship of mediators is idolatry. On the issue of the impersonal image of God, the Kabbalists created a complex structure of the godhead that includes both personal and impersonal parts. Nevertheless and despite the many differences between them, the Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia in the first part of the thirteenth century were very cautious with regard to God’s unity. According to the great majority of them the sefirot are emanated and not created and are in no way independent entities. Therefore, during prayer to the sefirot one is obliged to unify the sefirot with the uppermost part of the godhead, the Ein-Sof. According to other Kabbalists, like Asher ben David, the sefirot do not exist ontologically, they only reflect human attributions to God (Abrams 1996, p. 67). Nevertheless, according to all of them, the difference between praying to the sefirot, which take part in God, while unifying them with the Ein-Sof, and praying to mediators, which are independent is the difference between monotheism and idolatry.

On the other hand, unlike the sefirotic theosophy, this binitarian attitude accepted the remote and unreachable characterization of God and therefore called to worship a mediator. It says that one should not worship God at all and pray solely to a closer entity, the Minister of the World. This is, hence, an opposite solution to the same theological difficulty. Therefore, it is not surprising that Azriel of Gerona criticized this specific form of binitarianism as a heresy. In his treatise “The Way of Faith and the Way of Heresy” [Derekh ha-Emunah ve-Derekh ha-Kfirah], he wrote: “The third way [of heresy] [ . . . ] is one that worships some other [entity] since he fears approaching the worship of the Uppermost [God]” (Porat 2019, p. 96).

In conclusion, it is worthy to note that while this medieval binitarian belief was based on Maimonides’ theory of providence, such a radical interpretation according to which God does not watch over individual humans in the material world, was vehemently rejected by most of the Jewish sages in this period including many Maimonideans and Kabbalists. This theological approach led to the worship of a mediator, the Minister of the World, was, hence, a kind of a popular mythical reaction to Jewish Aristotelian discourse, which was based on earlier Jewish binitarian traditions which can be found in Jewish texts from late antiquity onwards.

Last but not least, I would like to make two notes: first, I would like to say that this binitarian attitude is different not only from the early Kabbalistic attitudes and Maimonidean approaches, but also from the attitudes of the German Pietists toward prayers and angels. There are a few traditions in the German Pietists’ writings in which prayers are directed to two divine powers (Abrams 1995; Dan 2011; Idel 1993). Nevertheless, those traditions were not influenced by ibn Tibbon’s philosophical terminology and do not refer to the controversy over individual providence. Therefore, at least at the end of
the twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries, the German Pietists’ texts did not explicitly prescribe to abandon God and therefore were not likely to endorse praying solely to a lower divine power.

My second note is that all three attitudes outlined above, namely the Maimonidean, the Kabbalistic and the binitarian, all espoused, in one way or another, an impersonal image of God. The Aristotelians argued that there could only be an impersonal notion of God, the Kabbalists depicted a unified godhead with both personal and impersonal parts and the binitarians believed that since God is indeed impersonal one can and should worship mediators. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that there was a fourth and probably more prevalent approach, which rejected the basic assumptions of the medieval-philosophical discourse concerning the impersonal nature of God, while espousing the classical rabbinic attitude towards Him. The latter simply assumed that God is one, personal and therefore watches over humans.

If my analysis is correct, then we are facing a medieval syncretistic belief that amalgamates a new philosophical discourse prevalent in the first part of the thirteenth century in Provence and Catalonia with early Jewish inclinations toward binitarianism. Nevertheless, as interesting as it may be, it seems at first glance that this belief was no more than a marginal attitude that was manifested in light of the controversy over God’s providence. In what follows, I will argue that this approach was not marginal and I will demonstrate how a precise charting of it can change the historiography of one of the most discussed issues in the scholarship of medieval Jewish thought: the historical events that accompanied the enigmatic emergence of the Kabbalah.

4. Rereading the Emergence of the Kabbalah

In 1934, Gershom Scholem published two historical documents, which described events and scandals that according to Scholem accompanied the emergence of the Kabbalistic literature (Scholem 1948, 1987, 1998). The importance of these two documents cannot be overestimated, given the poor inventory of early Kabbalistic historical documents in our possession.

