

Ambivalence toward Christianity in the  
Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is devoted to an investigation of the conflicted attitude toward Christianity demonstrable in the writings of the kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240 – ca. 1291). Abulafia's hostility toward Christianity is explicit and emphatic. He partakes of most of the polemical arguments raised against Christians by the fellow Jews of his day. On the other hand, Abulafia's absorption of Christian doctrines is equally clear and central. In fact, Abulafia goes beyond this absorption of doctrine to accord a place of key importance in his own messianic self-conception to the figure of Jesus. The latter Abulafia viewed as the transgressive element within his own inner psyche. Abulafia, in kind with many of the kabbalists of his day, viewed Jesus as the epitome of idolatry, and he discusses the extent to which this inner idolatrous element tempted him. For Abulafia, the threat of such temptations manifested itself in the form of demons. These, by his own testimony, dogged him as he sought to commune with the Active Intellect. We will explore the fashion in which these demons embodied Abulafia's powerful attraction to Christianity. The latter Abulafia characterizes as the forbidden feminine element, while the demons poised against him threatened Abulafia with emasculation. The implications of Abulafia's attitudes toward Christianity lend themselves to psychoanalytic investigation. Abulafia's ambivalent feelings toward Christianity ran to the core of his psyche, providing the subtext for his mystical doctrine and sense of his own

messianic mission and demonstrating the role of the forbidden other in the construction of self. Abulafia, in his mystical thought and practice, seeks to subsume Christian influences within a synthetic whole. By such means he intended to overcome the self-other dichotomy, with redemptive consequences.

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## Introduction

### Part I: Abraham Abulafia; a Brief Biographical Sketch

Based primarily on purely autobiographical data, modern scholars have assembled a relatively full accounting of the life of Abraham Abulafia.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Aragon in 1240 and lived in Spain until the age of twenty, at which point he embarked upon a journey to the Holy Land, hoping to find the fabled River Sambatyon. Warfare in the region, however, brought this quest to an end in Acre, and he subsequently changed his course for Greece. There he was married, and he continued on to Italy thereafter, where his study of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* began in earnest.

Sometime in the 1260s, Abulafia returned to Spain, where, under the tutelage in particular of R. Baruch Togarmi, his studies focused primarily upon *Sefer Yeşirah*. The year 1270 represented the onset of Abulafia's chief mystical experiences. He wrote of having undergone intense visionary encounters with the divine Active Intellect beginning at this time, of being plagued by vengeful demons as a result, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 126-130; Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 2-3. Most recently, Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 29-53, is comprehensive in his biographical approach to Abulafia. Hames maintains that the shifting tenor of Abulafia's literary production reflected his personal life experiences, particularly with respect to changes in the intensity and immediacy of his messianic expectations. If this is true, and Abulafia's sense of the manner in which redemption was to unfold in history changed at certain junctures in his life, the general contours of Abulafia's messianic doctrine are nevertheless noteworthy for their consistency over the course of more than two decades of literary output. It is for this reason that most modern treatments of Abulafia's doctrines are not framed in terms of the vicissitudes of Abulafia's life story. Most importantly for the current context, Abulafia's ambivalent relationship toward Christianity is a consistent feature of his writings, as we shall see.

of receiving word from the divine concerning his messianic mission to the Pope. Sometime in the late 1270s, Abulafia returned to Italy. It is possible that his messianic doctrine aroused the disapproval of R. Solomon Ibn Adret in Barcelona at this time and brought about his departure, although documentary evidence on both sides clearly portrays a conflict between the Rashba and Abulafia only at a considerably later date, when Abulafia was active in Sicily.

Following his departure from Spain, Abulafia would spend the remainder of his life in Italy and Sicily. There he would propagate the teachings that would ultimately come to comprise an enormously influential kabbalistic school. His prolific literary production, as we have it today, reflects the letter combinatory practices that constituted the basis of his meditative efforts to commune with the Active Intellect and to engage in hermeneutical analysis of Scripture, as we shall see. Abulafia claimed to have ultimately sought an audience with the Pope, in fulfillment of his messianic mission, in 1280, at which time he was imprisoned. With the Pope's death, however, Abulafia, miraculously, was soon released. We must note that we have no corroborating evidence regarding Abulafia's account of this brazen undertaking. Abulafia would await the year 1290 as the time of redemption, but his expectations were to end in disappointment. All traces of Abulafia disappear soon thereafter, his last known text being composed sometime in the year 1291.



