

# ON JERUSALEM AS A FEMININE AND SEXUAL HYPOSTASIS: FROM LATE ANTIQUITY SOURCES TO MEDIEVAL KABBALAH\*

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## 1. *Introduction*

Modern scholarship of Jewish mysticism has addressed the status of the feminine within the divine realm in different ways. Unlike the more standard views of some Jewish theologians, like Maimonides, who envisioned Jewish thought as subscribing to a stark abstract monotheistic vision, scholars started recently to elaborate on a variety of diverging visions of the deity, some of which include feminine elements that played an important role in medieval Jewish sources known as Kabbalah. The origins of these elements are a matter of dispute. Some scholars trace them to biblical times, as there are descriptions of the divinity or divinities in feminine terms in ancient Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, however, opted for the importance of Gnostic sources as a major clue for understanding the background of early Kabbalistic discussions, and focused his explanation in a shift of the understanding of a Rabbinic

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<sup>1</sup>\* This study is part of a more comprehensive book dealing with the emergence of the Kabbalistic views of femininity in preparation. For the vast scholarly literature on YHWH and the Asherah see, for example, the studies of Moshe Weinfeld, "Feminine Features in the Imagery of God in Israel; the Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Tree," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 46 (1996), pp. 515–529, Mark S. Smith, "God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahveh and His 'Asherah'," *Theological Studies*, vol. 48 (1987), pp. 333–340, or J. A. Emerton, "'Yahweh and his Asherah': The Goddess or Her Symbol?," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 49 (1999), pp. 315–337. See also J. J. Schmidt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *Revue biblique*, vol. 90 (1983), pp. 351–359, and Mayer I. Gruber, *The Motherhood of God and Other Studies* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 3–16.

theological term *Shekhinah*, the divine dwelling, which has been understood as pointing to a female entity.<sup>2</sup> He was however aware of the existence of a motherly image of the term Zion in late Antiquity Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

More recently other scholars, like Arthur Green and Peter Schaefer — capitalizing on Scholem's claim postulating an allegedly significant shift to the feminine valence of the *Shekhinah* for the first time in the *Book of Bahir* as constituting a significant fact, to be explained by specifically medieval circumstances — have proposed the impact of, or the phenomenological similarity to the cult of Mary in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, on the feminine concept of the *Shekhinah* in nascent Kabbalah in the same Catholic regions.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, and independent of this development, Elliot R. Wolfson championed a complex theory concerning the subordination of the feminine aspects in the divine sphere to the masculine divine power and their absorption within the divine male potency, what he described as the “eclipse of the feminine,” sometimes by recreating some form of androgyny.<sup>5</sup> A more balanced analysis of the state of the feminine versus the masculine powers in the Kabbalistic theosophy has been articulated in detail in one of Daniel Abrams' book as well as in one of his recent articles, where he took issue with the reading of the material regarding the meaning of the *Shekhinah* found in the book *Bahir* in recent scholarship.<sup>6</sup> More recently, a detailed analysis of the approach to the feminine divine power in the Zoharic thought has been offered by Shifra Asulin.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Z. Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 165–168; *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), pp. 157–182, and *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, tr. R. Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 106, where the Kabbalistic identification of *Knesset Yisrael* and *Shekhinah* as symbols of the last *sefirah* is described as a “specifically Jewish metamorphosis in which so much of the gnostic substance entered into Jewish tradition.” See also his formulations in *Elements of the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, tr. J. ben Shlomo (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 280–281 (Heb.).

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 263–264.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur I. Green, “*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in its Christian Context,” *AJS Review*, 26 (1) (2002), pp. 1–52, and Peter Schaefer, *Mirror of His Beauty, Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square. Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 95–110, “Woman — The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne,” in L. J. Silberstein and R. L. Cohn (eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York, London: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 166–204, and more recently in his *Language, Eros, and Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), and see also our discussion below.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature: Embodied Forms of Love and Sexuality in the Divine Feminine* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004) [Hebrew], *idem*, “The Condensation of the Symbol ‘*Shekhinah*’ in the Manuscripts of the *Book Bahir*,” *Kabbalah*, vol. 16 (2007), pp. 7–82.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Mystical Commentary of the Song of Songs in the Zohar and its Background* (Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2006) (Heb.).

Those descriptions dealing with the feminine dimensions of the divinity in early Kabbalah neglected the existence of an alternative line of discussions regarding the hypostatic feminine elements that are concerned with a topic rather ignored in the studies of the development of Jewish mysticism: the feminine hypostasis of Jerusalem. Several years ago I suggested a certain type of history that may explain the presence of some feminine dimensions of the divinity in medieval Kabbalah: ancient motifs dealing with feminine deities or feminine dimensions of the one God that have been discussed extensively by scholars of the Bible mentioned above, found their ways to medieval sources, and become part of the complex system of divinity, the ten *sefirot*, itself a development of earlier traditions.<sup>8</sup> Those elements are related to the special status of the nation of Israel,<sup>9</sup> sometimes conceived of as *Knesset Yisrael*, conceived in some cases as the divine wife, or the divine wisdom, *Hokhmah*, or of the *Shekhinah*,<sup>10</sup> and last but not least for the aim of our discussions below, the concepts of the land of Israel and of Jerusalem, conceived of as existing not only on earth but also in the divine realm as the feminine counterpart of the male aspects of the divinity.<sup>11</sup> In some cases, we may speak about a theory of ditheism or binitarianism that assumes a second divine figure as relevant for understanding either the history or the meaning of the ritual.<sup>12</sup> The development of each of these elements should be discussed in itself, as contributing something to a more complex concept of

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<sup>8</sup> Though I have articulated it in the eighties and reiterated later in various discussions, this explanation did not draw the due attention of scholars dealing with the issue of femininity and Kabbalah, who preferred to speculate without using specific written sources, especially manuscripts that had already been printed in my studies.

<sup>9</sup> D. Buzy, "L'allégorie matrimoniale de Jahve et d'Israël et la Cantique des Cantiques," *Viver et Penser*, 3 (1945), pp. 79–90, and N. Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People* (Kok Pharos, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> See the rather neglected studies of Charles Mopsik, "Une querelle à Jérusalem: la féminité de la Chekhina dans la Cabale," *Pardes*, 12 (1990), pp. 18–21, and Nicolas Sed, "La *Shekhinta* et les amis 'Araméens'," in R. G. Coquin (ed.), *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont* (Genève: Patrick Cramer, 1988), pp. 233–242.

<sup>11</sup> See "Kabbalism and Rabbinism; on G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism," *Modern Judaism*, 11 (1991), pp. 281–296, "Jerusalem in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Thought," in J. Praver and H. Ben Shammai (eds.), *The History of Jerusalem: Crusaders and Ayyubids (1099–1250)* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben-Zvi Publications, 1991), pp. 265–276 (Heb.), an essay upon which I shall draw heavily below, and *Kabbalah & Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), *passim*, and my study "The Triple Family: Sources for the Feminine Perception of Deity in Early Kabbalah," forthcoming in *Reuven Bonfil's Festschrift* (Jerusalem, 2009) (Heb.). For the type of historical explanation that I propose in the present article, namely to see in the late antiquity evidence traces of ancient Jewish mythologoumena, in our case of feminine hypostases, which later on impacted early Kabbalah see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 30–34, where I took advantage of this line of explanation also relying on the developments related to Jerusalem.

<sup>12</sup> Binitarian views can employ either male or female hypostatic entities as closely related to a higher deity.

the divine in the main line of Kabbalah, the theosophical-theurgical one, as a compound of ten divine powers, some of which have feminine aspects. Without a detailed understanding of all these developments as a whole and the possible contribution of each of them to the broader picture I doubt whether the understanding of the processes that contributed to the emergence of theosophy in early Kabbalah can be discussed seriously.

The present study will try to map only quite a small fragment of the extensive picture found in various Jewish thinkers through centuries, namely the feminine descriptions of Jerusalem as part of the divine world. Each envisioned the city within his religious, political or social frameworks, which dramatically shaped the concept, the image, or the status of the city. Here we shall limit our discussions to the emergence of the feminine, and sometimes sexual, aspects of Jerusalem as a hypostasis, ignoring other forms of symbolism related to this city, occurring in other forms of medieval Jewish speculations, including the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, or issues related to Jerusalem as a place of theophany or of the eschatological events.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *Jerusalem as a Feminine Hypostasis in Some Late Antiquity Sources*

Jerusalem, the city and the image, was a permanent challenge for many people: for religious leaders, for politicians, for its inhabitants in the present, and for those who want or wanted to be so.

The emergence of various conceptions of "Jerusalem" in Jewish mysticism is, too, a consequence also of the inner structure of the new conceptual systems that developed throughout the ages: each mystical system produced its own Jerusalem. The authors of the literatures known as Midrash and the Talmud, for whom the very performance of religious deeds was cardinal, adhered as closely as possible to the earthly Jerusalem, the sole city in which it was possible to practically observe a portion of the Divine commandments; they transformed the heavenly Jerusalem into an extension of the earthly city.<sup>14</sup> The spiritual significance of Jerusalem is probably enhanced when the Jews are living far away from the physical city, unable to visit it as pilgrims and

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<sup>13</sup> To be sure, Jerusalem is envisioned as a feminine entity several times in the Hebrew Bible, especially in Ezekiel 16 and 23. Below, however, I am concerned with a feminine hypostatic vision of the city, not with a grammatical or figurative reference. For the thirteenth-century allegorical interpretations of Zion and Jerusalem, see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, MA 1980), pp. 75–78.

<sup>14</sup> See E. E. Urbach, "The heavenly and the Earthly Jerusalem in Rabbinic Thought," in *Jerusalem through the Ages (Proceedings of the 25th Archaeological Convention of the Israel Exploration Society)* (Jerusalem, 1968), pp. 157–171. For a criticism of Urbach's position, see Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. LXXIII (1980), p. 587 n. 89.

even less to conduct there the rites connected with Jerusalem as the place of the Temple, as indeed was the case of the Jewish diaspora since the Hellenistic period.<sup>15</sup> This spiritual sense was attached, to be sure, not to the spiritual Jerusalem in heaven or to that on earth, which both were not seen by the authors to be cited below, but to the word Jerusalem, as found in a sacred text or in a tradition. This nominal nature of the symbolization of Jerusalem is paramount for the following discussions, most of them written by persons who did not have the opportunity to see the terrestrial Jerusalem.

Paul, in contrast, championed the centrality of heavenly Jerusalem, a vision unfettered by the biblical commandments, and even denounced the contemporaneous Jerusalem, that of the Judeo-Christian community, which still observed them.<sup>16</sup> Christian commentators who followed the Pauline doctrine widened the breach between the real city and the abstract concept of the “true” Jerusalem as symbolizing the Christian church.<sup>17</sup> Only in the wake of activity of a religious nature, such as pilgrimages and the building of Jerusalem, culminating in the Crusades — all deeds whose initiators and implementors were generally not Christian scholars<sup>18</sup> — did the earthly Jerusalem resume a more prominent place in Christian consciousness.

Medieval forms of Judaism maintained the position formulated in the Talmudic and Midrashic literature regarding the importance of the physical Jerusalem. Along with the *halakhah*, however, which regulates daily activity, the Jews of that period also engaged in philosophic speculation, expressed to a great degree in the spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures. The term “spiritual interpretation” refers both to the allegorical-philosophical school and the symbolic, Kabbalistic method. This system of exegesis has much in common, in terms of conceptual foundations, with Christian allegory, and with the Philonic modes of interpretation. The importance of heavenly Jerusalem for the Christian scholars, who engaged mainly in exegesis of the sacred scriptures, was shared by the Jewish thinkers, whether they adhered to the philosophical or the Kabbalistic trend. Thus the importance of the heavenly Jerusalem increased among “learned” Judaism, occupying a position of far greater consequence than that it had been afforded in the earlier Jewish literature. In contrast, however, to the Christian tendency to spiritualize, which emphasized

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<sup>15</sup> See J. A. Seeligman, “Jerusalem in Jewish–Hellenistic Thought,” *Judah and Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1957), p. 195 (Heb.); Moshe Weinfeld, “Inheritance of the Land — Privilege versus Obligation: The Concept of the Promise of the Land in the Sources of the First and Second Temple Periods,” *Zion*, vol. 49 (1984), pp. 133–139 (Heb.).

<sup>16</sup> E. E. Urbach, “The heavenly and the Earthly Jerusalem in Rabbinic Thought,” *art. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> See Joshua Prawer, “Jerusalem in the Christian Perspective of the Early Middle Ages,” in Joshua Prawer (ed.), *The History of Jerusalem. The Early Islamic Period (638–1099)* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben-Zvi Publications, 1987), pp. 249–281 (Heb.).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254 ff., 273 ff.

the importance of the heavenly Jerusalem with a consequential serious depreciation in the status or even in some instances total disregard of the physical Jerusalem,<sup>19</sup> Jewish authors attempt to integrate into their works Jerusalem's existence on two levels — the earthly and the heavenly, without subsuming the importance of the former. This effort of portraying a celestial Jerusalem corresponding to the terrestrial one, is part of a larger vision, which includes also the existence of a celestial temple, corresponding to the earthly one.<sup>20</sup>

This integration is achieved in Kabbalistic thought in a manner which differs intrinsically from that adopted by the school of philosophical-allegorical exegesis, including that found in ecstatic Kabbalah. The theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists emphasized the essential connection between the spiritual and terrestrial cities of Jerusalem — thus reinforcing the status of earthly Jerusalem, which drew sanctity from its heavenly source. Jewish allegorical exegesis, on the other hand, had difficulty in incorporating the centrality of Jerusalem within its philosophical system, which sought chiefly to reveal verities independent of time or space, and in certain instances this commentary contains nuances extremely similar to those appearing in Christian exegesis. A distinct approach is the systematically allegorical interpretation of “Jerusalem” in the ecstatic Kabbalah founded by R. Abraham Abulafia's and R. Joseph Gikatilla's writings, in which the specific structure of the consonants of the Hebrew name of the city becomes the subject of study, accompanied by quite blatant disregard of the physical city. Since it has been addressed elsewhere I shall not discuss it here,<sup>21</sup> as we are concerned with the feminine dimensions imagined by other type of Kabbalistic thought.

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<sup>19</sup> On heavenly Jerusalem in medieval Christian spirituality see Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study in Monastic Culture*, tr. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 54–56, Sylvia Schein, “Jerusalem in Christian Spirituality in the Crusader Period,” in J. Prawer and H. Ben Shammai (eds.), *The History of Jerusalem: Crusaders and Ayyubids (1099–1250)* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben-Zvi Publications, 1991), pp. 213–263 (Heb.), Bianca Kühnel, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Christian Art of the First Millennium* (Rome, Freiburg, Vienna: Herder, 1987), W.D. Davies, “Jerusalem and the Land in the Christian Tradition,” in M.A. Tanenbaum and R.J.Z. Werblowsky (eds.), *The Jerusalem Colloquium on Religion, Peoplehood, Nation and Land* (Truman Research Institute, Institute Publications, 1972), pp. 115–157, Guy G. Stroumsa, “Mystical Jerusalems” in Lee I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusalem — Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 349–370. For the ambiguous approach to Jerusalem in early Christian thought, see Guy G. Stroumsa, “Which Jerusalem?” *Cathedra* 11 (1979), 119–124 (Hebrew). A much more positive approach toward the earthly Jerusalem is found, however, in Joachim of Fiore's thought and that of his followers.

<sup>20</sup> For the importance of the principle of correspondence or analogy, especially insofar as the Temple is concerned, in both Rabbinic and Kabbalistic thought see the comprehensive study of Maurizio Mottotese, *Analogy in Midrash and Kabbalah: Interpretive Projections of the Sanctuary and Ritual* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2007), which comprises interesting discussions about Jerusalem and its supernal paradigm.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Idel, “Jerusalem in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Thought,” *art. cit.*, pp. 276–283.

