

NYU Press

Chapter Title: The Zohar: Masterpiece of Jewish Mysticism

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Book Title: Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah

Book Subtitle: New Insights and Scholarship

Book Editor(s): Frederick E. Greenspahn

Published by: NYU Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt9qfwtm.6>

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The *Zohar*

Masterpiece of Jewish Mysticism

EITAN P. FISHBANE

Certain works of the human imagination reorient the culture of reading, rising as classics in the terrain of letters and interpretation. Reaching across the ages, the classic reverberates with an enduring beauty; its artistry makes a claim on each new generation, and it awakens fresh engagement with the mystery and authority of the past. Crafted in late-13th-century Spain, the *Zohar* is one of a handful of texts in the history of Judaism that achieved such an essential impact. The unquestioned masterpiece of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar* is nothing less than one of the most significant compositions produced by the Jews in more than two thousand years of creativity. From the time of its mysterious emergence in Castile, the *Zohar* was regarded as a sacred text, a work whose place in the canon was only superseded by Scripture; it was perceived to hold a status comparable to the talmudic-midrashic corpora of late antiquity.¹ What is more, the *Zohar* was believed by its medieval receivers to be a part of that classical Jewish literature, the recovered mystical voice of the ancient tannaitic sages, a book authored by the revered master Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. It was not until modern academic scholarship on the Kabbalah that this belief was successfully challenged—first in the 19th century by the German scholars Adolph Jellinek and Heinrich Graetz and then in detail by Gershom Scholem, the pioneer of the field as it exists today.²

Shortly upon its initial circulation by the 13-century-kabbalist Rabbi Moshe de Leon—distributed first as selected pamphlets and passages from a supposedly larger work—the community of pious readers accepted the prominent authorship of bar Yochai, and the text was absorbed into the canon of paradigmatic and sacred works of the rabbinic tradition. The immense significance of this moment in the reception history of the *Zohar* cannot be underestimated, insofar as the acceptance of tannaitic authorship had the automatic effect of constructing the cultural memory of the genera-

tions that would follow. Once we see the clear grounds for medieval authorship of the *Zohar* (and I will discuss that in due course), we realize the degree to which projecting authorship into the past had the radical result of transforming perceptions of the historically real. Generations of traditional readers encountered the sages and landscape represented in the text and believed that they were sitting before a record of the rabbis of the 2nd-century Land of Israel, a historically true account of the tannaitic world.³ Of course, scholars of talmudic-midrashic literature may well say that the same principle holds with regard to that corpus, although I would suggest that the *Zohar* reflects a more complete process of invention than the reconstructed vignettes of rabbinic literature.⁴

The *Zohar* is marked by two dominant genres, each of which serves, in part, to situate the text in the literary world of rabbinic antiquity. The first of these, and by far the weightier in terms of sheer volume, is the mystical-midrashic genre. Modeled on the homiletical and exegetical forms of classical Midrash, this is an entirely new mode of kabbalistic discourse, blending metaphysical rumination on the inner workings of divine reality with an interpretive technique rooted in older midrashic creativity. What emerges from this fusion is an altogether different and brilliant construction of discourse, a lyrical and playful theological imagination that works homiletically out of a bold engagement with Scripture. In contrast to the many other kabbalistic works that were produced in 13th-century Spain, the *Zohar* articulates the theological system of the *sefirot* through the voice of midrashic exegesis, a method that not only successfully represents the text as a work of antiquity but also fashions a hitherto unknown type of discourse: a midrashically driven exploration of mystical symbols and inner-divine dynamics. For although the midrashic method was a well-established model in Jewish letters, the aim of homiletical creativity in the *Zohar* was to uncover a symbolic subtext about the intradivine realm, believed to be latent in the Torah. A central component of this new rhetoric is also the mythology of *sefirot*, a manner of reflecting on the divine dimensions that is markedly different from the rhetoric adopted in other kabbalistic texts of this period. In the *Zohar*, the realm of the *sefirot* assumes a powerful new dynamism—a supernal world in which the androgynous nature of Divinity is represented as a mythic drama of inner divine sexual yearning and union in which the cosmic battle of good and evil is subsumed within the divine self and wherein the perennial emanation of divine life from the depths of infinity is articulated with a radiant poetic charge. In the *Zohar*, the symbolic language of Kabbalah is opened to full flower. The symbols and myths of earlier Kabbalah are expressed with an

unprecedented dynamism and imaginative force; the inner life of God is narrated and envisioned with a fresh and bold mythological voice.

The second major genre of the *Zohar* is the fictional narrative, the epic tale of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his disciples wandering the roads of ancient Galilee in search of mystical wisdom. Presented in a highly fragmented structure, the narrated moments most often lead into and out of extended discourses of the mystical Midrash. More often than not, the fictional scene provides an opening into—or a closure for—the kabbalistic homily of one of the companions. But these units of narration are far more than mere excuses for the exegetical discourses; they constitute an art form unto themselves, a new aesthetic of language reaching toward birth. In the narratives of the *Zohar* we observe the quest for new kabbalistic insight; the construction of Rabbi Shimon as a saintly master of otherworldly power, the attempt to utilize fresh tools of rhetoric and representation. Searching for Torah on the road, the companions frequently encounter mysterious strangers who turn out to be exalted mystical masters in disguise; the narrative scenes often dramatize the power and ambivalence involved in the disclosure of secrets. The authors of the *Zohar* resurrect the world of 2nd-century Galilee within the poetic eye of a medieval imagination presented through the veil of pseudepigraphy.