## Part II: Abulafia and Alterity; the Other in the Self

Anachronistic as it may seem to begin an elucidation of the fundamental internal struggle of the medieval kabbalist Abraham Abulafia by means of ca. third century rabbinic literature, it is to some pertinent observations from Boyarin, regarding *Tosefta Hullin* 2:24, to which we may first turn. The rabbinic text that Boyarin examines reads, in part, as follows:

Once I [R. Eliezer] was walking in the marketplace of Tsiptori, and I found there Yaakov, the man of Kefar Sikhnin, and he recounted a saying of sectarianism in the name of Yeshu the son of Pantiri, and it caused me pleasure, and I was arrested by/for the words of sectarianism...

Boyarin, as he renders the story above, writes that it "...illustrates beautifully the hypothesis of simultaneous rabbinic attraction to and repulsion from Christianity."<sup>2</sup> The story recounts as well R. Eliezer's appearance before the authorities and his subsequent acquittal, but what need concern us here is R. Eliezer's admission that some sectarian, that is, Christian, pronouncement met, to his own personal chagrin, with his approval. Boyarin observes a relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> Boyarin, "The Close Call; or, Could a Pharisee Be a Christian?" in *Mapping Jewish Identities*, edited by L. Silberstein (New York: 2000), p. 276. Schiffman discusses the historicity of the story in *Who Was a Jew?*, pp. 71-73. He observes the rabbis' perspective that "even the most minimal contact" with the heretics posed a grave danger. As to the difficult question of the status of the sectarian followers of Jesus, Schiffman suggests that it was not until the Bar Kokhba war that Christians were no longer viewed by the rabbis as wayward Jews "whose identity as Jews was unquestionable." Ibid., pp. 73, 76.

this incident in R. Eliezer's life and the story of his excommunication in *Baba Mešia* 59a, where his recourse to magico-mystical means, in particular the enlisting of a *bat qol* or divine voice, to argue a halakhic point appears to have been his principle offence. In Boyarin's estimation, rabbinic mistrust of such means is intertwined with the censure of Christianity, which, the Rabbis maintained, was sorcerous at its root. In two ways, then, R. Eliezer was seen to bear a "sectarian" stigma. Further, *Baba Mešia* relates that R. Eliezer wore tefillin on Sabbath, violating rabbinic law and marking him as deviant, yet again reinforcing the rabbinic suspicions of his "sectarian" tendencies. Ultimately, nevertheless, R. Eliezer is vindicated by his well-framed response to the challenge posed to his orthodoxy. Writes Boyarin,

The Rabbi's seeming refusal to obey the laws of the Sabbath in his apparent desire to retain his phylacteries seems also to mark him as being "out of his mind," that is, suspect, in a mystical and perhaps sectarian state. His answer, belligerent as it is, thus marks him as 'within,' because it is a rational answer based on a good halakhic principle.<sup>3</sup>

The story of R. Eliezer's attraction to a Christian principle, Boyarin suggests, reveals that the rabbinic authorship was sensitive to the sometimes uncomfortable closeness of Christian to Jewish belief or practice. Distancing the self from the other, and thereby cementing one's own identity became, for the rabbis, then, a difficult and sometimes anxiety-producing undertaking. In the story, the Rabbis were, as

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<sup>3</sup> Boyarin, "The Close Call; or, Could a Pharisee Be a Christian?" p. 288.

Boyarin puts it, "...marking out the virtual identity between themselves and the Christians in their world at the same time they are very actively seeking to establish difference."

The marking out of difference from Christianity by the authors of these stories from the life of R. Eliezer comes in the form of the condemnations he receives, while the fact that the charges levied against him never seem to stick, and that he is ultimately not merely exonerated but honored as a great sage, illustrates the awkward ambiguity in determining the real difference between heresy and piety, in-group and out-group. All the more is this the case for a figure like R. Eliezer, who is distinguished by his supernatural gifts. "On the one hand," writes Boyarin, "he is a kind of holy man, almost a magic-worker, of a type that rabbinic religiosity has a constant suspicion of. On the other hand, he is the very type of an 'orthodox' Pharisee and a halakhic authority *par excellence*."<sup>4</sup> R. Eliezer exceeds the normative specification of rabbinic Judaism through his magical or mystical gifts (Boyarin employs both of these terms), and it becomes difficult, consequently, for truly normative evaluators (if they truly exist as such) to gauge his status. Thus, through these gifts, the pitch is raised of the anxiety surrounding the question of where R. Eliezer stands - with the "us" of rabbinic Judaism or with the "other" that includes Christians and other heretics. As Boyarin puts it, R. Eliezer's prospective practice of mysticism, just as does his prospective "sectarian" practice, indicates that he may be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

