

TORAH AND THE MESSIANIC AGE:  
THE POLEMICAL AND EXEGETICAL HISTORY OF  
A RABBINIC TEXT

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It was taught in the school of Elijah: The world will endure six thousand years: two thousand desolation, two thousand Torah, two thousand the messianic age, but because of our many sins some of [those final two thousand years] have already passed.<sup>1</sup>

It is no accident that this is the first Talmudic passage adduced by a medieval polemicist as a direct demonstration of a specific Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> The citation, which appears in a polemic written by Alan of Lille in the 1190's, was surely not discovered by the author, who evinces no other familiarity with rabbinic texts and who composed the brief anti-Jewish chapter of his work "against the heretics" largely on the basis of a compilation that had already been used by Jacob ben Reuben in 1170. Consequently, although we cannot know if that particular compilation contained this argument, we can be quite confident that the passage from what Alan calls "Scola Helye," or the school of Elijah, had embarked on its polemical career well before the final decade of the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bav. Sanhedrin* 97a; *Bav. 'Avodah Zarah* 9a; *Tana de-bei Eliyyahu*, ed. Shmuel Yehuda Weinfeld (Jerusalem, 1991), 2:1, p. 14. For a discussion of some Christian and Jewish sources relating to the concept of six ages, see Norman Roth, "Seis edadas durara el mundo": Temas de la polémica judía española," *Ciudad de Dios* 199:1 (1986): 45–65. Despite the title, the article is not concerned to any significant degree with our rabbinic text.

<sup>2</sup> I think that this formulation avoids the objections in Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca and London, 1982), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> See *De fide catholica contra haereticos*, PL 210: 410. I argued for the existence of a compilation utilized by both Jacob and Alan in "Gilbert Crispin, Alan of Lille, and Jacob ben Reuben: A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Polemic," *Speculum* 49 (1974): 34–47. The argument was endorsed by M.H. Vicaire, "'Contra Judaeos' méridionaux au début du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Alain de Lille, Evrard de Béthune, Guillaume de Bourges," in *Juifs et Judaïsme de Languedoc*, ed. Marie-Humbert Vicaire and Bernhard Blumenkranz (Toulouse, 1977), pp. 271–73.

The printed text of *De Fide Catholica* attributes the rabbinic passage to a work called *Sehale*. This mysterious term has elicited various interesting conjectures that

The utility of this passage, then, was so evident that it began to circulate nearly a century before the first concerted effort to demonstrate the truth of Christianity from rabbinic sources, which was launched by Pablo Christiani in a campaign marked most dramatically by the Barcelona disputation of 1263.<sup>4</sup> In a single striking sentence, the Rabbis appeared to have confirmed two Christian assertions about the messianic age that were critical to the debate with Jews: (1) It is not an age of Torah. (2) It has already begun.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these issues raised far-reaching questions involving both polemical tactics and fundamental theological positions. Before we examine them, however, we need to direct some fleeting attention to a curiosity in this passage that appeared to deprive Jews of their crucial fallback position in a dispute about the meaning of an aggadic text. In his debate with Pablo, Nahmanides argued that midrashic statements have no binding force and in the final analysis Jews are free to reject them. While Jewish polemicists were uncomfortable with this assertion as a first line of defense, it was very important as a safety net in the event of an unpersuasive Jewish argument with respect to any particular passage. In this instance, however, the statement was attributed

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have been rendered moot by Vicaire's citation (p. 272 and note 13a) of the manifestly correct manuscript reading *Scola Helye* (the school of Elijah). In light of this version, the illusory error in ascription can no longer be used to demonstrate Alan's ignorance of the original source; see Cohen, *Friars*, p. 31, where he cites Vicaire's article but overlooks the new reading. Even in the absence of the new manuscript evidence, general methodological considerations would require extreme caution in drawing conclusions about an author's knowledge or ignorance on the basis of errors that might well have been made by later copyists. This caveat attains overwhelming force when the error is in a word transliterated from a language that the copyists did not know. (In this instance, the newly discovered information that Alan cited the source accurately hardly matters; the chances that he had direct access to the Talmudic passage in its original context are in any event infinitesimal.) As recently as 1993, Amos Funkenstein retained a discussion of the possible explanations of *Sehale* in a revised version of a 1968 essay in which he first pointed to the passage in Alan's work. See his *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1993), p. 197, where he combines material from "Ha-Temurot be-Vikkuah ha-Dat she-bein Yehudim le-Nozerim ba-Meah ha-Yod-Bet," *Zion* 33 (1968): 142, n. 62, with a remark in his later study, "Parshanuto ha-Tippologit shel ha-Ramban," *Zion* 45 (1980): 41, n. 23. See also the phrase "Legitur in studio Helye," which introduces the citation of this passage in the much later Tortosa disputation (Antonio Pacios Lopez, *La Disputa de Tortosa*, vol. 2 [Madrid and Barcelona, 1957], p. 31).

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, Christians regarded the final clause about "our many sins" as a gloss.

to the school of Elijah, whom some Christians identified as none other than the prophet himself.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, some Jewish polemicists took pains to insist that the authority responsible for this schematization of history is a post-biblical rabbi, whose opinion—in *extremis*—could be dismissed.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the issues here are so central that the passage in its Christian interpretation could not be attributed comfortably to any rabbi, and Jews had to confront the questions raised by their adversaries with high seriousness and profound concern.

