

Ronit Meroz



The Middle Eastern Origins of Kabbalah*

A. The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac – A Bilingual Zoharic Unit

The Zohar as the most influential work of the Kabbalah is the only Jewish book, aside from the Bible and the Talmud, to achieve canonical status. Yet, its origins are apparently not what the book itself claims to be, i.e., that it was authored by Rabbi Simeon Bar-Yohai (henceforth, called Rashbi), a 2nd Century Tanna who lived in the land of Israel. Scholars, headed by Gershom Scholem, the founder of Kabbalistic research, maintain that it is a pseudo-epigraphical work, composed around the end of the 13th century.¹ Scholem advanced a wealth of arguments in support of this position, arguments that have been described and elaborated on at length by Isaiah Tishby.² Among the evidence marshaled against a 2nd century Palestinian origin are: a) the erroneous designation of Rashbi's son-in-law, R. Pinhas, as his father-in-law; b) the mention of Moslem sovereignty over the Temple Mount, which began only in the 7th century; c) familiarity with the writings of Maimonides, who passed away at the beginning of the 13th century, and those of Nahmanides, who died around the year 1270. Scholem maintained that Rabbi Moses de Leon was the sole author of the Zohar, primarily based on the similarities between the book of the Zohar and his other writings.

From the time Scholem first suggested it in the 1940's, this assumption dominated his research for nearly fifty years.³ Around the end of the century, Yehudah Liebes renewed an old argument, suggesting that the Zohar was composed by a number of

* For more details about the issues discussed here, see my forthcoming book – *Yuvalei Zohar* (Hebrew).

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of earlier conceptions about the nature of this book, see B. Huss, *Like the Splendor of the Sky – Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of its Symbolic Value*, Jerusalem 2007 (Hebrew, in print); M. Idel, "Moses Gaster on Jewish Mysticism and the Zohar" (Hebrew), in: R. Meroz (editor), *Te'uda* 21 (2007): 111-127 (in print).

² F. Lachower and I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar - An Anthology Of Texts Systematically Arranged and Rendered into Hebrew by F. Lachower and I. Tishby, With Extensive Introductions and Explanations by I. Tishby*, trans. D. Goldstein (Oxford 1989) Vol. I, 55-87.

³ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (NY 1941), chapters 5-6.

authors.⁴ Among the many arguments supporting this thesis are that although there are clearly many similarities between Rabbi Moses de Leon's writings and the book of the Zohar, nevertheless, several inconsistencies and changes in style appear over the course of its approximately 2500 pages. These seem to indicate that the book was not the work of a single author.⁵

My research into the manuscripts of the Zohar, undertaken over the past several years, supplies many proofs for the thesis of multiple authorship. One such proof turned out to be the key to answering several major questions scholars have been asking about the composition of the Zohar and the history of Jewish mysticism as a whole: What happened during the little-known era between the final compositions of *Heikhalot* literature, probably sometime in the 9th century, and the beginning of Kabbalistic literature, in the 12th or 13th centuries? Was there indeed no continuity in the writings of Jewish mystical literature? Furthermore, the Kabbalists claimed that their sources were ancient, whereas scholars maintain that the essence of the Kabbalistic doctrine, the notion of the Sefirot (the ten aspects or powers that form the structure of the Godhead) is new. Can we reconcile these two positions?

We might mention that Gershom Scholem was deeply puzzled by the question of the beginnings of Kabbalah. The first chapter in his book dedicated to this issue was entitled 'The Problem' and opened with the following claim: "The question of the origin and early stages of the Kabbalah, that form of Jewish mysticism and theosophy that appears to have emerged suddenly in the thirteenth century, is indisputably one of the most difficult in the history of Jewish religion after the destruction of the Second Temple." Scholem wondered whether this teaching was "really new" or perhaps it "came from distant lands or from subterranean levels of the Jewish societies in which [it] emerged into the light of day."⁶

The solution I suggest here is grounded in a well-known fact: in the Zoharic portion of *Exodus*, several passages in the most common printed editions are brought in Aramaic. However, in the Cremona printed edition, they appear in Hebrew.⁷

⁴ Y. Liebes, "How the Zohar was Written," *Studies in the Zohar* (New York 1993) 85-138, 194-227.

⁵ For many more arguments, see also R. Meroz, "Zoharic Narratives and their Adaptations," *Hispania Judaica* 3 (2001): 9-69.

⁶ G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. A. Arkush (Philadelphia 1987) 3, 45.

⁷ See, e.g., Scholem's notes in: Gershom Scholem's *Book of the Zohar*, facsimile edition of the book of Zohar (Josefow, 1873) with notes in his own handwriting, Jerusalem 1992, page 1140 (notes to Zohar II 17a). Yehudah Liebes first lectured on this subject at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University on May 7, 1999, and later at the plenum of the Academy of the Hebrew Language

Systematically, I have examined a wide range of sources, assembling passages like those from manuscripts scattered throughout the world. I have thus put together a rather large anthology of passages, which make up a single textual block – a Zoharic text that belongs to the portion of *Exodus* and appears in two languages. Upon examining this anthology, I was struck by the uniformity of this textual block in both content and style, and concluded that it should be viewed as a single textual unit.

