7

Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

Eroticism, Asceticism, and Mystical Experience

At first blush it might appear that the title of this study brings together two themes of a mutually exclusive nature. Asceticism, conventionally understood, implies rigorous discipline of body and soul and the adoption of an austere lifestyle, which in some cases leads to the abrogation of desire, self-denial, and self-mortification. Eroticism, by contrast, entails the sense of ecstatic rapture that ensues from the inspired indulgence in matters of the body and the full embrace of the sensual. In the case of both asceticism and eroticism, moreover, there is a paradoxical confluence of life and death, but from opposite ends of the spectrum: asceticism is the negation of life that occasions a simulation of death, eroticism the affirmation of life even to the point of death.

When one probes more deeply, however, it becomes apparent that asceticism and eroticism are not necessarily oppositional. Indeed, the ascetic impulse manifest in pious devotion may itself be rooted in erotic desire, which is a recurring element in the phenomenology of religious experience.[1] Matters pertaining to the sacred can be depicted erotically because there is a presumption with respect to the sacred nature of the erotic. In the medieval setting of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, this is enhanced by the common Platonic heritage according to which the intelligible realm is itself rendered in distinctively erotic language.[2] It is commonplace for historians of religion to emphasize, therefore, that the love of God is often expressed in the language of human sexuality. But the issue is not merely one of expression. The texture of intense religious experience frequently is marked by the tension between yearning and fulfillment.[3] As Georges Bataille put it, "The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm; she does not know that his unacknowledgeable passions and her own are really one."[4] To be sure, in traditional communities, the erotic aspect of the saintly life is not fulfilled by the satiation of physical desire, but by union with the spirit. The celibate calling nevertheless elicits a response no less erotic than that aroused by carnal temptation for one in pursuit of sensual pleasure.

The confluence of eroticism and asceticism is especially prevalent in the realm of mystical religious experience.[5] As is well known, a central (if not defining) feature of

mysticism cultivated within theistic traditions is the experience of communion of the individual soul with the personal God. Typically, such experiences are described in terms of love, betrothal, marriage, and consummation. The soul, which is feminized for both men and women,[6] expresses its desire for the divine, personified as the male bridegroom, through amorous images such as kissing, caressing, and copulation. It would be misleading to interpret these forms of erotic spirituality in the Freudian sense of sublimation. Mystics do not fit neatly into Freud's clinical category of the repressed subject who is ignorant of the libidinal force that he sublimates. On the contrary, mystics consciously appropriate modes of discourse from the realm of sensual love, for they are well aware of the amorous nature of religious experience. Therefore, we would do better to speak of the *transformation* of sexual energy rather than its displacement.

Allegorization of the Erotic in Medieval Jewish Exegesis

Medieval rabbinic exegesis of the Song of Songs presented an array of possible readings.[7] The midrashic orientation to the Song with a tendency toward historical allegory was preserved and expanded, particularly in the Ashkenazi tradition exemplified by Rashi.[8] In addition to this approach, philosophical and mystical interpretations of the Song abounded in the Jewish Middle Ages. In spite of the substantial differences between the philosophical and the kabbalistic perspectives on many doctrinal issues, with respect to the spiritualized understanding of the erotic images of the Song there is an important affinity between philosopher and kabbalist.[9] Indeed, the mystical conception of the union of the soul and God expressed in both theosophic and prophetic kabbalah (the two major trends of kabbalistic speculation that took shape in thirteenth-century Spain) is indebted to the philosophical interpretation of the Song as an allegorical depiction of the relationship of the female soul to the masculine God or to the Active Intellect.[10] By contrast, Scholem has argued that the Spanish kabbalah in its early period is to be distinguished from other forms of mysticism, especially that of Christianity, by the fact that man's relation to God is not portrayed in erotic images. In support of his claim, Scholem asserts that the interpretation of the Song as an allegorical depiction of the soul's yearning for union with the divine is lacking in kabbalistic sources until the sixteenth century.[11] Moshe Idel has argued that Scholem's view is valid with respect to theosophic kabbalah, but not in the case of ecstatic kabbalah.[12] As I will argue later, however, even in thirteenth-century theosophic kabbalah, one can find evidence for the allegorical interpretation of the Song as an erotic dialogue between the soul and God.

Brief allusions to the philosophical orientation are found already in Baḥya ibn Paquda's classical work of Jewish pietism, *Ḥovot ha-levavot* (Duties of the heart), which is clearly modeled on a Sufi paradigm. In particular, Baḥya cites from the Song in support of the notion that the pietistic ideal entails the all-consuming love of God, which is realized only in a state of contemplative isolation (*hitbodedut*).[13] Interestingly enough, in the introduction to his commentary on the Song, Abraham Ibn Ezra specifically rejects the philosophers (*'anshei meḥqar*) who interpret the biblical narrative as a reference to the union of the supernal, masculine soul and the female body as antithetical to the allegorical approach adopted by the Rabbis.[14] Ibn Ezra's remark is somewhat problem-

atic inasmuch as in his own poetry as well as in his *'Iggeret Ḥai ben Meqiṣ*, an adaptation of Avicenna's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*,[15] he does apply philosophical allegory to verses from the Song, an approach that jibes with that taken in other parts of his scriptural commentary.[16] This comment, regardless of its sincerity, is clear evidence that by the twelfth century a philosophical allegory of the Song had taken its place alongside the allegorical interpretations of the Rabbis. Thus we find, for example, in the *Torat ha-nefesh* (Doctrine of the soul), falsely attributed to Baḥya, that the soul is identified explicitly as the female voice of the Song, Shulamit, because of her peaceful return from the world to her ontological source in the divine. The erotic content of the Song, therefore, relates to the desire and love of the rational soul for the Creator.[17]

The philosophical approach is attested as well in the works of Maimonides. For example, in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides explicitly states that the entire Song of Songs is a parable (*mashal*) for the all-consuming love of the soul for God.[18] Along similar lines, in the context of explicating the ideal of the intellectual worship of God, Maimonides cites the verse, "I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful" (Song 5:2), to provide scriptural support for the idea that those inclined to prophecy experience the union of the rational soul and the divine,[19] an exegesis that is repeated by Abraham Maimonides in his treatise on Jewish Sufism, the *Highways to Perfection*.[20] In the continuation of the aforementioned passage from the *Guide*, Maimonides interprets the kiss mentioned in Song 1:2 as a reference to the comprehension that arises as a result of the passionate love (*'ishq*) for God,[21] which is followed by the experience of ecstatic death (related to the rabbinic trope of the death of the righteous by a kiss[22]), which is in fact deliverance from physical mortality and the limitations of the body.[23] Maimonides, therefore, appropriates the erotic symbolism to depict the contemplative ideal of union, the intellectual love,[24] which is also identified as true worship and the highest level of prophecy.

The philosophical reading is given its fullest expression in the commentaries on the Song composed in the thirteenth century by Joseph ibn Aknin and Moses ibn Tibbon. Ibn Aknin proposed three approaches to the book: *peshaṭ*, *derash*, and *sod*, which correspond respectively to the philological, homiletical, and philosophical. The three hermeneutical approaches are also related to the three human faculties—the natural, the animalistic, and the rational. The last approach, which is presented as the truly esoteric or internal meaning of the text, assumes that the erotic dialogue between bride and bridegroom relates to the desire of the human soul to become one with the Active Intellect.[25] The attainment of this state is clearly predicated on the liberation of the intellect from the subjugation of physical pleasures.[26] Nevertheless, erotic imagery is the most appropriate to characterize the longing of the soul for union with the Active Intellect even if there is no precise parallel between the contemplative and carnal forms of eros. Thus, to cite one example, in his interpretation of the kiss mentioned in Song 1:2, ibn Aknin writes, "Its explanation according to my approach is that the rational [soul] compares the dissemination of the lights of the [Active] Intellect upon her to the kisses of the mouth . . . and this is intellectual pleasure."[27]

In spite of some minor differences in interpreting certain images and phrases in the Song, Moses ibn Tibbon adopts the same hermeneutical approach as that of ibn Aknin. That is, he similarly affirms that the ultimate meaning of the Song is related to the "belief in the conjunction of the soul of man, that is, the rational [soul], with the Separate Intellect, for through this faith is the survival of the soul of man after death possible."[28] Ibn Tibbon accepts the standard medieval notion (which has its roots in antiquity) that the weaker party of any pair is depicted as feminine and the stronger as masculine. Thus, matter is configured as female and form male, the soul female and the intellect male, the intellect of man female and the Separate Intellect male.[29] In a state of potentiality, the soul is characterized as female, but when it is actualized it is male.[30] Commenting on the image of the kiss in Song 1:2, ibn Tibbon writes: "'Oh, let him kiss me' alludes to the fact that conjunction of the soul of man and the Separate Intellect is possible. . . . The conjunction of man with the Separate Intellect involves the intellect alone, for when he comprehends it, it is conjoined to him. The reality of the forms is in the intellect alone, for they are not matter so that the one is conjoined to the other, body to body."[31]

In a manner similar to the exegetical strategy prevalent in Christian authors, a resemblance explicable on the basis of the shared indebtedness to Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources, the sensual images of the biblical text were applied figuratively by these Jewish exegetes to the contemplative desire of the human intellect for union with God (or the Active Intellect).[32] The philosophical orientation took root in the cultural climate of the golden age of Hispanic Jewry, reflecting the particular impact of Greco-Arabic philosophy. To appreciate the unique contribution of the Sephardic thinkers in formulating a philosophical-mystical interpretation of the Song, however, it is necessary to bear in mind that the new secular poetry composed by the Hispano-Jewish poets undoubtedly revived the erotic element in the literal reading of this biblical book. On the other hand, the attempt to combine Arabic love poetry and the rabbinic liturgical use of the Song also leads to the allegorization of the love poems.[33] More important, the same poets who utilized the erotic symbolism of the Song in their secular love poetry also applied a philosophical allegory to it, understanding the overtly erotic imagery as a figurative depiction of the rational soul's longing for union with God. The application of images culled from the Song to refer to the relationship between God and the soul shifted the focus from national eschatology to personal salvation.[34]

Ecstatic and Theosophic Elements in Kabbalistic Allegoresis

In the history of scholarship on medieval kabbalah, it is generally assumed that the individualizing interpretation[35] of the Song of Songs as an imaginative representation of the love of the soul for matters spiritual, which was cultivated by a rabbinic elite given to a kind of philosophical mysticism,[36] had its greatest impact on the prophetic kabbalah developed by Abraham Abulafia.[37] In a measure this is true insofar as Abulafia's mystical teaching is a unique blend of Maimonidean philosophy and ancient Jewish esotericism (principally mediated through the writings of the German Pietists).[38] Abulafia follows Maimonides in affirming the love of God as the apex of intellectual worship. The passionate relationship between the mystic and God is also portrayed by Abulafia in the erotic images of the Song, especially the symbol of the kiss. Abulafia relates the bridegroom and bride to the rational soul and the Active Intellect respectively, the erotic union of the two constituting the mystical significance of prophecy.[39] He even goes so far as to interpret the midrashic understanding of the Song

an exoteric level the Song is a parable about the community of Israel and God, but esoterically it alludes to the relationship of the rational soul and the Active Intellect.

