

Intelligentia Spiritualis: Platonism, the Latin Polemical Tradition, and the Renaissance Approach
to the Prophetic Sense of History

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This study sheds light on key figures and trends in the medieval Latin West that influenced the intellectual lives of the humanist theologians Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), specifically regarding their respective visions of world history, which they understood primarily through the lens of biblical prophecy and the Greco-Roman classics. It highlights continuities over changes from the medieval to the Renaissance period so as to demonstrate how a longstanding culture of interreligious theological and philosophical disputation between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, particularly among converts, served as a vehicle for the exchange (and appropriation) of knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Among the exchanged and appropriated ideas were not only insights into the history of the world – its beginning, middle, and end – but also deeply intertwined mystical concepts, some of Late Antique Pythagorean and Platonic provenance, and some derived from more recent innovation, such as those derived from medieval Jewish Kabbalah, especially regarding the correct understanding of divine names (what is herein called ‘esoteric philology’). During the Renaissance, humanist theologians reinterpreted, recombined, and redeployed these concepts in various ways to serve their own particular pro-Christian polemical ends. This study, therefore, focuses on the rise, development, and embattlement of a distinctly Latin anti-Jewish polemical tradition, and attempts to demonstrate how the pro-spiritual and anti-carnal attitudes present in Ficino and Pico’s theological works cannot be fully understood without locating them within the wider context of this longstanding culture of interreligious disputation.

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Introduction:

“Nothing spiritual, descending below, operates without a garment.”
- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Conclusio* 28.35¹

This is a study about the influences that the joint reception of Late Antique Greek philosophy and a distinctly medieval Christian prophetic or apocalyptic approach to world history had on the intellectual development of humanist philosophers in *quattrocento* Italy. Above all, it aims to locate Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), specifically their combined humanist and prophetic senses of historical awareness, within the wider context of the various religious and philosophical trends that informed their times.² In particular, it puts an emphasis on their relationship to what is here called “the Latin polemical tradition.”³ Ficino, Pico, and other men from their intellectual circles clung to the belief that – to use the Platonically-inspired poetry of William Blake’s *Proverbs of Hell* (1790) – “Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ’d.”⁴ While there were many great and subtle differences between these two thinkers, they both wrote at length about how there existed a

¹ For a complete edition of Pico’s 900 *Conclusiones* in Latin and English translation, see Stephen A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 359. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of primary source materials in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew in this dissertation are those of the translators and editors noted in accompanying footnotes. See n. 6 and n. 580.

² Note that when I use the term ‘prophecy’ it is meant chiefly in accordance with that definition used by a long tradition of medieval Islamic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers (including Ficino and Pico). In keeping with Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, prophecy was considered a natural phenomenon deriving from the structure of both the cosmos and the human mind within it. Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) aptly expressed this view in section 2.36 of his *Guide*: “Prophecy is, in truth and reality, an emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man’s rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty; it is the highest degree and greatest perfection man can attain.” From Michael Friedländer, trans., *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1904), 225; cf. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1963), 1:369 for a more recent translation.

³ For an overview of the various themes which constituted this tradition from the time of the ante-Nicene fathers, see A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos: A Bird’s-Eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1935]) and Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa, *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996). See Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) for details on the role of polemics and apologetics in the construction of “Western Esotericism,” especially the chapter by von Stuckrad, “Christian Kabbalah and Anti-Jewish Polemics: Pico In Context,” 1-23. See also Guido Bartolucci, “Marsilio Ficino e le origini della Cabala Cristiana” in *Pico e la Cabalà*, ed. F. Lelli (Florence: Olschki, 2014), 47-67 and *Vera Religio: Marsilio Ficino e la tradizione Ebraica* (Turin: Paideia, 2017) for the first works to explore in detail the formative role of medieval polemical writings had on Ficino’s *De Christiana religione*. Though some may object to “the Latin polemical tradition” as an anachronistic misnomer because the word ‘polemic’ did not appear in the Middle Ages, what we have instead are ‘*Apologia*,’ ‘*Disputationes*,’ ‘*Refutationes*,’ ‘*Summa contra X*,’ ‘*Adversus X*’ etc., and it would be difficult to describe texts that bear these kinds of titles as anything but ‘polemical.’ By taking a stand on a given issue, theological or otherwise, theologians necessarily elevated one position at the exclusion of others, and then passed that knowledge on to later authors who further built upon it. In this sense, “the Latin polemical tradition” strikes me as a perfectly functional term in describing the currents that flow through this dissertation, ultimately culminating in Pico’s Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah. For more on the Jewish reaction to the *Contra Iudaeos* genre, see Israel Yuval and Ram Ben-Shalom, *Conflict and Religious Conversation in Latin Christendom* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

⁴ *William Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. Michael Phillips (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2011), 69 (Plate 10).

single, perfect, and irrefutable form of theology that was long ago revealed to prophets and philosophers through the *Logos*, the transcend Word of God made immanent, and that in their own day this logocentric theology urgently needed to be recovered as a means of bringing about religio-philosophical peace and unity for all.⁵ They believed that both the Hebrew prophets *and* the ancient philosophers from among the pagan nations both had some awareness of the Christian God in the form of this *Logos*, and argued that by carefully meditating upon their texts and applying a ‘spiritual understanding’ (*intellectus/intelligentia spiritualis/spiritalis*) one could find nothing but confirmation for all the most important doctrines of the Catholic Church (especially the doctrine of the Trinity and the immortality of the soul).⁶ An interesting facet of

⁵ It should be noted from the outset that in the last period of his brief life, Pico came to reject the concept of the *prisca theologia* in his *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, but only after having significantly widened and transformed the scope of that theory for later thinkers like Johannes Reuchlin and Francesco Giorgi through his knowledge of kabbalistic sources. See Ovanes Akopyan, “‘*Me quoque adolescentem olim fallebat*’: Giovanni (or Gianfrancesco?) Pico della Mirandola versus *prisca theologia*” *Accademia* 18 (2016): 77-81. Pico ultimately settled on the idea that all true doctrine stemmed from Moses via revelation on Mount Sinai and this wisdom tradition was only later passed down to the pagan sages in some limited capacity, not ‘naturally’ shared among all the nations in the way Ficino maintained it had been in *De Christiana religione*.

⁶ The *intellectus/intelligentia spiritualis* (that is, the angelic intelligence or understanding Pico treats throughout the *Heptaplus*) was, in accordance with the teachings of Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas, thought to be superior to human intellect insofar as it comprehends intelligibles with far fewer forms. On one hand, Pico maintained that “forms (*species*) are united to the angelic mind with an indivisible bond,” on the other, he maintained that the human intellect is “vague and ordinary” and required far more forms to comprehend the truth about anything, hence the importance of *allegory* in the analogical process of turning back toward God. See Crofton Black, *Pico’s Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 38 and 169-170. Note that in Roy J. Deferrari and M. Inviolata Barry, eds., *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948-9) the word *intellectus* is given with ten definitions, the first five of which are as follows: “(1) an immaterial intelligent substance, the νοῦς or the λογιστικόν of Aristotle, synonym of *substantia*, *separata*, *angelus*, *intelligentia*, and *ratio*, the opposite of *corpus*, (2) *reason*, *intellect* in the sense of a faculty, i.e., of a faculty of perception, but both of an organic or sentient and an inorganic or transcendental faculty of perception, synonym of *sensus*, rarely used by St. Thomas in this sense, (3) *reason*, *intellect* in the sense of an immaterial, inorganic faculty of knowledge, synonym of *ratio*, the opposite of *sensus*, (4) *activity of the reason*, *intellectual knowledge*, likewise a synonym of *intelligentia* and *ratio*, (5) *intuition*, *intellect* in the sense of a transcendental intuitive faculty of knowledge or of a spiritual faculty of contemplation, which arrives at truth non-discursively, directly, and immediately...” For an example of Pico’s use of this term, see the *Oratio* in *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, trans. Charles G. Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1965), 6: “Indeed, it is not the bark which makes the plant, but dull and non-sentient nature; not the hide which makes a horse or other beast of burden, but a brutal and sensual soul; not the circular body which makes heaven, but right reason; not the separation from the body which makes the angel, but the *spiritual intelligence*... If you see a philosopher discerning things with right reason, give him reverence; he is a heavenly not an earthly animal.” “Neque enim plantam cortex, sed stupida et nihil sentiens natura; neque iumenta corium, sed bruta anima et sensualis; nec caelum orbiculatum corpus, sed recta ratio; nec sequestratio corporis, sed *spiritalis intelligentia* angelum facit... Si purum contemplatorem corporis nescium, in penetralia mentis relegatum, hic non terrenum, non caeleste animal: hic augustius est numen humana carne circumvestitum.” All Latin for Pico aside from the *Conclusiones* is derived from *Opera omnia Ioannis Pici Mirandulae* (Basel: Henricpetrina, 1572), here 315. For Ficino’s use of the spiritual understanding, see Guido Bartolucci, ed., *De Christiana religione* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2019), 291: “...God promises that someday He will set up a new agreement and testament, and that He will hand down a new law, different from the one which He had given to Moses after He had delivered the Jews from Egypt, and that He will no longer write it on tablets, but in the minds of men, as if to say that first one could be destroyed, not the second, and the ancient ceremonies ought to be maintained according to the spiritual understanding (*spiritalis intelligentia*) once the New Testament is introduced.” “...promittit Deus aliquando se novum pactum Testamentumque dispositurum, novam traditurum legem differentem ab illa quam dederat Moysi,

both Ficino and Pico's pro-Christian polemical works is that they essentially double as roadmaps for the history of religion and philosophy as they saw it.⁷ In their own unique ways, these humanist theologians used the works of both ancient and medieval philosophers to structure (mostly) chronologically coherent sequences of arguments to craft a picture of history that they believed might serve to counter non-Christian narratives and beliefs – those of misguided philosophers, and of Jews in particular – in defence of the one true universal religion, Roman Catholicism.⁸ To these men, the coming of the Jews into the Church was inevitable; it would come after Christ's return, and would mark the culminating moment of history as he himself had prophesied.⁹ How this event would play out on the stage of history, however, remained a mystery. Nevertheless, within Ficino and Pico's own lifetimes, with the great series of mass conversions and expulsions of Jews across Western Europe, such a process seemed to be already underway.

In assembling their own projects against fellow Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers and scriptural interpreters whom they perceived to be in error, I argue that Ficino and Pico were doing three significant things: i) they were applying their 'spiritual understanding' in an attempt to both refute heresy and help to immanentize the prophesied culminating moment of history when the distinction between *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* would be erased; ii) they believed the best way to accomplish this was by proverbially using their enemies' own weapons (i.e., texts, words, letters, and ideas) against them; and iii) they did this chiefly as a demonstration of their own *bona fides* to their fellow co-religionists. I maintain that these three practices were not new or unique developments of Renaissance philosophy. Rather, these were well-attested practices carried out for centuries by the numerous monastic, mendicant, and converso authors who comprise what throughout this work I call "the Latin polemical tradition." What makes these practices significant here is precisely how they were carried forward, modified (or not), and redeployed by our humanist theologians to suit their own purposes. For Ficino and Pico, philosophical and religious debates in general and public disputations in particular were vital to the acquisition of wisdom. These were as integral to the scholastic as they were to the Platonic tradition, with its own roots stretching back to the fifth century BC marketplace debates

postquam Iudeos ab Egyptiis liberaverat, in scripturam eam non tabulis amplius, sed mentibus hominum, quasi prima illa deleri potuerit, non secunda, ac ceremonie veteres Novo Testamento introducto secundum spiritalem intelligentiam servari debuerint." Cf. n. 147 below. Note that all English translations of *De Christiana religione* in this dissertation are drawn from our forthcoming translation of Bartolucci's critical edition, Dan Attrell, David Porreca, and Brett Bartlett, *Marsilio Ficino: On the Christian Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

⁷ The terms "humanist theology" and "humanist theologians" were first devised by and explained in Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 10, 17-19.

⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 204-7 includes an extremely helpful chart for visualizing the backward historical motion of Pico's theses, progressing from the (1) Latins, (2) Arabs, (3) the Greek Peripatetics, the Platonists, and the Pythagoreans, (4) the Chaldeans (Zoroaster and commentators), (5) the Egyptians (Mercurius Trismegistus), and lastly, (6) the Hebrew Kabbalists (among whom Moses is upheld as the supreme originator of philosophy). The 500 theses following are "according to [Pico's] own opinion," and are similarly organized according to this chronology, concluding with "Cabalistic conclusions confirming the Christian religion: The Jews are converted 'with their own weapons' and mankind is prepared for its final eschatological reunion with Christ."

⁹ *Matthew* 8:11.

of the legendary Athenian gadfly, Socrates. In his 1486 *Oratio*, Pico made explicit that his passion for public debate burned primarily on account of its necessity in his quest for wisdom:

To those who misrepresent this custom of disputing in public, I shall have little to say, since this fault – if it is deemed a fault – is not only all of yours to share with me, most eminent doctors, who have often done this duty with great honor and praise, but also Plato’s and Aristotle’s along with all the most acclaimed philosophers of every age. To them it was absolutely certain that nothing made them more fit to gain the knowledge of truth they sought than constant practice at disputation. Just as the body’s strength becomes more vigorous through physical exercise, the strength of the mind undoubtedly grows livelier and hardier in this gymnasium of ideas. When poets keep singing about the arms of Pallas or when Hebrews say that ברזל שלהכמים, the iron of sages, is their symbol, I would have thought they were giving us a sign for contests just like this most honorable kind, which is absolutely necessary for acquiring wisdom.¹⁰

As can be gleaned from this, Pico’s own love of philosophical-theological polemic did not emerge from the Florentine love of the *Graeca veritas* alone, but from his joint love of the *Hebraica veritas* too. The primary aim of this work, therefore, is to explore some of the ways in which the humanist philosopher-theologians Pico and Ficino – on account of their interest in the *Hebraica veritas*, in particular the books of the prophets – tapped into a number of supercessionist themes inherited from medieval monastic, mendicant, and converso authors renowned for their anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic polemical works and scriptural commentaries. Although Ficino’s and Pico’s unique philosophies were consciously built up from various ancient Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic/‘Chaldean’, Egyptian, Persian, Syrian, and Arabic ideas, they were all ultimately brought together for the sake of bolstering the Catholic Church of the Latin West and defending the supremacy of its venerable doctrines and traditions. Neither Pico nor Ficino were so much interested in Jewish, Islamic, or pagan schools of thought on their own terms, but studied them insofar as they might appropriate certain aspects from them and then use them to spark a Christian renewal for the Catholic faith which they perceived as besieged on all sides by its opponents, theological or otherwise.¹¹

¹⁰ Pico, *Oratio* in Brian Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and his Oration in Modern Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2019), 471-472. Unless noted otherwise, all translations of Pico’s *Oratio* are taken from this translation, or its more recent version (with minor updates) as found in Brian Copenhaver, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola: Life of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oratio* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 79-139 which also provides the Latin, here 112: “Primum quidem ad eos qui hunc publice disputandi morem calumniantur, multa non sum dicturus, quando haec culpa – si culpa censetur – non solum vobis omnibus, doctores excellentissimi, qui saepius hoc munere non sine summa et laude et gloria functi estis, sed Platoni, sed Aristoteli, sed probatissimis omnium aetatum philosophis mecum est communis. Quibus erat certissimum nihil ad consequendam quam quaerebant veritatis cognitionem sibi esse potius quam ut essent in disputandi exercitatione frequentissimi. Sicut enim per gymnasticam corporis vires firmiores fiunt, ita dubio procul in hac quasi litteraria palaestra animi vires et fortiores longe et vegetiores evadunt. Nec crediderim ego aut poetas aliud per decantata Palladis arma, aut Hebreos cum ברזל שלהכמים, ferrum sapientum, symbolum esse dicunt, significasse nobis quam honestissima hoc genus certamina adipiscendae sapientiae oppido quam necessaria.”

¹¹ This thesis closely coincides with what Moshe Idel argued in the “Introduction” to *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah – De Arte Cabalistica*, trans. Martin Goodman and Sarah Goodman (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xxii within the context of a discussion on Reuchlin (who was a friend of both Ficino and Pico): “What is new in the Renaissance... is that in addition to the usage of Midrashic and Talmudic material in order to combat Judaism, as in the Middle Ages, some Renaissance Christian authors resorted also to kabbalistic

For the purposes of this project, special attention is given in later chapters to a selection of pertinent sources: Ficino's seldom read theological polemic *De Christiana religione* (1474),¹² and Pico's popular Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah in the *Oratio* (1486), the final 'kabbalistic' set of his *900 Conclusiones* (1486), and in particular the *Heptaplus* (1489), his Platonic sevenfold commentary on the six days of creation.¹³ Each of these early printed documents, composed in Latin during the late fifteenth century, were selected on account of their shared pro-Platonic, pro-Christian, and anti-Jewish polemical nature, in addition to the fact that their subject matter deals explicitly with history, whether it be the history of philosophical thought, the history of the world, or the history of salvation (all of which were inextricably intertwined to our humanist theologians). Methodologically speaking, I take an intertextual approach in an attempt to lay bare some of the chains of influence and patterns of polemical activity which extended from the philosophers and Church Fathers of Late Antiquity to the humanist theologians of the Renaissance, and all this to demonstrate that Ficino and Pico's polemical works are just as marked by a continuity with a longstanding medieval tradition (consisting of the appeal to the *intellectus spiritualis*, the reappropriation of the enemies' weapons, and the demonstration of *bona fides* to fellow Christians) as by any humanist innovation.

This study began strictly as an attempt to examine how both Ficino and Pico's respective projects to reforge a union of philosophy and theology were inextricably bound up with how they imagined the history of the world. In coming to understand their pictures of world history, however, it became increasingly clear that their respective returns *ad fontes* were not to be fully understood merely within the context of "Renaissance humanism" but also within the context of a long tradition of anti-heretical, anti-Islamic, and anti-Jewish polemics as developed by monastic reformers of the twelfth century and mendicant friars of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, in particular among converso polemicists. These were the first Hebraists in the Latin

material which was, likewise, put in the service of the new polemics. Curious and willing to learn about the Jewish mysteries as they were, *from the theological point of view there are not great differences in the relationship to Judaism between the Renaissance and medieval Christian theologians.*" [emphasis added] Cf. n. 102 below.

¹² Cesare Vasoli and Guido Bartolucci were the first to undertake a serious study of Marsilio Ficino's roots in the soil of the medieval converso anti-Jewish polemical tradition, sources which he used to legitimize his own ideas about Christianity and its ties to Platonic philosophy as the more spiritual religion. See Cesare Vasoli, "Per le fonti del *De christiana religione* di Marsilio Ficino," *Rinascimento* 28 (1988): 135-233 and "La tradizione cabbalistica e l'esperienza religiosa cristiana del rinascimento," *Italia* 9 (1994): 11-35; see also Guido Bartolucci, *Marsilio Ficino, Yohanan Alemanno e la 'scientia divinum nominum,'* *Rinascimento* 48 (2008): 137-163, and *De Christiana religione*, 34 and ff. Ficino's encounter with Judaism was first through the works of the Greek Church Fathers, especially Eusebius of Caesarea, *De evangelica praeparatione*, trans. Georgius Trapezuntius (Venice: Nicolaus Jenson, 1470), and secondly through the thirteenth to fifteenth century anti-Jewish polemical treatises of conversos from Spain and Southern France.

¹³ For texts in Latin, see Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 1-62 or in Eugenio Garin, ed., *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942), 167-383; for translations of the *Heptaplus* into English see both Jessie B. McGaw, trans., *Heptaplus* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1977) and Charles G. Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael, ed. and trans., *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1998 [1965]). See also Black, *Pico* for a detailed commentary. In citing full passages of the *Heptaplus*, I have availed myself of both McGaw and Carmichael's English translations, citing first whichever translation I judged preferable for a given passage.

West, and as far as Ficino and Pico were concerned there was little that could be known about ancient history without a correct understanding of the writings of the Hebrew Old Testament. Both the humanist philosophers and the mendicant polemicists alike emphatically held in common the belief that their doctrines had been *revealed* at a given time in history, and they likewise shared in a strong sense of Platonic skepticism regarding the human mind's ability to know God without the help of intermediaries or divine illumination. Both Ficino and Pico's respective thoughts on philosophy and theology, which they each expounded in various styles, were shaped by their struggles to decide what materials from among all the discordant schools of thought were most compatible with what God had revealed to the prophets. Their works were not always engaged in a polemical mode, but when they were, their rhetorical targets were comprised of those philosophers and interpreters of Scripture they perceived to be the biggest threats to Catholic doctrine. Among these were many of the Mediterranean world's leading Jewish and Muslim luminaries whose intellectual legacies also tended to have a long train of Christian admirers and critics. In like fashion to the critics, what Ficino and Pico saw conforming to gospel truth in the work of their opponents they retained or reinterpreted, and what they could not reconcile they vociferously rejected.¹⁴ While Ficino chiefly focused on reviving knowledge about the *prisca theologia*, 'the ancient theology' which was essentially a Christological genealogy of Platonic philosophy viewed in parallel to Hebrew prophecy, Pico busied himself with the union of Platonism (apophatic mysticism), Aristotelianism (kataphatic rationalism), and various schools of medieval Jewish mystical thought lumped together under the label of "Kabbalah." Although Pico was certainly informed by some authentic works of Kabbalah written by Jewish authors, he also took a Christological approach to the texts he encountered and in doing so produced his own idiosyncratic system followed by later intellectuals (herein described with the Latin spelling 'Cabala').¹⁵ This idiosyncratic fusion he called the '*nova philosophia*' was principally shaped by the information he inherited from four key sources: i) the schoolmen of the various universities he attended, staffed with both mendicant and secular masters; ii) his own Jewish teachers, the Averroist Elia del Medigo (1458–92), the converso Flavius Mithridates (1450–89), and the Kabbalist Yohanan Alemanno (c. 1435–1504); iii) the sages of Ficino's *prisca theologia*, especially the Christian Platonist ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite; and iv) whether directly or indirectly, the various Scriptural exegetes of the Latin polemical tradition (i.e., medieval authors like Petrus Alfonsi, Joachim of Fiore, Nicholas of Lyra, Ramon Martí, Ramon Llull, Arnald of Villanova, Paul of Burgos, Jerome of Santa Fé, etc.), all of whom are discussed in subsequent chapters. This study makes no attempt to be *the* definitive or even an exhaustive study of Ficino and Pico's literary lives, but rather seeks to offer a discursive exploration of some of these humanist theologians' more underemphasized 'medieval' aspects. It sheds light on

¹⁴ See n. 801 below.

¹⁵ For the sake of distinction and clarity, when referring to the kind of Jewish mysticism found in works like the *Zohar* or the *Bahir*, I will use the well-recognized English spelling "Kabbalah." When referring to the Christian synthesis that resulted from an elaboration of Pico's work in the sixteenth century, I will use the Latin spelling, Cabala. Conveniently, the modern 'Qabalah' of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn also has its own spelling, but it will not be discussed here.

a vision of a Ficino and a Pico marked as much by continuity with the medieval world as by change.

In putting forward their arguments for a perfected form of Christianity, each with their own unique emphases, the polemics of humanist theologians like Ficino and Pico sought for truth historically as much as they did philosophically, and given that the philosophers they most admired were figures from the distant past, these two approaches were fundamentally intertwined. They sought after the oldest references they could find and compared them against the sources of their intellectual opponents; they logically organized causal chains of consequential events, ideas, texts, and characters, creating genealogies of wisdom that were traceable and whose dates were calculable; they had a grasp on the importance of change and continuity; and most importantly, they sought to find meaning for their own lives in the process. In many ways they carried over much of the medieval mode of discussing world history chiefly in regards to how it was related in Scripture and the imagery drawn from the books of the prophets, but in other ways, being bolstered by an exposure to many reemerging Greco-Roman classics, their views of history were remarkably wider in scope than those of their predecessors, even if most of their claims may seem fanciful now to modern historians (e.g., that Pythagoras was a student of Hebrew mysteries, or that the Late Platonists appropriated their ideas from Dionysius the Areopagite). One way in which this widened scope manifested itself was in the development of the idea that Christian and non-Christian destinies were historically intertwined by divine providence. This idea was most famously elaborated in Marsilio Ficino's concept of a *prisca theologia*, which Pico picked up, reformulated, and systematized into his *nova philosophia*, albeit with an emphasis on the primacy of Moses and the Hebrew Kabbalah as the key to penetrating the deepest mysteries of Christian theology. Ficino's narrative relied more emphatically on a kind of Platonic perennialism whose origins can be traced as far back as Philo Judaeus (c. BC 25–AD 50), who had long foreshadowed Pico in seeing Moses as a kind of esoteric writer privy to all the mysteries later expounded upon in Platonic philosophy.¹⁶ The second century Middle Platonist Numenius, who built upon Philo's vision, proclaimed Platonic philosophy had been presaged among Persian Magi, Indian Brahmin, Egyptian priests, and Hebrew prophets, and had also long foreshadowed Pico's sentiment with his famous rhetorical question: "Who is Plato but Moses speaking Greek?"¹⁷ In keeping with this ancient spirit of

¹⁶ Giulio Busi, "Foreword," in *The Book of Bahir: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version (The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola vol. 2)*, ed. Saverio Campanini (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2005), 41 in discussing the *Bahir*, a text cited indirectly by Ficino and used more directly by Pico (which itself is partially a kabbalistic commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*) notes that "the similarities between the *Bahir* and some Judeo-Hellenistic theories attested to by Philo are a philological fact that cannot be ignored." See also n. 415 below.

¹⁷ Fr. 8, from Eusebius in *Numenius: Fragments*, ed., Édouard des Places (Paris: Budé, 1973); see also Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 9.6.6-9 (PG 21.694) and Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 201. See also M. J. Edwards, "Atticizing Moses? Numenius, the Fathers and the Jews," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, 1 (1990): 64-75. The terms "Western Esotericism" and "Platonic Orientalism" have become useful, but hotly debated labels in the study of these matters. The former, at least in accordance with Wouter Hanegraaff's definition, denotes an umbrella term for 'rejected knowledge' from the Enlightenment, while the latter denotes the idea of "Platonism understood as ancient

esoteric philosophical-theological ecumenicalism, both Ficino and Pico's visions of world history were also woven through with Christian and Platonic assumptions about humankind's alienation from God or the One, its "procession," its "turn" away from materiality, and its great spiritual "return" both at the end of life, and at the end of history.

In producing this study, it became clear that if there was one thing which held in common the apologetics and polemics pertaining to various intellectual systems that came to a head in the Renaissance such as Aristotelian and Platonic metaphysics, Hermetic theology, Arabic astral magic, Jewish Kabbalah, and numerous strains of apocalypticism, then it was *the pursuit of perfection* that bound them all together. In the Latin West, the quest to perfect nature, human or otherwise, and by extension perfect the world and its history, was conceptually inseparable from the Platonic doctrine of forms. Simply put, without a perfect *form* there could be no *reform*. Thus, to recover a perfect and original *form* was ever a prerequisite for achieving any kind of *reform*.¹⁸ This pursuit for *reform*, whether on the level of texts, souls, or societies, has therefore had a number of broader historical implications. Throughout the High Middle Ages and on into the Renaissance era, many individual Christians believed that they could effectively realign the values of their very own *societas Christiana*, but that this could only be achieved by doing one thing alone: imitating the life of Christ, the ideal or archetypal life as it exists eternally in the mind of a loving God. They believed that only through an emulation of the divine exemplar made flesh could the human soul be drawn back toward its perfected original condition before its nature was corrupted by Adam's fall, leading mankind as a whole to willfully turn away from the *felicitas* of primordial unity, away from the One and toward the Many, and there were certainly no stronger and more eloquent proponents of this view than the humanist theologians, Ficino and Pico.¹⁹

'divine wisdom derived from the Orient.'" See Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15 and Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12. The term "Platonic Orientalism" was not coined by Hanegraaff, but was repurposed from a specialist of medieval Islamic mysticism, John Walbridge, who developed it during his explorations of Suhrawardī (1154-1191), a Persian Illuminist philosopher who fused Zoroastrian and Platonic thought; see John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). For a grasp of the debates surrounding these historiographical concepts, see: Marco Pasi, "The Problems of Rejected Knowledge: Thoughts on Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*," *Religion* 43, 2 (2013): 201-212; Giovanni Filoramo, "Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff's Esotericism and the Academy," *Religion* 43, 2 (2013): 213-218; Bernd-Christian Otto, "Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff's Esotericism and the Academy," *Religion* 43, 2 (2013): 231-240; Olav Hammer, "Deconstructing 'Western Esotericism': On Wouter Hanegraaff's Esotericism and the Academy," *Religion* 43, 2 (2013): 241-251; Wouter Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse," *Religion* 43, 2 (2013): 252-273. See also Wouter Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity," *Aries* 1, 1 (2001): 5-37, "How Hermetic was Renaissance Hermetism?," *Aries* 15, 2 (2015): 179-209, and "Better than Magic: Cornelius Agrippa and Lazzarellian Hermetism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, 1 (2009): 1-25.

¹⁸ See, e.g., n. 658 below.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Pico, *On Being and the One*, trans. Paul J. W. Miller, 60-61: "we must be careful that while we are investigating the highest things we do not live in a low condition, that is, unworthy of those whom heaven has enabled to explore the reasons even of heavenly things. We must constantly remember that this our mind, to which

Among Christians, one of the most significant analogies for thinking about the Platonic problem of reconciling the One with the Many was through the gradual reconciliation of all true believers throughout the long arc of human history. These kinds of speculations were a response to dealing with the paradox of God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence in a temporally-oriented way. Just in the manner that hierarchies of angels were employed to mediate metaphysically between human minds and the incomprehensibility of God in his throne room, so too on the stage of history, where unfolded the redemptive processes inherent to God among both Jews and Gentiles, there also had to be mediators, and these took the form of specific ancient prophets and sages whose intellects surpassed ordinary human reason. Prophetic texts, and by extension the histories that could be derived from them, were widely believed to operate on numerous levels of interpretation, and thus did not only exist to give structure to time and the events in the material world, but also served as a means of mapping out God's providence, which was eternal and atemporal, existing outside of time, before the foundations of the world. For Ficino and Pico, to study history meaningfully was to study the writings of ancient prophets and sages, and consequently, this study is an attempt to give some context to the development of their particular prophetic sense of history – a sense which had pride of place for its culminating moment, the final union of Jew and Gentile in Christ at the end of time. To borrow an idea from Moshe Idel: "If European philosophy was described as a series of footnotes to Plato in the words of [Alfred North] Whitehead, Western apocalypticism may be understood as a handful of footnotes on the apocalyptic visions of Daniel. The former is the most influential founder of Western cultural metaphysics; the latter is one of the most important founding fathers of a peculiar type of historiography."²⁰ It is, therefore, this peculiar type of historiography as it pertained to the development of Ficino and Pico's thought that stands as the object of this study. What we will find is that in the works of these humanist theologians, Plato and Daniel were not only important in their own rights, but were not to be understood without reference to one another.

This is a work of intellectual history, therefore, and it begins with one Christian Platonist and ends with another. It runs roughly from the time of Augustine (354–430) to the death of Ficino in 1499, and for the sake of manageability, is organized in two parts. The first half generally looks forward, the second half looks back. The first half deals with broad currents and key thinkers in the Late Antique and medieval Latin West with an eye towards their prophetic and anti-Jewish polemical approaches to esoteric philology and world history, while the second half deals more specifically with ideas and events from the humanist theologians of *quattrocento* Italy. The first half traces out some of the most important figures and concepts that developed at

even divine things are accessible, cannot be of mortal race, and will be happy only by the possession of divine things. Mind wanders here as a stranger, and approaches happiness (*felicitas*) insofar as it raises itself more and burns for divine things, having put aside concern with earthly things. The present disputation seems above all to warn us that if we wish to be blessed, *we must imitate the most blessed of all things, God, [by] possessing in ourselves unity, truth, and goodness.*" [emphasis added]

²⁰ Moshe Idel, "The Time of the End: Apocalypticism and its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology," in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill), 155.

the crossroads of Platonic and Pythagorean philosophy, Jewish mysticism, and Christian prophetic approaches to history in the centuries leading up to the Italian Renaissance; the second half deals with some of the ways in which these Late Antique and medieval currents figured into the polemical dimensions of Ficino and Pico's works. These admittedly broad temporal parameters, from the fourth to the fifteenth century, were chosen in order to demonstrate some of the long-term changes and continuities in Christian polemical literature that unfolded over centuries in the Latin West. These spatial parameters, however, were chosen first and foremost to keep the scope of this study as narrow as possible, but more generally, to coincide with my own philological training which is focused on literature composed in Latin, the language used in the majority of Ficino and Pico's works.

Part I: Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

1 - Revelation and The Problem of God's Immanence vs. Transcendence at the Crossroads of Jewish, Christian, and Platonic Philosophy

From its earliest stages, Christianity was predicated on apocalyptic strains of Judaism, namely, those sub-groups that above all emphasized the thunderous admonitions of the Hebrew prophets with their visionary calls for societal reform. This reform was to occur along the lines of one divinely revealed set of laws with the express purpose of restoring God's favour over the people of Israel. The words and deeds ascribed to the prophets constitute a total of sixteen books of the Bible, and the Jesus presented in the New Testament Gospels (particularly in *Matthew*) is himself a profoundly apocalyptic figure, perfect in his knowledge of Scripture, and frequently possessed by dramatic visions of the future wherein the righteous forces of history emerge victorious over the wicked.²¹ In the Christ of St. Paul, this Son of God was sent "to set us free from the present evil age."²² Whereas the importance and centrality of the Messiah figure came and went at different times and different places throughout Jewish history, in Christianity, the doctrine of the 'Messiah-who-has-come' is its very *sine qua non*. Christianity, therefore, is by its very nature an apocalyptic belief system which puts as much stress on the historicity of its story as its trans-historical dimensions.

In line with the definition set down by Marjorie Reeves, foremost among Joachim of Fiore scholars, the word "apocalypse" here signifies specifically: "the disclosure of hidden divine purpose in history, to which common usage has added the dimension of imminent crisis."²³ Reeves explained that thinking about the flow of time in the shadow of apocalypse places it "on a different plane of understanding from the physical cosmos" since it is no longer conceived on the level of an endless cycle of birth, maturation, and death, but as the fulfillment of "a divine purpose in proceeding towards a foreordained conclusion," creating the definitive sense of a present moment which in some way or another is linked "to a definite beginning and a definite end," or in the simplest of terms, an Alpha and an Omega.²⁴ Historically, this way of thinking about time in the Latin West had its roots in the interpretations of writings attributed to traditional Hebrew prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and so forth, ancient holy men whose thoughts were conveyed in a style using bizarre, abstract, and impressionistic word pictures so as to render into language the contents of an ecstatic experience and a moment of rupture between

²¹ E.g., *Matthew* 3:2: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" *Matthew* 8:11: "I say to you, many will come from east and west to share in the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." *Matthew* 24:1-2: "Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."

²² *Galatians* 1:4.

²³ Marjorie Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 40.

²⁴ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 40.

the mundane and divine worlds.²⁵ They did not craft careful arguments or theses, but had visions which they condensed into narratives that described images pregnant with meaning that could then be read against contemporary events by later interpreters. Such word-pictures were not intended to obfuscate a prophet's purported message, but to deliver a kind of supra-rational essence. Since revelatory or visionary religious experiences were not uncommon in the ancient world, what set the prophet apart was the ability to produce a distilled message – the unintelligible clothed in intelligible language – and, most importantly, the ability to produce a message which was congruent with what a given community already knew to be right. The revelations of the prophets have historically had the power to imbue both individuals and societies with the sense of a transcendent purpose that would culminate at the end of time, and consequently, an impetus for the 'just,' 'right,' 'proper,' or 'fitting' reckoning of events, ideas, people, and places, so as to determine when that end might be and how it might play out. In setting the stage for a discussion of the prophetic sense of history among the humanist philosopher-theologians of the Renaissance, it is critical to understand this particular approach to thinking about history in both moral and teleological terms, since it was this very kind of universe which they inherited, inhabited, and elaborated.

One prominent theme among all the prophets' visions 'from the other side,' and arguably one of their legitimizing characteristics, is the ubiquitous sense of an impending divine judgement and a call for moral *reform*. The image of what constitutes a prophet is fairly standard: a zealous and unkempt man wandering to and fro, taking rest from his myriad asceticisms only to come down the mountain and pronounce to the people of God: "Repent, the end is nigh!"²⁶ Jeremiah wandered with a heavy yoke over his shoulders, Isaiah went naked through the streets, Hosea married a prostitute, and Ezekiel lay on his side for months and ate defiled bread.²⁷ Each exhibited a radical restructuring and reorientation of prevailing societal values by acting in ways that seemed totally at odds with what would normally be expected from mouthpieces of God. Their currency was moral transvaluation, a renegotiation of values in accordance with divine rather than human standards. Despite their humble status, or perhaps on account of it, they often served political roles as advisors to kings and religious leaders. For the Old Testament prophets, their goal was to redirect Israel toward adherence to its covenant with the God of Abraham: to maintain the deal which at the climax of the book of *Exodus* was brought down from the summit of Mount Sinai by Moses, the prophet of the prophets. What made these prophets distinct from those, for example, of the Delphic or Sibylline oracles was that the project of *justice* was the cornerstone of their message, the message of a great levelling before God. One could not maintain a society supposed to represent God wherein there existed injustice, and for the iniquities of the nation, a great reckoning was ever drawing nearer. A strong sense of dualism thus naturally pervades the apocalyptic spirit and its early reception as well, a fact made evident in early documents like the *Manual of Discipline* or the *War Scroll* found at

²⁵ Oded Irshai, "Dating the Eschaton," in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill), 114 and ff.

²⁶ Cf. *Daniel* 2:44, *Matthew* 3:2 and 4:17, *Mark* 1:15.

²⁷ *Jeremiah* 27:2-28:17, *Isaiah* 20:2-4, *Hosea* 1:2-3, *Ezekiel* 4:4-8 and 4:12.

Qumran, or in the New Testament Gospels themselves. The governing attitude is *us versus them*, “the sons of light” versus “the sons of darkness,” the spirit of truth versus the spirit of deceit, and only the former prevails in the creation of a new world order.²⁸ The prophetic vision does not elucidate a process of reconciliation by degrees; rather, the transition to a new era is sharp and swift. What is specifically relevant here, however, is the impact such prophetic ideas had upon medieval and Renaissance conceptions of world history, such as the periodizing of all time into a series of ages with their own definitive zeitgeists, reaching toward one great preordained final goal.

In light of its eschatological nature, the proselytizing spirit of Christianity was also engrained in it from its very inception. Since the primitive Church and post-second temple Judaism were born out of the same geographical milieu, it should come as no surprise that Christianity’s earliest and most deeply-engrained impulse was the desire to convert fellow Jews. The ultimate reconciliation of Christians and Jews into one fold was an apocalyptic theme directly rooted in various books of the New Testament. Nevertheless, as it was practised in the first century AD, Judaism stood as a counterpoint and an obstacle at Christianity’s most formative juncture, and polemics against Judaizing also became a prominent feature of the New Testament.²⁹ Christian identity, from the very beginning, was born out of an adoption, modification, and what the Church Fathers firmly believed to be an improvement upon Jewish practice. Where Christians perceived Jews only practicing ‘the letter of the Law,’ the Christians saw themselves in possession of its ‘spirit.’ Where Jews were ‘carnal,’ Christians were ‘spiritual,’ that is, oriented toward the immaterial.³⁰ In the process of negotiating their own identities – in determining what it meant to be a Christian – the early church created a series of negative tropes about Jews which had long-lasting ramifications enduring well into the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond. These tropes led to three modes of thinking about how to deal with the problem of Jewish presence in medieval Christian communities: i) the laissez-faire approach, ii) the violent persecution, exile, and annihilation of Jews and their books so as to bring about a state of perfected Christian universalism, or iii) the assimilative, non-violent, inclusive, and reasoned ‘bargaining’ with Jews (to bring about the same end, Christian universalism). This study serves as an exploration of some of the tensions that arose between these three approaches in the Latin West, particularly insofar as they influenced Ficino and

²⁸ A. Steudel, “The Development of Essenic Eschatology,” in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill), 82 and ff.

²⁹ Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*, viii: “Christianity has, since its earliest sources, been profoundly shaped by such boundary-constructing discourse. Several of the texts that came to form part of the *New Testament* canon insist that there is one and only one way to salvation, namely via Christ. The *Gospel of John* 14:6 famously lets Jesus proclaim that ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father, but by me.’ Similarly, *Acts* 4:12 asserts that ‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’ Much of the early Christian literature, unsurprisingly, builds on this exclusivism, in an attempt to distinguish the ‘correct’ mode of obtaining salvation from various ‘false’ doctrines. A sizeable proportion of such early apologetic-cum-polemical writing [however] was directed against the Jews.” For a discussion of the biblical origins of anti-Judaizing sentiment among Christians, see Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³⁰ Such an attitude manifested itself in passages like *Titus* 1:10-16.

Pico's anti-Jewish polemical writings. Before we can accomplish this, however, we must first give an overview of one school of thought which served to galvanize Ficino and Pico in their Christian pro-spiritual and anti-carnal beliefs, namely, Platonism, a Hellenic system of philosophy whose influence was formative to all Abrahamic religions throughout Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance era, but which was especially important in the intellectual makeup of the Latin West's most cherished philosopher-theologians.

1.1 Platonism and the Division of Semiological and Causal Approaches to History

If distilled down to their purest essence, the doctrines of the Platonists from Numenius in the second century AD onward through Plotinus could be said to be a system for understanding the immortality of the soul and a program for its return back through the emanations toward the One, the highest and most rarified metaphysical principle at the root of all existence.³¹ In a recent study, Stephen Gersh succinctly summarized Late Platonic doctrine as follows:

Plotinus' most notable doctrine is that there are three primary substances, principles, or "hypostases": first, the One or Good, which is actually unknowable and can therefore only be named or described in a provisional way; second, Being or Intellect – a combination of Plato's world of intelligible forms and Aristotle's agent intellect or unmoved mover, which is atemporal in nature; and third, Soul, which is primarily twofold in having a higher part approximating to intellect and a lower part that animates bodies and is temporal. The three principles are linked in a causal sequence for which various conceptual models are employed, including especially that of "emanation," i.e. the diffusion of light. Since Intellect and Soul are both simultaneously unities and multiplicities, they exist on both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels as the intellect and soul of the world and as the intellect and soul of an individual human being respectively. On the microcosmic level, the human being is primarily twofold in that its higher part, which consists of intellect, reason, and higher imagination, is essentially independent of body, whereas its lower part, which consists of lower imagination, sense, and the vegetative function, is a life emanated into the body. The true "human being" is the higher part. Its ethical goal is to distance itself from the lower and bodily state as much as possible, this process being accomplished by "conversion" of the lower faculties towards the higher, of the microcosm towards the macrocosm, and ultimately of the fully intellectualized and universalized soul to the One or Good itself. The traditional virtues are understood as types of purification.³²

For the Platonist, although the World Soul had fallen into multiplicity, the human soul was not fallen, at least not in the sense which the Christian understood it. Since the human soul was not infected by original sin, it did not need to be redeemed, it merely needed to 'turn around' and recognize its source of origin before beginning the arduous climb back up the ladder of emanation through self-purification (or self-simplification), back toward the One. The Platonists believed that the degeneration of a soul's condition was fundamentally to be understood through number: the further it fell into multiplicity, the less it participated in unity.³³ In this process the

³¹ It is worth noting here that the labels "Middle Platonist" and "Neoplatonist" are largely the retrojections of nineteenth century categorization efforts, and that most participants of the Platonic tradition merely considered themselves "Platonists" or 'lovers of wisdom' participating in a perennial tradition. For a window into the debates over terminology, see Peter Adamson, "Neoplatonism: The Last Ten Years" *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 9 (2015), 206-207 who comments on Lloyd Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3. Gerson argues that "Neoplatonism" ought to be banned as a term of abuse, preferring instead the term 'late antique philosophy,' especially since almost three quarters of the extant Greek philosophy from Late Antiquity was written by "Neoplatonists and commentators on Aristotle." While I agree with Gerson's assessment, and here employ the terms "Platonist(s)" and sometimes "Late Platonist(s)" rather than "Neoplatonist," I find "late antique philosophy" to be too non-descriptive as a label, especially when dealing with its reception in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

³² Stephen Gersh, *Plotinus' Legacy: The Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2-3.

³³ Black, *Pico*, 168.

formation of a human body around the divine spark of the soul was not viewed in a purely negative light, as it was by the so-called Gnostics against whom Plotinus wrote. Incarnation was simply the beginning of the soul's long journey back to re-identification with the World Soul. Here all bodies were pendulous extensions of soul, low as they might be, stretching back toward unity. A material human body was far from being "the Good," but it was just as far from being considered intrinsically evil too. It was widely accepted that the One or the Good must, by nature of being the Good, communicate itself. From this, the whole of the intelligible universe could be described as the by-product of a diffuse radiation emitted by the One (or the Good) that becomes more and more dense the further away it falls from its source (thus undergoing various degenerative permutations and at last creating the sensible, material world).³⁴ The metaphor which was most commonly used to understand this underlying metaphysical reality was either that of an overflowing fountain, or of the light of the Sun, interminably flowing out from the One to illuminate the rest of the cosmos, and its invisible noetic light was the universe's foundational formative power.³⁵ Key to our purposes, however, is the fact that it was this overflowing fountain of goodness that became equated, after a few modifications, with the Abrahamic God by medieval Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers and theologians. In the Platonic worldview, inequality – and difference itself – was merely a consequence of one's nature since everything exists in its own degree on the great, vertical pole of being, the *scala naturae*. Here hierarchies of value were writ into the structure of reality, and just as gems were superior to dirt, oaks were superior to shrubs, and men were superior to beasts, so too were wills and intellects turned up toward God or the One superior to those that were not.³⁶ While ancient theologians like Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Orpheus or Pythagoras had tended to veil such concepts or 'mysteries' with mathematical or mythological figures, what made Plotinus' approach to these ancient secrets unique was that he "for the first time stripped away the veils and penetrated the mysteries by dialectical means,"³⁷ and this approach was taken up wholeheartedly by later monotheistic philosophers and theologians.

³⁴ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans., E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1933]), 261 notes: "That the Good which is the final cause of all Being is itself beyond Being is, of course, Platonic and Plotinian doctrine. From Neoplatonism it was taken over by ps.-Dionysius, mediated by whom it reappears in the East in the teaching of John Damascene, and in the West in that of Eriugena."

³⁵ See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.6 in John Dillon and Lloyd P. Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2004), 75.

³⁶ E.g., see Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, 1.14, 15 as translated in Stephen Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*, vol. 2 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 5.28: "Since Intellect derives from the highest God and Soul from Intellect, while Soul produces and vivifies all things subsequent to it – this single splendor illuminates all things and is reflected in all, like a single face reflected in many mirrors placed in a row – and since all things follow on in continuous succession and degenerating stage by stage to the lowest point of descent, the close observer will find a single bond of interlocking and unbroken connection from the highest God to the lowest sediment of the universe... This is the golden chain of Homer which, as he reports, God ordered to hang down from heaven to earth." Cf. Homer, *Iliad*, 8.19-27.

³⁷ Gersh, *Plotinus' Legacy*, 6.

Platonism is a philosophy that is deeply concerned with images. In the *Timaeus*, Plato famously defined time as “an eternal image that moves according to number.”³⁸ History itself, from within a Platonic paradigm, may then also be thought of as a composite image of sorts, a series of *figurae* attempting to depict a snapshot of that great moving image of eternity. It is a narrative of word pictures, plucked and gathered in accordance with some higher organizational principle (which is typically elucidated by the historian at the outset of their work). Presumably, this organizing principle is an outgrowth of the historian’s given cultural context and their inherited system of values. But what were some of these ‘higher organizational principles’ throughout the medieval Latin West and on through the period of the Renaissance, a time when world history was conceived as the reflection of a deeper, metaphysical reality, wherein soteriological concerns were foremost? Throughout the Late Antique period, and with the virtual disappearance of purely materialist or atomist philosophies as the main competitors to the idealist philosophies of classical antiquity – those which privileged the noumenal over the phenomenal – two dominant and competing but not mutually exclusive epistemological frameworks were left largely at work: the semiological and the causal. The emphatically semiological (or “analogical,” “symbolic,” “hermeneutic”) predilection that predominated during the Middle Ages, with its dual inheritance from Platonic philosophy and Judaism, entered into Europe through the texts of the Church Fathers and became the dominant way of conceiving the world (and its history) until a paradigm shift rooted in nominalism slowly and gradually displaced it from its place of prominence by the end of the early modern period. The second dominant ‘way of knowing’ in the wake of Rome’s collapse was the causal view, an approach that in history can be seen in chronicles, genealogies, and smaller scale ‘secular’ narratives like biographies and national histories.

Throughout the Middle Ages, these two epistemological frameworks clashed in various contexts, casting off all manner of scintilla, with each one developing into some way or another of thinking about the incomensurabilities between emanation and creation, or between God’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence, and humankind’s relationship to these paradoxes as they unfolded through time. The following chapters thus explore how *thinking about the past* was conditioned by these different modes, each with their own approaches to understanding history, and each with their own divergent goals in mind. The emphatically “causal mode,” when applied to historical thinking, was best exemplified by the ancient Greek and Latin historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, or Livy, and this approach could be set against the medieval Christian semiological mode of conceptualizing the passage of time as a series of signs headed by higher organizational principles. Both approaches to knowledge construction were concerned with understanding the anatomy of the present, but the former mode was an attempt to relate the past specifically via process of *inquiry*, while the latter was an attempt to levy *revelation* – through the drawing of analogies or concordances between particular historical events and events in Scripture – with the intent of finding therein some sign of transcendent meaning adumbrating

³⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d6-7: “κατ’ ἀριθμὸν ἰοῦσαν αἰώνιον εἰκόνα.”

over the whole of history that might ultimately serve as a roadmap to salvation. In the former mode, history was a quest for understanding the present, and often a matter of civic or national pride; in the latter mode, it was a quest for understanding the whole, and a way of tapping into revealed wisdom with soteriological implications.

There is a crucial distinction here between the study of ‘prophetic’ or ‘oracular’ events in history and the ‘prophetic sense of history.’ The focus of this study is to deal more specifically with the latter than the former. The inclusion of omens, auguries, prophecies, and oracles was a fairly standard practice in the histories of such ancient authors as Herodotus, Plutarch, and Tacitus. These episodes, however, were not supplied by their authors to provide an overarching structure to their histories as wholes, but to elucidate the motivations of the specific individuals who sought and received such signs, and to understand how they interpreted the nebulous musings of Delphic priestesses or the portentous patterns in the flight of birds. The Greco-Roman historians demonstrated a great degree of skepticism when it came to prophecy, holding closely to the notion that men generally saw what they wished to see in them. Livy, for example, used prodigies as a narrative device to give weight to his annalistic style, beginning his descriptions of each year with a mention of who held office, and what were the recorded omens, but at no point did he sit down with the Sibylline books in order that he might find in them a complete reckoning of world history esoterically encoded in the Sibyl’s riddles.

Instead of doing history in the annalistic mode of the ancient Near East, or via inquiry into causes as in the Greco-Roman mode, the ‘prophetic’ approach to history – the dominant mode of doing world history in the Latin West for much of the Middle-Ages – was to construct narratives about the past, present, and future by explaining the meaning of material and spiritual processes vis-à-vis the various signs, symbols, and events revealed in Scripture. This mode of doing history, however, necessitated one particularly firm philosophical persuasion: that there existed a *real* link between finite particulars and transcendental universal principles, particularly in the sense that the words of Holy Scripture themselves were contingent, in a *real* way, upon a deeper immaterial reality that undergirded all physical existence. For those who maintained this view, history as the unfoldment of God’s providential plan was conceived as an unfoldment of correspondences or *concordia* through time. Most often these correspondences were allegorical, but sometimes, they were even more abstract, intelligible only through an esoteric science of letters and numbers. From Augustine’s biblical exegesis in the early fifth century or the numerological and lettrist schemes of Joachim of Fiore during the so-called “twelfth-century renaissance,” to the proponents of the astrological “Great Conjunction” theories of history, fundamentally different approaches to mapping out and understanding time and the events of the world were at work. All of these approaches, however, relied on a paradigm rooted in what has come to be known by modern philosophers as “Platonic realism,”³⁹ the belief that there is an

³⁹ For a brief outline of the realism/nominalism debate, see Joseph Agassi and Paul T. Sagal. “The Problem of Universals,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 28, no. 4

inextricable and *real* relationship between particulars and universals, or between immanent signifiers and signified transcendentals. Pico himself, for example, demonstrated his belief in this epistemological framework in *conclusio* 9.9 when he wrote: “images in a medium exist in an intermediate way between spiritual and material existence.”⁴⁰ That is to say, images (which include words) were thought to exist as a concrete and real link between the transcendent and the immanent. What is here called the semiological or prophetic mode of doing history, I maintain, is also a product of this epistemological framework having permeated the literary and intellectual circles of the Western world such that many of them constructed their histories not from the bottom up, starting with an analysis of sources generated by events and working outward, but from the top down, starting from abstract principles and constructing a narrative within their strictures. Thus, the prophetic approach to history has tended toward an emphasis on the values of correspondence, harmony, proportion, reason, and ultimately, hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy was the ultimate Good, the One, or God himself – the ultimate ideal of perfection (or super-perfection), from whom emanated all other perfect forms – with the rest of the intelligible cosmos existing purely as product of this super-being’s overflow of goodness. What is significant here is that all of these values were quintessentially “Platonic” long before they were ever thought of as Christian, but throughout the Middle Ages they readily found themselves at home in the hearts of Christian intellectuals nonetheless, and from there played a significant role in shaping narratives about world history.⁴¹

The semiological worldview, with its ‘doctrine of signatures,’ was constituted by the overarching notion that all things are rationally ordered in accordance with *Logos* (word or reason), and consequently, every part of the universe is mappable onto every other part of it in some way.⁴² To a modern audience these analogies across different cross-sections of elements, minerals, plants, animals, planets, angels, virtues, divine names, and numbers appear as nothing more than metaphor, but to the Late Antique and medieval mind, this really was perceived as the very process by which an intelligently created universe had rationally unfolded. The world was comprised of a great web of analogies in the intellect which could be interpreted in a variety of ways, and it was the Middle and Late Platonic philosophy of emanationism in particular that had first paved the way for justifying the analogical and syllogistic thinking that was necessary for propping up the structures of Platonic realism (again, in the view that there *really* exists a bond between, e.g., historical particulars and the universal ideals they represent). The connection was made in the intellect, the higher portion of the soul: the soul acted directly as mediator between the lower sphere of sensory impressions, and the much greater, immaterial sphere of the intellect. This noetic metaphysical framework came to serve many medieval intellectuals in understanding

(1975): 289-94. See John Bussanich, “Realism and Idealism in Plotinus.” *Hermathena*, no. 157 (1994): 21-42 for how this debate was handled by a Late Platonist specifically.

⁴⁰ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 270: “9.9. Species sunt in medio, medio modo inter esse spirituale et materiale.”

⁴¹ It is notable here that even the word “hierarchy” was coined in *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανόθεν ἱεραρχίας* (*On the Heavenly Hierarchy*) by ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, the late fifth century author who wrote under the name of St. Paul’s follower from *Acts* 17:34 and borrowed extensively from Proclus’s Platonic theology.

⁴² See n. 934 below to see how this belief manifested in Pico’s *Conclusiones*.

not only the processes by which prophetic revelations occurred, but also how they ought to be interpreted.⁴³ As we will see in later chapters, when it came to their respective approaches to history, Ficino and Pico could easily be placed among the ranks of medieval interpreters insofar as they approached history more semiologically than causally. To better understand the mind of these medieval interpreters, however, especially when it comes to their thoughts on history, we must first turn to one of the most formative thinkers not only to Ficino and Pico's particular brand of Christian Platonism, but to all Latin intellectuals in general: Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

⁴³ See n. 2 above.

1.2 Augustine, the *Libri Platonici*, and the Triumph of the Immaterial

St. Augustine, perhaps the most esteemed of the Latin Church Fathers, wrestled for years with the Bible through the lens of Greek philosophy and this struggle drove him to settle upon a unique theology which not only stood antithetical to the anti-Judaism of the Gnostic Manichaean sect to which he had once belonged, but also the Church's very own anti-Jewish sentiments.⁴⁴ Within Plotinus' lifetime (ca. 204–70), the Platonists had found themselves in competition with various fringe sects of so-called "Gnostics" that demonized both the material world and what they held to be its creator, the Demiurge – a concept lifted straight from Plato's *Timaeus* whose philosophy they had syncretized with their own idiosyncratic (and sometimes antinomian) strains of Judeo-Christian apocalypticism. In Plato, the Demiurge had served as a solution to the problems posed by the transcendence of the One. If the One was wholly transcendent, then there was nothing which even the philosophers could accurately say about it. Even to call the One ineffable was to ascribe to it a quality, and thereby drag it down into the realm of multiplicity and the intellect, despite the fact that it by definition transcended it. Intellection itself was understood as an aggregate of parts, working through processes such as syllogism, and therefore a product of the One's fall into multiplicity, albeit a more rarefied one than material composites. To solve this problem, the Platonists (and the Gnostics) maintained the existence of a lesser god below the One, a 'craftsman' who worked with the forms to construct the cosmos. This Demiurge (Craftsman or Creator) was the tail end of a series of emanations flowing out from the One, albeit ignorant of his own subordinate station. In some Gnostic circles, such as those who produced the *Apocryphon of John* found at Nag Hammadi, this Demiurge was given three names: Yaltabaoth, Saklas, and Samael (that is to say, "the god of the blind"). The Gnostics maintained not only that this god was evil, but that he was also none other than the YHWH of the Old Testament scriptures, no more than a faint echo of a higher truth to which that great daimon was entirely ignorant. Enthroned high in his pride above the circle of heaven, he declared to everything below him in the cosmic order: "I am God, and there is no other God beside me!"⁴⁵ Responding to this belief in the ninth tractate of his second Ennead entitled *Against Those that Affirm the Creator of the Cosmos and the Cosmos Itself to be Evil* (rendered by Thomas Taylor in the 19th century as *Against The Gnostics*), Plotinus argued against the equation of the Demiurge and his material world with evil, believing that the so-called Gnostics had twisted and perverted the original teachings of his master Plato with a pernicious and pessimistic form of dualism predicated on the existence of an evil principle: matter, the antithesis of spirit.⁴⁶ For

⁴⁴ Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*, x; Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations, 1000-1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom* (London and New York: Routledge), 6-7.

⁴⁵ Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, 1; III, 1; and IV, 1 with BG 8502,2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 71; cf. *Isaiah* 46:9.

⁴⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, 2.9.1-18; Cf. Joseph Katz, "Plotinus and the Gnostics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15, 2 (1954): 289-298. For the most recent assessments of Plotinus' ideas in relation to those laid down in Sethian Gnostic literature, see John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001); Dylan Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism*

Plotinus, matter was not evil: a life dedicated to material things was simply the lowest possible good one could pursue. A century later, a young Augustine followed suit in Plotinus' view to break himself out of a Manichaean mindset, and from there, this simple solution to the problem of dualism spread throughout the Latin West where it found a home for centuries to come.

During his nine years spent as a young Manichaean *auditor*, Augustine had subscribed to a brand of theology which declared that evil had substantial being and that God was also essentially material, albeit a subtle material.⁴⁷ After reading Cicero's *Hortensius* first and thereafter the books of the Platonists, Augustine slowly altered his views on these issues.⁴⁸ From combining the teachings of the Platonists with those of Scripture, Augustine concluded that evil was not a substance, but merely a privation of good – like a hole in a garment – and that ultimately, God was wholly immaterial and expressed his goodness chiefly by temporarily incarnating into matter. From this theological position, Augustine put great emphasis on mystical contemplation as a most efficient means of encountering God, and it is entirely possible that this emphasis was initially derived from Plotinus' preference for mystical contemplation of the One over the use of theurgy and initiatory rites (the approach to the divine espoused by other Platonists like Iamblichus). Augustine tells his readers of at least two mystical experiences in his *Confessiones* which are indistinguishable from those in the Platonic contemplative mode.⁴⁹ Although the *libri Platonici* mentioned in the *Confessiones* Book VII played a formative role in Augustinian philosophy until his death, as he grew older and as Christians and Platonists became increasingly more embattled over their differences, his outward support of the pagan philosophers waned significantly in favour of an exclusivist focus on Christian scripture. In spite of all the influence which this pagan philosophy had had in aiding Christianity to define itself, in 529, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I dealt a crushing blow to the Platonic tradition, explicitly ordering the closure of the Platonic Academy of Athens. Hereafter, Platonic doctrines did not simply disappear. They were assimilated, wrestled with, modified, absorbed, and deployed by subsequent Christian, Jewish, and Muslim intellectuals, at times inadvertently.

Augustine's indifference toward the Jews was in part informed by a rejection of the Manichean hatred of Judaism on account of the Gnostic belief that the supreme god of the Old Testament was nothing more than a Demiurge, an arrogant lesser god, wholly ignorant of the

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); and Alexander J. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus's Mysticism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 3.6.10-14, and 5.7.12 in James J. O'Donnell, ed., *Confessions I: Introduction and Text* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 26-27 and 50-51 respectively.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.9.13 in O'Donnell, *Confessions I*, 80: "procurasti mihi... quosdam Platoniorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinam versos, et ibi legi, non quidem his verbis sed hoc idem omnino multis et multiplicibus suaderi rationibus, quod in principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et deus erat verbum." Cf. Pier Franco Beatrice, "Quosdam Platoniorum Libros: The Platonic Readings of Augustine in Milan," *Vigiliae Christianae* 43, 3 (1989): 248.

⁴⁹ For the experience in Milan, see Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.9.13-27; for the experience at Ostia, see 9.10.23-26 in O'Donnell, *Confessions I*, 79-87 and 113-114 respectively. For a commentary on both these experiences, see Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183 and 228.

great pleroma of emanations which preceded him, and a boaster of his place of privilege despite his lesser status in the divine hierarchy of being.⁵⁰ In the succinct words of Anna Sapir Abulafia, one way of looking at Augustine's views on the Jews was as "an integral part of his continuing fight against Manicheans like Faustus who rejected the validity of the Old Testament."⁵¹ There were reasons for Augustine's privileging of the contemporary Jews over the pagans. In the ancient Hebrews, Augustine saw the very roots of the primitive Church:

What is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients, and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until "Christ appeared in the flesh." From that time, true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian.⁵²

This view on the pre-existence of Christ and his religion had also been espoused in the opening chapter of Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiae* (c. 313), and over a thousand years later, this is the view Ficino and Pico also maintained in their polemics, and it was not an uncommon view either. In light of this patristic theology of prefiguration, Augustine wrote a *Tractatus adversus Judaeos* in the last year of his life as part of the monumental *De civitate Dei* (written between 413–26).⁵³ While the Bishop of Hippo believed it was appropriate for a Christian Rome to shut down pagan temples and persecute heretics, he made special provisions for the Jews, whom he considered the direct descendants of the biblical Hebrews.⁵⁴ Herein, he wrote in support of the notion that the Jews were an important part of God's plan because they served as *Testimonium veritatis*: they were witnesses to Christian truth, especially the truth of prophecy, against the pagans. In Augustine's words, they were to serve as "our book carriers" since "they carry the books for us as we study" and "have the prophets and the law in which law and in which prophets Christ has been prophesied."⁵⁵ Given the fact that the authoritative foundations of ancient Hebrew Scripture and contemporary Jewish practice were the very same as those of the New Testament – that is, God and his prophets – he consequently urged fellow Christians that *Jews should be left alone as they would simply convert of their own accord upon Christ's inevitable return*. Any attempt to whittle away the foundations of Hebrew revelation was also to whittle away the foundations of Christian authority. Augustine wrote: "To be sure, the Jews are our enemies," but he firmly added that it was only "by the writings of the enemy [that] the adversary is beaten."⁵⁶ Insofar as debates among scholars were concerned, it was under the guidance of this classic polemical strategy that Christian-Jewish relations continued to develop in the Latin West for centuries.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Isaiah* 45:5.

⁵¹ Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 7.

⁵² Augustine, *Retractiones*, 1.12.3 in *St. Augustine: The Retractions*, trans. M. Inez Bogan (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 52. Cf. 1 *John* 4:2 and 2 *John* 1:7.

⁵³ *Patrologia Latina* 42, cols. 51-64.

⁵⁴ Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 5-6; Cf. Gábor Ambrus, "The Eschatological Future of the Jews in the 'Vine Diagram' of Joachim of Fiore," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81, 2 (2016): 173-174.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 40.14 in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 38, eds. Eligius Dekkers and Iohannes Fraipont (Turnhout, 1956), 459; cited in Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 16, n. 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The Middle Ages saw a rise in the assimilation of various branches of Platonic philosophy by theologians, from which they proverbially stripped all the salvageable wheat from the chaff, and separated the material that was reconcilable with Christian orthodoxy from what was irreconcilable. All literature foreshadowing, prefiguring, or in any way supporting Trinitarian Christian theology was diligently copied while incommensurable works were largely left to deteriorate. The Church Fathers had little trouble in trying to reconcile the words of Jesus alongside the Greek writings of St. Paul with many prevalent Platonic and Stoic doctrines. Truth was truth regardless of its provenance. Again, it was a well-known fact in the Latin West that the “books of the Platonists” (*libri platonici*) mentioned in the *Confessiones* were responsible for setting Augustine on his philosophical journey towards Christianity.⁵⁷ It is still not known precisely which works these were (probably works of Plotinus and Porphyry translated into Latin), but they were certainly not those of Plato himself.⁵⁸ It is from these works that Augustine was moved to think “spiritually,” or in his own words, to seek after “the truth beyond corporeal forms.”⁵⁹ His earliest explicit support of Platonic ideals can be found in his 386 tract *Contra Academicos* (*Against the Sceptics*). Ultimately, to Augustine, and so too for later medieval Christians, Platonism itself was considered important chiefly insofar as it analogically paved the way to “the hallowed calligraphy of [God’s] Spirit, and most importantly the writings of the apostle Paul,” not because its doctrines were believed to be intrinsically salvific.⁶⁰ Platonism, then, served Christendom not only as a kind of goad to follow Christ’s injunction to “search the scriptures!”⁶¹ but it also provided a kind of metaphysical scaffolding within which Christian theology could operate. From Augustine’s time onward, then, it was this jointly Platonic and Pauline injunction to “think spiritually” and its underlying intellectual scaffolding that raised up the immaterial over the material and endured well into the Renaissance, playing no small role in both Ficino and Pico’s theological writings over a thousand years later.⁶²

Throughout much of the Middle Ages, the only text of Plato’s available to the Latin West was Calcidius’ incomplete translation of the *Timaeus* (up to section 53c).⁶³ This work was, incidentally, one of Plato’s most obscure and mystical ones, having been produced near the end

⁵⁷ See n. 724 below for a reference to this acquisition by Pico in his 1486 *Oratio*.

⁵⁸ Gersh, *Plotinus’ Legacy*, 4.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.20.26 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 86.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.21.27 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 86-87.

⁶¹ *John* 5:39.

⁶² See, e.g., Pico, *Commento* in Garin, *De Hominis dignitate... e scritti vari*, 463 and Black, *Pico*, 152: “The Platonists divide all created things into three levels, of which there are two extremes. Under one are included all corporeal and visible things, such as the heavens, the elements, plants, animals, and everything composed of the elements. Under the other is understood everything which is invisible, and not only incorporeal, but entirely free and separate from any body. This is properly called intellectual nature, and by our theologians is called angelic nature.” “Distinguono e’ Platonici ogni creatura in tre gradi, de’ quali sono dua estremi. Sotto l’uno si comprende ogni creatura corporea evisibile, come è el cielo, gli elementi, le piante, gli animali ed ogni cosa degli elementi composta. Sotto l’altro s’intende ogni creatura invisibile e non solo incorporea, ma etiam da ogni corpo in tutto libera e separata, la quale si chiama proprie natura intellettuale e da’ nostri teologi è detta natura angelica.”

⁶³ Gersh, *Middle and Neoplatonism*, 2:421. Note that although Cicero had also produced a translation of his own (sections 27d-47b), Calcidius’ translation was far more influential in the medieval Latin west.

of a long life of teaching and contemplation. Aside from this source, medieval men generally received their Platonic theologies second-hand, via Augustine and through the medium of Late Platonists and their interpreters. Among the most significant of these authors were ps.-Apuleius (author of the *Asclepius*), Calcidius, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella. Of even greater importance than all of these, however, was that Syrian Christian monk who sometime around the late fifth century, as a great admirer of Proclus (412–85) and Damascius (458–538), wrote under the guise of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St. Paul, the preacher of the Ἄγνωστος Θεός (“the Unknown God”).⁶⁴ It was this mysterious figure, in his writings on divine names or attributes, on negative theology, and on angelic and ecclesiastical hierarchies who, through the early medieval Latin translations of John Scotus Eriugena, ultimately provided the bulk of Latin Christendom’s familiarity with many concepts inherent to Platonic philosophy, albeit reconceptualized through the lens of Christian theology, language, and imagery.⁶⁵

Throughout the early Christian centuries, Christological debates and councils had observed the links between Hellenic philosophy and official Church theology, but the battle lines between the two sides existed in a near constant state of renegotiation. Each theologian or philosopher upheld different values and ideals, and thus emphases and allegiances shifted accordingly. Over time, however, there triumphed a revised system of theology rooted in Platonic philosophy (albeit with a number of bold modifications to its ontological hierarchy), and through it, orthodoxy was by and large negotiated. Platonism had established a great many of the mechanisms by which Christianity was believed to operate on a philosophical or metaphysical level, and in turn, Christians rendered such lofty ideals both conceivable and desirable to the everyday man. Henceforth, the concept of heresies and the appropriateness of their persecutions became increasingly normalized. Church Fathers like Tertullian (c. AD 155 – c. 240) and Origen (c. AD 184 – c. 253) found themselves ‘on the wrong side of history’ (to use a distasteful contemporary expression), as terminology and dogma became standardized. Viewpoints and attitudes not reconciled with a Trinitarian and incarnational Christianity were catalogued, harangued, and gated out. Indeed, philosophical polemics and apologetics provided the basis for this process of formulating orthodoxy, and the formulation of a perfect theology was in essence the construction of Christianity itself. No one was ignorant to the fact that *expressio unius est exclusio alterius*, “the expression of one thing is the exclusion of another,” to use a popular Latin idiom of unknown provenance. Such a trend did not abruptly end in Late Antiquity, however. It continued on through the entirety of the Middle Ages with all those involved being completely

⁶⁴ In Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, xxvii, Dodds explained how the works of Dionysius had been “made the subject of an elaborate commentary by Maximus the Confessor, the first of a long succession of commentaries from the hands of Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, Robert Grosseteste, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and others. ‘Dionysius’ rapidly acquired an authority second only to that of Augustine.”

⁶⁵ For more on Dionysius, see Chapter 4.2 Greek Studies and the Search for the Areopagite below.

conscious to what extent they were participating in one, long and venerable tradition stretching back to St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church.⁶⁶

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between Platonic and Christian doctrine is the emphasis on the incarnation of God bridging the gap between the unknowable and the knowable. Here, in keeping with *John* 1:1-5, Christians held fast to the central tenet of their faith, that:

In the beginning was the Word (Λόγος), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.⁶⁷

For the Platonists, there was nothing objectionable in this notion that in the beginning was *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God – in fact, this was a central precept of their philosophical system. What the Platonists could not tolerate, however, was for this *Logos*, the rational ordering principle of the cosmos, to become flesh. They could not suffer the prophetic dispensations and the “worldly” or “carnal” Jewish Messianism nestled at the heart of Christianity to infect the immaterial purity of their doctrine. For the Platonist, the flight from the alone to the alone began the moment the form of man’s seed mingled with the matter of a woman’s womb, not the moment they turned to Christ. The spiritual *nostos* (νόστος) or journey home in the manner of an Odysseus battered at sea – the doctrine of return – was to be experienced personally, not mediated by a god-man.⁶⁸ The Platonists saved themselves. In his *On*

⁶⁶ Joseph Jacobs and Isaac Broydé, “Polemics and Polemical Literature” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer, vol. 10 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1905), 103 provides an excellent list of notable polemical texts from the early Church: “*The Canon of the Church or Against the Judaizers* by Clement of Alexandria (see Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.13); *Contra Celsum* by Origen; *Πρὸς Ἰουδαίους* by Claudius Apollinarius; *Adversus Judaeos* by Tertullian; *Adversus Judaeos* and *Testimonia* by Cyprian; *Demonstratio Evangelica* by Eusebius; *De Incarnatione Dei Verbi* by Athanasius of Alexandria; the *Homilies* of John Chrysostom; the *Hymns* of Ephraem Syrus; *Adversus Haereses* and *Ancyrotus* by Epiphanius; [and the] *Dialogus Christiani et Judaei de St. Trinitate* by Jerome. The main points discussed in these works are the dogma of the Trinity, the abrogation of the Mosaic law, and especially the Messianic mission of Jesus, which Christians endeavored to demonstrate from the Old Testament.” The article goes on to add, on p. 104: “The Church Fathers who lived after Jerome knew less and less of Judaism, and merely repeated the arguments that had been used by their predecessors, supplemented by more or less slanderous attacks borrowed from pagan anti-Jewish writings. Spain became from the sixth century a hotbed of Christian polemics against Judaism.” The oldest and the most important *Contra Judaeos* there was written by the Archbishop Isidore of Seville and its approach was to compile all the Biblical passages that used by the Fathers to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. Throughout the early Middle Ages, Jews paid little if any attention to these numerous Greek and Latin polemics. Overall, arguments for the Trinity and the Incarnation seemed so clearly to do violence to rabbinical Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament that according to Jacobs and Broydé “they deemed it superfluous to refute them.” It was not until the ninth and tenth centuries that the Karaite movement “awakened in the Jews the polemical spirit.”

⁶⁷ Pico, *Heptaplus*, 7.4 in *Opera omnia*, 55 (McGraw, 103; Carmichael, 163) interprets the Jews to be “the darkness” which did not comprehend Christ in spite of having descended among them; see also Plato, *Republic*, 6.508e where the sun is called “the visible son of God.”

⁶⁸ On the allegory of spiritual return (*nostos*) in Neoplatonism, see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 25.27 in Arthur H. Armstrong, *Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 66-67: “Spirit, man once, but now nearing the diviner lot of a spirit, as the bond of human necessity has been loosed for you, and strong in heart, you swam swiftly from the roaring surge of the body to that coast where the stream flows strong, far apart from the crowd of the wicked, there to set your steps firm in the easy path of the pure soul, where the splendour of

the Immortality of the Soul – whence Marsilio Ficino derived the subtitle for his own *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum* – Plotinus compared man’s spiritual regeneration with the following simile: “it is as if gold were ensouled and knocked off all that was dirty in it, being ignorant of its previous self, because it did not see the gold, but then seeing itself alone, it at once marvelled at its value.”⁶⁹ Christians, therefore, felt to an extent they could benefit from the doctrines of the pagan Platonists, but the pagan Platonists did not feel they could benefit from the doctrines of Christians, in whom the incarnational principle was indispensable. In Plotinus, as in the worldview of his editor Porphyry, and his later Arabic paraphrasers (such as those who assembled the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*), humans could perfect themselves by turning to a life of inward contemplation and returning to the source of all being. From the orthodox Christian perspective, God the Father is wholly transcendent in a manner similar to the One, existing entirely apart from his creation, and approachable only through the incarnate *Logos*, his son Jesus Christ.⁷⁰ To a Church Father like Augustine who was no stranger to the books of the Platonists, any other position smacked of Pelagianism (or worse, of other, “Gnostic” heresies), which suggested humans could be saved by their own works (or by acquiring some sort of secret knowledge).⁷¹ Since belief in Jesus, an historical figure, sat at the center of Christian doctrine, Christianity became an historical religion in a way that Platonism and the underground religious movements that it inspired did not.

The means by which the medieval Latin West wrestled with the problems of scriptural interpretation vis-à-vis God’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence was through the use of allegory, just as the Platonists had done before them.⁷² The Bible constituted the Word of God, but admittedly, the text was somewhat incommensurate on the level of rhetorical style with what one might expect to have been spoken from a King of kings and God of gods. As early as the late fourth century, Augustine himself had wrestled with this problem leading up to his own conversion experience detailed in the *Confessiones*, trained as he was as a professor of rhetoric. While seduced during his youth by the gnostic mythologies of the Manichaeans that operated on a cosmic scale, Augustine had scoffed at the literal reading of the Bible.⁷³ How could the Word

God shines round you and the divine law abides in purity far from lawless wickedness...”; cf. Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.399 and Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.8. in Dillon and Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy*, 28: “Someone would be better advised to say ‘Let us flee to our beloved fatherland.’ But what is this flight, and how is it accomplished? Let us set sail in the way Homer, in a riddling way, I think, tells us Odysseus did from the sorceress Circe or from Calypso. Odysseus was not satisfied to remain there, even though he had visual pleasures and passed his time with sensual beauty. Our fatherland, from where we have come, and our father are both in the intelligible world.”

⁶⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, 4.7.10 in Dillon and Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy*, 53.

⁷⁰ *John* 14:6.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.9.13 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 80.

⁷² On the use of allegory among the Platonists, see n. 68 above.

⁷³ *Confessiones*, 3.5.9 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 26: “...et velatam mysteriis. Et non enim sicut modo loquor, ita sensi, cum attendi ad illam scripturam, sed visa est mihi indigna quam Tullianae dignitati compararem. Tumor enim meus refugiebat modum eius et acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius.” “It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. But these were not the feelings I had when I first read the Scripture. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths.” Trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1961), 60.

of God, the fullness of all things in literary form, be related in vulgar folk-tales written by and for an ancient tribal and pastoral people? How could the majesty of a perfect and transcendent God be compressed into such an unsophisticated narrative, paradoxically filled with matters both mundane and absurd, while the Manichaeans spoke of such lofty subjects as the Sun, the Moon, the stars, and the eternal battle between Light and Darkness?

Shrouded by the dualism of the Manichaeans, Augustine could not yet see how the physical reality he inhabited was contiguous with the spiritual reality he sought, rather than distinct from it. The Scriptures were simply too humble to satisfy his youthful curiosities and grand cosmic ambitions. Augustine found the answer to this problem at age twenty-nine in AD 384 while visiting Milan. There he became acquainted with the preaching of St. Ambrose whose penchant for allegorical readings lifted Augustine from his high-browed dismissal of the biblical message's simplicity.⁷⁴ In this light, the ostensibly simple and rustic folk-tales of Iron Age Israelites or Galilean fishermen took on a new hue. The allegorical readings did not override, but deepened and complexified the stories to extend beyond the surface. This method of reading which pierced through the veil of history – the literal reading of the text – and sought after deeper allegorical truths did not have its first beginnings among Christians, but among the exegetical strategies used in the works and commentaries of Middle Platonists like Philo.⁷⁵ Even Plato himself had believed that the myths contained in Homer's poems had been repositories of hidden divine truths coded in images, symbols, and enigmas which begged interpretation – not to be taken only at face value. To get a sense of the kinds of questions which quickly emerged among the philosophers of Late Antiquity, one can turn to the words of ps.-Dionysius who asked himself:

What is the meaning [in biblical texts] of the formal semblances of the Angelic Powers? What of the fiery and the anthropomorphic? What is meant by their eyes, nostrils, ears, mouths, touch, eyelids, eyebrows, their manhood, teeth, shoulders, arms, hands, heart, breasts, backs, feet and wings? What are the nakedness and the vesture, the shining raiment, the priestly insignia, the girdles? What are the rods, spears, battle-axes and measuring-lines? What are the winds and clouds? What is meant by their brass and electron? What are the choirs and the clapping of bands? What are the colours of the various jewels?⁷⁶

Surely a literal reading was not capable of explaining these sights in more than vulgar terms, and consequently, the layers of interpretation began to proliferate. Starting with John Cassian (c. AD 360–435) in the Christian tradition, one can see as early as the fourth century the 'four senses of Scripture' being codified, these being the literal sense, the analogical sense, the moral sense, and above all, the anagogical sense (sometimes itself referred to as the *intellectus spiritualis*, the spiritual understanding), which disclosed ineffable secrets about the Trinitarian nature of God.⁷⁷ This theme regarding the proliferation of senses will arise frequently throughout this study of the

⁷⁴ *Confessiones*, 5.11.21-12.22 in O'Donnell, *Confessions I*, 56-57.

⁷⁵ For Philo as a font of allegorical interpretation in Ficino (via Eusebius), see n. 626 and n. 688 below. For the same in Pico, see n. 941 below.

⁷⁶ Ps.-Dionysius, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, Ch. 15.

⁷⁷ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 160.

intellectus or *intelligentia spiritualis*, especially in regards to medieval and Renaissance era biblical exegesis. First, however, we must turn to a later medieval figure who in the Latin West had arguably as profound an impact on Christian-Jewish relations as Augustine.

1.3 From Moses Sephardi to Petrus Alfonsi: Reinvigorating the Latin Polemical Tradition

Medieval Christian intellectuals fueled by both the exhortations of the Church Fathers and the Great Commission in *Matthew* 28:16-20 tended toward the idea that Jews, like members of any other nation, could and should be won over by peaceful means.⁷⁸ Among those means, however, all the tools of intellectual persuasion were to be tried, and sometimes these included forced (that is, not so peaceful) public debates. From the High Middle Ages onwards, Christians involved with such debates, while doing less violence than some of their crusading co-religionists, nevertheless applied themselves forcefully to learning Hebrew and Aramaic, adopting Jewish methods of scriptural exegesis, then using them to scour for Christological prefigurations in the books of the prophets, the Talmud, and in later periods, kabbalistic works like the *Zohar* or the *Bahir*.⁷⁹ They looked to appropriate some of the Jews' most cherished secrets specifically to reinterpret them and set them up as intellectual bridges by which Christianity and Judaism could be connected, and Jews could be drawn out from their religion as if it were a spiritless husk, then brought into the living body of the Church. These bridges were not just made up of external ritual or cultural practices, but by webs of esoteric philosophical nuances and distinctions.⁸⁰ Where an ambivalent spirit of either indifference or spur-of-the-moment violence characterized Jewish-Christian relationships in the Early Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages onward increasingly saw active efforts to convert individual Jews using more peaceful intellectual methods. We can, of course, hardly speak of modern day tolerationism here, as we must always judge historical events relative to what immediately preceded them rather than what occurred long after them, so the destruction of books, for example, was thought far more peaceful than the destruction of people, as had occurred during the Rhineland massacres of 1096.⁸¹ The agents of this change of heart were chiefly the monastic reformers of the twelfth century, forged in the fires of both Benedictine spirituality and the crusades; the mendicant friars who came in their wake (i.e., the Dominicans and Franciscans), especially those of converso origins; and last but not least, the humanist theologians of the Renaissance, particularly in Ficino's writings on the *prisca theologia* and in Pico's Christian interpretations of Jewish Kabbalah.⁸²

⁷⁸ See n. 83 below.

⁷⁹ Cf. Bernard McGinn, "Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, eds. R. H. Popkin and G. M. Weiner (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 12; McGinn was the first who thought it right to shine more light on Petrus Alfonsi as a pivotal figure in the study of Christian Cabala: "The intellectual shift in Christian perceptions of the Jews in the twelfth century suggests that more weight should be given to the figure of the converted Jew Petrus Alfonsi than most students of Jewish-Christian relations have hitherto allowed."

⁸⁰ For a discussion on the links between 'esotericism' and 'polemics' as a mode of discourse rather than a collection of 'currents' see Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*, xii.

⁸¹ See Guy Stroumsa, "From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism" in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, eds. Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 2-7.

⁸² What differed perhaps most markedly during the Renaissance was the increasing awareness among more polemically-minded individuals that a chief point of commonality which Christians could exploit as a tool for 'bridge-building' and conversion was the shared reliance in both Christians and Jews on the language of *Platonic*

In the Latin West, the atmosphere of institutional indifference toward the Jews after Augustine lasted almost 800 years until attitudes took a significant turn. Augustine's theological judgements regarding the presence of Jews in Christian society long endured the collapse of the Roman Empire and ultimately served to safeguard Judaism in medieval Europe, even against the violence of the crusades (at least on a legal and institutional level, certainly not on a popular level).⁸³ European Jews were still persecuted in times of great anxiety, but these attacks were most often the consequences of frustrated *ad hoc* flash mobs fuelled by their in-group preferences and their fear of out-groups; that is to say, these were not organized assaults with any kind of legal or theological backing. Such assaults began to arise in the thirteenth century in the wake of significant changes to the intellectual climate regarding interfaith relations. Jewish-Christian relations underwent significant changes in the Western Mediterranean during the era of the crusades. It was during this period that the widely traveled Andalusian physician, astronomer, and polemicist named Moses Sephardi (b. 1062) converted from Judaism to Christianity, took up the name Petrus Alfonsi (d. 1140), and gained success as a Latin author in disseminating all that he knew in regard to the differences that existed among the dominant Abrahamic religions of his day.

Petrus Alfonsi's work, the *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, played a significant part in causing Latin Christendom to break with the Augustinian *laissez-faire* tradition. Having come from a Sephardic background and having been educated in Hebrew, Petrus Alfonsi was privy to knowledge about Judaism to which most of his new Christian coreligionists were not. From this position of authority granted within Christendom, he proclaimed in his writings to the wider world that the Jews of his day were no longer legitimate descendants of Israel, as they had been in the days of Augustine, because their faith was emphatically centered not upon the Old Testament, but upon innovations like the Babylonian Talmud. It would not have been an offense for Christians if the Jews had merely clung to the "Old Law" as contained in the Pentateuch, but complex historical realities did not live up to match their simplistic expectations. To Petrus Alfonsi, the Jews had broken with the covenant and bought into a series of novelties which

philosophy. Aristotle was far more popular in the Middle Ages, but in Pico, we see Moses made into the Christian esotericist *par excellence*, a prophet who prefigured the doctrines of Plato and encoded them in the words of Scripture. Though it must be admitted that, from its earliest inception, the Hebrew prophetic tradition had nothing to do with Platonic ideas, in the Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Christian imagination, however, these two traditions were gradually caught up in each other's orbits, and the language of the one was often used to understand, explicate, and justify (or reject) that of the other. In all this, however, Platonic philosophy was for the humanist theologians of the Renaissance much as it had been for Augustine: its doctrines were an enticement to seek higher truths, but not ends in and of themselves.

⁸³ Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press), xii; Augustine, *City of God*, 18.46: "By the evidence of their own scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ... It follows that when the Jews do not believe in our scriptures, their scriptures are fulfilled in them, while they read them with blind eyes... It is in order to give this testimony which, in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books [of the Old Testament] that they are themselves dispersed among all nations, wherever the Christian church spreads... Hence the prophecy in the *Book of Psalms* [58(9)]: "Slay them not, lest they forget your law; scatter them by your might." Cf. Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law. Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 33.

essentially marked them as heretics of the ‘true’ Jewish religion.⁸⁴ The Jews of the twelfth century, he thought, would in no way have been recognizable to the ancient Hebrews, and Alfonsi maintained that the Talmud had been created out of malice to blind the Jews from seeing that Jesus was God’s only begotten son and the long-awaited Messiah foretold by the Old Testament prophets. Such an interpretation created a turning point in Jewish-Christian relations as it initiated a significantly less trusting atmosphere: contemporary Jews were no longer to be considered the custodians of the ancient Hebrew tradition (*Hebraica veritas*) into which Christianity was rooted. And, since the injunction in *Psalms 58(9)* as it had been quoted by Augustine said to “slay them not, lest they forget your law,” it now seemed justifiable to go on and “scatter them” or disperse them by force.⁸⁵ This is a significant event in the development of the Latin polemical tradition as it evolved into a kind of intellectual, non-violent arm of the crusader spirit, and it is vital for understanding Christian and Jewish intellectual relations as much during the Renaissance as during the Middle Ages.

As a Jew from Huesca, Petrus Alfonsi had spent his youth living as part of the Muslim Kingdom of Zaragoza. In 1097, however, during the period of the First Crusade (1096–99), Moses’/Petrus’ native city was taken by Pedro I of Aragon, and this geopolitical shift played a significant role in setting the stage for his conversion and baptism in 1106. From this point onward, he endeavoured to bring the whole breadth of his largely alien knowledge into the Latin literary world. Petrus Alfonsi was first and foremost a physician and astronomer who wrote on a variety of natural philosophical subjects, as in his *Epistola ad peripateticos* (written sometime after 1116), which attempted to persuade French scholars regarding the astronomical superiority of the Arabs. His influence has been particularly discerned in Adelard of Bath’s *De opera astrolapsus* and in his introduction to the tables of Al-Khwarizmi in 1126.⁸⁶ Above all, however, it is his polemical works that are filled with fascinating information of all sorts, whether historical, theological, or natural philosophical. The most famous of his works was not an exposition of medical or astronomical matters, but a theological polemic entitled the *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* (c. 1109), itself a work of the *Adversus Iudaeos* genre which was already a thousand-year-old literary tradition by the twelfth century (though it is worth bearing in mind

⁸⁴ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, trans. Irven M. Resnick (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 5. For the earliest printed edition of this work, see *Dialogi in quibus impiae Iudaeorum opiniones... confutantur* (Cologne: Ioan. Gymnicus, 1536).

⁸⁵ This tradition endured well into the early modern period and can be seen in Marsilio Ficino’s own citation of this very verse in his anti-Jewish polemic, the *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 30 entitled *Confirmatio rerum nostrarum ex Iudaicis contra Iudeos de sacris libris*; Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 271.

⁸⁶ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 18. The extent of Petrus Alfonsi’s influence on Adelard – a man whom Pico della Mirandola mistook as an Arab student of Plotinus (see Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 302) – has recently come under scrutiny; see Charles Burnett, “Petrus Alfonsi and Adelard of Bath Revisited” in *Petrus Alfonsi and his Dialogus: Background, Context, Reception*, eds. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann and Philipp Roelli (Florence: Sismel, 2014), 77-92.

that there was more literature in this genre published in the twelfth century than in all preceding centuries combined).⁸⁷

Continuous war between Christianity and Islam, as much in Iberia as in the Holy Land, set the framework for Petrus Alfonsi's writings. Being not only an era of war, however, the eleventh and twelfth centuries could also be seen as a period of renewal and reinvigoration for Latin Western Christendom. In the wake of the First Crusade, renewed was the emphasis on the humanity of Christ and his *real* presence in the Eucharist; renewed was the attention paid to the historicity of his earthly life; renewed was the cult of his human mother Mary; and renewed was the focus on the theology of Incarnation. These changes, as noted by Gábor Ambrus, were "strongly fuelled by the crusades to the Holy Land which bore such ample testimony to the Lord's birth, suffering, and death. The crusaders' imagination, [however], moved by and devoted to the events of the life of Jesus, engendered a series of hysterical outbursts against the Jews, accusing them of his murder and avenging it against them."⁸⁸ It is in the coming together of these currents, then, that the life and legacy of Petrus Alfonsi must be located. Alfonsi's translator Irven Resnick argued convincingly that in regards to his polemics against the Jews, this converso was not so much trying to convert his former coreligionists as much as trying to convince fellow Christians of the sincerity of his conversion. This pattern of writing anti-Jewish polemics in an attempt to demonstrate one's *bona fides* to fellow Christians would become an enduring one, and not merely for converso theologians either. Indeed, it is the third essential component of what I call in this study 'the Latin polemical tradition.' Given that Christians maintained a stereotype of Jews as being deceitful, stubborn, and blind to the truth by their very natures, they always kept their suspicions close at hand when it came to judging the sincerity of new converts. Nevertheless, since Alfonsi's *Dialogus contra Iudaeos* was written in Latin and not in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Judeo-Arabic, it can hardly be seen as an active attempt to trigger the mass conversion of Jews. Alfonsi could very well have composed (or at least translated) his work to target a Jewish audience, but no evidence survives to suggest he did.⁸⁹ Thus, this twelfth-century author, significant as he was, cannot himself be seen as belonging to a widespread, systematized campaign to convert the Jews, though in subsequent centuries his work was certainly used in the service of such endeavours. Although Alfonsi himself did not write to convert Jews, he did lay

⁸⁷ E.g., Tertullian (c. 155–240 AD) had written a tract entitled *Adversus Iudaeos* wherein he listed his arguments (buttressed by quotes from such other Church Fathers as Irenaeus and Clement), for why the Christians and not the Jews were the true heirs of the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament chiefly on the grounds that the Jews rejected God's freely offered grace by clinging to the letter of the old Law. Another prominent theme Tertullian explored is how Jesus fulfilled various Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, thus setting a definitive pattern for future iterations of this polemical genre. For the Latin, see H. Tränkle, *Tertulliani Adversus Iudaeos* (Wiesbaden, 1964); for English, see Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian, The Early Church Fathers* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004): 63-104. Even earlier, Justin Martyr (100–165 AD), wrote his anti-Jewish polemic in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, see Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*, xviii. Cf. n. 3 above.

⁸⁸ Ambrus, "The Eschatological Future," 174.

⁸⁹ Lasker, "Mission, Conversion, and Polemic," 707. As an example of a philosopher publishing in numerous languages to increase the reach of his audience, one can look to Joachim of Fiore's contemporary, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), who famously wrote his *Guide for the Perplexed* in Judeo-Arabic, but which was translated into Hebrew within his own lifetime by Samuel Ibn Tibbon (1165-1232).

the foundations for a disputation strategy that would soon be employed by all manner of missionaries and debaters in need of anti-Jewish arguments.

How Petrus Alfonsi differed from his Christian polemicist forebears was in his emphasis on the desire to ‘beat the Jews using their own weapons,’ so to speak.⁹⁰ In the *Dialogus contra Iudaeos*, Petrus and his interlocutor Moses (which, as noted above, had been Petrus’ pre-Christian name), propose to have a debate. Before beginning, however, the Moses character begs of his opponent: “that if you introduce some authority from the Scriptures, you chose to do this according to the Hebrew truth [*Hebraica veritas*].⁹¹ Because if you do otherwise, you know that I will not accept it.” To this Petrus replied candidly: “certainly I do not refuse this, for I desire greatly to slay you with your own sword.”⁹² This particular sentiment, as it endured throughout the centuries after Petrus Alfonsi’s era is a significant point of focus for this study. It is the second essential component of what is here called ‘the Latin polemical tradition.’ Petrus began his philosophical assault against the Jews specifically by bringing to the foreground the problem of God’s immanence versus his transcendence, perceiving that Jewish approaches to Scripture tended to privilege the literal interpretation of Scripture rather than its allegorical or spiritual levels. The trope of Jewish blindness to the spirit of the letter was an old one, but the fresh convert Petrus Alfonsi upheld it as a kind of keystone to his polemics. Petrus considered it an absurdity, for example, that through the Midrashic esoteric practice of the *Shi’ur Qomah* (שיעור קומה, literally: “Measurements of the Body”) God should be thought of as having literal arms and a face which were measurable in *parasangs* and were donned with superfluous adornments (i.e., tefillin or phylacteries).⁹³ Alfonsi ridiculed such ideas that God dwells only in the West, that he is in any way finite in space, that he literally weeps into the sea, roars like a lion three times a day, or beats the sky while lamenting the destruction of his temple.⁹⁴ Taken together with the so-called “carnal” elements of Judaism’s ritual practices, Alfonsi perceived the very theology of the Jews to be concerned primarily with the flesh and not the spirit. He maintained that Judaism was simply unphilosophical, irrational, and unfit to be the proper religion for a transcendent God. Among his many arguments, perhaps the most damaging idea he maintained was that the Jews living in his day no longer followed the old laws of the Torah, but followed new *heretical* doctrines from post-biblical literature, the rabbinic tradition (i.e., the Babylonian Talmud). He did not use the term “Talmud” explicitly but denounced the Jewish reliance on “the teachings of

⁹⁰ Cf. Jacobs and Broydé, “Polemics and Polemical Literature,” 105.

⁹¹ For the origins of the expression “*Hebraica veritas*,” which began with St. Jerome see *Hebraicae Quaestiones in Libro Geneseos, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 72, eds. Marc Adriaen, Germain Morin, and Paul de Lagarde (Turnhout, 1959), 1-2. Cf. n. 97 below.

⁹² Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 44; see especially John Victor Tolan, “To Slay You with Your Own Sword: Petrus Alfonsi and His Place in the History of Medieval Thought,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1990). Cf. n. 55 above.

⁹³ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 48 and ff; cf. *Song of Songs* 5:11-16 upon which the *Shi’ur Qomah* is based. Note that even from within Judaism, the *Shi’ur Qomah* and related mystical currents were heavily criticized by Maimonides (c. 1190) in his *Guide for the Perplexed* I.1, a fact which demonstrates that these mystical texts and practices were by no means universally accepted among twelfth-century Jews in spite of Christian criticisms. See *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 13.

⁹⁴ Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 237.

your sages” (*doctrina doctorum vestrorum*).⁹⁵ Alfonsi also rejected such traditional anti-Christian ideas that Jesus was a sorcerer, born of incest, and a grand deceiver. In arguing for the validity of Jesus as the one true Messiah, he cited works of ancient sages describing all kinds of strange omens that took place around the time of the crucifixion leading up to the destruction of the temple, a line of argument which endured for centuries to follow, included even in Ficino’s *De Christiana religione*.⁹⁶ In the wake of Petrus Alfonsi, who was the most notable formerly Jewish anti-Jewish polemicist to come out of Spain in the twelfth century, attacks on the post-biblical character of Judaism became an integral part of the Christian polemical tradition, as would the idea of using the weapons of Jews – that is their own Scriptures – against them. These polemical strategies certainly did not pass away with Petrus Alfonsi given that some three centuries later, they can be seen unambiguously recurring in the writings of humanist theologians, as much in the Platonic-Christian polemics of Marsilio Ficino as in the kabbalistic writings of Pico della Mirandola, as will be examined in future chapters.⁹⁷

Petrus Alfonsi ultimately believed there were two ways to defend Christianity against attack. The first of these was by an appeal to reason or rationality, the second was by an appeal to the authority of Scripture. In the philosopher’s sixth dialogue, however, there was one passage in particular which would stand out for centuries to subsequent Christian polemicists, and this comprised a discussion of the Trinity and how it relates to the ineffable name of God: IEVE (*yod, heh, vav, heh*), the holy Tetragrammaton. This discussion initially arose out of the context of a reaction to Sa’adia Gaon’s criticisms against the identification of the Trinity with the Platonic triad “essence,” “knowledge,” and “life.” Petrus argued instead that the Trinity was rather comprised of the triad “*substantia*,” “*sapientia*,” and “*voluntas*,” and saw in the Hebrew Tetragrammaton – the four-letter name of God – a way to prove this.⁹⁸ As his source on this divine name, the physician from Huesca cited a mysterious collection of works generically

⁹⁵ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 32. McGinn, “Cabalists and Christians,” 12 notes that “While it is true that Petrus does not *specifically* describe Rabbinic Judaism as a heresy, nor does he use that claim as a basis for a call to persecution or elimination of the Jews, it is evident that the approach that led to the condemnation of the Talmud in 1240 and the view found throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance that Talmudic Judaism was a heresy has a prototype in his widely disseminated work.”

⁹⁶ Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 238.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Ch. 31 entitled *Confirmatio Trinitatis Dei et divinitatis Christi ex Iudaicis* which argues against Jews using the very same appeal to “*Hebraica veritas*” (variously translated as ‘the Hebrew truth,’ ‘the actual Hebrew’ or ‘the original Hebrew’) that was invoked by Petrus Alfonsi and the authors writing in his wake when supplying arguments rooted in Hebrew grammar (Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 278). In the second half of the thirteenth century, Ramon Martí – who began a tradition of referring to Petrus Alfonsi (erroneously) as a “*magnus Rabinus apud Iudaeos*” (“a great Rabbi among the Jews” in *Pugio Fidei*, eds. Joseph de Voisin and Johann Benedikt Carpzov (Leipzig, 1587), 685 (3.3.4) – frequently employed the term “*Iudaica falsitas*” (“Jewish error”) as a corollary to the privileged “*Hebraica veritas*” [e.g., p. 650 (3.3.2); p. 915 (3.3.21)]. In this we can clearly see how Christians viewed contemporary Jews as quite distinct from their distant Hebrew ancestors. Cf. Aryeh Grabois, “The *Hebraica veritas* and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century,” *Speculum* 50 (1975): 613-635; and Jaroslav Pelikan, “*Hebraica Veritas*,” in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 11-28.

⁹⁸ McGinn, “Cabalists and Christians,” 12-13.

entitled the *Secreta secretorum*.⁹⁹ This was a compilation of esoteric texts, but most significant to our purposes is that it contained parts of one inestimably important work of Late Antique Jewish mysticism, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which describes how the creation of the world came about through ten *sefirot belimah* (countings or enumerations of nothingness), and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁰⁰ According to Bernard McGinn “the form of speculation on the Divine name may be related to that found in... the *Sefer Yesirah*,” though he adds the caveat that “there are important differences that cast doubt on claims that Petrus had direct knowledge of it.”¹⁰¹ What is ultimately significant here, in any case, is that this was the first instance of a converso Christian scholar making use of Jewish *mystical* literature on divine names to explicate, in a polemical context, the mysteries of the Christian Trinity, and it would certainly not be the last. Henceforth, Jewish mysticism in Christian circles – for those who knew anything about it at all – gradually began to be identified with a kind of primordial wisdom tradition that, although handed down by generations of Jews, had had its contents untrammelled by contemporary philosophers and Talmudic legalists who obsessed over the dead letter of the law rather than its vivifying spirit. In McGinn’s words: “Petrus Alfonsi’s contact with medieval Jewish mysticism... began the tradition which culminated in the creation of [Christian] Cabala,” a tradition which will be explored in subsequent chapters, especially as it pertains to Pico della Mirandola.¹⁰²

The Jews were not the only religious group in Europe affected by Petrus Alfonsi’s thinking. In 1142, five years before the start of the Second Crusade, the Cluniac abbot Peter the Venerable (1092–1156) traveled to Spain to put together a team of translators headed by Peter of Toledo to produce a Latin edition of the Qur’an entitled the *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*. The Qur’an, however, was not the only Islamic document which interested the team. During this time they were also commissioned to produce a translation and commentary of the now lost *Risālah (Apology)* of al-Kindī, a theological polemic written by an Arab Christian.¹⁰³ Prior to Peter the Venerable’s interest in it, it was Petrus Alfonsi who first brought attention to it, having made extensive use of it in writing the fifth *titulus* of his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, thereby supplying

⁹⁹ This is a generic title and must not be confused with the Latin translation of the ps.-Aristotelian mirror for princes, the *Kitab Sirr al-Asrār* or *Secret of Secrets*, made famous in the West by the thirteenth-century commentary by Roger Bacon (see n. 556 below).

¹⁰⁰ Alfred Buchler, “A Twelfth-Century Physician’s Desk Book: The *Secreta Secretorum* of Petrus Alfonsi Quondam Moses Sephardi,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37 (1986): 206-212 claims that this work was a compilation of three texts: i) the magical *Sefer ha-Razim*; ii) the proto-kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah*; and iii) an alchemical text.

¹⁰¹ McGinn, “Cabalists and Christians,” 13.

¹⁰² While the idea of linking the history of Christian ‘Cabala’ with Petrus Alfonsi was first suggested by François Secret, *Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1963), 8-9, it was McGinn, “Cabalists and Christians,” 14 who first suggested that there were three distinct strands of contemporary Judaism in Petrus Alfonsi’s time – “the Talmudic, the philosophical, and the mystical” – a division which became far more explicit in Christian texts by the late *quattrocento*.

¹⁰³ This work is attributed to one Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindī who is not to be confused with the Muslim peripatetic philosopher Abu Yūsuf Ya‘qūb ibn ‘Ishāq al-Kindī. The disputation itself takes the form of an exchange of letters between the Christian al-Kindī and a Muslim named Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī. See Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann and Philipp Roelli, eds., *Petrus Alfonsi and his Dialogus: Background, Context, Reception* (Florence: Sismel, 2014), 159-182 and 349-370.

Latin Christendom with far more reliable details about Islam than what it had access to before.¹⁰⁴ Alfonsi's work had a clear influence on Peter the Venerable. Benjamin Kedar maintains that the fifth chapter of the *Dialogus contra Iudaeos* "probably served as the single most important source of information [for the Latin West] about Islam."¹⁰⁵ José Martínez provides an overview of some of the main figures influenced by this work, in particular the Franciscan Alfonso de Espina, and the Dominicans Humbert of Romans, Vincent of Beauvais, Jacobus de Voragine, and Riccoldo of Monte Croce (who would later become Marsilio Ficino's primary source on all things Islamic).¹⁰⁶ Granted that the Christian conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade did much to expand knowledge about the military, politics, and culture of the Islamic world, nevertheless knowledge concerning the details of Islam's theological claims remained poor, and required the linguistic abilities of a Petrus Alfonsi as a bridge for it to pass into Europe. Before this, the Christian perspective was informed by such rudimentary beliefs as can be seen in the *Song of Roland* (i.e., that Muslims believed Mohammed to be one third of a satanic trinity alongside Apollo and Termagant).¹⁰⁷ Understanding of Islam did not grow in any meaningful way until an increasing number of polemical dialogues surfaced, each scrutinizing specific points of Islamic doctrine on Christian terms in some way or another.

Prior to this, Christians felt no real compulsion to endure the presence of Muslims as they did that of Jews, and therefore made little effort to understand them. They knew that Islam was younger than their own faith, and that Christendom's early experiences with Muslims were wholly marked by war and conquest. Urban II's inauguration of the crusading age only perpetuated this pattern, and in the twelfth century, conflicts between Christianity and Islam began to take on added eschatological dimensions as Islam became increasingly envisioned as an aspect of the Antichrist moving through history. Nevertheless, with the rise of crusader settlements established throughout the Levant and likewise contact in Spain, prospects for observation, exchange, and appropriation also arose. The taste for spices and luxury goods enabled by the presence of crusader kingdoms in the Levant led to a development of relationships between Muslims and Christians in matters of trade goods and ideas, particularly in Mediterranean port cities like Venice and Genoa. Eventually there arose some limited efforts to encourage Muslims to convert in thirteenth century figures like St. Francis of Assisi and his martyrdom-seeking followers, but these efforts were in no way comparable in scale to those efforts expended in attempting to convert local Jews.

In organizing his thoughts about Islam, Peter the Venerable had availed himself of as much freshly translated material as he could, and from it produced a body of new polemics which he would use as an introduction to his *Corpus Cluniacense*, namely, the *Summa totius haeresis ac diabolicae sectae Saracenorum siue Hismahelitarum* ("A Summary of the Entire

¹⁰⁴ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 92.

¹⁰⁶ de Hartmann and Roelli, *Petrus Alfonsi and his Dialogus*, 349-370.

¹⁰⁷ *Chanson de Roland*, 2589-90.

Heresy or Demonic Sect of the Saracens or Ishmaelites”) and the *Contra sectam sive heresim Saracenorum* (“Against the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens”). Works like these cemented the agenda for a Latin polemical tradition which, in the centuries to follow, would reach dazzling levels of volume and complexity. To Peter the Venerable, Islam was not so much a religion unto itself as much as a breakaway Christian heresy run amok in an unchecked East, and this would remain the standard view in the Latin West until well into Ficino’s day. As Peter explained in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, his aim was rooted in an historical precedent, in the writings of such renowned Church Fathers as Augustine or Irenaeus of Lyon “who passed over no heresy in silence ever, even the lightest (as I will thus call it), but rather resisted it with all the strength of their faith, and showed it, through writings and arguments, to be detestable and damnable.”¹⁰⁸ While this approach to dealing with Islam had no modern anthropological pretensions to understanding that faith on its own terms, it was nevertheless a step forward in the direction of a more objective approach because it represented attempts to understand an alien belief system by using its own sources rather than those produced in the wild imaginations of earlier polemicists.

To put matters into perspective, however, the famous Peter the Venerable’s *Contra Saracenos* survives in one single manuscript, while Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* survive in eighty.¹⁰⁹ Though he is but a fairly obscure figure on the margins of history to most today, Petrus Alfonsi’s influence resounds across Europe in a variety of intellectual milieus and must not be underrated. Within his own lifetime his Tetragrammatical speculations had spread into the apocalyptic *figurae* of Joachim of Fiore, and not long after in the thirteenth century, among the mendicant orders, for example, in Ramon Martí, who would borrow from his *Contra Iudaeos* extensively in producing his *Pugio fidei* (*The Dagger of Faith*), or in Vincent de Beauvais who included a long extract of it in his *Speculum historiale* (25.118-145).¹¹⁰ In Petrus Alfonsi one sees the murky beginnings of the formulation of a unique kind of Christian esotericism being negotiated at the boundaries of orthodoxy, that is, one that draws upon Jewish mysticism within a polemical context to explicate the invisible things of this world. In negotiating with Islamic science and theology, pagan philosophy, and Talmudic Judaism in a mode first set down by the Church Fathers, Petrus Alfonsi set the strategy for constructing what *should be* the official Christian stance on all the individual ideas which these foreign traditions put forward. This was achieved by providing answers to such well-worn questions as: What is

¹⁰⁸ “...ut morem illum patrum sequeretur, quo nullam unquam suorum temporum vel levissimam (ut sic dicam) haeresim silendo praeterirent, quin ei totis fidei viribus resisterent et scriptis ac disputationibus esse detestandam ac damnabilem demonstrarent.” Letter of Peter the Venerable to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, from Giles Constable, *Letters of Peter the Venerable*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), Letter 111.

¹⁰⁹ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 25-26.

¹¹⁰ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 28; de Hartmann and Roelli, *Petrus Alfonsi and his Dialogus*, 249-300. For the Tetragrammaton in Ramon Martí, see *Pugio fidei* (Leipzig 1587), 685 (3.3.4). For a discussion of the criticisms brought against Petrus Alfonsi by the later converso Alfonso of Valladolid (a.k.a. Abner of Burgos), see Ryan Szpiech, “Petrus Alfonsi... Erred Greatly’: Alfonso of Valladolid’s (d. ca. 1347) Imitation and Critique of Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogus*” in *Petrus Alfonsi and his Dialogus: Background, Context, Reception*, eds. Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, and Philipp Roelli (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2014), 321-348.

the nature of the soul? What is the real name of God? Is God one, or a unity of manifold parts?
Has the Messiah already come, and if so, when will he return?

1.4 Jewish Mysticism, “Kabbalistic Thinking,” Pythagoreanism, and the Spiritual Understanding in the Latin West

One of the chief debates which afflicted Late Antique intellectuals and set the tone for much of medieval philosophy was not so much trying to establish whether God did or did not exist, but to understand the extent to which God was simultaneously perfect, transcendent, and unapproachable, while also remaining immanent and knowable in some capacity. The real question, as stated by the contemporary American philosopher Lenn Goodman, was “how the One, or God, the Unconditioned, would compromise his absoluteness.”¹¹¹ As first elucidated by the twentieth-century scholar of Judaism Joseph Leon Blau, a student of Gershom Scholem who tackled the problem of God’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence as it related to the history of Kabbalah and laid out the blueprints for its study in *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance*: “this is a problem of religious sophisticates; [since] to the religiously naïve, God’s presence is a fact, not a problem – it is a dogma not a doubt.”¹¹² A number of ways by which various groups of learned individuals set themselves to solve this problem arose throughout the centuries: campaigns of mass centralization toward a more clearly demarcated sense of orthodoxy, or alternatively, disintegration into individual, short-lived idiosyncratic mysticisms. Mysticism, in its etymological sense, refers to a phenomenon whereby certain human experiences cannot be coherently articulated in language on account of the incommensurability between the mundane and the divine planes of experience. It is a mode of discourse that privileges silence in regards to transcendent matters. Where language fails to convey information about the world that lies beyond the sensible, one must simply remain silent. Where one cannot remain silent, however, one takes solace in speaking through riddles and allegories which serve to conceal as much as they do to reveal. The Ancient Greek word *muein* from which the term ‘mystic’ derives means ‘to shut one’s mouth’ (or eyes) and be silent, and this concept was most often related within the context of the Hellenistic mystery cults, for which inner revelation, ineffability, and secrecy were the *sine qua non* of the experience.¹¹³ For not only was it unlawful to speak of the mysteries in plain speech, it was also impossible. Within a strictly Christian context, however, speaking of a ‘mystical sense’ of Scripture, this almost invariably designated a kind of Trinitarian Christological interpretation whereby various episodes in the Bible could be read as allegories for the incarnation, death, and resurrection of

¹¹¹ Lenn E. Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (New York: University of New York Press, 1992), 2.

¹¹² Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 1. I here wish to make special note of my indebtedness to Blau for his pioneering work studying Christian approaches to Jewish mysticism, and for helping me to lay down some of the theoretical foundations of my own study here. The following paragraphs echo many concepts Blau first laid out in framing the field as a whole, and I reproduce his ideas here since – despite the fact that the history of the Christian appropriation of Jewish Kabbalah is a rapidly evolving field – his framework is still as relevant today as it was when first devised during the 1930s and 40s.

¹¹³ The Latin noun *mysticus*, “of or belonging to secret rites or mysteries, mystic, mystical” is derived from Ancient Greek μυστικός (“secret, mystic”), from μύστης (“one who has been initiated”), which in turn is derived from the Ancient Greek verb μύω (“to shut [one’s mouth or eyes]”) which is a cognate of Latin *mutus*.

Christ, and it should go without saying that this supercessionist approach to the highest interpretative sense was not shared by Jews.¹¹⁴

As Blau first explained, mysticisms tend to re-articulate rather than to challenge the basic principles of the religion which generated them. While they push individuals not so much toward heresy, they often exacerbate idiosyncratic beliefs and heterodoxies, causing the mystic typically to over-emphasize one traditional doctrine or another at the expense of simpler traditions, such as those held by fishermen, farmers, tent-makers, shepherds, and so forth. Within the Jewish tradition, Blau argued that there were three doctrines in particular which historically were subject to all manner of esoteric reinterpretations: i) the doctrine of God's transcendence; ii) the literal interpretation of Scripture, and iii) the redemption of humankind through the Messiah, drawn from the line of David.¹¹⁵ These were also the topics frequently debated during Jewish-Christian disputations. From the religion of the early Hebrews and its texts oft-redacted by many successive generations of interpreters, there derived a plurality of competing notions about God. In *Genesis* various aspects of God stand side by side, but the differences among them are hard to ignore. In the Garden of Eden, he walks about as a man in the cool of the day.¹¹⁶ In the later legends of the patriarchs, he appears stripped of his anthropomorphic character, making it necessary for him to don the appearance of a man to commune with humans, such as when he visited Abraham's tent, fully embodied.¹¹⁷ Here the *appearance* of God, with feet to wash and an appetite to be sated, literally bargains with Abraham as to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. From these early descriptions onward, the way the people of Israel conceived of God became increasingly more abstract and increasingly less human, as if he were being gradually sucked up into a Dionysian 'cloud of unknowing.' The flip-side of this process, of course, was the demotion of man, and the intensification of his sense of alienation from the divine realm, the place of God's many palaces.¹¹⁸ The Pharisees concretized the theology of the prophets into a God that was of utmost eminence, but no matter the degree to which they elevated Him or abstracted him from the human, in the lands of Israel, he never became transcendent.