## I

Is the messianic age an age of Torah? Since Maimonides listed the immutability of the Torah as a cardinal principle of Judaism, it appears that any medieval Jew would have felt compelled to respond to this question with a resounding, even indignant “of course.” In the context of a polemic with Christians, this response would have been particularly vigorous and uncompromising, and Jewish polemicists

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<sup>6</sup> An analogous Christian argument appears in connection with an alleged Christological reference in the apocryphal book of Baruch. Christians responded to the Jewish assertion that the book was non-canonical and hence not authoritative by maintaining that a statement by Jeremiah’s secretary can hardly be dismissed even if embedded in a non-canonical work. See my references to Christian sources in *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 290.

In non-polemical contexts, Jews too periodically affirmed that *Tana de-bei Eliyyahu* is a record of revelations by the prophet to a Talmudic sage. Cf. *Bav. Ketubbot* 105b–106a, and see the affirmation of this belief by the most recent editor of the work (*Tana de-bei Eliyyahu* [above, n. 1], editor’s int., p. 14), who notes R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai’s vigorous criticism of several Rabbis who pointed to a different Elijah; see Azulai’s *Shem ha-Gedolim*, ed. by Elazer Gartenhaus (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1958), II: *Ma’arekhet ha-Sefarim s.v. Seder Eliyyahu Rabba ve-Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Hayyim ibn Musa, *Sefer Magen va-Romah ve-Iggeret li-Beno* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 95; *La Disputa de Tortosa*, vol. 2, p. 32; Yehudah Aryeh da Modena, *Magen va-Herev*, ed. Shlomo Simonsohn (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 69, where Nahmanides’ assertion that one may reject aggadic statements is explicitly cited in this context. See too note 8 below. At Tortosa, Geronimo de Santa Fe replied that whoever Elijah may be, the statement is authoritative for Jews because it is endorsed by the Talmud. This, however, simply brought the discussion back to the normal parameters of the debate about Talmudic texts, which is all the Jews could have hoped for.

For an illustration of the difficulties facing Jewish polemicists who attempted to defend *aggadot* while retaining the option of rejecting them, see my “Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack on Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden, 1992), pp. 115–130.

confronting the Christian citation of “Elijah’s” assertion fully confirm our expectations.

Pablo Christiani himself pointed to this rabbinic passage in the “second Paris disputation” that took place some time between 1269 and 1273, arguing that the age of desolation was without Torah and the age of Torah was (or, in the Jewish view, is) without desolation; hence, the final, messianic age, is without both desolation and Torah. The Jewish protagonist responded that both Noah and Abraham observed at least some Torah in the first age, and many Jews committed idolatry in the second; thus, the age of desolation was not without Torah and the age of Torah was not unmixed with desolation. It follows that the messianic age will not be bereft of Torah.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the late-thirteenth century polemicist Mordecai of Avignon cited Pablo’s argument and replied that “the Torah will not be annulled; rather, it will attain a higher level in that the commandments will be observed in all their fullness and the [Jewish people] will reign supreme.” Moreover, said Mordecai, if the characteristic defining each age is to end when the age itself ends, then the era of the Messiah would end after the year 6,000, hardly a congenial position for Christians.<sup>9</sup>

R. Menahem ha-Meiri underscored the centrality of this discourse by explicitly asserting that he felt the need to digress from the primary intent of his work and insert a response to the Christian interpretation of our rabbinic statement into an otherwise non-polemical work. He consequently declares in the most vigorous language that the characterization of the last two millennia as the days of the Messiah does not

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<sup>8</sup> See Joseph Shatzmiller, *La Deuxième Controverse de Paris: Un chapitre dans la polémique entre chrétiens et juifs au moyen âge* (Paris-Louvain, 1994), pp. 57 (Hebrew text), 75–76 (French translation), where the Jewish disputant also denies that the Elijah in this Talmudic passage is the prophet. It is not difficult to account for Pablo’s failure to utilize this *aggadah* in the earlier Barcelona disputation. Although it could have been used to support the Christian position regarding the first item on the agenda (whether or not the Messiah has already come), he was saving it, as he did in Paris, for the final item (“that the laws and ceremonials ceased and should have ceased after the advent of the...Messiah”). But that final topic was never discussed. For a discussion of the agenda and the reasons for the interruption of the disputation, see Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1992), pp. 59, 75–78. See too my review essay, “The Barcelona Disputation,” *AJS Review* 20 (1995): 379–88.

<sup>9</sup> *Mahaziq* (or *Mehazzeq*) *Emunah*, Vatican ms. 271, chapter 13, p. 17. Shatzmiller (p. 20) noted Mordecai’s citation of Pablo’s argument, which is attributed to that “well-known fellow” (*ha-ish ha-yadua*).