The words “Jerusalem” and “Zion” have undergone many amazing transformations since their appearance in the Biblical literature. First we may discern an outstanding change occurred in the Bible itself: these two words changed from names of the city or of a fortress, sometimes functioning as synonyms, to appellations of the Jewish people, and at times also of *’Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel) as a whole.<sup>22</sup> However, the most important change occurred in post-biblical literature, and is constituted by the emergence of the technical term “heavenly Jerusalem,” *Yerushalayyim shel ma’alah*, which should be translated literally as “Jerusalem that is on high.” This concept appears in written Hebrew texts only after the destruction of the Second Temple.<sup>23</sup> The first indications for the shift that became important for an understanding of the development of the symbolism of Jerusalem and Zion do not, however, appear in the extant early Jewish sources; these words were not transformed into symbols, but rather continued to designate the city and the Jewish people. The descriptions of Jerusalem in the New Testament, on the other hand, attests to the antiquity of the feminine erotic conception of “Jerusalem;” unlike several of the Jewish and Christian depictions of Jerusalem as a mother<sup>24</sup> mourning, according to several sources, for her son, the apocalyptic vision of John states:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See B. Dinaburg (Dinur), “Zion and Jerusalem: Their Role in the Historic Consciousness of Israel,” *Zion*, vol. 16 (1951), p. 3 (repr. in his *Historical Writings* (Jerusalem, 1975), II, pp. 14–15 (Heb.)), and David Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 167–202. See also the contributions of Joseph Yahalom and Abraham Grossman, in Joshua Prawer (ed.), *The History of Jerusalem. The Early Islamic Period (638–1099)* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben-Zvi Publications, 1987), pp. 179–213, 215–234 respectively (Heb.). See also the discussions of Midrashic material on the heavenly Jerusalem in Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind. A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), pp. 148–154, 173–177 (Heb.).

<sup>23</sup> See E.E. Urbach, “The heavenly and the Earthly Jerusalem in Rabbinic Thought,” *art. cit.*, p. 165; see also: R. S. Eccles, “The Purpose of the Hellenistic Patterns of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in J. Neusner (ed.), *Religion in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 218–219.

<sup>24</sup> See Galatians, 4:26, 5:1. See also G. Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 262–263, and Victor Aptowitz, “The Heavenly Temple in the Agada,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 2 (1930–1931), pp. 267–268 (Heb.).

<sup>25</sup> *Revelation of John* 21:1–2. See *Revelation* 21:9–11, where we read: “Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven plagues, and he spoke to me saying, ‘Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal,” also *ibid.* 3:12. For the scholarship on this issue see, e.g., Loren L. Johns, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the

For the first time in a written text, Jerusalem — albeit only in its future state — assumes a clear sexual coloration: it is altered from a “mother” to a “bride,” a hypostatic representation with clearly erotic connotations. The adornment is part of the splendor characteristic of the descriptions of the supernal Jerusalem in general found in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic sources. However, here it is predicated on a vision of a feminine supernal entity prepared for some form of wedding. What exactly Jerusalem is, is however, not clear. It may stand for the ecclesia, namely the corporate personality of the Christians, who are the feminine counterpart of Jesus, conceived of as the bridegroom. In any case, here we have some ambiguity between the descent of Jerusalem from heaven and its descending from God. Does it mean that Jerusalem, like her bridegroom, Jesus, is divine too?

Apparently under the influence of this Christian conception, or under that of its hypothetical Jewish sources, the term “Jerusalem” acquired a feminine meaning in its transformation into a symbol in several extant writings of early Gnosticism. In describing the opinions of the Gnostics from the school of Valentinus (2nd century), Irenaeus writes:

For they maintain that their Aeons, and gods, and father, and lords, are also still further termed heavens, together with their Mother, whom they do also call “the Earth,” and “Jerusalem,” while they also style her many other names.<sup>26</sup>

This passage constitutes an example of what is called in Gnostic texts *syzygies*, namely sexualized couples of hypostatic powers that constitute the Gnostic *pleroma*. The pair in our text is constituted by the father, on the one hand, and the Mother, and thus also Jerusalem and earth, as indubitably a feminine term, which should be understood on the one hand in the context of the term “fathers,” who is understood as a term for divine powers, and in relation to the Gnostics, implicitly viewed as the sons of the supernal parents.

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Apocalypse of John,” in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), vol. III, pp. 255–279, especially p. 264, note 31 for an updated bibliography, Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Dream of a New Jerusalem in Qumran,” *idem*, pp. 231–254, especially pp. 251–253, and David M. Carr, *Erotic Word, Sexuality, Spirituality and the Bible* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 168–169.

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 1, 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1977), p. 463. See also the interesting parallel found in another Valentinian passage preserved by Irenaeus, *ibid.*, I, 5, 3, p. 323: “The mother they call also the Ogdoad, Sophia, Terra, Jerusalem, Holy Spirit, and, with the masculine reference, Lord. Her place of habitation is an intermediate one, above the Demiurge indeed, but below and outside the Pleroma, even to the end.” This text has been discussed several times by Carl G. Jung. See, e.g., his *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, tr. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 401. On Earth as a feminine hypostasis in late Antiquity texts see M. Idel, “The Land of Israel in Medieval Kabbalah,” in L. Hoffman (ed.), *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspective* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), pp. 171–172. For the many names attributed to hypostatic powers found in Gnostic thought in general see M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections. Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 239.



In any case this passage refers to a supernal feminine hypostasis, discussed together with a male one. To what extent this reflects also some form of sexual overtone is an open question. In another text related again to Valentinus, as it was preserved by Hippolytus, it is stated about the angels that they dwell

in Jerusalem, which is above, which is in heaven. For this Jerusalem is Sophia, she (that is) outside (the Pleroma), and her spouse is the Joint Fruit of the Pleroma.<sup>27</sup>

In these two texts the word “Jerusalem” symbolizes a feminine cosmic entity, which is the creator of our world. In both cases, the male counterpart is mentioned explicitly. The meaning of the phrase “Joint Fruit of the Pleroma” is Jesus<sup>28</sup> and it is obvious that it represents the male part of a syzygy. Therefore the expression “Jerusalem that is in heaven” is predicated upon an entity that is related to a higher divine structure, in a rather hypostatic sexual manner.

In other Gnostic texts, Jerusalem also represents the material from which the world was created, the primordial chaos. This matter, which originates in Sophia, is described as follows:

And this, he [i.e., Valentinus] says, is what Moses asserts: “The earth was invisible, and unfashioned” [Genesis 1:2].<sup>29</sup> This (substance) is, he says, the good (and) heavenly Jerusalem, into which God has promised to conduct the children of Israel, saying, “I will bring you into a land flowing with milk and honey” [Leviticus 20:24].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, vol. VI, 29, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, p. 88. For Jerusalem as the dwelling place of the archons, see also *The First Apocalypse of Jacob*, in *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 243. For the possible impact of this passage on Soloviov, see Samuel D. Cioran, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), pp. 19–20. For the term Pleroma in the context of early Kabbalah see: G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–75; and the different view expressed in M. Idel, “On the Problem of the Sources of the Bahir,” in J. Dan (ed.), *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe (Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, VI, pp. 3–4) (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 67–72 (Heb.). See in texts written in Hebrew and dealing with *Male*, indubitably available to authors in the Middle Ages, in the book of *Shi’ur Qomah*, in *Sefer ha-Razim* and in rabbinic literature. See M. Idel, “On the Problem of the Sources of the Bahir,” *art. cit.*, pp. 67–70; D. Abrams, in his Introduction to his edition of the book of *Bahir*, pp. 5–6; and Yair Lorberboim, *Imago Dei: Rabbinic Literature, Maimonides and Nahmanides* (Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 208–218 (Heb.).

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, p. 87, where the Joint Fruit of the Pleroma is explicitly described as Jesus. See especially the analysis of Luse Abramowski, “Female Figures in the Gnostic *Sondergut* in Hippolytus’ *Refutatio*,” in Karen King (ed.), *Images of Feminine in Gnosticism* (Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2000), pp. 150–152. For the description of the divine male power as comprising the higher divine powers in theosophical Kabbalah see below some discussions of the seventh or ninth *sefirah*, *Tiferet* or *Yesod* as comprising all the other powers, or *sefirot*.

<sup>29</sup> This philosophical interpretation of this verse deserves a special investigation.

<sup>30</sup> Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, VI, 25, p. 86.

The assumption is that Jerusalem is a preexistent entity, the raw material for the creation of the world, and at the same time quite a positive concept.<sup>31</sup> By identifying it with the earth, that is flowing with milk and honey, I assume that some more specifically feminine view was intended just as in one of the passages cited above it is identified with the Sophia.

The four Valentinian passages cited above share a common feature beyond the feminine hypostatic status of Jerusalem: the city has been described as identical to earth, in itself described also a supernal hypostasis. The concept of the earthy city has almost completely disappeared, being replaced by the symbolism of an early phase of the cosmogony. This is an interim stage denoting the state of Sophia (Wisdom) after it has left the Pleroma, i.e., the primordial matter from which the world was made, and preceding the formation of the physical world.<sup>32</sup>

A more positive, though implicit assessment of the significance of Jerusalem, though not a hypostatic view, appears in the *Gospel of Philip*, one of the major Gnostic writings discovered in Nag Hammadi:

There were three buildings specifically for sacrifice in Jerusalem. The one facing west was called "the Holy." Another facing south was called "the Holy of the Holy." The third facing east was called "the Holy of the Holies," the place where only the high priest enters. Baptism is the "Holy" building. Redemption is "the Holy of the Holy." "The Holy of Holies" is the bridal chamber. Baptism includes the resurrection [and the] redemption; the redemption [takes place] in the bridal chamber. But the bridal chamber is in that which is superior to [it and the others] because you will not find [anything like] it.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The connection between Jerusalem and the material whence the world was created also appears in another Gnostic text edited by Charlotte A. Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise Contained in the Codex Brucianus* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 136, and see the comments of the editor, p. 105. See also F. Sagnard, *La Gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irénée* (Paris, 1947), pp. 499–509. For another connection between motifs found in this work and Jewish discussions see M. Idel, "The Image of Man above the Sefirot," *Da'at*, 4 (1980), pp. 46–47 (Heb.), and Arthur Green, *Keter, The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 30–32.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of some elements in the book of *Bahir* and Valentinian Gnosis as to the feminine elements in see Schaefer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, pp. 140–142.

<sup>33</sup> Following the translation of W. W. Isenberg, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 142. For the affinity between the concept of the Holy of the Holies presented here as the place of coupling and the view presented in the *Zohar*, see below. It is noteworthy that the negative conception of Sophia in the *Gospel of Philip* corresponds to a certain aspect of the *Zohar's* conception of the Divine Presence, as G. Scholem notes, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, p. 303, note 92. Yehuda Liebes has shown the affinity between this Gospel and the *Zohar*. See his study "The Messiah of the Zohar: The Messianic Character of R. Shimon bar Yohai," *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 230–232 (Heb.). For this citation from the *Gospel of Philip* and its other Jewish parallels see also M. Idel, "Métaphores et pratiques sexuelles dans la Cabale," in Ch. Mopsik (ed.), *Lettre sur la sainteté* (Paris, 1986), pp. 339–340. On Temple-symbolism in Valentinian Gnosis, see April D. DeConick, "Heavenly Temple Traditions and

In this instance, the special structure of the Temple, obviously described a version of the tripartite pattern of the temple in Jerusalem, symbolizes the processes connected with the salvation of the soul: baptism, redemption, and the unification with the Source. I am not sure whether indeed the three buildings here reflect separate structures, or a more comprehensive building that contains the other, as in the Jewish temple.

Here too, as in the texts adduced above relating to Jerusalem as Sophia, the word “Jerusalem” bears, at least implicitly as the place of the third building, a certain sexual valence. These more positive approaches to Jerusalem may point to the existence of even earlier pre-Gnostic Jewish traditions, apparently only a portion of which are extant, and in which Jerusalem symbolizes a feminine entity at the end of the divine Pleroma, in a way we found in the Valentinian texts. These hypothetical Jewish pre-Gnostic, and perhaps also pre-Christian views, have probably influenced the formation of the early Kabbalistic representations of Jerusalem, and perhaps also of Zion, as we shall see immediately below.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. *The Symbolism of Jerusalem in Theosophical Kabbalah: Provençal and Catalan*

The sources of the main school of Kabbalah, that I proposed to describe as theosophical-theurgical are numerous and diverse. This variety should be assumed because of the diversity of the Kabbalistic views found in the earliest extant documents belonging to this school. The traditions extant in the book of *Bahir* that was conceived by Gershom Scholem and his followers as the main conceptual source of this Kabbalistic school, do not contain a significant and methodical discussion of Jerusalem and Zion as a sexualized couple,<sup>35</sup> though the concept of such a couple of divine powers is found there, but it has been expressed by other symbols. This is also the case in the extant writings of

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Valentinian Worship: A Case for First-century Christology in the Second Century,” in Carrey C. Newman, James R. Davila & Gladys S. Lewis (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 308–341.

<sup>34</sup> To be sure: as we shall see below, feminine concepts of Jerusalem are found also in Jewish material, like in the Aramaic translation known as Onqelos, but I did not yet find an hypostatic feminine view, which is the topic of my investigation here.

<sup>35</sup> See *The Book Bahir*, ed. by Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), p. 131, par. 26, where it is claimed that the gates of Zion are “from the side of evil.” In par. 85, p. 171, Zion is a symbol of the city of David, i.e., kingship. See also Carola Goetzen Krieg, “The Feminine Aspect of God in the *Book Bahir*,” in Yvonne Sherwood, Darlene Bird (eds.), *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text* (Ashgate, Aldershot, Burlington, 2005), pp. 15–28 and the important article of D. Abrams, “The Condensation of the Symbol ‘Shekhinah’ in the Manuscripts of the *Book Bahir*,” especially p. 52, and compare to Green’s contention as to the presence of the symbol of Jerusalem in this book, in “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary,” p. 16.

the Provençal master R. Isaac the Blind. Thus, provided this double absence, we may assume the existence of an additional channel of transmission of esoteric knowledge that nourished early Kabbalists, different from the extant discussions found in these two early Kabbalistic sources.

On the other hand, in one of the earliest books acquainted with theosophical symbolism, which refers many times to both Zion and Jerusalem, R. Yehudah ben Yaqar of Barcelone's commentary on the Jewish prayerbook, it seems that the two terms are synonymous and both are related to the last *sefirah*, the feminine *Malkhut*, Jerusalem has been understood at least in one case as a bride and God as her bridegroom.<sup>36</sup> My assumption is that despite the similarity to the view of the *Bahir*, ben Yaqar did not draw his view from that book.<sup>37</sup>

However, the symbolically differentiated significance of Jerusalem and Zion appears already in the writings of R. Ezra ben Shlomo (Gerona, Spain, first third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century), who offered for the first time in a rather systematic manner, also a sexual color for this distinction. Given the centrality of this distinction for the development of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, I shall elaborate on the statements to this effect found in his writings.<sup>38</sup>

In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, he writes:

“I will betake to the mount of myrrh” [Song of Songs 4:6] — this refers to Jerusalem, a blessing in Jerusalem which is on the mount of myrrh. “To the hill of frankincense” — this is Mount Zion. And Jerusalem resembles something which is red, an allegory to the attribute of strict justice, as it is said, “where righteousness dwelt” [Isaiah 1:21], and Mount Zion, on the hill of frankincense, [an allegory] to the attribute of mercy.<sup>39</sup>

R. Ezra undoubtedly alludes to the two *sefirot*: *Hesed* [divine love; the fourth *sefirah*]—whiteness [*loven*]—the hill of frankincense [*levonah*]—the attribute of mercy; and *Gevurah* [divine power; the fifth *sefirah*]—redness—the mount of myrrh—Jerusalem—the attribute of strict justice. It may reasonably be assumed that the symbols found in this text also possess an erotic connotation; elsewhere in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, R. Ezra writes about the sowing of seed: “For the male comes from the supplement of the male drop which

<sup>36</sup> *The Commentary on the Prayers and Blessings*, ed. Shmuel Ashkenazi (Jerusalem, 1979), second edition, part I, pp. 18–19, 32, 43, 57, 59, 87, 95, part II, pp. 40, 41, 102.