The influence of the philosophical approach to the Song is evident in a passage in the *Ginnat 'egoz*, a late thirteenth-century work by Abulafia's disciple, Joseph Gikatilla, which combines Maimonidean thought and various forms of linguistic and numerical mysticism.[40] In line with the philosophical interpretation, Gikatilla describes the experience of prophecy as the separation of the rational soul from the body and its consequent conjunction with the intelligible world (*'olam ha-śekhel*), identified further as the angelic beings that are incorporeal light. Gikatilla relates these immaterial and translucent forms to the waters mentioned by Akiva in his warning to those who entered Pardes (according to the version of the legend in the Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 14b) not to say "water, water" when they come upon the pure marble stones. "These are the waters," writes Gikatilla, "that are entirely the inner, intelligible, spiritual, subtle light. . . . Concerning these waters it says, 'Abundant waters cannot quench love' (Song 8:7). Love is not a corporeal matter that the waters could quench, but rather the waters are intelligible waters and the love is intelligible love."[41] *'Ahavah śikhlit*, a love that comes by way of intellect, commands the intense passion of the soul for the object of its longing. The Song expresses poetically the fervor of mind in its desire to be conjoined to the intelligible world of incorporeal light.

It would be wrong, however, to limit the impact of the philosophical interpretation exclusively to the trend of kabbalah cultivated by Abulafia and his followers. Indeed, there is ample evidence that other kabbalists in the formative period acknowledged the individualizing orientation with respect to the Song.[42] I do not wish to argue with the standard, and certainly valid, point of view that many kabbalists (early on and through the generations) have applied the erotic imagery of the Song to the masculine and feminine potencies of the divine.[43] Nevertheless, these very kabbalists did affirm a more personalistic and mystical stance when interpreting the Song.

The following remark from the earliest kabbalistic commentary on the Song by Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona illustrates this point:

> "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2): These are the words of the glory, which desires and yearns to ascend, to be conjoined and to be illuminated in the supernal light that has no image. It ascends in thought and in will, and thus it speaks in the third person. The kiss is a symbol for the joy of the conjunction of the soul in the source of life and for the abundance of the Holy Spirit. Thus it says, "of the kisses of his mouth," for each and every cause receives the thought and the increase from that sweet light and resplendent splendor. When he speaks with the glory, which is the gate to the entities, he speaks in the third person.[44]

The verse from the Song can be read in two ways, referring either to the intradivine relationship between the feminine and masculine glories or to the ecstatic encounter of the soul and the glory.[45] According to the first reading, the kiss signifies the aspiration of the lower, feminine glory (*Shekhinah*) to ascend and to be united with the upper, masculine glory (*Tif'eret*). By contrast, according to the second reading, the kiss is symbolic of the delight that the soul experiences when it is conjoined to the divine glory. In this case, then, the soul of the male mystic assumes the persona of the feminine lover and the divine glory that of the male beloved. The passage of Ezra attests that at a relatively early literary stage the feminization of the male mystic in relation to the masculine God is found in the symbolism of theosophic kabbalah and is not associated exclusively with ecstatic kabbalah.[46] Consistent with other mystical traditions, theosophic and ecstatic kabbalists portrayed the soul of the mystic as feminine in relation to the male deity. In particular, I would note that with respect to this reversal of gender roles, there is a striking phenomenological similarity between the kabbalah and Christian mysticism, for the latter is based in great measure on the appropriation of the erotic imagery of the Song to depict the soul's relationship to Christ: the male mystic assumes the voice of the female beloved and Jesus that of the male lover. According to the mystical exegesis of the Song in both traditions, the overtly heterosexual language of the biblical narrative is transmuted into a spiritualized homoeroticism.[47] As I will suggest at length in the conclusion of this essay, the homoerotic bond of the male kabbalist and the divine presence is predicated on the ascetic abrogation of carnal desire.

In the final analysis, the theosophic and ecstatic readings offered by Ezra cannot be separated, because the realm of divine potencies provides the ontological structure that occasions the mystical experience of union, an experience poetically rendered by the image of the kiss.[48] The kiss of the *Shekhinah* symbolizes the conjunction of the soul in the source of life and the consequent overflow of the Holy Spirit.[49] Thus, in the introduction to his commentary, Ezra refers to individuals who interpret the erotic imagery of the Song theosophically as the "true Sages of Israel" who "receive the face of the *Shekhinah*,"[50] in contrast to both those who take it literally and those who explain it allegorically. Ecstatic conjunction with the divine is an integral part of the theosophic hermeneutics.

The point is underscored in another kabbalistic commentary on the Song, composed by Isaac ibn Sahula somewhat later, in thirteenth-century Castile. Ibn Sahula is explicitly critical of ibn Aknin's philosophical interpretation of the Song as a dialogue between the rational soul and the Active Intellect. In spite of ibn Sahula's criticism, however, he was greatly influenced by ibn Aknin and indeed incorporated in his own commentary his allegorical interpretation as the "revealed way" (*derekh ha-nigleh*), which stands in contrast to the "hidden way" (*derekh ha-nistar*).[51] More important, the esoteric interpretation presented by ibn Sahula is not merely theosophical in nature. His kabbalistic orientation entails a mystical-ecstatic dimension, which shares much in common with the philosophical outlook, especially as it relates to the conjunction of the soul and the divine. Consider, for example, ibn Sahula's explanation of the title, *shir ha-shirim*, "song of songs":[52] in spite of ibn Sahula's rejection of ibn Aknin's philosophical allegory, he explains the mystical mechanics of the song, which underlie the book as a whole, in terms of a process that is very close in spirit (if not terminology) to the philosophical idea of conjunction. Indeed, ibn Sahula explicitly states that the soul of the one who hears the song is "escorted and conjoined to that which is above."[53] The theosophic interpretation, which is quantitatively more prevalent, cannot be understood properly without one's taking into account the mystical dimension.

The intersection of the two hermeneutical tracks is most evident in ibn Sahula's treatment of the image of the kiss related in Song 1:2. In a manner similar to that of Ezra, ibn Sahula presents two explanations, which I call the theosophical and the ecstatic. The symbolic meaning of the kiss is the "emanation of the spirit from its source," but

this can be applied to the *Shekhinah* in relation to the potencies above her or to the soul in relation to the *Shekhinah*. The Song begins with the verse, "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," "in order to arouse man so that he yearns for this supernal gradation . . . to provide him with the support to assist him in being conjoined to him in the manner of lovers who out of the abundance of their affection are conjoined to one another."[54]

The same claim can be made with respect to the interpretation of the Song found in the *Zohar*, the major kabbalistic anthology that surfaced in Castile in the latter decades of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. The theosophic reading of the Song as a symbolic narrative about the relationship of the male and female potencies of the divine is combined with the ecstatic rendering of the Song as a dialogue between the human soul (personified as the feminine) and the divine (imaged as male).[55] Thus, following the earlier examples of Ezra and ibn Sahula, the *Zohar* provides two concurrent explanations for Song 1:2[56] According to one line of interpretation, the one who utters the verse "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" is the *Shekhinah*, designated by the technical expression "Community of Israel" (*keneset Yiśra'el*), and the one addressed is *Tif'eret*. In that case, the kiss denotes the conjunction of the *Shekhinah*, imaged as the feminine beloved, with *Tif'eret*, the masculine lover.[57] According to the second line of interpretation, the one uttering the verse is the human soul (or, more specifically in terms of the historical and literary context of zoharic literature, the soul of the male Jew) who addresses the *Shekhinah*. The kiss signifies the union of the lower spirit of the *ṣaddiq*, the righteous Jewish man, and the upper spirit of the divine, (*'itdabquta' de-ruḥa be-ruḥa*),[58] a union that is also represented by the kiss of death. In a manner consonant with Maimonides, the author of the zoharic passage assumes that the kiss of death signifies the passionate union of the soul and God, which is in fact the salvation from the death of body.[59]

The two interpretations in the *Zohar* cannot be isolated, for it is precisely the ecstatic union of the male mystic and the *Shekhinah* that promotes the unification of the latter and her masculine partner in the divine realm. Indeed, basic to the zoharic symbology is the view that the erotic impulse of the divine feminine to cohabit with the masculine is triggered by the arousal from below, which is brought about by the communion of the group of enlightened (*maskilim*) with the divine feminine.[60] The principle is stated clearly in one passage, which explicates the conjunction of David with the three patriarchs who constitute the divine chariot: "The desire of the female towards the male occurs only when a spirit enters into her and casts fluid corresponding to the supernal, masculine waters. Analogously, the Community of Israel is not aroused in relation to the Holy One, blessed be He, except by means of the spirit of the righteous who enter into her."[61] The interpretation of the metaphor of the kiss in the Song is a specific exegetical application of the larger ontological principle. Moreover, the erotic encounter with the *Shekhinah* on the part of the righteous souls inverts the gender attribution, for the male below is feminized and the female above masculinized.[62] Subsequently, I shall return to this reversal of gender roles prompted by the eros of the mystical experience of communion (*devequt*).

