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Z O H A R

Pritzker Edition

VOLUME ONE

Translation and Commentary by
Daniel C. Matt

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To Margot

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Foreword

Some years ago, I began to study the Torah. As my facility with the text grew, I pursued the midrashic literature of the rabbis, and the interpretations of the classic medieval commentators. Eventually, I began to inquire about mystical commentaries on the Torah. I turned to the *Zohar*, seeking an English translation of its original Aramaic. I soon learned that previous translations not only were incomplete but also had been undertaken in the early twentieth century. Therefore, they did not reflect the enormous advances in scholarship since made by Gershom Scholem and his students. It was at this point that I realized how much I wanted to be able to study the *Zohar* from an English translation that would draw upon the research and scholarship of the past half-century. I determined to sponsor such a translation; the book you hold in your hands is the result.

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By its nature and purpose, the *Zohar* is difficult to penetrate. For hundreds of years it was inaccessible to all but a few. Furthermore, after the Sabbatean episode of the seventeenth century, the Jewish community became concerned about the potency of mystical ideas; leaders were anything but eager to promulgate the *Zohar*. Even with the rise of Hasidism as a mystically based movement starting in the eighteenth century, the *Zohar* remained a closed book. Consequently, bringing the *Zohar* to the English-reading public was—and continues to be—a complex, challenging task.

The words that can express my appreciation to Daniel C. Matt are found on every page of his translation of the *Zohar*. His scholarship, his artistry, and his poetry speak for themselves. You, the reader, are in his debt.

The odyssey of the past nine years, which will continue for some years to come, has been shepherded through a tangle of legal and administrative steps with the able and devoted skill of Glen Miller.

Professor Arthur Green, who co-chairs the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, has been a thoughtful and faithful counselor from the inception of the project.

My husband Tom, while not a student of the *Zohar*, recognized the magnitude and the importance of this project. He has kept us ever vigilant and focused with his insightful questions and thoughts and his constant support.

Foreword

From conception through gestation and finally to birth, this project would not have been realized without the wisdom, knowledge, and nurturing of Rabbi Yehiel Poupko. He is my teacher and my friend, and it is to him that this edition of the *Zohar* is dedicated.

It is with a sense of fulfillment and awe for Daniel Matt's remarkable accomplishment that my family and I now present the *Zohar* to the English-reading public, with the hope that the radiance that flows from this great work and from the Jewish mystical tradition will bring light to those who seek it.

Margot Pritzker

Translator's Introduction

DANIEL C. MATT

S*efer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Radiance)¹ has amazed and overwhelmed readers ever since it emerged mysteriously in medieval Spain (Castile) toward the end of the thirteenth century. Written mostly in a unique Aramaic, this masterpiece of Kabbalah exceeds the dimensions of a normal book; it is virtually a body of literature, comprising over twenty discrete sections. The bulk of the *Zohar* consists of a running commentary on the Torah, from Genesis through Deuteronomy. This translation begins and focuses there—in what are projected to be ten volumes; two subsequent volumes will cover other, shorter sections.²

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Arthur Green's introduction to this volume traces the development of Kabbalah and discusses the historical and literary context of the *Zohar*, its style, the complex question of authorship, and the symbolism of the ten *sefirot* (various aspects of the divine Self). Here I wish to treat several topics directly related to this translation and commentary.

Establishing the Text of the Zohar

This edition reflects a newly constructed, precise text of the *Zohar*, based on original manuscripts. Why was the creation of such a text necessary? All previous translations of the *Zohar* are based on the standard printed editions, which nearly all derive from the Mantua edition (1558–60), supplemented by variant readings from the Cremona edition (1559–60). At first I intended to

1. The title derives from the word זָהָר (*zohar*) in Daniel 12:3: *The enlightened will shine like the zohar, radiance [or: splendor], of the sky.*

2. On the various sections of the *Zohar*, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 214–19; Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:1–7. All of these sections are written in Aramaic, except for *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, which is written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The following sections are scheduled to be translated as part of the running commentary on the Torah, as in the standard editions of the *Zohar*: *Raza de-Razin*, *Sava de-Mishpatim*, *Sifra di-Tsni'uta*, *Idra Rabba*, *Idra Zuta*, *Rav Metivta*, and *Yanuqa*. The two subsequent volumes will include *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, *Matnitin*, *Tosefta*, *Sitrei Torah*, *Heikhalot*, *Sitrei Otiyyot*, "Vision of Ezekiel," *Qav ha-Middah*, and *Zohar to Song of Songs*. Two sections identified as imitations written by a later kabbalist, *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna*, are not planned to be included.

follow the same procedure, but upon examining many of the original manuscripts of the *Zohar* dating from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, I discovered a significant number of superior readings that had been rejected or revised by editors of the first printed editions.

Upon further examination, I noticed something more intriguing—a phenomenon familiar to scholars of medieval texts. Within the manuscripts themselves were signs of an editorial process: revision, reformulation, and emendation.³ After careful analysis, I concluded that certain manuscripts of older lineage reflect an earlier recension of the *Zohar*, which was then reworked in manuscripts of later lineage.⁴

I realized that I could no longer rely on the printed versions of the *Zohar*, since these obscured earlier versions. So I took it upon myself to reconstruct a new-ancient version of the Aramaic text based on the manuscripts, one which could serve as the foundation for this translation.

If I could have located a complete, reliable manuscript of the *Zohar*, this would have provided a starting point. Unfortunately no such manuscript exists anywhere in the world; in all likelihood it never did, since from the start the *Zohar* was circulated in sections or booklets. Probably no single complete *Book of the Zohar* existed until it was printed nearly three hundred years later in the sixteenth century, collated from various manuscripts.⁵

3. See Ernst Goldschmidt, *Medieval Texts and Their First Appearance in Print*; Malachi Beit-Arié, "Transmission of Texts by Scribes and Copyists: Unconscious and Critical Interferences"; Israel Ta-Shma, "The 'Open' Book in Medieval Hebrew Literature: The Problem of Authorized Editions"; Daniel Abrams, introduction to *Sefer ha-Bahir*, edited by idem, 8–14; idem, "Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature."

4. Among the manuscripts usually reflecting an earlier recension are the following: Cambridge, University Library, MS Add. 1023; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 217; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 1761; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 1564; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 779; Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 2971; Toronto, University of Toronto, MS Friedberg 5-015; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 206, 208. Manuscripts resembling (and perhaps underlying) the Mantua edition include: London, British Museum, MS 762; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 781; Parma, Perreau 15/A.

A list of eighty-four *Zohar* manuscripts (assembled by a team working under Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer) was published by Zvia Rubin in "Mif'al ha-Zohar: Mattarot ve-Hessegim," 172–73. Ronit Meroz of Tel Aviv University is conducting a systematic analysis of over six hundred extant manuscripts and fragments of the *Zohar*. In her extensive research she has identified numerous examples of editing and revision. While the discovery noted here of earlier and later recensions of the *Zohar* is my own, I have benefited from discussions with her and wish to thank her for sharing her insights with me. See her article "Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations" and her other studies listed in the Bibliography.

For further information on the manuscripts of the *Zohar*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:99–101; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 236–37; and the comments of Malachi Beit-Arié, cited by Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar*, 103–4.

5. See Abrams, "Eimatai Ḥubberah ha-Haqdamah le-Sefer ha-Zohar?"; idem, "Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature," 61.

This situation left me with two choices. I could select the best manuscript for each individual Torah portion of the *Zohar* and produce a “diplomatic” text, an exact reproduction of the original. Or, I could fashion a critical text, selecting from a wide range of variants in different manuscripts.

After consulting with members of our Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, I chose to compose a critical text, based on a selection and evaluation of the manuscript readings. The primary reason was simply that even for individual sections of the *Zohar* there is no one “best” manuscript: each has its own deficiencies and scribal errors. Back in the sixteenth century, the editors in Mantua and Cremona also fashioned critical texts, the former drawing on ten manuscripts, the latter on six.⁶

For these first two volumes of the translation, I identified nearly twenty reliable manuscripts, based on the criteria of provenance, age, lack of scribal errors, and legibility. The originals are preserved in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris, Munich, Rome, the Vatican, Parma, Toronto, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, while microfilm copies are available in the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, in the Jewish National and University Library on the campus of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.⁷

It is appropriate to describe more fully the methodology used in this scholarly undertaking. My research assistant meticulously combs through about half of these manuscripts and prepares a list of variant readings. For particularly difficult words or phrases, we check additional manuscripts. In addition to the manuscripts, my assistant lists variants from the Mantua and Cremona editions of the *Zohar*, as well as the edition used by Moses Cordovero in his sixteenth-century commentary, *Or Yaqar*.⁸

My procedure for establishing the Aramaic text is as follows. I begin with Reuven Margalioṯ's edition of *Sefer ha-Zohar*,⁹ based on the Vilna edition, which in turn is based on the Mantua edition. This represents a relatively reliable starting point. In front of me I have the list of variants prepared by my research assistant, photocopies of the original manuscripts, and other witnesses referred to previously.¹⁰ I peruse the variants line by line. Some of these are

6. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:98. For an enlightening comparison of diplomatic and critical editing, see Chaim Milikowsky, “Further on Editing Rabbinic Texts.”

7. See the list of *Zohar* manuscripts in the Bibliography, and above, note 4. Bound copies of nearly all of these manuscripts are housed in the Gershom Scholem Collection, Jewish National and University Library.

8. I also check readings in other sources including: Menaḥem Recanati, *Peirush al ha-Torah*; Joseph Angelino, *Livnat ha-Sappir*; Abraham Galante, in *Or ha-Ḥammah*; Shim'on Lavi, *Ketem Paz*; Abraham Azulai, *Or ha-Levanah*; Joseph Ḥamiz, ed., *Derekh Emet* (a list of emendations to the Mantua edition); Shalom Buzaglo, *Miqdash Melekh*; Yehudah Ashlag, *Peirush ha-Sullam*; and *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar*. See the Bibliography.

9. *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margalioṯ.

10. See above, note 8.

simply scribal errors or glosses, but some represent what appear to be better readings. When I identify an apparently better reading, I check if it is shared and confirmed by several reliable manuscripts and witnesses. If it is, I consider substituting it for the printed text.

Over the centuries, *Sefer ha-Zohar* has been revised by countless scribes and editors who tried to smooth away the rough edges of the text by adding an explanatory phrase, correcting an apparent syntactical mistake, or taming a wild neologism by substituting a more familiar, bland term. Often, relying on the variants, I decide to remove these accumulated layers of revision, thereby restoring a more original text. I seek to recover the *Zohar's* primal texture and cryptic flavor.

If the early manuscripts preserve unusual, striking wording that is revised or "corrected" by several later manuscripts and the printed editions, I tend to go with the older reading. Often, according to the more reliable manuscripts, a Zoharic rabbi creatively paraphrases a Talmudic saying. Some of the later manuscripts and the printed editions may then restore this saying to its exact Talmudic form. In such cases I emend the printed text in favor of the *Zohar's* original formulation—original in both senses: older and creative. In the commentary I cite the Talmudic saying on which the paraphrase is based, so that readers can see the transition and trace the imaginative process.

I do not claim to be fully restoring "the original text of the *Zohar*." There may never have been any such thing, since the text probably emerged over many years, written and distributed piecemeal. However, through painstaking analysis of the variants, I am able to scrape away some seven hundred years of accretion and corruption, and at least approach that elusive, hypothetical original. This revised Aramaic text of the *Zohar*, the basis of my translation, will be made available via the Internet and may be downloaded for study and scholarly examination.¹¹

Translation and Commentary

All translation is inherently inadequate, a well-intentioned betrayal. In the words of the second-century sage Rabbi Yehudah, "One who translates a verse literally is a liar; one who adds to it is a blasphemer."¹² Furthermore, the *Zohar* is notoriously obscure—perhaps the most difficult Jewish classic to translate. It was composed in Castile mostly in Aramaic, a language no longer spoken in medieval Spain.¹³ The author(s) concocted a unique blend of Aramaic out of traditional sources, especially the Babylonian Talmud and *Targum Onqelos* (an

11. At the website of Stanford University Press: < www.sup.org >.

12. BT *Qiddushin* 49a.

13. On the *Zohar's* Aramaic, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 226–29; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:64–68.

Aramaic translation of the Torah). This unparalleled neo-Aramaic is peppered with enigmatic expressions, puns, outlandish constructions, puzzling neologisms, solecisms, and traces of medieval Hebrew and Castilian.

The *Zohar's* prose is poetic, overflowing with multiple connotations, composed in such a way that you often cannot pin down the precise meaning of a phrase. The language befits the subject matter, which is mysterious, elusive, and ineffable; words can merely suggest and hint. An unfathomable process may be stated, then immediately denied: "It split and did not split its aura."¹⁴ Occasionally we encounter oxymorons, such as "new-ancient words," alluding to the dual nature of the *Zohar's* secrets, recently composed yet ascribed to ancient sources.¹⁵ The first impulse of divine emanation is described as *בְּרִצְיָנָא דְקַרְדִּינִינְתָא* (*botsina de-qardinuta*), "a spark of impenetrable darkness,"¹⁶ so intensely bright that it cannot be seen.

Through the centuries, the potency of the *Zohar's* language has mesmerized even those who could not plumb its secrets. While kabbalists delved deeply, the uninitiated chanted the lyrical Aramaic, often unaware of its literal meaning. In the words of an eighteenth-century mystic, "Even if one does not understand, the language is suited to the soul."¹⁷

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No doubt it is risky to translate the *Zohar*, but it would be worse to leave these gems of wisdom buried in their ancient Aramaic vault. So I have plunged in, seeking to transmit some of the *Zohar's* magic. The previous English translation (composed in the 1930s by Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul Levertoff) reads smoothly but often misunderstands the text.¹⁸ Its genteel prose is more a paraphrase than an accurate translation—avoiding unfamiliar terms, censoring erotic material, skipping difficult passages and even entire sections. The English flows too fluently compared to the original, subduing the unruly Aramaic, failing to render its untamed vibrancy. Moreover, since the translation is unaccompanied by a commentary, the symbolism remains impenetrable.

Despite its shortcomings, I have learned much from consulting this translation, along with others.¹⁹ But my approach is significantly different. Though I wish to make the *Zohar* accessible, I also want to convey its strangeness,

14. *Zohar* 1:15a. Citations of the *Zohar* refer to the standard Aramaic pagination (based on the Mantua edition of 1558–60), which in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* is indicated in the running head on each page.

15. See Daniel Matt, "New-Ancient Words': The Aura of Secrecy in the *Zohar*."

16. *Zohar* 1:15a.

17. Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto, in his preface to *Qelāḥ Pitḥei Ḥokhmah*, cited by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:29.

18. This five-volume edition is entitled *The Zohar* (see Bibliography). Scholem remarks (*Kabbalah*, 241) that it "suffers from incomplete or erroneous understanding of many parts of the kabbalistic exposition."

19. I have also consulted four different Hebrew translations, by Yehudah Ashlag, Daniel Frisch, Yehudah Edri, and Yechiel Bar-Lev; Charles Mopsik's French translation, *Le Zohar*;

potency, and rich ambiguity. Here the commentary is essential. When the translation cannot adequately express a multifaceted phrase, I unfold the range of meaning in the commentary. When the translation is as cryptic as the original Aramaic, the commentary rescues the stranded reader.

My style of translation is literal yet poetic. I am convinced that a literal rendering of the *Zohar* is not only the most accurate but also the most colorful and zestful—the best way to transmit the lyrical energy of the Aramaic. Still, at times, the multivalent language invites a certain freedom of expression. Let me cite two related examples. In *Zohar* 1:83a, Rabbi Shim'on describes the night-time journey of the soul, soaring skyward from her sleeping body: "Flying, she encounters those קומרין טהירין (*qumrin tehirin*) of defilement."

What does this bizarre term mean? The Sperling-Simon translation renders it as "certain bright but unclean essences."²⁰ The English translation of Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* reads: "the deceiving lights of uncleanness,"²¹ while Tishby's original Hebrew translation reads a bit differently: קימורי נגוהות (*qimmurei negohot*)—roughly: "vaulted splendors"—though in his note he acknowledges that the meaning is "doubtful."²² I render the sentence as follows: "Flying, she encounters those hooded, hunchbacked, dazzling demons of defilement." The accompanying commentary explains that these are malevolent forces who block the ascent of an unworthy soul. *Qumrin* derives via rabbinic usage from the Greek *qamara*, "arched cover," while *tehirin* is a cognate of the Aramaic *tihara*, meaning "brightness, noon." One class of demons is named *tiharei*, "noonday demons."

The virtuous soul who evades these demons reaches heaven and receives a divine message. According to another Zoharic passage (1:130a), while descending back to her sleeping earthbound body, the soul is assailed by חבילי טריקין (*havilei teriqin*). The Sperling-Simon translation renders this phrase as "malignant bands."²³ The English translation of Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* reads: "ill-intentioned destructive powers."²⁴ I render it as "ravaging bands of truculent stingers." The commentary explains that *havilei* derives from either *hevel*, "band, group," or the verb *hvl*, "to injure, destroy." *Teriqin* derives from the root *trq*, "to sting, bite."

the Hebrew anthology by Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, and its English version, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein; and the recent English translation edited by Michael Berg, *The Zohar by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, which, however, is based not on the original Aramaic but on Ashlag's Hebrew translation. For details on all of these, see the Bibliography.

20. *The Zohar*, trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, 1:277.

21. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. Goldstein, 2:818.

22. Idem, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 2:134. He concludes by saying that the phrase may mean: "delusive lights."

23. *The Zohar*, trans. Sperling and Simon, 2:19.

24. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. Goldstein, 2:813.

Although the *Zohar's* basic vocabulary is limited, its roots generate a rich variety of meanings. For example, the root תקן (*tqn*) spans the following range: “establish, institute, mend, restore, correct, perfect, prepare, arrange, array, adorn.” The root סלק (*slq*) can mean: “rise, raise, culminate, attain, surpass, depart, disappear, die, remove, postpone, reserve, emit (fragrance).” In normal Aramaic and Hebrew, the specific verbal conjugation determines which meaning of the root applies, but the *Zohar* ignores or flouts rules of grammar—confusing the conjugations, playing with multiple meanings, often leaving the reader stumped and wondering.

Mysticism strives to penetrate a realm beyond distinctions, but this mystical masterpiece demands constant decision making, challenging the reader or translator to navigate between conflicting meanings and determine the appropriate one—or sometimes to discover how differing meanings pertain simultaneously. The frequent dilemmas of interpretation suggest that in exploring the *Zohar*, linguistic search and spiritual search go hand in hand.

Especially puzzling, though charming, are the neologisms strewn throughout the *Zohar*, intended to bewilder and astound the reader.²⁵ Some derive from rare Talmudic terms, which the author refashions by intentionally misspelling or by inverting letters; some derive from Greek, Latin, or Castilian; some appear to be pure inventions. These nonce words often contain the letters ט (*tet*), ס (*samekh*), פ (*pe*), ק (*qof*), and ר (*resh*) in various combinations: קוספיתא (*quspita*), קטפירא (*qatpira*), קירטא (*qirta*), קסירא (*qesira*), קוסטרא (*qustera*), טופסרא (*tufsera*). *Qustera* derives from the Latin word *castrum* (plural, *castra*), “fortress, castle.” *Qatpira* and its variations mean several things, including “knot” (based on Aramaic קטרא [*qitra*]) and “waterskin.”²⁶

One newly-coined noun, טיקלא (*tiqla*), is particularly versatile. In various contexts it can mean “scale, hollow of the hand, fist, potter’s wheel, and water clock.” This last sense refers to a device described in ancient and medieval scientific literature, which in the *Zohar* functions as an alarm clock, calibrated to wake kabbalists precisely at midnight for the ritual study of Torah.²⁷ A similar device was employed in Christian monasteries to rouse monks for their vigils. How appropriate to invent a word for an invention!

Often, by pondering the context, comparing Zoharic and rabbinic parallels, and scouring sundry dictionaries and lexicons, one can decipher or at least conjecture the meaning of these weird terms, but some remain as perplexing as originally intended.²⁸

25. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:66–67.

26. See Yehuda Liebes, *Peraqim be-Millon Sefer ha-Zohar*, 349–54.

27. See *Zohar* 1:92b and my commentary.

28. After wrestling with Zoharic neologisms for years, I no longer share Tishby’s view (*Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:66) that “only rarely is it possible to determine their meaning from the context, while for the most part it is difficult even to guess what the author had in

In translating biblical citations, I have consulted various translations but generally composed my own.²⁹ Sometimes, in quoting a verse, the *Zohar* intends a meaning different from that conveyed by any known translation. In such cases I usually translate the verse as the *Zohar* understands it and then explain the difference in the commentary.