Characteristics of the Bilingual Unit

Stylistically, this unit intertwines a homily on the verses of *Exodus* with a homily on the *Song of Songs*. Drawing on both the Biblical books and their Rabbinical interpretations, it focuses on two subjects: the love between God and his people as well as the vicissitudes of the relationship between Israel and Egypt.

When we compare the Hebrew and the Aramaic in these bilingual passages, we cannot escape the conclusion that these passages were originally composed in Hebrew—with the Aramaic serving as its translation. This conclusion is based on two main observations. First, in the Aramaic, one occasionally finds mistakes. For example, in the Hebrew version we find an argument based on the Bible – 'Levi... begot Amram, and he begot Aaron and Miriam.'⁸ By contrast, the Aramaic version states things this way: 'Levi... was born to Amram, and he was born to Aaron and Miriam.'⁹

Second, while most of the Hebrew passages have at least two parallel Aramaic versions, one cannot find a single example of the opposite, namely, one Aramaic version and two or more parallel Hebrew versions. Thus, it seems that the translation was undertaken simultaneously by a number of different people who worked independently of one another over the course of the centuries between the Zohar's composition and the fixing of the definitive version of the Zoharic text, with its printing in the 16th century.¹⁰

in Jerusalem. For an English version of these lectures, see: "Hebrew and Aramaic as Languages of the Zohar," *Aramaic Studies* 4:1 (2006): 35-52. For a Hebrew version, see: <http://pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/ivrit.doc>.

⁸ See Zohar II, p. 19a, par. 335. In order to facilitate identification of the passages, I added the paragraph numbers that appear in R. Yehudah Ashlag's translation of the Zohar, first published in Jerusalem, 1945-1958. The Hebrew version runs: 'לוי... הוליד לעמרם והוא הוליד לאהרן ומרים'.

⁹ The Aramaic version runs: 'ואתיליד הוא [לוי] לעמרם, והוא אתיליד לאהרן ומרים'. This version is to be found in Mss. Zurich Heidelberg 83, which was written in Sephardic script around 1500.

¹⁰ Many of the translations are to be found either in the Mantua printed edition or in three other Mss: the above mentioned Zurich Mss, Munich 20 (Sephardic script from the 16th century) and Moscow

Content-wise, we find several surprises. Since the Zohar is assumed to have been written in the 13th century and is even considered to be the most distinct of Kabbalistic texts, we would assume that the cosmology reflected in the bilingual unit (which is part of the Zohar) would be Kabbalistic – in other words, that the divinity described there would be composed of an infinite aspect alongside a finite one – the ten Sefirot. However, an analysis of the content of this unit shows that although we do find the typical terminology of the Sefirot, here it serves to describe angels, rather than different aspects in God. For example, whereas the term Crown (*Keter*) is usually a general appellation for the Sefirot, here it designates the angels as a whole. Thus, when the Most Holy One, Blessed be He, is described as sobbing and weeping,¹¹ He is joined by the ten “inner” angels called “Crowns (*Ketarim*) of the King.”¹² Moreover, whereas two of the central Sefirot in kabbalistic literature are called Judgment (*Din*) and Compassion (*Rahamim*), here we find “the angels of Judgment and the angels of Compassion.”¹³

The Sefirah that has drawn the most attention among both Kabbalists as well as scholars is the Shekhinah. This is the lowest Sefirah, and it serves as a bridge between this world and the Divine world. Described in distinctly feminine terms, it is the consort of the Lord.¹⁴ In the bilingual unit, the Shekhinah is described in similar terms; just like in the Kabbalah in general, she is considered the bride,¹⁵ or an abstract hypostasis of the People of Israel (*Knesset Yisrael*).¹⁶ However, in various places in this unit, the Shekhinah designates the entire assembly of angels or the lord of angels that binds them together.

This unique usage of the term Shekhinah in the bilingual unit becomes clear in a group of passages¹⁷ that discusses the influence of songs and singing on the upper worlds. These terms relate either to liturgy (mainly the doxology) or to the recitation of the Song of Songs. These songs encompass all cosmic wisdom and prophecy, the Torah itself included. By singing them, wisdom and prophecy are poured out from

Guenzburg 293, written in an Italian script in the town of Pisa in 1549. In this last case, the scribe was a famous banker, a devoted student of the book of the Zohar, who was also famous for owning the largest Jewish library of his time – R. Yehiel Nissim, son of Shmuel of Pisa.

¹¹ One may assume God is weeping for the plight of his people, in the spirit of Rabbinic sayings. See for example, B. Hagigah 5b.

¹² Zohar II 18a, Par. 310.

¹³ Zohar II 18a, Par. 311.

¹⁴ For more details, see Lachower and Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (note 2), Vol. I, 371-387.

¹⁵ Zohar II 5a-b, Par. 60-64.

¹⁶ Zohar II 4a, Par. 39.