<sup>37</sup> See M. Idel, “Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 62 (1993), pp. 285–286 (Heb.).

<sup>38</sup> In the following I draw on material I collected in earlier discussions in Hebrew on R. Ezra in my article “Jerusalem in 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Thought.” More recently topics discussed below have been elaborated also in the important study of H. Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–161.

<sup>39</sup> Ed. Ch. D. Chavel, *The Collected Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. II (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 495 (Heb.).

yields white after the female yields red.”<sup>40</sup> The colors white and red appear here as symbols of the male and the female, i.e., *Hesed* and *Gevurah* respectively. R. Ezra further writes, in his *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadot*:

In the [talmudic] tractate of Niddah [it is written]:<sup>41</sup> “There are three partners [in the conception] of a person — his father sows white and his mother sows red, i.e., the seed of the mother is red because it is related to the attribute of strict justice, while the seed of the father, which alludes to mercy, is white.”

The conspicuous erotic nature of the relationship between Jerusalem and Zion is also present in another aggadic commentary of R. Ezra. He writes about the state of the linkage between the Holy One, blessed be He, and Jerusalem during the time of the Exile:

“I will not come in the city” [Hosea 11:9] [means] I shall not be copulate. And similarly, it is said, “and Jerusalem shall dwell<sup>42</sup> secure” [Zechariah 14:11]. These things are already known about Jerusalem and Zion. And it is said about Jerusalem, “that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt” [Isaiah 1:21]; and it is said about Mount Zion, “from the Lord of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion” [*ibid.* 8:18]. This is as we have written, and it says, “The Lord shall reign forever” [Psalms 146:10], “Blessed is the Lord from Zion, He who dwells in Jerusalem” [*ibid.* 135:21]. “Jerusalem built up” refers to the earthly one, as a city knit together with the heavenly one.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534. The discussion also appears in the R. Ezra's *Commentary on the 'Aggadot*, and had influenced R. Bahya ben Asher. See Ephraim Gottlieb, *The Kabbalah in the Writings of R. Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sepher, 1970), pp. 60–61 and note 105 (Heb.). See also R. Menahem Recanati, *Commentary on the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 61a.

<sup>41</sup> Printed in *Likkutei Shikhebah ve-Peah* (Ferrara 1555), fol. 14a; see also the commentary of R. Menahem Recanati on the Torah, fol. 11d. For the *sefirot* of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* as male and female respectively see the Kabbalistic interpretation of R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres to the concept of *du partzufin* — the two-faced type of androgyne — discussed in G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–218; M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128–136, “Androgyny and Equality in the theosophico-theurgical Kabbalah,” *Dio- genes*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2005), pp. 27–38, and *Kabbalah & Eros*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–103; and Elliot R. Wolfson, ‘Woman — The Feminine as Other,’ and *Circle in the Square*, especially, pp. 205–206, note 53. The symbolism of *du partzufin* — the two-faced human and divine entity — as an allusion to the *sefirot* of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* is characteristic of the Kabbalah of Provence and those Kabbalists following it. In the Nahmanidean Kabbalistic school, however, the expression *du partzufin* refers to two other *sefirot*: *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. See M. Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–65. This is the reason why I am not sure whether indeed R. Isaac the Blind had expressed a vision in which Zion and Jerusalem are male and female, corresponding to *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, respectively. Compare, however, Pedaya's conjecture, in *Name and Sanctuary*, *op. cit.*, p. 154, note 29, which is nevertheless possible.

<sup>42</sup> The form of Hebrew verb *Tishkon*, is the same verb related to the noun *Shekhinah*, creating therefore a nexus between Jerusalem and *Shekhinah*.

<sup>43</sup> *Likkutei Shikhebah u-Feah*, fol. 6b (Tractate Ta'anit), and the late 13<sup>th</sup> century codex MS Parma, de Rossi 1390, fol. 113b. In my opinion, this version is preferable to that cited by his

The entire passage, or its earlier source, is predicated upon the sexual reading of the verb *avo*, found in the verse of Hosea. While its original meaning is “enter,” semantically speaking it may signify also “will have an intercourse with.” This sexual reading is possible if the verse from Psalm 132 is read not as dealing with synonyms: Zion and Jerusalem, but as references to two different entities, male and female respectively. What is quintessential for my discussions below is that the verse of Hosea has been attributed to God, and this is also the way in which it has been perceived in the Kabbalistic interpretations. This unequivocally sexual interpretation of the verse become a cornerstone for many Kabbalistic discussions found in the three most important corpora in Kabbalah: the Zoharic, the Cordoverian and the Lurianic literatures, as well as the views of the influential R. Isaiah Horowitz and R. Moshe David Luzzatto, only a few of them will be mentioned below in this limited context.

R. Ezra explicitly claims that the polar understanding of the symbolic and the sexual valences of the terms Zion and Jerusalem as a couple is already known. This is just one case in his writings in which he claims to have received symbolic interpretations of biblical terms.<sup>44</sup> In this case, however, there is supporting material to confirm it, as seen in the material adduced above, as to the sexual meaning of Jerusalem as a female.

The definition of the relationship between Jerusalem and Zion as coupling appears also in a text in the *Commentary on the Pentateuch* of R. Menahem ben Benjamin Recanati, an Italian Kabbalist (early 14<sup>th</sup> century). This text apparently is a faithful transmission, or at the very least continuation, of the conceptual position of R. Ezra.<sup>45</sup> Recanati writes:

There is an allusion to his pure coupling<sup>46</sup> in what is written in Chronicles:<sup>47</sup> “Jerahmeel had another wife, whose name was *‘Atarah*.” Understand this well: she was called *‘Atarah*, for she encompasses [*me’atteret*] all the degrees<sup>48</sup> that pre-

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compatriot and younger contemporary R. Azriel of Gerona in his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*, ed. by I. Tishbi (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945), pp. 29–30, which makes no mention of the coupling. However, the words “no copulating” are not to be regarded as a later accretion, since I have found them in a citation from the commentary of R. Ezra on *‘aggadot* already appearing in a work written in the second half of the thirteenth century; the anonymous commentary on prayers found in many manuscripts, inter alia, in MS Paris, BN 848, fol. 12b. See now the edition of Adam Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), pp. 78–79, 225 (Heb.) For the rhetorical background of the statement of R. Yohanan in its Talmudic context, see R. Kimelman, “Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs,” *art. cit.*, pp. 586–587.

<sup>44</sup> See M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>45</sup> Recanati mainly copied the statement of R. Ezra. Several lines after the passage cited below, Recanati copied R. Ezra’s commentary on the above-cited dictum from *BT, Niddah*.

<sup>46</sup> Of scholars on Sabbath eves; this topic was discussed by Recanati before the passage cited here.

<sup>47</sup> Following I Chronicles 2:26.

<sup>48</sup> Namely the nine higher *sefirot*.

cede her and she was included in them all. Accordingly, King Solomon made six steps for the throne; the general rule was to join them together and not to lop off between them, as he said, “and both have the same life-breath” [Ecclesiastes 3:19]. It is further written: “Awake, awake, O Zion! Clothe yourself in splendor; put on your robes of majesty, Jerusalem, holy city!” [Isaiah 52:1]. When you contemplate [the meaning of] this verse, you will discover the union of Zion and Jerusalem, i.e., the attribute of mercy with the attribute of strict justice, and the union of the heavenly Jerusalem with the majesty of Israel.<sup>49</sup>

Recanati’s view that Jerusalem and Zion correspond to the attributes of strict justice and mercy respectively clearly parallels R. Ezra’s teachings on this topic. Recanati, as does R. Ezra in his commentary on the tractate *Megillah*, defines the relationship between Zion and Jerusalem with the term “union,” and it may reasonably be assumed that the “pure coupling” which means coupling in a state of purity, at the beginning of Recanati’s passage is of significance within this context.

R. Ezra, apparently in the first clear instance in the Kabbalistic literature, and Recanati following, drew an emphatic distinction between Zion and Jerusalem; they cease to be synonymous, as it is often times in the Hebrew Bible, and are transformed into symbols of the male force confronting the female force within the Godhead.

The identification of Jerusalem with a female entity as part of a sexually distinguished couple is therefore not a Kabbalistic innovation, and it is related to the above-mentioned early traditions, or to other, parallel ones which have not survived. The conception of Zion as a clearly male symbol however has, to the best of our knowledge, no basis in the early sources — both Jewish and non-Jewish — and this apparently is an innovation from the school of the Kabbalists of Provence or Gerona. The clearly masculine nature of Zion recurs in other places in R. Ezra’s writings, even if the sexual element is not stressed.

In addition to its above-mentioned identification with the *sefirah* of *Hesed*, Zion is associated also with the *sefirah* of *Yesod* [foundation; *sefirah* no. 9], which is the most prominent male *sefirah*. Explaining the Talmudic dictum “The world was created [starting] from Zion,”<sup>50</sup> R. Ezra writes: “For it is the middle point, and it is opposite the middle line, which is the beginning of the two worlds.”<sup>51</sup> Zion is the center of the world — the middle point<sup>52</sup> — just

<sup>49</sup> *Commentary on the Torah*, fol. 11d. This discussion is alluded to by Recanati, *ibid.*, fol. 82b.

<sup>50</sup> *BT. Yoma*, fol. 54b. For the female nature of Zion in the Biblical sources, see Barbara B. Kaiser, “Poet as Female Impersonator: The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering,” *Journal of Religion*, vol. 67 (1987), pp. 164–182 and above note 1.

<sup>51</sup> Printed in *Liqutei Shikbehab u-Fe'ah*, fol. 11b.

<sup>52</sup> The term middle point in reference to the passage in *Yoma* also appears in the writings of R. Ezra’s contemporary, Nahmanides; see the latter’s commentary on Job 38:6, in Chavel (ed.), *Collected Writings of Nahmanides* (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. I, p. 116 (Heb.).

as the middle line is the center of the seven *sefirot* of the building, namely the lower seven *sefirot*: Zion is a geographic location, the center of the lower world, symbolic of the higher Zion, the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, the center of the world of the *sefirot*. It is in light of this analysis that we are to understand R. Ezra's statement in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

The middle line, which is [stemming] from the attribute of mercy, which is Zion; this is the meaning of what is said, "From Zion, perfect in beauty, God appeared" [Psalms 50:2].<sup>53</sup>

R. Ezra was not the first to draw the connection between Zion and the middle line; in his *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadot* he brings, in the name of the pious one, i.e., his teacher Isaac the Blind, the following teaching about Zion, without mentioning however Jerusalem as its counterpart:

For it is the middle line, the drawing down of vitality and watering, which extends from the brain<sup>54</sup> to the spinal cord, extending from there to the sinews in all directions.<sup>55</sup>

The passage describes in fact the descent of the seed from the brain to the male organ, as part of a physiology current in the Middle Ages, which informed many Kabbalistic texts, as we shall see also below.

The three types of symbolisms connected with Jerusalem and Zion, one the sexual, the other that of the center, (implicitly also an omphalic perception), and finally the image of the spinal cord descending for the brain, and watering Jerusalem as a feminine power, which occupy a prominent position in the writings of R. Ezra, constitute main patterns in the development of the symbolism of theosophical Kabbalah concerning the two geographical designations, as we shall see in more details below. There are a considerable number of deviations in certain details from the expositions of R. Ezra, and obviously expansions and developments, but major conceptual innovations as to the significance of Jerusalem are present only in the discussions of an-

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<sup>53</sup> Ed. Chavel, p. 512. It should be noted that in two other passages R. Ezra maintains that it is the totality of *'Eretz Israel* that corresponds to the middle line or the inner line; see his *Commentary on 'Aggadot*, printed in *Liqqutei Shikhehah ve-Feah*, fol. 15a, and the response of R. Ezra published by Gershom Scholem, "A New Document for the History of the Beginning of Kabbalah," *Sefer Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1934), pp. 161–162 (Heb.) and M. Idel, "Land of Israel," pp. 177–178.

<sup>54</sup> Whether the brain is already here a symbol for the first *sefirah*, as we shall below in some Kabbalistic texts, is not totally clear.

<sup>55</sup> *Commentary on 'Aggadot*, MS Parma, de Rossi 1390, fol. 113b. More on the descent of the influx from the first *sefirah* conceived of as brain see below in the discussions on the book of the *Zohar* and in the passage of R. Isaac of Acre. See also Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.



other Kabbalistic school, that of ecstatic Kabbalah, where the feminine and hypostatic aspect of the city do not occur.

This is the place for a survey of several discourses appearing in the writings of the Kabbalists who undoubtedly were nurtured from the speculative systems of the Kabbalists of Gerona. Although Isaac the Blind had already identified Zion with the middle line, i.e., *Yesod*, the term “Zion” also acquires an additional significance among the Kabbalists of Gerona, as representative of the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* [kingdom; *sefirah* no. 10]. It may reasonably be assumed that R. Azriel of Gerona (the first half of the 13th century) had already followed this path; he states in his *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadot*:

The meaning of Jerusalem is that there peace will appear [*yira'eh shalom*], and the meaning of Zion is that there is a mark [*ziyun*] for all those located [*mezuyanim*] on the border.<sup>56</sup>

The expression “all those located on the border” may be interpreted as an allusion to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, the last in the series of *sefirot*.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, “Zion” symbolizes here the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*. But another statement of the same R. Azriel assesses “And these are the names which are fit to be spoken with the attributes with which the Lord is known and revealed. At times *Knesset Yisra'el* is called Zion, because it excels in the commandments, as it is said, ‘[I] have said to Zion: You are My people’ [Isaiah 51:16]” provides decisive support for another possibility mentioned by Y. Tishbi, that the mention of the “attributes,” i.e., the *sefirot*, compels us to distinguish between Zion and Jerusalem, i.e., between *Yesod* and *Malkhut*. In speaking, however, of Zion as *Knesset Yisra'el*, R. Azriel thereby identifies Zion with the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*. This tradition was preserved also in the Kabbalah by the school of Nahmanides and is mentioned in several texts, at times accompanying the association of Zion with *Yesod*. An anonymous *Commentary on Ten Sefirot* written during the lifetime of R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret states, for example:

*Malkhut*, [Kingship] *'Atarah*, [Diadem] *Hokhmat Shlomo*<sup>58</sup> [the Wisdom of Solomon], and *Shalem*; and the rabbi, R. Solomon ben Adret, may the Merciful One protect and bless him, writes that it is also called *ziyun* [spelled the same as *ziyon*, Zion]: “he shall erect a marker [*ziyun*]<sup>59</sup> beside it” [Ezekiel 39:15].<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ed. Tishbi, p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 3.

<sup>58</sup> For the identification of hypostatic Jerusalem with Wisdom see also above, in a Gnostic Valentinian passage. Also in Gnostic texts, the feminine aeon is sometime described as found on the borderline of the Pleroma and the created world.

<sup>59</sup> In the Biblical source, the first Zion is vocalized *Ziyyun*.

<sup>60</sup> MS British Library Reg. 16 A.X., cat. Margoliot no. 755, fol. 93b; MS Berlin 122 (Or. 8 538), fol. 96a. See also below the similar view adduced in the next section.

We may assume that by colliding Zion and Jerusalem as symbols of the same *sefirah*, the feminine one, the sexual overtone of the relationship between the two entities disappears.