Kabbalistic Theology and Mythology

The *Zohar* constitutes the culmination of more than a century of kabbalistic thinking and creativity in medieval Europe and perhaps much longer, if we are to believe at least some of the Kabbalists' own claims about the oral reception of their esoteric tradition. Having developed in the writings of the earliest kabbalistic authors in southern France and then among the circle of mystics that lived in the Catalonian town of Gerona, the theological system of the *sefirot* came to maturation in the *Zohar* and the related works of late-13th-century Castile. In this medieval kabbalistic thinking we observe a remarkably different theological conception than was established in previous Jewish thought, closest perhaps in approach to the 3rd-century Neoplatonism of Plotinus and its medieval reverberations many centuries later. In the *Zohar* and its antecedents, God is represented as a dynamic flow of cosmic energy—composed of ten identifiable dimensions or stages of emanation (the *sefirot*)—always in flux from a primordial source of Infinity, unfolding in progressively greater manifestation through these ten *sefirot* until birth is given to the lower world. *Ein Sof* (lit., “without end”; the Infinite One)

is the source of all, and it is the lifeblood of all reality, circulating through Divinity and the totality of the cosmos. From the mystery of that Infinity, the *Zohar* teaches, a spark flashed in the darkness—the colors of all that would be exploded in a wondrous array. From the most infinitesimal point of concentration, the containment of all future Being in complete potentiality, the rivers of divine life were opened—the concealed spring of the universe overflowed with an energy too immense to contemplate. *Keter* (Crown), *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), *Hesed* (Love), *Gevurah* (Severity), *Tiferet* (Beauty), *Netzah* (Eternity), *Hod* (Splendor), *Yesod* (Foundation), *Malkhut* (Kingship)—these are the ten dimensions of Divinity (the *sefirot*) that flow forth in a stream of emanation from *Ein Sof*, the well of Infinity. They are the ten rivers of cosmic light, the ten chambers of the inner divine self (Figure 2.1).

The Kabbalists never tire of emphasizing that these ten are one; they are not to be understood as separate entities, despite the considerable length to which the mystics go to explicate their individual features. It is all one. Indeed, this refrain of oneness is repeated numerous times on virtually every page of the *Zohar*; the ten rungs of divine life are contained in the mystery of oneness. But it is important to underscore that the standard Hebrew terminology I have just employed above—a vocabulary that is used extensively in the Hebrew kabbalistic literature of 13th-century Spain—is clearly avoided in the pages of the *Zohar*. This avoidance, including the absence of the term *sefirot* itself, is certainly part of the *Zohar*'s attempt to disguise its medieval origins, to separate itself from the distinctive markers of 13th-century conventions and forms. Nevertheless, the clusters of images and symbols associated with these *sefirot* are used with great liberty in the *Zohar*, and the constellation of symbolic discourse is readily apparent to the experienced reader of medieval Kabbalah.⁵ For despite the fact that the *Zohar* uses the word *dargin* (rungs) instead of *sefirot* (along with other Aramaic variations) and employs interchangeable images in place of the most recognizable sefirotic names, the subject of the text is clear, and the *Zohar* presents the drama of an inner divine mythology with a dynamism and life that was not attained in earlier kabbalistic creativity. In the rhythmic Aramaic voice of the *Zohar*, divinity is represented as brimming with interior struggle and yearning. Male lover (*Tif'eret*) and female beloved (*Shekhinah/Malkhut*) pine for each other with poetic romance, and the actions of Jews in the lower world are thought to stimulate union or separation of those divine forces above. The life of God is represented as a dance of sexual intimacy, a drama of eros between gendered and personified dimensions of the divine realm that is most easily com-

