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Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context

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**SHEKHINAH, THE VIRGIN MARY,  
AND THE SONG OF SONGS:**

*Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol  
in Its Historical Context*

by

**Arthur Green**

I

In a book published several years ago entitled *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*,<sup>1</sup> I tried to make a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion of Kabbalistic symbols and their origins. There I traced the evolution of a single but key symbol from its place in rabbinic aggadah and early Jewish esotericism to its fixed role in the Kabbalistic symbol system of the High Middle Ages. Here I would like to repeat that process with regard to another major symbolic element of Kabbalah, considering broadly the role of the female within the godhead, particularly under the twin rubrics of *shekhinah*, the indwelling Presence, and *kenneset yisra'el*, the hypostatized “Community of Israel.” The positing of a female aspect within the divine self has to be seen against the background of the entire tradition of Jewish imaging of God, going back to the Bible and the early rabbis. Specifically, however, I plan to show that the unequivocal feminization of *shekhinah* in the Kabbalah of the thirteenth century is a Jewish response to and adaptation of the revival of devotion to Mary in the twelfth century Western church.

Any positing of gender and eros in relation to God must be viewed especially in connection with the tradition’s prime source for all discussion of sacred eros, the Song of Songs, and the evolving ways in which that text was being read in the High Middle Ages among both Christians and Jews. Vital to this paper is the understanding that interpretation of the Song of Songs is not some arcane exegetical exercise, but one of the chief ways in which individuals and generations in both traditions spoke of their relationship with the loving God. For all its “taming” in the mantle of historical and collectivist allegory, the tremendous passion contained within this book’s verses remained available to those who sought to express such intense love in the context of religious devotion over the ages. The Canticle itself, we might say, became the “locked garden” of which it speaks, opening itself to those whose hearts longed to dwell by its streams and to be intoxicated by the strong

The author wishes to thank Ann Matter and Michael Fishbane for various suggestions and challenges to his thinking that are hopefully reflected in this article. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers for *AJS Review* for several helpful suggestions.

1. *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*. (Henceforth: *Keter*) Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

spices of sacred eros that wafted from its perfumed gardens. Ultimately the Song of Songs comes to represent not only a text but a wide-ranging network of religio-erotic metaphors. The influence of the Canticle on the religious lives of medieval Jews and Christians is not limited to specific commentaries on that work or the number of quotations from it in a particular body of poems, treatises, or sermons. It extends into the entire metaphor of sacred courtship and marriage as used to describe the relationship between God and the holy community of His faithful, be it Israel or the *ecclesia*. Once the key religious narratives of both traditions have been “washed over” in the eroticizing bath of association with the Song of Songs, those narratives themselves become ample “evidence” of the eternal King’s love for His chosen maiden, whoever she may be.

Let us begin by tracing some of the parallel developments in the two traditions’ understandings of this shared text. While many of the facts presented in this first section are well-known to scholars of one tradition or the other, their juxtaposition is new and essential to our purpose. The Song of Songs, whatever its origins,<sup>2</sup> was one of the last books whose canonicity was a matter of doubt, the discussions continuing as late as the rabbis of the early second century C.E.<sup>3</sup> Tradition attributes its acceptance to Rabbi Akiva, who by other evidence as well was an advocate of love as the central religious metaphor and the basis of Judaism’s ethic.<sup>4</sup> As recorded in the *Mishnah*, Akiva insisted that “the entire world is not as worthy

2. By this short phrase I mean the following: whether its origins are “secular,” a series of richly erotic poems about the love of men and women, or whether the Canticle bears a faded memory of cultic celebration of love involving diety or dieties, either in Israel or in the preceding/surrounding culture. The former view was first articulated in modern times by J. G. von Herder in 1778, a landmark event in the history of Song of Songs scholarship, marking the end of allegorical readings passing for *peshat* or “plain” meaning. This “secular” view of the Canticle is held by several modern Bible scholars, including Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs: A Study, Modern Translation, and Commentary*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954, and Yair Zakovitch, *Shir ha-Shirim*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992. Others are more open to seeing cultic and mythic undertones in the Canticles text. See Marvin Pope’s *Song of Songs* in the Anchor Bible series, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1977 (see p. 145ff. and especially p. 191) and T. J. Meek in the *Interpreter’s Bible*, v. 5. New York: Abingdon Press, 1956. Meek was among those who found and published, as early as the 1920’s, Sumerian texts that bear parallels to the imagery of the Song of Songs. While the prominent Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer disagreed with some of Meek’s specific readings, he too was a strong supporter of the cultic reading of the Canticle. See “The Sacred Marriage and Solomon’s Song of Songs” in his *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer*. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1969.)

3. Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, v. 47, February, 1976 (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1976), tries to make a fine distinction between canonicity and inspiration. He claims that the canonicity (meaning authoritative status) of all Biblical books was resolved perhaps as early as the second century B.C.E., and that the discussions about which books “defile the hands,” continuing as late at Yavneh (= Jamnia), c. 90 C.E. were about which books were “inspired.” I find the distinction a forced one. In order to be part of *Scripture*, the work needed to be considered inspired by the Holy Spirit. The authority of other, including halakhic, works seems secondary to this question.

4. y. Nedarim 9:4. See Judah Goldin, “Toward a Profile of the Tanna, Aqiba ben Joseph” in his *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988) pp. 299–324.

as the day the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Akiva is associated with the view that the Song of Songs was first spoken—a living dialogic event that took place among God, the angels, and the community of Israel—at Sinai.<sup>6</sup> I think it does not go too far to say that Akiva, and the Akivan school in his name, viewed the Canticle as the heart of revelation, the secret love-gift that God gave to Israel along with the more public Torah of history, law, and covenant.<sup>7</sup>

Of course this devotion to the Song of Songs assumes its allegorical reading.<sup>8</sup> The Canticle is the most sublime expression of the love between God and Israel, His chosen beloved from among all the “maidens” of the human race. King Solomon has written this work as a hymn to divine love, giving final poetic form to the dialogue of love between Israel and its God, wherever it was first “spoken.” In a rabbinic tradition where election was a key value, especially in a period when the continued election of Israel was disputed by the early Church, it is no surprise that this became the single and indeed the only permitted way of reading the Song of Songs among Jews for quite some centuries. This claim of the unique, ongoing love of God for Israel was the Jewish response to the emerging Christian doctrine of supersessionism, the belief that God’s election of the “old” Israel had been superseded by the advent of Christ and the emergence of the “new” Israel in the Church.<sup>9</sup> Varied interpretations of individual verses abound throughout the Midrashic literature, showing that the Canticle was a well-known book and a highly quotable one.

Within the overarching allegorical rubric of “Love-Song between God and Israel” various entire approaches were constructed. One of these, a stage-by-stage historic reading, characterized the Targum, in this case an extended Aramaic paraphrase of the text, tracing Jewish history from Egyptian bondage to the messianic redemption yet to come. Fragments of this approach are found throughout the

5. m. Yadayim 3:5.

6. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, ed. Horwitz-Melamed (Jerusalem: *Mekize Nirdamim*, 1955) p. 143. See S. Lieberman, *Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim*, published as Appendix D to G. Scholem’s *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960), pp. 118–126. This view that the Song of Songs was “spoken” earlier is not a denial of the Solomonic superscription. The “event” of God and Israel proclaiming their love to one another at the Sea, at Sinai, or in the Tent of Meeting was described in poetic form, these rabbis would probably have said, by Solomon. Daniel Boyarin in “The Song of Songs, Lock or Key: The Holy Song as a Mashal,” in his *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 105–116, tempts one to want to read the reply *shir ha-shirim be-X ne’ emerah* to mean “The Song of Songs is speaking of X” rather than “was spoken at X.” The phrasing of the preceding question, however (*hekhan ne’ emerah*) does not lend itself easily to such a reading. Regarding the rabbinic use of the Canticle, however, I am in general agreement with Boyarin, as will be clear below, n. 34 and 92.

7. See my previous discussion of “The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism” in *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 2:2 (1987).

8. The singing of the Canticle in a profane context was strictly forbidden. Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:10; b. Sanhedrin 101a. I retain the term “allegory” here *pace* Boyarin.

9. A powerful statement of this ongoing polemic is found in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:41 (ed. Dunsky p. 36). This passage is discussed by E. Urbach in *Tarbiz* 32 (1961) 159f.

Midrashic literature, alongside less historicizing characterizations of God's eternal love for Israel, their faithfulness to Torah, consolations regarding the exile, and references to Israel's martyrdom and suffering for love of God. The ongoing historical narrative is secondary to this reading, in which Israel are God's designated and beloved children since Creation, the ones "for whose sake the world was created." There may also have been an esoteric reading of the Song associated with the *Shi'ur Qomah* tradition, although this claim is now disputed.<sup>10</sup> While individual verses of the Canticle were occasionally applied to individuals (to show their great love of God)<sup>11</sup> or to situations outside the framework of allegory,<sup>12</sup> these were very much the exception.

The rabbinic allegory was both disputed and adapted by Origen (185–254), whose partial Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs form the basis of the earliest significant Christian understandings of this text. For Origen the Canticle is a love-song between Christ and the *ecclesia*, the Christian Church that quite literally has taken the place of the Community of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Although Origen is very much an Alexandrian in his knowledge of classical sources and his reading of Christian faith against a Hellenistic background, he moved around 233 to Caesarea and spent the last two decades of his life in the Holy Land. It has been shown that Origen became quite familiar with rabbinic teaching during this period, both arguing with it and adapting some of it to the Christian context.<sup>14</sup> Even after Origen was condemned for heresy and posthumously excommunicated (553 C.E.), the influence of his writings, especially his reading of the Canticle, remained undiminished.<sup>15</sup>

10. This was the innovative assertion of Saul Lieberman. See his "*Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim*" referred to above in n. 6. Lieberman's claim has been disputed by Daniel Boyarin "Two Introductions to the Midrash on the Song of Songs," *Tarbiz* 56 (1987): 479–500, and others. Cf. my discussion of this controversy in *Keter*, p. 78f., n.3.

11. Thus of Rabbi Akiva's own successful entry and return from the *pardes*, (the "orchard" of mystical vision) the Talmud says: "Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into His chambers" (Cant. 1:4). This is a rare direct application of the Canticle to an individual's own love and visionary experience of God.

12. See *Shir Rabbah* 8:6, for example, where "for love is as strong as death" is applied simply to the love of man and wife, and 4:31 (end), where "let my beloved come into his garden" is referred, in a probably non-allegorical context, to the bridal chamber. In *Shemot Rabbah* 24:3 use is made of Cant. 1:4 to describe the relationship between Moses and his flock.

13. Of the commentary in ten books that Origen wrote to the Song of Songs, only the prologue and commentary through vs. 2:15 survive. In addition, we have two homilies of Origen to the opening chapters of the Canticle. Origen's writings on the Song of Songs survive primarily through the Latin translations of Jerome and Rufinus, though some Greek fragments are preserved. For details see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*. (henceforth: Matter, *Voice*) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, p. 25ff. They are translated into English by R. P. Lawson in the *Ancient Christian Writings* series, #26. Westminster: Newman, 1957.

14. On the contact with rabbinic interpretation reflected in Origen see E. Urbach, "Rabbinic Exegesis and Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemics" (Hebrew). *Tarbiz* 30 (1960/61) 148–170 and in English translation as "The Homiletical Interpretation of the Sages and the Exposition of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation." *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971) 247–275.

15. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, v.1: *The*

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

But some greater variety of interpretations existed on the Christian side of Song of Songs interpretation than did among the Jews. The text was always a highly popular one for exegesis or homily within the Christian context; at least seventy Latin commentaries exist dating between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. What would later be called tropological readings of some verses, referring them to a dialogue between Christ and the individual soul rather than the collective *ecclesia*, are already to be found in Origen and elsewhere in pre-medieval Christian interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Even in the opening lines of his commentary Origen says,

This little book is an epithalamium, that is a nuptial song, which it seems to me that Solomon wrote in a dramatic form and sang after the fashion of a bride to her bridegroom, who is the word of God, burning with celestial love. Indeed, he loves her deeply, whether she is the soul, made in his own image, or the Church.<sup>17</sup>

Origen knows to write quite personally and touchingly about his experience of the Bridegroom drawing near to him and then withdrawing.<sup>18</sup> This earlier development of an individually focused and personal reading of the Song is not surprising, given the Hellenistic context within which Origen lived and wrote. Though he is earlier than Plotinus, the same forces that would create the Neo-Platonic religion of the soul's longing to return to its heavenly source were already quite fully present in his day. One might also say that in this reading of the Song Origen is being quite faithful to the Philonic legacy of allegories of the soul, even though the Song of Songs is not in Philo's canon and therefore not the object of his allegorization.<sup>19</sup>

But early Christian tradition knows yet another way of interpreting this text. I refer here to the Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs. Particularly in liturgical settings for the four festivals of Mary found in the old Christian calendar (Na-

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*Foundations of Mysticism*. (henceforth McGinn, *History*, v.1) New York: Crossroad, 1992, pp. 140–150, 209f., passim.; Matter, *Voice*, p. 36ff.

16. Matter, *Voice*, p. 20ff.

17. Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs. Lawson translation (see n. 13 above), p. 21. The “word of God” is Christ, bridegroom of the soul as well as of the *ecclesia*. It is interesting that Origen depicts Solomon writing as would the bride, rather than the bridegroom. The Solomon mentioned in the Song, including that of the superscription, is seen by the rabbis as referring alternatively to the historical Solomon and to God, the King of Peace (based on a supra-literal reading of *Shelomo* as “His peace.”). See b. Shevu'ot 35b. The divine Solomon is thus the bridegroom of the text, but the earthly Solomon speaks from the bride's point of view. The same is true of Moses in the Song at the Sea, where his opening line “then sang Moses” (Ex. 15:1) is repeatedly associated with the bride's words in the Canticle and other female expressions. See *Shemot Rabbah* 23:3, 4, 5, 10.

18. Homily on Cant. 1:7; tr. Lawson pp. 211–223; 229–238. While Song of Songs was not yet canonized when the New Testament was written, and therefore is not quoted as Scripture, the image of Christ as the bridegroom is well attested in New Testament writings. See especially John 3:29. On eros in Origen see also Matter, *Voice*, p. 32ff.

19. On the degree of Origen's indebtedness to Philo see D. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993) pp. 157–183.



tivity, Purification, Annunciation, and Assumption of the Virgin),<sup>20</sup> verses from the Canticle are often used to depict the love between God, to whom she is both bride and mother, and the Virgin. She is the garden of delight whom God enters and in whom He takes pleasure; she is also the “sealed fountain” out of whom will flow the living spring of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

The place of Mary as bride of the Song of Songs is complex and not without its problems. Her virginity is represented as the “locked garden” and “sealed fountain” of Canticles 4:12. But as both bride and loving (and nursing!) mother she has also to be symbolized as fertile, lush, and flowing.<sup>22</sup> This is a problem for theological writing as much as it is for Christian art through the centuries. The place of Mary in relation to the trinitarian Godhead is also not simple. In the older Patristic reading of the Song of Songs it would seem that she is the Bride of God the Father and the mother of Christ.<sup>23</sup> This changes in the High Middle Ages when full-scale Marian interpretation of the Canticle begins. Using the ancient identification of Mary with the *ecclesia*, to be discussed more fully below, she becomes bride of Christ as well as His mother.

The varied interpretations of the Song of Songs present in the early Church attest to a special fascination with this book and its message. For Origen, God’s great gift to us in Creation is *eros*, the power of love that also fuels the journey back to God. For the mature Christian, one who has overcome earthly passions for the sake of this still more passionate inner journey, the Song of Songs contains the most important message of the Bible. Of course this is precisely a Christian outgrowth and a Platonic reading of Rabbi Akiva’s original claim that the Song of Songs is the “Holy of Holies.” The *eros* that is essential to Neo-Platonic religion finds its Biblical home in this Christianized reading of the Song of Songs.

20. The four long-established (pre-twelfth century) feasts of the Virgin are: the Purification of the Virgin, February 2; the Annunciation of the Virgin, March 25; the Assumption of the Virgin, August 15; and the Nativity of the Virgin, September 8. The legend behind the Feast of the Nativity is told in the addendum to Honorius Augustodiniensis’ *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, trans. Amelia Carr (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1991), p. 86f., about which we will have more to say below.

21. Matter, *Voice*, p. 151ff.

22. The nursing Madonna is well-known in Christian art of the Middle Ages. For depictions see Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 13–25. The other Mary of the New Testament tale, Mary Magdalene, also takes her place in some later readings of the Song of Songs. Pope Gregory the Great, in his 25th homily on the Gospels, repeats from John 20:11–18 the account of Mary Magdalene staying behind in the empty tomb after the male disciples had left. She is then described as the passionate beloved of the Canticle, the one who says: “I sought him but I found him not (3:1).” Here Mary Magdalene is a wounded lover with whom the Jewish reader could empathize: disappointed for now, but knowing that her lover will return to her. On this passage see Grover A. Zinn Jr., “Texts within Texts: The Song of Songs in the Exegesis of Gregory the Great and Hugh of St. Victor” in *Studia Patristica* 25 (1991): 209–215.

23. J. Beumer, “Die marianische Deutung des Hohen Liedes in der Frueskolastik” in *Zeitschrift fuer Katholische Theologie* 76 (1954): 411–439. Beumer says the process of change begins as early as the seventh century, culminating in Rupert and Honorius. But the complexity is sometimes elegantly negotiated. In Honorius’ *Sigillum* to Cant. 4:7 (English translation p. 66), Christ, the male figure in the dialogue, refers to Mary as “My spouse,” but adds that he speaks this way “because I am one with the Father, to whom you, remaining closed, bore the Son.”

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

This view of the Canticle's centrality to the message of Scripture and Christian faith is carried forward in the fourth century by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (334–397) and in the sixth century by Pope Gregory the Great. Ambrose, reading the Song of Songs both as an ecclesial text and as a testament of the individual soul's love of God, refers to it frequently even when supposedly exegeting other parts of the Bible. His treatise *On Isaac* in fact masks a short commentary on the Song of Songs.<sup>24</sup> Ambrose sees Isaac and Rebecca themselves in highly erotic terms:

Isaac is good and true, for he is full of grace and a fountain of joy. To that fountain came Rebecca, to fill her water jar. For Scripture says that: "going down to the fountain she filled her water jar and came up (Genesis 24:16)."<sup>25</sup> And so the Church or the soul went down to the fountain of wisdom to fill its own vessel and draw up the teachings of pure wisdom, which the Jews did not wish to draw from that flowing fountain.<sup>26</sup>

Once Rebecca is seen filling her "water jar" from Isaac's "fountain," we understand that the leap from Genesis to the Song of Songs is a small one indeed. Soon Ambrose is commenting openly on the Song itself. One particularly rich passage will give us a sense of his direction in this work:

"The king brought me to his inner chamber" (Cant. 1:4). Blessed is the soul that enters the inner chambers. For, rising up from the body, she becomes distant from all, and she searches and seeks within herself, if in any way she can pursue the divine . . . and when she was brought into the secret place of divinity, the soul said: "Let us be glad and rejoice in you. Let us love your breasts more than wine." For the just man rejoices, not in treasures of gold and silver, nor in the proceeds of his property, but in God alone.<sup>27</sup>

Quotations from the Canticle also abound elsewhere in Ambrose's writings, especially in his lengthy commentary on Psalm 118 (119).<sup>28</sup>

In this tradition that extends from Origen to Gregory we may find a Christian devotion to the Song's allegorical reading that chronologically parallels the development of *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* in the rabbinic world. The collection of texts designated by that title (sometimes referred to as *Midrash Hazit* in the early sources) was probably edited around the seventh century,<sup>29</sup> though it contains read-

24. See McGinn's perceptive reading of Ambrose's *On Isaac* in *History*, v. 1, p. 209ff. and especially his note on p. 210 regarding gender transformation.

25. Of course, Isaac himself is not present at all in the Genesis account, which tells of Rebecca's meeting with Abraham's servant who has come to seek a wife for Isaac. Ambrose's erotic portrayal requires him to eliminate the middleman.

26. On Isaac 1:2 in Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, *Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. Michael P. McHugh (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1972), p. 11.

