

ABULAFIA ON THE JEWISH MESSIAH AND JESUS

by MOSHE IDEL *

During the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians argued the question of the true faith in dialogue, polemics and public, religious debates. The most pressing and acute challenge to Judaism was the question of the identity of the messiah whom the Christians claimed had already come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The most common answer among Jews — although the most dangerous, was absolute rejection of Jesus as the messiah. This position had various literary expressions of greater and lesser subtlety. A literary parody found in *Sefer Toldot Yeshu*,¹ depicted Jesus as a magician. In face to face debates, however, the Jews did not dare mock Jesus, and limited their rebuttal to a refutation of the christological interpretation of Scripture. These debates were forced upon the Jews who had no interest in an open confrontation with the dominant religion. R. Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291) took a unique position on the question of the nature of Jesus and attempted to conduct a dialogue with Christians as well. In elaboration of this, I will first discuss the episode of Abulafia's visit to the Pope.

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As early as the age of twenty, Abulafia left Spain, because "the spirit of God awoke me and moved me, and I left there and by sea, and on dry land came straight away to the land of Israel. It was my intention to go to the Sambation river."² This occurred in the year 1260. About ten years later, God appeared to him and commanded him to go and speak with the Pope. This revelation took place in the year 1271. His attempt to gain an audience with the Pope occurred on the eve of Rosh Hashana in the year 1280. Abulafia set the date of the End (the time of redemption) for the year 1290, and it seems that for Abulafia, these messianic events occurred every decade.

Now let us consider the circumstances of Abulafia's mission to the Pope. Close reading of a passage in *Sefer HaEduh*³ indicates that the date of the meeting with the Pope was possibly determined by a revelation that Abulafia had in Barcelona in the year 1271 (the year "EI" — of God). The ninth year, following that revelation, would be the year 1280 approximately. In our opinion, the phrase, "as He commanded" at the end of the passage may be understood to allude not only to the deed, but also to the time of its execution. If this interpretation is correct, it is useful to compare this passage to a section of the Zohar,⁴ written in the 1280's, which describes the coming of the Messiah, and the death of the ruler in Rome.

"I shall see him, but not now (Num. 24:17). Some of these things were fulfilled at that time, some later, while some are left for the Messiah. . . We have learned that God will one day build Jerusalem, and display a certain star flashing with. . .⁵ and it will shine and flash for seventy days. It will appear on the sixth day of the week, on the twenty-fifth of the sixth month, and will disappear on the seventh day after seventy days. On the first day it will be seen in the city of Rome, and on that day, three lofty walls of that city shall fall, and a mighty place shall be overthrown, and the ruler of that city shall die. . . In that time mighty wars will arise in all quarters of the world."

2. *Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Or.* 606 (Neubauer 1580), fol. 165r.

3. *Ms. Rome Angelica*, 38, fol. 10r; *Ms. Munich* 285, fol. 36r. Abulafia's mission to the Pope had a messianic goal, and was perhaps motivated by a conception found in Nachmanides' debate with Pablo Christiani. A. H. Silver has already taken note of this. See A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel* (New York: 1927), p. 146. See also G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: 1967), p. 127f.

4. Zohar III, fol. 212b; in English translation: *The Zohar*, trans. M. Simon and H. Sperling, V, p. 322. See A. Jellinek, *Beyt HaMidrash*, III, p. XXXVII f.; A. Posnanski, *Schiloh* (Leipzig: 1904), p. 166, n.1; A. Geiger, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, III, p. 26n.

5. On the 'star of the Messiah', see *P.T. Taanit*, 4, halakha 6, and *Midreshei Geulah*, ed. Yehuda Ibn Shmuel (Jerusalem: 1954), p. 102.

Aaron Jellinek made a computation, and found that Pope Nicholas III died on the twenty-second of August 1280 which was the twenty-fifth of Elul 5040. It follows that the statement of the Zohar about the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month (that is, Elul)—the day on which the ruler of Rome would die—conforms to the day of the death of Nicholas III!

Abulafia's report of his mission parallels the above description in the Zohar. He attests that he went to the Pope "on the eve of Rosh Hashana" that is, on the twenty-ninth of Elul.⁶ Bearing in mind that both sources concern events of messianic importance, one can assume that both sources, the Zohar and Abulafia, treat one and the same event: the death of Pope Nicholas III. It is difficult to determine whether the Zohar reflects a particular event, Abulafia's mission to the Pope. It is more than reasonable to assume that a Judeo-Spanish tradition about the date of the appearance of the Messiah on Rosh Hashana eve, in the year 1280, was the source of Abulafia's revelation, being known to Rabbi Moses de Leon as well. In his description, however, the author of the Zohar attributed the event to a future time.

Now let us return to the story of Abulafia's attempt to gain a papal audience. Abulafia went to Soriano near Rome, despite the extreme personal danger involved in his attempts to win a papal interview. He knew that the Pope had ordered that "they should take him outside the city, and burn him in the fire, and (for that) the wood was placed behind the inner gate of the city." In *Sefer HaEdut*, Abulafia emphasized his willingness to endanger himself. The book was written "as a testimony between himself and God that he was ready to suffer martyrdom for the sake of the love of His commandment."⁷ Abulafia interpreted the Pope's death⁸ to be "a

6. See *Perek Eliyahu in Midreshei Geulah*, p. 52: "On the twenty-eighth of Elul, the Messiah whose name is Yenon shall emerge from the eternal mountains and will make war with the Ishmaelites." See *Midreshei Geulah*, p. 114.