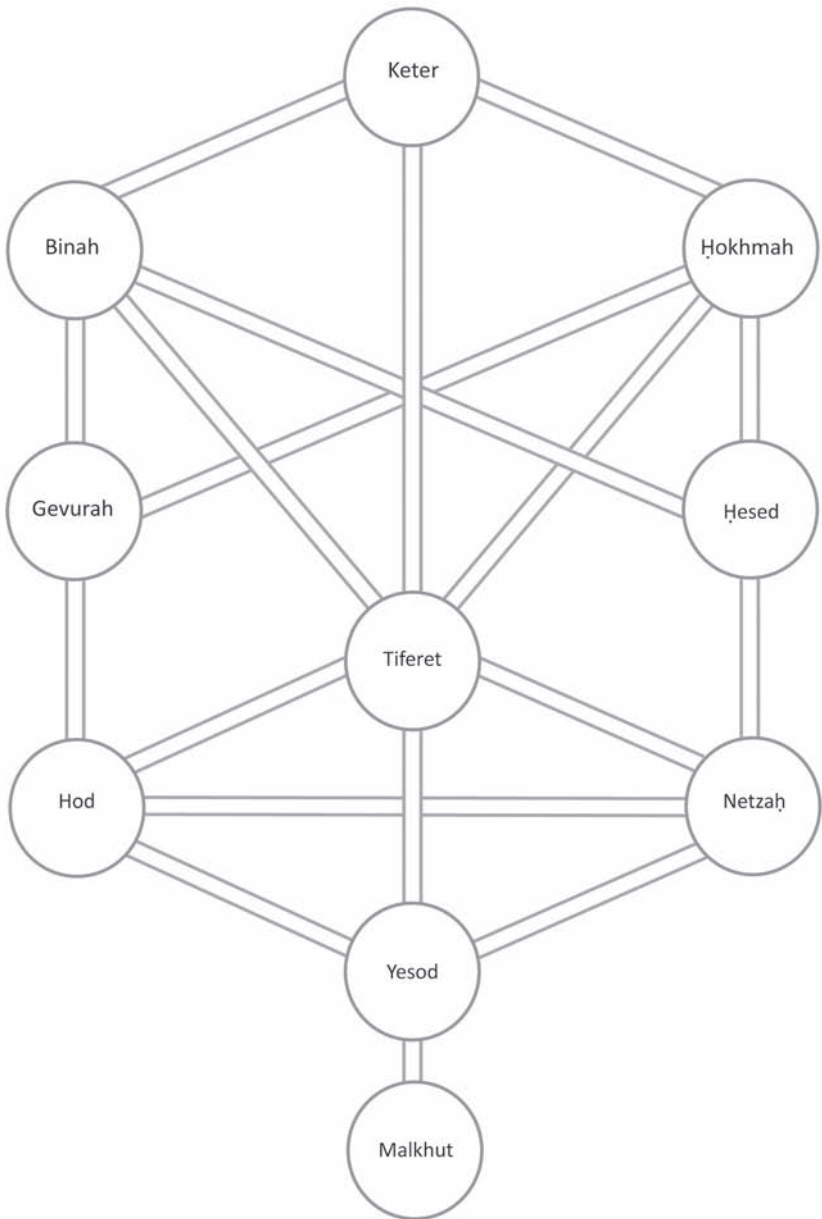


Figure 2.1. The Sefirot. Designed by Nicole Jacobsen, Florida Atlantic University.

pared to the mythological narratives of ancient Greece. And yet the *Zohar* constantly disavows these distinctions, claiming that the different, sexually charged *sefirot* are nothing but faces of the one, indivisible, divine organism.

The other prominent dimension of zoharic mythology is the perennial cosmic struggle between good and evil, metaphysical forces that are rooted in particular components of the tenfold divine structure.⁶ The divine self, like the world of human experience, is depicted as dominated by a tense polarity between the Right Side (*Hesed*—Love/Compassion) and the Left Side (*Gevurah/Din*—Severity/Judgment); the ideal is the restoration of a proper harmony between these two forces of the cosmos, a harmony that is ultimately a dominance of the Right Side (*Hesed*) over the Left Side, even a subsumption and reintegration of the Left into the Right.⁷ In this sense, it is *Hesed* that dominates when all is restored and perfect in the cosmos. The ideal and redeemed state of God and world is one of love and compassion. This is all the more powerful given that the Left Side is believed to give birth to the demonic, havoc-wreaking forces of the cosmos; the reintegration of the Left Side of God into the Right Side is the ultimate victory over the demonic forces and an obliteration of the severe face of evil.

The notion that evil derives from, and is even located within, the deity is a startling conception in the history of Jewish thought. This was one of the signature ideas of Castilian Kabbalah in general and of the *Zohar* in particular. Moreover, this divide between left and right is gendered in zoharic Kabbalah (as it is for Kabbalah more broadly). The ideal absorption of the forces of severity and evil into the forces of compassion and grace is articulated as an absorption of the female dimension of God back into the masculine. In this way, the Attribute of Judgment (*middat ha-din*) is constructed as female and subordinate to the masculine Attribute of Grace/Compassion (*middat ha-Hesed*). The perfected state of divinity is an androgynous masculine, the ultimate maleness of God thus understood to relocate femininity back into the masculine,⁸ a return to the primordial paradigm reflected in the way biblical Eve is drawn from the original body of Adam. For just as the first man was believed to reflect the upper divine image and paradigm, so, too, is the secret of divine gender indicated in the masculinity of primal man from whose body emerges the female. This theory of gender symbolism functions in some tension with the mythic drama of inner-divine courtship, marriage, and sex that the *Zohar* narrates. *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah* are depicted as lovers in quest of each other. Ultimately, however, the moment of sexual union enables the restoration of the original singular maleness of the deity. The female is understood to constitute a subcomponent of the unified male God.⁹

The Question of Authorship

The historical provenance of the *Zohar* is one of the most palpable wedge issues that exist between modern academic scholars and the community of traditional readers and believers. For the faithful, it is nothing short of blasphemous to dispute the antiquity of the *Zohar*; Rabbi Shimon bar Yochoi's authorship of the text and its position in the classical culture of Rabbinic Judaism is sacrosanct and integral to the traditional perception of Jewish history and textuality. To explode this belief is to unmoor religious memory and collective understandings of the paradigmatic and sacred past. And yet it is just such an explosion that lies at the heart of 20th- (and 21st-) century scholarship on this monumental text. Responding to the hypotheses and reflections of his predecessors (particularly the embittered judgments asserted by Heinrich Graetz), Gershom Scholem laid the foundation for all subsequent research into the problem of zoharic origins and authorship, in much the same way that he did for virtually every other major area of inquiry in the study of Jewish mysticism. Starting with his earliest Hebrew and German articles in the 1920s and culminating in his magisterial *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in 1941, Scholem set out to demonstrate why the *Zohar* was a medieval and not a 2nd-century work, and why, in his view, authorship of the text is solely attributable to the late 13th-century Castilian Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe de Leon. In making this bold claim, Scholem marshaled convincing evidence based on linguistic and thematic criteria. He showed, for example, that the author of the *Zohar* did not have direct knowledge of the geography of the Land of Israel, a startling fact given the traditional claim that the text was authored by a sage living and wandering in that land! Scholem points out that the characters walk absurd distances in short periods of time, that the author did not have a proper understanding of direction and proximity in the holy land. He observes that the author of the *Zohar* confuses the mountains of Kurdistan with the mountains of Palestine, that the representations of natural phenomena in the zoharic adventures are far more consonant with the plant life of Spain than they are with that of the Middle East.