¹⁷ Zohar II 18b-19a, Par. 324-339

above and unity is created among all levels of being. The innovation in this text is that the entity that unifies the entire world of angels is also designated as the Shekhinah.¹⁸ The chorus of the lower worlds possesses an ability to influence the upper worlds (theurgy), but the goal of this activation of power is not God; it is the world of angels. The unity created by this singing is described in terms of conjugal relations between the inhabitants of this world and the angels, citing the appropriate verses from the Song of Songs (for example, Song of Songs 8:1) or other Biblical sources. This theurgy clearly differs from the central theurgical model that characterizes Kabbalah, in which humanity unites the feminine and masculine Sefirot, which are part of the Divinity.

Yet another description of theurgy that differs from the common Kabbalistic model is mentioned in our unit. This model is presented in the following parable:

Rabbi Yossi opened [the discussion] and said: *'You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain'* (Song of Songs 4:12). A *garden locked up* - this is the Assembly of Israel [...], as Rabbi Elazar said: 'Just as one must guard the garden, cultivate it and water it and prune it, so too the Assembly of Israel needs to be cultivated and guarded and watered and pruned.' It is [therefore] called garden, and it is [also] called vineyard. For just as a vineyard needs to be cultivated, and watered, and pruned, and dug up, so does Israel. As it is written: *'For the vineyard of God is the House of Israel'* (Isaiah 5:7), and it is written, *'And he dug it up and cleared away its stones...'* (Ibid. 5:2) (Zohar II 4a. Par. 39)

According to this description, theurgy does not influence the unity among different parts of the Divinity, nor does it result in the ascent of any of the Sefirot. There is a cultivation and enhancement of one element alone, the Shekhinah, and this enhancement is not understood in terms of ascension or copulation, but in terms uncharacteristic of the Kabbalah - the nurturing of the garden.

It seems that the metaphor of the Shekhinah or Assembly of Israel as a garden is linked to its description as a very special garden – the Garden of Eden; the garden in which the souls of the righteous reside, either before their descent to this world or

¹⁸Zohar II 18b-19a, especially Par. 332-333.

after their departure from it.¹⁹ This explains why the commandments and good deeds performed by the people of Israel are described in these passages as having a beneficial, theurgical influence on the Shekhinah.²⁰ The commandments enable their performers to enter the Garden of Eden, and thereby augment the number of souls who actually gain admittance. In other words, they strengthen the Garden of Eden itself.

Moreover, in the spirit of these ideas, the Shekhinah is defined as the “Bundle of Life.”²¹ This expression, already utilized in the Bible,²² is assigned a precise spatial location in Rabbinic thought. There²³ we find the opinion that “the souls of the righteous are stored beneath the Throne of Glory, as it is said ‘*the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of life*’ (I Samuel 25:29).” Additionally, in Song of Songs Zuta it is said: “*Its seat was upholstered with purple*’ (Song of Songs 3:10) - that is the Throne of Glory. ‘*Its interior inlaid with love*’ (ibid.) – these are the souls of the righteous who are with Him in the heavens.”²⁴ Yet, according to another saying (B. Hagigah 12b), the Throne of Glory and the bundle of life are in the seventh and highest heaven, the heaven of Aravot. It seems that these links between the aforementioned terms are also assumed by our text. We may therefore consider the Shekhinah not only as the “Bundle of Life” but also as “the Throne of Glory” or the collection of all attendant angels. Thus, the cosmic status of the Shekhinah is enhanced considerably. On the one hand, the Shekhinah has a close relationship with the Most Holy One, Blessed Be He—through personification, it became not only His throne, but His consort as well. On the other hand, the Shekhinah is not part of the Divinity, but an intermediate entity between god and this world – i.e., paradise or the dwelling place of all the righteous.

The ensemble of evidence presented here demonstrates that even though the bilingual unit now appears in the printed book of the Zohar (the principal book of Kabbalah), the cosmology presented within it does not belong to the world of Kabbalah. The Shekhinah is not depicted in this unit as a divine Sefirah or as any aspect of God's essence, even though she is His consort. On the contrary, this unit promotes angelology, rather than the divine Sefirot.

¹⁹ Zohar II 11a, Par. 176.

²⁰ Zohar II 14a, Par. 233.

²¹ Zohar II 11a, Par. 179.

²² I Samuel 25:29.

²³ B. Shabbat 152b and its parallels.

²⁴ Song of Songs Zuta, 3:10

Compared to the angelology with its conceptions and characteristics of the first millennium C.E., the salient innovation in this passage is its systematization. Unlike the texts of the first millennium in which we find an enormous and chaotic list of angelic names, here we are presented with a systematic discussion of angels based on abstract categories – upper and lower, *Din* and *Rahamim* (Judgment and Compassion), male and female, etc. Furthermore, fixing the number 10 of the inner angels as a typological number also shows an effort at systematization.

Based on the evidence thus far, it would seem that our unit represents a transitional stage between the angelology of the first millennium and the Kabbalah of the 2nd millennium. It applies a system and categories to the world of angels, and these categories are later used in the new world of kabbalistic concepts. If the change from the *Heikhalot* literature to our unit is expressed through systematization, the transition from our unit to Kabbalah is expressed through the spiritualization of the world of angels, or their elevation to a higher level, that is, to the level of the various aspects within the divinity. Thus, the Angels of Judgment and Compassion in the bilingual unit become the principles of Judgment and Compassion of God Himself in Kabbalah. Similarly, whereas the Shekhinah is the collection of all angels in the bilingual unit, in Kabbalah she is part of the Godhead; she retains some of her attributes as a female likeness, God's consort, and is even sometimes considered as the supreme and most spiritual paradise.