27. On Isaac 4:11–12 (p. 18).

28. McGinn, *History*, v. 1, 209ff.

29. Moshe David Herr, writing in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (s.v. Midrash) dates it between 500–640, the later period of "classical" Midrash.



ings of individual verses that go back as far as the Tannaitic period. Two other Midrashic compilations, *Shir ha-Shirim Zuta* and *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* are somewhat later,<sup>30</sup> though these too may contain early materials, as is the way of Midrash. It is in the last-named text where we find the surprising statement, attributed to Rabbi Akiva: “Had Torah not been given, the world could have been conducted by the Song of Songs,”<sup>31</sup> a view with which these roughly contemporary Christian writers would have been more than comfortable, at least in theory.<sup>32</sup> In the rabbinic corpus too we find the Song of Songs becoming a favorite of exegetes even when dealing with other books of the Bible and matters seemingly far from the gardens and fountains of love. Both the sacrificial rites of the by then absent and mourned Temple and the rabbinic life of devotion to prayer and commandments are in many places romantically adorned by association with verses from the Canticle. Perhaps even more is the act of Torah study and exegesis itself described by the rabbis as a descent into the gardens of eros. For the Jewish writers on the Canticle there seems to be no greater acting out of the text than the act of commentary itself, the exegete playfully skipping among the verses and seeking out the objects of his homiletical desire much as the lover in the Song seeks his own beloved amid the lush growth of ancient gardens.

Notably absent from the rabbinic discussion of the Canticle is any theoretical concern with the nature of allegory. In the centuries when such Christian readers as John Cassian and Gregory were deeply involved in the fine points of this discussion, the rabbis, still lacking the refinements of self-reflective thought that had come to the Church through Hellenistic and especially Philonic sources, maintain a certain naivete about how allegory is the “real” meaning of this holy book. Usually it is the great wisdom of Solomon that is seen as having produced so profound and multivalenced a text, although this writing is also understood as a fine articulation of the “event” of the Song of Songs to which we have alluded earlier. The text is thus seen as a special mingling of divine revelation and human cleverness.<sup>33</sup>

30. *Shir ha-Shirim Zuta* was first published from a Cairo Genizah manuscript by L. Gruenhut. Jerusalem: W. Gross, 1897. It has been reprinted with a new introduction by Y. H. Wertheimer. Jerusalem: *Ketav Yad va-Sefer*, 1971. Wertheimer dates it before the *payyetan* R. Eleazar ha-Kallir, who he claims used it. Kallir’s own dates are a matter of some controversy, but a seventh-eighth century date for this Midrash seems likely. *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* was published by Solomon Schechter from a Parma (De Rossi) manuscript (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1896). He dates it (p. 102) to the mid-tenth century.

31. p. 5, line 22–23. My reading is based on an emendation of the Hebrew text that as it stands makes no sense. The letter *bet* needs to be moved from before the word “Torah” to the next word “shir.” This line, even if not Akiva’s own, stems directly from the school of R. Akiva. It may even have originated as a gloss on Akiva’s statement quoted above.

32. That is to say that neither the Church nor the Synagogue would have understood “the world conducted by the Song of Songs alone” as a call to abandon the slightest bit of the ever-growing legal structures within which both were operating. Rabbi Akiva is also the one, it should be remembered, who derived “heaps and heaps of laws from the crown-points” that surmount certain letters as written in the Torah scroll.

33. This is the key subject of the opening discourse in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim*. On Christian agreement with this approach to the Song as a joint divine/human creation, see Ann Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*; (henceforth: Astell, *Song*) Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 25f.

Its use as a secondary narrative through which the primary Jewish narrative of the Torah could be read, intensified, and eroticized was articulated by the rabbis when they praised Solomon for creating the first “handles” by which Torah could be uplifted.<sup>34</sup>

The Christian liturgical uses of the Song of Songs parallel the very extensive use of the Song in the Hebrew Payyetic or poetic tradition.<sup>35</sup> As early as the seventh century,<sup>36</sup> poets in the Holy Land would turn, especially when composing synagogue hymns for Passover and Shavu'ot, to the text of the Song, which is recited in the synagogue on the seventh day or the intermediate Sabbath of Passover.<sup>37</sup> This poetic usage continues in both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions, though in rather different idioms. Among the Sephardim, ancient *piyyut* gives way to the Golden Age poetry of Spain, based on Arabic models, as is well known.<sup>38</sup> This poetic oeuvre contains many religious love poems, which naturally refer to imagery drawn from the Song of Songs.<sup>39</sup> In these poems, if we may broadly conceive them as a form of Canticles interpretation, we find much talk of the poet's or the soul's longing for God, sometimes in settings replete with images of the Song of Songs. It would seem at first glance that these are perhaps the earliest tropological (“God and the soul”) readings of the Song in Hebrew. The problem with this view is that the poems themselves are allegorical. Most of the religious love poetry of Judah Halevi, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and the other “Golden Age” poets of Spain was composed for use in the synagogue service.<sup>40</sup> The “beloved” in these poems, though the poet thoroughly identifies with her, is the Community of Israel, the poetic embodiment of the Jewish people, so familiar from rabbinic literature. Her femininity is very much underlined in these poems,

34. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:8; ed. Dunsky p. 5. See the article by D. Boyarin cited in n. 6 above.

35. On *Piyyut*, see A. Mirsky, *Ha'Piyut [!]: The Development of Post-Biblical Poetry in Eretz Israel and the Diaspora* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990.

36. For Yannai, see Z. M. Rabinovitz' edition of *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai*, Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1987. There survive two long poems almost completely based on the Song of Songs, a *shiv'ata le-pesah*, in v.2, pp. 265–272 and a *qerovah le-pesah* v.2, pp. 272–289.

37. See Tractate *Sofrim* 14:1; 14:16.

38. On the influence of older *piyyut* on Spanish Hebrew poetry and the continuity of themes between them, see A. Mirsky, *Ha'Piyut*, pp. 522–652, and especially p. 617ff.

39. Mirsky (see previous note), p. 590 finds surprisingly little direct use of the Song of Songs in Spanish Hebrew Poetry. The poets “took from the Song of Songs a few concepts and images, like the deer and the gazelle, appellations for the beautiful lover . . . “ Indeed in Gabirol's religious love poetry there is less of Song of Songs than one might expect. The images of betrayal, wounded love, and abandonment that predominate seem to lead him more to the prophets and Lamentations. Among the clearer examples of Song of Songs influence are poems #31 and 32 in the Bialik-Ravnitzky edition of Gabirol's poetry *Sha'ar asher Nisgar* and *Shalom Lekha Dodi* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1925). The same may be said of Judah Ha-Levi. For extensive use of the Song of Songs, see his *Yafah ka-Tirtsah*, poem #144 in H. Brody, ed., *Diwan des Abu-l-Hasan Jehuda ha-Levi* (Berlin: Mikize Nirdamim, 1930). Of course, occasional language and setting reminiscent of the Canticle are found throughout the writings of these and other Spanish Hebrew poets.

40. About half the religious poetry of Gabirol, collected in the above-mentioned volume, is specifically liturgical. In the case of Judah Halevi *Shirey Qodesh* (Jerusalem: D. Yarden, 1980), all of that published as the “sacred verse” is within the framework of liturgy. This variance may be attributable, however, to different principles of editing.

but that too is derivative, both from the Canticle itself and from its rabbinic interpretation. The poet's soul that longs for a renewed relationship with God, calling out in female terms to her beloved, is thus also the collective soul of Israel. The poet sees himself as *shaliah tsibbur*, "emissary" or representative of the congregation. Indeed a great many of the poems are reflections on exile, Israel's historical, as well as the poet's spiritual, situation. So while it may be said that sacred love is a key theme in the poetry of the Golden Age, the poet's personal love of God and that of his audience/congregation, the community of Israel, are not to be distinguished.

Among the Ashkenazim, *piyyut* in the old *Erets Israel* tradition continued to be written into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Their whole verses from the Canticle were sometimes used as refrains and incorporated into new poetic settings.<sup>41</sup> But the Ashkenazic poetic tradition, more conservative in many ways than the Sephardic, remained entirely faithful to the collectivist interpretation of the Song that it had received from earlier generations of poets and Midrashic exegetes.

The emergence of *peshat* or "plain meaning" literal exegesis in early medieval Jewry was problematic when applied to the Song of Songs. Unlike any other part of Scripture, here an explicit rabbinic stricture was in force against reading the text in accord with its plain meaning.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps for this reason both the commentary attributed to Sa'adya Gaon<sup>43</sup> (tenth century) and RaSHI<sup>44</sup> (eleventh century) offer versions of the historic allegory<sup>45</sup> in their commentaries, unlike their writings on other books of the Bible, where they permit themselves, to one degree or another, to leave rabbinic tradition behind and to seek out the plain meaning. Other exegetes did so nevertheless, some prefacing their commentaries with *apologia* over this possible transgression. Their claim was usually that an understanding of the *peshat* was necessary in order to better comprehend the subtleties of King Solomon's allegorical masterpiece.<sup>46</sup> The *peshat* dealt with the text exactly as it presents itself, within the context of Solomonian authorship. Thus it might be

41. *Piyyutim* based on the Song of Songs predominate for the opening days and intermediate Sabbath of Pesah. See *Mahzor le-Pesah*, ed. Y. Frankel (Jerusalem: Koren, 1993), pp. 60–91, 94–105, 139–152, 245, 291–300, 304–330.

42. See n. 8 above.

43. The pseudo-Sa'adya commentary was first published in the collection *Sheloshah Perushim le-Shir ha-Shirim*. (Constantinople: Yabez, 1577?). The Arabic original was published by Y. Kapah in *Hamesh Megillot*, Jerusalem: Ha-Agudah le-Hatsalat Ginzey Teman, 1962. On the commentary see H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), p. 322f.

44. RaSHI's commentary was first published in *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, Bologna, 1477. A critical edition by J. Rosenthal was published in the Samuel K. Mirsky Jubilee Volume, ed. S. Bernstein and G. Churgin (New York: Jubilee Committee, 1958), pp. 130–188.

45. On the question of RaSHI and "allegory" see Sarah Kamin, "Dugma in Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs" in her collected essays *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), pp. 13–30.

46. A complete "Annotated Bibliography of Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs" by Barry D. Walfish is found in *Ha-Miqra' bi-Re'i Mefarashav: The Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994, pp. 518–571. Walfish's work replaces the former standard, but very dated work on the subject, S. Salfeld's *Das Hohelied Salomo's bei den juedischen Erklarern des Mittelalters* (Berlin: J. Benjian, 1879).

Solomon's own epithalamium to his bride or a hymn to the innocent love of shepherd and shepherdess as composed by the romantic king. Some of these Hebrew commentaries, particularly that of RaSHI, were read and studied by medieval schoolmen. The Jews' knowledge of the original language of Scripture was respected<sup>47</sup> by Christian commentators, and on the level of grammar and sentence structure there was much to be learned from them.<sup>48</sup> This was to have rather little effect, however, on the allegorical references of the text.

The other best known of these classic medieval Jewish commentaries is that of Abraham Ibn Ezra,<sup>49</sup> an often daring interpreter who offers what seem to be a promising three levels of reading in his commentary. The first rung, as it turns out, is philological, an explanation of unusual words and grammatical usages found in the Song. The second is the *peshat* commentary, the tale of "a very young girl, one who as yet had no breasts, who was guarding her vineyard when she saw a passing shepherd and desire fell in the hearts of both of them." The third rung of Ibn Ezra's reading is that of historical allegory, tracing Jewish history from Abraham to the messiah, though in somewhat less fantastic form than had the Targumic tradition.

Abraham Ibn Ezra is well-known to us as a Neo-Platonist philosopher as well as a most important and textually perceptive Bible commentator. It may seem strange at first glance that he did not make use of the Canticle for purposes of philosophical allegory. Such a possible reading was by no means unknown to him. But in the introduction to his commentary he specifically denounces such attempts: "Philosophers have sought to interpret this book in metaphysical terms [ *'al sod ha-'olam* ] or the way in which the elevated soul is joined to the lowly body. Others interpret it rhetorically.<sup>50</sup> May the wind carry all of them away, for they are

47. This is hardly the right word for the likes of Alexander Neckam (Nequam) (1157–1217), an English theologian and exegete who expressed terrible disdain for the "modern" Jews, referred to them as "pigs," thoroughly disapproved of their understanding of Scripture, and yet quoted them when useful. See A. Saltman, "Jewish Exegetical Material in Alexander Nequam's Commentary to the Song of Songs" in *The Bible in the Light of Its Interpreters: The Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), pp. 421–451. Interestingly, Nequam's (as yet unpublished) commentary is mostly Mariological. For an earlier treatment see R. J. Loewe and R. W. Hunt, "Alexander Neckam's Knowledge of Hebrew" in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies 4*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

48. See the anonymous Latin paraphrase of RaSHI's commentary, *Expositio historica Cantilicorum secundum Salomonem*, edited by S. Kamin and A. Saltman; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1989. Kamin is also author of "Rashi's Commentary on the Song of Songs and the Jewish-Christian Polemic" in her *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), pp. 31–60. See also Michael A. Signer, "Thirteenth Century Christian Hebraism: The Expositio on Canticles in MS Vat. Lat. 1053" in D. Blumenthal, ed, *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*. (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1988) pp. 89–100.

49. Ibn Ezra's commentary on Canticles exists in two recensions. The standard edition appearing in *Mikra'ot Gedolot* was first published in *Perush 'al Hamesh Megillot* in Constantinople, 1505. A second shorter version is that published by H. J. Matthews, London, 1874. The various super-commentaries to Ibn Ezra are listed by N. Ben-Menaheem in *Areshet 3* (1961): 71–92.

50. The Hebrew *'al ha-matkonot* is obscure. I suggest that it refers to a way of learning the language of love, the poetics of erotic expression.

vanity. . . .” Ibn Ezra remains conservative in this case, opting for a modified homiletical commentary rather than for philosophical allegory that would necessarily stray far from the text. Perhaps, having seen some early attempts in this genre, the poet/philosopher/exegete was not optimistic about the possibilities of reading the very bodily and erotic text of the Canticle around the love of an increasingly abstract, incorporeal, and non-anthropomorphic God.

While the early Hebrew philosophic commentaries to which Ibn Ezra refers remain mostly lost or unpublished,<sup>51</sup> there does survive an example of such treatments in the lengthy Judaeo-Arabic commentary of Joseph Ibn ‘Aqin (c. 1150–1220), first published and translated into Hebrew by Abraham Halkin.<sup>52</sup> Ibn ‘Aqin’s “third level” (following *peshat* and “the method of our rabbis”) is an Aristotelian commentary, in which the longing of the soul to be joined to the Active Intellect forms the main subject of Solomon’s Song. It provides the best and fullest example we have of philosophical *allegoresis* in the Jewish commentaries to the Song. Here we have shed the collectivist reading quite completely and dwell fully in the realm of Aristotelian religious philosophy in the Maimonidean age.<sup>53</sup> While Ibn Aqin was originally from Barcelona, he lived and worked in a Jewish-Islamic context, probably in Fez, having little contact with the Catalan Jewish culture from which he came and no effect upon it. The influences upon him seem to be those of Arabic philosophical literature, not those of Christian Europe. Still, it is interesting that Ibn Aqin, a younger contemporary of Maimonides, reads the Canticle as he does at this particular time. In the same tradition is the commentary of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon, though in this case the intergration of rabbinic and philosophical comments makes for a “softer,” less philosophically technical, reading of the text.<sup>54</sup> Their most important successor in this tradition, R. Levi ben Gershom or Gersonides, writes in Languedoc in the early 14th century.<sup>55</sup> All of these texts are attempts to interpret the Song of Songs as a love poem between the individual and the divine, in the new fashion that became popular among Christians in the Middle Ages, as we shall presently discuss. But they do so in highly intellectualized ways; it is the individual *mind* and the Active Intellect that are wooing one another in the Canticle, and they do so in strictly Aristotelian terms. In fact these commentaries may be characterized as rather stilted attempts to fit the bold passion

51. See the list of Walfish mentioned in n. 46. There are quite a few grammatical and some philosophical commentaries that preceded Ibn Ezra, including several by Karaite authors, in whose works Ibn Ezra often took a particular interest. See Walfish p. 528ff.

52. *Hitgallut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa ‘at ha-Me’orot: Perush Shir ha-Shirim*. Ed. A. S. Halkin. (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1964).

53. While Ibn ‘Aqin’s primary influences are Islamic thinkers whom he knows directly, not via Maimonides, he does mention RaMBaM several times and once (f. 102b) makes specific reference to the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

54. The Ibn Tibbon commentary was first published in Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1874. The fact that neither of these commentaries was printed before modern times is witness to their relative unpopularity.

55. Gersonides’ commentary was first published in *Perush Hamesh Megillot*, Riva di Trento, 1560. Another Aristotelian commentator was Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1279–1340). His commentary first appeared as *Hatsotserot Kesef*, Constantinople, 1577 [?] and again in *‘Asarah Keley Kesef*, ed. J. Last, Pressburg, 1903 [photo. ed. Jerusalem, 1970].



of the Song of Songs into the formal categories of Aristotelian metaphysics, in which the commentary seems like more of an excuse for philosophical disquisition than it does a true coming-to-terms with the meaning of the Scriptural text. These attempts by Hebrew commentators on the Song of Songs to turn to an individual rather than a collectivist reading remain remarkably tame and barren, especially when compared with the great transformation in reading the Canticle to be allowed by the new symbolic language of Kabbalah.

II

Before we come to Kabbalah, however, we need to say a few words about the era in which it was born, or at least entered its public phase. The twelfth century, particularly in France, has been described as an age of great transformation in the history of Western Christian Europe. It is a period of discovery, technological advance, a renaissance of ancient learning, and an age of new directions within the all-embracing sphere of religion. It is the century of both Crusades and troubador romances, a time when the notion of personal *quest* is idealized in both the secular and sacred spheres of romance. The knight/hero in quest of his lady and the monk seeking the love of God or the grace of the Virgin have been described by more than one student of the age as differing manifestations of the same spirit.<sup>56</sup> This sense of individual quest, and especially the search for perfect love, makes the twelfth century the age when the Song of Songs most fully takes its place as a key document in the spiritual heritage of the Western world.

This is the century of Bernard of Clairvaux' (1090–1153) homilies on the Song, one of the most popular texts of Western Christian mysticism of all time.<sup>57</sup> Bernard's eighty-six homilies covered the text only through Canticles 3:1. After Bernard's death, Gilbert of Hoyland (d. 1172) sought to complete the task, and when he too died before writing on the entire Song, John of Ford (d. 1214) finished the job with a collection of sermons that itself fills seven volumes in the recent English edition.<sup>58</sup> For the most part these Cistercians interpret the Song tropo-

56. J. LeClercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); J. C. Moore, *Love in Twelfth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972). See especially "The Varieties of Love," pp. 131–155. The best example of the thorough mixing of sacred and worldly longings in quest of the ideal is found in "The Quest for the Holy Grail." This thirteenth century text (discussed briefly in Matter, *Voice*, p. 55f.) includes references to the Song of Songs. It is published in English in the translation of P. M. Matarasso (London: Penguin Books, 1969). The complex interplay of the rhetoric of sacred and profane love is depicted by Peter Dronke in "The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric," *The Bible and Western Culture*, ed. W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), pp. 236–262. See also J. I. Wimsatt, "Chaucer and the Canticle of Canticles" in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. J. Mitchell and W. Provost. (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1973).

57. The Latin text is found in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. Jean Leclercq et al., (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1955–77), v. 1–2. An English edition in four volumes is translated by K. Walsh et al., Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1976–1980. See the extensive treatment by B. McGinn in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. v. 2: *The Growth of Mysticism* (henceforth: McGinn, *History*, v.2). (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 158–224. The popularity of Bernard's work is attested by the survival of more than 900 manuscripts, as reported by McGinn, p. 487, n. 21.

58. Gilbert's works in Latin are published in the *Patrologia Latina* (=PL) 184: 11–298. Gilbert's



logically, an allegory of Christ and the individual soul or the Christian. But Bernard's friend William of St. Thierry also interpreted the Canticle, continuing more in the old ecclesiological reading.<sup>59</sup> Among the other important commentators of the age are Rupert of Deutz (c.1075–1129), Honorius Augustodunensis (1090–1156), and Alain of Lille (c. 1120-c.1203), all of whose works include important mariological interpretations of the Song.<sup>60</sup> These take up what was once just a liturgical reading, appropriate to the feasts of Mary, and make it a full-fledged stream within Song of Songs interpretation, in which the entire Canticle is understood as betokening the love between Christ and Mary. No matter that Mary is the mother of Christ, and virginal mother at that. Here she is very much His loving bride, though in a context that also preserves and glorifies virginity, to be sure.