mean, “God forbid,” that the Torah, which was given for all eternity, will be absent from that period.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Isaac Abravanel maintained that the six thousand years of this *aggadah* correspond to the six days of creation, so that the middle millennia of Torah are symbolized by the creation of the two luminaries—representing the written and oral law—on the fourth day. Just as the sun and moon did not cease to exist during the fifth and sixth days, so will the Torah remain in full force during the messianic millennia. The reason that only two thousand years are specifically designated as the age of Torah is either that they represent the period through the redaction of the Mishnah after which all is commentary or else they refer to the period when the Torah will be confined to Israel alone. As a final salvo, Abravanel noted that Christians hardly believe that “their Messiah will cease” after his allotted millennia. Aside from its obvious function, this argument is probably intended, as it was by Mordecai of Avignon, to weaken the Christian claim, cited earlier by Abravanel, that because the age of desolation clearly ended with the onset of the age of Torah, the Jewish position affirming the persistence of Torah into the messianic age destroys the symmetry of history. The Christian pattern, Abravanel implies, is no less asymmetrical.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the vigorous Jewish denial that the messianic age brings the age of Torah to an end, some intriguing nuances could emerge when Jews considered the message of the “school of Elijah” in a less explicit context or in a non-polemical environment. A well known passage in Nahmanides’ commentary to Deuteronomy making no overt mention of our *aggadah* unquestionably presents a daring construction of its meaning that Nahmanides would surely have hesitated to articulate in debate with a Christian.

“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart” (Deut. 30:6). Similarly, the Rabbis said, “He who comes to be purified will be assisted” (*Bav. Shabbat* 104a). God promises that you will return to him wholeheartedly and he will help you.

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<sup>10</sup> *Beit ha-Behirah ‘al Massekhet Avot*, ed. by Binyamin Prag (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 13 = R. Menahem ha-Meiri, *Seder ha-Qabbalah*, ed. by S. Z. Havlin (Jerusalem and Cleveland, 1992), pp. 20–22, and cf. the two parallels cited by Havlin in n. 69. See too the brief discussion in Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Interpretation and Controversy in Medieval Languedoc* (London and New York, 2009), pp. 55–57.

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Abravanel, *Sefer Yeshu‘ot Meshiho* (Koenigsberg, 1861), p. 20b. He sets forth the Christian argument fully and fairly on p. 18a.

The following point appears to emerge from Scripture: From the time of creation, man had the choice of becoming righteous or wicked in accordance with his will; this is the case throughout the age of the Torah, so that people could achieve merit through their choice of good and be inflicted with punishment through their choice of evil. In the messianic age, however, the choice of good will become part of human nature; the heart will not be attracted by anything inappropriate and will feel no desire for it at all. This is the circumcision mentioned here, for coveting and improper desire are a foreskin for the heart, while the circumcision of the heart is that a person does not covet or desire. At that time, man will return to the state that he was in before the sin of Adam, when he did by nature that which was proper and was not driven by contrary desires, as I explained in my commentary to the portion of *Bereshit*.

This is the point of the verse in Jeremiah, “See, a time is coming—declares the Lord—when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers... But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days...: I will put my Torah into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts” (Jer. 31:31–33). This refers to the destruction of the evil inclination and the heart’s natural pursuit of proper behavior. That is why the passage continues, “Then I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, ‘Heed the Lord’; for all of them, from young to old, shall heed me” (Jer. 31:33–34). Now, it is known that man’s inclination is evil from his youth (Gen. 8:21), and so people require instruction. At that time, however, this will not be necessary; rather, their evil inclination will have ceased entirely.

So too it is written in Ezekiel, “And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you...and I will cause you to follow my laws” (Ezek. 36:26–27). The new heart refers to human nature and the spirit to desire and will. This too is what our Rabbis said, “‘And those years arrive of which you will say, I have no desire in them’ (Eccles. 12:1). This refers to the messianic age, when there is neither merit nor fault” (*Bav. Shabbat* 151b). In the period of the Messiah, then, human beings will have no desire but will behave properly by nature; consequently, those are years when there is neither merit nor fault, for merit and fault are linked to desire.

The expression, “This is the case throughout the age of the Torah” demonstrates decisively that Nahmanides was writing with our passage in mind and that he understood it as a declaration that the messianic age marks a significant break with the age of Torah. While he did not envision a change in the content of the law or in its binding force, he did not see the messianic character of the final age as the mere addition of an eschatological ingredient to an otherwise unchanging era of Torah. The end of meaningful choice is the end of the age of Torah as we know it.

This exegesis of the Talmudic schema is so disturbing to Jewish ears that I suspect an inclination to elide the discordant phrase and miss the reference. Those who did see the point made every effort to soften or eliminate it. One medieval Rabbi who often copied passages from Nahmanides' commentary was so clearly shaken by the formula that he emended it out of existence. In R. Menahem Ziyuni's commentary we read, "And this is the case in the period of exile and bondage." The remainder of Nahmanides' presentation remains intact, but the contrast between "age of Torah" and "messianic age" has disappeared.<sup>12</sup>

In a direct commentary on the rabbinic passage, a student of Nahmanides incorporated enough elements of his teacher's remarks on Deuteronomy 30:6 to demonstrate that he made the connection, but the sharpness of the original point is blunted and significantly transformed. R. David Bonafed's novellae on *Sanhedrin* 97a read as follows:

"Two thousand desolation, two thousand the messianic age." That is, the world is divided into thirds in the following manner: A third of the

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<sup>12</sup> *Sefer Ziyuni: Perush 'al ha-Torah 'al Derekh ha-Emet* (Lemberg, 1882, reprint, Jerusalem, 1964), p. 78b. C. Chavel cites Ziyuni's version as a variant reading in his *Perush ha-Ramban 'al ha-Torah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 480.