In addition to the systemization of the Angelic world, these findings—the result of an extensive process of analysis—reveal further elements that lay the foundations for the future development of Kabbalah. Until now, we have called attention to the identification of the Shekhinah with Paradise. A connection (though not necessarily identification) between the Shekhinah and the World to Come²⁵ is common in rabbinic literature. For example, it is written that in the World to Come, the Most Holy One Blessed be He will satiate the righteous with the splendor of the Shekhinah,²⁶ or that they will welcome the countenance of the Shekhinah.²⁷ It thus appears that our text was written by "Seekers of the Shekhinah," i.e., people who want to realize their link with her. They seek to unite with her and enter Paradise, thus

²⁵ This applies whether the expression refers to personal eschatology (that is, paradise) or cosmic eschatology.

²⁶ B. Bava Batra 10a.

²⁷ In many places – e.g., B. Sotah 42a and especially *Shoher Tov*, chapter 11.

intensively focus their thoughts on the Shekhinah and her attributes to attain this end. Accordingly, the roots of the Kabbalistic notion of Shekhinah and the roots of Kabbalah in general should also be sought in the history of the terms 'the World to Come' and 'Paradise.' When the term Shekhinah later crystallized in Kabbalistic thought as part of the Divine Entity, its path again diverges from these two notions.

The Date and Place of the Bilingual Unit

We shall now move on to a discussion of the dating of the bilingual unit. One of its passages reads:

Rabbi Isaac opened [the discussion, saying]: *'Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense'* (Song of Songs 4:6). *'Until the day breaks'* - this verse refers to the exile of Israel, since they shall be enslaved in exile until the day of the superiority of the nations ends. For we have learnt: Rabbi Isaac said: A thousand years is the time that all the nations as one will enjoy superiority over Israel, and there will be no nation to which they [Israel] will not be enslaved, --and this is equivalent to one day of His [meaning, that of the Most Holy One Blessed Be He], as it is said *'It will be a unique day...a day known to the Lord'* (Zekhariah 14:7)... *'I will go the mountain of Myrrh [Mor]'* – sayeth the Most Holy One Blessed Be He: I shall eject the nations from Jerusalem...[from] the Mount of Moriah that is in Jerusalem...[from] the Temple that is in Zion.²⁸

Various formulations in our unit repeatedly claim that Israel's bondage to all the nations of the world will endure a thousand years--which are equivalent to one day of God's. This rule of the nations over Israel corresponds precisely with their rule over the Temple Mount. At the end of a thousand years of their rule, according to these formulations, the Most Holy One Blessed Be He will cast them off the Temple Mount, reveal Himself in Jerusalem, and purify it. Following this, one may presume that the rule of the Lord and His people over the world will commence. Incidentally,

²⁸ Zohar II 17a, §291-292 (following the version found in mss. Vatican 206, p.4b-5a). These paragraphs make use of apocalyptic calculations which appear in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, chap. 28 (about this, see for example A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel* (NY 1927) 39-40; Y. Elboim, "Messianism in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer- Apocalypse and Midrash," (Hebrew), *Te'uda* 11 (1996): 245-266 and especially 247-248.) They also make use of the Rabbinic "definition" of the term "day" or "God's day" as the equivalent of a thousand "human" years (See for example, B. Sanhedrin 97a or Bereshit Rabbah 22:1)

as is clear from the previous quotes, it should be noted that Rabbi Isaac is the dominant figure in the bilingual unit. Hence, I have labeled it **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**.

Although these passages are printed in the Book of the Zohar (in their Aramaic version), no one until now has recognized that they are also calculations of the End-time and consequently, give us a means of dating the passages. If the redemptive process is to take place after a thousand years of foreign rule over the Temple Mount, then, according to standard Jewish dating, this refers to the year 1068.²⁹ Thus, **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac** must have been written before that year!

It must be noted that expecting the End-time to occur a millennium after the destruction of the Temple is known from other sources as well: Rabbi Yehudah Halevi and Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gavirol also expressed their disappointment arising from unfulfilled expectations raised by this very calculation.³⁰ This same disappointment is also articulated in paragraph 294, which appears in the printed edition of the Zohar immediately following the previous Zoharic quote. In contrast to the preceding paragraph, it does not exist in two languages, but in Aramaic alone. It attributes the lengthening of the exile to the fact that the Sons of Israel did not repent:

Rabbi Yossi said: If they are in bondage for more [than a thousand years], it is not an edict of the King [that is, God], but because they do not want to repent before Him.³¹

The presence of this apologetic paragraph may be explained quite simply: **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac** was written before the year 1068, but was inserted in an Aramaic text written after that year, when the expectations for redemption were not fulfilled! We might note that in many other places in The Zohar, the narrators express their disappointment that redemption had not arrived in the thousandth year as expected.³²

²⁹ The common date for the destruction of the Temple is 70 C.E., but Jewish sources set it at 68 C.E.