The twelfth century was also the time in which the Kabbalistic tradition began to emerge among the Jews. While the first Kabbalists we know are in Languedoc in the latter half of the century, and the movement quickly crossed the Pyrenees and found its best home in Catalonia and Castile of Northern Spain, the earliest origins of Kabbalistic literary expression are Franco-German rather than Sephardic in origin.<sup>61</sup> This is true in the first place with regard to *Sefer ha-Bahir* (in contrast to its title perhaps the most unclear document in the entire spiritual history of Judaism), containing materials possibly of older oriental or Byzantine origins but certainly edited and first released in southern France.<sup>62</sup> Recent scholar-

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sermons in three volumes have been published in the English translation of L. Braceland, along with a fourth volumes of other collected writings (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1978–81). John of Ford's sermons, in seven volumes, are translated by W. Beckett (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977–84). The Latin original, edited by E. Mikkers and H. Costello as *Ioannis de Forda: Super Extremam Partem Cantici Canticorum Sermones CXX*, is in the series *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis* (=CCCM) (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), pp. 17–18. For discussion of Gilbert and John's works see McGinn, *History*, v.2, pp. 298–309.

59. A critical edition and French translation by J. M. Dechanet is in *Sources chretiennes* 82 (Paris: Cerf, 1962). English translation by Mother Columba Hart (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970).

60. Rupert's *Commentum in Cantica Canticorum* is in CCCM 26. On him see John Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Regarding Honorius, I refer here to his first commentary on the Canticle, the *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, to be quoted below. The Latin text is found in PL 172. There is an English translation by A. Carr (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1991). His later commentary, the better-known *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, reverts to more of the ecclesial and tropological modes. Other Marian interpreters include Philip of Harveng (d. 1183; PL 203) and William of Newburgh (d. 1198), ed. J. C. Gorman, *Spicilegium Friburgense* 6, Fribourg, 1960. See E. Ann Matter, "Eulogium sponsi de sponsa: Canons, Monks, and the Song of Songs." *The Thomist* 49:4 (1985), p. 552, n.5.

61. G. Scholem's *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987) already points in this direction. See pp. 180–187 and index, s.v. "German Hasidim." Further steps in this identification of the Franco-German area as the primary source of Kabbalistic symbolism have been taken by more recent scholarship. See M. Idel, "The Intention of Prayer in the Beginning of Kabbalah: Between Germany and Provence," *Porat Yosef: Studies Presented to Rabbi Doctor Joseph Safran*, eds. B. and E. Safran. (Hoboken: Ktav, 1992), pp. 5–14, as well as several other studies by Joseph Dan, Idel, and Elliot Wolfson. See also my prior discussion in *Keter*, chapter 10.

62. The Hebrew text of the Bahir has recently been published in a highly useable edition by

ship has also had much to say about the emergence of proto-Kabbalistic symbols in writings transmitted by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (d. c.1230).<sup>63</sup> The Castilian Kabbalah of the mid-thirteenth century contained a new infusion of Ashkenazic materials and there are some halakhic and liturgical formulations in the Zohar (Castile, c.1290) that also point to Franco-German influence.<sup>64</sup> Moshe Idel has stressed the antique origins of certain aspects of Kabbalistic symbolism, a position that will get no argument from me.<sup>65</sup> But some key parts of the network of symbolic associations that makes for Kabbalah, its organization into a well-defined hierarchy, and the daring to publish such ways of thinking in written and distributed form all still seem to belong primarily to the latter part of the twelfth century, centering around southern France.

A key element in this symbolic universe is the emergence of the divine female, a figure within the divine-symbolic realm who serves as consort to the blessed Holy One, God of Israel. The radical character of this development cannot be overstated. The singularity and aloneness of God, described almost exclusively in masculine terms, is of the very essence of the monotheistic revolution wrought by Israel's ancient prophets.<sup>66</sup> It is the God who by definition has no heavenly con-

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Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), reproducing and transcribing the Munich manuscript as well as reprinting the first printed edition (Amsterdam, 1651) of the Bahir. This edition renders that by R. Margulies (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1951) obsolete. For scholarship on the Bahir through the early 1990's, see the fine bibliography in the Abrams edition. An English translation by Aryeh Kaplan is only partially reliable, tending to smoothe over real problems in the text. Selections from the Bahir in a better translation are included in J. Dan and R. Kiener's *The Early Kabbalah*, New York: Paulist Press (*Classics of Western Spirituality Series*), 1986.

63. The Song of Songs Commentary under the name of R. Eleazar, first published in Lublin, 1608, as *Yeyn ha-Reqah*, is of dubious attribution and unfortunately not particularly helpful in this context.

64. See I. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigle sheba-Nistar: The Halachic Residue in the Zohar* (Israel: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 1995), pp. 19–34.

65. M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 156ff and *passim*. His position is not quite identical with that of Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess*, which posits a direct historical connection between the ancient cult of Inana/Ishtar in Babylonia and the female *shekhinah* of the Zohar and later Kabbalah. That thesis simply lacks any evidence for a period of over a thousand years.

66. This is not to deny a certain maternal strain that runs through Biblical descriptions of that "almost exclusively" male deity. Recent feminist-inspired Bible studies have treated this subject extensively. See Mayer Gruber, "The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah" in *Revue Biblique* 90 (1983): 351–359, reprinted in his *The Motherhood of God and Other Essays* (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1992). See also J. J. Schmidt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother" in *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 557–569. My thanks to George Savran for these references. I also do not deny that in the popular cult of ancient Israel there may have been elements of goddess worship. This is obvious from the negative references in Jeremiah to "the Queen of Heaven," and possibly from archaeological evidence. But none of this denies the central thrust of Biblical and rabbinic Judaism's insistence that God's only "female" partner or beloved is His people Israel. Interestingly the Zohar (1:49a) subsumes the Biblical *asherah* among the names of *shekhinah*, linking its own female deity figure to the ancient and forbidden one. For the Kabbalist the essential sin of 'avodah zarah is not the worship of "foreign" deities but the separation of the *sefirot* from one another, especially of the female from her mate. That is the thrust of this Zohar passage. Raphael Patai's quotation of it in *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 318, n. 51, does little to strengthen his argument for historical continuity from ancient Near Eastern goddess worship to Kabbalah.

sort that seeks out a human beloved in the people Israel, allowing for the essential God-Israel erotic myth that plays a key role in rabbinic Judaism. Now Kabbalah comes and tampers with this most essential *datum* of Jewish devotional life.

*Sefer ha-Bahir*, the founding document of Sefirotic Kabbalah, intentionally leaves unclear the borders between God's divine and human beloved, as I have shown in my *Keter* study.<sup>67</sup> It is not quite certain, in several key passages of that strange pseudo-Midrash, whether the lost or fallen object of God's affection is a divine hypostasis, the human soul, or the collective community of Israel.<sup>68</sup> The Bahir, written and edited over a long period of time, represents the earliest stages of Kabbalah's evolution, reaching back perhaps a century or more before its publication, c. 1150. A female figure is present in the Bahir text, but she is either the seventh or the eighth of the ten *sefirot* and is not necessarily identified by the term *shekhinah*. By the time of the late thirteenth-century Zohar, however, the Kabbalistic reading is very well defined. The Song of Songs<sup>69</sup> is an epithelamium written

67. Chapter 12, pp. 134–150. On this point I differ from the view of Peter Schaefer in the article to which I will refer in n. 88 below.

68. The term *keneset yisra'el* is interestingly rather rare in the Bahir. In #46 *keneset yisra'el* is the force that judges and punishes Israel, based on "I will punish you sevenfold for your sins" (Lev. 26:28). Therefore, *keneset yisra'el* says, "do not imagine that I will seek mercy for you." Thus *keneset yisra'el* and the actual people of Israel are clearly distinct from one another. *Yisra'el*, without *keneset*, is the term used for the actual Jewish people in #26, 94, 107, and elsewhere.

The term *shekhinah* appears several times in the Bahir. In #50 *shekhinah* is identified with the first sort, the less harsh sort, of *tsedeq*, based on association with the verse "righteousness will dwell in her" (Is. 1:21). Since that verse clearly refers to Jerusalem, we see that the associative cluster Jerusalem/Righteousness/Shekhinah is already in place in the Bahir. In #85, *shekhinah* appears in association with the same Isaiah verse, but is also linked to King David, again predicting a commonplace association of later Kabbalah. The most complex reference to *shekhinah* is in #115–116. In #115 the lowest two *sefirot* (= *netsah* and *hod*) are referred to as *sof shekhinato shel ha-qadosh barukh hu*, "the end of the blessed Holy One's *shekhinah*," or again as just "*sof ha-shekhinah*." In #116 we are told that "*shekhinah* is above as *shekhinah* is below," a saying reminiscent of older Midrashic usages. But then, in response to the question, "What is this *shekhinah*?" the following definition is offered: "Say that it is the light emanated from the first light, which is *hokhmah*. It further surrounds all [all the *sefirot*? all the world(s)?], as it says: "The whole earth is filled with His glory" (Is. 6:3). This very important text reflects an early stage in the development of Kabbalistic symbolism, in which the term *shekhinah* is not yet identified with the feminine aspect of the Godhead. See the parable that follows in Bahir #116. See my translation and treatment of this text in *Keter*, p. 145ff. The "elevation" of *netsah* and *hod* from ninth and tenth place to seventh and eighth in the sefirotic system is a subject that I hope to treat elsewhere.

69. The two important extant early Kabbalistic commentaries to the Song of Songs are those of R. Ezra of Gerona and R. Isaac Ibn Sahula. The former was first published under name of Nahmanides in Altona, 1764. (A Berlin edition supposedly published in the same year is lacking this text, despite the promise of it on the title page, in both copies examined in the Scholem Library in Jerusalem—a rather strange bibliographic curiosity. Scholem wrote a note about the rare Hrubyszow, 1820 edition of this text in *Kirjath Sefer* 1, 167f.) This same rather poor version is included in C. Chavel's edition of *Kitvey RaMBaN*, Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1963. An English translation by Seth Brody (completed by A.G.), partly based on manuscript readings, is now available (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999). I published the Sahula text from a unique surviving manuscript in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6:3–4 (1987). Unfortunately lost is the commentary of Moses of Burgos, a document that would probably have offered important insight into the early history and development of this symbol.

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

by King Solomon, the mystic hierophant, to celebrate the marriage of male and female within God, blessed Holy One and *shekhinah*, a marriage to which earthly Israel are related both as offspring<sup>70</sup> and as wedding attendants,<sup>71</sup> but not as marriage partner.

Gershom Scholem claimed a very late date for truly feminine descriptions of *shekhinah*, distinguished from its earlier usage as a simple designation for God in His indwelling mode.<sup>72</sup> One or two Midrashic references distinguish between God and *shekhinah*,<sup>73</sup> but there is nothing before the eleventh century, and hardly anything before the twelfth, that depicts *shekhinah* as a female hypostasis. More recent scholarship may dispute this, suggesting that a *shekhinta* figure may have

70. Early Kabbalah is much interested in the divine origins of the human soul, including both the specific locus of origin and the process by which souls become embodied. One famous source in the *Bahir* depicts souls flying off the cosmic tree; others see them flowing in a divine river. Rabbi Isaac the Blind identifies the soul's ultimate source as *binah*, the mother/womb of the sefirotic world. It proceeds to journey through the sefirotic world and thus into *malkhut*, whence it goes on to enter into the human body. See R. Ezra's *Commentary to the Aggadot* Ms Vatican 294, f. 48b. Here there is no mention of divine copulation or of a birth-process, nor is there yet any distinction between various parts of the soul. From the Gerona period (mid-thirteenth century) onward, Kabbalistic notions of the soul become tied to the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of tri-partate soul division; sometimes only *ne-shamah*, the highest portion of the soul, is taken to come from the world of the *sefirot*. In Castilian Kabbalah, especially the *Zohar*, the main view seems to be that *ne-shamah* are born of the coupling of *tiferet* and *malkhut*, the male and female principles within the Godhead. See the discussion by I. Tishby in *Wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Littman Library, 1989), p. 697f.

71. See *Zohar* 1:8a. Both Israel and the angels are depicted as *shushbinin*, attendants, at the divine marriage. These passages may be influenced by the older tales of angels as *shushbinin* at Adam and Eve's wedding. See Pirke Rabbi Eliezer 12 and Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1925), v. 5, p. 90. See also *Zohar* 3:98 a–b, quoted in my *Keter*, p. 159f.

72. *Shekhinah* is of course a feminine noun in Hebrew and that can lead the casual reader to certain wrong impressions. My re-checking of the rabbinic sources confirms Scholem's view. Even in the very powerful passage in *Echah Rabbah*, where *shekhinah* is seen in bitter weeping and mourning (texts which were later rewritten by the *Zohar* [*Zohar Hadash* on Lamentations. This text has also been translated by Seth Brody and is published along with his translation of R. Ezra's *Commentary to the Song of Songs*. See n. 69 above.] to beautifully describe Mother Shekhinah) the single parable given in the original Midrash compares the mourning *shekhinah* (= God) to an earthly king! See *Echah Rabbah*, petihta 25. There are other scattered passages in which *shekhinah* seems to be separate from God's own self (see b. *Sukkah* 5a, for example—"He spread over [Moses] the glow of His *shekhinah* . . ."), but there is no real separation and certainly no evidence of femininity here, unless one projects it back from the later Kabbalistic readings. The same is true of *Devarim Rabbah* 11:3, sometimes quoted in this context, where Moses is said to "speak with the *shekhinah* face-to-face." Face-to-face conversation can of course take place between God and man, as the Biblical text in question (*Deut.* 34:10) makes clear, while they are yet two male figures. When one of the two is female, however, as will come to be in Kabbalah, "face-to-face" contact is read as sexual intimacy, leading to mystical union.

73. *Midrash Mishle* (ed. S. Buber, f. 47a—ninth-tenth century?) depicts the *shekhinah* as speaking to the blessed Holy One. In *Bereshit Rabbati*, a still later Midrashic compilation (ed. H. Albeck, p. 27—School of R. Moshe ha-Darshan, twelfth-century Provence) God threatens to remove "Himself and His *shekhinah*" from the world in response to human sin (*'atsmo u-shekhinato*), a locution not to be found in earlier sources. But this phrasing may reflect the influence of Sa'adya's theology which insisted on the distinction between God and His "created glory." A much earlier Midrashic source, *Va-Yiqra Rabbah* 6:1, uses *ruah ha-godesh* ("the holy spirit") in a clear intermediary role, but not *shekhinah*.

very ancient origins, representing the divine presence in female form.<sup>74</sup> *But in the older sources this shekhinah is never the consort of the male God.* For Judaism before Kabbalah such thoughts remain completely taboo. Neither is there any identification of *shekhinah*, the presence of God, with *keneset yisra'el*, the collective embodiment of Israel, nor any blurring of the distinction between them. *Shekhinah* is a way of representing God. *Kenesset Yisra'el* is the human community of Israel personified. Despite the female gender of the term *shekhinah*, that deity remains mostly masculine in description; God and Israel are lovers, frequent partners in dialogue, sharers of the sufferings of exile, but they always remain distinct from one another. The God who suffers exile may be depicted as *shekhinah*, the long-suffering presence that accompanies Israel in their wanderings. But this is a daring metaphor for the God who takes on suffering, not a hypostization of a divine consort.

While *shekhinah* is not female in the early sources, *keneset yisra'el* surely is. She is the embodiment of the people, precisely the bride of God in the Midrash on Canticles. *Kenesset Yisra'el* often appears as a seemingly female figure, representing Israel as an eternal entity.<sup>75</sup> As such she addresses God, sometimes expressing her love and devotion, occasionally questioning His justice, and so forth.<sup>76</sup> Torah too is a female, generally depicted as the daughter of God.<sup>77</sup> So too

74. The term *shekhinta*, even in its plural form (non-existent in Jewish sources) is widely used in Mandaean religious texts. The Mandaeans of Iraq are descended, as their name indicates, from ancient gnostics, probably of the pagan variety, and their writings, which date from the early Middle Ages, have often been used as a source for otherwise lost gnostic traditions. Their sources indicate knowledge of various Hebrew terms alongside significant hostility toward the Jews. Scholars have long debated whether these indicate origins in or close to Judaism, or whether this information and attitude could have come entirely through Islam and its reports on Judaism and the Jews. The term *shekhinta* in the Mandaean sources refers to a dwelling, sometimes to a sanctified or ritual hut where ceremonies are performed. See Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandaeer*, v.2 (Der Kult, Goettingen: Vaendenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), p. 21, n.6. There are places, however, where the term refers also to heavenly forces. See Edwin Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1967), text 31, line 21 (p. 290) for one example. The question of the Mandaeans' connection to Judaism in any period is an open one. To assert any connection specifically to Kabbalah would be highly speculative.

75. According to rabbinic sources Israel at least "occurred in thought" before Creation itself, which is sometimes described as having taken place for their sake. This sounds like a Jewish parallel to the notion of a primordial ecclesia, found already in the early church, and perhaps even its source. Ephraim Urbach treats *keneset yisra'el* strictly as a locution rather than as a hypostasis, dismissing the parallel to early Christianity. See *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), p. 646ff. He notes that the phrase does not appear at all in the Tannaitic Midrashim and later it is "chiefly found in Homilies on verses of the Prophets that liken Israel to a woman . . . or on passages of Canticles that were interpreted allegorically as referring to Israel" (p. 647). It should be said that this approach is general to Urbach, who tended to minimize both Hellenistic influences and parallels with Christianity in his reading of the rabbis. If we accept his view with regard to the early sources, the question becomes one of tracing the evolution of the locution into a hypostasis, something it has clearly become before the spread of Kabbalah.

76. The phrase *keneset yisra'el* is also (like *shekhinah*) grammatically female, and one must beware of over-reading simple grammatical gender usages. On the other hand, the choice of *keneset* over *'am* or *beney* was made by the rabbinic authors, and perhaps that in itself is significant. While *keneset yisra'el* is commonly the bride/spouse of God in Midrashic sources, see Shir Rabbah 6:18 (=Shemot Rabbah 15:10) for an occurrence of *keneset yisra'el* as daughter.

77. See E. Wolfson, "Female Imaging of the Torah: From Literary Metaphor to Religious



is the Sabbath occasionally depicted in rabbinic sources as bride or queen, sometimes the spouse of Israel but occasionally also as the bride of God.<sup>78</sup> Shabbat is depicted as a female figure also in both the writings of Philo of Alexandria<sup>79</sup> and in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, a medieval collection of Ethiopian Jewish traditions, some of which may be quite ancient.<sup>80</sup>

The innovation of Kabbalah in this area begins with the drawing together of these distinct images from the aggadic tradition into a single associative cluster, the members of which become interchangeable with one another.<sup>81</sup> Kabbalah *is*, or a

Symbol” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding, Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. J. Neusner et al., vol. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1989), pp. 271–307 and A. Green “Bride, Spouse, Daughter: Images of the Feminine in Classical Jewish Sources” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. S. Heschel (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 248–260. The relationship of the sages to the female Torah is depicted in many aggadot, especially in the Babylonian Talmud.

78. *Shabbat* is to be greeted as a bride. Cf. b. Shabbat 119a and Bava Qama 32a-b. The first Sabbath after Creation was the moment when the bride entered her bridal canopy. See Bereshit Rabbah 10:9, ed. Theodor-Albeck p. 85. One has the impression there that the King has prepared a canopy for His own bride. In the following chapter of Bereshit Rabbah, however (11:8; p. 95f.), *shabbat* is the bride of Israel. See E. Wolfson in the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6:2 (1997): 302f. This is the rabbinic source for what much later (late sixteenth century) developed into the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service. The Sabbath is God's queen in an important passage in Va-Yiqra' Rabbah 27:10 (ed. Margalioth, p. 643) where the readiness of an animal for sacrifice is delayed until the eighth day so that one see the queen (i.e., pass a Sabbath) before coming in to see the king. This may indicate an intercessory role for the queen. In various other parables comparing God to a human king, it is the queen who intercedes with him on behalf of her wayward son. On the prerogatives of queens and grand ladies in rabbinic literature, see S. Kraus, *Paras ve-Romi ba-Talmud uva-Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 1948), p. 128ff. A female figure of “Sabbath Princess” or “an Angel of the Sabbath” is found in the Midrash *Seder Rabba de-Bereshit* (ed. Wertheimer, *Battei Midrashot* 1, chapter 15 = P. Schaefer, *Synopsis* #852, quoting MS Oxford 1531, translated here: “The blessed Holy One brought *sarah shel shabbat* and seated her upon the Throne of Glory. He brought before her the prince of each one of the heavens and of each one of the depths; they danced and rejoiced before Him, [each] proclaiming: “Shabbat unto the Lord!” and all the other great princes responding: “Unto the Lord, Shabbat!” This certainly seems like the wedding feast of God and Shabbat. Is it possible that there is some relationship between this odd collection of esoteric *midrashim* and the Philonic traditions to be discussed in n. 79 and 83?