7. *Ms. Rome Angelica*, 38, fol. 10r. In Nachmanides' account of his disputation with Pablo Christiani, he writes that the Messiah "will come and will issue commands to the Pope, and to all the kings of all the peoples... and will work signs and wonders, and will have no fear of them at all. [J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Wikuhim* (New York: 1928), p. 90]. See note 3 above, concerning the possible interconnection of Abulafia's mission to the Pope and this statement by Nachmanides.

8. Abulafia never succeeded in meeting with the Pope. Therefore Israel Friedlander's claim that "Abraham Abulafia... in order to escape death, renounced his belief in the presence of the Pope," is completely unfounded! See Israel Friedlander, "Jewish Arabic Studies," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (n.s.) III (1912-13), pp. 287n., 428. Friedlander probably based his view upon that of Graetz who writes: "Possibly he told the Pope that he too taught the doctrine of the Trinity." Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, IV (Philadelphia: 1949), p. 7. Since Abulafia never met the Pope, it was impossible for him to tell the Pope about the existence

testimony of divine providence that He saved him from his enemy.” In *Sefer HaOr*⁹ Abulafia attributed the Pope’s death to the actual power of the Divine Name. “His adversary died, unrepentant, in Rome by the power of the Name of the Living and Eternal God.” On the same page Abulafia states, “His Name fashioned my tongue into a spear with which I killed them that deny Him, and I killed his enemies by a righteous judgement.” This stands alongside Abulafia’s report in *Sefer HaEdu*¹⁰ that “the Pope died suddenly... because of a plague.” This event undoubtedly encouraged him and moved him to action.¹¹ In several books, we read of Abulafia’s vigorous propaganda for his views. In *Sefer HaOr*¹² he writes, “And into the hand of Zachariah, God gave the gift of grace and a portion of mercy. So he went about the lands of the Gentiles where Israel are dispersed and began to speak and concluded as he began, for he proclaimed the Name of God, the Lord of the world, from its beginning to end, and did not waiver to the left or the right.

of a doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, Abulafia thought that “The masters of the Kabbalah of *Sefirot* thought to unify the Name of God, and to avoid any belief in the Trinity. Therefore, they declared Him to be ten, for the Gentiles claim that He is three and that three are one. I found that a few of the masters of Kabbalah believe this and say that the divinity is ten *Sefirot*, and that ten are one. Behold! They have rendered Him as multiple as possible, and have compounded Him as much as possible, for there is no multiple greater than that of ten.” Abraham Abulafia, “Epistle,” in A. Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* (Leipzig: 1853), p. 19. It seems to me that Graetz’s error was caused by his reliance upon M. Landauer’s attribution of a poem which begins, *אֵיחָד אֵל כָּדָה* “איחוד אל כדה” (“I shall unify God according to the religion given by Him.”), to Abulafia: See *Literaturblatt des Orients* 28 (1845), p. 473. In this poem the following line appears, “Why did he make ten sayings into three? Does the principle bough have a branch?... did he mention only three of His praises — and left unmentioned His scores of praises?” Had this poem been written by Abulafia there would be some truth to Graetz’s proposal. However, the author of this poem is Rabbi Asher ben David, a Provençal kabbalist who lived during the first half of the thirteenth century, and with whom Abulafia had no connection whatsoever.

9. Published by A. Jellinek in “*Sefer HaOr; Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten, und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia,*” *Jubelschrift zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag des Prof. H. Graetz* (Breslau: 1887), p. 67.

10. *Ms. Rome, Angelica*, 38, fol. 10r.

11. In this context it is also worth mentioning another parallel between an episode in Abulafia’s career with traditions about the Messiah — that is, Abulafia’s detention in Rome after the death of the Pope. In *Sefer HaEdu*, *Ms. Rome, Angelica* 38, fol. 10r, Abulafia states: “In Rome, the Minorites seized him, and he was held in their cloister for twenty-eight days.” In *Sefer Zerubavel (Midreshei Geulah*, p. 73) we find the following: “He said to me: I am God’s anointed one, and I have been imprisoned here at Rome until the time of the End.”

12. *Ibid.*, p. 78; “Zacharias” is one of several appellations by which Abulafia called himself. “Raziel” is another.

Only a few of the sages of Israel were willing to listen to him speak the Wisdom of God, and the exalted degrees of its ways... and there arose those who denied the supreme wisdom, those who were smitten with the stroke of death, and they spoke grandly against the Lord and His anointed, and against all those who joined him." In *Sefer HaYashar*,¹³ Abulafia writes, "And Raziel said that in many places he called out to the people and abjured the holy people to sanctify the Name and to learn it properly." In the introductory poem to *Sefer Hayyei HaOlam Haba*¹⁴ we read, "You shall revive a great multitude with the Name *Yah* and you will skip like a lion in every city and field." When Abulafia realized that the Jews had turned a deaf ear to his word, he tried his luck at influencing the Christians. So he writes in *Sefer HaOt*,¹⁵ "And God commanded that he speak to the Gentiles of uncircumcised heart and flesh, and he did so. He spoke to them, and they believed in the message of God. However, they did not return to God, because they trusted in their swords and bows, and God hardened their impure, uncircumcised hearts."

Abulafia's attempts to meet with Christians and to expound his religious conceptions did not lead to a softening of his criticism of that religion. An outstanding example of his uncompromising attitude to Christianity, and in certain measure also to Judaism, as understood by his Jewish contemporaries, is to be found in his version of the famous tale of the three rings. Abulafia was one of the first writers in Europe to employ it.¹⁶ His version of this parable has been printed several times,¹⁷ but only in part in each case. This discussion will be well served by quoting the complete version of the tale as it appears in Abulafia:¹⁸

"It is well known among the nations for some time that our people was the first to receive the Torah from God. No nation denies this, and what is acknowledged publicly by all does not need further proof. If so, that

13. *Ms. Rome, Angelica*, 38, fol. 41r.