³⁰ See Yehudah Halevi, *The Liturgical Poems*, D. Jarden edition (Jerusalem 1978) (Hebrew), Part I, poem 337; Ibn Gavirol, *The Liturgical Poems*, D. Jarden edition (Jerusalem 1973) (Hebrew), 334. For the discussion of this topic, see for example, Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel* (note 28) 67-68; S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York 1952-1993) Vol. V, 199.

³¹ Zohar II 17a §294 (following the version printed in Cremona 1548-1550, II, column 27 and all manuscripts. The version in the Mantova edition as well as in most other printed editions must have been censored!).

³² We shall give but one example – Zohar II 227b.

In discussing the date of the text's composition, we can ascertain several additional and more specific historical clues. Let us examine the following passage:

Rabbi Yehudah opened [the discussion, saying]: '*Under three things the earth trembles... a servant who becomes king... a maidservant who displaces her mistress*' (Proverbs 30:21-23). '*A servant who becomes king*' – for we have learnt that there is no nation lowly and despised before the Most Holy One Blessed Be He as the Egyptians, and He gave them mastery because of Israel. And under '*a maidservant who displaces her mistress*' – that is Hagar who gave birth to Ishmael, who brought about evil to Israel, and ruled them, and tortured them with various cruelties, and proclaimed decrees of forced conversion against them. And until this day, they rule over them and do not allow them to keep their religion, and there is no harsher exile for Israel than that of the exile of Ishmael.³³

This passage plainly equates the Egyptians with the Ishmaelites or Moslems. By linking them to Ishmaelites, the Egyptians are depicted, not as the people described in the Bible, but as those living in Egypt after the advent of Islamic rule. Similarly, we see a shift from depicting Egypt as the prototype of all gentiles who rule the Sons of Israel and conspire against them, to perceiving Egypt as a historical reality, as general as it may be. Next, this reality becomes even more concrete, as specified in the words "until this day they [Ishmael, meaning Egypt] rule over them [the Sons of Israel] and do not allow them to keep their religion..." We may assume from this degree of detail that the text means to indicate the nation *then* ruling over many Jews, particularly in the Land of Israel, which, during most of the 11th century, was the Fatimid caliphate based in Egypt.

Noting the calculations of the End-time we concluded earlier that the bilingual unit must have been written before 1068. We also noticed that it refers to the Fatimid (or Egyptian) reign in that century. A careful examination of the complaint against the Ishmaelites reveals some more details: "they [Ishmael, Egypt] do not allow [the Sons of Israel] to keep their religion;" the text also mentions 'decrees of forced conversion against them.' This clearly identifies the rule of Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) who

³³ Zohar II 16b-17a, §289.

initiated religious persecutions in the year 1004 (also against Christians) that continued until his death. These persecutions included the choice between forced conversion and expulsion.³⁴ We may thus conclude that the bilingual unit was written sometime between 1004 and 1068. Based on the author's profound identification with the situation, we may also assume that the text was written in the relevant geographical area, meaning the Land of Israel (or Egypt).

Summarizing the first part of this article, we find that tracing the origins of a bilingual Zoharic text led us to a surprising discovery: The unit that discusses angelology, Paradise and theurgy, but not the Sefirot, precedes the commonly accepted date for the composition of The Zohar, and was probably written in the Land of Israel (or Egypt) some time during the 11th century. The calculations of the End-time noted in the unit supply the reasoning for this dating. Over the years, this unit evolved from generation to generation, and was adapted and enlarged upon until it became absorbed into the Zoharic text as we know it now from the printed editions.³⁵ We also find that the multiple-authorship thesis for The Zohar is simply the most likely conclusion one can derive from the evidence presented about the early strata of the Zohar and their gradual development. Thus, it would seem that the hidden roots of the Zoharic tree were planted in the Moslem East, while its top spread out in Christian Spain. In the second part of this article, I will strengthen the argument for this date and place of origin by citing ideational parallels from other sources.

B. The Babylonian Stratum of the *Book Bahir*

As it turns out, the roots of The Zohar are not the only ones planted in the East--so are those of the *Book Bahir* (*Sefer HaBahir*), which is considered to be the first book

³⁴ See Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross – The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J. 1994) 164-165. On the general attitude expressed in the book of the Zohar towards Islam, see R.C. Kiener, "The Image of Islam in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989): 43*-66*. On the general attitude in Judaism towards Islam, see B. Septimus, "Better under Edom than under Ishmael: The History of a Saying," *Zion* 47 (1982): 103-111. Had we assumed, as most scholars do, that the entire Book of the Zohar was written in Spain, we could have read this paragraph as referring to the next wave of persecutions executed in North Africa and Spain by the Almohades (as did Kiener, *ibid.* p. 53*). As, however, their reign was based in Maghreb rather than in Egypt, our reading is to be preferred.