The fact that Nahmanides formulated his discussion within a framework established by the rabbinic passage may help explain his imprecise assertion that man had the choice of becoming righteous or wicked "from the time of creation" when this choice really began—as we are told a few lines later—only after the sin. Because he was thinking of a triad of millennia beginning from creation, he described free will in broad strokes as a characteristic of the first two ages even though it really began after an infinitesimal percentage of the first age had already passed. The imprecision was pointed out by Bezalel Safran, "Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 87 and 93, n. 68, but I am unpersuaded by his proposed resolution.

Nahmanides' allusion to his commentary to *Bereshit* refers to his remarks on Genesis 2:9. For some of the problems inherent in his position, including the question of how Adam could have sinned in the absence of a capacity to choose evil, see Safran, pp. 86–88. Nahmanides alludes to his position again in a brief comment in *Sefer ha-Ge'ullah*; see *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. by C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 1, p. 280.

Some contemporary supercommentaries on Nahmanides recognize the allusion to our rabbinic passage. See Yaakov Koppel Schwartz, *Sefer Yeveq Ephraim: Reshimot shel He'arot u-Be'urim be-Perushei Ramban 'al ha-Torah* (Brooklyn, NY, 1995), p. 167, where the author takes pains to assert that "it is not that in the Messianic age there is no Torah, God forbid." Yehudah Meir Devir, *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah im Be'ur Beit ha-Yayin* (Jerusalem, 2000/2001), vol. 5, p. 278, notes our passage in a context that may be limited to its use of the phrase "the days of the Messiah." In his comment on Nahmanides' reference to the absence of the evil inclination, Devir insists that "it is clear that even then choice will exist." Indeed, he writes, sinners during the messianic age will be punished all the more severely because of the absence of the inclination to do evil.

history of the world was in desolation, when there was no merit, and God sustained his creation through his own glory and lovingkindness. . . . The next third was sustained through the merit of the Torah, for the world was governed by the curse imposed on Adam except that it survived because of the merit of the Torah. And a third of history is prepared for the messianic age, when the world will be cured of the sin of Adam and will then be in a state of completion as it was at the initial creation so that it will no longer survive through the merit of the Torah.<sup>13</sup>

The references to merit and to restoration to a state before Adam's sin establish Bonafed's dependence on Nahmanides, but the point is no longer that free choice will end and that people will be without merit or fault. Rather, the effects of Adam's sin will be removed and the world will survive for the simple reason that survival is implicit in its pristine nature; it will not need to rely on the merit of the Torah or an infusion of special divine grace. One copyist was still sufficiently disturbed to feel impelled to add the word "alone" to the end of the final sentence, thus making clear that the merit of the Torah will still exist and even play some role in ensuring the survival of the cosmos. I do not believe that this was what Bonafed wrote, but even without the additional word, the passage says only that the world will not depend on the merit of the Torah. There is not even a hint of Nahmanides' assertion that individual merit or fault will end in an age in which human nature will be so transformed that the moral implications of observing the Torah will lose their current force.

If a Talmudic commentator addressing our passage felt the need to avoid Nahmanides' contrast between the age of Torah and the messianic age, the rejection of such a contrast was, as we have already seen, all the more crucial for polemicists. It is consequently no accident that not the slightest echo of Nahmanides' commentary to Deuteronomy appears in any polemical discussion of the school of Elijah's tripartite division of history. Yet the dynamics of religious debate are so delicately poised that a slight change in context can render the unthinkable not merely possible but positively desirable.

The "new covenant" passage from Jeremiah cited by Nahmanides was the central biblical proof-text for the Christian contention that the Torah would be replaced in the messianic age. The debate about that

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<sup>13</sup> *Hiddushei Rabbenu David Bonfil*, in *Sanhedrei Gedolah le-Massekhet Sanhedrin* I, ed. Ya'akov ha-Levi Lipshitz (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 90.



verse, however, contained a subtle but crucial change of emphasis. In the discussion of the rabbinic passage, the question was, "Does the messianic age stand in significant contrast to the age of Torah?" To this question, Jewish polemicists had to respond with an unequivocal "no." Even the assertion that the school of Elijah meant to establish such a contrast in the limited sense that the same Torah would be observed by radically transformed people risked the appearance of concession on the key point. In the debate about Jeremiah's prophecy, however, the questions were, "What is this new covenant that will be inscribed in the hearts of the people? Does it differ in content from the old one?" In this context, the issue was framed in a manner that granted Jews victory the moment they could establish that the Torah itself would not change. Indeed, the very point of the Jewish response had to be that the same Torah would be observed by people with newly receptive hearts. It is, then, precisely the transformation of human nature that converts a covenant whose content does not change into a new one. A position that could be asserted cautiously or not at all with respect to the school of Elijah could now be shouted from the rooftops.

One polemicist, in fact, made the point in the very words of Nahmanides' commentary to Deuteronomy 30:6. Needless to say, he did not reproduce the allusion to the "age of Torah" since in this slightly modified context, the whole point appears to be that the messianic age remains an age of Torah in the fullest sense. Otherwise, although there is no explicit citation, Simon ben Zemah Duran's discussion of Jeremiah 31 is an unabashed and uncompromising repetition of Nahmanides' assertions.