Among the linguistic criteria observed by Scholem is another phenomenon that reveals the confused historical knowledge of the zoharic author, one that supports the thesis that the *Zohar* was not written by a 2nd-century mystic. In a clear attempt to relocate the text in antiquity and to remove it from the literary conventions and forms of medieval Judaism, the author fashions an Aramaic that is unlike any other usage in rabbinic literature. Whereas the Kabbalists of medieval Europe wrote in a distinctive Hebrew,

the *Zohar* was composed in an Aramaic that attempts to replicate the language of the Babylonian Talmud and the Targumim, while simultaneously creating a completely idiosyncratic and invented mode of rhetoric, one with hitherto unseen words, phrases, and syntactical constructions. But the author of the *Zohar* clearly was not aware that the tannaitic mystics (most famously represented in the Merkavah/Hekhalot corpora) would not (and did not) write esoteric texts in Aramaic. In that era, Aramaic was the language of the populace, the spoken vernacular of the unlettered. It was Hebrew which was the literary language of the times, and it was Hebrew that was employed by the authors of the mystical-esoteric texts from this period. A text like the *Zohar*, which aims to construct a veil of concealment over its own discourse, a secrecy that covers the wisdom to be revealed, would certainly not have been composed in the language of ordinary people. To the contrary, it would seem that the author(s) thought of the *Zohar's* Aramaic as a way to maintain the secrecy and the aura of mystery around the text; precisely because the texts of 13th-century Spain were primarily composed in Hebrew, the strange Aramaic form underscored the esotericism and *otherness* of the text and its subject.¹⁰ Indeed, even apart from the matter of chronological dissimulation, the Aramaic of the *Zohar* functions to instill an atmosphere of mystery. The rhythms and tones of the text cast a secretive mist over the encounters and teachings represented, and I suggest that the author(s) sought to stimulate just such a sense of mystery in the readers of the work.¹¹

In making his assessment, Scholem noted still other features that point to a medieval dating of the text. Scholem observed the use of numerous philosophical concepts and turns of phrase that did not enter into Jewish usage until the Middle Ages, syntactical and idiomatic constructions that are thinly veiled Aramaic translations of distinctive medieval Hebrew forms and expressions; traces of Arabic and Muslim influence (which would have been anachronistic in the 2nd century), as well as a few instances of zoharic expression that betray a knowledge of Spanish (Castilian). Perhaps the most convincing piece of philological evidence emphasized by Scholem is the stunning similarity between the *Zohar* and the Hebrew writings of Rabbi Moshe de Leon. For despite the fact that the *Zohar* achieves a lyricism and dynamism not reached in de Leon's Hebrew works, the similarities in phrasing, syntax, and theme are indeed overwhelming. For a variety of reasons spelled out by Scholem, it is clear that de Leon's works were not simply influenced by an existing zoharic text; the signature manners of the *Zohar* are organic to de Leon's stylistic method in his Hebrew books. Moreover, there is no Kabbalist whose writings more closely resemble the *Zohar* in thought and compositional approach.

Many of Scholem's foundational insights still hold true and have guided the development of research for subsequent generations of scholars. And yet much has changed as well. Yehuda Liebes suggested a bold new approach in his 1982 article, "How the Zohar Was Written," an essay that dramatically shifted scholarly assumptions about and approaches to the question of authorship.¹² Liebes put forth the groundbreaking argument that the *Zohar* was quite probably composed by a group of Kabbalists, of which Moshe de Leon was a central part. Liebes himself acknowledged the extraordinary connection between de Leon and the *Zohar*, and affirmed that de Leon should still be viewed as the author of the great majority of the zoharic composition.¹³ But Liebes articulated convincing arguments for the hypothesis that several other Castilian Kabbalists also had a hand in this authorship—including such prominent figures as Yosef Gikatilla, Bahya ben Asher, Yosef of Hamadan, and David ben Yehuda he-Ḥasid.¹⁴ Most significant, Liebes proposed and effected the shift in scholarly emphasis from asking "Who wrote the *Zohar*?" to "How was the *Zohar* written?" Liebes suggested that a real-life circle of mystics stands behind the *Zohar*'s fictionalized group of wanderers; he even went so far as to hypothesize that Rabbi Todros Abulafia of Toledo may have been the real-world model for the figure of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the text.¹⁵ In shifting our attention to the "how" of zoharic composition, Liebes underscored the idea that the text was likely written as the collaboration of a mystical fraternity, the product of fellowship and shared spiritual purpose.

In more recent developments, Ronit Meroz has taken the conclusions of Liebes in exciting new directions. Meroz argues that the *Zohar* reflects many more compositional layers than was previously assumed; she has inaugurated a new kind of literary archeology, which utilizes the diversity of manuscript evidence to claim that different strata of the *Zohar* were written over the course of many years—indeed, over the span of numerous generations.¹⁶ In the research of Meroz, the supposed unity of the zoharic literature (leaving aside the major distinctions already observed by Scholem) has been challenged, thereby raising new questions as to how the *Zohar* came to achieve its ultimate form. Indeed, as Daniel Abrams has argued, the very nature of the manuscript evidence points to the provocative notion that the *Zohar* did not achieve the status of a "closed book," a canonized text with the shape and borders encountered by modern readers, until it was first printed in the 16th century.¹⁷ At that pivotal moment, the printers of the Mantua and Cremona editions of the *Zohar* collated a diverse set of manuscripts to fashion the book we now refer to as the *Sefer ha-Zohar*. Prior to that time, Abrams argues, the work existed as a loose constellation of manuscript fragments and

passages, not necessarily reflecting some underlying base text that was composed by the Castilian Kabbalists of the late 13th century. A disparate array of strata and sources (most of which, to be sure, were authored by those Castilian Kabbalists) existed as a non-unified literary landscape; the Mantua and Cremona editors gave new order and shape to that literature, thereby forming a new entity known as the *Sefer ha-Zohar*.