³⁵ My aforementioned book, *Yuvalei Zohar*, gives dozens of examples for the gradual adaptations of the bilingual unit, little by little changing its style and ideas. The progressive development of the text indicates that it was created by authors with an awareness of their own tradition and sources. It was not a 'foreign' text which was just imported into the 13th century Zohar, but instead an 'organic growth' of the early text and its ideas.

written according to the tradition of Kabbalah. We shall not rehearse all the arguments concerning the location of the book's composition.³⁶ Suffice it to say that Scholem himself sometimes held that the book was written in the East, sometimes in Provence, and sometimes that it had Oriental sources but was mainly formulated in Provence.³⁷

In a previous article of mine,³⁸ I argued that we may distinguish between several distinct literary layers in the *Book Bahir* – some written in the East at the end of the 9th century or in the early 10th century, and some in 12th century Provence. The *Book Bahir*'s use of the Babylonian grammar and vocalization system (which also reflects a different pronunciation and was widely utilized throughout the East) decisively proves the existence of an Oriental layer.³⁹ The Babylonian vocalization, as opposed to the Tiberian one used in Hebrew to this day, is mainly upper (that is, marked above the letters) and is characterized, among other properties, by the *segol* being pronounced like a *patah*.⁴⁰ Only if the *Book Bahir* was written in a region in which the Babylonian system was in use can we assign any meaning to a claim such as - “the Lord placed a *patah* above [a letter] and a *segol* beneath.”⁴¹ The *patah* is upper according to the Babylonian vocalization system, whereas the *segol* is lower according to the Tiberian system. Only according to the Babylonian system is it possible to pronounce this combination of vowels at the same time, as they both have the same pronunciation (the short *u*).

The use of the Babylonian vocalization system to symbolize the Holy is evidence of the passage's date of composition: At the beginning of the 10th century, a debate arose between Jewish communities over which grammatical system most faithfully represented the Torah; in other words, how was it pronounced when it was given to Moses on Mount Sinai? This debate ended with the victory of the Tiberian

³⁶ For a summary of most opinions, see the introduction (pp. 137-148) in my article: R. Meroz, “On the Time and Place of Some of Sefer Ha-Bahir,” (Hebrew) *Da'at* 49 (2002): 137-180.

³⁷ His changing opinions are summarized in the introduction mentioned in the previous note as well as in his following writings: G. Scholem, “Bahir, Buch,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Berlin 1929) vol. III, 969-979; Idem, *Origins* (note 6), esp. 12, 196-197; Idem, *The Beginnings of Kabbalah* (1150-1250) (Hebrew) (Jerusalem & Tel-Aviv 1948) especially 12, 47.

³⁸ Meroz, *ha-Bahir* (see note 36).

³⁹ The Babylonian system was not only used in the so-called Babylonian areas; there were other Jewish communities using Hebrew according to this grammar, e.g. in Syria, the Land of Israel, and Egypt.

⁴⁰ The Tiberian *segol* is pronounced as a short *e* sound (as in the English 'ebb'), and the Tiberian *patah* – as a short *u* sound (as in the English 'up'). In the Tiberian system, they are thus pronounced differently, whereas in the Babylonian system, they sound the same.

⁴¹ *Sefer Ha-Bahir* (D. Abrahms' edition) (Los Angeles 1994) §25. In all following citations of paragraphs in the Bahir, the reference is to the Abrahms' edition.

system and with the understanding that the Babylonian system reflected a foreign influence on the Hebrew language. Thereafter, one could no longer employ it as a proper symbolic instrument for the Holy. Hence, the Babylonian layer must have been written before this debate was concluded.

One may thus divide the *Book Bahir* into those passages clearly written in the East and those clearly written in Provence. The former consist of those containing Babylonian grammar, Biblical vocalizations that were used in the Orient, or influences of the Arabic language.⁴² To these we should add all passages with similar content and ideational meaning.⁴³ The latter will include all the passages that, as Scholem already demonstrated, are influenced by texts written in Provence, and all those similar to them in content and ideational meaning.⁴⁴

Such a division clearly shows that the textual layer written in the East is like **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**, i.e., angelological. In the Provençal textual layer, by contrast, the doctrine of Divine Sefirot develops and grows. Since one of the foundations of research on the Kabbalah is the assertion that the *Book Bahir* provides the base for the doctrine of Divine Sefirot, I shall not dwell on it now. However, it is not difficult to show that there is an angelological layer in the *Book Bahir*.

First, in many cases it is explicitly stated that the beings the text deals with are angels. Thus, in paragraph 32, for example: “And what are the ten angels? Seven voices and three sayings.” In other places, these entities are also named in the spirit of the book of Ezekiel as “Holy Creatures” (§88) or “Wheels” (§33, 88, 115). Very often it seems one may distinguish between male and female entities or angels. Moreover, terms characteristic of The Song of Songs, like “the Beloved,” are imposed here on names of angels, and the erotic relationships between them are incessantly implied. For example:

- [43] He was asked [the Rabbi by his disciples] ...what is the ‘*field of Zophim*’ (Numbers 23:14)?
- As it is said, ‘*come my lover, let us go to the fields*’ (Song of Songs 7: 12)
 - What is ‘*let us go to the fields?*’

⁴² For further details, see my above-mentioned article (note 36).

⁴³ I cannot cite here all the reasons for including particular passages of the *Bahir* in the Babylonian layer, but the following discussion provides many of these reasons. A full discussion will be found in a future book of mine devoted to the *Book Bahir*. In any case, only passages that belong to this layer will be mentioned here.

⁴⁴ See, e.g. Scholem, *Origins* (note 37), 62-63.