It was not until the current era, in the intellectually-fertile climate of Hellenistic Alexandria, that the concept of God's transcendence clearly emerged in Jewish theological discourse.¹¹⁹ Only once faced with the philosophical systems of other nations, particularly the

¹¹⁴ For one of many examples of a Christological reading of Old Testament Scripture (here *Daniel* 2:36-45), see Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 27 (Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 237): "Daniel means the same thing when, speaking of Christ, he says that a stone hewn not with hands will destroy a statue made of iron, woven fabric, gold, and silver. The 'stone hewn' is Jesus, cut down by the power of the priests; he destroyed the statue (i.e., idolatry, which worshipped statues), 'not with hands' (i.e., without human force). A statue, I say, consisting of four parts: for it was scattered into four particular kingdoms of the world (namely, the Chaldeans, the Medians, the Greeks, and the Romans). Cf. Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium Scripturarum*, 1.7.1, 78^r-79^r.

¹¹⁵ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 1-2.

¹¹⁶ *Genesis* 3:8.

¹¹⁷ *Genesis* 18:1-33.

¹¹⁸ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 2 saw the full completion of this process evidenced in the book of *Isaiah* (esp. 40:12-26).

¹¹⁹ David Winston, "Philo's Conception of the Divine Nature" in Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 21.

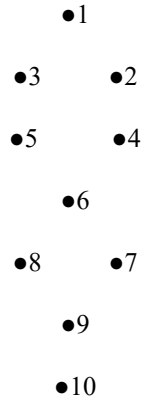
Greeks', did they develop a need to reconcile God's conflicting internal aspects in accordance with foreign principles and categories like those laid out in Plato's *Timaeus* or *Parmenides*.¹²⁰ Ultimately, through Philo Judaeus (c. BC 20 – c. AD 50), Moses was made into a kind of Platonic esotericist, given that his solution to the problem of God's extreme transcendence was found in the theories of Middle Platonic thought, namely, through the concepts of emanation and *Logos* (Λόγος).¹²¹ Here God was perfectly *ἄποιος* ('without quality'), and thus had but a single property: that of acting. And while God's essence remained forever absconded in the layers of its own self-transcendence, there were still vestiges or shadows of it perceivable within the images it generated out of its efflux of goodness.¹²² These were God's emanations. Over the following centuries, it was chiefly Philonian speculation of this nature, not so much the halakhic concerns of Rabbinic Judaism, that were taken up and debated among more philosophically inclined circles of Jews and Christians alike. Here God's transcendence – his mystical or esoteric aspect – was prominently emphasized as an extension of, *not a replacement*, of his more exoteric aspect familiar to popular piety.¹²³ In Jewish mysticism, the strong allure of emanationist theories gradually crystalized around the thirteenth century in the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* (סְפִירוֹת), which became one of the defining doctrines of "Kabbalah" as now defined by modern scholarship. In the medieval period God was extrapolated even further out from the *Ein Sof* (אין סוף, "the infinite," "the one without boundaries," or "the unending"), and made knowable through his ten vistas. These ten *sefirot* are, rendered into English alongside their Latin transliterations as (descending in order):

¹²⁰ *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).

¹²¹ On Philo and Middle Platonism see John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 BC to AD 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977); Peder Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Adam Kamesar, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹²² Winston, "Philo's Conception of the Divine Nature," in Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 21-22.

¹²³ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 3.



(S1) *Cheter* (Crown)

(S2) *Chocmah* (Wisdom), (S3) *Binah* (Understanding)

(S5) *Geburah* (Severity), (S4) *Gedulah/Hesed* (Greatness/Love)

(S6) *Tipheret* (Beauty)

(S8) *Hod* (Glory), (S7) *Nezach* (Victory),

(S9) *Iesod* (Foundation)

(S10) *Ma[l]chut* (Kingdom)¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Such is how they appear, for example, in Arcangelo of Borghonovo, *Conclusiones cabalisticæ numero LXXI. secundum opinionem propriam ipsius Mirandulae, ex ipsis Hebreorum sapientium fundamentis Christianam religionem maxime confirmantes* (Bologna, 1564), 76^v where he also associates each of the seven lower *sefirot* with their respective astrological powers: “Sic in archetypo regnant planetae supremi, et influunt in inferiores planetas materiales: Hoc modo tipheret praeest Soli, Lunae Machut, Marti Geburah, Mercurio Iesod, Iovi Gedula, Veneri Nezach, Sabbato Hod.” Note that Pico’s own *conclusio* 11.48 on these planet-to-*sefirot* associations does not actually name the *sefirot* with their traditional names, see Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 540-541: “Whatever other Cabalists say, I say that the ten spheres correspond to the ten numerations like this: so that, starting from the edifice, Jupiter corresponds to the fourth, Mars to the fifth, the Sun to the sixth, Saturn to the seventh, Venus to the eighth, Mercury to the ninth, the moon the tenth. Then, above the edifice, the firmament to the third, the primum mobile to the second, the empyrean heaven to the tenth [sic].” “Quicquid dicant caeteri cabalisticæ, ego decem sphaeras sic decem numerationibus correspondere dico, ut ab aedificio incipiendo Iupiter sit quartae, Mars quintae, Sol sextae, Saturnus septimae, Venus octavae, Mercurius nonae, Luna decimae; tum supra aedificium, firmamentum tertiae, Primum mobile secundae, caelum empyreum decimae.” Pico had all manner of other esoteric systems of correspondence which he deployed throughout his writings in order to discuss the ten *sefirot*. Copenhaver provides the following key to understanding how Pico deployed them in both his *Conclusiones* and *Heptaplus*: (S1): Ehyeh, *Fatum Supremum*, Father, Unity, Lord of the Nose, *aleph* א, *hu*; (S2): Yah, *Sapientia*, Son, Christ, Jesus, Messiah, Intellect, Beginning, Eden, Fear, *beth*, *iod*; (S3): YHWH (Elohim), *Intelligentia*, Holy Spirit, Reason, Green Line, Jubilee, Repentance, Love, *beth* ב, *he* ה, *scin* ש; (S4): El, *Amor*, Greatness/Love or Piety, Abraham, Michael, South, Water; (S5): Elohim Tseb’aot, *Judicium*, *Potentia*, Isaac, Gabriel, North, Fear, Fire; (S6): YHWH (Adonay), *Clementia*, Son Christ, Jesus, Messiah, Jacob, Uriel, East, Sun, Day, Shining Mirror, Heaven, *vav* ו; (S7): YHWH Tseb’aot, *Eternitas*; (S8): Elohim Tseb’aot, *Decor*; (S9): El Hay/Shaddai, *Fundamentum*, *Justus*, Redeemer, Water, *nun* נ, *ze* ז; (S10): Adonai, *Regnum*, Holy Spirit, David, Raphael, Israel, Sabbath, West, Bride, Daughter, Dwelling, Moon, Night, Unshining Mirror, Fear, Red Heifer, Hind with One Horn, Pure Wine, Sea, *tav* ת, *he* ה. Brian Copenhaver, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pico-della-mirandola/>.

In the pre- or proto-kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah* from Late Antiquity, however, the *sefirot* were simply to be thought of as “enumerations of nothingness” or ideal numbers like in a Pythagorean tetractys, while only in later works like the *Zohar* or the *Bahir*, they developed into something more akin to Gnostic *aeons* or Platonic emanations.¹²⁵ In contemporary Christian circles, however, ideas about God’s attributes/divine names had been laid down by the aforementioned sixth century Syrian mystic who followed in the philosophical footsteps of Proclus but composed under the guise of Dionysius the Areopagite.¹²⁶ In the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the names “common to the whole Deity” were “the Super-Good, the Super-God, the Superessential, the Super-Living, the Super-Wise, and whatever else belongs to the superlative abstraction;” to this the Christian Proclean added all those names “denoting Cause, the Good, the Beautiful, the Being, the Life-producing, the Wise, and whatever Names are given to the Cause of all Good, from His goodly gifts.”¹²⁷ All names such as these, the Kabbalists argued, were not God, but mere attributes which hid his true name, much like the attributes that were associated with the *sefirot*. It was not until the humanist theologians of the Renaissance, however, that enough intercultural exchange (or appropriation) had occurred for a similarity to be intuited between such Platonically-tinged theosophical concepts as those found in the books of the Areopagite and those found in the books of the Kabbalists, and for the latter to be explicated by recourse to the former.¹²⁸ Only through gradual landmarks in the joint study of the *Hebraica veritas* and the *Graeca veritas* were the foundations set for a Christological reinterpretation of kabbalistic texts, and the chief vehicle in achieving this process was the Latin polemical tradition, for whom Dionysius was the highest fountainhead of mystical doctrine.

Following along with Joseph Blau’s circumscription of the Kabbalah’s early beginnings, the prophetic notion of Scripture’s literal inspiration takes its seat next to the doctrine of transcendence. With the destruction of the second temple in AD 70 and the Roman-enforced exile of the Jews from the lands they blanketed over with their colony of Aelia Capitolina, the Jews turned to the written word as an avenue for rallying their fragmented society. Faced with a lack of centralized authority, the literal interpretation and adherence to Torah became the heart of Jewish culture from Spain to Kerala. For the average member of the Jewish community, the literal adherence to Torah posed no particular problem, but to those with more mystical or esoteric leanings, issues arose in reconciling some of the Torah’s more rustic elements with the absolute eminence of a supreme and singular God. There is, after all, much in the Bible which at

¹²⁵ See Sophia Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico: Aristotelianism, Kabbalism, and Platonism in the Philosophy of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 105-107. It seems as though Pico della Mirandola combined these two approaches, as can be seen in *Conclusio* 11.4 (Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 520): “*Ein-Sof* should not be counted with the other numerations, because it is the abstract and uncommunicated unity of those numerations, not the coordinated unity.” “*Ensoph non est aliis numerationibus connumeranda, quia est illarum numerationum unitas abstracta et incommunicata, non unitas coordinata.*”

¹²⁶ See Feisal G. Mohamed, “Renaissance Thought on the Celestial Hierarchy: The Decline of a Tradition?” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, 4 (2004): 559-582.

¹²⁷ *Divine Names*, 2.3 in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans., John Parker (London and Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1897), 16.

¹²⁸ See n. 724 below.

a first glance seems too mundane to be the handiwork of a transcendent God. The solution to these issues emerged from the development of complex systems of scriptural exegesis based on the notion that a vulgar, literal reading of the Torah veils a number of deeper senses, allegorical, comparative, and mystical. From these exegetical methods, there proliferated countless commentaries, many of which found their way into the contents of the Talmud. The medieval Kabbalists who came later were both an outgrowth *and* a critique of these rabbinical modes of interpretation: theirs was the desire to return to the letter of the law, emphasizing the divinely revealed character of the text itself. For them, every letter was filled with divine intention, couched in innumerable mysteries. From its earliest roots then, Kabbalah was tangled up with the idea of returning *ad fontes* and recovering scriptural purity, down to the smallest jot and tittle. Despite this concern for purity (or perhaps, as a direct consequence of it), the Kabbalists did not spurn the rabbinical techniques of Scriptural interpretation. On the contrary, they adopted them wholesale and added more. They maintained that Moses' revelation on Sinai was twofold: on one hand he received the letter of the law, while on the other, he received the secret systems of interpretation for decoding their hidden character. The former was transmitted in writing, to be known by all members of the community, while the latter was to be orally transmitted only.¹²⁹ This process of secret transmission and reception – this tradition – is thus a large part of what culminated in the thirteenth century in what is called “Kabbalah” (קַבְּלָהּ, literally: reception, tradition).

Judaism, and consequently Christianity, is a fundamentally historical religion. Despite the pessimist's cries in *Ecclesiastes* that all is vain and that nothing new exists under the sun, neither the Jewish nor the Christian worldview arose from an ahistorical framework. The third and final doctrine Blau listed as being emphasized by the early rabbis and the medieval Kabbalists, therefore, was the prophetic and Messianic doctrine of redemption.¹³⁰ The Kabbalists' take on this doctrine was merely a restatement of the traditional Jewish belief in a coming Messianic Age, a concept directly born out of the books of the prophets with such claims as Isaiah's “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”¹³¹ Here, however, salvation was not personal, but pertained to the people of Israel as a whole: this Messiah was an earthly king. When the hour would come, a new age of justice and mercy would dawn led by a descendant from the line of David. Blau emphasized that this was “definitely a this-worldly doctrine; it predicates not a heavenly paradise, but an earthly paradise” and therefore implicated the unfurling of history itself.¹³² Combined together then, these speculative doctrines on the literal interpretation of Scripture, on God's transcendence, and on the redemption of the world through the Messiah-who-shall-come became the backbone of

¹²⁹ See *4 Ezra (II Esdras)* 14:42-48; Pico della Mirandola used *4 Ezra* in his *Oratio* within the context of discussing how the ancient Jewish sages who divvied up knowledge into its exoteric and esoteric parts; it was thereafter recapitulated by Arcangelo Borghonovo in his *Apologia*. See n. 1087 below.

¹³⁰ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 6.

¹³¹ *Isaiah* 9:6.

¹³² Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 6.

Jewish Kabbalah, and upon this model the later Renaissance Christian Cabalists starting with Pico patterned their own activities as well. Among these Christians, however, the idea that there existed close parallels between Christian and Jewish doctrines was hardly new. While Christians had traditionally derived much of their knowledge about Jews from the Bible and the Church Fathers, their awareness underwent considerable growth during the period from the late-twelfth to the fourteenth century in Italy, Spain, and Southern France as contacts between Jewish and Christian communities intensified. The story of Kabbalah then, nebulously defined as it is, should not be seen in isolation from other mystical currents which either crisscrossed its paths or ran parallel to it, whether in the Latin West, or in the wider Mediterranean world.

Thanks to the comprehensive work done in recent decades by the renowned Romanian-Israeli historian Moshe Idel, it is generally accepted that Spanish Kabbalah came to Italy in two major waves. The first wave occurred at the end of the thirteenth century and was influenced by the works of Abraham Abulafia (1240–91) and Menahem Recanati (1250–1310). These two Kabbalists, though in no way exemplary of the whole tradition (if such a monolithic tradition could even be said to exist) were among the chief authors appropriated by Latin humanists during the Renaissance in their attempts to provide a Christian interpretation of kabbalistic principles. Having spent time in an Italian Christian milieu, they shared in certain religious and cultural proclivities with Italian Christians. The second wave, however, brought Kabbalists whose inner life had been formed from within a different intellectual context, with different texts and spiritual inclinations, and who found it at best difficult or at worst undesirable to adapt themselves to the Italian styles of ‘doing Kabbalah.’¹³³ In this way, by the time of the 1492 Alhambra decree and the great expulsion of Jews from all the lands controlled by the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile (including both Sicily and Sardinia), numerous kinds of Kabbalah coexisted in Italy with different aims and different practices. Idel maintains that where Spanish Kabbalah was “particularist, antiphilosophical, and conservative,” Italian Kabbalah, whether Jewish or Christian, was “much more universalist, more inclined to magic, and subject to interpretation through the use of a variety of philosophical trends.”¹³⁴ Given this diversity, a monolithic narrative about Kabbalah in general would be unfruitful, and one must instead focus on particular people or particular texts, without expecting that what is said of one author applies to all of them. In like fashion, pinpointing the precise root of Christian ‘Cabala’ has been a contentious issue among scholars. Exactly when a given phenomenon is thought to come into existence depends on whether a modern author is taking a substantive, a nominalist, or a functionalist approach to the labels they employ. The foremost definition of Kabbalah among scholars today considers the presence of the ten *sefirot* as its essential feature. According to this substantive approach, Jewish Kabbalah materialized in Southern France in the last decades of the twelfth century, and Christian ‘Cabala’ not long after in the final decades of the thirteenth

¹³³ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280-1510* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 212.

¹³⁴ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 218. It is this propensity towards “magic” inherent to Italian Kabbalah that lay at the root of both Abraham Abulafia’s (and then Pico’s) inversion of the traditional practical vs. speculative divide. See n. 813 below.

century.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, if Kabbalah is functionally defined as an occult tradition concerning divine names and esoteric philology, a tradition which had existed for many centuries earlier, and was indissolubly linked with earlier religious, philosophical, magical, and theurgical practices, the situation widens inordinately and becomes far more difficult to pin down. Texts dealing with divine names on a theoretical level existed in Christian contexts from as early as the sixth century, foremost among them being ps.-Dionysius' *On Divine Names*.¹³⁶ From then on, concerns with such ideas persisted well into the twelfth century as can be seen in works like those of Petrus Alfonsi or Joachim of Fiore, both of whom shared anti-Jewish polemics rooted in pro-spiritual and anti-carnal justifications. It is also possible these men were exposed in some way to the 'science of letters and names' (*'ilm al-hurūf wa-l-asmā'*) as it had widely been practised in the Islamic world. By the end of the thirteenth century, Christian authors like Ramon Llull and Arnald of Villanova were writing whole treatises on the science of divine names and attributes.¹³⁷ In this way, depending on where one defines the parameters, one could even include such an author as Joachim of Fiore as an early Christian Kabbalist. This point is not emphasized to suggest Joachim *should* be thought of as a Kabbalist, but to demonstrate that the label for what could have made an individual "a Kabbalist" is rather loose, and one should instead look to the specific interests and concerns which these men of the past had rather than trying to force a label upon them. Whether or not one would consider Joachim a Kabbalist, someone like Pico della Mirandola certainly recognized him as an adept of the one true, Pythagorean science of 'formal numbers' which went on to become a cornerstone of his understanding of 'natural prophecy,' a concept inextricably linked with his study of the kabbalistic texts.¹³⁸ Ultimately, what all the diverse traditions dealing with divine names, attributes, powers and enumerations had in common, whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, was a shared belief that symbols, words, and ultimately numbers were in some way divine, as the ancient Platonists and the Pythagoreans had long maintained before them.

As noted above, modern scholarship tends to follow Gershom Scholem's definition of Kabbalah, which makes the theosophical doctrine of the ten *sefirot* its essential feature. In Scholem's own words "the mystical interpretation of the attributes and the unity of God, in the so-called doctrine of the *sephiroth*, constituted a problem common to all Kabbalists, while the solutions given to it by and in the various schools differ from one another."¹³⁹ More recently Moshe Idel has rightly taken issue with this definition because it implies the existence of "a

¹³⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 227.

¹³⁶ Ficino translated and wrote a commentary on this work in the last decade of his life, see Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: Commentaries on Plato: Volume I, Phaedrus and Ion* (The I Tatti Renaissance Library 34, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) and *Marsilio Ficino: On Dionysius the Areopagite: vol. 1: On Mystical Theology and the Divine Names* and vol. 2: *On The Divine Names* (The I Tatti Renaissance Library 66 and 67, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹³⁷ See Chapter

3.6 Ramon Llull and Arnald of Villanova below.

¹³⁸ See n. 992 below.

¹³⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 13.

relatively homogeneous mystical phenomenon, more theoretical than practical, [underlying the] entire range of kabbalistic literature.”¹⁴⁰ Idel rejects the idea that theosophical concerns were the *sine qua non* of Kabbalah, though he certainly admits they were ubiquitous. Abraham Abulafia, for example, did not busy himself speculating on the ten *sefirot*, but was certainly a Kabbalist (especially from Pico della Mirandola’s perspective). For Idel, as for myself, Kabbalah should be more nebulously defined so as to include those schools of thought that emphasized letrism, numerology, the manipulation of divine names, and the hunt for prophetic states of consciousness, not solely the pursuit of theoretical, speculative, or “theosophical” knowledge about the attributes of God through the *sefirot*. After all, the word Kabbalah means “that which is received,” and the earliest attested usage of the word had nothing to do with mysticism.¹⁴¹ The use of the word “Kabbalah” as a signifier for anything more than halakhic (i.e., legal) matters was a rather late development, unattested in any substantial way until the twelfth century.¹⁴² When the word is used by Jews today, however, Kabbalah designates a multitude of esoteric traditions passed down from rabbi to rabbi through the centuries. These constitute everything from the hidden half of the Sinaitic revelation made to Moses (namely the orally-transmitted tools with which to interpret the Law), to the secret lore taught by later rabbis like Akiba and Shimeon bar Yohai.

Beginning in the twelfth and increasingly in the thirteenth century, the word Kabbalah began to signify a number of specific things beyond purely “that which is received.” Moshe Idel argued that not long after the beginning of the shift in this word’s semantic range, there occurred a bifurcation, dividing “Kabbalah” into two prominent branches: 1) the “theosophical-theurgical” branch, and 2) the “prophetic” or “ecstatic” branch, both of which were formulated in different places and concerned with different goals. The first Idel identifies as being “concerned much more with the impact on the divinity” – that is, what he calls ‘theurgy’ – and “which was conceived not as a simple unified entity but as a complex and dynamic system” – that is, what he calls ‘theosophy.’ It was the latter ‘prophetic’ mode and not so much the former ‘theosophical-theurgical’ mode which was concerned with attaining first-hand spiritual experiences akin to those of earlier *hekhalot* or *merkabah* mystics. What we know of *hekhalot* mysticism comes chiefly from a body of visionary literature dealing with the palaces of heaven and the divine chariot in addition to a number of magical ascension or angelic conjuration techniques.¹⁴³ For the

¹⁴⁰ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 107.

¹⁴¹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 22; Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 52.

¹⁴² Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 22.

¹⁴³ According to Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 5-6 there is some evidence that *hekhalot* literature was known in Italy from a relatively early period. The Iraqi rabbi Hai ben Sherira (a.k.a. Hai Gaon, 939-1038), for example, was asked by some Egyptian Jews to confirm the veracity of some books wherein divine names were employed for magical purposes. These Egyptian Jews purported that “sages from the land of Israel and from the land of Edom” had seen miracles performed through the formulae related in those books. Skeptical of popular superstitions surrounding the working of divine names, the rabbi responded with a jab at the credibility of those witnesses, claiming that such operations performed by “the persons from Rome and from the land of Israel” could also be found in his own region, subtly refuting the idea that these individuals were “sages” by referring to them simply as “persons.” Unfortunately, no other information survives in regards to the identity of those “persons from Rome” who employed divine names to perform miracles. All that is known is that there were Jews in Italy, and that magic through the use of divine

men who practised this prophetic Kabbalah, prophetic experiences themselves were believed to have redemptive power. This seminal distinction between ‘theurgical’ and ‘prophetic/ecstatic’ branches of Kabbalah was first proposed by Abraham Abulafia, the (in)famous late thirteenth-century Kabbalist and self-proclaimed Messiah, and in recent decades the dichotomy has generally been adopted and elaborated in modern scholarship.¹⁴⁴ Kabbalah in the Italian region, although it shared a good deal of overlap with the speculations of its Iberian counterparts, tended also to be shaped by more “prophetic” concerns and put a good deal of emphasis on divine names. The ‘theosophical-theurgical’ Kabbalah devised in Spain concerned itself more with *effecting change* within the supernal man, the *’Adam ’Elyon* (אָדָם עֲלִיּוֹן), the chief symbol upon which to hang the dynamic arrangement of the ten *sefirot*. Its goal was “the restoration of the harmonious relationship within this dynamic structure, especially the union between the ninth and the tenth *sefiroth* envisioned as male and female respectively.”¹⁴⁵ Here human action – the performance of good deeds according to the 613 commandments of Torah – was believed to have a direct theurgical impact on the body of the supernal Adam. What the human body did below, therefore, was echoed in the supercelestial, sublime, and ‘formal’ man above. A primordial catastrophe had ruptured man from his original state as the perfect image of God, and this rupture could only be repaired by the active performance of the commandments.

In general, medieval and Renaissance era Christians in the Latin West were not estranged by the idea that God had revealed himself through Hebrew texts, so long as it was understood that the Jews who still read them were themselves incapable of understanding what it is they were really reading because they were interpretatively blind. As Christians perceived Jews, they lacked the fundamental awareness required to see that the Hebrew Scriptures’ role served first and foremost to prefigure the coming of Christ and to anticipate the New Testament which fulfilled the old laws. In their own words, the Jews lacked the spiritual understanding (*intellectus/intelligentia spiritualis*) to see the Bible in all of its glorious prefigurements and correspondences.¹⁴⁶ In subsequent chapters, we will see this concept of a ‘spiritual (i.e., immaterial) understanding/sense’ invoked again and again. Its deployment comprises the first essential component of what is here called ‘the Latin polemical tradition.’ This was not only perceived among Christians to be the fundamental distinction between Christianity and Judaism, but also the key to a new earthly utopia looming just over the horizon, if only it could be possessed by all.¹⁴⁷ It is in light of ideas such as these that various artistic depictions of ‘*Ecclesia*

names played some role in their beliefs. See also J. R. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) and Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹⁴⁴ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 23.

¹⁴⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 237

¹⁴⁶ Ambrus, “The Eschatological Future,” 180.

¹⁴⁷ See for example, Joachim of Fiore, *Liber Concordiae Novi ac Veteris*, 422 quoting from *Malachi* 4:4-6, translated in E. R. Daniel, “Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews,” in *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. S. J. McMichael and S. E. Myers (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 19: “And the Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached throughout the entire world; and the *spiritual understanding* will come to the Jews and like a thunderbolt shatter the hardness of their heart, so that the promise that is written in Malachi

et Synagoga’ – two female figures representing Christianity and Judaism respectively – endured throughout the Middle Ages. *Ecclesia* stood triumphant, holding aloft the cross in her right hand and the holy grail in her left; meanwhile, *Synagoga* stood dejected, wearing a blindfold and holding the books of the Law, unable to read whatever it is she has received.¹⁴⁸ As the awareness of their existence grew in Christian circles, texts of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, just like the Hebrew Bible itself, were increasingly thought to provide a roadmap with the true message that God wished his people to know, but from the perspective that it was the underlying, secret or esoteric philosophy which Christ himself practised and preached in parables. Kabbalah properly understood was the *intellectus spiritualis*, and the *intellectus spiritualis* was the Kabbalah. Jews may have had produced the works, but they had not necessarily understood them, and for this reason the *Gospel of John* had proclaimed that “the light shone into the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.”¹⁴⁹ Kabbalah, as Pico and his humanist contemporaries would later come to argue during the fifteenth century, could be mined for truths about the mysteries of the Christian religion without conceding that Jews had any special prophetic or spiritual power: it was those who interpreted Kabbalah correctly, *not those who handed it down*, who were thought to be its true inheritors, just as it had been with the books of the Law. To read or hear the utterances and premonitions of an oracle was one thing, but *understanding and interpreting* them correctly and acting accordingly was another thing altogether.

Biblical studies and a developing interest in classical sources constituted what Blau called “the poles between which the Christian interpretation of the Cabala arose.”¹⁵⁰ A close reading of the Bible necessitated the study of both the Greek and Hebrew languages; the former was a necessary prerequisite to the study of Greek philosophy, and the latter, to Kabbalah. Though largely superficial, the resemblances between Kabbalah and Platonism became an essential component for facilitating Kabbalah’s entry into Christian circles during the Renaissance. The perceived analogies between a great number of kabbalistic teachings with many aspects of ancient Platonic doctrine (e.g., the immortality of the soul, the correspondence of the lower material world with the higher incorporeal world, the theme of spiritual ascent, the privileging of the word, the privileging of *nomos* (law) over *physis* (nature), of form over matter, etc.) served to imbue Kabbalah with an air of extreme antiquity commensurate with the works of Plato, Pythagoras, or Hermes Trismegistus, thereby making it something which Renaissance thinkers

will be fulfilled: “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and horrible day of the Lord. And he will convert the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the father; lest perhaps I come and I strike the land with anathema.”

¹⁴⁸ Miri Rubin, “Ecclesia et Synagoga: The Changing Meanings of a Powerful Pairing” in *Conflict and Religious Conversation in Latin Christendom*, eds. Israel Yuval and Ram Ben-Shalom (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 57. Cf. Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁹ *John* 1:5.

¹⁵⁰ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 13. Note that throughout his work, Blau explicitly avoided the formulation “Christian Cabala” and instead used the term “the Christian interpretation of the Cabala” to keep the distinction clear. Note that throughout this study I consciously attempt to maintain this distinction for the sake of both clarity and respect.

became eager to recover on their quest to reconstitute the distant past. Pico's ideas in particular were responsible for making kabbalistic speculations part and parcel of Renaissance Platonism in general. To his Jewish philosopher contemporaries who were largely Aristotelians in their approach to metaphysics, however, there was no real relationship between Platonism and Kabbalah. Which of these two parties' intuitions were correct is not to be debated here as the answers to such a question falls well outside the scope of this project, but here it suffices to say that men like Pico's teacher Yohanan Alemanno were captivated by the ideas of Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Kabbalah somewhat seamlessly, holding in the highest place of privilege those elements which were common to, or in harmony with, each of these broader trends.¹⁵¹ Both Pico and Alemanno's approaches were uncritical, with many perceived links bearing no real historical connection beyond surface resemblances. Nevertheless, in order to satisfy their aims they needed to start somewhere, and thus the earliest understandings of Kabbalah in Christian circles was built up by superimposing explicitly Platonic and Pythagorean ideas upon the Kabbalah, producing something altogether chimeric and distinct.¹⁵²

Throughout the medieval period, Southern Italy could be said to be among the most multicultural parts of the Latin West. From ancient times, however, this former region of *Magna Graecia* had historically been well-known as an intellectual breeding ground for one widely influential philosophical system in particular: Pythagoreanism. Though Pythagoras himself is a figure whose history is half lost to myth, the complex of ideas promulgated by his followers, the Pythagoreans and Neopythagoreans, never completely vanished from European culture during the medieval period. Pythagorean ideas were preserved in the works of various Middle and Late Platonists like Porphyry and Iamblichus, and from there they were assimilated by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers and theologians.¹⁵³ During the Renaissance, in keeping with an idea from Numenius preserved in Eusebius, so-called "Pythagoreanism" enjoyed an explicit resurgence as a point of commonality between Ficino, Pico, and Johannes Reuchlin.¹⁵⁴ For Ficino, Pythagoreanism had provided the authoritative foundations for his own philosophical master Plato, and for Pico soon after, it was conceived of as the direct descendant of that body of secrets imparted to Moses on Sinai. From this perspective, Renaissance scholars thought Pythagoras of Samos, the founder of an ascetic school in Crotona (today's Crotona, in Calabria), was actually the earliest Italian transmitter of *Hebrew* philosophy, especially in matters pertaining to the metaphysics of number and letter. In this belief, Pico was explicit:

That divine philosophy of Pythagoras, which they call magic, belongs to a great extent to the Mosaic tradition; since Pythagoras had managed to reach the Jews and their doctrine in Egypt, and knowledge of

¹⁵¹ See

6.4 The Count of Mirandola's Jewish Teachers: Yohanan Alemanno below.

¹⁵² Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 163.

¹⁵³ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ See n. 871 below for Flavius Mithridates' deployment of this imagined lineage in 1481, but note that Ficino had discussed it first in a polemical anti-Jewish chapter of his 1474 *De Christiana religione*, see n. 938 below. Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 17 who mentions Flavius Mithridates use of the idea, but does not mention Ficino.

many of their sacred mysteries... Zoroaster, the son of Oromasius, in practicing magic, took that to be the cult of God and the study of divinity; while engaged in this in Persia he most successfully investigated every virtue and power of nature, in order to know those sacred and sublime secrets of the divine intellect; which subject many people called theurgy, others Cabala or magic.¹⁵⁵

Not only were the sacred mysteries of Pythagoras here made to correspond with ‘the secrets of the divine intellect,’ but also with Kabbalah. Taking up Pico’s baton, Reuchlin later made the same equation as the young count of Mirandola, proclaiming himself to have restored the ancient Southern Italian school of Pythagoreanism through his studies of the Kabbalah, first explicated in his 1494 *De verbo mirifico*.¹⁵⁶ Years later, his dedication to Pope Leo X in *De arte cabalistica* (1517) boldly proclaimed:

For Italy’s part, Marsilio Ficino has published Plato, Jacob Faber of Étapes has brought out Aristotle for France. I shall complete the pattern, and for Germany I, Capnion [Reuchlin], shall bring out the reborn Pythagoras with your name at its head. His philosophy, however, I have been able to glean only from the Hebrew Kabbalah, since it derives its origin from the teachers of Kabbalah, and then was lost to our ancestors, disappearing from southern Italy into the kabbalistic writings. For this reason, it was almost all destined for destruction, and I have therefore written of the symbolic philosophy of the art of Kabbalah so as to make Pythagorean doctrine better known to scholars.¹⁵⁷

In making this equation between Pythagoreanism and ancient Hebrew wisdom, the humanist theologians Ficino, Pico, and Reuchlin were not so much talking about resurrecting the practices of asceticism, vegetarianism, and preparing themselves for higher levels of attainment via death and metempsychosis. More narrowly, what these Renaissance men believed themselves to be resurrecting was its peculiar approach to contemplative mysticism, and in particular its focus on the idea that *spirit was intrinsic to numbers, letters, and the words they formed*, and read in their spiritual sense, ultimately served as gateways toward reunion with God. This was the reason behind why the twelfth-century Calabrian prophet Joachim of Fiore – who will be examined in the following chapter – was admitted among the sages of Pico’s mathematical *Conclusiones*, as

¹⁵⁵ As quoted and translated by Daniel P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 50.

¹⁵⁶ *De verbo mirifico* (Basel: Johann Amerbach, 1494); Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 10: Reuchlin was a friend and student of Pico until the young count’s death in 1494. They met in Florence in 1490 while Reuchlin was on a diplomatic mission to Italy, during which time Pico persuaded him to double down on his Hebrew studies which he had undertaken so as to read more proficiently the Old Testament in its original language. Cf. Charles Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De Verbo Mirifico* and the Magic Debate of the Late Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976): 108: “Little is known in these meetings, except that in 1492 Reuchlin is known to have received copies of Pico’s *Heptaplus* and Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica* and translations of Plotinus. From Reuchlin’s work it is also known that he was very well acquainted with Pico’s *Conclusiones*. On the 1490 trip Reuchlin also travelled to Rome. His contact there with scholars such as Jakob Questenberg – who lived in the palace of his patron Marcus, Cardinal of San Marco, was a *familiaris* of Innocent VIII and later held a position in the papal chancellery – would surely have made him familiar with the attacks against Pico and the debate concerning the possibilities of magic which had been launched by Pedro Garsias (probably with Innocent VIII’s approval) less than a year earlier.” In a note he added: “Garsias’s *Determinationes* were published in October 1489. Reuchlin seems to have been in Rome during spring/summer 1490, leaving Rome by 9 August 1490.”

¹⁵⁷ Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 39; Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 15-16.

the practitioner of ‘natural prophecy’ and the interpreter of ‘formal numbers’ *par excellence*. Not arbitrary, but *real* were the links between signifiers and the things signified, an idea which flew in the face of the late medieval nominalist schoolmen who held fast to the doctrines of the *via moderna*.¹⁵⁸ The Kabbalists who practised various types of gematria were most certainly in agreement that all of reality was undergirded by number, and such formal numbers were best represented by the first and earliest alphabet: the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁵⁹ In this way, the very words which constituted Holy Scripture – those words which had been beamed from the mind of God into the mind of Moses through the medium of spirit – also masked higher, more abstract linguistic and numerical realities, waiting only for one with a spiritual understanding (*intellectus spiritualis*) to pierce through the surface meanings and on into its deeper mysteries, correspondences, and concordances. It was for good reasons that Philo and Augustine, writing under the influence of the Platonic tradition, had both occasionally relied on Pythagorean numerology to explain certain biblical texts.¹⁶⁰ In *De civitate Dei*, the aged Bishop of Hippo had expressly written:

We should not belittle the theory of numbers for its great value is eminently clear to the attentive student in many passages of holy Scriptures. The praises of God do not for nothing include this statement: “Thou hast ordered all things by measure and number and weight.”¹⁶¹

Thanks to ancient and authoritative precedents such as these, delving into ostensibly Pythagorean ideas in the study of Scripture would not have seemed unorthodox to medieval Christians, but perfectly natural.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ For a discussion of the *vis verborum* in Reuchlin’s polemics see Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De Verbo Mirifico*,” 113 and 121, esp. “Capnion has set up a series of links. God is *spiritus*, the word the *spiratio*, man the *spirans*. God is conceived by our minds, and this conception is produced by the word. So God has chosen both the ‘insensible seat of the mind’ as well as the ‘sensible mansion of words.’ By means of these words, God makes a covenant with men, and humanity is united with God.” Cf. n. 1018 and 1019 below.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 466-469, n. 7.10.

¹⁶⁰ A critical component to this story involves Reuchlin’s 1494 *De verbo mirifico*, which itself was built up from concepts laid down in Pico’s *Conclusiones*, but which were not fully explained. In Reuchlin’s work the Tetragrammaton is equated with the Pythagorean tetractys, the numerological quaternity that sits transcendently at the root of all reality. Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De Verbo Mirifico*,” 128-129 explains: “The *Yod* (I or Y), with the form of a point and the numerical value of 10, expresses the originally undivided unity and principle of extension in all things. It signifies therefore the beginning, communication and end of all things. The *He* (H), with the numerical value of 5, expresses the combination of binary and ternary (the trinity of God and the duality of the world), and so signifies procession rather than essence. The *Vav* (U or V or W), with the numerical equivalent of 6, a total made up of unity, binary and ternary (1+2+3; 2x3), signifies the perfecting element. It is the perfection of the emanation process, the sign of the whole corporeal world which has progressed from the original unity. The second *He* (H), as a 5 halfway between 1 and 10, expresses the human soul as medium between the higher and the lower, and indirectly thereby, the return of all to its beginning.” *De verbo mirifico*, e 4^v-e 6^r.

¹⁶¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. David S. Wiesen, vol. 3 (Loeb Classical Library, 1968), bk. 11.30 and *Wisdom of Solomon* 11:20; cf. G. Lloyd Jones, “Introduction” in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 20.

¹⁶² On the role of Pythagorean philosophy, music, asceticism, moderation, and self-control among the Latin schoolmen, see Bernd Roling, “Pythagoras and Christian Eschatology: The Debate on the Transmigration of Souls in Early Scholasticism,” in *Pythagorean Knowledge from the Ancient to the Modern World*, eds. Almut-Barbara Renger and Alessandro Stavru (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 103. It is notable that in *De civitate Dei*, 7.35,

The following chapter will explore how multidimensional readings of Scripture and the application of the spiritual understanding contributed to the Latin West's development of a prophetic view of world history. Along the way I explore some of the ways in which the esoteric philology discussed by Petrus Alfonsi (of proto-kabbalistic provenance) played an important role in Joachim of Fiore's apocalyptic sense of history, and was later taken up by missionaries and writers of the Franciscan and Dominican orders who became advocates for apostolic poverty, and ultimately havens for Jewish conversos from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries when anti-Jewish persecution by European rulers reached an unprecedented high point. The Benedictine abbot Joachim of Fiore dreamed of a coming world wherein the heresy of Islam was extinguished while Jews and Christians were reunited into a single fold, bound together by the love of the Holy Spirit that had always been moving through history toward this single momentous event.¹⁶³ This yearning for the perfection of the world through the reunion of Christians and Jews had a great number of constituent parts, each with their own respective histories which I hope to elucidate in the following chapters.

Augustine had attacked Pythagoras himself as a necromancer who relied occult rituals and divined with blood, but according to Roling, 105 such an idea "exerted almost no influence on the medieval image of Pythagoras."

¹⁶³ Cf. *Ezekiel* 34:8-31.

2 - The Prophetic Sense of History from Augustine to Joachim of Fiore

The language used to explain the flow of events through time is culturally specific: lines, trees, rivers, corkscrews, spindles, pendulums, wheels or cycles, each of these kinds of metaphors provide their own different texture to one's relationship with the passing of time. Many systems for reckoning history across various cultures have evolved and developed in isolation from the others, and thus can differ in several ways, but they all share in common such reliable patterns as the Earth's spinning on its axis, the revolutions of the Moon, and the Earth's revolution around the Sun (i.e., the basis for days, months, and years). Any conception of time that goes beyond labelling these basic facts of nature must necessarily be the product of additional semiological mapping, and as it turns out, there is a wide variety of ways in which this mapping has been done. Since the time of Herodotus, the Greeks recognized that there was a difference between 'the past' itself and 'narratives about the past,' and that *inquiry* (ἵστορία) and the knowledge derived from inquiry were the most effective ways to construct such narratives. By the seventh century BC, Hesiod had mapped out the ages of man in his *Works and Days* (the *locus classicus* for the idea of a "Golden Age" in the western world), but he had done so as a didactic poet working with foreign wisdom literature, not as a strict inquirer.¹⁶⁴ Rarely travelling outside of their corner of the Mediterranean, and with limited access to outside sources, the early Greek historians sought out and made use of available information in a totally different manner than the text-oriented Late Antique and medieval intellectuals to come. The Greek historians' purposes were more focused in scope and unambiguously laid out for all to see. In classical antiquity, the practice of history, namely of asking probing questions to determine why things are the way they are, was guided by explicitly stated aims such as, at least in Herodotus, preserving the "great and wondrous deeds" of both Greeks and barbarians, that their glory might not fade.¹⁶⁵ Whether Herodotus, Thucydides, or Livy, these authors all wrote what today would be considered "grand

¹⁶⁴ Hesiod, "Works and Days" in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), lines 109-126: "First of all the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods. But after the earth had covered this generation—they are called pure spirits dwelling on the earth, and are kindly, delivering from harm, and guardians of mortal men; for they roam everywhere over the earth, clothed in mist and keep watch on judgements and cruel deeds, givers of wealth; for this royal right also they received; — then they who dwell on Olympus made a second generation which was of silver and less noble by far. It was like the golden race neither in body nor in spirit. A child was brought up at his good mother's side a hundred years, an utter simpleton, playing childishly in his own home. But when they were full grown and were come to the full measure of their prime, they lived only a little time and that in sorrow because of their foolishness, for they could not keep from sinning and from wronging one another, nor would they serve the immortals, nor sacrifice on the holy altars of the blessed ones as it is right for men to do wherever they dwell. Then Zeus the son of Cronos was angry and put them away, because they would not give honor to the blessed gods who live on Olympus." Cf. *Daniel* 2:31-35.

¹⁶⁵ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.1.0.

narratives,” but not grand narratives with any kind of professed metaphysical underpinning reality or organizing telos. Theirs was a history of chains of specific causes and events, and of ethnographic curiosities, not of emanating universal principles unfolding themselves through time. Over a thousand years later, however, the idea of writing history to preserve the great and wondrous deeds of men sat tenuously with Christian intellectuals, for whom the glory of all but God seemed vain and transient. Throughout the Early Middle Ages, the monastic position in the Latin West, informed primarily by Augustinian biblical hermeneutics, was that the world was already in the end of its days and that Christ’s return lay in some near but uncertain future. The tribulations of Antichrist had already come to pass, and there was nothing left to do but to carry out the Great Commission (*Matthew* 28:16-20) as history came to its end. What was most significant to these men, and to most men leading up to the end of the early modern period, were the forms of knowledge which led to a clearer understanding of God, in whatever form that might take. The scholastic theologian Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1175–1253) and his disciple Roger Bacon (ca. 1214–92), for example, did not study al-Kindī’s science of optics as an end in and of itself, but because first the Bible and thereafter Dionysius the Areopagite had claimed that “God is light.”¹⁶⁶ Christian historiography in the Early Middle Ages was largely dominated by hagiographies and legends, or practical texts like chronicles or records of great migrations and the deeds of kings – lists of names, dates, and major events with a clear sense of chronological organization, but not necessarily organized toward generating any external meaning. These histories did not signify very much outside from the content itself; they were more like inventories in this way, or pieces of propaganda. The idea that some carefully delineated set of events carved out from the plenum of the past might signify, or at least be leading up to something that transcended themselves, was not in widespread use, at least not until the twelfth century.

This chapter will explore how influential Latin intellectuals from Augustine to Joachim of Fiore created their own elaborate maps of world history through a multidimensional reading of prophetic books. For these authors, the telos implicit to Christian apocalypticism and the prophesied events leading up to it served as fixed points in time around which a history of the whole cosmos could be hinged. They broke up the plenum of time – past, present, and future – abstractly dividing them into intelligible pieces and ‘stating their significance’ as they pertained to the inner dynamics of God. This was, in and of itself, a mode of ‘doing history,’ albeit not one which resembles that of the classical historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, etc.), which is the mode historians largely use today – a secular mode that had to be ‘recovered’ during the Renaissance and which sparked a revival of thinking of history in terms of large-scale ‘cycles.’ The prophetic sense of history was inherently concerned with a teleologically-ordained

¹⁶⁶ *1 John* 1:5; Delno C. West and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore: A Study in Spiritual Perception and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), xi. It was a similar notion which first prompted al-Kindī’s research four centuries earlier when he was asked by the son of the Caliph al-Mu‘tasim about the meaning of the Qur’anic verse [55:6] where it says “the stars and the trees prostrate.” For this reason, he composed his treatise *On the Explanation of the Bowing of the Outermost Body*, see Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17.

“big picture” of time shaped by overarching moral or metaphysical dimensions, such as unity, justice, or salvation, and the centrifugal force of such value-laden grand narratives was typically to blame for why discussions about world history recurred so frequently within various theological polemical contexts, ever prompting further and further elaboration. Through the development of their formal temporal taxonomies, it would not be wrong to consider men like Augustine and Joachim of Fiore as to the discipline of history what Linnaeus became to the discipline of biology. These men understood the surface appearance of that which had “undergone the formality of actually occurring,”¹⁶⁷ not as the mere sum of happenstance or fortune, but as the visible unfoldment of God’s invisible inner workings – hence the centrality of this term “apocalypse” (literally: unveiling or ‘taking out of hiding’) in constructing historical schemes of cosmic proportions.

Here I maintain that there is a great deal of understanding to be gleaned from viewing the prophetic sense of history as it appears in humanist theologians like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola in light of some changes Joachim of Fiore made to Augustine’s vision of world history, and which were later either treasured or attacked by mendicant friars throughout the centuries following the Calabrian abbot’s death. Not only did Joachim’s “kaleidoscopic imagination”¹⁶⁸ perceive time as pregnant with meaning, but it likewise set the stage for large scale projects that dramatically expanded the historical consciousness of intellectuals in the medieval Latin West as it grappled with the problem of what was to be done about its immediate and seemingly encroaching non-Christian neighbours. After Joachim, many philosophers, scholars, and missionaries of the Franciscan and Dominican orders continued to reconceptualized world history as the unfoldment of God’s plan marching toward a definite future, a progression from the carnal to the spiritual, but this was a future which also entailed certain responsibilities, all of which the Calabrian abbot had proclaimed to be intelligible by reading Scripture through the illumination of the “*spiritalis intellectus*,” the spiritual understanding.¹⁶⁹ This was a gift of the Holy Spirit, of which Jews were simply *not yet* endowed, that served to highlight and reveal the complex mass of concordances hyperlinking every piece of the Old and New Testaments together into a single perfect whole.¹⁷⁰

With the help of his *spiritalis intellectus*, Joachim of Fiore perceived a *numerical form* undergirding the flow of time itself, and intrinsic to this form was the unfoldment of God’s

¹⁶⁷ The late twentieth century apocalyptic thinker Terence McKenna often used this expression, attributing it to Alfred North Whitehead, but I have failed to locate the origins of this expression in Whitehead’s own work; see Rupert Sheldrake, Terence McKenna, Ralph Abraham, *The Evolutionary Mind: Conversations on Science, Imagination and Spirit* (Rhinebeck: Monkfish, 2005), 62.

¹⁶⁸ Marjorie Reeves and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 95.

¹⁶⁹ For more on the *intellectus* or *intelligentia spiritualis* in Joachim’s work, see Gian Luca Potesta, “‘Intelligentia Scripturarum’ und Kritik des Prophetismus bei Joachim von Fiore,” in *Neue Richtungen in Der Hoch- und Spätmittelalterlichen Bibelexegese*, ed. Robert E. Lerner (Munich: Oldenburg, 1996), 95-119. See also n. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** above for a definition of *intellectus/intelligentia*.

¹⁷⁰ Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae*, 5, 7, 22, 125, 153-155, 171, 210-211, 259-261.

providence, which manifested itself in history as a long process leading up to the reconciliation of all Jews and Christians into one fold at the end of time.¹⁷¹ The prophetic sense of history focused upon processes that had their origins in eternity, were developed in the remote past, and resolved in a dimly lit future. It was a far cry from the attempt to give a purely objective account of past events, or to record the “great and wondrous deeds”¹⁷² of Greeks and barbarians, but it was a mode of thinking about history nonetheless, and most importantly for our purposes, it was a mode expounded upon in detail by Ficino and Pico in their respective anti-Jewish polemics, *De Christiana religione* (1474) and *Heptaplus* (1489). Joachim firmly believed that the *intellectus spiritualis* – not historical inquiry into the causes of things – was the skeleton key to unlocking not only the hidden meanings lurking beneath the surface of Scripture, but also to unlocking a kind of utopian future. This ‘spiritual understanding’ consisted of the ability to discern the invisible things of God from the visible things of this world. In Joachim specifically, it did not only consist of a proper Christological reading of Scripture, but a whole remapping of world history along Trinitarian lines into various *figurae*. As Gábor Ambrus aptly noted in his study of Joachim’s ‘vine diagrams’:

Joachim presents the Jews’ incapability of understanding Jesus as a consequence of the Holy Spirit’s withdrawal from them (by reason of their ‘carnal nature’), which results in the removal of the Crucifixion from its precarious position as the central event of history and the quintessence of Jewish sin. Indeed, what will take place, as the eschatological mercy of God on his people, will be a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them, which, in Joachim’s mature theory of history, is an unmistakable sign of the historical sabbath as the final stage of history.”¹⁷³

What Joachim saw looming in the uncertain but not-too-distant future that no one else had seen, therefore, was a coming period of imminent turmoil that all true believers would have to overcome, here in this temporal plane of existence. The Church would be purified by this tribulation, Jews and Gentiles would be reunited in the Holy Spirit, and then at last, history would roll over into its final age.¹⁷⁴ It was this particular sense of millenarian imminence and its inextricable link to the *spiritualis intelligentia* which individuals across the Latin West would inherit from Joachim, whether they were friars minor in the thirteenth century, Florentine Platonists in the fifteenth century, or apocalyptically-charged radical German Reformers in the sixteenth century.

In line with Moshe Idel, I believe that when trying to understand the Christian interpretation of Kabbalah developed during the Renaissance, one should not be trying to

¹⁷¹ Cf. *Ezekiel* 34:8-31.

¹⁷² Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.1.0.

¹⁷³ Ambrus, “The Eschatological Future,” 180.

¹⁷⁴ *Joachim Abbas Florensis: Psalterium decem cordarum*, ed. Kurt-Victor Selge (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medioevo, 2009), 301: “...since the peoples which have been divided shall become one populace and one people, so they shall be truly an elect and holy nation, and also one fold with one shepherd. Two lines of descendants will no longer continue as they did from Shem and Japhet, who, in the Jews and the Gentiles, remained divided for a while because of their different morals and habits, but there shall be one nation and one people created for the glory of God.” Ambrus, “The Eschatological Future,” 182.

pinpoint the moment when a Christian adopted some forms of Jewish esoteric traditions as a starting point for this story, but rather when a Christian thinker first “adopted a kabbalistic type of thinking,” such as Joachim’s study of the divine names ΑΩ in *Revelation* 1:8 and IEUE in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*.¹⁷⁵ This is not to imply Joachim was himself consciously part of the Jewish mystical tradition, but to demonstrate how he took an approach to the divine analogous to a text like the *Sefer Yetzirah*, that is, through a close meditation on Scripture and the multidimensional revelations hidden therein. Esoteric pursuits like lettrism, numerology, and the contemplation of divine names are the fruits of a mysticism born out of a close relationship between spirituality and the written word, and they were far from vanities to Joachim. Although Joachim may only have had limited direct influence on a thinker like Pico (as is clearly demonstrated in his *Conclusiones* on formal numbers immediately preceding his *Quaestiones ad quas pollicetur se per numeros responsurum*, “Questions to which he promises to respond through numbers”), the Calabrian abbot had most certainly been an influence on many of Pico’s influences, and their influences before them.¹⁷⁶ What all these Christian thinkers from Joachim to Pico shared was the mutual belief that the books of the Hebrew prophets were of utmost importance to the study of history, but only when interpreted ‘mystically’ through the lens of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, and this of course included the Platonic theology of ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite. All of these men shared in the belief that truth had been *revealed* once and for all: it could not be synthesized via syncretism or broached by degree, it was simply to be grasped by the intellect all at once, in a wholly non-discursive manner, or not at all. To think otherwise was to set forth on an endless journey groping in the dark.

In putting Joachim of Fiore in an intellectual lineage with such figures as Augustine, ps.-Dionysius, Ficino, and Pico, I do not wish to suggest that the Calabrian Abbot was himself conscious about being “a Platonist” either, but rather to demonstrate how many Late Antique philosophical ideas had naturalized into Christianity and become interwoven with its conceptions of world history before eventually being levied within the context of interfaith polemics during the High Middle Ages. In Joachim’s works one sees a vision of history moving through a chronological progression from more carnal states to more spiritual states before an ultimate end. In highlighting its beginning, middle, and end, Joachim sought to demonstrate how the fullness of God’s innate Trinitarian and soteriological nature unfurled to generate the process of history itself. The *Psalterium decem cordarum* (*The Psaltery of Ten Strings*) makes it especially clear that Joachim was deeply immersed in an interior landscape framed by the principles and goals of ps.-Dionysius’ Christian Platonism that, in keeping with *1 Corinthians* 13:13, placed *caritas* or love as the highest of all virtues, for to love was to participate in the energies of the divine. As a monk and not a physician, Joachim was not so much concerned with the Peripatetics’ interest in scientific causality as Petrus Alfonsi was, and instead directed his attention toward what might be thought of as a uniquely Latin Christian version of what the Arabic world called the *ilm al-*

¹⁷⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 228; Cf. Idel, “Introduction” in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, vi.

¹⁷⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 466-469, n. 7.10.

ḥurūf wa-l-asmā', the science of letters/numbers and divine names/attributes, what Matthew Melvin-Koushki has called “cosmic philology,” and what in turn I here simply refer to as “esoteric philology” to keep it connected with its exoteric counterpart.¹⁷⁷ Once all the words of Scripture were properly understood down to the smallest letter, especially cryptic statements like “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end,”¹⁷⁸ theologians like Joachim could lay out and arrange their myriad correspondences into dizzying explanatory *figurae* that offered vistas into the fullness of creation, or what Plato in his *Timaeus* had long ago called “the moving image of eternity.”¹⁷⁹ To do this, however, to exercise the ‘spiritual understanding’ and to make use of the prophetic sense of history as we will see was no neutral scientific endeavour, but had exhortative, evangelical, and polemical ends as well.

¹⁷⁷ For “cosmic philology” see Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science?” *Theology and Science* 18, 2 (2020): 317. Note that despite the fact that the practice of illustrating spiritual *figurae* declined during the sixteenth century thanks to Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on *sola Scriptura*, it nevertheless endured in works like John Dee’s *Monas hieroglyphica* wherein, working in the *figura* tradition of “Joachim the prophecier” he attempted encapsulate the whole world into a single visual hieroglyph or sigil.

¹⁷⁸ *Revelation* 22:13

¹⁷⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37D, 6-9.

2.1 Joachim of Fiore and the Reform Movements of the Twelfth Century

Overall, the twelfth century might aptly be thought of as the starting period for the Latin West's expansion of consciousness across time and space. As Marie-Dominique Chenu once explained, "it was not the least splendid achievement of Latin Christendom in the twelfth century to awaken in men's minds an active awareness of human history."¹⁸⁰ Brett Whalen echoes a similar sentiment with the claim that in the twelfth century, the Christian theology of history "assumed an unprecedented coherence, framed by the schematic and symbolic exegesis of the Bible."¹⁸¹ For early medieval people, historical distance was not only poorly defined in quantity, but also in quality. Beyond the realms which the Romans had provincialized by imperial conquest, geography had fallen into myth. The lands once reached by Alexander were known unknowns, populated with all manner of strange skiapodes, blemmyes, and cynocephaloi. What lay beyond remained unknown unknowns. In parallel with the disintegration of spatial awareness, general perceptions of time had taken on a semi-cyclical quality, with the endless round of saints' feasts populating the calendar, buttressed by the eternally recurring cycles of the seasons, and given a sense of progress only through the processes of generation and corruption and the slow-but-steady motions of the celestial bodies.¹⁸² In addition to this was a rate of technological change slow enough to be imperceptible to the average individual, with their relatively brief lives. The medieval assumption was broadly that change is theologically unimportant and the present was largely continuous with the past.¹⁸³ Without labels and organizing principles, their image of the past could never hope to exceed beyond what William James called a "blooming buzzing confusion."¹⁸⁴ Joachim's image, however – fleshed out by his ability to find and correlate patterns, his command of biblical material and his knowledge of the Church Fathers – would come to play a critical role in bringing order to such an untamed mass. The earliest crusades had brought about an impetus for a rebirth of geographical awareness, and with it, a deepening conception of history to which Joachim was heir. One could now literally visit most places mentioned in the Bible as Joachim indeed did. As pilgrims, missionaries, merchants, and soldiers travelled abroad to the lands of ancient Christendom in Greece, Egypt, and the Levant, the outward bounds of Christendom (particularly Latin Christendom) grew more and more concrete. The earliest crusades had no intention of converting anyone; rather, they were conceived of as military ventures to secure and restore specific sites that had been holy to Christians for centuries and largely uncontested. It would not be until the rise of the Franciscans, following just in the

¹⁸⁰ Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Theology and the New Awareness of History," in *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, eds. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 162; Brett Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 73.

¹⁸¹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 98.

¹⁸² See Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 269 for a discussion of Jewish "semi-cyclical" time sitting at the root of Christian temporal linearity.

¹⁸³ William J. Bouwsma, "The Culture of Renaissance Humanism" *American Historical Association* 401 (1973): 17-18.

¹⁸⁴ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981 [1890]), 462.

wake of Joachim's life (d. 1202), that the now sanctioned practice of apostolic poverty would drive this new order of men out from cloistered contemplation and into the fray of martyrdom on the earliest missions outside of Europe. While this turn from inward contemplation to outward missions in the thirteenth century had many constituent causes, one of the most important factors was the Latin West's renewal of interest in foreign languages following the first Crusade, particularly in Greek and Arabic, and the growth and development of the market economy.

To understand Joachim and his prophetic sense of history, one must situate him within his own historical and geographical context. Immediately preceding Joachim's arrival on the stage of world events, a handful of what Brett Whalen calls "the Reformist apocalyptic thinkers" of the 'twelfth century renaissance' helped to prepare the way.¹⁸⁵ These "Reformist apocalyptic thinkers" included such individuals as the Benedictine Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075/1080 – c. 1129), or the schoolman Honorius Augustodunensis (c. 1080 – 1154). These men believed, each in their own ways, in a coming future era that would involve the mass conversion of pagans, heretics, and Jews just before the end of time. Through their hermeneutics of history and Scripture, these reformists give us a window into the twelfth century intensification of boundaries between Christians and religious outsiders, all the while signifying a new concern with the Jews' ultimate conversion rather than complete destruction. Rupert, for example, wrote extensively on the theology of the Holy Spirit and its role through history in his work *On the Holy Trinity*, believing it directly responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple by Titus and Vespasian, sent as a kind of punishment against the Jews for their rejection of Christ. For Rupert, this inspired act of destruction affirmed God's lifting of the yoke of Jewish law from the Gentiles. On the one hand, in an "age of renewal," the Holy Spirit would ultimately guide the Jews back through a "spirit of piety" and win them over to the one true faith.¹⁸⁶ Again, such ideas were not far off from those presented four centuries later throughout Ficino's *De Christiana religione* or Pico's *Heptaplus*. Honorius, on the other hand, was chiefly known for his popular *Imago mundi*, a complete book of geography and cosmology paired with a chronicle of world history which was rendered into many vernacular languages. The book even contained instructions for the conjuration of guardian angels. What Brett Whalen notes as critical is that:

[There were] reformist apocalyptic thinkers [that] envisioned the triumph of Christendom, somewhat paradoxically, as both an inevitable part of God's plan and something that was desperately imperilled. Jews and pagans, Muslims and heretics, and even non-Latin Christians posed a persistent challenge to the Church. Would such enemies be defeated and destroyed? Or turned to the Christian faith under the authority of the Roman Church? Even more disturbing were the inner failings of the Christian community... the final victory of God's people at the end of history was assured, but the precise script of that eschatological drama was not always clear to the faithful acting in it.¹⁸⁷

With time, all of these questions, dreams, and apocalyptic expectations debated by the Gregorian reformers of the crusading age would culminate and receive their clearest expression in the

¹⁸⁵ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 90.

¹⁸⁶ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 93-94.

¹⁸⁷ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 98.

works of Joachim of Fiore, a man acutely aware of the Latin West's precarious position in the wider world.

Leading up to the advent of the mendicant orders, the twelfth century can best be described as a period marked by great spiritual and intellectual changes, that is, changes which flowed *out from the cloister* and on into virtually every other dimension of daily life. The twelfth century Benedictine Geoffrey of Vigeois wrote in his chronicle that:

When the love of earlier cenobites grew cold, at that time the adherents of diverse dogmas arose, such as the Templars, Hospitallers, Grandmontines, Carthusians, Cistercians, the hospices of the poor, the convents of the nuns, the gatherings of lepers, and the congregation of various new canons.¹⁸⁸

To describe this whole process, Giles Constable convincingly argued in favour of the label “reformation.”¹⁸⁹ The impetus behind this twelfth century reformation, according to Constable, was the reformers' very own involvement with various forms of rigorous spiritual life. The most vociferous critics of monasticism during this period came not from the laity but from the ranks of those communally inhabiting monasteries. What these reformers stressed was the personal character of man's relationship with God, and consequently, they cultivated a sensibility for the immanent humanity of Christ, with all his implied virtues and incumbent duties. Here the fear of God was exchanged for love of God as the emotional mainstay of man's relationship to the divine: instead of focusing their energies on endless rounds of corporate prayer in hopes of propitiating the wrath of a vengeful God, they realized they could *reform* the human soul in the image of Christ, his apostles, and the saints. This change of heart transformed attitudes within the monastic orders and inspired new strategies to improve pastoral oversight. Strict contemplation was now to be buttressed by action as the most effective expression of Christian virtue. It would be a mistake to interpret Joachim in isolation from these broader twelfth century monastic reform movements, since much of his own life was dedicated to propelling these ongoing forces of reform to ever greater heights (and in his capacity as a mountain climber, he did this both literally and figuratively).

Geographically, when he was not travelling abroad, Joachim spent much of his life in a remote and mountainous part of Calabria (now called Jure Vetere). This was a harsh landscape to inhabit at the time, and was perfect for a hermit or monk who wished to test his mettle in the practice of *ora et labora*. On account of their proximity, its inhabitants had closer ties to Sicily than to the rest of Italy with respect to politics. Culturally, the area had traditionally been more Greek than Latin, though after the mid-eleventh century, it had been taken over by the Normans. There Greek was the most broadly spoken language, and Greek Orthodox Christian churches and monasteries were a more usual sight than Latin ones. Norman rulers upheld a policy of relative tolerance toward Muslims and Jews, and local rights were protected for members of all

¹⁸⁸ Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50.

¹⁸⁹ Constable, *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 65-66.

religions.¹⁹⁰ In Calabria's government, the influence of the Islamic world was particularly strong. Norman kings quickly began enlisting the talents of Greek and Arab intellectuals as administrators, modelling their own efforts after Byzantine and papal courts by issuing their documents in Greek, Arabic, and Latin. While Joachim spent most of his life secluded in monasteries or wandering about as a hermit (with his travels to Constantinople, the Holy Land, and Sicily having been confirmed), he could never completely elude being wrapped up in the complex world which raged around him, having a voice in some of the most prominent arenas of power in his own day.¹⁹¹

Calabria had long been dotted by communities of Greco-Italian Jews working in the cloth industry whose existence could be traced back to before the great diaspora of 70 AD, and it has been a matter of some speculation among Joachim scholars as to whether he himself had been born to a family of Jewish converts (especially given his peculiar name after the Old Testament king of Judah, Jehoiakim,¹⁹² Hebrew: יהויָאָקִים; Greek: Ἰωακίμ, "he whom YHWH has set up").¹⁹³ This point really only becomes important insofar as it would supply us with yet one more example to help establish a pattern of medieval Jews converting from Judaism to Christianity only to take up their quills and decry what they perceived to be the errors of their old coreligionists. Since Joachim himself was the author of a c. 1180 *Adversus Iudaeos* tract among his many works, and wrote so much on the final unification of Jews and Christians at the end of history, it is possible that like many converts before and after him he had written this kind of material to affirm the doctrines of his fellow Christians as being 'more spiritual' than the 'carnal' ways of the Jews to demonstrate his own good faith. Despite his criticisms of the Jews, Joachim acknowledged his debt to Jewish thinkers in at least two places: in an early work entitled *Genealogia* he hinted at his debt to Jewish sages for making use of the "day-year" principle in their historicist approach to the books of the prophets, while in the *Expositio in Apocalypsim* he made reference to his discussion with "a most learned Jew."¹⁹⁴ In the end, it is not important whether or not Joachim came from a Jewish background because he himself made no explicit allusions to it and his work is situated firmly within the Latin Western Christian tradition. Ultimately, Joachim shaped for himself an apocalyptic historicist *Weltanschauung* that systematically othered – but did not necessarily persecute – Greeks, Jews, Muslims, and heretics.

¹⁹⁰ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 2.

¹⁹¹ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 3.

¹⁹² Note that, in a strictly Christian context, this name was more immediately derived from Mary's apocryphal father St. Joachim, the husband of St. Anna. Special thanks to Richard Kieckhefer for pointing this out to me.

¹⁹³ Robert Lerner, *The Feast of Saint Abraham: Medieval Millenarians and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 24-29; cf. B. Hirsch-Reich, "Joachim von Fiore und das Judentum," in *Judentum im Mittelalter: Beiträge zum christlich-jüdischen Gespräch*, ed. P. Wilpert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 239-243. Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot* (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 18-19 maintains that Joachim was born Christian. See Daniel, "Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews," 1-22 for an account that goes against the theory that Joachim was descended from Jewish stock.

¹⁹⁴ For Joachim's 1176 *Genealogia* see Gian Luca Potesta, ed., "Die Genealogia: Ein frühes Werk Joachims von Fiore und die Anfänge seines Geschichtsbildes," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung Mittelalters* 56 (2000): 92 and ff; for the "most learned Jew" see Joachim, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, 36.

Joachim's greatest dream was to incorporate rather than exclude these groups, and the Jews in particular clearly held a special place of privilege in his vision of the divine economy.¹⁹⁵

The two main sources on the life of Joachim available to modern readers are biographies: the first was written by his personal secretary, Luke of Cosenza, the *Virtutum beati Joachimi synopsis*, and the second *Vita beati Joachimi abbatis* was assembled by an anonymous author.¹⁹⁶ A number of autobiographical facts can also be determined from Joachim's own writing, chiefly his testamentary letter, *Epistola prologosis*, written in 1200 to the abbots of his Order of San Giovanni (St. John) of Fiore.¹⁹⁷ There are over fifty extant texts attributed to, or directly concerning Joachim, and from these perhaps sixteen were written by Joachim himself.¹⁹⁸ He was born the son of a notary (or *tabellio*) in Celico, near Cosenza, around the mid 1130s.¹⁹⁹ In his formative years, he worked as a chancery official in the Sicilian court, but following a series of extensive travels in the East, including his pilgrimage to the Holy Land sometime around 1167, he turned himself over to the contemplative religious life. According to legend, he took to wandering the Levantine wilderness where he was called by God to write about his visions. He spent the 40 days of Lent meditating on what he believed to be the site of Christ's transfiguration, Mount Tabor. In his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* Joachim explains how on the eve of Easter day he received "the fullness of knowledge" and prepared to make an end to his stay on that mountain of revelation.²⁰⁰ Following a few years of eremitical wandering, often among places explicitly mentioned in the Bible as the backdrop for its events (which doubtless had an impact on fleshing out his conceptions of history), Joachim entered the Benedictine monastery of Corazzo in 1171.²⁰¹ Here he was thrust into the position of abbot more or less against his own wishes. There Joachim fought for years as an administrator to have his monastery subsumed by the more austere Cistercian order, feeling the Benedictines of his day had become too lax. It was not until the late 1170s, however, that the Calabrian abbot began dictating and recording his insights into the past, present, the future; insights which had only been revealed to him on

¹⁹⁵ See Daniel, "Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews," 21 who writes aptly "Joachim's thinking about the Jews stood in striking contrast to the prevailing trend in the last decades of the twelfth century. He did not focus on their role in the crucifixion, he did not demonize them and make them part of a devilish conspiracy against Christendom, he did not argue that they ought to be enserfed and treated harshly, and he certainly would have fought against massacres and forced conversions. Joachim assumed that the conversion of the Jews would take place only when the appropriate time came according to God's plan and he assumed that time was near. He also had a glimmering of the instrument of that conversion, an order or orders that would embrace genuine poverty, that would be characterized by true humility and love, and that would preach the spiritual understanding."

¹⁹⁶ Luke of Cosenza, *Virtutum Beati Joachimi Synopsis* (ca. 1220), ed. Herbert Grundmann, "Zur Biographie Joachims von Fiore und Rainers von Ponza," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 16 (1960): 539-544; Anonymous, *Vita Beati Joachim Abbatis* (c. 1210), ed. Herbert Grundmann in "Zur Biographie Joachims von Fiore und Rainers von Ponza," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 16 (1960): 528-538.

¹⁹⁷ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 1.

¹⁹⁸ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 6-7; many of the controversies surrounding Joachim can be traced back to works that were pseudepigraphically attributed to him, such as the *De oneribus prophetarum*, the *Expositio Sybillae et Merlini*, the Jeremiah Commentary, and the Isaiah Commentary.

¹⁹⁹ Daniel, "Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews," 2.

²⁰⁰ Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, 39^r.

²⁰¹ Bernard McGinn, "Joachim of Fiore and the Twelfth-century Papacy," in *Joachim of Fiore and the Influence of Inspiration*, ed. Julia Eva Wannemacher (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 19.

account of his diligent study of Scripture and his *spiritalis intelligentia*. In 1182/1183, Joachim journeyed to the Cistercian monastery of Casamari to continue his quest for the integration of Corazzo into their order. The year and a half he spent there was punctuated by two major visionary experiences which goaded him on to producing his most important texts: those that revealed the hidden structure of history itself.

On account of his new and unsettling theology, Joachim caught the ear of Pope Lucius III's court sometime around 1184 or 1185, whereupon he was summoned to the town of Veroli to give his interpretation of an enigmatic sibylline prophecy found in the notes of a recently deceased cardinal.²⁰² Joachim's brief text *De prophetia ignota* had impressed Lucius enough for the pope to encourage him to begin what would become his three most significant works: the *Liber concordie Novi ac Veteris Testamenti* (*The Harmony of the New and Old Testaments*), which elucidates his unique techniques for interpreting the Bible; the *Psalterium decem cordarum*, which laid out the structure of heaven as a series of musical strings strung between the three persons of the Trinity;²⁰³ and most importantly, his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (*Exposition of Apocalypse*), which contained his vision as to how the revelation of St. John of Patmos had unfurled and would continue to do so throughout history. According to Bernard McGinn, it was not long after meeting with Joachim that the pope travelled to Verona in northern Italy to meet with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederik I Barbarossa. There the pope and the emperor came to an agreement upon their mutual support of a new crusade to protect the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and upon a joint effort to choke out the spread of heresy. Upon Pope Lucius' death in 1185, the papal see was filled by an enemy of Barbarossa, Urban III (r. 1185–1187). Though his policies differed from those of his predecessor, he too personally favoured Joachim. In the light of Jerusalem's fall to Saladin, the popes following Gregory VIII (d. 1187), namely Clement III (r. 1187–91) and Celestine III (r. 1191–98) both sought to accommodate the empire's crusading efforts, and likely continued to support and consult the abbot.²⁰⁴

Joachim provides us with a good example of the paradox which often plagued highly respected monastic figures who, on the one hand craved for separation from the world and union with God, while on the other – in a kind of inverse proportion – were always being dragged into the role of interpreters of public affairs. Joachim's prophetic inspirations made him into an authority for those who needed a larger framework within which to pinpoint and confine the meaning of contemporary events. This phenomenon is likely responsible for the birth of one legend wherein, in 1191, while wintering in Messina before sailing to the Levant, Richard the Lionheart personally approached the abbot in order that he might elaborate on his understanding of St. John's seven-headed dragon (*Revelation* 12:3), eager to glean some insights into the outcome of his upcoming crusade.²⁰⁵ In any case, by the end of the 1180s, Joachim's

²⁰² McGinn, "Joachim and the Twelfth-Century Papacy," 19; Daniel, "Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews," 2.

²⁰³ Cf. *Psalms* 33 (Vulg. 32).

²⁰⁴ McGinn, "Joachim and Twelfth-century Papacy," 20.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

commitments to the Cistercian movement began to wane as he became decreasingly disinterested in the politics of managing his abbey, and increasingly concerned with silent contemplation and conveying his thoughts to writing. In 1189, he traveled to Sila and there climbed a mountain where he found a suitable location to plant a new monastery that would serve as a motherhouse for his very own order, the Florentian order. Joachim settled in that remote place, but this apparently did not stop him from climbing down from his solitude to meet with numerous key political figures. Despite having been condemned as a renegade by the Cistercian General Chapter in 1192, he never ceased to receive support from the papacy itself, as is evidenced by a letter written on August 25th, 1196, wherein Celestine III gave his approval for what was dubbed the new Florentian order in San Giovanni.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ McGinn, "Joachim and Twelfth-century Papacy," 21; Daniel, "Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews," 2.

2.2 Joachim of Fiore's Prophetic Sense of History

To the theologians of the early Church who lived during a low point for the Western Roman Empire, it seemed self-evident that the earth was old and in the twilight of its existence. In his *Epistle to Demetrianus* (260 AD), St. Cyprian wrote:

The world has now grown old, and does not abide in that strength in which it formerly stood; nor has it that vigor and force which it formerly possessed. This, even were we silent, and if we alleged no proofs from the sacred Scriptures and from the divine declarations, the world itself is now announcing, and bearing witness to its decline by the testimony of its failing estate.²⁰⁷

The “Book of Nature” as it were, was growing worn and tattered, and both Old and New Testament authors confirmed it. In the Latin West, the dominant interpretation inherited regarding the historical implications of Scripture had crystalized during the fourth century around the works of two widely revered authorities from North Africa: Tichonius and Augustine. The Tichonian-Augustinian view had been built upon a foundation of interpretations by Tichonius (c. 370–423 AD) working on the books of the prophets, and these soon after were taken up and slightly modified by Augustine in book 18 of his *De civitate Dei* (composed c. 422–25 AD). There Augustine offers us a definitive window into what Bernard McGinn has called his “anti-apocalyptic” view: he scorned in his own day those who looked to history as a forest of signs pointing the way to what was to come, insisting that the future was only for God to know. Augustine had a dim view of eschatological speculation, and a good deal of his admirers down through history tended to recapitulate his attitude, in particular the medieval Dominicans who adhered to an Augustinian rule.²⁰⁸ The Tichonian-Augustinian view held to the rather anti-climactic position that “the Millennium,” a thousand-year period of rest after a period of great tribulation (*Revelation* 20), had actually begun with Christ’s resurrection and would culminate with the Day of Judgement and the end of history.²⁰⁹ Christ had come in the sixth age, the world was already old, and it would soon come to a close. According to this model which had dominated Christian thought for nearly seven hundred years since the time of Augustine, the Church of Late Antiquity itself was the New Jerusalem, and the concept of a “New Age” was seen as not just beyond the event horizon of human history, but beyond the existence of this world. In keeping with this tradition, notable Late Antique and medieval commentators on the book of *Revelation* such as Ambrose (d. 387), Primasius (d. 560), Bede (d. 735), and Berengar of Tours (d. 1088), each recapitulated the interpretation passed down by the Church Fathers without much, if any, kind of elaboration.²¹⁰ Until the twelfth century, nearly everyone accepted

²⁰⁷ St. Cyprian, “Epistle to Demetrianus,” quoted in Ernest Lee, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 13.

²⁰⁸ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 37.

²⁰⁹ Augustine’s six/seven ages of history model was the dominant historical model in the Medieval Latin West, and it used the following breakdown: 1) from Adam to Noah, 2) from Noah to Abraham, 3) from Abraham to David, 4) from David to the Babylonian captivity; 5) from captivity to the birth of Jesus; 6) from the birth of Jesus to the present; 7) the end of history.

²¹⁰ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, xi.

Augustine's view that history had reached its climax in the Incarnation and was in or near its final millennium. What remained, according to Reeves, was merely "a period in which nothing significant would happen except the garnering of souls," thus blocking "the instinct to find 'meaning' in events of post-Incarnation history."²¹¹ After the Lombards invaded Italy and ruined his dream of reuniting Rome, Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) became fixated on the imminence of the eschaton. Since this proselytizing pope understood that the earthly sabbath could not come to pass without the conversion of the world, his mission to convert Ethelbert of Kent was viewed as a push toward the Last Things. For Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), the Visigoths had taken on the trappings of the Roman empire and their conversion to Christianity was understood to signify that the close of Augustine's sixth age could not be far off.²¹² If anyone might be said to have stood as a midpoint between the Augustinian and Joachite interpretations of *Revelation*, it would be Anselm (d. 1109).²¹³ Joachim and his followers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did not reject the "normative Augustinian position on millennial theorizing," but rather began "to play around its edges."²¹⁴ Simply put: where Augustine his followers pessimistically believed history was passing through the last days, Joachim believed the last days had not yet come, and before world peace could be achieved, turmoil first loomed over the horizon.²¹⁵ For Joachim the optimist, the passage of time marked the progress of spiritual fulfillment, not the final stages of decay in a fallen world. Christ had come into the middle of history, not near its end.

Joachim and the men he inspired did not look to natural signs in the heavens like astrologers to divine the future by way of Great Conjunction or any other method, but instead derived their predictions from a multilayered interpretation of Scripture. Rather than understanding history as a linear succession of events with an uncertain future, such readings folded the past, present, and future atop one another, conceiving them as a completed whole laced together via a network of symbolic correspondences (*concordia*). By the eleventh century, the idea that there existed four distinct senses with which to read Scripture had been expounded upon many times since it was first explicitly mentioned by John Cassian. For example, the Benedictine historian Guibert of Nogent (1055–1124) wrote in the preface to his commentary on *Genesis*:

²¹¹ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 18.

²¹² Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 42.

²¹³ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 282-283.

²¹⁴ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 90.

²¹⁵ Brett Whalen, "Joachim of Fiore, Apocalyptic Conversion, and the 'Persecuting Society,'" *History Compass* 8, 7 (2010): 684; Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 146 summarized the differences between Joachim and both Augustine and the medieval papacy's views of history as follows: "[Joachim's] dissent from Augustine's view of history, while not fully explicit in his own mind, was profound. The Abbot's optimistic hope for a new and better Church on earth was neither early Christian millenarianism revived, because it was the hope for a renewed Church and not for the scriptural Kingdom of God, nor was it the medieval papacy's canonization of the *status quo* as the best thing available within the framework of the pessimistic Augustinian theology of history. In his apocalyptic optimism, and in the fecundity of the new symbols and myths he introduced into the apocalyptic scenario, Joachim began what the Joachite tradition was to advance."

There are four ways of interpreting Scripture... The first is history, which speaks of actual events, as they occurred; the second is allegory, in which one thing stands for something else; the third is tropology, or moral instruction, which treats of the ordering and arranging of one's life; and the last is ascetics, or spiritual enlightenment, through which we who are about to treat of lofty and heavenly topics, are led to a higher way of life.²¹⁶

In illustrating how these levels of interpretation operate, Guibert used John Cassian's example of the city of Jerusalem, which became the chief example used in medieval textbooks to explain the fourfold method. Marjorie Reeves noted that Guibert stressed the literal sense – that is *history* – as “the basic subterranean foundation on which a second foundation of polished stones, composed of systematic doctrinal teaching (tropology) must be built to support the walls of allegory and anagogy,” that is, the mystical levels of interpretation, or the ‘spiritual understanding.’²¹⁷ In the monasteries of the twelfth century, this mode of doing Bible study became an inexhaustible source of hidden meaning from which one could draw endlessly in composing comprehensive hermeneutical *figurae*. For Joachim, however, these levels of Scriptural interpretation seemed to be interwoven with the very fabric of history which had progressed from the carnal, literal level, in the *tempus ante legem* (ended by the beginning of the law) to the *tempus sub lege* (ended by the beginning of the gospels); then, in the *tempus sub evangelio* there emerged the *typici intellectus* (typological-allegorical level of interpretation) whose application eventually brought about the *tempus sub tipico intellectu* wherein the *initiatio anagogici intellectus* (the anagogical/mystical level of interpretation) was brought about for all at the end of time.²¹⁸ This theme is important because the four-fold interpretation of Scripture will reappear when discussing the converso theologians who influenced Ficino and Pico, in whom this notion of a gradual ascent through layers of interpretation from baser and more literal to loftier and more spiritual vantage points in their polemics against Jews was often framed as a process of interpretative ascent from baser, literal Hebrew/Jewish levels of interpretation to more spiritual Christological/Christian ones.

Perhaps the gist of Joachim's thought can succinctly be summarized in his line “We will better explain new things if we carefully peer into the old.”²¹⁹ He perceived the world as a stage, or in Norman Cohn's words, “as a theater for God's activity,” wherein every human action was a

²¹⁶ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 17.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ This process is shown on Joachim's three-ringed *figura* depicting the three *status*. All of the *figurae* as depicted in the mid-thirteenth century Reggio Emilia codex have been made available online with Italian commentaries thanks to the Centro Internazionale di Studi Gioachimiti, <https://www.centrostudigioachimiti.it/tavole-liber-figurarum/>. Cf. *Avoda Zara* 9a in Adin Steinsaltz, trans., *Koren Talmud Bavli: Avoda Zara Horayot*, vol. 32 (Jerusalem: Koren, 2017), 48. “the Sages of the school of Eliyahu taught: The world is destined to exist for six thousand years. For two thousand years the world was waste, as the Torah had not yet been given. The next set of two thousand years are the time period of the Torah. The last set of two thousand years are the period designated for the days of the Messiah...” Cf. n. 1015 below.

²¹⁹ “Set melius ostendimus noua, si diligentius uetera perscrutamur.” Joachim of Fiore, *Liber de Concordia Noui ac Veteris Testamenti* (Venice 1519, reprint Frankfurt/Main 1964), fol. 25^v; E. Randolph Daniel, ed., *Abbot Joachim of Fiore: Liber de Concordia Noui ac Veteris Testamenti* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 210-211.

symbol of some higher reality.²²⁰ God's providence was universal, but not entirely particular. That is to say, although the general structure of history was eternal and abided with the triune Godhead, which individual actors specifically would carry out God's will as it unfurled was not carved in stone. Despite his dizzying hermeneutical games, Joachim never once overlooked the "letter" of Scripture in favour of the patristic search for the hidden "spirit" lurking in higher levels of interpretation beneath the literal surface of the text. All the senses of Scripture were equally important in their own way. Joachim believed that the events documented in the Old Testament, even hum-drum historical ones, existed insofar as they provided a detailed map for understanding the events of the New Testament. Brett Whalen explains how to Joachim, "important figures, groups, wars, and other developments that occurred in the time of the Old Testament directly corresponded to figures, groups, wars, and developments in the time of the New Testament, like a strand of DNA, history ran on these two parallel but interlinked tracks."²²¹

The heart of Joachim's work derived from a close reading and interpretation of the book of *Revelation* vis-à-vis the entire Bible. He saw described in that concluding book a summative breakdown of the seven periods in the history of the Church (a type of historical exegesis often discussed under the labels 'world-historical,' 'church-historical,' or 'historicist').²²² In *De prophetia ignota*, Joachim explained how he beheld that time in the Old Testament was divided according to 'seven seals' with each being marked by an attack on the Hebrews. These seven Old Testament divisions in turn were paralleled in the time of the New Testament, each one distinguished by a persecution of the Church, the new Israel.²²³ The sequence began with i) the Egyptians enslaving the Hebrews (which corresponded to the persecution of primitive Christians by Jewish authorities); ii) the Midianites persecuting the Hebrews (echoed by the persecutions of Christians by the pagans); iii) the conflict with other Gentile nations (corresponding to the struggles with Arian heretics such as the Goths, Vandals, Alemanni and Lombards); iv) the Assyrian invasions (mirrored by the coming of the Saracens); and lastly, v) the Babylonian captivity, vi) the Medes and Persians, and vii) the pagan rulers of Hellenistic Greece. Each corresponding seal of tribulation that would open beyond the fourth, cautioned Joachim, was at hand and would constitute a new Babylonian captivity culminating in the tyranny of Antichrist.²²⁴ Joachim interwove this scheme further with lesser temporal schemes such as the description of the seven-headed beast of *Revelation* 17.9-10. These groups of seven he interpreted in tandem with the earlier Augustinian organizational pattern of history which divided all of time into seven ages (based on the six days of creation plus a sabbath). Since Augustine had held true to the notion that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a

²²⁰ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1990 [1957]), 73. For a summary of Joachim as he relates to the issue of Church reform, see Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 104-115.

²²¹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 105.

²²² Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 73.

²²³ Whalen, "Apocalyptic Conversion and the 'Persecuting Society,'" 684.

²²⁴ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 105.

thousand years like a day,”²²⁵ he had rebuked the literalist interpretation that the world would only last for one more literal thousand-year period. In this regard, Joachim was different – albeit not necessarily precise (a fact which has probably been responsible for much of the longevity in his ideas). Through his interpretations of Scripture, he gave a scaffolding for how future events might unfold, but not precise dates.

Prophets of the end often live in their own end times, but this was not so for Joachim. Again, the first four periods in his breakdown were made up of several phases of tribulation faced by various orders in the Church, with each event having a corresponding prophecy in *Revelation*: the apostles versus the Jews [*Rev.* 2-3]; the martyrs versus the Romans from Nero to Diocletian [*Rev.* 4-7]; the Church Fathers versus the Arians [*Rev.* 8-11]; and the Desert Fathers versus the Muslims [*Rev.* 12-14]. Joachim held the fifth period as contemporary with his own day, and believed its defining feature was the conflict between the entirety of the Church and its Babylonian captors, the Holy Roman Empire. The sixth period would see the rise of Antichrist and come to a dramatic close with the final judgement of “Babylon.” Finally, the Church triumphant would be renewed by *novi viri spirituales*, that is, mendicants and contemplatives moved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to voluntary poverty and the *vita apostolica*, the perfection of man. Only through these seraphic doctors would Christ’s reign be fulfilled on earth, within the scope of history – not outside of it as Augustine had once believed. In Reeves’ words: “This countered triumphantly the dispiriting view that the one great climax of history was past and little was left now but waiting.”²²⁶ While many of Joachim’s ideas fell to the wayside in the centuries following his death, his reconceptualization of how the Last Things would unfold proved one of his most enduring ideas. At the heart of this story, however, was the historic process of reconciliation between Christians and Jews.

Throughout the course of his grand narratives of world history, Joachim epitomized the Gregorian reformist vision. Within the bounds of his “kaleidoscopic imagination,” he seemed to have a place (and set of correspondences) for every minute event in biblical or ecclesiastical history. The Calabrian abbot was highly sensitive to events which happened centuries before his own lifetime and how to frame them within a larger picture in a way which was unusual for his time. Such events included the development of Christian orthodoxy under Roman rule, the growth and embattlement of monasticism, the shift of imperial power from East to West, the schism between the Latin and Greek Churches over critical aspects of doctrine, and the short-lived victories of the crusades leading up to the rise of the Antichrist. Never before had anyone even tried to imagine such a comprehensive picture of how history had, and would continue to unfold with such precision.²²⁷ As pointed out by Stephen Wessley, it is even possible that Joachim’s entire vision of the word with its complex networks of correspondences had its beginning in his conception of himself as the new Benedict, since he deeply modeled his life

²²⁵ 2 *Peter* 3:8; cf. *Psalms* 90:4.

²²⁶ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 297.

²²⁷ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 123.

after the example of that particular saint in whose rule the command is written: “have a wholesome fear of the day of judgement.”²²⁸

Joachim left us with the idea that time itself and the events that populated it were akin to a kind of temporally-oriented *scala perfectionis* that he depicted in the images of such things as interlocking Tetragrammatical rings or shooting and flowering trees.²²⁹ Here the present moment was depicted as being drawn ever forward through the flow of time onward to its final state of moral perfection. Joachimism – strictly defined by most scholars today as the belief of history being broken up into three self-similar ‘*status*’²³⁰ – was a primitive theory of historical periodization which was semiological in nature and posited an “invisible landscape,” “universal attractor” or “transcendental object at the end of time” (to use the words of a twentieth century apocalyptic thinker, Terence McKenna). This eschatological singularity that had been projected into the future was the vision of a purely essentialized form of Christian universalism at critical mass, and it cast back its “organizing shadow.” The projection of a future Christian utopia within the bounds of history, wherein even the most hardened hearts would be softened to enjoin in eternal Christian brotherhood, added a new texture to reality. It created a kind of pressure toward action: a drive against wanting to remain lukewarm. In this way, by emphasizing the imminence of Judgement Day as a coming historical event, Joachim “materialized” Western Christendom’s struggle as much as he “spiritualized” it, collapsing the distinction into a gradient. The whole of history, all the events that had come to pass, had now become an intelligible expanse of signifiers which were interrelated with an unseen reality accessible only to the reader with the gift of the “*intellectus spiritalis*.”

Joachim’s *Psaltery of Ten Strings* is probably the work in which the Pythagorean/Platonic influence of ps.-Dionysius’ *Heavenly Hierarchies* is most explicit.²³¹ In it, Joachim envisioned the heavenly choirs suspended between the three persons of the Trinity, organized in the manner of a ten-stringed triangular instrument with a flattened top.²³² This symbol was drawn as much

²²⁸ Stephen Wessley, *Joachim of Fiore and Monastic Reform* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 16.

²²⁹ Perhaps the earliest instance of time being described through an arboreal metaphor – and certainly an image which had captured the medieval Christian imagination and had a significant impact on Joachim of Fiore’s historicizing schemes – was the image used to frame the messianic prophecy in *Isaiah* 11:1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” This theme plays a prominent role in Marsilio Ficino’s *De Christiana religione* who took it from Dominican converso polemicists. For more on “The Vine Diagram in the Iconographical tradition of the Tree of Jesse,” see Ambrus, “The Eschatological Future,” 183.

²³⁰ E. Randolph Daniel, *The Franciscan Concept of Mission in the High Middle Ages* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 76 states that “the term ‘Joachite’ was first employed by the chronicler Fr. Salimbene of Parma to designate those individuals who accepted and developed Joachim’s three-status historical scheme. This definition must be retained.” Though this definition is rather rigid, I believe it is useful; cf. Bernard McGinn and Marjorie Reeves, *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, The Spiritual Franciscans, Savonarola* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 108 where the three *status* model is also said to be Joachim’s most important contribution to history.

²³¹ See Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 59-60 for confirmation of Joachim’s use of ps.-Dionysius’ angelic orders.

²³² MS Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 255A, f. 8^r. The Reggio Emilia manuscript is very similar in design to this one, but has an empty space where the IEUE should be; Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 200-202 which explains this change in connection to the Trinitarian polemics of Peter Lombard. Cf. Joachim of Fiore, *Psalterium decem cordarum* (Venice, 1527; reprint Frankfurt, 1965).

from the image of God's claim "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (*Revelation* 22:13) as from the image of King David giving glory to God in his role as a musician (*Psalms* 33:2). Moreover, it also echoed that Pythagorean trope native to Southern Italy whereby the absolute was understood most clearly through the metaphor of a stringed instrument since it relies on perfect mathematical ratios and harmonic proportions to make its music. Here in vivid imagery Joachim recapitulates the general medieval conception of creation's overall purpose, that is, to bring glory and praise to the Creator. To Joachim the blunted top of the psaltery represented the Father, the incomprehensible source of all being, with the bottom two corners representing the Son and Spirit respectively. At the center of this triangle, there sits a perfect circle for a sound hole which symbolizes the Trinity's perfect unity (*unitas perfecta*) represented by the Latin Tetragrammaton adapted from Petrus Alfonsi's transliteration: "IEUE."²³³ Across its three pairs of two letters, it stood as a clear testament to the divine name's Triune nature (Father: IE, Son: EU, Spirit: UE). The psaltery's 10 strings represent the 10 offices of the ps.-Dionysian heavenly hierarchy (three times three offices, plus man). Each string sounds out its own note in praise of the Triune God, with the whole of the psaltery sympathetically resonating as one harmonious instrument. All this was elaborated to demonstrate how before the dawn of time, the heavenly order was perfect until Satan and a third of the angels rebelled and were cast out. God then created humans to fill the gap in the heavenly choir, and even to stand at its forefront, hence why the psaltery in the *Liber figurarum* sets man as the tenth and longest string, paired up with the angelic virtue of *caritas*, love. With Adam's fall into sin the divine chorus was again fractured, but God would deign to redeem his creation by descending into it via incarnation, entering history in the form of a second Adam. In this light, history had but a single *telos*: the regeneration and redemption of humanity such that it might again become worthy of re-joining the chorus of angels, as one immortal divine being among multitudes resounding blissfully in union with God forever. We will again encounter this theme of spiritual procession and return drawn primarily from the mysticism of ps.-Dionysius and his Christian adaptations of Proclean theology as a motif central to both Ficino's *De Christiana religione* and Pico's *Heptaplus* as well.²³⁴ For Joachim as for the humanist theologians of the Renaissance, however, the themes of individual spiritual return and the spiritual return of the world were inseparable. Spiritual regeneration was not an event, but a process which unfurled through time, and as it was for the individual, so it was for the world.²³⁵ In Joachim's own words from the *Praephatio super Apocalypsim* (written in the mid-1180s): "Thus it is proper for mankind after the guilt of the first man to return step-by-step (*gradatim*) to

²³³ Petrus Alfonsi is almost certainly the source of Joachim's breakdown of the Tetragrammaton along Trinitarian lines which likewise lays at the root of his three-status schema in the *Liber figurarum*. Cf. Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 172 and Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio*, 36^v. In *Pugio fidei* (Leipzig 1587), 685 (3.3.4) we also see Ramon Martí passing along Petrus Alfonsi's ideas about the Tetragrammaton, though with Hebrew and not Latin letters.

²³⁴ See Chapters

5.1 Ficino's *Prisca Theologia* and

7.2 Anagogy and the *Heptaplus* below.

²³⁵ Cf. n. 32 above.

the cognition of its creator, so it may be rooted in the first time of the Father, grow in the second time of the Son, and experience the sweet fruit in the Third Age of the Holy Spirit.”²³⁶ Though Ficino and Pico did not share in the ‘three *status*’ system of Joachim, they certainly shared in a single Dionysian vision of there existing one ultimate angelomorphic *telos* for mankind. In all these men, the heavenly vision of an otherworldly order or form explicitly shaped the goals and purposes of this world. Each was convinced that it was purely on account of a God-given spiritual understanding (*intellectus spiritualis*) that one could, through engaging with the letters and words that constituted Holy Scripture, peer beyond the veil into the invisible things of heaven and understand how all visible things on earth should be ordered to satisfy God.²³⁷ Most importantly, through their mutual regard of St. Paul’s theology, these men understood the role which *caritas* (or love) played in reconnecting man with his true self, his immortal soul, by which process he might finally achieve *felicitas* (or ‘perfect happiness’). This was no romantic or filial type of love. This was the kind of cosmic love which leads the enlightened individual to burn for God, to take up a life in imitation of the divine exemplar, to sell all their property and give to the poor, to take up their cross, and to give up their lives for the sake of others.

For Joachim, the reconciliation between Jews and Christians would not take place immediately preceding the Day of Judgement at the very end of history (i.e., the traditional Augustinian view), *but at the end of the second status*. In this way, Joachim envisioned that the Jews would be full participants of Christendom in the third *status*, casting off the yoke of legalism and carnality to become one with the Holy Spirit through the freedom of total renunciation.²³⁸ In his most recent book dedicated entirely to the subject of the Jews in relation to medieval eschatology, *The Feast of Saint Abraham*, Robert Lerner chases this thread of utopian ideation bent toward the mass conversion of Jews in individuals directly inspired by Joachim, especially the friars Peter John Olivi (1248–98) and John of Rupescissa (c. 1310–62). In a 1976 article, Lerner first examined the hope that there would ensue a brief era of peace on earth following the defeat of Antichrist and then the Final Judgment.²³⁹ While this belief preceded Joachim, he had a definitive role in elaborating and promulgating it, describing in concrete terms how an historical post-apocalyptic sabbath age would come to pass. Joachim expounded on the old Christian conviction that the Jews, last in the wake of innumerable pagan conversions, would be converted upon the defeat of Antichrist and the dawn of the sabbath age.²⁴⁰ In 1985, Lerner expanded on the process of proliferation of Antichrists in Joachimite thought (i.e., the idea of

²³⁶ Joachim of Fiore, *Praephatio super Apocalypsim*, in Kurt-Victor Selge, ed., “Eine Einführung Joachims von Fiore in die Johannesapokalypse,” *Deutsches Archiv* 46, 1 (1990): 102. The *Praephatio* consists of two sermons dealing with passages from the *Genealogia*. Here there is an extensive discussion of the relation between the seven seals from the book of Revelation and corresponding persecutions endured by Jews and Christians both.

²³⁷ Matthias Riedl, “Joachim of Fiore as Political Thinker,” in *Joachim of Fiore and the Influence of Inspiration. Essays in Memory of Marjorie E. Reeves (1905-2003)*, ed. Julia Wannemacher (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 65.

²³⁸ This belief is made clear and explicit in Joachim’s vine diagram, see Ambrus, “The Eschatological Future,” 171-194.

²³⁹ Robert Lerner, “Refreshment of the Saints: The Time after Antichrist as a Station for Earthly Progress in Medieval Thought,” *Traditio* 32 (1976): 97-144.

²⁴⁰ Lerner, “Refreshment of the Saints,” 110 and ff.

multiple, lesser Antichrists throughout history constituting the Great Antichrist whose advent would mark the *transitus* to the final age of history). Important here, however, is Lerner's point that since Joachim believed his Antichrist to be hydra-headed, he broke with the antisemitic tradition set forth by Hippolytus (c. 170–235) that the Antichrist himself would arise from the tribe of Dan and be chiefly served by Jews. The Joachimite model instead shifted some of the malice typically ascribed to the Jews in Christian millenarian theorizing by cleaving to the precarious position that the false Messiah would arise *within Latin Western Christendom*, certainly from among the heretics, but possibly even from within the papacy itself.²⁴¹

This particular reassessment of Joachim's role in the greater scheme of European antisemitism has been highlighted in explicit response to Robert I. Moore's 'persecuting society' thesis.²⁴² Joachimite apocalypticism comprised the historicist vision of a world with Jews and Gentiles united as one flock – a notion that stands as a “theoretical alternative to the undeniable intensification of a Christian persecuting mentality during the High and Late Middle Ages.”²⁴³ As we will see in later chapters, this “alternative” approach to the issue of Jewish presence within Christendom was also shared by Pico in his use of kabbalistic texts in assembling his vision of a perfected form of Christianity.²⁴⁴ Robert Lerner does not force to a close the hotly debated theory as to whether Joachim was born to a Jewish family, but like myself, he considers it ultimately irrelevant to understanding Joachim's attitude toward the Jews.²⁴⁵ His particular penchant for seeing the Old Testament as the root of all authority – historical and theological – was concomitant with a positive estimation of the ancient Hebrews and their Scriptures. They were inherent to his three-fold model of history and prefigurements of the Church to come. Joachim associated the Hebrews with the *status* of the Father, the Gentiles with the *status* of the Son, and in the double progression of history from the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit, the Jews and Gentiles would be united in a new spiritual era.²⁴⁶ Naturally, Joachim assumed that, at the end of history, the latter-day Jews would ultimately recognize Christ and turn away from

²⁴¹ Robert Lerner, “Antichrists and Antichrist in Joachim of Fiore,” *Speculum* 60 (1985): 566-568; cf. Whalen, “Apocalyptic Conversion and the ‘Persecuting Society,’” 684-685.

²⁴² Robert I. Moore, *Formation of the Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 4 argues that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries “deliberately and socially sanctioned violence began to be directed, through established governmental, judicial and social institutions, against groups of people defined by general characteristics, such as race, religion, or way of life; and that membership of such groups in itself came to be regarded as justifying these attacks.” Note that this rather Foucauldian perspective which deemphasizes the centrality of religious belief was rightly met with some criticism in the opening pages of Christine Caldwell Ames, *Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 10-12, a study which attempted to view Dominican inquisitors more on their own terms by emphasizing how sincere was their religious belief that they were saving souls from heresy in their efforts to force individual heretics to repentance by any means possible.

²⁴³ Whalen, “Apocalyptic Conversion and the ‘Persecuting Society,’” 685.

²⁴⁴ This is not to suggest Pico was a “Joachimite,” since after all he did not support the three *status* model of history. Rather, it is merely to demonstrate how the young count was part of a broader change of attitudes towards the Jews which had its roots in Joachim's theology. This was a view more concerned with ‘incorporating’ than ‘othering.’

²⁴⁵ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 24-29.

²⁴⁶ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 29-37; see especially E. Randolph Daniel, “The Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Joachim of Fiore's Understanding of History,” *Speculum* 55, 3 (1980): 469-483.

their out-dated adherence to the lethal letter of the Law. Nevertheless, to expect that this Calabrian abbot would ever be open to Jews persisting in the New Jerusalem *as Jews* is to retroject a modern standard of epistemological tolerance onto a fervent twelfth-century monk. To do this would be to assume Joachim himself had no serious convictions about the soteriological message of Christianity, and thereby commit one of the greatest sins a historian can: to refuse to try to understand the past on its own terms. Even Abraham Abulafia's wildest utopian expectations did not believe Jews would maintain their Judaism on into the end of history, as will be discussed in the following chapter. With respects to this particular issue, Joachim was influenced by the writings of Petrus Alfonsi. Granting that Joachim and the millenarians who followed in his footsteps were not advocates of modern-day toleration (to say nothing of "acceptance"), Lerner himself wisely conceded that "they nonetheless stood for an alternative to the formation of a persecuting society."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 121. It should be added here that missionary programs from the High Middle Ages must not be equated with those of nineteenth century missionaries in Asia or Africa who believed themselves bearers of civilization *as well as* Christianity. The difference between thirteenth century missionaries and nineteenth century colonialists is that the latter did not seek to *incorporate* their converts into European civilization, they sought merely to *impose* what they perceived to be their cultural superiority and *extract* what resources they could for their homelands. It was nationalism, not the *societas Christiana* which promoted this nineteenth century attitude. To the missionaries in the century to follow after Joachim, fuelled as they were by their belief in a looming Day of Judgement, the mission to the infidel and the mission to the faithful were one and the same, and both were governed by a burning desire to die for their neighbour's salvation, that is, to live by the virtue of *caritas*. Daniel, *The Franciscan Concept of Mission*, 4 and 38.

2.3 The Vision of History as Progress from Carnal to Spiritual States

To the early Church, the ‘literal sense’ of Scripture was not as important as the ‘allegorical sense.’ It was only in 384, when Augustine met Ambrose in Milan (an event described in the *Confessiones*), that the North African teacher of rhetoric finally relinquished his skepticism over what he considered the barbarous plainness of the biblical stories.²⁴⁸ With these new eyes, Augustine pierced through the literal surface of the text to reveal much deeper truths than mere stories meant to be taken as historical fact. Such had been the practice of Platonists like Philo, Porphyry, or Proclus in dealing with myth, just as it had been with their master Plato in dealing with Homer.²⁴⁹ This hermeneutic strategy intended for understanding myth was widely adopted and through the works of the Church Fathers came to dominate Christendom throughout much of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. As centuries passed, however, the literal sense became buried under a landslide of creative new interpretations, and would eventually have to be recovered and restored if the weight of all the senses was to be kept equal. Biblical literalism was fundamentally a reaction to the ever-proliferating mass of allegorical senses which accrued over centuries and often clouded out the original intentions of the texts’ authors. Thus it was in great part through a reintensification of emphasis on the literal sense of Scripture, first beginning around the twelfth century and climaxing centuries later with the humanists of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, that the Latin West’s sense of historical awareness was re-kindled. In its early stages, this rebirth of the literal did not revolve around an outright rejection of the *sensus allegoricus*, but through a kind of kaleidoscopic compounding of all the interpretative senses, each with their own equally important role to play in delving past the surfaces of Scripture on into its deeper meanings. For as far as Joachim or the friars who followed in his footsteps played a role in reawakening men to the literal interpretation of the gospels, thereby exhorting them to take up the *vita apostolica*, they believed their spiritual perceptions to be deepening: deepening enough now to see the importance of all the senses operating simultaneously. In this way, thanks to the multidimensional nature of his reasonings, thanks to his ‘spiritual understanding,’ Joachim’s prophecies became an object of meditation for many Franciscans in the thirteenth century, and from among the ranks of those he influenced, few were willing to sacrifice the literal interpretation of Scripture at the expense of a purely allegorical one, even upon pain of death.

Woven throughout the grand narrative of the Old and New Testaments, there were certainly no shortage of revelatory dreams and visionary experiences which played a role in feeding Joachim and others’ apocalyptic visions of history. Just to name a few, Joachim’s texts and *figurae* made extensive use of the imagery from such episodes as Jacob’s ladder (*Genesis*

²⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 6.4.6 and 6.5.8 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 61-62; cf. Dobell, *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion*, 10-12 and F. B. A. Asiedu, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, 3 (2001): 299-317.

²⁴⁹ See, e.g., *The Homeric Cave of the Nymphs in Select Works of Porphyry*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: Thomas Rodd, 1823); see also Anne Sheppard, “Proclus as Exegete,” in *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 57.

28:10-19); Ezekiel's chariot (*Ezekiel* 1:4-28); Isaiah's throne room (*Isaiah* 6) and the Tree of Jesse (*Isaiah* 11:1); Daniel's statue made of four metals (*Daniel* 2); Satan falling 'like lightning from heaven' (*Luke* 10:18); the mount of transfiguration (*Matthew* 17:1-8, *Mark* 9:2-8, and *Luke* 9:28-36); Paul's Damascus road experience (*Acts* 9); and of course, the vision of St. John of Patmos in its entirety (*Revelation* 1-22). To Joachim, there was nothing unorthodox or heretical in fixatedly reading the Bible to coax out its mystical meaning or inspirational character – so long as such explorations did not exceed the limits set down by the guidance of the Church. In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Peter explains that the perception of Jesus' true identity comes "not through flesh and blood" but through divine revelation (*Matthew* 16:17). Paul describes how visionary experiences formed the foundation of his practice (*Galatians* 1:12/16, *Acts* 22:17, and *2 Corinthians* 12:2). A set of verses which doubtless would have inspired Joachim in even the darkest moments of doubt can be found in the Old Testament book of *Joel* 2:28-32, and echoed again (or "in concordance with") the New Testament *Acts* 2:17-32:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

In light of this, it is not a misnomer to describe Joachim's theology of history with the somewhat tongue-in-cheek anthropological label "Apocalyptic Dream Time" – a fundamental shift in the medieval Latin West's perceptions about time and history after having been tempered and conditioned by the signs and symbols derived from cumulative religious experiences, whether from dreams, from raptures of contemplative ecstasy, or simply from an intense meditation upon Scripture.²⁵⁰ In turn, the stage upon which history itself unfurled was tempered and conditioned by those who took up and shared in Joachim's vision, especially among the Franciscans (in particular in that strain of friars which came to be called "Spirituals" and began to take a recognizable form around the 1270s and 1280s). In embracing Joachim's "being-toward-apocalypse," new dimensions and perspectives on daily life were opened up, especially among those immersed in the tedious life of absolute poverty, for whom a reminder that the long moral

²⁵⁰ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 74 argues that, although many terms have been used to describe this twelfth century style of theology such as 'symbolic,' 'speculative,' 'poetic,' and 'contemplative,' he believes such labels "imply a dream-like quality in those monks and clerics, immured in the abstract figurative landscape of their minds," and that "nothing could be farther from the truth" because these theologians "directly and indirectly tackled the most heated political, religious, and social issues of their day." Nevertheless, I fail to see the ways in which involvement in politics, religion, and society are in any way exclusive to participation in the dream-like state produced by the mass mutual reinforcement of a shared ideology. Nazi scientists, for example, were involved in the political, religious, and social issues of their day, and this did nothing to detract them from acting out their collective ideology which was rooted in the idealism of "racial hygiene." If anything, the involvement of these monks and clerics in the politics of their day could be taken as an indicator that their 'dreams' simply extended beyond the confines of the cloister.

arc of history forever bent toward Final Judgement and paradise imbued their hardship with purpose. This was not a retreat from reality, but a renegotiation of its constitution.

It is no surprise why radical millenarianism held such an appeal among those who renounced their embarrassment of riches to join the ranks of the tired, poor, and huddled masses. The impending end-times gave weight to their sacrifice. To those born poor and living on the margins of society, apocalyptic expectation drew its strength from the hope it offered: that they might one day be integrated into a utopian kingdom from which they felt themselves naturally excluded. Norman Cohn explained how, in the wake of the intensification of urbanization and the market economy from the late eleventh century onward, among landless peasants, among unskilled workers and journeymen, among Jews, beggars, prostitutes, and lepers living from hand to mouth – among the “amorphous mass of people who were not simply poor but who could find no assured and recognized place in society at all... there existed no regular, institutionalized methods of voicing their grievances... Instead, they waited for a *propheta* to bind them together in a group of their own.”²⁵¹ Where kinship-groups had been eroded and where individuals fell through the cracks in reorganizing the population into urban guilds and village confraternities, there apocalyptic expectations ran highest, and after 1209 the freshly inaugurated Order of Friars Minor were never far away. Emphasis on apostolic poverty was a cornerstone of Joachim’s apocalyptic program of monastic reform and largely the reason for which his ideas became so respected in Franciscan circles. So strong was his mandate for a return to simplicity that even a century after his death, Franciscan radicals in protest against the wealth of the Church were relying on the moral support of his prophecies to make sense of their persecution in 1318 under Pope John XXI and the condemnation of their doctrine of absolute poverty in 1323. Ultimately, it has been on account of how his ideas were received, rather than how they were conceived, that even today Joachim eludes canonization.

To understand why self-professed Joachimite Franciscans like Peter John Olivi or John of Rupescissa suffered torture and death in support of the belief that Antichrist would manifest and unfold *within the bounds of history*, one must examine how Joachim’s ideas became inextricably bound up with heretical movements, particularly those in Southern France.²⁵² While there was a general atmosphere of eschatological expectation in the thirteenth century, the specifically Joachimite outlook in the decades following the abbot’s death “came to a focal point in the person of St. Francis.”²⁵³ Many of the earliest Franciscans explicitly shared in Joachim’s cutting-edge apocalypticism, especially in their identification of Francis with the angel of the sixth seal who ascends from the rising of the sun (*Revelation* 6:12-17). This identification was held by Bonaventure and incorporated into the Order’s official position: that the opening of the sixth seal

²⁵¹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 282.

²⁵² See Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995 [1935/1961]), 156 and ff.

²⁵³ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 54.

had culminated in the great *transitus* from the second to the third *status*, from the *status* of the Son to the *status* of the Spirit.²⁵⁴

Thus far the topic of discussion has focused on Joachim's breakdown of history with respect to the breaking of the seven seals marking the twin set of seven persecutions, but there has been little discussion of his doctrine of the three *status* in general which forms the crux of what scholars today largely refer to when they use the term "Joachimism." While whole volumes have been filled in the exploration of this complex subject, in particular by Marjorie Reeves and her studies on the *Liber figurarum* published by the Warburg Institute, Joachim's ideals are dealt with here insofar as they constitute important developments in the prophetic approach to history and are bound up with interreligious currents in esoteric philology that would reemerge in the works of later humanist theologians. Through the power of his *spiritalis intellectus* or divine insight into the hidden meanings of Scripture, Joachim envisioned the whole of history suspended in eternity as a kind of hyperdimensional Trinitarian object. Before turning to this *figura*, however, one must first examine some preliminaries.

The Latin Tetragrammaton (IEUE) is a fundamental key to grasping Joachim's ideas about how divine revelation unfolded through history in a tripartite manner.²⁵⁵ For Joachim, the Tetragrammaton proved that the Trinity had been revealed to the Hebrews of biblical times from within their most holy of divine names, though Jews of his day had simply refused to accept it. The Tetragrammaton allowed him to envision the whole of history as a kind of numerical procession from 1 to 2 to 3 and return back from 3 to 2 to 1 again at last.²⁵⁶ Joachim's use of the Tetragrammaton was not the first time that exegesis on God's true Hebrew name served as a locus for Trinitarian speculation, and it would certainly not be the last. It is most notable for our purposes that Joachim borrowed its Latin spelling and many ideas about the divine name from a manuscript of Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, who if we recall, had derived his own understanding from a text called the *Secreta secretorum* containing excerpts from the proto-kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah*.²⁵⁷ Joachim's understanding of the Tetragrammaton was first elaborated in the *Expositio in Apocalypsim* and the abovementioned *Psalterium decem cordarum*, which was written as a result of Joachim's Easter vision at Casamari that he claimed

²⁵⁴ Ibid.; Ubertino da Casale, *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu Christi* (Venice: Andreas Bonetti, 1485), 206^v claims this identification was first made by John of Parma. The first concrete reference, however, occurs in excerpts from the lost *Liber Introductorius* of Gerard of Borgo San Donnino, *Archiv für Literatur und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters* I, eds. Heinrich Denifle and Franz Ehrle (Weidmann, 1885), 101.

²⁵⁵ Hirsch-Reich, "Joachim Von Fiore und das Judentum," 230-32 was first to locate the parallel between Petrus Alfonsi and Joachim's diagrams; see also Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 44; Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 173; Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 15; John Toland, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 114; and Gian Luca Potesta, *Il Tempo dell'Apocalisse: Vita di Gioacchino da Fiore* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2004), 130-135, which is also cited in Hames, *Like Angels*, 110, n. 10.