The main purpose of the commentary is to clarify the dense symbolism and unique terminology. Here I seek to elicit the meaning of the text, drawing it forth from the *Zohar*'s own language without being heavy-handed—without ruining the subtlety and ambiguity of the original. Remember that the *Zohar* was not intended to be easily understood but rather to be deciphered. I want to allow and compel the reader to wrestle with the text. Over the centuries, the tendency has grown to overinterpret, with commentators often insisting on assigning sefirotic significance to nearly every image and metaphor. I have resisted this tendency, while still identifying sefirotic correspondences when they are called for. Often a phrase or passage implies more than one meaning; the reader is encouraged to ponder various possibilities.

To clarify the context, I cite sources and parallels from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and the *Zohar* itself, with occasional references to secondary literature. The aim is not to overwhelm the reader by citing everything conceivable, but rather to provide what is needed to make sense of this enigmatic work of art.³⁰

In composing the commentary, I have drawn on numerous traditional and modern *Zohar* commentaries, especially those of Moses Cordovero, Shim'on Lavi, Ḥayyim Vital, Abraham Galante, Shalom Buzaglo, Yehudah Ashlag, Charles Mopsik, and Daniel Frisch.³¹ Other valuable resources include the annotations of Reuven Margaliot (*Nitsotsei Zohar*) in his edition of the *Zohar*, Isaiah Tishby's monumental *Mishnat ha-Zohar* (The Wisdom of the *Zohar*), *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar*, and Yehuda Liebes's eye-opening *Peraqim be-Millon Sefer ha-Zohar* (Sections of the *Zohar* Lexicon).

A glossary, bibliography, and an index of biblical and rabbinic citations are appended to each volume. A diagram of the ten *sefirot* appears on page XX of

mind." Still, I can appreciate the confession of David Goldstein (translator of *Wisdom of the Zohar*), who, after rendering several obscure lines directly from the Aramaic, writes (*ibid.*, 106, n. 16): "The English translations given are purely hypothetical."

29. Translations I have consulted include the King James Version, New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses*, and Richard Elliott Friedman's *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation*.

30. I have tried to follow the sage advice of Samuel Sandmel, who years ago warned scholars about the dangers of "parallelomania." See his presidential address of that title delivered to the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis and published in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13.

31. See the Bibliography.

this volume. The standard Aramaic pagination of the *Zohar* is indicated in the running head on each page (e.g., 1:34b).

How to Read the Zohar

There is no single right way to read and proceed through the *Zohar*, but I can point out certain features and suggest several guidelines.

First of all, the *Zohar* is dynamic—full of surprises. Typically we find that “Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose were walking on the way,” wandering through the hills of Galilee, sharing secrets of Torah—but also moving from one dimension to another, accompanied by *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence Herself. Who knows whom they will encounter on the road? A child amazes them with wisdom, a beggar enriches them with precious teachings, a cantankerous old donkey-driver turns out to be a sage in disguise.

You are about to enter an enchanted realm. Still, although the *Zohar* sometimes reads like a mystical novel, remember that this is fundamentally a biblical commentary. It's helpful to have a Bible at hand to check the original context, to see how a particular verse becomes a springboard for the imagination. Every few pages we read: “Rabbi Ḥiyya opened,” “Rabbi Yose opened,” signifying that he is opening not only his exposition but also the verse: disclosing new layers of meaning, expanding the range of interpretation. The reader of the *Zohar* should be open, too—open to new ways of thinking and imagining. As the *Havrayya* (Companions) continually exclaim, “Come and see!”

The *Zohar* is firmly rooted in tradition but thrives on discovery. “This verse has been discussed, but come and see!” “This verse has been established, but come and see!”³² “Innovations of Torah are required here!”³³ Innovation emerges through scrutinizing the biblical text, so questioning becomes a supreme value. After Rabbi Ḥizkiyah asks Rabbi Abba a challenging question, we are told that “Rabbi Abba came and kissed him.”³⁴ Why? Because, as one commentator notes here, “The question is half the answer; without a question, there is no reason for an answer.”³⁵

Even when the meaning of a verse is perfectly clear, the *Zohar* may question its structure, sometimes probing so deeply that the reader is stunned. To take an extreme example, come and see how Rabbi El'azar deals with the concluding verse in the story of the Garden of Eden, which could hardly be more explicit: *He drove out Adam*.³⁶ “We do not know who divorced whom: if the blessed

32. *Zohar* 1:56b, 112a, 136a, and frequently.

33. *Ibid.*, 155b.

34. *Ibid.*, 155a.

35. Abraham Galante, in *Or ha-Ḥammah*, ad loc. On questioning in the *Zohar*, see Matt, “New-Ancient Words,” 198–99.

36. Genesis 3:24. Literally, *He drove out the human*.

Holy One divorced Adam, or not.”³⁷ As the rabbi demonstrates by exegetical artifice, the mystical meaning is the shocking alternative lurking within that bland phrase, “or not”: Adam *drove out*, divorced *Shekhinah*, splitting Her from Her divine partner, *Tiferet*, and from himself. Once, as Adam, humanity was wedded to God. The original sin lies in losing intimacy with the divine, thereby constricting unbounded awareness. This loss follows inevitably from tasting the fruit of discursive knowledge; it is the price we pay for maturity and culture. The spiritual challenge is to search for that lost treasure—without renouncing the self or the world.

As you read, see how the *Havrayya* coax new meaning out of a biblical verse, phrase, word—or even letter. Often, they rely on standard rabbinic techniques of interpretation, such as verbal analogy: “Here is written: [such-and-such a biblical expression], and there is written: [an identical (or nearly identical) expression],” implying a close link between the two expressions.

The hermeneutical leap may be long, far from the literal meaning, but sometimes a verse is read “hyperliterally,” ignoring idiomatic usage in favor of a radically spiritual sense. For example, when God commands Abraham, לך לך (*Lekh lekha*), *Go forth, . . . to the land that I will show you* (Genesis 12:1), Rabbi El’azar insists on reading the words more literally than they were intended: *Lekh lekha, Go to yourself!*³⁸ Search deep within to discover your true self.

Another startling illustration is the *Zohar’s* reading of the opening words of the Torah, traditionally rendered: *In the beginning God created*. Everyone assumes the verse describes the creation of the world, but for the *Zohar* it alludes to a more primal beginning: the emanation of the *sefirot* from *Ein Sof* (“Infinity”). How is this allusion discovered, or invented? By insisting on reading the Hebrew words in their precise order: בראשית ברא אלהים (*Be-reshit bara Elohim*), construed now as *With beginning, It created Elohim*—that is, by means of *Hokhmah* (the *sefirah* of “Wisdom,” known as *beginning*), *It* (ineffable *Ein Sof*) emanated *Binah* (the *sefirah* of “Understanding,” known by the divine name *Elohim*).³⁹ *God*, it turns out, is the object of the verse, not the subject! The ultimate divine reality, *Ein Sof*, transcends and explodes our comfortable conception of “God.” The *Zohar* dares us to confront this reality, as it transforms the familiar story of Creation into divine biography.

So, as you undertake this adventure, expect to be surprised—stay alert. The *Zohar’s* teachings are profound and intense; one who hopes to enter and emerge in peace should be careful, persevering, simultaneously receptive and active. The message is not served to you on a platter; you must engage the text

37. *Zohar* 1:53b.

38. *Ibid.*, 78a.

39. *Ibid.*, 15a.

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and join the search for meaning. Follow the words to what lies beyond and within; open the gates of imagination.

Above all, don't reduce everything you encounter in these pages to something you already know. Beware of trying to find "the essence" of a particular teaching. Although usually essence is the goal of mystical search, here essence is inadequate unless it stimulates you to explore ever deeper layers, to question your assumptions about tradition, God, and self. In the words of a Zoharic parable:

There was a man who lived in the mountains. He knew nothing about those who lived in the city. He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he entered the city. They offered him good bread. The man asked, "What's this for?"

They replied, "It's bread, to eat!"

He ate, and it tasted very good. He asked, "What's it made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

Later they offered him thick loaves kneaded with oil. He tasted them, and asked, "And what are these made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

Later they offered him royal pastry kneaded with honey and oil. He asked, "And what are these made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

He said, "Surely I am the master of all of these, since I eat the essence of all of these: wheat!"

Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world, which were lost on him. So it is with one who grasps the principle but is unaware of all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle.⁴⁰

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40. *Zohar* 2:176a-b. The wheat and its products (kernels, bread, cake, and pastry) symbolize four levels of meaning in Torah: simple, homiletical, allegorical, and mystical. See Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 207.

Acknowledgments

To thank all the people who have helped me begin to plumb the *Zohar* would burst this book's binding. So here I will briefly trace my path and acknowledge some of those who have helped me along the way.

My father, of blessed memory, Rabbi Hershel Jonah Matt, taught me that God is real, and that by studying Torah you can experience *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence. (I have sketched his life and assembled his writings in *Walking Humbly with God*.) My mother, Gustine, has always been a fountain of love and a source of strength; I am grateful for her deep wisdom.

I first ventured into *Sefer ha-Zohar* in 1970 during my junior year abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The thick volumes were simultaneously forbidding and alluring; deciphering the Aramaic text was a puzzle, a challenge, a quest. Soon I fell in love with the *Zohar*, captivated by its lush imagery and poetic magic. My teachers that year in Kabbalah included Joseph Dan, Efraim Gottlieb, and Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer—and a kabbalist, Rav Toledano. I thank them all for guiding me into the orchard.

From Jerusalem I returned to Brandeis University, where I completed my undergraduate degree and then, after some European travel, plunged into graduate study in Jewish mysticism with Alexander Altmann, a superb *Wissenschaft* scholar and a gem of a man. He directed my doctoral dissertation, which consisted of a critical edition of *The Book of Mirrors*, a previously unpublished fourteenth-century Hebrew commentary on the Torah by David ben Judah he-Ḥasid. I chose to edit this text because it included the first extended translations of the *Zohar*, from Aramaic to Hebrew. I was encouraged to undertake this project by Gershom Scholem, while serving as his teaching assistant in the fall of 1975.

After I completed my dissertation, my friend Arthur Green invited me to compose an annotated translation of selections from the *Zohar* for the Paulist Press, as one volume in their *Classics of Western Spirituality*. Years earlier, Art had initiated me into the mystical thought of Hasidism, which stimulated me to uncover its roots in the *Zohar*. I am grateful for his insight and guidance over the years, and for demonstrating how to combine scholarship and spirituality.

Acknowledgments

For two decades, I taught Jewish mysticism in Berkeley at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), a school where Jews, Christians, and Buddhists study side by side, stimulating one another. I learned much there from my colleagues and students; I want to thank, in particular, David Winston and David Biale for their friendship and for the depth of their learning.

I had been at the GTU for many years already when, one afternoon in September 1995, Art Green called me on the phone and told me about a woman from Chicago named Margot Pritzker. She had been studying the *Zohar* with Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, but the dated English translation they were reading had proved inadequate. Margot had decided to commission a new translation, said Art, and she was inviting me to undertake the task! I was astounded, and told my friend that I needed a few days to consider this.

The days turned into weeks, which turned into months, as I kept wrestling with the thrilling, terrifying offer. I decided to translate a short section of the *Zohar* to see how it felt, but I poured myself into the experiment so intensely, day after day, that I was left drained, exhausted, discouraged. How could I keep this up for years and years? I reluctantly resolved to decline the offer, but Art convinced me to at least meet this woman and her rabbi; so the following May, the four of us gathered at the O'Hare Hyatt. I expressed my hesitation to them, and told Margot that the project could take twelve to fifteen years—to which she responded, "You're not scaring me!" I was won over by her genuine desire to penetrate the *Zohar* and make it accessible to English readers. A year or so later, over Independence Day weekend 1997, the *Zohar* project formally began with a two-day conference outside Chicago attended by the leading academic scholars of Kabbalah. They were invited not just to participate in this conference but to constitute the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, which was intended to guide and support this translation. (The members of the committee are listed at the front of this volume.) Over the past six years, I have benefited immensely from their feedback and encouragement. I thank all of them, especially Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, Ronit Meroz, and Elliot Wolfson. Time and again, Yehuda generously shared insights drawn from his vast, intimate knowledge of the *Zohar*. I smile, recalling the many times we wrestled over the mystifying Aramaic, deepening our understanding of the text and our friendship.

I spent the second year of the project (1998–99) at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on a program entitled "Studying the *Zohar*," directed by Yehuda Liebes. Here seven fellows and seven other visiting scholars (all fourteen of us, members of the Academic Committee) engaged in research on various aspects of the text. Our weekly seminars were devoted to a close reading of *Zohar* passages—often those that I was currently translating. Here I presented a draft of my translation and benefited from the responses of my colleagues. I am grateful to all of them, as well as to the staff of the Institute, who provided an ideal setting for our research. When

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the yearlong program ended in June 1999, the institute graciously allowed me to retain an office for the following year as well.

In the summer of 2000, it was finally time to leave the tranquil environment of the institute. Fortunately, Rabbi David Hartman provided me an office at the Shalom Hartman Institute across town, where I spent the following two years (2000–2002) in an atmosphere simultaneously peaceful and stimulating. David's enthusiasm for Torah energizes everyone around him, and I thank him for his support and encouragement, and for his healthy skepticism of mystical excess. I was enriched by my contact with many of the fellows at the Hartman Institute, especially Donniel Hartman (co-director), Daniel Abrams, Moshe Halbertal, Moshe Idel, Israel Knohl, Levi Lauer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Yair Lorberbaum, Israel Ta-Shma, and Shlomo Naeh. Shlomo was always generous in sharing with me his immense linguistic knowledge.

As described in the Translator's Introduction, I have based my English rendering on a critical text of the *Zohar*, which I have constructed by drawing on variant readings from a wide range of manuscripts. I could not have accomplished this task without my indefatigable research assistant, Barry Mark, who spent more than five years painstakingly preparing lists of these variants for the first two volumes of the translation. I thank him immensely for his years of devotion to this task. Recently, Merav Carmeli has followed in his footsteps, proving herself a worthy successor, and I am indebted to her as well.

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Arthur Green has carefully read large portions of this translation and offered criticism and suggestions, for which I am truly grateful. As co-chair of the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, he has helped guide the project from its birth.

Numerous libraries offered valuable resources, especially the Gershom Scholem Collection and the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, both housed in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. I want to thank, in particular, Esther Liebes (head of the Scholem Collection) for her constant willingness to help, Benjamin Richler (director of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts) along with his staff, and Adam Verete for checking obscure references. Other libraries and collections that provided precious material include: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican; Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome; Biblioteca Palatina, Parma; Bibliothèque nationale, Paris; the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; the British Library; Cambridge University Library; the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library of the Graduate Theological Union; the Friedberg Collection, University of Toronto Library; the Guenzburg Collection of the Russian State Library, Moscow; and the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The team at Stanford University Press, led by Geoffrey Burn and Norris Pope, has been superb to work with and wondrously adept at generating the first, demanding volumes of this complex classic. In addition to Geoffrey and Norris, I want to thank Lowell Britson, Alan Harvey, Randy Hurst, David

Acknowledgments

Jackson, Patricia Myers, and especially Mariana Raykov and Rob Ehle. Rabbi David E. S. Stein's expert copyediting polished this *Book of Radiance*.

As I toiled and exulted over the *Zohar*, I have received sound advice and warm encouragement from my far-flung siblings: Rabbi Jonathan Matt (Israel), David Matt (Iowa), and Debbie Erdfarb (New Jersey).

My wife, Hana, and I have been delving together into the *Zohar* ever since we met, discovering and sharing its new-ancient meanings, gazing into each other's souls through its penetrating lens. Thank you for your compassionate wisdom and unfailing support. You bring to life the verse: *On her tongue, a Torah of love* (Proverbs 31:26). You help me understand the words of Rabbi El'azar (*Zohar* 1:141a): "Isaac embraced faith, seeing *Shekhinah* dwelling in his wife."

My angelic children, Michaella and Gavriel, have never lost their sense of wonder, and I thank them for arousing mine. May this translation touch you and open up new worlds!

Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, co-chair of the Academic Committee, has excited and inspired me ever since our first meeting seven years ago. Descended from a famous kabbalist, the *Shelah* (Isaiah Horowitz), he is intimately bound to the *Zohar* and has devoted himself to spreading its light. I thank him for conducting this project so deftly and passionately.

Glen Miller, vice president of Zohar Education Project, Inc., has vitalized this adventure through his vision and devotion. On a practical level, he has navigated the ark of *Zohar* through countless legal and administrative passageways. I am profoundly grateful.

Thomas J. Pritzker has generously supported and heartened all of us through this long process. I thank him deeply. And I wonder: Is there a correlation between Tom's passion for exploring caves to discover ancient Asian art and the fact that, according to tradition (see below, page 571), the *Zohar* was composed in a cave?

Finally, Margot. How can I express my gratitude to you? You have enabled me to devote myself to what I love—that is every scholar's dream. You have not only sponsored this immense project; you have participated, probing the translation and commentary, skillfully guiding the entire process. I hope that I have responded to your bold generosity by opening up the *Zohar* for you and for all those who, thanks to you, will be illumined by its rays. To you I dedicate this translation.

D.C.M.

*****A diagram of the Ten Sefirot*****

Introduction

ARTHUR GREEN

I

The *Zohar* is the great medieval Jewish compendium of mysticism, myth, and esoteric teaching. It may be considered the highest expression of Jewish literary imagination in the Middle Ages. Surely it is one of the most important bodies of religious text of all times and places. It is also a lush garden of sacred eros, filled to overflowing with luxurious plantings of love between master and disciples, among the mystical companions themselves, between the souls of Israel and *Shekhinah*—God's lovely bride—but most of all between the male and female elements that together make up the Godhead. Revered and canonized by generations of faithful devotees, the *Zohar's* secret universe serves as the basis of kabbalistic faith, both within the boundaries of Judaism and beyond it, down to our own day, which has seen a significant revival of interest in Kabbalah and its teachings.

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The *Zohar* is a work of sacred fantasy. To say this about it is by no means to impugn the truth of its insights or the religious profundity of its teachings. The Middle Ages are filled with fantasy. Angels and demons, heavenly principalities, chambers of heaven and rungs within the soul, secret treasures of the spirit that could be seen only by the elect, esoteric domains without end—all of these were to be found in the writings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic authors throughout medieval times. All of them partake of fantasy. It may be said that all theological elaborations, insofar as they are allowed to become pictorial, are fantasy. They depict realities that have not been seen except by the inner eye of those who describe them, or by their sacred sources.

In the case of Judaism, prohibitions derived from the second of the Ten Commandments forbade the depiction of such sacred realms in any medium other than that of words. Perhaps because of this, the literary imagination became extraordinarily rich. All those creative energies that might in other contexts have sought to reify sacred myth in painting, sculpture, manuscript illumination, or stained glass here had to focus on the word—especially on the timeless Jewish project of commentary and exegesis. In this sense the *Zohar*

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may be seen as the greatest work of medieval Jewish “iconography”—one that exists only in the words of the written page, thence to be distilled in the imagination of its devoted students.

Written in a lofty combination of Aramaic and Hebrew, the *Zohar* was first revealed to the world around the year 1300. Those who distributed it, orally and in small written fragments, claimed that it was an ancient text they had recently rediscovered, and that it had been composed in the circle of those described within its pages—Rabbi Shim’on son of Yoḥai and his disciples, who lived in the land of Israel during the second century of the Common Era. The obscurity of the *Zohar*’s origins combined with its unique language and its rich poetic imagination to lend to the work an aura of unfathomable mystery. While a few of the more critical spirits in each century doubted the *Zohar* and questioned its authority, the great majority of readers, and later of Jewry as a whole, believed in the *Zohar* and venerated it, considering it a holy revelation and a sacred scripture that was to be ranked alongside the Bible and the Talmud as a divinely inspired source of religious truth. Only in modern times, and largely for apologetic reasons, was the *Zohar* deleted from the canon of what was considered “mainstream” Judaism.

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Translation of the *Zohar* into western languages began as early as the fifteenth century, when passages were rendered into Latin for use by Christian devotees of esoteric lore in Renaissance Italy. In the twentieth century, various translations of the *Zohar*, or at least of most sections of it, appeared in German, French, and English. The previous standard English translation is that of Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, published in 1931–34 by the Soncino Press.

The present translation and commentary by Daniel Matt reflect the high standards of *Zohar* scholarship that have been achieved in recent decades. These are the result of the new attention paid to Kabbalah in academic circles, largely thanks to the writings of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) and the cadre of scholars he and his successors have trained within the Israeli universities. The first to bring Scholem’s approach to kabbalistic studies to North American shores was Alexander Altmann (1906–1987) at Brandeis University, whose students include both the translator of these volumes and the author of this introduction. Further discussion of the translation and the principles underlying it may be found in the Translator’s Introduction.