- His heart said to the Most Holy One Blessed be He – ‘*come my lover*’ let us take a walk...
- And what is his heart [*lev*]?...
- He said to him [It should be – them!]: thirty-two paths...

The lover and the beloved are, according to this paragraph, the Most Holy One Blessed be He and his heart. The heart hints, by the gematria of the Hebrew word “*lev*” (heart), to the 32 wondrous paths of wisdom alluded to in *Sefer Yetsirah*.⁴⁵ It seems that the lover implied here is God himself as he is called “the Most Holy One Blessed Be He,” but another paragraph shows us this expression has two meanings:

[75] What is *teli*⁴⁶? That is a likeness that is before The Most Holy One Blessed Be He, as it is written ‘*his hair is curly*’⁴⁷ [Song of Songs 5:11]...and what is heart? That is, as is written ‘*to the very heavens*’ [literally – to the heart of the heavens][Deuteronomy 4:11],⁴⁸ which contain 32 wondrous paths of wisdom.

From the citation in the *Book Bahir* of a verse from The Song of Songs referring to the ‘lover’ of The Song of Songs, we learn that the discussion refers to the above-mentioned couple. Yet, this time the lover is described as a likeness that stands **before** The Most Holy One Blessed Be He. This confirms that we are speaking of entities outside of the Godhead Itself—namely, angels, (rather than Sefirot, which are part of God). We also learn here that the expression ‘The Most Holy One Blessed Be He,’ just

⁴⁵ *Sefer Yetsirah* is a short and enigmatic book with a vast literature written on it, both by Kabbalists and researchers alike. It is the first book to mention the term “*sefirot*,” although it is not clear what was meant by it. Estimations of its dating vary between the 2nd century CE and the 9th. See for example, P. Hayman, *Sefer Yezira-Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen 2004); Y. Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv 2000) (Hebrew); S. Wasserstrom, “Further Thoughts on the Origins of ‘Sefer Yesirah,’” *Aleph* 2 (2002): 201-221.

⁴⁶ An astronomical term; one may see it as a term for the Milky Way. Discussion of this term is part of the symbolic commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* that characterizes the *Bahir* (the passage discussed here is a commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* chap. 6, Mishna 2). For more details, see A. Sharf, *Jews and Other Minorities in Byzantium* (Ramat-Gan 1995) 178-189.

⁴⁷ In Hebrew, we have here a play on words – *teli/talim* - that is, curls.

⁴⁸ Even the expression “heart of heavens” hints, according to the Babylonian stratum of the *Book Bahir*, at the same couple – heart and heavens. Heavens is a common expression for the male image, which stands opposing the female image named “earth” (and see the discussion of the Shekhinah, below). For the heavens as designating a male figure, see paragraphs 23,25,30,39,40,85,115.

like the Tetragramaton,⁴⁹ is employed not only as the name of God, but also refers to an angel, a likeness that stands before God Himself.

If so, the tendency towards systematization of the world of angels is also evident here, just as in **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**, which constitutes the most ancient layer of the Zohar. In both the *Book Bahir* and **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**, the text speaks of ten angels and of the existence of male and female angels, although in the *Book Bahir*, the erotic relationships are made much more explicit than in **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**.

This process of systematization also applies to the classification of angels in ethical terms, albeit with a slight difference. In **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac**, we found angels of Judgment and Compassion standing on the right and on the left.⁵⁰ However, according to the angelological system delineated in the Babylonian stratum of the *Book Bahir*, the ethical structure has three elements, as is common in Kabbalistic structures. Here we find *Hesed* (Mercy), and *Din* (Judgment) with *Shalom* (Peace) placed between the two (§131).

Just as **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac** seems to represent the interests of the “Seekers of the Shekhinah,” the Babylonian stratum of the *Book Bahir* also shows great interest in Shekhinah. We should not be misled by the abundance of symbolism referring to the same entity. The Shekhinah is the aforementioned ‘heart,’ and it is also a diadem (§23), moon (§39), a precious stone (§131), King David (§85), a footrest (§115) as well as a throne (§25), earth (§23, 25, 49) the night (§49) and also wisdom (§3, 51) – to mention just a few of the multitude of symbols associated with it.

The major difference between the two texts - **The Midrash of Rabbi Isaac** and the Babylonian Stratum of the *Book Bahir* - is that the latter displays some distinct Gnostic (Valentinian) features, which are altogether absent in the first.⁵¹ These features are clearly indicated in the following passages:

[97] And R. Yohanan said: There were two big lights, as it said: '*And God said let there be light and there was light*' [Genesis 1:3], and of the two, it was said

⁴⁹ This refers to Metatron, an angel “whose name is as his Master's” that is – God's, according to B. Sanhedrin 38b.

⁵⁰ See the text, near note 13.

⁵¹ Scholem was the first to discern the Gnostic elements in the Bahir (Scholem, *Beginnings*, chap. 2). My claim here, among others, is that these elements already appear in the Babylonian stratum. Also, the cosmic cycle described hereafter escaped his attention.