“out of his mind” in the judgment of the rabbinic authors of these stories. We see that the figure of R. Eliezer, as he is characterized in these tales, threatens the “neat binary opposition of the world” that is sought in the self/other dichotomy. Indeed, we may suspect that the reification of this dichotomy is the purpose for which the very notion of normativity exists. Chimerical as it may be, normativity is ever the champion of this oppositional framework, one through which the world is rendered orderly.

R. Eliezer, as Boyarin describes his appearance in these stories, “is the very figure of liminality.”<sup>5</sup> The same should be said of the thirteenth century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. It is worth contemplating some of the points of contact between these two figures, the one character being largely a rabbinic construction, the other emerging chiefly as self-constructed, given that most of the information that we have concerning Abulafia came from his own pen. There is the matter of the *bat qol*, through which Abulafia vouchsafed his own reception of revelation, to accompany the wonder-working to which he at times also laid claim.<sup>6</sup> Operating in conjunction with these accomplishments, for Abulafia, were practices that extended normative

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>6</sup> Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 105; idem, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, pp. 129-130, 135 (in Hebrew). Abulafia refers, for instance, to the ability to perform signs and to “act upon matter and form.” *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 23b; printed edition, p. 33. Notwithstanding his own claim, Abulafia criticizes the Masters of Names for their own use of names to work wonders. See, *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN heb. 680, fols. 292a-b; printed edition, p. 13, following Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:61. Altmann, “Maimonides’ Attitude Toward Jewish Mysticism,” p. 201. See the discussion in Chapter Two, below. Scholem refers to Abulafia’s preference for a “magic of inwardness.” *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 145; idem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 177, 181.

rabbinic rules.<sup>7</sup> Abulafia, for instance, wore tefillin during his self-devised mystical rituals, including at night,<sup>8</sup> which should recall R. Eliezer's offense of wearing tefillin on the Sabbath. As Wolfson observes, Abulafia's commitment to halakhah is buttressed throughout by his elucidation of a mystical subtext for the *mišvot*; he thereby propounds a perspective, in kind with R. Eliezer's self-vindicating halakhic argument, that would concretize his insider status.<sup>9</sup> Within the achievement of the eliciting of the *bat qol*, there is, for both the fictionalized R. Eliezer and for the self-described Abulafia, the blending of magical with mystical capacities.<sup>10</sup> Abulafia, in fact, assigned to his own achievements a messianic dimension. For his apparent brazenness in this regard, he incurred the penalty of excommunication at the hands of his contemporary rabbinic authorities,<sup>11</sup> the same fate which R. Eliezer met in the rabbinic literature, although the latter's offenses related to supernatural and "sectarian" predilections, and not to messianic pretensions for himself. Nevertheless, a heretical messianism did play an obviously prominent role in the group, the Christians, that the Rabbis suspected R. Eliezer of having joined. Lastly, and central to this dissertation, is the active passion for Christian doctrines discernible in Abulafia's writings; as indeed was the case for R. Eliezer, as portrayed by the

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfson observes that, in fact, Abulafia viewed the very core of his mystical practice, letter permutation, to be "hypernomian," that is, an extension of practice prescribed by the rabbinate. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 209, to be discussed in Chapter Two. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 197-204, 225.

<sup>8</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 29, 39, 50 n. 114, 120.

<sup>9</sup> See note 7.

<sup>10</sup> See n. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, p. 78.

rabbinic authors, this penchant threatened Abulafia's identity as an "insider," engendering no small internal conflict.