The theosophic reading, which is obviously central to the understanding of the Song in the *Zohar*,[63] cannot be separated from the psychological-ecstatic interpretation, nor

can it be severed from the historical-allegorical sense, which, in fact, would have been understood by the medieval kabbalists as the *peshaṭ*, the contextual sense, of the Song. The socio-economic and political condition of Israel in this world reflects the ontological state of the divine above. The erotic yearning expressed in the Song aptly depicts the exile, which in its deepest symbolic sense alludes to the separation of the male and female aspects of the divine, the unification of which characterizes the redemption. I will here mention one passage that illustrates the point.[64] The erotic desire spoken by the female persona in the Song, "Upon my couch at night [I sought the one I love–I sought, but found him not]" (3:1), is applied by the *Zohar* to the divine feminine, the *Shekhinah*, which is identified further as the Community of Israel. The *Shekhinah* utters the words of longing before the masculine potency, for in the state of exile she is separated from him. The *hieros gamos* occurs within the spatial confines of the holy of holies of the Temple, but since in the time of exile the latter is not standing, there is no space wherein this union can be fully realized. Thus the feminine expresses her yearning to cohabit with the masculine, to inhabit the same space, nay to be the space wherein the phallic foundation is laid. Ever mindful of the standard medieval Christian triumphalist claim regarding God's rejection of Israel, the *Zohar* is quick to point out that even though the *Shekhinah* is in a lowly state, reflecting the depraved condition of Israel in exile, the Jews are still the only ones among the nations who can truly hear the word of God. The calling out by Israel in an effort to respond to the divine voice is correlated with the erotic longing expressed by the *Shekhinah* in relation to *Tif'eret*. Symbolically, the eroticism of the Song–marked by the ceaseless pull of attraction and push of deferment–must be interpreted in light of this theosophic dynamic.

According to other passages in the *Zohar*, the utterance of the Song celebrates not only the desire of the female for the male, which marks the temporal transition from exile to redemption, but the moment of consummation wherein the fragmentariness is overcome and the sense of integration is realized. The matter is expressed as follows in a passage from a fragment on the Song assigned to the *Midrash ha-ne'elam* section of zoharic literature: "In that moment, when everything was removed from the world, and the wife remained face-to-face with her husband, the Song of Songs was revealed."[65] Building upon the midrashic tradition that located the recitation of the Song by Solomon on the day of the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple,[66] the zoharic author interprets that historical moment in theosophic terms as a reference to the union of the masculine king in the feminine palace, a union that is also depicted by the symbolism of enthronement or that of the full moon illuminated by the light of the sun.[67] Thus, in one passage, the efficacy of the songs uttered respectively by Moses, David, and Solomon is distinguished in the following way: the song of Moses ascended to the heights but it did not descend, for the ultimate purpose of his song was to offer praise to the supernal King so that miracles would be performed in order to save Israel; the song of David was an attempt to adorn the Matrona and her maiden; the song of Solomon was aimed at bringing the Matrona under the bridal canopy to unite with her masculine consort. Whereas Moses united with the *Shekhinah* below so that there would be union in the terrestrial realm, Solomon at first facilitated the union above between the bride and the bridegroom in the canopy, and then he invited them to the Temple built below.[68]

The Elevation of the *Shekhinah* and the Transposition of Gender

The recitation of the Song signifies the moment of erotic coupling that occurs in both realms of being, but it is particularly the effect that this unification has on the *Shekhinah* that most engaged the imagination of the kabbalists of the *Zohar*. The mystical significance of the Song relates principally to the ontological transformation of the *Shekhinah*, which is portrayed in a number of different figurative tropes. For example, in one passage, the zoharic author describes the purification of the "lower point," that is, the *Shekhinah*, from all the other hymns that are gathered within the celestial palace that is called *zevul*. "And when it is purified from everything, it ascends above in the secret of the song, and it is called the 'Song of Songs,' and it rises above all those praises, and it is purified from them all." This process of purification (*berur*) is depicted, as is the female being prepared for her union with the male, a process that is also related exegetically to the account of the building of the Temple from the *'even shelemah*, the stones cut from the quarry (1 Kings 6:7). The cutting of the stones alludes symbolically to the mystery of the splitting of the primordial androgyne so that the female other could be constructed to provide the space in which the male could procreate and thereby extend himself.[69]

The ontological elevation of the status of the *Shekhinah* in relation to the Song is expressed in slightly different terms in another passage: "When Solomon built the Temple and the lower world was perfected in the manner of the upper world, all of Israel were righteous, and they ascended in several supernal gradations, and then the throne of glory ascended in joy with several delights and several ascensions."[70] The utterance of the Song at the time of the building of the Temple is associated with the ascent of the throne, which is one of the standard symbols employed by kabbalists to describe the *Shekhinah*. The elevation of the *Shekhinah* in the form of the ascending throne signifies the transformation of gender that follows her reunion with the masculine potency.[71] In one passage, this motif of the dedication of the Temple is marked by the elevation of the wisdom of Solomon, which signifies the *hieros gamos* of the King and the Matrona. The consequence of the union is the illumination of the face of the Matrona and the increase in her gradation (*darga*), which is celebrated in the utterance of the Song.[72] In another passage, the alteration in the ontological status of the *Shekhinah*, which is related exegetically to the verse "If you do not know, fairest of women, go follow the tracks of the sheep, and graze your kids by the tents of the shepherds" (Song 1:8), is represented as the transmogrification of the letter *yod* into the letter *he*, the opening of the female space (a "single dark point") to receive the male in coitus, as a result of which the female herself overflows to all sides and thereby sustains the beings beneath her.[73]

The esoteric meaning of the Song thus alludes to the gender transformation of the *Shekhinah* that follows the union of the female and male. In the process of her elevation and augmentation, the *Shekhinah* assumes the demiurgical characteristics of the upper female, *Binah*.[74] This is the implication of the metamorphosis of the *Shekhinah* from the diminished *yod* to the enlarged *he*, for *Binah* too is symbolized by the letter *he*. Indeed, the isomorphic relationship of *Binah* and the *Shekhinah* is captured succinctly by the fact that they correspond respectively to two occurrences of the letter *he* in the Tetragrammaton.[75] The extension of the point that was hidden signifies the transmutation of the *Shekhinah* from a passive receptacle to an active force that overflows. In

overflowing to the lower world, the *Shekhinah* mirrors the activity of *Binah* in the upper world. The zoharic author claims that the Song celebrates the restitution of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*, the eschatological union of Mother and Daughter through the ascent of the latter to the former, the lower world of the feminine to the upper world of the masculine.[76] This appears to be the symbolic import of the following statement, which attributes the explication of the Song to Elijah,[77] an attribution that undoubtedly carries messianic implications:

> When [*Shekhinah*] ascends, it ascends from gradation to gradation, and from crown to crown, until everything is united above. And this is the secret of "The Song of Songs of Solomon." The Song of Songs was decreed by the mouth of Elijah by means of the supernal authority. The "Song of Songs," the praise of praises to the King to whom peace belongs, for this is the place that desires joy, for no anger or judgment is there. The world-to-come is entirely joyous, and it gladdens everyone, and thus it dispenses joy and happiness to all the gradations. Just as the joy must be aroused from this world above, so the happiness and joy must be aroused from the world of the moon in relation to the supernal world. Consequently, the worlds exist in one pattern, and the arousal ascends only from below to above.[78]

According to this passage, the Song is directed to *Binah*, the "supernal world" or the "world-to-come," which is also identified as Solomon (*Shelomoh*), based on the rabbinic interpretation of the name as a reference to God who is the King to whom peace belongs (*melekh sheha-shalom shello*).[79] The rabbinic remark can be theosophically interpreted in this way, for *Binah* is the king whose creative potency is actualized in the phallic gradation (*darga*) of *Yesod*, designated as *shalom*, "peace" or "wholeness."[80] The "King" in this context does not refer to the sixth emanation or the masculine potency of *Tif'eret*, the divine son who emerges from the union of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, the father and mother. On the contrary, the "King" is clearly *Binah*, who is called by this name on account of her demiurgical role vis-à-vis the seven lower *sefirot*. The shift in symbolism underscores the fact that the ultimate theurgical purpose of the Song is to arouse the joy of the *Shekhinah*, the "world of the moon," in relation to *Binah*, the "upper world," so that the two worlds may be aligned in one pattern.[81] Indeed, the soteriological significance of the Song lies precisely in the gender transposition of the *Shekhinah* occasioned by her restoration to *Binah*, the divine attribute that is depicted by a variety of eschatological images, including the world-to-come. In another passage, the image of the kiss offered at the beginning of the Song is interpreted as a reference to the union of *Binah* and *Malkhut*, the lower light igniting the upper light.[82] The application of the ostensibly heterosexual setting of the metaphor of the kiss to the intimate relationship between these two attributes can be rendered meaningfully only if one bears in mind the transformation of gender to which I have alluded. That is, *Binah* assumes the persona of King Solomon in relation to the *Shekhinah*, who is the Shulammite woman; the desire of the latter to receive the kiss of the former denotes the longing on the part of the lower world to be united with the upper world, a union that is the decisive sign of the redemption.

The members of the zoharic circle continued the older midrashic tradition that assigned messianic significance to the Song. In the kabbalistic context, however, the messianism is linked primarily to the ontological elevation of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*. It is from this eschatological perspective, moreover, that we can understand the zoharic

utilization of the view attributed to Akiva (Mishnah Yadayim 3.5) that the Song is the holy of holies in relation to the rest of scripture as well as the implicit claim that the Song is equivalent to all of Torah:[83]

> This Song is the song that contains all of the Torah, the song in relation to which the upper and lower beings are aroused, the song that is in the pattern of the world above, which is the supernal Sabbath, the song on account of which the supernal, holy name is crowned. Therefore it is the holy of holies. Why? Because all of its words are in love and in the joy of everything.[84]

The eros of the Song conveys not only the heterosexual bonding of the King and the Matrona, but also the restoration of the holy pair to the womb whence they emerged.[85] The consummation of desire, therefore, involves the eschatological re/turn, the retracing of the way back to the great Mother, the union of the lower world of the feminine (*Shekhinah*) and the upper world of the masculine (*Binah*).[86] When the *Shekhinah* ascends to be conjoined to *Binah*, the upper is contained in the lower, a process that is semantically marked by the completion of the name *YHWH 'Elohim*.[87] Here the historical allegorization attains its fullest articulation inasmuch as the Song is read as a figurative depiction of the drama in the divine realm that corresponds to events in time, culminating with the coming of messiah. The symbolic approach articulated in zoharic literature does not preclude or supplant the historical allegory of the earlier rabbinic-targumic tradition; on the contrary, the former enhances and deepens the latter.[88] Thus, in one passage, we read:

> On the day [of the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple] the Song was revealed and the *Shekhinah* descended upon earth. . . . On that day verily this Song was revealed, and by means of the Holy Spirit Solomon uttered the hymn of the Song, which is the principle of all the Torah, the principle of the entire account of creation, the principle of the mystery of the patriarchs, the principle of the exile of Egypt . . . the principle of the coronation of the supernal, holy name in love and in joy, the principle of the expulsions of Israel amongst the nations and their redemption, the principle of the resurrection of the dead until that day that is the "Sabbath unto the Lord" (Lev 25:4).[89]

The Song encompasses every aspect of the *Heilsgeschichte* of the Jews, including the messianic redemption, resurrection of the dead, and the eschatological world-to-come, which is described as the Lord's Sabbath. The ultimate rectification involves the unification of all things in the world-to-come, the attribute of *Binah*, which is the "supernal Sabbath" that transcends the division of Sabbath into night and day, expressive of the polarity of female and male. The "Sabbath unto the Lord," therefore, signifies the transcending of gender dimorphism that is characteristic of zoharic soteriology.[90]

The apocalyptic reading of the Song as the symbolic depiction of the ontological restoration of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*, the lower female to the upper female, is expressed somewhat differently in another context: the Song begins in the third person, "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," for the initiation of love entails the arousal of kisses in the one that is not seen, the concealed of the concealed (*setima de-khol setimin*), who is conjoined to the gradation that corresponds to Jacob, the sun (*Tif'eret*), which illumines the moon (*Shekhinah*) with the supernal lights that shine from the place of the hidden wine, the attribute of *Binah*, or the world-to-come.[91] According to this passage, the Song is a poetic encoding of the overflow of light from the first of the ten

luminous emanations, "the concealed of the concealed," to the last, "the moon." In this context, the process is interpreted from above to below rather than from below to above. Nevertheless, the common denominator is the view that the Song in its innermost structure reflects the unification of the divine emanations, and particularly the union of the upper and lower female attributes, which is concurrently the sacred history of the Jewish people from creation to redemption.

This same thought is articulated in a somewhat different way in another zoharic passage wherein the content of the Song is related to the "supernal chariot," which is constituted by the four names *'Adonai*, *Ṣeva'ot*, *YHWH*, and *'Ehyeh*. The divine names correspond respectively to four kinds of splendor, an allusion to the four sefirotic emanations in ascending order: *Shekhinah*, *Yesod*, *Tif'eret*, and *Binah*. The "mystery of the four inscribed names of the four splendors" entails that "each splendor is contained in the other, and the desire of the one is to enter the other, so that one may be contained in the other. These four splendors are specified in their names as they are known."[92] The nature of the Song, which bespeaks the erotic pattern of the poetic word in general, is related to the desire of each splendor, to which corresponds a particular name of God, to be contained in the other. The eros for the other is here related to the impetus for unity in the divine realm, a unity that underlies the mystical import of the Song. The symbolic reading of the poem, therefore, imparts information about the "mysteries of the wisdom of the supernal, inscribed name," which is the Tetragrammaton. Indeed, the Song itself is that very name, which is an alternative way of expressing the equivalency of the Song and the Torah, given the identification of the mystical essence of the Torah as the name.[93] From this perspective, it is appropriate to speak of the Song as the "extreme point of zoharic intuition," for this part of Scripture is the holy of holies that is poetically envisioned as the "absolute interiority" of the divine edifice of the Torah.[94] Alternatively expressed, it is possible to view the Zohar as a commentary on the erotic mysticism celebrated in the Song.[95]

The intrinsic connection between the Song, the Tetragrammaton, and the erotic nature of the kiss as the union of the four spirits, which translates symbolically to the elevation of the lower world of the feminine (*Shekhinah*) to the upper world of the masculine (*Binah*),[96] is made explicit in the following interpretation of the opening verse of the Song, "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song 1:2):

> What did King Solomon perceive that he placed words of love between the supernal world and the lower world, and at the beginning of the poem of love he placed between them [the words] "Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses [of his mouth]"? Rather, it has been established and it is the case that there is no love, that is, conjunction of spirit with spirit (*devequt de-ruḥa be-ruḥa*), except through the kiss, and the kiss is through the mouth, the wellspring of spirit and its overflow. When the one kisses the other, these spirits are conjoined to these spirits, and they are one, and consequently there is one love. In the book of the first Rav Hamnuna the elder, it is said concerning this verse, the kiss of love divides into four spirits, and the four spirits are joined as one, and they are within the mystery of faith (*raza di-meheimanuta*), and they arise in the four letters, and these are the letters upon which depend the letters of the holy name (*YHWH*), and the supernal and lower beings depend on them, and the praise of the Song of Songs depends on them. And what are they? [The four letters of the word] *'ahavah* (*ahbh*), and they are the supernal chariot, and they are the union, conjunction,

> and perfection of everything. These letters are four spirits, and these are the spirits of love and joy of all the parts of the body that has no sadness at all. Four spirits are in the kiss, each one is contained in the other. When the one spirit is contained in the other and the other is contained in it, the two spirits become one, and consequently the four [spirits] are joined perfectly in one conjunction.[97]

The essence of the Song is thus related to the desire of the four spirits to be united in the one bond of love. These spirits are related to the four letters of the word *'ahavah*, which in turn are correlated with the four letters of the most sacred name, the name that signifies that which cannot be signified, the garment of Torah unveiled in its mystical core. The four spirits, which correspond to the four splendors, relate to four divine attributes, but also to the fourfold entity that is born from the union of the spirit/breath of the male and the spirit/breath of the female. Each gender contains the other in itself, the principle that is basic to the kabbalistic notion of androgyny. The conjunction of male and female thus yields the male in female and the female in male. Mathematically expressed, the twofold that is one becomes four.

In the zoharic commentary on the Song, the matter is expressed in somewhat different terms, related exegetically to the four spirits (*ruḥot*) that shall alight upon the shoot to grow out of the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:2) and to the breath (*ruaḥ*) of prophecy that comes forth from the four winds (Ezek 37:9): "The kiss of love is only through the mouth, the spirit is joined to the spirit, and each of them is comprised of two spirits, its spirit and the spirit of its counterpart. Thus the two are in the four spirits, and all the more so the male and the female in the conjunction of the four spirits together. The son that comes out from them, this is the breath that comes forth from the four winds, as it says, 'Come, O breath, from the four winds' (Ezek 37:9), this is the perfect spirit."[98] The eros of the kiss is thus associated with the emanative process by means of which the androgynous being emerges from the union of the spirits of the mouth, male and female. This androgynous being is the perfect spirit, which can be depicted as the son, but the son that contains the daughter as his sister, or as the breath of prophecy, the masculine voice articulated through feminine speech.[99]

Corresponding to the upper union of the breaths is the lower union of the genitals, but even with respect to this lower union the depiction embraces the symbolism of language to express the texture of the erotic experience. The point is accentuated in the description of the second splendor, *Seva'ot* or the "living splendor" (*zohar ḥai*), which corresponds to the phallic *darga* (gradation) of *Yesod*. "His desire is to praise constantly the first splendor, which is called song (*shir*), and thus they are contained as one in a single bond without separation, with a complete desire. As a result, the all (*kola*) is called Song of Songs (*shir ha-shirim*)."[100] The plural of the expression *shir ha-shirim*, the "song of the songs," alludes to the mystery of the sacred copulation between the first and second splendors, *Shekhinah* and *Yesod*. The former is transformed by this union, a transformation that is encoded in the linguistic transition from the singular *shir* to the plural *shir ha-shirim*. The theosophic interpretation of the title of the scriptural book indicates that the mystical constitution of the Song is related to the holy union of male and female. The final attainment of that union, however, is realized only in the restoration of the various splendors to the fourth splendor, the "hidden splendor that is not visible at all" except by means of "contemplation of the heart" (*sukhlatenu de-libba*), "for the heart knows and contemplates it even though it is not seen at all."[101] The Song of Songs is thus contrasted with the song that Moses uttered at the splitting of the Reed Sea, for the latter is the "song of the feminine" (*Shekhinah*) whereas the former is the "song that ascends to the world of the masculine" (*Binah*).[102] The Song is identified with the eschatological moment wherein the feminine potency ascends to the world of the masculine and is thereby transformed. The inspiration for the Song, the augmentation of the wisdom of Solomon, derives from the source wherein the feminine is restored to the world of the masculine.

Spiritual Eroticism and Ascetic Renunciation in Kabbalistic Readings of the Song

By way of summation, we may conclude that the impact of the Hispano-Jewish philosophical orientation on the kabbalistic understanding of the Song of Songs was quite profound. The negative attitude toward bodily pleasure fostered an allegorical interpretation that replaced the literal eroticism of the text by a spiritualized eroticism related to the contemplative ideal of conjunction. Going beyond the philosophers and poets, however, the kabbalists intensified the nexus of asceticism and eroticism. In a separate study, I argued that the sacralization of human sexuality, which lies at the heart of kabbalistic myth and ritual, is dialectically related to the ascetic impulse.[103] In the kabbalistic tradition, carnal sexuality is celebrated only to the extent that it is transformed by the proper intentionality into a spiritual act.