'good' [Genesis 1:4]. And God took one [of the lights] and concealed it for the righteous in the world to come... One should learn from this that no creature could gaze at the First Light, as it is written – '*God saw all that he had made and it was very good*' [Genesis 1:31]. The Most Holy One, Blessed be He '*saw all that he had made*' and he saw '*very good.*' And this is as it is written: '*I give you sound learning so do not forsake my teaching*' [Proverbs 4:2], that is – the treasure of the Oral Torah.

[98] And the Most Holy One, Blessed be He said: If [they] will keep this measure [*middah*] in This World, since this measure is considered to be This World, (that is, the Oral Torah), they will inherit the life of the World to Come, which is the concealed Good.

And what is the Good⁵² of the Most Holy One, Blessed be He? As it is said: '*His splendor will be like The Light*' [Habakkuk 3:4] – the splendor which had been taken from the First Light will be like The Light, if my sons will fulfill the Torah and commandments which I gave them and taught them.

The words of this Babylonian text are only a development of the rabbinic saying about the diminution of the moon.⁵³ In the beginning, there were two big and equal lights – Light and Light, the combination of both was called – The First Light, The Good, or Very Good. As this double light was too bright, God concealed one of lights and kept it for the World to Come (the Concealed Good).⁵⁴ The other Light, which is also called 'splendor' and 'sound learning', was given to the people of Israel in the form of the Torah and the commandments. If the people of Israel fulfill the commandments, they will be able to inherit the World to Come. In other words, if they cultivate the Splendor, taken from the First Light, it will ascend and reach the degree of the First Light. They can do this by means of the theurgical power given to them through fulfillment of the commandments.

⁵² The text states – "Uzo," that is "His vigor," but it seems like a scribal error influenced by the reading of the verse from Habakkuk. Following the logic of the question, its answer, as well as the general idea expressed in this paragraph, it seems that one should read – "*tuvo*" – 'His Good'.

⁵³ B. Hullin 60b.

⁵⁴ B. Hagigah 12a.

All this sounds as if the separation of these two entities was made because of God's goodness (since 'no creature could gaze at the First Light'), but in other passages, negative tones are heard as well.⁵⁵

[23] They [the disciples] said to him [the teacher]: But it is said '*He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth*' [Lamentations 2:1]. So they did fall!

He said to them: A parable of a King who had a pretty diadem on his head and a pretty mantle on his shoulder and received bad news. He threw his diadem down from his head and cast his mantle before him.

We are not told what the bad news was, but if we recall that these two lights are called Wisdom,⁵⁶ we can identify the distinctly Gnostic (Valentinian) picture of the ancient fall of wisdom and its return in the utopian future.

In conclusion, in this article we have identified the characteristics of a period of transition situated between the era of Heikhalot literature and the era of Kabbalah. We have defined two texts that belong to this transitional era – **The Midrash of R. Isaac** and the Babylonian stratum of the *Book Bahir*, both of which were probably written in the Moslem Middle East. We discovered no new texts, but we were able to identify existing texts as belonging to an era preceding the Kabbalah that were then assimilated into later works such as the *Zohar* and the *Book Bahir*. Consequently, if as we have claimed a bilingual unit of the *Zohar* was written in the 11th century, whereas most of the *Zohar* was written in the 13th, the thesis of multiple-authorship would be significantly strengthened. Moreover, by paying attention to the characteristics of

⁵⁵ The future ascent of the lower Light, which is the splendor or diadem, is hinted at in one of the famous parables of the *Bahir*: “A parable of a king who had a throne. Sometimes he takes it in his arms and sometimes he puts it on his head” [§25]. The throne that the king sometimes sits on and sometimes lifts in the air is the diadem, or fallen wisdom. For the use made of Babylonian vocalization in this parable, a fact that fixes it (and by extension all the descriptions of the rise and fall of this entity) as belonging to the Babylonian layer, see my article mentioned in note 36 above. Other paragraphs that exemplify the fall of the diadem and its future return to its source are paragraphs 50, 61, 131-132. Incidentally, the “stroll in the field” (paragraph 43 mentioned above) is also a hint at the fall of the diadem.

⁵⁶ Naming the lower entity “Wisdom” appears, for example in paragraphs 3, 51. Naming the upper entity “Wisdom” appears in paragraphs 3, 32, 36, 96, 129. Note that the use of the term “32 paths” also hints at Wisdom since, according to opening sentence of *Sefer Yetsirah*, these paths are part of Wisdom. These paths are mentioned in paragraphs 43, 75; with reference to the upper entity, see paragraph 97.

these two texts – angelology, intense interest in the Shekhinah,⁵⁷ special interest in the World to Come and a Gnostic view of Wisdom's fall (an idea found only in the Babylonian branch) – we may identify the connection between these two eras and understand how Kabbalah, starting in the 12th century, grew out of this infrastructure. The 'subterranean levels'⁵⁸ that constitute the origins of Kabbalah now seem to shine through from within the famous and known texts--like apples of gold in a filigree of silver.

⁵⁷There was no room in this article to discuss additional contemporaneous texts that show interest in the Shekhinah, like Yehudah Barzilai's commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah*. We also omitted some other important discussions, such as the connection between these developments and similar developments in the philosophy of that time and the reasons accounting for the transitions described in this article. I hope to deal with these issues and others on some future occasion.

⁵⁸ See note 6.