²⁵⁶ Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 45.

²⁵⁷ Cf. n. 100 above.

illuminated the meaning of the Trinity.²⁵⁸ What is best described as Joachim’s “lettrism” (to use a term borrowed from scholarship based on letter mysticism in the Islamic world) is most clearly articulated in what he called the *definitiones prima et secunda*: that is, when God said “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” Joachim took it literally. In the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, Joachim demonstrates how the very shapes of the letters Alpha (A) and Omega/Omicron (O) represent Trinity and Unity respectively. In the *Expositio*, Joachim attempted to illustrate what God meant in both *Revelation* 1:8 and 22:13 by labelling a three-sided majuscule Greek alpha (Α) with the three persons of the Trinity, thus invoking the image of a double procession of the Son and the Spirit out from the boundless Father.²⁵⁹ He then went on to interpret the minuscule Greek omega (ω) as a two-fold symbol denoting the symmetrical unison of the *Old* and *New Testaments*, which itself was a gift of the Holy Spirit. Here in Joachim’s figures, however, the omega used to represent Scripture itself was also broken up along a progression from Father (*IE*), to Son (*EU*), to Spirit (*UE*). These first *definitiones* are important to understand, because they set the frame around Joachim’s more elaborate exegetical figures (such as his various *arbores*, the interlocking rings of the three *status*, etc.).²⁶⁰ Using the Tetragrammaton, Joachim believed that the triune God had ordained the flow of history in his own image, and thus it was set to unfold in a threefold manner. He envisioned three overlapping rings set in a row, each of which represented one aspect of the Trinity (a pair of letters) whose essence was revealed through the flow of historical events themselves: a *status* of the Father (governed by law), a *status* of the Son (governed by grace), and a *status* of the Spirit (governed by illumination, love, and – perhaps most problematically of all for ecclesiastical authorities – freedom).²⁶¹ This idea of dividing history into three parts itself likely had a threefold inheritance. The first of these reasons is obvious, deriving from the fact that there are three persons in the Christian Trinity. The second, more obscure but just as fundamental reason can be traced back to the teachings of Pythagoras which his biographer Porphyry explained in the following excerpt:

²⁵⁸ Joachim, *Psalterium decem cordarum*, 485 states: “Note the end of your questions in this holy name of God which is IEUE. IE is one name which refers to the Father, EU is one name which has reference to the Son, UE is one name which refers to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, IEUE is one name, but it cannot simply be possible to refer to the Father alone or the Son alone or the Holy Spirit, but at the same time to all three.” This can be seen also in the Trinitarian figure of the *Liber figurarum* with the three interlocking circles indicating both the passage of time from the Creation to the end of the world with the workings of the three persons in the three statuses, MS Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 255A, f. 7^v. The circles with the Tetragrammaton also appear in manuscripts of other works such as in the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*. See diagrams at the end of Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, figures 3, 26, 27.

²⁵⁹ Compare this pattern of activity with what we find in the sixth century Greek treatise *On the Mystery of the Letters* (Περὶ τοῦ μυστηρίου τῶν γραμμάτων), a text which similarly expounded upon the lettrist mysteries of the statement “I am the Alpha and the Omega”; see Cordula Bandt, *Der Traktat “Vom Mysterium der Buchstaben”*: *Kritischer Text mit Einführung, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008). This Byzantine text is also important for providing historical context to the lettrism in the *Sefer Yetzirah*; see Guy Stroumsa, “A Zoroastrian Origin to the Sefirot?,” *Irano-Judaica* 3 (1994): 19 and “The Mystery of the Greek Letters: A Byzantine Kabbalah?,” *Historia Religionum* 6 (2014): 35-44.

²⁶⁰ Joachim of Fiore, *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (Venice: F. Bindoni and M. Passini, 1527; reprint ed., Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964) ff. 34^v-36^v. See Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 38-51.

²⁶¹ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 23.

Things that had a beginning, middle and end, [the Pythagoreans] denoted by the number Three, saying that anything that has a middle is triform, which was applied to every perfect thing. They said that if anything was perfect it would make use of this principle and be adorned according to it; and as they had no other name for it, they invented the form *Triad*; and whenever they tried to bring us to the knowledge of what is perfect, they led us to that by the form of this *Triad*.²⁶²

While such an idea may well have had much of its pre-Christian roots obscured by the late twelfth century, Pythagorean doctrines about number had a long and well-attested history among the ancient philosophers of *Magna Graecia* in ancient Italy, and had by this time become fully naturalized within the systems of higher learning of not only Christian, but also Islamic and Jewish societies around the Mediterranean as well. Lastly, the third and perhaps most immediate reason for Joachim's threefold breakdown of history was, I maintain, the product of a Christological reaction to a prevailing rabbinic conception of world history as described in *Avoda Zara 9a*, a tractate in the Talmud which states that "the world is destined to exist for six thousand years," that is, two thousand years of emptiness, two thousand years for the Law, and two thousand years for the Messiah.²⁶³ Although Joachim maintained a similar threefold division of a six thousand year period, he staggered or inverted the model in such a way so as to be suitable to Christian history, seeing its totality not as a movement out from the emptiness of the first two thousand year period into the era of the Law and culminating with the era of the Messiah, but rather as a progression moving from a fundamental era of Law toward an era of fullness in the Holy Spirit, which played no role in the reckonings of the ancient rabbis.

Joachim saw the totality of history as the "sign-writing of the Triune God."²⁶⁴ He frequently explained how this power to pierce into the inner signification of historical facts came from seeing with "the eyes of the mind" (*oculi mentis*).²⁶⁵ This was not the Gnostic vision of another world, but "an understanding of the full dimensions of the Word as it appeared clothed in historical fact" and this distinction is important.²⁶⁶ Joachim's mysticism did not constitute a type of hermetic ascent up and out of material existence that carried on into some nebulously defined celestial realm – rather, it was concerned with a kind of spiritual basking in the *totality* of Scripture and the dizzying story it described, presumably aided by an intense regimen of fasting, purification, hard labour, and prayer. From these meditations, forms and figures appeared to Joachim which he believed could be brought back down to consensus reality and used as windows to elucidate his understanding to others. Joachim was not primarily after the palaces of heaven (*hekhalot*), but after concrete descriptions, images, and *figurae* with which to relate the understanding of the unfoldment of God's hidden purpose in creation as he had revealed it through Scripture. What Joachim did was not exactly "Kabbalah," but it was certainly some kind

²⁶² Porphyry, "The Life of Pythagoras" in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, ed. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 133.

²⁶³ See *Avoda Zara 9a* in Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, 32:48.

²⁶⁴ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 19.

²⁶⁵ Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 20.

²⁶⁶ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 19.

of parallel Christian approach to the lettrist and theosophical speculations of Jewish Kabbalists, a kind of “kabbalistic thinking” through a close encounter with the word.

Implicit to Joachim’s understanding of world salvation was an inexorable arrow of progress from the moment of original sin until the *transitus* which would roll history into the third *status*, thus marking mankind’s visible shift away from worldly carnality, the life of the marketplace, toward the life of asceticism and spiritual enlightenment, the life of the monastery.²⁶⁷ Throughout this gradual progress, the *intellectus spiritalis*, the ability to see formal correspondences in Scripture and history, would become increasingly more manifest as the third status drew near, thereby producing a great blossoming of spiritual men who would put this understanding into effect. One such correspondence, according to Joachim, could be seen in the biblical story of Jacob, which he took to prefigure the union of Jews and Christians as an historical event that would take place in the third *status*. The transitus from the first to the second *status* arose when Jacob left Israel for Egypt. Jacobs’ struggles against his resentful uncle and father-in-law Laban prefigured the struggles between the contemplative orders and the clergy. His return to the lands of Israel, however, prefigured the return to the Jews into the fold of Christendom. To support the presence of such a prefiguration, Joachim cited Paul saying: “When the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, so all Israel shall be saved,”²⁶⁸ taking this to signify that once the Christians returned to Israel, having been perfected, then all differences between Christian and Jew would be submerged. Joachim himself asserted that: “When Jacob completes his itinerary, he comes to his father, for at the end of the sixth time of the sixth age... there is a union of the Gentile and the Hebrew people, and there will be one fold and one shepherd.”²⁶⁹ Therefore, in contrast to all his predecessors, in whom the belief was that the Jews would just naturally convert of their own accord during the end times, Joachim foretold of a union between the lines of Shem and Japheth as coming about within the bounds of history, at the start of the third *status* which loomed imminently over the horizon.²⁷⁰

Lurking in Joachim’s prophetic sense of history was an all-pervasive sense of Platonic realism unfolding through time. It was rooted in the imagery and discourse of Judeo-Christian prophecy, but on a practical level Joachim’s activities were profoundly concerned with the yoking of historical particulars to universal principles. In Joachim’s own words:

The first epoch was that in which we were under the law, the second when we were under grace, the third when we will live in anticipation of even richer grace... The first epoch was in knowledge, the second in

²⁶⁷ Hames, *Like Angels*, 24.

²⁶⁸ *Romans* 11:25-26.

²⁶⁹ *Liber concordia*, 130, 158-159; cited in Lerner, *Feast of St. Abraham*, 24; cf. *Ezekiel* 34:8-31.

²⁷⁰ See *Liber figurarum*, MS Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 255A, f. 12^v. The *figura* known as the Trinitarian tree bears the names of Noah’s sons in Hebrew. After examining the Hebrew letters, however, Hames, *Like Angels*, 24 argues that they are a later addition. See Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *Figurae*, 170-173 and for a picture of the figure. For more on the reunion of Jew and Gentile, see Lerner, *Feast of St. Abraham*, 23-37; Daniel, “Abbot Joachim of Fiore and the Conversion of the Jews,” 1-21; and Anna Sapir Abulafia, “The Conquest of Jerusalem: Joachim of Fiore and the Jews,” in *The Experience of Crusading, Vol. 1, Western Approaches*, eds. Marcus Bull and Norman Housley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127-146.

the authority of wisdom, the third in the perfection of understanding. The first in the chains of the slave, the second in the service of a son, the third in freedom. The first in exasperation, the second in action, the third in contemplation. The first in fear, the second in faith, the third in love. The first under slave bondage, the second in freedom, the third in friendship. The first the age of children, the second the age of youth, the third in full daylight. The first in winter, the second in spring, the third in summer. The first the seedling of a plant, the second roses, the third lilies. The first producing grass, the second stalks, the third wheat. The first water, the second wine, the third oil.²⁷¹

Here spiritual essences precede their earthly or temporal existences. All of reality coheres by virtue of analogy or correspondence to eternal principles hidden in the soteriological process inherent to the Trinitarian God. To fully grasp the complexity of Joachim's morally-organized vision of history, one must understand that this triplex view was no simple linear breakdown of time into three stages, and no mere chain of causality. Rather, through meditation on specifically Latin Trinitarian doctrines, he beheld the meaning of history (*ratio ordinis*) as a property emerging from the mysterious interpenetration of Three Persons, each with the others. Reeves explains succinctly:

The Father 'sends' the Son; Father and Son 'send' the Spirit; or, the Son 'proceeds' from the Father; the Spirit 'proceeds' from both Father and Son. This was the doctrine of the *missio* (sending) and *processio* (proceeding).²⁷²

The first *status* began with Adam, bloomed in Abraham, and closed with Christ. The second *status* began with King Uzziah of Judah, bloomed with the father of John the Baptist, Zachary, and was closing in Joachim's lifetime. The third *status* began with St. Benedict, bloomed around Joachim's own day, and would end with the final climax of history. In such a way, each of the three status were supposed to bleed into one another.²⁷³ The seeds of the subsequent *status* were always planted in the soil of the previous one. The final *status* of the Spirit, however, would be marked by a time "without war, without scandal, without worry or terror, since God shall bless it and He shall sanctify it, because in it, He shall cease from all of his labour that He has accomplished."²⁷⁴ It is worth noting here, as Marjorie Reeves has emphasized, that Joachim himself never drew a simple horizontal figure of three succeeding *status*. The figure inspired by Ezekiel's rotating wheels within wheels as its source of inspiration was chosen to demonstrate the growth of spiritual illumination by focusing on the central virtue of *caritas*, the symbol of the third status, with the verb expressing the relationship of the stages as *inesse*.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *A Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 17.

²⁷² Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 3.20; in regards to Joachim's strong belief in the Catholic theology of double procession (based on the infamous *filioque* affair), is also made evident in his first *figura* wherein when God says "I am the A and Ω", and Joachim understands this literally as a mystery to be revealed only through the spiritual insights of his own Greco-Latin lettrism. 'Lettrism' is a label used to describe a wide array of 'Pythagorean' mystical practices rooted in the idea that a 'real' link stands between semiology and ontology that were widely known in the Islamic world, though chiefly concerned with Arabic rather than Greek letters/numbers, and chiefly concerned with passages from the Qur'an rather than from the Bible.

²⁷³ Cf. n. 1014 below.

²⁷⁴ Joachim of Fiore, *Liber de concordia*, V, fol. 133ra.

²⁷⁵ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 289.

From within this scheme of interactions within the unity of the three divine persons, Joachim conceived a whole map of time laced through by a matrix of sympathies or correspondences: *concordia* to use his own words.²⁷⁶ In the *Liber concordie*, one finds a system of correspondence for each event, person, and period in the Old Testament with an event, person, or period in the New Testament. These correspondences then were demonstrated as prefiguring yet a third set of similar events, people, and periods in the final age of human history. What was perhaps most relevant to the Franciscans who adopted Joachim's view of history was the notion of "being sent" as the ultimate facet of *imitatio Christi*. West and Zimdars-Swartz explain how:

The central image of Christ is that of the Only Begotten Son who, with the Holy Spirit, was sent by the Father into the world. Joachim finds significance in the fact that the Son and Spirit are the two Persons of the Trinity who are sent, and in his discussion of Trinitarian doctrine in the *Psalterium*, he explains the terms and meaning of this sending (*missio*). For the abbot, the works of these two persons in history are a function of their mission for the salvation of the world: Christ in assuming human flesh reconciles people with God, reforming them to his image; the Holy Spirit makes the work of Christ effective in the hearts of believers and reveals the mysteries of Christ.²⁷⁷

In light of this conception, what better way was there for the friars to demonstrate not only to what extent they had been filled by the Holy Spirit, but also to what extent they could emulate the figure of the Son by being *sent out* into the world, out from a prior place of comfort and privilege and into the perilous cold.

It is not fair to say that the fullness of Joachimite thought and influence constituted the mere breaking down of time into three *status*. Although the three *status* are often considered today the *sine qua non* of Joachimite theology, this pigeonholes Joachim's ideas about time to some extent. His vision was much more complex and nuanced. With his "kaleidoscopic imagination," he had numerous periodization schemes operating simultaneously, overlapping one another in an almost fractal pattern. The three *status* were superimposed atop the seven ages (for the seven days of creation), which were calculated to total up to some 126 generations (42 generations leading up to Christ, 42 generations after Christ and before the coming of Antichrist, and then another 42 generations living during the *status* of the Holy Spirit). With the rise of this Antichrist, seven seals would be broken, marked by seven persecutions for both Israel and the Church in their respective *status*. Antichrist itself would arise with the seven headed beast – a process, not an event – and the third *status* would finally come about with the defeat of the Beast's tail. What is most important here in terms of lasting influence is not the three *status*, but the idea that the whole of history was providentially determined to progress in conformity with prophetically revealed forms toward ever more perfected moral states.

One of the clearest figures demonstrating Joachim's vision of history is the 'Tree of Trinity' found in the *Liber figurarum*, the thirteenth century compilation of Joachimite

²⁷⁶ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 7.

²⁷⁷ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Study in Spiritual Perception and History*, 78.

illustrations currently held at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in Rome.²⁷⁸ The tree comprises three loops made up of intertwining branches in a manner similar to the caduceus of Hermes with its intertwining serpents. This symbol has had a long history connoting the *coincidentia oppositorum* ever since its first appearance in the form of the Sumerian mediator god Ningishzida. Here, despite no direct connection to such ancient pagan symbols, the connotation is similar: the union of heaven and earth. The whole figure explicitly demonstrates the crisscrossing twin-tracked histories of Jew and Gentile ultimately culminating at the end of history with a great flowering of saints in the *status* of the Holy Spirit. Each ‘loop’ created by the crisscrossing vines symbolizes a *status*, the first of the Father, the second of the Son, and the third of the Spirit. The first *status*, enduring from the time of Abraham until that of Christ, constituted forty-two generations, a number taken from *Matthew* 1:17 where it is written: “all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.” The second *status*, by way of correspondence, was thought to be a recapitulation of these forty-two generations of thirty years each, a number which when multiplied yielded 1,260, the number which appeared in *Revelation* 11:2-3: “And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth,” a period of time after which Joachim believed the third *status* of the Spirit would begin and a new era of unprecedented peace and Christian universalism which would endure for the length of another 42 generations. If anything, the doctrine of three *status* is an explicit attempt at describing progress and historical discontinuity. Though to us this system of periodization might seem more prescriptive than descriptive, for Joachim it laid at the foundations of reality, being rooted in the very word of God.

In the first half of the thirteenth century, immediately following Joachim’s death, dreams of world conversion flourished in tandem with concrete attempts at action to immanentize that end. As such, this period was marked by unprecedented developments in both the theory and practice of missionary work, not merely to pagan peoples like the Mongols, but also to Islamic and Eastern Orthodox communities that Rome considered schismatic and/or heretical. Brett Whalen tells us that, under the aegis of two enthusiastic popes Gregory IX (r. 1227–41) and Innocent IV (r. 1243–54),

The European ambition to realize Christendom flourished as never before. One can track the aspirations of the papal monarchy to create a single “fold” from pagans, Jews, infidels, and Eastern Christians in papal bulls and correspondence, canon law and legal commentaries, and crusading and missionary projects.²⁷⁹

During this period polemical literature, which before had served more as a literary genre for the building up of Christian identity, was now actually being used to fuel efforts toward conversion.

²⁷⁸ Joachim of Fiore, *Liber Figurarum: Il libro delle figure dell’abate Gioachino da Fiore*, 2nd ed., eds. Leone Tondelli, Marjorie Reeves, and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1953).

²⁷⁹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 151.

In general, missions were viewed not as an alternative to crusading, but as a non-violent adjunct to it – preferable to the sword, but realistically more effective when backed by force.²⁸⁰ In this Christian intellectual expansion, Joachim’s philosophy of history imbued his Franciscan successors with a flexible set of historical narratives, future prophecies, and visions of utopia which created a scaffolding of meaning upon which to pin the novelties of their ever-widening world. Joachimite thinkers claimed that after having suffered through a series of apocalyptic tribulations, a refined and “spiritualized” Christendom would finally absorb the Greeks, Muslims, and lastly the Jews, ushering in the fulfillment of history under the careful watch of a new, spiritually transfigured papacy. On account of these radical beliefs that viewed the standing papacy as a manifestation of Antichrist, conflict between the Franciscans and the Popes grew increasingly bitter following the death of Pope Innocent IV in 1254.²⁸¹

On into the fourteenth century, many radical and vigorously persecuted Franciscan Spirituals like Petrus Olivi (1248–1298), Ubertino of Casale (1259 – c. 1329), Fra Dolcino (c. 1250–1307), John of Rupescissa (c. 1310–70), and Telesphorus of Cosenza (d. c. 1388), to name a few, became important to the further spread of Joachim’s prophetic sense of history and imminent apocalypticism throughout Italy, France, and beyond.²⁸² Though not a “Spiritual” Franciscan himself, even Roger Bacon also came to play an important role in promoting the nearness of Antichrist. Working from within the particular apocalyptic framework set down by Joachim, he did much to prepare the Latin West for an influx of foreign occult sciences and hoped that he might devise a way to reverse engineer them in the service of Christendom against the impending coming of Antichrist.²⁸³ Who this Antichrist was to be, however, was still uncertain. Fra Ubertino, a disciple of Olivi, in his *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu Christi (The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus)* identified Boniface VIII (1284–1303), an enemy of the Spiritual movement, and Benedict XI as the first and second beasts of St. John’s *Revelation*.²⁸⁴ Fra Ubertino was so hostile to the moderate majority of his order and so concerned with upholding the literal interpretation of St. Francis’ Rule that he even requested from the pope to be granted separate convents – a request which was denied. The alchemist and apocalyptic visionary John of Rupescissa was locked up beneath a staircase in a Franciscan convent for years and brutally tortured for his beliefs in the adherence to heretically strict apostolic poverty and to the notion that anyone who opposed this lifestyle was fundamentally an aspect of Antichrist. Despite having been deemed insane by Church authorities, Rupescissa was an extremely prolific author on the

²⁸⁰ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 157.

²⁸¹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 152.

²⁸² See McGinn, “The Joachite Movement before 1260,” in *Visions of the End*, 158-167.

²⁸³ For Roger Bacon’s apocalypticism and his proposed strategy to fight the forces of Antichrist with their own weapons, see Zachary Matus, “Reconsidering Roger Bacon’s Apocalypticism in Light of His Alchemical and Scientific Thought,” *Harvard Theological Review* 105, 2 (2012), and Amanda Power, *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For his role as one of the Latin West’s earliest Hebraists, see S. A. Hirsch, “Early English Hebraists: Roger Bacon and His Predecessors,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 12, 1 (1899): 34-88.

²⁸⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Harper Collins 1994), 164.

subjects of prophecy and alchemy, two domains which were deeply intertwined in his mind.²⁸⁵ Those friars who followed in Joachim's footsteps envisioned themselves as actors in an apocalyptic drama. Here persecution was to be expected for any true Christian, but as witnesses to the ideals of apostolic poverty, they had great incentive to persevere. The following chapters will turn to men such as these, and to the influence their prophetic sense of history had in the Latin West leading up to the *quattrocento*.

In this chapter was demonstrated how Jewish and Christian ideas about messianism and apocalypticism shaped the medieval Latin West's sense of time to such an extent that history became the very "field of God's activity."²⁸⁶ Although the average peasant's semi-cyclical concept of time persisted in various guises (particularly in astrological and liturgico-calendrical traditions), the Platonic assertion that "time is the moving image of eternity"²⁸⁷ – and the idea that such an image could actually be mapped out through Scriptural hermeneutics – was firmly concretized in the imaginations of many learned men. In Joachim, a balanced synthesis of the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical interpretations of world events took center stage. The notion that the whole of history itself was a signifier for God's elaborate Trinitarian plan of redemption, and that there was much left to do before the end would come, led to a profoundly different way for individuals to perceive their role in the grand scheme of things. In the prophetic reckonings of Joachim, one could argue there lay the dormant seeds of such a range of concepts as progress, utopianism, Hegel's historical dialectics, More and Marx's "end of history," and even such nefarious concepts as Hitler's *Tausendjährige Reich*. Putting the proverbial cart before the horse, it is not for nothing that Oswald Spengler in his *The Decline of the West* referred to Joachim as "the first thinker of a Hegelian stamp who shattered the dualistic world-form of Augustine."²⁸⁸ More immediately, however, in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, Joachim's apocalyptic dream of a universalized and perfected Christendom wherein Jews and Gentiles were at last subsumed into one body was to become an inspiration for all manner of intellectual projects seeking to realize this end. Again, although Joachim's esoteric approach to language, history, and Scripture cannot itself be considered "Kabbalah" – nevertheless the abbot's language rooted in a Platonic and Abrahamic synthesis, his concern with divine names, letrism and numerology, his overarching angelomorphic framework, and his emphasis on semiological over causal thinking in the study of world history – all of these facets of Joachim's thought certainly influenced later Christian Cabalists, whether directly or indirectly through later mendicant and/or converso authors. Furthermore, in his anti-Jewish polemical facet, in part inspired by Petrus Alfonsi's own *Adversus Iudaeos* tract, Joachim anticipated many of the kinds of arguments that Christian Hebraists such as Ramon Martí, Arnald of Villanova, Paul of Burgos, Jerome of Santa Fé, and ultimately humanists like Marsilio Ficino also used in

²⁸⁵ Leah Devun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (Columbia University Press: 2009), 26.

²⁸⁶ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 40.

²⁸⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 37c-e.

²⁸⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, revised edition, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 19.

wrestling against their Islamic and Jewish intellectual opponents – arguments which almost invariably involved mapping out the true course of events in the history of man’s salvation, as they had been laid out by an omnipotent and providential God.

3 - Mendicant Missions and the Polemical Use of the Prophetic Sense of History

After Joachim died in 1202, his thoughts and *figurae* were transmitted for posterity by the members of various orders, chiefly, the Florentians, the Cistercians, and most importantly, the Franciscans. Joachim's own order based in southern Italy, the Florentians, never aspired to become a multinational organization like the mendicant orders, but they too played their part in the promulgation of the Calabrian abbot's ideas.²⁸⁹ Each of these orders had members who copied his manuscripts and, in some cases, even composed pseudo-Joachimite works of their own. Such apocalyptic works became a significant source of inspiration to a handful of Latin intellectuals from the late thirteenth century onwards, particularly in spurring on missionary activity and/or writing polemics against heretics, Muslims, and Jews in defense of Christendom. This chapter, therefore, will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which apocalyptic expectations of Christian universalism in general, and Joachimite thought in particular, each provided impetus for the research of polemicists, missionaries, and mendicants to delve into various foreign languages, texts, and lands, all of which ultimately had the unintended consequence of building up the Latin West's general knowledge of world history. It was these ideas and texts produced in the thirteenth century that remained fascinating on into the fifteenth century, becoming a significant part of Ficino and Pico's own theological programs of spiritual regeneration.

The mendicant orders make up the subject of this chapter precisely because the Joachimite prophetic sense of history in the Middle Ages and the Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah in the Renaissance were both matters of fierce debate among their ranks. One predominant concept shared between these two theological currents was the emphasis placed on the 'spiritual understanding,' the intellectual faculty required to penetrate to the deeper Christological meanings of Scripture. The concept had been preached by the Church Fathers, adopted by Joachim, by the mendicants, and by the humanist theologians of the Renaissance in texts like Ficino's *De Christiana religione* or Pico's *Oratio, Conclusiones*, and *Heptaplus*. This 'spiritual understanding' and its exegetical fruits would become the very tools with which individuals outside the Church might be convinced to enter its fold, not by force, but by reasoned persuasion.²⁹⁰ I here hope to untangle some of the relationships between the prophetic approach to history, the mendicant orders, the Latin polemical tradition, the use of history, philosophy, esoteric philology, and divine names as a polemical strategy, and the figures most representative of the Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah's formative stages before Pico (since it was he who first explicitly blended all of these currents). First and foremost, however, we must explore some aspects of mendicant spirituality which developed in reaction to the market economy that emerged with the turn of the High Middle Ages, and how these economic ideas intertwined with

²⁸⁹ For an in depth look at the Florentian order, see Wessley, *Joachim of Fiore and Monastic Reform*, ix-x, 2, 15, 29 and ff.

²⁹⁰ See, e.g., n. 6 above for Pico and Ficino's use of this concept.

historical notions of evangelical perfection persisting on into the Renaissance, itself a period of artistic and cultural flourishing for which a thriving market economy was its very prerequisite.

3.1 *Vita Apostolica* and the Transvaluation of the Market Economy

In 1203, one year after Joachim's death, a Castilian canon regular named Dominic de Guzmán was passing through southern France where, much to his dismay, he found himself surrounded by thriving communities of heretics. The twelfth-century Church had been institutionally ill-equipped to deal with the boom in urban populations that resulted from improvements in technology, the c. 950 – c. 1250 Medieval Warm Period, and the widespread emergence of a market economy. This boom was accompanied by a swell of diversity in religious opinion, especially on the issue of apostolic perfection and the renunciation of wealth. Where ordained diocesan preachers of orthodoxy could not keep up with the demand, heresy naturally flourished. With the help of his bishop, Dominic set himself to devise a battleplan with which to turn back this tide of unchecked heresy, all while using the gospel as his sword. Though he made only a limited number of converts in rural mountain lands, he turned to the urban centers of Spain, France, Italy, and Germany where he collected a good number of recruits eager to participate in the apostolic lifestyle.²⁹¹ Dominic called upon his order of preachers to live a life of voluntary poverty, begging, frequent fasting, vegetarianism, and the wearing of simple robes, just as his opponents throughout the towns and mountain villages of Occitania had been arguing was necessary for the attainment of evangelical perfection. Now Dominic could encounter such heretics directly, immune to their most frequently cited criticisms, all while using their own weapons against them. To Dominic and his brothers, however, this ascetic pattern of activity had not been invented by heretics, but by Christ and his apostles. In 1215, the Dominicans were recognized as a permanent addition to the diocese of Toulouse and in 1216 they adopted the rule of St. Augustine and wrote a constitution. On 22 December 1216, they received papal approval from Honorius III, and in 1217, they solidified their existence with the name of *Ordo praedicatorum*, the Order of Preachers. By 1221, the order had blossomed to such an extent that it now comprised over sixty houses spread out from Spain to Hungary.²⁹² Dominic's order was tremendously successful from its inception, and much of this success can be attributed to the fact that it provided a way of life to satisfy that great spiritual desire which had emerged during the thirteenth century for Christendom to address the problems concomitant with a booming market economy, the wealth it generated, and the masses it left behind.

In his ground-breaking *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* first published in German in 1935, Herbert Grundmann put forward the argument that thirteenth century Europe should not be thought of as a period marked by the proliferation of numerous disparate movements, but rather various aspects of *one single* religious movement.²⁹³ This single movement centered on the issue of *evangelical perfection through apostolic poverty*, but it fragmented into multiple religious movements along the lines of their status as defined by

²⁹¹ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 16.

²⁹² Michael Tavuzzi, *Renaissance Inquisitors: Dominican Inquisitors and Inquisitorial Districts in Northern Italy 1474-1527* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 1.

²⁹³ Lerner, "Introduction to the Translation," in Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, xviii.

Church authorities: heretical or orthodox. The twelfth-century monastic reforms which prompted this single movement had raised the question from all of Western Christendom: “should ecclesiastical ordination be the only entitlement for carrying out the works of Christian salvation?” To the pious laymen living in Europe’s booming urban centers at the time, the answer was a resounding no.²⁹⁴ Until the reign of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), the seekers of evangelical perfection – those individuals wishing to live out a life of absolute poverty and die preaching in *imitatio Christi* – had functioned outside of the Church and eventually fizzled out without the support of official recognition. Among the first of these groups were the Waldensians of Lyon and the *Humiliati* of Northern Italy. Once elected, Innocent III reconciled the *Humiliati* with the Church and gave permission to Waldensians to preach. He allowed the ‘Catholic Poor’ to build their own convents (previously forbidden by Alexander III), and would become official patron to the Church’s first two ‘mendicant orders,’ the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the one ordained to preach among the lepers and the urban poor, the other to preach among heretics and later among other groups of non-Christians. Both orders, however, were sworn to the traditional monastic vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

Innocent III believed the Church had two duties: “to lead those in error back from heresy, and to preserve believers in the Catholic truth.”²⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the pope also recognized that the entire religious movement risked being driven to heresy if the Church could not relax its views. In this spirit, it was more important to maintain the right belief of true Catholics than to save heretics from falling into ruin. Innocent III thus took it as his duty to ensure that itinerant preaching and poverty movements be brought into the fold of orthodoxy.²⁹⁶ Despite Innocent III’s best intentions for maintaining the integrity of the Church, by the end of the twelfth century, many of apostolic poverty’s earliest practitioners had been snuffed out under waves of local persecution. The issue was taken up again in 1210 when Bernardus Primus and Francis of Assisi were each given papal approval to lead lives of absolute poverty and itinerant preaching. Through the patronage of Innocent III, the mendicant lifestyle and the orders’ anti-heretical missionary activities were thrust onto the global stage where the Waldensians or the *Humiliati* had only just failed in preceding decades.²⁹⁷ The Church never changed its consensus on the view that non-ordained preaching was heretical, but the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 obliquely took advantage of Francis’ burgeoning movement by officially recognizing that bishops should be released from their duties as preachers, and should therefore commission qualified preachers for the pastoral care of their dioceses. The recognition of a religious movement entailed the creation of new rules and ordinances suited to it, and so in an effort to stem the tide of heresy – Cathar or otherwise – the Church decreed that whoever wished to

²⁹⁴ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 7.

²⁹⁵ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 50.

²⁹⁶ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 51.

²⁹⁷ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 55.

become a monk or found a monastery had to accept an approved rule. No more could individuals invent new rules for their orders as had been done before.²⁹⁸

Throughout *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, Grundmann was clear: the religious movement was not a proletarian social movement. Apostolic poverty was not a reaction of the poor against economic injustice. Rather, as his evidence suggested, it was a response from *within* the upper class, typically urban elites, against the perceived corrupting influences of wealth. This theme of ‘economic transvaluation’ is critical and will recur frequently throughout this dissertation, since it is inextricably bound up with concepts like the ‘spiritual understanding’ and the privileging of the spiritual or immaterial over the carnal or material. Grundmann maintained his theories in the face of scholarship by his contemporaries which was strongly coloured by Marxist historical models, and fundamentally denied the presupposition that all cultural phenomena were *necessarily* founded in the dialectical struggles between socio-economic classes. Ideological forces too could be agents of substructural historical change, and it was the historian’s job to “take religion seriously.”²⁹⁹ As early as the 1170s, it was clergymen and upper-class persons who were joining the *Humiliati*. Peter Waldo himself (c. 1140 – c. 1205) was a well-to-do burgher with extensive land holdings who had become wealthy through usury.³⁰⁰ Francis of Assisi too was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, with both individuals being excellent examples in support of Grundmann’s argument.³⁰¹ “We cannot show a single example of a poor convert” wrote Grundmann, “and we have many examples to the contrary.”³⁰² The movement was not a reaction of the disinherited against the leaders of the Church, society, and the economy, but a socio-spiritual reaction among urban elites expressing disgust against their own culture’s greed through voluntary poverty and humility.³⁰³

Leading up to the thirteenth century, the Benedictines had worked out an educational program which was primarily suited to their own contemplative spiritual lives: they memorized the Psalter and read the works of the Church Fathers in Latin. Throughout the second half of the twelfth century, Joachim of Fiore had done the same. The practices of “analysis, criticism, debate, and persuasion,” however, were foreign to Benedictine education and the spiritual ends that order pursued.³⁰⁴ These had been of little use in the isolation of the monastery and would henceforth become the specialty of the mendicant orders. The mendicants received training in rhetoric, discourse, and disputation from the city schools and therein developed techniques that were ultimately intended to serve *preachers*. Thanks to a rapidly developing sense of geography and temporalization via intensified interest in education and contacts with the East, the study of history was also being cultivated. From this process emerged a whole new appreciation of the

²⁹⁸ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 60.

²⁹⁹ Lerner, “Introduction to the Translation,” in Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, xviii.

³⁰⁰ Robert I. Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 111-13.

³⁰¹ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 70-72.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 74.

³⁰⁴ Barbara H. Rosenwein and Lester K. Little, “Social Meaning in the Monastic and Mendicant Spiritualities,” *Past & Present* 63 (1974): 19.

early Church, the apostolic era, and “in particular the historic connection between poverty and preaching.”³⁰⁵ This confluence of factors led to what Marie-Dominique Chenu first called “l’éveil de la conscience,” that is, a vigorous new sense of self-awareness that drove Christians to internalize and cultivate individual moral conscience.³⁰⁶ Here the concept of sin, for example, changed dramatically by shifting attention from the *guilty act* itself to the *guilty mind*. “The price of better education and more sophistication” argued Rosenwein and Little, “was a more complex and potentially more tormenting form of guilt.”³⁰⁷ The explosive growth of the Dominican and Franciscan orders, then, can be seen as a by-product of this convergence of religious and economic factors. As mentioned above, one of the key concepts to understanding the mendicant orders is the idea of ‘transvaluation,’ or social/symbolic inversion. While the Dominicans appropriated key elements from successful heretical itinerant preachers like the Cathar *perfecti* in order to wage a spiritual war against them, the Franciscans synthesized the language of the marketplace with the traditions of the desert fathers, the hermits, the *Humiliati*, and the Waldensians in order to wage spiritual war against the evils of both heresy and the marketplace.

Attempts were made to find direct links between Francis’ calling to the life of apostolic poverty and Joachim’s vision of new *virii spirituales*, but according to Marjorie Reeves, no firm evidence for this has been established, as it was not until the 1240s that there began to be clear signs of an emerging interest in Joachim’s third *status*.³⁰⁸ Francis’ conversion and the spirituality of his immediate circle were expressly shaped around the rejection of the merchant life. In spite of this, the spirituality they developed was inseparable from the society it rejected. As Rosenwein and Little highlighted, friars essentially talked, bargained, argued, and negotiated for a living, and their language was heavily impregnated with marketplace vocabulary.³⁰⁹ Success in preaching – just as in bargaining or litigation – was contingent on the preacher’s skill in the art of persuasion. For this reason, Rosenwein and Little argued that the crowning achievement of the friars consisted in the demystification of the taboo of monetary commercial transactions, first through its outright rejection, then by the incorporation of commercial elements into their spirituality (e.g., *regula mercatorum*), then lastly by helping to justify worldly commerce in a modified and circumscribed form. The lasting legacy of the Church’s numerous *ordines* might then be thought to have served to Christianize key secular activities that had been seen before as “wholly exploitative and morally unacceptable” through a complex process of moral transvaluation.³¹⁰ This process resolved a critical problem for medieval Christendom which had

³⁰⁵ Rosenwein and Little, “Mendicant Spiritualities,” 19.

³⁰⁶ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *L’Éveil de la conscience dans la civilisation médiévale* (Paris: Institut d’Études Médiévales, 1969).

³⁰⁷ Rosenwein and Little, “Mendicant Spiritualities,” 26.

³⁰⁸ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London: Harper & Row), 30.

³⁰⁹ Rosenwein and Little, “Mendicant Spiritualities,” 23.

³¹⁰ Rosenwein and Little, “Mendicant Spiritualities,” 32.

arisen from the transition from informal “gift exchange” economies to formal market economies.³¹¹

Although it is uncertain when the Franciscans first learned of Joachim of Fiore’s ideas, or how they ended up perceiving their order as one half of Joachim’s prophesied *virī spirituales* and identifying their founder as “the angel of the sixth seal,” such notions were circulating in Italy by the 1240s. A circular letter written in 1255 by the Dominican and Franciscan minister generals, Humbert of Romans and John of Parma, used Joachimite imagery to affirm their shared belief that their orders had been sent to save the world.³¹² The main drive behind Franciscan interest in Joachim was fueled by the various disputes which erupted in the wake of Francis’s death. These chiefly concerned the authority of Francis’ *Last Testament* and issues surrounding absolute poverty. After Francis died, those who fought to uphold the same standards of apostolic poverty established by their founder’s reading of the New Testament were increasingly subject to attack, and it is likely that in Joachim’s teachings (authentic and spurious) they found justification for their tribulations: they were the heralds of the new age wherein the entirety of Christendom would soon roll over into a new paradigm more in keeping with the historic principles laid down during the apostolic age. In 1239, the advance of Frederick II (1194 – 1250) over the Alps left the first piece of concrete evidence that the Franciscans were interested in Joachimite prophecy.³¹³ Salimbene di Adam (1221 – c. 1290) explained how a Florentian abbot had fled his monastery and brought to Pisa all of Joachim’s manuscripts fearing that the Hohenstaufen emperor once prophesied as Antichrist would otherwise destroy them.³¹⁴ This Florentian abbot was responsible for getting Salimbene interested in Joachimite ideas and from there they spread like wildfire. In Pisa, the Franciscan lector Rudolph of Saxony adopted them, relinquished his profession in theology, and became a dedicated Joachimite.³¹⁵ Salimbene listed a number of men who took up Joachim’s historical schemes, chief among them John of Parma (who became minister general of the Franciscans from 1247 to 1257), the Provençal writer Hugh of Digne (d. c. 1285), the Parmigiani intellectual Bartholemew Guiscolus, and most infamously, Gerard of Borgo San Donnino (d. 1276), whose own interpretations of Joachim’s three *status* theory caused a great uproar at the University of Paris in 1255.³¹⁶ From the late 1230s onward, then, the regions of Calabria, Sicily, and Naples were the first to be known as centers of Joachimite ideas, and from there they proliferated among scattered members of the Franciscan order who took seriously the call to radical and absolute evangelical poverty.

³¹¹ Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 3-18.

³¹² Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels*, 19, n. 25.

³¹³ Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels*, 19, n. 27.

³¹⁴ See McGinn, “Salimbene of Parma, Chronicle,” in *Visions of the End*, 166-167.

³¹⁵ Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels*, 19, n. 28.

³¹⁶ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 172; Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 38.

3.2 Missionary Projects of the Thirteenth Century

The sudden and unexpected proliferation of Mongolian hordes across the Central Asian steppe beginning around the year of Joachim's death had the indirect consequence of broadening European geographical horizons.³¹⁷ By the 1230s, the semi-nomadic people who came to be known as the "Tartars" burst onto the scene. These were a people so alien and destructive to both Eastern Europe and the Islamic world that they were popularly believed to have arisen from Tartarus itself. As an almost knee-jerk reaction to these barbarian incursions, authorities raced to amass a crusade so as to defend Christendom from this new apocalyptic threat. Across the frontiers of Europe, men prayed for peace but prepared for war. Here the Mongols rapidly became implicated in the newly burgeoning dreams of Catholic universalism, especially among members of the newly founded order of Friars Minor. Their apocalyptically-fuelled expectations constituted the belief that a Khanate conversion to Christianity could ultimately lead to the overthrow of Islam and at last a recovery of the Holy Land. Although such efforts to convert the Mongols were short-lived, the consequences of their invasions, especially in the razing of Baghdad and the destabilizing of the Middle East, broadened the European sense of historical awareness tremendously.³¹⁸ Nevertheless, to use Brett Whalen's words: "the papacy... did not hold a monopoly on the interpretation of history."³¹⁹ On the contrary, a rising generation of apocalyptically-minded exegetes inspired principally by Joachim's peculiar interpretations of Scripture unleashed a torrent of new prophetic works, among which a great number were pseudepigraphically attributed to the Calabrian abbot. Despite being dissatisfied with the *status quo* of Church authority, these "Joachimites" were far from relinquishing the fulfilment of their dream of a totalizing union of Christian and non-Christian into one Catholic fold. Rather, they simply saw themselves as having more work to do in achieving that dream in the face of the corruption they perceived gripping their own ecclesiastical institutions.³²⁰ In response, such kinds of individuals advocating for radical ecumenicalism were increasingly met with hostility by authorities, and this hostility would endure well on into the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

One of Joachim's most influential prophecies gave rise to the expectation that the beginning of the third *status* and therefore the beginning of the last stage of history would be marked by the arrival of "two witnesses," that is, of two spiritual men (*virī spirituales*).³²¹ In the thirteenth-century imagination, it did not take long for these two *virī spirituales* to be equated with Francis and Dominic, each of whom held the key with which to unlock the new age: the key of apostolic poverty.³²² In exercising his "*spiritalis intellectus*," Joachim had taken count of the many sets of 'twos' which dot the Old and New Testaments as his precedent, and this pattern

³¹⁷ See McGinn, "Moslems, Mongols, and the Last Days," in *Visions of the End*, 149-157.

³¹⁸ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 150-151.

³¹⁹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 152.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ McGinn, "Joachim of Fiore," in *Visions of the End*, 129.

³²² Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, 165, 260-261; cf. Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 39.

was enthusiastically rearticulated by various pseudo-Joachimite writers. Numbers, after all, were the only thing that seemed to operate in the same way across all levels of reality, whether terrestrial, celestial, or supercelestial.³²³ It is specifically with respect to such interest in ‘formal numbers’ that Joachim would later fascinate Pico who cited him as the authority in “natural prophecy.”³²⁴ Joachim had provided examples of such formal correspondences as the two birds sent out from Noah’s Ark; the two angels sent to save Lot from the destruction of Sodom; the two brothers Moses and Aaron sent to save the Hebrews from the yoke of Egyptian slavery; the two explorers sent to scout out the lands of Canaan; the two prophets Elijah and Elisha sent to battle the worship of Baal among the northern tribes of Israel; Martha and Mary; Peter and John; the two on the road to Emmaus; Paul and Barnabas; and most importantly, the two aforesaid witnesses in the book of *Revelation*, with each set of twos reflecting something of the spiritual nature of every other set.³²⁵ Here the notion of double-procession, of the ‘twos’ being ‘sent’ was of critical importance within the context of Latin Christendom which had defined itself against the East through various so-called *Filioque* controversies. This semiological approach to history drove exegetes to leave no stone unturned when it came to the search for signs which might help to elucidate the future. While professional scholars from the thirteenth century maintained a multidimensional interpretation of Scripture tending toward a return to more literal and critical approaches, the *sensus allegoricus/typicus* (and its subcategories) stood out as especially important among members of the mendicant orders, especially given its flexibility in regards to interpreting contemporary and future events in a chaotic world.³²⁶ Nevertheless, as the impulse behind missionary work slowly grew, it was not long before Christian exegetes who privileged the *sensus allegoricus* began weaponizing their discoveries against their immediate neighbours, the Jews, whom they frequently accused of gravitating too heavily toward the literal sense, or the *Peshat* (פְּשָׁט), in their own readings of Hebrew Scripture, thereby denying all of their ‘more spiritual’ or Christological prefigurements, concordances, and correspondences.

The advent of the friars into universities across Europe also marked a new chapter in the study of the Bible. Among the Dominicans, religious education consisted chiefly of an updated version of the *lectio divina*, the Benedictine practice of meditating on Scripture and praying for the spiritual sense to be revealed. On account of their partial associations with the cloistered contemplative life, the older interpretative modes which stressed the purely spiritual sense of Scripture were falling out of fashion and being replaced by modes which stressed the moral dimensions of the text – a dimension which even those at the lowest rungs of society could understand through the simple words of a preacher. While the friars did indeed maintain the

³²³ Cf. Pico, *Heptaplus*, Second Proem (Carmichael, 77): “these three worlds are one world, not only because they are all related by one beginning and end to the same end, or because regulated by appropriate numbers they are bound together both by a certain harmonious kinship of nature and by a regular series of ranks, but because whatever is in any of the worlds is at the same time contained in each, and there is no one of them in which it is not to be found whatever is in each of the others... this was the opinion of Anaxagoras, as expounded by the Pythagoreans and the Platonists.”

³²⁴ Cf. Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 466-469, n. 7.10.

³²⁵ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 34. Cf. *Mark* 6:7.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

tradition of *lectio divina*, it gradually took on a more intellectual character, culminating in the commentaries of such influential academics as Albertus Magnus and his student Thomas Aquinas, both of whose legacies persisted into the Renaissance and remained exceedingly important to its intellectual life, both within and outside of the universities.³²⁷ By the Late Middle Ages, it was the allegorical sense which stood out as the most prominent of the four senses. Faced with this shift, Marjorie Reeves maintained that: “the sense that the Scriptures encompassed figurally the whole of history and the human experience of all ages was still pervasive, for in a world where chance and chaos often seemed to reign, it was vital to be assured of a divine pattern.”³²⁸ In spite of mendicant emphasis on the moral dimensions of Scripture for its utility in preaching, the bulk of monastic chroniclers continued to shape their narratives about world history in a hexameral mode, that is, according to the six days of creation and Augustine’s six ages of the world.³²⁹ The great majority of Dominicans by far, with Thomas Aquinas among them, stood fast to the Augustinian position on eschatological theorizing. By and large, they rejected Joachim’s dispensationalist schemes and his understanding of the Trinity outright. Meanwhile, regular Franciscans throughout the thirteenth century for the most part cleaved to orthodoxy as well, but there were many among their ranks who rose up to resist Church authority not only by emphasizing the role of apostolic poverty as a fundamental aspect of the transition to the third *status*, but also maintaining (to the death) that all those who opposed the ideas of Joachim also opposed those of St. Francis, of Christ and his apostles, and were acting as obstacles to the coming of a heavenly Jerusalem promised in Scripture. For the men emphasizing institutional poverty, the machinations of the Antichrist were not only widespread abroad but so too at home.

In general, the Franciscan order’s mission was straightforward: to entice individuals to convert and do penance in preparation for the coming of the New Jerusalem, and to embody the scriptural and historical principles of evangelical perfection, which are renunciation, humility, and poverty.³³⁰ In practice, however, the living out of these principles often took rather extreme forms. In particular, there was the practice of going out and reliving an old hagiographical trope whereby the Desert Fathers actively pursued opportunities to be martyred. The practice of wandering into the Islamic world in search of martyrdom began in 1220 and continued on into the early modern period. Nevertheless, as pointed out in a 2011 article by Christopher MacEvitt, Franciscan blood did not become “the seed of the Church” in these lands. Despite their best

³²⁷ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 31; for one of the first essays to stress continuity rather than discontinuity in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, see Paul O. Kristeller, “Thomism and the Italian Thought of the Renaissance,” in *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning: Three Essays*, trans. E. P. Mahoney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). See also Matthew T. Gaetano, “The Studia Humanitatis and Renaissance Thomism at the University of Padua,” *Divus Thomas* 120, 2 (2017): 21-47 for a more recent expansion on Kristeller’s groundwork that focuses on two Dominican professors of theology at the University of Padua, Sisto Medici and Girolamo Vielmi, who were fully engaged in many activities that scholars today lump under the label of “Renaissance humanism.”

³²⁸ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 32.

³²⁹ See n. 209 above.

³³⁰ Daniel, *The Concept of Franciscan Missions*, 26.

efforts, all the friars' torment and death succeeded in doing was test the boundaries between the *societas Christiana* and *Dar al-Islam*, only to find out that "they were impermeable."³³¹ Surprisingly, hagiographical accounts relating these early Franciscan martyrdoms did not surface until the fourteenth century and when they did, they were chiefly focused on the exploits of three groups: those who died in Morocco (1220), Armenia (1314), and India (1321). Consequently, a century's gap stood between the earliest of the martyrs and the composition of the narratives about their sacrifices.³³² MacEvitt argues that this gap arose because these martyrologies in particular appealed to fourteenth-century friars insofar as "they could help unify a Franciscan order shattered by the struggles between the Conventuals and the Spirituals" and because "the martyrs articulated a vision of Franciscan spirituality that transcended those differences."³³³ It is notable that this dream of sparking mass conversions in the Islamic world began with Francis himself. In 1212, Francis' first hagiographer Thomas of Celano (c. 1185 – c. 1265) had noted that his order's founder had "wished to take a ship to the region of Syria to preach the Christian faith and repentance to the Saracens and other non-believers," but on account of poor sailing conditions, was forced ashore nearby in Slavonia. Francis' "burning desire for martyrdom" did not dwindle, however, and he later traveled toward Morocco, hoping "to preach the gospel of Christ to the Miramolin and his retinue," but this time poor health cut his journeys short, reaching only as far as Christian Spain.³³⁴ Not until Francis joined the Fifth Crusade did he manage to reach Ayyubid Egypt and preach to Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil (c. 1177–1238). Here he neither converted the sultan nor received the martyrdom he sought, but by a century later, a belief emerged in Franciscan circles that al-Kamil had secretly converted, and that Francis' stigmata had constituted a form of martyrdom in and of itself.³³⁵

³³¹ Christopher MacEvitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World through Franciscan Eyes," *The Catholic Historical Review* 97, 1 (2011): 2.

³³² MacEvitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World," 5.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ Thomas de Celano, "Vita Prima Sancti Francisci," *Analecta Franciscana* 10 (Quaracchi, 1928), 42; translation from Thomas of Celano, "The Life of Saint Francis," in *Francis of Assisi: The Early Documents*, eds. Regis Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York, 1999), 229; as cited in MacEvitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World," 6.

³³⁵ MacEvitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World," 6.

3.3 Joachimite Thought and the Order of Friars Minor

Throughout the thirteenth century, Italy saw itself torn apart between the forces of papacy and empire. This was a time and a place where both sides increasingly made more and more appeals to the cryptic utterances of famous prophets – whether Hebrew, Christian, or pagan – in order to justify their own actions on the political stage. Here it became fashionable for papists and imperialists alike to turn to all manner of Joachimite and pseudo-Joachimite prophecies (most notably those regarding a Second Charlemagne, a Last World Emperor, and an Angelic Pope) in making their manifold predictions regarding what lay just over the temporal horizon.³³⁶ Donald Weinstein referred to this as the period in which “the seed of apocalyptic fantasy was implanted in the common culture.”³³⁷ Robert Lerner maintains that the revival of fascination with the work of such an impenetrably difficult author as Joachim of Fiore arose from a sense that he really had possessed astonishing insights into future events.³³⁸ In particular, by the late 1240s a work pseudepigraphically attributed to Joachim, the Jeremiah commentary *Super Hieremiam*, had retroactively endowed the abbot with an aura of supernatural insight regarding the unfolding of current events.³³⁹ Thereafter, in 1254, the infamous friar Gerardo of Borgo San Donnino published what he called the *Evangelium eternum* or “the Eternal Gospel,” a text which he believed would unite and thereby override the Old and New Testaments.³⁴⁰ Through a licensed Parisian stationer, Gerardo put out Joachim’s *Liber de concordia*, but had also supplemented it with his own preface and glosses that contained a number of heretical ideas.³⁴¹

Since the *status* of the Father and the *status* of the Son each had their respective Testaments, the Old and the New, it seemed necessary in the eyes of many Joachimites that there ought to be a Third Testament for the *status* of the Holy Spirit which bound them together. Where Joachim himself had differed from many of his Franciscan inheritors, however, was in his notion that the *status* of the Spirit would not abrogate any of the institutions of the second *status* – not papal authority, not the Church, and not the New Testament.³⁴² Nevertheless, some held this third and final revelation to be the *Rule and Testament of St. Francis*, and for others like

³³⁶ See Bernard McGinn, “Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist,” *Church History* 47, 2 (1978): 158 for the Calabrian abbot’s role in the creation and proliferation of these concepts.

³³⁷ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 39.

³³⁸ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 40 explains how in the years leading up to 1250, the Franciscans discovered that Joachim had: i) foreseen the critical soteriological role of their own order in their historic struggle against evil; ii) predicted the rise of the *Serpens antiquus*, the wicked Emperor Frederick II, either as a minion of the Antichrist or as Antichrist himself; and iii) hinted at the year 1260 as the culmination of a time of trials. Now, in reality, only the third of these predictions was explicitly discussed by Joachim himself; the other two were only the interpretations that others derived from his works; cf. Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 39.

³³⁹ Robert Moynihan, “The Development of the “Pseudo-Joachim” Commentary “*Super Hieremiam*”: New Manuscript Evidence,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome. Moyen-Âge, Temps modernes* 98, 1 (1986): 109-142 argues, based on the appearance of a previously unknown recension of the work and some intermediate glosses, that Joachim may have written the *Super Hieremiam* himself, but that it was thereafter altered by both Florentine monks and Franciscan friars.

³⁴⁰ Cf. *Revelation* 14:6.

³⁴¹ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 44.

³⁴² Matus, “Reconsidering Roger Bacon’s Apocalypticism,” 189-222.

Gerardo, it was unambiguously Joachim's main trilogy of works which proceeded from and fulfilled both the Old and the New Testaments just as the New Testament fulfilled the Old.³⁴³ To Gerardo, the second status was ending and the third was to begin in the year 1260: Joachim's Eternal Gospel would override the Old and New Testaments, and a renewed spiritual Church led by discolored friars would supplant the clergy and their sacraments. The proposition was, of course, met with outrage. Joachim himself never even hinted at sharing in such a presumption. Equally outrageous were the "Franciscanizing" retrojections that Gerardo painted atop Joachim's framework. He held, for example, that Joachim's formal triads pertaining respectively to the first two testaments (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Zacharias, John the Baptist, and Christ) would be fulfilled by the triad of the third testament: Joachim, Dominic, and Francis.³⁴⁴ For this scandalous belief, Gerardo was dragged into an academic dispute in 1255 at the University of Paris, from which point onward his work was used again and again "as ammunition by the secular masters against the mendicants" who had begun to flood the university system.³⁴⁵ This was especially so after a list of his errors was sent to Pope Alexander IV, the Commission of Anagni was established in October of 1255, and his *Liber introductorius* was condemned. Thereafter, Gerardo was put in chains and imprisoned in an underground dungeon for over a decade where he died without ever recanting.³⁴⁶

At the council of Arles in 1263, Gerardo's *Liber introductorius*, the most definitive work of Franciscan Joachimism proclaiming that the Calabrian abbot's works to comprise the Third Testament, was condemned to fire for promulgating a schismatic doctrine. Joachim's own works were left unscathed, but their condemnation was inevitable once having been recognized in the context of what Gerardo had drawn from them. The doctrine of the three *status*, as preached by the Joachimites, was condemned along with the writings of Joachim that were its foundation.³⁴⁷ Despite having been written with papal approval during his own lifetime, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had already condemned Joachim's writings once before on account of what the Church perceived to be his tendency to speak of three distinct gods rather than a Trinity.³⁴⁸ Gerardo's scandal of the *Evangelium eternum* was merely the final straw. In consigning Joachimite doctrines to Guido of Perpignan's *Catalogus haereticorum*, however, the Church only further embattled those who took to heart the three *status* scheme, with its vision of imminent persecution by the forces of Antichrist seated high in the places of power. Gerardo's peculiar interpretations would not be worth mentioning if they were a unique and anomalous example of how Joachim's writings were elaborated and re-interpreted by subsequent generations; instead, they were but drops in a large bucket of eccentric Franciscan readings that leveraged the Joachimite model in their predictions about – among other things – the future of their missions, especially to the Jews. This resulted from the Franciscan need for a narrative to

³⁴³ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 45.

³⁴⁴ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 45.

³⁴⁵ Warwick Gould, "Things Thought Too Long: Joachim Then and Now," *Intellectual News* 10, 1 (2002): 78.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 58 and ff.

contextualize the new and unique calling of their order, and eventually, to rationalize the calling of an ever-shrinking and radical subsection within that order. The order's dominant calling consisted of missions to the urban poor and missions abroad. Investing their personal effort into these objectives seems to have stimulated in the order's members "a dream of a world in which religious differences would be submerged."³⁴⁹ Even after the Gerardo affair, this dream persisted, but now under threat of persecution.

One of the next advocates of Joachim's dreams was, most unexpectedly, Bonaventure himself, the Franciscan minister general who was responsible for imprisoning Gerardo for heresy in the first place. Whereas Thomas Aquinas had embraced what secular philosophy had to offer his systems, Bonaventure was more skeptical and instead practised a kind of Platonic mystical theology inspired foremost by Augustine and ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite. Whereas Aquinas believed knowledge to begin with the senses, Bonaventure believed in Augustine's Platonic notion that human knowledge exists purely on account of divine illumination. For Bonaventure, all phenomena were to be interpreted as signs. Such a notion found its fullest expression in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron (On the Six Days of Creation)*, Bonaventure's last set of lectures given in Paris in 1273, known only to us from notes.³⁵⁰ The *Collationes* were structured in accordance with the six days of creation, and each day of creation corresponded to a vision. When it came to interpreting Scripture, Bonaventure largely rejected the *sensus litteralis* as cursory, preferring to be guided instead by what he called the mystical *triplex intelligentia spiritualis* which consisted in the allegorical (that which is to be believed), the anagogical (that which is to be expected), and the tropological (that which is to be performed).³⁵¹ The allegorical typically pertained to the Trinity, the analogical to heaven, and the tropological to the Church. In like fashion, he understood his own order's role through the image of a tripartite Jerusalem: there was Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, which comprised the aggregate Church in the physical world; the mystical Jerusalem, accessible only by contemplation; and the eschatological Jerusalem, which was the kingdom of God to come. In other words, the Friars Minor were called to be ministers, contemplatives, and missionaries all at once, endeavouring to inspire others to reform themselves in accordance with the model evangelical life as it was understood through the rule of St. Francis.³⁵² In spite of all his hermeneutical complexities, however, Bonaventure never ceased to emphasize to the end of his life that "after the New Testament, there will be no other" ("*post novum testamentum non erit aliud*"), reaffirming his order's firm stance against not only Gerardo's *Eternal Evangel*, but also against the Qur'an of the Arabs and the Midrashic books of the Jews.³⁵³

³⁴⁹ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 48.

³⁵⁰ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 55; Ilia Delio, "From Prophecy to Mysticism: Bonaventure's Eschatology in Light of Joachim of Fiore," *Traditio* 52 (1997): 153-177.

³⁵¹ Bonaventure, "Hexaëmeron XIII" in *Opera omnia S. Bonaventurae*, vol. 9 (Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, 1867), 91.

³⁵² Daniel, *The Concept of Franciscan Missions*, 30.

³⁵³ Bonaventure, "Illuminationes Ecclesiae, Sermo XVI" in *Opera omnia S. Bonaventurae*, 104; cf. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 36-38: Despite refusing the Spirituals' claim for the highest exaltation of

For Bonaventure, like for Joachim, history was the arena on which the progressive revelation of God was to unfold. Bonaventure could be called a moderate Joachimite, looking to the sign of the times for guidance, and even maintaining the notion that the Church's history was to be reckoned in three *status*: the first *ante legem*, the second *sub lege*, and the third *sub gratia*.³⁵⁴ This stands in contradistinction to the old anti-climactic and anti-apocalyptic Augustinian view which continued to be upheld and defended by Thomas Aquinas and his fellow Dominicans, especially in the face of heretics who clung to the eschatological schemes of Joachim of Fiore. In Bonaventure's theology of history, again as in Joachim's, he overlapped the doctrine of the three *status* with Augustine's model of six ages based on the six days of creation in *Genesis* along with the seven seals in the book of *Revelation*, placing the Church on the edge of a crisis at the end of the sixth age. Marjorie Reeves tells us how:

The fact that Bonaventura accepted the Joachites' identification of St. Francis as the Angel of the Sixth Seal and also saw him as the Angel of the Church of Philadelphia, a key figure in Joachim's exegesis, places St. Francis' eschatological role beyond doubt: the first 'sealed' the 144,000 redeemed, the second held the key to unlock the door of spiritual understanding. So St. Francis revealed both the nature of the final order and that of the final illumination. But the last stage was not yet: St. Francis had made the *transitus*, but the Order was still 'in the way.'³⁵⁵

Bonaventure was unwilling to go as far as to say his order had reached any degree of perfection, thereby placing its members in the rungs of the celestial hierarchy alongside the Cherubim, but its founder, he believed, had certainly achieved that Seraphic stage.³⁵⁶

The so-called "Spiritual" Franciscans began to arise around the 1270s and 1280s. These were friars who, on account of their own 'spiritual understanding,' put a radical emphasis on emulating Christ via Francis.³⁵⁷ As demonstrated by David Burr in his monograph on the subject, this label of "Spirituals" does not designate a monolithic group, but an aggregate of several types of radicals with respect to the issues surrounding apostolic poverty, each with their own histories and idiosyncrasies.³⁵⁸ The Franciscan Spirituals were but one reform group among many during this period, and even they themselves were but a loose amalgamation of different reform-minded individuals. Bonaventure's works became an inexhaustible wellspring of theological influence among the leading lights of these reform movements, like the Provençal Petrus Olivi and on

Franciscan life, Bonaventure still followed Joachim closely in the *Hexaëmeron* believing that history would ultimately generate a perfect, "Seraphic" order: "Et sicut sex diebus factus est mundus et sexta aetate venit Christus, ita post sex tempora Ecclesiae in fine generabitur Ecclesia contemplativa... Unde oportet quod in Ecclesia appareat status qui huic angelo (i.e. the Sixth Angel) respondeat habens ultimum et perfectum Dei cultum et hanc triplicem lucem elevantem tripliciter."

³⁵⁴ Bonaventure, "Expositio in Psalterium, Psalmus David LXXXVI" in *Opera omnia S. Bonaventurae*, 262.

³⁵⁵ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 37.

³⁵⁶ Two centuries later, it was this very same angelomorphic ps.-Dionysian vision of self-annihilation in God that endured as a central theme in Pico's *Oratio* where he argued that men must emulate the contemplative angels, since "one who is a seraph – a lover – is in God, and God is in him: or rather, he and God are one." Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 463.

³⁵⁷ David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), ix.

³⁵⁸ Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans*, viii.

through him the Italian Ubertino de Casale.³⁵⁹ Keeping these factors in mind should help soften the fallaciously dichotomous view that traditionally framed the internal struggles of the Franciscan order in terms of a sharp division between the Spirituals and the Regulars. In Burr's words: the idea of "Spiritual Franciscans" is a useful construct "insofar as it enables us to order available evidence, but dangerous when we begin to make the evidence fit the construct."³⁶⁰

What made a Franciscan a "Spiritual," insofar as modern historians are concerned, was the radical belief that not one iota of Francis' *Rule* and *Testament* could be relaxed or modified, since it itself was thought to be the key to the future age. Through a complete reorientation of their values, these mendicant radicals hoped that by their example, they might reorient the values of the world and usher in a new societal order. John of Parma (d. 1289) believed the *Testament* of St. Francis to be the very embodiment of the *spiritualis intelligentia*,³⁶¹ while Petrus Olivi came dangerously close to defending the idea that those who did not defend the ideal of "highest poverty" were limbs of the Antichrist.³⁶² Robert Lerner explains how much of the controversy that beset the order emerged from the fact the early Franciscans were in need of legal justification. Unlike the Dominicans, the Franciscans were the only mendicant order governed by a new rule. Technically, the Dominicans adhered to a modified form of the rule of St. Augustine. The Franciscans, however, needed to explain why their existence was necessary. A chief difference in their organizational structure was that, where the other monastic orders held no property on the level of individuals, the Franciscans wished to hold property neither individually nor corporately. They only wished to use goods that were technically owned by the Church through "a pious fiction acknowledged by the pope in 1245."³⁶³ The Franciscans justified this ideal of "absolute poverty" on the basis of Scripture, according to the entirely debatable notion that Christ and his apostles had themselves held no property in common, and it was Bonaventure who was personally responsible for determining the specifics in transforming this ideal into a legal reality such that there might be at least one order that could take on the mantle of holy poverty on behalf of the Church. The point of contention arose only once some Franciscans started believing themselves to be "more apostolic" than members of the other orders, especially the Dominicans, to whom such an idea reeked of Pelagianism (the ancient heresy incidentally attacked by the man who was believed to have written their own order's rule: St. Augustine). It was in the shade of this rivalry that some Franciscans found refuge in Joachimism; it was a means of situating themselves in a long chain of self-legitimizing historical patterns.³⁶⁴

³⁵⁹ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 55.

³⁶⁰ Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans*, 346.

³⁶¹ Angelo Clareno, "Historia septem tribulationum ordinis minorum," in *Archiv für Literatur und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters*, eds. P. Heinrich Denifle and Franz Ehrle (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1886), 2:271-283 as cited in Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 34.

³⁶² David Burr, "The Persecution of Peter Olivi," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 66, 5 (1976): 17-24; Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 55-56.

³⁶³ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 56.

³⁶⁴ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 57.

Apostolic poverty was never an end in and of itself. Rather, it was part and parcel of a larger project. The attainment of total non-attachment was but one step toward the perfection of one's inner life which ultimately culminated in the full conformity with the *vita apostolica* and the imitation of Christ. This is one of the reasons why the more austere and heterodox forms of apostolic poverty were suppressed by the mendicant orders in fear of an anti-Pelagian reprisal, or even a concession to the Cathar *perfecti*, since there is a thin line between achieving salvation directly through works *in imitatio Christi*, and achieving it by working through faith in Christ to cooperate with the grace God freely extends. All are redeemed, but one must work alongside of God's grace to be saved. God stretches his hand out to Adam, but Adam must himself reach out to touch it. Another way of thinking about it from within a hierarchical and correlative medieval paradigm is that apostolic poverty was not intrinsically salvific, but it was a critical step in one's life's program to re-evaluate one's priorities. By reordering one's values toward transcendent virtues and principles over material objects, one assimilated oneself to God, and thereby climbed the hierarchy of values ever higher in a procession toward a beatific vision of the divine at the apex. For what did stones, metals, plants, and animals, or even "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon" have to offer the wandering soul which the *Good itself* could not offer? The orthodox position was that poverty itself had no soteriological power, but its concomitant reprioritization of values did. If it was harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, the *transitus* from the carnal to the spiritual realm was more easily accomplished by individuals who renounced everything and took up their cross.

For the persecuted radicals, the year 1260 had taken on the sense of a critical moment in time when the third *status* would begin.³⁶⁵ One of the more well-known efflorescences of this belief was the widespread emergence of *disciplinati* (or "flagellant") processions. Mobs took to the streets in conspicuous displays of hysterical penance, and 1260 became known as the "year of the flagellants."³⁶⁶ Though its authorship remains unclear, at times being attributed to Thomas of Celano, Marjorie Reeves connected this movement with the (in)famous and powerful poem, the *Dies irae*, which describes the sounding of the trumpets as they summon forth all flesh to the Final Judgement before the throne of God, beginning in no uncertain terms with the words:

*Dies irae, dies illa,
Solvat saeculum in favilla:
Teste David cum Sibylla.
Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando Iudex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discussurus!*

The day of wrath, O that day,
Will dissolve the world in ashes,
With David and the Sibyl as witness.
How great will be the quaking,

³⁶⁵ *Revelation* 11:3 and 12:6.

³⁶⁶ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 52.

When the Judge will come,
To strictly scrutinize all things...

In the end, given that Frederick II had died quietly in his bed in 1250 rather than fulfilling the prophecy by proving himself to be the Antichrist, and given that 1260 passed with no obvious sign of a *transitus* into the third *status*, it was here when the Calabrian abbot's specific brand of mystical historicism lost a good deal of its popular appeal.³⁶⁷ Nevertheless, among the more radical of the Franciscan ranks, Joachim's sense of apocalyptic immediacy carried on, shifting ever forward with every passing foretold date wherein no sign appeared. For them cataclysmic apocalyptic expectation became the new normal, as did its concomitant utopianism. The mere existence of a man like Angelo of Clareno (c. 1247–1337), for example – an historian, organizer, and leader of a Fraticelli spiritual sect in the early fourteenth century dedicated to both Joachimite principles and the extreme interpretation of his order's seraphic founder – suggests that although the year 1260 went by with no observable apocalyptic events, it did not mean Joachimite sensibilities had entirely disappeared.³⁶⁸ Joachimites in southern Italy simply recalculated the span of 42 generations to begin at the start of Christ's ministry (about the age of 30 according to *Luke* 3:23), rather than from his birth: in this way, the third *status* would begin in 1290.³⁶⁹

Before 1260, the number of Joachimite Spirituals among the ranks of the Friars Minor in Italy could not have been more than a few dozen. By the end of that century, however, there arose three large groups of Joachimites: the “Apostolic Brethren” of Northern Italy, the Franciscan Spirituals, and the Beguines of Provence and Catalonia.³⁷⁰ The Apostolic Brethren had their origins in 1260 Parma, where in a small group of apostolic poverty absolutists centered on the figure of Gerardo Segarelli (or Segaleili, 1240 – 1300) had taken on some Joachimite ideas from radical Franciscan preachers. The movement snowballed as it was joined by many of the local poor, and eventually by well-educated merchants as well. After a blanket papal ban on all unauthorized religious groups in 1274, the band's influence began to spread into neighbouring cities. As the movement gained momentum over the following decades and increasingly appeared to authorities as a destabilizing force, it was eventually quashed. Salimbene tells us that pilgrims – seventy-two in number, a figurative quantity symbolizing a great multitude – began flocking to Parma from the surrounding regions, and Segarelli was put to death for his defiance of the Church's mandates. Despite his execution, Segarelli's group of Apostolic Brethren did not dissolve. Rather, it was picked up by the infamous Fra Dolcino of Novara (c. 1250 – 1307), under whose aegis their numbers swelled to a few thousand, hiding away in their remote Alpine valleys between 1288 and 1292. This offshoot of the Apostolic Brethren, now labelled the

³⁶⁷ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 79; Reeves, *Joachim and the Prophetic Future*, 34.

³⁶⁸ Angelo Clareno, *A Chronicle or History of the Seven Tribulations of the Order of Brothers Minor*, trans. David Burr and E. Randolph Daniel (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005).

³⁶⁹ Hames, *Like Angels*, 22; The prediction appears in the pseudo-Joachimite commentary on Isaiah. *Super Esaiam prophetam*, Ch. 16, f. 30^v; cf. Lerner, *Feast of St. Abraham*, 55.

³⁷⁰ Emmanuel Wardi, “Cognitive Dissonance and Proselytism: An Application of Festinger's Model to Thirteenth-Century Joachimites,” in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 275.

Dulcianites, was just as thoroughly influenced by the writings of Joachim and Francis as its predecessors were. Consequently, it did not take long before its members were branded heretics, in no small part because of Dolcino's adherence to the Joachimite doctrine of the three *status* and the role which he believed apostolic poverty played in unlocking it. In 1307, Clement V moved against the heretics successfully with what amounted to a small crusade and had all of the movement's leaders arrested, tortured, and executed.³⁷¹

Many Spirituals were closely connected with the Beghards and Beguines of Southern France (chiefly in Provence and Catalonia), whose numbers were greatly increased by both male and female Franciscan Tertiaries.³⁷² Among these Spirituals, Tertiaries, Beghards, and Beguines, most had been taught their Joachimite doctrines by the Provençal friar Petrus Olivi (c. 1248 – 1298), despite his order's every effort to suppress the spread of heterodox ideas in the wake of the Gerardo affair. Olivi's public lectures were a success, and more than sixty of his treatises survive today as an indicator of their popularity. Olivi was first roped into the debates between the Franciscan Spirituals and the order at large on account of a group of friars who began invoking his notion of *usus pauper* (poor use) in defending their adherence to extreme poverty. Though Olivi's writings were condemned in 1283, he was cleared of heresy during his own lifetime by the minister general Matthew of Aquasparta (1240–1302). This was not, however, because he had relaxed his more radical views regarding poverty.³⁷³ The mere association of Olivi's name with this haunting spectre of divisiveness, however, did not bode well for his reputation following his death in 1298.³⁷⁴ Around 1287–89, Olivi delivered lectures in Santa Croce, Florence, and afterwards at the Franciscan friary in Montpellier.³⁷⁵ So successful were these public lectures, and so centralized on the idea that apostolic poverty was the key to usher in a new era, that Santa Croce was made into a hotbed for the further proliferation of the Calabrian abbot's apocalyptic ideas.³⁷⁶

Olivi's scholastic work demonstrates how he situated himself historically. He upheld a framework of periodization which saw his own time on the cusp of the *transitus* between the second and third *status*, and between the fifth and sixth age of the Church. The fifth age was marked by the threat of laxity among the contemplative orders, and heresy among the schoolmen who followed in the footsteps of the pagan philosophers. Aristotle was acceptable in matters of reason, but in matters of spirituality, he was a tool of the Antichrist. In his thoroughly Joachimite *Postilla super Apocalypsim*, Olivi maintained that “nothing so prepares the way for the final Antichrist as the destruction of highest poverty.”³⁷⁷ In the same way that the carnal synagogue

³⁷¹ Wardi, “Cognitive Dissonance,” 276.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 62.

³⁷⁴ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 51.

³⁷⁵ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 47-48.

³⁷⁶ It is here where a youthful Dante Alighieri would have been exposed to Olivi's ideas, which explains why one finds Joachim of Fiore placed alongside Bonaventure in the *Paradiso*'s sphere of the Sun; *Paradiso* 12.140-41.

³⁷⁷ Petrus Olivi, *On Poverty and Revenue: The Sixteenth Question on Evangelical Perfection*, trans. Jonathan Robinson (self-pub., 2011), 15.

had been rejected at the end of the first *status*, so too would the carnal church need to be rejected at the end of the second status. In expounding his supercessionist apocalyptic ideals, Olivi demonstrated that he was no stranger to the association between Jews and “carnality” as the notion developed in polar opposition to Christian ideas about apostolic poverty.³⁷⁸ His belief was that so long as the Jews prioritized wealth over Lady Poverty, they would never be converted, or at the very least, converted last of all.³⁷⁹ Through the miraculous gift of the spiritual understanding extended to them by the grace of God, however, they would come to perceive that apostolic poverty was not merely an innovation of the New Testament, but a prominent feature in the lives of the Old Testament prophets too. Apostolic poverty was itself the spiritual thread which bound together the Old and New Testaments in concordance with one another. Unlike in Joachim, however, in Olivi one sees implications that the Jews would play no active role in the coming earthly sabbath; instead they were simply to be passive recipients.³⁸⁰ Nevertheless, as Robert Lerner writes, “[Olivi] still viewed God’s symmetry as requiring the merger of Gentiles and Jews as a characteristic of the coming wondrous age of the spirit,” and for him this final age would endure far longer than Joachim had foretold, being “fixed temporally in the ancient homeland of the Jews.”³⁸¹

Olivi’s commentary on the book of *Revelation* reached such levels of popularity that the Toulousian inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261–1331), a Dominican, went so far as to blame its Provençal edition for sitting at the root of all Beguine heresies, those which his own order had been charged to oversee.³⁸² Around 1310, the Franciscan minister general, John of Murrovalle – a staunch opponent of Olivi’s ideas – began a campaign of violent suppression of the friars of Provence who he believed clung obstinately to Olivi’s works, especially his ideas on *usus pauper*. By 1312, on account of their swelling numbers and their ever-deepening sense of embattlement, approximately 300 Spirituals were arrested on the orders of Clement V. By this time, however, their message had already been heard far and wide. With prominent members of the order now filling significant positions in the hierarchy of the Church, the only hope for the Franciscan Spirituals of bringing an end to their persecution hinged on having friends in high places: friends like Arnald of Villanova, who was in good standing with Frederick III, the king of Sicily.³⁸³ These men will be discussed later in this chapter, but first we must turn to some important currents from the later half of the thirteenth century in regards to members of the Franciscans’ rival order in the Church, the Dominicans, and what kinds of missionary projects they were beginning to develop whose impact would persist well on into the Renaissance period.

³⁷⁸ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 76 argues that for Olivi, carnality was a sickness that lay at the very root of all ecclesiastical decline which chiefly took the form of “corruption, heresy, an Islamicized Aristotelianism that subverts Christian doctrine, and the denial that *usus pauper* is an essential part of the Franciscan vow.”

³⁷⁹ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 87.

³⁸⁰ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 62-63.

³⁸¹ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 66.

³⁸² Gui, *Manuel de l’inquisiteur*, 1 and 111-114 as cited in Wardi, “Cognitive Dissonance,” 277.

³⁸³ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 163. See Chap.

3.6 Ramon Llull and Arnald of Villanova below.

3.4 Ramon Martí and the *Pugio fidei* (*The Dagger of the Faith*)

Starting within the lifetime of St. Francis and St. Dominic, there suddenly arose a great number of missionary projects focused on sending friars abroad to the furthest corners of the earth, often in search of martyrdom. By contrast, and just around the same period, there also arose more pastorally-oriented missionary projects *within* the bounds of Christendom, at work dealing with unorthodox Christians, Jews, and heretical groups like the Albigensian Cathars. The former group largely consisted of Franciscans, while the latter largely consisted of Dominicans. As efforts to bring salvation to infidels and heretics alike mounted, strategies for effective conversion were ever increasingly researched and refined. Wandering into foreign lands and preaching on the street was an effective way to get martyred, but hardly an effective way to win over lost souls. By the second half of the thirteenth century, it was the strategy of theologically slaying opponents of Christianity “with their own swords”³⁸⁴ that was adopted as both the most effective and the most compassionate way to lead outsiders to Catholic truth. Thus it is during this period that one sees doubled efforts to convert the Jews become manifest in monumental works like the 430-folio *Pugio fidei* of the Catalan friar Ramon Martí (c. 1278), which was the product of two decades spent studying ‘oriental’ or Semitic languages (Arabic/Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic) for the express purpose of serving in the Dominican order’s effort to convert the Muslims, but even more so, the Jews of Spain.³⁸⁵ His anti-Islamic polemics were in response to such anti-Christian polemical works as Ahmad ibn ‘Umar al-Qurtubī’s *Information about the Corruptions and Delusions of the Religion of the Christians and the Presentation of the Merits of the Religion of Islam and the Establishment of the Prophethood of Our Prophet Muhammad*, or Ibn Taymiyya’s *The Correct Answer to the One Who Changed the Religion of the Messiah*.³⁸⁶ Nevertheless, while Martí was well versed in Arabic, and was as familiar with the works of al-Fārābī, Avicenna, Al-Ghazālī, and Averroes as with those of Maimonides, his rebuttals of Islamic attacks ultimately made up an insignificant detour when the total scope of his four extant works are taken into consideration.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 44.

³⁸⁵ See Görges K. Hasselhoff and Alexander Fidora, eds., *Ramon Martí’s Pugio Fidei. Studies and Texts* (Santa Coloma de Queralt: Obrador, 2017); see also Ryan Szpiech, “Arabic Citations in Hebrew Characters in the *Pugio Fidei* of Dominican Raymond Martini: Between Authenticity and Authority,” *Al-Qantara* 32, 1 (2011): 71-107 and “Rhetorical Muslims: Islam as Witness in Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Al-Qantara* 34, 1 (2013): 153-185. For a look at the early influence of the *Pugio* on members of the Franciscan order, see Alexander Fidora, “Ponç Carbonell and the Early Franciscan Reception of the *Pugio fidei*,” *Medieval Encounters* 19, 5 (2013): 567-585.

³⁸⁶ See Samir Kaddouri, “Identificación de ‘Al-Qurtubi’, autor de Al-I‘lām bimā fi dīn al-naṣārā min al-faṣād wa-l-awhām,” *Al-Qantara* 21 (2000): 215-219 for information on the late-twelfth/early-thirteenth century Andalusian traditionalist; see Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1984) for an English translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Al-jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ*.

³⁸⁷ On the role of Arabic philosophers in the *Pugio fidei* see Ann Giletti, “An Arsenal of Arguments: Arabic Philosophy at the Service of Christian Polemics in Ramon Martí’s *Pugio fidei*,” in *Mapping Knowledge: Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. Charles Burnett and Pedro Mantas-España (London: The Warburg Institute, 2014), 153-164.

Up until the thirteenth century, Christians of the Latin West had shown little serious interest in converting the Jews of Europe. After having studied anti-Jewish violence in the Middle Ages for over a decade, Robert Chazan concluded that the First Crusade in 1098 represented “the first stage in the development of a dangerous exclusionist tendency in maturing western Christendom” fueled by “the desire to provide a more homogeneous Christian environment by removing the Jews.”³⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the radical attitude of popular German crusading bands who sought to erase Judaism by forceful conversion or death was disavowed by Church officials and heartily opposed in subsequent crusades. In place of the tendency which these mobs of crusaders represented, there arose a more systematic and non-violent approach to satisfy this desire to homogenize Christendom, chiefly through ‘rational’ argumentation – that is, through polemics which enshrined the spiritual nature of Christianity over the carnal nature of Judaism. This point is vital because as Gershom Scholem first argued, and I reiterate here, the Christian interpretation of Kabbalah by Pico della Mirandola and his followers in the Renaissance could not be properly understood as anything else but the outgrowth of the linguistic, exegetical, and polemical strategies begun with the Dominican *Pugio fidei* project of the late thirteenth century. As a Dominican living in Spain, it is unlikely Ramon Martí was influenced by Joachim of Fiore, but he and his team can certainly be said to have shared in the same universalizing impulses, fuelled by the knowledge that it was by no means impossible to turn individual Jews into conversos purely by persuasion, or if not, at the very least to silence them.

In his role as a Dominican, Martí was appointed as a member of a royal commission with seven other friars to investigate and deal with the rising threat posed by the spread of rabbinic literature and Arabic philosophy beginning in 1250.³⁸⁹ Equipped with a working knowledge of the Solomon Yitzchaki (1040–1105), Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), Abraham Ibn Ezra (c. 1093 – c. 1167), David Kimhi (1160–1235), the Talmud and Midrashim, Martí had nevertheless been wholly involved in the active censorship of Hebrew books in 1264, and his two major works, the *Capistrum Iudaeorum* (*The Muzzle of the Jews*) and the *Pugio fidei* (*The Dagger of the Faith*), were the most significant by-products of this labour.³⁹⁰ He also wrote a refutation of the Qur’an, but it is no longer extant. The *Pugio* was written with an audience of students in mind, and it expressly had two aims: i) to provide preachers with details for writing sermons attacking the Jews, and ii) to help “guardians (*cultores*) of the Christian faith” – namely, inquisitors, censors, and other secular and ecclesiastical rulers – in their *defense* against Jewish

³⁸⁸ Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, 1.

³⁸⁹ Syds Wiersma, “Weapons Against the Jews: Motives and Objectives of the Preface of the *Pugio Fidei*,” in *Ramon Martí’s Pugio Fidei. Studies and Texts*, eds. Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Alexander Fidora (Santa Coloma de Queralt: Obrador, 2017), 103; Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 248.

³⁹⁰ Louis I. Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform Movements* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 62. For a modern edition of the *Capistrum*, see Adolfo Robles Sierra, ed. and trans., *Capistrum Iudaeorum*, 2 vols. (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1990). On pp. 25-31, Sierra notes that while the *Pugio* was concerned with a full gamut of theological problems and included full citations of the actual Hebrew texts under scrutiny, the *Capistrum* was specifically written to prove, using translations without reference to Hebrew originals, that Christ was the Messiah long awaited by the Jews and that he had already come.

insults against Jesus, such as those maintained in the Talmud.³⁹¹ Ramon Martí kept a wide network of former Jews at hand, among them Pablo Christiani (d. 1274). It has been speculated that Martí himself was of converso origins given his linguistic skills,³⁹² though it is certain he was not a rabbi as some have claimed in accordance with his intellectual heir Jerome of Santa Fé who referred to him as “Rabbi Ramon.” Martí ultimately hoped that through his systematic endeavours, Christendom would become far better fortified and its enemies would be converted, thus paralleling the projects of Roger Bacon in many ways, and also setting foundations for such later projects in the fourteenth century as those of Ramon Llull. From within a medieval Dominican perspective, and in spite of its hateful and violent rhetoric, the *Pugio* was intended to benefit both Christians and Jews.³⁹³

To get a sense of the shared discourse which runs like a bright thread through the anti-Jewish aspect of the Latin polemical tradition taken up by men like Petrus Alfonsi, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Abner of Burgos, Paul of Burgos, Jerome of Santa Fé, Paulus de Heredia, Marsilio Ficino, Flavius Mithridates and Pico della Mirandola, I have here reproduced a recent translation of the preface of Ramon Martí’s *Pugio Fidei*, with some paragraphs omitted for the sake of concision.³⁹⁴

Here begins the preface to the *Dagger of the Christians*, edited by friar Raymond of the Order of Preachers, to destroy the perfidiousness of the unbelievers, but most of all of the Jews. As it is, according to the blessed Paul, most fitting and beautiful if a preacher of the truth “is able to instruct the faithful in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict the truth,”³⁹⁵ and according to the blessed Peter if one “is always prepared to satisfy all who ask arguments for the things he believes and preaches in hope and faith;”³⁹⁶ the contrary being very shameful, indeed.

Moreover, since according to a maxim of Seneca, “no plague is more effective to harm than an enemy who is close,” and no enemy of the Christian faith is more familiar and unavoidable to us than the Jew, it has been enjoined upon me to compose, from those books of the Old Testament which the Jews accept and also from the Talmud and the rest of their authentic writings, a work as might be available like a dagger (*pugio*) for preachers and guardians of the Christian faith – at some times to cut for the Jews the bread of the divine Word in sermons; at other times to slit the throat of their impiety and perfidiousness, and to destroy their pertinacity against Christ and their impudent insanity. So I have relied on the help of the Son of He who made the world from nothing, who [the Son] did not want to fulfill his own will but that of the Father, and who prescribes obedience to prelates and superiors. The dagger of the sort I will fashion, although not [precisely] as how it was prescribed but nevertheless of a kind I know and am able to make, is principally against the Jews, then against the Saracens and some other adversaries of the true faith...

³⁹¹ Among the most infamous passages shared by Talmudists which enflamed Christian anger can be found in *Talmud, Gittin 57a* wherein a Jesus is described as trapped in Hell (*Gehenna/Gehinnom*) “in boiling excrement” (צוֹאָה רוֹתֵחַת) (*tzoah rotachat*). Doubtless this is one of the many ‘absurdities’ which Ramon Martí decries in the paragraph cited below.

³⁹² Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 62.

³⁹³ Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 104.

³⁹⁴ The following translation is taken from Syds Wiersma, *Pearls in a Dunghill. The Anti-Jewish Writings of Raymond Martin O.P. (ca. 1220 - ca. 1285)* (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2015), 150-154. Abridgements to this text are here marked by ellipses; some very minor modifications to the translation are my own.

³⁹⁵ *Titus* 1:9

³⁹⁶ *1 Peter* 3:15

Now, the substance of this *Dagger*, especially inasmuch as it pertains to the Jews, is twofold: first and foremost, the *auctoritates* of the Law and the Prophets, and the entire Old Testament; second, certain traditions, which I found in the Talmud and Midrashim – that is, traditions and glosses of the ancient Jews – which I gladly raised up like pearls out of an enormous dunghill. With the help of God, I shall translate them into Latin and adduce and insert them at their proper places, insofar as shall seem wise to me.

These traditions, which the Jews call *torah she-be-'al peh* – oral law – they believe and state that God gave to Moses along with the Law on Mount Sinai. Then Moses, they say, transmitted them to his disciple Joshua, Joshua to his successors, and so on, until they were committed to writing by the ancient rabbis. Yet it seems that to believe this, that God gave Moses on the Mount Sinai all that is in the Talmud, should be deemed – on account of the innumerable absurdities which it contains – nothing other than the insanity of a ruined mind.

Certain [traditions], however, which savour of the truth and in every way smell of and represent the doctrine of the Prophets and the holy Fathers, wondrously and incredibly bespeak the Christian faith too, as will become obvious in this little book. They destroy and confound the perfidy of modern Jews, and I do not think that one should doubt that they managed to make their way successively from Moses and the Prophets and the other holy Fathers to those who recorded them. For in no way other than from the Prophets and the holy Fathers do we think that such things descended, since traditions of this sort are entirely contrary to those regarding the Messiah and so many other matters which the Jews have believed from the time of Christ even until now.

Such things of this sort were thus not meant to be rejected, since nobody sane would reject what he finds in places like the Law and the Prophets, even though both these are rejected among those so perfidious.³⁹⁷ For a wise man never despises a precious stone, even if it might be found in the head of a dragon or a toad. Honey is the spittle of bees, and how could there be anything less worthy of it than those having a poisonous sting! Indeed, he is not to be deemed foolish who knows how to render it fit for his own beneficial uses, as long as he knows to avoid the harm of the sting.

We therefore do not reject such traditions but embrace them both for those reasons already mentioned and because there is nothing so capable of confuting the impudence of the Jews; there is found nothing so effective for overcoming their evil. Finally, what would be more joyous for a Christian than if he could most easily twist the sword of his enemy from his hand and then cut off the head of the infidel with his own blade, or just like Judith butcher [him] with his own stolen dagger?

Further, whenever I introduce the authority of a text taken from the Hebrew, I will not follow the Septuagint, nor another interpreter.³⁹⁸ And what may seem to be even a greater presumption, I will neither defer to Jerome himself, nor will I avoid the unsuitability of the Latin language by translating the truth of the things we find with the Hebrews word for word, whenever this serves [the truth]. For on account of this, a way that is broad and spacious for subterfuge is barred to the false-speaking Jews. With my translation the truth is introduced by us against them and they will hardly be able to say it was not contained in their versions...

What is key here is seeing the recurring use of this theme from Petrus Alfonsi of slaying one's enemies with their own arms, namely, by arguing with them on their own terms, using their own

³⁹⁷ Note especially the appeal to 'reason/sanity/soundness of mind' here which, by this period, had already a cornerstone of the Latin polemical tradition with the works of Petrus Alfonsi.

³⁹⁸ Cf. against Ficino's use of Jerome and the Septuagint (in keeping with Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 18.43), sources he relied upon since he did not read Hebrew; see n. 664 below.

books. There is a distinct pattern at work here within the discourse of the mendicant orders' attitudes toward local Jews, and although rooted in the language of the crusades and the medieval market economy, this polemical mode did not come to a halt with the end of the Middle Ages. On the contrary, such attitudes would intensify during the Renaissance as the number of weapons with which Christians believed they could slay the Jews theologically grew tremendously. Where medieval Christians only dealt with refuting general Talmudic and Midrashic ideas at first, over time they extended their projects into the appropriation of more mystical and kabbalistic ideas, which were not so much rejected outright (as with Talmudic material) as much as reinterpreted through Christological lenses. This trend, as we have seen, began with Petrus Alfonsi and endured all the way to the fifteenth century to influence both Ficino and Pico in the composition of their own theological works.³⁹⁹

Ramon Martí's initial motivation was, in good keeping with the Latin polemical tradition, to assemble a highly systematized manual against all different kinds of unbelievers. As Syds Wiersma demonstrates, Ramon started his project by penning a refutation against all the predominant philosophical systems of his age (part I), then went on with a section focused on Judaism (part II), and had intended to proceed to attack Islam in the following part.⁴⁰⁰ At some point in the late 1270s, however, the Dominican Provincial Chapter in Spain interrupted this project and charged him with founding a *studium hebraicum* in Barcelona, which is where the *Pugio* began to take form as both a manual for students and a *Summa contra Iudaeos*. In this one can see the greater emphasis which the Church was putting on training preachers at the time, with the Dominican Hebrew language school having been designed specifically to prepare friars in preaching against the Jews. In the *Pugio*'s prologue Ramon maintains that the work was composed to refute Islam and other adversaries as well, calling it "a dagger... principally against the Jews, then against the Saracens and some other adversaries of the true faith." Though one might be able to extend many of the anti-Jewish arguments to apply to Islam as well – given their shared focus on non-Trinitarian monotheism – the *Pugio* should not be seen as a *Contra Saracenos* or a more general *Contra gentiles* as the largest part of the work is explicitly geared toward debating the subtler points of rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁰¹

As a Dominican, Ramon Martí subscribed to the traditional eschatological idea proclaimed by Jesus himself that the mass conversion of the Jews would occur during the Last

³⁹⁹ See n. 102 above. In parallel with Joachim of Fiore who preceded him by most of a century, Ramon Martí likewise passed along Petrus Alfonsi's letrist arguments (i.e., that the second *He* [ה] in the IEUE [יהיה] is a final *He* which distinguishes the *UE* [יה] pair from the *IE* [יה] and *EU* [יה] pairs). From this point onwards, from Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fé until the time of Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Johannes Reuchlin, virtually all polemical uses of the Tetragrammaton within a Christian context are used to demonstrate how the name of God exists as such in order to signify that the Holy Trinity is comprised of a unity of three different persons and three different substances (i.e. hypostases) just as the Messiah is comprised of body, soul, and the wisdom of God ("ה, *He*, ponitur iterato in fine nominis quae ipsum consummat, atque perficit; indicatur, cum dicitur de Messia, quod tres substantiae, quae sunt in eo ab invicem differentes, scilicet corpus, anima, et sapientia Dei..."), see *Pugio fidei* (Leipzig 1587), 685 (3.3.4).

⁴⁰⁰ Wiersma, 107; cf. Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 248.

⁴⁰¹ Wiersma, 107.

Days, after his return, when the name of the Lord would finally be one as it had been prophesied in Scripture. This mainstream, non-Joachimite view was also in keeping with St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (11:25) wherein he wrote that "until the fullness of the nations will come in" the Jews would remain blind and hard-hearted.⁴⁰² Consequently, Martí's anti-Jewish polemical literature – like Petrus Alfonsi's before him – must be understood as not so much intended to pressure the Jews to convert, but to educate Christians against ideas that others used to undermine their own religion, particularly in disputations. This was the approach taken by Ficino and Pico in their own anti-Jewish polemical writings too. That is to say, Martí believed that – according to Scripture – no amount of polemics from his part would convince the Jews to convert *en masse*. The real reason these arguments were assembled was to bolster Christianity's defences first and foremost, and if some Jews happened to convert before the Second Coming, then it was a happy by-product of the labour, but not its central aim, especially among Dominicans. Christians still had responsibilities toward preaching to individual Jews, but their expectations for mass conversion was projected into an unforeseeable future. Since preaching was the role for which the Dominican order had been founded, and although by 1242 regular preaching to the Jews in Aragon was already established by law, Martí's chief intentions here were pastoral ones.⁴⁰³

Ramon and his collaborators claimed that they wrote what they wrote in order to prevent the Jews from "biting" Christians, or from "shooting their arrows" at them, a thinly veiled reference to *Ephesians* 6:16. They wrote that the Jews should be 'muzzled' (with a *capistrum*), or their attacks put to an end by slaying them with their own weapons: Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture. The *Pugio's raison d'être* was to uproot Jewish faithlessness because it was considered a wholly subversive element in Christian society. In this way, the *Pugio* was as much intended as a political tool as a theological one, insofar as it was meant to highlight the potential dangers of allowing Jewish deceit among simple Christian folk to thrive, and especially the dangers of allowing them to pass freely in and out of Christendom's borders.⁴⁰⁴ For as often as there were public disputations against the Jews, there were also opportunities for failure if the speaker defending the Jewish faith was a particularly clever debater, or if the disputant on the Christian side was particularly inept in matters of theology, arguing on terms that any Jew would easily dismiss as irrelevant. The most famous example of this was the great four-day disputation held in 1263 before king James I of Aragon in Barcelona, wherein Moses ben Nachman (the *Ramban*, or Nachmanides, 1194–1270) beat the converso Dominican Pablo Christiani in debating over such matters as i) whether the Messiah had come or was yet to come, ii) whether the Messiah predicted by the prophets of the Old Testament was god or man, and iii) whether it was Christians or Jews who upheld the one true faith. While Pablo Christiani seems to have lost

⁴⁰² *Romans* 11:25. See, David Berger, "Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages" in *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 579, as cited by Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 110.

⁴⁰³ Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 105.

⁴⁰⁴ Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 105-106.

that battle, both parties claimed the victory, which only further served to highlight the incommensurability between Christian and Jewish beliefs.⁴⁰⁵ What is notable, however, is that Pablo had sought to demonstrate the supremacy of his new faith over Judaism not from claims made in the Bible, but in keeping with Petrus Alfonsi, from the Talmud itself.⁴⁰⁶ In these kinds of situations where mendicant friars found themselves humiliated by their opponents, the public disputations ended up having the opposite of their intended effect. It was for this reason that Thomas Aquinas deliberated on the question of whether Christians should even bother having public disputations at all.⁴⁰⁷ A work like the *Pugio* then was designed to give Christians the right tools with which to debate competent debaters, and to do so adeptly on their own terms using the *Hebraica veritas*, not its malevolent corollary, the *Iudaica falsitas*.

The language of dagger (*pugio*) and sword (*gladius/ensis*) was not solely meant to invoke the image of a Crusader's outright violence. By the late thirteenth century such terms had long become well-worn tropes of polemical literature, and violent imagery inherent to the discourse did not necessarily suggest that theologians should take up real weapons against the Jews. Rather, the trope referred back to St. Paul's discourse of 'spiritual warfare' which is *by definition* non-physical.⁴⁰⁸ It is also reflected the image presented in the *Book of Revelation*, whereby the word of God is envisioned as a sword coming out of Christ's mouth.⁴⁰⁹ This word was decisive: it had the power to cut a man off from his father, and a woman from her mother.⁴¹⁰ Over time, the language of the sword became a metaphor for a certain style of preaching pertaining to God's word (i.e., very subtle preaching, *not* the kind made up of *exempla vulgaria* for common folk, but the kind which focused on the level of fine detail and esoteric minutiae, such as philological details).⁴¹¹ It is indisputable that Ramon Martí, as a reader of Petrus Alfonsi, took the motif

⁴⁰⁵ Williams, *Adversus Judaeos*, 245: "as Nachmanides says, though never speaking discourteously, [Pablo Christiani] had no real knowledge of Jewish Law and Halakah, though he had had some practice in Haggadoth." For a general treatment of the event, see Robert Chazan, "The Barcelona 'Disputation' of 1263: Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response." *Speculum* 52, 4 (1977): 824-42 and *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴⁰⁶ Pablo Christiani was not dissuaded from his cause by his poor performance in the debate. Under the impetus of Raymond de Peñafort and the protection of King James, he undertook to fulfill Christ's Great Commission (*Matthew* 28:16-20) by wandering about, compelling Jews everywhere to hear his preaching and respond to his questions, whether in the synagogue or the marketplace. The friar's tour was, not surprisingly, largely unsuccessful. In his frustration, he went to Pope Clement IV to tell him all there was for him to know about the Talmud, in particular about those passages which expressly blasphemed Mary and Jesus. In light of this news, Clement IV sent a bull to the bishop of Tarragona in 1264, instructing him to have all the copies of the Talmud rounded up and put to the scrutinizing eye of the Dominicans and Franciscans. Christiani along with a handful of other friars were then appointed by the king to serve as the Talmud's censors. Together they endeavored to wipe out all content which they deemed inimical to Christianity. In 1269 Pablo went on to petition King Louis IX of France to enforce the canonical edict more rigorously which required Jews display badges wherever they went about in Christian lands; Richard Gottheil and Isaac Broyd, "Christiani, Pablo" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, eds. Isidore Singer et al., vol. 4 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903), 49.

⁴⁰⁷ *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 10, a.7 as cited in Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 116.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ephesians* 6:12-18: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness," etc.

⁴⁰⁹ *Revelation* 1:16, 2:16, 19:15.

⁴¹⁰ *Matthew* 10:34-35.

⁴¹¹ Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 112-113.

directly from him.⁴¹² In spite of all this talk of spiritual warfare, the spectre of real violence was never truly exorcized from being associated with this polemical trope especially given that by Ramon's own admission, his *pugio* was double-edged, intended in part "to cut off the bread of divine wisdom for believers," but also "to cut the throats of non-believers." Ultimately, it is almost impossible to defend Martí and his team against accusations of violent intentions when faced with such vividly gruesome lines as "what would be more joyous for a Christian than if he could most easily twist the sword of his enemy from his hand and then cut off the head of the infidel with his own blade?" And indeed, when such works as the *Pugio fidei* are seen in light of the disastrous consequences they would eventually have in the hands of figures like the converso Jerome of Santa Fé who used them to inspire secular rulers to enact edicts of mass persecution, the Dominican approach to the Jews from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries can hardly be excused as pacific.

The *Pugio* was but one part of a broader reaction to the ever-growing *desideranda* in the thirteenth century for knowledge of history in general, and of Hebrew Scripture and rabbinic Judaism in particular. As knowledge of these subjects continued to grow, so did the methods in missionary work change in due proportion. In this way, the overarching educational project that fuelled the *Pugio* remained open to future expansion well after Ramon Martí's era. Throughout the 1260s, Martí wrote with the support of countless sources, was guided by superiors, and supported by a team of researchers. He was not alone, but part of a movement. His project was an ongoing enterprise with numerous successors who would carry the work forward in light of new developments, and all this was done in keeping with the principles of the medieval mendicant 'knowledge economy.'⁴¹³ Where polemicists from the High Middle Ages like Petrus Alfonsi and Ramon Martí left off by closely scrutinizing the Talmud and Midrashim, however, later polemicists would spend no small effort in further developing that economy in subsequent centuries, particularly by turning toward Jewish materials as yet unscrutinised by Christian eyes, namely, the Kabbalah.

Although Martí drew from a broad expanse of Jewish learning to find any traces of veiled Christian truth, he never once cited a single work of Kabbalah. Gershom Scholem was shocked by Martí's lack of awareness about kabbalistic writings, especially since he worked in Catalonia throughout the thirteenth century, the exact time and place where Kabbalists under the careful eye of Nachmanides began compiling what they supposed to be the most authoritative texts. Scholem wrote: "Despite Martini's physical proximity, and the fact that his missionary zeal resulted in a general confiscation of books belonging to Catalonian Jewish communities, he was

⁴¹² Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 114; cf. Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogue Against the Jews*, 44. See *Pugio fidei* (Leipzig 1587), 685 (3.3.4) for how Martí used ideas about the Tetragrammaton from Petrus Alfonsi, whom he erroneously believed had been a "magnus Rabinus apud Judaeos" ("a great rabbi among the Jews") before his conversion.

⁴¹³ Wiersma, *Weapons Against the Jews*, 115.

not aware of the existence of the Kabbalah.”⁴¹⁴ One generation later, however, we increasingly begin to see references by Christian converso authors like the Dominican Paul of Burgos (who was certainly familiar with Martí’s projects) to texts like “*Lucidus*” (the *Sefer HaBahir*, or the *Book of the Bright*), but it is most likely he acquired this information while he had still been a practising Jew.⁴¹⁵

In the last third of the thirteenth century, another example of the anti-Jewish intellectual spirit that drove Ramon Martí can be seen in Alfonso X of Castile’s nephew, Juan Manuel, who wrote about how his uncle had “ordered translated the whole law of the Jews, and even their Talmud, and other knowledge, which is called *qabbalah* and which the Jews keep closely secret. And he did this *so it might be manifest through their own law that it is a presentation of that law which we Christians have*; and that they, like the Moors, are in grave error and in peril of losing their souls.”⁴¹⁶ This passage suggests that kabbalistic literature was translated and circulated as early as the 1270s, but more importantly, it gives testimony – in no ambiguous terms – to the end goal of Alfonso’s translation projects: the salvation of Jewish and Muslim souls. In spite of this movement, concepts from Jewish Kabbalah insofar as they appeared in the writings of conversos like Alfonso de Valladolid (a.k.a. Abner of Burgos, 1270–1347) or Paulus de Heredia (1405–86) failed to capture the imagination of the Latin West or to produce any significant impact in European culture as they would later during the Renaissance. It seems that at the time, those interested in esoteric matters, even among Jews, were more concerned with Arabic astral and talismanic magic (such as found in *Picatrix* which was also translated in Alfonso X’s court). Until the mid-1480s, Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah was largely disregarded in Christian circles until Pico – who repudiated astral magic and, in its place, sought something loftier – proclaimed Moses to be the most ancient of the *prisci theologi* and declared the Kabbalah of the Hebrews to be synonymous with the Christian anagogical interpretation of Scripture, and therefore a spiritual cornerstone of the faith (while Jewish philosophy in general remained irrelevant, and Talmudic Judaism remained a heresy).⁴¹⁷

Christian interest in Jewish Kabbalah first appeared in the regions where interest in Hebrew language and literature was re-emerging, namely in Spain, then in Italy. It was Spain, from the time of the translation projects of Alfonso X of Castile (r. 1252–84) to the publication

⁴¹⁴ Gershom Scholem, “The Beginnings of the Christian Kabbalah” in *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and Their Christian Interpreters*, ed. Joseph Dan (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1997), 18.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Saverio Campanini, “Introduction” in *The Book of Bahir: Flavius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, from *The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, ed. Giulio Busi, vol. 2 (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2005), 57 and ff. for a discussion of the *Sefer HaBahir*, which was a kabbalistic text not only mentioned in Ficino’s *De Christiana religione* (known to him only indirectly through the polemics of Paul of Burgos), but used more directly by Pico (albeit through translations of his converso tutor Flavius Mithridates).

⁴¹⁶ “Libro de la caza” in *Biblioteca venatoria*, 5 vols., ed. J. Gutierrez de la Vega (Madrid: M. Tello, 1877-1899), 3:4; and Norman Roth, “Jewish Collaborators in Alfonso’s Scientific Work,” in *Emperor of Culture: Alfonso X the Learned of Castile and His Thirteenth-Century Renaissance*, ed. Robert I. Burns (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 60, 225 n. 7, cited in both Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 419 and Idel, “Introduction” in *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, vi, n. 6.

⁴¹⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 228.

of the Complutensian *Polyglot Bible* of Cardinal Ximenes in 1521, which gave Germany the Dominican Petrus Niger, author of the first Hebrew grammar and the *Stella Messie/Stern des Meschiah*, and Italy the anti-Jewish writer Paulus de Heredia (author of the *Galie Razaya* and the *Ensis Pauli*), or the *Pugio fidei*-proselytizing converso humanist Flavius Mithridates, both of whom became teachers to Pico.⁴¹⁸ In the major cities of Spain and Italy where the study of Hebrew was slowly being revived, the Christians who appropriated and produced that knowledge all shared in the same apocalyptic and utopian aspirations that Pico would come to share in as well: that Christians and Jews would inevitably be reconciled at the end of history. The literary products of this contact between Jews and Christian missionaries working under the aegis of these expectations would become some of both Ficino and Pico's raw materials.

But why is it that so many conversos went to the extreme of becoming mendicant friars and hardline anti-Jewish polemicists instead of simple Christian laymen? I would suggest one rather commonplace explanation that it was for similar reasons ex-smokers today have a tendency to become the most vehement anti-smokers, not only as a demonstration of their good faith as converts, but also as a conspicuous display that "if I did it, then so can you." In Christian societies there was a greater onus on Jews who converted to join mendicant orders precisely because mendicant spirituality was predicated on *a moral transvaluation or an inversion of the stereotypically mercantile life*: they renounced wealth and material goods, they preached to the poor in the marketplace, they bargained for people's souls and kept inventories of successful conversions.⁴¹⁹ All this is to say that the language of the mendicant life was the result of turning the base language of the marketplace on its head and 'redeeming' it through a process of transvaluation. Since Jews were so often associated with the 'carnal' and the 'mercantile' in the Christian imagination, it stands to reason that Jews who became hardline converts attached themselves to what was widely conceived of as the extreme opposite of a Jewish stereotype, namely, anti-mercantile mendicant spirituality. In much of the way that modern day Satanists could be thought of as "inverted" or "post-Christians," the mendicant conversos of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries were essentially inverted or "post-Jews," and the more they set themselves in opposition to the ideas which sustained Jewish stereotypes, the more credible and sincere they appeared to their new coreligionists.

⁴¹⁸ François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 13-14; see

6.3 The Count of Mirandola's Jewish Teachers: Elia del Medigo and Flavius Mithridates.

⁴¹⁹ Rosenwein and Little, "Mendicant Spiritualities," 23.

3.5 Lettrism, Kabbalah, and Trinitarian Tetragrammatical Speculations in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

The development of Kabbalah throughout the thirteenth century was intimately connected with many of that era's leading controversies. The most significant intellectual process in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries was the advent of Aristotle into the universities of the Latin West via Arabic translations. In the Islamic world, the widespread reception of Aristotle had led to the development of a staunchly rationalist tradition with thinkers like Averroes at its head. In Christendom and in Jewish circles, however, these ideas were gradually renegotiated into the more tempered rationalisms of Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas respectively.⁴²⁰ Christian and Jewish reactions to dogmatic appeals to authority in pagan philosophers were surprisingly similar to one another, however.⁴²¹ On one hand there were prohibitions, and on the other, there was a sudden revitalization of interest into Platonic modes of thought, as seen in figures like Bonaventure or Thomas of York (c. 1220 – c. 1269) who rallied around the works of Augustine and ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite above all. On a parallel track in the Jewish world, one sees the speedy development and proliferation of kabbalistic texts arising in the thirteenth century to provide alternatives to the increasing popularity of Maimonidean rationalism, and especially to react to the hazards of being too loose with allegorical Scriptural interpretation. To offset these hazards, therefore, this Kabbalah was marked by a re-intensification of emphasis upon the *sensus literalis*, in this case meaning the letter-by-letter reading of Scripture.⁴²² Although they supposed themselves to form a bulwark of conservative reaction to stand up against the sudden influx of radical ideas from pagan philosophy, medicine, astrology, and so forth, the Kabbalists were, in reality, radical in their own right. While ostensibly focused on abstruse theosophical speculations regarding the nature of God's inner workings, Kabbalah in the thirteenth century by and large had a more practical dimension insofar as it gave persuasive reasons for *why* Jews should be strict in their religious observances, that is, because their good deeds had a direct impact on the supernal world, and this potential provided a vital impetus for the maintenance of Jewish tradition while still in exile.⁴²³ Here *mitzvot* (the fulfillment of commandments) became their own kind of 'magic,' since through them, this world could be "redeemed by human actions in concert with the purposes of God."⁴²⁴

Perhaps the most famous figure of medieval Judaism who stood as both an outgrowth of and reaction to the rise of Maimonidean rationalism was Abraham Abulafia (1240–91), an itinerant teacher of the *Guide for the Perplexed*.⁴²⁵ In the wake of his lifetime, Abulafia and his followers were translated into Latin more than any other Kabbalists, and this was largely thanks

⁴²⁰ Cf. Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180-1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

⁴²¹ Hames, *Like Angels*, 29.

⁴²² Cf. n. 115 above.

⁴²³ Hames, *Like Angels*, 30.

⁴²⁴ Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 13.

⁴²⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 31-32.

not only to his role as the Spanish founder of what scholars today call “prophetic” or “ecstatic Kabbalah” but also as a self-proclaimed Messiah for the Jewish people. Prior to founding a new approach to Kabbalah, Abulafia had closely studied the *Sefer Yetzirah* under the influence of the Rhineland mystic Eleazar of Worms (1176–1238), one of the last members of an ascetic sect of German pietists, the Hasidei Ashkenaz. Here he crafted a system based on letter, number, and vowel-point combinations in an attempt to use God’s various divine names, especially the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, to achieve prophetic states of mind.⁴²⁶ All this was in keeping with the injunction in *Sefer Yetzirah* 2.2 regarding the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet which commands: “Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future.”⁴²⁷ These were certainly not practices which Maimonides would have approved of, and they definitively served to distinguish Abulafia from his master.⁴²⁸ Nevertheless, a follower of Abulafia’s thought, Joseph Gikatilla (1248–1305), went on to elaborate this system before going on to become one of Pico’s favorite kabbalistic authors through the text entitled *The Gates of Light* (Hebrew: *Sha’are Ora*; Latin: *Portae lucis*) which had much to say on God’s 300 names and how each of them were attributed to the ten *sefirot* (e.g., *Ehyeh*, “I am,” was attributed to *Kether*/The Crown; *Yah*, “Lord,” was attributed to *Chokmah*/Wisdom; *Elohim*, “God,” was attributed to *Gevurah*/Severity; etc.).⁴²⁹ Gikatilla maintained that “the entire Torah is a fabric of appellatives, *kinnuyim* – the generic term for the epithets of God, such as compassionate, great, merciful, venerable – and these epithets in turn are woven from the various names of God. But all these holy names are connected with the Tetragrammaton YHWH (‘as He is’) and dependent upon it. Thus the entire Torah is ultimately woven from the Tetragrammaton.”⁴³⁰ Gikatilla’s view was not much different from his teacher Abulafia’s, though in an attempt to go beyond Maimonides, Abulafia had also argued that the actual name of God could not be found in the Pentateuch, and that the Tetragrammaton was merely “an allusion to or a reflection of the real or

⁴²⁶ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 178-179.