In order to explain the uniqueness of these documents, a historical note is needed. The Kabbalistic literature appeared in the beginning of the thirteenth century. We know very little about the precise origins of the Kabbalistic theosophy, an issue that led Scholem to describe the question of the origins of the Kabbalah as “The most difficult in the history of the Jewish religion after the destruction of the Second Temple” (Scholem 1987, p. 3). Moreover, most of the Kabbalistic compositions of this period are not of a reflective character and our knowledge of their sociological, cultural and theological context is limited. For these reasons, these two historical documents are of great importance in outlining the early history of the Kabbalah and as such, they were discussed repeatedly by scholars since their publication. In what follows, I will argue that the theological approach to which these documents refer, is not the Kabbalistic, but rather the above-mentioned medieval form of Jewish binitarianism.

The first document is a lengthy text that was written before 1240, by the Provencal Talmudist, Meir ben Simon of Narbonne (d. ~1270), known also as haMe’ili (Bar-Lev and Idol 2017; Goshen-Gottstein 2004; Herskowitz 1974; Scholem 1987, 1998; Weiss 2018a). This text is composed of three parts, of which Scholem published only one. In the text, haMe’ili expresses his concern regarding Jewish heretical beliefs prevalent in his time and refers explicitly to the Kabbalistic theosophy of the sefirot. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only text written by a non-Kabbalist in the first half of the thirteenth century, which mentions the sefirotic theosophy in details (Rebiger 2016). Scholem and the great majority of scholars assumed that this text is dedicated to the criticism of the sefirotic theosophy. Consequently, this criticism was of great importance for these scholars in their understanding of the historiography of the Kabbalah. Scholem described the Kabbalah from its very beginning as a radical theological movement that appeared, unexpectedly, at the turn of the thirteenth century (Scholem 1948, 1978, 1987). Nevertheless, as Moshe Idol
noted, Scholem’s narrative concerning the radical shift of the Kabbalah from traditional Jewish attitudes is not supported by much contemporary evidence (Idel 1988). The only solid evidence attesting to any objection to the Kabbalah that Scholem could point to was this text of Meir ben Simone of Narbonne. Nevertheless, William K. Herskowitz (Herskowitz 1974), Alon Goshen-Gottstein (Goshen-Gottstein 2004), and myself (Weiss 2018a) have pointed out, that close scrutiny reveals that haMe’ili’s criticism is in fact not directed at the sefirotic system as such and that he perceives the sefirot only as another designation for such notions as celestial spheres, “the working tools of God” (Weiss 2018a, p. 334). In his long discussion, the main reason that haMe’ili criticizes the theosophy of the sefirot is due to his concern that it might support another belief, the medieval form of Jewish binitarianism that I have depicted. He repeatedly expresses his apprehension with regard to people who worship mediators since they assume that God has an impersonal nature:

And had it occurred to any faithful sage that any angel would be called lesser God [YY], it is still preposterous to think that it would occur to him to pray to him and to bless and exalt [him], but only to the greater name above all Gods, the creator of all, Cause of all Causes ['Ilat kol ha’Ilot veSibat kol haSibot], the primordial one lacking any beginning and the ultimate one who has no end, as the pious one, his prophet, said: ‘But you remain the same and your years never end’ (Ps. 102:28), And one ought not relinquish the greater [God] [lifrosh min hagadol] and pray to the lesser one [...]. (Weiss 2018a, p. 337)