The modern perspective on the subject of alterity places no small emphasis upon the dubiousness of the distinguishing characteristics upon which the category of "other" actually depends. Certainly the perspective that "otherness" may be uncomfortably ephemeral is apparent in the rabbinic stories of R. Eliezer, and the same is the case as well for Abraham Abulafia. The "other" is designated as such, as modern studies indicate, based upon distinctions between in-group and out-group that are fragile and mutable.<sup>12</sup> For, as in the case of the stories of R. Eliezer, the interface between cultural groups, even in the case of rival groups, is permeable. Beliefs, doctrines and customs are often held in common among these groups in unexpected ways, and influences may travel in either direction. The resultant tenuousness of the category of "other" generates an often acute sense of insecurity. For it is the consensus on who exactly is "other" that is the foundation upon which group identity is constructed, and the realization that the presumed criteria for a group's purportedly unique identity may be fictitious is deeply unsettling. Most frequently, the insecurity that ensues with the dawning of this sense of the fragility of one's identity ultimately generates an emotional response, as the bare necessity of

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<sup>12</sup> Notes Smith, "'Otherness' is not so much a matter of separation as it is a description of interaction" ...the relation to the "other" is a matter of shifting temporality and relative modes of relationship." "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, edited by J. Neusner and E. Frerichs (California, 1985), p. 10.

the category of “other” for the strength of in-group identity yields to intensified xenophobia and hostility.<sup>13</sup>

An important perspective established by Wolfson regarding the theosophic kabbalah, of which the *Zohar* is the chief and most influential exemplar, suggests the awareness that, in this literature, the category of “other” is, first, an entirely relational category, and, second, that it is a category that cannot persist in the face of the mystic’s endeavor to commune with the Godhead.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in the theosophic kabbalah, the thwarting of the very category of “other” stands as part and parcel of the mystic’s objective for enlightenment. I refer most specifically to Wolfson’s observations concerning the feminine element in theosophical kabbalistic speculation.<sup>15</sup> To these we should add as well similar observations concerning the all-important alterity of Christendom.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, these two categories of “other,” the feminine and the Christian, are frequently rendered equivalent in kabbalistic discourse, as we shall see in the specific case of Abulafia’s writings.

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<sup>13</sup> Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, pp. 10, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson, “Woman - The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, edited by L. Silberstein and R. Cohn, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the overcoming of the self-other, male-female, dichotomy, see, *ibid.*, pp. 167-168. See also, *idem*, *Language, Eros, Being*, Chapter Two, “Differentiating (In)Difference.”

<sup>16</sup> Wolfson, “Woman - The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, edited by L. Silberstein and R. Cohn (New York, 1994), p. 169; *idem*, “Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology,” *Exemplaria* 12 (2000), p. 135; “Light through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 1 (1988), pp. 76, 88.

Some further discussion of the conception of the feminine as “other” is in order. In the case of two autonomous social groups in a state of de facto distinction from each other, notions of an out-group’s “otherness” exist to justify the social organization of an in-group as it is actually constituted. A given group seeks for reasons for the relative distinctness that it assigns to itself. But “otherness” persists *within* distinct social groups as well. As a result, the very idea of the presence of truly distinct social groups, of an “inside,” is problematized. Medieval Europe is a reasonably distinct cultural entity, but it is comprised of insiders and outsiders – Christians, Jews and Muslims, for instance. These groups as well are comprised of groups of insiders and outsiders, heretics, for instance, or, to a great extent, women.<sup>17</sup> The status of any group or individual as insider or outsider is ever ambiguous and dependent upon the frame of reference that one adopts in the course of one’s examination of the question.

Nirenberg’s work is useful in illustrating the elusiveness of answers to questions of who is “inside” and who is “outside” of a specific social group. When one considers medieval “Christian Europe,” the Jews are instantly designated, by definition, as “other.” As non-Christians, no spatial proximity can suffice to suggest inclusion in the Christian religious sphere. The violent attacks to which the Jews were subjected seem to perfectly illustrate their designation as “other,” especially

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<sup>17</sup> See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 58, where he notes a passage from the *Zohar* that “extends the external distinction between Israel and the nations to an internal distinction between Jewish men and women.”



since the attacks clearly resulted, at least in the case of Holy Week violence, from religious motivations. Yet Nirenberg observes that these instances of violence toward Jews were carefully controlled and ritualized; the violence served a specific function, but did not express the wholehearted “othering” that unrestrained attacks would suggest. Rather, the approach taken in these instances toward the Jews was modulated by an apparent awareness that the Jews’ function in the Christian social order, albeit marginal in certain key respects, was to remain entrenched.<sup>18</sup> The Jew enjoyed a relatively stable place within the functioning of Christian society. The result of this negotiation of religious impulses with social realities was that, in purely religious terms, the Jew came to be a participant (unwillingly, admittedly) in a ritualized Christian behavior. The Jew here is at once an “insider” and an “outsider.” The Christian attitude here reflects an uneasy acceptance of the “other” that is situated within.