⁴²⁷ *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (Newburyport: Weiser, 1991), 261-267.

⁴²⁸ See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 89 (1.61): “Every other name of God is a derivative, only the Tetragrammaton is a real *nomen proprium*, and must not be considered from any other point of view. You must beware of sharing the error of those who write amulets (*kameot*). Whatever you hear from them, or read in their works, especially in reference to the names which they form by combination, is utterly senseless; they call these combinations *shemot* (names) and believe that their pronunciation demands sanctification and purification, and that by using them they are enabled to work miracles. Rational persons ought not to listen to such men, nor in any way believe their assertions. No other name is called *shem ha-meforash* except this Tetragrammaton, which is written, but is not pronounced according to its letters.”

⁴²⁹ It is notable that Paulo Riccio (1480-1451), a German converso, philosopher, and personal physician to the Emperor Maximilian I, authored a rather free translation of Gikatilla’s *Sha’are Ora* which he completed around 1510, *Portae lucis: haec est porta Tetragrammaton, iusti intrabunt per eam* (Augsburg, 1516). Jerome Riccio, Paulo’s son, sent a copy to Johannes Reuchlin who made use of it in writing his *De arte cabalistica*. See Hames, *Like Angels*, 142-143 for a discussion of the relationship between Abulafia and Gikatilla.

⁴³⁰ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 37-44.

true name of God.”⁴³¹ This idea, albeit unorthodox, was taken up in full force by later Christians who looked to find not just the Trinity concealed under the cover of the Tetragrammaton – as Petrus Alfonsi had done – but the name of Jesus itself. Not only was Abulafia’s unique post-Maimonidean perspectives on Kabbalah and divine names of critical importance to shaping the ideas of Renaissance Cabalists like Pico centuries after his own day, but we cannot forget that – as demonstrated by Harvey J. Hames in his work on Abulafia’s connections to Joachimite Franciscans – this peculiar Jewish mystic stood:

In contradistinction to many of his Christian and Jewish contemporaries who focused on the particularistic aspects of messianic times... develop[ing] a theory of universal salvation based on a rather sophisticated understanding of history, political entities, and language... [and] suggest[ing] that the Divine economy planned for different religions... [this] led him to posit a coming together of the nations of the world in a state of spiritual knowledge of the Divine name in a way very reminiscent of the Calabrian abbot [Joachim of Fiore]. This implies that for Abulafia, contemporary Judaism was also in a transient phase, and though the closest to perfection, it would also be surpassed.⁴³²

This idea of a divine economy, with its ebbs and flows through history, had not emerged *ex vacuo*. Rather, it developed as a direct consequence of an environment that, whether for good or ill, necessitated interfaith philosophical exchange, in particular between the learned Jews of Europe and the learned missionaries of the mendicant orders determined to proselytize to them.⁴³³

Abulafia was as much an innovator as he was a preserver of tradition. Among his more original contributions was his work with divine names and his intricate hermeneutical system. While his more conservative contemporaries in Spain were focused on elaborating their methods for doing biblical exegesis, it was during this time that the fourfold method known as *PaRDeS* was receiving a great deal of use among the Jews.⁴³⁴ This fourfold method, in contrast to Abulafia’s more intricate one, was widely adopted among Jewish ‘theosophical’ Kabbalists in Spain. Although the thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalists’ techniques differed significantly from Abulafia’s, they shared in common an innovative approach to Kabbalah insofar as they were less concerned with halakhic matters than previous generations and were more interested in practical and theoretical developments than preserving ancient traditions. As such, all the Kabbalists active between 1270 and 1295 turned themselves and their exegetical efforts towards “questions related to both the infinity of the sacred text and the status of the interpreter,”⁴³⁵ or in other

⁴³¹ Wouter Jacques Van Bekkum, “What’s in the Divine Name? Exodus 3 in Biblical and Rabbinical Tradition,” in *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity*, ed. George H. van Kooten (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 14.

⁴³² Hames, *Like Angels*, 7.

⁴³³ For a general overview of Jewish-Friar relations, see both Steven J. McMichael and Susan E. Meyers, eds., *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004) and Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982).

⁴³⁴ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 64. This acronym which shares its etymology with the English word ‘paradise’ and stands as a reference to the “orchard” in the *Song of Songs*, was used to signify the four senses of the Hebrew Bible: “*Peshat* (plain sense), *Remez* (allegorical sense), *Derash* (homiletic sense), and *Sod* (secret sense).”

⁴³⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 64.

words, continuing to wrestle with the paradox of God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence.

Steeped in the apocalyptic atmosphere of the crusades, the period from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries was no stranger to the rise of various Jewish 'pseudo-Messiahs,' but none were as influential as Abulafia, especially in the Latin West.⁴³⁶ Believing himself to be the Son of God – which to him was more a state of mind available to all rather than an office unique to himself – he proselytized his gospel of divine names to all who would listen, whether Christian or Jew, rich or poor, learned or unlearned. In 1280 (or 5041 of the Jewish calendar), Abulafia took to Rome where, self-styled in the manner of a prophet, he attempted to gain an audience with Pope Nicholas III in order that he might have a discussion with him about Judaism as he understood it, that is, as a religion whose chief concern was a complete understanding of the names of God – an idea which would not have been completely alien to the pope given that meditations on divine names already had currency in Franciscan circles.⁴³⁷ Unsurprisingly, Abulafia never got his audience. The pope, who after having gotten wind of the prophet's intentions set up a pyre to burn him upon arrival, died of a stroke the day before Abulafia arrived.⁴³⁸ Years later, in 1288, Abulafia claimed the pope had been killed by the power of a divine name.⁴³⁹ More immediately, however, our would-be messiah was held captive for a month by a group of Franciscan friars, after which time he was given leave to travel to Sicily where he might continue his ministry among various groups of local Jews. From this point onwards, his words and deeds were closely watched by Church authorities.

A decade later, in 1290, the ranks of Abulafia's messianic entourage began to swell in Messina, Sicily, where there had long existed sizable Jewish communities. He proclaimed that year to mark the beginning of the new Messianic era. For this he was viciously attacked by the Talmudist and 'theosophical-theurgical' Kabbalist Shlomo ibn Adret of Barcelona (a.k.a. *Rashba*, 1235–1310), an erudite polemicist and student of Nachmanides who had also famously written a refutation against the charges raised in Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei*.⁴⁴⁰ The people of Palermo sought out ibn Adret's help against the threat of Abulafia's growing movement, and in response he wrote a damning indictment against the false messiah. Shortly thereafter, it appears that the movement fizzled out in 1291, but in the following decades, much of the ideas inherent to Abulafia's 'prophetic Kabbalah' remained in currency from Italy to Spain where various Latin intellectuals began to take interest in its propositions. To borrow from the conclusions of Louis Newman: "though the Christian influences on the Kabbalah of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries far outweigh the Jewish impression on Christian doctrine, nevertheless, the Kabbalah won a species of victory in its frequent use among Christian theologians in support of

⁴³⁶ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 178; Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen* (c. 1173/4) discusses a number of these false messiahs and their fates.

⁴³⁷ "Abraham Abulafia and the Pope: An Account of an Abortive Mission [אברהם אבולעפיה והאפיפיוד] – משמעותו – וגילגוליו של נסיון שנכשל." *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 7 (1982): 1-17.

⁴³⁸ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 44.

⁴³⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 46.

⁴⁴⁰ Meyer Kayserling, "Solomon Ben Abraham Adret" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, eds. Isidore Singer et al., vol. 1 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901), 212-213; Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 49.

fundamental Christian concepts,” and this became especially so during the Renaissance period regarding the Abulafian “ecstatic/prophetic Kabbalah” which was rather marginal in the Jewish world itself.⁴⁴¹

Abulafia was believed to have “Christianized” Jewish Kabbalah using a Trinitarian system in an attempt to win Christians over to a new universal religion that would dissolve the boundaries between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.⁴⁴² He clung to the belief that while exoteric Kabbalah consisted of the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* (as first properly expounded upon in the *Bahir* or the *Zohar*), his esoteric Kabbalah focused on the doctrine of the 22 letters from which the divine names are composed.⁴⁴³ On the surface, most Kabbalists shared in a theosophy of immanence by presenting God through his ten emanations but, most importantly, they upheld the belief that performing *mitzvot* produced theurgical consequences in the divine world. For example, the famous nemesis of the converso Dominican Pablo Christiani, Nachmanides, was eager to expound on the nature of the Godhead, but far more restrained in regards to the dimensions of Kabbalah that relied on the manipulation of various letter combinations, focusing instead on the correct practice of halakhic matters. For Abulafia, however, this emphasis was reversed. He believed it was specifically the word-working techniques from his science of names that cleared the path to achieving his goal: ecstatic experience and prophetic attainment.⁴⁴⁴ This point is important because it was Abulafia’s particular emphasis on the ‘speculative’ use of letters, numbers, and divine names, and *not* the ‘practical’ emphasis embodied by Nachmanides that Pico della Mirandola enshrined as central to his own Christian reinterpretation of Jewish Kabbalah over two hundred years later. More immediately, however, the universalist dreams shared by figures like Joachim of Fiore and Abraham Abulafia (thanks to their shared meditations on divine names) were perhaps most forcefully articulated in the works of the two late thirteenth century Christian polymaths, Ramon Llull and Arnald of Villanova, both of whom were great friends of the mendicant orders.

⁴⁴¹ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 180.

⁴⁴² Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 179.

⁴⁴³ Note that discussions of the *sefirot belimah* appear in as early a work as the *Sefer Yetzirah* (traditionally ascribed to Abraham, but likely written sometime in Late Antiquity). Abulafia certainly studied this text, but therein the *sefirot* are treated more so as ‘enumerations of nothingness’ than successive spheres of emanation as they are largely understood today. Thus in keeping with the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s approach (and that of many other non-Kabbalist rationalist interpreters), he wrote in his *Osar Eden Ganuz*: “If anything is said concerning the way of the *sefirot*, if they are considered to be numbers or entities, do not make this difficult in the eyes of those who see, for there are already in many books words that indicate that the primary intention in this, both specific and general, is that of number.” As cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Doctrine of *Sefirot* in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3, 1 (1996): 47. Cf. n. 125 above.

⁴⁴⁴ Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 37.

3.6 Ramon Llull and Arnald of Villanova

Ramon Llull, the so-called “*doctor illuminatus*,”⁴⁴⁵ in whom “we see an afterglow of Raymond de Peñafort’s influence,”⁴⁴⁶ was born around 1236 on Majorca just off the east coast of Spain. Llull came to play a significant part in the polemical tradition of his day for his uniquely logical approach. According to one tradition, Llull’s father was an Albigensian refugee and his mother was either of Arabic or Jewish descent.⁴⁴⁷ Around the age of 30, however, Llull was struck with a vision of Jesus hanging on the cross, whereafter he put aside his former life as a writer of frivolous love poems, feeling drawn instead to the mendicants’ call: to strive for martyrdom in an attempt to convert all non-Christians to the one true faith of Christ, and ultimately to die in the habit of a Franciscan. While his primary aim in life following a dramatic and visionary change of heart was the conversion of every last Jew and Muslim, a close second to this was his desire to see the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem returned to Christian hands.

As a Latin Christian, Llull differed from his Jewish, Muslim, and Greek neighbours because he largely had to rely on translations and interpretations of what he and his fellow co-religionists considered wholly revealed scriptures, that is, that which had been conveyed directly from the mind of God to the lips of his prophets. It is likely that Llull envied the unitive power of the Qur’an and the Hebrew Scriptures, for whom the words themselves rather than their underlying meanings or interpretations took pride of place and could serve as a rallying call for all believers regardless of their interpretations.⁴⁴⁸ How was it that Jews and Arabs could agree among themselves over the uniting character of their holy scriptures while Christians were subject to so many different textual traditions? To resolve this problem in the age before *sola Scriptura*, however, Llull did not so much attempt to raise Latin to the status of a divine language like Hebrew or Arabic as much as attempt to demonstrate that sacred books were not themselves sources of truth as much as affirmations of a truth that could be independently verified in any language. Simply put: truth transcended individual languages. What Llull wished to do was demonstrate that beneath the ostensible diversity of ideas contained within the religious texts of other cultures, there emerged certain key ideas about God that transcended all languages and religions. All languages, Llull believed, were equally capable of expressing truth in so far as they were rooted in the rules of reason. To make this demonstration, however, Llull devised a system of logic to be used in the context of inter-religious debates, and this he hoped might stand as a foil to some of the prevailing philosophical currents of his age, in particular Averroism. Llull hoped to demonstrate, by force of his system, that all those who denied the truth of Christianity did so not merely on the grounds that they rejected Christian revelation, but that they rejected reason itself. The words and the languages that comprised Scripture were indeed important to Llull, but only in so far as they connected to real ideas that could be shared,

⁴⁴⁵ Anthony Bonner, *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramón Llull Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴⁴⁶ Williams, *Adversus Judaeos*, 256.

⁴⁴⁷ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 180.

⁴⁴⁸ Fernando Domínguez Reboiras, “Ramon Llull, a Bridge among Christian, Jewish and Islamic Cultures,” *Contributions to Science* 12, 1 (2017): 66.

debated, and understood by every human mind, since beneath the great diversity of human languages lurked a very non-diverse truth. Llull was entirely aware that, despite being called infidels, Jews and Muslims in no way lacked faith. It was merely that the object of their faith was misplaced, and so he made it his personal mission to redirect them.⁴⁴⁹ In general, Llull “was very reluctant to refer to other thinkers of his time,”⁴⁵⁰ but over the past century some of his influences have been identified, and one among these was Ramon Martí.⁴⁵¹

Ramon Llull was not a kabbalist himself, despite what was commonly believed by so many nineteenth and twentieth century scholars and occultists on account of the pseudepigraphically attributed work *De auditu kabbalístico; sive, ad omnes scientias inductorium* (first printed in Venice, 1518).⁴⁵² Nevertheless, even if there was no direct influence, this tenuous connection between Llull and Kabbalah had long been intuited, even during the Renaissance.⁴⁵³ While Pico was in the process of formulating his own understanding of Jewish Kabbalah throughout the decade of the 1480s, he was introduced to the works of Ramon Llull who he greatly admired for the breadth and depth of his thought coupled with his missionary zeal. In the same way Pico perceived Joachim of Fiore to be a master of formal numerology, he respected Llull in particular as a master of the “combinatorial arts,” especially since they had been well received by the Franciscans. This art Pico acknowledged was quite different from Abraham Abulafia’s own combinatorial system, concerned as it was with the manipulation of letters in divine names, but he also believed they had a common source of origin. Although there have been many attempts at placing the origins of Llull’s *Ars magna* back to Kabbalah in some way, it is now widely accepted that his system had its own independent origins despite having arisen in a similar milieu and in reaction to similar theological problems.

⁴⁴⁹ Reboiras, “Ramon Llull,” 68.

⁴⁵⁰ Alexander Fidora, “Ramon Martí in Context: The influence of the *Pugio Fidei* on Ramon Llull, Arnau de Vilanova and Francesc Eiximenis” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 79, 2: 375.

⁴⁵¹ Éphrem Longpré, “Le B. Raymond Lulle et Raymond Martí, O.P.,” in *Bolletí de la Societat Arqueològica Lulliana* 24 (1933): 269-271 argued that around 1268-1269, Martí was in North Africa preaching to the “Saracen king” of Tunisia, only to return to Barcelona in 1269, and this therefore must have been the friar that Llull wrote about in his 1309 works *Liber de convenientia* and *Liber de acquisitione terrae sanctae*, especially since this friar was said to know Hebrew and to be often in disputes with “a learned Jew of Barcelona” (possibly Salomon Ibn Adret, 1235-1310). Fidora, “Martí in Context,” 377 gives some reasons to doubt this attribution, since Llull argued that this mysterious friar knew nothing of natural philosophy or theology, which “could hardly be a good description of Martí, who studied in Paris with Albert the Great” as evidenced by the many cosmological passages in the *Pugio Fidei*. In spite of all this, Fidora believes “it is quite possible that Llull’s story had its origins in several sources, among which should be numbered his conversations with Ramon de Penyafort,” a man who was close to both Ramons “who could have provided [Llull] with first-hand information about the activities of his order’s missionaries in Tunis.” Fidora adds “we can by no means claim that Llull had consulted Martí’s writings, but rather had vaguely heard about them... If Llull did know Martí’s works, then it seems strange that he would not have taken the opportunity to evaluate positively some of the key themes of the anti-Jewish polemic from the *Pugio fidei*, such as the interpretation of the Tetragrammaton to prove the Trinity.” Cf. Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 246-283.

⁴⁵² Blau, “Appendix B: Was Raymond Lull a Cabalist?” in *The Christian Interpretation*, 117-118; cf. Hames, *Art of Conversion*, 118. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 5:324-325 claims that the manuscript (MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 3187) bears the name Petrus de Maynardis (Pietro Mainardi, Pierre Ménard) who was likely its real author.

⁴⁵³ See n. 899 and n. 900 below.

In the end, Llull's system was concerned not so much with achieving prophetic states as much as producing a 'thinking machine' which exhausted logical possibilities and could be employed in polemical contexts, namely against Jews and Muslims.⁴⁵⁴

At the age of 60 and after years of planning and setbacks, Llull travelled to North Africa, arriving in September 1293 to begin his missionary work using the Arabic he had learned over the course of the previous decade with the help of a purchased slave. He set up a debate in Tunis and requested that scholars from all around come and debate him on the merits of their faiths. By October of 1293, however, local rulers arrested Llull to stop him from preaching, and put him on a ship to Naples. In 1299, Ramon Llull sought out James II of Aragon in search of a synagogue preaching license, hoping to become a legitimate tool in the conversion of the Jewish intellectuals over to the truth of Trinitarian doctrine. Jewish Kabbalists during this period argued that God could be grasped through an understanding of the ten *sefirot* and Llull argued much the same, but instead maintained that all processes ultimately derive from the three persons of the Trinity. This strategy forced Llull to consider how dignities related to the Trinitarian pattern. Harvey Hames carefully demonstrates how Llull's ideas in this regard changed from the *Libre de contemplado* to the *Libre de demostracions*: first he divvied up the dignities among the three persons of the Trinity, but eventually settled on the idea that each dignity itself has a Trinitarian structure: agent, act, and patient.⁴⁵⁵ For Llull, this linguistic approach carried ontological baggage. When subjects and predicates are equivalent and interchangeable, they can be applied to describe the internal creative dynamics of God. Thus, in keeping with the agent-act-patient triad one could argue that God is a 'unifier unifying the unified,' meaning God's unity was contingent on his Trinitarian structure.⁴⁵⁶ Such conclusions, however, were not so far from those of Petrus Alfonsi and Joachim of Fiore who likewise judged the unity of God to be a property derived from the internal activities of the tripartite Tetragrammaton. Since each dignity attributed to God were themselves triune in structure, this could explain the mechanism by which God's inner parts were manifested in creation: the creative process itself was caused by the overflow of activities eternally present within the Godhead (*Bonitas, Magnitudo, Duratio, Potestas, Sapientia, Voluntas, Virtus, Veritas, Gloria*).⁴⁵⁷ These virtues, which had all been the objects of Platonic philosophy, were important because they allowed a transcendent and infinitely creative God to create the immanent world without himself succumbing to change. Through ideas such as these, Hames gives testimony to the fruitful exchange of influence between Christian and Jewish

⁴⁵⁴ See n. 902 below.

⁴⁵⁵ Harvey J. Hames, "It Takes Three to Tango: Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret, and Alfonso of Valladolid Debate the Trinity," *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 202-203.

⁴⁵⁶ Hames, "Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret, and Alfonso of Valladolid," *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 199 elucidates how Llull "appropriated contemporary kabbalistic ideas about the Godhead in order to demonstrate that their reasoning implied the existence of a Trinity and that Christianity was the true faith. Solomon ibn Adret was forced to use kabbalistic teachings to contradict Llull's arguments and show that sefirotic imagery did not imply a Trinitarian structure in the Godhead. Alfonso of Valladolid [a.k.a. Abner of Burgos], a Jewish convert to Christianity, utilize[d] Llull's arguments and translates them into a Jewish context and language in a way that supersede[d] and dismisses Solomon ibn Adret's response."

⁴⁵⁷ Hames, "Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret, and Alfonso of Valladolid," 200.

intellectuals in the late thirteenth to the early fourteenth centuries, and how during this period the ‘knowledge economy’ was no way comprised of a one-way street.⁴⁵⁸

In 1311, while travelling to the Council of Vienne to see Pope Clement V and to propose his plans for the founding of schools in Arabic, Hebrew, and Chaldean, Lull wrote:

I learned Arabic, and I have been repeatedly among the Saracens to preach to them; by them I have been beaten and imprisoned. For 45 years I have labored to excite the rulers of the Church and the princes of Christendom for the public good. Now I am old, I am poor, and I still have the same purpose, which, with the help of God, I will retain till I die.⁴⁵⁹

He was successful in persuading the Pope to establish these schools at the papal court and at the Universities of Paris, Oxford, Bologna, and Salamanca for the express purpose of empowering conversion efforts. In this regard, Lull became a key figure in the development of intercultural exchange between the Latin, Greek, Jewish and Arabic worlds.⁴⁶⁰ Around 1315 or 1316, at the age of 83, Lull returned to Tunis to preach on the streets where he was captured and executed, granting him the attainment of his life’s ultimate goal: martyrdom. His death became a source of inspiration to his followers, some of whom were persecuted by the Catalan inquisitor Nicholas Eymerich (1316–99) for their heretical beliefs, among which were included the idea that to kill heretics is murder, and that every man who is not in mortal sin will be saved, even Jews and Saracens.⁴⁶¹

One among those supporters of Ramon Lull was Arnald of Villanova (c. 1240–1311), a lay ally of the Franciscans, and an important late Joachimite thinker, especially with respect to influencing later generations.⁴⁶² If the links between Ramon Martí and Ramon Lull appear

⁴⁵⁸ For an in-depth look at Lull and especially his attitude toward the Jews, see Harvey J. Hames, “The Jews in Lull’s Eyes” in *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 83ff. See also Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, 199-225. A good illustration of Lull’s thought in regards to dealing with non-Christians might be deduced from his *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* (1274-1276). Herein Lull tried to present Christians, Jews, and Muslims largely on their own terms such that an objective comparison could be made of each Abrahamic religion despite being rooted in a universal language. In this dialogue, four members of different faiths – a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a pagan – each discuss the merits of their respective religions in a forest, attempting to convert the lone polytheist among them. The disputants do this in the form of a game wherein they agree to terms set by ‘flowers’ set upon five symbolic trees. These are comprised of various combinations of the divine attributes, virtues, and vices, the combinations of which emerged by concordance or opposition. In this particular game, however, the mere act of accepting its conditions – which essentially symbolized the strictures of logic – led inexorably to Christianity’s victory without needing to denigrate or threaten its participants. It was simply the triumph of logic, with no hard feelings attached; see *Selected Works of Ramon Lull (1236-1316)*, ed. and trans. Anthony Bonner, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 110-304. For Arnald’s connection to the Franciscans see Harold Lee, Marjorie Reeves and Giulio Silano, *Western Mediterranean Prophecy: The School of Joachim of Fiore and the Fourteenth-Century Breviloquium* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1989).

⁴⁵⁹ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 181.

⁴⁶⁰ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 181-182.

⁴⁶¹ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 182. A significant portion of Eymerich’s work revolves around refutations of Lull’s work, especially the *Tractatus contra doctrinam Raymundi Lulli* and the *Dialogus contra Lullistas*.

⁴⁶² Moshe Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Preliminary Observation” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988): 172-173 concluded that: “The possibility of a kabbalistic influence on Lull has to be judged against the general background of his age: a new interest in Oriental languages and religions, including

tenuous, the links between Ramon Martí and Arnald of Villanova were far more explicit.⁴⁶³ Arnald achieved his influential status from serving as a physician, alchemist, diplomat, astrologer, and a translator of Galen and Avicenna. He wrote chiefly in Latin and Catalan but possessed a working knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew as well. As a man of such great erudition, he was a confidant to four kings and physician to three popes. Indeed, in his capacity as a physician, Arnald and his two nephews are known to have had close connections to Jewish scholars in Montpellier such as Jacob ben Makkir ibn Tibbon (a.k.a., Prophatius Iudaeus, or Don Pro Fiat, 1236–1305).⁴⁶⁴ He is known as the disciple of Robert of Naples, who was himself profoundly interested in Jewish learning.⁴⁶⁵ When requested to treat Boniface VIII for kidney stones, he managed to raise even more suspicion over his work – now not only for his association with Jewish learning, Franciscan radicals, and heterodox eschatologies – but with Arabic astrology and the occult sciences as well.⁴⁶⁶ Arnald was a friend of Petrus Olivi's, and alongside others, he managed through great effort to convince Clement V that if he did not solve the problems afflicting the Franciscan Order, it would come apart completely. Arnald made a number of apocalyptic predictions regarding future events and the Joachimite flavour of his writings about them is chiefly made clear by his belief in a coming age of spiritual renovation for the Church led by an angelic pope. Such works were sought out by the Spirituals and the Beguines to the extent that their circulation in vernacular form was prohibited by Church authorities.⁴⁶⁷

Christian philosophers and theologians had long pondered the question of “the Word” that was “in the beginning” and that itself “was God” in the opening passage of John's Gospel. This Petrus Alfonsi had established was the ineffable Tetragrammaton IEUE (יהוה), a secret

Hebrew and Jewish lore, which surfaced in two of Lull's contemporaries, Raymund Martini and Arnald of Villanova. The latter even wrote a treatise on the letters of the Tetragrammaton which may be considered the closest theological work to Kabbalah written by a Christian scholar up to this time. The interest of these authors, like that of their Italian Renaissance followers, was ostensibly of a missionary nature. However, in the case of Lull, the proposed influence of Kabbalah has to do mostly with the technical aspect of his thought rather than with its theological content.”

⁴⁶³ Fidora, “Martí in Context,” 381.

⁴⁶⁴ Jacob ben Makkir ibn Tibbon was an accomplished translator of numerous Arabic versions of Greek texts into Hebrew, such as Euclid's *Elements*, *Data*, and *Optics*, Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Menelaos of Alexandria's *Spherics*, in addition to al-Haytham's *Configuration of the World*, commentaries on Averroes, among many other works. In his preface to Euclid's *Elements*, he writes: “I... have undertaken to translate [Euclid's *Elements*] into our language... in order to avoid the mockery of the Christians, who say that we are lacking in all the sciences.” Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher* (Graz: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1956 [1893]), 505; Lynn Thorndike, “Andalo di Negro, Prophatius Iudaeus, and the Alfonsine Tables,” *Isis* 10 (1928), 52-56.

⁴⁶⁵ Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 177.

⁴⁶⁶ Arnald's solution to the Pope's ailments, in keeping with the practices of contemporary Jewish physicians, was to craft an astrological talisman from the infamous treatise of astral magic, the *Picatrix* (which had been translated at the behest of King Alphonso X of Castile in the late 1250s). See Dan Attrell and David Porreca, trans., *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise of Astral Magic* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 59 (2.12.44) for the image of Leo to be used as a remedy for kidney stones. Arnald's failed astrological predictions about history earned him a good deal of criticism from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. See n. 1023 below.

⁴⁶⁷ Wardi, “Cognitive Dissonance,” 277-278.

closely guarded by the ancient Hebrews. With the help of Petrus Alfonsi's divulging of Tetragrammatical speculations, and Joachim of Fiore's prophetic sense of history, Arnald of Villanova produced four works that stand out in particular as a demonstration of how these currents came together in one figure.⁴⁶⁸ The first of these works, composed around 1292, was Arnald's *Introductio in librum Ioachim 'De semine scripturarum'* which provided a commentary on a treatise which Arnald believed had been written by Joachim of Fiore (but which was actually the work of an early-thirteenth century northern Bavarian monk).⁴⁶⁹ Its chief concern was with the hidden meaning of the *figura*, *potestas*, and *ordo* of the letters in the alphabet, and as such emphasized the notion that spirit was innate to letter itself. Letters were not the mere husks for spirit, but were consubstantial with it. Here the links between signifiers and things signified were *real*, and this assumption as it pertained to the study of divine names was carried forward into the Renaissance by Christian interpreters of Jewish Kabbalah like Pico and Reuchlin (all in spite of the fact that by their day supporters of the *via moderna* had formulated an entire science on denying the reality of such links). Arnald's following work, the *Allocutio super significatione nominis Tetragrammaton*, written in 1292, continues with this line of reasoning and makes use of the previous work's exegetical principles to decrypt the meaning of the Tetragrammaton and the Christological abbreviations (IHS, XPS).⁴⁷⁰ Here Arnald relied on many of the conclusions about the name of God that Petrus Alfonsi and Joachim of Fiore had reached in previous centuries: to read the Tetragrammaton correctly is to demonstrate that God's essence is triune, distributed in three persons across the three pairs of four Hebrew letters. More directly and by his own admission, however, Arnald composed the *Allocutio* under the influence of Ramon Martí:

I have endeavoured often, most beloved father, that the seed of the Hebrew tongue, which the religious zeal of friar Ramon Martí planted in the garden of my heart, would sprout up not only for my eternal salvation, but also for that of all the other faithful.⁴⁷¹

Arnald had received instruction from Martí who led the *studium Hebraicum* at the Santa Caterina convent and praised his teacher for imparting to Christendom the knowledge hidden within the *Hebraica veritas*.⁴⁷² Arnald's Tetragrammatical speculations, therefore, relied on two separate but

⁴⁶⁸ Harold Lee, "Scrutamini Scripturas: Joachimist Themes and Figurae in the Early Religious Writing of Arnald of Villanova," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 33-56, and McGinn, "Arnald of Villanova," in *Visions of the End*, 222-224.

⁴⁶⁹ Sebastià Giralt-Jaume Mensa, "Arnau de Vilanova: Latin works and epistles," in Arnau DB. Corpus digital d'Arnau de Vilanova, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2016) <http://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/arnau/en/llatina>.

⁴⁷⁰ Joaquin Carreras y Artau, "La 'Allocutio Super Tetragrammaton' de Arnaldo de Vilanova," *Sefarad* 9 (1949): 75-105. Cf. Fidora, "Martí in Context," 383-385.

⁴⁷¹ *Arnaldi de Villanova, Introductio in librum [Ioachim]: De semine scripturarum. Allocutio super significatione nominis Tetragrammaton*, ed. Josep Perarnau (Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans: Barcelona, 2004), 139: "Pluries affectavi, karissime pater, ut semen illud hebraicae linguae, quod zelus religionis fratris R[aimundi] Martini seminavit in ortulo cordis mei, prodesset non mihi solum, sed ceteris etiam fidelibus ad salutem aeternam."

⁴⁷² See Arnald of Villanova, *Allocutio super significatione nominis Tetragrammaton*, 139 where Arnald claims Martí's work, almost certainly a reference to the *Pugio fidei*, "...continet multa et clara testimonia pro articulis nostrae fidei, quae latuerunt hactenus in hebraica veritate." Cf. Fidora, "Martí in Context," 381-382. See also n. 484 below.

connected streams of influence – I say connected, because both streams can ultimately be traced back to the anti-Jewish polemics of Petrus Alfonsi working with his *Secreta secretorum*. The first source was the Franciscan spirituals who had their interpretations mediated by both authentic and pseudo-Joachimite texts, and the second source was the *Pugio fidei* (namely, the section where Martí begins his discussion with a long passage from Moses Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* I.61 which is on divine names and the uniqueness of the Tetragrammaton).⁴⁷³ Alexander Fidora suggests convincingly, however, that in the *Allocutio* Arnald probably put the spotlight on Ramon Martí as his chief authority when it came to the interpretation of the divine name not necessarily because he saw him as the supreme authority on these matters, but because at the time he was far more respectable and far less controversial than Joachim of Fiore.⁴⁷⁴

The major impetus behind Arnald’s eschatological beliefs was the result of a long time spent wrestling with messianic notions shared among the Jews of his day, and this certainly did not exclude the Jewish Kabbalists.⁴⁷⁵ In the early 1290s, Arnald wrote two works explicitly focused on his interest in eschatology. By 1297, he had completed his *De adventu Antichristi* (*On the Advent of Antichrist*) which, in 1300, while on an ambassadorial mission to Paris, got him briefly arrested, raising suspicions over his work for years to come. Even Pico attacked Arnald for his predictions almost two centuries later.⁴⁷⁶ In defending his eschatological computations against contemporary churchmen, he addressed a text to Boniface VIII, *De mysteriis cymbalorum ecclesie* (*On the Mystery of the Cymbals of the Church*) in the summer of 1301, making it clear in the second tract that his methods were largely a response to Jewish messianic calculations and views.⁴⁷⁷ The text was not so well received, however. Arnald saw a crowning age of history just over the horizon and, along with other millenarians of his age, compounded this ideology of progress with the warning presented by Paul in the *Epistle to the Romans*:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.⁴⁷⁸

With a renewed emphasis on this “mystery of Israel,” the ancient replacement theology was giving way to the idea that Jews – by way of mass conversion – were to play a fundamental role in the new age. This change of attitude, marked by hope instead of hostility, signified the

⁴⁷³ Fidora, “Martí in Context,” 382, n. 27; *Pugio fidei* (Leipzig, 1687), 648-650 (3.3.2); Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 89-90.

⁴⁷⁴ Fidora, “Martí in Context,” 386.

⁴⁷⁵ Maurice Kriegel, “The Reckoning of Nahmanides and Arnold of Villanova: On the Early Contacts Between Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism.” *Jewish History* 26, 1 (2012): 17-40. See also Juanita A. Daly, “Arnald of Villanova: Physician and Prophet,” in *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association*, ed. Richard W. Clement, vol. 4 (Chicago: Loyola University, 1987), 29-43.

⁴⁷⁶ See n. 1023 below.

⁴⁷⁷ Kriegel, “Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism,” 20.

⁴⁷⁸ *Romans* 11:25-26; note that the Joachimite presupposition of a thousand-year earthly sabbath before the Final Judgement does not appear in Arnald’s theory; cf. Daly, “Physician and Prophet,” 43, n. 16.

beginning of a development of a kind of admiration for Jews – or at least, for their learning – as would be seen in later Christian Hebraists like Reuchlin, who at the beginning of the sixteenth century defended the existence of Jewish texts against Dominicans who wished to see them illegally seized and burned.⁴⁷⁹ Latin Christians even began to become sympathetic to the notion that Jews would come out of exile and return to the Holy Land.⁴⁸⁰ As Christian apocalypticism became more similar to Jewish messianism – and vice-versa – it fostered a “relatively more benign” climate of interaction between Christians and Jews (with an emphasis on the word ‘relatively’).⁴⁸¹ The periods of greatest persecution were yet to come. Arnald was specifically influenced by Joachim in his calculations of the time when Antichrist would arise, and in this particular matter, he had a direct influence on the Franciscan alchemist John of Rupescissa who carried Joachimite apocalypticism on into the fourteenth century, popularized it through his literature, and imbued it with a nationalist dimension.

Arnald calculated from the *Book of Daniel* 12:11 in its claim that “from the time when the continual sacrifice shall be taken away, and the abomination unto desolation shall be set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred ninety days.” Since the temple was destroyed by Titus 42 years after Christ’s crucifixion, and the sacrifices ceased some three and a half years after that, this yielded the calculation of $1290 + 33 + 42 + 3.5 =$ the year 1368, though oddly enough Arnald gives “around 1378” in *On the Advent of Antichrist* and “around 1376” in *On the Mystery of the Cymbals* because he was uncertain whether he should calculate using lunar or solar years.⁴⁸² In Arnald’s mind, this was not done to stoke fear, but as a form of love (*caritas*), warning believers that they must turn away from the things of this world and contemplate what the coming kingdom of God would mean for them. It bears mentioning, however, that this idea of deriving calculations from the *Book of Daniel* was based on a direct appropriation of a Jewish tradition for calculating the advent of their Messiah. It is here, then, in Arnald of Villanova that one sees an instance of kabbalistic messianism intersecting with and shaping Christian apocalypticism and the prophetic sense of history.⁴⁸³

Arnald may have encountered the views of Kabbalists like Nachmanides through a number of vectors, but he himself most unambiguously tells us that his biggest influence was the Dominican friar Ramon Martí who had sown the seeds of the Hebrew language in the garden of his heart with the opening sentence of his *Allocutio super significacione nominis*

⁴⁷⁹ See G. Lloyd Jones, “Introduction” in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 13-15 for an outline of the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn affair. There Jones makes it clear, however, that: “For all his love of Jewish literature and his respect for Jacob Loans, Reuchlin was no friend of the Jews. His opposition to Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans sprang from humanitarian and educational motives, not from philo-Semitic feelings. While he deplored the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and their constant harassment in Germany, he did so because he feared that the resultant loss of the Hebrew language would be detrimental to Christian Biblical scholarship.”

⁴⁸⁰ Kriegel, “Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism,” 17.

⁴⁸¹ Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 120.

⁴⁸² Kriegel, “Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism,” 20, n. 13. Note that this date differs from the one given by Pico in n. 1023 below.

⁴⁸³ Kriegel, “Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism,” 22.

Tetragrammaton.⁴⁸⁴ Ramon Martí had gathered some of his polemical material from Petrus Alfonsi and used it in formulating his battle plan against Judaism, and along with Arnald, his solutions can by no means be said to have been part and parcel with the more conciliatory, ecumenical, Joachimite approach to the question of Jews living among Christendom. In this light, one can draw a straight line of historiographical influence from Petrus Alfonsi to Ramon Martí to Arnald of Villanova, each of whom played a pivotal role in carrying forward the Latin polemical tradition all the way from the twelfth century to the fifteenth when its themes of disputation and stratagems were picked up by the humanist theologians of the Renaissance period. Chief among these themes were: conjectures about world history; the time of the Messiah's coming; the reasonableness of a given religion's theology and practice; the true meaning of the Scriptures as written in their original languages; and most importantly, what I here call the polemical use of esoteric philology (e.g., Tetragrammatical speculations).

Late in his life, Arnald became close with Frederick III of Sicily and proposed to him to follow suit with the kings of England and France by expelling all Jews who refused to convert, or at the very least enforce stricter policies of segregation. Trusting in Arnald's judgement, Frederick III took up the latter approach, forbidding Christians to eat with or hire Jews in their homes, and in 1312, forcing the Jews of Palermo to leave the desirable portions of town. Frederick III also reinstated old and defunct laws which forbade Jewish physicians from treating Christian patients.⁴⁸⁵ In this one can see how the pacific impulse to bring the Jews into the fold of Christendom that was present in Joachim of Fiore was not universally adopted among the proto-Christian-Cabalists, especially among those influenced by the writings of the Dominican Ramon Martí. From this point onward, the lines between philo-Semites and anti-Semites became increasingly blurry and such attitudes could even be found coexisting within the same intellectual movement, with similar goals, but with different means of achieving them.

Further into the fourteenth century, John of Rupescissa, a Franciscan Spiritual and a veritable nexus of apocalyptic prophecy and occult science, became a key figure from among the French followers of Joachim. Born near Aurillac around 1310, he had the good fortune to suffer not only years of persecution, torture, and incarceration for his strict adherence to the ideals of St. Francis, but also the Black Death, the Hundred Years War, and the Avignon Papacy. As a young friar, John of Rupescissa became enchanted by the works of Petrus Olivi while studying at Toulouse. There he became a committed Joachimite thinker, no doubt in large part fuelled by his own propensity for visions and prophecies. Rupescissa was also very deeply influenced by the works of Arnald of Villanova and Ramon Llull, both authentic and spurious, and played an

⁴⁸⁴ *Arnaldus di Villanova*, ed. Perarnau, 139; these opening sentences are only extant in Greek translation of the Latin treatise (which itself has been re-translated back into a modern Latin version, cf. *Arnaldus di Villanova*, ed. Perarnau, 74-75); Robin Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims, and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 114, n. 92 as cited in Kriegel, "Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism," 27.

⁴⁸⁵ Kriegel, "Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism," 28.

important role in carrying forth their approach to history, natural philosophy, and metaphysics.⁴⁸⁶ From 1344 onward, Rupescissa underwent a cruel chain of long-term imprisonments in the cellars of various Franciscan convents and, at last, in the papal prison at Avignon until his death in 1366. Despite the harsh and unusual treatment he endured in the name of absolute poverty – at times being locked beneath a staircase, forced to languish with a broken leg and sit in his own waste for weeks on end – at other times, being given permission to put his thoughts down into writing from behind bars.⁴⁸⁷ There he composed a number of prophetic works, the most significant of which was a commentary on the pseudo-Joachimite *Oraculum Cyrilli*, the *Liber secretorum eventuum*, the *Liber ostensor* and the *Vade mecum in tribulatione*. Though certainly heterodox in nature, texts such as these were widely disseminated and scrutinized by many of the Church’s most eminent minds. Reeves tells us that “their influence probably lay in their fusion of [French] national aspirations and Joachimist dreams,” and that although “the authorities dealt harshly with the poor fanatic – no one was quite prepared to disbelieve him.”⁴⁸⁸ From this point onward and enduring well into the Renaissance period, the kings of France would eagerly aspire to fulfill this prophesied role of ‘Last World Emperor’ (a prediction which retained much of its force well into the time of Charles VIII who, fancying himself a second Charlemagne, entered Florence by force on the very same day Pico died in November 1494).⁴⁸⁹ Rupescissa maintained that an Antichrist, identified with an emperor embodying all anti-spiritual aspirations would soon appear, and along with him, a complete schism between the spiritual Church and the carnal Church.⁴⁹⁰ The crisis which threatened to tear apart the Church appeared to be in full-swing, and through the spiritual understanding of a handful of radical mendicant writers, had now taken on a fully apocalyptic dimension.

For John of Rupescissa, as for many Joachimites who preceded him, the root of political evil was still indeed Frederick II (d. 1250), the *Serpens Antiquus* predicted by Joachim.⁴⁹¹ This was not such an unusual position to maintain since this particular Holy Roman Emperor had even been denounced as Antichrist by Pope Gregory IX during his pontificate (1227–41). From this Great Antichrist had spawned a number of lesser Antichrists, namely Louis and Frederick of Sicily, and Louis of Bavaria, with whom Rupescissa perceived the lukewarm Franciscan ‘Conventuals’ were aligned. Part of Rupescissa’s apocalyptic expectations involved the belief that, at first, the institutional Church would be persecuted by the Antichrist emperor, but eventually, an unholy alliance would emerge between the pope and the emperor.⁴⁹² He believed that a holy pope, a “*corrector et reparator*” would then rise up and receive support from the king

⁴⁸⁶ See DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, Chapter 5 for a discussion of the collective influence of these two missionary-minded philosophers on John of Rupescissa’s theology and natural philosophy.

⁴⁸⁷ DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time*, 26, n. 49.

⁴⁸⁸ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 67.

⁴⁸⁹ McGinn, “Savonarola and Late Medieval Italian Apocalypticism” in *Visions of the End*, 278; see McGinn, “Pseudo-Methodius,” in *Visions of the End*, 70 and ff. for *The Revelations of the Pseudo-Methodius* which stand as the earliest extant source for the legend of the ‘Last World Emperor.’

⁴⁹⁰ Kriegel, “Christian Millenarianism and Jewish Messianism,” 19.

⁴⁹¹ See McGinn, “Frederick II versus the Papacy,” in *Visions of the End*, 168-179.

⁴⁹² Cf. McGinn. “Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist,” 158.

of France and his “new Maccabees” against the offspring of the Antichrist. A battle would then ensue with victory for the side of spiritual reformers, ensured by the intervention of Christ himself, in accordance with *2 Thessalonians* 2:8. Thereafter, the new age would begin, destined to endure in the freedom of the Holy Spirit until the rise of yet another, final Antichrist, and at last, the Final Judgement.⁴⁹³ As Reeves keenly observed, this idea of an ‘Angelic Pope’ developed out of a dilemma that men like Rupescissa faced when forced to reconcile their obedience to the papacy with their obedience to the *Rule of St. Francis*:

The inexorable logic which drove Franciscans such as Olivi, Clareno, and Ubertino da Casale along could be stated thus: the true Pope could not err, the Rule of St. Francis could not be modified, therefore a pontiff who did so and manifestly erred must be the pseudo-pope of prophecy, presiding over the carnal church of Babylon.⁴⁹⁴

Apostolic poverty, therefore, firmly endured as the litmus test for true Christian spirituality. One could not call themselves Christian if one made no efforts to imitate the historical life of Christ and his apostles.

Among Rupescissa’s most important innovations, as Robert Lerner emphasized, was the belief that in the new age, “the Roman people” would be removed from power, and the Jews – having been converted *en masse* to Christianity in one of the last major events of world history – would take their place. In calculating the date for the rise of this impending iteration of Antichrist, Rupescissa turned to Arnald of Villanova. Arnald’s aforementioned 1301 work *On the Mystery of the Cymbals of the Church* had included a computation and prophecy beginning with *Vae mundo* and foretelling that a “bat” (a Christian king in Spain) would devour the “mosquitoes of Spain” (Muslims) and crush the head of the Beast (Islam) before rising to world monarchy, followed by the unveiling of Antichrist. As Lerner demonstrates, since Rupescissa used this reckoning for a prophecy in his *Liber secretorum eventuum* (1345), it is certain he knew of Arnald’s computation from this particular tract.⁴⁹⁵ Reiterating Arnald’s calculations of 1290 + 33 + 42, but without the complication of Titus’ pact, he yielded the date of 1365 for the rise of Antichrist.⁴⁹⁶ This year, of course, came and went without seeing a rise of the Antichrist, but what is important is the development in this trend among mendicants of trying to pinpoint significant events in history using calculations drawn from an historicizing exegesis of prophetic books. John of Rupescissa is but one example of this activity, but it is highlighted here because there develops a pattern of similar activities throughout the fifteenth century, such as in the latter half of Marsilio Ficino’s *De Christiana religione*, or in Book 7, Chapter 4 of Pico della Mirandola’s kabbalistic *Heptaplus* wherein they both thought it exceedingly important to challenge the calculations of “the Talmudists” in regard to when the Messiah had come. All this was to be done, at least as far as they were concerned, *using the Talmudists’ own methods*,

⁴⁹³ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 68.

⁴⁹⁴ Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 78.

⁴⁹⁵ Lerner, “Historical Introduction,” 58, n. 92. Cf. 772 below.

⁴⁹⁶ *Johannes de Rupescissa: Liber secretorum eventuum*, eds. Robert E. Lerner and Christine Morerod-Fattebert (St-Paul: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1994), 270-271.

through a close examination of Hebrew Scripture. This was done not only to refute the Talmudists but to prepare Christendom for the inevitability of the Last Things. The calculation of significant dates, while seldom in agreement as to the specifics, became an activity that late medieval Christians and Jews increasingly had in common, the former inspired by the Joachimite prophetic sense of history alongside mendicant spirituality, the latter inspired by a close reading of the Hebrew prophets, Talmudic esotericism, and prophetic Kabbalah. These two groups, however, were hardly kept in isolation from one another, and questions of dating significant events both in the past and in the future arose frequently. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, knowledge of both the Talmud and of Semitic languages in general expanded dramatically in mendicant circles, but for Jews living as an out-group minority within the bounds of Western Christendom, this meant being increasingly subjected to compulsory debates, book burnings, ghettos, exiles, forced conversions, and pogroms.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate to what extent the awareness of world history in the Latin West was bound up with inter-religious polemical debates prompted by various members of mendicant orders. At the heart of these debates were questions about how the words of Scripture ought to be interpreted correctly. Over centuries, the proliferation of various different ‘senses’ in the reading of Scripture – with the literal sense at the bottom of the hierarchy and the mystical sense at the top – helped a great number of Latin intellectuals, starting with the reformist apocalyptic thinkers of the twelfth century, to develop complex models of world history using the Bible, replete with numerous overlapping periodization schemes and overarching ideas about moral progress. These optimistic ideas of progress were then taken up in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by mendicant friars who saw themselves not as the passive recipients of fate, but as volitionally-charged instruments of God who could effect change in history as missionaries. The key to this change or *transitus*, they maintained, was the revival and emulation of an historical reality: the *vita apostolica*, exemplified by the primitive Church, whose very *sine qua non* was the rejection of the heart-hardening merchant life, and those who symbolized it (namely, adherents of Judaism). Along with this rejection of wealth and mercantilism came a reorientation of values: not one which denied the immanent and physical at the expense of the transcendent and the spiritual, but one which confounded those two realities into one ultimate moral universe. In working out this reorientation of values, the mendicants found themselves carrying on a spiritual war begun by their monastic predecessors, who themselves were in matters of theology the inheritors of those triumphant idealist philosophies that thrived throughout Late Antiquity and endured on into the Middle Ages. Besieged on all sides by the forces of Antichrist, the friars planned accordingly to turn his own devices against him, to plunder his armories, and to equip themselves with those very slings and arrows he had first deigned to use against them. In the end, however, this elaborate story only supplies part of the broader context required to understand the inter-religious polemical dimensions of the Renaissance humanist theologians Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The following chapter, therefore, turns to examine the growth and embattlement of humanist philology as a new mode of textual interpretation, the development of competing systems of historical awareness,

and ultimately, how our humanist theologians in particular attempted to return to the most ancient texts they could find to serve as guiding exemplars in a time of great crisis for the Church.

Part II: The Renaissance

4 - *Graeca Veritas* and *Hebraica Veritas*

Throughout the High Middle Ages and leading up to the Renaissance, Hebrew learning had remained of relatively little importance in the Latin West, though there was indeed some general interest in it among scholars for a variety of reasons. Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141), for example, had set himself up to compare the Vulgate against a Hebrew translation of the Bible and was known to hold debates with Jewish scholars.⁴⁹⁷ In the thirteenth century, general interest in Hebrew spread more widely and its scholars became more precise. Prior to this, medieval Jews who wrote and published on scientific or philosophical subjects like Maimonides or Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) had done so largely in Judeo-Arabic. This trend had begun to change in Spain and Italy with the rise of grammatically-minded authors and translators like Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092–1167) who wrote many commentaries such as his work on the book of *Genesis* or *Exodus* (printed in Naples, 1488), or Samuel ibn Tibbon (c. 1165–1232) who translated Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* alongside works of Aristotle and Averroes from Arabic into Hebrew. In highlighting the importance of Semitic languages to their own evangelical endeavours, thirteenth century mendicant intellectuals like Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, and Ramon Martí had helped to create an atmosphere wherein the systematic teaching of Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic (or “Chaldean”) was officially declared desirable for both missionary and ‘defence’ purposes. This was done in 1311 by Decree 24 of the Council of Vienne which gradually established chairs for its study at a number of major European universities.⁴⁹⁸ For all intents and purposes, without the modern knowledge of languages like Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and so forth, Hebrew and Chaldean were widely considered the most ancient of all languages, and so to study them was to study the foundations of the world. Despite this move towards trying to look at Hebrew sources on their own terms, the tools required for a philological analysis of Hebrew Scripture were rather lacking in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Greek text was not generally available in the Latin West, and the ability to read it there was still limited as well. Italians and Spaniards were privy to a few editions of specific printed books of the Hebrew Bible, but north of the Alps there was no substantial Hebrew grammar for a European audience until Reuchlin published his *De rudimentis Hebraicis* in 1506, which was chiefly an outgrowth of his kabbalistic studies inspired by Ficino and Pico.⁴⁹⁹ Even throughout most of the early modern period, scholars in keeping with Reuchlin persisted in the belief that Hebrew was the oldest of all languages. In the Bible, God and his angels spoke with men in Hebrew. “The language of the Hebrews is simple, pure, uncorrupted, holy, terse, and vigorous,” wrote Reuchlin, and with it “God spoke with men and men with angels, directly, face

⁴⁹⁷ Black, *Pico*, 64-65.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.; Deana C. Klepper, “Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship,” in *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, eds. Philip Krey and Lesley Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 289-311; cf. Ari Geiger, “What Happened to Christian Hebraism in the Thirteenth Century?” in *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France*, eds. E. Baumgarten, J. D. Galinsky (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 49-63.

⁴⁹⁹ Black, *Pico*, 65.

to face, and not through interpreters... like friend speaking with friend.”⁵⁰⁰ He pondered questions such as whether the Egyptians or the Hebrews were the first to teach the use of letters, but concluded that Hebrew was indeed the first and that Moses was the first author and teacher of the written word as a whole. From there, the word was passed on to the Phoenicians who themselves transmitted it to the Chaldeans and the Greeks.⁵⁰¹ Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century, therefore, there was yet much work to be done in developing an accurate narrative regarding ancient languages, textual origins, and the history of the Bible itself.

As we have seen, whether among Christians or Jews, those who had the ability to read Scripture had now for centuries maintained the idea that the word of God embodied more than one layer of meaning. From at least as early as the 4th century, this instinct for discerning complexity had amalgamated into a codification of the four senses or ‘types’ of scriptural interpretation: the literal (or historical), the allegorical, the moral (or tropological), and the anagogical.⁵⁰² Through this system, exegetes no longer found themselves having to privilege the immanent (literal/historical) dimensions of Scripture over its transcendent (allegorical/moral/anagogical) dimensions, or vice-versa – the text was simply understood to operate on a number of different levels simultaneously. This was the time-honoured ladder laid out for all spiritual seekers who yearned to reconcile the immanent and transcendent dimensions of God’s revealed word. By Pico’s day in the late fifteenth century, as one can see in his 1487 *Apologia*, this had become the normal Christian way to interpret the Bible. Leading up to Pico’s statement that “among us there is a fourfold way of explaining the Bible, the literal, the mystical or allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical,”⁵⁰³ there were two texts in particular that had played a significant role in the proliferation of this fourfold method, namely, the *Glossa ordinaria* and the *Postilla super totam Bibliam* by the fourteenth century Franciscan scholar, Nicholas of Lyra.⁵⁰⁴ In the brief 8-year span between the *Glossa* and the *Postilla*, the reception of the fourfold model among Christian exegetes was so successful that it was even encapsulated in a pedagogical couplet sung by school children: “*littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,*

⁵⁰⁰ Reuchlin, *De verbo mirifico*, 914; Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 43; Cf. Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De Verbo Mirifico*,” 122: “[Reuchlin’s] history runs like this: before the Trojan war, there were no letters, except for the books of the Hebrews. Moses handed down grammatical knowledge to the Phoenicians, who, through Cadmus, transmitted it to the Greeks. So 140 years after the Trojan war Homer and Hesiod began writing, and a little before them, Orpheus. Reuchlin’s sources for this history are Cicero and Eupolemus.”

⁵⁰¹ Zika, “Reuchlin’s *De Verbo Mirifico*,” 112 notes that although there were precedents for this in the works of Origen, Ambrose and others, “Reuchlin’s principal source, at least in his *De arte cabalistica* and later minor works, was Eusebius’ *Praeparatio evangelica*” which had likewise been a major source for Marsilio Ficino’s *De Christiana religione* and the sermons of Flavius Mithridates. Unlike those who looked to Egypt as one of the birthplaces of the *prisca theologia* (e.g., Ficino), however, Reuchlin had a tendency to identify ancient Egyptian culture “with idolatry and demonic magic.”

⁵⁰² Black, *Pico*, 56.

⁵⁰³ Pico, *Apologia* in *Opera omnia*, 178: “apud nos est quadruplex modus exponendi Bibliam, literalis, mystice sive allegoricus, tropologicus et anagogicus.”

⁵⁰⁴ Nicholas’ *Glossa* is a Latin compendium of patristic exegesis, replete with marginal and interlinear notes. While the *Postilla* (1331) concerned itself with exposition on a literal level, the *Moralia* (1339) was more or less concerned with the non-literal.

moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.”⁵⁰⁵ Even by the late fifteenth century, for humanist theologians like Ficino, Pico, or Reuchlin, when it came to their interest in Hebrew Scriptural hermeneutics, much of what they knew had been gleaned from reading Nicholas of Lyra’s responses to quotations of various rabbis from earlier centuries. In this way, that medieval scholar became integral to the way many Christians encountered Jewish ideas, that is, not first hand, but mediated through the commentaries and polemics of Franciscan and Dominican friars.

As a friar dedicated to public preaching and an exhaustive scholar of the Bible, this Norman schoolman was no stranger to the debates which Jews had initiated among his coreligionists in centuries prior.⁵⁰⁶ These debates often took the form of petty squabbles over various passages of Scripture and through what level of interpretation they ought to be correctly understood. In his quotations of the Qur’an, Nicholas chiefly cited Ramon Martí – proof he was in close contact with that particular Dominican’s monumental body of anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic literature. Marsilio Ficino would also make extensive use of Nicholas of Lyra’s works in assembling his *De Christiana religione* around 1473–4, most notably those parts which engaged with the interpretations of prophetic books by the French Rabbi Salomon Yitzchaki (or *Rashi*, 1040–1105). Ficino greatly admired Nicholas of Lyra for his repudiations of Jewish scriptural interpretations, especially as they appeared in the friar’s *Pulcherrimae quaestiones Iudaicam perfidiam in catholicam fide improbant* (or *Quaestiones* for short), where he applied the texts and ideas of such forerunners as Petrus Alfonsi, Joachim of Fiore, Thomas Aquinas, and Ramon Martí.⁵⁰⁷ Such a chain of influence from Nicholas of Lyra to Ficino was made possible by the fact that the *Postilla* had just been printed for the first time at Rome in 1471, two years before Ficino wrote *De Christiana religione* and was ordained a priest.

Nicholas of Lyra’s *Glossa ordinaria* explained how Scripture was to be interpreted along four *regulae* (or “measures”): “History speaks of things done; allegory is when one thing is understood as another; tropology, that is, moral instruction deals with the ordering of behaviour; anagogy, that is, the spiritual intellect (*spiritualis intellectus*), through dealing with the highest heavenly things, leads us onto higher matters.”⁵⁰⁸ Words indeed signified things, but in the Bible, those things signified yet another layer of things. The first layer established the literal/historical sense, that is, that the events purported happened as described. Nicholas then divided the second layer, the “mystical” or “spiritual” sense, into three subcategories:

⁵⁰⁵ Black, *Pico*, 57, n. 4; this couplet is quoted by Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, 4 vols. (Strasbourg, 1492; reprint Frankfurt: Minerva, 1972), 1, sig. A2^v. See also Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 3.16.

⁵⁰⁶ Deanna Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 27.

⁵⁰⁸ *Biblia latina cum glossa ordinaria*, 4 vols. (Strasbourg, 1480-1481; reprint Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 1, sig. A3^v: “Quattuor sunt regulae sacrae scripturae idest hystoria: quae res gestas loquitur. Allegoria in qua aliud ex alio intelligitur. Tropologia idest moralis locutio: in qua de moribus ordinandis tractatur. Anagoge idest spiritualis intellectus: per quem de summis et caelestibus tractaturi ad superiora ducimur.”

Because if the things signified by the words are referred to for the purpose of signifying things which are to be believed in the new law, this is understood as the allegorical sense; but if they are referred to for the purpose of signifying things which should be done by us, this is the moral or tropological sense; and if they are referred to for the purpose of signifying things which should be expected in the future beatitude to come, this is the anagogical sense.⁵⁰⁹

As we have already seen, such a categorization scheme was not unique to Nicholas of Lyra.⁵¹⁰ Our Norman friar's particular take was extracted from a discussion on the very same subject in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologica*, the favourite theological text of the Dominican order and a cornerstone of the Latin polemical tradition. Crofton Black argues that what made the *Glossa* and the *Postilla* important during the Renaissance was their popularity, not their originality. For our purposes, their importance lies in the fact that in the 1470s Ficino applied Nicholas of Lyra's methods in his polemics against rabbinical interpretations of the books of the prophets, and in the late 1480s Pico della Mirandola wished to go beyond them in devising his own 'sevenfold' exegetical system used to reconcile Platonic modes of interpretation with his kabbalistic study of the Hebrew Bible.⁵¹¹ On account of his texts' widespread dissemination, then, this fourteenth century Franciscan exegete and missionary-minded polemicist played a role in shaping the Church's official stance on how Scripture was to be interpreted.⁵¹² The fourfold method was so deep-seated in the general consciousness of fifteenth century Latin scholars that it provided a major basis for how they came to think about the history of the world, from a literal reading of the Bible which drew readers on into deeper levels of interpretation, penetrating well beyond the literal, causal approach to understanding history, and entering into a purely semiological mode. In the words of Alessandro Scafi, Nicholas of Lyra' was "the link between the Middle Ages and modern times [as] the commentator who freed medieval exegesis from its prolixity."⁵¹³ There was, however, another step from the 'medieval' to the 'modern' approach to Scripture. The fourfold method in no way encompassed the gradual development of a newly emerging science in the fifteenth century: that of humanist philology, which did not concern itself with lofty theological ideas directly, but with scrutinizing the very history of the words and grammar that comprised those ideas, with the creation of critical editions, and thus attempting to cut through to the *original intentions* of any given text's author. It is thus to the pioneers of this new science to which this chapter now turns in order that we might better understand the changes and

⁵⁰⁹ Black, *Pico*, 58, n. 7; Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla*, 1, first prologue, sig. A2^v: "quia si res significatae per voces referantur ad significandum ea quae sunt in nova lege credenda, sic accipitur sensus allegoricus; si autem referantur ad significandum ea quae per nos sunt agenda, sic est sensus moralis vel tropologicus; si autem referantur ad significandum ea quae sunt speranda in beatitudine futura, sic est sensus anagogicus."

⁵¹⁰ See n. 77 above.

⁵¹¹ McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 20 (cf. Carmichael, *Heptaplus*, 74) "How great the perplexity, the ambiguity, and the variety of the whole work [*Genesis* Chapter 1] is! See how great a labor I have conceived, which may not be easy to do... to interpret, *without use of previous commentators*, the whole creation of the world, not in one way but in seven ways, producing completely a new work from the beginning, continuous and free from confusion." [emphasis added]

⁵¹² Black, *Pico*, 59; Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla* was first printed in 1471 and the *Glossa* ten years later, with both being printed together in Venice 1495, with numerous other editions between and after. Both texts were widely coveted throughout the Late Middle Ages, with over 800 extant manuscript copies surviving into the present.

⁵¹³ Cf. Alessandro Scafi, "The Notion of the Earthly Paradise from the Patristic Era to the Fifteenth Century" (PhD diss., The Warburg Institute, 1999), 167.

continuities that marked humanist theology in the Italian Renaissance, especially as it began to digest the fruits of medieval non-Christian learning.⁵¹⁴

During the fifteenth century, to think about ancient history was to think about two things: the Bible and the Greco-Roman classics (which, to Christians of this period, included the writings of the early Church Fathers like Lactantius, Eusebius, Tertullian, and Augustine). As knowledge of history in the Latin West became more complex following the “twelfth century renaissance,” there arose an ever-narrowing gap between the knowledge of Church authorities and knowledge of pagan authorities, many of which were, of course, contemporaries. This was a gradual process, not an event. Though there were not so many ambiguities as to which ancient authors had been guided by divine inspiration and which had not, anxieties around Christian reliance upon pagan authorities proliferated, especially in more conservative circles. Despite these anxieties, a renewed emphasis on the role of the human author in the production of texts continued to narrow that gap, even among the more fervently religious members of the Franciscan and Dominican orders. In the production of commentaries for books of the Old Testament, writers in the Late Middle Ages gradually began drawing upon more and more classical literature to elucidate the ancient world’s politics, philosophy, mythology, natural science, and ethics. Consequently, as early as the fourteenth century one can see the rise of such groups as the “English classicising friars” – including the Dominican Robert Holcot (d. 1349), the Franciscan John Lathbury (d. 1362), and others – who in their scriptural exegesis drew extensively on the authors of antiquity.⁵¹⁵

Much of the Renaissance’s sense of classicism derived from a tendency to treat biblical and classical mythology *comparatively*. An example of this is found in Ficino’s *De amore*, his 1469 commentary on Plato’s *Symposium* – a text which had not been available during the medieval period – and likewise in his 1474 polemic *De Christiana religione* (the topic of the following chapter).⁵¹⁶ In antiquity, various philosophers of the Roman Empire, particularly the Stoics and Platonists, were the first to have worked out their own allegorical interpretations of Greek myths and poetry as a means of reconciling pagan religion with philosophical truth.⁵¹⁷ In keeping with this tradition, when monastic interpreters applied themselves to the classical poets, they erased or underemphasized all aspects that smacked of paganism, and legitimized their interests by highlighting the universalizing, or Christian, values portrayed by the ancient poets. On account of their two-fold love of Christian theology and pagan literature, it became common

⁵¹⁴ Black, *Pico*, 61-62 notes how the four senses of Scriptural interpretation endured on into the sixteenth century. Erasmus used the *Glossa* sparingly, sometimes applying the four senses when it seemed useful, but not remaining tied to them. Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples referred to the four senses, but did not make use of them, while his friend, Josse Clichtove published a work in 1517 entitled the *Allegoriae in Vetus et Novum Testamentum*, which is prefaced with a description of how the four senses operate. More importantly, the Complutensian Polyglot Bible (finished in 1514, but only circulated after 1520) – among the most significant sixteenth century tools in studying Biblical philology – was prefaced with a description of the fourfold method adopted and popularized by Nicholas of Lyra.

⁵¹⁵ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 51-52.

⁵¹⁶ Paul O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 65.

⁵¹⁷ E.g., see n. 249 above.

practice among the Renaissance humanists to deal with Christian and pagan material on *parallel* tracks. Noteworthy examples can be found in a 1406 treatment of Hercules' twelve labours by Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), or in the 1472 *Camaldulensian Disputations* by Cristoforo Landino (1425–1498), which included an intricate moral exegesis and allegorical interpretation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁵¹⁸ Marsilio Ficino, who ran in the same red-robed social circles as Landino – funded as they were by the same patron – carried on this tradition, looking not only to his immediate predecessors, but also to the exegesis of the Platonists whenever faced with the challenge of having to explain the allegory couched within a given myth. Ficino even makes a brief appearance as one of the characters in Landino's dialogue. The following chapter will return to Ficino's fusion of Platonic and Christian spirituality in more detail, but first it is important to consider some of the roots of his and Pico della Mirandola's *studia humanitatis* and how they developed in tandem with an impulse to reform the Church, not to replace it.

Now seeking out the roots of “humanism” ultimately begets a chase leading down a path of endlessly receding precursors that stretch all the way back to antiquity. As early as the eleventh century, a resurgence of interest in Roman law at Pavia, or at Bologna in the twelfth century, had stirred up curiosities over the ancient world, and the intensification of the market economy alongside the growth of cities had further served to spread a need and desire to read the classics beyond the grammar books of the cathedral schools. The *ars dictaminis* – the writing of letters through the lens of Cicero's rhetorical flair – was a fruit of the eleventh century, beginning at the famous Benedictine monastery of Monte Casino, and by the early twelfth century, this new type of prose had moved into the practical sphere, spreading first to Bologna and thereon into other parts of Italy.⁵¹⁹ When speaking of “humanism,” what is meant here is a shift of emphasis away from the traditional scholastic curricula's focus on Aristotelian *logic*, leaning instead toward “*grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy*.”⁵²⁰ Where the medieval schoolmen had emphasized logic over rhetorical stylings, the “humanists” emphasized the convincing power of eloquence with its potential for real-world religious and political consequences. Using this definition, however, it would appear that men like Ficino and Pico in many ways embodied the spirits of both the schoolmen and the humanists simultaneously. In these humanist philosopher-theologians ‘the grammatical,’ ‘the rhetorical,’ ‘the poetic,’ ‘the historical,’ ‘the moral’ and ‘the logical’ each complemented one another. On the one hand, Ficino did not always cite the medieval sources he relied on, but he was certainly no stranger to the works of Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and so on. His polemical sources (Paul of Burgos, Jerome of Santa Fé, Nicholas of Lyra, etc.) were no strangers to medieval *doctores* either. On the other hand, Pico composed his *Oratio* to persuade, in the

⁵¹⁸ Coluccio Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullman (Zurich: Thesaurus mundi, 1951); Cristoforo Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, ed. Peter Lohe (Florence: Sansoni, 1980); for MSS see Landino, *Lectures on Virgil's Aeneid* (MS Roma, Biblioteca Casanatense, codex 1368; MS Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 52, 32; and MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Lat. 5129, 69-77^v).

⁵¹⁹ Brian Copenhaver and Charles Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25.

⁵²⁰ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance,” *Byzantion* 17 (1944-5): 365.

rhetorical mode of a “humanist,” but its companion work, the *900 Conclusiones*, he wrote in the style of a schoolman. Although they produced the bulk of their work outside of the institutional framework of a university, both Ficino and Pico could not easily avoid engaging in the debates which had overtaken the schools, especially those which had become fond of Averroist or Alexandrian interpretations of Aristotle. Despite the fact that Ficino is often touted as the exemplar of Florentine humanism and Pico the pioneer of a Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah, their thoughts were profoundly shaped by the products of scholastic culture and the debates of the mendicant and secular masters who staffed them. For now, however, if we are to understand Ficino and Pico’s polemical works, especially *De Christiana religione* and the *Heptaplus*, it is important to touch on some of the most significant events in the development of a strictly ‘humanist’ mode of historical awareness for the Latin West from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries.

What follows here are some of the major milestones in the study of classical and biblical philology, that is, one of the many vectors leading into the development of what the humanists considered to be most ‘humane’ or civilized: namely, *a profound relationship with the word*. From the histories of Livy, to Diogenes Laertius’ *Eminent Lives*, to the four gospels and the writings of the Church Fathers, these were all fundamentally historical texts which – as access to them improved – worked synergistically to increase the sense of historical discontinuity between the present and the distant past, and to populate that span of distance with fixed points from which knowledge of other peoples, texts, or events could be more firmly placed. To those with the capacity to appreciate the long-lost works of Antiquity, it became increasingly apparent that centuries of barbarism had arisen in the wake of the classical world’s disappearance (namely, barbarians lacking in the earlier value systems which drove individuals to carry forward the Greco-Roman civilization, literature, and high style – the *humanitas* – they had inherited). In this light, history itself was recast in a new mode: it was not so emphatically a story of God’s rational plan implacably unfurling through time toward a state of final perfection (though it was still that indeed); instead, its focus was reoriented around mapping the ebb-and-flow of different peoples coming in and out of contact with good form. Although the humanists had a substantially different approach to dealing with history than from the multi-sense approach taken by men like Joachim of Fiore or Bonaventure (who applied their ‘spiritual understanding’ to uncover all the secret concordances and prefigurations woven throughout the word of God), the humanists continued to read many of the same texts, but with somewhat different eyes. These were eyes fixated on *discontinuity* rather than *continuity*; on what had changed, rather than what had stayed the same. Christianity had always been intertwined with the historicity of its message, but now on account of the proliferation of so many divergent approaches to Scripture, the learned philological approach of men like Francesco Petrarch (c. 1304–74) and Lorenzo Valla (1406–57) sought to cut through to the original intentions of a text, and in doing so, set the foundations for the rebirth of an old, classical mode of reading texts and ‘doing history.’

4.1 Petrarch, the Latin Renaissance, and the Return of Cyclical History

Throughout the medieval period, from about 400–1450, manuscripts were considered objects of tremendous value, and were prudently guarded. Anxieties over theft ran high, and monastic libraries did not just lend out books to anyone. Compounding these anxieties in the wake of the thirteenth century was the fear that the subversive contents of certain old pagan texts might set the world ablaze with heresy if found in the wrong hands, and so monastery librarians were all the more unwilling to let them circulate.⁵²¹ Nevertheless, in late thirteenth century Padua, believing that a renewal of pagan literature could actually save Christendom, a handful of lawyers plumbed their local libraries in pursuit of lost treasure, thus giving birth to a new manuscript hunting movement which might only be said to have gained full momentum with the rise of Petrarch. One cannot discuss the topic of historical awareness without touching on the man who, having broken with Augustine's 'six/seven ages of the world' theory, redefined the era that preceded his own as one characterized by "darkness."⁵²² Petrarch instead saw history in terms of cultural progress and regress. Many medieval historians in the Latin West had accepted a narrative upheld by the Holy Roman Empire which maintained that the empire of Augustus Caesar marked the culmination of ancient history and had been providentially instituted to prepare the world for Christ's incarnation. Not only that, but that the whole line of German emperors from antiquity down to the present represented an uninterrupted and lawful continuation of the Roman Empire.⁵²³ Under the influence of the classical sources they read, however, Petrarch and his successors developed a different view. While it may seem as though Petrarch's contributions to the rebirth of emphasis on classical literature and rhetoric in Italy lay off the beaten track of a narrative about Platonism and Christian 'Cabala,' nevertheless, it would come to play a significant part in the story that Christian Cabalists told themselves in the sixteenth century, such as in Reuchlin's 1517 *De arte cabalistica*, where Petrarch served as the starting point in the revivification of a kind of local Italian *prisca philosophia* narrative rooted in

⁵²¹ See, e.g., Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013) for an exploration of some of the ways in which anxieties over paganism affected how manuscripts concerning magic and the occult sciences were copied, stored, and preserved.

⁵²² The term "middle age" would not appear until 1439, coined by the Renaissance humanist and historian Flavio Biondo in his *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades* wherein he employed Leonardo Bruni's three-fold division of history: the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. See Theodor E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,'" *Speculum* 17, 2 (1942): 226-242, especially his conclusion: "It is precisely this notion of a 'new time' which distinguishes the Italian Renaissance from all the so-called earlier 'Renaissances' in the Carolingian and Ottonian times or in the twelfth century. These times may have experienced a certain revival of classical studies, but the people living in them did not conceive of or wish for a complete break with the traditions of the times immediately preceding. This idea was peculiar to the Italian Renaissance and it found its expression in the condemnation of the mediaeval epoch as an era of 'darkness.' Petrarch stands at the very fountainhead of Renaissance thought. It is logical that the 'Father of Humanism' is also the father of the concept or attitude which regards the Middle Ages as the 'Dark Ages.'"

⁵²³ This particular myth received one of its most eloquent treatments in *Dante: Monarchia*, trans. Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

“Pythagoreanism” (which Reuchlin believed had ultimately derived from the mystical practices of the ancient Hebrews).⁵²⁴

Petrarch’s first substantial manuscript find took place in 1333 during a tour of northern Europe.⁵²⁵ While travelling through the Low Countries, he found two Ciceronian orations in Liège which had not been read for centuries, one of which was the *Pro Archia* (a speech given in defense of Archius, a poet accused of having made false claims to Roman citizenship).⁵²⁶ One idea from Cicero stuck out to him above all: the *studia humanitatis*, the sum total of the liberal arts necessary to master if one ever hoped to achieve one’s full potential as a cultured human being. What excited Petrarch the most was that Cicero’s approach to the liberal arts differed significantly from what was discussed in the schoolmen’s handbooks.⁵²⁷ His excitement, however, was weighed down by the poor state of the manuscript itself. As remedy, Petrarch developed a system for the correction of those errors and the production of a new edition which he believed was as close to the original as possible. His yardstick was grounded in his ability to cross-reference between older and newer versions of any given text, generally privileging the pristineness of the older one. Through a diligent application of this method, Petrarch believed he could beat back the unwitting ignorance which overtook his contemporaries and cause them to see the same historical discontinuity he was seeing. His edition of Livy’s *Ab urbe condita* was his first major success, though only 35 of Livy’s 142 original books had survived.⁵²⁸ Employing his knowledge of Roman history, Latin grammar, and classical rhetoric, he read two manuscripts side by side and deduced the better interpretation (i.e., the interpretation which he believed conformed most elegantly with what he believed to be the author’s original intentions).⁵²⁹ Through this very technique, Petrarch established the discipline of Latin source criticism, and paved the way for later philologists, most notably, Lorenzo Valla in his work on the *Donation of Constantine* and on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, Marsilio Ficino in his recovery of Plato and the

⁵²⁴ Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 37: “Holy Father, philosophy in Italy was once upon a time handed down to men of great intellect and renown by Pythagoras, the father of that school. But over the years it had been done to death by the Sophists’ wholesale vandalism, and lay long buried in obscurity’s dark night, when, by God’s grace, that sun that shone on every field of liberal study, your father Lorenzo de’ Medici, son of the great Cosimo, rose up the chief citizen of Florence... But it must be said that when, in addition to this, his scholarly activities are taken into account, his birth seems heaven-sent. Petrarch, Philelph, and Aretino brought the arts of oratory and fine speech to “the youth of Florence,” so that there could be no disputing that her people wrote more lucidly and spoke more accurately than any other nation.”

⁵²⁵ Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 91-97.

⁵²⁶ *Cicero: Orationes*, trans. N. H. Watts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 6ff.

⁵²⁷ See Charles Nauert, *Historical Dictionary of the Renaissance* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), xxvi for a discussion of how humanist approaches to texts contrasted with the scholastic approach which was “ahistorical, totally unaware of the context of a [given] quotation... Since scholastic writers tended to take their “authorities” not out of the original literary source but out of anthologies, medieval use of the ancients often distorted their meaning. Medieval thinkers’ unawareness that ancient civilization was different from their own blinded them to the original meaning and often led them into crude, anachronistic misunderstandings.” It is this approach to a text that was in large part responsible for the state of disrepair into which many manuscripts of classical texts had fallen by Petrarch’s day.

⁵²⁸ Bishop, *Petrarch and his World*, 91.

⁵²⁹ Michael Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 36-38.

Platonists, Pico della Mirandola's works on the *Psalms*, and later Erasmus and Luther in their work on the Bible.

Steeped in his desire to see Rome returned to the state of glory he had read about in Cicero, Petrarch was moved to visit the city in March 1337. When he arrived, he was shocked to see how the city had deteriorated from the way in which it had been described by Livy.⁵³⁰ At its imperial apex, the city of Rome alone could boast of its population of about one million inhabitants, a number which by Petrarch's time had dwindled to around 20,000. He walked the ruins, searching for notable sites from the city's twofold pagan and Christian history.⁵³¹ Brooding over how he might reinvigorate the ruins, and in the process bring honour to himself, he dreamt of re-establishing the ancient tradition of the poet laureate, choosing himself as first candidate to be crowned with laurel on the Capitoline hill.⁵³² Petrarch drew on his connections to arrange for such an honour, and when an envoy came from the Roman senate to invite him to be crowned poet laureate, he pretended to be surprised.⁵³³ He received his award and delivered his *Collatio laureationis* on the Capitoline on April 8th 1341, reinstating a tradition which had been defunct since Antiquity.⁵³⁴

Since it was evident that Cicero and other Roman intellectuals had all acquired the bulk of their ideas from the Greeks, Petrarch thought he would be amiss as poet laureate not to learn their language. Ultimately, his progress was very limited. Despite his penchant for pagan literature, Petrarch held fast to the truth as revealed in the gospels, revealed texts with which all true learning had to be reconciled. As often happens with Christian intellectuals steeped in ancient pagan literature, Petrarch eventually suffered from a kind of personal crisis. In his *Secretum*, he wrote an imaginary dialogue between himself and Augustine, with whose *Confessiones* he had become increasingly obsessed.⁵³⁵ Augustine rebuked him for his pursuit of fame and the fulfillment of sexual desires instead of pursuing God. The *Secretum* exposed the tension which learned Christians like Petrarch felt between the ideals of Cicero and those of Christ. This was a tension which Petrarch vainly spent the rest of his life trying to resolve.⁵³⁶ Ultimately, the poet's significance here lies in the methodologies of textual criticism he devised in his quest to expand the horizons of his historical awareness. In acting on his belief that texts were easily corrupted and that lurking beneath those corrupt versions there always existed a purer text, he demonstrated how history might be analyzed in terms of change, decline, loss, and return, not merely in terms of either stasis or spiritual progress. When it came to the humanist theologians of subsequent centuries – namely Ficino, Pico, and Reuchlin – it is this idea above all which stood out as different from the historical thinking that came before, and it is this idea

⁵³⁰ Morris Bishop, ed., *Letters from Petrarch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 63-66.

⁵³¹ Bishop, *Letters from Petrarch*, 63-66; Giuseppe Billanovich, "Petrarch and the Textual Tradition of Livy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14 (1951): 137-208.

⁵³² Bishop, *Petrarch and his World*, 160-171.

⁵³³ Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 38-39.

⁵³⁴ Ernest H. Wilkins, "Petrarch's Coronation Oration" *PMLA* 68, 5 (1953): 1241.

⁵³⁵ Bishop, *Petrarch and his World*, 110 and ff.

⁵³⁶ Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 41.

which needed to be reconciled with the older approaches to history that proceeded via the study of scriptural revelation.

Petrarch disparaged both astrology and extra-biblical prophecy in the same breath. Christian ideas about human free will simply did not sit well with the idea that fate was determined by magic or the stars. Steeped in his classical studies, he believed that instead of looking to the motion of the heavenly spheres, we should rather turn to the souls of exemplary figures from history for guidance:

Leave free the paths of truth and of life... these globes of fire cannot be guides for us... the virtuous souls, stretching forward to their sublime destiny, shine with a more beautiful inner light. Illuminated by these rays, we have no need of these swindling astrologers and lying prophets who empty the coffers of their credulous followers of gold, who deafen their ears with nonsense, corrupt judgement with their errors, and disturb our present life and make people sad with false fears of the future.⁵³⁷

This realignment of emphasis toward the Platonically-enlightened souls flying home to their blessed fatherland rather than toward human bodies being billowed about by their astral allotments set the tone for much of the humanist theology to come. All this rhetoric, for Petrarch, was written in reaction to the surge of popular omens which accompanied a catastrophic outbreak of the Black Death that ravaged Padua in 1362. As per usual, the astrologers were reducing terrestrial disasters to unusual configurations of the stars. Steeped in the literature of Augustine, who himself had tackled the problem of astrological determinism on account of its role in Manichaean theology, Petrarch voiced his doubts, setting a precedent for humanist attitudes toward such matters.⁵³⁸

Unlike later humanists in the fifteenth century, Petrarch possessed a limited awareness of the extent to which Roman civilization had been built upon that of the Greeks, though he was certainly not ignorant to the countless references to Hellenic authors woven throughout the writings of his most cherished Roman authors, especially among the poets and philosophers. By and large, when medieval Latin translators sat down to translate works from Greek sources, they concentrated on works of theology, on the sciences, or on Aristotelian philosophy. Petrarch, on the other hand, attempted to break this mould by suggesting that a translation of Homer ought to be produced. Even more importantly, however, he became increasingly outspoken in his preference for Plato over the schoolmen's Aristotle, even if his knowledge of Plato remained vague throughout his life.⁵³⁹ Petrarch was well aware of Plato's *Timaeus*, but tended to derive the bulk of his Platonic ideals indirectly through Cicero and other Latin writers. In his 1367 treatise *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* ("On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others"), he

⁵³⁷ Petrarch, "Rerum senilium," 1.6.7 in *Opera omnia* (Basel: Henricpetrina, 1581), 747-748; trans. from Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance*, 8, n. 9.

⁵³⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.6.8 in O'Donnell, *Confessions I*, 77.

⁵³⁹ Christopher S. Celenza, "The Revival of Platonic Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 73.

called Plato the prince of philosophy, greater than Aristotle.⁵⁴⁰ This would become a significant event in the history of philosophy. To use the words of Kristeller, however, “Petrarch’s Platonism was a program and an aspiration rather than a doctrine or a fulfillment, yet it was a beginning and a promise that pointed the way to later developments: to the humanist translations of Plato, and to the Platonist thought of [Ficino’s] Florentine Academy.”⁵⁴¹ Were it necessary to summarize Petrarch’s intellectual program into one simple formula used in his treatise on ignorance, it was “Platonic wisdom, Christian dogma, Ciceronian eloquence.”⁵⁴² Petrarch’s search for philological purity was itself also a quest bound up with Platonic assumptions, namely, that texts – especially revealed texts – can be of superior or inferior quality relative to the degree to which they conform with their original forms. In order for there to be emendations to a text like the Latin Vulgate – or a return to pristineness – that text must have had an underlying perfect form in the mind of its author, a form from which it degraded over time through the imperfect copying of imperfect copies. Such assumptions did not die with Petrarch, but instead enjoyed a slow and steady diffusion throughout the Italian peninsula, and went on to inspire more fervently the desire to recover the *Graeca* and *Hebraica veritas* respectively.

One of Petrarch’s most significant successors was Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) whom he met in 1350 during a sojourn in Florence. With Petrarch’s assistance in refining his Latin, Boccaccio composed an expansive encyclopedia of pagan mythology which he first published in 1360. Later printed in Venice in 1472, the *Genealogia deorum gentilium* served as the standard handbook on the subject of pagan gods for centuries to follow. More importantly, while hunting for manuscripts at Monte Cassino, Boccaccio recovered a collection of Tacitus’ *Annales* and the *Agricola*.⁵⁴³ These along with Petrarch’s work on Livy, further fueled the renewed interest in a mode of ‘doing history’ that differed from that of monastic and mendicant circles. In this way, beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, so-called ‘secular history’ was being clearly articulated on a parallel track to ‘sacred history.’ Boccaccio attained some fluency in Greek, and with the help of his tutor, he composed rudimentary Latin translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which he offered to Petrarch as gifts (since he himself never developed any working knowledge of Greek).⁵⁴⁴ Thanks to these two luminaries, and the geographical, political, and socio-economic conditions that produced them, Florence henceforth became a thriving center for the *studia humanitatis*: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy, and history.

⁵⁴⁰ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 8-9; Francesco Petrarch, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, in *Invectives*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 222-363.

⁵⁴¹ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 10.

⁵⁴² Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 17.

⁵⁴³ Marco Petoletti, “Boccaccio, the Classics and the Latin Middle Ages” in *Petrarch and Boccaccio*, ed. Igor Candido (Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 226.

⁵⁴⁴ Petoletti, “Boccaccio, the Classics and the Latin Middle Ages,” 238-239.

4.2 Greek Studies and the Search for the Areopagite

In 1397, the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1355–1415) arrived in Florence from Constantinople to begin a teaching tour of Greek across Italy.⁵⁴⁵ Those who studied under Chrysoloras remained a tight-knit network, including such esteemed humanists as Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444, who wrote the *Historiarum Florentini populi libri XII* and translated Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*), Guarino da Verona (c. 1374–1460, who translated Strabo and some *Lives* of Plutarch among many other classics), and the Camaldolese theologian Ambrosio Traversari (1386–1439, who translated Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* and the complete works of Dionysius the Areopagite). The craze for classics spread from Florence to Venice, Verona, Milan, and finally, to Rome. With their advanced communication skills, humanist scholars were in hot demand among many halls of power. By 1447, even the pope himself, Nicholas V, was steeped in the *studia humanitatis*. It was his personal manuscript collection that ultimately formed the basis for the Vatican library.⁵⁴⁶

If Petrarch is to be thought of as the restorer of the *studia humanitatis* with the help of, and in the service of contemporary authorities, then Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) was the first to weaponize them against his intellectual opponents. According to Lodi Nauta:

[Valla] gave the humanist program some of its most trenchant and combative formulations, but also put it into practice by studying the Latin language as no one had done before, discussing a host of morphological, syntactical, and semantical features... His aim was to show the linguistic basis of law, theology, philosophy, and in fact all intellectual activities, thus turning the study of language into a sharp-edged tool for exposing all kinds of errors and misunderstandings.⁵⁴⁷

As a Catholic priest Valla dedicated himself to the study of Greek and Latin philology, but applied his knowledge to the decryption of ancient Church documents, most importantly, the so-called *Constitutum domini Constantini imperatoris* (the Donation of Constantine) which he proved to be a medieval forgery.⁵⁴⁸ Composed sometime in the eighth rather than the traditionally ascribed fourth century, the Donation claimed that, on his death bed, Constantine had passed down all his Roman imperial authority (and properties) to the reigning Pope Silvester I (r. 314–35). For some six centuries, this had been accepted as legally binding. Among the land holdings mentioned, Rome, Italy, and the whole of the Latin West were long thought to have been conferred in perpetuity to papal dominion. In Valla’s *Oration on the Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine* (c. 1440), he demonstrated through careful philological

⁵⁴⁵ Paul Botley, *Learning Greek in Western Europe, 1396-1529* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2010), 7-12.

⁵⁴⁶ John Monfasani, “Criticism of Biblical Humanists in Quattrocento Italy,” in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Erika Rummel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 16-17.

⁵⁴⁷ Lodi Nauta, “Lorenzo Valla and the Rise of Humanist Dialectic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195.

⁵⁴⁸ J. Cornelia Linde, “Lorenzo Valla and the Authenticity of Sacred Texts,” *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 60 (2011): 35-63.

argument how anachronistic its language was, and how untenable were its claims.⁵⁴⁹ The author used the word “satrap,” for example, a designation for certain Roman officials not yet current in fourth century sources.⁵⁵⁰ Merely by perusing old books and recording his work along the way, he was undermining a longstanding cornerstone of papal authority. In his defence, Valla wrote to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan (1401–65) in 1443 claiming: “I was not moved by hatred of the Pope, but acted for the sake of the truth, of religion, and also of a certain renown – to show that I alone knew what no one else knew.”⁵⁵¹ In keeping with this mission statement, Valla maintained that the *Apostles’ Creed* had not been written by the apostles themselves, but by the Council of Nicaea in 325. Enraged, Church authorities launched an inquisition into his writings where they were deemed heretical. The King of Naples Alfonso I of Aragon, however, in whose service Valla had been employed as a secretary, interceded to save him from execution. In spite of all the chaos he raised, Valla was well connected enough in the Church to secure a job as an apostolic secretary to the humanist pope Nicholas V who put him to the monumental task of translating the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides.⁵⁵² In the meantime, Valla was also in the process of working on his most audacious work yet: comparing the New Testament in its Latin Vulgate form against older Greek manuscripts.⁵⁵³ In doing so, he determined that the text which was widely used in the Latin West during his own day was riddled with mistakes and ambiguities. In his *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, Valla catalogued these with recommended alternatives, but they did not achieve much popularity in the wider world until 1505 when Erasmus published them in his *In Latinam Novi Testamenti interpretationem annotationes*, just a decade before applying them in the production of his own edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516.⁵⁵⁴

Among the most significant of Valla’s philological discoveries occurred in 1457 which led to the suspicion that the works of Dionysius the Areopagite were not in fact written by the man to whom they were attributed.⁵⁵⁵ This was no trivial discovery, as Dionysius was a supreme

⁵⁴⁹ C. Matzukis, “The Donation of Constantine: History and Forgery,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 18, 1 (2007): 120-127.

⁵⁵⁰ *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine*, trans. Christopher B. Coleman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 85.

⁵⁵¹ “Non odio pape adductum, sed veritatis, sed religionis, sed cuiusdam etiam fame gratia motum, ut quod nemo sciret, id ego scisse solus viderer.” Ottavio Besomi and Mariangela Regoliosi, *Laurentii Valle Epistole* (Padua, 1984), 21, 246-249 as cited by Salvatore I. Camporeale, “Lorenzo Valla’s ‘Oratio’ on the Pseudo-Donation of Constantine: Dissent and Innovation in Early Renaissance Humanism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, 1 (1996): 9.

⁵⁵² Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 44.

⁵⁵³ Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 35; Lorenzo Valla, *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, ed. Alessandro Perosa (Florence: Sansoni, 1970).

⁵⁵⁴ Monfasani, “Criticism of Biblical Humanists in Quattrocento Italy,” 21 and Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 112 and ff. Cf. Annet den Haan, “Giannozzo Manetti’s New Testament: New Evidence on Sources, Translation Process, and the Use of Valla’s Annotations” *Renaissance Studies* 28, 5 (2014): 731-747 to see how Manetti, a contemporary of Valla’s, produced his own translation of the New Testament “at the height of humanism” and “at the center of ecclesiastical power, the Vatican” half a century before Erasmus’ *Novum instrumentum*.

⁵⁵⁵ Mohamed, “Renaissance Thought on the Celestial Hierarchy: The Decline of a Tradition?,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, 4 (2004): 559-560 notes that “Renaissance scholars were not the first to question the dating of

authority among the doctors of the Church. Roger Bacon had considered him in his anti-magical polemics as the “*optimus astronomus*,”⁵⁵⁶ and this was no exaggeration given the extent to which Dionysius’ theology was recognized to cut across linguistic and geographical boundaries, being revered as much in the eastern branches of Christianity as in the Latin West. He was the second most cited author by Thomas Aquinas, and was also soon to become the cornerstone of Ficino’s historical narrative about the *prisca theologia* which placed the ancient Christian theologian upstream from the Platonists Plotinus and Proclus.⁵⁵⁷ Dionysius had first been translated into Latin during the Carolingian period by John Scotus Eriugena, the greatest philosopher of the Early Middle Ages in the Latin West. Valla began the long process of whittling away at the idea that Dionysius was truly the convert of St. Paul from Acts 17, from whom all the later Platonists like Proclus had appropriated their teachings (since the situation had in fact been the reverse). There were now whispers spreading that the sacred writings of Dionysius were not so close to the source of revealed truth as much as belonging to a later thinker who modified the Platonic theology of the pagan Proclus.⁵⁵⁸ Such a proposition would have struck a fatal blow to the belief in his inspired originality were it not for the weight of tradition that ensured this discovery took centuries to trickle into general consciousness, and not without its dissenters.⁵⁵⁹ Ficino certainly did not accept this revisionist narrative, if he had even heard of it at all, as is clear from his wisdom-chain in *De Christiana religione* (1474), from his chapter on Dionysius in the *Platonic Theology* (1484), and from his 1490–92 translations and commentaries of the *Mystical Theology* and *On Divine Names*.⁵⁶⁰ That the late Platonists had appropriated the Christian teachings of Dionysius, and not vice versa, was a cornerstone of Ficino’s story about the history of his logocentric Catholicism. Pico likewise never stopped referring to him as “the Areopagite”⁵⁶¹ and he valued his work above all other theologians as a confirmation of the belief that Moses had passed on two bodies of knowledge, one written down for the public, and one passed on orally to worthy initiates, the Kabbalah.

the *Corpus [Dionysiacum]*: Peter Abelard fueled general perception of his heretical tendencies by suggesting Dionysius may not have been the Pauline convert...”

⁵⁵⁶ Roger Bacon, *Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis, tractatus brevis et utilis ad declarandum quedam obscure dicta fratris Rogeri*, ed. Robert Steele and trans. A. S. Fulton. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920), 8: “Et astronomi Christiani debent pia devocione uti oracionibus ad Deum et sanctos, et eos invocare in omnibus operibus suis in auxilium, et non demones sicut magici, quibus oracionibus sancti utriusque Testamenti usi sunt, et addunt karacteres et figuras crucis et Crucifixi, et Beate Virginis, et Beati Dionisii qui fuit optimus astronomus et aliorum ad quos operans habet devocionem, et debent et possunt quedam opera facere conveniencia, ut facilius et melius accident que intendat.”

⁵⁵⁷ On the erosion of the Dionysian tradition, see Constantinos A. Patrides, “Renaissance Thought on the Celestial Hierarchy: The Decline of a Tradition,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 (1959), 155-166. For a later reaction to this article, see Mohamed, “The Decline of a Tradition?,” 559-582.

⁵⁵⁸ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 261.

⁵⁵⁹ In Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, xxvii, Dodds stated how “the authenticity of Dionysius’ works was denied by the Renaissance humanist Laurentius Valla, but was not finally disproved until the nineteenth century (there are still Catholic theologians who profess belief in it).”

⁵⁶⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 6 vols., trans. Michael J. B. Allen, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: I Tatti Renaissance Library 2001-2006), 1:77; cf. *Dionysii Areopagitae translatio una cum suis argumentis, Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Turin, 1962 [reprint Basel, 1576]), 2:1-112.

⁵⁶¹ Mohamed, “The Decline of a Tradition?,” 561.

In its strictly Christian interpretation, the ‘Cabala’ of the fifteenth century was inseparable from the Platonic ideas presented in the various works of Dionysius, namely, *On Divine Names*, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and the *Mystical Theology*, each of which exhibited a conspicuously Proclean influence, especially in their reliance on negative theology (which itself was really a Late Antique holdover from the kinds of philosophical speculation found in Plato’s *Parmenides* wherein “the one neither is nor is one”).⁵⁶² A generation before Ficino tried his own hand at translating some of Dionysius’ Greek in 1491–1492, Ambrosio Traversari produced a reliable translation in 1437 which was very influential to the Platonic and humanist movements, and these two distinct projects were brought together with commentaries in a 1498 printed edition produced by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples just four years after he had published Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1494. We have already seen the influence of ps.-Dionysius’ metaphysics upon thinkers like Joachim of Fiore in his *Psaltery of Ten Strings* or among various mendicant theologians, whether Dominican or Franciscan. Dionysius had been a pivotal figure insofar as he sparked a kind of pessimism in Christian thinkers with regard to the idea that humans had any real capacity to name, describe, or understand God. In Dionysius, God was a darkness beyond all light which could only be broached apophatically, but never understood. Any aspect of God that man believed he understood was simply not God by definition. Even to call God ineffable was to attempt to temper the unintelligible with an intelligible attribute or quality. In keeping with the language borrowed from the Platonists and the ancient mystery cults, God’s unity could be experienced through a kind of *mania* or *furor*, but never known. Dionysius’ mysticism was to explore the extent to which one *did not know* God. It was a definitively anti-Gnostic theology, for God stood wholly above and outside the intellect. Thus Dionysius used the term ‘unknowing’ not to indicate the absence of knowledge, but its transcendence. God was not Good; God was both ‘super-Good’ and ‘not-super-Good,’ and even then, such labels were no more than attributes instead of realities consubstantial with God. This was ‘the God of the philosophers,’ namely, the God of Plato’s *Parmenides*, the One, of whom “there is no name, account, knowledge, perception, or opinion,” though through some great mystery, this God was also consubstantial with Jesus Christ, the visible image of the invisible God.⁵⁶³ Through this great mystery, Dionysius’ negative theology had become a kind of antipode to the literal/historical mode of interpreting Scripture: his mysticism was indispensable to the ‘spiritual understanding,’ or what he himself called the ‘anagogical interpretation’ of Scripture, whose goals and truths were fundamentally ahistorical since they stood outside of time and the material world, and were concerned with things eternal. To chip away at the authenticity of Dionysius, therefore, was to chip away at the highest traditional mode of interpreting Scripture. Nevertheless, in spite of all of Valla’s criticisms with respect to ps.-Dionysius’ antiquity and historicity, the Christian-Platonist

⁵⁶² Ficino himself translated *The Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* in 1490-1492, see n. 136 above; see also Stéphane Toussaint, “L’influence de Ficin à Paris et le Pseudo-Denys des Humanistes: Traversari, Cusain, Lefèvre d’Étaples. Suivi d’un passage inédit de Marsile Ficin.” *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 5, 2 (1999): 381-414.

⁵⁶³ Plato, *Parmenides*, 141e; *Colossians* 1:15.

mystic's message retained much of its force among the generations of humanists that followed (especially in Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola).⁵⁶⁴

Ps.-Dionysius was only one of many Greek philosophers whose works were received from Greek manuscripts in Italy during this era, but the fact that he had been Christian put him second only to Augustine, in a definite place of privilege.⁵⁶⁵ In the fifteenth century, perhaps more than ever, he was still thought to have encapsulated the inner mysteries of the Christian faith, whether he had done it in the sixth century or the first, though it was necessary for the coherence of the humanist theologians' own historical narratives to maintain him as having lived during the first.⁵⁶⁶ As far as Greek studies were concerned, the humanists were in every way the heirs of medieval Byzantine scholarship. Greek manuscripts were brought from the East to libraries in the West – especially in the face of Ottoman encroachment – and there they were copied, printed, translated, and interpreted. Traditional modes of scriptural interpretation were here extended to the study of Greek authors. Western scholars became familiar with a great mass of Greek classical literature partially through studying the originals, partially through the flood of new Latin and vernacular translations.⁵⁶⁷ The changes these texts caused with respect to the quality of knowledge about Greek philosophers (and by extension the Church Fathers) were tremendous. Texts which had been available from Latin translations of Arabic editions, namely of Aristotle, could now be re-interpreted in a new light, with more pristine terminology. No longer was everyone lumping Aristotle's works, authentic or spurious, under the aegis of a single author. The fifteenth century also saw a great influx of texts translated into Latin for the first time, namely most of Plato and the Late Platonists, of which little had been accessible to the West during the Middle Ages. Alongside these came the late Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; the *Eminent Lives* of Diogenes Laertius, who gave some information about all the schools of antiquity, including the woefully underrepresented school of Epicureanism; the skeptic Sextus Empiricus; the Greek commentators of Aristotle; Plutarch and Lucan, who were to become favourites during the Renaissance; and last but not least, Pythagorean, Orphic, Hermetic and “Chaldean” works which served as significant channels of transmission for many philosophical and theological ideas from Late Antiquity.⁵⁶⁸

From Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, then, Christianity's relationship to the more mystical aspects of pagan philosophy was fraught with paradox. In the doctrines of Zoroaster, Hermes, the Pythagoreans, and the Platonists, the Christians found both their greatest justifications, but likewise their greatest intellectual rivals. While elements of Platonic philosophy – what I call its “mechanics” – had long been incorporated into Christian theology to buttress its claims for the existence of an immortal soul, or to support God's unity and oneness in

⁵⁶⁴ Mohamed, “The Decline of a Tradition?,” 561.

⁵⁶⁵ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, xxvii.

⁵⁶⁶ See Michael J. B. Allen, “Marsilio Ficino” in *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 353-379 for a dedicated discussion of ps.-Dionysius' role as the font of all true (i.e., Christian) Platonism in Ficino's reckoning of the history of philosophy.

⁵⁶⁷ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, 20.

⁵⁶⁸ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, 23.

spite of his triune nature, nevertheless, this relationship underwent dramatic changes throughout the fifteenth century through the return *ad fontes*. It was not anti-Christian sentiment or any romantic notion of pagan curiosity which fuelled this transformation, however. Indeed, for many it was quite the contrary: it derived from an intensification of the interiorization of Christian spirituality, and a theoretical reemphasis on the imitation of the historical Christ and his apostles. In the same way that esoteric and mystical Jewish literature began to be assimilated into Christian systems during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a means of ‘using its enemies’ weapons against them,’ the revival of pagan literature in the Latin West, and of Platonic literature in particular, did not exactly arise on account of Christians wanting to understand the doctrines of Plato on its own terms. Rather, it arose on account of a desire to see Christianity prefigured in the most evidently ‘revealed’ doctrines of paganism, the perfect logocentric theology Ficino called the *prisca theologia*. This was the very mystical theology regarding the *Logos* which had in some capacity been intuited by the greatest of the world’s sages before being embodied by Christ and revealed to Paul, Dionysius, and the Church Fathers (Tertullian, Lactantius, Eusebius, Augustine, etc.). If there was a romantic penchant for paganism in the Renaissance, it was not shared by men like Pico and Ficino. To use the concise words of leading Ficino scholars Michael Allen and James Hankins,

[Ficino was] committed to reconciling Platonism with Christianity, and Platonic apologetics with the Church Fathers and the great Scholastics, in the hope that such a reconciliation would initiate a spiritual revival, a return of the golden age with a new Pope and a new Emperor. In this regard he speaks to some of the recurrent millenarian and prophetic impulses that galvanized Renaissance Italy and witnessed their culmination in the ministry of Savonarola at the end of the fifteenth century.⁵⁶⁹

To imitate Christ was to participate in his essences, to climb the ladder of purgation, illumination, and perfection, and thereby to achieve the *unio mystica* with the Godhead, a state “which is not properly speaking knowledge, being supra-logical.”⁵⁷⁰ Such an idea was inextricably bound up with the presuppositions of Platonic philosophy insofar as particular Christians focused their energies on participating in the universal *form* of the *perfect exemplary man*.⁵⁷¹ Once every Christian had acquired the knowledge on how to achieve this perfection for themselves, Christendom’s arguments against its foes – whether Jew, pagan, infidel, or heretic – would be irrefutable, since deeds always spoke louder than words. It is, therefore, this belief that a return to the *form* of a perfected and pristine theology was even possible that played a significant role in propelling research into the philosophies and religions of the distant past. At the same time, the idea that the life of Christ should serve as a model for one’s own life was also being widely disseminated throughout the fifteenth century across Western Europe by movements like Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi* and Gerard Groote’s *devotio moderna*,

⁵⁶⁹ Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, *Marsilio Ficino’s Platonic Theology*, vol. 1 (London: Tatti Renaissance Library, 2001), vii.

⁵⁷⁰ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 312.

⁵⁷¹ In this Ficino was very explicit, using this exact language, e.g., in the title of *De Christiana religione*’s Chap. 23, *Christus est idea et exemplar virtutum* (*Christ is the Idea [or Platonic form] and Exemplar of Virtues*); Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 211.

which – although emphatically more concerned with asceticism than mysticism – still espoused ideas deeply rooted in the *Theologia mystica* of Dionysius with its ‘cloud of unknowing’ which by this time had taken on an anti-scholastic dimension. The final result of all these currents culminating together was that there were many who still clung to the old hope of the earliest mendicants in their belief that the mass implementation of *imitatio Christi* could produce an exemplary nation whose example would, in due course, be used to refute all opposing religions, sects, and heresies, leading to their ultimate incorporation into one universal body. One unintended consequence of elaborating this belief, however, was a deepening and a complexification of historical awareness, especially as it pertained to the history of the Church, the history of philosophy, the transmission of a *prisca theologia*, and its sources.

4.3 Sacred vs. Secular Approaches to History

As first argued by Marjorie Reeves, a fascination with prophecy was not *necessarily* at odds with the *studia humanitatis*, in fact, they often cohabited in the same individuals. What Reeves believed the most significant point to grasp in transitioning from the medieval to the Renaissance period was that apocalypticism in the *quattrocento* was no anachronism:

We are not dealing here with two opposed viewpoints – optimistic humanists hailing the Age of Gold on the one hand, and medieval style prophets proclaiming ‘Woe!’ on the other. Foreboding and great hope lived side by side in the same people. This dramatization of history as a juxtaposition of greatest tribulation and greatest beatitude was already present in the Joachimist view of history... Thus the Joachimist marriage of woe and exaltation exactly fitted the mood of late 15th century Italy, where the concept of a humanist age of gold had to be brought into relation to the ingrained expectation of Antichrist.⁵⁷²

As bright as the light of true believers might have shone, there was always that darkness looming over the horizon – spatially, temporally, and intellectually – that darkness which “comprehendeth not the Word”⁵⁷³ but whose illumination would dispel all distinctions in humankind and restore the world from its fallen state.

And yet, in the face of all this, there was still undeniably a newfound sense of “secularism” emerging, especially as it pertained to historical inquiry. What is meant here by secularism is essentially a return to a mode of thinking about historical events without drawing in conclusions from the higher levels of scriptural interpretation, namely, the analogical, tropological, and anagogical/spiritual understandings. Perhaps the most significant example of this process toward secularism is in Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), who is generally considered the most important humanist historian of the early Renaissance as the first to write using a threefold view of history comprised of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern era (primarily thanks to the influence of Petrarch).⁵⁷⁴ Though Bruni likely had no intention to “secularize history,” being the ill-defined discipline that it was, his work nevertheless broke distinctly with the Augustinian ‘six/seven ages’ model of world history, with the literal/historical interpretations of the scholastic commentators, and with more obscure dispensationalist schemes like the theories of Joachim of Fiore. Instead, Bruni’s narratives were entirely concerned with worldly affairs. As a translator of Plato, Aristotle, and Procopius from Greek manuscripts, it was Bruni who coined the term “*studia humanitatis*” to denote the study of culture as specifically distinct from scholastic theology and metaphysics. Here was a forceful show of a man thinking about history in the absence of medieval dispensationalism or Scriptural hermeneutics. Most emblematic of this paradigm shift in the study of history was Bruni’s twelve-book *Historiarum Florentini populi* which can be thought of as the first modern history book to ever emerge in the

⁵⁷² Reeves, *Joachim and the Prophetic Future*, 84; Cf. McGinn, “Savonarola and Late Medieval Italian Apocalypticism,” *Visions of the End*, 277.

⁵⁷³ *John* 1:5.

⁵⁷⁴ Gary Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 432.

Latin West.⁵⁷⁵ His interests in human culture drove him to write biographies – namely on Cicero, Dante, and Petrarch – and this was a style being revived from antiquity. While this secularizing influence would have some effect on the historical awareness of men like Ficino and Pico, they came a generation later, and were thus more eager to find a balance between ‘history as description of the ebb-and-flow of earthly affairs’ and ‘history as description of God’s unfurling providence,’ implacably marching forward toward the day of Final Judgement.

If there really can be said to have existed a “secularizing” impulse among the humanists – an impulse toward the worldly rather than the heavenly – it was a rather late development in the Renaissance, and it was certainly not an all-pervasive one. It took quite some time for the majority of humanists to come around to the idea of using the philological methods they had developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to criticize Latin translations of the Bible. This idea was only gradually broached through a cumulative series of publishing milestones: the first of these was Pico’s *Expositiones in Psalmos* (1489), followed by Erasmus’s publication of Lorenzo Valla’s *Annotationes* (1505), then Reuchlin’s arrangement of the Hebrew manual *De rudimentis Hebraicis* (1506), and the commentaries on Paul by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (1512).⁵⁷⁶ Of equal importance was the compilation of the polyglot Bible at the Spanish University of Alcalà, published in 1520. Leading up to these milestones, however, anxieties began to run high among the schoolmen of the latter half of the fifteenth century, chiefly on account of the threat which mere grammarians posed to the monopoly on authority held by the theologians who towered above them in the academic hierarchy.⁵⁷⁷ Once firmly entrenched in Italy, the so-called ‘humanist movement’ expanded the options for thinking, teaching, and exploring the world of long-lost texts that had survived the Middle Ages. A new type of literary studies, shaped by the reading of classical rhetoric and poetry in their original forms – stripped of excessive marginalia and commentary – provoked numerous reforms in education and ultimately, in the tastes, ethics, and aesthetics of public life.⁵⁷⁸ Coupled with a technology of viral dissemination – the printing press – this set of values which had initially spurred on the fourteenth century works of Dante and Petrarch led to a great influx of translations of classical texts and subsequently, prophetic, apologetic, and biblical texts too. Florence became a major center for Italy in terms of printed materials, and with every new edition of texts both novel and ancient, the general picture of world history grew increasingly complex, now further illuminated by altogether novel modes of textual interpretation coinciding alongside the old. By the end of

⁵⁷⁵ James Hankins, ed. and trans., *History of the Florentine People*, vols. 1-3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001-2007).

⁵⁷⁶ Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73. It is notable here that Pico’s *Expositiones in Psalmos* was his first work of Biblical commentary, and like so many commentaries before it, it relied principally on the traditional four modes of interpretation used throughout the Middle Ages. In spite of this, Pico’s second work of Biblical commentary, the *Heptaplus*, expressly broke with these traditional modes of interpretation in order that he might provide an entirely new perspective of the opening chapter of Genesis rooted in his marriage of Plato, Aristotle, and the Kabbalah.

⁵⁷⁷ Cameron, *European Reformation*, 73; Cf. Charles Nauert, “Humanism as Method: Roots of Conflict with the Scholastics,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, 2 (1998): 427 and ff. which builds upon “The Clash of Humanists and Scholastics: An Approach to Pre-Reformation Controversies,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4, 1 (1973): 1-18.

⁵⁷⁸ Cameron, *European Reformation*, 6.

the fifteenth century the *studia humanitatis* found their way into many disciplines and contexts, including philosophy and theology, precisely because what they were was ill-defined.⁵⁷⁹ Beginning with Petrarch's recovery of Cicero's *Pro Archia*, the Italian Renaissance humanists gradually opened up their minds to a different sense of historical consciousness. Emphasis on the pristineness of not only religion in antiquity, but also its texts, inspired a return to imitate that formal purity. Since history consisted of various periods of conformity and unconformity with that pristine form (be it scriptural, cultural, religious, etc.), it could also be interpreted through the metaphor of an ebb-and-flow of light and darkness rather than a linear progression from darkness to light, or from carnal to spiritual states. How these two modes of thinking about history could be reconciled, however, would become a significant theme in the humanist theologies of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.

⁵⁷⁹ Cameron, *European Reformation*, 69.

5 - Marsilio Ficino's Iron Age and the Polemics of Church Renewal

Throughout the fifteenth century, the encroachment on and conquest of the Byzantine East by the Ottoman Empire constituted a tremendous source of anxiety for Christians living in the Latin West.⁵⁸⁰ They wondered at how the descendants of the Roman people who once comprised the greatest empire the world had ever known could now be so imperiled. In order to make sense of this historical discontinuity, many Latin intellectuals concentrated on the theme of degradation and fragmentation, in particular the fragmentation of the *ecclesia primitiva* into countless competing heretical sects, some of which were adopted by barbarian nations, some of whom threatened the very existence of the Church. In the *quattrocento* mind, early Christianity in the first three centuries after Christ stood proudly as the Church Triumphant. Thanks to accounts by Fathers like Eusebius it was widely believed that, sprouting from the seed that was the blood of the martyrs, Christendom had rapidly expanded to blanket the Roman world in an era of unprecedented peace, and only with the erosion of the *pax Romana*, the arrival of the barbarians from every corner of the world into Christian lands, and the rise of ignorance, was the Church Triumphant forced to degrade into the Church Militant.⁵⁸¹

Among the most prominent philosopher-theologians of late fifteenth century Italy, the Catholic Platonist Marsilio Ficino made it his personal goal to understand what had gone wrong, how this decline might be reversed, and how the Church might be reinvigorated and restored to its condition as described in the writings of the Church Fathers. Here 'renewal' (*renovatio/rinnovazione*), at least on the historical level, implied the return to a totalizing and universal union of world empire and an unblemished philosophical theology, that is, the world which was believed to have existed during the earliest centuries of the Church, in ancient times, when philosophy, religion, and empire were one. For the humanists, however, to reinaugurate the marriage of philosophy and religion was to marry the classical world with the biblical world, and one way to do this was to deal with the histories of the ancient Greco-Roman world and the ancient Hebrew world on two distinct tracks culminating in the birth of Christ. In keeping with this twofold approach, Ficino asked himself two key rhetorical questions in the closing chapter of his theological polemic *De Christiana religione*: first, why exactly did "so many Jews remain

⁵⁸⁰ Please note that an alternate version of this chapter has been published elsewhere as part of the introduction to the translation of *De Christiana religione*. See Dan Attrell, Brett Bartlett, and David Porreca, eds. and trans., *Marsilio Ficino: On the Christian Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022). All translations of Ficino's *De Christiana Religione* below are derived from this publication which was translated at the same time this dissertation was written.