79. See Vita Mosis 2:210 (Loeb Philo Series 6:553): “. . . the prophet magnified the holy seventh day . . . for he found that she was in the first place motherless, exempt from female parentage, begotten by the father alone, without begetting, brought to birth yet not carried in the womb. Secondly he saw . . . that she was also ever virgin, neither born of a mother nor a mother herself, neither bred from corruption nor doomed to suffer corruption. Thirdly . . . he recognized in her the birthday of the world, a feast celebrated by heaven, celebrated by earth and things on earth as they rejoice and exult in the full harmony of the sacred number [seven].” See also *De Spec. Leg.* 2:56–58 (Loeb 7:343, 345). Quoted by Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p. 248f. It is certainly interesting that Philo's virgin Sabbath (seven being the only number in the decad that is neither the dual of any other nor capable of redoubling within the decad) should combine with the Virgin Mary in in the emergence of Kabbalistic symbolism.

80. See W. Leslau, ed, *The Falasha Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), pp. 3–39. Leslau dates the text as no earlier than the fourteenth century, but with possibly earlier elements. There is much controversy over the age of the Ethiopian Jewish traditions and their connection to other sources.

81. This is the functional way in which to understand the *sefirot* in general. Though described by the Kabbalists as “stations” or hypostases somehow within the Godhead, in function they are symbol-clusters, groups of nouns that join together elements from the cult, from Scripture, and from na-



text may be defined as Kabbalistic if it has, a certain fixed pattern of these symbolic clusters.<sup>82</sup> The Kabbalists are particularly daring in identifying *shekhinah* and *keneset yisra'el*. These two, formerly partners in the divine/human romance, are now a single hypostasis, a female consort of the blessed Holy One. The identification of these two allowed the Kabbalists to claim the ancient Midrashic tradition of exegesis as their own, while they were in effect standing it on its head. The Song, the rabbis had always said, is about the love of God and *keneset yisra'el*, the Community of Israel. The Kabbalists now agreed with that reading, but they interpreted *keneset yisra'el* in their own way, as the divine female.

The store of images by which this female figure is described has ancient roots, to be sure. *Shekhinah*, *keneset yisra'el*, *shabbat*, and also *malkhut*, the “kingdom” of heaven are all familiar terms to the reader of Midrash and Jewish liturgy. Also key among these is *hokhmah*, the feminine figure of wisdom, God’s plaything and delight as described already in Proverbs 8.<sup>83</sup> One of the terms for this female hypostasis will turn out to be “the lower wisdom” or “the wisdom of Solomon.” She will also be “holy city” and “holy land,” bearing with them feminine associations stretching back to the prophets. All of these are now joined together, combined also with such feminine images from nature as moon, sea, and earth to create a feminine divine figure of tremendous mythic power and symbolic richness.<sup>84</sup>

Gershom Scholem referred to the emergence of female divinity in twelfth century Kabbalah as a “Rebellion of Images,”<sup>85</sup> an event in which “the power of images proved to be stronger than the conscious intent of their authors.”<sup>86</sup> Speaking to the Jungian assembly at Ancona, Scholem described this resurgence

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ture. These serve to create a new enriched symbolic language that can be used for discourse about the divine process, a realm that is impenetrable to ordinary language. I have written briefly about this in my *Keter*, p. 129 and in my review of Elliot Wolfson’s *Through a Speculum that Shines in History of Religions* (1997) p. 267f.

82. I refer here to that which Idel designates as “theosophic” or “theurgic” Kabbalah. My interest here is in distinguishing such a Kabbalistic passage from a pre- or non-Kabbalistic passage in such writings as those of R. Eleazar of Worms or R. Judah ben Barzilai of Barcelona. I intend no reference here to the question of ecstatic Kabbalah.

83. This female figure of wisdom is identified with Torah throughout rabbinic literature. The wisdom tradition stands behind the notion of primordial Torah, which scholarly opinion today sees more as an inner development from Jewish/Semitic sources than as a reflex of the Hellenistic logos. The relationships here are complex, however. The interplay of traditions is manifest in Philo, who depicts the “Wisdom” of Prov. 8:22 as copulating with the Father and giving birth to the visible universe. See *On Drunkenness* 8:30 (Loeb Philo series v.3, p. 333, 335). Philo designates this primal pair also as “reason” and “instruction;” it is not hard to see why attempts have been made (none convincing to date) to connect this pair to the male *hokhmah*/wisdom and the female *binah*/understanding, the primal pair in Kabbalah as it emerges in the twelfth century. On the primal syzygy in Philo see also his *De Cherubim* 9:27 and 14:49, Loeb v. 2, p. 25 and 39.

84. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, v.1, pp. 371–387 and Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), pp. 140–196. The German original was first published in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 21 (1952) 45–107 as “*Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der kabbalistischen Konzeption der Schechinah*.”

85. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, p. 147.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 146f.

of “the Great Mother” as an event that requires either a psychological or a historical explanation.

There are two ways of explaining the emergence of the female *Shekhinah*. One possibility is that, when these ideas were originally conceived, the final *Sefirah* was already conceived as a vessel receiving all the other *Sefiroth*; it was consequently understood by the Kabbalistic mind as a feminine element, and hence naturally drew to itself the female symbols present in religious language. The other possibility leads us in a different direction. When the medieval Jewish Gnostics took the decisive step of identifying the *Shekhinah* and *Kenesseth Yisra'el*—two hypostases that had thus far been distinct in the rabbinic tradition—this necessarily triggered an eruption of the female into the sphere of the Godhead; the rest followed automatically. The state of our earliest extant texts does not allow us to choose between these alternatives—if, indeed, these are mutually exclusive. The former view is based upon a psychological assumption that precedes the exegeses in which it is confirmed: namely, that when the image of the Great Mother resurged, it found itself appropriate Jewish symbols. The second alternative, by contrast, takes as its point of departure a certain historical statement: because a powerful national symbol, the Congregation of Israel (*Kenesseth Yisra'el*) was incorporated within a new dynamic conception of the Godhead (perhaps as a result of the profound shock caused by the persecutions associated with the Crusades, or perhaps far earlier, under Gnostic influence) and because *Kenesseth Yisra'el* was understood as constituting the body of the *Shekhinah*, in which and through which the *Shekhinah* acts and suffers together with the people of Israel (perhaps somewhat parallel to Christianity's notion of the Church as Corpus Christi, the body of Christ)—because of these factors the archetypal, primordial image of the female took shape, its resurgence being rooted in these specific historic experiences.<sup>87</sup>

In either case Scholem sees the emergence of the divine female in the heart of medieval Judaism as an “eruption,” as something quite unintended by those who first articulated these symbols. I wish to suggest another explanation, one I believe to be somewhat simpler on the one hand and more embracing of the broader cultural context of this shift, on the other. The female figure of *shekhinah* may be seen as a Jewish response to the great popular revival of Marian piety in the twelfth century Western church.<sup>88</sup> The emergence of such a figure represents a remarkable coming together of internal Jewish spiritual-psychological needs and the ready availability of a parallel figure in the surrounding Christian culture.

The twelfth-century emphasis on the pious life and quest of the individual

87. *Ibid.*, p. 160f.

88. This conclusion is also that of Peter Schaefer, “Tochter, Schwester, Braut und Mutter: Bilder der Weiblichkeit Gottes in der fruhen Kabbala,” *Saeculum: Jahrbuch fuer Universalgeschichte* 49:2 (1998), 259–279. In very brief form (pp. 274–279) Schaefer anticipates several of the conclusions of this study. An English version “Daughter, Sister, Bride, and Mother: Images of the Femininity of God in the Early Kabbala” has appeared in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000) 221–242.

found its echoes in the world of the Jewish minority as well as the Christian majority in whose midst they lived. Jews in Western Europe, in the Christian north as well as in Muslim Spain, were aware of and to a degree participants in cultural trends within the general society.<sup>89</sup> Thus the theme of religious life as personal quest, usually for self-perfection leading to union with God (and here we see the Muslim version of the quest) become popular among Jews as well. The earliest text of such pietism, *The Duties of Hearts* by the eleventh-century Spaniard Bahya Ibn Paquda, was translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Judah Ibn Tibbon in 1161. The Hebrew paraphrase of Sa'adya's *Beliefs and Opinions*, considerably more mystical/devotional in tone than the Arabic original, influenced movement in the same direction.<sup>90</sup> The private life of piety as a sublime goal is attested as well in *Sefer Hasidim*, reflecting twelfth through thirteenth century Rhineland circles.<sup>91</sup> There grew up a genre of such works of Jewish moral piety, in which traditions of Spain and Ashkenaz were sometimes blended.

Perhaps the most famous description of this newly articulated individual piety is Maimonides' description of the love of God, a passage in which the Song of Songs plays a key role:<sup>92</sup>

What is the proper love [of God]? One should love God with an exceedingly great and powerful love until one's soul is bound up in the love of God, continuously pre-occupied with it like one who is lovesick, one whose mind is never free of thinking about that woman, whether sitting or standing, even when eating or drinking. Even more than this should the love of God constantly pre-occupy the hearts of those who love Him. Thus He has commanded us: "With all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 6:5)." Solomon spoke of this allegorically when he said: "For I am sick with love (Cant. 2:5)." The entire Canticle is an allegory concerning this matter.

But the attempt to read this new emphasis on individual piety into the Song of Songs also entailed a difficulty, one that eventually brought forth the female *shekhinah* as a newly conceived object of devotion. The *collective* Community of Israel as the bride of God was a figure of ancient lineage, quite taken for granted, her female gender witnessed by the prophets as well as by the allegorical understanding of the Canticle. But if the erotic metaphor was really about the longing of the *individual* soul for God, the soul of the male reader/worshiper, the language

89. This dimension of reality is still often under-emphasized by Judaica scholars, who tend to look more for internal Jewish continuities than for extra-Jewish factors in determining practices. A refreshing change from this tendency is I. G. Marcus' *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

90. A critical edition of the never-published paraphrase, called *Pitron Sefer Emunot*, is soon to appear, edited by Ronald Kiener. The first portion of this project constituted his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania (1984), under my supervision.

91. See I. G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981.

92. Mishneh Torah, *hilkhot teshuvah* 10:3. See also Guide 3:51. Note the obliviousness to the issue of gender in this description: one [presumably the male reader] is to love God with the same passion that one has for love of woman. Of course Maimonides' God is without gender.

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

and gender were somehow inadequate or not quite fitting. True, *neshamah* is a feminine word in Hebrew (as is *anima* in Latin), so technically the verses could work. But the intense eros of the Canticle could not be reduced to grammatical appropriateness of gender. This discomfort with the designation of the worshipper as female is expressed by R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon in his comment on Song of Songs 7:1: “Return, return, O Shulamite”:

The Lover replied: “Return, return, O Shulamite,” meaning that she is fit to attain *shelemut*, perfection and to become the King’s [female] partner. His saying: “Return, return” is clear proof that she is a penitent. She is called “Shulamite” in the feminine gender because she [the soul] is attached to matter and due to her lowly state, as we have said with regard [also] to the terms “kingdom” and “garden.”<sup>93</sup>

Here misogyny (the souls of males are referred to as “female” because they are lowly, attached to the body, and not yet penitent) is taken for granted and used as an apology for the text’s allegorically treating male souls as though they were women!

When we look at the unabashed eroticism of Bernard’s Homilies on the Song of Songs, or that of his Cistercian followers, we wonder where their parallel is in the Hebrew literature, or wonder at the reason for its absence. Any comparison of the Hebrew and Latin commentaries on the Canticle will have to agree with Ann Matter that “although the intellectual contacts between Christians and Jews in Champagne in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries may well have influenced the Song of Songs interpretation in both traditions, the passionate love-language of the moral readings is a Christian tradition, a particularly well-adapted response to the christocentric spirituality of the medieval church.”<sup>94</sup>

To appreciate this difference we need to restate an essential difference between Jewish and Christian understandings of the Bible or the Christian “Old Testament.” Since its very beginning, Christianity has read the old Biblical texts through the prism of a new Scripture. The Old Testament narrative is read by way of reference to that of the New: Old Testament figures and situations are often seen as typologies and prefigurations of Christ or the events of Jesus’ life and death. Prophetic texts, replete with theology, are re-read both as predictions of the Gospel and in the light of Paul’s theological formulations. The Song of Songs is also read this way: its erotic *poesis* is transformed by the prism of the Jesus narrative.<sup>95</sup> That

93. Ed. Lyck, f. 21a.

94. Matter, *Voice*, p. 137.

95. This is a Midrashic reading, if you will, of the Canticle, just like the application of the Canticle to the Exodus narrative pointed out by Daniel Boyarin. See “The Song of Songs, Lock or Key: The Holy Song as a Mashal” in his *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 105–116. In this way I find Boyarin’s interesting distinction between the Midrashic reading of the Song of Songs and the Christian allegorization somewhat inadequate. All pre-modern Christian readings of the “Old Testament” must be seen through the New Testament (NT) prism, even if there is another layer of allegory laid atop a particular text. I would thus see Origen’s reading as a Hellenistic allegory superimposed on a Jewish-Christian NT Midrash on the Song of Songs. This is true even though the NT authors themselves do not quote the Canticle; later Christian readers nevertheless inevitably read it through the NT prism.

story is not a tale of eros in the same gendered sense as the Canticle, but it is one filled with love and *passion*. The whole account of the gospels, from the love of Mary for her child Jesus to the torments of the crucifixion and the bliss of Jesus' disciples in encountering him after the resurrection, is washed over with eros as it is interwoven with verses from the Song of Songs.

The Latin devotee, completely unlike his Jewish neighbor, knows an *embodied* diety. Even if one's love for Christ must not be erotic in the lustful sense, the fact remains that Christ *has* a body, one depicted lovingly in Christian art from the third century onward. There is an *eros* in the way one is to relate to Christ's passion. The central rite of the Church is, after all the consumption of His divine body, an act that claims to transform the life of the one who partakes of it.<sup>96</sup> The *eros* of a relationship with an incarnate God, especially one whom one best venerates by incorporating Him, has been much discussed by modern historians of Christianity<sup>97</sup> and was an element of which the medievals themselves were at times aware.<sup>98</sup> Sometimes, especially in popular religious literature, the erotic relationship between Christ and the faithful is presented quite unabashedly.<sup>99</sup>

The Jewish reader did not easily picture himself as God's lover, with all the erotic intensity suggested by that phrase.<sup>100</sup> Why not? In part because medieval

96. The consumption of Christ's body and its mystical understandings is an important theme in Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). See especially chapter five: Food in the Writings of Women Mystics.

97. Bernard McGinn in his *History*, v. 2 often shows awareness of the complex reverberations of these issues. See especially his treatment of Bernard of Clairvaux's references to bodily *eros*, pp. 175–177, 196. On the theological plane, he shows how a theology of incarnation makes true, even on a literal level, the anthropomorphic references apparently to God in the Song of Songs and other texts. See *History*, v.2, p. 167f. See also the sophisticated discussion of modern responses to medieval "spiritual eroticism" in Matter, *Voice*, pp. 138–142 as well as the works of Caroline Walker Bynum, both that quoted in the preceding note and "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Response to Leo Steinberg" in her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 79–117, and elsewhere in that volume. Many of the same (O.T.) Scriptural passages treated in these works were the crux of painstaking reinterpretation by medieval Jewish rationalists, culminating in Maimonides' *Guide*, part I, where their literal meaning was set aside in order to reduce anthropomorphism. They were to be reclaimed, though on a symbolic level, by the Kabbalists.

98. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 20:6, speaks of the need to attach oneself first to a bodily love of Christ, thence to be raised higher. See the discussion by Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988). Bernard's friend William of St. Thierry also seems to show such awareness, which may also be traced as far back as Origen's prologue to his Commentary on the Song of Songs.

99. See for example the wonderful anonymous late-eleventh-century Latin poem quoted in McGinn, *History*, v.2, p. 145.

100. See for example the beautifully and unabashedly erotic passage from Hugh of St. Victor discussed by Grover Zinn in his "Texts within Texts: The Song of Songs in the Exegesis of Gregory the Great and Hugh of St. Victor" in *Studia Patristica* 25 (1991): 209–215. Commenting on a passage from pseudo-Dionysius, Hugh tells the tale of the disciples from Emmaeus walking with Christ, only gradually realizing that it is he who accompanies them (Luke 24:13–35). Their hearts are so burning with love that they realize the one with whom they walk can be none other. On this burning passion Hugh

Jewish intellectuals, at least, had a more abstract notion of the deity than did their Christian counterparts. Jewish intellectual life had been shaped by contact with Islam earlier and more decisively than by the influence of Christianity. From the ninth through the twelfth centuries, culminating in Moses Maimonides (1135–1205), we see an ongoing quest for “purification”<sup>101</sup> of the idea of God. This purification means greater abstraction, avoidance of any literal reading of Biblical anthropomorphisms, and a mighty struggle over whether and how one may speak of divine “attributes” at all. The lack of incarnation in the Jewish God, combined with the absence of plastic images, meant that He did not rouse the passionate intensity one could not help but feel in gazing at the lovely figures of Christ, in wood carving, in metals, and in paint, that are among the greater and lesser masterpieces of the Western artistic tradition.

But there may be another reason as well why eros was harder to arouse in the Jewish reader, one embedded more directly in the encounter with the text itself. Jewish (male) readers of the Song of Songs were not able to identify themselves individually with the bride or the female beloved of the Song. Perhaps they simply were less attracted to this type of reading, one that called for a high level of emotional involvement, because the language and imagery did not lead them in that direction. One may also suspect that such readings might have been avoided because their homoerotic overtones made them (consciously or not) uncomfortable. The Christian monastic community, perhaps drawn more passionately to sacred eros by their celibacy of the flesh, perhaps more naive or more flexible about spiritualized gender roles also because of celibacy, were able to ignore the difficulties and see themselves as Christ’s beloved and bride,<sup>102</sup> something the Jewish reader generally was unwilling or unable to do. Christian readership for homilies and commentaries based on the Canticle also came to include women,

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quotes from Canticles 3:4, “I will seize him and not let him go until I have brought him to my mother’s house, into the chamber of her who bore me.” Such a usage would be unthinkable in pre-Kabbalistic Judaism; only the Zohar could find a way to re-introduce the passion of that line into its intra-divine reading of the text. See below. In fact the great love among the disciples of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai as depicted in the Zohar is reminiscent of the fellowship of the Apostles. See Liebes, “Christian Influences on the Zohar,” (Hebrew) p. 70f.; *idem.*, “*Mashiah shel ha-Zohar*” 162ff. and English translations in his *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

101. See. S. Rawidowicz, “Saadya’s Purification of the Idea of God” in *Saadya Studies*, ed. E. R. Rosenthal (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1943), pp. 139–165; H. A. Wolfson, “Maimonides on Negative Attributes” in *The Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1945), pp. 411–446; J. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 134ff.; C. Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 141ff., 180ff.

102. Much has been made of this by Caroline W. Bynum in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Not only Jesus, but abbots and bishops are seen as taking maternal roles in many passages quoted from monastic literature, and monks are trained to be comfortable with the feminizing of their spiritual roles. Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), follows Bynum’s lead with specific regard to readings of the Canticle. The medieval (male) reader of the Song, she claims, is being taught to retrieve his own inner female, since “the reversal of the Fall depends metaphorically on the action of a new Eve, the woman within each one, the Bride of God.”



at least female as well as male monastics, whereas the Jewish readership remained exclusively male.

This is not to say that the *eros* of sacred quest was absent among the Jews. Far from it! Already in the poetry of Golden Age Spain, to which we have referred above, we have seen Israel as the passionate, sometimes temporarily abandoned, beloved of God. Both in that genre and occasionally even in the more formalistic Ashkenazic *piyyut* there are outcries of wounded love that lack nothing for passionate intensity. But there the figure is always still *Israel*. Even if the poet identifies wholly with her, the female gender is justified by the weight of tradition; it is *keneset yisra'el*, the earthly, historic embodiment of the Jewish people that loves God and longs for her Lover to return to her. But this collectivist reading did not fit well into the new individualizing turn of piety, where the lover might be the soul and just the soul. *We*, as Israel, had long been seen as God's beloved bride. But *I*, as a man standing before God, indeed a man who probably had and loved a real bride of my own and at the same time blessed God daily for not having made me a woman, could not comfortably assimilate that self-image.

This situation demanded (I speak of "demand" in the psychological sense) an innovation in Jewish piety. A female figure was needed, one who would be *interposed between the male God and the male worshipper, to whom both could be passionately devoted*. It was in response to this emotional need that the Kabbalists' *shekhinah* emerged, a female hypostasis positioned between God and Israel, bride of God, mother of the soul, perhaps even bride or lover of the adventurous Kabbalist who dared identify with Moses, alone among men designated as "husband of the Matrona."<sup>103</sup>

The imagery that created this hypostatized female figure was indeed of ancient

103. The fact that Moses alone is given this designation in the Zohar (once alongside Jacob; cf. Zohar 1:21b) by no means precludes the possibility that others might experience something of that role. Moses is present, after all, in the righteous of each generation, according to a much quoted passage in Tikkuney Zohar 69 (112b). The Biblical paradigms of such intense mystical experiences are offered by the Kabbalists more as ways to stimulate latter-day copiers than to forbid their attempts. The soul of R. Simeon is also the soul of Moses; he (like Rabbi Akiva in the later rabbinic sources; see Be-Midbar Rabbah 19:4, Pesikta Rabbati 14:13) reveals that which Moses could not. Might not he—and those Kabbalists who identified with him—also rise at least as high in their coupling with *shekhinah* as did Moses?

