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The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment

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One of the many contributions that feminist scholarship has made to the academic study of culture and society is a heightened emphasis on the body for a proper understanding of the construction of human subjectivities. To be sure, speculation on the body is as ancient as recorded human history, but the approaches sponsored by contemporary feminist theories are distinctive insofar as they insist on the need to consider embodiment from the vantage point of gender and sexual difference. Like other disciplines in the humanities, the study of religion has been transformed by the feminist concern with engendered embodiment. In the specific case of Judaism, there has been significant progress as well in the application of feminist criticism to the study of this complex religious phenomenon, though predictably one can still detect resistance on the part of some Judaic scholars to the adoption of this method as a legitimate critical tool to engage the past; in fact, in some cases, one encounters ignorance laced with outright hostility, a posture that seems to me far worse and morally reprehensible than simple resistance.

An area where the insights of feminist criticism are especially applicable is the esoteric wisdom cultivated in the late Middle Ages, even though it is quite likely that there is some credence to the claims of kabbalists that their teachings and practices were older. An essential component of the kabbalistic worldview is the anthropomorphic representation of the divine to the point that the priestly notion of the image of God by means of which Adam was created is applied by kabbalists to limbs of the supernal human form configured in the imagination. Moreover, just as Adam is described as having been created as male and female, so the imaginal body of the sefirotic potencies is portrayed in terms of a gender binary, with the female, emblematic of the capacity to receive, linked to the left side of judgment, and the male, emblematic of the potential to bestow, linked to the right side of mercy. The erotic language embraced by kab-

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balists, especially conspicuous in the zoharic anthology which began to crystallize in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as in the material produced by the disciples of Isaac Luria in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is anchored in this decidedly embodied conception of the divine. It is thus startling that the majority of kabbalah scholars have not availed themselves of the most useful contemporary theoretical models to explicate the nature of embodiment enunciated in medieval Jewish mystical spirituality. Many prominent scholars have been critical of my attempt to utilize feminist theory to analyze the construction of gender in kabbalistic sources, and have thus betrayed a retrograde hermeneutic that masks ideological agenda in the guise of philological exactitude. Instead of exploring the discourse of body in a theoretically sophisticated manner, most scholars of kabbalah interpret bodily images in an overly simplistic way, decoding gender references in anatomical terms without appreciating the complex relationship between sex as a biological demarcation and gender as a cultural construction.

In this essay, I would like to explore the issue of embodiment from the vantage point of the body of the text and the text of the body. For medieval kabbalists, in consonance with contemporaneous patterns of Christian and Islamic piety, but especially the former, the body was a site of tension, the locus of sensual and erotic pleasure, on the one hand, and the earthly pattern of God's image, the corporeal manifestation of the incorporeal reality, on the other. Given the intractable state of human consciousness as embodied, it should come as no surprise that, in spite of the negative portrayal of the body and repeated demands of preachers and homilists to escape from the clasp of carnality, in great measure due to the impact of Platonic psychology and metaphysics on the spiritual formation of the intellectual elite, the flesh continued to serve as the *prima materia* out of which ritual gestures, devotional symbols, and theological doctrines were fashioned. There is, however, a decisive difference that distinguishes Christianity from the various forms of mystical devotion that evolved historically in Judaism and Islam.

In the domain of the theological, which cannot be surgically extracted from other facets of medieval Christian societies, the dual role of body as "stigma of the fall" and "instrument of redemption" was mediated by the Eucharist, the central priestly rite that celebrated the mystery of transubstantiation through the miraculous consecration of bread and wine into body and blood. These sacraments were believed to occasion liturgically the presence of Christ, a prolepsis of the second coming, an advent of the appointed time, and a fostering of the "paradoxical union of the body

with the evanescence of the sacred."[1] As one might expect, Jews and Muslims provided alternative narratives to account for the commingling of the immanent and transcendent, the visible and invisible, the literal and spiritual. Focusing on sources composed within rabbinic circles in places as diverse as Palestine, Provence, Catalonia, Castile, the Rhineland, Italy, northern France, and England, just to name some of the geographic spots Jewish occultism can be detected in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we can identify a hermeneutic principle that explains the theomorphic representation of the human as divine and the anthropomorphic representation of the divine as human, leading to the transfiguration of flesh into word, which I will pose alongside of—not in binary opposition to—the more readily known Christological incarnation of the word into flesh. To be sure, I think it artificial to juxtapose these positions too sharply, for the hypothetical tenability of the word becoming flesh rests on the assumption that flesh is, in some sense, word, but flesh can be entertained as word only if and when word, in some form, becomes flesh. As it happens, in the history of medieval Latin Christendom, there is evidence of scribal inscriptions (including the words *Verbum caro factum est*) on the hearts of male and female saints—a hyperliteral reading of the figurative "book of the heart"—a gesture that effected the transformation of the written word into flesh and, conversely, the transformation of flesh into the written word.[2] Notwithstanding the compelling logic of this reversal, and the empirical evidence to substantiate it, the distinction should still be upheld in an effort to account for the difference in the narratological framework of the two traditions, a difference that ensues from, though at the same time gives way to, an underlying sameness. If I were to translate my thinking into contemporary academic discourse, I would put it this way: Pitched in the heartland of Christian faith, one encounters the logocentric belief in the incarnation of the word in the flesh of the person Jesus, whereas in the textual panorama of medieval kabbalah, the site of the incarnational insight is the onto-graphic inscripting of flesh into word and the consequent conversion of the carnal body into the ethereal, luminous body, finally transposed into the *literal* body that is the letter, hyperliterally, the name that is the Torah. Both narratives, therefore, presume

1. Françoise Jaouën and Benjamin Semple, "Editors' Preface: The Body into Text," *Yale French Studies* 86 (1994): 1–4. On the "swell of eucharistic devotion" in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982), 192–93, 256–57, and Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991).

2. Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago, 2000).

a correlation of body and book, but in an inverse manner: for Christians, the body is the embodiment of the book; for Jews, the book is the textualization of the body.[3]

HEBREW AND THE SEMIOTICS OF CREATION

A current that runs through the landscape of Jewish esotericism presumes that Hebrew, the sacred tongue, is the cosmic or natural language in comparison to which all other languages are derivative. Kabbalists uniformly posit an intrinsic connection between language and being, which rests, in turn, on the assumed correlation of letter and substance expressed in detail in the second part of *Sefer Yetsirah*. In the words of the thirteenth-century Catalonian kabbalist Jacob ben Sheshet, "The matter of the letters comprises the forms of all created beings, and you will not find a form that does not have an image in the letters or in the combination of two, three, or more of them. This is a principle alluded to in the order of the alphabet, and the matters are ancient, deep waters that have no limit."[4] From the kabbalistic vantage point, what exists in the world, examined subphenomenally through mystical vision—that is, seeing with the eye of the heart, in the locution frequently employed by kabbalists—are the manifold permutations of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, themselves enfolded in the four-letter name YHWH; what is/appears phenomenally cannot be experienced except through the prismatic mosaic of "bodily language," the "corporeal intentionality" of the ecstatic and enstatic body, that is, the body that stands without and is contiguous within an external world, the body that projects upon and receives from other projecting bodies;[5] whatever exists, ultimately, is nameable, even, or especially, the unnameable, the nameless that is un(named) in every (un)naming, the other of speech, the event—though in being so unnamed it, too, slips from the abandon of namelessness—that is impossible to say, the unsaying that is heard repeatedly in the infinite speaking, speaking of the infinite, discourse—literally, that which "runs about," *dis/currere*—always extending beyond the grip of language.

Kabbalistic literature exemplifies the intersection of two conceptual currents. On the one hand, we notice the disparity between appearance

3. For fuller discussion, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. T. Frymer-Kensky, D. Novak, P. Ochs, D. Fox Sandmel, and M. A. Signer (Boulder, Colo., 2000), 239–54.

4. *Sefer Meshiv devarim nekhohim*, ed. G. Vajda (Jerusalem, 1968), 154.

5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., 1964), 89.

that is truly apparent and truth that is apparently true, a metaphysical enigma that can be traced, at least in the history of Western philosophy, to the dualism of transcendence and corporeality that issues from the formalism of Platonic idealism.[6] And, on the other, there is the creed of archaic Jewish wisdom, for lack of a better term, that views the world as having been created by means of Torah, the Hebrew letters through which vestments of the ineffable name are woven, semiotic ciphers that constitute the plentitude of being. The roots for this esoteric tenet may be sought in the cosmological belief that Hebrew is the "language of creation," according to the formulation of Jubilees 12.26, a treatise composed in all probability in mid-second century B.C.E., presumably by a Jew in Palestine, perhaps of priestly lineage.[7] It is reasonable to assume that this conception is related to the older wisdom teaching, the contours of which may be culled from sections of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Psalms, apocalyptic visions, apocryphal wisdom literature, Qumran fragments, passages in the Philonic corpus, and the dicta of Jesus preserved in canonical and gnostic gospels.[8] We are more concerned with the aftermath than the prehistory of this sapiential tradition, but an initial word, no matter how insufficient, about the latter is necessary to open the way to the former.

In one current of ancient Israelite tradition, with roots stretching back to ancient Mesopotamia, wisdom was hypostasized or metaphorically depicted—there seems little sense to distinguish sharply between these options when assessing the scriptural context—as the first of God's creations, the idealized woman of valor and glory, a counterpoint to the degrading image of the whoring woman of sin and temptation. By the later part of the Second Temple period, as is attested in a number of sources (for example, Sirach 24.9–13 and Baruch 3.36–4.4), the image of the fullness of primordial wisdom[9] was identified by some as the Torah of Moses.[10] Philosophically, the symbolic identification must have engen-

6. Stephen Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, Ind., 1986), 1:170–74.

7. *The Book of Jubilees*, trans. J. C. Vanderkam (Leuven, 1989), 73.

8. For a useful survey and relevant bibliography of studies explicating the sapiential tradition in ancient Israelite religion and Second Temple Judaism, see John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Edinburgh, 1997).

9. For discussion of the depiction of wisdom as the image of fullness, see Jan Liesen, *Full of Praise: An Exegetical Study of Sir 39.12–35* (Leiden, 2000), 145–87.

10. *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes*, Introduction and Commentary by Alexander A. Di Lella (New York, 1987), 138. On the myth of the descent of the personified wisdom, see Randall A. Argall, *1 Enoch and Sirach: A Comparative Literary and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation, and Judgment* (Atlanta, 1995), 53–98.

dered the thought that if God creates by means of wisdom, which is Torah, then matters (*∂evarim*) created by the agency of the word (*∂ibbur*) would constitute and be constituted by the materiality of words (*∂evarim*).

Utilizing the technical terminology of quantum physics, we might say that Hebrew letters for kabbalists are excitation nodes that generate visual and sonic aftershocks, producing the semblance of light and resonance of sound expressive of infinity, looping round metric intervals of the fourth dimension, the space-time continuum, on one hand, contracting gravity in restricting expansion, and, on the other, attenuating antigravity in expanding restriction.[11] Matter, on this account, is a cloak, a veil, through which the luminous form-shadows of the Hebrew letters are concomitantly concealed and revealed. Scholem had in mind this foundational principle of kabbalistic cosmology when he wrote that the "worlds are nothing but names inscribed on the paper of the divine reality."[12] In spite of the diversity of opinions that properly characterizes the history of Jewish mysticism, the assumption that Hebrew is the "holy language" (*leshon ha-kodesh*) in the manner that I have just indicated binds together masters of Jewish esoteric lore across generations without any discernible rupture of time or space.

BOOK OF NATURE—MIRRORING—NATURE OF BOOK

Textual confirmation for this idea can be sought independently in rabbinic literature of the formative period, as we find, for example, in the dictum attributed to R. Simon: "Just as the Torah was given in the holy language, so the world was created by means of the holy language."[13] R. Simon's statement presumes an affinity, perhaps synchronicity, betwixt creation and revelation—just as the object of the latter consisted of Hebrew, the "holy tongue," so is it the instrument of the former. The sentiment well attested to in late antique Judaism that God created the world by gazing into the inscripted text of Torah in its primordial state can be

11. I offer this remark as a rhetorical prod to stimulate thinking about kabbalah in a somewhat broader conceptual framework and not as a commitment to the belief that medieval kabbalists anticipated current developments in quantum physics, as is sometimes suggested by the overly zealous preachers of the gospel of new age Jewish spirituality.

12. Gershom Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance, Volume 2*, ed. A. Shapira (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv, 1989), 38. See also idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. A. Arkush (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 448.

13. *Genesis Rabbah* 18.4, ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 164.

viewed as an exegetical elaboration pieced together from several archaic theologoumena, including the demiurgical representation of divine wisdom, embracing, *inter alia*, the image of God's female playmate, visual figuration of the verbal icon of the will. The idea of a primordial text, the textualization of wisdom, resonates with a still older mythic notion of the heavenly tablets that bear the divine inscription whence the visionary-sage learns the secrets of the cosmos, history, and time; the hypothetical green line, as it were, that circumscribes the symbolic tableau of the imagination.[14] If the instrument/blueprint of divine creativity, according to the mythologic of R. Simon, or the teaching transmitted in his name, consists of letters, objects of creation must be analogously constituted.

Whatever differences pertain to the rabbinic and occult perspectives, and surely such differences are essential to note, a shared view emerges with regard to the ascription of an ontic status to language and the consequent textual interpretation of reality; indeed, employing terminology that became fashionable in the speculative renaissance of the Latin West in the twelfth century, Torah can be identified as the "book of nature."[15] In the Jewish context, the metaphor is not to be understood metaphorically but hyperliterally, that is, Torah, the prototype of all books, the *hyper-text*, if you will, informs us about the semantic character of nature; alternatively expressed, Torah was thought to impart cosmological and anthropological knowledge because the substance of the world and the human self consists of the letters that constitute the building blocks of the revealed word. Medieval kabbalistic authors understood the rabbinic idealization of Torah in this manner, and there is at least enough ambigu-

14. On the theme of the heavenly tablets, see Shalom Paul, "Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life," *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973): 345–53, F. Garcia Martinez, "The Heavenly Tablets in the Book of Jubilees," *Studies in the Book of Jubilees*, ed. M. Albni, J. Frey, A. Lange (Tübingen, 1997), 243–60; Hindy Najman, "Interpretation as Primordial Writing: Jubilees and Its Authority-Conferring Strategies," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 30 (1999): 379–410; and other references cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 161, n. 31.

15. For a still useful review of the image of the world as a book, see Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction* (Stanford, Calif., 1971), 25–51. The augmented use of the metaphor of the book of nature has been traced to the renaissance of twelfth-century humanism. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1990), 302–47; Ashlynn K. Pai, "Varying Degrees of Light: Bonaventure and the Medieval Book of Nature," *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Classen (New York, 1998), 3–19.

ity in dicta attributed to rabbis of the early period to entertain seriously the possibility that kabbalistic sources open a way to ascertain older forms of a mystical specularity predicated on viewing the book as a speculum of nature and nature as a speculum of the book.[16]

The unique contribution of medieval kabbalists—and on this point I do not see any appreciable difference between the two major trends according to the taxonomy that has dominated contemporary scholarship—centers around identifying the Torah, referred to as the "divine body," with YHWH, the most sacred of divine names, which comprises all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which is the one language considered natural and not conventional, essential and not contingent. I cite here a representative formulation of this assumption from *Shaʿar ha-nikkud*, a treatise on the meaning of the vowels composed by Joseph Gikatilla in the latter part of the thirteenth century. The relevant remark brings together the rabbinic tradition that the world-to-come and this word were created respectively by *yod* and *he*, the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton,[17] and the system laid out in the second part of *Sefer yetsirah* in which the letters are presented both as the means by which all things are created and their substance. "All the worlds are dependent on the twenty-two letters, and the one who contemplates the secret of the permutation of the alphabet will comprehend the secret of the rotation of all entities in their ascent and descent by means of the secret of the property of the letters. The one who merits comprehending this will understand several mysteries and several levels that are hidden from the eyes of creatures, and he will comprehend and know the greatness of God, blessed be he,

16. On the textualization of God in kabbalistic symbolism, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 49–78; idem, "From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. S. Kepnes (New York, 1995), 145–78; Moshe Idel, "The Concept of Torah in Hekhalot Literature and Its Metamorphosis in Kabbalah" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 23–84; idem, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 2002), 44, 116–24, 483–87. On the link between representation of nature as a text or book in medieval Christian sources, a belief that rests on the assumption that things in nature and words in Scripture are to be interpreted as metaphorical signs denoting God's existence, and the doctrine of incarnation, see Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 29–50; Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. K. H. Jewett (New York, 2001), 108–18; Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddess: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2003), 51–137.

17. bMen 29b. Regarding this text and other cognate rabbinic dicta, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 159–60, n. 23.

and how everything is made from the truth of his great name and how all is dependent on his name."[18] In *Shaʿare orah*, a more extensive delineation of the different symbolic names associated with each of the ten emanations progressing from the bottom to the top, Gikatilla offers a succinct account of the linguistic theory that informed the thinking of kabbalists in his time and beyond to the present: The twenty-two letters are depicted as branches stemming from a tree whose trunk is inscribed with YHWH, the root-word that is the origin of all language, the mystical essence of Torah.[19] Accordingly, all that exists may be perceived as a garment that both hides and reveals the name.

In the earliest kabbalistic documents, moreover, it is presumed that the potencies of God, which are comprised within the name, are correlated with the limbs of a human body, a theosophical claim linked exegetically to the anthropological assumption that Adam is created in the image and likeness of God (according to the account recorded by a priestly scribe) as well as the prophetic presumption (perhaps expressed most boldly by Ezekiel) that the divine glory appears in the likeness of a human form. In subsequent generations, the anthropomorphism was embellished, or at least articulated more overtly,[20] but from its very inception, kabbalistic ontology rests on the assumption that the anthropos, to be identified more specifically as the circumcised Jewish male,[21] serves as the conduit connecting the divine and mundane realms. The role of mediating agent is realized primarily through contemplative prayer and Torah study, as these ritual activities are dependent on the utilization and manipulation of the Hebrew alphabet, the constitutive element of all that exists. The goal for the kabbalist—indeed what justifies his being called a kabbal-

18. *Sefer ha-nikud* (Jerusalem, 1994), 4.

19. *Shaʿare orah*, ed. J. Ben-Shlomo, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1981), 1:48–49. For discussion of this hermeneutical principle of kabbalistic ontology, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1969), 37–44; idem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 78–80 and *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 178–80, 193–94; Idel, "Concept of Torah," 49–58; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. D. Goldstein (Oxford, 1989), 1079–82.

20. Some kabbalists have affirmed the view that the soul, and not the body, is the image of God, an approach attested in philosophically inspired exegesis traceable as far back as Philo of Alexandria. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 679–82.

21. For philological and textual substantiation of this point, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," *Exemplaria* 12 (2000): 129–55. See also Moshe Ḥallamish, "The Relation to the Nations of the World in the World of the Kabbalists" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998): 289–311.

ist[22]—is to receive the secret of the name, that is, to cleave to YHWH, the archaic Deuteronomistic injunction interpreted in a manner very close to twelfth-century Neoplatonically influenced philosopher-poets, primarily of an Andalusian cultural background, as a conjunction of thought (*devekut ha-maḥshavah*), which was interpreted by kabbalists as the true mystical intent (*kavvanah*) of liturgical worship and study, an ideal achieved by few but with ramifications for all.[23]

The kabbalists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not to mention later generations, understood this conjunction, which comprised both an intellective and imaginal component, as an expression of prophecy, though, in their case, the contemplative ascent is more emphatically a personal experience of *unio mystica*, a more deeply expressed existential sense that the fragmented soul can attain a sense of wholeness by being reincorporated into the Godhead.[24] Union with the divine name is occasioned by psychic transport—which is consequent to clearing mundane matters from the mind—that, in turn, facilitates the theurgical unification of the divine potencies signified by letters of the name.

Though I have just discussed the mystical conjunction facilitating the theurgical task, I think it better to imagine here a core experience of ecstasy with two facets, reintegration of the soul into the divine and fusion of the sefirotic potencies into harmonious unity. Applying a linear logic, one will be tempted to treat these as two phases aligned in causal sequence, the former occasioning the latter. While there is cogency and heuristic value to this angle, it is not the only way the geometry of the

22. On the taxonomic centrality of knowledge of the name to understanding the phenomenological contours of kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York, 1993), 97–122.

23. Gershom Scholem, "The Concept of Kavvanah in the Early Kabbalah," *Studies in Jewish Thought*: *An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. A. Jospe (Detroit, 1981), 165–80; idem, *Origins*, 299–309, 414–30; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 42–49, 51–55; Ḥaviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalist* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2001), 73–102; idem, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* (Hebrew; Los Angeles, 2002), 137–207; Seth L. Brody, "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah," *Mystics of the Book,* 123–58; Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale: Les rites qui font Dieu* (Lagrasse, 1993), 88–95.

24. Idel, *New Perspectives*, 41–42. See also the detailed study of Joel Goldberg, "Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation in Provençal and Catalonian Kabbalah" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2001).

matter may be diagramed. When viewed morphologically, as opposed to typologically, that is, under the semblance of form rather than type,[25] ecstasy and theurgy can be seen as two manifestations of the same phenomenon. The consonance of these two elements, which have been too sharply bifurcated by the prevailing slant in the critical study of Jewish mysticism, is necessitated by the ontological assumption regarding the divine/angelic status of the Jewish soul, an idea whose roots lie in the assumption that the righteous or holy ones of Israel have been endowed with an angelomorphic nature, a conception that evolved in earnest in late–Second Temple Judaism, though likely based on a still older ancient Near Eastern mythological understanding of kingship.[26] In the intellectual milieu inhabited by medieval kabbalists, it is presumed that God and Israel are circumscribed within a monopsychic unity that levels out the ontic difference between cause and effect, and hence mystical union and theurgic unification are concurrent processes that have been artificially separated for extraneous taxonomic concerns by contemporary scholars of kabbalah.

The incarnational theology that informs the kabbalistic standpoint is

25. Years ago I began to utilize the term "morphology" as a theoretical alternative to the typological approach championed by Scholem and Idel. For an elaboration of this terminological shift, see Goldberg, "Mystical Union," 32–54.

26. James H. Charlesworth, "The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel," *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. J. J. Collins and G. W. E. Nickelsburg (Chico, Calif., 1980), 135–51; Willem F. Smelik, "On Mystical Transformation of the Righteous into Light in Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995): 122–44; Deborah Dimant, "Men as Angels: The Self-Image of the Qumran Community," *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*, ed. A. Berlin (Bethesda, Md., 1996), 93–103; Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "4Q374: A Discourse on the Sinai Tradition: The Deification of Moses and Early Christology," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 3 (1996): 236–52; idem, "Some Reflections on Angelomorphic Humanity Texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Dead Sea Discoveries 7* (2001): 292–312; idem, *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden, 2002). On angelomorphic Christology, see Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London, 1992); Richard N. Longenecker, The *Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London, 1970), 26–32; Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen, 1998), 113–83; Charles A. Grieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden, 1998); Darrell D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 1999). On angelification as an ideal of Jewish mystical piety, see Christopher A. Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 (1992): 1–31; and Elliot R. Wolfson, "*Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Early Jewish Mysticism," *Mystics of the Book,* 13–44, esp. 23–26.

predicated on a distinctive understanding of corporeality. "Body" does not denote physical mass that is quantifiable and measurable, but rather the phenomenological sense of the corporeal as lived presence. Medieval kabbalists, due to the influence of philosophical thinking that had informed the general cultural trends of European societies in the high Middle Ages, adopted a negative view toward the corporeal body (indeed, according to some passages in zoharic literature, the physicality of the human is linked to the demonic other side[27]) and thus considered the contemplative life as a way to escape the bonds of carnality. This explains the adoption of ascetic forms of piety on the part of kabbalists with special emphasis placed on sexual abstinence.[28] The positive valence accorded the body in kabbalistic symbolism, however, reflected in the repeated use of anthropomorphic images to depict God, images that on occasion embrace an intense erotic tone, is related to the textual nature of bodiliness, which, in turn, rests on an assumption regarding the bodily nature of textuality. The linguistic comportment of embodiment accounts as well for the theurgical underpinnings of the kabbalistic understanding of ritual epitomized in the saying "limb strengthens limb," that is, the performance of ceremonial acts by human limbs fortifies the divine attributes, which are imaginally envisioned as bodily limbs.[29] Alternatively expressed, insofar as Torah is the name YHWH, and the latter takes the form of an anthropos (an idea buttressed by the numerical equivalence of the four letters of the name written out in full and the word *adam*), it follows that each commandment can be represented as a limb of the divine body.[30] Such a perspective reverses the generally assumed allegorical approach to scriptural anthropomorphisms promoted by medieval rab-

27. For example, *Zohar* 3:170a; see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 764–65.

28. Bezalel Safran, "Rabbi Azriel and Naḥmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man," *Rabbi Moses Naḥmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 75–106.

29. Idel, *New Perspectives*, 184–85; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 59 (1988): 231–35.

30. The kabbalistic representation of Torah as body is supported by the idea that the 248 positive commandments correspond to the 248 limbs and the 365 negative commandments to the 365 sinews. This formulation is a modification of the tradition attributed to R. Simlai (bMak 23b) according to which the 248 positive commandments correspond to the limbs and the 365 negative commandments to the days of the year. See Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 128. It is worth noting, however, that the 248 limbs and 365 sinews are mentioned in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Gn 1.27 as an explication of the "divine image" with which Adam was created. See Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization," 231, n. 78.

binic exegetes, for instead of explaining anthropomorphic characterizations of God as a figurative way to accommodate human understanding,[31] the attribution of corporeal images to an incorporeal God indicates that the real body, the body in its most abstract tangibility, is the letter;[32] I call this premise the principle of poetic incarnation.[33] When examined from the kabbalistic perspective, anthropomorphism in the canonical texts of Scripture indicates that human and divine corporeality are entwined in a mesh of double imaging through the mirror of the text that renders the divine body human and the human body divine.[34] Phenomenologically speaking, the life-world of kabbalists revolves around the axis of the embodied text of textual embodiment.

EMBODYING RITUAL AND MYSTICAL TRANSFIGURATION

Beyond providing a radically different hermeneutical key to interpret Scripture, not to mention later rabbinic legends that ascribe corporeality to God, the understanding of textual embodiment advanced by kabbalists had practical implications in the mystical approach to ritual, which, in the final analysis, cannot be severed from the theurgical element described

31. Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, N.Y., 1993), 147–62.

32. It is also possible to explain this matter in terms of the distinction between spiritual and corporeal substance, a Neoplatonic motif that was known by kabbalists in Provence and northern Spain. If we adopt this hermeneutical framework, we could say that for kabbalists the mystery of incarnation entails the transformation of the former into the latter, a transformation facilitated by the mystical conversion of the latter into the former. See discussion of a similar theme in Isma'ili Neoplatonism in Mohamed A. Alibhai, "The Transformation of Spiritual Substance into Bodily Substance in Isma'ili Neoplatonism," *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. P. Morewedge (Albany, N.Y. 1992), 167–77.

33. On the use of poetry as a literary model to articulate an incarnational language from within a Christological framework, see Kathleen Norris, "A Word Made Flesh: Incarnational Language and the Writer," *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins (Oxford, 2002), 303–12.

34. The point was well grasped in the lecture "The Kabbalah," by Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights* (trans. E. Weinberger [New York, 1984], 95–98): "The diverse, and occasionally contradictory, teachings grouped under the name of the Kabbalah derive from a concept alien to the Western mind, that of the sacred book. . . . The idea is this: the Pentateuch, the Torah, is a sacred book. An infinite intelligence has condescended to the human task of producing a book. The Holy Spirit has condescended to literature which is as incredible as imagining that God condescended to become a man." For extended discussion of the kabbalistic influence on Borges, see Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la Cabala: La búsqueda del verbo* (Buenos Aires, 1986).

previously.[35] A hallmark of medieval kabbalists, both influenced by and reacting to philosophical explications of the commandments, was to view sacramental behavior as an instrument through which the physical body is conjoined to and transformed in light of the imaginal body of God manifest in the inscripted body of Torah. The equation of the commandments of Torah and the divine attributes, based on the presumption that Torah is the name, and hence ontically indisguishable from God, implies further that ritual performance was viewed as the means by which the corporeal body is textualized and the textual body corporealized.

The experience of being assimilated into the light as a consequence of fulfilling the ritual is predicated, moreover, on the assumption that the action below stimulates the light above; since the commandments are part of Torah, and Torah is identical with God, ritualized gestures facilitate the separation of the soul from the corruptible body and the consequent ascent to the light. This ascent, however, is predicated on the soul donning the ethereal or angelic body; the "garments of light" originally invested to Adam and Eve were changed into "garments of skin."[36] Alternatively expressed, fulfillment of the commandments occasions the transformation of the carnal body into the textual body of Torah, a state of psychosomatic equilibrium wherein the body becomes the perfect vehicle to execute the will of the soul and the soul becomes the perfect guide in directing the will of the body. The soul thus mirrors the embodiment

35. Focusing primarily on passages in the oeuvre of Ezra of Gerona, Moshe Idel, "Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993): 111–30, has argued that we need to consider the kabbalistic approach to ritual without being burdened by a negative assessment of rabbinic halakhah as demythologized legalism, on one hand, and by an overemphasis on a symbolic narrative of a gnostic nature, on the other. I am in general agreement with this contention, but I would argue that, in the final analysis, the spiritualized understanding of ritual cannot be separated from the theosophic orientation and its implicit theurgy.

36. This is based on a rabbinic exegesis of Gn 3.21; see GenR 20.12, pp. 196–97; Gary A. Anderson, "The Garments of Skin in Apocryphal Narrative and Biblical Commentary," *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, ed. J. L. Kugel (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 101–43; idem, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Ky., 2001), 117–34. See also S. N. Lambden, "From Fig Leaves to Fingernails: Some Notes on the Garments of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Bible and Select Early Postbiblical Jewish Writings," *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical, and Literary Images of Eden*, ed. P. Morris and D. Sawyer (Sheffield, 1992), 74–90; Stephen D. Ricks, "The Garment of Adam in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Tradition," *Judaism and Islam Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. B. H. Hary, J. L. Hayes, and F. Astren (Leiden, 2000), 203–25.

of God's glory in Torah by putting on the name envisioned imaginally in the form of an anthropos. As the incorporeal assumes the bodily contours of the scriptural text, the body of one who observes the commandments is transformed into a body composed of the very same letters. This holds a key to understanding the role of asceticism that has shaped the mystical pietism of kabbalists through the generations: Separation from sensual matters is not seen as a way to obliterate the body—commitment to rabbinic ritual precluded such an unmitigated renunciation of the natural world—but as a means for the metamorphosis of the mortal body into an angelic body, a body whose limbs are constituted by the letters of the name, the anthropomorphic configuration of Torah. Adorned in the apparel of this body, the soul is conjoined to the divine name.

FLESH MADE WORD/SPECULAR ICONIZATION OF THE BODY AS TEXT

While it was surely the opinion of kabbalists that the ideas I have mentioned were part of the ancient esoteric lore of Judaism, and indeed there is textual verification that at least in some measure their ideas were expansions of older doctrines, one cannot help but note the resemblance between the pertinent kabbalistic symbolism and several dogmas shared ubiquitously by orthodox Christians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This point is not lost on some of the rabbinic figures (for example, Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne) who openly attacked kabbalists for espousing heretical views and promulgating blasphemous practices.[37] Specifically, I have in mind the kabbalistic teaching regarding the incarnation of the name in the body of Torah, which implies as its corollary the materialization of Torah in the body of the name, and the even more striking affinity between the embodiment of the splendor of *Shekhinah* in tangible form and the consequent transformation of the corporeal body into a glorified body (*corpus glorificationis*) by partaking of that light, on the one hand, and representations of the divine flesh as the consecrated host in the medieval Christian imagination and the sacramental transubstantiation of the body into spirit, on the other. To be sure, the philosophical issue underlying these mythic formulations can be framed in metaphysical terms that would not necessarily be limited to a Christian context. That is to say, thinkers in different religious settings laboring under the impact of Neoplatonic theories of emanation, which, for all their diversity and complexity, uniformly posit a continuous chain of being, had to deal not

37. Samuel Krauss, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789*, vol. 1: History, ed. and rev. W. Horbury (Tübingen, 1995), 70, 229, 238.

only with the challenge of how the One becomes many but also with how sensible substance arises from intelligible, the corporeal from the incorporeal. I would surely assent to this caution, but I am not persuaded of the wisdom of separating the Christological and Neoplatonic channels of influence in this matter. It is not even necessary to limit the former to textual sources, as there were other forms of communication, including especially the visual medium, which would have readily conveyed the symbolic power of the image of Christ's body in the formation of Christian piety.[38] Notwithstanding the legitimacy of this rather obvious, though regrettably neglected, avenue to explain the transmission of Christian creed to masters of Jewish esoteric lore in European cities and towns, I would contend that the issue need not be restricted to historical influence whether through text or image. Far more important is the logical inevitability that speculation of this sort will invariably yield a mythopoeic representation of the literal body, that is, the body that literally is literal, the body that is letter, an analogical literalism that accounts for the phenomenological resemblance between kabbalah and Christianity, a resemblance exploited—but not concocted—by Christian kabbalists in the Renaissance.

Assuredly, one must be on guard against making definitive claims regarding the origin of kabbalistic motifs given the sophisticated exegetical prowess of kabbalists and the intricate ways they develop secret traditions either hinted at in older texts or transmitted orally, a belief steadfastly affirmed by practitioners of the occult wisdom; nevertheless, it behooves us to note the obvious affinity of the mythic understanding of Torah as the name and the related motif of shedding the somatic body and donning the luminous body, sometimes portrayed as being crowned by light, with Christological beliefs.[39] As I have already noted, there is no

38. Michael Camille, "The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies," *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. S. Kay and M. Rubin (Manchester and New York, 1994), 62–99, esp. *74–77*. See also Willemien Otten, "The Parallelism of Nature and Scripture: Reflections on Eriugena's Incarnational Exegesis," *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena: The Bible and Hermeneutics: Proceedings of the Ninth International Colloquium of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies Held at Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve June 7–10, 1995*, ed. G. Van Riel, C. Steel, and J. McEvoy (Leuven, 1996), 81–102.

39. Idel, "Some Remarks," 120–21, compares Ezra's description of the one who fulfills the commandments being encompassed by light and donning the pure and holy body to the Christian notion of the aura that encircles the body of Christ known as the *mandorla*. In my opinion, this is a very evocative suggestion, which is corroborated by the independent approach I have taken. Mention here should

escaping the incarnational implications of the esoteric identification of Torah and the name, since the latter is the divine essence, a point made explicitly in several zoharic passages and confirmed by other kabbalists contemporary with the literary production of *Zohar*, for instance, Gikatilla, Menahem Recanati, Joseph of Hamadan, and the anonymous authors respectively of *Sefer ha-yiḥud* and *Sefer ha-temunah*.[40]

In spite of, or perhaps precisely on account of, the proximity of the gnosis promulgated by kabbalists and Christian faith, the incarnational thrust of the identification of Torah as the name and the name as divine body, especially as expressed in zoharic literature, has to be understood as a subtle polemical ploy vis-à-vis the Christological myth of incarnation of the Word. An illustration of the point may be adduced in the following passage extracted from the *Zohar* in the opening homily on the verse "On the eighth day Moses called to Aaron, his sons, and the elders of Israel" (Lev 9.1). The homily begins by extolling the fortune of Israel for having received Torah, which is described as the "joy of the holy One, blessed be he," the object of his bemusement (*sha'ashu'a*, a term derived from Prov 8.30),[41] the place wherein he strolls, *atyyaluta*, apparently a zoharic coinage derived from the Hebrew *letayyel*, "to stroll," a widespread euphemism in kabbalistic texts, attested already in *Sefer ha-bahir*, for sexual intercourse,[42] the foot symbolizing the male (or, more precisely, the phal-

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also be made of Meir B. Sendor's observation, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's *Commentary on Sefer Yezirah*" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1994), 1:154–64, that the discussion of the unity of the divine in early Provençal kabbalists like Isaac the Blind and his nephew Asher ben David should be seen as responding to the apparent polytheism implied by the Neoplatonist doctrine of the primordial causes of John Scotus Eriugena. On the charge of the doctrinal similarity of kabbalah and Christianity leveled at kabbalists by opponents in the thirteenth century, and the possible impact this may have had on Isaac, see Sendor, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah," 164–67.

40. *Zohar* 2:60b, 87a, 90b, 3:13b, 19a, 21a, 35b–36a, 73a, 89b, 98b, 159a, 265b, 298b; Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 44; Idel, "Concept of Torah," 58–73; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 284, 293–94, 1086; Mopsik, *Grands Textes*, 278–80; Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Mystical Significance of Torah-Study in German Pietism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 84 (1993): 59–60.

41. Regarding this theme, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 69–72; idem, "Gender and Heresy in the Study of Kabbalah" (Hebrew), *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Medieval Texts* 6 (2001): 252–53, n. 107; idem, "Before Alef/Where Beginnings End," *Beginning/Again: Towards a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts*, ed. A. Cohen and Sh. Magid (New York, 2002), 146–50.

42. See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 242, n. 114.

lic) potency and the ground the female.[43] The older aggadic theme is embellished with the esoteric truism that the Torah entirely is the one holy name of God. The discussion circles around to the point that an explanation (attributed to R. Ḥiyya) is offered for why the first letter of Torah is *bet*, the second letter of the alphabet, a query that appears in classical rabbinic literature[44]: this letter signifies the dual Torah, oral and written, a doctrine that is also used in this context to explain the plural in "Let us make Adam in our image," that is, Adam was created by means of the oral and written Torah, reflected in the mentioning of image and likeness in tandem with his creation, the former correlated with the masculine and the latter with the feminine. According to R. Isaac, the orthographic structure of *bet* as the letter that is opened on one side and closed on three sides[45] is interpreted as a sign that Torah receives those who seek to be conjoined to her but is closed from the other side in relation to those who shut their eyes and turn away from her. It is at this point in the homily that the passage critical to my analysis appears:

> R. Judah said: *Bet* has two sides[46] and one that connects them. What do they come to teach? One for heaven, one for earth, and the holy One, blessed be he, connects and receives them. R. Eleazar said: These are the three holy, supernal lights bound as one, and they are the totality of Torah, and they open an opening to everything. They open an opening to faith and they are the abode of everything. Thus they are called *bet* for they make up the dwelling [*beta*]. And thus the beginning of Torah is *bet*, for it is the Torah, the remedy for the world. Therefore, whoever is occupied with Torah it is as if he were occupied with the holy name . . . for Torah is entirely the one supernal holy name. And since it is the holy name, it begins with *bet*, for it is the totality of the holy name in three knots of faith. Come and see: all those occupied with Torah are conjoined to the holy One, blessed be he, and they

43. On the symbolic background for this symbolism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Images of God's Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism," *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. H. Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 143–81.

44. For references, see Wolfson, "Before Alef," 154, n. 28.

45. The orthography of the letter was also the subject of midrashic interpretation. For a sampling of sources, see Wolfson, "Before Alef," 154, n. 33.

46. *Gagin*, literally, "roofs," but one of the connotations of this term attested already in rabbinic literature is the orthographic line is part of the letter (see, for example, bShab 104b).

are crowned in the crowns of Torah, and they are beloved above and below.[47]

The kabbalistic identification of Torah and the name is joined to an orthographic teaching regarding why the Torah begins with *bet*. According to the opinion attributed to R. Judah, *bet* refers to heaven, earth, and the divine being that unites the two. I am not inclined to interpret this opinion theosophically; it seems rather that it is meant to be understood at face value: the three lines that make up the letter symbolize the heavenly and earthly realms and the divine being who unites them.[48] The theosophic explication is offered in the name of R. Eleazar. The three lines of *bet* refer to three holy, supernal lights that are bound as one, and they are the totality of Torah (*kelala ∂e-oraita*). Insofar as the three potencies are the opening for faith, which may here denote the lower seven emanations, they are characterized as the abode (*beta*) of all that exists, and hence they are the three lines that make up *bet*, the letter that is the "totality of the holy name in three knots of faith" (*kelala ∂i-∫hema kaddi∫ha bi-telat ki∫hre mehemanuta*). All of Torah is the name, and thus its first letter must encompass the totality of the name; the three lines—orthographic form of the letter—are knots of faith. I would conjecture that the three knots of faith—faith is the fourth side, the opening created by three closed sides—may be decoded as the three letters contained in the Tetragrammaton, YHW, a name that is depicted pictorially by *bet*.[49] At the beginning is the second letter that is first; the letter made of three lines, which are three

47. *Zohar* 3:36a.

48. Yehuda Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1976), 401, suggests that heaven, earth, and the divine mediating between them, symbolized by the three lines of the *bet*, may correspond to *Binah*, *Malkhut*, and *Tif'eret* in the middle, an interpretation found in the commentary on *Zohar* by Shalom Buzaglo, *Mikdash melekh*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1997), 60. Implied in this approach is the belief that the opinion attributed to R. Eleazar reiterates and supports the view of R. Judah. I am skeptical of this suggestion, as it seems that zoharic hermeneutics is predicated on positing an exoteric interpretation followed by an esoteric, though I am not alleging that these two levels are in any absolute sense independent.

49. The mystery of the threefold unity is linked to the orthography of *alef* in *Zohar* 3:193b: "The image [*∂iyokna*] of *alef* consists of three sides, the beginning of the supernal mystery of primordial Adam, for the image of *alef* is composed of two arms, one from here and the other from here, and the body in the middle, and all is one mystery, it is the mystery of unity, and therefore *alef* has the numerical value of one."

knots of faith, YHW.[50] Alternatively, the knots of faith may allude symbolically to *Ḥokhmah*, *Binah*, and *Tif'eret*, three configurations of the divine that are imaginally depicted in some zoharic passages as father, mother, son and correlated respectively with YHW; the last letter of the name, the fourth party of the quaternity, the daughter, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, is represented by the second *he*, the letter that has already appeared, a duplicate of the second, the element of faith, empty vessel, capacity to receive.

The beginning of Torah, therefore, is the letter that marks the mystery of the threefold unity, the totality of the name, the secret abode of faith. The Christological resonance in the zoharic locution *telat kishre mehemanuta* has been noted.[51] Reinforcing this orientation, I would add that the author of the homily has combined the motif of Torah as the incarnation of the divine name and the trinitarian symbol of the three knots of faith. In this matter, as with regard to a number of crucial themes, the kabbalists whose ideas and interpretations are preserved in zoharic literature reflect a complex relationship to Christianity, which was viewed as the major competitor in the arena of salvation history, the perennial struggle between Synagogue and Church, Jacob and Esau, Israel/Adam and Gentile/Edom, not in binary opposition, attracted through repulsion, repulsed by attraction, a gesture that encompasses both at once, differently similar in virtue of being similarly different. On one hand, the kabbalists adopted a harsh stance and portrayed Christianity as the earthly instanti-

50. I have argued that an older mythopoeic complex extractable from the bahiric text posits a primal triad, depicted imaginally as father, son, and daughter. The father regains the unity with the daughter through the agency of the son, that is, the daughter is given in matrimony to the son, brother weds sister. In some passages, the son represents the male potency, the phallic channel that connects father and daughter. See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 63–88; idem, "Before Alef."

51. Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*, 400. Curiously, when Liebes mentions the part of the zoharic passage that I have investigated, the three lines that make up the letter *bet*, the beginning of Torah and the totality of the name, he makes no mention of the Christological element. On the threefold unity in the "mystery of the voice," *raza de-kol*, i.e., *Tif'eret*, which comprises water, fire, and air (the central *sefirot* of *Ḥesed*, *Din*, and *Raḥamim*), discerned through the "vision of the holy spirit" (*ḥezyona de-ruaḥ kudsha*), linked exegetically to the three names of God mentioned in the *Shema'* (Dt 6.4), see *Zohar* 2:43b, and parallel in Moses de León, *Sefer sheqel ha-kodesh*, critically edited and introduced by Charles Mopsik, with an introduction by Moshe Idel (Los Angeles, 1996), 103–06; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Zohar*, trans A. Schwartz, S. Nakache, and P. Peli (Albany, N.Y., 1993), 140–45; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 380–83.

ation of the demonic potency, Satan or Samael, long conceived to be the archon of Edom, progenitor of idolatrous religion, *ʿavodah zarah*, worship that leads one astray, the other that seduces the Jew (men seem be especially vulnerable) both in the form of spiritual enticement (particularly in the guise of magic) and sexual temptation.[52] On the other hand, the very same kabbalists were duly impressed with and intrigued by aspects of this faith, including trinitarian and incarnational symbols, as well as Marian devotional imagery, and attempted to appropriate them as the authentic esoteric tradition,[53] perhaps even modeling the fraternity of Simeon ben Yohai and his comrades on the pattern of Jesus and his disciples.[54] In my judgment, the kabbalists hidden behind the personae of the zoharic fraternity sought to divest Christological symbols of their Catholic garb and redress them as the mystical truths of Judaism. The zoharic understanding of text as body, which provides the mechanism by which the body is understood as text, is a stunning illustration of this strategy.

In conclusion, let me suggest that the secret of poetic incarnation imparted by masters of Jewish esoteric lore, beholding the luminous flesh from the word, may be seen as a countermyth to the image of the word/light made flesh in the Johannine prologue, a mythologoumenon that played an inestimable role in fashioning the hermeneutical aesthetic of medieval Christendom. This is not to deny that in the history of Christian devotion, the incarnational theme did express itself in terms of textual embodiment.[55] My point is, however, that the mythologic basis for this

52. Liebes, *Studies in Zohar*, 66–67; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the Zohar," *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Yerushalmi Festschrift*, ed. E Carlebach, J. Efron, and D. S. Myers (Hanover, N.H., 1998), 216–24.

53. Liebes, *Studies in Zohar*, 139–61. Recently, Schäfer and Green independently have adopted a similar strategy to explain the kabbalistic fascination with the feminine image of *Shekhinah* in light of the augmented Marian imagery in Christian piety during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), 118–34, and Arthur Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Historical Context," *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 1–52. On my own conjecture that a critical passage in *Sefer ha-bahir* should be decoded as a polemic against the Christian myth of the virgin birth of the messiah (ignored by both Schäfer and Green), see Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 83–86.

54. Liebes, *Studies in Zohar*, 41–43, 79, 171, n. 65, 174, n. 90, 180, n. 126, 191, n. 209.

55. For an exemplary study of this theme, see David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1996). On the attempt to forge a nexus between interpretation and incarnation, see Alla Bo-

form of embodiment in Christianity is always the incarnation of the Word in the person of Jesus, whether this is understood veridically or docetically. As a consequence, medieval Christian piety has been informed by the exegetical supposition that incarnation of the word in the flesh had the effect of removing the veil of the letter as expounded by Jews who steadfastly refused to accept the spiritual interpretation that the Christological understanding demanded; the literal meaning, intricately bound to the carnal law, thus killed the spirit by obstructing the true knowledge of the Last Things.[56] By contrast, in the kabbalistic wisdom that materialized in the course of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, incarnation of the flesh in the word preserved the veil of the letter; the only credible means to apprehend the inner meaning of the law was thought to be through its outer covering, to behold mysteries of Torah from underneath the garment, to see the image of the imageless embodied iconically in the text that was the textual embodiment of the name.

zarth-Campbell, *The Word's Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation* (University, Ala., 1979). See also discussion of the metaphorical conjunction between *corpus* and *verba* in Augustine by Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 116–22. According to this insightful analysis, Augustine draws a parallel between his own writing and the incarnational Word that became flesh so that saving words could be spoken and written. In short, Augustine's *verba* become the *corpus* to explain God's *Verbum*. For further elucidation of these points, see Calvin L. Troup, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Augustine's* Confessions (Columbia, S.C., 1999), 82–116.

56. Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Jewish Carnality in Twelfth-Century Renaissance Thought," *Christianity and Judaism: Papers Read at the 1991 Summer Meeting and the 1992 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. D. Wood (Oxford, 1992), 59–75.