⁵⁸¹ On the *pax Romana* see Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 27 "The reign of Octavian was also the most just. There was even such peace at the time throughout the entire world that there has never been a wider or a longer-lasting one. Hence Virgil: 'The doors of war shall be closed.' The peace lasted for thirty-seven years after Jesus." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 240: "Octaviani quoque imperium iustissimum fuit. Tanta etiam pax eo tempore per universum orbem, ut nunquam vel amplior vel diuturnior. Hinc Vergilius: 'Claudentur belli porte.' Perseveravit ea pax post Ihesum annos septem atque triginta." Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.293.

faithless to this day?”⁵⁸² and second, what was it exactly that “drew a great many barbarians into heresy after the time of blessed Gregory?”⁵⁸³ To the causes of these two catastrophes, his immediate answer was simple enough. On the one hand, in regards to the Jews, their faithlessness was entirely on account of

the divine depth of the prophetic and Christian mysteries: because it is divine, it is therefore impenetrable to human understanding. Conversely, the character of the venal and wretched Jews is entirely uncultivated and obstinate: an insatiable greed not only to preserve what is theirs but also to earn interest; [and] a natural love of their own people and an innate hatred for Christians.⁵⁸⁴

In regards to the barbarians, on the other hand, Ficino put the blame squarely on: i) the difficulty involved with correct scriptural interpretation, ii) the rise of uncultured barbarians in the places of high culture, and iii) the violent rise of Mohammad’s heresy and the “seven kings succeeding him in order from his family.” What the Jews and the barbarians had in common, Ficino maintained, was a failure to interpret Scripture in its most profound and mystical sense: the Christological sense, the *intellectus spiritualis*. The rise of barbarism in Christendom’s midst itself could be blamed on: “the orders of ambitious leaders, an uneducated generation, wanton abandon, the lies of malignant demons; [and] the blandishments and flatteries of the poets [who] then fuelled the error.”⁵⁸⁵ Christianity, as Augustine had argued in *De civitate Dei*, was blameless. In concluding *De Christiana religione*, Ficino wished to make it clear that the vilest error of all was the obstinate clinging to ancestral custom in light of developments in God’s plan for humankind, namely, in light of new theophanies, miracles, and revelations. It was the inability to see the changing winds of history and the dynamic nature of God’s providence above all that caused non-Christians, whether Jews or barbarian heretics, to persist in error. Christianity was *a priori* the religion of truth, the logocentric religion rooted in a transcendent divine law, free from the mistakes of the pagans and the heretics, and this particular tradition could not “keep lawful Christians in error, since, from the beginning, they have assumed a religion that is removed from error.”⁵⁸⁶ For a philosopher-priest like Ficino, therefore, any kind of mass return to the supercelestial faith of Catholic Christianity could only come about if there was first a

⁵⁸² Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 37: “Queritur quenam causa sit, que Iudeos adhuc multos in perfidia detinet.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 309.

⁵⁸³ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 37: “Quid autem post beatum Gregorium barbaros plurimos traxit in heresim? Difficillima divinarum litterarum interpretatio, barbarorum genus nimium imperitum, violenta Maumethis, regis Arabum, manus septemque regum ipsi ex eius familia per ordinem succedentium leges.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 309.

⁵⁸⁴ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 37: “propheticorum Christianorumque mysteriorum divina profunditas, et quia divina, ideo humana intelligentia non penetrabilis atque, e converso, rursus ingenium mercenariorum miserabiliumque Iudeorum incultum prorsus et pertinax. Avaritia tum eius, quod suum est, servandi, tum facendi fenoris inexplebilis, naturalis suorum amor, innatum odium Christianorum.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 309.

⁵⁸⁵ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 37: “Verum quid Gentiles olim a vera Hebreorum religione detorsit? Mandata ambitiosorum principum, etas parum erudita, profusa licentia, fallacia demonum malignorum; auxerunt errorem deinde blandimenta adulationesque poetarum. Detinet autem omnes facile in quovis errore mos patrius et diuturna consuetudo.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 309.

⁵⁸⁶ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 37: “Non potest consuetudo in errore Christianos legitimos detinere, qui a principio religionem susceperunt ab errore semotam.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 309.

reunion of religion and philosophy among his own people, followed by a reunion of sacred and secular power. The correct doctrine needed correct interpretation, but it was only against the backdrop of a profound and ancient wisdom tradition, the *prisca theologia*, that Ficino believed true Christian doctrine could even be understood.

5.1 Ficino's *Prisca Theologia*

Marsilio Ficino was born in Florence in 1433. His father was a physician who lived and worked under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici.⁵⁸⁷ Cosimo took a liking to Ficino at a young age and took him into his household to be a tutor to his grandson, Lorenzo. Throughout his life, even in light of his more 'occult' interests, Ficino was no fringe figure: as an adult he was ordained as a priest, he was a friend of courtiers and princes, and at one point in his life, he even became a candidate for taking up the cardinal's mitre.⁵⁸⁸ In spite of all of his friends in high places, however, it was Ficino's contemplative bent which distinguished him from many of his more practically-oriented humanist contemporaries. He was not a lawyer or a clerk, but a scholar, physician, astrologer, mathematician, musician, and priest: in other words, a professional sage.⁵⁸⁹ In the succinct words of Eugenio Garin: "medicine, geometric optics, physiognomy, and then Lucretius' poem [*De rerum natura*]: these were Ficino's starting points."⁵⁹⁰ Throughout his life, Ficino's day-to-day work in these various roles forced him to engage with the whole of available philosophy in a way that had hitherto rarely been seen in the generation of Leonardo Bruni.⁵⁹¹ This breadth of study, however, was impossible to achieve without engaging in the *vita contemplativa*, a lifestyle which to use the words of Brian Copenhaver was usually concomitant with "an ascetic contempt for the material world" and "not in keeping with the pragmatic interests of the civic humanists."⁵⁹² Ficino's most famous literary accomplishment was the production of a complete translation of Plato's extant corpus (finished in 1468, published in 1484 under the 'Great Conjunction' of Saturn and Jupiter in the sign of Scorpio).⁵⁹³ His other translations were of no small value either. These included, among others, the *Corpus*

⁵⁸⁷ Nauert, *Historical Dictionary of the Renaissance*, 139.

⁵⁸⁸ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola*, 21.

⁵⁸⁹ For more recent biographical treatments of Ficino's life and times, see Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw, and Valery Rees, eds., *Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Sophia Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁵⁹⁰ Garin, *Astrology and the Renaissance*, 64.

⁵⁹¹ One philosopher who exhibited a similar breadth of knowledge in the generation immediately preceding Ficino that comes to mind is the German cardinal and conciliarist Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), the author of *De docta ignorantia* and *Cribratio Alkorani*. For an in-depth look at his philosophy, see Dermot Moran, "Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007), 189 who summarized Cusa as "a conservative Platonic theologian, seeking names for the infinite God... always [showing us] the finitude of human knowledge, and [instructing us] in our ignorance." See Nauert, *Historical Dictionary of the Renaissance*, 310 for a general overview, and Stephen Gersh, "Berthold of Moosburg, Nicholas of Cusa, and Marsilio Ficino as Historians of Philosophy" in *The Renewal of Medieval Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 453-502 for another which compares Cusa with Ficino, and see Jan-Hendryk de Boer, "Faith and Knowledge in the Religion of the Renaissance: Nicholas of Cusa, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Savonarola," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 83, 1 (2009): 51-78 for a comparison of Cusa's ideas with those of Pico and Savonarola.

⁵⁹² Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 144.

⁵⁹³ Allen, Rees, and Davies, *Marsilio Ficino*, xiii: with funding from Filippo Valori and others, and with the guidance of previous Plato translators like Leonardo Bruni (e.g., his 1405 *Phaedo* and his 1409 *Gorgias*), Ficino did not release the whole of his Platonic corpus until 1484, under the 'Great Conjunction' of Saturn and Jupiter, which Ficino took to signify the long-awaited reunion of Wisdom and Divine Law on a cosmic scale. Cf. Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 40.

Hermeticum (finished in 1463, published without authorization on December 18th 1471), Plotinus' *Enneads* (1492), selections from the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (published 1496), and select texts of Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, and Synesius (1497), all of which fall under the rubric of Late Antique mystical philosophy.⁵⁹⁴

Between 1438 and 1445, in the face of aggressive Turkish expansion into the ever-dwindling territories of the Byzantine East, ecclesiastical authorities from both Greek and Latin churches assembled at the Council of Ferrara-Florence to find a way to mend the divisiveness that had long stood between them. If they could usher in a new era of concord between East and West, they believed that they could stand together as one against a common foe looming over the eastern horizon.⁵⁹⁵ It was here at this extended council that Cosimo de' Medici and his inner circle became acquainted with the Greek philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon, a Platonist and a pagan revivalist whose lectures on the differences between Plato and Aristotle enthralled the humanists of Florence.⁵⁹⁶ Even though he was only 6 years old at the time, Ficino himself reports of these events:

At the time when the Council was in progress between the Greeks and the Latins in Florence under Pope Eugenius, the great Cosimo, whom a decree of the Senate designated *Pater patriae*, often listened to the Greek philosopher Gemistos (with the cognomen Plethon, as it were a second Plato) while he expounded the mysteries of Platonism. And he was so immediately inspired, so moved by Gemistos' fervent tongue, that as a result he conceived in his noble mind a kind of Academy, which he was to bring to birth at the first opportune moment. Later, when the great Medici brought his great idea into being, he destined me, the son of his favourite doctor, while I was still a boy, for the great task.⁵⁹⁷

Endowed with all the support he needed to live up to his station, Ficino threw himself wholly into his study of the Greek language, taking advantage of his numerous Greek connections in

⁵⁹⁴ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 300; Hankins derives his chronology from Paul O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinanum*, 1:147-157; cf. Kristeller, *Renaissance Philosophy and the Mediaeval Tradition* (Latrobe: Archabbey Press, 1966) and "Philosophy and Medicine in Medieval and Renaissance Italy" in *Philosophy and Medicine* 7 (1978): 29-40. For a recent treatment of Ficino's work on Plotinus, see Anna Corrias, *The Renaissance of Plotinus: The Soul and Human Nature in Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Enneads* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁵⁹⁵ For a brief discussion of this 'Pythagorean' theme of reconciliation between East and West in Ficino's forerunners Cardinal Basilios Bessarion and Nicholas of Cusa, see Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier, "Pythagoras and the 'Perfect' Churches of the Renaissance" in *Pythagorean Knowledge from the Ancient to the Modern World*, eds. Almut-Barbara Renger and Alessandro Stavru (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 375-376.

⁵⁹⁶ Cesare Vasoli, "Da Giorgio Gemisto a Ficino: nascita e metamorfosi della 'Prisca theologia'." In *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Claudio Varese*, ed. Giorgio Cerboni Baiardi (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 2001), 787-800.

⁵⁹⁷ See *Marsilii Ficini florentini, insignis philosophi platonici, medici, atque theologi clarissimi, opera, et quae Hactenus extiteret, et quae in lucem nunc primum prodierunt omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel: Henricpetrina, 1576), 2:1537 [subsequently cited simply as Ficino, *Opera omnia*]: "Magnus Cosmus Senatus consulto patriae pater, quo tempore concilium in Graecos atque Latinos sub Eugenio Pontifice Florentiae tractabatur, Philosophum graecum nomine Gemistum, cognomine Pletonem, quasi Platonem alterum de mysteriis Platonice disputantem frequenter audivit, e cuius ore ferventi sic afflatus est protinus, sic animatus, ut inde Academiam quandam alta mente conceperit, hanc oportuno primum tempore pariturus." Ficino's claim has been criticized in Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 139 and more recently by Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 7, 11, and ff., who directs readers to Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 161. Note that Ficino never actually met Plethon in person.

Florence, many of whom had recently fled the East in light of Ottoman conquest. In 1459, six years after the fall of Constantinople to Mehmet the Conqueror, the refugee Aristotelian philosopher John Argyropoulos (1415–87) lectured in Florence on Greek language and literature under Cosimo’s patronage.⁵⁹⁸ Capitalizing on this invaluable resource, Ficino put himself at his feet.⁵⁹⁹

On account of his many friendships in humanist circles, Ficino was also exposed to a great deal of influences which tend to be disregarded for failing to fit the label of “Platonism.” In his early years, for example, Ficino was engrossed Lucretius’ Epicureanism (via Poggio Bracciolini’s text of *De rerum natura* freshly recovered around 1416/7), an influence he never entirely shook off.⁶⁰⁰ In the late 1450s, Ficino even claimed to have written a brief commentary on *De rerum natura*, but later to have burned it as Plato had done with his own juvenilia, once he had become convinced of the immortality of the soul, the key doctrine held in common by the ancient Zoroastrians, Hermetists, Orphics, Pythagoreans, Platonists, and Christians.⁶⁰¹ It is perhaps because of this early exposure to hardline pagan materialism that Ficino became more partial to Aristotle whom he perceived as a moderate figure in the war to reunite religion and philosophy (so long as he was interpreted in the light of the Platonists, rather than according to the readings of Alexander of Aphrodisias or Averroes).⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁸ Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 7.

⁵⁹⁹ Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 43-44.

⁶⁰⁰ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1:933: “Argonautica et hymnos Orphei, et Homeri et Proculi, Theologiamque Hesiodi, quae adolescens, (nescio quomodo) ad verbum mihi soli transtuli, quemadmodum tu nuper hospes apud me vidisti, edere nunquam placuit, ne forte lectores ad Priscum deorum daemonumque cultum iamdiu merito reprobatum, revocare viderer, quantum enim Pythagoricis quondam curae fuit ne divina in vulgus ederent, tanta mihi semper cura fuit, non divulgare prophana, adeo, ut neque commentariolis in Lucretium meis, quae puer adhuc, (nescio quomodo) commentabar, deinde pepercerim, haec enim sicut et Plato tragoedias elegiasque suas, Vulcano dedi.” Hankins, *Plato and the Italian Renaissance*, 2:456-457 includes the following translation of this letter to Martinus Uranius: “I have always been reluctant to publish the literal translations I made in my youth, for my private use, of the *Argonautica* and *Hymns of Orpheus*, Homer and Proclus as well as the *Theology of Hesiod* – the ones you saw when you were recently my guest. I didn’t want readers to think I was trying to bring back the ancient worship of the gods and demons, now for so long rightly condemned. For just as the Pythagoreans of old were careful not to reveal divine things to the vulgar, so I have always been careful not to make profane things common property. Hence, I did not even spare the little commentary I prepared (somehow or other) on Lucretius when still a boy, but consigned it to the flames, as Plato did with his tragedies and elegies.” In James Hankins, “Monstrous Melancholy: Ficino and the Physiological Causes of Atheism,” in *Laus Platonici*, ed. Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw, and Valery Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 34, Hankins aptly declares that Ficino’s “whole interpretation of the Christian religion is shaped by the need to make it impregnable to the Lucretian critique of religion.”

⁶⁰¹ Gerard Passannante, “Burning Lucretius: On Ficino’s Lost Commentary,” *Studies in Philology* 115, 2 (2018): 267-285 lays out a narrative about how, in his youth, Ficino was fascinated by prevailing Lucretian currents but he ultimately rejected this fascination in a rather dramatic fashion, by burning his *commentariola*; Elena Nicoli, “Ficino, Lucretius and Atomism,” *Early Science and Medicine* 23 (2018): 330-361, however, has cast doubts on this narrative, seeing his claim to have burned his *commentariola* as merely a literary *topos*.

⁶⁰² Henri D. Saffrey, “Florence 1492: The Reappearance of Plotinus,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, 3 (1996): 499 includes the following appraisal of Aristotle and his followers by Ficino, taken from the introduction to his Latin translation of Plotinus’ *Enneads*: “As for us, we have tried to reveal and to explain the impact of the abovementioned theologians in the works of Plato and Plotinus, so that the poets may cease in an impious manner to introduce the events and mysteries of religion into their fables and so that the horde of Peripatetics – that is to say nearly all philosophers – may be warned that they should not mistake this religiousness for an old wives’ tale.

In 1462, rather pleased with Ficino's progress in his Greek studies, Cosimo de' Medici put him up in his villa at Careggi just outside of Florence, placed several Greek manuscripts on his desk and asked him to translate them into Latin so that he might learn the ancient secrets regarding the immortality of the soul before his own mortal life inevitably came to an end.⁶⁰³ As such, 1462 is typically used to mark the founding of the so-called "Platonic Academy of Florence," but this was more of an informal collective of individually well-funded intellectuals than an actual institution.⁶⁰⁴ At Careggi, Ficino worked away diligently at his edition of his *Divini Platonis omnia opera* (printed 1484), interrupted only by the arrival of a much shorter Greek manuscript, the mysterious *Corpus Hermeticum*, an ancient collection of Greco-Egyptian theological works to which he immediately turned his attention.⁶⁰⁵ This translation was made

Indeed, nearly all the world is inhabited by the Peripatetics and divided into two schools, the Alexandrists and the Averroists. The first ones believe that our intellect is mortal, whereas the others think it is unique: both groups alike destroy the basis of all religion, especially because they seem to deny that there is such a thing as divine providence towards men, and in both cases they are traitors to Aristotle. Nowadays, few people, except the great Pico, our companion in Platonism, interpret the spirit of Aristotle with the same reverence as was shown in the past by Theophrastus, Themistius, Porphyry, Simplicius, Avicenna, and more recently Plethon... Today, the will of divine providence is that this genus of religion should be confirmed by the authority and the reasoning of philosophy, whereas at an appointed time the truest species of religion will be confirmed by miracles acknowledged by all nations, as was once the case in the past." Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 2:1537: "Nos ergo in Theologia superioribus apud Platonem atque Plotinum traducendis et explanandis elaboravimus, ut hac Theologia in lucem prodeunte, et poetae desinant gesta mysteriaque pietatis impie fabulis suis annumerare et Peripatetici quam plurimi, id est Philosophi pene omnes admoneantur, non esse de religione saltem communi, tanquam de anilibus fabulis sentiendum. Totus enim ferme terrarum orbis a Peripateticis occupatus in duas plurimum sectas divisus est, Alexandrinam et Averroicam. Illi quidem intellectum nostrum esse mortalem existimant, hi vero unicum esse contendunt, utriusque religionem omnem funditus aequae tollunt, praesertim quia divinam circa homines providentiam negare videntur, et utrobique a suo etiam Aristotele defecisse. Cuius mentem hodie pauci praeter sublimem Picum complatonicum nostrum ea pietate, qua Theophrastus olim et Themistius, Porphyrius, Simplicius, Avicenna, et nuper Plethon interpretantur. Si quis autem putet tam divulgatam impietatem, tamque acerbis munitam ingeniis sola quadam simplici praedicatione fidei apud homines posse deleri, is a vero longius aberrare palam re ipsa procul dubio convincetur, maiore admodum hic opus est potestate, id autem est vel divinis miraculis unice patentibus vel saltem philosophica quadam religione philosophis eam libentius auditoris, quandoque persuasura. Placet autem divinae providentiae his saeculis ipsum religionis suae genus autoritate rationeque philosophica confirmare, quoad statuto quodam tempore verissimam religionis speciem, ut olim quandoque fecit, manifestis per omnes gentes confirmet miraculis." Note, however, that Ficino wrote this proem in the early 1490s, and not the 1470s, during which time he was much less familiar with Plotinus' material.

⁶⁰³ James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Rome: Edition di Storia e Letteratura, 2003/2004), 1:436 and 2:196; Nauert, *Historical Dictionary of the Renaissance*, 139; Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 13.

⁶⁰⁴ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 40; see 40-41 for Ficino timeline; see especially James Hankins, "The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence" *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, 3 (1991): 429-475 and "Cosimo de' Medici and the 'Platonic Academy,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990): 144-62 which offer revisionist accounts of the mythical founding of "the Platonic Academy."

⁶⁰⁵ Ficino's Latin *Asclepius* was printed in 1469, and his Latin translation of the first fourteen books of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was first printed without authorization two years later (with the Greek text not published until 1554 by Adrianus Turnebus in Paris). By the mid-sixteenth century, the *Hermetica* would see itself published in about two dozen editions. This proliferation encouraged further the production of a panoply of vernacular translations in French, Dutch, and Spanish. In 1463, under Ficino's supervision, Tomaso Benci put out an Italian version, Copenhagen and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 148. The most important codices for the *Corpus Hermeticum* are MSS Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 71, 33 (14th c.); Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 1220; Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 237 (14th c.); Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl. 3388 (15th c.); and for the *Asclepius*, MSS Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1^{er}, 10054-56 (early 9th c.);

from a single Greek manuscript that had been rescued from Macedonia by the monk Leonardo di Pistoia who himself then gave it to Ficino's friend, Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), a fellow humanist and member of Cosimo's scholarly salon.⁶⁰⁶

With Cosimo's death in 1464, the reigns of Florentine power were passed down to his son Piero de' Medici who ruled for a brief time before succumbing to gout in 1469. Next in line to rule was Piero's son Lorenzo whom Ficino had tutored as a boy. Around the time of his ascent to power, Lorenzo began turning to philosophy more seriously, an interest which mounted with the death of his mistress Simonetta Vespucci in 1473. During this year, Lorenzo met with Ficino at Careggi and memorialized the event in his Platonically-inspired poem entitled *De summo bono*.⁶⁰⁷ Ficino's master-disciple relationship with Lorenzo served both men as a piece of propaganda in and of itself. It served the young Medici ruler to solidify his own place in the ranks of the Medici family's intellectual legacy, and cast him in the image of his grandfather Cosimo, that of a philosopher-ruler united with his subjects in Platonic love.⁶⁰⁸ In exchange for supporting Lorenzo's public image, Ficino benefitted from not only patronage for his projects, but also from status as, to use the words of Donald Weinstein, "Florence's chief philosophical guru." From this point onward, Orphic, Hermetic, Pythagorean, and Platonic notions of perfection coupled with messianic expectations and Ficino's ideas about Platonic Love became the hottest topics for discussion and debate in the philosophical circles of *il Magnifico's* Florence, and such an intellectual climate endured until the rise of Savonarola in the final decade of the fifteenth century.⁶⁰⁹

Ficino's literary life rode atop the peak of a wave made up from a flood of newly available material, chiefly philosophical (natural or metaphysical), entering the Latin West from the wider Mediterranean world and beyond. This process had begun in the twelfth century, in the wake of the First Crusade, and gained considerable momentum in the decades leading up to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It was chiefly the fall of this metropolis which provoked an

München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 621 (12th c.); and Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 3385 (10th/11th c.). Cf. Maurizio Campanelli, "Marsilio Ficino's Portrait of Hermes Trismegistus and its Afterlife," *Intellectual History Review* 29, 1 (2019): 53-71.

⁶⁰⁶ It is often argued in popular narratives about Ficino that, while busily translating all that was available of the Platonic corpus under Cosimo's patronage, he was commanded to interrupt his work to translate the *Corpus Hermeticum* when it arrived to Italy from Greece on account of its perceived antiquity which, at the time, was thought significantly greater than Plato's. This narrative gained widespread attention through Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 12-13 where the story was presented as if the chief reason Ficino interrupted his translations of Plato was because he thought Hermes Trismegistus was more authoritative. The problem with this twist is that it overlooks the significantly more pragmatic reason his work on Plato was interrupted: the *Corpus Hermeticum* was simply much shorter and would have posed nothing more than a brief detour. In the end, Ficino finished his draft in April of 1463, and resumed his project on Plato which he then topped off with his 1469-74 project of writing the *Theologia Platonica* and *De Christiana religione*; see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 42, n. 162; see also Hanegraaff, "How Hermetic Was Renaissance Hermeticism?," 179-209.

⁶⁰⁷ James Hankins, "Lorenzo de' Medici's *De summo bono* and the Popularization of Ficinian Platonism" in *Humanistica Per Cesare Vasoli*, eds. F. Meroi and E. Scapparone (Florence: Olschki, 2004), 61-69.

⁶⁰⁸ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 62.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

unprecedented need for intellectual cooperation between Greek and Latin Christians. Choice texts from these vast bodies of foreign literature were translated, mulled over, and assimilated. As this assimilation process went on, ideas about what constituted orthodoxy were developed, and there arose a need for so many different competing systems and worldviews to be hierarchized. Here the history of thought became a battleground where various competing worldviews clashed for survival or supremacy, and in keeping with the *a priori* assumptions of both Platonism and Christianity, there could only be one truth. Not every philosopher could be right, and if anyone was going to provide a sufficiently convincing rallying banner for Christendom to thwart heresy, paganism, Islam, and Judaism, it would have to be the one with all the right answers in matters both philosophical and theological. For Ficino, therefore, true philosophy was that which confirmed religion, and true religion was that which confirmed philosophy. This belief was gradually developed out of his search for a comprehensive and accurate picture of the cosmos from its earliest beginnings, a description comprising the fullness of knowledge of all things both hidden and revealed. This meant not just a perfected knowledge of the physical world, but of the metaphysical, the moral, and the spiritual.

From an early age Ficino perceived history in something of a poetic or “Petrarchan” mode, that is, as a series of cycles of light and dark ages. There were ages in which philosophy and religion were united, and there were ages in which they were not; ages wherein sacred and secular powers were married, and ages in which they were wretchedly divorced. This idea was inseparable from Ficino’s speculations on the nature of ‘ancient theology’ (*prisca theologia*) which began around the mid-1450s, though picked up great momentum in the 1470s onwards in the wake of his many translation projects.⁶¹⁰ He became interested in recovering the theology of the remote past insofar as he felt alienated from the mainstream theological systems of his day, longing for a return to a time when the world had been rightly guided by a religious philosophy and a philosophical religion. One of Ficino’s concerns during the 1460–70s was the feeling that the philosophy of the Latin schoolmen had lost touch with reality on account of its fragmented state, divided up as it was across various competing *viae antiquae* and *modernae*, and reliant on what he perceived to be faulty interpretations of Aristotle which pitted philosophy and religion against one another.⁶¹¹ In the presence of all this theological diversity, it was difficult not to be reminded of ancient times, especially as described in the histories of the Church Fathers. These described a great empire that covered the world and had fully united secular and religious authority. These, however, had also described how the old *pax Romana* was torn apart by the rise of great heresies, factionalisms, and barbarisms in the places of the learned. Instead of sticking to the beaten track of archetypal spirituality that had first been tread by Christ and the apostles, the professors of theology had entirely lost their way fighting over Ockhamist, Scotist, Averroist,

⁶¹⁰ Cesare Vasoli, “Il mito dei ‘prisci theologi’ come ‘ideologia’ della ‘renovatio’” in *Quasi sit deus: Studi su Marsilio Ficino*, ed. Cesare Vasoli (Lecce: Conte, 1999): 11-50 and “‘Prisca theologia’ e scienze occulte nell’umanesimo fiorentino” in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 25: Esoterismo*, ed. Gian Mario Cazzaniga (Turin: Einaudi, 2010): 175-205.

⁶¹¹ Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 38ff.

and Alexandrian positions to the extent that many hardly even believed that the human soul was immortal. For Ficino, therefore, the best alternative to giving credence to the ideas of wayward theologians relying on centuries of medieval commentary, with their glosses upon glosses and their endless debates, was to cut through all the noise with private *first-hand* readings of historically significant works that confirmed doctrines like the Trinity and the immortality of the soul, especially those surviving in their original languages.

Between 1469 and 1473, once Ficino had completed his translations of Plato's entire corpus and seen his Hermetic *Pimander* go through two editions, he turned his attention to the longest of all his works, his eighteen-book magnum opus, the *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum* which was written in the form of a polemical *summa* on the immortality of the soul and structured as a progressive series of arguments in support of his pro-Platonic and anti-Averroist theses.⁶¹² During these years, Ficino was locked in a philosophical war with many fronts. It was as much a civil war as an interstate war, as much a conflict between Ficino and his fellow Christian schoolmen as with a recent surge of Epicureans and Averroists, all of whom cast doubt upon the immortality of the soul and the maintenance of its individuality after death. Without the soul's immortality, Christianity lost both its most attractive and fundamental feature. Averroes' own ideas had initially developed as a reaction to the more Platonically-oriented ideas of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, and this fact had not been lost on Ficino.⁶¹³ The longest section of Ficino's *summa*, therefore, was one which strictly concerned itself with a refutation of Averroes' ideas on the matter. "The book is so extensive indeed, so packed with argument and detail, so combative in its refutation" writes its translator Michael Allen, "that it leaves us in no doubt that refuting the great Arab's arguments, and particularly what he saw as Averroes's denial of the soul being the substantial form of the body, was still an abiding concern for Ficino and presumably for his sophisticated Florentine readers."⁶¹⁴ All this was in spite of living some three centuries removed from Averroes' own lifetime, for since the twelfth century "The Commentator" had crept in as one of the intellectual cornerstones of European university learning for his interpretations of "The Philosopher," Aristotle. To Thomas Aquinas in *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (1270), to be an Averroean meant chiefly to uphold the doctrine of the unity of the intellect, a doctrine that flew in the face of long-held Christian ideas about the individuality and immortality of the intellectual soul. Averroist ideas had not only gained some currency in Christian circles, but they were also known to have taken root among Jewish intellectuals who equally seemed to threaten the Church's doctrinal hegemony in Europe. In relating the cosmic proportions of Ficino's Proclean and Thomistically-inspired *Theologia Platonica*, its English translators, Allen and Hankins, maintain that:

⁶¹² Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:viii speculate that this work "probably played a role in the Lateran Council's promulgation of the immortality of the soul as a dogma in 1512."

⁶¹³ See n. 602 above.

⁶¹⁴ Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Saturn, the Plotinian Mind, and the Monster of Averroes," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 16, 1 (2010): 89.

At its center is not just his spiritual search for reassurance and conviction that an afterlife awaits us and that death is not the termination of consciousness and accordingly of the self, but also his concern to redefine and thus to reconceive the constitution, the *figura*, of the human entity.⁶¹⁵

Ficino was in search of a regenerative, comprehensive, and totalizing *image* of man. If man was lost in the darkness of infidelity to God, it was simply because he had lost sight of his divine *exemplar*. Since according to the Word of God the Church as a whole was the body of Christ, to reform the individuals who constituted it – especially the popes and princes of Italy – was to assist in bringing it back to the condition it had been in at the height of its ancient unity and authority before it had collapsed into its current fragmented state, billowed about by heresies, sects, doctrinal disagreements, and political factionalism.⁶¹⁶ Consequently, Ficino exhorted readers to “cast off the bonds of our terrestrial chains; cast them off as swiftly as possible, so that, uplifted on Platonic wings and with God as our guide, we may fly unhindered to our ethereal abode, where we will straightway look with joy on the excellence of our own human nature.”⁶¹⁷ In the *Theologia Platonica*, therefore, Ficino attempted to produce a text that was just as classical as it was scholastic; as much concerned with Dionysius, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas as with Plato and Proclus.⁶¹⁸ In large part, Ficino’s work was assembled to provide a non-pagan update to Proclus’ own systematic work also entitled the *Platonic Theology* (*Περὶ τῆς κατὰ Πλάτωνα θεολογίας*).⁶¹⁹ Nevertheless, many of Ficino’s arguments for the soul’s immortality had not been alien to the theologians of the thirteenth century.⁶²⁰ What Ficino did differently, however, was buttress old arguments with support from newly available texts: ancient Greek philosophical texts that bypassed the need to rely on translators, some of whom were responsible for the proliferation of heretical ideas. If there was disillusionment in Ficino for the culture of debate in his day, it was in regards to the nature of its sources, not necessarily the topics it debated.

In the warm afterglow of his major translation and commentary projects throughout the 1460s – after years of studying Scripture alongside the works of Zoroaster, Hermes, Plato, and Proclus – Ficino developed the conviction that throughout the whole of human history there existed a recurring pattern of proper ‘natural religion’ (which today one would call a Christianized system of Platonic idealism). This natural religion’s theology was logocentric in

⁶¹⁵ Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:ix.

⁶¹⁶ Cf. *1 Corinthians* 12:12-14.

⁶¹⁷ Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:1.1.1; “solvamus quamprimum vincula compedum terrenarum, ut alis sublatis platonicis ac deo duce in sedem aetheream liberius pervolemus, ubi statim nostri generis excellentiam feliciter contemplabimur.” Cf. Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 149.

⁶¹⁸ Denis Robichaud, “Fragments of Marsilio Ficino’s Translations and Use of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* and *Elements of Physics*: Evidence and Study,” *Vivarium* 54, 1 (2016): 50 rightly argued that “Proclus accompanied Ficino from his early ‘scholastic background’ through to his mastery of the Platonic tradition late in his career, especially... in his study of Pseudo-Dionysius and Plotinus. Despite the fact that scholarship at times pits scholasticism and Renaissance Platonism against each other, in this sense Proclus – largely due to the *Elements* – bridges two cultures.”

⁶¹⁹ Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:xii; cf. *Proclus: Théologie platonicienne*, eds. and trans., Henri D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, 6 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968-1997).

⁶²⁰ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 148-149.

essence, and it had been the *sine qua non* of all true theology since the days of the earliest prophets and sages. Its essential features were the existence and immortality of the soul, the Trinitarian nature of God, and the centrality of *caritas* (love) as a virtue, which is manifest in things like devotion, service, self-sacrifice, and the renunciation of the body – in other words, the *imitatio Christi*. This conviction played a fundamental role in getting Ficino to think differently about the role of *certain* non-Christian sages in Christian history, namely those whom he believed had in ancient times presaged his own theology. As Ficino learned more about his sources, he expanded his picture of the history of philosophy immensely, but insofar as he delved, he delved primarily in service of his Church and of his patron, in the hopes of bringing about a renewal of its pristine state, just as it had existed in its earliest centuries. This renewal could only come about, however, by shining a light on all the signs by which God had demonstrated his providence throughout history.⁶²¹ Ficino maintained that such signs were not only contained in the books of the Hebrew prophets, but that there were also parallel prefigurements of the Messiah, theophanic ruptures of the *Logos*, in the Hymns of Zoroaster and Orpheus, in the cryptic words of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in the utterances of the Sibyls, and above all, in the doctrines of *divinus Plato*. To most modern readers working with the privilege of historiographical hindsight, this makes it seem as if Ficino was reading history backwards – putting the proverbial cart before the horse – but this interpretation ignores the Platonic paradigm within which Ficino was thinking, whereby perfect doctrine in the form of an exemplary *Logos* dwelt up in the realm of ideal universals, outside of time and space, unravaged by the phenomenal reality that comprised human and natural history.⁶²²

In 1473, the same year he was putting the final touches on his *Theologia Platonica* (not published until 1482), Ficino took up holy orders to become a Catholic priest, and took on the challenge of writing out a work which would inaugurate his marriage of Christianity and Platonism.⁶²³ From that time on until 1474, he worked to complete his *De Christiana religione*. If the *Theologia Platonica* was composed in emulation of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* (a text Ficino cited frequently, sometimes verbatim, especially in Book II), then the *De Christiana religione* was Ficino's echo of the *Summa contra gentiles*.⁶²⁴ This text will be the

⁶²¹ Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 33ff.

⁶²² See, for example, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 27 “Why do the prophets often relate what will happen as what has already passed? Because in the divine mind, for which all things are present, they see those things as present, and after they have seen them, as past (that is, they speak of matters that are manifest and that have already been fulfilled).” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 237: “Cur Prophete que futura sunt sepe tanquam preterita narrant? Quia in divina mente, cui sunt presentia omnia, illa tanquam presentia vident, et postquam viderunt, tanquam preterita, id est manifesta et iam consummata loquuntur.”

⁶²³ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 161.

⁶²⁴ Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:xi discuss how by the *quattrocento*, Thomas had long become the Church's “ultimate scholastic authority” and the very exemplar of moderate, rational philosophy. It was very image that Ficino was attempting mirror in his own writings. Ficino calls him “our divine Thomas, the splendor of Theology” (2.12.8). Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 143 states that, in general, Ficino primarily made use of the *Summa contra gentiles* not the *Summa theologiae*. Cf. Ardis B. Collins, *The Sacred Is Secular: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).

object of focus for the remainder of this chapter as it was this particular work – rather than those of Ficino’s later career – that was designed entirely to defend the truths of Christianity against its most dangerous opponents: those who incorrectly interpreted Holy Scripture. In it, Ficino argued that Platonic philosophy and Christian revelation were not only conformable to one another but were historically inseparable, since they both tapped into the same transcendent truth embodied by the *Logos*. *De Christiana religione* was an attempt to demonstrate how God had revealed himself in ancient times to various sages from among all the nations, *not only to the ancient Hebrew prophets*.⁶²⁵ Although Plato and the *prisci theologi* came before Christ historically speaking, the philosophical doctrines they divulged were legitimate as they conformed to the doctrines of Christianity. The centrality of Plato in the ‘pagan half’ of Ficino’s grand narrative about the culmination and fulfillment of natural religion in Christianity was perhaps most clearly expressed in the following passage:

The ancient theology of the pagans, in which Zoroaster, Mercurius, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, and Pythagoras concurred, is entirely contained in the volumes of our Plato. Plato prophesied these kinds of mysteries in his Epistles, saying that they could at long last be made manifest to man after many centuries, which indeed so happened; for in the era of Philo and Numenius, the mind of the ancient theologians first began to be understood in the Platonists’ pages, clearly immediately after the speeches and writings of the apostles and the disciples of the apostles. The Platonists used the divine light of the Christians for interpreting the divine Plato; hence the fact that, as Basil the Great and Augustine show, the Platonists appropriated for themselves the mysteries of John the Evangelist. I have certainly discovered for myself that particularly the mysteries of Numenius, Philo, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus had been taken from John, Paul, Hierotheus, and Dionysius the Areopagite. For whatever lofty thing the former had to say about the divine mind, the angels, and everything else regarding theology, they obviously appropriated from the latter.⁶²⁶

Here Plato acquired a divine status as a transmitter of theological concepts that he held in common with other *prisci theologi* from various nations. His legitimacy for Ficino was buttressed by the similarities in doctrines between those of the Church Fathers and those works of ancient theology which in the fifteenth century were believed to be of a far older provenance despite being, in reality and unbeknownst to Ficino, post-Platonic works. All these documents were in unanimous agreement over one key issue, the immortality of the human soul, and so they must have all in some way been the product of a higher divine mind. Ficino approached these sources within the context of trying to understand the full gravity and significance of

⁶²⁵ See especially *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 13 entitled “*On the Generation of the Son of God in Eternity*” for Ficino’s discussion of the *Logos* and its presence among the pagans.

⁶²⁶ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 26: “*Prisca Gentilium theologia, in qua Zoroaster, Mercurius, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras consenserunt, tota in Platonis nostri voluminibus continetur. Mystera huiusmodi Plato in Epistolis vaticinatur, tandem post multa secula hominibus manifesta fieri posse, quod quidem ita contigit; nam Philonis Numenique temporibus primum cepit mens priscorum theologorum in Platonis cartis intelligi, videlicet statim post Apostolorum Apostolicorumque discipulorum contiones et scripta. Divino enim Christianorum lumine usi sunt Platonici ad divinum Platonem interpretandum; hinc est quod magnus Basilius et Augustinus probant Platonicos Iohannis Evangeliste mysteria sibi usurpavisse. Ego certe repperi precipua Numenii, Philonis, Plotini, Iamblici, Proculi mysteria ab Iohanne, Paulo, Ierotheo, Dionysio Areopagita accepta fuisse: quicquid enim de mente divina Angelisque et ceteris ad theologiam spectantibus magnificum dixere, manifeste ab illis usurpaverunt.*” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 210.

Christianity's historical development. He did not study them as some kind of crypto-pagan revivalist, but as a kind of reformer attempting to trigger a renewal of religio-philosophical unity. His intellectual genealogy was no mere historical thesis, but an explicit program of ecclesiastical regeneration.

As a devoted follower of the ps.-Dionysian mystical theology that seamlessly fused Christian dogma with Proclean metaphysics, Ficino's world was that of a universe stretched between two extremes: a manifest world of the senses, and an invisible, apophatically-reckoned world of the divine, the entire span of which was densely populated with various rungs of overlapping ontological hierarchies. History itself was one such hierarchy, albeit a temporally oriented one, and it described the process by which the one extreme (i.e., the atemporal and divine) descended down into the other (i.e., the temporal world of matter) to redeem it and make it a unity again, all in a kind of grand display of God's ever-unfolding goodness. To Ficino, only Christianity could offer a true reconciliation of the immanent and the transcendent, the temporal and the eternal, because only the Christian God, by his very Trinitarian nature, unfurled himself into history as a kind of "priest in eternity."⁶²⁷

While Ficino's ideas about history were decisively humanistic in nature, with its cultural ebbs and flows, its wavering periods of light and darkness, and its Hesiodic cycles of gold and iron ages, they were also tinged by a kind of 'optimistic' or utopian prophetic mode of historical development as discussed in previous chapters, with its gradual move toward the reconciliation of all faiths and the submersion of all differences before God at the end of history. History for Ficino, as much as for any medieval interpreter, was a stage for the redemptive processes innate to a threefold God. He maintained that prior to the Incarnation, both the prophets of the Bible and the pagan sages throughout the nations of the world had achieved on their own some limited apprehension of the *Logos*, the Son of God. Following its incarnation in the historical figure of Jesus, however, both pagan and Hebrew revelations alike reached their end points in Christ and his mystical theology, which itself was related in the writings of the Apostle Paul and his disciple Dionysius the Areopagite. In *De Christiana religione*, Ficino argued that this set of divine doctrines had then been appropriated by the Late Platonists of Alexandria in the wake of the apostolic era, and used to elucidate the mysteries of the *prisca theologia* in their own works. Nevertheless, there were many philosophers, especially among the Peripatetics, who misunderstood the mysteries of the ancients, and wrote voluminously to spread their deficient interpretations. With the gradual demise of the apostolic era and the disappearance of the simple life lived out in *imitatio Christi* during the medieval period – with the gradual rupture of religion and philosophy – the world fell into a dark age, or in Ficino's words, an iron age (*saeculum ferreum*).⁶²⁸ Ficino's model of history was therefore one of progress, but not necessarily of linear progress. Despite having a definitive end point – that day when "the Lord shall be king over all

⁶²⁷ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 32 (Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 283); cf. *Psalm* 110:4 (Vulg. 111:4) and *Hebrews* 7:17.

⁶²⁸ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 156.

the earth” and when “there shall be one Lord and his name shall be one”⁶²⁹ – history still ebbed and flowed, punctuated by revelations of the *Logos*, such that in some eras it was heeded and in others it was lost. In eras when the *Logos* was acknowledged as divine and given due respect, philosophy and religion (or “Pallas and Thetis” or “Wisdom and Divine Law”) enjoyed a comfortable marriage. In those eras wherein *Logos* was rejected, Ficino perceived a wretched divorce. It was in this light, therefore, that Ficino viewed the status of the Church during the mid-fifteenth century: as an institution long overdue for a return to form, billowed about as it was by its disregard for the one true logocentric religion of Christ as practised by the *Ecclesia primitiva*.

Inasmuch as Ficino’s quest for pinning down and understanding the *prisca theologia* was a fundamentally historical project, it was also a deeply polemical one, and one thoroughly conditioned by the debates surrounding various prophetic approaches to world history that were popular in the centuries leading up to his own times. His work pertained to the present and the future as much as it pertained to the past. Its chief concern was with tracing out how a ‘natural religion’ developed throughout history, and arguing as to which contemporary belief system was its legitimate heir in the present. As far as Ficino was concerned, the legitimate heirs and correct interpreters of the one true and revealed religion were unquestionably *not* contemporary Jews, not Muslims, nor any other heretical group who used philosophy to cast doubt on the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, or the Messiah’s arrival in the figure of the incarnate *Logos*, Jesus Christ, who was clearly foretold by all the world’s most venerable sages and prophets.

Like his medieval predecessors, Ficino saw in history a quest for transcendent meaning more emphatically than a quest to understand its immediate causes. Ficino’s causal reckonings of human history were essentially a byproduct of his overarching quest to locate a single transcendent form of religious universalism that could be recovered and reimplemented to bring about the return of a new golden age. Rather than hinging his narrative from the projection of some utopian end point in the distant future, as did Joachim of Fiore in the third *status* of the Holy Spirit, Ficino’s *prisca theologia* cast present religio-philosophical *desideranda* back into the distant past, into a time when such values were imagined to have existed in their perfect archetypal clarity. True wisdom had been progressively and historically revealed, and Ficino’s obligation was to pinpoint the ways in which that wisdom had been transmitted, where it had been lost, where it had been preserved, and how it could be recovered – that is, understanding a given set of ideas as much *sub specie temporis* as *sub specie aeternitatis*, for the Trinitarian God by necessity occupied both spaces simultaneously.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ Zechariah 14:9, Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 259.

⁶³⁰ In the 1480s, this particular return *ad fontes sed sub specie temporis* mentality will go on to shape Pico in profound ways, and it is especially clear from the way he ordered his *900 Conclusiones* in a kind of reverse-chronological order, moving from a state of philosophical disunity back toward unity, from many opinions to a single truth. In *De Christiana religione*, Ficino formulated a general outline for writing a history of the mystical theology, while Pico followed suite by filling in all the details (albeit with a revised chain of transmission and different understanding of its mechanics, to which we will return later). It will be in partial rejection of Ficino’s ideas on the primordial unity inherent to natural religion, for example, that Pico formulated the thesis of his

That there even existed one single natural religion held together with a single comprehensive *prisca theologia* was a notion fundamentally rooted in Platonic assumptions, and it was first sparked in Ficino by the ideas of the pagan Plethon. Nevertheless, Ficino was the first to really put effort into Christianizing the idea and using it as a polemical tool against would be detractors of the Catholic faith. In this way, one of the chief lifelines sustaining Ficino's classical studies was rooted in his priestly quest to demonstrate that the eternal religion of Christ was the consummation of all natural religion. *De Christiana religione* demonstrates how Ficino was not so much concerned with understanding his *prisci theologi* in some kind of detached or objective way as a modern scholar would feign to do. Rather, he was using them carefully to find Christological prefigurations and confirmation of dogmas from his own religion.⁶³¹ He saw primarily what he took to be significant, and what he took to be significant was whatever supported his interpretation of Christian doctrines. In this way, what medieval polemical authors like Petrus Alfonsi or Ramon Martí had done in prior centuries – namely, scrutinizing Jewish literature to find esoteric historical and philological minutia with which to refute Jews – Ficino now found himself doing much the same in *De Christiana religione*, but using the support of his *prisci theologi*. Despite being pagans, the ancient theologians had still been in contact with the *Logos* or pre-existent Christ through their faculties of reason, and thus could still help to refute the follies of medieval exegetes who challenged the central tenets of our philosopher-priest's faith with irrational beliefs.

To Ficino, Christianity was the religion of the divine pattern. Christ was the eternal exemplar co-eternal with God the Father, and so when the various *prisci theologi* – ancient though they were – intuited the *Logos* or reason itself, they found themselves preaching reform, chiefly by a return to the implementation of divine law at all levels of society. The Hebrew prophets of the Bible were no different: their message was not new, but *reflexive*. Christ had not come to abolish the Law passed down by Moses, but to fulfill it.⁶³² Ficino saw Christianity not only as the fulfillment of ancient Hebrew prophecy, but also the culminating figure among the *prisci theologi* too. Just as Christ put an end to the ritual practices of the Jews, he likewise did the same for the pagans. His work, therefore, manifested as a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*. It set pagan and Hebrew traditions *in parallel* to highlight the ways in which they had, or had not, at various junctures in history been familiar with the eternal *Logos* and the true religion of God (rather than merely the blandishment of demons or the follies of poets). It praised those pagans and Jews who conformed to Christian beliefs and practices, and rebuked all of those who did not. In this way, the Latin polemical tradition, first devised by the Church Fathers as a means of carving out a Christian identity and then developed throughout the Middle Ages by monastic and mendicant writers, became a significant outlet for humanistic philosophical research in Ficino during the 1470s. While it is true that Ficino was not doing the exact same thing as the Church

Heptaplus which exclusively privileged Moses and put him upstream from all the other pagan *prisci theologi* like Hermes or Zoroaster. Cf. n. 5 above.

⁶³¹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola*, 46.

⁶³² Cf. *Matthew* 5:17, *Luke* 16:17, and *Romans* 3:31.

Fathers, since in their own writings they rarely admitted pagan authorities given that they were trying to distance themselves from paganism, there were still many from among them like Augustine who did indeed admit that there was some wisdom to be gleaned from reading philosophy, if only at the very least to serve as tools in the refutation of the Church's enemies, and in his capacity as a priest, Ficino thought of himself as walking primarily in those footsteps.

5.2 The Iron Age (*Saeculum Ferreum*)

The only way Ficino believed the Latins might survive the *saeculum ferreum* was by banding together around the ideal of *Concordia*. For Ficino this involved the setting aside of differences and coming together to build the scaffolding of a new society which united civil and religious powers into one figure, a philosopher-king, modelled after the Melchizedek of the Old Testament who was widely believed to have been a theophanic prefiguration of Christ.⁶³³ In this the prophetic character of Ficino's thought becomes apparent. Central to his philosophical building project was an appeal for the mass implementation of the myriad *exempla* laid out in Holy Scripture. Christ was fast returning and his judgement against those who had not carried their crosses while they had the chance would be swift and final. A reconfiguration of society into a philosophically-guided theocracy, however, was not going to come about through haphazard reforms; it would come about either through the moving mass exhortations of good men, or come about with a flash flood that would wash the current world order away. In this, Ficino definitively foreshadowed Savonarola's theocratic reforms which attempted to seamlessly unite church and state through the rallying cry of "Christ is the King of Florence!" and thus it would come as no surprise to see how in 1490 Ficino became one of Savonarola's early supporters.⁶³⁴

In the opening years of the 1470s, when our philosopher-priest's apocalyptic anxieties were at their highest point, Ficino put his circle of humanist friends to the task of completing a number of rhetorical exercises, some of which were assembled into a text under the title of *Declamationum liber* by Benedetto Colucci da Pistoia (1438 - c. 1506).⁶³⁵ More recently, Amos Edelheit made a careful study of how these orations served as clear windows into the problems faced by Florentine intellectuals in this period: chiefly, the threat of Turkish invasion, the revolt of Volterra, and disillusionment with university learning, all of which when heaped together served as further fuel for a kind of apocalyptic expectation carried over from the Middle Ages. He explains how over the course of three days in late December 1473, these *sermones* were delivered in Ficino's house to his friends Naldo Naldi, Alessandro Braccesi, Nicolo Michelozzi, and Angelo Poliziano. The five speakers were Paulo Antonio Soderini, Giovanni Cavalcanti, Bindacio Ricasoli, the younger Francesco Berlingheri, and Carlo Marsupini.⁶³⁶ The oratorical

⁶³³ The letter to the *Hebrews* (esp. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10, 11, 15, 17, 21), traditionally ascribed to Paul, is the only work in the *New Testament* to identify a prefiguration of Christ with Melchizedek, whose name in Hebrew literally means "Priest-King." This particular book of the New Testament was exceptionally important to Ficino in constructing the theology on display in *De Christiana religione* since its original author identified Christ as a "priest in eternity" or "the eternal priest according to the order of Melchizedek." See Bartolucci, *Vera religio*, 37 and *De Christiana religione*, 34 and ff. Such ideas were not far from the Joachimite expectation of an "Angelic Pope and Last World Emperor," albeit enfolded into a single figure; see McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 34, 147-148, 186 and ff.

⁶³⁴ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 28-29. Admittedly, Ficino's support would not endure very long given that Dominican preacher's hostility against the idea that one should – or even could – reconcile the doctrines revealed in Scripture with anything but themselves, let alone pagan philosophy. This was a distinctly anti-Ficinian view in Savonarola. Although the paradigms of Ficino and Pico had some overlap, those of Ficino and Savonarola quickly drifted into incommensurability during the early 1490s.

⁶³⁵ Arsenio Frugoni, ed., *Scritti inediti di Benedetto Colucci da Pistoia* (Florence: Olschki, 1939), 1-47.

⁶³⁶ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130-131.

expositions were chiefly intended to embolden Italian rulers in their wars against the Turks. Small successes in these long-term struggles were fraught with political and religious implications, not only since the Ottomans had captured Constantinople in 1453, but more importantly because they ruled over the Holy Land. Almost every site mentioned in the Bible was now under the control of an Islamic empire. In this light, the threat of further Turkish incursion into Christendom was conceptualized by Ficino and his circle as an impending *diluvium*, a Great Flood of biblical proportions which would come and wash away the world to correct its state of degeneracy and disrepair. The symbolism of the Flood is important because of its longstanding two-fold character: while it is chiefly symbolic of mass destruction – of God’s temporal judgement – it is just as much a symbol of renewal and purification – of God’s eternal mercy.⁶³⁷ It punishes the wicked as much as it preserves the righteous, that is, those who walk in the light of the divine exemplar. Here the Flood was not a final end; it would not leave the world in permanent disrepair, but would trigger the renewal of a pristine state. In the mind of these humanists, the only means by which the Church could survive the impending *diluvium* and regenerate the world was through the return to ancient texts – many only recently recovered – and through the study of exempla from ancient literature and history, whether they be drawn directly from Scripture or from key Church Fathers (Tertullian, Eusebius, Lactantius, Irenaeus, Augustine, ps.-Dionysius, etc.). Ultimately, they passed over the most popular schoolmen of their day in conspicuous silence.⁶³⁸

Cavalcanti’s oration was directed to toward Pope Sixtus IV and his struggles against the Turks, and even his opening words were marked with a sense of trauma.⁶³⁹ His sense of impending danger appeared pronounced, but it is the weakness of the Church, not the strength of the Turk which he feared most. He cried out: “Sixtus, best and holiest father, you taught me from my earliest youth to undergo the bitterest torments in the name of Christ; now you, with power over so many things, must rescue the collapsing Church of the very same Christ.”⁶⁴⁰ Here it seems the Turks would not have been considered so great a threat to the Church were it not already collapsing thanks to the avarice of former popes.⁶⁴¹ As his *exempla*, Cavalcanti jointly evoked episodes of classical history such as the victory of Scipio Nasica over Tiberius Gracchus, or of Cicero over Catiline, and further illustrated his points with a comparison between King

⁶³⁷ See Winston, “Philo’s Conception of the Divine Nature,” in Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 30-31 to see how as early as the 1st century AD, the Great Flood was a way God acted in the world, since he always proceeds through some equal measure of justice and mercy: “That the race may subsist, though many of those which go to form it are swallowed up by the deep, He tempers His judgement with the mercy which He shows in doing kindness even to the unworthy [Noah and his family].”

⁶³⁸ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130-132; Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 1:ix highlight the significance of Ficino’s avoidance of scholastic terminology “even as he deploys scholastic concepts” which leads us sometimes having to “rescholasticize his formulations in our own minds in order to grasp them.”

⁶³⁹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130-132; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 4: “Multa me ab hac prima declamatione dehortarentur... In hoc vero luctuosissimo et gravissimo bello quod infelicissime tot annos cum immanitate barbarica gerimus.”

⁶⁴⁰ “Sixte, pater optime ac sanctissime, docuisti me admodum adolescentem pro Christi nomine acerrima subire tormenta; nunc tu in tantarum rerum potestate eiusdem Christi Ecclesiae cadenti subvenias.”

⁶⁴¹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130-133, n. 22 and 25; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 10-11.

Solomon building the temple in Jerusalem and the pope fighting off the Turks. Important to note here is that throughout all these orations there was not so much a seamless integration of biblical and classical figures and sources as was common among medieval writers, but a conscientious paralleling, or a juxtaposing, of mutually exclusive historical lineages that only later in time had come together. This marked a sense of increased historical clarity, sensitivity, and awareness, even if it was chiefly for the sake of persuasiveness that the rhetors had returned to the ancients.

Another oration by Paulo Antonio Soderini was addressed to the Senate of Venice, praising its members for the maintenance of the ancient Roman value *concordia*, and exhorting *omnes Latini* to unite against the Turks who rallied under the banner of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-1481).⁶⁴² As Edelheit first demonstrated, *concordia* (an historically pagan concept) and *diluvium* (a biblical concept) were here carefully set in opposition: “If you wish to keep *concordia* and *justitia*, O Venetian Fathers, now you must strive with unprecedented effort, lest we succumb to the most sorrowful ruin in this flood.”⁶⁴³ Such a dichotomy suggests an impending crisis wherein there will be no middle-ground between the good and the evil. This was in keeping with *Revelation* 3:16 wherein Christ promised that he would spew the lukewarm out of his mouth, for they were neither hot nor cold. Here salvation would not come in degrees. In Soderini’s words, “grave punishment awaits those who have not used their counsel and arms against this savage monster,”⁶⁴⁴ an admonition meant specifically for the leading men of Venice, but that could be extended to all of Latin Christendom. Yet another oration given by Francesco Berlingheri was directed to Galeazzo Sforza, and it likewise concerned the Turkish threat and the image of a *diluvium*. Berlingheri drew his examples from the wellspring of the past, Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Attila, and aside from mentioning the memory of Christ himself, he too gave no examples from medieval Church history.⁶⁴⁵ It is clear, then, what all of these men were hinting at: in order to bring about the end of the crisis of their age, they had to inspire the leading men of the Latin West to restore the marriage of Wisdom and Divine Law, of philosophy and religion, of the secular and the sacred, back to the *status quo* that reigned at the height of the Roman era, before everything had gone awry.

In the first of Ficino’s own *Praedicationes*⁶⁴⁶ – the sermons which he wrote around the same time as he composed of *De Christiana religione* – he enshrined “judgement in matters of religion” as the *sine qua non* of what distinguished man from the animals.⁶⁴⁷ Although animals could demonstrate reason, he argued, none of them exhibited true religiosity. Among men, however, religiosity was universal. It is to this very argument that Ficino returned in full force in his *De Christiana religione*. As he made clear in the first part of his second *Praedicatio*, Ficino

⁶⁴² Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 139, n. 45; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 9.

⁶⁴³ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130-135, n. 33; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 28 “Si haec [concordia et justitia] retinere vultis, Patres Veneti, nunc summa ope nitendum est, ne hoc eminenti diluvio luctuosissime obruamur.”

⁶⁴⁴ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 136, n. 34; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 28-29 “...cum gravis poena maneat omnes qui consilia et arma in hoc monstrum immane non contulerunt.”

⁶⁴⁵ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 140; Frugoni, *Scritti inediti*, 33-39.

⁶⁴⁶ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1:473-493.

⁶⁴⁷ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1:473-474.

maintained that it was only virtue, truth, and religion – not intellect in and of itself – which could repress bodily desires and the sins of the flesh. Virtue, truth, and religion, however, were things which could be inspired into men through things like preaching and good rhetoric, that is, through the power of the word. To illustrate his point, Ficino gave examples drawn from around the world, citing Plato, Xenocrates, Origen, Persian Magi, Egyptian priests, and Pythagorean philosophers.⁶⁴⁸ Central to Ficino’s doctrine of ‘natural religion’ was that all true philosophy and religion had the potential of grasping at some truth insofar as its adherents were concerned with willful self-abnegation and, concomitant to this, the practice of sacrificial rites. To read classical and biblical literature side by side was to discover the universality of animal (and sometimes human) sacrifice as a religious practice among early humans. Since man had been made in God’s image, the religion that was natural and intrinsic to man was also the religion that was natural and intrinsic to God. The wisest men from among the ancients practised self-renunciation through sacrifices, and Ficino believed that these were echoes or prefigurations of God’s eternal sacrifice. Ficino did not make this point in an attempt to reinstitute idolatry, but in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of *caritas* (love) within both man and God. The focus on the ascetic impulse as the essence of religion could be seen not only from Christian and Platonic sources, but indeed in Plato himself. Ficino wrote:

It is most apparent among philosophers and the religious who – either for the sake of finding truth, or obtaining divine grace – choose a way of life which not only wages war against the senses but is doubtless also harmful to the body. In this, the human mind indeed makes its free action and its control over the body and corporeal matters clear.⁶⁴⁹

In this way, Ficino privileged the freedom of religious interiority over a life of slavery to the impulses of the body. In keeping with the doctrines of Plato, Ficino maintained that mankind alone was uniquely capable of applying its intellect to the active rejection of the senses. This liberty to do so arose purely out of the imperfection of the human intellect, which is free to either err or to follow God: “The imperfect human intellect is the only thing in nature which has a connection to religion and to religious morality.”⁶⁵⁰ In discussing the struggle between the material and the spiritual, Ficino highlighted the schism between God and mankind using Platonic language, maintaining that the division of the rational soul in two, into intellect and will, and its separation from matter and the body “is the reason for its ability to deploy the power of

⁶⁴⁸ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 153; Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1:475: “Cum Plato noster domandi corporis gratia salubrem Atticae locum Academiam habitandam elegit, nonne animus eius corporali adversabatur? Cum Xenocrates dilectus Platonis discipulus, et Origenes eorum spectator exusserunt sibi virilia, quo libidinis incendia prorsus extinguerent, nonne iniussus animus bellum membrum corporis indicabat. Ante hos Magi Persarum, Aegyptii Sacerdotes, Pythagorici Philosophi, ut Venerem enervarent, et sobrii forent ad contemplantum, mero et carnibus abstinebant.”

⁶⁴⁹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 159; Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1:478: “Quod quidem maxim apparet in Philosophis atque religiosis, qui vel veritatis inveniendae, vel divinae gratiae ineundae, gratia institutionem vitae eligunt, non solum sensibus repugnantem, sed etiam corpori proculdubio noxiam. Qua quidem in re mens humana liberam actionem imperiumque in corpus corporeaque declarat.”

⁶⁵⁰ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 159.

the intellect and the will more perfectly.”⁶⁵¹ That is to say, the further out the intellect and will got from the body, the closer they got to the source of their creation. And although such kinds of distinctions between intellectual faculties like “intellect” and “will” had long been popular in scholastic theology – such as in Bonaventure or in Thomas Aquinas – Ficino here cites only Plato as his source, namely the *Phaedo*, the *Crito*, and the *Apology*. There were indeed plenty of recent examples Ficino could have drawn from in illustrating what constituted true piety such as the multitude of martyrs and saints from recent Church history, but it was the ancient evangelists, apostles, and the earliest ascetic philosophers that provided all the doctrine and *exempla* that Ficino needed to make his point about reform. After all, the later group were really only relevant insofar as they conformed to the image set down by the earlier group. What was new here is that Ficino and his circle were engaging in theological discourse strewn with Platonic language and references to Plato’s actual dialogues (of which the *Crito* and the *Apology* had been unknown in the medieval Latin West).⁶⁵² The manifold competing works of the schoolmen, and the fruits of their spirituality, were here explicitly circumvented. Though they might be great Thomists or Averroists or Scotists or Ockhamists, the depth of their historical awareness about what had allowed for bygone golden ages to come about was simply not up to par for Ficino and his circle in their quest to inspire reform. Ficino was not unaware of contemporary academic discourse either, he was simply disinterested: their words failed to rouse men to piety. They lacked both the clarity of Plato and the simplicity of the Gospels, both of which had a rich history of doing just that.

⁶⁵¹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 154.

⁶⁵² Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 155.

5.3 *De Christiana religione: Contra Iudaeos et Saracenos*

In spite of the lofty image of a contemplative Platonic magus, perhaps one of the most unacknowledged facets of Ficino's career concerns his life as a Catholic priest.⁶⁵³ While much has been written about "Ficino the philosopher" from his many translations and commentaries, and much about "Ficino the magus" from his interest in Hermetic and astro-magical works, there is another aspect of Ficino's life which has received much less attention: Ficino the Christian apologist, author of the seldom-read 38 chapter polemic against Muslim and Jewish scriptural interpretation, *De Christiana religione* (first published in Italian: 1474, Latin: 1476, and again in in 1484). If some have seen a "fusion,"⁶⁵⁴ a "syncretism," or a "marriage" of Platonism and Christianity in Ficino, then I believe it is also important to stress the extent to which this was a lopsided marriage in terms of which spouse held the majority of the power: Ficino used Platonism to bolster Christianity, not Christianity to bolster Platonism. Although he himself was neither monk nor mendicant, here in this project Ficino was as deeply influenced by the polemical writings of such medieval mendicant theologians as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra, or the conversos Petrus Alfonsi, Jerome of Santa Fé, and Paul of Burgos, as he was by any Church Fathers or Platonists.⁶⁵⁵ Ficino's reliance on the theological arguments drawn up from the wellspring of the Latin polemical tradition has received comparatively little attention, especially in regards to those who were medieval Jewish converts to Christianity.⁶⁵⁶ This section, therefore, will be exploring Ficino's use of supercessionist anti-Jewish material drawn from the arsenals of formerly Jewish converts to Christianity, and how such usage shaped his particularly humanist approach to the prophetic sense of history. Moreover, it will demonstrate how Ficino's polemical strategy in *De Christiana religione* of levying pagan philosophy and the *Graeca veritas* to support his Christian theology can be understood all the more clearly when examined in parallel to his use of the *Hebraica veritas* (or at least what little he could grasp about it) in his invectives against the Jews.

While ideas of an impending *diluvium* were gestating among the so-called 'Florentine Academy,' Ficino sat down to try his hand at his first formal attempt to create an accessible

⁶⁵³ For an article focused on Ficino's administrative and priestly duties (albeit with little regard for his theological polemics), see Peter Serracino-Inglott, "Ficino the Priest" in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, eds. Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1-14, esp. 9: "Ficino did not become a priest just nominally. He committed himself to engaging in quite significant pastoral and specifically clerical activity. However, it is not at all surprising that little attention has been given to these facets of his daily life; they have nothing extraordinary about them. What is extraordinary is that they were carried out by Ficino."

⁶⁵⁴ Howlett, *Marsilio Ficino and His World*, 11.

⁶⁵⁵ For Ficino's debt to converso mendicant sources, see Vasoli, "Per le fonti," 135-233.

⁶⁵⁶ In spite of its numerous merits in contextualizing Ficino's theological works, see Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola*, 206 for a discussion of his study's conscious limitations: "This chapter [#3 focused on Ficino] is not a commentary on *De Christiana religione*. Such a commentary needs to be written, but this is not the place for it. Nor shall I analyse some chapters of this work, such as the long discussion of the Sibylline Oracles or the detailed disputations with Judaism and Islam [which in fact comprise the main bulk of the work]. I shall concentrate on those chapters which present Ficino's own Christian theology," namely, the first half of the work dedicated to his Platonic interpretation of Christianity.

guide to his new theology wherein Platonic intuition would complement Christian revelation. Although written after the *Theologia Platonica, De Christiana religione* was the very first of his own major theological works to be printed. Here, as discussed above, Ficino maintained that the perfect union of philosophy and religion – centered upon the doctrines of the Trinity and the immortality of the human soul – had in ancient times been upheld, but within the course of later Church history a degradation of that union gradually arose, an event he called “the wretched divorce of Pallas [Athena] and Themis” (i.e., of Wisdom and Divine Law).⁶⁵⁷ It was back to this pristine state, back into accordance with pure ‘form’ that our philosopher-priest wished the society in which he lived to be reformed. In Ficino’s own writings, the concepts of “word,” “form,” and “reform” are inseparable, as seen in the following:

Through the Word of God men had previously been *formed*, [and] through the same Word they ought to be *reformed* – and deservedly so, for through the light of the intellectual Word, the darkness of the human intellect must be expelled, [and] the rational animal must be corrected through the reason of God.⁶⁵⁸

True theology was logocentric theology. It was to be found in prophetic writings, in miracles, in theophanies, and in supernatural revelations of the *Logos*, whether incarnate or disincarnate, for these all gave a glimpse of the true reason of God. To Ficino, this was emphatically not that reason outlined by the rationalist philosophy of Aristotle, especially as it had been interpreted by later Arabic philosophers and their more recent disciples among contemporary schoolmen.⁶⁵⁹ Truth had simply been revealed to a handful of purified supernal minds, it was not something one could deduce by syllogism. Ficino made it clear, however, that the ancient sages among the Hebrews, the Persians, the Indians, the Egyptians, the Ethiopians, the Greeks, the Gauls, and the Romans – at least those who had some level of familiarity with the divine *Logos* – had *all* played a part in God’s unfurling plan.⁶⁶⁰ In a way, like Joachim of Fiore had envisioned the intertwining fates of Jews and Gentiles from his close study of the motifs found in the books of the Hebrew prophets, Ficino envisioned the history of “natural religion” through an arboreal motif as well. All the religions of the world were but different branches linking back to one great trunk rooted in divine/natural law, the religion of the *Logos*, but at the end of history, the whole tree would

⁶⁵⁷ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Proemium: “O secula tandem nimium infelicia, quando Palladis Themidisque divortium miserabile contigit!” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 156.

⁶⁵⁸ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 15: “Per Dei Verbum formati quondam homines fuerant, per Verbum idem reformari debebant et merito, per intellectualis enim Verbi lucem depellenda erat caligo intellectus humani, per rationem Dei rationale animal emendandum.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 198.

⁶⁵⁹ Erika Rummel, “Scholasticism and Biblical Humanism in Early Modern Europe” in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, 1 and ff.

⁶⁶⁰ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Proemium: “Prophete igitur Hebreorum atque Essei sapientie simul et sacerdotio incumbabant; philosophi a Persis, quia sacris preerant, Magi – hoc est sacerdotes, sunt appellati; Indi Brachmanas de rerum natura simul atque animorum expiationibus consulebant; apud Egyptios mathematici et methaphysici sacerdotio fungebantur et regno; apud Ethiopas gymnosophiste phylosophie simul magistri erant ac religionis antistites. Eadem in Grecia consuetudo fuit sub Lino, Orpheo, Museo, Eumolpo, Melampo, Trophimo, Aglaophemo, atque Pythagora, eadem in Gallia sub Druidum gubernaculis. Quantum apud Romanos Nume Pompilio, Valerio Sorano, Marco Varroni multisque aliis sapientie simul sacrorumque studium fuerit, quis ignoret?” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 155. For similar albeit ancient *prisca sapientia* narratives, cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.15.71; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1-12.

culminate in a single great flowering of blossoms. On the side of ‘Gentile’ or ‘pagan’ history were sages like Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Pythagoras, and on the side of Jewish history were Melchizedek, Moses, and the Hebrew prophets, each of whom, rooted in the *Hebraica veritas*, had been necessary in their own eras for re-establishing the degenerated link between the religious and political spheres and reemphasizing the logocentric theology. If the ideas undergirding the Platonic tradition were prefigured in Zoroaster, Hermes, Aglaophemus, Orpheus, and Pythagoras then its doctrines were necessarily as ancient as those of the Hebrews, and this meant that the religious traditions of their prophets were not necessarily unique, but had much in common with the Gentile *prisci theologi*, all of whom paved the way for one single ultimate religion, that of Christ the eternal *Logos*.

Ficino’s chief point of disillusionment was his view that Christian theology had over centuries become calcified by institutionalization and degraded through the gradual acceptance of various imperfect and erroneous philosophical doctrines that denied fundamentals of the faith. Philosophy no longer served the interests of religion. The true doctrine, understood most clearly by Christ, his apostles, and their apostles, had been lost and buried under a landslide of erroneous non-Christian philosophies such as the Averroist unicity of the intellectual soul or the Alexandrist denial of the soul’s immortality and these had found a stronghold in the places of high learning where supposed Christians were seen as acting more like followers of a corrupted Aristotle than followers of Christ. In addition to this, thanks to the increased presence of Islamic and Jewish learning, there were also now circulating all kinds of alternative readings of Scripture which did not coincide with those made by the Church.⁶⁶¹ This great diversity of opinion only furthered Ficino’s belief that the philosophy practised in the universities of his day, or the religion practised by his fellow co-religionists, was a symptom of the “iron age.” To combat this trend, he decided it would be best to ignore and bypass contemporary scholastic authors, and what he lacked in this respect, he made up for with direct citations of Scripture, the Church

⁶⁶¹ Just as Petrus Alfonsi had done in the fifth titulus of his own *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, Ficino occasionally made a few detours in his attacks on Judaism to attack Islam. Ficino’s arguments against Islam were of a somewhat different nature than those against Judaism. In *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 12, he states that although Muslims seem to be Christians in some way, they are essentially followers of Arian and Manichean heresies, and can be dismissed on these grounds alone. Though Ficino recognizes Islam’s reverence for the figures of Jesus and Mary and for the truths revealed in the gospels, he believed he was justified in dismissing Islam as an overblown Christian heresy on the grounds that: “There are two principal errors of Muhammad: the one is that although he places some divinity in Christ, far greater than in all men, whether present, past or future, he nevertheless seems in some places to assert that divinity to be distinct from and lesser to the substance of the Highest God, [an idea] which in fact he received from the Arians; but in this matter he wrestles with himself: for the epithets, which he attributed to Christ, signify that his divinity is the same as the Highest God’s. Muhammad’s other and in fact more obvious error is that when the attendants of the priests, who tried to put their hands on Christ, fell, God, as Muhammad reckons, immediately and secretly swept Jesus up to heaven. When they stood back up, seizing a hold of someone else resembling Jesus, they flogged and crucified him; this [idea] it seems he received from the Manicheans. There is no need to refute errors of this kind: for whosoever have refuted the Arian and Manichean heresies [i.e., Augustine], they surely seem to have also refuted Muhammad. We may conclude that it is conceded among all sects of pagans, Jews, and Muhammadans that the Christian law is truly the most excellent of all. For although each of them prefers his own heresy on account of some influence of nature and custom or some influence of fiction, he nevertheless places the Christian religion before all others, with the exception of his own. Therefore, when it is being judged honestly, it is indisputably preferred to all the rest.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 192-193.

Fathers, the *prisci theologi*, and most significantly for our purposes, the seldom discussed anti-Jewish mendicant converso polemicists who, although medieval, had an awareness of the *Hebraica veritas* which was unparalleled in the Latin West.

In *De Christiana religione*, Ficino tried his hand at an age-old tradition that was explored in previous chapters: attempting to demonstrate the superiority of Christian doctrine over that of all other religions, especially over rabbinical teachings, chiefly by emphasizing the importance of the Incarnation, the Trinitarian composition of God, and the historical nature of Christ. The divine became man to give man the perfect religion, and to bridge the inestimable gap between man's finitude and the infinite transcendence of God. Christ was the 'eternal priest' who entered into history, transected it, sacrificed himself to himself, and thereby fulfilled and brought to a close the temporal laws of both the ancient pagans and the Hebrews with a set of eternal laws.⁶⁶² In the chapters entitled *On the Generation of the Son of God in Eternity* (13) and *On the Generation of the Son in Eternity and His Manifestation in Time* (15), Ficino explores the theme of prophecy foretelling the Incarnation of Christ among the Hebrews and the pagans both. It is here that Ficino cites the Orphic tradition, claiming that the *Logos* among the Greeks had been understood under the guise of Pallas Athena, sprung fully-formed from the head of Zeus, or Plato's *Letter to Hermias*, wherein he called the *Logos* "the Son of God the Father." He adds that both Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster believed the same, namely, that God had "intellectual offspring" (*intellectualem prolem*).⁶⁶³ Ficino then discusses the importance of the Sibyls and their prophecies (Chapters 24 and 25) in paving the way for the Incarnation. All this, however, leads up to a very lengthy polemic directed against the Jews and their various rabbis' particular interpretations of the books of the prophets (Chapters 26-34). These chapters make up the majority of the work, but have yet to receive much scholarly investigation. In them, Ficino stressed his use of Jewish sources in an effort to refute Judaism – that is, using the Jews' own weapons against them in the fashion set down centuries earlier by anti-Jewish polemicists like Petrus Alfonsi and Ramon Martí.⁶⁶⁴ When it came to attacking some of the subtler points of doctrine that various rabbis throughout history had maintained about the Messiah, Ficino's own

⁶⁶² Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 32: "Christ, therefore, is thus 'the priest in eternity,' sacrificing Himself once for God, who alone was able to cleanse others perfectly, since neither was He unclean, nor did He need holocausts to cleanse Himself unlike the rest of the priests before Him, since He perfectly purified the uncleanness of man and that of His own house not with the blood of beasts, not with impure blood, not with the blood of someone else, but with His own pure human blood. The apostle Paul speaks about these things in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 283.

⁶⁶³ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 13: "Hanc Palladem appellavit Orpheus solo Iovis capite natam; hunc Dei patris filium Plato in epistola ad Hermiam nominavit, in *Epinomide* nuncupavit logon, id est rationem ac verbum dicens: "Logos omnium divinissimus mundum hunc visibilem exornavit". Mercurius Trismegistus de verbo et filio Dei ac etiam de Spiritu sepe mentionem facit, Zoroaster quoque intellectualem Deo prolem attribuit. Dixerunt isti quidem quod potuerunt et id quidem adjuvante Deo; Deus autem hoc solus intelligit et cui Deus voluerit revelare." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 194-195; cf. Plato, *Epistle VI*, 323d2-4 and *Epinomis*, 986c4-5.

⁶⁶⁴ As one example of this using Ficino's own words, he mentions how he made liberal use of the Septuagint translation, chiefly "to convince/prevail against/overwhelm (*convicere*) this treacherous Jewish people using the excellent arsenal of those illustrious Jews [i.e., those who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek]." Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 30: "ego translatione libentius utor, ut perfidam hanc plebeculam Iudaicam cum egregiis illustrium Iudeorum illorum armis convincam." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 271.

take on the polemical tradition was mediated by two important converso figures. In arguing against the idea that the Messiah had not yet come – an idea that had been debated and passed down for centuries in the writings of the rabbis Salomon Yitzchaki (*Rashi*) and Moses Maimonides (*Rambam*) – Ficino turned to the writings of the formerly Jewish converts to Christianity, Paul of Burgos (a.k.a. Pablo de Santa Maria, or Paulus Burgensis, formerly Solomon ha-Levi, c. 1351–1435) and Jerome/Gerónimo of Santa Fé (or Hieronymus de Sancta Fide, formerly Joshua ben Joseph ibn Vives al-Lorki, fl. 1400–30), both of whom had become Dominican friars after their conversions and dedicated their lives to preaching to Jews.⁶⁶⁵ While situating his own use of their texts within a prophetic/apocalyptic framework, Ficino explicitly cited the converso sources he used against the Jews in the following passage:

But what is to be said about the Jews in the meantime [i.e., “in the day the bud of the Lord shall be in magnificence”]? Few will be chosen, and seldomly. For the following verse of Isaiah is understood to be about them: ‘And the fruit thereof that shall be left upon it shall be as one cluster of grapes, and the shaking of the olive tree, two or three berries in the top of a bough.’⁶⁶⁶ Afterward, because of their perfidy, they were shaken from the natural tree and separated from the root of the olive tree, as the Apostle Paul says, and still, a good many seem either to have been left behind there, or rather to have been grafted to it again in the meantime, like Evaristus the Hebrew, a distinguished man, who was the seventh Pope of the Christians after Peter, and who lived more than ten years in that office and died a martyr. Thereafter, at the time of the Goths, Julian [of Toledo] the Jew ruled the first bishopric in Spain in the holiest manner.⁶⁶⁷ Petrus Alfonsi, from the same nation, also wrote a dialogue against the perfidy of the Jews; Alfonso of Burgos, the greatest metaphysicist, took up the faith of Christ in the sixtieth year of his life and wrote many exceptional things against the Jews. What shall I say about Nicholas of Lyra, a great gentleman of learning and an exceptionally holy man? What about Jerome [of Santa Fé] the physician, who at the time of Pope

⁶⁶⁵ For brief biographical entries, see Walter Drum, “Paul of Burgos” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Herbermann, vol. 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913); Richard Gottheil and Meyer Kayserling, “Ibn Vives Al-Lorqui (Of Lorca), Joshua Ben Joseph (Hieronymus [Geronimo] de Santa Fé)” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, eds. Isidore Singer et al., vol. 6 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 552. Paul of Burgos is especially of interest for our purposes insofar as he wrote the anti-Jewish polemic *Dialogus Pauli et Sauli contra Judaeos, sive Scrutinium scripturarum* (Rome, 1471; Mantua, 1475; Mainz, 1478; Paris, 1507, 1535; Burgos, 1591), but also *Additiones* to Nicholas of Lyra’s *Postilla* (Nuremberg, 1481; 1485; 1487, etc.; Venice, 1481, 1482, etc.), excerpts of which appear in a work of Paul of Burgos entitled *De nomine divino quaestiones duodecim* (Utrecht, 1707) which focuses to the Tetragrammaton. For Ficino’s discussion on the pronunciation of this divine name’s as “hiehouahi” in a chapter on miracles, see Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 272; cf. Nicholas of Lyra, *Quaestiones disputatae contra Hebraeos in Biblia Sacra*, eds. Iohannes of Colonia and Nicholas Jenson, Venice 1481, c. 5^v.

⁶⁶⁶ *Isaiah* 4:2-3; *Romans* 11:16-24; Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium Scripturarum* (Rome: Ulrich Han, 1471), 286^v-287^r, 2.6.14. This text can be found digitized at Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Inc.200 at <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/Inc.III.200/0001>. See also Bartolucci, *Vera religio*, 50-57.

⁶⁶⁷ A notable work for our purposes here is Julian of Toledo’s 686 *De comprobatione aetatis sextae contra Judaeos*, a converso anti-Jewish polemic known to Paul of Burgos that dealt with Messianic prophecies and was written at the behest of the Visigothic king Erwig; see Jocelyn Nigel Hillgarth, ed., *De comprobatione sextae aetatis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976). Richard Gottheil and Meyer Kayserling, “Julian of Toledo” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, eds. Isidore Singer et al., vol. 7 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 391 add that Julian attempted “to prove that Jesus was actually born in the sixth age, in which the Messiah was to come; ‘but,’ he adds, ‘this time should not be reckoned according to the Hebrew original, which has been falsified by the Jews, but according to the Septuagint, which is more trustworthy.’” Note how Ficino’s own reckoning of when the Messiah had come did not follow this early medieval pattern, maintaining instead— whether consciously or unconsciously – a time more in keeping with Joachim of Fiore’s paradigm which saw Christ come into the middle of history, not near its end.

Benedict argued subtly against the Jews? There were also others, a great number in fact, although few were exceptional over such a long period of time. I reckon that this verse of Jeremiah is about them: “I will take you, one of a city, and two of a kindred” – or “of a congregation” – “and will bring you into Zion,” namely, heaven. The bishop Paul of Burgos, a distinguished theologian, treated these things diligently.”⁶⁶⁸

Much like Petrus Alfonsi who preceded them by two centuries, both Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fé had been erudite Talmudic scholars before their conversions to Christianity.⁶⁶⁹ Prior to his Christian baptism on July 21st 1391, changing his name from Solomon ha-Levi to Pablo de Santa María, he had been a wealthy rabbi in his own community, renouncing it all to take up the life of the cloth and assume the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience by joining the order of St. Dominic.⁶⁷⁰ All this, of course, was done in the immediate wake of the terrible massacres of Jews which began on 6 June 1391, but Paul himself claimed to have been moved, like so many others before and after him, by his readings of Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁷¹ Immediately following his conversion experience, Paul studied theology at the University of Paris, traveled to London, and was made Bishop of Cartagena in 1402, became a close advisor to Henry III of Castille, and eventually the archbishop of Burgos.⁶⁷² As a means of demonstrating their *bona fides* toward their new co-religionists, ever wary of relapsing ‘crypto-Jews,’ both men took to a life of heaping skepticism and doubt over the knowledge which had been passed down to them during their own religious upbringing. Henceforth, both Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fé actively campaigned to persecute Sephardic Jews, stripping them of their livelihoods and traditional rights, and ultimately forcing them to convert or flee Spain. In 1415, Paul was made Archbishop of Burgos for his great learning and his efforts in the spiritual war against the Jews, from which position he doubled down. Under the influence of the Dominican Thomas Aquinas’ polemics and the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra’s biblical exegesis, the work Paul of Burgos penned in the final

⁶⁶⁸ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 27 (Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 240): “De Iudeis autem interim quid est dicendum? Raro et pauci electi erunt. De iis enim illud Isaie intelligitur: “Et relinquetur in eo sicut racemus et sicut excussio olive duarum aut trium olivarum in summitate rami.” Postquam enim propter illorum perfidiam a naturali arbore, ut Paulus Apostolus inquit, excussi sunt et ab olive radice separati, adhuc nonnulli vel ibi relict, vel potius interdum denuo videntur inserti, qualis fuit Evaristus Hebreus, vir illustris, qui septimus a beato Petro Pontifex Christianorum fuit, annos plures quam decem in ea dignitate dignissime vixit martyre obiit. Preterea Gotorum tempore Iulianus Iudeus primum Hispanie sanctissime rexit episcopatum. Petrus quoque Alfonsius, eiusdem generis, dialogum conscripsit contra perfidiam Iudeorum; Alfonsus Burgensis, summus methaphysicus, in sexagesimo etatis sue anno fidem Christi suscepit pluraque adversus Iudeos egregia scripsit. Quid dicam de Nicholao Lyrensi, mari doctrine magno viroque sanctissimo? Quid de Hieronymo physico, qui tempore pontificis Benedicti contra Iudeos subtiliter disputavit? Fuerunt et alii numero quidem multi, quamvis egregii, tam longo seculo pauci, de quibus illud Hieremie dictum censeo: “Assumam vos unum de civitate et duos de cognitione [*sic*]” - (aliter “congregatione”) - “et adducam vos in Sion,” scilicet celestem. De iis diligenter Paulus Burgensis episcopus, theologus insignis, tractavit.”

⁶⁶⁹ Francisco Cantera Burgos, *La Conversión del célebre talmudista Solomón Levi (Pablo de Burgos)* (Santander: Publicaciones de la Sociedad de Menéndez Pelayo, 1933).

⁶⁷⁰ Benzion Netanyahu, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (New York: Random House, 1995), 171.

⁶⁷¹ Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2003), 160-161; Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 551.

⁶⁷² Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform*, 551.

year of his life toward this end – the *Dialogus Pauli et Sauli contra Iudaeos sive Scrutinium Scripturarum* – is here most significant.⁶⁷³

Much like Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogus contra Iudaeos*, Paul of Burgos' *Scrutinium Scripturarum* is comprised of a kind of Socratic dialogue bouncing back and forth between "Saulus ad Paulum" and "Paulus ad Saulum" wherein the Christian Paulus acknowledges that the Jewish Saulus will not be convinced by arguments based on the New Testament, but on Old Testament scriptures alone.⁶⁷⁴ Here the strategy is familiar: locate a particular belief which Jews do not share with Christians, and find precedent for it in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) original to demonstrate how contemporary Jews have fallen off the path of true Judaism (that is, Judaism as defined by Christians, or at least in this case, formerly Jewish Christians). It was through this work that Jerome of Santa Fé was inspired to write his own anti-Jewish polemics, the *Tractatus contra perfidiam Iudaeorum* and the *De Iudaeis erroribus ex Talmuth*, all of which Ficino cited extensively in 1473/4 in his invective chapters against the Jews (to say nothing of that Dominican's influence upon Martin Luther in his own infamous treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies*, 1543).⁶⁷⁵ The works of these converso mendicants wore the influences of their polemicist predecessors proudly, allowing us to draw a straight and self-conscious line of literary influence from men like Petrus Alfonsi and Ramon Martí all the way down to Marsilio Ficino.

With no real knowledge of Hebrew, Ficino was not as well equipped as his fellow humanist theologians Pico or Reuchlin in making linguistically-oriented arguments about the letters which originally comprised the Bible, but this did not stop him from turning to arguments that had been made by recent authorities on the subject. It is mainly in this regard that Ficino drew upon the works of Jerome of Santa Fé and Paul of Burgos who, as former Jews, relished in the kinds of polemics dedicated to esoteric Talmudic minutiae, in particular philological concerns. When arguing for the presence of Christological prefigurations in the Old Testament, Ficino often used Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation in a way Petrus Alfonsi would not have,⁶⁷⁶ but there are also a number of instances where he tried to leverage his crude knowledge of transliterated Hebrew into arguments about the nature of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Messiah. For example, in Chapter 31, *Confirmation of God's Trinity and Christ's Divinity from the Jews*, Ficino attempted to levy certain ideas unique to Hebrew grammar typically unknown outside of rabbinical circles, and attempted to remind his Jewish contemporaries that God had explicitly

⁶⁷³ See John Y. B. Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) which argues that, in spite of how his works were used by later interpreters, Aquinas himself had maintained a rather skeptical attitude towards anti-Jewish developments in thirteenth century Christian theology, especially the idea that the Jews were guilty above all for crucifying Christ, and consequently cursed. On p. 77 and ff., e.g., Hood explains how Aquinas believed that God was indeed punishing the Jews, but he still loved them, and wished to see them converted in the end, which is why the *Doctor angelicus* continued to advocate for the old Augustinian laissez-faire tradition, believing that Jews were to be treated differently than pagans and heretics.

⁶⁷⁴ Cf. n. 92 above.

⁶⁷⁵ The works of Jerome of Santa Fé were gathered together under the title of *Hebraeomastix* (i.e., *Scourge of the Hebrews*) and published in Zurich, 1552 then were translated into Spanish with the name *Azote de los Hebreos*.

⁶⁷⁶ For Ficino's use of the Septuagint, however, see n. 664 above.

mentioned his son on numerous occasions throughout the Old Testament books of the prophets. In doing so, he ensured that very specific grammatical constructions had been employed such that his mysteries might be revealed only to the most diligent of interpreters. Ficino wrote:

You deny that God has a natural son, that is, of the same nature [as himself]. Yet God says in the *Psalms* [2:7]: “Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee.” This cannot be said of angels and souls, which are not begotten, but created, for they proceeded not from the substance of God, but from nothing. Therefore, even if at times in holy scripture “the sons of God” [i.e., בני האלהים] are mentioned, nevertheless God never mentions sons as being begotten. But he said “this day,” that is, in the eternal today, specifically in the present state of eternity, which has neither beginning nor end – for whatever is of the substance of God is also eternal within God. Therefore, there is in the *Psalms* [71:17]: “Give to the king thy judgment, O God,” where it is clearly discussing the Son of God. Regarding the Son Himself it is said: “His name shall be forevermore, and His name continueth before the Sun.” The fact, however, that where our translation says “continueth,” the Hebrew text has “ynnon” [i.e., יִנּוֹן] – which actually is a word derived from “nyn”⁶⁷⁷ and “nyn” means ‘son’ – makes clear that the language is about the eternal Son of God. Therefore, what else does “ynnon” signify but a son, begotten, born, and absolute?⁶⁷⁸

On the one hand one cannot call these “kabbalistic” arguments given that Ficino made no direct recourse to kabbalistic texts like the *Zohar* or the works of Abraham Abulafia, no reference to the *sefirot*, and no use of gematria, temurah, or notarikon; on the other hand, similar arguments oriented around Hebrew grammar were used against Jews in the writings of medieval polemicists like Petrus Alfonsi and Ramon Martí (who themselves were slightly more familiar with some of Judaism’s more mystical literature).⁶⁷⁹ Such kinds of arguments – including a discussion of how the Tetragrammaton is pronounced “*hiehouahi*”⁶⁸⁰ – were the closest Ficino came in the 1470s to touching on what Moshe Idel called “kabbalistic thinking.”⁶⁸¹ Ficino privileged these sorts of arguments in the Bible’s original languages as valuable weapons in his arsenal, not only because

⁶⁷⁷ i.e., נָוּן (nuwn) verb derived from “a primitive root” “to resprout, i.e., propagate by shoots; figuratively, to be perpetual, be continued,” see Strong’s H5125.

⁶⁷⁸ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 275: “Negatis Deum filium naturalem, id est eiusdem nature, habere. Deus tamen in *Psalms* ait: “Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te.” Neque hoc de angelis animisque dici potest, qui non geniti, sed creati sunt, non enim de substantia Dei, sed de nihilo processerunt. Ideo etsi quandoque dicuntur in sacris litteris “filii Dei,” nunquam tamen a Deo dicuntur geniti. Dixit autem “hodie,” id est in eterno hodie, scilicet in presenti illo eternitatis statu, qui neque principium habet neque finem – quicquid enim ex substantia Dei est et intra Deum eternum est. Ideo in *Psalmo*: “Deus iudicium tuum regi da,” ubi manifeste de filio Dei tractatur. De ipso Filio dicitur: “Erit nomen eius in secula et ante Solem permanet nomen eius.” Quod autem de Filio Dei eterno sit sermo, illud declarat, quod ubi translatio nostra dicit “permanet,” Hebraicus textus habet “ynnon,” que quidem dictio a “nyn” derivatur: “nyn” filius est. “Ynnon” ergo quid aliud significat quam filium progenitum, natum atque absolutum? Quod Deus filium habeat, Salomon in *Proverbiis* testimonio est: “Quis ascendit in celum atque descendit? Quis continuit spiritum in manibus suis? Quis colligavit aquas quasi in vestimento? Quis suscitavit omnes terminos terre? Quod nomen est eius? Et nomen filii eius, si nosti?” Audite insuper Isaiam ad Deum ita clamantem: “Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.” Ter sanctus Trinitatem divinarum significat personarum, Dominus in singulari unicum Dei substantiam. “Plena est omnis terra gloria eius,” hoc assumptionem hominis e verbo Dei factam significat; nam ibidem Isaias Deum in throno sub figura hominis collocat.” Cf. Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium Scripturarum* (Rome: Ulrich Han, 1471), 136^v (1.9.10).

⁶⁷⁹ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 272; cf. n. 100 above.

⁶⁸⁰ For more on the hypothesis of an early encounter between Ficino and the themes of Kabbalah, in particular from the *Sefer HaBahir*, see Guido Bartolucci, “Per una fonte cabalistica del *De Christiana religione*: Marsilio Ficino e il nome di Dio,” *Revue de la Société Marsile Ficini* 6 (2004): 35-46. Cf. n. 834 below.

⁶⁸¹ See n. 175 above.

they reaffirmed his humanist proclivities as a translator to return *ad fontes*, to return as far back in history in his arguments as his philological savvy allowed him, where he could cut off various problems at the root and make his appeals to authority known, but also because such a mode of attack had precedent in the stratagems of his sources, the mendicant converso missionaries who themselves were tapping into a much longer Hebrew philological tradition as it had been practised by Jewish scholars throughout the Middle Ages.

In Chapter 27, *The Prophets' Testimonies about Christ*, Ficino's lengthiest chapter by far, our philosopher-priest relied on a pastiche of knowledge drawn from his converso sources Nicholas of Lyra, Paul of Burgos, and Jerome of Santa Fé in an attempt to refute the "many opinions among the Talmudists regarding the coming of the Messiah."⁶⁸² Recall how such a topic had been the very subject of debate at the infamous disputation of Barcelona in 1263 between Nachmanides and Pablo Christiani, a fact only mentioned here to give testament to its enduring and perennial nature.⁶⁸³ More immediately, the theme had also been the subject of debate at the 1413-1414 Disputation of Tortosa initiated and presided over by Jerome of Santa Fé. Among the many opinions debated in Talmudic circles were those reported in the *Avoda Zara*, perhaps the earliest account ever written to discuss the division of history into three 2000-year periods. In citing this work as an authoritative one among the Jews and comparing it to his own Christian reckoning of history, however, Ficino made the following observation:

The Jews accept the view from the book *Of Ordinary Judges* which is of no small authority among them.⁶⁸⁴ There, it is stated that the world is 6,000 years old, 2,000 of them for emptiness and void, the same number for the law, and the same again for the Messiah... But according to the Hebrews' calculation, 2,000 years passed from Adam to Abraham, which were the years of emptiness. From this to Jesus the Nazarene, there were also 2,000, which were the years of the law. Therefore, based on the Jewish calculation, the years that come after Jesus seem to have begun with the Messiah, especially since in that book the claim is made that there are 4,000 years between the beginning of the world and the Messiah.⁶⁸⁵ But according to the computation of all the Hebrews, the world today is passing through its 5,234th year. Therefore, the Messiah has already come.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸² Note that Nicholas of Lyra was not actually a converso, though Ficino believed that he was in keeping with a belief that was widespread in the fifteenth century.

⁶⁸³ See n. 405 above.

⁶⁸⁴ See Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, 32:48; cf. Pico, *Heptaplus*, 7.4 in *Opera omnia*, 53 (Carmichael, 160). Note that the book *Iudicum Ordinariorum* ("Of Ordinary Judges") here refers to the *Seder Nezikin* ("Order of Damages") in the Babylonian Talmud, from which the tractate *Avoda Zara* is taken.

⁶⁸⁵ Note that Ficino conveniently omitted to mention the section in *Avoda Zara* 9a which accounts for this problem in no uncertain terms: "The last set of two thousand years are the period designated for the days of the Messiah, but due to our many sins there are those years that have been taken from them, i.e., such and such years have already passed and have been taken from the two thousand years that are designated for the Messiah, and the Messiah has not yet arrived." Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, 32:48.

⁶⁸⁶ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 230: "Tertia Iudei opinionem accipiunt a libro *Iudicum Ordinariorum*, qui non parve apud illos auctoritatis est. Ibi tractatur sex annorum milia esse mundi etatem, duo quidem milia vanitati vel vacuo, tantundem legi, tantundem Messie attribui. Aiunt autem hec dicta fuisse a discipulo quodam Helie, filio Sarrecte, quem Helias suscitaverat. At vero secundum Hebraicam computationem ab Adam ad Abraham duo milia annorum fluxerunt, qui anni vanitatis fuerunt, ab hoc ad Ihesum Nazarenum millia quoque duo, qui fuerunt legis anni. Anni igitur, qui Ihesum secuntur, a Messia incepisse Iudaica computatione videntur, presertim quia in eo libro

In an attempt to demonstrate how many and sundry dates the Jews have in regards to the coming of the Messiah, many of which Ficino claimed had come to pass without a sign, he went on to list the various different times postulated by different rabbis throughout the centuries like Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Gersonides (again mediated through his mendicant sources Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fe). “Therefore, the Jews await a future Messiah in vain!” he exclaimed, adding that “whoever has still awaited the Messiah after Jesus has been deceived” since “they have not considered what Daniel said elsewhere: ‘In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed,’ namely, the heavenly kingdom of Christ.”⁶⁸⁷ Ficino was here attempting to use Scripture to interpret Scripture, and to demonstrate how the manifold dates posited by the rabbis were in contradiction with what had been written in the books of the prophets (whether in their Hebrew or “Chaldean” forms), which needed only a ‘spiritual understanding’ to unlock their hidden, Christological meanings. A little later in Chapter 27, Ficino made explicit his reliance on this ‘spiritual understanding’ in correctly interpreting the books of the prophets, and explained how this understanding had its precedent long ago in ancient times among some of his ‘good’ Jews, but was now lacking among the “stubborn” and “childish” minds of contemporary Jews who continued to await the Messiah:

The high priest Eleazar and Aristobulus, the wisest Jewish interpreters before Christ, and Philo, the wisest after Christ, all reckoned that the sacred scripture had to be explained through allegory, because of its mystical sense, and they even attempted it themselves.⁶⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the childish minds of many Jews stand in expectation of such a golden age with the Messiah reigning absolutely as is depicted in the words of poets, and in paintings. Moreover, while Jesus lived, the golden truth, peace of mind, and eternal reward shone enough in the souls of men who are not stubborn; and after Him, because of His works and teaching, anyone with the will can enjoy the golden age: Jesus secured for man eternal peace with God... Before Jesus, the Gentiles and the Jews were wholly at odds in all matters; after Him, many of the Jews and most of the Gentiles lived, and still live, harmonious in custom and belief by His teaching. Every day, all over the world, the bites of venomous animals are rendered harmless by the miracles of the apostles. Each one of these things, it seems, applies to the golden age.⁶⁸⁹ The golden age ought to be placed entirely in the rewards of the soul rather than in those of the body; the poets’ trifles, however, are best left to children.⁶⁹⁰

asseritur ab initio mundi ad Messiam quatuor annorum milia intercedere. Secundum vero Hebreorum omnium computationem hodie mundus agit annorum quinque milia et ducentos insuper atque triginta quatuor: iandiu igitur Messias venit.” Cf. Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium Scripturarum*, 33^v-34^r (1.3.4); cf. Hieronymus de Sancta Fide, *Contr.*, 1.2, 31.

⁶⁸⁷ *Daniel* 2:44; cf. Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium Scripturarum*, 83^r (1.7.6) and 283^r (2.6.11); Hieronymus de Sancta Fide, *Contra*, 71-2 (1.6).

⁶⁸⁸ Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 8.9-11 (PG 21.626-44).

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Lyra, *Quaestiones*, 6^a.

⁶⁹⁰ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 255-256: “Quamvis Eleazarus pontifex Aristobolusque ante Christum, ac Philo post Christum Iudeorum interpretum sapientissimi, sacras litteras propter mysticum sensum per allegoriam exponendas esse censuerint idque etiam ipsi tentaverint, tamen puerilia multorum Iudeorum ingenia talem omnino regnante Messia auream etatem expectant, qualem poetarum verba coloresque depingunt. Satis autem vivente Ihesu fulsit in animis hominum non pertinacium aurea veritas, tranquillitas mentis et fructus eternus; atque post illum ob eius opera et doctrinam quicumque vult aurea etate potitur: eterna pax hominibus cum Deo per Ihesum conciliata est, quanquam etiam multos annos “lupus”, id est potentior princeps vel populus, “agnus”, id est debiliorem principem aut populum, non devoravit. Erant ante Ihesum Gentiles et Iudei in omnibus omnino inter se discordes, post illum multi ex Iudeis, plurimi ex Gentilibus sub illius doctrina concordem moribus opinionibusque vivebant atque vivunt.

In all this we get a glimpse of how Ficino was tapping into a long tradition of polemical literature which stretched all the way back to the Church Fathers, but which reached new heights of exegetical complexity in the anti-Jewish polemics of medieval converso mendicants. Here we see how our humanist theologian's sense of historical awareness was deeply interconnected with his pro-Christian polemical side. To argue against those who would deny Christianity's most basic tenets, whether it be God's threefold nature, his role in history as Messiah, or the supremacy of the spiritual interpretation of Scripture over all other types – all points that pagan, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers were wont to reject – was to be forced to elaborate and complexify his ideas about the history of the world, and these included its overall structure. In Ficino, the poets Hesiod, Virgil, and Petrarch's cyclical reckoning of history – the humanist approach to history – was certainly present, but it was ultimately subordinate to his prophetic sense of history, since he argued clearly that the concept of things like “golden ages” were to be understood primarily with the “mystical sense,” not the literal, for this was the way Jews interpreted the coming of their alleged Messiah and his concomitant earthly golden age. The golden age was available to anyone anywhere, according to Ficino, so long as they had the intellect and the will to turn themselves toward the works and teachings of Jesus, the divine exemplar.

We see Ficino's use of the “*intelligentia spiritalis*” again explicitly in Chapter 34 entitled *Proof against Jews from Jewish Sources that the Ritual Practices of the Old Testament have been Completed and Fulfilled by the Arrival of the New Testament*. Here along with the help of Augustine, Ficino levies two different translations of Jeremiah's text in the light of a mystical – i.e., Christological – interpretation specifically to demonstrate the fulfillment of the Old Testament by the New:

Jeremiah protested against your [i.e., the Jews] obstinacy in this way: “‘Behold the days shall come,’ saith the Lord, ‘and I will strike’ (or ‘I will bring about’) ‘a new covenant’ (or ‘testament’) ‘with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, not according to the testament’ (or ‘agreement’) ‘which I made’ (or ‘agreed to’) ‘with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, the agreement which they made void’ (or ‘since they did not abide by my testament’) ‘and I disregarded them’ (or ‘I loathed’) ‘saith the Lord. But this shall be the testament’ (or ‘agreement’) ‘that I will set up with the house of Israel. After those days, saith the Lord, I will give my law to their minds’ (or ‘in their bowels’), ‘and I will write it in their heart, and I will see them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And each man shall not teach his neighbour, and each man his brother saying: ‘Know the Lord,’ since all shall understand me’” – namely that God is one. It continues: “From the greater even to the lesser, for I will be forgiving of their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no longer.”⁶⁹¹ In these words God promises that someday He will set up a new agreement and testament, and that He will hand down a new law, different from the one which He had given to Moses after He had delivered the Jews from Egypt, and that He will no longer write it on tablets, but in the minds of men, as if to say that first one could

Quotidie multis in locis animalium venenosorum morsus Apostolorum miraculis innoxii reddebantur. Singula hec ad seculum aureum pertinere videntur. Omnino autem aureum seculum in animi potius quam in corporis fructibus est ponendum, nuge vero poetarum pueris reliquende.”

⁶⁹¹ *Jeremiah* 31:31-34; Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 17.3.2 (*Patrologia Latina* 41.525-6; Dombart and Kalb, 553); cf. *Hebrews* 8:8-10.

be destroyed, not the second, and the old ceremonies ought to be maintained according to the spiritual understanding (*intelligentia spiritalis*) once the New Testament is introduced. Certainly, as Paul the Apostle says, when the prophet speaks of a “new agreement and testament,” he means that the other can grow old and falter.⁶⁹²

Where the old law was founded on corruptible tablets made of stone, the new law was “to be burned into hearts and minds, which in fact signifies that this new teaching is more spiritual – and also eternal – since the form of natural law is eternally impressed onto eternal minds,” not tablets of material stone.⁶⁹³ The old law was particular, the new law was universal; the old was place specific, the new applied to all places; the old promised temporal rewards, the new, eternal; the old pertained to common and civic virtues, the new, purgative virtues. Here all the hallmarks of the Latin polemical tradition are clearly on display: namely, the reappropriation of the enemy’s own arms (i.e., words) through a transformational appeal to a higher level of interpretation focused on incorporeal matters over corporeal ones. Through his personal studies, however, Ficino had become acutely aware of how all these hallmarks had been historically as much a part of the Platonic tradition as they had with the Christian. The teachings of both groups privileged the rejection of the bodily and sensual, or ‘the literal,’ for the immaterial and ideal, or ‘the spiritual,’ and in passages such as these we can see why Ficino believed a reinauguration of wisdom (Platonism) and divine law (Christianity) would lead to a fruitful union, and thereby furnish all the arguments he needed to refute the errors of Judaism and Islam. In all this, he was not trying to be original, but rather, trying to mimic the pattern set down by the ancients.

De Christiana religione was not designed to address debates revolving around academic systems of philosophical minutiae, but rather to offer a sweeping vision of why the religion of Christ and no other religion – especially not Judaism and Islam – constituted the one true supercelestial faith. Ultimately, Ficino maintained that it was the austerity, asceticism, renunciation, and above all, love (*caritas*) exhibited by the primitive Church – those values which had also been so highly touted by the medieval mendicants – that provided the clearest

⁶⁹² Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 290-291: “Adversum pertinaciam vestram Hieremias ita reclamavit: “‘Ecce dies venient,’ dicit Dominus, ‘et feriam, – (aliter “consummabo”), – “domui Israel et domui Iuda fedus,” – (aliter “Testamentum”) - “novum non secundum Testamentum,” – (aliter “pactum”), – “quod disposui,” – (aliter “pepigi”), – patribus eorum in die quia apprehendi manum eorum ut educerem eos de terra Egypti, pactum quod irritum fecerunt,” – (aliter “quoniam ipsi non permanserunt in Testamento meo”) – et ego neglexi eos,” – (aliter “abominatus sum”), – “dicit Dominus. Sed hoc erit Testamentum,” – (aliter “pactum”), – “quod constituam cum domo Israel. Post dies illos, dicit Dominus, dabo legem meam in mentem,” – (aliter “in visceribus”), – “eorum et in corde eorum scribam eam, et videbo eos et ero eis in Deum, et ipsi erunt mihi in plebem. Et non docebit unusquisque proximum suum et unusquisque fratrem suum dicens: ‘Cognosce Dominum,’ quoniam omnes scient me,” scilicet unicum esse Deum. Et sequitur: “A maiore usque ad minorem, quia propitius ero iniquitatibus eorum et peccatorum illorum iam non recordabor.” In iis promittit Deus aliquando se novum pactum Testamentumque dispositurum, novam traditurum legem differentem ab illa quam dederat Moysi, postquam Iudeos ab Egyptiis liberaverat, inscripturam eam non tabulis amplius, sed mentibus hominum, quasi prima illa deleri potuerit, non secunda, ac ceremonie veteres Novo Testamento introducto secundum spiritalem intelligentiam servari debuerint. Certe, ut Paulus Apostolus ait, quando Propheta dicit pactum Testamentumque Novum, significat alterum consensescere atque deficere posse.” Cf. *Hebrews* 8:8-12.

⁶⁹³ *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 34 (Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 290-297).

sign that Christ's earliest followers did not have ulterior motives.⁶⁹⁴ The apostles lived out their lives just like the Old Testament prophets, as holy fools who rejected the things of this world. They then suffered and died in order to share in the death and suffering of Christ, not that they might achieve some paradise of earthly delights, or perhaps to be reunited with their ancestors, but that they might rest in the eternal and transcendent perfect happiness (*felicitas*) of God's throne room through the power of love (*caritas*). Beyond invoking the fulfillment of various prophecies in confirming the truth of Christianity, Ficino enshrined the *vita apostolica* as the surest sign of his religion being true. It was the transvaluation of worldly or pagan values – a transvaluation he believed absent from Judaism or Islam – which Ficino saw as the *sine qua non* of the Christian message. Citing a pastiche of quotes from Christ himself, he wrote:

“Give all your possessions to the poor; reject who you hold dearest; if someone strikes you turn your cheeks; do good to your enemies; regard this life and all its pleasures as worthless; deny even yourselves; take up this cross of ours – the terrible cross; please follow us immediately. For if you follow us, without doubt you will undergo everything that mortals judge evil throughout the rest of your life.” They said this. What persuasion, full in all respects of every sort of dissuasion! Do we believe that Demosthenes or Cicero could have persuaded anyone of anything using this method? Nevertheless, that speech, nay the speaker persuaded many great men against all expectation. But how? By God was that miracle done, more amazing than any other miracle, since Jesus, as those who heard him attest, spoke not as scribes and Pharisees, but as one with authority.⁶⁹⁵

For Ficino, an imitation of the Word spoke louder than mere words ever could. For as much as he was concerned with Platonic, incorporeal, and supercelestial matters, he first had to broach the subject by an appeal to history, to the lived experiences of exemplary men who lived long ago. In the Christian message, the transcendent was found only through total abasement: the highest things were brought down to the lowest, and the lowest things were brought up to the highest. With the backing of prophecy, acts of renunciation here became the unique badges of the Christian faith, acts which Ficino reckoned had no place in the ‘carnal’ faith of the Jews, the ‘lewd’ and ‘unjust’ faith of the pagans, or the ‘lascivious’ faith of the Mohammadans:

If purity is the chief quality of religion, this one is certainly the most divine, because it allows neither the base superstitions of the later Jews and the foulest absurdities of the *Talmud*, nor the lewd and unjust fables of the pagans, nor the abominable wantonness of the Mohammadans and the silliness of the *Qur'an*. Indeed, the Christian law neither promises earthly rewards, as other laws do, but rather it promises heavenly rewards, nor does it command opponents of its faith and law to be killed, in the way that the *Talmud* and *Qur'an* have commanded, but rather it commands that they be taught by reason, converted

⁶⁹⁴ See *1 Corinthians* 13:13.

⁶⁹⁵ Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 173: “Date vestra omnia pauperibus; carissimos vestros respuite; porrigite genas percutienti; benefacite inimicis; vitam hanc omniaque eius oblectamenta pro nihilo habetote; abnegate vos metipso; crucem hanc nostram, crucem terribilem, subinetete; sequamini nos quamprimum precamur. Si enim nos sequemini, procul dubio quecunq; a mortalibus mala existimantur per omnem vitam subibitis.” Hec illi. O suasionem dissuasionis omnis undique plenam! An putamus Demostenem, Ciceronemque hac ratione quicquam persuadere cuiquam potuisse? Persuasit tamen contio illa, immo contionator, subito multis magnisque viris. At unde? A Deo factum est illud omni miraculo mirabilius, siquidem, ut testantur qui audierunt, loquebatur Ihesus non sicut scribe et Pharisei, sed tanquam potestatem habens.” In order, cf. *Matthew* 19:21; *Luke* 12:33, 18:22, 14:25-27; *Matthew* 5:44, 6:19-20, 16:24-26, 4:19.

through speech, or tolerated with patience. This law – that makes the case for virtues through toil before talk, as became self-evident during the first fruits of the Christians – does not merely cut away at vices, but uproots them entirely.”⁶⁹⁶

To be in the Lord’s vineyard was to toil and suffer. To be a Christian was to renounce this world, and to renounce this world was to practice the one true natural religion, the religion of sacrifice, for nature itself had been established for rational souls to climb up and out of, to return back toward the one true supernatural God through a soteriological system that was woven into the very fiber of his Trinitarian being. For the wider Greek world, it was Pythagoras and Plato who had paved the way for a dualistic renunciation of the flesh for the life of the mind, but Ficino saw this ideology perfected most completely in the men of the New Testament alone, namely those who established the perfect marriage between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

For as much as poverty, suffering, martyrdom, and death played a role in historically legitimating the Christian faith, the concept of revelation or prophecy – a concept held in common among pagans, Muslims, Jews, and Christians ‘by nature’ – was even more central to Ficino’s theology. This is because the *vita apostolica* had been entirely patterned upon the *vita prophetica* from its inception. It was through the lens of the historic lives of the prophets and their words that the moral transvaluations of Christ and his apostles acquired their force. In as much as Christ and his apostles lived lives of religious renunciation, they had done so in imitation of the Old Testament prophets who preceded them. They emulated men who walked about the streets dressed in sackcloth, who mortified their flesh or ate defiled bread, who reproached hostile priests and kings at great peril, all in service of something that transcended mundane earthly concerns: their ideals about justice and mercy. It was the prophets who ‘prepared the way for the Lord’ with their thunderous admonitions for a return to a just society.⁶⁹⁷ It was after these men that the *vita apostolica* was modelled, and through their emulation that they legitimized their own antinomianisms. In Ficino’s mind, of course, the apostles were not historically emulating the prophets so much as the prophets were prefiguring the eternal pattern embodied and revealed by Christ. If the lives of most Christians in Ficino’s day did not reflect the lives of the *ecclesia primitiva*, or of the prophets who preceded them, it was because something had been neglected, and the rot was accumulating. Fortunately, this something was not completely lost, because the blueprints for its existence had been preserved in the very letter of Holy Scripture – the transcendent Word – that very Scripture which Ficino perceived in his own age as being pushed aside at the expense of non- or even anti-Christian innovations.

⁶⁹⁶ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 8; Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 178: “si religionis maxime propria est puritas, hec certe divinissima est, que neque viles posteriorum Iudeorum superstitiones et spurcissima *Talmut* deliramenta, neque obscenas et iniquas Gentilium fabulas, neque abominabilem Mahumethensium licentiam et *Alcorani* ineptias admittit, que neque terrena premia, ut leges alie, sed celestia pollicetur, neque adversarios fidei legisque sue interfici iubet, quemadmodum iussit *Talmut* et *Alcoranum*, sed vel ratione doceri, vel oratione converti, vel patientia tolerari; que, ut in primitiis Christianorum re ipsa manifestissime apparuit, non modo amputat vitia, sed extirpat que virtutes persuadet operando priusquam loquendo.”

⁶⁹⁷ *Isaiah* 40:3.