14. *Ms. Oxford, Mich.* 143 (Neubauer, 1582) fol. 3r.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

16. This parable is well documented in Islamic sources. See L. Massignon, "La Legende de *Tribus Impostoribus* et ses Origines Islamiques," *Opera Omnia*, I, pp. 82-85. This parable was well known in Italy during Abulafia's time. See Cecil Roth, "HaReka HaHistori Shel Maḥbarot Immanuel," *Assaf Festschrift* (Jerusalem: 1953), p. 455.

17. See M. Steinschneider, *Hebraische Bibliographie* IV (1861), p. 78, n. 7; *idem*, XII, p. 21; *Mose*, VIII (1885), pp. 359-361 (Italian translation). The Steinschneider version was copied by I. Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature* (New York: 1974), Vol. IV, p. 70n.

18. *Sefer Or HaSekhel, Ms. Vatican*, 233, fol. 37v-39v.

which originates in the Source of all is superior to its counterparts. Its language is superior to all languages. That He spoke to all that He said to this people in their particular language and that He commanded that all be written in their alphabet bear witness to this. Furthermore, what He wrote on the two tablets of stone was written in the holy language (Hebrew) which persists until this day as a living tradition. This remains true whether Scripture is to be understood both literally and esoterically or in only one of these two ways. If one will say, 'It is true, but He says that that nation was unworthy of that high degree, and He exchanged them for another nation and changed their laws and commandments, and diminished their scripture.' Behold! One who says this must admit of necessity to the exalted degree of that scripture, and to the exalted degree of its language, and alphabet. After he conceded the principal matter, he came to question its value, because he saw that it was lacking the three virtues mentioned before. We also will not contest the matter of that scripture's sensible deficiency, for if we were to deny the sensible, we would have to deny the intelligible. This is because the sensible precedes the intelligible in nature, although the intelligible precedes the sensible in degree. . . . However, we also will acknowledge the truth. Today, the Hebrew Scripture lacks those three virtues, but this is not because it has been exchanged for another. Rather, the matter resembles that of a man who had a beautiful pearl which he wanted to give as an inheritance to his son. While he was instructing his son in the matter of wealth, so that the son would recognize the virtue of the pearl, and would value it in the same way, the son came to anger his father. What did the father do? He did not want to give the pearl to another man, for if the son would repent and please his father, he would lose his inheritance. Rather, the father cast the pearl into a pit, for he said, 'If my son does not repent, I do not want him to lose it. While he does not repent, the pearl will remain hidden in the pit. When he repents, I will immediately take it from there, and give it to him. All the while that the son did not repent, the servants of his father used to come to him and trouble him. Everyone would boast that his lord had given him the pearl, but the son did not pay attention to them, because he had no intelligence. After a while, they so aggrieved him that he repented, and his father forgave him and brought the pearl out of the pit and gave it to him. The servants had to exert themselves and offer many words of apology. This has happened to us in the matter of those who say that God has taken them in exchange for us, for all the while that we do not make peace with God, as we have sinned. We have no mouth to answer them. However, when we will repent, and He will return our captivity, those who shame us now will be ashamed before us (when they see that God has returned our captivity). They will see that their thought and image were figments of the imagination, and that we have been afflicted for our sins, but all have been absolved. As of today, we have not attained that exalted degree to which we expect to rise at any time. For this reason, the disputation continues about who is beloved of God and who has the truth, we or our enemies. This will persist until that Judge will come and take the pearl out of the pit and give it to His chosen, to us or to them.¹⁹ Then the absolute truth will become perfectly clear, and the precious treasure will become radiant and return to its rightful owners, those worthy to inherit it, those who are

called 'sons of God.' Jealousy and strife, disputation and hatred, will cease, and mere imaginations will be removed from the minds of men. Then, each and every man will consider his fellow man to be like himself, just as man can see every one of his limbs, and that every limb is himself, every part of every limb altogether is himself. Then many will go about and knowledge will increase; no longer will anyone instruct his fellow man and say, 'Know God', for all shall know the Name from the greatest to the smallest, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the water that cover the ocean. Since the matter is so, all agree that for all time the chosen language is the holy tongue (Hebrew) etc."

Close study of this passage indicates that Abulafia made unique use of this tale. Certain narrative elements that appear in most of the other version are not to be found in his rendering. First, in most versions the story speaks of three identical rings, of which one is the original and the others, copies. Their identical appearance makes it impossible to distinguish between them. This, of course, resembles the condition of religion in the Middle Ages, when it was impossible to know which one of the three monotheistic religions was true. The tales of the three rings was composed in an agnostic and tolerant spirit. All three religions appear outwardly to have equal value, and no standard of measurement exists in the present to gauge their veracity. In opposition to this, Abulafia claims that there is only one pearl²⁰ and that the servants merely pretend to have the pearl in their possession. This variation alters the 'liberal' spirit of the original story. Abulafia implies that Christianity and Islam are not even copies of Judaism. They are a vain pretense, having no theological basis at all. Second, in general literary tradition, the story speaks of three sons who are equal in their father's system. Other rings were made so as to prevent arguments. In Abulafia's version, there is only one son, and the servants are his rivals.²¹ From the outset, Abulafia

19. See Steinschneider, *Hebraische Bibliographie*, IV, p. 78. The text reads: and they will give us." Undoubtedly, this version is a less than accurate rendering of Abulafia's words. See A. Berger, "The Messianic Self Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia — A Tentative Evaluation," *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron* (New York: 1959), p. 59f., n. 19.