Within what we construct as a distinct social unit, those who are marginalized culturally, are politically disenfranchised, and are placed in a position of vulnerability to social inequity are those who most consistently are designated, in religious terms, as the “other”.<sup>19</sup> To some extent, European Jewry certainly confronted these conditions. However, by adopting a different frame of reference, we

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<sup>18</sup> Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, pp. 201, 210-212.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the studies of Asad, who is concerned with “the sense in which power constructs religious ideology.” It is such power, he relates, that “produces religiously defined knowledge.” This principle constitutes the basis of Asad’s critique of Geertz’ anthropological definition of religion, an issue to be discussed below. Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” *Man* 2 (1983), p. 237.

may see that these conditions describe as well the social position of the medieval European Jewish woman within the larger Jewish community. And for the medieval kabbalist, the reflex to render the feminine as “other” was not only a social commonplace. It was projected into a conception of the hypostatic realm as well.<sup>20</sup> We see here how notions of the “other” coalesce into all-encompassing pictures of reality.

Nevertheless, the theosophical kabbalist sought to overcome his instinctive attribution of the feminine to the category of “other;” the perfected man, as the kabbalist perceived him, was one who no longer recognized the feminine, both within himself and in the hypostatic realm, as “other.” The feminine was to be conceived of as an essential element in a reconstituted - though avowedly still masculine - whole. This element, the feminine, was to be both incorporated internally within the individual and to be united hypostatically with the divine masculine element. Any sense of division was to be elided, any difference recognized as illusory. Liminality was repositioned as central in this kabbalistic discourse. And hand in hand with this approach to the “otherness” of the feminine, notes Wolfson, the kabbalist sought to turn away from the like conception of the demonic or idolatrous element as “other.” By this, it was the Christian, who was represented consistently in these terms, who was intended.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See above, note 15.

<sup>21</sup> See above, note 16.

We may situate Abulafia in this discussion of the tenuousness of the alterity of the “other.” There is a clear conflictedness on his part regarding the appropriate perspective to take toward the religious “other” - that is, the Christian. This conflictedness manifests itself in several ways. First, there are in his writings contradictions to an ostensibly uncompromising anti-Christian polemical posture. These take the form of anomalous and surprising mitigating statements. Second, there is to be considered Abulafia’s frequent cooptation of manifestly Christian doctrines, a cooptation which flies in the face of his relentlessly polemical anti-Christian posture. Lastly, there is the perspective that Abulafia synthesizes from his mixed feelings, one in which he sees himself as possessing within himself an indispensable but dangerous Christian element, one which he must somehow properly embrace and assimilate. Through this last manifestation of Abulafia’s conflictedness we will come to see how central his complex relationship to Christianity is to his entire mystical system.

We observed earlier that an ambiguity in the status of the other as such jeopardizes one’s own identity and generates deeply-seated emotional responses. So it should come as no surprise that Abulafia makes it abundantly apparent that his conflict in confronting the religious other resulted for him in a tumultuous internal crisis. We would do well to see it as a crisis of identity. Very literally, as we shall see, Abulafia is plagued by inner demons. These demons are representations of the alien, forbidden other. Abulafia sought to overcome the crisis that the attack by

demons represented in a fashion reminiscent of the pattern discussed above with respect to the theosophical kabbalists. That is, Abulafia sought an internal reconciliation, one which would annihilate the distinction between self and other.

This paradigm recalls vividly the observation of Kristeva that the “othering” that one engages in with respect to a given out-group reflects a deep internal battle with the foreigner who, in fact, “is within us.”<sup>22</sup> Kristeva observes the same phenomenon with respect to Biblical Jewish identity: “If David is also Ruth, if the sovereign is also Moabite, peace of mind will then never be his lot, but a constant quest for welcoming and going beyond the other in oneself.”<sup>23</sup> In this instance, David is obliged to confront not only the non-Jew within that challenges his own identity, but as well the female within. On both of these scores, the example of David could not be more apropos as an analogy for the same struggles with which Abulafia contended; all the moreso is this the case when one considers that Abulafia deemed himself to be the heir to David’s messianic identity. Indeed, as we shall see, the coming into true messiahhood signified, for Abulafia, the transcendence of the dichotomies that threaten to fragment individual identity.<sup>24</sup>