At this juncture I highlight the most recent major contribution of Elliot Wolfson to the question of authorship and composition. In a fascinating new article that offers a critical edition of a hitherto neglected source, Wolfson reveals striking affinities between the *Zohar* and a text known as *Sha'arei ha-Zaqen* (The Gates of the Elder).¹⁸ Like the narrative about Shimon bar Yochai and his wandering disciples, a story in which the drama of the text revolves around the master who reveals the secrets, the *Sha'arei ha-Zaqen* centers upon such a revered figure, one that suggests the existence of a real-world circle of Kabbalists who may have been one of the primary envisioned models for the authors of the *Zohar*. Furthermore, in addition to the figure of Shimon bar Yochai, the *Zohar* dramatizes the persona of another elderly master of secrets, the much discussed old man of its commentary on *parashat Mishpatim* (the *Sabba de-Mishpatim*).

A Literary Approach to the Zohar

As I have outlined above, zoharic scholarship to this point has focused on the historical question of authorship; the conceptual universe of zoharic theology, mythology, and symbolism; the exegetical dimensions of the text; the nature of mystical experience; and the representation of gender and sexuality with the human and the divine realms. Relative to this prodigious research, we are still in the early stages of our appreciation of the *Zohar* as a work of the literary imagination, as a product of poetic and narrative artistry.¹⁹ This is, after all, one of the central threads of zoharic textuality; the rhythm of the work is set by the alternation between the mystical Midrash and the fictional representation of Shimon bar Yochai and his band of Galilean disciples. It is to this *desideratum* of scholarship that my own work is directed; I seek to develop a poetics of zoharic narration, an understanding of the narrative tapestry and the techniques whereby the authors take us into the imagined world of mystery and mystical disclosure.

As intimated earlier, the fiction of the *Zohar* portrays a quest for wisdom, the sojourn of a group of mystics through the ancient Galilee in search of a deeper understanding of divine truth in the cosmos. This point is essential,

I believe, to an appreciation of the dynamic interplay between the *Zohar's* narrative and exegetical modes. The narrated anecdotes and tales most often depict a moment of mystical discovery, an insight that is presented to the companions through an encounter of one sort or another. Frequently this takes place through an interpersonal encounter with a stranger along the road. The companions meet a figure who does not appear to be a kabbalistic sage but turns out to be the bearer of some extraordinary level of mystical knowledge and teaching. In one instance, a donkey driver reveals himself to be a great sage; in another a small child delivers a profound homily and rebukes the rabbis for their shortcomings in piety; and in yet another scene the companions are guided to safety in the desert by a man who subsequently delivers a stunning kabbalistic discourse. In all these cases, the moment of teaching is represented as a great surprise, a wondrous and unexpected discovery, a revelation that is greeted with intense emotional and rhetorical drama on the part of the companions. In still other instances, a few examined here, kabbalistic meaning is extracted from an experience in the natural world. The companions encounter a particular phenomenon of nature, and this moment of engagement serves as a stimulus for new associations in theological and cosmic meaning. In these instances, we observe the interdependent relationship between the exegetical and narrative modes, as well as the way in which the lines of discourse are drawn and bridged by a removed narrator and editor.

With this in mind, I turn to a paradigmatic textual case. Framed as a homily on the opening chapter of Exodus, this pericope begins by citing the language of that biblical text: "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." We may note, first of all, that, like a great many exegetical moments in classical midrashic literature, the citation of the verse is presented in the removed voice of an editor; the interpretive voice of the specific sage whose reference is only cited as such *after* the anonymously uttered biblical verse. And in keeping with earlier midrashic models, the zoharic text immediately shifts to a particular rabbinic voice, in this case, that of Rabbi Yosi, who offers a kabbalistic reading of the biblical words. Rabbi Yosi links the verse in Exodus with a seemingly unrelated formulation in Psalm 104—"He makes His angels spirits"; such a method of correlation between distant biblical verses was also a typical technique of the older homiletical Midrashim. It is the use of the present tense (*oseh*, "makes") that attracts the preacher's attention, and he asserts that God is constantly creating angelic messengers to be in charge of different elements of the universe. And this, Rabbi Yosi argues, is how we should understand the statement in Exodus 1:8. Because all phenomena and

happenings of the earthly realm are the mirrored reflections of the heavenly domain, the rise of a new king in Egypt reflects the moment in which a celestial purveyor was appointed over the demonic, impure elements of the cosmos, a cluster of negative forces represented by the symbolic word “Egypt.” For just as there is an Egypt below, so, too, is there an Egypt above. Rabbi Yosi then parses the second half of the verse, “who did not know Joseph” (*asher lo yada et yosef*): because the purveyor of cosmic impurity comes from “the place of Separation” (*atar de-peiruda*) or the evil Other Side of the cosmic structure, he is characterized as one who does not know Joseph, the symbolic representation of divine perfection, righteousness, holiness, and sexual purity, the frequent term of choice to refer to the *sefirah Yesod*, the locus of male sexuality within the divine self. As is the way of the *Zohar*, the straightforward meaning (*peshat*) of the biblical text, and indeed of the whole earthly world, is read as a doorway into a deeper understanding of the divine mysteries and the workings of the cosmos. In this case, the polarity between earthly Joseph and the subsequent Pharaoh of earthly Egypt reflects a heavenly polarity between the ultimate forces of Good and Evil, of purity and impurity, in the universe.

But it is to the relationship between this interpretation and the narrative that follows that I want to call our attention. Immediately upon the conclusion of Rabbi Yosi’s kabbalistic interpretation of the biblical verse, the voice of the text shifts from quoted speech to a removed narration of the journeying companions. Having just been the speaker of exegesis, Rabbi Yosi now becomes the subject of a fictional scene that carries the purpose of anchoring the foregoing hermeneutical assertions in the living context of the road, in an encounter with the vibrant phenomena of the natural world, the moment of discovery wherein cosmic meaning is extrapolated from the physical-sensory experience of the companions:

Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yosi were traveling on the road, and they arose with the light to continue walking. They saw a star running from one side and another star from the other side. Rabbi Elazar said, “The time has now arrived for the stars of morning to praise their Master. They are running out of fear and awe for their Master, to praise and to sing to Him.” As it is written: “When the morning stars sang together, and all the divine beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). Because they are all in one unity, they praise Him.²⁰

At this point, we are still hard-pressed to discern a link between the exegesis regarding the figure of Joseph and the narrated encounter with the sunrise and morning stars. Here the lyrical voice of the *Zohar* comes to the fore;

we are drawn into the pastoral imagination of the text, into an evocation of natural rhythms of the world as a seemingly pure celebration of physical wonderment. The stars are personified only to the extent that they are the hyper-literal realization of Job's use of imagery; we have yet to see these natural phenomena as portals to *metaphysical* understanding. But that transition takes place almost immediately as the interpreter (presumably still in the voice of Rabbi Elazar) offers a correlated metaphysical reading of Psalm 22:6. Here we also see the association to the Joseph exegesis:

“For the leader; on the doe of the dawn. A Psalm of David” (Ps. 22:6)—
“Doe of the dawn”: For when the face of the East shines and the darkness of night withdraws, there is one purveyor for the east side, and he draws forth a single thread of light from the south side until the sun comes and emerges and breaks through the windows of heaven and illumines the world. And that thread of light causes the darkness of night to withdraw.

In these lines we still see the *Zohar* in lyrical thrall to the mysterious rhythms of nature; the majestic experience of sunrise is represented as the sublime craft of heavenly officers, the unfolding threads of light a meditation on the slow and wondrous passage from the depths of night to the rise of morning. In the instrumental role of the appointed purveyor (*memanne*), we observe the rhetorical link between the foregoing exegesis regarding the “new king who did not know Joseph” and the lyrical representation of sunrise prompted by the moment in the narrative in which the stars are beheld. This association is significant in that it begins to crystallize the manner in which the *Zohar* moves from one thought to another, from the hermeneutical to the narrative-lyrical and back again. Through the powerful hand of the purveyor, the speaker evokes the drama of that radiant breaking through, the passage of increasing illumination through the “windows” of the firmament, the shining of the “face” of the East.

Utilizing such metaphoric depiction endows the sunrise in the East with a quality of personified life, a living face that is aglow with awakened energy. Thus far, the *Zohar* speaks within the ordinary bounds of nature; there may be heavenly officers in charge of the mundane cycle, but we have yet to pass into the realm of theosophical knowledge, of the extrapolation of inner divine mysteries from the happenings and structures of the world. But this is indeed the next step in the zoharic speaker's exegetical process; the poetic evocation of the natural realm, first fueled by the narrated encounter of the

companions with the wonder of an emergent daylight, leads the *Zohar* on an inexorable stream of association to the dynamics of the divine *sefirot*. With this we return to the opening focus of the reflection—the “doe of the dawn” (*ayelet ha-shaḥar*) and her symbolically potent emergence in the predawn light that divides the night from the day:²¹

Then the doe of the dawn [*ayelet ha-shaḥar*] comes out, and a black light emerges in the darkness to join with the day, and the day is illuminated. And the light of day subsumes and draws that doe [*ayelet*] into itself.

With this depiction of the doe that comes out at the earliest moment of dawn, Rabbi Elazar has begun the interpretive move so characteristic of zoharic exegesis. The sun is a well-known symbol for the masculine *sefirah Tiferet* in kabbalistic hermeneutics, and the darkness of night (further symbolized elsewhere by the moon) and the *ayelet* are standard symbols for the *Shekhinah*, the feminine dimension of Divinity, the partner of *Tiferet*. The breaking through of dawn’s light is the first gesture of love and eros between *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*; this moment culminates in the union of male and female, here characterized as the drawing in of the female, the reabsorption and enclosure of the feminine within the masculine that is such a dominant gender paradigm in kabbalistic symbolism, despite the fact that it clearly runs counter to the workings of earthly heterosexuality.

And so the natural phenomenon of sunrise is understood to reflect a supernal dynamic within the divine self, the process of the two inner-divine lovers uniting as one light. But as the lovers separate, following the climactic moment of union, they immediately yearn for each other; they lament the sorrow of their parting. It is in this way that the *Zohar* magnificently reflects on the meaning of Psalm 22 and the enigmatic juxtaposition of the *ayelet ha-shaḥar* in verse 1 with the passionate call of the psalmist in verses 2 and 3, the exclamation of yearning for a God who has seemingly abandoned the individual to his crying and his anguish. The *Zohar* makes this exegesis of the Psalm explicit in the lines that follow:

And it was about this doe, [about the moment] when she withdraws from the daylight that subsumed her, that David sang his song. As it is written: For the leader; on the “doe of dawn.” And what did he say? “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” For the doe of dawn (*ayelet ha-shaḥar*) has withdrawn from the light of day.