Throughout the Gospels, Christ himself is depicted as a kind of prophet above all prophets, namely, one who fulfills the prophecies of others as much as he gives and fulfills his own. Among all the prophecies issued by Christ, however, Ficino upheld the destruction of Judaism as among the most important. Throughout Chapter 8, in giving his list of reasons as to why Christianity is supreme above all other religions, Ficino asked the rhetorical question:

What of the fact that many centuries ago an exceeding number of prophets and sibyls in long succession predicted each and every one of these things which we shall show in the following section? What of the fact that Christ, the teacher of life, not only predicted his own death, the future persecution against his disciples everywhere, the propagation and immutability of his religion, the wretched ruin of the Jews soon to come, the conversion of the pagans, the obstinacy of some Jews to endure all the way to the end of the world, but also inspired his disciples to say the same?⁶⁹⁸

Here the ultimate prophet, who through his own life fulfilled the very religion of the prophets, is praised in his foretelling of Judaism's inevitable two-fold demise: first with the destruction of the Second Temple, then with their mass conversion upon his final return. Not only was Christ the Ur-prophet, he was also God, and his prophecies did not so much describe the world as shape it. In this we can see how the very legitimacy of Christ as Messiah was held in a kind of inverse proportion to the legitimacy of Judaism in Ficino's age: Christ is Christ insofar as he fulfilled and ended the faith of the Old Testament by replacing it with a new one. To suggest anything else, *to reject the spiritual interpretation of the Law for the carnal*, was to throw the gift of God back in his face. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ficino's polemics made few, if any, waves in actual Jewish circles. Not only were his hermeneutical arguments unoriginal, being taken directly from works of medieval converso polemicists, but to a learned rabbi they would not have been very convincing either. Relying on transliterations and second-hand information, Ficino himself was simply not equipped with the linguistic expertise to truly 'beat the Jews at their own game,' though he considered his work satisfactory for his own purposes. Despite being rhetorically addressed to the Jews at times, the work was not so much intended for a Jewish audience as much as to impress Ficino's inner circle of princes, poets, priests, and patrons. Simply put: Ficino was really only preaching to the choir since the immediate reach of the *De Christiana religione* was limited to learned Christian circles.

Ficino was a man with many facets and this chapter endeavoured to shed light on just one, that is, the humanist philosopher-priest living in the early 1470s concerned with developing an accurate picture of world history within which he might locate the exemplars needed to create an orderly society in his own day. This chapter explored how anxieties about the rise of Islam, Turkish invasions in the East, the infiltration of the universities by a corrupted reading of

⁶⁹⁸ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 8: "Quid quod multis ante seculis longo ordine a plurimis Prophetis atque Sybillis singula hec predicta fuerunt, quod in sequentibus ostendemus? Quid quod Christus, vite magister, mortem suam, persecutionem adversum discipulos suos ubique futuram, propagationem immutabilitatemque religionis sue, miserabilem Iudeorum ruinam brevi venturam, Gentilium conversionem, Iudeorum quorundam pertinaciam usque ad mundi finem duraturam tum ipse predixit, tum discipulos suos inspiravit, ut dicerent?" Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 178.

Aristotle, the spread of rabbinical ideas about Scriptural interpretations, and the factionalism among learned Christians each fuelled Ficino's ideas about reform or renewal. In dealing with these anxieties, we saw a Ficino fixated upon four important concepts: i) that God's truth in the form of the *Logos* or pre-existent Christ is both singular and universal, it serves as an intuitive model for the natural religions of man, and that its presence came and went throughout various junctures in history; ii) that the period in which Ficino wrote the *De Christiana religione* was cast in the light of an 'iron age,' an era in which society would soon be swept away by a great catastrophe unless individual Christians could re-establish their lost connection with the *Logos*; iii) that Judaism and Islam, above all, were the greatest foils to God's truth on account of their many apparent similarities to Christianity (albeit without its *essential* features); and iv) that only a fusion of ancient philosophy (i.e., Platonism) and New Testament doctrine as embodied in the ideal or exemplary man could foster the conditions for a new, golden age. Ficino was not translating the complete works of various *prisci theologi* for their own sake as some kind of pagan revivalist, but as an ordained Catholic priest attempting to reinaugurate and immanentize a spiritual golden age for Christendom. Above all, we saw how throughout the bulk of his polemical work, Ficino relied as much – if not significantly more – on Latin converso and mendicant authors than he did on the writings of Church Fathers or Plato. He did this, however, because these authors allowed him access into the world of the *Hebraica veritas*, which unlike the *Graeca veritas* he could not access on his own. With this material, he was able to handle these two distinct traditions in a conscious parallelism, in the mode that was fashionable among the humanists of his day.⁶⁹⁹

The next chapter will turn to the figure of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a scholastically-trained philosopher with whom Ficino shared both many friends and many similar, albeit subtly distinguished, ideas. The elder Ficino inspired the younger Pico to see the world to some extent through his Platonic and humanist lens, but over time there developed greater and greater incomensurabilities between their respective approaches to philosophy and its history. Whereas the Medici's court philosopher predominantly used his knowledge of the *Graeca veritas*, Plato, the Bible, and medieval converso literature to cut at the root of the ideas put forward by Jewish rabbis and Islamic philosophers, the university-educated count of Mirandola's career even more closely resembled that of a medieval mendicant like Ramon Martí or Ramon Llull, that is, men who actually made a career of learning Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic so as to be more effective in raiding their enemies' intellectual armories. Pico differed from Ficino quite significantly in that he knew if he was to assemble a set of philosophical disputations to demonstrate irrefutably the truth of his esoteric Christian *nova philosophia* over Judaism, Islam, or the false interpretations of certain schoolmen, he knew that he could never accomplish it by enshrining the revelations of pagans like Zoroaster or Hermes Trismegistus. All Pico really needed was the *Hebraica veritas*, since he believed any careful interpreter applying his spiritual understanding could discover for himself that all the doctrines of Plato had already been known

⁶⁹⁹ See n. 641 above.

to Moses when he wrote the Pentateuch; he simply had not laid them out exoterically, or plainly for all to see. In keeping with centuries of Christian polemical tradition, however, we can see how both of these humanist theologians held in common the presupposition that if they wanted to dismantle the objections of rival religions, they would best do so by going back to the earliest sources and ‘raiding the armouries of their opponents’ or ‘slaying their enemies with their own swords.’

6 - The One to End the Many: Pico's Prophetic Sense of History

6.1 The Life and Works of the *Princeps Concordiae*

In 1463, Giovanni Pico was born in Mirandola, a small city-fortress in northern Italy some 160km north of Florence. He was the younger son in a family of feudal lords of Lombard origins who controlled this small territory and traced back their ancestry to the Roman Emperor Constantine.⁷⁰⁰ As a child Pico received an education in the *studia humanitatis* at home under the watch of a number of personal tutors. Given his advanced talents, his mother encouraged him to pursue a clerical career, and so he became a papal notary at the age of ten. At age 14, in 1477, he undertook the study of canon law at Bologna. In the wake of his mother's death in 1478, and after two years of being drained by his studies, he left Bologna to go spend his following years in the various universities of Italy and France where he developed his taste for Greek and Latin philosophy, especially at Ferrara. At this time, Ferrara's elites were well acquainted with the ideals of Renaissance humanism, particularly through the famous school of Guarino da Verona (1374–1460) who had been a student of Manuel Chrysoloras and a follower of Gemistos Plethon.⁷⁰¹ After spending some time at the University of Ferrara, Pico attended the University of Padua where the scholastic study of Aristotle and his Arabic commentator Averroes was most emphasized. There he studied under the watchful eye of the last Jewish Averroist Elia del Medigo (c. 1458 – c. 1493) and the translator of Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*, Ermolao Barbaro (1454–93). During this period, Pico was in contact with scholars of all types and with their help, he managed to amass for himself a sizable library of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chaldean (Aramaic), and Arabic philosophical works. It is also in Ferrara that he first came into contact with the budding theologian, Girolamo Savonarola, a man whose apocalyptic fervour would later come to have a profound impact on not only Pico, but on every last citizen of Florence.⁷⁰²

By 1482, Pico was studying philosophy, mathematics, and literature at Pavia. After this period, he spent some time among the humanist circles of Florence with the poets Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542), and Marsilio Ficino. While in Florence from 1484 to 1485, Pico became acquainted with many other scholars from Lorenzo de' Medici's social circles, including Lorenzo himself. These were relationships he maintained for

⁷⁰⁰ The following dates and bibliographical details are drawn from McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 4; Black, *Pico*, 5-11; Brian Copenhaver, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pico-della-mirandola/> and *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and his Oration in Modern Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2019). Note that while there are two famous Pico della Mirandas, namely Giovanni Pico and his nephew Gianfrancesco Pico, whenever the shorthand "Pico" appears here, it is a reference to the former rather than the latter.

⁷⁰¹ Jan-Hendryk De Boer, "Faith and Knowledge in the Religion of the Renaissance: Nicholas of Cusa, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Savonarola," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 83, 1 (2009): 56. For Plethon, see n. 596 above.

⁷⁰² Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 27.

the rest of his foreshortened life. A number of formative experiences in his scholarly career arose from his close association with the so-called “Platonic Academy” which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was not so much a formal school as a loose gathering of Ficino’s friends who occasionally shared orations, sermons, poetry, and philosophical writings. In this circle of erudite and well-connected elites, the young Pico was particularly influenced by the idea promulgated by Ficino and Poliziano, that the Church could be reformed through a marriage of religion and philosophy, namely through Christianity and Platonism. This was just around the time when Ficino was finally printing his monumental *Theologia Platonica* (1482), his *Divini Platonis opera omnia* (1484), and a revised Italian edition of *De Christiana religione* (1484), all of which had a formative impact on the way Pico conceived his world and its history. Nevertheless, Ficino’s take on Plato and the Platonists was palpably partisan and anti-scholastic in nature, and this was a stance that challenged Pico’s educational upbringing in the universities. Ficino wished to enshrine Platonism as the philosophy of choice for understanding Christianity, but this was chiefly done as a means of *getting away* from the Aristotelianism of the schoolmen he saw becoming increasingly corrupted by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes in regards to such questions as the immortality of the soul. In light of this dilemma – set between the Scylla of Ficino’s Platonism and the Charybdis of the schoolmen’s Aristotelianism – the young prince set out to begin his lifelong project: harmonizing Plato and Aristotle.⁷⁰³ The best way to do that, Pico believed, was simply to turn back to the *Graeca veritas* and nip problems in the bud. Despite his youth, Pico was far less provocative in this regard than Ficino, as might be gleaned from a letter he wrote to Ermolao Barbaro dated June 9th, 1485.⁷⁰⁴ In it he defended scholasticism against the now common rebuke that its practitioners spoke and wrote in barbarous Latin. The young count maintained the Augustinian argument that truth was the only thing of consequence, regardless of the vulgarity of the tongue which expressed it.⁷⁰⁵ In this letter Pico set the work of Lucretius, the arch-materialist poet of *De rerum natura* fame, against that of John Scotus Eriugena, the illustrious medieval Latin translator of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Positioning himself between these two philosophical titans standing at either end of the extremes in the materialist-idealist divide to examine the merits of their rhetoric, Pico wrote:

See how Eriugena speaks with a clumsy tongue, but Lucretius with a foolish mind; Eriugena is unaware of the rules of the grammarians and poets, but Lucretius does not know the decrees of God and nature;

⁷⁰³ For a recent assessment of Ficino’s Platonic influence on Pico, see Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico*, 63-72 and for the influence of the schoolmen who staffed the universities specifically, see A. Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).

⁷⁰⁴ Ermolao Barbaro and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?*, ed. F. Bausi (Naples: Liguori, 1998), 38; cf. Erika Rummel, “Scholasticism and Biblical Humanism in Early Modern Europe” in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, 1-2 who provides this letter along with a number of other “programmatic pieces advancing the cause of humanism and the New Learning” alongside Petrarch’s *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (1368), Salutati’s letter to Giovanni da Saminiato (1405), and a few other later pieces which “commented on the issues that were of principle importance to humanists: their preference for rhetoric over logic, their emphasis on philology and language studies, the call for a return to the classical and Biblical sources, and their disdain for the scholastics whom they characterized as barbarian logic-choppers.”

⁷⁰⁵ Black, *Pico*, 6.

Eriugena speaks with the most childish of tongues, yet he understands things that cannot be praised too highly.⁷⁰⁶

Pico believed himself in a war between elegant falsehoods and awkwardly presented truths, and in this we can see how already in the pre-excommunication stage of his life, he argued in favour of simplicity over lavish embellishment. What he was after was unity, agreement, harmony, and truth, not the adornment of words. This was a position that stretched all the way back to Plato's war against the poets, and was likewise emphasized by Augustine, a teacher of rhetoric, who famously argued that wisdom was of far greater importance than eloquence (though admittedly, he also argued that, if wisdom and eloquence could be coupled together, they made an irresistible combination).⁷⁰⁷ In keeping with this sentiment, Pico was something of a poet himself, and his interest in creating a 'poetic theology' became a central part of his need to bridge the gap between pagan and Christian theologies with the idea that "the best pagan poets had been secret monotheists."⁷⁰⁸ From 1485 to 1486, Pico worked on his vernacular *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore*, a collection of notes on the theme of love that he was later intending to rework into a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.⁷⁰⁹ This work was following hot on the heels of Ficino's 1484 publication of his own *Symposium* commentary, *De amore*, many facets of which the young Giovanni was not in agreement with.⁷¹⁰ In his *Commento*, Pico made the following statement that would trail him for the rest of his life and become perhaps the most succinct way to encapsulate the whole breadth of his life's philosophical work: "happiness (*la felicità*) is nothing other than reaching one's highest good and ultimate end, and the ultimate end of everything is the same, namely, its own first principle."⁷¹¹ Henceforth, this *felicitas* became Pico's highest aspiration and the cornerstone of his whole philosophy, and in this regard he strove for the same goal as Ficino, though they ultimately sought to achieve it through slightly different pathways.

Unlike Ficino, Pico studied for a time across various European universities, particularly those which had long stood as centers for Aristotelian philosophy, theology, and scholastic disputation. Although Pico's ideas certainly remained tinged by the Platonism of Ficino's circle,

⁷⁰⁶ *Corpus reformatorum*, 686 as cited in Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 81; Quirinus Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on the Conflict of Philosophy and Rhetoric," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (1952): 384-412. See also Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 261.

⁷⁰⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 607b5-6; Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 4.5.

⁷⁰⁸ Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism*, 488.

⁷⁰⁹ *Commentary on a Poem of Platonic Love*, trans. Douglas Carmichael (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986). In the end, large portions of Pico's *Commento* were reused in his 1489 *Heptaplus*, thereby explicitly fusing the themes of Platonic and kabbalistic literature into a single work.

⁷¹⁰ James A. Devereux, "The Textual History of Ficino's *De Amore*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28, 2 (1975): 173-82; Yvan Morin, "Les Trois Grâces du «Commento»: la réaction initiale de Pic à Ficin," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain, Quatrième série* 101, 3 (2003): 383-412; and Unn Irene Aasdalen, "The First Pico-Ficino Controversy," in *Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, eds. Stephen Clucas, Peter Forshaw and Valery Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 67-88.

⁷¹¹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore a cura di Paolo De Angelis* (Palermo: Novecento, 1994), 51: "...la felicità non è altro che pervenire al suo sommo bene e ultimo fine, e quell medesimo è ultimo fine d'ogni cosa che è suo primo principio."

especially after reading the *Theologia Platonica*, he knew better than to allow admiration to cast any kind of shadow of disrespect on Plato's greatest protégé, Aristotle, the most widely revered philosopher of his age, whether among Christians, Muslims, or Jews. Aristotle had been Plato's greatest student and an expounder of his doctrines, not his rival. Ficino, who had no outstanding gripes against Aristotle (or ps.-Aristotle for that matter), towed the Late Platonist party line: he was worthwhile for his elucidations of logic and natural philosophy (i.e., terrestrial and celestial matters, like medicine and astronomy), but a pale shadow of Plato in regards to theology and metaphysics (i.e., supercelestial matters). Whenever Plato and Aristotle were in disagreement, therefore, Ficino subordinated the student to the master. On account of his scholastic training, however, Pico held Aristotle and his school in much higher regard. To him, these two foremost pagan teachers could be reconciled, believing them to have merely used different language to express the same underlying concepts. All there was to do was sweep away the erroneous and factionalizing interpretations that had accreted in later centuries which pitted the two philosophical giants against one another. Pico's desire to resolve this tension was enough to earn him the moniker *Princeps Concordiae* or "Prince of Harmony" among his friends, and this was as much a pun on his title as Prince of Concordia, one of his family's holdings, as on his wish to do away with the dissonance that over centuries had gradually arisen between Ancient Greece's two greatest philosophical luminaries.⁷¹²

For every intellectual, there was a unique Plato and a unique Aristotle depending on the texts which were available to them (and depending on which from among those texts they deemed authentic or spurious).⁷¹³ From Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages, the boundaries erected between the Aristotelian and Platonic systems were certainly not thought to be so great as to be incommensurable. In keeping with the Late Antique philosophers of Alexandria, the Renaissance continued to inherit and produce new and various hybridized permutations of the Platonic and Aristotelian systems.⁷¹⁴ This spirit of reconciliation was manifest in as early a source as Cicero (106–43 BC), who likely inherited it from his teacher Antiochus of Ascalon (125–68 BC), the founder of eclecticism, which itself developed as a branch from Plato's school. In fact, such attempts at reconciling Plato and Aristotle ultimately became a defining feature of Platonism in Late Antiquity. Kristeller noted that Plotinus' master Ammonius Saccas (175–242) planned to translate into Latin all the writings of Plato and Aristotle, a project to which Boethius (477–524) had given his approval.⁷¹⁵ Porphyry (234–305) had also written a work on the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle, claiming that a condensed version of Aristotle's

⁷¹² Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 62.

⁷¹³ Pico, for example, understood the *Secretum secretorum* (*Sihr al-Asrar*, *Secret of Secrets*) to be an inauthentic work of Aristotle, and thus this 'mirror for princes' did not colour his view of his Stagyrite master in the way it coloured the view of medieval philosophers.

⁷¹⁴ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 62-63; scholars of the twentieth century also tended to emphasize similarities over differences, solving the discrepancies between Plato and Aristotle by invoking a hidden variable in Plato's oral teachings between his own dialogues and Aristotle's surviving later works. Consequently, they posited that Aristotle's lost early writings were closer to Plato's in language and content. In this way, the differences between the two formed gradually, but was not fundamental.

⁷¹⁵ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 62-63.

Metaphysics could essentially be found in Plotinus' *Enneads*.⁷¹⁶ With this began a precedent, beginning as early as the 4th century, for thinking about selections from Plotinus' *Enneads* (IV-VI) as the "*Theology of Aristotle*" (with the *Metaphysics* only much later coming to be known as Aristotle's actual treatise on theology). Therefore, although Pico's approach was particularly systematic, he was not the first to try his hand at a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, whether in his *900 Conclusiones* or his unfinished *Symphonia Platonis et Aristotelis*, and indeed he would not be the last.⁷¹⁷ It is notable that one of the few mentions Martin Luther made of Pico in his writings consisted of a jab at this endeavour to highlight the concordances between Plato and Aristotle, both of whom he (like Savonarola before him) found distasteful and full of pagan folly.⁷¹⁸ All this is to say, however, that there was no definitive image of Aristotle or Plato which medieval and Renaissance philosophers had in mind as they debated the possibilities for their reconciliation – what did exist were a great diversity of texts of varying providence which could be cited, interpreted, measured against the truths revealed by Scripture, and most importantly, *debated* in both public and private spheres.

In 1486, after a brief time away in Paris, Pico returned to Florence by March, and it is here where he likely encountered Margherita de' Medici, the wife of Giuliano Mariotto de' Medici of Arezzo. Two months later, on May 10th 1486, Pico made an attempt to elope with her and promptly failed. This was an extremely foolish decision on his part as the abduction process got some people killed and others injured. Pico was caught on horseback by a company of Aretine riders, Margherita was taken from him, and the whole affair rapidly degenerated into a scandal across his family's and friends' elite social networks.⁷¹⁹ The event may even have gone on to play a role in his mysterious death later in 1494. Somewhat disgraced, Pico spent the following months moving between Fratta and Perugia.⁷²⁰ In Perugia, he cultivated his interest in Averroes, and intensified his studies of Hebrew and Arabic under the guidance of hired Jewish tutors: Elia del Medigo and Flavius Mithridates. It is during this time that Pico became entranced by the concepts his teachers had derived from their studies of Kabbalah, and that he put himself

⁷¹⁶ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 14.5-7.

⁷¹⁷ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 102-105; this trend reached its high point in the baroque sixteenth century cosmological syntheses of Bernardino Telesio or Pietro Pomponazzi.

⁷¹⁸ *Resolutiones* on the *95 Theses*, WA 1, 611. Luther had noticeably become disconcerted after reading the *Theology of Aristotle*, which in 1519 was known as Aristotle's *Libros de secretiore parte divinae sapientiae secundum Aegyptios*. This text, brought into the Latin West from the Arabic world during the Middle Ages under the guise of the *Liber de causis*, had long been thought Aristotelian because of its goal of harmonizing Plato and Aristotle, and its demonstration of how Aristotle conformed with Christianity. Luther thought this idea preposterous, maintaining that the work had been pseudepigraphically attributed to Aristotle merely to enhance the reputation of the Church's "worst enemy." See Krayer, "Pseudo-Aristotelian Theology," 268-9. Whether Luther knew the whole story of this text's transmission, that it had originally been an Arabic paraphrased version of Plotinus's *Enneads* IV-VI translated into Latin centuries later, is unlikely. Cf. Stengel, *Reformation, Renaissance, and Hermeticism*, 118.

⁷¹⁹ Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5; Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 168 notes that Gianfrancesco Pico almost entirely glossed over and minimized this event in his uncle's biography. See also P. C. Bori, "The Historical and Biographical Background of the Oration," in *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. F. Borghesi, M. Papio, and M. Riva (New York: Cambridge University Press), 11.

⁷²⁰ Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico*, 18.

to working on his *Conclusiones* in his eagerness to present his new philosophical and theological discoveries before officials of the Church later that year.⁷²¹ With regard to his Semitic language studies, where Ficino had only dabbled around the time he wrote *De Christiana religione* a decade earlier, Pico was now putting in serious effort.⁷²² It is here at Perugia where Pico was allegedly given access to seventy volumes of Kabbalah translated at the behest of Sixtus IV for the general good of the faith, which he claimed to have read and re-read because they contained “a vein of intellect, or an ineffable theology of supersubstantial divinity; a spring of wisdom, or a complete metaphysics of intelligible and angelic forms; and a stream of knowledge, or a most certain philosophy of Nature.”⁷²³ What he found in these, however, should not come as a surprise. He confessed in his 1486 *Oratio*:

I saw in them – so help me God – a religion not so much Mosaic as Christian. There I read about the mystery of the Trinity, about the incarnation of the Word, about the divinity of the Messiah, about original sin, its atonement through Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, the fall of the demons, the orders of angels, about purgatory and the pains of hell, reading the same things we read every day in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine. But where these books bear on philosophy, you might actually be hearing Pythagoras and Plato, whose teachings are so closely related to the Christian faith that our Augustine gives great thanks to God because books by the Platonists came into his hands. All in all, there is hardly any point of contention between us and the Jews on which these books by Kabbalists cannot defeat and rebut them, leaving no corner to hide in.⁷²⁴

To see Christians proclaiming that there were Christological prefigurations in the Hebrew writings of the Old Testament, as we have seen, was nothing new. To see Christological prefigurations being read into the writings of the Kabbalists, however, was entirely new. To Pico, Jewish Kabbalah, Platonism, Aristotelianism, and the Christian mysteries were all inseparable as they each – if correctly understood – spoke to the same fundamental truths.⁷²⁵ The problem was that throughout history there had been so many who had not correctly understood these

⁷²¹ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 56; Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 4-5.

⁷²² In September of 1486, Pico wrote to Ficino that while his Hebrew was still lacking, he could at least write a simple letter in it: *Opera omnia*, 367: “...in qua possum nondum quidem cum laude, sed citra culpam epistolam dictare.”

⁷²³ Pico, *Oratio* in Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 480 or Brian Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration* (Cambridge: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2022), 135. Cf. n. 35 above.

⁷²⁴ Pico, *Oratio* in *Opera omnia*, 330: “Vidi in illis – testis est Deus – religionem non tam Mosaicam quam Christianam. Ibi Trinitatis mysterium, ibi Verbi incarnatio, ibi Messiae divinitas, ibi de peccato originali, de illius per Christum expiatione, de caelesti Hierusalem, de casu daemonum, de ordinibus angelorum, de purgatoriis, de inferorum poenis, eadem legi quae apud Paulum et Dionysium, apud Hieronymum et Augustinum, quotidie legimus. In his vero quae spectant ad philosophiam, Pythagoram prorsus audias et Platone, quorum decreta ita sunt fidei Christianae affinia, ut Augustinus noster immensas Deo gratias agat, quod ad eius manus pervenerint libri Platoniorum. In plenum nulla est ferme de re nobis cum Hebraeis controversia, de qua ex libris Cabalistarum ita redargui convincique non possint, ut ne angulus quidem reliquus sit in quem se condant.” Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, 135; cf. Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Kabbalistes Chrétiens*, 21.

⁷²⁵ See, e.g., Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 547: “11.63: Just as Aristotle disguised and concealed the more divine philosophy, which the ancient philosophers veiled under tales and fables, under the mask of philosophical speculation and in the brevity of words, so Rabbi Moses the Egyptian, in the book the Latins call the *Guide for the Perplexed*, while in the superficial shell of words appears to move with the philosophers, in hidden insights of a profound sense enfoldes the mysteries of the Cabala.”

traditions. So many had been interpretatively blind. For Pico, the history of philosophy was simply a history of decline which had to be reversed.⁷²⁶ Wishing to elaborate on some of Ficino's ideas about the history of intellectual decline, Pico conceived for himself a system of theology to demonstrate how all the current diversity of philosophical and religious opinion could be traced back step-by-step to a time of primordial unity, when both religion and philosophy were guided purely and correctly by one true prophetic revelation and one true form of interpretation. Having come to this revelation throughout 1486, Pico set himself to work on a new summer project modeled after the style of a Parisian disputation. We do not have the actual arguments as to how Pico came to believe what he did, but what we do have are his [in]famous *900 Conclusiones*, as he called them, which constitute a long series of enigmatic interlocking statements he published for debate in Rome on November 7th.⁷²⁷ Pico's landmark *Oratio* (later known in 1496 as the *Oratio in the Roman Assembly*, and even later – erroneously – as the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*)⁷²⁸ was also composed in tandem with these *Conclusiones* as a more rhetorically-oriented call to observe his arguments. Unbeknownst to Pico, the arguments he put forward in the *Conclusiones* and the *Oratio* would lay the groundwork for the whole tradition of Christian 'Cabala' later defended by the humanists Johannes Reuchlin, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Aegidius of Viterbo, the Franciscans Francesco Giorgi and Arcangelo of Borgonovo, and many other scholars from the sixteenth century who found the young count's Christological interpretations of important Hebrew or Aramaic texts especially useful for their own biblical hermeneutics.⁷²⁹

In the *Oratio*, Pico guaranteed to the readers of his *900 Conclusiones* that he therein proved not only that Plato and Aristotle had always stood in total agreement, but that the principal philosophers of the Arabic world, namely Avicenna and Averroes, in addition to the schoolmen Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, had far more things in common than things which divided them. Out of his 900 theses, 402 were scholastically synthesized from the inherited opinions of Church authorities, while the remaining 498 were written in accordance with his own thought. The *Conclusiones* covered a wide gamut of contemporary university learning: 45 points were drawn from the works of Thomas Aquinas, 17 from Albertus Magnus, and 22 from Duns Scotus.⁷³⁰ Pico saw great value in the leaders of the *via antiqua*, but was mostly disinterested in the *via moderna* (i.e., William of Ockham and his followers), in whose nominalist systems, as

⁷²⁶ De Boer, *Faith and Knowledge*, 66.

⁷²⁷ For the full text in both the original Latin and in English translation, see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*. For a translation in French, see Bertrand Schefer, *900 Conclusions philosophiques, cabalistiques et théologiques* (Paris: Allia, 1999). Cf. Black, *Pico*, 7.

⁷²⁸ Stephen Farmer, "On the Original Title of Pico's So-Called 'On the Dignity of Man'" (1999/2000/2004): <http://safarmer.com/pico/oration.html>; Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 28-31.

⁷²⁹ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 62.

⁷³⁰ McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 5; see Edward P. Mahoney, "Pico, Plato, and Albert the Great: The Testimony and Evaluation of Augustino Nifo," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992): 165-192 for a discussion on how Pico relied on Albertus Magnus' interpretations of Plato in reckoning with the problem of whether the soul is one or many.

Farmer poetically stated, “the crystalline proportions of the cosmos had been shattered.”⁷³¹ In place of that shattered cosmos, Pico professed to have constructed a complete system of physics in no more than 72 theses using his Pythagorean *via numerorum*. So self-assured was he in his new cosmic oeuvre that *he even offered to pay* some of the most eminent scholars of Europe to engage with him in public debate.⁷³²

In Pico’s *Oratio*, the rhetorically-oriented foreword to his *900 Conclusiones*, he attempted to persuade his audience, the philosophers and theologians of Rome, to perfect their theologies and consequently, their natures, first by emulating the ‘contemplative angels,’ the Cherubim who occupied the penultimate rung in the hierarchy of the divine throne room, then ultimately returning through a mystical cloud of unknowing back to the oneness of God where lay their ultimate *felicitas*. In line with what was taught by the ps.-Dionysian system that had been wholly naturalized in the Latin West throughout the Middle Ages by a multitude of monks and friars, the Cherubim circled just below the rung of the Seraphim which was populated by spirits wholly consumed by the supercelestial fire of love for their Creator. Mixed in among these circled the souls of all the great martyrs and saints who, perfected in their love, had annihilated themselves through their *caritas* and flown straight to the inner circle of God’s glory.⁷³³ In Pico’s own words, this was a place where

Lifted now to the topmost height of theology’s watchtower, and from there taking the measure – by a time beyond division – of what is, what will be and what might be, then gazing up at primeval beauty, we shall sing prophecies about those times like Phoebus, and we shall be winged lovers of that beauty until at last, driven wild by desire with a love beyond telling and transported beyond ourselves like burning Seraphs, full of divine power, we shall be ourselves no longer, but shall be Him, the very One who made us.⁷³⁴

At this stage in his life, it seemed as if the fledgling Count of Mirandola was not quite ready to take that step of total abnegation required to become a burning Seraph, advocating instead for a more moderate approach to spirituality, as is fitting for a philosopher, by choosing the ‘contemplative’ rather than the ‘loving’ angels as his model for ascent. It is likely too that an exhortation to a passionate and immoderate form of spirituality ultimately focused on the fires of martyrdom would not only have been seen as disingenuous but could have also struck Pico’s

⁷³¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 36.

⁷³² See British Library, IB 18857, fol. 35^v replicated in Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, viii; Pico concluded his *Conclusiones* with the statement: “if any philosopher or theologian, even from the ends of Italy, wishes to come to Rome for the sake of debating, his lord the disputer promises to pay the travel expenses from his own funds.”

⁷³³ Pico, *Oratio* in *Opera omnia*, 316: “Ardet Saraph caritatis igne. Fulget Cherubin intelligentiae splendore. Stat Thronus iudicii firmitate. Igitur si actuosae addicti vitae inferiorum curam recto examine susceperimus, Thronorum stata soliditate firmabimur. Si ab actionibus feriati, in opificio opificem, in opifice opificium meditates, in contemplandi ocio negociabimur, luce cherubica undique corruscabimus. Si caritate ipsum opificem solum ardebimus, illius igne, qui edax est, in saraphicam effigiem repente flammabimur.” Cf. Carl N. Still, “Pico’s Quest for Knowledge” in *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193-194.

⁷³⁴ Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, 100-103: “Nam in illius eminentissimam sublimati speculam, inde et quae sunt, quae erunt quaeque fuerint insectili metientes aevo, et primaevam pulchritudinem suspicientes, illorum Phebei vates, huius alati erimus amatores, et ineffabili demum charitate quasi aestro perciti, quasi Saraphini ardentis extra nos positi, numine pleni, iam non ipsi nos, sed ille erimus, ipse qui fecit nos.”

audience with suspicions that he was trying to reawaken that ancient heresy of Pelagianism, or the struggles which arose during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century civil wars between the so-called Spiritual and Conventual friars regarding the extent to which one must emulate the perfect *vita apostolica* to be saved. Instead, Pico advocated a philosophical life of gradual purification which, according to Copenhaver, had its roots in the Stoic vision of the ascent of the soul harkening back to Chrysippus (BC 279–206) and Plutarch (AD 45–120): “moral philosophy tames the passions; dialectic calms the storms of discursive reason; then natural philosophy addresses differences of opinion about the worlds of mankind and nature. At the end of this progression comes the peace of theology, described by Pico as an *epopteia* or mystic initiation following the expiations of dialectic and moral philosophy.”⁷³⁵

For Pico, just like for Ficino, or even for Joachim of Fiore and Augustine long before them, Christianity as the religion of the *Logos* was envisioned as a religion which in essence pre-existed Judaism, but was still in some way bound up with it on the plane of history. It has been widely noted in recent scholarship that in 1486 the Prince of Concord expressly wished to hold off debating his *900 Conclusiones* until after the feast of Epiphany which, as Farmer pointed out, was “a symbolic date of the submission of the pagan *gentes* to Christ in the persons of the three Magi.”⁷³⁶ Here the perennial theme of “the wise men of the East” coming face-to-face with the superior mysteries of the Incarnation was being prominently emphasized by this decision. On this, Wouter Hanegraaff aptly commented “not only would the pagan sages be seen as bowing down symbolically before the truth of the Gospel, but the Jews would submit themselves to Christ quite literally, as it dawned on them that Jesus had been the true secret of their own ancient traditions all along,” most notably by coming to a correct understanding of his divine name.⁷³⁷ Farmer suggests that Pico may even have believed that “his Vatican debate would end with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse crashing through the Roman skies,”⁷³⁸ but we cannot be sure whether or not this was really the case given that we also know he calculated that the end of the world would take place in the year 2000.⁷³⁹ In any case, his grand debate – where he was to lay out what he actually meant in his *Conclusiones*, the culmination of his entire life’s philosophical work – was cancelled before it ever had a chance to take place.

In response to this bold publication, Pope Innocent VIII (r. 1484–92) arranged for a commission to comb through the wide assortment of theses. The commission, including one of Pico’s chief detractors, the Dominican Pedro Garcia, returned with the results that 13 of the 900

⁷³⁵ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 166.

⁷³⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 43-44.

⁷³⁷ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 57.

⁷³⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 44.

⁷³⁹ In thesis 11.9, Pico calculates that the end of the world would arise in the year 2000: “11>9. If any human prediction can be made concerning the Last Things, we can discover through the most secret way of the Cabala that the end of the world will occur five hundred and fourteen years and twenty-five days from now [1 January 2000].” Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 525; cf. Theses 7a.38 and 10.20. Note that if we calculate from the date that Pico published his *900 Theses* (i.e., November 12th, 1486), this would yield December 7th, 2000 rather than Farmer’s January 1st as the date of the world’s end.

Conclusiones contained heresies.⁷⁴⁰ The proposed debate was cancelled. Instead of recanting immediately, Pico thought himself to have been misunderstood, and promptly tried to publish an *Apologia* in defence of his conclusions. In this work Pico composed in 1487, he doubled down on his ideas about Jewish mysticism as they pertain to affirming Christ's divinity. In the introduction, he made sure to mention that the seventy works of Kabbalah he had used had first been translated into Latin by Flavius Mithridates specifically under the patronage of the previous pope Sixtus IV (1471–84), and had therefore been sanctioned by the Church.⁷⁴¹ It is in these kabbalistic texts that he said himself to have found not so much Jewish doctrine as the mysteries of the Trinity, original sin, the incarnation of the Word, the divinity of the Messiah, the heavenly Jerusalem, the angelic hierarchies, the fall of the rebel angels, the expiation of sins, and the realities of hell – all of which were perfectly orthodox ideas that appeared as much in the Scriptures as in the Fathers.⁷⁴² Pico's *Apologia* failed to convince his judges.⁷⁴³ Jean Cordier, a man who later became a rector at the University of Paris, gave the only dissenting vote, and thus the papal court declared Pico guilty of heresy almost unanimously.⁷⁴⁴

For the young count's insolence, Innocent VIII flatly condemned all 900 *Conclusiones* and excommunicated Pico.⁷⁴⁵ Fearing for both his life and the fate of his soul, the Prince of Concord fled to France in 1488 and immediately upon his arrival was captured at the behest of a papal envoy and detained at Vincennes by Philip II, the Duke of Savoy (1438–94). Given his numerous connections on account of his family's noble status, a handful of Italian princes negotiated his parole, and the young count was released from prison with the provision that he should return to live in Florence under the personal protection of Lorenzo de' Medici. This was also where Pico began spending time with another one of his Jewish teachers, Yohanan Alemanno. To his ambassador in Rome, Giovanni Lanfredini, Lorenzo wrote on June 13th, 1489, that Pico at that time was living out his days like a monk, simply and austerely, often burning the midnight oil in his study of Scripture and his composition of theological works (presumably referring to his commentaries on the *Psalms* and his *Heptaplus*). Although the letter was written in a manner so as to help smooth tensions between the Pope and Pico, there is no reason to

⁷⁴⁰ For the condemned theses, see Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, 143-144. See also M. V. Dougherty, "Three Precursors to Pico della Mirandola's Roman Disputation and the Question of Human Nature in the *Oratio*," 114-151 and Francesco Borghesi, "A Life in Works," 215-216 in *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁴¹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 13-14.

⁷⁴² Cf. Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, 135; Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 25, n. 55.

⁷⁴³ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 165-166; Pico's *Apologia* essentially just recapitulated the points he had made in his *Oratio*. The complete *Oratio* was not published until two years after Pico's death in 1496, and it only received the title *On the Dignity of Man* much later in 1557. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, 66 aptly notes that the words "*De dignitate Hominis*" were simply added to the title because readers were particularly impressed with the clear description of man's place in the hierarchy of being in the opening of the speech, but without taking the full context of this part into consideration, "as often happens with hasty readers."

⁷⁴⁴ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 25; L. Dorez et L. Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France (1485-88)* (Paris: Leroux, 1897), 63. He was cleared only years later through backroom dealings with the subsequent pope, Alexander VI.

⁷⁴⁵ For Innocent VIII's papal bull, see Garin, *De hominis dignitate... e scritti vari*, 63; cf. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 17

believe Lorenzo was lying in regards to his young friend's demeanour when we consider the kinds of literary works Pico was producing at the time.⁷⁴⁶ Lanfredini wrote back to Lorenzo, claiming that the pope found Pico's incorrigible interest in theology insufferable and much preferred it if he simply busied himself with writing poetry instead.⁷⁴⁷ In spite of his precarious position and these additional warnings, Pico again published in 1489. This time, it was his magisterial Platonic and kabbalistic sevenfold commentary on the opening chapter of *Genesis*, the *Heptaplus*, which was also promptly declared heretical by heads of the Church, though not before making it into print. In it, the young theologian persisted in his attempt to demonstrate the importance of Kabbalah to his fellow Christians, and his intentions were clear: "[By using it] you will be equipped with the most powerful arms against the stony hearts of the Hebrews, drawn up from their own armories."⁷⁴⁸ After shoring up all his evidence, in particular from sections of the Talmud like the *Avoda Zara* (which Ficino had criticized a decade earlier with the help of his own converso sources), Pico proclaimed: "If [the Jews] persist to impudently and stubbornly deny this, let them hear out their own Talmudists who strongly corroborate our opinion."⁷⁴⁹ But why did Pico risk doubling down on heretical positions at this time? By looking at his pertinacity in going against the will of the Church, I believe that the young philosopher-theologian must have been fuelled by the trend exhibited by the mendicant tradition whereby formerly disgraced men (in particular former Jews), turned themselves wholeheartedly to Scripture, and made active efforts to demonstrate their own *bona fides* by composing theological tracts and preaching conspicuously against the opponents of Christendom. Throughout the *Heptaplus*, it would appear that Pico was not so much attempting to convert Jews to Christianity as he was trying to convert Christians to Platonic allegory and kabbalistic concepts interpreted in the light of his *intellectus spiritualis*, and thereby prove his own *bona fides*. Ultimately, the line between these two intentions – converting Jews to Christianity versus converting Christians to Kabbalah – is admittedly quite blurry given that by Pico's reckoning, a fully regenerated Christianity that incorporated a kabbalistic reading of Scripture would in the end make the Church irresistible to non-Christians, especially Jews. To attempt to convert non-Christians was indeed a time-honoured way of demonstrating one's own good faith, but to refute the greatest minds from among the Jews by beating them at their own game of esoteric interpretation – this was to take the demonstration of *bona fides* to a whole new level.

⁷⁴⁶ Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico*, 23 takes issue with this idea that Pico was living like a monk, arguing that in "studying, writing, moving around with his entourage, debating, and spending time with his network of friends and power relations" he was "not living like a monk," but "simply keeping a relatively 'low profile.'" Nevertheless, I do not see how any of these activities necessarily preclude "living like a monk." These were all things done by Pico's friend Savonarola, for example, who was most certainly a monk.

⁷⁴⁷ Black, *Pico*, 9.

⁷⁴⁸ "Unde et vobis potentissima tela contra lapideum cor Hebraeorum de armentariis eorum petita subministrabuntur," Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 51-52.

⁷⁴⁹ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 54 "Quod si impudenter et pertinaciter negare pertendant, audiant suos Thalmutistas nostram sententiam maxime roborantes." For Ficino's polemical use of passages from the *Avoda Zara*, see n. 684 and n. 686 above.

It was at this juncture in Pico's life that the disheartened but pious prince began spending a good deal of time with his old university friend Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican priest and soon to become ex-philosopher and radical reformer. They had begun getting closer ever since the late 1470s where they both met as students at the University of Bologna, then at Ferrara. Savonarola formally entered the Dominican order in April 1475 and only became infamous for his sudden rise to power in Florence during the early 1490s. Around 1480, while Pico was still only 17 years old, he had been invited to attend the Dominican chapter at Reggio Emilia to observe a 28-year-old Savonarola give a disputation, and this event had a definitive impact on the young humanist.⁷⁵⁰ In 1490, however, laying low under Medici protection and living out his quasi-monastic existence, Pico put in a request to his patron Lorenzo to have Savonarola brought to Florence, primarily for the sake of its moral edification.⁷⁵¹ Thus invited, the friar came. From then on until Pico's death in 1494, these two men grew close, and their relationship was not as strained as many have supposed it must have been (chiefly on account of the baseless assumption that 'Pico the Renaissance humanist' and 'Savonarola the medieval Dominican' could not truly have had much in common).⁷⁵² Although we will return to Savonarola in later chapters, it suffices to say for now that it was he who set the archetype for the 'fire and brimstone preacher,' and one of his most prominent talking points was that the pit of Hell awaited all who disinclined their ears from the signal of the Church and turned to the noise of idolators, Jews, heretics, astrologers, and pagan philosophers. A *diluvium* was coming, just as Ficino and his circle had been predicting throughout the early 1470s, and only the righteous would be spared.⁷⁵³

Savonarola's base of operations during this time was the monastery of San Marco. Since the time of Cosimo's reign, the Medici family had spent no small number of florins in the reconstruction of the priory, formerly a holding of Silvestrine monks, but converted into a Dominican priory in 1436–37. Not only was this building to serve as an intellectual and artistic center, but also as a center for preaching to the city and nearby towns. After the death of Niccolò Niccoli in 1437, Cosimo had agreed to cover all his debts in exchange for his collection of over 400 rare books, which he then housed at San Marco. Under decades of patronage, and in spite of setbacks brought on by frequent plagues and earthquakes, San Marco was transformed from its formerly dilapidated state into a lively center for Dominican intellectual life. Its halls were host to heated philosophical debates, sermons, and lectures, in addition to priceless paintings, tapestries, and manuscripts.⁷⁵⁴ Serving the monastery as a lector in 1482, Savonarola had preached to the friars on his favorite theologians, meditating especially intensely on the writings

⁷⁵⁰ Paolo Rocca, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nei suoi rapporti di amicizia con Gerolamo Savonarola," in *Quaderni di storia della scienza e della medicina* 3 (1964): 4.

⁷⁵¹ Anne Borelli, Maria Pastore Passaro, et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 121, n. 27.

⁷⁵² Justine Walden, "An Anatomy of Influence: Savonarola and Pico's Hidden Affinities," from *Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting* (March 2012), 1 and ff.

⁷⁵³ For examples to the recurring theme of the *diluvium* and the ark throughout Savonarola's writings in the 1490s, see Borelli et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, xxiii, 72, 111, 114, 139-140, 164.

⁷⁵⁴ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 30.

of Dionysius the Areopagite, Augustine, John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, and above all, the Bible itself.⁷⁵⁵ Within his first six months at San Marco, he argued that:

The preacher should be completely dedicated to God, full of the grace of the Holy Spirit, of love and of divine wisdom. He should take himself outside himself, be wholly involved in what he is expressing... and he should separate his mind from human arts, neither employing any human mode of speech or doctrine, nor be guided by eloquence or human philosophy, but only by what he is able to justify according to Scripture.⁷⁵⁶

This attitude was a direct affront not only against the humanist atmosphere that prevailed throughout Italy, but also against many of those who, like Ficino, were trying to reform religion with the help of Platonic philosophy. In his ever-increasingly apocalyptic sermons, Savonarola espoused a kind of radical precursor to the Reformation's *sola Scriptura* approach that was rooted entirely in monastic and mendicant spirituality. His attitude was that if there really existed forms of philosophy that confirmed Christian doctrine, then they were simply redundant and unnecessary. This approach was in some ways similar to Pico's fundamentalist turn toward the importance of understanding the kabbalistic mysteries inherent to the Hebrew letters that comprised Scripture, but Savonarola came from a far more exclusivist rather than inclusionist approach. Savonarola wanted to convert Christendom back to Christianity by stripping it down to its most pristine essence, not to elaborate it through some newly contrived hybridization with Kabbalah or Platonism. The black friar's means of returning to this pristine essence were retrospective and deeply reflexive. In some ways, however, elements of Savonarola's theology were not so different from Pico's. In a sermon outside of San Marco, for example, he gave a deep meditation on the name of "Jesu," a motif which Donald Weinstein noted had derived from ps.-Dionysius and had reached Savonarola through Bernardino da Siena and Giovanni da Capistrano.⁷⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the practice of meditating on divine names for the purpose of spiritual illumination had its own rich history, as seen in previous chapters, and it played no small role in Pico's theology either. Despite its pagan origins, this was a spiritual practice that had naturalized within not only Christianity, but also in Judaism and Islam, and contemplating the name of God was definitively an area of interest in which both Pico and Savonarola could find some common ground. As far as both of them were concerned, this was a tradition that had first been passed down by the enlightened Dionysius the Areopagite in his work *On the Divine Names*, and that put it on the same level as gospel truth.

Before meeting his untimely death, Pico was ultimately hesitant to take the final step in his own spiritual life, chiefly by donning the black cowl and taking up vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience to join the Dominicans at the friary of San Marco as Savonarola had done before. As a wealthy lay person, Pico simply had too many worldly responsibilities and familial

⁷⁵⁵ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 33.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.; Giulio Cattin, *Il primo Savonarola: Poesie e prediche autografe dal Codice Borromeo 13* (Florence: Olschki, 1974), 105.

⁷⁵⁷ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 33.

attachments to renounce.⁷⁵⁸ To use the words of Brian Copenhaver, however, “Pico’s theological adventures may have been imprudent and provocative, but there was no insincerity in his wanting to die in a friar’s habit nor any inconsistency in the friendship with Fra Savonarola that guided his final years,” and with this assessment I am certainly in agreement.⁷⁵⁹ This was not purely one of Gianfrancesco Pico’s mythologems about his uncle “St. Pico,” whose life he reimagined in terms of an abrupt conversion experience rather than a lifelong gradual intensification of religious interiority until his death in 1494.⁷⁶⁰ Around 1491, the humanist scholar Piero Crinito (c. 1475–1507) wrote positively about Pico and Savonarola’s frequent philosophical disputes at San Marco’s Greek library and described their intellectual friendship as one built up on mutual love and respect. Crinito explained that Savonarola saw in Pico: “the only one, today, as perfectly versed equally in the philosophy of the ancients as in the Christian religion and capable of collecting the great antique sages from Jerome and Augustine to men such as Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius.”⁷⁶¹ Though the two theologians differed in many respects, they certainly agreed on the importance of Scriptural revelation, and the extent to which this inspiration had been shared by the Fathers as much as by the Bible itself.

Pico never accomplished his grandest ambition. In 1492, while Lorenzo de’ Medici lay dying, he told Pico there was nothing he wished more than to help him complete his reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle. This was a work which Pico never finished beyond his initial dialogue, *De ente et uno* (*On Being and the One*, 1491). What the young theologian did manage to conclude before he was murdered was this: whenever Plotinus or other Late Platonists read Plato in a manner that challenged Aristotle, this was because they must have been mistaken in their understanding of Plato. Given that the opposite of ‘being’ was ‘nothing,’ while the opposite of ‘the one’ was ‘the many,’ Pico tried to resolve the problem of whether ‘being’ and ‘unity’ (or ‘the One’) are co-extensive – as Aristotle argued in Book X of his *Metaphysics* – or whether ‘unity’ has a more expansive diffusion than ‘being,’ since it stems from a higher and more rarefied metaphysical principle according to Plotinus and subsequent Platonists. In keeping with the schoolmen’s realist doctrine on transcendentals, Pico wished to argue for the position held by Aristotle, and then, to prove that Plato was not in disagreement, as some later Platonists had maintained (including Ficino). In marshalling his arguments, Pico drew his evidence from Plato’s *Sophist* and the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, and ignored the logic-chopping made in the *Parmenides* out of a belief that the ideas presented in that dialogue were mere rhetorical

⁷⁵⁸ Howlett, *Re-Examining Pico*, 24.

⁷⁵⁹ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 165.

⁷⁶⁰ See Howlett, *Re-Examining Pico*, 5 who in agreement with Copenhaver’s reassessment of Pico’s historiographical representation, noted that “Pico was clearly religious. He also spun daydreams of living eventually as the itinerant penniless sage. But he did not give away all his money or move into the religious life, and there is no evidence that he would have done so...” and “St. Pico was a construct of Gianfrancesco’s biography, Savonarola’s attempted appropriation of his famous friend, and a history of reception particularly through Thomas More.”

⁷⁶¹ Rocca, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola con Gerolamo Savonarola,” 14.

exercises, not statements of doctrine.⁷⁶² Here Pico made a sharp distinction between ‘being itself’ and ‘participated being’ that allowed him to uphold the claim that God is indistinguishable from ‘being itself,’ but above it in regards to ‘participated being.’ Whereas Ficino had long towed the Platonist’s party line in that ‘unity/the One’ was above being, and could only be approached through apophasis or negative theology, in *De ente et uno* Pico concluded that God and being were synonymous, and that the kataphatic scholastic approach to theology was equally as valid as the mystical Platonic approach.⁷⁶³ In devising this convertibility of unity and being, he drew heavily from ps.-Dionysius’ *On Divine Names*⁷⁶⁴ and Simplicius’ interpretations of “Parmenides the Pythagorean” in his commentary on Aristotelian physics.⁷⁶⁵ In keeping with the ideas of these ancient Late Platonists, Pico made the following ‘bold conjecture’ which would become his single most all-encompassing conclusion attempting to unify Plato’s and Aristotle’s systems:

If these three things – the One, the True, and the Good [or Unity, Truth, and Goodness] – follow Being by perpetual connection, it follows that when we are not these, we really are not, even though we may seem to be; and although others may believe we are living, nevertheless we would be forever dying rather than living.⁷⁶⁶

For Pico, “unity,” “truth,” and “goodness” were all ontologically inseparable from one another – they were all aspects of ‘Being and the One’ – and this had implications for the individual soul as much as it did for the course of world history. As much for the individual human as for the world, without striving for unity, truth, and goodness – without striving for God – they would simply come undone and cease to be. As Kristeller noted, “the harmony between Plato and Aristotle turns out to be quite Aristotelian, at least in its wording, since it excludes the views of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists; but in another sense it is neither Platonic nor Aristotelian.”⁷⁶⁷ For his role as a metaphysical moderate of sorts, Pico was attacked by both sides. From one side, Ficino used his *Parmenides* commentary (published 1496) to defend the Plotinian approach to the problem, and from the other side, the schoolmen defended their own traditional interpretations of Aristotle.

Pico’s ultimate success in his reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle is still entirely a matter of debate, but his re-readings of Aristotle using the *Graeca veritas* were at least successful

⁷⁶² Pico, *On Being and the One*, trans. Paul J. W. Miller, 39: “I shall first say this about the *Parmenides*. Nothing in the whole dialogue is positively asserted. If anything is asserted, still nothing is clearly found by which we may ascribe this sort of teaching to Plato. That book is certainly not to be included among his doctrinal works, since it is nothing but a dialectical exercise.” See also Michael J. B. Allen, “The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy: Parmenidean Poetry, Eristic and the One,” in *Marsilio Ficino e Il Ritorno di Platone*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, vol. 2 (Florence: Olschki, 1986), 419-55.

⁷⁶³ Ovanes Akopyan, *Debating the Stars in the Italian Renaissance: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s Disputationes adversus astrologiam and its Reception* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 39. Cf. n. 34 above.

⁷⁶⁴ *Patrologia Graeca*, 3:596 A-B.

⁷⁶⁵ Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Physicorum libros quattuor priores commentaria*, ed. H. Diels (Berlin: Koniglich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1882), 147.

⁷⁶⁶ Pico, *Omnia opera*, 256: “Quod si tria haec, unum scilicet, verum, et bonum perpetuo annexu ens consequuntur, reliquum est ut, cum illa non sumus, etiam prorsus non sumus, etsi esse videamur, et quamvis credamur vivere, moriamur tamen potius iugiter quam vivamus.”

⁷⁶⁷ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 64-65.

enough to win him some of Ficino's continued admiration in spite of all their differences. In 1492, two years before Pico's death, and the year Ficino was putting his complete translation of Plotinus' *Enneads* into print, he included the following glowing review of Pico's approach to Aristotle:

As for us, we have tried to reveal and to explain the impact of the abovementioned theologians in the works of Plato and Plotinus, so that the poets may cease in an impious manner to introduce the events and mysteries of religion into their fables, and so that the horde of Peripatetics – nearly all philosophers – may be warned that they should not mistake religiousness for an old wives' tale. Indeed, nearly all the world is inhabited by the Peripatetics and divided into two schools, the Alexandrists and the Averroists. The first ones believe that our intellect is mortal, whereas others think it is unique: both groups alike destroy the basis of all religion especially because they seem to deny that there is such a thing as divine providence towards men, and in both cases they are traitors to Aristotle. Nowadays, few people, except the great Pico, our companion in Platonism, interpret the spirit of Aristotle with the same reverence as was shown by Theophrastus, Themistius, Porphyry, Simplicius, Avicenna, and more recently Plethon. If there be some who believe that an impiety so common and upheld by such sharp minds can be erased from the hearts of men merely by preaching faith to them, there is no doubt that the facts themselves will prove that they are very far from the truth: a much greater power is needed, namely some divine miracles, acknowledged as such everywhere, or at least some sort of philosophical religion that will convince the philosophers open to its teachings. Today, the will of divine providence is that the genus of religion should be confirmed by the authority and the reasoning of philosophy, whereas at an appointed time the truest species of religion will be confirmed by miracles acknowledged by all nations, as was once the case in the past.⁷⁶⁸

On one hand, Ficino had the general tendency to brush aside differences and disagreements between himself and the young count, while on the other, Pico often found himself wrestling with Ficino's ideas quite openly, using them as opportunities to carve out his own philosophical identity. Nevertheless, to Ficino, Pico was a golden mind for a golden age – a sign that a new age was dawning and the old *saeculum ferreum* was passed. Pico indeed gave great reverence to Aristotle, but his Aristotle was a faithful student of Plato, not his impious rival as later philosophers had made him out to be. For this reason, what made Pico so great to Ficino in the end was that he was a frontline soldier in the battle to reunite of religion and philosophy, even if they did not always agree on subtler points of doctrine.

⁷⁶⁸ “Nos ergo in Theologis superioribus apud Platonem atque Plotinum traducendis et explanadis elaboravimus, ut hac Theologia in lucem prodeunte, et poetae desinant gesta mysteriaque pietatis impie fabulis suis annumerare et Peripatetici quam plurimi, id est Philosophi pene omnes admoneantur, non esse de religione saltem communi, tamquam de anilibus fabulis sentiendum. Totus enim ferme terrarium orbis a Peripateticis occupatus in duas plurimum sectas divisus est, Alexandrinam et Averroicam. Illi quidem intellectum nostrum esse mortalem existimant, hi vero unicum esse contendunt, utrique religionem omnem funditus aequae tollunt, praesertim quia divinam circa homines providentiam negare videntur, et utrobique a suo etiam Aristotele defecisse. Cuius mentem hodie pauci praeter sublimem Picum complatonicum nostrum ea pietate, qua Theophrastus olim et Themistius, Porphyrius, Simplicius, Avicenna, et nuper Plethon interpretantur. Si quis autem putet tam divulgatam impietatem, tamque acribus munitis ingeniis sola quadam simplici praedicatione fidei apud homines posse deleri, is a vero longius aberrare palam re ipsa procul dubio convincetur, majore admodum hic opus est potestate, id autem est vel divinis miraculis unice patentibus vel saltem philosophica quadam religione philosophis eam libentius audituris, quandoque persuasura. Placet autem divinae providentiae his saeculis ipsum religionis suae genus autoritate rationeque philosophica confirmare, quoad statuo quodam tempore verissimam religionis speciem, ut olim quandoque fecit, manifestis per omnes gentes confirmet miraculis.” As translated in Saffrey, “Florence 1492,” 499-500.

The last work Pico produced at the end of his life was his most voluminous by far: an incomplete but thorough refutation of predictive astrology, the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, much of which he composed in 1493, but never finished.⁷⁶⁹ The conclusions Pico had reached in composing *De ente et uno* were certainly carried forward into his final work in its grand appeal for scientific unity. While many have claimed it is difficult to disentangle to what extent Pico's ideas were shaped by Savonarola's – or even his nephew Gianfrancesco Pico's – the Prince of Concord had long attacked astrology before becoming a follower of Savonarola, because astrology and astral magic – popular as they were among the elites of Italy – were only concerned with terrestrial and celestial matters and therefore distractions from the immaterial supercelestial concerns of his heavily ps.-Dionysian and kabbalistic theology.⁷⁷⁰ Despite Savonarola's influence, Pico's problems with astral influences and determinism here were as much conditioned by his old Augustinian emphasis on human free will as by his sense of disillusionment with the mounting incommensurabilities plaguing the science of his day. In attacking divinatory astrology, however, Pico engaged his sources critically in the mode of a humanist, relying heavily on an *argumentum ad antiquitatem*. Whatever textual tradition he engaged, if their contents diverged in any way from their original Greek sources (e.g., just as Abu Ma' Shar differed in some places from Ptolemy), then he maintained that the originals had simply been corrupted (rather than corrected), and needed to be restored in line with the pure wisdom of the ancients. Pico had argued in his 1486 *Conclusiones* “according to the ancient doctrine of Mercury Trismegistus the Egyptian,” that if “God announces the future to man,” he did so in six ways, namely “through dreams, portents, birds, intestines, spirit, and the Sibyl.”⁷⁷¹ Subsequently, in the *Disputationes*, Pico heaped scorn on the many failed historical predictions such as those of Abu Ma' Shar and Arnald of Villanova, both of whom were mistaken in their predictions of the end of Christianity and the rise of the Antichrist respectively, because they had relied on astrology.⁷⁷² Scripture alone provided for these concerns, and in highlighting the failures of the astrologers, it was issues of textual purity, of returning to Ptolemy's *Graeca veritas*, that loomed large. In this way, we see how in the final phase of Pico's life, his polemics began tapping more and more into that mode of challenging intellectual authorities that Lorenzo Valla had used against the schoolmen. Ovanes Akopyan rightly argued that Pico's late writings adhered to this approach, that is, that a “humanist critical examination of the historical interpretations of canonical sources can be traced through both the *De ente et uno* and the *Disputationes*.”⁷⁷³ For Pico, therefore, one of the strongest arguments that could be mustered against astrology or astral magic was that neither could be found in the *actual* works of Plato or

⁷⁶⁹ See Eugenio Garin, ed., *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, 2 vols. (Turin: Aragno, 2004) which is a reprint of the 1946-1952 edition, or *Opera omnia*, 411 and ff.

⁷⁷⁰ E.g., see n. 924 below.

⁷⁷¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 341 (*Conclusio* 27.7).

⁷⁷² *Disputationes*, 1.5.1, 522; Cf. Ovanes Akopyan, “Principes Aliorum: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on the ‘Astrological Tradition’ in the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*,” *Renaissance Studies* 32, 4 (2017): 560. Cf. Harold Lee, “Scrutamini Scripturas,” 46-48 for a discussion of how Arnald of Villanova blended astrology with Joachimist *figurae* to make predictions about the future.

⁷⁷³ Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 39.

Aristotle, only in those of their later interpreters, men who polluted their teachings with the doctrines of the ancient Egyptian and Chaldean pagans.

Notwithstanding their mutual distrust of astrology's ability to divine the future, much of what Pico and Savonarola had in common was not so different from what Pico and Ficino also had in common. All three men were Italian philosophers tinged by the prevailing intellectual currents of the day, and all three shared in a sense of apocalyptic expectation which blossomed into their respective approaches to the various crises that beset Florence. Each hoped to bolster the Church's official ideas about what constituted orthodox belief at a time when it was beleaguered on all sides, whether by internal political division (among the families of Florence or within the Dominican order itself), by encroaching Turks to the East, by theological disagreement in the universities, and even by Italy's sudden influx of Jews fleeing exile from Spain and Sicily.⁷⁷⁴ The threat of French invasion loomed over the horizon throughout the early 1490s, which also took on an apocalyptic tone. In the *Compendium revelationum*, with the benefit of hindsight, Savonarola linked the old humanists' theme of *diluvium* with the invasion of King Charles VIII, recalling that:

...since everyone knew that the French king had invaded Italy with his forces [in 1494] when I began my sermon with these words – i.e., ‘Behold, I will bring flood waters upon the earth’ – suddenly many were astonished and thought that this passage of *Genesis* [6:16] was furnished by the hidden will of God for that moment in time. Among these was Count Giovanni della Mirandola, a man unique in our day for talent and learning; he later told me that he was struck with fear at these words and that his hair stood on end.”⁷⁷⁵

If Savonarola was reporting the truth, and we have no reason to doubt him here, this would suggest that at the time Pico was extra sensitive to the threat of an impending catastrophe. It truly must have seemed as if a great flood of some kind was coming to wash away Florence's iniquities, just as Ficino and his circle had long feared for decades. According to both Pico and Savonarola, the iniquities needing to be flushed out were unambiguous. These were: “i) the pollution of the prelates... ii) the lack of good and just men... iii) the exclusion of the just... iv) the desire of just men... v) the obstinacy of sinners... vi) the multitude of sinners... vii) the exclusion of the primary virtues, that is, love (*caritas*) and faith... viii) the denial of articles of the faith... ix) divine worship has been lost... and x) because of universal opinion.”⁷⁷⁶ For Savonarola, the widespread use of more and more pagan, Islamic, and Jewish ideas instead of turning to Holy Scripture alone stood in direct conflict with the basics of Christian doctrine. While Pico and Ficino did not necessarily agree with Savonarola's exclusivism, both of them sought to address issues of compatibility in different ways, and these often involved appeals to the supreme authority of prophecy.

⁷⁷⁴ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola*, 26.

⁷⁷⁵ McGinn, “Compendium of Revelations,” in *Visions of the End*, 281; translated from the edition of Angela Crucitti, *Compendia di Rivelazioni: testo volgare e latino, e Dialogus de veritate prophetica* (Rome: Belardetti, 1974), 134-137.

⁷⁷⁶ McGinn, “Renovation Sermon,” in *Visions of the End*, 279-280 [here abbreviated].

All three of these theologians, Pico, Ficino, and Savonarola, in keeping with concepts laid down in the Bible and in the works of the Fathers, structured the past, the present, and the future as a series of progressive theological processes culminating in an era of spiritual fulfillment. If they could demonstrate that God's providence was the chief mover of history and that present events had their correspondences in episodes from Scripture, they would have something useful to cling onto in the chaos of the present, a place from which they could orient themselves and create some kind of lifeboat to survive into the future.⁷⁷⁷ Christian universalism was a value common to all three men, but each one had different opinions as to what the universal form of Christianity was to look like: Ficino's Platonic synthesis, Pico's 'Judaizing' Platonico-peripatetic-kabbalistic synthesis, or Savonarola's radical mendicant *sola Scriptura* approach. All three approaches were fueled by a synthesis of Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic philosophical ideas – and all were likewise heavily influenced by their forerunners in the Latin polemical tradition – albeit with their own particular sets of emphases. In spite of all their disagreements magnified only by comparison to one another, all three could ultimately agree on the theological supremacy of the Bible, and adjacent to this, the writings of the Church Fathers, especially the mystical (i.e., apophatic or 'negative') theology of Dionysius the Areopagite which itself was historically inseparable from ideas written down in Plato's *Parmenides* and elaborated in Late Antiquity by Plotinus and Proclus. All agreed that only the one faith could end the many, but which one it was that would bring peace to the world was never settled.

Pico died on 17 November 1494, possibly of arsenic poisoning, on the very same day that the invading King of France Charles VIII entered Florence with his armies. Exactly who murdered him and why remain a mystery. By this time, Florence had already been abandoned by its ruler Piero de' Medici (so-called "the Unfortunate"), and was soon to undergo four years of theocratic purgation under Savonarola's *Gottestadt* run by a thuggish brigade of what his enemies dubbed the "*Piagnoni*" ("snivelers," "wailers," or "crybabies").⁷⁷⁸ While Pico languished in his bed in cold sweat and moribund, Savonarola was reluctant to grant that his fast-fading friend should have his last wishes fulfilled: to be buried in the habit of a Dominican as a tertiary, for it was widely believed that whoever dies in a friar's habit was granted a plenary indulgence with which their souls might bypass purgatory.⁷⁷⁹ This request was not granted to Pico, though Savonarola may have lain a habit over his body as he died. His body was buried in brocade, not a habit, for within his brief lifetime he had not taken the final steps of total

⁷⁷⁷ Walden, "An Anatomy of Influence," 5.

⁷⁷⁸ Reeves, *The Prophetic Sense of History*, 62 notes that "Members of Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Academy, including both Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his nephew, Gianfrancesco, become *Piagnone*, disciples of Savonarola, while Marsilio himself – though later disillusioned – elevated Charles into his role as Second Charlemagne in his oration on 17 November 1494, welcoming the King into the city. The most eloquent spokesman of the Platonist *Piagnoni* was Giovanni Nesi who, in his *Oraculum de novo saeculo*, gathered together a strange mixture of Neoplatonism, occult mysteries, and Christian prophecy. Another Ficinian who joined Savonarola was Girolamo Benivieni, a friend of Giovanni Pico." Cf. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 90.

⁷⁷⁹ Walden, "An Anatomy of Influence," 3.

renunciation which Savonarola had wished him to take.⁷⁸⁰ Ficino, a much older man, outlived Pico by five years, but in these latter years – thanks to the Count of Mirandola’s death coinciding so closely with Medici exile and the rise of Savonarola’s power – much of his optimism about there arising some new golden age of philosophy and religion faded away like a dream.⁷⁸¹

To conclude this summary of Pico’s life with an observation from Joseph Blau, “the glory of Renaissance humanism” as much for Ficino as for Pico, was rooted in “its breadth, not its depth.”⁷⁸² This was not necessarily said to diminish these men’s philosophical accomplishments, but to highlight their role in the complexification of knowledge, for in these matters, breadth must necessarily precede depth. If the Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah was indeed to acquire any significant depth, then it came about cumulatively, in the later work of those who followed in Pico’s footsteps, especially in that of Reuchlin, Francesco Giorgi, or Arcangelo of Borgonovo. Blau contextualized this orientation toward ‘breadth over depth’ as a product of its age, locating it in an ‘age of discovery’⁷⁸³ for the Latin West:

As men of action in the Renaissance explored the earth to discover new countries, as men of science explored the skies to discover a new universe, men of thought explored the world of ideas to discover new systems. And as the explorers made the new countries into temporal empires, making the ends of the earth their own, the humanists made the new systems into intellectual empires, making all thought their own.⁷⁸⁴

While I certainly agree with this assessment, I add to it that this was also the tail end of an age of valiant crusades, high-stake debates, and perilous missionary ventures, some of which were met with resounding success, while others were met with catastrophic failure. We must also position our humanist theologians in the light of this enduring ‘medieval’ context. Pico’s Christian interpretations of Jewish Kabbalah were as much part and parcel with the scientific impulses of the age – the impulse to know, to correlate, to subordinate, to hierarchize, and to universalize – as they were with an apocalyptically-charged expansionist impulse fostered by the mendicant orders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: the impulse to argue, to negotiate, and to barter for lost souls in the marketplace of ideas.⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸⁰ Malcolm Moore, “Medici Philosopher’s Mystery Death is Solved,” *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2008 by <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1577958/Medici-philosophers-mystery-death-is-solved.html>.

⁷⁸¹ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 176.

⁷⁸² Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 14.

⁷⁸³ It is interesting to note that the concept of ‘discovery,’ which derives from the Latin verb ‘*discooperire*’ meaning ‘to uncover, disclose, lay bare, expose,’ is essentially synonymous with that of ‘revelation,’ from *revelare*, ‘to unveil, uncover, lay bare.’

⁷⁸⁴ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 14.

⁷⁸⁵ See n. 309 above.

6.2 Pico and the Jews

Beginning in the late thirteenth century and gradually gaining momentum for centuries to come, Jewish communities across Europe witnessed a significant rise in formalized persecution, coercion, extortion, and expulsion at the hands of their Christian neighbours.⁷⁸⁶ Although France and England were the first to attempt this in 1182 and 1290 respectively, these expulsions were to pale in comparison with events to come in 1390, 1492, and 1496 which were marked by mass campaigns of forced conversion and exile from France, Spain, Sardinia, Sicily, and Portugal.⁷⁸⁷ These fifteenth century expulsions, and the calamitous events leading up to them, drove enormous quantities of Iberian migrants into North Africa, France, Italy, and Germany, and this sudden influx of Jews and Jewish learning inevitably motivated many Christians of Europe to play their own part in finalizing the process of mass conversion which the expulsions had begun. In Christian minds, this was not so much kicking a man while he was down, but striking while the iron was hot. The overwhelming majority of Jews targeted by such persecutions certainly did not share in this perspective, of course, but there were indeed some who did, and such converts, particularly those drawn from among the learned portions of Jewish society, were widely sought out by Christian theologians for their ‘insider’ opinions and ideas.

In the Latin world, apocalyptic expectations about what would happen to the Jews at the end of history ran as high in the Renaissance era as they had in the Middle Ages. Widespread was the belief that the end, or alternatively some ill-defined new beginning, was drawing nigh and that only faithful members of the Church would make the *transitus*. The rallying cry of “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” fuelled on missionary endeavours and projects of internal proselytization to bolster the Church’s ranks. As much in the Renaissance as in the High Middle Ages, however, it was *mendicant spirituality* – the spiritual life which put so much emphasis on emulating the historically-attested *vita apostolica* – that lay at the root of so many formal efforts to barter and debate with non-Christians for the allegiance of souls. Pico’s Christian interpretation of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, with what Chaim Wirszubski accurately called its “lineal descent”⁷⁸⁸ from the Dominican Ramon Martí’s *Pugio Fidei*, was one such branch of these endeavours, comingled though it was with novel currents in the *studia humanitatis*. As seen, this anti-Jewish polemical tradition’s *modus operandi* was to use Jewish modes or ‘types’ of scriptural interpretation and use them to create justifications for Christianity as a successor ideology. Its method was “a Trinitarian or Christological interpretation superimposed as a kind of supercommentary on carefully selected texts,” and was in no way an attempt to understand Jewish Kabbalah on its own terms.⁷⁸⁹ What Wirszubski generously here called “carefully selected,” most people today would more cynically describe as “cherry-picked.” Prior to the first formal appearance of Pico’s *72 Conclusiones cabalisticæ*, the crowning section of his *900*

⁷⁸⁶ Moore, *Formation of the Persecuting Society*, 4

⁷⁸⁷ Arthur Michael Lesley, “Jews at the Time of the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, 3 (1999): 846-847.

⁷⁸⁸ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 168.

⁷⁸⁹ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 169.

Conclusiones published in 1486, one could find a very similar pattern of polemical activity practised in such works as Paul of Burgos' *Scrutinium Scripturarum* (first printed 1471), Jerome of Santa Fé's *Tractatus contra perfidiam Judaeorum* and *De Judaeis erroribus*, Petro de la Cavaillería's *Zelus Christi contra Iudaeos, Sarracenos, et infideles* (1450), and ultimately Ficino's *De Christiana religione* (1474/6, reprint 1484), each of which were nursed on a Latin polemical tradition rooted in the dialogues of Petrus Alfonsi, the first man in the Latin west to ever use a proto-kabbalistic text in an anti-Jewish polemic, along with the philosophically-oriented missionary projects of those who followed in his footsteps, like Ramon Martí. These influences were entangled among the deeper, substructural roots of Pico's polemical dimensions. At the surface, Pico's attitude toward Jews was largely developed during his studies of the converso Flavius Mithridates' own various *bona fides*-generating translation projects from Hebrew into Latin.⁷⁹⁰ But even Mithridates' own work was not unaffected by the Latin West's legacy of the anti-Jewish polemical tradition, in particular the *Pugio fidei*.⁷⁹¹ The interpretation of Kabbalah they developed together, as Wirszubski first demonstrated, was not so much a Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah as a search for an occult set of doctrines that affirmed the truth of Christianity over Judaism by using the very same methods that Jewish rabbis used to understand their own "documents of revelation."⁷⁹² Simply put, Kabbalah's mystique was irresistible to Pico, so he tried to use his own version of it to make Christianity irresistible to all. No longer would Christians ever have to rely on ideas derived from late, intermediary, decadent, or corrupt sources which had lost the intentions of their original authors.

In combing the historical record as he plotted out his program of philosophical reform, the furthest back in time Pico's evidence could take him was to the Hebrew books of Moses: the first five books of the Old Testament. In Moses' writings, particularly in the first creation story of *Genesis*, Pico believed there lay encoded an entire image of history that had been prophetically revealed and which Christians could read if only they were equipped with the right linguistic and hermeneutic tools. Understanding history, therefore, was intertwined with understanding not only Hebrew philology, but also the ancient oral traditions which were passed down to explain the text's hidden meanings. These he could only access in the traditional manner: through the Jewish (or formerly Jewish) tutors whose services he was privileged enough to afford. Pico was convinced, chiefly through his time spent with the converso Flavius Mithridates, that Christological prefigurations would make themselves manifest to all if only Christians were able to access and interpret the letters and words of the prophets in their *original forms* – the forms which had been imbued by God's original intentions, including all sorts of arcane riddles which masked the secrets of creation, such as the "closed mem ם/מ," the "cruciform tsade ף," and the "redemptive zeh ך." ⁷⁹³ It is in this way that Jewish Kabbalah and the dream of Catholic universalism came together in Pico's mind. He clung to a vision of a future

⁷⁹⁰ See n. 723 and 741 above.

⁷⁹¹ See n. 869 below.

⁷⁹² Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 169; see also Robert Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 317.

⁷⁹³ Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 355.

world which had been shared by all the aforementioned converso authors and the members of the mendicant orders alike: that of a single flock worldwide at the end of history. Pico, like the twelfth century reformer Joachim of Fiore, had by no means wished to replace the Old Testament either. He simply wished to see it in its full splendour, correctly interpreted in the fullness of the knowledge of *both* Testaments, with eyes fully illuminated by the gift of the spiritual understanding, which saw in the whole of Scripture a boundless abundance of concordances that built up a message far greater than the sum of its individual parts.

In the end, Pico was himself engaged in a life-long project to reform Christendom along new lines which he hoped would dissolve the gloom of error and reconcile Christians and non-Christians, Jews and Gentiles, on into a perfected form of Christianity. In doing so, however, his strategies differed in some respects from those medieval practices laid out in R. I. Moore's concept of "A Persecuting Society," whereby inquisitors and professional polemicists took a *compelle intrare* approach to those living at the fringes of Christendom.⁷⁹⁴ In Pico, the conversion of the Jews through the kabbalistic perfection of Christianity might be a positive consequence, but it was not its driving goal. The true driving goal of his philosophy as laid out esoterically in the *Oratio*, *Conclusiones*, and *Heptaplus* was simply to provide a faithful roadmap for the individual soul to attain *felicitas*, 'perfect happiness'⁷⁹⁵ and leave the world behind. In this, his goal was the same as Ficino's laid out a decade earlier in *De Christiana religione* which itself put *felicitas* as its highest ambition, all while deriving the bulk of its material from the freshly printed anti-Jewish polemical works of Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fé.⁷⁹⁶ In

⁷⁹⁴ Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 4.

⁷⁹⁵ On the difficulty in translating *felicitas* note how Black, *Pico*, Preface states that since "*Heptaplus* is much concerned with the concept of the proper end of human life, which Pico calls *felicitas*" and since "none of the usual English translations of this word has the equivalent scope," Black understandably decided to leave it untranslated throughout his commentary. I myself feel it is important to leave the term generally untranslated in order to allow for the theologies of men like Pico and Ficino and the men who preceded them to be understood on their own terms. When forced to translate the term, as in our translation of Ficino's *De Christiana religione*, we reluctantly opted for "happiness."

⁷⁹⁶ Cf. Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 34, "Therefore, you see that the law of the Messiah differs from the law of Moses, and that Moses' ritual practices completely fade away in the sight of the Messiah. But the law of Moses is called vain not in absolute terms, but relative to the law of Christ, for it is more outstanding than all the rest. But why is it called vain? Because it can only guide the human race through civic virtues to the path of heavenly blessedness, but not to that end. Christian law leads perfectly toward exemplary virtues and perfect heavenly happiness through purgative virtues and those of a purified soul. For perfect *felicitas* is not given, except to perfectly purified souls; the law of Moses does not effect this, but the law of Christ does. The law of Moses, therefore, is a kind of preparation for the law of Christ, almost a perfect form and *habitus*, since he who has the *habitus* does not need preparation. As we have said above, you admit that the saints do not enter paradise under the law of Moses, but rather await the law and grace of the Messiah. For this reason, as I see it, Moses promises only temporal rewards for those who keep his law, as that teaching cannot aspire to anything greater." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 291-292: "Videtur ergo legem Messie esse a lege Moysis differentem ceremoniasque Mosaycas in Messie conspectu penitus evanescere. Vana vero Moysis lex appellatur non absolute, sed ad Christi legem; ceteris enim prestantior est. Sed cur vana? Quia per civiles virtutes tantum humanum genus non ad celestis beatitudinis finem, sed viam duntaxat dirigere potest. Christiana per purgatorias purgatique animi virtutes ad exemplares virtutes celestemque felicitatem perfecte perducit. Non enim datur perfecta felicitas, nisi animis perfecte purgatis: hoc non Mosayca sed Christiana lex efficit. Preparatio igitur quedam est Mosayca lex ad Christi legem, quasi formam habitumque perfectum, cum vero quis possidet habitum, preparatione non indiget. Quod autem sub Moysis lege sancti paradysum non ingrediantur, sed Messie legem gratiamque expectent, vos, ut in superioribus diximus,

parallel with what was discussed concerning Joachim of Fiore in Brett Whalen's *Dominion of God* (2009), however, Pico's project fueled by a prophetic approach to history was more about *integrating* than *othering*. By today's categories, one would definitely be right to call Pico's project "cultural appropriation" in the most pejorative sense of the term, but as discussed with Joachim of Fiore, we also cannot reasonably expect modern sensitivities to be shared by Catholic theologians of the fifteenth century, nor is it fair to use today's so highly privileged liberal value of tolerance as a yardstick for determining to what extent such an integration project was benevolent or malicious.⁷⁹⁷ To say that Pico's attitudes were simply "anti-Semitic" is not a very useful statement either. To do so would be to presume Catholics do not actually believe in the tenets of their own religion, of which proselytizing to one's neighbour upon pain of death is a central injunction. Anti-Semitism was indeed rampant across Western Europe, *especially* in the latter half of the *quattrocento*,⁷⁹⁸ but it must be admitted that men like Pico or Reuchlin would not have tried to incorporate Jewish mysticism at the highest level of their perfect ideal of Christianity if they had held Jews in complete contempt, especially when they already had perfectly viable systems for exploring the deeper meanings of Scripture (e.g., Pythagoreanism, Platonism, ps.-Dionysian mysticism, etc.) without having to flirt with the old sin of "Judaizing" decried in both the New Testament and in the writings of the Church Fathers.⁷⁹⁹ Pico loved all the Jewish learning to which his teachers gave him access throughout the 1480s, but he desperately yearned for it to be Christian.

As we have seen, prophecies describing the mass conversion and integration of the Jews into Christendom had a long history going right back to the words of Christ and the writings of St. Paul, the archetypal convert from Judaism to Christianity.⁸⁰⁰ Beginning with converso philosophers like Petrus Alfonsi whose anti-Talmudic polemics inspired apocalyptically-minded monastic reformers of the twelfth century, and subsequently the mendicant orders, attitudes towards Jews bifurcated. On one hand, the politically-backed anti-millenarian *compelle intrare* approach was taken up by the orthodoxy-preaching Dominicans who produced such aggressively proselytizing polemics as the *Capistrum Iudaeorum* or the *Pugio fidei* (c. 1270), while on the other, we see an equally vital approach based on the ideals of *integration*, as embodied by Joachim of Fiore and carried forward by more radical members of the Franciscan order who generally focused on promoting the merits of apostolic poverty as the key to the *transitus* into the

confitemini. Ob hoc, ut arbitror, Moyses legem suam servantibus premia solum temporalia pollicetur, non enim potest ea doctrina ad maius aliquid aspirare."

⁷⁹⁷ Cf. Lerner, *Feast of Saint Abraham*, 121.

⁷⁹⁸ See, e.g., Paul O. Kristeller, "The Alleged Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent (1475) and Its Literary Repercussions: A Bibliographical Study," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 59 (1993): 103-35.

⁷⁹⁹ Cf. *Galatians* 2:14. G. Lloyd Jones, "Introduction" in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 12 writes "the fact remained that in the early sixteenth century it was considered unwise for a Christian to display excessive interest in Hebrew. Those Christian scholars who ventured to swim against the tide by seeking help from Jewish tradition to elucidate the Old Testament passages were promptly branded as Judaizers. Ignorant friars, alarmed by the progress of the new learning, thundered from the pulpit that a new language... called Hebrew... should be avoided at all costs since those who learned it became Jews."

⁸⁰⁰ E.g., *Matthew* 8:11 or *John* 10:16.

third *status* of the Holy Spirit. Pico, though more coloured by the theological polemics of the former group (especially on account of his familiarity with scholastic authors like Thomas Aquinas), was in his attitude toward the Jews more akin to the latter integrationalist or inclusivist school of thought. Pico wished to create a synthesis that captured the original spirit of Scripture conceived as a complete whole. He wanted to honour the letter of Scripture in its original form, and thereby potentially make Christianity attractive enough on its own merits to cause Jews to convert of their own accord. When we look at Pico's own words, however, such as those written down in his 1489 *Heptaplus* (which is the subject of our next chapter), it may appear as though the velvet glove at some point slipped off the iron fist:

If [the Hebrews] agree with us anywhere, we shall order [them] to stand by the ancient traditions of their fathers; if anywhere they disagree, then drawn up in Catholic legions we shall make an attack upon them. In short, whatever we detect foreign to the truth of the Gospels we shall refute to the extent of our power, while whatever we find holy and true we shall bear off from the synagogue, as from a wrongful possessor, to ourselves, the legitimate Israelites.⁸⁰¹

Exhortations such as these, however, are not to be taken literally – that is, calling for violence upon unrepentant Jews. Rather, in composing the *Heptaplus*, Pico was tapping into a polemical mode of discourse that, as we have seen in previous chapters, was highly typical of anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic polemics and Scriptural commentaries. These cast themselves in a language of “spiritual warfare” that had most clearly been articulated and developed by monastic and mendicant circles going back to the time of the earliest crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁸⁰² For men like Joachim of Fiore and all those whom he influenced through his eschatological writings and prophetic ideas, history itself became a long and arduous march through persecution and tribulation to a utopia where all differences between Jews and Gentiles (Christians, heretics, and pagans alike) would be submerged. This process was to come about not by force of arms, but by force of truth, through the sword that emerged from Christ's mouth in *Revelation* 1:16, which was interpreted as nothing other than his word. If anyone in the Renaissance could be said to have overtly shared in this vision of a final reconciliation between Christians and Jews near the end of history, it was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his immediate circle of readers in the decades after his death. Kabbalah, then, was to serve as a bridge to ease this reconciliation process. It is for this reason that Pico's peculiar interpretation of Jewish mysticism was the crown jewel of his grand project to actualize the perfection of the history of Christian theology and philosophy, but he knew when he wrote down his *Conclusiones* that his ideas could not be realized without first going through a rigorous dialogue with all the leading intellects of his age.

⁸⁰¹ Pico, *Heptaplus*, 3.Proem in *Opera omnia*, 23: “...sicubi quidem concordabunt nobiscum, iubebimus Hebraeos stare in antiquis patrum suorum traditionibus, sicubi dissonabunt instructi catholicis legionibus impressionem faciemus in eos. Denique quicquid alienum ab evangelica veritate depraehendimus confutabimus pro virili, quicquid sanctum et verum a synagoga ut ab iniusto possessore ad nos legitimos Israëlitas transferemus.” (Carmichael, 106-107; cf. McGaw, 52)

⁸⁰² For the Biblical roots of the language of spiritual warfare, see *Ephesians* 6:10-18. Cf. n. 92 above.

One of Pico's 13 condemned theses (i.e., 9.9) was that "there is no science that gives us more certainty of Christ's divinity than magic and Cabala."⁸⁰³ In this *conclusio*, the capstone of his twenty-six magical conclusions, he was most certainly misunderstood as much by his contemporaries as by casual modern readers given that his use of these words was equivocal. He defined his terms esoterically, making ambiguous statements like: "to operate magic is nothing other than to marry the world."⁸⁰⁴ Nevertheless, when the *Conclusiones* are taken as a whole, it is clear that for Pico, magic constituted both the practical part of the natural sciences, and the absolute perfection of natural philosophy, lofty concerns which he believed were wholly set apart from the notorious necromantic pursuits he dismissed as *goetia*. Rather than the study of the stars and their spirits, it was the study of Hebrew letters (and the formal numbers behind them) that made up the bulk of Pico's views on what he called "*magia et cabala*," and this is why he yoked the two concepts together in *conclusio* 9.9.⁸⁰⁵ Pico's chief interest in Hebrew letters was attempting to decipher how they functioned in the divine names that were strewn about the books of the prophets, as these served not only to produce miracles but also to penetrate to the very deepest depths of true theology. The young prince felt fully justified in the study of this subject given that the study of divine names had long precedent in Christian history, especially in the works of the mystical Dionysius.⁸⁰⁶ Pico's Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah was primarily derived from an attempt to demonstrate irrefutably how Christ's incarnation was central to the redemption of all creation by expounding on the Trinitarian mysteries woven into the Hebrew texts common to both Jewish and Christian traditions. For Pico, to carefully scrutinize and interpret the words of Scripture in their original form was the essence of Kabbalah. When God spoke of himself to his prophets, he spoke in esoteric multi-dimensional puns which could, using the correct philological methods and a spiritual understanding, be dissected and understood across the numerous planes of God's intended meaning. Pico's underlying assumption was that Hebrew was the sacred language *par excellence*: in Gershom Scholem's words, a "language in its purest form" which mirrored "the fundamental spiritual nature of the world."⁸⁰⁷ The weight of Hebrew's authority, however, was not arbitrary. It derived from its antiquity, since from what Pico could understand from his available evidence was that

⁸⁰³ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 496-497: "Nulla est scientia quae nos magis certificet de divinitate Christi quam magia et cabala"; cf. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God*, 313ff.

⁸⁰⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 498-499: "9.13. Magicam operari non est aliud quam maritare mundum."

⁸⁰⁵ Pico's ideas about the "magical" power of the Hebrew language, for example, can be seen in his 'magical conclusions': (9.15) "No magical operation can be of any efficacy unless it has annexed to it a work of Cabala, explicit or implicit." "Nulla potest esse operatio magica alicuius efficaciae nisi annexum habeat opus cabalae, explicitum vel implicatum." (9.22) "No names that mean something, insofar as those names are singular and taken per se, can have power in a magical work, unless they are Hebrew names, or closely derived from Hebrew." "Nulla nomina ut significativa, et in quantum nomina sunt singular et per se sumpta, in magico opera virtutem habere possunt, nisi sint hebraica, vel inde proxime derivata." (9.25) Just as characters ("magical words" according to Farmer) are proper to a magical work, so numbers are proper to a work of Cabala, with a medium existing between the two, appropriable by declination between the extremes through the use of letters." "Sicut characteres sunt proprii operi magico, ita numeri sunt propria operi cabalae, medio existente inter utrosque et appropriabili per declinationem ad extrema usu litterarum." Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 499ff.

⁸⁰⁶ Cf. n. 724 above.

⁸⁰⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 17.

Hebrew was “the first and original language.”⁸⁰⁸ His return *ad fontes*, therefore, was no mere attempt to signal his erudition and good taste as a humanist, but a quest to understand the constitution and history of language itself such that he might be transformed into an irrefutable debater for Catholic truth, and effectively move the hearts of all men to the one true angelomorphic theology, to salvation, and to *felicitas*.

Pico’s gradual yielding to a less overtly eclectic and a more *sola Scriptura* approach began around the time of his excommunication, during which he wrote a small handful of works including his *Expositiones in Psalmos* and his *Heptaplus* (1489). This was also around the same time he became close with Yohanan Alemanno. Among the fruits of Pico’s labours studying the books of the *mecubales*, there were two main elements which received significant attention from later Christian thinkers who picked up Pico’s kabbalistic studies where he had left off, like Johannes Reuchlin, Francesco Giorgi, Arcangelo of Borgonovo, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, and Aegidius of Viterbo. The first of these elements was the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* which Kabbalists already believed constituted the image of a supernal man, the *Adam Elyon/Kadmon*, and was thus readily appropriated by Christians to correspond with their conceptions about a pre-incarnate Christ, albeit in a more static reinterpretation.⁸⁰⁹ The divine name-to-*sefirot* correspondences derived from works like Gikatilla’s *Gates of Light* likewise helped Pico to elaborate the relationship between many biblical divine names (Ehyeh, Tetragrammaton, Adonai, etc.), by connecting them to the three persons of the Trinity in various configurations. The second element was an intensification with the study of the very Hebrew letters that constituted Scripture. These two elements became the chief points of emphasis in Christian texts on “Cabala” in a way that was rather distinctive of Christian authors. To understand why these two elements in particular became so important at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, they cannot be divorced from the popularity of the works of earlier medieval Hebraists and Arabicists, and how their ideas were being applied in Medici Florence. The humanist interests in Hebrew grew hand in hand with their love of Greek Platonism, because in regards to theological or philosophical matters, to encourage the reliance on the *Graeca veritas* was to encourage the reliance on the *Hebraica veritas* as well. Men from that informal circle formulated some two decades earlier under Medici patronage, the very circle established by Marsilio Ficino that attracted scholars like Yohanan Alemanno, are some of the best examples of this phenomenon. Ficino set the stage for a deep dive into antiquity through his translations of Platonic and Hermetic works and his Christian interpretations of Platonic theology, and these

⁸⁰⁸ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 21; see the very last of Pico’s “Philosophical Conclusions Dissenting from the Common Philosophy,” i.e., *conclusio* 2.80 in Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 396-397: “If a first and not accidental language exists, it is clear through many conjectures that it is Hebrew.” Pico, *Opera omnia*, 89: “Si qua est lingua prima et non causalis, illam esse Hebraicam multis patet coniecturis.”

⁸⁰⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 232 remarks on how the fusion of Platonism and Kabbalah in Christian Cabalistic writings “obliterated concepts of the dynamic nature of the sefirot. Such a static understanding of the sefirot is obvious in Pico della Mirandola and most of his immediate followers, who instead identified them with the Platonic Ideas... The Christian version of Kabbalah was concerned with concepts providing a map of the divine world rather than a guide to experience.” This was certainly one of the most significant points of divergence between Jewish Kabbalah and Pico’s Christological reinterpretation.

created a *desiderandum* for understanding the complex ways in which Jewish, pagan, Islamic, and Christian philosophies were all historically intertwined, albeit ultimately subordinate to Christian truth. The rhetorical fashion in Ficino's circle was to set ancient pagan and biblical traditions in parallel, and this seems to have served to mollify some of the anti-Jewish sentiment that impeded the study of Hebrew traditions. Without the development of an environment wherein pagan philosophy could first be reappraised in a more positive or Christocentric light, it is questionable whether any serious interest in Hebrew learning would ever have arisen in Florence when it did.⁸¹⁰

Pico shared a similar vision regarding the history of religion and philosophy to that of Ficino with his *prisca theologia* narrative that saw Zoroaster, Hermes, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato all in some way prefiguring the mysteries of Christianity, but there were certain key differences. Pico used similar overarching concepts as Ficino, but he wove them into a much more detailed yet linear system that made Moses the supreme font of all revelation, while all other prophets and sages were merely downstream. Ficino, on the other hand, took a more humanist approach to this problem, dealing with Hebrew and pagan revelation on parallel tracks. Moreover, where Ficino had tackled this subject rather discursively throughout his works, the count of Mirandola tried to approach it systematically, in the mode of a Parisian disputation. In Pico there was no unfurling process of 'natural religion,' there was only revealed religion, and outright agreement or disagreement over its truths. Pico also differed from Ficino on a key point: while both men used the anti-Jewish dimensions of their polemics to show off their own respective *bona fides*, Pico went beyond much of the purely Latin material available to Ficino in the 1470s with a selection of kabbalistic texts he had more recently become familiar with while studying Semitic languages with his tutors. Ficino had occasionally dealt with arguments that required him to supply crude Hebrew transliterations, but these were drawn second-hand from his Spanish converso sources, and did not demonstrate the same level of familiarity with his source material as Pico did writing a decade later. In Pico, the more scholastic approach to the problem of diversity and factionalism in religio-philosophical discourse distinguished him subtly from the anti-scholastic Ficino, but in the end, despite their varying levels of competency, both men's impulses to return to the *Hebraica veritas* in whatever capacity they could had roots in the approaches of Christian Hebraists and anti-Jewish polemicists who first established the strategy by which opponents to Christianity might be silenced: namely, by slaying them with their own swords.

The doctrine that Scripture is divinely inspired – a foundational doctrine to Kabbalah – was quite easy for Pico to reinterpret for his own ends since such ideas had for so long existed in Christian circles, especially in monastic ones with their practice of *lectio divina*. It must have seemed only natural to him that if kabbalistic techniques had long been used by Jews to get at the hidden heart of the Old Testament, the same could just as well be applied by Christians to understanding the New. For as many 'concordances' woven through both Testaments as had

⁸¹⁰ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 234; Cf. Idel, *Introduction* in *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, vii.

been observed over the centuries, there was potentially no end to the discoveries which Pico could glean from the New Testament through the application of his newfound kabbalistic concepts and techniques. Given the fact that the most important books of the Bible to the Kabbalists were those of the Old Testament prophets, it was only logical that John of Patmos' *Revelation* – the only prophetic book in the New Testament – should serve as their closest Christian analogue. Joseph Blau remarked that when Pico appropriated the *ma'aseh merkavah* (the work of the chariot), he had “to wrench it out of its Jewish framework and to make of it a theosophical structure supporting the doctrine of the Messiah-who-had-come... by substituting the *Book of Revelation* for the apocalyptic books of the Jews, thus formulating a Christian ‘work of the chariot.’”⁸¹¹ Recall, however, that thanks to the exploitation of that book by Spiritual Franciscans for their own millenarian ends during the High Middle Ages, there had developed a general sense of unease in the Church towards theologians reading too much into it.⁸¹² As an erudite count with holdings in Northern Italy, around the lands where so many radical Franciscan endeavours had been quashed just over a century earlier, it is doubtful Pico was unaware of the controversial nature of some of his ideas.

In composing his *Conclusiones cabalisticæ*, Pico tapped into many local intellectual currents, and in particular, currents which emphasized an ‘Abulafian’ more than what we might call a ‘Nachmanidean’ approach to Kabbalah. He split all human sciences into two parts, namely into the practical (*practica*) and the speculative (*speculativa*).⁸¹³ The theosophical-theurgical science of the *sefirot* or enumerations he labeled the practical, and the science of *shemot* or divine names he labeled the speculative. He then further divided the speculative science of names into four branches.⁸¹⁴ As the first and highest of these branches, he placed “the science of the revolution of the alphabet,” that is, the very system of letter permutations used by God in order to create the world in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the same system that sat at the root of the Abulafian *ars combinandi*, a meditation system for provoking ecstatic and prophetic states. This lettrist tradition was in fact distinct from the Llullian *ars combinatoria* well known in the Latin West for mapping out the *dignitates Dei*, but the Prince of Concord suspected in them some kind

⁸¹¹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 15.

⁸¹² See Irena Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xviii.

⁸¹³ See Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 437 for ‘*speculativa*’ as ‘visionary’ rather than Farmer’s ‘speculative.’ Note that these two different translations lead to entirely incommensurable readings of Pico’s division of the sciences, which Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 518-519, n. 11>1 discusses as follows: “Since in medieval traditions ‘divine names’ and ‘practical Kabbalah’ were associated with magic, Scholem and Wirszubski (followed now by Copenhaver...) – reversing the natural order of Pico’s thesis – tried to identify Pico’s ‘science of sefirot’ with speculative science and his ‘science of names’ with practical science or magic. However, given Pico’s disclaimer at the start of this thesis (“Whatever other Cabalists say...” [“Quicquid dicant caeteri cabalisticæ...”]), as well as the content of the theses that follow, no justification exists for inverting his sense: Practical science for Pico was the ‘science of the *sefirot*’ and speculative science ‘the science of names,’ and not the reverse.”

⁸¹⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 521.

of shared source.⁸¹⁵ The remaining three of the four parts of his *Cabala speculativa*, he described as the “threefold Merkabah,” with each step pertaining to the study of the divine, celestial, and material worlds respectively.⁸¹⁶ In this regard, Pico was explicitly following a pattern set down by Abraham Abulafia, but which was at odds with “whatever other Kabbalists say” (“*quicquid dicant alii cabaliste*”).⁸¹⁷ It was Abulafia who in the late thirteenth century had first inverted the standard breakdown of practical vs. speculative Kabbalah as traditionally understood.⁸¹⁸ The pursuit of things like prophetic ecstasy and talismanic magical power had customarily belonged to the baser ‘practical’ domain while sefirotic concerns were relegated to the loftier ‘speculative/theoretical’ branch. In adopting this inverted Abulafian division, we can see one of the ways the more unconventional ideas of twelfth and thirteenth century mystics working in Italy, whether Christian or Jewish, had an influence on Pico to produce an interpretation of Kabbalah that would have been hardly recognizable to contemporary Jewish Kabbalists. This was because Pico’s encounters with Jewish mysticism were mediated by more local Christian spiritual currents which themselves had long been permeated by various permutations of Pythagorean, Platonic, and Aristotelian philosophy. In light of these local currents, he set the concern for the correct understanding and use of *divine names* center stage, just as men had done in previous generations with names like the Tetragrammaton, whether they were Jews like Abraham Abulafia or Joseph Gikatilla; missionary polemicists like Petrus Alfonsi, Ramon Martí and Ramon Llull; or prophetic thinkers like Joachim of Fiore, Petrus Olivi, and Arnald of Villanova.

Despite his more emphatically Abulafian angle, another one of Pico’s sources for thinking about the spiritual mechanics of the Hebrew alphabet and the divine names that its letters formed was Menahem Recanati’s biblical commentary, which was actually a commentary on the *Zohar* or “*Book of Splendour*,” the most significant kabbalistic text to emerge from the thirteenth century. The *Zohar* is not a single book with a consistent system, but as Blau noted, “behind its repetitious and discursive comments there lies a theosophical doctrine which is a riot of lush esotericism,” not unlike the *Chaldean Oracles* or the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but significantly more voluminous, and at the time more widely respected.⁸¹⁹ Pico was not the first Latin theologian to deal with this work, as it was cited twice by the converso Joannes de

⁸¹⁵ See Moshe Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Preliminary Observation,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988): 170-174 for a discussion of the similarities and differences between the Llullian and Abulafian arts, and how Pico interacted with both these systems.

⁸¹⁶ According to Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 136-138, each of these ‘chariots’ corresponded with a specific triad of sefirot, but Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 520 refutes this notion – regardless of how it might coincide with medieval usage – arguing that this understanding could only derive from Wirszubski’s misreading of Pico’s Latin in such a way that he overlooked his conscious inversion of the traditional breakdown of the sciences (see n. 813 above). Farmer reminds readers that Pico’s disclaimer “Whatever other Cabalists say...” at the start of these theses serves to signal a departure from any medieval precedents.

⁸¹⁷ See Moshe Idel, *L’esperienza mistica in Abraham Abulafia* (Milan: Biblioteca di Cultura Medievale, 1992), 46 and Brian Copenhaver, “Maimonides, Abulafia and Pico: A Secret Aristotle for the Renaissance,” *Rinascimento* 46 (2006): 23-51.

⁸¹⁸ See n. 444 above.

⁸¹⁹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 10, 28.

Figuerola in a 1397 *Contra Iudaeos*, a text which relied heavily on Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei*.⁸²⁰ Throughout his *Conclusiones cabalisticæ*, the young count gave no precise discussion of the ten *sefirot* or the 32 lettrist "paths of wisdom" interconnecting them as described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but he did demonstrate some familiarity with them and how they related to creation and revelation, though it is clear he saw in them a way to unify kataphatic and apophatic approaches to theology.⁸²¹ It was under the influence of the *Zohar* and the *Bahir*, filtered through Jewish interpreters like Recanati, that Pico had stressed:

28.33. There are no letters in the whole Law which in their forms, conjunctions, separations, crookedness, straightness, defect, excess, smallness, largeness, crowning, closure, openness, and order, do not reveal the secrets of the ten numerations.⁸²²

Behind each and every Hebrew letter which constituted Scripture there hid a flood of revelation which extended even beyond the four senses to which most Christians were accustomed to using. Not only did the contents of Scripture matter, namely, the words, sentences, and concepts that conveyed the history of the world since its foundation, but now even factors like the size, shape and arrangement of the letters were critical to a thorough understanding.⁸²³ In the decades after Pico's death, it was kabbalistic/"Pythagorean" assumptions such as these that helped to drive many humanists headlong into a much closer relationship with the Hebrew language and its many divine names than had ever been seen outside circles of Jews (or formerly Jewish converts to Christianity), and their numerous subsequent discoveries would provide much fodder for debate throughout the sixteenth century.⁸²⁴

The ten *sefirot* or enumerations were for Pico a kind of skeleton key with which to unlock secrets that the Latin world, the heirs of the one true Catholic faith, had up until this point overlooked. In conceiving a static Christian map of the *sefirot*, Pico associated the three highest emanations *Kether* (Crown), *Chockmah* (Wisdom), and *Binah* (Understanding) with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively. The Father sat at the summit of all existence, the Son or *Logos* sat at his right hand as the Father's wisdom (heading the pillar of Kindness/Mercy), and the Spirit sat at the Father's left as his understanding (heading the pillar of Severity/Judgement).

⁸²⁰ François Secret, "Un kabbaliste chrétien oublié: Jean Phelippeaux, jésuite du XVIIe siècle," *École pratique des hautes études* 82, 2 (1973): 7.

⁸²¹ See n. 809 above; cf. Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 39: "According to Pico, if God could be both One and Being, negative theology ceased to be the only valid way of describing God. Thus, contrary to what Ficino had stated, the Neoplatonic and Christian mystical tradition was not the only valid way to deal with theological matters; Pico admits that the scholastic tradition of using affirmations about God was equally acceptable," for God had made himself knowable in some way precisely through words.

⁸²² Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 358-359: "28.33. Nullae sunt litterae in tota lege quae in formis, coniunctionibus, separationibus, tortuositate, directione, defectu, superabundantia, minoritate, maioritate, coronatione, clausura, apertura, et ordine, decem numerationum secreta non manifestent." For the attribution of this passage to Recanati see Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 45.

⁸²³ Cf. Brian Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala: The Upright *Tsade*, the Closed *Mem*, and the Gaping Jaws of Azazel," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, eds. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 25-76.

⁸²⁴ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 21; cf. Robert J. Wilkinson, *Orientalism, Aramaic and Kabbalah in the Catholic Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

This, however, was but one of three configurations possible for distributing the *sefirot* among the three persons of the Trinity.⁸²⁵ Given the brief and sketchy nature of the *Conclusiones*, and that the actual debate surrounding them never took place, exactly how the other *sefirot* fit into this reckoning was never fully explained. What can be gleaned, however, is that Pico had three possible configurations in mind for this person-to-*sefirot* breakdown, and these could be used to demonstrate how a *deus absconditus* revealed himself to the world without compromising his absolute transcendence. In the second of these configurations, the Father (אֱהִיָּה, Ehyeh) remained seated with *Kether*; the Holy Spirit (אֲדֹנָי, Adonai), who is sent out into the world, was associated with the last *sefirot Malkuth* (Kingdom); and between these two extremes sat the sixth and central *sefirot, Tiferet* (Glory/Beauty), which Pico associated with the Tetragrammaton יְהוָה and the person of Jesus Christ as Messiah, incarnate *Logos*, and wisdom of God revealed. No Kabbalist, of course, had ever understood the *sefirot* in this way, and thus the Prince of Concord's mappings of the inner dynamics of God's redemptive actions were more so a production of his Platonically-tinged and polemically-charged imagination than an outgrowth of any real Jewish mystical tradition. It was, after all, with the help of Proclean, not kabbalistic triads that he discovered for himself this system of formal numbers for disentangling the mystery of how a disincarnate *Logos* could be distinct in some way from the incarnate Messiah, and all three parts of the Trinity to be distinct from one another, while yet all remaining aspects of the *Ein Sof* (the Boundless or Infinite). As Blau put it, this was a "Three out of One, rather than Three in One"⁸²⁶ schema, and such conclusions were ultimately compatible with those of Plato's *Philebus* 27b wherein Socrates describes the three-in-one principle from which all things had emerged with the following doctrine: "The first I call infinite, the second limit or finite, and the third something generated by a mixture of these two."

Divine names were important for a great number of reasons, one of the more important being because they were thought to produce miracles, but the most important being that putting one's faith in the correct name was the only real way to salvation. Another reason, however, was that in so far as divine names appear to be comprised of pre-existing letters/words that can be used to signify something else, or be grammatically analyzed, they doubled as metaphysical statements that revealed *real* information about the nature of God (e.g., *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be"; *YHWH Sabaoth*, "God of Hosts," etc.). Throughout the Middle Ages, many significant battles in the problem of 'immanence vs. transcendence' played out in debates regarding the various names and attributes given to God among pagans, Christians, Muslims, and Jews. By Pico's day, the dust kicked up by such debates had hardly settled once and for all. Traditionally, God had all kinds of names, and no one was even certain

⁸²⁵ Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, lxxi: "There are ten *Sefirot*... not three. [And] there was room in the ten for more Trinities: S1, S2, and S2; a first triad, absolutely undescended into creation and transcending it; S1, S6, and S10, a second triad, reaching through the Godhead from top to bottom and starting a descent toward immanence; then a third triad, S1, S9 and S10, as far descended as a *Sefirah* could be." In this way, the disincarnate *Logos*, Christ the Messiah, and Jesus occupied *Chockmah* (Wisdom), *Tiferet* (Glory), and *Yesod* (Foundation) simultaneously.

⁸²⁶ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 15.

as to how many: Jerome claimed there were ten, Dionysius the Areopagite claimed forty-five, Abraham Abulafia claimed seventy-two, and so on, but no one knew exactly given that God is so unknowable. It was widely maintained in accordance with the books of the Hebrew prophets, however, that before Adam sinned, God had a single name, and only after the fall was the one name wiped clean from the slate of human knowledge. Humankind then fell into a great multiplicity of names, and the true wonder-working word was lost like a needle in a haystack.⁸²⁷ This is how Pico and Ficino had interpreted the prophet Zachariah's words "On that day the Lord shall be one, and His name one,"⁸²⁸ that is, as an eschatological prophecy wherein the fallen multiplicity of names would enfold back into the singularity and perfection of one divine name.⁸²⁹

As a humanist theologian interested in all things both ancient and esoteric, Pico was forced to reckon with the time-honoured tradition begun by the ancient Israelites of erecting ritual barriers around the various names of God. Originally, this tradition served as a means of preserving his kingly transcendence over human affairs, and on a more practical level a means of preserving the commandment to not take his name in vain. Perhaps the most well-known of these traditions in the Hebrew language comprised the use of techniques to safeguard or 'fence in' the name of God with labels like *Hashem* (The Name) in place of *Adonai* (Lord), and *Adonai* in place of יהוה (YHWH). One of Pico's goals in bringing together the *72 Conclusiones cabalisticæ* involved discovering how all the different names of God related to one another through the mysteries of the Hebrew letters, which themselves provided the key to unlock the ultimate secret of Scripture: the true name of God.⁸³⁰ An example of this activity can be seen at work, albeit obscurely, in the following *Conclusiones*:

⁸²⁷ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 45.

⁸²⁸ *Zachariah* 14:9; Ficino cited this very verse in *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 28: "Thus, at last, in the predetermined times, Judah will be saved and there will be then, as was divinely predicted, one shepherd and one fold. Then will be fulfilled that prophecy of Zachariah: 'On that day the Lord will be one and his name one.'" "Sic demum statutis temporibus Iuda salvabitur eritque tunc quod divinitus predictum fuit pastor unus et unum ovile. Tunc implebitur illud Zacharie: 'In die illa erit Dominus unus et nomen eius unum';" Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 259.

⁸²⁹ Cf. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 45.

⁸³⁰ These ideas were later elaborated by Johannes Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* (*On the Wonder-Working Word*), published the same year as the count of Mirandola's death in 1494, wherein he also divided the Tetragrammaton in half by inserting the three-pronged sibilant, the Trinitarian letter *shin* (ש), into the middle of the word, causing the Tetragrammaton IHUH (יהוה) to appear as the IHSUH (יהשוה). This was both in order to reject contemporary grammarians who tended to compress the name of Christ into the powerless IHS, and to demonstrate how only the name of God with the 'breath' or 'spirit' present within it could make the inexpressible word expressible, and thereby useful for the working of miracles, in particular the salvation of man. Zika, "Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico*," 105-107 and G. Lloyd Jones, "Introduction" in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 17-19. Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 230-231; Secret, *Les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance*, 44-52; and Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4 (New York, 1934), 517-524.

11.14. By the letter ψ , that is, *shin*, which mediates in the name Jesus [i.e., ישו], it is indicated to us Cabalistically that the world then rested perfectly, as though in its perfection, when *Yod* י was conjoined with *Vav* ו – which happened in Christ, who was the true Son of God, and man.⁸³¹

11.15. By the name *yod he vau he* [יהוה], which is the ineffable name that the Cabalists say will be the name of the Messiah, it is clearly known that he will be God the Son of God made man through the Holy Spirit, and that after him the Paraclete will descend over men for the perfection of mankind.⁸³²

11.16. From the mystery of the three letters in the word *shabbat*, that is, שבת, we can interpret Cabalistically that the world will sabbatize when the Son of God becomes man, and that ultimately the sabbath will come when men are regenerated in the Son of God.⁸³³

By going into the works of the Jewish Kabbalists and extracting such conclusions from their science of names and using them to explicate Christian mysteries, the young count of Mirandola saw himself essentially trespassing over enemy lines to recover hostile intelligence, much in the way Ficino had done a decade earlier in the 1470s with the anti-Jewish chapters of *De Christiana religione*, or Petrus Alfonsi long before him in his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*.⁸³⁴ Speculations on divine names had certainly already been mingled with kabbalistic ideas by the thirteenth century, but prior to this, similar patterns of activity to what Pico was doing were already present in Christian circles, in the attacks by conversos on various esoteric concepts found in the Talmud and other rabbinical texts that they denounced as irrational. For centuries, the Tetragrammaton's secrets had been hidden away from Christian eyes as the right to pronounce fully the ineffable

⁸³¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 526: “Per litteram ψ , id est, scin, quae mediat in nomine Iesu, significatur nobis cabalistiche quod tum perfecte quieuit, tanquam in sua perfectione, mundus cum Iod coniunctus est cum Vau, quod factum est in Christo, qui fuit uerus dei filius et homo.” Farmer notes that “Pico presumably meant to read out these secrets from the shapes of these letters using the approach suggested in [Conclusio] 28.22 where we find that each stroke in Hebrew has symbolic significance [see n. 822]. There is presumably a connection between this thesis and the next, since *yod* and *vav*, the first and last letters in the name ‘Jesus,’ are also part of the ‘ineffable name’ YHWH that Pico associated with the Messiah.” See also n. 844 below.

⁸³² Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 526: “Per nomen Iod he uahu he, quod est nomen ineffabile quod dicunt Cabaliste futurum esse nomen messiae, euidenter cognoscitur futurum eum deum dei filium per spiritum sanctum hominem factum, et post eum ad perfectionem humani generis super homines paraclytum descensurum.” Farmer notes “Like most of Pico’s longer Cabalistic secrets, this one is presumably to be demonstrated through his *revolutio alphabetariae*...” We find this method used again, and with similar conclusions, in the very last chapter of Pico’s *Heptaplus*, see n. 1019 below.

⁸³³ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 527: “Ex mysterio trium litterarum quae sunt in dictione sciabat, id est שבת, possumus interpretari cabalistiche tunc sabbatizare mundum cum dei filius fit homo, et ultimo futurum sabbatum cum homines in dei filium regenerabuntur.”

