

### Abraham Abulafia's Esotericism: Secrets and Doubt

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Moshe Idel

**Abraham Abulafia's Esotericism**

# **Studies and Texts in Scepticism**

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## **Volume 4**

Moshe Idel

# Abraham Abulafia's Esotericism

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Secrets and Doubts

Editor: Racheli Haliva

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“It is incumbent on every illuminate to conceal what has been revealed to him regarding the general principles of the secrets of the Torah, and even more so of its details, from the multitude of our sages, even more so from all the other ignoramuses.”

כל משכיל מחויב להסתיר מה שנגלה לו מכללי סתרי התורה וכל שכן מפרטיהם מעין המון חכמינו וכל שכן משאר עמי הארץ

Abraham Abulafia, Introduction to *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 6

“There was no one who benefited, since the minds of men are different from each other, in particular regarding the depth of wisdom and the secrets of the Torah.”

וגם בם אין מועיל כי הדיעות משונות מאד בבני אדם כל שכן בעמקי החכמה ובסתרי התורה  
Abraham Abulafia, *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 369

“You should know that I shall not favour my nation, but I shall tell the truth.”

ודע כי אני לא אשא פנים לאומתי ואומר אמת  
Abraham Abulafia, *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 193

“Since all His lovers, either from among us or from among the Gentiles, are our lovers, and all His haters are our haters.”

שכל אוהביו בין ממנו בין מן האומות הם אוהבינו, וכל שונאיו הם שונאינו.  
Abraham Abulafia, *Šomer Miṣwah*, 41



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## Acknowledgments

The present study brings together a series of findings from some of my earlier studies of Abraham Abulafia, but concentrates on a topic which has not been addressed separately before: esotericism in Abulafia's writings. In my opinion, this is a pivotal topic, since if this propensity is not taken into serious consideration, then this Kabbalist's hidden messages will be missed. The decoding of the esoteric level of Abulafia's writings brings about a new vision of his thought, which in my opinion is less known or even rejected by scholars: his universal attitude that differs from Rabbinic approaches and is unparalleled by other Kabbalists both before his time and for many later centuries. Following Maimonides and Maimonidean thinkers, Abulafia offers a sharp rereading of many central ideals of Judaism, which is the main topic of the present study.

Thanks are due to the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, for a grant concerning the study of Abraham Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*, to the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and to the Matanel Chair of Kabbalah at the Safed Academic College, for allowing me the necessary time to prepare this monograph. In its first draft, the book was kindly read by three scholars: Prof. Warren Zev Harvey and Dr. Caterina Rigo, both of whom are my colleagues at the Hebrew University, and Prof. Menachem Kellner of Haifa University. I am very grateful for their courtesy. During the preparation of this study, some conversations at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem with my friends Adam Afterman and Menachem Lorberbaum from Tel Aviv University enriched the treatments of some of the topics. Their criticism, suggestions, and corrections improved that draft.

Later, a four-day conference organised by the Maimonides Center for Advanced Studies—Jewish Scepticism (MCAS) at Hamburg University brought together a large number of distinguished scholars dealing with medieval Jewish studies, mainly Maimonideans. These scholars read the draft before the conference and together we discussed the chapters of the book. Thanks are due to Prof. Giuseppe Veltri, the director of the Institute for Jewish Philosophy and Religion and MCAS, and his staff, and especially Dr. Racheli Haliva, for their organisation and hospitality. The comments and critiques of all participants, especially Profs. Steven Harvey, Warren Zev Harvey, Hannah Kasher, Haim (Howard) Kreisel, Yossef Schwartz, and Joseph Stern, triggered the emergence of the final draft, which greatly benefited from the editorial contribution of Racheli Haliva. Needless to say, all the remaining mistakes are mine.

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## Foreword: A Maimonidean Kabbalist

Warren Zev Harvey, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Moshe Idel, the Max Cooper Professor Emeritus of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was born in Târgu Neamț, Romania, in 1947. He immigrated to Israel in 1963, majored in Hebrew and English literatures at Haifa University (BA, 1970), and studied Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under Shlomo Pines and Ephraim Gottlieb (PhD, 1976). He has published scores of books and hundreds of essays, including the ground-breaking *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), which has been translated into nine languages. He is an Israel Prize laureate (1999), an EMET Prize laureate (2002), and a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (2006).

Idel's research ranges far and wide, from the Bible and Talmud through the medieval Kabbalists and philosophers to Renaissance humanism, Safed mysticism, Sabbatianism, Hasidism, and post-modernism. However, at the centre of his work is the "prophetic" or "ecstatic" Kabbalah of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291). His doctoral dissertation, written in Hebrew under the supervision of Shlomo Pines, was entitled "Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine" (1976). Among his English books on Abulafia are *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (1988), *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (1988), and *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (1989).

Idel was not the first person to appreciate Abulafia's importance. In 1919, Gershom Scholem, who later founded the discipline of Kabbalah studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, began a doctoral dissertation at the University of Munich on the theory of language in the works of Abulafia and other Kabbalists. However, he abandoned this project because he had difficulty deciphering Abulafia's arcane texts, and instead wrote about *Sefer ha-Bahir* (1922).<sup>1</sup> In 1925, Scholem composed a report for the famed Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik in which he assessed the state of research in Jewish mysticism. When he came to mention the Kabbalistic works that urgently needed to be published, he lauded "the books of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia," describing him as "the most important personality among all the early [Kabbalists] known to us today."<sup>2</sup> In his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, Scholem devoted a significant chapter to Abulafia, writing about his "very great" influence and praising his "remarkable combination of logical power, pellucid style, deep insight, and highly colored abstruseness."<sup>3</sup> However, after *Major Trends*,

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1 Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1980), 115.

2 Gershom Scholem, *Devarim be-Go* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 62.

3 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 124.

his interest in Abulafia waned.<sup>4</sup> Idel sees Scholem's decreased interest in Abulafia as the result of his growing tendency to portray Kabbalah as an essentially theosophical tradition. However, I am inclined to see it as being due to Abulafia's overt Maimonideanism. In *Major Trends* and later works, Scholem contrasted the spiritually meaningful Kabbalah with "sterile" Maimonideanism. Abulafia's stunning integration of Kabbalah and Maimonideanism gives the lie to Scholem's contrast.<sup>5</sup>

Idel wrote his doctoral dissertation on Abulafia not under Scholem, the master of Kabbalah, but under Pines, the savant of medieval Arabic and Hebrew philosophy. Why Pines instead of Scholem? First, Scholem had retired from teaching in 1965, five years before Idel came to Jerusalem, although he was still active and supervised the dissertation of Idel's friend and colleague Yehuda Liebes (1976). Second, Idel was initially interested in philosophy and intended to study a philosophical subject with Pines, but Ephraim Gottlieb aroused his interest in Kabbalah. Gottlieb supervised Idel's research on Abulafia until his untimely death in 1973, at which point Pines took over his supervision.

Be this as it may, one might also imagine that Idel was drawn to Pines because of a similarity in their attitudes to scholarship. He shared with Pines an anarchic suspicion of all theories. He has spoken of the "important lesson" he learned as a young scholar researching Kabbalistic texts and trying to understand them in light of the theories of Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and others: "The theories [...] simply don't work." No theories work. "The minute you try to apply [a theory] to the text, you [...] do violence to [it] [...]. You must remain free to listen to the text."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Pines, Scholem, like Hegel and Schelling, was a theorist. His brilliant dialectical theory of the history of religion is confidently set down in his *Major Trends*.<sup>7</sup> To put things too simplistically: Scholem's approach was dogmatic, Pines's was sceptical.

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<sup>4</sup> There are two exceptions: (1) From January to March 1965, Scholem lectured on Abulafia at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew,] ed. Y. Ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem: Academon, 1965); (2) In 1970, Scholem spoke at the Eranos conference in Ascona on the Kabbalistic theory of language, focusing on Abulafia. See Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," trans. Simon Pleasance, *Diogenes* 79 (Fall, 1972): 59–80; 80 (Winter, 1972): 164–94. The Eranos talk was based in part on Scholem's aborted Munich doctoral dissertation. See Moshe Idel, *Old Words, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 168–75.

<sup>5</sup> See my essays "Idel on Spinoza," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18 (2007): 88–94 and "Two Approaches to Evil in History," in *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 194–201. On Scholem's later tendency to see Kabbalah as "a pre-eminently symbolic, theosophical, and Gnostic-like lore," see below, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Idel, *Representing God*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 156–60. Cf. my "The Versatility of Contemporary Jewish Philosophy," in *The Future of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 47–48.

<sup>7</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 7–10.

Like Pines and Idel, Abulafia was a sceptic. His scepticism was rooted in his theory of the imagination, which was essentially Maimonidean, although liberally spiked with alphabetology and numerology. Following Maimonides, he held that all knowledge, including prophecy, is dependent on the imagination, which mediates between the *sensibilia* and the *intelligibilia*. Abulafia notes that the Hebrew word *dimyon* (“imagination”) is an anagram of the Latin *medium*<sup>8</sup> (“middle”). The imagination, however, is a corporeal faculty that “never apprehends any true reality.”<sup>9</sup> It is “a large-boned ass [*hamor garem*], crouching between the boundaries” (Genesis 49:14); that is, it is a body (= *gerem*) composed of matter (= *homer*) mediating between the sensible world and the intellect. Since all our knowledge is dependent on this large-boned ass, we should never expect it to be apodictic.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Abulafia continues, the true “secret” (*sod*) of the imagination is indicated by another one of its anagrams: *demon*. The imagination is demonic. It is Satan! He sabotages our attempts to achieve knowledge; thus, error is inevitable, and scepticism warranted.<sup>11</sup> Idel writes of “an affinity between imagination and doubt.”<sup>12</sup> He explains that according to Abulafia, it is a “perennial problem of human nature” that the “perfect type of cognition” is obstructed by the imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Idel stresses the decisive importance of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* for Abulafia. Throughout his life, Abulafia studied and taught the *Guide*. In 1261, he studied it in Capua with the Maimonidean philosopher Hillel of Verona. In Spain, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere, he taught it to young and old, scholars and layfolk. He wrote three different commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide* during the years 1273 to 1280. Maimonides’s presence is felt in all of Abulafia’s works. Indeed, as Idel puts it, Abulafia is “part of the history of Maimonideanism.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Idel observes, Abulafia saw Maimonides not only as a philosophical source, but also as a Kabbalistic one. According to Abulafia’s own testimony, his Kabbalah was based on two main sources: *Sefer Yeşirah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>15</sup> “It would not be an exaggeration,” Idel writes, to see Abulafia’s Kabbalah as “gravitating around central concepts found in the *Guide*.”<sup>16</sup> In Abulafia’s eyes, Maimonides was “the divine rabbi” (*ha-rav ha-elohi*).<sup>17</sup>

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**8** To be precise, the anagram is *mediun* or *medion* (דמיון = מדיון), which presumably reflects an old vulgar form of *medium*.

**9** See below, p. 150.

**10** See below, p. 150.

**11** See below, p. 150: *dimyon* = *demon* (דמיון = דימון). See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2:12, p. 280 (imagination = evil impulse); and 3:22, p. 489 (evil impulse = Satan). Cf. 2:30, p. 356 (Samael = Satan).

**12** See below, p. 148, n. 154.

**13** See below, p. 132.

**14** See below, p. 45.

**15** See below, p. 85.

**16** See below, p. 77.

**17** See below, p. 89.

According to Idel, Abulafia, at least in some of his works, adopted a complex esoteric style of writing similar to that used by Maimonides in his *Guide*, which was analysed in detail by Leo Strauss in several studies, notably *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). Idel argues that Abulafia's works must be read with precisely the same strategies that Strauss recommended for reading the *Guide*. However, Idel reminds us, Abulafia's texts are exceptionally recondite, since they combine philosophical esotericism, such as that found in the *Guide*, with different varieties of Kabbalistic esotericism.<sup>18</sup>

At one point, Abulafia remarks that he does not call Maimonides's book *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* ("The Guide of the Perplexed"), but rather *Makkeh ha-Ruḥanim* ("The Striker of the Spiritual Ones"). The two phrases, Abulafia explains, are interchangeable, since they have the same numerical value: 384. Abulafia discloses that he calls the book "The Striker of the Spiritual Ones" because "it adds the spirit of wisdom [*ruaḥ ḥokhmah*] to each devotee of knowledge [*ba'al madda* ], and says to him: grow!" Abulafia's words here allude to an astrological statement in *Genesis Rabbah* 10:6: "There is no herb that does not have a star in heaven that strikes it, and says to it: grow!" Here, Abulafia's point is that Maimonides's *Guide*, like a star in heaven, strikes the scientist or philosopher and inspires him with "the spirit of wisdom." It raises him from *madda*' (= *ratio*) to *ruaḥ ḥokhmah* ("the spirit of wisdom").<sup>19</sup> Now, this phrase, "the spirit of wisdom," alludes to two biblical texts. The first text refers to the extraordinary spiritual power of Moses: "And Joshua the son of Nun was full of *the spirit of wisdom*, for Moses had laid his hands upon him" (Deuteronomy 34:9). In the Bible, it is Moses ben Amram who imparts the spirit of wisdom; in Abulafia's text, it is Moses ben Maimon. The second text refers to the famous messianic verses in Isaiah: "And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse [...]. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, *the spirit of wisdom* and understanding" (Isaiah 11:1–2). The *Guide* thus fulfils a messianic mission by striking its readers and elevating them from "knowledge" or "science" to "the spirit of wisdom." Abulafia's numerical games can often be pushed beyond their surface-level meaning. If we ask the meaning of 384, we discover that it equals "the messiah of YHWH!"<sup>20</sup>

The parallel between Moses ben Amram and Moses ben Maimon is often cited by Abulafia, as it has been cited by Maimonideans throughout the ages. In a poem discussed by Idel, Abulafia writes: "Read the religion [*dat*] of [Moses] the son of Amram together with the religion [*dat*] of Moses son of Maimon." Idel writes that this line expresses "the dramatic change generated by the emergence of the new philosophical religion." He observes that according to the poem, the "two religions," the biblical and the philosophical, are "almost independent," but "one should study them together." In Idel's words, Abulafia sought to make a "synthesis" of the two reli-

<sup>18</sup> See below, pp. 13–17.

<sup>19</sup> See below, p. 69. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide*, 2:10, 269–270.

<sup>20</sup> מורה הנבוכים = מכה הרוחנים = 384 = משיח יהוה

gions.<sup>21</sup> It may, however, be more precise to say that he wished to dissolve the former into the latter.

Indeed, the evidence that Idel marshals shows that Abulafia was consistently radical in his reinterpretations of biblical and rabbinic religion and deserves to be counted among the boldest of the Maimonideans. For example, Idel gives a detailed analysis of Abulafia's multiple interpretations of a notorious rabbinic homily according to which the Serpent in the Garden of Eden had sexual relations with Eve and cast pollution into her and her descendants. This homily states that the pollution of the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai has ceased, but that that of the Gentiles continues (BT *Šabbat* 146a and parallels); it is the closest text in the Jewish tradition to the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. Like this doctrine, it is problematic because of its exclusivism. However, Maimonides had already provided an allegorical interpretation that mitigates the exclusivism, although he did so cryptically. According to his interpretation, the homily concerns morality, not history: the Serpent's pollution symbolises imaginary desires, and standing at Mount Sinai symbolises true ideas. The lesson is that imaginary desires lead human beings to sin, but true ideas prevent them from sinning.<sup>22</sup> Abulafia elaborates on Maimonides's interpretation. First, referring to certain rabbis who indulged in magic, Abulafia writes that the Serpent has cast pollution into them; "their brain is polluted," they did not stand at Sinai, even though they are rabbis, and they will have no cure until they do. Here, it is explained by means of a clever letterplay that the name "Mount Sinai" (*Har Sinai*) derives from the word "bridle" (*resen*) and means "self-restraint." The antidote for the maladies caused by the imaginary desires is self-restraint, and self-restraint is concomitant to true ideas.<sup>23</sup> Second, in discussing the homily, Abulafia speaks of human beings (= *adam*), not Israelites. He also identifies standing at Mount Sinai with eating of the Tree of Life: both acts symbolise the acquisition of true ideas, but the former is particularistic and the latter universalistic.<sup>24</sup> Third, in a mind-boggling revision of the homily, Abulafia writes: "The pollution of the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai has *not* ceased!" He then continues: "In order to find a way to make the pollution cease, the books [of King Solomon] were written." According to the radically revised homily, Mount Sinai was *not* sufficient to stop ignorance and immorality in Israel. Therefore, King Solomon, the wisest of all human beings, wrote three books: Proverbs, on ethics; Ecclesiastes, on physics; and the Song of Songs, on metaphysics. Abulafia may be hinting that the books of Solomon represent progress beyond those of Moses.<sup>25</sup> Fourth, in one of his discussions of the homily, Abulafia ridicules those who think it should be taken literally: "How can any person in the

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21 See below, pp. 21–22. The poem was written for the Feast of Weeks by a certain Rabbi Abraham, whom Idel has convincingly identified as Abulafia.

22 *Guide* 2:30, pp. 356–57.

23 See below, pp. 130–31: הר סיני = רסן.

24 See below, p. 132–33.

25 See below, pp. 131–32; cf. p. 217 (on "Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon").



world be called ‘wise’ who thinks this homily is to be taken literally, and the Serpent [...] had sexual relations with Eve?!” Idel writes that Abulafia’s sharp criticisms of the literal meaning of certain rabbinic texts are unprecedented in both the Kabbalistic and the Maimonidean literature of his time. These criticisms, in Idel’s opinion, reflect Abulafia’s “intellectual repulsion” in the face of “foolish” myths.<sup>26</sup>

Abulafia emerges from Idel’s discussions as a trenchant and morally sensitive thinker who does not hesitate to reinterpret an unreasonable scriptural or rabbinic text. As he punned, “A philosopher will examine the literal meanings [*pešaṭim*] and know they are words said for fools [*ṭippešim*].” *Pešaṭ* (“literal meaning”) is an anagram of *ṭippeš* (“fool”).<sup>27</sup> He also emerges as an independent-minded Kabbalist and Maimonidean. His thought shows how far the Kabbalah can go in the direction of philosophy, and how far philosophy can go in the direction of Kabbalah.

In sum, Abulafia was a Maimonidean Kabbalist. This phrase may sound like an oxymoron to many Maimonideans and Kabbalists. Nonetheless, it describes Abulafia accurately. Abulafia was bold not only as a thinker, but also as a man of action. In 1258, at the age of eighteen, he journeyed from Spain to the Land of Israel, seeking to find the River Sambation and to discover the lost Ten Tribes. Considering himself a prophet and a messiah, he went to Rome in 1280 in order to confront Pope Nicholas III. Although orders were issued to have him executed, Abulafia fearlessly entered the papal palace in Soriano, but then learned that the pope had suddenly died (perhaps from anxiety over his threatened visit).

Abulafia’s prophetic and messianic pretensions, coupled with his radical Maimonideanism, incurred the antagonism of many. Among his antagonists was the celebrated Talmudist Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret of Barcelona, who put him under the ban sometime in the 1280s. In a remark from 1273 that sounds like it was uttered by Spinoza, Abulafia referred to the persecution he was suffering for his ideas: “They call me a heretic and unbeliever because I have worshipped God in truth and not according to the imagination of the people who walk in darkness [...]. I shall not forsake the ways of truth for those of falsehood.”<sup>28</sup>

The Barcelona ban against Abulafia was more effective than the Amsterdam ban against Spinoza. While Spinoza’s books have often been printed and extensively discussed, most of Abulafia’s books were not printed until recent years and his Kabbalah was studied only clandestinely. Despite the effectiveness of the ban, however, Abulafia did succeed in having an influence on some major thinkers and scholars, such as Ramon Llull, Meister Eckhart, Joseph Kaspi, Moses Narboni, Johanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Moses Cordovero, Ḥayyim Viṭal, Spinoza, Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, Elijah Gaon of Vilna, and Menahem Mendel of Shklov. In the

<sup>26</sup> See below, pp. 134–35.

<sup>27</sup> See below, p. 116: טפש = פשוט This anagram was a favourite of Abraham Joshua Heschel. See Michael Marmur, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Sources of Wonder* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 21.

<sup>28</sup> See below, pp. 110–11.

contemporary era, important authors, including Yvan Goll, Jacques Derrida, and Umberto Eco, have been fascinated by him.<sup>29</sup> The present book by his pre-eminent interpreter explains why Rabbi Abraham Abulafia merits our attention too.

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<sup>29</sup> See below, pp. 307–8. Cf. R. Barbara Gitenstein, *Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 133, s.v. Abulafia, Abulafianism; and Christine A. Meilicke, “Abulafianism among the Counterculture Kabbalists,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2002): 71–101.



# I Introduction: Secrecy and Maimonideanism

## 1 Esotericism, Disguise, and Camouflage in a Generation of Discontent: Leo Strauss, Mircea Eliade, and Gershom Scholem

In the latter half of the 1930s, two grand and original scholarly narratives were formulated regarding the way in which philosophy and religion had previously been understood. The formulators of these narratives were European scholars who, not finding academic positions in their homelands, ended up becoming professors at the University of Chicago and leading intellectuals in the United States. The writings of the German-born Jewish professor of political philosophy Leo Strauss and the Romanian-born historian of religion Mircea Eliade revolutionised the way in which many scholars addressed major issues in the humanities, and their impact has been felt long after their deaths.

In a series of monographs, Strauss introduces the concept that there is a strong propensity toward esotericism in Western philosophy that is conditioned by the inherent tension found in society between the rulers and the multitude on the one hand and the searcher of truth—that is, the critical philosopher—on the other. The founding event for this longstanding propensity was the condemnation and execution of Socrates. This tendency was assumed to have informed not only some parts of classical Greek philosophy, but also important segments of medieval thought, specifically Muslim philosophy, *falsafah*, some parts of Jewish philosophy, especially that of Maimonides and his followers, and some aspects of premodern European philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Strauss's proposal put on the agenda a new way of carefully reading philosophical texts, which were themselves written by many thinkers who were aware of soci-

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1 There are many fine expositions of Strauss's sometimes evasive methodological approach. See, for example, Shlomo Pines's concise piece "On Leo Strauss," trans. Aryeh Motzkin, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6 (1988): 169–71; Rémi Brague, "Leo Strauss et Maimonide," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1986), 246–68; Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993); Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014); Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006); and David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 106–29. For expositions of Strauss's thought dealing with issues to be discussed below, see, more recently, Haim O. Reznitzner, *Prophecy and the Perfect Political Order: The Political Theology of Leo Strauss* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012), and Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32–35, as well as Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, *Exile and Interpretation: The Shaping of Modern Intellectual History in the Age of Nazism and Barbarism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2014), 93–130.

ety's tendency to persecute free thinkers. He was concerned not only with what had been written, but also with questions related to how it was written; namely, what had been omitted and what had been consciously suppressed. Strauss's thought contains a basic polarity between "Jerusalem" (religion or faith) and "Athens" (philosophy). This polarity was adopted and adapted by several thinkers active within the framework of the three monotheistic religions.<sup>2</sup> The latter approach can be seen as "rationalist" and critical, the former as much more mythical and fideistic. In a way, Strauss proposed a "hermeneutics of suspicion"—to borrow a phrase from another context—while Eliade, at least in the earlier phases of his career, can be depicted as a thinker who resorts to a "hermeneutics of confidence."

Mircea Eliade articulates a contrary tendency to that of Strauss. He regards the mythical, archaic type of religion as the more authentic form of spiritual life, antithetical to the later monotheistic religions that he imagined to be grounded in a proclivity towards attributing importance to events in history rather than to cosmological myths.<sup>3</sup> He proposes the historical evolution of religion to be an ecstatic-orgiastic attempt to overcome linear time by means of myths and rituals. Our current linear vision of time, in this view, is a negative development because it is essentially accompanied by a process of demythologisation, a characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian approach, which is strongly connected to an apotheosis of history. Also crucial for Eliade's scholarly approach, as well as for some of his literary works, is the assumption that the sacred is camouflaged within the profane (and sometimes the banal) and that its presence, traces, or secrets should be deciphered by means of hermeneutics that he rarely used and only delineated in general and vague terms.<sup>4</sup>

Theories of disguise are present in the thought of these two scholars in quite a significant yet opposing manner. They may be understood as representing two different mentalities, reflecting a famous opposition formulated by Karl Jaspers: Strauss represents the axial mentality and Eliade the preaxial mentality. Put in another way, while Strauss inhabited an intellectual universe and espoused a distant and implicit critique of the essence of the ordinary social and political order, Eliade personally believed, especially in his youth, in what I call a magical universe. This magical universe is a type of reality—replete with cosmic homologies, correspondences, se-

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<sup>2</sup> David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008); Steven B. Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Susan Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Work of Leo Strauss* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995); Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, passim.

<sup>3</sup> See Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Idel, "The Camouflaged Sacred in Mircea Eliade's Self-Perception, Literature, and Scholarship," in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, eds. Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159–95. Though there are some differences between Eliade's early thought and his later thought, which should not concern us here, this approach remained fundamental throughout.

crets, and sympathies—that is the locus for extraordinary events and miracles that reflect an ontologically porous reality, not just ancient religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

For Strauss, Western philosophy—pre-eminently an elitist preoccupation—involves an esoteric dimension in many important cases. For Eliade, however, the true religion—namely, the archaic one—is essentially exoteric, although the “sacred” may be camouflaged and thus may be secretly present in nature and in historical events (i. e., the profane). Eliade specifies that it is within the “banal” that the sacred is eventually camouflaged. Both scholars were conservative thinkers, concerned with the preservation of the current situation rather than attempting to ignite or cope with change. In a way, the two scholars considered ancient events—the trial of Socrates in Athens for Strauss and the worldviews in archaic religions for Eliade—as both a formative and a higher form of experience when compared to what is called the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

In each of these scholarly systems, we may speak about more universal types of human activities that transcend the more particularist specific types of prevailing religious orientations in the present; what Eliade calls “mental horizons.” In a way, Eliade subscribes to a form of *philosophia perennis*,<sup>6</sup> as does Strauss (at least insofar as Shlomo Pines describes him), but while the former searched for a pre-Socratic archaic ontology, the latter took as the starting point for his reflections Socrates’s dialogical form and its political concerns as found in Plato.<sup>7</sup> However, while Strauss is concerned with the status of the individual elite versus the wider community or society as part of a hidden confrontation, Eliade is concerned with what he would agree to call the populace; namely, with the persons participating in religious life within their society. In fact, he conceives the turning point in the history of religion to be the violent imposition of monotheistic faith on the Jewish population by what he calls “the Jewish elite.”<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Strauss, who was exclusively concerned with decoding the hidden content of written documents composed solely by elite figures, Eliade was much more concerned with explaining the religious meanings of natural symbols and rituals that are characteristic of mostly pre-literate cultures—that is, with collective symbols and rites. He assumed, however, that archaic men understood some kind of secret wisdom by means of ritualistic practices which, though later obscured by historical

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5 See Idel, *Mircea Eliade*, introduction. See also chapter 10 below.

6 See chapter 5 below. On Eliade and the esoteric movement in Western Europe, see Marcel Tolcea, *Eliade Ezotericul*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: EST, 2012); Antoine Faivre, “Modern Western Esoteric Currents in the Works of Mircea Eliade: The Extent and the Limits of their Presence,” in Wedemeyer and Doniger, *Hermeneutics*, 147–57; and Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

7 Pines, “On Leo Strauss.”

8 See Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2005), 216–23.

developments, are not entirely unretrievable today. In 1943, he remarked in his *Portugal Journal*:

The act of creation,<sup>9</sup> the Eros, is capable of untying primordial powers and visions, of a strength that surpasses by far the contemporary mental horizon; cf. the mystique of the archaic orgies, Dionysus, etc. [...]. If there are certain archaic secrets that are accessible to man as such, to the raw man/animal, then those secrets reveal themselves only to the person who embodies the total Eros, the cosmic one, without problems, without neurasthenia.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt, as he testifies, neurasthenia was a malady that haunted Eliade in precisely this period of his life. At this time, he was serving as a cultural attaché at the Romanian embassy in Lisbon. While his wife, who was ill, travelled to Bucharest for a medical consultation, Eliade attempted to cure his own ailment by means of his participation in sexual orgies.<sup>11</sup> He derived his approach to the existence of allegedly lost mental horizons from his early encounter (indeed, in his high school years) with Romanian folklore and what is now called Western esotericism. Later on, the impact of the latter became blurred in his writings. Studying in India towards the end of the 1920s, Eliade became acquainted with the theories and practice of yoga, which he understood, against its presupposed pre-Arian background, to be based on some forms of hidden correspondence between the human body and the cosmos.

While Eliade was a profoundly Dionysian type of thinker and writer, we may describe Strauss as an Apollonian type of thinker and writer: he was someone who turned to Greek history and classical philosophy in order to understand the dangers that philosophers may encounter. Eliade went much further back in time than Strauss in order to understand the archaic true religion that he believed could be retrieved from a variety of rituals, objects, and documents. While Eliade mainly focused his research on more popular and folkloric material, Strauss, on the other hand, was concerned with decoding hints found in elite speculative literatures. Or, to propose

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, this means procreation.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Jurnalul Portughez și alte scrieri*, trans. Mihai Zamfir, ed. Sorin Alexandrescu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 1:200–201. On “secrets of the universe” in Eliade, see also Idel, *Mircea Eliade*, 7, 11, 36. Elsewhere, he speaks about the secrets of becoming divine, see Idel, 13; for discussions of his “secret life,” see 34. Perhaps one should compare Eliade’s claim of lost mental horizons whose secrets can be revealed by means of sexual orgies to the recurrent concept of the “horizon of mysteries”; namely, the spiritual realm of man found in several pieces by his somewhat older friend, Lucian Blaga, initially printed around 1937 in *Știință și creație* vol. 1, *Trilogia valorilor* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 200–216; *Artă și valoare*, vol. 3, *Trilogia valorilor* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 31–32, 154; and *Diferențialele divine. Aspecte antropologice. Ființa istorică* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 143, 147.

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between orgies and neurasthenia in Eliade’s life in this period, see *Jurnalul Portughez*, 1:118, 126, 199, 235. The comparison in the last passage between death, orgies, and war as a dramatic return to primordial unity shows the importance of violence in religious experiences. See also his view of orgies in *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 57–58.

another typology: while Strauss was informed by Platonic political esotericism related to the structure of society, which has nothing to do with a specific cosmology, Eliade was more concerned with mysteriology as developed before Plato's time in Pythagoreanism and Orphism. Indeed, in his youth, Eliade was very interested in Greek mystery religions: he would later claim that he reconstructed a Pre-Socratic ontology in his work.

These differences notwithstanding, both Strauss and Eliade were not merely influential scholars in academia: they were mystagogues who aspired to initiate their followers into a sort of art which they considered to be a forgotten or neglected lore, relevant not only for historians of philosophy or religion, but also for the people living in the present. Thus, two entirely different mystical approaches to thought (one philosophical-esoteric and the other mythical-exoteric) coexisted at the University of Chicago in the very same years, although I assume that they did not intersect with or react to each other either technically or conceptually. I am not acquainted with any significant dialogue, either oral or written, between these two thinkers. The aims of these two eminent scholars—similar to that of Gershom Scholem—were to be part of minorities who promoted what they claimed to be forgotten mental universes. The return of the repressed, though taking such different forms, also represents a turn from the Enlightenment faith in future utopias to proposals to learn much more from the forgotten past.

The two thinkers were part of what I call the “generation of discontents,” which also includes other major figures such as Gershom G. Scholem. German-born like Strauss, Scholem had good relations with both him and Eliade. His academic approach, which revolutionised the study of Kabbalah, held a different view of religion than Strauss and was closer to Eliade's opinion. Scholem believed that the real vital power in Jewish religion was not Jewish philosophy, but a mythical revival of themes that generated the emergence of Kabbalah in the Middle Ages. Kabbalah is a prominently esoteric type of religious lore that was, according to Scholem, profoundly permeated by Gnosticism and, to a substantial extent, Neo-Platonism. Though in spirit he had a very critical method that was a lot closer to Strauss's textual approach, Scholem's attitude was much more historically oriented. His vision of the content of his subject matter (Kabbalistic literature) was much closer to Eliade's, as he emphasised the esoteric, symbolic, and mythical dimensions of the study of Kabbalah.<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, Scholem also advanced a theory that attributes a transcendental status to the divine realm—the *sefirot* or the ten divine powers, which is paramount in the Kabbalistic theosophical structure—that can be expressed or intuited only by means of what he called symbols, mainly biblical words, whose hidden sig-

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<sup>12</sup> For a comparison between Strauss and Scholem, see Sheppard, *Leo Strauss*, 114–16. For a recent comparison between Eliade's and Scholem's approaches to mysticism, see Philip Wexler, *Mystical Sociology: Toward Cosmic Social Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 73–108. See also the next footnote.



nificance Kabbalists knew how to decipher.<sup>13</sup> For Scholem, the symbolic mode was understood as pointing to the transcendental, ultimate reality: it was considered to be the main sort of discourse in Kabbalah, representing a special form of esotericism, one that involves a kind of ineffability. In some cases, this essential type of esotericism is more connected to the feeling that there are supernal mysteries that are understood to be related to a reality that is difficult to understand or intuit. Political esotericism, by contrast, deals with issues that can be explained to any intelligent person. At least once, Scholem resorts to the word “camouflage,”<sup>14</sup> and one of his Israeli editors even claimed that he was holding on to a sort of Zionist esoterica.<sup>15</sup>

In a way, this assumption may be connected to a vision expressed in some of his documents regarding the existence of a metaphysical core of reality for which the Kabbalists were searching; a scholar may also touch this core by decoding symbols, or may at least wait for a hint coming from this same core of reality, which he called “the mountain.”<sup>16</sup> As with Eliade, Scholem assumes the existence of an objective ontology of the sacred both in the Kabbalistic sources he studied and (at least implicitly) in the work of the scholar who aspires to contact that sacred dimension of reality. Hidden in texts, in nature, or in reality, the secret (or mysterious) dimension haunted modern scholars much more than it did their nineteenth-century predecessors.

The three authors reflect, overtly and implicitly, uneasiness with their respective religious establishments; they attempt to unearth different, sometimes even clandestine, narratives lying in the bosom of the sources of Western culture which were, according to their opinion, forgotten or sometimes even intentionally suppressed. Though working on different materials and drawing different conclusions, all three scholars attempted to reconstruct lost and forlorn narratives that (at least implicitly) had a bearing on the modern world.

Moreover, all three were emigrants whose decisions and political circumstances took them far away from their initial intellectual backgrounds, which nevertheless continued to inform their approaches. Ultimately, they became intellectual heroes in their respective countries of origin.<sup>17</sup> In the following, we shall be concerned with several issues that were treated in the studies by Strauss and Scholem, different

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**13** See Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 83–131.

**14** See Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 59.

**15** As I heard from Professor Avraham Shapira, the editor of several collections of his articles in Hebrew.

**16** See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 12.

**17** Sheppard, *Leo Strauss*. For the claim that Scholem felt like an exile while living in Israel, see Irving Wohlfarth, “‘Haarscharf an der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus.’ Zum Motiv des Zimzum bei Gershom Scholem,” in *Gershom Scholem: Zwischen den Disziplinen*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Gary Smith (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995): 176–256. Eliade had been in exile from Romania since late 1944; he was active in Romanian exile circles in Paris and Chicago and contributed to Romanian journals printed by exiles.

as their intellectual concerns were. In this context, another famous émigré should be mentioned: Hans Jonas, who, influenced by Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, offered a sharp existential understanding of Gnosticism. Jonas's views on Gnosticism deeply influenced the way Scholem understood Kabbalah as predominantly Gnostic and mythical. Following Jonas, in the late thirties, Scholem came to understand Kabbalah as an antagonistic mystical phenomenon that was at least antithetical to the allegedly anti-mythical Rabbinic legalism.<sup>18</sup>

It should be emphasised that these concerns with the revivals of repressed wisdom were flowering in a period when the Freudian approach had become more and more widespread. This approach included the prevailing assumption that the unconscious is a determining power in individual and social life, the need to decipher its symbolic expressions in dreams and otherwise, and the use of Greek myth in order to make sense of what Freud called complexes. The title of one of Freud's most influential books, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1930, wonderfully captures his general approach, as well as what I see as the basic situation that characterised the elite European scene. This discontent is especially true insofar as several elite Jewish figures were concerned; a reason that is obvious in the interest in and spread of melancholia, another topic addressed earlier by the founder of psychoanalysis.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, the prominent role Carl G. Jung has played in the discourse on religion since the 1930s should be mentioned. He attempted to retrieve what he considered to be the forgotten archetypes that informed not only the classical religions, but also a variety of other types of literatures, such as alchemy, not to mention Eastern esoteric literatures.<sup>20</sup> Through the Eranos conferences in Ascona, he was in contact with both Eliade and Scholem for many years. These conferences were part of a sort of religious movement that—discontented with the religious landscape of its generation—attempted to explore alternative religious avenues through using critical tools. Moreover, although it had some earlier sources, it was also in the 1930s that the esoteric movement found its most important advocate, René Guénon, an influential figure in some circles in Europe and elsewhere, who was discontented with the academic approach to religious studies due to the problems he had had getting his PhD thesis accepted by the famous scholar Sylvain Lévi.

In a way, the turn to esotericism constitutes a somewhat Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment's unbalanced worship of rationalism, which nevertheless was carried out by rational scholars who turned their gaze to literatures that had previously been misunderstood or neglected. Thus, a return to the past in order to retrieve meaningful

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**18** Jonas's view of Gnosticism, which influenced Scholem's and Isaiah Tishby's Gnostic understanding of Kabbalah, needs a separate study. See Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, 133–45.

**19** Moshe Idel, *Saturn's Jews: On the Witches' Sabbat and Sabbateanism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 91–97.

**20** See Moshe Idel, "Androgynes: Reflections on the Study of Religion," in *Labirinti della mente: Visioni del mondo. Il lascito intellettuale di Elémire Zolla nel XXI secolo*, ed. Grazia Marchianò (Torrita di Siena: Società Bibliografica Toscana, 2012): 17–48.

experiences and situations, according to the new scholarly interpretation, was a prevalent mode of approach in 1930s Europe, and more examples in this direction can be adduced in this context.

Last but certainly not least among those I consider “discontents” are Franz Kafka and his great admirer Walter Benjamin: both had a deep impact on Scholem, although Kafka, despite belonging to the group of discontents, was much more concerned with the enigmatic universe as it is seen now than with a secret layer of texts that can be only understood in principle but never wholly known in the present. Benjamin was probably also influenced by the theory of language devised by Abraham Abulafia, who will be the subject of our discussion below, by means of Scholem himself, who, when in the earliest phases of contact with Benjamin in Munich, wrote an unfinished doctoral thesis on Kabbalistic theories of language, especially that of Abulafia. Scholem did not finish this thesis because he found the topic to be very difficult and he later shifted his focus of study to *the Book Bahir*.<sup>21</sup>

I propose to study these scholarly approaches both seriously and critically, since each opened new vistas of thought while being conditioned by specific types of literatures and historical situations.<sup>22</sup> However, a precondition for the utilisation of these approaches and any others that have been formulated independently of the analysed material is a good acquaintance with all the available pertinent primary source materials, their many interpretations by other scholars, and their multiple backgrounds and contexts. These materials should be tackled with concern for all of their complexities, inconsistencies, and fluidity. Interpreters of these materials even ought to allow for the possibility of contradictions and, as much as possible, to avoid reductionist interpretations that are more likely to prove the pertinence of the interpreter’s adopted methods and overarching monochromatic schemes than to display a deeper understanding of the contents of the interpreted texts, as we will see below. An example of such reductionism is the adoption of Strauss, Eliade, Scholem, or any other modern method’s “solid grids” of interpretations without further reflection as to their strengths in terms of the problems at hand.

The concern with esotericism has been significantly enhanced in recent decades with the emergence of a new trend in research dealing with what has been labelled “Western esotericism,” a variety of literature written in more recent centuries, initiated by Antoine Faivre<sup>23</sup> and continued by Wouter J. Hanegraaff.<sup>24</sup> The various

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<sup>21</sup> See Idel, *Old Worlds*, 168–75.

<sup>22</sup> See Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 4–10.

<sup>23</sup> See especially Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and the book he co-authored with Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998). For a survey of this development and additional studies, see Alessandro Grossato, ed., *Forme e correnti dell'esoterismo occidentale* (Milan: Medusa, 2008). See also Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, Jean-Pierre Brach, and Wouter Hanegraaff, eds., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

forms of Western esotericism were influenced in different forms and in varying intensities by Jewish Kabbalah, or, more specifically, by the mediation of Christian Kabbalah, which appropriated some facets of Kabbalistic symbolism and developed in small circles in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bypassing the “rationalism” of the Enlightenment. Although this trend has been defined in various ways by Faivre and Hanegraaff, I do not accept that their descriptions, which may be appropriate for later phenomena, apply to the method of the medieval Kabbalist, especially since these scholars assume a form of incarnationism<sup>25</sup> that is, in my opinion, clearly absent in the Kabbalistic texts I analyse below.

These categories, as used by scholars in the field, represent to a greater extent the reverberations of Henry Corbin’s often ahistorical approach to mysticism that has been imposed on texts and basic mystical concepts from Islam and other religions as if they reflect some form of ontological experience.<sup>26</sup> In a way, this is a reification of concepts that Corbin skilfully and repeatedly used in his influential writings, as if these concepts represent some sort of reality in the same vein that may be found in many of the writings of Eliade and Jung. In his writing, the Sufi concept of the “world of images” (*‘ālam al-miṭāl*), which Corbin translated as *mundus imaginabilis*, turned into a form of objective ontology rather than the view of a specific Sufi school alone. Corbin’s views sometimes hinged on the scholarly reading of mysticism beyond Islam, as well as on a form of psychoanalysis.

With the penetrating scholarship on Kabbalah established by Gershom Scholem and his students, the medieval esoteric phenomena came to the attention of general scholarship on the Middle Ages and Western esotericism. Though the literature belonging to what is called Western esotericism was written much later than Abulafia’s period, belonging as it does to pre-modern times, it is conceptually much more complex and syncretistic than the texts we shall be dealing with below. The emergence of such an approach in recent scholarship constitutes, in my opinion, a move with which a scholar writing about esotericism would do well to be acquainted, even more so when some of its manifestations are reflected in the categories used by

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<sup>25</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 350, 353–54.

<sup>26</sup> Hanegraaff, 341–46. The combination of the categories of incarnation with both esotericism and the imaginal, characteristic of Corbin’s mysteryology, had a deep impact on Elliot Wolfson’s conceptualisation of Kabbalah, a fact that he sometimes indicates explicitly. See, for example, his “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body: Abraham Abulafia’s Polemic with Christianity,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, eds. David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman and Elliot R. Wolfson (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 189–226; his *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2004), xii, xviii, 28–29, 239, 391, notes 3, 5, 392; note 10, 239; and his “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence: Angelic Embodiment and the Alterity of Time in Abraham Abulafia,” *Kabbalah* 18 (2008): 144–45, notes 40, 44, 147; in note 53, he also applies Corbin’s views to Abulafia. For methodological problems related to Corbin’s rather idiosyncratic vision of religion, see Wasserstrom’s *Religion after Religion*, 172–81. See also Appendix E below.

scholars of Kabbalah in order to analyse the writings of the Kabbalist under discussion.<sup>27</sup>

By enumerating the above scholars and their approaches, my intention is to point out that there is nothing like one single general type of esotericism; this is also the case in Judaism. Modern speculations about common denominators between the various forms of esotericism are more often than not reductive generalisations.<sup>28</sup> I would say that even in more specific literatures, such as Jewish philosophy or Kabbalah, there are different and even diverging esoteric approaches. This is my working hypothesis as to the existence of various types of Jewish thought in general and of Kabbalah in particular. Although those different forms of *imaginaire* sometimes converged or intersected, they should nevertheless first be understood in themselves.<sup>29</sup> I do not intend to offer a comprehensive typology of esotericism here, but rather to address those types of secrecy that are related or antithetical to some views of secrecy found in the specific medieval texts I shall address below. By addressing this secrecy, I will be able to interrogate these texts in a new way.

One of the most seminal figures in Strauss's grand narrative was Maimonides, a pivotal thinker in the general history of Judaism, the legalistic as well as the theological. Strauss devoted much energy and many publications to Maimonides's esotericism. Maimonides was also the starting point of Strauss's articulation of his method in depicting the history of Western philosophy.<sup>30</sup> The huge impact of Strauss's approach is obvious in a long series of studies of Maimonides produced by many recent scholars,<sup>31</sup> though important forms of critiques of Strauss's approach have also been

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**27** See previous footnote.

**28** This is also the case in Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906): 441–98, which deals with organisations and secrecy, a topic that does not concern us below, interested though I nevertheless am in the necessity of distinguishing between roles played by two elites in the history of Kabbalah.

**29** See especially the theory of models as formulated in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 45–145.

**30** His most influential papers are "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952): 38–94, and "How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*," printed as a preface to Shlomo Pines's translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), 1:i, xi–lvi. See also Alfred L. Ivry, "Leo Strauss and Maimonides," in *Leo Strauss' Thought*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder: Reinner, 1991): 75–91, and Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

**31** On Maimonides's esotericism, the importance of which for Abulafia will be the starting point of many of my discussions below, there is a long series of studies written after Strauss. I quote below only the most seminal ones: Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87–123; Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide to the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159–207, reprinted in his *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1996): 205–303; Ravitzky, "Maimonides: Esotericism and Educational Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth See-

addressed.<sup>32</sup> In my opinion, Maimonides was a reformist who was discontented with the prevailing understandings of Judaism among most Rabbinic Jews. Indeed, his

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skin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 300–323; Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 49–68; Howard Kreisel, “Esotericism to Exotericism: From Maimonides to Gersonides,” in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006): 1:165–84; Kreisel, “The *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Art of Concealment” [Hebrew], in *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, eds. Uri Ehrlich, Howard Kreisel, and Daniel J. Lasker (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2008): 487–507; Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 68–111; Schwartz, “The Separate Intellects and Maimonides’s Argumentation (An Inquiry into *Guide of the Perplexed* II, 2–12),” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, eds. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshivah University Press, 2010): 59–92; Yair Lorberbaum, “‘The Men of Knowledge and the Sages Are Drawn, As It Were, toward This Purpose by the Divine Will’ (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction): On Maimonides’s Conception of Parables” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 71 (2001–2): 87–132; Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 4 (2002): 711–50; Warren Zev Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” in *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, eds. Ezra Fleisher, Gerald Blidstein, Carmi Horowitz, and Bernard Septimus (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 11–28; Harvey, “A Third Approach to Maimonides’s Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle,” *HTR* 74, no. 3 (1981): 287–301; Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 38–52, especially 39, note 94; Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 15–17; James A. Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002).

**32** The earliest and more direct critiques of Strauss’s theory from a scholar of Jewish thought are found in Julius Guttman’s posthumously printed *On the Philosophy of Religion* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1958); Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides, The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 387–402; Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” in *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1995): 49–103; Eliezer Schweid, “Religion and Philosophy: The Scholarly-Theological Debate between Julius Guttman and Leo Strauss,” in *Maimonidean Studies* 1 (1990): 163–95; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2006), 59–80; Warren Zev Harvey, “Les Noeuds du *Guide des Égarés*: Une critique de la lecture politique de Leo Strauss,” in *Lumières médiévales*, ed. Géraldine Roux (Paris: Van Dieren, 2009): 163–76; Harvey, “How Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the 20th Century” [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 387–96; Menachem Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 33–44; Joseph A. Buijs, “The Philosophical Character of Maimonides’s *Guide*—A Critique of Strauss’ Interpretation,” *Judaism* 27 (1978): 448–57; and Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 149, 163. See also, more recently, Micah Goodman, *The Secrets of The Guide to the Perplexed* [Hebrew] (Or Yehudah: Devir, 2010). Mitigating as those scholars’ critiques of Strauss position are for his famous thesis, Maimonides’s esotericism is, however, not denied but qualified in a variety of ways. However, in other cases, like the studies of David Hartman and Isadore Twersky, Maimonides’s thought was conceived in a more harmonious manner, emphasising the importance of the Great Eagle’s Halakhic creativity and commitment for also understanding his philosophy. To



most important book for the history of Jewish thought was emblematically entitled *The Guide of the Perplexed*, which refers to members of the Jewish faith whom he imagined were perplexed; the intention, then, was to guide these individuals through their alleged perplexities. His “guidance” in this book differs from the more traditional attitudes in his Halakhic works, especially insofar as the question of universalism is concerned, given that it mainly emerges from Neo-Aristotelianism.<sup>33</sup>

I will discuss the affinities between Maimonides’s thought and that of Abulafia who preoccupies me throughout this book, a medieval figure who was deeply influenced by Maimonides’s thought (including his esotericism, which scholars call “rationalism” in too general a manner).<sup>34</sup> This figure, already also the subject of several studies by Gershom Scholem, is the Kabbalist Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240–c. 1291),<sup>35</sup> and I will survey the evolution of his thought below. However, I am essentially concerned here with Abulafia’s understanding of Maimonides, not with the latter’s view per se. Unlike the Great Eagle, Abulafia was not a Halakhic figure, a decisive factor in his worldview that helps in understanding his extreme interpretations of Maimonides’s philosophical thought and of Rabbinic Judaism.

Abulafia’s thought never remained part of one specific conceptual genre; rather, it brings together some trends that were already to be found in the Jewish thought of both his own generation and that which preceded him. Too mystical for Strauss’s cerebral approach, too philosophical and non-symbolic for Scholem’s tendency to see Kabbalah as a pre-eminently symbolic, theosophical, and Gnostic-like lore, and practically unknown by Eliade, Abulafia’s special approach should nevertheless be ana-

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a certain extent, this is, in principle, also the approach of Aviezer Ravitzky. See note 70 below. Shlomo Pines, whose approach to Strauss’s emphasis on esotericism was quite positive, moved in his later studies towards a position that differs from Strauss; he conceives the Great Eagle’s thought as more sceptical, and this is also the case especially in Joseph Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’s Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For a recent survey of scholarship on Maimonides and esotericism, see Omer Michaelis, “‘It is Time to Act for the Lord: [They] Violate[d] Your Torah’: Crisis Discourse and the Dynamics of Tradition in Medieval Judaism” (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2018), especially 286, notes 806, 807.

**33** For the intention of the guidance in the *Guide*, see Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’s Guide*, 7.

**34** In the following discussions, I try to avoid this term, since even in scholarship, it is used with an implicitly judgmental attitude. My approach assumes the existence of different forms of *imaginaires* that should not be judged by a critical scholar concerned with understanding the past.

**35** On this Kabbalist, whose views will be the focus of our discussions here, see the more general, though influential, expositions of Gershom Scholem, especially in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1960), 119–55, and his last series of lectures at the Hebrew University printed as *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew], ed. Y. ben Schlomo (Jerusalem: Academon, 1969).

lysed by taking into consideration aspects of these diverging approaches to mystical thought, also including that of Carl Jung, for example.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, the writings of this Kabbalist have received special attention in scholarly studies; many of them have been printed for the first time, mainly by Amnon Gross, and several have been translated into English and some into French. However, very few pages of his voluminous output have been critically edited, and none of his books, with the recent exception of *Sefer ha-Ot*,<sup>37</sup> has been subjected to a separate and detailed analysis in print. Most of the scholarship is grounded in a reading of only part of his identifiable writings, and even then the analyses were based on quotations taken from different books, sometimes outside of their immediate contexts, without exhausting the corpus of those writings. This situation has provoked significant misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Abulafia's thought, as we shall see below, especially in chapters 9 and 21. Moreover, the general intellectual context of his thought has only been partially addressed in scholarship; this context will be one of the main subjects of many of our discussions below, especially in part II of this study.

In the present study, I am particularly concerned with Abulafia's views on esotericism.<sup>38</sup> A complex figure, Abulafia was also a devoted student of the Great Eagle's book at the same time as being a Kabbalist, and a self-proclaimed prophet and Messiah. These two last self-perceptions, which he expressed in both written and, we may assume, oral forms, were of course likely to elicit persecutions from various forms of the Jewish establishment, as indeed occurred. In this study, my claim will be that a seminal dimension of Abulafia's writings consists in the hiding of what he thought "true" religion is or ought to be, a view he adopted—or, perhaps, adapted—from Maimonides and several Muslim philosophical sources. This esoteric propensity was *en*

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**36** See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. J. Chipman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 109–11. See, in more general terms, Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 35, and Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 5, 9–10.

**37** Abraham Abulafia, *Księga Znaku: Rabbi Abraham Abulafia*, ספר האות, רבי אברהם אבולעפיה, ed. Arje Krawczyk (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2018).

**38** See my monographs *The Mystical Experience; Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. M. Kallus (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); see also Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia (Sha'arei Tzedeq)*, trans. Maurizio Mottolose, ed. Moshe Idel (Milan: Adelphi, 2001); Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*; Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007); Robert J. Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life: The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Response to Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and Shimeon Levy, "Sefer Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh" (MA thesis, Hebrew University, 1955). Sustained discussions on some topics in Abulafia's Kabbalah are also available in chapters of many of my other books, in particular *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 58–100, 295–302; *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 30–88, 297–98; *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2007), 276–376; *Middot: Divine Attributes from Late Antiquity to Early Kabbalah*, chapter 9 (in preparation); as well as in many studies by me and others to be referenced in chapter 1 footnotes 40 and 41.



vogue among some of Maimonides's followers who were contemporaries of Abulafia. Nevertheless, Abulafia is the representative of this approach and one of the most radical of Maimonides's followers. More than any of the Maimonideans, he speaks about secrets, secrets of the Torah and secrets of existence, and this stark emphasis on secrecy should be taken into serious consideration when assessing his thought. I doubt whether a significant understanding of Abulafia's thought can ignore this dimension of his writings.

In these writings, political esotericism is coupled with an entirely different type of esotericism: eschatological esotericism, which is negligible in the writings of the Great Eagle. This type of esotericism refers to secrets dealing with a special understanding of the nature of redemption, the time of redemption, and the identity of the redeemer. Abulafia interpreted these traditional issues as also referring to personal and intellectual events, an approach that was prone to disrupt the prevailing approaches to these issues in traditional Judaism, which was more concerned with topics such as the signs and time of the Messiah or with the restoration of the ancient political and religious order for the sake of the entire nation. It seems that this messianic pretension was one of the main reasons for Abulafia's persecutions, along with the ban issued against him by the most prominent legalistic figure of that generation in Catalonia, the Kabbalist Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret. Less prominent in Abulafia's writings is the third type of esotericism: the essential one, which is conditioned by the relatively ineffable nature of the object of discussion or experience. In Abulafia's case, what he considers to be the true divine name is, although hidden in a variety of other names, not ineffable.<sup>39</sup>

Different as the two first types of esotericism are both conceptually and from the point of view of the sources that nourish them, political and eschatological esotericism are deeply related to each other in Abulafia's writings. For Abulafia, individual redemption constitutes the peak of natural religion, whose tenets are hidden as part of political esotericism, while the messianic redemption is part of eschatological—and more popular—esotericism. Nevertheless, it is also possible to include personal redemption as part of eschatological esotericism. The contents of eschatological esotericism and its special methods of expression are related to gematria and combinations of letters also used for referring to secrets belonging to Abulafia's political esotericism. However, the uncommon manner of its expressions in the philosophical camp has deterred scholars of Maimonidean thought from dealing seriously with Abulafia's thought and has also prevented them from seeing him as an original part of the Maimonidean camp.

An effort to read some of Abulafia's discussions in the manner that Strauss recommended can contribute to a better understanding of the esoteric facet of this Kab-

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<sup>39</sup> See *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2000), 3:9, 354–55. See also the very important discussion in his early *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 69–70, where it is obvious that theological issues can be understood, but that they should nevertheless be hidden.

balist's writings, as well as that of his oeuvre in general. These forms of esotericism differ dramatically from the kind of esotericism found in the vast majority of the writings belonging to the nascent Kabbalah in the twelfth century, a fact that distinguishes both the content and the rhetoric of Abulafia's secrets quite neatly from those of the early Kabbalists.<sup>40</sup> The latter dealt with either the secrets of the divine realm and the relation of the commandments to the supernal powers or the source of the soul within the divine world and its vicissitudes in this and the other world; both of these nomian approaches were made in connection to the commandments.<sup>41</sup>

Needless to say, in my opinion, neither these secrets nor those of Abulafia constitute the surfacing of the contents of the ancient Jewish secrets mentioned in Rabbinic sources or their faithful continuation with a few changes. Nevertheless, I would

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40 Closer to Abulafia in the modes of expression and numerical methods, but not in their philosophical content, are some of the writings of the Castilian ha-Kohen brothers, one of whom also influenced Abulafia. See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries in the Writings of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia," *Tarbiz* 79 (2011): 519–27. On this circle of Kabbalists, see Daniel Abrams, "'The Book of Illumination' of Rabbi Jacob ben Jacob HaKohen: A Synoptic Edition from Various Manuscripts" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., New York University, 1993).

41 See my studies of early forms of Kabbalistic esotericism from the point of view of both rhetoric and content: "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 12 (2004): 89–199; "Sitre 'Arayot in Maimonides' Thought," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 84–86; "Commentaries on the Secret of 'Ibbur in 13th-Century Kabbalah and Their Significance for the Understanding of the Kabbalah at Its Inception and Its Development" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 72 (2012): 5–49; 73 (2012): 5–44; "The Secret of Impregnation as Metempsychosis in Kabbalah," in *Verwandlungen: Archaeologie der literarischen Kommunikation* 9, eds. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (Munich: Fink, 2006): 349–68; and "The Jubilee in Jewish Mysticism," in *Millenarismi nella cultura contemporanea*, ed. Enrico I. Rambaldi (Milan: F. Angeli, 2000): 209–32. For the original Hebrew texts, some still in manuscript, which were translated and analysed in the last study, see the Hebrew version of this article printed in Joseph Kaplan, ed., *Šilhei Me'ot—Qišam šel 'Idanim* (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2005): 67–98, and "Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia." My claim in some of these studies is that there is quite a neat difference between the esotericism of the Nahmanidean Kabbalistic school on the one hand and what can be found among the followers of Rabbi Isaac the Blind on this topic on the other. To this effect, see my "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): 51–73. On esotericism and exotericism in Kabbalah in more general terms, see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 253–56. For other studies of Jewish esotericism in the thirteenth century, see Harvey J. Hames, "Exotericism and Esotericism in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah," *Esoterica* 6 (2004): 102–12; Daniel Abrams, "The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism," *Shofar* 12, no. 2 (1994): 67–85, and its Hebrew version, "Esoteric Writing in Ashkenaz and Its Transition to Spain" [Hebrew], *Maḥanayyim: A Quarterly for Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture* 6 (1993): 94–103, along with the next footnote. For secrecy in Abulafia's lifetime, see Hartley Lachter, "The Politics of Secrets: Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah in Context," *JQR* 101 (2011): 502–10; Lachter, "Jews as Masters of Secrets in Late Thirteenth-Century Castile," in *The Jew in Medieval Iberia: 1100–1500*, ed. Jonathan Ray (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012): 286–308, as well as Lachter, *Kabbalistic Revolution: Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), especially 8–26, 28–35, 37–43.

say that such a continuation is found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the theory of the identification of the Torah and divinity as anthropomorphic structures conceived as a secret (*raz*) in the *Hekhalot* literature;<sup>42</sup> this continuation may also be found in the assumption that the divine names are part of an esoteric tradition.<sup>43</sup> If there are additional ancient esoteric themes in the Jewish Middle Ages, they are probably the vestiges of Pythagorean theories, mediated mainly by the writings of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, as we shall see in chapter 7 below. In any case, I do not intend to summarise the findings in those topics, but will deal with quite different kinds of secrets, more in vein with those of Strauss.

First, I will survey what seem to me to be the essential points of Maimonides's special contribution, especially in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, to the new trend in medieval Jewish thought that he established. I will then turn to the movement that can be designated as Maimonideanism, within whose framework Abulafia's esotericism should be understood incomparably more than any other type of esotericism. As in the case of the Great Eagle's hidden positions in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, analyses of the esoteric topics in Abulafia's writings are often haphazard, and their results debatable. However, these two authors' explicit and numerous references to the existence of important secrets necessitate such an arduous and sometimes perilous exercise. Ignoring the claims of the existence of these secrets will certainly not advance our understanding of their thought.

In addition to being an ardent student of the text of the *Guide*, Abulafia claims to have received secrets as to Maimonides's intentions both orally<sup>44</sup> and, in many other cases, as revelations from above. From this point of view, Abulafia's literary corpus represents an interesting case study of the impact of philosophical (and essentially political) esotericism flowering beyond the more limited range of the Maimonidean

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, my "The Concept of the Torah in Hekhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah" [Hebrew], *JSJT* 1 (1981): 23–84. See also my "'In a Whisper': On Transmission of *Shi'ur Qomah* and Kabbalistic Secrets in Jewish Mysticism," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 47, no. 3 (2011): 477–85, and "The Image of Man above the *Sefirot*: R. David ben Yehuda he-Hasid's Theosophy of Ten Supernal *Sahsahot* and its Reverberations," *Kabbalah* 20 (2009): 181–212.

<sup>43</sup> On ancient Jewish esotericism related to divine names, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Tradition and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 109–31. See also Halberthal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 13–33; Yehuda Liebes, *God's Story: Collected Essays on the Jewish Myth* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2008), 163–76; Liebes, "The Work of the Chariot and the Work of Creation as Mystical Teachings in Philo of Alexandria," trans. James Jacobson-Maisels, in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination. Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, eds. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 105–20; Vita D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003). See also the important study by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moessi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) for early medieval Islamic sources.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, *Maftēah ha-Šemot*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 156: *כבר קבלנו על פה מהות הכוונה*. See also *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, 5, as well as some discussions on the secrets of the *Guide*, in chapter 4 note 76.

authors as envisioned in modern scholarship, to say nothing of Maimonides himself. Though a Kabbalist, Abulafia's opus nevertheless requires an analysis that utilises Leo Strauss's thesis about persecution and the art of writing, even when a complex and quite diversified corpus of writings is involved. After all, Abulafia too was persecuted for his ideas for many years—and later even banned—and he too attempted to spread the contents of Maimonides's *Guide*, as we shall see in part III below. To be sure, political esotericism is not the only type of esotericism to be found in his writings; for example, he also adopted the Pythagorean secret of the Tetraktys, the doctrine of the centrality of the number four, as we shall see in chapter 7 below. However, in my opinion, political esotericism is the most important kind found in Abulafia's work, and its existence and ramifications will be the centre of many of our discussions below. This kind of esotericism has to do with the secrets regarding the transcendental and intellectual nature of God, kept from the greatest part of the society or community immersed in the traditional visions of God as anthropomorphic and anthropopathic.

## 2 Maimonides and Jewish Mysticism

In the twelfth century, the province of Al-Andalus hosted a Neo-Aristotelian renaissance among some Muslim thinkers; this renaissance occurred among some Jewish thinkers in the same area somewhat later.<sup>45</sup> The most important of the Jewish thinkers born in Al-Andalus by far was Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides. In Egypt, where he went in order to escape the Almohadi persecutions in his native Al-Andalus, Maimonides followed some developments in earlier Muslim *falsafah*, represented mainly by Al-Fārābī and Avicenna in Asia, who were active much earlier, and by the Andalusian Muslim thinkers, who elaborated in various ways on the avenues opened by the Arabic translations of (mainly) Aristotelian texts. This is a clear example of the decisive influence of the speculative dimensions of Greek culture on some elites in Islamic thought and then, by the mediation of the latter, on some Jewish thinkers. This influence is constituted by the massive translations of several corpora of speculative writings stemming from a millennium or more beforehand that flourished in new geographical areas and in new intellectual and political circumstances.

Unlike the much more Neo-Platonic background of Muslim and Jewish thought in Al-Andalus in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the turn to Neo-Aristotelianism towards the second part of the twelfth century is quite conspicuous. Indeed, follow-

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<sup>45</sup> See Sarah Stroumsa, "Thinkers of 'This Peninsula': Towards an Integrative Approach to the Study of Philosophy in al-Andalus," in *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, eds. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 44–53; Stroumsa, "The Muslim Context in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Steven Nadler and Tamar Rudavsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 39–59.

ing this renaissance, a new era in the religious history of Jewish philosophy and mysticism began. This new era was ushered in by the composition of Maimonides's theological *chef d'oeuvre*, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, in 1191 and its translations from Arabic into Hebrew shortly afterwards.

Only rarely in the history of Judaism has the appearance of one book generated such a dramatic religious turn in such a brief period while simultaneously triggering sharp and prolonged debates that reverberate among Jewish thinkers even today. Maimonides's grand-scale adoption of a combination of Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics, physics, logic, and psychology and Platonic negative theology and esotericism informs much of the discussions in his book, which he presents as an interpretation of allegedly lost Rabbinic secrets (a claim that was somewhat less evident in his earlier writings); this assumption became widespread and in many cases dramatically changed the conceptual landscape of some elite forms of Judaism from the early thirteenth century.

One of the most puzzling questions related to the impact of this treatise is that although it claims to be a guide, it is more of a puzzle, as Warren Zev Harvey insightfully elaborated following Maimonides's own remark in his introduction to the *Guide*.<sup>46</sup> This is the reason why the presentation of his views below is to a certain extent a tentative attempt to put together hints that were never systematically treated either by Maimonides himself or even by his many followers. This lack of systematisation has much to do with esotericism and the need to hide some views that could have been considered to be heterodox, as they differ from traditional forms of Judaism or the Jewish collective memory; some of his views had been sharply criticised, just as Neo-Aristotelianism elicited persecutions from Muslim and Christian scholars in the very same period.

A major shift in the understanding of many elements found in a variety of Rabbinic traditions that Maimonides introduced to Judaism is a much more naturalistic understanding of it; that is, the acceptance of an organised universe with constant laws, sometimes described as nature (the Hebrew medieval neologism *teva'*, which stems from the Arabic *ṭabī'ah*), which can be observed and understood as reflecting divine wisdom. Maimonides brings to Judaism the form of a stable *cosmos* as understood in some forms of Greek philosophy.<sup>47</sup> Earlier forms of Judaism were concerned with the role played by the divine will, which freely intervenes in creation and history; after Maimonides, divine wisdom became the primary concern among his main followers.

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<sup>46</sup> See Warren Zev Harvey, "The Return to Maimonideanism," *JJS* 42 (1980): 263, note 1.

<sup>47</sup> The role played by the new understanding of reality in medieval Judaism because of the new philosophical vision of an ordered cosmos deserves a separate inquiry. Below, we shall address one such case of adopting the philosophical approach towards an ordered universe. On nature as differing from choice and accidents in the Aristotelian tradition, see the footnotes by Simon van den Bergh, the translator of *Averroes' Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (The Incoherence of Incoherence)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 1:272; 2:95, note to 145.4; 148, note to 266.1; 149, notes to 271.2 and 272.2.

In the realm of anthropology, this view translates to elevating intellectual activity to a sublime role that it had not played earlier, thus giving the philosopher the function of an educator of the masses, at least in principle. In many cases, this role has been identified with that of the prophet. In the case of Maimonides's own oeuvre, his thirteen principles of faith represent one such educational effort.

The intellectual dimension of reality, a new common denominator that is understood to be found in God, nature, and man, allowed for a new dynamic between these three factors. In order to generate such a picture, philosophers in the three religions had to de-anthropomorphise God and angels, disenchant nature, and reduce the ideal human activity solely to acts of pure intellection. One of the main concepts in Judaism adopted from Muslim and ultimately from Hellenistic philosophers is the cosmic Agent Intellect, understood in most of these traditions as the lowest of the ten separate intellects, which is sometimes envisioned in a hypostatic manner.<sup>48</sup>

Although this concept influenced many of the Maimonidean thinkers as well as the Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, it played quite a marginal role in the main theosophical-theurgical schools of Kabbalah; even then, it was used in a different way conceptually. The Agent Intellect's constant intellectual activity reflects the intellectual activity of God on the one hand and serves as a form of ideal intellectual activity to be imitated by man on the other. Thus, what Aron Gurevitsch calls a "Gestalt-contexture"<sup>49</sup> has been generated. This Gestalt-contexture unifies the mentalistic understanding of God, that of his main intermediaries (the system of separate intellects, especially the last one, the Agent Intellect), the presence of the divine in nature, and the highest human activity, intellectual activity, into one broad continuum constituted by the intellectual element that permeates all levels of existence. I consider the consonance between the various significant aspects of reality and the resulting possibility for active human life to constitute a profound noetic structure that characterises both Maimonides's and Abulafia's thought.

This unifying concept was understood by Alexander of Aphrodisias, one of the major sources for medieval Neo-Aristotelianism and one of the main ancient commentators on Aristotle, to be a power that binds together the entire universe, which is understood as an organism whose different parts are permeated by a spiritual dimension. This view is found in a series of texts that are sometimes attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias himself and sometimes to an ancient anonymous sage. It

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<sup>48</sup> See the important monograph by Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> See Aron Gurwitsch, "Phenomenology of Perception: Perceptual Implications," in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, ed. James M. Edie (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965): 21; Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 49, 111, 203, 272, note 15; Moshe Idel, "'Adonay Sefatay Tiftah': Models of Understanding Prayer in Early Hasidism," *Kabbalah* 18 (2008): 106–7, note 265.



cannot be found in the extant Greek sources, but it is found in Averroes, who puts forth the theory that there is an intellectual power that binds the entirety of reality.<sup>50</sup>

With such a view of the cosmos, the possibility of a union between the human intellect and the supernal intellectual powers, the Agent Intellect or God, is easier to understand. Needless to say, this emphatic approach to the centrality of mental operations as *imitatio dei* and the main religious ideal is alien to the Rabbinic emphasis on the performative aspects of religion.

Depending on the angle from which this concept is seen and the emphasis placed on one or more of the elements of this continuum, the connection between the three entities can imply a monotheistic, pantheistic, naturalistic, or anthropocentric religion. Moreover, these three processes also involve a much less voluntarist theology, which is an approach to nature where miracles become a quandary; that is, an approach that sees a human being as a composite that should suppress many aspects of his complex personality in order to allow the “best” form of human activity, intellection, to take place undisturbed.

Jewish philosophers or religious thinkers look for God not only in their religious life or in events in history, but also, and perhaps prominently, in the contemplation of nature, or, more precisely, in the contemplation of the constant mechanisms that operate in nature, the natural laws. The divinity is now conceived as being intimately related to both the permanent laws and the domain of the spiritual; the two realms are intertwined, although not as regards the voluntary acts of creation or the election of the people of Israel.

In more than one sense, the concept of God was naturalised and thus universalised. Either as a separate intellect, as the unmoved mover of the highest cosmic sphere, or as the First Cause, new concerns originally found in Greco-Hellenistic mental universes were adopted and disseminated in Jewish texts via the mediation

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**50** See the three commentaries on *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, *Moreh ha-Moreh*, ed. Yair Shiffman (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001), 186. Also, under his influence, Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Maškiyyot ha-Kesef*, ed. S. Werbluner (Frankfurt am Main, 1848), reprinted in *Šlošah Qadmonei Mefaršei ha-Moreh* (Jerusalem: 1961), 74–75, and Rabbi Moses Narboni’s *Commentary on the Guide*, in *Der Commentar des Rabbi Moses Narbonensis, Philosophen aus dem XIV. Jahrhundert, zu dem Werke More Nebuchim des Maimonides*, ed. Jakob Goldenthal (Vienna: K.K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1852), fol. 16b, all reflecting a view already adduced in Averroes; cf. Van den Bergh, *Incoherence of Incoherence*, 1:253–54; 2:143, note 254.2, which is a discussion that served as a major and perhaps the only conduit from the Greek sources of Jewish thought. In one of the discussions found in ibn Falaquera, this power is called “pre-eternal,” *qadmon*, just as in Averroes’ text. Whether or not this specific concept had already informed Maimonides’s important discussion in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:72, Pines, 187–89, where the entire world is seen as one organism, is a matter that deserves further investigation. For other influences of Alexander of Aphrodisias on Maimonides, see Pines’s introduction to the *Guide*, 1:lxiv–lxxv. It is possible that this theory has something to do with the Stoic theme of the cosmos consisting in a universal sympathy. For a similar view in Abulafia’s concept of natural powers as binding, see chapter 16, note 120 below. See also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 79–80, 87, and the version of this view found in the *Theology of Aristotle*, chapter 8.

of Muslim philosophers and greatly impacted the theology of Jewish thinkers. This noetic core of philosophical religions does not include, however, a precise path to attaining the final noetic goal, but rather includes recommendations as to which philosophical books to study and encouragement to contemplate nature as a means of reaching the reflection of the divine. This lack of a definitive guideline for attaining union with the divine is the reason I conceive Maimonides's goal to be to provide a profound structure rather than a model that combines the ideal with a specific and elaborated path that leads towards the attainment of the divine.

In fact, Maimonides's *Guide* is not so much a systematic theology or treatise presenting a coherent philosophy as much as it is a mentalistic approach to religion that he imposes on a variety of earlier Jewish sources, especially biblical, by means of new and radical exegetical strategies unknown in the earlier classical versions of Judaism. The most important of Maimonides's approaches was the method of homonyms; namely, the claim that a word that does not fit the structure of the new religious worldview can be attributed a meaning that will resolve the quandary of a philosophically inclined exegete.

One of the main claims of this new sort of interpretation is that the scriptures have hidden aspects in the form of intellectual dimensions, a much broader strategy that I have called arcanisation.<sup>51</sup> In this manner, religious texts have been imagined to contain secret layers related to the structure of nature and especially to the inner processes of man. Thus, the book of nature and the book of law are unified by the same assumption as to the existence of a shared hidden intellectual dimension, the intellectual or mental one, and the pursuit of the new type of religious man has been bifurcated into the categories of "scientific" and "exegetical." Moreover, these two paths should be followed at the same time.

This dramatic change generated by the emergence of the new philosophical religion is reflected in a poem written by a certain Abraham, who in my opinion may be identified with Abraham Abulafia. The poet writes: "Read the religion of the son of Amram,<sup>52</sup> together with the religion of Moses the son of Maimon!"<sup>53</sup> Though these two religions (in both cases, the Hebrew term *dat* is used) are mentioned as if they are independent, both times, a Moses is mentioned either implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, the poet recommends that they should be studied together.<sup>54</sup>

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51 See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2002).

52 Namely, the biblical Moses.

53 Printed by Moritz Steinschneider in "Moreh Meqom ha-Moreh," *Qoveṣ 'al Yad* 1 (1885): 4: קרא דת בן עמרם עם דת משה בן מימון.

The Hebrew term translated as "religion" is *dat*. On this poem being Abulafia's work, see Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1976), 34.

54 For the philosophical religion according to Maimonides and Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon, see James T. Robinson, "Maimonides, Samuel ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 291–306; Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Sa-*



In a way, this is another, perhaps even sharper formulation of the much more widespread dictum regarding Maimonides: “From Moses to Moses there was no one like Moses.” This dictum emerged in the same period; namely, the second part of the thirteenth century. The poem’s author puts the Mosaic religion alongside its medieval philosophical reform. Abulafia himself not only strove to synthesise the two forms (the Mosaic traditional form of Judaism and the Maimonidean mentalistic reform); he was also concerned with what I would call a linguistic reform of this synthesis.

Because of the influence of Muslim forms of Neo-Aristotelian philosophy,<sup>55</sup> which were relatively new in Judaism and completely unknown to the Jews of some geographical areas such as Northern and Central Europe, Maimonides’s *Guide* not only tremendously enriched Judaism, but it also disseminated some perplexity among his Rabbinic and more mythically oriented readers, both in his lifetime and afterwards. More than his earlier writings, where many of the new elements had already been introduced in order to reinterpret the classical forms of Judaism, *The Guide of the Perplexed* operated with a complex esoteric style in a rather weighty manner, which is the reason why the views that he wanted to keep under a veil of secrecy are now hardly understood much better than they were in his lifetime or in the Middle Ages, despite an entire century of vast, meticulous, and often fine scholarship in the field.

Following Shlomo Pines, we may describe Maimonides as someone who shifted from a somewhat more mystically oriented approach in his youth to a more sceptical

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*muel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Hā’irīn into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 1–17, 40–53, and in English, his “From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: Interpreting Judaism as a Philosophical Religion,” in *Traditions of Maimonideanism*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 177–211; Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*; James T. Robinson, “We Drink Only from the Master’s Water: Maimonides and Maimonideanism in Southern France, 1200–1306,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 40 (2007–8): 27–60; and Zvi Diesendruck, “Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides’s Theory of Providence,” *HUCA* 11 (1938): 341–66, and some of the studies to be referenced in the following notes. See also Lenn E. Goodman, “Maimonidean Naturalism,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992): 157–94 and Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); see also Howard Kreisel, “Maimonides on Divine Religion,” in *Maimonides after 800 Years*, 151–66.

<sup>55</sup> For other significant types of influences on Maimonides, especially the Neo-Platonic or Ismā’īliyyah, see Shlomo Pines, “Shi’ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 240–43, reprinted in his *Collected Writings*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997): 245–47. See also Alfred L. Ivry’s studies, especially his “Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides’ Thought,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel L. Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 115–40; “Maimonides and Neoplatonism: Challenge and Response,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 137–55; “Islamic and Greek Influence on Maimonides’s Philosophy,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 139–56; and “Isma’ili Theology and Maimonides’s Philosophy,” in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity*, ed. Daniel H. Frank (Leiden: Brill, 1995): 271–300.

one in his later years.<sup>56</sup> Given my approach to the understanding of Maimonides's thought as dynamic, as explicated in two of my studies mentioned in the last footnote, it is inaccurate to speak about the Great Eagle's view as static or of him as having one single opinion, and even the inconsistency and contradictions he refers to in his expositions in *The Guide of the Perplexed* contribute to a more cautious approach to articulating his views.

It is possible to find a discussion in the *Guide* that became very important for Abulafia's anchoring of his linguistic exegetical technique in Maimonides himself, which has not yet attracted its due attention from scholars of the Great Eagle.<sup>57</sup> I follow Pines's later view, which characterises Maimonides's later approach as rather sceptical towards the possibility of knowing the separate intellects and sees him as a thinker who was significantly influenced by the later phase of Al-Fārābī's thought as to the limitations of human knowledge of the metaphysical realm.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, I would say that it would be too simplistic to adopt a homogenous description of Maimonides's thought as a whole, as, for example, his being purely a rationalist sceptic thinker or a philosophical mystic. I would assume that in his case, like in many others, we would do better to speak about what I call "conceptual fluidity"<sup>59</sup>—that is, a synchronic adoption of different views—or of diachronic changes of

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**56** See Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to al-Fārābī, ibn Bajja and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979): 89–109, reprinted in *Studies in the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. Warren Zev Harvey, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996): 404–31; Idel, "Sitre 'Aryot," 84–86; and Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School and Some Reflections," in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, eds. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2010): 131–64. See also Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 191–92.

**57** See Maimonides's pun on names related to the letters of the roots *HBL/BHL* in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:43, Pines, 2:392–93, described as a way to understand the secrets of the Torah, as discussed in Moshe Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*: A Linguistic Turn," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998): 300–304. To Abulafia's sources discussed in this study as to Maimonides's combination of those letters, we should also add the discussions in Abulafia's *Sefer Ge'ulah*, ed. Raphael Cohen (Jerusalem: 2001), 38, and in *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 54. Both Maimonides's and Abulafia's discussions on these permutations require a more detailed analysis that cannot be achieved within this framework. See Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann, "On Some Passages Attributed to Maimonides" [Hebrew], in *Me'ah She'arim*, 225–27, and the view of Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi in *Maṣkiyyot ha-Kesef*, 109–10.

**58** See, for example, his most elaborated expressions of this approach in his "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to al-Fārābī, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," and "Les limites de la métaphysique selon al-Fārābī, ibn Bājja, et Maïmonide: sources et antithèses de ces doctrines chez Alexandre d'Aphrodise et chez Themistius," *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 13 (1981): 211–25, reprinted in *Studies in the History of Jewish Thought*, 432–46.

**59** For my application of this approach in some studies, see *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 50–51; *Ben*, 337; "On the Identity of the Authors of Two Ashkenazi Commentaries to the Poem *ha-*

opinion concerning the same topic in a person's career which generated the various evaluations.<sup>60</sup>

I do not mean to say that there is no profound structure that unifies the various stages of Maimonides's thought or distinguishes them from those of other thinkers; rather, in his specific case, those changes took place without any major transformation of the nature of Maimonides's entire conceptual structure, which is mainly based on Neo-Aristotelian noetics. No less important than general labels such as rationalist, sceptic, or mystic,<sup>61</sup> highlighting the nature and directions of changes in his

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*Aderet we-ha-Emunah* and the Concepts of Theurgy and Glory in Rabbi Eleazar of Worms" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 29 (2013): 67–208; "Adonay Sefatay Tiftah"; "Prayer, Ecstasy, and Alien Thoughts in the Besht's Religious Worldview" [Hebrew], in *Let the Old Make Way for the New: Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Eastern European Jewry Presented to Immanuel Etkes, Volume I: Hasidism and the Musar Movement*, eds. David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2009): 57–120; "Mystical Redemption and Messianism in R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov's Teachings," *Kabbalah* 24 (2011): 7–121; "The Kabbalah's 'Window of Opportunities,' 1270–1290," in *Me'ah She'arim*, 185–91; "The Land of Divine Vitality: Eretz Israel in Hasidic Thought" [Hebrew], in *The Land of Israel in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Tzvi, 1998): 256–75; *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth*, 4, 19–21; *Primeval Evil: Totality, Perfection, and Perfectability in Kabbalah*, especially in my concluding remarks (in preparation); and "*Male and Female*": *Equality, Female's Theurgy, and Eros—Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's Dual Ontology* (forthcoming). Also relevant are the studies of other scholars: Uriel Barak, "The Formative Influence of the Description of the First Degree of Prophecy in the *Guide*, on the Perception of 'the Beginning of the Redemption' by Rabbi A. I. Kook's Circle" [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism: Presented to Moshe Hallamish on the Occasion of His Retirement*, eds. Avraham Elqayam and Dov Schwartz, *Da'at* 64–66 (2009): 403–4, note 125. See also Uri Safrai, "The Daily Prayer Intention (*Kavvanot*) according to Rabbi Isaac Luria" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 77 (2014): 145 and note 6. My resort to "conceptual fluidity" differs from the recurrent resort to *concordia oppositorum* and paradoxical statements that have permeated scholarship on Kabbalah and Hasidism since Scholem, which generates a paradoxical type of scholarship.

**60** See Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann's important discussion in "Maimonides and Miracles: the Growth of a (Dis)belief," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 147–72. Langermann maps another instance of development in Maimonides's thought, one shifting from a sceptical attitude towards miracles towards a more open-minded attitude to their possibility. See also Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *alias Ma'aseh Merkavah*: The Evolution of His Views," in *Maimónides y su época*, eds. Carlos del Valle Rodríguez, Santiago García-Jalón de le Lama, and Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2007): 221–30.

**61** For scholarly views of Maimonides as a mystic, see David R. Blumenthal, "Maimonides's Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Prophecy of Moses," *Studies in Medieval Culture* 10 (1981): 51–77; Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006); Hannah Kasher, "Mysticism within the Confines of Reason Alone" [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 37–43; Shaul Regev, "Prophecy in Maimonides's Philosophy—Between Rationalism and Mysticism" [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 45–55; Gideon Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism in Maimonides" [Hebrew] in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 77–97; Menachem Lorberbaum, "Mystique mythique et mystique rationelle," *Critique* 728–729 (2008): 109–17, Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School." For views of other Maimonideans as mystics, see Joseph B. Sernoneta, "Rabbi Judah and Immanuel of Rome: Rationalism Whose End Is Mystical Belief" [Hebrew], in *Revelation, Faith, Reason*, eds. Moshe Halamish and Moshe Schwartz (Bar-Ilan Uni-

thought can illuminate our understanding of the significance of his discussions. Such an approach differs significantly from the main type of presentation of authors belonging to Jewish thought, philosophy, and Kabbalah as reflecting ways of thought that are imagined as being, conceptually speaking, more homogenous.<sup>62</sup> To offer an example of my more complex reading: the very title of the *Guide* deals, in my opinion, with two different topics: the guidance is mainly Neo-Aristotelian, dealing as it does with the more general philosophical worldview, while the alleged perplexity, which is merely one that Maimonides creates, is of a Platonic nature, as Strauss claimed, as it opens new questions in Judaism in ways reminiscent of the allegorical interpretations of ancient myths that disestablished the status of traditional religious truths. Those discrepancies and complexities are not just a matter of divergences between legalistic versus philosophical sorts of writings, but can be discerned even in the same treatise.

By opening a new line in Jewish thought that was embraced by many Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages, and even much later in Jewish theology in general, Maimonides's specific form of understanding earlier Jewish esotericism—known by the term *Sitrei Torah*,<sup>63</sup> “the secrets of the Torah”—either in its Rabbinic forms or that found in the Hekhalot literature,<sup>64</sup> prompted a reaction among early Kabbalists who conceived his philosophical interpretations of these secrets to be illegitimate innovations. Instead, they offered their diverging interpretations.<sup>65</sup> Though a marginal impact of some of the Great Eagle's philosophical phrases and themes can be discerned in some Kabbalistic views in books written before 1270, the main lines of Kabbalistic thought moved in directions that were conceptually different from that of Maimonides's thought and they developed literary genres that did not depend on those used by Maimonides. In a way, they are rather antithetical to Maimonides.<sup>66</sup>

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versity Press, Ramat-Gan, 1976): 54–70. See also Adam Afterman, “*And They Shall Be One Flesh*”: *On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 102–20.

62 Moshe Idel, “On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship,” in *Religious Apologetics—Philosophical Argumentation*, eds. Yossef Schwartz and Volkhard Krech (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004): 123–74.

63 See Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism*, or Idel, “*Sitre 'Arayot*.”

64 See Idel, “The Concept of the Torah in Hekhalot Literature.”

65 See Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, 31–81.

66 See Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides's Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism,” in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981): 200–219; Charles Mopsik, *Chemins de la cabale: vingt-cinq études sur la mystique juive* (Tel Aviv/Paris: Éclat, 2004), 48–54; Shlomo Blickstein, “Between Philosophy and Mysticism: A Study of the Philosophical-Qabbalistic Writings of Joseph Gikatila (1248–c. 1322)” (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984); Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical “Wirkungsgeschichte” in Different Cultural Contexts*, eds. Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004): 209–37; Wolfson, “The Impact of Maimonides' *Via Negativa* on Late Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 393–442; Boaz Huss, “Mysticism versus Philosophy in Kabbalistic Literature,” *Micrologus* 9 (2001): 125–35; Sara O. Heller-Wilensky, “The Dialectical

Maimonides's name or writings were only rarely explicitly referenced by early Kabbalists writing before 1270. One exception can be found in an epistle of Rabbi Ezra of Gerona, who quoted a line from the *Guide*<sup>67</sup> that contains nothing especially Maimonidean. More substantially, Nahmanides approvingly quoted a lengthy, mystically oriented passage from Maimonides's *Commentary on the Mishnah*; given its content, the passage could have been influential on Nahmanides's spiritual eschatology.<sup>68</sup>

The rather scant amount of references to Maimonides, who was the main centre of debates and discussions among European Jewry in the first half of the thirteenth century, is a surprising fact that should be put into relief because it displays the low importance his thought had in the conceptual economy of the theosophical Kabbalists. In one of these few instances, a longer quotation was given so that the Kabbalist could oppose his views.<sup>69</sup> From this point of view, Maimonides served as a negative trigger whose mentalist and naturalistic approaches to religion<sup>70</sup> challenged some

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Influence of Maimonides on Isaac ibn Laṭif and Early Spanish 'Kabbalah' [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988): 289–306; and Menachem Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty: Theology as Poetics in Hispanic Jewish Culture* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 2011), 51–121.

67 See Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle," 222.

68 See Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School," and Afterman, "And They Shall Be One Flesh," 102–29.

69 See the text by Rabbi Jacob Ben Sheshet that was translated and discussed in Moshe Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 199–201, and Moshe Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 338–44. In Ben Sheshet's *Meṣiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968), he refers to Maimonides's book several times while taking issue with Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yiqawwu ha-Mayyim*. See also Jonathan Dauber, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 57–88. None of the theosophical Kabbalists in the thirteenth century wrote even a neutral Kabbalistic commentary on Maimonides's philosophical texts, nor an extensive exposition on his views. In my opinion, Maimonides was of negligible importance to the theosophical Kabbalists, especially when compared to his centrality in Abulafia's works. In the case of most of the theosophical Kabbalists, the role played by Maimonides is essentially that of a negative trigger, though in its detailed themes this had a negligible impact. Especially interesting is the fact that Maimonides's enumeration of the 613 commandments in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* was sometimes accepted by Kabbalists, although they never mentioned his name in that context.

70 For some general surveys of Maimonides's novel concept of true religion—namely, of Judaism as he understood it—see David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophical Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976); Eliezer Goldman, *Expositions and Inquiries: Jewish Thought in Past and Present* [Hebrew], eds. Avraham Sagi and Daniel Statman (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 60–137; Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Joel L. Kraemer, "Naturalism and Universalism in Maimonides' Political and Religious Thought," in *Me'ah She'arim*, 47–81; Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, 146–303; Amos Funkenstein, *Nature, History, and Messianism in Maimonides* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1983); Davidson, *Moses Maimonides, The Man and His Works*, 377–87; Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Oxford: Littman



segments of the Jewish elite in Western Europe to offer alternatives to his theories. Indeed, his interpretation of Jewish esoteric matters was one of the main reasons for the emergence of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah as an articulation of earlier themes in a wider framework.<sup>71</sup> Seen in its entirety, the thirteenth-century theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah includes some faint echoes of Maimonides's thought, in a negative parallel to the intensity and depth of appropriation that is evident in Abulafia's Kabbalah.

Let me provide an example of such a challenge. In the introduction to his widespread *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, an important Kabbalist active sometime at the end of the thirteenth century,<sup>72</sup> wrote in a rather fascinating manner about the eschatology of the philosophers who located the main act of redemption in the intellect and not in the soul: "You should know that to those who are going to interpret the Torah according to the way of nature and say that the intellect cleaved to God, this is no more than a joke and a theft, an attempt to steal the minds of the sons of religion."<sup>73</sup> The nexus between the "way of nature" and the

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Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011); Jose Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*; Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 175–202; Eliezer Hadad, *The Torah and Nature in Maimonides's Writings* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011); and Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, trans. Joel Linsider (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

71 Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah."

72 This text, widespread in manuscript and in print, has been attributed to the twelfth-century Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières. For the real author, see the ground-breaking study by Gershom Scholem, "The Real Author of the *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah* Attributed to Rabbi Abraham ben David and His Works" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Kabbalah* [1], eds. Joseph ben Shlomo and Moshe Idel (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998): 112–36.

73 Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah* (Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 6a: ולכן יש לך לדעת כי ההולכים לפרש התורה ע"ד טבע ואומרים כי השכל נדבק בשם, אין זה רק היתול וגנבה שגונבים דעת בני הדת. For a different understanding of the cleaving of the soul, see Ashkenazi, fol. 9cd, and his *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 269. This Kabbalist was certainly aware of Maimonides's book, and formulations found in some of his few statements show that from some points of view, he was close to Abulafia, though his Kabbalah was radically different from that of the ecstatic Kabbalist. On this Kabbalist and his type of Kabbalah, see Haviva Pedaya, "Sabbath, Sabbatai, and the Diminution of Moon: The Holy Conjunction, Sign and Image" [Hebrew], in *Myth in Judaism*, ed. Haviva Pedaya (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1996): 150–53; Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth: Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 18–21, 187, 193–94, 216–19, 279–80; Moshe Idel, "An Anonymous Commentary on *Shir ha-Yiḥud*," in *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, eds. Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995): 151–54; Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 119–26; Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 228–32; Moshe Idel, "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 5 (2007): 100–104, and my more recent *Saturn's Jews*, as well as Vajda's important study referenced in note 79 below.

“cleaving to God” is of the utmost importance for understanding Abulafia’s general approach, as will be discussed below.<sup>74</sup>

The intellectual cleaving is conceptualised as a natural phenomenon and understood in a negative light. Moreover, we learn here about attempts to propagate this view. Elsewhere, in a parallel statement found in another of Ashkenazi’s books, he adds that those commentators connected their naturalistic interpretation to a view of the world as pre-eternal (*‘al ha-qadmut*).<sup>75</sup> Here, the intellectual and natural understandings of the sacred scriptures, envisioned by Ashkenazi as deleterious, were imagined to go hand in hand, since the intellect was conceived as part of nature when understood in an Aristotelian vein. A person is capable of educating her- or himself in order to attain the intellectual overflow, as it is available since it is constantly pulsating in reality. Ashkenazi presents the philosophical ideal of the intellect’s union with God, which is found, though only implicitly among those commentators, to be a mere strategy to attract religious persons to the study of philosophy. This strategy of disguise was recognised by both Abraham Abulafia himself and by Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret in his description of the special nature of Abulafia’s books.<sup>76</sup>

Ashkenazi’s accusation is corroborated by the writing of one of his contemporaries. Rabbi Judah Romano, an Italian thinker active in Rome at the beginning of the fourteenth century, writes in his *Commentary of the Account of Creation*: “Some of the sages of Israel in the last generation—whose names it would be better not to mention—were inclined to an interpretation of pre-eternity in their commentaries on the order of creation and to the syllogisms of the philosophers.”<sup>77</sup> As we shall also see

<sup>74</sup> See below, pp. 234, 255.

<sup>75</sup> Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 250:

אלא שגם קמו בעדתנו אנשים נקראו חכמים בעיני מי שאינו יודע דתו וסובר שעלתה בידו ואמנותו והנם מפרשי התורה על דרך הטבע עד שפירשו את התורה על הקדמות.

“But in our community appeared persons who are called ‘sages’ by the one who does not know what his religion is but thinks he understands his faith, and they are commenting on the Torah in accordance with the path of nature, so that they will comment on the Torah according to pre-existence.” See also his similar claim in an important discussion found elsewhere in the same book, 146:

לקיים הקדמות ועשו מלות בדואות בפשטים כל אחד ואחד כדי לישב הדת על מאמיני הפכה בקדמות העולם.  
 “To sustain the pre-eternity, and they invented words for the plain sense, each and every one in order to settle religion according to the believers of its opposite, the pre-eternity of the world.” The “invented words” may refer to allegories that interpret the plain sense. See also the view that Nahmanides attributes to a certain Rabbi Abraham, perhaps ibn Ezra, as to a Platonic view of pre-eternity, to be adduced below at the end of chapter 18.

<sup>76</sup> See ibn Adret’s responsum 1, no. 548, and Rabbi Nathan, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478.

<sup>77</sup> Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. I, 22, fol. 45a:

אבל קצת מחכמי ישראל האחרונים אשר אין ראוי לנקבם בשמות, נטו אל הקדמות וביארו בפירושיהם כל סדר הבריאה ביאור נוטה אל הקדמות נמשכים אחר הקשי הפילוסופים.

On this treatise, see Joseph B. Sermoneta, “The Commentary to ‘The Pericope of Creation’ of Rabbi Judah Romano and Its Sources” [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies 2* (1965): 341–42.

in the case of Abulafia, Romano's main concern was not with philosophy per se, but rather an attempt to reinterpret traditional Jewish religion in a new way, though his approach differs quite substantially from that of the earlier Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon. We have recently learned from Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann's discussion of the earlier Jewish exegetical material that there were indeed earlier commentators on Genesis who assumed the pre-eternity of the universe.<sup>78</sup>

Joseph Ashkenazi was certainly quite critical of philosophers, although he was also influenced by them: his writings display a good acquaintance with medieval philosophy.<sup>79</sup> Though he resorts to the term "nature" many times, he nevertheless claimed that nature does not have a grasp on the people who are close to God.<sup>80</sup> Ashkenazi offered a comprehensive Kabbalistic picture of the universe based on non-Maimonidean ways of thought, some probably stemming from the Ismā'īliyyah,<sup>81</sup> which were at least in part formulated as a response to the philosophical challenge, grounded in a naturalistic approach.<sup>82</sup> He eventually used Maimonidean themes within an anti-Maimonidean approach, as duly pointed out by Georges Vajda.<sup>83</sup> A commentator on some Psalms<sup>84</sup> and several late antique Jewish texts,<sup>85</sup> Joseph Ashkenazi was more concerned with the fallacies of philosophical hermeneutics than any other thirteenth-century Kabbalist, at least insofar as we can learn from written testimonies.

I have offered and will continue to refer to these examples from his writings because Ashkenazi was critical of some philosophical issues that were treated positive-

**78** Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann, "Cosmology and Cosmogony in *Doresh Reshumot*, a Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Torah," *HTR* 97 (2004): 199–227. See also Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 175–76. Compare also to the remnant of the lost commentary on the Pentateuch by Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, presented by the fourteenth-century Rabbi Samuel ibn Tzartza, discussed in Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz, "Shem Tov Falaquera's Lost Bible Commentary," *HUCA* 64 (1993): 191, as well as his other discussions cited on 172–73.

**79** See the important article by Georges Vajda, "Un chapitre de l'histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la philosophie: la polémique anti-intellectualiste de Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 31 (1956): 45–14, as well as the text he printed dealing with his critique of philosophy, "Ninety-Four Principles of the Philosophers Cited by Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 290–300.

**80** *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, fol. 44d:

כי דורשי ה' לא יפעל בהם טבע רק ה' עליהם יחיו" (ישעיה לז:ח).

It should be pointed out that other Kabbalists also expressed their reticence towards the centrality of the concept of nature in the writings of philosophers. See especially Nahmanides's views as addressed in chapter 18 below.

**81** See the important observations of Shlomo Pines to this effect in his "Shi'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*," 249–51.

**82** See the passage by Nahmanides about Maimonides's emphasis on nature versus miracles in chapter 18 below.

**83** See his "Un chapitre de l'histoire du conflit," 73–74.

**84** See Moshe Hallamish, "Remnants of the Commentary of Rabbi Yoseph Ashkenazi to Psalms" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 10 (1983): 57–70.

**85** See Hallamish's introduction to *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 14–16.



ly by Abulafia. This parallelism shows an antithetical relationship between two forms of Kabbalah that were acquainted with the same philosophical sources. Their exponents nevertheless took divergent paths; perhaps there is also some kind of silent polemic present in these forms. Though he was indubitably a theosophical Kabbalist, the profound structure of Ashkenazi's Kabbalah differs quite substantially from that of the other theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists,<sup>86</sup> just as his thought differs from Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah, though there are some details that may point to a form of acquaintance with Abulafia's practice.<sup>87</sup>

However, other Kabbalists who espoused views very different from those of Maimonides were much less outspoken than Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi. This implicit reaction is part of what I have called a silent controversy concerning the Great Eagle's thought, especially his interpretations of Rabbinic esotericism.<sup>88</sup> Thus, we may see a considerable variety of attitudes towards the Great Eagle in Abulafia's generation, some of which are part of a dialogue with Maimonides and others of which are representative of frictions between their views and his.

Maimonides's universalist approach (and that of his philosophical sources) and his strong propensity to naturalise religion polarised Jewish thought. On the one hand, it induced more radical interpretations of Judaism in terms that Maimonides was careful not to explicate or elaborate; these more radical interpreters include several thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Jewish philosophers, whom we shall designate in the following as the Maimonideans. On the other hand, it triggered the elaborations of theosophical systems based on what may be called positive attributes as a response to his claims.<sup>89</sup> The difference between these two moves is not just a matter of specific understandings of the same topic, but also of the main themes that the two speculative moves adopted and elaborated. So, for instance, some of the Maimonidean thinkers were concerned with the Great Eagle's theory of prophecy in more general terms than Maimonides's discussions provide. This is the case, for example, for Rabbi Zerahyah Hen, Rabbi Levi ben Abraham, Isaac Albalag, Judah Moses ben Daniel Romano, Isaac Polqar, and Gersonides. This topic is also quintessential for Abulafia's own concerns.<sup>90</sup>

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**86** See, for the time being, Moshe Idel, "The Meaning of 'Ta'amei Ha-'Ofot Ha-Teme'im' by Rabbi David ben Judah he-Hasid" [Hebrew], in *'Aleī Šefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexander Safran*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990): 11–27.

**87** See Scholem, "The Real Author," 115.

**88** See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah."

**89** See also Moshe Idel, "Divine Attributes and Sefirot in Jewish Theology" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, eds. Sara O. Heller-Willensky and Moshe Idel (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989): 87–112, and Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah."

**90** See Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 148–423; Kreisel, "The Verification of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy" [Hebrew], *JSJT* 4 (1984): 1–18; Kreisel, "Sage and Prophet in the Thought of Maimonides and His Followers" [Hebrew], *Eshel Ber Sheva* 3 (1986): 166–69; Kreisel, "Prophetic Authority in the Philosophy of

This interest in prophecy was to a great extent triggered by the *falāsifah's* discussions, especially those of Al-Fārābī, who supplied Maimonides with the basic terms for his philosophical definition of the nature of biblical prophecy.<sup>91</sup> The emphasis on the importance of this topic differs from Rabbinic religiosity as well as from early theosophical Kabbalists, whose references to prophecy are quite scant and conceived as being related to the ascent and cleaving to hypostatic divine powers. The only theosophical Kabbalist who expatiated on prophecy in a manner different from Maimonides was the abovementioned Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, who was of Ashkenazi extraction.<sup>92</sup>

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Spinoza and in Medieval Jewish Philosophy” [Hebrew], in *Spiritual Authority: Struggles over Cultural Power in Jewish Thought*, eds. Howard Kreisel, Boaz Huss, and Uri Ehrlich (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2009): 207–21; Kreisel, “The Prophecy of Moses in Medieval Jewish Provençal Philosophy: Natural or Supernatural?” [Hebrew], in *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015): 179–204; Kreisel, “The Land of Israel and Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy” [Hebrew], in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought*, eds. Moshe Halamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1991): 40–51; Hannah Kasher, “Disciples of Philosophers as ‘Sons of the Prophets’ (Prophecy Manuals among Maimonides’s Followers)” [Hebrew], *JSJT* 14 (1998): 73–85; Shlomo Pines, “Some Views Put Forward by the 14th-Century Jewish Philosopher Isaac Pulgar, and Some Parallel Views Expressed by Spinoza” [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy, and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, eds. Joseph Dan and Joseph Hacker (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986): 420–26; Dov Schwartz, “On the Concepts of Prophecy of Rabbi Isaac Pulgar, Rabbi Shlomo Al-Qonstantini and Spinoza” [Hebrew], *Assufot* 4 (Jerusalem: 1990): 57–72; Joseph B. Sermoneta, “Prophecy in the Writings of R. Yehudah Romano,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): 337–74; Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Thought of R. Zeraḥyah ben Isaac ben She’altiel Ḥen and Maimonidean-Tibbonian Philosophy in the 13th Century” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1977) [Hebrew], 273–86; Barry Mesch, *Studies in Joseph ibn Caspi* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 60–106; Abraham J. Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, ed. Morris M. Fierstein (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1996); Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy,” *Speculum* 52 (1977): 62–79; and Sarah Stroumsa, “Prophecy versus Civil Religion in Medieval Jewish Philosophy: The Case of Judah Halevi and Maimonides,” in *Tribute to Michael: Studies in Jewish and Muslim Thought Presented to Professor Michael Schwarz*, eds. Sara Klein-Braslavy, Binyamin Abramov, and Joseph Sadan (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2009): 79–102. Of special interest is the lengthy discussion of prophecy in Levi ben Avraham, *Liwyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah* [Hebrew], ed. Howard Kreisel (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2007). See also Isaac Albalag’s *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De’ot*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1973), 82–83, as well as Paul Fenton, “A Mystical Treatise on Perfection, Providence and Prophecy from the Jewish Sufi Circle,” in *The Jews of Medieval Islam*, 301–34.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962), 206–19.

<sup>92</sup> See Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 228–32. See also my “Prophets and Their Impact in the High Middle Ages: A Subculture of Franco-German Jewry,” in *Regional Identities and Cultures of Medieval Jews*, eds. Javier Castano, Talya Fishman, and Ephraim Kanarfogel (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018): 285–338.

The Maimonidean line of thought was continued later on, and one of its last major metamorphoses in this chain of thinkers can be found in Baruch Spinoza, who was also the greatest philosophical critic of the Great Eagle's theory of religion.<sup>93</sup> What seems to unify these Maimonidean authors in contrast to Maimonides himself is the acceptance of his general naturalist understanding of religion while often ignoring the esoteric strategy employed in the *Guide*. By commenting on the *Guide*, most of them implicitly or explicitly removed the esoteric veil found in the interpreted text. Though this is also the case with Abulafia, he nevertheless remained closer to the esotericism in the *Guide* by retaining some important aspects of Maimonides's technique of hiding, without, however, any critique addressed to the Great Eagle, as is most obviously found in Spinoza.

However, this naturalisation of religion also generated the articulation of opposing views, especially among the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists who were more particularist than in earlier Jewish thought, Rabbi Judah ha-Levi aside. In other words, we witness a gradual polarisation of conceptual camps within the thirteenth-century European Jewish elites which would become parts of belligerent factions in the controversies over Maimonides's writings.

To be sure, Maimonides and the Maimonideans were not the sole factor that contributed to this polarisation in Jewish thought that created the more pronounced mythical literatures, since the Hebrew translations of the writings of Averroes, as well as the growing Latin scholastic literature in Italy and Western Europe, could also have contributed to a reaction against philosophy and the philosophical understanding of religion. In any case, an example of such early polarisation seems to be the case of Jacob ben Sheshet's reaction to Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon's treatise *Yiqawwu ha-Mayyim*. However, the Great Eagle and his many followers among the Provençal and Spanish thinkers, whose names we will mention very shortly, were indubitably the most decisive factor in this complex process of restructuring undertaken by some European Jewish elites.

By portraying a more organised and stable universe—the Greek *cosmos*, which has a *physis*, a stable nature—medieval Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophers were inclined to reduce the role that traditional religious activity could play, or, in the case of the Jews, the theurgical aspects of the commandments as formulated in some Rabbinic dicta, the literature of the Ashkenazi Hasidism, and the main schools of Kabbalah. Let me emphasise here that the game of hinting at secrets opens the gate to a variety of interpretations for better or worse, a well-known phenomenon in studies of Maimonides.<sup>94</sup> It also allows for a gradual radicalisation of what the

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<sup>93</sup> See Warren Zev Harvey, "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 151–72; Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1982), 147–92; Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 213–81; and Alexander Even-Hen, "Maimonides's Theory of Positive Attributes" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 63 (2008): 41–45. See also Appendix C, note 136 below.

<sup>94</sup> See Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, 16, note 43.

Maimonideans guessed were the master's hidden thoughts, be they genuine or spurious.

### 3 The Early Maimonideans

In this chapter, I am concerned with situating some major aspects of the thought of the Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia within the Maimonidean tradition. Abulafia's thought is one of the many varieties of Jewish thought that depends on the Great Eagle's books; it is related to subsequent developments in what can be called the broader phenomenon of Maimonideanism, especially the Averroistic interpretations of Maimonides's thought. In this book, I will explore four major issues: 1) the Maimonidean tradition; 2) Abulafia's testimonies as to his study of *The Guide of the Perplexed* and other philosophical books, as well as his teaching of the *Guide* in a variety of places in Europe; 3) some esoteric issues related to his thought and activity; and 4) the presentation and analysis of Abulafia's parable of the pearl as an allegory for the true religion. I will also discuss his interpretations by elucidating some key issues in his writings that pertain to those interpretations. The five appendices will deal with issues that are less concerned with esotericism.

My analysis of the above material should be seen within the wider framework of the transmission of knowledge (*translatio scientiae*) from the Middle East to Europe at the end of the first millennium of the common era and the complex developments that occurred afterwards. This broad phenomenon was delineated by Moses Gaster, though with quite vague lines, at the end of the nineteenth century; his views constitute an insight, unduly forgotten in scholarship, for understanding some aspects of the emergence and evolution of European culture in general and Jewish culture specifically.<sup>95</sup> We may see this insight in terms of the stream of traditions that resort to scholarly descriptions of the transmission of ancient Mesopotamian religions.

Medieval Jewish philosophy, which began outside Europe, mainly in Iraq and some parts of Northern Africa, was quickly transferred to the southern countries of Europe; there, it began its rapid development as part of the larger phenomenon of the transmission of Greek and Hellenistic philosophies, mostly through the mediation of Christian and Muslim translators and seminal Muslim thinkers. The Neo-Ar-

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<sup>95</sup> See Moses Gaster, *Ilchester Lectures on Greeco-Slavonic Literature* (London: Trübner & Co., 1887) and Moses Gaster, *Literatura populară română*, ed. Mircea Angheliescu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1983). On his views of Jewish mysticism in general, see Moshe Idel, "Moses Gaster on Jewish Mysticism and the Book of the Zohar" [Hebrew], in *New Developments in Zohar Studies*, ed. Ronit Meroz, 111–27. For a massive survey of many issues that are pertinent to Gaster's general scheme, see the recent analyses of the arrival of the dualistic theories from the East to Western Europe by Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 65–123. See also Shulamit Laderman, *Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art: God's Blueprint of Creation* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

istotelian trend is just one of several developments, though indubitably the main one, that changed the intellectual landscape of medieval Europe, especially from the thirteenth century. In addition, in the case of Jewish culture, a broad variety of other genres of literature was transmitted: Rabbinic, magic, and Hekhalot literature, along with liturgical poetry, made their ways, by paths and channels that are scarcely known, to the southern shores of Europe and laid the foundation of the variety of Jewish cultures there.

However, none of these literatures was as dramatically novel and challenging to the traditional forms of Judaism as the Maimonidean speculative presentation of Judaism. This mentalistic trend met, in Abulafia's case, an entirely different esoteric stream, represented at its peak by the various forms of the Ashkenazi traditions, but stemming from different centres in Italy, and plausibly part of an earlier Jewish tradition from the Middle East, which emphasised the linguistic elements of Jewish traditions, the canonicity of the Bible and liturgical texts, the centrality of divine names, and radical forms of exegesis that include, among other things, gematria and permutations of letters.<sup>96</sup>

Interestingly enough, while Maimonides's activity coincides with the Andalusian *floruit* of Muslim Neo-Aristotelianism, Maimonideanism developed in a period when Muslim Neo-Aristotelian philosophy had vanished as a significant living phenomenon in Islam. From the temporal point of view, it parallels the appropriation of Neo-Aristotelianism in some circles in Christian Europe. We may remark that like any transfer of a significant corpus of writings possessing a certain degree of coherence from one culture to another, this one provokes a change in the culture that acquires that corpus. This was also the case in Islam, Judaism, and, later, Christianity. However, it should be pointed out that in Jewish circles, due to the absence of a central authority, the impact of Neo-Aristotelianism was more widespread and longstanding, despite the sharp critique it initially encountered.

Let me distinguish, tentatively, between four major stages of Maimonideanism that are relevant for our discussion below. The first stage, that of Maimonides himself, is constituted by the application of Neo-Aristotelian categories to many topics in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. Other figures who are a part of this stage include Joseph ibn 'Aqnin, Joseph al-Fawwāl, and Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta, all of whom were active in the Middle East and predominantly used Arabic as their philosophical language. The second phase consists of Maimonides's translators into Hebrew, such

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<sup>96</sup> This is an issue that deserves further investigation. See, meanwhile, the controversy between Israel Weinstock, "The Discovery of Abu Aharon of Baghdad's Legacy of Secrets" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 32 (1963): 153–59; Gershom Scholem, "Has Abu Aharon's Legacy of Secrets Been Discovered?" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 32 (1963): 252–65; and the rejoinder by Israel Weinstock, "The Treasury of 'Secrets' of Abu Aharon—Imagination or Reality?" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 54 (1964): 226–59; Moshe Idel, "From Italy to Ashkenaz and Back: On the Circulation of Jewish Mystical Traditions," *Kabbalah* 14 (2006): 47–94; Moshe Idel, "Holding an Orb in His Hand: The Angel 'Anafi'el and a Late Antiquity Helios Mosaic," *Ars Judaica* 9 (2013): 19–44; Idel, *Ben*, 51, 55–56, 70, 194, 378; Idel, "In a Whisper."

as Samuel ibn Tibbon and Judah al-Ḥarizi, as well as his defenders, such as David Qimḥi, during the first controversy over his books. These figures all wrote in Hebrew and were inhabitants of Western Europe. The third phase consists of additional translations of Arabic sources, some of which are important for understanding the *Guide*, either as its very sources or as simply helpful for explicating Maimonides's worldview. This stage is comprised of Jewish authors who were active after 1230, such as Jacob Anatoli, Moses ibn Tibbon, Rabbi Zerahyah ben Isaac ben She'altiel Ḥen (Gracian), and Qalonymus ben Qalonymus. They were inhabitants of the centres of Jewish culture, especially Provence, Catalonia, and southern Italy. The fourth phase, to which Abulafia may be described as belonging and which overlaps with the later part of the third phase, consists of the active dissemination of the *Guide*'s views, either orally or in writing by means of commentaries on it and philosophical commentaries on Jewish scripture.

Although the thinkers in the first two stages had no positive association with Jewish mysticism, in the third and fourth stages, the situation changed, as some of the representatives of these moments in the developments of Maimonideanism sporadically refer to Kabbalistic writings or to earlier materials that informed Kabbalah, as is the case with Levi ben Abraham, Isaac Albalag, or Moses Narboni. Others, such as Rabbi Zerahyah Ḥen, sharply criticised these writings.

In the less than a hundred years since its completion in its original Arabic in distant Egypt, the reverberations of the *Guide* had transformed much of the intellectual landscape of Jewish Europe, as well as the Eastern provinces of Egypt, the Land of Israel, and other Jewish communities in Asia; all this despite the fierce critiques it encountered from a variety of major figures in Rabbinic Judaism. This transfer of Greek thought in disguise as Jewish esotericism generated a transformation of Judaism in several circles, and we shall be dealing in this study with some of its major developments.

Modern scholarship in the field advanced, roughly speaking, in accordance with this chronological scheme, which means that Maimonides's own writings and thought received and continue to receive maximum attention. It was only later, in the nineteenth century, that the books of Samuel ibn Tibbon and Jacob Anatoli were printed, while the two other later phases have received even less attention in both research into and publication of the writings as practised by scholars in the field in the last century and a half. However, in the last half-century, Jewish Western Maimonidean trends have been studied rather intensely by a long list of scholars<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The most important of them, in alphabetical order, are Alexander Altmann, Kalman Bland, Isaac E. Barzilay, Gerrit Bos, Igor De Souza, Zvi Diesendruck, Esti Eisenmann, Seymour Feldman, Resianne Fontaine, Carlos Fraenkel, Gad Freudenthal, Jacob Friedman, Ottfried Fraisse, Ruth Glasner, Naomi Grunhaus, Moshe Halbertal, Racheli Haliva, Avraham Halkin, Steven Harvey, Warren Zev Harvey, Maurice Hayoun, Sara O. Heller-Willensky, Gitit Holzman, Alfred L. Ivry, Raphael Jospe, Hannah Kasher, Menachem Kellner, Howard (Haim) Kreisel, Jacob Levinger, Charles H. Manekin, Barry Mesch, Abraham Nuriel, Shlomo Pines, Aviezer Ravitzky, Caterina Rigo, James Robinson, Shalom



whose studies deal with some aspects of the writings of Moses ibn Tibbon, Isaac ben Abraham ibn Laṭif, Jacob ben Makhir (Don Profatius), Moses of Salerno, Nathan ibn Tibbon, Hillel of Verona, Rabbi Zerahyah ben She'altiel Hen, Shem Tov ibn Falquera, Isaac ben Yeda'yah, Yeda'yah ha-Penini of Beziers, Levi ben Abraham ben Ḥayyim of Villefranche, Isaac Albalag, Isaac Polqar, Nissim ben Moses of Marseilles, Menahem ha-Me'iri, Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles, Joseph ibn Kaspi, Qalonymus ben Qalonymus (Maestro Kalo), Immanuel of Rome, Judah ben Moses Romano, Gersonides, and Moses Narboni, to name only the most important early Maimonideans. In addition to their own writings related to Maimonides himself, such as their commentaries on the *Guide*, and a concentration on biblical exegesis, as some Maimonideans produced, some of them also translated a variety of philosophical books from Arabic, making this group's production even more impressive from a quantitative point of view.

Though active in Christian hegemonic territories for several centuries, the wide spectrum of Western Maimonideanism echoed much of the results of the intellectual developments that took place in Islamic provinces during the preceding three centuries of appropriating and elaborating some forms of Greek and Hellenistic philosophies. These appropriations of ancient Greek thought that occurred in medieval Muslim and Jewish cultures and the *floruit* of the latter Neo-Aristotelianism in Christian provinces are fine examples of the poverty of historicism, which attempts to reduce complex phenomena to events that took place in their immediate environment. Moreover, the differences between Platonism and Aristotelianism, and the eventual syntheses between them, reverberated not only in late antique Hellenism in Alexandria and Rome, but also in Muslim and Jewish philosophies and Kabbalah in the Middle Ages. They also had an impact on Jewish thought during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, as we shall see below in Appendix B.

The Jewish thinkers mentioned above, different as they are from each other, may nevertheless be considered as part of a broader philosophical movement. It is only in Colette Sirat's recent history of medieval philosophy that they have been paid greater attention. Thanks to her earlier extensive study of their manuscripts, in this survey, she integrates their thought into a more comprehensive history of Jewish philosophy, including the views of Abraham Abulafia, for the first time.<sup>98</sup> In this context, it is im-

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Rosenberg, Shalom Sadik, Marc Saperstein, Dov Schwartz, Yossef Schwartz, Joseph B. Sermoneta, Joseph Schatzmiller, Yair Shiffman, Colette Sirat, Gregg Stern, Frank Talmage, Charles Touati, Isadore Twersky, Georges Vajda, and Mauro Zonta. In the present framework, it is difficult to refer to all the studies by those scholars, but their findings allow a much better picture than what we had a generation ago. The more comprehensive picture that the Maimonideans formed has served as the background of my studies on Abulafia since the beginning.

<sup>98</sup> See her *La philosophie juive médiévale en pays de chrétienté* (Paris: Presses de CNRS, 1988). Compare to the pioneering, though somewhat biased, monograph by Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250–1650* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton 1967), whose first part deals with Rabbi Hillel and Zerahyah, though Abulafia appears only on the margin of his analyses.

portant to point out the five voluminous tomes of writing by Maimonideans that were recently printed with introductions, footnotes, and indexes (some of them facilitated by Sirat's previous research) by Howard Kreisel. Kreisel has thus made important material available for understanding the allegorical trends thriving in the generation following Abulafia's *floruit*.<sup>99</sup> This goal is also evident in the case of James T. Robinson's publication of Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*,<sup>100</sup> Yair Shiffman's critical edition of Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera's *Moreh ha-Moreh*,<sup>101</sup> and Hannah Kasher's critical publication of ibn Kaspi's *Šulḥan Kesef* with introduction and footnotes,<sup>102</sup> as well as the recent printing of some of the Hebrew translations of Arabic texts made by the Maimonideans.<sup>103</sup>

However, what can be seen from those voluminous writings is a form of epigonism, which means that all these writers were writing under the wings of the Great Eagle,<sup>104</sup> though the complexity generated by his greatness in both legalistic and philosophical studies is immeasurably greater in comparison to his followers. Nothing resembling the *Guide* has been produced that amplifies its project; rather, attempts were made to clarify and apply the insights Maimonides presented or hinted at in his *chef d'oeuvre*. In other words, quantity is indeed obvious in the case of the Maimonideans, but much less so intellectual originality. If the main problem of the *Guide* was how to hint at secrets without revealing them, Maimonides's followers revealed what they believed those secrets were without too many hints, which means that esotericism weakened dramatically, given the proliferation of writings on the same topics addressed by the *Guide*. I would say that very few new secrets were invented in what can be called the Maimonideans' super-commentaries. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Maimonideans were much more exoteric writers than their model, though Abulafia is somewhat closer to Maimonides due to his emphasis on the need for esotericism, as we shall see below.

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**99** Levi ben Abraham, *Liwyat Ḥen, Ma'ašeh Berešit* (Jerusalem: The World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004); Levi ben Abraham, *Liwyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*; Levi ben Avraham, *Liwyat Ḥen: The Work of the Chariot*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013); Nissim ben Moses of Marseilles, *Ma'ašeh Nissim*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 2000); and Moses ibn Tibbon, *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe'ah, Ma'amar Ha-Taninim, Peruš ha-Azharot Le-Rav Solomon ibn Gabirol*, eds. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010). See also his "A Fragment from a *Commentary on Ruth* Ascribed to Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles" [Hebrew], *JSJT* 14 (1998): 159–80.

**100** Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Samuel ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, ed. James T. Robinson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). See also Liron Hoch, "The Philosophy of Samuel ibn Tibbon and Rabbi David Kimhi as Background for Abrabanel's Philosophical Approach" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 77 (2014): 123–41.

**101** Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, *Moreh ha-Moreh*.

**102** Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Šulḥan Kesef*, ed. Hannah Kasher (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1996).

**103** See below chapter 4, notes 60, 61.

**104** See Robinson, "We Drink Only from the Master's Water," 27–60.



The members of this conceptual movement were sometimes aware of each other and quoted their predecessors, especially the members of the ibn Tibbon family. However, what seems to me to be more interesting for our approach towards Abulafia's allegoresis is the similarity between the members of the Maimonidean camp as a whole. Even when they comment on the same issue independently, they offer similar solutions because of their shared hermeneutical grid profoundly informed by both Neo-Aristotelianism and Abulafia's allegoresis.

Some of those thinkers began their education or even their activity in Al-Andalus, although they had to leave this region for Southern France, especially Provence. In their first generation, they were part of the Muslim philosophical culture; later on, they were part of what I call the Jewish *Andalusian internationale*.<sup>105</sup> This means that the Andalusian refugees from the Almohad persecutions that had occurred since 1145, who arrived in Provence in the second half of the twelfth century and who mastered both Arabic and the philosophical sources written by the *falāsifah*, translated and defended Maimonides's books written in remote Egypt. They even translated some writings by Muslim philosophers, mainly of Andalusian extraction, into Hebrew. Both types of translations constituted the first layer of the conceptual development that can be called Maimonideanism. Later, this development turned into a movement that constituted the Western Jewish Maimonidean tradition. The impact of the Jewish translators' work on Christian scholasticism and that of Christian scholasticism on some Maimonideans should also be taken into consideration.

The Eastern Maimonidean tradition, which has been studied separately, is mainly represented by Maimonides's descendants and Yemenite Jews and is less relevant to the points we would like to make here. It should be mentioned that even Muslim thinkers in the East studied the *Guide*.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, several Karaite thinkers were also influenced by Maimonides.<sup>107</sup> Though the two forms of Maimonideanism differ so dramatically, the Western more Averroistic and the Eastern more Sufi-oriented,

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**105** See Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 197–99, and compare to Narboni, *Commentary on the Guide*, fol. 15b.

**106** See Paul Fenton, "The Literary Legacy of Maimonides' Descendants," in *Sobre la Vida y Obra de Maimónides*, ed. Jesús Peláez del Rosal (Córdoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 1991): 149–56; Fenton, "A Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on Maimonides's *Mišne Tora* by Rabbi David Ben Joshua Maimonides (ca. 1335–1414)" [Hebrew], in *Heritage and Innovation in Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Culture: Proceedings of the Sixth Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, eds. Joshua Blau and David Doron (Ramat-Gan: University of Bar-Ilan Press, 2000): 145–60; and David R. Blumenthal, "Was There an Eastern Tradition of Maimonidean Scholarship?" *REJ* 138 (1979): 57–68. On esotericism among Maimonides's descendants in the East, see David R. Blumenthal, "An Epistle on Esoteric Matters by David II Maimonides from the Geniza," in *Pesher Nahum; Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature from Antiquity Through the Middle Ages Presented to Norman (Nahum) Golb*, eds. Joel L. Kraemer and Michael G. Wechsler (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012): 57–74, where permutations of letters of the divine name are mentioned on page 67.

**107** See Daniel J. Lasker, "Maimonides' Influence on Karaite Theories of Prophecy and Law," *Maimonidean Studies* 1 (1990): 99–115.

they were in contact with each other, though a significant reciprocal influence between the two is rather difficult to discern.

The differences between the various Maimonideans in the West notwithstanding, they share some interesting common denominators that are incongruent with Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*: one of which is the assumption that it is possible to conjoin with the Agent Intellect. In some cases in the Western branch, this assumption was coupled with the possibility that because of this conjunction, a person is capable of momentarily changing the course of events in nature. These two issues will be discussed below, for example, in chapter 7.<sup>108</sup> Another common denominator is the expansion of the range of sources that were included in the writings of the Maimonideans, who were more inclusive than the Great Eagle. This fact contributed to a certain conceptual diversification—and we should see Abulafia in this view—as one major and independent variant among others.

Insofar as I am concerned with this phenomenon here, the Jewish Western Maimonideans were mainly active during the century and a half after Maimonides's death. Their activity is contemporaneous with the emergence of Kabbalah and its most decisive phases of expansion. In addition, there is also some geographical overlap between the two expanding literatures: they flourished in Provence, Spain, and Italy. Though far from constituting a unified tradition, the Maimonidean thinkers shared a strong interest in Maimonides's books on the one hand and in the philosophical sources in the Muslim world that constituted his conceptual background (Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and the Andalusian *falāsifah*: ibn Bāğğah, ibn Ṭufayl, and Averroes) on the other. Those sources were eventually combined with additional types of sources, especially Neo-Platonic ones, the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra, and, though more rarely, even with Kabbalistic themes, sometimes part of the encyclopaedic tendency of these generations, as Rabbi Judah ibn Matkah's *Midrash Ḥokhmah*, Rabbi Shem Tov Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*,<sup>109</sup> and Rabbi Levi ben Abraham's *Liwyat Ḥen* and *Battei ha-Nefeš we-ha-Leḥašim*<sup>110</sup> show. The latter two authors were Abulafia's contemporaries, and he had read the former's book, as we shall discuss in chapter 6.

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**108** See also below chapter 3, note 108, Levi ben Abraham, *Liwyat Ḥen*, *Ma'ašeh Berešit*, 135–36, 367–68; Levi ben Avraham, *Liwyat Ḥen: The Work of the Chariot*, 133; Nissim ben Moses of Marseilles, *Ma'ašeh Nissim*, 438; Joseph (Ynon) Fenton, “The Theory of *Devequt* in the Doctrine of Rabbi Abraham the Son of Maimonides” [Hebrew], *Da'at* 50–52 (2003): 107–19; Moshe Narboni, as discussed in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (1988), 63–67; and Gitit Holzman, “Seclusion, Knowledge and Conjunction in the Thought of Rabbi Moshe Narboni” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 7 (2002): 111–73, especially 143–50 and 164–68. See also the interesting passage by the thirteenth-century Provençal author Rabbi Isaac ben Yeda'ayah, as quoted in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 21, note 11.

**109** Steven Harvey, “Shem Tov Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*: Its Sources and Use of Sources,” in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedia of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000): 211–47.

**110** See Warren Zev Harvey, “Levi Ben Abraham of Villefranche's Controversial Encyclopedia,” in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedia of Science and Philosophy*, 171–88.

Abulafia's specific generation is a special one, especially when we look at it from the point of view of European culture. The Maimonideans indeed accelerated their literary activity in his lifetime, but they did not produce a major new form of philosophical thought. However, at the same time, Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa*, the Kabbalists produced the vast Zoharic literature, and, somewhat later, Dante Alighieri produced his *Divina Commedia*,<sup>111</sup> undoubtedly all major cultural achievements. Western Maimonideanism, however, turned into a less creative, somewhat scholastic type of writing. It is against this relatively inertial or epigonic background that Abulafia's intellectual creativity will be better understood.

From the point of view of creativity rather than its content, Abulafia's vast literary legacy is temporally paralleled by the outburst of production by the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists flowering in Castile, especially the vast Zoharic literature, though both the experiential and the conceptual structures are substantially different and in many cases opposite in their visions of religion, as we shall see in more detail later in this chapter and in chapter 27. What they have in common, however, is the substantial influence of Ashkenazi thought that became more prominent in Spain in the second part of the thirteenth century, though they integrated its thought and practices in different ways. While Abulafia was mainly interested in the Ashkenazi mystical techniques and exegetical linguistic methods, the Castilian Kabbalists were more interested in Ashkenazi customs and magical devices, the so-called "name for delivering sermons" or "name for speedy writing" that may be a reference to speed-copying.

It should be pointed out that there was a sharp division of labour evident in the writings of two main figures of scholarship in Jewish thought: Julius Guttman, a leading scholar of Jewish philosophy, and Gershom G. Scholem, the eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism. In the former's many studies dedicated to the Maimonideans, there are very few references to the numerous pieces of information and modes of interpreting the *Guide* found in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia.<sup>112</sup> This ne-

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**111** See Sandra DeBenedetti Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica* (Florence: Giuntina, 2004). On the questions related to Averroism, Thomas, and Dante, including the questions of intellect and imagination, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 116–34.

**112** The only significant exceptions are Ravitzky's relatively short remarks in "Secrets of the Guide," 172–73; Warren Zev Harvey's remark in his "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," 293; Yossef Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah: The Mystical and Magical Interpretation of Maimonides in the Later Middle Ages," in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 99–132; and Hannah Kasher, "Where Did Maimonides Explain the Homonymy of the Name *Ben*?" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 63 (1994): 239. However, even in Schwartz's remarks, it is not the philosophical aspects of Abulafia's writings that are addressed, but only discussions of the divine names in his writings. The only major scholar who attempted to deal with a specific text by Abulafia in one of the commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide* was Alexander Altmann in his "Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism," but he also essentially regarded Abulafia as representative of the Kabbalists rather than as a part of the philosophical camp. See, for example, the resort to *Sefer Ner Elohim* (a treatise from Abu-

glect is questionable because for some formative years in his life, he was, as we shall see below, part and parcel of this tradition and continued to adhere to it even after he became a Kabbalist.

This rich philosophical tradition written in Hebrew in Abulafia's generation, conceived as a potential reservoir for comparison with his writings, has also not been addressed in a detailed manner in most of the studies of Abulafia written by scholars of Kabbalah, which follow Scholem's too-stark distinction between Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy. I have attempted to do so in the case of Abulafia's original approach in Kabbalah towards two of his most important issues: mystical union and the understanding of his intellectual messianism.

The weight of the phenomenological similarities between Abulafia's and Maimonides's thought, as well as the similarities between the Maimonideans and their Muslim philosophical sources, is considerable and should be taken much more into account, especially given that it touches two of the most sensitive aspects of Abulafia's Kabbalistic thought: the nature of prophecy and the noetic character of mystical union.<sup>113</sup> This similarity is also quite obvious in the central role played by the Agent Intellect as understood by Maimonides and the *falāsifah*: it functions as the ruler of this world, both in the writings of the Maimonideans and in those of Abulafia, deeply transforming their understanding of religion not just into an intellectual enterprise, but also into an orientation towards an entity that is not identical with the highest power within the universe.<sup>114</sup> If the role of this intellectual apparatus that concerns both the cosmic and the human levels is paramount, the question should be how other views and approaches that do not fit the Neo-Aristotelian approach may be understood in such a framework.

In attributing such a paramount role to this seminal concept in both types of Maimonideanism (the philosophical and the ecstatic Kabbalistic), some aspects of earlier forms of Judaism underwent a sharp intellectualistic restructuring, and this is also alien to the gist of the other Kabbalistic schools in the thirteenth century, the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, and the contemporary Ashkenazi literature. In the rare cases when Kabbalists in this period mentioned it, this concept played only a marginal role, although it was connected in this case to a much higher level than in the Arabic Jewish philosophical tradition.<sup>115</sup> It should be noted that

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lafia's school, though it is not his own book) in Howard Kreisel's attempt to reconstruct the theosophical material found in Rabbi Levi ben Abraham's writings in his introduction to *Liwyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 95–96. Here, I am more concerned with the consonance between Abulafia's philosophical views and those of Maimonides and the Maimonideans.

**113** See also Afterman, "And They Shall Be One Flesh," 152–70.

**114** See Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*. For a sharp designation of the Agent Intellect as the ruler of the world, see Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 29: אדון כל העולמים. In the same context, the Agent Intellect is designated as "all." See also *Ošar Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 139, where it is also called the "King of the World": מלך העולם.

**115** See the important footnote in Assi Farber, "On the Sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon's Early Kabbalistic System" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, 85–86, note 43.

the ecstatic Kabbalist often related the philosophical term “ruler of the sublunary world” to the functions of the angel Metatron, who played a central role in earlier Jewish esoteric literature because of his traditional role as a scribe writing the merits of Israel; that is, he was someone who was involved in a type of linguistic activity.

In fact, Abulafia’s writings aside, it is surprising to see how great the polarisation was between the theosophical Kabbalists on the one hand and the Maimonidean authors on the other, even in the cases of the few Kabbalists who were acquainted with philosophy earlier in their careers as Rabbi Moses de Leon<sup>116</sup> and Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla were.<sup>117</sup> A perusal of Kabbalistic writings in the last third of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century will easily show how Kabbalistic theosophical nomenclature is essentially independent of the philosophical languages practised (mainly by the Maimonideans) in their immediate vicinities (which is also true vice versa). Even when phrases or themes had been adopted from philosophical texts, they were absorbed and adapted within broader theosophical structures whose basic approach differs from the philosophical ones, to a great extent changing the original meaning of what the Kabbalists were borrowing; examples of this adoption and strong adaptation are legion.

Indeed, let me point out an important issue: the Maimonideans adopted Maimonides’s profound conceptual structure, not just his philosophical terminology. This adoption is evident even in cases where they adapted forms of thought from other speculative sources. On the other hand, they were much less concerned with Maimonides’s legalistic writings and their implications for understanding Maimonides the theologian or philosopher. To a great extent, this is also the case with Abraham Abulafia, who also resorted to linguistic mysticism and to some form of astral magic, despite the substantial modifications he introduced into the Maimonidean mode of thought as described above. In my opinion, he grafted linguistic methods and speculations onto a philosophical religion as he understood it, mainly in the Maimonidean version, thereby creating an ecstatic religion that consisted in the search for experiences he called prophecy, while others envisioned these experiences as a union with the intellectual world.