After affirming that the new covenant is a renewal of the old one, Duran writes,

For the Lord, may He be blessed, promised them that when he effects their return at the time of the true redemption, they will not be stiff-necked but will believe in the Lord and in His righteous Messiah. It is written in the Torah, "Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world..., the Lord your God will circumcise etc." (Deut. 30:4-6). All this demonstrates that when the true redeemer arrives, they will not be stiff-necked but will heed his words. God made this promise when he said, "The Lord your God will circumcise," for circumcision means that they will do good by nature and the evil inclination will not rule them just as it did not rule Adam before his sin. This too is what the Rabbis said, "'Days in which there is no desire' (Eccles. 12:1); this refers to the messianic age, when there is neither merit nor fault" (*Bav. Shabbat* 151b). What this means is that the observance of the commandments

at that time will happen by nature. Thus, there will be no merit because their nature will lead them to proper behavior, and there will be no fault because they will do no evil. Similarly, Ezekiel said, “And I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26).<sup>14</sup>

Even with respect to Jeremiah 31, not every Jew, polemicist or otherwise, was willing to embrace the radical implications of Nahmanides’ position. Shem Tov ibn Shaprut, in his polemic *Even Bohan*, made the usual observation about how the same law would find a more receptive audience in the messianic age and went on to cite the verse in Deuteronomy on the circumcision of the heart. He felt the immediate need, however, to add the following caveat:

This does not mean that God will compel us to observe the Torah in a miraculous fashion, for the Rabbis have taught us, “All is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven” (*Bav. Berakhot* 33b). Moreover, this would mean the abolition of reward and punishment as well as the nature of the contingent. The meaning is rather that God will remove all external impediments and bring them a teacher of righteousness who proclaims the truth.<sup>15</sup>

The one medieval author that I know who undertook the polemical risk of explicitly connecting the biblical passages about a new heart with the statement of the school of Elijah also stopped well short of endorsing the Nahmanides’ position in its fullness. R. Isaac Arama criticized the ineffectual Jewish response to the Christian citation of this passage at the Tortosa disputation and went on to propose his own explanation. What the Rabbis meant, he argued, was that just as two thousand years had sufficed to prepare the world—or at least the descendants of Abraham—to receive the Torah, so two thousand

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<sup>14</sup> Prosper Murciano, *Simon ben Zemah Duran, Keshet U-magen: A Critical Edition*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1975 (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1983), Hebrew section, pp. 49–50 (my translation). Murciano, whose translation appears on pp. 49a–50 of the dissertation, was unaware of Duran’s source.

In his refutation of the Christian reading of Jeremiah 31, Abravanel too was willing to speak of a miraculous change in human nature (“ha-shefa’ ha-hu me-ahavat ha-Torah...maggia’ aleihem be-derekh nissiyi”); see *Yeshu’ot Meshiho*, p. 68b. See also Yair b. Shabbetai da Corregio, *Herev Pifiyyot*, ed. Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1958) pp. 29, 46.

<sup>15</sup> *Even Bohan*, section 7 (Jeremiah), chapter 6, unpublished critical edition by Libby Garshowitz, p. 273. I am grateful to Prof. Garshowitz for making this edition available to me.

years of Torah should suffice to prepare us for the great overflow of divine knowledge that will mark the final age. Although he characterized this age as one in which the evil inclination would cease and the prophecies of a new, circumcised heart would be fulfilled, he did not explicitly speak of the end of choice, let alone of an age without merit or guilt. From the perspective of our discussion, there is no doubt that Arama proposed a relatively daring interpretation, but it remains far more moderate than Nahmanides' bold assertions in his commentary to Deuteronomy.<sup>16</sup>

The contention that the messianic age reverts to conditions before the first sin and that this change has implications for the Torah does appear in kabbalistic texts. In the *Ra'aya Mehemna*, the messianic era is apparently governed by the Tree of Life rather than the Tree of Knowledge, and the Torah of Exile is transformed into the Torah of Redemption. Isaiah Tishby has challenged this understanding of the text and argued that some kabbalists live under the Tree of Life even in pre-messianic times while inferior people continue to be governed by the Tree of Knowledge even after the Redemption. Nevertheless, even this reading does not entirely eliminate the element of change, and the radicalism of the position, needless to say, is in no way diminished.<sup>17</sup>

To Nahmanides, then, the messianic age will be a world with no merit and no guilt. This position, along with the kabbalistic eschatology of the *Ra'aya Mehemna* and even some polemical and exegetical approaches to Jeremiah's new covenant, afforded an opening for a Jewish understanding of the school of Elijah's prophecy that would have acknowledged a transformation of the meaning of Torah in the

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<sup>16</sup> See Isaac Arama, *Sefer 'Aqedat Yitzhak* (Pressburg, 1849), ch. 28, pp. 217b–219b. See too ch. 7, p. 58b, on the centrality of man's choice—cited in Safran, pp. 86–87). Da Modena adopts the Nahmanidean understanding of the circumcision of the heart as the elimination of choice, but he applies it in a temporary and limited context. If the Jews stubbornly refuse to accept the Messiah, God will make sure that they do. See *Magen va-Herev*, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp. 22–24; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (New York, 1989), vol. 3, p. 1108. The issue of the status of the commandments in the messianic age and/or world to come deserves far more extended treatment, and I hope to turn to some of its implications in another study. A glance at *Hiddushei ha-Ritva: Massekhet Niddah*, ed. David Metzger (Jerusalem, c. 1978), cc. 390–92, cited among other sources in Norman Roth's important but sometimes problematic article, "Forgery and Abrogation of the Torah: A Theme in Muslim and Christian Polemic in Spain," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987): 234, will provide some indication of how interesting such discussions can become.

messianic age; the dynamics of the debate, however, precluded such a Jewish interpretation in direct discussion of this passage. The Torah is eternal. Period. Nonetheless, despite the centrality of this affirmation for Jewish polemicists, even a full concession to the Christian position on the messianic annulment of the Torah would not have led medieval Jews to abandon their faith unless the third age could be shown to have begun. We turn, then, to the second critical question.