The purpose of this introduction is to equip the reader to better appreciate the *Zohar* text. The translation before you is one that takes full cognizance of the poetic spirit in which the *Zohar* was composed and especially of the elevated tone achieved by its unique use of language. To appreciate these in the fullest sense, it must be said, the *Zohar* needs to be read, indeed studied, in the original. Like most of the kabbalistic tradition within which it stands, the *Zohar* is entranced with the mysteries of language, in both its oral and written forms. No translation could do justice to the *Zohar*’s rich and creative appro-

priation of the nuances of Hebrew and Aramaic speech, its startling transformation of countless biblical verses, and the frequent subtle rereadings of the Talmudic/midrashic legacy that together comprise much of the *Zohar's* charm and genius. Nevertheless, a great deal can be gained through carefully reading and studying the *Zohar* in translation. For this to be possible, however, the reader needs to be initiated into the symbolic language in which the work was written.¹ Although the *Zohar's* poesis often transcends the symbolic conventions, they are always present in the background of the writers' imagination. So too, it was assumed, would they be present in the mind of the reader. The *Zohar* was composed in the hope that it would be passed on and studied within circles of initiates, as indeed it was for many generations.

To appreciate the *Zohar*, you will also need to know something of the historical and literary context in which it appeared. The *Zohar* made use of a very wide selection of Jewish texts that preceded it, ranging from the Torah itself to legal, mystical, and philosophical works that were written just shortly before its appearance. It reflected on all of these and used them freely as inspiration for its own unique sort of innovative and sometimes even playful religious creativity. It is also much concerned with the Jews and their history: that recorded in Scripture, the present exile, and the dream of messianic redemption. These, too, form part of the background needed to understand the *Zohar*.

This introduction will begin by outlining the development of Kabbalah in the century leading up to the *Zohar*, considering also the use made in Kabbalah of prior Jewish sources. We will then turn to the *Zohar* itself, discussing in turn its style of thought and exegesis, its narrative modes, and the question of the *Zohar's* appearance and authorship. Because this essay serves as an introduction to the entire *Zohar* text, we will not quote passages to exemplify the analysis offered. We hope that the reader will proceed from this introduction to a careful reading of the text and commentary, finding ample passages throughout the *Zohar* against which to test the claims offered in this brief introductory essay.

The "tall order" detailed in the preceding paragraphs requires a disclaimer. Monographs and learned articles have been written on each of the subjects just mentioned. Some of them have been the subject of entire books. This introduction does not seek to break new ground in most of them. It is rather a digest of what the writer considers to be the finest scholarship and deepest

1. A much expanded version of this introduction to the *Zohar* is to be found in my *Guide to the Zohar*, also available from Stanford University Press. There the symbolic language of Kabbalah (i.e., the sefirotic system) is more fully outlined and discussed. The most comprehensive introduction to the subject is the three-volume *Wisdom of the Zohar* by Isaiah Tishby, originally written in Hebrew. The English translation by David Goldstein offers a thorough historical analysis of many topics covered by the *Zohar*, followed by selected passages. Although the Hebrew version was published in 1949–61 and thus predates much of current *Zohar* scholarship, Tishby's work remains an invaluable source of knowledge.

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insights regarding the *Zohar* that have been written since Scholem began the era of modern Kabbalah scholarship. While responsibility for any misunderstandings or omissions in this introduction are entirely my own, I wish to acknowledge fully that the insights contained within it are those of three or four generations of scholars who have labored hard as today's *mehatstsedei haqla*, "reapers in the field," of *Zohar* scholarship. Many of these are members of the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, and their names are listed on page XX. I am grateful to each of them for their contributions to our collective efforts to understand even "a drop in the sea" of the *Zohar's* profound secrets.

II

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Jewish mysticism in the Middle Ages is a rereading of earlier Jewish tradition, including both the Bible and the corpus of rabbinic literature. It has to be understood in the context of the great project of medieval Jewry as a whole, the interpretation of a received, authoritative, and essentially complete body of normative Jewish teaching. This body of teaching, canonized in the Gaonic age (eighth–tenth centuries), nominally commanded the loyalty of all Jewry, with the exception of a Karaite minority. But the deeper attachment of Jews to this tradition had to be re-won constantly, especially in the face of both Christian and Muslim polemics against Judaism, ever the religious culture of a minority living in the shadow of one or the other of its giant offspring. Increasingly, various new intellectual currents that came into fashion among the Jews also occasioned a need for defense or reinterpretation of the tradition. These included Mut'azilite Philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism. The classic form for such reinterpretation of authoritative texts was the commentary, whether on one or more books of the Bible or on a part of the Talmudic legacy. Kabbalah, a new sort of mystical-esoteric exegesis first appearing in the twelfth century, may be seen as another medieval rereading of the received Jewish canon.

In order to understand the ways in which Kabbalah, and particularly the *Zohar*, finds its home within the earlier tradition, we need to distinguish five elements that are present in the legacy that medieval Jews had received from the Judaism of late antiquity or the Talmudic age. Although these five are not at all equal either in the amount of text devoted to them or in the degree of formal authority with which they are accredited, each was to play an important role in the new configuration of Judaism that Kabbalah represents.

First of the five is *aggadah*, the narrative tradition, contained in the Talmud and the various works of Midrash. Midrash is a hermeneutical term, renderable both as "inquiry" and "homiletics," indicating a way of delving into Scripture that tended toward fanciful and extended rereadings. Much of *aggadah* is legendary in content, expanding biblical history and recreating the biblical

landscape in the setting of the rabbinic world. But *aggadah* also includes tales of the rabbis themselves and teachings of wisdom in many forms: maxims, parables, folk traditions, and so forth.

The kabbalists made great use of the midrashic/aggadic tradition, drawing on both its methods of interpretation and its contents. The hermeneutical assumptions of Midrash, including the legitimacy of juxtaposing verses from anywhere within Scripture without concern for dating or context, the rearranging of words or even occasional substitution of letters, use of numerology and abbreviation as ways to derive meaning, the endless glorification of biblical heroes and the tarring of villains—all of these and others were carried over from Midrash into Kabbalah. Indeed many of them were used by other sorts of medieval preachers as well. But the content of the aggadic worldview—with its mythic picture of God as Creator and divine Ruler who sees everywhere; who acts in history; who responds to prayer and human virtue, even suspending the laws of nature to rescue His beloved; who mourns with Israel the destruction of their shared Temple and suffers with them the pain of exile—all this too was faithfully carried over into the kabbalistic imagination. In fact the kabbalists were partial to the most highly anthropomorphic and mythic versions of rabbinic tradition, such as were contained in the eighth-century collection *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*. Here they stood in sharp contrast to the prior emerging intellectual trend of the Middle Ages: Jewish philosophy, which exercised a degree of critical skepticism with regard to the more fantastic claims of the *aggadah* and sought out, whenever possible, those more modest and somewhat naturalistic viewpoints that could be found among certain of the early rabbis.

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Second is the tradition of *halakhah*, the legal and normative body of Talmudic teaching, the chief subject of study for Jews throughout the era, and thus the main curriculum upon which most kabbalists themselves were educated. The early kabbalists lived fully within the bounds of *halakhah* and created a meaning system that justified its existence. While later Kabbalah (beginning in the early fourteenth century) contains some elements that are quite critical of *halakhah*, little of this trend is evident in the period before the *Zohar*. Some transmitters of Kabbalah—Rabbi Moses Naḥmanides (see below) is the great example—were also active in the realm of halakhic creativity, writing responsa and commentaries on Talmudic tractates. More common was a certain intellectual specialization, undoubtedly reflecting spiritual temperament, spawning kabbalists who lived faithfully within *halakhah* and whose writings show its patterning of their lives, but who devoted their literary efforts chiefly to the realm of mystical exegesis, including kabbalistic comments on the commandments or reflection on aspects of halakhic practice.

A third element of the rabbinic legacy is the liturgical tradition. While liturgical praxis was codified within *halakhah* and thus in some ways is a subset of it, the texts recited in worship—including a large corpus of liturgical poetry, or *piyyut*—constitute a literary genre of their own. Medieval writers, including

the mystics of both Spain and Ashkenaz, were much concerned with establishing the precise proper wording of each prayer. The text of the prayer book had been mostly fixed by compendia dating from the tenth century; in the Middle Ages, however, it became the object of commentaries, many of which sought to find their authors' own theologies reflected in these venerated and widely known texts by the ancient rabbis. This is especially true of the kabbalists, who devoted much attention to the *kavvanah*, or inward meaning, of liturgical prayer.

The fourth strand of earlier tradition is that of Merkavah mysticism. *Merka-vah* designates a form of visionary mystical praxis that reaches back into the Hellenistic era but was still alive as late as tenth-century Babylonia. Its roots lie close to Apocalyptic literature, except that here the voyager taken up into the heavens is usually offered a private encounter with the divine glory, one that does not involve metahistorical predications. Those who "went down into the *merkavah*" sought visions that took them before the throne of God, allowing them to travel through the divine "palaces" (*heikhalot*), realms replete with angels and, at the height of ecstasy, to participate in or even lead the angelic chorus. The term *merkavah* (chariot) links this tradition to the opening vision of the prophet Ezekiel, which was seen as the great paradigm for all such visionary experiences and accounts. It is also connected to the *qedushah* formula ("Holy, holy, holy is YHVH of hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory!") of Isaiah 6, since it is this refrain that most Merkavah voyagers recount hearing the angels sing as they stand with them in the heavenly heights.

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The Merkavah tradition was known to the medievals in two ways. Treatises by those who had practiced this form of mysticism, often preserved in fragmentary and inchoate form, were copied and brought from the Near East to western Europe, as we shall see below. But just as important were the references to Merkavah practice in the Talmudic literature itself, a fact that lent legitimacy to the fascination that latter-day mystics clearly felt for this material. Such great Talmudic sages as Rabbi Akiva and Rabban Yoḥanan son of Zakkai were associated with Merkavah traditions. Akiva, considered in some aggadic sources to be a sort of second Moses, is the subject of the most famous of all rabbinic accounts of such mystical voyages. He alone, unlike the other three of the "four who entered the orchard," was able to "enter in peace and leave in peace." While some modern scholars question the historicity of associating the early rabbinic sages with Merkavah praxis, in the Middle Ages the Talmudic sources were quite sufficient to sustain this link. It was the philosophic questioners of the Merkavah traditions, rather than their mystical supporters, who were hard-pressed to defend their views. Merkavah traditions also had considerable influence on the rabbinic liturgy, and this association too raised their esteem in medieval eyes.

The fifth and final element of this ancient legacy is the hardest to define, partly because it hangs on the thread of a slim body of text, but also because it

contains elements that seem contradictory to one another. I refer to the speculative/magical tradition that reached medieval Jewry through the little book called *Sefer Yetsirah* and various other small texts, mostly magical in content, that are associated with it. *Sefer Yetsirah* has been shown to be a very ancient work, close in spirit to aspects of Greek esotericism that flourished in the late Hellenistic era. While the practice associated with this school of thought is magical/theurgic, even including the attempt to make a *golem*, its chief text contains the most abstract worldview to be found within the legacy of ancient Judaism. By contemplating the core meaning of both numbers and letters, it reaches toward a notion of cosmic unity that underlies diversity, of an abstract deity that serves as cosmic center, in whom (or perhaps better: “in which”) all being is rooted. The magical praxis is thus a form of *imitatio dei*, man’s attempt to reignite the creative spark by which the universe has emerged from within the Godhead. Here we have the roots of a theology more abstract than anything to be found in the *aggadah* or the Merkavah tradition, an essentially speculative and nonvisual mysticism.

Sefer Yetsirah was the subject of a wide variety of commentaries in the Middle Ages, rationalists as well as mystics claiming it as their own. In the twelfth century, the language and style of thought found in this work became central to the first generations of kabbalistic writing, as reflected by commentaries on it and by the penetration of its terminology into other works as well.

Kabbalah must be seen as a dynamic mix of these five elements, sometimes with one dominating, sometimes adding the mix of another. It was especially the first and last listed, the *aggadic/mythic* element and the *abstract/speculative/magical* tradition that seemed to vie for the leading role in forging the emerging kabbalistic way of thought.

Jewish esoteric traditions began to reach the small and isolated communities of western Europe (some of which dated back to Roman times) perhaps as early as the ninth or tenth century. How these ancient materials first came to Franco-German Jewry is lost in legend, but it is clear from manuscript evidence that much of the old Merkavah and magical literature was preserved among the earliest Ashkenazic Jews, along with their devotion to both *halakhah* and *aggadah*. These esoteric sources were studied especially by groups in the Rhineland, who added to them their own speculations on God, the cosmos, and the secrets of the Torah. Out of these circles there emerged in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century a movement known to history as *Hasidut Ashkenaz*, a pietistic revivalism based on small communities or brotherhoods of mystics who committed themselves to high standards of ascetic practice and contemplative devotion. These groups also played a key role in the preservation and further development of esoteric traditions.

It was in the area of southern France called Provence, culturally akin in the High Middle Ages to northern Spain, that a somewhat different sort of esoteric speculations began to emerge. These came to be called by the name Kabbalah,

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a term applied to this emerging school of mystical thought in the early thirteenth century. The word means “tradition”; its use in this context indicates that the kabbalists saw themselves as a conservative element within the Jewish religious community. Their secrets—so they claimed—were *qabalah*, esoteric teachings received from ancient masters by means of faithful oral transmission from one generation to the next.

The Provençal Jewish community in the twelfth century was one of great cultural wealth, forming something of a bridge between the spiritual legacy of Jewish creativity in Spain of Muslim times and the rather separate world of Jewry in the Ashkenazic or Franco-Rhenish area. It is in this cultural realm that Kabbalah first appears, about the middle of the twelfth century. The origins of this spiritual and literary movement are obscure and still much debated. There are clearly elements of Near Eastern origin in the earliest Kabbalah, materials related to Merkavah and late midrashic texts that were present in the Holy Land in the ninth or tenth centuries. There are also strong influences of elements that were to appear in Rhineland Hasidism as well, indicating that at some early point these two movements had a common origin. But here in Provence, a new sort of religious discourse began to emerge in circles of mystics who combined knowledge of these various traditions. These groups, which may have been several generations in formation, are known to us as the editors as one of the strangest and most fascinating documents in the long history of Hebrew literature. This slim volume is known as *Sefer ha-Bahir*, awkwardly renderable as *The Book of Clarity*. We first find reference to it in Provençal works of the latter twelfth century, and from that time forward it has a continuous history as a major shaper of Jewish mystical ideas.

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The *Bahir* takes the form of ancient rabbinic Midrash, expounding on biblical phrases, tying one verse of Scripture to another, and constructing units of its own thought around what it offers as scriptural exegesis. Like the old Midrash, it makes frequent use of parables, showing special fondness for those involving kings and their courts, in which God is repeatedly compared to “a king of flesh and blood.” In form, then, the *Bahir* is quite traditional. But as soon as the reader opens its pages to look at the content, astonishment takes over. The text simply does not work as Midrash. Questions are asked and not answered, or answered in a way that only adds mystification. Images are proposed that in the midrashic context surely refer to God, and then suddenly things are said that make such a reading theologically impossible (The “King” turns out to have an older brother, for example). What sort of questions are these, and what sort of answers? The scholar is sometimes tempted to emend the text!

If one comes to the *Bahir*, on the other hand, bearing some familiarity with the methods of mystical teachers, particularly in the Orient, the text may seem less bizarre. Despite its title, the purpose of the book is precisely to mystify rather than to make anything “clear” in the ordinary sense. Here the way to

clarity is to discover the mysterious. The reader is being taught to recognize how much there is that he doesn't know, how filled Scripture is with seemingly impenetrable secrets. "You think you know the meaning of this verse?" says the *Bahir* to its reader. "Here is an interpretation that will throw you on your ear and show you that you understand nothing of it at all." Everything in the Torah, be it a tale of Abraham, a poetic verse, or an obscure point of law, hints at a reality beyond that which you can obtain by the ordinary dialectics of either Talmudic or philosophical thinking.

As we read on in the *Bahir*, it becomes clear that the authors are not simply advocating obscurantism for its own sake. The text has in mind a notion, often expressed only vaguely, of a world that lies behind the many hints and mysteries of the scriptural word. To say it briefly, the *Bahir* and all kabbalists that follow it claim that the true subject of Scripture is God Himself, that revelation is essentially an act of divine self-disclosure. Because most people would not be able to bear the great light that comes with knowing God, the Torah reveals divinity in secret form. Scripture is strewn with hints as to the true nature of "that which is above" and the mysterious process within divinity that led to the creation of this world. Only in the exoteric, public sense is revelation primarily a matter of divine *will*, teaching the commandments Israel is to follow in order to live the good life. The inner, esoteric revelation is rather one of divine *truth*, a web of secrets pointing to the innermost nature of God's own self. That self is disclosed in the garb of a newly emergent symbolic language, one describing the inner life of the Deity around a series of image-clusters that will come to be called (in a term derived from *Sefer Yetsirah*) the ten *sefirot*.

xxxv

The earliest documentary evidence of Kabbalah is found in two very different sorts of literary sources. The *Bahir* constitutes one of these. Alongside it there is a more theoretical or abstract series of kabbalistic writings. These appear first in the family and close circle of Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres, a well-known Provençal Talmudic authority. His son, Rabbi Isaac the Blind (d. ca. 1235), and others linked to his study circle (including family members) evidence an ongoing tradition of kabbalistic praxis both in their brief commentaries on prayer and on *Sefer Yetsirah*, and in their written reflections on names of God. These treatises—quite laconic in style when compared with the mythic lushness of the *Bahir*—point to an already well-defined system of kabbalistic contemplation, suggesting that their appearance after 1150 may reflect a decision to reveal in writing that which had been previously kept secret, rather than an entirely new genre of religious creativity. The sort of rabbinic circles in which Kabbalah is first found are highly conservative; it is hard to imagine them inventing this new sort of religious language on their own. It seems more likely that they saw themselves as guardians and transmitters of a secret tradition, passed down to them from sources unknown, but in their eyes surely ancient.

The context for the publication of kabbalistic secrets is the great spiritual turmoil that divided Provençal Jewry in the second half of the twelfth century: the controversy over philosophy, and especially over the works of Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). This conflict came to a head with the public burning of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* (by the Dominicans, but possibly with the tacit approval of anti-Maimonidean Jews) in 1232. The surrounding struggle engaged the intellectual life of the Provençal Jewish elite for several decades. As the era's great halakhic authority and codifier of Jewish law, Maimonides' name commanded tremendous respect. In many writings of the age, he is simply referred to as "the Rabbi." But his works raised not a few questions regarding his degree of theological orthodoxy. Did Maimonides go too far in his insistence that the Bible's ascription of emotions to God, as well as bodily attributes, was a form of anthropomorphism that needed to be explained away? Was it right that he derived so much of his wisdom from non-Jewish sources, the Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions? Was he correct in identifying the ancient rabbinic references to "The Account of the Chariot" and "The Account of Creation" with metaphysics and physics as the philosophers taught them? Did he have a right to dismiss certain old Jewish esoteric speculations as inauthentic nonsense? Still more painful in this law-centered culture: how could the rabbi have given legal status to his own Aristotelian philosophic views, seemingly insisting, in the opening section of his Code, that any Jew who did not share them was either an idolator or a naive fool?

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But the heart of the Maimonidean controversy went deeper than all of these accusations, touching the very heart of the philosophical notion of the Godhead. Philosophy insisted on divine perfection—on the unchanging, all-knowing, all-capable quality of God. If perfect and unchanging, this God was necessarily self-sufficient and in no need of human actions of any sort. Why, then, would such a God care about performance of the commandments? How could a Torah centered on religious law, including so much of ritual performance, represent the embodiment of divine will? Maimonides taught that indeed God had no "need" for us to fulfill the commandments. The chief purpose of religious observance was educational, a God-given way of cultivating the mind to turn toward God. But once the lesson had been learned, some suspected, there would be those who would come to see the form itself as no longer needed. Moreover it was rumored that in some circles of wealthy Jewry in Muslim Spain, the abstractions of philosophy had begun to serve as an excuse for a more lax view of the commandments and the details of their observance.

Some rabbis of Provence were deeply loyal to a more literalist reading of the Talmudic and midrashic legacy, one that left little room for the radical rationalization of Judaism proposed by the philosophers. Others had been exposed to the esoteric traditions of the Rhineland and northern France, which stood in conflict with the new philosophy partly because they seemed to highlight—rather than minimize—the anthropomorphic passages in Scripture and tradi-

tion. The Franco-Rhenish tradition also had room for a strong magical component to religion. Ancient speculations on secret names of God and the angels still held currency in these circles. The power of using such names to affect the divine will, utter blasphemy in the eyes of the Maimonidean, was taken for granted in early Ashkenaz, as it had been centuries earlier throughout the Jewish world.

