***Meshovah Niẓaḥat*: Jewish-Christian Polemics in *Kaf Naki* by R. Kalifa Ben-Malka (1650?–­­175?) of Agadir**

# Introduction

R. Kalifa Ben-Malka was born in Safi in Western Morocco during the second half of the seventeenth century. He was orphaned at an early age and apparently studied in his youth with Joseph Bueno de Mesquita. At some point, he departed for Fez, and there he studied with Judah ben Attar (1656–1737) and SamuelẒarfati (1660–1713), who were among the city’s senior rabbis at the time. After this, Ben-Malka returned to Safi and continued studying with De Mesquita who also supported him financially. Shortly thereafter, Ben-Malka emigrated to Agadir in southwestern Morocco, where he became a successful merchant, married, had a family, and authored *Kaf Naki.* He lived to a ripe old age, passing away in Agadir in the second half of the eighteenth century.[[1]](#endnote-2)

*Kaf Naki* is composed of five parts: 1. *Kaf Naki* – a commentary on the Sephardi Maḥzor (a prayer book containing the cycle of Jewish liturgy), published in Amsterdam in 1728. Ben-Malka commented on the liturgy for weekdays, the Sabbath, the New Moon, Hanukkah, Purim, the Pilgrimage Festivals, the four fasts, and the High Holidays. 2. *Parpera’ot le-Ḥokhmah* [Adjuncts to Wisdom] – on matters of Jewish law, ethics, history, and more.3**.** *Shekhiḥah ve-Leket* [Forgotten Fruits and Gleanings] – material supplementing the two prior parts. 4. *Maskil le-Asaf* [A *Maskil* of Asaf] –novella on rabbinic literature. 5. *Meshovah Niẓaḥat* – this part is comprised of 14 sections, 13 of them relate to Jewish-Christian polemics and one relates to Islamic arguments against Judaism.[[2]](#endnote-3)

*Kaf Naki* survived in two manuscripts: A. MS 1006 in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, which only contains a small part of the entire composition. B. MS Gunzburg 315 in the Russian State Library in Moscow which is complete. Moshe Halamish and Moshe Amar edited the first part of the composition and published it (Lod, 2012), and the complete edition, containing all five parts, was published by Amar about two years later (Lod, 2014) along with a comprehensive introduction.

A few studies have been dedicated to Ben-Malka and his works. Bloch has researched his nomadic life.[[3]](#endnote-4) Zafranu and Ben-Ami addressed the diverse stories told about him.[[4]](#endnote-5) Zafranu and, especially, Elkayam worked on his poetry.[[5]](#endnote-6) The latter also devoted some of his research to Ben-Malka’s language in *Kaf Naki*, and to his commentary on the Sephardi Maḥzor published in Amsterdam.[[6]](#endnote-7) Kenan expanded upon Elkayam’s research, addressing Ben-Malka’s tendency to preserve certain liturgical versions and customs.[[7]](#endnote-8)

In this study, I will focus on an aspect of Ben-Malka’s work that has yet to receive sufficient scholarly attention, the fifth part of *Kaf Naki*, *Meshovah Niẓaḥat*, which is primarily dedicated to Jewish-Christian polemics. This study will add to Ben-Malka’s intellectual portrait and contribute to the scholarly conversation about Moroccan Jewry’s intellectual history during the first half of the eighteenth century, a topic that has also failed to receive a significant amount of serious scholarly attention. Simultaneously, by focusing on Jewish-Christian polemics in Ben-Malka’s writings, I will *ipso facto* expand the conversation about eighteenth-century Jewish-Christian polemics into a new geographical region—the Jewish communities of the Maghreb.[[8]](#endnote-9)

# Jewish-Christian Polemics in Islamic Lands and in Morocco in Particular

Many studies have been devoted to Jewish-Christian polemics, including the polemics in Islamic lands.[[9]](#endnote-10) Even though Christianity was far less of a threat there, the presence of a Christian minority and diplomatic and economic ties between Muslim and Christian countries meant that Jews living in Islamic lands still had to contend with Christian doctrine. They, therefore, authored polemical, anti-Christian writings (in fact, they were the first to do so), for example, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest* and Marwan al-Muqammis’s writings in the ninth and tenth centuries.[[10]](#endnote-11)

In addition authoring explicitly polemical literature, Jewish authors in Islamic lands responded to Christian claims when they touched upon issues that the Christians also took a stand on, such as God’s unity or the Torah’s eternity. Saadia Gaon was a prominent practitioner of such incidental responses.[[11]](#endnote-12) Many others polemicized with Christian claims non-systematically, including Judah Halevi, Maimonides, his son Abraham, and others.[[12]](#endnote-13) In other words, even though the Jews living in Islamic lands were under far less threat, if any, by Christian missionary activity, they still grappled with Christian doctrine on a theological level, and so they integrated responses to Christian dogma in their writings and, occasionally, even dedicated specific compositions to anti-Christian polemics.

Scant academic scholarship has been devoted to Jewish-Christian polemics in Morocco, and generally, when it exists, it discusses specific instances from the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period.[[13]](#endnote-14) Limor calls our attention to an 1179 debate that took place in Ceuta, then an active port city located on Morocco’s western coast.[[14]](#endnote-15) The participants were a Genoan citizen (Genoan traders had strong ties to the port of Ceuta at the time) named Guglielmo Alfachino and a Jew (apparently, a local) named Abraham. Abraham asked questions and Alfachino responded. Abraham was ultimately convinced and with his family traveled to Israel where they were baptized into the Christian faith in the Jordan River. The arguments raised by Alfachino were extremely simplistic, they reflect a merchant’s knowledge whose education in Bible and theology was limited, and the debate is characterized by an extremely non-combative tone.

During the fifteenth century, Portugal captured large chunks of Morocco and established fortresses along the Atlantic coast. Consequently, the level of missionary activity in Morocco in the 1430s and 50s increased and religious disputations took place between Franciscan monks, Jesuits, and the Jews of Fez, Tétouan, and Ceuta, as Hirschberg, Bashan, and Huss have shown.[[15]](#endnote-16) With the death of Don Sebastian, Portugal’s young king, in the Battle of Alcácer Quibiron Moroccan soil in 1578, many of his soldiers were taken captive and imprisoned in Fez’ *mellah* (Jewish quarter).[[16]](#endnote-17) As a result of this unmediated proximity, a religious polemic arose between the Jewish residents and the Portuguese, Christian captives. Lipiner comments upon the Portuguese chronicler Jeronimo de Mendonca’s documentation of the disputation. Ohana declared that this was a traditional disputation, that is to say, a disputation based on biblical texts and not on post-biblical literature, a new style that Funkenstein asserted became the norm from the twelfth century onwards.[[17]](#endnote-18)

Anti-Christian Jewish works were also composed on Moroccan soil. Wike discusses a composition written in Spanish that documents a dispute conducted orally by a Jew and a Christian. He identified the text’s anonymous author as Estevo Dias, a Portuguese New Christian who had returned to Judaism. He wrote the first draft in Marrakesh around 1581 and completed it in Antwerp two years later.[[18]](#endnote-19)

Ohana examines three sermons delivered by Saul Serero, who held a rabbinic post in Fez in the first half of the seventeenth century. In these sermons, Serero challenged and refuted Christian dogma—primarily dogma concerning redemption and the Messiah, and incidentally the question of the Jewish and Christian traditions’ relative credibility. In one of these cases, Serero was required to debate Christian doctrine in response to a Jewish converso’s claims. We do not know what compelled him to polemicize in the other two cases.[[19]](#endnote-20)

At the same time, Christian anti-Jewish works were being written either in Morocco itself, or, by authors who had spent time in Morocco. Thus, for instance, after living in Morocco during the first third of the seventeenth century, John Harrison, an English diplomatic legate, wrote a polemical text based on one of the medieval disputations’ foundational tropes: Had the Messiah already appeared as Christianity claimed, or had he still not arrived and was yet to come as the Jews believed?[[20]](#endnote-21)

# The Jewish-Christian Polemic in Agadir: Circumstances and Participants

Agadir, the city to which Ben-Malka immigrated, is situated on the Atlantic coast and was of some importance in Moroccan-European trade during the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries. The locals largely traded in sugar, wax, copper, and leather, while the Europeans mainly offered weapons and textiles. Under the rule of Moulay Ismail (1672-1727), trade with France began to decline, but trade with England and Holland significantly increased.[[21]](#endnote-22)

In the introduction to *Kaf Nak*i’s fifth part, *Meshovah Niẓaḥat*, Ben-Malka described the circumstances that led him to write this section. He relates that in keeping with the words of the Sages, “Know how to respond to a heretic [*epikorus*]” (M. Ethics of the Fathers, 2:14), he thought it appropriate to transcribe the debates he had conducted with some Christians, and especially those disputations that he took part in when he held an administrative position (a ‘sofer,’ to quote Ben-Malka) at the mercantile establishment of a Christian who was one of the “righteous among the nations” (probably someone who observed the seven Noachide laws). Ben-Malka characterized him as somewhat knowledgeable in Hebrew. Perhaps, this knowledge was a distant echo of the Christian Hebraism that flowered in the Renaissance and Reformation and was still found in seventeenth-century Germany, Italy, and England.[[22]](#endnote-23) In addition, Ben-Malka described him as someone who is “close in his thinking to our beliefs and our religion” since he only denies metempsychosis.[[23]](#endnote-24) Ben-Malka also reports that the aforementioned Christian “does not cease to be enamored with our faith.” Presumably, Ben-Malka means that notwithstanding the many arguments they had, the Christian continued to be enamored of the Jewish faith. Indeed, the informal, interfaith disputes that took place in private spaces (private homes) and public ones (marketplaces and ports) were conducted in a congenial atmosphere, as Limor and Ben-Shalom assert.[[24]](#endnote-25) According to Ben-Malka, this Christian even believed that God would redeem Israel in the future, and he (the Christian) brought proof for this: in contrast to many other nations that had assimilated and been lost to posterity, the Jews had not assimilated among the nations.

Ben-Malka reports that he only transcribed a small percentage of his many debates because most topics had already received treatment elsewhere, such as in *Ḥizuk Emunah* by Isaac (the Doctor) ben Abraham of Troki (Amsterdam, 1705),[[25]](#endnote-26) *Sefer Niẓaḥon* by Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen (Amsterdam, 1709),[[26]](#endnote-27) and many other books (which he did not name).[[27]](#endnote-28) Thus, he only mentioned those arguments that had been ignored in the polemical literature, hoping that they might benefit someone.[[28]](#endnote-29) Notwithstanding these protestations, in practice, as we shall see, he did employ and transcribe topics that had already been addressed in earlier literature.

A close reading of Ben-Malka’s composition reveals that it recounts disputations with various Christian denominations: Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist.[[29]](#endnote-30) In fact, Ben-Malka displays an in-depth knowledge of the denominations and their sub-denominations: Catholics; Protestants (Lutherans and Calvinists); and Garagos (Garagos and Armenian). He distinguished between the various denominations’ methods of worship and described the founders of each denomination and its senior clerics. It is unclear whether this knowledge came from conversations with his Christian colleagues or from reading either general or anti-Christian Jewish literature.

The religion of Edom has three denominations: The first, the most well-known, is called Papism because they obey the Pappas (Pope), the great bishop of Rome and his cardinals, and they worship idols.[[30]](#endnote-31) The second, whose adherents do not obey the Pope and do not worship idols, called the Protestants, are divided in two. Some are called Calvinists and they rely upon the opinion of a wise man named Calvin, who moved them [out of the orbit of the Catholic Church] and distinguished them from the Pope’s path. And there are those called Lutherans who rely on the opinion of another [wise man] named Luther, who also parted ways [from Catholicism] by instituting certain changes.[[31]](#endnote-32) And the third are the Greeks, known as Greek Orthodox, who base themselves on an earlier understanding of the religion, as they were the first to believe in Jesus, and they have what is called a Patriarch. They are also divided into two: one denomination being Greek Orthodox and the other being Armenian.[[32]](#endnote-33) They all believe in the religion of Jesus and the Evangelion.[[33]](#endnote-34)

In other words, Jewish-Christian polemics continued in Morocco during the first half of the eighteenth century, even though the small Christian demographic in Morocco at the time was comprised solely of merchants and diplomats. Jewish anti-Christian literature was available to the Moroccan Jews, or at least to their rabbinic elite. They even had access to information about ancient and contemporary schisms in the Christian Church, although we may surmise that this knowledge was more accessible to those who dwelt in the port cities (as opposed to the Moroccan interior) since European traders from a multitude of backgrounds spent time in the various port cities. This notwithstanding, Ben-Malka’s introduction fails to clarify whether Ben-Malka solely responded to arguments made against him by his Christian colleagues, or whether he initiated interreligious polemics. Earlier studies made the argument that some Jewish-Christian polemics were solely the result of claims made against the Jews; however, Lasker has recently argued that Jews often chose to initiate a polemic in order to refute Christian doctrine without any provocation from the Christian side.[[34]](#endnote-35) A close reading of *Meshovah Niẓaḥat* teaches that oftentimes Ben-Malka responded to claims made against him, sometimes he initiated the debate, and sometimes there was no actual debate, and Ben-Malka’s polemic with Christian doctrine, took place solely on paper.[[35]](#endnote-36) Hence Ben-Malka’s example strengthens Lasker’s hypothesis about Jewish-Christian polemics wherein the Jews’ not only responded to invitations to debate but sometimes initiated debates themselves.

In any case, Ben-Malka chose to conclude his composition, *Meshovah Niẓaḥat*, on a positive note, “And I saw fit to conclude these disputations with a good thing,” the common denominators between the Christian and Jewish faiths, the belief in the genesis of the world—or, to be precise, its creation in six days—and the belief in the Resurrection of the Dead.[[36]](#endnote-37)

Furthermore, a close reading of *Kaf Naki*’s other sections reveals that there were cases in which Ben-Malka appealed to his learned Christian colleagues to receive assistance in interpreting difficult cases. Thus, for instance, he had difficulty understanding Samson’s riddle “out of the eater came forth something to eat and out of the strong came forth the sweet” (Judg 14:14), so when he had the opportunity, he turned to a Christian colleague, whom he characterized as “a wise Christian […] sharp-witted and well-learned in the Bible.”[[37]](#endnote-38) Similarly, Ben-Malka did not hesitate to study the Christian commentary literature and to offer his own readers its solutions to various difficulties. For instance, Ben-Malka cited R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres’s (Rabad 1110-1198) critique of Maimonides’s ruling forbidding the High Priest from marrying two women. Rabad pointed out that Scripture relates that Yehoyada the High Priest was married to two women (2 Chron 24:3). Ben-Malka presented Vidal of Tolosa’s (the author of the *Maggid Mishneh*, a commentary on Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah*, 1282–1360) solution and then proposed his own. At the end of this section, he noted that “I have found among the copies that the Christians have made that they interpret it [the aforementioned verse] as pertaining to Yoash”. this proves that Ben-Malka was familiar with Christian Bible commentary, and used at least some in its original Christian form. [[38]](#endnote-39)

# The Jewish-Christian Polemic in Agadir: Topics and Sources

The sixteenth century witnessed many changes both in Europe and throughout the world with the discovery of new territories, the scientific revolution, the shattering of the Catholic Church’s hegemony, and so much more. However according to Lasker, Jewish-Christian polemics did not change significantly during the early modern period. Lasker recognized that the historical context had changed and he admitted that the disputants made the adjustments needed to adapt to a new reality. Yet, he claimed that whatever changes occurred, they were superficial and the fundamental points of disagreement and their nature remained unchanged.[[39]](#endnote-40) Jewish-Christian polemics in Agadir at the beginning of the eighteenth century seem to substantiate Lasker’s hypothesis. By examining the contents of Ben-Malka’s debates we can learn what topics and arguments fueled them, and what new shapes they took as the winds of change began to blow.

Ben-Malka’s disputations, as mentioned above, are divided into three types: in the first, Ben-Malka initiated the debate and asserted his claims against Christian doctrine before his colleagues. In the second, Ben-Malka merely wrote about his difficulties with the Christian doctrine, and, in the third, his Christian colleagues initiated the debate and he responded.

I will divide the following discussion into two. The first part will focus on the main topics that Ben-Malka raised for discussion and the arguments he made against Christian doctrine. This part will include both the occasions he engaged in live debates and those he engaged in theoretical ones (that is, types one and two above). The second section will focus on the main issues and claims made by Ben-Malka’s colleagues and his responses to them.

## **“I made a claim against a Christian”**

As was common in Medieval Jewish anti-Christian literature, some of Ben-Malka’s arguments focused on undermining the legitimacy of the Christian commentatorial literature. For instance, he expressed surprise at the Christians, who despite their intelligence, believe that the Evangelion can be classified as prophecy.[[40]](#endnote-41) Ben-Malka disputed this claim in three ways: first, we all know that “these remarks were set down by ignorant and feckless men”; that is to say, he undermined the credibility of this literature by claiming that the morals and values of its authors and transmitters were dubious. This *ad hominem* argument was extremely popular in Jewish anti-Christian polemics. Second, he asserted that “in contrast to the prophetic works, they [the Evangelion] are like monkeys compared to human beings.” In other words, these works are a cheap imitation of the prophetic works. This second argument questions the literary quality of the works, as opposed to their author’s morals in the first argument. Ben-Malka’s third argument was that the authors of this literature were not familiar with “even the simple meaning of the biblical verses,” and because of this, the prophetic verses cited by the Christians to support their arguments actually are their undoing. Ben-Malka cited several examples from Ben-Avraham’s *Ḥizuk Emunah* to substantiate this claim.[[41]](#endnote-42)

On another occasion, Ben-Malka questioned the validity of Christian interpretations of certain verses in Isaiah, Micah, and Psalms, which they claimed referred to Jesus. Ben-Malka notes that the prophets themselves taught their audience how to interpret the verses correctly, and this interpretive tradition remained in the possession of the Israelites, the prophet’s own people. Ben-Malka then argued that it is, therefore, completely absurd for Christians, who have no direct connection to these verses or their interpretations, to question the Israelite’s interpretive tradition and proffer an alternative reading.

Surely the prophet who made this prophecy and wrote it down in his book is our brother and he prophesied to us and transcribed [his words] in a book and gave it to us, and he certainly explained to our ancestors what he meant to say in his prophecy, and this is the received interpretation that we have possessed since the day the prophet transmitted it. So how can you think that you, who had no knowledge about this matter, can explain it as you wish in your philosophizing and say to the owners of the book, who received it from their forefathers, this is not what Scripture meant to say.[[42]](#endnote-43)

Other arguments raised by Ben-Malka focused on Christian doctrine’s inherent logical contradictions. Ben-Malka cited Ben-Abraham who wondered “how they square their strange beliefs with the human intellect without acceptable proofs from the prophets.” Furthermore, citing Ben-Abraham’s explanation that these conceptions originate in faiths that preceded Jesus’ appearance, he notes that because they (the Gentiles) had become accustomed to such beliefs, their strangeness did not register upon them even once they accepted Christianity.[[43]](#endnote-44)

Ben-Malka further noted that one learned Christian told him that many of his learned colleagues no longer believe in Christianity (or, at least, in some of its fundamental doctrines) and they even wrote compositions disputing Christian dogma. However, since a lot of money was involved, including the livelihood of the religious clerics, they could not publicly denounce their faith.

A Christian, one of their wise men, put it to me nicely, saying that many of their wise men do not believe in the fundamentals of their religion, and some of them even threw off the yoke of their faith and wrote denunciations against their religion, and some held by the faith of Israel. However, since their entire kingdom rests upon their businesses and their trading which enriches the royal treasury with vast wealth from various incomes, tithes and allotments, and business takes place on fixed days, such as market days and at certain fairs in which massive numbers of people gather for the fair day and a lot of money enters the royal treasury. These days take place on their holy days, established by their religion. An example [of this] is the sale of wax, which must be bought and sold in immense quantities to light their houses of worship, and reaches an amount that is hard to imagine, and, therefore, religion, the government, and business are intertwined, all dependent on one another.[[44]](#endnote-45)

On another occasion, Ben-Malka questioned his Christian colleague, asking why if Jesus (according to the Christians) had atoned for the sin of First Adam, would it not make sense for all of humanity to recognize that Jesus had been punished on their behalves and gained atonement for them, and, therefore, they would never sin again? Ben-Malka polemically added, that this clearly has not happened. This rhetorical trope, in which the speaker accepts his opponent’s fundamental assumption for the sake of argument and then tries to convince his opponent that based upon his own assumptions, his arguments are weak, was common in medieval polemical disputations.[[45]](#endnote-46) Ben-Malka sharpened his argument by claiming that even if we accept that only Christians (as believers in Jesus) are forgiven, they too continue to sin, just like the rest of humanity! Moreover, if Jesus atoned for First Adam’s sin on behalf of the Christians, why are the punishments meted out to Adam still in practice: Christian wives still give birth in agony, Christian men work hard for their livelihoods, and both Christian men and women are mortal. The Christian responded that death is beneficial for human beings as it allows them to enter the Garden of Eden. Ben-Malka rejected this response, by expressing his surprise that if this were true, why don’t the human beings who are granted atonement (through Jesus, according to Christianity) enter the Garden of Even immediately where everyone lived before First Adam sinned? Also, what about the other punishments that Christians still suffer from?

Alongside the criticism that Ben-Malka expressed towards Christian doctrine, he also came to the defense of Jewish tradition regarding the aspersions cast on the Oral Torah. He addressed these apologetics to the “Karaites and the Christians.”[[46]](#endnote-47) Although this issue is ubiquitous to medieval Jewish-Christian polemics, it makes sense to address it in terms of Ben-Malka’s particular historical period, as in his period the doubts about the validity of rabbinic literature were often raised by Jews who had returned to Judaism, after they, or their ancestors, had converted to Christianity (for instance, Uriel de Costa and Baruch Spinoza).[[47]](#endnote-48) These returnees were accused of Karaism and even labeled ‘Karaites.’ During the same era, Sabbateans were also labeled Karaites, presumably because of the inherently antinomian nature of much of Sabbateanism and because Sabbateans did not practice some of the commandments.[[48]](#endnote-49) Ben-Malka explains that the Karaites and the Christians question the rabbinic claim that the Mishnah and the Talmud are traditions that go back to Moses and suggest that these interpretations originate with the Tannaim (the Sages of the Mishna) who interpreted the Written Torah. To respond to this claim, Ben-Malka intermittently quotes from the works of Joseph Ergas, (1685–1730) a distinguished rabbi from Livorno.[[49]](#endnote-50) Ben-Malka, following Ergas, argues that the Written Torah was given to Moses at Sinai; however, since anything that is written down is open to multiple interpretations, God had to teach Moses how to interpret the text in the way He desired. Moses passed this God-given interpretation on to Joshua orally and this process of oral transmission continued until the time of R. Judah the Prince who realized that the number of disciples was declining and trials and tribulations were increasing. He, therefore, composed the Mishnah with great concision but the text was so cryptic that later generations found it necessary to interpret it in a corpus that came to be known as *Gemara*. In other words, according to Ben-Malka, a written text requires an authoritative interpretation passed on from the transmitter of the text. Such an interpretation was, indeed, given orally to Moses by God. The rabbis were later forced to transcribe it because of increasingly difficult historical circumstances.

Ben-Malka, quoting Ergas again, further demonstrates that an Oral Torah was necessary in order to understand the Written Torah. Thus, for instance. He wondered how to understand the commandment “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Exod 12:2) without any accompanying interpretation. Is this the first of the lunar months or the solar ones, or, perhaps the first Egyptian or Chaldean one? Moreover how are we supposed to synchronize between the lunar and solar years so that we can observe the commandment of the Paschal lamb in the Spring as the Torah commands (Deut 16:1)? Ergas, and Ben-Malka in his footsteps, listed a series of additional commandments that would be difficult, if not impossible, to perform in practice without an accompanying, authoritative interpretation of the Written Torah. Among those he mentions are the commandment to slaughter animals before eating them, the prohibition against eating animal suet, the limit on the distance a Jew can walk from his home on Shabbat (and on Festivals and the Day of Atonement), and many other commandments.

Even though *Meshovah Niẓaḥat* is dedicated to Jewish-Christian polemics, Ben-Malka also mentioned such debates elsewhere in *Kaf Naki*.[[50]](#endnote-51) One specific polemic also needs to be addressed in terms of Ben-Malka’s particular historical period, the era of the scientific revolution which took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Taking part in this debate, Ben-Malka rejected Copernicus’s heliocentric theory which states that the sun is at the center of the universe, while the Earth, along with the rest of the planets, orbits around it; this revolutionary theory contrasted with the regnant geocentric theory which argued that planet Earth was the center of the universe and the sun orbited it. According to Ben-Malka, the heliocentric theory contradicts a simple reading of the Bible because the sun’s role is to illuminate and serve the earth. Moreover, according to this theory, Joshua had no reason to command the sun to stop moving (because it never moves), but rather he should have asked the earth to cease rotating.[[51]](#endnote-52)

Ben-Malka noted that “I raised this difficulty with a Christian, who shared the following thought with me [….]”. We might have assumed that the Christian would also reject heliocentrism because at the time both the Catholics and the Protestants rejected it. The former placed Copernicus’s book on the list of banned books (and later ordered Galileo Galilei’s book, which proved the veracity of the heliocentric theory, banned, as well), and the latter asserted that the notion that the sun stood at the center of the universe contradicted Holy Scriptures, in particular, Joshua’s commanding the sun to stand still. However, later in their discussion, it becomes clear that the Christian adopted an allegorical reading of the verses in the book of Joshua, presumably in light of Galileo Galilei’s suggestion.[[52]](#endnote-53)

According to the Christian, the difficulty with Joshua commanding the sun to stop moving pertains to the geocentric model as well. Since according to the latter model, if the sun’s autonomous movement from west to east had stopped at Joshua’s command the day would have gotten shorter, and nothing would have been achieved. Therefore, he reasoned that Joshua must have ordered the daily sphere (which carries the sun) to stop moving and not the sun itself. To reiterate, the daily sphere was commanded to stop its movement from east to west, not the sun. Given this interpretation, the passage in Joshua should be defined as “speaking in human language, as was accustomed among them.” Since they did not distinguish between (the movement of) the sun and (the movement of) the daily sphere, Scripture chose to just mention the sun. Ultimately, according to the Christian, the passage from the book of Joshua could not be utilized to refute Copernicus’ theory because the passage also refutes the regnant geocentric theory. Ben-Malka was most reluctant to accept the Christian’s allegorical interpretation of Joshua’s miracle, writing that “this is the substantive content of his solution, lead should be poured into his mouth,”[[53]](#endnote-54) and he continued his arguments refuting the notion that the sun stands at the center of the universe.[[54]](#endnote-55)

## **“A Christian Made a Claim Against Me”**

One of the most popular arguments made in Christian anti-Jewish literature was that the Jews’ exile is proof of Christianity’s veracity. This type of historical argument was used in religious polemics since historical reality was perceived to be determined by God.[[55]](#endnote-56) The Christians claimed that Israel’s exile was proof that God had replaced “Israel of the flesh” with “Israel of the spirit” because the former had rejected Jesus. Thus Israel’s existence as a despised minority in exile attests to their error and to God’s subsequent rejection of them, alongside the validation of the Christian faith provided by Christian nations’ success and prosperity. This argument was raised again in Agadir in the early eighteenth century. According to Ben-Malka, a Catholic Christian claimed that the lengthy exile indicates that hope was lost for the Jewish people and confirms Paul’s claim that God had replaced the Jewish people with another one.

All hope is lost for you Jews with this 1,645-year exile.[[56]](#endnote-57) Why do you continue to wait? The length of this period affirms Paul’s words….that compared Israel to an olive tree whose owners chopped it down and planted a tree that does not bear fruit in its place and this tree thrived, etc., and the olive tree will not be remembered or mentioned again (Rom. 11:17-24).[[57]](#endnote-58)

Ben-Malka refuted this argument in two ways. First, he made arguments from biblical verses, a stratagem ubiquitous in Jewish-Christian polemics.[[58]](#endnote-59) He claimed that the exile’s length in no way attests to God’s replacing the Jewish people with another since God had declared at the very beginning of their relationship that even though Israel would be exiled, He would not replace the Jewish people with another nation (Lev 26:44). Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 31:35-36) asserted that notwithstanding Israel’s sin, God would not replace them with another nation, and Paul certainly did not have the authority to contradict the words of a prophet.

The second way in which Ben-Malka refuted the Christian argument that God had replaced Israel was by employing his own historical arguments. For instance, he asked the Christians to explain why they had not been blessed with prophecy if they had replaced the Jewish people. Ben-Malka also offered an alternative interpretation of Christianity’s historical claims (that the success of the Christian nation attested to its chosenness, while Israel’s debased existence attested to God’s rejection) by drawing on an analogy employed by Saul Levi Morteira, the author of *Givat Sha’ul* and the rabbi of Amsterdam’s Sephardi-Portuguese community. According to Morteira, the Gentiles enjoy God’s divine abundance because He can not give it to Israel (as they sinned). Morteira explains that this is similar to the case of an upper-class woman whose infant dies and, to relieve the pain caused by the surplus milk in her breasts, nurses her maidservant’s baby.[[59]](#endnote-60) To sharpen his point, Ben-Malka also cited another analogy. The divine abundance that the Gentiles enjoy may be compared to the abundance a man lavishes on a prostitute to make his wife jealous and return to him. Ben-Malka relates that this comparison—of the Christians to a prostitute—infuriated his interlocutor; however, Ben-Malka provided a biblical basis for this analogy by citing Scripture (Deut 32:21).[[60]](#endnote-61)

The historical arguments testifying to Christianity’s veracity became even more powerful in the early modern period as Christianity spread to the New World—North and South America—becoming ever more successful and prosperous. Ben-Malka describes a Christian who disputed him in the following manner:

So that you should know that belief in Jesus and his religion is the truth and this is what God wants [...] when the Christians set out to explore, led by Christopher Columbus, they entered the land, conquered it, and accustomed its inhabitants [to their culture and religion] to the point where they left their religions and entered Jesus’s religion and became Christians;[[61]](#endnote-62) meaning that in the land that was possessed by the French, the natives became [culturally] French, and likewise in the land claimed by the Spanish, and so to the others, and they all became Christians. Only a few remain, in the deserts or the forests who have not become Christians yet. Therefore, the Christians asserted that this was a strong proof of the truth of Jesus’s religion, as it spreads throughout the world, even among the inhabitants of the faraway islands.[[62]](#endnote-63)

Ben-Malka refuted the aforementioned argument in two ways. First, if God wanted Christianity to be spread among the nations then it would have made sense for the Jews to adopt it first. Second, this empirical reality actually proves the superiority of the Jews! The spread of Christianity throughout the new territories—that is to say, America’s native peoples becoming Christians—actually proves that “the religion of Israel is the main thing.” He argues that since shifting from idol worship to Judaism directly is impossible, adopting Christianity is the necessary intermediate (or, intermediary) level.

Since the Holy One, blessed be He, wants to benefit all his creations, for they are all the products of His hands, may He be blessed, everyone accepted Jesus’s religion in order to accustom them to believe in His existence, may He be blessed, and in His providence and prophecy. For Jesus’s religion is situated in between the worship of the stars and images and true worship. For they could not have climbed the entire ladder [of spirituality] in one go, and from this [level] they can ascend to the religion of Israel. If this is so, this attests to [the religion of] Israel, for the Lord, may He be blessed, wishes to promulgate the truth throughout the world via his messiah, so that this way of speech may become entirely comprehensible to them, so that they may all call upon the name of the Lord and worship Him as one.[[63]](#endnote-64)

Along with the traditional claim (in its new iteration) that Israel’s exile proves God’s rejection of Israel and that Christian success vindicates their belief, the Christians who debated with Ben-Malka raised other well-known arguments against Judaism, for instance, the matter of forbidden foods. Thus, one Lutheran Christian said to Ben-Malka that certain commandments are “laws that are not good,” and are like the tales told by “old women and those with a wild imagination.”[[64]](#endnote-65) According to this Christian, God is indifferent to these types of actions. He only desires that human beings act uprightly: “Does God desire whether you eat this and do not eat that […], it is only God’s will, may He be blessed, that you act righteously and love justice.” In this case, God does not care what a person puts in his mouth, but what comes out of it: “He, may He be blessed, only wishes to distance [people] from speaking words of heresy, despicable things, curses, and suchlike, but there is no prohibition forbidding placing something in one’s mouth.” Likewise, according to the Christian, while the prohibition proscribing eating forbidden foods appears in the Pentateuch, this prohibition only applies to the generation of people “who did not yet know the Lord, and [therefore] he weighed them down with a few commandments that had no purpose [in order] to refine that generation.”

In his response, or, at least in his recorded response, Ben-Malka chose to focus on the matter of the prohibition’s time limit. He did not address the Christian’s first claim that God is indifferent to certain human actions by explicating the reasons for the commandments. Instead, Ben-Malka noted that Daniel, Ḥananya, Mishael, and Azariah, who lived one thousand years after Moses’s generation, were careful not to eat forbidden foods, explicitly demonstrating that “they certainly knew that the forbidden foods proscribed by Moses remained forbidden for all time.”[[65]](#endnote-66)

The Christian’s claim that the commandment proscribing the forbidden foods was only temporary and Ben-Malka’s decision to focus on this issue (and not on the commandments’ reasons) could have led Ben-Malka to a fundamental discussion of Christianity’s abrogation of the Law, a topic that often played a central part in Jewish anti-Christian literature.[[66]](#endnote-67) However, he did not take this path, at least not in his recorded response; instead, he chose to focus solely on the validity of the commandment forbidding certain foods.

The Christians who Ben-Malka confronted criticized not only Jewish beliefs and laws but also their customs. A new literary genre developed in sixteenth-century Western Europe: ethnographic depictions of the Jews that systematically described Jewish customs and rituals. This trend continued full steam ahead into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of the compositions were written in the *lingua franca* (not in Latin), and some of them became best-sellers. About two-thirds of the authors were converts and a third were Christians from birth. The agenda of these works was polemical, as they attempted to portray the customs as ridiculous and absurd, anti-Christian, steeped in superstition, and as diverging from the biblical commandments. Thus, as Deutsch proposed, we can classify the ethnographic writings about the Jews as “ethnographic polemic.”[[67]](#endnote-68)

A Christian Calvinist once challenged Ben-Malka, and as will become clear, it was no coincidence that Ben-Malka’s interlocutor was not a Catholic but a member of one of those denominations that sought to repair Christianity and reform Christian ritual. He questioned Ben-Malka about the Jewish custom of visiting cemeteries: “Why do the Jews go to cemeteries, for what is the purpose of going to someone’s grave after they die and they have returned to dust and their soul has returned to the Lord who gave it?”[[68]](#endnote-69) Ben-Malka responded that the human body still has great importance after death, as the fact that our forefathers made their sons take an oath to bury them with their own fathers demonstrates (Jacob made his sons swear and Joseph had his sons swear). Therefore, we do not bury an evil person with a righteous one (B. Sanhedrin 47a).

The Christian responded to this by saying, “our contemporaries investigated and know what the ancients did not know.” The Christian seems to be implying that contemporary knowledge refutes earlier assumptions about the body’s importance after death, so visiting graves should now clearly be worthless. Ben-Malka responded that while our contemporaries certainly know more than the ancients, and therefore takes precedence over it, this is only correct with regard to certain types of knowledge “intellectual, natural disciplines, and the wisdom relating to sailing ships, and so forth.” In all matters of divine wisdom, our contemporaries have no advantage over the ancients.[[69]](#endnote-70) The matters at hand, i.e., the body’s importance after death and visiting graves, is part of divine wisdom, declared Ben-Malka; therefore, “we have no incursion in this, neither you nor your wisdom.”

# Summary

The fifth part of Ben-Malka’s *Kaf Naki*, *Meshovah Niẓaḥat* dwells on a series of interreligious disputations that the author conducted with his Christian colleagues in Agadir during the first half of the eighteenth century. Despite the fact that, as Ben-Malka himself admits, his presentation has gaps, it sheds light on vital aspects of Jewish-Christian polemics (including those with the various post-Reformation Christian denominations) in a port city in the Maghreb in the aforementioned era. It paints a picture of the very lively contemporary atmosphere. Finding, identifying, and studying additional manuscripts that describe similar polemics will enrich our picture of Jewish-Christian polemics in the Maghreb in the waning years of the early modern period, and *ipso facto* this will also help paint a more diverse and detailed picture of Jewish-Christian polemics in general.

Ben-Malka only extemporized on a small number of the issues fundamental to Jewish-Christian polemics, apparently because he wanted to avoid plagiarizing published material. Of those topics, Ben-Malka did discuss, it is clear that he was well-versed in the intricacies of theological debate and was familiar with the most sophisticated tools the medieval polemical tradition had to offer. It is especially worth noting his familiarity with the later Jewish anti-Christian literature, including Isaac ben Abraham of Troki’s *Ḥizuk Emunah* and Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen’s *Sefer Niẓaḥon*, as well as his familiarity with the Jewish literature composed and printed in Europe, such as *Givat Shaul* by Saul Morteira, *Ma’aseh Tuviyah* by Tuviyah (Harofeh) Cohen, *Me’or Einayim* by Azariah dei Rossi (Azariah min ha-Adumim), and more. This notwithstanding, the debates that Ben-Malka participated in were a direct continuation of medieval Christian polemics, as were the other interreligious disputations that took place in the early modern period. As mentioned above, sometimes the traditional arguments nevertheless took on a new garb, such as those proofs that relied on the era’s geographical or scientific discoveries.

This portrayal of Ben-Malka’s debates, arguments, knowledge, and sources open a window onto eighteenth-century, Jewish Morocco’s, intellectual history, a topic that has been largely ignored in academic scholarship. However, simultaneously, it has also raised a number of questions. Were the other Moroccan rabbis, or, at least those living in port cities, as curious about these intellectual matters? Were they exposed to the best of contemporary Jewish creativity? Were they aware of the consequences of the revolutions taking place around them in the early modern period? In other words, is Ben-Malka representative of the other Moroccan rabbis (and not just the port rabbis) or is he an outlier? Further study will be necessary to paint a fuller and more diverse picture of Moroccan Jewry’s intellectual history during this period.

The interreligious polemics that took place in medieval and early modern Europe were meant to encourage mass conversion or to promote anti-Jewish policies, including the banishment of the Jews from Christian lands, and therefore posed a real threat to Jewish communities. In contrast, Agadir’s interreligious debate during the first half of the eighteenth century in no way posed a threat to the local Jewish community, and it was conducted in a pleasant atmosphere with the Jews freely and voluntarily participating. This picture presumably changed in later years, as nineteenth-century missionaries began to target Jews in Moroccan cities and twentieth-century colonial rule was established; however, this is a topic for further study.[[70]](#endnote-71)

# Endnotes

1. Naḥum Netanel Kenan, *Iyyunim be-‘Kaf Naki’: Siddur ha-Tefillah shel R. Khalifa ‘n Malka (Mekorot, Nusḥa’ot, Minhagim u-Megamot),* M.A, Bar-Ilan University, 2011, 17–20; *Sefer Kaf Naki ha-Shalem*, edited and redacted from manuscript form with additional commentary—Moshe Amar (Lod, 5774), 29–45. Henceforth all references are to this edition of the work. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. I will not address the section on Jewish-Muslim polemics in this paper. Scholarship on these polemics in Morocco is scant. See Sarah Lazarus-Yaffe, “*Terumato shel Mumar Yehudi mi-Morocco le-Pulmus ha-Muslemi* *Neged ha-Yehudim ve-ha-Yahadut”* *Pe’amim* 42 (1990): 83–90. I plan to devote a separate study to this topic that will include Ben-Malka’s writings. For now, I will note that throughout his composition, Ben-Malka quotes sayings and poetry in Arabic and translates them into Hebrew (even though, he did not always agree with them). For instance, see pages 234, 238, 239, 240, 267, 306, 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. I. Block, “Kalifa Ben Malka - Notes et Me'langes,” *REJ* 14 (1887): 114–115. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. H. Zafranu, “Une Letre-Homme D'Affaires Juif du Maroc Meridionak des XVIIe-XVIIIe Siecles: Rabbi Khalifa ben Malka,” in *Hommage a Georges Vajda* (Louvain, 1980), 399– 405; Issachar Ben-Ami, *Ha’araẓat Kedoshim be-Kerev Yehudei Morocco* (Jerusalem, 1984), 441. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. H. Zafrani השירה העברית במרוקו, ירושלים תשמ"ד, 58- 60.; Shlomo Elkayam, “*U-ve-Khen ha-Aniyim ve-ha-Evyonim Mevakshim Mayim: Piyyut le-Aẓirat Geshamim mi-tokh ‘Kaf Naki’ (ketav-yad) le-R. Khalifa Ben Malka*” *Berit* (27) 2008: 86–90; idem, “*Shir Todah al Batei ha-Knesset shel Agadir ve-She’ar Arei ha-Sus ‘she-Ḥazru le-Yishuvan’*” *Berit* 21 (2003): 44–49. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. On the former, see Shlomo Elkayam, “*Inyyenei Lashon be-Haghut ha-Siddur le-R. Khalifa Ben Malka*,” in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division 4, Volume 1 (Jerusalem, 1993), 201–204. On the latter, see Shlomo Elkayam, “*Nusaḥ ha-Tefillah shel Bnei Morocco al pi Sefer Kaf Naki le-R. Khalifa Ben-Malka*” *Pe’amim* 78 (1999): 61–72. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Kenan, Studies, 72–98. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Indeed, very few studies have been devoted to Jewish-Christian polemics in that century, and those extant were focused on Europe, primarily Italy, see: Daniel Lasker “*Ha-Pulmus ha-Anti-Noẓri be-Me’ah ha-Shomeneh Esreh*,*”* *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division B, Vol 1 (1994), 185–192; idem*,”‘Sefer Herev Pifiyot’ shel Shaul ben Merari (?): Pulmus Yehudi Italki Anti-Noẓri me-ha-Me’ah Shomeneh Esreh,*” *Italia* 12 (1996): 7–35; David Malkiel, “The Jewish-Christian Debate on the Eve of Modernity—Joshua Segre of Scandiano and his Asham Talui,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 164, 1–2 (2005): 157–186; Another few studies will be cited below as they become relevant.. מחקרים אחדים נסובו על הפולמוס היהודי-נוצרי בארצות האסלאם, אולם אלו התמקדו באימפריה העות'מאנית, ראו:

   Alisa Meyuhas-Ginio, "Reflections of Medieval Jewish-Christian polemics in the Me'am Lo'ez: Rabbi Ya'akov Khulis commentary of the book of Genesis (1730), David M. Bunis (ed.), Languages and Literatures of Sephardic and Oriental Jews, Jerusalem 2009, 81-90 (Heb.); Moises Orfali, "'Kur mazref ha-emunot u-mar'eh ha-emet by R. Isaac Lopez", Yom Tov Asis, Miriam Frenkel and Yaron Harel (eds), Aleppo Studies, Jerusalem 2009, 17- 36 )Heb). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Many studies have been published on this topic. Relevant studies will be cited in context below. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. See Daniel J. Lasker, “The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages,*” Proceedings of the American for Jewish Research* 57 (1990–1991): 121–153; Sarah Stroumsa, ed., *Dawud Ibn Marwan al-Muqammis’s Twenty Chapters* (Leiden, 1989); Daniel Lasker & Sarah Stroumsa, *Pulmus Nestor ha-Komer* [*The Polemic of Nestor the Priest*]—Critical Edition, (Jerusalem, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. For instance, in his book entitled *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 2, 4–7 and 8, 7–9. And, see, Harry A. Wolfson, “Saadia on the Semantic Aspect of the Problem of Attributes,” in Salo W. Baron Jubilee Volume, 2, (New York/London, 1975), 1009–1021; Harry A. Wolfson, “Saadia on the Trinity and Incarnation,” in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion* 2, (Cambridge, Mass./ London, 1997), 393–414; Daniel Lasker, “*Neged Me Hitpalmes Rav Sa’adia Gaon be-Diyuno be-Bitul ha-Torah,*” *Da’at* 32–33 (1994): 5–11. See too Eliezer Schlossberg “’*Neged Me Hitpalmes Rav Sa’adia Gaon be-Diyuno be-Bitul ha-Torah?’* *Teshuvah le-Ma’amaro shel Professor Daniel Lasker*,*” Da’at* 32–33 (1994): 13–17. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. See, Dov Schwartz, “*Rabbi Yehudah Halevi al Noẓrut ve-al ha-Madda ha-Nisiyoni*” *AJS Review* 19, 1, (1994):א-כד; Daniel J. Lasker, '”Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Thought of Judah Halevi,” *JQR* 81 (1990): 75–91; Daniel J. Lasker, "Rashi and Maimonides on Christianity,” in eds. E. Kanarfogel & M. Sokolow, *Between Rashi and Maimonides—Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis* (New York, 2010), 3–19; Naḥem Ilan, “Aspects of Abraham Maimuni's Attitude towards Christians in his Commentary on Genesis 36,” in ed. Miriam L. Hjalm, *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims* (Boston, 2017), 252–279. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Another work which would ordinarily be cited is *The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco*. One of the polemical genres most widely disseminated works, it has been preserved in hundreds of manuscripts and was translated into many languages. According to the epistle’s introduction, it was composed by Samuel of Fez who was about to convert from Judaism to Christianity. He wrote the epistle to his friend Isaac, expressing his conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. According to the text, the epistle was discovered by Alfonso Buenhombre, a Dominican monk, who translated it into Latin in 1339. However, contemporary scholars believe that he wrote the epistle himself. See Ora Limor, “The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco: A Best-Seller in the World of Polemics,” eds. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tubingen, 1996), 177–194. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Ora Limor, “*Vikuḥei Emunah be-Nemalei ha-Yam ha-Tikhon*,” *Pe’amim* 45 (1991): 35–38 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Haim Zeev Hirschberg, *Toldot ha-Yehudim be-Afrikah ha-Ẓefonit*, Vol 1 (Jerusalem, 1965), 322–324; Eliezer Bashan, *Sheviyah u-Pedut be-Ḥevrah ha-Yehudit be-Arẓot ha-Yam ha-Tikhon*: 1391–1830 (Ramat-Gan, 1980), 60; Boaz Huss, *Al Adnei Paz: Ha-Kabbalah shel Rabbi Shimon ibn Lavi* (Jerusalem, 2000), 6–7.  [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. This battle was also known as the Battle of the Three Kings since three kings lost their lives in it: the aforementioned king of Portugal and the two claimants to the Moroccan throne, Abu Abdallah and Abd al-Malik. See Mercedes Garcia-Arenal & Ahmad al-Mansur: *The Beginning of Modern Morocco*, (Oxford, 2009), 6-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. See, Eliyahu Lipiner, “*Yehudei Fez be-Me’ah ha-Shesh-Esreh be-Einav shel Kronika’i Portugali Ben Doram*,” in ed. Issachar Ben-Ami, *The Sepharadi and Oriental Jewish Heritage: Studies* (Jerusalem, 1982), 13–24; Michal Ohana, “The Jewish-Christian Polemics in the sermons of R. Shaul Serero of Fes (1566–1655),” Entangled Religions 6 (2018): 132–133; Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, 1993),172-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Wike Carsten, *The Marrakesh Dialogues: A Gospel Critique and Jewish Apology from the Spanish Renaissance* (Leiden, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Ohana, Serero. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. For instance, this was the first topic addressed in the Barcelona Disputation “We have agreed to speak about the matter of the Messiah, whether he has already come as is the belief of the Christians or whether he will come in the future as is the belief of the Jews,” see *Ramban,* *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe ben Naḥman* (Jerusalem, 1964), 303; Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moshe ben Naḥman—Biographiyah Intelektu’alit* (Jerusalem, 2020), 296–301. The exact same schedule was adopted in the second Disputation in Paris, see Jeremey Cohen, “*Vikuaḥ Pariz ha-Sheni ve-ha-Pulmus ha-Yehudi-Noẓri shel ha-Me’ah ha-Shelosh-Esreh*” *Tarbiz* 68 (1999): 558, 566. See Mercedes Garcia-Arenal & Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds - Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore/London, 2003), 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Marie Francois Dartois, *Agadir et le Sud* (Paris, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. David Malkiel, “Christian Hebraism in a Contemporary Key: The Search for Hebrew Epitaph Poetry in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” *JQR* 96, 1 (2006), 123–146; Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-166)*, (Leiden, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Ben-Malka noted that Menasseh ben Israel, one of the Amsterdam Sephardic community’s rabbis in the first half of the seventeenth century, asserted in his book *Nishmat Ḥayyim* that only Saadia Gaon, Yedaya b. Abraham HaBedershi (also known as Yedaya Hapenini) and Joseph Albo rejected this belief. The belief in metempsychosis was a matter of debate in the Sephardic communities of Western Europe. See Doron Danino, *Mahuto ve-Mashma’uyotav shel ha-Vikuaḥ Seviv ha-Emunah be-Gilgul Neshamot be-Kehillot Yisrael she-be-Veneẓia, Amsterdam, ve-Hamburg be-Mahalakh ha-Me’ah ha-17*, Ph.D. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Ora Limor, “*Be-Armon be-Barẓelonah u-be-Shuk be-Mayorka: Likrat Tipologiyah Ḥadashah shel Vikuḥei ha-Dat Bimei ha-Benayim,*” *Pe’amim* 94–95 (2003), 127. This congenial and tolerant atmosphere even allows the disputants to make unconventional and unorthodox claims that could never have been uttered in official debates. See Ram Ben-Shalom, “Between Official and Private Dispute: The Case of Christian Spain and Provence in the Late Middle Ages,” *AJS Review* 27, 1 (2003): 23–71. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. This polemical composition by the Karaite Isaac ben Abraham (1533–1594) of Troki (Poland-Lithuania) *Ḥizuk ha-Emunah* was disseminated widely among the Jewish communities and was even translated into several European languages. In his polemic with Christianity, Ben-Abraham did not employ Karaite sources. He refuted Christian doctrine using the arguments made by competing Christian sects and by adopting rationalist interpretation. See M. Waysblum, “Isaac Troki and Christian Controversy in the XVI Century,” *JQR* 3 (1952): 62–77; J. Fridman, “The Reformation and the Jewish Antichristian Polemics,” *Bibliotheque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 41 (1979): 83–97;Robert Dan, “Isaac Troky and his ‘Anti-Trinitarian’ Sources,” ed. Robert Dan, in *Occident and Orient—A Tribute to the Memory of A. Scheiber* (Budapest and Leiden, 1988), 69–82; Golda Akhiezer, “The Karaite Isaac ben Abraham of Troki and his Polemics against Rabbanites,” eds. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel, *Tradition, Heterodoxy, and Religious Culture—Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period* (Beer-Sheva, 2006), 437–468; Miriam Benfatto, “Jesus in Jewish Polemical Text: The Case of Isaac b. Abraham's ‘*Sefer Ḥizuk Emunah*’,” *Judaica: Beitrage zum Verstehen des Judentums* 74, 1–2 (2018): 96–115. Henceforth, all citations of this work refer to the Leipzig, 1857 version. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen’s (1421–?) polemical work *Sefer Niẓaḥon* was disseminated widely among Jews and Christians alike in the early modern period. The work was designed to grapple with Christian anti-Jewish claims (particularly with the accusation of heresy) and simultaneously with the internal dissent voiced by Jewish skeptics who were uncomfortable with the anthropomorphism and irrationality in the Bible. These doubters continued to be a threat even after they converted to Christianity. In order to grapple with these claims, Lipmann employed philosophical arguments, and thus authored the first Ashkenazi polemical book to take this approach. See *Sefer ha-Niẓaḥon,* a facsimile of Hackspan’s edition, Altdorf-Nierenberg 1644/ R. Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen, Introduction by (Frank) Ephraim Talmadge; Ora Limor and Israel Jacob Yuval, “Skepticism and Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Doubters in Sefer ha-Niẓaḥon,” eds. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 2004), 159–180; Milan Žonca, “The 'Imagined Communities' of Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen: Heresy and Communal Boundaries in Sefer Niẓaḥon,” in *The Jews of Europe around 1400: Disruption, Crisis, and Resilience*, eds. Lukas Clemens and Christoph Cluse (Wiesbaden, 2018), 119–142. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Some of the other books will be mentioned in context below. Elbaz described the relentless efforts of Morrocan rabbis to obtain and purchase books printed in Europe, André Elbaz, *Tefu*ẓ*at ha-Sefarim ha-Ivri’im be-Kerev Ḥakhmei Fez be-Me’ah ha-Shemoneh Esreh*,*” Me-Kedem u-Mayyim* 9 (2006), 37–46. However, it seems clear that Ben-Malka had access to, or even possessed, a considerable number of books, many of which were even up-to-date. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. In his general introduction to the book, wherein he presented the five parts of his work, Ben-Malka explained why he omitted much of the material from his disputes: he wished to avoid accusations of literary plagiarism. In the same introduction, he also cites Solomon ibn Verga’s *Shevet Yehudah* (Constantinople, 1550). Ibn Verga (1460–1554) describes several interreligious disputations in his book, most, if not all, fictional, except the Disputation of Tortosa (1413–1414). For the most part, he does not focus on the theological conflict in these debates, but rather on personal and practical matters. However, in his description of the Disputation at Tortosa, he elaborated upon the debates concerning the correct way of interpreting the Talmud and the true heir of God’s covenant with the chosen people. According to Cohen, Ibn Verga reworked what was known about the Disputation of Tortosa, so that he could extract the messages he wished to teach his readers: notwithstanding the harsh conditions, God’s providence had not left Israel; the Christian rulers function as the mediators of this providence, and, therefore, the Jews must act with respect towards the monarchy. See Jeremy Cohen, “Interreligious Debate and the Literary Creativity: Solomon ibn Verga on the Disputation of Tortosa,” *JQR* 20, 2 (2013): 159–181. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Lutherans: Sections Four and Twelve; Catholics: Section Five; Calvinists: Section Eight [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. The Pope is the head of the hierarchical system of the Roman Catholic Church and lives in Rome in Vatican City. Next in line are the bishops and below them, in the administrative hierarchy, are the cardinals. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several groups consolidated and rejected the Catholic Church. As a group, they were known as Protestants. The German Martin Luther (1438–1546) was Protestant Christianity’s founder and chief theologian, while the French John Calvin (1509–1546), for whom the Protestant Calvinists are named, was one of its leaders, [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Translator: Perhaps, Greek Orthodox (Grigus being a corruption of the original) and Armenean or Irmaneus? [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Ben-*Malka*, *Meshovah Niẓaḥat* (henceforth MN in endnotes), 406–407. On the Jews’ familiarity with the Christian Reformation, see Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, “The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 4 (1971): 239–326; idem, "Jewish-Christian Disputation in the Setting of Humanism and Reformation," *HTR* 59, 4 (1966): 369-390; David Abraham, “The Lutheran Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography,” *JQR* 10, 2 (2003): 124–139. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Daniel J. Lasker, “The Jewish Critique of Christianity: In Search of a New Narrative, ”*Studies in Christian-Jewish Relation* 6 (2011): 1–9. For a classification of Jewish anti-Christian literature, see Jeremy Cohen, “Towards a Functional Classification of Jewish Anti-Christian Polemic in the High Middle Ages,” in *Religionsgesprache im Mittelater* (Wolfenbutteler Mittelater-Studien 4) eds. B. Lewis and F. Niewohner (Wiesbaden, 1992), 93–114. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Type I: Section 4: “A Christian Lutheran made a claim against me,” 406; Section 5: “A Christian Papist made a claim against me,” 408; Section 8: “One of the Christian Calvinists made a claim against me,” 416; Section 10: “A Christian made a claim against me,” 417; Section 11: “One of the Christians argued against me, saying”; Section 12: “A Lutheran Christian argued against me”, 419. Type 2: Section 6: “I made a claim against a Christian”, 412; “I made further arguments against them,” 413. Type 3: Section 1: “I will begin with an introduction describing my wonder at what I saw in the Christian books known as the *Even Giliyon* [Evangelion]….,” 403; Section 3: “And I will begin with the arguments of the Sages and their remarks concerning what will happen to the heretics in Tractate A”Z [*Avodah Zarah*, lit.Idolatry], Chpt 4….,” 405; Section 13: “To the Karaites and the Christians who carp against the Oral Torah….,” 420. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Ibid., 423–424. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Ibid., 317. Later in his work, Ben-Malka also describes his conversation with Northern European fishermen who corroborated the aforementioned Christian’s claim about worms infesting an animal corpse (a lion, in Samson’s case, and a fish in the case of the fishermen) and over time transforming it into another type of vermin (bees, in Samson’s case, and locusts, in the other case). Furthermore, below, Ben-Malka describes his conversation with “men who came from *Einglitira* [=England].” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Ibid., 385–386. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Daniel J. Lasker, “Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period: Change or Continuity,” in *Tradition, Heterodoxy, and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva, 2006), 469-488. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Ben-Malka, MN, 403. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. For the original (and lengthy) source, see Ben-Abraham, *Ḥizuk Emunah*, Part I, Chapter 45, 87–90. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Ibid., 414. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Ibid., 403–404. For Ben-Abraham’s original words, see Isaac Ben-Abraham, *Ḥizuk Emunah*, *ha-Haẓa’ah.* [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Ben-Malka, MN, 404. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. See, for instance, (Frank) Ephraim Talmadge, *Kitvei Pulmus le-Profiat Duran: Kelimat Goyim ve-Iggeret Al Tehi ka-Avotekha* (Jerusalem, 1981), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Ben-Malka, MN, 420–423. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Shalom Rosenberg, “*Emunat Hakhamim*,” in Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus eds., *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge Mass. 1987), 285–341. Yoseph Kaplan, *Mi-Noẓrim* *Ḥadashim le-Yehudim Ḥadashim* (Jerusalem, 2003), 257–299; Moshe Orphali, *Be-Ma’avak al Erkah shel Torah: ‘Ha-Numologiyah’* (Jerusalem, 1997), 22-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Lasker, *Ha-Karai*, 100. Elsewhere Ben-Malka notes the extensive spread of Sabbatean beliefs in the Maghreb, 290. On the Moroccan Sabbatean custom of annulling the fast days and instituting changes in the prayer service (albeit in keeping with their belief that the time of redemption had arrived), see Eliyahu Moyal, “*Hatenu’a ha-Shabbeta’it be-Morocco—Toldotehah u-Mekorotehah*,” (Tel-Aviv, 1984), 83–92, 98–104. While the Sabbatean prophet from Meknes, Joseph ibn Ẓur mandated certain halakhic changes, such as moving the date of the Festival of Pentecost to make it follow immediately after Passover. These changes were minor, so it is fair to say that his primary involvement in Sabbateanism was limited to Messianism and not to an antinomian agenda. See, Eliezer Baumgarten “*Derashot al ha-Ilan ha-Kabbali le-Yosef ibn Ẓur*,*”* *Kabbalah* 37 (2014): 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. For Ergas’s own words, see Raphael Meldolah, *Mayim Rabbim* (Amsterdam, 1697), *She’elah* 20. Before quoting Ergas, Ben-Malka notes that what he writes is, in fact, based upon Judah Halevi’s earlier work, and he directs the reader to the *Kuzari* 3:30 onwards. A cursory glance at that passage (especially 3:35) reveals that Halevi brought many examples of biblical commandments that are impossible to understand without an Oral Torah, a fact that Ergas himself mentions later in his writings. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. Ben-Malka, *Kaf Naki*, 327–328. It is unclear why this debate, or at least part of it, was not placed in *Meshovah Niẓaḥat*. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Ben-Malka lauded Tuviyah Cohen, also known as Tuviyah Harofeh (Tuviyah the Doctor) the author of *Ma’aseh Tuviyah*, who nicknamed Copernicus “the first born of Satan.” For Tuviyah’s original wording, see Tuviyah Cohen, *Ma’aseh Tuviyah* (Venice, 1687), 50b–53a. Avraham Melamed, *Al Kitfei Anakim Toldot ha-Pulmus bein Aḥaronim le-Rishonim be-Hagut ha-Yehudit Bimei ha-Benayim u-be-Reishit ha-Et ha-Ḥadashah*, (Ramat-Gan, 2004), 226–232, David Ruderman, Jewish thought and scientific discovery in early modern Europe, (New Haven 1995), 229–255. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Galileo made this argument in his 1615 letter (the second, expanded one) to the Grand Duchess Christina of Lorraine. It was widely dispersed even while still in manuscript form. See Ẓvi Mazeh, *Al ha-Sivuvim shel Kadur ha-Areẓ—Gilguleiha shel ha-Mahapekhah ha-Kopernike’it* (Jerusalem, 2021), 178–184. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Apparently, Ben-Malka felt that the Christian’s allegorical interpretation minimized the greatness of the miracle ascribed to Joshua. According to the interpretation, Joshua did not stop the sun from moving, but “only” the motion of the daily sphere. Joshua’s aforementioned miracle greatly troubled the medieval Jewish thinkers and commentators. The rationalists among them wished to detach the miracle from reality because according to Aristotle, the rules of nature are eternal and unchanging, particularly the laws of the celestial spheres. In contrast to the rationalists, the conservative thinkers believed the miracle actually happened and even wished to increase its extent and overwhelming effect. In between these two schools of thought, we find moderate commentators who championed the miracle’s reality, but wished to minimize its extent so that the Bible would only be violating part of the laws of nature. See Dov Schwartz, “*Ha-Omnam Amdah Lo Ḥamah le-Yehoshua? Perek be-Torat ha-Nes be-Filosofiyah ha-Yehudit shel Yemei ha-Benayim,*” *Da’at* 42 (1999): 33–62. For the first half of the seventeenth-century thoughts of the Fez rabbis, Aharon ben Ḥayyim and Shaul Serero, on the matter, see Michal Ohana, *Ben Shelosh Arim—Hagut Yehudit bi-Ẓefon Afrikah be-Dorot she-le-Aḥar Geirush Sefarad*, Chapter Eight (in press). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. On the heliocentric model’s gradual infiltration of the Jewish world, see Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought* (Oxford, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. Historical arguments were not considered particularly powerful, in contrast to exegetical or logical ones since both sides interpreted the historical reality in light of their own worldviews (as Ben-Malka, indeed, does below). See Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1977), 7–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. This dating clearly indicates that the debate took place during the second decade of the eighteenth century, since 1,645 years since the destruction of the Second Temple is 1713 CE. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. Ben-Malka, MN, 408. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, 3–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. Saul Morteira, *Givat Shaul* (Amsterdam, 1645), 87b (Sermon 49). On Jewish-Christian polemics in Morteira’s sermons, see Marc Saperstein, “Christianity, Christians and ‘New Christian’ in the Sermons of Saul Levi Morteira*,*” *HUCA* 70–71 (1999–2000): 329–384. In fact, Ben-Malka’s teacher, Judah ben Attar, made a similar suggestion. See Judah ben Attar, *Sefer Minḥat Yehudah* *Mahadurah Tinyyana,* ed. Moshe Amar (Lod, 2011), 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. Ben-Malka also described this with great brevity in *Kaf Naki*’s *Parpera’ot le-Ḥokhmah*, making sure to note the fundamental points, 245–246. He concluded his comments there with a brief poem:

    Don’t give up, forlorn of mercy/ [doomed] to wander the length of the exile to the end

    And [watch] the evil people’s tranquility and the happiness among the nations/and [see that] they dwell in your land as a heritage.

    Surely I have sworn not to exchange you among those who arise/I will not replace you though pain will torment you.

    You made Him jealous by [worshipping] dumb idols/and He too with a vile nation angers you.

    Ben-Malka highlights another dimension of the lengthy exile when he delves into the topic of “calculating the End of Days.” In *Parpera’ot le-Ḥokhmah*, Section 86, he discusses Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi’s calculation of the End of Days (in his book *Meshare Kitrin*), Isaac Abarbanel’s calculation (in his book *Mayanei ha-Yeshu’ah*) and others calculations, and even offers a suggestion of his own, 288–294. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. Ben-Malka noted that Menasseh Ben Israel in his book *Mikveh Yisrael* had investigated the provenance of these native Americans and proposed that they might be the descendants of the ten lost tribes. See Steven Nadler, *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* (New Haven, 2018); Limor Mintz-Manor, *Ha-siach al ‘ha-Olam ha-Ḥadash be-Tarbut ha-Yehudit be-et ha-Ḥadashah ha-Mukdemet*, Ph.D. Thesis, Jerusalem, 2014, 240–261. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. Ben-Malka, MN, 417–418. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. Ibid., 418–419. Ben-Malka writes that he later noticed that Judah Halevi had made the same argument in *Kuzari* 4:23: “for he wrote [and these are his very words] ‘and these Hagarians [descendants of Ishmael son of Hagar] are a preparation and an introduction for the Messiah….’ see therein.” [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. Ibid., 419. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
65. Ibid., 420. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
66. In their attempts to refute Christianity’s total nullification of commandments, the Jewish philosophical thinkers charged that nullifying the commandments would have been anathema to Jesus himself. Profiat Duran dedicated the fourth chapter of his book *Kelimat ha-Goyim* to explicating this counter-claim. Having made this distinction between Jesus’s original intentions and the later Christians’ customs, Duran and other Jewish commentators claimed that early Christian history had two stages. See Ram Ben-Shalom, *Mul Tarbut Noẓrit—Toda’ah Historit ve-Dimuyei Avar be-Kerev Yehudei Sefarad u-Provans Bimei ha-Beynayim* (Jerusalem, 2007), 154–174. In doing so, the Jewish philosophers wished to emphasize Paul’s dramatic modification of Christianity, a change that meant that later Christianity was unfaithful to its own Holy Scriptures, and, therefore, has no authority over the Christians, and certainly not over the Jews. See, for instance, Schwartz, *R. Yehudah Halevi*, p. 4, n. 7–12. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
67. Yaacov Deutsch, “‘A View of the Jewish Religion’: Conception of Jewish Practice and Ritual in Early Modern Europe,” *Archiv fur Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2000): 273–295. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
68. Ben-Malka, MN, 416. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
69. This question, ‘Are the contemporaries or the ancestors greater?’ very much troubled the Jewish thinkers in the early modern period given the great many new discoveries made at that time. See, Melamed, *Al Kitfei Anakim*, 188- 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
70. On the former, Eliezer Bashan, *Ha-Yehudim be-Morocco be-Me’ah ha-19 ve-ha-Misi’on ha-Anglikani* (Ramat-Gan, 1999). On the Jewish-Christian polemic that erupted throughout the Ottoman Empire under these conditions, see, Yaron Harel “*Likutei Amarim in Ladino—Al Sifrut ha-Pulmus shel ha-Rav Refael Kaẓin*,” in *Leshonot Yehudei Sefarad ve-ha-Mizraḥ ve-Sifruyoteihem*, ed. David Bonis (Jerusalem, 2009), 106–119. On the latter, for instance, see Yosef Mashash’s (a twentieth century rabbi in Tlemsen and Meknes) discussion: Yosef Mashash, *Mayim Hayyim*, Part 2 (Jerusalem, 1985), 193 (*Yoreh De’ah* 108); idem, *Oẓar ha-Mikhtavim*, Part 1 (Jerusalem, 1968), 133. David Moshe Biton, “Muslims and Christians in the Writings of Twentieth-Century Hakhamim of Morocco,” in Joseph Chetrit, Jane Gerber, Drora Arussy eds., *Jews and Muslims in Morocco—Their Intersecting Worlds*, (Lexington Books, 2021), 301. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)