In the above quotation, haMe’ili describes the worship of the Greater God: “the creator of all, Cause of all Causes ['Ilat kol ha’Ilot veSibat kol haSibot], the primordial one lacking any beginning and the ultimate one who has no end”, to which prayer should be directed and criticizes those who worship the lesser God, i.e., Metatron. HaMe’ili writes that it seems to him unreasonable to “relinquish the greater [God] [lifrosh min hagadol] and pray to the lesser one”. This abandonment of God is haMe’ili’s main concern and he expresses it repeatedly, as for example he writes in the beginning of his text: “And these fools are of the opinion that the primordial God, the first who has neither a beginning nor end, should not be given gratitude, prayers and benedictions” (Weiss 2018a, p. 334). It seems, hence, that both haMe’ili and the text cited above about the worship of the Minister of the World refer to the same phenomenon: people who accepted the impersonal image of God and therefore decided to worship mediators. My argument is that because of the dominancy of the two categories—“philosophy” and “Kabbalah”, which guided scholars in their research, the latter were unable to discern and recognize the essence of haMe’ili’s attitude and the object of his criticism. The outcome was an inaccurate scholarly discussion over the meaning of what seemed to be an objection of Meir ben Simone to the “Kabbalah”, although this was not his main concern.

This concern that people will relinquish the Cause of Causes and turn to worship mediators could be detected in another source written in the very same period and region: a letter sent by Isaac the Blind (d. ~1235) to Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi (d.~1263) (Bar-Asher 2019, 2021; Halbertal 2006; Idel 1995; Pedaya 2001; Scholem 1998, 1987, 1948; Weiss 2021). Like the former text, this epistle is of utmost importance, since it offers valuable documentary regarding the early days of the Kabbalah. As far as I know, this is the only detailed correspondence between Kabbalists from this period, and its content is of both theological and sociological importance. In my opinion, the letter is much more complicated than scholars assumed, philologically and historically alike. As I demonstrated elsewhere, it addresses several disparate issues, most of which are not related to Kabbalah (Weiss 2021). For our matter, I would like to draw attention to a specific historical scandal to which the letter makes reference: its description of people who disseminate heretical beliefs in the city of Burgos. According to Scholem, Idel and their followers, this letter testifies to the existence of an inner Kabbalistic polemic about the esoteric versus exoteric nature of the theosophical Kabbalah (Idel 1995; Scholem 1998). They assume that both Isaac and Nahmanides were concerned because certain unnamed people disseminated the theosophy of the Kabbalah in a reckless way. This might be true, but only partially.
Reading the letter against the background of the existence of the binitarian attitude we have described reveals a different and more entangled picture. According to this picture, Isaac and his addressees are worried that people who abandon God, the Cause of Causes and worship mediators would consider Kabbalistic theosophy as support to their claims.

In the epistle, Isaac says that he warned people, his disciples perhaps, to avoid irresponsible dissemination of Kabbalistic theosophy. In this, he follows the example of his ancestors, who were cautious with regard to overt speech about (secret) wisdom. Nevertheless, according to Isaac’s narrative the scandal that occurred in Burgos was not caused by his students but by others. The scandal was that unknown people abandon God, the Upper Cause, and cut the shoots, i.e., worshiped mediators:

Furthermore, I have heard from the regions around you and from people from Burgos that they openly speak in the marketplaces and in the streets, in confused and hasty discourses, and from their words it is clearly perceptible that their heart has been turned from Upper Cause [<ḥa’ İlhaḥ> ha’Elionah] and that they are cutting the shoots, whereas these devarim [sefirot] are united as the flame is bound to a coal, for the Master is one and has no second, and ‘what can you count before One’. (Weiss 2021)

As we have seen above, abandoning of the Cause of Causes is a known accusation addressed against the supporters of ibn Tibbon’s attitude toward individual divine providence. According to the anonymous text about the worship of the Minister of the World as well as according to Meir ben Simone of Narbonne, this attitude also leads to the worship of mediators. In light of this, Isaac’s words shows that he advises to be cautious of those people whose “heart is turned away from the Upper Cause”. The portrayal of the dangers of ibn Tibbon’s attitude and the consequent criticism of this influence is similar to the words of his nephew, Asher ben David, which I quoted above. Asher ben David refers to those who read the “Guide of the Perplexed” and “delve into inquiries regarding the Cause of Causes [‘Ilah ha’Ilot], thus preventing humans from praying” (Abrams 1996, p.135). Another example of such an accusation against the Aristotelians can be gleaned from an anti-Aristotelian poem of Meshullam da-Piera (d. after 1260). Da-Piera was a disciple of the Kabbalists of his days and in his criticism of the Aristotelian interpreters of Maimonides he wrote: “With regard to prayer they found a Cause [‘Ilah] and [therefore] they would not pray and would not accede” (Brody 1938, p. 104)

It seems therefore that Isaac’s words are part of a theological discourse in which criticism was directed at those who internalized ibn Tibbon’s attitude toward divine providence and thence denied prayer to the Cause of Causes.