Both types of experiences are repeatedly mentioned in Abulafia’s writings, and this is the reason why I understand his ideals as more comprehensive than the pursuit of experiences of revelations that can be described as prophecy alone. Hence my

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**116** See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 203, 397–98, note 154; Rabbi Moses de Leon, *The Book of the Pomegranate*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 36–38, 390–92; Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 256, note 161; and Avishai bar-Asher, “Penance and Fasting in the Writings of Rabbi Moses de Leon and the Zoharic Polemic with Contemporary Christian Monasticism,” *Kabbalah* 25 (2011): 300–303.

**117** See Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, *Ginnat Egoz* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Ahavah we-Ḥayyim, 1989), 168, 340–41, 345–47, as well as his critique of Maimonides in his *Haššagot*. See chapter 5 note 210 below.

resort to the term “ecstatic Kabbalah” covers unitive and/or prophetic valences, as well as precise techniques. Let me emphasise something that in my opinion is self-evident: Abulafia cultivated ecstatic experiences of more than one type. At the same time, he created an extensive literature devoted to describing his original techniques for reaching ecstatic experiences as he imagined them. In principle, an ecstatic mystic does not have to create a literature that is ecstatic in its main target: he may not create any literature at all.

However, in the case of the main schools of Kabbalah in Provence, Catalonia, and Castile, Kabbalists had their own systems; namely, theosophies, which, different as they are from each other, are nevertheless sharply different from and incompatible with Maimonides’s metaphysics. This does not mean that Kabbalists were not acquainted with Maimonides’s books, or, at least, with his ideas. As I understand it, what they decided to adapt from his writings was a few disparate themes that did not affect their major concerns which were founded in the theosophical-theurgical model. In short, unlike Abulafia’s profound conceptual structure, which is fundamentally Neo-Aristotelian, nothing as significant as a profound structure shaped by Neo-Aristotelianism can be discerned in earlier and contemporary theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. Without being aware of the structural and conceptual differences between the different literatures, the different literary genres, and the specific nomenclatures that were dominant in their writings, scholars may only deal with marginal themes and exaggerate the significance of their findings, reflecting a dimension that is actually much less significant than they are inclined to believe.

Nevertheless, the development of Jewish thought in the thirteenth century should be seen in a more integrated manner than it has been previously. It should be seen as a domain constituted of diverging trends that are simultaneously competing, criticising, and enriching each other. If the Jewish philosophers, following earlier sources, introduced the importance of constant order, the idea of the organised cosmos, to be found in both God and reality, the main line of Kabbalah elaborated on the importance of the divine dynamic nature, which is dependent on human activity, a phenomenon that I propose to call theurgy.<sup>118</sup> This phenomenon that sees the dy-

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**118** See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 173–99; Moshe Idel, “From Structure to Performance: On the Divine Body and Human Action in the Kabbalah” [Hebrew], *Mišqafayyim* 32 (1998): 3–6; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 3, 13, 31, 60, 67, 73–74; Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 7, 11, 16–18, 68, 114–15, 120–21; Moshe Idel, “On the Performing Body in Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah: Some Preliminary Remarks,” in *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, eds. Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009): 251–71; Moshe Idel, “Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah,” *JJTP* 3 (1993): 111–30; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 33–34, 47, 215–20; Idel, “On the Identity of the Authors of Two Ashkenazi Commentaries to the Poem *ha-Aderet we-ha-Emunah*”; Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale: les rites qui font Dieu* (Paris: Verdier, 1993); Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God, Halakhah and Aggadah* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004); Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005); Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times* 3 (1988): 41–



namic order as dependent on human actions was central for the development of Kabbalah from its historical inception in the last third of the twelfth century. Understanding Abulafia should therefore take the path of a person at the crossroads of a variety of intellectual trends choosing paths that he deems to be cogent to his thought. The nature of his choice can be discerned by examining some of this Kabbalist's texts which have not received due attention in scholarship.

Let me point out one of the major frameworks of the present book. In recent years, the focus of scholarship concerning Abulafia's sources has moved in two new directions. The most visible tendency has been the emphasis on his interactions with Christianity and its impact on his thought. This tendency can be found in the studies by Hames, Wolfson, Sagerman, and, more recently and to a lesser degree Pedaya, all of whom claim the existence of new facets of this impact,<sup>119</sup> going far beyond what I already proposed on this topic in my earlier work.<sup>120</sup> The second new direction has been the suggestion regarding the greater influence of Sufism on the ecstatic Kabbalist, as Hames and Pedaya claimed to have discerned.<sup>121</sup> In this study, only some aspects of the first of the two recent trends will be discussed.

It should be stressed from the very beginning that the existence of such influences, even if they were proven, does not affect the possibility of Abulafia having a centre of gravity that is conceptually different from those specific sources. The existence of divergent types of sources does not, in my opinion, constitute a problem, and these suggestions, even if they were proven—of which I am far from being convinced—do not have to be understood as exclusive in regard to the much more decisive impact of Maimonidean thought on Abulafia, coupled as it also is with other Andalusian philosophical sources.

However, the problem with those other proposals is that they have been articulated without the support of explicit references that could be found in Abulafia's writings on specific books or authors, without the discovery of the existence of specific terminology shared in a historical background, before a serious inspection of the alternative sources that Abulafia himself mentions in his books, and, finally, without making any attempt to explore the range and depth of the impact of those

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79. For the theurgical aspects of Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi's thought, see his *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 40, 274, and Mopsik, *Chemins de la cabale*, 150, 218, 220, 356, 509 (who believes this Kabbalist to be a Spanish author!).

119 See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*; and Haviva Pedaya, "The Sixth Millennium: Millenarism and Messianism in the *Zohar*" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 72 (2012): 85–87.

120 See, for example, *Messianic Mystics*, 295–301.

121 See Haviva Pedaya, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2002), 195–98 and Harvey J. Hames, "A Seal within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings," *Medieval Encounters* 11 (2006): 153–72. For my assessment as to the importance of the Muslim influence on Kabbalah, see "Orienting, Orientalizing or Disorienting the Study of Kabbalah: 'An Almost Absolutely Unique' Case of Occidentalism," *Kabbalah* 2 (1997): 13–48, with references to my previous discussions on this topic.

sources which Abulafia actually repeatedly says nourished his thought. This is the reason why even a tentative acquaintance with merely the titles of those sources—and even more with their contents—is absolutely necessary before making more solid claims as to possible contributions of additional sources to Abulafia's thought that were not explicitly mentioned by the ecstatic Kabbalist.

Nevertheless, let me emphasise that it is important that attempts have been made to point towards alternative understandings of Abulafia's thought and thus to open the possibility of addressing his views in a broader perspective. However, laudable as such efforts are in principle (indeed, references to non-Jewish sources may open the possibility of a better understanding of the influences on Jewish thought that existed at that time), they should be judged not by their originality, but by their explanatory power.<sup>122</sup> Without being aware of what Abulafia's selective affinities and more comprehensive worldview were, it is difficult to see what is merely a marginal borrowing in his thought and what material constitutes the profound structures that informed it. That his thought is essentially noetic points to Abulafia's being part of the history of Maimonideanism. Moreover, his political esotericism dramatically differentiates him from the vast majority of Kabbalists.

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<sup>122</sup> See my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 33.



## II Abraham Abulafia's Studies and Teaching

### 4 Abulafia's Studies of Philosophy and Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*

In contrast to the manner of its development, which had been documented for almost a century, a momentous change in the history of Kabbalah took place in Barcelona sometime in 1270, when Abraham ben Shmuel Abulafia, a student of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, became a Kabbalist through the study of *Sefer Yeşirah* and its commentaries. Though some other Kabbalists in his generation underwent similar intellectual metamorphoses, that is, shifting from philosophy to Kabbalah,<sup>1</sup> Abulafia's adherence to or invention of a certain specific type of Kabbalah differs from that of any other in that he became a Kabbalist without changing his allegiance to his earlier studies. After this shift, he also continued to teach and promote the study of philosophy by writing commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*. Though he certainly subordinated philosophy to his own Kabbalah, the latter was nevertheless conceived as problematic without the prior impact of the former.

Moreover, philosophy was regarded as necessary for supplying the conceptual keys to a self-understanding of the highest forms of religious experiences, as well as for achieving a more accurate theological picture.<sup>2</sup> In fact, for the ecstatic Kabbalist, without philosophy, Kabbalah has no superior significance, since its contents should be tested by resorting to philosophical criteria. Abulafia's understanding of Kabbalah was that it was "intellectual." To be sure: philosophy may be regarded, at least in theory, as a relatively early phase in his career that he deserted or transcended through the study of Kabbalah. However, this is far from being the correct understanding of his evolution, because many philosophical concepts remain crucial for discerning between truth and falsehood along the mystical way, be it in Abulafia's hermeneutics or in his mystical experiences; his main goals, prophecy and mystical union, were defined in definitively philosophical terms.<sup>3</sup>

It is plausible that Abulafia also wrote books of philosophy that are no longer extant or identified as his. In his *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, written in 1282, he writes that until 1279, "he did not compose a single book that was designated as prophetic" despite the fact that he wrote many other books of *ḥokhmot* and a small number of them were books on the secrets of the Torah."<sup>4</sup> I do not see a better

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1 See Idel, "The Kabbalah's 'Window of Opportunities,'" 171–208; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 2.

2 See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 144–45; Abulafia, *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 24.

3 For an alternative view, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 77–78. For the existence of more than one main type of mystical union in Judaism, see my "Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, eds. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Macmillan, 1989): 27–58.

4 *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 57:

English word for *ḥokhmot* than “sciences,” a topic that in the Middle Ages belonged to philosophy in a broad sense. The number of Kabbalistic books written by Abulafia before 1279 is small, but it should be mentioned that a decade later, he argued that he also composed books of grammar that were “sufficient for grammarians to study.”<sup>5</sup>

However, a scholar's perception of Abulafia's philosophical background depends on the manner in which they understand Maimonides's thought. Indeed, Maimonides's esoteric theology is a matter of hot debate among modern scholars, just as it was among his medieval followers and opponents. Given the fact that Abulafia also adopted an esoteric approach of his own, the precise extent of his esoteric views, which I see as strongly depending on Maimonides and his perception of Maimonides's secrets, is not so easy to fathom. Given the proliferation of secrets in his own writings, in two of his major speculative sources, that is, his philosophical sources, Maimonides and ibn Ezra, and in quite a different manner in the Ashkenazi literature, it is a challenge to explore the details of this Kabbalist's esotericism; this is the reason why so little has been done in this area.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there can be no doubt that Abulafia had other secrets that differed from those of Maimonides, especially those related to divine names and eschatology.

It is in these complex contexts that the following pages are written: my purpose is not only to point out Maimonides's overwhelming impact on Abulafia—a fact recognised in principle by scholars in many cases,<sup>7</sup> though more rhetorically than substantially—but to focus my discussions on the esoteric aspects involved in Abulafia's appropriation of Maimonides's esotericism and his affinities—phenomenological and perhaps also historical—with the radical positions of some of the Maimonideans. Though I have already attempted to do so in some of my other works,<sup>8</sup> this arduous task has been neglected in the more recent studies dealing with Abulafia's thought, which are inclined to read his Kabbalah in what I see as the opposite direction;

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אבל עד השנה ההיא לא חיבר ספר שיחסהו לשם נבואה כלל אע"פ שחבר ספרי חכמות אחרים רבים ומקצתם הם ספרי סתרי קבלה.

5 Abraham Abulafia, “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” in *Ginzei Ḥokhmot ha-Qabbalah*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Leipzig: A. M. Colditz, 1853), 18:

שחברתי בדקדוק עוד ספרים מספיקים ללומדיהם, עד שיקראו בעלי דקדוק בדורויו והכל יודעים כפי הצורך.

6 See my “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia” [Hebrew], in *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought: Essays in Honor of Aviezer Ravitzky*, eds. Benjamin Brown, Menachem Lorberbaum, Avinoam Rosnak, and Yedidiah Z. Stern (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2012): 1:387–409.

7 See the list of references to scholarship dealing with this point collected by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 153–54, 158–60, and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 126. Scholem refers to Abulafia's admiration for the Great Eagle as “lifelong.”

8 For some examples, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 131, 177–78, note 350, 210, note 33; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 12, 51, 145, 165, 176, 177, 180–81, note 173, 195–96; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 21, 35, 36, 41, note 10, 85, note 22; Moshe Idel, “Types of Redemptive Activities in Middle Ages” [Hebrew], in *Messianism and Eschatology*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1984): 259–63; and Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 88–89, etc.

namely, as closer to theosophical Kabbalah, as we shall see further below. Whether such a reading can ignore Abulafia's explicit and profound adherence to Maimonides's thought is a rather central question needing a separate and detailed study, which has not yet been produced.

My main concern here is to illustrate Abulafia's adherence to some major Maimonidean speculative approaches and to some concepts found in similar philosophical sources. However, as well as providing a continuation of the Great Eagle's thought, as many Maimonideans did, Abulafia also radicalises some ideas, whether or not they actually constitute part of Maimonides's esoteric views. Abulafia also combined them with conceptual elements that are entirely alien to Maimonides's thought. As we shall see, the fact that he resorted to more traditional forms of speculation related to the Hebrew language and to divine names and their permutations and numerical calculations does not mitigate his radical philosophical understandings of religion, but rather, in some cases, strengthened them through the creation of the sorts of proofs that no philosopher would produce. However, in order to address the sources and nature of his esotericism, let me begin with some important biographical information that describes the background for the young Abulafia's immersion in the study of Maimonides and other philosophical writings. I will then situate him as a part of the Maimonidean tradition as described above.

Unlike any other thirteenth-century Kabbalist, such as Moses de Leon or Joseph Gikatilla, whose conceptual beginnings and reasons for their development are either unknown or at best very vague, in Abulafia's case, there is incomparably more biographical material, which allows for the construction of a clear and elaborate picture of his life and the evolution of his studies. His quite prolific literary production, mostly undertaken under adverse conditions during a life of peregrinations, contains a great deal of information that I consider to be reliable. It allows for a much better reconstruction of his biography and thought; it also provides the opportunity to identify the wide spectrum of sources that he studied and was inspired by.

In order to do so, one should undertake a careful perusal of all the extant documents containing his views and not rely on the analysis of only one instance in his opus among many others, as has sometimes been done in dominant forms of scholarship on this Kabbalist. We will have the opportunity to deal with examples of misunderstandings of his view due to reliance on a single discussion among many others that are available later on in this study.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, let me insist on the importance of scholars' awareness of different registers for understanding Abulafia's esoteric thought as paramount for a full picture of his views; the present study is an effort to put this assessment on the table.

As with many other prolific Kabbalists, Abulafia's thought ought to be approached from the perspective that it contains a certain amount of conceptual fluidity. In his case, one of the reasons for this fluidity is the variety of conceptually different sour-

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<sup>9</sup> See below, chapter 9 note 91.

ces that he admitted to having studied, as we shall see below. In addition to this evident fact, we should take into consideration the fact that he addressed different audiences<sup>10</sup> and the variety of literary genres he used in his writings: poems, epistles, commentaries, and handbooks of mystical techniques. This variety is unparalleled by any other person writing in the field of Kabbalah, either the earlier Kabbalists or his contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Nahmanides and some of his followers also wrote in literary genres other than Kabbalah, but their proper Kabbalistic activity was limited to hinting at the secrets of the Torah to the few Kabbalists who studied with them.

The assumption of conceptual fluidity does not easily work with the theory of political esotericism, since what may be described as a diachronic change or a synchronic type of fluidity may be understood, following Strauss's opinion, as hiding the true esoteric view. However, despite this genuine methodological conflict, I propose not to abide by one single type of explanation. That there are secrets in Abulafia's writings is an undeniable fact that is explicitly repeated in numerous cases. It is not a preconceived theoretical assumption that is externally imposed. At the same time, his shift from the study of philosophy to a specific kind of Kabbalah, which may be referred to as a diachronic type of fluidity, is well-documented from his writings, as we shall see below.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, even in the later Kabbalistic period, we may discern a variety of meanings attributed to the same term, such as *'aravot*, which we will discuss later in chapter 8.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, potentially confusing and conflicting as these different moves may be, they should nevertheless be seriously taken into consideration so that we may determine what Abulafia's views were, the direction in which his thought moved, and whether he is actually hiding something when he claims that there is a secret concerning a specific topic that he treats.

Indubitably, there is a difference between this Kabbalist's earlier books and his later ones.<sup>14</sup> The existence of more than one commentary on the same topic—namely, on each of the thirty-six secrets of the *Guide*—allows a comparison between the versions of Abulafia's thought. From my perusal of the versions of his commentaries on the secrets, the differences between them are quite conspicuous, although their general structure (literary genre) and profound conceptual structure are quite similar. However, Abulafia's fluidity does not mean that we may see his thought as coinciding with the range of fluidity of other Kabbalists, or even as overlapping with it in a significant manner. The range of conceptual fluidity may differ dramatically from one school to another in their breadth and content, which means that the scholarly ap-

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**10** See Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar's testimony about his master, who was most probably Abulafia, in *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478. See also below chapter 8 note 30 and Appendix E, note 219.

**11** For a survey of Abulafia's writings, see Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 3–68. In the following, I shall also refer to some writings that were not identified or described in that early phase of my studies in the 1970s.

**12** See below, p. 46.

**13** See below, p. 313.

**14** See "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 7.

proach that deals with disparate themes alone blurs the differences between different schools or individuals when their views are seen in their entirety.

In general terms, we may discern the existence of conceptual poles that can be understood as being sometimes contradictory in Abulafia's writings: a Kabbalist emphasising esotericism who nevertheless wrote approximately fifty books and propagated his doctrine openly and orally "in each town and market," as he wrote in one of his poems,<sup>15</sup> even among Christians and, unsuccessfully, to the pope; or his interest in a logocentric philosophical approach alongside his emphasis on an overt one; or as a Spanish Kabbalist drawing from Ashkenazi esoteric traditions while remaining a faithful follower of Maimonides's philosophy; or as someone claiming to be a Messiah without preaching the traditional forms of popular messianism, such as the imminent return of the Jewish nation to the Land of Israel, the building of the third Temple, or apocalyptic redemption.

Abulafia's approach to the commandments differs significantly from one discussion to the next, an issue that requires a new detailed analysis of the topic based on Abulafian material that has not yet been addressed in scholarship.<sup>16</sup> In general, Abulafia's attempt to offer a linguistic reform after Maimonides's mentalist reform, which he profoundly interiorised, created new complexities that prevented the sustained articulation of too stable a worldview, this being one of the reasons for his conceptual fluidity. Those contradictory positions should, however, not be confused with paradoxical approaches, since they were not openly articulated in the same context.

However, despite the fact that Abulafia was speaking from a variety of different conceptual perspectives, he did have a privileged position that he conceived as esoteric, while others who dealt with the same topic were conceived as exoteric and less important. This discrepancy may also be rhetorical, with different emphases in different books.<sup>17</sup> However, even when taking into consideration the spectrum of different opinions found in Abulafia's writings, it is surprising to see how small the overlap between any of those views is; or, for that matter, between his ecstatic model<sup>18</sup> and those that are dominant in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, the theology of the divine Glory (*Kavod*) as found in various forms in Jewish philosophy, or Hasidei Ashkenaz, which is found in some of the books that he had clearly read. Nor is his type of discourse a matter of simple eclecticism, since Abulafia only rarely lumped

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15 See the opening poem to his *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, ed. Gross, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Nehora Press, 1999), 45: אדלג כאריה בכל עיר ומגרש.

16 See, meanwhile, below chapter 8 note 15; chapter 8 note 52; chapter 8 note 68; chapter 10 note 143; chapter 10 note 160; chapter 10 note 161; chapter 10 note 182; chapter 10 note 193; chapter 19 note 218; chapter 21 note 246; chapter 22 note 361; chapter 24 note 28; chapter 26 note 139; chapter 27 note 203, and especially chapter 27.

17 For example, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, his commentary on the secrets of the *Guide*, presents a much more radical approach to the validity of tradition and commandments in comparison to his later and more conservative book *Šomer Mišwah*.

18 See Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 53–65.

together quotes from different sources without interpreting them in a way that served his spiritual interests.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the material he adopted underwent profound conceptual transformations that reflected his major interests and ignored the ideitic contexts of the adapted material.

Let me turn to what can be envisioned as the first formative period in Abulafia's development from the conceptual point of view as described in a document which, though printed several times, has scarcely been analysed in detail and remains underestimated in scholarship on Maimonideanism. As he testifies, perhaps both before 1270 and afterwards, he remained involved in studying and teaching Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. I will translate and analyse his own report of his study and teaching of the *Guide*, a unique document in the intellectual history of the Jewish Middle Ages.

In the summer of 1260, either on his way to find the legendary river of Sambation in the Land of Israel or on his way back, Abulafia visited Greece, in the Byzantine Empire, where he married his wife. Sometime at the very beginning of the 1260s, he took her to Italy. This we learn from one of his richest and most important autobiographical confessions, which concerns the circumstances of his involvement with *The Guide of the Perplexed*. I will divide this passage into two parts, [a] and [b],<sup>20</sup> and will analyse the content of paragraph [a] in detail here. Its continuation [b] will be dealt with in the following chapter. Abulafia writes:

[a] And I headed to the Waters of Ravenna<sup>21</sup> in order to study Torah,<sup>22</sup> and while I was in the city of Capua—which is five days' distance from Rome—I found there a noble man, sagacious and wise, a philosopher and an expert physician, Rabbi Hillel, blessed be his memory,<sup>23</sup> and I be-

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**19** Abulafia's types of discourse, which combines extensive linguistic methods of presentation with Aristotelian allegoresis, differ from those of any of the other authors before him in the thirteenth century and deserve a special study. See, meanwhile, Moshe Idel, "Multilingual Gematrias in Abraham Abulafia and Their Significance: From the Bible to Text to Language," in *Nit'ei Ilan: Studies in Hebrew and Related Fields Presented to Ilan Eldar* [Hebrew], eds. Moshe Bar Asher and Irit Meir (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2014): 193–223. To be sure, there are additional examples of multilingual gematria in his writings; one of them is found in the quote to be adduced below from Abulafia's text in Ms. Paris, BN 770, fol. 208a.

**20** The two parts constitute one bigger text, [b] being a direct continuation of [a]. [b] will be dealt with in the next chapter.

**21** מי רביני. My translation of the text from Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1580, which has been accepted by some scholars, differs from Jelinek's reading and that of all the other scholars who followed him. I interpret it as referring to the waters of Ravenna because of the fact that that town is found at the confluence of two rivers. This means that after his journey in the Middle East, Abulafia first arrived in northern Italy and only later moved on to Capua. On the grounds of his testimony here, it seems that he remained in Capua for a few years at least.

**22** This event took place when Abulafia was in his early twenties, around 1261. For his wandering in order to study Torah, see Abulafia's testimony in *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 120a, 17.

**23** Rabbi Hillel of Verona died several years after Abulafia wrote this passage; I assume that the last phrase is either an addition by the later copyist of Abulafia's book that is extant in a unique manuscript or that it is actually a misunderstanding of the phrase ל"י which means "may God make him

friended him and I studied a little bit of the science of philosophy with him, and it immediately became very sweet to me<sup>24</sup> and I made an effort to learn it<sup>25</sup> with all my strength and all my power, day and night. And my mind did not relent until I had studied *The Guide of the Perplexed*, several times.<sup>26</sup>

The only teacher of matters of philosophy whom we know by name is Rabbi Hillel, a physician and a moderate Maimonidean thinker, and we shall have more to say about him later in this study. The manner in which this Rabbi Hillel is described, as well as the location of the encounter, undeniably points towards an identification of this figure with Rabbi Hillel ben Shmuel of Verona, a fact accepted by all scholars in this field. It seems as if the passage refers to a process that began with the study of some topics in medieval philosophy, while Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* might have been a somewhat later topic, as is also hinted by the passage from Abulafia's *Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah*.<sup>27</sup>

Joseph B. Sermoneta pointed out that Hillel was living in Naples, very close to Capua, from at least 1255 until sometime in the late 1270s.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Abulafia met Hillel at the beginning of his career, and his studies with Hillel were, most presumably, quite formative for the future Kabbalist's thought. Let me point out, however, that Hillel's name does not occur elsewhere in Abulafia's writings, even in instances where he deals with his studies of philosophy or the *Guide*, as we shall see later. This absence may seem surprising, but it should not, in my opinion, cast significant doubt on the accuracy of the testimony: also, his master in matters of ecstatic Kabbalah, Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, whose *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* he praised highly, was mentioned only once in Abulafia's entire opus, again in a list of books that he had studied, though his influence is quite obvious in many other places in

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live forever" and is found later in the text; in the latter case, the phrase was misinterpreted as ל"י: "blessed be his memory."

24 Compare this to the same imagery of sweetness in Abulafia's disciple's work *Ša'arei Šedeq*; see Rabbi Nathan, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 465, 477–78.

25 In the manuscript this is written במ, which seems to be a mistake for בה.

26 3:9, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1580, fols. 164a–164b, ed. Gross, 368:

ואשים פני לבוא עד ממי רביני ללמוד תורה. ואני בעיר קפואה קרוב לרומי מהלך חמשה ימים מצאתי שם איש נכבד חכם ונבון פילוסוף ורופא מומחה ושמו ר' הלל ז"ל ואתחברה אתו, ואלמוד לפניו מעט מחכמת הפילוסופיאה ומיד נמתקה לי מאד ואשתדל בידיעתה בכל כחי ובכל מאדי ואהגה בה יוםם ולילה, ולא נתקררה דעתי ממשבתתי עד שלמדתי מורה הנבוכים פעמי' רבות.

See also Joseph B. Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona and His Philosophy" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1961), 45–46, note 23; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 33, 96–97; and Yossef Schwartz, "Imagined Classrooms? Revisiting Hillel of Verona's Autobiographical Records," in *Schüler und Meister*, eds. Andreas Speer and Thomas Jeschke (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2016): 488–89. For the immediate continuation of this quote, see [b] in the next chapter, where I shall adduce the pertinent bibliography.

27 "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," in *Philosophie und Kabbala*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Leipzig: Heinrich Hunger, 1854), 1:14. The passage is translated in chapter 4 note 56 below.

28 Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 4–6.



his writings.<sup>29</sup> In any case, it seems that he never met his master again, and I do not see any corroborating data to sustain Hames's hypothesis that Abulafia remained in contact with Rabbi Hillel after the former left for Spain sometime towards the end of the 1260s.<sup>30</sup> Even less plausible is his other hypothesis that Abulafia could have later become Hillel's teacher in matters of the *Guide*.<sup>31</sup> I am not acquainted with any text that corroborates Hames's other claim that Rabbi Zerahyah Ḥen attributed the resort to gematria to Hillel.<sup>32</sup>

Before turning to other aspects of this passage, it is necessary to survey some chronological and conceptual quandaries that are related to its opening. The chronological one has to do with the testimony of Rabbi Hillel himself about his three-year stay in Barcelona at the beginning of the 1260s, where he studied with the famous Rabbinic figure Rabbi Jonah Gerondi. This unique testimony is found in the first letter that Rabbi Hillel sent to Rabbi Isaac ben Mordekhai,<sup>33</sup> also known as Maestro Gaio, who had been a physician to two different popes in Rome from 1288. The letter deals with Rabbi Hillel's sharp reaction against the anti-Maimonidean propaganda of Rabbi Solomon Petit, both generally and in Italy (Ferrara) in particular.<sup>34</sup> It is in this context that Rabbi Hillel mentions the burning of Maimonides's books in both Montpellier and Paris, though the latter event is unknown from any other source. Since this event is only reported in this document, scholars such as Yitzhak Baer,<sup>35</sup> Joseph B. Sermoneta,<sup>36</sup> and, more recently, Reimund Leicht<sup>37</sup> have doubted its authenticity.

Other scholars such as Israel M. Ta-Shma<sup>38</sup> and Harvey Hames<sup>39</sup> have independently accepted at least the veracity of Rabbi Hillel's report about Rabbi Jonah Gironde's change of mind regarding Maimonides that is included in Hillel's letter and nowhere else, and this approach has recently been strengthened in Yossef

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**29** See Israel Weinstock's appendix to his edition of Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1984), 53–62.

**30** See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 97.

**31** See Hames, 99.

**32** Hames, 34.

**33** See, however, Benjamin Richler, "An Additional Letter of Rabbi Hillel ben Samuel to Isaac ha-Rofe" [Hebrew], *QS* 62 (1988–89): 450–52; Richler doubts that the name "ben Mordekhai" is correct.

**34** The epistle was printed in *Ṭa'am Zeqenim*, ed. Eliezer Ashkenazi (Frankfurt am Main: 1854), fols. 70b–73a.

**35** Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1960), 485, note 60.

**36** Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 5–6, 11–16. See the somewhat more sceptical attitude of Warren Zev Harvey, "J. Sermoneta (ed.), Hillel ben Shemuel of Verona: *Sefer Tagmulei ha-Nefeš* (*Book of the Rewards of the Soul*), 1981" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 535, 537.

**37** Reimund Leicht, "Miracles for the Sake of the Master of Reason: Hillel ben Samuel of Verona's Legendary Account of the Maimonidean Controversy," *Micrologus* 21 (2013): 579–98.

**38** See his collection of *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature, Volume 2: Spain* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2004), 128–29, note 45.

**39** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 97.



Schwartz's study.<sup>40</sup> Doubting the presence of Rabbi Hillel in Barcelona, as Sermoneta does, would mean that there is no chronological problem with his encounter with Abulafia in Capua in late 1260 or 1261,<sup>41</sup> while accepting Hillel's studies in Barcelona with Rabbi Jonah Gerondi would mean that the meeting between Hillel and Abulafia in Capua perhaps took place later, around 1263 or 1264.<sup>42</sup>

In any case, let me point out that Barcelona, described by an early thirteenth-century inhabitant as "the city of princes," was one of the most important centres of Jewish culture in the thirteenth century.<sup>43</sup> It was also the place of origin of Rabbi Zerahyah Hen and the place where Abulafia would, during his visit in 1270 after his study of philosophy in southern Italy, study Kabbalah. It is in Barcelona that some years later, the Provençal figure Rabbi Qalonymus ben Qalonymus would study Arabic and begin his vast project of philosophical translations, including some of Averroes's writings (one of which he also translated into Latin), a project he would continue in Rome and Naples.<sup>44</sup> This town was famous enough that inventing a stay there, as well as in another important centre of Jewish culture, Montpellier, may have been part of claiming an allegedly advanced form of education.

There is a question that is more sensitive from our point of view here; namely, Sermoneta's claim about Rabbi Hillel's poor competence in matters of philosophy and *The Guide of the Perplexed*, at least in the early part of his sojourn in southern Italy in the period that is pertinent to his meeting with Abulafia.<sup>45</sup> If we accept Sermoneta's view that the early Rabbi Hillel of Verona was much more of a physician than a philosopher, although one who nevertheless later became the champion of a sort of Thomism in Judaism without a good prior acquaintance with the *Guide*, his role as an important initiator of Abulafia in matters of the *Guide* is certainly diminished, and subsequently his role as Abulafia's instructor becomes somewhat

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<sup>40</sup> Schwartz, "Imagined Classrooms?" See also his "Cultural Identity in Transmission: Language, Science, and the Medical Profession in Thirteenth-Century Italy," in *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, eds. Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017): 181–203, especially 190.

<sup>41</sup> See David Abulafia, "The Aragonese Kings of Naples and the Jews," in *The Jews of Italy, Memory and Identity*, eds. Bernard Dov Cooperman and Barbara Garvin (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2000): 82–106.

<sup>42</sup> See, however, Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 33, who, unaware of Sermoneta's discussions to the contrary, accepts the view found in Hillel's letter to Maestro Gaio that he studied in Barcelona; he therefore postpones the meeting with Abulafia in Capua to "after 1262." See also page 35, where he claims that Abulafia studied Kabbalah in the 1260s, thus shortening the period of his study of philosophy still further.

<sup>43</sup> See also my "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona." For the phrase "the city of princes" and its prominent status, see Bernard Septimus, "Piety and Power in 13th-Century Catalonia," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, 1:197–230.

<sup>44</sup> See Joseph Schatzmiller, "Iggeret ha-Hitnaşşelut ha-Kaţan," *Şefunot* 10 (1966): 9–52.

<sup>45</sup> Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 19, 46, note 23. Let me point out that no modern analysis of Rabbi Hillel's discussions of Maimonides's philosophy exists.

problematic. However, this sceptical approach to Hillel's account of his studies has recently been refuted.<sup>46</sup>

The manner in which Abulafia describes the encounter with Hillel does not, however, actually create a big problem, even if we accept Sermoneta's view of his visits abroad having been invented. First, we may read Abulafia's passage as referring to Rabbi Hillel only having initiated him in matters of philosophy, and even then only in a qualified manner ("a little bit"); we may also assume that he studied the *Guide* with someone else, though I am not convinced that this is the best way to understand the text, as we shall see below. What is certain is that Abulafia mentions philosophy twice in the context of Rabbi Hillel, and these references should be taken quite seriously given the fact that Abulafia displayed a concrete interest in the field from that time.

Given the fact that Rabbi Hillel's only early works were Hebrew translations of Latin medical works and that his original books were published much later in his career,<sup>47</sup> perhaps even shortly before Abulafia's death, what we may learn about his early views from his *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš* is quite limited. On the other hand, Hillel met the young Abulafia when the latter was not yet a Kabbalist and was not interested in Kabbalah, as we learn from one of his observations;<sup>48</sup> therefore, Abulafia could not have been influenced by Hillel's later views and could not have passed them on to people such as Dante, whom he met much later in his life. Dante, however, may have had access to them from another source.<sup>49</sup>

However, the above passage (paragraph [a]) about the beginning of Abulafia's studies in the field of philosophy is not unique in Abulafia's writings: there are other descriptions of the young Abulafia as an ardent student of the *Guide*. There are two parallel passages to the opening of paragraph [a] that are found in two of Abulafia's epistles. In one of them, he writes:

I studied twelve commentaries on it,<sup>50</sup> one better than the others, some of them [written] on the path of philosophy and some others on the path of prophecy. This was after I had studied some

<sup>46</sup> See Schwartz, "Imagined Classrooms?"

<sup>47</sup> For a list of those translations, see Leicht, "Miracles," 592–93.

<sup>48</sup> See *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:5, 155:

דע כי טרם שאדע שום קבלה בספר יצירה גם אני הייתי חולק חלוקה חזקה וקשה על אמתתו. ולכשיקובלתי מה שהיה ראוי לקבל בו לכל בעל קבלה, ר"ל מה שלא היה ראוי לשום חכם להיותו חסר מידיעתו, חזרתי בתשובה בו. וחלקתי על חולקיו כמו שראוי לעשות לכל שלם.

See also Idel, "*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries," 477–78. This picture is also corroborated by another text, found in his epistle "*Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah*," 22, to be discussed below in chapter 5.

<sup>49</sup> Compare to Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 49–50, and Irène Rosier-Catach, "Sur Adam et Babel: Dante et Aboulafia," in *En Mémoire de Sophie Kessler-Mesguish*, eds. Jean Baumgarten, José Costa, Jean Patrick Guillaume, and Judith Kogel (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012): 115–40, especially 133, where she suggests the possibility of the mediation of Immanuel of Rome. See also below chapter 14 note 42.

<sup>50</sup> Namely, *Sefer Yeširah*. On the list of the twelve commentaries on this book and their role in Abulafia's Kabbalah, see my "*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries," 494–95.

of the books of Aristotle about natural sciences<sup>51</sup> and metaphysics,<sup>52</sup> since I only studied the mathematical sciences a little,<sup>53</sup> since I did not find them translated into our language, which alone is the Holy Language and the others are profane, not holy, and “blessed be He who distinguishes between holy and profane.”<sup>54</sup> And afterwards, I studied *The Guide of the Perplexed* a great many times, until I understood how one part of it is linked to another part of it, since I compared its chapters to one another,<sup>55</sup> and the demonstrative proof of it is the science of combination.<sup>56</sup>

Here again, we learn about the same sequence of topics that were studied: more general philosophical studies first, then the study of *The Guide of the Perplexed* and some other books of Jewish philosophy, and only later, as we know from several other sources, linguistic Kabbalah related to *Sefer Yeşirah* and its commentaries. The end of the quote should be understood in the correct perspective: he compared the content of the various chapters of the *Guide*, as Maimonides indeed recommended, but he did not then use the technique of combining letters, remarking on the similarity between the two phenomena only much later.

As we learn from this passage, Abulafia did not know Arabic, since he admits that he had only limited access to books on arithmetic, geometry, music, and astron-

51 See Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, 32, where he mentions the books about natural sciences.

52 Abulafia quotes Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:1, 303; 3:5, 319; 3:7, 327; and 3:8, 337. For Abulafia's remarks on Aristotle's *Organon*, see *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 114; 1:10, 185–86; and 3:8, 338. As opposed to Abulafia's generally positive attitude towards Aristotle that can be found in most of the cases in which he mentions him by name, Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi has a completely negative approach to this philosopher, and in some cases also to Maimonides, in an important passage of his *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 146–47.

53 This sequel is paralleled in his testimony in the epistle “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 18:

אני ש"ל כבר סדרתי למודי ולמדתי המקרא ודקדוקי הפעולה די ספקי עד שחברתי בדקדוק עוד ספרים מספיקים ללומדיהם עד שיקראו בעלי דקדוק בדורינו זה כל יודעם כפי הצורך, ולמדתי תלמוד גמרא (א) ופסק משני מורים עד שהספיק לי ממנו לדעת קצת המצות, ולמדתי דרשות ואגדות ובריייתות למוד בינוני, ולמדתי הגיון וחכמת הטבע וקצת הלמודים בלי עמקה, ולמדתי חכמת האלוהות על דרך המחקר, ולמדתי מקצת חכמת הרפואות מפני ידיעת עניני הגופים והתחלפותם בעבור שיש לה מבוא גדול בחכמת הטבע וכן חולין, ולמדתי המורה הנקרא מורה הנבוכים מורה באמת בעומקה מופלאה עם סתריו ועממו המלמד וספר האמונות לר' סעדיה וספר חובות הלבבות לרבינו בחיי, וכל אלה עם ספרי אברהם בן עזרא בחכמתו הניעוני והביאוני לבקש סוד הספירות והשמות ודרכי החותמות.

54 See *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 29a.

55 This is the way in which Maimonides himself recommends that his book should be studied. See Shlomo Pines's introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:15. On this seminal passage, see Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 64–65, and Menachem Lorberbaum, “A Filigree of Language and Narrative: Translating Maimonides's *Guide*” [Hebrew], in *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought*, 1:183–84.

56 Abraham Abulafia, “Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah,” 14:

ואני למדתי עליו יב' פירושו זה מעולה מזה, קצתם על דרך פילוסופית וקצתם דרך נבואית. זה היה אחרי ל[ן]מדי מקצת ספרי אריסטו בטבעיות ובאלהיות. כי מן הלימודיות מעט למדתי מפני שלא מצאתים מועתקים בלשוננו שהוא לשון קודש לבדה ואין זולתה קודש כי אם חול וברוך המבדיל בין קדש לחול. ואחרי ל[ן]מדי מורה הנבוכים פעמים רבות מאד עד שהבנתי ממנו איך נקשר קצתו בקצתו. כי השבתי פרקיו זה על זה, והמופת על זאת חכמת הצירוף.

Compare this to what Abulafia wrote in his *Sitrei Torah*, 35–36, as well as to Moshe Idel, “On the History of the Interdiction against the Study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 16.

omy (known as the quadrivium) that were available in that language.<sup>57</sup> Abulafia also studied and later taught the *Guide*, which was originally written in Arabic, in ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation. Let me point out that his studies of philosophy in Hebrew were not a choice made due to the holiness of Hebrew versus the profane nature of other languages, but rather a matter of his not being able to read pertinent material that was found solely in Arabic.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that we may easily discern from his books that Abulafia was well-acquainted with astronomy, which is part of the *limudiyot*, and even with some forms of astral magic, as we will see below.<sup>58</sup> Especially important in this context is the impact of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, who had already offered an astral interpretation of Judaism, as we shall see in chapter 7 below. As to his study of the natural sciences, it should be noticed that he mentions Aristotle's *Meteorology*,<sup>59</sup> which was translated into Hebrew in the early thirteenth century by Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon and which was studied by many Maimonideans as part of their naturalist proclivity.<sup>60</sup> Abulafia's acquaintance with two of the most important of Aristotle's books that contributed to a naturalistic understanding of religion among Maimonides's followers is, therefore, obvious and fits the gist of his treatment of a variety of topics; for example, the two tablets of the Law, as we shall see in chapter 16. These works were also used by two of his contemporaries, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Zerahyah Hen. According to another testimony, Abulafia was acquainted with *De Anima*, a book authored by what he calls a "well-known philosopher," which is most likely a reference to Aristotle.<sup>61</sup>

In another epistle entitled "We-Zot li-Yehudah," Abulafia confesses that he studied Rabbinic topics, logic, natural and mathematical sciences, and the "science of

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57 This means that he also did not have access to other forms of literature in his surroundings; writings that can be defined as containing mystical philosophy, like those of ibn Masarra, were never mentioned in his writings. See Sarah Stroumsa and Sara Sviri, "The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in Al-Andalus: ibn Masarra and His *Epistle on Contemplation*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 36 (2009): 201–53.

58 See below, chapter 19 note 211 and Appendix A note 64.

59 See *Sefer ha-Melammed*, ed. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2002), 23, and *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 284, 285.

60 On the importance of this book in thirteenth-century Jewish thought, see Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 139–56. See also Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Otot ha-Shamayim: Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew Version of Aristotle's Meteorology*, ed. Resianne Fontaine (Leiden: Brill, 1995) and Robinson, "We Drink Only from the Master's Water."

61 See *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 18. I wonder whether Abulafia was acquainted with Rabbi Zerahyah Hen (Gracian's) translation into Hebrew. See Aristotle's *De Anima. Translated into Hebrew by Zerahyah ben Isaac ben Shealtiel Hen. A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Gerrit Bos (Leiden: Brill, 1994). In any case, Zerahyah's translation of Al-Fārābī's treatise on the essence of the intellect is found in a manuscript that was copied in Rome as early as 1284; this manuscript contains Kabbalistic material that Abulafia might have brought from Barcelona. See Moshe Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 1:38, note 14; 43, note 10; 235, note 25.

divinity” according to the view of the philosophers,<sup>62</sup> quite an important observation made late in his career. He writes:

I studied the *Guide* that is called *The Guide of the Perplexed*, a guide indeed, in wondrous depth, together with its secrets, and together with it the *Malmad*,<sup>63</sup> and the book of *Beliefs* by Rabbi Sa'adyah,<sup>64</sup> and the book of the *Duties of the Heart* by our Rabbi Baḥya.<sup>65</sup> And all these, together with the books of Abraham ibn Ezra,<sup>66</sup> [written] in his wisdom, brought me to pursue the secrets of the *sefirot*,<sup>67</sup> and of the names, and of the paths of the seals. And all that has been mentioned brought me to the pretension of wisdom, in my opinion, but not to the boasting of prophecy.<sup>68</sup>

**62** Abraham Abulafia, “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” in *Ginzei Ḥokhmat ha-Qabbalah*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Leipzig: A. M. Colditz, 1853), 18:

ולמדתי הגיון וחכמת הטבע וקצת הלמודים בלי עמקה, ולמדתי חכמת האלוהות על דרך המחקר.

For the full context of this quote, see chapter 4 note 56 above. Interestingly enough, he never mentions the study of the science of divinity according to Kabbalistic theosophical sources. For a similar confession, see also his *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 36–37, a book written in 1273. According to two Abulafian sources, philosophers had been described as being “without religion”: *beli dat*. See Moshe Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: Between Magic of Names and Kabbalah of Names” [Hebrew], *Maḥanayyim* 14 (2003): 88, note 42, 89, note 51. The phrase is also found in the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Baḥya's *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, a book that Abulafia studied, as we shall see in chapter 4 note 65 below.

**63** Namely, Rabbi Jacob Anatoli's *Sefer Malmad ha-Talmidim*. Those two books are also mentioned together in *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 356, and in *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmat*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 89.

**64** Rabbi Sa'adyah Gaon's well-known *Sefer ha-Emunot we-ha-De'ot* was translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Judah ibn Tibbon.

**65** Namely, Rabbi Baḥya ibn Paqudah's classic book translated into Hebrew from Arabic by Rabbi Judah ibn Tibbon. See Sara Sviri, “Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: The Cases of Baḥya ibn Paqudah and Judah Halevi,” *Donaire* 6 (1996): 78–84. Abulafia adopted an important aspect of his mysticism from this book: the centrality of inner war as part of spiritual life. See Moshe Idel, “The Battle of the Urges: Psychomachia in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia” [Hebrew], in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture*, ed. Avriel Bar-Levav (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2006): 99–143. Though there are also many other sources for this view, especially in Islam, this book seems to be the most plausible of Abulafia's sources. This is also the case of the feeling of delight related to the ecstatic experience as found in ibn Paqudah's book and in Sufism. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 188–89. Interestingly enough, views of the pre-Maimonidean thinkers ibn Ezra and ibn Paqudah were adopted when describing the highest noetic experience.

**66** On Abulafia's acquaintance with several of ibn Ezra's books, see chapter 7 below.

**67** Following the Pythagorean interpretation offered by ibn Ezra, I assume that the term *sefirot* should be understood here as “numbers.”

**68** Abulafia, “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 18–19, corrected according to Ms. New York, JTS 1887:

ולמדתי המורה הנקרא מורה הנבוכים, מורה באמת בעומקה מופלאה עם סתרו, ועמו המלמד, וספר האמונות לר' סעדיה וספר חובות הלבבות לרבינו בחיי. וכל אלה עם ספרי אברהם בן עזרא בחכמתו הניעוני והביאוני לבקש סוד הספירות והשמות ודרכי החתמות וכל הנוצר לפי דעתי לא הביאוני אל תפארת הנבואה, אבל הביאוני אל התהלות החכמה. For a discussion of the longer text that includes this passage, see “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 494–95. For a similar list of philosophical sources, see Abulafia's *Šomer Mišwah*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 27, where he also mentions Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol's moralistic work *Tiqqun Mid-dot ha-Nefeš* in addition to Maimonides, Sa'adyah, Baḥya, ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides.

It is possible that the study of the *Guide* took place together with other books of Jewish philosophy, most plausibly after the study of at least some philosophical books, especially those of Aristotle and the commentaries on them, as we shall see below. These two latter passages are solely concerned with what Abulafia studied and not what he taught, and the second passage is introduced as part of his response to the claim of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret or some others, as implied in Abulafia's epistle, that he had not studied sufficiently.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere, Abulafia explicitly mentions Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Peruṣ Millim Zarot*:<sup>70</sup> a small dictionary of philosophical terms that ibn Tibbon translated from Arabic into Hebrew. It is plausible that Abulafia had also seen a short composition by this author that dealt with the question of divine providence, given that he refers to ibn Tibbon's discussion of this issue in his "treatise."<sup>71</sup> Abulafia was also acquainted with *Ruah Ḥen*, a short and widespread philosophical treatise whose author is not known.<sup>72</sup> One manuscript of this text includes an appendix dealing with the philosophical theories of names copied in a still-unprinted fragment from Abulafia's *Mafteaḥ ha-Ra'ayon*, which is extant in a truncated manner in the surviving manuscripts and in the printed edition.<sup>73</sup>

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69 See Abulafia, "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 18, and Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret's well-known responsum 1, no. 548.

70 Quoted in his *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 7. On this treatise, see James T. Robinson, "Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Peruṣ ha-Millot ha-Zarot* and al-Fārābī's *Eisagoge* and *Categories*," *Aleph* 9 (2009): 41–76.

71 See his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 143. The text was printed by Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence." Abulafia's own position, neglected by Diesendruck, differs from that of ibn Tibbon, and he assumes that according to Maimonides, divine providence is related not to corporeal issues, but only to spiritual ones, a view found later in Narboni. See Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," 349–51. See also Dov Schwartz, "The Debate over the Maimonidean Theory of Providence in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Philosophy," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995): 185–96. For Maimonides's own view, see Leo Strauss, "The Place of the Doctrine of Providence according to Maimonides," trans. Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov, *Review of Metaphysics* 57 (2004): 537–49.

72 See his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 103. On *Ruah Ḥen*, see Colette Sirat, "Le livre 'Rouah Ḥen,'" *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 3 (1977): 117–23. Sirat points out the Averroistic overtones in this booklet. In some manuscripts, the text was attributed to Anatolio, the son of Jacob Anatoli. See also Ofer Elior, *A Spirit of Grace Passed before My Face: Jews Reading Science, 1210–1896* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute and Hebrew University, 2016).

73 See Ms. Paris, BN 1092, fols. 90–91b; compare this passage with the views dealt with by Shalom Rosenberg, "Signification of Names in Medieval Jewish Logic" [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 27 (1976/77): 106–25. I shall dedicate a separate study to the authorship of these folios, attributed in the manuscript to Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra. Interestingly enough, in this book, Abulafia distinguishes between the philosophical way of demonstration and that which he understood as the religious way of demonstration, which seems to me an adumbration of his much clearer distinction between two types of logic that can be found in one of his epistles written many years later. See *Mafteaḥ ha-Ra'ayon*, 24–25, and Moshe Idel, "Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Preliminary Observation," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988): 170–74.



The study of books dealing with logic played an important role in Abulafia's earlier years and continued to do so, given the number of books on this topic we can find in his later writings. Moreover, from perusing his writings, we can see the persistence of their content concerning logical terminology, even when the titles of the books about logic were not mentioned. In cases that will be discussed elsewhere, Abulafia conceived his Kabbalah as a higher form of logic that was superior to Aristotelian logic in a manner reminiscent of Ramon Llull; the possible relations between the two thinkers, flourishing at the same time in the same place, deserve a more detailed analysis. Although Abulafia does not elevate logic higher than his Kabbalah, he nevertheless does not negate its relevance in matters of understanding nature, but defines his approach as a higher form of logic, resorting to the term *higayon*, an approach inspired by the Aristotelian practice that he transferred to the combinations of letters. Those two forms of discourse are reminiscent of the distinction between the philosophical and the Talmudic discourses we saw in the letter of Rabbi Zerahyah Ḥen discussed above.

In addition to the list of philosophical books that he studied together with the *Guide*, which has no parallel among thirteenth-century Kabbalists, Abulafia confesses that he studied Maimonides's book according to or together with "its secrets" (*im setaraw*) before he embarked on the path that brought him to prophecy, Kabbalah. This shows, in my opinion, that Abulafia received the list of the thirty-six secrets allegedly found in the *Guide* from teachers who were philosophers,<sup>74</sup> and I see no reason to assume that they were connected to Kabbalah. The study of this list may have something to do with the "great many times" he studied the *Guide*. Thus, in addition to Maimonides's own esotericism, there was also another dimension of transmitting certain secrets orally; namely, the subjects on the list. The existence of such a list of secrets is not mentioned by anyone in the Middle Ages except Abulafia.<sup>75</sup>

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74 See Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*," 311, which is focused on *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 81–82. Here, Abulafia speaks about those who received the truth of the statements in the *Guide* from their "perfect masters," thereby becoming mediators for Maimonides's secrets:

והם לא הועילו עצמם בזה ונשארו הנזק כולו עמם, לא עמו ז"ל ולא עם המקובלים מאמתת מאמרי ספרו האלהיים. כי הוא והם נפשם הצילו ודי לו ולהם בזה שכוונתו וכוונתם דבר אחד. ואני התלמיד הקטן המקובל מספרו על פי רבותי השלמים ז"ל.

Of course, Abulafia identifies himself as one of these few.

75 In one of the first attempts to catalogue manuscripts related to Abulafia, Franz Delitzsch compared the list of secrets found in Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah* to the content of Ms. Leipzig, University Library 39, where parts of Abulafia's *Sefer Ge'ulah* are extant; he reached the conclusion that it is nevertheless a work by Rabbi Zerahyah ben She'altiel Ḥen. See his *Literaturblatt des Orients* 41 (1842): 643–44. This is also the case in his *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum qui in Bibliotheca Senatoria Civitatis Lipsiensis Asservantur* (Grimae: Gebhardt, 1838), 301–2, but in the corrections he added on 562, he refers to it as Abulafia's book. Indeed, in this manuscript, there are also fragments of Zerahyah's commentary on the *Guide*; however, the two treatises are independent writings. See Chaim Wirszubski, "Liber Redemptionis. An Early Version of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalistic Interpretation of the *Guide* of the Perplexed in the Latin translation of Flavius Mithridates," *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1970): 139–49 and Ravitzky, "The Thought of Rabbi Zer-



Nevertheless, I would propose that a further investigation—which cannot be undertaken within the current framework—that examines the content and structure of the secrets on the list as well as what could have been the form of the list in Abulafia's hand and what he did with this hypothetical series of secrets is necessary. In other words, the question that should be addressed regards the organisation of the economy of esoteric topics in Abulafia's list in comparison to what can be elicited from the study of the *Guide* itself or from scholars' interpretations of it. In any case, traces of secrets that were orally transmitted seem to be evident in his last commentary on the secrets of the *Guide*.<sup>76</sup>

For a better understanding of the historical background of this last passage, let us turn once again to Rabbi Hillel's first letter to Maestro Gaio, to a passage that is worth translating. Hillel recommends that his addressee turn to him if he has any quandary related to topics found in the *Guide*, writing:

And I shall resolve all opacities, by means of the good hand of God that is on me since—praised be God, I say this not as someone boasting, but as praising my Creator, blessed be He, who granted me this—that nowadays there is no one in [the people of] Israel that knows all the secrets of the *Guide* and its roots and branches more than me, especially the second and third parts that are the essence of the *Guide*, and all his intentions are clear to me, and this is because the books that are its roots and its foundations—namely, the books on natural sciences and the science of divinity<sup>77</sup>—are known to me and [I received] their interpretation from the mouth of an excellent rabbi.<sup>78</sup>

Hillel wrote this letter to a well-known figure in Rome, a city where the *Guide* had been intensively studied by more than one person; it is too easy to assume that he

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aḥyah.” See also Jacob Friedman, “The Commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Rabbi Zerahya Hen” [Hebrew], in *Sefer Zikkaron le-Ya‘aqov Friedman, Qoveš Mehqarim*, ed. Shlomo Pines (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1974): 3–14. The coexistence of fragments from the two commentaries is emblematic for my thesis in this study as to the affinities between the Maimonideans and Abulafia's commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*.

**76** See *Sitrei Torah*, 168–69.

**77** Compare also to the end of the second letter to Maestro Gaio, written after his completion of *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*, in *Ḥemdah Genuzah*, ed. Zvi H. Edelmann (Königsburg: Gruber & Euphrat, 1856), 21, where he mentions his acquaintance with Averroes's and ibn Bāḡḡah's commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*. On the other hand, Hillel questions Zerahyah's assumption that the secrets of the Torah consist, in Maimonides's view, solely in the Aristotelian doctrines. See Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith*, 47–48. I assume that Abulafia would agree with Zerahyah's position on this point and not with Hillel. See also below chapter 15 note 81. On the question of the relationship between revelation and philosophy, see also the material collected by Esti Eisenmann in her edition of *Moses b. Judah: Ahava ba-Ta'anugim, Part I (Physics), Discourses 1–7* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 6, note 14.

**78** *Ṭa'am Zeqenim*, fol. 72a:

ואני, כיד אלהי הטובה עלי, אתיר לך את כולם ואפרש לך כל הסתומות כי תהיה לאל חיי אני אומר באמת ולא כמתפאר אלא כמשבח את יוצרי ית' אשר חנני בזה שאין היום בישראל איש שידע כל סתר המורה ושרשיו וענפיו יותר ממני ובפרט בחלק השני והשלישי שהם עיקר המורה, וכל כונתיו מבוארים אצלי, וזה בעבור שהספרים שהם שרשיו ויסודותיו כלומר ספרי חכמת הטבע וחכמת האלהיות ידועים אלי ופירושם מפני רב מובהק.

merely invented his intimate acquaintance with it.<sup>79</sup> With this caveat in mind, let me highlight two points in this passage: first, the claim that he knows the “secret”—perhaps a mistake for the “secrets”—of the *Guide*, and second, that he received an interpretation from the mouth of a Rabbi concerning the natural sciences and the science of divinity. According to the letter, the Rabbi, whose name is not mentioned, taught him the interpretation of the books of philosophy orally, a claim that is interesting, since Rabbi Hillel lived for several years in southern Italy, most probably in both Capua and Naples, the latter being one of the major centres for translations of philosophical books, as we shall see immediately below.

However, the impression that Hillel wants to leave—that he has the clues for understanding any obscurities one may encounter in the *Guide*, that they are transparent to him, and that he knows the “secret,” most probably of the *Guide*—is reminiscent of Abulafia's passage quoted above. Since the two epistles, Abulafia's *Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah* and that of Rabbi Hillel, were written independently of each other and composed in different parts of Italy in the late 1280s, I see their affinities as reflecting some form of reality in Capua at the beginning of the 1260s, which means indeed that Abulafia not only studied the books of philosophy with Hillel, whom he describes as both a physician and a philosopher, but also the *Guide* and, plausibly, some secrets related to it, whatever the origin of these secrets may be. In any case, the theme of orality in Hillel's letter as pointing to a form of transmission and instruction that is presented as higher than the written books is important for understanding that Kabbalists were not alone in making this claim about their secrets.

Whether Hillel was indeed the greatest expert in matters of the *Guide* in the world is, however, an entirely different story that cannot be checked because of the scant references to this book in his *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*. Nor is he recognised as such by Rabbi Zeraḥyah Ḥen, who writes to Rabbi Hillel in a letter: “A person who does not want to confuse himself should always follow the natural matters when he wants to know a secret or a subject matter that the genius, blessed be his memory,<sup>80</sup> did not want to reveal.”<sup>81</sup> Zeraḥyah's point here is parallel to the point that Rabbi Hillel made in the passage mentioned above transcribed from his first letter to Maestro Gaio: the clues to understanding Maimonides are found in books dealing with the natural sciences. This point is also important for the approach to religion in Abulafia's own books.

<sup>79</sup> On two recent studies of Rabbi Hillel's early acquaintance with Arabic philosophy, and especially with the *Guide*, see Schwartz, “Imagined Classrooms?”, 483–502, and Caterina Rigo's forthcoming study “Between Al-Ḥarizi and *Dux Neutorum*: *Dux Neutorum* and the Jewish Tradition on the *Guide of the Perplexed*” [Hebrew].

<sup>80</sup> Namely, Maimonides in his *Guide*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ošar Neḥmad*, ed. Isaac Blumberg (Vienna: Israel Knopfmacher und Sohne, 1857), 2:125:

ומי שאינו רוצה לבלבל עצמו יהיה נמשך תמיד אחר הדברים הטבעיים כשירצה לדעת סוד או ענין שלא רצה הגאון זצ"ל לגלותו.

The motif of “confusion” mentioned here is quite interesting. From the context, it is clear that Rabbi Zerahyah Ḥen proposes to neatly distinguish the Talmudic discourse from the philosophical one and to not confuse them. This attitude belongs to an Averroistic approach, reflecting, in my opinion, a stark distinction between different kinds of people or audiences, and also in Abraham Abulafia's own writings.

The accusation of confusion addressed to Rabbi Hillel is reiterated again by Rabbi Zerahyah Ḥen, in a context that potentially contributes an interesting detail pertinent to our discussion. In a rhymed passage related to Hillel's name, he writes that “the view of the Genius, the Rabbi, the teacher of righteousness, blessed be his memory, he obliterated, and he confused the order of his words, and he did not receive his interpretation.”<sup>82</sup> “He” here is Rabbi Hillel. The Hebrew phrase פירושו לא קבל may be translated in more than one way, since פירוש means either an interpretation given to the *Guide* or the interpretation that the *Guide* gives to scripture. Moreover, the verb קבל may be translated as either “he did not accept” or, as I translate it, “he did not receive.” If this second interpretation is accepted, which is also not very straightforward, it means that Hillel was accused of distorting the meaning of the *Guide* and of not understanding it because he did not receive its interpretation. Therefore, we may have here another instance of the assumption that the *Guide* should be studied on the basis of a received tradition.<sup>83</sup> In any case, this approach to the *Guide* which assumes that one should not mix religious approaches with secrets is also found, in a way, in Abulafia's claim that one should not adduce any proof from the “plain sense of the scriptures” for “those who are inquiring the essence of wisdom and those who search for the secrets of the Torah.”<sup>84</sup>

To return to the Hillel/Abulafia connection: if indeed the existence of a “secret” of the *Guide* is assumed to have been in the hands of Rabbi Hillel when he was in southern Italy and it is not merely a boast, it may strengthen Abulafia's claim, as well as that of Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, as to the necessity of an oral tradition in order to understand the *Guide*, as well as the somewhat later tradition known by Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi that the secrets of the *Guide* were known to the members of Maimonides's family who were alive in the East, to which we shall turn in the next chapter.

However, even if Hillel did not really possess any secrets related to this seminal book, his claim of possessing them is nevertheless an interesting fact that cannot be denied. It should also be mentioned that Rabbi Hillel claims to have attempted to contact Maimonides's grandson Rabbi David Maimuni concerning the nascent

<sup>82</sup> *Oṣar Neḥmad*, 2:126. The words rhyming with Hillel are the verbs *bilbel* (“to confuse”), *biṭtel* (“to obliterate”), and *qibbel* (“to receive”). For the polemic between Zerahyah and Hillel, see Ravitzky, “The Thought of Rabbi Zerahyah,” 269–92, and Yossef Schwartz, “Imagined Classrooms?”

<sup>83</sup> See above chapter 4 note 81 and below chapter 4 note 97.

<sup>84</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 48: שאין מביאים ראיה לחוקרי אמיתת החכמה ולמחפשי סתרי תורה מעניין פשטי הכתוב.

phase of the second controversy over Maimonides's writings,<sup>85</sup> which in a way is reminiscent of ibn Kaspi's journey to the East.

Let me be quite clear: this does not mean that I am assuming that Maimonides himself orally transmitted the secrets of his book; rather, I only assume that given the existence of the independent reports we have about it, such a tradition, spurious as it may be, was circulating among some of the Maimonideans and Abulafia offered the most extensive report of it. In any case, as we know, Maimonides himself refused to resort to oral transmission as a manner of informing students of his esoteric thought, and his elegant refusal to meet his translator, Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon, exemplifies this reluctant attitude.<sup>86</sup> Abulafia was aware of Maimonides's reticence to transmit secrets orally, and in order to explain this reluctance, he hints at the absence of a prophet in Maimonides's lifetime as the reason for the lack of transmission. Abulafia argues that this situation had changed with his own appearance.<sup>87</sup> As he reckoned himself a prophet and a Messiah, he believed that unidentified persons had transmitted those secrets to him which could consequently be revealed, as he indeed did.

Whether this tradition dealing with the oral transmission of the secrets in the *Guide*, perhaps imagined as stemming from Maimonides's own mouth, has something to do with the special manner in which Flavius Mithridates (the late fifteenth-century Sicilian convert to Christianity) translated Abulafia's commentaries is quite an interesting issue worthy of further inquiry. In his Latin translations of the Hebrew commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*, Mithridates claims that Abulafia received the secrets in the *Guide* directly from Maimonides's mouth, as has been pointed out by Chaim Wirszubski.<sup>88</sup> Although it forms part of the background of our current discussions, this claim is still a matter to be investigated, and I cannot engage with it here. It may stem from an oral tradition circulating in Sicily, where many of Abulafia's works were written, studied, and later translated. In any case, there is a certain similarity between the view that there is another, perhaps higher, series of secrets than those alluded to in the *Guide* and the various legends about Maimonides being, or becoming, a Kabbalist.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See the second letter to Maestro Gaio, printed by Edelmann, *Hemdah Genuzah*, 20–21.

<sup>86</sup> See Alexander Marx, "Texts by and about Maimonides," *JQR* 25 (1935): 378–80; Isaiah Sonne, "Maimonides's Letter to Samuel b. Tibbon according to an Unknown Text in the Archives of the Jewish Community of Verona" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 10 (1939): 135–54, 309–32. For more on this letter, see Steven Harvey, "Did Maimonides' Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon Determine Which Philosophers Would Be Studied by Later Jewish Thinkers?" *JQR* 83 (1992): 51–70, and recently, Doron Forte, "Back to the Sources: Alternative Versions of Maimonides's Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon and Their Neglected Significance," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 23 (2016): 47–90.

<sup>87</sup> See *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 122.

<sup>88</sup> See Wirszubski, "*Liber Redemptionis*."

<sup>89</sup> See Gershom G. Scholem, "Maimonide dans l'oeuvre des Kabbalistes," *Cahiers juifs* 3 (1935): 103–12, and Moshe Idel, "Some Images of Maimonides in Jewish Mysticism," *Studia Judaica* 17 (2009): 36–63.

Such a tradition is reminiscent of the manner in which Kabbalists envisioned the oral transmission of Kabbalistic secrets concerning the Pentateuch, especially in the school of Nahmanides, an author well-known to both Rabbi Hillel and Abulafia as well as more generally in Rome in the 1380s.<sup>90</sup> In any case, the tradition of orally transmitted secrets found in the *Guide* shows the fast canonisation of this book in a manner reminiscent of the line from Abulafia's poem about the two religions that should be studied presented above.

More interesting in our context is the fact that Abulafia's general approach is indeed closer to the naturalistic attitude of Rabbi Zerahyah Ĥen than to the later views of Rabbi Hillel. Therefore, we may suggest an evolution in Rabbi Hillel's thought that is different from that of Sermoneta. Sermoneta saw Hillel as less interested in philosophy and the *Guide* during the period in which he sojourned in southern Italy, turning to some form of Jewish Thomism only after 1287, when he had already lived in Flori in northern Italy.<sup>91</sup> Sermoneta's view of Hillel's intellectual career creates a problem with his initiation of Abulafia into philosophy and the *Guide*, particularly concerning the manner in which the Kabbalist described him as a "philosopher" in the early 1260s, as seen above. However, more recent studies assume that he was well-acquainted with the *Guide* much earlier, while he was in Barcelona in the 1250s, and perhaps even that he was the author of a Latin translation of the *Guide*.<sup>92</sup>

However, it is possible to envisage another hypothetical scenario: while he was in Naples and Capua, from the 1250s, Rabbi Hillel was immersed in studies that would fit the interest of the intellectual centre that had emerged around the court of Frederick II a few decades earlier.<sup>93</sup> Namely, under the influence of the Naples centre, he was a student of the *Guide* and of philosophy more generally, and consequently could have initiated Abulafia in both philosophy and the *Guide* in the early 1260s. In time, so I assume, Hillel distanced himself from the hypothetical radical philosophical approach and turned towards a more moderate approach, perhaps under the influence of Thomism, critical as it was toward Averroism, a critique that to a certain extent informed the book Hillel wrote in the late 1280s. Thomas Aquinas arrived in Naples in 1272 and died there in 1274, but we do not know whether Hillel was still living there at that time.

It should be mentioned that clear traces of Averroes's thought, along with some explicit mentions of the Cordovan commentator himself, are found in *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*, as well as in the second letter he sent to Maestro Gaio at the end of his life, a fact that may strengthen my proposal. Abulafia, however, left Capua no later than 1269; it is difficult to find traces of the terminology that is characteristic of Hill-

<sup>90</sup> See Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist*, 1:39, 40, 48, and Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 98–99.

<sup>91</sup> Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazar of Verona and His Philosophy," 21–31.

<sup>92</sup> See Rigo, "Between Al-Ĥarizi and *Dux Neutorum*."

<sup>93</sup> See David Abulafia, *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (London: Pimlico, 1988), 255–89.

el's writings or of Aquinas's synthesis between reason and faith that also informed Hillel's thought in his much later book in Abulafia's writings.

This hypothetical shift towards a much more moderate Maimonideanism created, so I assume, the tensions between Abulafia and what Joseph B. Sermoneta calls the Jewish Averroistic group that was active in Rome, which includes Zerahyah Ḥen and Immanuel of Rome, and may explain the differences between Abulafia's views and the approach of the late Rabbi Hillel and also Hillel's continuous boasting about possessing the clues to Maimonides later in the late 1280s, a claim that Sermoneta's scheme of development can hardly explain. By proposing the hypothesis of a move towards a more moderate Aristotelian approach influenced by Thomism, after a more radical approach to Aristotelianism in his youth, I have attempted to show the integrity of most of the documents mentioned above, as well as most of their details.

I find no difficulty in accounting for the absence of Rabbi Hillel's story of the burning of Maimonides's writings in Abulafia's works. Had Hillel told him this story, it is implausible that his disciple would not repeat it in one of his commentaries on the *Guide* or elsewhere. Moreover, he could not have told Abulafia in 1261 that he had returned from Barcelona that same year. Our observation therefore corroborates Sermoneta's scepticism about the veracity of several of the elements found in Hillel's epistle; we may assume that the fabrication of the story happened after he met Abulafia in 1261.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Rabbi Hillel was in contact with Christian authors, as he himself recognised and as other people reminded him, which Sermoneta duly noted.<sup>94</sup> This is also the case with Abulafia himself, as we shall see in chapter 8 below, which is quite a rare phenomenon among the Kabbalists of the thirteenth century. In the case of the latter, there is good reason to assume that those Christian thinkers were Aristotelians, even Averroists.

According to the end of the passage from "We-Zot li-Yehudah" cited above, the concepts of *sefirot*, names, and seals, which occur together in the same book, *Sefer Yeşirah*, are part of Abulafia's development after his studies in the domain of philosophy after 1270, when he began concentrating on the study of several commentaries on *Sefer Yeşirah*;<sup>95</sup> however, he does not mention any book related to theosophical Kabbalah in this context. The three concepts are understood here as triggering revelatory experiences. This means that the term *sefirot* should be understood as having a philosophical meaning, either as separate intellects or as numbers in a Pythagorean vein; however, in general, they are not conceived as theosophical entities, as

<sup>94</sup> Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 26–31.

<sup>95</sup> See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 484–85, 490–91. This does not mean that he was especially interested in the theosophical aspects of these commentaries, which he presumably found in Barcelona as part of a circle of Kabbalists that concentrated on *Sefer Yeşirah*. See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 57–71.

most of the Kabbalists envisioned them.<sup>96</sup> One may find Pythagorean and Neo-Aristotelian understandings of this seminal term from *Sefer Yeşirah* side-by-side in Abulafia's writings.

Interestingly enough, in his lists of the philosophical books that he had studied, Abulafia never mentions a major treatise in medieval Jewish philosophy, Rabbi Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, which had a significant impact on the history of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, an issue to which we shall return in chapter 9 below. This absence may have something to do with the acutely particularist approach of this book, which differs from Abulafia's own approach influenced by Maimonides. His neglect to mention the *Kuzari* is even more conspicuous if we remember that it includes a rather lengthy commentary on *Sefer Yeşirah* in 4:25, as Abulafia was very fond of both this book and commentaries on it.

A parallel discussion to the last quote is found in another epistle that Abulafia addressed to a certain Rabbi Abraham, who is not to be identified with his student Rabbi Abraham ben Shalom whom he taught in Messina.<sup>97</sup> There, the ecstatic Kabbalist confesses again "the little of what I learned from the books of philosophers and what I knew from the study of the *Guide*."<sup>98</sup> In this way, although Abulafia singled out *The Guide of the Perplexed* as a special source for his philosophical knowledge, this book is often mentioned along with additional studies of other books by a variety of philosophers. This is done without referring to them in a critical manner but, on the contrary, by putting them into sharp relief as his source of knowledge.<sup>99</sup> In both cases discussed here, the books—and I assume also the study—of philosophy, or at least some of them, preceded the study of the *Guide*.

This open, recurrent, and rarely critical recognition of these studies and the many quotations from philosophical sources constitutes one of the main differences between Abulafia's specific type of Kabbalistic thought and writings and those of the other Kabbalists both before and contemporaneous to him, a fact that not only puts him much more in the camp of the Maimonideans, but also in that of the rather radical Maimonideans. Unfortunately, we do not have any text by Abulafia that was written during this formative philosophical period; every extant document belongs to the period after he began studying Kabbalah. However, the obvious fact that all the above quotations stem from his later books, when he was already a Kabbalist,

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<sup>96</sup> See my "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah': Between the Prophetic Kabbalah and the Kabbalah of Sefirot in the 13th Century" [Hebrew], *Pe'amim* 93 (2002): 49–51, and *Ben*, 317–18. See also the important discussion in *Oşar 'Eden Gamuz*, 1:1, 21. This issue is the topic of a more detailed study which is now in preparation.

<sup>97</sup> For more on this figure, see Appendix B below.

<sup>98</sup> "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 21. For the context of this passage, see Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 57.

<sup>99</sup> I do not understand why Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 170–71 and note 207, claims that Abulafia was critical of Maimonides's philosophical approach to the divine name. He mentions that his view is contradicted by another statement of Abulafia's to which he referred. See also his "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 140, note 21.



only strengthens the continuity of his concerns and his vital dependence on some of the Andalusian Neo-Aristotelian traditions.

Interestingly enough, although in the context of those quotations and in other places Abulafia mentions books that belong to what may be described as Jewish esotericism, such as an unknown version of *Sefer Razi'el*, for example,<sup>100</sup> he does not mention books of theosophical Kabbalah that were written in the thirteenth century, with the exception of some commentaries on *Sefer Yeşirah*—a book that particularly interested him—and *the book Bahir*, which he conceived as an ancient book. He was almost exclusively interested in the discussions of divine names in that book.<sup>101</sup> The absence of a list of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalistic books that could constitute a specific stage or a field of study in itself and his failure to enumerate books belonging to this Kabbalah elsewhere in his writings gives space to the possibility that he was acquainted with or conceived of this sort of Kabbalah as a domain of study in itself. However, this absence is quite a significant one for understanding the intellectual biography of the ecstatic Kabbalist, though it is not total, as he mentions Nahmanides's *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, a treatise about personal eschatology, and, in another context, Nahmanides's theory of transmigration.<sup>102</sup> However, this was part of his effort to convince his former student, Rabbi Judah Salmon, that he was also acquainted with the sefirotic Kabbalah, though I am confident that he did not accept this theory as it was understood by Nahmanides and his school.<sup>103</sup> Such an absence reflects what was (or was not) important in his opinion from the conceptual point of view. This absence is also evident in Abulafia's tripartite distinction between the masses, the philosophers, and the prophetic Kabbalists in one of his later writings.<sup>104</sup>

It seems plausible that Abulafia encountered some forms of linguistic Kabbalah in Barcelona, as found, for example, in his teacher Rabbi Baruch Togarmi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*. He dramatically revised them by massively adding to Maimonides's worldview, especially his theory on the nature of prophecy,<sup>105</sup> while he conceived elements of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah as part of the mythical dimension of Judaism, which should be reinterpreted, as he had done, in an allego-

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**100** See "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 21.

**101** See my preface to *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* [Hebrew], ed. Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), 4–6.

**102** See "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 27.

**103** See Idel, "Commentaries on the Secret of 'Ibbur in 13th-Century Kabbalah." Compare, however, Ogren's different view on Abulafia's use of the term *'Ibbur*, in Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, 149–54. I hope to return to an elaborate discussion of this issue in a separate study.

**104** *Šomer Mišwah*, 11. Compare also to Rabbi Isaac of Acre's similar distinction, without mentioning the prophetic Kabbalah, but only Kabbalists, as discussed in Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 74.

**105** Material belonging to linguistic Kabbalah that presumably preceded Abulafia may be found in manuscripts and has been not taken into account when describing the development of Abulafia's Kabbalah. I hope to deal with it in separate studies. See, meanwhile, my "Incantations, Lists, and 'Gates of Sermons' in the Circle of Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon the Prophet, and Their Influences" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (2008): 499–507, and some of the discussions below.

rical manner. In short, Abulafia actually did what Maimonides required in his *Guide* and in one of his epistles concerning what a student should do first: study the books of Aristotle, Al-Fārābī, and Averroes as part of a philosophical preparation towards encountering a complex book like his, which is an esoteric and exegetical treatise that is far from a systematic exposition of its author's ideas.

Let me now introduce a short statement Abulafia made concerning the *Guide*: he calculates the numerical valence of the consonants of the Hebrew title of the *Guide*, מורה הנבוכים (*Moreh ha-Nevukhim*), and the phrase מכה הרוחנים (*makkeh ha-ruḥanim*), each of which amounts to 384. As the Kabbalist puts it, the latter phrase means “strikes the spiritual people and invites them to grow.”<sup>106</sup> This means that Maimonides's book is imagined not just as containing important theological information, but also as triggering the spiritual development of its students. Interestingly enough, Abulafia uses the same method of permuting letters in order to extract the meaning of the *Guide* that he applied to interpreting the Bible, a fact that shows that what is important for him is not the canonical scripture, or even a text containing a certain narrative, but language.<sup>107</sup> Let me point out that although the *Guide* obviously constitutes the core of Abulafia's study of Maimonides's thought, Abulafia was also acquainted with the latter's two other major works, the Hebrew translation of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*<sup>108</sup> and his famous legalistic codex *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>109</sup> However, as he was much less concerned with the legal aspects of Judaism and his acquaintance with those issues was rather scant, he references these two writings only rarely.

As mentioned above, no writing from Abulafia's pre-1271 period has survived, and I wonder whether he wrote anything dealing with philosophy during that time. It is not plausible that he wrote a critique or study of Kabbalah, although it is possible that he may have written books of grammar.<sup>110</sup> The entire range of information given above stems solely from treatises that were written later. This is the reason why it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the precise spiritual physiognomy of Abulafia as a pre-Kabbalist Maimonidean, though he certainly was one. However,

**106** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 133:

שהתבאר בספר הנכבד הנקרא מורה הנבוכים אשר אני קורא שמו מכה הרוחנים, מפני שמוסיף רוח חכמה לכל בעל מדע ומכה אותו ואומר לו גדל.

Abulafia is capitalising on a Rabbinic statement found in *Genesis Rabbah*, 10:6, dealing with a form of Platonic theory that every being has an entity on high which is appointed to him and tells him: “Grow!”

**107** This is the gist of my article “Multilingual Gematrias in Abraham Abulafia.” See also the combinations of letters of the word *DMYWN* in chapter 10 below. See also below Appendix D note 209, on the gematria of his name.

**108** See *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 78.

**109** See *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 33; *Sitrei Torah*, 11, 61; *Šomer Mišwah*, 27; *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, 78.

**110** See “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 18; *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 6:7, 330–31. On the last passage, see my “Hekhalot Literature: The Ecstatic-Mystical Model and Their Reverberations,” 191–202, where I also deal with the titles of books related to the Hekhalot literature mentioned in Abulafia's writings.

it is possible to assert, based on his own explicit testimony, that in that period, he was opposed to what he then considered to be Kabbalah.<sup>111</sup>

## 5 Abulafia's Career as a Teacher of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*

However, Abulafia was much more than an ardent student of the *Guide* or someone who displayed a selective affinity with the contents of that book. More than anyone else in the thirteenth century with whom I am acquainted, this Kabbalist claimed that he also taught this book in a variety of towns in southern Europe. In the autobiographical document from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, whose beginning was quoted above as paragraph [a], Abulafia continues:

[b] And I also taught it [i. e., the *Guide*] in many places: In Capua, [I taught it] to four [students] who came by, but they took wayward paths, since they were thoughtless young men, and I left them.<sup>112</sup> And in Thebes, [I had] ten [students], and none of them [benefited from the teaching] and they deserted the two ways,<sup>113</sup> the first and the second. In Euryppo,<sup>114</sup> [I had] four [students], and there as well, there was no one who benefited, since the minds of men are different from each other, particularly regarding the depth<sup>115</sup> of wisdom and the *Sitrei Torah*, and I did not consider any of them to be worthy of receiving even the headnotes of the truth as it is.<sup>116</sup> And in Rome, [I taught the *Guide*] to two elders of the city, Rabbi Ṣedaq[ya]h<sup>117</sup> and Rabbi Yeša[ʿ]yah,<sup>118</sup>

**111** See “Ševa’ Netivot ha-Torah,” 22. See also chapter 4 above, where I cite the passage from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*.

**112** Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 102, speculates about the possibility that the four students converted to Christianity, which I find implausible as it is clear that Abulafia would have mentioned it.

**113** Namely, according to the two levels of understanding the *Guide*. It is probable that the second way is identical to the head chapters, to be mentioned in the quoted passage immediately below. I wonder whether Scholem's view that the second way is that of *Sefer Yeširah* is plausible. See his *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 112. In any case, it is interesting to note that Abulafia himself never mentioned teaching *Sefer Yeširah* anywhere in his writings, though he wrote more than one commentary on it.

**114** A place in Peloponnese also called Calchis, or Negroponte; a Jewish community is known to have been there from the twelfth century.

**115** On “depth” as indicative of secrets, see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 206, 216.

**116** On this technique of transmitting esoteric knowledge, see Moshe Idel, “Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, & Cultural Diffusion*, eds. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000): 138–65.

**117** Presumably Rabbi Ṣedaqyah ben Abraham, the author of the famous legalistic book *Šibbolei ha-Leqeṭ*.

**118** Probably Rabbi Isaiah ben Elijah of Trani, an inhabitant of Rome, known as Rabbi Isaiah the Second or the Young. On this figure, see Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature, Volume 3: Italy and Byzantium* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2005), 11; Ta-Shma relies on Abulafia's testimony found in this passage in order to determine his time of death. Interestingly enough, in his “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 18, Abulafia asserts that he studied “Talmud, Gemara, and Poseqim with

my allies,<sup>119</sup> blessed be their memory, and they succeeded in a limited way and [then] they died, since they were very old. And in Barcelona, [I had] two [students]; one of them was old, Rabbi Qalonymus, blessed be his memory, a venerable man,<sup>120</sup> and one young man, learned and intelligent and very respected, from the aristocracy of the city, whose name was Rabbi Judah called Salmon,<sup>121</sup> and he succeeded greatly. And in Burgos, [I had] two [students], a master and [his] student: the name of the master [was] Rabbi Moses Şinfa Y.L.,<sup>122</sup> a great man and an honourable scholar,<sup>123</sup> and the name of the student was Rabbi Shem Tov,<sup>124</sup> also a kind and good young man, but his young age prevented him from learning and he did not study it<sup>125</sup> except for a few external traditions, neither he nor his master. And in Medinat Shalom,<sup>126</sup> [I had] two [students], one of them, Rabbi Samuel the Prophet,<sup>127</sup> who received a few traditions from me, and the second, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, let the Supernal guardian safeguard him, and he doubtless succeeded in a wondrous way concerning what he studied under my guidance, and he added much from his [own] strength and knowledge,<sup>128</sup> and God was with him.<sup>129</sup> But in this city where I am today, whose name is Sinim<sup>130</sup>—namely, Messina—I found six persons, and I brought with me a seventh one,<sup>131</sup> and they studied it<sup>132</sup> with me for a very short time. Each of them received whatever he received from me, more or less, and they all left me, with the ex-

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two masters.” I am not acquainted with alternative names of other two masters who could have taught Abulafia these issues. I assume that his contact with them took place in the period of his first stay in Italy in the 1260s.

**119** *Ba'alei Beriti*. This phrase hints at the existence of tensions between Abulafia and other individuals in Rome or Italy, apparently concerning his attempt to meet the pope as part of a messianic enterprise.

**120** It is not clear whether it is possible to ascertain the identity of this person in Barcelona.

**121** In Hebrew שלמה, but I have corrected it in the translation on the grounds of Abulafia's letter to him. To this author, who became one of the judges of the Jewish Barcelonese community later in Abulafia's life, he addressed one of his most interesting epistles, “We-Zot li-Yehudah.” He was the addressee of one of Rabbi Zerahyah ben She'altiel Hen's epistles printed in *Oşar Neḥmad*, 2: 121–22.

**122** The acronym for *Yehayehu le-'Ad*, “Let him live forever.”

**123** Namely, Rabbi Moses ben Simon of Burgos. On this influential Kabbalist, see the seminal studies by Gershom Scholem, “Rabbi Moshe mi-Burgos: The Student of Rabbi Isaac” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 3 (1932): 258–86; 4 (1933): 54–77, 207–25; 5 (1934): 50–60, 180–98, 305–23. In my opinion, it is possible to discern the influence of Abulafia in an interesting discussion on prophecy, divine names, miracles, and changing nature found on 55–56 and discussed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 19.

**124** The identity of this student has not been established in a solid manner in modern scholarship; on the possible identity of this Rabbi Shem Tov as the famous Kabbalist Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Gaon, see Scholem, “Rabbi Moshe mi-Burgos,” *Tarbiz* 3 (1932): 261–62.

**125** That is, the *Guide*.

**126** The town of Medinat Celim in Castile, which is also where Gikatilla was born.

**127** It seems that the only reference to this figure may perhaps be found in Ms. Paris, BN 790, fol. 171a, where the term “Samuel the Prophet” occurs in the context of the use of gematria. See also my “Incantations, Lists, and ‘Gates of Sermons,’” 499, note 206.

**128** For the importance of a creative approach to secrets as part of an open type of knowledge, see the passage from *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 116, discussed in Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” 456–58.

**129** See Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” 63.

**130** Namely, Messina, anagrammatised.

**131** Probably Naṭronai ha-Şarfati, to be mentioned immediately below in this quote.

**132** Namely, the *Guide*.

ception of one, who was the first and was the first cause [compelling] each of them to study what I taught. His name is Rabbi Sa'adyah<sup>133</sup> the son of Isaac Sigilmasi,<sup>134</sup> blessed be his memory. He was followed by Rabbi Abraham ben Shalom,<sup>135</sup> and he was followed by his son Jacob,<sup>136</sup> and he was followed by his friend Isaac, and he was followed by the friend of their friend,<sup>137</sup> and three of them had three ranks and the other three had lower ranks than the [first three] and the seventh one [is named] Rabbi Naṭronai ha-Šarfati,<sup>138</sup> blessed be his memory.<sup>139</sup>

**133** Again, as in the case of Rabbi Hillel, Sa'adyah was still alive many years after this document was composed; the phrase dealing with "his memory" must be an addition of the scribe or an error. It should be mentioned that Abulafia dedicated his longest book, *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, to him (370) and describes him as someone who adheres to him out of love. It seems that he was the most faithful of Abulafia's followers.

**134** In the manuscript, this is written "Sagalmafi," but this is indubitably a copyist's error, and I have translated what I see as the correct form, which is the name of a town in the southern part of Morocco. The correct spelling of the name of the city in the context of this figure is found in the manuscripts of Abulafia's introduction to *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot* and was printed in Ben-Zion Dinur, *A Documentary History of the Jewish People* [Hebrew], 2nd. Ser., vol. 2, bk. 4 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), 368. Compare to Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 51.

**135** On this disciple, to whom Abulafia dedicated his *Or ha-Šekhel*, see below in Appendix B. I wonder whether this disciple is described as coming from the very small island of Comino near Malta, since he is referred to as יומטיא in Abulafia's introduction to the commentary on Genesis, *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 2, which was written much later, in 1289. Abulafia makes an earlier mention of his forced stay on that island in "Sefer ha-Ot'. Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheeten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia," in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1887), 79, where the phrase אי-קומטיא—namely, "the island of Comina"—occurs.

**136** Perhaps he is the person to whom he dedicated his *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, in addition to Rabbi Sa'adyah ben Isaac Sigilmasi. See *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 2.

**137** Abulafia does not enumerate all the names of the seven disciples. He only mentions five by name; the other two may have belonged to a lower rank. I suspect that one of the two is Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar.

**138** No other information on a figure with this name in the thirteenth century is available.

**139** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* 3:9, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1580, fols. 164a–b:

וגם למדתיו במקומות הרבה. בקפואה לארבעה במקרה ויצאו לתרבות רעה כי נערים בלי מדע היו ועזבתים. ובתיבץ עשרה ולא הועיל אחד מהם אבל הפסידו שני הדרכים הראשון והשני. ובאבריו ארבעה וגם בס אין מועיל כי הדיעות משונות מאד בבני אדם כל שכן בעמקי החכמה ובסתרי התורה. ולא ראיתי בס מי שראוי מהם למסור לו אפילו ראשי פרקים מן האמת כמות שהיא. וברומי לשני זקני העיר ר' צדקה ור' ישע' בעלי בריתי ז"ל, והצליחו בו קצת הצלחה ונפטרו כי זקנים היו הרבה. ובברצלונה שנים אחד זקן ושמו ר' קלונמוס ז"ל אדם גדול ואחד בחור משכיל ומבין ונכבד מאד מטובי העיר ושמו ר' יאודה המכונה שלמה והצליח בו הצלחה מעולה. ובבורגוש שנים רב ותלמיד שם הרב ר' משה צינפא י"ל אדם גדול וחכם נכבד. ושם התלמיד ר' שם טוב גם כן בחור נחמד וטוב אלא שהבחורות מנעו מן הלמוד ולא למד ממנו עמי כי אם קצת קבלות חיצוניות לא הוא ולא רבו. ובמדינת שלום שנים האחד מהם ר' שמואל הנביא שקבל ממני קצת קבלות. והשני ר' יוסף ג'קתיל"א ישמרהו שומר מעלה והוא בלא ספק הצליח הצלחה מופלאה במה שלמד לפני והוסיף מכחו ומדעתו הרבה ויי היה עמו. ואמנם בעיר הזאת שאני בה היום ושמה סינים היא מסיני, מצאתי ששה אנשים ועמי הבאתי השביעי ממנו למדו לפני קצת זמן קצור מאד, וכל אחד מהם קבל מה שקבל ממני מעט או הרבה, ונפרדו ממני כלם חוץ מאחד והוא הראשון אשר הוא הסבה הראשונה לכל מה שלמד כל אחד ואחד [מכל] חבריו מפי, ושמו ר' סעדיה בר יצחק סגלמאפי ז"ל, ואחריו החזיק ר' אברהם בר שלום, ואחריו החזיק יעקב בנו, ואחריו יצחק חברו, ואחריו החזיק חברו. והיו שלשה מהם בעלי שלש מדרגות ושלשה מהם בעלי מדרגות אחרות למטה מהן. ושם השביעי ר' נטרונאי הצרפתי ז"ל.

There is hardly a more detailed and instructive report concerning the dissemination of the Hebrew translation of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* in the entire intellectual history of the Jewish Middle Ages. Paragraph [b] shows an intense scholarly activity concerning the secrets of this esoteric book that is unparalleled by any similar efforts from Jewish philosophers, the followers of the Great Eagle, or even the well-known members of his family.<sup>140</sup> For a long period in his mature life, I would say for ten years, Abulafia continued to teach at least the *Guide* to around twenty-five students, presumably all of them Jewish, in several towns in southern Europe. This activity took place over a period of less than fifty years and can be described as the interregnum between the first two grand-scale polemics concerning Maimonides's writings that mainly took place in Europe. As far as I know, Abulafia's autobiographical document has not been integrated into the general picture found in the scholarship dealing with the details of the dissemination of the *Guide*, which is quite odd, especially given the fact that two of Abulafia's commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide* are extant in many manuscripts, in many cases more numerous than the commentaries of the other Maimonideans.

A problem that haunts this list of places and students is the fact that it is corroborated by almost no external evidence, with one exception to be discussed below. However, there are good reasons to accept it as reliable; first and foremost because in its first part, the list of the places where Abulafia taught is corroborated by his other books in which he mentions his presence in the Byzantine Empire, where he also wrote some of his first prophetic books.<sup>141</sup> His second stay in Capua in 1279 is also documented by his presentation of his reasons for writing *Sitrei Torah* for the four young students he had in Capua:

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This text was printed, with several small errors, by Adolph Jellinek in 1853 (*Bet ha-Midrash*, 3 [Leipzig: 1853–79; reprinted Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1967], xl–xli); following him, see also Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 93–94; Dinur, *A Documentary History of the Jewish People*, 366–67; and Gross's edition, 368–69. Heinrich Graetz's influential description of Abulafia in his *History of the Jews*, trans. Bella Löwy, vol. 5, repr. ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Society of America, 1967) greatly depends on this document, though no analysis of its content is provided there. For additional analyses of issues found in this passage that have not been reproduced here *in toto*, see my "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 60–63; my introduction to Rabbi Nathan's *Ša'arei Šedeq*, in *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 29–31; and my "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 216–18. See also Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 33, 51, 124, note 41, 131, note 88, and Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah," 111, note 47.

**140** For Samuel ibn Tibbon's teaching of the *Guide*, see the information related to his activity in Languedoc assembled by Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 133–46, and James T. Robinson, "Secondary Forms of Transmission: Teaching and Preaching Philosophy in Thirteenth-Century Provence," in *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism, and Science in the Mediterranean World*, eds. Haggai Ben-Shammai, Shaul Shaked, and Sarah Stroumsa (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013): 187–215.

**141** See Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah in Byzantium: A Preliminary Inquiry" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 18 (2008): 199–208.



I am today<sup>142</sup> in the city of *Phonon*<sup>143</sup> and four precious stones joined my academy,<sup>144</sup> these are the onyx stones and filling stones, set in the tunic and breast-plate.<sup>145</sup> God bestowed upon these four children knowledge and intelligence in order to understand every book and science, and this is the reason why I brought them as close to my discipline as I could, and I invented names for them: Daniel, and Ḥananyah, Misha'el and 'Azaryah,<sup>146</sup> and I called the latter Zekhar-iyah,<sup>147</sup> and they are children with no deficiency, good-looking and understanding every science and knowing knowledge, and having the capacity to stand in the king's palace in order to teach them a book and the language of the holy,<sup>148</sup> and those four children, Daniel and Ḥananyah, Misha'el and 'Azaryah, when they came to shelter under the wings of the *Šekhinah*, false witnesses<sup>149</sup> [...] attempted to seduce them from the table of the Lord, the God of Israel, in order [that they would] not be nourished from the splendour of the *Šekhinah*<sup>150</sup> at the time when other men were consuming grass<sup>151</sup> [...] and they came and implored and asked me to interpret the secrets of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, together with some secrets of the Torah which are in my hands, dealing with very profound matters in order to have a proof and merit and mouth and intercessor in order to extract some wisdom towards which their souls were striving very much, to know it and comprehend its essence in order to know their creator. And they implored me very much to this effect [...] and I, because of my love of them, did not desire to turn them down and I fulfilled their desire according to their wish and I composed this commentary for them and for those similar to them through their intellectual desire.<sup>152</sup>

**142** In 1279.

**143** Capua, in gematria, whose Hebrew consonants amount to 192.

**144** *Midrashiy*. I wonder whether this means an institution, or merely his sermons in addition to his teaching of the *Guide*. There is no way to ascertain the situation in Capua in 1279 in order to corroborate Abulafia's claims.

**145** Abulafia enumerates the names of some precious stones and vestments of a high priest. See Exodus 28:17–22. On Abulafia's discussion of the "real" meaning of the high priest, see below in chapter 24. I assume that Abulafia considered himself to be a high priest and his students as the precious stones on his tunic and breast-plate.

**146** Cf. Daniel 1:7.

**147** This is one of the designations that he took for himself elsewhere in his writings, as it amounts in gematria to Abraham. However, here it seems plausible that Abulafia had a student in Capua named Abraham. He also wrote an epistle to a certain Abraham, most probably from Messina. See "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 1; it is impossible to identify the addressee with the former student in Capua or his student in Messina, Abraham ben Shalom. Compare, however, Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 49. See also chapter 4 note 97.

**148** Did he also teach them Hebrew?

**149** I assume that there is clear evidence here that there was antagonism towards Abulafia's Kabbalistic thought, as he exposed it while he was in Capua.

**150** *Ziv ha-šekhinah*. This Rabbinic term was interpreted in ecstatic Kabbalah in many cases in order to point to ecstatic experiences. See, e.g., Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 32–33, and Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 91. For the phrase "the table of God," see Zachariah 1:7. See also the occurrence of the name Zachariah for one of his students in the text.

**151** This may be a remark pointing to anthropomorphic understandings of the divinity, influential in some circles in contemporary Italy. See Israel Ta-Shma, "Nimuqqei Ḥumash le-Rabbi Isaiah mi-Trani," *QS* 64 (1992/93): 751–53.

**152** *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 120a, 17–18:

ואני היום בעיר פונון, וחוברו אלי במדרשי ארבעה טורי אבן ואלה שמותם והילדים האלה ארבעתם נתן להם האלהים מודע והשכל בכל שכל וחכמה [...] ועל כן הקרבתיים אל משמעתי בכל יכולתי וחדשתי להם שמות וקראתיים בשם דניאל וחנניה



Let me point out that the last two words of the passage, *ḥeṣeq ha-šekhel*, refer to the discussion in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:51. This intellectual desire, as well as their striving to comprehend God, shows that the four students were motivated by some form of intellectual impulse that was characteristic of the secondary elite and of Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, another student whom Abulafia was destined to meet in Capua a year later, to transcend the current traditional Jewish studies, including that of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Like this Nathan, about whom we shall have more to say below, especially in Appendix B, some young Jews active in the second part of the thirteenth century were unsatisfied not only with Rabbinic studies, but also with philosophical ones. Abulafia presented an alternative to some of these young Jews that combined philosophy with what he considered to be Kabbalah, arguing that though the latter transcends the former, he was concerned with a more experiential type of lore.

However, according to the passage from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, what was initially a great success regarding the teaching of the four youths soon turned into a failure. This happened after Abulafia left Capua following the completion of his book and before he left for his unsuccessful attempt to meet the pope in Rome. Unfortunately, we do not have any detailed information as to the nature of the opposition Abulafia encountered in Capua in late 1279 or early 1280 that convinced the four students to recant. I assume that his second stay in Capua lasted less than a year.

More interesting is the fact that he presents the students he had in the two towns in Byzantium as failed students. I do not see any reason why anyone should invent his own failures in two different countries. When dealing with the list of towns, Gershon Scholem assumed that there was no inherent logic in it, as he understood it in a chronological manner.<sup>153</sup> My assumption is that the actual logic of the above list is not a chronological one; that is, Abulafia did not enumerate the places he taught in accordance with the order of his travels and sojourns, but in accordance with the as-

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מישאל ועזריה, ועזריה קראתיו זכריה. והם ילדים אשר אין בהם כל מוס וטובי מראה ומשכילים בכל חכמה ויודעי דעת ומביני מדע, ואשר כח בהם לעמוד בהיכל המלך וללמד ספר ולשון קדושים. ואיבעת הילדים האלה דניאל חנניה מישאל וזכריה בבואם לחסות תחת כנפי השכינה קמו עליהם "עדי שקר ויפח חמס" (תהלים כו:ב), ובקשו להדיחם מעל שולחן יי' אלהי ישראל לבלתי היותם ניוונים מזיו השכינה בעת ששאר בני האדם אוכלים עשב אשר המירו את כבודם בתבנית שור אוכל עשב [...] וכראות הילדים האלה כי חזקה יד מונעיהם מהאמת וכבר שתו בשמים פיהם ולשונם תהלך בארץ ופחדו ורעדו ושבו ונהלו העם כעם והכהן ככהן ולפי חכמתם. ולא היה כעם ככהן ונהרו אל יי' ואל טובו כמנהג בני ישראל עם קרובו, עמדו עלי בחן ובתחוננים ויבקשו ממני לפרש סודות "מורה הנבוכים" עם קצת סתרי תורה אשר בידנו מעניינים עמוקים מאד להיות להם לראייה ולזכות, ולפה, ולמליץ, להעלות בידם קצת מהחכמה אשר השתוקקה נפשם לדעתה ולהשיג אמתה למען יכירו את קונם. ויפצרו בי מאד על זה וגברה חשקתם אל החכמה מאד בשמעם קצת נסתריה, אז גבר ההפצר לפי החשק ואני מפני חשקי במ לא רציתי להשיבם נכלמים משאלתם ועשיתי חפצם כנפשם וכתבתי זה הפירוש בעבורם ובעבור כל הדומים להם בחשק השכל.

See also Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 217–18. For an additional description of the four youths, see also the concluding poem of *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Gross, 199. On Abulafia and the *Guide*, see also Nathan Hofer, "Abraham Abulafia's 'Mystical' Reading of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," *Numen* 60 (2013): 251–79.

<sup>153</sup> Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 103.

ending order of his success in teaching the *Guide* to students there, beginning with the worst, as he saw it retrospectively in 1286. If one adopts the proposal of an ascending gradation from worst to best, Capua is the worst, then the Byzantine students, then perhaps the Romans, where the success was short-lived since the two students succeeded but died, then the greater successes in the two provinces in the Iberian Peninsula, and finally his seven students in Messina, the place where he wrote the above report. The problem with this list is therefore not the order of the cities he mentions, but the possibility of confirming the accuracy of Abulafia's testimony from external independent sources.

I am aware of a single example of a plausible confirmation: Abulafia's claim to have taught Joseph Gikatilla, whom he considered to be the greatest of his successes, can be confirmed primarily by the conceptual affinities between Gikatilla's earlier Kabbalistic writings and those of Abulafia. Had he not been in Castile for a while, he would not know that the views of this young Kabbalist were so close to Abulafia's. Indeed, Gikatilla had already composed a very detailed Kabbalistic book at the age of twenty-six that belonged to linguistic Kabbalah. Moreover, as pointed out by Efraim Gottlieb, in one of the earlier versions of the third part of his *Ginnat Egoz* (a book written in 1274) still found in manuscript, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla mentions "Rabbi Abraham, let his candle radiate," who asked difficult questions, "the older teacher of the intellectual issues," or, according to another version, "the eye of the intellectual light."<sup>154</sup> In both cases, the way in which this Abraham is portrayed fits Abulafia's claim that he taught *The Guide of the Perplexed* in Medinat Celim.

Abulafia's testimony has quite plausibly been confirmed by Gikatilla's own testimony, though he does not refer to this Abraham as his own teacher. Moreover, the term "teacher of intellectual matters" includes the Hebrew *moreh ha-sikhliyot*, which may refer to *The Guide of the Perplexed*. However, let me repeat, it is interesting that Gikatilla did not explicitly refer to Abulafia as his teacher in matters of Kabbalah in this context or elsewhere, despite the many affinities between his earlier works and Abulafia's writings.

Moreover, this testimony also contributes a possible date for the contact between the two: shortly before 1274, when Gikatilla wrote the longer and perhaps final version of his non-theosophical *Gate of the Vowels* that became part of his first full-fledged book, *Ginnat Egoz*. Indeed, this possible date works perfectly with the timetable that informs the way I see his teachings and his career in general: around 1271, he left Barcelona after studying and teaching there<sup>155</sup> and taught in the Castilian towns of Medinat Celim and Burgos during 1272 and 1273; around the end of 1273 or early 1274, he left for the Byzantine Empire, where he stayed for about six

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154 Efraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature* [Hebrew], ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), 104–5: מורה השכליות ועין האורה השכלית. See also Federico dal Bo, "The Theory of 'Emanation' in Gikatilla's *Gates of Justice*," *JJS* 62 (2011): 80, note 3.

155 Commentary on *Sefer ha-'Edut*, 57.

years.<sup>156</sup> This dating seems to be compelling since he had already taught the *Guide* in Castile in two different ways; I assume that one of them was related to his Kabbalah, which he had studied only in 1270 and 1271.

Abulafia refers to the Messina students as providing the highest moments in his teaching career, which is represented by the crescendo structure of the locales in the list, though immediately after the quoted passage, he admits that some of them left him.<sup>157</sup> However, given the later mentions of them, it seems that at least some of them returned to him. Elsewhere in his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, he refers to Rabbi Sa'adyah ben Isaac, his student from Messina to whom the book was dedicated, and reminds him of the two views of the creation of the world as found in the *Guide* "that you have studied earlier,"<sup>158</sup> which may be a reference to Abulafia teaching him this book, as mentioned above. Interestingly enough, written around five years after his arrival in Messina, this list does not refer to any followers in Palermo, to whom he refers only later on in the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, as we shall see later in this chapter.

To return to Abulafia's teaching of the *Guide*: Abulafia was aware of the existence of two Hebrew translations of the book, that of Judah al-Ḥarizi and that of Samuel ibn Tibbon. An examination of his commentaries shows that he preferred to use the latter.<sup>159</sup> Perhaps this is related to his being associated with the Naples centre, where there were descendants of Samuel ibn Tibbon. In fact, from the point of view of the amplitude of his teaching and writing, Abulafia and his circle's preoccupation with the *Guide* is very rarely matched by any circle of philosophers other than that of Samuel ibn Tibbon and the members of his family. We may speak of a modest renewal of interest in the *Guide* that was initiated by Abulafia in the aftermath of the first controversy over Maimonides's writings.<sup>160</sup>

In my opinion, it would not be an exaggeration to speak about Abulafia's Kabbalah as gravitating around central concepts found in the *Guide*. In any case, the pro-

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**156** See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 528, note 370. Let me point out that this understanding of Abulafia's biography requires a substantial shift in the discussions of his affinities with various forms of Christianity. The years 1273–1279 were formative and served to prepare him for the period from 1279 to 1282, to be discussed in Appendix D. In the Byzantine period, and to a certain extent also later in the Sicilian one, he could have been influenced, as I think, by Byzantine Christianity, different as it is from Catholicism, an issue that has been marginalised in the analyses of his relations to Christianity.

**157** A testimony as to the existence of tensions in Messina is found in the 1282 *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, printed in *Maṣref ha-Šekhel*, 40.

**158** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* 2:1, 215: על פי ספר המורה שלמדת לפנים. I wonder whether לפנים is not a copyist's error for לפני; namely, "that you learned with me."

**159** See his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, Ms. Munich, 408, fol. 47a, 81.

**160** For a survey of his commentaries on Maimonides's *Guide* and its secrets, see Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 203–5. The material assembled there has not yet been addressed in recent scholarship on Abulafia and I hope to return to the neglected manuscript material elsewhere. Meanwhile, see my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 11–12, and "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah," 173.

curement of the manuscripts of the translations and the philosophical treatises generated by the centre of culture in Naples is an interesting question, since Abulafia not only read them, but also seems to have had access to them much later when he left southern Italy.

The conceptual implications of the context of the above seminal passage from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*<sup>161</sup> for the understanding of Abulafia's intellectual career are tremendous and inform most of the areas of his activity and the content of his thought. Nevertheless, its relevant details and its more general message have been ignored by scholars in recent decades. This absence is especially evident among those who turned Abulafia into a "phantastischer Schwaermer,"<sup>162</sup> or "phantastic enthusiast," as Moritz Steinschneider puts it; or a somewhat more sympathetic "mystischer Schwaermer," "mystical enthusiast," according to Adolph Jellinek;<sup>163</sup> or a theosophist thinker, as claimed by Israel Weinstock, who interpreted Abulafia's non-theosophical statements theosophically;<sup>164</sup> or a theosophist and theurgist, as has been carried out more emphatically, sophisticatedly, and based on a much wider reading of Abulafia's manuscripts by Elliot Wolfson and other scholars.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, having perused one of his discussions, Warren Zev Harvey insightfully describes him, in a manner with which I essentially agree, as a "philosophically astute Kabbalist."<sup>166</sup> Scholem regards him as a "good disciple of Maimonides."<sup>167</sup> To a great extent, he was greatly concerned with what Donald Davidson called "mental acts," ecstatic as his

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161 Quoted above, chapter 4 note 26.

162 "Die hebraeischen Commentare zum 'Fuehrer' des Maimonides," in *Festschrift zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag A. Berliners*, eds. Aron Freimann and Meier Hildesheimer (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1903), 349. See also his description of Abulafia as "Schwaermer und Pseudo-Prophet" in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1925), 435.

163 See his *Philosophie und Kabbalah*, vol. 3, as well as Heinrich Graetz's writings. See, e.g., Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Ismar Schorsch (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975), 166. On the word "enthusiasm" in the perception of Sabbatai Tzevi, see Michael Heyd, "The Jewish 'Quaker': Christian Perceptions of Sabbatai Zevi as an Enthusiast," in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey Shoulson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 234–64.

164 See, especially, some of Weinstock's footnotes to his *Commentary on Sefer Yeṣirah*, 22, 23, 24, 40, 41.

165 See Wolfson's *Abraham Abulafia*, where he declares in the subtitle that the Kabbalist was both a theurgist and a theosophist. See also his *Language, Eros, Being*, 204, and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, viii, note 13, 88, etc. Interestingly enough, in his introductory sketch (1–2), Sagerman does not seem to be aware that Abulafia taught the *Guide* for many years and that this book may have shaped many of his ideas in a universalistic manner.

166 Harvey, "A Third Approach," 293. See also his later view about "medieval Hebrew speculative tradition—a tradition in which Rabbi Abraham Abulafia played no mean role." See also his "Idel on Spinoza," in *Essays in Honor of Moshe Idel*, eds. Sandu and Mihaela Frunza (Cluj-Napoca: Provo Press, 2008): 105.

167 Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 135. See also 129.

ideals were, in a manner reflecting the Greek philosophical traditions in medieval garbs with which he was acquainted.

Because scholars have not taken into consideration Abulafia's career as a teacher of the *Guide*—the tensions between many of these scholarly descriptions on the one hand and the structure and contents of his books as a whole on the other—Abulafia's thought has not been competently addressed in recent studies. Indubitably, in Abulafia's case, the *Guide* served as a major positive intellectual trigger for formulating a more hybrid and complex type of Kabbalah, dramatically inspired by the philosophical content of his earlier studies and divergent from its theosophical-theurgical versions/incarnations, his specific type of political esotericism being only one of the main areas of divergence between the two main trends in Kabbalah. The references to Abulafia as an “enthusiast” and an “ecstatic” have, in general, negative repercussions in the detailed analyses of his writings. A perusal of them, however, shows that most of them were written in a highly planned and cautious manner that included sophistications that were rarely part of the Maimonideans' writings, to say nothing of his broad resort to mathematical calculations.

Committed to writing in Messina in 1285 and 1286, Abulafia's report in paragraph [b] shows that he was not shy about boasting his continuous adherence to the *Guide* and his ongoing teaching of its secrets while he had already been a Kabbalist for fifteen years. It would not be superfluous to look at his thought from the perspective of his study and teaching of a certain type of philosophy, though this perspective, paramount as it is, is just one of many others, as I have shown in my analysis of his studies of commentaries on *Sefer Yeširah*.<sup>168</sup> After all, he spent many of his mature years in Italy at a time when Jewish philosophy was more dominant and Kabbalah was a rather marginal topic.

Indeed, Abulafia formulated his attitude towards a certain type of esotericism, the eschatological one, in comparison to the other Kabbalists in quite an instructive manner:

*'Et qeš,*<sup>169</sup> and though I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they do that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue [*seter*],<sup>170</sup> I shall care neither

**168** On the methodology of perspectivism, see my “Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*,” 309–10; in more general terms, see my *Ascensions on High*, 11–13. The need to combine the two perspectives, the philosophical and the combinatorial, is obvious from all of Abulafia's writings. See also above chapter 4 note 110.

**169** Daniel 12:9, referring to the “time of the end.”

**170** *'eT Qeš* [470 + 190] = *SeTeR* = 660. The other gematria is *'MŠ 'ŠM* = *Ma'aŠeH MeRKaVaH* = *HaR-KaVaT Ha-KoL* = *ŠeM Be-ŠeM* = 682. On *Qeš* = 190, see Appendix C note 140 below. On the entire messianic context of the figure 660, see Moshe Idel, “‘The Time of the End’: Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology,” in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 164–67, 179–80. See also Pedaya, “The Sixth Millennium,” 66–68, 74–75, 85. Pedaya's discussions of Abulafia compare what I call the matters related to the second narrative—namely, the apocalyptic ones—with his calculations, ignoring the many other discussions found in the writ-

about their thought nor about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this issue is very different from and even opposite to theirs. And this is the reason why I have revealed to you that the secret of 'eMeš with 'aŠeM is *Ma'ašeh Merkavah*, refers to *Harkkavat ha-kol*, like *Šem be-Šem*.<sup>171</sup>

Abulafia is here playing on only two of the several meanings he attributes to the Hebrew root *STR* in his writings: one is its secrecy, which should not be revealed—other Kabbalists opposed disclosures of secrets. The other meaning is a numerical one that deals with the sum of the consonants of this word as 660, which amounts, according to his view, to the year in the Jewish calendar that corresponds to 1290, the year that he believed the Messiah would come according to a series of additional calculations that I cannot deal with here.<sup>172</sup>

The use of the term *seter* in this specific context is indubitably related to its gematria. However, for our purpose here, it is interesting to note that he formulated his approach to esotericism in the above passage from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* as being different from that of the other Kabbalists, even as opposite to it. Thus, two forms of secrets are dealt with: one related to eschatology, *seter* = 660, and the other with the account of the chariot, which in his writings is a form of metaphysics mingled with linguistics. In both cases, I propose to use the term “secret” rather than “mystery,” as it is translated in many cases, since my understanding is that Abulafia's eso-

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ings of this Kabbalist of exactly the same two words she analyses (*'et qeš*), which can be found in his writings in print, to say nothing of material in manuscripts and secondary literature, unaware as she was of my study on exactly the same topic in Abulafia's thought. See my “The Time of the End.” While I am dealing here with Abulafia's esoteric narrative as referring to spiritual arousal, which is consonant with some of the Maimonideans's allegorical understanding of redemption (see my *Messianic Mystics*, 54, 88, 344, note 60), she analyses the eschatological narrative; namely, what he reveals openly. This is also known as the second narrative, which is consonant with the *Zohar*. In this way, she again blurs, following Elliot Wolfson, the huge phenomenological differences between the two forms of Kabbalah. Moreover, she believes, like Wolfson, that there are “genuine ecstatic experiences” in the *Zohar*. See Wolfson's *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 330. What is “genuine” in topics like this is rather doubtful, scholarly speaking, since it assumes some form of essentialism. Slowly, scholars have recently come closer to the starting point of scholarship on Kabbalah, as formulated by Meyer H. Landauer in the mid-nineteenth century. His scholarship began with Abulafia's manuscript writings, whom he regarded as the author of the *Zohar*! Now, however, some scholars see him as close to the *Zohar*. Pedaya even claims that rumors of his fate, his death, and the failure of his messianic mission are reflected in this classic of Kabbalah. See also chapter 19 note 225 below.

171 *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 110:

עת קץ ועם היותי יודע שיש מן המקובלים רבים שלא נשלמו וחשבו שנשלמו בהיותם בלתי מגלים דבר סת"ר לא אחוש אני למחשבתם ואפילו בגנותם אותי על הגלוי. כי דעתי בזה רחוקה מדעתם או הפכית. ועל כן אחר שגיליתי לך כי סוד אמ"ש עם אש"ם הוא מעש"ה מרכב"ה המורה על הרכב"ת הכ"ל כמו ש"ם בש"ם.

See also my “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” 417, and Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 185, note 13.

172 See Idel, “The Time of the End.” As I shall show below in Appendix D, the initial year for the messianic event was most probably 1280, but it was then postponed to 1290.



tericism is closer to that of the philosophers, which means that something known to one person is hidden from others.<sup>173</sup> It assumes a great amount of transparency for someone who is cognisant of the secret, which is not something that is in itself difficult to understand or non-transparent. In general, I would say that the substantial resort to mystery is a part of recent attempts to bring Kabbalistic esotericism closer to the Christian understanding of some aspects of Jewish mystical literatures on the one hand and to minimise the philosophical valences that were formative for Abulafia's esotericism on the other.

Let me point out that the eschatological esotericism that Abulafia openly disclosed is not the highest form of esotericism in his writings even insofar as this specific topic is concerned, since the term *qeş*, "end," has another significance in some of Abulafia's discussions; in his pseudo-epistemology, the root word is related to *ye-qışah* ("awakening"), which means a spiritual sort of arousal.<sup>174</sup> In my opinion, for Abulafia, this is the higher aim and part of a different narrative from the traditional eschatological one; this higher aim, which I will discuss below in chapter 13, is what I call the hidden or third narrative.

In any case, I am not acquainted with any explicit reservation that this Kabbalist addressed to the Great Eagle's thought, whose esoteric approach he shares. The above discussion from *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz* does not contradict anything related to Maimonides's esotericism. I would say that we have here an indication of the tensions Abulafia had with other Kabbalists, most probably from Nahmanides's circle, who advocated the secret feature of Kabbalah.<sup>175</sup> Whether the polemic with Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret had already begun when this passage was written in 1285 or whether it began a few years later (no later than the end of 1287), the above passage testifies

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**173** For the massive, though not completely exclusive, resort to "mystery" in translating Abulafia's *sefer*, see Wolfson's *Abraham Abulafia*. For an important discussion of where the two categories are found in Maimonides, see Lorberbaum, "The Men of Knowledge and the Sages Are Drawn." See also Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolisme et interprétation* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 115–18, where earlier sources dealing with hidden contents of the interpreted texts, including Maimonides, have been pointed out. Let me also point out that a Kabbalistic turn to secrecy may be discerned in a certain case when theosophical Kabbalists hid their views out of fear of philosophers. See the view of Rabbi Meshullam Dapierra, who describes the Geronese Kabbalists as follows: "They knew the size of their creator but they stopped their words out of fear of the heretics," printed in Hayyim Brody, "Poems of Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera," *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem* 4 (1938): 104, as well as Dapierra in Brody, 18. See my "In a Whisper," 462, note 97. This formulation related to the concept of divine size and corporeality shows that it was not a mystery but a secret that is found in the views of these Kabbalists.

**174** See Idel, "The Time of the End." It is difficult to precisely define the meaning of the *Ye-qışah*. Like many other terms related to spiritual processes, I can hardly imagine a serious scholar would assume the existence of one unchanging meaning even in the writings of the same author. Let me point out that in my opinion, there is no "perennial ecstasy," but a variety of forms of ecstatic phenomena, and even in Abulafia, there is more than one such experience. See my *The Mystical Experience*, 48–49, 74–119, and also Appendix B note 82 below.

**175** See Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This," 51–73.



to the existence of the criticism Abulafia had regarding the other Kabbalists' approach. Ibn Adret indeed belongs to the camp of those Kabbalists who adopted a strict policy of esotericism, faithfully preserving the oral Kabbalistic traditions of Nahmanides, as his students testified.

Indeed, Abulafia assumed, in a manner closer to Maimonides, that secrets should be revealed only to those who already had some form of philosophical education.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, he asserts in an interesting passage that the "majority of the secrets of the Torah" emerge from discussions between two sages who are arguing with each other,<sup>177</sup> which is an entirely non-Nahmanidean understanding of the secrets of the Torah. This seminal declaration assumes not only a process of clarifying an issue that is already found hidden in the text at hand, but also the emergence of such a secret through the technique of debate. This amounts to the view that for Abulafia, secrecy is an open category and not just what is deemed to have been transmitted or revealed from above.

However, there may well also be another reason for using "secrets" rather than "mystery." In an interesting distinction, Abulafia differentiates between the disclosure of a secret to a philosopher (he uses the term *sod*) and the discussion of the content of *seter* with a Kabbalist.<sup>178</sup> While the *sod* has to do with the secrets of reality and to "inquirers" in a manner reminiscent of Maimonides's term *sodot ha-mešī'ut*, the term *seter* is more reminiscent of the phrase *sitrei Torah*, the secrets of the Torah. That is, it is reminiscent of a type of approach to the sacred text.<sup>179</sup> In other words, while *sod* is imagined here to stand for philosophical contents, *seter* is understood as being connected to combinations of letters that should be applied to the decoding of the arcana allegedly found in a sacred text.<sup>180</sup> We have here a distinction between studying the arcana of nature and the arcana as allegedly found in texts that should be "decoded."

Written in 1289 in the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, which means towards the end of Abulafia's career, this distinction and its larger context shows the persistence of the philosophical type of esotericism present in Abulafia's

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176 See Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide," 297.

177 *Maftēah ha-Šemot*, 86:

לדעת שני החכמים המקשים זה לזה ובא על זה התירוץ והפירוק המופלג המגלה רוב סתרי התורה.

178 See the introduction to *Maftēah ha-Hokhmot*, 46:

ואם כן כשתשמע ממני סוד מן הסודות על דרך המחקר, עיין בו לפי אמיתת המציאות. ואם תשמע ממני סתר מן הסתרים על דרך הקבלה עיין בו לפי אמיתת דרכי צירוף האותיות והשמות והנמשך אחריהם מכלל הדיבור.

179 Compare also to the view already expressed in *Sitrei Torah*, 33: סודות המציאות וסתרי תורה. However, in *Maftēah ha-Hokhmot*, 101, the order is inverse. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 83.

180 This distinction is very reminiscent of another passage by Abulafia where he compares the Aristotelian type of logic that deals with nature or reality to the Kabbalistic type of logic, which is represented by the combination of letters, understood as the clue for understanding sacred texts. See "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 14–15, discussed in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 91, 267, 416–17. On combinations of letters in Abulafia's former student, see Elke Morlok, *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Hermeneutics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 37–56, 109–23.

thought long after he turned into a Kabbalist. Indeed, he continued to mention circles or groups of persons who are related to *The Guide of the Perplexed* even in his last book.<sup>181</sup>

However, I do not assume that Abulafia's statement about the distinction between *sod* and *seter* should serve as a universal clue for all the instances when the two terms occur, either separately or together, in his writings. Nevertheless, it is important to note it in order to show how long the impact of Maimonides's esotericism continued to linger in his thought. It is possible that Abulafia promoted the oral transmission of both philosophical and Kabbalistic secrets.

In this text, he explicitly writes "when you will hear from me," which means a certain type of instruction that drew its inspiration from the domain of philosophical speculations. It is possible that the transmission of philosophical secrets in this specific book has something to do with the nature of the audience of his students in Palermo, where one of the major figures whom Abulafia claimed was one of his students in his introduction lived. This Rabbi Aḥiṭuv ben Isaac, a Maimonidean physician, translated a short Arabic treatise about logic written by—or perhaps attributed to—the young Maimonides entitled *Millot ha-Higayon*.<sup>182</sup>

These facts mean that the challenge of Jewish philosophy as an intellectual enterprise cultivated by an actual audience was constant in Abulafia's immediate milieu, especially in Palermo, where people with whom he was acquainted knew Arabic alongside Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, as Abulafia astutely observed.<sup>183</sup> In any case, in

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**181** See the phrase "the sages of the *Guide of the Perplexed*" in his last book, *Imrei Šefer*, to be discussed in chapter 18 below. Compare also to the phrase משכילי המורה found in the earlier *Sitrei Torah*, 7. Though difficult to translate exactly, it refers to a group that is preoccupied with the *Guide*. Though the latter book was composed in Capua or Rome, the former one was most probably written in Sicily and the reference to the sages of the *Guide* may be related to students he had in Palermo, one of whom, Rabbi Aḥiṭuv, was certainly Maimonidean. See also the end of Appendix D below.

**182** On this treatise, see the different opinions of Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, 313–22, Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty*, 59, and Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 126–28. Abulafia states that this treatise was authored by Maimonides in his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:1, 307–8, displaying a better version than that which is found in the manuscripts used by Israel Efros, in his edition of the translation in "Maimonides's Treatise on Logic," *PAAJR* 7–8 (1939): 93; see also *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:2, 311. This is the earliest evidence of the possible existence of this Hebrew translation and may testify that Abulafia already had some form of relationship with the Jews in Palermo in 1285. See also Idel, "On the History of the Interdiction," 17, note 9. It is to this Rabbi Aḥiṭuv that Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret addressed one of the letters against Abulafia's prophetic or messianic pretensions, according to Abulafia's own testimony in his epistle "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 29. For the possible impact of one the terms in this translation on Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, see Scholem's hand-written note adduced in *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 412, note 2.

**183** See *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:2, 313. For a study on Sicily's variegated linguistic background that also uses this passage, see Nadia Zeldes, "Language and Culture of a Sicilian Jewish Intercultural Mediator: The Hebrew Background of Flavius Mithridates," in *Flavio Mitridate: Mediatore fra culture nel contesto dell'ebraismo siciliano del XV secolo*, eds. Mauro Perani and Giacomo Corazzol (Palermo: Officina di studi medievali, 2012): 17–26.

his *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, a commentary on Exodus written in 1289, he claims that some issues hinted at in his commentary cannot be understood unless they are received “mouth to mouth.”<sup>184</sup> I wonder if such a practice was known or experienced by his students.

Thus, without denying for a moment his self-perception as a Kabbalist claiming to have received oral traditions from anonymous sages of his generation, as he sometimes testified,<sup>185</sup> it is nevertheless fruitful to compare many of his views with those circulating among the various members of the Maimonidean camp in order to better situate both his views and those espoused by other members in a more complex and accurate manner. Especially interesting is the similarity between Abulafia's theory of intellectual union, which in my opinion is mainly of Averroistic extraction, to the views about such a union found in other commentators on the *Guide* such as Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi, Rabbi Joseph al-Fawwāl (who wrote a *Commentary on the Song of Songs*), Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon, and Isaac Polqar.<sup>186</sup>

What is quintessential for the topic under scrutiny here is the fact that most—if not all—of the towns mentioned in the list in paragraph [b] fit what we know about Abulafia's biography *after* he became a Kabbalist, not before. However, we cannot preclude the possibility of his teaching the *Guide* in one form or another before 1270. Such a possibility is plausible insofar as his teaching of the two Halakhic figures in Rome. I would say that he perhaps taught there before leaving Italy for Spain (probably Barcelona) sometime in the late 1260s.<sup>187</sup>

When he returned to Spain (probably Catalonia), he was still solely a Maimonidean thinker. He taught the *Guide* to Rabbi Judah Salmon and to the as yet unidentified Rabbi Qalonymus in Barcelona quite early on. He mentions leaving this town around 1271,<sup>188</sup> most probably for a tour of towns in Castile, where he stayed for around two years before leaving for a longer sojourn in the Byzantine Empire that spanned about six years and at least three towns. He remained there until early 1279.<sup>189</sup> I assume that most of his Barcelonian period fell into his earliest Kabbalistic career.

Consequently, it seems plausible that his career of teaching the *Guide* in several towns and countries was also an important occasion for disseminating his own Kab-

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**184** *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 164.

**185** *Sefer ha-Hešeq*, ed. Matatياهو Safrin (Jerusalem: 1999), 7:

אמסור לך קבלות ידועות, מהם שקבלתים מחכמי הדור פה אל פה.

“I shall transmit known traditions to you, some of which I received from the sages of the generation, from mouth to mouth.” Compare also to the text translated by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 186.

**186** See his *Menorat Kesef*, printed in *‘Ašarah Kelei Kesef*, ed. Isaac H. Last (Pressburg: Alcalay, 1903), 2:100–101, 103, 108; *Adnei Kesef*, ed. Isaac H. Last (London: Narodiczky, 1912), 2:140; Moses ibn Tibbon, *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe’ah*, 99; and Pines, “Some Views Put Forward by the 14th-Century Jewish Philosopher Isaac Pulgar,” 428–29.

**187** See, however, chapter 5 notes 117 and 118 above.

**188** See the *Commentary on Sefer ha-‘Edut*, 57, and our discussion below in Appendix D.

**189** See my “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 528, note 570, and Appendix D below.

balah and perhaps even for providing propaganda about his role as prophet and Messiah. In any case, Abulafia himself was aware that he was not simply disseminating the secrets of the *Guide* since he explicitly distinguished its secrets from some of the secrets of the Torah, which his students in Capua asked him to commit to writing. This became his most popular commentary on Maimonides's secrets.<sup>190</sup> From the Hebrew formulation reproduced in the footnote, it is not clear whether these secrets of the Torah were exegetical techniques to be applied in order to understand the *Guide* or conceptual secrets that were not explicitly found in the *Guide*.

In other words, while disseminating a philosophical type of esotericism that he believed could be found in the *Guide*—and also, as he would like us to believe, in the Bible—Abulafia most probably also disseminated his own redemption-oriented esotericism, as well as the secret of his mission as a messianic and redemptive figure. The latter most plausibly constituted one of the main reasons for the emergence of tensions generated by his teaching. In fact, this personalisation of the collective memory and traditional concepts in allegorical terms, coupled with a belief in the imminence of redemption, contributed to the radicalism of Abulafia's thought which sometimes went beyond what may be found in the Maimonidean camp, which was concerned more with religious exegesis than with eschatological experience. With Abulafia, a sense of mission is very pronounced as part of the prophetic experience that involves the activation of the imaginative faculty,<sup>191</sup> unlike the higher experience of the union of the human intellect with the divine or the Agent Intellect that he conceived to be free of the effects of the activities of this faculty.<sup>192</sup>

However, most of Abulafia's activity as a teacher of the *Guide* was probably not merely a plain exposition of Maimonides's thought. As the Kabbalist mentions above in the context of his students in Thebes, he taught the *Guide* in two different ways, the second one presumably coinciding with the peculiar manner in which he interpreted the secrets of Maimonides's book, to be discussed immediately below.<sup>193</sup> As is clear from many of his writings, it is the second, higher, secret, oral, combinatory,

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**190** *Sitrei Torah*, 14:

עמדו עלי בחן ובתחוננים ויבקשו ממני לפרש סודות "מורה הנבוכים" עם קצת סתרי תורה אשר בידינו מעניינים עמוקים מאד להיות להם לראייה ולזכות.

Let me point out that Hames's assumption that Abulafia returned from Rome to Capua after his unsuccessful attempt to meet the pope, though not impossible, is not corroborated by the extant material with which I am acquainted. See his *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 42, where no evidence or reference has been adduced.

**191** See *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, 10.

**192** For his more imaginative, demonic revelations that lasted for several years, see *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 370. Compare, however, Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 155. Wolfson claims that there is an integration of the imaginative power even in the highest experience in Abulafia's thought. See, however, my "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 538. For imagination as illusion in Maimonides, see Faur, *Homo Mysticus*, 9, 11.

**193** See below, p. 70.

linguistic, individualist, and Kabbalistic interpretation of the *Guide* that is, in fact, a major aspect of his ecstatic Kabbalah.

According to Abulafia's own testimony, the *Guide*, together with *Sefer Yeşirah*, constitutes one of the two main sources of his Kabbalah.<sup>194</sup> One major example of his attempt to bring his two sources together is his interpretation of the ideal of knowledge of God, expressed somewhat ambiguously in Hebrew by the phrase *Yed-i'at ha-Šem*, which can be understood, in principle, both as the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the name of God.<sup>195</sup> The former interpretation is philosophical, while the latter is related to *Sefer Yeşirah* and its commentaries, where "one name" (*šem eḥad*) is mentioned.<sup>196</sup> According to another widespread formulation in his writings, the knowledge of *ha-šem* is achieved by *šem*; that is, the knowledge of God is reached by means of the divine name.<sup>197</sup>

The strong emphasis on the divine name being quintessential for Abulafia's Kabbalah may have something to do with Ashkenazi forms of esotericism that include traditions relating to the divine names, some of which made their way to Barcelona in the second half of the thirteenth century, where they were accepted by some Kab-

**194** See my "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 67; my "*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries," 486; and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 126.

**195** This expression found in hundreds of discussions in Abulafia's works used to refer to the divine name. See *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, *Sitrei Torah*, 78, 140, 154, 194, and especially the following passage from *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 39:

תכלית האחרונה המכוונת במציאותו שהיא השגת ידיעת השם וידיעת השם אינה כי אם על פי האותיות שהם הם הכלים הקרובים [...] שהאותיות הם מציאות העולם כולו, ובם השם מנהיג עולמו כמו שמעיד בעל ספר יצירה באומרו "כל היצור וכל הדבור יוצא מהם." ואמר שהשם המליך האותיות של כל היצורים, וקשר להם הכתרים וצרפם זה עם זה, כלומר האות עם היצור.

"The ultimate aim that is intended by his existence is the knowledge of the name and the knowledge of the name is [impossible] without the letters which are the close instruments [...] since the letters are the existence of the entire world, and by their means, God governs over His world, as *Sefer Yeşirah* testifies when it was said 'All the creature[s] and all the speech[s] emerge out of them.' And it said that God appointed the letters over all the creatures, and he attached crowns to them and combined them with each other; namely, one letter with one creature." See also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 27, and the text translated by Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 54–55, and his "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 140.

**196** See *Sefer Yeşirah*, 2:8.

**197** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 51–53, and the more elaborated treatment in my *Enchanted Chains*, 76–121, and "Hekhalot Literature," section 6. On the gnosis of the divine name as part of the secret of some parts of the Hebrew Bible, see the recent study by Israel Knohl, *The Holy Name* [Hebrew] (Or Yehudah: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2012). In my opinion, there was a tension between trends of thought that emphasised the centrality of the divine name and those that deal with the revelation of the divine attributes or manifestations. See the important Midrashic text in *Mekhilta' de-Rashby on Exodus*, eds. Yaakov N. Epstein and Ezra Z. Melamed (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1959), 129–31, as well as my "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*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993): 117–43. Thus, Abulafia elaborated, in his specific and idiosyncratic manner, on an older tradition that conceived itself as superior to the Kabbalistic theory of the divine attributes.

balists.<sup>198</sup> However, what is important to point out is the existence of a statement that depicts this specific form of knowledge not just as a noetic experience, but also as an experiential moment during which knowledge is moving the aspirant and the super-nal influx is felt within his body.<sup>199</sup>

It seems that this level of exposition related to the *Guide* is also connected to the assumption that Abulafia introduced some of his students to what he called the external traditions and, implicitly, the internal ones, as he mentions in his reference to the two students he had in Burgos. However, insofar as Rabbi Moses of Burgos's writings are concerned (and we know that none of them survived), the importance of *The Guide of the Perplexed* is only marginal.

By speaking about oral transmission in this particular context, Abulafia capitalised on a tradition, paralleled by other rumours, about the existence of orally transmitted secrets related to the *Guide*. This we learn from the somewhat later information that reached the early fourteenth-century commentator on the *Guide* Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi—who reported that he had travelled to Egypt in order to learn the secrets of the *Guide* that were allegedly circulating orally in Maimonides's family, returning to Provence and Catalonia quite disappointed<sup>200</sup>—as well as from a statement of his contemporary Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi.<sup>201</sup> In my opinion, Abulafia's

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**198** See Rabbi Eleazar of Worms's reference to the Tetragrammaton as the sublime name as strengthened by the gematria אותיות ד' ליראה ד' ליראה את השם הנכבד בגימ' ליראה ד'. Both expressions indeed amount to 1073. See Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer ha-Šem*, ed. Aaron Eisenbach (Jerusalem: Eisenbach Edition, 2004), 8. While the Ashkenazi master is concerned with the awe of God or of the divine name, Abulafia is concerned with knowing God and the divine name. See also Idel, "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," 75, note 16, and my "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typology*, ed. R.A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 97–122. From this point of view, Abulafia claims to be continuing a long tradition found in Judaism since late antiquity, though my assumption is that the detailed content of his discussions does not constitute the continuation of older traditions, which perhaps were lost. It should be emphasised that Abulafia stressed the intellectual nature of the knowledge of the divine name several times. See *Imrei Šefer*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 1999), 50, 106.

**199** *Gan Na'ul*, 41.

**200** See ibn Kaspi's introduction to *Sefer ha-Mussar*, printed in *‘Ašarah Kelei Kesef*, 2:60. A very similar passage is also found in his *Menorat Kesef*, 94. There is good reason to assume that ibn Kaspi was acquainted with Abulafia's commentary on the secrets of the *Guide*, as was also pointed out by the editor of ibn Kaspi's commentary on the *Guide*, *Maškiyyot Kesef*, in the unnumbered preface and in the footnote on page 21. See also Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 12. For other possible cases of Abulafia's impact on ibn Kaspi, see also his *Adnei Kesef*, 2:75, discussed in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 176–77, note 127, 196, note 99; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 81–82; and chapter 6 note 224, chapter 16 note 100, and chapter 21 note 325 below. On ibn Kaspi's intellectual world in general, see Isadore Twersky, "Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, 1:231–57, and Ram Ben-Shalom, *The Jews of Provence and Languedoc: Renaissance in the Shadow of the Church* (Ra'anana: Open University, 2017), 145–48, 178–80, 315–18, 506–10, 548–50, 662–66.

**201** See *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, fols. 31d:

הר"מ ז"ל ומי קם בגאונים כמוהו אמנם דבריו בראשי פרקים מובנים למי שקבל סודותיו מפה אל פה.



claim in the epistle that he studied the *Guide* with knowledge of the “secrets” means that he studied those secrets before turning into a Kabbalist; moreover, the list of the secrets was not necessarily part of a knowledge related to Kabbalah, though it was indubitably a matter of esotericism.

It was only later on in his career that Abulafia combined the contents of this list with linguistic exegetical techniques as found in the extant commentaries. Both the allegorical exegesis and the numerical-linguistic one allow an aristocratic and aggressive attitude towards the plain sense, as he formulated in a succinct but seminal form in a passage found in the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch:

When the sage sees that the plain sense is not acceptable to his mind, he should concentrate his attention on its inner meaning,<sup>202</sup> and it is already known that it is possible to take each and every speech out of its plain sense. This is [the case] even when there was a fool who speaks and he intends nothing but the plain sense.<sup>203</sup>

This passage combines the exegetical efforts related to the Hebrew Bible and the senseless speeches of the fool, proposing a similar approach to both based on what the sage assumes is acceptable to his mind; namely, the unearthing of esoteric overtones. He suggests that even in the case of the speeches of fools, it is possible to “elevate” the text to a higher and intellectual level of significance, an attitude that is reminiscent of the much later practice of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, who is quoted as follows:

In accordance with what I heard from the teacher, blessed be his memory, that there are *yihudim* by means of speech, either speeches of Torah and prayer or by means of speech with his companion in the market, he will be able to link him and elevate each of them in accordance with his rank, and there is a speech of holiness and a speech of profane issues since in it there are twenty-two letters, etc.<sup>204</sup>

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See also fol. 55c; Scholem, “The Real Author of the *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*,” 115; Idel, “An Anonymous Commentary on *Shir ha-Yihud*,” 146–47; Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 553–56.

**202** The concept of inner and outer meanings can be found in Plato, perhaps from Pythagorean sources, and in many cases in Muslim exegesis, including in that of the *falāsifah*.

**203** *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*, 44:

החכם בראותו שהפשט אין דעתו סובלתו יעייין בפנימיותו וכבר הוא יודע שכל דבור ודבור אפשר להוציא מפשוטו. ואע"פ שיהיה המדבר פתי שלא כוון בו אלא לפשוטו.

For the wider context, see Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” 428.

**204** See Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Sefer Şafnat Pa'aneah*, ed. Gedalya Nigal (Jerusalem: ha-Makhon le-ḥequer ha-sifrut ha-Ḥasidit, 1989), 260:

על דרך ששמעתי ממורי זלה"ה שיש יחודים בדבור, בין בדבור תורה ותפלה ובין בדבור עם חבירי בשוק, ויכל להברו ולהעלות לכל אחד לפי דרגתו, יש על ידי דיבור דקדושה ויש על ידי דיבור חול שיש בו כ"ב אותיות וכו'.

On cleaving to sounds in the Besht, see, for the time being, Moshe Idel, “Modes of Cleaving to the Letters in the Teachings of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov: A Sample Analysis,” *Jewish History* 27 (2013): 299–317 and my forthcoming monograph *Vocal Rites and Broken Theologies: Cleaving to Vocables in Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov's Mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2020). For other emphases



The issue of the twenty-two letters that are the basis of not just the sacred texts, but also of all speech is indeed reminiscent of *Sefer Yeširah*, and the explicit extension of it to non-canonised texts is significant.

Both the biographical sketches and the explicit and recurring claims that the *Guide* is a major source of his Kabbalah sharply distinguish Abulafia's *Bildung* and subsequently the conceptual structure of his specific type of Kabbalah from earlier and contemporary Kabbalists and their more Neo-Platonically oriented thought, a fact which has not drawn its due attention from scholarship on Kabbalah. This divergence is particularly conspicuous when efforts to trace the sources of his spiritual approaches in other types of literatures were made by scholars before they first exhausted the potential contributions of the *Guide* to the phenomena under their scrutiny. After all, out of all of his medieval sources, it is only Maimonides that Abulafia describes as "the divine Rabbi."<sup>205</sup>

Without first exploring the possible contributions of Maimonides's thought, the early Maimonideans, their sources in the writings of the *falāsifah*, his teacher Rabbi Hillel of Verona, or his sources in order to achieve a more precise understanding of Abulafia's writings, proposals based on other possible sources must turn into mere conjectures. So far, suggestions related to Abulafia's thought being influenced by Catharism have turned out to be no more than a resort to themes found much more plausibly in Maimonides's book.<sup>206</sup> A similar instance can be discerned in recent scholarship claiming that Abulafia expresses a view found in alchemy even though a much better alternative would be a discussion found in the *Guide*,<sup>207</sup> to mention only two examples. The *Guide* has been gravely underestimated as a major source for Abulafia.

Moreover, the efforts to teach the *Guide* in many places in the southern parts of Europe did not remain only a matter of Abulafia's oral activity. He also wrote three commentaries on thirty-six secrets found in this book,<sup>208</sup> which he claimed to have received from some unnamed teachers,<sup>209</sup> most probably before he engaged in the

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on the importance of voice in modern Jewish mysticism, see Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia, Gershon Scholem, and Rabbi David ha-Kohen [ha-Nazir]" [Hebrew], in *Derekh ha-Ruah: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Eliezer Schweid*, ed. Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem: Hebrew University and Van Leer Institute, 2005): 2:787–802, and Semadar Cherlow, *The Šaddiq is the Foundation of the World: Rav Kook's Esoteric Mission and Mystical Experience* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012), 317.

**205** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29: הרב האלוהי.

**206** See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 33–44.

**207** See Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God' on Jesus and Christianity," in *Jesus Among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl (London: Routledge, 2012): 93, note 157.

**208** See Wirszubski, "Liber Redemptionis," 139–49, reprinted in his *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 84–100; Levy's introduction to *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*; Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*," 289–329; Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 197–226; and Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah," 99–131.

**209** See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 58, note 88.

study of Kabbalah. This amounts to the claim that he was in possession of a list of secrets that Maimonides had hidden in his book. Therefore, he claims that they deal with the secrets of the Torah in an esoteric manner. The existence of three such commentaries on Maimonides's alleged list of secrets may be conceived as constituting a new literary genre that is unparalleled in other sources.

The existence of *Haššagot to the Guide*,<sup>210</sup> another composition dealing with the *Guide*, most probably authored by Abulafia's former student Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, shows that only in this small circle of Kabbalists did ideas connected to the *Guide* receive such prominence from the point of view of their importance. The so-called *Nine Chapters on Unity*, a short treatise extant in a unique manuscript attributed to Maimonides (but which is very close conceptually to Gikatilla's early Kabbalistic views, as was pointed out by its editor Georges Vajda),<sup>211</sup> shows a synthesis between some of the Great Eagle's views and linguistic speculations, a mixture entirely unlike the variety of forms of thought of earlier Kabbalists in Provence and Catalonia.<sup>212</sup>

It should be pointed out that Abulafia's three commentaries on the thirty-six secrets as well as that of Gikatilla differ in their genre and content from all the other commentaries on the *Guide*, which are based on a linear exegesis of Maimonides's text, a method that does not follow the non-linear manner in which the author of this book himself recommended it be studied. That is, the ideal manner for studying the *Guide* was to compare parallel discussions found in the various chapters of his book.

However, important as the differences between the Kabbalists and the Maimonideans indeed are, some essential points made in ecstatic Kabbalah and by the followers of Maimonides should be put into relief, thereby not only providing a better understanding of the variety of Kabbalistic thought, but also enriching our understanding of the history of Maimonideanism, its commonalities, and its varieties. After all, most if not all of the commentators on Maimonides's book did not remain pure Maimonidean thinkers: this is evident from the significant impact of Averroism seen in Samuel ibn Tibbon's glosses to the *Guide*; the Neo-Platonism and Avicennianism in Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera's *Moreh ha-Moreh*; and Rabbi Moses Narboni's significant resort to astral magic and ibn Ezra, as well as his belief in amulets.

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**210** See Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, 110–17, and the minor additions by Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 191–92, note 53; compare to the different view of Georges Vajda, “Deux Chapitres du ‘Guide des Égarés’ Repensés par un Kabbaliste,” in *Mélanges Offerts à Étienne Gilson*, eds. Pierre Paulhac and Joseph Vrin (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1959): 51–59.

**211** *Tiš‘ah Peraqim bi-Yihud*, printed by Georges Vajda in *Qoveš ‘Al Yad* [NS] 5 (1951): 127, and Georges Vajda, “Le Traité Pseudo-Maïmonidien—Neuf Chapitres sur l’Unité de Dieu,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 20 (1953): 83–98; Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle,” 235.

**212** See also Hayyim Weiller, “Inquiries in Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Kabbalistic Terminology and His Relation to Maimonides” [Hebrew], *HUCA* 37 (1966): 13–44.

These issues were sharply combated by Maimonides himself, in addition to Narboni's resort to other types of literatures,<sup>213</sup> including one of Abulafia's books.

Narboni even adopted a philosophical version of the concept of *Ši'ur Qomah* and discussed the ten *sefirot*.<sup>214</sup> It should be mentioned that an attempt to read Maimonides's book as if it were a matter of Kabbalah and magic, as was probably claimed in a lost treatise by an unknown contemporary of Abulafia who has been identified as Rabbi Zerahyah Hen,<sup>215</sup> may also be connected to persons who were close but not identical to Abulafia's views from a conceptual standpoint.<sup>216</sup>

Another biographical dimension that transpires from the above passage is the intensely itinerant life Abulafia led, as he travelled in many countries for a long period of his life both before and after he became an ecstatic Kabbalist. Unlike all the other Kabbalists who came before him, as well as his contemporaries,<sup>217</sup> Abulafia travelled almost all the time and was active in one way or another in several countries and communities in the southern parts of Europe. We may also add to this list his short journey to the Land of Israel.

This itinerant life added much to the complexity of his thought and perhaps accounts for his attempts to integrate different views, though they were interpreted according to Abulafia's philosophical background and subordinated to his ultimate mystical goals. Abulafia was a very prolific writer, probably because he wanted to address different audiences and students in the various towns that he visited. Indeed, as we shall see in Appendix B, several of his writings composed in the 1280s were dedicated to his students.

The above passages, and some others to be quoted in the next chapter, show a scale of interest in Maimonides and in philosophy in general that dramatically dif-

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**213** See Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 181–204; Schwartz, “Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah”; Dov Schwartz, *Studies in Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought*, trans. David Louvish and Batya Stein (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 28–39.

**214** See Alexander Altmann, “Moses Narboni's Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967): 242–44, and Maurice R. Hayoun, “Moïse de Narbonne: Sur les sefirot, les sphères, et les intellects séparés. Edition critique d'un passage de son commentaire sur le *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* d'Ibn Ṭufayl, avec introduction, traduction, et notes,” *JQR* 76 (1985): 97–147.

**215** On this thinker's commentary on the *Guide*, see Ravitzky, “The Thought of Rabbi Zerahyah.”

**216** See Ravitzky, “The Secrets of the *Guide to the Perplexed*,” 174–77; Idel, “Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*,” 313–19; Idel, “On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School,” 147–57; and Idel “Some Images of Maimonides in Jewish Mysticism.” Some of these materials were dealt with once more in Schwartz, “Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah,” to which he added additional material from Christian treatises.

**217** The only Kabbalist whose wanderings can be compared to Abulafia's itinerant life is Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, whose *floruit* was a few decades after Abulafia's. He was, to a certain extent, close to ecstatic Kabbalah, an issue that deserves much more analysis. In principle, it is possible that Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi also travelled a lot, but this is hardly documented by solid historical evidence. On mobility among some of the Kabbalists in this period (though nothing that parallels Abulafia's own richer itinerant career), see Idel, “The Kabbalah's ‘Window of Opportunities,’” 203–4.

fers, both from the merely statistical point of view in terms of the number of references to the Great Eagle and also conceptually, from all the other thirteenth-century Kabbalists. I would say that the difference between these Kabbalists is also essential given the depth and breadth of Abulafia's adoption of Maimonides's and other philosophical thinkers' worldviews in a manner unparalleled by any other thirteenth-century Kabbalist. If a more general picture of each of the thirteenth-century Kabbalists was drawn, the difference between all the other Kabbalists' interest in Maimonides on the one hand and that of Abulafia on the other would appear tremendous both in its breadth and in its depth. The amplitude of Abulafia's acquaintance with the *Guide* is incomparably greater than that of any other Kabbalist; it is visible in most of his writings, not only in his commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*.

Despite those solid and numerous pieces of evidence, it is unfortunate that this obvious situation has not yet been acknowledged as a paramount fact. There is a reluctance to adopt an appropriate and more diversified phenomenology of Kabbalah. Such a phenomenology should be based on an examination of the significance of the sources used in Kabbalistic books in a detailed and substantial manner. It should also address the profound structures characteristic of each Kabbalistic school. Immersed solely in the details of the relationship between Kabbalah in general and philosophy, the wider picture has been blurred in many of the recent studies of the specificity and originality of this Kabbalist and his unparalleled dependence on the comprehensive philosophical intellectual apparatus. The importance of the autobiographical passages discussed in this chapter has also been neglected.

This is a fine example of losing focus on what is essential for Abulafia himself. Without first discerning and formulating which aspects of a thinker's profound structure are central and which are peripheral in a certain system, and without stating it as clearly as possible as part of the analysis, especially when a vast literary corpus is concerned, a scholar may be prone to offer analyses of marginal aspects as if they are situated at the core of the complex picture and vice versa. In any case, readers of scholarly analyses who are not sufficiently informed as to the relative importance of the topics under scrutiny, to say nothing of the original Hebrew texts, some of which are still in manuscript, are prone to become prisoners of the given scholar's idiosyncratic biases and are doomed to reproduce these biases uncritically.

I propose, therefore, to adopt as the central characterisation of Abulafia's Kabbalah the choice of the topics that he himself defined as quintessential: his views of the nature and status of language in the broad sense (its semantic aspects, including exegetical aspects and its usage as part of a technique), the ideal of the attainment of prophecy, and the mystical union with the Agent Intellect or with God. On the other hand, I would consider as merely marginal for his thought those topics that he explicitly criticised in one place or another in his writings: the Kabbalah that concen-

trated on sefirotic theosophy<sup>218</sup> and the centrality of the commandments for elite types of experiences.

Understanding the pivotal role played by Maimonides's book both in Abulafia's education and in his ongoing activity should serve as a major corrective to recent simplistic generalisations that blur the much more complex and sophisticated picture that he wanted to project: a unique type of Kabbalah that brings together Maimonides and *Sefer Yeşirah* as presented in some of the thirteenth-century commentaries. He fought for this purpose with supporters of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, as represented by the school of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret,<sup>219</sup> and was persecuted and even banished because of it, a historical event in the development of Kabbalah whose significance should not be underestimated.

Before turning to other issues, let me point out that some of the cities where Abulafia taught the *Guide*, as found in the above list, represent centres of provinces where different types of Jewish cultures were cultivated: Catalonia, Castile, Rome, Capua/Naples, the Byzantine Empire, and the multifaceted Sicily. Travel between these regions involved not just a transition from one place to another, but, in a way, an encounter with a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish cultures. The two most formative moments for Abulafia were his early encounter with the Andalusian/Maimonidean traditions in Capua/Naples and his later initiation into combinatory theories, some of Ashkenazi extraction, in Barcelona. In some of these places, his teaching of Kabbalah was the first introduction to this lore. Moreover, it may well be that he was the first person to write Kabbalistic books in some of these places.

In any case, Abulafia's stays in Capua, Rome, Barcelona, Castile, and then the Byzantine Empire coincide with some intellectual and spiritual renaissances in those places: the philosophical one in Capua/Napoli, the Kabbalistic ones in Catalonia and Castile, Alfonso Sabio's renaissance in Toledo, and the establishment of Hesychasm in the monasteries of Mount Athos in the Byzantine Empire. At least some of the encounters in these important cultural centres in the period in which Abulafia visited them may account for the complexity of his Kabbalistic writings.

## 6 Abulafia: Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes

Maimonides's book is unquestionably the most influential philosophical source on Abulafia's thought, a statement that cannot be pronounced about any other thirteenth-century Kabbalist both from the point of view of the number of explicit quotations and the use of Maimonides's speculative framework and that of Abulafia's authorship of three commentaries on the latter's book. However, important as the *Guide* indeed was, it was not the only philosophical treatise that Abulafia studied. As he

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<sup>218</sup> See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 129.

<sup>219</sup> See "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 19.

confessed in the above autobiographical passage, before he studied Maimonides's *Guide*, he had already studied philosophy "day and night," most probably with Rabbi Hillel of Verona, though at the same time, he states that he only did "a little" study in this field.

Elsewhere, he mentions the titles of books he studied along with the *Guide*, as seen in two quotes above.<sup>220</sup> In his last work, Abulafia refers to the Neo-Platonic *Liber de Causis*—a medieval epitome of Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, one of whose paragraphs he quotes in Plato's name—as *Sefer ha-'Ašamim ha-'Elyonim*, a version that is not found in any of the three other extant Hebrew translations of this treatise that were created in his generation.<sup>221</sup> It is obvious from the context of the quotation that Abulafia had seen the entire book, which he describes briefly. I hope to return to the possible impact of this book on Abulafia's earlier writings in a separate study.

For the sake of our discussions in parts III and IV, it is necessary to discuss Abulafia's recourse to other philosophical books that cultivated a form of esotericism similar to that of Maimonides. The books of Abū Naṣr Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes were likely influential on his esotericism.<sup>222</sup> Al-Fārābī is quoted as the author of a book entitled *al-Siyāṣah al-Madaniyyah*, translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon under the title *Hathalot ha-Nimṣa'ot* (the *Principles of the Existents*) both in Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah* and in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, which are both commentaries on Maimonides's secrets.<sup>223</sup>

However, traces of this book can be discerned as late as 1289 in his commentary on the Pentateuch.<sup>224</sup> Pertinent to Abulafia is the fact that according to a testimony,

<sup>220</sup> See above, pp. 55–56, 58.

<sup>221</sup> See *Imrei Šefer*, 193–94, and Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): 216–17, 220–23; Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," 332–33. On the presence of passages from a Hebrew translation of *Sefer ha-Sibbot* together with passages from Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah* and *Or ha-Šekhel* in some manuscripts, I shall elaborate elsewhere. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew translation Abulafia used differs from what his former teacher, Rabbi Hillel of Verona, translated from Latin in northern Italy in the very same period, as well as from that of Rabbi Zerahyah ben She'altiel Ḥen. Abulafia was also acquainted with Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Tiqqun Middot ha-Nefeš*, but this is not a particularly philosophical writing.

<sup>222</sup> See James T. Robinson, "Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes in Hebrew: Remarks on the Indirect Transmission of Arabic-Islamic Philosophy in Medieval Judaism," in *The Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Explorations in the Abrahamic Traditions*, eds. Irfan Omar and Richard Taylor (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012): 59–87.

<sup>223</sup> For a detailed analysis of this quote, see Idel, *Ben*, 279–84, 352–53, note 70; see also my "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 11. This book was also known to Rabbi Hillel of Verona. See also Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah," 111, note 47.

<sup>224</sup> See *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 26, and *Maftaḥ ha-Sefirot*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 33, where the term "the faithful spirit" (הררו הגאון) as a designation for the Agent Intellect is found exactly as in the Hebrew translation in Al-Fārābī's book. See also ibn Kaspi, *Menorat Kesef*, 81.



Al-Fārābī changed his mind as to the possibility of the dramatic conjunction of the human intellect with the Agent Intellect. This also seems to be the case with Averroes's thought, though in a different direction. These changes are not recorded in Abulafia's own discussions, though Hillel was better acquainted with some of them.

Averroes's influence on Abulafia should therefore be reconsidered.<sup>225</sup> As was pointed out by Solomon Munk more than a century and a half ago, Averroes's writings were preserved by Jewish thinkers and translators in Europe, who greatly contributed to their survival.<sup>226</sup> It seems that his diagnosis did not change in the scholarship in the generations after him, and I propose that Abulafia should also be seen as someone who was acquainted with and influenced by the Cordovan philosopher. Especially important for our discussion here is the fact that some of Averroes's writings were translated into Hebrew and Latin in the generation preceding the decades when Abulafia began his study of philosophy. This happened in the immediate geographical vicinity of Capua (Naples) in the writings of Rabbi Jacob Anatoli, Michael Scotus, Hermannus Alemannus, and some others.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, other members of the Tibbon family, in addition to Anatoli and his son Anatolio, lived in Capua for a significant period of time: Moses ibn Tibbon himself; his son, Samuel (the grandson of the translator Samuel ibn Tibbon); and some of Samuel's cousins.

A rather lengthy passage from Rabbi Jacob Anatoli's Hebrew translation of Averroes's commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* is quoted in Abulafia's epistle *Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah*, where the names of Aristotle, Averroes, and the Jewish trans-

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**225** For the different references to views of Averroes that do not mention his name in the context of Abulafia's thought, see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 60; my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 12, 13, 75, 81, 145, 183, 187; my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 3, 5, 7, 17, 23, 68, 118, 153; my *The Mystical Experience*, 70, 74–75, 126, 138, 146, 172; my "Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide," 308; and my *Kabbalah in Italy*, 142–43, 331. To the best of my knowledge, the proposal to understand Abulafia against an Averroistic background has not attracted the due attention of scholars in recent scholarship, which mainly looks in different directions in order to understand his thought. See, however, Yossef Schwartz, "To Thee Is Silence Praise": *Meister Eckhart's Reading in Maimonides's Guide of the Perplexed* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002), 163–64, note 256.

**226** See his pioneering study *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe* (Paris: Vrin, 1927), 418–58.

**227** See Mauro Zonta, *La filosofia antica nel Medioevo ebraico* (Brescia: Paideia, 1996), 73–74, 76–78, 143, 182–84, 245–46, 258; Charles Burnett, "The 'Sons of Averroes with the Emperor Frederick' and the Transmission of the Philosophical Works of ibn Rushd," in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition: Sources, Constitution and Reception of the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd (1126–1198)*, eds. Gerhard Endress and Jan A. Aertsen (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 259–99; and Giuseppe Sermoneta, "Federico II e il pensiero ebraico nell'Italia del suo tempo," in *Federico II e l'arte del Duecento italiano*, ed. Angiola M. Romanini (Galatina: Congedo Editore, 1980), 2:183–97. See also Robinson, "Secondary Forms of Transmission," 195–201, and Luciana Pepi's introduction to the Hebrew text and Italian translation of Anatoli's book in Anatoli Ja'aqov, *Il Pungolo dei discepoli*, trans. Luciana Pepi (Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali—Fondazione Federico II, 2004), 1:3–42.



lator are mentioned.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, it is more than plausible that another passage in the same epistle, where Abulafia enumerates the different parts of Aristotle's *Organon*, indicates that his studies in this domain were dependent upon Anatoli's Hebrew translations of Averroes's commentaries on these treatises.<sup>229</sup> As Abulafia claims, he studied them attentively, or, as he puts it in Hebrew, *be-'Iyyun*.

This epistle was written sometime in the second half of the 1280s and testifies to Abulafia's continuous interest in such philosophical sources. This conclusion is fostered by his positive references to Aristotle's book on the ten *Categories*, translated into Hebrew as *Sefer ha-Ma'amarot*. He quotes this book several times, sometimes at length, in *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*<sup>230</sup> and his last book, *Imrei Šefer*.<sup>231</sup> He also mentions the *Prior Analytics* (*Sefer ha-Heqeš*) and the *Posterior Analytics* (*Sefer ha-Mofet*),<sup>232</sup> which were also extant within Anatoli's translation of Averroes's commentary.<sup>233</sup> Porphyry's *Isagoge*, another famous book on logic, is mentioned twice in Abulafia's writings as *Sefer ha-Mavo*,<sup>234</sup> most probably accompanied by Averroes's Middle Commentary on it, which Anatoli had also translated into Hebrew.<sup>235</sup> This means that Abulafia studied texts with Averroes's commentaries on them, although he only mentions his name once.

Interestingly enough, Abulafia assumes that the methods of those books on logic pertain solely to the matter of this world, or that of nature. However, in order to obtain higher insights, one should proceed to the method of the combination of letters, which he envisioned as a higher, inner, or superior type of logic.<sup>236</sup> Thus, we may assume that Abulafia's early study of several books on logic contributed in some part to his reception of the theory of combining letters, which he conceived as a higher form of logic than the Greek one.

**228** See "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 14. For a translation and analysis of this passage, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 12–13. Abulafia quotes a passage found in the Hebrew translation preserved in Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1356, fol. 59b.

**229** "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 14. For the issue of Anatoli's translations of this philosophical literature, see Shalom Rosenberg, "Logic and Ontology in Jewish Philosophy in the 14th Century" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1973), 8–10. Abulafia refers to the *Book of Logic*—a term he sometimes uses for all eight books of the *Organon*—in his *Sitrei Torah*, 73, where he also mentions "many other books." For the medieval transmission of the *Organon* in more general terms, see the studies collected in *Logik und Theologie: Das Organon im arabischen und lateinischen Mittelalter*, eds. Dominik Perler and Ulrich Rudolph (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

**230** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:1, 302–3, 3:1, 305.

**231** *Imrei Šefer*, 128–29.

**232** On the impact of this book on Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, see *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 470.

**233** See *Sitrei Torah*, 160.

**234** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:5, 321, and *Imrei Šefer*, 156.

**235** See Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge and on Aristotle's Categories*, ed. Herbert A. Davidson (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1969); Rosenberg, "Logic and Ontology," 140–43; and Zonta, *La filosofia antica nel Medioevo ebraico*, 73–74.

**236** See *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 37; "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 14–15; and *Imrei Šefer*, 156.

It is possible to detect at least one of the sources for Abulafia's acquaintance with Averroes in addition to Anatoli's Hebrew translations: Abulafia's teacher in matters of philosophy, Rabbi Hillel ben Samuel of Verona, was acquainted with some Averroistic treatises, especially those dealing with questions related to the union of the human and cosmic intellects, as they were translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon early in the thirteenth century.<sup>237</sup> Though there are claims that Rabbi Hillel's book was written in 1291, several years after Abulafia had studied with him, there is no plausible reason to deny Rabbi Hillel's earlier interest in the topic that was so central for his only "original" book, *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*.<sup>238</sup> Moreover, as Joseph B. Sermoneta has shown, Rabbi Hillel was also well-acquainted with the scholastic debates surrounding the "heretical" aspects of Averroism.<sup>239</sup> This awareness complicates Sermoneta's claim that Rabbi Hillel was not interested in philosophy earlier, since he refers to Averroes as well as to his books and ideas. Unlike most thirteenth-century European Jewish philosophers, Hillel was not sympathetic to Averroes and shared Aquinas's antagonism towards him.

Again, it is obvious that Abulafia was aware of *Midrash Ḥokhmah*, a vast encyclopaedic treatise that includes much of Averroes's views written by Rabbi Judah ha-Kohen ibn Matkah of Toledo, who was active in both Spain and Italy. As pointed out in detail by Mauro Zonta, ibn Matkah's encyclopaedia shows that he was acquainted with several Averroistic sources.<sup>240</sup> This vast compendium also contains linguistic speculations understood as Kabbalah of which Abulafia would certainly have approved.<sup>241</sup> Abulafia refers to this encyclopaedia in his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*,<sup>242</sup> as well as in one of his epistles, probably written later than the book. In this epistle, he writes that a part of this voluminous encyclopaedia was missing in the town

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**237** See the detailed analysis by Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 355–401, and Zonta, *La filosofia antica nel Medioevo ebraico*, 226–28.

**238** See Rabbi Hillel of Verona, *Sefer Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*, ed. Joseph B. Sermoneta. See especially 73, where the human intellect's intelligising of the separate intellect is described by resorting to the formula *ישׁוּב לְהִיּוֹת הוּא הוּא*, which is the same as that found in Abulafia. Compare to the formulas found in Abulafia adduced in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 10, for additional possible sources and "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School" for the young Maimonides's use of this formula in Arabic.

**239** Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona."

**240** Zonta, *La filosofia antica nel Medioevo ebraico*, 200–204, and Resianne Fontaine, "Judah ben Solomon Ha-Cohen's *Midrash ha-Hokhmah*: Its Sources and Use of Sources," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000): 191–210.

**241** See also Colette Sirat, "Juda b. Salomon Ha-Kohen—philosophe, astronome et peut-être Kabbaliste de la première moitié du XIIIe siècle," *Italia* 1, no. 2 (1979): 39–61, and Colette Sirat, "La kabbale d'après Juda ben Salomon ha-Cohen," in *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, eds. Gérard Nahon and Charles Touati (Louvain: Peeters, 1980): 191–202. The mixture between a sort of linguistic gnosis designated as Kabbalah, astronomy, and philosophy, more specifically some Averroistic elements, adumbrates the later developments in Jewish culture, like the different mixtures found in the writings of Rabbi Hillel of Verona, Rabbi Isaac Albalag, and Rabbi Moses Narboni.

**242** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 284. See also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 155, note 105.

where he was staying (perhaps Messina), which is a sign of his continued interest in this type of literature long after the end of the studies that constituted his philosophical period.<sup>243</sup>

Finally, an interesting passage attributed to a certain Rabbi Nathan quoted by Rabbi Isaac of Acre, which deals with the various levels of the intellect, has been understood as representing an Averroistic point of view and was printed for the first time as an appendix to Hercz's edition of Averroes's two treatises on the conjunction of the human and active intellect and that of Averroes's son.<sup>244</sup> Though I also assume that there is a Neo-Platonic aspect to this passage, there is no reason to deny its Averroistic overtones, just as Abulafia's attitude towards the union with the separate intellect also had Neo-Platonic sources.<sup>245</sup> I assume that this Rabbi Nathan is none other than Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, one of Abraham Abulafia's disciples, whose name will be mentioned several times in the present study. The two last points show that an interest in Averroes's views was not only a subject of Abulafia's early studies during the period when he was not yet a Kabbalist. Rather, Abulafia's interest in Averroes persisted later on in both his career and in his intellectual circle.<sup>246</sup>

Therefore, acquaintance with Averroes's thought might quite plausibly have been part of the study of philosophical books that Abulafia mentions formed part of his studies sometime in the 1260s, before he turned into a Kabbalist. Just as in the case of his admiration for Maimonides, Abulafia's conversion to Kabbalah did not substantially affect his attitude towards the Andalusian commentator. It is plausible that he continued to keep some interest in him after the beginning of his Kabbalistic career.

It seems that on a central point, Abulafia was much closer to Averroes than to Maimonides's later thought: his assumption that the human intellect is capable of

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**243** *Maṣref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fol. 33b. On this epistle being Abulafia's work, see Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 28–29. See also now Gideon Bohak, ed., *A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of Jewish Magic, MS. New York Public Library, Heb. 190 (Formerly Sassoon 56): Introduction, Annotated Edition and Facsimile* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014), 1:18, 87–96.

**244** Jitzhak Hercz, ed., *Drei Abhandlungen über die Conjunction des separaten Intellect mit dem Menschen von Averroes (Vater und Sohn)* (Berlin: H. G. Hermann, 1869), 22. On the impact of this text on Rabbi Hillel of Verona, see Sermoneta, "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazar of Verona," 335–41; Herbert A. Davidson, "Averroes' *Tractatus de Animae Beatitudine*," in *A Straight Path, Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture. Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989): 57–73; Marc Geoffroy, "À la recherche de la *Béatitude*," in *Averroès: la béatitude de l'âme*, eds. Marc Geoffroy and Carlos Steel (Paris: Vrin, 2001): 18–30; Carlos Steel, "La tradition Latin du traité," in *Averroès: la béatitude de l'âme*, 126–29.

**245** See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 23, note 30, 116–17, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 133–34, especially 173, note 290. See also the survey of scholarship and analysis of the Neo-Platonic sources of Averroes's theory of union with the separate intellect recently presented in the important study by Cristina D'Ancona Costa, "Man's Conjunction with Intellect: A Neoplatonic Source of Western Muslim Philosophy," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 8, no. 4 (2008): 57–89.

**246** Rabbi Nathan also refers to a story about Avicenna in his *Ša'arei Šedeq*. See what I wrote in the introduction to *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 55–56.

uniting with the Agent Intellect.<sup>247</sup> The possibility of the intellect's conjunction with the Agent Intellect is not found in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, though some expressions of a possible post-mortem unitive language can be discerned in Maimonides's early works in a rather neglected passage from his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, on *Sanhedrin, Pereq Ḥeleq*.<sup>248</sup> However, it seems that Abulafia was not acquainted with the Arabic original or even with a Hebrew translation, which in any case he does not quote.

Abulafia's insistence on the possibility of intellectual conjunction while alive stems therefore from his studies of Averroistic material on this topic. In a way, Abulafia envisioned the ideal of intellectual conjunction found in the Cordovan commentator as being higher than Maimonides's understanding of prophecy, which indeed had a deep impact on him.<sup>249</sup> Abulafia's view that there is an Agent Intellect that is active not only in the sublunar world, but also within us *in actu*, and his view that the intellect that is found within us is the last of the ten separate intellects may reflect a kind of Averroistic noetics, though it may also reflect the Thomist interpretation articulated in the second part of the thirteenth century, which he could have learned from Hillel of Verona.<sup>250</sup>

Let me point out that Abulafia's resort to Averroes's thought despite his faithfulness to Maimonides and his shift to speculations described as Kabbalah should be better understood as part of the more general development of Jewish thought in the late thirteenth century. In that period, Averroes became more and more prominent even among more conservative thinkers, such as Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera<sup>251</sup> and Rabbi Hillel of Verona (who also quoted *the book Bahir*), to say nothing

**247** For a discussion of Abulafia's views on union, see my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 1–31.

**248** On this issue, see the translation and analysis in Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School," 134–45. See also Adam Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2011), 134–68.

**249** Moshe Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia" [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 1–36.

**250** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29:

אוי להיות זה השפע הוא הקרוב לאלוה יתברך יותר מהשפע הנשפע על השמים בפרטיהם. שהם גופים מקבלים שפע והם בעלי חקר, ואינו דומה מי שהוא בעל חקר למי שאין לו חקר בפועל. כי הנשארם משכלי בני אדם אין להם חקר והנמצאים משכלי השמים יש להם חקר. ועל כן היתה ראויה זאת הפעולה המעולה הנכבדת המיוחדת מכל פעולות המציאות להיותה מיוחדת לאלוה ית' שמו. ועל כן בחר השם במין האדם להיות חלקו בפועלתו יותר ממה שבחר בזולתו מן העליונים ומן התחתונים, וזה מצד שכלו. ועל זה אנו יודעים כי השכל הפועל בנו שכל פועל בפעל הוא אדון כל העולמים, ולא זולתו מן השכלים הנפרדים כולם. ואם זה השכל אשר לנו הוא עשירי הוא הכל, והוא המיוחד אצל הסבה הראשונה לכל במעלה. On the assumption that human and divine thought can be united, see *Sitrei Torah*, 20, and compare to what a follower of Abulafia wrote in *Ner Elohim*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 72: "This is the human intellect that is emanated from the divine intellect, that is cleaving to us by nature" (הוא השכל האנושי) והוא השכל הנפרדים כולם. ואם זה השכל אשר לנו הוא עשירי הוא הכל, והוא המיוחד אצל הסבה הראשונה לכל במעלה. On the assumption that human and divine thought can be united, see *Sitrei Torah*, 20, and compare to what a follower of Abulafia wrote in *Ner Elohim*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 72: "This is the human intellect that is emanated from the divine intellect, that is cleaving to us by nature" (הוא השכל האנושי) והוא השכל הנפרדים כולם. ואם זה השכל אשר לנו הוא עשירי הוא הכל, והוא המיוחד אצל הסבה הראשונה לכל במעלה.

**251** See Shem Tov ben Yosef Falaquera, *Falaquera's "Epistle of the Debate": An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Steven Harvey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) and Raphael Jospe, *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov ibn Falaquera* (Cincinnati: Hebrew

of philosophers like the Provençal thinkers Rabbi Levi ben Anbaham and Rabbi Isaac Albalag, who were eventually ready to mention even Kabbalists and some of their ideas in their writings.<sup>252</sup> This is the case with a famous commentator on the *Guide*, the mid-fourteenth-century Rabbi Moses Narboni, who was also influenced by Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*,<sup>253</sup> and Rabbi Moses ben Judah, the lesser-known mid-fourteenth-century author of the encyclopaedic treatise *Ahavah be-Ta'anugim*.<sup>254</sup>

The possibility of uniting with God that is sometimes hinted at in Abulafia's treatises may reflect the impact of another Muslim philosopher, Abū Bakr ibn Ṭufayl, who was a somewhat older Andalusian contemporary of Averroes. However, it is difficult to find any evidence for Abulafia's own acquaintance with his otherwise influential writings. The naturalistic turn in ibn Ṭufayl, which probably influenced Maimonides, as has been pointed out by Shlomo Pines,<sup>255</sup> is relevant for our understanding of Abulafia's ideal religion as essentially naturalistic.<sup>256</sup> Though he

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Union College Press, 1988). In principle, the epistle written in the early 1260s could have been known to Abulafia when he visited Castile ten years later. The presence of Averroes's thought in both Spain and Italy, which were the two major areas for Abulafia's education and activity, is significant for understanding his intellectual background.

**252** For the former, see Howard Kreisel's introduction to *Liwyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 90–97; Georges Vajda, “À propos de l'Averroïsme juif,” *Sefarad* 12 (1952): 3–29; and Georges Vajda, *Isaac Albalag: Averroïste Juif* (Paris: Vrin, 1960). In the mid-fourteenth century, Averroes's thought was combined with Kabbalah by Rabbi Joseph ibn Waqar in Toledo. See Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Mouton, 1962), 270–78. Such philosophical ideas were even known in Halakhist circles. See Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists of Provence* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 75–79, to say nothing of the great impact of Kabbalah on Moses Narboni. For ha-Meiri's dependence on Maimonideans, see also Robinson, “We Drink Only from the Master's Water,” 47–52.

**253** See my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 63–66; my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 170–71, note 87; and Gitit Holzman, “Rabbi Moses Narboni on the Relationship between Judaism and Islam” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 65 (1995/96): 285, 298, note 79. See also Maurice R. Hayoun, *La philosophie et la théologie de Moïse de Narbonne* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) and Maurice R. Hayoun, “Moïse de Narbonne (1300–1362), et l'Averroïsme Juif,” *Chora: Revue d'études anciennes et médiévales* 2 (2004): 81–124.

**254** Esti Eisenmann, “Between Kabbalah and Maimonidean Philosophy in *Ahavah be-Ta'anugim*” [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 57–58, and now her edition of *Moses b. Judah: Ahava be-Ta'anugim*, 333–34. Eisenmann shows that in this book, there are Maimonidean and Averroistic interpretations of Nahmanides's Kabbalistic secrets.

**255** See Pines's introduction to the *Guide*, 1:cvii–cviii.

**256** See the important study by Sami S. Hawi, *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism: A Philosophical Study of Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy bin Yaqzān* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) and Remke Kruk, “Ibn Ṭufayl: A Medieval Scholar's View on Nature,” in *The World of Ibn Ṭufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, ed. Lawrence Conrad (Leiden: Brill, 1996): 69–89. Ibn Ṭufayl's views were known by some of the Jewish Maimonideans. See Maurice R. Hayoun, “Le commentaire de Moïse de Narbonne (1300–1362) sur le *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* d'Ibn Ṭufayl,” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 55 (1988): 23–98, and Parveen Hasanali, “Texts, Translators, Transmissions: 'Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān' and Its

was also influenced by Avicenna's views, it seems that this was achieved mainly through the mediation of Maimonides's book.<sup>257</sup> This may also be the case with the theories of another major Andalusian thinker, ibn Bāğğah.<sup>258</sup> Abulafia's concerns with two different themes, and perhaps also two types of experience, intellectual union and prophecy, are reminiscent of Avicenna's "natural mysticism," as his approach has been designated by some scholars.<sup>259</sup>

Whatever the extent of Abulafia's acquaintance with the rich Andalusian philosophy in Arabic was, it is incomparably greater and much better documented than anything we know about any of the early Kabbalists or his contemporaries. This is a fundamental fact that is established by his own testimony of names and titles, as well as by an analysis of the content of his writings. This assessment invites much more attention to his philosophical sources and their impact than has been paid in recent scholarship. The list of books he mentioned that he studied, many of which he actually quotes in his writings long after he became a Kabbalist, is not a matter of an ideal recommendation or an inventory concerning a period of studies that became obsolete later on, but an inherent part of the fabric of his texts and thought throughout the entirety of his mature life.

Moreover, let me emphasise the importance of pointing to Abulafia's philosophical sources. They account for the emergence of two different ideals in Abulafia's Kabbalistic literature: on the one hand, prophecy, following Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, and on the other hand, following the lead of Avicenna and Averroes, mystical union.

Furthermore, the manner of reading his writings as the result of the impact of the two great masters of esotericism invites a decoding of messages that are not always on the surface and which may even be contradicted by the more traditional views within earlier forms of Judaism. In other words, I propose to envision the young Abulafia—namely, during the years between ca. 1261 and 1269—as belonging solely to the

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Reception in Muslim, Judaic and Christian Milieux" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1995), especially the brief discussion of "rational mysticism" on 122–23.

**257** See Steven Harvey, "Avicenna and Maimonides on Prayer and Intellectual Worship," in *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism, and Science in the Mediterranean World*, eds. Haggai Ben-Shammai, Shaul Shaked, and Sarah Stroumsa (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013): 82–105. For a discussion of the souls of the spheres and the latter's intellects, a clear Avicennian approach, see Abulafia's earliest writing *Ge'et ha-Šemot*, 40–41, and *Imrei Šefer*, 73.

**258** See Pines's introduction to the *Guide*, 1:xciii–cviii.

**259** See Louis Gardet, *La connaissance mystique chez Ibn Sina et ses expériences philosophiques* (Cairo: Publications de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1952), 62–67, or Georges C. Anawati and Louis Gardet, *Mystique Musulmane: aspects et tendances, expériences et techniques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1976), 90–96. Interestingly enough, Avicenna was interested in the special status of letters. See Louis Massignon, "La philosophie orientale d'Ibn Sina et son alphabet philosophique," in *Opera Minora* (Beirut: Dar al-Masarif, 1963): 2:591–605. See also Shlomo Pines's preface to my *The Mystical Experience*. For Avicenna's resort to allegories and myths, see Sarah Stroumsa, "Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's *Poetics* Reinterpreted," *Arabica* 39 (1992): 183–206.



above-mentioned Jewish Western Maimonidean tradition. This statement is supported by all the available materials. Moreover, let me emphasise that even after turning to his specific type of Kabbalah, Abulafia nevertheless shared many of the views endorsed by these Maimonideans, though in some cases in a rather radical manner.

It should also be mentioned that through his combination of philosophy and a certain type of Kabbalah (namely, a linguistic type of lore drawing from a variety of sources, some of them Ashkenazi), together with some other kinds of sources from outside Judaism, Abulafia generated a complex discourse that requires a very different conceptual approach to that required when approaching other Kabbalists. The huge amount of sources that are relevant for understanding Abulafia's thought (the vast Maimonidean tradition that existed before and contemporaneously to him as well as the Ashkenazi literature) or for creating a comparative analysis of his writings creates an intellectual challenge for a serious scholar. Nevertheless, such an arduous perusal is, in my opinion, indispensable.

Problems of political esotericism, complex conceptual hybridity, sustained efforts to demythologise Jewish traditions, and an intensification of the role of the mystical elements are rarely part of the other forms of Kabbalah, to say nothing of Abulafia's mobility and his readiness to speak with Christians about secret issues. It should be mentioned that in comparison to the Maimonidean tradition, the Kabbalistic literature written in the very same period is, quantitatively speaking, less voluminous, even if we include the vast Zoharic literature, and many of its longer treatises were written solely by contemporaries of Abulafia. Thus, though we may speak about the most creative and innovative period in the history of early Kabbalah, the major Kabbalists active in the last quarter of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth century produced fewer writings than their Maimonidean contemporaries, who were nevertheless epigones from the philosophical point of view.

## 7 Abulafia and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra's Books

Any survey of Abulafia's early studies cannot be complete without a reference to Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra's writings.<sup>260</sup> From many points of view, ibn Ezra's approach

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**260** On this figure, see Maurice Olitzki, "Die Zahlensymbolik des Abraham ibn Ezra," in *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstag des Dr. Israel Hildesheimer*, eds. Ezriel Hildesheimer and David Hoffman (Berlin: H. Engel, 1890), especially 99–111; Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Interpretation of the Bible in Abraham ibn Ezra's Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999); Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Torah* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003); the introduction to *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Yesod Mora' we-sod Torah* [Hebrew], eds. Yosef Cohen and Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 13–56; Aaron W. Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy*, 102–26. For the esoteric aspects of ibn Ezra's writings, see Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 34–48; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 39–40, note 95, 83–84, note 264; and, more recently, Uriel Simon, *The Ear Discerns Words: Studies in*



to religion was starkly different from that of Maimonides, who deliberately ignored his views and never mentioned his name.<sup>261</sup> Ibn Ezra believed in astrology (another form of naturalism), was acquainted with Pythagorean and Hermetic traditions (adopting some of them), and was much more concerned with Jewish books that Maimonides ignored or did not like (such as *Sefer Yeširah* and *Ši'ur Qomah*). Abulafia mentions that while he studied the *Guide*, he studied the “books of Abraham ibn Ezra,” as seen above in the passage translated from his epistle “We-Zot li-Yehudah.”<sup>262</sup>

Indeed, Abulafia refers to several of ibn Ezra's books, most prominently to his famous commentary on the Pentateuch that he quotes in his writings several times.<sup>263</sup> Especially important for him was *Sefer ha-Šem*, a booklet dealing with the special qualities of the letters of the Tetragrammaton<sup>264</sup> and the letters 'HWY, an important issue in Abulafia's thought that we shall deal with in chapter 22 below. Among ibn Ezra's other books, Abulafia mentions *Sefer ha-Šaḥut* (a book dealing with Hebrew grammar),<sup>265</sup> *Sefer ha-Mispar*,<sup>266</sup> and *Sefer ha-Moznayyim*.<sup>267</sup>

In addition to these explicit references, it is possible to discern many additional cases of ibn Ezra's impact on Abulafia, as has been done by Israel Weinstock<sup>268</sup> and in my studies.<sup>269</sup> These influences deal with some fundamental topics in Abulafia's Kabbalah: for example, the theory of the adherence of the particular soul to the spiritual world, the latter conceived of as universal;<sup>270</sup> the theory of the source of the speech-act during revelation; and the possibility of changing nature by cleaving to the spiritual world.

However, more tantalising is the fact that Abulafia is the first person to have mentioned (in 1285) having seen a commentary on *Sefer Yeširah* authored by ibn Ezra in Barcelona in 1270. In one case, he writes that “most of it [consisted in] philosophy and a small part of it [contained] brief Kabbalah.”<sup>271</sup> Elsewhere, in a discus-

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*ibn Ezra's Exegetical Methodology* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013), especially 24–26, 323–24, 326–28.

**261** See Isadore Twersky, “Did Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra Influence Maimonides?” [Hebrew], in *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 21–48.

**262** “We-Zot Li-Yehudah,” 18–19, cited above chapter 4 note 68.

**263** *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 66; “Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah,” 4; *Sitrei Torah*, 125; and *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 25.

**264** Abulafia refers to this book in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 95–96; “Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah,” 4, 21; *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 66, 101; and *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 6. See also *Imrei Šefer*, 60. On the name 'HWY, see also chapter 22 note 364 below.

**265** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 95–96, and *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 6.

**266** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 45.

**267** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 95–96.

**268** Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, especially 18–20.

**269** See, especially, the many references found in *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 206, under “ibn Ezra,” and *The Mystical Experience*, 235, under “ibn Ezra.” See also *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 70.

**270** See my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 45.

**271** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 67: רובו פילוסופיאה וקצתו קבלה קצרה.

sion dealing with this lost commentary that has been neglected by scholars, he writes: "I have already seen his commentary on *Sefer Yeşirah*."<sup>272</sup> Scholars dealing with this issue negated the reliability of the first statement and ignored the existence of the second one. Weinstock did so as part of his argument that Abulafia wanted to ascribe his own commentary to ibn Ezra and that ibn Ezra never wrote such a commentary, a theory that I do not accept. Nor do I assume that he did not see ibn Ezra's now lost commentary, as Paul Fenton implies. Fenton claims that Abulafia merely misquoted, as some other later medieval authors did, the commentary on the same book by Dunash ibn Tamim.<sup>273</sup> In any case, ibn Ezra himself refers to *Sefer Yeşirah* several times in his writings, thus making it more plausible that he did write a commentary on this book.<sup>274</sup> Abulafia's indication that there is a "brief Kabbalah" in the commentary would conceptually fit ibn Ezra's lost commentary much better than that of ibn Tamim. This is also the case when Abulafia mentions this commentary containing something similar to ibn Ezra's *Sefer ha-Šem*, in the quote we shall adduce immediately below.

The great importance of ibn Ezra for Abulafia is, therefore, that he was a well-known commentator on the Pentateuch who from time to time writes that there are secrets in the Torah, although he does not elaborate on them. Most of these hints are to do with the astrological understanding of events in the Bible, a new interstice between two modes of religious outlook in Judaism. These cryptic references were the subject of an entire literature of supercommentaries that began in Abulafia's generation and became much more dominant in the second part of the fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century.<sup>275</sup> However, interested as Abulafia was in the secrets of the Torah, he ignored these astrological hints, just as he chooses to ignore Nahmanides's hints in his own commentary. Neither the astral nor the theosophical-theurgical types of esotericism found in two of the most authoritative commentaries on the Pentateuch that he otherwise quotes approvingly attracted much of his attention.

The importance of the study of ibn Ezra's books is that traditions that are very different in content from Maimonides and the Neo-Aristotelian Andalusians made their way into Abulafia's writings, in some cases in rather prominent moments for his thought. First and foremost is the Pythagorean tradition dealing with the special

272 "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 4: אני כבר ראיתי פירושו על ספר יצירה.

273 See his discussion in Georges Vajda and Paul Fenton, eds., *Le Commentaire sur le Livre de la Création de Dūnaš ben Tāmīm de Kairouan (X<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Peeters, 2002), 159–75. Abulafia described Dunash's commentary as being different from that of ibn Ezra, as he refers to both in the same context.

274 See the references collected in the introduction to *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Yesod Mora' we-sod Torah*, 54. It should be pointed out that his acquaintance, Rabbi Judah ha-Levi, wrote some kind of commentary on this book in his *Kuzari*. See also chapter 22 note 364 below.

275 For the most complete and updated list of the dozens of supercommentaries, see Simon, *The Ear Discerns Words*, 465–73; this list contains 73 items.

role of numbers in the structure of the universe that impacts several of Abulafia's discussions, one to be translated below.<sup>276</sup> It is possible to detect in Abulafia's writing the vestiges of one of the most cherished of the Pythagorean secrets, the Tetraktys, the superiority of the number four, most probably via the mediation of ibn Ezra's writings.<sup>277</sup> However, much more important is the acceptance in many cases of ibn Ezra's interpretation of the concept of *sefirot* as referring to numbers in *Sefer Yeširah*. Last in this context is the importance ibn Ezra, following ibn Gabirol's philosophy, accorded to the theory of "All," which had an impact on Abulafia's metaphysics, as we shall see in chapter 21 below in the analysis of the process of universalisation.<sup>278</sup>

I would like to deal here with only one passage from ibn Ezra's commentary on the Pentateuch that was quoted by Abulafia, the content of which constituted a challenge for him. I will then analyse the manner in which he coped with it. In his epistle *Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah*, he refers to ibn Ezra's reticence to use the method of gematria<sup>279</sup> as part of his description of his sixth method of interpreting the Bible, which is part of his more comprehensive sevenfold exegetical paths:<sup>280</sup>

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, blessed be his memory, annulled it<sup>281</sup> [...] and ben Ezra said that the Torah did not speak according to gematria since it would allow someone to turn evil into good and good into evil. And I do not think about him that this matter was hidden from him, but perhaps he said so in order to hide the secret, and he was correct [...] since he wrote his book for the multitude, with the exception of few places where he hinted to it, saying: "And this is a secret for

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**276** See the passage from "ha-Seder ha-Mithappekh," to be adduced and translated in chapter 17 below.

**277** Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 369–74; C. Anne Wilson, "Jabirian Numbers, Pythagorean Numbers and Plato's Timaeus," *Ambix* 35, no. 1 (1988): 1–13. See Abulafia's "We-Zot Li-Yehudah," 20. See also below Appendix C; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Letter Symbolism and *Merkavah* Imagery in the Zohar," in *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexander Safran*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990): 195–236, 203, note 27; and Morlok, *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Hermeneutics*, 79–82.

**278** See Elliot R. Wolfson, "God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra," *REJ* 149 (1990): 77–111; Howard Kreisel, "The Term *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra: A Reappraisal," *REJ* 153 (1994): 29–66; Jacques E. Schlanger, "Sur le Rôle du 'Tout' dans la Création selon ibn Gabirol," *REJ* 123 (1965): 125–35; and Adi Tzemach, "Yeš be-mo Yeš," in *Studies in the Work of Shlomo ibn Gabirol*, ed. Zvi Malachi (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1985), 9–22.

**279** See Aharon Monshein, "On the Attitude of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra on the Exegetical Use of the Method of Gematria" [Hebrew], in *Studies in the Works of Abraham ibn Ezra*, ed. Israel Levin (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1992): 137–61; Stephen J. Lieberman, "A Mesopotamian Background for the So-Called Aggadic Measures of Biblical Hermeneutics," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 218.

**280** For my view as to the pertinence of Jellinek's comparison of Abulafia's sevenfold exegetical system with the seven stages of St. Bonaventura's ascent of the mind to God, see *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 82–83.

**281** Cf. ibn Ezra on Genesis 14:14.

the illuminate, and if he merits [it], he will discern [it],” even more so because I have seen his commentary on *Sefer Yeşirah* and *Sefer ha-Šem*.<sup>282</sup>

Abulafia interprets ibn Ezra's explicit rejection of gematria as a dissimulation of his true esoteric approach, which actually validates a resort to gematria, since he perceived a propensity to views similar to his own in some cases in the commentary on the Pentateuch and the two books he mentioned at the end of the passage. I see here the attribution—certainly artificial—of a technique of political esotericism to ibn Ezra, perhaps similar to the Maimonidean one, in a manner reminiscent of what we shall see in chapter 26 below in the context of the Rabbinic view of the phylacteries of God. We have a case of a denial of a denial.

In any case, the adoption of some of ibn Ezra's positions that dramatically differ from those of the Great Eagle, such as the drawing down of astral powers, should be seen as part of the conceptual fluidity that creates syncretic views of a complex nature. In fact, Abulafia attributed practices to ibn Ezra that were deemed to be esoteric that stemmed, inter alia, from Hasidei Ashkenaz, though ibn Ezra himself explicitly detested them. It should be mentioned that unlike Abulafia's detailed description of his attachment to Maimonides's book, nothing similar is found in the case of ibn Ezra. Indeed, Abulafia did not write a commentary on any of ibn Ezra's books.<sup>283</sup> Nor was he interested in ibn Ezra's criticism of the belief in Moses's authorship of some small parts of the Pentateuch, a view that had an impact on Spinoza, despite the Kabbalist's own critique of some forms of Rabbinic Judaism, as we shall amply see in chapters 9 and 26.

The brief linguistic-cosmic speculations found in ibn Ezra's *Sefer Šahut* are reminiscent of speculations found in a much more elaborate manner in Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's various versions of *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, which was incorporated into the last section of his *Ginnat Egoz*.<sup>284</sup> Indeed, in my opinion, ibn Ezra's contribution to the structure of the linguistic Kabbalah in its early stages still needs a detailed inquiry, which should take many anonymous manuscripts into consideration. In any case, it should be emphasised that in the comprehensive enumerations of the seven methods of interpretation, the highest one deals with the prophet's ability to change nature, following ibn Ezra.<sup>285</sup>

In short, like many other medieval Maimonideans, Abulafia incorporated a variety of elements of ibn Ezra's thought into his predominantly Maimonidean thought, generating a hybrid phenomenon that is still evident in the writings of the much later Maimonideans such as Moses Narboni, Solomon Maimon, and Nachman Krochmal.

<sup>282</sup> Ed. Adolph Jellinek, 4. See also chapter 16 note 117 below.

<sup>283</sup> The attribution of a commentary on *Sefer ha-Šem* to Abulafia is spurious, despite the use of some gematrias found in his writings. See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine,” 77.

<sup>284</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 142, note 46. On the sources of linguistic Kabbalah, see Farber, “On the Sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon's Early Kabbalistic System.”

<sup>285</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 105–6, and see also below in chapter 17.

### III Persecution and Secrets

#### 8 Abulafia: The Art of Writing/Teaching and Persecution

As is well-known, despite their formal status as part of the primary elite in their respective religions, both Maimonides and Averroes were sharply criticised in their lifetimes due to their philosophical views although they were masters of esoteric writing. Averroes was even persecuted towards the end of his life. They were very cautious in formulating their writings because they did not wish to agitate the populace or provoke antagonism and because they occupied high positions in their respective courts. The critiques addressed to them have much to do with the introduction of a stark dichotomy within their religious discourse between the plain sense and the hidden secrets of sacred scriptures. The hidden secrets were philosophical in nature, but were sometimes conceived as being hinted at in the interpreted texts. This dichotomy corresponds to another dichotomy on the anthropological plane between the masses and the elite.<sup>1</sup>

These anthropological dichotomies correspond to the two types of discourse or narratives: one religious, mythical, national, and historical (that is, the exoteric dimension of their writings) and the other Neo-Aristotelian, abstract, and individualistic (esoteric). In a way, the two levels of discussion contradict each other, though this point was rarely put into relief by the two philosophers as part of the religious responsibility they enjoyed as legalistic figures. In fact, both Maimonides and Averroes referred to the role played by a third category, the Rabbis and the Mutakallimun, whom they believed were spreading erroneous theological views among the multitude, a view that was later adopted by Abulafia, who was critical of certain Rabbis, as we shall see in chapter 9 below. The social and intellectual positions of Maimonides and Averroes produced similar approaches; in addition, Maimonides's later thought was influenced by some of Averroes's writings.<sup>2</sup>

Abulafia, on the other hand, did not occupy a formal position in Jewish society: he was not part of the primary elite, he did not serve as the Rabbi of a community, and he did not become a legalistic figure. As he himself confesses, his Rabbinic back-

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1 See Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism* and Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 49.

2 See Warren Zev Harvey, "Averroes and Maimonides on the Duty of Philosophical Contemplation (*I'tibār*)" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 58 (1989): 75–83. See also David Gonzalo Maeso, "Averroes (1126–1198) y Maimonides (1135–1204), dos glorias de Córdoba," *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 16–17, no. 2 (1967/68): 139–64; Ralph Lerner, "Le philosophe comme législateur: Maïmonide et Averroès," *Critique* 728–729 (2008): 8–27; Steven Harvey, "Arabic into Hebrew: The Hebrew Translation Movement and the Influence of Averroes upon Medieval Jewish Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 250–80; and Daniel J. Lasker, "Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 294–304.

ground was relatively poor, for which reason he may be seen as belonging to what I propose to call the secondary elite.<sup>3</sup> As seen above, he was a rather itinerant scholar who did not stay in the same town for long periods, with the exception of few consecutive years in Messina in Sicily, whence he also visited Palermo and likely the island of Comino.

However, Abulafia's vision of man followed Aristotle, as he conceived man to be a social being by nature.<sup>4</sup> This dependence on society increased Abulafia's need to resort to cautious language and esotericism. However, despite this dependence, his attitude to both the multitude, including Jews, and even to contemporary Rabbis is quite disdainful—much more so than what may be found in the attitude to the vulgus in Plato, Averroes, or Maimonides, as we shall see in the next chapter.<sup>5</sup> In any case, his more open attitude towards revelation and law, which is in a manner more reminiscent of the Latin radical Averroists, is much more problematic. His attitude towards the sacred text and its esoteric message is even more problematic, especially given the assumption that he saw himself as a prophet who was receiving messages from above and believed that the time of redemption was at hand; that is, he believed that he was a Messiah.

A characteristic of Abulafia's later life that is unlike what we know about all the other thirteenth-century Kabbalists is that he was not just an itinerant figure: he was also persecuted and was ultimately banned. For example, he was arrested in the city of Trani (or Terni) around 1279 because of denunciations from Jews and escaped, as he claims, by means of a miracle.<sup>6</sup> Later on, he was likely expelled to the small island of Comino, near Malta.<sup>7</sup> Sometime in the second half of the 1280s, he entered into a vicious polemic with Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret that culminated in him receiving a banishment from this legalistic figure, a ban that was effective in the Iberian Penin-

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**3** For the distinction between the primary and secondary elites in Kabbalah and the reverberation of this distinction on the nature of their respective forms of Kabbalah, see my "The Kabbalah's 'Window of Opportunities.'" For ecstatic Kabbalah, see my "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 216–18.

**4** *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 60:

כי האדם מדיני בטבע ולא יחיה אדם לבדו כי אם ימים מעטים ובמקרה שיזדמן לו מזונו הטבעי ההכרחי לצורך חייו. See also his *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 86–87: לפי הכרח כל קבוץ אנושי ("In accordance with the necessity of any human collective").

**5** See Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "The Place of Politics in the Philosophy of ibn Rushd," *BOAS* 15, no. 2 (1953): 246–78.

**6** Commentary on *Sefer ha-'Edut*, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57:

ובלכתו עבר דרך טראני ונתפש בידי גוים מפני מלשינות שהלשינוהו יהודים ונעשה לו נס ועזרו השם וניצל. This printing follows Ms. Roma, Angelica 38, which reads "Trani," while in Ms. Munich, 285, which is a later codex, it is spelt טרני. See Sermoneta's decoding of the name of the town as Terni, a town in Umbria in central Italy that was part of the Papal States, in "Hillel ben Samuel ben Eleazer of Verona," 53, note 51, which probably follows the Angelica manuscript. It is difficult to determine the location of the place where Abulafia was imprisoned since there were Jewish communities in both towns in the medieval period.

**7** See *Sefer ha-Ot*, 79.

sula until the Jews' expulsion from Spain.<sup>8</sup> We may well assume that those events were related not only to the specific content of his writings and teachings, but also to his boasting of being both a prophet and a Messiah. This may also be the reason for the problems that occurred in Capua in 1279 and his short imprisonment by the Minorite brothers in Rome after his unsuccessful attempt to meet the pope in the small town where his family had a palace sometime in the later part of 1280. This palace, known as Castro Firmano, still exists today: it can be found north of Rome in Soriano nel Cimino.

However, even earlier than these events, if my dating of a certain passage in his writing is correct,<sup>9</sup> he felt himself persecuted for different reasons:

Behold, the good is discerned by [means of] evil and evil is discerned by good, and all this is interpreted in *Sefer Yesirah*.<sup>10</sup> On this issue, the power of my fear was overcome, and I compelled my will and I sent my hand to [deal with]<sup>11</sup> what is somewhat higher than my capacity; seeing as I did that, my generation is calling me a heretic and an Epicurean<sup>12</sup> because I worshipped God in truth and not according to the fantasy of the nation<sup>13</sup> that walks in darkness, since they and those like them were immersed in the abyss [and] were glad, and they were [also] glad to cause my immersion in their vanities and also in the darkness of their deeds.<sup>14</sup>

**8** See my “The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: The History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic” [Hebrew], in *A'ara le-Haim: Studies in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. Daniel Boyarin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000): 235–51.

**9** See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine,” 10.

**10** Cf. 6:5. See also Shlomo Pines, “Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil: A Study of Jewish and General Philosophy in Connection with the *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1,2,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, 124–25, note 88.

**11** This is a Hebrew idiom which means “I dared.”

**12** This is a Rabbinic term for heresy. For the antonomastic use of this term in Rabbinic literature, see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2nd rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 1:29, 354, 652. For the more general view of philosophers as heretical in the Jewish Middle Ages, see Hannah Kasher, “‘The Philosophers Never Believed in Anything’ (Rabbi Isaac Arama): Notes on the Accusation That Philosophers are Heretics in Medieval Jewish Philosophers” [Hebrew], in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2012): 57–70.

**13** Though the term *ha-am* can be also translated as “populace,” as it is in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:54, Pines, 638, following Isaiah 9:1, I prefer to use the word “nation” here. There is no good reason to doubt that he is here referring to the Jews who persecuted Abulafia.

**14** Ms. Jerusalem, NUL, 8<sup>o</sup> 1303, fol. 73a, printed with several errors in Cohen's edition of *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 5–6:

והנה הטוב מבחין את הרע, והרע מבחין את הטוב, וכל זה מפורש בספר יצירה. על זה נצחתי כח פחדתי והכרחתי רצוני והשלחתי ידי במה שהוא למעלה מיכולתי מעט בראותי דורי קוראים אותי מין ואפיקורוס בעבור הייתי עובד אלהים באמת ולא כפי דמיון העם ההולכים בחשך ובעבור היותם הם ודומיהם נשקעים בתהום היו שמחים כאשר היו שמחים כשהיו יכולין להשקיעני גם אני בהבליהם ובמוחשך מעשיהם.

See also Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 129–30, 380, note 40, and Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 530.



This early testimony of the strong critiques that the ecstatic Kabbalist presumably encountered, likely in Catalonia, should be examined in any serious consideration of his thought before a harmonistic picture of Abulafia as part of the more general approach in Kabbalah as a whole is offered. No other Kabbalist testifies so clearly that he was accused of heresy, and such an accusation is grounded, in my opinion, in Abulafia's affinity with Maimonides.

Moreover, in the very same book, Abulafia claims that if Maimonides had explained the commandments in accordance with philosophical spirituality, he too would now be considered "heretical and Epicurean" by the Jews.<sup>15</sup> Thus, at least according to this early text, his concern was not with what Christians or other religious persons would say, but with what Jews thought about his teachings. From this point of view, Abulafia's approach to the nature of worship is as subversive as his approach to the Hebrew language, and, as we shall see, his approach to the status of the Torah. The critique of the genetic vision of the nation, as well as the perfection of the Hebrew language, Torah, commandments, and Temple, esoteric as it may be, is part of Abulafia's Maimonidean naturalism.<sup>16</sup>

However, what seems important to me is the claim Abulafia makes in the same context: had Maimonides interpreted the commandments according to the various methods of the prophetic Kabbalah, those who condemned him as a heretic would certainly have been correct.<sup>17</sup> This is indeed a keen recognition of the transgressive nature of Abulafia's own interpretations of the commandments, at least as he expected they would be understood by some other traditional Jews, a topic that deserves a more detailed elaboration that cannot be offered within this framework.

Abulafia's explicit testimony of having been accused of heresy also fits another, somewhat more veiled testimony found in a book written in 1282 in Messina: his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliš*. In this text, Abulafia describes the following situation:

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15 *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 14–15. I have already corrected the reading of this text in my study "*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries," 530–31, where I printed the improved Hebrew passage. This text should be compared to the much later (though equally important) discussion found in *Imrei Šefer*, 20–21, where he claims that Maimonides wrote only the "plain" sense of the commandments, while the secret meanings of the commandments are interpreted as referring to *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah* ("love" and "understanding") and *Limmud* ("study"). See also chapter 10 note 182 below. Let me point out that Maimonides and Averroes influenced Abulafia's understanding of the emergence of the ideal of mystical union without an accompanying antinomianism, as was the case of the extreme mysticism in some Christian circles in Central Europe known as the "Free Spirit." See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1972), 61–68.

16 Needless to say, the sources of the propensity to naturalist explanations are found in Greek philosophy and it was mediated by Muslim texts. See, e.g., Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 112–24. See also note 370.

17 *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 14–15.

Nowadays, because of our being in this lengthy exile that we are in [...] this name<sup>18</sup> was hidden from the sages who are members of our nation, *a fortiori* from their multitude,<sup>19</sup> so that anyone who searches for the knowledge of this name or other holy names similar to it becomes a heretic and an Epicurean to the sages of this generation.<sup>20</sup>

In my opinion, it is difficult to miss the precise identity of the person in that generation who was seeking to know the various divine names and was consequently called a heretic and an Epicurean: in my opinion, it was Abulafia himself, who regarded the disclosure of the unknown divine name 'HWY as the peak of his revelatory achievements. I wonder whether some kind of skandalon two years earlier in Capua was the backdrop for this diagnosis.

This awareness of the danger of being considered a heretic is also found in *Sefer Or ha-Šekhel*, a book whose content will be the subject of many of our discussions below. In a passage that may reflect some form of autobiographical experience, he writes:

When someone wishes to disclose the true faith to an illuminate,<sup>21</sup> he [the teacher] shall comprehend whether his [the latter's] mind bears it or not. And this is the sign: if he rejoices in it and is afraid of hearing its secret<sup>22</sup> and does not break its fences,<sup>23</sup> which are to it as the keys to the lock, by means of which he prevents the garden from being entered by evil beasts, you should immediately understand that he received the intellectual faith and that he is a wise person, who understands by himself<sup>24</sup> [...]. But if you reveal a secret to him and he is worried and astonished about it and thinks that all his faith will be removed because of it,<sup>25</sup> and [he thinks that] you are a fool or a heretic and an Epicurean, do not nourish him with the potion of life, lest you kill him.<sup>26</sup>

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**18** Namely, the divine name.

**19** The plural form מהמוניהם is not so clear.

**20** *Sefer ha-Meliš*, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 36:

ואמנם אנחנו היום מפני היותנו בגלות הארוך הזה שאנו בו [...] נעלם זה השם מחכמי אנשי עמנו כל שכן מהמוניהם עד ששב היום אצל חכמי דורנו זה, כל המבקש שום ידיעה בשם כזה או בזולתו מן השמות הקדושים הדומים לו כמין ואפיקורוס.

See also *Gan Na'ul*, 40, and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 383, note 92, where he acknowledges that he was accused of believing in the pre-eternity of the world, like Aristotle. Compare to *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 212, and *Sitrei Torah*, 91–92. See also Joseph Dan, *Kabbalists in Spain in the Thirteenth Century* [Hebrew], vol. 9, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism* (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2013), 409, who claims that Abulafia believed in pre-eternity, this being the reason why language did not play a role in the creation of the world.

**21** Who is still an aspirant.

**22** That is, the secret of the true faith.

**23** This is a theme for keeping a certain social framework that recurs throughout this book.

**24** This is a phrase found in Rabbinic literature describing the part that is apt to deal with esoteric topics. See *Mishnah Ḥagigah*, 2:1.

**25** Compare the description of Rabbi Nathan, Abulafia's student, to whom *Or ha-Šekhel* was dedicated. His faith was prone to be shaken by his study of philosophy. See *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 477.

**26** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 10:

These accusations of heresy are found in several of Abulafia's writings and may have been one of the main causes of his persecutions. The manner in which he envisioned these persecutions is quite revealing: in his opinion, they proved that he was indeed a prophet because suffering and persecutions were also the fate of the biblical prophets.<sup>27</sup> Abulafia coupled this "protestant" prophetic attitude found in ancient Judaism with a philosophical attitude towards reforming Judaism by means of a series of mentalistic interpretations that accompanied his self-perception as a Messiah.

The warning about the potential lethal danger stemming from the revelation of secrets is quite extraordinary in the entire history of Jewish esotericism, and it shows that persecution is also to be understood not only as the consequence of writing, but also as the consequence of the oral divulgence of secrets to people who are not appropriate audiences. If we accept Abulafia's claims of persecution, then his testimony is exceptional because no other thirteenth-century Kabbalist gave a similar testimony.<sup>28</sup>

The sharp tension between the plain and the esoteric senses of the Hebrew Bible, to the extent that in some cases the latter is conceived as contradicting or deconstructing the former, is, according to some of Abulafia's views, quite obvious.<sup>29</sup> In one text, Abulafia writes: "Those are secrets of the Torah that are truthful for the sages, but indeed according to the fools, they contradict the Torah."<sup>30</sup> This is a guarded esotericism: it prevents the unqualified from reaching topics that they cannot un-

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ועל כן כשיגלה אדם האמונה האמיתית למשכיל ישיג דעתו אם טובל אם לא. זה לך האות, אם ישמח בה ולא ייבהל בשומעו סודה ולא יפרוץ גדריה, אשר הם לה כמפתחות למנעול, שבשניהם ישמור הגן מליכנוס בו חיות רעות. תבין מיד שזה המקבל האמונה המשכלת הוא החכם ומבין מדעתו [...] ואמנם אם תגלה לו סוד אחד ויבהל וישתמם עליו ויחשוב שסוד מעליו כל אמונתו, ושאתה סכל בעיניו או מין ואפיקורוס, אל תאכילהו סם חיים פן תמיתרו.

See also the warning not to be surprised or astonished by the content of his book, *Or ha-Šekhel*, 69. Compare this to Abulafia's resort to the possibility of being accused of *minut*, heresy, in his early treatise *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 25. On the accusation of heresy and Epicureanism addressed to a person studying Greek philosophy, see his *Sitrei Torah*, 35. On the lethal danger related to disclosing secrets to the masses, see Amir-Moessi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> See *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> We should distinguish between critiques of ideas, found in many writings concerning Kabbalah or philosophy, and actual personal persecutions, which, as far as we know as far as the medieval scene was concerned, were quite rare in Judaism.

<sup>29</sup> See my "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 403–9, and see also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 175.

<sup>30</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 13: סתרי תורה הם באמת לחכמים, וסתרי תורה לפתאים בלא ספק. See also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 9. For the use of the word "fool" in the *Guide* and some later echoes, see Harvey, *Falaquera's "Epistle of the Debate"*, 15–16, note 5, and Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah," 104. See also the stark distinction between the two extremities: the multitude is concerned solely with the plain sense, and the special individual is concerned only with the hidden sense, as described in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 39–40. This is the background of Abulafia's statement in *Sitrei Torah*, 118, discussed by Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 27, 423, note 257, and in *Abraham Abulafia*, 81–88. In the latter text, he interprets the statement differently, in a manner that fits the sixteenth-century Rabbi Moses Cordovero's quite different vision of secrets, as what was earlier called an essential issue. For Abulafia, it is an anthropological and cognitive issue. See also Appendix E note 219 below.

derstand and allows qualified recipients to learn them. On the surface of the text, this esotericism does not seem like a mysterious issue that is veiled in a cloud of unknowing in order to prevent transmission. Rather, it works with the basic problem of the inferior nature of the minds of some of the possible audience, who nevertheless need instruction. The ineffability of the divine, let me emphasise, is not at stake, but rather the weakness of the human constitution.

This is also the gist of a discussion that I am very much inclined to attribute to Abulafia, which is found anonymously in a manuscript that contains other Abulafian material. After offering some calculations that aim to demonstrate that the concept of *ex nihilo* can be deduced from the numerical values of the letters of the Tetragrammaton, the Kabbalist writes:

Behold, I have already announced to you this great, wondrous, covered secret,<sup>31</sup> that is appropriate to hide from someone that is not worthy of it, and he is preoccupied with its knowledge for reasons other than the glory of God, blessed be He, and it is appropriate to reveal it and to speak about it in the entire world in order to hallow it, to honour it for the sake of the glory of God, blessed be He, and this is the reason why I wrote it in a slightly confused manner, intentionally, and because of the will that the possessor of the eyes of the intellect will look at it and the possessor of the eyes of the fool<sup>32</sup> will not contemplate it.<sup>33</sup>

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**31** See Abulafia's resort to the very same phrase (הסוד המופלא המכוסה) in his *Sitrei Torah*, 186. He only resorted to series of adjectives that qualify the secret as extraordinary in a little more than a dozen cases, which is quite a small amount in comparison to the thousands of occurrences of the terms *sod* or *seter* without those qualifications. This is one of the reasons why I identify the anonymous passage as having been written by Abulafia.

**32** The pun on the Hebrew שכל/סכל is found in many of Abulafia's texts. For example, see *Sitrei Torah*, 14. Let me present an anonymous passage found in a manuscript that claims that the plain sense is intended for fools:

דע שיש לחכמים דברים נעלמים רמזים במדרשים ובהגדות חתומים ואם נגליהם לעיני הסכלים בדברים בטילים ליודעים חן ולמבינים שכלים.

"You should know that what the sages have are hidden things and hints in the Midrashim, and sealed in the legends, and if in their plain sense [they seem] to be trivial in the eyes of the fools, for those who know the hidden wisdom and those who understand, [they] are intellectual." See Ms. London, British Library 1087, Or. Add. 27173, fol. 64a. The formulation at the end is a little ambiguous. The style is quite reminiscent of Abulafia and its authorship requires further analysis. Compare this view to Levi ben Abraham's statement in *Liwyat Hēn: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Kreisel, 212:

כי ההכרח הביא להסתיר קצת דברים ולחקן להם משל כדי ללבב שכל הנבונים ולעור עין הכסילים לא יבינום.  
 "Since it was necessary to hide some things, and to prepare for them a parable, in order to arouse the intellect of the wise, but to blind the eyes of the blind, [so that they] will not understand them."

**33** Ms. Jerusalem, NUL 8<sup>o</sup> 1303, fols. 50b–51a:

הנה כבר הודעתוך הסוד הגדול המופלא ומכוסה הזה הראוי להסתירו ממי שאינו ראוי לו והוא מתעסק בידיעתו לדבר אחר זולת כבוד השם ית' וגם הוא ראוי לפרסמו ולספרו בכל הארץ כדי לקדשו וכבודו לכבוד השם ית' והוא שכתבתיו גם אני מבולבל מעט בכונה וברצון כדי שישתכלו בו בעל עיני השכל וכדי שלא יביטו אליו בעלי עיני השכל.

For the affinities between part of the material found in this manuscript and Abulafia's early views, see my "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 30, and especially my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 138, note 20, where fol. 52a of this manuscript is mentioned.

The remark about the intentionally distorted manner of writing the secret is, from a Straussian point of view, paramount, especially since it explicitly conveys Abulafia's consciousness of the need to keep the secret from the vulgus. If this text is to be believed to reflect an actual practice, then there are formulations in Abulafia's writings that are intentionally cast in a confusing manner, a practice that contradicts what he wrote elsewhere about his refusal to take into consideration the dangers involved in disclosing an important secret.<sup>34</sup>

I assume that Abulafia wrote this anonymous passage very early in his career and that the more audacious position was formulated later. In any case, we should note the existence of different, even contradictory positions in his writings concerning the politics of esotericism. In my opinion, this difference was a result of a more general development in his thought, perhaps part of personal experiences of persecution, a development that we shall survey in some detail at the end of Appendix D.<sup>35</sup>

However, in another anonymous and quite provocative statement found in a short treatise for which I also propose Abulafian authorship, we read: "The curse of the plain [sense] is the blessing of the hidden one, and the curse of the hidden [meaning] is the blessing of the plain [sense]."<sup>36</sup> For the time being, this is the most extreme formulation of antagonism towards the plain sense found in Abulafia's writings, and, to the best of my knowledge, in Jewish literature in general.<sup>37</sup> It is in this general context that Abulafia uses a pun on the name of a philosopher who would say that the "plain senses [*pešaṭim*] are said [intended] for the fools

<sup>34</sup> See below the passage from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 51.

<sup>35</sup> See below, 345–59.

<sup>36</sup> See Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 2047, fol. 69a, and Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 207–8, 377–78, note 25: וקללת הנגלה הוא ברכת הנסתר, וקללת הנסתר הוא ברכת הנגלה, and I hope to return to this fascinating passage in a separate study on thirteenth-century Kabbalistic hermeneutics. In the context of this passage, it is clear that *nigleh* and *nistar* also stand for the second person and the third person, but this is done in the context of an interpretation of the names of the biblical forefathers according to the methods of combining their letters. See also Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 346–47. For another quotation from this text, see chapter 10 below. For the view that the secret sense is the essence and the plain sense is inconsequential [*tafel*], which he attributes to Maimonides, see *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 12:

העניין המובן מן הנסתר עיקר ונשאר א"כ זולתו טפל כנגדו והנה הורנו כי אין תכלית הכוונה האחרונה בעבור המובן מפשרו הכתוב אשר הם נגליו ברב המקומות, אבל תכלית הכוונה האחרונה בו בעבור המובן מפרושו אשר הם נסתרו. "What is understood from the hidden sense is essential, and what remains in addition to it is inconsequential in comparison to it. And behold, we have been taught that the ultimate intention is not what is understood from the plain sense of the scripture, which is the revealed one in most places, but the ultimate intention is what is understood from the interpretations that are its hidden senses." See also the longer quote from the same book below, 15, quoted below chapter 8 note 59, where the term *tafel* occurs in a similar context. Indubitably, this is a radicalisation of Maimonides's thought and constitutes an attitude that is the inverse position to that of Spinoza.

<sup>37</sup> Compare to Alan de Lille's twelfth-century Latin text, discussed in Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, eds. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 99–100.

[*tippšim*].”<sup>38</sup> In the Hebrew spelling, the two words in parentheses are compounded from the same consonants, though permuted in a different order. This is not just a repudiation of the plain sense as given in a more gentle or veiled way by other Maimonideans, but a full-fledged rejection of its intellectual relevance.<sup>39</sup>

This approach seems to be the source of *Sefer Toledot Adam*, a later, anonymously authored treatise likely written under the influence of Abulafia’s writings in Italy in the first decades of the fifteenth century:

All speeches and exchanges of [the order of] letters are conventional, [stemming] from the imagination, but the intellect and prophecy do not by themselves need speech and the language of the languages for their comprehension, as the imagination needs. And the speech of the sages is a parable and an enigma and brief talk, though [nevertheless possessing] plenty of meanings, but prophecy does not need even brief talk. However, given that the sage cannot explain the speculation of his wisdom to the masses, since they do not understand his special language, and they did not convene with him [...], this is the reason why you may see sages always laughing in their heart at the fools when they speak their language, which they learned from their early youth.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps in the anonymous author’s passage we have a radicalisation of Abulafia’s thought that might also have been impacted by the Averroistic sources that he knew, such as the books of the Maimonidean Rabbi Moses Narboni.<sup>41</sup> In any case, this is an elitist approach that assumes a high, perhaps insurmountable barrier between the elite and the masses. I call this type of approach to the various senses of the biblical text “disjunctive,” which means that it operates with the imperative of preventing the vulgus from learning the esoteric interpretations of the Bible.<sup>42</sup> Again, quite a dramatic shift in comparison to the early Kabbalistic sources and the Ashkenazi approaches with which Abulafia was acquainted. Though dealing

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**38** *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 44: שהפילוסוף יעיין בפשטים ויכיר שהם דברים נאמרים לטפשים. See also his earlier *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, 69: הנסתר מהכסילים הוא אשר נגלה להכמים. Let me point out that there is nothing paradoxical here, or in similar statements Abulafia makes, since the secret is conceived as something that transcends the understanding of a certain level of the populace while it is understood by another level. His esotericism is therefore intended to ensure that ignoramuses would not be harmed by the text on the one hand and that the elite would not be harmed by the multitude on the other.

**39** See Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 35–46.

**40** *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 169a, translated, with some changes, in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 144, note 55. The Hebrew original of this text was printed in the Hebrew version of my book on page 136, note 54. For some affinities between this treatise and Abulafia’s thought, see *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 46; 58; 65; 136; 144, note 55; 179; 181. See also Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 352, note 50, and Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 150–52; 182; 391, note 63. I hope to return to a more sustained analysis of this neglected treatise in a separate study.

**41** For Averroes on the nature of prophecy, see *Sefer Toledot Adam*, fol. 157b.

**42** Introduction to *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 6–7. On the affinity between esotericism and elitism in Maimonides, see Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*, 16 and note 41.

with the secrets of the Torah, these other approaches were nevertheless much more “conjunctive.”

With Abulafia, however, the tension between the different interpretations and audiences is quite obvious, as we shall see immediately below. In one of the densest passages that deals with the three Rabbinic forms of esotericism, he writes:

At the very beginning of the formation [of man], three types of sins were comprised: idolatry, incest, and shedding blood [homicide].<sup>43</sup> And also in the case of circumcision, these three [are found],<sup>44</sup> since from this, there is the beginning of the creation of the species and its eternal persistence. And this is so in order to change what has been created in accordance with the ultimate divine intention, and this is the first natural intention. The natural intention, which is the account of creation, is to always preserve the human species and to preserve its individuals for a period of time by means of sexual intercourse, while the divine intention, which is the account of the chariot, is to always preserve the distinguished individuals<sup>45</sup> by means of the revelation of secrets,<sup>46</sup> which are like the disclosure of the sexual organs in the eyes of the multitude of the species,<sup>47</sup> and matters that are pernicious to be spoken and forbidden to be heard, like things about incest, despite the fact that they are the principles and the others are negligible. And this is the reason why it is incumbent on the multitude belonging to the species to believe the scriptures according to their plain sense, and [subsequently] no secret matter should be revealed to them, since for them, it is shameful, and it is incumbent on the [elite] individuals to believe the inverse, that is, to reveal to themselves the shamefulness of the plain sense and cover it from the others and take the secret sense as fine flour and leave the plain sense as refuse, as it is said “stolen waters are sweet and bread [eaten] in secret is pleasant”;<sup>48</sup> namely, the secrets of the Torah, which are secrets that are transmitted in a whisper<sup>49</sup> and intended for the intellect through plenty of thought, and they are stolen and covered from the multitude, and all are hidden, attesting to the two urges,<sup>50</sup> and according to the plain sense they are one of the command-

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**43** Those are three cardinal sins in Rabbinic Judaism. The intention here is that those sins are implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the first chapters of Genesis, as the Rabbis understand it.

**44** See also *Sitrei Torah*, 70.

**45** Namely, the elite. For more on this issue, see chapter 21 below. On nature being concerned with species rather than individuals, see Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*, as discussed by Erich Neumann, *The Origin and History of Consciousness*, trans. Richard Francis Carrington Hull (New York: Harper, 1962), 2:333–34.

**46** The secrets are seen as the means of reaching immortality.

**47** The term “species” most likely has two different meanings in this context: the human species and the multitude, who are considered heretical because of their incorrect beliefs. See also later in the translated passage, as well as in his *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 21, and *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 9, 10. The category of the human species is very important in Abulafia's anthropology, as we shall see below. It comprises fools and wise men, Jews and non-Jews, all together.

**48** Proverbs 9:17.

**49** On the topic of transmission in a whisper, see Idel, “In a Whisper.” See also Elliot R. Wolfson, “Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Medieval Kabbalah,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter. J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 65–109.

**50** In most of the occurrences of the discussions of the two urges within Rabbinic literature in Abulafia's writings, he refers to the faculties of imagination and intellect.



ments, which are [needed] for the perfection of the body and the perfection of the soul,<sup>51</sup> which are necessary or useful.<sup>52</sup> Behold, the plain sense is the key<sup>53</sup> for the opening of the gates of the hidden,<sup>54</sup> and behold, it is part of the category of the hidden by genus but not by species, since the perfection of the body is a preparation for the perfection of the soul, and the perfection of the soul is a preparation for the ultimate felicity,<sup>55</sup> which is the aim of the ultimate divine intention, which [consists] in the comprehension<sup>56</sup> of God.<sup>57</sup>

51 The concepts of these two perfections or amendments can be found in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:27, Pines 2:511. For analyses of these concepts, see Miriam Glaston, "The Purpose of the Law according to Maimonides," *JQR* 67 (1978): 27–51; Warren Zev Harvey, "Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics," in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990): 1–15; Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides's Four Perfections," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 15–24; and Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). One may ask whether the omission here of an explicit reference to a third perfection (the intellect) from the purposes of the Torah—though the concept is found elsewhere in Maimonides—is an intended hint as to the exclusively social or pedagogical nature of the Torah. See also Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29 on the three perfections. See also Gad Freudenthal, "The Biological Limitations of Man's Intellectual Perfection according to Maimonides," in *The Trias of Maimonides: Jewish, Arabic, and Ancient Culture of Knowledge*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005): 137–49, and chapter 8 note 60 below.

52 "Necessary and useful" refer to things that are intended for the masses although they are not necessarily true. This is the status of the commandments. See chapter 16 below for the passage from the epistle *Mašref la-Kesef*.

53 The image of the key is quite important in Abulafia's writing: he wrote several books whose title includes a reference to a key. See Idel, "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah,'" 67. Interestingly enough, according to a Jewish testimony related to early Islam, a prophet who was regarded as the anointed one claimed that he possessed the keys to paradise. See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3–4.

54 See the introduction to *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*, 7. Nota bene: the key is necessary; however, at the same time, it is different in nature to the gate.

55 On this ideal in the Jewish Middle Ages, see Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003).

56 *Haššagat ha-Šem* is another version of *Yedi'at ha-Šem*, which is one of Abulafia's highest religious aims. This comprehension is expressed by the term *haššagah*, which is a philosophical term for cognition. See also the quote from *Sefer ha-Yašar* in Appendix D below. See also chapter 5 note 195 above and chapter 8 note 80 below.

57 *Sefer Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 15, corrected according to Ms. Munich, 408, fol. 10a:

והנה בראשית היצירה נכללו ג' מיני עבירות ע"ז ג' ע"ש"ד, וכן בסוד המילה שלשה אלה, מפני שממנה ראשית בריאת המין וקיומו לעד, וזה כדי להפך מה שנוצר כנגד הכוונה האלהית האחרונה, והיא הכונה הטבעית הראשונה. כי כונה הטבעית—שהיא מעשה בראשית—לקיים המין תמיד ולקיים פרטיו מדת זמן אחד באמצעות גלוי עריות. וכוונה האלהית—שהיא מעשה מרכבה—לקיים האיש המיוחד תמיד ע"י גלוי נסתרות אשר הם כגלוי עריות אצל ההמון המיניים, ועניינים מוגנים לדבר במ און ראוי לשמעם כדברי עריות, ואם הם עקר וזולתם טפל. ועל זה חוייב להמין המין להאמין הכתובים כפשוטם ושלא יתגלה להם במ שום נסתר כי ערוה היא להם. וחוייב הוא ליחידים להאמין הפכס, והיא לגלות ערות הנגלה לעצמם, ולכסותו מזולתם ולקחת את הנסתר לסולת ולעזוב את הנגלה לפסלת. ועל כיוצא בזה אמר שלמה ע"ה: "מים גנובים ימתקו ולחם סתרים ינעם" כלומר סתרי תורה, והם סתרים הנאמרים בלחשיה, ונועדים אל השכל ברוב מחשבה, והם גנובים ומכוסים מכל ההמון, וכלם נסתרים, מעידים על שני יצרים. והם בנגלה מצוה מן המצוות, שהם לתקן הגוף או לתקן הנפש ההכרחיים או מועילים. הנה הנגלה מפתח לפתוח בו שערי הנסתר, והנה הוא מכלל הנסתר בסוג ולא במין,

Abulafia uses a basic pun: incest, *'arayot*, is also referenced in some Rabbinic texts as *gillui 'arayot*, literally meaning the uncovering of the genitals, and by extension, the uncovering of sexual relations of a forbidden nature.<sup>58</sup> In Hebrew, uncovering also means disclosure, which means that the revelation of the secrets of incest may be regarded by the vulgus as being shameful. Thus, the same act may be regarded as sublime by the elite and shameful by the multitude.<sup>59</sup>

To formulate it differently: what is good for the species—namely, its genetic continuity that is attainable only through sexual relations (which is conceived as the intention of the account of creation, or the natural intention)—is considered in this context as inferior to the account of the chariot (which is concerned with the special wise or distinguished individuals whose continuity depends on intellectual activity) that is described as fulfilling the ultimate divine intention.<sup>60</sup> Secrecy is, therefore, not a matter of ineffability, but of the need to provide different audiences with a variety of diverse information that is appropriate to their different capacities of understanding.

Such a stringent attitude towards other people is found in one of Abulafia's commentaries on his prophetic books:

It is incumbent on every illuminated [person] who wishes to prophesy that he regard in his eyes and heart each and every individual of the “men of the land,”<sup>61</sup> the foolish ones, as if they are apes and all their deeds are like the deeds of the parrots and their thoughts are like the thoughts of the *šenhavim*,<sup>62</sup> and these are sorts of beasts and it is appropriate to bless on them “blessed is He Who changes the beings,”<sup>63</sup> and all three [of them] are kinds of apes and all their acts are

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מפני תקון הגוף היא הכנה לתקון הנפש ותקון הנפש הכנה לשלמותה האחרון אשר אליו תכלית הכוונה האלהית האחרונה, והיא השגת השם.

See also my “The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah,” 158–59, and “In a Whisper,” 481–82. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 191–93, 200, whose analysis is, in my opinion, quite problematic because he presupposes that the performance of the commandments is essentially related to the hidden layer, not merely to the study of the words expressing these commandments. See, especially, his discussions on 191, 197, and 200. The terminology related to the term “intention” is once again Maimonidean.

**58** An interesting parallel is found in *Sefer Ner Elohim*, an anonymous treatise from Abulafia's circle, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 48: הוא מגלה עריות לו, הוא מגלה עריות לו, הוא מגלה עריות לו.

**59** See also *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 289.

**60** Abulafia is more explicit than Maimonides was as to the existence of the third divine intention; namely, the perfection of the intellect. See his *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Parma, de Rossi 141, fol. 7a, 21–22; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 109–10; as well as chapter 8 note 51 above. On the topic of distinguished individuals, see the detailed discussion in chapter 21 below.

**61** A Hebrew expression for ignoramuses.

**62** Sic! In Hebrew, however, this is a term related to elephants or their ivory, having nothing to do with apes, as Abulafia asserts, quite surprisingly, in the following phrase. This is a rare case in Abulafia's writings where a clear misunderstanding of a Hebrew term is found.

**63** Cf. 1 Kings 10:22 and *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 58b. Compare also to Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac Bedershi, *Ḥotam Tokhmit*, ed. Gavriel Pollak (Amsterdam: Levison and Proops, 1865), 1.24, 265.

imaginative<sup>64</sup> and the person who is found with them is like someone who is alone in a forest knowing that there is no one like him and that his body is endangered by those evil beasts that are found in the forest all the time. But they have no power over his soul, since it is the intellectual soul that remains after the life<sup>65</sup> of this world. But because he is found among them and he is from their species as one of them, and given the fact that his intellect transcended their species, he was [nevertheless] separated from them and became another species, a divine one after being human.<sup>66</sup>

What is obvious here is the stark distinction between the elite and the masses that follows Maimonides, his philosophical sources, and perhaps his teacher, Rabbi Hillel of Verona.<sup>67</sup> Abulafia does not even hint here at the other distinction between Jews and Gentiles. I can scarcely imagine a more elitist anthropology than this one, which had quite an impact on Abulafia's understanding of religion and esotericism altogether. However, let me emphasise that this is not an exceptional text, as its content reverberates in his later writings as well.

Abulafia recommends that one should “be separated from the people of the earth”; “all the people should be in his eyes as beasts and animals and birds”; the assumption that only those who are similar to the elite figures possess “*šelem* and *demut*, which are the masters of the Torah and the keepers of the commandments in truth.”<sup>68</sup> In the vein of a Straussian reading, I propose that we be sensitive

<sup>64</sup> Or imitative. Compare to a similar depiction of apes in his *Šomer Mišwah*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> חיות. I see no reason to translate this term as “beasts” here, as I did earlier in the same text.

<sup>66</sup> *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliš*, Ms. Roma, Angelica 38, fol. 9a, 19–20:

ראוי לכל משכיל המבקש להתנבאות שיראה בעיניו ובלבבו כל איש ואיש מאנשי הארץ הסכלים כאילו הם קופים וכל מעשיהם כמעשי התוכים ומחשבותיהם כמחשבות השנהבים שכל אלה מיני חיות וראוי לברך עליהם ברוך משנה הבריות. ושלשתם מיני קופים הם וכל פעולותיהם דמיוניות והאיש עמהם הוא כמי שמצא עצמו ביער לבדו שיוודע שאין שם איש זולתו וגופו מסוכן בין החיות הרעות הנמצאות תמיד ביער. אבל נפשו אין להם יכולת עליה והיא הנפש המשכלת הנשארת אחר חיות העולם הזה. ואמנם מפני חיותו ביניהם והיה ממינם ומהם וכאחד מהם, והיום בשכלו נתעלה ממינם ונתייחד מהם ושב מין אחר אלוהי אחר חיותו אנושי.

On this passage see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 16. See also *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 121. For the possibility of the divinisation of human beings, see also Al-Fārābī and Hillel of Verona, *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*, 56, Sermoneta's footnotes there, and ibn Falaquera, *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*, 28. On “apish” behaviour, see Abulafia's *Mafteḥ ha-Ra'ayon*, 68. For the transformation into “sons of God” (that is, some form of angel), see the anonymous text found in Ms. Jerusalem, NLI 1303, fol. 70a, which is found just before what I consider to be the introduction to his early commentary on the *Guide*, *Sefer Ge'ulah*. Let me point out the importance of several manuscripts, this being one of them, which contain a variety of secrets or disparate material from ecstatic Kabbalah, for understanding some topics in this Kabbalah but which have nevertheless been ignored in modern scholarship on Abulafia. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 12–13; 27, note 63. In general, the importance of the traditions found in collectanea of Kabbalistic secrets found mostly in manuscript for understanding the eclectic aspects of Kabbalistic literature needs a more detailed assessment. See also *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:7, 267.

<sup>67</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:14.

<sup>68</sup> *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 364:

to the potential hint found in the adverbial form *be-emet*, “in truth,” since it may reflect a distinction between the performance of the commandments on the one hand and the study of the letters by means of which the commandments are formulated on the other, the latter being considered superior to their performance. Moreover, I assume that the image (*šelem*) is paralleled by the Torah, while *demut* corresponds to the keeper of the commandments, an issue to which we shall return to in some detail in chapter 10.

A question that should be addressed in the context of this passage is whether this transformation of the human into the divine, which is a form of apotheosis or even theosis, concerns only the intellectual faculty or whether it also concerns the human imagination. Since I have not found the assumption that God possesses some form of imagination, transformation, in my opinion, means getting rid of this faculty.

We learn from another passage from the same commentary on the *Guide*'s secrets that anthropology and the alleged structure of the canonical texts are intertwined:

The [biblical] verse bears two topics together, and even supports the plain sense, when its first words are brought together with the last words, more than the hidden; when the hidden topic is understood by the perfect intellect,<sup>69</sup> [that is] a demonstrative and Kabbalist-religious one, we should not care about the connections between the words in the plain sense. Those [connections] came only in order to [profoundly] deepen the secrecy<sup>70</sup> that emerges out of it and to cover the hidden [sense] from the multitude of the sages of the plain sense<sup>71</sup> [...] the hidden [things] are divine topics and the plain sense [things] are human topics.<sup>72</sup>

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ובהיותה או מיוחד ומפורש ומובדל מכל עמי הארץ החושבים שהם חכמים. ויהיה כל אדם אז בעיניך לפי דרך כחיות ובהמות ועופות, ותשיג בהרגשותיך ובשכלך השגות אמתיות. והדומים לך יהיו בעלי צלם ודמות והם בעלי התורה ושומרי המצוה באמת.

On *šelem* and *demut* in Maimonides, see Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 156–73. Compare, however, to the view of Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 23: “The morphological resemblance between the divine and human image, rooted in biblical thinking, played a central role in the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism in all of its stages.” On the rationales of the commandments in Maimonides, see Yair Lorberbaum, “‘What Would Please Them Most is That the Intellect Would Not Find a Meaning for the Commandments and the Prohibitions’: On Transcending the Rationales of the Commandments—A Close Reading of the *Guide of the Perplexed* III 31” [Hebrew], *Da‘at* 77 (2014): 17–50.

**69** “Perfect intellect” is an important concept for Abulafia, since he was concerned with removing the imaginative power in order to attain the highest type of experience, as we shall see below.

**70** Or the hiding; *lehaflig ha-hester*.

**71** See also *Mafteah ha-Hokhmat*, 101. On the oxymoronic phrase “multitude of sages,” see also Abulafia’s *Or ha-Šekhel*, 39, and the introduction to *Mafteah ha-Hokhmat*, 6, which is quoted as a motto.

**72** *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, Ms. Munich, 408, fol. 9b, 12:

ואע”פ שהכתוב סובל שני העניינים יחד, ואולי סובל הנגלה יותר מן הנסתר לכשיוקשרו דבריו הראשונים והאחרונים בתחילת המחשבה. אך כשיושכל העניין הנסתר בשכל שלם מופתי או מקובל תוריי, אין לחוש על הקשרים הנקשרים בנגלהו, שהם באו כדי להפליג ההסתר הנולד ממנו, ולכסות העלמו מהמון חכמי הפשט. ומזאת ההערה תבין שאם עניין הספור ההוא הבא בכתוב הוא זר מאד חוץ להקש והוא כנגד הטבע, ולא זכר הכתוב בו שהוא פלא שאתה צריך

The plain sense covers the hidden one by giving the impression that the purpose of the biblical verse is a narrative that can also be understood by the vulgus. In a way, this sense only dissimulates the hidden truth, at least giving it some form of camouflage. In other words, the more the plain sense is understood, which means the more conspicuous the mythical elements are, the less it conveys or indicates of the presence and true meaning of secrets. Thus, it lures the reader to believe in this plain sense.

Just as he regards the plain sense as refuse in comparison to the secret sense, which he describes as fine flour, here the plain sense does not play a significant role in the religiosity of the Jewish elite as Abulafia understood it. This we may learn from one of the concluding pages of his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*:

But in the event that we attribute them to Him, blessed be He, as we attribute them to us, we would be lying<sup>73</sup> as far as both of us are concerned,<sup>74</sup> since there is nothing in our thought and in our words, but all are imaginations and parables that we resorted to since they generate fear and awe in the heart of the multitude, which does not discern that they are the utmost limit of lowness.<sup>75</sup>

This is one of the most distinct pedagogical-political statements made in Judaism before Spinoza. Abulafia evinces what I would designate as a disjunctive approach that creates a sharp tension between the two senses of the sacred scripture, expressed in quite strong terms. This statement is no doubt part of the reason for the persecutions he suffered.

Abulafia's rather deterministic anthropology is part of this disjunctive attitude. Indeed, he was ready to take chances, even when he was aware of the high price he might pay for his opinions. For example, in *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, his longest *Commentary on Sefer Yeṣirah*, he describes his disclosure of the secret of the twenty-

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לדעת נסתר, על כל פנים אחר אשר אין מציאות אל נגלהו לא במרגש ולא במשכל, וראוי שתשליך ממנו המדומה ושתשכיל ענינו ומה הכוונה אליו [...] הנסתרות הם ענינים אלהיים, והנגלות הם אנושיים.

On the secrets of the tablets of the Law, see *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 192.

<sup>73</sup> This is reminiscent of the Shi'ite concept of dissimulation, or *taqiyya*. Cf. Etan Kohlberg, "Some Imāmi-Shi'i Views on *Taqiyya*," *JAOS* 95 (1975): 395–402, and Etan Kohlberg, "*Taqiyya* in Shi'i Theology and Religion," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, eds. Hans. G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: Brill, 1995): 345–60. However, despite the important role of the hypostatic intellect reminiscent of Abulafia's *ṣekhel ha-po'el*, early Shi'ite esotericism dramatically differs from Abulafia's.

<sup>74</sup> The Hebrew is not so clear here.

<sup>75</sup> *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 386:

ואמנם אצלו ית' כשניחסם אליו כהתייחסם אלינו נשקר בין שנינו כי אין הדבר במחשבתנו ולא בדברינו אבל הכל דמיונות ומשלים הצרכנו אליהם להיותם משימים פחד ויראה בלב ההמון שאינם מכירים שהם בתכלית הפחיתות.

For the nexus between fear and the multitude, see also *Maṭteah ha-Ḥokhmat*, 76:

מפני שיירא מאלהיו תמיד כל ימי חייו עת אחר עת לפי ההמונות.

"Since he will fear his God always, all the days of his life, time after time, as the multitude does."

two fundamental letters and the combination of letters as if they were unknown by Gentiles as well as forgotten by Jews in the last generations:

I have a strong need and necessity [generated by] the motion of desire to write here the truth of the thing without fear of punishment, and to announce this immense secret in a manner that is entirely explained and interpreted, so that you<sup>76</sup> and those like you will not be deprived of the knowledge of this wondrous secret, which is the stake on which everything depends. I do so despite the fact that I knew what things would happen to me and to my book because of its disclosure [and] because of them, I will not refrain from saying what we have been taught from heaven<sup>77</sup> and what we have received from the best of the prophets and sages, blessed be their memory, who received it from God mouth to mouth.<sup>78</sup>

What is the secret hinted at concerning the letters and their combination? And why does Abulafia imagine that he will be persecuted because of the disclosure of this secret? I hope to be able to answer these questions later in this study when I deal with Abulafia's concept of language. Now, I would like only to note that this passage contains a second explicit recognition that he is breaking the spell of secrecy despite his awareness of the dangers of doing so. A third instance is better known in scholarship and has to do with conversations Abulafia had with a Christian who was so fond

76 Namely, his faithful student, Rabbi Sa'adyah ben Isaac Sigilmasi, to whom the book is dedicated.

77 A very similar phrase is found in *Ner Elohim*, a treatise from Abulafia's school, 96:

ואמנם אני לא מפני זה אמנע מלומר בו מה שהורוני מן השמים.

This close affinity in the formulation shows that the confidence in the content of revealed knowledge prevailed over the fear of the negative reaction of the surrounding populace. On the resort to the phrase "we were taught from heaven" in the twelfth century, see Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 291–97. In general, Abulafia and his followers were less concerned with the conservative approaches in Rabbinic Judaism. Compare, however, Scholem's totalising statement that "all mysticism" has a conservative and a revolutionary dimension that are complementary. Cf. his "Mysticism and Society," *Diogenes* 15 (1967): 15.

78 *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 51:

על כן יש לי צורך גדול והכרח הנעה חשקית לכתוב פה אמתת הדבר הזה מבלי פחד עונש. ולהודיעך זה הסוד המופלא כולו מפורש ומבואר עד שלא תהיה אתה והדומים לך ריקים מידיעת זה הסוד המופלא, אשר הוא יתד שהכל תלוי בו. ואע"פ שכבר ידעתי שיקרו לי ולספרי זה דברים מגלוי, לא אמנע בעבורם לומר מה שהורוני בו מן השמים ומה שקבלנו ממבחר נביאנו וחכמינו הוא משה רע"ה אשר קבל מפי השם פה אל פה.

For another translation and analysis of a longer passage that includes this text, see my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 47–48. Compare this passage to the text from the same book, *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 110, translated above, as well as to the short but conclusive statement in his *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 3: "They learned the order of all the known languages from *Sefer Yeširah*, in a very hidden manner" (שלמדו סדר כל הלשונות הנודע מספר יצירה בצורה נעלמת מאד).

On the order of the languages, see also *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 4. This means that the book that deals with combinations of letters as related to cosmogony was understood as secretly hinting at the technique of generating languages. The alleged hidden aspect of this book was understood by Abulafia as dealing with the account of the chariot, which in this specific context means the practice of combinations of divine names. On the secrets of languages (in this case, he uses the term *seter*), see *Or ha-Šekhel*, 33.

of him that he was ready to accept “secrets of the Torah” from the ecstatic Kabbalist.<sup>79</sup> Abulafia hints that he gave them to him.

The nature of the secrets of the Torah has not been discussed by scholars, but this can be gleaned from the immediate context: *Yedy’at ha-Šem*, the gnosis of the divine name.<sup>80</sup> This means that Abulafia was ready to initiate a Christian into the highest form of secret Jewish knowledge, according to his own view of secrecy. This is the reason why he immediately added “there is no need to reveal the issue of the Gentile any longer.” He well-understood that his comportment was far from being one that was acceptable to many Jews, given the explicit Rabbinic dictum that it was forbidden to teach Torah to a Gentile, much less its secrets.<sup>81</sup> Whether there is indeed more to this affair that he did not disclose remains a question that cannot be answered from the scant information we have.

Abulafia claims that he is the inheritor of an ancient secret lore that has been forgotten, which is a common claim of other esotericists of the Middle Ages, especially Maimonides, as well as Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists. At the same time, however, he claims that he receives messages from above concerning non-exegetical matters. Thus, exegesis is not the sole channel for reaching the secrets; there is an alternative avenue that is open to pneumatics and to both pre-existing and new secrets. Esotericism, therefore, is not just a matter of preserving ancient secrets, or a closed type of knowledge. It may turn into an open type of knowledge which was conceived to be revealed and could then be inserted into the interpreted texts by means of what is today called hermeneutics (eisegesis).

The political esotericism of the Neo-Aristotelian philosophers is the most important source for the secrets that constitute Abulafia’s profound conceptual structure. However, it should be emphasised that Abulafia was also exposed to other forms of esotericism already found in the Jewish sources with which he was acquainted, such

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**79** See *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 89–93, a passage referenced and sometimes analysed by Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 129; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 102–4; and Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 198–99.

**80** On this phrase, see chapter 5 note 195 above and chapter 8 note 56 below. On the different understandings of the divine name in Jewish traditions before Abulafia, including Maimonides and the early Kabbalists, see Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, *YHWH: Its Meanings in Biblical, Rabbinic and Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2019), as well as Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty*, 126–27, 148–49.

**81** *BT, Hagigah*, fol. 13a, and the quote in the *Zohar*, 3 fol. 73a. Compare, however, Wolfson’s claims that for Abulafia, “the promotion of this knowledge is dependent on the inherently incomparable comportment of the Jew.” See his “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 200, note 41. Note the resort to the singular when describing “the Jew”: all Jews are portrayed as “inherently” displaying the same comportment and Abulafia is therefore seen as behaving like all the others! This is an example of what I would call compact Judaism, a scholarly fiction of homogenous Jewry which neglects distinctions between different Jews on the one hand and, in this case of the subversive nature of Abulafia’s behaviour, his persecutions by other Jews and his unique Kabbalistic thought on the other. The same approach can be seen in Wolfson’s earlier *Abraham Abulafia*, 224. See also chapter 21 note 340 below.



as the Ashkenazi literature, some of which may be described as esoteric; such, for example, are the writings from the circle of the Qalonymus family, where a scriptural type of secrets is predominant, and similarly the astrological esotericism of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra. Furthermore, he was familiar with the esotericism of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, who were mainly concerned with the intradivine powers, the affinities between them, and the performance of the commandments, as well as the various esoteric understandings of the transmigration of souls.<sup>82</sup> Abulafia was also acquainted with the so-called Hekhalot literature, as well as with some of the Jewish magical literature, though their influence is less evident.<sup>83</sup> Another type of esoteric tradition, the Neo-Pythagorean one, was also known to Abulafia, though in quite a fragmentary manner. An important example of this will be presented in Appendix C.

However, merely revealing the precise sources that he was acquainted with or which were influential on his views is not sufficient for gaining a better understanding of Abulafia. Rather, it is important to determine the type of esotericism that informed Abulafia's thought and that prevailed over the others. In my opinion, the political esotericism that was concerned with naturalistic and mentalistic views constituted the most important source for Abulafia's own esotericism, and all the others are presented in order to facilitate the hiding or divulgence of his secrets.

There were indeed multiple sources, but what is conceptually quintessential is the establishment of the central point of a certain profound structure—if such a centre can be detected—and the nature of the material that remained on the periphery of his thought. In addition, there is also the question of what the available choices between his sources were and which of them shaped his attitude towards those sources. This is a matter of the statistical occurrence of terminology. In this case, the recurrence of Neo-Aristotelian nomenclature is paramount, but statistics alone are certainly not enough, though they may indicate the gist of the fabric of his thought. He was attracted to Maimonides's Neo-Aristotelianism more than any of the other Kabbalists in the thirteenth century, a fact that sharply distinguishes him from them, including his disciple Gikatilla, who changed his Kabbalistic approach later in his life.

Moreover, the many references to the existence of the esoteric level of the Torah did not address the specific content of those esoteric issues. Indeed, they constitute more of a rhetoric of esotericism than a revelation or indication of esoteric issues. To understand the way in which Abulafia operated, according to Wolfson, one should assume that this is a case of "the secret that cannot be kept."<sup>84</sup> Given the possibility that a Kabbalist's rhetoric is also a meaningful fact, the question is whether he had some secrets that he did not reveal, but rather kept to himself. In the following chap-

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<sup>82</sup> See Idel, "Commentaries on the Secret of *Tbbur* in 13th-Century Kabbalah."

<sup>83</sup> See Idel, "Hekhalot Literature, the Ecstatic-Mystical Model and Their Metamorphoses," 191–202.

<sup>84</sup> Abraham Abulafia, 52. Compare also his "The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle," *Kabbalah* 19 (2009): 152.

ter, I will address this issue by providing a positive answer. If my positive answer is correct, at least in some important cases (and there was a layer of secrets that was hidden), it may provide a picture of Abulafia's thought that differs from the many scholarly accounts we have about him. It seems that the ecstatic Kabbalist was an esoteric thinker, and quite an efficacious one at that. His secrets have not been decoded by many scholars writing about him over a century and a half, as we shall see immediately below.

## 9 Was Abulafia a Particularist Kabbalist?

In an age of political correctness that has deeply permeated the language of scholarship, particularism has very bad overtones, especially in academic circles, unlike its opposite pole, universalism. In fact, it is difficult to detect universalistic religious approaches in general, since each universalism is based upon inbuilt assumptions that are sometimes as particularist as the particularist ones. They are conditioned by specific historical circumstances, linguistic biases, and political conjectures. In the following pages, I shall attempt to refer to these two approaches without judging them or giving preference to one or the other,<sup>85</sup> especially given the fact that the limited universalist approach to be discussed in this chapter is highly restrictive and quite elitist, as it looks down on unintelligent persons. Thus, the claim of Abulafia's universalism is, in my parlance, not to be seen as a judgmental statement.

It is obvious that traditional Jewish thought, anchored in a much more nationalist proclivity, was likewise much more inclined to particularism. However, some distinct tendencies towards universalism can be discerned in a few Rabbinic texts, and especially in Maimonides,<sup>86</sup> whose books were one of Abulafia's major sources. Moreover, this more universal approach is found in the philosophical sources he studied: Aristotle, Al-Fārābī, and Averroes, to name a few. I claimed above that the philosophical sources for Abulafia's early studies should also be seen as decisively formative for his thinking in the Kabbalistic period, in a manner that remained much more universalistic than some Abulafia scholars have imagined.

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<sup>85</sup> Compare, however, the approaches of the contributors in Raphael Loewe, ed., *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism & Universalism in Memory of Leon Roth* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

<sup>86</sup> See Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, 14–15, 250–64; Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash*, 249–346; Menachem Kellner, *They Too Are Called Human: Gentiles in the Eyes of Maimonides* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2016), 21–38, 44–51; Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy?" *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 1–19; Kraemer, "Naturalism and Universalism in Maimonides' Political and Religious Thought." For his Rabbinic background, see Marc Hirshman, "Rabbinic Universalism in the Second and Third Century," *HTR* 93, no. 2 (2000): 101–15, and his Hebrew book *Torah le-khol Ba'ei 'Olam* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibutz Ha-Meuhad, 1999).

The relevance of philosophical sources for Abulafia's Kabbalah can be put into relief by discussing the manner in which we should understand his treatments of an important Rabbinic particularist myth. This has to do with the assumption that the pollution, or poison, that the serpent injected into Eve as he had sexual relations with her was removed from the Israelites on the occasion of the Sinaitic revelation. Some scholars consider that the manner in which this myth was formulated provides an antidote to the Christian conception of the ongoing effect of original sin, which seeks to emphasise the centrality of the salvific role played by Jesus in the process of redemption. The Gentiles, so this Rabbinic myth asserts, not being present at the revelation on Mount Sinai and consequently not receiving the Torah, remained contaminated with that primordial pollution.<sup>87</sup>

This Rabbinic myth is indubitably part of the more general idea of the Jews as a chosen people forged in the Hebrew Bible, for which the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai is the most dramatically formative event.<sup>88</sup> Given the traditional view that the Sinaitic revelation was a unique act in history, the stark division between Jews and Gentiles is conceived as a dramatically important aspect in Rabbinic anthropology and constitutes a final separation that can only be overcome by conversion to Judaism.

The Rabbinic discussion presented in the name of Rabbi Yohanan had some reverberations in medieval Jewish thought, including in some philosophical and Kabbalistic writings.<sup>89</sup> However, it seems that none of the medieval writers referred to it as many times as Abulafia did. To judge solely on the basis of the mere occurrences of quotations from Rabbinic sources in Abulafia's writings, there may indeed be no

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**87** See *BT, Shabbat*, fol. 146a; *BT, Yebamot*, fol. 103b; *BT, 'Avodah Zarah*, fol. 22b. On Genesis 3, see *Yalqut 'Sim'oni*, paragraph 247; 28, paragraph 28; 31, paragraph 130. On this myth, see Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 1:427–28, 553; Sharon Faye Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 89–90; and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40–41; and on Abulafia, see 65, note 203. See also chapter 9 note 93 below. For the possible Zoroastrian background, see Koren, *Forsaken*, and, in more general terms, Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph Over Evil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

**88** On the topic of the chosen people, there is a vast bibliography. Close to our topics are the studies by Raphael Jospe, "The Concept of the Chosen People: An Interpretation," *Judaism* 170, vol. 43 (1994): 127–48, and Kasher, *High above All Nations*, *passim*.

**89** See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:30, Pines, 2:357, and Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*. See also Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, 76, note 47; Menachem Kellner, "Monotheism as a Continuing Ethical Challenge to the Jews," in *Monotheism and Ethics*, ed. Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 80–81, note 18; Esti Eisenmann, "The Sinaitic Revelation in Maimonides's Thought" [Hebrew], in *The Bible and Its World, Rabbinic Literature and Jewish Thought*, eds. Baruch Schwartz, Abraham Melamed, and Aharon Shemesh, vol. 1, *Iggud—Selected Essays in Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008), 322–62; and Davidson, *Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, 346–47.

substantial difference between Abulafia and the particularist view of the Rabbis or of other Kabbalists.<sup>90</sup>

However, such an assumption would be based on a superficial reading of the sources, since Abulafia offered his own quite idiosyncratic interpretation of them and even explicitly criticised them more than once. What counts in this specific case and others is not the mere fact of the occurrence of a quotation, but the specific meaning that the author attached to it; namely, the type of interpretive register used in interpreting it. It is even more incumbent on a serious scholar to discern the fact that he is actually criticising the ideas found in the quoted passage.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Abulafia refers to the Rabbinic statement, writing immediately afterwards:

The secrets of incest are the serpent's intercourse with Eve, who is an adulterer, and it injects its pollution into her. And Israel that stood in front<sup>92</sup> of Mount Sinai, [their] pollution ceased, and the Gentiles who did not stand on Mount Sinai, their pollution did not cease. And this is a great matter that does not need an interpretation, since it is obvious for the illuminati that the Torah is the reason for the life of the world to come.<sup>93</sup>

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**90** As indeed Wolfson claims in *Venturing Beyond*, 65.

**91** On this issue, see my "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 418–30, where I already presented and analysed most of the pertinent sources in Abulafia's writings.

**92** This is an unusual formulation, instead of "on." Is it a hint at the fact that the Israelites did not in fact stand on the mountain, as claimed in the Jewish traditional sources?

**93** *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 53:

וסתרי עריות הם ביאת נחש על חוה, שהוא הנואף והוא המטיל בה זוהמא. וישראל שעמדו לפני הר סיני פסקה זוהמתן, גויים שלא עמדו על הר סיני לא פסקה זוהמתן. וזהו העניין הגדול הנכבד אינו צריך פירוש כי הוא מבואר למשכילים, כי התורה היא סיבת חיי העולם הבא.

On this text, see Idel, "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 418–20, and Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, 82–83. The "world to come" is a traditional term that Abulafia understood as referring to the comprehension of the Agent Intellect. See the Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 79b:

וכל מי שמשיג השגת השכל הפועל זוכה לחיי העולם הבא.

See also *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, 92. On the quoted passage, compare to Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 65, note 203; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 194; and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 174–77. The two latter scholars addressed only this passage without providing any analysis, thereby ignoring the crucial contribution of the passages to be analysed below, which changes the picture dramatically. In *Venturing Beyond*, 65, note 203, Wolfson refers to only one of Abulafia's passages, the first one presented here, and even in this case, the text was misinterpreted in an opposite manner to the original, an example of a larger phenomenon I call the art of inversion. On the art of inversion in another case of ecstatic Kabbalah, see my *Ben*, 334–37; for another example related to Safedian Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, "Ascensions, Gender, and the Notion of Pillars in Safedian Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 25 (2011): 60, note 11, with some other examples in my *The Privileged Divine Feminine in Kabbalah* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 117, note 507, 208, note 923, and in my forthcoming "Male and Female," as well as chapter 9 note 87 above and chapter 21 note 343 below. For the background of the more open Rabbinic statement under scrutiny here, see Israel Y. Yuval, "All Israel Have a Portion in the World to Come," in *Redefining First Century Christian and Jewish Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008): 114–33; and Eugene Korn, "Gentiles, the World to Come, and Judaism: The Odyssey of a Rabbinic Text," *Modern Judaism* 14, no. 3 (1994): 265–87. See also Hannah Kasher, *High above All Nations*.

The nature of “the great matter” (an indication that should be taken seriously) and, moreover, that of the “secret” that is understood by the illuminati is not explained in the translated passage, but it can be elucidated by resorting to what is written only a few lines later, as well as in some other discussions on the same topic in Abulafia’s writings. Following Maimonides, who elaborated at length on the meaning of the myth of Adam, Eve, and the serpent according to the stories found in the Hebrew Bible and the Midrash,<sup>94</sup> though not concerning the removal of pollution, Abulafia allegorises the tale: the Aristotelian concept of form, Adam, is tempted by the imaginative faculty, the serpent, or, as he writes elsewhere, Satan, thus introducing the error that is matter, Eve. Following the Maimonidean tradition, the traditional conception of Sinai as a historical event has been identified with a mental experience which is interpreted as an atemporal, potentially recurring event, which is the most important register for Abulafia’s Kabbalah.<sup>95</sup>

However, while in his *Guide* Maimonides refers quite succinctly to the Rabbinic passage on pollution and to the Sinaitic event as an antidote without elaborating on its possible meaning, Abulafia was obviously fascinated by the content of this discussion, returning to it; this fact allows for the decoding of his hint towards secrecy. Before turning to the other instances of dealing with the Rabbinic myth, let me refer to an interpretation of the quoted passage.

Referring to the passage from Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, Elliot Wolfson writes: “Abulafia depicts the ontic difference between Jew and non-Jew in terms of the Rabbinic legend that the Sinaitic theophany resulted in the removal of the filth with which the primordial serpent inseminated Eve from the Jews in contrast to the other nations.”<sup>96</sup> The assumption of an “ontic difference” is indeed found,

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<sup>94</sup> Especially *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:2, Pines, 1:23–26, and 2:30, Pines, 2:357. On the details involved in Maimonides’s interpretation of the myth of the events in Paradise, see Pines, “Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil,” 95–157; Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’s Guide*, 64–96; Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’s Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis: A Study in Maimonides’s Anthropology* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1986); Lawrence Berman, “Maimonides on the Fall of Man,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 1–15; Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil” [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 28 (1978): 167–85; Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 110–18; and Heidi Ravven, “The Garden of Eden: Spinoza’s Maimonidean Account of the Genealogy of Morals and the Origin of Society,” *Philosophy and Theology* 13, no. 1 (2001): 3–47. On Maimonides’s attitude towards Gentiles, see Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*, 229–33, 238–64.

<sup>95</sup> Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’s Interpretation of the Story of Creation* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1987), 348; Schwartz, “*To Thee Is Silence Praise*,” 162; and Gitit Holzman, “State, Religion, and Spirituality in the Thought of Rabbi Moses Narboni” [Hebrew], in *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought*, 1:201–2. As Warren Zev Harvey pointed out to me, Moses Narboni develops Abulafia’s insights regarding “the mountain.” See also Ephodi on *Guide*, 2:30, and Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar-Strauss, 1978), 146. In principle, this type of spiritualisation is compatible with the views of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber.

<sup>96</sup> *Venturing Beyond*, 65, note 203; 41, note 104, and his description of the “dualist tone” in “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 215. This passage does not prevent him from writing that

however, not in Abulafia's passage, but only in the Rabbinic discussions and in those of their followers. What Abulafia himself had in mind was something entirely different, and he hints at the existence of a secret, an issue that was not taken into consideration by Wolfson's analysis. Indeed, this is a symptomatic example of ignoring the possibility that there was a secret in this specific Kabbalist's discourse, even when he explicitly mentioned its existence. Consequently, this neglect caused his interpreters to miss or invert his hidden intention.

Abulafia elaborates the secret hinted at in the last passage in several other places in much more explicit terms. This preponderance of references to this secret has been ignored in the discussion of Abulafia's view on the topic. When dealing with the magical texts that were widespread and used by some unnamed contemporary Rabbis, whom we may assume were mainly of Ashkenazi extraction and whom he sharply condemned,<sup>97</sup> Abulafia issues the following evaluation:

They have polluted brains, which the serpent injected the pollution into: and they did not stand on the Sinai mountain, and this is the reason why their pollution did not cease. This is the reason why anyone<sup>98</sup> who wants his pollution to cease should stand on Mount Sinai *ha-senyry, harsynay, harsnyy*, which puts the halter in the mouth of the power of desire, and then he will be saved.<sup>99</sup>

The depiction of the Rabbis who were interested in magic as persons who did not stand on Mount Sinai and the description of their brains as subsequently still polluted is quite explicit and sharp; it seems that Abulafia envisioned the Sinaitic revelation as having nothing to do with the catharsis related to people possessing a certain genetic quality in a given historical moment. Here, the allegorisation of the experi-

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he envisioned Abulafia in universalist terms or from claiming that I distorted his views when I described his reading of the ecstatic Kabbalist as particularist, as we shall also see in chapter 9 note 116 below. For the existence of an alleged "ontological barrier" that Abulafia "erected" between Kabbalists and Christian sages, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 58.

**97** See my "Abraham Abulafia: Between Magic of Names and Kabbalah of Names," 79–96; *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 44; *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 23–24; and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 144.

**98** Compare to the resort to the term *Adam* (man) in exactly the same context, in a text to be quoted immediately below.

**99** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:7, 332:

מוחם המזוהם כי הנחש שהטיל בם זוהמא ולא עמדו על הר סיני, ועל כן לא פסקה זוהמתן מהם. ולפיכך כל הרוצה שתפסק זוהמתו ממנו יעמוד על הר סיני הסנירי הרסיני הר סניי, המשים רסן בפי כח התאוה וינצל.

Interestingly enough, the same exact phrase, *moḥam mezoham*, occurs in another critique of those who use magic and persons who were seen to belong to a Jewish elite in Northern France two generations before Abulafia. See Joseph Schatzmiller, "For a Picture of the First Polemic on Maimonides's Writings" [Hebrew], *Zion* 34 (1969): 143:

כי עשו עצמם בעלי שם כנביאי האמת הידועים והמה אוילים משוגעים מלאי תעותועי מוחם מזוהם.

The more general similarity between this text and Abulafia's view has also been pointed out by Ram ben Shalom, "Kabbalistic Circles Active in South of France (Provence) in the Thirteenth Century" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 72 (2014): 596, note 117.



ence on Mount Sinai is explicit: the ancient experience was conceived as an irreversible event in Rabbinic sources, but according to Abulafia, it may and should be repeated in the present.

The true meaning of the experience on Mount Sinai was, according to Abulafia, only a matter of restraint, a conclusion he reached by permuting the consonants of the Hebrew phrase הר סיני (“Mount Sinai”) so that other combinations of letters emerge, two of which, הרסיני and הרסיני, contain the root *RSN*, which means “to restrain.”<sup>100</sup> He then interprets this root in the more general context of both the Edenic and the Sinaitic myths: both situations are a matter of sexual restraint. When someone does so in the present, the possibilities of re-experiencing the Sinaitic and Edenic situations emerge.

The significance of these two different situations in the Hebrew Bible has been homologised, and the two consequently became atemporal and homologous events that in this discussion depend on sexual restraint<sup>101</sup> and much less, if at all, on the divine decision to reveal something. We shall have more to say about Abulafia’s specific view of the divine will in chapter 18 below.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that in some places in his writings, Abulafia allegorises the concept of “mountain” in general, sometimes as imagination and sometimes as intellect.<sup>103</sup>

As a corollary to the above discussion, let me mention another example of Abulafia’s radical allegorisation: he regarded some people, most probably Jews, as having not yet departed from Egypt; rather, these people were still working for the Pharaoh and labouring to produce bricks.<sup>104</sup> In this way, the two major “historical” events that were imagined to have shaped Jewish religious history are understood as repeatable and directly relevant in the present for both the elite and the multitude. Like Maimonides, Abulafia would say that there are Jews who remained in Egypt as it is allegorically understood and who did not stand on Mount Sinai. The basic anthropological unit of the biblical/Rabbinic literature, the Jewish nation, is not operating here. Rather, it is the individual who stands at the centre of the allegorised events. As with Maimonides’s allegorical approach, the dramatic attenuation of the uniqueness of the formative historical events in the biblical/Rabbinic *imaginaire* is coupled with

**100** Abulafia was probably influenced by a dictum attributed to Plato: “Prayer is the halter of the appetitive soul,” which was also discussed on several occasions by Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi. See his *Commentary on Proverbs* in *‘Ašarah Kelei Kesef*, 1:17: התפילה רסן נפש המתאוה.

**101** It should be mentioned that sexual sin is the very starting point of sin, and that *zohama* (pollution) means “seminal emission” in other contexts in Abulafia’s discussions. On the revelation of the Torah as a non-temporal event, see his *Imrei Šefer*, 134, where the First Cause and the Agent Intellect are related to this event.

**102** Let me point out that it is not asceticism that Abulafia is hinting at; this is a call for restraint. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 143–44.

**103** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 100–103.

**104** *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 2:7, 267:

ידוע כי מי שלא יצא ממצרים הוא עובד לפרעה ולמצרים ועדיין הוא עושה חמר ולבנים ונטבע במ.



the attenuation of the subject matter of those events; namely, the Jews as a corporate personality.

However, the following passage from the same book by Abulafia is no less radical. Addressing the Rabbinic view, he writes:

And as it was said in the account of creation about the prostitute woman who was allured by the serpent, it had sexual intercourse with her and injected her with its pollution. But for Israel that stood on Mount Sinai, the pollution did not cease, and in order to find a way to stop the pollution, all the [three] books [attributed to King Solomon] were written.<sup>105</sup>

In this instance, Abulafia flatly contradicts one of the most cherished formulations that informed the national myth: in his opinion, the primordial serpentine pollution, if taken literally, was not removed at all, or at least not entirely, from Jews or Gentiles. The attempt to remove the pollution, according to Abulafia, is part of the much later literary project of King Solomon, who used a series of parables with the intention of combating the continuous impact of the mythical pollution. Implicitly, the Torah and commandments are seen as insufficient for this purpose; it is the wisdom of the later king that is found in his three books, written long after the Sinaitic revelation, that purifies the pollution. The task of wisdom, then, is imagined as a continuation of the attempt to purify what he imagined to be “the original pollution.”

Wisdom, then, is a clue to the removal of the alleged pollution, which the traditional rites are incapable of accomplishing. This means, in my opinion, that according to Abulafia’s esoteric views, the commandments have a political rationale, and the question that should be asked is whether they have an exclusively political purpose or whether they have additional ones as well.

To be sure, I do not assume that Abulafia adopted the myth of the Adamic sin verbatim in the terms that were elaborated in Christianity (original sin or the so-called Fall of Adam) or in the case of the Midrashic statement on serpentine pollution. Rather, in his mind, there is some form of perennial problem of human nature related to the inner powers that prevent the perfect type of cognition. This prevention occurs because of the existence of falsehood in the imaginative faculty. The historical status of the Sinaitic revelation therefore becomes quite problematic, though Abulafia does not openly question it here. As we shall see in chapter 14 below, according to two of Abulafia’s other texts, Moses was a scribe who committed an older tradition to

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**105** *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 120:

כמו שנאמר במעשה בראשית על ענין האשה הזונה שפתה אותה הנחש ובא עליה והטיל בה זוהמא. וישראל שעמדו על הר סיני לא פסקו זוהמתו. וכדי לתת דרך להפסקת הזוהמא נכתבו הספרים כולם.

See an earlier version of the relation between the first man and the prostitute in Geo Widengren, “Primordial Man and Prostitute: A Zervanite Motif in the Sassanid Avesta,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, eds. Ephraim E. Urbach, Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967): 227–34.

writing. Abulafia thereby mitigates both the paramount role of the revelation on the mountain and the uniqueness of this prophet for Maimonides.<sup>106</sup>

In a manner reminiscent of the last passage discussed, Abulafia writes in his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*:

If the serpent has sexual intercourse with Eve, who is the prostitute woman, and she is the second wife of Adam, not the first, [who is called] Lilith, and the name of the second is *Yomit*, it will then inject the poison and the pollution when she eats from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and she feeds it to Adam, her husband, by dint of the serpent, and they will both die. And for a person<sup>107</sup> who will stand on Mount Sinai, his pollution will cease and if the [serpent] bites him, he will not die, since he took from the tree of life and ate.<sup>108</sup> Know that the name *šelem* is a wondrous parabolic one, and so the term *demut*, since the human comprehensions are three; namely, the sensual, the imagination, and the intellect. And the sensual connection is that of a man and his wife, and the imaginative connection is that between matter and form, and the intellectual connection is that between the intellect and the soul. The first two connections were linked and then separated, while the third, when it takes place, [then] persists forever. The Torah mentioned to the last two connections as imagination and intellect, provided they are secret matters, the one being natural—namely, *demut*—and the second one divine—namely, *šelem*—and solely these two alone are a divine act, but the third one<sup>109</sup> is a human volitional act.<sup>110</sup>

The assumption of the existence of a secret in the biblical and Rabbinic accounts is again mentioned in an explicit manner. In a manner reminiscent of Maimonides's famous interpretation in the *Guide*, this is a strong typological interpretation that envisioned "Adam" not as the personal name of a figure belonging to the mythological story, but rather as the species.<sup>111</sup> The concept of Eve (*Yomit*, the lady of day-time) versus Lilith (the legendary first wife of Adam, whose name, according to some Midrashim, refers to the night on the grounds of a pseudo-etymological relationship between *Lilith/Lailah*) is a nice example of a typological understanding based on dichotomies.

<sup>106</sup> See Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 179–80.

<sup>107</sup> *Adam*; namely, a human being in general, without mentioning whether he/she is Jewish or Gentile. See Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides's Guide*, 64–66, 67, 68.

<sup>108</sup> This contradicts the biblical version of the Paradise story.

<sup>109</sup> Namely, the sensual one.

<sup>110</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 1:1, 8:

אם יבוא נחש על חוה שהיא אשה זונה, והיא אשת אדם השנית לא הראשונה, כי שם הראשונה לילית ושם השנית יומית, הנה הוא יטיל בה ארס וזוהמה באכלה מעץ הדעת טוב ורע, ותאכל את אדם בעלה בעטיו של נחש וימותו שניהם. ואם יעמוד אדם על הר סיני תפסק הזוהמה של נחש ממנו ואם ישכנו לא ימיתנו כי לקח מעץ החיים ואכל ממנו. דע כי שם צלם הוא מופלא בהמשלה, וכן שם דמות, וזה כי ההשגות האנושיות שלש והם, הרגש ודמיון ושכל. והחבור המורגש הוא חבור איש ואשתו, והחבור המדומה הוא חבור הצורה והחומר, והחבור המושכל הוא חבור השכל והנפש. ושני החבורים הראשונים חבורו ויפרדו, והחבור השלישי כשחובר לא ייפרד מעולם. ועל שני החבורים האחרונים שהם דמיון ושכל זכרה התורה דמות וצלם מפני היות שניהם עניינים נסתרים, האחד טבעי והוא הדמות, והשני אלהי והוא השכל הנקרא צלם. ושני החבורים האלה הם לבדם פעולה אלהית, אך החיבור השלישי הוא פעולה אנושית רצונית.

<sup>111</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:30, Pines, 2:335–59. See also ibn Kaspi's commentary *Maškiyyot Kesef*, ed. Werbluner, on the *Guide* 1:2, 13, and 1:14, 31, note 1. Ibn Kaspi claims that Adam did not exist and is only an allegory for Moses.

Again, the Edenic and Sinaitic experiences are homologised and imagined to be accessible in the present given their allegedly intellectual character. Though not explicitly contesting the historicity of these events, it obliterates their uniqueness, allegorising them as referring to experiences accessible to individuals at any time. Abulafia's interpretation, which indubitably has its Maimonidean source in the *Guide*, is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's fascinating reading of the Paradise events.<sup>112</sup>

The different forms of connection mentioned in the last quoted passage should be understood in the framework of this discussion, which describes the body's connection to the soul: the connection of the soul—which is understood as divine—with the intellect is described as “all” only after the soul has separated from the body and its faculties.<sup>113</sup> This means that there is a process of universalisation attained by separation from the lower realms and the concomitant union with the higher, an issue that will be addressed in more detail in chapter 21. In the last quoted passage, the natural act is conceived as divine, at least implicitly, an issue to which we shall return in chapter 16.

Let me point out that the sexual connection between man and woman is here conceived as the lowest of the three, while in the theosophical-theurgical brand of Kabbalah, it is conceived as a symbol of the union between two divine powers, as is written, for example, in the anonymous and highly influential *Holy Epistle* attributed to Nahmanides, which was most probably written during Abulafia's generation and which deals with conjugal relationships. This is but one example of the stark divergence of Abulafia's thought from the main lines of theosophical Kabbalah.

In the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, we find what is chronologically speaking the last significant treatment of the Rabbinic passage. Abulafia writes:

The matter of Adam, the serpent, and Eve, when taken as individuals according to their plain sense, is appropriate to laugh at the beginning of thought, in accordance with the nature of humanity, and the Torah did not intend matters of laughter [...]. It is *a fortiori* necessary to interpret the words of the sage or of the prophets differently from their plain sense if a person's understanding does not accept them. And behold, our sages said in the Midrash that the serpent had intercourse with Eve and injected its pollution into her, and for Israel who stood on Mount Sinai, the pollution ceased, while the pollution of the Gentiles who did not stand on Mount Sinai did not cease. How is it possible that a person who thinks that this issue—that the serpent that is mentioned in the Torah will have intercourse with Eve—is according to the plain sense will be called wise? And behold, the Torah did not mention it.<sup>114</sup>

**112** See his *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 28–33, and compare to Moshe Idel, “On Paradise in Jewish Mysticism,” in *The Cradle of Creativity*, ed. Chemi Ben-Noon (Ramot: Hod ha-Sharon, 2004): 613.

**113** *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 7–8. See also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29.

**114** *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 44–45:

ענין אדם ונחש וחווה שאם ילקחו שלשת הפרטים האלה כפשוטם ראוי לשחוק מהם בתחלת מחשבה לפי טבע האנושות [...] כל שכן אם כן שראוי להוציא דברי חכם או דברי נביא מפשוטם אם אין הדעת סובלתם. והנה אמרו חכמינו במדרש משבא נחש על חווה הטיל בה זוהמא, ישראל שעמדו על הר סיני פסקה זוהמתו, גוים שלא עמדו על הר סיני לא פסקה

Here, it is obvious that Abulafia regards the plain meaning of the Rabbinic discussion as inconceivable and explicitly states the imperative of allegorising it. His observation about the absence of any mention of the serpent's intercourse with Eve shows that he was critical of the mythical element introduced by the Rabbinic mythopoesis. Those statements assembled around one of the most particularist themes in the Rabbinic *imaginaire* show that Abulafia had dramatically parted ways from the dominant (but not exclusive) Rabbinic point of view on these themes.

Let me put into relief the fact that according to one of the passages quoted above, it is those Rabbis who were interested in popular forms of magic, not the Gentiles, who are described as the people whose pollution did not cease, since according to Abulafia's views, they did not stand on Mount Sinai at all. Such a statement runs sharply against the Rabbinic tradition, which was strongly interested in building the myth of national election, since Abulafia's statement shifts the emphasis from the nation to the individual and from the constitutive moment in the past to the present. Or, to cast this shift in other terms: the mythical events as told in Jewish sources (Rabbinic and then Kabbalistic) that are ethnocentric and thus particularist in so many cases were interpreted by Abulafia in philosophical terms stemming from Greco-Hellenistic sources. This was often done in a careful manner that ought to be decoded by scholars because they constitute the Kabbalist's secret position, which was antithetical to the dominant form of Rabbinic anthropology.

Such an example of antagonism towards a Rabbinic dictum reveals a form of intellectual repulsion towards what Abulafia considered to be a foolish myth accepted by the vast majority of Jewish sources that is, to the best of my knowledge, unparalleled in the Kabbalistic literature of the thirteenth century. Interestingly enough, an inspection of many of the Maimonideans' interpretations of the Paradise myth has not unearthed any critique of the Rabbinic passage about the cessation of pollution. Abulafia's view that the concepts that are found in the minds of all the nations are identical points in the direction of his universalistic view.<sup>115</sup>

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זוהמתן. ואיך יקרא חכם שום אדם בעולם ממי שיחשוב שזה הענין הוא כפשוטו ושהנחש הנזכר בתורה בא על חוה והנה התורה לא זכרה אותו.

It should be pointed out that another discussion of this Rabbinic myth is found on the very last page of *Mafteah ha-Šemot*; unfortunately, the unique manuscript of this commentary is corrupted here. Let me point out that Abulafia's critical approach to the content of the Rabbinic myth separates him from the theosophical Kabbalists' much more positive attitudes towards the Midrash. This separation calls for a qualification of Scholem's view as to the difference between philosophers and Kabbalists in their attitude to Aggadah. See his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 28. As a Kabbalist, Abulafia is a more radical critic of Rabbinic myths than most of the Jewish philosophers.

115 *Or ha-Šekhel*, 27:

אמנם העניינים הנמצאים בנפש כל האומה ובנפש זולתה בכלל ובפרט הכל יוצאים ממקור אחד. ואפשר לומר עליהם בכלל שהם על כוונה אחת כללית ראשונה. אמנם הנמצא בה מצד הטבע לא ישתנה במ דבר מצדו, כי אם במקרה.

See also my discussion of the context of the parable of the pearl below. The parable is found in *Or ha-Shekhel*; I will translate it in chapter 12. Compare to the position of Rabbi Levi ben Abraham, as dis-

In short, Elliot Wolfson's claim that the ontic difference between Jews and Gentiles in Abulafia's thought is grounded in the Rabbinic legend about the pollution and its removal is, scholarly speaking, wrong. It is, to use his terms, "grossly misleading,"<sup>116</sup> not only because it ignores the content of Abulafia's hint about the existence of a secret concerning the topic in a passage which Wolfson was acquainted with and quoted, but also, and especially, because he neglects to partake in a serious perusal of Abulafia's literary corpus in order to find parallels that would clarify his meaning. Moreover, this claim of being "misleading" not only inverts the accuracy of my presentation of Wolfson's own view on the topic, but also his view that he has now decided to renege, without admitting it. This earlier approach is part of Wolfson's strong tendency to homogenise Kabbalistic thought in many of his writings as if it was predominantly particularist, and he quite indiscriminately includes Abulafia's writings in this generalisation. An essentialist vision of Kabbalah as a whole fails even on the grounds of the Kabbalistic discussions that are cited for this sake, to say nothing of many other treatments that have been ignored.

I have presented and discussed all the extant passages in order to show a problematic tendency in recent scholarship on Abulafia: scholars writing entire books on quite a specific topic choose to ignore the most relevant treatments and then invert his thought; other scholars read these books and continue to repeat and even amplify those mistakes. If this is the case where scholars of Abulafia are concerned, it is even clearer in cases regarding other scholars who are less acquainted with Hebrew and Kabbalah.

As has been illustrated above, Abulafia's more universal approach, which is quite Maimonidean, by far transcends his unusual and in fact antagonistic interpretation of one Rabbinic legend. The passages I presented earlier in this chapter are by no means exceptional. In the context of surveying Abulafia's different attitude towards Gentiles, let me present his quite explicit declaration that "the eternal life of the soul is the true life, for which all the nations have been created," which makes perfect sense in the context of a universalistic worldview.<sup>117</sup>

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cussed by Nachman Falbel, "On a Heretical Argument in Levi ben Abraham ben Chaiim's Critique of Christianity," *Proceedings of the Congress of World Union of Jewish Studies* 4 (1981): 39.

**116** As we shall see below, this is the phrase Wolfson uses in order to refer to my presentation of his view on the topic as well as Abulafia's particularism. See also his "Deceitful Truth and Truthful Deceit: *Sod ha-Hippukh* and Abulafia's Divergence from Maimonides," in *A Tribute to Hannah: Jubilee Book in Honor of Hannah Kasher*, eds. Avi Elqayam and Ariel Malachi (Tel Aviv: Idra Press, 2018): 91\*–125\* and Appendix E note 219 below.

**117** *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, 3: חיי הנפש הנצחיים הם החיים האמיתיים / אשר בעבורם נבראו כל הגוים.

I do not understand why Sagerman (*The Serpent Kills*, 68) claims that this book evinces a less generous attitude towards the Gentiles. On the basis of this statement, and by assuming that this book was written in 1279 (Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 45; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 42), another statement that is far from being a fact (see my "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 11), he introduces psychological speculations as to Abulafia's alleged problems of identity.

Indeed, all of the Gentile nations (*kol ha-goyyim*) were created for the sake of the highest religious achievement, as Abulafia envisioned.<sup>118</sup> This pre-designed vision may have something to do with Averroes's theory of a material intellect that is shared by all mankind. In order to better understand the meaning of the phrase "eternal life of the soul," we may compare it to what Abulafia writes in his *Or ha-Šekhel*, where he says that the divine speech is the cause of "the union of the soul with her God; this union is the case of the soul's eternal life, similar to the life of her God."<sup>119</sup> This means that the highest possible religious attainment imagined by the ecstatic Kabbalist was considered to be open to the Gentiles. This does not mean that he embraced an egalitarian approach to all human beings,<sup>120</sup> but rather that there is a greater openness in his approach than in any other Kabbalist in the thirteenth century. In any case, he refers to the Gentiles' writings in a positive manner, resorting to the dictum that one should learn the truth from whoever speaks it.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, he condemns the multitude and the Rabbis, irrespective of their being Jewish or not.

Extremely important for our point here, and for understanding Abulafia's esotericism, is the manner in which he depicts the special status of the Jewish nation. In his opinion, the Jewish nation is indeed different from the other nations because a greater part of it dedicated itself to study and contemplation compared with other nations. This type of activity was conceived as necessary, hence the large number of students; however, studying is not considered to be an inherently genetic or cor-

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His claim there that the book was written as he was on his way to Rome has no support in the material with which I am acquainted. Like Hames, he probably confused this book with *Sitrei Torah* and then drew conclusions based on this confusion. Also, Sagerman's view in *The Serpent Kills*, 76, 137, to the effect that Abulafia wrote *Sitrei Torah* after his attempt to meet the pope, though not entirely impossible, is not supported by any actual evidence in my opinion. For his attitude towards *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 58. In general, in this book Abulafia is much more critical of the Jewish elite than of Christians. See *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 83, and compare to Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 92, where the attainment of the world to come is conceived in purely noetic terms.

**118** See also one of the verses in the opening poem of *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 1:

בו בעלי שכל לכל עם שלחו—תקוה לכל גוים בסוד רבוע.

"He was sent to the masters of intellect in every nation—A hope to all the nations according to the secret of the quarter." See also Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 58.

**119** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 114: והדיבור ההוא הוא סבת חיי הנפש הנצחיים כחי אלהיה. See also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 13.

**120** See his *Sitrei Torah*, 195–96. His attitude towards women was misogynistic. Compare Menachem Kellner, "Philosophical Misogyny in Medieval Jewish Thought: Gersonides vs. Maimonides" [Hebrew], in *From Rome to Jerusalem: Joseph Baruch Sermoneta Memorial Volume*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998): 113–28; Abraham Melamed, "Maimonides on Women: Formless Matter or Potential Prophet?" in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, 99–134; and Julia Schwartzmann, "Isaac Arama and His Theory of Two Matches (Zivvugim)," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2006): 27–49.

**121** See the untitled short treatise found in Ms. Sassoon 290, now Ms. Geneve and Montana, Segre Amar Collection 145, 234.

poreal quality of the Jews. Even in this case, the Kabbalist is anxious to mention that even in a nation like the Jewish one that is dedicated to studying so that individuals may come closer to God, not all of its members, and perhaps not even its majority, were conceived as being capable of reaching it. He is probably referring here to the Jewish vulgus; nevertheless, the number of individuals devoted to this activity among the Jews is conceived as being greater than that found in other nations.<sup>122</sup>

According to this understanding of the superiority of the Jewish nation, it is no more than a matter of a society's cultural organisation around an intellectual ideal that is considered to be the cause that produces its national specificity in comparison to other nations. This understanding of the Jews' superiority as contemplators reflects the theory of the connection between the human intellect and divine providence which developed among the Maimonideans, especially Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon, and the version interpreted by two members of the ibn Tibbon family was known, though not accepted, by Abulafia.<sup>123</sup>

In a very fascinating passage, Abulafia, influenced in his tenor by Maimonides's *Guide*, recommends the recourse to Gentile thinkers in order to prevent the misunderstanding of the plain sense of the Bible:

“He that sits on the circle of the earth,”<sup>124</sup> “He that sits in the heavens shall laugh, the Lord shall have them in derision,”<sup>125</sup> and those similar to them should be studied by [means of] the many words of the sages of the world, since by those [forms of] knowledge, the quandaries will be resolved as well as the doubts about many of the imaginative issues, and the man will remain with his intellect in perfection and with his Torah in truth, and the plain senses of the scriptures will not cause his removal from the appropriate path.<sup>126</sup>

**122** *Maftēaḥ ha-Šemot*, Ms. New York, JTS 843, fols. 52b–53a, 26:

נחל לזמ' כי האדם מפני היות אישי מינו נושאי השכל בכח ויש לו צרך בקיום המין בהשגה, יהיה הענין יותר קרוב בהיות אומ' אחת נבדלת אל דרכה ונמשכת אחריה יותר משאר אומות, לא מצד היות ההשגה אפשרית לכל האומה אבל מצד היות דרך ההשגה מתפשט באומה [...] ביחד ממנה משפחה או שבט כדמות שבט לוי וליחד מין השבט אישים רבים להשגות הקרובות לשם יותר.

“We shall begin to say that a person needs the existence of the species of man in order to comprehend, since the individuals of the species are the portent of the potential intellect. And it is plausible that a certain nation is separated in its path [to comprehension], and it follows this path more than the other nations, not because the comprehension is possible for the entire nation, but because this path is widespread in the nation [...] by their consecrating a family or a tribe like the tribe of Levi and to consecrate individuals of the tribe to comprehensions that are closer of God.” Unfortunately, some of the words of this seminal passage are not very clear in the unique manuscript of this commentary. See also the discussion of the nature of the high priest as an intellect that is a direct continuation of this passage in chapter 24 below.

**123** See the texts and analyses printed in Diesendruck, “Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence” and *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon*, 117, note 324. See also the similar view in Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 142–43; *Šomer Mišwah*, 12; and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 46–47.

**124** Isaiah 40:22.

**125** Psalm 2:4.

**126** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 288–89:



According to Abulafia, when the term “sitting” (*yešivah*) is related to the supernal world, it actually means existence. In this way, Abulafia also interprets a Rabbinic statement concerning Metatron sitting on high, which he adduced in that context.<sup>127</sup> To be sure, the Rabbis were also worried about this, since only God was conceived as sitting while the angels were conceived as standing—they were designated as “the standing ones” (*ha-‘omedim*). This is the reason why they were denied the possibility of sitting, an issue that cannot be elaborated within this framework, but this denial has nothing to do with an anthropomorphic attitude. As to the divine sitting, it was conceived as part of the basileomorphic attributes. The importance of the literal sense of the Seat of Glory is well-known in Rabbinic literature. However, Abulafia understood the term “Seat of Glory” (*kisse’ ha-kavod*) in rather inner-human terms, as we shall see below.<sup>128</sup>

Abulafia was interested in quite a different type of denial. His explicit reference to the “many words of the Gentiles” as presumably capable of saving Jewish authors from an anthropomorphic misunderstanding of the Bible and allowing them to reach a perfect intellect and a true Torah instead of an imaginative one is a phenomenon hardly matched by any explicit formulation I know of from the Jewish Middle Ages, including the writings of the Maimonideans or other medieval Jewish thinkers. The proposal of Gentile thought as a corrective for Jewish misunderstandings of the biblical portrayal of God hardly resonates with a particularist understanding of Abulafia’s thought. In any case, according to Abulafia’s own testimony, he also tried to reach out to Christians and even praised them for their attitude being more positive towards his messages than that of the Jews.<sup>129</sup> As discussed above,<sup>130</sup> Abulafia was ready to discuss matters related to the secrets of the Torah with at least one Christian.

This opening towards the other, based on the viability of a common intellectual enterprise, has no parallel in the various forms of thirteenth-century Kabbalah. We

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היושב על חוג הארץ” (שעיה מ:כב) “יושב בשמים ישחק אדני ילעג למו” (תהלים ב:ד). וכיוצא באלו הדברים כך ראוי ללומדם ברוב דברי חכמי העולם, כי באלו הידיעות יותרו הקשרים והספקות ברוב העניינים המדומים וישאר האדם עם שכלו בשלמות ועם תורתו באמתות, ולא יבאוהו פשטי הכתובים אל הרחקה מהדרך הנכונה.

Maimonides’s equivocal analyses of the occurrences of the verb *YŠV* in connection to God, see *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:11, Pines, 1:37–38. Maimonides resorted to the two biblical verses mentioned in the two previous footnotes. For a somewhat interesting parallel to the view that philosophy can save one from a misunderstanding of the Bible, see Albalag, *Tiqqun ha-De’ot*, 83–84. Symptomatically enough, this passage has not been adduced in Wolfson’s last attempt at describing Abulafia as particularist, “Deceitful Truth and Truthful Deceit.” I hope to elaborate on this seminal passage in a separate study.

127 See *BT, Hagigah*, fol. 12b.

128 See below chapter 24 note 1.

129 See *Sefer ha-Ot*, 76; Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 80; and Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 197. Wolfson finds this testimony to be dubious. What cannot be denied, however, is the fact that Abulafia wrote what he wrote and sent it to Spain (or at least intended to), which means that this is the image that he wanted to project, independently of the veracity of the historical fact, in this or in other cases that Wolfson is also inclined to doubt. Abulafia’s thought as found in his books is, in any case, independent of what he did or did not do in history.

130 See above chapter 8 note 60.

should therefore try to understand who Abulafia's intended audience was. Though writing exclusively in Hebrew, he was nevertheless less concerned with an audience composed of the mythical unit called the nation of Israel. Rather, he was more interested in the intelligentsia within Judaism and, perhaps, outside of it. In this way, Abulafia's approach differs from that of Maimonides.

It is understandable that this shift from a particularist to a more universalist approach is not expressed in an explicit or systematic manner in Abulafia's writings. This reticence and veiled expression is related to the dominance of the mythical register in most of the circles within Judaism, as we can learn from the various phases of the polemics against Maimonides, some of which Abulafia was well-acquainted with, while the more universalist approach may be related to the interregnum period in which Abulafia operated. On the one hand, ibn Adret had already banned Abulafia,<sup>131</sup> and on the other hand, Rabbi Hillel of Verona, Abulafia's teacher, took the philosophers' side in the second controversy over Maimonides's writings.

In any case, the comparison of Abulafia's radical statements about the "real" nature of the Jews—and, implicitly, of the nations—to those of some philosophers such as the Maimonidean Rabbi David Qimḥi and Joseph ibn Kaspi,<sup>132</sup> to say nothing of some of the theosophical Kabbalists, shows the size of the conceptual gap between

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**131** See many of the pertinent texts related to the controversies that were assembled and presented by Dinur, *A Documentary History of the Jewish People*, 139–274; Daniel J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy: 1180–1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); Shatzmiller, "For a Picture of the First Polemic on Maimonides's Writings"; Azriel Shohat, "Concerning the First Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides" [Hebrew], *Zion* 36 (1971): 27–60; Sarah Stroumsa, *The Beginnings of the Maimonidean Controversy in the East: Joseph ibn Simon's Silencing Epistle Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Tzvi Institute, 1999); Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 551–70; Abraham S. Halkin, "The Ban on the Study of Philosophy" [Hebrew], *Peraqim* 1 (1967/68): 35–55; Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. Raphael Judah Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7–8, 10–12, 337–81; Joseph Dan, "Ashkenazi Hasidim and the Antimaimonidean Controversy," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1995): 29–47; Charles Touati, "Les deux conflits autour de Maïmonide et des études philosophiques," in *Juifs et Judaïsme de Languedoc*, eds. Marie-Humbert Vicaire and Bernard Blumenkranz (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1977), 173–84; Gregg Stern, "Philosophical Allegory in Medieval Jewish Culture: The Crisis in Languedoc (1304–1306)," in *Interpretation and Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2002): 189–209; Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought*, 112–43; Dov Schwartz, "Changing Fronts in the Controversies over Philosophy in Medieval Spain and Provence," *JJTP* 7 (1997): 61–82; Ram Ben-Shalom, "Communication and Propaganda Between Provence and Spain: The Controversy Over Extreme Allegorization (1303–1306)," in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: The Pre-Modern World*, ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 171–225; Ben-Shalom, *The Jews of Provence and Languedoc*, 461–62, 511–64; Ram Ben-Shalom, "The Ban Placed by the Community of Barcelona on the Study of Philosophy and Allegorical Preaching—A New Study," *REJ* 159 (2000): 387–404; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*; and, last but not least, Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, 152–79.

**132** See the passages assembled by Dinur, *A Documentary History of the Jewish People*, 303–15.

their position and Abulafia's own much more universalist position.<sup>133</sup> This is the meaning of "radical" in the specific historical context we have discussed here: the antithetical attitude found in many of the traditional Jewish sources is here turned towards the vulgus rather than towards the Gentiles.

It suffices to mention in this context Abulafia's rather astonishing definition of what a Jew is: someone who confesses the name of God that explicitly occurs in at least two of his prophetic writings.<sup>134</sup> This is an exceptional position in the Middle Ages and should be seriously taken into account before one decides that Abulafia was a particularist Kabbalist. In my opinion, we have here one of the most audacious attempts at an open reform of Rabbinic Judaism by proposing the search for ecstasy by means of divine names as an ideal and even the most important criterion for Jewishness.

In short, one should not take the fact that Abulafia quoted biblical and Rabbinic material as meaning that he adopted the worldviews found in those Jewish sources, just as it would not be wise to do so in the case of Maimonides, upon whose views Abulafia draws in this specific case, though he dares to explicate much more than the Great Eagle did. Quotations from traditional sources should be understood in their fuller context and not as self-evident vehicles for conveying the intentions of their ancient authors.

Nor does Leo Strauss's warning, according to which the fact that someone repeats a certain idea does not mean that this idea is a hidden view,<sup>135</sup> hold in our case, given the fact that Abulafia openly contradicts the traditional Rabbinic anthropology. This contradiction is emblematic and the persecutions he claims to have suffered from are reminiscent of one of the few other Jewish thinkers who were officially banned, Baruch Spinoza. Both thinkers share a kind of pantheistic approach and critique major aspects of Rabbinic Judaism; both are, in their distinct ways, descendants of Maimonides's thought, though Spinoza was far more critical of the Great Eagle and incomparably more analytical and systematic in his geometrical expositions of his metaphysical alternative than anything that can be found in Abulafia's writings.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, Abulafia's critique is based on a fundamental topic of

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**133** Abulafia was well-acquainted with some of the critiques of Maimonides, as we can see from his two commentaries on the secrets in the *Guide*. For example, see *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, Ms. Munich, 408, fol. 47a, 81. For Maimonides's universalistic propensity, see Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*.

**134** See Moshe Idel, "A Unique Manuscript of an Untitled Treatise of Abraham Abulafia in Biblioteca Laurentiana Medicea," *Kabbalah* 17 (2008): 20–23.

**135** *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 30–31.

**136** Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*; the collection of translated articles in Leo Strauss, *Le testament de Spinoza: écrits de Leo Strauss sur Spinoza et le judaïsme*, eds. Gérard Almaleh, Albert Baraquin, and Mireille Depadt-Ejchenbaum (Paris: Cerf, 1991); Franz Nauen, "Hermann Cohen's Perceptions of Spinoza: A Reappraisal," *AJS Review* 4 (1979): 111–24. For a survey of the affinities between Abulafia and Spinoza in my various studies, to be understood as related to sources influenced by

human nature and society: the negative role played by imagination. Although it plays an important role in political organisation, it obstructs perfect cognition.

Given the fact that Abulafia addressed the Rabbinic discussion of the serpentine pollution more than any other Kabbalist (with the exception of the contemporary vast corpus known as the book of the *Zohar*, which took this Rabbinic statement quite verbatim), and given the fair number of passages dealing with this issue in his writings, our survey above has to reflect not only on the understanding of his thought as more universalistic, in the line of Maimonides, but also on the nature of his Kabbalah as a whole. Given the rather scant occurrences of the Rabbinic discussion in other Kabbalistic writings or the theosophical-theurgical schools, to take Wolfson's survey in his *Venturing Beyond* as representative of what is found in this vast literature, a broader question looms. Abulafia has been misrepresented as a particularist due to scholars ignoring his immense formative debt to the thought of Maimonides and that of Arabic philosophers. His view on the topic under scrutiny here, dealing with the Gentiles, has also been presented in an inaccurate manner. These two misrepresentations are related to the general incorrect scholarly attitude that Kabbalah is homogeneous on this specific point.

Moreover, insofar as I am acquainted with the Maimonidean literature, it seems that Abulafia was the first author to explicitly allegorise this specific Rabbinic statement as pointing to an atemporal situation. Indubitably, given a choice between the particularist views found in most of the Rabbis, mythical (especially Zoharic) Kabbalists, and Rabbi Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* on the one hand and the universalist approach of the Great Eagle on the other, Abulafia would definitely have chosen the latter as the source of authoritative guidelines on this topic.

Abulafia's failure to mention Judah ha-Levi's book in the series of writings he studied, or to mention him at all in those writings, is, in my opinion, not a matter of ignorance or neglect, but a rejection that is part of a wider phenomenological bifurcation that is seen in the thought of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists as being significantly informed by the *Kuzari*. Again, Abulafia drew his inspiration mainly from Maimonides's thought and that of the Muslim *falāsifah*. This does not mean that he was not acquainted at all with ha-Levi's book, but rather that he did not agree with its basic approach and did not consider it worthy of criticism.

All this being said, I would not be surprised if someone was able to find another attitude towards the Rabbinic discussion that would fit the interpretation of Abulafia's thought as particularist in one of Abulafia's books with which I am not yet acquainted. As part of the conceptual fluidity I mentioned above, I propose not to reify a person's thought as if it were constituted of frozen entities, but to allow, at least in principle, the possibility of the existence of diverging or even opposing positions that would confirm the particularist interpretation, like *Sefer ha-Melammed*, p. 32.

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Abulafia and plausibly known to Spinoza as they were found in print, see the summary in Harvey, "Idel on Spinoza," 99–105, and my *Messianic Mystics*, 79–82. See also chapter 16 note 98 below.

However, this latter position would have to be illustrated by examples that I have not found in the extant sources. For the time being, however, Abulafia's relatively universal position as reflected in his interpretations of the Rabbinic view is quite evident, and I doubt whether it is possible to find material dealing with this precise topic that endorses a different interpretation of the above passages that could challenge this evaluation of Abulafia's universalist position.

Indeed, the above considerations as to the importance of political esotericism as an essential aspect of Abulafia's thought invite a more careful reading of many of his statements, especially when these statements contradict each other, or, even more significantly, when they contradict common wisdom in traditional Judaism. Indeed, if two different statements may be discerned, one which contradicts the accepted views on Judaism and another which confirms the regular themes, we should not dismiss the divergent views. This is not to say, however, that all the instances of the terms *sod* or *seter* in Abulafia's writings stand for a sort of political esotericism, as other types of esoteric issues exist in his works, as has been pointed out above. Without the necessary awareness of the existence of an esoteric level, one may indiscriminately confuse Abulafia's exoteric and esoteric registers.

## 10 The Torah as a Median Entity

Let me turn now to another esoteric topic that touches a very sensitive chord within traditional Judaism and Maimonides's thought: the nature of the Torah. As in the case concerning the removal of the serpentine pollution, Abulafia's opinion can be quite easily understood if we take into consideration the several discussions of this topic he gives in his various books. However, given that the issue of the Torah is much more sensitive, I would like to illustrate Abulafia's treatment of the topic of the Torah with the earliest instance found in the starting point in his literary career. In his first extant book, *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, which he wrote in 1271, Abulafia makes several references to secrets that he does not reveal.<sup>137</sup> This means that the politics of esotericism that he adopted in his first Kabbalistic book was not necessarily a new starting point in his way of thought, but in my opinion, it is quite plausible to assume that it reflects an earlier, philosophical period in his intellectual development.

In this book, Abulafia describes the two major techniques for eliciting the secrets of the Torah as consisting of the linguistic techniques of *Sefer Yeširah* and the philosophical exegetical techniques of distinctions between different meanings of biblical nouns, the homonymies, which is characteristic of the method of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. These distinctions can also be found in some of his other writings that

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<sup>137</sup> *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 2, 3, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 40. See also his early book, *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 23, where he mentions the oral transmission of secrets.

deal with logic, which were discussed in chapter 6 above.<sup>138</sup> This combination of entirely different types of exegesis into a sevenfold structure sets the tone for all of his later writings. In a more minor manner, this combination is also found in the work of his teacher, Baruch Togarmi, as linguistic methods and modest philosophical terminology of a Neo-Aristotelian nature occur together in Togarmi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*.

I shall start by decoding the meaning of a discussion that is not explicitly designated as a secret. After describing the fact that the personal names in the Bible can be explained as having meaning, a view that is part of his divorce from meaningless magical names (to which the title of the book refers), Abulafia writes:

I had already mentioned to you the truth existence and the intellectual one in general, and about the nature of man, the external and the internal, and about the paths of prophecy, the plain sense and the hidden one, that depend on letters, words, and numerical calculation, in order to announce to you their subject matter from all aspects. And behold, the Torah is the middle [*emša'it*],<sup>139</sup> the tree of life, as it is written<sup>140</sup> "and the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil."<sup>141</sup>

That a secret is hinted at here is obvious from the resort to the assumption of a hidden sense that depends on the exegetical methods the Kabbalist uses. The Torah is described using the Hebrew word *emša'it* ("the middle"), which has the same value in gematria as the consonants of "Torah" (*TWRH*), 611. To be sure, though this gematria is not hinted at here, this is certainly not my finding, since it recurs in Abulafia's later writings in several instances. This description can be seen as part of the widespread affinity between the Torah and the tree of life which is found in Rabbinic Judaism.

Neither the implicit gematria nor the identification with the tree of life is to be considered as esoteric. However, this median status should be understood in the fuller context of the above passage. Immediately before the discussion of the Torah, Abulafia mentions several pairs: sense versus intellect; the plain sense versus the hidden one; and external/internal man and the two trees in Paradise. The Torah should be understood as a sequel of these pairs; namely, as standing between pairs of two extremes. This means that it has a sensual and an intellectual dimension, the plain sense and the hidden sense; it belongs to both the external and inter-

**138** *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 5–6.

**139** The biblical תוך, which means "within the Garden," was interpreted in several cases before Abulafia as "in the middle of the Garden."

**140** Genesis 2:9.

**141** *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 40:

וכבר העירותיך על אמיתת מציאות המורגש והמושכל בכללו, ועל טבע האדם החיצון והפנימי, ועל דרכי הנבואה הנגלים והנסתרים התלויים באותיות ובמילות ובחשבון, כדי להודיע ענייניהם מכל צד. והנה התורה היא אמצעית עץ החיים כמו שאמר הכתוב (בראשית ב:ט) "ועץ החיים בתוך הגן ועץ הדעת טוב ורע."

nal natures of men. In this context, it is plausible that it also stands between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The question is, what does such an interpretation mean? This is not explicated in *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, but it is elaborated further in a parallel passage found in *Or ha-Šekhel*, part of which will also be dealt with in Appendix C:

There are two attributes, truth and fear; the former comprises the knowledge of God that is the knowledge of truth, and the latter comprises the fear of God that is the attribute of fear. And behold, after you conceptualise the two extremities mentioned insofar as faith is concerned, which are not dependent on deeds, you should conceptualise that the Torah is the median [*emša 'it*]<sup>142</sup> between the two, just as the study of the Torah announced to you the path of the appropriate deeds that you should walk on, and the path of the inappropriate ones that you should stray away from. And provided that all the commandments are following faith, they amount in gematria<sup>143</sup> to the knowledge of God.<sup>144</sup>

The gematria of 611 is again implied, but not explicated. The Torah is once more mentioned after a series of pairs: the two attributes of truth and fear and knowledge of God and fear of God. It is plausible that the attribute of truth corresponds to the intellectual sense in the passage from *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, and, by default, the attribute of fear to that of the sensual realm. As Warren Zev Harvey pointed out to me, these pairs correspond to the first two commandments, reducing the 613 ones to 611, and those 611 commandments are described as the middle.

However, in this passage, the terminology points in an obvious manner to theosophical imagery, especially when the attribute of fear, expressed by the Hebrew *Paḥad*, is used. In the common theosophical scheme, the attribute of *Paḥad* is

**142** See also a very similar discussion in Rabbi Nathan's book, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 462, where the *emša'it* referring to the third attribute is again depicted between two divine attributes in the context of the occurrence of the form תורה. However, it is possible that this form may be understood as *toreh*; that is, as referring to the third and not the Torah. For *emša'i* as a reference to the imaginative faculty, see Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:45.

**143** This is a widespread calculation of the number of the commandments (613) from the numerical valences of words in Exodus 3:15 mentioning the divine name (*šemi*), the remembrance of God (*zikhri*), and the letters of the divine name, as Abulafia mentions immediately afterwards on the same page.

**144** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 20:

והם ב' מדות אמת ופחד, האחת כוללת ידיעת השם שהיא מדת האמת, והשנית כוללת יראת השם שהיא מדת הפחד. והנה אחר שתצייר שתי הקצוות הנזכרות באמונה אשר לא נתלו במעשים, תצייר היות תורה אמצעית בין שתייהם, מפני שתלמוד תורה מודיעך דרך המעשים ההגונים שתלך בה, ודרך המגונים שתרחק מהם. ומפני היות כל המצוות נמשכות אחר האמונה, עלו כן במספר שווה לידיעת השם.

On the possible relation of the median role of the Torah and the Aristotelian and Maimonidean concept of the Golden Mean, see my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 165, note 47. For this theory in general, see Marvin Fox, "The Doctrine of the Mean in Aristotle and Maimonides: A Comparative Study," in *Studies in Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 98–120, reprinted in his *Interpreting Maimonides*, 93–123, and Herbert A. Davidson, "The Middle Way in Maimonides's Ethics," *PAAJR* 54 (1987): 31–72.



found on the left side, while that of truth (*Emet*) is found in the middle between two “higher” attributes. *Emet* corresponds to Jacob just as *Paḥad* corresponds to Isaac, as is mentioned in the passage above. However, it is obvious that the attribute of truth is conceptualised as the opposite of fear and thus it is found on the right side, while the Torah stands in the middle, between the two “higher” attributes. This is an uncommon type of symbolism, as we shall see in more detail in Appendix C below.

This understanding of the Torah as the median may also reflect a theosophical view that identified the Torah with the *sefirah* of *Tiferet* that stands in the middle of the two other divine powers. This seems to be the meaning of the median place of the Torah here. Interestingly enough, truth and fear are not conceived as being conducive to deeds, which is a quality reserved solely for the Torah.

What is shared by the last two quotes is the common status of the Torah as a median entity, which is expressed using different forms of imagery, both philosophical and theosophical. An important question that should be asked in this context is what do we understand from Abulafia’s use of theosophical imagery: is there a structural homology between the triad of divine attributes and human feelings, meaning that Abulafia believed in the first triad as a blueprint for the second, human triad within the lower world? Alternatively, does the Kabbalist allegorically interpret what he conceives to be an *imaginaire* found in a theosophical literature whose conceptual basis he did not accept? The fact that his main concern was the median place of the Torah is illustrated by a variety of examples from other realms: the two trees in Paradise, the intellectual and the sensual, and the knowledge of God (which also means the love of God) and the fear of God (which implicitly does not assume knowledge).

One might read the homologies as having some form of sympathetic affinity between the distinct pairs of entities mentioned above, affinities that would include both a theosophical and a potentially theurgical valence—in a manner reminiscent of Mircea Eliade’s magical universe<sup>145</sup>—while another scholar might see the homology as merely rhetorical or analogous structures and assume the existence of one basic pair found within the human being. This bipolar human structure constitutes the basis of the allegorisation of the meaning of the other pairs, some of them of a cosmic nature. The parallelism between different triads does not, according to such a

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**145** See Mircea Eliade, “The Cosmical Homology and Yoga,” *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 5 (1937): 188–203. Nor do I believe that for Abulafia, the noetic awakening of the individual has an effect on the external universe in the manner Eliade describes as the meaning of the principle of homology in some yoga practices in his *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 108, 251–52, 254–55, 341. See also Idel, *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth*, 4–14. For Abulafia’s view of the prophet as changing the course of nature by means of divine names, but not as part of the principle of homology, see chapter 17 below.

reading, mean that there is a sympathetic or theurgical affinity between them, which we may learn from a lengthy passage from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*.<sup>146</sup>

I propose to adopt the second interpretation because Abulafia repeatedly speaks about the need to free the intellectual element from the material realm, this being one of the targets of his techniques. Abulafia does not inhabit a harmonious universe, but rather one based on a deep dualism that distinguishes between the intellect on the one hand and matter, imagination, and desires on the other, a disjunctive approach that we discussed in the previous chapter concerning his anthropology. This is the reason why he is less interested in learning about the divinity from the divine acts or natural phenomena, as philosophers do. He prefers to learn about the divinity from divine names.<sup>147</sup> To be sure, Abulafia utilises more of a Platonic type of dualism than a Gnostic one.

This second reading means that for Abulafia, it would be a misunderstanding to take the imagery of the divine attributes literally, since, as he puts it, God has no attributes and what we do attribute to Him is solely a human exercise intended to understand Him by means of our categories.<sup>148</sup> According to another statement, probably stemming from Ismā'īlite sources, though also found among other Kabbalists in Abulafia's generation,<sup>149</sup> God cannot be described as a being or even as a non-being.<sup>150</sup> In our context, the dyadic opposition of attributes is important not for conveying his theosophy, but for understanding the Torah's special status standing in the middle.

According to an additional source, the Torah is conceived as a median between God and man, another instance of mediation.<sup>151</sup> However, what is crucial in the Torah occupying a median position is explicated in another passage from the same book, where the approach in the last two passages finds an explanation. There, the ecstatic Kabbalist distinguishes between three types of apprehensions: "Each true human apprehension in general is either close to the intellect, as an intellectual one, or remote from it, as the sensual one [is], or the median one [*emša'it*], which is between them, as imaginative, all [of them] coming from God, blessed be He."<sup>152</sup> The vision of the

**146** See 199–200, translated in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 71–72. On causal versus non-causal correspondences, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 181, note 110.

**147** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 108–9, and "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah."

**148** See *Šomer Mišwah*, 42. On this issue, see more my detailed discussions in *Middot*, chapter 9.

**149** See Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, 163, 288, note 22.

**150** Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 2047, fol. 68b. For another quote from this anonymous text, see chapter 10 above as well as Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 161, note 182.

**151** *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, 2.

**152** *Šomer Mišwah*, 118:

שכל השגה אמיתית אנושית בכלל בין קרובה לשכל כמושכלת בין רחוקה ממנו כמורגשת, בין האמצעית אשר ביניהם כמדומה, כולן באות מהשם יתברך.

This passage parallels Aristotelian noetics and is also found in Rabbi Hillel of Verona, *Tagmulei ha-Nefes*, 73–100. There are many discussions in Abulafia about the median status of imagination as a faculty that stands between two other modes of cognition. Only a few will be discussed below. See

median apprehension as imaginative is not directly related to the Torah, but given the content of the passage from *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, where the sensual and the intellectual existence are mentioned in the context of the Torah, this oblique reading of the two sources as corroborating each other seems to be more than plausible. This means that the Torah is understood as mediating and thus as standing in the middle between the intellectual and the sensual, just as the imaginative power does. This median status of the imaginative power is also found in a poem attributed to a certain “Abraham KNT (קנר),” which I take to be some form of distortion of Abulafia’s name, extant in one manuscript. In the poem, the author says that “the imaginative is the median [emša’i]”<sup>153</sup> in a context that mentions both the sensual and intellectual types of cognition.

In a memorable passage from *Or ha-Šekhel*, where he allegorises some biblical verses, Abulafia offers a threefold categorisation of the activity of the imaginative faculty:

But imagination never attains true existence,<sup>154</sup> but it is “a strong ass couching down between the sheepfolds.”<sup>155</sup> Sometimes it tends to the sensible and keeps its existence as the senses com-

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also his *Imrei Šefer*, 16; *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, 14; and *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, 23. For the assumption that a discussion about the correspondence between philosophy and religion is compounded and median, see Eisenmann, *Moshe b. Judah: Ahava ba-Ta’anugim*, 171–73, where Averroes’s impact is quite explicit.

**153** Ms. Vatican, 441, fol. 92a:

\אם למורגש נ[י]תן מאות\ למושכל נ[י]תן רבבות\ אך המדומה הוא אמצעי\ כחו נוטה לשתי פאות\ אם למורגש יטה הרבה\  
\כוב בתמונות לו באות\ או אם למושכל הוא נוטה\ ורב לו חכמות ונבואות.

There is additional Abulafian material in this manuscript. See Moshe Idel, “Sefirot above Sefirot” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 260, and Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 144; 388, note 23; 389, notes 38 and 40. More Abulafian material can be found in this manuscript (fol. 115a), as I shall show in a separate study in which I hope to print and discuss the entire poem.

**154** Compare to the sharp distinction between intellectual and imaginative comprehension in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 144–45, 160, and the anonymous *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fols. 171b–172a, where the affinity between imagination and doubt is explicit, perhaps an impact of Abulafia’s *Sitrei Torah*, 152. Let me point out that in my opinion, imagination is conceived as a hindrance to achieving the ideal type of cognition promoted in Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah, and only rarely so in theosophical Kabbalah. For an alternative view, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines* and Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, especially 3. This latter issue deserves a separate analysis that transcends the present framework. In short, my claim is that when the Kabbalists speak about imagining or visualising, they use precise terms, which I have written about elsewhere, and when they do not intend such processes, there is no need to impose a general assumption on such practices by means of oblique interpretations that mingle together material from different Kabbalistic schools. See my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 103–11; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 73–89; *Enchanted Chains*, 228–32; *Golem*, 119–26; “Kabbalistic Prayer and Colors,” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988): 17–27; and “Kawwanah and Colors: A Neglected Kabbalistic Responsum” [Hebrew], in *Tribute to Sara: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Presented to Professor Sara O. Heller Wilensky*, eds. Moshe Idel, Devorah Dimant, and Shalom Rosenberg (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994): 1–14. Rather than entities to be imagined or visualised, the *sefirot* were

prehend it, other times it tends to the *intelligibilia* and keeps its existence as [long as] the intellect comprehends it, and sometimes it invents everything from its heart and there is no reality to it at all, despite the fact that it thinks that whatever it comprehended is solely the truth, and nothing else is [the truth]. And this third imaginative apprehension leads every true existing apprehension to error and confusion, and always denies it. When the memory of the abovementioned imaginative false apprehension is effaced from the hearts of [those who] sense and the intellectuals, “death will be destroyed forever and God will wipe away tears from all faces, he shall remove the insult of his people from the whole of the earth”;<sup>156</sup> namely, [the verse points to] the secret of the intellect being revealed after it was hidden.<sup>157</sup>

The passage refers to a standard Aristotelian type of noetics. The statement found in the opening sentence is crucial: imagination, referenced in general terms, does not allow for a comprehension of reality. It can indeed serve both the senses and the intellect, as in the verse of the poem mentioned above. It can also sometimes run wild. In any case, by itself it is not reliable from the cognitive point of view. According to another of Abulafia’s statements, the effacement of the imagination is conceived as possible and even necessary for the emergence of the intellect. In a later treatise, he speaks about the possibility of killing the imagination.<sup>158</sup> Elsewhere, he speaks about imagination as a natural, innate faculty that cannot be changed.<sup>159</sup>

However, I would opt for the assumption that the theme of the ass has something to do with the burden of the commandments, as Abulafia explicates elsewhere in an-

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categories considered to be capable of mapping and interpreting the canonical texts in a new manner or influencing the divine powers by means of the performance of the commandments. See, especially, Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 280–95. See also Appendix B note 96 below.

**155** Genesis 49:14. See also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 59, 76. The consonants of *Ḥamor* (ass) are the same as those of *Ḥomer* (matter). In his *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia connects imagination to the compounded entities; see chapter 2 note 76 above.

**156** Isaiah 25:8.

**157** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 119:

והדמיון אינו משיג שום מציאות אמיתי לעולם, אבל הוא "חמור גרם רבץ בין המשפתים" (בראשית מט:ד), פעם נוטה למורגש ושומר מציאותו מה שהשיגוהו החושים, ופעם נוטה למושכל ושומר מציאות מה שהשיגו השכל, ופעם בודה כל דבר מלבו ואין שום מציאות לפעלו. ואע"פ שחושב שכל מה שהשיגו הוא לבדו האמת ואין אמת זולתו. וזו ההשגה המדומה השלישית היא מטעה ומשבשת כל השגה אמיתית נמצאת ומכחישה תמיד. ובהבטל ההשגה המדומה הנוכרת השקרית, ובהימחות זכרה מלב המרגישים והמשכילים, "בלע המות לנצח ומחה אדני אלהים דמעה מעל כל פנים" וכו' (ישעיה כה:ח), כלומר סוד השכל נגלה אחר העלמו.

See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 99–100, 132, 144, 172, note 285; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66, 69, note 9; Idel, “Types of Redemptive Activities,” 260–61; and Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God,’” 80–81. This passage was copied verbatim almost in its entirety without reference to the source in the anonymous *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 159a, a book that has been referenced several times above. For another example of this author copying from another of Abulafia’s books, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 200–201.

**158** *Sefer Gan Na’ul*, 58–59. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 132. I hope to return to this theme and its possible sources in a separate study.

**159** *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 156–57. For a view of *dimyon* as phantasy, see Abulafia’s *Maftaḥ ha-Ra’ayon*, 24.

other of his writings.<sup>160</sup> A rather explicit connection between the imagination and the commandments is found in his *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon* and his *Or ha-Šekhel*.<sup>161</sup> I wonder whether this is not also a reference in the historical register to Christianity conceived as imagination, which is to be understood not only as a historical phenomenon, but also allegorically, as a component of every person's spiritual structure when they are unredeemed, including Abulafia.<sup>162</sup>

Abulafia, in what I consider to be a seminal passage, understands imagination as a median and as being much more “demonic” than in the earlier passages discussed in this chapter. In this text, for the first time, Abulafia says that this is an important esoteric matter:

Now I shall reveal to you this wondrous secret, hidden from the eyes of most of the sages of this generation, and I would say almost from the eyes of all [of them], despite the strength of its visibility. And its rank will be considered high, and the intensity of the delight of its knowledge to those who are acquainted with it, and the power of the delight of its comprehension to its inquirers. This is because the imaginative faculty is the tool for the apprehension of prophecy and all of its apprehensions are imaginative and parables and enigmas. And this is a faculty that is found in most of the animals and in every living being that possesses a heart. And its existence in man is similar to the existence of prophecy in a mirror or in water, and this is a bloody<sup>163</sup> conceptualisation.<sup>164</sup> And just as its name is, so it is imagination [*dimyon*], imagining, and its secret is *demon* and it is a demon and a Satan, and indeed *medion*—namely, a median [*emša'ī*]<sup>165</sup>—and all of its strategies are political [*mediniyyot*].<sup>165</sup>

This is a rare example of exegetical ingenuity that resorts to the permutation of the consonants of the Hebrew term for “imagination” (*DMYWN*), which generates *MDYWN* (*Medion*, median), and *DYMWN* (*Demon*, demon), as well as the Hebrew

**160** See the English translation and analysis of this text in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 59.

**161** On this issue, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 57, and Idel, “The Battle of the Urges: Psychomachia in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia.” The passage from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 69, is especially important and deserves a separate analysis.

**162** See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God,’” 78–83.

**163** In Hebrew, דמי contains some of the consonants of דמיון. As Warren Zev Harvey pointed out to me, דמי here may perhaps mean “sanguine” in the technical sense of the theory of humours (ליחות); i. e., having a predominance of red bile or blood and therefore being predisposed to happiness, courage, hope, and love.

**164** I assume that prophecy is envisaged here as some form simulacrum of the reality that is more original on another level.

**165** *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 121–22:

עתה אגלה לך זה הסוד המופלא הנעלם מעיני רוב חכמי דורינו זה וכמעט אומר מעיני כולם, עם חזק הראותו ותיקר מעלתו ועוצם תענוג ידיעתו לידעיו ואומץ מעדן השגתו לחוקריו. והוא שהכח המדמה הוא הכלי להשגת הנבואה וכל השגותיו דמיוניות ומשלים וחידות. והוא כח אחד נמצא לרוב בעלי חיים ולכל חי בעל לב. ומציאותו באדם כמציאות הנבואה במראה או במים והוא ציור דמיי. וכשמו כן הנו דמיון מדמה, וסודו דימון והוא שד ושטן. ואמנם הוא מדיון כלומר אמצעי. וכל תחבולותיו כולם מדיניות.

For a translation of the fuller context of this passage, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 56–57, and Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 242.

term for “political” (*MDNYWT*, *Mediniyyot*). This is a nice and concise summary of a radical interpretation of Maimonides’s esotericism: prophecy is dealing with a combination of intellectual and imaginative topics, and this is the reason why it contains so-called demonic and imaginary aspects that are political devices. They are instruments, intermediaries, playing as they do a median role.

Though the Torah was not mentioned here, it is well-represented by the hint about the median and in the mention of prophecy. To put it more generally, in addition to the conceptual radicalism as to the nature of the Torah, there is also an exegetical radicalism consisting in the possibility of manipulating the canonical texts using many numerical and combinatory techniques. All of these are accompanied by the eschatological radicalism of a person who assumes that some form of redemption is at hand. Therefore, this is the appropriate time to reveal secrets. His exegetical radicalism may well be one of the reasons why he did not resort to ibn Ezra’s critique of the authorship of a part of the Pentateuch: for Abulafia, the entire text was a prime matter for permutations and allegorisations.

Let me address Abulafia’s use of the word “demon.” By using a Greek term, he refers to an evil power that does not, in his view, possess an ontological status, which means that unlike most of the other Kabbalists, he does not believe in a quasi-independent system of evil powers, which emerged in some Castilian forms of Kabbalah during his lifetime. Following Maimonides, the scene of the spiritual life is now the human soul, and thus it has a purely cognitive valence, which should avoid the activity of imagination.<sup>166</sup> This is a major difference between him and other Kabbalists, since in the case of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, the existence of the “externals” (*ha-ḥiṣoniyyim*), a widespread term for the demonic powers, parallels, sometimes inversely, the system of good powers. This double system is also used in order to drastically distinguish between the Jews and the Gentiles.<sup>167</sup> The absence of a theory of ontological evil in Abulafia is reminiscent of the marginal role played by the ontological status of the theosophical powers, known as the divine *sefirot*, in his writings.<sup>168</sup>

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**166** For the power of imagination in Maimonides’s thought, see Stern’s many discussions in his *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’s Guide*, especially 5, 122–23, 177–81, and especially the *Guide* 1:73, Pines 1:209–10, where imagination is described as contrary to intellection.

**167** Demonological systems also attract the demonisation of the other. See the many examples I present in “The Attitude to Christianity in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*,” *Immanuel* 12 (1981): 77–95, as well as in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*.

**168** Compare my view of Abulafia’s understanding of demons as purely imaginary, to Sagerman’s quite different, somehow ontological portrayal of Abulafia’s demons, that is reminiscent to the writer of views in the *Zohar*. See his *The Serpent Kills*, 153–54, 158–59. I am not confident that Sagerman was always aware of the purely imaginary nature of evil in Abulafia’s thought. See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 138. See also, e. g., Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 89, 90, *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 56, 96, 118, 121, translated above, or *Maḥteḥ ha-Šemot*, 16. This topic will be treated in a separate study on the basis of additional sources.

The view that the Torah includes both intellectual and sensual matters at the same time as being imaginative is found in a longer series of Abulafian texts.<sup>169</sup> Abulafia's view differs from Maimonides's explicit and well-known thesis that Moses's prophecy was distinguished from that of the other prophets because he did not use his imaginative faculty. Whether this was indeed Maimonides's ultimate view is, however, far from being clear. Of course, it may well be part of the hidden teaching of the Great Eagle. However, it may also be that he believed that the Torah had an imaginative aspect and that such a view was part of his esoteric position.<sup>170</sup>

Abulafia's emphasis on the importance of this secret at the beginning of the last quote is hardly matched by anything else in his writings. Indeed, it must touch on a major religious topic. This emphasis on the esoteric nature of the discussion requires closer attention to be paid to the implications of that secret, and I am convinced that what Abulafia wanted to hide was the imaginative nature of the Torah, or at least its possession of such a dimension in a significant manner. In my opinion, this is not just a major topic that stands alone, but rather its meaning radiates onto a variety of other important topics, such as the status of the commandments within the elitist type of religion Abulafia was attempting to esoterically propagate in his writings.

By attributing an imaginative dimension to the Torah, Abulafia mitigates the stark opposition between the founding document of classical forms of Judaism and all the other religions, a distinction that Maimonides attempted to present, in my opinion, as his exoteric position. Implicitly, Abulafia's view is a more universal approach, though it does not gravitate around the centrality of intellectual activity. This significant insertion of the imaginative power as a decisive factor, although not the only one, into the inner structure of the founding document of Judaism has parallels among the Maimonideans with whom I am acquainted, culminating in Spinoza's approach to the Hebrew Bible as being solely related to instructions that only held for specific historical circumstances that were politically, though not philosophically, significant.<sup>171</sup>

Returning to the first passage from *Geṭ ha-Šemot* presented in this chapter, I believe that the later elaborations we have provided here do not add much to an attentive reading of the early discussion. The great secret divulged in a more elaborated manner in *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3 is, in my opinion, already contained *in nuce* in *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, although it was not elaborated there. What is even more interesting

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**169** For additional examples of the double Torah in Abulafia, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 73–81. See also Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 144–51.

**170** Maimonides had more than one view on this issue. See Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 186–87, note 67; Dov Schwartz, “Psychological Dimensions of Moses's Prophecy—Imagination and Intellect” [Hebrew], in *Moses the Man*, 251–83; and Kreisel, “The Prophecy of Moses, 179–204.” For Abulafia on this point, see *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 157, and *Sitrei Torah*, 167.

**171** See Pines, “Some Views Put Forward by the 14th-Century Jewish Philosopher Isaac Pulgar,” and Schwartz, “On the Concepts of Prophecy of Rabbi Isaac Pulgar, Rabbi Shlomo Al-Qonstantini and Spinoza.”



is that it was not hinted at as a secret either. Only someone who sufficiently understands the Neo-Aristotelian intellectual apparatus and its problematic application to religion is capable of accurately guessing the Kabbalist's message. This means that the idea of the Torah as a median and thus as related—structurally, and, in my opinion, also conceptually—to the imaginative faculty had been present since Abulafia's pre-Kabbalistic philosophical period, stemming as it does from a type of thought which had a Muslim *falāsifah* background. However, he did interpret it during his “Kabbalistic” years later on by resorting to linguistic methods.<sup>172</sup>

It is, therefore, not that the gematria for *Torah* (*emša'it*, 611) generated the nexus between these two concepts; rather, it is a profoundly philosophical theory that has been strengthened by the discovery of this numerical affinity, just as happens with the connection between nature and *Elohim*; namely, *Elohim* (*ha-ṭeva'*, 86), a topic about which we shall have more to say below.<sup>173</sup> However, in time, the original philosophical nexus became the starting point of linguistic speculations as, for example, in the following discussion in Abulafia's untitled treatise, where he writes, in quite a dense manner: “Behold, the Torah is median, a true tree, the spring of truth, a complete token, and be aware to understand the tree of life in the garden as the letters of the twenty-two<sup>174</sup> in their perfect names, whose number is fifty-eight.”<sup>175</sup> Here, the term *emša'it* (*Torah*) is interpreted according to gematria: “true tree” (*eš amitti*), “spring of truth” (*ma'ayan emet*), and “a complete token” (*maṭbe'a tamim*) all amount to 611. However, more interesting is the first phrase, “true tree” (*eš amitti*), whose consonants are exactly those of *emša'it* when rearranged.

What is new here is the interpretation that takes the gnoseological discussion in the direction of linguistic speculations as to the names of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Elsewhere in the same treatise, he writes:

The secret is so because of its being a point, a small<sup>176</sup> letter, and we are called *Yešurun*<sup>177</sup> because of the letter, and because of the point. And there can be no doubt that “point,” *Emša'it*,

172 On the nexus between *emša'iyot* (“the median ones”) and imagination, see Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 476.

173 Beside note 697.

174 Namely, the number of the letters of the spellings of the names of the twenty-two letters. See also Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 74b: אותיות הקדש הן עץ החיים זהו שם המיוחד.

175 Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 92b:

כי הנה תורה היא אמצעית עץ אמיתי מעין אמת מטבע תמים ושים לבך להבין עץ החיים בתוך הגן כי האותיות של כ"ב בשמותם שלמים מספרם ח".

See also Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 93b. For the identification of the Torah with the theosophical concept of the median line, קו אמצעית, in Hebrew, see Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 97a.

176 In Hebrew, *Qaṭan* (“small”) is masculine, unlike *Ot*, which is a feminine letter, because *Qaṭan* amounts to 159 like *NeQuDaH* and *'OlaM Ha-BA'* (“the world to come”). See also *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 24.

177 Cf. Deuteronomy 32:15.

refers to [the fact that] the world to come [is] Torah, and likewise “the palace of holiness”<sup>178</sup> is knowledge, “that is arranged in the middle,” in the twenty-two letters, and in all the worlds.<sup>179</sup>

The small letter is *Yod*, which is, from the graphical point of view, a dot. That there is a secret here is obvious from the beginning of the passage. The only clue to the secret is found in the mention of knowledge being related to the palace. Here, the specifically philosophical terminology has been removed and the linguistic speculations have taken over. However, the meaning of those phrases did not remain solely on their literal level or take significance only if interpreted, but Abulafia hinted at the existence of a secret that will be revealed only with the coming of the Messiah. Here, however, the Torah as a median entity is related to the intellectual status of this entity, identical to the Agent Intellect,<sup>180</sup> which differs from what we have seen in the earlier cases, where mediation was connected to the imaginative faculty.

Let me ponder upon some of the affinities hinted at in the above passages: the Torah is *Emša‘it*, but it is also related to the twenty-two letters. It seems that we may learn something here about Abulafia’s intentions that permeates some of his rather cryptic statements. In his *Sitrei Torah*, we find the following compact and rich statement:

[The letters of] *Otiyyot ha-Qodeš* amount in gematria to 1232, and afterwards calculate as you can so that it will amount to 1232, like, for example, *Otiyyot ha-Qodeš* is in gematria *ha-Torah ha-Emša‘it*, and also *ha-Torah* is in gematria *ha-Emša‘it*. And so also *Otiyyot ha-Qodeš* [amounts] in gematria to *Limmud Mišwot ha-Torah*. And also *Limmud Mišwot* [amounts] in gematria to *Šelem u-demut*. Afterwards, skip the thousand and return it to one and say *Otiyyot ha-Qodeš* [amounts] in gematria to *Be-rla*, and its secret is *G[o]r[a]l R[e]g[e]l* and it is *‘Eš ha-Ḥayyim*.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>178</sup> On the “palace of holiness” and knowledge, see chapter 24 below. Abulafia’s passage is influenced by *Sefer Yeširah*, 4:3.

<sup>179</sup> Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 92ab:

והסוד הוא מפני היותה נקדה אות קטן ועליה נקראו עמנו ישורון בסבת אות ובסבת נקדה ואין ספק כי נקודה אמצעית מורה לנו כי העולם הבא תורה וכן היכל קדש שהוא דעת מכוון באמצע כעשרים ושתיים אתייות וכן בכל העולם.

See also another discussion of the median point in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 77a.

<sup>180</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 29–38. I wonder whether the two aspects of the Torah, the intellectual and the imaginary, fit the distinction between *numen* and *nomos*, respectively, in the Andalusian *falāsifah* as formulated by John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131, 135–36.

<sup>181</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, 141:

אותיו"ת הקד"ש בגימטריא עולים תתתל"ב ואחר כן תעשה מהם חשבונות כפי יכלתך שיעלו אלה ומאתים ושלושים ושנים. כגון אמרך אותיות הקדש, בגימטריא התורה האמצעית. וכן תאמר עוד התורה בגימטריא האמצעית. וכן תאמר עוד אותיות הקדש בגימטריא למוד מצות התורה. וכן למוד מצות בגימ' צלם ודמות. ואחר כן תדלג ותחשוב האלה ותחזירם לאחד ותאמר אותיות הקדש בגימ' ברל"א, וסודו גרל רגל והוא עץ החיים.

For a partial parallel to the end of the passage, see *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 213–14, and note 108. The gematrias are not deciphered in this text; the author reaches a different conclusion from the one I reach here.

What is important here is the various calculations gravitating around the numerical values of the *Otiyyot ha-Qodeš*, the holy letters. On the one hand, it stands for the combined value of *ha-Torah* and *ha-Emša'it*, and on the other for *Limmud Mišwot ha-Torah*. Let me elaborate on the last gematria: “the study of the *Mišwot* of the Torah” is related to the holy letters, which I understand to mean that in Abulafia’s opinion, it is not the performance of the commandments that is central, but rather their study, which is tantamount to the calculation of the numerical values of the combination of the letters that are used in the Hebrew Bible in order to articulate those commandments. The gematria is obvious: *Limmud Mišwot* = *Ha-TWRaH* = 616, which means that the study of the commandments constitutes the Torah.

Such an understanding, which probably prefers the study to the performance, may point to a Maimonidean view, as analysed by Warren Zev Harvey, concerning the superiority of the study of texts about sacrifices over the act of sacrifice.<sup>182</sup> On the other hand, the combination of letters is hinted at by the consonants *be-rla*, whose numerical values amount to 233. This is a figure that is conceived here as emerging from  $1232 = 1 + 232 = 233$ . The figure 233 represents “by means of the 231 combinations of letters” and also means, inter alia, *‘Eš ha-Ḥayyim*, the tree of life; it is also related to the 232 combinations of letters hinted at in *Sefer Yeširah*.

The linguistic speculations are also related to more traditional terms such as *Šelem u-demut* = 616 = *ha-Torah* = *ha-Emša'it*. Following Maimonides, image and likeness mean intellect and imagination in Abulafia’s thought. I will summarise the above passage in a manner that also contributes to the other passages quoted in this chapter: the study of the letters of the Torah or of the commandments is conducive to an intellectual experience that also includes imagination; namely, a prophetic one that also has eschatological overtones, as the mention of the tree of life shows.

Let us turn to another interpretation of the gematria *Torah* = *Emša'it*, found in an unidentified passage preserved in several manuscripts. It is part of a more magical approach that deserves a detailed discussion that cannot be undertaken here:

This is the reason that man was given permission to change natures by dint of the power of the knowledge of the [divine] name vocalised,<sup>183</sup> and the secret of its vocalisation is written in the Torah,<sup>184</sup> *Ševa'*, *Ḥolam*, *Qamaš*, whose numerical value is *Torah*, and it is *Emša'it*,<sup>185</sup> of the supernal and the inferior [worlds]. And I shall tell you why man can change nature: you should know in truth that God, blessed be He, created His world by the power of his special name and He gave it to the First Man [*Adam ha-Rišon*], who is known [as] the secret *Adam 'Elyon*,<sup>186</sup> in order to rule

**182** See his interesting “Les sacrifices, la prière et l’étude chez Maïmonide,” *REJ* 154 (1995): 97–103. See also chapter 8 note 15 above and Appendix E note 16 below.

**183** See *Mafteaḥ ha-Sefirot*, 68.

**184** For the vocalisation of the divine name with these three vowels, see *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:8, 341, and Idel, “Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona,” 99.

**185** *Torah* = *Emša'it* = *Ševa'*, *Ḥ[o]lam*, *Qamaš* = 611. See also Joseph Gikatilla’s *Gimmat Egoz*, 98.

**186** This is most likely the Agent Intellect or Metatron, who has been described in some cases as the supernal man. See *Sitrei Torah*, 70, and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 82.

over the world by its means. And just like He gave it to the Last Man, who is known, and He gave to both of them power to rule over the world, one [governs] the supernal [world], the other the inferior [world].<sup>187</sup>

The vocalisation of the Tetragrammaton by the three vowels, two of them also found in the Hebrew form of the Torah, is conceived as the highest way of manipulating the created world, just as the Agent Intellect or Metatron does so in the supernal world. The “last man” may stand for the Messiah, following the Pauline description of Jesus.<sup>188</sup> Indeed, Abulafia describes the Messiah elsewhere as using divine names in a manner perhaps relevant for the way he envisioned himself: “And then there will be the true<sup>189</sup> time of the Torah. When? When the Messiah of *YHWH* will rule over the entire *Merkavah*, [so as] to change natures in accordance with the will of God.”<sup>190</sup>

However, the Pauline source mentioned above has been allegorised by assuming that it is the First Man—namely, a metaphysical structure and not the first historical man conceived as a sinner—who is found on high, not the last one, who is envisioned as active here below. Though maintaining the Pauline vision of the last man as the Messiah—namely, as Jesus—Abulafia substitutes the latter for himself, as he is the true Messiah who uses the divine names.

Polemical or not, the structure of this passage tells a story that is different from the Christian source, since here it is the Torah that remains active, though magically as related to the Tetragrammaton and not ritualistically in the present. To put the

**187** Ms. New York, JTS 1887, fol. 119a, Ms. Budapest, Kaufmann 238, 129:

ולפיכך נתן לאדם רשות לשנות הטבעי' בכח ידיע' הש' בניקודו, וסוד נקודו הכתו' בתורה שב"א חל"ם קמ"ץ במניינם תורה והוא אמצעית העליוני' והתחתוני'. ואודיעך מפני מה אדם יכול לשנות הטבע. דע באמת כי ה' ית' ברא עולמו בכח שמו המיוחד ומסרו לאדם הראשון הידוע סודו אדם עליון כדי שינהיג בו עולמו וכשם שמסרו לאדם אחר כך מסרו לאדם האחרון הידוע ונתן שלטונות לשניהן להנהיג את העולם זה את העליוני' זה התחתוני'.

In my opinion, this anonymous text is part of the material stemming from Abulafia's school.

**188** Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45–49: “The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” See also below in Abulafia's passage referenced below in chapter 17 note 140; see also chapter 17 note 136.

**189** Compare also to the true performance of the commandments mentioned above in the same book.

**190** Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 89a:

ואז יהיה זמן תורה, אמת' כשישלוט משיח יהו"ה בכל המרכבה לשנות הטבעים כרצון השם.

On the divine names as the tools of the Messiah, see Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 90b. I assume that the “true time of the Torah” is a hidden polemic against the famous Rabbinic view on the six thousand years, two of *Tohu*, two of Torah, and two of the Messiah. For more on this passage, see note 720 below. As Prof. Menachem Kellner pointed out to me, this passage should be understood in the context of Nahmanides's similar term. See his commentaries on Genesis 37:2, Numbers 15:22, and Deuteronomy 30:6.

passage from the anonymous text into the context of the discussion from the Untitled Treatise presented earlier: here, we have a more messianic interpretation that is combined with magic, while earlier we saw a more spiritualistic approach, dealing as it does with the experience of the world to come by the individual who redeems himself.

Thus, while collecting the various uses of the gematria *Torah = Emsa'it*, we may find some form of consistency as well as developments moving from a more philosophical interpretation of the median position as imagination to a form of gnosis conceived as linguistic, magical, or eschatological. In the context of the quote from the Untitled Treatise, Abulafia is speaking, in my opinion, about the angel of the covenant, *mal'akh ha-Berit*, who is found in the middle of some form of revelation that is taking place in the allegorical paradise, which is tantamount to manipulation of the linguistic material. Thus, I assume that it is the Agent Intellect,<sup>191</sup> who is traditionally referred to as Metatron, the angel of the Torah, the angel of the face or presence, and, rarely, the “angel of paradise” who stands behind the angel of the covenant. It is described as an emissary—perhaps the imagination—of the Agent Intellect, related to redemption, and the divine name, most probably related to Elijah, who was described as the angel of the covenant and as including the divine name.<sup>192</sup> In order to resort to a view found in many cases in Abulafia’s writings as well as in the Untitled Treatise, what was received by tradition, *qabbalah*—in a written, oral, or revealed manner—should be confirmed by means of the intellect that can validate the “hidden secret,”<sup>193</sup> a view quite different from Nahmanides and his followers’ perception of Kabbalah.

The imaginative status of the Torah according to these statements may also have something to do with Abulafia’s assumption that unlike the study of their letters, the commandments themselves are related to imagination, a view implied in the above passage from *Or ha-Šekhel* as well as elsewhere in the same book.<sup>194</sup> In any case, in what I consider to be a seminal discussion, Abulafia distinguishes between the knowledge of the divine name of the distinguished individual,<sup>195</sup> who is portrayed as an extraordinarily rare person, on the one hand and the Torah, commandments,

**191** The philosophical term is mentioned in the Untitled Treatise in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fols. 69a, 76a, 79a, 95a. For Metatron as Agent Intellect among the Maimonideans, see *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe'ah*, 99, 102, and Albalag, *Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, 58, 60.

**192** See Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fols. 69a, 71b, 89b–90a. For a special concern with Paradisiacal imagery, see the Abulafian-oriented *Sefer Or ha-Menorah*, Ms. Jerusalem, NLI 28<sup>o</sup> 1303, fols. 26b–27a.

**193** Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 71a: יתאמת לך הסוד הנסתר הזה שכן הוא גם מצד השכל אחר: הקבלה.

**194** See the texts discussed in my “The Battle of the Urges: Psychomachia in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,” 124–34, especially 132, note 151; the text from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 90; and *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, 122–23. I hope to return to this theme in more detail elsewhere.

**195** See *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 39.

and good deeds that are conceived as the “gatekeepers”<sup>196</sup> on the other. These values were used instead of the knowledge of the name since they “are sufficient for the multitude to worship the gatekeepers and these are only for the best of them.”<sup>197</sup> The phrase “worship of gatekeepers” is quite an exceptional expression in medieval Judaism, even more so when they are identified with the Torah and commandments. Earlier in the same book, Abulafia speaks about the gatekeepers at the gates of wisdom; namely, philosophers.<sup>198</sup>

The linkage between the Torah and the multitude is reminiscent of that between the Torah and the imagination on the one hand and between the commandments and the imagination on the other. If we identify the so-called “distinguished individual” as someone who is undergoing some form of intellectual training or experience that is related to the divine name, as we shall see in some detail in chapter 21 below, he is distinguished, namely separated from the strong imaginative inclination of the multitude. In this context, the view of an anonymous Kabbalist from Abulafia’s school should be mentioned: he speaks about the parables as the *melış* (the intermediary, the *emša’i*) between the intellectual and sensual interpretations of the Torah.<sup>199</sup> However, this Kabbalist was much more conservative than Abulafia and does not resort to the category of imagination in the context of his discussion of the Torah’s content.<sup>200</sup>

The assumption that there is an important secret related to the Torah is found in Abulafia’s commentary on Exodus, where he writes that he will not mention anything related to the revelation of the Torah at Sinai there since this is not a topic that should be written in a book, but it should rather be received “from mouth to mouth.”<sup>201</sup> This is quite a revealing formulation, even if the Kabbalist does not expli-

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**196** The gatekeepers were originally those who opened the gates of the Temple during the day, though here they may refer to astronomical entities or the angels that are mentioned in the Hekhalot literature.

**197** *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 354–55:

וכשימצא איש מיוחד מתפאר בה יכחישהו השומעים מפני שלא נתפרסמה להמון כאשר היא. אבל הושמו במקומה שועריה שהם תורה ומצוות ומעשים טובים והספיק להמון בעבודת השוערים וזה לטובים שבהם.

On the Torah and commandments as guiding people to the gates of the palaces, see *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 130. On the “distinguished man,” see the discussion in chapter 21 below.

**198** *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:7, 330.

**199** *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2004), 24–25.

**200** In my opinion, this book, extant in two versions, only one of which has been printed, was not written by Abulafia. See my analysis in “Abraham Abulafia’s Works and Doctrine,” 69–72. However, without referring to my arguments at all, Sagerman claims that it is Abulafia’s (*The Serpent Kills*, 56, note 91 [where he translates the title in quite a surprising manner as *The Book of Refinement* instead of *The Book of Permutation* or *The Book of Combination*], 94, note 180; 205, note 84). Even the traditional editor of this book, Gross, viewed it as Abulafia’s work. Let me remark that I am not correcting the mistranslations of Abulafia’s texts in English scholarship if they do not affect the points I am trying to make in my study.

**201** *Maftēah ha-Šemot*, 164: לא נזכיר דבר בענין מתן תורה פה, כי אינו דבר שיכתב בספר אך דרכו היא לקבל ענין זה פה אל פה.

cate his opinion as to the meaning of the revelation of the Torah. It shows that it constitutes a supreme secret, and my assumption is that it has much to do with the issues we discussed earlier in this chapter as to the nature of the Torah. In any case, according to one of Abulafia's earlier books, the Israelites' journey in the desert to receive the Torah is interpreted as an allegory for the transition from the brain to the heart; that is, it is interpreted as a cognitive event of an individual and allegorised in some cases as the sun and moon.<sup>202</sup>

In short, Abulafia's discussions above should be seen within the framework of the Neo-Aristotelian intellectual apparatus; the secrets he hides fit the parameters of this apparatus. They are understood as implied in the inner structure of the biblical text. Moreover, as we shall see in chapter 22 below, Abulafia is one of the rare Kabbalists who spoke about a "new Torah," writing books entitled *Berit Ḥadašah*, "The New Covenant," and *Sefer ha-Yašar*. He claimed that his prophetic books should be read in synagogues along with those of the biblical prophets. Such facts imply an innovative—not to say subversive—attitude towards the Jewish canonical writings as they were understood in traditional Jewish circles, and an at least implicit attempt to supply an alternative to them, as some of the titles of Abulafia's prophetic books show, *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, to be read in the synagogues on the Sabbath, like the books of the biblical prophets, or *Sefer ha-Berit*. It assumes some form of apostolic consciousness that attempts to coagulate itself in scriptural articulations that are highly esoteric in style.

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202 *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 152–53.



## IV The Parable of the Pearl and its Interpretations

### 11 Maimonides's Parable of the Pearl and Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*

Taking into serious consideration Abulafia's Neo-Aristotelian framework—which harboured both a radical anthropology and a radical theory about sacred texts (which, distinct from double-faith theory,<sup>1</sup> is similar to double-truth theory)—and his use of multi-layered esotericism,<sup>2</sup> I will now analyse his understanding of a special modified version of the well-known parable of the three rings. This parable, which deals with the nature of religion, is not found in traditional Jewish sources.

In this book, I have argued that Abulafia utilises something similar to a universal approach in his interpretation of sacred texts. In this chapter, I seek to take this theory from the more general level of observation and discussion to an analysis of a concrete subject that can be better understood by attributing a much greater role to Abulafia's Maimonidean background. Although political esotericism, in my opinion, underlies the content and context of Abulafia's analysis of the parable of the pearl, I will show that a more redemptive and personal form of esotericism is also present. However, let me first address a concept that is fundamental in the medieval version of the parable of the pearl.

As found in the introduction to this book, a careful reader and teacher of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as Abulafia presents himself to be, could hardly be ignorant of Maimonides's parable of the lost pearl. Dedicated to a new emphasis on the paramount role of cognition, Maimonides refers to the use of parables by Solomon, the wisest of all men, as understood in the Midrash on the Song of Songs. He writes:

Rather what this text has in view here is, without any doubt, the understanding of obscure matters. About this, it has been said: Our Rabbis say<sup>3</sup> a man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lightning a taper worth an *issar*. In the same way, this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it, you can understand the words of the Torah.<sup>4</sup> This too is literally what they say. Now consider the explicit affirmation of [the sages] [...] that the internal meaning of the words of the Torah is a pearl, whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing, and their comparison is of the concealment of a subject by its parable's external

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1 See Harry A. Wolfson, "The Double Faith Theory in Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas," in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, eds. Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973): 1:583–618, and Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 122–39.

2 In addition to Maimonidean political esotericism, Abulafia was well-acquainted with Abraham ibn Ezra's astrological esotericism. Although Abulafia was interested in astro-magic, there are relatively few vestiges of ibn Ezra's esotericism in his writings. The fear of Christian persecution is mentioned once as a reason for hiding his views. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 54–55.

3 I am not aware of the existence of a Rabbinic parable like this.

4 *Midrash of Song of Songs* 1:1.

meaning to a man who let a pearl drop in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until [...] he lights a lamp—an act which corresponds to an understanding of the meaning of the parable.<sup>5</sup>

From the point of view of our discussion here, the sharp distinction between the parable itself (which is considered worthless) and its interior meaning (which is the only thing that counts from an intellectual point of view) is of paramount importance. Parables in general are not the subject matter under discussion, but rather only the parables found in the sacred scriptures. This passage, therefore, goes further than simply providing an implicit critique of the plain sense of the Bible. The plain sense is compared to a darkness within which there is a precious and luminous pearl. Interpretation consists in illumining the darkness (i.e., the opaque parable) in order to find the lost pearl. As such, the Bible itself is not criticised, but only its plain sense.

Although it is quite plausible that Abulafia was acquainted with this passage from Maimonides's famous text, I have not found any direct references to it in his writings. Nevertheless, it seems that in the introduction to his book *Or ha-Šekhel*, whose title means “the light of the intellect,” we find a very similar image; in this case, an image of the light of the sun that illumines a dark house so that it is possible to see what can be found within. Abulafia, following Aristotle,<sup>6</sup> compares this image to the impact of the illumination of the intellect, explicitly referencing the tenth separate intellect (the Agent Intellect) in this context.<sup>7</sup> In his description of his own illumination in Barcelona, he speaks about light penetrating through windows.<sup>8</sup> No doubt these images stem from the vast reservoir of imagery found in the Platonic

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5 Pines, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:11. This passage is discussed in Levi ben Abraham, *Liwyat Hen, Ma'ašeh Berešit*, 38–39. It was also interpreted in the fourteenth-century Yemenite commentary by Zeraḥyah ha-Rofe' discussed by Yitzhak Tzvi Langemann, “Sharḥ Al-Dalala: A Commentary to Maimonides's *Guide* from Fourteenth-Century Yemen,” in *Traditions of Maimonideanism*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 160–61. See Joseph Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments (Ṭa'amei Ha-Mitzvot)* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 7; Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides's Guide*, 26–28, 53, 61; see also the different position of Lawrence Kaplan, “The Purpose of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides's Theory of Parables, and Sceptical versus Dogmatic Readings of the Guide,” in *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought*, ed. Racheli Haliva (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018): 67–85, and Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment*, 13–20.

6 *De Anima* 3.5.430a16.

7 *Or ha-Šekhel*, 2–3. For the resort to the phrase *Or ha-Šekhel* in the poem that concludes the introduction, see page 4, where there is an error in the print (מאור שכל instead of מואור שכל).

8 See the texts presented in Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 478, and *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 367.

and Aristotelian traditions—they reverberate in innumerable texts in the Middle Ages, including many Jewish ones.<sup>9</sup>

This is just one example of the large-scale resort to Maimonidean images, parables, and terms that permeates Abulafia's writings. Unquestionably, the Maimonidean literature is the main source of the technical terminology that is dominant in all of his writings. An example of this utilisation of Maimonidean literature can be found in the manner in which Abulafia describes the definition of prophecy, which was a major topic in his religious worldview.<sup>10</sup> Though at the same time drawing from a very opposite intellectual trajectory, as Abulafia was part of the Maimonidean camp, it is evident that his thought is also grounded in *Sefer Yeşirah*, a book never mentioned by Maimonides himself. Abulafia's conceptual apparatus is dominantly Neo-Aristotelian, while the other sources (Neo-Platonic, Pythagorean, Hermetic, or theosophical), though sometimes evident in his writings, are nevertheless marginal. In some cases, their meaning is substantially qualified by the Neo-Aristotelian matrix. However, while Maimonides's parable assumes a hidden message that is quite definite in Abulafia, it is less a matter of discovering the secret meaning of the text and more, though not exclusively, a matter of an interpreter inserting meaning into a text, which a modern thinker will see as eisegesis. With these observations in mind, I will now give a detailed analysis of a parable found in one of Abulafia's major writings.

## 12 Abraham Abulafia's Version of the Pearl Parable

There is scarcely a single passage in Abulafia's numerous writings that has received scholarly attention equal to that of his account of the parable of the son and the pearl. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, this parable has been dealt

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<sup>9</sup> See Alexander Altmann, "Ibn Bajja on Man's Ultimate Felicity," in *Harry Austryn Wolfson: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, eds. Arthur Hyman, Saul Liberman, Shalom Spiegel, and Leo Strauss (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965): 1:60–64; Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 155–92; and Van den Bergh, *Averroes' Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, §29. On light in Abulafia, see my *The Mystical Experience*, 77–83; "From 'Or Ganuz' to 'Or Torah': A Chapter in the Phenomenology of Jewish Mysticism" [Hebrew], *Migwan De'ot be-Yiśra'el* 11 (2002): 37–46; and my introduction to *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 165–200. For Abulafia's reference to this image, see *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 154–55, 158. On mysticism more generally, see Matthew T. Kapstein, ed., *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 19–77; Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 125–50; and Max Pulver, "The Experience of Light in the Gospel of St. John, in the 'Corpus Hermeticum,' in Gnosticism, and in the Eastern Church," in *Spiritual Disciplines: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 239–66.

<sup>10</sup> See Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia."

with by a variety of scholars, each for his or her own reason; however, no sustained analysis of its context and the author's intention is available.<sup>11</sup> This parallel to the more famous parable of the three sons and the three rings appears in *Or ha-Šekhel* (ca. 1282–83),<sup>12</sup> one of the earliest books Abulafia wrote during his stay in Messina in his most productive decade (ca. 1281–91).

In this chapter and the two following ones, I will concentrate on Abulafia's version of the three rings parable and its scholarly interpretations, leaving aside other versions in the Jewish tradition that focus on the more common variants of it. In order to provide an adequate analysis of Abulafia's version, I have produced a critical edition and translation of the entire chapter that contains the parable in Appendix A. In the present chapter, I will provide a detailed comparison to other discussions found in *Or ha-Šekhel*, as well as Abulafia's other treatises. I seek to avoid discussions grounded in small fragments taken out of context, a phenomenon that invites eventual misunderstandings. This approach, which attempts to make sense of a larger passage by Abulafia and not only short excerpts, has already been applied in my analysis of a passage that includes Abulafia's list of twelve commentaries on *Sefer Yeširah*.<sup>13</sup> It allows for a much more detailed confrontation with his thought and sources, as seen above in the case of his testimony of his teaching of the *Guide*.

Most of the scholars who have analysed Abulafia's version of the parable have been less concerned with the specific conceptual framework in which it is embedded

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**11** The core of the story can be found in Muslim sources. See Louis Massignon, "La légende de *Tribus Impostoribus* et ses origines Islamiques," in his *Opera Minora*, 1:82–85, and Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, and Pim Valkenberg, eds., *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 279–81. For a bibliography, see Iris Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings: A Revision of Its History," *Journal of Medieval History* 23, no. 2 (1997): 163–77, especially 171–72 and 175–77, and now her *The Parable of the Three Rings and the Idea of Religious Toleration in Premodern European Culture* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017), passim, especially 37–42. For Abulafia's special version, see Moritz Steinschneider, *Hebraeische Bibliographie*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Asher, 1861): 78, note 7; Moritz Steinschneider, *Hebraeische Bibliographie*, vol. 12 (Berlin: Asher, 1872): 21; Abraham Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia—A Tentative Evaluation," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, eds. Joseph Leon Blau and Salo Wittmayer Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959): 59–60, note 19; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 48–50; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 75; Idel, *Ben*, 370–71, note 213; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 66–69; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 60–61, 64–67; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia and the Prophetic Kabbalah," in *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederik E. Greenspan (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 72; Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 204–5; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 58, note 98; Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology Systematically and Historically Considered* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 434; Avishai Margalit, "The Ring: On Religious Pluralism," in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 148. See also Appendix B note 98 below.

**12** On the book and its influence, see Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 35–36, and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 63–71. On this period of febrile literary and propagandistic activities, see Appendix D.

**13** Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 480–94.

in the chapter where it appears and more concerned with the similarities and differences between his version and Boccaccio's "original" story in the *Decameron*. In any case, the framework has not been analysed in detail, and therefore nor has the message that Abulafia wanted to convey. This resort to a parable that is not found in Jewish sources is relatively rare in Abulafia's many writings. Unlike the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, the Talmudic literature, and even Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*,<sup>14</sup> Abulafia was less concerned with this type of literary device, the resort to the pre-existing parable of the pearl being an exception. Moreover, he explicitly points out in the context of the parable that he is addressing an esoteric dimension of matters, a vital issue which has not been put into relief in the scholarly interpretations of this parable with which I am acquainted.

Therefore, let me translate the salient context of the parable as well as the parable itself and then discuss them in some detail. In this way, I will make sense of this special version of the parable, as Abulafia intended. In my opinion, it is only when the full context is seen that a better understanding is possible. Given Abulafia's esoteric approach, quotations of short segments can lead to an entirely different picture of his meaning. As such, an analysis of the larger text and not merely of a few segments taken from different books is a much-needed type of engagement with Abulafia's thought. In this way, the specificities of his discourse and its esoteric valences, only rarely addressed in the thematic approach, can be made clear. Paying greater attention to longer segments of discussion compels an engagement with wider contexts that are otherwise ignored in scholarship. While the thematic approach is determined by the assumption that a particular thinker's method had a significant coherent structure, the textual one sees understanding the text as the scholar's most important task.

The parable is part of a rather short chapter that is, according to its title, intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Hebrew language.<sup>15</sup> Given the fact that following Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* 16a, the basic function of transmitting the mental message in any language works through the use of different sounds, Abulafia claims that we may discern which is the best language by checking the specific nature of the nation that uses a certain language. He writes:

[a][1] It is known that a nation that possesses Torah and commandments, laws, and regulations that are more righteous than another [nation] is more respected by that which emanates on all.<sup>16</sup> And as much as the nation has moved away from the universal religion [*ha-dat ha-kelalit*]<sup>17</sup> that

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**14** On Maimonides's theory of parable and its background, see Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides's Guide*, 18–63.

**15** The Hebrew text of the entire chapter is printed, with reference to several manuscripts, in Appendix A.

**16** Perhaps God or the cosmic Agent Intellect.

**17** According to one of the manuscripts I consulted (see Appendix A, note 1205), the Hebrew is *ha-dat'at ha-kelalit*, which means "the universal knowledge." However, this phrase is not repeated in other discussions in Abulafia's extant writings. Given the specific context of the occurrence of the

was hinted at, it is more remote from that which is the first cause of the influence of the religion, which is the divine overflow<sup>18</sup> that moves the universal speech [*ha-dibbur ha-kelali*].<sup>19</sup> [2] It is known among the nations that our nation is the nation that first received the Torah from the mouth of the Dynamis, and there is no nation that denies this. And what is acknowledged by everyone and has become known in public does not need further proof. If so, that which originates from the source of all is superior to its counterparts, and its language is superior to all other languages. And the witness is that it is in the language of this special nation that He spoke all that He spoke,<sup>20</sup> and in its writing [namely, the alphabet] that He commanded all that he would write to be written. Furthermore, what He said was written by Him on the two tablets of stone, either if this is according to the plain sense alone or if it should be understood in both the exoteric and the esoteric senses. And either both senses are true, or one of them is; indeed, it was written in the Holy Language and the tradition persists to this day. [3] If one will say: “It was true, but behold, the nation is not worthy of this exalted degree and He changed it for another nation, and He changed its laws and commandments, and He came and diminished them and changed their writing,” indeed, by necessity, he who says this, he himself confesses its degree, and the degree of its language and the degree of its writing. After he concedes the principal matter, the quandary occurs since the above-mentioned three degrees are today absent from it [or us]. And if we do not question him on the sensible deficiency, since we would be denying the obvious, we could not ascertain the intellectual since the sensible precedes the intellectual by nature, despite the fact that the intellectual precedes the sensible in degree [...]. But

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phrase, the variant “universal religion,” which is found in more manuscripts, is more cogent. The phrase *dat kolelet*, which is a close parallel to Abulafia’s phrase, is found in a much later fourteenth-century sermon. See Ari Ackerman, “Zerahia Halevi Saladin and Joseph Albo on Natural, Conventional and Divine Law,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20 (2013): 333. It is translated on 336 as “comprehensive law.” For natural law in Judaism, see Avi Sagi, *Existentialism, Pluralism, and Identity*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Rothschild and Aaron Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 59–102. On the meanings of *dat* in the context of a more general type of religion, see Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides’ ‘True Religion’: For Jews or All Humanity,” *Meorot* 7, no. 1 (2008): 2–28. For a recent survey of the meaning of and developments related to the term *dat*, see Abraham Melamed, *Dat: From Law to Religion: A History of a Formative Term* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2014), 55–59.

**18** Some lines before this, Abulafia speaks about the universal overflow or influx (*ha-šefa‘ ha-kelali*) that moves the universal speech (*ha-dibbur ha-kelali*). See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 32, 33. Compare also to what Abulafia wrote in “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 27: “The Torah, as well as all speeches, are as a *hyle* for thought [*maḥašavah*].” Here, thought is human thought. It should be pointed out that Abulafia considered the oblivion of language to be a regress into a state of animality, and he also includes Jews in this category. See the two texts analysed in my *Kabbalah in Italy*, 84–85. For the relationship between the Agent Intellect and the seventy languages, see *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 60. Compare, however, to the quite different interpretation of Wolfson, “Deceitful Truth and Truthful Deceit,” 114\*–15\*, who translates the Hebrew term *dibbur* as “language” instead of “speech,” and grounds his analysis on this mistranslation of language as a historical and thus a particular phenomenon, ignoring Abulafia’s phrase “universal speech” found in this very passage. See also his other translation “universal word” below in chapter 14 note 51.

**19** Paragraph [a1] has not been translated in the various accounts of the parable and is only rarely mentioned in passing; there has never been a proper analysis of its contribution to understanding the parable.

**20** The assumption that God spoke is quite problematic in Abulafia’s worldview; Abulafia assumes that God is an intellect, as Maimonides did. See his *Guide* 2:48, and Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language.”



we shall acknowledge the truth that nowadays the three degrees are absent from us, though not by way of the exchange of one for another.

[b] Rather, the matter resembles a man<sup>21</sup> who had a beautiful pearl which he wanted to bequeath to his son. While he was instructing his son in matters of wealth so that the son would recognize the virtue of the pearl and would value it in the same way as it was valued in the eyes of the father, the son came and angered the father. What did the father do? He did not want to give the pearl to another person, lest the son lose his inheritance if he wanted to repent and to please his father, but he cast the pearl into a pit and said: "If my son does not repent, I do not want him to inherit it, but if he repents, I do not want that he should lose it. And as long as he does not repent, it will be stored in the pit, and when he repents, I shall immediately take it out of the pit and give it to him." As long as he did not repent, the father's servants<sup>22</sup> came each and every day and aggrieved him, and each of them would boast that his master had given him the pearl. But the son did not pay attention to them, because he had no intelligence [*ḥasar da'at*]. After a while, they so aggrieved him that he repented, and the father forgave him and brought the pearl out of the pit and gave it to him. The servants had to exert themselves for griefs they had caused him and offered many words of appeasement.

[c] This has happened to us in the case of those who say that God has taken them in exchange for us, for all the time that we do not make peace with God, because we have sinned, we have no mouth to answer them. However, when we repent, and He returns our captivity, those who shame us now will be ashamed when they see that God has returned our captivity; they will see that their thought and imagination [were wrong] and that we have been afflicted for our sins, but that we have all been absolved. As of today, we have not attained that exalted degree to which we expect to rise at any time. For this reason, the dispute continues about who is the beloved of God and who has the treasure and the truth, us or our enemies. This will persist until the decider [*ha-makhri'a*]<sup>23</sup> comes and takes the pearl out of the pit and gives it to His chosen, to us or to them. Then the absolute truth will become perfectly clear and the precious treasure will become radiant and return to its rightful owners, those worthy to inherit it, those who are called the sons of God. [Then] jealousy and strife [and] disputation and hatred will cease, and imaginative thoughts will be obliterated from their hearts. Then, each and every man will consider each and every member of the species as if he is his fellow and his fellow is himself, just as a man can see every one of his limbs as if it is another's/another person's and each part of them is everything for him, "and many will go about and knowledge will increase."<sup>24</sup> No one

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21 I do not know why Wolfson, both in *Venturing Beyond*, 60, and in "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 204, claims that Abulafia's parable speaks about a king or about the son being a prince. Nothing in the printed Hebrew text or its manuscripts with which I am acquainted points in this direction. See the Hebrew original in Appendix A.

22 The Hebrew is *'eved*, which can also be translated as "slave."

23 Or arbiter; this is most likely a reference to the prophet Elijah, who, coming before the Messiah as a harbinger, was often understood in Jewish sources as deciding issues that cannot be resolved by the ordinary kind of human decision-making. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 57, note 22. Since Elijah as a human person and a harbinger of the Messiah does not play a role in Abulafia's eschatology, I assume that the decider here is the cosmic Agent Intellect that was associated with this intellect in *Sitrei Torah*. See Idel, *Ben*, 279–82 and 289. Indeed, Abulafia relates *makhri'a* to Metatron in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 82. On the other hand, the word *makhri'a* stands for the intellect that is found within man in a passage in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 41. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew form of Elijah, *Eliyahu*, contains the consonants *'HWY* plus the letter *lamed*.

24 Daniel 12:4.



will instruct his fellow man and say “Know God!” for all shall know the name,<sup>25</sup> from the greatest to the smallest, “for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the water that covers the sea.”<sup>26</sup> Since the matter is so, all have agreed from that time that the chosen language is the Holy Language. Therefore, I will make known that which was made known to the prophets concerning the secret of the pronounced name, which is not known to any of the members of the human species.<sup>27</sup>

### 13 Three Different Narratives in Abulafia’s Writings

In my opinion, the above passage is a good case for testing the need to interpret Abulafia in the context of his being a follower of Maimonides. The passage from *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz* discussed in chapter 10 above, in my opinion, provides the clue for understanding the parable translated from *Or ha-Šekhel*, as well as its context: Maimonidean thought, especially his allegorizations, coupled with similar Neo-Aristotelian views, should be understood as quintessential for understanding Abulafia’s hints related to the parable.

I would like to distinguish between the three different types of narrative that are found in the above passage: the parabolic one, found in paragraph [b], which consists of a resort to the genre of parable; the historical one, found in both [a] and [c], which I shall call the second narrative and which is a horizontal interpretation of the parable that deals with national redemption; and finally, a third one that is only hinted at when Abulafia refers to it in [a2]. Such a distinction between these three levels is certainly Maimonidean.<sup>28</sup>

This third narrative, essentially a different conceptual register from the second, national one, deals with the esoteric meaning of some concepts Abulafia uses that are also implied in other instances. This narrative is a psychological allegory that is transhistorical and vertical; it deals with personal redemption, which is attainable

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25 Or God. The assumption is that the knowledge of God depends not on human instruction, but on direct contact with divinity, an assumption that fits Abulafia’s claims of revelation from above. Compare to *Zohar* 3, fol. 130b: “In the days of King Messiah they will not have to teach one to one.”

26 Isaiah 11:9. I have no idea why Hames (*Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 135–36, note 28) deemed the “similarities” between this part of Abulafia’s passage and a text of Joachim of Fiore to “stand out.” I see neither similarities nor parallels between the two texts; indeed, there are no parallels even between the biblical verses that these texts used as proof-texts.

27 Ms. Vatican, 233, fols. 37b–39b, printed from different manuscripts by Gross, 33–36; *Matityahu Safrin* (Jerusalem: 1999), 41–44; and *Ohr ha-Sechel: The Light of the Intellect*, eds. and trans. Avi Solomon, Adam Shohom, and Sharron Shatil (s.l.: Providence University, 2008), 47–50, 202–4. The Hebrew original of this passage is printed in Appendix A below. I have also printed and translated the discussion that follows the translated passage here, designated as paragraph [d]. Some details of paragraph [d] will be discussed in various footnotes in chapter 24 and Appendix A below.

28 See Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’s Guide*, 61–63, and see also 66–73.

by a union with a “higher” intellectual entity.<sup>29</sup> From some points of view, it is parallel to the manner in which Christian authors understood the anagogical interpretation. Needless to say, this third level is the most important one for Abulafia, who, following the lead of two books written by Maimonides and Al-Fārābī that he knew and quoted, as well as that of Averroes, subscribed to a political type of esotericism. The allegorical type of discourse as practised by Maimonides—and, following him, Abulafia—is by nature atemporal, as I showed above in chapter 9 in my discussions on the Paradisiacal and Sinaitic experiences. In my opinion, this insistence on the spiritual register contains one of Abulafia’s most important contributions to Jewish mysticism, esoteric as it sometimes is.

However, given the concentration on the parable’s historical dimensions and background displayed by some scholars who were more concerned with the parallels of the parable and its reverberations, as well as the assumption that the ultimate significance of the passage is the historical fate of the Jewish people or mankind as a whole (i. e., the second narrative), little has been done to put into relief the existence and significance of the third level of narrative (i. e., the esoteric one). This latter register has been neglected in most scholarly analyses of the parable and of Abulafia’s type of mysticism in general. In the following discussion, I will broaden some observations I have already made about it in the past. It should also be pointed out that there is no reason to assume that it is possible to coordinate the details of the parable to every detail of the two narratives, a well-known problem in interpretations of parables in general, still more so when a parable is adopted from earlier sources.

The assumption that there are three different narratives is not explicitly formulated either in the parable itself or in its immediate context. Rather, this assumption is the result of my analysis of the material found in *Or ha-Šekhel* and elsewhere in Abulafia’s writings, though its pertinence may be contested. However, this assumption is corroborated by a rather instructive statement found in the context of the interpretation of a lengthy vision Abulafia reports experiencing in his prophetic composition *Sefer ha-Ot*. After formulating the details of his vision of the wars between four warriors and the arrival of a fifth figure, he asks for an interpretation of these visions from the supernal figure who was revealed in his vision; namely, the angel Yaho’el.<sup>30</sup> He then says that the four warriors refer to four kings who will come at

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**29** On the two registers, see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 84, 90–91, 283; Idel, “The Time of the End”; and Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 74, 82. For Abulafia’s view of atemporal intellectual experiences, see already Moshe Idel, “Higher Than Time’: Observations of Some Concepts of Time in Kabbalah and Hasidism,” in *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Brian Ogren (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 179–210, a part of which has been reproduced in Appendix E below.

**30** On this angel and Abulafia’s possible source for this rather rare name, see Idel, *Ben*, 18, 120, 206, and 209–11; *Messianic Mystics*, 85–94; and Moshe Idel, *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2008), 135–48. Abulafia’s discussion of Yaho’el in his *Sitrei Torah*, perhaps for the first time in his writings, was one of his first pieces to find its way into print in Italy. See *Liqqutei Šikheḥah u-Fe’ah* (Ferrara: s.n., 1556), fols. 232b–24a. See also Appendix D note 212 below.

the end of time; the fifth is to be identified as the Messiah.<sup>31</sup> Abulafia continues: “This is an interpretation that is evident to everyone, but the hidden interpretation will be understood [only] by someone who understands from his own knowledge.”<sup>32</sup>

The term translated as “interpretation” is *pitron*, which also means “a solution to an enigma.” It occurs in many instances in Jewish sources, including Abulafia,<sup>33</sup> in exegetical contexts to refer to the possibility of decoding the meaning of a dream. This fact brings the vision closer to the common usage of decoding, meaning that the prophetic vision found in a text composed by Abulafia himself can be understood according to two different interpretations: the first deals with the arrival of the Messiah after the eschatological wars, while the second is conceived as being hidden or spiritual and most likely deals with an individual’s inner redemption.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of something being “hidden” is to be understood according to its two senses: unlike the first type of interpretation, it is hidden from the public; that is, it is a political type of esotericism. In addition, it also means a secret sense of a narrative—namely, some form of allegory—which does not necessarily have to be problematic from the political point of view.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the eschatological secret undergoes an allegorical interpretation that removes the apocalyptic elements in the first type of interpretation (the second narrative).

The second register or narrative (namely, the national one) can be understood as myths that are necessary for the education of the masses; in our case, the creation of a shared hope of a better future for the national unit that is political but, at the same time, devoid of any inner spiritual or atemporal meaning. In some cases, it can also

31 *Sefer ha-Ot*, ed. Jellinek, 84.

32 *Sefer ha-Ot*, 85:

והנה הגבור חמישי הוא משיחי אשר ימלוך אחר מלחמת ימי ארבע מלכויות. זה פתרון הנגלה לכל, רק פתרון הנעלם יבינהו המבין מדעתו.

33 See *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 41 and 55, and especially *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 29–30, where the *pitron* deals with more of an intellectual aspect that differs from the national interpretation found there. See also Moshe Idel, *Nocturnal Kabbalists* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2006), 15–36. Compare to *Commentary on Iš Adam*, 49, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*: “And Raziel started to say that he concentrated [his mind] and told [future] events, and they are known in accordance with the plain sense and the esoteric one.”

והחל עוד רזיאל להגיד שהתבודד והגיד הקורות והן ידועות בנגלה ובנסתר.

For the possibility of a hierarchy of readings of the narratives in the canonical texts of Maimonides, see Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment*, 19–20.

34 Compare to *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 54, where the primacy of the kingdom of Israel (מלכות ישראל) over the four kingdoms corresponds to the “powers of the soul,” both referred to by two letters, א”ד. I assume that both *Yiśra’el* and *Malkhut* are terms that stand for the Agent Intellect, as well as for “general” or “universal.” See Idel, “Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia,” 6, 9–13.

35 See also the *Commentary on Sefer ha-’Edut*, 76, where he refers to האמת; that is, the true hidden sense of his vision. See also Rabbi Isaac of Acre’s view of the true hidden sense, as discussed in Boaz Huss, “*Nisan*, the Wife of the Infinite: The Mystical Hermeneutics of Rabbi Isaac of Acre,” *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 155–81.

be understood as a canonised belief that can be interpreted as having an inner meaning that is infused with the internal experiences of members of the elite. In other words, the utopian narrative of the second register concerning the fate of the nations can be understood as secretly referring to something higher; namely, to a perfect spiritual state that an individual may attain in the present. To put it in another way, the two narratives that were used in order to interpret the first narrative of the parable can also be seen as the external—the second narrative—versus the internal sequence of events; namely, the third narrative or register. In my opinion, another important example of the three types of narratives can be found in a brief discussion of a prodigal son or student who does not want to learn the truth, as in the pearl parable, which is interpreted both as the people of Israel and as an individual standing before God.<sup>36</sup> In fact, these two interpretations coexist in the same text, though they convey different eschatological meanings, a phenomenon I propose to describe as synchrony.<sup>37</sup>

In more general terms, it should be mentioned that Abulafia makes recourse to the concept of polysemy. So, for example, he wrote commentaries on some lost and quite enigmatic books, in which he committed his own revelations to writing, and in one of these, we find instances of terms used in the prophetic books which had more than one meaning. One such example, which will be translated in chapter 20 below, is when the term “Messiah” is interpreted as having three different meanings, two of them explicitly related to Neo-Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

It should be mentioned that there are good reasons to assume that the hidden or secret interpretations may refer to Abulafia's own role as a Messiah or to the special significance of specific episodes in his life—for example, the meanings of the names of the cities where he lived.<sup>39</sup> It is in these secret interpretations, not the national narrative that he considers to be known to everyone, that Abulafia believes the most important messages can be found. In my opinion, this is also the case in the parable of the pearl. Especially important is the fact that Abulafia explicitly asserts that the two interpretive narratives may contradict each other. In other words, based on my assumption that there is an esoteric narrative that constitutes the highest form of knowledge that Abulafia would like to communicate, we should differentiate between the more particularist (exoteric) expressions in his books and the more univer-

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**36** *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 196–97.

**37** See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God.’” For the coexistence of different narratives in the same text and the application of exegetical methods characteristic of the interpretation of sacred scriptures to one's own writing, see my “On Symbolic Self-Interpretations in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Writings,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 16 (1988): 90–96; on Dante, see Robert Hollander, “Dante *Theologus-Poeta*,” *Dante Studies* 94 (1976): 91–136. This has nothing to do with Jung's well-known concept of synchronicity.

**38** See chapter 20 below as well as Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon, *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe'ah*, 99.

**39** See Idel, “On Symbolic Self-Interpretations in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Writings.”

salist (esoteric) ones, which is an issue that has been obfuscated in the recent scholarship on this Kabbalist.

## 14 A Commentary on the Parable's Contexts

The starting point of paragraph [a1] makes the connection between the universal speech and the universal religion, which means that the best language (general speech) is related to the best religion (the universal one). In order to determine the best language, which is the main topic of the chapter, one has to review the structure of the nation associated with it. These two topics are therefore related to each other. A third topic, the script, is not mentioned in this specific context, though it is mentioned together with the other two later in the discussion.

The central theme of the long passage is a concept which, I believe, cannot be found in Jewish writings before Abulafia or even elsewhere in his writings: the universal religion (*ha-dat ha-kelalit*). This religion is described as part of the past, a conclusion based on the use of the past tense of the verb “to move away,” and constitutes a form of ideal criterion against which every other religion is judged. Though the phrase does not occur anywhere else in Abulafia’s writings, we may be able to guess its meaning from the surrounding context in paragraph [a], as well as the content of paragraph [c]. In paragraph [a], this concept is parallel to the universal speech since both the universal religion and the universal speech emanate from the divine influx.<sup>40</sup> The term “universal speech” parallels natural speech (the twenty-two letters), as we learn from his discussion.<sup>41</sup> We may assume that the divine influx is

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<sup>40</sup> What exactly Abulafia meant by *Dat* is not so clear. For example, see his enumeration of the ascending categories in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48 fol. 94b:

השכון מוליד עפר. העפר מוליד השדים. השדים מולידים היצר. היצר מוליד הדת. דת מולידה עולם קטן. עולם קטן מוליד הקדש. הקדש מוליד סוף נקדה. נקדה מולידה גלגל פרת. גלגל פרת מוליד העולם הבא. העולם הבא מוליד חיי החיים החיים תמיד.

The view that demons generate religion should be understood as the involvement of imagination in the formulation of religion. I assume that the world to come is some form of intellectual entity, human or cosmic, and that this world generates a higher form of life, perhaps the divine life. It is plausible that from the semantic point of view, he is following the lead of Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah*. See *Hilekhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 71:1, 9:2, and *Hilekhot Melakhim* 10:9. According to Warren Zev Harvey, Maimonides refers several times to *dat ha-emet* as some form of universal religion in his *Mishneh Torah*. See *Hilekhot Melakhim* 4:10, 12:10. See also Kellner, *They Too Are Called Human*, 55–56; and Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan and Aaron W. Hughes, eds., *Menachem Kellner: Jewish Universalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). For more on the term *dat* in the Jewish Middle Ages, see Melamed, *Dat: From Law to Religion*.

<sup>41</sup> I do not know why Wolfson (“Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 204) translates it as “universal word.” See also *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 24:

אך הצורה הכוללת כל כתב היא צורת הדבור הטבעית הדבקה בפה שהיא חקוקה בלב בעת היצירה. והעד שאילמלא לא היתה זאת צורת האדם לא היה האדם מדבר, ולא היה עיקר מציאותו הדבור.

an intellectual influx that is transformed in both speech and religion; it also includes imagination as part of the phenomenon of revelation.

In a very important passage in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, Abulafia discusses the past existence of one unified nation (*ha-ummah ha-enošit*) which had one religion (*dat aḥat*) and one language (*šafah aḥat*) which disintegrated with the attempt to build the Tower of Babel.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly enough, in this context, he does not mention the common type of writing. How the universal religion emerged is not clear. Therefore, I propose to identify the phrase *dat kelalit* in *Or ha-Šekhel* with the ancient single religion mentioned in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*. This identification seems to be plausible because of a distinction in the latter book that refers to the earlier discussion of one single religion. There, Abulafia speaks about the universal Torah and the particular Torah, *Torah kelalit* and *Torah peraṭit*.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it seems that the Torah that was revealed to the Jews—namely, the written Torah—is a particular Torah that came later than the unwritten and universal Torah.

It should be noted that according to two of Abulafia's texts, the Torah was known orally before Moses committed it to writing, which is quite a radical approach, especially for someone in the Maimonidean camp.<sup>44</sup> According to one of these passages,

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“The universal form that comprises the entire script is the form of natural speech that sticks to the mouth, which is engraved in the heart at the beginning of creation [of man]. And the testimony is that this would not be the form of man, man would not speak and the essence of his existence would not be speech.” *Sefer ha-Melammed*, written, at least in part, in 1276, is perhaps the first Kabbalistic book written in the Byzantine Empire. Compare to chapter 13 note 29 above. On natural language in Abulafia, see the text preserved in a seventeenth-century manuscript translated in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 14, as well as 16–27. See also Allison Coudert, “Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century,” in *Magia Naturalis und die Entstehung der modernen Naturwissenschaften*, ed. Albert Heine (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978): 56–118.

<sup>42</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 80. The background of some of the terms is evidently the verses in Genesis 11:1–9. On the similarity between other passages of Abulafia's discussion of the confusion of languages and their dispersion as well as Dante's view, see Dante Alighieri, *De l'eloquence en vulgaire*, trans. Irène Rosier-Catach (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 44–45, 115. See also chapter 4 note 49 above.

<sup>43</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 151.

<sup>44</sup> *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:9, 178–79:

ואמנם בדתנו שיש שם אומות זו מזו משונות והם אינם בעלי דתות, ראוי לומר שהאומות קדמו לחלוק הדתות ולשנוייהם. וזה לפי המושכל אבל לפי התורה זה מבואר מבני נח ומדור הפלגה, שהיו אומות שנחלקו ונבדלו זו מזו ועדין תורה לא נתנה מפורסמת עד בא משה ומן התורה נתחדשו שאר הדתות.

See also *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 91–92:

זאת התורה השלמה [...] ומצותיה באו בה להבדיל זו האומה בחקים ומשפטים ידועים לה ונעלמים מכל האומות שהן מביאות אותה להבדל ולהקדש מכל עם בעבודת השם. והיא הדרך שידעה אברהם אבינו על פה לא בכתב [...] ובבא משה נכתבו הענינים ההם כדי שימצאו בכתב כמו שהיו על פה. ואם כן לא היה בהם שום דבר לבטלה והשם יתע' רצה שתתפרסם מעלת זאת האומה הקדושה לעיני כל העמים.

“This perfect Torah [...] and its commandments came in order to distinguish this nation by means of laws and regulations known to her, but unknown to all the other nations, which separates her from any people by means of the worship of God. And this way was known to Abraham our forefather, orally, not in a written form [...], and when Moses came, those issues were written down, so that they will be found in a written form as they were in an oral manner. And there was, therefore, nothing

it was only after the Torah had been written down that various religions were derived from it, though the laws (*huqqim*) had been there all the time.<sup>45</sup> Thus, as Abulafia asserts, given that the written form was identical to its oral transmission, Moses became more of a scribe than a divinely inspired law-giver.<sup>46</sup> This merely technical role attributed to Moses needs more clarification than can be given in this context. Indeed, Abulafia also describes Moses as “the leader,”<sup>47</sup> which would shift the emphasis from Moses’s role as a perfect and unique legislator, as the law already existed, to that of a great leader.<sup>48</sup> In my opinion, this emphasis allows for an easier explanation of the possibility that Abulafia conceived himself to be higher than Moses because his revelation was the ultimate one.

In any case, we may ask who, in Abulafia’s view, was the first (oral) recipient of the Torah if it was not Moses? May we understand that the pre-existing Torah—which, in its oral form was an intellectual entity, universal religion, or universal Torah that could not in principle be committed to writing<sup>49</sup>—was turned, through its written transmission, into a combination of intellect and imagination? And if so, is this the reason why the other religions that appeared afterwards were a further deterioration of the original religion—the oral and intellectual one that he refers to as the universal religion, what he calls the ancient universal faith?<sup>50</sup> Such a historiographical narrative would indeed put Abulafia at the very extreme of the radical Maimonideans and explain why he so often had to resort to an esoteric discourse.

The turning away from that universal religion is similar to what happened to the universal speech after the Tower of Babel. However, according to an important dis-

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superfluous and the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to publicise the rank of this holy nation, in the eyes of all the nations.”

<sup>45</sup> *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:9, 178–79. See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 57–58. Perhaps Abulafia was capitalising on, though strongly reinterpreting, the Rabbinic view that the forefathers kept all the commandments and studied the Torah. See Arthur Green, *Devotion and Commandment: The Faith of Abraham in the Hasidic Imagination* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1989). I would not like to engage with the Rabbinic theme of the pre-existent Torah found on high before the creation of the world from which Moses copied as if he were a scribe because it does not fit the context of Abulafia’s discussion. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 449–60, and the accompanying footnotes.

<sup>46</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 92. For Moses as a scribe, see Maimonides’s introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, and in Kabbalah, see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 458, and a series of additional sources. However, the assumption in those sources, unlike Abulafia, is that Moses copied as if from a supernal book, perhaps an example of Muslim influence. The oral pre-existence of the Torah as assumed by this Kabbalist is, therefore, quite a different attitude.

<sup>47</sup> See Idel, “Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia,” 13–15.

<sup>48</sup> See Menachem Lorberbaum, *Politics and the Limits of Law: Secularizing the Political in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001), 72–75. On the other hand, see the view of Maimonides’s Moses as a legislator advocated in Goodman, *The Secrets of The Guide to the Perplexed*, 352–53, note 11, as well as in the scholars mentioned in his note.

<sup>49</sup> On this issue, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 48–49.

<sup>50</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, 92.



cussion in *Or ha-Šekhel*, the mythical episode that occurred at Babel has no meaning whatsoever for the illuminated person, but only for the multitude.<sup>51</sup> This means, implicitly, that there was no specific historical moment for the dispersion of the nations or changes of languages; rather, these were natural processes that are similar to what we have seen above concerning the departure from Egypt or the reception of the Torah at Sinai. In this way, the dispersion of languages could even take place today, since the shift from the natural language with which one is endowed to a conventional language is a natural, innate phenomenon. While the spoken languages are artificial and conventional entities the infant must learn, and thus particularist, the ideal sounds are innate and thus universal.

I consider the emphasis on universality to be related to intellectuality and the natural interpretation of religious documents. Some pages before the translated passage, Abulafia describes the transformation of the natural sounds into conventional speech or languages:

It is necessary from this<sup>52</sup> that everything has a governor that does not move but governs everything from outside, which means that it is separated from them by its essence and it emanates providence upon them, and this is the human intellect that governs all the languages. But it is not moving, neither in essence nor accidentally, but the human intellect operates in the human species *in actu* from its side and *in potentia* from their side. And it is this<sup>53</sup> that changed the languages after they had [once] been one entity, understood by all speakers, which today is also one entity, but it is not understood by every speaker, and this is because of the dispersion of the nations.<sup>54</sup>

This view of the human intellect as being both separated from matter on the one hand and that which unifies the entire human species on the other represents, in my opinion, the impact of Averroes's later theory of a potential intellect that is common to all of humanity.<sup>55</sup> As in Maimonides (*Guide* 1:74), his followers, and Averroes (at least in a later phase of his thought), for Abulafia, the human intellect is not just a personal quality, but a common entity shared by all humans. He envisions this human intellect as a mover of speech which is referenced in the quote by the term "one entity," causing the emergence of the seventy languages, just as the unmoved mover (God or the first separate intellect) moves the cosmic spheres, which govern

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51 Ed. Gross, 39–40.

52 Namely, the manner in which the elements of language are moved so that speech emerges.

53 The human intellect.

54 *Or ha-Šekhel*, 31:

התחייב על זה להיות לכל זה מנהיג בלתי מתנועע שהוא מניע הכל מחוץ, ר"ל שהוא נבדל מהם בעצם ומשפיע עליהם בהשגחה, והוא השכל האנושי המניע כל הלשונות. והוא בלתי מתנועע לא בעצם ולא במקרה, ור"ל השכל האנושי הפועל במין האדם בפעל מצדו ובכח מצדו. הוא אשר שינה הלשונות אחר היותם דבר אחד מובן לכל מדבר, שגם היום הוא דבר אחד, אלא שהוא בלתי מובן לכל מדבר והיה סיבת זה פיזור האומות.

55 Maurice Blaustein, "Averroes on the Imagination and the Intellect" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1984), 200–210.

what happens in the terrestrial world.<sup>56</sup> Those are, according to Abulafia, three distinct phases.

As we shall see in Appendix A, Abulafia conceives the emergence of languages as being related to letter permutations, which he describes as the movements of two concentric wheels that allow the extraction of all possible combinations of two letters from the twenty-two Hebrew consonants. Thus, language is perceived as emerging in a natural manner, semantically speaking. Its turns are diversified because of two main causes: the emergence of the allophones (which differ slightly from the twenty-two natural consonants) and ideal sounds (which linguists would call phonemic, given varying climatological factors),<sup>57</sup> and secondly, because of the different combinations of letters that produce the conventional languages<sup>58</sup> and which generate diversity, misunderstanding, and dispersion among nations. In a way, the transition between the natural language—understood by Abulafia as a sonorous simple speech—or *Ursprache* that is nevertheless still present and the conventional languages that transmit information that is contaminated by imagination is prefigurative of Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory of the innate potential of learning language and the possibility of speaking many languages.

The opening remarks about *a* Torah and legal regulations can be understood either as being identical to the universal religion or as being different from it; each reading constitutes quite a different understanding of the text. The former can be described as a more universalistic vision of “the Torah” and the latter as a more particularist “a Torah.” I believe that the second interpretation is the more plausible one, if we allow the rather bizarre formulation of “a Torah.” Let me point out that the need to take the absence of the definitive form into consideration is not an exaggerated interpretation, but follows Abulafia's clear statement in which he assumes that there are single letters that hint at an esoteric sense on the one hand<sup>59</sup> and the distinction between the universal and the particular Torah, mentioned above, on the other. The accuracy of the law constitutes the closeness or distance from the divine

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56 On the different positions among Muslim philosophers on this issue, see Harry A. Wolfson, “Averroes's Lost Treatise on the Prime Mover,” in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, 1:402–29; Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” 17–19; Joseph Puig, “Maimonides and Averroes on the First Mover,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 213–23; and Even-Hen, “Maimonides's Theory of Positive Attributes,” 19–45.

57 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 3–4.

58 Idel, 8–11. I will reproduce here the astute note by Warren Zev Harvey: “In his *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (1957), ‘Hebrew—the Mother of Languages,’ 18–19, William Chomsky recalls romantically the old view, held by Jews and Christians until the eighteenth century, that ‘all the languages of mankind [...] derived from Hebrew,’ etc. Cf. Noam Chomsky, ‘Morphophonemics of Modern Hebrew’ (1951). I think that the most likely explanation for the mystical and unempirical nature of Chomsky's theory of ‘universal language’ is that it is a modern version of the ancient view about Hebrew.” William is Noam Chomsky's father.

59 Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 114–17.

source that promulgated the universal religion/Torah, and I shall try to reinforce this reading later in this study.

The three degrees or values mentioned in paragraph [a] are Torah, the Hebrew language, and the Hebrew script (that is, the visual shapes of the Hebrew letters). Needless to say, these virtues are related to each other, as was explicitly mentioned earlier in this chapter, as they deal with a form of linguistic articulation. They are often described in opposition to the languages and religions of the Gentiles and as the opposition between intellect and imagination.<sup>60</sup> It seems, however, that only the script or phonetics is explicitly described in the last sentence as being continuously in the nation's possession, while all three may actually be lost, as we may infer from the closing sentence of paragraph [a2]. I see no way to resolve this contradiction except through the assumption that there is an esoteric teaching that assumes that even the original Hebrew language has been forgotten, as Abulafia expressly mentions elsewhere in the same book.<sup>61</sup>

In any case, in a rather clear statement, Abulafia lists Hebrew writing along with and as one of the seventy other writings without distinguishing between them in this case.<sup>62</sup> In general, the basic assumption of the consonance between the superior society formed by a certain religion and the language that is spoken by it is logically difficult from the historical point of view: if someone tried to use this nexus in order to prove the superiority of Hebrew, they would run up against the difficult conditions of the exile, as Abulafia openly recognises. Moreover, the manner in which it is formulated in the context of the parable in paragraph [2], "that it is known" and agreed that the Jews antecede the other nations, is through the verb *hitparsem*, which is related to the noun *mefursamot* (the things that are known and widely accepted) and which is a low form of cognition in both Maimonidean nomenclature and, in some cases, in Abulafia's writings, where it is explicitly related to imagination.<sup>63</sup>

The Kabbalist also resorts to an existing dictum whose history in medieval Jewish thought is a desideratum. His approach regards *intelligibilia* as being higher than *sensibilia*, and the latter as being higher than things accepted only by dint of wide

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<sup>60</sup> See Idel, 19; the quote from "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 14, discussed above; and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 58–59. On the three virtues, see *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 183, 188.

<sup>61</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 13 and 23–24; see also Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 135, note 25. In *Or ha-Šekhel*, on the other hand, Abulafia states that the universal language is known even today, but is incomprehensible to its present speakers. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 20. In my opinion, Abulafia issued contradictory views as part of his political esotericism, which is a major methodological problem for understanding his hidden secrets that has not drawn sufficient attention in scholarship on this topic. See his *Or ha-Šekhel*, 70–71, 107, and *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 121, 122–23.

<sup>62</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 24:

שארז"ל שבעים כתבים יש להקב"ה בעולמו [...] וכתב עברית היא אחת מהכתיבות.

On Maimonides on the Hebrew language as a regular language, see Kellner, *Maimonides's Confrontation with Mysticism*, 155–78, and Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language."

<sup>63</sup> See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 9,

agreement. In general, it may be assumed that the three gifts represent a lower modification of the intellectual mode that constitutes a particular historical religion, while the intellectual level is understood as the hidden layer.

Let me emphasise that the necessity of assuming an esoteric register is not my own subjective imposition: it is explicitly stated by Abulafia himself in paragraph [a2]. In a manner reminiscent of the parable's son who will not receive instruction, we read in his commentary on the secrets of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* about the Jews "turning away from an earlier tradition they possessed, which is mentioned in the following quote: "And all this [the account of the chariot] you will know from the letters.<sup>64</sup> No other nation has a tradition like this, and even our own nation is far from it, having quickly moved away from the path. This is the reason why our exile has been prolonged."<sup>65</sup> Here, the state of exile is explicitly related to the obliteration of or a deviation from a tradition related to letters—namely, the written one—reiterating the nexus between society and language mentioned earlier.

This turning away from a type of lore that is conceived as essential and yet unknown in the present is reminiscent of the straying away in the passage from *Or ha-Šekhel* translated above;<sup>66</sup> in both cases, the exact same Hebrew verb is used: *nitraḥa-qah* ("moved away"). This may be interpreted not only on the second or national level, but also on the personal or third level, which means that by returning to the correct understanding of the function of language, a person may still escape from exile even today, though it will be on an individual basis. In his *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia expresses the same idea that in the present (i.e., during the centuries of exile), the Jewish nation is oblivious to a specific type of wisdom which is key to the possibility of prophecy and which he considered to be the seventh and highest level of interpretation conducive to prophecy.<sup>67</sup>

The context of the parable has a very significant—and hitherto unnoticed—parallel that occurs in a lengthy discussion found in Abulafia's later book, *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, where the parable is not mentioned at all.<sup>68</sup> The basic difference between

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64 Compare to *Sitrei Torah*, 146:

והאותיות האלה הטבעיות והאלוהיות המצוירות בכל העולם.

65 *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 162a, 158:

זה כולו מתוך האותיות תבינהו, כי אין לאומה קבלה כזו, ואפילו אומתינו רחקה ממנה וסרו מהר מן הדרך על כן אך גלותינו.

See also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 25, 101–9, 184, note 205, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 61. This claim about the continuation of the exile because of the oblivion of an esoteric tradition contradicts his view, adduced in chapter 8 note 30 above, as well as its source, Maimonides's *Guide*.

66 See above, chapter 2 note 55.

67 Ed. Gross, 34–35. Let me emphasise that according to Abulafia, the lower methods of interpretation, and their corresponding human groups, are not superseded when someone advances to a higher one, since the multitude, Midrashists, and philosophers do not disappear when someone attains the highest, prophetic level.

68 *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 185–93.

the two contexts can be seen in the more particularist formulations found in the later book in comparison to the more universalistic one found in *Or ha-Šekhel*. It should be mentioned that in the latter book, Abulafia does not refer to any biblical name in the historical narrative, though hints towards Moses and Elijah can be discerned. Nor does he explicitly refer to Christianity or Islam in this version.<sup>69</sup> He also chose not to mention any specific historical event, although the sin of the Golden Calf is perhaps at least hinted at, as has been correctly pointed out by Harvey Hames.<sup>70</sup> This reluctance may be part of an attempt to de-emphasise the popular version of the eschatological narrative, which gravitates around personalities and external events; in short, the Kabbalist attempted to reduce the specificities of the second narrative.

## 15 The Secret of Languages: “The Best of the Languages”

The passage translated above is part of a chapter that intends to deal with “the best of the languages,” which in the Hebrew original is *ha-lašon ha-muvḥar*. In this context, Abulafia essentially addresses human language, since God, according to Maimonides as well as Abulafia, being an intellect, cannot speak.<sup>71</sup> Let me translate the opening paragraph, which was not translated above (its Hebrew original can be found in Appendix A):

Behold, we have already announced general issues regarding languages, and we have explained that the divine influx moves all [the languages] and that it is the reason for their existence, from potentiality to actuality.<sup>72</sup> And given that this is the case, it is necessary to announce whether they are all equal for Him or whether they are unequal, provided the fact that they are all His acts and because it is known that they are equal from His side, they are also equal for Him from the perspective of their existence, because their matter is the universal speech, and it is He that gives particular forms to it, and they are comprehensions that are intelligised from the speech, and given that the comprehension is equal, everything is equal, but the difference between the languages will be similar to the difference between the nations, and similar to the difference between nations is the difference between their scripts.

The equality between all languages from the perspective of the divine influx, and perhaps also that of God, is predicated on their all being divine acts and their all sharing the same prime matter (the universal speech material), which in Abulafia’s thought consists of the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew language. This

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<sup>69</sup> Compare, however, to Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 204. It should be mentioned that in the parallel discussion in *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:9, 183, the names of the three founders of the three monotheistic religions are explicitly mentioned.

<sup>70</sup> Hames, *Like the Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 69.

<sup>71</sup> See *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:65, Pines 1:158–60, and Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” 174–78.

<sup>72</sup> Compare also to what Abulafia wrote some pages later in the same book, *Or ha-Šekhel*, 38–39, and to *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 192.

means that the divine influx operates, in the manner we find in the Avicennian and Maimonidean concepts of the Agent Intellect, as the *donator formarum* (the giver of forms) to the ideal sounds of language that function as the *hyle*, the speech, as described in *Sefer Yeširah*.

From these two points of view, there is no reason to make a substantial distinction between the various languages since their referents (what they convey or their “comprehension”) are conceived as identical despite the disparity of the words used by the different languages. At the same time, the ideal vocal articulation is constituted by the same principle of combinations of the same natural sounds. This principle is also expressed in Abulafia’s Untitled Treatise:

I have already announced to you the secret of the languages, which is the seventy languages that are contained under the one Holy Language; namely, that it is one and unique and better than all the others. And how is this secret? I shall tell you if you have a heart to understand the essence of the matters that are necessary in our opinion, from the point of view of Kabbalah. Know [that] they instruct [how to employ] the combinations of letters, namely to turn them backwards<sup>73</sup> [...] and the secret is that all the seventy languages will emerge because of the combination of letters, generation and decay, and its secret is very great.<sup>74</sup>

What is the great secret of a topic that is something which can be understood simply as dealing with the superiority of the Holy Language? What is the “secret of languages” or, according to a phrase that is found many times in Abulafia’s writings as well as in *Or ha-Šekhel*, “the secret of language”? Let me first decode the gematrias: “one Holy Language” in Hebrew is *Lešon Qodeš eḥad* = 798 = *ha-Lešonot* (“the languages”). More widespread is the other calculation, the seventy languages: *šive’im lešonot* amounts to the combinations of letters *šerufeī otīyyot* = 1214.<sup>75</sup> In Hebrew, the term *Galgal* refers to both “sphere” and “wheel.” The combinations of letters are made by means of rotating concentric wheels, and this motion is compared to the process

73 I have translated אחר as a mistake for אחר. אחר would mean “to turn one of the wheels used in order to generate the combinations of letters in the inverse direction.”

74 Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 99b:

וכבר הודעתך סוד הלשונות והוא שבעים לשון שהם נכללים תחת לשון הקדש אחד כלומר שהוא אחד מיוחד ונכבד מכלם וזה הסוד כיצד אניגד לך תכליתו אם יש לך לב להבין אמתת ענינים המוכרחים אצלינו מצד הקבלה דע באמרם כי צירוף האותיות כלומר להחזירם אחר [...] וזה סודה שבאותו הדרך ימצאו שבעים לשונות אח[ו]ן צירוף האותיות ההויה וההפסד סודו גדול מאד.

Compare to the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, 36–37, and Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah,” 384–85, where there is a “huge secret” that is related to the seventy languages and the combinations of letters. The huge secret is, in my opinion, the naturalist approach to all languages as having been emanated by combinations of letters from the twenty-two sounds of Hebrew; he thought that the actual Hebrew language was not essentially different from other languages. See also *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 147, as well as Morlok, *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla’s Hermeneutics*, 63–76.

75 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 8–11. See also Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, 32–33.

of cosmic generation and passing away; namely, the most natural processes that are also connected to the movement of the sphere.<sup>76</sup>

In my opinion, the great secret is that the *lingua sacra*—which, according to the plain sense accepted in traditional Judaism, is the historical manifestation of the Hebrew language—means, according to the secret meaning, no more than the twenty-two perfect sounds. These perfect sounds are the natural sounds of the Hebrew alphabet that can be pronounced by everyone and combined in different ways, thus generating all seventy languages.<sup>77</sup> These letters/sounds alone are considered to be natural, so when they are pronounced perfectly, they are part of the natural human vocal apparatus. As such, they are independent of the individual’s religious beliefs and ritual performances.

If I am correct, the secret of the languages can best be understood by assuming that the superiority of the historical Hebrew language is not involved here, but rather the similarity of all languages, which emerge in the exact same manner from the metaphorical Holy Language which is constituted by the twenty-two natural sounds.

Unlike the Muslim Neo-Aristotelians and the Maimonideans, Abulafia was especially concerned with the nature of language, and repeatedly resorts to phrases such as “all the languages” and “the essence of language” in relation to a secret that he does not clearly explicate. However, this secret is crucial for understanding his views in general, as we shall see below. The twenty-two sounds of *Sefer Yeširah* are both ideal and natural; therefore, in principle they are not separated from other languages. Instead, the twenty-two sounds are the “mother” of all other languages; the relationship between the twenty-two sounds and other languages is a relationship between the generation of entities from the prime matter into individuation by the different types of combinations of sounds rather than a simple type of superiority or chosenness.<sup>78</sup> This is indeed a very great secret to be kept hidden if one is operating within a religious tradition that was essentially particularist, treating the Holy Language as the historical phenomenon of Hebrew.<sup>79</sup> Elsewhere, Abulafia sees the beginning of all languages as the Holy Language, as their mother.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> See *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 20. See also Appendix A.

<sup>77</sup> Compare to “Ševa’ Netivot ha-Torah,” 4, 8, and *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:9, 181–82. This is a view that is found in Abulafia’s first book, *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 38.

<sup>78</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 14. On Hebrew as the “head” (ראש) of all languages, see *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 26. Let me point out that in my opinion, Abulafia’s description of Hebrew as the lady of the two other languages, Latin and Greek, refers to the ideal “Hebrew.”

<sup>79</sup> See *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 38:

תזכירו בעי' לשונות אין אותיותיו כי אם לשון הקודש והכל עניין אחד, אלא שזה הלשון שמוכן בו לזה היודע ואינו מוכן לזה שאינו יודעו שם, לכך לזה העניין המופלג כי יש בו סוד גדול מאד.

Compare to the statement in *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 364:

וזה דרך אשר תלך בו להשיג בו סוד הפעל האמתי. קח בידך עט סופר מהיר ויהיה לשונך מדבר תמיד בנגון נאה ונעים בנחת בנחת. והבן בדברים המצורפים אשר יצאו מפיד יהיו מה שתראה ובכל לשון שתראה. כי כל הלשונות אתה צריך להשיבם אל חמרים הראשון.

See also the passage quoted above from *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 51.



Abulafia's effort to distance himself from the particularist approach is obvious in his early book *Sefer Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, where he writes at the end of the report of the infant experiment that

concerning our belief that the child was a Hebrew speaker, being in actuality a nonspeaker, this would be a very good story, for we would thereby raise the stature of our language in the ears of those who adhere to this story, although it would be an entirely false fabrication. In addition, he diminishes the stature of the proofs he uses. And as for me, it is not wise to use false claims to raise the stature of anything [...]. However, since our language is indeed of a higher quality, but for different reasons, [...] therefore, it is called the "Holy Language."<sup>81</sup>

In my opinion, the other reason, in addition to the testimony of the nations as to the priority of Hebrew, is the natural character of the Hebrew sounds, as mentioned above. According to this understanding of the nature of language, it is difficult to deny Abulafia's universal approach. Let me point out that although we do not know where *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon* was written, it is quite plausible that it was not produced in Italy, but either somewhere in Spain around 1273 or a few years later in the Byzantine Empire. However, the topic of the above passage (the infant experiment) seems to point to Abulafia's earlier presence in Italy, where this issue became an important topic in Jewish sources some years later.

According to Abulafia, the single difference between the languages is not inherent in the different structures of the languages themselves, but in the nature of the nations that are speaking them and in the possible deterioration of the natural aspect of language. In any case, he indicates in his *Or ha-Šekhel* that if "language is conventional, speech is natural,"<sup>82</sup> and does not exclude Hebrew from this general

<sup>80</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> See *Sefer Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 24:

כן היותנו מאמינים שהנער ידבר בלשון הקדש בהיותו בלי דבור זה גם כן טוב מאד בעבור היותנו מעלים לשוננו בעיני כל שומע. ואע"פ שזה כולו דמיון שקרי גם כן, והוא מביא להפחית הלשון שמופתיו שקריים. ואין זה אצלי חכמה לטעון טענות נבוכות כדי להעלות דבר מהדברים, כי בהמצא שקרות בטענות הן יפחת הדבר מאד מהלבבות תחת היותו מתעלה, ותתהפך הכוונה בו. אך היות ולשוננו מעולה מכל לשון זה אמת מצד אחד ומופתיו הם מופתיים נראים, ועל כן נקרא לשון הקדש.

See also Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 324–39.

<sup>82</sup> *Or ha-Šekhel*, 54: שאם הלשון הוא הסכמי הדבור הוא טבעי.

This means that intellection cannot ground itself in language that is conventional and, therefore, imaginary. This would also be the view of Spinoza's *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*, par. 88–89, translated by Robert Harvey Monroe Elwes as *On the Improvement of Understanding* (New York: Dover Books, 1955), 37: "Words are part of the imagination—that is, since we form many conceptions in accordance with confused arrangements of words in the memory, dependent on particular bodily conditions—there is no doubt that words may, equally with the imagination, be the cause of many and great errors, unless we keep strictly on our guard. Moreover, words are formed according to popular fancy and intelligence, and are, therefore, signs of things as existing in the imagination, not as existing in the understanding." See especially Abulafia's discussion in *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:6, 324, where he makes it clear that the name "Abraham" does not represent anything essential about his personality. For the views that connect Abulafia's approach to Dante's con-

statement as he does in his later book, *Imrei Šefer*: “All the languages are conventional, but the Holy Language is natural”.<sup>83</sup> This parallelism between Holy Language and speech both being natural versus the conventional languages is conspicuous and at the same time quintessential for understanding Abulafia’s secret of the languages.

Indeed, according to Abulafia, the cosmic Agent Intellect is most probably the primordial speech (*dibbur qadmon*), the source of all speech that constitutes the prime matter of the revelation.<sup>84</sup> According to several of his texts,<sup>85</sup> this separate intellect is the source of all the sciences of the world—and of human knowledge as well—and at the same time, it is depicted in many of his writings as the source of the seventy languages (*šive’im lešonot*). *Šive’im lešonot* is a phrase which is identical, according to gematria calculation, to the consonants in the combination of the letters of the phrase *šeruf otiiyyot*, since the two Hebrew phrases amount to the same figure, 1214.<sup>86</sup>

Again using gematria, Abulafia calculates that the consonants of the Hebrew term for the Agent Intellect (*Šekhel ha-Po’el*) are numerically identical to the noun *Yišra’el*, since both phrases equal 541. The noun *Yišra’el* is interpreted as being composed of *Yeš* = 310, which means “there are,” and *Ra’l*, the 231 combinations of two letters presented in some versions of *Sefer Yeširah*.<sup>87</sup> In his *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia discusses the speech that is common to man and God, which can only mean that speech has a distinct intellectual character of its own, or that it should be understood as intellect in this context.<sup>88</sup> This is the reason why Abulafia uses the term *koḥ dibbri* (“the speaking faculty”) in many cases to refer to the intellectual faculty.

Following the theories of *Sefer Yeširah* and its commentaries, the source of the forms in this world is envisioned to be identical to all of the possible two-letter combinations in the Hebrew alphabet. In Abulafia’s mystical system, combinations of letters are a major component in attaining mystical experience, which is tantamount in many instances to union with the Agent Intellect. The lower linguistic activity there-

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cept of *forma locutionis*, see chapter 4 note 49 and chapter 14 note 42 above; see also Rosier-Catach, “Sur Adam et Babel: Dante et Aboulafia,” 134–37.

<sup>83</sup> Ed. Gross, 67.

<sup>84</sup> See Abulafia, “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 16.

<sup>85</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 108, 142–43.

<sup>86</sup> See Gershom G. Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic of the Kabbala,” *Diogenes* 80 (1973): 187–92; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 8–11, 38–41, 108–9.

<sup>87</sup> See *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 125a, 139. See also Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic of the Kabbala,” 187–88; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 240–41. A question can be asked whether the 231 gates (the combinations of two letters) are natural units, given their mathematical comprehensiveness or exhaustiveness; they are closer to the origin than the other combinations of letters, some of them allophones, that generate the conventional languages.

<sup>88</sup> *Or ha-Šekhel*, 27–28: בכח הכרח הדבור המשותף בין האדם והאלהים. Since God cannot speak or hear, the intellectual aspect of the term “speech” in this passage is logically necessary.

fore unifies the human and supernal spiritual realms, which are both conceived in linguistic terms. There is also, in my opinion, a more psychological contribution within the art of letter combination: it frees a person's thoughts by removing inhibitions related to given forms of words and allows new associations, including the resort to several words from foreign languages.

This removal is also evident in contemporary Zoharic literature, whose composition might have been related to the magical techniques of *Šem ha-Doreš*, the name for delivering sermons, and *Šem ha-Kotev*, the name for fast writing or copying of texts. It should be pointed out that the above speculation also includes a spiritualisation of the term *Yiśra'el*, understood in many of Abulafia's writings as being allegorically related to the cosmic Agent Intellect. The name of the Jewish nation has therefore been transposed into a reference to a universal entity related to all the acts of intellection that are not conceived as specific to this nation in the Neo-Aristotelian tradition.

The more natural and thus universal conceptualisation of the Hebrew language and the consequences that are involved in the particularist vision of religion in Judaism (for example, the unique status of the sacred scripture) may explain why Abulafia considered the natural character of the letters and the similarity of the languages that emerge from their combinations to be a theory that was dangerous and prone to endanger him, as we have seen in the passage from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* translated above.<sup>89</sup> It should be emphasised that in *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia describes the possibility of the special nation (implicitly the Jews) returning to a certain place after it was dispersed among other nations and spoke their languages; there, it will speak a language that combines all the other languages.

As described above, Abulafia's attitude subverts the traditional view that historical Hebrew will become the universal language in the eschaton.<sup>90</sup> It should be pointed out that in Abulafia's many discussions of the nations, he addresses processes of dispersion, changes of leadership, and changes of languages and religions in a rather natural manner, unlike the explanation by divine voluntaristic attitude that is found in other Kabbalists. Thus, it is not just a philosophical theme that is dangerous in itself, but the application of this theme to understanding the esoteric meaning of religion that would attract protest from the traditionalist thinkers, paramountly Jewish ones who were prone to particularism.

The natural interpretation of the linguistic structure Abulafia proposes in the context of *Sefer Yeširah* has been combined with the naturalistic/intellectualistic structure of Maimonides's thought and some other philosophical books that the Kabbalist studied. This combination was understood as being prone to imperil, in his view, the inner structure of traditional forms of Judaism. In a way, Abulafia expanded the continuum of intellectual entities (God, the separate intellects, and the human intellect) to the linguistic apparatus, conceived as a continuation of the intellectual

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<sup>89</sup> *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 364, translated above in chapter 15 note 79.

<sup>90</sup> *Or ha-Šekhel*, 32–33.

influx, also within the natural sounds. He plays on the double sense of *koaḥ dibbri*, the intellectual and linguistic power, an echo of the Greek double sense of *logos*. Let me explore the esoteric aspect of a similar topic and discuss such a potentially dangerous consequence.

The idea that the Jewish people had been elected or chosen was part and parcel of traditional Jewish myths. This view also extends to the sacred scriptures and the Hebrew language. The meaning of chosenness was that God decided to separate the Jews from the other nations, a separation that was conceived in terms of genetic criteria; namely, the special status of the seed of Israel, *Zera' Yiśra'el*.<sup>91</sup> This means that the ancient tribal extraction of people stemming from the tribe of Judah was viewed as continuing throughout the centuries. This view was dominant in Rabbinic Judaism and in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists and created a form of conception that assumes an ontic difference between the Jews and other nations.<sup>92</sup>

However, Abulafia adopted another understanding of chosenness: the view that some entities are to be understood as the best in their category, which does not mean, or at least not necessarily, that they have been chosen in the ordinary sense of the word. This is the reason why Abulafia plays with the various meanings of the Hebrew root *BḤR*, which means “to choose”: *muvḥar*, or *mivḥar*. In the context discussed above, this root means “the best of all”; however, it may also have the connotation of “the chosen” in the more traditional sense. This is quite an interesting case of equivocality, and we have seen premises that encourage a reading that is more universalistic than particularist in chapter 9 above.<sup>93</sup>

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91 See Isaiah 26:2, 28:5, 45:19, 60:21, 61:9, 64:9 65:9; and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible 1 Chronicles 16:13; Nehemiah 9:2; and Psalms 22:23. See also Michael L. Satlow, “‘Wasted Seed’: The History of a Rabbinic Idea,” *HUCA* 65 (1994): 137–75 (especially 161–62, 168, where he suggests the possibility of a Zoroastrian impact on the Babylonian Rabbis’ prizing of semen). Compare these to Romans 4:16, 9:6–8, and Galatians 3:27–29. The phrase “seed of Israel” occurs in the oldest reference to Israel in extra-biblical sources. See David Winton Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 137–41. On the mixture of the seed of Israel as a sin, see Ezra 9:2, 10:19, and the discussion by Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 71–73. Compare the more universalist theory of the nature of the Jewish people, grounded in an ethical monotheism, in the thought of Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas, as analysed in Kasher, *High above All Nations*, 178–90, 216–24.

92 On the Zoharic phrase *zera' qadiša'* (“the holy seed”), see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 27; for additional sources in Kabbalah, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 36–37, 49, 54–55, 87–88, and 158–59.

93 For the question of the relationship between divine will and divine wisdom in Maimonides and his followers, see Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 41–63; Halbertal, *Maimonides*, 263; Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides on Creation and Emanation,” in *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1987): 57–59; Aviezer Ravitzky, *‘Al Da’at ha-Maqom: Studies in the History of Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991), 212–41; Vajda, *Isaac Albalag*, 91–129; and Isaac Albalag, *Tiqqun ha-De’ot*, 77–78. See also Alfred L. Ivry, “The Will of God and Practical Intellect of Man in Averroes’ Philosophy,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 9 (1979): 377–91. A reading of Abulafia from the perspective of his ongoing adherence to Maimonides’s approaches to the nature of divine will, wisdom, and nature, especially to what I assume was

Therefore, the best of the languages is not necessarily a concrete chosen language selected by an arbitrary divine act. It is not the result of the divinity's act of free will that determines or predetermines the superiority of one entity over many others. In Abulafia's thought, Hebrew is conceived as not necessarily the specific language spoken by the Jews, but rather as a natural expression of the human capacity to speak using the twenty-two natural letters, as found in *Sefer Yeşirah*, where the association between letters and the human vocal apparatus is obvious. The idea that this language is natural can also be found in this book: according to its first part, God created the world by means of combining letters, and according to its second part, the letters are appointed in the various realms of existence.

This concentration on language is reflected in a brief but cogent description of Abulafia found in Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret's responsum as belonging to those who are "deepening in language according to their opinion."<sup>94</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know who the other authors belonging to this category could be. I am inclined to identify them with the group of Kabbalists dealing with *Sefer Yeşirah* with whom Abulafia was in contact in Barcelona in the early 1270s. This group was highly influential in Abulafia's career as a Kabbalist.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Rabbi Baruch Togarmi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah* displays a strong propensity towards linguistic speculations.

Here, there is an obvious special attitude that considers the Hebrew language to be more natural than other languages without accepting the myth that it was spoken by God to the prophets or that it was the instrument of creation of the world, as found in Genesis 1, since Abulafia prefers the combinatory account of creation at the beginning of *Sefer Yeşirah*. This is also the case in his attitude towards the question of which language an infant would "naturally" speak without being taught to speak at all—namely, what the innate language was—which was highly debated in the second part of the thirteenth century. Abulafia derides the view found in an epistle of his former teacher Rabbi Hillel of Verona—though without mentioning his name—which opts for the assumption that an infant would spontaneously speak Hebrew.<sup>96</sup> In short, Abulafia's attitude as a Kabbalist whose Kabbalah is focused on lan-

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the latter's esoteric position, means that the former can hardly be considered a theurgist, as Elliot Wolfson and his followers would like us to believe. See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 235–36, or Pedaya, "The Sixth Millennium," 67–68. This question requires a more detailed analysis that cannot be undertaken here; see, for the time being, Abulafia's statement in his early book *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 5, as well as my discussion in chapter 17 below. On the connection between the denial of the concepts of divine will and the pre-eternity of the world, see the discussion about Al-Gazali and Averroes in van den Bergh, *The Incoherence of Incoherence*, 1:224–66.

<sup>94</sup> *Responsum* 1, no. 548: מעמיקים בלשון לדעתם.

<sup>95</sup> See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 527–31.

<sup>96</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 327–33; Irene E. Zwiep, *Mother of Reason and Revelation: A Short History of Medieval Jewish Linguistic Thought* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997), 172–77; and Rosier-Catach, "Sur Adam et Babel: Dante et Aboulafia," 124–32. See also Gad Freudenthal, "Dieu parle-t-il hébreu? De l'origine du langage humain selon quelques penseurs juifs médiévaux," *Cahiers du judaïsme* 23 (2008): 4–18.

guage is nevertheless much more naturalistic, being far more consonant with the way Rabbi Zeraḥyah Ḥen, who was active in Rome in the years Abulafia was there, understood the story in comparison to the more particularist approach as found, for example, in his former teacher's epistle.<sup>97</sup>

I would therefore say that Abulafia's allegorical radicalism dramatically complicates the widespread scholarly picture of Kabbalists who are conceived as being on the opposite conceptual pole to Maimonidean allegorical thinkers. A better assumption would be that it is quite plausible that the latter were triggered by Abulafia writing down the secrets of the *Guide*.<sup>98</sup> It is even more plausible that Abulafia and his sources or circle can be modestly conceived as one of the triggers for the philosophically oriented commentators,<sup>99</sup> such as Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi<sup>100</sup> and Rabbi Zeraḥyah Ḥen. In one of his epistles, Rabbi Zeraḥyah Ḥen reacted to the magical-mythical interpretations of the term *Ben* probably found in a lost commentary on the *Guide*.

Abulafia, however, does not seem to react to what may be called radical Maimonideanism, as Yossef Schwartz suggests, since he was already one of the most radical among them. So, for example, he is conceptually much closer to Rabbi Zeraḥyah than to Rabbi Hillel insofar as the infant experience is concerned, as we mentioned above.<sup>101</sup> This fact shows that the possible direction of impact is far from being clear; it is possible that both directions are equally plausible.

Moreover, to strengthen my point as to the independence of Abulafia's dealing with the secrets of the *Guide*, it should be mentioned that he wrote his commentaries in the context of his oral teaching of these secrets to some of his students, perhaps as a response to their request, as he claims. Therefore, we have at least one good reason for his literary activity, as he specifies it in two of his commentaries.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the assumption that the revelation of the secrets is related to imminent redemption offers

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**97** I see no historical evidence for Hames's hypothesis that Zeraḥyah's reaction to Abulafia's coming to Rome might have been so "negative as to include warning his Christian contacts against him." See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 98.

**98** See Yossef Schwartz, "Magic, Philosophy and Kabbalah," 114.

**99** See the different hypothesis formulated in Idel, "Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," 219, where, following a suggestion from Steven Harvey, I claim that the impact of esoteric mystical and magical traditions on the philosophers/commentators was both a challenge and a trigger to react.

**100** Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 12. I refer here to the important observation of the editor of ibn Kaspi's two commentaries on the *Guide*, Salomon Z. Werbluner, 21–22, note, who already explicitly referred to Abulafia's commentary on the *Guide*. Compare also Abulafia's discussion of the damage that the teachings of extreme disciples of Maimonides's thought inflicted, according to his *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, Ms. Munich, 408, fol. 47a, 81. Compare too with ibn Kaspi's discussion in his commentary on Proverbs 1, 'Ašarah Kelei Kesef, 1:19. It should be pointed out that a similar attack on addressing the radical followers of Maimonides, who damaged his image so much so that he is sometimes envisioned as a champion of Jewish traditionalism, is found in Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 80.

**101** See above chapter 16 note 97.

**102** This is obvious in *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 32, and in *Sitrei Torah*, 17–19.

another plausible reason for his independent and intense literary activity. In any case, in what I propose to see as the introduction to Abulafia's first commentary on the secrets of the *Guide*, he expressly says that he was told in a revelation to write something that no one had written before. This statement minimises the possibility that he was reacting to other commentaries.<sup>103</sup>

## 16 The Secret of the Two Tablets of Stone

Above, we analysed some secrets in Abulafia's esoteric thought. He resorts to the terms "secret," *sod*, and *seter* more than two thousand times. There is no way to analyse all these occurrences, even in a study especially devoted to his esotericism. Nevertheless, let me turn to what I conceive to be a few of the other major secrets in his esoteric thought.

In paragraph [a2] of the above text, there is quite an unusual statement regarding the biblical tablets of stone, which are described as possibly possessing an esoteric meaning: "The two tablets of stone, either if this is according to the plain sense alone or if it should be understood in both the exoteric and the esoteric senses. And either both senses are true, or one of them."

The last possibility of the three mentioned here, to the effect that only one of the two possible meanings is the correct one, is a rather surprising one in medieval literature, but not so much in this specific case. In Abulafia's axiology, the esoteric meaning is conceived as superior or, presumably, truer. It is obvious, by dint of elimination, that the last words can only be understood as referring to the possibility that the esoteric sense alone is true.

Indeed, in one case in his commentary on *Hotam ha-Haftarah*, which is the final part of his prophetic books, we read that a certain issue "was, according to its plain sense, overt and necessary, and its secret [sense] is for a true reason."<sup>104</sup> The plain sense is conceived, therefore, as being necessary for the vulgar's low level of understanding, though it is not necessarily true.<sup>105</sup> This means that the plain sense of the verse about God writing the letters of the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone with his finger should be treated as quite unimaginable within the framework of Abulafia's Maimonidean theology, which often describes God as a separate intellect, or as the Necessary Existent, in the vein of the theologies of Avicenna and Maimo-

<sup>103</sup> See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 10.

<sup>104</sup> In *Maṣref ha-Šekhel*, 117:

הוא ענין גלוי מסתרי התורה שהיה כפשוטו לענין נגלה הברחי, ובנסתרו לענין אמיתי, ראוי להעלימו מכל סכל. In Maimonides's terminology, the necessary does not automatically mean something good in itself; here, the association with the plain sense only confirms the negative aspect.

<sup>105</sup> See *Maṣref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sason 56, fol. 33b: והשקר נגלה בם והאמת נעלמת ("The lie is revealed in them and the truth is hidden"). Compare to his *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 32: דרך המחשבה ההמונית ("The path of the vulgar thought").



nides.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, such an anthropomorphic description constitutes a great theological quandary which must be solved, and in this context, the concept of secrecy is explicitly mentioned.<sup>107</sup>

The philosophical concept of divinity that Abulafia confesses to having studied in some places and to which he refers as constituting the main “objective” framework for his mysticism is in the vein of the sequence described by Hans Jonas: between a more philosophical, “objective” framework that preceded the emergence of a certain type of mysticism and its interiorisation.<sup>108</sup> This conclusion leaves us with the possibility that at least in some cases, Abulafia attributes religious authority solely to the esoteric sense of this biblical episode, perhaps the only possible one from his theological point of view, especially when the plain sense is so problematic. Such a view that aligns veracity and authority with the esoteric alone is quite rare and is certainly problematic in Rabbinic Judaism, as it also was in Ismā‘īliyyah, and it was formally condemned by Rabbi Isaac of Acre.<sup>109</sup>

For example, what would the esoteric meaning of the biblical verse on the finger of God and the tablets be, according to Abulafia? Maimonides had already addressed the quandary generated by the anthropomorphic image of the finger of God.<sup>110</sup> In his *Sefer ha-Melammed*, most probably written in 1276, perhaps in Patras in the Greek territories, Abulafia writes:

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**106** Abulafia combines an Avicennian and Maimonidean view of God as the Necessary Existent with the necessity of a separate intellect as a Prime Mover, which is more Averroistic. Averroes’s vision of God as the Necessary Existent runs through many of Abulafia’s books, from his earliest writings (*Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 4, 34), the middle period of his literary activity (*Or ha-Šekhel*, 15, 71, and the commentary on *Sefer Yeširah*, 21), through to his last writings (*Sefer ha-Hešeq*, 34, and *Imrei Šefer*, 60 and 190). This assumes some form of hierarchy, which is evident, for example, in his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 20. See also his untitled short treatise found in Ms. Sassoon 290, 233. For Maimonides’s source for the Necessary Existent, see Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides’ Avicennism,” *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 110–16; for God as an intellect, see Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” 22–24. Abulafia sees God as the immobile mover (cf. *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 13) and he also uses this concept in other cases when speaking about the human intellect.

**107** See Levi ben Avraham, *Liwyat Hen*, 250–63. See also Dov Schwartz, “Remarks on the Late 13th-Century Debate on Prophecy and Esotericism” [Hebrew], in *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought*, 1:263–285.

**108** See Hans Jonas, “Myth and Mysticism: A Study in Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,” in Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 291–303; see also Franz Rosenthal, “Ibn ‘Arabi Between ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Mysticism.’ ‘Sufism and Philosophy are Neighbours and Visit Each Other,’” *Oriens* 31 (1988): 1–35, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 138.

**109** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 188, note 5, and Rabbi Isaac of Acre’s passage translated in Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah,” 73, note 153, which seems to be a diametrically opposite formulation in comparison to the hint found in Abulafia.

**110** For Maimonides’s own discussions of the finger of God, see *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:46, Pines, 1:100–101; 1:66, Pines, 1:160.

And indeed the existence of the twenty-two letters that are engraved in the voice, [and] extracted from the wind, [and] fixed in the mouth in five places<sup>111</sup> [...] that in man are found in a natural existence and on the tablets [of stone] in an artificial, conventional existence.<sup>112</sup> And this is the case in every script and every scripture and every tablet, except for the script and the scripture on the tablets that were created during the twilight;<sup>113</sup> it is written that<sup>114</sup> “and the tablets were the tablets of *Elohim* and the writing was the writing of *Elohim*, engraved upon the tablets,” and elsewhere it was written<sup>115</sup> “and I will give thee the tablets of stone and the Torah and the commandments which I have written that thou mayst teach them” together with what was written in the first verse, “and the tablets are the tablets of *Elohim*,” and then he wrote “and the writing is the writing of *Elohim* engraved upon the tablets,” and he also said that “they were written by the finger of *Elohim*. From all these three things, you will understand that it is written *Elohim* [which refers to] natural deeds [...]. You should know that the writing and the scripture and the tablets are indubitably natural deeds like all the others [mentioned] in the account of creation, as the Rabbi said:<sup>116</sup> “Indeed, Onqelos commented when he commented on *Ešba’-Ešba’a’*, and he did not interpret it against its plain sense, because of a wondrous secret.” And it is not hidden from me that this was hidden from the Rabbi, as he mentioned there. But it seems to me that he said so only in order not to disclose the secret to the multitude.<sup>117</sup>

Following Maimonides’s statement concerning the tablets conceived as divine deeds and as natural, Abulafia elaborates on the biblical verses that may be the background of Maimonides’s equation between divine and natural deeds. The recurrence of the divine name *Elohim* in the three instances in the Hebrew Bible where the tablets and the writing on them are mentioned, as well as in all the contexts where the

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111 *Sefer Yeširah*, 2:6.

112 This is a sharp assumption as to the conventionality of writing on tablets, which differs from his own assumption found elsewhere in his writings that writing on tablets is natural. For the attack on the theory of the conventionality of names in Hebrew, see Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 142. For Maimonides’s view of Hebrew as a conventional language, see *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:30, Pines, 2:357–358, and Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” 197–99.

113 Cf. *BT, Pesahim*, fol. 54a.

114 Exodus 32:16.

115 Exodus 24:12.

116 Namely, Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:46, Pines, 1:100–101, or 1:66, Pines, 1:160.

117 *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 24–25:

הנה אם כן מציאות כ"ב אותיות שהם חקוקות בקול חצובות ברוח, קבועות בפה בחמשה מקומות [...] הם נמצאות באדם מציאות טבעי ובלוחות מציאות מלאכותי הסכמיי. וזה בכל כתב ובכל מכתב ובכל לוח, אך הכתב והמכתב הנמצאות בלוחות הנבראים בין השמשות שנאמר עליה, "והמכתב מכתב אלהים הוא חרות על הלוחות" (שמות לב:טז). ונאמר עוד במקום אחר, "ואתנה לך את לוחות האבן והתורה והמצוה אשר כתבתי להורותם" (שמות כד:יב). עם מה שקדם בכתב הראשון באמרו בעניין הלוחות, "ההלוחות מעשה אלהים המה". ואח"כ אמר "והמכתב מכתב אלהים הוא חרות על הלוחות." ועוד אמר על הכתב "כתובים באצבע אלהים." מאלה כולם תבין שאלה השלשה עניינים אחר שהזכיר בשלשתם אלהי"ם הם מעשים טבעיים [...] תדע באמת כי הכתב והמכתב והלוחות הם מעשים טבעיים בלא ספק כשאר מעשה בראשית. כמו שאמר הרב ז"ל, אמנם פירש אונקלוס כאשר פירש על מלת אצבע, אצבעא, ולא הוציאו ממשוטו, הוא לסוד נפלא. ולא יעלם אצלי שנעלם זה מן הרב כמו שזכר שם, אבל נראה שלא אמר זה אלא כדי שלא יתגלה הסוד להמון.

This argument is reminiscent of the manner in which he treats ibn Ezra’s rejection of the use of gematria, as discussed in chapter 7 above.

finger of God is mentioned in the same book, is reminiscent of the recurrent and exclusive usage of this name in the first chapter of Genesis, designated in the translated passage as the “account of creation.” Thus, a nexus has been created between the specific divine name used in connection to primordial beginnings and the tablets.

Abulafia adds to these parallels another “natural” entity: the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as spoken, the twenty-two sounds, since they are also described as engraved in *Sefer Yeširah*. This connection between nature and the name of God can be understood as a divinisation of nature, though it is at the same time a naturalisation of a certain aspect of God or his activity, designated by the name *Elohim*.<sup>118</sup> Thus, unlike other alphabets and tablets that are conceived as artificial and/or conventional, in the case of the tablets given to Moses, Abulafia speaks about a natural phenomenon, which means that there was no act of writing on the tablets in the moment of their revelation, since the “writing” was found there primordially. Therefore, there is no conceivable role for the anthropomorphic “finger of God” writing down the commandments at a certain historical moment. In other words, the priority of the sonorous aspects of the original language over the written and posterior forms is obvious.

Such a naturalistic approach to these biblical episodes is presented as a secret that cannot be revealed to the multitude, despite the fact that Maimonides himself did not explain or hint at the reason why the Aramaic translator did not replace the anthropomorphic finger with something else. For the sake of our discussion in the previous chapter, let me emphasise again the naturalistic approach to Hebrew writings and, implicitly, to language as such. Beyond those exegetical and philosophical moves, for Abulafia’s mode of thinking, there is one more reason to assume the correctness of Maimonides’s naturalistic interpretation: the consonants of the name *Elohim*, which was related to the acts of creation in Genesis 1, amount in gematria to 86, like the word *ha-Teva*, “nature.”<sup>119</sup> From the 1270s, this gematria became a clas-

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**118** See also the interesting discussions where the categories of divinity and nature are mentioned together in Abulafia’s *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 77, 79. Compare, however, Abulafia’s propensity to naturalise the tablets of stone to the strong tendency to mythologise by identifying them with the breasts of the female divine power (the *Shekhinah*) in the latter layer of the Zoharic literature; see Biti Roi, “The Myth of the *Šekhina* in *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*: Poetic, Hermeneutic and Mystical Aspects” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2012), 266–68. See also chapter 26 note 157 below.

**119** For more on some of these issues, see Moshe Idel, “Deus sive Natura—The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, eds. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 87–110; Carlos Fraenkel, “Maimonides’s God and Spinoza’s ‘Deus sive Natura,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 169–215; Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 185–86. To Elliot Wolfson’s mind, however, Spinoza’s source might be Jacob Boehme! See his *Language, Eros, Being*, 8. See also Henry Malter, “Medieval Hebrew Terms for Nature,” in *Judaica: Festschrift zu Hermann Cohens siebzigstem geburtstage*, eds. Ismar Elbogen, Benzion Kellermann, and Eugen Mittwoch (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1912), 253–56, and Fritz Meier, “The Problem of Nature in the Esoteric Monism of Islam,” in *Spirit and Nature: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon, 1954), 153–54.

sic in various forms of Jewish literature up to Hasidism, although scholars of Spinoza did not always take the implications of this numerical linkage very seriously.

In my opinion, we may guess the significance of this famous gematria in Abulafia's thought, which is most plausibly the principal source of this numerical linkage. According to Abulafia, "*Elohim* are the supernal powers that bind all of existence."<sup>120</sup> A somewhat similar position can also be found in the short *Commentary on Ma'aseh Berešit* by one of the early writings of Abulafia's disciple Gikatilla:

The word *Elohim* is an appellative<sup>121</sup> corresponding to certain acts and as long as the Holy One, blessed be He, does not act, there is no appellative of *Elohim*, since the appellative is always close to the act and He, blessed be He, is never called an appellative except in the moment of action [...] See, at the beginning of creation, *Elohim* [is found], and this appellative was given to Him because of the act of nature in order to announce that this appellative would now be innovated by the innovation of the natures.<sup>122</sup>

The two last passages show that the equation *Elohim* = *ha-Ṭeva'* does not assume a full pantheistic vision, still less a panentheistic one, since there is also a level or a moment of the divinity's existence before the act of creation; it is only the latter, which is tantamount to nature, that is identical to *Elohim*. I assume that Abulafia's view differs from Gikatilla's since the latter emphasises the belatedness of the appellative much more than his teacher does. This antecedence of some names is the rea-

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**120** *Sefer Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 31: אלהים שהם הכחות העליונים הקושרות כל המציאות. Compare to the introduction to *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 39, which includes a description of the role of the soul in the human body, and also Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:72, Pines, 1:187–89, especially his description of nature. See also note 47. Let me point out that despite this identification, Abulafia is less concerned with learning about God from nature, as is the case with Maimonides, whose emphasis is much more on learning from the divine name. The Kabbalist was much less concerned with *amor mundi* than the Great Eagle.

**121** In Hebrew, *Kinnui* amounts in gematria to 86, like *ha-Kisse'*, *Elohim*, *Nivdal*, and *ha-Ṭeva'*. This identical series of gematrias shows how close Gikatilla was to Abulafia's Kabbalistic method. See also the next footnote.

**122** Ms. New York, JTS 2156, fol. 39a:

מלת אלהים כינוי לפי פעולות ידועות וכל עוד שאין לש"י פעולה אין שם כינוי אלהים כי הכינוי סמוך הוא לפעולה לעולם והוא ית' איננו נקרא כינוי כי אם בשעת הפעולה [...] הנה בתחלת הבריאה אלהים ונתנה לו כינוי זה לפעולת הטבע להודיע כי זה הכינוי עכשיו נתחדש לו בחידוש הטבעים.

For other passages for the same view in Gikatilla's early writings, see Idel, "Deus sive Natura," 93–96, especially his view in *Ginnat Egoz*, 34: "The creation of the world is the act of nature, whose secret is *Elohim*, since nature is the nature of the throne [...]. You should understand that the name *Elohim* emerged with the creation of nature, whereas the Tetragrammaton did not emerge with the creation of the world, since it is [a name] unique to Him." I wonder whether this emphasis on innovation is a reaction to the view mentioned on above, which discusses the pre-eternal nature of the unifying power. See the anonymous *Eškol ha-Kofer*, a Kabbalistic treatise close to the views of the early Gikatilla, found in a unique manuscript Ms. Vatican, 219, fol. 10a. For the resort of another of Abulafia's students to even a longer series of gematria amounting to 86, see the anonymous treatise *Ner Elohim*, 46: והמלה אלהי"ם, הוא י"ה מלא, ואם הטבע, כנוי, נבדל, מברדל, הכונה, נקרא אלהי"ם פ"ו שסודו הכסא, ונסתרו 46: אכסה. This list is reminiscent of Judah Alboṭini's discussion in *Sullam ha-'Aliyyah*, 56.

son why, as we shall see in chapter 17 below, the other divine names, which point to a more sublime aspect of divinity, are capable of changing the natural order.

Abulafia concisely formulates his conclusion in a later work, *Sefer ha-Heṣeq*: “The tablets [of the Law] are a homonym for natural internal issues—since according to the *atbash* device, tablets [in *LHT*, according to the elliptical biblical spelling without the vowels] are tantamount to [the consonants of] *Kisse*’ [“throne”], which [in gematria] is *Ṭeva*’ [“nature”]—and for external issues, which are the tablets of stone.”<sup>123</sup> Abulafia combines two basic forms of esoteric interpretation: the philosophical one, grounded in the assumption that the equivocal meaning entails some hidden message, and the linguistic exegesis. He introduces the *atbash* technique of coding and decoding—namely, the changing of letters by substituting one letter with another according to the inverse order of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet—in order to hint at the meaning of the tablets; namely, that they are the Seat of Glory.<sup>124</sup> He then resorts to the gematria that connects tablets to nature; namely, that the tablets of stone are to be considered as a natural phenomenon.

The exegetical techniques are, however, auxiliary to the main cognitive act: the interpretation that depends on the philosophical approach, namely, that the divine seat is nature. The last move of recognition is, therefore, indispensable: while the linguistic techniques dissolve the existing linguistic structures that convey the plain sense, dealing with imaginary topics, it is by means of the allegoresis based on philosophical concepts that new meanings dealing with intellectual matters are introduced into the interpretation of linguistic material.<sup>125</sup> This is an example of exegetical ingenuity that strengthens Maimonides’s view on the divine/natural character of the tablets of stone in an original manner, which would doubtless not be acceptable to the Great Eagle.<sup>126</sup>

In more general terms, this is the role of philosophy in exegesis, be it of the sacred scriptures, of the texts written by Abulafia himself, or of the contents of his experiences: to introduce a spiritual meaning into the concrete, plain sense of the

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**123** Ms. New York, JTS 1801, fols. 19b–20a, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 39–40. See also fol. 8b and *Sitrei Torah*, 34.

**124** This explanation is found in Ashkenazi sources and perhaps even earlier; in any case, it is present long before Abulafia. See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 168–69, notes 77 and 80; Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism,” *JQR* 84 (1993): 75–76. See also Ms. Cambridge, Add. 644, fol. 19b; Rabbi Bahya ben Asher’s *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, on Exodus 31:18; and Sara Offenberg, *Illuminated Piety: Pietistic Texts and Images in the North French Jewish Miscellany* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013), 140, note 48.

**125** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 100–103. Compare also to my “On the Meanings of the Term ‘Kabbalah,’” 61–68.

**126** See, however, Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 204. He describes my association of divine and natural in Abulafia, which differs from his vision and that of the other Kabbalists, as “gratuitous.” His reading is predicated on a simple logical fallacy: if two Kabbalists use the same term (“divine”) in the context of language, they also, according to his reading, mean the same thing; this is the reason why there are no great differences between Abulafia and other Kabbalists.

words. In fact, we may speak of two registers or levels of interpretation: one stemming from Ashkenazi sources that may be called the deconstructive approach, which atomises the words of the texts into individual letters, and another, higher, allegorical one, which reunifies and regroups the letters according to a new order and infuses the philosophical sense, namely allegoresis, which originates in the *falāsifah*. Moreover, though Abulafia's various definitions of prophecy are essentially Maimonidean with some intersections of linguistic elements, the belief that it is possible to attain prophecy in the present may have something to do with the presence of several "prophets" in the Ashkenazi regions of Germany and France in the first part of the thirteenth century.<sup>127</sup>

According to the last passage, the tablets also stand for the inner, spiritual aspects of man: the tablets of the heart, which on the one hand are the intellectual and imaginative faculties,<sup>128</sup> both designated as nature, and on the other are external objects. Since the two key concepts referred to in the passage from *Sefer Geṭ ha-Šemot* (nature and throne) also occur in the passage from *Sefer ha-Hešeḡ*, it seems reasonable to apply the exegetical principle of homonymy from one discussion to the other and to articulate Abulafia's secret about the meaning of the material entities in the Bible as pointing inward to the spiritual nature. What we learn from these passages as to the meaning of the hint in paragraph [a2] is that Abulafia interpreted the biblical episode as esoterically dealing with an inner experience, which means that the tablets of the heart are conceived as the esoteric meaning of the biblical tablets of stone. This is an allegorisation that goes far beyond Maimonides's discussions of the tablets.

Let me demonstrate at the end of this discussion a rather explicit recognition that there is a great secret involved in Abulafia's treatment of the writing of the tablets. In a continuation of the first quote I provided in this chapter (from *Sefer ha-Melammed*), Abulafia writes:

Since this is so, we should believe that the Torah testified to its existence; namely, the existence of the writing on the tablets being natural similarly to all the other [parts of] the account of creation. And the author of the first and last intention who has hidden and concealed his secrets<sup>129</sup> from the hearts of the people who make efforts to stand in the world of falsehood and to prolong their days in it in vain should be praised.<sup>130</sup>

**127** See Moshe Idel, "On Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon the Prophet's Commentaries on the Name of Forty-Two and *Sefer ha-Ḥokhmah* Attributed to Rabbi Eleazar of Worms" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 14 (2006): 157–58. I elaborate on this topic in "Prophets and Their Impact in the High Middle Ages."

**128** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 16, 42–46, and the pertinent footnotes. I shall not repeat here most of the material that I have already examined there.

**129** In this text, Abulafia resorts to both *sod* and *sefer* without distinguishing between them as he did in the passage from *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*.

**130** *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 26:

אחר שהעניין כן נאמן למה שהעידה התורה עליו במציאותו ר"ל בהיות מציאות המכתב בלוחות טבעי כשאר מעשה בראשית כולו. ישתבח בעל הכוונה הראשונה והאחרונה אשר העלים והסתיר סתריו וסודותיו מלבות בני אדם המשתדלים לעמוד בעולם השקר ולהאריך בו ימים לשוא.



This small exercise hints at a direction that should be followed insofar as other aspects of the discussions in the passage from *Or ha-Šekhel*—which means the ultimate meaning, which is the esoteric, conceived as the most important one—deal with the inner experience of the intellect and other inner human faculties (or according to another interpretation, with the brain and the heart)<sup>131</sup> and are therefore understood to be simultaneously individualistic—though not particularistic—and universal.

## 17 Changing Nature by Divine Names

The naturalist approach we dealt with in the previous chapter that elaborates on Maimonides's breakthrough within the Jewish framework is coupled with another approach. This approach resorts to the very same set of terms discussed above. Abulafia describes the three divine names that have the ability to change the order of nature in his first book as “divine [*Elohiyyim*] [and they] change nature [*Ṭeva*’],<sup>132</sup> [since they] are the throne [*ha-Kisse*’] and this is the secret of [the verse]<sup>133</sup> ‘It is the Finger of God’ [*Ešba*’ *Elohim*]; namely, the finger changes nature by virtue of the mentioned *Elohim*, which is the attribute of judgment.”<sup>134</sup> In this context, the Kabbalist hints at the numerical values of three divine names: the so-called name of 72 letters, *Adonai* [= 65], and the Tetragrammaton [= 26], which amount to 163, as does *Ešba*’.

This means that it is possible to change the course of the nature that was created by the name *Elohim* through a resort to three other divine names that are understood as preceding the term “finger” in the biblical verses. Thus, what Maimonides did not

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**131** See *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 44, where the gematria *kisse*’ = 86 = *lev u-moaḥ* is discussed according to *Sefer Ge’ulah*, 11. For the gematria of *moaḥ va-lev*, which occurs in other places in Abulafia’s writings, see the discussion of the meaning of the phylacteries in chapter 26 below.

**132** *Ṭeva*’ and *Kisse*’, which amount to 81, are often related in Abulafia’s writings and in the early writings of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla. See Idel, “Deus sive Natura” and Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 70b, where these two entities are described as comprising “heaven and earth and their hosts.” On *Kisse*’ and *Ṭeva*’, see also Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 75b and fol. 78a, where *Kisse*’, *Ṭeva*’, and *Anokhi* are mentioned together. Compare also to the Abulafian passage from Ms. Paris, BN 770, fol. 208a to be translated immediately below in this chapter. On the incorporeal nature of the divine seat, see *Or ha-Šekhel*, 72. For Gikatilla, see *Ginnat Egoz* (Hanau, 1615), fols. 5cd, 12d, 13a, 13b. Both may draw, as Warren Zev Harvey has remarked, on Maimonides’s distinction in the *Guide*, 1:9, Pines, 1:34–35, where “throne” refers to the eternal heavens and “nature” refers to the sublunary world of generation and corruption (i.e., the earth). Interestingly enough, this gematria, recurring so many times in the Kabbalah of Abulafia and of that of the early Gikatilla, disappears in the latter’s later theosophical writings as part of an axis change related to the different profound structures that inform his two stages: natural/linguistic in the first period and the divine sphere for the later period.

**133** Exodus 31:18.

**134** *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1682, fol. 101b. On this work by Abulafia, see Idel, “Abraham Abulafia’s Works and Doctrine,” 4–5. On the finger of God in Abulafia, see also Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 260–61.



do (to explain the meaning of the divine finger in a separate lexicographical chapter) is supplied by Abulafia. Here, we can discern the intersection between the philosophical interpretation and the Kabbalistic one that is oriented towards divine names: the divine finger that may change nature is not an anthropomorphic entity, part of the divine body, but actually something divine that is constituted from the names of God that are conceived as superior to the name *Elohim*, related as it is to the structure of nature.

The assumption that it is possible to change nature by means of divine names is a continuation of a view about the incantation of the supernal worlds by means of languages that is found in the *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* by Abulafia's teacher Rabbi Baruch Togarmi.<sup>135</sup> In an anonymous text that I have shown to have been authored by Abulafia and which is found in manuscripts together with Togarmi's *Commentary*, there is an interesting presentation to the effect that

the secret of the first man<sup>136</sup> that rules over all the parts of language by virtue<sup>137</sup> of the knowledge of the mentioned name [...] and rules by dint of the power of the mentioned name over all the natures in the world, [...] is the secret of *Kisse*,<sup>138</sup> as I told you in connection to *Anokhi*, and this is the reason why He swears to whomever conjures me, by the power of this name as it is appropriate, to enact whatever he wants to do by changing the nature of all the *naturata*, and the sign of the letters of this name amounts to the number *Qayyam*,<sup>137</sup> out of the 613 commandments, and the calculation and letters are *Anokhi Qayyam*,<sup>138</sup> whose secret is *Ra'l*,<sup>139</sup> whose meaning is *Arkhi* which in Greek is *Rešit*.<sup>140</sup>

**135** See my analysis in “Incantations, Lists, and ‘Gates of Sermons,’” 503–4. For the change of nature by means of the divine name, see also Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, *Ginnat Egoz*, 337.

**136** By comparing this text to the next one, in which the Messiah is mentioned in a similar context, we may assume that the first man is the Messiah. See chapter 10 note 188 above.

**137** 150 is the number of combinations of the letters of the Tetragrammaton.

**138** On the term *qayyam* as parallel to the monad and “idea,” see the Pythagorean material discussed by Yitzhak Tzvi Langerman, “The Astral Connections of Critical Days: Some Late Antique Sources Preserved in Hebrew and Arabic,” in *Astro-Medicine: Astrology and Medicine, East and West*, eds. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Florence: SISMEL, 2008), 106.

**139** The number of the combinations of two letters, according to *Sefer Yeširah*.

**140** Ms. Paris, BN 770, fol. 208a, Ms. New York, JTS 1884, fols. 3b–4a:

סוד אד"ם הראשון הנזכר והוא שולט על כל חלקי השפה בידיעת זה השם הנזכר וזה שמורה עליו שחלקי השעה מניינם א"ף שעה והוא שולט בכח השם הנזכר על כל טבע שבעולם והוא סוד כסא כמו שהודעתך במלת אנכי ועל זה נשבע למשביעיני בכח זה השם כראוי לעשות מה שירצה בשנוי טבע כל המוטבעים. וסימי' אותי' זה השם מניי' קי"ם מתריג מצות וכלל החשבון והאותי' אנכי קים וסודם רא"ל שפירושו ארכי שהוא בלשון יון ראשית.

On this text and its affinity to Abulafia, see Idel, “Abraham Abulafia’s Works and Doctrine,” 30. On multilingual gematrias, see my “Multilingual Gematrias in Abraham Abulafia.” For a parallel discussion, see the passage from Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 70b, mentioned above, as well as *Sitrei Torah*, 71. These parallels suffice in order to show how close the anonymous texts found in these few manuscripts are to Abulafia’s identified books. On the gematria *Anokhi* = *Kisse*’ = *Ṭeva*’ = 81, see the early text by Gikatilla, *Commentary on Ma’aseh Berešit*, found in Ms. New York, JTS 1891, fol. 70a–b, translated in the previous chapter. See also the book from Abulafia’s school, *Ner Elohim*, 46:

והמלה אלה"ם הוא י"ה מלא ואם הטבע כנוי נבדל מבדיל הכונה נקרא אלה"ם פ"ו שסודו הכסא נסתרו אכסה. כי "כוס ישועות אשא ובשם יודו אקרא" (תהלים קטז:ג)

The “mentioned name” is the Tetragrammaton, whose four letters were permuted earlier in the truncated untitled text. In this instance, the name that changes nature differs from what we have seen above, but the principle is the same. The two gematrias that inform the passage are *Anokhi = Kisse' = Teva' = 81* and *Anokhi Qayyam = Ra'l = Arkhi = 231*.<sup>141</sup> We may assume that the reference to the Greek term *archē* has something to do with the creation of the world, reminiscent of the first chapter of Genesis, which can be altered by resorting to the powers of the divine name.

By using the terms *Berešit* and *Ra'l*, Abulafia combines the biblical account of Genesis with that of *Sefer Yeširah*. This is also the case in another of his untitled texts extant in Ms. Firenze Laurenziana, where he writes that “the powers of the special name are the tools of the Messiah [in order] to change natures by their means, since its powers are over Adam, Lion, Ox, Eagle,”<sup>142</sup> a view that reverberates elsewhere in the same treatise, where it is written that “the Messiah of the Lord will rule over the entire chariot, in accordance with the will of God.”<sup>143</sup>

Thus, though diminishing, and perhaps even obliterating, the role of divine intervention in the revelation connected to the tablets of the Law, Abulafia enhances the possibility of the human knower of the divine name (the prophets or the Messiah) changing the course of nature. It should be emphasised that the power of the names is mentioned along with elite figures and that it is for the sake of redemption, not for magical purposes as the Rabbis used it, which is an enterprise that he criticises fiercely. By mentioning nature, Abulafia continues a tradition found in Abraham ibn Ezra, who was influenced by views of Al-Ġazālī and Avicenna, as to the possibility of changing the course of nature by cleaving to the supernal realm which, in their view, is universal.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, according to two testimonies found in the writings of Flavius Mithridates, Abulafia performed miracles in Palermo.<sup>145</sup>

To frame it in a more general manner: while Abulafia was interested in both external and, more importantly, internal nature, the latter being imagined to affect the former or external nature, the theosophical Kabbalists assumed the centrality of the divine realm for their theurgical activity. These two distinct foci, nature versus divine, differ in quite a dramatic manner; they define the nature of the profound structures

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Due to Gikatilla's influence, these gematrias also occur in Rabbi Hananel ben Abraham Esqira, *Sefer Yesod 'Olam*, Ms. Moscow, Guenzburg 607, fol. 79b.

**141** See also in his *Sitrei Torah*, 71: טבע קים בסוד רא"ל.

**142** Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 91a:

וכחות השם המיוחד הם כלי משיח לשנות הטבעים במ כי כחותיו הם על אד"ם אר"ה שו"ר נש"ר.

**143** Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 89a: כשילוט משיח יהו"ה בכל המרכבה לשנות הטבעים כרצון; Kresel, “The Term *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra,” 29–66. See also fol. 82b. See also chapter 10 note 190 above.

**144** See Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, 154–204; Wolfson, “God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra,” 77–111; Howard Kresel, “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *JQR* 75, no. 2 (1984): 99–133; Kresel, “The Term *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra,” 29–66.

**145** See Saverio Campanini, “Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada (alias Flavio Mitridate), traduttore di opere cabbalistiche,” in *Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada alias Flavio Mitridate. Un ebreo converso siciliano*, ed. Mauro Perani (Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2008), 62.

of the two types of Kabbalah more than any of the other major differences between them.

Unlike the theurgical approach of the main line of Kabbalah that assumes as its main working hypothesis that the divine powers (*sefirot*) can be affected by human activities, Abulafia is careful not to blur the gap between the natural world, which can indeed be changed, and the higher world of the separate intellects, who cannot under any circumstances be affected by man: “Do not opine that I believe that the separate intellects are under the hand of man, since this is impossible to say or to think at all, but that [I believe that] he changes nature, the world behaves under his hands, as it is conferred to man.”<sup>146</sup> It may well be that his denial is a polemic against Rabbi Baruch Togarmi’s view of the “supernal world” being given over to human hands.<sup>147</sup> Magic is therefore conceivable, but not a theurgical impact, as the theosophical Kabbalists allege.

The assumption that there is no change in the divine world is highly apparent in a very rich and seminal passage found in one of Abulafia’s epistles that I propose to call “Ha-Seder ha-Mithapekh,” a text rather neglected in modern research:

You should know that a person who does not know the order of the ten *sefirot*, upon which all existence is moving, the supernal, the median, and the low, will never know the providence of the Holy One, blessed be He, on the three. How is this? The ten *sefirot* of *Belimah*<sup>148</sup> will teach us

**146** Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 83b:

ואל תסבור שאני מאמין שהשכלים הנפרדים תחת יד האדם כי זה לא יתכן לאומרו ולא להעלותו על הלב כלל אמנם כשהוא משנה הטבע העולם המתנהג תחת ידם נמסר לאדם.

See also *Maftēḥ ha-Ra’ayon*, 5: “כי לא ימצא שינוי בשכלים הנפרדים כלל” as well as in his “*Seva’ Netivot ha-Torah*,” 25:

דע באמת שהמדות מתהפכות לקיצים ידועים בלי שנוי ותמורה מפני הנהגת הנבראים. והשנוי הוא לנפול על לפועל מצד הכרח ענין הנמצאים.

“You should know in truth that the attributes change at fixed dates, without change and shift, because of the rule of the creatures. But the change is in the *causarum* and in the *cause*, because of the necessity of the entities.”

See also *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 28; compare to the different perception of Abulafia’s attitude to theurgy in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 82–83. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 175, where he admits that Abulafia has allegorised theurgy and assumes that there is a tension between his different views. Thus, Wolfson implicitly excludes the possibility that Abulafia had a basic conceptual view that negated theurgy in principle. However, Wolfson does not express this view explicitly, as Abulafia does in the passages quoted in this footnote, which Wolfson does not address even though some of them were available in the books by Abulafia with which he was acquainted. This denial of theurgy should be the clue for attempting to understand the meaning of *התהפכות המידות* (“the inversion of the attributes”), which Wolfson understands theurgically. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 172–173 and note 213, which is an issue that deserves a separate analysis. See, meanwhile, the passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš* in Appendix E below. Compare also to Lorberbaum’s presentation of Maimonides’s view in *Dazzled by Beauty*, 39–40, note 92.

**147** See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 235.

**148** Cf. *Sefer Yeširah*, 1:2–8. The *sefirot* are identified here with letters that also have numerical valences, as in many other cases in Abulafia’s writings.

the essence of the existence of the Holy One, blessed be He, who is like a fast [writing] scribe<sup>149</sup> who rotates the letters, though He is not of the species of the *sefirot*, but all the *sefirot* are dependent on His will to govern them as He would like, but His will depends upon His wisdom, and His wisdom depends upon His power, and His power depends on Him, but He, blessed be He, does not change and does not shift and is not exchanged, and also His power does not add to Him, and His wisdom is not different from power and nor is His will without His wisdom [...] since He is intellect, intellection, and intelligibilia<sup>150</sup> [...]. And there is no doubt that those issues will be shifted in [human] creatures in accordance with the essence of those creatures. And a person who contemplates them and comprehends the[ir] beginnings will think that just as they are exchanged in the creatures, so they will be exchanged in the Creator, blessed be He. And most sages of the world will err on this issue, and it will not be revealed except to the prophets alone that the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed to them by the knowledge of His name, blessed be He, in accordance with the rotations of those divine<sup>151</sup> systems.<sup>152</sup>

The passage deals with the ten *sefirot*, conceived as identical to the first ten Hebrew letters, whose different forms of permutations are described in detail immediately after this passage. This means that the *sefirot* are some form of numbers, as we learn from the fact that their numerical values are assiduously calculated in the following discussions.

However, what is interesting here is not only the Pythagorean theory of numbers as the principles of the universe, which leads to a non-theosophical and non-theurgical understanding of the *sefirot*,<sup>153</sup> but the negation of the idea that there is a change on high because the three divine attributes (will, wisdom, and power) are represented as being identical to the divinity, which is described as not changing. If changes are discerned, these changes are actually changes within the creatures (that is, within human beings), with no ontological correspondence on high. A theurgical impact on the divine sphere would, according to this passage, be an

<sup>149</sup> Compare to Psalms 45:2.

<sup>150</sup> For more on this triad, see Appendix C.

<sup>151</sup> The divine systems (*ma'arakhot*) here stand for various methods of combining letters, described in the epistle immediately after this passage. Abulafia describes letters, especially in his later writings, as divine.

<sup>152</sup> Ms. London, British Library, Catalogue Margoliouth 749, fol. 30a:

דע כי מי שאינו יודע סדר הספירות העשר שעליהם כל המציאות מתגלגל, העליון והאמצעי והתחתון, לא יוכל לעולם לדעת השגחת השי"ת בשלשתם. כיצד היא? זה כי י"ס בלימה הם יורונו אמיתת מציאות השם ית' שהוא כסופר המגלגל האותיות ואינו ממין הספ"י אבל הספ"י כלם תלויות תחת רצונו להנהיגם כאשר ירצה, אך רצונו תלוי על חכמתו וחכמתו תלויה על יכלתו ויכלתו תלויה על עצמו. ואמנם עצמו ית' אינו משתנה ואינו מתהפך ולא מתחלף גם יכלתו אינה נוספת על עצמו ולא חכמתו דבר זולת יכלתו ולא רצונו זולת חכמתו [...] מפני שהוא שכל משכיל ומושכל ושכל פועל תמיד [...] ואין ספק כי יתהפכו העניינים האלו בבריות לפי מהות הנבראים, והמעייין בהם ושייג ההתחלות יחשוב שכמו שהם מתחלפים בנבראים כך יתחלפו בבורא ית'. ויטעו בזה רוב חכמי העולם ולא יתגלה זה כי אם לנביאים לבדם שהודיעם השי"ת זה בידיעת שמו ית' והוא לפי גלגול אלו המערכות האלוהיות.

On this text and its relationship to Abulafia, see Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 29–30, and Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 512–13.

<sup>153</sup> I hope to elaborate on these issues in a separate study. See Idel, *Ben*, 317–18.

error,<sup>154</sup> and the only realm changes are those made by humans when they combine the letters that are conducive to their knowledge of God. Let me point out that in this epistle, Abulafia relies heavily on the theory of letter combinations in the essentially lost *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah* by Rabbi Isaac of Beziars,<sup>155</sup> and he does not mention the performance of the commandments in the context of the changes in humans.

Interestingly enough, this philosophical tradition about the possibility of changing nature had an impact on two authors who were also influenced by Abulafia: Rabbi Moses Narboni and the anonymous mid-fifteenth century author of the treatise *Toledot Adam*. In the latter treatise, whose author was well-acquainted with Maimonides's discussion of the tablets as natural matters,<sup>156</sup> there is an interesting claim to the effect that the prophet's miracles are problematic since "nature is the will of God and the will of God, blessed be He, does not change [...] and if the enterprise is attributed to God, blessed be He, in that miracle then it seems that God operated by a change of will, and this is also inappropriate."<sup>157</sup> The question of the divine will, which can change and be changed according to Rabbinic sources and still more to the Kabbalistic ones, became quite a problematic topic for the Maimonideans.

This disappearance of the formative role of the divine will is also obvious in the manner in which redemption is described:

The governance is divided between the two<sup>158</sup> for the ends, and for the [cosmic cycles] *šemiṭin* and *Jubilees* by the *sefirot*.<sup>159</sup> And a person who does not know the secret of the ends will

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**154** See also the interesting discussion in *Sitrei Torah*, 111. These examples dramatically problematise the theurgical understanding of some aspects of Abulafia's Kabbalah as advocated by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, and as discussed in chapter 5 note 165 and chapter 17 note 146 above; see also Pedaya's uncritical acceptance of this interpretation in her "The Sixth Millennium," 67–68. She even claims that this Kabbalist's historical activity belongs to the category of theurgy! This is part of what I call the mirror vortex. See also Appendix E.

**155** See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 485, 504–27. The acquaintance of this Kabbalist, whom I proposed to identify as Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, with Ashkenazi material is part of a broader phenomenological affinity. See also the many discussions on the affinities of the discussions between the Spanish Kabbalists on divine names, especially in the second part of the thirteenth century in Castile, and the earlier Ashkenazi sources in Asi Farber-Ginat, "The Concept of the *Merkabah* in the Thirteenth-Century Jewish Esotericism—*Sod Ha-Egoz* and Its Development" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1986); Abrams, "'The Book of Illumination' of Rabbi Jacob ben Jacob HaKohen," 57, 61, 85, 111, and 247; Ben-Shalom, *The Jews of Provence and Languedoc*, 574–75.

**156** See the quote from *Guide* 1:66, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 166ab.

**157** Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 167b: 'ואם ייוחס המפעל לשם ית' [...] לא ישתנה הש"י לא ישתנה. באות ההוא א"כ נראה שהש"י יפעל בשינוי רצון, גם זה מגונה. See also fols. 163a and 165b.

**158** Namely, between the sun and the moon.

**159** One might be tempted to see here a Kabbalistic theory of the connection between the *sefirot* and cosmic cycles, as found in Nahmanides's school. See Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), 274–93, and Idel, "The Jubilee in Jewish Mysticism." However, it seems doubtful whether here the *sefirot* are conceived as referring to divine powers presiding over cosmic cycles (basically an astronomical theory predating the Kabbalists), but they point to measures of time, as we shall see immediately below.

never know the secret of the renewal of the world<sup>160</sup> in truth [...]. Behold, the renewal of the world will necessarily be in accordance with the measures,<sup>161</sup> and the measures will, indubitably, be in accordance with the [divine] names. And the names will be revealed and concealed, in accordance with the letters. And from this renewal, the ascent of a nation or nations will take place, as well as the decline of another nation or nations.<sup>162</sup>

Abulafia subscribed to a cyclical type of astral undulatory historiosophy (that is, a form of eternal return), which is also connected to the ascent and decline of the nations, including the Jewish one. These shifts in the statuses of nations are generally described as related to revelations of secrets found within letters, divine names, and attributes or measures (*middot*).<sup>163</sup> In the broader context of this passage, which deals with the secret of impregnation, there is a relationship between the divine names and the formulas that inform the renewal or decline of nations.<sup>164</sup>

What is especially important for our discussion here is the fact that the divine will is not described as intervening in this process. Indeed, after the above passage, Abulafia mentions the governance of the special nation that will assimilate all the other languages and scripts; however, even in this case, this is not part of a final, definitive redemption, but is rather merely an example of the process of renewal, which follows a strictly astral rhythm related to the celestially combined cycles of the sun and moon. This, let me emphasise, is a natural process that does not include divine intentionality or intervention; it is neither a change within the divine realm nor a change in the configuration of the divine powers, as in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah.<sup>165</sup>

## 18 On Nature and the Divine Choice

Let me engage the question of the relationship between nature and the divine choice in more general terms, in addition to our earlier discussion of the Hebrew language being natural. There are several instances in Abulafia's writings where it is nature,

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**160** *Ḥidduṣ ha-'olam*. This term should be understood in this context, as in some other places in Abulafia's writings, as pointing not to *creatio ex nihilo*, but to periodical renewal, as is the case with the moon: *ḥidduṣ levanah*.

**161** In Hebrew, מדות is similar to *sefirot*, to be understood as numbers. My reading is dependent on the parallel found two passages beforehand, where the verbs נמדדות and נספרות are used in the similar context of the *teqqufot*. See *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 204.

**162** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 207:

הממשלה נחלקת בשניהם לקצים ולשמטין וליובלות על ידי הספירות. ומי שאינו מכיר סוד הקצים לא יוכל לדעת לעולם סוד חדוש העולם באמתתו [...] הנה יהיה חדוש העולם על פי המדות בהכרח ותהיינה המדות על פי השמות בלא ספק, ויהיו השמות נגלים ונעלמים על פי האותיות ויתחדש מחדשו זה עלית אומה או אומות וירידת אחרת או אחרות.

**163** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 94, 103.

**164** See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 80–81. Abulafia's interpretation of the secrets of impregnation differs from that of other Kabbalists and will be discussed in a separate study.

**165** See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 79–82.

not the divine will, that is conceived as determining the course of events.<sup>166</sup> Indeed, in a seminal passage from *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, which is a parallel discussion to paragraph [d] from *Or ha-Šekhel* translated in Appendix A below, the term *Behīrah* (“choice”) is conceived as a homonym; that is, it is conceived as having more than one meaning. I propose to compare this passage, which I shall translate in this chapter, to the text from *Or ha-Šekhel* that will be under scrutiny below:

One can say about each and every thing of them that He chose for it to be what it is, and how this choice is better than any other and even in natural particular matters, *a fortiori* in the universal ones. We may say that nature chose that this body would be more sublime than another body, and nicer and stronger, even in the case of two individuals of the same species. And it was also said that of two species, one is naturally better than the other, and this is called by the name *Behīrah* as an equivocal name.<sup>167</sup>

I propose to see here a certain gradation in which the first represents the more traditional approach while the two later approaches are much closer to the views of Maimonides and Abulafia. In the first case, God chooses; in the second and third, nature does so. What counts in this context is the assumption that what is better is a matter of nature.

On the connection between nature and choice, already addressed in one of Abulafia's earliest books, Abulafia states that “in our language, this nature is called ‘choice,’ as it is said: seven firmaments were created by the Holy One, blessed be He in His world, and out of them all, He chose to put His Seat of Glory for His kingdom in ‘*Aravot*.”<sup>168</sup>

As we have seen above, like Maimonides, in his writings Abulafia uses homonyms or equivocal terms, such as words occurring in the sacred scriptures, in order to hide an esoteric meaning that is conceived as problematic for simple-minded readers of Jewish tradition.<sup>169</sup>

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**166** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 40: שהיצירה האנושית הטבעית גזרה and also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 121: גזר טבע השכל האלהי; שישפיע שכל על נפש הנביא, שהיא הכח הדברי; “the nature of the divine intellect determined that an intellect will be emanated upon the soul of the prophet, that is the speaking [namely, the intellectual] faculty.” See also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 45. For a similar position, see the view of the anonymous author of *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fols. 165b, 167b, where the gematria *Elohim* = *Teva* occurs together with the assumption that nature is tantamount to the divine will. Cf. Idel, “Deus sive Natura,” 97–98.

**167** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 185–186:

ויכול אדם לומר על כל דבר ודבר מהם שבו בחר להיותו באשר הוא, איך בחירה זו היא מעולה מזו ואפילו בעניינים הטבעיים הפרטיים וכל שכן בכלליים כבר נוכל לומר שהטבע בחר שיהיה זה הגוף יותר נכבד מזה הגוף האחר ויותר נאה ויותר חזק ואפילו בשני אישי מן אחד. וכן נאמר בשני מינים שזה מובחר מזה בטבע ונקרא זה בשם בחירה בשם משותף.

**168** *Maftaḥ ha-Ra'ayon*, 43–44:

בלשונינו נקרא זה הטבע בחירה, כאמרם שבעה [רקיעים] ברא הקב"ה בעולמו ומכולם לא בחר להיות כסא כבוד למלכותו אלא ערבות.

**169** See Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 11, where he regards the “secrets of the equivocality of names” as the clue for the *Guide* and for other unspecified writings. On homonyms in the Maimonideans, see



We learn about the existence of a “great secret” that is considered to be related to *Behīrah* from one of Abulafia’s early books, *Sefer ha-Melammed*, where he mentions “absolute nature” (in Hebrew, *ṭeva‘ gamur*), quite a rare phrase in the thirteenth century,<sup>170</sup> which is of the utmost importance in the context of qualifying the concept of divine choice:

Justice and law [belong] to God indubitably, since they are attributed to him by a great affinity, by absolute nature, according to the directives of existence. However, about the secret of choice, it has been said that “He chose the [firmament of] ‘*Aravot*,”<sup>171</sup> as you can understand from the blessing of the Torah, “You have chosen us from all the nations,” and as it was said<sup>172</sup> “and the Lord chose you,” as well as<sup>173</sup> “and He chose his seed after him,” and we also say that<sup>174</sup> “He chooses the Torah and Moses His servant, and the prophets of truth and justice.” You should understand this very well, and from this, you should understand the secret of “you should choose life” [Deuteronomy 30:19].<sup>175</sup>

This aura of secrecy around the theme of divine choice is extremely important for an understanding of Abulafia’s esotericism: what was conceived as an obvious and undisputed topic in the Jewish tradition here becomes a problem that must be understood esoterically. The assumption that one should read all the pertinent verses and blessings as containing a secret is certainly indicative of an interpretation that does not fit the ordinary concepts of choice.

The direction of the interpretation is found in the above passage when the phrase “absolute nature” is mentioned; its possible contribution to our understanding of Abulafia may be elicited from the following statement found in the context of the pearl parable, where Abulafia writes: “And nature also determines that God will choose a specific thing from all the details of matters, as He chose ‘*Aravot* from all the spheres.”<sup>176</sup> The parallelism between the last two quotes is quite evident and leads to the conclusion that it is nature that determines divine actions. This is a secret that Abulafia preferred to keep, resorting in some cases to the more traditional

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Robinson, “We Drink Only from the Master’s Water,” 40–47. See also the important discussion in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29, where the choice of the human species is related to the existence of the intellect in this species.

**170** The other occurrence of this phrase is found in Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 32, and his student’s *Ša‘arei Šedeq*.

**171** On this choice, see Appendix A. Compare to Maimonides’s *Guide* 1:70.

**172** Deuteronomy 14:2.

**173** Deuteronomy 4:37.

**174** According to the blessing after the reading of the portion from the prophets.

**175** Ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2002), 31:

וצדק ומשפט הם לאל בלא ספק כי הם מיוחסים אליו בקרבה גדולה בטבע גמור לפי הנהגת המציאות. ואמנם סוד הבחירה ואמרו שבחר בערבבות תבינהו מברכת התורה, “אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים.” כאמרו “ובך בחר יהוה” (דברים יד:ב) וכן “ויבחר בורעו אחריו” (דברים ד:לז). וכן עוד אנו אומרים “הבוחר בתורה ובמשה עבדו ובנביאי האמת והצדק”, והבן זה מאד וממנו תבין סוד “ובחרת בחיים” (דברים ל:ט).

**176** For the full Hebrew text and an English translation, see Appendix A. On divine volition and choice in Maimonides, see Goodman, “Maimonidean Naturalism,” 167–74.

vision of the election, formulated within the framework of that which defines the nation genetically.<sup>177</sup>

According to some concepts which were expressed in medieval Hebrew writing by a phrase that means “according to the recipient,” the result of the divine influx depends entirely on the recipient’s preparation. There are other instances in Abulafia’s writings where the specific nature of a certain entity determines the result of the interaction between the unchanging divine action and the nature of the recipient, as is the case with the nature of man which “determined” that God allows the power of speech.<sup>178</sup> In short, while Maimonides sees in the divine wisdom the quality that determines the divine acts, Abulafia, following the Great Eagle by using the same phrase, assumes that it is the very structure of existence that is to be understood as determining the acts related to it and attributed to God. Especially interesting in this context is a statement in *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*: “The essence of the Israelite faith is that the Holy One, blessed be He, created everything and brought it out of nothing, when knowledge of His wisdom, blessed be He, has determined His pre-eternal, permanent will,<sup>179</sup> which will not change in any case or by any form of change, and will not multiply by any multiplicity.”<sup>180</sup> The inexchangeable will, pre-eternal and informed by divine wisdom, is indeed described as creating the world *ex nihilo*, but it is obvious that there is a tension, in fact a contradiction, between the various parts of this short passage.

Let me compare this view to what Abulafia wrote in the same year in his *Sitrei Torah*, where he distinguishes between the Greek nomenclature, based as it is on terms “pointing to the pre-eternity of deeds that are found within the permanent wisdom, without a volitional intention” on the one hand, and the Jewish terminology on the other. The Greek one is indubitably the inverse of what he calls “our opinion” which is expressed by terms conveying “innovation of the created deeds, by intention and will.”<sup>181</sup> It seems that what the Kabbalist ascribes to the Greeks here is

<sup>177</sup> See *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, 68–69. Let me point out that Abulafia did not accept it on the esoteric level, as he did not accept Judah ha-Levi’s view or the Muslim view of the innate Muslim faculty (*fi-trah*). For the assumption of the possible influence of ha-Levi on Abulafia, see Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 141, note 21. For the problem posed by the biblical concept of nation, see Steven Grosby, “The Biblical ‘Nation’ as a Problem for Philosophy,” *Hebraic Political Studies* 1 (2005): 7–23. See also Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, “Jewish Reflections on Nationhood in the Twelfth Century” [Hebrew], *Peraqim* 2 (1969–74): 145–218.

<sup>178</sup> *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, 3. See also *Imrei Šefer*, 202: “The wise always chooses the best.”

<sup>179</sup> The phrase *rešono ha-qadum* occurs already in another context in the translation of the *Guide* 1:10, Pines, 1:36. See also Goodman, “Maimonidean Naturalism,” 175–87.

<sup>180</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, 48:

אמיתות האמונה הישראלית היא, שהשׁיׁת בׁה ברא הכל והוציא מאין לישׁ, כשגורה ידיעת חכמתו יתׁש ברצונו הקדום התמיד, אשר לא ישתנה בשום פנים מאופני השינוי, ולא יתרבה בשום ריבוי.

The term *rašon qadum*, “pre-eternal will,” is also found in the anonymous *Sefer Or ha-Menorah*, Ms. Jerusalem, NUL 1303, fols. 28b and 43a, which is from Abulafia’s school. See also *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 83: רצון השם הקדמון יתׁשׁ.

<sup>181</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, 36:

quite similar to what he defines as the essence of the Jewish faith in the other book. The contradiction is, in my opinion, evident and I would say that what he hinted at in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* represents his secret position, which he vehemently negates in *Sitrei Torah*. In other words, I do not see here a case of conceptual fluidity—namely, of a change of mind as part of a certain type of intellectual evolution—but rather a case of esoteric discourse that includes two diametrically opposed positions, and this contradiction between the two positions expressed in books written in the very same year is premeditated, part of his esoteric style.

Perhaps the distinction between the Greeks, who are portrayed as holding an incorrect position, and Abulafia's traditional position, which is envisioned as correct, has something to do with the intended audience of *Sitrei Torah*: four young people who eventually deserted him, as he angrily indicates.<sup>182</sup> In any case, the above distinction is part of a wider discussion dealing with the Rabbinic statement<sup>183</sup> that recommends preventing young people from studying logic.<sup>184</sup> However, despite the fact that Abulafia takes, in a reserved manner, the part of the traditional camp in this debate, criticising the view of Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon,<sup>185</sup> he himself studied logic in his youth and confessed to doing so without any reservation some years after *Sitrei Torah* both in texts that I discussed above and in others I will mention below. His view is that the Rabbis intended their interdiction only for immature young people and not for mature ones, a view that is consonant with that of Rabbi Jacob Anatoli.<sup>186</sup>

In the same book, Abulafia expressly says, in the context of studying logic, that “reality shows the philosophers the essence of matters in an easy manner,” although Kabbalah, based on meditation on letters, does so “in an even easier manner.”<sup>187</sup> The mention of this easiness may have something to do with the concept of *ḥads* (a form of intuition), which is a concept found in Muslim philosophy and in Maimonides.<sup>188</sup> This means that his approach does not invalidate philosophy, but offers an easier

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וההבדל אשר בינינו לבנים שאנחנו קראנו בשמות מורים חידוש מעשים נבראים בכוונה ורצון, והם קראום בשמות מורים קדמות מעשים נמצאים בחכמה תמידית בלתי כוונה רצונית. ודעתם הפך מדעתנו בלא ספק.

**182** See p. 74 above.

**183** *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 28b. The possible meanings of this Rabbinic statement and its medieval interpretations have been debated by scholars. See Mordekhai Breuer, “Keep Your Children from Higayon” [Hebrew], in *Mikhtam le-David: Sefer Zikaron le-rav David Ochs*, eds. Yitzhak D. Gilat and Eliezer Stern (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1978): 242–61, and Frank Talmage, “Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality,” in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, eds. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 81–101.

**184** Idel, “On the History of the Interdiction,” 15–20.

**185** See *Sitrei Torah*, 35–36.

**186** See Idel, “On the History of the Interdiction,” 17–18, and Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 534–35.

**187** See *Sitrei Torah*, 160. See also my *Absorbing Perfections*, 90–91.

**188** See Amirah Eran, “The Diffusion of the *Ḥads* Theory of Avicenna from Maimonides to Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav” [Hebrew], in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, 71–76, and my “On the Meanings of the Term ‘Kabbalah,’” 58–59.

path to understanding, by means of what he regarded as a higher type of logic. This rather positive attitude towards the findings of the philosophers is obvious elsewhere where he describes them as “the sages of the nations who are perfect in those issues” in the context of the adherence to the Agent Intellect,<sup>189</sup> perhaps also a reference to the thought of Avicenna or Averroes.

Immediately afterwards, Abulafia confesses that he “agreed with them in all,” again related to the comprehension of the Intellect.<sup>190</sup> Abulafia indeed has a more complex understanding of Kabbalah, since he understands what he calls “the first Kabbalah” to be an approach based on accepting contents by means of traditions that are not demonstratively examined—like the so-called “truthful tradition” (*ha-haggadah ha-ne’emanah*) in Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon<sup>191</sup>—and thus it is conceived as being replete with imagination, while his own Kabbalah, after it is purified of imaginary contexts, is an examined and intellectual one.<sup>192</sup>

I propose to understand this type of problem related to the nature of the divine will as part of radical Maimonideanism as it assumes an approach close to the medieval theory known as *potentia dei ordinata*.<sup>193</sup> However, it seems that Abulafia’s approach was more explicit and extreme than the views of the other Maimonideans. Such an interpretation of the term *Beḥirah* as a nature that impedes the divine choice cuts short the widespread assumption in traditional forms of Judaism that the Jews are, ethnically speaking, the chosen people elected by the free will of God or that they are the portents of the so-called “divine issue.” It allows, however, the assumption that they may be superior to other nations by dint of some natural qualities such as, in our context, respecting the correct pronunciation of the twenty-two natural, innate consonants, as we have seen above.

This is a cardinal point that should be taken into consideration when portraying the special characteristic of Abulafia’s thought: the dialogue with his specific philosophical backgrounds, as described above, was paramount for his thought long after he turned into a Kabbalist; he maintained a more universalistic approach in his writings, though this dimension was an integral part of his esoteric narrative. In one case, in his last known book, he claims that a certain topic may be revealed solely to “the sages of *The Guide of the Perplexed*” because it may create what he calls “a great perplexity.”<sup>194</sup> This means that he refers to at least some of his followers

189 *Sefer Maḥteah ha-Šemot*, 25–26.

190 *Sefer Maḥteah ha-Šemot*, 26.

191 Wolfson, “The Double Faith Theory in Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas.”

192 See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 83; *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 8–9; and, in particular, the phrase קבלה מושכלת, “the Kabbalah that is understood by the intellect,” occurring in “Ševa’ Netivot ha-Torah,” 9. This description is like his other two that are better known. The Kabbalah of Names and the prophetic Kabbalah were not used by Kabbalists who did not belong to his school in the thirteenth century.

193 See Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 157–80. See also Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 139.

194 See *Imrei Šefer*, 8: בי אין ראוי לגלות זה כי אם לחכמי מורה הנבוכים כי היא מבוכה גדולה.

in such a manner; namely, as qualified recipients of the secrets he would like to impart.

For Abulafia, let me emphasise, it is the philosophical concepts and their impact on traditional themes that constitute the content of his esotericism, not the theosophical ones, as the former alone are capable of accounting for internal human improvements.<sup>195</sup> In my opinion, Abulafia recurrently uses the imagery of “nature” in order to undermine the divine free choice and consequently to understand the superiority of the Jews only when he describes it in what he considers to be natural terms.

It should be pointed out that Abulafia resorts to the term “nature” hundreds of times in his writings, much more than any other Kabbalist with whom I am acquainted, and perhaps more than all the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists in the thirteenth century altogether. This emphasis is also evident in the case of Rabbi Nathan ben Sa’adyah’s shorter treatise *Ša’arei Šedeq*, in which he acknowledges the philosophical source of the importance of *ṭeva’*, and describes, in a manner reminiscent of Abulafia, the external nature as a parable for the inner nature.<sup>196</sup> In fact, according to the testimony of Rabbi Nathan, he asked his teacher Abulafia:

Why did you write books [based] on the ways of nature, together with teaching the [divine] names? He told me: for you and those like you among those interested in philosophy, in order to draw your human intellect by way of nature, perhaps this drawing will be the reason for bringing them to the knowledge of the Name.<sup>197</sup>

Philosophical explanations are understood here as tantamount to natural interpretations, in a manner reminiscent of the critique of Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, whom we quoted at the beginning of this study. Here, this manner of composition is presented as a strategy for persuading the young elite who are already acquainted with the study of the *Guide* and natural sciences, as Rabbi Nathan himself already was, to enter into Abulafia’s type of Kabbalah.<sup>198</sup>

On the other hand, as we have seen above in some instances, Abulafia uses the phrase שינוי הטבע (*šinnui ha-ṭeva’*) several times; this phrase refers to a change of na-

<sup>195</sup> For more on these issues, see my *Primeval Evil: Totality, Perfection and Perfectibility*, 363–70.

<sup>196</sup> For example, see some of the occurrences in *Le Porte della Giustizia*: 469, 471, 473, 475, 477–78, 479, 480, and 481. See also the gematria *moaḥ va-lev* = *ṭeva’* = 86 that occurs in Abulafia’s writings, such as *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 33.

<sup>197</sup> *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478:

וכבודך מפני מה מחבר ספרים בדרכי הטבעים משותפים בהוראת השמות, אמר לי בעבורך והדומי לך מן המתפלסים למשוך שלם האנושי בדרך טבע אולי תהיה ההמשכה הזאת סבה להבאתם אל ידיעת השם.

This characterisation also fits what Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret had to say about Abulafia’s writings in his famous responsum 1, no. 548.

<sup>198</sup> See his confession as to the things he studied before meeting a Kabbalist (Abulafia): *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 477.

ture, especially through the activities of the prophets.<sup>199</sup> This is the reason why one may ask: what is the meaning of obliterating the divine choice and perhaps also the divine will to change nature, while nature, or at least parts of it, may be changed by divine names when used by some people? At least in one case, Abulafia claims that it is the plain sense that is intended for the multitude of Israel, dealing as it does with changes in parts of nature.<sup>200</sup>

According to another passage whose meaning is far from transparent, Abulafia offers an interiorised understanding of miracles:

And what comes from the miracles, in accordance with what has been intelligised from letters and words that are understood by the intellect after a great amount of study. And the Kabbalistic issues are the wonders and miracles which are engraved in every Kabbalist's heart, and when they move from *potentia* to *actu*, in accordance with the aforementioned manner, by means of the breathings that are known from tradition, the matters are accepted willingly and immediately for anyone who comprehends in accordance with the power of the recitations, which amounts to the complete comprehension.<sup>201</sup>

Abulafia resorts to the pun *otot/otiyot* (“wonders”/“letters”) because it is by means of letters (which are essentially sounds) that miracles (*mofetim*, “changes of nature”) are performed. Abulafia is here describing the mystical technique that he invented based on reciting letters and breathing.<sup>202</sup> By following the instructions found in this technique, a person is capable, so he argues, of changing his inner nature, as we also learn from other instances in his writings.<sup>203</sup> Presumably, Abulafia is speaking here about changes of what his student Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah calls “the inner nature.”<sup>204</sup> The matters may stand for questions a person has and are answered as part of a revelation related to the performance of the technique.

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**199** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 27–28, 120; *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 195–96; as well as the anonymous text found in Ms. Moscow, Güzburg 737, fol. 83a, which will be printed in a separate study. See also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 63–71; Idel, “Incantations, Lists, and ‘Gates of Sermons,’” 499–501; and Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, 154–204. In an interesting reference to Abulafia, informed by the above-mentioned passage from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Rabbi Johanan Alemanno mentions the possibility of performing miracles. See *Ḥešeq Shlomo*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1535, fol. 147a. Alemanno was well-acquainted with this book of Abulafia's. Cf. his *Collectanea*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 2234, fols. 95a–96b, 148a–149a; he was also very fond of Narboni's writings. Narboni was one of the channels through which some of those ideas penetrated into the Italian Renaissance.

**200** *Maftēaḥ ha-Šemot*, 49.

**201** *Maftēaḥ ha-Šemot*, 86:

הוא מה שבא בענין האותות לפי מה שיושכל מן האותיות והתיבות המובנות בשכל עם רוב לימוד. והמקובלים הם הא[ו]ת[ו]ת והמופתים הם אצל כל מקובל חקוקים תוך לבו והם בצאתם מן הכח אל הפעל לפי הדרך הנזכרת בנשימות המקובלות עניינים מתקבלים ברצון מיד למשיג על פי כח ההזכרות המודיעות ההשגה כולה.

**202** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 13–52.

**203** See Abulafia, *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 40: ועל טבע האדם החיצון והפנימי. Compare also *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 1. See also *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 364, discussed in chapter 21 note 291 below.

**204** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 463.

This quandary may also be explained in a somewhat different manner: it is only man who has a free will that allows him to be preoccupied with material issues that are considered to be lower than spiritual ones. In this context, it is important to highlight the almost total absence in Abulafia's writings of Maimonides's claim that the biblical figure Baruch ben Neriah was prevented from prophesying by the divine will.<sup>205</sup> His view is that "it is impossible that a natural matter will change from the aspect of nature, and if something changes quite rarely and by dint of a volitional divine wonder, this will be by means of a prophet in order to validate his prophecy, [changing] one of the parts of natural existence."<sup>206</sup> Again, this is quite a weird formulation: the change in nature, which is supposed to depend on the divine will, is immediately qualified as being caused by the prophet because of his need to validate his mission.

In a way, it seems that Abulafia radicalised Maimonides's more moderate naturalistic approach to religion in his exoteric views by resorting to the term "absolute nature" in contradistinction to Nahmanides's famous statement about Maimonides in a well-known sermon: "We are amazed by Maimonides, blessed be his memory, because he diminishes miracles and enhances nature, and he says that miracles only persist for a while."<sup>207</sup> This is just one more example, if one were needed, of

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**205** See *Imrei Šefer*, 40, where this view is presented as a "wondrous secret":

ואם לא נגלה לו זה הסוד המופלא ידאג כבודך בן נריה על בקשו הנבואה כשלא ישיגנה כאומרו יגעתי באנחתי ומנוחה לא מצאתי.

This statement, however, does not imply that God prevented Baruch from prophesying, but the contrary. Compare to the *Guide*, 2:32, Pines, 2:362.

**206** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 27:

והענין הטבעי אי אפשר שישתנה מצד הטבע, ואם ישתנה בו דבר לעתים רחוקות, ועל ידי הפלא הרצוני האלהי יהיה על ידי נביא להצדיק נבואתו בחלק מחלקי המציאות הטבעי.

See also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 27–28, and 66, where he does not mention Neriah, but speaks about the possibility that the divine will may prevent some form of cognition. However, in *Imrei Šefer*, he speaks about a great secret related to the possibility of prevention. See 37:

והאומרים שיתכן שיהיה לו מונע מהשם האלהים שכך היא המידה. אבל יש לה סוד ואם גלינוהו היה קשה מאד בעיני כל חכם. ואם לא נגלהו יחשוב השומע שלא ידענהו ולא נגלה לנו. ואנו יודעים שאנו יודעים אותו וכבר נגלה לנו. ואם כן נעשה לישב שתי הדעות נגלהו ברמו ויהיה נגלה למביניו ונעלם מזולתו.

**207** See his sermon "The Torah of God is Perfect," in *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, vol. 1, ed. Chaim D. Chavel (Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1963), 154:

על כן נתמה מן הרמב"ם ז"ל שהוא מגרע הנסים ומגביר הטבע, ואומר שאין הנסים עומדים אלא לפי שעה.

For a somewhat similar view, see *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, 1:158, where he refers to "Rabbi Abraham," probably ibn Ezra:

אולי שמע דעת אפלטון שהוא סובר שהעולם בהיותו מחודש אלא שהטבע קדמון שקשה עליו דבר האפיסה.

See also Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the *Guide*," 313. See also Nahmanides's expression in his discussion of Genesis 2:17 in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*: הטבע ("the people of nature"), which refers to some form of naturalist view. For Nahmanides's complex theory of miracles, see the analysis by Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of a Tradition* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2006), 149–80, especially 178–79. For Nahmanides's voluntaristic theosophy, see Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of *Šimšum* in Kabbalah and Its Research" [Hebrew], in *Lurianic Kabbalah*, eds. Rachel Elior and Yehuda Liebes (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992): 61–62;



the stark divergences between Abulafia's Kabbalah and the theosophical-theurgical one represented by Nahmanides and his followers in Barcelona. It may well be that Abulafia was reacting to Nahmanides's critique of Maimonides in his famous sermon. In any case, in an interesting discussion by Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, a Kabbalist we mentioned above, there is a critique of the assumption that the natures of things are permanent such that God cannot change them.<sup>208</sup>

It should be mentioned that in addition to Maimonidean naturalism, there is also another type of naturalism which can be called hermetic; this assumes the possibility of drawing down the overflow from above as part of the experience. In my opinion, this hermetic trend is starkly different from Maimonides's thought, as he was a person who fought a fierce war against magical Hermeticism (which he referred to as Sabianism); it is found in only some of Abulafia's books,<sup>209</sup> which is an issue on which I hope to elaborate in another study.<sup>210</sup> This propensity towards causing the descent of the supernal spiritualities is also found in Rabbi Moses Narboni's writings.

## 19 The Nature of the Son in the Pearl Parable

The scholars dealing with the pearl parable interpreted the son as an allegory for the nation mentioned in paragraphs [a] and [c]; namely, the historical people of Israel. This is indubitably true, and means that the Torah in its absolutely intellectual meaning was not delivered to the Jewish nation in the past and is certainly not found in its possession in the present, though they may have some form of priority for receiving it in the future. This is indeed a radical statement, which has many ramifications for a proper understanding of Abulafia's approach to religion in general and to Judaism in particular, as well as for the general history of philosophical religions. Such a reading would constitute an understanding according to the second type of narrative; namely, the historical explanation of the plain sense of the parable. There is nothing esoteric here, and nothing especially spiritual either, but rather a particularist understanding of religion that gravitates around a nation composed of genetic Jews.

However, in my opinion, this understanding, though correct, is not the final message that Abulafia wanted to transmit through his resort to this parable. Such a national-historical reading takes Abulafia's intention solely to a concrete, plain sense,

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Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*, 274–93; and again in Nahmanides's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, concerning Genesis 2:17.

<sup>208</sup> *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*, 102.

<sup>209</sup> See the Abulafian sources translated and analysed in Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 94–95.

<sup>210</sup> See, meanwhile, Moshe Idel, "Hermeticism and Kabbalah," in *Hermeticism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, eds. Paolo Lucentini, Ilaria Parri, and Vittoria Perrone Compagni (Brepols: Turnhout, 2004), 389–408.

as if what was most important for him religiously is what historically happened to a large group of people, genetically belonging to a certain collective category, who were considered to be the sons of God, or the collective son of God. Such an assumption reduces Abulafia's thought to merely a more complex version of the biblical or Rabbinic understanding of Judaism as a corporate personality. In one of his most outspoken confessions, as he discusses the Tower of Babel episode, Abulafia claims that the biblical stories are predominantly intended for the multitude and have only a little interest for the special individual, whom at other points he calls "the distinguished person."<sup>211</sup>

However, following Maimonides's Neo-Aristotelianism, Abulafia shifted the importance of the resemblance between father and son from the original corporeal isomorphism, which is the thrust of the discussions in the biblical and Rabbinic traditions regarding the image mentioned in Genesis 1:27, to a spiritual resemblance or a contiguity between the supernal world conceived as an intellectual realm and a perfect man when he actualises his passive intellect.<sup>212</sup> Unlike earlier forms of morphonominalism—namely, the assumption that a son resembles his father in a physical manner because they share a common shape and also because he bears his father's name<sup>213</sup>—Abulafia was interested in what I propose to call a *nous* nominalism; namely, the assumption that the true Israel and the divine sphere share not only a common name, but also a common nature, the intellectual one, which means that we have here an intellectual or spiritualised understanding of the name Israel, as we saw in chapter 15 above. According to Abulafia's statement, the secret of the son is the most important secret of the first part of his interpretation of the secrets in the *Guide*.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, in his other commentary on the alleged secrets of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed, Sitrei Torah*, he deals with three different meanings of the term "son." This distinction deserves a more detailed discussion.

For our purpose here, it suffices to say that Abulafia assumes that the Hebrew term *Ben* is one of the thirty-six secrets hidden in *The Guide of the Perplexed* that he claims to have understood. Abulafia distinguishes between three different categories of sons in the Hebrew Bible: the ethnic one, the metaphorical-intellectual one, and all the others related to linguistic resorts to the term *Ben* without any genealog-

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<sup>211</sup> Or *ha-Šekhel*, 39. Compare also to his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliš*, Ms. Roma, Angelica 38, fol. 9a, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 8, and his introduction to *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*, 6.

<sup>212</sup> Idel, *Ben*, 287. See also Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God,'" 70–71. Strangely enough, in his book printed in 2012, Sagerman does not seem to know about my lengthy chapter in English on Abulafia and the son of God, which was printed in 2008. This is the reason why his treatment of the theme of the son, in a book dealing with Abulafia's attraction to Christianity, is quite scant, as he is not aware of the strong impact of the Jewish-Christian tradition on one of Abulafia's Ashkenazi sources (i.e., Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon, the prophet of Erfurt).

<sup>213</sup> See my *Ben*, 18–22.

<sup>214</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 10.

ical overtone.<sup>215</sup> He claims that all the occurrences of the term *Ben* in *The Guide of the Perplexed* should be understood as pointing to some form of allegorical meaning, as the phrase “the sons of the prophets” does not refer to the biological relationship between father and son, but to someone who is the disciple of another person. Also, the occurrence of the expression “The Name of Four Letters” (*Šem ben Arba‘ Otiyyot*)—namely, the Tetragrammaton—should be understood in a metaphorical manner. He then claims that any *causatum*, or overflow, is designated as a son, like in the biblical expression *Benei ha-Elohim* in Genesis 6 which refers to some category of angels.

After establishing the metaphorical nature of the Maimonidean discussions, Abulafia returns to the Bible and asserts that one should not apply this principle of metaphorical reading to all the occurrences of the term *Ben* because this would generate a form of heresy. On the other hand, however, he claims that one should not assume that all the occurrences of the term *Ben* in the Bible are dealing with biological sons, since the intellect understands that they are not eternal. In short, we have here an application of Maimonides’s exegetical method of homonymy, about which we shall have more to say in this chapter.<sup>216</sup>

Especially important for our discussion is the metaphorical reading he proposes of the biblical phrase “My firstborn Israel,” which should be interpreted against its plain sense and read metaphorically. This means that according to an esoteric reading of the Hebrew Bible, it is not a person that is described here, but solely the intellect when it is actualised, as in the case of Seth, who was described as being born in the image and likeness of God.

Abulafia dislocates the national type of sonship as a conclusive definition of Judaism and supplements it with an intellectual one that he conceives as more sublime, which means that he interprets one of the most cherished national values, national sonship, as pointing to an intellectual relationship between God as intellect and a human intellect that is derived from the divine one. By doing so, he highlights another value that is more important than national or genetic belonging. Rather than centring the national collective, as in traditional Judaism, Abulafia prioritises the individual’s intellect. In other words, his contribution to the discussions of the concept of sonship in Judaism should be seen in his conspicuous and explicit addition of the register of noetic interpretation as being, in the way I understand him, more important.

Who are these intellectual sons? According to another commentary on the secrets of the *Guide*, they are the prophets. Abulafia draws this conclusion by resorting to exegetical techniques characteristic of his Kabbalah based on the permutations of the consonants of the word *mitnabe'im* (which means “they prophesy”), which gen-

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<sup>215</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, 22–26, Ms. Munich, 341, fol. 160b. I addressed the content of this passage briefly in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 54.

<sup>216</sup> For the earlier Greek and Arabic theories that informed Maimonides, see Rosenberg, “Signification of Names in Medieval Jewish Logic.”

erate the words *attem banim* (“you are the sons”), an expression found in Deuteronomy 14:1, one of the most important biblical proof-texts for the divine sonship of the people of Israel.<sup>217</sup> Accordingly, it is the act of intellection that is crucial for obtaining prophecy, rather than concrete religious deeds—namely, acting in accordance with the commandments—which count much less, if at all, for the attainment of the ultimate perfection.<sup>218</sup>

This subversive axiology dramatically prefers the spiritual over the corporeal, historical, and national axis or register and represents a deep tendency in Abulafia’s thought insofar as many other topics are concerned, such as the question of creation *ex nihilo* or continuous creation,<sup>219</sup> following some of the medieval philosophies with which the Kabbalist was acquainted. The proof of the need for such a spiritual understanding of the nature of the son in the parable is his description of him as lacking knowledge; his later repentance is most probably related to his acquisition of knowl-

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**217** *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 16; see also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 109–10.

**218** See, for the time being, Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah,” 430–51, and Abulafia, *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 28–29.

**219** This topic in Abulafia’s thought deserves a separate inquiry. See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 183–84; Abulafia’s fourth secret of part 3, in his list of secrets in the *Guide*, according to his three commentaries. See, especially, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 99: העולם התמידי; *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 133: ומתחדש תמיד; *Sefer Gan Na’ul*, 40–41; *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 1–2; *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 207; and *Maftaḥ ha-Sefrot*, 16–17. See also Appendix E note 12 below. On this problem in general, see Harvey, “A Third Approach to Maimonides’s Cosmology-Prophetology Puzzle,” especially 293–94, notes 22–23; Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” 15–17; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 88; and Ravitzky, “Secrets of the *Guide*,” 173. For sources mentioned by Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, see Genesis 1:1, Exodus 3:2, Exodus 20:20, and the short commentary on Exodus 20:1, which is possibly related to the views of the Muslim Ash‘ari theologians. On this issue in Abulafia’s generation, see Harvey, *Falaquera’s “Epistle of the Debate,”* 111–15; Ravitzky, “The Thought of Rabbi Zerayah,” 221–63; Seymour Feldman’s analysis of the somewhat later author Rabbi Isaac Albalag’s view on creation in “An Averroist Solution to a Maimonidean Perplexity,” *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 15–30; Seymour Feldman, “The Theory of Eternal Creation in Hasdai Crescas and Some of His Predecessors,” *Viator* 11 (1980): 289–320. On ibn Kaspi, see Hannah Kasher, “Joseph ibn Kaspi as a Philosophical Exegete” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1982), 54–61. See also Norman M. Samuelson, *The First Seven Days: A Philosophical Commentary on the Creation of Genesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). On Maimonides’s stance regarding the creation of the world, which likely influenced Abulafia, there are several studies. See Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 25–40; Israel Ravitzky, “The Question of a Created or Primordial World in the Philosophy of Maimonides” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 35 (1966): 333–48; Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’s Interpretation of the Story of Creation*; Hyman, “Maimonides on Creation and Emanation,” 45–61; and recently Racheli Haliva, “The Origin of the World—An Anti-Sceptical Approach in Medieval Jewish Averroism,” in *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought*, 139–42. For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). See also Laderman, *Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art*, 101–10. Compare also to the view of ibn ‘Arabi discussed in Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969; repr. 1998), 200–207.

edge.<sup>220</sup> Also, the gist of paragraph [c] deals with the spread of knowledge in the eschaton.

In any case, at least in one instance, Abulafia explicitly rejects the view that the people of Israel are to be understood solely as a corporate personality, that they are, in a genetic sense, a Son of God, as he points out in the threefold categorisation of sonship in his *Sitrei Torah*.<sup>221</sup> In this context, it should be mentioned that in *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia refers to his two students to whom he dedicated the book as the sons of his intellect, which is not different from the sons of God.<sup>222</sup> More than any other type of sonship, intellectual sonship constitutes the “true” meaning of the relationship between God and man. This also seems to be the essence of a brief comparison of the people of Israel to a son who does not listen to his father and is punished found in *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, a book written two years before *Or ha-Šekhel*.<sup>223</sup> In this case, the rebellious son is portrayed as unwilling to learn the truth, not merely as behaving badly.

However, what is important in this short anticipation of the pearl parable is the fact that immediately afterwards, Abulafia applies this type of rebellion to a person who is unwilling to recognise the truth. This is a transposition of the parable: the son, and the nation, according to the second narrative, becomes the individual standing before God, undoubtedly an intellectual type of relationship consonant with what I call the third type of narrative.<sup>224</sup> This third narrative precisely fits an ecstatic Kabbalist in its details.

The future aspect of the pearl parable speaks about the son’s repentance; namely, his acquisition of wisdom and his inheritance of the pearl.<sup>225</sup> This parabolic part is

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**220** For the concept of repentance interpreted in strong intellectual terms, see Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, 38. See also Abulafia’s text in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 127.

**221** For Abulafia as a son, see more below at the end of this chapter.

**222** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 3–4. Compare also to *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:2, 55: ופרי שכלי (“You should know, my cherished son, the branch of my soul and the fruit of my intellect”). Here, it is clear that he is referring to his students and not to his genetic descendants.

**223** *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, 196.

**224** *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, 196–97.

**225** In Abulafia’s Hebrew original, the sole term used is *margalit*, just as in the Hebrew translation of the passage of the introduction to the *Guide* that is cited above that influenced Abulafia. However, by reading Hames’s correct English translation of Abulafia’s parable in *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 67–68, where the English term “pearl” occurs, Pedaya retranslates it into Hebrew as *peninah*, most probably without reading or checking the Hebrew original, which indeed she chose not to cite or give a precise reference to. She then freely speculates about the possible connection between Abulafia’s discussion about the alleged *peninah* and the famous Gnostic *Hymn of the Pearl* on the one hand, and that of Joachim of Fiore on the other. See her “The Sixth Millennium,” 85–86. Interestingly, Abulafia himself never uses the Hebrew word *peninah* in his writings, only when quoting biblical verses or titles of books where the term is found. On the basis of such superficial associations, and unaware of the entire bibliography related to the pearl parable, it is easy to be “creative” and to invoke Gnosticism and Joachimism as significant parallels. This is just one example of the plight of Abulafia studies, which relies on secondary sources and translations that are not always reliable, even when the

understood on the historical or national level as the redemption of the Jews and the recognition of their superiority by all the other nations. In another form, it is part of the parable of the three rings. This reading is no doubt part of a popular exoteric form of messianism, well-known in the Middle Ages and used by Abulafia in his writings on the rhetorical level. However, I assume the existence of an additional level: an esoteric one, which entails another form of redemption. Such a reading will parallel the interpretation of the son as an intellect; namely, the concept of sonship in a non-genetic sense.

## 20 Messianic Valences in Abulafia's Interpretation of the Parable

The end of passage [c] from *Or ha-Šekhel* has a clear messianic overtone that is worth explicating as part of my assumption that Abulafia was operating with more than one type of narrative. For this purpose, let me first present a text that stems from Abulafia's commentary on one of his own "prophetic books" written in the same period and in the same town that he wrote *Sefer Or ha-Šekhel*. The Kabbalist, who believes that he is a Messiah, distinguishes between three different meanings of this term:

The term *Mašiah* is equivocal, [designating] three [different] matters; [a] first and foremost, the true Agent Intellect is called the Messiah [...] [b] and the man who will forcibly bring us out of exile from under the rule of the nations due to his contact with the Agent Intellect will [also] be called Messiah. [c] And the material human intellect is called Messiah. This is the hylic<sup>226</sup> intellect that is the redeemer and has influence over the soul and all elevated spiritual powers. It can save the soul from the rule of the material kings and their people and their powers, the lowly bodily desires. It is a commandment and an obligation to reveal this matter to every wise man of the wise ones of Israel<sup>227</sup> in order that he may be saved, because there are many things that oppose the opinions of the multitude of the Rabbis,<sup>228</sup> even more that differ from the views of the masses.<sup>229</sup>

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original Hebrew versions of his books are easily accessible. See also chapter 5 note 170 above and chapter 25 note 45 below. This is but one example of the neglect of the study of documents and the vortex of speculations, generalisations, and exaggerations that have plagued some parts of Kabbalah scholarship in the last two decades.

**226** Namely, the material, passive, or potential intellect. This elevated status of the hylic intellect may reflect Averroes's theory. Perhaps the resort to the singular form points in the direction of an intellect that is common to all men. In some other cases, Abulafia also uses the parallel term *šekhel ḥomri*. It should be mentioned that Abulafia uses the term שכל אפשרי in his *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 21; this term means the potential or possible intellect and was known in Hebrew sources through Averroes. See Rabbi Hillel of Verona, *Tagmulei ha-Nefeš*, 56, 72, and 73.

**227** Thus redemption is restricted to a few people of Israel and not the entire people, as is the case of [b].

**228** This phrase is found in the preface to the Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: סכל מהמון הרבנים.

Thus, three meanings of the term *Mašiah* are advocated: [a] the cosmic intellect that operates all the time and informs all the processes of intellection in this world, which are conceived as a salvific process from the point of view of the Neo-Aristotelian theories in the Middle Ages. This global or universal Messiah therefore saves all people who use their intellect, be they ethnic Jews or not. The particular human intellect is the Messiah, but it is now found in the individual [c]. Here again, a universal approach may be safely discerned because the intellect is not simply attributable to Jews alone.

Neither sense [a] nor sense [c] of Messiah, is, however, related to apocalyptic figures, nor to catastrophic changes, which are presupposed to be part of this type of redemption. It is only the second sense of Messiah as described in section [b]—namely, a person who will save the people of Israel—that is closer to the popular vision of the Messiah in Judaism, although in this case, it is connected to an intellectual type of activity: the cleaving to the cosmic intellect. This type of understanding of the Messiah is dependent on the Avicennian theory that assumes the possibility of changing Nature by cleaving to a higher entity, the supernal soul or the supernal intellect.<sup>230</sup>

Perhaps in this context, we may better understand a short passage from Abulafia's Untitled Treatise that is preserved in the *Polyglota* to the Psalms printed by Augustino Giustiniani,<sup>231</sup> where it is written that “Constat vivificationem mortuorum positam esse in manu Matatron, i. Messie”;<sup>232</sup> that is, Metatron, who is reviving the dead,<sup>233</sup> is also the Messiah. The last part of the sentence, “i. Messie,” is not found

**229** *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, Ms. Roma, Angelica 38, fol. 9a:

שתדע ששם משיח משותף לשלשה עניינים אלה. משיח יקרא תחילה השכל הפועל באמת [...] ומשיח יקרא האיש והעתיד להוציאנו מן הגלות מתחת ידי האומות בכח שישפיע עליו מן השכל הפועל. ומשיח יקרא השכל התומרי האנושי ההולאני שהוא הגואל והמושיע הנפש וכל כוחותיה הנפשיות המעולות מתחת ידי המלכים הגופניים ועממיהם וכוחותיהם התאויות הפחותות. וזה העניין מצוה וחובה לגלותו לכל משכיל ממשכילי ישראל להושיעו מפני שיש דברים רבים שהם הפך דעות המון הרבנים, כל שכן שהם חולקים על כל מחשבות המון עמי הארצות.

On this passage, see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 65–68; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 65–66; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66; Idel, *Ben*, 308; Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God,’” 74–75; Moshe Idel, “Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism,” *JQR* 101 (2011): 39–42; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 112–19; as well as the observation of Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 54, note 149, and 91. This is not the place to trace the possible impact of these approaches to Hasidic concepts of redemption, including those of Habad.

**230** See Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, 154–204.

**231** *Psalterium Hebraeum, Graecum, Arabicum, et Chaldaicum* (Genoa: Pt. Porrus, 1516). On the relationship between some of those glosses to Abulafia's untitled treatise, see my remarks in “A Unique Manuscript,” 27–28.

**232** See the gloss on Psalm 147. The only Hebrew version extant in the *Polyglota* is ביד מטטרון which means that  $313 + 1 = 1313 =$  תחית המתים, which means that  $313 + 1 = 1313 =$  תחית המתים = 314 = מטטרון. On the identification of Metatron with Jesus, see Daniel Abrams, “Metatron and Jesus: The *Long Durée* of Rabbinic and Kabbalistic Traditions: An Eighteenth-Century Manual of Christian Proselytizing in German and Yiddish,” *Kabbalah* 27 (2012): 13–105. On other Kabbalistic material in the *Polyglota*, see now Avishai Bar Asher, “Isaac b. Solomon ibn Sahula's Commentary on Psalms” [Hebrew], *Koveš 'al Yad* 26 (2018): 1–46.

**233** On Metatron and the resurrection, see Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 95a:



in the Hebrew version of the Kabbalistic fragment and may be Giustiniani's addition. However, it fits Abulafia's allegorical approach as described above and its meaning should be understood within the framework of the Untitled Treatise; namely, that the realm of resurrection is a spiritual and not a corporeal phenomenon.<sup>234</sup>

Like some Maimonideans,<sup>235</sup> Abulafia widely identifies Metatron with the Agent Intellect.<sup>236</sup> This transposition of the traditional Messiah to the philosophical term is part of the parallelism between Abulafia and the Maimonideans, as has already been pointed out elsewhere.<sup>237</sup> However, it is not just a matter of one more application of an exegetical allegoresis, as the Maimonideans did in some cases; it is part of his self-perception as a person with a special eschatological mission.

Interestingly enough, the faculty of imagination is not mentioned at all in this passage, most probably as part of the assumption that the unitive experience attained by the Messiah is conceived as being higher than that of the prophet, who needs imagination for his prophetic mission, nor is any theosophical concept operative in any of the three descriptions.

Obviously, the list of the three meanings is based upon an implied hierarchy that begins with the more general or universal understanding of the Messiah as a cosmic and universal entity understood to be the "true" one, [a]; then comes the national Messiah, which concerns many people but not everyone, since it is implied that he will only redeem the Jewish nation, [b], and finally comes the individual type of redemption that affects only a single person, [c]. Let me emphasise that all these forms of redemption are described in the context of the term "Messiah," and as such, they are all part and parcel of the constellation of messianic ideas. Although Abulafia at least understands the three meanings to be valid, though intended for different audiences, the intellectual register is evidently more important than the national one.

This type of discourse based on the exegetical principle of homonymy or equivocal terms was borrowed from Maimonides's *Guide* and also assumes different types of narratives: a national and historical one in [b] and an individual one in [a] and [c], as was suggested in chapter 13 above in the case of the parable of the pearl. It should be mentioned that in the description of the Messiah found in [c], there is an explicit instance of allegorisation. Also in this passage, we find Abulafia's disjunctive approach in which his views and those of the Rabbis and the multitude are explicitly described as opposing one another.

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המלאך הנוכר המודיעו ליודעיו ובו נמצאת תחיה למתים ואמר בעדו שמי המיוחד לי ושם המלאך הנוכר בשם רבו [...] שבו תלה השם תחיית המתים והוא מטטרון.

**234** See Idel, "The Time of the End." This point is not acknowledged in Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 248, when he discusses Abulafia's corporeal approach to resurrection as part of a Christian view.

**235** See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 349, notes 26, 27; 351–52, notes 44, 46, 50.

**236** Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia," 7–8.

**237** See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 112–19, who correctly dealt with this passage in the context of other Maimonidean contemporary thinkers; see also Idel, "Types of Redemptive Activities," 259–60; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 75, 77; as well as Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 54, note 149.

This passage was written in the same period as *Or ha-Šekhel*. This means that a more complex understanding of Abulafia should be adopted, at least when dealing with the parable, which assumes some form of personal and spiritual redemption, not just one dealing with the national horizontal narrative. In a similar manner to the intellectual understanding of the human saviour [b], we read in another passage:

The prophet is necessarily called *Mašiaḥ* because he is anointed with the supernal oil that is called “the oil of anointing”<sup>238</sup> [...] with which he utilises the Names. Actually, the *Mašiaḥ* must possess two qualities. The first is that he must be anointed by God with wondrous prophecy and the second is that he must continue to be consecrated by God and by the people, who will hail him as their great king for all time. And he will rule from sea to sea,<sup>239</sup> and this is all due to the great intensity of his clinging to the divine intellect and his reception of the power, in a strong manner like the manner of Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon. And the issue of the Messiah will be known by everyone, and this is the reason why there is no need to announce this issue more here, because he is destined to reveal himself soon in our days.<sup>240</sup>

There is no doubt that this imminent revelation is related to Abulafia’s own eschatological mission. Two main attributes of the Messiah are mentioned here: prophecy and power. However, in this context, power depends not on brute force, military or otherwise, but on some form of high intellectual experience. The adherence to the supernal intellect allows the prophet, and implicitly the Messiah, to perform miracles that are understood as part of the laws of nature, following views found in the thought of Avicenna and Al-Ġazālī.<sup>241</sup> Conspicuously, the true meaning will be revealed in the future, which means that it is currently unknown.

These passages and many others in Abulafia’s writings reflect his emphasis on individual redemption being attained through clinging to the cosmic intellect, a stage that was conceived as preceding his more public activity. In some other instances, Abulafia understood redemption in an interiorised manner as a form of spiritual awaking.<sup>242</sup> Interestingly enough, in a fascinating passage from his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, Abulafia regards the dichotomy between the masses and the elite as forever unsur-

**238** Presumably the supernal intellectual influx that descends upon the prophet and the Messiah.

**239** See Zachariah 9:10.

**240** See Abulafia’s *Sefer Maftaḥ ha-Tokhaḥot*, his commentary on Deuteronomy, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1605, fol. 46b, 78:

אמנם ארמוז לך קצת בבחינת נביא השם בדורנו זה בין כל נביא שיקום בין באלהו בין במשיח. וזהו דע שהנביא כבר יקרא משיח בהכרח מפני שמושחים אותו עם השמן העליון הנקרא שמן המשח"ה אשר בו ממש"ש הנביא"א ובו משמש בשמו"ת. ואמנם המשיח באמת צריך שיכלול בו שני עניינים יחד. א' שימשח תחלה מהשם בנבואה מופלאה. וב' שימשח אחר כן עוד מהשם ומבני אדם שיקבלוהו עליהם למלך גדול מכל המלכים שקדמו לו. וירד מים עד ים ומנהר עד אפסי ארץ בנגלה ובנסתר. וזה מפני רוב הדבקו לשכל האלוהי וקבלו כח בחוקה. כענין משה ויהושע ודוד ושלמה. וענין המשיח הכל יכירוהו, על כן אין צריך להודיע פה ענינו יותר מזה מפני שעתיד להגלות במהרה בימינו.

**241** See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 63–71, which relies on a passage from *Or ha-Šekhel*. See also Ravitzky, *History and Faith*, 154–204.

**242** Idel, “The Time of the End,” 155–86, and Idel, “Multiple Forms of Redemption,” 42–44. Let me point out that for Abulafia, in a manner reminiscent of East European Hasidism, the experience of personal redemption is understood as preceding general redemption.

mountable, as an inherent part of human nature, in a manner reminiscent of Leo Strauss's more deterministic approach, or that of Averroes according to a certain interpretation, minimising the possibility of a general redemption which may have a noetic nature.<sup>243</sup>

Indeed, one of his contemporaries, the Provençal author Rabbi Isaac ben Yeda'ayah, had already asked the following question: if the Messiah's role is to enable people to philosophise, is it the case that one who can do so immediately and independently does not need a Messiah?<sup>244</sup> Thus, the esoteric nature of redemptive noetics is far more determined by genetics and can hardly be significantly corrected, an approach that allows little room for a collective type of redemption in the vein of the second narrative, pushing to the forefront the individual redemption in the third narrative.

In a way, Abulafia combines the popular Messiah as part of the second narrative with the personal redemption of the third narrative; in other words, he combines the linear time of national eschatology with the atemporal nature of redemption according to the third narrative. The distinction between the two types of religiosity formulated by Eliade as belonging to exclusive religious modalities does not hold for Abulafia, who combines the linear-historical with an atemporal form of experience that has a strong ecstatic dimension.<sup>245</sup> In other words, actual religious phenomena, unlike the abstract scholarly dichotomous distinctions in different categories, are always more complex, and Abulafia is indubitably an example of complex approaches.

This spiritual reading fits the manner in which the son is portrayed in the parable: in paragraph [b], he first lacks knowledge, then obtains it; knowledge is mentioned again quite conspicuously in [c], where the obliteration of imagination is described as part of redemption. This reading constitutes the contribution made by Maimonides's theory of knowledge to Abulafia's thought.

Let me turn to the description of the eschaton in the context of the parable in paragraph [c]. The situation of salvation is described as the state in which each person will contain all the others like his own limbs. We would do better to understand this view as part of the process that I designate as universalisation; namely, the expansion of the intellect of the individual so that he becomes identical with the whole, an issue to which we shall now turn.

## 21 Universalisation, or the Vertical, Psychological Allegory

In the lengthy passage from *Or ha-Šekhel* (quoted above in chapter 15), there are several terms that point to some form of universality: "universal speech," "universal re-

<sup>243</sup> Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš, 126–27 and 77, and Idel, "On the Secrets of the Torah," 397.

<sup>244</sup> See Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*, 110–11.

<sup>245</sup> See also Idel, "Multiple Forms of Redemption."

ligion,” and the recurrence of the term *kol* (“all”). The mention of the human species in this passage also points in this direction. In fact, the entire human race’s ignorance of the divine name that occurs at the very end of the chapter does not allow for a significant difference between Jews and Gentiles.

These occurrences of terms related to “universals” in a relatively short text are too dense to be overlooked or underestimated. In my opinion, these terms, which convey a sense of being universal or general, constitute a major contribution to the meaning of the passage, and they should be interrogated in order that we may understand Abulafia’s intent. More than any other Kabbalist with whom I am acquainted, Abulafia was especially fond of the language of universality; this theme occurs not only in his *Or ha-Šekhel*, but also in many other instances in his writings. For example, he refers to the “universal [or “general”] Kabbalah” and to the “universal prophecy” together with the knowledge of the Torah and commandments “in general.”<sup>246</sup>

In another instance, he refers to the Agent Intellect using the term *ha-Ruah ha-Kelali* (the “universal spirit”),<sup>247</sup> and elsewhere, he describes the Agent Intellect as the “general power.”<sup>248</sup> In an interesting discussion, Abulafia makes a numerical connection between the term *kolel* (“comprises”) and *ha-Teva’* and *Elohim*, an important motif in his thought as shown in several instances above.<sup>249</sup> In one case, he mentions the “universal nature,” *ha-Teva’ ha-Kelali*.<sup>250</sup> Elsewhere, Abulafia discusses the principles (*kelalim*) of the secrets of the Torah, which should be hidden from the masses, versus their details, which are conceived as being even more dangerous to divulge.<sup>251</sup> These are only some examples of Abulafia’s reference to entities or concepts being general or universal.

In general, I would say that the more “universal” terms are more abstract and thus more difficult for the masses to understand, though they were of vital impor-

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**246** See his commentary on the book of Numbers, *Maftaḥ ha-Sefirot*, 56. Here, the general Kabbalah is related to the combinations of letters. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 185–86; Abulafia, *Imrei Šefer*, 150–51, 198; and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 198–99. Implicitly, a universal or general Kabbalah is also referred to in Abulafia’s *Or ha-Šekhel*, 85, and *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 381. See also *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 349, and Abulafia’s “Ševa’ Netivot ha-Torah,” 12. See my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 12–13, 75, and 187, note 239, and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 5, 7, 17, and 23, note 27. The two narratives discussed above (the national exoteric one and the individual esoteric one) are reminiscent of Averroes’s theory of double truth, an issue that deserves further investigation.

**247** See *Sitrei Torah*, which is a seminal text that had a wide impact on Kabbalah. It is translated and analysed in Idel, *Ben*, 279–80.

**248** *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 87: הכח הכולל. See also the important statement found in his *Sefer ha-Hešeq*, 1.

**249** See above chapter 17 note 132 and chapter 18 note 196; see also Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 261.

**250** *Or ha-Sekhel*, 108.

**251** Introduction to *Maftaḥ ha-Hokhmot*, 6, translated above as a motto. This is an extremely important discussion because the details contradict the specific tenets or beliefs of the vulgus.

tance for Abulafia's own type of religion. As I proposed elsewhere,<sup>252</sup> it would be helpful to distinguish between examples of mystical union experiences described as a process of universalisation over and against others that can be understood as describing a sense of integration; Abulafia's expressions belong to the former in quite an obvious manner.

In an interesting statement that deals with a seminal hermeneutical principle, Abulafia asserts that "the hidden" matters are general by necessity and that the plain sense involves particulars, since all the particulars are built on the senses, like the particulars that the senses apprehend, but the secrets are all general intellectual matters and it is subsequently necessary that there are many parts in the plain sense."<sup>253</sup> Thus, following Maimonides, the general is abstract and unifies many contents of the particulars, and as such, they are unseen, hidden, or secret, while the particulars are obviously a matter conceived by the concrete senses and thus they are part of the plain sense of the text understood by people who do not possess the intellectual power of abstraction.<sup>254</sup> Here, it is obvious that the hidden matters—namely, the secrets that belong to Abulafia's Kabbalah—should be understood within the framework of Neo-Aristotelian noetics, which regards the understanding of the general or the principles as a much more noble type of perception than the understanding of concrete details.

Although the "general Kabbalah" is a rather rare term, it occurs in several Kabbalistic texts written before and after Abulafia.<sup>255</sup> It runs against the manner in which earlier Kabbalists, especially Nahmanides and his disciples, understood Kabbalah as dealing with specific details that cannot be expanded by a person's intellectual activity, but which should be carefully transmitted orally from mouth to mouth.<sup>256</sup> They

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**252** See Idel, "Universalization and Integration," 27–58. Let me point out that my use of the term "integration" differs from that of Wolfson and Sagerman. I speak in this text about the integration of a lower entity within a greater entity as part of a mystical union that still allows for the retention of some form of individuality. The two other scholars use integration in a manner closer to psychology, as a bringing together of two entities that generates something higher.

**253** *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 43:

כי הנסתרות הן כלליות בהכרח והפשטים הם פרטים וזה מפני שהפשטים כלם בנוים על הרגשות כמו הפרטים שהרגשים משיגים אותם. ואמנם הנסתרים כולם בנוים על העניינים השכלים הכלליים, ויתחייב מזה שהיו בפשטים חלקים רבים. On the assumption that general principles are atemporal and eternal, see Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 19, which is translated and discussed in Appendix E.

**254** See Maimonides's *Guide* 1:73, Pines, 1:209.

**255** See the material I referred in Moshe Idel, "Kabbalistic Material from Rabbi David ben Judah Hasid's School," [Hebrew], *JSJT* 2 (1983): 177–78, note 40. A history of this term is a desideratum for understanding the varieties of Kabbalah in the thirteenth century.

**256** See Moshe Idel, "Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership," in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership*, eds. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998): 15–96; Idel, "In a Whisper," 467–77; and Daniel Abrams, "Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides: Preserving and Interpreting Esoteric Traditions and Texts," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995): 85–102. See also Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 4: יום ילחשם בכל יום ויום המשכילים בכל יום ויום ילחשם ("Also, he should whisper them in the ears of the illuminati each and every day").

deal with particulars in the biblical texts, not with principles. On the contrary, Abulafia encourages his reader to unveil what he has hidden and conceives his Kabbalah to be intellectual and dependent on the activity of the intellect.

Of special importance is the discussion found at the end of Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, where he writes about "the influx that he [the recipient] will receive and from which he will comprehend the form of the universal wisdom, without time."<sup>257</sup> The timeless reception of the universals corresponds to what I call the transhistorical narrative. The concept of "universal grace" (*Ḥen kelali*, quite an exceptional phrase in Jewish mysticism that perhaps reflects a translation of the Christian "charisma"), which is also described in the same context as "divine," points in the same direction: an interest in universality.<sup>258</sup>

In his commentaries on the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, Abulafia speaks about the "general and particular ways" of understanding the Bible,<sup>259</sup> while in his *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* and *Imrei Šefer*, it is the technique of combining letters that is called the "general way."<sup>260</sup> The concept of the "universal [or "general"] secret" (*ha-sod ha-kelali*) recurs in two of Abulafia's writings and contributes to the spectrum of expressions that refer to universality.<sup>261</sup> No doubt the attainment of the state of totality is regarded as an ideal, and is in any case superior in comparison to that of the particular.<sup>262</sup> By becoming universal, the particular entity expands itself and is substantially transformed, assuming a new status described as a divine spe-

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**257** See his *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 61 and 80. "Universal wisdom" is a term Abulafia probably took from his teacher Rabbi Baruch Togarmi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah* (cf. Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 233), as has been pointed out in Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 189, note 208. The term itself is reminiscent of the approach that has been designated since the seventeenth century as *pansophia*, one of whose main representatives was Leibniz. See Sorin Antohi, *Utopica: Studies on the Social Imaginaire*, 2nd ed. [Romanian] (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2005), 160–61.

**258** See Abulafia's *Šomer Mišwah*, Ms. Paris, BN 853, fol. 57a, 24, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 223. On *Ḥen* as a higher attainment than prophecy, see *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 159.

**259** *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 103; *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 164–65; *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, 124–25; and *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 1.

**260** See, respectively, 1:1, 2, 1:10, 79, and 198.

**261** Namely, *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* and *Sitrei Torah*, both written during the same period (1279–80). See also Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 172–78. See also Abulafia, *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29. For an interesting reverberation of the issue of the universalisation of the perfect man, see the anonymous *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 165a: "Since he comprises them together as he already became universal, and this is the reason why he can innovate forms in matters and perform wonders and miracles, since he is the absolute righteous."

**262** Compare, however, the opposite interpretation of the concept of "universal speech" given in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 61: "An elocution that denotes not language in general or the potentiality for language as such, but rather the specific ethno-cultural linguistic comportment of the Jewish people, Hebrew, the language of creation, revelation, and redemption." However, he did not present or adduce any support for this claim. This surprisingly particularistic interpretation of the text reflects Wolfson's attitude not only to Abulafia's interpretation of the parable, but also to Abulafia's thought in more general terms; see his "Deceitful Truth, Truthful Deceit," 114\*–15\*.

cies. This radical type of transformation does not constitute an event that may only take place in the eschatological future—given that the universal speech and religion have already been referenced in paragraph [a] as a matter of the past—but one that may also occur in the past and the present.

In my opinion, it is in the context of Abulafia's emphasis on the universal that the following passage should be understood:

In the perfect man [*ha-iš ha-šalem*] whose intellect has been actualised, his liver, heart, and head, that is, his brain, are one thing until the vegetative soul and the master of knowledge [*ba'alat ha-da'at*] discerns, knows, understands, and comprehends how to govern her matter according to God and not according to nature alone. The efflux overflows from the world of angels to the world of the heavenly spheres and from the world of the heavenly spheres to the world of mankind, until the point that the distinguished universal person<sup>263</sup> becomes intellectualised in actuality. Analogously, the verbal, intellectual overflow that is in the brain overflows from the head to the heart and from the heart to the liver.<sup>264</sup>

It is evident that the “perfect man” (*ha-iš ha-šalem*<sup>265</sup>) at the beginning of the passage is parallel to what I translate as a “distinguished universal person” later in the passage; Wolfson translates it as “particular universal.” In both cases, an individual person who has actualised his intellect is intended.

Based on this passage, Wolfson understands Abulafia's view to be generally dealing with the special ethnicity of the Jews as a nation, as well as with the chosenness of all the Israelite nation; thus, he imposes a particularist position not just on this specific passage, but also on this Kabbalist as a whole. Wolfson writes quite eloquently as follows: “The mark of their chosen position *vis-à-vis* the other nations in virtue of which they are the ‘universal particular’ (*ha-meyuḥad ha-kelali*), that is, the particular ethnicity that can actualise the potentiality of human beings to become universal by receiving the intellectual overflow of the logos.”<sup>266</sup> However, nothing can be further from the intention of Abulafia's passage than the ethnic-particularistic interpretation offered here by this scholar. The term *meyuḥad* in this

**263** *Ha-meyuḥad ha-kelali*. My translation differs from Wolfson's rather oxymoronic phrase “particular universal.”

**264** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 200:

והאיש השלם אשר יצא שכלו לפעל שבכבדו ולבו וראשו כלומר מ[ו]חו דבר אחד, עד שהנפש הצומחת ובעלת הדעת מוכרת וי[ו]דעת ומבינה ומשכלת להנהיג ענייניה על פי השם, לא על פי הטבע לבד. והשפע כמו ששופע מעולם המלאכים על עולם הגלגלים ומעולם הגלגלים על עולם האדם, עד ששב את המיוחד הכללי משכיל בפעל. כן השפע השכלי הדברי אשר במח משפיע מן הראש אל הלב ומן הלב אל הכבוד.

In general, I have used Wolfson's translation from *Venturing Beyond*, 72, with one major exception, mentioned in the previous footnote. The three organs mentioned at the end of the quote are considered to be the principle organs and are treated as such in several of Abulafia's writings. See “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 24–25, and *Šomer Miṣwah*, 15.

**265** In many of his writings, Abulafia speaks about the “perfect man” as an individual and not a nation, comprehensive unit, or hypostasis. See *Sitrei Torah*, 61; *Maftaḥ ha-Ḥokhmot*, 78; and *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 16. See already Maimonides's *Guide* 1:73, Pines 1:91–92.

**266** Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 73.



specific context does not mean “particular,” as Wolfson quite questionably translates it following modern Hebrew; in medieval Hebrew, it means “special,” “outstanding,” “exalted,” or “distinguished,” as in Abulafia’s thought, and in his worldview only the distinguished person can be designated as universal.<sup>267</sup>

Therefore, it stands not for a whole nation, as indeed the parallel to the phrase (the phrase “perfect man”) demonstrates. The fact that he is described as intelligising shows that this is a process that can only be tangentially linked to a national unit in a Neo-Aristotelian framework. Universalisation is related to the intellect and definitely transcends ethnicity, as intellection is conceived both by medieval philosophers and by Abulafia as a specific quality of the human species; evidently, it cannot therefore be restricted to Jews alone. This is clear from the passages quoted in this chapter from *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*. However, in order to prove my point still more, let me compare the above passage to a parallel found in another of Abulafia’s books:

All that which is interpreted according to the hidden path [*ha-derekh ha-nistar*] points to a deeper wisdom and is more beneficial to the distinguished person<sup>268</sup> than the teaching of the plain

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**267** See the passage from *Sitrei Torah* immediately below in chapter 21 note 305, where the phrase מיוחד כולל (“distinguished and comprehensive”) occurs. For the meaning of *ha-Meyuḥadim* (a technical term referring to intellectually developed persons), see the *Commentary to Sefer ha-Yašar*, 106. See also *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, 1, where he claims that in each generation a certain individual—described as a prophet or king—becomes universal as part of his leadership. Compare also to the interesting discussion in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29, and *Sitrei Torah*, 111. See also the next footnote.

**268** *Ha-iš ha-meyuḥad*. The source of this specific use of the term *meyuḥad* is Samuel ibn Tibbon’s translation of the *Guide* 1:14, trans. Pines (1:40), as an “[outstanding] individual” that is in opposition to *hamon*, “the multitude.” In his commentary on the *Guide*, Yehudah Even Shmuel correctly interprets *meyuḥadim* as *yehidei segullah*. See *Moreh Nevukhim la-Rambam* (Tel Aviv: Shevil, 1935), 83. In *Give‘at ha-Moreh*, Solomon Maimon reads it as *ḥašuvim* (“the important ones”). On this phrase referring to a distinguished individual, see also Abulafia’s “Ševa‘ Netivot ha-Torah,” 4, 9; *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, preface, 2, and 3:9, 354 (which is a passage that was quoted in chapter 10 above); *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 9 and 15 (discussed in chapter 8 above); *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:8, 173; and Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” 388 and note 64, where I discuss Abulafia’s gematria of *meyuḥad* = 68 = *ḥakham* [“wise”] = *ha-navi* [“the prophet”] as found in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 9. See also the very important discussion of the “distinguished man” in Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” 128. These gematrias define the meaning Abulafia attributes to the distinguished individual. For another important passage where the “perfect man” is described as comprising everything (*makhil ha-kol*), see *Imrei Šefer*, 121, translated into English by Wolfson in “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 172–73, and dealt with immediately below in chapter 21 note 301. Compare this concept to the more common expression found in Islam, *al-insān al-kāmil* (a concept that is connected to a prophet in some way), approximating the later Hebrew *ha-adam ha-šalem*, a phrase that also occurs in Abulafia’s writings, sometimes in the context of universalisation. For example, see *Commentary to Sefer ha-Yašar* in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 99. For the closest parallel to Abulafia, see the view of ibn ‘Arabi, as described in Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 314, and Paolo Urizzi, “L’uomo teomorfico secondo ibn ‘Arabi,” in *Il Fine ultimo dell’uomo*, eds. Patrizia Spallino and Paolo Urizzi (Palermo: Officina di studi medievali, 2012): 151–87, especially 167–68,

sense, since the plain sense is written for the benefit of the entire people, who have no reason to distinguish between truth and falsehood, but this is not useful for a person who has intelligence and is in search of the felicity that is unique to the intellectual power.<sup>269</sup>

In both cases, the term *meyuḥad* is used in the context of an intellectual person, namely one whose intellect has expanded; however, in the latter passage, it is clear that this term stands in stark opposition to the “entire people.” In other words, the particular nation does not become universal, but rather only a select few of its members who alone are capable of actualising their intellect.

Ethnicity has nothing to do with the intellectual achievement of one or some of those who belong to it. The individual member alone may become universal, but the nation remains particular, even if chosen, though this choice should be understood in the manner discussed above. Though Abulafia does speak about the “special [or “distinguished”] nation” (*ha-ummah ha-meyuḥedet*),<sup>270</sup> this specialness is not genetic, but is dependent on the nation which possesses the tools that help it to attain the knowledge of God: the language and the script. Nothing ethnic is mentioned here, except the resort to two sorts of tools that can be acquired by anyone, Jew or Gentile, but which are especially known to the Israelites. In other words, a Jew who does not know Hebrew or the Hebrew script is hardly conceived as being part of the distinguished nation, while a Gentile who knows them should be.

On the basis of his erroneous interpretation of Abulafia’s view in *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, as well as his equally mistaken interpretation of Abulafia’s position on the cessation of pollution discussed in chapter 9 above, Wolfson goes one step further, claiming that on the point of ethnicity, or what he calls “Israel’s ontic status,” there is no difference between Abulafia’s view and those Kabbalists who wrote the *Zohar*!<sup>271</sup> This leitmotiv of an alleged similarity between these Kabbalistic corpora that is recurrent in recent scholarship<sup>272</sup> is based on flawed analyses of basic Kabbala-

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note 82. Let me be clear: in Abulafia’s writings, the term *meyuḥad* also has the meaning of “special,” “particular,” or “unique,” depending on the context in which this term is used.

**269** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 39–40:

שכל מה שנדרש על דרך הנסתר מורה על חכמה יותר עמוקה ויותר מועלת לאיש המיוחד מהוראת הנגלה. שהנגלה נכתב להועיל לכלל העם שאין להם שקול דעת להבדיל בין האמת והשקר. וזה אינו מועיל לבעל הדעת המבקש ההצלחה המיוחדת בכח הדברי.

Compare to *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 361, where the distinguished person is again explicitly juxtaposed with the multitude. Let me point out that the distinction between the “distinguished individual” and the masses, *he-hamon*, is reminiscent of Erich Neumann’s theory based on the evolution of the individual and the loss of individuality through becoming part of mass events, which he calls re-collectivisation. See his *The Origin and History of Consciousness*.

**270** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 33, 34, translated in the context of the parable of the pearl, in “Ševa’ Netivot ha-Torah,” 9; *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 192; and *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 2:1, 200, 207.

**271** *Venturing Beyond*, 73.

**272** See Pedaya, “The Sixth Millennium.” The problem with scholars’ comparisons of Abulafia’s Kabbalah with the *Zohar* is the former’s understanding of national redemption as a lower register, as found in traditional Judaism and in the *Zohar*, while his esoteric, noetic, and individual register,

lah texts, particularly those of Abulafia, as well as on a type of comparativism that is exceedingly tendentious and which loses the general structure of the framework of the specific discussions therein.<sup>273</sup> Thus, these interpretations generate lamentable generalisations about the characteristics of Kabbalah as a whole. Without understanding the conceptual frameworks that are characteristic of Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah and those of the Zoharic literature, it is meaningless to deal with details when detached from their wider contexts.

Let me turn to a seminal passage from Abulafia's last book, which deals with the perfect man:

The purpose of the intention of the existence of man is his knowledge of himself and of his essence, that is, in the form of *Y* according to its form and also according to its name, *Y[od]*; namely, the assembly, the bringing together of everything,<sup>274</sup> which is the secret of *Knesset Yišra'el*, whose secret is *Y Šar 'eL*,<sup>275</sup> since the perfect man brings everything together and is called *Qehillat Ya'aqov*. And the essences from all are the ten souls, in accordance with the assembly of the ten *sefirot* within the *sefirah* of *Šekhinah*, which is an impregnable woman, and she received everything from All, and her name is *Šedeq* according to its masculine [aspect] and *Šedaqah* according to its feminine [aspect].<sup>276</sup>

The main subject matter of the passage is the perfect man, whose main feature, or essence, is his comprehensiveness. He is all, comprises all, and receives all. Let me analyse the Hebrew terms applied to him and how Abulafia understands their qualifications of the perfect man: *Y* stands for the Hebrew letter *Yod*, whose numer-

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speaking about an atemporal state, is ignored by both scholars and the Zoharic literature. The issue of the sixth millennium, or similar computations, may simply belong to the lower, national register. What is missing in the Zoharic discourse is what is especially characteristic of Abulafia's thought, the atemporal, individualistic, and esoteric noetics.

**273** For examples of the stark divergences between Abulafia's imagery of the Torah and those found in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, xiii–xv. For the divergent theories of the nature and role of the soul and intellect in those two schools, see also my “*Nišmat Eloha: The Divinity of the Soul in Nahmanides and His School*” [Hebrew], in *Life as a Midrash: Perspectives in Jewish Psychology*, eds. Shahar Arzy, Michal Fachler, and Baruch Kahana (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2004): 338–80. See also part V below.

**274** I assume that the meaning is that this number, 10, is the sum of 1+2+3+4, which precede it. See *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 352–53: “Like *Y* that is the general principle, that is derived from what precedes it, referring to the assembly of the ten and the collection of the powers of *Malkhut*, and its name is *Qehilat Ya'aqov*, that is called *Y-šra'el*, *Y-a'aqov*; namely, *Y* end.” See also chapter 21 note 308 above. כמו י' שהוא כלל שהתחייב מהרבת מה שקדם לו ומורה על קבוצת העשר ועל אסיפת כחות המלכות ושמה קהלת יעקב, שנקרא י' שראל י' עקב כלומר י' סוף.

**275** Here, the term “secret” stands not for numerical equivalences, but for the ontological entity that is designated by the two terms “Agent Intellect.”

**276** *Imrei Šefer*, 121:

תכלית הכוונה במציאות האדם היא בהשיגו עצמו ומהותו שהיא בצורת י' לפי צורתה וכמוה לפי שמה י' כלומר קהלת דבר מקהל הכל. והוא סוד כנסת ישראל. שסודו כנסת י' שר אל. כי האדם השלם הוא מקהילי הכל ונקרא קהלת יעקב. והעיקר מהכל עשר נפשות לפי קבוצת עשר ספירות בספירת השכינה שהיא הנקבה המתעברת ומקבלת הכל מידי הכל ושמה צדק בלשון זכר וצדקה בלשון נקבה.

ical value is ten,<sup>277</sup> conceived as the greatest of the numbers. It should be mentioned that in several cases in this book, the *sefirot* are compared to the first ten Hebrew letters.<sup>278</sup>

*Knesset Yiśra'el* literally means “the assembly of Israel,” and in the Rabbinic sources, it stands for the hypostatic manifestation of the people of Israel as part of the particularistic approach. However, here, it stands for bringing together within man the powers of the supernal intellect (the Agent Intellect), which is equated to *Yiśra'el* in many Abulafian texts,<sup>279</sup> even more so given the fact that the term *Yiśra'el* begins with *Yod*. Also present in this passage is the biblical phrase *Qehillat Ya'aqov*,<sup>280</sup> which means “the community of Jacob.” This phrase reflects a mode of semiotics parallel to *Knesset Yiśra'el* because the first word also means “assembly,” while—so I assume—the second word, *Ya'aqov*, may refer to the Agent Intellect.<sup>281</sup>

Abulafia then turns to the idea of man comprising the ten souls (I assume the ten souls of the spheres according to Avicenna),<sup>282</sup> which is a philosophical theme that is here connected to a theosophical one; the convergence of the ten *sefirot* within the last, the *Šekhinah*, described as female. In this last context, Abulafia also makes use of the theosophical theme that the *Šekhinah* is described as “all” and receives influx from All; namely, the male power, *Yesod*. This view is also found in Nahmanides’s type of symbolism.<sup>283</sup> Interestingly enough, the term “secret” occurs twice in the context of the philosophical terminology, but not in the context of the theosophical one. This means that the interpretation of the traditional terms as referring to the Agent Intellect is a secret, but the theosophical aspects of the discussion are not.

The manner in which the *Šekhinah* is described, as “a woman who cannot be impregnated,” follows a view found in Geronese Kabbalah.<sup>284</sup> However, Abulafia is less concerned with the gender distinction than he is with the fact that the *Šekhinah* is conceived as comprising something that comes from the outside and is found within the human soul or intellect. In theosophical Kabbalah, the distinction between the male and female attributes is ontological and the interaction between them is described using sexual terminology. For Abulafia, however, these sexual differentiations are obliterated: he describes the *Šekhinah* in terms which are either male or female. It should be mentioned that he does not take this type of symbolism as his own

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277 See also *Imrei Šefer*, 62.

278 See *Imrei Šefer*, 106–7.

279 See Idel, “Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia,” 9–11; compare to Wolfson’s alternative analysis in “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 172–73.

280 Deuteronomy 33:4.

281 For Jacob as the Agent Intellect, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 41.

282 See also chapter 6 note 257 above.

283 See Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Jonathan Chipman (New York: Schocken, 1991), 171–72.

284 See Idel, “Commentaries on the Secret of ‘Ibbur’ in 13th-Century Kabbalah,” 21.

view, as we learn from another passage concerning some other Kabbalists in the same book:

And they call the name of one of the *sefirot* “will,” but did not find a way to call it created and did not find a way to call it pre-eternal, and this also happened to them with the name “thought,” which they called the “supernal crown,” which according to them is the first *sefirah*, but the tenth according to them is *Šekhinah*, and they call it *Šedeq*, and the names are known from their books, but they are very confused by them.<sup>285</sup>

This statement is not written as part of a polemic against Kabbalists, but rather as his own view that their theory of the *sefirot* and their symbols are part of a confusion; included in this confusion is the theme that Abulafia uses when discussing the *Šekhinah* quoted earlier. The distance between the views he presents as belonging to others and the views that are probably his own is quite obvious, as he insists on specifying that the former are “according to them” several times in a short passage.

Indeed, let me remind the reader what the main topic of the passage is: the comprehensive nature of the perfect man. The biblical, Rabbinic, philosophical, and theosophical themes are brought together to make an important claim: everything spiritual is found within the perfect man; this is the reason why a person who knows himself can know everything.<sup>286</sup> This explains why these different terminologies were brought together and, in my opinion, why they were subordinated to what constitutes the centre of the translated passage.

Though written in Hebrew and resorting to a variety of Jewish themes, there is nothing specifically ethnic in this description of the perfect man. The only operation mentioned here is the act of knowing oneself, which is a famous Greek imperative. However, interestingly enough, in this case, the knowledge of God, a topic that is related to self-knowledge, is not included. Unlike the other interpretations of the Delphic maxim, Abulafia’s passage emphasises comprehensiveness—which in my opinion is another version of universalisation—as the main quality of the perfect man. This perfect man transcends any particular ethnicity.

This hierarchy of the particular and the universal is not only a matter of lower versus higher forms of experience, but also of an ontological scheme that conceives the universal as occupying a higher ontological status than the particular. In the vein

<sup>285</sup> *Imrei Šefer*, 18:

וקוראים שם אחת מהספירות רצון ולא ימצאו בעצמם דרך לקראו נברא גם לא ימצאו דרך לקראו קדמון וכן קרה להם בשם מחשבה שקראוהו כתר עליון והוא אצלם ספירה ראשונה והעשירית אצלם שכנה וקראוהו צדק והשמות ידועים מספריהם והם נבוכים בהם מאד.

The resort to the adjective “confused” shows that he reverted to Maimonides’s attitude towards those who do not understand the real nature of Judaism. For someone actively involved in disseminating the *Guide*, the other Kabbalists are conceived as intellectually inferior and perplexed. See my discussion of Abulafia’s critique of the other Kabbalists’ concept of the ten *sefirot* in Appendix C.

<sup>286</sup> See Alexander Altmann, “The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism,” in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistgeschichte*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987): 1–33.

of the Neo-Platonic approach, the main type of transformation is that of the particular soul into a universal soul. In some cases, it also includes the ascent of the lower and particular to the higher and universal source. However, Abulafia prefers to speak about the transformation of the intellect rather than the soul.<sup>287</sup> He explicitly indicates that the human intellectual faculty gradually “ascends” to the Agent Intellect, a metaphorical nousanodia, and is probably also united with God as an intellect. In other words, Abulafia operates with a well-defined ontological hierarchy, an elitistic anthropology and a series of seven methods of interpretation starting with the lowest, the narrow vulgus, and culminating with the prophets, the most comprehensive and universal. Without taking these hierarchies into consideration, it is difficult to appreciate the specificity of Abulafia’s thought. Let me remind the reader that the last quote stems from a book written after 1290, the date for the coming of redemption according to Abulafia, which means after the time that the national redemption had not materialised.

In Abulafia’s *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, the commentary on the secrets of the *Guide* written a few years before the composition of *Or ha-Šekhel*, we read: “And will unite with it [the Agent Intellect] after many difficult, strong, and mighty exercises, until the particular and personal prophetic [faculty] will turn universal, permanent, and everlasting, similar to the essence of its cause, and he and He will become one entity.”<sup>288</sup> This is not a union in which the particular identity of the interacting factors is preserved, but a complete transformation of the particular intellect into a universal entity that Abulafia imagines to happen in that moment. It is not very plausible that an individual existence could maintain itself or survive the post-mortem state of existence. Indeed, the eternity mentioned here assumes a transcendence of time, an issue that will be addressed in more detail in Appendix E.

Elsewhere in the same commentary, he writes: “You should meditate on his [Maimonides’s] words in an intellectual manner, because of them, you should separate

<sup>287</sup> See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 60.

<sup>288</sup> Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 155a, 138:

וידבק בו אחר ריבוי הרגל חזק ואמין, עד שוב הנבואי האישי החלקי בצורת סיבתו כללי תמידי נצחי כמוהו ויהיה הוא והוא דבר אחד.

This process of universalisation through cleaving to the supernal spiritual realm also means an experience of atemporality. See the passage from *Ner Elohim* translated in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 125, where the assumption that it is possible to enter God is discussed. See also *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 165a, translated in chapter 21 note 261 above. See also *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:8, 337. For the indifference to what I call “shared time” (the traditional time defined by the Jews’ participation in the weekly cycle with the Sabbath as a special type of time shared by God and other Jews) in Abulafia, see Idel, “On Paradise in Jewish Mysticism,” 625–35. According to Abulafia’s Untitled Treatise, the separate “intellects do not fall under the [category of] time.” See Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 80a: שהשכלים בעצמם לבדם אינם נופלים תחת זמן. On this treatise and its relationship to Abulafia, see my “A Unique Manuscript,” and Appendix A. On Abulafia and simplification or depersonalisation of the mystic, see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 18–19. See also Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God,’” 90, note 117.



yourself from the entire species, the general [species of] man, and you will become for God, a distinguished and comprehensive [one], and you will be called by the name ‘Living God,’ and you will become similar to God.”<sup>289</sup> We have here a transition from one sort of universality to another, from the natural one of the species to a divine one. By this process of intellectual universalisation, the individual intellect becomes not only eternal, but also universal, which means the combination of what used to be individuals into one universal being, which thereby obliterates individuality. In fact, the return from this state of union, or the reluctance to experience it, is described in two discussions as an act of rebellion against God.<sup>290</sup>

When describing what he refers to as the “real operation” (human transformation) at the end of his longest book, *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia writes about “the secret of the true operation that changes the nature of the parts of beings by virtue of all speech[es], so that your intellectual spirit will become all after it was a part, and it will comprise in you all the substances of the species from your species, *a fortiori* what is beneath your species.”<sup>291</sup> The “true operation,” a term that occurs again in a similar context in his book,<sup>292</sup> refers to the change of nature; however, it is quite obvious that the nature intended here is none other than the human spirit or inner nature.<sup>293</sup>

This means that when compared to the changing of the external nature, the change of the inner nature—the spirit—is conceived as being much more important.

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**289** *Sitrei Torah*, 188:

התבונן בדבריו התבוננות שכלי ותיבדל בעבורם מכל מין האדם הכללי, ותשוב אצל השם מיוחד כולל, ותקרא אז בשם אלהים חיים, ותתדמה לאלהים.

Compare to the description of transformation into a divine species in the *Commentary on Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, translated in chapter 8 note 66 above, the discussion in the Untitled Treatise preserved in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 83a, and the view found in the anonymous text in Ms. Sassoon 290, 235: “From the side of his knowledge, the one who comprehends it will become a separate intellect, and this is the reason for his survival, that is the best that it is possible to achieve” (שמד) (דיעתו ישוב המשיגו ממנו שכל נפרד והוא סבת ההשארות המעולה שאפשר להשיגה). On the authorship of this short anonymous treatise, see Idel, “Abraham Abulafia’s Works and Doctrine,” 6. See also Appendix E. For the possible Maimonidean source that regards “Elohim” as angels—that is, the separate intellects—see *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilekhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:6, 7:1, etc., which was pointed out to me by Warren Zev Harvey.

**290** See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 142, and *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, 196–97.

**291** *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 364, corrected according to the unique manuscript:

סוד הפעל האמתי המשנה טבע חלקי היצור בבה כלל הדבור, עד שישוב רוחך השכלי כל אחר היותו חלק ויכלול עצמך כל העצמים המיניים אשר ממינד וכל שכן מה שתחת מינד.

**292** See *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 361, 366, which concerns the transformative type of ecstatic experience. On page 361, the transformation of the part into “all” is mentioned. See also *Imrei Šefer*, 72, where the particular soul is described as becoming universal or comprehensive of all souls (נפש) (כוללת כל נפש) by the activity of the Agent Intellect. On the topic of the transformation of the self in religion, see the studies collected in David Shulman and Gedalyahu G. Stroumsa, eds., *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

**293** See also *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, 42, where this term is again connected with a mental operation. In *Gan Na‘ul*, 40, Abulafia speaks about the “operation of prophecy” (פועל הנבואה).



Here lies the peak of Abulafia's axiology of religious life: the inner transformation is conducive to a state of universalisation, which means the transcendence of the normal human type of existence. We may no doubt discern some form of tension between the spiritualisation of the personal life that gravitates around an internal process which at the same time culminates in an experience of adherence to or union with an objective world that is quintessential for the act of transformation. Whether this implies an individual type of survival for the intellect or not—as is the case for Averroes—is not clear in Abulafia's thought, since transformation into another species may imply a loss of the older individuality.

In this specific case, we may assume that the description of universalisation is also reminiscent of the famous account of the ascent in Plotinus's *Enneads*, where the ascending soul is looking down at what is beneath her.<sup>294</sup> Such a view was circulating in Arabic sources in the so-called *Theology of Aristotle* and had a significant impact on Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists,<sup>295</sup> though it only became known to Abulafia's school later on.<sup>296</sup> It should be mentioned that although universalisation is described here as being inclusive of the lower species and thus it may be depicted as more complex, according to Abulafia's description of the highest sphere that encompasses the lower ones, that sphere is “more simple” than the lower.<sup>297</sup>

In any case, Abulafia's description above is reminiscent of the manner in which he describes the nature of the first entity or substance, seen as God qua Necessary Existent:

It is necessary that a first substance<sup>298</sup> is separated from all the aspects,<sup>299</sup> comprising beneath it all the mentioned principles that are substantial, and that it includes the accidents that have no existence outside the substances, and in the similarity of the particulars of the universals, the

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**294** *Enneads* 4.8.1. On ecstasy in Plotinus as a super-intellectual and sudden experience, see Émile Brehier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, trans. Joseph Thomas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 147–63; Anna Kelessidou-Galanou, “L'extase plotinienne et la problématique de la personne humaine,” *Revue des Études Grecques* 84 (1971): 384–96; and Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 232–36.

**295** Cf. the Hebrew translation included in Rabbi Shem Tov Falaquera, *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*, ed. Ludwig Venetianer (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1894), 22. See also Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 257–58; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 203; and Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 52. On the impact of this work on thirteenth-century Jewish thought, see Altmann, “The Delphic Maxim,” 26–28; Alexander Altmann and Samuel Stern, eds. and trans., *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 191–92; Paul B. Fenton (Ynnon), “Shem Tov ibn Falaquera and the *Theology of Aristotle*” [Hebrew], *Da'at* 29 (1992): 27–40; and Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy*, 40–41. See also Kreisel, *Prophecy*, 626–27, and note 13.

**296** See Rabbi Judah Albotīni, *Sullam ha-'Aliyyah*, 73, trans. in Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 51–52.

**297** *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 139: העליון המקיף מעולה מן המוקף ופשוט ממנו.

**298** Compare the resort to the description of God as “one substance” in his commentary on *Sefer ha-'Eduṭ*, 60, discussed in Appendix C below.

**299** Namely, from everything else.

species of the genera and their principles would [exist], [and so] all existing things are beneath the first thing.<sup>300</sup>

This is a quasi-Spinozistic presentation of ontology that combines the concept of utmost simplicity with compoundness; a combination which Abulafia considers to be one of the greatest secrets.<sup>301</sup> The “first thing” is a substance, a view that does not fit the Aristotelian ontology, but perhaps a more Neo-Platonic one, and all the lower beings are gradually determined by categories of genus, species, and accident, each more limited than the previous. This “downward” movement of limitation has an opposite process of an upward movement that removes the limitations from the particular beings that are capable of elevation. I see here an affinity between this passage and the description of the transformed self in the passage from *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz* presented earlier in this chapter.

In any case, the last quoted passage from *Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz* contributes a better understanding of the passage from *Or ha-Šekhel* about each individual containing all the members of his species. I would consider it a description belonging to the second narrative whose secret meaning, belonging to the third narrative, is offered in the passage we have just translated that deals with the individual intellect that is integrated into the more comprehensive entities.

Abulafia’s views discussed here should be compared to Averroes’s approach to intellection, which has been cogently summarised in a recent study as follows:

The individual intellect loses its individuality through becoming immersed in a realm of universal concepts. When we are at the level of using imaginative representations, those representations very much belong to a particular individual, and they represent aspects of the material side of the agent intellect. Once there is progress to more and more abstract thinking, these more graphic forms are put behind the individual thinker and immersion and conjunction occurs with the agent intellect itself. As human minds become more and more perfect, they become less and less human and individual. They free themselves gradually of the material body and its accompanying ideas, and become much more like the agent intellect. They lose in specificity and gain in generality, and any normal sense of person disintegrates totally.<sup>302</sup>

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**300** *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 20:

והתחייב מזה היות עצם ראשון נבדל בכל צד מהצדדים כולל תחתיו כל הכללים הנזכרים שהם עצמיים וכל שכן המקרים שאין להם מציאות בלתי העצמים ולפי דמיון אישי הכללים ופרטיהם יהיו מיני הסוגים וכלליהם וככה יהיו כל הנמצאים תחת הדבר הראשון.

As Weinstock proposed in his footnotes, it seems that there is here an impact of ibn Ezra’s theory of All, mentioned in chapter 7 note 278 and chapter 21 note 292 above; as well as that of ibn Gabirol. See also Appendix E note 13 below. Harald A.I. Reiche, *Empedocles’ Mixture, Eudoxan Astronomy and Aristotle’s Connate Pneuma* (Amsterdam: Hakert, 1960), 101–32, discusses the concept of “General because First.”

**301** See the untitled short treatise found in Ms. Sassoon 290, 235.

**302** Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 90. See also Rabbi Hasdai Crescas’s interpretation of Maimonides, as found in Warren Zev Harvey, “Hasdai Crescas’ Critique of the Theory of the Acquired Intellect” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1973), 125. Cf. Crescas’s text on 278 (English, 432).

Despite changes in Averroes's own views over the years as to the status of the material intellect and the nature of the acts of intellection, as has duly been pointed out by scholars,<sup>303</sup> Leaman's description fits many of the less systematic and fragmentary treatments of those topics in Abulafia's writings. It should be mentioned that Abulafia's imagery of the expansion of the mind—namely, its becoming wider and wider when interpreting the Bible by means of several exegetical methods—is paralleled by his image of the seven paths, the seven concentric spheres, the highest being the most comprehensive and corresponding to the most sublime form of exegesis, while the first or the lowest of these spheres is the most limited of them, dealing with the plain sense.<sup>304</sup>

In a work written in a similar vein to Abulafia's Kabbalah, we read that “the power of speech is called the rational soul, which received the divine influx, called *Knesset Yiśra'el*, whose secret is the Agent Intellect, which is also the universal influx,<sup>305</sup> and which is the mother of the intellect of the world.”<sup>306</sup> Though not com-

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**303** See Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*; Arthur Hyman, “Averroes' Theory of the Intellect and the Ancient Commentators,” in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 188–98; Alfred L. Ivry, “Averroes' Three Commentaries on *De Anima*,” in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 199–216; Alfred L. Ivry, “Averroes on Intellection and Conjunction,” *JAOS* 86 (1966): 76–85; Richard C. Taylor, “Remarks on *Cogitatio* in Averroes' *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis de Anima Libros*,” *JAOS* 86 (1966): 217–55; Kalman P. Bland's introduction to his edition of *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982); Blaustein, “Averroes on the Imagination and the Intellect,” 211–73; and Maurice Blaustein, “Averroès et Moïse de Narbonne: Sur la possibilité de la conjunction,” *Archives juives* 21, no. 1–2 (1985): 5–9.

**304** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 122–24.

**305** השפעת הכלי. The identification between the influx and the Agent Intellect should be understood as part of what I call a limited pantheistic approach that is visible in Abulafia's writings, but less evident in Jewish philosophy. See the discussion of the topic in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 12–14. The fact that Abulafia repeatedly distinguishes between God and the influx and describes the former using the philosophical terms “Necessary Existent” and “Prime Mover” (see chapter 16 note 106 above) is the reason why I use the qualification of limited pantheism: immanentism. See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 147–48. See, on the other hand, Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 169–70. Wolfson does not refer to these theological issues, but decides that pantheism is a better description of Abulafia's position than limited pantheism. However, without first presenting the entire range of pertinent materials, it is quite easy to claim new insights, or qualifications of older ones, which eventually turn out to be dramatically problematic when additional material is taken into consideration, and I refer here only to Abulafia's printed material. One may ask how this pantheistic approach operates together with the theosophical vision of the *sefirot* that Wolfson champions on other occasions. It is one more quandary that deserves elaboration. I am, therefore, more concerned with understanding the fluidity of Abulafia's thought, or of any other thinker, than to establish clear-cut theological positions deemed to represent what I assume is a complex discussion. See also my “Deus sive Natura,” 185–86.

**306** *Sefer Or ha-Menorah*, Ms. Jerusalem, 8<sup>o</sup> 1303, fol. 28b. For details on this book, see Idel, “Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine,” 79. On the term *Knesset Yiśra'el* in similar contexts, see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 80, and the pertinent footnotes; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 211–12, note 36; and *Ben*, 321, 332. Compare, however, what Wolfson attributes to me, based on some of

pletely identical to Abulafia's passage, the terminology is nevertheless quite similar. Here, universality is explicitly regarded as being related to a higher ontological level, and similarly, we see the concern with the move towards language (the power of speech) which, unlike the view found in Aristotle's *Politics* that was adopted by many thinkers, defines the human being by his capacity of intellection.<sup>307</sup> Interestingly enough, the secret is presented as the inner sense of the traditionally Jewish theme, which is the philosophical concept of the Agent Intellect.

In one case, found in Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah's treatise *Ša'arei Šedeq*, Moses is described in terms quite similar to Abulafia's treatment of Moses elsewhere in *Sitrei Torah*<sup>308</sup> as having "been transformed into a universal [being] after being a particular, central point. And this is the matter of the lower man who ascended and became 'the man who is upon the throne'<sup>309</sup> by virtue of the power of the Name."<sup>310</sup> This de-

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my other discussions, in "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 173, note 159, as if he gives a somewhat different reading from mine! As to his suggestion there that the appellative *Malkhut* for the Agent Intellect should be attributed to theosophical Kabbalah, see the text from the Hebrew translation of Al-Fārābī's book *Haṭḥalot ha-Nimša'ot*, which is paraphrased by Abulafia in his *Sitrei Torah*, translated and discussed in Idel, *Ben*, 279, 352–53, note 70, and in Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia," 6, 11–13. In this passage, Abulafia, following Al-Fārābī, designates the Agent Intellect as *Malkhut ha-Šamayyim* ("the dominion of heaven"). This is an interesting example that shows how a better acquaintance with the philosophical background of both the ecstatic Kabbalist and the scholarly bibliography on the matter under discussion dramatically mitigates the theosophical reading of Abulafia.

**307** An issue that is central for Abulafia is the speech that a person may have with the imaginary representation of the Agent Intellect in the form of the aspirant, as found in a variety of texts. See my *The Mystical Experiences*, 86–95, and *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 60. This speech may have two meanings: an intellectual one (a communication of ideas without any linguistic components) and an imaginative one (self-revelation and linguistic communication). Interestingly enough, the former is conceived as philosophical, while the second is conceived as Kabbalistic.

**308** Idel, "Universalization and Integration," 30. See also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 106. It should be pointed out that Abulafia does not conceive all types of prophecy as leading to an experience of universalisation. See his *Šomer Mišwah*, 5–6.

**309** Ezekiel 1:26. It should be noted that this verse is the proof-text for the Midrashic dictum about the prophets who compare forms to the entity that forms them, which is presented by Rabbi Nathan by means of a passage quoted from a book by Rabbi Isaac of Acre, as cited by Rabbi Moses of Kiev, to be discussed below in Appendix B note 82. On the concept of "the point," which in Abulafia's writings refers either to the Agent Intellect or to the human soul, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 40–41.

**310** Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 385:

והו ענין משה שב כללי אחר היותו נקודה פרטית מרכזית והו ענין האדם התחתון שנתעלה ונעשה אדם שעל הכסא בכח הש'.

Compare to Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 24. Warren Zev Harvey indicated to me the similarity of this view to that of ibn Kaspi, which is found in his commentary on the *Guide* in 1:14, 30. Compare this to the manner in which Sagerman (*The Serpent Kills*, 320, note 207) interprets the term "all" in the context of Moses as suggestive of the *sefirah Yesod*. See also Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 166. This is an interesting example of the vicissitudes of the application of Freudian interpreta-

scription is closer to Neo-Platonically oriented transformations of the particular soul into the universal soul, a phenomenon I propose to call universalisation.<sup>311</sup>

This form of expression, which may or may not represent an experience that is different from others and which is described as involving cleaving to God and a mystical union, already had a history in Jewish mysticism. Rabbi Nathan's *Ša'arei Šedeq* is just one link in a longer chain of traditions. Indeed, some lines further on, our author explicitly refers to the "soul of all."<sup>312</sup> In this brand of Kabbalah, Moses's transformation should be understood as being accomplished by means of a name (*ha-šem*) which consists of the same consonants as *Mošeh*, a term that stands for the Tetragrammaton, though its consonants have been permuted. Therefore, by resorting to the Kabbalistic technique based on names used by Abulafia, Moses is imagined as becoming a supernal man.

The transformation from the particular to the general is found elsewhere, in a book written by Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, a disciple of Rabbi Nathan, the author of *Ša'arei Šedeq*. This more famous Kabbalist mentions "the Nought, which encompasses everything"<sup>313</sup> and elsewhere writes that "the soul should cleave to Nought and become universal and comprehensive after being particular because of her palace<sup>314</sup> when she was imprisoned in it; [she] will become universal, in the secret of the essence of the secret of her place from which she was hewn."<sup>315</sup> Interestingly enough, Rabbi Isaac of Acre is one of the few Kabbalists who uses the expression "universal Kabbalah."<sup>316</sup> Like Rabbi Nathan, he is also concerned with the Neo-Platonic sort of universalisation concerning the soul and much less with the Neo-Aristotelian one concerning the intellect. In any case, the transformation of the intellect is part of a wider scheme that denies changes in the separate supernal intellects, at

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tions to medieval texts whose agendas are quite different. For the special relationship between the "distinguished man" and the "unique name" of God, see *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 128.

**311** For more on the concept of universalisation in Abulafia and its sources, see Idel, "Universalization and Integration," 28–33, and Appendix E.

**312** Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 385: נפש הכל.

**313** I hope to deal with this view in a separate study.

**314** "Her palace" is *Heikhalah*. The latter is a recurrent image in Rabbi Isaac's writings on the body. See also the quote from an unnamed Kabbalist found in Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, *Ša'arei Šedeq*, in *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 373, and in the Hebrew translation, attributed to Maimonides, of the anonymous *Peraqim be-Ḥašlaḥah*, ed. David Baneth (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1939), 17. Here, the term "comprehensive," in the sense of "embracing or encompassing the lower", reflects Neo-Platonic terminology.

**315** *Sefer Ošar Ḥayyim*, Ms. Moscow, Günzburg 775, fol. 233b. I have translated the rather exceptional formulation found in this version, which uses "Nought" in lieu of *Ein Sof*, as is also the case in the version of this passage in Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1911, fol. 154b. "Nought" is *wa-tidbaq nefeš zo be-ayin*.

**316** See *Sefer Ošar Ḥayyim*, Ms. Moscow, Günzburg 775, fol. 93a: קבלה כללית. On this topic, also found in both the school of Rabbi David ben Judah he-Ḥasid and in Abulafia, I hope to elaborate elsewhere.

least in the various speculative corpora that nourished the diverse thought of these Kabbalists.<sup>317</sup>

Given the centrality of the process of universalisation in these texts and many others that cannot be adduced within this framework, I propose to see them in the wider context of the concepts of the universal speech and the universal religion, both in the past and in the future. I would read the content of passage [a1], dealing with the distancing from the universal religion, as something negative that is complemented by the universalisation of the intellect. In other words, they are two complementary movements reminiscent of the Neo-Platonic procession and regression. The human intellect, when purified of imaginative contents, turns universal, reaching a form of prophecy or a state that parallels the universal religion. These vertical motions are paramously transhistorical and individual, not national or historical. The Moses who gave the Torah is not necessarily a historical figure, and nor is the high priest, as we shall see in chapter 24; these are examples of the “perfect man” who became universal.

According to one of Maimonides’s views, among all the prophets, only Moses did not use imagination in his prophecy. Abulafia would say that this disappearance of imagination is essentially a cognitive event, not a historical one, as we shall see below in chapter 22. In any case, unlike Maimonides, Abulafia thought that the Messiah would be higher than Moses,<sup>318</sup> and given that he thought that he was the Messiah, the implications are obvious: he imagines that it would be possible to experience a revelation higher than the Mosaic one. What is quite central in Abulafia’s Kabbalistic approach is the exegetical spiritualisation of the Hebrew Bible, of Rabbinic Judaism, and, in some cases, of concepts found in theosophical Kabbalah as if they are esoterically referring to inner processes that have salvific valences, and he offered alternative techniques designed to attain this goal.<sup>319</sup>

The process of noetic universalisation also seems to be the clue for understanding the meaning of the people’s new attitude towards one another at the end of paragraph [c] as part of a more general category: the species. In the utopian situation, the individual person—in my opinion, an allegory for the intellect—loses his particular status and approaches all other people as though they are part of a more general and unified category, which as a whole will be in contact with the divine. In the eschaton, individuals belong to their species and nations are no longer mentioned.

The integration of individuals—again, I believe that this is an allegory for the intellect—into a more general entity, which he refers to as the human species, does not include the integration of their religions, which are no longer mentioned, but rather

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<sup>317</sup> See *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, 5.

<sup>318</sup> In *Sitrei Torah*, 11–12, Moses is portrayed as attaining the most perfect intellectual achievement possible for a man; see also *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 105, and *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, where he refers to Moses as prophesying without the faculty of imagination. See 157.

<sup>319</sup> See Idel, “The Time of the End,” 155–86, and Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 177.



involves a process of simplification, which means the spiritualisation of the essence of the individual persons; that is, the purification of the process of cognition from imaginative contents that are based on composed images. This is also a process of depersonalisation, to use Philip Merlan's term; it is a dissolution of individuality.<sup>320</sup>

This dissolution is the main reason why Abulafia here refers twice to the concept of the human species as a whole; the distinguished individual's spiritual or mental development has nothing to do with the specificity or uniqueness of his human existence.<sup>321</sup> This simplification and depersonalisation, related to an intensification of experience that has a profound intellectual significance, is the peak of Abulafia's Kabbalah and represents a phenomenon that differs from the more widespread cases of religious interiorisation that assume the existence of each individual's complex inner life. Nevertheless, such complexity is obvious in Abulafia's theory of inner struggle and prophecy, which are considered lower forms of his mystical path, but not in the higher ideal of mystical union.

In any case, let me emphasise that Abulafia's view of the human species as consisting solely of those individuals who have succeeded in actualising their intellect differs from modern understandings of humanism, which assume the importance of the compound of body and soul. It seems that we have here a version of the encounter of the one with the One: the more something ascends to the divine, the more unified it is. In this context, it seems that the necessity of language for inter-human communication is rather questionable: if people are conceived as the limbs of a great utopian organism that is constituted by the human species, then no one really speaks to his own limbs as they operate through thought alone.<sup>322</sup>

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**320** Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoplatonist and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Springer, 1963), 84. On dissolution, see Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, Inc., 1960), 111–23, especially the reference to Abulafia on 116. According to Stace's criteria, Abulafia is an introverted mystic. I see no reason to assume that by the human turning divine, there is also an implication that the divine thereby becomes human, as Wolfson assumes (*Abraham Abulafia*, 148) as part of his Christotropic understanding of Abulafia's thought.

**321** See the use of the phrase מן האדם in dozen of instances in Abulafia's writings, as well as in "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 4.

**322** The metaphor of a human organism that organises more complex particulars occurs in several instances in Abulafia's writings. See also Averroes in van den Bergh, *The Incoherence of Incoherence*, 253–54. For the resort to the metaphor of the organism in general, see Judith E. Schlanger, *Les métaphores de l'organisme* (Paris: Vrin, 1971). This a-linguistic, intellectual type of communication is reminiscent of the scholastic question as to how angels communicate. See Theo Kobusch, "The Language of Angels: On the Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity of Pure Spirits," in *Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry: Their Function and Significance*, eds. Isabel Iribarren and Martin Lenz (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008): 131–42; Barbara Faes de Mottoni, "Enuntiatores divini silentii: Tommaso d'Aquino e il linguaggio degli angeli," *Medioevo* 12 (1986): 199–228; Bernd Roling, *Locutio Angelica: Die Diskussion der Engelsprache als Antizipation Einer Sprechakttheorie in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Bernd Roling, "Angelic Language and Communication," in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy* ed. Tobias Hoffman (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 223–60.



If this is the case, the perfect language is not to be found in the Jewish nation in the present, given its precarious plight in its exile; in the future, when the pearl returns to the son in accordance with the national narrative, it will become superfluous. Will the sublimation of the spoken languages, or the historical ones, take place by ascending to the intellectual form of activity, in a manner reminiscent of Maimonides's approach to mental prayer? Is such sublimation connected to the effacement of imagination that will be mentioned in one of the passages from *Or ha-Šekhel*?<sup>323</sup> Those processes may take place in the present, at least for the perfect individual.

To formulate the quandary in different terms: if, in the exilic situation, there is hope that the son will receive the pearl, perhaps consisting in the three virtues, as distinct from the status of the servants, he will not receive them in the eschaton while he is still a separate entity, an individual. This reception will only be possible as part of the unification of the entire human species, not as a separate part, not as a particular, not as a separate nation, important as it may be, distinct from the other nations which keep their particular nature even in the new situation. Or, to put it in more epistemological terms, only by becoming universal can the individual be saved.

In my opinion, the cessation of the antagonism between people or nations that is part of the historical narrative is explained as the result of the disappearance of the imaginative power. The species is, naturally, a much more comprehensive category than the nation. Abulafia's specific emphasis on the individual can be discerned if we compare the content of the biblical verses he uses as a proof-text to his own words: while the biblical verse speaks of the nations, at the end of paragraph [c], Abulafia speaks of the individuals: the "members of the species."

Thus, in my opinion, the historical redemption includes a transcendence of the present divisions between religions and nations. Indeed, what seems to be the major distinction with which Abulafia is operating is much less the widespread dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles, as some of the other Kabbalists were assuming, but the dichotomy between elite persons or distinguished individuals and the multitude found in different nations, including in the Jewish nation.

When dealing with the threefold distinction between exegetical techniques, he sees in the first, the "vulgar one," dealing with the plain sense, an approach that

it is appropriate to safeguard [the vulgar sense] together [with two other senses for the sake of] the vulgus, who are the righteous in the nation, [...] that it is appropriate to safeguard the three ways since all three are true, but there are three different degrees and each of them perfects what is appropriate in order to perfect those [individuals] who safeguard it and know it. And there is no doubt that among the Christians, there are some sages who know this secret, and they spoke with me secretly and revealed to me that this is their position, indubitably. And I considered them to be in the category of the pious men of the Gentiles.<sup>324</sup> And one should not care as to

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<sup>323</sup> The passages are translated above pp. 148–49.

<sup>324</sup> "The pious men of the Gentiles" is a Rabbinic category, which, from a linguistic point of view, is problematic for Abulafia's conceptualisation, since in his books, "pious" stands for a lower category.

the words of the fools in any nation, since the Torah was not given but to those who possess knowledge.<sup>325</sup>

This dichotomy seems to me to reflect an Averroistic approach, although the distinction involves a threefold rather than a double-truth theory. In the vein of the interpretation of the parable about the mindless son who does not initially receive the pearl, the Torah is here conceived as being given only to those who possess knowledge, a far-reaching statement that assumes that the Torah has only been revealed to the elites, be they Jewish or not.<sup>326</sup>

The first part of the passage is much more harmonistic, while the end is much more exclusive or disjunctive; just one more example of Abulafia's conceptual fluidity. As to the possible identity of the Christian interlocutors that the Kabbalist mentions, let me propose an alternative to the hypothesis suggested by Gershom Scholem, who speaks about contacts with Christian mystics,<sup>327</sup> and Harvey Hames, who claims that they are "perhaps [...] Franciscan Joachimists."<sup>328</sup> Although this sugges-

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See also Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 207, note 76. For the more universalist Rabbinic approach, see Michael Zevi Nehorai, "Righteous Gentiles Have a Share in the World to Come" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 61 (1992): 465–87. For the existence of earlier missionary vectors in Rabbinic Judaism that have been eradicated, see Moshe Lavee, "Converting the Missionary Image of Abraham: Rabbinic Traditions Migrating from the Land of Israel to Babylon," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds. Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 203–22.

**325** Introduction to *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 48–49:

שהדרך הראשונה כלה המונית. ואעפ"כ ראוי לשמרה עם ההמון שהם הצדיקים שבעם כמו שזכרתי תמיד שראוי לשמור שלשת הדרכים ששלשתם אמת. אבל להם שלש מדרגות מתחלפות וכל אחת משלמת מה שראוי לה לפי מהותה להשלים שומריה ויודעיה. ואין ספק שיש מהנצרים קצת חכמים שיודעים זה הסוד ודברו עמי בסוד וגלו לי שזו היא דעתם בלא ספק. ואז דתים אני גם כן מכלל חסידי אומות העולם. ואין לחוש על דברי הפתאים בשום אומה שלא נתנה תורה אלא לבעלי הדעת.

See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 129, 379, note 33. On triple exegetical and anthropological hierarchies, see Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 109–14. The anthropological distinction between the common people (the multitude), the philosophers, and the prophets is a recurring theme in Abulafia's writings; it may reflect an earlier source for the similar position of Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Falaquera in *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*, 77, as well as ibn Kaspi. See Mesch, *Studies in Joseph ibn Kaspi*, 86. On the ironic phrase "our sages, the fools of the Jews, [...] the majority of the sages of our generation are fools," see Abulafia's early work *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 45: [...] ויאיר לבות חכמינו הפתאים היהודים [...]. רוב חכמי דורנו פתאים are conceived to be foolish Jews.

**326** See the intellectual interpretation of the Rabbinic statement that the Torah was only given to those who consumed manna in his *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 152.

**327** Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 129. Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 197, note 31, correctly questions the accuracy of Scholem's assessment.

**328** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 43, 127–28, note 59. See, however, his much more confident statement issued on page 2 of the introduction of this text: "Abulafia's works show that he was in constant dialogue with Christianity, or more precisely, with a mode of Christianity highly influenced by the thought of the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot, Joachim of Fiore." This was indeed

tion is indeed possible from the historical point of view, this identification is far from being certain. Even less certain is the following statement, which is not supported by any evidence, to the effect that it is possible to explain “why some of the Franciscans in Rome were so eager, less than one year later, to see what would happen when Abulafia met with Nicholas III.”<sup>329</sup> Who those Franciscans were and where this statement came from is quite obscure and is perhaps the result of a theoretical imagining of what could have happened in history, something of which Hames is fond.

In my opinion, Abulafia’s assumption regarding the topic of a consensus with those anonymous Christian sages mentioned in this passage is, quite evidently, much closer to an Averroistic approach than to the above-mentioned unidentified Christian spiritualists. Abulafia could have been acquainted with Christian circles whose thought was nourished by the Latin translations of the Cordovan commentator while in Italy in the 1260s or the 1280s.<sup>330</sup> In any case, the formal condemnations of Averroism in Paris in 1270, 1272, and again in 1277 by Bishop Etienne Tempier show that the perception that the Arab philosopher was a heretic had already spread among the Christian intellectuals long before 1289, when the passage quoted above was written, to say nothing of the earlier critique of Albertus Magnus.<sup>331</sup>

Thus, the attempt to claim that there is only one potential Christian context for Abulafia’s thought, as Hames claims when pushing the Joachimite–Franciscan one, is problematic, for it is obvious that one must consider several contexts rather than a single one.<sup>332</sup> The resort to the assumption of one context, as undertaken by so many

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the issue to be proven, and it seems that at the end of the book, the author himself acknowledges the fact that no solid proof has been found. It should be mentioned that this hypothesis was adumbrated long ago by Jacob L. Teicher, following a discussion by Yitzhak Baer. See the former’s “The Medieval Mind,” *JJS* 6 (1955): 2. See also my “Abraham Abulafia and the Pope: The Meaning and the Metamorphosis of an Abortious Attempt” [Hebrew], *AJS Review* 7–8 (1982/83): 1–17; reprinted in my *Chapters in Ecstatic Kabbalah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1990): 51–74, 69–70. Acquainted as I was with this hypothesis from Teicher’s study, I formulated my view that Joachimite influences on Abulafia were marginal, if they existed at all; this view of mine served as the motto for his introduction (1). Since no conclusive evidence has been shown to disprove my view, I have not changed it since then. However, as I mention in *Messianic Mystics*, 56, when such evidence is brought forth, another picture of the development of Jewish eschatology may emerge. Let me point out that Hames’s assumption in *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 99, that Abulafia had contact with the Franciscans prior to his attempt to meet the pope who could have facilitated the encounter is, for the time being, not corroborated by any historical evidence with which I am acquainted. See also Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 392, note 97, and Appendix D.

**329** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 96.

**330** See also Hames, 133, note 4.

**331** See Bernardo Carlos Bazán, “On ‘First Averroism’ and Its Doctrinal Background,” in *Of Scholars, Savants, and Their Texts*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger (New York: Peter Lang, 1989): 9–22, and John F. Wippel, “The Condemnation of 1270 and 1277 at Paris,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977): 169–201.

**332** *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, 4. See also Sagerman’s use of “Christian context” in *The Serpent Kills*, 25. Like Wolfson’s Jewish “comportment” in the singular, Christians are presented as a unified entity with no variation. These scholars neglect Orthodox Christians, for example: indeed, Abulafia

historians, is entirely mistaken when dealing with a protean and itinerant figure like Abulafia. I would say that the resort to the singular underestimates the diversified and dynamic situations that Abulafia encountered.

Let me point out that the fact that the above passage exists is worthy of additional reflection. One may doubt indeed whether such a testimony is of any historical value, given the fact that it is not corroborated by external evidence. This is a legitimate question, but I have not seen any scholar who has doubted it. However, in my opinion, what counts more than the historical event, whether it actually took place or not, is the fact that Abulafia wanted to project the image of a person who spoke with Christians even on issues that—Halakhically speaking—were forbidden. This confession allows a better understanding of his self-perception and the manner in which he wanted to be perceived.

In any case, insofar as our knowledge of the direct relations between Jewish and Christian scholars in Italy is concerned, it seems that they had to do with matters of philosophy, and perhaps are related more to interactions with members of the Dominican and Augustinian orders,<sup>333</sup> although Abulafia was imprisoned in Rome by the Minorites, an extreme group of Franciscans, for two weeks.<sup>334</sup> It should be pointed out that although the Dominican order was more opposed to Averroism, it was the Franciscan order that campaigned for the condemnation of the Averroists in Paris. If my conjecture as to the identity of those Christians as Averroists is indeed correct, and it is still a conjecture, though I nevertheless see it as a more plausible one on the grounds of its content, we may have a relatively early example of the views that are known as Latin Averroism found among Christian authors. This is, to be sure, an intellectual phenomenon that differs from that known among the Muslims and the Jews; namely, the Christians' reception of the Cordoban thinker as a heretic, a critique that began some years earlier with Albertus Magnus.<sup>335</sup>

In another of Abulafia's statements, he refers to a more universalistic approach when he compares those Jewish Kabbalists who do not examine their beliefs by resorting to philosophical arguments to "the *mequbbalim* of the other nations."<sup>336</sup> This

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lived in the Byzantine Empire for several years. They also neglect Abulafia's Averroistic context, which reflects an Islamic intellectual milieu. The reification of the "context" to just one single conceptual framework is a completely non-historical approach, especially for an author as itinerant as Abulafia was.

**333** See Joseph B. Sermoneta, "Moses ben Solomon of Salerno and Nicholas of Giovinazzo on Maimonides's *The Guide to the Perplexed*" [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 2 (1970): 212–40. Caterina Rigo claims that he was not a Dominican. See her "Per un'identificazione del 'Sapiente Cristiano' Nicola da Giovinazzo, collaborator di Rabbi Mošeh ben Šlomoh da Salerno," *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 69 (1999): 61–146. On the other hand, Aegidius Romanus was well-known to Italian Jewish authors. See also Appendix D note 214 below.

**334** See Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 58.

**335** See Wolfson, "Averroes's Lost Treatise on the Prime Mover," 371–401; Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy*, 163–78.

**336** "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 28.

means that there is no significant difference between the fools of the various nations, just as there is no real difference between their elites, because they are various groups that belong to the human species. Those statements are unparalleled in all Kabbalistic literature in the thirteenth century and should be seriously taken into consideration when surveying the basic configurations of the different Kabbalists in that period.

I opt, therefore, for a more universalistic, esoteric, and spiritually oriented approach to the parable, in contradistinction to the more particularist and historically oriented understanding of this story and of Abulafia's Kabbalah in general offered by Elliot Wolfson, especially in his *Venturing Beyond*.<sup>337</sup> Given the fact that he recently quite vehemently denied my claim, calling it "grossly misleading," since I presented him as adopting a particularist reading of Abulafia's thought,<sup>338</sup> allow me to quote another of his statements that is pertinent to my depiction of his view:<sup>339</sup> "Even in passages where Abulafia ostensibly embraces the philosophical anthropology of Maimonides, careful scrutiny reveals that he reinterprets the latter in a manner that shows greater affinity with the particularism of the esoteric tradition<sup>340</sup> than with the universalism of medieval rationalism."<sup>341</sup> It is fascinating to watch the recurrent resort to the singular: just one "esoteric tradition," just one type of "universalism," just one "medieval rationalism." As pointed out above in chapters 4 to 7, Abulafia was exposed to many different sources rather early in his career, and let me stress, again, that it is historically erroneous to speak about one context.

Let the reader judge what is "grossly misleading": either Wolfson's view and my presentation thereof, or the way he has now depicted it.<sup>342</sup> The resort to the violent phrase "grossly misleading" is very difficult to understand in scholarship in general, and especially in this case, as Wolfson expressed the very views I had attributed to him only a few years earlier.<sup>343</sup> In any case, he "grossly misunderstands" his own

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<sup>337</sup> *Venturing Beyond*, 60–61, 64–67; also see chapter 21 note 262 above.

<sup>338</sup> See his "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 200, note 41. See also his claim of ethnic particularity in Abulafia in the same article (204–5), discussed in chapter 12 note 11 above, as well as his "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," *Exemplaria* 12 (2000):135. His claim that he admitted a universalistic reading of Abulafia "especially" in his analysis of one of Abulafia's texts in his *Language, Eros, Being*, 203–4, is not supported by the discussion found in my copy of his book; instead, he conflates Abulafia's view of language with that of Rabbi Moses de Leon, who was indeed quite the particularistic Kabbalist. Given his selective and sometimes even inverting treatment of Abulafia's understanding of the Rabbinic myth of pollution, as we discussed in chapter 9 above, I hardly can understand his position.

<sup>339</sup> See another quote to this effect from the *Venturing Beyond*, 65, note 203, that was discussed above in chapter 9 note 96.

<sup>340</sup> Something that is not so clear to me is which exact "esoteric tradition" in the singular he has in mind. Was there only one esoteric tradition in Judaism? See note 467 above.

<sup>341</sup> *Venturing Beyond*, 65.

<sup>342</sup> This is just one more example of the art of inversion. See chapter 9 note 93 above.

<sup>343</sup> In fact, this is not a surprising case for a careful reader of his vast opus. Concerning another topic, Wolfson has changed his mind twice in three consecutive years without alerting the reader.

statements, which in the past I chose not to quote, but it seems that it is sorely necessary to remind him of his own views, which he has never recanted, including in his most recent studies, such as “Deceitful Truth, Truthful Deceit.”

Meanwhile, something very positive has happened more recently in Wolfson’s understanding of ecstatic Kabbalah, as he now confesses that in fact, “I do not deny the universal dimension of Abulafia’s prophetic Kabbalah.”<sup>344</sup> However, only a few pages later, in the very same paper, he writes about Abulafia’s “dualist tone” when dealing with his anthropology.<sup>345</sup> Is his “non-denial” of universalism denied again, or was the non-denial a last-minute insertion that does not fit his basic approach in this same paper?

My assumption is that Abulafia, as analysed above, is *more* radically universalist than many of the Jewish philosophers, including the Maimonidean camp, not less, as Wolfson claims. His view is a telling example of a scholar’s explicit attempt to avoid or at least to belittle the need to take seriously the very books Abulafia studied and admired as potential sources, as well as his own statements. Let me elaborate on its consequence: it ignores all the basic data about both Abulafia’s intellectual career and the fabric of his extant writings, replete as they are with philosophical terminology. However, those are not the worst misunderstandings of this Kabbalist’s thought.

In fact, what is of even greater importance for understanding Abulafia is the fact that in many cases, linguistic esotericism is philosophically reinterpreted as the highest form of understanding, thus putting the philosophical apparatus ahead of the linguistic one, as we have seen in some of the discussions above, especially when we discussed the median Torah. Union and prophecy were understood as prominently noetic processes. Though linguistic manipulations are capable of cleansing the mind and opening the purified consciousness to new insights, those insights consist in philosophical interpretations of the linguistic units. This is the reason why the philosophical sources are so essential both at the beginning of the path and at its end.

Let me mention in this context the testimony of Rabbi Nathan Ḥar’ar: after he used the technique he studied with Abulafia, which culminated with a mystical experience, speeches emerged from his mouth that he described as “words of wisdom,” which should be understood as having speculative valences.<sup>346</sup> Thus, philosophical concepts do not dissipate in the higher moments of experience, but reappear in the moment of ecstasy as part of an acceleration or intensification of the noetic process-

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See Idel, “On the Identity of the Authors of Two Ashkenazi Commentaries on the Poem *ha-Aderet we-ha-Emunah*,” 139, note 339.

**344** Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 200, note 41. See a somewhat more nuanced view in his “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 149, note 61.

**345** “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 215. On the ontic status of the Jews, which is based on an erroneous understanding of Abulafia’s view, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 73.

**346** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478–79: ראיתיה מדברת חכמות [...] ראתיה בי כח העיון.

es.<sup>347</sup> Interestingly enough, the practice of drinking wine in order to solve a philosophical problem attributed to Avicenna in Rabbi Nathan's book illustrates my point.<sup>348</sup>

The basic difference between Wolfson's approach and mine in matters of understanding Abulafia's thought is not just a matter of his rather inverted interpretation of the message of this specific parable; rather, it is grounded in basic methodological matters on how to read this Kabbalist's writings generally. The particularist mode corresponds, roughly speaking, to the national-historical narrative; however, I assume the centrality of a two-tiered form of interpretation in many cases in Abulafia's hermeneutics, with the spiritual and esoteric level being higher. This means, for example, that the son, if described as the Jewish nation as a whole in accordance with the historical narrative, not only does not possess the pearl in the present, but will also not obtain the pearl in accordance with the presented picture of the nature of the end that discusses the collective human organism as a species.

Thus, Wolfson's assumption that the preservation of the "the particular ethnicity that can actualise the potentiality of human beings to become universal by receiving the intellectual overflow of the logos"<sup>349</sup> deals with a special ethnicity (in fact, a corporeal feature, or what I call a genetic factor) is misleading, since Abulafia's assumption is that the Jews' propensity to contemplation is the result of a special form of social organisation that allows certain individuals specific time for contemplation, though not the entire Jewish nation, many of whose individuals are incapable of higher spiritual achievements.<sup>350</sup> Thus, it is not a specific ethnic self-assertion that transpires from these treatments, but a form of philosophical religion that one community embraces more than others.

In any case, insofar as the topics of sonship or the Rabbinic passage on the pollution of Adam are concerned, Wolfson's brief discussion leaves out some of the most pertinent and explicit materials on the topic on the one hand and generates exaggerated visions of the nature of Kabbalah on the other. This scholarly neglect of so many salient texts which deal with the very core issue under scrutiny—namely, Abulafia's attitude towards the Gentiles—misinterprets the single source that has been quoted, and that only in part, thereafter generating a general homogeneous picture of Kabbalah as a whole.<sup>351</sup>

This is quite an unfortunate new development—or should I say retrogression—in the study of Kabbalah in general and of Abulafia's thought in particular. What is even

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347 On the importance of acceleration in mystical experiences, see Moshe Idel, "Performance, Intensification and Experience in Jewish Mysticism," *Archaeus* 13 (2009): 93–134.

348 *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 55–56.

349 *Venturing Beyond*, 73.

350 See the passage from *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, Ms. New York, JTS 843, fols. 52b–53a, and 26, cited above in chapter 9.

351 See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 490–91, and 550, note 559. In this text, I outline my proposal for using the expression "the art of invention."



more surprising is the fact that the quintessential role played by the philosophical aspects of Abulafia's discussions of this topic, which constitute much of what I called the third narrative or register, have been neglected in this context. An entire book devoted to this Kabbalist and Christianity does not distinguish between the two different registers he uses, as if Abulafia was solely concerned with the historical level or with an inter-religious dialogue.<sup>352</sup> Concerned more with softening or tempering the borderline between the ecstatic Kabbalah and the theosophical-theurgical one, scholars writing recently have neglected the very foundation of Abulafia's thought, which is grounded in the concepts that are characteristic of the Maimonidean movement.<sup>353</sup>

Last but not least: Wolfson's approach is generally more concerned with the esotericism that he finds in the semiotic field of theosophical Kabbalah; that is, it is concerned with an understanding of Kabbalah as dealing with mysteries, with the problem of ineffability, and with questions related to the expression of the mystical experience. I am much more concerned here with forms of political esotericism that are conditioned by the existence of the vulgus. In my opinion, this latter form of esotericism is the main sort in Abulafia's writings, and one should pay attention to its philosophical sources both from the point of view of the principles—namely, the sociological-anthropological distinction—and from the exegetical point of view; namely, the sources of Abulafia's allegorisations.

In this context, some of the occurrences of the terms *sod* and *seter* should be taken much more seriously, as we have seen above, especially when they are accompanied by adjectives that are superlatives, such as [*sod*] *muflag*,<sup>354</sup> [*sod*] *gadol*, [*sod*] *mekhusseh*, or combinations of them,<sup>355</sup> since they point not only to numerical equivalences—that is, gematrias—but also to topics that the Kabbalist did not want to explicitly disclose but which are part of his esoteric thought. The gist of this type of esotericism is, however, not the Neo-Aristotelian conceptual apparatus per se, as found in many books translated from Arabic, but its relevance for the proper understanding of religious topics, which may contradict the dominant and popular perception of those topics. The wide resort to terms related to secrecy in Abulafia's writings should invite a more thoughtful approach to decoding his thought, with the assumption in

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**352** This is also the case in his discussion of the son as an intellectual entity. In addition to the passage from *Sitrei Torah* referenced above in chapter 21 note 322, also see *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 5; 2:7, 267; and 3:9, 347, where the firstborn son is explicitly interpreted as the human intellect, which should be rescued from the material forces. For a similar situation where Wolfson does not take into consideration Abulafia's explicit view that does not fit into his claim of particularism, see our discussions above in chapter 9 about the pollution of the Gentiles, as well as the references in Idel, "On the Secrets of Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 422, note 239; 425, 429.

**353** See Sagerman, following Wolfson, *The Serpent Kills*, 7, note 12.

**354** Abulafia is fond of this epithet, which, although it recurs in his writings, is rather absent in early Kabbalistic literature.

**355** See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 114; *Sod Yerušalayyim*, ed. Raphael Kohen (Jerusalem: Raphael Kohen, 2001), 16; as well as the anonymous *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, 11, where all of these adjectives are found together.

mind that there is a secret context for some of his discussions that may disguise a more subversive approach in its relationship to traditional concepts.

Another narrative that should be taken much more seriously into consideration is one that progresses from the spoken languages to the universal language and from there to the source that generates that universal language, the cosmic intellect. Thus, the process of descent that is mentioned at the beginning of the passage and which introduces the parable, paragraph [a]—and the image of the pearl in the pit fits this picture—is reversed by the return of the pearl in its brilliance in paragraphs [b] and [c]. At any rate, at least in one case, it is obvious that the combination of letters is not a matter of the Hebrew language alone: it can be done in every language.<sup>356</sup> This is also the case with the gematrias that Abulafia contrived with words which stem from a variety of languages.<sup>357</sup>

The inclusion of many languages without referring to the possible existence of a problem in doing so in this passage is one of the expressions of Abulafia's more universal approach, and it has no parallel in theory and practice among the Kabbalists active in Spain or Safed. The combination of Abulafia's emphasis on the noetic processes that are universal by their sources and nature and his intense resort to other languages in his linguistic games contributed to the unique character of his Kabbalah in comparison to those developments in other Kabbalistic literature.<sup>358</sup> This is one of the reasons for Abulafia's impact on both the Jewish Kabbalah and the Christian Kabbalah in the Italian Renaissance.

## 22 What is the Pearl?

Historical religions began with the assumption that the fundamental religious event, the revelation, took place at their very beginning. The institutional revelation is conceived as being in need of interpretation, clarification, and eventually even expansion, but it is hardly ever conceived as replaceable or as already transcended. This is most evident in Maimonides's (exoteric?) approach, where Moses is conceived as the perfect figure and the Torah is consequently conceived as unchangeable. Its esoteric meanings might indeed be lost or obfuscated by the tribulations of the exile, but

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356 *Šomer Mišwah*, 16.

357 See Idel, "Multilingual Gematrias in Abraham Abulafia," and, e.g., *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 176–77.

358 Compare also to Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, 140, and the secondary literature assembled in Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," 198, note 35. Let me point out that the combination of the two elements shows that language games are not always in service of a particular extant community, as some post-modern authors think, since Ashkenazi authors who resorted to these linguistic games did not adopt Neo-Aristotelian noetics and vice versa. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Abulafia's combination was, as much as possible, intended to create a new community of distinguished individuals, not a homogenic genetic one.

they may nevertheless be restored, though not exchanged, as Muslims claimed, or supplemented, as Christians did.

With Abulafia, however, it seems that the situation is somehow different. Assuming an ideal, perhaps utopian universal religion based on acts of intellection, in good Maimonidean terms, the Torah as a specific revelation to the Israelites and the Jews, which have been formulated in a specific language, is, by its nature, limited. In my opinion, in his Kabbalistic project, Abulafia wanted to demonstrate not the truth of traditional Judaism as it was understood by the Rabbis, especially contemporary ones, but the truth of his own special and diverging message that strove for a universal understanding of Judaism as a natural, intellectual, and thus universal type of religion.

In my opinion, this was the religion he wanted to discuss with the pope.<sup>359</sup> The critique of Christianity therefore comes together with a dislocation of a strongly generational type of sonship in Judaism traditionally understood in Rabbinic Judaism as the single principle for defining Jewish identity. It is not the historical Judaism that will prevail in the future, Abulafia assumes, but—if at all—a new esoteric, spiritual version, which is dramatically influenced by Greek philosophy and gravitates around the revelation of the divine name, that may or will transcend the existing historical religions. Rabbinic Judaism as conventionally understood, just like the traditional forms of Christianity and Islam, will not be integrated into this utopian universal religion, but will be transcended by it, either in the experience of the individual in the present through their following of Abulafia's technique or through the collective unified human species as a whole in the future, if we accept the veracity of the national-historical narrative in his thought.

The old-new religion, like the pearl, does not emerge in a specific historical moment in the future, but is coexistent with reality and may enter history at an appointed moment. The ethnic Jews indeed have the propensity to accept this spiritual intrusion into history more than others, as they are conceived as having some form of linguistic and thus intellectual preparation, but neither in the past nor in the present have they actually possessed the pearl, which is the sole patrimony of the “real” Jews, the prophets and the mystics. This is the reason why Abulafia is so critical of the Jewish masses and of Rabbis, especially those in his generation, as we have

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<sup>359</sup> See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia and the Pope.” See now the particularist claim regarding Abulafia's position in Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 85–87, based solely on a misquotation of the passage from Abulafia's Hebrew text that I cited in that article. However, in the quotation in his book, the critical term for Boyarin's thesis, כּלל—which should be translated as “principle”—is mysteriously absent from the original Hebrew text that I cited and elaborated on at length, while the term יהדות is spelt היהדות. Most probably, he read a corrupted version of my article, otherwise unknown to me, and if this is indeed the case, I deeply apologise for inducing him into such a big error. In any case, he was not aware of the existence of concepts such as “universal religion” and “universal Torah” in Abulafia's writing, which we saw in chapters 12 and 14 above. But see a totally different view in *Sefer ha-Melammed*, p. 32. Abulafia uses phrases such as universal Kabbalah and universal prophecy. See *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, p. 56.

seen in some cases above.<sup>360</sup> Jews have the potential to receive the ideal Torah, but have not yet received it despite the fact that they have the three degrees: a Torah, a language, and a script.

Moreover, the absence of the pearl in the present (i.e., in the exile), according to the second narrative related to the parable, reflects the status of the most concrete and practical aspects of Rabbinic Judaism: the performance of the commandments, a most crucial requirement in general Jewish religious life. It seems, therefore, quite obvious that although commandments are described as being strictly necessary for the well-being of society and as having a political purpose, this is not necessarily the case for the utopian religion based on the priority of noetic processes.<sup>361</sup> In other words, commandments are not identified with the pearl, but, perhaps, with the esoteric interpretations a Kabbalist like Abulafia can offer.

The question may be asked: what is the pearl, after all?<sup>362</sup> My assumption is that just as Hebrew, in Abulafia's thought, is not the specific Hebrew language in its historical manifestations, but the basic principles that govern all languages, like the basic consonants and the principle of the combination of letters,<sup>363</sup> likewise, religion or Torah is not a specific manifestation in history, but a more abstract or general principle, in the vein of the "universal religion" mentioned in chapter 14 above. Indeed, in many passages, Abulafia refers to the name 'HWY as the hidden name of God, which was concealed from or perhaps unknown even to Moses. Those consonants are also conceived as half-vowels and are described in several of Abulafia's texts, and before him in books on Hebrew grammar, as hidden letters, as they are not pronounced even when they are written in the regular spelling of the words.

These four letters are understood in our context as the letters of occultation: *otiyot ha-ha'alah* or *otiyot ha-seter*.<sup>364</sup> This name is also understood to be hinted

**360** See also Abulafia's early book *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 23–24, 45; Idel, "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 423–24; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 74–75, and 184, note 203; and also the passage translated in chapter 20 note 229 above.

**361** Compare to the much more positive attitude towards commandments in Gikatilla's early writings, discussed in Hartley Lachter, "Kabbalah, Philosophy and the Jewish-Christian Debate: Reconsidering the Early Works of Joseph Gikatilla," *JJTP* 16 (2008): 1–58.

**362** For the resort to the pearl in a similar parable, see Pines, "The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source," 273–74 note 139; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 57, note 20; and Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings," 167–68, and now in her Hebrew book *The Parable of the Three Rings*, 13–23. See also Roberto Celada Ballanti, *La parabola dei tre anelli. Migrazioni e metamorfosi di un racconto tra Oriente e Occidente* (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 2017).

**363** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 22–24.

**364** See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 175–76; the Abulafian texts found in *Hotam ha-Haṣṣarah; Maṣref la-Sekhel*, 117; and the discussion found in the untitled treatise in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 70a:

וזהו צורף אותיות אהו"י ששם השם המיוחד בהם והם כנגד כל התורה כלה ואין דבור בלעדיהם והם אותיות הסתר לברם והם ראש ואמצע וסוף.

at in the consonants of the two divine names *YHWH* and *'eHeYeH*,<sup>365</sup> which are understood as hiding the real nature of the supreme divine name, a rather interesting case of esotericism. In my opinion, the special acoustic nature of these semi-consonants should be seen as the reason for their special status, much more than their numerical value or their written form. Abulafia seems to envision a form of vibration that is specific to those four letters.<sup>366</sup>

What is important is the fact that this specific divine name plays an especially important role in *Or ha-Šekhel*.<sup>367</sup> The underlying assumption is that just as God revealed a new name, *'eHeYeH*, to Moses in the context of his redemptive mission, so also the Messiah, who in this case is most probably Abulafia himself, will be taught a new name. In a way, this name is the most refined part of language, consisting of a word that is entirely compounded of vowels, the closest possible thing to a sublimation of the linguistic process. In one passage, Abulafia claims that the name that is

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“This is the combination of the letters *'HWY*, that He put the special name of God in them, and they correspond to the entire Torah and there is no speech without them, and they alone are the letters of occultation and they are the head, the middle, and the end.”

This name is hinted at in Rabbi Judah ha-Levi, *Kuzari*, 4:3; Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra’s commentary on Exodus 3:8, and in his other books such as *Sefer ha-Šem*, chapter 3, and *Sefer ha-Šaḥut*. See also the introduction to Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: *Yesod Mora’ we-sod Torah*, 52–54. These figures influenced Abulafia’s discussion in *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, 64, as well as Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, in Gershom Scholem, “New Remnants from Rabbi Azriel of Gerona’s Writings” [Hebrew], in *A. Klein and S. Gulak Memory Volume* (Jerusalem, 1942): 218–19; Ibn Laṭīf, *Šurat ha-‘Olam*, in Yossi Esudri, “Studies in the Philosophy of Rabbi Isaac ibn Laṭīf, Profile, Knowledge and Prophecy, and a Critical Edition of *Šurat ha-‘Olam*” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2008), 2, 8, 25; and Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, in Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 234. This name also plays a conspicuous role in Gikatilla’s *Ginnat Egoz*, 340, 343–45, but not in his later theosophical writings. This shift is just one of the major developments in his Kabbalistic thought and shows how bizarre the assumption of the hidden name was in the eyes of theosophical Kabbalists. See chapter 17 note 132, chapter 22 note 383, and below chapter 25 note 45. For the grammatical status of these letters, see the anonymous grammar book *Sefer ha-Binyan*, Ms. New York, JTS 2325, 161. It is possible to see the impact of this view on an anonymous Kabbalistic treatise found in several manuscripts belonging to the circle of *Sefer ha-Temunah*, Ms. Vatican, 290, fol. 79a. I hope to deal with this text elsewhere. These letters, as discussed in Gikatilla’s *Ginnat Egoz*, had an impact on other Kabbalistic writings like the early fourteenth-century Rabbi Hananel ben Abraham Esqira’s *Sefer Yesod ‘Olam*, Ms. Moscow, Günzburg 607, fol. 77a.

**365** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 140–41, and Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 513, note 270; 522, note 327. See also Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 180.

**366** See Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1995); André Padoux, *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, trans. Jacques Gontier (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990); Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).

**367** See *Or ha-Šekhel*, 47, 48, 70, 77, and 85. See also the passage from the introduction to this book (3), which will be translated in the next chapter, and *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, 346–47, where these four letters are described as the elements of “all speech,” presumably a parallel to the concept of universal speech discussed above reflecting a phrase stemming from *Sefer Yeširah*, 2:8.

found with the Messiah “naturally” produces speech.<sup>368</sup> In any case, the mystical technique found in *Or ha-Šekhel* is based on the combination of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the letters of the Tetragrammaton, found in several tables that illustrate the technique, presumably some form of elevating the ordinary letters by their conjunction with the semi-vowels that are components of the Tetragrammaton as well as by pronouncing them together.<sup>369</sup>

This combination of regular consonants with the letters of the Tetragrammaton also occurs in other instances in ecstatic Kabbalah. In an interesting discussion in *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia emphasises that the letters of the divine name were added to the names of the forefathers and to Saray,<sup>370</sup> and he invents theophoric names for his students.<sup>371</sup> Even more so, this practice was also adopted by Rabbi Nathan, who hints at his first name by inserting it among the letters of the Tetragrammaton, YNHTWNH, as well as among the letters of ŠD (*Šed*, demon), NŠTDN.<sup>372</sup> The intellectual fusion of the human and the divine is thus represented by a linguistic fusion. In any case, Abulafia conceives the knowledge of the divine name as the time of freedom and redemption,<sup>373</sup> and in an interesting discussion, he claims that a person who strives to attain prophecy is called by a series of divine names, including the Tetragrammaton, Elohim, Adonai Elohim, the angel of Elohim, etc.<sup>374</sup> From this context, it seems that these different names are connected to Abulafia’s mention of the different degrees of progress in prophecy.

In a way, it is possible that the four letters conceived as a tetragrammaton are the first type of revelation that precedes the universal one, which is composed of the twenty-two ideal sounds, and then come the allophones, assuming some form of growth of the linguistic material that becomes language by means of the combination of letters in a manner reminiscent of Joseph Gikatilla’s triangle of the linguistic material in the Torah.<sup>375</sup> Is the transition from these vowels to the consonants of the other divine names and then to regular words an expansion of speech reflecting a vision of the development of speech in humans, from infants to mature adults?<sup>376</sup>

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**368** *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 6–7. The versions of this treatise are sometimes problematic. See also below chapter 26 n. 134.

**369** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 92–93.

**370** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 111.

**371** For Abulafia’s references to his five students from Messina, including Rabbi Nathan and Rabbi Abraham, using theophoric names, see Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 81–84; cf. *Is Adam* in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 46.

**372** See Idel, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 47–48. For the righteous being called by the Tetragrammaton in Rabbinic texts, see Idel, *Ben*, 115–17.

**373** *Or ha-Šekhel*, 110.

**374** *Mašteaḥ ha-Šemot*, 163.

**375** See my *Absorbing Perfections*, 360–61.

**376** This observation has nothing to do with Abulafia’s interpretation of the infant experiment mentioned above.

In his opinion, the pearl, which is the symbol of the pure religion in Abulafia's special version of the famous three rings parable, was not to be found in Israel during his time.<sup>377</sup> It follows that Abulafia did not view the mission of Moses, the law-giver who was conceived as promulgating the perfect and ultimate Torah in Rabbinic circles and in Maimonides, as entirely successful, or at least not final. There is room for a more advanced form of religion, a superior Judaism.<sup>378</sup> This is the reason why Abulafia imagined that he could bring a new religious revelation. He describes the yet unrevealed divine name as the purest form of language from the linguistic point of view; the supreme reference to God in a religious framework is the real and unknown name of God.

Indeed, in his commentary on his prophetic book, *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, written around 1282, we find an important passage for clarifying Abulafia's approach. The first-person speaker in the following passage is God—or the Agent Intellect—who reveals to Abulafia that

“A New Torah<sup>379</sup> I innovate nowadays amongst the holy nation; it is my people Israel, [which is] My sublime Name that is like a New Torah. And it has not been explained to My nation since the day I hid My face from them. And though it is a hidden name, it is explained.”<sup>380</sup> And then He commanded him<sup>381</sup> to hide His name no more from those who inquire after it in truth, and He revealed it to him according to its holiness, its crowns and its parts and its systems and its forms. And He announced its pronunciation to him, and has shown its customs<sup>382</sup> and also the influxes of life in him, to every spirit.<sup>383</sup>

**377** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 140. This interpretation was accepted by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 69.

**378** Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 50–51. See also the comparisons of Moses to Rabbi Simon bar Yochai in the following recent studies: Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 391; Elliot R. Wolfson “‘Sage Is Preferable to Prophet’: Revisioning Midrashic Imagination,” in *Scriptural Exegesis—The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, eds. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 186–210; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 34–36; and Boaz Huss, “‘A Sage Is Preferable Than a Prophet’: Rabbi Simon Bar Yochai and Moses in the Zohar” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 4 (1999): 103–39.

**379** For the concept of New Torah in Abulafia, see Moshe Idel, “Torah Ḥadashah”—Messiah and the New Torah in Jewish Mysticism and Modern Scholarship,” *Kabbalah* 21 (2010): 70–78. See also chapter 10 above.

**380** Namely, revealed.

**381** Namely, to Abulafia, who speaks about himself in the third person when he interprets the meaning of the revelations he received.

**382** Gross uses מנהיגיו (“its leaders”); I assume that this is a copyist's error.

**383** *Peruš Sefer ha-Haftarah*, Ms. Roma, Angelica 38, fol. 37a, printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 113: כי תורה חדשה אני מחדש בקרב גוי קדוש הוא עמי ישראל, שמי הנכבד בתורה חדשה הוא והוא לא פורש לעמי מיום הסתייר פנים מהם. ואם הוא שם נעלם הוא מפורש. ואז צוהו לבלתי הסתיר שמו מחקריו באמת וגלהו לו בקדושתו ובכתריו ובחלקיו ובמערכותיו ובצורותיו, והודיעו הזכרותיו והראהו מנהיגיו גם משפיעי החיים בו לכל רוח.

For more on this quote and its implications see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 306–7; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 140–41; and Idel, “Torah Ḥadashah,” 72–73. On the divine name as the quintessence of the esoteric Torah, see the more elaborate discussions of Abulafia's student, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, es-



The Kabbalist is therefore not shy about claiming a final type of revelation. It should be mentioned that in the same book, Abulafia also describes it as *Sefer ha-Bešorah*, which is the Hebrew equivalent of *Evangelion*,<sup>384</sup> and in his commentary on *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, Abulafia expects that his book will be read in synagogues after the reading of the Torah, like the portions from the books of the biblical prophets.<sup>385</sup>

Abulafia means that until the revelation that took place around 1280, the hidden name of God—'HWY—was imagined to be unknown by the public, though he himself knew it, and since then, he has been allowed to reveal it and it has come to constitute a new sort of canonical message. This is unquestionably part of the experiences in some months of 1279/80, a year corresponding to the Jewish year 5040, which constituted a turning point in Abulafia's activities, as we shall see in Appendix D.

Let me attempt to analyse the audience for which the revelation is intended. During the previous centuries, the hidden name had been unknown to the nation, but now Abulafia has been sent to reveal it, yet only to those who truly inquire; he has not been sent to reveal it to all the members of the Jewish nation. This distinction seems to me to be quite significant: it leaves most of the Jewish people beyond the frame of the new revelation, and this new audience he concretely envisions was exclusively composed of his own small group of students.

If this distinction between the inquirers and the regular Jews is accepted, we have here a drastic reduction of the nation from a number which normally includes the masses and Rabbis and other Kabbalists as part of an organic unity to a very small elite. This means that Abulafia's Kabbalah, conceived as the quintessence of true Judaism, was supposed to displace the normal Rabbinic type of religion in order to disseminate a practice that was intended only for a few people. To put it in other terms, the ideals of his Kabbalah belong to the axial mode, while the Rabbinic and the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah belong more to the pre-axial one.

In a way, the hidden nature of the name is reminiscent of the hidden plight of the pearl in the pit, according to the parable that was written in this exact period. This unknown divine name, which is likely the new Torah, is not necessarily a brand new piece of information, but rather a means of fathoming the depth of the biblical text

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pecially his famous *Ša'arei Orah*, which is a text that requires a separate inquiry. It seems that Abulafia approximates the triangular structure of Gikatilla's vision of the words in the Torah with a divine name at the top, then ten divine names, and then seventy cognomens; at the base of the triangle are all the other words in his various writings, especially in *Or ha-Šekhel*, 72–73. While the hidden name, or in other cases the Tetragrammaton, is at the top of a pyramid (or triangle), Abulafia's combinations of the letters of the divine names that constitute his mystical techniques have a lower status than it; in this way, all the other words of the text of the Hebrew Bible are even lower, each series of words depending on the higher ones. See Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 360–67.

<sup>384</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 108.

<sup>385</sup> See his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Haftarah*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 107:

הנה צוה רזיאל בזה הספר להשיב עס יי' בשמו לקדשו ולקרא ספר זה בכל שבת פעם אחת אחר קריאת התורה בכלל קריאת הנבואות.

by resorting to the Kabbalistic techniques that Abulafia advanced. These techniques consist in finding out the secret, still unrevealed divine name by combining the consonants of two other divine names. These two layers are assumed to coexist in the Bible, but are intended for quite different audiences: the esoteric sense is intended solely for the elite and the plain sense for the masses.

Gaining access to the esoteric layer is, according to Abulafia, tantamount to a form of redemption, which in his terms means a personal and intellectual salvation. It should be mentioned that the revelation of a new name for God to a messianic figure like Abulafia is reminiscent of the revelation of the name *'eHeYeH* to Moses, described as previously unknown in Exodus 3:14.<sup>386</sup> Implicitly, this disclosure of the unknown name constitutes a higher, if not supreme form of revelation in Abulafia's way of thought and plausibly situates him in his self-portrayal as the seal of all the prophets.

In short, among the main contents of Abulafia's Kabbalah that contributed to the earlier forms of this literature, there are exegetical techniques and divine names conceived as representing the secret layers of the Torah, the New Torah, and the new revelation on the one hand and as the means of redemption on the other. The coexistence of the normal, plain sense of the Torah that is understood as maintaining normal social life and the esoteric sense that has, for the few, a salvific dimension in the present, although it is ultimately conceived as a matter for the future, is a situation that I would call synchrony.<sup>387</sup> This synchrony hosts two diverging approaches concomitantly, which are reflected by the terms that are hidden and revealed. In other words, the two quite different registers are not exclusive, though for this Kabbalist, the present experience, related to the salvific dimension, is much more important.

This seems to me to be the case when Abulafia describes the future state of things. In a way, this is a self-referential statement, as it deals with the revelation of the divine name:

In the future [...] all the three [nations]<sup>388</sup> will know God by name, as it is said: "For then I shall turn to the people a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord."<sup>389</sup> The

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**386** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 140.

**387** See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God,'" 62–64. My assumption as to synchrony in Abulafia hardly fits a vision that is comparable to the Joachimites' theory that there are three distinct phases in the development of history, the last one being the most spiritual and related to the Holy Spirit. Nor do his writings display an interest in the ideal of poverty that is so conspicuous among the *fraticelli*.

**388** Namely, the three monotheistic religions. Nota bene: the three nations are understood as one conceptual unit and the Messiah implicitly transcends the Mosaic revelation.

**389** Zefania 3:9. This is an important proof-text for Abulafia's theory. See also his *Sefer Šomer Mišwah*, 40.

great wisdom of the redeemer<sup>390</sup> shall be the cause of this knowledge. Of him, it was said:<sup>391</sup> “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and excellent, and shall be very high.” In the tradition [*qabbalah*], it was said: “He shall be more exalted than Moses, and more extolled than Abraham, and higher than the ministering angels—greater than any man.”<sup>392</sup>

The assumption is that all religions or nations will know the divine name, a fact that minimises the centrality of the Jewish people in the eschatological scenario. The assumption that the Messiah has a higher status than Moses also has to do with another important topic: the enormous gap between Abulafia’s view that the Torah essentially possesses a paramount esoteric layer that is sometimes even envisioned as contradicting the plain sense on the one hand and that espoused by his Rabbinic contemporaries as dealing with laws and parables on the other. This assumption brought him to the conclusion that the Torah in its purity is not yet to be found in the hands of the people of Israel, but will be revealed in its entirety only during the Messianic era; until then, it may only be for the few elites in the present to whom he revealed it.

In Abulafia’s parable, it is indicated that the unique pearl, which symbolises the true religion, is not to be identified with any of the present historical religions. Indeed, though the nation of Israel has a natural priority for receiving it, in that they are the “son” of God, they have not yet received it, as the son angered his father and is portrayed as being devoid of knowledge.<sup>393</sup> I would say that just as the potential intellect has the propensity to receive the actualised intellect but is yet still sunk in matter, desire, or imagination, in principle, the Jews are more capable of receiving the new Torah or the knowledge of the divine name than the servants. This claim presumably allegorically points to the other historical religions according to the historical narrative and to lower human capacities according to the transhistorical one. In my opinion, these lower capacities also include the imaginative faculty. It should be mentioned that the plural form of pearl, *margaliyyot*, possesses an esoteric meaning on some occasions in Abulafia’s writings.<sup>394</sup> This esoteric meaning reinforces the possibility that Abulafia is referring to an esoteric religion in the parable.

**390** חכמת הגואל. On this phrase, which occurs many years beforehand, though in a different sense, in Abulafia’s commentary on *Sefer ha-Yašar*, see the detailed analysis in Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 298–301.

**391** Isaiah 52:13.

**392** *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, Ms. New York, JTS 843, fol. 68b, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 81–82:

והיה זה השם נלקח בצירוף זה להודיע ששלתן עתידין לדעת את השם בשם בימי הגואל האחרון כמו שנאמר "כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ידוד ולעבדו שכם אחד" (צפניה ג:ט). והסבה בידיעה זו היא רוב חכמת הגואל שנאמר עליו "הנה ישכיל עבדי ירום ונשא וגבה מאד" (ישעיה נב: ג). ונאמר בקבלה ירום ממש ונשא מאברהם וגבה ממלאכי השרת מאד מכל אדם.

For the earlier sources of Abulafia’s discussion, see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 50–51; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 140–41; and Idel, *Ben*, 323.

**393** See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 75.

**394** See Abulafia, *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 40; Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 128; and his Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 81a.

This emphasis on intellectual redemption means that the type of eschaton he describes is not specifically a matter of the remote or immediate future, which is dependent on a historical redemptive figure, but is rather a psychological process that can be achieved by a few individuals even in the present, either alone or in a small circle. The assumption of a “hidden” intellect shows that the potential for present redemption is already found in the past in a manner reminiscent of Averroes’s specific theory of the cleaving to the separate intellect and the basic identity of the material and active intellect. It is not a matter of an event that is to occur in the eschatological future alone, but also in the ideal present. This more spiritual reading of philosophy differs from the Straussian emphasis on the esoteric social focus, though in the case of Abulafia’s ecstatic religion, they are found together.<sup>395</sup>

In any case, the emphasis in recent scholarship on Abulafia on the role of imagination as an allegedly positive factor in this Kabbalist’s gnoseology and as a human faculty to be “integrated” into a higher form of existence or experience is, in my opinion, quite problematic to say the least, especially if one undertakes a serious perusal of the pages of his *Or ha-Šekhel*<sup>396</sup> as well as some of his other books.<sup>397</sup> These scholars’ assumption is conditioned by an implicit supposition about the maintenance of some form of identity of the various nations in the historical narrative in the eschaton or of the lower human spiritual capacities in the highest type of utopian experience according to the transhistorical narrative. My assumption is that in Abulafia’s

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**395** For the awareness of the possibility of exploiting the spiritual potentialities of Greek theories of cognition, see the pioneering study by Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*; Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995); Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Institut d’études augustiniennes, 1993); Pierre Hadot, “Exercices spirituels,” *Annuaire de la V<sup>e</sup> section de l’École pratique des hautes études* 84 (1974): 25–70; Richard T. Wallis, “Nous as Experience,” in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Norkford: SUNY Press, 1976): 122 and 143, note 1; and Terry Lovat and Inna Semetsky, “Practical Mysticism and Deleuze’s Ontology of the Virtual,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2009): 237. For a similar approach applied to Maimonides, who is understood as a mystic to a certain extent, see Georges Vajda, *Introduction à la pensée juive du moyen âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1947), 143–44; Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*; Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*; Joseph B. Sermoneta, “Rabbi Judah and Immanuel of Rome”; Faur, *Homo Mysticus*; Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty*, 15–55, especially 32–33 (in French, “Mystique mythique et mystique rationnelle”). See also Bernd Radtke, “How Can Man Reach Mystical Union? Ibn Ṭufayl and the Divine Spark,” in *The World of Ibn Ṭufayl*, 165–94.

**396** See *Abraham Abulafia*, 80–85. Wolfson’s approach—and, following him, Sagerman’s approach—assumes the importance of a theory of the integration of the lower faculties, especially imagination, in Abulafia’s higher experience, as well as in theosophical Kabbalah in general. For the latter, see his *The Serpent Kills*, 11, 187, 190–91, 193, 235, 253, 255, 321, etc. However, this assumption is not reflected, in my opinion, in Abulafia’s material, which we have presented here, concerning the ideal type of experience; namely, the noetic union of the human intellect with the divinity or with the Agent Intellect. I hope to dedicate a separate study to the status of the faculty of imagination in Abulafia’s thought and its sources. See, meanwhile, Faur, *Homo Mysticus*, 11, and Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*.

**397** See the texts discussed in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 99–100.

eyes, and according to the third narrative, the highest experience is one of universalisation, which also means spiritual simplification, and depersonalisation, which effaces differences; this, I would claim, is also what is at work in the second narrative.

When dealing with the highest religious experience, we would do better to speak about the disintegration of the complex human personality, compounded as it is of higher and lower faculties, through what he calls “untying the knots”<sup>398</sup> in several of his discussions. These knots stand for the attachments of the soul or the intellect<sup>399</sup> to the material world or the faculty of imagination; untying these binds leads to the human aggregate being reduced to the intellectual faculty alone, a process I propose to call intellectual simplification. We shall revert to the issue of untying the knot in chapter 26 below.

The human intellectual faculty is understood to be capable of cleaving to God, an entity described in many cases in Abulafia’s writings as “simple,” *paşuř*, in a manner in which the impact of many other medieval sources, including Maimonides,<sup>400</sup> Avicenna, and perhaps also Averroes, may be discerned.<sup>401</sup> Indeed, in an enigmatic statement, Abulafia declares that there is a great secret that he cannot reveal to flesh and blood and that this secret has to do with the divine causes: “The simplest among them is also compounded of all, and the most compounded of them is the simplest.”<sup>402</sup>

## 23 Abraham Abulafia: Was He the Possessor of the Pearl?

It seems that Abulafia purposefully adopted a version of the parable on the true religion that differed in its articulation from the one which was more widespread in Europe. In the above parable, there is only one son, not three; there are not three rings, but only one single “authentic” pearl; and finally, there is no mention of additional artefacts, rings or pearls. However, even more divergent than the details of the parable in comparison to most of the other extant versions is the specific mystical framework, as discussed above, which is more sophisticated than anything I am acquainted with in the interpretations that have been offered of other versions of the parable. The peak of this sophistication is, in my opinion, to be found in the implicit assumption that the real son in the parable is none other than Abraham Abulafia himself, and that the pearl is in the possession of the teller of the parable; namely, that Abulafia alone possesses it.

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<sup>398</sup> See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 134–37.

<sup>399</sup> For the understanding that the soul is in fact the intellectual faculty, see *Or ha-Šekhel*, 121.

<sup>400</sup> *Guide* 1:60, Pines, 1:146–47.

<sup>401</sup> See Barry S. Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 238–40.

<sup>402</sup> See Abulafia’s text found anonymously in Ms. Sasoon 290, 235–36. See also Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 170, note 150.

If this identification is correct, here the present and future are colliding in a situation that is, in Abulafia's opinion, moving rapidly towards a more general redemption according to the second narrative,<sup>403</sup> though he himself may be imagined as already being redeemed because of the revelations he claims to have previously received. In any case, since the hidden divine name had already been revealed some years earlier, now everyone may redeem themselves by using it.

The eschatological content of Abulafia's prophetic books, dealing as they do with revelations he received while he was in Greece around 1279 and in Italy in 1280, and the commentaries he wrote on those books in Messina in 1282, whose original versions have been lost, points to a situation like the father bringing the pearl out of the pit and his giving it to the son. In both cases, the revelation of the previously unknown divine name is an event that plays a central eschatological role. May we assume that the pit is none other than the imaginative casting of the historical religions?

Moreover, Abulafia conceives himself as an intellectual son of God and as a prophet in addition to being a Messiah.<sup>404</sup> Thus, he imagines that he possesses some of the attributes he ascribes to the son in the parable. It should be emphasised that my proposal to read the parable in an allegorical manner and not only in a historical one is part of a broader understanding of Abulafia's general project that is intended to spiritualise the interpreted text, as mentioned above, which makes it much more plausible. This is obvious, for example, in the case of Abulafia's spiritual interpretation of messianism alongside and against how it was understood in popular Judaism; he intended to trigger a spiritual revivification.<sup>405</sup> As seen in the case of his understanding of messianism, Abulafia proposes three different meanings of the term "Messiah," and this is also the case for his understanding of the nature of the Jews as those individuals who confess the divine name and the understanding of Israel as being related to both the Agent Intellect and the combination of letters.<sup>406</sup>

All of these issues are major topics in Abulafia's religious worldview, and in these cases, the allegorical interpretations that he offered constituted a fresh, explicit understanding of important subject matters that had only been accepted in their concrete sense by generations of Rabbinic Jews. Abulafia does continue the path of allegorisation that was opened in Judaism in large part by Maimonides's *Guide*, which was especially concerned with purifying the biblical language from formulations that are problematic from the theological point of view, especially expressions that refer

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**403** For the emphasis on the second narrative as being related to "universal salvation," see Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 54–70.

**404** See Idel, *Ben*, 310–11, 316, and Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God.'"

**405** See Idel, "The Time of the End."

**406** See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God,'" 64–68, 78; Idel, "The Time of the End," 172; Idel, "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 433–34; Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 84–88.

to anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms.<sup>407</sup> However, he goes further by combining Maimonides's allegorizations with linguistic mysticism as part of his exegesis of sacred scriptures with an attempt to understand and explain his own experiences through the use of two exegetical methods. He was much less concerned with issues related to cosmology or even with detailed theories of the intellect than the Great Eagle and Averroes were.

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**407** See Isaac Heinemann, "Die wissenschaftliche Allegoristik des jüdischen Mittelalters," *HUCA* 23, no. 1 (1950/51): 611–43; Warren Zev Harvey, "On Maimonides' Allegorical Reading of Scripture," in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 181–88; Samuel M. Stern, "Rationalists and Kabbalists in Medieval Allegory," *JJS* 6 (1955): 73–86; Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides's Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis*; Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," *PAAJR* 26 (1957): 97–100; Frank Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986): 318–21; Shalom Rosenberg, "Observations on the Interpretation of the Bible and Aggadah in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" [Hebrew], in *Memorial Volume to Ya'akov Friedman*, ed. Shlomo Pines (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1974): 215–22; Jean Robelin, *Maimonide et le langage religieux* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides on Religious Language," in *Perspectives in Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1991): 175–91; Maurizio Mottolese, *Analogy in Midrash and Kabbalah: Interpretive Projections on the Sanctuary and Ritual* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2007), 247–67; Marc Saperstein, "The Earliest Commentary on the Midrash Rabbah," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, 1:283–306; Marc Saperstein, "R. Isaac ben Yeda'ya: A Forgotten Commentator on the Aggadah," *REJ* 138 (1979): 17–45; Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis*; Howard Kreisel, "The Philosophical-Allegorical Exegesis of Scripture in the Middle Ages: *Ma'aseh Nissim* by Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles" [Hebrew], in *Me'ah She'arim*, 297–316; and Hannah Kasher, "The Myth of the 'Angry God' in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" [Hebrew], in *Myth in Judaism*, ed. Haviva Pedaya (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1996): 95–111.



# V Abulafia's Kabbalah versus other Kabbalists

## 24 Prophecy and Individuality

The emphasis on the reading of the parable that views it as dealing with Abulafia's own role as the son of God and the possessor of the pearl is part of the more individualistic propensity of his general approach. Under the pressure of the noetic visions he adopted from the Greek sources as mediated by Muslim and Jewish texts, Abulafia regards the paramount processes as a matter of an individual's mind and as reversible events that an aspirant may re-experience if he so chooses. He also allegorised collective events such as the Exodus from Egypt and the Sinaitic revelation. As Abulafia explicitly states: Sinai, Paradise, and the Land of Israel are analogous to a lower entity, just as the Seat of Glory, Jerusalem, and the supernal academy all represent the same entity on high, although they are reinterpreted as being related to the experience of a living person.<sup>1</sup> I propose to designate this type of allegory as spiritualistic exegesis,<sup>2</sup> which also reverberates in his followers' writings.<sup>3</sup>

According to Abulafia's understanding, his Kabbalah had two main goals: one is union with God and the other is the attainment of prophecy. The former is understood as the goal of the Torah,<sup>4</sup> and the various expressions of Abulafia's unitive vision have been analysed in detail elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The second one, which I have analysed in a separate study, is discussed in numerous instances in Abulafia's texts.<sup>6</sup> However, I would like to adduce one more expression of the centrality of this ideal. In the introduction to his *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, Abulafia writes:

From the entire Torah, the prophet will indeed only pursue that which is sufficient to bring him to prophecy. Since what does it matter whether the world is eternal or created? This will not add any degree to him or diminish his degree because of this; it will not add to his rank and will not diminish his rank.<sup>7</sup>

This seems to me to be a fundamental statement on Abulafia's attitude towards the special nature of the topics that are found in the Bible: neither the theological nor the cosmological ones are conceived as important, but only a human's psychological

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1 See *Sitrei Torah*, 90.

2 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, xvi–xvii. This has to do with a strong individualist tendency in Maimonides's *Guide*. See also Ralph Lerner, "Maimonides' Governance of the Solitary," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 33–46.

3 For example, see the anonymous treatise from his school, *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, 1: לִגְן עֵדֶן.

4 Introduction to his *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 32.

5 Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 1–31.

6 Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia." See also *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 163.

7 *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 38:

ואמנם הנביא לא יבקש מכל התורה כולה אלא מה שמספיק לו להביאו לידי הנבואה. כי מה לו אם העולם קדמון או חדש וקדמותו לא תוסיף לו מעלה ולא תגרע מעלתו מצדה וחדושו גם כן לא יוסיף לו מעלה ולא יפחית מדרגתו.

transformation into a prophet. In this context, we should take into consideration a statement from the same book—which will be quoted in Appendix B—to the effect that he wrote his commentary on the Pentateuch only for those who prophesy.

As seen above, the true operation is the inner change. To be sure: a serious scholar does not have to accept the self-presentation of the author that he is studying, but in Abulafia's case, the content of his writings abundantly sustains those statements as to what is or is not central for him. In any case, Abulafia envisions the purpose of the Torah in a manner that explicitly contradicts the Rabbinic statement that prophecy had already ceased,<sup>8</sup> a view adopted by many thinkers, though not all Jewish ones, in the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Unlike for the Rabbinic authorities, for Abulafia, the ultimate aim of the Torah is to bring people to prophecy.

Let me provide one more example of his allegorical understanding of a vital topic in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism: the ancient Temple ritual. In one of his epistles, Abulafia writes:

Whoever wants to come into the Temple and to enter its inmost part should sanctify himself by the sanctity of the high priest, and should study and teach and keep and do<sup>10</sup> until he becomes perfect in his ethical and intellectual attributes, and then he should seclude himself<sup>11</sup> in order to receive the prophetic influx from the mouth of the Dynamis.<sup>12</sup>

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**8** Ephraim E. Urbach, “When Did Prophecy Cease?” in *Me-‘Olamam Šel Ḥakhamim*, ed. Ephraim E. Urbach (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988): 9–20; Ephraim E. Urbach, “Prophet and Sage in the Jewish Heritage,” in *Collected Writings in Jewish Studies*, eds. Robert Brody and Moshe D. Herr (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1999): 393–403; Philip S. Alexander, “A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy: The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism,” in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer*, eds. Jon Davies, Graham Harvey, and Wilfred G.E. Watson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 414–33; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “‘The Sage is Superior to the Prophet’: The Conception of Torah through the Prism of the History of Jewish Exegesis” [Hebrew], in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, 2:37–77; Joseph Dan, “The End of Prophecy and Its Significance to Jewish Thought” [Hebrew], *Alpayyim* 30 (2007): 257–88; Stephen L. Cook, On the Question of the “Cessation of Prophecy” in Ancient Judaism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); and especially Benjamin D. Sommer, “Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 31–47.

**9** As to the medieval material, see the rich material collected and analysed in Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic Literature and Modernism* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), 9–12; Huss, “A Sage Is Preferable Than a Prophet,” 103–39; Wolfson, “Sage Is Preferable to Prophet.”

**10** Cf. *Avot* 4:5.

**11** *Yitboded*. This term can also be translated here as “concentrate.” See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 103–69.

**12** *Mašref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fols. 33b–34a, ed. Gross (Jerusalem: 2001), 23:

צריך הרוצה לבוא אל בית המקדש ולהיכנס לפני לפני, להתקדש בקדושת כהן גדול וללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות עד שישלם במדותיו ובדבריותיו, ואז יתבודד כדי לקבל השפע הנבואי מפי הגבורה.

Let me point out that I proposed to distinguish between ecstatic Kabbalah, which is less interested in place but rather seeks to emphasise the importance of the human being's perfection, versus theological-theurgical Kabbalah, which is much more concerned with place and with the emendation of the divine sphere. See my “The Land of Israel in Jewish Mystical Thought” [Hebrew], in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought*, 207–8, 211. In my opinion, this claim is true both emically

Abulafia himself was not of priestly extraction, nor was he especially interested in rebuilding a material Temple<sup>13</sup> or even in the Jews' return to the Land of Israel, despite his belief that he was the Messiah. We know for sure that he was an Israelite,<sup>14</sup> and as such, he could not, Halakhically speaking, serve as a priest—*Kohen*—still less a high priest. Thus, according to his own criterion, if we take his words on the level of their plain sense, he could not become a prophet.

Interestingly enough, he claims that he received a tradition that the Messiah would build the supernal Jerusalem by means of the divine name before the terrestrial Temple would be built, a passage that I understand to be dealing with the human intellect.<sup>15</sup> Though emicly speaking, Abulafia believes he is dealing with the real temple and does not actually subvert what he saw as the authentic understanding of this concept, from a Rabbinic or etic point of view, he subverts the traditional understanding of the Temple as such, as well as the importance of the special space in general.

In two discussions, one in the context of the parable of the pearl and again in a parallel to this context, Abulafia claims that the best of the Israelites are the Levites, that the best of the Levites are the priests, and that the priests are considered to be prophets.<sup>16</sup> The ecstatic Kabbalist's assumption that the high priest's experience in

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(in what the Kabbalists themselves claim) and eticly (what can be observed by an outsider). However, Haviva Pedaya, in "The Divinity as Place and Time and the Holy Place in Jewish Mysticism," in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land*, eds. Benjamin Z. Kedar and Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998): 95, claims that theosophical Kabbalah is also concerned with the form of man and his activity and thus in this way is similar to ecstatic Kabbalah. In this case, it contradicts the emic, theomorphic, and theocentric approaches of the theosophical Kabbalists, which I consider to be correct, although it is true that it empowers the human being. Pedaya simply confuses the emic and the etic categories. See also below chapter 25 note 84. Given Abulafia's reduction of the ideal humanity to the intellect and the divine to a sublime, separate intellect, the idea of theomorphism as merely dealing with both the human and the divine limbs is a gross religious misunderstanding.

**13** The only possible exception is a brief reference to the building of the temple in *Sefer ha-Ot*, 69, though immediately afterwards, he mentions the letters of the names of 72 and 42 letters that were revealed to him as something to be performed now; another exception may be his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:8, 272. I assume that the passage about the Temple is part of the national/historical narrative.

**14** See *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, 148.

**15** *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, 100–101:

וקבלנו על המשיח שהוא בונה ירושלים של מעלה בשם יי' כלומר מכין מקום המקדש להשבין שכינה בו, ואחר כן נדחי ישראל יבנס. וכך קבלנו אין התחתונה נבנית עד שתבנה העליונה מפני שבית המקדש של מעלה מכוון כנגד בית המקדש של מטה וכן ירושלים מכוונת זו כנגד זו.

I have not found the source of such a tradition.

**16** See the Hebrew text of *Or ha-Šekhel* below in Appendix A, paragraph [d], where an English translation is also provided. See also *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 190, 3:8, 337. This claim does not fit Abulafia's own extraction at all as he was an Israelite. See his confession in *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, 149. The tripartite distinction between the three degrees of the Jews is found in many instances in Abulafia's writings. See also his *Šomer Mišwah*, 14–15. Interestingly enough, in *Sitrei Torah*, 73, he equates the words

the Temple was a prophetic one has very little, if anything at all, to do with the manner in which the ancient ritual is perceived in Rabbinic sources, transformative and apothotic as the experience of the high priest was conceived to be, as has been pointed out by Michael Schneider.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Abulafia understands the high priest as comprising all the other Jews, as well as the Gentiles, as part of his vision of the highest individual being more universal than the lowest ones, who are sublated by the process of elevation. In a manner reminiscent of the way in which Abulafia describes God as both the simplest and the most complex entity, the “distinguished man” and high priest sublimate the lower forms that comprise humanity into a higher one.

The particularist figure of the high priest in Rabbinic Judaism, who is mainly conceived as performing a very specific and concrete ritual once a year for the welfare of the people of Israel, is—in Abulafia's philosophical allegorisation—transposed into the most spiritual and universal figure. A mystic who sometimes uses the specific gesture of the blessing priest alone in a secluded room when there is no one to be blessed, not on a special day of the year but rather on any day or night, and not in a special place in the space that the community deems important, is, in my opinion, an anomian practitioner.<sup>18</sup>

Understood in terms of Rabbinic Judaism, where there is no linkage between the concept of priesthood and the phenomenon of prophecy, this prophetic understanding of the high priest is quite an absurd claim. At least in the biblical material, there are often conflicts between the two forms of Jewish religious leadership; the manner in which Abulafia presents the hierarchy we are discussing here is absurd according to its plain sense and requires an allegorical interpretation, which can be found in his writings. The Kabbalist, however, describes the mystical experience as being related to a feeling of being anointed, which may have something to do with the anointing of the high priest, the king, and—important for the manner in which Abulafia understood himself—the Messiah.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in the figure of the Messiah, Abulafia unifies the three ancient elites: the king, the high priest, and the prophet, all of them conceived as irrelevant in the exilic situation.

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*Kohen Gadol* (“high priest”) with *ha-Nevi'im* (“the prophets”) = 118. For the gematria of 118, see Appendix A below.

<sup>17</sup> See his *The Appearance of the High Priest—Theophany, Apotheosis and Binitarian Theology: From Priestly Tradition of the Second Temple Period through Ancient Jewish Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 29–30. See especially *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḳ*, 16, where Abulafia's technique is described in terms that are identical to the priestly blessing. However, it should be pointed out that this blessing was not part of what happened in the Holy of Holies, where the service was silent, unlike Abulafia's recitation of the combinations of the letters. See Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), and Israel Knohl, “Between Voice and Silence: The Relationship between Prayer and Temple Cult,” *JBL* 115, no. 1 (1996): 17–30, and its pertinent bibliography.

<sup>19</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 76–77.

Abulafia's interpretation of themes related to the Temple is allegorical and is reminiscent of the views of Philo and Plotinus on this topic,<sup>20</sup> though I have no reason to assume any direct influence from their writings. In this case, the impact of Maimonides's Neo-Aristotelianism was the main reason for the allegorical interpretations that permeate Abulafia's approach. As with the philosophers mentioned above, Abulafia is concerned with private experience, unlike the ancient Jewish "Templar" ritual in which the high priest is the representative of all the Israelites, who are understood to be both a corporate collective and private individuals. To judge from a passage found in the epistle we are dealing with here that parallels passage [d] from *Or ha-Šekhel*, the priest stands for the intellectual faculty.<sup>21</sup> This is also the case in a discussion found in Abulafia's Untitled Treatise.<sup>22</sup>

In a way, Abulafia opens the possibility of a more democratic understanding of this ritual: "whoever wants to come." However, his concepts of perfection and seclusion represent a much more elitist approach, and are part of an epistle that was most probably written to one of his disciples. In any case, I am not acquainted with any discussions in Kabbalistic texts concerning the dramatic allegorisation and democratisation of the ancient ritual—indeed, the high priest was only ever one person at a time. In my opinion, this interpretation belongs to what I call the third narrative, to be distinguished from the much more widespread allegorical understandings of the Temple as a microcosm that reflects the structure of the macrocosmos found in a variety of ancient and medieval sources, including Rabbi Baruch Togarmi and Abulafia himself.<sup>23</sup> This latter understanding may belong to what I called the second narrative, as it is concerned with the rituals of the nation.

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**20** See Moshe Idel, "Hitbodedut: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism," in *Einsamkeit*, eds. Aleida and Jan Assmann (Munich: Fink, 2000): 192–98; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 96–97, 361, note 148; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 123, 378, note 9; and, more generally, the comprehensive study by Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005). See, more recently, Avraham Elqayam, "Nudity in the Sanctus Sanctorum: Philo and Plotinus on Nudity, Esthetics and Sanctity" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 28 (2012): 301–21. As to Pedaya's claim that Abulafia's view of the Temple was influenced by Sufi views, there is no proof. She attributed the threefold division of the Temple as corresponding to three parts of the human body as well as to the macrocosmos, which had actually already been discussed by Rabbi Judah ha-Levi (*Kuzari*), Rabbi Ezra of Gerona, and Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, to Abulafia without referring to any of his writings. See my "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 482, note 59. See also chapter 27 note 186 below.

**21** See *Mašref la-Kesef*, 7–9. See also *Sefer Toledot Adam*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol.154a, where the high priest refers to the intellect *in habitus*. Interestingly enough, *Sefer Ner Elohim*, a treatise from Abulafia's school that deals with the priestly blessing and mentions the high priest many times, does not use philosophical allegoresis in order to interpret the role of the high priest. This is just one of the reasons why I think that this book was not written by Abulafia himself.

**22** Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut., II, 48, fol. 98b, where the actualisation of the human intellect, the *Šelem*, is described as a lower temple. For the allegorisation of the Tabernacle in the Pseudo-Maimonidean *Iggeret ha-Mussar*, see my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 45–46.

**23** See, for the time being, Idel, "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia," 33, note 21.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the person whom Abulafia described to be entering the Temple was Abulafia himself, although intended solely in an allegorical manner. In his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, he describes the end of a period of negative experiences as God “brought me into the palace of holiness.”<sup>24</sup> The single exception to such an interiorisation of the concept of the Temple seems to be a much later text that was written in the fifteenth century. In this text, the anonymous *Sefer Toledot Adam*, the impact of Abulafia's writings is quite obvious. There, it is said that after becoming a philosopher, astrologer, and a person capable of conjuring angels, demons, and liliths, and of reaching the rank of prophecy and beings illuminated by the light of God, the aspirant then arrives at an even higher rank, an event that is described as follows:

And cleave to Him and your soul unites with the Creator of the Berešit and will cleave to All and will be able to perform wonders on earth and will enter into the chambers of chambers together with the King, the Lord of Ševa'ot, and you will be called the Palace of the Lord,<sup>25</sup> the Palace of the Lord, two times [...] this is the reason why you will be able to be one of those who see the face of the King and be illuminated by the light of life. Remember and do not forget.<sup>26</sup>

The description of entering of the chambers where God is found is quite reminiscent of the high priest in the ancient Temple. In the above cases, the spiritual sense is, most evidently, not accompanied by an actual performance of the Temple ritual, as the Jewish Temple had been destroyed many centuries previously. In fact, Abulafia's Kabbalah's concentration on the techniques for pronouncing the divine names represents a qualified continuation, and even more, a replacement, perhaps even a displacement, of the most important ritual performed in the ancient Temple: the high priest's pronouncement of the divine name as the culmination of the ritual of the Day of Atonement.

However, although in both cases, the divine name is the focus of the ritual, the details of its pronouncement differ dramatically, and I am confident that Abulafia was well-aware of this divergence, since he invented the details and the general structure

<sup>24</sup> 3:10, 370: In his *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 26, Abulafia claims that Kabbalists identify the holy palace with the intellectual soul and the holy spirit with the intellect. Thus, we have clear indications as to the existence of a more sustained inner, or third, narrative. For his secluded room as a sanctuary where a person meets the divine, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 34. Let me point out that Abulafia compares the Israelites to the “people of the plain sense” (אנשי הפסט) and to the body, certainly not a compliment, but rather an attitude that reflects his ambivalence towards the chosenness of the Jewish nation as understood in traditional texts. See his *Šomer Mišwah*, 14–15.

<sup>25</sup> In Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 71a, the Agent Intellect is allegorised as the “Palace of God.”

<sup>26</sup> Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 836, fol. 156a:

ותדבק בה' ונפשך מתאחדת עם יוצר בראשית ותדבק בכל ותוכל ע"כ לעשות אותות ומופתים בארץ ותכנס בחדרי חדרים עם מלך יי' צבאות ותקרא היכל יי' היכל יי' פעמים [...] ע"כ תוכל להיות מרואי פני המלך ולאור באור החיים. זכור ואל תשכח.

of those techniques. Or, to put it a different way: Abulafia does not continue or enhance the ancient ritual, but rather its dramatic abrogation. The person now conceived as a high priest is not a priest; the chamber of seclusion is not a temple; the time is not a special moment in the year, but whenever one would like to perform the technique; the divine name is not what is pronounced in those techniques. What is dramatically different is the fact that no one is blessed because the technique is performed in total isolation. While a few elements are used, its ritualistic logic—the culmination of the Temple ritual, taking place in a special space, performed by the representative of the Jewish people acting in a privileged moment of the year—has been abrogated.

Abulafia's extreme spiritualisation opens the question as to whether the assumption that the actual performance of Jewish rituals as formulated in Rabbinic literature is indeed necessary for understanding the manner in which his Kabbalah functioned. Let me nuance the question: given the detailed descriptions of the techniques Abulafia offered, it is strange that he does not specify a preliminary requirement of keeping the commandments in order to enter the path of prophetic Kabbalah, or of integrating the performance of the commandments as an essential part of the technique he described.

In our specific case, the question may be asked whether the spiritual interpretation of the parable is necessarily dependent on the assumption of the veracity of the historical narrative, and in my opinion, the answer is no. According to what I call Abulafia's third narrative, the high priest, like the Messiah (both of whom played an important role in the Jewish popular imagination), is now considered to be a paradigmatic, ideal figure for modelling a spiritualised inner life, independent of his historical role or even his existence.<sup>27</sup> This ambivalent attitude towards fundamental aspects of biblical and Rabbinic forms of Judaism is paramount for understanding Abulafia: though not necessarily denying the validity of the second narrative, he conceives it to be marginal at best to an individual's spiritual life in the present and the ideal life in general.

In our case, it seems evident that Abulafia's techniques function as an alternative to (and are conceived as being higher than) the most important rite in ancient Judaism: the Templar ritual. In my opinion, it is only barely capable of strengthening them, as access to the pronunciation of the previously unknown divine name is an act that is explicitly described as being open to everyone, at least in principle. By allowing access to the techniques of pronouncing the letters of the divine names to people who are not priests, and by ignoring the restriction of such a use to special occasions as the Rabbinic rituals do, Abulafia undermines the efficacy of the more mundane rituals whose mystical efficacy is conceived as less evident, unlike the par-

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<sup>27</sup> See also Abulafia's treatise preserved in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fols. 87b–88a and 92ab, where the high priest is again described in terms of ecstatic Kabbalah. See also Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 194–97, and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 154–55.



amount importance of the Rabbinic commandments in most other forms of Kabbalah.

In a way, Abulafia articulates a detailed type of technique or ritual of his own that has several slightly different variants in his various handbooks. One of his most influential expressions of these techniques can be found in *Or ha-Šekhel*. This ritual or technique implicitly supersedes the other, traditional rituals and is intended for younger people through the effective way in which they bring them as close as possible to the cosmic intellect.<sup>28</sup> From his point of view, this is the universal religion and the language and script that are of supreme religious importance for the human species are found within the human spirit. However, Abulafia hardly dared to formulate his intention in a more explicit manner, given the persecutions that could result from such a radical approach, and indeed, persecutions seemed to haunt him throughout his career. Even prophecy, related as it is to imaginative power, speech, images, and writing, constitutes a lower form of activity in comparison to the much purer state achieved by the act of universalisation, which assumes a perfect form of intellection and the state of being with God alone, a form of theosis.<sup>29</sup>

Abulafia interprets the parable and the meaning of the pearl in terms that reflect his own messianic mission, which has strong intellectual overtones that transcend the historical religions. Not being interested in the question of which of the three historical religions is the true one, as in the ordinary version of the three rings parable, he proposes another, competing alternative which transcends the particular religions. He understood the highest form of religious life as a matter of inner development that is conceived as moving from a low form of cognition/connection to higher forms thereof and then the effacement (not the integration) of the lower in order to be able to attain the higher. This process should also be understood as referring to historical religions that emerged from the descent of the influx of the cosmic universal intellect and its transformation into the imaginative representations that include the conventionally established languages and institutional structures that constitute these religions. Their return to the universal status in the ideal situation means the

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<sup>28</sup> I dare to disagree with Elliot Wolfson's insistence, expressed in many places in his studies, as to the hypernomian nature of Abulafia's Kabbalah. In his opinion, the importance of the actual performance of the commandments for attaining the ideal experience is upheld by Abulafia and his techniques enforce the status of Rabbinic ritual. See, for example, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 204–9 and 222–23; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 186–284; as well as its reverberations in Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 5, note 8, 109, 122, note 44. In this context, see my different opinion in "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah," 158–59. In *Or ha-Šekhel*, 25, the Kabbalist envisions the performance of the commandments as preserving some form of social or psychological order whose existence facilitates the emergence of the conditions that allow for the attainment of the comprehension of God. On commandments as a political issue, see two passages from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 121, 123.

<sup>29</sup> See the important passage from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 197, which is discussed in my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 19–20; the passage from the commentary on *Sefer ha-Meliš*, translated above, in chapter 8 note 66; and the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, 188, translated in chapter 21 note 289 above.

transcendence of the specifics of their corporeal, emotional, or imaginative manifestations.

However, while describing the more general events that generated collective religious phenomena, for Abulafia, the most central narrative is the third one, which means not just privileging the experience of the individual elite as such, but also his own spiritual processes that are conducive to it. In fact, we know much about his life because of the importance he attributed to certain details of it; he interpreted some of the events that had happened to him as being meaningful for his message. It is an interesting enterprise to address Abulafia's personal secrets, which are to be added to the secrets of the Torah and the secrets of the *Guide* and which are presumably part of the eschatological secrets.<sup>30</sup>

This is one of the major discrepancies between Abulafia and all the other thirteenth-century Kabbalists: his personality is related to messianic secrets, his itinerant career is strongly related to the need to disseminate these secrets, and he was rejected because of them. This ultimate concern about saving others is missing in other Kabbalists, who were more concerned with improving the inner structure of the divine world. From this point of view, Abulafia attempted to continue Maimonides's mentalistic reform, assuming that a new and final stage of the revelation of the secrets was possible given the imminence of redemption.

Meanwhile, given the inaccurate understanding of the intellectual cosmos, each of the historical religions accuses the others of being idolatrous, as one of the followers of Abulafia's Kabbalah claimed, and such a statement puts the Judaism of his time in the same category as all the other historical religions.<sup>31</sup> Though proclaiming the superiority of Judaism in many places in his writings, Abulafia nevertheless radically reinterprets the nature of this superiority by claiming that it is related less to God's premeditated choice of a specific nation as an organic unit, made solely on genetic or Halakhic grounds,<sup>32</sup> than it is to intellectual processes and to combinations of letters.<sup>33</sup> In other words, Abulafia's elitist Judaism has little to do with the much more democratic Rabbinic form of Judaism.

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<sup>30</sup> See *Sitrei Torah*, 16–17.

<sup>31</sup> See the passage from the anonymous *Sefer Ner Elohim*, Ms. Munich, 10, fols. 156b–157a, a book whose views are close to those of Abulafia and which was translated in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 57, note 22. Compare also to Abulafia's *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 44–45, where he deconstructs the concept of a Jewish nation that is unified by the same beliefs. Unfortunately, the unique manuscript of this work is truncated in quite a sensitive part of the discussion, perhaps because of Abulafia's sharp critique of "Judaism." Meanwhile I identified another manuscript and will discuss the whole issue elsewhere.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 5, where he speaks about the oblivion of the knowledge of God or his name in the present: אשר היה זר מאד מכל אומתינו היחידה הבחירה מהשם בימים הטובים ההם הקדמונים.

<sup>33</sup> On Abulafia's interpretation of the meaning of Judaism as confessing the name of God without mentioning any other criterion, see the various texts presented in Idel, "A Unique Manuscript," 20–23.

Abulafia's identity as a Jew was less related to the Rabbinic criteria and thus less endangered by other religious options such as historical Christianity, as Sagerman's psychoanalytic approach to him stipulates. From his boastings about being a prophet and Messiah, where he sometimes implies that he is even higher than Moses, it is difficult to extrapolate a feeling of insecurity as to his Jewish identity as he understood it. At the same time, let me clarify, I do not assume that Abulafia was a predecessor of modern ecumenical dialogues or of scholars' assumptions that there is one universal truth behind the external forms of the different historical religions or the variegated forms of mysticism.

Abulafia believed that he was the founder of an old-new religion that possessed the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible; arbitrary as his exegesis was, the nature of this religion transcended the particularities of the historical religions and could, given the natural/intellectual character of his religiosity, in principle be embraced by everyone. Though philologically speaking he was influenced by both types of Christianity (Orthodox and Catholic) as well as by the Islamic *falāsifah*, he presents his revelation as original. Such a presentation consists in his strong reinterpretation of central topics related to particularism in traditional Judaism in a more natural and universal manner.

The esoteric meaning of the "choice," which has been discussed above in chapter 18 and below in Appendix A, is a paramount issue in Abulafia's esotericism, and only by understanding its natural significance—namely, that some things are inherently better than others—can we also understand other major issues in his thought. Messianism is therefore less a divine voluntary intervention in history, as is the case in traditional Judaism, but rather the result of intellectual activity initiated by an individual, which means a natural type of activity. Even the national redemption that concerns the Jewish people is described by Abulafia in a natural manner—in political terms<sup>34</sup> and in some other cases in astronomical terms—but hardly as the forceful intervention of the divinity in the course of events, as is the case in the popular apocalyptic texts and in many elite descriptions of messianism.

To summarise the point under scrutiny here: the horizontal, national messianism as a popular and exoteric dimension found in Jewish popular literature and in the historical interpretation of the parable on the one hand and the vertical, individual, esoteric redemption found in this context on the other represent diverging messages that are related to the parable of the pearl and are presented in an intertwined manner in the same text. Nevertheless, according to Abulafia, contradicting as these two narratives may be from the phenomenological point of view, they may eventually converge when a person who believes that he has already redeemed himself takes over the responsibility or the mission of restructuring religion. This is the case

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<sup>34</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 79–81.

with the ecstatic Kabbalist,<sup>35</sup> who believed that he was the son in the parable and, so I assume, also the current possessor of the pearl.<sup>36</sup>

The certainty generated by presumably strong mystical experiences, triggered by accelerated forms of bodily, vocal, and mental activities, may have convinced Abulafia that he could reach the status of a different species from the human one,<sup>37</sup> an experience that explains his radical attitude as well as the negative reactions to his views.<sup>38</sup> It is this type of transformation through processes leading to spiritual simplification and universalisation that constitutes the ultimate ideal of Abulafia's mysticism. His writings should be understood as an attempt to attain the pure state of noetic union with the divine realm or divinisation by an act of intellection, a state that he conceived as being higher than prophecy.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly enough, the possibility of attaining such extreme experiences was not envisioned to be a secret, despite Maimonides's reticence to allow it as part of intellectual life.

However, unlike the philosophers, and most of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, who capitalised on the Rabbinic commandments as modes for arriving at a higher type of religious experience, the ecstatic Kabbalist proposed several new and precise techniques that were contrived from a variety of sources and were intended to assist the practitioner to achieve the highest noetic goals. He was not only interested in using philosophical allegorisations in order to solve theological misinterpretations, as Maimonides and most of the Maimonideans were, but much more so in an articulation of an interiorised type of religiosity that could be attained in a short time by resorting to techniques that neither Maimonides and his followers nor most of the other Kabbalists would accept.<sup>40</sup> Abulafia was more interested in a rather drastic type of human change, while the Maimonideans, like Maimonides himself, were

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**35** It should be mentioned that in some Midrashic tales, the biblical Abraham was described as possessing a pearl that was capable of healing whoever saw it. See, for example, *BT, Babba' Batra'*, fol. 16b. Is there an affinity between the two proper names, that of Abulafia and that of Abraham who possessed a pearl?

**36** See the passage cited above in chapter 20 note 229; see also Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 124.

**37** See the passage from his commentary on the prophetic book *Sefer ha-Meliš*, written in Messina in 1282, translated above in chapter 8 note 66.

**38** Later on, Abulafia was persecuted by the most important figure in the camp of Sephardi Rabbinic leadership: Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret. See my "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia."

**39** See Abulafia's resort to concepts of simplification and unity in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 20, and *Or ha-Šekhel*, 41. Compare to the divinisation of the soul in Rabbi Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, 1:103, and Rabbi Azriel of Gerone's appropriation of this view in his *Commentary on the Talmudic Legends*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945), 14.

**40** For the analyses of some of Abulafia's texts as part of a larger phenomenon of an "inner religion," see Ron Margolin, *Inner Religion: The Phenomenology of Inner Religious Life and Its Manifestation in Jewish Sources (From the Bible to Hasidic Texts)* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2011), 208–11, 257–60, 314–19, 402, 405–6. In 269–71, Margolin finds a similarity between Abulafia's interiorised interpretation and a Zoharic passage which speaks about the parallelism between human states and the various events on high, the latter dimension being absent in Abulafia's writings.

concerned with a longer form of development of the human spirit that was less related to ecstatic experience.

To summarise this point: though Abulafia followed Maimonides's allegorical exegetical technique, he was inclined to generate a narrative that implicitly pointed not only to inner processes, but also to his own experiences and to his special role in teaching a new spiritual message. These two points were connected to esotericism and sometimes remained only implicitly. However, the interiorisation and individualisation of the religious experience do not also mean its democratisation, as we have amply seen above.

## 25 Individual versus Collective Experiences

Let me turn now to another dimension of the experiences Abulafia described. In all the handbooks which explain his techniques, the instructions are very clear: the aspirant should be alone in a special chamber when using them.<sup>41</sup> This situation is corroborated by the descriptions of the mystical exercises as found in Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar's book.<sup>42</sup> The master is never described as accompanying the aspirant in the secluded room when he practises the techniques, or as someone who surveys the aspirant as he performs the technique or reaches an ecstatic experience.

This individualistic approach is also evident in Abulafia's understanding of redemption as a supremely individual experience, as part of the third narrative. On the other hand, no traces of descriptions or assumptions of collective experiences are found in ecstatic Kabbalah as there are, for example, in Sufism. Surprisingly enough, this absence becomes more evident when he describes some groups of students studying with him at the same time, also providing their names, unlike the rather evasive identity of the Kabbalists who co-operated in the production of the Zoharic corpus, an issue to be addressed immediately below in this chapter.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, the contemporary Zoharic descriptions of raptures are often related to the unique status of the master, the legendary Rabbi Simon bar Yochai, his special achievements, his life, and his death.<sup>44</sup> In other words, his presence and preaching and his extraordinary revelations of secrets regarding the supernal world are part and parcel of triggering the mystical experience or rapture, or at least intensifying it. It is his magnetic personality that is imagined to constitute the pillar of the group composed of his students.

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<sup>41</sup> See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 103–19, 122–25, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 37–41, 144.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478–79; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 150–51.

<sup>43</sup> See below. 273–76.

<sup>44</sup> On his special status in the *Zohar* and Jewish mysticism under its influence, see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 1–84, and Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 31–51, 330.

This stark divergence sharply differentiates between the two types of Kabbalistic literature. Nevertheless, the two literatures share the same background of encounters between Sephardi and Ashkenazi masters, the latter bringing to Spain from the 1260s onwards not only an interest in pneumatic experiences, but also a resort to linguistic techniques, understood mystically by Abulafia and magically by other Kabbalists in Castile. This common denominator requires a more elaborate analysis than can be undertaken within this framework.

The emphasis on the importance of loneliness and seclusion in ecstatic Kabbalah when approaching the divine and during the prophetic experience should be compared to what happened in the same period with the Maimonideans and the theosophical Kabbalists: no individual who claimed to be a prophet or who was regarded as a prophet by others is known to have belonged to these two schools in Abulafia's lifetime. The only two examples we know about in Castile, Rabbi Nissim ben Abraham, the youth from Avila, and Rabbi Samuel the Prophet, are not known for being Kabbalists or philosophers, and in any case, they have no extant theosophical writings.

As seen above, Abulafia's attitude to Rabbinic myths is sharply negative, an attitude that opposes the more welcoming approach of the theosophical Kabbalists, especially within the Zoharic corpus, to this layer of Rabbinic literature. Such a welcoming approach contains no parallels to what we have seen above in Abulafia's writings.

These divergences notwithstanding, claims have recently been made as to the prophetic nature of Rabbi Moses de Leon's and Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's expressions. Charles Mopsik claims they were influenced by the prophetic ambience that Abulafia had created.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Elliot Wolfson and others claim that there are ec-

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<sup>45</sup> *Rabbi Moses de Leon's Sefer Šeqel ha-Qodeš* [Hebrew], ed. Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 6–8. I would claim something different: the prophetic mode that arrived from Ashkenaz, where the category of prophet was not problematic in the first half of the thirteenth century and influenced Abulafia, also triggered the Castilian Kabbalists to look for a more revelatory approach. See my “Incantations, Lists, and ‘Gates of Sermons.’” We may see a common denominator in the sudden emergence of two schools of Kabbalah at the same time in Spain (the ecstatic and the Zoharic) as the appropriation of different types of linguistic techniques that liberated the more doctrinal approach found in Maimonideanism and in the earlier Spanish Kabbalah and triggered these different forms of creativity. For Pedaya's attribution of the central role of Abulafia's messianism and calculations, as well as his disappearance and disappointment due to the failure of his messianic mission in Castilian Kabbalah, see “The Sixth Millennium,” 68, 73–75, 82, 85, 91, 96, where she assumes that the channel of transmission of Abulafia's messianism was Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, Abulafia's former student, whose relationship with Abulafia was discussed above. I wonder, however, where Gikatilla expressed anything about a type of messianism or eschatological calculations similar to those of his former teacher, either in his printed or manuscript writings. I would say, if at all, that he was much closer to Abulafia's concepts of spiritual or individual redemption, what I call the third narrative or register, than to his historical eschatology, which does not occur in Gikatilla's writings. However, except for two brief mentions of his first name, which were immediately eliminated from the final form of *Ginnat Egoz*, written in 1274, Abulafia's name never occurs throughout his many writings

static experiences in the Zoharic literature, claims that soften the gap between Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah and theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah.<sup>46</sup>

The first claim has already been addressed by Yehuda Liebes.<sup>47</sup> I see no reason to change my opinion because of the brief references that Mopsik deals with that do not describe either techniques or detailed forms of general experiences and contain nothing similar to what is found in Abulafia's writings. In a small number of phrases that were adduced to this effect, de Leon and Gikatilla used expressions that point to some form of spiritual arousal, but no more—such terms can be found in many writings in the Middle Ages. The contents of their many books, however, point in quite a different direction from that of authors driven by prophetic or ecstatic experiences.

However, what is of capital importance from my point of view is they were neither called prophets by others nor did they claim to be so. This is not just a matter of an absence of hidden experiences, but of how they perceived themselves and were perceived by others. Against the background of the Rabbinic claim about the cessation of prophecy, de Leon and Gikatilla did not rebel or even try to question the prevalent traditional opinion on the topic. To have a mystical experience is one story; to claim that it is prophetic or ecstatic is quite a different one. We can see this quite clearly from the writings of Rabbi Isaac of Acre, who is not shy about discussing his various mystical experiences; however, despite his acquaintance with ecstatic Kabbalah, he categorically denies that he is a prophet.<sup>48</sup> In any case, in Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret's famous responsum, he enumerates some extraordinary pneumatic experiences in his lifetime among the Jews in Europe, but there is no mention of any Kabbalist except Abraham Abulafia.

Let me point out that the most important statement about prophecy as a possible everyday experience was formulated in Castile only two generations later in a famous Halakhic compendium written by an Ashkenazi Rabbi, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher. Dealing with the Halakhic instructions related to prayer, he writes:

Let him think as if the *Šekhinah* were standing before him, as it is said "I always set God before me,"<sup>49</sup> and he should arouse the *kawannah* and erase all annoying thoughts so that his thought and intention will remain pure during his prayer [...]. It is obligatory to direct one's thought because for Him, thought is tantamount to speech [...] and the pious ones and the men of [good]

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(see also p. 76 above). In any case, the possible link between Abulafia's attempt to meet the pope and a passage in the *Zohar*, in both cases depicted as having some form of messianic valence, is, surprisingly enough, not mentioned by Pedaya at all. See the discussions by Adolph Jellinek and me to this effect that are referenced in Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 121–24. See also chapter 19 note 225 above.

<sup>46</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, "Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993): 219–20, 227, 234–35, where he claims that the Zoharic circle already existed.

<sup>47</sup> "Review Essay: Charles Mopsik, *Rabbi Moses de Leon's Sefer Šeqel ha-Qodeš*" [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 2 (1997): 284–85.

<sup>48</sup> See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 227–28.

<sup>49</sup> Psalm 16:8.



deeds were concentrating their thought and directing their prayer to such an extent that they reached a [state of] divestment of their corporeality and a strengthening of their intellectual spirit so that they would reach [a state] close to prophecy.<sup>50</sup>

However, despite the prophetic moment ben Asher inserted, no serious scholar would regard his book as part of a prophetic or ecstatic literature. Ecstasy or prophecy is one thing; ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah as a more elaborated conceptual approach represented as a literature is another.

Insofar as the second claim as to the alleged ecstatic experiences in the Zoharic literature is concerned, the situation is much more complex. Let me begin with the terminological problem. Unlike prophecy, “ecstasy” is a term imposed by scholars, and as such, it needs to be defined. I have attempted to qualify the use of ecstasy by resorting to the category of “intense ecstasy” in the case of Abulafia’s experience, following Marganita Laski,<sup>51</sup> in order to distinguish it from contemplative forms or from the “contained experience” of the Zoharic companions, as Hellner-Eshed describes it.<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere, I have proposed seeing ecstasy as a constant in human religious experience.<sup>53</sup> More recently, I distinguished between different categories of ecstatic language in various layers of Jewish mysticism.<sup>54</sup>

My assumption is not that ecstatic Kabbalah is the only type of Kabbalistic school where ecstasies occur, but that that ecstasy is “the essential purpose of ecstatic Kabbalah,” as well as the use of “techniques for its attainment.”<sup>55</sup> This means that the centrality and intensity of ecstatic experiences and the existence of specific techniques for achieving them are criteria for describing a given body of literature as ecstatic, not just relying on harbouring some types of rapture related to the performance of Rabbinical commandments or exegetical practices that a scholar decides to call “ecstasies.” This is the reason why I use the term “core” in this context in order to avoid too harsh a separation between the different Kabbalistic schools.<sup>56</sup>

My approach should therefore be understood as a search for the general characteristics of certain schools or models without assuming an absolute separation between them. This approach has been judiciously understood in Melila Hellner-

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50 Tur, *Orah Hayyim*, 98. For the huge impact of this passage, see Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977), 61–62, and Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 1982), 283–84, who pointed out some sources and influences for this passage. See especially a text printed in *Talmidei Rabbenu Yonah*, on *Berakhot* 5, which is quoted in Heschel, *Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets*, 26–27; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 163–64, note 136; and Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 64–65.

51 See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 40.

52 Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 326.

53 Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 53–54, 56.

54 Moshe Idel, “On the Language of Ecstatic Experiences in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Religionen—Die Religiöse Erfahrung (Religions—The Religious Experience)*, eds. Matthias Riedl and Tilo Schabert (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2008): 43–84.

55 Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 8.

56 Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, xviii.

Eshed's discussions of Zoharic ecstasy as they compare to those of Abulafia.<sup>57</sup> Without some definitions, qualifications, or distinctions, there is no great gain from using terms such as "genuine ecstasy"<sup>58</sup> or "profoundly ecstatic" experiences that reflect a scholar's opinion on the Zoharic literature.<sup>59</sup>

As becomes more and more evident in scholarship, the first layers of Zoharic literature, which do not include the two later treatises *Tiqqunei Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna*, do not constitute the work of a single Kabbalist, as scholars thought when it was attributed to Rabbi Moses de Leon, and the question that is increasingly being discussed is whether it is a collective work of a group of co-operating Kabbalists,<sup>60</sup> a work of different groups,<sup>61</sup> or merely uncoordinated reworkings of a variety of Aramaic texts that fell into the Kabbalists' hands.<sup>62</sup>

Let me reiterate the approach that I suggested before the emergence of these proposals:

By the 1270s, the province of Castile had become an important meeting centre of Kabbalists [...]. We can therefore regard Castile between 1270–1290 as a meeting point for all the major trends within Kabbalah [...]. These two decades witness the final steps in most of the older Kabbalistic traditions and the birth of a more complex approach to Kabbalah as a discipline encompassing previously discreet trends of thought. This new approach, mostly represented by three Kabbalists—Gikatilla, de Leon, and Joseph of Hamadan—as well as by the *Zohar*, constitutes what I propose to call the "innovative Kabbalah" in Spain. [...]. Now the time had come when the Kabbalists had learned the motifs of this mysterious melody and were able to compose novel variations, elaborating upon older motifs and creating new ones. This new work was the *Zohar*, which constituted both the first outpouring and the climax of Kabbalistic symbolic creation.<sup>63</sup>

This means that all the trends found in Kabbalah, including the ecstatic one, met and confronted each other in Castile, and in principle, there is no problem with assuming its influence on some of the developments in the region, including the Zoharic literature. After all, as mentioned above, Abulafia taught some Kabbalists in Castile. However, such a view does not preclude the emergence of a phenomenologically

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57 Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 314–16, 318.

58 *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 330. In my opinion, "genuine" is a rather doubtful category, scholarly speaking.

59 Wolfson, "Forms of Visionary Ascent," 234–35. For an additional contraposition of the mystical (Maimonidean) versus the mythical (Zoharic) approach, see Lorberbaum, *Dazzled by Beauty*, 26–28; this is an opposition that fits Abulafia's propensity for de-mythologisation versus the Zoharic propensity for mythologisation.

60 This is the theory of Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 85–138, and, more recently, Elliot Wolfson, who claims to have detected the description of such a group and has printed a Kabbalistic treatise emanating from it. See chapter 25 note 64 below.

61 This is the theory of Ronit Meroz, "Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations," *Hispania Judaica* 3 (2000): 3–63.

62 Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011), 224–428.

63 See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 211–13, 215.

different type of Kabbalah in Castile after Abulafia left the Iberian Peninsula, which is my claim.

Moreover, the note attached to my considerations cited above reads as follows:

This view of the *Zohar* as the zenith of a certain process taking place over the two decades 1270–1290 is not, however, identical with the view that this work is the exclusive composition of Rabbi Moses de Leon, as assumed by Scholem or Tishby. I believe that older elements, including theosophical views, symbols and perhaps also shorter compositions, were merged into this Kabbalistic *oeuvre* which heavily benefited from the nascent free symbolism.<sup>64</sup>

In my opinion, these are the facts that are of primary relevance as one of the most important intellectual backgrounds for the emergence of the Zoharic literature, and all the later hypotheses still need more concrete evidence in order to become full-fledged theses. In any case, by now, all the serious scholars in the field do not assume a homogenous Kabbalistic approach within the *Zohar*. In other words, the Zoharic literature incorporates a variety of views found in Kabbalistic trends that are different from each other and that differ from Abulafia's corpus, which was written by a single author and is more coherent despite his conceptual fluidity.

However, from the specific point of view that concerns the comparisons to Abulafia, let me refer to three major differences that distinguish the two Kabbalistic schools insofar as the experiential aspects are concerned: 1) the experiences described in the *Zohar* are always collective and not individual, 2) they are described

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<sup>64</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 380, note 66, and, in general, 211–15, as well as my introduction to Efraim Gottlieb, ed., *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of Tiqqunei Zohar and Ra'aya' Meheimna'* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities, 2003), 30; Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 125; and Idel, "Moses Gaster on Jewish Mysticism and the Book of the Zohar," 122, note 47. The quoted statement, as well as others, points to a complex attitude towards what "innovative" means in matters of Kabbalah. My views of the *Zohar* have been judiciously summarised by Daniel Abrams, "The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholars," *Kabbalah* 19 (2009): 56–61; Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 295–333. Compare, however, the distorted, in fact inverted, manner in which my views on Zoharic hermeneutics, which I have called innovative Kabbalah, are presented in the same volume of *Kabbalah* (19) by Wolfson, "The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets," 169–71. His "own" view on the topic of hermeneutics is actually much more similar to what I described in the passage from *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 380 that was cited above. Needless to say, in the case of Abraham Abulafia, another main representative of what I called innovative Kabbalah, I emphasised the important contribution of earlier Ashkenazi elements in his hermeneutics. However, I do not share his view that we have evidence of what he calls "the early activity of the Zoharic Circle" in the Kabbalistic text he printed. I have expressed my view as to the composition of the *Gates of the Elderly Man* in the last decade of the thirteenth century in some of my studies. Since more material belonging to this circle is extant in manuscripts and has not been dealt with in scholarship before, it is wiser to postpone a detailed discussion of Wolfson's argument as to the alleged "circle of the Zohar" as if it is reflected in the details found in this treatise. Meanwhile, see also the critical view of Yehuda Liebes, *The Cult of the Dawn: The Attitude of the Zohar towards Idolatry* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2011), 91, note 31, towards Wolfson's hypothesis that the *Zohar* was written in this specific circle, if it existed at all in reality.

as involving the Kabbalists' souls and not their intellects, as is the case with Abulafia, and 3) they are presented as experiences of the past, of ancient Rabbinic figures, of a way of thought that negates the continuation of prophecy, though some form of ecstasy is found in Rabbinic literature in the context of prayer.<sup>65</sup> Again, the absence of the term "prophet" is not just a matter of terminology, but reflects the main gist of Zoharic literature, which strives to present itself as the deeper layer of the Rabbinic mentality, an approach that does not easily lend itself to claims related to prophecy.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Abulafia's emphasis on individual experiences is related to the fact that he mentions his name in his writings, which is not the case in the Zoharic literature, or in many other theosophical-theurgical writings that resort to pseudo-epigraphic techniques or anonymity.

Let us turn now to the recent scholarly claim of the existence of ecstasy in the two schools: as I have proposed elsewhere, this claim would require a distinction between mere occurrences of moments that can be described as ecstatic in a literature that deals with a variety of other topics, including moments of rapture, and a literature that as its main religious aim is devoted to reaching ecstatic experiences and defining them as achievable by specific paths initiated by the mystic.<sup>67</sup> In principle, the claims as to the existence of ecstatic moments in the Zoharic literature are not new. Scholem formulated them in a cogent manner: "It is a significant fact that the most famous and influential book of our mystical literature, the *Zohar*, has little use of ecstasy."<sup>68</sup> I believe that this diagnosis is correct.

However, my more general assumption is that ecstasy is certainly not the prerogative of one specific Kabbalistic school, as I formulate it: "The ecstatic element in Jewish mysticism is to be understood as an important constant, rather than the prerogative of a certain phase or school"<sup>69</sup> or "the quest for ecstasy [...] is part and parcel of a quest that was inherent in Jewish mysticism, much more outside Spain rather than in the Iberian Peninsula."<sup>70</sup> In fact, I have compared the mystical elements in Abulafia and the *Zohar* in quite an explicit manner.<sup>71</sup> However, while Abulafia's Kabbalah was explicitly intended to experience prophecy, in the Zoharic literature, this is not explicated as a distinct goal and it is quite probable that they occur sporadically, at least according to the claims made in the texts.

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<sup>65</sup> On the nexus between prayer and ecstasy in early Rabbinic literature, see Shlomo Na'eh, "Bore' Niv Sefatayim," *Tarbiz* 63 (1994): 185–218; Abraham Wolfish, "Ha-Tefillah ha-Šogeret," *Tarbiz* 65 (1996): 301–14.

<sup>66</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Lawyers and Mystics in Judaism: A Prolegomenon for a Study of Prophecy in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Joseph and Gwendolyn Straus Institute Working Papers* (New York: New York University, 2010): 3–42.

<sup>67</sup> See Idel, "On the Language of Ecstatic Experiences in Jewish Mysticism," 71–72.

<sup>68</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," 129.

<sup>70</sup> Idel, 128.

<sup>71</sup> Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 97–98.

The Zoharic moments of rapture occur as part of homiletic discussions in a group or circle; whether this is imaginary or real is less important.<sup>72</sup> This is part of an interpretive symbolic-mythic approach to the biblical and Midrashic materials.<sup>73</sup> As Mopsik duly puts it, the *Zohar* is a Midrash on a Midrash.<sup>74</sup> It includes efforts to deepen the mythical aspects of the canonical texts by elaborating on the fabric of the texts, not by arbitrarily deconstructing and then reconstructing them.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as seen above, Abulafia's deconstruction of the texts is not only a matter of a radical exegetical approach, but one that centres the development of the individual, that consciously infuses new meanings that do not come from a project or group focused on the fate of a nation, as is the case in the *Zohar*.

Abulafia does not choose imaginary ancient Rabbis promenading in imaginary geographical areas of the Land of Israel or a group studying in a cave to be his protagonists, but rather a Kabbalist who is capable of allegorically understanding his or others' experiences as a continuation of those of the biblical figures, or even a transcendence of them. Abulafia writes mainly about himself for his specific—and in many cases, younger—disciples; in some cases, we know their names and writings, their locale, and rather precise dates. Though he was a Neo-Aristotelian thinker, the background of Abulafia's experiences is not the peripatetic walks of the ancient philosophers in nature as is the case of some of the compositions from the Zoharic circle,<sup>76</sup> but a secluded room found, so I assume, in a populated area.

However, it should be emphasised that some of Abulafia's descriptions of the mystical experience, especially those in the prophetic books, reflect what he claims were his experiences and can be described as ego-documents. Let me give just one example: “[...] So also the Agent Intellect,<sup>77</sup> and I testify taking heaven and earth as my witnesses, that it [the Agent Intellect] taught me in such a way [...] and the speech that comes from it is according to the intellectual comprehension.”<sup>78</sup> This resort to first-person revelations is rather rare outside the school of ecstatic Kabbalah.

This confession should be understood in the context of Abulafia's understanding of Kabbalah as a revelation stemming from the Agent Intellect in a manner that is more profound than the philosophical knowledge that stems from the very same source.<sup>79</sup> Unlike the expansion of consciousness in the various descriptions of the

72 Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 107–10.

73 See Hellner-Eshed, 331–32, 334.

74 See Mopsik, *Chemins de la cabale*, 168–70.

75 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, xiii–xv; compare also to Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 330–32, and Mopsik, *Chemins de la cabale*, 229–30.

76 Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 111–20.

77 Earlier, he describes this intellect functioning as a teacher.

78 *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 147–48:

...בכך השכל הפועל, אני מעיד עלי שמים וארץ שמלמדני בדרך ההוא בעצמו [...] כי הדבור הבא ממנו הוא על דרך השגת השכל.

For God speaking with prophets without mention of visions, see *Sitrei Torah*, 91.

79 *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, 56–57:

experiences of the companions of the Zoharic circle, which did not annihilate their personalities, but nevertheless maintained an intimate contact with the supreme realm,<sup>80</sup> Abulafia is concerned with a mystical union of the intellect that may culminate in a fusion between it and the supernal intellectual realm.

Nor is Abulafia concerned with theosophy and theurgy that sometimes puts the complex divine structure at the centre of its sermons, as the Zoharic literature does. It suffices to read the most theological Zoharic compositions, *Sifra' di-Šeni'uta'* and the *Iddrot*, in order to understand how far the Zoharic world is from that of Abulafia. The composite nature of the divinity with its various manifestations, the ten *sefirot* or the various *paršufim*, is nevertheless conceived as constituting one unified dynamic theological unit and is also reflected by the confraternity, by the entire people of Israel, which are such composite entities. Also, from this point of view, the main bulk of the Zoharic literature continues the Rabbinic-Midrashic mode of creativity that operated with a variety of ideas which were in tension with one another, but which were nevertheless accepted as part of a more comprehensive structure.

Those are two quite different forms of *imaginaire* that stem from different profound structures, distinguished from each other terminologically, structurally, and conceptually. They also determined their different fates in the history of Jewish mysticism: the Zoharic *imaginaire* was drawing from the Rabbinic universe, which was interpreted mythically and sometimes symbolically,<sup>81</sup> while the Abulafian *imaginaire* drew from the Greek philosophical universe and operated in what I have called an allegorical-spiritualistic manner. The former is dramatically nomian and its protagonists are famous Rabbis; the latter is anomian, articulated by a person who is most often writing for individuals who belong to the secondary elite and who criticises contemporary Rabbis rather than emulates them. These are the reasons for the huge success of the Zoharic corpus in the history of Jewish mysticism in comparison to the Abulafian Kabbalah that remained a secondary and elitist school.

In a way, the two main Kabbalistic schools that emerged in the last quarter of the thirteenth century in Europe represent two different modes of religiosity, parallel, *mutatis mutandis*, to what Strauss and Eliade advocated: the individual versus the group in the case of the former, and the group as the basic religious unit that thrives by developing a mythical type of consciousness in the case of the latter. Let me emphasise the historical dimension of the two modes: mythical elements are found in Greek myths, but the Greek philosophers in late antiquity either ignored them or allegorised them. This also happened in late antique Judaism in the case of Philo of

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אין בין החכמה ובין הקבלה אלא שהקבלה הוגדה מפי השכל הפועל, ביותר עמוקה ממה שהוגדה החכמה עם היות שתי ההגדות מפייהו. והקבלה אם כן השגה יותר דקה וחכמה יותר עמוקה מן החכמה המושגת בשכל החמר.

See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 143–44.

<sup>80</sup> Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 325.

<sup>81</sup> See Yehuda Liebes, “Myth vs. Symbol in the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah,” in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995): 212–42.

Alexandria,<sup>82</sup> but the philosophical-allegorical approach did not make its way to Rabbinic Judaism, which continued to operate with many mythologumena. The adoption of this exegetical approach in the High Middle Ages, especially in ibn Gabirol, ibn Ezra, and Maimonides, prompted Abulafia's exegesis, with its proclivity towards the individual inner experience, triggered to use one of his techniques by his personal predilections.

While the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists remythologised the Jewish texts and the meanings of the commandments, Abulafia, following Maimonides, strove to demythologise them. However, unlike the Great Eagle, Abulafia does so not only through a naturalist approach, but also and prominently by "mystifying" the sources, by claiming that the true meaning of the sources is to point to the ideal of prophecy, ecstasy, or unitive experiences. In short, the tension between the noetic interpretation and the mythical one that shapes the relationships between how Maimonides, the Maimonideans, and Abulafia understood reality and society and traditional Judaism (including theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah) are part of a much longer history; it also assumes a tension between the individual and the social.<sup>83</sup>

While in ecstatic Kabbalah the mystical experience is conceived as standing in itself, especially in the case of the mystical union, in the Zoharic Kabbalah, and I would say in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah in general, the experience of adherence to the divine as a mystical experiment was thought to be followed by a theurgical operation.<sup>84</sup> This means that when seen in a more holistic manner—namely, when incorporated into different conceptual structures—the same mystical phenomena, if we may speak about significant similarities in issues like these, are different since they are conjugated with different elements and thus generate different models.<sup>85</sup>

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**82** Maren R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

**83** See also Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. and trans. Gerhart Niemeyer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 185.

**84** See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, xviii, 51–58, and Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 318. Compare to the quite similar view of Seth H. Brody, "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Worship and Mystical Experience in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1991), and "'Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights': Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typology*, ed. Robert A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 123–58. This more complex approach has also been more recently adopted in Haviva Pedaya, "Two Types of Ecstatic Experience in Hasidism" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 55 (2005): 81. She is apparently unaware of my methodological claims to this effect and asserts that I analysed isolated concepts by themselves and not their wider concatenation in the framework of broader models. See also her "The Besht, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, and the Maggid of Mezeritch: Basic Lines for a Religious-Typological Approach" [Hebrew], *Da'at* (2000): 71. Compare also to the reference to the Gestalt-contexture in chapter 2 note 49 above as well as the gist of my study, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*.

**85** See Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 45–145.



To be sure, I do not deny the mystical aspects of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, as some scholars mistakenly assume, but I propose to see them as being essentially subordinated to another goal, the unification of the divine sphere or its reparation, *tiqqun*, which Abraham Maslow called “means-experience,” that those Kabbalists conceived to be higher than adherence. Abulafia’s experiences were target experiences that were, in many cases, conceived as the end of the mystical path.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, discussions about the existence of ecstasy alone without first defining what a scholar means by this term and addressing their conceptual context are rather futile.

The two foci of Abulafia’s ideal experiences should also be seen from another perspective. The revelations he describes gravitate around more than one basic vision: the mystic may see aggrandised letters or his own self conversing with the mystic during the experience,<sup>87</sup> or a vision of a circle or globe,<sup>88</sup> or, in other cases, a vision of the human form, an old man, standing for the Agent Intellect,<sup>89</sup> or the revelation of the angel of Paradise.<sup>90</sup> In some cases, some form of speech emerges from the mystic’s mouth without an accompanying vision.<sup>91</sup> This means that it would be erroneous to reduce Abulafia’s descriptions to one single type of experience, although he refers in many cases to the phenomenon he calls prophecy. A variety of experiences that may all be regarded as mystical, some having ecstatic overtones, can also be found in the description of the experiences of Rabbi Nathan ben Sa’adyah.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the reduction of Abulafia to one type of experience, the ecstatic one, is just one step in identifying this alleged one type of experience as that allegedly found in the *Zohar*—another even more diversified type of Kabbalistic literature, as seen above.<sup>93</sup>

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**86** See also Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 130, 169, 376, note 1.

**87** See Appendix B note 81 below. This view is described in Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 185, as some form of incarnation. It was also adopted by Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” who fails to mention Scholem’s resort to the concept of incarnation in connection to Abulafia, though he refers to other discussions of Christianity in Abulafia that appear in Scholem’s writings. See 195–96, note 24. However, what Abulafia means in these texts is the emergence of a configuration within the imagination of the mystic that has a form that differs from one case to another and that is not necessarily a human body, still less fleshly. This is the reason why I speak about “informment” rather than incarnation. See Idel, *Ben*, 60–61, 101, note 182, 278, 420, 451, and compare to Wolfson’s cavalier rejoinder, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” 200, note 41. In any case, in order to understand Abulafia’s mystical experiences, one should take into consideration the existence of several modes of revelation and not reduce the wide spectrum to one colour (the allegedly “incarnational” one) alone.

**88** Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 109–11.

**89** Idel, 112–16.

**90** See the Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fols. 69a, 71b, 89b–90a.

**91** Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 83–86.

**92** See *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478–79, and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 150–52.

**93** See Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 318. Following Elliot Wolfson to a certain extent, Pedaya claims to know, on the grounds of sources unaccounted for or at least unknown to me,

My rather different proposal is based on the importance of the distinction between various types of language in Jewish mysticism and their different conceptual sources and reflects different underlying types of experiences. This variety may even occur in different works by the same Kabbalist.<sup>94</sup> It is only after a more elaborate picture of the varieties of mystical experiences in two vast corpora are recognised and analysed<sup>95</sup> that a comparison between them may be fruitful. The homogenisation of these corpora and then the homologisation between them in scholarship in the last two decades is too uncritical and, in any case, too conceptually vague to mean anything. In fact, it is a matter of manipulating terms that have not been sufficiently defined, and which are thus problematic, in order to make them academically fruitful.

In this context, let me point out that unlike the Maimonideans, Abulafia did not abandon his involvement with at least some part of society, though he was full of contempt for the vulgus. As Aviezer Ravitzky astutely remarks, Maimonides's followers adopted an elitist approach, rejecting their master's conceptual complexity, which combined philosophy with Halakhah in many of his writings.<sup>96</sup> This is also the case with Averroes, who combined jurisdiction with philosophy. However, the devotion to the two types of activity did not enjoy a real continuation because the Maimonideans adopted a more contemplative approach influenced by ibn Bāḡḡah and ibn Ṭufayl.<sup>97</sup> With all his emphasis on noetic activity, Abulafia was nevertheless more socially active than the other Maimonideans as both a prophet and a Messiah, though without endorsing the importance of Halakhic creativity. Though seclusion was important for him, it was of short duration and took place in a room at night, not outside of society. In other words, Abulafia only required seclusion for the moments to be dedicated to attaining peak experiences and otherwise remained socially active.

The approach to language and to the sacred text as embodied in the type of discourses found in Abulafia's writings versus those found in the Zoharic corpus is another criterion for easily and dramatically distinguishing between them. The pervasive use of gematrias when combined with philosophical allegorisation on an unprecedented scale either beforehand or afterwards in Kabbalah is marginal in the Zoharic literature, if present at all. All of them point to mental activities that dif-

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that Abulafia's ecstatic experience is similar to that of the *Zohar*, itself a highly composite literary corpus, although she recognises that they make use of different terminology. This is a claim that is reminiscent of Wolfson, who knows that the experience in the "Zohar" was "genuine." See her "The Sixth Millennium," 67–68. For my approach, which pays maximum attention to the literary expressions of the mystical experiences rather than proclaiming their authenticity or alleged identity with other experiences, see *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 35–28, and Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 383, note 1. Earlier in Pedaya's works, she resorts to a different approach that allows for a much greater weight of the linguistic expressions in her analysis. See, for example, her *Vision and Speech*, 97.

<sup>94</sup> See Idel, "On the Language of Ecstatic Experiences in Jewish Mysticism," 43–84.

<sup>95</sup> Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 340–51.

<sup>96</sup> Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 40.

<sup>97</sup> See Holzman, "State, Religion, and Spirituality, in the Thought of Rabbi Moses Narboni," 191–211.

fer from the symbolisation that is based on discovering or unveiling correspondences with a higher, dynamic, and fluid level of the divine world and interacting with it.

No competent scholar would ever mistake a Zoharic passage for an Abulafian one, and vice versa; any claim to the contrary would, in my opinion, be a sign of deep ignorance in matters of Kabbalah that would discredit such a writer as a serious critical scholar. This is, to be sure, not just a matter of the Zoharic Aramaic versus the Tibbonian Hebrew, but also quite conflicting forms of *imaginaire* that operate in different ways. As Scholem duly formulated this difference: “The truth is that no two things could be more different than the outlook of the Zohar and that of Abulafia.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the Zoharic tone is much more descriptive, narrative, and essentially conjunctive—namely, it attempts to operate with the concept of Jewry as a national organic unit—while the Abulafian approach is more prescriptive and disjunctive, or exclusive, addressed as it is solely to the elite as individuals and despising the vulgus, Jewish or not, and even Rabbis, part of an anti-clerical attitude.

## 26 “Phylacteries of the Holy One, blessed be He,” and Phylacteries of Man

Let me now discuss the special manner in which Abulafia approached a particular Rabbinic statement and compare it to that of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists. In a Talmudic tract, Rabbis portray God donning phylacteries and possessing a *tallit*.<sup>99</sup> To be sure, the biblical text in God’s phylacteries is different from that contained within the ordinary human ones: God was imagined as remembering not what He had done in *illud tempus* by rescuing the people of Israel from Egypt, but rather the uniqueness of the people of Israel and its relationship to Him.<sup>100</sup> This discussion represents an important instance of reciprocal remembrance that occurs when the two different personalities, the human and the divine, don reminders on which the other is inscribed in so that they may perpetually remember each other.<sup>101</sup> Various Jewish authors attempted to obliterate the anthropomorphic image-

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<sup>98</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 130.

<sup>99</sup> See *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 6a. For an analysis of the relevant text and its later reverberation of this issue, see Arthur Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 53–56, 119–20, 139–40, 162. See also Raphael Loewe, “The Divine Garment and *Shi’ur Qomah*,” *HTR* 58 (1965): 153–60; Raphael Loewe, “Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs,” in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966): 159–96.

<sup>100</sup> *Berakhot*, fol. 6a.

<sup>101</sup> On the “envelope of reminders” in ancient Judaism and its later reverberations in Judaism, which includes the phylacteries, see Moshe Idel, “*Memento Dei*—Remarks on Remembering in Judaism,” in *Il senso della memoria, Atti dei convegni Lincei* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2003): 143–94, especially 152–56, 172–74.

ry in the Rabbinic passage by attributing it to a supreme angel or to an allegory of the entirety of reality; some even claim that it is not a reasonable story at all.<sup>102</sup>

However, Abulafia has a different approach, which is related to esotericism. Let me present a quote that reflects the manner of his approach to this case of Rabbinic anthropomorphism:

They are saying that “the Holy One, blessed be He, dons phylacteries” and they said “the phylacteries of the Holy Ones, blessed be He, what is written in them? ‘And who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth.’”<sup>103</sup> Behold, they revealed that they were not phylacteries, since this [verse] is not written in our phylacteries, and if it was written there, they would indubitably be disqualified. And so also in all the places that you will find this in the hidden [layer] in the Written or Oral Torah, you will immediately find hints near to it that point to the truth of the issue and what the intention is in most places, or the author will rely on what is already widespread in tradition, such as “The Torah spoke in the language of humans”<sup>104</sup> and “the Torah spoke in the language of fables,”<sup>105</sup> but the Torah did not speak except in order to popularise. And these are rousing everyone, and many like them in the two true Torahs, and it is not appropriate for a sage of our Torah to err concerning any of the vulgar, imaginary beliefs.<sup>106</sup>

Abulafia’s approach is so antagonistic towards the content of the Rabbinic depiction of God donning phylacteries that he claims that this is quite impossible even according to the way the context should be understood. This means that by mentioning the biblical verse that the Rabbis attribute to the divine phylacteries, they are in fact invalidating them, since that biblical verse is not written in our phylacteries. This absurdity annuls the entire message regarding God’s donning of phylacteries.

It may be that in addition to the problem of anthropomorphism, Abulafia also had a problem with the collective image of the people of Israel as a complete entity that should be remembered by God. In other words, for this Kabbalist, the Rabbis were writing for an intelligent audience that would understand from the context that the content of their narrative was, in fact, deriding anthropomorphism. This in-

**102** See the comprehensive analysis of the history of this theme in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources, most of them predating Abulafia, in Adam Afterman, “The Phylacteries Knot: The History of a Jewish Icon” [Hebrew], in *Myth, Ritual, and Mysticism: Studies in Honor of Professor Gruenwald*, eds. Gideon Bohak, Ron Margolin, and Ishay Rosen-Zvi (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2014): 441–80, and the important source discussed in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 212–14.

**103** 2 Samuel 7:23.

**104** *Tosefta, BT, Baba’ Meši’a’*, fol. 31b. This dictum is used quite often in Abulafia’s writings.

**105** *Sifri, Devarim*, 25.

**106** See *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 94–95:

אמרם שהקב"ה מניח תפילין, אמרו תפילין של הקב"ה מה כתיב בהן "ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ" (שמואל ב' ז:כג). הנה גילו לך שאינן תפילין, שהרי אין זה כתוב בתפילין שלנו ולו נכתבו בהן היו פסולין בלא ספק. וכן בכל מקום שתמצא זה על עניין נסתר בתורה שבכתב או בתורה שבע"פ, מיד תמצא סביבו רמזים מורים אמיתת עניינה ומה הכוונה עליו ברוב המקומות. או יסמוך המחבר על מה שכבר התפשט בקבלה, כגון "דברה תורה בלשון בני אדם." ו"דברה תורה בלשון הבאי." ולא דברה תורה, אלא לשבר את האזן. ועם אלו המעוררות כולם רביים כמותם בשתי תורות האמיתיות לא היה ראוי שהיה תועה שום תכם מחכמי תורתנו בשום אמונה מן האמונות הדמיוניות ההמוניות.

On Oral Torah in medieval Jewish thought, see Dov Schwartz, “Some Brief Comments on the Oral Law and Its Transmission in Jewish Thought” [Hebrew], in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, 2:79–94.

terpretation amounts to reading the Rabbinic passage in a Maimonidean-Straussian manner: the Rabbis are conceived as premeditatedly contradicting themselves so that only the intelligent reader could discern their real intention. Interestingly enough, in order to reject the validity of the above passage, Abulafia turns nomian and argues from the point of view of the Jewish law being against the Rabbinic micro-myth.

Let me compare Abulafia's attitude to the micro-myth to that of other Kabbalists. The famous late thirteenth-century Catalan Kabbalist Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher wrote about the creation of the world following a Platonic approach that sees the archetype or prototype for all that was created below in the supernal world of forms. However, in addition to the structural correspondences between the Temple on earth and the supernal world, envisioned as a supernal Temple, the Kabbalist also assumes the possibility of the actual presence of the higher within the lower, a presence that creates a union between the two worlds.<sup>107</sup> In this context, a description of the uniqueness of the people of Israel is offered:

"This is the great degree of Israel; they have a great adherence [*devequt gadol*] to the Holy One, blessed be He. This is the reason why it is written: "And you will be a special treasure unto Me."<sup>108</sup> The word "special treasure"<sup>109</sup> points to the very thing within which there is a hidden power, as the "special treasure" is predicated on the power of grasses and pearls, within which there is a hidden power. And out of the strength of adherence [*rov ha-devequt*] [of Israel], God unifies and praises them as one nation. This is the reason why it is written in the phylacteries of God:<sup>110</sup> "Who is like the people of Israel, a singular<sup>111</sup> nation on earth?"<sup>112</sup> Just as they unify Him and praise Him saying:<sup>113</sup> "Hear, Israel: The Lord, our God, the Lord is one," etc. I too shall make you one unit in the world."<sup>114</sup>

The importance of unity below, which is related to particularist chosenness, for achieving a state of union with God is obvious in this passage, as well as in the lines that follow it. Only by the Jewish nation being or becoming a *monos* is it possible to ad-

**107** Cf. Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Qemaḥ*, Lulav, in *Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya*, ed. Chaim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1970), 234. See also Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy*, 89–92, who pointed out to the source in Rabbi Judah ha-Levi. For Abulafia's account of the ascent to that Temple, see Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 173–77.

**108** Exodus 19:5.

**109** *Segullah*. In fact, Rabbi Baḥya refers to a concept that is not biblical, but quite medieval; it deals with special qualities inherent in a few objects that cannot be described by means of regular physics.

**110** *BT*, *Berakhot*, fol. 6a.

**111** *Eḥad*, "one."

**112** 1 Chronicles 17:21.

**113** Deuteronomy 16:4.

**114** *Kad ha-Qemaḥ*, 234:

זו היא מעלה גדולה לישראל בהיות להם עם השי"ת דבקות הגדול הזה ולזה רמז הכתוב שאמר "הייתם לי סגולה" (שמות יט:ה) כי מלת סגולה נאמרת על עצם דבר שבו הכח הנסתר כמו שאומר סגולה על כח העשבים והפנינים שיש בהם כח נסתר. ולרוב הדבקות תמצא שהוא יתברך מיחד אותן ומקלסן שהם גוי אחד והוא שדרשו ז"ל בתפליין דמארי עלמא מה כתיב בהו "מי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ. כשם שהם מקלסים אותו ית' ואומרים שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד וגו' אף אני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת בעולם."

here to the divine Monad. The fact that the unity of God is mentioned in the human phylacteries just as the unity of the people of Israel is mentioned in the divine phylacteries allows a reading that suggests that by remembering the one, it becomes one with the other.

I wonder whether the *segullah* is not only Israel as a nation, given what they say about God, but also the phylacteries, whose hidden treasures no one can see from the outside—that is, the formula of the divine unity. In any case, it is clear that the affinity between the two types of what I propose to call reminders (the human and the divine phylacteries) represent a union between Israel and God, who are reminded of each other through the texts found in their respective phylacteries. This is an interactive vision, and it refers to a reciprocal relationship between God and His chosen nation.

According to another of Abulafia’s texts—which has several parallels in Kabbalah,<sup>115</sup> one of which may serve as Rabbi Baḥya’s source—the divinity is portrayed as dwelling in someone who dons the phylacteries, a view that is consonant with the use of the term *devequt* in the above passage.<sup>116</sup> Baḥya follows the gist of the Rabbinic passage not only with his non-denial of the meaning of the mythical picture, but also by maintaining its national valence. This is also the case in the *Zohar*, which represents a strongly mythologising tendency that is part of a particularist approach.<sup>117</sup> This means that the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists celebrated the details of the Rabbinic micro-myth while Abulafia conceives what he considers its exoteric form as absurd, though in this case, he does not attempt to offer even an allegorical interpretation. Even a Maimonidean thinker was closer to the Rabbinic approach, as we may see in one of the writings of Rabbi Levi ben Abraham, with his emphasis on God’s special relationship to the Jewish nation.<sup>118</sup>

Once again, Abulafia’s approach differs not only from that of the theosophical Kabbalists, who were quite fond of the Rabbinic micro-myths and in some cases elaborated them into broader myths: he is also more radical than the Maimonideans. To a certain extent, this approach can be seen as complementary to the critique of the Rabbinic myth of the serpentine pollution that we discussed in chapter 9 above: the concrete language of the narratives that is so characteristic of the Rabbis is regarded as meaningless in favour of the more allegorical and naturalist understanding that Abulafia offers. They are also seen as self-contradictory and as requiring esoteric interpretation.

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**115** See, especially, *Zohar* 3, fols. 262b–263a.

**116** See Baḥya’s *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, on Exodus 13:16, ed. Chavel, 104–5, and compare also to 268 in the same work.

**117** 3, fol. 175b. In general, see Oded Israeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba’ de-Miṣpaṭim of the Zohar* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005).

**118** See *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of the Chariot*, ed. Kreisel, 187–88, in a context where the author explicitly refers to Kabbalists, and see also 287 in the same work.

Let me turn to a closely related issue. According to another statement in the same Talmudic treatise, God showed Moses the knot of the phylacteries as part of an interpretation of the biblical assumption that He had shown His back to Moses.<sup>119</sup> This micro-myth was perhaps part of a broader myth that also included the micro-myth of the divine phylacteries. Naturally, this image was reinterpreted in a variety of ways; Jewish philosophers interpreted the knot as an allegory for the concatenation of reality from the divinity and thus as a manner of knowing God.<sup>120</sup>

Abulafia also rejects the anthropomorphic micro-myth<sup>121</sup> as he prefers a more unitive understanding of the event, since it originally tells us about a particular revelation to Moses. In the vein of his theory that *Ha-QeSeR* means “the knot,” while *HeTeR* means “unknotting”—both Hebrew terms amounting to 605<sup>122</sup>—the Rabbinic statement is conceived as an allegory for the soul's adherence to the supernal world after the knot, its connection to the material or the corporeal world, becomes unfettered.<sup>123</sup>

Elsewhere, he adopts a more ontological view that interprets the knot of the head phylactery as referring to the Account of the Chariot and the knot of the hand phylactery as referring to the Account of Creation.<sup>124</sup> Again, Abulafia loads the exoteric passage with an esoteric meaning as part of what I call his arcanisation of Jewish texts. This is also the case in another of his treatments of the phylacteries:

[T]he secret that they testify to you the four witnesses<sup>125</sup> that are on your head and they arouse you [...]. Know your head from your heart and also know your heart from your head. And this is the reason why your phylacteries were in two places on the body, on the head and on the weakened hand, which corresponds to the heart, and they are indubitably like amulets. And you already know what those who don the phylacteries say:<sup>126</sup> “[the letters of] *Adonai* are upon them, [and] they will live”<sup>127</sup> “and [the letters of] *YHWH* are on their head;”<sup>128</sup> afterwards, he said<sup>129</sup> “and their king passed before them.”<sup>130</sup>

119 *BT, Berakhot*, fol. 7a.

120 See Afterman, “The Phylacteries Knot,” 457–60, and Warren Zev Harvey's important analyses in his “Maimonides's Critical Epistemology and *Guide* 2:24,” *Aleph* 8 (2008): 216–19.

121 *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 19–20.

122 See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 134–37.

123 *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 284, corrected according to the Ms.:

ואיסור והיתר הכונה בו ככונת צורת קשר של תפילין שקשרו בראש לאחור קשר נקשר בלי התר, ושביד לפנים נקשר פעם וניתר פעם. כן הקשר העליון צריך המשכיל שידבק בעליונים ויקשר במ עדי שלא יתיר במ מהם לעולם. והקשר התחתון פעם ידבק בו לפי צרכו אליו ופעם יותר ממנו לפי מעלת עצמו בערך אליו.

124 *Sitrei Torah*, 69. See also *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 277.

125 The four biblical pericopes found within the phylacteries of the head.

126 I have not found a Rabbinic source for Abulafia's claim.

127 Isaiah 38:16.

128 Micah 2:13.

129 Micah 2:13.

130 *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 127.



Two phrases should draw the attention of the careful reader of this passage: the comparison of the phylacteries to amulets and the phrase “those who don phylacteries.” The first phrase should be understood as part of Abulafia’s more comprehensive rejection of all magic including amulets (*qamei’in*), again following Maimonides.<sup>131</sup> Especially telling is the term “indubitably” within this framework. It is a clearly negative comparison. This seems to me to also be the point of the second phrase, “those who don phylacteries” (*menihei ha-tefillin*), which conveys some form of implicit distance between himself and these traditional performances.

Who exactly these individuals are, literary sources or living Jews, is not clear, though the similarity to the views of Rabbi Bahya, written some few years after Abulafia’s death, is quite interesting. His explanation is that the two parts of the body that are pertinent for understanding the donning of the phylacteries, the head and the heart, point to cognitive processes related to the brain and the heart. These two organs are understood to be related to the phylacteries in Rabbinic literature. This is also the case in another of Abulafia’s discussions concerning the phylacteries, where we also find an interesting gematria:

And the secret of *tefillin*, four, hints to four pericopes which are ten, [namely] ABCD,<sup>132</sup> and they come to stand against the evil inclination, born out of four luminaries<sup>133</sup> [...] and the secret of the brain and the heart, *Elohim*, and within them the “light of Shadday” is emanating a “light of the sense,” which is hot and humid in the blood.<sup>134</sup>

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והסוד שמעידים עליך זה ארבעה עדים שעל ראשך ומעוררים אותך [...] ועל כן אתה דע ראשך מלבך גם דע לבך מראשך ולפיכך היו התפילין בשני מקומות הגוף בראש וביד כהה כנגד הלב והן כדמות קמיעין בלא ספק. וכבר ידעת אומרם של מניחי התפילין, "יהו"ה [אדני] עליהם יהיו" (ישעיה לח:טז) "ויהו"ה בראשם" (מיכה ב:יג) אחר אמרו "ויעבר מלכם לפניהם" (שם).

See also Meir bar Ilan, “So Shall They Put My Name upon the People of Israel (Num 6:27)” [Hebrew], *HUCA* 60 (1990): 19–31.

**131** See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: Between Magic of Names and Kabbalah of Names,” 82–83; on Maimonides, see Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 181–204.

**132** In Hebrew 1+2+3+4=10. See also “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” 20, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 149, note 153. This is an example of understanding an aspect of Jewish ritual (in this case, the four portions in the phylacteries) by means of resorting to its numerical structure and then to the Pythagorean theory of Tetraktys. This is described as including “hints,” or, in other words, including some form of secrets.

**133** It is not clear who these luminaries are; however, we may discern some form of cosmic approach based on non-theurgical types of correspondences.

**134** *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 134, amended according to Ms. Munich, 408, fols. 87b–88a, and Ms. New York, JTS 1813, fol. 27ab:

וסוד התפילין, ארבעה רמזים בארבע הפרשיות שהם י' אבג"ד. ובאו לעמוד כנגד יצ"ר הר"ע נולדו מארבע המאורים [...] וסוד מוח ולב, אלהים ובהם משפיע או"ר שד"י או"ר חו"ש, שהוא חם ולח בדם.

The New York JTS manuscript is a separate treatise that draws on material from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš* but is not identical to it, though it perhaps preserves a better version of the text. The same gematria, together with the Pythagorean Tetraktys, is found in a different version, Ms. New York, JTS 1813, fol. 27b. It is possible that Abulafia is referred to on fol. 27b as the person who informed the anonymous Kabbalist about the gematrias. I hope to return to the Kabbalistic material found in this manuscript elsewhere.

This short and compact passage is based on four series of gematrias. The first one, the Pythagorean, is decoded in the footnote. The second one is of special importance: *ha-Tefillin* = *yeşer ha-ra'* = 575. The phylacteries are not conceived as identical to the evil inclination, as the gematria may be interpreted, but as standing against the evil inclination, reminiscent of the amuletic perception seen in the passage quoted above. However, the evil inclination is now considered to be an inner power, which means that the phylacteries are part of a struggle with the inner human inclination. This interpretation is corroborated by another important gematria found in the quoted text: *moaḥi wa-lev* = 86 = *Elohim* = *ḥam we-laḥ*. This means that the human body, especially the brain and the heart, is the recipient of the “light of Šaddai” (or *Šaddai*) or the “light of the sense” (or *ḥuṣ*), both amounting to 521.

Why are these issues considered to be secrets? It seems that the answer is quite simple: because the commandment of the phylactery is understood as referring to an inner process that is similar to what is found in many other cases in Abulafia, such as the secret of the reception of the Torah discussed above.<sup>135</sup> Abulafia interiorised the apotropaic function of the ancient ritual and this is also the case in the manner in which he portrayed the Sinaitic revelation as restraining the sexual impulse.<sup>136</sup> However, this restraint should be understood as facilitating noetic actions rather than apotropaic ones.

Let me turn now to Abulafia's student Rabbi Nathan, the author of *Ša'arei Šedeq*, who promises that “if you will cleave to God, and link yourself to His power, your power will rule over the *tefillin*, which amounts in gematria to *Yeşer ha-ra'*.”<sup>137</sup> Does such a text mean that there was an antinomian approach regarding the *tefillin*? I believe not. This gematria is simply part of an interpretive game that can change direction just as a positive approach to the same topic may do using another gematria. In more technical terms, I assume that as in many cases in ecstatic Kabbalah, the evil inclination refers to the imaginative faculty that is contrasted with the “good” inclination, the intellect.<sup>138</sup> Flexible interpretations of words, even when associated with the commandments in Abulafia and his followers, do not automatically add to or detract from their behaviour. Did the Kabbalist who created the gematria for the evil instinct think that he was indeed donning the evil inclination when putting on *tefillin*? By untying one's soul or intellect from corporeality, one binds it to the intellectual world.<sup>139</sup> This is a fine example of what I called a type of spiritual allegorisation.

<sup>135</sup> See chapter 9 above.

<sup>136</sup> See chapter 9 note 99 above.

<sup>137</sup> See Rabbi Nathan, *Ša'arei Šedeq*, 465 and 476, to be quoted below on p. 288. For other analyses of *tefillin* in ecstatic Kabbalah, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 149–50, note 153.

<sup>138</sup> See examples quoted in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 44–45; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 96–97, 102–3; and *Ša'arei Šedeq*. Cf. *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 462–63.

<sup>139</sup> *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 464–65.

This theory about the *tefillin* recurs in *Ša'arei Šedeq* in a variety of forms, but I refer the reader to my detailed discussion of this issue elsewhere.<sup>140</sup> Crucial for this book is the Neo-Platonic assumption that “nature” keeps the spiritual power within its dominion and that “divestment” means “escape from nature.”<sup>141</sup> In this book, the divestment is only once attributed to the intellect, which is depicted as becoming universal after separating itself from matter.<sup>142</sup> Especially interesting is the mention of the divestment in quite an anomian context: “When she<sup>143</sup> enters and is immersed in its innermost [aspect] and divests herself of the knot of the *tefillin*, which is the evil instinct according to the gematria, and binds it<sup>144</sup> [...] and the secret that you should receive from it is ‘because<sup>145</sup> the name is within it.’”<sup>146</sup> The divestment of corporeality or imagination, viewed as the evil instinct, is a matter of interiorisation. Thus, it is a nomian approach that informs the description of the very high perception of God according to Rabbinic sources, envisioning Him as performing a common Jewish commandment.

Abulafia recommends using the phylacteries as part of the preparations for performing one of his techniques that is to be carried out at midnight.<sup>147</sup> Donning phylacteries during the night was certainly not a nomian performance, according to Rabbinic instructions, though it is not a sharp digression from the norm. In two instances that are parallel to the other two, phylacteries are not mentioned at all.<sup>148</sup> I suspect, to put it mildly, that no phylacteries were used in the Friday night experience reported by Rabbi Nathan; at the very least, they are not mentioned.<sup>149</sup> This means that they were indeed not considered to be strictly necessary for the technique.

Interestingly enough, in the early sixteenth century, Rabbi Judah Alboṭini’s version of the passage from *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’* contains the following formulation:

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**140** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 134–37. The matter of the “fettering” and putting on of the spiritual form also appears in the Byzantine Kabbalistic book *Sefer ha-Qanah* (Koretz: 1784), fol. 106d: “And the intention is that Enoch divested the bodily element and put on the spiritual element and was fettered by a spiritual knot.”

**141** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 467, 475. Compare also to 464–65.

**142** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 468–69. Compare also to Rabbi Judah Alboṭini, *Sullam ha-‘Aliyyah*, ed. Joseph E. E. Porush (Jerusalem: 1989), 71.

**143** The subject matter is not clear. It is the letter *Yod*, but my assumption is that it is also the soul, as both are, grammatically speaking, feminine.

**144** To the four biblical portions written in the phylacteries.

**145** Exodus 23:21.

**146** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 476:

וכשהיא נכנסת ושוקעת לפנימיותה ומתפשטת מקשר התפלין אשר הוא יצר הרע בגימטרי' וקושרתו [...] והסוד קבל מזה כי שמי בקרבו.

**147** This is the case in *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’* and in *Or ha-Šekhel*. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 38–39, 120.

**148** *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 16, translated in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 38; see also *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 3:10, 365.

**149** *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 479.

If you can,<sup>150</sup> wrap yourself in a *ṭallit* and don your *tefillin* on your head and your arm, so that you may be fearful and in awe of the *Šekhinah*, which is with you at that time. And cleanse yourself and your garments, and if you can, have them all be white,<sup>151</sup> for all this greatly assists the intention of fear and love.<sup>152</sup>

Thus, phylacteries and the ritualistic shawl, the *ṭallit*, are conceived as being helpful for inducing a certain state of mind rather than for keeping certain commandments. They do not ensure the presence of the *Šekhinah*, but rather the appropriate attitude towards her presence, which is produced by the recitation of divine names or combinations of letters. In his *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia also recommends them as an option: “And sit wrapped in pure clean white garments or new garments over all your garments or have your *ṭallit* and your head adorned with *tefillin*.”<sup>153</sup>

The “or” here parallels the “if you can” in the *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’* version and demonstrates that for Abulafia, white clothes are more essential than the traditional ritual objects. In this case, only the phylactery of the head is mentioned, not that of the hand! Interestingly enough, in a Vatican manuscript of *Or ha-Šekhel*, there is a painting illustrating Abulafia’s technique where the figure dons the head phylacteries: his left hand, quite visible in the picture, has no sign of phylacteries.<sup>154</sup> From the dark background that surrounds the figure, it is more than plausible that night is implied as the moment for the recitation of the combinations of letters. Not quite a hypnomic approach, to be sure.

In the third case, when describing the preparations for recitation, Abulafia ignores the issue of wearing phylacteries altogether.<sup>155</sup> In a passage from an unidentified text that is most plausibly part of ecstatic Kabbalah and preserved by Rabbi Ḥayyim Viṭal, we read as follows: “Isolate yourself in a house and close your eyes, and if you can wrap yourself in a *ṭallit* and *tefillin*, it would be better.”<sup>156</sup> The explicitly optional use of external accoutrements from the liturgical ritual helps to account for the absence of *ṭallit* and *tefillin* in Rabbi Nathan’s version in *Ša‘arei Šedeq*. In any case, both the absence of the recommendation to wear the *tefillin* when reciting the divine name in solitude and the above *gematria*, to say nothing of the optional formula-

150 Here and again below the Hebrew phrase is *im tukhal*.

151 See Ecclesiastes 9:8. The sources for white clothes are numerous and include many magical texts. The closest, however, is Rabbi Eleazar of Worms’s *Sefer ha-Šem*. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 237, note 195, and Rabbi Judah ben Nissim ibn Malka, *Kitāb Uns wa-Tafsīr*, ed. Yehuda A. Vajda (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1974), 53.

152 Albotīni’s *Sullam ha-‘Aliyah*, 73. Compare to *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1582, fol. 51b.

153 *Or ha-Šekhel*, Ms. Vatican, 233, fol. 109a, 105. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 223–24.

154 See Ms. Vatican, 597, fol. 113a.

155 See the passage in *Sefer ha-Hešeq* mentioned in chapter 26 note 148 below. Compare to Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 209. Wolfson contends that the donning of the *ṭallit* and *tefillin* are “essential” for the recitation because the latter are no more than “an extension of traditional prayer.” See also Appendix E note 219 below.

156 *Ša‘arei Qeḏušaḥ* (Jerusalem: 1973), 7.

tions, are far from suggesting that this Kabbalist believed that ecstatic Kabbalah was closer to the ritual core of Judaism than philosophy, as a hypernomian might think.<sup>157</sup>

Interestingly enough, the only instance, to my knowledge, where the donning of the *ṭallit* and *tefillin* is not presented as optional is in the version copied from *Or ha-Šekhel* by the early sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Judah Alboṭini, who was active in Jerusalem.<sup>158</sup> Alboṭini was a Halakhic figure, unlike Abulafia and Rabbi Nathan, a fact that may account for the change he made in Abulafia’s advice. Reading the anomian framework through the lens of a nomian figure like Alboṭini does not, however, make the anomian hypernomian.

Clearly, ecstatic Kabbalah’s approach to mystical techniques can be categorised as anomian rather than hypernomian in that—with due respect to Wolfson’s claims<sup>159</sup>—neither Abulafia nor Rabbi Nathan attempted to expand the range of ritual, but they rather strove to validate their own (anomian) techniques that were derived from *Sefer Yeširah*, itself an anomian text, and from the combinatory techniques found among the Hasidei Ashkenaz. These linguistic methods are a skeleton onto which Abulafia incorporates optional technical elements that are designed to inspire awe and a sense of mysteriousness in the atmosphere that surrounds the performance of their combinatory techniques.

The auxiliary status of the phylacteries becomes especially clear when we realise that there is no synchronicity between the ritual acts that are regularly performed in the morning and the mystical techniques that form the core of the ecstatic method. The liturgical artefacts constitute ornaments, as Abulafia himself states, and are not accompanied by any special consideration related to their religious meaning.

In order to better understand their role in Abulafia’s technique and its psycho-ritual background, his advice needs to be compared to a magical formula attributed to the thirteenth-century Rabbi Elijah of London: “When you wish [...] to formulate your question, turn your heart away from all other involvements, and unify your intention and your thoughts to enter the *Pardes*.<sup>160</sup> Sit alone in awe, wrapped in *ṭallit*

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**157** See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 227, on the basis of *Ša‘arei Šedeq, Le Porte della Giustizia*, 477. The hypernomian implication this scholar finds there is unwarranted by the material. For an example of hypernomianism, see the assumption of a somewhat later Kabbalist, the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, who speaks about the *Šekhinah* donning the phylacteries. Cf. Roi, “The Myth of the *Šekhinah* in *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*,” 280–82. See also chapter 16 note 118 above.

**158** See *Sullam ha-‘Aliyyah*, ed. Porush, 69.

**159** See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 209–10. For an earlier use of the term “hypernomism” in the context of Kabbalistic material, see Talya Fishman, “A Kabbalistic Perspective on Gender-Specific Commandments: On the Interplay of Symbols and Society,” *AJS Review* 17 (1992): 199–245. Unlike my view of Abulafia as a universalist versus Wolfson’s view of him as a particularist, which I based on texts that have been ignored, in the case of the nature of the technique, the difference between us is a matter of differing interpretations of, roughly speaking, the same texts.

**160** Namely, the orchard described in many Jewish texts as a supernal level of reality that can be experienced.

and with *tefillin* on your head, and begin [to recite the] 'Mikhtam for David,'<sup>161</sup> the entire psalm [...] and read them with their melodies."<sup>162</sup> This passage is certainly influenced by Kabbalistic thought, but I would not date it to the thirteenth century, even though it is attributed to Rabbi Elijah of London.<sup>163</sup> Nevertheless, its similarities to Abulafia's technique are fascinating, especially the mention of melodies. It can serve as a foil for what we learn from the ecstatic Kabbalist.<sup>164</sup> First and foremost, the recited text is a nomian one, a Psalm, and not a divine name. Moreover, the *ṭallit* and *tefillin* are not means to induce awe, as this is a state of mind already mentioned beforehand. There is nothing optional here: this technique is formulated in a non-conditional manner.

In another formula from the same codex, which is one of the most important Hebrew magical manuscripts, we find:

You may picture the Ineffable Name like the white flame of the candle, in absolute whiteness, and [like] the light when looking at the candle, and even when there is no candle, remember the flame, and there you may see and look at the light, [which stems] from the pure white light. And you must always imagine that you are a soul without a body,<sup>165</sup> and the soul is the light, and you are always within the flames, in the pure clouds.<sup>166</sup> And strive to be pure and complete [or perfect], and if it is daytime, wear *ṣiṣit* and *tefillin* and the ring upon your finger, and at night as well, [wear] the ring upon your finger. And be accustomed to cleanliness in that house where you stand in the sanctuary of God,<sup>167</sup> within His precious, holy, and pure names.<sup>168</sup>

Here, the anonymous author is well-aware that one does not wear phylacteries at night. This ascension on high has both a mystical and a magical component, as the reference to a ring shows. However, unlike the attitude in the two later texts, Abulafia's is not sacramental. The details he recommends are intended to change one's psychological atmosphere before beginning the recitations of the combinations of letters.

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**161** Ps. 16. This psalm had a profound impact on Jewish mysticism, especially verse 8.

**162** Ms. Sassoon 290, 381.

**163** On this figure, see Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic Literature*, especially the index entry for *Eliyahu Menahem ben Moshe mi-London*.

**164** On music as part of Abulafia's technique, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 53–71.

**165** See Vital, "The Fourth Part of *Ša'arei Qeḏuṣah*," in *Ketavim Ḥadašim me-Rabbenu Ḥayyim Viṭal*, ed. Nathanel Safrin (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 1988), 10; Lawrence Fine, "Recitation of Mishnah as a Vehicle for Mystical Inspiration: A Contemplative Technique Taught by Hayyim Vital," *REJ* 141 (1982): 197.

**166** See the Abulafian description of the continuum of God as intellect, the separate intellects, and the human intellect as lights within a candle, quoted in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 130–31.

**167** On the metaphorical resort to terms related to sanctuary, see also chapter 25 above.

**168** Ms. Sassoon 290, 648. This manuscript was mainly copied before the peak of Safedian Kabbalah, although its later parts reflect the impact of Safedian theories.

## 27 Some Methodological Remarks

Let me compare Abulafia's thought to the approach of the Maimonideans, as well as to the approach(es) of most of the other Kabbalists. In the case of the former, his thought diverges in his strong naturalist approach to language, which is conceived as a natural phenomenon related to speech. It is a specifically human feature: humans are speaking and intelligent beings. Abulafia's emphasis on the superiority of the divine names as being conducive to a form of sublime intellection is hardly approximated by the Maimonideans, whose approach to language was essentially informed by its conventionality. Moreover, unlike the more scholastic approach of the Maimonideans, Abulafia developed a much more spiritualist approach that concerned his life and those of his students and not merely theoretical discussions about prophecy or the allegorical exegesis of ancient texts. Finally, his strong eschatological propensities, either individual or collective, are hardly paralleled by any of the followers of the Great Eagle.

Abulafia's pointed critique of theosophical Kabbalah is unparalleled by any other polemic within the Kabbalistic camp in the entire thirteenth century; it is one of the sharpest assaults on this type of Kabbalah ever given. In my opinion, it is not just a matter of an attitude adopted in a moment of intense controversy. On the contrary: his critique of those Kabbalists as being worse, theologically speaking, than Trinitarian Christians would have been counterproductive for someone who was attempting to find a way to mitigate the critique of ibn Adret, as is obvious from his epistle to the latter's colleague in Barcelona, Rabbi Judah Salmon.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, also in other contexts, and not just polemical ones, Abulafia rejects theosophy.<sup>170</sup>

This is also the case with his attitude towards theurgy, as I discussed above.<sup>171</sup> His explicit critique of symbolism as practised by the theosophical Kabbalists touches another major topic on the manner in which the Kabbalists in Spain elaborated their discourse.<sup>172</sup> This topic also links to his special type of esotericism, most of which is closer to the philosophers and to Ashkenazi thought. In short, all of these critiques should be seen as part of the intellectual philosophical mould that informed Abulafia as a matter of principle, not just as a matter of historical conjecture.

Abulafia's acquaintance with the thought of the *falāsifah* is one of the reasons behind his approach, which caused a shift in the centre of the human ideal activity that was decidedly different from the theosophical Kabbalists. Following a Maimonidean, ultimately Greek, propensity, he shifted the emphasis from what I call the performing body that concerns the Rabbinic tradition and the integration of the perfor-

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<sup>169</sup> Ed. Jellinek, 19, quoted below in Appendix C.

<sup>170</sup> See *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 40.

<sup>171</sup> See chapter 17 note 154 above.

<sup>172</sup> See the passage translated above from *Imrei Šefer*, 18.



mance of both body and soul that concerns most of the Kabbalistic traditions<sup>173</sup> to intellectual operations or, more rarely, to processes in the external reality. He considered them as secrets on the one hand and as sublime ideals to be attained on the other.

These differences and others separate Abulafia from the two main alternative camps to which he should be compared: the Maimonideans and the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists. He was a significant member of the former, but was acquainted with and critical of the latter, which is evident not just from his biography, but also from the content of his books, when understood as he would have liked them to be. Nevertheless, given his synthetic approach, he differed dramatically from both. At least in the case of the theosophical Kabbalists, the rejection was quite explicit and sharp, as we learn from ibn Adret's influential attitude and from the more elaborate attack by Rabbi Judah Ḥayyaṭ made at the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>174</sup>

Thus, both conceptually and socially, Abulafia remained outside the Spanish Kabbalists' camp for two full centuries after his death. This reciprocal rejection is unparalleled in the case of any other Kabbalist from those centuries and it was only through the restructuring of the Spanish Kabbalah after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain that the enmity of the Spanish Kabbalists towards his sort of Kabbalah was mitigated. The modern scholarly attempts to reduce the gap between the two forms of Kabbalah ignore the importance both of the histories of Kabbalah and of its phenomenological variety, as Scholem and I have proposed by elaborating on Abulafia's own typology to a great extent. However, Abulafia's esotericism should be seen as part of a much broader phenomenon which included Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and Ashkenazi literature: what I call the profound arcanisation of Judaism. Though there were plenty of secrets in Qumran, Rabbinic, magical, and Hekhalot literatures, those secrets were nevertheless contained in only a few areas. However, from the twelfth century, an accelerated process of more comprehensive interpretations of Judaism as constituted by secret messages, and more rarely mysterious ones, took place, with the late thirteenth century as one of the peaks of this process that would develop for four further centuries.

Though much more a matter of rhetoric than of practice, the vector was definitely in the direction of a proliferation of secrets in general, including areas of secrecy that earlier had not been conceived as esoteric. The founder of ecstatic Kabbalah was active at the intersection of most of these types of esotericism and his approach, though profoundly influenced by philosophical esotericism, did not exclude the astral one

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173 See Idel, "On the Performing Body," 251–71, and Idel, "Nišmat Eloha: On the Divinity of the Soul in Nahmanides and His School." Let me point out the difference between the theosophical Kabbalists' assumption that the soul is divine, has descended here below, and is striving to return to the supernal source versus Abulafia's emphasis on the intellect that grows from its potential to actual status. Thus, even when the two types of Kabbalah discuss the same issue, such as *devequt*, the issue means quite different things in the different systems of thought.

174 See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 221.

as advocated by Abraham ibn Ezra or the Ashkenazi one, and he mentions the theosophical-theurgical issues only rarely and rhetorically.

Moreover, unlike other medieval authors, Abulafia is one of the very few whose rhetoric includes the assumption that secrets may be inserted into the interpreted texts through a conscious process of secretive eisegesis that I call comprehensive arcanisation, which means that secrets were not only elicited from the interpreted texts, but also projected into them by means of a variety of exegetical methods that he described.<sup>175</sup>

By unveiling the dominantly political nature of those secrets whose importance Abulafia deemed worthwhile either to put into relief or to hide, we may have a more solid insight into the specific nature of his speculative axiology. Natural processes and natural linguistics, envisioned as conducive to sublime noetic processes, are the clues for understanding his esoteric axiology. This is the reason why it is difficult for me to understand why some scholars attempt to mitigate the central role the noetic processes played in his writings while blurring the phenomenological divergences between his writings and those of the theosophical Kabbalists whose conceptual worldviews were so different on this point.

It is Neo-Aristotelian philosophy that serves as the main source of the hermeneutical grid for reinterpreting the earlier layers of Judaism in a manner that gravitates around noetic processes. This means that Abulafia possesses a naturalistic understanding of religion that brings together the Neo-Aristotelian intellectual apparatus, non-linguistic in nature, with the cosmology and linguistics of *Sefer Yeşirah*, whose worldview he interprets in a strongly naturalistic manner. As Abulafia indicates, these two sources should be seen as coefficient but insufficient if separated from one another.<sup>176</sup> It is here that the originality of Abulafia's writings can be discerned because unlike the other Kabbalists, he does not betray his earlier adherence to Maimonides, and unlike the Maimonideans, he does not remain imprisoned in a scholastic approach based on Arabic-Jewish Neo-Aristotelianism and its application to the religious texts by means of allegories and homonyms.

Abulafia's approach is a hybrid approach that brings together these disparate realms—linguistic speculations with intellectualistic ones through modifying each of them, especially the former—despite their significant conceptual dissonance. For example, he inserted linguistic elements into Maimonides's philosophical definition of prophecy on the one hand and loaded these elements—namely, the Hebrew letters and the divine names and their combinations—with an intellectual cargo on the other.<sup>177</sup> This more philosophically oriented conceptualisation of the sources of Abulafia's thought is also true in the case of the extant lists of the books he claims to have studied; we are indeed able to definitively ascertain that he used them in his

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<sup>175</sup> This process is described in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*.

<sup>176</sup> *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:1, 33. On Abulafia's preference of the phonetic over the graphic elements of language, see my *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 135, note 11.

<sup>177</sup> See, for example, *Sitrei Torah*, 160, and *Oşar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1580, fol. 90a.

writings. His claims are not just boasting, as is the case of Rabbi Hillel according to Joseph B. Sermoneta.

With this approach in mind, the more specific analyses of topics above allow for the understanding of Abulafia's worldview as presupposing a rather stable universe within whose framework it is possible for a man to achieve some form of sublime noetic experiences through resorting to techniques Abulafia articulated starting from 1280.<sup>178</sup> This natural stability should be seen against the background of its author: an itinerant thinker, often in motion from one country to another, who believed that he was living in a time of dramatic transition and who interpreted the words of the texts as having been manipulated in a variety of ways so that through new combinations of letters, he could introduce a variety of meanings stemming from his own mind.

On the grounds of the materials adduced above, some of which have not yet been discussed in scholarship, it seems quite plausible that Abulafia was inclined to a more universalistic conception of man (within the constraints of his time and place) than most of his thirteenth-century contemporaries, with the possible exception of Rabbi Menahem ha-Me'iri. Even the Ancient Greek philosophers who contributed so much to the emergence of the universalist approach had their prejudices, as the use of the word "barbarian" shows.

Especially surprising are the recent depictions of Abulafia's thought as particularist and the assumption that he adopted theosophical views.<sup>179</sup> These descriptions are missing an accurate understanding of the main point of his Kabbalistic enterprise: in some instances, he allegorises Kabbalistic symbolism, just as he allegorises biblical verses or Rabbinic legends. Without seeing a more comprehensive and complex picture based on the entire range of pertinent discussions, the scholar and the reader are lost in details that may not fit the more complex intention of the author or the general picture as it emerges from the specifics of its literary presentation. Therefore, they generate some analyses of details in a rather surprising manner.

It is particularly important to decode the specific types of discourse, replete with both allegories and gematrias that are hardly found in Kabbalistic literature before Abulafia and the circle related to him, as well as the content of his secrets. No doubt this is one of the most complex types of discourse, which necessitates much more than just decoding numerical equivalences: it also requires an attempt to understand the types of narratives he uses, either alone or together.

Through the unnecessary efforts to reduce the importance of the philosophical dimensions of Abulafia's thought that are too obvious in almost all of his studies on the topic along with an overemphasis on a few theosophical themes found in some of his writings—which, in my opinion, Abulafia often reinterpreted in a new,

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<sup>178</sup> See Appendix B below.

<sup>179</sup> See the subtitle of Wolfson's book on Abraham Abulafia in which both theurgy and theosophy are mentioned.

non-theosophical manner that was essentially a phenomenon of allegorising symbolism<sup>180</sup>—Elliot Wolfson has striven to soften the phenomenological gap between the two major forms of Kabbalah in the thirteenth century.<sup>181</sup> In this context, let me note that he has also overemphasised the impact of Maimonides on the theosophical Kabbalists, again blurring the sharp divergences between the two forms of Kabbalah.<sup>182</sup>

There is no reason not to highlight the profound affinities between Abulafia's theories and various forms of philosophy, especially Maimonidean ones. Otherwise, the core of his message remains solely within the second narrative, as is indeed the case in some of Wolfson's particularist readings of this Kabbalist. This amounts to an exoteric understanding of a person whom I consider to be an esoteric Kabbalist. Abulafia has therefore been judged by scholars on the level he wanted to project for the unqualified readers, the vulgus, while the secrets that he wanted to hide have remained hidden in the recent scholarship on his thought.<sup>183</sup> At the same time as he tries to uncover the phallogocentric "secret" of Kabbalah, envisioning the divine perfection as a male androgyne and imagining that this disclosure of his well-kept secret transforms Abulafia into a heretic in the eyes of other scholars of Kabbalah, Wolfson<sup>184</sup> reads Abulafia, who was banned and deemed heretical in his lifetime and also for many years afterwards, in quite a harmonistic manner, as a particularist Kabbalist like all the others.

The question that should therefore be asked at this stage of our discussion is: if Abulafia resorts to more traditional explanations of topics in many places in his writ-

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**180** I have prepared a separate study on this phenomenon.

**181** For the assumption of a substantial bifurcation in the phenomenology of Kabbalah as pointed out by Abulafia himself, see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 7–10; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, xii–xvii; Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," 117–43; and Idel, "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah,'" 40–52. I hope to return to this issue in a more expanded manner based on some texts that have not yet been taken into consideration in another study.

**182** See, more recently, Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence." This is also the case in the study by Lachter, "Kabbalah, Philosophy and the Jewish–Christian Debate," 1–58, who, in my opinion, overemphasises some themes as if Gikatilla's "immersion" in theosophical imagery is already present in his early writings. In this case, just as in Wolfson and Sagerman's approach, we may discern the same sort of effort to "theosophise" material that is not concerned with theosophy through assuming an esoteric theosophical level. In these cases, the scholars analyse only disparate themes of these materials rather than their profound structures, and then some form of implicit conclusion as to a hidden layer of thought is drawn. Though different from Abulafia's more naturalistic approach and his more sympathetic attitude to philosophy, Gikatilla's early worldview also differs dramatically from the Kabbalistic theosophy that he would so magnificently expose in his later Kabbalistic books. See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 108–10.

**183** This, in my opinion, is also the case in Wolfson's discussion of the rationales of the commandments, where he distinguishes between esoteric and exoteric levels. See his *Abraham Abulafia*, 186–97, and see, for the time being, my "On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia," 430–51.

**184** See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Gender and Heresy in the Study of Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 6 (2001): 231–62.

ings, but in one or more cases offers secret views that contradict the former, are the former exoteric expressions a cover for the esoteric ones? This is a crucial issue that cannot be answered in general terms without a detailed analysis of the meaning of the various secrets themselves. However, on the grounds of Abulafia's resort to the phrase "Holy Language" in both the traditional sense and in its esoteric and naturalist sense, which differs so significantly from its exoteric understanding, as has been presented above, and of the secret of the divine choice, I am inclined to offer a positive answer.

This is also the case with the interpretation I have given of the parable of the pearl, as well as that of his reinterpretation of popular messianism as ultimately speaking about an individualistic kind of redemption. In some cases, though not all, the secrets that Abulafia conceives as important are highlighted with terms like "wondrous" and other similar adjectives. My assumption as to the importance of these secrets is not a subjective evaluation.

In other words, we should take Abulafia's indications as to what is important much more seriously than they were taken in the past. To put it another way: in my opinion, Abulafia was a Maimonidean not just in what he said or in his resort to Neo-Aristotelian nomenclature, but also in the manner in which he hid matters, both through the strategy of homonyms and, which seems to me to be even more important, in the nature of the matters he decided to hide themselves. Such Maimonidean esotericism, which is essentially political in nature, is even more surprising for a Kabbalist who claimed that the time of the end had arrived and that the secrets should be revealed; that is, he claimed that the stark distinction between the vulgar and the elite had been mitigated.

I would also like to point out the difference between Maimonides's economy of esotericism and Abulafia's. The Great Eagle assumed that his book, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, was a self-contained unit that served as the sole container of his secrets. They are spread and hidden within the contradictions and hints found in this single and very carefully written book. This does not mean that his two earlier major books are not mentioned or that they cannot help us to understand his secrets. However, these books were built on other strategies of hiding secrets to those adopted in the *Guide*, and secrets were not the author's primary intention for writing them.

In this book, I have culled passages from around three dozen of Abulafia's texts. From these passages, it is clear that Abulafia adopted a different strategy that necessitated not only considering the different wavelengths or registers for different audiences, as was also the case for Maimonides himself, but also developments in his own thought over the course of twenty years. Moreover, Abulafia wrote his numerous books under the impression (or in the confidence) that he was living and acting during a special moment in history, as well as that he was playing a unique, redemptive role, at least according to the historical narrative. It should be mentioned that Abulafia could not have imagined that his most avid reader would have possessed all of his writings, which were composed in different countries and for different audiences. Therefore, contradictions may not only be a matter of deliberate authorial decisions,

as is explicitly the case with Maimonides's esotericism, but also of conceptual fluidity, which should be taken into consideration when dealing with his thematic approach.

What cannot be denied, however, is the fact that Abulafia repeatedly pointed to the existence of secrets, including extreme epithets that refer to his emphasis on the special importance of some of them in particular. He also provides expressions of heterodox ideas, sometimes in a clear manner, in his rebuttal of the Rabbinic theory of pollution and his rather convoluted treatments of the problems of the nature of the choosing of the Jewish people and the freedom of the divine will. Though these issues are different themes, they are all related to each other, and they are part of the profound structure of Abulafia's teachings. These are questions, tensions, and frictions that generated stark opposition through the introduction of naturalist themes into a particularist religion; the tensions found in Abulafia's texts were translated in the public arena through his banishment by ibn Adret.

In more general terms, the question is: to what extent were the contents of Abulafia's writings, which he would call Kabbalah, identical to his own esotericism? In my opinion, the answer is complex. At least in one case, Abulafia distinguishes between the Kabbalistic interpretation, seen as the plain sense, and the secret meaning of a certain commandment.<sup>185</sup> Though he envisioned ecstatic Kabbalah as the path leading to what he conceived as being the highest experience, be it prophetic or messianic, this is not necessarily an esoteric issue, though the identification of the prophet or the Messiah with a certain specific person may indeed be part of eschatological esotericism. The highest experience, that of mystical union in itself, does not have to be related to esotericism, which, in my opinion, should be essentially understood in a political manner; namely, as being intended to hide the religious framework which frames the experience: the naturalist-inclined religion that is an important register, which includes the centrality of the noetic transformation, in strident opposition to the traditional forms of Jewish religion, with its emphasis on the centrality of the performance of rituals.

This conclusion can be formulated in more general categories: the religious framework (Abulafia's theology and cosmology) is essentially naturalistic, a fact that allows for the accomplishment of the highest experience through a mental process. The two intertwined aspects, the natural and the mental, belong to the third narrative. These two elements, both by their nature and by the sources that inspired Abulafia, are rather universalist. In my opinion, the anomian character of Abulafia's techniques assumes the possibility of attaining these experiences in a short time by resorting to linguistic repetitions and bodily acts that are not dependent on the Rabbinic rituals. These practices are reminiscent of Hindu, Hesychastic, and perhaps

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<sup>185</sup> See *Sitrei Torah*, 44.

also Sufi techniques.<sup>186</sup> The role of the divine will in preventing the achievement of prophecy is negligible in Abulafia's writings, thus allowing the performance of his techniques to be the main means of obtaining a prophetic experience, though it would ideally be preceded by some form of philosophical education.

In general, Wolfson's approach to Abulafia as a particularist and his more concrete readings of Abulafia's statements—taking as he does the national-historical narrative of the parable of the pearl as if it were the main message that Abulafia intended to convey—differs from my emphasis on the centrality of the metaphorical and allegorical aspects of his texts. My approach is much more inclined towards the universal dimension of his thought, which is either only succinctly mentioned or is carefully hidden in his works. This dimension informs the manner of reading his writings I have provided above.

Our approaches also differ insofar as the attitude towards commandments is concerned: my assumption is that Abulafia's techniques are anomian, and subsequently less dependent on Rabbinic rituals, if at all, while Wolfson assumes that they are "hypernomian" and thus that they strengthen these rituals. These substantial differences have had an impact on our general understandings of Kabbalah: I assume a greater polarisation of camps or schools and see a much less homogeneous view of the field, while Wolfson blurs some of what I see as the most vital differences between them, offering a more theosophical understanding of all Kabbalistic phenomena. Indeed, these two readings still deserve additional special, critical, and detailed studies that discuss the appropriateness of these two diverging scholarly analyses of and approaches to these specific texts.

My call for a comprehensive understanding and attentive reading of details and discerning contradictions, based on weighing the nature and continuing impact of Abulafia's philosophical sources, is indeed one of the reasons why I decided to provide most of the original Hebrew texts in the footnotes of this book: in this way, a more informed type of argumentation can be undertaken by scholars. The fact that some of the texts dealt with here are only available in manuscript form has also encouraged me to provide the Hebrew originals. From perusing scholarship in this specific field, scholars do not turn to the manuscripts often enough in order to ascertain the accuracy of a translation or interpretation, and seldom search for yet unidentified texts in manuscripts belonging to ecstatic Kabbalah. Even supposing the mere existence of such texts barely surfaces in recent scholarship.

Let me point out that since my description of Abulafia's literary corpus in my PhD dissertation submitted in 1976, scholars writing entire books have not found

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<sup>186</sup> See my *The Mystical Experience*, 13–52, and *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. Let me point out that the Sufi impact on Abulafia has been exaggerated in recent years on the basis of very scant grounds; I hope to return to this issue elsewhere. See Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 195–98; Hames, "A Seal within a Seal," 153–72; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 34–35; Idel "Definitions of Prophecy: Maimonides and Abulafia," 33, note 21; Idel, "*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries," 492, note 59; and chapter 24 note 20 above.



even a single previously unknown page belonging to this Kabbalist, even in the case of an industrious scholar like Elliot Wolfson, who has published a great deal about Abulafia and regularly reads manuscripts. This is a rather surprising situation, given the fact that it is still possible to find new materials belonging to Abulafia and his school in manuscript (and even in print) that were unknown to me at that point in time. As I have done in several of my earlier studies, in my discussions above I have brought forth manuscript materials from texts that I did not deal with in my dissertation,<sup>187</sup> and I also hope to do so in additional studies concerning several unidentified texts in the near future.

Unfortunately, recent studies of Abulafia rely—with many omissions and with what I consider to be bibliographical mistakes—on only a small portion of the material I already outlined in 1976 and in some studies written afterwards. The authors of these studies only seem to use the recent printed editions of his works, which are not always reliable, and neglect new material that is still extant only in manuscript form. Although access to hundreds of unknown manuscripts is more facilitated than it has ever been in Jewish history, the study of the range of material found in these manuscripts has been surprisingly limited, even more than in the very beginning of the study of Kabbalah by the likes of Adolph Jellinek and Gershom Scholem, who did not enjoy the technological possibilities available today. However, what seems to be more problematic is not just the sometimes lazy resort to printed works (often without any reference to my 1976 identifications of manuscript texts and sources belonging to Abulafia): rather, some scholars' selective reading of his texts is caused by their selective manner of treating the pertinent material and above all their ignoring of the content of the esoteric dimensions of his writings.

The selective manner in which the content of these printed books has been presented is often informed by a more comprehensive agenda, as we have seen above in the case of the treatment of the pollution myth.

The impression these scholars give is that they are less committed to a serious acquaintance with the details of the complex field in which Abulafia wrote than what would be expected. The manner in which Abulafia's treatment of the Rabbinic statement on the primordial pollution and the cathartic Sinaitic experience has been discussed is based solely on one discussion among many others, and Pedaya's treatment of Abulafia's interpretations of the phrase "end of time" are examples of a fragmentary and sometimes impressionistic presentation of the rich material available in print, to say nothing of the need to peruse unknown material in manuscripts.

Let me clarify my approach here: I am not concerned with the lack of exhaustive scholarly treatments of topics related to Abulafia—I am sure, for example, that parallels to some of my discussions above can be amplified by additional passages—but only with instances where such a lack has caused misleading presentations and sometimes even inversions of Abulafia's views. However, what is even more disturb-

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**187** See also my *Ben*, 324–26.

ing is the fact that on the grounds of these impressionistic treatments, comparisons with other Kabbalistic writings have been drawn and much broader conclusions about the nature of Kabbalah in the thirteenth century, and sometimes its nature in general, have been presented and then accepted and repeated by other scholars in a cringingly obsequious manner. Though I am ready to admit that my presentation is based on texts I have selected and that another scholar could draw upon another selection of texts, the extent of the pertinent material adduced in order to make a certain point and the correctness of its understanding will determine what serious scholarship will adopt or abandon in the future critical work in the field.

I hope that any further study will demonstrate the centrality of what Abulafia would consider the higher, individualistic-spiritual register in his esoteric thought, though other registers that were less important for him as an esotericist and that were intended for other audiences are also to be found in his writings. For a more accurate understanding of the uniqueness of Abulafia's thought, it is necessary to uncover his profound conceptual structure (within which there are fluctuations related to conceptual fluidity) and to compare it to those of the other Kabbalists. It is also necessary to avoid drawing conclusions on the basis of comparing only isolated and marginal themes or terms. After all, meaning stems from the nature of the comprehensive structures that should be understood as informing the particular themes that constitute these structures and their valences. I have attempted in this book to show that this profound structure stems from philosophical Neo-Aristotelian noetics.

Though Abulafia most probably adopted a complex philosophical theology drawing from a variety of Neo-Aristotelian sources that in principle does not allow changes within the divine realm or of the separate intellects induced by human activities, his emphasis on the positive role of language is far from anything we may find in the philosophies available to him, with the possible exception of Rabbi Judah ha-Levi, whose book *Kuzari* he never mentions. It is the manipulation of language that ensures the acceleration of acts of intellection and thus the attainment of experiences he believed to be sublime: prophecy and, even higher, a union with the separate intellects or with God. The combination of the mentalistic philosophical approach and the linguistic techniques represents an original achievement that starkly distinguishes him from the camps of the Maimonidean philosophers, as well as from the vast majority of the other Kabbalists.

However, for a better understanding of Abulafia's ideal experiences, it is important to recognise that he adopted the Avicennian and Averroistic ideals of intellectual conjunction and that he not only dramatically reinterpreted some aspects of Maimonides's approach as to the limitations of human cognition of the spiritual world as found in the *Guide*, but also introduced a more universal ideal into Kabbalistic literature. This introduction has been ignored, or at least underestimated, in scholarship and requires more attention. Understanding (in scholarship as well) should be pre-occupied with discerning what is unique, new, and idiosyncratic, dependent as it may be on a variety of other sources that were digested, reinterpreted, and sometimes even openly criticised. The scholarly turn to Abulafia's writing in the mid-nineteenth

century in the pioneering studies of Meyer H. Landauer and Adolph Jellinek is interesting. Jellinek's publication of some of Abulafia's epistles and a few extracts from his books in some of his more open-minded studies produced in Germany in the second part of the nineteenth century was paralleled by an interest in Averroes's noetics in Jewish scholarly studies. This parallel is evident in the contemporary Jewish scholars' publication of the medieval Hebrew translations of the Cordovan commentator's treatises,<sup>188</sup> as well as a variety of other Maimonidean authors such as Samuel ibn Tibbon, Hillel of Verona, ibn Falaquera, ibn Kaspi, and Narboni. Some of these authors were contemporaries of Abulafia. However, these two lines of scholarly interest did not then meet,<sup>189</sup> and only rarely did so in subsequent generations.

I have attempted to draw material pertinent for the interpretation of Abulafia's parable from its immediate literary context—namely, the book in which it is embedded, *Or ha-Šekhel*—as well as from his other Kabbalistic treatises written shortly beforehand, such as *Sitrei Torah*, and his commentaries on his prophetic books, as well as Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah's *Ša'arei Šedeq*. Rabbi Nathan is one of the two Kabbalists to whom *Or ha-Šekhel* was dedicated. This seems to me to be the best methodological approach in order to understand his views, which changed over the years as part of his conceptual fluidity. Likewise, I have tried to rely as much as possible on the philosophical sources that he expressly asserted that he had read, sometimes commented on, and sometimes quoted, such as Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and Averroes respectively. I have tried not to indulge in speculations about the pertinence of other sources that are not expressly mentioned.

Given the fact that we have a rather detailed list of the books that Abulafia read (indeed, there is more that can be added to these sources, but this is not the place to do so), which is information that is incomparably more detailed than is the case with any other Kabbalist, scholarship would do better to attempt to address possibilities found in these sources first before indulging in any further speculations as to types of sources that are merely conjectures. Instead of perusing the available books, scholars choose to analyse the content of lost books that no one can read or even non-existent ones as possible sources for Abulafia's thought.<sup>190</sup> Indeed, it is much easier to do so than to actually read the manuscripts by Samuel ibn Tibbon or Jacob Anatoli's translations of Averroes's books that Abulafia read and, in some cases, also quoted.

My insistence on the relevance of the sources that are explicitly quoted or at least mentioned constitutes a more cautious approach to Abulafian scholarship. However, I do not intend to prevent the discovery of the possible impact of other unnamed sources in the future, especially if additional sources are referenced in Abulafia's writings. However, methodologically speaking, it is wiser to make a serious effort

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**188** See chapter 6 note 244 above and the Hebrew translations printed in *Über die Möglichkeit der Konjunktion oder über den materiellen Intellect*, ed. Ludwig Hanne (Halle: 1892).

**189** The only significant exception is Werbluner's footnote mentioned in chapter 5 note 200 above.

**190** See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 492.

to first exhaust the possible contribution of what I see as the cluster of Andalusian sources that are evident in Abulafia's conceptual horizon before turning one's gaze to hypothetical possibilities and their presumed impacts. It is not that these speculative attempts are problematic, but they should be made only with the caveat that their results must be clearly presented in a manner that will be properly understood in scholarship as what they indeed are: conjectures or working hypotheses. A cautious scholar should not build additional hypothetical constructs upon those conjectures, which are sometimes quite shaky, given by other scholars.

Given the non-critical approach of some younger scholars to such hypotheses, sometimes accepted as if they were proven (and there are even attempts to elaborate and build further speculations upon them), there is a certain burden of responsibility in the very articulation of these conjunctures. Thus, the proliferation of conjectures by a too-easy resort to formulating possibilities without a proper perusal of the entire range of extant material is prone to creating even more speculative proposals by later scholars, who build upon earlier speculations without critically examining the earlier proposals. It is a case of repeating someone's else communication, a repetition and a much less critical account of what the medieval author under scrutiny had to say.

Such a mirror vortex is evident in Haviva Pedaya's recent description of Abulafia as being influenced by a Sufi approach that can allegedly be found in a book that he studied written by Rabbi Ezra of Gerona. However, the source actually stems from Rabbi Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari*. Harvey Hames accepted the "Sufi" theory without any hesitation. He then attributed a Sufi influence to a lost text by Rabbi Ezra (*Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*) that no one has seen since 1270 or 1286, when its existence was briefly mentioned by Abulafia.<sup>191</sup> In her turn, Pedaya adopted Hames's hypothesis as to the Joachimite-Franciscan impact on Abulafia as if it constituted a well-established fact. She took no precautions, qualifications, or even doubts, transforming it into a proven thesis (as Sagerman also did)<sup>192</sup> without being aware of the bibliographical problem behind the claim of the "Sufi" nature of Rabbi Ezra's lost *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, which to my best knowledge, no scholar has ever read.<sup>193</sup> Nor have I seen any awareness in scholars writing about Abulafia of the fascinating phenomenon of a scholar inventing a commentary on *Sefer Yeşirah*, which was allegedly written by Abulafia's former student Rabbi Moses of Burgos and which has been understood as containing theosophical material that could have influenced Abulafia's alleged tendency towards theosophy.<sup>194</sup> In fact, such a commentary never existed. It is much easier, as mentioned above, to speculate on the contents of lost Kab-

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**191** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 35; Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, 191–97; and some other cases that I am not discussing here.

**192** Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 354, note 288.

**193** See Pedaya, "The Sixth Millennium," 66–68, 74–75, 85, where she refers to various parts of Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*.

**194** See Pedaya, "The Sixth Millennium," 67–68; see more in my "Sefer Yetzirah and Its Commentaries," 492.

balistic books or those that never existed than to carefully peruse many of Abulafia's extant treatises or the studies concerning them before ventilating impressionistic theories.

To the best of my knowledge, mistaken claims in this mirror vortex of reciprocal quotations have never been checked. They are part of some scholars' uncritical reliance on the shaky hypotheses of other scholars, which in turn generate additional shaky hypotheses. The great problem in scholarship is, however, not with the existence of these mistakes, but their endurance. There are examples of uncritical approaches in scholarship in the last decade that represent not only a regress from the goal of introducing unknown texts by Abulafia into the discussion, but also a passive acceptance of hypothetical suggestions made by scholars as if they were indeed proven. They then build new hypotheses on these original, but untested hypotheses. The later proposals turn out to be even less plausible, formulated as they are without fresh textual resources that are not known to scholars, with quotations from sources deemed to have influenced Abulafia, or even without mention of those alleged sources; they are produced without first considering the entire range of possible sources before choosing the best ones for the task.

This is the reason why a wider acquaintance with the pertinent backgrounds would address, for example, the possibility of the impact of the Averroistic trends in Italy in the second part of the thirteenth century that has already been studied by Joseph B. Sermoneta, whose unpublished PhD dissertation has not attracted its due attention from any of the scholars writing entire books on Hillel's former student Abulafia. In general, let me point out that while the more mature Abulafia spent a little less than twenty of the most important years for his intellectual development and career (ca. 1261–ca. 1268 and 1279–91) in Italy and Sicily, he spent only around three to four years (ca. 1269–73) in the Spanish provinces. However, those Spanish years were decisive ones for his Kabbalistic career. This is the reason why greater importance should be attributed to the Italian periods for his studies in the first period and for his teaching and writings in the second. The studies in the Italian period provided the matrix for interpreting what he learned and taught after 1279.

Some of Averroes's books were available in Hebrew during Abulafia's lifetime due to translations made by some of the Maimonideans (Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon and their relative Jacob Anatoli); a significant portion of his works was studied by the young Abulafia himself, most probably in Capua. This is the reason why I insisted on surveying the Maimonidean movement as a relevant intellectual structure that parallels the profound philosophical structure of Abulafia's thought on both its esoteric and exoteric levels. More than any other type of source, this is the most relevant type of literature for understanding the starting point of this Kabbalist's thought rather than sources that are Sufi, theosophical, Franciscan, Joachimite, or others, even if one is able to show philologically, not only conjecturally, that he was indeed significantly influenced by any of them. I would say that even if we look at all the suggestions made by scholars as to his possible sources, they do not explain the core of Abulafia's intellectual concerns in the way that his Maimoni-

dean background and Arabic philosophy do. I would also say that a good acquaintance with medieval Hebrew in general,<sup>195</sup> and especially with the particular Tibbonian philosophical dialect, is indispensable for understanding the Maimonideans and Abulafia. Interestingly, traces of the specific Hebrew style of Rabbi Hillel, heavily influenced by Latin scholastic sources, are absent in Abulafia's writings, which resort to Tibbonite nomenclature.

Let me repeat what I wrote many years ago in a passage about the study of eighteenth-century Hasidism that was quoted in part by Hames in his book on Abulafia, since it is indeed also relevant for the manner in which this Kabbalist should be studied:

In lieu of relying on the findings of others, the student of Jewish mysticism might better investigate in depth the kind of material that we may reasonably assume were seen, quoted and though sometimes misunderstood by the mystics, were nevertheless formative with regard to their religious worldview<sup>196</sup> [...] in many cases "history" stands for the shaky picture accepted by one scholar on the basis of the writings of another [...] collected sometimes according to a preconceived theory about the social, political, or economic situation.<sup>197</sup>

I have more to say about those historical issues in Appendices C and D below. This is the reason why I consider it to be incumbent on each scholar to check all the crucial data and claims that were made before him or her and, more importantly, not to build new speculations or hypotheses on others' older speculations or hypotheses, a shaky edifice to be sure.<sup>198</sup> Let me add now that this is also the case in any intellectual history that rarely takes the full range of manuscript materials we have into consideration.

As mentioned above, a better approach consists in first specialising in a series of writings that were studied by Abulafia himself or ones that are parallel to the topics of his earlier studies, like the books written by the Maimonideans or the voluminous Ashkenazi sources, some of which he mentions or even quotes, before trying to guess what his sources could have been. Nor am I aware of efforts to read other pertinent

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**195** See my detailed analyses of the quite problematic understandings of different medieval Hebrew texts found in Idel, *Rabbi Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist*, 1:217–19, and, more recently, Idel, "On the Identity of the Authors of Two Ashkenazi Commentaries to the Poem *ha-Aderet we-ha-Emunah*," 141–42, and below in Appendix E, and ch. 21 above.

**196** That is what I have attempted to do above without relying on the available historical reconstructions, which are often no more than hypotheses or conjectures that are not sustained in the material with which I am acquainted.

**197** Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 22–23, cited in part by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 108, note 8. For my reasons for questioning the contribution of historians to the study of Abulafia, see Appendix C. My critical approach has not changed since then, judging from the discussion of the historical mistakes in recent scholarship on the topic in many of my footnotes in this study. For example, see Appendix D.

**198** See, especially, chapter 4 note 32, chapter 4 note 42, chapter 5 note 190, chapter 13 note 26, chapter 16 note 97, chapter 21 note 328, chapter 21 note 329 above and Appendices C and D below.

manuscripts of this period that still await serious perusal, or even texts by Abulafia that remain in manuscript, to say nothing of identifying new texts written by him.

The philosophical sources I have discussed were studied and quoted—sometimes at length—and were certainly part of the intellectual ambience of a few Jews in Abulafia's generation. Their priority as reliable sources is incomparably greater than that of any of the other type of sources one may imagine, if no significant discovery of new Abulafian material unknown to me is made. They account, as mentioned above, for the two main forms of ideal attainments: Maimonides's book for his definition of prophecy and its source in al-Fārābī and Avicenna, and Averroes for his account of mystical union, both cast in the noetic terms used by these philosophers. At the same time, Hames duly recognises that there are no direct quotations of or references to what he conceives to be the Christian sources of Abulafia's eschatology.<sup>199</sup>

But alas, for the time being, even the Kabbalistic material that was identified as belonging to Abulafia and his circle forty years ago has been read only in part in recent scholarship, and in quite a surprising manner: sometimes superficially and quite selectively. At the same time, some of his views have been presented in a rather inverted manner.

Another phenomenon that has been generated by the recent interest in Abulafia is the exaggeration of his impact. He has become, out of the blue, a source, and

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**199** See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 104. However, his complaint on 4–5 and 104 that Abulafia's eschatology has not been studied against its historical context is, in my opinion, more than surprising; also surprising is that he considers that my approach is not historical, but phenomenological. Let me note my discussions of the possible impact of the Mongol invasion, which was known in Catalonia and most probably also to Abulafia before he arrived in Italy. See, for example, my *Messianic Mystics*, 8, 58, 81, 124; my "On Apocalypticism in Judaism," in *Progress, Apocalypse, and Completion of History and Life After Death of the Human Person in the World Religions*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002): 49–54, 73; my "The Beginnings of the Kabbalah in North Africa? The Forgotten Document of Rabbi Judah ben Nissim ibn Malka" [Hebrew], *Pe'amim* 43 (1990): 4–15, 9; and, more recently, my "Mongol Invasions and Astrology: Two Sources of Apocalyptic Elements in 13th-Century Kabbalah," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 10 (2014): 145–68. This approach is as historical, or even more so, as the hypotheses of a Joachimite influence that has not been demonstrated, but rather supported solely through the mentioning of circumstantial possibilities and without the analysis of a single text by Abulafia that compellingly reflects specific Joachimite or Franciscan terminologies. As to the other inadequate accusation that my approach is merely phenomenological, see what I wrote in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, xix, 210–13, 250–60, which states that phenomenology and history should be used together, unlike the misunderstandings of my approach by scholars who are much less historically oriented than me. Simply put, they mistake my critique of historicism, which I called proximism, as if it were a critique of history! Compare to Ron Margolin, "Moshe Idel's Phenomenology and Its Sources," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6, no. 18 (2007): 43, or Boaz Huss, "The Theology of the Research of Jewish Mysticism" [Hebrew], in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, 53. The assumption that it is necessary to choose between history and phenomenology as if they are exclusive approaches is a false presentation of the practice of my studies. See also Appendix B note 82 below.



sometimes a clue, for understanding, for example, Castilian messianism,<sup>200</sup> Ramon Llull,<sup>201</sup> Dante Alighieri,<sup>202</sup> Meister Eckhart,<sup>203</sup> Johanan Alemanno,<sup>204</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,<sup>205</sup> Judah Albotini,<sup>206</sup> Moses Cordovero,<sup>207</sup> Ḥayyim Viṭal,<sup>208</sup> Spinoza,<sup>209</sup> and Leibniz,<sup>210</sup> to say nothing of the Besht,<sup>211</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady,<sup>212</sup> the Gaon of Vilnius, and his student Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Shklov.<sup>213</sup> More recently, I pointed out Abulafia's impact on Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida.<sup>214</sup> As someone who has been accused of pan-Abulafianism in the past—namely, of finding traces of this Kabbalist everywhere—I feel rather uneasy about some aspects of this proliferation of the impact of his rather complex thought, in many cases studied without a proper historical or philological analysis. I have attempted to do so in my studies mentioned above, but I have my great doubts as to the impact

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**200** See Pedaya, "The Sixth Millennium."

**201** Idel, "Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah."

**202** Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, 32–33; Debenedetti Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica*; Dante Alighieri, *De l'eloquence en vulgaire*; chapter 4 note 49 and chapter 14 note 42 above.

**203** Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 126; Schwartz, "To Thee Is Silence Praise," 162–64, especially notes 253, 331, 333; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 17, 30, 157, 158.

**204** See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 343, 462, note 46.

**205** Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*; Stefane Toussaint, "L'individuo estatico. Tecniche profetiche in Marsilio Ficino e Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Bruniana & Campanelliana, Ricerche filosofiche e materiali storico-testuali* 6, no. 2 (2000): 351–79; Idel, *Ben*, 510–11.

**206** Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 122–26, 134–35, 158–59, 164–65.

**207** Idel, 136–40.

**208** Idel, 135–36.

**209** See Idel, "Deus sive Natura" and *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66–67.

**210** Susanne Edel, *Die individuelle Substanz bei Boehme und Leibniz* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1995), 163–205.

**211** Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 53–60.

**212** See Bezalel Naor, "The Song of Songs: Abulafia and the Alter Rebbe," *Jewish Review* 3 (1990): 10–11, and Bezalel Naor, "Ḥotam Bolet Ḥotam Šoge'a, in the Teaching of Abraham Abulafia and the Doctrine of Habad" [Hebrew], *Sinai* 107 (1991): 54–57.

**213** Moshe Idel, "Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Shklov and Rabbi Avraham Abulafia" [Hebrew], in *The Vilna Gaon and His Disciples*, eds. Moshe Hallamish, Yosef Rivlin, and Raphael Shuhat (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003): 173–83. For the impact of Abulafia on Rabbi David ha-Nazir, see my study mentioned in chapter 5 note 204 above.

**214** See *Absorbing Perfections*, 91, 416–19. See also the different picture of scholarship as drawn by Boaz Huss, "The Formation of Jewish Mysticism and Its Impact on the Reception of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia in Contemporary Kabbalah," in *Religion and Its Others*, eds. Heicke Bock, Jorg Feuchter, and Michi Knechts (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008): 142–62. Huss's picture is dependent on the assumption that scholars use a certain term like mysticism or ecstasy in the same way, as if there is only one meaning of these terms in the mind of scholars and across all religions, and thus operates with some form of *mystica perennis*. However, this assumption is not necessarily the case and in order to prevent such an essentialist view, I recommend distinguishing between different sub-categories, models and different types of order, to say nothing of various Kabbalistic schools and many different geographical centers of Kabbalah.

of Abulafia's thought on Dante or Leibniz, for example. However, further serious studies are necessary in order to prove or disprove some of these claims.

Scholars have recently become ecstatic about Abulafia's ecstasy and have found ecstasy, sometimes understood as identical to his, even in the Zoharic literature.<sup>215</sup> We are witnesses to a mystification of Kabbalah<sup>216</sup> that depends on a new and splendid career for the ecstatic Kabbalist who, after quite a long period of ostracisation and oblivion, is now understood as evincing views also found in the *Zohar*.

Let me, however, finish on a more optimistic note: if this study prompts scholars to return to reading manuscripts, including those of Abulafia and the Maimonideans, there is some hope that more serious scholarship on the topic will eventually emerge that deals not with imaginary "grossly misleading" presentations, but with a more controlled type of analysis of all the pertinent texts belonging to a given topic in their proper contexts without generalising as to the relevance of specific findings to the entirety of the literature written by many Kabbalists in many countries over many centuries. Otherwise, a perennialist approach may overcome a critical attitude towards the variegated and complex developments in the history of Kabbalah.

If we can learn something more general from the methodological point of view of the above study, it is that a wider spectrum of ideas should be allowed from remarkable individual thinkers like Maimonides, the Maimonideans, and Abulafia, and certainly for wider literatures such as philosophy and Kabbalah. Interested as I am in figures who were active at the intersections of a variety of intellectual trends (such as Rabbi Isaac of Acre, Rabbi Johanan Alemanno, and Solomon Maimon in addition to Maimonides and Abulafia), I am more concerned with the details and the reasons for the complexities that naturally emerge in such a minuteous type of scholarship than in ventilating abstract systems that can be easily and conveniently summarised for the sake of wider, though less informed audiences.

The present analysis of Abulafia can help by promoting such an approach in a less dogmatic way that is less prone to producing simplistic generalisations about the nature of Kabbalah and is more attentive to the details, texts, specific terminologies, and contents of the texts under scrutiny. Such an analysis of Abulafia's writings shows that he was attempting to promote a vision of Judaism (as he understood it) that was more open to philosophical inquiry and prophetic and ecstatic experiences and that is not represented by the main paragons of Rabbinic Judaism before the High Middle Ages. Abulafia only rarely elaborated on Rabbinic Judaism, his attitude being more explicitly critical than that of most other Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages.

The above analyses show that the stark distinctions between Kabbalah and philosophy as ideal types collapse when considering ecstatic Kabbalah in a more sub-

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<sup>215</sup> See the views of Wolfson and Pedaya mentioned earlier in this chapter.

<sup>216</sup> Huss, "The Formation of Jewish Mysticism"; Boaz Huss, "The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism" [Hebrew], *Pe'amim* 110 (2007): 9–30 (English version in *BGU Review; A Journal of Israeli Culture* 2 [2008]: 9–30).

stantial manner. The spectrum of phenomena mentioned above does not allow for a simple distinction between the two different camps (the philosophical and the Kabbalistic). Rather, the present study proposes to add a third camp that is considered to be Kabbalistic and yet is dramatically closer to the Maimonidean camp than to theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, and sometimes even critical of the latter. Again, I do not propose to adopt the description of a continuous spectrum within the ecstatic Kabbalah found exactly in the middle between Jewish philosophy and theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. I seek to open a space for a more complex image of intersecting circles, with this type of Kabbalah having a broad surface that coincides with the *falāsifah* as well as a small one that scarcely touches the circle of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. Especially prominent would be the overlapping of the esoteric segment of the ecstatic Kabbalist circle within Maimonidean-oriented esotericism.

Let me emphasise that these imaginary circles represent literatures; from this point of view, the phrase “ecstatic Kabbalah” is used here in order to refer to a specific literature that is explicitly intended to induce ecstatic experiences, not just to refer to momentary forms of experience to be found sporadically in a literature whose main purpose differs from that of Abulafia. Neither the other Kabbalists nor the Maimonideans interested in the concept of prophecy wrote literature aiming to systematically achieve prophetic experiences. From this point of view, the resort to the general term “mysticism” and the different distinctions in the field, like the resort to “rational mysticism” mentioned above, does not sufficiently cover the main concerns of Abulafia’s writings, which include several detailed handbooks describing various techniques for reaching prophetic experiences and instances of meeting oneself as part of an experience. By “ecstatic Kabbalah,” I mean a literature that widely differs from the two other main forms of speculative literature in thirteenth-century Judaism mentioned earlier. Moreover, the literature I designate as ecstatic Kabbalah includes also treatises by Kabbalists who confessed their ecstatic experiences, though at the same time they deny being prophets.

Last but not least: we cannot avoid asking whether Abulafia, as I have portrayed him, was a heretic. He testifies that he was accused of being one early in his career as a Kabbalist, and he was later banned by a famous Halakhic authority, ibn Adret. His critiques of traditional Judaism and Rabbis are rather sharp, as seen above. However, he did not consider himself to be a heretic, but, on the contrary, as the custodian and representative of the true Judaism as he understood it; namely, a spiritual type of religiosity. Not being a theologian myself, I do not believe that the answer to such a question is relevant from a scholarly point of view. Assuming as I do that Judaism was and still is a multifaceted religious phenomenon, which includes—both diachronically and synchronically—a variety of religious phenomena, Abulafia’s thought and practices are a variant, radical as they may be, of the broad Maimonidean spectrum, combined with a traditional theory of combinations of letters and discussions of the divine names. The fact that his books, in full form or in fragments, are extant in approximately two hundred manuscripts, and have more recently been

printed, distributed, studied, and even practised in some communities in the stronghold of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy, Meah Shearim in Jerusalem, to say nothing of many New Age circles, is a paramount event to be taken into consideration for a more complex understanding of Judaism as a dynamic religious phenomenon, a topic that deserves a more detailed inquiry.

## VI Appendices

### Appendix A: The Hebrew Original of the Parable of the Pearl

In this appendix, I would like to offer a critical edition of the Hebrew original of the entire chapter that serves as the basis of most of the discussions in the second part of this study; I shall then translate and analyse the last part of this chapter, paragraph [d], as part of the thematic approach I have delineated above. *Or ha-Šekhel* is one of Abulafia's most popular books and it is extant in approximately thirty manuscripts. I have chosen four manuscripts in order to check the variants that may have an impact on the meaning of the given passages. These manuscripts were copied between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, constituting some of the earliest manuscripts of the book, while the base manuscript, Ms. Firenze-Medicea Laurenziana Plut II. 20/1, is a very legible fifteenth-century codex, whose version was compared to another, unidentified manuscript with the variants being marked in the margin. The printed version on pages 33–36 of Amnon Gross's edition does not mention from which manuscript it was printed, but it is most probably Ms. Fulda, Oct. Ba 2.

גוף הטקסט על פי כתב יד פירנצה-לאורנציאנה PLUT. II.20/1 דף א17-א18  
השינויים על פי כתבי היד:

מ= כ"י מנטובה, הקהילה 80, דף ב33-ב34.

פ= כ"י פירנצה-לאורנציאנה PLUT. 44.16/7, דף א76-א77.

מי=כ"י מינכן 40, דף א174-א176.

ספר אור השכל – חלק ג' חלק ל' ענין ב' סימן נ' כולל סוד הלשון המובחר שבכל הלשונות:

[a] הנה כבר הודענו עניינים כלליים בלשונות וביארנו שהשפע האלהי מניע את כולן והוא סיבת מציאותן, והוא המוציא אותן מן הכח אל הפועל. ואחר שהוא כן, צריך להודיע אם כולן אצלך<sup>2</sup> [אצלו] שווים או בלתי שווים. אחר שכולן הן פעולותיו ונאמר שידוע שהם שווים אצלו מצדו, וגם הם שווים אצלו מצד מציאותם.<sup>3</sup> אחר שחומרם הוא הדבור הכללי, אשר הוא הנותן בו צורות פרטיות, והן ההשגות המשכלות מהדבור. וגם אחר שההשגה שוה הכל שוה, אלא שההבדל בין הלשונות יהיה בדמות ההבדל אשר בין האומות, ובדמות האומות<sup>4</sup> [ההבדל] אשר בין מכתבם. [a1] וידוע<sup>5</sup>(ו) שכל אומה שהיא בעלת תורה ומצוות וחקים ומשפטים צדיקים יותר מולתה, היא יותר נבדדת<sup>6</sup> אצל מי משפיע על הכל. וכל מה שהתרחקה האומה מן הדת הנרמזת הכללית,<sup>7</sup> היתה יותר רחוקה ממי שהוא סבה ראשונה להשפעת הדת<sup>8</sup> שהוא השפע האלהי המניע הדבור הכללי. וכבר התפרסם באומות שאומתינו היא האומה הראשונה אשר קבלה תורה<sup>9</sup> מפי הגבורה, ואין שום אומה מכחשת זה. ומה שהכל מודים בו והתפרסם כבר אין צריך להביא עליו ראיה. ואם כן מי שעניינו היה אצל המשפיע המעולה משאר חבריו, לשונו גם כן מעולה אצלו משאר הלשונות. והעד שבלשונת של האומה הזאת המיוחדת דבר אתה

1 פ: במקום המוציא אותן- 'המוציא' 1

2 מ, פ, מי: אצלו 2

3 על ההבחנה בין "מצד" האל ומצדנו ראו לעיל פרק 16 הערה 128 ופרק 17 הערה 37. 3

4 מ, פ, מי: ההבדל 4

5 מ, פ, מי: וידוע 5

6 מ, פ, מי: נבדדת יותר 6

7 מ, פ, מי: הכללית הנרמזת 7

8 מ: הדעת 8

9 מ: ליתא 'תורה' 9

כל מה שדבר, ובמכתבה צוה לכתוב כל מה שיכתוב<sup>10</sup> ולא עוד אלא שמה שנאמר שנכתב על ידו על שני לוחות אבנים, בין יהיה הדבר כפשוטו לבד, בין יסבול הנגלה והנסתר<sup>11</sup> יחד ויהיו שניהם אמת, או האחד מהם. הנה נכתב בלשון הקדש שהקבלה נמשכת קיימת עד היום. ואם יאמר אומר אמת היה, אבל ראה האומה בלתי ראויה לאותה המעלה, והחליפה באומה אחרת, והחליף חוקיה ומצוותיה ובא ומיעטם והמיר מכתבה. הנה האומר<sup>12</sup> זה הוא בעצמו מודה על מעלתה<sup>13</sup> ועל מעלת לשונה ועל מעלת מכתבה בעל כרחו. ואחר שהודה על העקר בא והקשה עליו, מפני ראותו חסרון שלשת המעלות הנזכרות היום ממנו, וגם אנו לא נקשה עליו בענין החסרון [המורגש] כי אם היינו מכחישים המורגש, לא היינו<sup>14</sup> יכולים<sup>15</sup> לאמת המושכל, שהמורגש קודם לו בטבע. ואע"פ שהמושכל קודם למורגש במעלה, כמו שהתבאר בדרכי<sup>16</sup> חמש<sup>17</sup> הקדמות. אבל גם אנו נודה על האמת שהיום שלשת המעלות חסרות ממנו, אבל לא על דרך חילוף אחת מהן באחרת.

[b] רק הדבר דומה למי שהיה אצלו מרגלית נחמדת, והיה רוצה להנחילה לבנו, ובתוך הזמן שהיה מורה לבנו דרכי העושר כדי שיכיר מעלת המרגלית ותהיה נחמדת בעיניו, כמו שהיתה תמודה בעיני אביו, בא הבן והכעיס את אביו. מה עשה האב לא רצה לתת המרגלית ביד אדם כדי שלא יפסיד בנו ירושתו אם ישוב וירצה את אביו, אבל השליכה בבור, כי אמר אם לא ישוב בני איני רוצה שירשנה, ואם תשוב<sup>18</sup> איני רוצה שיפסידנה. וכל עוד שלא ישוב תהיה גנוה בבור, וכשישוב מיד אעלנה מן הבור ואתננה לו. וכל עוד שלא שב היו באים עבדי אביו והיו מכעיסין את הבן בכל יום ויום, וכל אחד מהם היה מתפאר שאדוניו נתן לו המרגלית. והבן לא היה חושש כי לא היה בו דעת. אחר זמן כל כך הכעיסוהו עד ששב, ומחל לו אביו והעלה המרגלית מן הבור ונתנה לו. כשראו עבדי אביו כך מיד נפלו פניהם ובושו משקריהם לפני הבן, והיה להם הרבה לעשות עמו עד שימחול להם<sup>19</sup> הכעס שהכעיסוהו ברוב פיוסים.

[c] כן קרה לנו עם<sup>20</sup> האומרים שהשם החליפנו בס, שאין לנו פה להשיב כל זמן שאנו<sup>21</sup> בלתי מרצים את השם כאשר חטאנו לו. ואולי<sup>22</sup> בשובינו ובהשיבו גם הוא את שבותינו, ייבושו מביישנו מפנינו בראותם אשר שב ה' את שבותינו, ואשר שברו [סברו] וקבלו דמיון היה, ואנו לקינו בעוונותינו ונמרקו עד כלותם. ומפני שאין אנו עדיין היום באותה המדרגה שאנו מצפים לעלות אליה בכל יום, עדין המחלוקת במקומה עומדת למי החמדה והאמת, הלנו אם לצרינו, עד בוא המכריע הדולה המרגלית מן הבור ויתננה לאשר יחפוץ, לנו או להם. ואז יתברר האמת תכלית הבירור, ותשוב החמדה לבעליה הראויים ליירש אותה הנקראים בניו לי, ותסור הקנאה<sup>23</sup> והמחלוקת והשנאה, ותבטלנה המחשבות המדומות מהלבבות, ויראה כל איש ואיש את כל אחד ואחד מאישי המין כאלו הוא חבירו, וחברו הוא<sup>24</sup> עצמו, כמו שהאדם רואה כל אבר ואבר מאיבריו שהאחד הוא זולתו, וכל חלק וחלק<sup>25</sup> מהם אצלו הוא<sup>26</sup> הכל ואז ישוטטו רבים ותרבה הדעת, ולא ילמדו<sup>27</sup> איש את רעהו לאמר דעו את י, כי כלם ידעו את השם למקטנם ועד גדולם,<sup>28</sup> "כי מלאה הארץ דעה את ה' כמים לים מכסים"<sup>29</sup> ואחר שהדבר הוא<sup>30</sup> כן, הכל מודים

10 מ, פ, מ: שיכתב

11 מ: הנסתר והנגלה

12 מ: האומר דבר זה

13 מ: ליתא 'על מעלתה'

14 פ: ליתא 'היינו'

15 פ: יכולנו

16 פ: ליתא 'בדרכי'

17 פ: בחמש

18 מ, פ, מ: מי: ישוב

19 מ: ליתא 'להם'

20 מ: עם האומה האומרים

21 מ: אלו

22 מ, פ, מ: מי: ואולם

23 מ, פ, מ: מי: הקנאה והקטטה והמחלוקת והשנאה

24 פ: וחבירו הוא עצמו

25 מ, פ, מ: מי: ליתא 'חלק'

26 מ: ליתא 'הוא'

27 מ, פ, מ: מי: ילמדו עוד איש

28 מ, מ: מי: תוספת 'כמים מכסים לים'

29 ישעיה יא: ט.

30 מ: ליתא 'הוא'

שמבחר כל הלשונות מאז הוא לשון הקדש. ועל כן נודע מה שנודע בה לנביאים בסוד השם המפורש, מה שלא נודע לזולתם מאישי מין<sup>31</sup> האדם.<sup>32</sup>

[d] והנה גם הטבע גזר עוד שיהיה השם בוחר בדבר אחד מזיחד מכל פרטי העניינים כמו שבחר בערבות מכל הגלגלים באמרם<sup>33</sup> שבעה רקיעים ברא ה'ב"ה<sup>34</sup> בעולמו ומכולם לא בחר כסא כבוד למלכותו אלא ערבות, והוא השביעי<sup>35</sup> אלא ששם ערבות משותף. והנה הנראה מכל כוכבי השמים שהשם בחר בשמש מכולם, והנראה מהיסודות שהאש המובחר מכולם ולמעלה מכולם, והנראה ממיני מתכות שהזהב מעולה מכולם, ומהאילנות שהתמר מעולה מכולם,<sup>36</sup> ומבעלי החיים השוחים שלויתן מעולה מכולם, ומהמעופפים שהנשר מעולה מכולם,<sup>37</sup> ומההולכים השור בבייתים הנקראים בהמות, והאריה בבריים<sup>38</sup> הנקראים חיות, ומכולם האדם, ומהאדם ישראל, ומישראל שבת לוי, ומשבת לוי הכהן הנביא.<sup>39</sup> הנה כבר התבארה הכוונה שרצינו להודיע בזה החלק השלישי, שמבחר השלישי<sup>40</sup> [הלשונות] היא לשון הקדש.

So far, most of the original text of the parable has been translated and analysed above, with the exception of paragraph [d]. Let me now translate this paragraph and analyse some of its conceptual components:

[d] And nature also determines that God will choose a certain special thing from all the details of matters, as He chose 'Aravot from all the spheres, as they said<sup>41</sup> "the Holy One, blessed be He, created seven firmaments in His world and He chose only 'Aravot as His Seat of Glory for His kingship" and it is the seventh,<sup>42</sup> but the term 'Aravot is an equivocal name (homonym). And behold that among all the stars of the world, He chose the sun out of all of them, and behold that among the elements, fire is the chosen one, and it is higher than all, and behold that among all the kinds of metals, gold is the chosen one, and among the trees, the palm tree is the best of all, and among the animals that swim, the Leviathan is the best, and among the flying ones, the eagle is the best, and among the domestic animals that walk, the ox is the best, and among the wild ones, called the beasts, the lion [is the best], and among all [the animals], man,<sup>43</sup> and among [all] men, the Israelites, and among the Israelites, the tribe of Levi [is the best], and

31 פ: המין

32 פ: ליתא 'האדם'

33 ראו להלן הערה 42.

34 מ, פ: הקב"ה

35 מ: תוספת 'או אמור התשיעי'

36 פ: ומהאילנות שהתמר מעלה בכלם—תוספת בשולי הגיליון

37 מ: ליתא 'והמעופפים שהנשר מעולה מכולם'

38 מלשון בר, דהיינו בעלי חיים לא מתורבתים.

39 כך גם בנוסח המקביל שבספר אוצר עדן גנוז, מהד' גרוס, עמ' 190.

40 מ, פ, מי: הלשונות

41 This statement is quoted verbatim in the parallel discussion in *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, 185, and in a very similar version in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, in chapter 18 note 168 above. I have not found this precise formulation in the available treatises in late antique or early medieval Jewish texts. I nevertheless assume that this is an authentic quote. The whole issue deserves a separate investigation. See, for example, a partial parallel found in the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Judah Ḥallewah's *Sefer Šafnat Pa'aneaḥ*, Ms. Dublin, Trinity College, B. 5. 27, fol. 15a. Ḥallewah was not influenced by Abulafia's writings.

42 The assumption that the seventh is the best is found in late antique Jewish sources, e. g., the book of Enoch.

43 The last four beings indubitably reflect the four beasts in the vision of the chariot in Ezekiel 1. However, Abulafia refrains from mentioning the chariot or the *merkavah* in this chapter, just as he does not mention other biblical matters, as pointed out above.



among the tribe of Levi, the priest [who is] a prophet [is the best]. Behold, the intention that we wanted to announce in this third part<sup>44</sup> has been clarified to the effect that the best of the languages is the Holy Language.<sup>45</sup>

Let us first turn to the opening sentence: according to Abulafia, nature was conceived as determining what God will choose; namely, something that is better than all other things. This is quite a strange formulation that, in my opinion, means that nature is the dominant force. It actually precludes the possibility of divine choice, or in any case free choice, as we discussed at length in chapter 18 above. It also hints at nature having some sort of antecedence to the divine choice.

Another important element found in this passage is the occurrence of equivocal-ity in connection to the term *'Aravot*,<sup>46</sup> which means there are two or more divergent meanings, probably referring to the fact that an act of choice made by an entity that has a free will is not necessarily related to what may be seen in nature, but rather something quite different: a hierarchy which is natural, but also arbitrary. What such an allegorical understanding may be can be learnt from the opening verses of a poem in one of Abulafia's epistles, where it is written that "two tablets of stones are written, combined [of letters] on the heart of the sphere<sup>47</sup> of *'Aravot*. Designed in the form of cherubs,<sup>48</sup> the Rock<sup>49</sup> prepared them in order to answer their ques-

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44 Of his *Sefer Or ha-Šekhel*.

45 Compare to a parallel discussion in "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 16–17, translated in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 12–13.

46 The term for a high sphere occurs several times in Maimonides, *Guide* 1:70. Enigmatic references to the secret of *'Aravot* can be found in Abulafia's teacher Rabbi Baruch Togarmi's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, printed in Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 236, 238. See also Abulafia's *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 14, and the untitled treatise found in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II 48, fol. 99a. In Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah's *Ša'arei Šedeq*, *'Aravot* is interpreted as referring to the universal soul as part of his more Neo-Platonic propensity, a turn that perhaps began in Abulafia's late work. See his *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 469, 474. For Abulafia's resort to the term "supernal soul" as a cosmic soul, see *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 87.

47 *Galgal* means, in an astronomical context, "a sphere or orb," especially when it is conjugated with *'Aravot*. However, in Hebrew, it also means "circle," and this is its meaning here when interpreted in the manner in which I propose it was interpreted by Abulafia. See also the passage quoted from *Or ha-Šekhel*, 31, above.

48 I wonder whether the two cherubs refer here to the faculties of the imagination and the intellect. Compare also to Abulafia's Untitled Treatise preserved in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 99a, where there is a link between the term *'Aravot* and the cherubs in the context of describing some form of supernal Paradise or *Pardes*. The various interpretations of this word in Abulafia's writings are an example of exegetical fluidity, or of what I propose to call the grapefruit approach; namely, the existence of a variety of interpretations on a concept or theme that is important for a certain thinker. According to such a view, what is more important is the topic that is repeatedly interpreted and not the specifics of each of these interpretations. See Idel, *Ben*, 616–18.

49 Compare the link between the term "rock" (referring to God), writing, and the heart in the poem written by Abulafia mentioned in chapter 10 note 153 above: הַתּוֹרָה צוּר עַל לֵב אִישׁ תּוֹ ("The Rock has put a sign on the man's heart"). This is a comment on Ezekiel 9:4; compare also to the discussions in Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Ot*, 82–83, concerning the sign on the forehead, as well as to *Or ha-Šekhel*, 76.

tions.”<sup>50</sup> The tablets of stone being an allegory for the human faculties was discussed in chapter 16 above. My assumption is that the firmament of ‘*Aravot*—imagined in many other cases in the Middle Ages and in Abulafia’s early writings as the ninth of the ten spheres<sup>51</sup>—is understood here as referring to some form of mixture through the resort to the meaning of the root ‘*RB*, which means “to combine” or “to mix.” In this context, he is alluding to the practice of combining letters by means of concentric circles.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the end of the word ‘*Aravot*, *Ot*, has been understood as if it refers to the word *Ot*, probably a reference to “letter.”

This image of a sphere moving and thus combining letters is widespread in Abulafia’s writings.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the understanding of the term ‘*Aravot* as referring to a certain mode of combining letters is quite explicit in a large fragment from an untitled work by Abulafia, where the ecstatic Kabbalist writes: “The comprehension of the divine name is [found]<sup>54</sup> in ‘*Aravot*, and it is known that ‘*Aravot* is a noun referring to the mixture and the combination of the amalgam, and it also refers to their mixture and their amalgamation with one another, and so is the combination of letters.”<sup>55</sup> This passage fits Abulafia’s recurrent claim that it is impossible to know the divine name except by resorting to the combination of letters.<sup>56</sup> In my translation, I resorted to metallurgical terms stemming from the root ‘*RB*, which is perhaps a hint at alchemy, against the plain sense that refers to another, much more important act: the combination of letters.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that our interpretation of the root ‘*RB* as referring to a practice belonging to *ars combinatoria* is found in quite an ex-

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50 *Maṣref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fol. 24b (now New York Public Library 190), printed in David S. Sassoon, מאהל 77: *Sassoon Hebrew and Samaritan MSS* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 424: מצורפים בלב גלגל ערבות – שני לוחות אבנים הם כתובים / הכינם צור להשיבם תשובות – מצוירים בצורת הכר[ו]נים.

51 See *Geṭ ha-Šemot*, 21.

52 See Idel, “Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah,” 170–74; Idel, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and Its Commentaries,” 525–26; Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 118–41; and Adam Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Study and Critical Edition of an Anonymous Commentary to the Prayers* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), 35–64.

53 See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 38–41.

54 Or “by means of.”

55 See Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 78b:

כי השגת השם המפורש הוא בערבות וידוע כי ערבות הוא שם מורה על עירוב ותערובת הרכבה מורה על עירובם ועל הרכבם זו עם זו וכן צירוף האותיות.

See also my “*Sefer Yeširah* and Its Commentaries,” 534–35. On other meanings of the term ‘*Aravot*, see also the passage in Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fol. 95b.

56 See *Sitrei Torah*, 161.

57 It should be pointed out that the most common term for combinations of letters, *ṣeruf*, was sometimes related to the root *ṢRF* that in some cases was interpreted as being related to purification or refining in alchemy. See Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 159.

plicit manner in a book by Abulafia himself,<sup>58</sup> indubitably inspired by the biblical verse where *‘Aravot*, referring to some form of clouds, occurs together with the divine name *Yah*.<sup>59</sup> This is also the case in an early version of Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla’s text *Ša‘ar ha-Niqqud*. Abulafia considered Gikatilla to be the most successful Kabbalist as he claims in the passage that is mentioned in chapter 5 above.<sup>60</sup>

To return to the content of the poem: when combined with each of the other letters, the answers to the questions posed by the aspiring prophet, as in the case of the biblical Urim and Tumim, as they were understood by Abulafia, are part of the prophetic experience.<sup>61</sup> This is but another allegorical-psychological understanding of the tablets of stone, in addition to that which we saw in chapter 16 above. The occurrence of the term “heart” in the above passage points to this transfer of the discussion from the astronomical context to the anthropological one. Moreover, the view that there is a divine throne—namely, the Seat of Glory—should, in many cases in Abulafia’s thought, be understood as an allegory for the human intellectual faculties;<sup>62</sup> that is, as part of his more general proclivity towards spiritual allegoresis.

Thus, the traditional and quite concrete terms discussed in section [d], namely, the firmament of *‘Aravot* and the Seat of Glory (*Kisse’ ha-Kavod*) as found in a yet unaccounted-for ancient dictum—the seat is understood in several instances in Abulafia’s writings as the “nature of the heart” by dint of its shared numerical value<sup>63</sup>—turn into references to the two major aspects of his Kabbalah: combinations of letters and some form of initial inwardness that is conducive to the union of extra-human intellectual entities. This specific kind of resort to the method of gematria is far removed from the manner in which other authors, mainly the Ashkenazi ones, used this method (as a way to find correspondences between the biblical texts and words and extra-biblical ones such as the structure of prayer). Abulafia uses the numerical equivalence in a manner that is reminiscent of the exegetical technique of philosophically oriented homonyms: he uses the linguistic methods in order to transfer the meaning of one type of nomenclature—the traditional one, in our case “the

58 See *Imrei Šefer*, 190.

59 Psalms 68:5.

60 For the translation and analysis of the original text, see Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 89. See also my *Enchanted Chains*, 149–51.

61 See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 105–8. Indeed, the third verse of this poem states *החיות באותיות משיבים*, which means “the beasts answer by means of letters.”

62 For the various meanings of this term in Maimonides, see David R. Blumenthal, “Maimonides on Angel Names,” in *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky* ז”ל, eds. André Caquot, Mireille Hadas-Lebel, and Jean Riaud (Leuven: Peeters, 1986), 367–68. For the Seat of Glory being understood by some of the Maimonideans as pointing towards the encompassing sphere, see Ravitzky, “The Thought of Rabbi Zerahyah,” 258–68.

63 *Teva’ ha-Lev* [“the nature of the heart”] = *Kisse’ ha-Kavod* [“the Seat of Glory”] = 118. See Abulafia’s *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 70; *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 31; *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 2:2, 224; *Šomer Mišwah*, 47; and *Maftaḥ ha-Šemot*, 114. The reiteration of this gematria shows that it was rather important for Abulafia. On the gematria 118 = *kohen gadol*, see also chapter 24 above.

Seat of Glory”—into a philosophical one, “the nature of the heart.” I would like to emphasise the resort to the Hebrew medieval neologism *ṭeva* that occurs in philosophical texts.

While Muslim and Jewish philosophers took an allegedly polysemantic approach to words in order to solve the quandaries generated by theologically problematic terms, Abulafia also used the numerical equivalences in order to insert—though, it should be admitted, in quite an arbitrary manner—the new messages without always appealing to the philosophical pseudo-semantic approach of the homonyms or equivocation, which in my studies means allegorisation, which is essentially lexical. He assumes that the semantic potential of the consonants that constitute certain words ought also to be investigated by their numerical value (gematria) and by means of combinations of letters. This double exegetical method, which is often combined, is characteristic of his approach and only rarely found outside Abulafia’s Kabbalistic school.

While the anonymous authors of the Hekhalot literature, some of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, and most of the Kabbalists were concentrating some of the major aspects of their esotericism on the “objective” structure of the supernal worlds, including the divine one, and while philosophers were concerned with understanding the natural world, Abulafia was much more concerned with the transformation of the human intellect through its actualisation and subsequent universalisation. The ecstatic Kabbalist was ready to adopt elements from a variety of philosophical sources, some of which have been mentioned above, to which we may add an interest in astronomy and some form of astro-magic, as well as other types of sources, some of which will be dealt with in a future study.

However, Abulafia was no more an astro-magician, theurgist, or theosophist than he was an astronomer, despite the substantial place the latter domain occupies in his discussions and especially in the imagery found in his visions. In any case, he was incomparably more interested in using astronomical imagery than he was in theosophical or theurgical imagery (that was interpreted allegorically), an issue that still awaits a balanced and competent inquiry.<sup>64</sup>

In any case, Abulafia was much more a “philosophically astute” Kabbalist, as Warren Zev Harvey puts it,<sup>65</sup> than an astro-magician, theosophist, or theurgist; the question is whether the different descriptions can actually coexist so simply, despite my allowance for what I call conceptual fluidity. My answer is that not all of these scholars’ attributions are actually appropriate; even those that somehow fit Abulafia’s thought as I understand it do not play the same role in its broader economy.

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<sup>64</sup> For Abulafia’s use of astronomy, see Idel, *Saturn’s Jews*, 52–55. For other examples, see *Sitrei Torah*, 174; the introduction to *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, 40–41; *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, 128; *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 34–35; and especially in many cases in *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, where he also displays a good acquaintance with the calculations related to the secret of intercalation. This astronomical register in his thought deserves a special analysis in itself.

<sup>65</sup> See chapter 5 note 166 above.

In any case, without clearly differentiating between what is marginal and what is central in Abulafia's writings, either statistically, conceptually, or structurally, a confused picture composed of some details belonging to a broad corpus emerges in scholarship. Reading Abulafia in accordance with the national-historical register—namely, according to the particularist attitude, as if it were his main message—and at the same time ignoring the centrality of the spiritual-atemporal register, is an example of such a confusion between Abulafia's secondary and main intentions.

The question is whether Abulafia was operating with more than one basic profound structure in his writings, which were composed over his twenty years of literary activity, or with more than one, diachronically, as Joseph Gikatilla and Moses de Leon did. The possible answers to this question should involve a detailed analysis of Abulafia's theology; namely, of his many discussions on his concept[s] of God, a topic which is still a desideratum in research. Without a prior and more comprehensive analysis of this issue, tentative as it may be, it is very difficult to understand Abulafia's various approaches to *sefirot* or his pantheism (which, in my opinion, is not panentheism) in their much wider framework, which has been the dominant or core approach to this issue.<sup>66</sup>

In my opinion, we should assume the existence of one such profound theological structure, the noetic one, which, when combined with techniques of attaining the ideals based on this structure, can be called the ecstatic model that permeates all Abulafia's extant writings and limits his conceptual fluidity. Within this more general structure, adopted from the Andalusian thinkers, Abulafia could experiment with a variety of theological concepts without systematically or dogmatically subscribing to any one of them. However, the dominant theology explicit or implicit in his many fragmentary discussions of the topic is deeply influenced by philosophical terminology, despite Abulafia's claims to the contrary.<sup>67</sup>

However, what counts more for a proper portrayal of Abulafia is less his specific theology and more the manner in which he presents himself, either as a prophet, Messiah, or prophetic Kabbalist, whatever the conceptual sources he used and misused were. His free attitude towards the linguistic articulations of many of his sources, biblical and otherwise, whose specific formulations he does not refrain from deconstructing, introducing his own views into the new combinations of letters (which he called giving or innovating a form or a new meaning), which are mainly concerned with spiritual processes, explains why he was ready to adopt concepts and phrases from a variety of sources whose general worldview he did not necessarily agree with. This "informing" of the interpreted texts (including the Torah) with meaning extracted from philosophical sources (that is, philosophical eisegesis)

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<sup>66</sup> The limited pantheism or immanentism may be related to Averroes's view. For a similar phenomenon among the Maimonideans, see Dov Schwartz, "Divine Immanence in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *JITP* 3 (1994): 249–78, especially 251–53.

<sup>67</sup> See *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 2:9, 279. I hope to deal with this passage and its implications for understanding Abulafia in more detail elsewhere.

after the letters had been permuted is especially characteristic of this Kabbalist, who was ready to impose his views in such an arbitrary manner.<sup>68</sup> As an anonymous Kabbalist who was related to Abulafia's Kabbalah puts it, by means of the radical forms of exegesis, it is possible to work as a potter does with the clay he uses.<sup>69</sup>

By this sharp shifting of weight from exegesis to eisegesis, the interpreting personality and the intellectual background become much more pronounced. Instead of a crisis arcanisation that prompts the interpreter to infuse the sacred text with new secrets stemming from external sources because of the crisis in the cultural perception of the scripture and other Jewish religious literature, as may be the case in Maimonides's two major projects,<sup>70</sup> in the case of Abulafia, we may speak about the feeling of empowerment of the individual whose experiences and ideas are conceived as more important than the interpreted text. The crisis is seen much more in the ordinary audience's inability to transcend its inferior state from the cognitive point of view, while he himself claims the plenitude of experience, as the comparison to the ecstatic experience of the high priest shows. Moreover, with Abulafia, the allegorical interpretations were not a matter of external wisdom, but part of Jewish tradition as already expressed in the book that he conceived to be the most important in the world, *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

In chapter 24 above, we discussed the problems involved in presenting the high priest as a prophet and thereby transforming ancient rituals involving animal sacrifices, blessings, and the pronouncement of the divine name into occasions for attaining ecstatic experiences of a mental nature outside the sacred centre of ancient Judaism. By opening the exclusive status of the high priest to everyone through his allegorical interpretation, Abulafia performed a transgressive action, especially when understood in the context of the secret nature of his wider proposal and in terms characteristic of Rabbinic literature. This approach, which dissolves the centrality of the genetic criterion, may be one of the reasons why he was accused of heresy. In a way, here and in a few other cases, Abulafia approaches Rabbinic Judaism in a manner reminiscent of how Buddhism approaches the caste-oriented Hinduism: the historical and social frameworks were reinterpreted in a rather strong spiritualistic manner, implicitly undoing their original relevance.

## Appendix B: *Or ha-Šekhel* and Rabbi Nathan the Wise

Let me turn to a passage found in the introduction to the book in which the parable of the pearl appears:

<sup>68</sup> See "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 27.

<sup>69</sup> *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, 153: כמו שהיוצר עושה בחמר.

<sup>70</sup> See especially Moshe Halbertal, "What is Mishneh Torah? On Codification and Ambivalence," in *Maimonides after 800 Years*, 88–90; Michaelis, "It is Time to Act for the Lord: [They] Violate[d] Your Torah," 24–26.

In this book, I intend to bring benefit to those who begin the meditation on the divine name, and I shall show them the path of its knowledge, so that this treatise will be related to the knowledge of famous name, according to the path of the prophetic Kabbalah, just as the Account of Creation is related to the Account of the Chariot. Behold, I had been triggered to do so because of the love of two friends, who are lovers of wisdom, out of the best<sup>71</sup> of the community of the sons of Messina on the island of Sicily, who brought me very close to them, and they follow my discipline and their names are Rabbi Abraham the Enlightened [*Avraham ha-Maškil*]<sup>72</sup> and Rabbi Nathan the Wise [*Natan ha-Navon*], blessed be his memory.<sup>73</sup> Because after I had been with them for a few days,<sup>74</sup> they asked me to briefly write down the general principles for them regarding the knowledge of the supreme and awesome name. And out of the true love that I had for them,<sup>75</sup> I compelled myself to wilfully supply their requirement, and I know that this treatise will assist them and those like them very much.<sup>76</sup>

Abulafia's dedication of this book to his two disciples is indubitably part of his propaganda, intended to draw younger people to his Kabbalah and to convince them of his special role as prophet and Messiah. The practice of dedicating his books to his disciples is obvious in other cases as well; for example, Abulafia explicitly names the four students to whom he dedicated *Sitrei Torah*, as discussed in chapter 5 above.<sup>77</sup> *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* was dedicated to Rabbi Sa'adyah, *Sefer ha-Hešeq* was dedicated to Rabbi Jacob ben Abraham ben Shalom and Rabbi Sa'adyah, his 1287 book *Šomer*

71 In Hebrew *mivḥar*, again a use of a noun that does not mean "election." On this issue, see Appendix A.

72 Most probably, this is Rabbi Abraham ben Shalom, who was mentioned in the passage quoted from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* in chapter 5 above. As I have proposed elsewhere, this figure may be related to the much later Rabbi Abraham Shalom, an author active in Spain in the mid-fifteenth century. In his *Neweh Šalom*, there are some quotes from Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*. See my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 66–67, 69–70, note 11.

73 This is certainly a mistake or a later addition by a copyist, since Rabbi Nathan lived for several years after his meeting with Abulafia, in my opinion as late as the last years of the 1280s.

74 This is an important indication as to the date of this book. Since Abulafia was most probably already in Messina in 1281, it seems that *Or ha-Šekhel* was written no later than 1283. Compare, however, the dating to 1285 by Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings," 171 (though in her *The Parable of the Three Rings*, 37–42, this date is not mentioned), and Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 66, perhaps following Gross's view.

75 On the affinity between love and the transmission of secrets, see *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 121–22, and "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," 4.

76 Ms. Vatican, 233, fols. 1b–2a, 3:

אכונן בזה הספר להועיל המתחילים בעיון השם המפורש ואורה להם דרך ידיעתו, עד שיהיה ערך זה החיבור אל ידיעת ה' הידוע על דרך הקבלה הנבואית כערך חכמת מעשה בראשית אל מעשה מרכבה. והנה העירתיני אל זה לעשותו כן אהבת שני חברים מאוהבי החכמה מכלל מבחר בני מסיני אשר באי סקליאה אשר הקריבוני אליהם מאד והם סרים אל משמעת. ושם ר' אברהם המשכיל ור' נתן הנבון ז"ל, וזה כי בהיותי עמם ימים מועטים ביקשו ממני לכתוב להם בקצרה הקדמות כוללות מעניין ידיעת ה' הנכבד והנורא. ומרוב אהבתי אותם אהבת אמת, הכרחתי עצמי לתת את שאלתם ברצון ואני יודע שזה החיבור יועיל להם מאד ולדומים להם.

For some other occurrences of Rabbi Nathan's name in Abulafia's writings, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 134.

77 See also *Sefer Ge'ulah*, 32.



*Miṣwah* was dedicated to a certain Rabbi Solomon ben Moses ha-Kohen on the occasion of his return to his native province of Galilee, and in the introduction to *Sefer ha-Mafteḥot*, his commentary on the Pentateuch, he describes seven students (three from Messina and four from Palermo) as the people who encouraged him to write the commentary.<sup>78</sup> He envisioned his readers to be part of a potentially somewhat larger audience than his very few students—the phrase “those like them” recurs many times in Abulafia’s writings—who could adopt his Kabbalistic theories. In this commentary, he quite surprisingly asserts that he only wrote this text for those who prophesy.<sup>79</sup>

However, there is only one author on his list of seven who would come to meet this requirement, according to the scant evidence we have: Rabbi Nathan ben Sa’adyah, whose mystical experiences were described in his *Ša’arei Šedeq*, though he himself did not claim any prophetic attainment. Nevertheless, in principle, Rabbi Nathan describes the phenomenon of prophecy in terms very close to Abulafia’s. It is probably Rabbi Isaac of Acre who quotes his teacher as follows:

The wise and illuminated Rabbi Nathan, blessed be his memory, told me:<sup>80</sup> “Know that the perfection of the secret of prophecy for the prophet is that he should suddenly<sup>81</sup> see the form of his self standing in front of him. He will then forget his own self and it will disappear from him. And he will see the form of his self in front of him, speaking with him and telling him the future.”<sup>82</sup>

**78** See the Introduction to *Mafteḥ ha-Hokhmot*, 1–2, and *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, 147. I hope to return to some facets of the Palermo aspects of the controversy with Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret.

**79** See *Mafteḥ ha-Šemot*, 163–64: כִּי זֶה הַסֵּפֶר לֹא חֹבֵר אֶלָּא בְּעִבּוּר הַמַּתְנַבְּאִים לְבַד. The context is an esoteric discussion on the revelation of the Torah. See chapter 10 note 202 above.

**80** Presumably to Rabbi Isaac of Acre.

**81** The assumption that the prophetic experience begins suddenly recurs in Rabbi Isaac of Acre, and if this text indeed also represents Rabbi Nathan’s stance, Rabbi Isaac was influenced by Rabbi Nathan. The question is whether this sudden phenomenon is conceived as being preceded by some form of preparations, either intellectual or technical, or whether it is completely independent, which would represent a different view from both Maimonides and Abulafia. I prefer the first explanation. “Suddenly” seems to reflect a Platonic source, which in itself may point to an even earlier phenomenon. See Francis M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: A Study of the Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought*, ed. William K. C. Guthrie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 86. For the phenomenon of autoscopy in Abulafia, see Shahar Arzy, Moshe Idel, Theodor Landis, and Olaf Blanke, “Speaking with One’s Self: Autoscopy in the Ecstatic Kabbalah of the 13th Century,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12 (2005): 4–29, as well as Shahar Arzy and Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: A Neurocognitive Approach to Mystical Experiences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). For an interesting parallel found in Avicenna and ibn Ṭufayl, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 512, note 312.

**82** Preserved in the late fifteenth-century Rabbi Moses of Kiev, *Šušan Sodot* (Koretz: 1784), fol. 69b: אָמַר לִי הַחֵם הַמִּשְׁכִּיל בִּי נִתָּן ז’ ל. דַּע כִּי שְׁלִימוֹת סוּד הַנְּבוּאָה לְנִבְיָא שְׁפִתָּאום יִרְאֶה צוֹרֵת עֲצֻמוֹת עוֹמֶדֶת לְפָנָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּח אֶת עֲצֻמוֹ וַיִּתְּעַלֵּם מִמֶּנּוּ וַיִּרְאֶה צוֹרֵת עֲצֻמוֹ לְפָנָיו מְדַבֶּרֶת עִמּוֹ וּמְגַדֶּת לוֹ הַעֲתִידוֹת. On this passage, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 253; Gershom G. Scholem, “*Ša’arei Šedeq*, a Kabbalistic Text from the School of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, Attributed to Rabbi Shem Tov (ben Gaon?)” [Hebrew], *QS* 1 (1924/25): 127–39; Gershom G. Scholem, “Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung,” *MGWJ* 74 (1930): 289–90. See also Scholem, *On the Mystical*

This means that Rabbi Nathan's experience did not include a vision of himself, although he belongs to ecstatic Kabbalah. Abulafia indicates in *Or ha-Šekhel* that he wrote the book for those who are intelligent and who have received the general principles that are related to God.<sup>83</sup> Here, we have a description of the way in which he envisioned the two disciples, indubitably beginners, just as he later wrote his Commentary on the Pentateuch for seven people whom he believed should become prophets. He envisioned his audience in categories that were shaped by his expectations, or *imaginaire*, of the development of the eschatological process.

Interestingly enough, Abulafia does not dedicate *Imrei Šefer*, a book written in 1291, some months or a year after the date that Abulafia believed that the Messiah would come or be revealed, to any of his disciples. He mentions none of his students' names, perhaps an implicit sign that he had again been deserted by them as had happened in Capua in 1279. Then, in the early 1280s in Messina, for a short time at least, he again remained alone. Nevertheless, it is difficult to detect signs of despair or a significant change in the nature of his Kabbalah from this book. In my opinion, the absence of such signs of disappointment may be related to the importance of the other narrative or register, the third narrative, that could prevail over the date of the advent of the Messiah in history passing by, which belongs to the second narrative that is connected to a collective experience, as Abulafia's continuation of the dissemination of the third, spiritual-noetic register was, for him, quintessential.<sup>84</sup>

Let me point out that the number of young Jews interested in philosophy around 1270 was much larger than those who were interested in Kabbalah, which means that the demographic pool for propagandistic activities was not among the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists, but among the young Maimonideans. One such student gleaned from this pool was Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, but in principle, this student could also have been someone with the intellectual profile of the famous poet Immanuel of Rome, cognisant as the latter was not only with philosophy, including Averroistic philosophy, but also with *Sefer Yeširah* and *the book Bahir*.

Maimonides's purism as to which books were reliable and should be read and which should not did not hold too long and had certainly already become completely irrelevant by the third phase of Maimonideanism. However, in the case of Abulafia,

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*Shape*, 259–60, 314, note 22. This is one more example of the existence of different types or perhaps levels of experience in ecstatic Kabbalah, a situation that prevents the reification of one type of experience. See also chapter 5 note 174 above. On the impact of such a view, though from another source, on a modern Hasidic Rabbi who perished in the Holocaust, see Ron Wachs, *The Flame of the Holy Fire: Perspectives on the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro of Piacenza* [Hebrew] (Gush Etzion: Mikhlelet Herzog, 2010), 236. See also chapter 27 note 199 above.

<sup>83</sup> Ed. Gross, 40.

<sup>84</sup> As to the possible postponement of the messianic date 1280 to 1290, see Appendix D.

his profound appropriation of the combinatory techniques should be seen as a major reason for his transcendence of the scholastic approach of the other Maimonideans.

In any case, an example of Abulafia's attempt to persuade a philosophically oriented thinker to accept his Kabbalah can be found in his epistle "Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah," written sometime towards the end of his life and addressed to a certain unidentified Rabbi Abraham. It seems that this letter is a response to a previous letter from Rabbi Abraham, who adopted a view according to which philosophy is higher than the "science of the Torah."<sup>85</sup> Quite unusually for his writings, where he almost always uses the term "my son" in order to address his readers, Abulafia refers to this Abraham as someone who is as dear to him as a brother. From a perusal of the content of the letter, it seems that Abraham lived in a community that Abulafia had visited at some point in the past.<sup>86</sup> In any case, it seems that we cannot identify him with one of the four students in Capua who were also called Abraham. Perhaps he is Abraham ben Shalom the Enlightened, who was mentioned above.

It is evident that Abulafia had initiated at least some of his disciples into his techniques in quite a short period of time, a practice that was described in some detail in Rabbi Nathan's *Ša'arei Šedeq*. There, he claims that he was taught by his master, most plausibly Abulafia, who instructed him to practise his various techniques during a span of four months.<sup>87</sup> Afterwards, he practised those techniques by himself and testified that they worked, though he took guidance from his master regarding the unusual events that occurred during those experiences.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly enough, in Rabbi Nathan's description of his studies before meeting his Kabbalistic master and in the detailed enumeration of the Kabbalistic topics he studied with him, there is nothing related to sefirotic Kabbalah, though some themes related to the *sefirot* are found in his book.

This fact corroborates my assumption that the absence of a separate phase of studying sefirotic Kabbalah in Abulafia's life was practically (not rhetorically) necessary for approaching the more advanced form of Kabbalah, the ecstatic one. At least insofar as the details of the techniques described in Abulafia's handbooks are concerned—techniques which constitute one of Abulafia's most original contributions—as well as those in Rabbi Nathan's book, it is obvious that there is no vital connection between these techniques and the issues characteristic of theosophical Kabbalah, such as theosophical structures. In a way, the techniques reflect a pre-axial approach based on corporeal activities: oral and bodily movements are grafted onto the axial ideal of noetic activity. The complexity emerging from the combination of specific linguistic techniques and noetic ideals constitutes what I call the ecstatic model in my

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<sup>85</sup> As is implicit in Abulafia's epistle, 5, 7, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Interestingly enough, in this epistle, he does not refer to theosophical Kabbalah at all, but sees the turn from philosophy as a means of bringing someone to his prophetic Kabbalah.

<sup>87</sup> See Rabbi Nathan Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478. Why Scholem speaks about "two months" in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 150, and Gross about "three months" is not clear to me.

<sup>88</sup> Rabbi Nathan Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478–79.

studies, which was described in detail in several of Abulafia's handbooks and which has no parallel in the Kabbalah of his contemporaries among the theosophical Kabbalists or philosophers.

Given the fact that these techniques are an original contribution both to Jewish mysticism and, I would say, also to the history of mysticism in general, and given the fact that he regarded them as very important, the absence of sefirotic themes in their fabric is a crucial fact for a proper understanding of Abulafia's approach. Moreover, some of his different handbooks describe paths for reaching mystical experiences (*Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, *Or ha-Šekhel*, *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, and *Imrei Šefer*) and these practices are, in their profound structure, similar to each other, though in many details they diverge from one another. These divergences, though in many cases a matter of details, are nevertheless interesting since they differ both the sacramental manner in which mystical techniques are often described (e.g., as someone using the same technique all his life) and from the details of the performance of the commandments, which are described in the same manner in Rabbinic writings without any substantial difference.

However, in his various books, Abulafia experiments with the basic elements of his techniques and offers slightly different methods. This is an important case of conceptual fluidity within the framework of his profound noetic structure and within the more complex framework of what I call a model, which is constituted by a sequel that also contains a technique for reaching certain forms of experiences, techniques that I describe as anomian. The expectation is to attain some form of revelation, a mystical ideal that in our case is a prophetic experience, or, reaching even higher, to attain union with the supernal intellectual realm, to be experienced by means of applying one of his techniques.

Let us now turn to the two epithets that Abulafia confers on his two students in *Or ha-Šekhel*: "the enlightened" and "the wise." The meaning of these terms fits the title of the book: *The Light of the Intellect*. The book deals with the influx or overflow of the tenth, or lowest, cosmic intellect, which may also be a reference to the First Cause. In my opinion, the main intention of the treatise is to open the disciples' minds to the intellectual light by first resorting to vocal techniques that are formulated in great detail in the book and then later advancing to a more interiorised concentration on the mental level of the combinations of those letters.

In a way, Abulafia portrays his role *vis-à-vis* the two students to whom he dedicated the book as that of the cosmic Agent Intellect in relation to the human individual intellect.<sup>89</sup> This ultimate goal is connected, as seen in the last passage, to the revelation of the divine name 'HWY which he considered to be the most secret of the divine names and which he imagined had first been disclosed to him a few years ear-

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<sup>89</sup> Compare to *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29. On the phrase *Or ha-Šekhel*, see *The Writings of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon: Sefer Pe'ah*, 103, or Rabbi Baḡya ibn Paquda's *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, trans. Judah ibn Tibbon, ed. A. Tzifroni (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1959), gate 10, chapter 1, 558, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 209, note 22.

lier. The comparison of this topic to the account of the chariot, a major esoteric subject in Abulafia's thought that in many cases is related to his speculations on the divine names,<sup>90</sup> shows how important this name was for him.

The Kabbalist Nathan the Wise, who is mentioned in the introductory passage of this book, is to be identified, as I have proposed elsewhere, with Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, the author of *Ša'arei Šedeq*.<sup>91</sup> He is also most likely the author of some Kabbalistic collectanea that contain Sufi influences stemming from ibn Arabi's school in Damascus, which was assembled by Rabbi Isaac of Acre and described in a unique manuscript as having been authored by a certain "sage R. N." I decoded this acronym as a reference to his teacher Rabbi Nathan<sup>92</sup> by means of two brief though quite important sentences: one in the name of "Rabbi Nathan the sage and the illuminate," adduced along with a short paragraph by Rabbi Isaac of Acre—entirely unknown by other sources—in a late fifteenth-century eclectic Kabbalistic work<sup>93</sup> and the other in another interesting quote attributed to Rabbi Nathan, in the same Rabbi Isaac's *Me'irat Einayyim*.<sup>94</sup>

However, in our context, it is important to point out that these two Kabbalists, though decisively influenced by Abulafia in some important cases, were much more inclined towards Neo-Platonism and Sufism<sup>95</sup> than to Neo-Aristotelian or Maimonidean approaches. They were disinterested in the political sort of esotericism found in Abulafia and in Maimonideanism, though they had no significant critique of naturalistic views, in the manner we have seen above in the writings of Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi, as far as I can see. Rabbi Isaac, like his older contemporary Gikatilla, sometimes expressed anti-philosophical and anti-Maimonidean positions, though in many cases, their writings are informed by philosophical terminology.

In fact, this is also the case in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, whose esotericism is much less concerned with problems connected to the "Straussian" tensions between the religious, mythical mentalities of the multitude *à la* Eliade and those of the elite, if at all. Their writings deal much more with supernal attributes or categories (the *sefirot*) that organise traditional information in accordance with theosophical structures that served in the first century of the history of Kabbalah as a decadic

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<sup>90</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 51–53.

<sup>91</sup> See my introduction to *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 47–51, and Moshe Idel, "Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, the author of *Ša'arei Šedeq* and Its Influence in the Land of Israel" [Hebrew], *Šalem* 7 (1992): 47–58.

<sup>92</sup> See my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 73–90.

<sup>93</sup> See Scholem, "Eine Kabbalistische Erklärung der Prophetie als Selbstbegegnung," 285–90; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 91–92; and my introduction to *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 330–45. See also Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 123, note 47; 167, note 131, who was not then acquainted with the identification of the author of these passages as Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah, which I demonstrated more than a decade ago.

<sup>94</sup> See Chapter 6 note 244 above.

<sup>95</sup> See my *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 73–101.

code for deciphering the alleged esoteric meaning of the scriptures, a phenomenon that I call arcanisation.<sup>96</sup>

*Or ha-Šekhel*, in which the parable of the son and the pearl is discussed, was dedicated to a Kabbalist named Nathan the Wise. It is difficult to avoid the connotations of the title of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous play *Nathan der Weise* (1779), where a version of the parable of the three rings and a precious stone is found and the plot is set in the late thirteenth century. Is this resort to the phrase "Nathan the Wise" by the two authors a mere coincidence? I am inclined to give a negative answer, though so far I have been unable to establish a possible connection between the passages from Abulafia's book discussed above and Lessing's play or his general approach. Nor am I capable of finding, for the time being, a connection between them and Lessing's good friend, the famous Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, whom Lessing called "the second Spinoza," who could, thanks to his knowledge of Hebrew, have brought them to Lessing's attention.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps new material that I am not acquainted with will be able to establish such a possible historical link. In any case, in both Abulafia's parable and Lessing's play, a precious stone is mentioned, in addition to Lessing's reference to the three rings. Finally, one of the thirty manuscripts of *Or ha-Šekhel* is located in a library in Berlin.<sup>98</sup>

The more universal approach found in Abulafia's book, though extremely elitist, is different from many medieval discussions and points to a phenomenological affinity with the German thinker that is worthy of a more detailed inquiry. In my opinion, a general affinity can be discerned between the two historical stages of the use of the parable about the true religion, even if they are unrelated historically: in both cases, the impact of the reverberations of ancient Greek philosophy has generated an atmosphere that was more open to a universal approach.

Like the early Maimonideans, the much later Maimonideans who were active in the second part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were drawn to the more

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**96** For the codic function of the system of the ten *sefirot*, see my *Absorbing Perfections*, 280–89, and see Chapter 10 note 154 above. See also Idel, *Middot*.

**97** As to Mendelssohn's interest in Kabbalah, especially in Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's *Ginnat Egoz*, see Rivka Horwitz, *Multiple-Faceted Judaism* [Hebrew] (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2002), 11–74. As Horwitz has shown, Mendelssohn had a special interest in the divine name. For *Nathan the Wise* and Mendelssohn, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 298–99, 569–70, 573–75, but the reason for the choice of "Nathan the Wise" as the title is not addressed.

**98** Ms. Berlin, 122, Or. 8<sup>o</sup> 358, fols. 1a–59b. There is a rich bibliography on Lessing's views and sources. See the English translation of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, ed. George A. Kohut (New York: Bloch Publishing House, 1917), 117, where he translates Abulafia's parable without mentioning the name of Rabbi Nathan the Wise, or Yossef Schwartz, "Three Rings or Three Cheats: Revealed Religions and Pluralism between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment," in *Streams into the Sea: Studies in Jewish Culture and Its Content Dedicated to Felix Posen*, eds. Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal and Elchanan Reiner (Tel Aviv: Alma College, 2001): 268–81, as well as Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 285–86.



naturalist and intellectualist proclivities in Maimonides and his esoteric thought.<sup>99</sup> Solomon Maimon is perhaps the best example of the continuity between the two stages of Jewish thought, because he adopted Maimonides's name as his family name, wrote an incomplete commentary on the *Guide* in Hebrew entitled *Giv'at ha-Moreh* and quite a long exposition of the content of Maimonides's book in his autobiography,<sup>100</sup> and understood the earliest form of Judaism that extended from the period of the Patriarchs to that of Moses to be a natural religion. However, Maimon distinguished between this phase of Judaism and the later ones, in which there are greater and smaller mysteries that also include the secrets of Kabbalah.<sup>101</sup> His older contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn, regarded natural religion as mankind's first common religion.

In the nineteenth century, first editions of books written by Maimonideans were quite widespread as part of the renewal of interest in a "rational" Judaism, especially among Jews in Germany and in some areas where Jews were influenced by the Western Enlightenment.<sup>102</sup> It seems quite plausible that Maimonideanism, both in the form of Maimonides's own major books and the vast literature of his followers, including Abulafia's writings, left significant traces, directly—and in more cases indirectly—on pre-modern philosophers such as Spinoza and Maimon.<sup>103</sup> They adopted a much more naturalist approach to religion and to reality, as well as a more incisive and explicitly critical stance towards the sacred scriptures, which indeed explains why they were persecuted. Maimon's perception of Judaism as a religion, not only of Kabbalah, was greatly influenced by the discourse of mysteriology; he not only de-

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**99** For Strauss, Maimonides was part of the essentially esoteric medieval Enlightenment, while he understands the modern Enlightenment as essentially exoteric; see Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 73. However, some of Maimon's writings do not fit this characterisation.

**100** Salomon Maimon, *Salomon Maimons Lebensgeschichte*, repr. ed. (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), 240–315.

**101** Solomon Maimon, *An Autobiography*, trans. John Clark Murray (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 176–85. For Maimon's interpretation of Maimonides's esotericism, see Moshe Idel, "Solomon Maimon and Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 28 (2012): 74–79. For Maimonides's impact on Maimon's philosophy, see Samuel Atlas, *From Critical to Speculative Idealism: The Philosophy of Solomon Maimon* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

**102** See the rather general survey by Fishel Lachover, "Maimonides and the Hebrew Haskalah in Its Beginnings" [Hebrew], in *'Al Gevul ha-Yašan we-ha-Ḥadaš* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1951): 97–107, and the more incisive study by Eliezer Schweid, "From the 'True Wisdom of the Torah' and the 'Secret of the Unity of Faith' to 'Philosophy of Religion,'" *Iyyun* 20 (1969): 29–59; Abraham P. Socher, *The Radical Enlightenment of Solomon Maimon: Judaism, Heresy, and Philosophy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006); Allan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012); and Daniel B. Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 93–103.

**103** Maimon was influenced by Rabbi Moses Narboni's commentary on the *Guide*. See Maimon's *Giv'at ha-Moreh*, eds. Shmuel H. Bergman and Nathan Rotenstreich (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1965), 96, 99.



scribed great and small mysteries in Judaism, but also those of Hasidism (a predominantly esoteric type of popular Kabbalah), which he knew from his own brief experiences, in terms of a “secret society,” as if it were similar to the recently founded sect of the Bavarian illuminati.<sup>104</sup>

In a way, Maimonides created a religion of his own, as Abulafia’s verse from his poem about the religion of Moses and Maimonides that was quoted above formulates it, which is esoteric, and we have surveyed here only a few of its persistent variants. Interestingly enough, it was a statement on esotericism by Maimon’s contemporary Lessing that served Leo Strauss when he exemplified his own approach.<sup>105</sup> In my opinion, esotericism and universalism are not exclusive approaches, especially when they are related to particularistic societies. After all, Strauss elaborated on how this approach informed the history of Western philosophy, and he may be considered part of what can be called the twentieth-century Maimonideans. As the late Professor Shlomo Pines told me, Strauss reached his theory on philosophical esotericism by beginning with reading the medieval commentaries on *The Guide of the Perplexed* that could be found in print at that time.

## Appendix C: Abulafia: From Christian Trinities to Noetic Triads or Vice Versa?

Abulafia’s image has undergone a variety of metamorphoses in modern scholarship.<sup>106</sup> However, the bizarre presentations of his image began much earlier, at the very beginning of scholarship on Kabbalah.<sup>107</sup> Such a strange presentation can be seen in Meyer H. Landauer’s claim that Abulafia wrote the *Zohar*, an issue that was duly rejected by Adolph Jellinek.<sup>108</sup> Landauer was the first serious reader of Abu-

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**104** Maimon, *An Autobiography*, 151–69, 185.

**105** Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 28, 182. See also Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 107–8. That Lessing embraced an Averroistic view of humanity as a species that can be educated in the course of history, see Shlomo Pines, “La philosophie dans l’économie du genre humain selon Averroès: une réponse à al-Fārābī?,” in *Multiple Averroès: Actes du colloque international organisé à l’occasion du 850<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la naissance d’Averroès, Paris 20–23 septembre 1976* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978): 189–207, reprinted in *Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Sarah Strouma, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997): 374–75.

**106** See Ronald Kiener, “From *Ba’al ha-Zohar* to Prophet to Ecstatic: The Vicissitudes of Abulafia in Contemporary Scholarship,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, 145–59. See also Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (London: Littman Library, 1991), 1:48–49.

**107** For the first part of this appendix, I draw from my article “Abraham Abulafia and the Pope.”

**108** See his small but ground-breaking monograph, *Moses Ben Schem-Tob de Leon und sein Verhältnis zum Zohar* (Leipzig: s.n., 1851). The parallels he found between de Leon’s Hebrew writings and the Aramaic passages in the *Zohar* are very solid and have not been shaken even by the more recent find-

lafia's manuscripts that could be found in the Bavarian library in Munich, and his wild speculations had scholastic consequences for some decades, despite the fact that Jellinek refuted them soon after his premature death.

In what follows here, I will summarise these scholars' discussions and indicate the points of legend regarding Abulafia, all of which are merely the fruit of these scholars' and historians' wild imaginations, a tendency still evident, *mutatis mutandis*, even in some historical presentations in recent scholarship. The foundations of the legend of Abulafia's meeting with the pope and its alleged content were laid by Meyer H. Landauer, the founder of the studies of Kabbalah in the mid-nineteenth century. He writes:

Im Monat Ab des Jahres 5041 ging er von Capua nach Rom. Hier ging er am ערב ר"ה zum Pabst, und suchte ihn zu bekehren; hätte aber diese Kühnheit beinah mit dem Leben bezahlen müssen. Er ist nur dadurch vom Feuertod gerettet worden, daß ihm Gott, wie er sich ausdrückt, שתי פיות hat wachsen lassen, wahrscheinlich hat er als Zweizünger gesprochen, wie er es auch in seinen Schriften thut.<sup>109</sup>

In the month of Av in the year 5041, he went from Capua to Rome. There, on the eve of the new year, he went to the pope and tried to convert him, almost paying for this audacity with his life. He was saved from death by fire, since God, as he put it, allowed him to grow two mouths; he probably spoke equivocally, as he also does in his writings.

Clearly, Landauer derives many of the particular elements of his story from a single source: the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edu*.<sup>110</sup> He includes a number of incorrect details, such as the year 5041 (instead of 5040) being the year that Abulafia arrived in Rome. He also omits the fact that the pope was at that point not in Rome, but in Soriano nel Cimino. However, what is most important in Landauer's report is that Abulafia went to the pope on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. Details such as the pope's refusal to meet him and the pope's sudden death are omitted and the impression is created, by means of the German verb "ging," that Abulafia succeeded in meeting him. Moreover, he states that Abulafia's purpose in this encounter was to convert the pope to Judaism: "suchte ihn zu bekehren."

An additional error in Landauer's report is his emphasis on the opinion that Abulafia was saved from the flames due to his "two mouths," which is, on the basis of the single description we have, also untrue. Abulafia was also apparently not imprisoned in Soriano, but in Rome. It was in Soriano that the wood was set aside for his immolation, but the "two mouths" story, with all the ambiguity that this expression contains, is described as an event that occurred before Abulafia's

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ings in the field, which have substantially restricted the role of Moses de Leon in the composition of the Zoharic literature.

**109** Meyer H. Landauer, "Vorläufiger Bericht über meine Entdeckung in Ansehung des Sohar," *Literaturblatt des Orients* 6 (1845): col. 382.

**110** Landauer knew Abulafia's commentaries on his prophetic works that are contained in Ms. Munich, 285 very well and briefly described them in *Literaturblatt des Orients*, col. 118.

journey to Soriano, or at most on the day of his arrival there, not during a [non-]meeting with the pope.

An additional contribution Landauer made to the creation of the legend comes by way of a bibliographical error. His fantastic statement regarding the “Trinity” in Abulafia’s writings is based on his quote from a poem contained in Munich Ms. 285, situated between *Imrei Šefer* and the epistle “We-Zot li-Yehudah,” both of which were written by Abulafia. The poem reads:

A prophet did arise, God’s chosen one  
He proceeded with the praise of the fashioner of utterances  
and declared in his praise only three  
Putting aside, not mentioning the ten  
I await a reply from the Lord of Utterances  
for His pure idiom.<sup>111</sup>

Landauer explains the content of these lines as follows: “In a poem [...] he declares that he abandoned the ten *sefirot* and he settled on three.”<sup>112</sup> And so, Abulafia became someone who forsook the Kabbalistic concept of the ten *sefirot*, substituting in its place a Kabbalah founded on only three *sefirot*. In Landauer’s eyes, this is a clear indication of Abulafia’s Christianising tendency.

However, the poem upon which Landauer relies was not written by Abulafia. It was accidentally inserted into that text between two of his writings, and it was actually authored by the Provençal Kabbalist Rabbi Asher ben David, who lived a generation before Abulafia in Catalonia.<sup>113</sup> The poem speaks about the biblical Moses, not about Abulafia; “a prophet did arise, God’s chosen one” undoubtedly refers to Moses. The poem refers to the thirteen attributes, of which, according to some Rabbinic sources, Moses chose three: “the great, the mighty, and the awesome.” Therefore, the poem does not at all imply Abulafia’s forsaking of the ten *sefirot*. When “Abraham” is mentioned later on in the poem, it is the biblical patriarch, not the medieval Kabbalist, who is discussed.

The decisive stage in the collection of additional details concerning the “encounter” between Abulafia and the pope was first reached by the most important and most famous of Jewish historians, Heinrich Graetz. Basing his analysis on Landauer’s mistakes, Graetz adds his own personal touches, writing:

<sup>111</sup> Landauer, *Literaturblatt des Orients*, col. 483:

וקם נביא בחיר האל ופתח, לשבח לגזר מאמרות—ולא זכר שבחיו רק שלשה, והניח ולא פקד עשרות—אצפה מענה מאל אמורות—לאמרותיו אמרות טהורות.

<sup>112</sup> *Literaturblatt des Orients*, “In einem Gedicht [...] Macht er sich groß daß er die 10 Sefirot verlasen, und dafür drei gesetzt [hat],” a statement based on Landauer. See Jellinek’s German introduction to his edition of *Sefer ha-Ot*, 65. See also Ezriel Guenzig, *Abraham Abulafia: His Life, His Doctrine, and His Spiritual Propensity* [Hebrew] (Krakow: J. Fischer, 1904), 22.

<sup>113</sup> The original version of the poem was printed by Daniel Abrams in *R. Asher ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in His Kabbalistic Thought* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 28–31.

In the end, a spirit of madness fell upon him. He was to meet with Pope Martin IV in Rome, in an attempt to prevail upon him to remove the robes of his high office and become Jewish. The Pope heard the words of this mad Kabbalist Jew, and enraged, he put him in prison. He was incarcerated for 28 days and was released; spared from the fiery verdict of the Inquisition because, as he put it, God graced him with two mouths. There is reason to suppose that Abulafia told the Pope that in place of the ten *sefirot* he upholds a doctrine of three. The Pope found this at least partially satisfactory and set him free. Upon being released he was permitted to move about freely in Rome.<sup>114</sup>

Uncritically relying on Landauer, Graetz understands the purpose of Abulafia's meeting with the pope as an attempt to bring about his conversion to Judaism. He also adds many "significant details" that do not appear in Landauer's account. For instance, he identifies the pope Abulafia went to meet as Martin IV. This supplementary detail was the result of Graetz's acceptance of Landauer's 5041 (1281) date for Abulafia's meeting with the pope, as Martin IV was elected pope in 1281.<sup>115</sup>

This mistake made other pure inventions possible: according to Graetz, the pope spoke to Abulafia and the latter's life, so the great historian speculated, was spared thanks to the fact that his beliefs were found to be "partially satisfactory." Whence did Graetz derive these details? Again, the single possible source is the passage from Landauer cited above. Accordingly, it was reasonable for Graetz to assume that Abulafia had confessed a belief in the Trinity in the presence of the pope in order to survive. So, too, the interpretation of Abulafia's expression "two mouths" as implying his partial acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity is at least in part derived from Landauer. In such a manner, a legend was created whose origin lies in Landauer's faulty quotations from the *Commentary on Sefer ha-Edut*, in which he omits several crucial details, and the erroneous reliance on Rabbi Asher's poem as a reflection of Abulafia's approach. It continued with Graetz's attempt to accept Landauer's story, resulting in him filling in significant but fabricated details derived from Landauer's "historical" evidence. The irony of this is that Graetz, the pre-eminent "rationalist" historian, turned himself into the composer of quite a fantastic legend.

Interestingly enough, in addition to this fabrication of details, it should be mentioned that it was Graetz who first published the entire Hebrew original of the *Commentary on Sefer ha-Edut*, which actually contradicts the legend he composed, and

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**114** Heinrich Graetz, *Divrei Yemei Yišra'el*, vol. 5, trans. Shaul P. Rabinovich (Warsaw: Ahiasaf Press, 1897), 185. The English version of these discussions is shorter and differs in some details, but nevertheless includes the issue of Abulafia's confession of the Trinity. See Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, trans. Bella Löwy, vol. 4, repr. ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 7. Shimeon Berenfeld also bases himself on Heinrich Graetz. See his *Da'at Elohim* (Warsaw: Ahiasaf Press, 1899), 386, note 1.

**115** Martin IV was elected pope some months later on February 22, 1281, when Abulafia was most probably already in Messina. See also the assumption that Abulafia attempted to meet Pope Martin IV in 1281 made by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke in "Ramon Lull's New World Order: Esoteric Evangelism and Frontline Philosophy," *Aries* 9 (2009): 188.

who translated Abulafia's text into German. Surprisingly, he noticed nothing that necessitated a substantial revision of his earlier erroneous historical report.<sup>116</sup> Thus, gross mistakes and even fabrications about Abulafia's thought are not of recent scholarly invention, but rather are the result of superficial readings of his writings. For this reason, in chapter 27 of this book, I recommend that readers of Abulafia should not rely on history as shaped by historians, but should rather check everything from the very beginning. In this way, one can offer one's own picture rather than relying on the imagination of others, including historians.

Graetz's publication of the original Hebrew text did not succeed in clarifying the true nature of this affair for scholars writing much later. For example, Israel Friedlander, an accomplished scholar of messianic thought, writes that Abulafia "renounced his belief in the presence of the Pope [...] in order to escape death"<sup>117</sup> and David Neumark, a distinguished historian of Jewish thought, writes that "according to modern writers, Abulafia formulated this doctrine (i. e., the Trinity) in order to placate his captors in Rome and save his life—indeed they set him free."<sup>118</sup> In this context, when dealing with legends created and disseminated by distinguished historians concerning Abulafia's attempt to meet the pope, let me point out that I am not sure whether or not Sagerman's claim that Abulafia was imprisoned before the pope died and released sometime afterwards also stems from Graetz's account.<sup>119</sup>

However, what can be shown is that Abulafia's acknowledgment of the Christian Trinity was an invention by Meyer H. Landauer and repeated uncritically by Heinrich Graetz. It has recently been attributed to Abulafia on the grounds of some of his other texts that the two nineteenth-century scholars mentioned above could not have seen as they were in manuscripts and libraries that were not accessible to them. Probably unaware of the fantastic nature of the nineteenth-century claims of his illustrious predecessors, or of my Hebrew article on the topic of Abulafia's attempt to meet the pope, Sagerman attempts to demonstrate that some forms of trinity that were influenced by Christianity were indeed part of Abulafia's doctrine, though they were accepted with some due changes.

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**116** Heinrich Graetz, "Abraham Abulafia der Pseudo-Messias," *MGWJ* 36 (1887): 557–58. For a similar approach to some historical accounts, see Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro, "Historians as Storytellers: A Critical Examination of New Age Religion's Scholarly Historiography," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 10 (2019): 1–24.

**117** Israel Friedlander, "Jewish-Arabic Studies," *JQR* 3 (1912/13): 287, note 428: "[Abulafia] renounced his belief in the presence of the Pope [...] in order to escape death." See also Louis I. Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform Movements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 179, and William J. Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 141.

**118** David Neumark, *Toledot ha-Filosofiah be-Yiśra'el* (New York: A. Y. Shṭibl, 1921), 1:67–68.

**119** Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 2. I do not know the Hebrew source for Sagerman's claim that Abulafia was imprisoned by the pope's forces after his departure from Spain [sic], since he does not mention any date, place, or source for his statement. See *The Serpent Kills*, 28.

Let me begin the discussion of this allegation with Abulafia's explicit statement as to the manner in which he envisioned the Christian Trinity. In his epistle "We-Zot li-Yehudah," he writes:

The sages of the sefirotic Kabbalah thought to unify God and to flee from the belief in the Trinity [šilluš], and they had [envisioned] Him as a decad [išseruhu], like the Gentiles say that He is three and three are one, so some of the masters of Kabbalists believe, and they say that the divinity is ten sefirot, and the ten are one and they multiplied Him at the maximum and compounded Him at the maximum, and there is no greater multiplication than ten.<sup>120</sup>

Here, we have a mention of the Christian Trinity in the context of a sharp critique of Kabbalistic theosophy issued in a treatise written by another Kabbalist. This important passage has not been given its due attention in the new wave of scholarship on Abulafia since it complicates the harmonious picture of Kabbalah cum Christianity. For example, surprisingly enough, this was not addressed by Sagerman in his book dedicated to Abulafia's attitude towards Christianity. Nor has he mentioned the other clear references to the Trinity that can be found in his *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*: "I am confident—he says—that no illuminate will be duped to believe the dictum of those who say that God is one substance, which has three properties."<sup>121</sup>

However, the clear content of Abulafia's statements notwithstanding, Sagerman's general approach merely follows Wolfson's incarnational interpretation of Abulafia: he writes of a co-optation of the Christian Trinity.<sup>122</sup> In this vein, he sees in Abulafia's discussions of the Trinity a double tendency: one towards adopting it and another one towards amending its idolatrous content.<sup>123</sup> Let me therefore address these dis-

**120** Ed. Jellinek, 19, corrected according to Ms. New York, JTS 1887:

שבעלי הקבלה הספיריית חשבו לייחד השם ולברוח מאמונת השלוש ועשרוהו וכמו שהגוים אומרים הוא שלשה והשלשה אחד כן מקצת בעלי הקבלה מאמינים ואומרים כי האלוהות עשר ספירות והעשרה הם אחד, והנה הם רבוהו תכלית הריבוי והרכיבוהו תכלית המרכבה ואין ריבוי אחר העשרה.

For another sharp critique of the belief in a divine Trinity, see *Sefer ha-Ḥešeq*, 54, and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 146–47.

**121** Printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 60:

ואני בטוח ששום משכיל לא יתפתה להאמין מאמר האומרים שהאלוה עצם אחד ויש לו שלש סגולות.

See also *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 59–60, where he speaks negatively about the faith in one substance and three attributes. The resort to the Hebrew term *to'ar* here may refer to the Christian view of three persons in the deity.

**122** *The Serpent Kills*, 249: "This Jewish mystical trinity is both a cooptation, on Abulafia's part, of core Christian doctrine and a subversion of idolatry." Compare Landauer's view of Abulafia as a "rationalist Christian," *Literaturblatt des Orients* 6 (1845): col. 473, and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 379, note 35. The claim about this Kabbalist's cooptation of the Trinity is another instance of the scholarly ignorance of the vital impact of Maimonides's thought on Abulafia.

**123** *The Serpent Kills*, 84, where he speaks about Abulafia's proclivities towards the Trinity and the incarnation. See also *The Serpent Kills*, 218, 225, 248, etc. Unlike Wolfson, who often qualifies incarnation, speaking, for example, about "textual incarnation," Sagerman speaks about incarnation without any further qualification. In my opinion, this term obscures much more than it clarifies, since we may well understand the phenomena as different forms of embodiment.

cussions on the basis of our assumptions above about Abulafia belonging to the Maimonidean camp.

One of the most frequently recurring topics in Abulafia's writings is his adoption and elaboration of the well-known Aristotelian and Maimonidean theory of the possible identity between the intellect, the act of intellection, and the intelligibilia during the noetic process.<sup>124</sup> He mainly uses the medieval forms of *Šekhel*, *maškil*, and *muškal*,<sup>125</sup> but he also sometimes uses *yode'a*, *da'at* (or *madda'*), and *yadu'a*<sup>126</sup> for the noetic triad.<sup>127</sup> Though three different concepts are involved, they are conceived as becoming one indistinguishable unity in the moment of intellection.

Discussions about intellection are an integral part of Abulafia's profound noetic structure and may be detected in dozens of places in his writings. They follow the lead of Maimonides's thought and also, to a lesser extent, that of ibn Ezra, the Andalusian thinkers, and the Maimonideans, who are quintessential for understanding Abulafia's thought. This means that the intellectual nature of both the human and the divine activity as a union between three distinguished components is well-established both in his thought and in his speculative sources, despite the complete absence of these terms in the biblical and Rabbinic literature. These discussions can be understood on their own without resorting to other conceptual structures like Christianity.

The question that should therefore be asked is how the basic noetic structure that so profoundly informed Abulafia's thought attracted and modified other types of triads and reinterpreted them by means of their noetic contents, such as the triads of *hošeq* (desirer), *hešeq* (desire), and *hašuq* (desired);<sup>128</sup> *regeš* (sense), *margiš* (the

**124** See Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy*, 110–24, 139–58, and Even-Ĥen, “Maimonides's Theory of Positive Attributes.” For the impact of Aristotelian noetics on Maimonides in more general terms, see Charles Manekin, “Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology,” in *Beyond Religious Boundaries: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, eds. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 78–95.

**125** See *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, 64, 73; *Or ha-Šekhel*, 16–17, 108–9; *Sefer ha-Hešeq*, 3, 10, 33, 42; *Imrei Šefer*, 69, Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48, fol. 75b; “Ševa' Netivot ha-Torah,” 13, 19; *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 129; 130, 2:1, 200; *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 59; *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, 61; as well as the passage translated above in chapter 17 from his epistle “Ha-Seder ha-Mithappekh”; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 71; and Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 13–14, and the accompanying footnotes. See also *Ner Elohim*, 29. Sagerman marginalises the discussions on noetic triads that have nothing to do with Christianity, mentioning only one such example in passing. See *The Serpent Kills*, 66, 91.

**126** Following Maimonides's terminology in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilekhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapter 2, halakhah 10, *Hayyei ha-Nefeš*, 88, 97, or the Untitled Treatise, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II, 48, fols. 70b, 75a, 75b, 79b, 90b, etc. See Warren Zev Harvey, “De la notion d'intellect-intelligent-intelligible chez Maïmonide,” in *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux*, eds. Jacqueline Hamesse and Olga Weijers (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006): 253–62. See also Chapter 3 note 93 above.

**127** See *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, 83.

**128** *Sefer ha-Hešeq*, 10.



person that senses), and *murgaš* (sensed);<sup>129</sup> *medammeh* (the person who imagines), *medummeh* (the imagined), and *dimyon* (imagination);<sup>130</sup> and *Ḥokhmah, Binah, and Da'at*.<sup>131</sup> However, he did not conceive the “true” meaning of the Christian Trinity as identical to these intellectual components; they do not constitute a hermeneutical grid that dictates the significance of the few cases in which the Christian Trinity is mentioned in his works.<sup>132</sup>

Let me present an example where the meaning is established by a certain philosophical background that Abulafia applies to the Christian material. In his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, the ecstatic Kabbalist wrote about the first *sefirah*, called *Ruah ha-Qodeš* (the Holy Spirit) already in *Sefer Yeširah*, as follows:

The first, which is one [Alef], is the Holy Spirit, and was called one *sefirah*, and together with the second [the letter Bet] one, their meaning will be AB [Av = father]. And from the third [figure] up to the tenth [figure, when all of them are added]<sup>133</sup> means Ben [52], and their meaning altogether is Adonai [= 65], and whoever thinks otherwise cuts the branches and he will be accounted for [...] and the secret of *Ha-AV, Ha-Ben* [65 = the Father, the Son], amounts to *Ben David Ba'* [69 = the son of David comes] and “he brings the prophecy [*ha-nevu'ah* = 69] in his hand.” And indeed “he is the son” [*hu' ha-ben* = 69] and “behold he is the father” [*ha-av hino* = 69].<sup>134</sup>

It is obvious that the three entities mentioned here are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, Abulafia is attempting to show how the procession going from the Holy Spirit to the Father to the Son is not a matter of a theological tenet; the order of the persons in this discussion is nothing like what can be found in Christian orthodoxy. Rather, it reflects a form of numerical order.

The letters of the Hebrew alphabet have a double meaning: as linguistic units, they form words, and as mathematical entities, they add up to numbers. Thus, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is interpreted here as a reference to the Holy Spirit, according to *Sefer Yeširah*, where Abulafia takes the phrase *sefirah aḥat* to mean

129 Commentary on *Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 61.

130 Commentary on *Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 61.

131 *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, 80.

132 Compare, however, the assumption that the “triads” in Abulafia are related to or evocative of Christianity in Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, viii, 83, 147, 220, note 123, 293.

133 Namely,  $3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10 = 52 = Ben$ .

134 1:1, 31:

ואמנם אמר כי הראשונה שהיא אחת היא רוח הקדש וקראה ספירה אחת, ועם השנית היה סימנם א"ב. ומן הג' ועד הי' היה סימנם ב"ן שסימנם אדנ"י בכלל, ומי שחושב זולת זה מקצץ בנטיעות והוא עתיד ליתן את הדין מפני שקצץ גלגל ונטיעות. שהנה הנטיעות בגלגל הן נטועות והוא שרשם. והסוד ה' א"ב ה' ב"ן והנה רמז ב"ן דו"ד ב"א והביא בידו הנבוא"ה. ובאמת הוא הב"ן, ואם כן הא"ב הנ"ו.

See Idel, *Ben*, 315–18, and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 86, who could benefit from the analysis in my book, were he to be acquainted with it. Compare also some themes found in this passage to a discussion in *Sefer ha-Ḥešeḡ*, 54. For the Neo-Pythagorean Eudorus's view that distinguishes between the One and the Monad and the Dyad that both emerge from it, see Charles Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 97–98.

“number one.” When the second Hebrew letter, *Bet*, is added to the first one, the word *AB* (“Father”) emerges. Then, when one adds up the remaining letters/numbers from three to ten, the figure 52 emerges; *Ben* (“Son”). An unorthodox imaginary that approximates the Christian Trinity is here built on speculations that are specific to Abulafia’s thought, though the procession of the three divine powers in Christianity is not accepted.

The leading idea of the passage is that a certain type of Trinity is found in the ten *sefirot*, which in this context refer to the first ten numbers. This Trinity should be understood as one unity, a triunion, and any separation between its components is heretical. When the definite forms of the Hebrew characters of the Father and the Son (*ha-Av ha-Ben*) are calculated, they amount to 65, which is also the numerical value of the divine name *Ad[oi]nai* when it is spelt elliptically without the *Waw*. Having construed the word *ha-Av* together with *ha-Ben*, Abulafia changes the order of the letters *Av* and *Ba*’, formulating the sentence *ha-Ben Ba*’ (“the son comes”), which is reminiscent of the traditional phrase “the son of David comes.” This phrase amounts in gematria to 69, as does “he is the son” and “behold he is the father.”

The phrase “the son comes,” described in Jewish terms as “*Ben David* comes,” which is an explicit messianic statement that draws on a Talmudic discussion,<sup>135</sup> is here connected to the Son, though, in a certain way, also to the Father. Abulafia relates the arrival of the messianic son to the renewal of prophecy, an issue that recurs in Abulafia’s works written long before the above passage as it deals with his own mission. What is the logic of the above calculations? In my opinion, Abulafia’s cumulative calculations are reminiscent of the Pythagorean secret of the Tetraktys, which is based on the addition of all the numerical values before the last one (the fourth):  $1+ 2+ 3+ 4$ , which amounts to 10. This approach was known to Abulafia and we have this type of calculation in the passage translated above: though it is conspicuously built upon a series of gematrias, there can be no doubt that they occur in a sort of crescendo: each unit is followed by another one that is numerically greater. Each later stage is construed as more complex than the previous one and they reflect a particular narrative of some kind: that the three are one unit that should not be disrupted or that the son of David is coming.

However, the ascending numerical valences may reflect a view that is closer to a Pythagorean triangle, which serves as the basis of the calculation of the Tetraktys, a view also found elsewhere in Abulafia’s writings. However, if we adopt the Pythagorean mode in order to understand the text, the final sum of the earlier numbers is

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<sup>135</sup> *BT, Yebamot*, fol. 63b, or from *the Book Bahir*. Abulafia interprets these two statements as referring to a secret that would explain the Bahiric theory of the transmigration of the Messiah’s soul, although he does not elaborate on how this occurs. See *Ošar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 30–31. I hope to elaborate on this text in my study of the secret of impregnation in Abulafia’s writings, where several other texts will also be analysed.

quintessential:  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$ .<sup>136</sup> What about the sum of all the numbers mentioned in the text from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* that we translated above:  $1 + 3 + 52 + 65 + 69 = 190$ ? The need to add those figures is implicit in the addition of the consonants that compound the words whose numerical valences are calculated here. The question is: is this number meaningful in Abraham Abulafia's writings? In the passage translated above, there is no hint of this whatsoever. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the answer is in the affirmative: the number 190 is understood in some of Abulafia's writings as pointing to the end times, as it is "referred" to in the gematria *qeš* ["end"] =  $190 = ne'elam$  ["hidden"] = *penimi* ["internal"] = *naqam* ["revenge"], and which is a date that Abulafia takes to mean 1290, the year he believed would be the time of redemption.<sup>137</sup>

In other words, this is an interesting example of eschatological esotericism, which occurs when the core of the secret is not explicitly specified; we may assume that it was transmitted orally. In my opinion, this is also the case in one of Abulafia's commentaries on a prophetic book where the term *ego*, which means "I" in Greek and Latin, occurs in the context of his discussion of the knowledge or wisdom of the Messiah, and it is not explicitly explained, but is rather left to the insight of the reader.<sup>138</sup>

What does all this mean? In my opinion, Abulafia's resort to Christian concepts does not betray an attraction to this type of typology. Instead, it is the application of a Pythagorean numerical technique to the various Jewish divine names and the three persons of the Christian triune. He does all of this in order to extract the date of the advent of the Messiah, which he "knew" in advance, since he had already used the gematria in 1282 when he extracted it by means of other kinds of calculations.<sup>139</sup>

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**136** Much more obvious is his discussion in "We-Zot li-Yehudah," 20, and in parallel discussions, where the four pericopes written in the *tefillin* are described as amounting to ten. For an analysis of *Sefer Yeširah* itself by using Abulafia's text as pointing to the Pythagorean secret of the Tetraktys, see Phineas Mordell, *The Origin of Letters and Numerals, According to Sefer Yetzirah* (Philadelphia: s.n., 1914, actually Breslau 1914), printed by H. Fleischmann. The text has already been published to a large extent in *JQR* [NS] 2 (1912): 557–83; 3 (1913): 517–44. Such a view of the phylacteries occurs earlier in Abulafia's *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 134, which was translated in chapter 26 note 130, chapter 17 note 154 above. See also Idel, "On the Meanings of the Term 'Kabbalah,'" 50–51. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 224; unaware of the Pythagorean background, he sees in this text a sign of performance that is related to his more general efforts to infuse some sort of theurgy into Abulafia's Kabbalah. See chapter 5 note 165 and chapter 17 note 146 above. For more on Abulafian texts denying theurgy, see Appendix E and Idel, *Middot*, chapter 9.

**137** Idel, "The Time of the End," 161–62; cf. Abulafia's 1282 *Commentary on Iš Adam*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 49, and his *Imrei Šefer*, 86, written after 1290. See also Moshe Idel, "On Symmetric Histories and Their Termination: On the Prophecy of Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon the Prophet" [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish History Presented to Joseph Hacker*, eds. Yaron Ben-Na'eh, Moshe Idel, Jeremy Cohen, and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2013): 111. See also note 276 above.

**138** See my *Messianic Mystics*, 296–301.

**139** For the most plausible Ashkenazi sources of Abulafia's gematrias of these words that amount to 190, see the writings of Rabbi Nehemiah ben Solomon, the prophet of Erfurt. Cf. Moshe Idel, "Some

Is this an influence of Christianity or an exercise in exegetical ingenuity applied to an eschatological secret known in advance as well as to divine names? If the message is understood on the level of hiding a secret as the main message, then the secret itself had nothing to do with the Trinity, but with the messianic date, and, on what he would consider a deeper level, the internal, personal dimension of redemption.

What counts for Abulafia, in my opinion, is the relationship implied by the numerical valences of the words and not the hypostatic status of the three persons of the Trinity. As seen above in the discussion of the myth of the pollution and the removal of the serpent's venom, Abulafia was not entrenched in the worldview of a widespread Rabbinic approach. Though he quoted it, he nevertheless quite openly opposed its main assumptions, just as in the case of his rejection of the micro-myth of God's phylacteries, as he discussed in the passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš* translated above. By radicalising Maimonides, Abulafia adopted a much more critical approach towards aspects of Rabbinic micro-myths at the same time that other Kabbalists over-mythicised them.

Abulafia's allegorical approach to Rabbinism, which also has a negative dimension, is also, in my opinion, Abulafia's approach to Christianity: the fact that he interprets some of its concepts does not mean that he was attracted to it, but simply that he decided to apply his radical hermeneutics to it. In this case, the application of the radical exegetical methods, coupled with his eschatological interest, is far more important than the specific contents of the Christian material that he interpreted.

Let us now turn to another triad found in some Kabbalistic texts that have also been understood as being related to Christianity: regarding a passage translated above in the context of the Torah as a median,<sup>140</sup> we discussed an example of a divergent triad of divine attributes. In the vast majority of the theosophical texts, the *sefirah* of the right hand, called *Gedullah*, is identified as *Ḥesed* ("mercy"), while its opposite, the left hand, *Gevurah*, is identified with *Din* ("the attribute of judgement") or *Pahad* ("fear"); and the median one, *Tiferet*, is conceived as *Raḥamim* ("the attribute of compassion") and is often referred to using the symbols of *Šalom* and *Emet* ("truth"). However, according to a fourteenth-century text found in a Hebrew book of polemics against Christianity, a triad of attributes has the attribute of mercy (= *Ḥesed*) as the median or preponderating power.<sup>141</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, different triads of attributes exist in a series of other Hebrew texts, some of

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Forlorn Writings of a Forgotten Ashkenazi Prophet: R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi," *JQR* 96 (2005): 189–90.

<sup>140</sup> *Or ha-Šekhel*, 20. See chapter 10 above.

<sup>141</sup> See David Berger, ed., *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages—A Critical Edition of Nizzahon Vetus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 3.

them contemporary to Abulafia, though the sources may be found much earlier in Jewish texts.<sup>142</sup>

According to Abulafia, there are two attributes that stand as opposites (truth and fear) while the Torah stands between them. Especially interesting in this context is Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah's *Ša'arei Šedeq*, where he uses the same designations for the three attributes that occur in other texts that differ from the regular usages of most of the Kabbalists. He speaks about the attribute of compassion (*Raḥamim*), judgement (*Din*), and a third one, peace (*Šalom*), which preponderates between the two.<sup>143</sup> Abulafia's triad of divine attributes differs from that of his student; neither of them is identical to those of other Kabbalists.

This diversity of technical expressions is the reason why I assume the existence of an earlier Jewish source (or sources) that differs from the more common description of the triad of *sefirot*, a supposition that has recently been proven by additional material discovered by Ronit Meroz in a particular manuscript of the *Zohar*<sup>144</sup> as well as by Liebes's analysis.<sup>145</sup> Abulafia's and Rabbi Nathan's discussions presented here contribute two more instances of triads of divine attributes that differ from the standard one found in theosophical Kabbalah. They open the way towards reinforcing the assumption that the materials I have presented in my studies, those discovered by Meroz, and Liebes's discussions allow for another historical reconstruction of the reliability of the interesting passage found in a later book of Jewish–Christian polemics, where another triad that is divergent in its terminology can be found.<sup>146</sup> Let me point out that it is quite improbable that the Zoharic text was influenced by Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret's discussions.

Against this background, I would like to address an additional and important discussion that was unknown to me when I wrote my two short remarks on these issues: that of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret, which was introduced into scholarly discourse by Harvey J. Hames. In two instances in his studies, he claims that ibn Adret's Hebrew passages, which he translated into English and analysed, were influenced by Ramon Llull on a certain point related to the description of the third attribute.<sup>147</sup>

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**142** See Moshe Idel, "Notes on Medieval Jewish–Christian Polemics" [Hebrew], *JSJT* 3 (1983/84): 689–98, and Moshe Idel, "More on *Middat Ḥesed*" [Hebrew] *JSJT* 4 (1984/85): 219–22. The first was translated into English in *Immanuel* 18 (1984): 54–63. See my *Middot*, chapter 10.

**143** See *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 462, and Liebes, *God's Story*, 150, note 104. As to the history of the hypostatic entities designated as peace as mediating between two other supernal entities, see Michael Schneider, *Scattered Traditions of Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2012), 188–91

**144** See her "Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations," 38–39, 44, note 137, 60.

**145** Liebes, *God's Story*, 123–57. Liebes surmises some Greek possible sources for Philo and for the Midrashic discussions.

**146** See Berger, *The Jewish–Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, 3.

**147** See Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 258–65. Printed in 2000, Hames's discussion in his book could not take advantage of Meroz's study printed in the same year or Liebes's discussions, printed first in 2001, nor could they then have known his argument. However, when elaborating on the same topic in 2009, Hames continued to make the same claim as to the impact of the Lullian vision of the

Let me present here the most pertinent citation from ibn Adret's discussions, according to Hames's translation:

And as to what the Rabbis said in the *Midrash*,<sup>148</sup> that with those three attributes God created the world, [namely] with the attributes of *El*, *Elohim* and *Yahveh*, you should know that there are three attributes: judgement, mercy and a third being a total conjunction [*mezugah*] of both judgement and mercy [...]. And the name *Elohim* represents the attribute of complete Judgement. And the name *Yahveh*, the attribute of complete Mercy. And the name *El* is the attribute of total conjunction [*mezugah*] of both.<sup>149</sup>

On the basis of his translation of the adjective *mezugah* as pointing to a “total conjunction,” Hames claims that ibn Adret was influenced by Ramon Llull, who uses the terms *conjunctio* and *composta* in the context of his discussions of the Trinity and calls the powers *dignitates*.<sup>150</sup> However, the Hebrew form *mezugah* does not mean “conjunction,” but rather a combination or admixture between two attributes, sometimes envisioned as two types of liquids, one hot and one cold, and its sources are found much earlier in Judaism. They may even be as old as Philo, who utilised a triad of divine attributes throughout his work.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, there is no special reason to assume that this theme occurs for the first time in ibn Adret's texts or in his master Nahmanides.<sup>152</sup> He should, according to Hames, be explained as resorting to the theory of an external influence.

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Trinity on ibn Adret, although meanwhile more Hebrew material on the three attributes in independent Jewish sources had been revealed and analysed in detail. See his “It Takes Three to Tango: Ramon Llull, Solomon ibn Adret, and Alfonso of Valladolid Debate Trinity,” *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 199–204. I would say that for a real tango, it would be better to invite also another triad: Liebes, Naeh, and Meroz. My following discussions of the three attributes have been translated into Spanish and published in my *Estudios sobre la cábala en Cataluña*, trans. Javier Guerrero (Barcelona: Alpha Decay, 2016), 23–27. See also now Yair Lorberbaum, “Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret's Treatise against the Christians: A Reevaluation” [Hebrew], *Zion* 84 (2019): 61–63.

**148** The Midrash quoted here is the *Midrash Šoḥer Ṭov* on Psalm 50:1.

**149** I am essentially following Hames's translation in “It Takes Three to Tango,” 201–11, where the original Hebrew sources are also presented. See also Hames, “It Takes Three to Tango,” 212.

**150** See Hames, 211.

**151** Shlomo Naeh, “*Poterion en cheiri kyriou*: Philo and the Rabbis on the Powers of God and the Mixture in the Cup,” in *Scripta Classica Israelica* 16 [= *Studies in Memory of Abraham Wasserstein* 2], eds. Hannah M. Cotton, Jonathan J. Price, and David J. Wasserstein (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1997): 91–101; Liebes, *God's Story*, 135–57; as well as Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson and Moshe Halbertal, “The Divine Name YHVH and the Measure of Mercy” [Hebrew], in *And This is For Yehudah: Studies Presented to Our Friend, Professor Yehuda Liebes*, eds. Jonathan Garb, Ronit Meroz, and Maren Niehoff (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012): 53–69. For the resort to the term *memuzag* in order to describe the result of the union between a male and female—namely, the offspring, which is related to two equal members of a couple—see Abulafia's *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, 140. See also *Šomer Mišwah*, 28, where he speaks about *middot memuzagot*. See also Appendix C note 152 below and my *Middot*, chapter 10.

**152** See Nahmanides's discussion of the relations between the divine attributes in his commentary on Leviticus 23:17 as well as in other texts, for example, in a context very close to ibn Adret, in the



Let me point out in passing that the occurrence of the root *MZG* together with the question of the concept of a combination of the divine attributes is found at least twice in Rabbi Menahem Recanati's *Commentary on the Torah*, written some time at the beginning of the fourteenth century in Italy.<sup>153</sup> Its contemporary, the anonymous Kabbalistic classic *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, a book that stems from the circle of Kabbalists around Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret and which was written sometime in the early fourteenth century, describes the sixth *sefirah*, *Tif'eret*, as *middah mezugah*,<sup>154</sup> combining as it does the two higher *sefirot*. Though it is not impossible to reduce these two discussions to a common earlier source hypothetically found in ibn Adret's Kabbalistic school, I see it as a much less plausible alternative to my assumption that there were earlier Jewish sources independent of ibn Adret and those influenced by him.

The recurrence of the terms *mezugah* and *mazug* in various Kabbalistic contexts is the main reason why, unlike with Hames's hypothesis that ibn Adret's discussions of the three attributes were influenced by Ramon Llull's views on this point, it is much more economical and plausible in my opinion to assume the possibility that the impact went in the reverse direction; whether the Kabbalists influenced Ramon Llull or vice versa. The variety of Hebrew sources from Zoharic material, from early fourteenth-century Spain and Italy and Sicily in the 1280s, some of which even refer to a "Midrash," may more easily be understood as stemming from an earlier common Hebrew source. This means, in my opinion, that Llull's resort to the terms *conjunctio* and *composta* may also reflect, as does his doctrine of *dignitates*, a Jewish Kabbalistic influence.<sup>155</sup>

Moreover, it should be mentioned here that the impact of Nahmanides's theory of several types of *kavod* (divine glories) on Llull's view of *dignitates* may be related to the theory of the mixed third *sefirah* in ibn Adret's discussions because he belonged to Nahmanides's Kabbalistic school. I am not confident that this is indeed the case, since I have not sufficiently studied the topic. However, on the grounds of the available sources as brought forth by Hames, this direction of influence seems to be a more plausible solution. As is known, Ramon Llull was in contact

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passage from an anonymous commentary on the Pentateuch related to the school of Abulafia found in Ms. Oxford, Bodleian 1920, fol. 16a that I printed in "Notes of Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemics," 691–92, which resorts to both the Midrash on Psalm 50:1 and to the term *mazug* in the context of the third attribute; the formulation in the prayer of *Šema' Yišra'el* is also found there. If we do not assume that the passage was influenced by ibn Adret, which I do not see to be a necessary assumption, then we may speak of the two authors drawing from a common source, perhaps Nahmanides. For a later resort to *memuzag* in the context of a third *sefirah* that mediates between two others, see Rabbi Moses Cordovero in *Or Yaqar*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Aḥuzat Yisrael, 1970), 18, as well as 194, 245, and *Or Yaqar*, vol. 11 (Jerusalem: Aḥuzat Yisrael, 1981), 113. See more in my *Middot*, chapter 10.

153 *Commentary to the Torah* (Jerusalem: 1961), fols 25d, 66a.

154 *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (Mantua: 1558), fol. 86b.

155 See Moshe Idel, "Dignitates and Kavod: Two Theological Concepts in Catalan Mysticism," *Studia Luliana* 36 (1996): 69–78.



with ibn Adret, ibn Adret's companion in Barcelona, and Abulafia's former student Rabbi Judah Salmon, who is mentioned above. In my opinion, we may assume in this case that the direction of influence was from Jewish sources to Christian ones, not vice versa.<sup>156</sup>

However, Hames's major point in his article—to show that the addressee of ibn Adret's discussions is to be identified with Ramon Llull—is correct, since it includes a convincing testimony of a certain implicit dialogue between the two contemporary authors, even if the direction of influence is changed. My own view as to the direction of influence is sustained by the fact that Nahmanides, when speaking on the thirteen divine attributes mentioned in Exodus 34:6, was quoted to the effect that the first three terms are the essence of the divine name[s] (*ʿAšmutam*) or of the theosophical divinity in general, which he describes as the third, sixth, and tenth *sefirah*, while the remaining ten terms implicitly refer to the ten *sefirot*.<sup>157</sup> Thus, some form of trinity is found in a version of Nahmanides's commentary on the Pentateuch. Moreover, in the context of Nahmanides's view on this point, Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher, a disciple of ibn Adret, mentions the term *Ḥesed* ("mercy") as being related to the third *sefirah* of a lower triad, that of *Tiferet*, in a manner paralleling some of the triads I have already discussed.<sup>158</sup>

To summarise the discussions in this appendix: the resort to triads and even to triune discussions is not necessarily a matter of Christian influence. In Abulafia's thought, the Aristotelian noetic triad, the triads found in *Sefer Yeširah*, and the Mid-rashic and medieval treatments dealing with three attributes, different as they are from each other, should be recognised as starting points for Abulafia and other Kabbalists' triune discussions, which sometimes attempted to interpret the Christian Trinity. Assuming as I do that these sorts of triads were known to be part of what a Kabbalist would consider the Jewish tradition (the different historical origins of some of them notwithstanding), they could also be used in order to interpret the Christian Trinity, as they do in the case of other topics found in the Jewish traditions. As seen above, triads that include the categories of the senses, imagination, and intellect recur in Abulafia's writings and play a major role in his worldview.

In another Kabbalistic circle that produced short pieces of writing related to *Sefer ha-Iyyun*, three divine lights are conceived as one unit.<sup>159</sup> In Abulafia's lifetime, triune views can be discerned in the book of the *Zohar*, as Yehuda Liebes has pointed out.<sup>160</sup> In this context, the triadic structure of some of the theosophical systems of the ten *sefirot* should also be mentioned. They are perhaps influenced by Neo-Platonic

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**156** Idel, "Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah."

**157** This is a version of Nahmanides's commentary on Exodus 34:6, as quoted in Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher's commentary *ad locum* that differs from Nahmanides's printed commentary. See *Bahya on the Torah*, ed. Chaim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1967), 2:352.

**158** See Rabbi Baḥya ben Asher, *Bahya on the Torah*, 2, and in Appendix C note 142 above.

**159** See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 353–54.

**160** Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 140–45.

speculations.<sup>161</sup> However, unlike these Kabbalistic resorts to triads or trinities, in Abulafia's case, there is a dominant triad that was part of his profound structure; the noetic one, which constitutes the main type of his conceptual concerns and which, statistically speaking, is much more widespread than any other trinity.

This means that there was a wide spectrum of triadic speculations found in texts that were dear to Abulafia, one of them emphasising the identification between the three components that could also invite a turn to the Christian triads and not vice versa. Sagerman's monograph on Abulafia's attitude towards Christianity, which insists so much on the importance of triads as part of his view of this Kabbalist's position having been influenced by Christianity, as he repeatedly indicates, neglects the pivotal importance of the non-Christian triads in Abulafia's thought, which I call his profound noetic structure. Therefore, Sagerman's is a one-sided description that belittles the role played by major sources that informed this Kabbalist's worldview. These noetic triads were used as a hermeneutical grid that imposed meanings on a variety of topics, including the Christian Trinity.<sup>162</sup> Nor have I found in Abulafia's works a tripartite division of the sacred history that is fundamental for the historiography of Joachimism, though some sources in late antique Judaism can facilitate its acceptance in his thought.<sup>163</sup>

Let me formulate the problem as I see it in the case of the scholarship dealing with Abulafia and Christianity. The issue is not how much Christianity is actually found in his writings; an issue that should not be denied, but rather dealt with carefully. This issue is about what the nature of scholarship is, and, more specifically, about the philological strength of the proofs adduced in order to prove the presence of Christian themes in his writings. My impression is that with less solid scholarship, it is possible to find many more cases of Christian influence. The more one presents all the pertinent evidence and analyses it in detail, the more difficult it is to express interesting generalisations and to learn, for example, about Abulafia's alleged fears of castration, about his concept of the great mother, and similar clichés.

However, to be clear, this simplistic approach is the case not only in scholarship on Abulafia, but also with some of the other instances of scholars attempting to prove Christian influences on early Jewish mysticism<sup>164</sup> and medieval Kabbalah<sup>165</sup>

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**161** Whether Abulafia was acquainted with triadic speculations in Neo-Platonic metaphysics or not is an open question. See Chapter 6 note 221 above. On the Neoplatonic trinity and Christianity, see the detailed analysis by Paul Aubin, *Plotin et le christianisme* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992).

**162** See *The Serpent Kills*, viii.

**163** Whether or not the tripartite distinction between three periods of two thousand years each found in earlier Jewish and Christian sources is influenced by Joachimism is a matter that deserves a separate investigation. See Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 161–92; for earlier Jewish sources, see Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*, 16, 38, note 24.

**164** For the strong penchant in this direction in the recent studies by Peter Schäfer, see *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), especially 32–33. See also Ra'anan S. Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of the Merkavah Mysticism* (Tü-

in a more generalised manner. Though certainly not entirely absent, in my opinion, these influences have been greatly exaggerated in recent scholarship. The scant amount of evidence to this effect is quite obvious when we compare the plethora of evidence we have as to the presence of philosophical influences (such as Neo-Aristotelian, Neo-Platonist, and even Hermetical ones), to say nothing of the astronomical-astrological influences, in the various writings of the Kabbalists of the thirteenth century.<sup>166</sup>

By neglecting (and in some cases even completely ignoring) the formative impact of the obvious sources, mainly the philosophical ones that constitute the profound structure of Abulafia's thought, by not discussing pertinent passages written by him on a topic under scrutiny in all their occurrences and thus not carefully weighing their impact, and by ignoring the specific meaning of crucial terms like the specific Tibbonian use of the term *meyuḥad*, some scholars have discovered "subtle" themes that they consider to be psychological, theurgical, theosophical, Sufi, or Christian, and which again were deemed to be clues for decoding Abulafia's vaguer remarks. In most cases, these are misunderstandings because they are based on misinterpreted passages, sometimes understood inversely to their actual meaning; at the same time, they ignore other pertinent texts explicating the Kabbalist's intention in an explicit manner, as we have seen in several instances discussed above.

I have attempted to analyse some of these problems, not just by pointing to the weakness of the recent interpretations offered by scholars, but also by proposing my more general alternative interpretation based on a broader series of texts, sometimes

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bingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) and some of the studies in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). For early Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, see the earlier view of Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2004). A more nuanced view is found recently in Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy in Ancient Judaism," *Journal of Studies of Judaism* 41 (2010): 323–65. These Christotropic approaches do not take into consideration a variety of additional sources, such as the Iranian or Pagan Greek/Hellenistic backgrounds. See also Appendix D note 215 below.

**165** This is the view of Arthur Green and Peter Schäfer. For my great doubts about their claims as to the influence of the Marian cult in Christianity on the feminine perception of the *Šekhīnah* in Kabbalah, see my *Kabbalah and Eros*, 46–47, 268, note 143; Idel, *Ben*, 377–403; and more recently, on the grounds of additional texts not previously taken into consideration, Moshe Idel, "The Family Aspects of Divinity in Early Kabbalah" [Hebrew], in *Tov Elem: Memory, Community & Gender in Medieval & Early Modern Jewish Societies, Essays in Honor of Robert Bonfil*, eds. Elisheva Baumgarten, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Roni Weinstein (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2011): 91–110, and Yehuda Liebes, "Was the *Šekhīnah* a Virgin?" [Hebrew], *Pe'amin* 101–2 (2005): 303–13. Based on general and often anachronistic reflections without pointing out any specific textual borrowings, this theory reflects more the modern situation of a Jewish–Christian dialogue than events in medieval history.

**166** See Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance" and Idel, "Hermeticism and Kabbalah."

unknown to or neglected by those scholars even though I demarcated them in some of my earlier studies. It would be more helpful if a full perusal of Abulafia's extant writings and those written by his school constituted a basic scholarly requirement for engaging with his complex thought. Such a perusal is far from obvious from reading most of the studies that have recently been published.

Secondary sources, like the earlier studies of Abulafia from the mid-nineteenth century, are only rarely mentioned by a few of these scholars and sometimes, when mentioned at all, their meaning is distorted, as we have seen above. Only when a more mature, erudite, and critical approach to the pertinent sources and the entire range of scholarship on the topic takes shape will a more solid and comprehensive picture of Abulafia's thought and its specific features emerge, whether it be similar to what I described above or different. By relying on a sometimes inverted presentation of Abulafia's thought, it is difficult to offer a significant psychological interpretation. Only when this new approach to Abulafia studies prevails may psychological speculations help, perhaps, but they do so very little otherwise.

## Appendix D: From Patras to Rome: *Annus Mirabilis* 1279/80

I have attempted in this book to delineate some of the major moments in Abulafia's intellectual life, especially those relating to his study of philosophy and his esotericism. In this appendix, I shall try to briefly describe one of the most intense periods in his life, 1279/80, which was both, roughly speaking, the fortieth year of Abulafia's life as well as the fortieth year of the sixth millennium of the Jewish calendar.<sup>167</sup> Many of the above discussions have constituted interpretations of some passages from Abulafia's *Or ha-Šekhel*. This book is part of an unusually febrile literary activity spanning between the beginning of 1279 and the end of 1282, which is the period when he committed to writing *Sitrei Torah*, *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, *Or ha-Šekhel*, his first eight prophetic writings, and their commentaries, to enumerate only the books that explicitly carry dates from this period.

This flow of great profusion has to do with two different though not independent reasons: one is his turning forty, considered to be the time of intellectual maturity or the reception of wisdom according to some Jewish traditions that Abulafia explicitly referenced,<sup>168</sup> and the other is that this was the time determined in his 1270/71 revelation that he should go to Rome.<sup>169</sup> Another important revelation from the point

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<sup>167</sup> I draw here from my study "The Kabbalah in Byzantium: Preliminary Remarks," in *Jews in Byzantium; Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, eds. Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 665–79. I would like to correct the date of Abulafia's arrival in Patras from 1278—as mentioned in 675—to 1274, as explained here below.

<sup>168</sup> See my "On the History of the Interdiction" and "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist 'Son of God,'" 77.

<sup>169</sup> See *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57.

of view of Abulafia's output that took place in 1279 in Patras or in the Byzantine Empire probably reiterated the earlier demand to go to Rome, as we shall see below in this appendix.<sup>170</sup> These facts meant not just a sudden intensification of his literary activity in 1279/80 and immediately afterwards, but also his turn to two new literary genres: prophetic books, which by his own account he began in 1279, and handbooks for reaching mystical experiences, which possess salvific overtones and which were intended to teach others how to reach the experiences found in the first new literary genre.

Indeed, the two handbooks *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* and *Or ha-Šekhel*, Abulafia's two most widespread technical treatises amongst all his writings (in manuscripts), were written in this period. They primarily deal with the details of his methods and were designed so that they could assist potential aspirants to reach what he considered to be sublime experiences through initiating a certain type of experiment. This was also the same year that he wrote the third and perhaps the last of his three commentaries on the secrets found in Maimonides's *Guide*: the influential *Sitrei Torah*. In any case, a comparison of Abulafia's literary production in the decade before 1279/80 to what he wrote during the decade afterwards shows that he dramatically intensified his writings, but even then, his literary creativity of the three years mentioned above is unparalleled in its breadth and originality.

In other words, these three years constitute a turning point in Abulafia's messianic activity, grounded in the belief that he could disseminate a sort of knowledge that could assist other people to reach a spiritual experience independently of his personality or his presence in a certain place. Nevertheless, unlike the intense personality cult that surrounds messianic phenomena like the magnetic late antique figure Rabbi Simon bar Yochai, so characteristic of the Zoharic *imaginaire*, and, later on, of many other Kabbalists, in Abulafia's case, it is the individual's noetic processes that are presented as the clue for his eschatological aspiration, and we have discussed above the issue of individual versus collective experience in Abulafia's work.

Let me analyse now an important passage dealing with a revelation that Abulafia claims to have had:

Afterwards, Razi'el<sup>171</sup> saw a vision, within which he comprehended the secret of the [divine] name, and the secret of prophecy, and the essence of its truth. And he said that at the time of the fifth [year] since his coming to Dibon, which was the sixth year since his departure from Sefarad, in the tenth [month], which is the month of Tevet, on the fifth day [of it], behold, he revealed the secret of the name. Also<sup>172</sup> *Patros* [is] *Sefarot* [is] *Šemot*.<sup>173</sup>

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**170** *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57.

**171** Razi'el = Avraham = 248. The name *Razi'el*, which means "the secrets of God," recurs dozens of times in his early prophetic books.

**172** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 40, skipped the following four crucial words and interpreted the whole story as if it were related to Sicily, part of his working hypothesis as to the importance of the 1270s for Abulafia's encounter with the Joachimite Franciscans. On this issue, see more below in this appendix.

Let me first address the conceptual structure of the passage. Though mentioning a vision, Abulafia does not describe its details or the visual aspects of it, but reports only what he understood; namely, what he comprehended from it, most probably what he decoded. That the figurative details of the vision were already in the original version of the prophetic book that has not survived and that the interpretation is part of the commentary on the book are plausible, but not certain.

I assume that this is an example of a self-interpretation of a brief narrative that is similar to the parable of the pearl according to terms that belong to the third narrative. Abulafia's understanding of the content of the vision is conveyed using a verb that displays a conspicuously philosophical act: *hišig* ("he comprehended"). This act is related to understanding secrets, which means that what he saw in the vision was believed to be a coded message that possessed a secret dimension that was waiting to be deciphered. From this point of view, his vision is to be understood in a similar way to how he regarded the prophetic texts in the Bible, which he also thought had more than one sense, in a manner reminiscent of Dante's claim in his famous letter to Cangrande.<sup>174</sup>

This passage deals with a crucial detail in Abulafia's biography: we learn from it that he arrived at a place named Dibon five years before the vision. This means that he was still living in Dibon when he wrote the passage. This vision is found in his first prophetic book, *Sefer ha-Yašar*, which was written in Patras in the month of November or a short time later in the year 1278, according to the testimony found in *Sefer ha-'Edut*, another prophetic book.<sup>175</sup>

A stay in the same place (Dibon) for five probably consecutive years is a relatively long period of sojourn in Abulafia's intensely itinerant life. Immediately beforehand, he had been wandering for approximately a year after leaving Sefarad, which, in the terminology of his generation, refers to one of the provinces of modern central and northern Spain. Thus, in 1278, we are at the end of his stay in Dibon, since Abulafia's last departure from Spain took place six years earlier in late 1273, as we discussed in chapter 5 above. This means, as he explicitly puts it, that he left Spain (not Barcelona, as Hames claims and then calculates his timetable on this basis),<sup>176</sup> and for an entire year or so roamed the Greek towns of Thebes and Eurypo. He then arrived

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173 *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yašar*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 99:

אחרי כן ראה רויאל מראה שבה השיג סוד השם וסוד הנבואה ומהות אמתתה. ואמר שבזמן ה' לבואו לדיבון אשר היא שנת ו' לצאתו מספרד ב"י שהוא החדש הנקרא טבת בה' ימים בו הרי גלה סוד השם. גם פתרוס ספרות שמות.

The H = five, W = six, Y = ten, and H = five represent the consonants of the Tetragrammaton. This is a strategy found elsewhere in Abulafia's dating of his revelations by resorting to letters of divine names. For a different interpretation of the meaning of this passage, see Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 40. It is possible that Abulafia was here working on the alliteration of *Sefarad* and *Sefarot*.

174 See also Idel, "On Symbolic Self-Interpretations in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Writings."

175 *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57.

176 Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 40. See, however, the *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57 (originally written in 1280), where he speaks about this year as the tenth year since he had the revelation in Barcelona.



in Patras and remained there for approximately five years, either consecutive or not.<sup>177</sup>

In my opinion, this understanding of the details of Abulafia's biography means that Patras should be identified with the name Dibon, though I do not understand exactly why he used the name of the biblical town in this context.<sup>178</sup> One possible explanation would be that the consonants of Dibon amount in gematria to 72, like the so-called divine name of seventy-two letters that was very important for Abulafia in general, especially in that period, as is clear from his *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, just as he identifies Patras, spelt *Patros* in Hebrew, with *Šemot* (names) because the two words, like *Sefarot* (numbers), amount in gematria to 746. Later in the same book, he describes *Har Patros* ("the mountain of Patros") as being composed of the same consonants as the phrase *Sefer Torah* and thus also sharing the same gematria of 991.<sup>179</sup>

In fact, I see no reason to assume that Abulafia would speak about one town in Greece and another in Sicily in the same paragraph without hinting that they were two different localities or at his transition from one to the other. In my opinion, it is very plausible that while the name *Patros* stands for the positive attitude towards Abulafia, *Dibon*, or *Dibona*, stands for the negative attitude towards him, as he probably understood it as being derived from the Hebrew word *Dibbah*, which can be translated as "defamation" or "slander." These two different attitudes are explicitly mentioned in the immediate context of the passage from *Sefer ha-Yašar* that was translated in the previous paragraph.<sup>180</sup>

However, Hames attempts—so I understand him—to dissociate the time of the writing of the first prophetic book, *Sefer ha-Yašar*, written at the beginning of 1279, from the time when the vision mentioned in this book took place, which, according to him, occurred several years earlier somewhere in Sicily in 1276.<sup>181</sup> However, based on the evidence we have, this chronology is rather impossible, since 1276 fell during the six years of his sojourn in the Byzantine Empire, which occurred after he left Sefarad—Castile or Spain—probably as late as 1273 or perhaps early 1274.

In my opinion, Abulafia left Barcelona sometime at the end of 1271 and Sefarad in 1273/74; these are two different events that should not be confused. There is there-

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**177** We may speculate as to the reason for such a long stay in one city which was not very important in Jewish life by assuming that he married his wife there fourteen years earlier when on the way from searching for the legendary river of Sambatyon, where the ten lost tribes were imagined to be hiding, or on his way back in both cases in 1260. As it was an important port, Abulafia could have stayed in Patras, then a territory belonging to Venice, for a while and have married either on his way eastward or when returning to Europe, and his return fourteen years later might have been a prolonged family visit. If my hypothesis as to the messianic valence of the year 1280 is true, it may be that he left his family in Patras and travelled to Italy alone, confident as he may have been of the imminence of a change in history, according to the second narrative mentioned above.

**178** See Numbers 21:30, 32:34, or Joshua 13:9, 17.

**179** *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yašar*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 98.

**180** *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yašar*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 97–98.

**181** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 31, 40–42, 71, 125–26, note 47.



fore no evidence and, in my opinion, no reasonable need to substantially disassociate the date of the composition of *Sefer ha-Yašar* from the date of the vision reported in it, and it is quite plausible that they both took place sometime in late 1278, in the same town (Patras), or at least for the writing of the book in early 1279.<sup>182</sup> To the best of my knowledge, there is no extant evidence of any visions Abulafia had after 1270/71, after the Barcelona revelation and before late 1278.

This chronology means that it is quite plausible that during the six years between Abulafia's departure from Spain and his second visit to Italy, first to Trani or Terni and then to Capua in 1279, he spent most of the time, if not all those years, in the Peloponnese part of the Byzantine Empire and in Patras, then a colony of Venice, where he taught *The Guide of the Perplexed* according to his special method. Let me repeat, no solid indication is available in the material with which I am acquainted as to an important revelation, or any revelation at all, that occurred in 1276, as alleged by Hames. If my historical reconstruction is correct, there scarcely remains the necessary time for a significant visit to Italy or Sicily between the years 1269 and 1278, if such an early visit or stay took place at all, as assumed by Hames for the sake of his attribution of the alleged Franciscan-Joachimite influence on the ecstatic Kabbalist.<sup>183</sup> In any case, I know of no evidence of such a visit to the island any time before late 1280 or early 1281.

The implication of this timetable is that after turning from the study of philosophy to the study of Kabbalah in 1270, Abulafia spent a significant period of time in a religious milieu dominated by Christian Orthodoxy—its well-known presence was also felt in southern Italy and in Sicily, where Abulafia visited and stayed for longer periods. Hence, the possible influence on Abulafia's thought of a Christian form of mysticism known as Hesychasm, which intensified its impact in monasteries in Mount Athos towards the end of the thirteenth century, becomes quite plausible, at least in the case of some of the details of his techniques.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, the recurrence of many Greek words in Abulafia's writings—which, I would say, are as numerous as the Latin/Italian ones—mitigates in favour of a greater role played by Orthodox Christianity than has been recognised in the more recent surveys on Abulafia and Christianity.

It should be mentioned that in 1279/80, Abulafia had an additional revelation in Capua, where he claims that he was told what would happen to him in Rome some months or weeks later.<sup>185</sup> This proleptic revelation shows that the historical register was important at this stage, though it was certainly not the most important one. In the summer of 1280, he experienced a third revelation, either in Rome or in Soriano nel Cimino (a small town north of Rome where the pope sojourned for several weeks

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**182** Let me point out that though it is plausible that he also taught the *Guide* in this town, as Hames indicates (42), we have no textual evidence for this.

**183** Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, 125–26, note 47.

**184** Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 13, 24, 35, 40, 80, 122, 176–77, note 338.

**185** See *Commentary on Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 79.

from the beginning of July), whose content is included, I assume in a fragmentary manner, in the *Commentary on Sefer ha-‘Edut*.<sup>186</sup>

A few months later, Abulafia had two other revelations in two consecutive days.<sup>187</sup> This means that in a year and a half, he had at least five revelations mainly related to the divine name and his wish to meet the pope. In his prophetic books written in this period, he speaks about additional visions, as many as ten, in the manner in which Ezekiel’s visions are understood.<sup>188</sup> Given their very cryptic language, with many unexplained allusions and a discourse that is unparalleled by any other Kabbalistic text with which I am acquainted, only a very small number of passages from these revelations and their commentaries have been analysed in scholarship so far, though many of them most probably touch major issues in Abulafia’s prophetic and messianic self-perception as well as his biography.<sup>189</sup>

The period between the last two months of 1278 and the second part of 1280 roughly corresponds to the fortieth year of Abulafia’s life, the year when the emergence of the intellect was considered to occur and which had personally redemptive implications as seen above in chapter 20. We cannot, however, ignore an additional possible interpretation of this fact as a reference to the supposed appearance of the Messiah during the year 5040.<sup>190</sup> The meeting with the pope was intended—at least in Nahmanides’s version, which is the most plausible source for our knowledge of Abulafia’s attempt—to be the act of the Messiah, as Nahmanides mentions twice in his polemic with Pablo Christiani.<sup>191</sup>

Indeed, in Abulafia’s prophetic books, the messianic theme is incomparably more conspicuous than in his writings from before 1279, and even more than in most of his later books.<sup>192</sup> We may speak about a concentration of discussions on this topic that reverberates only in his much later prophetic book *Sefer ha-Ot*.

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**186** *Sefer ha-‘Edut*, 57.

**187** *Sefer ha-‘Edut*, 58.

**188** *Sefer ha-‘Edut*, 61, and *Sefer ha-Yašar*, 99.

**189** See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, 126–28; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 73–74, 82–83, 295–307. On the cryptic nature of some books that the teacher of Rabbi Nathan Ḥar’ar (Abulafia) had shown to him, see *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 478. It should be pointed out that Abulafia claimed to have written more books of this type (twenty-two prophetic books) and it seems that only one more has survived, *Sefer ha-Ot*, in addition to the 1279–80 books, upon which he wrote commentaries. For the figure of the twenty-two prophetic books mentioned by Abulafia, see “Ševa‘ Netivot ha-Torah,” 23. To this literary genre also belongs, in my opinion, the lengthy fragment referred to as the Untitled Treatise that has been mentioned several times above, which survives anonymously in a unique manuscript, Ms. Firenze, Laurenziana, Plut. II. 48. See also Krawczyk, *Księga Znaku: Rabbi Abraham Abulafia*.

**190** I draw here from some of the arguments printed in my article “Abraham Abulafia and the Pope.”

**191** See the Hebrew account of Nahmanides’s polemic with the convert to Christianity Pablo Christiani, where the former asserted that the Messiah would go to the pope. See *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, 1:306. That this text had an impact on Abulafia’s intention to speak with the pope was pointed out by Abba Hillel Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 146; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 128; and Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 113–14.

**192** See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 235–307.

Thus, the year 1280, which comprised the last months of the Hebrew year 5040 and the first eight months of 5041, would, in Abulafia's eyes, have been a messianic year, which he later postponed to the year 1290/91.<sup>193</sup> In this context, let me point out that in the book of the *Zohar*, there is a discussion about a Messiah who goes to the pope at a certain moment that is quite reminiscent in some of the details of Abulafia's episode, as Adolph Jellinek already pointed out more than a century and a half ago.<sup>194</sup>

Let me turn to the fact that 1280 was the fortieth year of Abulafia's life. In this context, I will mention an interesting testimony that reports an eschatological expectation for the fortieth year. In a letter by the Franciscan author Roger Bacon (known as *doctor mirabilis*) addressed to Pope Clement IV, who was his protector, during the year 1267/68, he writes: "But it was stated in a prophecy forty years ago,<sup>195</sup> and in this regard there are many corroborating visions, that the pope that will be during this time<sup>196</sup> will purify the canon law and the Church of God of raileries and of frauds of justice, and will enact justice for all, without the din of controversy."<sup>197</sup> Moreover, according to Bacon, that future pope will "renew the world and convert many Gentile nations (to Christianity) and the remnant of Israel will change their faith (to Christianity)."<sup>198</sup>

As Marjorie Reeves has proposed, in these texts, there is evidence of a clear influence from Joachim da Fiore;<sup>199</sup> yet I have found no explanation whatsoever in her analysis or elsewhere for the meaning of the quite vague reference to "the fortieth year" when the ideal pope was to appear or to perform his eschatological acts. Are we permitted here to entertain the possibility of an influence from a motif found in earlier Jewish thought that stipulated the arrival of the Redeemer during the fortieth year since 1240, which was the beginning of the sixth millennium and, according to the Jewish calendar, 5000; namely, 1280? Was the future pope, who was perceived as a figure who would cause the nations to convert to Christianity

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**193** See already Idel, 83–84.

**194** See Idel, 121–24.

**195** The Latin phrase *a quadraginta annis* is not entirely clear. I have cautiously translated that the original prophecy was dated forty years ago, but it is also possible that it means that in the year forty; that is, something will happen in the fortieth year since the prophecy.

**196** Namely, forty years later.

**197** Roger Bacon, "Opus Tertium," in *Opera Inedita*, ed. John S. Brewer, vol. 1 (London: Longman Green, 1859), 86, cited in Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 47: "Sed prophetatum est a quadraginta annis, et multorum visiones habitae sunt, quod unus Papa erit his temporibus qui purgabit jus canonicum et ecclesiam Dei a cavillationibus et fraudibus juristarum et fiet justitia universaliter sine strepitu litis." See also Bernard McGinn, "Pastor Angelicus," in his *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 6:227–28.

**198** Roger Bacon, "Opus Tertium," 47: "Renovetur mundus et intret plenitudo gentium et reliquiae Israel ad fidem convertantur."

**199** Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 46–49.

in the fortieth year, reflecting a theme originally stemming from a Judaic messianic tradition that was later made consistent with Christianity?

It is worth noting that Roger Bacon mentions that the prophecy and the visions foresaw the arrival of some form of angelic pope forty years later<sup>200</sup> and that this detail was most probably also a component in Abulafia's 1270 vision in Barcelona that was, hypothetically speaking, about 1280, the fortieth year after 1240. In other words, the fact that two different eschatological traditions related to visions and prophecies, two apocalypses, Bacon's and Abulafia's, overlap in terms of the relationship between some form of redemptive action in the fortieth year by dint of a prophecy that is not otherwise accounted for may point to a hypothetical Jewish source that influenced both prophets independently. To be sure: forty is a well-known formulaic number in Jewish culture in general, but what is especially pertinent is the fact that in some Jewish messianic texts, it reflects a correspondence to the forty years of the Israelites' wandering in the desert: beginning with redemption, understood as the Exodus from Egypt, and the end of the process being the entrance into the Land of Israel.

Since the possibility of Abulafia's influence on Bacon can be safely excluded, and in my opinion also vice versa, I opt for the existence of a common source, or sources, reminiscent of what is found in some earlier Jewish sources.<sup>201</sup> In this framework, I cannot enter into the complex question of the possible Jewish sources or even into the hypothesis of a possible Jewish background of Joachim da Fiore; however, on the grounds of the most recent scholarship in the field, this line of investigation should not be ignored, especially when dealing with his possible impact on Jewish thought.<sup>202</sup> This means that there is a possibility that common sources, found in Judaism in Europe in the twelfth century or earlier, may have been shared by both the famous abbot of Calabria and Abulafia.

In any case, the ecstatic Kabbalist's thought can be better understood against the background of two eschatological traditions found separately in two of Nahmani-

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**200** Reeves, 48, note 1.

**201** Regarding the coming of the Messiah of the House of David forty years after the arrival of the Messiah of the House of Joseph, see the late antique *Hekhalot Rabbati*, chapters 37 and 39, according to Shlomo A. Wertheimer, ed., *Batei Midrašot* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1968), 1:125, 130, or *Midrash Tanhuma*, pericope 'eqev, par. 7. See also Nahmanides's *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, printed in *Kitvei Ha-Ramban*, 1:291, 294. See also Appendix D note 191 above.

**202** See, especially, Robert E. Lerner, *The Feast of Abraham: Medieval Millenarians and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), who went quite significantly beyond the more general remarks on Joachim's acquaintance with Jewish themes as proposed by Marjorie Reeves and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 40–43, 173, note 14; Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, "Joachim von Fiore und das Judentums," in *Judentum im Mittelalter*, eds. Paul Wilpert and Willehad P. Eckert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966): 226–63; Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, "Die Quelle der Trinitaetskreise v. Joachim von Fiore und Dante," *Sophia 22* (1954): 170–78; McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 170–71; and Idel, "Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine," 134. See also Appendix C note 163 above.

des's writings, which were not influenced by Bacon or Joachim.<sup>203</sup> Few and sometimes only implicit as those possible Jewish sources of Joachim's thought are, even according to the scholars mentioned in one of the last two footnotes, they are nevertheless more concrete and more compelling than the details of Joachimite or Franciscan material that have been referred to as part of the hypothesis of their influence on Abulafia.<sup>204</sup>

If this hypothesis is correct—namely, that a Jewish tradition existed that predicted the time of the arrival of the Messiah, or of an eschatological event, reminiscent of the prophecy mentioned by Roger Bacon, that would take place during the year 40, or, according to another possibility, in Abulafia's 1270/5030 revelation in Barcelona, in 1280/5040—it is understandable why Abulafia insisted, at any price, on holding his meeting with the pope before the end of the Jewish year, in August 5040. That was also the fortieth year of his life and he was determined to meet the pope “on the eve of the New Year”<sup>205</sup> as part of his first messianic date, the year 5040. Since we do not have the original versions of Abulafia's prophetic books, which can be guessed to be rather incomprehensible from the few quotations found in his commentaries, and we only have his commentaries written after 1280, it is difficult to know more about the centrality of this year in the interpretations he offered after the fact.

Let me point out that in his prophetic books and their commentaries written between 1279 and 1282, Abulafia mentions several times that he is aged forty.<sup>206</sup> After all, he calculated the special gematria of the words *arbba'im šanah* [“forty years”] = ‘oneš ha-eivarim [“the punishment of the limbs”]<sup>207</sup> = 678 = *Razi'el*<sup>208</sup> *ben Šmu'el*.<sup>209</sup> The latter refers to Abulafia's forename, Abraham, and to the name of his father, respectively. Does such a gematria mean that the quintessence of the name Abulafia is

**203** See Appendix D notes 191 and 201 above.

**204** For the possibility that another important thirteenth-century Christian apocalypse, the widespread Latin Tripoli prophecy, may display some form of Jewish influence, see Idel, “Mongol Invasions and Astrology,” 150–53. On this apocalypse, see the comprehensive monograph by Robert E. Lerner, *The Power of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).

**205** *Commentary on Sefer ha-'Edut*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 57: ביום ערובה של ראש השנה. In print, there is a mistake: ערובה for ערוכה. See also the tradition that the Messiah will come on the 28th day of the month of Elul, very close to the eve of the Jewish New Year, discussed in Idel, “Abulafia and the Pope,” in *Chapters in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 62. On the affinity between New Year and redemption, see my *Messianic Mystics*, 82–84, and, for its wider context, 21, 45, 213, 220, 246, 289.

**206** See, e.g., commentaries on *Sefer ha-'Edut*, 75, *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*, 79, 82, 83, or *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, 111, all printed in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*.

**207** While the concept of forty years, dealing with a precise moment in history, is part of what I earlier called Abulafia's second narrative that deals with events in history, the birth of the intellect in that year and the punishment of the limbs belong to his third narrative or register.

**208** *Razi'el* = 248 = Avraham.

**209** *Commentary on Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*, in *Mašref ha-Šekhel*, 83. This form of reference occurs in the same period in his *Sitrei Torah*, 17, but only extraordinarily rarely later on.

understood in terms of the secrets of God—this is, the meaning of the angelic name Razi'el, which is numerically identical to Abraham—or Šmu'el, which can be interpreted in Hebrew as the name of God as well as the age of forty? I can hardly imagine another more plausible interpretation for this outstanding gematria. The “punishment of the limbs” may quite plausibly refer to the preponderance of the spiritual over the corporeal organs. This punishment is related to the knowledge of the names of God.

In other words, though traditions dealing with a variety of eschatological topics were known from different kinds of sources, the round decades in Abulafia's life (1240: the year of his birth; 1260: the year of his search for the Sambation river; 1270: the year of his messianic revelation in Barcelona; 1280: the year of the revelations mentioned above and his attempt to meet the pope as part of a messianic date; and finally 1290: the year of his postponed date) are a timetable that is more decisive for the manner in which he interpreted the eschatological process.<sup>210</sup> Though some of the earlier dates could only be retroactively significant for Abulafia, it is difficult to escape the impression that the rhythm of a chronology of round decades played a role in his understanding of eschatology.

In general, my approach to complex inter-religious affinities that are not openly recognised by the authors themselves or that are not textually proven by a serious analysis, but are only conjectural and based solely on the existence of common themes in similar contexts, is quite cautious. Many of the suggestions in this direction stem from preconceived scholarly assumptions that are at base historicistic. There are plenty of reasons to doubt many of them, and parallels can also be explained by similar, though unrelated, developments. For example, when dealing with the similarity between Abulafia's emphasis on the centrality of the name of God in his Kabbalah and the nascent cult of the name of Jesus in the Franciscan camp in the first part of the thirteenth century (and, later in Abulafia's generation, among some Dominicans as well), I have not attempted to derive one of these tendencies from the other, but I rather assume the possibility that Abulafia's awareness of such a cult in Christianity could facilitate his propaganda of the centrality of the divine name stemming from earlier Jewish traditions that are also known in Christian circles.<sup>211</sup>

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**210** For more on this issue, see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 97–100.

**211** See “Abulafia and the Pope,” in my *Chapters in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 69–70, where I referred to the seminal work of Peter R. Biasiotto, *History of the Development of Devotion to the Holy Name* (New York: St. Bonaventura College and Seminary, 1943), 69–71, or to the later phenomenon, in the fifteenth century, as discussed by Loman McAodha, “The Holy Name in the Preaching of St. Bernardine of Siena,” *Franciscan Studies* 29 (1969): 42–58, an interesting issue not dealt with by Hames and Sagerman. Also, Pope Gregory X (1271–76), who served at the Holy See before Nicholas III, the pope whom Abulafia tried to meet, had recommended some form of devotion to the Holy Name, understood as the name of Jesus.

My assumption as to the existence of a wider spectrum of Jewish traditions that should be taken into consideration for understanding Abulafia informs my general approach<sup>212</sup> and is the reason for my claim in one of my studies that the Joachimite influence on Abulafia was marginal, if present at all. Evidently, I have not closed the door to such a possibility there, provided that new texts are discovered that may teach us something different.<sup>213</sup> However, in my opinion, no such new text has been introduced into scholarly discussion that was unknown when I wrote what I wrote, nor have the known texts been analysed in a convincing manner, apart from interesting suggestions that are based on conjectures or contextual possibilities grounded in concomitance of time and place. This hypothesis that there was an impact of Joachimite spirituality on Abulafia is, in my opinion, a suggestive proposal that should, for the time being, not be considered a solid starting point for further speculations. However, a serious scholar should keep this possibility in mind while refraining from building further conclusions upon it.

Let me remind the reader that at least in principle, similar suggestions as to the Christian impact on Abulafia were presented, though very briefly, many years ago by Meyer H. Landauer, Yitzhak Baer, and Jacob L. Teicher. I was already acquainted with these views before 1976 and I have also added some additional proposals to them. However, these suggestions have scarcely been referenced by later scholars dealing with these issues. Those views should not only be mentioned appropriately, but also discussed in some detail, for all their strong and weak aspects, especially when scholars are dealing with exactly the same specific Christian influences on this Kabbalist.<sup>214</sup>

Obviously, not everything that happened in the past—what is called “history”—should be reduced to what can now be found in extant texts. Indubitably, the reality was much richer and probably also more variegated. However, nor should history be understood as what could possibly have happened regardless of the existence of actual evidence. After all, people also spoke with each other, and we have seen above an extraordinary example of a conversation Abulafia had with Christians, but, naturally, most of these conversations are now lost. From the historical point of view, conversations between Abulafia and Franciscans or Joachimites could certainly have taken place, though for the time being, there is no evidence from Abulafia’s own tes-

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**212** See references to my discussions of more ancient traditions concerning the angelic Yaho’el, which impacted Abulafia’s writings from 1280 onwards, in chapter 13 note 30 above.

**213** *Messianic Mystics*, 56.

**214** See above chapter 21 note 328. Baer’s scant discussion of this issue should be compared to his much more elaborated and well-known analysis of the possible relations between the Zoharic literature and the Franciscans’ pivotal ideal of poverty, though this more detailed analysis has also been substantially questioned by some important scholars of the *Zohar*, but the details of this debate do not concern us here. See Yitzhak Baer, “The Historical Background of the *Ra’aya’ Meheimna*” [Hebrew], *Zion* 5 (1940): 1–44, and the detailed critique of this hypothesis by Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1438–47.



timonies of such a conversation with these specific sorts of Christian spiritualists or of their possible imprint on his thought. After all, his report assumes his impact on his interlocutor, not the inverse.

Without seriously engaging with all the pertinent texts in their original languages or with other kinds of documents, figurative or otherwise, some of them now in print and some still in manuscript, we may become turned around, lost in a forest of wild imagination and free speculations about what could have been, grasping at one answer and neglecting the multitude of other possibilities. However, only rarely have scholars weighed those possibilities against one another, on the basis of all the possible contexts, before deciding in one way or another. This is the reason why it is difficult to find significant doubts, hesitations, or a significant resort to categories like “possible,” “probable,” and “plausible” in recent scholarship about Abulafia. Despite the relatively poor acquaintance with the entire extant corpus, many scholars are nevertheless confident that their proposals are indubitably correct.

The certainty of some scholars that there is a single, clear solution for the question of the sources of certain issues in Abulafia’s spirituality—in this case, that he was influenced by Christian thought—is either to be envied or simply to be laughed at. Despite the fact that the Kabbalist himself does not indicate a strong Christian influence on his thought and the fact that there are scant materials, if any, that support their claims, these scholars nevertheless believe that they have the right answer. Consequently, in scholarship, there are few signs as to the possible relevance of speaking about a variety of sources from multiple places or the need to weigh between different alternatives for sources or meanings of a certain specific topic. There is no engagement with the possibility of Abulafia simply changing his mind, with what I call his conceptual fluidity. In short, the feeling I have that there is a conceptual complexity and a variety of different sources for one of the most complex thinkers in the Middle Ages is missing in much of the recent scholarship on this Kabbalist. This is the reason why no sustained efforts have been invested in order to prove which of the available sources would be more plausible than others in one specific case or another. For example, based on the analysis of the content of Abulafia’s testimony, the anonymous Christian with whom Abulafia claimed to have spoken is much more likely to have been an Averroistic thinker than a Joachimist spiritualist, because of his adoption of the assumption of the existence of secrets.

Let me reiterate my position regarding some issues that were addressed in the last two appendices: the problem in scholarship, as I see it, is not with whether or not there was an impact of Christian views on Abulafia, but with questions such as what, when, how much, and, especially, whether and how this has been proven in a plausible manner.<sup>215</sup> Without being capable of first figuring out a more compre-

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<sup>215</sup> To be sure, this does not mean that I think that there were no Christian influences on Kabbalah in general or on Abulafia’s thought in particular. See, for example, some proposals for what I consider to be more reliable studies on the topic: Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 422–23, 425, 428–30, 439; Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, “L’influence de Jean Scot sur la doctrine du Kabbalist Azriel de Gerone,” in *Jean*

hensive picture of Abulafia's thought, in particular its Islamicate background, and the sources that he explicitly mentions, and, phenomenologically speaking, without an understanding of the centrality of its profound structure concerning noetic processes, the significance and real weight of one specific theme or another in his system cannot be understood or evaluated in a balanced manner. Indeed, its meaning itself may even become distorted. Abulafia, who was born and lived almost his entire life in a variety of Christian regions and who did not know Arabic nevertheless preserves the profound structures of thought formulated in the Islamicate provinces; they informed his understanding of the traditional forms of both Judaism and Christianity.

Such a general and tentative picture should be coupled with an acquaintance with the direction of the conceptual developments over the course of two decades of Abulafia's literary career and for the three decades of his intellectual biography. Without such a general picture in mind, tentative as it may be, it is difficult for some scholars to situate some of Abulafia's more specific discussions within a larger comprehensive framework.

This essentially means that a scholar should be capable of conveying what she or he considers to be central or marginal in the wider structure of the material under scrutiny, as otherwise, the information provided may turn out to be mere descriptions of exceptions, earlier views that were marginalised, technical details, or abstract speculations that do not offer a broader or nuanced picture of the thought of a specific author or literature.

If our assumption is correct that the year 1279/80 was a significant turning point in Abulafia's intellectual career, moving him towards much more intense forms of re-

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*Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: CNRS, 1977): 453–62; Shlomo Pines, “Nahmanides on Adam in the Garden of Eden in the Context of Other Interpretations of Genesis, Chapters 2 and 3” [Hebrew], in *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of Jewish People Presented to Prof. H. Beinart*, eds. Aaron Mirsky, Avraham Grossman, and Yosef Kaplan (Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, 1988): 159–64; Amos Funkenstein, “Nahmanides’ Symbolical Reading of History,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, eds. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge, MA: Association of Jewish Studies, 1982): 129–50; Mark Sendor, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah, Rabbi Isaak the Blind’s *Commentary on Sefer Yezirah*” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994), 1:115–16, 377; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 139–61; Bar Asher, “Penance and Fasting in the Writings of Rabbi Moses de Leon,” 293–319; Idel, “Sefirot above Sefirot,” 246, note 41, 261, note 110, 267–68; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 190–93; Idel, “The Attitude to Christianity,” and Moshe Idel, “Rabbi Israel Ba’al Shem Tov ‘In the State of Walachia’: Widening the Besht’s Cultural Panorama,” in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe*, ed. Glenn Dynner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011): 104–30. See also above, chapter 10 note 188 and Appendix D note 164. However, in my opinion, the contributions of modes of thought found in or mediated by Muslim texts, translations, and other channels of transmission to the multifaceted physiognomy of Kabbalah are incomparably more explicit, more numerous, and, in my opinion, also more profound than what can be solidly documented regarding themes found in Christianity. See, for example, Moshe Idel, “Jewish Mysticism and Muslim Mysticism” [Hebrew], *Maḥanayyim*, n.s. 1 (1991): 28, as well as my book *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 82–85; Idel, “Prayer, Ecstasy and Alien Thoughts in the Besht’s Religious Worldview”; and, for a later summary of my approach, see my “Orienting, Orientalizing or Disorienting the Study of Kabbalah.”

demptive activity, then we may distinguish between three different decades in the activities of the ecstatic Kabbalist: 1261 to 1269, the philosophical period; 1270 to 1279, the first phase of his Kabbalistic period, with fewer elements concerning the role played by his personality as a redemptive figure; and, finally, late 1279 to 1291, a period when the redemptive aspects of his thought, as well as the revelation of the allegedly “unknown” divine name *'HWY*,<sup>216</sup> became much more evident.

The basic conceptual vectors found in the first two stages of Abulafia’s thought—the demythologisation of and naturalist approaches towards the classical Jewish texts, which mainly involved their philosophical allegorisation—also serve as the inner structure of his messianic or individual redemptive impulses, especially its intellectual features that were elaborated in more detail later on. Much of the content and the conceptual structure that was dominant in the first of these three periods continued to profoundly inform both the content of his writings and his reported experiences, including his conspicuous propensity towards political esotericism, in the two later periods.

This approach assumes a significant continuity in Abulafia’s intellectual world-view over the years that emphasises an intelligible message, despite his adoption of letter combinations, gematria, and other of types of eccentric exegetical methods that may have led to random associative thinking that could have shattered his conceptual noetic structure (though they did not).<sup>217</sup> Even his most incomprehensible passages are based on long, carefully calculated series of gematrias.

So far, I have not found in Abulafia’s writings or in those of his disciples phenomena of glossolalia related to revelations they had, but rather a controlled type of discourse. As is evident from the different visions he describes of light, of himself (autoscopy), of letters that grow larger and larger during the experience, of the divine name, or of a cosmo-psycho-gram in the form of a globe (or a mandala, to resort to Carl G. Jung’s terminology), several types of ecstatic experiences are mentioned in his writings. They most likely had a different structure from other ecstatic types such as those that generate glossolalia. Ecstasy should be seen as an umbrella term that includes many different categories, and a serious and meaningful comparison between literatures cannot be based solely on assuming an unqualified ecstatic nature, without any substantial elaboration.

In other words, in his mature life, Abulafia indubitably expanded his interests and horizons by gradually incorporating a greater awareness of eschatological issues that he understood in noetic terms. This was done without suppressing, negating, or

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**216** See chapter 22 note 364 above.

**217** Compare, however, the quite different explanation of the content of mystical experiences as combinations of random cognitive processes by the creative unconscious in Daniel Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999). It is not an accident that Abulafia is not discussed in this book. Compare also to chapter 16 note 108 above. See also the claim of Rabbi Nathan as to the content of his revelations, as translated in Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 151.

even relegating to the margins his important initial starting points.<sup>218</sup> Such a development is one of the major reasons for the growing complexity of his thought. Abulafia's continuous adherence to Maimonides's thought and to other aspects of the Neo-Aristotelian thought of the *falāsifah* generated a conceptual complexity that distinguishes him from other Kabbalists and prevents any serious sweeping or essentialist generalisations as to the nature of Kabbalah as a whole.<sup>219</sup>

## Appendix E: Abulafia's "The Mystery of Time" or Supra-Temporality?

I have distinguished between secrecy and political esotericism on the one hand and mysteriology, which deals with topics that cannot be understood in an exhaustive manner, on the other. The latter is less concerned with the welfare of society and the place of the distinguished individual in it, but rather with the impenetrable secrets of the divine sphere and cosmologies replete with hidden sympathies. While the former is much more philosophically inclined, the latter is more occultist. The former is the result of the author's choice to reflect on and write or teach about issues related to those secrets or to only hint at them; the latter is much more a situation that is not necessarily chosen, but is rather an encounter, real or imagined, with the somewhat impenetrable and objective dimension of reality. My assumption is that the former type is a more useful category for understanding Abulafia, and even in the other forms of Jewish mysticism, the secrets, of whatever nature, are closer to esotericism than to mysteriology.<sup>1</sup>

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**218** Compare, however, Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 139, where he sees Abulafia's Kabbalah as "rationalisations" of a system that is a Jewish parallel to yoga. This statement assumes an early role that was allegedly played by the mystical techniques, which are expounded in accordance with Maimonides's conceptual apparatus. However, the Kabbalist only committed the details of those techniques to writing from 1280, long after the so-called "rationalisations," whose details had been known to him from his studies described above since the early 1260s. In my opinion, the techniques were later grafted onto the earlier philosophical thought and ideals, in what I have called the profound structure, not vice versa, and there are very few attempts to interpret those techniques in a philosophical manner.

**219** Compare to Wolfson's claim that he is not an essentialist in *Language, Eros, Being*, 88, where on the same page, he mentions "the repetition of the structure" of Kabbalah, in the singular, as well as the uncritical adoption of Franz Rosenzweig's vision of "system," again in the singular. My point in my studies is that in the vast Kabbalistic literature, there are repetitions of quite different structures, systems, or models, a fact that is obfuscated by Wolfson's resorts to generalisations such as phallogocentrism or pervasive male androgyneity as characteristic of Kabbalistic literature as a whole. See also above chapter 8 note 30 and chapter 9 note 116. See also now Idel, *The Privileged Divine Feminine*.

**1** See above in chapter 1 note 10 and chapter 5.

In the following, I shall address some of Abulafia's texts referring to time.<sup>2</sup> Let me deal with a secret that has recently been turned into a mystery by Elliot Wolfson, through a scholarly interpretation of a passage by Abulafia concerning a secret that has been understood as being related to "the mystery of time." I will here translate the fuller context of this passage, found in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, Abulafia's commentary on the *Guide*:

[a] But their issue<sup>3</sup> is YHWH—in the world of the angels, which are the first *Hawayah* according to the secret of necessity,<sup>4</sup> YHWH—in the world of the spheres, which are the second *Hawayah* according to the secret of necessity, YHWH—in the lower world, which is the third *Hawayah*, the last according to the secret of necessity, those according to their degree and those according to their degree. This is the reason why the wisdom comprises all three altogether,<sup>5</sup> those and those, and all the existent[s] of the three are [emerging] in necessary manner from the unity of God, blessed be He. However, despite this, He, blessed be He, is Unique, One alone, since in One comes the unique *Hawayah*, which is not so in those who are other than Him. [b] And since He does not fall under time, it is permitted to [attribute to] Him the three times equally, by saying about Him that was, and is, and will be.<sup>6</sup> He was before man, and is together with man, and will be after man. And so the tradition is that He was before the world, and is together with the world, and will be after the world. [c] And the secret is that He was in the past, as He is now, and as He will be in the future, without change, for none of His actions changes in relation to Him and in accordance with His knowledge. All the more so as He himself does not change and inasmuch as his attributes are naught but His essence, His attributes do not change. And the

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2 On time and Kabbalah in general, see my "Higher than Time," part of which has been discussed below; Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, eds. Elishiva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998): 153–88; Moshe Idel, "Sabbath: On Concepts of Time in Jewish Mysticism," in *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality*, ed. Gerald Blidstein (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2004): 57–93; or Idel, "Multiple Forms of Redemption" and "The Time of the End." For medieval Kabbalah and time, see also Pedaya, *Nahmanides*, passim; Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence"; or Adam Afterman, "Time, Eternity and Mystical Experience in Kabbalah," in *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Brian Ogren (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 162–75.

3 Namely, of the three tetragrammata, mentioned beforehand, where he refers to both the Talmud and to Maimonides's *Guide* 1:61. See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 72–73.

4 *Ḥiyuv*. I am not sure that I fully understand this term. From the broader context, it may be connected to the description of God as the "Necessary Existent" in the context of the Tetragrammaton. See *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 73, *Sitrei Torah*, 75, *Or ha-Šekhel*, 41, *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:8, 174, and above chapter 16 note 106.

5 *Ḥokhmah* = 73 = *HYH*, *HWH*, *WYHYH* = 72. The meaning of the three combinations of letters is: He was, He is, and He will be, which, when combined differently, compound three Tetragrammata or the name of twelve letters, as is specified in paragraph [b]. For the very probable source of this gematria in Abulafia's teacher Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, see Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 189, note 208. In this passage, the term *Hawayah* refers to the Tetragrammaton; namely, to the threefold form of Tetragrammaton that was sometimes conceived as the Talmudic name of twelve letters, as Abulafia mentions earlier on the same page in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*. See also Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 187, note 205.

6 *HYH*, *HWH* *W-YHYH*. See also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 84.

change that is thought by us that is found in our world is not a change in His operation, blessed be He, but [only] the revolution of the sphere. And the revolution of the sphere is not a change in the substance of the sphere, not in general and not in particular.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to first highlight what is new in paragraph [c] in comparison to his earlier discussion in the same passage about God and time, especially since the term “secret” is found there. In my opinion, the secret has to do with Abulafia’s view of the immutability of the divine realm in any of the three worlds or tenses, an issue that is absent in the more traditional descriptions as he formulated in paragraph [b].

Abulafia quite emphatically refuses to allow any change in the divine essence or in His attributes, because change is related to a motion in time and God and the separate intellects are explicitly understood in this passage and elsewhere as not falling under the category of time. Such a view of the immutability of the divine realm, which includes both God and the attributes that are conceived as identical with Him, is also found elsewhere in Abulafia’s thought<sup>8</sup> and counteracts the plausibility of the assumption made by Elliot Wolfson that the impact of human acts on the divine realm (theurgy) is a relevant category for understanding Abulafia’s Kabbalah. Surprisingly enough, when dealing with the translated part of the passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*—Wolfson did not render the last sentence of [c] into English—he has nothing to say about the flat contradiction between the view of divine immutability found in it and the concept of theurgy that he attributes to this Kabbalist.<sup>9</sup>

However, what is of particular importance here is that Abulafia conceives divine immutability (in a good Maimonidean manner) to be a secret, because, in my opinion, it contradicts the widespread biblical, Talmudic, and theosophical-theurgical images of God, which are quite dynamic. Instead, Abulafia assumes that changes take place solely in our world and depend solely on the different forms of reception

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7 *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 72:

אבל עניינם הוא יהו"ה בעולם המלאכים שהם הויה ראשונה בסוד החיוב, יהו"ה בעולם הגלגלים שהם הויה שניה בסוד החיוב, יהו"ה בעולם השפל שהם הויה שלישית אחרונה בסוד החיוב, באלה כפי מעלתם ובאלה כפי מעלתם. על כן החכמה כוללת שלשתם אלה ואלה, וכל נמצא משלשתם הוא מחויב מיוחד ה' ית'. אמנם עם זה הוא ית' יחיד אחד לבד, כי באח"ד בא הויה יחידה מה שאין כן בזולתו. ומפני שאינו נופל תחת הזמן יותרו עליו שלשת הזמנים בשווי כאומדן עליו ית', שהוא היה והוה ויהיה. היה לפני האדם, והוה עם האדם, ויהיה אחר אדם. וכן הקבלה עוד היה לפני העולם, והוה עם העולם, ויהיה אחר העולם. וכן הסוד היה לשעבר, כאשר הוה עתה, וכאשר יהיה לעתיד בלא שני, שאין דבר ממעשיו משתנה אצל עצמו ולפי דעתו, כל שכן שלא ישתנה הוא בעצמו וגם אחר שאין מדותיו אלא עצמו לא ישתנו מדותיו. והשנוי הנחשב אצלנו שהוא נמצא בעולמנו, אינו שינוי אצל פעולתו יתע' כי אם גלגול הגלגל. וגלגול הגלגל אינו שנוי בעצם הגלגל, לא בכלל ולא בפרט.

Paragraph [b] and part of [c] were translated in Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 187. The denial of change even in the substance of the sphere, despite its motion, should be compared to a passage from *Or ha-Šekhel*, 29, but see Wolfson’s different interpretation, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 187. See also *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 20, where Abulafia compares the union of the soul to the spiritual world as being stronger than that of the matter of the sphere to its form. For more on the issue of attributes in Abulafia, see Idel, *Middot*, chapter 9.

8 See, e.g., *Maftaḥ ha-Ra’ayon*, 5, *Sitrei Torah*, 111, and chapter 17 note 154 above.

9 “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” 187. See also chapter 17 note 146 above.

of the powers from above by the human recipients. Thus, no mystery is intended here.

Another secret is the presence of a Tetragrammaton in each of the three worlds, as mentioned in paragraph [a], which may be understood as being connected to the presence of an immutable entity within growingly mutable worlds. This is also a Maimonidean position since it fits the Great Eagle's assumption as to the naturalness of the divine presence in the world, hinted in paragraph [b] by the "togetherness" of the divine within the three worlds,<sup>10</sup> a view that I have described as "limited pantheism."<sup>11</sup> In any case, what is paramount for my argument is the fact that Abulafia regarded the act of cognition as taking place outside of time.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in the passage above, there is no "mystery of time" as has been claimed,<sup>13</sup> just as there is no "personification of time" by the figure of the angel Metatron in another passage that has been quoted from one of Abulafia's books. In fact, the quoted passage has nothing to do with Metatron, explicitly or implicitly, and very little to do with time, as is evident from even a superficial reading of its wider context. I see no need to further prove my assessment.<sup>14</sup>

Let me turn to an analysis of Abulafia's approach to time and its experience as I understand it. I will first translate a neglected passage from his *Commentary on Sefer Yeṣirah*, where he writes that the transcendence of time is required and portrays it neither as an experience that takes place in time nor as a personification. When describing humans, Abulafia writes:

We are the very last of all the existents, and from this side, we are at the extreme distance from Him. And because we are the furthest beings [remote] from him, He desired that we should be extremely close to Him from another side, and He saw that there was no manner that is more excellent than that in which He created us, and He set us as bodies that possess faculties [*koḥot*] that receive from others [the] *hawayyot* that exist for short times, and there are *hawayyot* that are present without time at all and they are the eternal [*hawayyot*]. And everything that is universal is eternal, and everything that is eternal is universal, and she/he will not be called innovated or created, but by an equivocal name.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See my "Deus sive Natura," 185–86.

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 21 note 305 above.

<sup>12</sup> See his *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, 124, *Sefer ha-Ḥeṣeq*, 80, and Rabbi Nathan ben Sa'adyah Ḥar'ar, *Le Porte della Giustizia*, 476.

<sup>13</sup> Compare to Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 187. This does not mean that elsewhere there is no "secret of time" (סוד הזמן) in Abulafia's writings. See *Sitrei Torah*, 122, *Maf-teaḥ ha-Sefrot*, 20, and *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, but this issue deserves a separate study that will deal with the complex question of his cosmology. See chapter 19 note 219 above.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 190, note 211, where he interprets a passage from *Imrei Šefer*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentary on Sefer Yeṣirah*, 19:

כי אנחנו האחרוני הנמצאים כלם ואנחנו מזה הצד בתכלית הרחק ממנו ומפני היותנו אחרונים לו בקש להיותנו בתכלית הקרבה אליו מצד אחר וראה שלא היה שם דרך מעולה מזאת שבראנו עליה ושמונו גופים בעלי כחות מקבלים מזולתנו היות קימות זמנים קצרים והיות קימות בלתי זמנים כלל והם הנצחיות וכל כללי נצחי וכל נצחי כללי ולא יאמר עליו מחודש ונברא כי אם בשם המשותף.



According to this passage, God demands that humans become eternal by turning from a particular or individual into a universal entity,<sup>16</sup> a metanoic experience that is predicated on receiving eternal or temporary powers, referenced by the enigmatic term *hawayyot*, from the outside. Though such a reception causes a change in the individual, it is not a change insofar as the eternal *hawayyot* are concerned.

Abulafia distinguishes between the particular type of experience related to the body and the lower faculties in man, which are extremely remote from the divinity, and the spiritual experience related to the other faculties, which may bring someone closer to, or, according to another passage to be discussed immediately below, within God. I assume that the term *hawayyot* refers to separate intellects or perhaps even higher entities or forms of ideas within the divine mind.<sup>17</sup> The onus of the change is here put on the human constitution, which can receive different influences because of its composite and changing nature. We may assume that the body receives the temporary influences while the spirit, or the higher faculties, receive the spiritual ones. It is important to note that the above statement covers humans in general and not just the Jews. Therefore, this amounts to a more universalist approach, which is indeed Abulafia's main approach, as we have seen above.

This transformation from a particular individual into a general or universal being is certainly not new in Abulafia and his school, as they were following some brief discussions by Abraham ibn Ezra.<sup>18</sup> Let me point out that this passage is somewhat reminiscent of Meister Eckhart's statement in his commentary on Psalm 86: "We have been put into time for the purpose of coming nearer to and becoming like God through rational activity in time,"<sup>19</sup> though Abulafia would not have accepted this view as it attributes importance to time.

A similar position to what we saw in the last quote is found in another treatise, *Sefer Ner Elohim*, which belongs to ecstatic Kabbalah and was not authored by Abulafia himself:

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Compare also to the similar views on general principles in Al-Baṭalyawsi's *Sefer ha-'Aggulot ha-Ra'ayoniyyot*, ed. D. Kaufmann (Budapest: s.n., 1880), 50. On general principles, see also *Or ha-Šekhel*, 40, 108–9, and chapter 21 note 251 above. For an interesting discussion that complements the translated passage, found in the same book, immediately afterwards on page 20, see chapter 21 note 300 above.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 21 above and my "Universalization and Integration."

<sup>17</sup> See *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, BN 774, fol. 148b, 116. For more on this passage, see Idel, "Sefirot above Sefirot," 260–61, and compare Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," 186. See also *Imrei Šefer*, 129.

<sup>18</sup> As judiciously pointed out by Weinstock in his footnotes to his edition of Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeširah*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2005), 192.

The root of all the negative commandments alludes to not following the temporary matters, since whoever is drawn towards the vanities of temporality,<sup>20</sup> his soul shall survive in the vanities of temporality; and whoever is drawn towards God, who is above temporality [*le-ma'lah me-ha-zeman*], his soul shall survive in eternity, beyond time [*be-lo' zeman*], within God, may He be blessed.<sup>21</sup>

Following a principle formulated in Abulafia's thought on this issue,<sup>22</sup> the anonymous Kabbalist describes the effect of a person's union according to the object to which she/he chooses to adhere: if one adheres to temporary entities, one's survival depends on time and is transient; but if one does so to an eternal entity, then the survival will be eternal too.

Interestingly, the eternal is here described as God and as being beyond time; adherence means here an entrance into the divine realm. God is described using the Hebrew phrase *le-ma'lah me-ha-zeman*, an expression that was rare in the Middle Ages but which some centuries later became a leitmotif in the major school of East European Hasidism.<sup>23</sup> For the time being, it seems that this is the first dated occurrence of this phrase in Jewish literature, though it is most probably not the first source or the origin of any influence on other thinkers, as the anonymous book was only preserved in a single unique manuscript and was, to the best of my knowledge, never quoted by any Kabbalist. The soul's experience is, however, described by a slightly different phrase: *beli zeman*, "without time." This divergence may refer to a status achieved by the soul after leaving time. I wonder whether the expression "within" that is related to God reflects some act of transcending space, just as time was imagined to be transcended, or, alternatively, as comprising all the space just as time was conceived to be comprised.

If Abulafia's highest experience is described as a profound transformation that affects the human intellect and transcends time and space, I also assume the plau-

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**20** *Hevlei ha-zeman*. This warning as to the negativity and the futilities of time is a topos in the Jewish Middle Ages. It recurs in Spanish Jewish poetry, and was shared by several Jewish thinkers, especially Maimonides. See, for example, the material assembled in Israel Levin, "Zeman and Tevel in the Hebrew Secular Poetry in Spain in the Middle Ages" [Hebrew], *Ošar Yehudei Sefarad* 5 (1962): 68–79; Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilekhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapter 7, halakhah 1, or ibn Falaquera, *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*, 50. For Abulafia's recurrent use of this phrase see, for example, *Or ha-Šekhel*, 20, 21, 105; *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 331; *Maftaḥ ha-Tokhaḥot*, 62; or *Imrei Šefer*, 136. For other negative contexts of using *zeman*, sometime referring to the *mašshakh ha-zeman*, "the darkness of time," see his *Or ha-Šekhel*, 3; *Sitrei Torah*, 113, 137, 170; *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, 371.

**21** *Sefer Ner Elohim*, Ms. Munich, 10, fol. 154b, 68:

והשרש של מצוות לא תעשה כולן הוא לרמוז לבלתי לכת אחרי העניינים הזמניים. כי כל הנמשך אחר הבלי הזמן השארות נשמתו בהבלי הזמן. ומי שנמשך אחר השם אשר למעלה מהזמן השארות נשמתו נצחית בלא זמן בשם ית'.

This text is especially close to *Or ha-Šekhel*, 21. This vision of the negative commandments as an allusion—namely, as preventing someone from being immersed in mundane issues—deserves a separate discussion. See chapter 10 note 182 above.

**22** See the passage from *Ošar 'Eden Ganuz*, translated in my *The Mystical Experience*, 124–25.

**23** See my "Higher Than Time."

sibility of the cessation of ritual and social life for as long as the supra-temporal experience is imagined to last. The intellectualistic nature of the transformation and the union is well-chosen in an anonymous text that I attribute to Abulafia: “From the side of his knowledge the one that comprehends it will become a separate intellect, and this is the reason for his survival, that is the best that it is possible to achieve.”<sup>24</sup> The perfect human’s acquired supra-temporal existence is one of the reasons why the ritual is conceived as secondary or irrelevant in the ideal state of the mystic.

In short, instead of assuming the hypostatic vision of time or its personification in the Agent Intellect in ecstatic Kabbalah, as proposed by Wolfson, my assumption is that Abulafia was concerned with the ideal attainment of an experience of transcending time, since time was a category he understood in an Aristotelian manner as being inseparably connected to motion.<sup>25</sup> He was pre-eminently concerned with attaining the highest possible experience in order to be able to intelligise as the separate cosmic intellects do, an attainment that amounts to becoming universal and thus trans-temporal and leads to possessing some form of unity that resembles the unity of the divinity, in a manner reminiscent of Neo-Platonic views.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, another plausible source for the syntagm “higher than time” is the famous Neo-Platonic treatise known as *Liber de Causis*, which Abulafia knew,<sup>27</sup> and excerpts of it are found together with Abulafian material in manuscripts, which requires additional studies.<sup>28</sup>

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**24** See chapter 21 note 289 above.

**25** See, e.g., *Sefer ha-Melammed*, 9; *Sitrei Torah*, 115–16; and *Imrei Šefer*, 127, 129.

**26** *Aḥdut*. See, for example, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefeš*, 20, and *Or ha-Šekhel*, 41. For the nexus between this term and an experience considered to be higher than time in the various passages found in the traditions of the Hasidic master known as the Great Maggid and his school, see my “Higher Than Time,” 197–208.

**27** See his *Imrei Šefer*, 193–94, and Idel, “The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance,” 216–17, 220–23; Idel, “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance,” 332–33.

**28** A discussion of hypostatic time from chapter 2 of this book is found together with Abulafian material in manuscripts. See my “Higher Than Time,” 186 and note 21. See, e.g., Ms Paris BN, 776, fols. 192b–193a.

# Abbreviations

HTR – Harvard Theological Review

HUCA – Hebrew Union College Annual

JAOS – Journal of the American Oriental Society

JJS – Journal of Jewish Studies

JJTP – Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy

JQR – Jewish Quarterly Review

JSJT – Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought

MGWJ – Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums

PAAJR – Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research

QS – Qiryat Sefer

REJ – Revue des études juives

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