#### 4. Jerusalem and Zion in Nahmanides' Kabbalistic School

In contrast to the above-mentioned identification of Zion with Malkhut, we possess two other testimonies to the effect that R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret received from his master Nahmanides another tradition, viz., that Zion is a symbol for Yesod, though the tradition of Zion as Malkhut is attributed to another pupil of Nahmanides, the Kabbalist R. Isaac Todros (Barcelona, late 13<sup>th</sup> century) by one of the latter's disciples. R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, a common student of the two Catalan Kabbalists mentioned above, writes in his book supercommentary on Nahmanides' secrets found, according to his view in the Pentateuch, Keter Shem Tov, regarding the sefirah of Yesod:

And I received from my teacher, R. Solomon ben Abraham Adret, the great one of the generation, may the Merciful One protect him, who received from his teacher, the master, of blessed memory,<sup>61</sup> that it is Zion, and the sign of this is "he shall erect a marker beside it..." [Ezekiel 39:15]. My master, the pious one, R. Isaac Todros, may the Merciful One protect him, found an explicit [proof] for [the tradition of] our master, of blessed memory, in the portion of *Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah* [Deut. 33–34] and in other places to the effect that *Hokhmat Shlomo* is called Zion. I stated before him that all was true according to the words of our master,<sup>62</sup> of blessed memory, in truth and in faith, including everything, and he agreed and said, [This is] correct.<sup>63</sup>

Under the influence of R. Shem Tov's writings, the author of the classical book of Kabbalah entitled *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut* states concerning *Yesod*:

<sup>61</sup> Namely from Nahmanides.

<sup>62</sup> Again Nahmanides.

<sup>63</sup> Following MS Paris BN, 774, fol. 76a. The text in the published version in the book *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, ed. Yehudah Qoriat (Livorno, 1839), fol. 26b, is distorted. It also is copied in *Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim* by R. Isaac of Acre; see ed., Ch. A Erlanger, second edition (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 7, 315, and see also the 14<sup>th</sup> century anonymous Kabbalistic book *Sefer ha-Shem*, printed in the book *Heikhal ha-Shem* (Venice, 1601), fol. 32a: "And they said that *Yesod* is called Zion and this attribute [*Malkhut*] is called Jerusalem... and when they are together, you shall call it Zion, for it is the City of David, as well as Zion, in the sense of shall erect a marker beside it, and Zion is the holy of Israel." A distinction between Zion and *Malkhut* is to be found in the writings of Nahmanides himself who wrote: "The Holy One, blessed be He, will gladden us in Zion, Zion will be glad in its sons, and He will gladden it with His Divine Presence." Published in E. Kupfer, "The Concluding Portion of Nachmanides' Sermon *Torat Ha-Shem Temima*," *Tarbiz*, 40 (1970–71), p. 80 (Heb.). Presumably the Divine Presence (= *Malkhut*) will gladden Zion (*Yesod*).

And R. Solomon ben Abraham Adret said that he received [an oral tradition] from Nahmanides, of blessed memory, that this attribute is called Zion, giving it a sign, this *ziyun*. But this does not appear to be so in his commentary... or perhaps the main meaning of Zion is *Malkhut*.<sup>64</sup>

Evidence of the difficulties surrounding the precise meaning of the term Zion in the circle of R. Solomon ibn Adret in Barcelona is preserved in the anonymous collection of Kabbalistic traditions gathered by one of his pupils:

The sage R. Ezra follows this method, that Zion is an allusion to the middle line, and brings as a sort of proof<sup>65</sup> “from Zion, He who dwells in Jerusalem.” He similarly interprets “The Lord shall reign forever...” [Psalms 146:10] to mean that this includes the entire Godhead. My master, may the Merciful One protect him, noted that he had similarly<sup>66</sup> heard this orally from the master,<sup>67</sup> of blessed memory; when he saw this in the commentary, he wondered<sup>68</sup> at his [interpretation], and said that this is an allusion to the heavenly Jerusalem, and that this is Mount Zion; the reason why Mount Zion is written about it, is that their [i.e., the heavenly Jerusalem and Zion] name [together] is from the city of the Lord of Hosts, who dwells in Mount Zion. Thus wrote the above-mentioned sage in the name of the pious one, of blessed memory.<sup>69</sup>

These doubts indicate that the early Kabbalistic tradition did not unequivocally identify Zion with *Yesod*. It may reasonably be assumed that the disagreement between the two traditions preceded R. Ezra, a support for this conjecture been provided by the above-mentioned passage from the *Commentary on 'Aggadot* of R. Azriel of Gerona. The issue, however, apparently had already been decided in the writings of R. Ezra, as preferring the sexual polarity. In any case this polarity perceived by Kabbalists between Zion and Jerusalem enabled some earlier Kabbalists to depict the relationship between the two *sefirot* *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, and afterwards between *Yesod* and *Malkhut* by employing the symbolism of Zion and Jerusalem.<sup>70</sup> As was shown above, this relation-

<sup>64</sup> Ed. Mantua 1558, fols. 66b–67a. On fol. 73a Zion has the clear meaning of *Malkhut*; see also Tishbi, in his edition of R. Azriel's *Commentary on 'Aggadot*, p. 30 n. 3, and the statement by R. Joshua ibn Shu'ail in his commentary on the esoteric teachings of Nahmanides, pericope *Ve-Zot ha-Berakhab*. For the connection between the books *Keter Shem Tov* and *Ma'arekhet ha'Elohub*, see Gottlieb, *Bahya ben Asher*, pp. 249–259, and especially p. 252.

<sup>65</sup> The reference apparently is to two separate discussions by R. Ezra appearing in his *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadot* (see above).

<sup>66</sup> Thus in MS Harvard; and in MS Cambridge, here (*ka'n*).

<sup>67</sup> Namely Nahmanides.

<sup>68</sup> Thus in MS Harvard; and in MS Cambridge, “*pirkei tavha*” has no meaning.

<sup>69</sup> Thus in MS Harvard 58, fol. 105a, which corresponds, with minor changes, to MS Cambridge, Add. 671, 8, fol. 124a.

<sup>70</sup> The occurrence of couples of divine powers can be understood as a matter of syzygies, or in some cases of binitarianism or ditheism.

ship has distinctly sexual undertones, which exerted great influence upon the Kabbalistic literature of the school of the *Zohar*, as we shall see below.

“My master, may the Merciful One protect him,” is undoubtedly R. Solomon ben Abraham [ibn] Adret, who received from his teacher Nahmanides a tradition similar to that of R. Ezra, i.e., that Zion symbolizes *Yesod*. In contrast, “the pious one,” i.e., R. Isaac Todros, another student of Nahmanides, inherited another opinion, as is learned from the above passage from *Keter Shem Tov*, that Zion alludes to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* or to the heavenly Jerusalem. Noteworthy in this context is the Kabbalistic text which stems from the Nahmanidean school of Kabbalah, and speaks of the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*:

It is the heavenly Jerusalem, which in the prayers is called Zion, for it is the symbol [*ziyun*] of all the powers... therefore women are obligated to observe prohibitions, for they are from the same source.<sup>71</sup>

Zion in this context undoubtedly means *Malkhut*. It seems that Nahmanides followed the synonymy of Zion and Jerusalem as both identified as a feminine hypostasis, as in the book of his teacher, R. Yehudah ben Yaqar of Barcelona and implicitly in the *Bahir*:

However, in a parallel text, found in an anonymous collection of Kabbalistic traditions I found in the phrase “symbol of all the powers” is understood differently than Jerusalem, the feminine *sefirah*:

“Blessed is the Lord from Zion” [Psalms 135:21] — the Lord is *Ateret* [the crown], from Zion, the *Tiferet*, or the *Yesod*, and he calls *Yesod*, Zion, because it is the treasury of souls, as is said, “What monument [*ziyun*] is that” [II Kings 23:17]. And because it is being fruitful and multiplying,<sup>72</sup> it says: “This teaches that Israel were *mezuyyanim*, [excellent, instead of the word *mezuyyanim*, distinct found in the Haggadah] i.e., they were fruitful and multiplied, and it, *Tiferet*, which is the symbol [*ziyun*] of all powers,<sup>73</sup> is called Zion.” “Thus is called the House of the Lord,” which is *Tiferet*,<sup>74</sup> and it is called everything, as it is said, “It is I, the Lord, who made everything” [Isaiah 44:24], which is the heavenly Jerusalem, which is *Tiferet*, which is the symbol of all the powers.<sup>75</sup>

This passage may reflect a tradition committed to writing in early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, the phrase “symbol of all the powers” has both a feminine

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<sup>71</sup> Discussed by G. Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, p. 285. Compare also to M. Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–250 as to the Kabbalistic valence of the deeds of women. For an additional example see R. Moshe Cordovero, *’Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1978), vol. 8, pp. 1–2.

<sup>72</sup> Here the sexualized vision of Zion is evident.

<sup>73</sup> Namely of all the divine powers, namely the higher nine *sefirot*.

<sup>74</sup> I assume that House is a symbol of *Malkhut*, while the Lord, in the original verse the Tetragrammaton, stands for *Tiferet*.

<sup>75</sup> MS Paris BN 859, fol. 6a. See also *ibid.*, fol. 10b.

meaning — *Malkhut*, and a masculine meaning — *Tiferet*, as does the word Zion.<sup>76</sup> The description of the masculine as the marker or symbol of “all the powers” is reminiscent of the Gnostic description of Jesus as the husband of the Sophia, as the “joint fruit of the Pleroma” in a passage discussed above.

The introduction of the polarity within the biblical verses that are based on the stylistic device of parallelism between two parts of the same verse, as if they refer to a sexual couple is central form the understanding of Kabbalistic hermeneutics in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. However, this type of exegesis is not an approach invented by the medieval authors, as we find it already in a classical Rabbinic source, the Palestinian Talmud, which could have been known to the early Kabbalists.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, it is probably not only that a feminine hypostatic view of Jerusalem has been inherited from earlier sources, but also an exegetical approach to the Bible, based on a sexual polarity, has been part of the exegetical practice in some forms of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>78</sup>

### 5. Jerusalem as a Feminine Sexual Hypostasis in Castilian Kabbalah

In the last third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the vast Kabbalistic literature written in Castile was characterized by an elaborated system of sexual symbolism, focusing on the unification of the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* (or *Yesod*) and *Malkhut* as a process of male-female coupling.<sup>79</sup> The many erotic images had a purpose: to denote the aspiration towards unity within the divine world.<sup>80</sup> The already existing and diverging symbolism of Zion and Jerusalem,<sup>81</sup> found in ben Yaqar, the book of *Bahir*, and in some Nahmanidean traditions, was integrated into more comprehensive Kabbalistic system, with the *Zohar* providing the central contribution to this development. Thus, e.g., we read in the Zoharic literature:

<sup>76</sup> See also MS Berlin 122, Or. 80#538, fol. 85a.

<sup>77</sup> See the discussion in M. Idel, “Leviathan and its Consort, From Talmudic to Kabbalistic Myth,” in Ithamar Gruenwald and M. Idel (eds.), *Myths in Judaism: History, Thought, Literature* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2004), p. 155 note 34 (Heb.).

<sup>78</sup> See also my view that the entire structure of ten divine powers, found higher than the regular ten *sefirot*, together with the concept of Infinite, may stem from earlier, late antiquity sources. See M. Idel, “About Theosophy at the Beginning of Kabbalah,” in Z. Gries Ch. Kreisel, B. Huss *Shefa'* (eds.), *Tal, Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture presented to Bracha Sack* (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2004), pp. 131–158 (Heb.).

<sup>79</sup> See G. Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, p. 294 ff.

<sup>80</sup> Also the procreation is part of the significance of this process, an issue that is not found in this passage.

<sup>81</sup> The view that Zion is *Malkhut* and not *Yesod*, recurs several times in R. Todros ha-levi Abulafia's Kabbalistic writings. See, e.g., his *Sha'ar Ha-Razim*, ed., Michal Kushnir-Oron (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 85 and his *Otzar ha-Kavod* (Warsaw, 1879), fol. 18ab.

R. Phineas began and said, “May the Lord bless you from Zion; may you share the prosperity of Jerusalem” [Psalms 128:5]. “May the Lord bless you from Zion” — what is the reason [for the blessing to be] from Zion? Because a surfeit of blessings are located there;<sup>82</sup> this is the meaning of what is written, “There the Lord ordained blessing, everlasting life” [*ibid.* 133:3]. Accordingly, the Lord will bless you from Zion, for from there the blessings issue for all. “May you share the prosperity of Jerusalem” — because it is on behalf of Zion that Jerusalem is blessed; since Zion is filled with blessings, then Jerusalem is blessed, and mercy is present in it.<sup>83</sup> Since Jerusalem is blessed, the entire people is similarly blessed. “All the days of your life” [*ibid.* 128:5] — that the rainbow not appear during your days as it did to your fathers.<sup>84</sup> Accordingly: “May you share the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life, and live to see your children’s children.”<sup>85</sup>

This exposition splits the verse in Psalms into its two branches: the first deals with Zion, which symbolizes the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, denoting the male sexual organ containing the blessings, i.e., the seed. The second clause makes mentions of Jerusalem (the female), which receives blessing and prosperity from Zion; only after the coupling between them will the Jewish people be blessed with plenty. This interpretation is supported by the continuation: the rainbow — a clearly sexual symbol — which is parallel to *Yesod*, is conceived of as superfluous as long as a righteous person is present in the world and is capable of coupling with the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* in place of the *sefirah* of *Yesod*;<sup>86</sup> such a righteous one was R. Simeon bar Yohai, and R. Phineas wishes that his son will attain the level of his father.

An additional example of patently sexual symbolism appears at the end of *Idra Zutta*, in one of the most “sublime” scenes in the entire *Zoharic* literature:

When this Matrona<sup>87</sup> joins with the King, all the worlds are blessed and are present in the general rejoicing... for they are two degrees, above and below, and therefore only the High Priest, who is from the aspect of *Hesed*, may enter there, so that the place above will be entered only by [the level] called *Hesed*. He enters the Holy of Holies, and the female is exhilarated and is blessed,

<sup>82</sup> I have preferred the version [to be found] instead of to participate. The verb recurs in the continuation of this text in a similar context, as well as in a passage from *Idra Zutta* cited below.

<sup>83</sup> The sentence is possibly to be understood as follows: When compassion is present in Jerusalem, then it is blessed; compassion [*Rahamim*] is a male symbol, as we have seen above in the writings of R. Ezra, and as we will see below in the discussion of the passage from *Idra Zutta*. Commonly regarded as representing the attribute a minor judgment, the nature of the feminine power changes to mercy because of the seed of the male regarded as more positive.

<sup>84</sup> *BT Ketubot*, fol. 77b.

<sup>85</sup> *Zohar*, III, fol. 36a.

<sup>86</sup> See: *ibid.*, 2, pp. 298–300.

<sup>87</sup> I.e., the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*.

and from this<sup>88</sup> *Hesed* he enters the Holy of Holies, within<sup>89</sup> the place called Zion. Zion and Jerusalem are two [supernal] levels, one mercy and the other strict justice. Zion, because it is written, “Zion shall be saved in the judgment” [Isaiah 1:27]; Jerusalem, because it is written, “where righteous dwelt” [*ibid.*], as we have seen. And all the desire of the male is to the female here, and they will be called blessing, for from there issue forth blessings to all the [lower] worlds, and all are blessed. This place is called holy, and all the holinesses of the male enter there with the same level which we have mentioned, and they all come from the supernal head of the skull of the male, from the supernal brain<sup>90</sup> located in it, which draws blessing to all the limbs of the body, to those [limbs] which are called Hosts. All the influxes drawn from the entire body gather there,<sup>91</sup> and therefore they are called Hosts, for all the hosts of the upper and lower ones issue forth there. This flowing, after it is gathered there, is steeped in the holy [supernal] foundation, all white, and therefore it is called *Hesed*. This *Hesed* enters the Holy of Holies, for it is written, “There the Lord ordained blessing, everlasting life” [Psalms 133:3].<sup>92</sup>

This passage requires a precise explanation. The first matter demanding our attention is the statement by the author that Zion and Jerusalem are two levels, meaning that they represent two different *sefirot*, unlike their biblical synonymy. The essential nature of these *sefirot* is indicated by his discussion of the Holy of Holies: “Holies” are the seed which descends from the brain and are gathered from all the limbs, enter the sexual organ of the male, and become white;<sup>93</sup> “Holy” is *Malkehut*, the female, which receives the holies, i.e., the blessing and life.<sup>94</sup> In comparison with this interpretation, Zion and Jerusalem are to be regarded as male and female. The description of the white seed corre-

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<sup>88</sup> My translation is based on a text that diverged from the printed version of the book of *Zohar*, using instead the passage from *Idra Zutia* as quoted in *Commentary on the Pentateuch* by Menahem Recanati, fol. 62b: “And it is blessed, and from that [supernal] compassion it enters the Holy of Holies.”