Indeed, we know that Burgos was a key location in the dispute over Maimonides’ radical interpretations during that time and it seems that there was in Burgos, in those years, a prevalent discourse about Maimonides philosophy. Burgos is the only place in Castile and Catalonia that we know for sure welcomed the Maimonidean supporters led by David Kimhi (d. ~1235) during the controversy about the interpretation of Maimonides philosophy in the 1230s and made their arguments public (Shohat 1971; Halberstam 1875, pp. 29–30, 52–53). Given this reputation of Burgos, it stands to reason that Isaac had heard about the popular understanding of Maimonidean discourse in Burgos, i.e., that people in that area had abandoned God, the Upper Cause, worshipping mediators instead. In this respect, Isaac’s fear, like that of haMe’ili, was that irresponsible dissemination of sefirotic theosophy would unintentionally end up reinforcing or supporting this binitarian belief. Nevertheless, it is of importance to accentuate that according to Isaac, the sefirotic theosophy is in fact the solution to this problem, not the problem itself. He maintains that the sefirotic doctrine in fact supports the monotheistic attitude toward the remote God, while other attitudes lead to a concept of composite godhead composed of two authorities: “whereas these devarim [=sefirot] are united as the flame is bound to a coal, for the Master is one and has no second”.

To conclude this section, I would like to say that my contention is neither that Isaac the Blind was pleased with the way certain people disseminated Kabbalistic attitudes in
this period, nor that Meir ben Simone supported the sefirotic theosophy. Nevertheless, I do wish to underline and point out in the clearest way possible that this was not their main concern. There was a much greater problem, a medieval form of binitarianism that explicitly called for the worship of mediators, a matter that was considered by them all as the worst theological transgression: idolatry. My argument is that scholarship failed to discern this attitude as such because it relied on a single set of binary categories: “philosophy” and “Kabbalah”. To put it differently, I would say that this medieval form of binitarianism was not defined as such and therefore scholars saw it as a quasi-Kabbalistic attitude.

Indeed, in later Kabbalah, which was composed from the last third of the thirteenth century onwards, the Shekhinah became more independent and therefore this binitarian approach became closer to a few marginal Kabbalistic attitudes (Weiss 2015). That could explain why this attitude waned. Nevertheless, the early Kabbalists, albeit ideationally diverse, were remote from binitarianism. They were all united in their common attitude toward the providence of God as well as their definition of the worship of mediators as idolatry. With regard to these two theological issues, believers in this binitarianism took an opposite tack: they said that there is no reason to pray to God and therefore one should worship the Minister of the World.

5. Conclusions

We know very little about the historical reality of the early days of the Kabbalistic movement. This is why the two documents published by Gershom Scholem in 1934 are so precious. Scholem, and following him many other scholars, constructed an extensive narrative about the Kabbalah and its historical acceptance based upon these documents. According to this narrative, the Kabbalah is a mythical, mystical radical theological movement. Therefore, they assumed that the main sages that developed its theological system tried to conceal its content, and that rabbis like Meir ben Simone of Narbonne who happened to know something about the Kabbalah, vehemently rejected it as a dangerous heresy.

My argument in this paper was that looking beyond the limiting scope of the terms “Kabbalah” and “Philosophy” reveals a different picture. According to this picture, the main concern, which was in fact shared by haMe’ili and Isaac the Blind had very little to do with Kabbalah, but with a medieval form of Jewish binitarianism. This seems to have been a syncretistic belief, which relied on a simplistic understanding of the philosophical impersonal image of God and therefore called to worship a mediator. If this conclusion is correct, it could help us draw a clearer picture regarding the theological forces involved in one of the most formative moments in the history of Jewish theology.

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