20. Professor S. Pines has informed me that a similar parable, in which a "pearl" figures instead of a "ring" is to be found in a debate between a Nestorian patriarch and a Moslem at the end of the eighth century. See Timothy's *Apology for Christianity*, ed. A. Mignana (Cambridge: 1928). Woodbrooke Studies No. 2, p. 88f.; also S. Pines, "The Jewish-Christians According to a New Source," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. II (1956), p. 37f., n. 139.

21. The Gentile languages are also described as the "handmaidens" of the Hebrew language. In *Sefer HaOti*, p. 71, "...two languages, Greek and Latin came into existence in order to serve the Jewish tongue. The power of both is inter-connected above and below, for their power was hung and bound upon the

denies the possibility of an equal contest between the religions. Third, Abulafia's most interesting innovation in the story that none of the contestants has the pearl in hand, the pearl being hidden away all the time, is that three religions exist. In his view, even Judaism does not possess religious truth in its entirety.²² However, the Jews are best endowed to attain this truth, because they are 'the sons of God' — and not servants. However, when religious belief will become cleansed of illusory opinions, then Judaism will become the universal religion. This process will reach its conclusion with the arrival of the Messianic Age, when knowledge of the true God will break down the barriers between the religions.

In another context, Abulafia discusses the role of the Messiah who will effect the negation of the distinction between the religions and a recognition of the true God. In *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot*,²³ he says of the three religions: "In future... all three religions will know the supreme Name as it is said, 'For then I will turn to the people a pure language that they may all call upon the Name of the Lord.' (Zefaniah 3:9). The great wisdom of the redeemer shall be the cause of this knowledge. Of him it was said (Is. 52:13) 'Behold my servant shall deal prudently (lit., be intelligent), he shall be exalted and excellent, and shall be very high.'

cross, fastened with nails." This clearly indicates that Christianity also figures among the servants in the parable. See Abulafia's interpretation of the term *anti-christos* below.

22. One of Abulafia's disciples, the author of the book, *Ner Elohim*, differed with his master. In this parable of the pearl, Abulafia expressed his belief that in the Messianic Era, the ideal religion would make its appearance. "Pay no attention to the belief of every people that they alone serve God, and that all others are idolators, for all the sages of the other nations admit that God spoke to the prophets of that nation which is uniquely His and instructed that people, concerning the true way of divine worship. One who states otherwise is most certainly mistaken. However, this mistake shall not be corrected until hte coming of Elijah who prophesied during the time of the prophets, and is still alive. He will reveal himself, and by prophecy, he will demonstrate who is in error, and who is not. Therefore, his name is Elijah (*Eliyahu*) the prophet (*ha-Navi*) for the letters of his name tell of the truth of his prophecy. For the two names contained within his name may be further divided into three: the first of two letters, and the one after that of four letters" (*Ms. Munich* 10, fol. 156v, 157r). The name *Eliyahu ha-Navi* (Elijah the Prophet) is subdivided into three names as follows: *El, YHWH, ha-Navi*. This mnemonic was already suggested by Abraham Ibn Ezra. See Y.L. Fleischer, "Rabbenu Abraham Ibn Ezra B'Zarfah," *Mizrah U Maarav* IV, (1938), p. 358; also n. 33. See also R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo; Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: 1962), p. 270.

23. *Ms. New York—Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS)* 843, 68v. A. Berger published a portion of this quotation in his "The Messianic Self Consciousness," but mistakenly attributed it to *Sefer Mafteah HaHokhma*.

In the *kabbalah* (tradition), it is said, ‘He shall be more exalted than Moses, and more extolled than Abraham; and higher than the ministering angels; greater than any man.’” The statement, quoted here in the name of “kabbalah”, can be found in several midrashim.²⁴ However, it is a more likely assumption that Abulafia drew the general idea from a passage, attributed to Nachmanides, which has been preserved in several manuscripts. According to that source, the Messiah is superior to Abraham, Moses and the ministering angels because, “none of them approached the true knowledge of God as closely as the Messiah. . . therefore Isaiah said that he will be of superior intelligence, for he will have great knowledge of the Holy Blessed One and will have an exalted and excellent knowledge of His Name, blessed is He, more than all that was created before him.”²⁵ Nachmanides refers to another virtue of the Messiah. “Furthermore, he will convert many nations to Judaism.” It should be noted that this discussion of the Messiah by Nachmanides is a theoretical one. Abulafia, however, undoubtedly had his own messianic activity in mind. This is evident in Abulafia’s diversion from the typology which Maimonides determined as criteria for recognition of the true Messiah “The Messiah will not be wiser than Moses, but will only be similar to Moses.” (*Code: Laws of Repentance* 9:2).²⁶ Did Abulafia consider himself to be wiser than Moses? In Abulafia’s story of the pearl, he claims that the son is not yet in possession of the pearl, but that one day the son will receive it. According to the allegory, Abulafia saw himself, making great innovations in religion which would lead to the perfection of all mankind.