<sup>89</sup> The original reads, “among,” and is apparently a corruption.

<sup>90</sup> See above the passage of R. Ezra, and below, the discussion of the heavenly Jerusalem as *Keter* and brain in the passage I propose to attribute to R. Isaac of Acre.

<sup>91</sup> See the view of R. Ezra mentioned above.

<sup>92</sup> *Zohar*, III, fol. 296ab.

<sup>93</sup> For this conception of the formation of seed, found in medieval physiognomy and in the book of the *Zohar* see Yehuda Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon* (Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 253–254, par. 365 (Heb.).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. the existence of a different conception in the book *Sheqel ha-Qodesh* by R. Moses de Leon, ed. by Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), pp. 24–25. According to de Leon, the term “holy” symbolizes the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, while *Binah* is represented by the term holies: “The root of the *Heikhal* is from this holy, and it is called the holy *Heikhal*, for the holy made a *Heikhal* in which to dwell. The holy of holies is the root of the holy which is the root of the heavenly point and this *Heikhal*, which is holies. Accordingly, all the essences formed within it are called holies, which are inner holies, for all the holies emanating from the power of the drawing of *Hokhmah* and all the emanations and appearances, which come forth from within it and enter *Binah* and their junction together, without division, are called the holy of holies.”

sponds to the above-mentioned depictions in the writings of R. Ezra, and his view is reflected strongly also in the contrast drawn by *Idra Zutta* between the attributes of strict justice and mercy.<sup>95</sup> This Zoharic passage seems to be the major source for the later developments of the “point of Zion”, some specific and limited place within the space of the last *sefirah*, where the *Yesod* is conceived of as penetrating.<sup>96</sup> Thus, the quandary as to the precise sefirotic power with which Zion is identified, *Yesod* or *Malkhut*, found in early Kabbalah and in the Nahmanidean school, has been solved by the author of the *Idra Zutta* in a synthetic manner. Zion may be the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, but the limited male presence within the female, designated by many discussions as the “point of Zion.” This theory, which is based on a sharply sexualized understanding of the Temple, has been elaborated in many details in some discussions by R. Moses Cordovero and in R. Isaac Luria’s Kabbalistic writings.<sup>97</sup>

A discussion found in the *Zohar* exploits the possibilities created much earlier by *Targum Onqelos*, one of the Aramaic translations of the Bible:

“Great is the Lord<sup>98</sup> and highly to be praised, in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness” [Psalms 48:2]. Then is the Lord called “great?” When *Knesset Yisra’el* [the congregation of Israel] is to be found with Him, as it is written, “In the city of our God is He great.” “In the city of our God” means “with the city of our God”... and we learn that a king without a queen is not a [real] king, and is neither great nor praised. Thus, so long as the male is without a female, all his excellence is removed from him and he is not in the category of Adam, and moreover he is not worthy of being blessed... “Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, Mount Zion, the side of the North, the city of the great King.” [The meaning of the verse is] “Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth” stands for the excellence of their [sexual] intercourse. “Beautiful for situation” [stands] for the Holy One, blessed be He, who is the Righteous, [who is] “the joy of the whole earth” and then it is the delight of All, and *Knesset Yisra’el* is blessed.<sup>99</sup>

The Zoharic interpretation of the terms describing the city of Jerusalem. *Yefeh nof*, a beautiful view, is understood as a symbol for divinity, more pre-

<sup>95</sup> Cf. *Zohar*, I, fol. 186a.

<sup>96</sup> See the contrasting opinion of G. Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, p. 206, note 79, who interprets Zion to mean the womb of the Divine Presence. R. Moses de Leon’s book, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. by C. Mopsik, p. 73 does indeed contain a quite clear allusion connecting Zion to *Malkhut*: “That Zion whom no one seeks out [Jeremiah 30:17] — no one seeks it out from heaven, for the Holy One, blessed be He, had sworn He would not enter it until Israel would enter the earthly Jerusalem.” Despite this allusion, I tend to regard Zion in *Idra Zutta* as a symbol of *Yesod*, which enters *Malkhut* for, as we saw in note 94 above, there are contradictions between the symbolism of the *Zohar* and that in *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*.

<sup>97</sup> See, e.g., below note 130.

<sup>98</sup> Again the Tetragrammaton, standing for the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*.

<sup>99</sup> *Zohar*, III, fol. 5a. See also M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 308–309.



cisely the ninth *sefirah*, *Yesod*, which is the male divine power par excellence, identified with the *membrum virile*. This limb, which is to be used only in holiness — an imperative recurring frequently in the *Zohar* — is representative in the Zoharic symbolism of the quality of righteousness, both the divine (the ninth *sefirah*), and the human. This sexual reading is fostered by the occurrence in the same verse of the term *masos*, translated here as joy and delight, which occurs in several other Jewish texts in the context of the desire of the bridegroom for the bride. Indeed, the erotic connotation implied in the reading of *yefeh nof* as a bridegroom is not completely new with the *Zohar*: it is inspired by the much earlier Onqelos Aramaic translation of this verse: “Beautiful, like a bridegroom who is the delight of the inhabitants of the whole earth.” The biblical *masos* has been translated into Aramaic as *hedwatah*, which is followed by the term *kol*, a fact that inspired the emergence of the Zoharic phrase *hedwatah de-kullah*. I suspect that the term “earth,” *ha-'aretz*, was understood by the author of the *Zohar* as a symbol for *Malkhut*, which is synonymous in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah with *Knesset Yisra'el*, all of them serving as symbols for the feminine divine manifestation.

A short discussion alluding to the *Zohar*'s understanding of the verse in Psalms 133 appears in the writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla, a contemporary of the authors of the *Zohar*. He writes in *Sha'arei 'Orah*:

Blessing comes to the world only by means of Zion, when it discharges its blessings in Jerusalem. As it is said, “like the dew of Hermon that falls upon the mountains of Zion. There the Lord ordained blessing, everlasting life” [Psalms 133:3]. The “mountains of Zion” are [the *sefirot*] *Netzah* and *Hod*, the source of the fine oil which is drawn to Zion, from where it descends to Jerusalem.<sup>100</sup>

The sacred static geography was interpreted in terms of a dynamic theosophy. The geographical terms that most of the Spanish Kabbalists knew only from the study of the Hebrew Bible turned into symbols of stages and process within the divine realm, thus infusing in the canonical text significance beyond time and space.

Both in the *Zohar* and in Gikatilla's *Sha'arei 'Orah*, the same verse from the Psalm is used in order to describe the relationship between Zion and Jerusalem. As does the book of the *Zohar*, Gikatilla too regards Zion and Jerusalem as symbols of *Yesod* and *Malkhut*. Finally, worthy of special attention is the fact that the Holy of Holies is conceived in the *Zohar* as the location of the coupling, similar to the conception appearing in the *Gospel of Philip* from the Nag Hammadi Library and discussed above, thus indicating that the most important elements of the description of Jerusalem and Zion in the Zoharic composition entitled *Idra Zutta*, were already in existence at the beginning of the

<sup>100</sup> Ed. Yosef ben Shlomo (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1971), vol. I, p. 130; cf. *ibid.*, p. 133.

13<sup>th</sup> century, whether in a tradition similar to that in the *Gospel of Philip*, or whether in the writings of R. Ezra of Gerona, which undoubtedly were known to the authors of the *Zohar*. As we have already seen, R. Joseph Gikatilla and the authors of the *Zohar* shared a similar understanding of the verse in Psalms 133. In many other places as well Jerusalem and Zion clearly have the meaning of *Malkhut* and *Yesod* respectively. This is Gikatilla's terminology, and an additional example of which will suffice:

Regarding [what will happen in] the future, what is written? "For liberators shall march up on Mount Zion to wreak judgment on Mount Esau; and dominion shall be the Lord's" [Obadiah 1:21]. Then Jerusalem and Zion will join together, for Jerusalem is the royal city, and this is the meaning of "and dominion shall be the Lord's." And regarding the restoration of the *sefirot* to their pristine state, what is written? "And the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the Lord on the holy mount, in Jerusalem" [Isaiah 27:13]. "On the holy mount" — this is Mount Zion. "In Jerusalem" — this is the royal city. The Rabbis, of blessed memory, alluded to the identity of "the strayed [lit., lost]" when they said, "The righteous one was lost." What did he lose? He lost righteousness.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, "the strayed shall come" — righteousness has lost the righteous one, and the righteousness one has lost righteousness... righteous one and righteousness are what is called "the holy mount in Jerusalem." Based on this principle, the prayer<sup>102</sup> includes the wording "[God] Who restores His Divine Presence to Zion," whose esoteric meaning is: "Blessed be the One who restores a lost object<sup>103</sup> to its owner."<sup>104</sup>

The expression "its owner" undoubtedly refers to Zion, i.e., the male or *Yesod*, which has lost the female; i.e., the Divine Presence, the dominion, (symbolized by Jerusalem) has been separated from it but will return in the future. Their plainly sexual coupling is a clear sign of the Redemption,<sup>105</sup> which is depicted as the renewed union of Zion and Jerusalem. Here we have an additional element that is characteristic of the Castilian Kabbalah: the assumption that evil powers attempt to enter the divine sphere and the need to safeguard that sphere is attributed here to the tower named Zion. Esau, the symbol of the other nations, or of Christianity, are symbolized by the term "Mount Esau," just as the Jews were referred by Mount Zion.

<sup>101</sup> In Hebrew this is a feminine noun, standing here for the lost female power.

<sup>102</sup> Of the Eighteen Benediction.

<sup>103</sup> *Sha'arei Orab*, vol. I, pp. 133–134.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. *Sha'arei 'Orab*, vol. I, p. 123, in which it is clear that the retrieval of a lost entity has the meaning of the union of man and wife. For a parallel to most of the topics found in this quote see the anonymous Kabbalistic material found in MS Paris BN 859, fol. 10a.

<sup>105</sup> An exposition corresponding to that in *Sha'arei 'Orab* appears in the *Zohar*, III, fol. 266b, as noted by J. ben Shlomo, vol. I, p. 133, note 115.

An interesting exposition of the verse from Obadiah appears in the *Zohar*,

And when the Matrona returns to the place of the *Heikhal* and the King will engage in a single coupling with her, then everything will join together, without division; about this is it written, “In that day there shall be one Lord with one name” [Zechariah 14:9]: In that day: when the Matrona will return to the *Heikhal*, then everything will be unified, with no division, and then liberators shall march up on Mount Zion to wreak judgment... R. Shimon said: “the Matrona will not enter His *Heikhal* rejoicing until *Malkhut* shall judge Esau and extract vengeance from him for having caused all this; after this she shall couple with the King, and the rejoicing shall be complete.”<sup>106</sup>

Here we have a split between two feminine powers which were commonly conceived of as identical. *Malkhut* is described as turning toward the lower world and judging Esau, plausibly the Christians, on the one side, while the Matrona seems to be another power, related to the higher, divine male potency, in a sexual manner, on the other side.<sup>107</sup>

An interesting development of the sexual symbolism surrounding Zion and Jerusalem appears in an anonymous *Commentary on Ten Sefirot*, presumably written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This work attempts to learn from the physical reality of Zion as a tower, and from Jerusalem as a city, about the sexual relationship between male and female, and that between *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, respectively:

For every Jew possesses the seal of the King.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, since he possesses the seal of the King, he must guard it, not to bring it into a filthy place. Therefore the Torah was strict regarding [the intercourse with] *niddah* [menstrual impure woman] for this reason. Joseph merited seeing the divine attribute<sup>109</sup> because he guarded the seal of the King regarding the sin of the wife of Potiphar, and therefore he was called “righteous.” Mount Zion is so called<sup>110</sup> because the tenth [*sefirah*] is called the heavenly Jerusalem, which receives an emanation from *ha-Tzaddiq Yesod ‘Olam* [the righteous, who is the foundation

<sup>106</sup> III, fol. 77b.

<sup>107</sup> This split may be an early indication for a similar distinction of the two divine potencies related to the last *sefirah*, in Lurianic Kabbalah.

<sup>108</sup> Namely the circumcision, related sometimes to the divine names. On this issue see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrines,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 78 (1987), pp. 77–112.

<sup>109</sup> Presumably this is a reference to the Midrashic view that Joseph saw the image of his father Jacob, during the incident with Potiphar’s wife. It should be pointed out that the Hebrew consonants of Joseph’s name amount in gematria to the same numerical value as the consonants of Zion, namely 156.

<sup>110</sup> Probably the term “Mount” is understood as the feminine power, which belongs to the masculine one, Zion. Here the construct form Mount Zion is interpreted as pointing to two entities.

of the world],<sup>111</sup> which is called Zion. For just as in the earthly Jerusalem there is Mount Zion, a tower defending the city, so too in the heavenly Jerusalem, that Mount Zion, is its spouse, [and] is protecting it from the accusers,<sup>112</sup> so that they will not enter her.<sup>113</sup>

The concept of defense of a city from the intrusion of the enemies, by its tower that has been interpreted as the male *sefirah*, Zion, conceived of as defending the female one, against the attack of the demonic powers. Thus, the feminine *sefirah* constitutes not only the sexual counterpart within the divine sphere, but is understood also as the subject of the rivalry between the divine and the demonic male powers, each seeking to conquer her. As such Jerusalem is conceived of as an entity in herself, whom the demonic powers besieged her, and the divine ones protect her.

### 6. Two Jerusalems in the Theosophical Structure

The Kabbalistic theosophies engaged above transformed a celestial Jerusalem, an idealized duplicate of the lower Jerusalem, into a female attribute of the divine sphere. The affinity between the terrestrial and the supernal have been indubitably changed by this emphasis on the feminine nature of the higher Jerusalem. However, an additional development should be noticed, in which also the concept of the lower Jerusalem has been understood as a symbol for a divine power. What has been described in earlier theosophies as the lower divine power and the heavenly Jerusalem, has been referred now as the symbol of the lower Jerusalem, while the heavenly one has been identified with even higher divine powers. This shift is part of a more comprehensive development in Kabbalistic symbolism that has not received the due attention in scholarship. It started in late 13<sup>th</sup> century or early 14<sup>th</sup> century, in the theosophical theories of R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, of the author of

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<sup>111</sup> For the recurrence of this phrase in order to refer to the ninth *sefirah* see in the passage to be discussed immediately below.

<sup>112</sup> Namely the demonic powers.

<sup>113</sup> MS Moscow-Ginsburg 90, fol. 41b. A short version of this passage appears in MS Cambridge Add. 400, 7, fol. 692a. See also M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 286–287. A parallel discussion, apparently preceding in time that in MS Moscow, appears in another anonymous *Commentary on Ten Sefirot* extant in MS Berlin Or. 122, fol. 91a, where it is said about the *sefirah* of *Yesod*: “And it is called Mount Zion, for the heavenly Jerusalem is as the earthly Jerusalem, and the heavenly Zion corresponds to the earthly Zion; just as (from the border) [*mi-gevul*; the correct reading is *migdal*, the fortress] of Jerusalem and the fortress [*migdal*, instead of the faulty *mugdal*] guarding the city, so too does the supernal fortress [*mugdal*], which is the righteous, guard the tenth [*sefirah*], i.e., Jerusalem, from the demonic powers.” This passage has been appropriated in the classic of Kabbalah called *Sefer ha-Peliyah*, a late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine book.