## II

Has the messianic age already begun? Here again the medieval Jewish answer appears self-evident: "Of course not." Yet here again we shall see that although Jews in fact proffered this response in exchanges with Christians, it was not quite as uncomplicated as it might seem.

Before presenting their own interpretation of the rabbinic assertion that the final two thousand years are the messianic age, some Jews attempted to abort the question by arguing that their opponents can take no real comfort from the apparently straightforward Christian interpretation of the passage since Jesus was born well before the end of the fourth millennium. Structurally, this is reminiscent of Nahmanides' argument that Christians cannot make effective use of the midrash that the Messiah was born on the day the Second Temple was destroyed because Jesus' birth came later.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Jews routinely maintained that whatever the meaning of the verse, "The rod shall not pass from Judah... until Shiloh comes" (Genesis 49:10), it cannot help Christians in their assertion that the absence of Jewish rule proves that the Messiah must already have come; after all, Jesus was born well after the rod had passed from Judah with the destruction of the First Temple.<sup>19</sup>

Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas dismissed the Christian argument regarding the final two millennia by calculating that Jesus appeared on the scene 2,221 years before 6,000 A.M.<sup>20</sup> At Tortosa, Geronimo

<sup>18</sup> *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 1, p. 306.

<sup>19</sup> See my discussion in *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, pp. 249–250.

<sup>20</sup> Yehudah Shamir, *Rabbi Moses Ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and his Book 'Ezer Ha-Eemunah*, Part II (Coconut Grove, Florida, 1972), p. 133.

de Santa Fe refuted a Jewish assertion that Jesus appeared 212 years too early by arguing that given the absence of a Messiah during the more than 1,100 years that had passed since the end of the fourth millennium, it is perfectly clear that a reasonable approximation is sufficient to satisfy the words of Elijah.<sup>21</sup> In the seventeenth century, Leone da Modena underscored the centrality of our passage by maintaining that Christians rely upon it for “everything they say” about the time of the messianic advent; nevertheless, he says, they must concede that “the two thousand years of the messianic age did not begin after the [first] four millennia, since in the time of Jesus [only] 3,800 years had elapsed.”<sup>22</sup>

Needless to say, Jews could not be fully content with this negative argument; they needed to supplement it with their own understanding of the messianic nature of Elijah’s third era. At first glance, this posed no serious problem. The statement, after all, explicitly asserts that “because of our many sins, some of [those final two thousand years] have already passed.” Thus, Elijah was speaking of the period in which the Messiah could potentially appear, but there is no guarantee as to the precise time of his advent.

This interpretation, however, was by no means as compelling as it seems. In his candid presentation of the Christian argument, Abrahanel noted the difficulty of assuming that the final phrase was an original part of the school of Elijah’s statement. The literary setting of the Talmudic passage is tannaitic, and by definition, a tannaitic statement must have been composed before the end of the fourth millennium. Hence, the reference to the passage of time beyond the year four thousand must be a gloss inserted by later rabbis attempting to

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<sup>21</sup> *La Disputa de Tortosa*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Magen va-Herev*, p. 69. The translation is based on my emendation of what seems to be a clearly corrupt text. In Simonsohn’s text, the second part of the sentence reads, “Since in the time of Jesus, 4,800 years had already elapsed; thus the Messiah should have come 800 years earlier (*she-kevar bi-zeman Yeshu hayu dalet alafim tav tav shanah, u-lefi zeh hayah lavo mashiah tav tav shanah qodem*). The number 4,800 is an obvious error for 3,800. The final phrase (“thus the Messiah etc.”), which is missing from one group of manuscripts, appears only in the single manuscript that Simonsohn used as the basis for his edition and is clearly an elaboration of the erroneous number. I read simply *she-harei* (or just *she-*) *bi-zeman Yeshu hayu gimel alafim tav tav shanah*. Although some Christian chronologies may have dated Jesus well after 4,000 A.M. (see n. 25 below), it is hard to imagine that da Modena would have alluded in so matter-of-fact a manner to a date that contradicts Jewish chronology.

account for a prophecy that had apparently gone unfulfilled.<sup>23</sup> From the Christian perspective, then, the date of the original statement unmasked a desperate Jewish effort to escape the Christological implications of Elijah's prophecy.