To be sure, as Scholem already noted, kabbalah is to be contrasted with non-Jewish mysticism, and in particular the spiritual ideal of Christianity, since the kabbalists resisted a monastic ideal of abstinence, viewing marriage not as a concession to the weakness of the flesh but as a symbolic realization of the union of the masculine and feminine divine potencies. Scholem thus distinguished the ascetic dimension of Christian mysticism, which led to the transplanting of eroticism into the relation of man to God, from the affirmation of human sexuality on the part of the kabbalists, which was viewed as one of the central means to discover the mystery of sex within the divine.[104] While I would agree that the Jewish and Christian approaches to asceticism must be distinguished in light of the respective values placed on human sexuality and the engenderment of the divine image, my own research has led me to the conclusion that the medieval kabbalistic tradition does share something closer to the Christian orientation. For the kabbalist, as for his Christian counterpart, the corporeal body, which is correlated with the feminine, is problematic.[105] In particular, the symbolic reading of the Song, which is expressive of both theosophic and ecstatic elements, underscores the extent to which the kabbalists sought to augment, and in some measure displace, carnal sexuality with spiritual eroticism.[106] Functioning within the confines of normative *halakhah*, the kabbalists could not affirm celibacy as an absolute ideal, but they nevertheless boldly posited an austere lifestyle for themselves wherein the intensity of their contemplative regimen was linked to an erotic passion that demanded the abrogation of physical desire. The ascetic renunciation of carnal sexuality for the sake of spiritual eros anticipates the condition of the *eschaton*, which must be a retrieval of the primordial beginning.[107] If one presumes that an actual circle of mystics in Castile produced the narrative tales of the *Zohar*, a presumption that I think

is well grounded, then it is possible to refer to an eschatological community of ascetic mystics who believed they were already living at the end of days.[108]

It lies beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed account of the nexus between asceticism and redemption. Such an account will appear as part of a chapter on eroticism and asceticism in my forthcoming monograph on eros and the construction of gender in kabbalistic ritual and myth. For the purposes of this study, let me simply note that the ascetic dimension is highlighted in kabbalistic literature by the symbolic association of *Binah*, which is the world-to-come, and Yom Kippur, a day in which physical pleasures are prohibited. The kabbalistic symbolism thus intensifies the rabbinic depiction of the world-to-come as a state beyond sensual joyance. A particularly important passage in this regard is found in one of the later strata of zoharic literature:

> Therefore, on Yom Kippur . . . sexual intercourse is forbidden. There the sign of the covenant, which is the *yod*, is the crown on the Torah scroll (*taga 'al sefer torah*) . . . as it has been established, "In the world-to-come there is no eating, drinking, or sexual intercourse. Rather the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads."[109] Since there is no intercourse (*shimmush*) in this world with the crown (*taga*), the masters of the Mishnah established,[110] "anyone who makes use of the crown perishes" (*kol ha-mishtammesh be-taga ḥalaf*).[111]

In this context, the sexual abstinence required on Yom Kippur is linked explicitly with the feminine assuming the posture of the crown, a theme that I have analyzed in a number of studies.[112] For my immediate purpose, what is important to note about this passage is that the eschatological image of the righteous sitting with crowns on their heads is interpreted as a symbolic depiction of their celibacy. The elevation of the *Shekhinah*, which is designated as the sign of the covenant, the phallic marking of the *yod*, to the position of the crown on the scroll of Torah or on the head of the righteous attests to the transformation of the feminine into an aspect of the masculine. In the social plane, it is necessary for the kabbalist to separate from physical sex with his wife in order to be assimilated into the *Shekhinah* in her transformed posture as the crown of the male. This motif is linked exegetically in several zoharic passages to the verse, "O maidens of Zion, go forth and gaze upon King Solomon wearing the crown that his mother gave him on his wedding day, on his day of bliss" (Song 3:11). The interpretation of this verse in the *Zohar* underscores the convergence of the theosophic and the ecstatic elements, for the coronation of Solomon by his mother on the day of his wedding is applied simultaneously to an event within the Godhead and to the experience of the mystic vis-à-vis the divine presence.[113] Most important, that experience involves the assimilation of the male mystic into the feminine presence that has been transposed into the corona of the phallus. The overtly heterosexual images, therefore, must be decoded as a veiled allusion to the homoerotic bond between the male mystic and the reconstituted male androgyne in the divine realm. Insofar as the homoeroticism is (ideally) predicated on the abrogation of carnal sexuality, one must distinguish the homosocial texture of the mystical experience from homosexuality.[114] Indeed, the kabbalist who is bound to God experiences the life of the world-to-come, which is a plane of existence beyond physical eros and the concomitant gender bifurcation. Alternatively expressed, the Song celebrates the great Sabbath in which the division of Sabbath into night and day is overcome. By contrast, this great Sabbath, the world-to-come, is, according to the rabbinic idiom, the day that is entirely Sabbath.[115]

In some measure, the process of eschatological reparation unfolds each Sabbath. Thus, according to one relevant passage, which I have analyzed elsewhere at great length, the letters of the word *shabbat* (*shin bet taw*) are interpreted as a reference to the ascent of *Shekhinah* to *Binah*, for the letters *bet* and *taw* spell the word *bat*, "daughter," which symbolizes the *Shekhinah*, and the letter *shin* the three patriarchs or the fourth, fifth, and sixth emanations, *Ḥesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Raḥamim*. When the *bat* rises as a crown on the head of the *shin*, the chariot is completed by the unity of the four, and they in turn ascend to be united in the world-to-come, which is the "great Sabbath" (*shabbat ha-gadol*).[116] This is precisely the theosophic dynamic that the zoharic authors assign to the Song. Thus, in one passage, the four words of the first verse of the Song, *shir ha-shirim 'asher li-Shelomoh*, are related to the "perfect, holy chariot," which consists of the three patriarchs and David, that is, the central three *sefirot* of *Ḥesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Raḥamim*, conjoined with the *Shekhinah*.[117] Contained in the first verse, therefore, is the mystery of the entire Song, which relates to the elevation of the *Shekhinah* to form together with the patriarchs the holy chariot for King Solomon, that is, *Binah*, the king to whom peace belongs. The symbolic import of the Song is thus identical to the mystical meaning attributed to the Sabbath.

The nexus between the great Sabbath, the world-to-come, and Yom Kippur indicates that the eschatological vision is predicated on the ascetic renunciation that characterizes the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. In the rhythm of each Sabbath, night is the time for the sexual union of man and his wife, since this is the time of the *hieros gamos* above between the Holy King and the Matrona,[118] but in the progression of the day the sanctity of physical copulation gives way to the abnegation of sexuality, a state of purity that anticipates the holiness of the world-to-come, which is Yom Kippur.[119] The reading of the Song that emerges from the different literary settings of the *Zohar* suggests that the thirteenth-century kabbalists responsible for this work imagined that the celebrated love poem is an allusion to the very same transition from the currently acceptable observance of Sabbath, which features prominently engaging in carnal intercourse in an effort to facilitate the sacred union above, to the eschatological Sabbath, which involves a state of holiness that is predicated on the abolition of physical desire. The zoharic interpretation of the Song, therefore, embraces an erotic mysticism that affirms the ideal of ascetic eschatology, an ideal that is proleptically realized by the kabbalists in their pietistic fraternity principally through the communal study of the secrets of Torah.[120] No scriptural text afforded these kabbalists a better opportunity to express the homoerotic asceticism of their mystical piety than the Song of Songs, for this book is the holy of holies, the speculum through which the invisible glory could be seen and the ineffable name spoken.

Notes

1. For a representative list of studies that deal with the nexus of eroticism and asceticism, see O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*; Schimmel, "Eros—Heavenly and Not So Heavenly," 119–41; Kripal, *Kali's Child*; Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath," 151–85.

2. See Rist, *Eros and Psyche*. On Plato's characterization of the rational soul in terms of the sexual images of the body, see Thornton, *Eros*, 210–12.

3. The point is beautifully conveyed in Bürgel, "Love, Lust, and Longing," 81–117.

4. Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, 7.

5. See the poignant remarks regarding this matter in Scholem, *Major Trends*, 225–26. On the relationship of mystical experience and the language of passion in medieval Christendom, see Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, 141–70.

6. See the description in Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 151. In the Middle Ages, the spiritual or rational is symbolically associated with the male and the material or imaginative with the female. See Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 216–17, 262. Yet, in relationship to the divine, the soul is feminized, an experience that was shared by men and women. Although it was not uncommon for women in medieval Christian society to take on a symbolic maleness in order to advance spiritually, it is also the case, as Bynum has argued, that basic images of women's religious experience were feminine in nature or at the very least androgynous. See *Holy Feast*, 28 and 291.

7. The range of exegetical strategies in reading the Song can easily be gauged from even a cursory glance at Walfish, "Bibliyografyah mu'eret," 518–71.

8. See Kamin, *Ben Yehudim le-Noṣerim*, 13–61. On the rendering of Rashi's historico-allegorical approach to the Song as the literal sense (*exposito historica*) in the thirteenth-century Latin commentary on the Song, see Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 352–55; Signer, "Thirteenth Century Christian Hebraism," 89–100; and Kamin and Saltman, *Secundum Salomonem*. On Ashkenazi exegesis of the Song, see also Salfeld, "Das Hohelied bei den jüdischen Erklärern des Mittelalters," 150–60. On the historical approach to the allegorical reading of the Song, referred to as the concealed meaning (*nistar*), in contrast to the literal or revealed sense (*nigleh*), see Abraham b. Isaac ha-Levi Tamakh, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 39–42. I am deliberately ignoring the utilization of verses from the Song in the formulation of the mystical theosophy articulated by the Jewish Pietists of the Rhineland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as we find, for instance, in their depiction of chariot speculation in terms of the image of the secret of the nut (*sod ha-'egoz*), which is derived from Song 6:11. See Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism*, and comprehensive bibliography cited by the author. In my various attempts at decoding the Pietistic esotericism, which involved the attribution of an erotic drama to the divine realm, I have noted the central role played by key passages from the Song. See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 185–86, n. 364. See also Marcus, "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism," 181–89.

9. See, by contrast, Green, "The Song of Songs," 49. I do not think it is valid to speak (as Green does) of a "contraction of midrashic thinking" in medieval Jewish academies or of "philosophical theology" as a dominant mode of discourse. Most important, it is unlikely that medieval Jewish philosophers would have been scandalized by the "sacred eros" articulated in kabbalistic literature. On the contrary, the sacred eroticism so pronounced in the kabbalah is related to and in a measure derived from the idea of an intellectual eros that informed the medieval philosophical conception of conjunction (*devequt*). The contrast between the approach of Maimonides to the image of the kiss in the Song as a metaphor for the union between the rational soul and the Active Intellect, and the erotic spirituality of the kabbalistic symbolism (especially of the *Zohar*) is also drawn too sharply by Perella, *Kiss Sacred and Profane*, 75–83. By contrast, Rosenberg, "Ha-parshanut ha-filosofit le-Shir ha-shirim," 133–51, proposes a typological distinction between the philosophical exegesis of the Song as a figurative dialogue between the individual soul and the divine, on the one hand, and the kabbalistic exegesis that reads the Song as a description of the relationship of the male and the female attributes of the divine, on the other, but he readily acknowledges that the philosophical interpretation appears in works that would be classified as kabbalistic (p. 134).

10. See Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 142, 144–45, 168–69, 179–80, 242–47, 254–55.

11. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 226.

12. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 206.

13. Baḥya, *Sefer Torat Ḥovot ha-levavot*, 10.1, trans. Qafiḥ, 412.

14. See Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 115, n. 6.

15. The relevant passages are cited by Rosenberg, "Ha-parshanut ha-filosofit," 136–37.

16. See Scheindlin, *The Gazelle*, 49, 128–29.

17. *Les réflexions sur l'âme*, 35, 38, and 40; see also Rosenberg, "Ha-parshanut ha-filosofit," 137.

18. *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuvah 10.3.

19. *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.51. On the reappropriation of the language of eros in the thought of Maimonides (and other philosophical thinkers influenced by him) as the most compelling metaphorical expression to depict the intellectual conjunction of the soul and the divine, see Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*, 24–30; Gordon, "The Erotics of Negative Theology," 1–38.

20. Abraham Maimonides, *The Highways to Perfection*, 2:395.

21. Saadia Gaon, *Kitāb al-mukhtār fī al-amānāt wal-i'tiqādāt* 10.4, ed. Qafiḥ, 300–303, discusses those individuals who are dedicated to passionate love (*'ishq*), which serves as the model for their relationship to God. For the social and intellectual background to Saadia's use of this term, including the possibility that it is borrowed from Islamic mysticism, see Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 5: 317–20. On the use of *'ishq* in Sufism to connote the passionate love of the soul for God, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 137; Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, 1:340–43, 523 n. 64; 2:412; 3:102–104; Wafer, "Vision and Passion," 111, 122, 128 n. 4. On the discrediting of *'ishq* on the part of Islamic philosophers, see Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs*, 64–65.

22. Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 17a; *Shir ha-shirim rabbah* 1.16, ed. Dunsky, 16. On the description of the kiss of death as the "union of the soul in the root," see *Zohar* 1:168a.

23. See Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 291–98. The influence of Maimonides is clearly discernible in Baḥya ben Asher's description in *Kad ha-Qemaḥ* of *ḥesheq*, intense desire, which he contrasts with *'ahavah*, love, in *Kitvei Rabbinu Baḥya*, ed. Chavel, 34–35: "The intense desire (*ḥesheq*) is the conjunction of thought (*devequt ha-maḥshavah*) to the great and powerful love, for the thought of the one who desires is not at all separated from that which is desired. . . . The book of the Song of Songs is based on this level of intense desire, as it begins 'Oh, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' (Song 1:2), and the Rabbis, blessed be their memory, explained that all of scripture is holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of the holies, for the desired goal of human beings is to conjoin thought to the holy of holies. The word 'kiss' (*neshiqah*) has the meaning of conjunction (*devequt*). . . . Concerning the one whose death is by the kiss of the *Shekhinah*, his body is pure and his soul is pure."

24. On the origin of this term in Plotinus, see Ivry, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought," 125.

25. Ibn Aknin, *Hitgalut ha-sodot we-hofa'at ha-me'orot*, 18–19. See also Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 144–45.

26. Ibn Aknin, *Hitgalut ha-sodot*, 14–15.

27. Ibid., 24–25.

28. Tibbon, *Perush 'al Shir ha-Shirim*, 8. See also 9, 11, 12.

29. Ibid., 9.

30. Ibid., 11.

31. Ibid., 14–15. See also Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 179–80.

32. This allegorical approach was continued by subsequent philosophical and mystical authors. See, for instance, Narboni, *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*, 96 (English section), 128–29 (Hebrew section); Levi ben Gershom, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, xv–xxxi.

33. For a similiar process in Christian authors, see Wright, "The Influence of the Exegetical Tradition of the 'Song of Songs'"; Brückmann and Couchman, "Du 'Cantique des cantiques' aux 'Carmina Burana,'" 35–50.

34. My brief analysis of the use of the Song in medieval Hebrew poetry is indebted to Scheindlin, *The Gazelle*, 20–21, 37–41, 48–49. See also Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 86, 91, 99, 115.

35. I have borrowed this term from McGinn, "The Language of Love," 217, who bases his own remarks on the formulation of Idel, "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah," 199–200.

36. This locution is derived from the work of David R. Blumenthal. See especially Ḥoṭēr ben Shelomo, *The Philosophic Questions and Answers*, ed. and trans. Blumenthal, 72–73. Blumenthal cites several examples from the so-called "eastern school of Maimonidean interpretation," Zekharya ha-Rofe and Sa'id ibn Da'ud, who interpreted the Song as affirmation of the ideal of conjunction typical of medieval philosophical mysticism.

37. Idel, "Sexual Metaphors," 200–201; idem, *Kabbalah*, 206.

38. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 126, 138–39, 144, 383 n. 76; idem, *Ha-qabbalah shel Sefer ha-Temunah*, 87–90, 107, 127–28, 151–52, 161, 164; idem, *Kabbalah*, 54; Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 16–17, 22–24; idem, *Kabbalah*, 98–101; idem, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," 124–25.

39. In addition to the studies of Idel cited in n. 38, see *Mystical Experience*, 180–84, 203–5; *Kabbalah*, 151. See also Fishbane, *Kiss of God*, 39–43.

40. See Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism."

41. Gikatilla, *Ginnat 'egoz*, 280–81. It is of interest to note that in his later work on the symbolism of the *sefirot*, Gikatilla reaffirms the contemplative ideal of *devequt* that is consequent to the passionate love of God, but in that context it is related to knowledge of the names, which are interpreted in a theosophic way as a reference to the divine attributes. See Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, 1:47, 83.

42. This has been duly recognized by McGinn, "Language of Love," 217–18. However, McGinn, following Idel, contrasts the mystical orientation to the Song in the two branches of kabbalah, the ecstatic and the theosophic, on the grounds that in the former the mystic, like the Christian saint, is conceived of as female in relation to the masculine divine lover, whereas in the latter the mystic is male in relation to the female aspect of the Godhead. In my judgment, there is ample evidence that in the theosophic kabbalah itself there is a gender metamorphosis whereby the male mystic is feminized in relation to the divine. See Wolfson, "Eunuchs," 166–67.

43. See Vulliaud, *Cantique des cantiques*, 118–33, 183–85, 191–204, 219–25; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 153–79; Green, "Song of Songs," 48–63; and Mopsik, *Le Zohar: Cantique des cantiques*, 18, 20–21. The theosophic interpretation of the male and female personae of the Song is already implied in several sections of the *Bahir*. See Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, 141–43 (§§ 43–44), 203 (§ 117).

44. *Kitvei Ramban*, 2: 485.

45. To a degree this is implicit in Green's comment on this passage, "Song of Songs," 57: "The 'Glory' here is the devoted bride whose longings for union with her spouse also represent the longing of the worshipper's soul for reunion with God." Green does not, however, note the gender reversal implied in the application of the verse to the soul in relation to the divine potency.

46. The contrast between the theosophic and the ecstatic trends of kabbalah along these lines is the position adopted by Idel, "Sexual Metaphors," 206; *Kabbalah*, 209–10.

47. For an alternative approach, see Green, *Keter*, 161–62, n. 35.

48. See Ezra of Gerona, *Le commentaire,"* 141–44.

49. The reading proffered by Ezra, which is reiterated by many other kabbalists, has a striking resonance with philosophical mysticism, particularly as it has been expressed in Sufi-influenced authors. For instance, see Fenton, "Daniel Ibn al-Mashita's 'Taqwim al-Adyan'," 79.

50. *Kitvei Ramban*, 2:480.

51. See Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 233–35; Green, "Peirush Shir ha-shirim," 396–97; idem, "Song of Songs," 57.

52. Green, "Peirush Shir ha-shirim," 408–9. For more on the background of this passage, see Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 59–60.

53. Green, "Peirush Shir ha-shirim," 409.

54. Ibid., 410. See also Green, "Song of Songs," 57–58.

55. Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 210.

56. *Zohar*, 2:124b.

57. On the use of the kiss to symbolize the union of spirits in the divine realm, see *Zohar*, 1:44b, 70a; 2:124b, 146a–b, 253b–254a, 256b; 3:287a; *Zohar ḥadash*, ed. Margaliot, 63c–64a.

58. *Zohar ḥadash*, 60c.

59. See *Guide* 3.51. In *Zohar*, 1:137a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*) the desire for the kiss expressed in Song 1:2 is interpreted as the yearning of the soul to derive sustenance and pleasure from the splendor of the *Shekhinah*. See, by contrast, Fishbane, *Kiss of God*, 38–39. Although Fishbane readily acknowledges that in the *Zohar*, as in the case of Ibn Sahula, there are two explanations to the kiss, the ecstatic and the hypostatic, he concludes that the "zoharic tradition of ecstatic death by divine kiss is not affected by philosophical notions or vocabulary, which distinguishes it from the Maimonidean reworking of the talmudic tradition, as well as from the mystical adaptation of Maimonides by Abraham Abulafia." It seems to me that the Maimonidean influence is evident in the relevant zoharic passages as well.

60. See Liebes, "Zohar we-'Eros," 67–115.

61. *Zohar*, 1:60b. The zoharic attitude is well captured in the brief remark of Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, 2:51: "This is the secret of the conjunction of the tenth emanation in the ninth without any doubt, for he who causes the Community of Israel to be united with the emanation of *Yesod* is himself conjoined to her, and she is conjoined to *Yesod*, and the two of them as one are conjoined to *YHWH*."

62. Wolfson, "Eunuchs," 166–69.

63. Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu*, 217–21, 223–28. The theosophic interpretation is the mythical basis for the ritual instituted by Safedian kabbalists in the sixteenth century to chant the Song every Friday evening, the time of the *hieros gamos* in the divine realm, which is facilitated by the sexual intercourse below between a man and his wife. See Benayahu, *Toledot ha-'Ari*, 350, n. 3; Hallamish, "Meqomah shel ha-qabbalah ba-minhag," 209, n. 170.

64. *Zohar*, 3:42a–b.

65. *Zohar ḥadash*, 62c. See ibid., 63d, 72b.

66. See Lieberman, "Mishnath Shir ha-Shirim," 119.

67. *Zohar*, 2:143a.

68. *Zohar*, 2:144b–145a.

69. *Zohar ḥadash*, 62b.

70. Ibid., 62d.

71. I have discussed this motif in more detail in Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 92–98.

72. *Zohar*, 3:74b.

73. *Zohar ḥadash*, 71b.