⁸³⁴ In Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 30 “On Miracles,” Ficino had made the following conclusions: “the holiest goal of this teaching makes very clear that Christ and His disciples performed miracles not with magic but with divinity. There remains among you a book on the life of Jesus of Nazareth, where one reads that Jesus, among the other miracles that are there recounted in great number, even revived the dead, clearly because only He knew how to correctly pronounce the proper name of God, which among you is revered more than anything else, and since it consists only of four letters – and those in fact are all vowels – it is pronounced with the utmost difficulty. It sounds almost like this: “*hiehouahi*,” that is, “was, is, shall be,” and the majority of Hebrews hold this opinion. If this is so, since nothing among you is regarded as holier than this name and therefore you cannot confirm anything profane, undoubtedly our Christ’s teaching is divine, because it, just as you say, is rooted in the power of that most divine name and, just as we assert, in the power of God.” On Ficino’s potential use of kabbalistic sources for this pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, see Bartolucci, “Per una fonte cabalistica,” 35-46 and “Marsilio Ficino e le origini della Cabala Cristiana,” 47-67.

four-consonant divine name (including the hidden vowels) was strictly reserved for a high priest of the temple on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).⁸³⁵ For Abulafia, the correct name of God was so important that he felt the true Israel was simply the one that had maintained it in its correct form.⁸³⁶ When dealing with a divine name such as the Tetragrammaton, it is useful to keep in mind Naomi Janowitz's "Peircean" semiotic theory of divine names which explains why such a name was to be so powerful in Jewish culture from Late Antiquity onward:

The name is not an arbitrary word chosen to stand for the deity, hence it is not a symbol. Instead, it represents the deity in the less-familiar way in which an icon "stands for" its subject. Just as a line is formally linked with what it represents... so too here the divine name is understood to have a formal, motivated relationship with what it represents (the deity).⁸³⁷

Though it may seem strange to us that so much attention should be placed on having a correct understanding of the name of God, we must remember the great multitude of verses in both the Old and New Testament which stress its miraculous and soteriological powers. *Mark* 16:17, for example, states: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: *in my name* they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues." *John* 14:13 states "Whatever you ask *in my name*, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." *Luke* 10:17 states "the seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us *in your name*." In *John* 14:14, Jesus says: "If you ask me anything *in my name*, I will do it." *Acts* 4:12 states "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." *Acts* 4:30 states: "While you stretch out your hand to heal, signs and wonders are performed *through the name* of your holy servant Jesus." And *Romans* 10:13 states "everyone who *calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved," and so on. Among those who took the gospel message seriously, and in light of verses such as these which could be interpreted in a variety of overlapping ways, the historical reconstruction of God's name was certainly no trifling concern. Compounding all these with Zachariah's apocalyptic prophecy (14:9) that "On that day the Lord shall be one, and His name one," the recovery and implementation of God's *true* name also had eschatological implications.

As already alluded to above, many key discoveries in understanding how and why a Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah emerged in Renaissance Italy were first made by Chaim Wirszubski.⁸³⁸ Through his work on *quattrocento* Hebrew sources, he developed an

⁸³⁵ See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 90 (1.61) and *Leviticus* 6:1-30; see also its importance as a prefiguration of Christ discussed in Ficino, *De Christiana Religione*, Chap. 32; Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 280-283. Cf. George F. Moore, *Notes on the Name יהוה*, *The American Journal of Theology* 12, 1 (1908): 39.

⁸³⁶ Hames, *Like Angels*, 65: For Abulafia, as he indicates in the 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem: 2000), 193: "Judaism is not what most people think it is. True Judaism is the knowledge of the Divine name, and that is self-evident from the etymology of the word *Yehudim*. The first three letters of the word are the letters that make up the Tetragrammaton and the last part with vowel changes means "enough" or "sufficient." In other words, to be a true Jew, it is sufficient to know the essence of the Divine name."

⁸³⁷ Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 24.

⁸³⁸ See n. 789 above.

awareness of what kabbalistic texts and doctrines circulated in Florentine intellectual circles specifically. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, he began cataloging the Hebrew writings that made up Pico's *72 Conclusiones cabalisticæ*, and traced out some of the permutations they underwent while being absorbed from a Jewish into a Christian environment. In studying the Latin translations of Hebrew texts made predominantly by Flavius Mithridates, he was able to pinpoint a good deal of Pico's sources and outline some boundaries to his knowledge.⁸³⁹ While doing this, however, he made an important but oft-overlooked discovery which is included here on account of its significance:

The details vary from thesis to thesis but the pattern... is substantially the same; they all start, explicitly or tacitly, from existing interpretations which are then infused with new meaning. This pattern is familiar. Almost exactly two hundred years before the publication of Pico's theses, [Ramon Martí's] *Pugio Fidei* set an example of a Christianizing interpretation of rabbinic texts, notably the *Midrash* and the *Talmud* (but not Kabbala). The influence of this voluminous work can be traced far and wide. The common pattern of Pico's four theses [then] will be easily recognized by anyone acquainted with the *Pugio Fidei*. Compare [Pico's kabbalistic] theses with the following passage, which I quote verbatim, omitting only the Hebrew texts from the *Pugio fidei* (1687), p. 851:

"In *Bereschit minori* taliter scriptum est super illud *Gen. 22:6* Et accepit Abraham ligna holocausti et posuit super Isaac filium suum: שטען צלויבר בכתפר כזה sicut *iste* qui fert crucem suam humeris suis. Simile huic habetur in libro *Beracot Jerosolymitano* in distinctio Maimatai Korin Et fuit cum absolvisset Salomo precari precationem, et supplicationem istam, surrexit de conspectu altaris Domini procumbens super genua sua, et manus ejus erant expanse ad coelum. Nam sicut *iste* crucifixus, vel in cruce expansus erat stans. Istis duobus apte subjungitur quod in libro *Menachot*, distinct. Col *Menachot* taliter scribitur Deus sanctus benedictus vocatus est ה [ze] *iste*, sicut scriptum est *Exod. 15:2* *iste* est deus meus, et glorificabo eum. Hucusque *Talmud*."⁸⁴⁰

I am not suggesting that [Pico's theses are] derived directly from the *Pugio fidei*. The direct source of inspiration does not very much matter for the present purpose.⁸⁴¹ *What matters is that the pattern of the thesis is traditional: the texts are in part different; the theme and the method are the same.*⁸⁴² [emphasis added]

⁸³⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 229. For a more recent, and detailed appraisal of Pico's library with respect to his Hebrew-to-Latin sources, see the collection of three volumes edited by Giulio Busi, *The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004-2008) and "Toward a New Evaluation of Pico's Kabbalistic Sources," *Rinascimento* 48 (2009): 165-183.

⁸⁴⁰ The following is my own translation, since Wirszubski left the passage in the original Latin: "In the *Bereshit minor*, it is thus written about in *Genesis 22:6* "And Abraham took the wood of the sacrifice and placed it on his son Isaac..." "just as this one who bore the cross on his shoulders." Similar to this, it is maintained in the *Berakhot* of the Jerusalem Talmud, in the distinction *Maimatai Qorin*: "And this was when Solomon had finished to pray this prayer and make supplication, he arose before the altar of the Lord, falling on his knees, and his hands were spread out toward heaven, for he was standing just as *this one* crucified or laid out on a cross." To those two [texts] were easily adapted what was also written in the distinction *Qol Menahot* from the book *Menahot*: "the holy God, blessed is he, was called ה [ze] ("this one"), just as it was written in *Exodus 15:2* "this one is my God, and I will glorify him. So says the Talmud."

⁸⁴¹ The source, however, was in fact Flavius Mithridates who was himself a reader of the *Pugio* and directly responsible for Pico's interest in the cruciform *tsade* along with the redemptive *zeh*, see Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 354-355.

⁸⁴² Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 163-164.

Here I am most certainly in agreement with Wirszubski, though I would carry his argument even further back in time by a century to supply an even fuller context for Pico's approach to the Jews, locating the origins of this particular tradition of anti-Jewish disputation in Petrus Alfonsi, the converso who reinvented the *Adversus Iudaeos* genre by setting the standard for how Christians ought to deal with their intellectual opponents, that is, by slaying them with their own Scriptural 'swords,' in particular by using Jewish mystical texts against the Talmudists. Here the ability to see intensely the 'concordances' across the Old and the New Testaments through the 'spiritual understanding' supplied Christian theologians with all the vindication they needed to confirm their belief that Christ was indeed the Messiah foretold by the Old Testament prophets.

In many of the *Conclusiones cabalisticæ* (e.g., 14, 16, 43, 59, 60, 61), we encounter the use of letter symbolism and esoteric philology as one of the many means of using the enemies' own weapons against them.⁸⁴³ As one of many examples, in the Prince of Concord's interpretation of the symbolism behind two of the Tetragrammaton's letters *yod* י and *vav* ו – likewise the first and last letters of Jesus' name in Hebrew, mediated by ׁ – it could be known how “the Messiah himself as God was the foundation of himself as a man.”⁸⁴⁴ Though Pico offered new ways to think about the specifics concerning divine names, such as the aforementioned idea in *Conclusio* 6 that the names of God differed across his Trinitarian parts (e.g., Father: אהיה, Ehyeh; Son: יהוה, YHWH, Holy Spirit: אדני, Adonai),⁸⁴⁵ his “purpose and methods”⁸⁴⁶ of argumentation clearly echo something of those of the medieval polemicists explored in previous chapters, like Petrus Alfonsi, Joachim of Fiore, Petrus Olivi, Arnald of Villanova, and even Marsilio Ficino, all of whom saw in the Tetragrammaton some justification for the threefold structure of God and the redemptive processes inherent to it. What differed here is that drawing on novel ideas from Jewish Kabbalah, Pico attributed each of the three persons of the Trinity with a four-letter name, and then associated these with three different triads of *sefirot*/enumerations. Nevertheless, in keeping with Abraham Abulafia, Pico believed that even these names – Ehyeh, YHWH, and Adonai – were but shadows of the real name.⁸⁴⁷ If Ehyeh was like the root of a tree, then YHWH was like the trunk, but behind even this great mainstay lay hidden further mysteries, such as the 72-letter name of God (a tetractys made up from the numerical values in the letters in the Tetragrammaton),⁸⁴⁸ or the Pentagrammaton יהשיׁה (YHShVH) in which all things would ultimately sabbatize.⁸⁴⁹ All things had been created through the Word (*John* 1:3), and this included a redemptive process that was to be resolved within the bounds of human history through the loss and recovery of God's one true salvific name. Despite the fact that the older medieval Tetragrammatical speculations differed from

⁸⁴³ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 165.

⁸⁴⁴ *Conclusio* 11.43, “ipse messias ut deus fuit principium sui ipsius ut homo.” (Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 538-539. Cf. n. 831 above.

⁸⁴⁵ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 166.

⁸⁴⁶ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 168-169.

⁸⁴⁷ Cf. 431 above.

⁸⁴⁸ Copenhaver, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, lxviii.

⁸⁴⁹ Cf. n. 831 and 833 above.

Pico's in regards to their specifics – having emerged in a time and place that predated the spread of kabbalistic works like the *Zohar*, the *Bahir*, or the *Gates of Light* into Christian circles – they were fully analogous in “purpose and method.” Thus we see some of the ways in which the development of a Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah during the Renaissance was paradoxically both a new and unique “humanist” phenomenon, part and parcel of a return *ad fontes* back to the *Hebraica veritas*, while simultaneously drawing on the momentum of older, anti-Jewish polemical practices, and serving the same ends as were sought by medieval Latin Hebraists and mendicant missionaries.

A frequently cited example to illustrate this point was first highlighted by Joseph Blau and it involves two formulae recurring often throughout the 72 kabbalistic theses, namely, “Whatever other Cabalists say, I...” and/or “No Hebrew Cabalist can deny...”⁸⁵⁰ So, to build up the example, Pico tells his readers: “no Hebrew Cabalist can deny” that to analyze Jesus’ name יֵשׁוּׁעַ kabbalistically is to behold “God, the Son of God, and the wisdom of the Father through the third person of divinity,”⁸⁵¹ while the Tetragrammaton יהוה specifically symbolizes “God, the Son of God, made man by the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁵² In this we can see how Pico was not so much “Judaizing” or trying to bring a host of Jewish beliefs and practices into Christianity, but he believed himself to be rediscovering a long covered up Christological way of interpreting the Scriptures – the “original” way – which he believed was similar to the mystical beliefs of contemporary *mecubales* but had far a greater antiquity. Pico was not, therefore, exploring Jewish mysticism for its own sake, but attempting to peel back the layers of what he perceived to be accretions atop an irrefutable Trinitarian mystical theology. This was the ground of all ancient theology as it had been shared by all the Hebrew prophets, men whom Christians had always held in high esteem for foretelling through revelation all the key elements in the life of Christ. Christian polemicists had long broached their subject by highlighting all the Christological precursors scattered throughout the words of these Old Testament prophets, but Pico felt the need to go further in this pattern of activity by delving into esoteric texts of Jewish mysticism, and to find them in there too. To succeed in this endeavour was to demonstrate not only his good faith, but his spiritual understanding which itself, according to his *Oratio*, had salvific and angelomorphic power.

What is significant here above all is that the highest science enshrined in both the Count of Mirandola's *900 Conclusiones* and *Heptaplus* – though based on a different set of raw materials – was rooted in the same kind of speculation regarding Hebrew divine names which men like Petrus Alfonsi, Joachim of Fiore, or Ramon Martí had engaged in during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and these were undertaken with similar motives: levying the crypto-Christian ‘spiritual’ character of Jewish mysticism against the interpretative ‘blindness’ of Judaism. These earlier philosophers and theologians had scoured the Old Testament for evidence

⁸⁵⁰ “Quicquid dicant alii (caeteri) Cabalistsae, ego...” and “Nullus Hebraeus Cabalista potest negare”; Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 22. Cf. n. 817 above.

⁸⁵¹ Pico, *Opera omnia*, 108.

⁸⁵² Pico, *Opera omnia*, 109.

of the Trinity's presence throughout, and Pico did much the same, but his personal library of scholastic, Platonic, and kabbalistic texts, along with his access to key language tutors, allowed him a far greater scope with which to put his spiritual understanding to the test. This search for prefigurations was a hallmark of the Latin polemical tradition, but unlike Ficino and his medieval predecessors Nicholas of Lyra, Paul of Burgos, and Jerome of Santa Fé, Pico would unveil his own mysteries. Now he would not just confound the Jews with recourse to Talmudic and biblical sources as his predecessors had done, but with a handful of their own kabbalistic texts and methods too.

6.3 The Count of Mirandola's Jewish Teachers: Elia del Medigo and Flavius Mithridates

To better understand Pico's complex relationship with the Jews and their religion, one must take a closer look at those Jewish (and formerly Jewish) teachers with whom he spent the most time. Around the beginning of the 1480s, Pico's appetite for Kabbalah was first whetted by one of his Jewish instructors at Padua, the Aristotelian Elia del Medigo (1453–93).⁸⁵³ Del Medigo himself was very skeptical about Kabbalah, and was quite vocal about his distaste for Florentine Platonism too. In a 1485 letter from Ficino to Benivieni, we are given a window into the kinds of lively religio-philosophical debates that arose in the living rooms of Florentine elites, in this instance, between two of Pico's Hebrew teachers, del Medigo and the converso Kabbalist Flavius Mithridates.⁸⁵⁴ Ficino's letter indicates that the main points of disagreement were, not surprisingly, over the correct interpretation of biblical verses. According to Harvey Hames, these discussions

surely also included philosophical expositions and kabbalistic interpretations [that] must also have influenced how Elia perceived and understood his Judaism. Mithridates' use of Neoplatonism and Kabbalah to prove the truths of Christianity must have given Elia much food for thought and helped him clarify his [anti-Platonic] position both on philosophical proofs of religious truths and on Kabbalah.⁸⁵⁵

In his letter, Ficino noted how the Jews' arguments might have been incontrovertible were it not for "the divine Plato" entering the debate, "the invincible defender of holy religion."⁸⁵⁶ For Ficino, Plato was the anti-peripatetic philosopher *par excellence*, and consequently it is no surprise Elia had nothing good to say about Platonism and its followers. Hames summarizes Elia's remarks about Platonism from October 1485 as follows: he felt that Plato made no complete discussion of any topic, and that most of his dialogues said nothing of value. He was elliptical and wrote in riddles. His main fault was a lack of systems behind his arguments, since without these systems, acquisition of knowledge was impossible. For this reason, Elia wrote disparagingly about "a group of present-day thinkers, mainly men of poetry and rhetoric, who have dedicated themselves to the exposition of Platonic doctrines, and they use the demonstrations of Aristotle to explain the riddles of Plato" because they believed "there is truth in every sort of wisdom."⁸⁵⁷ Since this group of poets and rhetoricians were getting louder, Elia believed his need to clarify the doctrines of Averroes were all the more important.

⁸⁵³ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 171. For more on their relationship, see Edward P. Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Elia del Medigo, Nicoletto Vernia and Agostino Nifo," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Editore, 1997). For a general overview, see Michael Engel, "Elijah Delmedigo," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/delmedigo/>.

⁸⁵⁴ See also Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 355.

⁸⁵⁵ Harvey J. Hames, "Elia del Medigo: An Archetype of the Halachic Man?" *Traditio* 56 (2001), 217.

⁸⁵⁶ Hames, "Elia del Medigo," 217.

⁸⁵⁷ Hames, "Elia del Medigo," 218.

As an erudite commentator on “The Commentator,” and an ‘anti-anti-Averroist’ of sorts, del Medigo was skeptical from the start not only regarding Pico’s interest in harmonizing various schools of philosophy (which he personally believed were incommensurable), but also regarding the young Christian count’s interest in Flavius Mithridates’ translations of kabbalistic texts. Kalman Bland, who studied Pico and Elia’s relationship in detail, tells us that del Medigo’s texts which both incorporated his thoughts on Kabbalah and had an impact on the young count consisted of the following:

i) the Hebrew version of his *Treatises on Intellect and Conjunction*, composed originally in Latin in 1482 at the request of Pico della Mirandola; ii) the Hebrew version of his *Commentary* to Averroes’s *De Substantia Orbis*, composed originally in Latin in 1485 for the benefit of Pico; iii) the Latin-Italian letter to Pico, written in late 1486; and iv) the Hebrew treatise *Behinat Ha-Dat*, usually translated as *The Examination of Religion*, composed in late 1490 and early 1491, following the return to his native Crete after ten years of productive and troubled sojourn in Italy. Del Medigo’s remarks testify to the competition between Jewish philosophers and mystics for leadership within their communities. They reverberate with the complex interactions of Jewish and Christian (and Islamic) cultures during the Italian Renaissance. They also prove that Del Medigo’s struggle to come to terms with the Kabbalah [as an Aristotelian rationalist] was chronic.⁸⁵⁸

In spite of all their open disagreements, Elia del Medigo still became instrumental to the young scholar’s work insofar as he was a loyal language tutor and his translations formed the foundation of his 41 *Conclusiones* “According to Averroes” which sit in the first set of Pico’s 402 “Historical theses,” following immediately after the discordant Latins in reverse chronological order.⁸⁵⁹ It was therein that Pico argued:

Man’s greatest happiness is achieved when the active intellect is conjoined to the possible intellect as its form. This conjunction has been perversely and incorrectly understood by the other Latins whom I have read, and especially by John of Jandun, who not only in this, but in almost all questions in philosophy, totally corrupted and twisted the doctrine of Averroes.⁸⁶⁰

Thanks to his teacher’s guidance, Pico had no need to jettison Averroes from his system entirely as Ficino had done, he simply needed to read him in a different light, that is, not in the light of the Latin schoolmen who had misunderstood the Commentator’s teachings. Pico believed that: “There are many possible intellects that are only illuminated. There are also many participated active intellects that are illuminating and illuminated. But there is only one active intellect that is illuminating only.” To this he added: “I believe that, in Themistius [the Peripatetic], the active intellect that is illuminating only is the same as *Metatron* in the Cabala.”⁸⁶¹ On his search for

⁸⁵⁸ Kalman Bland, “Elijah del Medigo’s Averroist Response to the Kabbalah of Fifteenth-Century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (1991): 23-53.

⁸⁵⁹ *Conclusio* 19.1 and 19.2 (Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 250-263). Cf. n. 8 above.

⁸⁶⁰ *Conclusio* 7.3 (Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 253): “Foelicitas ultima hominis est cum continuatur intellectus agens possibili ut forma; quam continuationem et latini alii quos legi et maxime Iohanes de Gandauo peruerse et erronee intellexit, qui non solum in hoc, sed ferme in omnibus quaesitis Philosophiae, doctrinam Auerrois corruptit omnino et deprauauit.” Later, Pico makes it clear in *Conclusio* 11.2 that “Intellectus agens nihil aliud est quam deus/the active intellect is nothing but God.” (*Syncretism and the West*, 274-275.)

⁸⁶¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 294-295.

union with this active intellect, therefore, there lay one avenue for Pico to find much common ground between Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism. Del Medigo was also pivotal to Pico's development insofar as he set him up with his first bibliography of choice kabbalistic texts including the *Zohar* (*The Book of Splendour*); Isaac of Acre's *Meirat Enayim* (a kabbalistic commentary on Nachmanides' Torah commentary); Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah* (*Gates of Light*) which introduced Pico to the links between the *ten sefirot* and the divine names; Menahem Recanati's Torah commentary entitled the *Ma'arekhet Ha-Elohut* (*The Order of God*); and some unknown commentaries on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (*The Book of Formation*). Each of these was chosen in accordance with their ease of accessibility for beginners, though del Medigo conspicuously omitted the works of the pseudo-Messiah Abraham Abulafia, a controversial figure whom that peripatetic philosopher excluded from his personal canon.⁸⁶²

After Pico's initial exposure to Hebrew mysticism through del Medigo, it was the Sicilian Flavius Mithridates (i.e., Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, 1450–89), the son of an educated Jew and a convert to Christianity, who came to play a more formative role for the young count in his capacity as a teacher of Hebrew. This was especially so because he was a prime example of how a Jewish humanist of high philosophical and philological calibre could be won over to Catholic Trinitarianism.⁸⁶³ Flavius Mithridates was most commonly known in humanist circles for translating many kabbalistic and Hasidei Ashkenaz books into Latin. The northern humanist Rudolph Agricola (1443–85) referred to him as “a man very knowledgeable in all languages, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldean and Arabic... in addition a theologian, philosopher, and poet.”⁸⁶⁴ He was not only a friend and mentor to Pico, but also an acquaintance to Ficino.⁸⁶⁵ In spite of this positive aspect to his reputation, Mithridates was also somewhat of a troublemaker, and that may be putting it lightly.⁸⁶⁶ His fellow coreligionists never really considered him a particularly good Jew, nor a good Christian for that matter.⁸⁶⁷ Mithridates lived in Rome between

⁸⁶² Giulio Busi “‘Who Does Not Wonder at this Chameleon?’ The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,” in *Hebrew to Latin, Latin to Hebrew: The Mirroring of Two Cultures in the Age of Humanism*, ed. Giulio Busi (Torino: Nino Aragno, 2006), 172-173.

⁸⁶³ We especially get a window into Pico's optimism about the power of the Christian interpretation of the Kabbalah to convert Jews in the 1486 *Oratio* in the following aside: “All in all, there is hardly any point of contention between us and the Jews on which these books by Kabbalists cannot defeat and rebut them, leaving them no corner to hide in. I have a most impressive witness to this fact in Antonio Cronico, a man of immense learning. When I was dining at his house, with his own ears he heard Dattilo, a Jew skilled in this science, come over hand and foot to a thoroughly Christian position on the Trinity.” Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 481.

⁸⁶⁴ Agricola, letter to Adolf Rusch, 13 April 1485 in Karl Hartfelder, “Unedierte Briefe von Rudolf Agricola. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Humanismus” in *Festschrift der Badischen Gymnasien* (Karlsruhe, 1886), 32, as cited in Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129.

⁸⁶⁵ Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*, 8; Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129 notes that Johannes Reuchlin also knew him as “Raimundus Mithridates Romanus,” though his period at Rome lasted only from 1477-1483. For a discussion of the relationship between Flavius Mithridates and Marsilio Ficino, see Bartolucci, *Vera religio*, 74.

⁸⁶⁶ McGinn, “Cabalists and Christians,” 17 described him as a “pugnacious pederast.” See also Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 222.

⁸⁶⁷ Brian Copenhaver, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Virtue, Happiness, and Magic” in *Plotinus' Legacy: The Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era*, ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 53.

the years 1477 and 1483, after which time he was forced to flee, possibly for having been caught practising some element or another of Judaism.⁸⁶⁸ Throughout those years, Mithridates had served for some time as a lecturer in theology at the Sapienza University.

The impact of Flavius Mithridates role as both a Jewish convert to Christianity and a humanist teacher of languages, philosophy, and theology must not be overlooked, especially as it allows us to connect Pico with many of the anti-Jewish polemical currents seen in previous chapters. On Good Friday 1481, the year of his conversion to Christianity, and about five years before he began his Hebrew translation program with Pico, Mithridates found himself in the Vatican preaching about Christ's passion to the pope and his cardinals. In that sermon, Mithridates revealed the ways in which the crucifixion had been anticipated by the prophets of the Old Testament.⁸⁶⁹ Thanks again to Chaim Wirszubski, we know the contents of that oration were grounded not so much in their alleged Hebrew sources as in the works of medieval anti-Jewish polemicists, in particular Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei*.⁸⁷⁰ That is to say, Mithridates did not choose to elaborate on his ideas about Christological prefigurations using Kabbalah, but anti-Talmudic Dominican polemical works. This, as we have seen, was a time-honoured method used by Jewish converts to Christianity for demonstrating their *bona fides*. His speech, in addition to preaching about the concordances between Old and New Testaments, preached about the concordances between a great number of ancient religions. To prove his point, he cited a piece of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Praeparatio evangelica* 9.7 (a recently printed work which incidentally had also been a favourite of Ficino's for lending authority to his logocentric *prisca theologia*).⁸⁷¹ Here one of the most knowledgeable Kabbalists in late fifteenth century Italy went on to argue that Pythagoras had not so much appropriated his knowledge from the Kabbalah, but that the Pythagoreans stood alongside the ancient Hebrews as part of a larger underlying substrate of religio-philosophical agreement.⁸⁷² By 1486, Pico certainly agreed with this view that connected Pythagoreanism and Kabbalah, but he ultimately went a step further in his conviction, proclaiming that this substrate was emphatically Christological and originated in the revelations of Moses on Sinai.⁸⁷³ Now it is entirely possible that a sermon giving any explicit support of Kabbalah or the primacy of Moses coming from the mouth of a Jewish converso like Mithridates

⁸⁶⁸ Gershom Scholem believed Mithridates may have been discovered secretly practising some aspect of Judaism or another, see "Considérations sur l'histoire des débuts de la Kabbale chrétienne" in *Kabbalistes chrétiens*, ed. Albin Michel (Paris: Cahiers de l'Hermétisme, 1979), 23; Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129.

⁸⁶⁹ See Chaim Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates: Sermo de Passione Domini* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1963), 115; cf. n. 840 and 841 above. See also Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129 and Bartolucci, *Marsilio Ficino e le origini della Cabala Christiana*, 48.

⁸⁷⁰ Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates: Sermo de Passione Domini*, 13-28. Cf. n. 840 above.

⁸⁷¹ Wirszubski, *Flavius Mithridates: Sermo de Passione Domini*, 101: "ut Numenius Pythagoricus in volumine De bono sribit. Plato atque Pythagoras que Abrahames et Iudei invenerunt, ea ipsi grece exposuerunt. Et idem rursus. Nihil aliud esse Platonem quam Mossen actica lingua loquentem." Cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 9.3: "Numenius autem pythagoricus aperte scribit nihil aliud esse Platonem quam Moysem attica lingua loquentem: et in primo volumine de bono Plato inquit atque Pythagoras quae Brachmanes Magi Aegyptii Judaeique invenerunt ea graece ipsi exposuerunt..." Cf. Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, xii.

⁸⁷² Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 16.

⁸⁷³ See n. 129 above.

would have been considered some form of relapsing or Judaizing, putting a strain on his relationship with the pope and the cardinals who invited him in a way which it would not if it came from the mouth of a lifelong non-Jewish Christian like Pico (who flagrantly exulted in his discovery that Moses' multidimensional writings lay at the root of all correct philosophical doctrine). Ultimately, finding equivalences between Pythagoreanism and Kabbalah was a Latin Christian phenomenon, probably fuelled in part by a budding sense of Italian nationalist sentiment. In 1485 Mithridates had even translated the *Golden Verses of Pythagoras* from Greek hexameter into Latin.⁸⁷⁴ Such ideas were in vogue during the early 1480s thanks to the Platonic-perennialist polemics of Marsilio Ficino who maintained in line with "Numenius the Pythagorean" (first quoted in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*) that "Pythagoras too had followed Jewish teachings."⁸⁷⁵ Ficino, of course, had not initially mentioned this factoid in his chapter entitled "*On the Prophets' Authority, the Old Testament's Nobility, and the New Testament's Superiority*" to heap praise on Judaism, but to suggest that everyone in the line of Pythagoras had ultimately derived their own teachings from the Jews, and could therefore be admitted on a list of 'Jewish anti-Jewish sources.'⁸⁷⁶

In 1484, Flavius Mithridates fled to Germany, taking refuge at the universities of Cologne and Tübingen, only to return to Italy in 1485 and take his position in Perugia where he gave Pico lessons in Hebrew, Arabic, and 'Chaldean'/Aramaic in 1486.⁸⁷⁷ The young count described his studies in a letter to Ficino, wherein he claimed:

After a whole month of days and wakeful nights with the Hebrew language, I have devoted myself to the study of Arabic and Chaldean, and I will progress no less in these than in Hebrew, in which I am able to compose a letter, if not yet worthy of praise, at least without error.⁸⁷⁸

Be that as it may, when it came to gleaning any understanding from the kabbalistic texts that he read, the young count could not have gotten very far without working closely with Mithridates' Latin translations and advice.⁸⁷⁹ Although his grammar lessons profoundly influenced Pico, more considerable to his student's development were his translations of key Hebrew works: Levi ben Gershom's commentary on the *Song of Songs*; Moses Maimonides' *Treatise On the Resurrection*

⁸⁷⁴ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 16, n. 83. Pico, in the proem of his *Heptaplus*, makes a passing reference to the "golden verses" signalling his awareness that they had been written not by Pythagoras but by Philolaus, a philosopher from the late fifth century BC. Cf. n. 939 below.

⁸⁷⁵ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 26, "Addit in libro *De bono* Pythagoram quoque Iudaica dogmata sectatum fuisse." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 218-219.

⁸⁷⁶ In the same chapter, note that Ficino also maintained that "Pythagoras was born of a Jewish father," citing the authority of Ambrose to substantiate such a bold claim. Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 220: "Ambrosius, si recte memini, Pythagoram patre Iudeo natum ostendit."

⁸⁷⁷ Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129

⁸⁷⁸ Pico, *Opera omnia*, 367: "postquam enim Hebraicae linguae, perpetuum mensem, dies, noctesque invigilavi, ad Arabicae studium et Chaldaicae totus me contuli, nihil in eis veritus me profecturum minus, quam in Hebraica profecerim, in qua possum nondum quidem cum laude, sed citra culpam epistolam dictare."

⁸⁷⁹ As evidenced by a rather infamous note to his young student and patron, Mithridates used to mock Pico to his face: "You can't find anyone to give you an excellent Latin translation of this material, which is scarcely intelligible in Hebrew: for what you do understand, you have Mithridates to thank." Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 356.

of the Dead;⁸⁸⁰ Menahem Recanati's no longer extant commentary on the Torah and Ibn Shem Tov Palquera's *Book of Ascents (Sefer ha-Ma'alot)*; Eliezer of Worms' *Scientia Animae (Hochmat ha-Nefesh)*;⁸⁸¹ Abraham Abulafia's commentary on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*; a work of Nachmanides;⁸⁸² Joseph Gikatilla's *Gates of Justice (Sha'arei Tzedek)*,⁸⁸³ and numerous other kabbalistic texts which filled in the gaps left by del Medigo's bibliography. One of these, the *Liber de radicibus vel terminis cabale*,⁸⁸⁴ a glossary of kabbalistic names and expressions for the ten *sefirot*, was especially vital to Pico's development.⁸⁸⁵ Not only were Mithridates' occasionally idiosyncratic Latin translations of such difficult authors as Abulafia, Recanati, Yehudah Romano, and Levi ben Gershom vital, but so too were his renditions of the *Qur'an* and the *Golden Verses* (in which he even quoted a passage from Bonaventure).⁸⁸⁶ All these texts further buttressed rather than mollified the Prince of Concord's pre-existing ideas about philosophy and theology, thus paving the way for his *72 Conclusiones cabalisticæ* and his *Heptaplus*. In particular, he drew his ideas about the ten *sefirot* from Recanati for the first of his kabbalistic theses, and for his speculations on divine names in his second set, he drew from Abulafia.⁸⁸⁷

In light of all his efforts, it would not be a mistake to pinpoint Flavius Mithridates, not Pico, as the true font of Renaissance Christian Cabala, even if it was the younger of the two that carried its legacy more broadly. In a converso like Mithridates, we see even more clearly how the study of Kabbalah within a Christian context was inseparable from the study of anti-Jewish polemical works like Ramon Martí's *Pugio fidei*.⁸⁸⁸ Through his readings of various Jewish, Islamic, and Christian (namely mendicant) sources, Mithridates was the first to even make it possible to conceive of a Christological interpretation of kabbalistic ideas – interpretations that were irresistible to the young count, entranced as he was by what Wirszubski called, perhaps too dismissively, the “mock mysteries” of his teacher.⁸⁸⁹ By the time he finished his *Conclusiones*, Pico's grasp of Hebrew had still not developed far enough to allow him to deal with original sources on his own, and this made him wholly subject to Mithridates' Latin translations that often changed the meaning of original texts in a way that facilitated Christological reinterpretations.⁸⁹⁰ Mithridates had even managed to convince his young student that Recanati had read the Trinity into the Pentateuch; that the rationalist Moses Maimonides had been a Kabbalist; and that Abulafia had anticipated Nicholas of Cusa's “coincidence of opposites”

⁸⁸⁰ Both in MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 4273.

⁸⁸¹ In MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. ebr. 189.

⁸⁸² Nachmanides and Abulafia are in MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat ebr. 190.

⁸⁸³ In MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chigi A VI 190.

⁸⁸⁴ In MS Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. ebr. 190, fols 222^r-75^r.

⁸⁸⁵ This list of MSS is drawn from Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129-130.

⁸⁸⁶ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 17, n. 86.

⁸⁸⁷ Recall from n. 862 Pico's earlier teacher Elia del Medigo had purposefully neglected teaching Pico about Abulafia.

⁸⁸⁸ Copenhagen, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 355.

⁸⁸⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 17, n. 87; “Mock Mysteries” is the title of Chapter 10 in Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*. For a more recent view of Mithridates' translations which contrasts with Wirszubski's rather disparaging view, see Giulio Busi, “Toward a New Evaluation of Pico's Kabbalistic Sources,” 178.

⁸⁹⁰ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 69-114.

theory.⁸⁹¹ Both through Pico and by his own merits, therefore, Mithridates made significant contributions to the respectability of Kabbalist texts among the literary and intellectual circles of fifteenth century Italy, and to the specific ways in which the doctrines within them were received by an unfamiliar audience.⁸⁹² What ultimately inspired Christians to assimilate these converso contributions, however, must be considered in light of how they were repurposed toward polemical ends, and not to advance some sort of objective scientific or anthropological program of study.

Given that Kabbalah simply means ‘tradition,’ Pico developed a good sense about exactly what traditions were most important to the Christian religion in particular. Many Christian authors who influenced him, while not technically Kabbalists, were certainly thought of as being somehow related to that current. In the *900 Conclusiones*, for example, we find references to Dionysius the Areopagite, Joachim of Fiore, and Ramon Llull, all of whom were by no means Kabbalists, but which each exhibited “a kabbalistic type of thinking.”⁸⁹³ Lorenzo de Medici himself had personal interest in the Lullian arts, confirmed by his ownership of his *Liber de secretis naturae*.⁸⁹⁴ Pico’s own interest in Llull, however, was confirmed by his ownership of Llull’s *Ars generalis* and *Ars brevis*.⁸⁹⁵ This should not seem all too surprising since, in the words of Charles Singer: “Llull was under strong Neoplatonic influence, and into Neoplatonic thought he was able to fit Cabalist development.”⁸⁹⁶ Here by ‘Neoplatonic’ is meant primarily the influence of ps.-Dionysius, especially regarding his work on divine names/attributes which first reached the Latin West through the translations of John Scotus Eriugena (an influence which both Frances Yates and Gershom Scholem accepted to be far more prominent than any Jewish work of theosophical Kabbalah).⁸⁹⁷

Another of Mithridates’ contributions to Pico’s scholarship was the help he gave in understanding what the young count called the “*scientia alphabetariae revolutionis*” in his

⁸⁹¹ Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 171; for Maimonides as a Kabbalist see Pico’s *conclusio* 11.63 in Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 547. Cf. Copenhaver, “Maimonides, Abulafia and Pico,” 23-51.

⁸⁹² Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 17.

⁸⁹³ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 228; Cf. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton*, 313.

⁸⁹⁴ Michela Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: Warburg Institute, 1989), 29, n. 38.

⁸⁹⁵ Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 261 notes that “an edition of *Ars Brevis* appeared in 1481; and of the *Ars generalis* at Venice, 1480.” To add weight to the idea that Llull’s arts were indeed considered a “kabbalistic type of thinking” during the Renaissance, it can be noted that in 1474, the *Ars brevis* was translated into Hebrew in Senigallia on the Adriatic coast, after which it was copied many times. According to Harvey J. Hames, “Jewish Magic with a Christian Text: A Hebrew Translation of Ramon Llull’s *Ars Brevis*,” *Traditio* 54 (1999): 283, “This translation is of especially great significance in that there appears to have been in Italy in the fifteenth century a circle of Jewish scholars willingly engaging with a Christian text in order to achieve divine illumination.”

⁸⁹⁶ Edwyn R. Bevan and Charles Singer, *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 274, cited in Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah,” 170.

⁸⁹⁷ See *Lull and Bruno – Collected Essays*, ed. Francis Yates, vol. 1 (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge, 1982), 78-212; the notion that Llull was chiefly influenced by the kabbalistic idea of ten *sefirot* in producing his doctrine of the *dignitates dei* has fallen out of favour with scholars who now, in line with Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah,” 170 prefer to see that “if there are some similarities between the kabbalistic *sefirot* and Lull’s *dignitates* they may be the result of the influence of common sources and Scotus Eriugena [translator of ps.-Dionysius] may indeed be considered just such a source.” Cf. notes 451 and 462 above.

Conclusiones.⁸⁹⁸ In the *Apologia*, Pico elaborated on what he meant by this and described his interest in a specific branch of Kabbalah: “that which is called the art of combining [letters]... and it is similar to that which amongst ourselves is called the *ars Raymundi*, although they work in very different ways.”⁸⁹⁹ The main difference between the *ars Raymundi* and that *ars* used within the context of Abulafian ‘ecstatic’/‘prophetic’ Kabbalah (both of which relied upon combinations of letters in different ways) was that: the former combined various letters of the alphabet as a “way of proceeding in the sciences” and was chiefly used as an engine of logic within polemical contexts, while the latter was a system of combining the letters of divine names in order to achieve ecstatic experiences.⁹⁰⁰ Note that when Pico used the word *scientia* what he meant by it was specifically “non-revealed knowledge,” a kind of knowledge which could only get him so far in the pursuit of *felicitas*.⁹⁰¹ Among the Prince of Concord’s most critical polemical devices, then, was a system of letter rotation derived from a certain type Abulafian *ars* from the late thirteenth century. Unlike Abulafia’s use of his own *ars*, however, we will see Pico using it in the *Heptaplus* not in a mystical way (for achieving prophetic states), but in a polemical way, akin to the way Ramon Llull employed his own *artes* in an attempt to convert Muslims and Jews. In this way, Ramon Llull’s polemically-oriented philosophical projects fed into the rise of Christian “kabbalistic type thinking” in the Renaissance, particularly through Pico.⁹⁰²

While the combinatorial arts, letrist techniques, numerologies, and theosophies of medieval Jews constituted a significant aspect of Pico’s kabbalistic thought, what became most important to him in the latter half of the 1480s – to the extent that he risked even further punishment by the pope – was to publish in support of the old idea that the Scriptures operated on numerous levels stretching from the literal to the anagogical interpretation – the last of which revealed nothing more than the Trinitarian nature of the divine and the immortality of the human soul – but which was also wholly equivalent with both the Kabbalah and the *intellectus spiritualis*. Being both a student of scholasticism as well as a student of many different Jewish personal tutors, he went a long way in trying to bridge this gap between Christian and Jewish patterns of exegesis, and to accomplish this he would later devise in the *Heptaplus* what he considered a perfected, sevenfold allegorical system that went above and beyond the Christian fourfold method or the Jewish *PaRDeS*. Before that, however, in the *Apologia* he had written following his excommunication, he defended himself against accusations of Judaizing for

⁸⁹⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 64; 108; cf. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 259.

⁸⁹⁹ Pico, *Opera omnia*, 180, “quae dicitur ars combinandi... et est simile quid, sicut apud nostros dicitur ars Raymundi, licet forte diuerso modo procedant.”

⁹⁰⁰ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 64; Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah,” 170-171.

⁹⁰¹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 25.

⁹⁰² This renewed interest in Llull spread from Italy to France where translations of his writings were published in 1504, 1505, and 1510, eventually to catch the attention of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (c. 1455-1536) and his circle of humanists. See John Lewis, “Rabelais and the reception of the “art” of Ramon Lull in early sixteenth-century France,” *Renaissance Studies* 24, 2 (2009): 271. See also Roberta Albrecht, “Pico della Mirandola and Raymond Llull,” *Notes & Queries* 61, 2 (2014): 277 who writes of how Reuchlin studied the Llullian art with Pico while in Florence, and later published his *De arte cabalistica* in 1517 which put forward a system firmly rooted upon both Pico and Llull’s respective arts.

privileging kabbalistic ideas by demonstrating how the fourfold interpretive scheme already widely known “*apud nos*” (“among us [Christians]”) was entirely analogous to the Jewish system. “*Pesat*” was equivalent to the literal interpretation; “*Midras*,” the allegorical, or mystical; “*Sechel*,” the tropological (or moral); and “*Cabala*,” the anagogical.⁹⁰³ For Pico, therefore, to study “*Cabala*” was simply to study the anagogical interpretation, or in other words, the spiritual understanding. In highlighting these concordances between Jewish and Christian exegetical modes as he had read them in authors like Nicholas of Lyra, the Prince of Concord thus intended to show that his seemingly alien and unorthodox dabbling in Jewish mysticism *had substantial Christian precedent*, even if he was updating and playing around with the boundaries of what these four senses traditionally involved.⁹⁰⁴ In all these examples, we develop a picture of Pico’s ‘integrative’ rather than ‘exclusionary’ or ‘persecutory’ approach to the problem of Jewish presence in Christian society. It was by uncovering all the hidden correspondences between the Christian tradition and the Platonic, Aristotelian, and kabbalistic systems, not simply by eradicating those systems, that the Prince of Concord attempted to bring unity to the discord that had long stood between the religions descended from Moses, and to create an anagogical roadmap to perfect happiness, *felicitas*, for all.

⁹⁰³ Pico, *Opera omnia*, 178; cf. Black, *Pico*, 62-63, n. 31. Note how in Pico’s *Apologia* “*Midras*” stands in place of “*Remez*,” “*Sechel*” in place of “*Derash*,” and “*Cabala*” in place of “*Sod*,” the more traditionally recognized names for the parts of the *PaRDeS* (itself an acronym of Peshat, Remez, Derash, and Sod).

⁹⁰⁴ Black, *Pico*, 63-64 notes, e.g., how although the ‘literal’ interpretation in Christian circles had traditionally-speaking never involved philology, Pico nevertheless subsumed that humanist science into his own definition of “the literal sense” on the grounds that it pertained to the *historical* level of the text. Historically, “the literal sense” concerned itself with questions like whether creation was to be taken as having unfolded over a literal six day period, while philology involved mending corruptions which had accrued over centuries of transmission.

6.4 The Count of Mirandola's Jewish Teachers: Yohanan Alemanno

In 1488, the year leading up to his publication of the *Heptaplus* and in the wake of his trials with the pope, Pico came into direct contact with the last of his Jewish teachers, Yohanan ben Isaac “Alemanno”⁹⁰⁵ (1435–1504).⁹⁰⁶ He was not a converso like Mithridates, but a Jewish humanist philosopher, a student of Judah Messer Leon, and like Elia del Medigo, predominantly an Aristotelian thinker (yet unlike del Medigo, deeply interested in kabbalistic and astral magical matters). Later in his life, Alemanno had developed some proclivities for Platonic philosophy that went above and beyond the Aristotelian school in which he had been educated, and was thus equipped to deal with Pico's preference for more exclusively Greek philosophical ideas.⁹⁰⁷ Together with Pico he continued to explore the esoteric dimensions of Jewish thought, especially in regards to Alemanno's interpretation of the *Song of Songs* (*Heshek Shlomo*, or *The Desire of Solomon*), his most significant work as it pertains to shaping Pico's interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah, the introduction of which was printed under the title of *Sha'ar ha-Heshek*.⁹⁰⁸ This is one of the most important works written during the Renaissance to highlight the role of King Solomon as a magician and mystic who used his powers to build the First Temple, and Alemanno himself tells us that he was inspired by Pico to write it.⁹⁰⁹

Since it acted as a kind of counter-point to the distinctly esoteric elements of the Latin polemical tradition – those rooted in the interpretation of revealed Scripture and the requirement of a spiritual understanding with which to unlock its secrets – one must here touch upon the role of the Helleno-Arabic astral magic tradition (as exemplified by texts like the ps.-Aristotelian *Hermetica*, the *Secretum Secretorum*, or the *Picatrix*), a school of occult natural philosophy based on using scientific knowledge to manipulate the channels of causality. Texts such as the *Picatrix* exhorted practitioners to pursue their Hermetic “Perfect Natures” through astral magic and to perform rituals with images and talismans that manipulated the effects of invisible rays cascading down from the spirits of the stars. In negotiating with this manifestly non-Christian tradition, in deciding what Christians found useful and what they found abominable, many philosophers in the Latin West were profoundly impacted, and many were polarized, but its lasting influence pertained more emphatically to natural philosophical matters than mystical

⁹⁰⁵ I.e., the Italian rendering of “Ashkenazi.”

⁹⁰⁶ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 256 also indicates that “Alemanno might have been known to Pico before they met in Florence in 1488” based on a reference to a “Johanan” in the *Commento*. For more bibliographical information on Alemanno and his relation to Pico, see Brian Ogren, *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought: Ma'aseh Bereshit in Italian Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah, 1492-1535* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 7-8.

⁹⁰⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between Yohanan Alemanno and Marsilio Ficino, see Bartolucci, *Vera religio*, 93 and ff.

⁹⁰⁸ See Yohanan Alemanno, *Sha'ar Ha-Heshek* (Hebrew: Livorno, 1790); Arthur Michael Lesley, *The Song of Solomon's Ascents by Yohanan Alemanno: Love and Human Perfection According to a Jewish Colleague of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (PhD diss., University College Berkeley, 1976) includes an English translation of *Sha'ar Ha-Heshek* which is itself an introduction to a larger work; see also Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 173 and Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 178, n. 6.

⁹⁰⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 178.

ones. It was Moses Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* 3.29-30 who first famously attacked the practices contained in the books of Hermes, the *Nabatean Agriculture*, and those books falsely attributed to Aristotle (e.g., *Kitab al-Istimākḥīs*), placing the use of spiritual and demonic magic in the category of idolatry, in violation of the very first and most fundamental of the ten commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”⁹¹⁰ Having become particularly knowledgeable about the intricacies of astrology and *nigromancia* through his readings of Roger Bacon’s annotations of the *Secretum secretorum*, the *Picatrix*, and through exposure to both Ficino and Alemanno’s rather tame personal practices, Pico ultimately rejected magic in keeping with Maimonides’ exhortations, but did so by subordinating them to the workings of the ‘supercelestial’ world of Christian metaphysics as described by ps.-Dionysius.

In the last few years of Pico’s life, therefore, the very same Platonic pro-spiritual, anti-carnal sentiments that drove him to harangue against Talmudic Judaism went on to form a cornerstone for his other polemical writings, such as those against divinatory astrology and other prevailing astro-magical theories. What is most significant for our purposes here is the fact that this style of polemical discourse privileging spirit over flesh – the immaterial over the material – was ultimately common to both his anti-Jewish and his anti-*nigromantic* (or goetic) attitudes. Pico’s emphasis on the prophetic or ‘supercelestial’ character of Kabbalah over mere ‘celestial’ talismanic astral magic used to cause changes in the ‘terrestrial’ world was predicated on his privileging of a more ancient doctrine, one closer to the source of creation, and thus less susceptible to pagan corruption. His biases were fundamentally rooted in appeals to antiquity and the weight of historical precedent. What was more removed in time from Pico’s own day was of a more transcendent nature. Ultimately, what mattered most to him was the idea that nature could be read and understood as a text that might serve as a roadmap leading back to God. The magic and theology of the ancient Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus had its uses in understanding the Book of Nature, as Ficino explored in his *De vita libri tres* – which he was writing around the same time Pico wrote his *Heptaplus* – but for the young count of Mirandola the natural sciences were simply inferior subjects of study when compared to the study of the most ancient revealed texts in all of existence, the writings of Moses, the supreme prophet and esotericist, and the first to whom God orally transmitted the secrets of creation and the instructions on how to correctly interpret the Law. Pico never ceased to believe that, to quote the very last of his *900 Conclusiones*, “just as true astrology teaches us to read in the book of God (Nature), so the Cabala teaches us to read in the book of Law (Torah),” though it is clear that understanding how to please God by keeping his commandments was far more important than merely understanding his creation.⁹¹¹

⁹¹⁰ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 315-320; *Exodus* 20:2 and *Deuteronomy* 5:6.

⁹¹¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 552-553, *Conclusio* 11.72): “Sicut uera astrologia docet nos legere in libro dei, ita Cabala docet nos legere in libro legis.” Farmer here adds the following important note: “For the astrological reference here, cf. 7a.74, to be answered through Pico’s *via numerorum*. According to the *Apology* (Pico, *Opera omnia*, 178), the ‘first and true Cabala’ pertained to the true interpretation of the Law that God revealed to Moses... providing Christians with a means to ‘pierce the Jews with their own weapons’ [*unde Iudaeos suis telis confodiant*].”

Commonplace astrological knowledge and astral magic might have offered worldly power, but it did not offer peace or perfect happiness (*felicitas*). Where the Hellenistically-inspired practical magic of Arabic occultism exerted an influence on philosophers to see the world more in terms of manipulatable chains of causes and effects, the so-called ‘magic’ privileged by Pico’s ‘magical conclusions’ was a kind of miracle-working theurgy rooted in ps.-Dionysian principles: it was concerned with the correct understanding of theology and divine names, and the imitation of angelic virtues, of which *caritas* was the very highest. This was what today we would call a ‘mystical’ more than a ‘magical’ worldview. Like any common magician, Pico saw all of creation as a dense forest of hyperlinked signs, but each of these corresponded in some way to the signs that constituted the very word of God, which was above nature. Therefore, for a Christian to achieve their equivalent of a Hermetic “Perfect Nature,” their entelechy or personal *telos*, was to acquire the spiritual understanding and use it to emulate or pattern their lives perfectly after the contemplative angels. Then, following a self-sacrifice to God by way of the archangel, the saint was rewarded with an ecstatic experience, the kiss of God’s mouth, or more precisely, the *mors osculi* or “death of the kiss,” by which their soul, freed from all impure bodily accretions, ascended to the supercelestial sun of *Tiferet* (the sixth *sefira* associated with the Messianic Tetragrammaton יהוה), to live in ultimate *felicitas* – the highest possible goal for any human soul to attain.⁹¹² This death of the kiss motif, without its Christian and kabbalistic embellishments, ultimately derived from Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* 3.51 and was fundamental to shaping Pico’s highest spiritual aspirations.⁹¹³ To achieve this blessed state, Pico argued that one must first climb through the ladder of i) moral philosophy, ii) dialectic, iii) natural philosophy, and iv) theology, and thereby become one with humanity’s intellectual or angelic nature and be reunited with the divine.⁹¹⁴ In the 1486 *Oratio*, he laid out clearly his roadmap for supercelestial ascent and beatific union, as much for himself as for his fellow Christians, in the following way:

[Moral philosophy] will check the wild excesses of the many-formed beast, as well as the lion’s brawling, raging, and pride, if our man seeks only a truce from the enemy. Then, if we think better of it and want the security of perpetual peace for ourselves, morality will come with generous answers to our prayers, and – once both beasts have been killed like pigs at a sacrifice – this philosophy will ratify an inviolable covenant of the holiest peace between flesh and spirit. Dialectic will calm the turmoils of reason... Natural philosophy will settle disputes and disagreements of opinion that come from all sides to worry, distract, and torment the restless soul. But it will calm us by also compelling us to remember that Nature was born of war, according to Heraclitus, which is why Homer called it contention. From philosophy, therefore, we

Thus, Pico’s last thesis, like the last section of his text as a whole, contains suggestions for a final means to convert the Jews, a traditional sign of the beginning of the millennium.”

⁹¹² Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 524-525, *Conclusio* 11.11 states “The way in which rational souls are sacrificed by the archangel to God, which is not explained by the Cabalists, only occurs through the separation of the soul from the body, not of the body from the soul except accidentally, as happens in the death of the kiss...” “Modus quo rationales animae per archangelum deo sacrificantur, qui a Cabalisticis non exprimitur, non est nisi per separationem animae a corpore, non corporis ab anima nisi per accidens, ut contingit in morte osculi...” Cf. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 390-391 (3.51).

⁹¹³ See n. 979, 980, and 982 below for more on the *mors osculi*.

⁹¹⁴ Copenhagen, “Who Wrote Pico’s Oration?”, 1.

cannot get true rest and lasting peace; this is a gift from philosophy's mistress – from most holy theology – and only hers to give. Philosophy will show us the way, keep us company, and lead us to her. When she sees us far off, hastening toward her, “come to me” – she will shout – “you who are weary with toil, and I will restore your strength. Come to me, and I will give you the peace that the world and Nature cannot supply.”⁹¹⁵

Pico indeed considered it a blessing if man might be perfected in learning everything there was to know about contemporary science and philosophy, thereby coming into contact with his Perfect Nature, but this was only an embodied, and therefore carnal, lesser *felicitas*: *that of the sage, but not of the prophet*. Nature was born of war and the peace of true *felicitas*, the sabbath of the soul, necessarily lay beyond its bounds.

Alemanno was unique among Pico's Jewish teachers insofar as his opinions of Kabbalah were also somewhat idiosyncratic relative to those of Elia del Medigo and Flavius Mithridates. His interpretations of kabbalistic texts were coloured by his engagement with the kind of ps.-Aristotelian/Hermetic talismanic magic found in the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* or *Picatrix* (known since the thirteenth century also by its Hebrew name *Takhlit he-Hakham*). At the very core of this system of magic was the concept of attaining one's “Perfect Nature” through the perfection of the human intellect with respect to a full knowledge and understanding of the sciences. Here the “Perfect Nature” or astral body of perfected magicians was identified with the “tselem” (תְּלֵמָה) or image of man made in God's image from *Genesis* 1:27, and recast in a more supernal light.⁹¹⁶ Where Alemanno distinguished himself from the average practitioners of astral magic was in his fusion of these ideas with kabbalistic ones. The celestial world for him was of course still a spiritual realm of causes which had to be understood on the path of perfecting one's nature, but Alemanno also superimposed this ancient system of practical magic with his knowledge of the supercelestial realm of the ten *sefirot*. In the same way that talismans could be fashioned at opportune times with the appropriate materials to draw upon the influx of the stars, the performance of specific religious rituals likewise drew down the influx of the *sefirot*.⁹¹⁷ Though a similar idea was already in currency in works like the anonymous *Sefer Toledot 'Adam*, Alemanno's synthesis was far more nuanced and complex. Moshe Idel provides us with a succinct but revealing example of this system from Alemanno's *Liqqutim/Collectanae*:

At first the Kabbalist recites divine names, which he reads to himself from a Torah scroll: After the external cleansings of the body and an inner change and spiritual purification from all taint, one becomes as clear and pure as the heavens. Once one has divested oneself of all material thoughts, let him read only the Torah and the divine names written there. There shall be revealed awesome secrets and such divine visions as may be emanated upon pure clear souls who are prepared to receive them as the verse said: “Make ready for three days and wash your clothing” [Exodus 19:15]. For there are three preparations: of the exterior [the body], of the interior, and of the imagination. By reading the Torah as a series of divine names, man receives an initial infusion of power. This reading is preceded by a series of “preparations” that are reminiscent of the purifications performed by the Jews before the giving of the Torah at Sinai... The Torah

⁹¹⁵ Pico, *Oratio* in Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 465; cf. Wallis, *On the Dignity of Man*, 11.

⁹¹⁶ Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 251-273, 312-319.

⁹¹⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 182.

scroll itself [then] becomes imbued with the spiritual force. At this time, “the writing of God, the spirit of the living God, shall descend upon the written scroll.”⁹¹⁸

In this way we see a seamless fusion between various philosophical, mystical, and magical elements: the importance of ritual purification, the power of divine names, the use of physical actions to provoke changes in the spiritual world, and the reception of *epopteia* or visions through divine emanations as a result of performing traditional religious commands. The difference here between astral magic as found in the *Picatrix* and this kabbalistic reinterpretation was the exchange of talismans for divine names from Scripture, and a trade of practical concerns like the manipulation of weather or control over the tongues of men in exchange for the revelation of secrets or divine visions. The Torah itself is even described with the language of a talisman as it is described in *Picatrix*: an object imbued with spiritual force. This bridge, this application of the discourse of natural magic layered atop purely kabbalistic concerns, became critical to Pico on his path to divorcing himself from any associations with ‘magic’ or astrology before throwing himself headlong into his theories about the true end goal of human existence.

Subordinating talismanic astrology to Kabbalah, just as Pico did in his *Heptaplus*, Alemanno’s *Shir HaMa’alot* (*Song of the Ascents*) explains that:

The Kabbalists say that every limb of a man’s body has a spiritual power corresponding to it in the sephira Malkhut.⁹¹⁹ ...When a man performs one of the commandments by means of one of his corporeal limbs, that limb is readied to become a seat and home for the supernal power that is its likeness... Our patriarch Abraham was the first to discover this wondrous science... as proven by his book *Sefer Yetzirah*, which was composed in accordance with this principle. It demonstrates how the likeness of each and every limb is to be found in the celestial spheres and stars and how matters stand in the spiritual world, which he terms the world of letters... And study how this ancient science resembles the ancient science of astrology, which found that every limb and form and corporeal body that exists in the world of change has a likeness in the world of celestial motion in the stars and their forms. The astrologers prepared every thing in a way as to receive the efflux proper to it. However, this is a material craft that is forbidden, flawed, and impure. But the wisdom of Abraham is a spiritual craft that is perfect and pure and permitted, and his sons, Isaac and Jacob, followed in his path.⁹²⁰

Here we see the type of magic which was traditional to the Latin West since the twelfth century, even in Jewish circles, when such texts began arriving from the Arabic world – the types of practices as espoused in the ps.-Aristotelian *Hermetica*, *Secretum secretorum*, *Picatrix*, *Speculum astronomiae*, or even Ficino’s *De vita libri tres* – being dismissed as a “forbidden, flawed, and impure” material pursuit, while the practical Kabbalah, through an appeal to antiquity, he privileged as a “perfect, pure, and permitted” spiritual pursuit, placing that which is immanent below that which is transcendent. For Alemanno, the patriarchs like Abraham and Moses had an intuitive knowledge of the spiritual sciences, and these they expounded in riddles about the *sefirot*, the divine names, and the letters which comprised them. Whenever Moses

⁹¹⁸ Alemanno, *Collectanea*, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2234, fol. 164a as cited in Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 182.

⁹¹⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 185, n. 32.

⁹²⁰ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 185, n. 33.

performed miracles, he did so through prayers and the utterances of divine names, which caused a kind of sympathetic resonance between the attributes in the higher world and the matter of the lower world, drawing down the influx of divine emanation.⁹²¹ In Alemanno's words: "A prophet has the power to cause the emanation of divine efflux from *'Ein Sof* upon the *hyle* [matter] by the intermediary of the *sefirah Malkhut*. In this way the prophet performs wondrous deeds, impossible in nature."⁹²² In keeping with these concepts, he described both the Tabernacle and the Temple as giant magical talismans which drew down emanations from the realm of the *sefirot* – two talismans which in Pico's mind, however, Christ himself had ultimately replaced.

Alemanno considered the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm/Picatrix/Takhlit he-Hakham* to be a roadmap for any magician who wished to achieve perfection through the sciences.⁹²³ Like Ficino working on his Plotinian self-help guide *De vita libri tres* around this time, Alemanno borrowed bits and pieces of the comprehensive astro-magical system, but fused them seamlessly with the 'more spiritual' science of Kabbalah (much like Ficino did in fusing the *Picatrix*'s system with his own Platonic speculations from his readings of authors like Plotinus, Iamblichus, and ps.-Psellos). Both Alemanno and Ficino, though working from within different philosophical paradigms, carried forward this Arabic magical tradition which had bifurcated in late thirteenth century Spain along Latin Christian and Jewish lines. Ultimately, while these two men had in Pico nurtured the seeds of Kabbalah and Platonism respectively, they failed to override the young count's academic scepticism of astral magic. What portion of the ps.-Aristotelian or Hermetic worldview they did manage to impart unto Pico, however, was the emphasis on the teleological dimension of human life on its quest to achieve its *Perfect Nature*, that is, 'The Goal of the Sage.' Instead of conceiving this process in 'magical' terms, that is, by achieving the fullness of knowledge in all the sciences to the extent that one can produce miracles, Pico had reinterpreted

⁹²¹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 186.

⁹²² Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 186, n. 36.

⁹²³ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 206, n. 38 and 39: Idel notes that two Hebrew translations of the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* from Arabic to Hebrew were circulating in Italy around the period of the late *quattrocento*, both of which existed in abridged forms. "The most important abridgment" reports Idel, "was made from the Arabic version and survives in two manuscripts under the title *Takhlit he-Hakham* [n. 40]. Both manuscripts, Ms. Munich 214, folios 46a–101b, and Ms. London, British Library Or. 9861, folios 1a–38b, were copied in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. A fragment of the second abridgment of *Picatrix* is preserved in two manuscripts that were part of the same codex, Ms. New York, JTS 2470 (ENA 2439), folios 1a–10b, and Ms. New York, JTS 2465 (ENA 1920), folios 1a–5a. These two manuscripts were also copied in Italy. On folio 10a in the first manuscript we read: "This book was translated from Aramaic into Arabic and from Arabic into Hebrew, but this translation is not the first Hebrew translation. From Hebrew it was translated into Latin and from Latin this translation was made, praise to God." At the end of the second manuscript we find: "The translation of the first chapter of the book *Ghāyāt al-Ḥakīm* has been completed, thank God, and was translated from a Christian translation, most of which is incorrect, as their translation is in no way clear." These references to a translation from Latin (la'az) seem to point to the Renaissance period. In any case, the Hebrew translation was made after the first Arabic translation and certainly after the Latin one, whose date is unknown. A small portion of the Hebrew text of *Picatrix* has been preserved in MS Oxford, Bodleiana 1352 (Mic. 228), folio 177a. Adolph Neubauer published part of it in his catalogue of Oxford manuscripts. This manuscript, too, was produced in Italy. Thus three Hebrew translations of *Picatrix* survive in Italian manuscripts written at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries... R. Yohanan Alemanno, who was involved in intellectual activities of the type pursued at the academy in Florence, was one of the few to mention the Hebrew version of *Picatrix*."

such ideas in light of his own readings of mystical works, especially of Dionysius *Mystical Theology*, Flavius Mithridates' interpretation of kabbalistic texts, and of Alemanno's commentary on the *Song of Songs*. The goal of this young sage was not Perfect Nature, but *felicitas* – perfect happiness in the heaven above the heavens. A decade earlier, similar ideas had also been carefully articulated in Ficino's *De Christiana religione*, rooted in comparable 'anti-carnal, pro-spiritual' Platonic sentiments, but with Pico excommunicated as a heretic and forced to demonstrate his own *bona fides* if he hoped to be brought back into the Church's good graces, he went much further than Ficino in emphasizing how superior the pursuit of *felicitas* was relative to the carnal pursuits of the magicians.

In the *Heptaplus*' second exposition, on the celestial world, Pico gave us a glimpse into his burgeoning anti-astro-magical rhetoric which, like his anti-Jewish rhetoric, was predicated on the same Platonic foundations: the superiority of the immaterial to the material. Pico exhorted his readers:

*Let us not mold in metals images of the stars but mold in our souls an image of Him, the Word of God. Let us not ask from the heavenly bodies the goods of body or fortune, which they will not give; but from the Lord of heaven, the Lord of all goods, to Whom is given all power in heaven and in earth, let us ask both present blessings, in the measure in which they are good, and the true happiness of eternal life.*⁹²⁴ [emphasis added]

Here Pico projected an image of what he believed constituted true magic, the kind rooted in the Word of God and which affirmed the divinity of Christ, not the kind that made use of talismans, whose use Ficino cautiously prescribed a few months later with the publication of *De vita libri tres*.⁹²⁵ This was a concept Pico had in the works for years: to define himself alongside of, but also against, the ideas inherent to traditional varieties of learned magic which for three centuries had been practised in the Latin West among what Richard Kieckhefer dubbed "the clerical underworld"⁹²⁶ (and condemned by mendicant polemicists like Roger Bacon for just as long).⁹²⁷

⁹²⁴ Pico, *Heptaplus*, 2.7 in *Opera omnia*, 21 (McGaw, 50; Carmichael, 105): "Quare neque stellarum imagines in metallis, sed illius, id est, verbi Dei imaginem in nostris animis reformemus: Neque a coelis, aut corpore, aut fortuna, quae nec dabunt, sed a domino coeli, domino bonorum omnium, cui data omnis potestas in coelo et in terra, et praesentia bona quatenus bona sunt, et veram aeternae vitae foelicitatem quaeramus."

⁹²⁵ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 119; Carol Kaske and John Clark, eds. and trans., *Marsilio Ficino's Three Books on Life* (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1989).

⁹²⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 208.

⁹²⁷ Bacon's belief had been that natural magic (i.e., magic stripped of its demonic characteristics) was acceptable insofar as it was appropriated from and used against the enemies of the Church: "Once subjected and laid at the feet of the Roman Church, [these magnificent sciences] must work on behalf of great utility according to papal command, so that the Church may have recourse during all its tribulations to these things so that in the end it may be met by the Antichrist and his followers, as they perform through their faith similar works, it will be shown that he is not a god, and his persecution will be impeded in many ways and lessened through works of this kind being done. And therefore if the Church would arrange their study, good and holy men could toil on the magical sciences under the special authority of the Pope." Little, *Opus tertium*, 17-18 as cited in Matus, "Reconsidering Roger Bacon," 206. Pico also had Roger Bacon's annotations on the *Secretum secretorum*, which he himself had translated into Latin around 1280; cf. Roger Bacon, "*Secretum secretorum*," in *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi*, ed. Robert Steele, vol. 5 (Oxford: Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1909): 3. For the Maimonidean roots of the division of magic into two

Pico was not ignorant of the *Picatrix*'s contents, having himself owned a copy, but in keeping with Maimonides, he had rightly believed the *Secretum secretorum* and other ps.-Aristotelian Hermetic magical works to be spurious and not authentic.⁹²⁸ This doubtless did not help to improve Pico's already negative perceptions of Arabic astro-magical works and their contents, at least insofar as he held fast to the humanist presupposition that antiquity and pristineness of doctrine went hand and hand. What was most important, however, is that when juxtaposed with the simple piety of the gospels, the magic of these texts clearly had different goals, but only one was a roadmap to perfect happiness. Angelomorphic *felicitas* was an end in and of itself, astral magic was but a means to an end.

All of these facts are important in so far as they help to demonstrate how Pico's anti-magical rhetoric was itself also an aspect of his place in the Latin polemical tradition, and very much predicated on the same grounds as that tradition's arguments against Judaism. Both magic and Judaism were conceived as 'carnal' pursuits, more rooted in ritual and augmenting one's individual fortunes in this world, making them inferior to the supercelestial faith of Christianity with its theurgy of abasement, its *caritas*, and its ultimate telos, not of 'Perfect Nature' but of *felicitas*. Pico's belief system was fundamentally rooted in a salvific theology which emphasized works. This did not, however, consist in talismanic operations so much as an implementation of those highest of virtues to which humans were created to aspire, particularly *caritas*.⁹²⁹ This *caritas* was not the kind of charity we know of today intended to elevate 'the deserving poor' from an unfortunate state into hope for a better life, but an exercise of sacrifice, self-renunciation, and the accumulation of angelomorphic merit. In the perfection of *caritas* lay the perfection of man, and subsequently, *felicitas*, the sabbath of the soul, his ultimate goal and final resting place. Such a view was certainly part and parcel with traditional medieval Catholic beliefs in a penitential cycle, but in Pico it was further fuelled by the practical kabbalistic belief that the practice of *mitzvot* had an effect on the supernal, supercelestial realms inhabited by God and his intellectual angels like *Metatron*. It is in light of ideas such as these that he would have interpreted the words of Jesus: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."⁹³⁰ The heaven of which Pico spoke was not the celestial heavens of the astrologers' stars, but the heaven of Dionysius' *Heavenly Hierarchies* and *Mystical Theology*. Through his skepticism against physical explanations for spiritual matters, Pico began to reject the most learned and complex science of his day, hoping to replace its presence among Christians with the

forms, one acceptable and one abominable, see Dov Schwartz, "Two Kinds of Magic" in *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 28-37.

⁹²⁸ See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 315-320 (3.29), where he denounces the "absurdities of the Kasdim, Chaldeans, and Sabeans," i.e., Hermetic talismanic magic, particularly the sort laid out in Ibn Wahshīya's *Nabatean Agriculture*, or in the ps.-Aristotelian *Kitab al-Istimākhīs* which is the source of the concept of the Perfect Nature. This "book Istimachis, attributed to Aristotle, who can by no means have been its author..." he maintained was a book of idolatry.

⁹²⁹ Recall here that *caritas* was the virtue attributed to humans in Joachim of Fiore's *Psalter of Ten Strings* which depicts Dionysius' 3x3 angelic hierarchy, albeit with man in his exalted state as the tenth angel at the top of the hierarchy next to God.

⁹³⁰ *Matthew* 6:19-20.

revelations inherent to the letters that comprise Holy Scripture. With his newly developed understanding of Jewish Kabbalah, the young philosopher applied it to escaping the ravages of history and the machinations of the celestial bodies, and tracing his way back to a place which stood outside of time, back to the peace and unity that existed before the founding of the world.

7 - The *Heptaplus* and Pico's Polemical Use of World History

7.1 Prophets Above the Sages, Prophet Above the Prophets

In the summer of 1489, four years before he died at the age of 31 on November 17th 1494, Pico published his ground-breaking sevenfold commentary on the six days of creation and dedicated his monument of biblical scholarship to his princely protector, Lorenzo de' Medici, the man who helped save him from Pope Innocent VIII's condemnations by putting him up in a villa at Fiesole.⁹³¹ While allegedly living a quasi-monastic life there, Pico assembled his *Heptaplus* by applying many of the principles of his *900 Conclusiones*, albeit in a reined in reformulation, and putting them to the task of demonstrating who, among all the ancient sages, was of supreme authority, wisdom, and pre-eminence. In the proem to the third book, Pico explained his twofold *modus procedendi*:

Since much about the angelic and invisible nature has been handed down by the ancient Hebrews and much also by Dionysius, it was my plan to expound the words of Moses according to the teachings of both schools. But since what is said by the Hebrews is unfamiliar to the Latins and could not easily be understood by our people unless, hatched from a twin egg, as they say, I explained nearly all of the dogmas of the ancient learning of the Hebrew people, I thought I ought to put it off until I have made these dogmas known to my countrymen by writing of them more fully elsewhere [i.e., in the *900 Conclusiones*], examining how far they agree with the traditions of Egypt, the philosophy of Plato, and Catholic truth.⁹³²

After a long time spent studying the Aristotelian philosophy of the schoolmen, Ficino's Platonism, and a variety of kabbalistic works selected by his small circle of Jewish teachers, Pico's thoughts had become clear: the supreme ancient authority on all theological and philosophical matters was none other than Moses, the inspired author of the Pentateuch, the prophet who stood upstream from all subsequent *prisci theologi*. By Pico's reckoning this supreme authority was neither equalled by Zoroaster, nor Hermes, nor Pythagoras, nor Plato, nor any other pagan sage Ficino had fancied throughout his career. These were all important figures in the history of thought, but ultimately, derivative. Pico's exegetical goal, therefore, was to demonstrate how the books of Moses in no way lacked all the most important points that pagan philosophy much later came to relate, specifically those points revealed in Plato's *Timaeus*, the most comprehensive and influential work of 'Pythagorean' cosmology to survive from antiquity. Chaldean Oracles, Hermetic texts, Orphic hymns, the *Aurea dicta* of Pythagoras (or Philolaus),

⁹³¹ Black, *Pico*, 8; Innocent VIII issued his bull against Pico's *900 Theses* on the 8th of August 1487, but it was not promulgated until the 15th of December by which time Pico had already fled to Paris, been caught, and arrested.

⁹³² Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 23: "Cum autem de hac natura angelica, et invisibilia ab Hebraeis veteribus multa, multa item a Dionysio tradantur, erat consilium Moseos verba exponere iuxta doctrinam utriusque familiae. Sed quoniam quae ab Hebraeis dicuntur (cum sint in usitata) apud Latinos intelligi a nostris hominibus facile non possent, nisi a gemino (quod aiunt) ovo exorsi, plurima, et fere omnia Veteris discipline Hebraicae gentes dogmata enarraremus: cogitavi differendum donec de his alibi latius scripserimus, et nostratibus notas fecerimus illorum opiniones, ubi Aegyptiis monumentis, quantum Platonicae philosophiae, quantum catholicae veritati consonant examinantes..." (Carmichael, 106; McGaw, 51).

and various strands of Arabic philosophy all played some role in Pico's poetic theology, but he wanted to devise a system by which to subordinate them all hierarchically to one ultimate *Christian* Mosaic revelation. In the *Hebraica veritas* then, specifically in the opening chapter of the book of *Genesis*, Pico saw a means to bind the whole of the history of philosophy beneath a single authoritative aegis, all with the help of his cutting-edge interpretations of various Jewish rabbis, philosophers, and *mecubales*. Pico believed that only by convincing Christendom of the truths contained in his kabbalistic readings of the *Hebraica veritas* would the Church finally be equipped to lead unconverted Jews away from their erroneous interpretations of their prophetic books. The Kabbalah as it was conveyed to him by his mixed bag of texts and teachers empowered the Prince of Concord with a whole multi-dimensional arsenal of arguments with which to try and reconcile Catholic theology with Platonic philosophy, particularly that line of thinkers starting with Philo Judaeus and carrying on with Plotinus, Proclus, and most importantly, ps.-Dionysius, whom Pico himself (in line with Ficino) continued to reckon a contemporary of St. Paul (and consequently, the root of all later Platonic philosophy that had been built up on a foundation of appropriated Christian truths).⁹³³ It especially gave him another means of demonstrating one of the highest Platonic exegetical principles he had enshrined in his *900 Conclusiones*: that "everything exists in everything in its own way."⁹³⁴ The *Heptaplus* would be the very last work Pico finished since, although he published his *De ente et uno* in 1490, it was all he was able to produce for his *Concordia Platonis et Aristotelis* before his life was cut short. Despite being Pico's last complete work, Gianfrancesco Pico placed the *Heptaplus* at the very beginning of his uncle's *Opera omnia* after editing it for publication (and conspicuously leaving out the *900 Conclusiones*). There the sevenfold commentary retained that position throughout all later editions for posterity, framing the whole of Pico's corpus in its light.⁹³⁵

In the wake of his excommunication at the recommendations of Pedro Garcia's council, Pico's project for writing the *Heptaplus* began from the premise that the sages of old were sensitive to the kinds of scandals that could arise from the publication of their mysteries. It was not for nothing that Christ, in *Matthew 7:6* gave explicit instructions to his disciples not to cast pearls to swine. Wishing to avoid potential disasters, the sages of old had published their mysteries either directly through oral transmission, or through encrypted accounts comprised of symbols, riddles, and enigmas. This technique has the effect of making the occulted material more seductive, hidden behind many veils, thus far rarer and more valuable to the one who finds it. The many would not believe the truth if one told it to them outright, but forced to work for it,

⁹³³ Allen, Rees, and Davies, *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, xix; McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 6

⁹³⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 320-321: "Licet ut tradit theologia distinctae sint diuinae hierarchiae, intelligendum est tamen omnia in omnibus esse modo suo." Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 92 (proposition 103): "πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν, οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἑκάστῳ." Cf. Stephen Gersh, "Proclus as Theologian," in *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Gersh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 98, n. 133.

⁹³⁵ Black, *Pico*, 10-11. See also the Italian and French translations made within a century of Pico's death: *Le sette sposizioni del S. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola intitolate Heptaplo, sopra i sei giorni del Genesi. Tradotte in lingua toscana da M. Antonio Buonagrazia Canonico di Pescia...* (Pescia, 1555) and *L'Heptaple... traduit par N. Le Fèvre de la Boderie, in F. Giorgio, L'harmonie du monde* (Paris, 1578), 829-878.

they value it all the more once they have arrived at it with difficulty. The *Heptaplus* describes in its opening proem how Jesus himself taught through this metaphoric mode of communication:

...the image of the substance of God did not write the Gospel, but proclaimed it. In fact, he proclaimed it to the crowds in parables; and separately, to the few disciples who were permitted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, openly and without figures. He did not even reveal everything to those few, since they were not fit for everything, and there were many things which they could not endure *until the coming of the spirit taught them all truth*.⁹³⁶ [emphasis added]

The kinds of concepts radiated by God directly into the mind of his elect through the Holy Spirit were not intended to be shared with the many in the same way: some required the wisdom to be delivered in parables, and others required it in *figurae*. Those blessed with the gift of a ‘spiritual understanding,’ however, were not such people, having the ability to cut through all signifiers to get to the signified mystery in its nakedness, to see the truth plainly without recourse to intermediating forms. To the skeptically-inclined Pico – pessimistic as he was about humankind’s ability to know anything about the transcendent mind of God – it was the prophets and the apostles alone who had had access to such mysteries through an illumination of God’s spirit, which they passed on into writing. Through the right tools of interpretation and with the help of that same spirit, however, Pico believed all humans could acquire the capacity to draw out the intended layers of meaning, and be perfected in their understanding. What is important for our purposes, however, is how this story of a single revealed wisdom tradition – coming down from the prophets of the Old Testament and being carried on through Christ and the apostles of the New Testament – served Pico as a kind of intellectual scaffolding for understanding the history of not only his poetic theology, but also the world as a whole. This we can see unfolding in the first proem of the *Heptaplus*:

So far as we are concerned, both Luke and Philo... are very authoritative testimonies that Moses was very learned in all Egyptian doctrine.⁹³⁷ And all the Greeks who have been considered superior – Pythagoras, Plato, Empedocles, Democritus – used the Egyptians as masters. It is a well-known saying of the philosopher Numenius that Plato was nothing else but an Attic Moses. Also the Pythagorean Hermippus attests that Pythagoras transferred many things from the Mosaic Law into his own philosophy.⁹³⁸ Accordingly, if in his books Moses appears naïve and sometimes more an inexperienced popularizer than a philosopher, or theologian, or creator of great wisdom; nevertheless, let us keep in mind that it was a famous custom of ancient seers simply not to write of divine matters or to write of them dissemblingly; hence, they are called mysteries (things that are not hidden are not mysteries); this has been observed by the Indians, by the Ethiopians, to whom the surname was given because of their nakedness, and by the

⁹³⁶ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 2: “Iesus Christus imago substantiae Dei evangelium non scripsit, sed praedicavit, praedicavit autem turbis quidem in parabolis, seorsum autem paucis discipulis, quibus datum erat nosse mysteria regni coelorum, palam citraque figuras: Neque omnia paucis illis, quia non omnium capaces, et multa erant quae portare non poterant, donec adveniens spiritus docuit omnem veritatem.” (Carmichael, 69; McGaw, 17); see n. 121 above.

⁹³⁷ *Acts* 7:22.

⁹³⁸ Cf. Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 26: “Plato usque adeo Iudeos imitatus est, ut Numenius Pythagoricus dixerit Platonem nihil aliud fuisse quam Moysen Attica lingua loquentem. Addit in libro De bono Pythagoram quoque Iudaica dogmata sectatum fuisse.” Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 218-219; Cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 10.1.4.

Egyptians; also the Sphinxes in front of the temples insinuated this. Taught by them, Pythagoras became a master of silence; and he himself did not commit anything to writing, except only a very few things which he gave in custody to his daughter Dama. In fact, those golden poems that are circulated are not of Pythagoras, as commonly believed even by the most educated, but of Philolaus.⁹³⁹ The Pythagoreans with continuous tradition have guarded the custom very religiously. Lysis deploras that it was violated by Hipparchus. Finally, Porphyry is the authority by which the disciples of Ammonius – Origin, Plotinus, and Herennius – swore. Thus, our Plato hid his beliefs with masks of allegory, a veil of myths, mathematical images, and obscure disclosures of late events so that he himself declared in his *Epistles*⁹⁴⁰ that from what he wrote no one would clearly understand his ideas on divine things...⁹⁴¹

These Mosaic, Pythagorean, and Platonic mysteries could not be broached directly, only discursively, and these were exactly the ideas Pico had intended to debate at the cancelled 1486 disputation for which he had written his *900 Conclusiones*. In his *Heptaplus*, however, Pico attempted to demonstrate his ability to pierce through to the inner significations of Scripture using a novel sevenfold allegorical method along with the help of some kabbalistic techniques. In reading *Genesis*, he envisioned Moses as an arch-philosopher of the highest skill who implanted the precursors of Pythagorean and Platonic metaphysics into the Pentateuch with subtlety. He had occulted the fullness of what had been revealed to him on Horeb's heights in the simple Hebrew text of *Genesis*, a work which lacked much of the elevated style one might find in Plato's *Timaeus*, but encapsulated all the same truths with a far more ingenious economy of words. Among the opening words of the creation myth, for example, Pico perceived Moses to have secretly conveyed one of the most important teachings of Platonic philosophy: the doctrine of form and matter. Pico attempted to demonstrate that long before Plato's time, the fact that the sensible world of matter was but an echo of the higher realm, accessible only to the intellectual part of the soul had first been revealed to Moses. The Bible itself, therefore, needed to be understood in accordance with such doctrines.

⁹³⁹ Porphyry, *Vita Pythagoras*, 57 (Nauck, 49); Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagoras*, 28.146; cf. Pico, *Opera omnia*, 122 and 329 (in the *Apologia* and *Oratio* respectively) for two previous mentions of Dama and the preservation of the Pythagorean mysteries.

⁹⁴⁰ Plato, *Epistle II*, 312 d-e.

⁹⁴¹ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 1-2: "Sunt item quantum attinet ad nostros, et Lucas et Philon autores grauissimi illum in uniuersa Aegyptiorum doctrina fuisse eruditissimum. Aegyptiis autem usi sunt praeceptoribus Graeci omnes qui habiti diuinores Pythagoras, Plato, Empedocles, et Democritus. Notum illud Numenii philosophi non aliud esse Platonem quam Atticum Mosem. Sed et Hermippus Pythagoricus attestatur Pythagoram de Mosaica lege plurima in suam philosophiam transtulisse. Quod si rudis in suis libris et popularis interim Moses potius quam aut Philosophus aut Theologus aut magnae alicuius sapientiae artifex apparet: Reuocemus eo mentem, fuisse ueterum sapientum celebre institutum, res diuinas ut aut plane non scriberent dissimulanter. Hinc appellata mysteria, nec mysteria quae non occulta, hoc ab Indis, hoc ab Aethiopicis quibus de nuditate cognomen, hoc ab Aegyptiis obferuatum. Quod et Spinges illae pro templis insinuabant. Ab eis edoctus Pythagoras silentii factus est magister: nec ipse quicquam literis mandavit praeter omnino pauca quae Damae filiae moriens commendavit. Non enim quae circumferuntur aurea carmina Pythagorae sunt, ut vulgo etiam doctoribus persuasum, sed Philolai. Legem deinceps eam Pythagorici religiosissime tutati sunt. Eam Lysis ab Hipparcho violatam quaeritur. In eam denique iuratos Ammonii discipulos, Origenem, Plotinum et Herennium, Porphyrius est author. Plato noster ita involucris aenigmatum, fabularum velamine, mathematicis imaginibus et subobscuris recedentium sensuum indicibus sua dogmata occultavit, ut et ipse dixerit in epistolis neminem ex his quae scripserit suam sententiam de diuinis aperte intellecturum..." (McGaw, 16; Carmichael, 68-69).

In the years leading up to Pico's composition of the *Heptaplus*, when he had been working on his *Conclusiones*, the polemical aspect of his overall intellectual enterprise became increasingly evident, and it would appear that this turn was the very shadow cast by his apocalyptically-inspired ecumenical spirit. The more he yearned for unity, the more vociferously he lashed out at those who opposed his concept of unity. He had previously made it clear in his *Conclusiones* that, in spite of his admiration for Jewish learning,

Every Hebrew Kabbalist following the principles and sayings of the science of Kabbalah is inevitably forced to concede, without addition, omission, or variation, precisely what the Catholic faith of the Christians maintains concerning the Trinity and every divine Person: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁹⁴²

In his capacity as a Christian interpreter of kabbalistic works, Pico strove to recover the many Trinitarian 'bridges' that were supposedly intrinsic to his mystical sources, and when he found them, they only fanned the flames of his certainty that Kabbalah and Christian anagogy were fundamentally synonymous. Within a few years, these endeavours culminated not in just any kind of text, but in a kind of unorthodox biblical commentary on the creation of the world according to the secret teachings of Moses (which of course were incomprehensible first without recourse to the *Hebraica veritas*, and second without recourse to various kabbalistic techniques which pierced through the surface of the text on into its inner significations, such as the combinatorial arts that made up the first part of his reconceptualized 'work of the chariot.' In other words, in an attempt to demonstrate his own good faith to his fellow coreligionists, the Prince of Concord dedicated himself to the appropriation of his primary intellectual opponents' arms such that the Church might be equipped to use them. In the *Heptaplus*, therefore, Pico can be seen again affecting the same polemical stance in regards to the Jews that Ficino had done over a decade earlier in *De Christiana religione*, and that his influences had done before him. In the introductory passage to the third of his seven tiers of interpretation, Pico was quite explicit in his attitude:

And, therefore, if [in studying Hebrew dogmas] I find the Hebrews to agree with us in something, I shall order them to stand by the ancient traditions of their fathers; if I find a place where they disagree, then, drawn up in Catholic legions, I shall make an attack against them. Finally, whatever I find foreign to the evangelic truth, I shall refute in keeping with my power; while any principle that is sacred and true, as from a wrongful possessor, I shall transfer from the Synagogue to us, the legitimate Israelites.⁹⁴³

This impulse toward the discourse of 'using the enemy's weapons,' as explored in previous chapters, was certainly not new or unique to Pico. It had roots going all the way back to the

⁹⁴² Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 522-523, *conclusio* 11.5: "Quilibet hebreus cabalista, secundum principia et dicta scientiae Cabalae, cogitur ineuitabiliter concedere de trinitate et qualibet persona diuina, patre, filio, et spiritu sancto, illud precise sine additione, diminutione, aut uariatione, quod ponit fides catholica christianorum."

⁹⁴³ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 23: "...sicubi quidem concordabant nobiscum, iubebimus Hebraeos stare in antiquis patrum suorum traditionibus, sicubi dissonabant instructi catholicis legionibus impressionem faciemus in eos. Denique quicquid alienum ab evangelica veritate depraehendimus confutabimus pro virili, quicquid sanctum et verum a synagoga ut ab iniusto possessore ad nos legitimos Israëlitas transferemus." (McGaw, 51-52; cf. Carmichael, 106-107).

twelfth century beginning with the converso polemics of Petrus Alfonsi.⁹⁴⁴ What was new to the Latin West with the *Heptaplus*, however, was Pico's mustering of his teachers' idiosyncratic interpretations and translations of kabbalistic texts as his spiritual 'weapons' to use against the carnal Talmudists. In the end, what value Pico perceived in Kabbalah, he argued, was derived from its similarities to various schools of speculative philosophy that had prefigured Christian theology, whether Egyptian, Orphic, Pythagorean, or Platonic.⁹⁴⁵ Its value was not derived from its own merits, but from how it could confirm "the evangelic truth."

With Pico's tenuous status as an excommunicate from the Church, "magic" is not only conspicuously absent in the *Heptaplus*, but it is explicitly refuted. Despite its prominence in the *900 Conclusiones* – wherein by Pico's own admission in his *Apologia* the word was used equivocally – there is no place for magic in Christendom where such higher sciences as Kabbalah are available and lead to more felicitous ends.⁹⁴⁶ It was Kabbalah and certainly not magic that, given its similarity to time-honoured Christian systems of mystical interpretation, might serve as the most appropriate tool to inspire the carnal Jews to turn over to a true understanding of spiritual Christian theology. Pico believed that the Jews were so stubborn that the only way to convince them of the truth of Christian theology was by uncovering their most cherished and secret exegetical methods, and using them to highlight their own errors.⁹⁴⁷ Ultimately these motives were eschatologically driven, for in Pico the fullness of time and the fullness of knowledge were two sides of the same coin, just as it had been for figures like Abraham Abulafia and Joachim of Fiore.⁹⁴⁸ To achieve the former was to achieve the latter, and this could be done by no better way than by returning to the source, or to the *form*, of all subsequent revealed knowledge, that is, the *Hebraica veritas* – the books of Moses – albeit in their most veiled and rarefied sense of interpretation.

⁹⁴⁴ See n. 100 and 102 above.

⁹⁴⁵ See n. 932 above.

⁹⁴⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 149; Pico, *Opera omnia*, 169.

⁹⁴⁷ Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 231.

⁹⁴⁸ A good example to demonstrate this explicit connection between ancient prophecy and the Last Things in Pico can be found in *conclusio* 10.20 (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 512-513): "Through the seven [Orphic] hymns attributed to the paternal mind—to Protogonos, Pallas, Saturn, Venus, Rhea, Law, and Bacchus—a knowledgeable and profound contemplator can predict something about the end of the world." Farmer notes that "Pico obviously intended to correlate the properties of each of these gods with one of his seven historical ages, ending in an age of mystic frenzy (the age of "Bacchus"). Thus "Protogonos" in Greek = "first born," etc. There are many methods of numerological prophecy in the Kabbalah, a number of which Pico planned to demonstrate in theses 7a.1-74; the exact methods that he had in mind here are unknown. For other theses involving the calculation of the date of the end of the world, see 7a.38 (to be answered through the "way of numbers") and 11.9."

7.2 Anagogy and the *Heptaplus*

Existing among the Jewish Kabbalists, and later acquiring favour among their Christian emulators, was the Talmudic distinction between *ma'aseh bereshit*, the “work of creation” (or, as Maimonides interpreted it, the science of nature/Aristotelian physics), and *ma'aseh merkavah*, the “work of the chariot” (the science of divinity/Aristotelian metaphysics).⁹⁴⁹ These terms had existed in Jewish mystical thought since antiquity, long before they became associated with the label of “Kabbalah.” The latter *ma'aseh merkavah* pertains to the interpretation of the vision of the chariot in *Ezekiel 1* or analogous visions like the throne in *Isaiah 6*, while the former, the *ma'aseh bereshit*, pertains to cosmological speculation and creation (that is, as it is described in *Genesis 1*). Being the audacious young man that he was, Pico could not resist trying his hand at both. This was, of course, in flagrant disregard of a widely understood rabbinic ban traditionally placed on the public exposition of these ‘works.’⁹⁵⁰ When it came to eschatology, the *mecubales* had traditionally reemphasized the ideas put forward by mainstream Jewish religion, which were chiefly concerned with the “Messiah-who-shall-come,” the time of his coming, and the nature of his kingdom. All things considered, as Blau maintained, these ideas did not differ so significantly from Christian ideas about the second coming of their own Messiah, and thus were easily appropriated, modified, and transposed to suit Christian agendas:

The Cabalists maintained that God is boundless in His nature and cannot be grasped by human reason because He is without will, intention, desire, thought, language, and action. He is an Infinite Being, utterly and completely unknowable and inconceivable in His infinity, containing all perfection and all existence in Himself. He is an absolute and utterly incomprehensible unity. He is called *En Soph*, the Infinite. God cannot be the direct creator of the world, for a creation proceeding directly from Him would have to be boundless and perfect. He, therefore, begot ten emanations, or sephiroth, which form the *Adam kadmon*, or archetypal man.⁹⁵¹

In all of these kabbalistic concepts, there was nothing disagreeable to Pico. In fact, many of them he found most seductive, seeing in them the necessary components for perfecting his understanding of Christian mysteries. There was one aspect of kabbalistic belief, however, which did not sit well with him: chiefly, how the stress on the utter transcendence of an infinite God incidentally left little room for its corresponding immanence in the incarnation. In Christian theology these two things had been reconciled in the figure of Christ, and Pico made it his

⁹⁴⁹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 11; Idel, “Introduction” in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, xvi explains how for a Christian audience “even Maimonides’ views became... representative of kabbalistic thought and were understood as referring to the Talmudists and Kabbalists, respectively.” In Reuchlin’s imagination, as in Arcangelo Borghonovo following in his and Pico’s footsteps, “the Talmudists” represented the base and carnal portion of Judaism (hence their concern with physics and the letter of the law), while “the Kabbalists” represented the lofty and sublime thinkers (hence their concern with metaphysics, in particular those which affirmed Trinitarian doctrines, and the spirit of the law). This was a tradition, as we have seen, begun by the converso Petrus Alfonsi: see n. 102 above.

⁹⁵⁰ For more on this ban, see Yair Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic Ban on Ma’aseh Bereshit: Sources, Contexts and Concerns” in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity*, eds. Lance Jennot and Sarit Kattan Gribetz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 39-63.

⁹⁵¹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 12.

mission to prove to the world that although some Jews had gone very far in their meditations of Hebrew Scripture, they were too interpretatively blind to see one of its most glaring features: the constant presence of God as a Trinitarian unity. To prove this, however, he would have to go back to the source, back to the *Hebraica veritas* which had so long been overlooked in the Latin West, but which he had also just recently acquired the skills to read with the help of his tutors and their books.

In his study of Pico's biblical hermeneutics, Crofton Black demonstrated how Pico put most of his emphasis on a hidden non-literal meaning which he believed interconnected the whole Bible. Most importantly, Black showed how Pico's personal idea of 'non-literal' reading in the *Heptaplus* differed quite significantly from the mainstream scholastic commentary tradition. The medieval breakdown of Scripture into four senses as seen in earlier chapters endured as the most widely used hermeneutical model well into the second half of the fifteenth century, especially thanks to the widespread popularity of Nicholas of Lyra's commentaries.⁹⁵² Around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, we have also seen a different mode of scrutinizing texts developing outside of scholastic tradition: that of humanist philology, with its impulse to return *ad fontes*. While Pico made use of all the traditional 'typical' approaches in his 1488 commentary on the *Psalms* (which he was writing at the same time as he composed his *Heptaplus*), he used none of them in the making of the *Heptaplus* except the anagogical/mystical level of interpretation which appears in his seventh exegesis.⁹⁵³ Pico, therefore, derived his own approach to allegory not from the traditional fourfold method first and foremost, but from the Late Platonic tradition, particularly as it stood in its imaginary form descending from Dionysius the Areopagite (and consequently from Proclus). Pico was inspired by ps.-Dionysius to the extent to which his texts were anagogically organized or oriented around a kind of intellectual mystical ascent. For Pico, however, as it had been for reformers like Joachim of Fiore long before him, this anagogical process was emphatically intertwined with the history of the world, as it was upon history itself that God had laid down the path leading back to the beatific state that transcended the world, the resting place of the individual human soul as a divine, disembodied intellect. On this point the Talmudists might concede, Pico believed, if only they could be shown according to their own Scriptures how they got their dates wrong for the coming of the Messiah, and were now waiting in vain.

Using the tripartite division of the world laid down by Late Antique philosophers, Pico broke up the world into three levels which progressed from material to spiritual states: the terrestrial world of corruptible matter, the celestial world of incorruptible heavenly bodies, and the pure supercelestial world of disembodied intelligences, each of which were thought

⁹⁵² See n. 498 above.

⁹⁵³ Pico, *Expositiones in Psalmos*, ed. A. Raspanti (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1997); Black, *Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2 and 9; Paul Richard Blum, "Pico, Theology, and the Church" in *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.

connected in their own ways, especially through number.⁹⁵⁴ Pico wished to demonstrate how this hierarchy – despite being in reality the results of a more recent systematization – was already present in the mind of Moses when he encrypted it into the simple language of *Genesis*. By this time, Pico had already laid out a kind of skeleton key to understanding his hermeneutical system in his *Conclusio* 24.17. This was one of his numerous “Proclean theses” which stated: “granted that the divine hierarchies are distinct, as theology teaches, everything exists in everything in its own way.”⁹⁵⁵ In his preface, to illustrate how each part of the cosmos operated on multiple levels, he used heat as his example, and then proceeded in this mode:

Among us, fire is a physical element; the sun is fire in the sky, the celestial world; and in the region above man, fire is the seraphic intellect. But see how they differ: the elemental fire burns, the celestial fire enlivens, and the supercelestial fire loves.⁹⁵⁶

In keeping with this schema, the *Heptaplus*’ following fourth and fifth expositions (*De mundo humano, id est, de hominis natura* and *De omnibus mundis divisim ordine consequenti*) go on to describe a vision of humanity that was less daring than in the 1486 *Oratio*, perhaps signifying that Pico had been humbled by the castigations of Church authorities.⁹⁵⁷ Here he made the human soul and body correspond to heaven and earth respectively, conjoining these two extremes with a spiritual substance. Mankind became a “fourth world” in creation, but “not so much a fourth world like some new creature,” he claimed, “so much as the bond and union of the three [worlds] already described.”⁹⁵⁸ Every part of the tripartite world had a part in tripartite man, and every part of tripartite man had a part in the tripartite world.

Following this three-/four-fold cosmological system, Pico’s hermeneutical ladder ascends in its subject matter from the base material (or elementary) world of the everyday man, to the celestial world of the astrologers, and from there on up to the angelic and invisible world of the metaphysicians, theologians, and mystics. Although each of these worlds interpenetrated one another in their own ways, and the whole was greater than the sum of its parts, each had their own individual histories as well. The elementary world, Pico saw as having been chiefly the object of study of those pagan natural philosophers of antiquity (such as Thales, Heraclitus, and Anaximenes); the celestial world, as described by the Hellenistic astrologers (namely, Ptolemy); and above all, the ‘angelic and invisible world’ which he maintained was most truthfully related

⁹⁵⁴ To be precise, the order of expositions in *Heptaplus* are as follows: i) Of the Elemental World; ii) Of the Celestial World; iii) Of the Angelic and Invisible World; iv) Of the Human World, Of the Nature of Man; v) Of All the Worlds, in Successive Order of Division; vi) Of the Affinity of the Worlds with Each Other and with All Things; vii) Of the Felicity which is Eternal Life; and lastly, the Bereshit (“In the Beginning”) exposition, which relies on a Christological interpretation of the first word of *Genesis* 1:1 through the *revolutio alphabetariae*.

⁹⁵⁵ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 320-321. See n. 934 above.

⁹⁵⁶ Pico, *Heptaplus*, Preface in *Opera omnia*, 7: “Est apud nos ignis quod est elementum. Sol ignis in coelo est, est in regione ultra mundana ignis seraphicus intellectus. Sed vide quid differant. Elementaris urit, coelestis vivificat, supercoelestis amat.” (McGaw, 24; Carmichael, 77).

⁹⁵⁷ Copenhagen and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 173.

⁹⁵⁸ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 29 (Carmichael, 134).

“by the ancient Hebrews and much also by Dionysius.”⁹⁵⁹ Pico had been clear since the time he wrote his *Oratio* that the first human to reach the invisible world could be found in as early an account as the book of *Genesis*: “For even the most secret Hebrew theology at one time transforms holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, whom they call *Metatron*, and at other times it reshapes other men into other divine beings.”⁹⁶⁰ Here it was *the Hebrew theology itself* – available during the antediluvian age, but now occulted – that had soteriological, *felicitas*-inducing angelomorphic power, and it was this very theology to which Pico was attempting to convert his fellow Christians. As we have seen, Pico was only really interested in natural philosophy and ‘magic’ insofar as they were upward leading rungs on a ladder which led to the ultimate goal for any given human intellectual soul.⁹⁶¹ This was achieved by emulating Christ, the exemplar or form of the perfect man, an idea which had been so carefully articulated by Ficino a decade earlier in his *De Christiana religione*. Man was an ‘angel of love’ merely waiting to be reawakened to his original beatific nature. In this, there was much precedent for Pico’s beliefs, and they were hardly unorthodox, being perfectly in keeping with the words of Christ:

Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock. If any man shall hear my voice, and open to me the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that shall overcome, I will give to sit with me in my throne: as I also have overcome, and am set down with my Father in his throne.⁹⁶²

Examples for this kind of ascent motif could be seen in all manner of popular medieval iconography such as in the images of the stigmatized St. Francis, who had annihilated himself through his unceasing dedication to the celestial virtue of *caritas*.⁹⁶³ It was well known in Pico’s day, as was described in Bonaventure’s mid-thirteenth century *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, that St. Francis’ ‘spiritual understanding’ transformed into a Seraph, and in this form it took its rightful place with the other supercelestial intellects of the highest order to burn eternally with the love of God.⁹⁶⁴ Pico’s highest aim was to refine the subtlety of his own intellect through

⁹⁵⁹ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 23 (Carmichael, 106; McGaw, 51).

⁹⁶⁰ See Pico, *Omnia opera*, 315: “Nam et Hebreorum theologia secretior nunc Enoch sanctum in angelum divinitatis, quem vocant מלאך השכיבה, nunc in alia alios numina reformant.” Cf. Michael J. B. Allen, “The Birth Day of Venus: Pico as Platonic Exegete in the *Commento* and the *Heptaplus*,” in *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, ed. M. V. Dougherty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 91.

⁹⁶¹ *Philippians* 4:7.

⁹⁶² *Revelation* 3:20-21.

⁹⁶³ This is certainly the light in which the sixteenth century Franciscan Arcangelo of Borgonovo interpreted Pico’s vision of intellectual ascent: “Si tu relinquendo corpus in aetherem liberum transieris, eris immortalis Deus, huic mundo mortuus. Sic legimus Zoroastem, Pythagoram, Socratem, Heraclitum, Platonem, Plotinus raptu solitos se vocari; Et sic multarum rerum ediscere sapientiam. Apud Augustinum sanctum legimus, prout ipse narrat de sacerdote calamensi; lacebat (inquit) simillimus mortuo sine anhelitu: et cum ureretur, et secaretur, non sentiebat. Patet etiam de raptu multiplici sancti Francisci.” *Conclusiones cabalisticæ numero LXXI* (Bologna, 1564), 54^v.

⁹⁶⁴ Cf. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8 (Quaracchi: College of St. Bonaventure, 1898), 499-503: “Through [Francis’] contemplative disassociation, he passed over into God: this is offered as an example of perfect contemplation, since he was at first a man of action – as was Jacob, who became Israel. Thus, through his example, God invites all truly spiritual people to take part in such a transcendence, and a mental disassociation through action rather than through words.” “...ubi in Deum [Franciscus] transiit per contemplationis excessum; et positus est in exemplum perfectæ contemplationis; sicut prius fuerat actionis, tanquam alter Iacob et

theology to the extent that it ascended up and out of his earthly body to join in with the angelic choirs, leaving the world and history behind, and this was in every way in keeping with the language and goals of medieval monastic and mendicant spirituality (rooted as they were from the start in the illuminist theories of Late Antique Platonism). This is significant because it serves to emphasize that in Pico's theology elements of continuity with medieval spirituality were just as pronounced as those elements of change so often stressed on account of depictions of him as a 'Renaissance man.'

These angelomorphic pursuits were defined by a local Platonic/ps.-Dionysian tradition that emphasized moral perfection through the monastic and mendicant values of self-abnegation, the *vita apostolica*, and mystical contemplation rather than the perfection of knowledge through natural philosophy. The latter mode approached the divine by way of living analogously to the supercelestial intellects and platonically participating in the virtues they embodied until achieving a complete annihilation of the self; the former approached the divine by way of chasing down causes into celestial matters, and acquiring a perfected understanding of God's creation so as to manipulate various natural forces *within the world*.⁹⁶⁵ In Pico's pursuit of angelomorphosis, there was no consorting with sublunary demons or celestial intelligences through talismans, rituals, and suffumigations; instead, there was a knowledge of true theology, a meditation on the correct divine name and – as William Blake and St. Paul would have put it – a life-long cleansing of “the doors of perception” so as to see God not as if “through a glass darkly,” but “face to face.”⁹⁶⁶ In this, Pico was explicit: “as Dionysius hands down, there are three angelic functions – purification, illumination, and perfection.”⁹⁶⁷ To be assimilated to those of the outermost rings of the concentrically-circular throne room of God involves a process of purification; to be assimilated to those of the middle circles is to be illuminated; and lastly, to be assimilated to those angels in the innermost circle is to be perfected. It was from the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, however, that the idea first emerged in the Latin West that humans even had the capacity to turn away from their sense experiences and dedicate themselves to emulating supercelestial intellects, and for that reason, they had a special place in Pico's spiritual vision of world history much as they had for Ficino's.

Another secret kabbalistic principle that Pico used to organize the composition of his *Heptaplus* given how it consisted of 49 chapters, was the 49 “gates of understanding” known to Pico through the *Portae iustitiae* of Nachmanides. The concept of the 49 gates as the 49 levels of

Israel, ut omnes viros vere spirituales Deus per eum invitaret ad huiusmodi transitum et mentis excessum magis exemplo quam verbo.” See Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 37.

⁹⁶⁵ Cf. n. 537 above.

⁹⁶⁶ William Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 73 (Plate 14): “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern;” *1 Corinthians* 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

⁹⁶⁷ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 27 (McGaw, 58; Carmichael, 114): “Cum enim (ut tradit Dionysius) tres sint actiones angelicae, purgatio, illuminatio et perfectio, sic sunt distributae, ut purget ultimus ordo, supremus perficiat, medius autem hic, de quo nunc agimus illuminet.”

knowledge revealed on Sinai was chiefly an idea of thirteenth century Spanish provenance, but it had also been taken up by Abraham Abulafia and Mehanem Recanati who, as we have seen, were dominant figures in Pico's intellectual makeup. For Pico, of course, these 49 gates were transformed into the 49 ways to Christ.⁹⁶⁸ In theory, Pico's goal in writing his sevenfold exposition was to demonstrate to his fellow Christians how the process of human salvation and return to God could be understood most clearly through his hexameral vision of world history that decoded what Moses had encoded in *Genesis*. Moreover, this was all part and parcel of his overall personal quest to attain theological perfection and reunification with God. In practice, however, Pico found himself not so much doing anything new as much as reviving age-old Talmudic debates that had sat at the heart of conflicts between Christian and Jewish intellectuals for centuries, in particular, debates over when the Messiah would (or had already) come.⁹⁶⁹

The theme of Christian anagogy occupies the seventh of his seven expositions: there in the proem of the last and 'highest' exposition, Pico included a discourse on the potential of human happiness (*felicitas*) or attainment (*adeptio*) of evangelical perfection in God much in the way Ficino did in *De Christiana religione*. In a study comparing Pico's beliefs with those of his Jewish teacher Yohanan Alemanno, B. C. Novak aptly emphasized the development in Pico of a belief in two distinct *felicitates*:

The first is the perfection of a substance within itself, i.e., the attainment of its potential [i.e., entelechy]. This is called the natural felicity, available to all creatures, and it participates in God in the sense that God is within all things, and more so within things that share in His perfection. The second felicity is of a higher order: "Vera autem et consummata felicitas ad Dei faciem contuendam, quae est omne bonum, ut ipse dixit: et ad perfectam cum eo principio a quo emanavimus, unionem nos revehit et adducit."⁹⁷⁰ Neither man nor angel can reach this height on his own; rather he must be drawn by grace.⁹⁷¹

Novak explained how even this discourse of double *felicitas* emerged chiefly from a polemical milieu. It was above all conceived in order to serve in battle against the folly of non-Christian philosophers, especially Averroes, whose philosophies precluded concepts such as grace and supernatural *felicitas*. Pico was here repeating old polemical tropes stretching back to Roger Bacon and Thomas Aquinas that there were critical distinctions between the goal of the wise according to Christian theology when set against the goals of Islamic or Jewish scientific rationalism. He even mentioned the Islamic philosophers with whom he disagreed by name. Pico believed Alfarabi capped off the pursuit of perfection that could be realized within the limits of one's humanity, namely, through the practice of philosophy. Nevertheless, Avicenna, Averroes,

⁹⁶⁸ Brian Ogren, "The Forty-Nine Gates of Wisdom as Forty-Nine Ways to Christ: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Heptaplus and Nahmanidean Kabbalah," *Rinascimento* 49 (2009): 27-43. The number 49 derives from 7x7 *sefirot* below the supernal triad comprised of *Kether* (Crown), *Chockmah* (Wisdom), and *Binah* (Understanding).

⁹⁶⁹ Recall how the coming of the Messiah was of the main subjects of debate at the infamous 1263 Disputation of Barcelona between Nachmanides and the Dominican converso Pablo Christiani, just as it was later at the 1413-1414 Disputation of Tortosa. Cf. n. 405 above. It was also a central motif in Ficino's *De Christiana religione* which he had derived from his medicant converso polemicist sources, particularly Paul of Burgos and Jerome of Santa Fé, see n. 686 and n. 689 above.

⁹⁷⁰ Pico, *Heptaplus*, in *Opera omnia*, 47.

⁹⁷¹ Novak, "Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," 137.

Avempace, and Alexander of Aphrodisias had each transgressed beyond this by introducing the “active intellect” as the seat of reason. To Pico, however, these philosophers could say nothing about the soul’s beginnings nor its ends, and therefore must have been referring to a lesser type of *felicitas*, one which occurs *inside* the body.⁹⁷² Pico had no problem with the teachings of these philosophers insofar as their ideas applied to a lower level of reality, to corporeal things, and insofar as they did not conflict with his own ideas about a second and loftier *felicitas* knowable only through Christian revelation, outside the body. Where on the one hand the philosophers and ancient sages had spoken much of the first *felicitas*, Pico maintained under the influence of Yohanan Alemanno that Moses had spoken of both a lesser and a greater.⁹⁷³

To reinforce his belief in the necessity of grace for the attainment of the second, true *felicitas* or *summum bonum*, Pico relied upon an analogy with nature. This, again, was congruent with that guiding Proclean principle in the *Conclusiones*, that “everything exists in everything in its own way.”⁹⁷⁴ Novak summarized Pico’s theology of salvation concisely as follows:

Nothing can rise above itself by relying on its own strength, for then it would be stronger than itself. Similarly, nothing relying on itself can attain a felicity greater or more perfect than its own nature, i.e., through its own efforts it can reach only the first felicity, the perfection within itself, and not the second, ultimate felicity. That this second felicity belongs only to angels and men is demonstrated by a further analogy to nature: men and angels are like vapour, while the creatures below man are of heavier composition: “Vapor can rise upwards,” [wrote Pico] “but not unless drawn by the rays of the sun; stone and all heavy substances can neither receive the rays to so great an extent nor be carried up by them.”⁹⁷⁵

Necessary to Pico’s system was the descent of a divine force which could lead human desire toward reunion with God. The very fall of Satan and his angels, and so too for Adam and Eve, resulted from their own attempts to climb up to God rather than letting themselves be carried up. To reinforce this notion, Pico quoted St. Paul, writing:

We can be... brought back to God by the motive power of grace. Hence comes ‘Whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God’ [*Romans* 8:14]. ‘Who are led,’ it says, not ‘who move.’⁹⁷⁶

For Pico, it was unambiguous how God led back his people: through Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the Messiah-who-has-come, and the Messiah-who-shall-come-again. Grace and redemption were processes which had unfolded historically and were woven into the fabric of

⁹⁷² Novak, “Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno,” 138 notes how “Pico thought that the Active Intellect of the Islamic philosophers was a limited conception,” and this was first because it did not involve the workings of grace, and second because their conceptions of it “neque hi hominem ad suum principium neque ad summum bonum adductunt.” Pico, *Heptaplus*, in *Opera omnia*, 47.

⁹⁷³ Novak, “Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno,” 138-139.

⁹⁷⁴ See n. 934 and n. 955 above.

⁹⁷⁵ Pico, *Heptaplus*, in *Opera omnia*, 46; Novak, “Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno,” 138. This argument would be picked up again in Savonarola, *The Triumph of the Cross*, ed. John Procter (London: Sands & Co., 1901), 165-166.

⁹⁷⁶ Pico, *Heptaplus*, in *Opera omnia*, 48: “Tales enim sumus natura, ut non circumagere nos et reflectere, sed circumagi motricae vim gratiae et reflecti in Deum possumus. Hinc illud, qui aguntur spiritu Dei, hi filii Dei sunt. Qui aguntur dixit, non autem qui agunt”; Novak, “Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno,” 139.

creation from its very foundations. Novak was right, therefore, to locate the justifications for Pico's soteriology in the *Heptaplus* in the Platonic idea of circular motion and the perfection of the circle. To relate how fundamental this motion was to his understanding of the process of salvation, he highlighted Pico's claim that:

The heavenly bodies, although adapted to circular motion, are not in themselves sufficient to perform this motion, but need the divine mover to turn and revolve them... It is no different for the angels. Our nature is such that we cannot go in a circle and come back upon ourselves, we can be moved in a circle and brought back to God by the motive power of grace.⁹⁷⁷

This was the Platonic doctrine of 'procession-turn-return' in Christian clothes, and the concept also had its parallels in Judaism in the idea of *teshuvah* (תשובה, lit: "return").⁹⁷⁸ Thanks to his diversity of teachers, Pico's vision of being carried up to God was as thoroughly colored by his readings of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* as by Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* 3.51 which introduced the concept of the *mors osculi*, "The Death of the Kiss" from *Song of Songs* 1:2, a mystical kiss by which God sweetly carried off the souls of perfected humans who cleaved to him perfectly throughout their brief sojourns in this world.⁹⁷⁹ This was the means by which the prophets were swept up to God, experiencing not a first death (the separation of the body from the soul), but a second death (the separation of the soul from the body). The 'kiss' in this sense, was spiritual: it constituted a mingling of breaths.⁹⁸⁰ What death this kiss conferred, therefore, was really beatific union and self-annihilation in God, the second death, which is a death of death itself. Prior to its appearance in Maimonides, this concept had its precedent in the writings of the Late Platonists, though naturally without the cover of sensual biblical allegories. In his *Sententiae*, for example, Porphyry had spoken of "a twofold death; one, indeed universally known, in which the body is liberated from the soul; but the other peculiar to philosophers, in which the soul is liberated from the body," and added that the one does not entirely follow from the other.⁹⁸¹ Throughout the later Renaissance, this philosophical image became a popular theme for poetry, especially once coloured by nuances of the *Symposium*'s picture of Platonic love, that is, as a parting of the soul from the body toward the love of love itself. It was thus specifically

⁹⁷⁷ Pico, *Heptaplus*, in *Opera omnia*, 48; Novak, "Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," 139 sets in parallel the Christian concept of *felicitas* with the Alemanno's ideas about Jewish *devekut* ("clinging" or "cleaving") which likewise share in "the Neoplatonic idea of circular motion."