The secrets of Kabbalah were made public in this age as a way to combat the influence of Maimonidean rationalism. The freedom and implied disinterest in human affairs of the philosophers' God frightened the mystics into coming out of the deep esotericism that had until then restricted them to oral transmission of their teachings within closed conventicles of initiates. Their secrets were to serve as an alternative explanation of the Torah, one that saw Torah and its commandments not only as playing a vital role in the ongoing spiritual life of Israel, but also as having a cosmos-sustaining role in a view of the universe that made them absolutely essential. It is no accident that two of the key subjects discussed in these earliest kabbalistic speculations are the *kavvanot* or secret meanings of prayer and *ta'amei ha-mitsvot*, the reasons for the commandments. Both of these are interpreted in a way that insists on the cosmic effects of human actions. The special concentration on divine names played an essential part in early Kabbalah, setting in course a theme that was to be developed over many centuries of kabbalistic praxis.

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The secret doctrines first taught in Provence were carried across the Pyrenees in the early thirteenth century, inspiring small circles of mystics in the adjacent district of Catalonia. One key center of this activity was the city of Gerona, well known as the home of two of the most important rabbinic figures of the age, Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (called Naḥmanides) and Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (c.1200–1263). Naḥmanides, perhaps the most widely respected Jewish intellectual figure of the thirteenth century, is the most important personage associated with the early dissemination of kabbalistic secrets. He was a leading Talmudic commentator, scriptural interpreter, and legal authority. His Torah commentary includes numerous passages—most brief and intentionally obscure, but several lengthy and highly developed—where he speaks “in the way of truth,” referring to secret kabbalistic traditions. Alongside Naḥmanides there emerged a somewhat separate circle of kabbalists including two very important teachers, Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon and Rabbi Azriel. These figures seem to have been more innovative than Naḥmanides in their kabbalistic exegesis and also more open to the Neoplatonic philosophy of Abraham Ibn Ezra and others that was gaining credence in their day. Naḥmanides was essentially conservative in his kabbalistic readings, insisting that he was only passing down what he had received from his teachers, and his view of philosophical thought in general was quite negative. Rabbi Ezra, the author of commentaries on the Song of Songs and some Talmudic *aggadot*, and his disciple Rabbi Azriel, who wrote a larger treatise on the *aggadot* as well as a widely quoted

commentary on the liturgy, combined the legacy of the *Bahir* with teachings received from Rabbi Isaac the Blind and his nephew Rabbi Asher ben David. They read Kabbalah in a Neoplatonic spirit, which is to say that they saw the *sefirot* as an ordered series of emanations, increasingly removed from an unknowable primal source.

This Catalonian kabbalistic tradition remained fairly close to the original purpose we have suggested for the publication of kabbalistic secrets. Naḥmanides' inclusion of openly kabbalistic references in his highly popular Torah commentary complemented his fierce polemical attacks in that same work on Maimonides' philosophical interpretation of the Torah. Jacob bar Sheshet, another key Gerona figure, also engaged in the battle against the rationalists. While neither Rabbi Azriel nor Rabbi Ezra of Gerona is known to have written anything outside the realm of Kabbalah, their writings reflect significant rabbinic learning and show them to belong to the same traditionalist and anti-Aristotelian circles. Neoplatonism, they found, was a philosophy more amenable to the needs of mystics, thus rediscovering in a Jewish context something that Christian mystics had come to know many centuries earlier.

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Around the middle of the thirteenth century, a new center of kabbalistic activity became active in Castile, to the west of Catalonia. Soon the writings of this new group, out of which the *Zohar* was to emerge, overshadowed those of the earlier Catalonian circle with regard to both volume and originality of output. The Castilian kabbalists' writings were not characterized by the highly conservative rabbinic attitude that had been lent to Kabbalah by such figures as Rabbi Isaac the Blind and Naḥmanides. This circle had its roots more planted in the *Bahir* tradition than in that of the abstract language of early Provençal/Catalonian Kabbalah. Mythic imagery was richly developed in the writings of such figures as the brothers Rabbi Isaac and Rabbi Jacob ha-Kohen and their disciple Rabbi Moses of Burgos. Their writings show a special fascination with the "left side" of the divine emanation and the world of the demonic. Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen developed a full-blown mythos in which the forces of evil were presented as near autonomous powers emanated in an act of purgation from the depths of divinity. Dependent upon both the divine and the human for their existence, they exist at the liminal outskirts of the sefirotic realm and the phenomenal universe, at the very borders of chaos and non-being. There they wait in ambush for the *Shekhinah* and the worlds that She creates and nurtures. Thus, to the world picture of divine sefirotic hierarchy and an emanated cosmos, the Castilians add a parallel but antithetical realm of the demonic, serving as the source of all that is destructive in the cosmos.

This conception of the "left-hand emanation" is founded on a set of suggestive aggadic statements and biblical verses. In particular, the Castilian kabbalists' imagination was sparked by Rabbi Abbahu's famous dictum: "The blessed Holy One created and destroyed worlds before He created these, saying: "These please me. Those did not please me." Out of this and other fragments of

aggadic thought, Rabbi Isaac spun an elaborate mythos in which the *sefirah Binah*, at the dawn of time, welled forth emanations of pure *din*, (literally “judgment,” but resulting in absolute forces of destruction, whose intensity doomed them to almost immediate annihilation). From the residue of these destructive forces rose a hierarchy of powers of unmitigated judgment. Possessing no creative potency of their own, these forces are ontologically dependent upon divinity and are energized by the power released by human transgression.

Because of their fascination with myths of the demonic realm, this group was characterized by Gershom Scholem as the “Gnostic Circle” of Castilian kabbalists. Their writings had great influence in the further development of kabbalistic thought. They are the most immediate predecessors of the circle of kabbalists represented in the *Zohar*. The mythic imagination of the *Zohar*, reaching to its greatest heights in depicting the realms of evil, has its roots in this setting. It is likely that Rabbi Moses de León, the central figure in both the writing and the circulation of the *Zohar*, saw himself as a disciple of these “Gnostic” kabbalists. Rabbi Todros Abulafia, a kabbalist who also served as an important political leader of Castilian Jewry, is another important link between these two groups. Although significant in their own day, the writings of the Gnostic circle were mostly forgotten by later generations of kabbalists and were not printed until Scholem himself retrieved them from rare surviving manuscripts.

XXXIX

There is another difference between Catalanian and Castilian circles that is especially important for understanding the *Zohar's* place in the history of Kabbalah. The earliest kabbalists were fascinated with the origin of the sefirotic world, devoting much of their speculation to the highest *sefirot* and their relationship to that which lies beyond them. They were also deeply committed to the full unity of the sefirotic world, even to its circularity, so that the rising of all the *sefirot* to be united with the highest one was a frequently articulated goal of contemplation. Varied patterns of inner connection in the upper worlds were reflected in the *kavvanot* (mystical directions) of prayers and in understandings of ritual commandments, but the ultimate goal of all of these was the full restoration of the divine unity and the rise of all to the highest rung, designated as *maḥshavah* or *haskel* (contemplation, intellect). The situation was quite different in the Castilian writings. Here the emphasis was placed on the lower part of the sefirotic world, especially on the relationships between “right” and “left” and “male” and “female.” The counterbalancing of demonic energies needed the strengthening of the right-hand power of divine love, and this could be awakened by human love of God and performance of the commandments. But as these writings developed, it was fascination with the sexual mysteries, reflected in the joining together of divine male and female, that overwhelmed all other symbolic interests. The uniting of the male sixth/ninth *sefirot* with the female tenth became the chief and in some places almost unique object of concern and way of explaining the religious life as a whole. This *mysterium coniunctionis* or *zivvuga qaddisha* lies at the very heart of Zoharic teaching.

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In the divergence between these two tendencies within Kabbalah, we see mythic and abstractionist elements struggling within the emerging self-articulation of the mystical spirit. In raising all to the very heights of the sefirotic world, the Catalonians were voting for abstraction, a Kabbalah that led the mystic to experience a God not entirely removed from the rarified transpersonal deity of the Jewish philosophers. The Castilians may have incorporated some aspects of Gerona's Neoplatonism, but their spirit is entirely different. Perhaps influenced in part by renewed contact with more mythically-oriented Ashkenazic elements, and in part reflecting also the romantic troubadour ethos of the surrounding culture, they write in a spirit far from that of philosophy. Here we find a strong emphasis on the theurgic, quasi-magical effect of kabbalistic activity on the inner state of the Godhead, and its efficacy in bringing about divine unity and thus showering divine blessing upon the lower world. Their depictions of the upper universe are highly colorful, sometimes even earthy. The fascination with both the demonic and the sexual that characterizes their work lent to Kabbalah a dangerous and close-to-forbidden edge that undoubtedly served to make it more attractive, both in its own day and throughout later generations.²

xL

The last quarter of the thirteenth century was a period of great creative expansion among the kabbalists of Castile. The sefirotic Kabbalah—as detailed in the works of such well-known figures as Moses de León, Todros Abulafia, Joseph Gikatilla, Isaac Ibn Sahula, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, Joseph Angelino, and Joseph of Hamadan, all dating from the period between 1280 and 1310—constitutes a considerable and highly varied body of writing, even leaving aside the *Zohar* itself. It was within this circle that fragments of a more poetic composition, written mostly in lofty and mysterious Aramaic rather than Hebrew, first began to circulate. These fragments, composed within one or two generations but edited over the course of the following century and a half, are known to the world as the *Zohar*.

2. The emergence of kabbalistic teaching is more complex and obscure than has been described in the preceding paragraphs. The relationship between Kabbalah and certain late forms of midrashic writing is still not entirely clear. The nature and degree of contact between early kabbalists and the German Hasidic circles, especially as reflected in the writings of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (ca. 1165–ca. 1230), continues to puzzle scholars. The group of abstract mystical writings known as *Sifrei ha-Iyyun*, or *Books of Contemplation*, fits somewhere into this puzzle, but its precise date and relationship to other parts of the pre-Zoharic corpus is still debated by scholars. The sources of the highly distinctive school of “prophetic” or “ecstatic” Kabbalah taught by Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240–after 1292), while having little connection to the *Zohar*, also would require treatment in a full picture of the emergence of kabbalistic thought. But this very brief treatment of major schools and themes should suffice to set forth the context out of which the *Zohar* emerged.

III

Kabbalah represents a radical departure from any previously known version of Judaism, especially in the realm of theology. While kabbalists remained loyal followers of normative Jewish praxis as defined by *halakhah*, the theological meaning system that underlay their Judaism was reconstructed. The God of the kabbalists is not primarily the powerful, passionate Leader and Lover of His people found in the Hebrew Bible, not the wise Judge and loving Father of the rabbinic *aggadah*, nor the enthroned King of Merkavah visionaries. The kabbalists' God also differs sharply from the increasingly abstract notions of the deity created by Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages, beginning in the tenth century with Saadia Gaon and culminating in the twelfth with Maimonides—whose work often stands in the background as the object of kabbalistic polemics. The image of God that first appears in *Sefer ha-Bahir*—to be elaborated by several generations of kabbalists until it achieved its highest poetic expression in the *Zohar*—is a God of multiple mythic potencies, obscure entities eluding precise definition but described through a remarkable web of images, parables, and scriptural allusions. Together these entities constitute the divine realm; “God” is the collective aggregate of these potencies and their inner relationship. The dynamic interplay among these forces is the essential myth of Kabbalah—the true inner meaning, as far as its devotees are concerned, both of the Torah and of human life itself.

XLI

In describing the God of the kabbalists as a figure of myth, we mean to say that the fragmented narratives and scriptural interpretations found in the *Bahir* and other early kabbalistic writings refer to a secret inner life of God, lifting the veil from the ancient Jewish insistence on monotheism and revealing a complex and multifaceted divine realm. In sharp contrast to the well-known ancient adage of Ben Sira (“Do not seek out what is too wondrous for you; do not inquire into that which is concealed from you”), these writings precisely seek to penetrate the inner divine world and to offer hints to the reader about the rich and complex life to be found there. Of course, outright polytheism (like that of the pagan Gnostic groups of late antiquity) is out of the question here at the heart of a medieval Jewry that defined itself through proud and devoted attachment to the faith in one God. What we seem to discover in the early Kabbalah are various stages of divine life, elements within the Godhead that interact with one another. In the *Bahir*, these potencies relate quite freely and mysteriously with one another; a fixed pattern of relationships is somehow vaguely in the background, but not clearly presented. In the century of development following the *Bahir*'s publication (1150–1250), the system comes to be quite firmly fixed. It is that pattern that lies behind the fanciful and multi-layered creativity of the *Zohar*.

What we are speaking of here is the realm of divine entities that are called *sefirot* by early kabbalistic sources. The term originates in *Sefer Yetsirah*, where

it refers to the ten primal numbers which, along with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, comprise the “thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom” or the essential structure of existence. For the kabbalist, it is these forces and the dynamic interplay among them that constitutes the inner life of the Godhead. To know God, a necessary condition of proper worship (on this point the kabbalists agree with the philosophers), one must understand the symbolic language of the *sefirot*. To be a kabbalist is to contemplate the flow of energy among the *sefirot* and reflect upon their ultimate unity.

The non-*Bahir* writings of early Kabbalah add an important new element to this picture. Here the term *Ein Sof* begins to appear as the hidden source from which the ten *sefirot* emerge. Originally part of an adverbial phrase meaning “endlessly,” *Ein Sof* is used in this context in a nominal sense to designate “the Endless” or “that which is beyond all limits.” *Ein Sof* refers to the endless and undefinable reservoir of divinity, the ultimate source out of which everything flows. *Ein Sof* is utterly transcendent in the sense that no words can describe it, no mind comprehend it. But it is also ever-present in the sense of the old rabbinic adage “He is the place of the world.” To say that *Ein Sof* is “there” but not “here” would entirely falsify the notion. Nothing can ever exist outside of *Ein Sof*. It is thus not quite accurate to say that the *sefirot* “emerge” or “come out of” *Ein Sof*. Within the hidden reaches of infinity, in a way that of necessity eludes human comprehension, there stirs a primal desire, the slightest rippling in the stillness of cosmic solitude. That desire (not a change, the more philosophically-oriented kabbalist hastens to add, but an aspect of reality that has been there forever) draws the infinite well of energy called *Ein Sof* toward self-expression: a becoming manifest or a concretization that begins with the subtlest of steps, moves toward the emergence of “God” as divine persona, manifests its spectrum of energies in the “fullness” of the ten *sefirot*, and then spills over with plentitude to create all the “lower” worlds, including—as its very lowest manifestation—the material universe. The *sefirot* are thus a revelation, a rendering more accessible, of that which has existed in *Ein Sof* all along.

We are now ready to trace the pattern of the *sefirot* and the essential symbols associated with them. The description in the following paragraphs does not summarize any particular passage in a single kabbalistic text, but attempts to offer a summary understanding of the *sefirot* as they were portrayed in the emerging Castilian Kabbalah of the late thirteenth century. (See the Diagram of the Ten *Sefirot*, above, page XX.)

The highest *sefirah* represents the first stirrings of intent within *Ein Sof*, the arousal of desire to come forth into the varied life of being. There is no specific “content” to this *sefirah*; it is a desire or intentionality, an inner movement of the spirit, that potentially bears all content, but actually none. It is therefore often designated by the kabbalists as “Nothing.” This is a stage of reality that lies between being wholly within the One and the first glimmer of separate existence. Most of the terms used to describe this rather vague realm are

apophatic in nature, describing it negatively. “The air [or: ether] that cannot be grasped” is one favorite; “the hidden light” is another. The prime pictorial image assigned to it is that of the crown: *Keter*, the starting point of the cosmic process. Sometimes this rung of being is referred to as *Keter Elyon*, the Supreme Crown of God. This image is derived partly from a depiction of the ten *sefirot* in anthropic form, that is to say, in the image of a human being. Since this personification is of a royal personage, the highest manifestation of that emerging spiritual “body” will be the crown. But we should also recall that the more primary meaning of the word *keter* is “circle”; it is from this that the notion of the crown is derived. In *Sefer Yetsirah* we are told that the *sefirot* are a great circle, “their end embedded in their beginning, and their beginning in their end.” The circularity of the *sefirot* will be important to us further along in our description.

Out of *Keter* emerges *Hokhmah*, the first and finest point of “real” existence. All things, souls, and moments of time that are ever to be, exist within a primal point, at once infinitesimally small and great beyond measure. (Like mystics everywhere, kabbalists love the language of paradox, a way of showing how inadequate words really are to describe this reality.) The move from *Keter* to *Hokhmah*, the first step in the primal process, is a transition from nothingness to being, from pure potential to the first point of real existence. The kabbalists are fond of describing it by their own reading of a verse from Job’s Hymn to Wisdom: “Wisdom comes from Nothingness” (Job 28:12). All the variety of existence is contained within *Hokhmah*, ready to begin the journey forward.

XLIII

But *Hokhmah*, meaning “wisdom,” is also the primordial *teaching*, the inner mind of God, the Torah that exists prior to the birth of words and letters. As being exists here in this ultimately concentrated form, so too does truth or wisdom. The kabbalists are building on the ancient midrashic identification of Torah with primordial wisdom and the midrashic reading of “In the beginning” as “through Wisdom” God created the world. Here we begin to see their insistence that Creation and Revelation are twin processes, existence and language, the real and the nominal, emerging together from the hidden mind of God. As the primal point of existence, *Hokhmah* is symbolized by the letter *yod*, smallest of the letters, the first point from which all the other letters will be written. Here all of Torah, the text and the commentary added to it in every generation—indeed all of human wisdom—is contained within a single *yod*. This *yod* is the first letter of the name of God. The upper tip of the *Yod* points toward *Keter*, itself designated by the *alef* or the divine name *Ehyeh*.

This journey from inner divine Nothingness toward the beginning of existence is one that inevitably arouses duality, even within the inner realms. As *Hokhmah* emerges, it brings forth its own mate, called *Binah*, “understanding” or “contemplation.” *Hokhmah* is described as a point of light that seeks out a grand mirrored palace of reflection. The light seen back and forth in those

countless mirrored surfaces is all one light, but infinitely transformed and magnified in the reflective process. *Hokhmah* and *Binah* are two that are inseparably linked to one another; either is inconceivable to us without the other. *Hokhmah* is too fine and subtle to be detected without its reflections or reverberations in *Binah*. The mirrored halls of *Binah* would be dark and unknowable without the light of *Hokhmah*. For this reason they are often treated by kabbalists as the primal pair, ancestral *Abba* and *Imma*, Father and Mother, deepest polarities of male and female within the divine (and human) Self. The point and the palace are also primal Male and Female, each transformed and fulfilled in their union with one another. The energy that radiates from the point of *Hokhmah* is described chiefly in metaphors of flowing light and water, verbal pictures used by the mystics to speak of these most abstract levels of the inner Mind. But images of sexual union are never far behind these; the flow of light is also the flow of seed that fills the womb of *Binah* and gives birth to all the further rungs within the ten-in-one divine structure, the seven “lower” *sefirot*.

XLIV

This first triad of *sefirot* together constitutes the most primal and recondite level of the inner divine world. It is a reality that the kabbalist regularly claims is quite obscure and beyond human ken, although the many references to *kavvanah* reaching *Keter* and to the union of all the *sefirot* with their source undercut such assertions. But for most passages in the *Zohar*, *Binah* stands as the womb of existence, the jubilee in which all returns to its source, the object of *teshuvah* (turning, returning)—in short, the highest object of the religious quest to return to the source. Out of the womb of *Binah* flow the seven “lower” *sefirot*, constituting seven aspects of the divine *persona*. Together these comprise the God who is the subject of worship and the One whose image is reflected in each human soul. The divine Self, as conceived by Kabbalah, is an interplay of these seven forces or inner directions. So too is each human personality, God’s image in the world. This “holy structure” of the inner life of God is called the “Mystery of Faith” by the *Zohar* and is refined in countless images by kabbalists through the ages. “God,” in other words, is the first Being to emerge out of the divine womb, the primal “entity” to take shape as the endless energies of *Ein Sof* begin to coalesce.

These seven *sefirot*, taken collectively, are represented in the spatial domain by the six directions around a center (in the tradition of *Sefer Yetsirah*) and in the realm of time by the seven days of the week, culminating in the Sabbath. Under the influence of Neoplatonism, the kabbalists came to describe the *sefirot* as emerging in sequence. This sequence does not necessarily have to be one of time, as the *sefirot* comprise the inner life of *YHVH*, where time does not mean what it does to us. The sequence is rather one of an intrinsic logic, each stage a response to that which comes “before” it. The structure consists of two dialectical triads (sets of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) and a final vehicle of reception that also energizes the entire system from “below,” corresponding to *Keter* at the “upper” end.