74. For a more elaborate discussion of this gender transposition, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 103–6.

75. *Zohar ḥadash*, 72b.

76. In zoharic terminology, *Binah* is the mother, but she is called *'alma di-dekhura*, the world of the masculine, in contrast to the *Shekhinah*, which is called *'alma de-nuqba*, the world of the feminine. Elsewhere the zoharic text expresses the idea that the Song relates concomitantly to *Binah* and *Shekhinah*, the two arrayments of the feminine (*tiqqunei de-nuqvei*), and thus it mim-

ics the account of creation (*ma'aśeh bereshit*) at the beginning of the Torah that begins with a *bet*. See *Zohar*, 1:240b; 3:290b.

77. On the significance of Elijah in the zoharic commentary on the Song, see Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, 8–10.

78. *Zohar ḥadash*, 62b. Ibid., 60c–d, the symbolic intent of the Song is said to be contained in its first letter, the *shin*, which represents the three patriarchs, or the three central emanations, that constitute the supernal chariot. The Song thus encompasses the mystical intent of the esoteric discipline of the account of the chariot (*ma'aśeh merkavah*).

79. BT Shevu'ot, 35b.

80. See *Zohar*, 1:29a; 2:5a, 100b, 127b.

81. See Wolfson, "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*," 313–22; idem, "Fore/giveness On the Way," 153–69.

82. *Zohar*, 1:70a–b. A similar interpretation is presented in *Zohar ḥadash*, 64b, but in that context the emphasis is on the desire of the lower world, *Shekhinah*, to join the upper world, *Binah*.

83. It is also possible to interpret this older rabbinic idea in a theosophic way as a reference to the union of the Oral Torah and the Written Torah, which correspond respectively to *Shekhinah* and *Tif'eret*. That is, the Song is equivalent to the Torah in its entirety because the Song is about the relationship between male and female, which relate to the dual Torah. See *Zohar ḥadash*, 63d–64a; Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'orah*, 1:86.

84. *Zohar*, 2:143b. For analysis of this passage, see Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, 13–14.

85. See Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, 22–23.

86. This idea is on occasion related exegetically by the zoharic authors to the expression *mi zot*, "who is this one," which is found three times in Song of Songs (3:6, 6:6, and 8:5). See *Zohar*, 1:10a; 2:126b.

87. *Zohar ḥadash*, 67a; and see parallel discussion in Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'orah*, 2:51–56.

88. Thus, one finds strewn throughout the zoharic corpus exegetical applications of specific verses in the Song to moments in Israel's sacred history. For instance, see *Zohar*, 1:170a, 176b. Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, 15, has duly noted the appropriation in the *Zohar* of the historical-allegorical approach to the Song evident in the Targum.

89. *Zohar*, 2:143b–144a. The all-inclusive quality of the Song is affirmed as well in *Zohar*, 2:18b: "Thus it is written the 'song of songs' (*shir ha-shirim*), that is, the song of those archons (*śarim*) above, the song that comprises all the matters of Torah, wisdom, power, and strength, all that was and all that shall be, the song that the archons above sing."

90. See Wolfson, "Coronation of the Sabbath Bride," 301–43.

91. *Zohar*, 2:146b–147a.

92. *Zohar ḥadash*, 61d.

93. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 37–44; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 283–84, 292–95, 1079–82; and Idel, "Tefiśat ha-Torah be-sifrut ha-Heikhalot," 23–84, esp. 49–58.

94. Lévy-Valensi, *La poétique du Zohar*, 94.

95. Vulliaud, *Le Cantique des cantiques*, 183; Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, 13.

96. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 89, 99, 103.

97. *Zohar*, 2:146a–b. See Liebes, "Zohar we-'Eros," 79.

98. *Zohar ḥadash*, 60d.

99. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 73–74.

100. *Zohar ḥadash*, 60d.

101. Ibid., 62a.

102. Ibid., 63a.

103. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath."

104. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 235.

105. The negative attitude toward the body and consequent need for an ascetic lifestyle in the zoharic corpus was already noted by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 764–65.

106. See Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 101–20.

107. On the different approaches to the sexual nature of primal Adam prior to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, see Safran, "Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides," 75–106.

108. This is the conclusion articulated by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 1–84, but he does not emphasize the ascetic dimension of the messianic posture.

109. BT Berakhot, 17a.

110. Mishnah Avot 1:13.

111. *Zohar*, 2:116a (*Ra'aya meheimna*).

112. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 342, 357–68; idem, "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*," 322–29; idem, "Coronation," 332–41; idem, "The Engenderment of Messianic Politics," 203–58, esp. 230–47.

113. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 363–64.

114. See earlier, n. 47.

115. BT Sanhedrin, 97a.

116. *Zohar*, 2:204a. For fuller discussion of this motif, see Wolfson, "Coronation," 314–16.

117. *Zohar*, 2:144a.

118. The linkage of Sabbath evening and carnal intercourse is found in rabbinic sources, particularly as it relates to the time for scholars to fulfill their marital obligations. The rabbinic idea has been appropriated by kabbalists as the cornerstone for their belief that the enlightened should engage in sex only on Sabbath eve (and a few other times, which are treated like the eve of Sabbath). For citation and discussion of some of the relevant sources, see Wolfson, "Eunuchs," 159–61. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 5:312–13, notes that from the Genizah material one can conclude that the talmudic recommendation that scholars engage in sexual intercourse on Friday night was extended to the Jewish population more generally. Additionally, Goitein notes the conflict between this Rabbanite view and that of the Karaites, who regarded sexual intercourse as a desecration of the holiness of the Sabbath. On the connection between Sabbath observance and ascetic renunciation, which leads to a vision of God, see Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 100–101.

119. See Wolfson, "Coronation," 325–32.

120. The kabbalists were able to achieve the ascetic ideal without rejecting the social institution of marriage and thereby ignoring the religious obligation to procreate. A similar phenomenon is attested in medieval Christian culture in cases where husband and wife both renounced sexual activity for the sake of a more intense pious devotion. See Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*.

Bibliography

Abraham ben Isaac ha-Levi Tamakh. *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Ed. Leon A. Feldman. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1970.

Abrams, Daniel, ed. *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: Cherub, 1994.

——. *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation in Medieval Germany: A Study of the Sod ha-Egoz Texts*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997.

Alonso-Fontela, Carlos, ed. "El Targum al Cantar de los Cantares (Edición Crítica)." Ph.D. diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1987.

Astell, Ann W. *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Baḥya ben Asher ben Ḥlawa. *Kitvei Rabbeinu Baḥya*. Ed. Charles B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1970.

Baḥya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda. *Sefer Torat Ḥovot ha-levavot*. Trans. Y. Qafiḥ. Jerusalem, 1973.
——, supposed author. *Les reflexions sur l'âme par Baḥya ben Joseph Ibn Pakouda*. Trans. Isaac Broyde. Paris, 1896.
Bataille, Georges. *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. New York: Walker, 1962.
Bell, Rudolph M. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
Benayahu, Meir. *Sefer Toledot ha-'Ari (Toledoth ha-Ari and Luria's 'Manner of Life' [Hanhagoth])*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1967.
Beumer, Johannes. "Die marianische Deutung des Hohen Liedes in der Frühscholastik." *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 76 (1954): 411–39.
Biale, David. *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
Blickstein, Shlomo. "Between Philosophy and Mysticism: A Study of the Philosophical-Qabbalistic Writings of Joseph Giqatila (1248–ca. 1322)." Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983.
Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
——. "Shenei mevo'ot le-Midrash Shir ha-shirim" (Two introductions to the Midrash on the Song of Songs). *Tarbiẓ* 56 (1987): 479–500.
Brückmann, John, and Jane Couchman. "Du 'Cantique des cantiques' aux 'Carmina Burana': amour sacré et amour érotique." In *L'érotisme au moyen âge: études présentées au troisième colloque de l'Institut d'études médiévales*. Ed. Bruno Roy, 35–50. Paris: Éditions de l'aurore, 1977.
Bürgel, J. C. "Love, Lust, and Longing: Eroticism in Early Islam as Reflected in Literary Sources." In *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*. Ed. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, 81–117. Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1979.
Buzy, T. R. Denis. "L'allégorie matrimoniale de Jahve d'Israel et la Cantique des Cantiques." *Revue biblique* 52 (1944): 77–90.
Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.
Clark, Elizabeth A. *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.
Clark, Gillian. "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender." In *Asceticism*. Ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 33–48. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
Cohen, Gerson D. *Studies in the Varieties of Rabbinic Cultures*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991.
Cohen, Martin S. *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983.
Constable, Giles. *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
Cooper, Kate. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
Elliott, Dyan. *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.
Ezra of Gerona. *Le commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des cantiques*. Trans. Georges Vajda. Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1969.
Fenton, Paul B. "Daniel Ibn al-Mashita's 'Taqwim al-Adyan': New Light on the Oriental Phase of the Maimonidean Controversy." In *Genizah Research After Ninety Years The Case of Judaeo-Arabic: Papers Read at the Third Congress of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies*. Ed. Joseph Blau and Stephan C. Reif, 74–81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Fishbane, Michael. *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.
Fulton, Rachel Lee. "The Virgin Mary and the Song of Songs in the High Middle Ages." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1994.
Giffen, Lois A. *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre*. New York: New York University Press, 1971.
Gikatilla, Joseph. *Ginnat 'egoz*. Jerusalem: Yeshivat ha-ḥayim weha-shalom, 1989.
——. *Sha'arei 'orah*. Ed. Joseph Ben-Shlomo. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1981.
Gilson, Étienne. *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986.
Goitein, Shlomo D. *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. Vol. 5. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.
Gordon, Peter E. "The Erotics of Negative Theology: Maimonides on Apprehension." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995): 1–38.
Gottlieb, Isaac B. "The Jewish Allegory of Love: Change and Constancy." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992): 1–18.
Green, Arthur. *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.
——. "Peirush Shir ha-shirim le-R. Yiṣḥaq 'ibn Saḥulah" (Rabbi Isaac Sahola's commentary on the Song of Songs)." *Meḥqerei Yerushalayim be-maḥashevet Yisra'el* (Jerusalem studies in Jewish thought) 6:3–4 (1987): 393–491.
——. "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism." *Orim* 2 (1987): 49–63.
Hallamish, Moshe. "Meqomah shel ha-qabbalah ba-minhag (The place of Kabbalah in customs)." In Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisra'el: meqorot we-toladot* (The rituals of Israel: sources and developments). Vol. 3, 173–225. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994.
Hirshman, Marc. *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
Hollywood, Amy. *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Madgeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
Ḥoṭer ben Shelomo. *The Philosophic Questions and Answers*. Ed. and trans. David R. Blumenthal. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981.
Ibn Aknin, Joseph ben Judah. *Hitgalut ha-sodot we-hofa'at ha-me'orot: Perush Shir ha-shirim*. Ed. and trans. A. S. Halkin. Jerusalem: Meqiṣe Nirdamim, 1964.
Idel, Moshe. "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism." In *Gershom Scholem's "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism" 50 Years After*. Ed. Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer, 117–43. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993.
——. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988.
——. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
——. "Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism." *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 281–96.
——. "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah." In *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*. Ed. David Kraemer, 179–224. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
——. "Tefiśat ha-Torah be-sifrut ha-Heikhalot we-gilguleha ba-qabbalah (The concept of Torah in Hekhalot literature and its metamorphoses in the Kabbalah)." *Meḥqerei Yerushalayim be-maḥashevet Yisra'el* (Jerusalem studies in Jewish thought) 1 (1981): 23–84.
Ivry, Alfred L. "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought." In *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*. Ed. Joel L. Kraemer, 115–40. London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996.
Jantzen, Grace M. "Mysticism and Experience." *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 295–315.