Earlier I noted that notions of the “other” coalesce into all-encompassing pictures of reality. The statement recalls Geertz’ views upon, and famed definition

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<sup>22</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by L. Roudiez (New York, 1991), p. 191, cited in Silberstein, “Others Within and Others Without,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, edited by L. Silberstein and R. Cohn, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by L. Roudiez (New York, 1991), p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfson points to another, parallel kabbalistic conception of messiahhood. *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 94.

of, religion, and, indeed, much of what I have written to this point presumes an anthropological perspective more or less aligned with that of Geertz.<sup>25</sup> It is to this that we must turn, as well as to the objections to it that have arisen in recent years.

Geertz conceives of a religion as a set of “sacred symbols” that construct both models of and models for reality, symbols imbued with “a people’s ethos...and their world view.”<sup>26</sup> The dynamic between ethos and world view is that of mutual reinforcement. The former consists primarily of emotional and aesthetic responses, the latter of reasoned formulations. Both coalesce to reify a sense of the “really real.”<sup>27</sup> That is to say, they form the overarching medium through which a human being experiences the world and what comes to be perceived as its reality. As suggested above, this medium Geertz conceives of as embodied in a network of symbolic structures. The latter act, upon the members of a society that constructs them, to reflect and distill the essence of the reality that is then perceived to comprise the larger world; it is the anthropologist or student of religious culture who may detect from without that these symbolic structures actually constitute that perception of reality.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Frankenberry and Penner review the remarkable influence of Geertz on subsequent academic work. “Clifford Geertz’s Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions,” *The Journal of Religion* 4 (1999), pp. 617-618.

<sup>26</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 89, 93.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> “They [culture patterns] give meaning...to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.” *Ibid.*, p. 93.

The perspective upon alterity that I have adopted already assumes much of what Geertz has articulated, although it moves as well toward several sites at which his approach bogs down. Implicit to this point has been the view that identity is constructed through a trafficking in culture. Most importantly here, identity is a construct. It is built out of processes of group self-definition from which result the cultural edifice within which the participant is situated. The extent to which we accept that, in the Middle Ages, religion - or the religious symbols through which religion exerted its power - acted to construct identity is also the extent to which we acknowledge the power that was exerted by the “ethos” and “world view” generated and confirmed by these symbols. It is difficult to challenge this contention, that religious symbols shape perceptions of reality by acting upon both the “hearts and minds” of believers.

If culture – and religion in particular - dictates identity in this fashion, then we may say just as decisively that it dictates the identity of the other. That is, it delineates, through recourse to the power entailed in subscription to its symbol systems, the location of the margins of cultural participation. Those who believe in the force of a given set of cultural symbols are confirmed as participants, while the force of the symbols themselves is dedicated in large measure to indexing the status of those who do not believe. In this sense, Geertz’ theory of religion offers a theoretical superstructure for the notions of alterity that have been suggested here,

this notwithstanding the fact that the insertion of the word “sacred” before “symbols” does not assist greatly in distinguishing religion from culture.

A further and even greater problem in this approach to religion and alterity lies in our observation that the other lies within. This we have seen to occur in two ways: The other exists within the individual as a challenge to self-differentiation and identity, and the other exists within the bounds of a society in the form of groups, at various levels of disenfranchisement, that are labeled as others. In each of these cases, Geertz’ notions of culture and identity suffer a crippling blow. For it is the breach running through culture in the form of the other that defines culture as such. The result of this approach to culture is that, by its very essence, it can be found nowhere.

Asad seeks to dispense almost entirely with Geertz’ approach to the power of cultural symbols due in part to the second of the two aforementioned problems. In fact, he points to an even larger issue. He observes that it is political coercion - and he looks to Medieval Europe in particular in this regard<sup>29</sup> - through which religion finds its strength.<sup>30</sup> The relationship between discourses of othering and political disenfranchisement here becomes most decipherable. It is not merely that someone is rendered other as a result of his or her being perceived, because of a compromised social status, to exist in a corresponding fashion within a society’s symbolic superstructure. Such an interpretation could flow from Geertz’ approach. But it is

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<sup>29</sup> Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” *Man* 2 (1983), p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Writes Asad, “...power constructs religious ideology.” *Ibid.*, p. 237.