The difficulty in male/male spiritual coupling is too delicate an issue for us to expect to see it directly addressed in the early Kabbalistic sources. In the later and more spelled out Hasidic writings, however, it occasionally is articulated quite clearly. Here Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (d. 1798) explains why Moses could not dedicate the tabernacle on his own: "It is known that the main arousal has to be that of the lower world in relation to the upper, that of a female [desiring] the male, as Scripture says [God speaking to Eve]: "Your longing will be for your man (Gen. 3:16). But Moses, who is called "husband of the *shekhinah*," was male. Therefore his desire to ascend could not rouse the "female waters." The lower rungs are considered to be needy; they have to long to rise up and be aroused like a woman for a man. But Moses, to whom Torah was given, and was even called "Torah of Moses," was a male . . . God said to him: "Torah was mine and I gave it to you. You are on the level of Torah, that of the male, husband of *shekhinah*. Therefore you cannot ascend [to provide] the delight of female arousal for which God longs; it is female arousal that is needed by the Male . . ." Note that here the male/male union does not work because it does not fulfill *God's* need! *Me'or 'Eynayim, aharey #2*; ed. Jerusalem, 1984, p. 88.

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

Jewish origin: *shekhinah*, wisdom, *Keneset Yisra'el*, *shabbat*, Mother Rachel, Mother Zion, Temple, Ark, Tent of Meeting, and all the rest. Several elements of femininity were already present within this list, as we have indicated. But it all came together in the shadow of the great Marian revival in twelfth-century France, a result of the tremendous cultural influence exercised by the veneration of Mary throughout the majority culture amid which the Jews lived.<sup>104</sup> Whatever else the Kabbalistic *shekhinah* is historically or psychologically, she is also a Jewish response to the growth of the popular Marian devotion that flourished in the twelfth century.

Marian piety took on a very public character in twelfth-century France. The renescent cult of Mary was visible in the dedication of cathedrals<sup>105</sup> and their “Lady Chapels,” where prayers were especially directed to the Virgin. It is key to many of the artistic creations of the age, including statuary, painting, and manuscript illuminations. Mary was venerated in street processions, in sacred drama enacted in town squares on her holy days and other festivals, and in roadside shrines that dotted the countryside. She was celebrated in music, popular and quasi-“secular” as well as sacred, and in many other forms that show the deep diffusion of Marian piety throughout the culture. In the art of the age Mary is commonly depicted as the Queen of Heaven. The altars of French cathedrals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are sometimes graced by twin statues of Christ the King and Mary, Queen of Heaven. Of this tendency, limited to that century, one scholar writes: “As the bride and bridegroom are made equal in their love, the King and Queen of Heaven appear nearly equal in their power. Both sit upright in a frontal pose, turned slightly toward each other.”<sup>106</sup> The Assumption of the Virgin, her tri-

104. Scholem’s silence regarding the Christian setting in which *shekhinah* symbolism developed needs some explanation. It is part of his general tendency to avoid reference to Christian influence on Kabbalah. Scholem was creating a cultural-nationalist reading of Jewish history, one in which Kabbalah represented the very heart of Jewish uniqueness, the place in which native Jewish creativity was most deeply felt. In contrast to Jewish religious philosophy, which was so obviously an adaptation of Islamic models, Kabbalah was seen as truly and authentically Jewish. For Kabbalah to have been as influenced by Christian models (though in a different way) as philosophy was by Islam would be to portray Judaism as a minority culture in both societies, inevitably subject to cultural shaping by the majority, rather than as a “national” culture, creating out of its own deep well of ancient sources and inexhaustible creativity. For a discussion of this tendency of Scholem, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “‘Without Regard for External Considerations’—The Question of Christianity in Scholem and Baer’s Writings.” (Hebrew) *Mada’ey ha-Yahadut* 38 (1998): 73–96. The question of *shekhinah*, not raised in that article, provides an extreme example to support Raz-Krakotzkin’s thesis. As perceptive a scholar as Scholem would have had to work hard to *avoid* noticing the parallels and likely course of influence. This is not to say that I disagree altogether with Scholem’s view. I would formulate my position this way: In response to both the inner need and the outward stimulus, the Kabbalists indeed engaged in work of remarkable religious creativity. Their chief sources for this achievement were their great wealth of Jewish textual knowledge and their own inner experiences, fantasies, and longings.

105. In the twelfth through fourteenth centuries the Gothic Cathedrals of Chartres, Amiens, Laon, Paris, Reims and many others throughout France were built and dedicated to “Notre Dame.” The fact that a certain group of these cathedrals appears on the map to imitate the constellation *virgo* was taken as an earthly representation of the Virgin’s heavenly powers. See E. Ann Matter, “The Virgin Mary—A Goddess?” in C. Olson, ed, *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1985), p. 86.

106. Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-*

umphant ascent into heaven to be seated at Christ's right hand as his Queen, is the greatest of all the Marian miracles (the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, much celebrated by the modern church, is mostly a later innovation).<sup>107</sup> A study of manuscript illumination of codices of the Song of Songs notes that Latin manuscripts of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries are replete with depictions of the Virgin and child Jesus, a feature absent in the earlier examples.<sup>108</sup>

All this was seen by the Jews, who could not but have been aware of this new outgrowth of pious devotion among their Christian neighbors.<sup>109</sup> While they might have been theologically offended by what seemed like worship of an admittedly human woman (new evidence, if any was needed, of the idolatrous and polytheistic tendencies of Christianity<sup>110</sup>), I would suggest that there might also have been an attractive side to the love, beauty, and simple piety associated with the cult of the Virgin. This attraction found its echoes in the newly constituted cluster of symbols around *shekhinah*. In the shadow of this new development in the majority culture, the Jews, responding chiefly their own needs and in a form shaped by their own limitations, created a religious symbol that was to transform the character of Jewish devotional life.

Among the several female symbols adopted by *Sefer ha-Bahir* from earlier aggadic sources is the figure of Abraham's daughter whose name was *ba-kol*, "in all."<sup>111</sup> This obscure female figure is taken in the Bahir to represent divine pleni-

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*Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 61. For a Kabbalistic passage just slightly reminiscent of this pose, see the most surprising parable in Zohar 2:140b, where Moses and the Matronita appear as king and queen.

107. Mary's Assumption as Queen of Heaven is sculpted, for example, on the West Facade of the Cathedral of Chartres. Reproduced in *Christian Spirituality II*, ed. J. Raitt, p. 399.

108. Judith Glatzer Wechsler, "A Change in the Iconography of the Song of Songs in Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Latin Bibles" in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 73–93. Wechsler examined 120 Latin Bibles of the period, focussing on the usually illuminated initial "C" of Cantica Canticorum. (That letter and "O" of Osculetur ["Let him kiss"] were the most frequently illuminated.) She suggests that the shift from a single woman, depicting *ecclesia*, or a couple, representing either Solomon and the Queen of Sheba or Christ and the Church, to the Virgin and Child, reflects the growth of Mariological interpretation in the latter twelfth century. Wechsler also suggests that Virgin and Child may be a "safe" way of depicting the love between the Lover and the Virgin, obviously portrayed in erotic terms in the text of the Canticle. On the broader setting of this change see R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 238ff.

109. Ivan Marcus notes in the Leipzig Mahzor, a twelfth–thirteenth century illuminated Hebrew manuscript, a depiction of Moses with a school child on his lap that is very like depictions of Mary as nursing mother. See his *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 88 (and see illustration, p. 82). The breasts of the bridegroom, according to an ancient Christian exegetical tradition (based on the Septuagint reading of the Masoretic *dodekha* ["your love" or "your affections"] in Cant. 1:2 as *dadekha*, "your [m.] breasts") are filled with milk. See Honorius, *Stigillum* (English trans., see n. 60 above) p. 53.

110. On Christianity as idolatry in the eyes of most medieval Jewish authorities, see J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 24ff.

111. Bahir #52, based on b. Baba Batra 16b and Bereshit Rabbah 59:7. This Bahir passage is quoted and discussed at length by Nahmanides in his commentary to Genesis 24:1. From there it became widely known and influential throughout Kabbalistic literature.

tude, the fullness of God's blessing. She is both daughter and bride in the Bahir and the early Kabbalah, both chaste betrothed and fruitful spouse. So too "the understandings of the Virgin Mary as the exalted spouse of the Song of Songs emphasizes her flexible nature in medieval Christian piety: she is the bride of God, and the mother of God; she represents the Church, and each individual Christian."<sup>112</sup> The same, *mutatis mutandi*, could be said of *shekhinah*. The cluster of symbols around the tenth *sefirah*, as she comes to be placed by the latter thirteenth century, is the most highly developed part of Kabbalistic symbolism.<sup>113</sup> *Shekhinah* is the daughter of *hokhmah* and *binah* within the Godhead, the hidden sources of "wisdom" and "understanding" that brought forth seven lower *sefirot* or divine essences, six clustered around the male deity, the "blessed Holy One" well-known from Biblical and rabbinic literature, and *shekhinah* or *malkhut*, His sibling/spouse. She in turn is the Mother of all lower worlds, angels, intermediaries, and serves especially as mother of the human soul. *Shekhinah* has precisely that function of standing perfectly balanced between the upper and lower worlds, the agent through whom grace [or *shefa*] descends to the community devoted to her praise. She is the sublime Community of Israel, the ideal of Israel of which the human community of Israelites is an earthly manifestation.

The identification of *keneset yisra'el* with *shekhinah*, as we have suggested earlier, was key to this entire development, especially to the Kabbalists' ability to claim the rabbinic tradition as secretly intending the same meaning as their own. The audacity of this move surprises us, but it is rendered considerably more understandable as a Jewish replication of one made much earlier in Christian symbolic language. The association between Mary, Motherhood, and Church has been taken for granted since earliest times. Mary is a figure of the *ecclesia* because she was the first on earth to recognize the divinity of Christ and to worship him, and because her womb contained him before his birth as the church contains him after his death and resurrection. But Mary who represents, embodies, or symbolically *is* the *ecclesia* is also directly parallel to *shekhinah* as representing or identified with *keneset yisra'el*. This identification of the embodied community with the divine or quasi-divine female took place first in Christianity, where it made considerably more sense, and that may well be the source of the parallel development in Kabbalah. *Ecclesia* is depicted as "mother" to Christians as early as Tertullian (c.160–c.220).<sup>114</sup> This ancient association<sup>115</sup> is well-known and fully used by the

112. Matter, *Voice*, p. 15.

113. The classic Kabbalistic lexicon of symbols is Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'arey Orah* (first editions, Mantua and Riva di Trento, 1561; Latin translation published 1516); now available in the standard edition of *Y. Ben-Shelomo* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1981). *Sha'arey Orah* is translated into English by Avi Weinstein as *Gates of Light* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994). The first chapter is a beautifully written and highly accessible account of the symbols associated with *shekhinah*.

114. *De Oratione* 2:198–200. See J. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington: n.p., 1943). Professor Elaine Pagels has suggested to me that this identification is already found in the New Testament, in the female figure of Revelation 12. The symbolic associations there remain somewhat obscure, however.

115. J. Beumer suggests that the associaton of Mary and the Church goes back to Augustine. Thence is derived the importance of this symbolic linkage for the Western Church. See his "De mari-

authors of the Mariological commentaries to the Song of Songs. “Everything that is said of the church can also be understood as being said of the Virgin herself, the bride and mother of the bridegroom,” writes Honorius.<sup>116</sup> “The glorious Virgin Mary stands for the church, who is both Virgin and Mother.”<sup>117</sup> The understanding that the Canticle is about the love of Christ and Mary does not come to *replace* the reading that says it refers to Christ and the Church, but only to symbolically deepen it, since Mary *is* the *ecclesia*.<sup>118</sup>

Of course, Mary is not God. The explicit worship of Mary as a deity was condemned in the fifth century.<sup>119</sup> She is the human vessel through whom God is born into the world. As Kabbalistic symbolism emerged there was no room for *shekhinah* to be a separate figure who would serve exactly the same intermediary role. As mystics, the Kabbalists’ interest was ultimately in the return of all, including the human soul, to its place within the One. This is especially true of the earlier Catalanian tradition within Kabbalah, where the return of all to its source in the highest *sefirot* still takes precedence over the later Castilian fascination with the *mysterium conjunctionis*, the mystical union of male and female.<sup>120</sup> Nahmanides argued fiercely against Maimonides and the whole philosophical tradition to insist that *shekhinah* was in no way separable from the Godhead.<sup>121</sup> So the female who was also God, *kallah ha-kelulah min ha-kol*,<sup>122</sup> “the bride who comprises all,” better served their need by standing within, or mostly within,<sup>123</sup> the divine realm. But

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anische Deutung des Hohen Liedes in der Frueskoloastik” in *Zeitschrift fuer Katholische Theologie* 76 (1954) p. 414.

116. PL 172, c.494.

117. PL 172, c.499.

118. Thus my own long-range “History of Religions” view (in contrast to that of Raphael Patai) is that it is not Ishtar/Inana of the Ancient Near East but rather the Mediterranean goddess figures (Ceres/Demeter) who shaped early Christian views of Mary that find Jewish verbal and imaginative expression in the medieval Kabbalistic *shekhinah*. The fact that the Zohar’s *shekhinah* has so large a piece of both judgment and violence about her has partly to do with the legacy of rabbinic Judaism (the importance of justice as balanced with love, etc.) but even more reflects the historical experience of Jewry and its need for a divine defender and avenger. The avenging God of post-Crusades Ashkenaz is attached in Kabbalah (especially that of the so-called “Gnostic” school in Castile, shaped in several ways by Ashkenazic influence) to the figure of *shekhinah*.

119. The worship of Mary was denounced at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

120. I have argued this briefly in my *Keter*, chapters 13–14. It is a key contention of the book by my late student Seth Brody, *Cosmos and Consciousness: Worship and Mystical Experience in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah*. This work, a revision of Brody’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, is currently being prepared for publication by SUNY Press.

121. See RaMBaN’s commentary on such passages as Genesis 46:1; Exodus 23:20, 33:14; Leviticus 1:9, etc.

122. This formulation was well-liked by the early Kabbalists. Cf. Nahmanides to Genesis 24:1 and Rabbi Azriel of Gerona’s *Commentary to the Aggadot*, ed. Tishby, Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945, p. 3 (f.1b). The Kabbalistic derivation of *kallah* (“bride”) from *kol* (“all”) is explained in Gikatilla’s *Sha’arey Tsedeq*, ed. Cracow, 1881, f. 6b.

123. *Shekhinah* is of course a liminal figure. Though she is within the sefirotic world and thus an essential part of the ten-in-one that comprise it, she is often seen as tragically separated, exiled from the higher sefirotic realms, cut off from her sources of sustenance and light. In that mode she is subject to “capture” and subjugation by the “other side” of evil. But even short of her sometime alienation from God, *shekhinah* is seen as an “emissary” of divinity, a “lad” [*na’ar*] sent forth into the low-



recent examinations, both feminist and phenomenological, of the role of Mary in the devotional life of Latin Christendom as well as elsewhere, have tended to cast doubt on her “non-god” status, making us wonder how much the denial of her divinity is a matter of theological formalism that flies in the face of devotional reality. Does the fact that she is lavishly worshipped,<sup>124</sup> addressed in prayer, serves as the object of shrine, pilgrimage, and so many other forms of devotion, not (functionally speaking) make her a “god,” despite the denials of formal church doctrine?<sup>125</sup>

As the structure of Kabbalistic symbolism develops in the thirteenth century, the triad of *hesed-gevurah-tif’eret*, the second triad of *sefirot*, becomes particularly important, and *malkhut* or *shekhinah* is joined as a liminal and passive fourth partner to them. These three *sefirot* represent the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but King David, the personal embodiment of *shekhinah*, is their completion.<sup>126</sup> They are the four directions, with *shekhinah* being west (based on “the *shekhinah*, has never departed from the Western Wall”). The three *sefirot* are also the bundle of greens, palm, myrtle, and willow, used on *sukkot* and the feminine *etrog* completes them as their fourth. This oft-repeated quaternary form is quite directly parallel to the Christian trinity and the Virgin Mary as a nearly-but-not-quite adhering fourth, making that trinity too into a quaternity. Picture, if you will, a simplified Kabbalistic chart, depicting only those four *sefirot*. *Tif’eret*, representing the blessed Holy One or God the Father is in the middle. On His right and left are *hesed* and *gevurah*, love and power. Seen historically, these two figures are of ancient Jewish origin, to be sure, derived from *middat ha-din* and *middat ha-rahamim* in Talmudic sources.<sup>127</sup> But *topographically*, in terms of the chart, they take

er worlds. The relationship of *shekhinah* and her servant Metatron is thus complicated, since *na’ar* is his title as well. On this see the brief discussion by Tishby in *Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 379.

124. Among the most blatant examples of medieval Mary-worship are the “Mirrors” and “Psalters” devoted to her name. In the latter, Psalms are actually re-written to be addressed to her. Elizabeth Johnson quotes from one of these: “Sing to our Lady a new song, for she has done wondrous things./ In the sight of the nations she hath revealed her mercy; her name is heard even to the ends of the earth.” Here Psalm 96 is essentially re-written in feminine form (some 900 years before Jewish feminists dared to do so!); Mary is clearly in the place of God. See *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Psalter of our Lady* (St. Louis: Herder, 1932), cited by E. A. Johnson in “Marian Devotion in the Western Church” in *Christian Spirituality II* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1988), p. 395.

125. Cf. E. Ann Matter, “The Virgin Mary—A Goddess?” in C. Olson, ed, *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1985), p. 80–96. My thanks to one of the anonymous readers of this paper for pointing out that the designation of Mary as goddess goes back to the thirteenth-century German mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg. See her *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 1:22 and 3:9.

126. The association of David with *shekhinah* may seem strange to the modern reader. How is it that this most masculine of Biblical heroes is the human embodiment of the female? But we should recall that *shekhinah* is also frequently designated as *malkhut*, the “kingdom” of God, and that God’s kingdom is repressed on earth by the House of David. The medieval David is also more frequently the Psalmist than the warrior, and as Psalmist he is depicted as longing for God, calling out for divine closeness, very much as *shekhinah* does in her exile.

127. The replacement of *rahamim* by *hesed* as the “right side” of God is characteristic of Kabbalah and seems to be in place already in *Sefer ha-Bahir* #132. A fuller history of the relationship between these two terms in the later aggadic sources might prove interesting. They both appear in the old



the same places as the Son and the Holy Spirit, to the right and left hand of the Father. *Below these three, on a rung poised directly between the upper and lower worlds, stands either shekhinah or the Virgin, bride of God, mother of those below, receiving the grace of the upper trinity for dispensation to the lower world, bringing us lower creatures the love and blessing of God, and serving as the gateway to heaven through whom prayer is directed in the faith that she will bring it to God's throne as she comes before/is united with Him.*

Seen in this comparative structural way, the two traditions are very close indeed. In the following passage the Zohar describes the role of *shekhinah* in relation to the transcendent God beyond her:

Come and see. Thus says Rabbi Shim'on: The blessed Holy One has established before Him a holy, sublime palace, a holy sublime city. It is called Jerusalem, the holy city. One who comes before the King may only enter through that city, taking the path to the King. It is there that the path proceeds, as Scripture says: "This is the gateway unto the Lord; the righteous walk through it" (Ps. 118:20). Every message the King requires goes forth from this Lady's house. Any message from below that is sent to the King arrives first at the house of His Lady, and from there proceeds to the King. The Lady is thus the universal go-between, from above to below and from below to above. She is the emissary of all, of whom Scripture says: "The angel of the Lord who goes before the Camp of Israel moved on" (Ex. 14:19). Israel above. "The angel of the Lord"—the one of whom it says "The Lord walked before them" (Ex. 13:21).<sup>128</sup> And that [conclusion of the verse] "to walk day and night," is as it has been interpreted.

Is it in the King's honor that the Lady go and engage in battle, that She be His emissary?<sup>129</sup>

But this is like a king who was wedded to a grand lady. He saw how much more glorious she was than any other lady in the world. "Next to mine," he said, "all the others are mere handmaidens. She rises above all. What shall I do for her? My entire household will be in her hands." The king sent forth a decree saying that henceforth all the king's affairs would be handed over to the lady. What did he do? He placed in her hands all his weapons, all his warriors, all the king's precious stones, all the royal treasures.