First to manifest is *Hesed*, the grace or love of God. The emergence of God from hiding is an act filled with love, a promise of the endless showering of blessing and life on all beings, each of whose birth in a sense will continue this process of emerging from the One. This gift of love is beyond measure and without limit, the boundless compassion of *Keter* now transposed into a love for each specific form and creature that is ever to emerge. This channel of grace is the original divine *shefa*, the bounteous and unlimited love of God. But the divine wisdom also understands that love alone is not the way to bring forth “other” beings and to allow them their place. Judaism has always known God to embody judgment as well as love. The proper balance between these two, ever the struggle of the rabbis themselves (loving the people as well as the law), is a struggle that Jewish sources have long seen as existing in God as well. *Hesed* therefore emerges linked to its own opposite, described both as *Din*, the judgment of God, and *Gevurah*, the bastion of divine power. This is a force that measures and limits love, that controls the flow of *Hesed* in response to the needs, abilities, and deserts of those who are to receive it.

Hesed represents the God of love, calling forth the response of love in the human soul as well. *Gevurah* represents the God we humans fear, the One before whose power we stand in trembling. The kabbalists saw *Hesed* as the faith of Abraham, described by the prophet as “Abraham My lover” (Isaiah 41:8). Abraham, the first of God’s true earthly followers, stands parallel to *Hesed*, the first quality to emerge within God. He is the man of love, the one who will leave all behind and follow God across the deserts, willing to offer everything, even to place his beloved son upon the altar, for love of God. *Gevurah*, on the other hand, is the God called “Fear of Isaac” (Genesis 31:42). This is the divine face Isaac sees when bound to that altar, confronting the God he believes is about to demand his life. Isaac’s piety is of a different quality than his father’s. Trembling obedience, rather than love, marks his path through life. In the *Zohar*, the “Fear of Isaac” is sometimes depicted as a God of terror.

The linking together of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* is an infinitely delicate balance. Too much love and there is no judgment, none of the moral demand that is so essential to the fabric of Judaism. But too much power or judgment is even worse. The kabbalists see this aspect of the divine and human self as fraught with danger, the very birthplace of evil. *Gevurah* represents the “left” side of the divine as the *sefirot* emerge in humanlike form. The *Zohar* speaks of a discontent that arises on this “left” side of God. *Gevurah* becomes impatient with *Hesed*, unwilling to see judgment set aside in the name of love. Rather than permitting love to flow in measured ways, *Gevurah* seeks for some cosmic moment to rule alone, to hold back the flow of love. In this “moment,” divine power turns to rage or fury; out of it all the forces of evil are born, darkness emerging from the light of God, a shadow of the divine universe that continues to exist throughout history, sustained by the evil wrought by humans below. Here we have one of the most important moral lessons of Kabbalah. Judgment

not tempered by love brings about evil; power obsessed with itself turns demonic. The force of evil is often referred to by the *Zohar* as *sitra aħra*, the “other side,” indicating that it represents a parallel emanation to that of the *sefirot*. But the origin of that demonic reality that both parallels and mocks the divine is not in some “other” distant force. The demonic is born of an imbalance within the divine, flowing ultimately from the same source as all else, the single source of being.

The proper balance of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* results in the sixth *sefirah*, the center of the sefirotic universe. This configuration represents the personal God of biblical and rabbinic tradition. This is God seated on the throne, the one to whom prayer is most centrally addressed. Poised between the “right” and “left” forces within divinity, the “blessed Holy One” is the key figure in a central column of *sefirot*, positioned directly below *Keter*, the divine that precedes all duality. The sixth *sefirah* is represented by the third patriarch, Jacob, also called Israel—the perfect integration of the forces of Abraham and Isaac, the God who unites and balances love and fear.

XLVI

Nonpersonal designations for this sixth *sefirah* include *Tif'eret* (Beauty, Splendor), *Rahamin* (Compassion), *mishpat* (balanced judgment), and *emet* (truth). The three consonants of *emet* represent the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet. Truth is stretched forth across the whole of Being, joining the extremes of right and left, *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, into a single integrated personality. Thus is the sixth *sefirah* also described as the central “beam” in God’s construction of the universe. Adopting a line from Moses’ Tabernacle (Exodus 26:28), depicted by the rabbis as reflecting the cosmic structure, Jacob or the sixth *sefirah* is called “the central beam, reaching from one end unto the other.”

In Jacob or *Tif'eret* we reach the synthesis that resolves the original tension between *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, the inner “right” and “left,” love and judgment. The “blessed Holy One” as a personal God is also the uppermost manifestation called “Israel,” thus serving as a model of idealized human personality. Each member of the house of Israel partakes of this Godhead, who may also be understood as a totemic representation of His people below. “Jacob” is in this sense the perfect human—a new Adam, according to the sages—the radiant-faced elder extending blessing through the world. This is also the God of *imitatio dei*. In balancing their own lives, the people of Israel imitate the God who stands at the center between right and left, balancing all the cosmic forces. That God knows them and sees Himself in them, meaning that the struggle to integrate love and judgment is not only the great human task, but also a reflection of the cosmic struggle. The inner structure of psychic life is the hidden structure of the universe; it is because of this that we can come to know God by the path of inward contemplation and true self-knowledge.

The key dialectical triad of *Hesed-Gevurah-Tif'eret* is followed on the kabbalistic chart by a second triad, that of the *sefirot* *Netsah*, *Hod*, and *Yesod*, ar-

ranged in the same manner as those above them. Little that is new takes place on this level of divinity. These *sefirot* are essentially channels through which the higher energies pass on their way into the tenth *sefirah*, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, the source of all life for the lower worlds. The only major function assigned to *Netsah* and *Hod* in the kabbalistic sources is their serving as the sources of prophecy. Moses is the single human to rise to the level of *Tif'eret*, to become “bridegroom of the *Shekhinah*.” Other mortals can experience the sefirotic universe only as reflected in the *Shekhinah*, the single portal through which they can enter. (This is the “formal” view of the kabbalists, though it is a position exceeded by a great many passages in the *Zohar* and elsewhere.) The prophets other than Moses occupy an intermediate position, receiving their visions and messages from the seventh and eighth *sefirot*, making prophecy a matter of participation in the inner sefirotic life of God.

The ninth *sefirah* represents the joining together of all the cosmic forces, the flow of all the energies above now united again in a single place. In this sense the ninth *sefirah* is parallel to the second: *Hokhmah* began the flow of these forces from a single point; now *Yesod* (Foundation), as the ninth is called, reassembles them and prepares to direct their flow once again. When gathered in *Yesod*, it becomes clear that the life animating the *sefirot*, often described in metaphors of either light or water, is chiefly to be seen as male sexual energy, specifically as semen. Following the Greek physician Galen, medieval medicine saw semen as originating in the brain (*Hokhmah*), flowing down through the spinal column (the central column, *Tif'eret*), into the testicles (*Netsah* and *Hod*), and thence into the phallus (*Yesod*). The sefirotic process thus leads to the great union of the nine *sefirot* above, through *Yesod*, with the female *Shekhinah*. She becomes filled and impregnated with the fullness of divine energy and She in turn gives birth to the lower worlds, including both angelic beings and human souls.

The biblical personality associated with the ninth *sefirah* is Joseph, the only figure regularly described in rabbinic literature as *tsaddiq* or “righteous.” He is given this epithet because he rejected the wiles of Potiphar’s wife, making him a symbol of male chastity or sexual purity. The *sefirah* itself is thus often called *tsaddiq*, the place where God is represented as the embodiment of moral righteousness. So too is *Yesod* designated as *berit* or “covenant,” again referring to sexual purity through the covenant of circumcision.

But there is more than one way to read these symbols. The ninth *sefirah* stands for male potency as well as sexual purity. The kabbalists resolutely insist that these are ideally identical and are not to be separated from one another. Of course sexual transgression and temptation were well known to them; the circle of the *Zohar* was quite extreme in its views on sexual sin—and on the great damage it could cause both to soul and cosmos. But the inner world of the *sefirot* was completely holy, a place where no sin abided. Here the flow of male energy represented only fruitfulness and blessing. The fulfillment of the

entire sefirotic system, especially as seen in Castile, lay in the union of these two final *sefirot*. *Yesod* is, to be sure, the agent or lower manifestation of *Tif'eret*, the true bridegroom of the Song of Songs or the King who weds the matronita—*Shekhinah*—as the grand lady of the cosmos. But the fascination with the sexual aspect of this union is very strong, especially in the *Zohar*, and that leads to endless symbolic presentations of the union of *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, the feminine tenth *sefirah*.

By far the richest network of symbolic associations is that connected with the tenth and final *sefirah*. As *Malkhut* (Kingdom), it represents the realm over which the King (*Tif'eret*) has dominion, sustaining and protecting her as the true king takes responsibility for his kingdom. At the same time, it is this *sefirah* that is charged with the rule of the lower world; the blessed Holy One's *Malkhut* is the lower world's ruler. The biblical personage associated with *Malkhut* is David (somewhat surprisingly, given its usual femininity), the symbol of kingship. David is also the psalmist, ever crying out in longing for the blessings of God to flow from above. While *Malkhut* receives the flow of all the upper *sefirot* from *Yesod*, She has some special affinity for the left side. For this reason She is sometimes called "the gentle aspect of judgment," a mitigated version of *Gevurah*. Several *Zohar* passages, however, paint Her in portraits of seemingly ruthless vengeance in punishing the wicked. A most complicated picture of femininity appears in the *Zohar*, ranging from the most highly romanticized to the most frightening and bizarre.

XLVIII

The last *sefirah* is also called *Shekhinah*, an ancient rabbinic term for the indwelling divine presence. In the medieval Jewish imagination, this appellation for God had been transformed into a winged divine being, hovering over the community of Israel and protecting them from harm. The *Shekhinah* was also said to dwell in Israel's midst, to follow them into exile, and to participate in their suffering. In the latest phases of midrashic literature, there begins to appear a distinction between God and His *Shekhinah*, partly a reflection of medieval philosophical attempts to assign the biblical anthropomorphisms to a being less than the Creator. The kabbalists identify this *Shekhinah* as the spouse or divine consort of the blessed Holy One. She is the tenth *sefirah*, therefore a part of God included within the divine ten-in-one unity. But She is tragically exiled, distanced from Her divine Spouse. Sometimes She is seen to be either seduced or taken captive by the evil hosts of *sitra ahra*; then God and the righteous below must join forces in order to liberate Her. The great drama of religious life, according to the kabbalists, is that of protecting *Shekhinah* from the forces of evil and joining Her to the holy Bridegroom who ever awaits Her. Here one can see how medieval Jews adapted the values of chivalry—the rescue of the maiden from the clutches of evil—to fit their own spiritual context.

As the female partner within the divine world, the tenth *sefirah* comes to be described by a host of symbols, derived both from the natural world and from the legacy of Judaism, that are classically associated with femininity. She is the

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moon, dark on her own but receiving and giving off the light of the sun. She is the sea, into whom all waters flow; the earth, longing to be fructified by the rain that falls from heaven. She is the heavenly Jerusalem, into whom the King will enter; She is the throne upon which He is seated, the Temple or Tabernacle, dwelling place of His glory. She is also *Keneset Yisra'el*, the embodied "Community [or: Assembly] of Israel" itself, identified with the Jewish people. The tenth *sefirah* is a passive/receptive female with regard to the *sefirot* above Her, receiving their energies and being fulfilled by their presence within Her. But She is ruler, source of life, and font of all blessing for the worlds below, including the human soul. The kabbalist sees himself as a devotee of the *Shekhinah*. She may never be worshiped separately from the divine unity. Indeed, this separation of *Shekhinah* from the forces above was the terrible sin of Adam that brought about exile from Eden. Yet it is only through Her that humans have access to the mysteries beyond. All prayer is channelled through Her, seeking to energize Her and raise Her up in order to effect the sefirotic unity. The primary function of the religious life, with all its duties and obligations, is to rouse the *Shekhinah* into a state of love.

All realms outside the divine proceed from *Shekhinah*. She is surrounded most immediately by a richly pictorialized host. Sometimes these surrounding beings are seen as angels; at others, they are the maidens who attend the Bride at Her marriage canopy. They inhabit and rule over variously described realms or "palaces" of light and joy. The *Zohar* devotes much attention to describing seven such palaces with names that include "Palace of Love," "Palace of the Sapphire Pavement" (alluding to the vision of God in Exodus 24:10), "Palace of Desire," and so forth. The "palaces" (*heikhalot*) of the Zoharic world are historically derived from the remains of the ancient Merkavah or Heikhalot mysticism, a tradition that was only dimly remembered by the *Zohar's* day. In placing the *heikhalot* beneath the *Shekhinah*, the kabbalists mean to say that the visionary ascent of the Merkavah mystic was a somewhat lesser sort of religious experience than their own symbolic/contemplative ascent to the heights of the sefirotic universe, one that ascended with the *Shekhinah* as She reached into the highest realms. While the inner logic of the kabbalists' emanational thinking would seem to indicate that *all* beings, including the physical universe, flow forth from *Shekhinah*, the medieval abhorrence of associating God with corporeality complicates the picture, leaving Kabbalah with a complex and somewhat divided attitude toward the material world. The world in which we live, especially for the *Zohar*, is a thorough mingling of divine and demonic elements. Both the holy imprint of the ten *sefirot* and the frightening structure of multilayered *qelippot*, or demonic "shells," are to be found within it.

IV

The *Zohar* first made its appearance in Castile toward the end of the thirteenth century. Passages from it are included in works by Castilian and Catalanian kabbalists writing at about that time. In some cases these are presented as quotations, attributed to “Yerushalmi” (usually referring to the Jerusalem Talmud, but sometimes also to other work originating in the Holy Land) or to Midrash, particularly “the Midrash of Rabbi Shim’on son of Yoḥai.” Some refer to it as an ancient work. In other cases, including passages in the writings of well-known Castilian kabbalist Moses de León and the Barcelona author Bahya ben Asher, pieces identical to sections of the *Zohar* are simply absorbed within their writings and presented as their own. By the second decade of the fourteenth century, the *Zohar* is referred to (by the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*) as a “prior” or completed document. Large portions of it are by then available to such authors as David ben Judah he-Ḥasid, who paraphrases and translates various sections, and the Italian kabbalist Menaḥem Recanati, who quotes copiously from the *Zohar* in his own commentary on the Torah. Recanati seems to be the first one to regularly refer to this group of sources by the term *Zohar*.

The question of the *Zohar*’s origins has puzzled its readers ever since its first appearance, and no simple and unequivocal statement as to the question of its authorship can be made even in our own day. There is no question that the work was composed in the decades immediately preceding its appearance. It responds to literary works and refers to historical events that place it in the years following 1270. The 1280s seem like the most likely decade for composition of the main body of the *Zohar*, probably preceded by the *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* and possibly certain other sections. Indeed it is quite possible that the *Zohar* was still an ongoing project when texts of it first appeared, and that parts of it were being written even a decade later. Because the question of the *Zohar*’s origins has been so hotly debated by readers and scholars over the centuries, it is important to offer a brief account here of the history of this discussion.

Debate about the *Zohar*’s origins began in the very decade of its appearance. Fragments of the *Zohar* were first distributed by Rabbi Moses de León, who claimed that they were copied from an ancient manuscript in his possession. This was a classic technique of pseudepigraphy, the attribution of esoteric teachings to the ancients, to give them the respectability associated with hoary tradition. While some naive souls seem to have believed quite literally in the antiquity of the text and the existence of such a manuscript, others, including some of De León’s fellow kabbalists, joined with him in the pretense in order to heighten the prestige of these teachings. While they may have known that De León was the writer, and may even have participated in mystical conversations that were reflected in the emerging written text, they did believe that the

content of the *Zohar's* teachings was indeed ancient and authentic. They probably saw nothing wrong in the creation of a grand literary fiction that provided for these ancient-yet-new teachings an elevated literary setting, one worthy of their profound truth. There were, however, skeptics and opponents of the *Zohar* right from the beginning, who depicted the whole enterprise as one of literary forgery.

Fascinating evidence of this early controversy is found in an account written by the kabbalist Isaac of Acre, a wandering mystic who arrived in Castile in 1305. A manuscript version of Isaac's account was known to the sixteenth-century chronicler Abraham Zacuto and was included in his *Sefer Yuhasin*. Isaac tells us that he had already heard of the *Zohar*, and came to Castile to learn more about it and specifically to investigate the question of the *Zohar's* origins. He managed to meet De León shortly before the latter's death. De León assured him that the ancient manuscript was real, and offered to show it to him. By the time Isaac arrived at Avila, where De León had lived in the last years of his life, he had a chance only to meet the kabbalist's widow. She denied that the manuscript had ever existed, recounting that her husband had told her that he was claiming ancient origins for his own work for pecuniary advantage. Others, however, while agreeing that there was no ancient manuscript source, claimed that De León had written the *Zohar* "through the power of the Holy Name." (This might refer either to some sort of trancelike "automatic writing" or to a sense that he saw himself as a reincarnation of Rabbi Shim'on and—through the Name—had access to his teachings.) Various other players then enter the account in a series of claims and counterclaims, and the text breaks off just before a disciple of De León is able to present what seems like promising testimony in the *Zohar's* behalf.

LI

This account has been used by opponents of the *Zohar* and of Kabbalah in general in various attempts to dismiss the *Zohar* as a forgery and Moses de León as a charlatan. Most outspoken among these attempts is that of the nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz, for whom the *Zohar* was the epitome of the most lowly, superstitious element within medieval Judaism. Graetz and others assumed that the wife was the one who spoke the truth, all other explanations serving to cover or justify the obvious chicanery of the author. Wanting to denigrate the *Zohar*—which did not fit the early modern Enlightenment idea of proper Judaism—Graetz did not consider the possibility that De León might have told his wife such things for reasons other than their being the simple truth. Sadly, her account may reflect the kabbalist's assumption of his wife's inability to appreciate his literary intentions. The claim that he did it for the sake of selling books has about it the air of an explanation to a spouse, offered in a dismissive context.

Modern *Zohar* scholarship begins with the young Gershom Scholem's attempts to refute Graetz. He set out in the late 1920s to show that the picture was more complex and that indeed there might be earlier layers to the *Zohar*.

Awed by the vastness of the *Zohar* corpus, he found it hard to believe that all of it could have been the work of a single author. But in a series of stunningly convincing essays Scholem reversed himself and came to the conclusion that the entire *Zohar* had indeed been written by De León. He supported this conclusion by careful analysis of the *Zohar*'s language, its knowledge of the geography of the land of Israel, its relationship to philosophy and to earlier works of Kabbalah, and references to specific historical events or dates. Most convincing was Scholem's painstaking philological analysis. Scholem compared the *Zohar*'s unique (and sometimes "mistaken") use of Aramaic linguistic forms to characteristic patterns of language to be found (uniquely, he claimed) in De León's Hebrew works. Here he believed he had found something of a literary fingerprint, making it finally clear that De León was the author. As to the magnitude of the work and its attribution to a single individual, Scholem was consoled by historical parallels, particularly that of Jakob Boehme, a seventeenth-century German shoemaker, originally illiterate, who had composed a vast corpus of writings under the force of mystical inspiration.

LII

But the matter is by no means ended here. The fact that Scholem agreed with Graetz on the question of single authorship did not at all mean that he shared in his lowly opinion of the *Zohar* or its author. The parallel to Boehme in fact sounds rather like the writing "through the power of the Holy Name" that had been suggested to Isaac of Acre. Assuming that Moses de León did write the entire *Zohar*, the question became one of understanding *how* this might be the case. Two specific questions here come to the fore. One concerns the notable differences between the *Zohar*'s various sections. Could one person have written the *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, with its hesitant, incomplete usage of sefirotic symbolism; the *Idrot*, where that symbolism was incorporated and surpassed; and the obscure *Matnitin* and *Heikhalot*, along with the rich narrative and homilies of the main *Zohar* text? What can account for all these seeming variations in both literary style and symbolic content?

The other question has to do with the intriguing relationship between a single author and the many voices that speak forth from within the *Zohar*'s pages. Is the community of mystics described here entirely a figment of the author's creative imagination? Is there not some real experience of religious community that is reflected in the *Zohar*'s pages? Might it be possible, to take an extreme view, that each of the speakers represents an actual person, a member of the Castilian kabbalists' circle, here masked behind the name of an ancient rabbi? Or is there some other way in which the presence of multiple authors (or participants in the group's ongoing conversations) can be detected within the *Zohar*'s pages?