also, Asad observes, that religion operates materially and politically as a disenfranchising force. Religion here as a political mechanism exceeds the sense intended by Geertz when he discussed it as a model *for* reality. The meaning-generating faculty of religious symbols does not fundamentally fuel this dynamic on its own, and an engagement in meaning-making as a means to relate to perceived reality is taken to be insufficient, by Asad, as an explanation for othering discourses.<sup>31</sup> Rather, the political might and the socio-economic interests of religion fuel both the meanings of its symbols and the weight of its edicts.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, when turning from the Church - Asad's chief focus, in this instance - to approach an individual like Abulafia, political or self-interested motivations alone are clearly inadequate explanations for such a fervent religiosity and an obviously deeply-seated inner struggle. Though Abulafia's messianic pretensions certainly contain a streak of self-interest, and though his life was not untouched by the political vicissitudes of medieval religiosity,<sup>33</sup> it is equally clear that he was firmly under the sway of the meaning-generating forces perceived by

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<sup>31</sup> Writes Asad, "What I want to emphasize is that social life is not simply a matter of systems of meaning (whether conventional or intentional), even if it is true that communication between human beings is necessarily present in every domain of social activity-that social life is not identical with communication, although communication is necessary to it." Asad, "Anthropology and the Analysis of Ideology," *Man* 4 (1979), p. 618.

<sup>32</sup> Asad is particularly concerned here with the actions of the medieval Church taken in response to the threat to power posed by those subsequently deemed to be heretics. "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 2 (1983), p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> We may think of both his purported messianic mission to the Pope and his excommunication from Barcelona by R. Solomon ibn Adret, both to be discussed further below.



Geertz, caught by the imperative to locate himself within a network of overlapping cultural systems.

Asad's approach to religion, for all of its cogency, is clearly off the mark in the effort to achieve a thorough understanding of the forces at work here. But both approaches, we may see, suffer from inadequacy; this may be hinted at as well in that both are primarily functionalist ones; Asad offers a materialist functionalism, Geertz a psychological and cognitive one.<sup>34</sup> For all of his efforts to the contrary, Geertz' approach to religion, like Asad's, stresses chiefly what the religious phenomenon accomplishes. Nevertheless, it does appear that Geertz' functionalism goes further to account for the particular types of forces acting upon Abulafia than does Asad's.

On why this may be so, Sewell offers a pertinent explanation. He does so in the context of a consideration of how it could be that Geertz' influence has been so profound and widespread upon historians, while anthropologists have been comparatively much more resistant to it. Sewell observes that Geertz' anthropological approach to religion recalls that of the social historian; it is "focused not on the practices of political leaders and intellectuals but on those of ordinary people." Further, "it revealed - in their rituals, social conventions, and language -

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<sup>34</sup> In the case of Asad, a functionalist perspective is readily apparent. For Geertz', see Frankenberry and Penner, "Clifford Geertz's Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions," *The Journal of Religion* 4 (1999), p. 627. These authors observe that, although Geertz sought to resist the charge of relativism, he sought as well to eliminate any evaluations of objective truth quality in the assertions upon which a given religion is built. The result is a religious functionalism: "When symbols are thought not to have truth-conditions, the criterion of meaning shifts to use, and from there easily becomes relativized to the context of what it *does*...Human beings [for Geertz] create religion (and other cultural systems) out of a *need for meaning*." See also, *ibid.*, pp. 629, 633.

lives rich with complex symbolism and overflowing with meaning.”<sup>35</sup> It is this same frame of reference, that of social history, that appears to me to be most conducive to an analysis of a person such as Abulafia, one whose engagement with an intense religious inner life demonstrates a tremendous degree of absorption of diverse cultural influences.

For all of its merits, however, the approach to Abulafia in which we have embarked entails some further problems that bear analysis. Earlier we observed that a threat to Geertz’ view of cultural symbols, occurring in two ways, inheres in the fact that the other “is within us.” One of these threats, that of the disenfranchised social group persisting uneasily within and threatening the identity of its “host,” a larger cultural system, we have begun to consider. The other concerns the level of the individual psyche, where the “other” may also persist, constituting a threat to personal identity. The jeopardization of a sense of distinct alterity can result from a feeling of kinship or attraction to the other, a phenomenon that we noted beginning first with the fictionalized R. Eliezer.