*Tiqqunei Zohar*, of R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid and in some of the writings of R. Isaac ben Shmuel of Acre. In the phase that followed the first steps in the composition of the Zoharic literature, Kabbalistic symbolism become more precise and much more detailed and higher levels of the divine world were addressed more and more, sometime the claim being that they reflect themselves within the lower sefirotic realm.<sup>114</sup>

A text based on a certain physiological view, including also the reference to two types of supernal Jerusalem appears in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century eclectic book *Shushan Sodot* by R. Moses of Kiev. In an anonymous passage, authored very probably by the much earlier Kabbalist, the younger contemporary of Moses de Leon and Joseph Gikatilla, the itinerant scholar R. Isaac ben Shmuel of Acre, we have an interesting view as to the theosophical meanings of the two Jerusalems. He operated with a much more complex type of theosophy than just the ten *sefirot*, and in many cases he transposed the terrestrial-celestial dichotomy to the relations between powers found within the divine sphere, and I suspect this is the case also in the anonymous passage I translate here below:

The secret [of the Rabbinic dictum]: “the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem are separated only by eighteen mils.”<sup>115</sup> In order to explain this principle, we will first require several hypotheses. First, know that there will be a hypothesis constructed by means of the wisdom of anatomy in the body of man, and this is its sign: from the brain to the [place of] the circumcision you will find the eighteen vertebrae in the spinal cord. Second, the brain alludes to *Keter ‘Elyon*,<sup>116</sup> [sefirah no. 1] and the circumcision to the righteous, who is the foundation of the world [i.e., *Yesod*, sefirah no. 9]; the brain alludes to the heavenly Jerusalem and the circumcision to the righteous, who is the foundation of the world, and its partner, which are called Zion and Jerusalem, and they are the earthly ones. Third, *Keter ‘Elyon* and the righteous, who is the foundation of the world, are separated by nine *sefirot*, each of which include [in itself both the attributes of] *Din* [Judgment] and *Rahamim* [Mercy], for a total of eighteen,<sup>117</sup> and there are eighteen mils between the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem. This is the reason why there are eighteen vertebrae between the brain and the righteous, who is the foundation of the world.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>114</sup> See M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 311–313.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. *Genesis Rabba*, 69:7.

<sup>116</sup> For the symbolism of *Keter* and brain see already in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century treatise *Keter Shem Tov*, of R. Abraham Axelrod. See *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Literatur*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Leipzig, 1853), p. 42.

<sup>117</sup> See *Meirat Einayyim*, ed., Erlanger, p. 28. Compare also to another passage of this Kabbalist discussed in M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

<sup>118</sup> (Korets 1784), fol. 69a. I cannot enter here in a detailed analysis of the reasons why this anonymous passage was authored by R. Isaac of Acre. It suffices to mention that on fol. 69b, this Kabbalist is mentioned rather explicitly. Let me point out that this Kabbalist expressed more than one understanding of the nature of Jerusalem. See M. Idel, “Jerusalem in 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Thought,” *art. cit.*, pp. 281–282 and above note 63. For the polyvalence of symbols in general see Mircea Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,”

Though the interpreted Rabbinic passage deals with the celestial and the terrestrial cities, the Kabbalistic significance attached to the two cities by the author is quite different: both cities refer also to two different powers within the divine realm: the heavenly Jerusalem corresponds to the first *sefirah*, *Keter*, while the earthy Jerusalem corresponds to the last one, *Malkhut*, as in many other cases discussed above. Between the two Jerusalems in the theosophical realm there are nine *sefirot*, each of which comprising two aspects, one of judgment and one of mercy, altogether eighteen, which correspond to the eighteen vertebrae within the human, this being the meaning of the eighteen mils in the Rabbinic dictum.

This elevation of the name of Jerusalem as a symbol of the highest *sefirah* represents also the apotheosis of the feminine power to a position higher than that of the male potency, the *Yesod*. The divine righteous is found between the two females, just as according to a view found in late 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalistic texts, the human righteous does so.<sup>119</sup> According to the logic of this passage, there is no ascent of the lower *sefirah* representing Jerusalem, to the level of the *sefirah* of *Keter*, but rather a double presence: of the heavenly Jerusalem on the peak of the sefirotic system and another Jerusalem on its lowest point. At least in the case of the latter one, the association to the male potency is quite obvious, transforming the discussion into one that has a sexual overtone.

The question may be asked whether according to the view of this Kabbalist the supernal Jerusalem, as identical to the *sefirah* of *Keter*, retained a feminine valence, as it had in earlier Kabbalistic passages investigated above. The first *sefirah* commonly functions as a male divine power, when the issue of gender is significant.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, I would say that here we may assume a different position. In comparison to the highest ontological level called *'Ein Sof*, the Infinite, some entities may function as feminine, as we learn from discussions of the same R. Isaac of Acre.<sup>121</sup> If my conjecture as to the identity of the author of the

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in M. Eliade, J.M. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions. Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), pp. 86–107, and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. by Rosemary Sheed (New York: World Publisher, 1972), pp. 437–458.

<sup>119</sup> For the many recurrences of the view that the righteous is found between two females see R. Moses de Leon's *The Book of the Pomegranate*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (Brown Judaic Studies, Atlanta, Georgia, 1988), pp. 82, 138, 142, 179, 192, 241. On the topic of the presence of the righteous between two females in general see Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar ve-'Eros," *'AlpPAYIM*, vol. 9 (1994), pp. 101–103 (Heb.), Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature*, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–174 and M. Idel, "On the Performing Body in Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah: Some Preliminary Remarks," eds. Giuseppe Veltri–Maria Dieming (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 263–264 (Forthcoming).

<sup>120</sup> See, e.g., M. Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>121</sup> See Boaz Huss, "NISSAN — The Wife of the Infinite: The Mystical Hermeneutics of Rabbi Isaac of Acre," *Kabbalah*, vol. 5 (2000), pp. 155–181.

anonymous passage is correct, we should better conceive the supernal Jerusalem as *Keter* as a feminine sexual counterpart of the male power named Infinite.<sup>122</sup>

Last but not least in this context: as seen above in the Zoharic discussion, the descent of the influx from the brain is related to the descent of the semen. This seems to be implied also in the above passage, when the spinal cord is mentioned. In fact, the two supernal Jerusalems stand at the two extremities of this cord, conceived as the median line of the sefirotic world, just as two Jerusalems: the terrestrial and the celestial ones, stand at the two extremities of the link between the lower and the higher world, according to the Rabbinic literature.

In two anonymous collections of Kabbalistic traditions stemming from Castilian circles, we find an identification of the supernal Jerusalem, *Yerushalayyim ha-'Elyonah* and *Yerushalayyim shel ma'alalah*, with the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, while the lower Jerusalem is identified with the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*.<sup>123</sup> Given the truncated form of the discussions extant in this collection it is difficult to assert to what extent the supernal Jerusalem, described as the source of "Living water," assumed a distinct feminine role.

However, other and more influential Kabbalistic texts display a similar projection of the concept of terrestrial Jerusalem on high as a second and in this case also a higher feminine power. This is a different development from the point of view of the details of the symbolism, and the two approaches should not be harmonized. So, for example, we find it in elaborations on earlier views done by R. Moses Cordovero, a major mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist active in Safed.<sup>124</sup> In his classic compendium of previous Kabbalah, *Sefer Pardes Rimmonim*, he capitalizes on a brief but seminal passage from the later layer of the Zoharic literature, called *Tiqqunei Zohar*, written by an early 14<sup>th</sup> century Castilian Kabbalist that was a contemporary to R. Isaac of Acre.<sup>125</sup> There we

<sup>122</sup> On the vision of the Infinite in R. Isaac see Sandra Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed, the Notion of Eyn Sof (Infinity) in Kabbalah: From Isaac the Blind to Isaac of Acre* (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2008) (Heb.). Compare to the view of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Liqqunei Torah* (New York, 1991), part III, fol. 31a, where the supernal Jerusalem is described as the *Malkhut* of the infinite.

<sup>123</sup> See MS Vatican 428, fol. 54b, and MS Paris BN 859, fol. 28b.

<sup>124</sup> Cordovero's discussions on Jerusalem and Zion are numerous and quite elaborated and we address below just one of them. See, e.g., *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 14 (Jerusalem, 1986), p. 197, *ibid.* (Jerusalem, 1989), vol. 17 p. 49, 134, 175. An especially interesting discussion of the sexual symbolism of Zion and "the point of Zion" is found *ibid.*, p. 75, in a passage which deserves a separate study. See also *ibid.*, p. 34–35, where it is evident that the presence of the *sefirah* of *Yesod* within *Malkhut* is described to be quite limited, and constituted by the aspect of *Malkhut* found within the *sefirah* of *Yesod*. See also *'Or Yaqar, Tiqqunim* (Jerusalem, 1973), vol. II, p. 55. This means that the male aspect of Zion is not conquering the feminine nature of Jerusalem by its presence within the feminine divine power. See also *ibid.*, p. 37 and Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49, 95.

<sup>125</sup> See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, no. 69, ed. Reuven Margoliot (Jerusalem, 1978), fol. 107a. See also *ibid.*, no. 50, fol. 86b.

find two “married” couples, an imagery recurring in many Kabbalistic writings, as a rather consistent structure that I proposed to call the Holy Family:<sup>126</sup> the higher one constituted by a “Father” *’Abba*, or the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, and a “Mother” *’Imma*, the *sefirah* of *Binah*, on the one hand, and a Bridegroom, *Tiferet*, and a Bride, *Malkhut*, on the other. The second couple is conceived as the son and daughter of the first one. This more complex structure, rather widespread in Kabbalistic books, did not constitute a significant interpretive framework in the scholarship of Kabbalah.

Cordovero refers to the statement found in the *Ta’anit* passage, as discussed by early Kabbalists, as the oath not to enter the heavenly Jerusalem until the Jews will enter the terrestrial one, as dealing with the intercourse between the lower couple, as being a precondition for the intercourse between the higher couple. In both cases, the feminine powers have been explicitly identified not only as Jerusalem, but also as “two mothers.”<sup>127</sup> This resort to a concept of double motherhood means that at least implicitly, also the lower couple functions in a way in a manner that is similar to the higher one: its intercourse depends on what the children will do, which means that according to Cordovero the lower divine couple depends on the behavior of the humans here below, more precisely on their proper sexual encounter.<sup>128</sup>

Major elements of Cordovero’s interpretation were adopted in several instances in Lurianic Kabbalah,<sup>129</sup> and these views were reiterated in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalists several times, as well as in Hasidism, especially in the school of Habad. Let me point out, though I cannot enter here in an elaborate discussion of this issue, that also the *sefirah* of *Binah*, the supernal mother, has been described in Lurianic Kabbalah as possessing the “point of Zion” as the lower *sefirah*, *Malkhut*, which means that many of the descriptions of the lower sefirotic discussions of Jerusalem and Zion, have been projected on the

<sup>126</sup> See M. Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London, New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 381–382 and the pertinent footnotes. Much more material to this effect can be added, including *Tiqqunei Zohar*, fols. 106b–107a.

<sup>127</sup> See *Pardes Rimmonim*, 8:13. See also *ibid.*, 8:14, 23:16, and in chapters 54–55 of the unprinted part of *’Elimah Rabbati* to be published by Professor Bracha Sack, who kindly put the text at my disposition. For the two “mothers” see also the discussion in *’Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 2, p. 111.

<sup>128</sup> See, e.g., *’Or Yaqar*, vol. 17, pp. 48–49, 50, where the idea of continuity of the worlds starting with the lower Jerusalem, and the impact of the lower upon the higher entities is expressly formulated. See also *ibid.*, vol. 9 (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 6, 112, vol. 12 (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 44, and in chapters 54–55 of the unprinted part of his other book, *’Elimah Rabbati*. For the importance of theurgy in Cordovero in general see, e.g., *’Or Yaqar*, vol. 17, pp. 10, 61–62.

<sup>129</sup> See *Sefer ’Etz Hayyim* (Warsaw, 1891), Gate 15, ch. 11, *Sefer ha-Liqqutim* (Jerusalem, 1972), Shoftim, ch. 4, fol. 74b, *Sha’ar Ma’amarei Rashby*, fols. 28c–29a, etc. or *Zohar ha-Raqi’a* (Lemberg, 1885), fol. 142b. See also R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Liqqutei Torah*, part II, p. 76 and his notes on the Song of Songs (New York, 1961), pp. 81, 86.



higher couple of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*.<sup>130</sup> It is this double vision of Jerusalem as feminine powers that nurtured then some of the discussions in Lurianic Kabbalah and in later writings, and without taking in consideration the more sophisticated structure of the Holy Family, it is rather difficult to make sense of some of the portrayal of Jerusalem.

Thus, let me emphasize, that R. Isaac of Acre's passage extant in *Shushan Sodot*, the anonymous tradition found in the two manuscripts, and the *Tiqunei Zohar* passage elaborated by Cordovero, Luria and others, represent diverging approaches to Kabbalistic theosophy. The former is more interested in the higher spheres of the divine world, including the Infinite, while the latter is concerned more with the family structure of the four components. This difference notwithstanding, both show that it was important for these Kabbalists to translate their systems also in terms related to the holy geography, which includes Jerusalem. In any case the fact that it is the third of the three options discussed in this section, that identifies the supernal Jerusalem as an explicit feminine hypostasis, as a mother who is related to a father, which become the most widespread one in later Kabbalah, shows that it is the syzygies that was polarized from the sexual point of view, as presented in the fourfold Holy Family structure that especially attracted the attention of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists.

The question may be asked whether the elevation of the geographic Jerusalem to the status of the last feminine divine power does not substitute the concrete by the spiritual, in a manner it happened when the heavenly Jerusalem became the focus of Christian mysticism. I assume that the answer to this question is positive, at least in some cases, though it is hard to prove it, since such a proof requires more detailed analysis. My general answer assumes that the proliferation in the supernal realm of entities designated as Jerusalem may help indeed reminding the concrete city but at the same time weakens the concentration on the role of the concrete city, that is more conspicuous in the earlier forms of symbolism that dominated the 13<sup>th</sup> century theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, which emphasized the omphalic status of the last feminine divine power as the supernal Jerusalem. The dynamics evident in the above-mentioned forms of Kabbalah since early 14<sup>th</sup> century is less one that accounts for the exchanges between the terrestrial and the supernal, but a concentration on the processes between the higher and lower parts of the sefirotic

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<sup>130</sup> See, e.g., *Zohar ha-Raqi'a*, *ibid.* Compare, however, to the interpretations offered by two quotes from *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Rashby*, by Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 106, 114. I hope to revisit the interpretation of these quotes in another study in the light of the structure of the fourfold holy family. This neglect of the two couples is evident also in Scholem's interpretation of a passage in *Zohar*, III, fol. 75a, in his *Elements of the Kabbalah*, p. 298. Also his assumption, *ibid.*, that according to a discussion in *Zohar*, III, fol. 31a, Jerusalem is a symbol for separation between the male and the female divine powers, is not supported, in my opinion, by the material found in the *Zohar*.

realm. I assume that this is especially more evident in R. Isaac of Acre. But much less in the version of the two supernal Jerusalems in Cordovero, where the theurgical activity of the Kabbalists is conceived of as participating in the supernal processes. While the associative Kabbalist who authored *Tiqqunei Zohar*, or the contemplative R. Isaac of Acre were less concerned with a strong nexus between the geographical and the sefirotic, such a link is much more evident in Cordovero, who follows earlier discussions, some which will be surveyed in the next section.

### 7. *The Omphalic Nature of the Hypostatic Jerusalem*

We have seen above in several instances the importance of the middle line in the context of the two references to the holy city. This is a continuation of the much earlier vision of Jerusalem as *axis mundi*, found explicitly in pre-Rabbinic and Rabbinic sources.<sup>131</sup> We may speak about a complex picture that emerges in early Kabbalah, which combines an analogical vision of the relation between the supernal world and the terrestrial geography, with a vision of ontological continuity between the two realms. So, for example, R. Jacob ben Sheshet of Gerona, a Catalan Kabbalist, writes in his book entitled *ha-'Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*: “The navel of the world is directed opposite the middle line, which is called the heavenly Jerusalem, and it is the royal power of the House of David.”<sup>132</sup> Unlike the parallelism between the “middle line” and Zion — *Yesod* or *Tiferet*, found in other early Kabbalists, R. Jacob ben Sheshet identifies the middle line specifically with the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* and with Jerusalem.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, in the same book the middle line symbolizes also the *sefirah* of *Yesod*.<sup>134</sup> We may see here a vision of the *axis mundi* related to several *sefirot*, which serve collectively as a sort of spinal cord to the sefirotic realm.