The cry over divine absence in Psalm 22:2–3 is understood to be a direct response to the symbolic meaning of verse 1. The doe that emerged at dawn's light, that was enveloped and subsumed in the radiance of the rising sun, has returned to her hiding place. In the symbolism of the *Zohar*, the *Shekhinah* who had been united in love with *Tiferet* has now withdrawn from the fully risen sun, and her lover, *Tiferet*, cries out in anguished yearning, "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?"

Though somewhat marginal to my specific literary concerns here, it certainly behooves us to recall the centrality of this Psalm to Christian thinking about the Passion of Christ. In Matthew 27, Jesus utters a blended Hebrew and Aramaic version of these words on the cross at the height of his suffering, and Christian exegetes have long understood Psalm 22 to be a prefiguration of the crucifixion. Seen through the lens of later Christian theology, the language of Psalm 22 and Matthew 27 reflects an *inner* divine cry—a calling out of yearning from the divine Son to the divine Father. It is in this respect that there exists a striking parallel between the zoharic exegesis and the Christian model. In the passage from the *Zohar* it is also an *inner* divine cry that takes place—one sefirotic dimension of Divinity cries out in anguish over the absence of his lover; it is *Tiferet* who utters an exclamatory lament for the withdrawn *Shekhinah*. A veiled correlation, to be sure, though one wonders whether this exegesis may reflect some measure of response to Christian thinking, especially in light of our growing appreciation for the likelihood that the Christian majority culture in medieval Spain may have influenced the zoharic literature.

At this point, the voice of the text shifts again from Rabbi Elazar's homiletical monologue back to a voice that seemingly stands outside the text or, at the very least, outside the interior of narrative action. This third-person voice serves to enclose the exegesis of Rabbi Elazar, and indeed returns us to the original context within which the teaching about the *ayelet ha-shaḥar* was articulated:

As they were walking, the day became light, and the time for [morning] prayer arrived. Rabbi Elazar said, "Let us pray and then walk on." They sat and prayed. Afterward, they stood up and [continued] walking.

As we find rather frequently in the *Zohar*, the narrated action here is conveyed in a simple staccato rhythm; unlike the many instances in

which the authors apply their considerable poetic artistry (as we have just observed in the *Zohar's* depiction of the sunrise and its correlated metaphysical drama), the narrator here seems merely interested in sealing up one piece of discourse and opening another. The intentional act of sitting to pray functions here as a gesture of pause and focus in the narrative rhythm, and it evokes its own intrigue. One would assume that the companions would have needed to stand for parts of the morning service (as is stipulated by rabbinic law) before rising again to continue walking.

But the moment of prayer and the act of sitting²² are most notable for our purposes insofar as they function to complete the pericope; after the companions stand and continue walking, Rabbi Elazar launches into an unrelated metaphysical discourse. The interrelated acts of sitting and praying mark the rise of the sun to full daylight; it is clearly the recognition of that light that prompts Rabbi Elazar's suggestion that they pray before walking further. In this way the act of morning prayer seals and brings to dramatic conclusion the discourse that it follows. For having first beheld the rushing stars of dawn within the context of the fictional tale, Rabbi Elazar's kabbalistic teaching was a theological-metaphysical reflection on the gradual emergence of daylight, a mystical rumination stimulated by an experience in the natural world. Returning to the third-person voice (for we recall that the encounter with the morning stars was first narrated in the third-person), the completion of sunrise is acknowledged and responded to with ritual gesture and speech.

In conclusion, I have set out here to examine the contours and borders of zoharic discourse through consideration of one paradigmatic pericope. I have sought to show the manner in which the *Zohar* is crafted as a tapestry of exegesis, narrative, and lyricism—how the narrative dramatizes the energy and process of mystical discovery. The fictional dimension of the *Zohar* is by no means incidental to the creative power of the text; instead, it is within the shapes and wonders of worldly exploration that the divine mysteries are revealed—the narrative of journey and the lyrical representation of the natural realm serve to lead the kabbalistic exegete into the discovery of metaphysical associations. Through this lens of analysis, which has been remarkably underdeveloped in zoharic scholarship, we see the workings of an organic and protean literary aesthetic, a textual weave that still awaits appreciation as one of the pivotal masterworks in the broad history of religious literature.

1. On this question, see the analyses in Boaz Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of Its Symbolic Value* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute and Bialik Institute, 2008).
2. Scholem's findings were summarized in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 156–204 and notes. Also see the highly important discussion in Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1:13–23. For a recent and extremely detailed history of scholarship on the zoharic authorship, see Daniel Abrams, “The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholars,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 7–142.
3. On the relationship between historical objectivity and received cultural memory in medieval Judaism, see Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), pp. 31–52.
4. On this question in rabbinic literature, see Richard Kalmin, “Saints or Sinners, Scholars or Ignoramuses? Stories about the Rabbis as Evidence for the Composite Nature of the Babylonian Talmud,” *AJS Review* 15 (1990): 179–205.
5. On this notion of symbolic clusters and the construction of a new religious language through sefirotic terminology, see the remarks of Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 56.
6. The two most prominent discussions of this issue in kabbalistic mythology are Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), pp. 56–87; and Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:447–74, 509–12.
7. This topic has been examined at great length in the writings of Elliot Wolfson; see, for example, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” *AJS Review* 11 (1986): 27–52; *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 326–92; *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 142–89 and notes.
8. This insight has been powerfully argued by Elliot Wolfson; see the above-mentioned works, as well as the more detailed consideration of Wolfson's work in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson's chapter in this volume.
9. The broader subject of mythological creativity and the place of myth in the mystical imagination have also been explored in stimulating ways in recent scholarship. These developments have, among other things, ventured to show the ways in which kabbalistic mythology functions within an organic tradition from rabbinic antiquity, despite the fact that the specifics of theological doctrine are dramatically different. See, for example, Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 1–64; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 301–44; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 275–92.