"From now on," he said, "anyone who wants to speak with me may not do so unless he first informs my lady."

So the blessed Holy One, out of His great passionate love for Commu-

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lists of "qualities that serve before the throne of glory" or "qualities with which God created the world" indicating that at an early point there was a clear difference between them. See Avot de-Rabbi Natan 37. This is also the case, but quite differently, in Kabbalah, where *rahamim* (perhaps because of its plural form) is identified not with *hesed*, but with *tif'eret/emet/shalom*/Jacob, the sixth *sefirah*.

128. The Zohar is using the Biblical text's seeming inconsistency to show that the "angel" of Ex. 14:19 is "the Lord" of Ex. 13:21. The angel who is also the Lord can be none other than *shekhinah*, who is part of God yet sometimes acts as God's emissary.

129. The Zohar contains many passages where *shekhinah*, as lower manifestation of *din*, the divine force of judgment, is depicted as doing battle against the forces of evil.

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

nity of Israel, placed all in her hands.<sup>130</sup> He said: “All the others are nought compared to her.” “Sixty queens and eighty concubines, maidens without number; one is my dove, my perfect one” (Cant. 6:8–9). What shall I do for Her? My entire household is in Her hands . . .

Henceforth whoever needs Me may speak to Me only if he first informs my Lady.

Thus Scripture says: “Through this [one] may Aaron enter the Holy” (Lev. 16:3).<sup>131</sup>

Based on this passage is the following description of *shekhinah* and her role by an eighteenth-century Hasidic master,<sup>132</sup> showing the long-lasting and popular influence of this key feature of Kabbalistic piety:

Whoever seeks to come before the King cannot enter without the Matronita, as is explained in the Zohar, that “every request that one may seek to ask is by means of the Matronita.”<sup>133</sup> First one must come to Her, and by Her one is brought inward to the King. How does one come in to Her? By means of the gift that one brings her, adornments She may wear. Thus She comes in to the King glorious in adornment, dressed in the finery given Her by Her people. In this way they come before the King. So it is here too.<sup>134</sup> We must adorn her in the finery of Torah and commandments. Then She comes before the King. In this way we [too] enter the King’s presence. This is “What shall we do for our sister (Cant. 8:8)” — In what way shall we “greet the Shekhinah?” For one must come in to Her first. “On the day when she will be spoken for” — When our behavior is “for Her,” is in accord with Her Torah, commandments that become Her adornments . . .

Here *shekhinah* as intercessor stands in direct parallel to what is perhaps the best-known role of Mary in the devotional life of the Catholic Church. The role of Mary as intercessor in prayer is largely a creation of the twelfth-century Marian revival.<sup>135</sup> Like the Kabbalistic *shekhinah*, Mary is an intermediary in both directions. By bearing Jesus in her womb, Mary brings heaven’s grace to earth, the

130. The Zohar here is defending the Kabbalists’ identification of *keneset yisra’el* with *shekhinah*; it is due to God’s unique love for Israel that He has promoted them in this seemingly surprising way.

131. Zohar 2:51a. Lev. 16:3 is taken to mean that *shekhinah* is the single gateway to the divine world, the inner sanctum, beyond. See also Zohar 2:22b, where it is only the unmarried (i.e. virgin) daughter of the King who serves as intermediary. Once she is wedded to Moses, it is he who takes on that role since he, unlike the prior patriarchs, can speak to God “face to face.”

132. R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me’or ‘Eynayim* (Jerusalem: Yeshivath Meor Enaim, 1986), p. 251b.

133. See also Zohar 2:200b and R. Margulies’ *Nitsotsey Zohar* #3.

134. The text shifts into an analogic mode even though the prior statement does not quite take the form of parable.

135. J. Pelikan, *Mary through the Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 125ff.; Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Marian Devotion in the Western Church” in *Christian Spirituality II*, ed. J. Raitt (New York: Crossroad Books, 1988), p. 400–405.

greatest of gifts to humanity.<sup>136</sup> This places her in the role of mediatrix in the other direction as well, offering the prayers of humanity to her risen Son. *Shekhinah* too is conduit of divine grace, indeed of the life-force itself, into the lower worlds. She is active in creation, in revelation, and in the daily conduct of the world through divine providence.<sup>137</sup> As Mother of the lower worlds and as Throne of Divine Glory, it is also she who receives the prayers of humanity and the merits of their good deeds. Here the traditions diverge along the predictable fault of virginal/celebate versus marital/coital difference. *Shekhinah*, energized by this flow from below, is herself stirred with sexual desire. She arouses her husband, the blessed Holy One or the male principle, and he enters her and fills her with the flow of renewed blessing for the world.

But there is yet another way in which the female figures of intercession are parallel in the two traditions. Mary as mediatrix and intercessor is related in Christianity to the depiction of Mary as *Mater Dolorosa*, the Mother of Sorrows. She is the woman who has suffered the greatest of human pain, the death of a beloved child, and yet has borne that pain in faith. It is because of her own suffering that she can identify so fully with all the sufferings of humanity and thus bring their prayers before God as her own.<sup>138</sup> *Shekhinah* too is seen as a suffering figure. This goes back to the old rabbinic depiction of *shekhinah*, long before female or maternal imagery crystallized around her. “Wherever Israel were exiled, *shekhinah* was exiled with them.”<sup>139</sup> Mary has witnessed the greatest suffering known to the Christian imagination: the torment and death of Jesus on the cross. *Shekhinah* has witnessed and taken part in the greatest suffering experienced by the Jewish People: the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel. Both suffering Mothers thus serve as bearers of tears as well as prayers. “The gates of prayer are closed, but the gates of tears are never closed.”<sup>140</sup>

The emergence of Kabbalistic symbolism has an important effect on the place of eros in all later Jewish devotion. The Kabbalistic texts speak in richly developed and highly pictorial fashion of the inner life of God, the male Deity uniting with his own female Self, rather than with the human soul. The positing of this divine female entity allows passion to emerge fullblown in Kabbalistic Judaism. God engages in kissing, in foreplay, and in coitus with *shekhinah*. This sexual union became the chief fascination of the Castilian Kabbalists of the late thirteenth century. The writings of these Jewish mystics include incredibly detailed descrip-

136. Interestingly the same Psalm verse, 68:18 (“You went up above, took a captive; you brought gifts for man . . .”) that the rabbis interpret as referring to Moses’ ascent at Sinai is used in Christian tradition in praise of Mary. See Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

137. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 379f., 423ff.

138. The relationship between Mary’s roles as *mediatrix* and *mater dolorosa* is discussed by Pelikan in *op. cit.*, p. 125ff. Jeremy Cohen discusses the relationship of the *mater dolorosa* motif to the Biblical Mother Rachel and to the figure of a victim of the 1096 massacres named Rachel. See his “The ‘Persecutions of 1096’—From Martyrdom to Martyrology: The Sociocultural Context of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles” in *Zion* 59 (1994): 169–208, especially pp. 200ff.

139. b. Megillah 29a. On the suffering of *shekhinah* in sympathy with human suffering, see also b. Hagigah 15b. Of course in the old rabbinic sources “*shekhinah*” here is nothing other than a way of saying “God suffers with them.” Indeed Psalm 91:15, “I am with him in sorrow,” is the usual proof-text.

140. b. Berakhot 32b.

tions of divine sexuality, male and female arousal, the act of coitus, and climax within God. They speak of human devotion as the “female waters” needed to arouse the *zaddik*, the ninth *sefirah* or the “righteous one” within God, but when aroused he is also the erect cosmic phallus, ready to fill the beloved, the bride, the palace, the holy city, or the great sea with the seed that has been gathered from all the upper reaches. Of course this is speech on a symbolic plane, but it contains endless and sometimes completely unrepressed discussions of the divine male and female. Once both male and female exist within God—and the presence of the female inevitably makes the upper aspect of the deity more clearly defined in its maleness—within the context of a tradition that unambiguously values sexual union and fecundity rather than virginity or celibacy, the stage is set for what sometimes indeed feels like “the return of the repressed,” an erotic language that would shock most Western sensibilities in its fullness of variety and detail. Human love and proper marital sexuality are seen as earthly copies of these cosmic/symbolic processes, copies flawed by their fleshy nature and corruptible through demonic forces ever poised to turn human sexuality into sin rather than holy fulfillment. But at their best, when living within the law and having proper moral attitudes, the Kabbalist and his wife in sacred union are earthly embodiments of the inner divine kiss and of the coital embrace that takes place within the Godhead.<sup>141</sup>

This font of erotic mythos dominates in the writings of the Castilian Kabbalah, and especially the Zohar, the great compendium of medieval Spanish Kabbalah. After the Torah text and the Psalter, the Song of Songs is probably the most widely quoted Biblical source in the Zohar literature. There is hardly a page in the Zohar that is not replete with the lush imagery of the Canticle’s gardens, streams, fountains, and lovers’ embrace.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, once eros is given free rein by the in-

141. We should add here that there is just a bit of evidence for the involvement of real women, the wives of Kabbalists, in thinking about or acting out sexual activity as an act of *imitatio dei*. (Generally the sources are silent about any such praxis and seem more interested in guarding against excess than in celebrating the human acting out of cosmic sexual joy.) The anonymous thirteenth-century *Iggeret ha-Qodesh* (ed. prin. Rome, 1546), serves as a manual for sexual conduct. While devoting much of its attention to the male partner, it does instruct him to “appease his wife and make her happy, preparing her and drawing her forth by such things [or “words”] as bring happiness to her heart, so that she agree with [his] pure and righteous thoughts. Thus they will be one regarding this *mizvah* [the sexual act]. Then their thought will be bound as one, *shekhinah* will dwell between them, and they will bring forth a son fitting to the holy form they have pictured.” Both partners are to concentrate on the divine anthropic form during intercourse, the beauty of the union above. The verb *yetsayyeru* [“have pictured”] indicates that they may do so in somewhat graphic terms, and the child of their union will be in the image of that beautiful divine form they have gazed upon during lovemaking. *Kitvey RaMBaN*, v. 2, p. 331 (Jerusalem: *Mossad Ha-Rav Kook*, 1964). The fact that this text was long attributed to Nahmanides certainly added to its prestige and influence over the course of many generations. In the same spirit is the report in Moshe Ibn Machir’s *Seder Ha-Yom* (Israel: *Mefitsey Or*, n.d.; reprint of Lvov, 1858[?], 22a) that on Friday afternoons the “early *hasidim*” (i.e., the Kabbalists of Safed) “would immerse themselves together with their wives, to unite their hearts in a single place.” *Seder Ha-Yom* was first published in Venice, 1599. Insofar as we know, Kabbalistic sexuality is largely a world of symbolically laden fantasy, conceived and discussed in an entirely male setting. This point was first made by M. D. Georg [= Jiri] Langer in *Die Erotik der Kabbalah*, Prague: Dr. Josef Flesch, 1923. Much discussion of it is to be found in the writings of Elliot Wolfson (see following note).

142. The section of the Zohar specifically devoted to the Song of Songs, Zohar Hadash 60b-

roduction of the divine female, the Kabbalist is able to rediscover erotic meanings throughout the Song, some of which turn out to be nothing but long-forgotten *pe-shat*, symbols of male and female in the trees, streams, and fountains of the garden already in the Biblical text itself. The spring of sacred eros continues to flow in Kabbalistic creativity down through the seventeenth century, including both the Lurianic and Sabbatian expansions of the Zoharic myth.

This liberation of the spiritual-erotic muse in Judaism can only happen once the female hypostasis has been set in place. No mere exegetical exercise, this new reading of the Canticle is an essential transformation in the language and logic of sacred love in the context of Judaism. Due to the influence of the Zohar, the language of sacred eros would come to play a very major role throughout later Jewish piety. There is good reason to believe that this transformation took place in France and Northern Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the direct presence of the Marian revival, which was producing a more passionate Christian reading of that shared Scripture on love than any the Jews had yet dared.

### III

In its preceding sections, this study has referred broadly to the Christian cultural context in which Kabbalah began to emerge. It sought out structural and symbolic parallels between the treatment of the divine (or quasi-divine) female in the two traditions, particularly showing that the complex of symbols around *shekhinah*, including its identification as divine bride and as *keneset yisra'el*, is parallel to a similar symbolic construct in Christianity.

We turn now to an examination of certain passages from Christian commentaries on the Song of Songs with the “eye” of a student of Kabbalah. While I have no evidence that Jews read these specific commentaries,<sup>143</sup> the internal par-

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75a, is but a small portion of the Zohar's treatment of the Canticle, covering only the first ten verses of Chapter One. Another extended discussion of the Song is found in Zohar 2:143a-145b. A collection of the many Zohar passages that interpret the Song of Songs is found in Isaac Crispin's *Zehorey Hamah* (Salonkia, 1738). Something similar (with Hebrew translation) is contained in the seventh volume of Yudel Rosenberg's *Zohar Torah* (Bilgoray, 1930).

The role of eros in the Zohar literature, significantly underplayed by such earlier scholars as Scholem and Tishby, has been a key subject of recent scholarship. Yehuda Liebes' essay *Zohar ve-Eros, Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 67–119, is the pioneering work in this field, presenting a nuanced view of the erotic fantasy that he sees as underlying a great deal of the Zohar mythology. Eliot Wolfson goes significantly farther than Liebes in claiming that obsession with the phallus and with gender transformation (the absorption of the female within the male) is the very center of Kabbalistic esotericism. Both Liebes and I have been critical of some of his views. See my review of his *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism in History of Religions* (1997): 265–274. Wolfson's rejoinder appears in his “Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah” in E. Wolfson, ed., *Rending the Veil* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), p. 353, endnote 6. My agreement with some of Wolfson's readings of the sources (as well as my great respect for his scholarship) is greater than is obvious from the polemical expressions of our positions in those statements.

143. Part of the problem in claiming Jews read Christian commentaries has to do with language. It is generally thought that very few Jews, even among the educated elite, were able to read Latin. It should also be noted, however, that there were vernacular Christian commentaries on the Canticle as early as the twelfth century. Most famous is the St. Trudperter Hohelied, made for female monastics.



allels between the Christian and Kabbalistic languages of eros are quite striking. I believe that an examination of these Christian sources from the point of view of comparison to Kabbalistic symbolism will force us to admit at least a possibility that the language of sacred love was read or heard across the generally rigid communal and linguistic divide that separated Jewish and Christian religious creativity. I am interested in demonstrating here that the type of thought that characterizes Kabbalistic eros, the complex symbolic interfacing of lover and beloved, including the multiple faces of gender, are to be found in Christian France of the twelfth century. The spirit of the age is very much manifest in these writings. That spirit, I want to suggest, is the spirit of Kabbalah as well.

Of course the notion that Kabbalah was influenced by Christianity and thus will reflect certain hidden Christian structural elements is by no means new. Renaissance Christians became interested in Kabbalah out of a similar belief,<sup>144</sup> and one may say that the whole edifice of Christian Kabbalah is built around it.<sup>145</sup>

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The Trudperter Hohelied, which makes use of both Bernard and Honorius, was widely distributed in the southern part of the German-speaking lands and influenced many vernacular sermons and popular tracts. See the recent edition by F. Ohly and N. Kleine, *St. Trudperter Hohelied: eine Lehre der liebenden Gotteserkenntnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1998), and the study by H. E. Keller, *Wort und Fleisch: Koerperallegorien, mystische Spiritualitaet, und Dichtung des St Trudperter Hoheliedes im Horizont der Inkarnazion* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1989). See also J. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 180ff. On the Jewish side there were vernacular old-Yiddish paraphrases of the Song of Songs by the fourteenth century. These have been studied primarily by Karl Habersaat. That the Christian vernacular literature came into the hands of Jews is by no means implausible, although oral conversation, including disputation, seems the more likely route for passing this sort of awareness.

144. Rather than claiming Christian influence on Kabbalah, Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) and others saw the Kabbalistic teachings as stemming from a lost ancient revelation that would provide the true key to understanding Christianity itself, along with Orphic and other ancient esoteric texts. Christian Kabbalists in the sixteenth century identified Mary with *shekhinah*, a natural move in their attempt to unite the two traditions. See Genevieve Javary, “A propos du theme de la Sekina: Variations sur le nom de Dieu,” in *Kabbalistes Chretiens*, ed. A. Faivre and N. Tristan (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), p. 294 and 302ff. See also her full-length treatment in *Recherches sur l'utilisation du theme de la Sekina dans l'apologetique chretienne du quinziesme au dix-huitiesme siecle* (Paris: Champion, 1977).

145. A great deal has been written on the Christian Kabbalah. The essential introductions to the subject are those of Joseph Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press, 1944) and Francois Secret, *Les Kabbalistes Chretiens de la Renaissance* (Paris, n.p. 1964). For a bibliography through the 1960's see G. Scholem in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, v. 10, p. 652f. Major writings in more recent times include Philip Beitchman, *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Essays collected by Joseph Dan in *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and Their Christian Interpreters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1997); Moshe Idel, “The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance,” *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 186–242 (Reprinted in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D. Ruderman (New York: NYU Press, 1992); *Kabbalistes Chretiens*, essays edited by A. Faivre and F. Tristan (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978); Catherine Swietlicki, *Spanish Christian Cabala: The Works of Luis de Leon, Santa Teresa de Jesus, and San Juan de la Cruz* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986); Hayyim Wirszubski, *Three Chapters of Christian Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1975 and *A Christian Kabbalist reads the Torah*, Jerusalem, 1977 (both in Hebrew).

Much of non-Jewish interest in Kabbalah, even in modern times, has still been shaped by this view.<sup>146</sup> Among Jewish scholars in the nineteenth century, some saw Christian influence as a major factor in the emergence of Kabbalah, though in a more realistic historical setting.<sup>147</sup> Gershom Scholem, with his Jewish nationalist-historical view of Kabbalah,<sup>148</sup> as well as his strong sense that the mysticism of each tradition was unique to it and represented a specific stage in its development, set aside the question of Christian influence. A generation later, however, the question was treated anew by Yehuda Liebes in his landmark article “Christian Influences in the Zohar.”<sup>149</sup> Liebes points to several areas of Christian influence, based primarily on a suggestion of the Kabbalists’ fascination with Christianity, including a certain flirtation with trinitarianism, in a number of specific passages within the Zohar.<sup>150</sup> Liebes has also suggested that the community of disciples around R. Simeon ben Yohai, a subject of the Zohar narrative that is key to his understanding of that entire work, is reminiscent of the apostles and their community around Jesus. He does not deal, however, with the Marian question.

146. See Adolph Franck, *The Kabbalah or the Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews* (New York: Kabbalah Publishing Co., 1926). The French original, published in 1843, was a landmark quasi-modern study of Kabbalah. Franck sees Kabbalah’s origins in the “oriental philosophy” or mystery religions of late antiquity. The commonalities of Kabbalah and Christianity are explained by the fact of this common age and source. Arthur E. Waite (*The Secret Doctrine in Israel*; London: Wm Rider and Son, 1913), the most important and critical of the “occultist” writers in the early twentieth century entertains but rejects as “misleading” the notion that “[*shekhinah*] occupies in Kabbalah the same position of intercessor as is ascribed to the Blessed Virgin by the devotion of the Latin Church, yet having regard to *shekhinah*’s incorporation with the Divine Hypostases.” (p. 215) Much of Waite’s effort in this book, however, is to provide a counterweight to De Pauly’s then recently published French translation of the Zohar, which treated the work openly as one filled with secret Christian content.

147. The most perceptive of these was Adolph Jellinek. See his *Beitraege zur Geschichte der Kabbala* (Leipzig: C. L. Fritzsche, 1852), and especially part 2, p. 51ff, “Christlicher Einfluss auf der Kabbala.” This view was shared by Heinrich Graetz and others who were less sympathetic than Jellinek toward Kabbalah. It played a major role in emerging modern Jewry’s placing of Kabbalah in the “margins” of Jewish religious history, outside the “mainstream.”

148. See the article by Amnon Raz-Krokotzkin discussed in n. 104 above. On the place of Kabbalah in Scholem’s Jewish cultural nationalist ideology, see also David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

149. *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1982/83) 43–74 (Hebrew). English translation in his *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 139–161.