Contemporary scholarship on the *Zohar* (here we are indebted especially to the writings of Yehuda Liebes and Ronit Meroz) has parted company with Scholem on the question of single authorship. While it is tacitly accepted that De León did either write or edit long sections of the *Zohar*, including the main

narrative (homiletical body) of the text, he is not thought to be the only writer involved. Multiple layers of literary creativity can be discerned within the text. It may be that the *Zohar* should be seen as the product of a *school* of mystical practitioners and writers, one that may have existed even before 1270 and continued into the early years of the fourteenth century. Certain texts, including the *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* (perhaps an earlier rescension of it than that which has survived?) belong to the oldest stratum of writing. Then the main part of the *Zohar*, including both the epic tale and teachings of Rabbi Shim'on and his disciples, was indeed composed in the decades claimed by Scholem. Work on the *Zohar* did not cease, however, with the turn of the fourteenth century or the passing of Moses de León. In fact, the author of the *Tiqqunei Zohar* and the *Ra'aya Meheimna*, seen by Scholem as “later” addenda to the *Zohar* corpus, may represent the third “generation” of this ongoing school. It would have been in his day, and perhaps with the cooperation of several editors, that the fragments of the *Zohar* as first circulated were linked together into the somewhat larger units found in the surviving fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts.

There is no single, utterly convincing piece of evidence that has led scholars to this revision of Scholem's view. It is rather a combination of factors stemming from close readings of the text and a body of scholarship on it that did not yet exist in Scholem's day. There is considerable evidence of what might be called “internal commentary” within the *Zohar* text. The “Secrets of the Torah” are an expansion of the brief and enigmatic *Matnitin*, as the *Idrot* comment and enlarge upon themes first developed in the *Sifra di-Tsni'uta*. In the *Zohar* narrative, whole or partial stories are told more than once—one version seemingly an expansion of an earlier rescension. The same is true of certain homilies, some of which are repeated in part or whole several times within the text. These expansions and repetitions could be explained as the developing project of a single author; however, when taken together with other factors (the differing sections of the *Zohar* and the multiple “voices” that speak within the text), they point more toward multiple or collective authorship. Historical evidence has shown that closed schools or societies (*havurot*) for various purposes were a common organizational form within Spanish Jewry. The image of Rabbi Shim'on and his followers, encountering a series of mysterious teachers in the course of their wanderings, looks rather like a description of a real such school, meeting various mystics from outside its ranks who were then accepted by the school's leader as legitimate teachers of secret Torah.

It is particularly intriguing to compare this fictionalized but historically real school of kabbalists to another that is rather more clearly described in documents available to us. In neighboring Catalonia, the kabbalistic school of Naḥmanides lasted—side by side with his halakhic school—for three generations. Naḥmanides' disciple Solomon ben Adret (ca. 1235–ca. 1310) carried his master's teachings forward to a group of disciples who then wrote multiple

commentaries on the secret aspects of Nahmanides' work. That circle was significantly more conservative in its views of kabbalistic creativity than was the Castilian group. But we could easily imagine a parallel school of Castilian kabbalists—beginning with the “Gnostics” of the mid-thirteenth century and extending forward over the same three generations—whose collective literary product, much freer and richer in imagination than the Nahmanidean corpus, included the body of work finally edited into what later generations have come to know as the *Zohar*. It may indeed be that the competition between these two schools of mystical thought had some role in advancing the editing process that finally resulted in the *Zohar* as we know it in its printed version.

V

The *Zohar* was composed in the Castile of the late thirteenth century, a period that marked the near completion of the Reconquista and something of a golden age of enlightenment in the history of Christian Spain. As the wars of conquest ended, the monarchy was able to ground itself and establish central authority over the semi-independent and often unruly Spanish nobility. This included responsibility for protection of the Jews, who generally fared better at the hands of kings than at the arbitrary mercy of local rivals. Alfonso X (1252–1284) was known as *el Sabio* or “the Wise” because of his interest in the sciences—which he was willing to learn from Jews and Muslims when necessary—as well as history, literature, and art.

Jews retained a high degree of juridical and cultural autonomy, as well as freedom of religious practice, in the Castile of this period. They constituted a significant percentage of city and town dwellers, generally choosing to live in self-enclosed neighborhoods and communities. But Jews were seen by Christian society as barely tolerated outsiders, and they viewed themselves as humiliated and victimized exiles. As an emerging class of Christian burghers came to see the Jews as rivals, the economic opportunities afforded by the early Reconquista years were gradually eroded. Jews were required to wear distinguishing garb, synagogue building was restricted, and various burdens of extra taxation came to be an expected part of Jewish life.

Most significantly, Jews were under constant pressure to convert to Christianity in the atmosphere of a church triumphant with the glory of having vanquished the Moorish armies and standing on the verge of ending the “stain” of Islamic incursion into Christian Europe. Alfonso X commissioned translations of both the Qur'an and the Talmud into Castilian, partly out of scholarly interest but also as an aid to the ongoing missionary campaign. The success of the Reconquista itself was trumpeted as great testimony to the validity of Christian claims. The Christian supersessionist theology, beginning with the Church Fathers but growing in stridency through the Middle Ages, claimed tirelessly that Judaism after Christ was an empty shell, a formalist attachment

to the past, lacking in true faith. This message was delivered regularly in polemical writings, in sermons that Jews were forced to hear, and in casual encounters between Jews and Christians. We should remember that Jews in Spain spoke the same language as their neighbors and lived with them in the same towns and cities. Their degree of isolation from their surroundings was significantly less than that of later Jews in eastern Europe, the lens through which all Jewish diaspora experience is often mistakenly viewed in our time.

In this context, the *Zohar* may be viewed as a grand defense of Judaism, a poetic demonstration of the truth and superiority of Jewish faith. Its authors knew a great deal about Christianity, mostly from observing it at close hand but also from reading certain Christian works, including the New Testament, which Dominicans and other eager seekers of converts were only too happy to place in the hands of literate and inquisitive Jews. The kabbalists' attitude toward the religion of their Christian neighbors is a complex one, and it also has come down to us through a veil of self-censorship. Jews writing in medieval Europe, especially those promulgating innovative religious teachings that were controversial even within the Jewish community, must have been well aware that their works would be read by Christian censors (often themselves Jewish apostates) who would make them pay dearly for outright insults to the Christian faith.

LV

The *Zohar* is filled with disdain and sometimes even outright hatred for the gentile world. Continuing in the old midrashic tradition of repainting the subtle shadings of biblical narrative in moralistic black and white, the *Zohar* pours endless heaps of wrath and malediction on Israel's enemies. In the context of biblical commentary these are always such ancient figures as Esau, Pharaoh, Amalek, Balaam, and the mixed multitude of runaway slaves who left Egypt with Israel, a group treated by the *Zohar* with special venom. All of these were rather safe objects for attack, but it does not take much imagination to realize that the true address of this resentment was the oppressor in whose midst the authors lived. This becomes significantly clearer when we consider the *Zohar's* comments on the religion of these ancient enemies. They are castigated repeatedly as worshipers of the demonic and practitioners of black magic, enemies of divine unity and therefore dangerous disturbers of the cosmic balance by which the world survives. Israel, and especially the kabbalistic "companions" who understand this situation, must do all they can to right the balance and save the *Shekhinah* from those dark forces and their vast network of accursed supporters on earth. As Moses had fought off the evil spells of Balaam—darkest of all magicians—in his day, so must the disciples of Rabbi Shim'on fight those evil forces that stand opposed to the dawning of the messianic light that is soon to come.

All of this is said, of course, without a single negative word about Christianity. But Rabbi Shim'on and his second-century companions lived in a time when the enemies of biblical Israel had long disappeared from the earth.

The same is even more true of the reader in medieval Christian Spain, who is being firmly admonished to join the battle against those who would strengthen the evil forces—wounding or capturing the *Shekhinah* and thus keeping the divine light from shining into this world. It does not require a great deal of imagination to understand who these worshipers of darkness must be. We must remember, of course, that this was also the era when the Christian image of the Jew as magician and devil-worshiper was becoming rampant. The *Zohar*'s unstated but clearly present view of Christianity as sorcery is a mirror reflection of the image of Judaism that was gaining acceptance, with much more dangerous consequences, throughout the Christian world.

But this is only one side of the picture. As people of deep faith and of great literary and aesthetic sensibility, the kabbalists also found themselves impressed by, and perhaps even attracted to, certain aspects of the Christian story and the religious lives of the large and powerful monastic communities that were so prominent in Christian Spain. The tale of Jesus and his faithful apostles, the passion narrative, and the struggles of the early Church were all powerful and attractive stories. Aspects of Christian theology—including both the complicated oneness of the trinitarian God and the passionate and ever present devotion to a quasi-divine female figure—made their mark on the kabbalistic imagination. The monastic orders, and especially their commitment to celibacy and poverty, must have been impressive to mystics whose own tradition did not make such demands on them, but who shared the medieval otherworldliness that would have highly esteemed such devotion.

The kabbalists were much disconcerted by the power of Christianity to attract Jewish converts, an enterprise that was given high priority particularly by the powerful Dominican order. Much that is to be found in the *Zohar* was intended to serve as a counterweight to the potential attractiveness of Christianity to Jews, and perhaps even to the kabbalists themselves. Of course this should not be seen as an exclusive way of reading the *Zohar*, a mystical work which was not composed chiefly as a polemical text. Nevertheless, the need to proudly assert Judaism's spirit in the face of triumphalist Christianity stands in the background of the *Zohar* and should not be ignored as we read it.

VI

The *Zohar*, as the contemporary reader of the original encounters it, is a three-volume work, constituting some sixteen hundred folio pages, ordered in the form of a commentary on the Torah. The first volume covers the *Zohar* on Genesis, the second volume is *Zohar* on Exodus, and the third volume completes the remaining three books of the Torah. The text is divided into homilies on the weekly Torah portions, taking the form of an ancient midrash. Within this form, however, are included long digressions and subsections of the *Zohar*, some of which have no relation to this midrashic structure and

seem to be rather arbitrarily placed in one Torah portion or another.³ An addition to the three volumes is *Zohar Ḥadash* (New *Zohar*), a collection of materials that were omitted from the earliest printed *Zohar* editions but were later culled from manuscript sources. Here we find addenda to the Torah portions but also partial commentaries on Ruth, Lamentations, and the Song of Songs. Another work usually considered part of the *Zohar* literature is *Tiqqunei Zohar*, a kabbalistic commentary on the opening verse of Genesis that explicates it in seventy ways. This work—along with the *Ra'aya Meheimna* or “Faithful Shepherd” passages published within the *Zohar* itself, mostly taking the form of a commentary on the commandments—is seen by modern scholars to be the work of a slightly later kabbalist, one who wrote perhaps in the opening decades of the fourteenth century and saw himself as continuing the *Zohar* tradition.

As stated, the main body of the *Zohar* takes the form of midrash: a collection of homiletical explications of the biblical text. The *Zohar* enters fully into the midrashic genre, even though that form of writing was considered antiquated in the time and place where the *Zohar* was composed. Its authors were especially learned in *aggadah* and used it ingeniously, often convincingly portraying themselves as ancient midrashic masters. But the anachronism of their style was intentional. The *Zohar* is an attempt to re-create a form of discourse that would have seemed appropriate to a work originating with its chief speakers, Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai and those of his circle, who lived in the land of Israel eleven hundred years earlier. In fact, this medieval midrash is based on a thorough knowledge of the entire earlier Jewish tradition, including rabbinic, philosophical, and esoteric works. Its purpose, as will quickly become clear to the reader, goes far beyond that of the ancient midrashic model. The *Zohar* seeks nothing less than to place the kabbalistic tradition, as it had developed over the preceding centuries, into the mouths of these much-revered sages of antiquity and to use them as its mouthpiece for showing the reader that the entire Torah is alive with kabbalistic secrets and veiled references to the “mystery of faith” as the kabbalists taught it. In this sense, the *Zohar* may be seen as an attempt to create a new midrash or, as one scholar has put it, a renaissance of the midrashic art in the Middle Ages.

The old midrashic homilies were often preceded by a series of “Openings,” introductory proems in which the homilist would demonstrate his skill, picking his way through a series of biblical associations eventually leading up to the subject at hand. The *Zohar* too uses such “Openings,” but with a very different purpose in mind. Here the preacher wants to “open” the scriptural verse itself, remove its outer shell, and find its secret meaning. In this way, the verse itself may serve as an opening or a gateway into the “upper” world for the one

3. For a discussion of how these special sections of the *Zohar* have been handled in this translation, see the Translator's Introduction.

who reads it. This leads us closer to the real purpose of Zoharic exegesis. The *Zohar* wants to take the reader inside the divine life. It wants ever to retell the story of the flow of the *sefirot*, their longings and union, the arousal of love above and the way in which that arousal causes blessing to flow throughout the worlds. This is the essential story of Kabbalah, and the *Zohar* finds it in verse after verse, portion after portion, of the Torah text. But each retelling offers a new and often startlingly different perspective. The *Zohar* is ever enriching the kabbalistic narrative by means of retelling it from the vantage point of yet another hermeneutic insight. On each page yet another verse, word, or tale of the Torah is opened or “uncovered” to reveal new insight into the great story of the *Zohar*, that which it proffers as the truth of the Torah, of the cosmos, and of the reader’s soul.

In the series of homilies by various speakers around a particular verse or moment in the scriptural text, the *Zohar* takes its readers through multiple layers of understanding, reaching from the surface layer of “plain” meaning into ever more profound revelations. A great love of language is revealed in this process; plays on words and subtle shadings of meaning often serve as ways to a total reconfiguration of the Scripture at hand. For this reason, the *Zohar*’s best readers, both traditional and modern, are those who share its endless fascination with the mystery of words, including both their aural and graphic (or “spoken” and “written”) manifestations.

LVIII

Other kabbalists contemporaneous with the *Zohar* were offering multileveled readings of Scripture as well. Rabbi Bahya ben Asher of Barcelona immediately comes to mind. His Torah commentary, written in the 1290s, offers the best example of the fourfold interpretation of Scripture in its Jewish form: verse after verse is read first for its plain meaning, then according to “the way of Midrash,” followed by “the way of intellect” or philosophical allegory, and finally “the way of Kabbalah.” Rabbi Bahya’s work is in fact important as one of the earliest sources for quotations from the *Zohar*.

The *Zohar* offers no such neat classifications. Insights offered by a group of “companions” discussing a text may bounce back and forth from readings that could be (and sometimes indeed are) found in earlier midrashic works to ways of reading that belong wholly to the world of Kabbalah. Kabbalistic interpretations are sometimes so well “sewn” into the midrashic fabric that the reader is left wondering whether the kabbalistic referent might not indeed be the “real” meaning of a given biblical verse or rabbinic passage. In one well-known text, the *Zohar* refers to mystical interpretations as the “soul” of Torah, distinguished from the narrative that forms the outward “garments” and the legal derivations that serve as Torah’s “body” (playing on the phrase *gufei Torah* [“bodies of Torah”], that in rabbinic parlance means “essential teachings”). That text also suggests a further level of readings, the “innermost soul” of Torah that will not be fully revealed until messianic times. But when encountering actual passages from the *Zohar*, it is not easy to determine just where

their author stood in the process of undressing the textual bride. Here as almost everywhere, the poesis of the *Zohar* overflows the banks, thwarting any attempt at gradation or definition. It is mostly within the area of “soul” or kabbalistic readings that the assembled sages reveal layer after layer, showing that this level of reading itself is one that contains inexhaustible riches of the imagination. There is not a single mystical interpretation of a verse or passage that is *the* secret in the eyes of the *Zohar*. “Secret” (*sod* in Hebrew; *raza* in Aramaic) is rather a *method*, a way of reading that contains endless individual secrets within it.

The language of sefirotic symbolism offers the *Zohar* limitless opportunities for creative interpretations of Scripture. On the one hand, the *Zohar*’s speakers and authors exult in the newness and originality of this exegesis. Rabbi Shim’on and his disciples speak glowingly of *hiddushei Torah*, novellae in Torah interpretation, and their great value. God and the angels join in rejoicing over each new insight. But the *Zohar* also seeks to deny the newness of kabbalistic interpretation. Not only is the work itself allegedly an ancient one; the interpretive craft of the *Zohar* goes to a higher, deeper, and hence also more “ancient” level of the text. As the highest rung within the Godhead is sometimes called *Attiqa*, the elder or “ancient one,” so does profound interpretation take Torah “back to its antiquity,” to its original, pristine, highest state.

LIX

The *Zohar* stands within the long tradition of Jewish devotion to sacred study as a religious act. The faithful are commanded to “contemplate it day and night” (Joshua 1:8), traditionally taken to mean that the study and elaboration of Torah is ideally the full-time obligation of the entire community of male Israelites (women were exempted from the obligation to study, and only rarely were they offered more than a rudimentary education). This community viewed the Torah as an object of love, and an *eros* of Torah study is depicted in many passages in the rabbinic *aggadah*. Based on biblical images of feminine wisdom, Torah was described as the daughter and delight of God and as Israel’s bride. Study of Torah, especially the elaboration of its law, was described by the sages as courtship and sometimes even as the shy, scholarly bridegroom’s act of love, the consummation of this sacred marriage. The midrash on the Song of Songs, compiled in the sixth or seventh century, devotes a large part of its exegesis of that erotic text to discussing the revelation at Sinai and the delights of both God and the sages in the study of Torah.

The *Zohar* is well aware of these precedents and expands upon them in its own richer and even more daring version of *amor dei intellectualis*. The lush and well-watered gardens of the Song of Songs are the constant dwelling place of the *Zohar*, where frequent invocation of the Canticle is the order of the day. In the kabbalists’ literary imagination, the gardens of eros in the Song, the *pardes* or “orchard” of mystical speculation itself, and the mystical Garden of Eden—into which God wanders each night “to take delight in the souls of the righteous”—have been thoroughly linked with one another. The description in

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Genesis (2:10) of paradise—"a river goes forth from Eden to water the garden, whence it divides into four streams"—and certain key verses of the Cantic—"a spring amid the gardens, a well of living waters, flowing from Lebanon" (4:15) and others—are quoted endlessly to invoke the sense that to dwell in mystical exegesis is to sit in the shade of God's garden. Even more: the mystical exegete comes to understand that all of these gardens are but reflections of the true inner divine garden, the world of the *sefirot*, which *Sefer ha-Bahir* had already described as lush with trees, springs, and ponds of water.

The *Zohar* is devoted to the full range of religious obligations that the Torah places upon the community of Israel. The mysteries of the commandments and the rhythms of the sacred year very much occupy its pages, even if we discount the somewhat later *Ra'aya Meheimna* (Faithful Shepherd) section, which is almost wholly devoted to the meaning of the commandments. Both prayer and the ancient Temple ritual, the classic Jewish forms of devotion, are given lofty kabbalistic interpretations, and the figure of the priest in particular is very central to the Zoharic imagination. Still, it is fair to say that the central religious act for the *Zohar* is the very one in which its heroes are engaged as described throughout its pages, and that is the act of study and interpretation of Torah. Again and again Rabbi Shim'on waxes eloquent in praise of those who study Torah, especially those who do so after midnight. They indeed take the place of the priests and Levites of old, "who stand in the house of the Lord by night." Those who awaken nightly to study the secrets of Torah become the earthly attendants of the divine bride, ushering Her into the chamber where She will unite at dawn with Her heavenly spouse. This somewhat modest depiction of the mystic devotee's role in the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage rite that stands at the center of the kabbalistic imagination does not exclude a level of emotional/mystical reality in which the kabbalist himself is also the lover of that bride and a full participant in, rather than merely an attendant to, the act of union.

Torah in the *Zohar* is not conceived as a text, as an object, or as material, but as a living divine presence, engaged in a mutual relationship with the person who studies her. More than that, in the Zoharic consciousness Torah is compared to a beloved who carries on with her lovers a mutual and dynamic courtship. The *Zohar* on the portion *Mishpatim* contains, within the literary unit known as *Sava de-Mishpatim*, a description of a maiden in a palace. Here the way of the Torah's lover is compared to the way of a man with a maiden. Arousal within Torah is like an endless courting of the beloved: constant walking about the gates of her palace, an increasing passion to read her letters, the desire to see the beloved's face, to reveal her, and to be joined with her. The beloved in the nexus of this relationship is entirely active. She sends signals of her interest to her lover, she intensifies his passionate desire for her by games of revealing and hiding. She discloses secrets that stir his curiosity. She desires to be loved. The beloved is disclosed in an erotic progression before her lover

out of a desire to reveal secrets that have been forever hidden within her. The relationship between Torah and her lover, like that of man and maiden in this parable, is dynamic, romantic, and erotic. This interpretive axiom of the work—according to which the relationship between student and that studied is not one of subject and object but of subject and subject, even an erotic relationship of lover and beloved—opens a great number of new possibilities.⁴

Seeing the act of Torah study as the most highly praised form of devotional activity places the *Zohar* squarely within the Talmudic tradition and at the same time provides a setting in which to go far beyond it. Here, unlike in the rabbinic sources, the *content* of the exegesis as well as the *process* is erotic in character. Formerly it was the ancient rabbis' intense devotion to the text and to the *process* of Torah study that had been so aptly described by the erotic metaphor. The laws derived in the course of this passionate immersion in the text were then celebrated as resulting from the embrace of Torah, even when they dealt with heave-offerings and tithes or ritual defilement and ablutions. (The Talmudic rabbi Akiva—the greatest hero of the rabbinic romance with the text—was inspired by his great love of Torah to derive “heaps and heaps of laws from the crowns on each of the letters.” That indeed had been the genius of Rabbi Akiva's school of thought: *all* of Torah, even the seemingly most mundane, belonged to the great mystical moment of Sinai, the day when God gave Torah to Israel and proclaimed His love for her in the Song of Songs.) But the authors of the *Zohar* crave more than this. The *content* as well as the *process* has to reveal the great secret of unity, not merely the small secrets of one law or another. In the *Zohar*, the true subject matter that the kabbalist finds in every verse is the *hieros gamos* itself, the mystical union of the divine male and female—the eros that underlies and transforms Torah, making it into a symbolic textbook on the inner erotic life of God.

VII

But the *Zohar* is not only a book of Torah interpretation. It is also very much the story of a particular group of students of the Torah, a peripatetic band of disciples gathered around their master Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai. In the main body of the *Zohar*, there appear nine such disciples: Rabbi El'azar (the son of Rabbi Shim'on), Rabbi Abba, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yitṣḥak, Rabbi Ḥizkiyah, Rabbi Ḥiyya, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Yeisa, and Rabbi Aḥa. A very significant part of the *Zohar* text is devoted to tales of their wanderings and adventures, proclamations of their great love for one another, accounts of their devotion to their master, and echoes of the great pleasure he takes in hearing their teachings. While on the road, wandering about from place to place in the

4. Melila Hellner-Eshed, “The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar: The Zohar through Its Own Eyes” (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 2000), 19.

Holy Land, they encounter various other teachers in the form of mysterious elders, wondrous children, merchants, and donkey-drivers, all of whom are possessed of secrets that they share with this band of loving and faithful companions. Usually these mysterious figures know more than the wanderers had expected, and Rabbi Shim'on's disciples are often outshone in wisdom by these most unlikely figures. That too is part of the *Zohar's* story. A contemporary scholar notes that there are more than three hundred whole and partial stories of this sort contained within the *Zohar* text. In some places the narrative shifts from the earthly setting to one that takes place partly in heaven or "the Garden of Eden," in which the master is replaced by God Himself, who proclaims His pleasure at the innovations offered as the kabbalists engage in Torah.

These tales of Rabbi Shim'on and his disciples, wandering about the Galilee a thousand years before the *Zohar* was written, are clearly a work of fiction. But to say that is by no means to deny the possibility that a very real mystical brotherhood underlies the *Zohar* and shapes its spiritual character. Anyone who reads the *Zohar* over an extended period of time will come to see that the interface among the companions and the close relationship between the tales of their wanderings and the homilies they occasion are not the result of fictional imagination alone. Whoever wrote the work knew very well how fellow students respond to companionship and support and are inspired by one another's glowing rendition of a text. He (or they) has felt the warm glow of a master's praises and the shame of being shown up by a stranger in the face of one's peers. The *Zohar*—leaving aside for now the question of who actually penned the words—*reflects the experience* of a kabbalistic circle. It is one of a series of such circles of Jewish mystics, stretching back in time to Qumran, Jerusalem, Provence, and Gerona, and forward in history to Safed, Padua, Miedzybozh, Bratslav, and again to Jerusalem. The small circle of initiates gathered about a master is the way Kabbalah has always happened, and the *Zohar* is no exception. In fact, the collective experience of this group around Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai as "recorded" in the *Zohar* forms the paradigm for all later Jewish mystical circles.

The group life reflected in the text is that of a band of living kabbalists, except that they occupied Castile of the thirteenth century rather than the land of Israel of the second. They lived in Toledo and Guadalajara rather than Tiberias and Sepphoris. Whether these real kabbalists wandered about in the Spanish countryside as their fictional counterparts did in the Holy Land is hard to know, but they certainly felt that the most proper setting for study of Torah was out of doors, especially in a garden or a grove of trees. Occasionally the companions in the *Zohar's* pages have conversations indoors, as when the disciples visit Rabbi Shim'on or they all travel to the home of Rabbi Pinḥas son of Ya'ir. Interestingly there is no house of study or synagogue that appears as a setting for any of their encounters. The *Zohar* very much prefers that they take place under the shade of a certain tree, at a spring of water, or at some

similar place that might call to mind a verse from a psalm or the Song of Songs, with which a homily might then open.

The very frequent references in the text to the importance of secret Torah study at night raises the likelihood that this group of Spanish kabbalists shared for some time, as a regular, ritualized activity, a late-night session for the study of Kabbalah. If they were anything like their fictional counterparts, these sessions began after midnight and went until dawn, concluding with morning prayers. These nightly gatherings (of course there is no way to be certain whether or for how long they did take place on an actual level) were omitted on the Sabbath, when it was the companion's duty to be at home with his wife. They reached their annual climax on the eve of *Shavu'ot*, when the vigil was in preparation for a new receiving of the Torah. The intense climax of the *Zohar* narrative is the tale of two great and highly ritualized meetings of master and disciples in the *Idra*, a special chamber of assembly. In the first of these two assemblies, three of the companions die in the ecstasy of their mystical devotions. The second, the *Idra Zuta* or Lesser Assembly, records the death of Rabbi Shim'on himself and forms the grand conclusion of the *Zohar*.

Gershom Scholem once suggested that the *Zohar* takes the form of a "mystical novel." This suggestion is particularly intriguing because the *Zohar* appeared in Spain some three hundred years before Cervantes, who is often seen as the father of the modern novel. One may see the tales of Rabbi Shim'on and the companions as a sort of novel in formation, but it is clear that the form is quite rudimentary. When the *Zohar* wants to express an idea, it needs to slip back into the more familiar literary form of textual hermeneutics. The novelist in the classic post-Cervantes sense is one who can develop ideas or suggest complex thought patterns by means of character development and plot themselves, rather than by having the characters assemble and make a series of speeches to one another (though such moments are not entirely unknown in later fiction). It might be interesting to place the *Zohar* into the setting of such works as medieval troubadour romances, Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*, or the *Thousand and One Nights*. All of these are narrative cycles, frameworks of story into which smaller units (in these cases narrative, in the *Zohar's* case homiletical) can be fitted. All of them, too, may be seen as precursors of the novel.

But the peregrinations of Rabbi Shim'on and his disciples are more than the "story" of the *Zohar*, whether fictional or masking a historical reality. In the *Zohar*, everything is indeed more than it appears to be. Master and disciples represent wandering Israel, both the ancient tribes in the wilderness on their way to the promised land, and the people of Israel in their present exile. While the ancient rabbis suggest to the would-be scholar to "exile yourself to a place of Torah," here exile or wandering is itself that place. The "place of Torah" is indeed wherever the companions happen to be, the home of the master or the grove of trees. Said in words that they might prefer, the "garden"

Introduction

of mystical conversation follows them wherever they wander, just as Miriam's movable well gave drink to Israel throughout their forty-year trek through the wilderness. The adventures of the companions show their participation in Israel's greatest suffering, that of exile.

Israel's historic exile, however, is itself symbolic, an earthly representation of a still greater exile, that of the *Shekhinah* from Her divine spouse. The nature and origin of this inner divine "exile" is one of the kabbalists' great mysteries. Some passages, both in the *Zohar* and in earlier sources, attribute it to the sin of Adam and Eve. In this sense, Kabbalah may be said to have a true sense of the "fall" or "original sin" of humans, much more so than the older rabbinic sources. The world as first created was a true Garden of Eden because the blessed Holy One and *Shekhinah* were "face-to-face," joined in constant embrace like that of the upper *sefirot* *Hokhmah* and *Binah*. Divine blessing thus coursed through the system without interruption, flowing through all of *Shekhinah's* "hosts" and "palaces" into an idealized lower world as well. Only Adam and Eve's sin—sometimes depicted as that of separating *Shekhinah* from the upper *sefirot* to worship Her alone (symbolized by the separation of the Tree of Knowledge from its roots in the Tree of Life)—disturbed this initial harmony, which since the expulsion from Eden has been sporadic rather than constant, dependent upon the balance of human virtue and transgression.

LXIV

But other passages express a somewhat darker vision of the exile within God. Here the very existence of the lower worlds is an after-effect of divine exile and would not have taken place without it. Some of these sources employ the old Platonic myth of androgyny, embedded in an ancient midrashic description of Adam and Eve, to explain the cosmic reality. Adam and Eve, according to the *aggadah*, were Siamese twins, cojoined back-to-back. This single being is that described in Genesis 1:27: "God created the human in His form; in the divine form He created him, male and female He created them." The forming of Eve from Adam's rib (or "side") in the following chapter is the separation of this pair, in which they are first turned face-to-face to one another, so that they might meet, see one another, and unite to propagate the species, fulfilling God's first command. The kabbalists claim that in this sense too humans are made in God's image: the *sefirot* *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut* were a single entity, back-to-back. They had to be "sawed" apart (a rather violent choice of verb) so that they might be properly united. Only through this union does the divine life begin to flow outward, giving life to worlds below. In order for our life to come about, in other words, God has to undergo a transformative act of great pain, one in which the divine becomes separated from itself, its future reunification to depend entirely upon the actions of these creatures below. Here exile and suffering are inherent in the cosmos, and the balm provided by human goodness is somewhat more superficial, an oasis of relief in the wandering that is indeed the necessary human and cosmic condition.

It is this exile that the kabbalists are acting out in their wanderings through the Galilee of their imagination. In this sense, it may indeed be said that the *Zohar* in its entirety is a symbolic work, not just a collection of symbolic interpretations of Scripture. The narratives themselves may be seen as the most profoundly symbolic and “kabbalistic” part of the *Zohar’s oeuvre*, not just a framework into which the homilies are woven.

VIII

Our discussion to this point leads us now to confront the question of the *Zohar* and religious/mystical experience. A first reading of the *Zohar* might give one the impression of a work that is more *mythical* than *mystical* in content; i.e., more involved with a narrative of cosmic origins and structures than it is with inner experience, the soul, or higher states of consciousness. But this view is partially misleading. To read the *Zohar* well is to fathom the experiential dimension of the entire text, including narrative, exegesis, cosmology, and all the rest. The kabbalist speaking in the sefirotic idiom is laying bare the innermost structure of reality as he both understands and *experiences* it. That same structure is reflected in the cosmos, in Torah, and in the human (or more precisely: “Jewish”) soul. The language of sefirotic symbolism provides a new lens through which to see Torah. But the power of that reading, especially as practiced in the circle of the *Zohar*, offers more than a hermeneutic. To open one’s inner eyes to the new reality created by that pattern of thinking is to live within the realm of the *sefirot* themselves. The transformations of language and inner experience go hand in hand with one another; the breakthrough in consciousness to a higher realm of contemplative existence is conveyed through the vehicle of self-expression in sefirotic terms. Therefore to speak of the origins of the sefirotic universe, or to interpret the Torah text in terms of sefirotic symbols, is also to enter into those places within the soul. For the speakers within the *Zohar*, as for the ideal kabbalist in any time, to speak of the *sefirot* is not only to draw on a body of esoteric knowledge, but is also to enter the inner universe where sefirotic language is the guide to measured experience.

LXV

The authors of the *Zohar* do not generally feel the need to tell their readers that this is the case. In a work written for initiates, the link between the intellectual and experiential dimensions was taken for granted. It is primarily the frequent expressions of enthusiasm and ecstasy with which the text is dotted that serve to indicate how deeply and personally the sefirotic teachings were felt. The repeated refrain “Had I come into the world only to hear this, it would be sufficient!” and the kisses showered upon speakers by their grateful companions make it clear to any but the most obtuse of readers that in the pages of the *Zohar* we are witnessing the shared inner life of a vital mystical circle and not merely a series of exercises in biblical homiletics.

Introduction

The sefirotic universe as a representation of inner religious experience may be described in more specific ways as well, though these are surely not exhaustive. The “descent” of the *sefirot*, beginning with *Keter*, is said to describe the emergence of God from hiddenness to revelation. Both the creation of the world and the giving of Torah are this-worldly extensions of that inner divine process. On a more realistic plane, however, so too is the mystic’s own inner life. Sefirotic symbolism provides a language for describing the mystic’s own return from an experience of absorption in the “nothingness” of God and gradual reintegration into the framework of full human personality, the re-emergence of conscious selfhood. It should be emphasized that the *Zohar* never makes such a claim. In general the kabbalists were loathe to speak too openly about the experiential aspects of their teaching. Especially when it came to the highest triad of the sefirotic world, to speak in terms that claimed direct experience was considered far beyond the bounds of propriety. But one who reads the kabbalists with an eye to comparative and phenomenological descriptions of mysticism cannot but suspect that such experience underlies the sources. The accounts of a mysterious energy that flows from undefined endlessness, through a primal arousal of will, into a single point that is the start of all being, and thence into the womb-palace where the self (divine or human) is born, sound familiarly like descriptions of the rebirth of personality that follows the contemplative mystical experience. Even though the *Zohar* depicts it chiefly as the original journey of God, we understand that the mystical life repeats that divine process. In fact, it is out of their own experience that the mystics know what they do of the original journey on which theirs is patterned. Perhaps one can go even a step further to claim that the constant movement within the sefirotic world, including both the flow of energy “downward” from *Keter* and the rising up of *Malkhut* and the lower worlds into the divine heights, represents the dynamic inner life of the mystic and the spiritual motion that ever animates his soul. It is these nuances of inner movement that constitute the “real” subject of a very large part of the *Zohar* and the world it creates. To most fully appreciate the *Zohar* as a mystical text is to understand these movements as reverberations within the mystic’s soul of events as they transpire within the sefirotic cosmos that constitutes the divine reality.

When the *Zohar* does speak of mystical experience, it is largely through use of the term *devequt*, “attachment” or “cleaving” to God, and its Aramaic cognates. Ever since the early rabbinic discussions of Deuteronomy 4:4 (“You who cleave to *YHVH* your God are all alive today”) and 10:20 (“Fear *YHVH* your God, cleave to Him and serve Him”), *devequt* has played a central role in the devotional life of pious Jews. But the *Zohar* is also quick to associate this term with its first biblical usage in Genesis 2:24, where man “cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.” Attachment to God, for the *Zohar*, is erotic attachment, whether referring to the kabbalist’s own attachment to God by means of Torah, to *Shekhinah*’s link to the upper “male” *sefirot* as God’s bride, or in the

rare passages where Moses becomes the kabbalistic hero and himself weds *Shekhinah*, entering the Godhead in the male role. The contemplative and erotic aspects of attachment to God are just different ways of depicting the same reality, quite wholly inseparable from one another.

With the experience of human love and sexuality as its chief metaphor for intimacy, the *Zohar* depicts *devequt* as a temporary and fleeting experience. Scholars have debated for some time the question of whether true *unio mystica* is to be found in the *Zohar*. But this debate may itself hinge on the sexual analogy. Is there true loss of self or absorption within union to be attained in sexual climax? How does one begin to answer such a question without interviewing all of the world's great lovers? Whether or not the experience underlying countless passages in the *Zohar* can be described as "union" lies, I would submit, beyond our ken. But it is clear that there is no possibility offered of *permanent* bliss to those still attached to bodily existence; only in the world to come will the disembodied spirits of the righteous enjoy the endless delight of basking in the divine presence. Religious experience in this world is but a foretaste of that eternal joy.

As the *Zohar* seeks to develop a language for what we may call its *eros* of poetic creativity, exegesis of the Song of Songs plays a major role. The *Zohar* turns with great frequency, especially in its proems or homiletical "warm-ups," to that great font of sacred *eros*. The Song of Songs, a text in which *eros* in fact remains unconsummated, offers poetic language for every other aspect of the complete drama of courting, including even loss, separation, and longing. All of these come to the fore in the *Zohar's* frequent disquisitions on the Song, which is often most surprisingly linked to verses describing some aspect of the Tabernacle cult or another seemingly dry detail of biblical law. Those texts are utterly transformed by association with the Canticle. The Torah text as a whole, it may be said, is "washed over" in an eroticizing bath created by repeated juxtaposition of Torah texts with verses of the Song of Songs, poetically enriching the *eros* of sefirotic symbolization itself.

The *Zohar* learned from the Neoplatonist milieu within which it existed to speak of the flow of energy, usually described as light, from one cosmic realm to the next. The Neoplatonists tended to emphasize the diminution of that light as it reached "downward" toward the material plane. For the kabbalist, this constantly renewed pouring forth of divine presence could be felt, both in the daily renewal of nature and in the creative vigor of Torah interpretation. He sought to align himself with the cosmic flow, in order to receive its bounty, but also to act in such ways as to stimulate the flow itself. Images of both light and water abound in the *Zohar's* pages to describe the *shefa*, the endless flux of divine bounty that sustains the universe. In the context of the *Zohar*, it is clear that this fluid is also the divine seed, that which enters into *Shekhinah* and allows for the constant rebirth of life in the realms beneath her.

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Read this way, the *Zohar* is very much a mystical, often even an ecstatic, work, or at least one in which the ecstatic dimension is very highly developed. One of the strongest expressions of this reality is found in the *Zohar's* powerful and poetic soliloquies around the word “*Zohar*” itself, and on the verse (Daniel 12:3) from which the work's title is taken: “The enlightened shall shine like the radiance [*zohar*] of the sky, and those who lead multitudes to righteousness, like the stars, forever.” *Zohar* represents a hidden radiance issuing forth from the highest sefirotic realms, a showering of sparks lighting up all that comes in its path. Its inspiration is surely the night sky, the wondrous event of shooting stars against the background of the Milky Way. But like all such images in mystical literature, the beacon of light or drop of divine seed is a pictorial representation of an event that takes place also within the mystic's heart, the inspiration that “sparks” this creative vision.

The inner event of this radiant presence is outwardly manifest in the shining gaze of the kabbalist's face. “The enlightened shall shine” is also understood in this rather literal way. Here, as frequently in the *Zohar*, there is an assimilation of the kabbalist to the biblical description of Moses as he emerged from the Tent of Meeting, his face glowing with the radiant presence of God. But the kabbalist is also Moses' brother Aaron, the ancient priest whose face shines with divine presence as he bestows the blessing of God's own countenance upon the children of Israel. “May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you” (Numbers 6:25) is seen as the Torah's personified way of calling forth the same light that the kabbalist as Neoplatonist perceives to be shining forth from one cosmic rung to another. He now seeks to become the earthly bearer of that light, transmitting it to his community of disciples and readers. This is the kabbalist (most often personified in the *Zohar* by Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai) in the role of *tsaddiq*, conveyer of divine light.

A main purpose of the *Zohar* is to arouse within the reader a constant longing for such “enlightenment” or inspiration. The great religious creativity—and even the ecstatic deaths—of Rabbi Shim'on and his disciples are meant to induce in the reader a sense that he too, as an initiate into the *Zohar's* secrets, may continue in this path. While no generation before the advent of messiah will fully equal that of Rabbi Shim'on, all those who come in his wake are encouraged to follow in his path. The *Zohar* is thus a highly evocative work, one that seeks to create and sustain a mood of ecstatic devotion. Certain familiar biblical verses, including the “garden” passages mentioned above, are used as awakeners—one might almost think of them as “bells”—to regularly restimulate awareness, rousing readers from their daily torpor and reminding them of the constant vital flow needed to quicken the cosmos. This reminder is meant to renew and refresh their participation in Israel's great collective task of rousing *Shekhinah*. She in turn awakens Her divine Lover to release the flow of light/water/seed, enveloping Her in His presence and renewing the universal flow of life.

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The “Eden” (or “Lebanon”) whence that flow is to come is an accessible if hidden rung within the divine and human self. It is not just an ancient and lost site of the biblical tale, nor is it only the “paradise” to which souls will ascend after death. Eden is the “upper world,” a recondite and inward aspect of being that is mirrored in the “garden,” the One who needs to be watered by that flow. We creatures of the “lower world,” trees growing in the garden, need to trace back the course of that river to its source, linking the upper and lower worlds (*Binah* and *Shekhinah*, but also *Shekhinah* and “this” world, or *Shekhinah* and the soul), so that the flow will never cease.