Consequently, despite the fact that Jews rarely conceded that the qualification about sins was a later gloss, they did make some effort to show that the full two thousand year period is in some sense a messianic age even though the Messiah has not actually come. In the Christian account of the Tortosa disputation, Rabbi Astruc is alleged to have proposed an original, highly problematic interpretation. The two thousand years of desolation (*vanitas*), he said, represent a period in which people debated the issue of *vanitas*, i.e., "Was the world created or not? Was it eternal or not?" Similarly, the ages of Torah and the Messiah are eras in which those subjects will be matters of contentious, lively discussion.<sup>24</sup>

In response, Geronimo de Santa Fe pointed out that the major disputes about creation took place in the second era, not the first, and that it was during that period as well that the prophets initiated considerable discussion of the Messiah. He then proceeded with a particularly ironic argument: If this is indeed the meaning of the two millennia of the messianic age, how can we account for the remark that our sins have delayed the effective implementation of the final era? The usual Christian assertion that this remark is a gloss was entirely forgotten for the purpose of the response; nonetheless, the point was telling. The more effectively a Jew pursued an alternative explanation of "messianic age," the more hard-pressed he would be to explain the very line of Elijah's statement that was usually invoked to defend the Jewish position.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, p. 18a. In Solomon ibn Verga's report of the Tortosa disputation, he quotes Geronimo de Santa Fe's argument that Elijah and his disciples lived well before the Jewish exile and could surely not have composed this closing remark. See ibn Verga, *Shevet Yehudah*, ed. Azriel Shohet (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> *La Disputa de Tortosa*, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> In Hayyim ibn Musa's *Magen va-Romah*, we find a highly idiosyncratic interpretation that the author explicitly proposes just for the sake of argument. In reality, he says, this statement is not by a student of Elijah but dates from the tannaitic period. Nevertheless, if we accept the Christian dating (and, one might add, ignore the Talmud's own assertion in *Avodah Zarah* 9a that the age of Torah begins with Abraham), the passage could well mean the following: From this point on (i.e., from the time of Elijah), the world will experience three periods of two millennia each. The

Abravanel himself confronted the issue with vigor and ingenuity. The qualification about sin, he said, is assuredly part of the original tannaitic statement. A similar statement attributed to Elijah on the same page of tractate *Sanhedrin* asserts that the world will endure for eighty-five jubilees. Immediately following we find the qualification, "R. Ashi said, . . . 'Until then do not expect him; from that point on you may expect him'," which proves that the Talmud is scrupulous about identifying and even attributing such addenda.

What the qualification means in our case is that the sins that caused the destruction of the second Temple determined that the same sort of delay which affected the beginning of the first two ages would also affect the last. The first era did not become one of desolation until the generation of Enosh began to worship idolatry well over two hundred years after creation, and the second era did not really become one of Torah until the revelation at Sinai well over two hundred years after the year 2,000. Similarly, the messianic potential of the last age will not begin until a similar period of time will have passed after the year 4,000, and Abravanel cleverly coordinates this assertion with several other messianic dates in the Talmud.<sup>26</sup> In a final flourish, he reinterprets the very wording of the crucial phrase. The sentence that I translated, "Because of our many sins, some of [those final two thousand years] have already passed" literally says, "Because of our many sins, there have passed from them what passed." To Abravanel, the deeper meaning of the statement is that it is now determined that the same period that passed in each of the previous ages before its essential character became effective will also pass in the final age. ("There

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first is characterized as desolation because idolatry will persist even though the Torah will also be present. This period will give way around the time of ibn Musa to an age of Torah only, an assertion that he supports by pointing to contemporary religious innovation and ferment in Bohemia and elsewhere. He appears to understand the messianic age to be precisely the same as this incipient age of Torah. If this is his intention, then the phrase "six thousand years" really represents four thousand, an implication that moves an already peculiar reading to the threshold of the absurd. See *Magen va-Romah*, pp. 95–97.

In another argument based on a Christian assumption that he does not share, ibn Musa (p. 93) points to Christian chronographers who place the date of Jesus' birth well after the year 5,000 A.M., thus rendering his advent manifestly irrelevant to the prophecy of the school of Elijah.

<sup>26</sup> On these messianic dates, see my discussion in "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah ben Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus," *AJS Review* 10 (1985): 149–155.

have passed [or will have passed] from the final era what passed from the first two.”) This is no guarantee that the Messiah will come at that point, but the potential will then begin.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this *tour de force*, Abravanel was (understandably) not content, and he too made an effort to explain the last two millennia in a way that renders them a messianic age from the very beginning. His proposal reverses the Christian understanding of the passage in the most pointed fashion of all—by embracing it. Indeed, he said, the final age is called messianic from the outset precisely because it begins with the spread of Christianity. It was God’s plan to prepare the way for the true redeemer by utilizing false messiahs to initiate widespread discussion of the Messiah’s advent and of the era that he will inaugurate. If people’s minds were not attuned to this subject, the Messiah would have to overcome extraordinary obstacles in order to validate and publicize his nature and mission. Indeed, Maimonides has already taught us that illusory messiahs like Jesus and Muhammad were brought into the world for the purpose of paving the way for the real messianic king.

Christianity, then, is one of the false messianic movements that define the initial stages of the final age. Abravanel attempted to avoid the problem of approximation which Jewish polemicists had invoked against the original Christian interpretation by implying that it was not Jesus’ birth but the spread of Christianity that inaugurated this rather special “messianic” era. “At the beginning of these last two millennia, there arose the disciples of Jesus who raised his banner and publicized the assertion that he was the Messiah promised by the prophets so that their belief spread throughout most of the world at that time.” One wonders whether Abravanel realized that this very attractive suggestion could be borrowed by Christians without any change as a response to the most effective Jewish argument against their position. In any event, Abravanel did not insist on a rigorous dating of this era since he listed Bar Kokhba, who appeared “close to that time . . . at the end of the fourth millennium,” as the first relevant figure, to be followed by Jesus, Muhammad, and medieval Jewish messianic pretenders.