Abulafia’s position on the question of Jesus versus the Jewish Messiah clearly reveals his attitude to Christianity. In *Sefer Maṣteah HaShemot*²⁷ he writes, “Similarly, the seal of the sixth day of the week is that of Jesus of Nazareth. However, the seal of the seventh day of the week

24. See *Midrash Tanḥumah* (Buber edition) I, p. 139, and the sources cited by Solomon Buber in n. 138.

25. See Neubauer-Driver, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (New York: 1969), Vol. I, pp. 76, 82.

26. Maimonides, however, describes the Messiah in terms approximating those of the Midrash. “When the true King Messiah will arise and will prevail, and will be excellent, and exalted. . .” (*Code, Laws of Kings*, XI:4). This passage has been deleted from most editions of the Code. Maimonides refrained from offering as detailed a description of the Messiah as found in the Midrashim, mentioned above in n. 24; for example, whom the Messiah would excel, and above whom he would be exalted. This reticence was prompted possibly by Maimonides’ desire not to rank the Messiah above Moses.

27. *Ms. New York JTS* 843, fol. 80r. The passage is difficult to read.

which is half of the Tetragrammaton is (that of)... the King Messiah." In the book, *Hayyei HaOlam Haba*,²⁸ written several years before *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot*, this idea appears in a slightly different form:

"However, the Name *Yah* (*Yud Heh*), which are found in many verses of the Hagiographa, and in a few places in the Prophets, and least of all in the Torah, is part of the entire proper Name of God. It is half of this Name, and it is at the beginning of the Name, and it is at its end. Now although half of the Name is as the whole Name, see that this half of the Name signifies the mystery of the King Messiah which is the seventh day, and rules over the body of the Satan whose name is Tammuz, as the verse, 'the women weeping for Tammuz' (Ez. 8:14). This was one form of idolatry, worshipped by the women of ancient times. The mystery of the season of the month of Tebet, known to the kabbalists, explains the matter of one half of the Name; the mystery of the season of the month of Tammuz explains the secret of the other half of the Name. The whole Name is indicative of the perfection of the season of the month of Nissan, and half of the whole Name is indicative of the season of the month of Tishrei. This is the secret of Aries and Libra. One is Tebet, and the other is Tammuz."

These two passages contradict one another for in both the Messiah is associated with the seventh day. Abulafia's connection of the two is based upon a *gematria*—that both words have a numerical value of four hundred and fifty-three. The second quotation states that the Hebrew words for the body of Satan and Tammuz, also have a numerical value of four hundred and fifty-three, the same as that of the word, messiah. However, the relation between the Messiah and the body of Satan is one of ruler and subject which in Abulafia's opinion expresses the relation between the Jewish Messiah and Jesus. In *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot*, Abulafia describes the seals of the sixth and seventh days of the week which correspond to Jesus and the Messiah. We learn about the nature of these seals in a composition by one of Abulafia's students, called *Sefer Haqdama*.²⁹ "Know that the sixth day has the numerical value

28. *Ms. Oxford* 1582, fol. 71v. This passage bears the marked influence of Maimonides' remarks about Tammuz in the *Guide to the Perplexed* III:29. See also the *Commentary on Ezekiel* of R. David Kimhi (Ex. 8:14).

29. *Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (BN)* 776, fol. 184v. When the letters of the name Henriç are rearranged, it becomes the word *Noçri* (Nazarene, of Nazareth). Therefore, this is an allusion to Jesus. Undoubtedly, Abulafia and his disciples relied upon an earlier source which stated that the sixth day is signified by the letters *yud-heh*, and that the seventh day when "the heavens were finished" (Gen. 2:1) is signified by the letters *vav-heh* (*Va yehulu Hashamayim*). In *Sefer Meirat Eynayim* (*Ms. Munich* 17, 42v), Rabbi Isaac of Acre writes, "This world was created by the letters *yud-heh*, that is the sixth day, *Yom Hashishi, yud-heh*, and the world to come was created by the letters *vav-heh, Vayehulu Hashamayim*

Henriz, three hundred forty-five, and is the active force within the half of the Divine Name, *Yah*. However, the seventh day is signified by the half of the Name, *Vav-Heh*, and is the secret of the King Messiah who will come speedily in our days. All his activity will be founded upon the letters *vav-heh* and also upon the letters *yud-heh* which are the mystery of the sixth day. In the Messiah's days, the Name will be whole, and he (the Messiah) will complete all the work of creation, as the verse says, "*Vayechulu ha-shamayim* — and the heavens were completed..." (Gen. 2:1). This quotation clearly states that the seal of the sixth day is the abbreviation *Yud-Heh*. The seal of the seventh day, however, is *Vav-Heh*, an abbreviation of the sentence above from Genesis.

Now let us return to the passage in *Sefer Hayyei HaOlam Haba*. The reference to two halves of the divine name is to be understood to mean *Yud-Heh* and *Vav-Heh*. Further proof that this was the writer's intention can be found in the mention of the paired months Nissan and Tishrei, Aries and Libra. In several places in his writings, Abulafia mentions