Reflecting on these nature-evoking verses takes us back to the typically outdoor settings of the companions’ conversations, which we have mentioned earlier. These settings represent the varied topography of the land of Israel as it existed in the authors’ imagination, including deserts and vast, forbidding mountains as well as fertile oases and springs of water. The lush garden, especially as evoked in the Song of Songs, is a particularly characteristic setting to inspire such conversations. This may be connected to the much older designation of the “place” of mystical speculation as *pardes* or “orchard.” But it is related also to the verses quoted here and to the series of connected gardens in which the kabbalist sees himself as dwelling. This world is a lower garden, needing constantly to be watered by sources from above, ultimately by the love and sustenance that is the gift of *Shekhinah*. But She too is a garden, nurtured by the river that comes forth from the hidden Eden, itself also a “garden” in some unknown, mysterious way. Somewhere between this world and *Shekhinah* stands the “Garden of Eden” that contains the souls of the righteous, both those who have completed their time on earth and those not yet born. It too is divided into “upper” and “lower” sections, described in various mythic ways.

All of these gardens are linked to one another. The kabbalist sitting and studying Torah with his companions in an earthly garden—physically in Castile, but imaginatively in the Holy Land—is aware that at the same moment the righteous in the Garden of Eden are also engaged in such study. Their garden is open from above, because it is taught that God Himself descends into that Garden to take delight in the souls of the righteous. All of these point still higher, toward the sefirotic gardens, and all these levels of the imagination fructify and enrich one another. The sweet aromas rising from these gardens also play a role in the descriptions of mystical intoxication frequently found in the *Zohar’s* pages.

IX

The unique genius that finds expression in the *Zohar* has everything to do with language. Its homiletical style builds upon midrashic sensitivity to the nuances of biblical language, and often seeks to go beyond it. Underlying every page of the *Zohar’s* reading of Torah is a rich “ear” for associative links and plays on

words, a constant search for “hints” within the text that will allow for an opening to deeper levels of interpretation. This careful attention to the text is joined to the *Zohar’s* readiness to apply to it the symbolic language of the *sefirot* that we have discussed above. It is the interplay between these two factors, heightened midrashic sensitivity and the old/new grid of sefirotic symbols, that creates the unique and powerful poesis of the *Zohar*.

Another element that plays a key role in the powerful impression the *Zohar* has made on its readers throughout the generations is the sonorous and seemingly mysterious Aramaic in which it is written. All the sections of the *Zohar*, except for about half of *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. While scholars have devoted much attention to the unique grammatical and syntactical features of the *Zohar’s* Aramaic, few have tried to understand *why* it is that the *Zohar* is written in Aramaic and what meaning this surprising choice of language might have had for the work’s authors.

Aramaic was the spoken language of Jews, both in the land of Israel and in Babylonia, from late biblical times (fourth–third century B.C.E.) until after the Islamic conquest and its replacement by Arabic (seventh century C.E.) . The Talmud, in both its Babylonian and Palestinian versions, is composed mostly in Aramaic, as are portions of Midrash and other rabbinic writings. The Targum, existing in several versions, is the old Jewish translation of the Bible into Aramaic.

By the time the *Zohar* was written, Aramaic was a purely literary language for all but a tiny group of Jews in the mountains of Kurdistan. Knowledge of it elsewhere was purely passive, even among rabbinic scholars; only very rarely was a short treatise or poem still written in Aramaic. The choice to compose the *Zohar* in Aramaic gave to the work an archaic cast, and this immediately set the stage for its mysterious quality.

In Spain of the thirteenth century, unlike Palestine of the second, Aramaic was a mysterious and only vaguely understood language. Presenting secrets in Aramaic rather than Hebrew (a method that had been tried, in brief texts, before the *Zohar*) shrouded them in an obscuring veil, forcing a slower pace of reading upon those who delved into its pages. It also permitted a certain grandiloquence that might have seemed pretentious in the more familiar vehicle of medieval Hebrew. Images that might have been seen as trivial in Hebrew, especially if frequently repeated, maintained a certain mysterious grandeur when veiled by the obscurity of Aramaic dress.

The *Zohar’s* Aramaic made the text slightly, but not impossibly, more difficult for the educated Jewish reader in its day. This was probably the precise intent: to offer the reader a sense that he had come to a more profound, and therefore less penetrable, sort of teaching. With some extra effort, it would reveal to him the secret universe that the *Zohar* sought to share and pass on to its elite community of readers. Students of the *Zohar* come quickly to understand that the Aramaic of the *Zohar* is indeed a penetrable veil. The real

difficulty in reading the text is that of mastering the symbolic language and the subtlety with which it was employed.

It may also be that the *Zohar's* composition in Aramaic was not entirely a matter of conscious choice. Perhaps it was something that “happened,” either in the author’s psyche or in the community of mystics where Zoharic teachings were first shared orally. If there was a living community of kabbalists in Castile in the 1280s, meeting by night in courtyards and gardens to study the secrets of the Torah, in what language did they share those secrets with one another? How did the transition take place from discussing the Hebrew text of Torah in Castilian—their only spoken language—back into Hebrew or Aramaic, for transcription onto the written page? Could it be that the richly vocalic sound of Aramaic—where each noun ends in a vowel—better reflected the sounds of their own speech than did Hebrew? Were they themselves somehow “seduced” by the mysterious sound of Aramaic to follow it into the fantasy realm represented by the *Zohar*?

These speculations may also be applied to the written text itself, especially if we assume that Rabbi Moses de León is the author of large portions of the *Zohar*. Some twenty Hebrew treatises by De León have survived, and several of these have now been published. Compared to the *Zohar*, they are relatively dull and uninspired. While the doctrinal content is very much the same, they possess little of the poetic muse and freedom of expression that so characterize the *Zohar*. One has the impression that De León stepped into another world when writing the *Zohar*, and the transition from Hebrew to Aramaic was one of the ways he marked that portal. Working in this other, more dimly perceived language released his muse, as it were, giving him the freedom to soar to heights of imagination and literary excess that he would not have dared attempt in Hebrew. We might almost say that the use of Aramaic was some part of “the Holy Name” by which it was said that De León had written the *Zohar*.

The Aramaic of the *Zohar* is indeed a unique composite of dialects and features drawn from ancient literary sources. Details of Scholem’s analysis of the *Zohar's* language can be found in his writings and need not be repeated here. See also the Translator’s Introduction to this volume for further discussion of linguistic questions that have direct bearing on the translation before you.

X

During the last two centuries of Jewish life in Spain, the *Zohar* continued to be copied and studied among small groups of devotees. It competed with two other schools of kabbalistic thought, the Catalanian and the Abulafian, for the attention of those few interested in mystical pursuits. Some kabbalists seem to have combined these various approaches, or else to have “migrated” in the course of their own quests from one school of mystical thought to another. Jewish rationalism was also very much alive in Spain through the fifteenth

century, probably continuing to have a larger following than did Kabbalah. Manuscripts of the *Zohar* also reached Italy, the Byzantine lands of the eastern Mediterranean, and the Holy Land during this period.

It was after the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492 that the influence of Kabbalah entered a period of rapid growth. Various explanations have been offered for this increased interest in the mystical tradition. Some have attributed it to the suffering and despair that visited this once proud group of Jewish communities in the period between 1391 and 1492. The devastation of the age, so it is said, caused Jews to seek out deeper resources of consolation than those offered by the typically optimistic worldview of the philosophers. Others claim that the growth of Kabbalah came as a response of a different sort to the Spanish expulsion. Jews throughout the Mediterranean world, including many Spanish exiles, were shocked and disgraced by the high numbers of Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity in the course of the fifteenth century. Once again the blame was placed partly at the door of philosophy, the intellectual sophistication of Spanish Jewry having supposedly led to a laxity in religious observance and a relative indifference to the question of religious identity. Yet another view attributes the growth in Kabbalah's influence to the new home cultures in which former Iberian Jews found themselves. Ottoman Turkey, with its closed *millet* system—in which each faith community held fast to exclusive truth-claims and total denigration of all outside influences—was a hospitable environment for precisely the closed-minded Zoharic view of the outside world, rather than the Aristotelian quasi-universalism of the philosophers, which had served the needs of a very different age.

LXXII

Whatever the reason (and a combination of the above factors is most likely), we begin to see new kabbalistic works written and old ones distributed and explicated in the early sixteenth century. The *Zohar* and other works of the Castilian tradition are especially prominent in this period. Perhaps typical is the figure of Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai, a Turkish kabbalist who tells us that he was born in Spain in 1481 and left as a child among the exiles. Ibn Gabbai's magnum opus, *Avodat ha-Qodesh* (Venice, 1567), is a grand systematization of Kabbalah and a defense of it against philosophy. Typically of the sixteenth century, Ibn Gabbai knows a great many earlier texts and seeks to harmonize them with one another. But the great source of kabbalistic truth is the *Zohar*, which he quotes on virtually every page as "the Midrash of Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai."

The kabbalistic conventicles of Safed, which flourished in the late sixteenth century, also accorded to the *Zohar* top place as the authoritative source of kabbalistic truth. Clearly, the choice of Safed as a place of settlement for Jews attached to the kabbalistic legacy had much to do with its proximity to Meron, the supposed burial place of Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai. His tomb had been a site of pilgrimage for local Jews long earlier, but with the growth of the Safed community it became a truly important shrine. Both Rabbi Moses Cordovero

(1522–1570), who probably immigrated to Safed from elsewhere in the Ottoman realm, and Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572), who came from Egypt, chose to live in Safed because of the nearness of holy graves and the possibility (described by Cordovero in his *Sefer Gerushin*) of achieving mystical knowledge through prostration upon them. Among the sacred dead of the Galilee, Rabbi Shim'on, now acclaimed as the undisputed author of the *Zohar*, took a central place. Luria specifically hoped to achieve a true understanding of passages in the *Zohar* by visiting what he believed to be the grave of its author.

The “return” of Kabbalah to the Galilean landscape of the *Zohar*'s heroes fired the imagination of Jews throughout the Diaspora. Reports of the holy men of Safed, especially the mysterious figure of Luria, known as *ha-ARI ha-Qadosh* (the Holy Lion), were widely copied and printed in several versions. A vast literature of both kabbalistic writings and ethical or pietistic works influenced by Kabbalah poured forth from the printing presses of Venice, Constantinople, and Amsterdam—to be distributed throughout the Jewish world. It did not take long until the claim emerged that the soul of the ARI was in fact a reincarnation of that of Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai.

It was in this period that the *Zohar* came to be considered not only an ancient and holy book, but a *canonical text*, bearing authority comparable to that of the Bible and the Talmud. The authority of the *Zohar* as the prime source of mystical truth had already been considered by fourteenth-century kabbalists, some of whom came to view its word as superior to that of Naḥmanides, for example, because of its allegedly greater antiquity. Naḥmanides was portrayed by these as a “modern” source, whose word could be set aside by a contrary quotation from the work of Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai. But in the sixteenth century, it was said that Elijah himself had appeared to Rabbi Shim'on, and the *Zohar*'s authority became that of heaven itself. Meir ibn Gabbai traced the kabbalistic tradition back to Sinai, claiming that Zoharic secrets were given to Moses along with the written Torah.

Canonical status, in the context of Judaism, bears with it halakhic authority as well as mystical prestige. If the *Zohar* contained the “true” meaning of both written and oral Torah, might it be used as a source of legal authority, especially in ritual and liturgical matters, as well? This question came up among halakhic scholars, especially in the few cases in which the *Zohar* seemed to contradict the majority opinion of rabbis deciding the law on the basis of Talmudic precedent and its formulation in responsa and codes. In fact, as scholars have shown, these cases mostly turn on local custom—the *Zohar* reflecting either Franco-German or old Spanish customs, while the *halakhah* had decided in favor of others. A classic example of such halakhic dispute involving the *Zohar* concerns the donning of *tefillin* on the intermediate weekdays of *Pesaḥ* and *Sukkot*. The *Zohar* expresses itself most strongly on the issue, considering the wearing of *tefillin* on those days an insult to the festival and a virtual sacrilege. Although the halakhic codes mostly tended otherwise, some

halakhic authorities bowed to the *Zohar*, and the use of *tefillin* on those days was rejected throughout the Sephardic (and later Hasidic) communities.

Thanks to the influence of the Safed revival of mystical studies, Kabbalah became widely known among eastern European Jews in the seventeenth century. The works of Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, a Prague kabbalist who later settled in Jerusalem, carried the teachings of Ibn Gabbai and Cordovero, among others, to preachers throughout the Ashkenazic communities. Here, too, the *Zohar* was very widely quoted. Prayer books with kabbalistic commentaries, including those by both Cordovero and Horowitz, brought kabbalistic thinking into the realm of actual synagogue practice. The highly mythical Kabbalah of Naftali Bacharach, seventeenth-century German author of *Emeq ha-Melekh* (*Valley of the King*), is primarily influenced by the language and imagery of the *Zohar*.

Another area of the growing canonicity of the *Zohar* is reflected in its use in liturgical contexts and its appearance in digests of daily religious practice. Various kabbalistic *Tiqqunim* or “Orders” were published throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These include many collections of *Zohar* passages to be recited during the vigils of *Shavu’ot* and *Hosha’na Rabbah*, at the Sabbath table, and on various other occasions. It came to be understood in this period that oral recitation of the *Zohar* was efficacious even for those who did not understand its meaning. In the nineteenth century, vocalized editions of the *Zohar* were printed to allow for this situation, and to assure that the recitation would nevertheless be performed with some degree of accuracy. There were also various digests produced for daily study/recitation, especially in the eighteenth century. The most widespread of these was called *Hoq le-Yisra’el* (Cairo, 1740), including passages to be recited each day from the Torah, Prophets, Hagiographa, Mishnah, Talmud, *Zohar*, ethical guides, and legal digests. The *Ḥemdat Yamim*, an anonymous compendium of kabbalistic praxis (Izmir, 1731/32), prescribes readings from the *Zohar* for nearly every conceivable occasion in the Jewish liturgical year. In both of these compendia, we see the *Zohar* at the apex of its acceptance and integration into the daily regimen of Jewish spiritual life.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the messianic movement around Sabbatai Tsevi (1626–1676) swept through the Jewish communities. In the more radical forms of Sabbateanism, the *Zohar* carried even greater weight as the authority of Talmudic law came to be questioned. The kabbalistic system of Nathan of Gaza (1643/4–1680), the great prophet of Sabbateanism, is based on the imagery of the *Zohar*; and devotion to the *Zohar* was touted loudly throughout the history of Sabbateanism. Some of the later Ashkenazic Sabbateans—followers of Jacob Frank—came to refer to themselves as “Zoharites,” Jews who followed the authority of the *Zohar* while rejecting that of the Talmud and the rabbis. This, of course, would be a spurious claim had the authors of the *Zohar* been asked their opinion, since they had no

intention of rebelling against Talmudic authority. But by this time (and in these circles), the *Zohar* was being read through the lenses of such radical interpreters as the *Ra'aya Meheimna*, the fifteenth-century *Sefer ha-Qanah*, the anonymous work *Galei Razayya*, and the writings of Nathan of Gaza. When seen as the font of this literary tradition, the *Zohar* could be read as a very radical work indeed.

The decline of Sabbateanism in the mid-eighteenth century preceded by only a few decades the beginning of the Enlightenment era in western Europe and the admission of Jews into a more open and religiously tolerant society. As large numbers of Jews became eager supporters of what they could only see as emancipation, readings of Judaism that supported or fit this new situation became widespread. One feature of this emerging post-Enlightenment Judaism, whether in its Reform or Orthodox versions, was either an open rejection or a quiet setting aside of Kabbalah and the *Zohar* in particular. Scholem wrote an essay about several obscure nineteenth-century figures whom he designated as “The Last Kabbalists in Germany.” We have already spoken of Heinrich Graetz’s negative views of the *Zohar*, a position that was widely shared by his contemporaries. While there were a few scholars in the period of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Adolph Jellinek of Vienna is the most notable) who studied the *Zohar*, it was mostly neglected by westernized Jews throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

LXXV

In eastern Europe, the situation was quite different. Hasidism, a popular religious revival based on Kabbalah, continued to revere the *Zohar* and believe in its antiquity. Several significant *Zohar* commentaries were written within Hasidic circles, and the authors of Hasidic works often referred to the *Zohar*. Rabbi Pinḥas of Korzec, an early Hasidic master, was said to have thanked God that he was born after the appearance of the *Zohar*, “for the *Zohar* kept me a Jew.” Hasidic legend has it that when the *Zohar* was published by his sons, who owned the printing-works in Slawuta, they dipped the press in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) before printing each volume, so great was the holy task that was about to come before it! Hasidic masters, because of this legend, went out of their way to acquire copies of the Slawuta edition of the *Zohar* and to study from it. The great opponent of Hasidism, Rabbi Elijah (the “Gaon”) of Vilna (1720–1797), was also a kabbalist, and a small group within the circle of his disciples continued the study of *Zohar* for several generations.

Among the Sephardic and Mizraḥi Jews, the reputation of the *Zohar* as a holy book was particularly strong. Jews in such far-flung communities as Morocco, Turkey, and Iraq studied it avidly. Simple Jews recited the *Zohar* much in the way that uneducated eastern European Jews recited the Psalms. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Jerusalem became known as a center of kabbalistic studies, and Jews from throughout these communities went there and studied works that emanated from that center. Outside of Europe, it was primarily the Lurianic Kabbalah that held sway, and the *Zohar*, while revered,

was generally viewed through the Lurianic prism. Only as Enlightenment ideas began to spread in the early twentieth century, partly through the arrival of European Jews in the Colonial era, did the authority of the *Zohar* come into question.

The writings of Scholem, Tishby, and the scholars following in their wake have done much to make the *Zohar* intelligible to moderns and to renew interest in its study. Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar*, translating selected passages from Aramaic into Hebrew, was a highly successful attempt to make the *Zohar* more accessible to an educated Israeli readership. The interest aroused among scholars of religion by Scholem's highly readable and insightful essays, especially those first presented at the Eranos conferences, served to kindle great interest in Kabbalah within the broader scholarly community. This interest is maintained today thanks to the profound and sometimes provocative studies of Yehuda Liebes and Elliot Wolfson. The important writings of Moshe Idel continue to bring Kabbalah to the attention of the scholarly and intellectual world. The availability of English and other translations, including the selections in Tishby and anthologies by both Scholem and Matt, have also served the *Zohar* well in creating readerships outside of Israel. In more recent decades, this intellectual interest in Kabbalah has spread to wider circles, including many who are concerned with questions of symbolism, philosophy of language, and related issues.

LXXVI

At the same time, two other seemingly unrelated phenomena have come together to greatly increase the interest in *Zohar* studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. One is the broad interest throughout the Western world in works of mysticism and "spirituality." Our age has seen a great turn toward sources of wisdom neglected by two centuries of modernity, partly in hope of finding in them a truth that will serve as a source of guidance for the difficult and complex times in which we live. Recently, an interest in the *Zohar* and Kabbalah has emerged as part of this trend. As is true of all the other wisdoms examined in the course of this broad cultural phenomenon, the interest in Kabbalah includes both serious and trivial or "faddist" elements. This revival of Kabbalah is a complicated phenomenon within itself, containing expressions of great hunger for religious experience and personal growth, alongside the broader quest for wisdom.

This interest has come to be combined with a very different renewal of Kabbalah, primarily in Israel, after the 1967 and 1973 wars. It is manifest in the growth of kabbalistic *yeshivot* or academies, the publication of many new editions of kabbalistic works, and a campaign of public outreach intended to spread the teachings of Kabbalah more broadly. This new emphasis on Kabbalah is partly due to the reassertion of pride in the Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage, where Kabbalah has an important place. It is also in part related to the difficult and trying times through which Israel has lived, resulting in both a resurgence of messianism and a turn to "practical Kabbalah"—a long-standing

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part of Near Eastern Judaism—as a source of protection against enemies and hope of victory over them. The Kabbalah taught in these circles is primarily of the Lurianic variety, as interpreted through a long chain of Jerusalem-based teachers. Some versions of what is proffered as “Kabbalah” today can only be described as highly debased versions of the original teachings. But the *Zohar*, even if reinterpreted in Lurianic terms, is revered throughout these circles as the primary font of kabbalistic truth, the ancient teaching of Rabbi Shim’on son of Yoḥai.

How this very complex interweaving of forces will affect the future of interest in Kabbalah is yet to be seen. It is certain, however, that the *Zohar* will continue to find a place in the hearts of new readers, some of whom will turn to the more authentic and profound aspects of its teachings. It is hoped that these readers will be helped and guided by the present translation and commentary.