⁹⁷⁸ Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 129 (proposition 146): "In any divine procession the end is assimilated to the beginning, maintaining by its reversion thither a circle without beginning and without end. For if each single processive term reverts upon its proper initial principle, from which it proceeded (proposition 31), much more, surely, do entire orders proceed from their highest point and revert again upon it. This reversion of the end upon the beginning makes the whole order one and determinate, convergent upon itself and by its convergence revealing unity in multiplicity." "Πασῶν τῶν θεϊῶν προόδων τὰ τέλη πρὸς τὰς ἑαυτῶν ἀρξὰς ὁμοιοῦται, κύκλον ἀναρχον καὶ ἀτελεύτητον σώζοντα διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὰς ἀρξὰς ἐπιστροφῆς. εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν προελθόντων ἐπιστρέφεται πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρξὴν, ἀφ' ἧς προεληλύθε, πολλῶ δὴπου μᾶλλον αἱ ὅλαι τάξεις, ἀπὸ τῆς ἑαυτῶν ἀκρότητος προελθοῦσαι, πάλιν ἐπιστρέφονται πρὸς ἐκείνην. ἢ δὲ ἐπιστροφή τοῦ τέλους εἰς τὴν ἀρξὴν μίαν ἀπεργάζεται πᾶσαν καὶ ὀρισμένην καὶ εἰς ἑαυτὴν συννεύουσαν καὶ ἐν τῷ πλήθει τὸ ἐνοειδὲς ἐπιδεικνυμένην διὰ τῆς συννεύσεως."

⁹⁷⁹ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer, 390-391.

⁹⁸⁰ For more on the "Binsica" or *mors osculi* see Ioan P. Culiano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57 and 72.

⁹⁸¹ Thomas Taylor, *Select Works of Porphyry* (London: T. Rodd, 1823), 170.

through Pico's writings – with the help of his Jewish teachers – that these Maimonidean ideas about the *mors osculi* found themselves in later monuments of Renaissance literature: Francesco Giorgi's *De harmonia mundi*, Aegidius of Viterbo's *Libellus*, Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, and Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori*, signalling how one twelfth century rabbi's Platonizing ideas about divine union in the Hebrew scriptures remained an enduring aspect of Christian poetry and mysticism some four centuries after they were first written down.⁹⁸²

⁹⁸² Novak, "Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," 141 provides the following list: Francesco Giorgi, *De harmonia mundi*, 3.6.18; Aegidius da Viterbo, *Scechina e libellus de litteris hebraicis*, ed. François Secret (Rome: Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici, 1959), 53; Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 4.64; Giordano Bruno, *De gli eroici furori*, 2.1.7; cf. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 55.

7.3 Formal Numbers and Pico's Prophetic Sense of History

Pico's *Heptaplus* was not the first of his works to be concerned in some way with the flow of time and history (and it would not exactly be the last either). Indeed, one can argue that since the first 400 of his theses or *Conclusiones* maintained a quasi-historical structure – beginning with the discordant Latin scholastics, progressing backward through time on through the Arabs, and back to the Greeks, whom he perceived to have lived in philosophical harmony – they stood in a way as a kind of work of intellectual history. For Pico, however, the further back in time the history of philosophy went, the more apparent it became that ‘the love of wisdom’ was deeply rooted in the soil of theology, of prophetic revelation, and in particular what he called “natural prophecy.” The first and greatest of all the Hebrew prophets had been none other than Moses, for the Pentateuch ascribed to him was not only the most important text known to Pico to have survived from antiquity, but the most ancient too, more ancient still than even the writings of Mercurius Trismegistus, Orpheus, or Zoroaster. Pico's Moses was the first man to use writing, and consequently, the first (and most profound) to record history. The history he recorded in *Genesis*, however, was no mere causal reckoning of events – no matter of civic or national pride, of preserving the “great and wondrous deeds” of men.⁹⁸³ Rather, it was a dense network of interpenetrating allegorical signs that lead upward to God, awaiting only for one with a spiritual understanding to behold the fullness of their interconnectivity.

At the very foundation of how all things were interconnected sat number. For Pico, natural prophecy, the anagogical mode of interpretation or *intelligentia spiritualis*, and Kabbalah were all conceptually intertwined, and all these were likewise bound up with mathematics and the philosophical study of number in a variety of ways.⁹⁸⁴ In the *Oratio*, Pico explained his propensities towards “Pythagorean” numerology as follows:

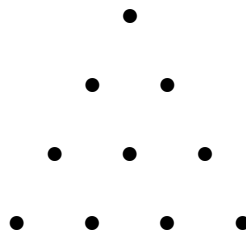
Beyond what I have mentioned so far, there is another novel method that philosophizes with numbers; in fact, the ancient theologians used it in antiquity – Pythagoras especially, as well as Aglaophemus, Philalaos, Plato, and the earlier Platonists. But it withered away when our later age neglected it, along with many other brilliant achievements, and in our time one finds hardly a trace of it. Plato writes in the *Epinomis* that among all the liberal arts and the sciences of contemplation, the supreme and pre-eminently divine science is that of numbering. When he asks why man is the wisest animal, his answer is that he knows how to count, a remark that Aristotle also recalls in the *Problems*. Abumasar writes that Avenzoar of Babylon used to say that a person who knows numbers knows everything. There could be no truth at all in this if by the art of numbering they meant the technique in which merchants are now the great experts, for Plato also testifies and loudly warns us not to understand this divine arithmetic as the arithmetic of commerce. Of this much esteemed arithmetic, then, I am ready to make a trial...⁹⁸⁵

⁹⁸³ Cf. n 165 above.

⁹⁸⁴ Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico*, 116.

⁹⁸⁵ Pico, *Oratio* in *Opera omnia*, 326-327: “Est autem et praeter illam alia quam nos attulimus nova per numeros philosophandi institutio, antiqua illa quidem et a priscis theologis – a Pithagora praesertim, ab Aglaopheno, a Philolao, a Platone, prioribusque Platonicis observata – sed quae hac tempestate, ut praeclara alia, posteriorum incuria sic exolevit, ut vix vestigia ipsius ulla reperiantur. Scribit Plato in *Epinomide* inter omnes liberales artes et

Pico's obsession with what he called the *via numerorum* stood chiefly on account of what he perceived to be the transcendent, incorporeal, and purely intellectual character of numbers. These were not the base numbers used for carnal mercantile calculations, or even the numbers of geometers, but the formal numbers beheld by prophets. That is to say, these were not 'numbers of things,' but purely abstract numbers which dwelt up in the realm of forms. Indeed, these were the forms. In among his *900 Conclusiones*, he had maintained – in a discursive rather than direct fashion – that God had created the world as a kind of Pythagorean tetractys (a triangle made of ten dots), and thus the whole world could be explained through the unfoldment of these numbers, as a gradual progression from one to the many and back again.⁹⁸⁶ With its four levels representing the One and its hypostases, the triangular shape of the tetractys could be taken as a symbol of the Trinity as much as it could be taken as a symbol for all of creation.



The one represents the monad or absolute unity; the two, the world of *nous* (mind) or intellect; the three, the celestial world; and the four, the material world, after the four elements that constitute nature. Four was also the sign of man, and when combined with the number of the Trinity, it produced the heptad of creation.⁹⁸⁷ But this was merely one 'Pythagorean' mathematical approach to mapping out the cosmos, and kabbalistic gematria or isopsephy was yet another, since all Hebrew letters have generally agreed upon corresponding numerical values. Pico's choice of the number 900 in assembling his conclusions, for example, had been chosen to reflect the gematric value of the cruciform Hebrew letter *tsade* (צ), whose numerical value was 900, and whose shape represented the straight line of royalty which ran from King David to Christ.⁹⁸⁸ In keeping with ideas such as these, he hinted at his plans to apply his system of numerology to lay out a description of the ages of history and to calculate dates for the end of the world.

scientias contemplatrices praecipuam maximeque divinam esse scientiam numerandi. Quaerens item cur homo animal sapientissimum, respondet quia numerare novit, cuius sententiae et Aristoteles meminit in *Problematis*. Scribit Abumasar verbum fuisse Avenzoar Babylonii eum omnia nosse qui noverat numerare. Quae vera esse nullo modo possunt, si per numerandi artem, eam artem intellexerunt cuius nunc mercatores in primis sunt peritissimi; quod et Plato testatur, exerta nos admonens voce ne divinam hanc arithmetica mercatoriam esse arithmetica intelligamus. Illam ergo arithmetica quae ita extollitur..."; translation and emendations to the text of the *Opera omnia* (esp. punctuation) from Copenhagen, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oration*, 122-124; cf. Copenhagen, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 476.

⁹⁸⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 36-37. Cf. n. 160 above.

⁹⁸⁷ Howlett, *Re-Evaluating Pico*, 118.

⁹⁸⁸ Copenhagen, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 354.

Most significant for our purposes here is that in the *Conclusiones*, Pico had explicitly claimed that his own methods for “understanding everything knowable” were similar to those of Joachim of Fiore whom he considered the Latin Western practitioner of numerological or “natural prophecy” *par excellence*. Simply put, to Pico, Joachim had been a Pythagorean (or perhaps more accurately, Pythagoras and Joachim shared in the same “method that philosophizes with number”).⁹⁸⁹ Pico’s response to “natural magic” which he ultimately thought vain, was “natural prophecy,” which he took to be the wellspring of all revelation. Again, this was a phenomenon broached, according to Pico, “through formal, not material, arithmetic” – through the kind of mystical contemplation of number in Scripture practiced by Joachim of Fiore that was emphatically distinct from the base computations of the marketplace.⁹⁹⁰ It was this very phenomenon of ‘reading esoterically’ which sat at the juncture of his Pythagoreanism, his Platonism, and his Kabbalism: the legitimating factor to all of these philosophies was their shared concern with the numerologization of theology and the theologization of number in the production of a teachable system of “natural prophecy” through which all things could be known. What was mathematical was simple, pure, intellectual, wholly divorced from ‘practical’ worldly concerns, and therefore, wholly conducive to the contemplation of *invisibilia* such as the realm of perfect forms which dwelt in the mind of God. What follows here are Pico’s own introductory statements to his “*Conclusiones de mathematicis*” which follow his section on the *Liber de Causis*. These stand as a syncretic synthesis of various kinds of logical emanationist arguments rooted in the works of Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus. In these ancient pagan authors, the ineffable One and the Many which comprised all of existence were understood to have unfolded in intelligible mathematical patterns, but Pico’s intention in incorporating their ideas into his *nova philosophia* was to illustrate the principle from *Wisdom* 11:20 that God had created the world “by measure and number and weight.”⁹⁹¹ Reading carefully, however, we can also see how Pico believed this “novel method that philosophizes with numbers” had in fact already been known to Latin Christendom despite having “withered away when our later age neglected it,” since he dedicated one of his eleven introductory conclusions to the fact that “formal numbers” had been used by none other than the Calabrian prophet Joachim of Fiore:

- 7.1. The mathematical sciences are not true sciences.
- 7.2. If happiness (*foelicitas*) exists in speculative perfection, mathematics does not lead to happiness.
- 7.3. The mathematical sciences are not sciences per se, but a way to seek other sciences.
- 7.4. Just as the subjects of mathematics, if they are taken absolutely, do not perfect the intellect, so if they are taken as images of superior things, they lead us immediately by the hand to the investigation of intelligibles.
- 7.5. Just as the saying of Aristotle concerning the ancients, which states that they erred in physical contemplation because they treated physical things mathematically, would be true if they had accepted

⁹⁸⁹ Cf. n. 985 and n. 993.

⁹⁹⁰ Cf. n. 277 above.

⁹⁹¹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 466-467. Farmer notes how “this part of the nine hundred theses... had a powerful influence on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought and was drawn on heavily by Agrippa von Nettesheim, John Dee, Giordano Bruno, Robert Fludd, Athanasius Kircher, and scores of lesser-known writers” like Francesco Giorgi or Arcangelo of Borgonovo.

mathematics materially, not formally, so it is very true that the moderns, who dispute mathematically concerning natural things, destroy the foundations of natural philosophy.

7.6. Nothing is more harmful to the theologian than frequent and continuous exercise in Euclidean mathematics.

7.7. Just as medicine chiefly moves the spirits that rule the body, so music moves the spirits that serve the soul.

7.8. Medicine heals the soul through the body, but music the body through the soul.

7.9. Through formal, not material, arithmetic, the optimal way is had to natural prophecy.⁹⁹²

7.10. Joachim (*Ioachim*) in his prophecies did not proceed in any other way than through formal numbers.

7.11. Through numbers a method exists to the investigation and understanding of everything knowable...⁹⁹³

Unfortunately, the details as to how “formal numbers” made up everything in existence are not perfectly clear in the *Conclusiones*, which leave us only with hints about Pico’s system that was elaborated by later authors. In *conclusio* 9.23, however, we are given a clue about which numbers Pico considered “formal” and which he considered “material.” The “ternarius and the denarius,” the three and the ten (that is, the numbers which begin and end the Pythagorean tetractys, as well as representing the Trinity and the ten *sefirot* respectively), he claimed to constitute the formal numbers, or “the numbers of numbers,” while claiming all other numbers were “material.”⁹⁹⁴ This belief formed the basis of Pico’s *via numerorum* or system of natural prophecy which he had planned to use to win over his detractors during his Vatican debate by demonstrating the hidden agreements or correspondences between kabbalistic, Platonic, and Christian texts, especially insofar as they could be related to grand eschatological schemes about

⁹⁹² Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 468, n. 7.9: here formal arithmetic implies “mathematics symbolizing cosmological or metaphysical principles (intelligible things),” and material arithmetic implies “mathematics applied to the inferior realm of motion and change,” or worse, “mercantile arithmetic.” In simpler terms, formal numbers are pure numbers in and of themselves (e.g., the monad, the triad, the decad) while material numbers are numbers of things (one coin, three loaves of bread, ten apples). Here the elitist attitudes derived from the Platonist’s disdain for practical matters over purely theoretical ones overlaps with the mendicant rejection and sublimation of all things associated with the marketplace, albeit for different reasons. Cf. Rosenwein and Little, “Mendicant Spiritualities,” 23.

⁹⁹³ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 466-469: “7.1. Mathematicae non sunt verae scientiae. 7.2. Si foelicitas sit in speculativa perfectione, mathematicae non faciunt ad foelicitatem. 7.3. Mathematicae scientiae non sunt propter se, sed ut via ad alias scientias quaerendae. 7.4. Sicut subiecta mathematicorum, si absolute accipiuntur, intellectum nihil perficiunt, ita si ut imagines accipiuntur superiorum, immediate nos ad intelligibilium speculationem manu ducunt. 7.5. Sicut dictum Aristoteles de antiquis, dicentis quod ideo errarunt in physica contemplatione, quia mathematicae res physicas tractarunt, verum esset si illi materialiter mathematica non formaliter accepissent, ita est uerissimum modernos, qui de naturalibus mathematicae disputant, naturalis philosophiae fundamenta destruere. 7.6. Nihil magis nocivum theologo quam frequens et assidua in mathematicis Euclidis exercitatio. 7.7. Sicut medicina movet spiritus principaliter ut regunt corpus, ita musica movet spiritus ut serviunt animae. 7.8. Medicina sanat animam per corpus, musica autem corpus per animam. 7.9. Per arithmetica non materialem, sed formalem, habetur optima via ad prophetiam naturalem. 7.10. Ioachim in prophetiis suis alia via non processit quam per numeros formales. 7.11. Per numeros habetur via ad omnis scibilis inuestigationem et intellectionem...”

⁹⁹⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 502-503: “9.23. Quilibet numerus praeter ternarium et denarium sunt materiales in magia; isti formales sunt, et in magica arithmetica sunt numeri numerorum.” Farmer notes how this “magical arithmetic,” if we are right to link it to Pico’s *via numerorum* (and there is little reason to think we should not), is “magic used for contemplative or prophetic ends.” Recall, therefore, how this ternarius/denarius combination also sat at the foundation of Joachim of Fiore’s vision of the *Psalterium decem cordarum* (*The Psaltery of Ten Strings*) that was used to depict the unity of the nine orders of angels plus man suspended between the three persons of the Trinity.

a worldly sabbath.⁹⁹⁵ He left us with a list of 74 “*Questions To Which He Promises To Respond Through Numbers*,” but we do not have his answers.

Pico’s vision of world history as it stood in 1486 when he published the *Conclusiones* was not particularly elaborated, though it was clearly intertwined with his vision of the individual soul’s process of mystical ascent back toward *felicitas* as described in the *Oratio*. For Pico, this process was hard-coded into the six ages of the world. This he hinted at in his discussion of “the hunt (*venatio*) of Socrates in the *Protagoras* [321b],” which progressed through six stages (*gradus*), progressing from more corporeal to more intellectual states, all leading toward a seventh stage, the final sabbath or ‘day of rest’ for the world which will unite all men in peace and beatitude.⁹⁹⁶ Where mysticism offered the mystic visions of heaven, and prophecy offered the prophet visions of the past, present, and future, in Pico, the two notions were inseparable, since progress toward the universal reconciliation of all divergent philosophies and theologies was progress toward the kingdom of heaven. Again, not much is clear about Pico’s view of world history from the *Conclusiones* alone, but what is clear is that in the final stages of a teleologically-ordained hexameral cosmology, Pico anticipated the return of all the perfected souls in creation back to God through one true theology and “total intellectual existence,” freed from all the impurities of the material world, a state which would finalize the great reflux back from multiplicity to unity under the aegis of a single doctrine and a single name. It is only in the *Heptaplus*, however, that we get details about how this process had unfolded and was to unfold on the stage of history.

Like Ficino before him, and in spite of his scholastic training, Pico was largely disinterested with the consensus-fragmenting ideas of the nominalists and consequently pursued the path of the Platonic realist, maintaining that symbols and the things they signified were not only semiologically, but ontologically woven together.⁹⁹⁷ The symbols used by Moses were not arbitrary but based on that “greatest of all” cosmic principles, that is, that everything on every level of reality is reflected in some way on every other, and this was especially so through the unifying power of number.⁹⁹⁸ This was the heart of the heart of Pico’s theses since such a concept became fundamental in composing his later works: “as theology teaches, the divine hierarchies are distinct, [nevertheless] it should be understood that *all things exist in all things in their own way*.”⁹⁹⁹ It was this overarching theory which allowed Pico to claim that Moses, the

⁹⁹⁵ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 73.

⁹⁹⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 456-457, *conclusio* 5.58: “That hunt of Socrates in the *Protagoras* can be appropriately divided this way into six grades: so that the first is the existence of external matter, the second particular immaterial existence, the third universal existence, the fourth rational existence, the fifth particular intellectual existence, the sixth total intellectual existence. In the seventh, in the sabbath, as it were, one must desist from the hunt.” “*Venatio illa Socratis, de qua in Protagora, convenienter per sex gradus potest sic distribui: ut primus sit esse materiae extrinsecae, secundus esse particulare immateriale, tertius esse universal, quartus esse rationale, quintus esse particulare intellectuale, sextus esse totale intellectuale; in septimo tanquam, in sabbato, cessandum est a venatione.*”

⁹⁹⁷ See n. 39 above.

⁹⁹⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 80.

⁹⁹⁹ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 320-321; see n. 934 above.

wellspring of all prophetic writing, had readily applied divine names to earthly and celestial things, and vice-versa. Pico explained:

Since they are *drawn together by the chains of concord*, all these worlds exchange names as well as natures with mutual liberality. From this principle (if perhaps someone has not yet perceived it) has flowed the discipline of all allegorical interpretation. Nor were the ancient Fathers able to represent correctly some things through the figures of others unless they were taught, as I have said, the occult friendships and affinities of all of nature. Otherwise, there would be no reason why they should have represented one thing by this image, or that by another, rather than the contrary. But expert in all things – and moved by that Spirit who not only knows all things, but made them – they would aptly symbolize the natures of one world through that which they knew corresponded to them in the other worlds. Therefore, those who wish to interpret rightly the figures and allegorical sense of those Fathers need the same knowledge – *unless the same Spirit comes to them as well*.¹⁰⁰⁰ [emphasis added]

Allegory, therefore, sat at the very foundations of Pico's Platonic realism. It constituted the "chains of concord" which bound together man, the three worlds, and God, and since it was necessary to read Scripture allegorically in order to reveal its hidden Christological correspondences, Pico took pains in the *Heptaplus* to explain its importance as a unifying force. It was the very spirit of God which had breathed into Moses and allowed him to encode the Pentateuch with so many layers of symbolism and meaning, and only through an intellectual participation in that very same spirit did Pico believe he could correctly interpret them, that is, through the spiritual understanding, a gift of the Holy Spirit. In keeping with his many anti-Jewish polemicist forerunners, however, Pico made it clear that it was this very spirit – the third person of the Christian Trinity – that contemporary Jews were too deaf, blind, stubborn, or stony-hearted to recognize, and when they denied the presence of Christological allegories woven throughout the *Hebraica veritas*, they ultimately denied God himself.

Having looked at some of Pico's underlying metaphysical assumptions, and returning to the *Heptaplus*, Chapter 4, Exposition 7, we are now on better footing to understand how the *Princeps Concordiae* used an extensive discussion on biblical prophecy for mapping out his vision of world history before setting it against a map that had long been in currency among Jewish Talmudists. Relative to the anti-Jewish medieval polemical tradition rooted in Petrus Alfonsi and Ramon Martí, Pico approached the problem of harmonizing the Christian and Hebrew traditions with a more flexible attitude. This difference was in many ways rooted in his own linear vision of the history of philosophy which set the origin of all true 'spiritual' writing in the figure of Moses alone. Pico's attack plan was not simply to point out the theological errors of

¹⁰⁰⁰ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 7-8: "Quoniam, scilicet, astricti vinculis concordiae uti naturas ita etiam appellationes hi omnes mundi mutua sibi liberalitate condonant. Ab hoc principio (si quis fortasse hoc nondum advertit) totius sensus allegorici disciplina manavit. Nec potuerunt antiqui patres aliis alia figuris decenter repraesentare nisi occultas, ut ita dixerim, totius naturae et amicitias et affinitates edocti. Alioquin nulla esset ratio cur hoc potius hac imagine aliud aliae quam contra repraesentassent. Sed gnari omnium rerum et acti spiritu illo qui haec omnia non solum novit, sed fecit naturas unius mundi, per ea quae illis in reliquis mundis noverant respondere aptissime figurabant. Quare eadem opus cognitione (nisi idem adsit et spiritus) his qui illorum figuras et allegoricos sensus interpretari recte voluerint." (Carmichael, 78; cf. McGaw, 25).

the Jews and cross his fingers with hopes that they would suddenly see the light. Instead, he began from the assumption that “behind apparent diversity lay unity.”¹⁰⁰¹ His search, therefore, was primarily for common denominators, and he had found them especially by using the kabbalistic exegetical techniques he had been taught by his Hebrew teachers, then applying them towards the confirmation of his own Christological interpretations of the Old Testament. Again, Pico’s simultaneously ecumenical but appropriative approach, while certainly not seen favourably in the light of modern progressive values, was arguably far less violent in nature than the persecutory approach taken by many of his hardline anti-Jewish polemicist forebears (and successors). Pico’s position was more like the one espoused by prophets like Joachim of Fiore or Abraham Abulafia than the one espoused by Dominican converso polemicists like Paul of Burgos, Jerome of Santa Fé, or Johannes Pfefferkorn. The ultimate goal of this ecumenical approach can be seen in his conclusion to the *Heptaplus* which ends in an exhortation for man to emulate the world’s hidden sympathies so as to become one in God’s love:

Just as the whole world is one in the totality of its parts, so also like this, at the end, it is one with its Maker. Let us also imitate the holy agreement of the world, so that we may be one together in mutual love, and that simultaneously, through the true love of God, we may all happily ascend as one with him.¹⁰⁰²

In order to understand further this concluding exhortation, we must take into consideration Pico’s reading of *Genesis* 1:14-19, which he explained in Chapter 4, Exposition 7. This section is particularly significant for our purposes because it contains the closest thing we have to a complete picture of world history as Pico understood it, including dates, and this was a history whose central theme was the ultimate reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Jesus Christ. The following paragraphs from the *Heptaplus* are here included in full as this section in particular, out of all of Pico’s extant writings, stands as our clearest available window into his vision of world history, and it also happens that – although rhetorically addressed to his Christian brothers – it is simultaneously framed as an invective against the Jews:

And lo the fullness of time!¹⁰⁰³ For if the number four is the fullness of numbers, in the world of numbers, will the fourth day not be the fullness of days? See then what the fourth day brings us. On the second day the heavens were created, namely, the law, without sun and moon and stars, certainly capable of future light, but for the moment still dark and not illuminated by any remarkable light. Then came the fourth day on which the sun, lord of the firmament, namely, Christ – Lord of the laws, and the lunar Church, Christ’s consort and wife, similar to the moon, and the apostolic doctors, who would educate many to justice, as

¹⁰⁰¹ McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 8.

¹⁰⁰² Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 62: “...ut quemadmodum inter se totus mundus unus, ita et cum suo auctore postremo sit unum. Imitemur et nos sanctissimum foedus mundi, ut et mutua charitate invicem fimus unum, et simul omnes per veram Dei dilectionem, cum illo unum feliciter evadamus.” (McGaw, 114; cf. Carmichael, 174).

¹⁰⁰³ The following section is taken from Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 51-53 (McGaw, 98-100; Carmichael, 157-159). Given the length of this passage, I have provided the Latin paragraph-by-paragraph for the sake of manageability.

stars in the firmament – began to shine for eternity, calling the world to eternal life. The sun did not destroy the firmament, but fulfilled it, and Christ came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.¹⁰⁰⁴

The light of the first day, namely, the very pious Abraham, saw the fourth day, which is the day of Christ, and rejoiced. He saw the rays of his light, that is, of the true religion which He had brought into the world by the sun of justice, were to diffuse very widely in the whole universe through the true light illuminating all men. He saw Jesus Christ, the splendour of the Fatherly Substance, shining upon these who were entrenched in darkness and in the shadow of death, and he saw that the prince of darkness, the prince of this world, was cast out and banished from the minds of men. He saw these things and exulted; he saw the fourth day and was glad, this day which the Lord made, in which the Lord became man, and in which God dwelt among us. Let us also exult in it this day and let us be glad.¹⁰⁰⁵

Oh, Christian brothers, I pray that you consider a little more diligently how true and sound is my exposition, whence to you there will be furnished, against the stony hearts of the Hebrews, very powerful darts taken from their armaments. I shall prove then, first that from the testimony of the Jews, through the work of the fourth day, is shown to us the coming of Christ. Secondly, I shall show that the Messiah is represented to us by no symbol better than the sun; and by a calculation of time, I shall deduce with absolute evidence that Christ will not come in the future, but that Jesus of Nazareth, the son of the Virgin, was the Messiah promised to the Hebrews.¹⁰⁰⁶

Among the decrees of ancient Hebrew wisdom is the fact that through the six days of Genesis are symbolized the six thousand years of the world, so that what are here called the works of the first day were a prophecy of what was going to be in the first millennium of the world, likewise, the works of the second day, of what was going to be in the second millennium, and so on, with always the same order of succession on either side. Among the more modern thinkers, Moses of Gerona [sc. the Ramban, Nachmanides, 1195–1270], a theologian of great renown among the Hebrews, proves this doctrine. Saint Jerome also mentions it in the exposition of that Psalm which is assigned to Moses, and this opinion seems

¹⁰⁰⁴ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 51: “Et ecce iam temporis plenitudo. Si enim numerus quaternarius plenitudo est numerorum, nonne erit et dies quartus plenitudo dierum? Videte igitur quid nobis afferat quartus dies. Coelum secundo die firmatum, id est, lex sine Sole et Luna ac stellis erat: capax quidem futurae lucis, sed obscurum adhuc, nec insigni alioquo lumine illustratum. Advenit dies quartus, quo Sol Dominus firmamenti, id est, Christus Dominus legis et lunaris ecclesia Christi compar et sponsa, et qui multos ad iustitiam erudirent Apostolici doctores in firmamento uti stellae in perpetuas aeternitates elucescerent, ad aeternam scilicet vitam mundum vocantes. Sol firmamentum non dissoluit, sed perficit, et Christus legem non venit ut dissolveret, sed ut perficeret.”

¹⁰⁰⁵ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 51: “Lux primi diei Abraham pietissimus vidit diem quartam, quae est dies Christi et gavisus est. Vidit radium suae lucis, id est, verae religionis, quem mundo intulerat per solem iustitiae, per lucem veram illuminantem omnes homines in universum orbem latissime diffundendum. Vidit Iesum Christum splendorem paternae substantiae illucescentem his qui in tenebris et in umbra mortis sedebant, et principem tenebrarum principem mundi huius eiici foras, et de mentibus hominum examinari. Haec vidit et exultavit vidit diem quartam et laetatus est. Haec dies quam fecit Dominus, qua dominus homo fit, qua Deus habitavit in nobis: exultemus et nos et laetemur in ea.”

¹⁰⁰⁶ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 51-52: “Quam autem vera quam solida sit nostrae ratio expositionis attendatis quaeso paulo diligentius christiani fratres. Unde et vobis potentissima tela contra lapideum cor Hebraeorum de armentariis eorum petita subministrabuntur. Probabimus autem illud primo ex testimoniis Iudaeorum per opera diei quarti adventum Christi nobis significari: secundo ostendemus nobis Messiam repraesentari per nullam rem congruentius quam per Solem, colligemus evidentissime ex temporum ratione non venturum in posterum Christum, sed Iesum ex Nazareth filium virginis promissum Hebraeis Messiam fuisse.”

to have the firmest support in the principle that a thousand years, as the prophet says, are one day before God.¹⁰⁰⁷

The fourth day, then, if this doctrine is true, is the prophecy of what is going to happen in the fourth millennium of the world. Now let me show that, according to the annals of the Hebrews and the calculation of those years which they approve, that Jesus appeared in the fourth millennium of the world. They count 1556 years from Adam to the flood, 292 years from the flood to Abraham, and so from Adam to Abraham are computed 1818 years.¹⁰⁰⁸ From the birth of Isaac to the ruin of the second temple, which was after the death of Christ, they compute around 1660. From Isaac to the exodus from Egypt they compute 430 years; and from the exodus to the temple that Solomon built, they compute more or less as many years; from Solomon to the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, 410 years; from the building of the temple under Ezra to its capture under Titus, 420 years.¹⁰⁰⁹

So if you add all together, from the origins of the world to Christ you will count, according to the reflection of the Hebrews, 3508 years, so that Christ came into the very middle of the fourth millennium. Within the limits of the same millennium, as within the limits of the fourth day, the light of the moon, namely the Church, shone over the whole world, and the innumerable multitude of martyrs, apostles, and doctors who all became renown within 500 years after the death of Christ illuminated the darkness of our night and the obscurity of the firmament, that is, of the law.¹⁰¹⁰

Pico here combined different maps of history to create a composite image of time as a whole.¹⁰¹¹ Most notably, he built his own temporalization schemes not through astrological means or through the events recorded by ancient historians, but by way of appropriating Jewish calculations based on their interpretations of Hebrew texts, and then employing them as “darts taken from their armaments” to show that Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised by the

¹⁰⁰⁷ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 52: “Est inter decreta veteris Hebraicae disciplinae per sex dies Geneseos sex mille annos mundi sic designari, ut sint quae hic dicunt opera primi diei vaticinium eorum, quae primo mundi millenario futura erant ut contingerent, opera item secundi eorum quae in secundo, et sic deinceps eodem semper utrobique successionis ordine servato: cui sententiae etiam attestatur inter iuniores Moses Gerundeniensis theologus primae celebratis apud Hebraeos. Meminit et divus Hieronymus in expositione Psalmi illius, qui Mosi inscribitur, videturque, opinio haec fundamento praecipue illi inniti quod mille anni (ut inquit Propheta) unus dies sunt apud Deum.” See *Psalm* 90:4 (Vulg. *Psalm* 89:4). On the “day-year” principle in Joachim of Fiore, see n. 194 above.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Carmichael, 159, n. 18 points out the fact that Pico’s figures here really add up to 1848, but that this number agrees with the 3508 total in the following paragraph.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 52: “Quartus igitur dies, si vera est haec doctrina, vaticinium est eorum, quae quarto millenario mundi eventura sunt: Age nunc ostendamus iuxta annales Hebraeorum, et quam approbant ipsi annorum supputationem quarto mundi millenario Iesum apparuisse. Computant illi ab Adam ad diluvium annos mille quingentos quinquaginta sex, a diluvio ad Abraham annos ducentos et nonaginta duos, atque ita ab Adam ad Abraham colliguntur anni mille octingenti quadraginta octo. A genitura autem Isaac ad ruinam secundi templi, quae fuit post Christi mortem numerant annos circiter (neque enim resco ad vivuum) mille sexcentos sexaginta. Supputant enim ab Isaac ad exitum ex Aegypto annos quadringentos et triginta, ab exitu ad templum quod Salomon aedificavit totidem fere, a Salomone ad temple desolationem per Babylonios annos quadringentos et decem, a templi instauratione sub Esdra ad hanc sub Tito captivitatem annos quadringentos viginti.”

¹⁰¹⁰ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 52: “Itaque si omnes simul collegeris, computabis a mundi exordio ad Christum iuxta ipsorum Hebraeorum mentem annorum tria milia quingentos et octo, ut et in ipso quarti millenarii medio Christus advenerit et intra eiusdem millenarii quasi intra terminos quarti diei et lunae, id est, ecclesiae, lux toti mundo affulxerit, et innumerabilis martyrum, apostolorum, doctorumque multitudo qui intra quingentos annos post Christi mortem omnes claruere, et firmament, id est, legis obscuritatem et nostrae noctis tenebras illuminaverint.”

¹⁰¹¹ Cf. n. 38 above.

prophets. As he demonstrated later in composing his astrological *Disputationes* not published until 1496 after his death, Pico was no stranger to the kinds of ‘Great Conjunction’ chronologies of history popularized by figures like Abu Ma‘Shar and later used by Roger Bacon or Arnald of Villanova in their attempts to predict the rise of the Antichrist.¹⁰¹² In this treatise Pico attacked the idea that astrology had any relation with history or religion at length, but here in the *Heptaplus* Pico proceeded by citing only the calculations of Talmudists, and this was done specifically in an attempt to rebuke those “Jewish vipers” by showing them how, *in their own Scriptures and in accordance with the oracles of Elijah*, it says that their Messiah would come in the fourth millennium of the world. “Why then,” Pico harangued, “why do you blind ones wait for the sun? The sun is here and shines, but it shines in darkness and your darkness does not comprehend it.”¹⁰¹³

Pico’s calculations for affirming the divinity of Christ ran from the first day of Creation to the fall of the Second Temple in 70 AD, a date which he believed even more significant than the crucifixion because it marked both the fulfillment of the Mosaic law and the fulfillment of Christ’s prophecy in *Luke* 21:6. Pico maintained, therefore, that that particular span of time constituted a total of 3,508 years, meaning that the Messiah had come in the middle of the fourth day/millennium. Pico’s date for the arrival of the Messiah, consequently, was over 250 years short of what the Jews traditionally calculated and less still from even the most conservative of Christian calculations. He solved this discrepancy, however, by allowing for the Talmudic *Avoda Zara* 9a’s “two thousand empty, two thousand for the law, and two thousand for the day of the Messiah” to overlap one another, just like Joachim of Fiore’s rings of the three *status* had overlapped.¹⁰¹⁴ “Before the second [age] is over” wrote Pico “there will come the law, and before the fourth has elapsed, the Messiah.”¹⁰¹⁵ If history had a beginning and an end, it also had to have a middle, and it just so happened that the advent of God’s Son would align – at least in Pico’s calculations – with that perfect middle. Thus if the Jews argued that their Messiah would not come in the middle of history, then Pico maintained they would have to deny their own sacred scriptures. Ficino had attempted to make a similar argument a decade earlier in *De Christiana religione* while referring to the three periods of *Avoda Zara* 9a, but this had been done through the help of his own anti-Jewish converso sources. According to Pico’s calculations, he saw himself writing the *Heptaplus* in the 4997th year of the world, at the very close of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth day of Creation. Pico’s interpretation, then, was that the fifth day was when God created the fish and birds, and these represented pagans and Christians

¹⁰¹² Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 92 and ff.

¹⁰¹³ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 55: “Quid igitur caeci Solem expectatis? Adest Sol et lucet, sed lucet in tenebris, et in tenebrae vestrae illum non comprehendunt.” Cf. n. 67 above.

¹⁰¹⁴ Cf. n. 273 above.

¹⁰¹⁵ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 53: “Sed et antequam secundus exactus, sit lex, et antequam quartus elabatur, erit Messias.” (Carmichael, 160; cf. McGaw, 101). For an earlier discussion of the same passage contained in *Avoda Zara* 9a, see n. 684 and n. 686 above; to see how this passage was used to explain one of Pico’s Cabalistic *Conclusiones* by a later author, see also Arcangelo of Borgonovo, *Conclusiones cabalisticæ numero LXXI* (Bologna, 1564), 115^r-117^r. Note that on 116^v, in keeping with Joachim of Fiore’s terminology, the Franciscan friar twice refers to these 2000 year periods as “status” explicitly (“aetatem, vel statum”).

respectively.¹⁰¹⁶ On the sixth day, however, God created the land animals, such as the easily misguided sheep and stubborn oxen. Since Christianity was born on the fifth day when Christ entered history and ‘the birds’ were separated from ‘the fish,’ Pico’s insinuation is that the rise of Judaism occurred on the sixth day, was made up from remnants of those long-lost Hebrews who rejected the Messiah, and was signified by Moses in God’s creation by the ‘land beasts.’ Following along with these analogies, Pico concluded that it was for this reason that “Christ, who said that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, claimed for Himself the title not of fisherman, but of shepherd.”¹⁰¹⁷

At the very end of the *Heptaplus*, after the seventh rung of his ascending sevenfold interpretation dealing with ultimate *felicitas*, Pico tacked on a final chapter in order to give his readers a little taste of a secret mode of interpretation he had recently discovered, though given its subject matter he had been a little unsure as to whether it belonged at the beginning or the end of his work. This discovery involved a technique of close meditation on the results produced by permutating the letters that comprised the Hebrew scriptures in their original form. Standing in the position as the *Heptaplus*’ most esoteric and spiritual level of interpretation, this technique was naturally the most abstract, but it was also the one Pico must have thought most forceful. Here he applied a kabbalistic ‘combinatorial’ technique with the aim to demonstrate how hidden beneath the Jewish doctrine of the Messiah-who-shall-come was the Christian Messiah-who-had-come. Christ was the very spiritual Sun of creation itself, and a tangible redeemer who had already established his kingdom on Earth, and thus there was no place left for the vague superstitious belief in some future redeemer. Pico’s proverbial ‘nail in the coffin’ at the highest level of his Christological interpretation of *Genesis* was, in good rabbinic fashion, derived from his own meditations on the Hebrew word *Bereshit*, “in the beginning.”¹⁰¹⁸ By combining each of the letters comprising a word with one another, a Kabbalist can create a series of smaller words and, ultimately, exhaust all the possible letter combinations intrinsic to any given word. Lurking beneath the surface of that single monumental word opening the Hebrew Bible, *Bereshit*, Pico found twelve words (*ab, bebar, resit, sabbath, bara, rosc, es, seth, rab, hisc, berit, thob*) which he arranged into a sentence that translates as follows:

The Father, in the Son and through the Son, the beginning and end or rest, created the head, the fire, and the foundation of the great man with a good pact.¹⁰¹⁹

In other words, the eternal God, the Alpha and the Omega, in and through his own incarnation in Jesus Christ, the ultimate *felicitas*, created man by a good union of the three worlds: terrestrial (foundation), celestial (fire), and supercelestial (head). This was not only another demonstration

¹⁰¹⁶ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 55-58.

¹⁰¹⁷ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 58: “Christus autem, qui se dixit non missum nisi ad oves quae perierunt de domo Israël, sibi non piscatoris, sed pastoris potius nomen vendicavit.” (McGaw, 107; Carmichael, 167).

¹⁰¹⁸ Pico, *Heptaplus* in *Opera omnia*, 50.

¹⁰¹⁹ For a discussion on how seven of the twelve words Pico formed, namely *pater, ignis, filius, creavit, foedus, magnus, fundamentum* first appeared in the *Liber combinationum* (MS Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. ebr. 190, a text in the tradition of Abraham Abulafia), see Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 258-261.

of his Platonic principle that “everything exists in everything in its own way,” but a demonstration of how the inner workings of a Trinitarian God were the true beginnings, and end, of the world. This was Pico’s highest mystery, and while he was entirely sincere in its great cosmological weight, such a “translation” had ultimately been devised in an attempt to dazzle his readers in a dramatic refutation of the Jews with one last argument, playing their own game of *Bereshit* mysticism while using a combinatorial art. This appropriation, again and above all, was not done so much to convert the Jews as to supply his fellow Christians with a perfect understanding of their own mysteries, rooted as they were in the *Hebraica veritas*. Here Pico stepped where no Christian had ever stepped before, and in this spirit of discovery he must have been urged – as an excommunicate dabbling in heretical matters – by a tremendous sense of personal responsibility to relate such possible interpretations to his fellow coreligionists, in particular his patron Lorenzo de’ Medici.

Although we have Pico’s *Oratio, 900 Conclusiones, Heptaplus, and Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* which are detailed enough to get a limited understanding of Pico’s thoughts on number and its interaction with world history, it is most regrettable that we do not have his treatise *De vera temporum supputatione (On the True Calculation of the Ages)* either because it no longer survives or was never actually written.¹⁰²⁰ Ultimately, it is still useful for us to know that Pico’s interests in the accurate dating of historical and eschatological events (through various traditional methods) were at least firm enough that he was willing to dedicate an entire treatise to the subject. We are given a fair deal of information about Pico’s (often erroneous) astrological calculations in his *Disputationes*, and though it may come as no surprise to anyone at this point, these calculations too were primarily being used within a polemical context, here not against the errors of the Jewish Talmudists, but now against the astrologers following in the wake of Abu Ma‘Shar whom Pico perceived as having perverted the science of Ptolemy and spread their corruptions of the *Graeca veritas* far and wide. He argued against Pierre d’Ailly, Roger Bacon, and even Arnald of Villanova for their faulty predictions. Especially laughable to Pico were Abu Ma‘Shar’s failed prediction based on faulty astrological calculations that Christendom would end in the year 1460 (a prediction repeated by Roger Bacon);¹⁰²¹ the failed prediction of “Abraham Judaeus”¹⁰²² that the Messiah would come in 1464; and the inconclusive nature of Arnald of Villanova’s predictions regarding the rise of Antichrist which he claimed was based on the very same Great Conjunction theory.¹⁰²³

¹⁰²⁰ Pico, *Disputationes in Opera omnia*, 435: “Alteram autem utilitatem quam ex astrologia idem [Petrus Alliacensis, Pierre D’Ailly] putavit provenire de vero scilicet annorum numero colligendo, abundanter refellimus eo libro quem de vera temporum supputatione conscripsimus.”

¹⁰²¹ Pico, *Disputationes in Opera omnia*, 550: “Albumasar, vel auctor vel inventor huius erroris, eandem legem, hoc est nostrum, permansuram dixit ad annos 1460, quia scilicet tot sunt anni quos vocant Solis maximos. Praeterierunt anni illi nec ipsa praeteriit, quia scilicet caelum et terra praeteribunt, verba autem Domini non praeteribunt.”

¹⁰²² Pico, *Disputationes in Opera omnia*, 550: “Abraham Judaeus [probably Abraham Ibn Ezra] anno Christi millesimo quadringentesimo sexagesimo quarto Messiam eorum venturum dixit ex astrologica observatione...”

¹⁰²³ Pico, *Disputationes in Opera omnia*, 551: “Arnaldus Hispanus, nobilis quidem medicus, sed ad superstitiones Paulo nimis propensus ex astrologica vanitate, plerisque aliis adiectis, Antichristum nobis anno gratiae 1345

Pico became especially interested in the history of the world around the time he wrote his *Conclusiones* when he realized he could make use of his personal calculations from the books of the prophets as yet another weapon in his polemical armory to refute all those who denied that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah. All this is to reiterate again that Pico's reckoning of time and the events that populated it was no neutral or 'scientific' map, but rather was shaped by various prophetic or apocalyptic currents and polemical traditions that he had inherited from the medieval period through his sources, his teachers, and his environment. Overall, his endeavours constituted one branch of that larger intergenerational and transnational project concerned with demonstrating how intellectually and spiritually superior Christendom was to all those religions that came later, especially Talmudic Jews and "the Mohammadans." While such kinds of polemical approaches relied on the information produced by centuries of debate throughout the Middle Ages, Pico's ideas about time and dating in particular would go on to lay the groundwork for the age of Johann Funck's *Chronologia ab urbe condita* (1545–52) and Joseph Scaliger's *De emendatione temporum* (1583), works that ultimately pioneered a more formal approach to technical chronology and world history.¹⁰²⁴

Taking *Genesis* within the context of its whole (that is, *all* of the books of the Old and New Testaments) and mapping out all of its inherent chains of concord, Pico laid bare how the totality of creation, past, present, and future could be fractally contained within a few, brief enigmatic sentences, or even single words. His vision of the universe was akin to Ficino's in its three-tiered cosmos atop of which sat the rational angelic world where the super-essential Christ as *Logos* sat at the right hand of the Father, but this ps.-Dionysian vision in Pico took on the added layer of a kabbalistic interpretation, particularly with its focus on the occult properties of 'formal' numbers and letters and the divine names they constituted. The story of creation itself was about the wanderings of man as he struggled to calibrate his free will and to return back toward the Supreme Good, but for Pico it was only through the unity in the wonder-working name of the incarnate God and the literal spirit which dwelled within it that this blessed return could be attained. All this was in keeping with what Pico had written in his *Apologia* to the 900 *Conclusiones* where he doubled down on his stance in the face of accusations of heresy. There he had made the distinction between Jews and Christians by invoking the Christians stereotype that Jews focused too intently on the 'lethal' letter of the law at the expense of its life-bringing spirit.

comminabatur." Note how Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 9 had also expressed doubts about the power of the stars over religious affairs, likely in response to the same ideas which were floating around in the late 1460s and early 1470s and further fueling expectations of an impending *diluvium*: "In our *Theologia* [Platonica], we have proved that the common religion is from neither the stars, nor men, nor illness, but from God and the common nature of the human species. But for the time being, we shall briefly show here that the Christian law is not from, nor is it maintained by some fate from the stars. The coming of Christ was foretold as divine from the beginning of the world by prophets and Sibyls, who were not trained in astrology, but inspired by the divine." Bartolucci, *De Christiana religione*, 179-180. Cf. Allen and Hankins, *Platonic Theology*, 4:301-29.

¹⁰²⁴ On Pico's role as chronologer, see Emanuel Hirsch, *Die Theologie des Andreas Osiander und ihre geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1919), 128-135; and for his later impact see Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, vols. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) as cited in Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 124.

He firmly believed that if only the Jews had the ‘spiritual understanding’ to properly interpret their own Kabbalah, then at last they would come to understand that Christian doctrine pre-existed and shaped the traditions of their forefathers, and that Christians were truly the rightful heirs of the *Hebraica veritas*.

In this chapter we have seen how Pico cast his historical studies in the language of spiritual warfare. What materials he found in the books of the Hebrew prophets in support of his Christological interpretations of history, he conceived of as “darts” or “armaments” drawn up from Jewish armouries to be turned around and used against them. Inasmuch as we can find this pattern of anti-Jewish rhetoric recurring throughout a variety of Pico’s works, from the *900 Conclusiones* to the *Heptaplus*, it is important to see how this polemical discourse and approach to the problem of Christianity’s reliance on Hebrew scriptures was not simply an idiosyncratic flight of fancy sparked by Pico’s kabbalistic studies, but the product of a longstanding attitude developed by Latin polemicists who wrote in an altogether similar mode, moved by missionary fervour, apocalyptic expectation, or a recent conversion, to debate forcefully over all manner of esoteric minutia regarding the natural philosophical, theological, philological, and historical claims of competing faiths. As much as Pico can be seen in the light of “humanism” on account of his place in time and space, the breadth of his learning, his passion for resurrecting the *Graeca* and *Hebraica veritas*, or his associations with men like Lorenzo de’ Medici (to whom the *Heptaplus* was dedicated), by that same measure he can also be seen in the light of hardline converso polemicists, and twelfth and thirteenth century apocalyptic reformers, prophets, missionaries, and theologians. These were figures, many of whom were affiliated with mendicant orders, whose values are typically considered by moderns to be antithetical to the values of humanism; nevertheless, it is these figures whose spiritualities, worldviews, and ideas that helped shape Pico’s attitudes and beliefs in his quest not for human dignity, but for ultimate union and self-annihilation in God, *felicitas*.

8 - Pico's Last Years, the Rise of Savonarola, and the Fall of Medici Power

8.1 Match Made in Heaven? Pico and Savonarola

In the apt words of Amos Edelheit, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola “represents humanist theology,” that is, Ficino and Pico’s style of theology, “turned into action.”¹⁰²⁵ Savonarola’s approach, of course, was not without some modifications, but what Ficino had only dreamed about in prior decades – the utopian reinauguration of the marriage of Wisdom and Divine Law through the return of an all-powerful priest-king who could reunite the fragmented sacred and secular spheres – Savonarola put into practice forcefully. It was in August 1490 that Savonarola began styling himself as a prophet of doom, warning all of Florence with his dramatic lessons and sermons about an impending cataclysm that would soon usher in the rise of Antichrist and inaugurate the end of history. While Savonarola denied himself the label of prophet in the first few years of his preaching vocation prior to 1490, his sense of self-importance grew like a wildfire once he took up the position first as a lecturer of philosophy, and then as prior of San Marco that very year.

To understand Pico’s life in the years leading up to his untimely death, we must understand that the influence which passed between the Prince of Concord and the Dominican reformer of San Marco did not flow only in one direction. As much as Savonarola had influenced Pico, so too in due proportion had the prince influenced the friar.¹⁰²⁶ In the years leading up to his death, Pico lived a life of active correspondence and wrote both *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* and *De ente et uno* as part of his larger project to harmonize the Platonists and the Aristotelians. These later works laid untouched for years until Pico’s nephew Gianfrancesco Pico, one of Savonarola’s *Piagnoni*, published them in 1496.¹⁰²⁷ This same nephew wrote a biography of Giovanni Pico which followed a quasi-Augustinian *Confessiones* format: a riotous youth full of heresy and lust, an abrupt change of heart, and a later life lived out in ascetic rigor.¹⁰²⁸ Much of his own views, such as his speculations on “magic and Cabala,”

¹⁰²⁵ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola*, 370.

¹⁰²⁶ Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 127-138.

¹⁰²⁷ McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 5. Gianfrancesco and Savonarola met in 1492 and from then on, they became close friends, see Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 140. For a discussion of the debates over the extent to which Savonarola and Gianfrancesco influenced Pico’s work, especially the *Disputationes* see Akopyan, “*Me quoque adolescentem olim fallebat*,” 75-94.

¹⁰²⁸ Note that it was this biography was translated into English and published by Sir Thomas More in 1525 under the title “The Life of John Picus Earl of Mirandula.” See Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, “Iohannis Pici Mirandulae, viri omni disciplinarum genere consummatissimi, vita,” ed. Clarence H. Miller, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards et al., vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 294-341 or for a more recent edition and translation, see Copenhaver, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola*, 1-77. Gianfrancesco also wrote a biography of Savonarola, see *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae*, ed. Elena Schisto (Florence: Olschki, 1999). Akopyan, *Debating the Stars*, 140 also notes the presence of hagiographical topoi in Gianfrancesco’s two *vitae*, such as the spontaneous appearance of a flame in the room where Pico was born.

were left out of his rather propagandistic and hagiographical reimaginings.¹⁰²⁹ In the end, although the Augustinian motif of a journey back to piety after a headlong leap into a Manichaeic-like error was somewhat exaggerated by Gianfrancesco Pico's biography – it was not applied without reason.

Gianfrancesco Pico tells us that throughout the summer of 1490, his excommunicate uncle Giovanni Pico was compelled by a crisis in his spiritual life to prove his *bona fides* as so many had done before: by following in the footsteps of the great mendicant order founders like Dominic and Francis, who themselves had perfectly emulated Christ and his apostles. What this entailed was wandering barefoot through the towns of Italy to spend time among society's outcasts: the poor, prostitutes, lepers, and Jews. At this point in his life, Giovanni Pico dreamed of taking up vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and committing himself to the order of St. Dominic. While many have attributed this change of attitude to Pico's 1487 excommunication and blooming relationship with Savonarola (especially Stephen Farmer¹⁰³⁰), it can easily be demonstrated that as early as the mid-1480s Pico was already very gradually headed in what today would be called a more 'fundamentalist' and scripturally-oriented direction thanks to his emphasis on both a Christian interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah and Platonic ideas about the *Logos*. Savonarola may simply be said to have intensified Pico's exclusivist or 'fundamentalist' turn to Scripture and his path toward the sanctifying processes of purgation, illumination, and perfection through a general kind of peer-pressure. Pico and Savonarola spent much time together as close friends: they spent long hours together at San Marco poring over old texts and philosophical debates. They left deep imprints on each other's thought. In his infatuation for the young philosopher, Savonarola maintained that: "in mind alone, he was greater than St. Augustine."¹⁰³¹

On August 1st 1490, Savonarola began preaching in San Marco's church on the *Apocalypse* of St. John, a series of lectures which ran until January of 1491. Donald Weinstein tells us that "it seems likely that Savonarola still followed the non-millenarian reading of Nicholas of Lyra, whose *Apocalypse* commentary was one of his main authorities. But on one point he was certain: the divine scourge was coming soon."¹⁰³² Weinstein reconstructs Savonarola's view of time as follows:

Of the world's seven ages we are living in the fourth, but now, almost 1,500 years after the birth of Christ, the Fifth Age is approaching, the age of Antichrist, universal evil, and divine judgment. Demonic clerics, prelates, and all the wise and powerful of the earth will be scourged: [Savonarola writes] "I have given [Jezebel, false prophetess] time to do penance but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Therefore, I will

¹⁰²⁹ Black, *Pico*, 11; see Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: vita e dottrina* (Florence: F. Le Monier, 1937), 17-18 and 535 n. 3 for how references to 'Cabala' were removed from the printed edition of Pico's *Commento* (on Plato's *Symposium*). For a complete version of this biography in both English and Latin, see in Brian Copenhaver, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola: Life of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Oratio* (Cambridge: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2022), 1-77.

¹⁰³⁰ Farmer, *Syncretism and the West*, 151 and ff.

¹⁰³¹ Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*, vol. 1 (Rome: Belardetti, 1952), 147.

¹⁰³² Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 79.

fling her on a bed of pain and visit her lovers with terrible punishment unless they do penance for their actions, and I will kill her children. All the churches will know that I examine all thoughts and all hearts, and that I will give to each one of you according to your works [Rev. 2:21-24].” After great destruction the Church will be renewed – changed spiritually, not materially – and the conversion of the Turks and of all other pagan and infidel peoples, the Jews among them, will follow.¹⁰³³

Over two centuries after Joachim of Fiore had enflamed Italy with millenarian expectations for a third status of the Holy Spirit, we see a similar kind of grand vision of the future based on historicizing readings of apocalyptic scenes from Scripture come about in Savonarola. Thus it is no surprise that he had to preface his 1490 *Apocalypse* series with the disclaimer that his certainty about the coming scourge was not based on “the diverse prophecies of Joachim, Saint Vincent, and others,” but on Scripture alone, and on the morally bankrupt state of mankind.¹⁰³⁴ Nevertheless, in his sermon on the theme of *Renovatio*, Savonarola proclaimed to the people of Florence:

See, everyone seems to be preaching and waiting for the scourge and tribulations, and everyone seems to feel it would be just that punishment for such great iniquity should come. The abbot Joachim [of Fiore] and many others preach and announce that this scourge has to come at this time.¹⁰³⁵ These are the reasons why I have preached to you about the renewal of the Church. Now let us speak about the symbols that demonstrate it...¹⁰³⁶

In his Lenten sermon of 1491, crying out beneath Brunelleschi’s resounding dome, Savonarola declared a spiritual war against the pagans, sodomites, murderers, gamblers, and usurers of Florence. The poor were broken under the yoke of excessive taxation while the rich lived on in lavish excess, a *status quo* Savonarola felt was about to come to a breaking point. On account of his sermons tinged with populist overtones, the friar’s popularity began to swell among the lower rungs of Florentine society. Much to the disgruntlement of many, Savonarola railed against “poets, clerics who read [pagan] poets, and artists who painted ‘nude Venuses.’”¹⁰³⁷ By these clerics who read pagan poets, he of course meant men like Marsilio Ficino, whose attempts to marry Christianity and Platonism Savonarola despised. Pico’s elaborate corpus of visionary

¹⁰³³ This material is derived from quotations from the notes published by Armando F. Verde (ed.), “Le lezioni o i sermoni sull’Apocalisse di Girolamo Savonarola (1490): ‘Nova dicere et novo modo,’” in *Imagines e Parole Retorica, Filologica-Retorica, Predicatoria (Valla e Savonarola), Memorie Dominicane* 19 (1988): 5-109.

¹⁰³⁴ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 78. Weinstein adds: “Whether this was a blanket rejection of millenarian expectations or simply an assertion that his own prophecies had scriptural authority is not clear” and leaves the caveat “[but] nowhere in these sermons does he say that an earthly millennial reign of the Spirit would come before the Day of Judgment and the end of time.”

¹⁰³⁵ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 346, n. 15 argues that Savonarola “mentions Joachim with approbation several times, but in the *Compendium revelationis* he [cautiously] denies any serious influence. Savonarola may not have had extensive knowledge of Joachite texts and toward the end of his career was naturally anxious to assert his own independence as a prophet.” Marjorie Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, 435, argued on the other hand that: “when he goes on to the message of *renovatio*, it is difficult to see where his hope had been fed except at some Joachimist spring.” In this respect I side with the latter view.

¹⁰³⁶ Borelli, et al., “Renovation Sermon” in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 64. Cf. Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 279-280 who translates the same passage.

¹⁰³⁷ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 79.

material was likewise in Savonarola's sights.¹⁰³⁸ While some like Ficino perceived the age of Lorenzo as a new golden age, the black friar saw it as a sign that the Antichrist was soon to come.¹⁰³⁹ All he wished for was a return to the simplicity of the early Church. That year, predicting the death of Lorenzo de' Medici and the exile of his son Piero, Savonarola wrote out his blueprints for political reform in his treatise *Rule and Government of the City of Florence*.¹⁰⁴⁰

Fra Girolamo's apocalyptic sermons did not go unnoticed by Lorenzo "il Magnifico." "The Magnificent," of course, was not a title which was given to him for his humility and asceticism. The boisterous friar, whom Pico had suggested be brought from Ferrara to Florence that he might goad that city to reform, could now be heard echoing through the churches and the streets about Christ's imminent return. Lorenzo may have sent some of Florence's leading men to stop Savonarola from this kind of preaching, but such admonitions fell on deaf ears and only motivated him further as he became increasingly persuaded that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him.¹⁰⁴¹ Lorenzo was advised to exile Savonarola for his blatant disregard, but it was he who had invited him to begin with, and there was little doubt in his mind that the black friar was indeed some kind of holy man. Francesco Guicciardini, in his *History of Florence*, claimed that Lorenzo was displeased with the friar's sermons, but did nothing because they "did not touch him in a vital part."¹⁰⁴² Like an oil fire, Lorenzo hoped that Savonarola's influence would just burn out on its own given enough time, given that his radical approach to piety made him insufferable to many, and thus quick to accumulate enemies. Nevertheless, by April of 1492, Lorenzo lay on his deathbed at his Careggi villa. There he was visited by his son Piero, Giovanni Pico and Poliziano, and – whether summoned or not – "fra Girolamo of Ferrara, a man eminent in both learning and sanctity and a superb preacher of heavenly doctrine."¹⁰⁴³ Poliziano wrote of how Lorenzo confided in Savonarola and before passing away asked for, and was given, the friar's blessing.¹⁰⁴⁴ Marsilio Ficino was conspicuously absent.¹⁰⁴⁵

In many ways, and this point is vital, the lavish humanism of Florence, built up on the backs of merchants and usurers, ultimately developed into a kind of antithesis to the values of apostolic poverty and simplicity so heavily emphasized by the mendicant orders: it maintained that the primary virtue of *caritas* did not need to involve conspicuous renunciation and apostolic poverty, but could be levied in civic ways, such as through the patronage of the arts and the beautification of the city. Money could be made and distributed wisely and strategically, not

¹⁰³⁸ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 79 also explains that it is around this time that relations between Ficino and Pico began to deteriorate. Pico had offended Ficino by publishing works criticizing Platonism, which was essentially Ficino's bread and butter as the long-standing star philosopher of the Medici court.

¹⁰³⁹ See n. 768 above.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Borelli et al., "Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 176-206.

¹⁰⁴¹ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 80.

¹⁰⁴² Francesco Guicciardini, *History of Florence*, ed. and trans. Mario Domandi (New York: 1970), 103.

¹⁰⁴³ Angelo Poliziano, *Letters*, ed. and trans. Shane Butler, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 227-251.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 89.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 332, n. 42.

simply given away in an effort to build up merit. Savonarola's theocratic republic, then, was a complete rejection of Medici values. If Medici Florence had been built on a foundation of values that were antithetical to apostolic simplicity and poverty (e.g., through usury, conspicuous consumption, public endowments, patronage of the arts, etc.), then Savonarola sought to invert this perversion. The infamous 1497 "Bonfire of the Vanities," for example, served as a clear and unambiguous symbol of rejection against the Medicean carnival, a festival the ruling family had long patronized as a means of putting their cultural supremacy on display.¹⁰⁴⁶ The New Republic of Florence was to become the New Jerusalem, and its citizens God's chosen people.

Savonarola's grand project was ultimately to convert the whole world, whether pagan, Jew, Muslim, or heretic, and in order to succeed in this project, he would first have to turn Florence into an exemplary nation. Medici Florence had stood long enough as a cesspool for the breeding and proliferation of humanism's "pagan" side. This was an infection Savonarola saw in Ficino, and from which he also saw himself rescuing Pico. Savonarola spent a great deal of effort trying to convince Pico to take up the black cowl of the Dominicans which might serve to snatch him from the purifying fires of purgatory. In deciding whether or not to assume the habit and vow away all his earthly possessions, however, Pico became very reluctant, likely unwilling to abandon his partner for celibacy, and unwilling to relinquish all of his princely holdings, especially those he had only recently acquired. Savonarola was well aware of the details concerning Pico's inner crisis, and these coloured his judgement of the young man leading up to and after his death.

As touched on above, one prominent point of interest that stood between Pico and Savonarola was their mutual disdain for 'divinatory' astrology (i.e., using astrology specifically to predict the future). This disdain crystallized into the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* which was neither edited nor published until after Pico's murder. We are told by Ficino's friend Giovanni Nesi that Savonarola had given Pico "advice and judgement" in its composition.¹⁰⁴⁷ It is important for us to understand their perceptions about divinatory astrology given that a great portion of Pico's interest in the ideas he inherited from medieval Jewish and Christian prophetic currents were a kind of foil or alternative to the science of divinatory astrology.¹⁰⁴⁸ Pico was particularly dismissive of the idea that the stars had any power in shaping the events of history, especially the history of religions. He scoffed at astrologers, maintaining that they could barely forecast the weather let alone predict the future. The astrologers of the fifteenth century offered a quasi-mechanistic universe cobbled together by a matrix of semi-physical astral influences, while what Pico and Savonarola were after was a wholly morally-oriented view of the universe founded in Scripture, pregnant with transcendent meaning. As he

¹⁰⁴⁶ de Boer, "Faith and Knowledge in the Religion of the Renaissance," 57-58.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*, 1:148.

¹⁰⁴⁸ See, e.g., how in the wake of Pico's *Conclusiones*, which made the case for Hebrew being indispensable in the effectiveness of magical/miraculous operations, Johannes Reuchlin argued in *De verbo mirifico*, c^{r-v}: "Nihil igitur horum et Roberthus et Bacon et Abanus et Picatrix et concilium magistrorum, vel maxime ob linguarum ignorantiam ad amussim ut oportet tenere atque docere; minus etiam librorum manus, ab exemplis dupla scribentium, non aberrare, minus discipuli discere, minus operarii potuerunt operari." Zika, "Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico*," 113-114.

had first done in the *Heptaplus*, he subordinated the astral and terrestrial to the purely noetic world above the circle of fixed stars. The science of Ptolemy – regardless of whether it had been corrupted by its Arabic interpreters or not – was useful for writing calendars or almanacs but it was simply not comprehensive enough to encompass all of the metaphysical dimensions of being with which Pico was interested, and it was certainly incapable of making predictions for such monumental events as the rise and fall of religions in the way Abu Ma‘Shar or Roger Bacon and others had postulated using the theory of Great Conjunctions. As Ficino had argued in prior decades, Pico and Savonarola believed the natural world was merely an imperfect echo of the higher world, wrought in motion, change, conflict, and contraries.¹⁰⁴⁹ The thing which led out of this lower world, however, was the supreme virtue of *caritas*, for it transcended the stars and drew souls up above into the heaven above the heavens, above the world of change and motion wrought by astral forces, into perfect union with God. Just as the terrestrial world was subordinate to the celestial, the celestial world was subordinate to the metaphysical and the supercelestial, and only by turning one’s intellect toward the latter could the highest *felicitas* be found.

Pico’s war on divinatory astrology arose in some part because it conflicted with critical elements of his theology, but more importantly, it was as the result of a crisis of incommensurability arising from the countless inconsistencies (or disunity) affecting the various astrologers of his day. On the theological level, if one proclaimed themselves to be able to divine the future based on astrological predictions, firstly one was denying the role of human free will which had become an indispensable part of Christian soteriology, and secondly one was denying the word of God, both in its own prophetic power and, of course, in violating its injunctions against divination. Such kinds of polemics were certainly not new given that Augustine himself had argued against the belief in astrological determinism in the early fifth century using the example of two children who were born simultaneously in the same house and yet grew up to experience extremely different lives.¹⁰⁵⁰ Free will was a cornerstone of Augustine’s theology, itself based on a rejection of Manichaean dualism and an adoption of Plato’s principle of seeking the Highest Good rather than from an array of lesser goods.¹⁰⁵¹ Augustine had taken the will as a given: humans choose to allow passions and desires to rule their souls – they choose to give up their wills to their animal natures – otherwise, they always choose to do good. When given the choice, however, they often choose lesser, worldly goods. In Augustine the problem of humanity, billowed about by the impulses of its predetermined sinful nature, was countered by the “good will” that is, “a will by which we seek to live rightly and honorably, and to attain the highest wisdom” and it is this aspect of the will that is free.¹⁰⁵² This idea of the will which pierced

¹⁰⁴⁹ Cf. Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, Chap. 14 (Bartolucci, 196) for a description of how the 3x3 set of angels in God’s throne room mirrors the nine celestial spheres of the natural world (seven planetary spheres, plus the sphere of fixed stars, plus the Empyrean).

¹⁰⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.6.8 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 77.

¹⁰⁵¹ *Confessiones*, 7.1-21 in O’Donnell, *Confessions I*, 73-87.

¹⁰⁵² Augustine, *De libero arbitrio voluntatis*, 1.12.25.83 in Peter King, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

through the material world and its chains of celestial causality unto true freedom and perfect wisdom was a cornerstone of Pico's theology, and it became one for Savonarola as well. For Pico, the pursuit of human perfection through the fullness of scientific knowledge was but one of Augustine's "lesser goods."¹⁰⁵³ One could use magic and draw down goods from the heavens, or one could be uplifted by the grace of God to the very source of all goodness itself.

While on the surface these *Disputationes* might appear to modern readers as a "scientific" text given that it dealt with a systematic rejection of the questionable significations astrologers read between celestial bodies and the things of this world, its polemical approach was really in keeping with medieval modes of thought, that is, rooted in the belief that truth could not be synthesized since it dwelt above and beyond the capacity of the human intellect, and therefore had to be revealed by a higher, divine mind. If there stood any disparities between the apocalyptic gospel message thundered out from Savonarola's pulpit and the collective wisdom of all the Kabbalists, philosophers, astrologers, magicians, and ancient sages, then these were not to be reconciled and incorporated, but condemned outright. At the time of the *Disputationes*' composition, the burden of excommunication still loomed over Pico's head like a black cloud: his *900 Conclusiones* were, after all, the first printed text ever to be banned by the Church, and this was no trifling matter to the penitent Pico. In 1492, with the death of the pope who first issued the excommunication, Innocent VIII, Savonarola suspected that Pico's new *Disputationes* might serve to win some orthodox favour from the unorthodox Rodrigo Borgia (or Pope Alexander VI). It did not take long, however, for Savonarola's relationship with Alexander VI to degenerate, and it turned out that the pope and his family (which included his infamous children Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia) had a penchant for astrology and a good number of other vices and superstitions which Savonarola could not overlook. As tensions between the pope and the black friar grew, the Borgia family's willingness to patronize Pico's work dried up too. In spite of this strain on their relationship, it was this Borgia Pope – perhaps on account of his being more sympathetic to the occult sciences – that lifted the ban on him and his *900 Conclusiones*.¹⁰⁵⁴

On November 17th 1494, the *diluvium* came for Pico. He was assassinated, likely at the behest of Piero de' Medici, on the very same day Charles VIII entered Florence and drove the Medici into exile. His death by arsenic poisoning marked an abrupt end to his life's many greatest ambitions, in particular the *Symphonia Platonis et Aristotelis*, of which *De ente et uno* was supposed to be but one part. Here in one of his final works, Pico concluded his dialogue with the statement that "If these three things – the One, the True, and the Good [or Unity, Truth, and Goodness] – follow Being by perpetual connection, it follows that when we are not these, we

¹⁰⁵³ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.5.7 in O'Donnell, *Confessions I*, 76-77: "Maius quidem et summum bonum minora fecit bona, sed tamen et creans et creata bona sunt omnia." "It is true that [God] is the supreme Good, that he is himself a greater Good than these lesser goods which he created. But the Creator and creation are both good." (Trans. by Pine-Coffin, *Confessions*, 138).

¹⁰⁵⁴ McGaw, *Heptaplus*, 6; Zika, "Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico*," 137 writes "Alexander embraced the Egyptian mysteries, astrology and magic, which were all reflected in the Pinturicchio frescoes in the Appartamento Borgia; he was intent upon exploiting this revival by his identification of the Borgia bull with Apis, the Egyptian sun god; and he absolved Pico of the condemnation of Innocent VIII."

really are not, even though we may seem to be; and although others may believe we are living, nevertheless we would be forever dying rather than living.”¹⁰⁵⁵ Pico passed from this world having come to the conclusion that “the One, the True, and the Good” were all inseparable facets of one thing – *Being* – and that to lack in any one of these was to be apart from God in a perpetual state of degeneration, decay, and death. Pico’s theory proved true, at least for his own sake, since in the meantime, division and disunity swept over Latin Christendom, and with it came imminent death and dissolution. With the coming of Charles VIII, Savonarola’s support for the foreign invader as the “New Cyrus, the Second Charlemagne, God’s agent of scourge and renewal”¹⁰⁵⁶ won him control over Florence for several months.¹⁰⁵⁷ With both the advent of the French king and the collapse of Medici rule, it surely seemed to the people of Florence that Savonarola’s prophecies were coming to pass. Those who resided in places of power soon found themselves turning to Savonarola for guidance, and in this way, he acquired the authority to implement a great number of austere reform measures which in a sense turned the monastery of San Marco inside-out, bringing the values of Dominican spirituality down upon the people whether they wanted to live in a kind of ascetic New Jerusalem or not. Despite the myth of “St. Pico” Gianfrancesco later fashioned in the biography of his uncle’s life, Savonarola concluded a sermon in the Duomo on Sunday, 23 November 1494 with this somewhat damning indictment:

I believe that each of you knew of Count Giovanni della Mirandola, who was staying here in Florence and died a few days ago. I tell you that his soul – because of prayers from the friars, also some good works that he did in this life and other prayers as well – is in purgatory: pray for him. He was slow and did not come to religion while he lived, as had been hoped, and so he is in purgatory.¹⁰⁵⁸

Pico was not in heaven, but he was on his way, and the closing remarks of Gianfrancesco’s 1496 biography also attempted to confirm this indictment of Savonarola’s, for he believed his uncle had “long kept company with those who dwell in Kedar,” that is, he had held quarter with pagans, and so on their account, he was burning away his sins in purgatory until finally being admitted to the *felicitas* he had so ardently contemplated in life.¹⁰⁵⁹ Not everyone agreed with Savonarola’s assessment, however, since its underlying implication was that only those who took up the religious life of chastity, poverty, and obedience were truly saved from the purgative fires, and this was an affront to all serious practitioners of lay piety. Ficino himself was one such person who explicitly rebuked Savonarola’s offensive claims, writing in a letter to Germain de Ganay dated March 23 1495: “Pico left this shadow of a life happily, with this assurance: that he had clearly seemed to be returning from a kind of exile to his fatherland in heaven... For my part, I

¹⁰⁵⁵ See n. 766 above.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 249.

¹⁰⁵⁷ John M. Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 93.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 167.

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; *Psalms* 120:5.

know what this pious man wanted in the end, for Pico was a son to me in age, a brother in kinship, and in love really another self.”¹⁰⁶⁰

¹⁰⁶⁰ Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 181.

8.2 *Prisca Theologia* vs. *Sola Scriptura*: Ficino and Savonarola

The last decade of the fifteenth century contained a number of significant milestones in the disintegration process that gradually disrupted the harmony between reason and faith, Athens and Jerusalem, ancient philosophy and Christianity. In the Medicean era, the most prominent figure signposting this disruption was Savonarola.¹⁰⁶¹ Decrying the many vices of his host city, Fra Girolamo railed against the infatuation that intellectuals had developed over the so-called “*divinus Plato*” and other likeminded ancient pagan thinkers Ficino had lumped together with his *prisca theologia* narrative. The rise of Fra Girolamo to political prominence was for a time cemented in 1494 by Charles VIII’s invasion of Italy which dislodged Florence’s Medici rule. Leading up to this moment of great political instability, Savonarola had acquired much of his power and influence through a relentless propaganda campaign founded on the apocalyptic expectation of a catastrophe analogous to the Great Flood that swept up Noah’s ark for forty days and forty nights. As we have already seen, this theme of an impending *diluvium* had been developed by Ficino’s circle in the early 1470s before Savonarola took it up in full force.¹⁰⁶² On January 13th 1495 he preached his famous *Renovation Sermon*. In it, Savonarola’s ark, like Ficino’s before it, was of course not literal, but mystical; it constituted the very doctrines preserved and upheld by the early Church, to which all would have to cleave for safety lest they be washed away in the coming tribulation. The ark was the Church itself, the body of *true* believers, those who were not just Christians in name, but who also resisted the Devil’s seductions, and thus would live through the *diluvium* and come out on the other side to set the foundations of Christ’s Kingdom. The collective trauma of such a dramatic episode as Charles VIII’s invasion had the secondary effect of casting serious doubt upon the overly optimistic claims of Ficino and his humanist entourage who, since the time of that Great Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1484, had believed that a new golden age was dawning for the faithful, a golden age defined by the perfect union of Christian religion and Platonic philosophy. Jacob Burckhardt, the first to stress the *studia humanitatis* as a defining feature of the Renaissance period famously stated that “humanist culture melted away in the furnace which [Savonarola] lighted.”¹⁰⁶³ Ultimately, the notion that true piety consisted of stripping the theological wheat from the philosophical chaff became widespread among the ranks of the black friar’s *Piagnoni*, and this struck a serious blow to many of the universalizing impulses and ecumenical enterprises which had been so popular before it.¹⁰⁶⁴

¹⁰⁶¹ Mark Jurdjevic, “Prophets and Politicians: Marsilio Ficino, Savonarola and the Valori Family,” *Past & Present* 183 (2004): 41.

¹⁰⁶² Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 130ff.

¹⁰⁶³ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York, 1954), 351.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Jurdjevic, “Prophets and Politicians,” 42, n. 4; By the seventeenth century, the Catholic ‘Counter-Reformation’ produced a great number of thinkers like the theologian Roberto Bellarmino who placed Plato as a foremost figure in his ‘genealogy of evil’ – a kind of inverted *prisca theologia* narrative illustrating whence came the source of all Christendom’s ills. This, however, was done precisely on account of the uncanny similarities Plato bore with Christianity: similarities which here so emphasized the subtlest of differences rather than excused them.

The conflict between Ficino and Savonarola served as a kind of microcosmic exemplar reflecting the macrocosmic breakdown of the harmony between ‘the Christian’ and ‘the Classical.’¹⁰⁶⁵ Following the collapse of Medici power, which by this point had long kept Florence stable, Ficino and Savonarola represented the two sides of one pole: at one end, we have a Christianity embellished by the rich inheritance of ancient pagan philosophy, while at the other, we have a Christianity that is *exclusively* focused on the revelation of Scripture. They were both devout forms of Christianity to be sure, with much in common, but they also had significantly different emphases. This is not to say Savonarola was incapable of envisioning a Christianity fully decorated with the trappings of pagan wisdom – after all, he began his career as a lector of philosophy at San Marco – it is simply that his impulse to return *ad fontes*, back to the purely revealed, was far more absolutist and exclusionary in nature than Ficino’s had ever been, even in his most zealous theological writings. Indeed, this absolutism and exclusivity was the very essence of Savonarola’s philosophy. The Scriptures were clear: “Narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life, and few there are that find it.”¹⁰⁶⁶ In Mark Jurdjevic’s concise reckoning: “Ficino advocated an elitist, gradual, top-down approach to spiritual reform, guided by the study of Plato, who was interpreted by the humanist as a divinely inspired philosopher who had helped prepare the classical world for the arrival of Christianity.” Savonarola, on the other hand, “advocated a sudden, popular, bottom-up approach to spiritual reform, rooted exclusively in Christian authors and biblical revelation.”¹⁰⁶⁷ Prior to the dissolution of Medici power, these two positions had coexisted in spite of their contrasting natures. After the advent of Charles VIII, however, Savonarola was thrust into a position of authority while a now elderly Ficino was forced to face the loss of so many of the benefits and protections he had enjoyed under Cosimo and Lorenzo.

A great source of enmity between Ficino and Savonarola derived from the fact that Ficino had long worked directly for Lorenzo as a kind of propagandist helping to develop the Medici’s new *Weltanschauung* for Florence (that is, Lorenzo had continued to pay for Ficino’s humanist projects for some time after Cosimo’s death in 1464, the first to put Ficino up in his villa at Careggi where he tirelessly produced his new translations of Greek classics). Once the black friar expanded his theocratic power and influence – haranguing against the moral ills and impending catastrophe that beset Florence for its proclivities toward pagan philosophy as much as to its sexual and financial immoralities – Ficino fled to the Careggi villa just outside the city and remained there. Prior to 1494, the Valori family had been financially indispensable to both Savonarola and Ficino. They were Ficino’s second biggest patrons insofar as financing his Platonic endeavours was concerned, and they became his number one supporters after the flight of the Medicis. With the institution of Savonarola’s republic, Savonarola made Francesco Valori one of his closest friends and allies. Thereafter, as tensions grew over the distinctions between Savonarola and Ficino’s respective theologies, the family’s support for Ficino was dropped. Here

¹⁰⁶⁵ Jurdjevic, “Prophets and Politicians,” 42.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *Matthew* 7:14.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Jurdjevic, “Prophets and Politicians,” 42.

without the support of either the Medici or the Valori, and in the face of Savonarola's rising power, Ficino – now in his early sixties – found himself in dire straits.¹⁰⁶⁸ After enjoying decades of patronage, Ficino by no means suffered Savonarola's backstage dealings unheard, but first he had to bide his time and wait for the right opportunity to strike.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 43.

8.3 The Polemics of Savonarola

During the final decade of the fifteenth century, apocalyptic expectations ran high in Florence, and as Savonarola's power grew, sins like gambling, illicit sex, sorcery, and paganism, were ruthlessly suppressed by the *Piagnoni*, young fanatical supporters of Savonarola's regime under the leadership of Fra Silvestro Maruffi who maintained his power through various gang intimidation tactics. Ficino as much as Savonarola had long wished to marry religious reform with political reform, to live in a society that seamlessly integrated the sacred and the secular, but when he actually got it (albeit as interpreted through the theology of another, more dogmatic theologian), he was certainly displeased with the results, for to him Savonarola had reinaugurated the wretched divorce of philosophy and religion. The black friar fervently preached a return to republicanism, and in doing so also played a significant role in shaping how that new order would be constituted, that is, chiefly in line with radical mendicant ideals.¹⁰⁶⁹ Christ was now the king of Florence. This new order, however, did not last long. Over the course of four years, Savonarola had struggled to maintain the apocalyptic fervour which had set him in his place of power. For this, resentment against his radical regime grew. Moreover, the Borgia Pope Alexander VI had tolerated Savonarola in the early period of his reign, but was angered when Florence refused to join his Holy League against the French. Savonarola could not come to an agreement with Alexander VI, and at the end of their correspondence he sent the pope his *Compendium Revelationis*, an account of his many visions.¹⁰⁷⁰ This battle with the pope earned Fra Girolamo an excommunication on May 12th of 1497 and this only further emboldened the numerous enemies of his regime. Faced with so many enemies in high places, and after the definitive end of Charles VIII's invasion thanks to the anti-French alliance of Italian city states, Savonarola's support crumbled beneath him.

In the face of this excommunication, Savonarola stopped his public preaching and set down to write his great defense of his own interpretation of Christianity, *De triumpho crucis, On the Triumph of the Cross* (1498). This treatise was in many ways an homage to Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles* in its theological demonstration of Christianity's supremacy over the errors of all its intellectual opponents, namely on the grounds that these did not emphasize the most important virtue of all: *caritas*, love. Much like Ficino's *De Christiana religione* in form, this work was Savonarola's own comprehensive attempt at demonstrating his good faith by producing a work in keeping with the Latin polemical tradition that inspired him. Nevertheless, Savonarola differed from his more immediate predecessors in a crucial way: his work represented a far more cautious and skeptical approach to the medieval strategy of 'raiding the enemy's armories' and 'using their own weapons against them.' He used this approach, to be sure, but to use another metaphor, he believed it was exceedingly difficult for men to fight fire

¹⁰⁶⁹ Jurdjevic, "Prophets and Politicians," 46.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Bernard McGinn, "Compendium of Revelations" in *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-en-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola*, eds. Bernard McGinn and Marjorie Reeves (New York: SPCK, 1970), 211-270.

with fire without getting burned. There were few reasons to be concerned with the beliefs of those who did not uphold the gospel, since they had very little of value to share beyond what could be used within the context of a pro-Christian theological polemic. Everything that was necessary for salvation was contained in Holy Scripture, and all other texts were extraneous. It is with this attitude that Savonarola approached the genre of pro-Christian polemic, an emphatically different attitude from that of both Pico and Ficino, albeit one fuelled in many ways by similar influences.

Above all, Savonarola was inspired by the polemics of that very same thirteenth century Dominican friar who had inspired so many theologian-polemicists from Ramon Martí to Ficino, namely Thomas Aquinas. If Christians were to be reconciled with non-Christians, it would be on Christian terms, not through any sort of compromise with pagans, Jews, or heretics. Compromise of this sort would have made him one with the folly of humankind – a folly which he perceived in his friend Pico to some extent and in his enemy Ficino most certainly. For all that he hated the philosophy of the pagans, Savonarola’s love for the thought of the Angelic Doctor radiates from his words. St. Thomas had authoritatively separated all the wheat from the chaff once and for all, leaving nothing of value to be extracted from the husks now being dug up from antiquity. According to *The Triumph of the Cross*, Savonarola saw only six religions existing in the world in addition to Christianity: “heathen philosophy, astrology, idolatry, Judaism, heresy, and Mahometanism.”¹⁰⁷¹ Any further division was not essential, but merely a matter of “the different opinions and divisions which have existed amongst philosophers, astrologers, idolaters, and heretics.”¹⁰⁷² Even where the leaders of these different “defective and erroneous religions taught by the heathen philosophers” taught doctrines he believed were free of error, their work was “exceedingly poor and insufficient... seeing that their only guide was the light of human reasons.”¹⁰⁷³ Concerning the mystery of salvation, the true goal of human life, “the heathen sages could have no such knowledge, because it exceeds the bounds of human reason, by which alone they were enlightened.” Savonarola’s reproach then, was fundamentally rooted in the super-rational illuminist mysticism of Augustine and ps.-Dionysius (via Thomism), wherein God’s transcendence of the rational sphere and his utter unintelligibility set the bar for orthodoxy. Any pagan philosopher who did not stress the mystical ineffability and incomprehensibility of God – anyone attempting to come to knowledge of divine matters through reason and the *via positiva* rather than through the cloud of unknowing – was doomed to teach things “necessarily imperfect, uncertain, or erroneous.”¹⁰⁷⁴ The God of the philosophers was still far too small. Moreover, the philosophers could not, by means of natural reason, come to any real knowledge about the future life, whose blessedness Savonarola held up as the only legitimate goal to be had by any man. Any other pursuit was error. Savonarola’s message was that “since... the very greatest philosophers have been so grossly mistaken in matters concerning salvation, it is evident

¹⁰⁷¹ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 158.

¹⁰⁷² Ibid.

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 159.

that the natural light of reason is but a treacherous guide.”¹⁰⁷⁵ If human reason was to no avail, then only the window of revelation – mediated through the inspired Word of God – might serve as a guide for all those groping in the darkness of human arrogance.

One of the chief arguments with which Savonarola attacked pagan philosophy was on account of their belief in the eternity of the world, the mother of all heresies, which if accepted had the potential to render absurd the very *historicity* of the Christian story.¹⁰⁷⁶ In this we can see how the historicity of Christianity’s message had quickly become a *sine qua non* of its veracity where it had not necessarily been needed before. It was in this light that Savonarola wrote:

If anyone will read the philosophical books treating of the universe, of the end for which it was made, and of its supposed beginning and end, he will find almost as many errors as there are words. And, although Aristotle, and some of his followers, have tried to establish the eternity of the world, the Aristotelian arguments are so weak, that any learned man could easily overthrow them.¹⁰⁷⁷

Not only was the eternity of the world a threat to Savonarola’s soteriology, it was also a threat to his apocalypticism, the very source of much of his own authority. The world had to have a beginning, a middle, and an end – an end which was fast approaching, for all the warnings from Scripture were clearly speaking of the present age. When it came to overthrowing the arguments of his philosophical opponents, Savonarola’s approach is immediately recognizable. He argued:

[The pagans] entertained also many most frivolous ideas about Divine Providence. And thus, their teaching, far from being profitable to man’s salvation, or honourable to religion, was merely a source of confusion to mankind. *Nevertheless, we must not despise the valuable portion of the old philosophy, but rather make use of it ourselves. For, although it is not sufficient for salvation, it is often of great assistance to us in confuting the adversaries of the Faith.*¹⁰⁷⁸ [emphasis added]

If pagan philosophy had any purpose to Savonarola whatsoever, it was to refute paganism on its own terms, a *de facto* Dominican tradition. To confute was to convince, and to convince was to convert, and this was most certainly in keeping with the goals of any given mendicant friar dedicated to the faith. For all Savonarola had learned from Lady *Philosophia*, it was now more important than ever for her to know her place as the perennial handmaiden of theology, not its equal, and certainly not its master.

Another prominent target of Savonarola’s assault was upon what he perceived to be one of the most popular errors of his age: astrology, and just like Pico in the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, he raged against divinatory astrology in particular, the kind used to map out history and predict the future rather than the kind used in basic medical or natural

¹⁰⁷⁵ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 163.

¹⁰⁷⁶ For a discussion of the eternity of the world as the ‘mother of all heresies,’ in contradistinction with the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 105. See especially Ann Gilletti, “The Journey of an Idea: Maimonides, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and Ramon Martí on the Undemonstrability of the Eternity of the World.” *Pensar a natureza* (2011): 269-299.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 163-164.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 164.

philosophical pursuits. This type of astrology had enjoyed a resurgence starting around the 1450s, and the discipline was undergoing a great process of reconciling its many internal contradictions.¹⁰⁷⁹ This the astrologers accomplished by bringing together numerous publications of classical astrological texts in their original languages (e.g., Ptolemy), alongside the translations of more recent ones with altered calculations, those of the Arabic world (e.g., al-Kindī, Abu Ma‘Shar, and *Picatrix*). Regardless of whether contemporary astrologers were persistently improving the accuracy of their calculations or not, to Savonarola, the entire discipline was a vain pursuit, misguided from the start. Astral determinism – albeit not a belief shared by all astrologers at the time – was the doctrine Savonarola held in highest contempt given that those medieval theologians he respected most had toiled to map out its inadequacies (in particular Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas who wrote at length on the necessity of free will in accepting the gift of salvation which God extends through grace).¹⁰⁸⁰ Savonarola’s basic argument went as follows:

Superior things cannot be governed by their inferiors; hence, as the intellect is more perfect than any mere body, it cannot be governed by either heaven nor any other bodies... the power of the heavenly bodies cannot, strictly speaking, act upon our understanding, since the power of the understanding far surpasses that of the firmament.¹⁰⁸¹

In denigrating the utility of astrological prophecy or divination, Savonarola gives us a glimpse into his understanding of events that have not yet come to pass: “future events, which may or may not take place, cannot be known in themselves, as they as yet possess no being; nor can they be foreseen in their cause, since they have no definite or determinate cause, but only such as is uncertain and wholly undetermined.”¹⁰⁸² These conclusions of Savonarola’s were ultimately in keeping with Pico’s ideas: “Speculative astrology is a true science, because it tries to recognize the effects through the true causes... but divinatory astrology which consists entirely of effects which proceed indifferently from their own causes, especially in human affairs which proceed from free will, and in those which rarely come from their causes, is wholly vain and can be called neither art nor science.” Here all Savonarola had done was reiterate the ideas laid out in the prologue of Pico’s anti-divination polemic.¹⁰⁸³ In the end, however, despite Savonarola’s monumental literary endeavour attempting to put his *bona fides* and orthodoxy down in writing for all to see, no amount of writing would spare him from what was to come.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life* (London: Penguin, 1988), 24

¹⁰⁸⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 4.70-71.

¹⁰⁸¹ Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 165-166.

¹⁰⁸² Savonarola, *Triumph of the Cross*, 169-170.

¹⁰⁸³ Garin, *Astrology and the Renaissance*, 84.

8.4 Savonarola's End

Savonarola's rule was tenuous from beginning to end, and beset on all sides by rivals, dissenters, and intellectual opponents. The black friar's personal brand of apocalypticism was ultimately a failure. It demanded too much from too many too quickly. As he became increasingly obsessed with, to use the words of Bernard McGinn, an "optimistic, millenarian view of the coming state that would prevail after the defeat of the Antichrist in the dawning Fifth Age of history,"¹⁰⁸⁴ his *Piagnoni* became increasingly insufferable to the everyday people of Florence. The final chapter in Savonarola's life began in 1498 when a Franciscan friar challenged him to demonstrate the miraculous favour which God had for him in a public spectacle of walking through fire. When Savonarola failed to deliver the desired results on account of a rainstorm that put out the fire on the appointed day, a mob took to the monastery of San Marco where the friar dwelt. Savonarola was arrested and thrown in prison, where under torture by strappado he denounced himself as a prophet and declared all his predictions false. Of course, it should be mentioned that prophets are often want to deny that they themselves are prophets (e.g., Amos, Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself all denied that they were prophets); on this account it may not have been as difficult for Savonarola to renounce that he was a prophet when faced with extreme torture. He could have been taking this as another opportunity to debase himself and express his humility, but we also know today that people will say anything expected of them under torture. On the day of May 23rd 1498, however, Savonarola and two of his fellow Dominicans were stripped of their habits, condemned as heretics, and sentenced to be hanged and have their bodies burned in the Piazza della Signoria such that none in Florence still sympathetic to the friars might steal away with relics. For some, Savonarola became a martyr on that day, while for others, he was simply a tyrant meeting a deserved end. Martin Luther, who had read some of Savonarola's works was one such figure who considered him a martyr. For Ficino, however, who only a few years prior had given him support, Savonarola had become a *saevus Nero*, a 'savage Nero,' no more than a manifestation of the Antichrist himself – an accusation we can see clearly in the letter he sent to the College of Cardinals just prior to Savonarola's execution.¹⁰⁸⁵ In this way, if it was apocalyptic tropes that helped to raise Savonarola to power, then apocalyptic tropes also played a role in his demise.

Shortly after Savonarola's death, the Medici returned to Florence, the French invaded Italy again in 1498, and Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, threatened the whole city. "Such events" writes John Court, were yet again "readily seen as the troubles heralding the last days while the Devil was loose upon the earth."¹⁰⁸⁶ The end was ever at hand, as it continues to be among many today who cling to a prophetic interpretation of world history. Throughout the sixteenth century, the grand narratives of sacred history rooted exclusively in Scripture, those most forcefully brought to the light of public consciousness by mendicant friars, these were in

¹⁰⁸⁴ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 279.

¹⁰⁸⁵ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 279, n. 12.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse*, 94.

some respects being challenged by the more particularist, ancient source-based humanist readings of history, while in other respects, they were also being scrutinized more rigorously than ever before by the new adherents of the *sola Scriptura* approach. Nevertheless, with Ficino's death at Careggi on October 1st, 1499, aged 66, the details of that story fall just outside the scope of this study.

9 - Conclusion

Within a century following Pico's death, his more controversial ideas eventually found themselves apologists in two Franciscan Hebraists, Francesco Giorgi and the aptly named Arcangelo of Borgonovo.¹⁰⁸⁷ The former became the author of a commentary on 47+72 of Pico's *Conclusiones cabalisticæ*, while the latter wrote complete defense of the conclusions entitled *Cabalistarum selectiora obscurioraque dogmata* (printed in Venice 1569).¹⁰⁸⁸ In the proem of his text, Arcangelo referred to Pico as the *phaenix ævui*, the phoenix of his age, who would die only to rise again more brilliantly than ever. Prior to this Arcangelo also wrote another volume in defence of Pico's kabbalistic propositions, an *Apologia* "secundum propriam opinionem" (printed in Bologna 1564).¹⁰⁸⁹ Most significantly, this work was prefaced with its own defence outlining the reasons why a Franciscan schoolman like Arcangelo was putting himself on the line to defend kabbalistic ideas. Here he repeated the time-honoured argument that Pico had inherited about the revelation made at Sinai and how it consisted of two parts, one written and one oral. The written law was passed on immediately to the Israelites (who later bequeathed it to the Christians); the oral law, however, was transmitted through the seventy elders, through the prophets, and through the great rabbis of antiquity, that is until Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi captured a portion of that tradition in writing while composing the six books of the Mishnah. On a parallel track, however, Arcangelo also took note of how there were other works which had preceded the revelation of Sinai, such as the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which Jews traditionally attributed to Abraham. It was through works such as these that the extra-Scriptural secrets of the Kabbalah had been transmitted, and in their correct interpretation, they were in no way inimical to Christianity. Throughout history, those initiated into the mysteries of these texts made up a series of "kabbalistic doctors" (some of whom scholars today would by no means consider Kabbalists, though this Franciscan believed them firmly to be so).¹⁰⁹⁰ All that was needed for them to be considered as such was some small passage or another with mystical overtones, or perhaps some sign of their using a letrist technique like *gematria*, *temurah*, or *notarikon*. In any case, the list of doctors was directly derived from Johannes Reuchlin and Francesco Georgi, and was not a creation of his own.¹⁰⁹¹ All this is to suggest that by the mid-sixteenth century, Pico's Christian

¹⁰⁸⁷ Blau, "Appendix C: Archangelus of Borgo Nuovo" in *The Christian Interpretation*, 119-120

¹⁰⁸⁸ Chaim Wirszubski, "Francesco Giorgio's Commentary on Giovanni Pico's Kabbalistic Theses," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 145 wrote somewhat disparagingly that it was only by a stroke of fate that Arcangelo "should go down in the history of the Italian Renaissance and of Christian Kabbala as the commentator upon Pico's kabbalistic theses. Fate is a whimsical goddess: she bestowed on Arcangelo a distinction which ought to have gone elsewhere," that is, to the Venetian Francesco Giorgi on account of his very little-known *Yah. MS Var. 24* (1555) which contains an interpretation of 119 of Pico's *Conclusiones cabalisticæ* (his original 47 plus his later 72 published in 1486).

¹⁰⁸⁹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 26; Arcangelo's *Trattato ossia Dichiarazione della Virti e Dignita del Nome di Gesiu* (Ferrara, 1557) comprises an expansion on the ideas put forward in the final chapters of Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*, but for a popular audience.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 26; Cf. n. 891 above for the roots of this in Flavius Mithridates.

¹⁰⁹¹ Blau, *The Christian Interpretation*, 26 notes that the derivation from Reuchlin "is particularly evident" since Arcangelo repeats Reuchlin's error in listing Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1305) as two separate people: "R. Joseph Carnitole and R. Joseph Cicatilia."

interpretation of Jewish Kabbalah had already become something of a tradition unto itself, and it had likewise become particularly attractive to Franciscans on account of its associations with the traditional ‘spiritual understanding’ of Scripture. From this period onwards, the Prince of Concord’s main supercessionist arguments were simply recapitulated in surer terms: Kabbalah correctly interpreted was Christianity, and Christianity correctly interpreted was Kabbalah. Hidden within its tangled mass of esoteric doctrines lay all the prefigurements for the new faith, devised not so much to abolish the old one so much as to fulfill it. According to Arcangelo’s *Apologia*, all these prefigurements were laid out in the following:

If my declaration about [Pico’s] kabbalistic *Conclusiones* should be seen: there is hardly any article in which the Jews are not compelled by the Kabbalists’ authority to agree with us. Also, each and everyone handling their very weighty volumes can easily see how great and how sound are the testimonies for the truth of the faith offered by the Kabbalists’ doctrine, in addition to those already mentioned. For indeed, they express without any obscurity the mystery in the unity of the Trinity on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, on the eternal generation of the only-begotten, on the original sin, through which death entered the world, on the redemption through the passion and the blood of the Messiah, on his resurrection, on the virgin mother queen of heaven, on the mystical body of the Church – because the saints are the temple of God and the limbs of Christ – on the [last] judgement, on the end of the world, on penitence and the remission of sins, on the resurrection of the dead, *on the gift of prophecy, knowledge, and wisdom, on allegory and the spiritual sense of holy speech, by which Kabbalah itself raises to sublime and divine oracles not only each word and each element of each word, but also each vowel mark, point, and whatever else is attached to them.* Hence the human mind is exercised and strengthened by a diligent meditation on lofty matters.¹⁰⁹² [emphasis added]

All these were aspects of Christian spirituality which Franciscans had held close to heart since the very inception of their order, and especially the latter doctrines in light of that great number of ‘Spiritual’ friars that had once been swept up in the spirit of Joachimism and radical apostolic poverty. These topics in particular (apocalypticism, the “spiritual understanding,” etc.) were responsible for much of the interest that the Kabbalah garnered in individuals like Francesco Giorgi and Arcangelo in the wake of Pico’s career, since they could easily be fit into the wider spiritual worldview and personal narratives which the Franciscans had been constructing for themselves since their order’s inception in the early 1200s. Christians read into Kabbalah what they thought significant, and had been primed to do so by their fascination with the higher levels of interpretation put forward by Platonizing interpreters who used theories of illuminism to explain how true knowledge could be attained. These interpreters included such men as Jerome,

¹⁰⁹² Arcangelo, *Apologia* (1564), 9^v-10^f: “Ita cognoscetur esse de omnibus aliis, si conclusionum Cabalisticarum videatur mea declaratio: nullum pene articulum in quo nobiscum Iudaei, per Cabalistarum auctoritatem sentire non cogantur. Quanta etiam, et quam solida veritatis fidei testimonia ultra praedicta praebent hoc Cabaleorum dogma, facile videre licet cuique amplissima illorum volumina tractanti. Ea siquidem non obscure Trinitatis in unitate enunciant sacramentum, de Patre, Filio, et Spiritu sancto, de unigeniti generatione aeterna, de peccato originis, quo mors intravit in Orbem: de redemptione per passionem, et sanguinem Messiae, de eius resurrectione: de virgine coeli Regina alma: de mystico Ecclesiae corpore, quod sancti templum sunt Dei, et membra Christi, de iudicio, et mundi consumatione, de poenitentia et peccatorum remissione, de mortuorum resurrectione: de dono prophetiae, scientiae et sapientiae, de allegoria, et spiritali sacri eloquii sensu, quo Cabala ipsa non modo verba et singula verborum elementa, sed apices, puncta et quaeque illis adiecta, ad sublimia et divina tollit oracula. Unde assidua meditatione exercetur et stabilitur mens humana in superis.”

Augustine, ps.-Dionysius, Petrus Alfonsi, Joachim of Fiore, Bonaventure, and a multitude of other theologian-philosopher-polemicists from the monastic and mendicant traditions who rallied around the banner of the exhortation “*scrutamini scripturas!*” (“search the scriptures!”). In the Franciscan interpreters of the sixteenth century there was little understanding of Kabbalah as it was understood by Jews, but in various works of Jewish mysticism they had found themselves an aegis under which they were able to collect and systematically arrange the full gamut of their own esoteric Christian inheritance, rooted as it was in a synthesis of Pythagorean, Platonic, and Jewish mystical ideas from the very beginning. Starting with Pico in 1486 but quickly expanding beyond him thanks to a kind of “Streisand effect” that arose from his censure at the hands of Pedro Garcia and the papal commission, the Christian interpretation of Kabbalah developed in the Renaissance was not *really* a Jewish tradition being received and appreciated for its own sake, but as a static blueprint of a comprehensive spiritual system meant for confirming pre-existing Christian ideas.¹⁰⁹³ From its very earliest phases, therefore, the pattern of Christian interaction with kabbalistic texts during the Renaissance fell very much in line with the patterns set down by earlier medieval anti-Jewish polemicists who went after the Talmud and its interpreters. If there was anything unique in Pico and his later sixteenth century supporters, it is that unlike the many converso authors seen in previous chapters, they were more emphatically attempting to convert Christians to Kabbalah than using their skills to convert Jews to Christianity (if not simply attempting to establish their own *bona fides*).

Prophetic readings of history and their concomitant apocalyptic expectations in no way disappeared after the fifteenth century. Transformed to fit the crises of the times, these expectations became so ubiquitous that they continued to serve in the Renaissance as they had in the Middle Ages, namely, as a kind of scaffolding for the development of an ever more elaborate historical consciousness, albeit with different resources at hand, and yielding different fruit. This expansion of historical awareness in all directions – past, present, and future – ultimately served to intensify the sense of historical discontinuity or difference across time, in particular a sense of decline or degeneration. One cannot overemphasize the importance of this ever-developing sense of moral/intellectual/spiritual decay through time as it pertained to the many divergent programs of reform which proliferated during the sixteenth century in an attempt to inspire Christians to return to the pristine piety of the historical Jesus. These reforms were not ends in and of themselves, but means for individuals to prepare for Christ’s imminent return. The intellectual battle that was yet to be fought, however, was over which form of pristine knowledge was to be most effective in leading the Church to triumph: the simple philosophy of Christ himself as laid down in the gospels, or perhaps something more complex, like the combined logocentric revelations of Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, the Church Fathers, and so on. To Ficino the newly-minted priest living in the 1470s, these two competing views were not yet at odds with one another. What made all of these *prisci theologi* important was that through their practice of a kind of religious philosophy, they prefigured and anticipated

¹⁰⁹³ See n. 809 above.

the incarnation of Christ in his form as the pre-existent *Logos*, so there was no ultimate disagreement between the two parties. The return of these ancient sages and prophets was not some rash caused by an underlying outbreak of crypto-paganism or a conscious flirtation with heterodoxy and heresy; rather, in the fifteenth century, the enshrining of the *prisca theologia* was part of a larger project of Christian reform.

In their respective attempts to bolster the Church, Ficino and Pico were both deeply indebted to not merely a great many philosophers, but also a great many theologians and Scriptural interpreters that preceded them. Both profoundly wished to reconcile the pagan wisdom of Plato's dialogues with the revealed wisdom contained in the books of Moses. Both could agree that the books of Moses had long preceded Plato's dialogues, and both firmly believed the opening chapters of *Genesis* contained all the mysteries of creation, including a map or image for the whole of history itself. Both understood that God had woven into his word riddles and enigmas that were inherent to the original text alone. They knew the *Hebraica veritas* was ready to be divulged, if only the reader knew how to read the language, understand the context, and apply the correct (i.e., allegorical and spiritual) methods of exegesis. As we have seen, however, one thing which held both of these humanist theologians in common that is seldom discussed was their shared foundation in a genre of literature entirely focused on negotiating Christianity's alterity in a polemical mode. In the Latin West, this tradition was emphatically Pauline, Augustinian, and ps.-Dionysian – that is, tinged by Platonic philosophy – and thus inextricably wound up with the grand theme of the triumph of the spiritual over the carnal, the intellectual over the sensible, as laid down in the dialogues of Plato. We have also seen how this particular theme was deployed to understand the procession and return of the individual soul back toward God just as much as the progression of world history.

We saw how Joachim of Fiore's prophetic sense of history and his reiteration of Christ's injunction "*scrutamini scripturas!*" in some ways shaped the humanist theologians in how they approached the subject of history (if not directly, then indirectly through later authors). This was in the millenarian belief that Christ had not come near the end of history, but in the middle, and that for the men living in the *quattrocento*, great changes were at hand, and – after a set period of struggles, or a great *diluvium* – there would arise "an age in which the faithful would be in some sense 'closer to God' than hitherto."¹⁰⁹⁴ By stressing the theme of *concordia* between the Old and New Testaments, Joachim had imagined an ultimate reunion of Christian and Jew at the end of history rather than an outright conquest, and this more ecumenical rather than purely persecutory *compelle intrare* approach was also shared among the humanist theologians of fifteenth century Italy. In Pico specifically, Joachim's influence can be seen primarily in his development of the *via numerorum*, a system of "natural prophecy" which deployed itself through "formal numbers," and this ultimately served as a kind of Christiano-Pythagorean precedent to the kinds of activities he so admired among Jewish Kabbalists.¹⁰⁹⁵ Another of

¹⁰⁹⁴ Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse*, xviii.

¹⁰⁹⁵ See n. 992 above.

Joachim's ideas which gained great traction as much in Savonarola as in later Protestant reformers was that the Antichrist would arise from Rome to persecute all true believers, and his religion would be constituted by a combination of all heresies. Ultimately, Joachimite beliefs, as we have seen, had long been present in Italy and Southern France among the so-called "Spiritual" Franciscans in the centuries leading up to the Renaissance and the Reformation, had spread therefrom into a much wider audience, and would continue to enjoy a resurgence on throughout the sixteenth century in such figures as Aegidius of Viterbo (1472–1532), Pietro Galatino (1460–1530), and Guillaume Postel (1510–81), especially the idea of an 'Angelic Pope,' who would serve as *corrector et reparator* for a fragmented Church.¹⁰⁹⁶

Ficino's dreams of a golden age for the Church through a reinauguration of the marriage of philosophy and religion (i.e., through the joint wisdom of the ancient pagan sages and the Hebrew prophets) were ultimately crushed. Within two centuries, men like Ficino and Pico were proverbially 'hoisted by their own petards' given that, during their own lifetimes, they had empowered the ever-mounting sentiment that a *sola Scriptura* approach to personal religion could reform Christianity, especially with emphasis on the *Graeca* and *Hebraica veritas*. It is ultimately these very attitudes – those which drove the humanist theologians to study Platonic and Jewish esoterica in the first place – that later down the line caused their own work to be rejected by various Reformation and Counter-Reformation theologians caught up in a contest of cross-confessional 'purity spiraling' or puritanical one-upmanship.¹⁰⁹⁷ In a letter to Capito, Erasmus famously encapsulated this sentiment with the following quip:

Talmud, Cabala, Tetragrammaton, Gates of Light, these are all but empty names. I would rather see Christ infected by Scotus than by that rubbish. Italy has very many Jews; Spain has hardly any Christians.¹⁰⁹⁸

Through their own polemical writings, Pico and Ficino had played no small role in fuelling this sort of intellectual atmosphere wherein express disavowals of non- or anti-Christian ideas signalled one's allegiance to the Christian faith in its pristine form. It did not take long, however, for later theologians of the Reformation to come along and, entirely on the same grounds, dismiss the baroque mystical religio-philosophical worldviews the humanist theologians had

¹⁰⁹⁶ See especially Wilkinson, *Orientalism, Aramaic and Kabbalah*, 29-62. Zika, "Reuchlin and Erasmus," 225 describes Galatino, author of *De arcanis Catholicae veritatis* as a "Franciscan theologian and Hebraist, collector of Joachimite prophecies and [a] disciple of Amadeus the Angelic Pope." See also Sharon A. Leftley, *Millenarian Thought in Renaissance Rome with special reference to Pietro Galatino c. 1464 – c. 1540 and Egidio da Viterbo c. 1469–1532* (PhD diss, Bristol University, 1995); Secret, *Kabbalistes chrétiens*, 103 and Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future*, 101-104.

¹⁰⁹⁷ In spite of all the tensions between 'the humanist' and the emphatically 'theological' approach to history in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, there were certainly elements of continuity between the early humanists and the later reformers. To use the succinct words of Erika Rummel: "The reformers used the historical and philological methods pioneered by humanists to underpin their doctrinal positions; and the Lutheran emphasis on Scripture could justifiably be called an extension of the humanistic slogan *ad fontes*." Rummel, "Scholasticism and Biblical Humanism in Early Modern Europe" in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, 4.

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen, vol. 3 (Oxford, 1910), Letter 798, 253. G. Lloyd Jones, "Introduction" in Goodman and Goodman, *Johann Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 26 notes "not only did the study of the Kabbalah open the door to the pernicious influence of Judaism, it also encouraged a form of piety which was the complete antithesis of all that Erasmus stood for."

created for themselves throughout the late fifteenth century. Later on during the eighteenth century, in an age of increasing secularization, interest in Ficino and Pico waned again, but for different reasons altogether.¹⁰⁹⁹

While the thread of our narrative ends here, the story about the ways in which the apocalyptic or prophetic sense of history and Christian polemics criss-crossed one another certainly does not end with the fifteenth century. With the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation, the already rather diverse strands of apocalypticism in the Latin West broke up into countless more: Catholic, Reformist, and Radical, with many more subdivisions thereof. Each group had their own interpretations of the Last Things, their own antichrists, their own ideas about surviving tribulation, and their own ideas about whether or not a millennium of world peace would even come.¹¹⁰⁰ In this regard, the early sixteenth century is best described by a sense of fragmentation, and this ran in the very opposite direction of the twelfth century reformers, the thirteenth to fourteenth century mendicants, or the fifteenth century humanist theologians' dreams of universal reconciliation into a single sheepfold under a single shepherd. Here the cumulative interweaving of sacred and secular histories came together like trellis and foliage to create a thick canopy from which all kinds of idiosyncratic narratives could be plucked to sustain one's own confessionally-motivated arguments. From this rich body of novel data, various new approaches to world history emerged that were qualitatively different from the pure grand narrative visions embodied by the prophetic approach to history, or the smaller-scale cause-and-effect focused histories emblematic of the classical period (e.g., Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, Josephus, Ammianus Marcellinus, etc.). The religiously-inclined who privileged sacred history, like Pico and Ficino had done, continued to hold fast to the narratives laid out in the Bible (albeit interpreted in a variety of ways), while those who privileged secular history more emphatically took a turn toward the classics instead. Here began a fork in the ways which world history could be reckoned, a fork whose internal incomensurabilities have endured even into the 21st century. Where in the Middle Ages the biblical and the classical were blended together, and in the Renaissance period they were dealt with in conscious parallelisms, the Enlightenment period experienced something of a rupture between the two traditions. Even Isaac Newton (1642–1727), at the height of the Scientific Revolution and at the risk of harming his own reputation, was deeply interested in what Moshe Idel called that “peculiar type of historiography rooted in the book of *Daniel*.”¹¹⁰¹ Whenever he approached the subject of world

¹⁰⁹⁹ One can find Ficino being severely criticized in Johann Jakob Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabilis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta* 5 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1742-1744), cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 137-47. See also S. Matton, “L'éclipse de Ficino au siècle des Lumières,” in *Marsilio Ficino, Commentaires sur le Traité de l'amour ou le Festin de Platon. Traduction anonyme du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. S. Matton (Paris: SEHA, 2001), 5-68.

¹¹⁰⁰ Cf. Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹⁰¹ See n. 20 above.

history, he did so chiefly by delving into the mysteries lurking between the lines of Scripture.¹¹⁰² Today this “particular type of historiography,” while no longer welcome in the places of high learning such as modern history departments in universities, continues to enjoy a great multitude of adherents around the world, in particular among those who continue to exercise their own spiritual understandings, and to await the coming (whether first or second) of a Messiah: one with the power to raise up every mountain, to lay low every hill, to make the crooked straight, and the rough places plain, such that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh together shall see, that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken.”¹¹⁰³

¹¹⁰² Moshe Idel, “The Time of the End” in *Apocalyptic Time*, 155. Based on his *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* (1733), Newton predicted the end of the world might come in 2060 (but he also had other dates, like 2034).

¹¹⁰³ *Isaiah* 40:4.

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