——. *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
Johnson, Penelope D. *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
Kamin, Sarah. *Bein Yehudim le-Noṣerim be-farshanut ha-Miqra* (Jews and Christian interpret the Bible). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991.
Kamin, Sarah, and Avrom Saltman, eds. *Secundum Salomonem: A Thirteenth Century Latin Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1989.
Keiser, Elizabeth B. *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997.
Kimelman, Reuven. "Rabbi Yohanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation." *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 567–95.
Kripal, Jeffrey. *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*. Trans. Catherine Misrahi. New York: Fordham University Press, 1961.
——. *Le mariage vu par les moines au XII^e siècle*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf. 1983.
Levi ben Gershom. *Commentary on Song of Songs*. Trans. Menachem Kellner. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998.
Lévy-Valensi, Eliane A. *La poétique du Zohar*. Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 1996.
Lieberman, Saul. "Mishnath Shir ha-Shirim." In Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 118–26. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965.
Liebes, Yehuda. *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*. Trans. Batya Stein. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
——. *Studies in the Zohar*. Trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
——. "Zohar we-'Eros" (Zohar and Eros). *'Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 67–115.
Loewe, Raphael. "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs." In *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*. Ed. Alexander Altmann, 159–96. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966.
MacKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
Maimonides, Abraham. *The Highways to Perfection*. Trans. and ed. Samuel Rosenblatt. 2 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938.
Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Trans. Shlomo Pines with an introductory essay by Leo Strauss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
Marcus, Ivan G. "The Song of Songs in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: A Preliminary Comparison." In *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, Vol. 1. Ed. Barry Walfish, 181–89. Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1993.
Massignon, Louis. *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*. Trans. Herbert Mason. 4 vols. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982.
Matter, E. Ann. *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.
McGinn, Bernard. "The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism." In *Mysticism and Language*. Ed. Steven T. Katz, 202–35. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
Miller, Patricia Cox. "'Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure': Eros and Language in Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 241–53.
Mopsik, Charles. *Le Zohar: Cantique des cantiques*. Paris: Verdier, 1999.
Naḥmanides, Moses. *Kitwei Ramban*. Ed. Charles B. Chavel. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964.

Narboni, Moses. *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni*. Ed. and trans. Kalman P. Bland. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982.
O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
Perella, Nicolas J. *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.
Pope, Marvin A. *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977.
Rawidowicz, Shimon. *Studies in Jewish Thought*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974.
Rist, John M. *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.
Rosenberg, Shlomo. "Ha-parshanut ha-filosofit le-Shir ha-shirim—he'arot mavo" (Philosophical hermeneutics on the Song of Songs: introductory remarks). *Tarbiẓ* 59 (1990): 133–51.
Rougemont, Denis de. *Love in the Western World*. Trans. Montgomery Belgion. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983.
Saadia ben Joseph. *Kitāb al-amānāt wal-i'tiqādāt = Sefer ha-Niviḥar be-'emunot uve-de'ot*. Ed. Y. Qafiḥ. Jerusalem: Sura Institute for Research and Publication, 1970.
Safran, Bezalel. "Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man." In *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*. Ed. Isadore Twersky, 75–106. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983.
Salfeld, S. "Das Hohelied bei den jüdischen Erklärern des Mittelalters." *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 5 (1878): 150–60.
Saltman, Avrom. "'Aleksander Neqwam—Peirusho le-Shir ha-shirim weha-parshanut ha-yehudit" (Jewish exegetical material in Alexander Nequam's commentary on the Song of Songs). In *Ha-Miqra bi-re'i mefarshaw: sefer zikkaron le-Sarah Qamin* (The Bible in the light of its interpreters: Sarah Kamin memorial volume). Ed. Sara Japhet, 421–52. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994.
Scheindlin, Raymond P. *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991.
Schimmel, Annemarie. "Eros—Heavenly and Not So Heavenly—in Sufi Literature and Life." In *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*. Ed. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, 119–41. Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1979.
——. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
Scholem, Gershom. *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965.
——. *Kabbalah*. Jerusalem: Keter, 1976.
——. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. 3d rev. ed. New York: Schocken, 1954.
——. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Schocken, 1969.
——. *Ha-qabbalah shel Sefer ha-Temunah we-shel 'Avraham 'Abul'afiyah*. Ed. Joseph Ben-Shlomo. Jerusalem: Akademon, 1965.
Sells, Michael A. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
Shir ha-shirim rabbah. Ed. S. Dunsky. Jerusalem: Devir, 1980.
Signer, Michael A. "Thirteenth Century Christian Hebraism: The *Expositio on Canticles* in Ms. Vat. lat. 1053." In *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*. Vol. 3. Ed. David R. Blumenthal, 89–100. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988.
Smalley, Beryl. *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. 1st pbk ed. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964
Thornton, Bruce S. *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997.

Tibbon, Moses ibn. *Perush 'al Shir ha-shirim*. Lyck, Prussia: Meqişe Nirdamim, 1874.
Tishby, Isaiah. *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Trans. David Goldstein. 3 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
Turner, Denys. *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995.
Urbach, Ephraim E. "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen and the Jewish-Christian Disputation." *Scripta hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 247–75.
Vajda, Georges. *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du moyen âge*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1957.
Valantasis, Richard. *The Gospel of Thomas*. London: Routledge, 1997.
Vulliaud, Paul. *Le Cantique des cantiques d'après la tradition juive*. Paris: Éditions d'Aujourd'hui, 1975.
Wafer, Jim. "Vision and Passion: The Symbolism of Male Love in Islamic Mystical Literature." In *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*. Ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, 107–31. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
Walfish, Barry D. "Bibliografyah mu'eret 'al ha-parshanut ha-yehudit 'al Shir ha-shirim mi-ymei ha-beinayyim" (An annotated bibliography of medieval Jewish commentaries on the Song of Songs). In *Ha-Miqra bi-re'i mefarshaw: sefer zikkaron le-Sarah Qamin* (The Bible in light of its interpreters: Sarah Kamin memorial volume). Ed. Sara Japhet, 518–71. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994.
Wolfson, Elliot R. *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
——. *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
——. "Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 301–43.
——. "The Engenderment of Messianic Politics: Symbolic Significance of Sabbatai Sevi's Coronation." In *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*. Ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen, 203–58. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998.
——. "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism." In *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, 151–85. New York: Garland, 1997.
——. "Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig." *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 4 (1997): 39–81.
——. "Fore/giveness On the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response." *Graven Images* 4 (1998): 153–69.
——. *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.
——. "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto." *History of Religions* 36 (1997): 289–332.
——. "Weeping, Death, and Spiritual Ascent in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism." In *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*. Ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane, 209–47. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
Wright, Constance S. "The Influence of the Exegetical Tradition of the 'Song of Songs' on the Secular and Religious Love Lyrics in Ms. Harley 2253." Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1966.
Zaehner, R. C. *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.
Zohar hadash. Ed. Reuven Margaliot. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978.

8

Typology, Narrative, and History

Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen on the Book of Ruth

BARRY D. WALFISH

Commentaries on the book of Ruth are relatively uncommon in both Jewish and Christian exegesis.[1] Of those extant, one of the most intriguing is that of Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen, written around 1400 and published in Sabbioneta, Italy, in 1551.[2]

Isaac lived in Spain, perhaps in the town of Jativa, Valencia, around the turn of the fifteenth century.[3] His only other extant works are commentaries on the books of Esther and Ecclesiastes, neither of which has ever been published. The commentary on Ruth has several remarkable features. The first is the means by which Isaac claims to have come to his understanding of the book's contents. The second is his use of typological exegesis. The third is the interweaving of this typology with the narrative plot line of the book of Ruth.

The Purpose of the Commentary

Like other late medieval exegetes, Isaac justifies his commentary by claiming that the previous commentaries did not deal with all the issues adequately.[4] He writes that he has been troubled by several aspects of the book, especially the advice given by an intelligent woman (Naomi) to her companion (Ruth) to uncover the feet of a great and noble man, "an action which, when made known publicly, would be perceived to be brazen and degrading to the honor of all women."[5] Boaz's reaction to her brazen act is also difficult to understand. Instead of chastising Ruth, Boaz praises her and does not rest until he marries her. Isaac simply cannot understand how such a book, which presumably condones immoral behavior and promiscuity, could have been included in the canon.

Isaac's discomfort is difficult to fathom. The book of Ruth was highly regarded in rabbinic literature and its characters effusively praised for their actions at every point in the story, including the sexually charged scene on the threshing floor.[6] For the Sages, the book of Ruth exemplifies, above all else, the quality of *hesed*, loving-kindness, as well as many other praiseworthy virtues, such as modesty, loyalty, and obedience.[7] Nevertheless, Isaac was obviously troubled by the book's contents and had been pondering its meaning for some time. Initially, he tried to clarify the book's meaning

With Reverence for the Word

Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Edited by
Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish,
and Joseph W. Goering

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS