

KABBALISTIC CONCEPTS OF TRADITION

REVELATION AND THE 'CRISIS OF TRADITION' IN
KABBALAH: 1475–1575

Moshe Idel

1. *Tradition, Reception and Revelation in Early Kabbalah*

During the first three centuries of its historical and literary existence, namely between approximately the years 1175 to 1492, the Jewish literature known as Kabbalah produced several distinct schools whose attitudes to the manner in which this religious knowledge has emerged and is transmitted differ dramatically.¹ Firstly I shall describe two major approaches: the traditionalist one, gravitating around Nahmanides's approach, and the revelatory one known in the literature as *Sefer has-Meshiv*, first connected to the ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia and to the Zoharic literature. Then I shall turn my attention to issues related to some of the views articulated in the powerful Safedian Kabbalistic centre during the mid-16th century regarding the emergence and transmission of Kabbalah.

In the mid-thirteenth century the Catalan Kabbalist Nahmanides and his school claimed that oral transmission, when performed in a controlled manner from a reliable master to his student, is the only source of authentic Kabbalah in the present. In the introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*—which includes some allusions to Kabbalistic topics—Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, also known as Nahmanides (1194–1270), wrote:

I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Kabbalist [speaking] into the ear

¹ See Wolfson, 'Beyond the Spoken Word'; Idel, 'Transmission', and for some examples of earlier transmission of secret knowledge: Idel, 'Defining Kabbalah'. See also below, note 7.

of an understanding recipient; reasoning about them is foolishness; any unrelated thought brings much damage and withholds the benefit.²

In explaining the sources of Kabbalah as it reached him, Nahmanides combines the idea of an ancient secret revelation delivered to Moses with that of a subsequent faithful transmission based on Rabbinic authority. This is a non-hermeneutical situation, which means that without the reliable transmission no one can reconstruct the secrets of the Torah by an independent analysis of the canonical text. From the semantic point of view Nahmanides inverts the manner in which the term Kabbalah functions: while semantically it signifies 'reception', it is conceived by him here as pointing much more to 'esoteric tradition', which means that he accentuates the process of faithful transmission of an authoritative type of knowledge concerning the secrets of the Torah.

The above passage can also be summarized as follows: a master, described as a Rabbi (which means indubitably a male), is the only source of transmitting the secrets of the Torah, described as Kabbalah, to another male. Implicitly, other sources of obtaining information that may be understood as Kabbalah are excluded: revelation from a non-human, God, angels, non-Rabbis, or as the result of innovation by means of intellectual activity. I assume that this restriction has been imposed by Nahmanides as part of the debate around the dissemination of Kabbalah in the circle of the followers of R. Isaac ben Abraham the Blind.³ It is also possible that traditions related to the revelations of Elijah in circles of Kabbalists in Provence provoked this restriction of Kabbalah to a tradition transmitted orally alone.⁴

However, this solemn declarative passage is not just a vain warning, but is backed by what I see to be a practice followed in Nahmanides' commentary of hinting at secrets without revealing them in a written

² Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, vol. I, 7–8. On this seminal passage see Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture*, 113–114; Idel, 'We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition' and 'NAHMANIDES'; Abrams, 'Orality in the Kabbalistic School'; Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 83–85 and his *By Way of Truth*; Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, 75–76, 80–81, 219–221 and for another approach Wolfson, 'By Way of Truth'.

³ See Idel, 'NAHMANIDES', 28–42.

⁴ See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 35–38, 242–243 and Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration*, 32–37.

form.⁵ In any case, in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, he writes that:

The Account of Creation [*Ma'aseh Bereshit*] is a profound secret, which cannot be understood from the [biblical] verses, and cannot be known *in toto* but by the way of the [esoteric] transmission, up to Moses, [who received it] from the mouth of the [divine] Dynamis. Those who know it are obligated to hide it.⁶

Nahmanides' great authority, combined with the solemnity of passages in the introduction of a book that became a classic, contributed to its impact on later generations. However, already in the generation after Nahmanides, in the two most important circles of Kabbalists, some diverging understandings of Kabbalah were forged. Given the fact that Nahmanides' views were well-known, it is plausible that the new concepts were, at least in part, a reaction to the restrictions imposed by Nahmanides.

It should be mentioned that among the followers of Nahmanides' Kabbalah at the end of the thirteenth century, mostly those in Barcelona, there are testimonies as to the oral transmission of the pronunciation of the letters of the divine name, a process in which Ashkenazi masters initiated some Spanish Kabbalists.⁷ One who was not an adherent of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic school was the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah, R. Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291). He and his followers assumed that although Kabbalistic topics can be learned from ancient books, and also received orally from masters, the highest form of receiving Kabbalah is nevertheless by means of a revelation that can be induced in the present through certain techniques:

In order to understand my intention regarding [the meaning of] *Qolot* [voices] I shall hand down to you the known *Qabbalot*, some of them having been received from mouth to mouth from the sages of [our] generation, and others that I have received from the books named *Sifrei Qabbalah*, composed by the ancient sages, the Kabbalists, blessed be their memory, concerning the wondrous topics; and other [traditions]

⁵ For various aspects of Nahmanides' exegesis in general see Goodman, 'Typological Interpretation'; Pedaya, *Nahmanides*; Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation* and his *By Way of Truth*.

⁶ Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, vol. I, 9. See also Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets*, 241 and Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 86–87.

⁷ See Idel, 'Ashkenazi esotericism'.

bestowed on me by God, blessed be He, which came to me from *ThY*⁸ in the form of the 'Daughter of the Voice', these being the higher *Qabbalot* [*Elyonot*].⁹

The plural for *Qabbalah*, *Qabbalot*, is understood to mean *Bat Qol*, which refers to a certain type of lower revelation in Talmudic tradition. Thus the highest form of Kabbalah is not the oral and written transmission, but the reception of a revelation from above. While Nahmanides was interested in combining the picture of a glorious past (when the final revelation took place) with a reliable establishment that perpetuated the context revealed in the past, Abulafia was much more concerned with a glorious present in which the authority of Rabbis is much less important—and the recipient of the revelation, namely he himself, could compete even with Moses.¹⁰

Drastically different as Abulafia's concepts of Kabbalah are from that of Nahmanides' and his school, they nevertheless share—at least implicitly—the view that a woman does not partake in the Kabbalistic tradition. For the ecstatic Kabbalist, a Kabbalist is a philosopher and a mystic who may become the son of the cosmic *Intellectus Agens* itself described as the son of God.¹¹ Women, historical or generic, are not mentioned in their writings as parts of the chain of transmission, nor are they mentioned as being qualified in one way or another to become practitioners of Kabbalah, and nor does the feminine hypostasis play any role.

According to Abulafia, as a revelation from above the lore of Kabbalah is also consonant with philosophy, although it is achieved by means of linguistic techniques that originally have nothing to do with philosophical speculations. So, for example, we learn from a book he wrote in 1285/6 in Messina:

We and all those who follow our intellectual Kabbalah [*Qabbalah musk-kelet*], [attain] prophecy by means of the combinations of letters; it will teach us the essence of reality as it is, in an easier way in comparison to all the [other] ways in existence in the world, despite the fact that the

⁸ I read the two letters as pointing in a short form to *theos*, namely God. Abulafia already uses the form *THYV* in order to point to God in his early treatise *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*; see Idel, *Language*, 24.

⁹ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, fol. 4b. I cannot enter here into an analysis of the question of what Abulafia conceived to be Kabbalistic books, but lists of such books occur in his writings.

¹⁰ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 50–51.

¹¹ On this issue see Idel, *Ben*, 276–376.

knowledge of the essence of reality is apprehended by much thought. What brings it about [this knowledge] is the combination [of letters], and this combination induces it [the knowledge] as immediately as a youth studies the Bible, then the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*, he will indubitably achieve it quickly, with perseverance, being better than any [other] thought.¹²

The main issue to be learnt from the Kabbalah according to this Kabbalist is the essence of reality, not the secrets of the Torah. Preeminently a philosophical concern, inspired by Maimonides' thought, this knowledge is nevertheless achieved by combining letters, an approach to language that differs from the more conventional understanding of it in philosophical ways of thought.

Some of Abulafia's contemporaries, the Kabbalists who produced the vast Zoharic literature in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century in Castile, as well as a few others, assumed that a series of revelations took place in the distant past and were encoded in a series of books which constitute the main and primary source of Kabbalah.¹³ Although the alleged ancient scholars to whom the *Zohar* was attributed were described as enjoying some forms of revelation, the Kabbalistic topics were conceived of as secrets inherent in the biblical text which were to be extracted by a variety of hermeneutical devices, sometimes as part of a homiletic situation—a phenomenon that I call 'arcanization'—and their decoding as part of pneumatic interpretation.¹⁴ Of paramount importance for understanding the concept of Kabbalah in the main bulk of this literature is a very influential parable describing how a beautiful maiden imparts secrets of Kabbalah to a young male person who is eager to be initiated.¹⁵ Here the source of Kabbalah

¹² Abulafia, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, fol. 90a. For the different meanings of the term Kabbalah in Abulafia see Idel, 'On the Meanings of the term 'Kabbalah'.

¹³ Matt, 'The Aura of Secrecy' and Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets*, passim.

¹⁴ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 137–163 and *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 234–249. Since then a variety of scholars adopted this category. See, e.g. Burns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 135 or Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 329.

¹⁵ See *Zohar*, II, fol. 99b. This story has enjoyed a variety of interpretations in modern scholarship. See, e.g. Wolfson, 'Beautiful Maiden'; Abrams, 'Knowing the Maiden'; Asulin, *The Mystical Commentary*; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 227–229; Bacher, 'L'exegese biblique', 36–38; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 55–56; Talmage, 'Apples of Gold', vol. 1, 316–317; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 3, 1084–1085; Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets*; Benin, *The Footprints of God*, 168–169; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 304–305 and, as to the later reverberations of the parable, Lachover, 'Al Gevul ha-Yashan ve-ha-Hadash', 38–51; for Hasidic discussions influenced by the Zoharic parable of the maiden, or at least in its vein, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*,

is presented as a feminine power, a symbol of the divine manifestation also known in this literary corpus as the *Shekhinah*. No more the male Rabbi who preserves the esoteric teachings for his advanced student in matters of halakhah, but a basically erotic situation, in which the study of Kabbalah is much more connected to an emotional encounter with a spiritual reality. In fact the Zoharic parable is part of a critique of rabbinic behavior by a figure that represents some form of secondary elite.¹⁶ In any case, it should be pointed out that the same parable is also part of a more complex vector that can be described as the apotheosis of the femininity in Kabbalah, one of whose stages will also be discussed below. Thus, unlike the more male-oriented tendencies of both Nahmanides and Abulafia, the Zoharic turn drastically changed the solely male-oriented direction this later Kabbalistic literature could have developed on their basis. Indeed, one of the many differences between the two late thirteenth century schools is the divergence of their attitude to femininity. While Abraham Abulafia follows on this point Maimonides' clearly negative attitude toward the feminine elements, the Zoharic literature displays a much more complex approach, which also includes some quite positive attitudes toward the divine feminine power, an issue that will certainly be important for our later discussions in this study.¹⁷ Let me point out that despite the importance of the parable of the beautiful maiden, I do not claim that the feminine hypostasis is the sole source of Kabbalah in the Zoharic literature.

Different as the two late thirteenth century Kabbalistic schools are, they share an important common denominator: they believed that what a Kabbalist innovates by resorting to 'Kabbalistic' exegetical devices is Kabbalah, thus creating the first most important crisis of the Nahmanidean approach, which had identified Kabbalah with esoteric tradition as a closed type of knowledge. No less important is the assumption in this parable that the human mediation of the precious information that should carefully be preserved is marginalized in the name of an encounter with the spiritual realm, be it the cosmic

23–25, and Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets*, 207, 240–241. According to Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, 43, the maiden represents a supernal feminine entity, who may be described in terms related to the last *sefirah*.

¹⁶ Huss, 'A Sage is Preferable to a Prophet' and his 'The Appearance of the Book', 535–542, as well as idem., 'Sefer ha-Zohar', 271–274. Much of the material dealt with in these articles is found now in his *Like the Radiance of the Sky*.

¹⁷ See already Idel, *Language*, 14–15.

Agent Intellect understood as a male entity, or the feminine *Shekhinah*, thus removing Rabbinic authority from the process of receiving or creating Kabbalah. In any case, let me stress the fact that innovation related to exegesis and the experience of revelation are combined in these two schools, representing a strong departure from the traditional horizons of Nahmanides and his followers. Though they may appear independent of each other, the two approaches are often combined, creating what I propose to call 'pneumatic interpretation'. Thus the reliable Kabbalist as the single source of orally transmitted secrets was supplanted by a higher entity, male or female, and the faithfulness of transmission was substituted by the ingenuity of applying some Kabbalistic exegetical devices.

In my opinion, the crisis of esoteric tradition in thirteenth century Kabbalah was created by a variety of processes: on the one hand, by the social process of the ascent of a secondary elite,¹⁸ and on the other by the arrival of free exegetical techniques from Ashkenazi esotericism to Spain and by the forging of new and complex exegetical tools by the Kabbalists themselves in the second part of the thirteenth century.¹⁹

2. 1475–1575: *The Crisis of Mediated Tradition in Kabbalah*

For the next 150 years or so, Kabbalah—and especially the Spanish Kabbalah—entered a period of far greater inertia. Though a few important books were written during this period, especially in Byzantium, the emergence of major new Kabbalistic systems cannot be discerned even there.²⁰

However, starting approximately with the year 1475, namely on the eve of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, an entire century of intense Kabbalistic creativity took place, producing a variety of Kabbalistic systems that became classical and in some cases even canonical. In almost all of them we may find the reverberation of rhetoric dealing with the importance of the transmission of Kabbalistic secrets known to earlier generations, thus repeating what they found in their sources, especially the above quote from Nahmanides; but *de facto*, they operated without relying on the assumption that they themselves

¹⁸ Idel, 'Kabbalah and Elites', 5–19.

¹⁹ See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 430–437; idem., 'On angels'.

²⁰ See Idel, 'Kabbalah in Byzantium'.

indeed inherited such an oral tradition from their human teachers. The hundred years mentioned above form a significant temporal unit, since they start around 1475 with the emergence of an entire Kabbalistic literature related to the *Book of Meshiv*, and end with the dissipation of the Kabbalistic centre in Safed, marked by the death between 1570 and 1575 of all the major figures (with the important exception of R. Hayyim Vital).

We may speak about a crisis of the category of oral transmission as operative in the developments of Kabbalah in the century under scrutiny below. In many cases, what scholars conceive as the period of the birth of Kabbalah and its development in the three centuries beforehand, was conceived by this Kabbalist as the period of decline of this lore.²¹ This awareness of a crisis in the concept of continuous transmission and the disclosure of what has been taught orally, in a written form, invited two different forms of continuity: that of revelations—what I shall describe as gnoseological continuity—and that of a strong ontological affinity with the divine world, which does not necessarily constitute a revelation. In both cases the mediating role of the present religious establishment as the source of true Kabbalah—as envisioned by Nahmanides and his school—has been obliterated *de facto*, though its importance is mentioned several times *de jure*, and an intimate connection with the divine source is conceived as possible in the present.

This crisis may have several historical causes. The first part of the century we shall consider is characterized by a sharp geographical shift: the expulsions of the Jews from Spain and then Portugal, which means the disappearance of the most important centre of Kabbalah. This event was preceded by a period of decline in the Jewish situation in the Iberian Peninsula, and it was followed by periods of peregrinations by many Kabbalists, who moved from one country to another and sometimes from one continent to another. Thus, for the first part of the century we shall examine, mobility was characteristic of many of the Kabbalists, and in many cases the Spanish Kabbalists travelled alone and had to establish their prestige in the new places they arrived alone.²² During this period, the rise of the importance of the book of

²¹ See *Shevaḥ Hokhmat ha-Kabbalah*, printed in *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim* (Premisze, 1975), fol. 26cd.

²² See Idel, 'On Mobility'.

the *Zohar*—especially amongst the Spanish Kabbalists—was dramatic, and it assumed that the major event in the history of Kabbalah took place a millennium and a half before, leaving little space for the Kabbalistic authorities in the interim.²³ In the second part of the hundred years, the book was printed for the first time by two Italian printing houses and the most important commentaries on it were compiled, while Guillaume Postel translated large parts of it into Latin under the impact of a feminine personality, Sister Juana. Thus in the sixteenth century this book made its way to the forefront of Kabbalah more than ever before.

On the other hand, the transition of written Kabbalistic material from one Kabbalistic centre to another triggered a form of developments that are based on individual studies of texts without a master or a group. This is especially the case among Kabbalists flourishing in Italy. Kabbalists like R. Elijah Genazzano, R. Yohanan Alemanno, R. David ben Yehudah Messer Leon, or R. Isaac and Yehudah Nissim da Pisa, do not mention reliable transmission as the source of their knowledge of Kabbalah. In the second half of the century under scrutiny here, several important Kabbalistic books were printed, a major development for a lore that was conceived of as esoteric.

During the century between 1475 and 1575, another major transition took place: that of Kabbalistic knowledge from Jewish circles to Christian ones. The emergence of Christian Kabbalah is a dramatic development that had important repercussions in both Christianity and Judaism. For some Jewish Kabbalists, the emergence of Christological interpretations of Kabbalah was conceived of as a crisis, which had an impact on the development of Kabbalah in Judaism. On the one hand, Kabbalah came under attack in some Jewish circles; on the other hand, attempts at offering alternatives to the 'erroneous' Christological interpretations were made.²⁴ It is in this period that the earlier interdiction of revealing religious secrets to gentiles is discussed more than any time earlier.²⁵

In the last half of the century under examination here, some of the major Kabbalists lived in close vicinity to the tomb of the alleged author of the book of the *Zohar*. Arriving at and staying in Safed, a town very

²³ See Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, 218–240.

²⁴ See Idel, 'Jewish thinkers'.

²⁵ See Kaufmann, 'Elia Menachem Chalfan', 500–508.

close to Meron, the place where the tomb of R. Shime'on bar Yoḥai is found, some of the Kabbalists received some forms of information that were conceived of as belonging to Kabbalah by visiting the tomb and by communing with the spirit of this paragon of Kabbalah.²⁶

Thus oral information that may reach them from any living Kabbalist was naturally conceived of as inferior to what the spirit of the most important Kabbalist could tell them. Indeed, it is in Safed that we may find the social phenomenon Boaz Huss designated as 'Zoharic Communities'.²⁷ We may add that such communities are also communities devoted to the *Shekhinah*.

We have an interesting situation: on the one hand, Kabbalah as a literature was a well-established lore amongst some sections of the Jewish elites in the southern parts of Europe; but on the other hand, the earlier claims of Kabbalists that this was an esoteric tradition transmitted orally does not hold for those Kabbalists, who subscribed to the emphasis on the importance of a continuous tradition. Thus we may describe the Kabbalists from the period we are dealing with as following—to a certain extent—views and practices of the two late thirteenth century groups mentioned above, modified and adapted to new cultural circumstances.

In this period we can discern two main lines of developments related to the *Shekhinah*: one is her increasing role in the process of revelation, the other is the more prominent role she plays in the worship of the Kabbalists. A liminal concept in the theosophical system, standing as she is between the sefirotic, sometime divine realm and the non-divine world, she mediated between the two worlds and constituted the concept which designates both the downward move—revelation—and the upward move, created by the deeds of the Kabbalist. I would say that in addition to the ascent of the importance of the *Zohar*, we may assume that the particular median place occupied by the feminine divine power invited systemic developments that enhanced its role.

Before turning to some more detailed discussions of points made above, let me draw attention to the fact that the period between 1475 and 1575 in the history of Kabbalah coincides with what Michel de Certeau described as the century of the mystics in Christianity.²⁸ There

²⁶ See Giller, 'Recovering the sanctity'; Huss, 'Holy Place'; idem, 'The Worship of the Tombs' and Garb, 'The Cult of the Saints'.

²⁷ See Huss, 'Zoharic Communities in Safed'.

²⁸ See de Certeau, *La fable mystique*, 211–212; see already Bremond, *Histoire littéraire*; see also Jones, *Spiritual Reformers*.

can be no doubt that the sixteenth century constitutes a burst of creativity in Christian mysticism, especially in Spain and Italy. This is not less true in Judaism. However, while the sixteenth century mystics in Christianity operated under the open eyes of authorities—principally confessors in the case of the female mystics—in contemporaneous Judaism we can hardly find a parallel to this symbiosis between the two different and distinct personalities: mystics on the one hand, and ecclesiastical authority on the other. In many cases, as we shall see below, they are one and the same.

3. *Ontological Continuum and Revelation in Sefer ha-Meshiv*

The most significant Kabbalistic corpus of writings that emanated from the last decades of the presence of the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula is known as *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, or *Sefer ha-Mal'akh ha-Meshiv*, which means the book of the answering entity or the answering angel.²⁹ For our purpose it is essential to point out that this literature was understood to have been written down as the result of a series of revelations, and the question of the mechanics of revelation is found from time to time in this book. The major parts of this Kabbalistic corpus are permeated by the assumption that there is an open channel to the divinity or to superior angels that may reveal more or less nightly revelations. So, for example, we find in a passage preserved in a sixteenth century treatise written in Safed:

The issue of the garment of the speaking angel [*ha-Mal'akh ha-Maggid*] who will come to someone and teach him Torah, I found it written in the book *Mar'ot le-Maggid*³⁰ and the angel [who reveals himself] is called Azriel and he³¹ has revealed to him great and hidden things which no mouth can tell. You should know that the secret of causing the descent of the supernal book is the secret of the descent of the supernal chariot,³²

²⁹ For a description of this voluminous corpus and an updated bibliography related to it, see Scholem, 'The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek'; idem., 'On the Story of R. Joseph della Reina', 100–108; Idel, 'Inquiries'; idem., 'The Lost Books of Solomon'; idem., 'Magic and Kabbalah'; idem., 'The Origins of Alchemy'; idem., 'Neglected Treatises', and idem., *Messianic Mystics*, 126–132.

³⁰ The term *mar'eh*, the singular of *mare'ot*, means visions related to topics found in the biblical portions. Apparently one of the titles of *Sefer ha-Meshiv* was the 'Book of Visions', *Sefer ha-Mare'ot le-Maggid*, at least in the codex that reached R. Ovadia Hamon in mid-sixteenth century Safed.

³¹ The angel who revealed himself to the Kabbalist who wrote *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.

³² The descent of the *Merkavah* is identified with a mystical or magical reading of

and when you pronounce the secret of the Great Name, immediately the force of the 'garment' will descend downwards, which is the secret of Elijah, who is mentioned in the works of the sages. And by this R. Sime'on bar Yoḥai and Yonathan ben 'Uzziel learned their wisdom, and they deserved the secret of the 'garment' and to be dressed in it. And R. Hanina [ben Teradyon] and R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah and R. 'Aqiva and R. Ishmael ben Elisha and our holy Rabbi [i.e., R. Yehudah the Prince] and Rashi and many others [learned] likewise.³³ And the secret of the 'garment' is the vision of the 'garment', which the angel of God is dressed in, with a corporeal eye, and it is he who is speaking to you because you did not merit seeing him as they did; they received this privilege because they had a pure spirit and they merited the vision.³⁴ And the secret of the garment was given to those who fear God and meditate upon His Name; they have seen it, those men who are the men of God were worthy of this state. And they fasted for forty days continuously, and during their fast they pronounced the Tetragrammaton forty-five times,³⁵ and on the fortieth day [the 'garment'] descended on him and showed him whatever he wished [to know], and it stayed with him until the completion of the [study of the] subject he wanted [to know]; and they [i.e. Elijah and the 'garment'] stayed with him day and night.³⁶ Thus was it done in the days of Rashi to his master, and the latter taught him [i.e. Rashi] this secret [of the garment], and by means of it [the secret] he [Rashi] composed whatever he composed, by means of his mentor and instructor.³⁷ Do not believe that he [Rashi] wrote this down from his own reason³⁸ for he did it by the secret of the 'garment' of the angel and the secret of mnemotechnics, which explain the questions one is asking or compose a book one wishes to compose, and [thus] were all the sciences copied,³⁹ one by one. By this technique the ancient sages

the Torah, an issue that has earlier sources in Jewish mysticism. However, according to other sources from this corpus, the ancient protagonists of the Hekhalot literature were thought to be capable of ascending on high *in corpore* in order to see the chariot, and the technique to do so was revealed to the late medieval Kabbalist in order for him to do exactly that. See the text found in MS Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fo1. 94a.

³³ With the exception of Rabbi, i.e., R. Yehudah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, all the names are those of ancient Tannaitic masters who were alleged heroes of ancient Jewish mystical literature.

³⁴ In Hebrew there is here a pun on the root *Zkhkh*: *Zakhu*, 'they merited', and *zakhei ruah*, 'they had a pure spirit'. The speaker is therefore clearly differentiating the ancients from the moderns; the latter are unworthy of seeing, as the ancients were, but can only hear the voice.

³⁵ This number appears in similar contexts: see Idel, 'Inquiries', 213–215.

³⁶ Apparently in *Sefer ha-Meshiv* itself all the revelations took place at night, unlike the case of the great masters mentioned above.

³⁷ In Hebrew, *rabbo ve-'alufo* alludes to angelic guidance. In the manuscript it is written 'Elijah'; however, I doubt whether this is the correct version.

³⁸ Literally, 'his own head'.

³⁹ In Hebrew the root 'tq is used. However, it points to transmission of the sciences from their celestial source to our world by means of copying divine books; see Idel,

learned from him innumerable sciences. And this happened in the days of the Talmud and in the days of Rashi's master and in the days of Rashi, too, since his master began this [usage], and Rashi ended it, and in their times this lore⁴⁰ was transmitted by word of mouth, one man to another, and this is the reason why all the sages of Israel relied upon Rashi, as at that time they knew the secret. Therefore, do not ever believe that he [Rashi] composed his commentaries on the Talmud and on the plain meaning of the Bible out of his reason, but by means of this force of the secret of the 'garment', and that [force] which wore it, which is an angel, since by means of it he could know and compose whatever he wished. This is the [power] which elevates the letters of the divine name⁴¹ upwards,⁴² and it brings downwards [both] the secret of the chariot and the thought of God. And those who were able to see it are like prophets, and in the times of the Talmud many used it. Afterward, those who pursued the lore diminished, and they resorted to the daughter of the voice [*Bat Qol*], and the daughter of the voice is called the supernal voice [*ha-Qol ha-'Elyon*]. It is heard like the voice of a man indeed, but they do not see a body, but a speaking voice.⁴³

In this seminal passage, there is no human authority that transmits Kabbalah. Books of either exegetical, legalistic or Kabbalistic natures are described as emerging by means of a descent of Elijah, who covers himself in different forms in order to reach the lower world and take part in the writing of books that do not mention revelation at all as the manner of their composition. Here we have a clue as to the manner in which the Kabbalist envisioned the composition of an entire range of classical books in Judaism.

In treatises belonging to this literature, the *Shekhinah* is presented in a special manner influenced in some cases by the vision of Mary in Christian theology. Since I have addressed this issue elsewhere⁴⁴ let me turn to another treatment of the *Shekhinah*, which also has to do with the concept of Kabbalah. The anonymous Kabbalists claim that the descent of the *Shekhinah*—which means the return of this feminine divine power below—is part of the redemptive process. In *Sefer*

'Inquiries', 261 n. 81 and in R. Shlomo Molcho's revelations; see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 240.

⁴⁰ How to receive revelations.

⁴¹ 'H.'; this is a common abbreviation of the Tetragrammaton.

⁴² Apparently this is the way the magic of this Kabbalistic system was thought to operate. The letters of the invocations ascended and reached the divinity. This is clear elsewhere in a text from this school. See the passage reproduced in Idel, 'Inquiries', 258.

⁴³ MS Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fol. 39a–39b; Idel, 'Inquiries', 239–240.

⁴⁴ See Idel, 'The Attitude to Christianity'.

Kaf ha-Qetoret, a lengthy commentary on the Book of Psalms written immediately after the expulsion from Spain, this process is described as follows:

There are books that had descended to earth by the prophets, who caused the descent of their books from the attribute of *Hod*, and the foundation of the hagiographical books is from the attribute of *Malkhut*... and when the king Messiah reveals himself, the meaning⁴⁵ of the books of the great luminary, R. Shime'on bar Yoḥai and his group, will become manifest, and the preoccupation with these books will cause the descent of the power⁴⁶ of the *Shekhinah* on earth.⁴⁷

There can be no doubt that the books of the *Zohar* are the subject of the last part of the quote, since the very conception of the arrival of the Messiah as concomitant with the revelation of secrets found in a certain book was articulated in the later layer of the *Zohar*.⁴⁸ I am concerned here with the description of the effect of the study of these books: causing the descent of the *Shekhinah*. This descendant vector is central for the theory of revelation of the entire *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, as it is for the passage quoted above.⁴⁹ However, here I am concerned with the description of the secrets of the book of the *Zohar* as rotating around the peak of the descent of the *Shekhinah*. Such an understanding has little to do with the content of the book itself, and it represents an imposition of Hermetic astrological magic on a view found in Midrashic literature about the original place of the *Shekhinah* in this world.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, let me emphasize that on the grounds of the texts adduced above, the *Shekhinah* is not merely the divine

⁴⁵ On the meanings of the *Zohar* see also the passage printed in Scholem, 'The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek', 104.

⁴⁶ See also the phrase *Koah ha-Shekhinah* in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, in Scholem, 'The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek', 106. For the *Shekhinah* as the source of power in sixteenth century Kabbalah see the passages discussed by Garb, *Manifestations of Power*, 97–100 and his 'Gender and Power', 86–93.

⁴⁷ MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 845, fol. 54a. On this book see Vajda, 'Passages anti-chrétiens' and Idel, 'Neglected Treatises'. Cf. also the view of Cordovero found in his discussion to be adduced from his 'Or Yaqar on *Tiqunei Zohar*, in the following section.

⁴⁸ See Cordovero, 'Or Yaqar', fol. 111b, and Cordovero's view to be discussed below, perhaps influenced by *Kaf ha-Qetoret*.

⁴⁹ See also in the other parts of this corpus: MS Jerusalem, Musayiof 24, fols. 30ab, 34ab, 37ab, 38a, MS Hamburg-Levi 152, fol. 26b, MS Oxford-Bodleiana 1597, fol. 58b.

⁵⁰ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 168–170.

presence but a quite sexualized understanding of this concept.⁵¹ This personalization of the supernal feminine power intensified with time in Kabbalistic literature, an issue that cannot be dealt with here in detail.⁵² It should be pointed out that the study of the Zoharic literature is portrayed in the fuller version of this passage as an antidote to the Jewish philosophical literature, understood as related to demonic powers and as constituting an obstacle to redemption.⁵³

4. *A Zohar for the Shekhinah according to Moses Cordovero*

One of the most impressive figures in the entire history of Kabbalah was R. Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522–1570), a Kabbalist of Spanish origins active in Safed in the mid-sixteenth century. Acquainted as he was with almost the entire range of earlier Kabbalistic books, he offers a synthesis of the long series of topics found in Kabbalistic literature, a relatively coherent approach that is replete with original theories which were seminal for the development of Kabbalah. A perusal of his vast literary legacy demonstrates a fascination he had with erotic images and the special role the *Shekhinah* played in his thought. Though a commentator on the book of the *Zohar*, he is concerned less with the revelation of the secrets by the beautiful maiden mentioned above, and more with the Kabbalist helping her in her situation of exile. To a great extent, Kabbalah turns into a project of helping the feminine presence of God.⁵⁴

The composition of the book of the *Zohar* is imagined as the result of the initiative of the ancient Kabbalists to help the *Shekhinah*. This approach is best represented by the following passage originally found in Cordovero's *Or Yaqar*, his voluminous commentary on the *Zohar*,

⁵¹ See especially *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, MS London, British Library 766, fol. 35a.

⁵² See the text from *Sefer ha-Meshiv* printed in Scholem, 'The Maggid of Rabbi Joseph Taitatchek', 104–105, where the *Shekhinah* is described as an impure and menstruating woman. For the claim of a vision of the *Shekhinah* as a woman by a Safedian Kabbalist, R. Abraham Berukhin, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 192; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 80–81, and see also *ibid.*, 83–87; Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 421, note 35 and immediately below.

⁵³ See Idel, 'Inquiry', 232–241.

⁵⁴ On the *Shekhinah* in Cordovero's writings see also Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Rabbi Moshe Cordovero*, *passim*; Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, 404 and Wolfson, 'Gender and Heresy', 249–251.

but copied and thus disseminated in a widely read treatise by Cordovero's follower, R. Abraham Azulai:

Whoever performs a commandment nowadays, he prepares something that sustains the *Shekhinah* [*semekh la-Shekhinah*], and draws to her a little bit of influx...and he has notwithstanding a retribution for his toil...and the proof for it is the daughter of the king when she sits in the palace of her father and one of her servants performs for her an act of worship, she will certainly pay attention to him, but not so much would she be outside the palace, in trouble in exile. And if the servant would give her even a small thing, like a piece of moist grass to help her, recovering it will be more important in her eyes than whatever she had when she was governing. Know that the main intention of Rashby,⁵⁵ blessed be his memory, when he composed the book of the *Zohar* was for this reason, since the *Shekhinah* was in exile without any influx, without anyone to sustain and help her [*'ozet lah*].⁵⁶ And he wanted to do something to sustain her [*semekh*], and to unite her with her husband, [creating] a little union by the composition of the book of the *Zohar*, by what he and his companions are dealing with the secrets of the Torah, which is causing the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah* by means of [the *sefirah* of] *Yesod*, which is *Raz* [secret] and it [amounts] in gematria 'Or [Light].^{57, 58}

⁵⁵ The phrase 'intention of Rashby' is an expression that is characteristic of Cordovero. He is thus less concerned with the intention of the Torah than with what has been disclosed by the innovations of bar Yohai. The disclosure of the hidden intention of a Kabbalistic book becomes the main Kabbalistic activity in some important circles in Safed.

⁵⁶ This seems to be an inversion of the role played by the woman in the account of Genesis, where she was born as a help to her husband. See the previous footnote.

⁵⁷ 'Or, light, which stands for Splendor, *Zohar*, and *Raz* amount to 207. This nexus is also found in another form from the same book to be discussed at the end of this section, and is found elsewhere in Cordovero. See Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar', 289. See also Cordovero, 'Or Yaqar, (Jerusalem, 1972), vol. , 32.

⁵⁸ Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham* (Lemberg, 1863), fol. 6c:

וי"ל כי העושה מצוה בעת הזאת הוא עושה סמך אל השכינה ומושך לה שפע קצת כמו זיעה בעלמא, ועכ"ז יש לו שכר טוב בעמלו וע"ז נאמר שישו אתה ממוש וגו' כי הוא עושה לה סמך, ואדרבה שכרו יותר גדול והעד ע"ז בת מלך בהיותה יושבת בהיכל אביה המלך, וא' מעבדיה יעשה לה איזה עבודה ודאי תשים לו שכר אבל לא שכר כ"כ כמו שאם תהי' חוץ להיכל המלך בדוחק בגלות, ואם העבד יתן אז אפילו דבר קל כמו עשב לח להבריא נפשה הוא חשוב בעיניה מכל אילי נביות אשר היה בשעת הממשלה ודע כי עיקר כוונת הרשב"י ע"ה בחבור ספר הזוהר היה לזה, להיות השכינה בגלות באפס שפע באין תומך ובאין עוזר לה, ורצה לעשות לה סמך ליחודה בבעלה יחוד מועט ע"י החיבור הזוהר, במה שהיה הוא וחבריו עוסקים בסודות התורה, שזהו גורם לייחוד קב"ה ושכינתיה ע"י היסוד שהוא סוד ר"ז בגימטריא או"ר.

For the source see Cordovero, 'Or Yaqar, (Jerusalem, 1970), vol. 5, 219, Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, 266 and Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 335–336. See also the Cordoverian sources adduced in Huss, 'Sefer ha-Zohar', 291–292. As to the seminal phrase *Semekh la-Shekhinah*: the term *semekh* occurs twice before this pas-

Cordovero and Azulai share the view that the composition of the most important Kabbalistic book, in fact tantamount to Kabbalah itself, was intended to help the *Shekhinah*. In this discussion the assistance takes two forms: one is related directly and solely to the *Shekhinah*, and has to do with her situation in herself, i.e. to sustain her in the plight of the exile. The other one is addressing the—by then already classical—task of the commandment to induce the sexual union of the *Shekhinah* with God. The first one operates by drawing supernal influx down onto the divine feminine power, the latter by causing the ascent of the feminine power in order to conjoin with the male counterpart.

The composition of the *Zohar* is presented in a more general framework that deals with the meaning of the performance of the commandments. The act of composition is part of the comprehensive theurgical effort directed to help the well-being of the exiled *Shekhinah*, according to this passage and some other ones. We may discern here the triad of father/King, daughter/mother, and sons/servants, and the various affinities between them, but here the focus upon the feminine element is quite evident. According to this passage the rationale for the performance of the commandments is the sustenance of the *Shekhinah*, while, on the other hand, the situation of the divine male is not even mentioned in this context.

The discrepancy between the ways in which the feminine factor is described in the various parts of the passage is evident: she is in the very same context the *Shekhinah*, the daughter of the King, and also His consort. Part of this inconsistency has to do with the difference between the parable and its meaning. However, this inconsistency is part of a tradition stemming from Midrashic sources in which the same feminine entity is portrayed as fulfilling different functions in relation to the male.⁵⁹ The parable assumes the personalization of the *Shekhinah* as an entity participating in the exile. It is the divine Queen's deprivation of Her earlier exalted status in the palace of Her father that serves as the core of this passage: the harmonious situation

sage. Compare also the view of Cordovero that *semekh* is the term for expressing the male help to the female, while *'ezer* designates the help of the female to the male. Cf. Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1963), 42, and *ibidem*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963), 59. It should be pointed out that Cordovero and following him Azulai are very fond of the expressions related to *semekh* and *sa'ad*, and use them together from time to time. See however the next footnote, and the expression *semekh* and *sa'ad la-Shekhinah* that occurs in the passages to be translated below in this section.

⁵⁹ See Green, 'Bride, Spouse, Daughter'.

renders the humans marginal. I assume that the Kabbalists are conceived of as marginal when the Queen is served by her servants while she is in the palace, namely the *Shekhinah* as served by her entourage, probably angels, while in her proper place. On the other hand, the poverty of the feminine power in exile creates a new situation in which the most humble of human deeds is capable of alleviating the plight of the *Shekhinah*. The composition of the most important book of Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, is therefore an act conditioned by and inspired by the special plight of the *Shekhinah* in exile: it is therefore determined by the historical situation of the feminine power, and is thus not based, at least not essentially, on a line of transmission dealing with earlier esoteric traditions.

The composition is related to the theurgical dimension of the study of the secrets of the Torah. Again we have here a clearly feminine entity: the Torah, whose secrets possess a theurgical effect. According to this text, the ancient authors of the *Zohar* addressed the quandary of the wandering *Shekhinah*, but we may assume that the Safedian Kabbalists active in the sixteenth century also conceived of themselves as partaking in the same task. Indeed, in Cordovero's *Sefer ha-Gerushin*, namely the *Book of the Wanderings*, there are descriptions of Kabbalists participating in a ritual of roaming in the fields as a form of identification with the wanderings of the *Shekhinah* in exile.⁶⁰ This ritualization of the wanderings as rotating around a feminine power is quite an interesting parallel to the vision represented in our passage, where the parable speaks explicitly about the wanderings of the *Shekhinah* and the Kabbalists' response to her plight. Interestingly enough, the wanderings of the Kabbalists coincide geographically with the area where the book of the *Zohar* was written, according to this book itself and to the Kabbalists, namely the upper part of the Galilee. Some of the very same Kabbalists who participated in Cordovero's wanderings were also visiting the tomb of the author of the *Zohar*, R. Shime'on bar Yoḥai, in order to be in touch with the spirit of the author of the book. This convergence between the place where the *Zohar* was written, the tomb of the alleged author, and the place of the Kabbalists' wandering created a new situation in the *imaginaire* of the Kabbalists, unparal-

⁶⁰ See Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, 17–21, 219–220, 226–227, 264–266; Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 51–54 and Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 59–60, 272–273, 293.

leled before the mid-sixteenth century, in which their lives merged with the setting of the authors of the *Zohar*.

Interestingly enough, this more acute understanding of the *Shekhinah's* exile was formulated by a Kabbalist who lived all or at least most of his life in the land of Israel, a fact that did not attenuate his sense of exile. In the new exilic situations the Kabbalist assumed the role of the divine male, who does not supply the influx by himself. Found between the two males, the feminine divine power is enhanced and pushed from below by the humans in order to restore her intimate relationship with the supernal male; meanwhile, however, she is helped to survive by drawing down some influx she needs.

However, we are not only concerned here with the above passage from Cordovero/Azulai describing the purpose of composing the *Zohar* as a response to the plight of the *Shekhinah*. In a much more famous passage dealing with the role of the revelation of the book of the *Zohar* in the eve of redemption, Cordovero asserts that 'it will be needed essentially at the end of exile for the descent of the *Shekhinah* to the utmost of her fall, so that it will be a sustainer to her [*lah semekh*] at the end of this exile of ours.'⁶¹

In his writings, Cordovero consistently describes the *modus operandi* of the secrets divulged by R. Shime'on as dealing with the union of the supernal powers. While the revelation of secrets from above by Elijah is described as the transmission of the debates taking place between the righteous in the heavenly academy, which Elijah is just transmitting to individuals, R. Shime'on is conceived of as innovating his secrets by the dint of his own soul, and they ascend and perform unions on high.⁶² In fact Cordovero assumes that there are two different approaches to the interpretation of the Bible that are represented by the two figures: the ascending one of R. Shime'on and the descending one of Elijah.⁶³ The latter figure was conceived of as instrumental in the composition of the Zoharic layer known as *Tiqqunei Zohar*, which is described as revealed by him to R. Shime'on and his companions.⁶⁴ Thus the Zoharic literature itself was understood as reflecting

⁶¹ Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. I, 24, Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, 40, 277 and Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, 239. See the passage from *Sefer Kaf ha-Qetoret*, adduced in the previous section. It is plausible that Cordovero was influenced by that passage.

⁶² Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 17, 49.

⁶³ See *Parades Rimmonim*, 8:6.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*. See also 8:20.

two different approaches, and we may assume that this vision also represents Cordovero's own understanding of Kabbalah in general: interplay between moments of innovation and revelation of secrets, not described as necessarily part of a faithful line of transmission.

Let me turn now to another outstanding passage found in Cordovero's *'Or Yaqar*, which describes the manner in which R. Shime'on bar Yohai generated their secrets. In a manner reminiscent of the passage quoted above, Cordovero assumes that the Kabbalist draws the secret *Raz*, identified also with light, 'Or, from the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, or from that of *Tiferet*, to that of *Malkhut*. However, he believes that the ultimate source of these secrets of the Torah is to be found in the *sefirah* of *Keter* or supreme configuration of 'Arikh 'anppin, and the Kabbalist is capable of causing them to descend.⁶⁵ Then we read as follows:

R. Shimeon and his friends did not say what was already received by them [*mequbbal lahem mi-kevar*], because what there would be their merit, but the study of the Torah alone? And what would be the difference between them and the other people of their generation?... And those innovations were needed in order to renew the Torah, since the *Shekhinah* is in exile and there is no union, since the feature of the innovation of secrets of the Torah [*Hiddushei Sodot ha-Torah*] is that they generate union, and the drawing of the light always, and [then] there is no external [i.e. demonic] power that constitutes a hindrance. This is the reason why he [God] allowed them to deal with the secrets of the Torah in order to prepare a help for the *Shekhinah* [*Sa'ad la-Shekhinah*], as it is written in the *Tiqqunim*.^{66, 67}

Here two different effects of the innovations of the secrets of the Torah, namely of innovating Kabbalah, are mentioned: the theurgical one, the inducement of the union between the *Shekhinah* and her divine husband, and another distinct one, the drawing down of secrets and light,

⁶⁵ Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 9 (Jerusalem 1976), 99.

⁶⁶ I did not find this precise phrase in the *Tiqqunim*. See, however, the passage belonging to *Tiqqunei Zohar* to be translated immediately below.

⁶⁷ Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 9, 99. For a discussion of the permission to innovate in matters of interpretation of Kabbalistic issues see also Cordovero, *'Or Yaqar*, vol. I, 26–27, where the assumption is that the ascent on high to the *sefirah* of *Binah* facilitates the drawing down—here the verb is *MShKh*—of secret knowledge. This is an interesting example of what I have called the 'mystical-magical model' characteristic of Cordovero which had a huge impact on eighteenth century Hasidism. It should be pointed out that Cordovero's Safedian disciples also followed their master's special concern with the *Shekhinah*. See the two passages from R. Elijah da Vidas translated by Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 62–64.

which I would designate as talismanic magic.⁶⁸ Faithful transmission *à la Nahmanides* is relegated here to a lower status than what is shared by the allegedly less distinguished 'Kabbalists' of the generation of R. Shime'on bar Yoḥai. The innovation of secrets—which explicitly has the upper hand over the study of those already existing—is understood as having a stronger impact on the supernal world. However, let me emphasize that for Cordovero the innovation of secrets is not invention but bringing down, or causing the descent of hidden topics already found in the supernal realm of the higher *sefirot*. We may speak of an ontology of secrets which does not allow, according to the vision of this Kabbalist, too great a role for what we would call originality.

Let me address Cordovero's claim that belief in the necessity of helping the *Shekhinah* stems from the later layer of Zoharic literature. Indeed, in one of the discussions found there we read that the *Torah de-Beriy'ah*—the Torah of Creation, a lower form of the manifestation of the Torah—constitutes

the garment of the *Shekhinah*. And if man were not created, the *Shekhinah* would remain without covering, like the poor. Consequently whoever sins strips, as it were, the *Shekhinah* of her garments. And this is man's punishment. And whoever fulfils the commandments of the Torah clothes, as it were, the *Shekhinah* in her garments.⁶⁹

The Torah of Creation is not just an accommodation to the needs of men, but also constitutes a necessity of the *Shekhinah*, and it could appear only when man was created. This form of law constitutes the interaction between the divine need and human religious obligations. Thus we may discern in this later layer of Zoharic literature an additional instance of moving the feminine entity toward the centre of the

⁶⁸ It should be mentioned that the nexus between theurgical and talismanic effects of human activity also appear together in other instances in Cordovero. In the context of the above passage, Cordovero resorts to the verb *sho'avim*, namely drawing, as if by a vessel, from secrets or influx from above. See also *'Or Yaqar*, vol. I, 9. See also the interesting description found *ibidem*, 26–27, where also this verb is used in order to describe the soul as a vessel drawing secrets from above. See also *ibidem*, 24, where the Kabbalists are described as drawn within the book of the *Zohar*. Cf. also Cordovero's texts printed by Sack, 'More on the Metamorphosis', 184 now in *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, 108. See also the view of the famous eighteenth century Kabbalist R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, who describes the writing of the *Zohar* as the drawing down from the supernal realm. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 153–155.

⁶⁹ *Tiqqunim*, printed in *Zohar*, I, fol. 23ab, according to the translation in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 3, 11.

Kabbalistic cult, which was exploited by the Safedian Kabbalist in the passages translated above.

In the above translation of Cordovero's passage I skipped a short description of how the companions of R. Shime'on received the secrets from above. This is a fascinating description which deserves a separate discussion. Here it suffices to mention that it starts with reciting a biblical verse, which triggers an experience of the Holy Spirit, and it is reminiscent of a practice we know from the abovementioned *Sefer ha-Gerushin* by which Cordovero and his companions received insights. Thus we may assume that this Kabbalist described the manner in which the *Zohar* was written by resorting to terms that reflect his own practice of innovating Kabbalah.⁷⁰

According to some Cordoverian texts, the body of the righteous Kabbalist is considered as the surrogate of the Temple or the tabernacle, and the *Shekhinah* pursues him in order to dwell there, a dwelling which is expressed in erotic terminology.⁷¹ What is also interesting in Cordovero's passages translated above is the emergence of a cult of the *Shekhinah*, the centrality of which is rarely found in earlier Kabbalistic sources in such an intense manner. In a manner similar to the above discussions, this cult should be understood as related to the emphasis placed on the coupling of male and female powers, the origins of which are much earlier in Jewish texts.⁷²

In my opinion it is also pertinent to mention that both Cordovero and—under his influence—Abraham Azulai resort from time to time to the phrase 'the bosom of the Mother', *heiq ha-'em*, in order to convey the privileged status of some Kabbalists living in the land of Israel. The latter's vision is related to his assumption, which again may also stem from Cordovero, that the special status of the land has not actually deteriorated because of the exile, the destruction of the temple or the presence of gentiles in the land. This feeling of living in the bosom of the mother is explicitly related in this context to the view that the *Shekhinah* was not removed from the land, and her peregrinations are

⁷⁰ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 50–51.

⁷¹ See Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 4, 1–2, 4–5, and vol. 12, 192–193 and Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham*, fol. 6c, and Sack, 'The Tracing of Sources', 168; see also Sack, *Be-Sha'arei Ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, 53, 218–219.

⁷² See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 25–32.

related to the need to participate in the fate of the Jews, without her leaving the special place for her dwelling in the land.⁷³

Last but not least, in this context it should also be mentioned that it is probably due to Cordovero that the recitation of the formula according to which commandments are to be performed for 'the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*' afterwards became quite widespread.⁷⁴ Of special importance is the fact that Cordovero's student, R. Elijah da Vidas, sees in this formula an expression of the ideal of elevating the *Shekhinah* from exile.⁷⁵ In many circles within Judaism this formula became the main understanding of all the commandments.

Another important vision as to the manner in which Cordovero imagined how the *Zohar* has been composed is also pertinent to our discussions here. In his commentary on the *Zohar* he assumes that the book is a compendium of the secrets of the Torah:

... the keys of wisdom and even more so when the secret wisdom is not given in the name of one single man, since each and every one has a share in the Torah and what this opens the other does not, since it is impossible to touch the share of the other, and this is the reason why someone who pursues the secrets of the Torah, in order to learn from everyone indeed the keys, so that they will be opened, and the light of the Torah is added... and this is the reason why he draws light from the [sefirah of] *da'at* the key of the wisdom so as to hire the opener of the keys, namely R. Shime'on bar Yohai and his companions, blessed be their memory, who were pursuing the keys of Torah until the wisdom was committed to writing in a book and they were writing the truth from the mouth of the people who said them⁷⁶ and they brought together the keys of the Torah that were dispersed in different places, some in the hands of wise persons, some in the hands of other persons, and the reason was that the aim was to know the creator and it is impossible that one person will attain the entire science... each and every person has some measure in the Torah as to how to know his Creator.⁷⁷

⁷³ Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 7, 20, and *Hesed le-'Avraham*, I:25, fol. 7c. The source of this discussion may well be in de Leon, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 73.

⁷⁴ See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 192. On this formula see Hallamish, *Kabbalah in Liturgy*, 45–70 and Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 1–2, 233–237.

⁷⁵ See Hallamish, *ibidem*, 50, where he also pointed out the Zoharic background of this formula.

⁷⁶ I.e. the quotes are precise. For the source see *Palestinian Talmud, Shabbat*, fol. 6b, in the context of transmitting a tradition—not truth—in the precise manner of its source.

⁷⁷ Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, (Jerusalem, 1981), vol. 11, 259–260.

Cordovero assumes that the *Zohar* consists of traditions found in a variety of sources, since no one single person is capable of containing the entire wisdom related to the knowledge of God. By mentioning the wise persons and other people, Cordovero refers to the fact that the *Zohar* contains not only the views of Rabbis but also those of other figures, such as infants and allegedly simple men, who in a manner reminiscent of the princess we mentioned above turned out to be even wiser than the Rabbis in matters of Kabbalah. By resorting to the term 'keys' as a method for understanding the secrets of the Torah, or interpreting it, Cordovero comes closer to the Abulafian version of Kabbalah than to any other.⁷⁸ The assumption is that the keys may be transmitted by reading the book of the *Zohar*, and thus the oral traditions that were divided before its writing are now superfluous, since everyone may use the keys by himself. Therefore we have another conceptualization of Kabbalah as independent of an oral initiation as stipulated by Nahmanides.

Let me point out now the difference between the notion of rescuing the *Shekhinah* from her plight by elevating her, and that of the *Book of Meshiv* and *Kaf ha-Qetoret*, where redemption is predicated upon her descent into this world. Those are indeed different understandings of redemption, and of the role played by the book of the *Zohar*. They represent different models operating within Kabbalistic literature, and I do not recommend attempting to reduce the gap between them; on the contrary, one should be aware of the different ways of thinking about the very same topic to be found in Kabbalah. A 'tradition' of Kabbalah in the singular or the assumption of a basic 'philosophy' underlying its approach is, in my opinion, a simplistic understanding of this rich literature from the conceptual point of view.

5. R. Joseph Karo and the Revelation of the Feminine Divine Powers

Cordovero was, indubitably, a major Kabbalist. His bold attribution to the emergence of the *Zohar*—and in a way to Kabbalah in general—of the need to contribute to a feminine divine power is not totally unexpected. It reflects several more modest beginnings, but as I have mentioned, what is more interesting is the emergence of a cult of the

⁷⁸ See Idel, 'Transmission' and in more general terms Idel, 'Hieroglyphs'.

Shekhinah that is rarely found in an explicit manner in earlier Kabbalistic sources. This cult should be understood as part of the emphasis placed on the coupling of male and female powers, and of ditheistic views whose origins are much earlier in Jewish texts.⁷⁹ Moreover, Cordovero himself is elaborating on an earlier Kabbalistic view that assumes that there was a situation of equality between the male and female elements in the sefirotic system.⁸⁰

This cult assumes different forms, the most widespread of which argues that the feminine divine power—*Shekhinah*, *Malkhut*, *'Atarah*, *Knesset Yisrael*—should be united with the masculine divine power, *Tiferet*.⁸¹ Moreover, the abovementioned famous Zoharic story about the beautiful maiden attributes to a feminine power a paramount role in initiating the study of this esoteric lore by the male Kabbalist.

Let me turn to another important Safedian instance of a close relation between a feminine power and Kabbalistic issues. In the case of the revelations received by the eminent legal figure R. Joseph ben Ephraim Karo (1488–1575), feminine entities—known basically as the 'admonishing mother', the *Matronita* or the *Mishnah*—are the dominant factors in his spiritual life, as we learn from his diary entitled *Maggid Meisharim*. All those entities are designated by terms which are grammatically feminine and perceived conceptually to be so. In those revelations, they express a major desire of the power that reveals 'herself', namely, that Karo should continuously concentrate his thought on feminine entities like *Torah*, *Mishnah*, or *Shekhinah*, and they reflect a need to concentrate on these values.⁸² So, for example, we read in one instance: 'Indeed I am the *Mishnah* speaking from your mouth, I am the mother that admonishes her sons, I am embracing you and you should adhere to me always, so that my splendor will be upon you and your splendor upon me.'⁸³

⁷⁹ See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 25–32.

⁸⁰ See Idel, *idem.*, 63–65 and the pertinent footnotes, and Idel, 'Androgyny', 35–36.

⁸¹ See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 104–152. For a different understanding of this topic, see Wolfson's many studies, especially his *Circle in the Square*. For another approach see Abrams, *The Female Body of God*.

⁸² See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 148–167. I shall return in a more detailed study to the issue of the paramount role played in Karo's revelations by feminine rather than male powers like the *Maggid*.

⁸³ *Sefer Maggid Meisharim*, (Petah Tiqwah, 1990), 211. It should be stressed that here we have not only a hypostatic vision of the feminine power but also a sexualized description of the encounter between the Kabbalist and the source of revelation.

In the vein of the Zoharic story about the beautiful maiden, elsewhere the feminine power reveals herself to Karo and teaches him Kabbalah.⁸⁴ This is also the case regarding the revelation that Karo had during the two nights during the Feast of *Shavu'ot* in 1534 which he spent in Nicopolis in the Greek part of the Ottoman Empire. This revelation can be described as the foundation (though certainly not the actual creation) of the ritual of *Tiqqun Leil Shavu'ot*—the Amendment of the Night of *Shavu'ot*—as reported by his close friend and Kabbalist, R. Solomon ha-Levi Alqabetz, in his important epistle describing this mystical event.⁸⁵ In some instances the revealing power is described as *Maggid*, though in another one it is the *Shekhinah* who is described as speaking from Karo's mouth.

To what extent such an approach to revelation either in public or private did not disturb Jewish authorities we learn from an interesting document. In a text found in the approbation of the Jerusalem rabbin-ate to the printing of Karo's *Maggid Meisharim* it is said:

And the Lord was with Joseph, [namely Joseph Karo] and he was a prosperous man⁸⁶ reading and studying the six orders of the Mishnah, so that the spirit of the Lord moved within him, and he heard the voice speaking through the [the means of] the Mishnah itself... 'But thou, blessed of the Lord, hast helped me and comforted me by the melody of your voice with which you recite and study the Mishnah.'⁸⁷

Neither here, nor in any other instance, does Karo mention a human teacher he eventually had in matters of Kabbalah. In general, I am inclined to emphasize the role played by the feminine powers that spoke through the voice of R. Joseph Karo, and to reduce to the minimum the possible role in those revelations of the category referred to as *Maggid*, implicitly a masculine power, though such a type of revelation has been attributed to Karo by other Kabbalists. If my assumption is fostered by additional analyses, which cannot be done here, then we witness another major figure in Safed who attributed a central role to the feminine powers in revealing secrets. As we have seen in the previous section, for Cordovero the divine feminine power needs the Kabbalists' activity, and even their purified bodies, in order to rest

⁸⁴ Ibidem, 316, 319.

⁸⁵ See Elijor, 'R. Joseph Karo'.

⁸⁶ Genesis 34:2.

⁸⁷ Translated by Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, 18–19. See also ibidem, 109, 111, 267.

there; but with Karo the situation is somewhat different. The *Shekhinah* indeed requires the total dedication of the Kabbalist through the concentration of his attention on her, but she nevertheless needs Karo's mouth in order to reveal her messages. What is also evident here is the role played by the technique in inducing a revelation. By the recitation of some short passages of a legal text, the Mishnah, Karo induced the speech of the feminine power through his voice.⁸⁸

6. R. Isaac Luria Ashkenazi:
Revelation as Source of Kabbalah

The theory of ontological continuity, which does not rely on oral transmission of esoteric knowledge, emerged within the same circle of Kabbalists in Safed. This was a new development which emphasized revelation while nevertheless not subscribing to the strict ontological continuity proposed by Cordovero. The core of the developments in Safed in the second half of the sixteenth century were constituted by Cordovero's older companion, R. Joseph Karo, and two of his own students, R. Hayyim Vital Calabrese and the latter's famed teacher R. Isaac ben Shlomo Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572), the divine R. Isaac known by the acronym *ha-'Ari*. The latter put a special emphasis on topics dealing with the revelation of Kabbalistic knowledge, especially the revelation of Elijah. To be sure, this is not a new start, as we have seen in the section on *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, but it may reflect in different ways the surge of the emphasis on revelation found in that book, as it has been described above.

Luria's principal master in matters of Kabbalah was Cordovero, and as we have seen above, the latter did not emphasize the importance of oral transmission. Following him, Luria too did not rely on traditions he received from his master, nor did he emphasize the importance of such a transmission in general. Instead he was reported several times to have enjoyed revelations of a relatively low form from the prophet Elijah.⁸⁹ Moreover, he himself once claimed that 'I can hardly open my mouth without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and

⁸⁸ See *ibidem*, 18–19, 257–286; Fine, 'Recitation of Mishnah', 183–199; Elijior, 'R. Joseph Karo', 678–680, 692–693. See also Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 167–168.

⁸⁹ See the pertinent material discussed in Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 96–99, 108, and the material adduced by R. Naftali, *Sefer 'Emeq ha-Melekh*, Introduction, fol. 10a.

overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received, and how can I put it down in a book?⁹⁰

There can be no doubt that the reception mentioned here has nothing to do with oral transmission, nor with some form of inarticulate content which is so overwhelming emotionally or conceptually that the recipient is hardly capable of writing it down. In this context reception is most probably not an experience conceived of as ineffable, but a series of ideas that reaches the mind of the Kabbalist at such a speed that it is hard to control them. Thus innovation was not just a matter of invention but was considered by this Kabbalist as excavating the inner sense of a Kabbalistic book.

Last but not least in this context, Luria was one of those Kabbalists who frequently visited the tombs in the village of Meron of the saint figures who were thought to be related to the Kabbalists, and with whom it was possible to commune and thus receive valid Kabbalistic information, especially related to the book of the *Zohar*.⁹¹ However, in his system Luria is somewhat less interested than Cordovero in the *Shekhinah* as the focus of a cult or of his theosophy. His concerns were equally divided between masculine figures: he dealt with the Primordial Anthropos, 'Adam Qadmon, a comprehensive supernal structure, and with the figure of Ze'yir 'Anppin, the smaller male divine configuration, as well as with the *Shekhinah*. As Yoram Jacobson has recently pointed out, Luria was especially concerned with the construction of the feminine divine entity, and he also deals with the question of equality between the male and female divine powers.⁹² However, there are two matters that are even more important for the impact of the Lurianic Kabbalah: firstly, the strong connection between this attitude to the *Shekhinah* and the establishment of a paramount Kabbalistic ritual, known as *Tiqqun Hatzot*, the Amendment of the Midnight, in which the identification with the plight of the *Shekhinah* plays a significant role; and secondly, the aggrandizing of two feminine divine powers, represented by Rachel and Leah, which correspond to the sefirot *Malkhut* (or *Shekhinah*) and *Binah*, or to the configurations of *Nuqqebba'* and *'Imma'* respectively. According to a certain version of

⁹⁰ Adduced and discussed by Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 254. See also the description of the late thirteenth century ecstatic Kabbalist Nathan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar in Idel (ed.), *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 202, 345.

⁹¹ See above, note 26.

⁹² Jacobson, "The Aspect of the "Feminine".

this ritual, its climax is described as follows: 'After you have performed the *Tiqqun Hatzot*, prepare your soul and you should unify the Holy One, Blessed be He, with His *Shekhinah*, onto each and every limb and you should make your body a chariot for the *Shekhinah*.'⁹³

While this passage does not occur in early Lurianic formulations of the ritual, the very concept of the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* upon the Kabbalist represents an original Lurianic view, though also reflecting a view found in Cordovero, as we have seen above. *Nota bene*: although the unification of the two divine powers is mentioned earlier, it is only the *Shekhinah* that is imagined to dwell upon the Kabbalist. A prayer is recommended whereby the performer expresses his desire that all the limbs of his body will become the chariot of the *Shekhinah*. While the two main parts of the *Tiqqun* ritual deal, respectively, with the exile and the redemption of the *Shekhinah*, in the third phase, as described by the later Kabbalist R. Nathan Hanover, She is envisioned in a rather different context, as dwelling upon the Kabbalist's body. This third part of the ritual may be understood in more than one manner: for example, as an attempt to offer to the wandering *Shekhinah* a purified human body to serve as Her chariot, namely as a locus for Her stay in lieu of the destroyed Temple, following Cordovero and earlier sources. This seems to me to be quite a plausible suggestion.⁹⁴ Hence a widespread ritual is again closely connected to the feminine divine power. The elevation of the souls of the righteous as part of this ritual should also be seen as part of the devotion to the feminine supernal lady. Thus, just as Karo's experience of the revelation of the *Shekhinah* during the vigil of the two Nights of *Shavu'ot* created a custom, so too the Amendment of the Midnight, connected to the aggrandizing of two feminine powers, created another influential Kabbalistic custom. Here we may therefore perceive a major development in Kabbalah: in the sixteenth century, the feminine power named *Shekhinah* enjoyed some form of apotheosis, and commandments and customs were connected to her special status.

This creation of the nexus between the *Shekhinah* and the body of the Kabbalists may be better understood as part of the new accents

⁹³ R. Nathan Neta' Hanover, *Sha'arei Tzion*, col. 4, fol. 2b. For this ritual see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 308–320. For an interesting parallel to this view, probably influenced by this Lurianic approach, see the prescriptions of R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, cf., Idel, 'Adonay Sefatai Tiftah', 64–76.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., R. Joseph ibn Tabbul's "Commentary on 'Idra' Rabba", 129–130.

characteristic of Luria's Kabbalah. His complex theosophical system is founded on two types of rupture between God and the world: the first caused by the *Tzimtzum*, the primordial withdrawal of the divine presence from the place where the world is destined to be created in a concrete manner,⁹⁵ and then the breaking of the vessels, another primordial process during which the divine structure is shattered. Unlike Cordovero's paramount continuous picture of the universe, in which ontological chains that unite the higher and lower worlds (including the divine ones) are understood to operate in the present, for Luria existence is marked by the displacement of the divine sparks from their original place in the supernal structure of the Primordial Anthropos. Thus neither oral transmission nor the ontological continuum so important for Cordovero and his followers played any significant role in Luria's Kabbalah. Luria relies on personal revelations instead, which were thought to be rooted in the esoteric meaning of the text of the *Zohar*, but were nevertheless new and secret. This does not mean that Nahmanides' warning discussed above was not reiterated in the Lurianic corpus,⁹⁶ or that Luria did not attempt to restrict his teachings for a few Kabbalists who studied with him orally; rather, it only means that the impact of the warning does not prevent the role played by revelation in Luria's disclosure of Kabbalistic secrets.

Although Luria was understood as having generated his Kabbalah in a revelatory and oral manner, this lore in almost its entirety immediately became a scholastic enterprise, which means preservation, elaboration and interpretation. Faithful transmission of it as an esoteric lore was imagined as strictly necessary by Luria, and his attempt at drastically constraining its dissemination beyond the restricted circle of his direct disciples was a political measure also adopted by his most important disciple, R. Hayyim Vital—though in this case too dissemination of Lurianic teachings began quite early.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Idel, 'On the Concept of Zimzum'.

⁹⁶ Nahmanides is described in this introduction as the 'last of the [genuine] Kabbalists' or as 'the last of all the Kabbalists' because of his emphasis on the need for reliable oral transmission. Vital quotes Nahmanides' passage from the introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, in *Shevah Hokhmat ha-Kabbalah*, printed in *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim* (Premisze, 1975), fol. 26cd. See also Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 100–104, 107.

⁹⁷ Scholem, 'Shetar ha-Hitqasherut shel Talmidei ha-'Ari', reprinted now in *Lurianic Kabbalah: Collected Studies by Gershom Scholem*, Abrams, D. (ed.), Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2008, 262–294 (Hebrew), and Meroz, 'Faithful Transmission'.

Luria's views represent an amalgam of earlier Kabbalistic traditions, combined with novel interpretations of ideas mainly found in the book of the *Zohar*. In his case, revelation means in many instances the disclosure of the esoteric meanings of this Kabbalistic text, which were passed over unnoticed by earlier Kabbalists, without however involving revelations of angels or of God, as is the case in most of the discussions in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*. In both cases, the role of mediating human authority acting in the present is absent: the esoteric meaning is found within the authoritative text, and its disclosure depends on a pneumatic experience. Even the vast knowledge and great authority of as eminent a Kabbalist as Cordovero, who was also Luria's principal teacher in matters of Kabbalah, did not suffice to have him mentioned as a meaningful Kabbalistic authority. In fact, despite his deep impact on the treatment of some important Kabbalistic issues, he is scarcely mentioned in the vast Lurianic corpus.

Let me summarize this section: Luria, like Karo, Cordovero and the latter's followers, da Vidas and Azulai, paid special attention to the feminine supernal figures, and this development reflects both the prominent role of the two feminine powers in the Holy Family structure, and the apotheosis of the *Shekhinah*.

7. *Some Conclusions*

The period under scrutiny here coincides with the most radical rupture of authority not only in Jewish culture but also in Western Christianity. The Protestant reform represents some form of phenomenon parallel to that described above in the Jewish camps. Though these phenomena represent different processes, and cannot be connected to each other in a significant manner, such a linkage is not totally missing in the eyes of some Jewish authors in this period, especially given the philosemitic tendency of the young Luther.⁹⁸ According to an Italian Kabbalist, R. Elijah Menahem Halfan, writing at the end of the first third of the sixteenth century in Venice:

Especially after the rise of the sect of Luther, many of the nobles and scholars of the land [namely the Christians] sought to have a thorough

⁹⁸ For other Jewish positive reactions to the first stage of Luther's activity see Ben-Sasson, 'The Reformation', 239–326.

knowledge of this glorious science [namely Kabbalah]. They have exhausted themselves in this search, because among our people there are but a small number of men expert in this wisdom, for after the great numbers of troubles and expulsions,⁹⁹ but a few remain. So seven learned men [namely Christians] grasp a Jewish man by the hem of his garment and say: “Be our master in this science”.¹⁰⁰

By and large, this Italian Jew seems to react, at least in this epistle, in a moderately positive manner to the possible consequences of this dissemination of Kabbalah; on the other hand, he was much more reticent with regard to this matter in another text he wrote.¹⁰¹ The noble men of the early sixteenth century were not, to be sure, respectful of Nahmanides’ oath of receiving the secrets of Kabbalah from a faithful teacher. They just needed someone to introduce them to a lore that had become quite widespread. Like the more erudite cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, who depended so much on the services of Rabbi Elijah Levita and some converts for his studies of Kabbalah, they too needed someone who knew Hebrew and was capable of reading Kabbalistic books, rather than being initiated into oral secret traditions that were not committed to writing. It was not a return to Rabbinic authority in order to receive secrets, but to someone who was able to mediate between the readers and the books.

However, this interest was put in an oblique relationship with nascent Protestantism: the two forms of interest in Judaism reflect, according to R. Elijah Halfan, the imminent arrival of the Messiah. This remark is fascinating from the sociological point of view, and to a certain extent it is also correct: both Christian Kabbalah and early Protestantism reflect in their different ways some affinities to Judaism—at least more than can be found in medieval Catholicism, not to speak of the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. In both cases, a return to much earlier religious sources created tensions with the major mediating religious authority, the Catholic Church. This is already evident in the Pope’s attitude towards Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Conclusions*, and even more so, later on, towards Martin Luther.

⁹⁹ In Hebrew *galuyyiot*, meaning literally ‘exiles’. It seems that there is no reason to doubt that he refers to the late fifteenth century expulsions from the Iberian peninsula, perhaps also including the expulsion of the Jews from Sicily later on.

¹⁰⁰ See Idel, ‘Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations’, 186–187.

¹⁰¹ See above, note 26.

However, the circumvention of the mediating authority did not create tensions in medieval and Renaissance Judaism, including Kabbalah. As we have seen, R. Joseph Karo, the most important legal figure in pre-modern Judaism, was at the same time a Kabbalist and a mystic, and no conflict between the different forms of Jewish lore are visible in his writings. Thus no major tension emerged out of the crisis of tradition in the oral transmission of Kabbalah and the ascent of revelatory experiences in the writings of any Jewish authority with whom I am acquainted. The strong canonization of the *Zohar* and the frequent and intense gravitation around its contents—of which the numerous and voluminous commentaries written on the book are a clear testimony—constituted stabilizing factors for the continuity of Kabbalah, even when major conceptual changes actually occurred. In this period the tension between the rhetoric of traditionalism accepted *de jure* and the innovative practice of the Kabbalists *de facto* did not amount to an explicit inner problem in the history of Kabbalah.

In any case, we may describe the main tendency in this history as a transition from lore that rhetorically emphasized the legitimacy of traditions transmitted esoterically, while *de facto* in most cases an entire range of new approaches was created by those Kabbalists who belonged to what I propose to call 'innovative Kabbalah'.¹⁰² This transition was related to the introduction of new legitimate sources for receiving Kabbalistic secrets—one of the main additions being, in my opinion, the supernal feminine power. Since I believe that the passages translated and analyzed above which reflect this shift from the traditional Rabbi as the authoritative Kabbalist are representative of a much larger series of texts, and are not just peripheral occurrences, we should pay special attention to the functions this apotheosis of the *Shekhinah* played in Kabbalah and its rituals in both Judaism and Christianity, especially since the sixteenth century.¹⁰³ The question that seems to me to be relevant in our context is whether the depiction of supernal sources as feminine affected in any way the nature of

¹⁰² See Idel, "The Kabbalah's 'Window of Opportunities'", 171–208.

¹⁰³ See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 66, 177. In the case of Postel's Latin translation of the *Zohar*, the role played by a feminine person is obvious. It should be pointed out—as I have already remarked—that the understanding of the *Shekhinah* should be seen as part of the larger theosophical systems, as the Holy Family for example, and never discussed as detached from them. See Idel, *Ben*, 377–385. The role played by the *Shekhinah* in eighteenth century Hasidism deserves a special study against the background of the sixteenth century Kabbalah. See above, notes 67, 93.

symbolism that permeates this form of Kabbalah, an issue that cannot be addressed in the framework of this study.¹⁰⁴

However, when the role of transmitted esoteric tradition in Kabbalah dramatically declined among Jews in Safedian Kabbalah, a phenomenon also due to the emergence of the printing of Kabbalistic books, in Western Europe there began an unprecedented development of the concept of an esoteric tradition in seventeenth century Christian circles.

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¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., the emphasis on equality of man and woman which recurs in the main school of Kabbalah. Cf. note 77 above. Though the issue of equality is found in Kabbalah also before the *Zohar*, there can be no doubt that the development of this theme later on, especially in the thought of Cordovero, may also reflect the ascent of the importance of the hypostatic feminine as a source of Kabbalah. The ascent of the importance of the Holy Family, which consists of two married couples, attributed seminal roles to two feminine powers in the dynamics of the system.

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