150. To Liebes’ list of such references I would like to add Zohar 2: 147a: “Attachment to the Father is through His Son.” The Zohar is speaking the language of sefirotic symbolism; the “Son” is Jacob, the sixth *sefirah*, while the Father is the recondite *hokhmah*, the second *sefirah*. Still the passage is remarkably reminiscent of John 3:35–36 and 14:6, “No man comes to the Father but through me.” The Zohar context depicts Jacob, God personified as a male figure, as the one through whom kisses come from the hidden God who is beyond all personification. This is related to the well-known change in person in the opening verse of the Song of Songs: “Let *him* kiss me with the kisses of *his* mouth, for *your* kisses are better than wine.” “Him” here would refer to the hidden Godhead, while “your” is God in the form of Jacob, surprisingly referred to as the “son.” There is also likely an unspoken reference here to Psalm 2:12: “kiss the son,” interpreted Christologically throughout the history of Christian exegesis. As Liebes makes clear, the point of noting such passages is not to claim that the Zohar’s authors were crypto-Christians, but rather that they were aware of Christian Scripture and enjoyed teasing with the possibilities it afforded to the Kabbalistic mind.

## Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs

As indicated previously, the Marian revival in twelfth-century France is especially represented in commentaries on the Song of Songs.<sup>151</sup> In both the tropological and the Mariological interpretations the issue of gender, both within God and within the beloved (or the community of the beloved), is treated in complex and subtle ways. We will come presently to the Mariological tradition, where<sup>152</sup> the issues are somewhat clearer. But let us turn first to Bernard, the most important figure among the Cistercians, who subscribe mostly to the tropological reading. Actually, like all latter-day interpreters, he combines his approach with the older one. The *ecclesia* is indeed Christ's beloved for Bernard. But this is also the *pre-existent* *ecclesia*, identical with *the heavenly Jerusalem*, who has been Christ's bride since the beginning of time.<sup>153</sup> In his earthly incarnation, says Bernard, the eternal Christ

came to seek a bride [the church, the earthly *ecclesia*], but he did not come without one. He sought a bride, but she was [already] with him. Had he then two brides? Surely not, "One is my dove (Cant. 6:8)" . . . although from the beginning he had as a bride the multitude of angels, it pleased him to summon the church from among men and unite it with the one from heaven, that there be but one bride and one Bridegroom.<sup>154</sup>

This union of the primordial bride with the earthly bride or church, so "that there be but one bride and one Bridegroom" seems remarkably like that which the Kabbalists were to do in uniting the heavenly divine manifestation called *shekhinah* with what had until then been *keneset yisra'el*, the earthly community of Israel. God has a bride above but He chooses to make her one with the community of Israel, so that there be "but one bridegroom and one bride." We will see more of this parallel further on. But let us continue with Bernard. The bride Christ already had, before coming to earth as Jesus, is made visible in the incarnation as she is manifest within Christ:

These two then have their origin in heaven—Jesus the Bridegroom and Jerusalem the bride. He, in order to be seen by men, "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phillipians 2:11)." But the bride—in what form or exterior loveliness . . . did St John see her?<sup>155</sup> . . . He saw the bride when he looked on the Word made flesh, and acknowledged two natures in one flesh . . . we came to know the visible image and radiant comeliness of that supernal Jerusalem, our mother, revealed to us in

151. A mosaic in the church of S. Maria Trastevere in Rome, dated c. 1140, shows in its lower panels scenes from the life of Mary. Above them the Virgin is seated at Christ's right hand, crowned, and holding a copy of the Song of Songs.

152. Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1988), p. 192f.

153. Christ is bridegroom or husband of the church already in the writings of Paul; cf. Ephesians 5, where the relationship of husbands and wives is compared to that of Christ and the church. The heavenly Jerusalem is Christ's bride in Revelation 21.

154. Bernard, Homilies on the Song of Songs 27:6.

155. Referring to Revelation 21:9ff.

Christ and by his means. What did we behold if not the bride in the bridegroom? What did we admire but that person who is the Lord of glory, the Bridegroom decked with a garland, the bride adorned with her jewels? . . . the one and same Lord who as head of the church is the bridegroom, as body is the bride.<sup>156</sup>

The incarnate Christ, in other words, is androgynous.<sup>157</sup> He is male insofar as he seeks the earthly bride, the church or the soul. But he also contains within him the eternal female, known here as the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the eternal bride with whom the earthly soul will be joined as one, as she too becomes Christ's bride. Bernard offers a strikingly different reading here of the classic formula "two natures in one flesh," using it to refer to Christ's male and female aspects.

The androgynous nature of the Kabbalistic God is well-known and has been much discussed. The ancient aggadah<sup>158</sup> contains a Platonically based tale that describes Adam as an androgynous being, a sort of Siamese twin of both genders who had to be separated at the rear in order to turn face-to-face to him/herself. This myth, which serves as an etiology of human sexual difference and attraction, is applied by the earliest Kabbalists<sup>159</sup> to God; it is then in *imitatio Dei* that Adam is bi-gendered. The back-to-back joining and the need for separation and turning occurred in the first place within the Godhead, in relation to the "male" and "female" aspects of the divine Self.<sup>160</sup> That the female is originally seen as contained within the male also fits with much of what one finds in the Kabbalistic materials.<sup>161</sup> That these are a *pre-existent* pair is taken for granted by the entire Kabbalistic con-

156. Bernard, Homilies on the Song of Songs 27:7.

157. See the discussion of this passage by McGinn in *History*, v. 2, p. 178f. Although noting the parallel to the Jewish mystical interpretation, McGinn does not deal with the seeming parallel to the Kabbalistic notion of primordial divine androgyny. On the androgyny of Christ's body in some medieval depictions, see Caroline W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p93ff. and extensive notes there. See also other writings of Bynum cited throughout this essay.

158. b. Berakhot 61a.

159. Although this "secret" is not discussed explicitly in the Bahir, it may lie in the background of such passages as #55 and #116–117, where reference is made to the original oneness of the divine male/female syzygy. For a more open Kabbalistic discussion of this myth see Todros Abulafia's *Otsar ha-Kavod* to the Berakhot 61a passage; ed. Warsaw, 1879, 9a.

160. Kabbalists understand this myth as referring to the sixth and tenth *sefirot*, the second male/female syzygy of their symbolic universe. The primal male/female pair, *hokhmah* and *binah*, exist in a properly ordered and eternally undisturbed flow, that of "two lovers never separated." But the relationship of the sixth *sefirah*, often called *tif'eret* ("glory"), and the tenth, *malkhut* or *shekhinah*, is the chief subject of the *Zohar* and other works of Castilian Kabbalah. These two emerged as a single entity, were separated, turned face-to-face, and exist in a state that alternates between harmonious marital union and exile/alienation of the female. Much of the reality of Jewish history is reflected in the instability of this symbolic configuration, including the old rabbinic claim that "wherever Israel were exiled, *shekhinah* was exiled with them." *Shekhinah's* exile from her spouse is the divine prototype of Israel's exile.

161. The inclusion or reabsorption of the female within the male is a key theme in E. Wolfson's understanding of Kabbalah. See discussion in his *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) and more recently in the essay referred to in n. 142 above.

text. It is interesting to note that the heavenly Temple (parallel to the “heavenly Jerusalem” here), a figure to be identified with *shekhinah*, is also listed in the Talmud<sup>162</sup> as one of “seven things that were created before the world came to be.”

It will also come as no surprise to readers of the Jewish sources that this Christian text understands that the soul of Christ is male and that “the one and same Lord . . . *as body* is the bride.” Here is the ubiquitous Neo-Platonism that underlies most Western mystical traditions, assigning soul-like qualities to the male and those of the body to the female. This view too is widely evident in Kabbalistic sources.<sup>163</sup>

We turn now to two further passages from the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* by Bernard and two from the *Seal of the Blessed Virgin* by Honorius Augustodunensis, all reflecting types of exegesis and/or the use of specific symbols that are also found in Kabbalah. First let us see Bernard’s comments on the “polished arrow” of Isaiah 49:2.<sup>164</sup> The verse in its entirety reads: “He has made my mouth like a sharp sword and has hidden me in the shadow of His hand; He has fashioned me into a polished arrow, placing me in His quiver.” Bernard says that

This is the special love of Christ, which not only pierced Mary’s soul but penetrated through and through, so that even the tiniest space in her virginal breast was permeated by love. Thenceforth she would love with her whole heart, her whole soul, and her whole strength, and be full of grace. It transpierced her thus that it might come down even to us, and of that fullness we might all receive. She would become the mother of that love whose father is the God who is love; and when that love was brought to birth he would place his tent in the

162. b. Pesahim 54a and Nedarim 39b.

163. See the Zohar’s *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* for an extended allegory of Abraham as soul and Sarah as body. The parallel of this text to Philo’s reading has been noted and was the subject of a study by Samuel Belkin, “The Midrash Ha Naeelam [!] of the Zohar and Its Sources in Alexandrian Literature” in *Sura: Israeli-American Annual* 3 (1957–58): pp. 25–92 (Hebrew). There is apparently no historic connection between Philo and the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* other than that borne by Christianity. Philo’s work was unknown to post-Alexandrian Jews until Azariah Di Rossi’s reclamation of it in the sixteenth century. The seeming Philonic influence then becomes a question of parallel and independent typologies of thought or else some possible influence by Christian neo-Platonic interpretation of Genesis. The latter seems possible but has not yet been demonstrated.

164. Sermon 29; p. 109. It is noteworthy that the “dart” or “polished arrow” of Isaiah 49:2 is associated with the exegesis of the Song of Songs already by Origen. See his *Commentary*, book three, Lawson translation p. 198. Of course this Christian reading of Isaiah may have behind it the arrows of Cupid, an association not to be found among the Jewish interpreters. Unlike Christians, Jews did not see themselves as heirs to the world of classical mythology. The wounding of Mary with the arrow of love is the scene commemorated by Bernini in the well-known statue in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. This is also the arrow or dart of love with which St. Teresa of Avila was wounded: “an arrow . . . driven into the very depths of the entrails, and sometimes into the heart, so that the soul does not know either what is the matter with it or what it desires . . . The arrow seems to have been dipped in some drug which leads it to hate itself for the love of this Lord so that it would gladly lose its life for Him.” *Vida* 29:13; English translation from *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, tr. E. Allison Peter (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), p. 191. See the treatment of this “arrow of love” by Bernard McGinn in “Tropics of Desire: Mystical Interpretation of the Song of Songs” in *That Others May Know and Teach: Essays in Honor of Zachary Hayes* (Franciscan Institute, 1997).



sun, that the Scripture be fulfilled: "I will make you the light of the nations so that you may be my salvation to the ends of the earth (Is. 49:6)."

Reading this text as though Bernard were a (Christian) Kabbalist rather than a Cistercian, I would understand him to be saying that Christ's love is an arrow that enters Mary and fills her with love of heart, soul, and might. She is so filled with love from above that her overflowing of love is passed on to us. But Mary is also the tent that the arrow of God's love has pierced and filled. As the arrow pierces her, that tent (like Jerusalem, a conventional term for the feminine tenth *sefirah*) is "placed in the sun," a reference to Psalm 19:5.

If I allow myself to look a bit more deeply at this text from the viewpoint of a contemporary Kabbalah scholar, I would say that the arrow is an obvious sexual symbol; it is by the "arrow" of God that Mary becomes impregnated, filled with grace, indeed so filled that she gives birth to the Son/Redeemer. He in turn becomes the new bridegroom alluded to by the reference to Psalm 19:5. The one who "places his tent in the sun" is there (19:6) "like a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber," Christ the bridegroom emerging from the womb of Mary. The love of God fills Mary and from her overflows into the person of her son, bringing that love into the world in his birth. *Shekhinah* too is filled to overflowing with the male-generated love that flows from above until that blessing pours forth into the lower worlds as well.

One of the key symbols of *shekhinah* in the Zohar is that of the sea.<sup>165</sup> The upper *sefirot* are streams that flow into the single sea; Ecclesiastes 1:7 ("All the streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, they flow yet again.") is frequently quoted in this connection.<sup>166</sup> Israel, through the power of their prayers, raise *shekhinah* back to her source, causing the waters to renew their flow. Here is the opening of Bernard's thirteenth homily on the Song of Songs:

Just as the sea is the ultimate source of wells and rivers, so Christ the Lord is the ultimate source of all virtue and knowledge. For who has the power to endow us with virtues if not he who is the King of Glory? And what are we told in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:3) but that God Himself is the Lord of all knowledge? Hence from Him as from a well-head comes the power to be pure in body, diligent in affection and upright in will . . . Are they not all streams from that one spring? *If the waters that surround us inevitably return to the sea by hidden underground channels, only to gush forth again without fail and without weariness for the refreshing of our sight and the relief of our needs, why should not those spiritual streams return unerringly and without ceasing to their native source, and flow back without interruption to irrigate our souls? Let the rivers of grace circle back to their Fountain-Head that they may run their course anew (Ecc. 1:7). Let the torrent that springs in heaven be channelled back to its starting-point, and be poured on the earth again with fertil-*

165. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 161.

166. Hyman's *Ha-Torah ha-Ketuvah v'ha-Messurah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1939) lists twenty-five citations of this verse in the Zohar. See also Gikatilla's *Sha'arey Orah*, ed. Ben-Shelomo, p. 61f.

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izing power. You ask how this will be done. It will be done in accord with Paul's advice: "In all things give thanks to God (1 Thess. 5:18)." If you can credit yourself with wisdom or with virtue, realize that the credit is due rather to Christ, who is the Power and Wisdom of God.<sup>167</sup>

By giving credit to God, by acknowledging Him as the source of our own powers of virtue, we cause the waters of the spiritual sea to flow back into the fountainhead, so that the stream may refresh us yet again. The student of Kabbalah will recognize the parallel to the key symbolic structure in Zoharic literature. We receive the flow of divine energies through the streams that flow into the sea of *malkhut* or *shekhinah*. Our job is to re-energize them and return them by uplifting *shekhinah* to unite with their source, so that they may flow back to us yet again. In another passage, speaking in a more Marian context, Bernard actually refers to Mary as a kind of spiritual aqueduct: the divine waters flow downward to bless us on earth and the Virgin becomes an aqueduct through which we are able to lift them back to their source in God!<sup>168</sup>

Now it is true that both traditions worked from the same Scripture and reflected on the same natural surroundings. It is indeed possible that each independently came up with this notion of a cycle of spiritual energy as the undiminishable waters of the sea. But the mechanism of renewal is so similar that we cannot entirely dismiss the possibility of historical and cultural links, as well as typological parallels, between them.

One reason why scholars have not noticed these parallels until now is the rejection by Scholem and Tishby<sup>169</sup> of "allegory" as a way of understanding the Kabbalists' reading of Scripture. Working from a rather rigid definition of allegory, one they associated with the *remez* level of Jewish philosophical exegesis, they sought a completely different term to represent *sod*, or the Kabbalistic understandings of the text. These, they insisted, were *symbolic* readings, over the allegorical. Allegory was depicted by them as unidimensional and fixed, while symbols were free-flowing, associative, and multivocal. Allegory was thus always readily capable of specific decoding, in which the object in the narrative is "replaced" by the significant it represented, while the symbol is itself uplifted by and included in the "field" of holiness created by symbolic thinking. That which is represented by the symbols remains mysteriously elusive and is given form only by the aggregate of its symbolic representations. To take a Kabbalistic example, we may not know what *binah*, the third *sefirah*, represents within the divine realm; its essence, like that of all the *sefirot*, necessarily transcends our comprehension. (The literal translation of *binah* as "understanding" adds very little.) We come to grasp it ever so slightly, however, by referring to the key symbolic terms associated with *binah*, including "mother," "womb," "jubilee," "repentance," "palace," "quarry," "fountain," and

167. On the Song of Songs I, p. 87f. Emphasis mine.

168. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De aquaeductu*, cited in E. A. Johnson's "Marian Devotion in the Western Church," p. 413, n. 9.

169. See Scholem's discussions in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (index, s.v. "allegory") and Tishby's in "*Ha-Semel ve'ha-Dat ba-Kabbalah*," the opening essay in his collection *Netivey Emunah u-Minut* (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1964).

“upper Eden.” Putting all of those together gives us an animated sense of *binah* as a deep and primary source of love-energy within the Godhead, and a source to which all return. That is as close as we can come to “decoding” the Kabbalistic symbol.

We are usually taught to think of Bernard, along with other Christians of this age, as speaking allegorically when they interpret a text like the Song of Songs. But this allegory *versus* symbol distinction, going back to Scholem’s early conversations with Walter Benjamin,<sup>170</sup> is overplayed. The category of allegory is broader than that allotted to it by this typological distinction. Allegory is not limited to a simplistic  $x=y$  system of replacement. Subtlety and multivocality are by no means lacking in the Christian readings of Scripture that are termed “allegory.” Complex theories of allegory and its ways of representing reality are articulated as early as Augustine and John Cassius (fifth century).<sup>171</sup> These classic definitions were used rather loosely by Western writers in the Middle Ages. When their prose descriptions are allowed to flow freely, as is naturally the case especially in homiletic texts, there emerges an exegetical *poesis* that is often quite complex, with levels of meaning playing off against one another. The result is closer to what Scholem calls “symbolism” than we might have expected.

There does remain a difference between Christian and Kabbalistic usage, however. Only the latter developed a fixed *system* of allegorical equivalences, a grid of symbols in which terms or verbal pictures whose meaning was established could replace and weave in and out of one another. In the Christian interpretations, as in non-Kabbalistic Hebrew texts, the primary referents (Christ, Mary) could not be let go of. The Kabbalist (especially in the *Zohar* literature) can speak *in extenso* about the well, the garden, the six days of the week, and the moon, the sea, and Jerusalem without touching back to tell us at all that he is referring to elements 2, 3, 6, and 10 in the sefirotic system, or to such conventional names as *hokhmah*, *binah*, *tif’eret*, and *malkhut*. Even were he to do so, he would only be trading symbol for symbol. There is no concrete reference point in these hypostases, which are in fact nothing but clusters of symbolic associations. The grammar of the symbolic language being spoken here has been wholly absorbed, allowing for a freedom of image-play previously unimagined. This refinement in the use of verbal pictures might indeed be expected of a tradition that, while suffering no lack in the richness of its pictorial imagination, was nevertheless limited by its aniconic prohibitions to the expression of such imagery through the medium of words alone. The Jews may have felt the greater need to create this special symbolic language because they did not have recourse to expression in the medium of pictorial art.<sup>172</sup>

170. See the very important discussion by Susan Handelman in *Fragments of Redemption*, p. 105ff. See also the earlier comments by Frank Talmage in “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism” in *Jewish Spirituality I*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroad Books, 1988), p. 341.

171. See the treatment in Matter, *Voice*, pp. 49ff.

172. In this regard I have some reservation about the claims of Kalman Bland’s most interesting *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). I fear that in the course of polemic he tends to underestimate the toll taken by the strictures of the second commandment (even in its narrow reading). Because of it, the Kabbalists were

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While these differences are important for the reader of texts from the two traditions, there is nothing in them to prevent our viewing such symbols in a cross-traditional comparative way. The ultimate meaning of the parallels we find, like their genesis, remains somewhat beyond reach.

There are some places where the Biblical text itself seems to dictate a bit of symbolic structure, and there we should not be surprised by the parallels in the two traditions. Such is the case, for example, in Canticles 2:6: "His left hand is beneath my head and his right hand embraces me." Thus we are not surprised to hear Bernard, after expressing consternation over the blatant physicality of the image, come to familiar conclusions:

What more are we to think the left hand and the right are for the bridegroom, the Word? Does that which is called the word of man have within it separate bodily parts, distinct features, and a difference between the left side and the right?<sup>173</sup> All the more does He who is God and the Word of God not admit diversity of any kind. He is who He is, so simple in his nature that He has no parts, so much one that he is without number . . . But we speak as well as we can of that which we do our best to understand, as the Holy Spirit reveals . . . Therefore, as adversity and prosperity are usually designated by the left hand and the right, it seems to me that here the left may be interpreted as the Word's threat of punishment, the right as his promise of the kingdom.<sup>174</sup>

After the familiar apologies, this interpretation is very much like the Jewish readings that see God's "left" standing for divine justice and retribution, while His "right" is the force of compassion and forgiveness. But Bernard then employs another Biblical text to move on from this distinction between "right" and "left," opting for that which comes between them. This seems very like the Kabbalistic preference for the "central column" of the *sefirot*. We read a bit further on in Bernard's text:

"If you sleep in the middle of the chosen lots, there are dove-wings covered with silver." (Psalm 68:14) What I think this means is that there is a place between fear and security like that between the left arm and the right, a central hope, as it were, in which the mind and conscience very happily repose upon the soft bed of love. And perhaps this place is referred to in a subsequent text of this Song, where in a description of the throne of Solomon you have the following: "the midst he covered with love for the daughters of Jerusalem" (Cant. 3:10).<sup>175</sup>

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prevented from displaying their image-laden and richly pictorial conceptions of the Godhead in visual media. Imagine how different the cultural legacy of Jewry would be if we had representations on canvas or in stained glass of *shekhinah* and her maidens, the divine bridegroom and the bride, the streams of divine grace flowing forth from Eden, down from the patriarchal hills of Lebanon, and into the great sea!