10. On the Aramaic of the *Zohar*, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Late Aramaic: The Literary and Linguistic Context of the *Zohar*,” *Aramaic Studies* 4 (2006): 5–19; Yehuda Liebes, “Hebrew and Aramaic as Languages of the *Zohar*,” *ibid.*, pp. 35–52; Charles Mopsik, “Late Judeo-Aramaic: The Language of Theosophic Kabbalah,” *ibid.*, pp. 21–33 (first published in French in 1999).
11. See Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 157–88.
12. Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Stephanie Nakache (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 85–138.
13. On the shift in Liebes’s opinion about this matter, see Abrams, “The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book,” p. 71.
14. Also see Moshe Idel, “Kabbalistic Material from the School of R. David ben Yehuda he-Ḥasid” [in Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1983): 169–207.
15. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 135–38.
16. See Ronit Meroz, “Der Aufbau des Buches Sohar,” *PaRDeS: Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für jüdischen Studien* 11 (2005): 16–36.
17. Abrams, “The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book,” p. 107.
18. Elliot Wolfson, “The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 143–278, esp. pp. 172–83.
19. That said, however, quite a number of important advances have been made. Among an array of other works, Yehuda Liebes’s groundbreaking study, “The Messiah of the *Zohar*” (in *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 1–84 and notes) powerfully demonstrated that the representation of Shimon bar Yochai as the “great one” of his, and indeed all, generations was critical to the life of the text and to the depth of its reception among generations of devoted readers. Other elements of the literary approach are present in Liebes, “*Zohar and Eros*” [in Hebrew], *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 67–119. This last essay explores the playfulness of the narrative strata, including the use of humor in zoharic creativity. Other important contributions to the literary approach, or to the study of the narrative content, include Mati Megged, *The Darkened Light: Aesthetic Values in the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1980); Mordechai Pachter, “Between Night and Morning: A Literary Analysis of a Zoharic Text” [in Hebrew], in *The Age of the Zohar*, ed. Yosef Dan (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1989), pp. 311–46; Naomi Tene, “Constructions of the Story in the *Zohar*” [in Hebrew] (Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 1993); Michal Oron, “Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart: The Poetics of the *Zohar* in *Sabba de-Mishpatim*” [in Hebrew], in *Masu’ot: Studies in the Literature of Kabbalah and Jewish Thought Dedicated to the Memory of Prof. Efrayim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1994), pp. 1–24; Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, *La Poétique du Zohar* (Paris: Éditions de l’Éclat, 1996); Pinchas Giller, “Love and Upheaval in the *Zohar*’s *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1997): 31–60; Aryeh Wineman, *Mystic Tales from the Zohar* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997); Boaz Huss, “A Sage Is Preferable to a Prophet: R. Shimon bar Yochai and Moses in the *Zohar*” [in Hebrew], *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 4 (1999): 103–39; Ronit Meroz, “Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations,” *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 3 (2000): 3–63; Gil Anidjar, “*Our Place in al-Andalus, Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish*

Letters (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 166–218; Eitan P. Fishbane, “Tears of Disclosure: The Role of Weeping in Zoharic Narrative,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11 (2002): 25–47; David Greenstein, “Aimless Pilgrimage: The Quotidian Utopia of the *Zohar*” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2003), esp. pp. 105–44; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, esp. pp. 1–45, 190–260, and notes (Wolfson’s work in this monograph opens up the dynamic forces of poetic imagery and contemplative imagination in the Kabbalah; his quest to “craft a poetics of Kabbalah” and its relation to one of Scholem’s many programmatic remarks, is articulated on pp. xi–xiv); Oded Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2005), pp. 51–112; Ronit Meroz, “The Weaving of a Myth: An Analysis of Two Stories in the *Zohar*” [in Hebrew], in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Be’er-Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 2:167–205; Michal Oron, “The Motif of the *Yanuqa* and Its Meaning in the *Zohar*” [in Hebrew], in *Ḥiddushei Zohar*, ed. Ronit Meroz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2007), pp. 129–64; Joel Hecker, “Kissing Kabbalists: Hierarchy, Reciprocity, and Equality,” in *Love—Virtual and Real—in the Jewish Tradition*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean A. Cahan (Omaha, Nebr.: Creighton University Press, 2008), pp. 171–208; Nathan Wolski, “Mystical Poetics: Narrative, Time, and Exegesis in the *Zohar*,” *Prooftexts* 28 (2008): 101–28; idem, “Don Quixote and Sancho Panza Were Walking on the Way: El Caballero Andante and the Book of Radiance (*Sefer HaZohar*),” *Shofar* 27 (2009): 24–47; and Eitan P. Fishbane, “The Scent of the Rose: Drama, Fiction, and Narrative Form in the *Zohar*,” *Prooftexts* 29 (2009) 324–61.

20. *Zohar* 2:10a–10b.

21. Compare this text to the parallel analyzed in Mordechai Pachter, “Between Night and Morning,” pp. 311–46.

22. See the parallel to the *Sha’arei ha-Zaqaen* (as mentioned by Moshe Cordovero) cited in Wolfson, “The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets,” p. 147 n. 23.