R. Jacob ben Sheshet's view probably influenced the late 13<sup>th</sup> century R. Bahya ben Asher in his commentary on Deuteronomy who, when dealing with Moses' desire to enter the Holy Land, says:

“Let me, I pray, cross over and see” [Deuteronomy 3:25]: since I was granted knowledge by attaining the heavenly middle point, extend Your faithfulness, I pray, with me and let me see the promised land, which is the earthly middle point, the goodly mountain which is Jerusalem, which is the middle line of the

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<sup>131</sup> Philip Alexander, “Jerusalem as the ‘omphalos’ of the world: on the history of geographical concept,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, vol. 46, 2 (1997), pp. 147–158.

<sup>132</sup> Printed in ed. Chavel, *Collected Writings of Nahmanides*, vol. II, p. 385.

<sup>133</sup> See his passage, *ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

goodly land, and Lebanon, which is the Temple and the middle of the goodly mountain. The intention is that since [God] taught him and caused him to understand the supernal [realm] by the means of the eye of the intellect, it is proper that He should not hinder him the lower, but will gain to see it... and from the lower his soul will ascend to the supernal.<sup>135</sup>

Moses is therefore described as having had access to the supernal Jerusalem while he was outside the holy land, but he would nevertheless like to see also the terrestrial Jerusalem with his eyes, a point to which we shall return at the end of this study. While the pneumatic vision of the supernal Jerusalem was attained by a divine instruction, Moses would like to make his way by himself from the lower to the higher one.

A fitting conclusion for this survey of the sexual and hypostatic symbolism of Jerusalem and Zion in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah is provided by R. Isaac ben Solomon Ibn Abi Sahula, a contemporary of R. Joseph Gikatilla and of the authors of the *Zohar*,<sup>136</sup> who writes in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, composed in 1283:

“Your navel [*shoreireikh*] is like a round goblet” [Song of Songs 7:3]:<sup>137</sup> the word *shoreireikh* is synonymous with *tabur* [navel], from the same root as *lo karat shaireikh* [“your navel cord was not cut”] [Ezekiel 16:4]. It is as if the verse were stated about the status of Jerusalem, which is the navel of the world; just as the navel of the fetus is connected to the intestines of his mother and draws his food and support from it, similarly Jerusalem<sup>138</sup> is connected with the heavenly Jerusalem, which is called the “built up Jerusalem” [Psalm 122:3]... Jerusalem receives emanation and effluence from the heavenly Jerusalem, as the form of the moon receives emanation from the light of the sun... for just as the navel is [situated] in the center of the stomach, so too is the stomach in the center of the body, and so too did the Rabbis, of blessed memory, say that *'Eretz Israel* is situated in the center of the world, with Jerusalem in the center of *'Eretz Israel*.<sup>139, 140</sup>

This is a parallel to the sexual formulation found in the Kabbalists contemporaneous with Ibn Abi Sahula: the Divine emanation descends from Zion

<sup>135</sup> Ed. Chavel, vol. III, p. 255.

<sup>136</sup> R. Isaac ibn Avi Sahulah is presumably the first author to cite *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, which is considered to be the first stratum of the Zoharic literature; see Gershom Scholem, “Chapters from the History of Kabbalistic Literature,” *Qiryat Sepher*, vol. 6 (1929–30), pp. 109–118 (Heb.).

<sup>137</sup> The connection between this verse and Jerusalem, which is the center of the world, already appeared in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, pericope Ki Tisa, par. 2, but this source does not discuss the connection between the heavenly Jerusalem and its earthly counterpart.

<sup>138</sup> Namely the terrestrial one, not like in the previous section, a symbol for the lower *sefirah*.

<sup>139</sup> See, e.g., *Tanhuma, Qedoshim*, par. 10.

<sup>140</sup> MS Oxford-Bodleiana 343, fol. 49c–49d, printed now in Arthur Green, ed., “Rabbi Isaac ibn Sahula’s Commentary on the Song of Songs,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 6:3–4 (1987), pp. 472–473 (Heb.).

(the male potency) into the heavenly Jerusalem (*Malkhut*), and thus is born the fetus (namely the earthly Jerusalem), which is connected by its navel to its heavenly mother. The omphalic linkage between the physical Jerusalem and its divine counterpart as it has been described by Ibn Abi Sahula is, this should be emphasized, a conception shared by many other theosophical Kabbalists. The emphasis of this connection thereby makes possible the integration of the two conceptions mentioned in the opening part of the quote: the earthly Jerusalem, which occupies a central position in the Midrash; and the heavenly Jerusalem, which is a focal point of Kabbalistic thought. Symbolic Kabbalah overcame the potential danger of the breach that could have opened between the halakhic, more concrete and geographic approach, and the Kabbalistic, more hypostatic approach, those the two conceptual foci, the earthy and the spiritual images respectively, creating a system in which the earthly Jerusalem could not be sundered from the heavenly one, with the latter directed towards its earthly counterpart and emanating blessing towards it.<sup>141</sup> From this point of view, the integrated vision differs from the Christian discussions of the spiritual Jerusalem in the mystical literature, as essentially unrelated to the geographical centrality of the geographical city.

Furthermore, the earthly Jerusalem constitutes the best geographical starting point for the prayer to attain the heavenly Jerusalem, as is shown already by Nahmanides's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*:

Whoever prays in Jerusalem is regarded as if he prays before the Throne of Glory, for it is the gateway of heaven, open [in order to] to listen to the prayer of Israel, as it is said, that is "the gateway to heaven" [Genesis 28:17].<sup>142</sup>

Or, according to the prayer Nahmanides composed and recited over the ruins of Jerusalem: "Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem [Psalms 122:2], the house of the Lord and the gateway of heaven, Jerusalem built up, a city knit together [*ibid.*, v. 3] with that above it."<sup>143</sup> The earthly city, desolate as it was in the sixties of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after the conquest of the Mongols, is nevertheless conceived of as been linked with the heavenly Jerusalem, and despite the worst desolation of Jerusalem in its medieval history, it remains nevertheless in the view of the Kabbalist who watched it the gateway of heaven, i.e., the entrance to the world of the *sefirot*.<sup>144</sup> The emphasis placed on the essential

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<sup>141</sup> From this point of view too, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah differs from the ecstatic one, which is concerned basically with the numerical dimensions of the word Jerusalem. See the texts and analyses in M. Idel, "Jerusalem in 13<sup>th</sup> Jewish Thought," *art. cit.*, pp. 276–283.

<sup>142</sup> In his commentary on Genesis 28:17; see also his commentary on Genesis 14:18.

<sup>143</sup> *Collected Writings of Nahmanides*, ed. Chavel, vol. I, p. 424.

<sup>144</sup> See *Sefer Torat ha-Adam*, printed in *Collected Writings of Nahmanides*, ed. Chavel, vol. II, p. 298: "When you will say about the one who stands in Jerusalem, that his soul is engarbed with Divine inspiration and prophetic labors with Divine will." For more elaborated visions of Jerusalem as *axis mundi* and as the locus that allows the ascent on high in Nahmanides' school,

connection between the lower and upper worlds, which passes through the earthy Jerusalem, retained the importance of the physical city within this system of Kabbalistic thought, which succeeded in closely integrating these two planes of reality as parts of a continuum. Thus the role of the feminine divine power in mediating the contact between the different worlds is vital, and its status cannot be minimized, given the structural task the heavenly city has been attributed. Either the energetic supply descending by the mediation of the heavenly Jerusalem to the earthy one, or the ascent of the intention of the Kabbalist in prayer via the earthy Jerusalem to the supernal one, transformed the concept of the desolate terrestrial city, a simple *axis mundi* in biblical Judaism, into a complex type of *axis mundi* in some later forms of this religion.<sup>145</sup>

Interestingly enough it is the feminine hypostasis that is conceived of as the spiritual center of the lower divine powers, just as the terrestrial Jerusalem is conceived of as an *axis mundi* below. These double and in some instances triple cases of *axis mundi*, as the centers of two worlds or three worlds, and as related to each other in imageries which display some forms of centrality, articulate a view according to which the different forms of Jerusalem are not only centers of their respective planes of being, but of reality in general, be it divine or otherwise. This centrality is not only conceived by a mere geometrical imagery, but is part of the explicit omphalic picture of the universe and the way it has been created, which emphasize the superiority of the middle point over other parts of the complex picture, as the necessary channel that transmits the vital supply to the lower world, as the mother's navel does to her child. It has to do with the very maintenance of the terrestrial realms by the dint of the influx descending, according to the Kabbalistic cosmology, from the feminine power envisioned in some cases as the mother of the world, to the lower worlds. This is the reason why in some instances we may speak about a growing phenomenon of worship directed to the last *sefirah* as eminently a feminine power, especially evident since the Safedian Kabbalah.<sup>146</sup>

### 8. *Some Methodological Remarks*

We have examined some of the different symbolic valences of the couple Zion–Jerusalem recurring mainly during the first two centuries of the history of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, and their earlier, though partial,

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and in some later Kabbalistic views, which are all based on some Arabic sources see M. Idel, *Ascensions on High*, pp. 171–181.

<sup>145</sup> On *axis mundi* see Mircea Eliade, in his studies referred in note 146 below. For an application of Eliade's approach concerning the center to biblical material see Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 111–137.

<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., my *Kabbalah & Eros*, p. 144. Compare, however, Elliot R. Wolfson's different vision of the status of the feminine in Kabbalah, articulated in his studies mentioned above, note 5.

parallels. We may easily discern a variety of identification of the two biblical terms with different aspects of the divine pleroma, though the feminine valences of Jerusalem are rather stable and obvious. Thus, in some few late antiquity texts, we may discern the importance of a hypostatic vision of Jerusalem, described in feminine and sometimes sexual terms, which predates by many centuries the similar phenomenon in medieval Kabbalah. However, under the impact of Rabbinic approaches, the supernal feminine hypostasis was oftentimes conceived of as essentially linked to the terrestrial Jerusalem, creating some form of dependence of the mystic on the latter one, when he attempts to reach the former.

The similarities between some of the Kabbalistic treatments discussed above and the Gnostic views are quite significant. However, while the Gnostic descriptions are more concerned with the past in fact the primordial times, and with the details of the structures of the supernal pleroma, the Kabbalists imagined a more continuous and integrated universe, which gives some form of relevance to the holy geography in the present. The Rabbinic commandments with their theurgical effect allows some form of impact and participation in the pleromatic world. Gnosticism, quite a variegated form of religion is, roughly speaking, a protestant religion in respect to ancient Judaism and nascent Christianity, and it differs dramatically in its basic mentality from the more "Catholic" Kabbalistic approach to Rabbinism.

Though elaborating on the content of a spiritual Jerusalem, the semantic strategy of the main line of Kabbalists was to reinforce at the same time the role played by terrestrial one. Thus, we may extrapolate from this approach that just as the role played by the spiritual Jerusalem was not undermining that of the geographical one, also the role of the supernal feminine one, should not be diminished, as she is partaking in a significant manner in the processes taking place within the divine sphere, as we have seen in the discussions about the two Jerusalems.

The vast majority of the texts adduced above, and additional parallels may be found in other Kabbalistic writings, have been written in medieval Spain, by Kabbalists who never visited the land of Israel or Jerusalem. Their symbolic interpretation is basically of passages found in texts not of a real landscape they have ever seen. The hypothetical earlier traditions, the logic of their theosophical system, the style of the interpreted texts, and their exegetical ingenuity constitute the row-matter of their discussions, not an encounter with an external world that requires a symbolic decoding. Symbolism as represented above is part of a diasporic situation, attempting to anchor its spirituality in geography that different dramatically from what they acquainted with in their common life. In fact, the real geography of Spain, or of other cities or countries where Kabbalists were active in the Diaspora, did not serve to my best knowledge, as starting point for significant forms of symbolic speculations.<sup>147</sup> In a certain

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<sup>147</sup> See M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 285–286.

moment of the development, the system elaborates on more complex attitudes toward Jerusalem, as the elevation to the rank of *Keter* or to that of *Binah* demonstrates. The interchanges between the diverse factors, like the specific logic of the theosophical systems, the textual data that had been interpreted according to these systems functioning as exegetical codes, and the exegetical skills of the individual Kabbalists are therefore components that are divorced to a great extent from a history or of the realia of the specific locale of the city.

The above discussions should be seen also from a more general point of view, regarding the notion of *axis mundi*. As mentioned above, the Kabbalists living in the diaspora regarded *axis mundi* as situated in a geographical place they did not see neither had access to it. This approach questions Mircea Eliade's emphatic assertion that people need to live at the geographical center of the world. However, in cultures based on canonical texts, it is the textual universe, the Hebrew words rather than natural landscape that may supply material for building a universe that structures meaning, not necessarily its concrete and immediate geographical data. Unlike Eliade's vision of the archaic mentality, a topos-oriented type of religion, in which the "real" religious man is immersed in re-experiencing the primordial acts within the geographical perimeter he believed they happened therein, namely at what he believes is the concrete center of the world, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists assumed that also when they are outside the geographical center of the world, the city of Jerusalem, which they have never seen, they are capable to connect themselves with the spiritual center of the world, the median line and the supernal Jerusalem as its lowest extremity, as it was the case of Moses, according to the passage adduced above from R. Baḥya ben Asher's *Commentary on the Torah*.

It is not my intention to decide here what form of experience is more "realm" or authentic and even less to deal with which of them is "superior" to the other. By being acquainted with the logic of Eliade's vision of religion, we may extrapolate that he would certainly decide as to the inferiority of the Kabbalistic approach as described above. Neither am I concerned here with the possibility of a shift from the rituals related the center of Beit-El as a reflecting a more natural and popular religion, to one that is focused on a non-mythical cult in Jerusalem, or a shift between the archaic and more historical oriented religion, and implicitly less positive, as one of Eliade's passage to be cited immediately below, and many others, imply.<sup>148</sup> My aim here, or elsewhere in my studies, is not to take a position as to the "validity" of the material I study, or of the experiences it may convey, neither as to its general relevance. What I try to show is that more elaborated forms of religious thinking, which are often-times related to speculations regarding texts and language

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<sup>148</sup> See his Romanian review on a book about Elephantine Aramaic documents by Albert Vincent, entitled "From Elephantine to Jerusalem," reprinted in the collection of his essays *Drumul spre centru*, edited by Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu (Bucharest: Univers, 1991), pp. 225–231, originally printed in 1937.

that represent quite a remote geography, rather than nature that is perceived directly, may operate with many forms of centers, while admitting the importance of the concept of *axis mundi*. We may speak more about a complex composite axis constituted by multiple centers rather than about a point, and this axis is conceived of organizing a series of planes of being, even for thinkers who lived outside the center. In my opinion, the proper understanding of those complicated religious approaches requires more complex theories of religion, which do better justice to the entire realm of religious phenomena, if someone insists that he is capable to explain the entire realm of religion, rather than the more simplistic schemes.<sup>149</sup>

Let me try to point out some of the reasons for the emergence of such a complexity. The Kabbalistic discussions above represent a combination between the projection of a sexualized geography onto the divine map of powers, and the understanding of the correspondences between those powers and the lower entities in a dynamic, in a sympathetic manner. The principle of correspondence between earthy and celestial structures, so vital for theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, is found already in Rabbinic sources, the sexualized approach may have Jewish origins in hypothetical traditions that have Christian and Gnostic parallels and in Rabbinic exegesis, but the more dynamic approach, which includes the assumption of the possibility to have a theurgical impact on high, is a development that is characteristic of the main lines of Kabbalah, though it too has some earlier Rabbinic sources. Those conceptually diverse sources, whose contents have been presumably brought together in early Kabbalah for the first time in a written manner, account for the complexity of the Kabbalistic discussions above.