(and the heavens were completed) whose initials are *vav-heh*." This statement does not appear in a messianic context. The homiletic also appears in *Sefer Get HaShemot*, Abulafia's first work (*Ms. Oxford 1658, Opp. 425, fol. 90v*): "That [the Tetragrammaton] is also divided into two names... after the likeness of the Merkabah which has two aspects, the sensible and the intelligible, as we have stated. These are indicative of two worlds which are this world and the world to come." Notably, the more common tradition speaks of the superiority of the Name, *yud-heh* to the Name, *vav-heh*. In *Sefer Ozar Hayyim* (*Ms. Moscow-Ginzburg, 775 fol. 226v*), Rabbi Isaac of Acre expressed the opinion that, "The Name YHWH contains both body and soul, both a simple and superior spirituality and a lower, compound spirituality. The first half of the Name, *yud-heh*, is certainly the secret of the superior simple substance which imparts efflux and the latter half, *vav-heh*, is undoubtedly the secret of the lower, compound, receptive substance. For this reason, the sweet singer of Israel, the anointed one of the God of Jacob, did not say, 'Halleluhu Halleluhu' (Praise Him! Praise Him! lit. Praise *heh-vav*) but always said, 'Halleluyah' (Praise *yud-heh*). Rabbi Isaac of Acre relied upon a tradition that he found in Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's work, *Sefer HaShem*, chapter VIII (Fiorda: 1834), fol. 19a, "How weighty are the words of our ancient sages of blessed memory who said that the upper world was created by half of the Divine Name." However, in chapter IV of *Sefer HaEmunah V'HaBitahon* of Rabbi Jacob Ben Sheshet (printed in the collected writings of Nachmanides, ed. Chavel, Vol. II, p. 363) we read, "I found an allusion to this and support for this in the verse, 'Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice' (Ps. 96:11) in which the first letters of the words of the verse form the Name, YHWH. The verse attributed the Name, *yud-heh*, to the heavens and the Name, *vav-heh*, to the earth, and these correspond to the two worlds. Thereafter, I found that Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra had mentioned the matter another time, in his liturgical poem for the *selihot* of the Day of Atonement. He wrote, "...the upper world with *Yud-Heh*, and the lower world with *Vav-Heh*."

that the “squaring” of the letters *yud-heh* is equivalent to 121 and represents the constellation of Aries.³⁰ As in the passage from *Sefer Hayyei HaOlam Haba*, an analogy is made between the King Messiah and the letters *vav-heh*.³¹ Therefore, one may assume that the letters *yud-heh* correspond to the body of Satan or Tammuz, and in consequence to Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible that Abulafia associated the crucifixion with Maimonides’ remark in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (III : 29), about the “strange death” of Tammuz. The description of the relationship between the Messiah and Jesus as that of a ruler and slave is supported by remarks in *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot*.³² “The Greek Christians call him (ἀντίχριστος), messiah. That is to say lord, (*adonei*) that man, an allusion to the verse, ‘The man, the lord (*adonei*) of the land, spoke roughly to us’ (Gen. 42:30). This means that he (the Jewish Messiah) shall stand up against him (Jesus). He will inform everyone that what Jesus said to the Christians, that he is God, and the son of God is completely false, for he did not receive power from the Unified Name. Rather, all his power depends upon an image, hung upon the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, while the matter of the Messiah relies upon the Tree of Life. It is the pillar which upholds all. Jesus, however, was hung bodily because he relied upon a material tree, while a spiritual matter which is the divine intellect gave the Messiah eighteen years of life and of these, two years remain.”

30. See his epistle, *Sheba Netivot HaTorah*, printed in A. Jellinek, *Philosophie uno Kabbalah*, Vol. I (Leipzig: 1853), pp. 10, 18. It seems to me that the paired months Nissan and Tishrei have a significance beyond that derived from this numerical calculation (*gematriah*). Jesus was killed in the month of Nissan, while Abulafia went to speak with the Pope on the eve of Rosh Hashana, close to the month of Tishrei. However, this parallel presents a difficulty. Nissan—the month in which Jesus was killed has a numerical value in Hebrew of 121. This corresponds to the Name *vav-heh*, whose letters are the initials of the seventh day which symbolizes the messiah! It is also possible, of course, to connect the Name, *yud-heh*, to the sixth day of the crucifixion. According to most sources, this occurred on “Passover eve.” In *B.T. Sanhedrin*, fol. 43a (cf. with *Dikdukei Sofrim*, IX, p. 126). There we read that “Jesus of Nazareth was a familiar of the king, and they hung him on Passover eve.” If the word “eve” is understood literally, this means on the fifteenth of Nissan, which is equivalent to the letters *yud-heh*.

31. This analogy is also worthy of mention. The sixth day, the day of the crucifixion, is called “the accursed one” by Christians. In Hebrew, the words *Yeshu Hanozri* (Jesus of Nazareth) have the numerical value of 671, the same as the value of the words, *yom hashishi* (the sixth day). See N.T. Luke, XXIII: 54 and N.T. Mark, XV:42.

32. *Ms. New York, JTS* 843, fol. 81v. This text is quoted in part by A. Berger in “The Messianic Self Consciousness,” p. 57, n. 11. There is a play on words here. The word *adonei* (Lord) is read as “anti”. Abulafia means to say “anti-Christ.”

The meaning of the section is clear: Abulafia who had been the Messiah these eighteen years³³ depends upon the Tree of Life, the divine intellect, or the Active Intellect. Jesus relied upon the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,³⁴ and invented an imaginary religion³⁵ which speaks about matters of convention, good and evil. The superiority of Abulafia to Jesus resembles that of the intellect to the imagination or the body. Again, we read in *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot*,³⁶ "The error of the Christians in our time concerns Jesus, son of Pantera; the hidden matter of Jesus is that he was a bastard, conceived during his mother's menstrual impurity. That blood is the mystery of primordial matter of which all created things are made and whereby they bear a common name." The meaning of this seems to be that Abulafia considered menstrual blood to be matter which can take on all forms;³⁷ again Jesus is representative of matter in contrast with the spirituality of the Jewish Messiah. It seems to us that a similar polarity is to be found in another of Abulafia's works,³⁸

33. *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot* was written in the year 1289, exactly eighteen years after the revelation in Barcelona.

34. In the Middle Ages, it was commonplace that the wood of the cross came from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. See R. Nelli, "La Legende Medievale du Bois de la Croix," *Folklore* 20:4 (1957), pp. 3-12.