173. Although the incarnate Christ obviously has a body, two hands, and therefore a right and left, the risen Christ or the second person of the trinity spoken of here is incorporeal and entirely simple (in the sense of indivisibility), thus without such corporeal distinctions as "right" and "left."

174. Sermons on the Song of Songs 51:7–8, English edition p. 45f.

175. Bernard, op. cit. 51:10 (p. 47f.).

Although there is some difference of specific symbols between this text and the Kabbalistic usage, the idea that the bride's true resting place is in the center, the throne or dwelling of the Spouse, is shared by both traditions. *Shekhinah* is at the bottom center of the Kabbalistic chart and her lover is directly above her, surrounded and supported by the forces of the right and left.

Schoolmen as well as monastics took part in the "bride-mysticism" that was so widespread in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and seems to be so much reflected in the Zohar. In *The Soul's Pledge*, Hugh of St. Victor, the leading figure in the Victorine school of exegesis, "interweaves the story of Esther, the bride prepared for the King, with the *sponsa* of the Song of Songs . . . The *triclinium* where the bride is readied for the heavenly *cubiculum* is, of course, the church. The means used for her beautification are the sacraments and the life of prayer and virtuous living. Scripture is the *speculum* in which the bride can gauge her renewed attraction for the Divine Lover who has rescued her from the squalor of sin."<sup>176</sup> This weaving together of the Esther narrative and the bridal mysticism of Kabbalah is precisely what is done by Rabbi Shelomo Alkabetz in his sixteenth-century commentary on Esther *Manot ha-Levi*. But it is already present to some degree in the Zohar and elsewhere in thirteenth-century Kabbalah. The Zohar contains several very lavish descriptions of the adorning of *shekhinah* and her maidens in preparation for the bridal feast.<sup>177</sup> That such descriptions echo the Biblical accounts of Esther and the other Persian beauties as they prepared to meet the king should come as no surprise.

We turn our attention now to some of the classical Mariological commentaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Before doing so, however, we should give some thought to the nature of this Marian exegesis of the Canticle. On one hand, the Marian reading is said to be a "historical" one<sup>178</sup>; the author is in effect claiming that the love between Mary and Jesus is the original, "plain" meaning of this Scripture. Such a fanciful view of "history" of course relies upon a Solomon of prophetic gifts, anticipating the New Testament quite directly. The same is done for many other "Old Testament" writings and causes no problem for the medieval Christian mind. But the Canticle as "history" speaks of the Virgin in symbolic as well as direct terms. She is the garden, the spring, and date-palm as much as she is the maiden whose breasts are so perfect ("like the twins of a gazelle"), whose teeth are so straight ("like a flock of ewes come up from the bath"), whose hair is so flowing ("like a flock of goats coming out of Mt. Gilead"). Even if Solomon were interested in the hair, teeth, and breasts of the beautiful woman who bore Christ into the world, his contribution lies more in the realm of metaphor and simile than it does in the appreciation of female beauty (something the historic Solomon apparently did quite enough of in his own day!). Our interest here will be in this rich language of the Song of Songs and the ways in which its

176. McGinn, *History* v. 2, p. 590, n. 150, referring to pp. 964a–67d in the text.

177. See for example Zohar 3:98a–b.

178. Such is the claim in various sources quoted by Rachel Fulton in her "Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs," p. 87ff.



application to Mary anticipates the symbolic *shekhinah* language of the late-thirteenth-century Kabbalah.<sup>179</sup>

We turn first to Honorius' *Sigillum*, one of the classic Mariological commentaries on the Song of Songs. Honorius is an early twelfth-century monk, probably English in origin, who later settled in Germany, possibly Regensburg. The *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, composed c. 1100–1110, was the first of two commentaries Honorius wrote on the Song of Songs. His later *Expositio in Canticum Cantico-rum* is in fact better-known, but less specifically devoted to Mary and therefore of less interest to us here.

Honorius begins the *Sigillum* with a liturgical question, witness to the older liturgical roots of the Mariological interpretation of the Song, to which we have referred above.

You say that you wonder why the Gospel text *Jesus entered* and the Canticle are read on the feast of the blessed Mary [the Assumption], although neither of them is seen by simple people to say anything about her. First of all, then, you should know about this Gospel that in all of Scripture there is nothing more fitting, more suitable, more worthy to be read on her sacred feast. The text reads: *Jesus entered into a certain town* (Luke 10:38). In this town there is a high tower which has ramparts against enemies; and a wall on the outside for protection of the citizens within. This town was that sanctuary of the holy spirit, namely the glorious Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, who was fortified on all sides with the unailing protection of the angels. In her there is a high tower, that is to say, humility, reaching to the highest heaven, whence it is said: *He has regarded the humility of his handmaid* (Luke 1:48). The wall outside her was chastity, which furnished a defense for the rest of the virtues within. The Lord entered this town when he took human nature to himself in the womb of the Virgin. . . . The fount of Wisdom Himself had made a dwelling-place in her and therefore all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were hidden in her.

The liturgical question is answered with a homily telling us that Jesus' entering the town really refers to his entering the Virgin. She is a town with ramparts to protect her and a high tower within her. All of this is spoken, of course, in the context of the glorification of virginity. Jesus' entering Mary is innocent; the Christ child enters her womb *without* an act of sexual penetration. Mary=town=Jerusalem is an association completely familiar to the reader of Kabbalistic texts. But looking back at this text from the perspective of Kabbalah (including that notorious Viennese neo-Kabbalist, Dr. Freud), we cannot help but wonder whether that "high tower" in the "town with ramparts to protect her" might not be an unconscious sexual symbol, perhaps like the high Gothic tower in the medieval town itself. Jesus enters the town, the woman, the Virgin who is also bride of God. He is the *Fount* of Wisdom entering her; because of his presence "all the

179. Indeed Alexander Neckham referred to the Marian reading as "partly historical and partly mystical." Fulton, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are contained within her. To one who has read thirteenth-century Kabbalistic texts, there is something strikingly familiar in all this, the male “fountain” entering into and being placed at the center of the female “town,” filling her with the flow of his wisdom. The parallels to Kabbalistic symbolism could not be more direct, except that the Kabbalist is quite aware that this powerful symbolism also has sexual meaning. In a non-celibate context, the flowing fountain entering the palace or the garden may also be revealed to be the “sign of the holy covenant,” or the circumcised phallus. The Kabbalist is allowed to hint more directly at such meanings and to develop the symbolic associations in that direction as well as others. At the same time, the symbol is not reduced to stand exclusively for sexuality. The “flow” is also the flow of light from one divine realm to another, of blessing and bounty from the upper Godhead into *shekhinah* and thence to the world. Because we are mere humans, we understand this cosmic coupling in the language of mere bodily union. Throughout Jewish mystical literature, however, even as late as eighteenth-century Hasidism, we are regularly reminded of the inadequacy of this metaphor. In the Christian context, where virginity and chastity are so highly valued, indeed where the discussion takes place among presumed celibates, the innocence of the language, and perhaps of consciousness itself, needs to be still more fully protected.

Next we turn to a pair of passages where figures of the bed or couch are found in the Song of Songs text. At the conclusion of chapter one, on the phrase “our bed is flourishing,” Honorius says:

Mary was the bed of Christ, in whom he rested as on a bed. It is called “ours” because the Father and the Holy Spirit were always there with him. It was flourishing in virtues. For she is the house of God, in whom he lived.<sup>180</sup>

A bit further on, on the verse “King Solomon made himself a litter,” he says:

Christ the true king of peace<sup>181</sup> made him a litter. That is, he chose the Virgin from among patriarchs and kings, in whom he reclined as on a bed placed for a feast, because the faithful feast on flesh, which he took from the Virgin . . . “The seat of gold”: this was the body of the Lord, taken from her, upon which divinity reclined. This was of gold, meaning adorned with wisdom and charity. For the Virgin herself was the seat, in whose womb Christ reclined; it was of gold because it shone with the splendor of chastity.

Here we should notice how many of the symbol-terms for *shekhinah* are also applied to the Virgin Mary: she is *bed*, *house*, *litter*, and *seat*, in addition to *sea*, *tent*<sup>182</sup> and *city/Jerusalem*. Now it is true that all of these are fairly predictable for

180. Honorius, p. 57.

181. According to the Talmud (b. Shevu’ot 35b), every reference to Solomon (*Shelomo*) in the Canticle, except for one (8:12), refers to God, the King of Peace. This play on the Hebrew meaning of the name Solomon was adapted for Christian use to refer to Christ, who was much earlier referred to as the “prince of peace,” itself undoubtedly a translation of the Hebrew *sar shalom* (Is. 9:5).

182. For Mary as tent see also Bernard, Sermons 53:7 (English ed., v. 3, p. 64f.).

the female in relation to the male, and they are taken from the shared Biblical text and the shared “Book of Experience,” to use a term of Bernard’s. One can also find Mary as moon,<sup>183</sup> and I am sure we will find other parallel associations as well. What we are seeing here is *at least* the influence of the same Biblical text and the same symbolization of the natural world working in both traditions. But is there more than that?

The fact is that there is hardly a female symbol used by the Kabbalists to designate *shekhinah* that was not used, and usually a century earlier, to describe the Virgin Mary. An important designation for *shekhinah* is that of gate, for she is the lowest *sefirah*, the gateway into the divine world. Honorius says, on Cant. 7:5, “*at the gate of the daughter of the multitude;*” “the gate is the eternal virgin, through which, though closed, the king of heaven entered into the world, unto us. And she is the ‘daughter of the multitude’ because a multitude of the faithful will enter through her into the palace of heaven.”<sup>184</sup> She is also referred to as the “doorway” through whom Christ has entered the world.<sup>185</sup> *Shekhinah* is precisely that: the female door or gateway through which divinity enters this world and through which the Kabbalist enters “heaven” or the realm of the *sefirot*. *Shekhinah* is *aron ha-berit*, the ark that contains the covenant. In the Zohar this is a sexually charged symbol, because of the phallic meaning of “covenant.” But Mary too is the ark, as the one who has borne Christ within her womb. Mary is also the tabernacle in which Christ rests and the “bridal chamber” in which he stands.<sup>186</sup> Adam of Dryburgh (d. c. 1210) calls Mary “the tabernacle of the Father, the chamber of the Son, the arbor of the Holy Spirit, the resting place of the Trinity, the celestial habitation, the home of the Incarnate Word, the temple of God.”<sup>187</sup> She is also associated with Jerusalem, Christ’s “heavenly homeland,” Zion, the earthly Church that contains Him, and the Cedar of Lebanon.<sup>188</sup> Bethel, the House of God, is another of her names in

183. Rupert of Deutz in PL 932C, based on Cant. 6:10. See also Philip of Harvenst (d. 1183) who refers to Christ as the rising sun, Mary as the birth-giving moon. PL 203:182 as cited by R. Fulton in “Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs,” p. 95. These are directly parallel to the Kabbalistic symbolizations of *tif’eret* as the sun and the east and *malkhut* as night, moon, mother/birther of lower worlds, and west, except for the crucial difference that *tif’eret* and *malkhut* are bridegroom and bride, not son and mother. The Kabbalistic association of moon with *shekhinah* is based primarily on other texts, including Is. 30:26 and the famous *aggadah* in b. Hullin 60b.

184. Honorius p. 78f. Cf. also his comment on 5:4 (p. 70): “My beloved put forth his hand through the hole”—Therefore my beloved . . . put his hand through the keyhole, that is, his son, into the world through me, who became a hole through which he came unto men, narrow by humility, but shining in chastity, and therefore accessible to him alone.” Similarly on p. 71 Mary is a “door” through which Christ entered the world.

185. Honorius, p. 71.

186. Honorius, p. 50. Cf. Alan of Lille (as cited by R. Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion,” p. 96) who, in likening Mary to the Tabernacle, humbly presents his commentary as a mere offering of “goat skins” after the gold, silver, and precious stones she has already received. See Ex. 25:3–5.

187. Addresses to Mary, PL 198: 367D. The Latin text reads: “*Ipsa patris tabernaculum, filii cubiculum, Spiritus santi umbraculum, Trinitatis reclinatorium, coeleste habitaculum, incarnati Verbi domicilium, Dei templum.*” See also the sources quoted by C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 338, n. 53 and 355, n. 120–121.

188. Honorius, p. 51.

Scripture.<sup>189</sup> “Furthermore, a multitude of metaphors taken from the Old Testament were applied to her: burning bush, the Ark of the Covenant, the Star of the Sea, the enclosed garden, the blossoming shoot out of the Root of Jesse, the fleece, the bridechamber, the door, the dawn, the ladder of Jacob.”<sup>190</sup>

Among the most beloved images of *shekhinah* in the Zohar literature is that of nourisher; motherly *shekhinah* is naturally depicted as the source of sustenance for the lower worlds. Here the imagery of female fullness and of humans nursing at the divine breast is expressed in various ways, including comments on verses that refer to the breasts from the Song of Songs and other Scriptural passages. Elsewhere she is depicted in a lovely metaphor derived from the animal kingdom, by extension also connected to the imagery of the Song of Songs. *Shekhinah* is here the doe of morning, each dawn gathering around her all the beasts of the forest to give them food she has brought from “above.”<sup>191</sup> All of these passages are characterized by a maternally-directed eros, a desire to nurse at the breast of the divine Mother that it takes only a small dose of Freud to see also as the fulfillment of male sexual fantasy.

But despite this well-known feature of *shekhinah* as nourisher/sustainer, something paradoxical is seen in her ability to feed. When viewed from the viewpoint of the upper *sefirot*, *shekhinah* is regarded as empty-handed. She is the “poor one,” an embodiment of poverty itself, an empty vessel until filled by the forces above her. One of her key symbolic manifestations is as moon, dark on her own until she receives the light of the sun. Yet it is only through her that light shines onto the lower world.<sup>192</sup> In a well-known Zohar passage describing *shekhinah* as Sabbath, the paradox of her role as source of nourishment is laid out:

“Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8).” Rabbi Isaac opened by saying: “God blessed the seventh day (Gen. 2:3).” But of the manna Scripture says: “Gather it for six days, but on the Sabbath Day there shall be none (Ex. 16:26).” If there is no sustenance on Seventh Day, what blessing is to be found in it? But thus have we learned: All blessings, both above and below, depend upon Seventh Day. Why was no manna found on the Seventh Day? Because that is the Day by which all the Six Supernal Days are blessed. Each of them sends its own sustenance below on its own day out of that blessing they all receive on the Seventh Day.

*Shekhinah*, Sabbath among the seven lower *sefirot* or “supernal days,” is both pure passivity, receiving her light or strength only from the “male” forces above her, and

189. Honorius, p. 61

190. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Marian Devotion in the Western Church” in *Christian Spirituality II*, ed. J. Raitt (New York: Crossroad Books, 1988), p. 397.

191. Cf. Zohar 1:4a; 2:7a; 3:21b etc.

192. “Sun” and “moon” here are symbolic entities within the realm of the *sefirot*, sun representing *tif'eret* or male principle and moon *shekhinah* or female. The fact that the earth is daily blessed with sunlight is celebrated in the daily Jewish liturgy. The lowered status of the moon is the subject of a well-known aggadic passage in b. Hullin 60b.

the unique font of blessing [in Christian terms: “grace”] upon whom all the worlds depend.<sup>193</sup>

Mary too is nourisher and sustainer of humanity. “The lactating virgin is, of course, one of the most common iconographic themes in all of Christian art.”<sup>194</sup> By the very fact of being a lactating virgin, to be sure, her unique and paradoxical status is clear. The virginal woman from whom one can expect no sustenance has been transformed into a flowing fountain.

Honorius’ *Sigillum* remains in close contact with the liturgical roots of the Mariological reading. He interprets only selected passages of the Cantic, emphasizing those that echo with liturgical familiarity. The first consistently Mariological reading of the entire Song of Songs is found in the commentary of Rupert of Deutz. Rupert reveals that he composed his Commentary only in response to “a certain holy brother, who had seen our Lord Jesus Himself, sitting above the altar on a throne, surrounded by the saints and holding Solomon’s book as an outward sign of the celestial music of love.”<sup>195</sup> Rupert himself was also known for religious experiences of an erotic nature.<sup>196</sup> His *Commentarium*, written in about 1125, and possibly influenced by Honorius’ work, seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity in its day, though it hardly achieved the classic status of Bernard’s *Sermones*.<sup>197</sup> Its influence was mostly limited to Germany, where over 40 manuscripts of it survive. There is no evidence that it was known as far away as southern France or Spain.

For Rupert the Cantic is all about the love of Mother and Son. In its verses Mary contemplates the life of Christ, including his suffering in rejection and death, and she yearns for his presence after His ascension.<sup>198</sup> The relationship of Mary and Christ, while it is primarily that of mother and son, is also that of bride and bridegroom. It is Christ rather than God the Father who plays the male role in Rupert’s reading of the Cantic. Mary’s longing for Him after His ascent is thus changed from that of mother to that of Christ’s beloved. Elsewhere, however, Rupert sees Mary as the bride of *both* God the Father and the Son:

Thus the Virgin Mary, who was the best part of the old church before Christ, meriting being the bride of God the Father in order to become also the pattern of the new church, the bride of God the Son.<sup>199</sup>

193. Zohar 2:88a. This passage is recited by pious Sephardic and Hasidic Jews at the Sabbath Eve table.

194. Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

195. PL 168: 837–8. Cited by Astell, *Song*, p. 33.

196. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 50–52.

197. It should be noted that the Venerable Bede had expressed opposition to the Marian reading of the Cantic. It may be in part due to his influence that Bernard mostly avoids it. Cf. Van Engen, *Rupert*, p. 293. But the Marian reading was mostly associated with liturgy and was simply not thought of before Honorius and Rupert as a framework for consistent Biblical interpretation.

198. *ibid.*, p. 294.

199. De Spiritu Sancto 1:8. Cited by Henri de Lubec, *The Splendour of the Church* (New York, 1956), p. 243.



The dual role of Mary as mother and bride of Christ seems to have been most boldly tackled by William of Newburgh in his relatively obscure *Explanatio sacri epithalamii in matrem sponsi*. William has Christ tell Mary that her role as Mother of God ends with his death, after which she is to love him as bride. The nature of her love is transformed once the respective bodily roles have been left behind.<sup>200</sup> “Once you looked at me with maternal eyes, when I was growing up with you, when, the word of life having been sown, I hung on the cross; but, because I have now ascended to my father, those maternal eyes are exempt from now on from service, and more abundantly you may have the eyes of a lover and a bride.”<sup>201</sup>

This rich and varied symbolization of eros in the Christian texts precedes and provides a context for understanding that which happens a century later in the Jewish mystical sources, especially the Zohar, where images of mother, sister, bride, and a host of others are deeply interlocked. For the Christians this love remains mostly a chaste, maternal *eros*, here transformed on the spiritual/hermeneutical plane to that of the virginal, untouched bride. For the Jews, not having a tradition that glorifies virginity or celibacy, the varieties of female imagery in the imagination of the mystic will culminate in the fantasy of a direct sexual coupling. For the Christian sources the love expressed in these readings of the Canticle is that between Christ, who is God, and His human mother Mary, who is not God. For the Kabbalist, whose God is manifest in the ten *sefirot*, *shekhinah* is within the Godhead and the eros of the Canticle is about the love of God for God. This love is strengthened and supported by human effort, indeed allows itself to be dependent on the energies aroused by Israel in this world, but essentially remains transcendent. Despite these real differences, however, the commonality of symbols, typologies, and structures of thought is truly remarkable.

Scholars have long seen the reading of the Song of Songs as an important point of contact between Judaism and Christianity. Jewish scholarship has generally been quite content to note this, both in the case of the early rabbis' influence on Origen and RaSHI's influence on the Victorines and Nicholas De Lyra. As long as the Jews are the giving partner in this relationship, most scholars of Judaica remain untroubled. Recognizing Jewish *indebtedness* to Christianity, especially on the level of popular piety, is often much more difficult, beclouded by a long history of martyrdom, persecution, and unwanted, often forced, missionary efforts. But there are well-known examples where the flow does go that way. The present treatment is offered in the same spirit, an example of the complex intertwining of these two traditions as they were lived in greater physical and cultural proximity to one another than is often realized, and continued to read, interpret, and be spiritually nourished by the same font of Scripture.

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200. William of Newburgh, *Explanatio sacri epithalamii in matrem sponsi: A Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, ed. J. Gorman, Fribourg, 1960 (*Spicilegium Friburgense* 6).

201. Op. cit., p. 280f. Cited by Rachel Fulton in “Mimetic Devotion,” p. 107.