This proposal has the disadvantage of rendering useless Abravanel’s ingenious explanation of the qualification about the delaying effect of

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<sup>27</sup> *Yeshu’ot Meshiho*, pp. 19b–20a.



sin. Consequently, he suggested another re-reading of that sentence. This one, however, while undoubtedly clever, could not fail to strike even the medieval reader as forced. Abravanel now translates the phrase “there have passed from them what passed” (*yaze’u me-hem mah she-yaze’u*) in even more literal fashion: “there have come out from them what came out.” Because of our sins, says the school of Elijah, various persecutions have emerged (or will emerge) from this era.<sup>28</sup>

The utilization of Maimonides’ naturalistic perception of the messianic process may well be the most interesting aspect of Abravanel’s second interpretation of the final two millennia. In his discussion of the role of Christianity and Islam, Maimonides himself drew upon a consistent, naturalistic position that he formulated throughout his *oeuvre* and applied to every stage of the messianic era.<sup>29</sup> In this case, God cannot be expected to engender a spiritual earthquake in the mind and soul of non-Jews so that they should recognize the Messiah with no preparation. As we have seen, however, Abravanel was prepared in a related context to speak of the miraculous eschatological elimination of the evil inclination, so that the need for naturalistic preparation appears much less compelling.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Nahmanides endorsed the Maimonidean understanding of the preparatory function of Christianity and Islam despite his own affirmation of a fundamental change in human nature at the end of days.<sup>31</sup> Since Nahmanides associated the circumcision of the heart with the rabbinic principle that “he who comes to be purified will be assisted,” he may have regarded the miraculous transformation of Gentiles as improbable. To a very limited extent, we might even regard the invoking of this principle as injecting an element of naturalism into the process. In the final analysis, however, the embrace by both Nahmanides and Abravanel of Maimonides’ strongly naturalistic doctrine regarding the preparatory function of Christianity is striking in

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<sup>28</sup> Abravanel’s various approaches to this passage appear in *Yeshu’ot Meshiho*, pp. 19a–20b.

<sup>29</sup> See Amos Funkenstein, *Teva’*, *Historiyyah u-Meshihiyyot ezel ha-Rambam* (Tel Aviv, 1983). Cf. my discussion in “‘Al Toze’oteha ha-Ironiyyot shel Gishato ha-Razionalistit shel ha-Rambam la-Tequfah he-Meshihit,” *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 1–8 (Hebrew section); English translation: “Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides’ Rationalistic Messianism,” in *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason, and Community*, ed. Yamin Levy and Shalom Carmy (New York, 2006), pp. 79–88.

<sup>30</sup> See above, n. 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Torat Hashem Temimah, Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 1, p. 144.

light of their general adherence to a far more supernaturalistic messianic vision than that of Maimonides.

Elsewhere in *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Abravanel makes further allusion to naturalistic preparation for the end of days. In addressing the Talmudic assertion that immediately before the coming of the Messiah “the kingdom will be transformed into heresy” (*Bav. Sanhedrin* 97a), he points to the burning of many heretics at the stake and goes on to maintain that “all the priests and bishops of Rome at this time pursue lucre and take bribes while caring nothing for their faith, because they have been afflicted by heresy.” The last remark is interesting in its own right as the reaction of a hostile outsider to clerical behavior in the pre-Reformation Church at precisely the time of Luther’s well-known visit to Rome. For our purposes, however, it is Abravanel’s theological explanation of the phenomenon that matters. The divine purpose, he says, in bringing about the erosion of traditional faith is that the absence of such belief makes a person more receptive to the truth, which no longer has to compete with contradictory doctrines. The perception of heresy as non-belief is significant in itself and may have been suggested by Abravanel’s impression of contemporary Churchmen. Whether or not this is the case, the argument once again presumes a process through which people’s hearts and minds are gradually prepared to accept the Messiah and his message.<sup>32</sup>

And so—has the messianic age already begun? Of course not. And yet....

\* \* \* \*

It is hard to imagine that even the prophetic powers of the school of Elijah could have envisioned the dimensions of the debate that would swirl around our brief passage. Leone da Modena cannot be faulted for his hyperbolic remark that Christians rely on it for “everything they say” about the onset of the messianic age. The Jewish response ranged across a remarkably wide spectrum and encapsulated some of the central issues of late medieval polemic from a tactical as well as

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<sup>32</sup> *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, pp. 34a–b. Note too Abravanel’s argument that Rabbinic statements about extreme poverty and other forms of privation in the period immediately preceding the Messiah reflect the fact that the redemption follows “the natural order ([*ha*]-*havayah ha-tiv'it*), which proceeds through the alternation of opposites.” Thus, for example, the redemption is “necessarily” preceded by a great famine (*Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, pp. 33b–34a).

a substantive perspective: the subtle dynamic that allows a polemicist to say something in one context but not in another; the rejection of the binding character of *aggadah*; the deflection of an argument by maintaining that whatever a problematic passage may mean, it cannot refer to Jesus; the perception of Christianity as a preparation for the Messiah; naturalistic and supernaturalistic messianism; and the fundamental question of Torah in the messianic age.

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