35. The Hebrew word *demut* (likeness) means the imagination, and is contrasted with the Hebrew word *zelem* (image) which denotes the intellect.

36. *Ms. New York, JTS* 843, fol. 81r. In Hebrew, the words *Yeshu ben Pandera* have a numerical value of 713 which is the same as that of the words, "*Yesh mamzer ben hanidah*" (there is a bastard, conceived in menstrual impurity). On the meaning of the name Pandera, see J. Klausner, *Jesus de Nazareth* (Paris: 1933), pp. 20f., 23, and M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, p. 46f.

37. See *Igeret Sheba Netivot HaTorah*, published by A. Jellinek, in *Philosophie und Kabbala, Vol. I* (Leipzig: 1853), p. 17. In *Sefer Gan Naul*, Abulafia makes another connection between Jesus and matter, "And God appointed him over the land of Egypt (*Eretz Migraim*), and darkness fell upon Jesus of Nazareth." (*Ms. Munich* 58, fol. 329v). Again, the words *Yeshu HaNozri* have numerical value equivalent to 671 which is the value of the letters of the words *Eretz Migraim*, the land of Egypt. On the land of Egypt as a metaphor for matter, see my dissertation, "R. Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," pp. 190-192.

38. *Sefer Ozar Eden Ganuz, Ms. Oxford*, 1580, fol. 102r. Cf. this is to the remarks of Rabbi Levi ben Abraham, a contemporary of Abulafia. In *Sefer Livyat Hen* (*Ms. Vatican* 192, fol. 28r), Rabbi Levi compared the messiah, son of Joseph, to the practical intellect and the messiah, son of David, to the speculative intellect. The opinion of Rabbi Levi concurs with that of Abulafia, that the Messiah represents human intellect, developed to its greatest extent. See *Vatican Ms.* 192, fol. 57v. On this particular conception of Abulafia, see my dissertation (*ibid.*), p. 396ff. For the interpretation of the Messiah as "acquired intellect," see D. R. Blumenthal, "Was There an Eastern Tradition of Maimonidean Scholarship," *Revue des Études*, 138 (1979), p. 64.

“the messiah, son of Joseph, was born in the physical realm, but the messiah, son of David, was born in the metaphysical realm.” It can be assumed that Abulafia identified the messiah, son of Joseph, who was born naturally with the body, and the messiah, son of David, with the metaphysical intellect. In the book, *Hayyei HaOlam Haba*³⁹ Abulafia expresses this by means of *gematriah* — equations of terms whose Hebrew letters have an equivalent numerical value, e.g.: ‘David, Messiah, son of Jesse’; by the method of permutation, one realizes the secret teaching, ‘David son of Jesse is the messiah,’ and also ‘The messiah, son of David, is a lad’ (*na’ar*). The latter is an allusion to the well known identification of the Hebrew word *na’ar* — a lad, with the angel Metatron who represents the Active Intellect. It is possible that Abulafia considered the death of the body, paralleled by the death of the messiah, son of Joseph to be a pre-condition for the appearance of the Messiah, son of David, who represents the intellect. If we go one step further, we can assume that Abulafia also had in mind the death of Jesus, whose father was named Joseph. In as early a source as Tractate Sukkah,⁴⁰ a parallel is drawn between the death of the messiah, son of Joseph, and the death of the Evil Inclination. It is possible that Abulafia’s statement contains an allusion to this talmudic source. There is a parallel discussion of good and evil in terms of the dichotomy of body and soul in Abulafia’s *Sefer HaMelitz*.⁴¹ There, Abulafia’s remarks concern Armilus,⁴² the legendary adversary of the messiah. “However, the sages said that the entire nation of King Armilus shall fall before you. So did God assure us that He would save him from his enemy. Armilus is the first king and is thirteen year his senior, for when Armilus begins to fall, he shall always fall.

39. Ms. Oxford 1582, 67v.

40. B.T. *Sukkah*, fol. 52a. In the Middle Ages, the death of Jesus was identified with the death of the messiah, son of Joseph, mentioned in Tractate Sukkah. See H. Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates; Sermo de Passione Domini* (Jerusalem: 1963), p. 121, n. 4. Notably, Isaac Abrabanel considered the tradition about the death of the messiah, son of Joseph, to have been the source which influenced the formulation of the historical image of Jesus. See *Mashmia Yeshuot* (1644), fol. 13c; *Maayanei HaYeshua* (1607), pp. 45, 74. The Sabbatean, Abraham Cardozo, compared Jesus to the messiah, son of Ephraim. He writes: “The first messiah, rooted in the shells [in evil] is Jesus of Nazareth who corresponds to the messiah son of Ephraim. Insofar as his [Jesus’] origin is with Samael, who so emanated upon him that he became a god, according to those who believe in him...” This text was published by G. Scholem in *Studies and Texts Concerning the History of Sabbatianism and Its Metamorphosis* (Jerusalem: 1974), p. 289 (in Hebrew).

41. Ms. Rome, *Angelica* 38, fol. 6r-6v. Ms. Munich 285, fol. 11r.

42. See Y. Dan, *HaSippur Halvri BeYmei HaBaynayim* (The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages) (Jerusalem: 1974), pp. 40-43, and notes.

The sages noted that the name Armilus signifies Satan, and is the name of the Evil Inclination which is the angel of death.” The section describes the victory of the messiah over Armilus. However, Armilus, the son of Satan,⁴³ becomes the Satan himself. The war between Armilus and the messiah becomes a war between the body and the soul. In the continuation of the above quotation, Abulafia writes,⁴⁴ “and it is an allegory concerning the powers which at times are weakened, and the intellect. In any case, one must strengthen the powers of the intellect and remove anyone who in any way prevents the attainment of intellectual apprehension.”