Moreover, the multiple types of Jerusalem to which this name refers in Kabbalistic sources, create semantic problems that are relatively rare in the history of symbolism: a word, Jerusalem, found in an ancient book which refers to a desolate city, which the Kabbalist did not see. Then this city and its name refer to a higher city, the heavenly one, which has been attributed conceptual valences which do not appear in the canonical book, the sexual ones. This heavenly Jerusalem become in some cases just a lower entity in the divine structure, which points or reflects and even impacts on another heavenly Jerusalem, as the two higher *sefirot Binah* or *Keter* are. No doubt this is an apotheosis of a symbol dealing with a feminine hypostasis that was not eclipsed during the development of theosophical Kabbalah, but in fact enhanced significantly and proliferated in growingly more numerous discussions.

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<sup>149</sup> See also the pertinent critique of Eliade's view of the center theory articulated by Jonathan Smith, *Map Is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 101–102, 292–293. A major way to avoid simplistic descriptions is to address in details as many examples dealing with a certain symbol as available in a philological manner, including material found solely in manuscripts, before deciding if it really fits a certain pattern.



This is quite a baroque type of symbolism, which both multiplies itself by adding levels that are superior to the ones as discussed by earlier Kabbalists, and by becoming more precise by mapping much more complex theosophical structures. Just as Jerusalem the city created by projection the heavenly Jerusalem, which at its turn created the concept of the last divine power, the feminine entity designated as “Jerusalem on high” so at its turn the latter created the even higher “Jerusalem on high.” Is this development in the way Kabbalistic symbolism develops from a certain moment in early 14<sup>th</sup> century, a casuistic approach, that has only exegetical purposes, or does it constitute part of a more experiential approach? Is the map construed by so many types of Jerusalem a map without much territory, and without anyone who traveled according to it? I shall try to answer this question immediately below.

Also another famous distinction, between the pre-axial and axial forms of religion, as articulated by Karl Jaspers, is not especially helpful in analyzing the complexity of the symbolism and practices as described above.<sup>150</sup> The pre-axial spirituality related to a geographical center, that organizes not only the universe but also the communal or tribal life, did not disappear with the emergence of the much more complex symbolisms, but on the contrary, it was strengthened by them. We may therefore conclude that any neat distinction based on temporal criteria does not work in the cases of traditional mentalities, where ancient traditions are perpetuated for many centuries, but were reinterpreted in figurative manners.

However, it seems that a usual distinction formulated more recently by Jonathan Smith, may help to characterize the above discussions in a more salient manner: Jerusalem is certainly possessing a locative nature by being at the center, but given the dynamic nature of the theosophical systems in which it has been embedded it has sometimes also some locomotive dimension, by transmitting the influx to the lower worlds.<sup>151</sup> What seems to me fascinating is the fact that despite the destruction of the second temple, and the fact that Jerusalem was not a center of Kabbalah studies for many centuries, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists in the diaspora maintained both the rabbinic and biblical topocentric forms of religion, and projected them on high, without attempting to create a more non-locative model, even when the portative center of study and contemplation, the Hebrew Bible, had been canonized. In fact, the canonization of the Bible and of the Talmud meant also the canoniza-

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<sup>150</sup> See, e.g., the collection of interesting studies edited by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *The Origin and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), and Ewert H. Cousins, *The Christ of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Rockport: Element, 1992), who speaks about a second axial period in the future that will comprise the two different forms of religiosity. See also M. Idel, *Ascensions on High*, *op. cit.*, pp. 153–154.

<sup>151</sup> See Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–102, 292–293, 308, and Benjamin D. Sommer, “Conflicting Constructions of the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle,” *Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 9 (2001), pp. 45–48.

tion of the locative approach, which has been formulated in these texts, even when the literary sources are portable *par excellence*. From this point of view, the numerous Kabbalistic discussions of *axis mundi* depend heavily on the classical Jewish texts, biblical and Rabbinic, an assertion that conflicts with the more general perception of Gershom Scholem, as it reverberated also in Mircea Eliade's account of his great surprise when reading in 1966 some of Scholem's lectures — which have in fact been delivered at Eranos many years beforehand while he participate there — entitled in English *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*:

In Kabbalah we have to do with a new, real creation of the Judaic religious genius, due to the need to recover a part of the cosmic religiosity smothered and persecuted as much by the prophets as by the later Talmudic rigorists.<sup>152</sup>

I do not believe that the Kabbalists represent a more “real” case of Jewish “genius” than do the prophets or the “Talmudic rigorists.” In fact, many of the Kabbalists we have cited above were also well-known rabbinic scholars, and it is hard to find in their resort to the sexual symbolism of Jerusalem, a view that was perceived of as conflicting with their Talmudic knowledge, either by they or by others. In a critical academic discourse there is no reason to adopt an essentialist vision of Judaism, by relegating the religious phenomena that are uncomfortable for the scholar's general theory, to a marginal place on the one hand, but confer nice epithets to that religious modality that fits someone's general vision of what is authentic in religion, on the other. Neither am I convinced that very much is “new” in the manner in which the medieval Kabbalists presented the views cited above. Also the implied assumption that there is a “Kabbalah,” in the singular, represents a strong simplification of diversified spiritual trends. Whether “Kabbalah” was indeed a cosmic religion or not is also quite a great quandary. As seen above, the focus of the speculations

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<sup>152</sup> M. Eliade, *No Souvenirs. Journal, 1957–1969*, trans. Fred H. Johnson Jr. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 266. For Eliade's review of Scholem's book see his “Cosmic Religion,” *Commentary*, vol. 41:3 (March 1966), pp. 95–98. More on this issue see M. Idel, *Ascensions on High*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–224. The early Eliade was, let me emphasize, well-aware of the existence of elements in Talmudic texts related to *axis mundi*. See his Romanian essay on “Babylonian Cosmology and Alchemy,” reprinted in *Drumul spre centru*, *op. cit.*, pp. 484–559, originally printed in 1937, where he deals with the importance of the geographical center, *axis mundi*, or homologies between heaven and earth, adducing also Jewish material to support his views as to the importance of these homologies. See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 496, 503, in his most widespread book *The Myth of the Eternal Return, Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 8–9, 15, 17, 18 or *Images & Symbols. Studies in Religious Symbolism*, tr. Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), pp. 41–42, and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 376, 378. The very few examples Eliade brought already in 1937, have been reiterated in his later works, without a more profound analysis of details. However, most of those Rabbinic themes, some of them cited above, which were also the proof-texts of the Kabbalists, and in my opinion, determined to a great extent the direction of their thought, were not addressed by Eliade.

related to the powers symbolized by Jerusalem is the inter-divine structures, and not so much events in the extra-divine cosmos.

A more general lesson that may perhaps be learned from the above detailed analyses: symbolism may work in more than one manner in rapport to the symbolized issues: it may help retaining the memory of the old traditions while nevertheless weakening them, or in some other cases it may reinforce them. The latter alternative is more plausible when traditions are related not only to the past, in the vein of “places of memory,” but to some forms of future. As seen above, the veneration of Jerusalem was not only a matter of the glorious sacred history in the past, but in some cases, related also the main locus of events related to the future, more precisely the messianic future. The Kabbalists who offered the novel interpretations to the verses about Jerusalem have capitalized on the aura of sanctity the city already acquired in Jewish traditions, but they added nevertheless the dimension of contributing something to the higher Jerusalems in the present, by performing the rituals with the intention to affect the supernal sphere. It was not only nostalgia, inertia and automatic retrieval of memories about the center of the world, but in fact also an attempt to disregard history by the belief not only in the supernal Jerusalem that has not been destroyed, but also an entity which retains its centrality in the performance of the rites in a theurgical manner.

Moreover, it is plausible that the very integration of certain symbolism within a more comprehensive cosmic or divine structure prevents the transformation of the old traditions in memories that drew their strength from history alone. In fact many of the above Kabbalists subscribed to what can be described as a theory of a continuous universe, a form of great chain of being, which allows ascent and descent from the divine realm to the human one.<sup>153</sup> In this cosmic and rather comprehensive chain, which includes not only the sefirotic emanations but also the lower cosmic structures, the two forms of Jerusalem constitute vital rungs.

Let me point out that in my opinion nowhere in the texts adduced above, or in others I am acquainted with, has the role of the feminine hypostasis designated as Jerusalem, been attenuated by absorbing it into the male potency, neither in the present nor in the eschatological future.<sup>154</sup> It was the flowering of the city, by its receiving the influx from Zion and transmitting it to the lower worlds, not its assimilation to Zion that Kabbalists were writing about in explicit terms. Also the imagery they used, the center, the navel, or the last vertebra, do not easily allow an assumption of a change of its place in the theosophical system.

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<sup>153</sup> See M. Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Rituals and Techniques in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>154</sup> See above note 130.

These considerations may help answering a question related to the baroque forms of symbolism that include also the multiple Jerusalem symbolism. As mentioned above, most of the Kabbalists active during the first three centuries of the history of Kabbalah had scarcely seen the terrestrial Jerusalem with their eyes: Nahmanides is no doubt an exception, though he has seen indeed a desolate city after the conquest of the Mongol hordes. Their life in the Diaspora is often understood as an exilic life, one in which it is difficult to achieve a supreme form of mystical experience, and indeed this is the approach of Nahmanides. To resort to Gershom Scholem's "diagnosis," in the pre-Messianic forms of Judaism, religious life of the Jews was in "deferment," an experience of plenitude being impossible,<sup>155</sup> a statement parallel to Eliade's more famous "nostalgia of the Paradise." In both cases, different as the points of reference are, an assumption that the religious persons of one sort or another live a life of alienation is presupposed as evident.

Let me attempt to describe the discussions above as ex-centric life, as they took place not only before the coming of the Messiah, in Scholem's terms, but also outside the sacred center, *à la Eliade*. These two eminent scholars, different as they were in many respects methodologically and from the point of view of the primary source they used, nevertheless shared a strong propensity to reduce complex approaches to relatively simple visions: if for Scholem the predominant religious axis in Judaism including Kabbalah is the temporal one, is profoundly informed by the problematic of exile and redemption,<sup>156</sup> for Eliade the centrality of the sacred place is one of the most defining characteristic of archaic religions, though he was also concerned with the regeneration by the return to the primordial time. To judge from these two points of scholarly view the content of the approaches found in the Kabbalists we mentioned above, we may assume, that the Kabbalists' approach allows only some form of peripherally mystical life, less intense than their religious systems would claim it is possible to achieve, at least in principle. Guided by strict objective criteria, which are to be understood as shaping religious life these scholars were much less concerned with the possibility that the religious *imaginaire* created by the Kabbalists can play as important and formative a role in the inner life as the external facts may do.

The possible answer to the scholarly claims presented above is rather complex. In my opinion, mystics rather rarely build up systems that will diminish their religious life. Judging from what we know about the different views of R. Isaac of Acre, the author of the anonymous passage on the two sefirotic Jerusalems, he claimed that it is possible to concentrate daily, though relatively shortly, on the Infinite, as part of contemplation during prayer. This means

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<sup>155</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 35. See also *ibid.*, p. 7, 202.

<sup>156</sup> See, e.g., Gershom Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

that the projection of the symbol of Jerusalem to the level of *Keter* is not merely putting this value on a pedestal, but part of construing an approach that is not hindering its contemplation. It is not a deferral effort, but part of a continuously developing theosophical system that allows access to and experience of the metaphysical realm where the heavenly Jerusalem has been projected.<sup>157</sup> In fact, the same Kabbalist claimed that the very life in Jerusalem as a city is not sufficient for an intense religious experience, but if someone's soul is dwelling in a Jewish body, which is called *'Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. In his understanding the body constitutes the earth of the soul that is named *Yisrael*.<sup>158</sup> According to this view of his, the very presence of someone in a sacred geography alone does not suffice for an intensified inner life, or for attaining a theophanic experience.

On the other hand, we know only very little about the biography of the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, the Kabbalist, who offered the vision that the heavenly Jerusalem is the *sefirah* of *Binah*. From a perusal of his Hebrew and Aramaic writings, it seems obvious that he was less concerned with mystical experiences but was immersed more in wild associative exegesis. This much more exegetical approach nevertheless does not mean that his symbolism could not inspire a more experiential approach in other Kabbalists, like Moses Cordovero, a Kabbalist that as been known for his intense mystical life.<sup>159</sup> In any case, my point is that no one single reading of the way in which baroque symbolism in Kabbalah functioned is plausible: it may well reflect an intensified mystical life, just as it may reflect a more ludic approach to the interpreted texts.

However, the fact that symbolic strategies moved easily from one Kabbalist to another, and were adopted within different theosophical systems, any single understanding of the way it functions would be quite precarious. It is only the painful analysis of extensive literary corpora, oftentimes complex and offering different answers to the same problem that may allow the emergence of a more plausible picture, even when quite a specific symbol is concerned. Comprehensive descriptions of Kabbalah, not to speak of religion in general, are often times no more than scholarly exaggerations that reflect much more the biases of the scholar than the variegated content of the wide range of extant material. What can be done in a responsible manner is to allow the analyses of as many details to shape the emergence of more diversified and comprehensive pictures, rather than impose such a general picture on some few of the available details. Processes of internalization of religious life, which

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<sup>157</sup> On the question of plenitude of religious experience in Kabbalah see M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, *op. cit.*, pp. 423–427, and *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 283–289.

<sup>158</sup> M. Idel, "Jerusalem in 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Thought," *art. cit.*, pp. 281–282.

<sup>159</sup> See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 50–54, and M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 126–131, 136–140.

reinterpret the temporal and special dimensions of earlier forms of religion played a central role in later elaborations, and they should be attributed a major role in the understanding of the complexity of religious phenomena. These processes created new religious territories, imaginary as they might be, but quite concrete for the Kabbalists, who did not need the real territory of the earthy Jerusalem in order to achieve experiences of plenitude, but refused at the same time to give it up. However, even beyond the belief in the special status of the geographical Jerusalem, the fact that the Kabbalists believed in the valences of the words related to it, constitutes a starting point that is not essentially different from those religious persons who believed in the specially status of certain places as the center of the world. I conceive the possibility to attribute new meanings to a word, as religiously significant as attributing a new meaning to a place.

In any case the possibility that symbols acquire new life by migrating from one system to another, and do not express always the same message, may be exemplified also from the transition of the sexual and hypostatic understanding of Jerusalem to a famous English poet. William Blake (1757–1827), who in a few instances in his poem *Jerusalem* (1804), defines the relationship between Albion and Jerusalem as the male-female relationship, whose sexual union leads to perfection. In light of the fact that Blake himself was acquainted with the Kabbalistic conception of Adam, whom he identifies with Albion, it may reasonably be assumed that the feminine nature of Jerusalem is a consequence of Kabbalistic influence, perhaps mediated by Emanuel Swedenborg or by Zinzendorf. The fact that a personalized Jerusalem is described by the English poet as an Emanation of the Giant Albion, and as a feminine hypostasis strengthens this hypothesis in a considerable manner. And, perhaps, Blake's male Albion that functions as a name for Adam, is connected with the masculine valences of Zion<sup>160</sup> in some of the Kabbalistic passages dealt with above?<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Zion occurs several times in Blake's poem as a geographical term.

<sup>161</sup> See, e.g., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. by David Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 166. For Blake and Kabbalah see A. A. Ansari, "Blake and the Kabbalah," in A. H. Rosenfeld (ed.), *William Blake — Essays for S. Foster Damon* (Providence, R.I. 1969), pp. 199–220, especially pp. 204–205. See also Harold Fisch, *Jerusalem and Albion: The Hebraic Factor in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (London, 1964), p. 12, note 1, Sheila Spector, "Blake's *Milton* as Kabbalistic Vision," *Religion and Literature*, vol. 25 (1993), pp. 19–33, and Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (London: Century, 2006).