In this connection it is proper to mention Abulafia’s view that Jesus is “an alien god.” In *Sefer Seter Torah*, he writes about Jesus,⁴⁵ “That man founded a new religion, as evidenced by the remainder of the nation which is called until this very day by the name attributed to him by his and their consent. They are called Christians, annointed ones, because he named himself the annointed one, the messiah (χριστός). The Torah, however, called him ‘an alien god.’ Understand this well, for it is a great secret.” The intention here is that the numerical value of the word *Yeshu* (Jesus) has the same numerical value of three hundred sixteen as the Hebrew words for an “alien god” (*elohei nekhar*). This is an explicit polemic against the Christian belief that Jesus is God. For Abulafia, Jesus is the body, the image of Satan or an alien god. All told, these names have a clearly negative connotation. This assumption in no way restricted Abulafia’s application of *gematriah* which he used in order to prove that Jesus is mentioned in the Bible. Later, Flavius Mithridates⁴⁶ and Paulus de Heredia⁴⁷ made the same claim, and it seems that they were influenced by Abulafia’s works.⁴⁸

43. *Ibid.*, p. 40f.

44. *Ms. Rome, Angelica* 38, fol. 6v; *Ms. Munich* 285, fol. 11r. See also *Ms. Rome, Angelica* 38, fol. 7v.

45. *Ms. Munich* 341, fol. 160v. This passage has been deleted from several manuscripts; See *Ms. New York, JTS* 2367, *Ms. British Library* 757. In other mss. such as *Paris* 774, the words, “messiah” and “messiahs”, i.e. “Christians” are missing.

46. See Wirszubski’s remarks in *Flavius Mithridates, Sermo...*, p. 40, n. 3.

47. F. Secret, “L’Ensis Pauli de Paulus de Heredia,” *Seferad* 26 (1966), p. 101. Heredia mentioned Abulafia several times in this composition. See Secret’s article, p. 98.

48. A *gematriah*, similar to the one mentioned here appeared in a work written before that of Abulafia. See M. Idel, “Two Notes on R. Yair b. Shabetai’s H̳erev Piph̳ot,” *Kiryat Sefer* 53 (1978), p. 214, n. 14 (in Hebrew). See also Isaac Abrabanel in his *Maayanei HaYeshua*, part XI, chapter 8.

Now let us return to Abulafia's statement in *Sefer Mafteah HaShemot* about the King Messiah and Jesus of Nazareth. We have tried to prove that Abulafia's intention was to hint that in degree, the Messiah is equivalent to the intellect, while Jesus is equated with matter. Ironically, this particular anti-Christian claim found its way into a Christian work of Kabbalah. The Christian author seems to have drawn upon the statement of *Sefer Haqdama*, quoted above. The *Haqdama* author seems to have been reluctant to reveal the superiority of the Jewish Messiah; before this passage, he writes,⁴⁹ "Know that what I am about to reveal to you is one of the most hidden things. God forbid if the nation of Edom were to know of it! This would constitute a great danger." Ironically, what the author of *Sefer Haqdama* wanted to conceal found its way to Johannes Reuchlin, one of the scholars of Edom. In his book, *De Arte Cabbalistica*, he writes,⁵⁰ "Scribitur in libro cabale Hacadma(!), the secret of the King Messiah that he shall come speedily in our days and that by the letters *vav-heh*, and also by the letters *yud-heh* which are the mystery of the seventh day, all his activity will commence, and that His Name is whole, and that all the work will be completed by His hand." Undoubtedly, *Sefer Haqdama* was Reuchlin's source in spite of the slight corruption in the spelling of the title. It is surprising that Reuchlin ignored the anti-Christian meaning of the statement. Was he aware of this tendency, omitting it from his quotation, or was it missing in the source from which he drew? This quotation from *Sefer Haqdama* is to be found in Ms. New York, 1887 (formerly in Halberstamm⁴⁴). However, the words, "equals *Henriç*" and "the king of Edom"⁵¹ are missing. G. Scholem has already ventured that Reuchlin had this manuscript before him.⁵² The continuation of Reuchlin's discussion is worthy of attention, as he speaks of the transition from the sixth day

49. Ms. Paris, BN 776, 184v.

50. In the 1517 edition, p. XVIII, and also in the Basle edition of 1587, p. 637. In the version which appears in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Opera Omnia* (Basle 1557) Vol. I, p. 769, the word "three" appears instead of the word "perfect". See also F. Secret, *La Kabbale* (Aubier: 1973), p. 89f., where he translated Reuchlin's work. In addition to this attribution in Latin, Reuchlin quoted the text in its entirety in Hebrew. Reuchlin's quotation is comparable to the version found in *Sefer Haqdama*.

51. Fol. 12r.

52. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1969), p. 180. In Reuchlin, the end of the passage differs from that found in Ms. New York. One must ask whether Reuchlin had another manuscript before him. Such a manuscript would be similar to Ms. New York, but would have a wording closer to that of Reuchlin. The matter deserves investigation.

to the Sabbath, which alludes to the passage from the active to the contemplative life.⁵³

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53. See Abraham bar Hiyya, *Megillat HaMegalleh*, ed. A. Poznanski (Berlin: 1924), pp. 57-58. On the one hand, Bar Hiyya speaks of the passage from the six days of creation to the Sabbath as the passage from this world to that of the Messianic Era, and on the other, as a passage from the creation of material bodies to the creation of the soul.