But we have yet to fully address the important question of why the phenomenon occurs at all. What accounts for the inexorableness of this attraction to the other, when its consequences frequently prove so deleterious to individual identity? Certainly for Abulafia this attraction, we shall see, brought about considerable anguish. One answer to this question, which we have begun to address,

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<sup>35</sup> Sewell, “Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation,” *Representations*, (Summer, 1997), p. 38.

is that it is more accurate to say that, in an important sense, there in fact *is* no attraction to the other, this because there really *is* no other. Identity is built out of delineations of otherness that are, in essence, arbitrary. The consequences for the very notion of identity are grave,<sup>36</sup> but if the assigning of alterity is groundless, then attraction to the seeming other is not different then attraction to the same. We must then recast our observation of the phenomenon to say, simply, that the imposition of the status “other” in the construction of identity does not eliminate attractions. There are, however, ramifications consequent to the rendering of forbidden that which is rendered as other; I allude to the resultant intensification of such an attraction. It may be that othering instigates the fetishization of attraction; the designation as other – that is, as prohibited – may stir or refocus the oedipal impulse. For us, the

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<sup>36</sup> We have yet to fully address the sense in which the contingency of identity calls into question identity’s fundamental reality. Is the very premise that identity actually exists as an entity which can be threatened a false one? Khare approaches this question when he examines Hindu responses to the notion of alterity, observing that, in Hindu discourse and praxis, the elimination of the perception of a self-other dichotomy is of the greatest import, it constituting the only means to an authentic apprehension of reality. This is accomplished through the dissolution of any sense of “I-ness,” of self identity. Khare, “The Other’s Double. The Anthropologist’s Bracketed Self: Notes on Cultural Representation and Privileged Discourse,” *New Literary History* 1 (1992), p. 10. On a related note, Wolfson discusses his approach to the reading of kabbalistic texts with respect to Derrida’s conception of the coincidence of sameness and difference embodied in textual deconstruction. That this occurs in the context of a chapter concerning the kabbalists’ effort to overcome the self-other dichotomy is important. The coincidence of sameness and difference put forth by Derrida, Wolfson observes, nevertheless does not occur without the essential preservation of the text’s “trace.” *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 90-92. This trace we may consider in terms of a relationship to some minimum essential preservation of what Khare refers to as “I-ness.” Referring to the nature of “the infinite,” Wolfson writes of a mode of “textual reasoning...that affirms the identity of the nonidentical by discerning the nonidentity of the identical.” Here, seeming difference conceals likeness, and vice versa. He points to Schelling’s notion of the *Ungrund* as suggestive of kabbalistic modes of thought. With this *Ungrund*, preceding Nicholas of Cusa’s state of coinciding opposites, we find the “indifference” of opposites, a state of “opposites coexisting as nonopposites,” where “identity and indifference” are preserved in a unity. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-102. For the kabbalistic objective of achieving “non-dual consciousness,” see, *idem*, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 7. See also, for example, *ibid.*, p. 212.

relationship of Abulafia's attraction to the forbidden other with the oedipal model will be of particular concern.

For the present it should be noted that the introduction of psychoanalytical approaches raises complications closely related to those we have already encountered. These relate to what we can broadly refer to as a colonialist critique.<sup>37</sup> In the thirteenth century, as now, one's "other" could only be perceived through the prism imposed by one's own culture, that is, through a web of cultural symbols. This prism additionally comprises one's particular psychological needs as well as one's own politico-economic interests - in fact all of those elements through which one's place in culture and the world is mediated and generated. For the modern anthropological study of religion, however, this very same human predilection has been seen to generate seemingly insurmountable methodological problems in the study of those in whom it is observed.

One important objection to Geertz' approach to anthropological investigation, among other similar such approaches, is that it presumes an untoward universality, one tantamount to a colonialist mentality; indeed the very exercise of contriving a definition of religion entails this presumption.<sup>38</sup> So, for instance, as part of his

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<sup>37</sup> For the increasingly expansive range of applications of this terminology, see, Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1989), p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> As Kondo writes, following upon the work of Asad and Said, among others, "...colonial hubris seeps into the very process of cultural representation, leading the ethnographer to affirm that 'I know you better than you know yourselves.' We intrude; we perpetrate symbolic violence; we satisfy our needs; we leave; we achieve a final domination of the Other in the text." Kondo, "Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology," *Cultural Anthropology* 1 (1986), p. 83.

critique of Geertz, Asad notes the intrusion of a modern secularized perspective within the former's efforts to define religion in terms of the power exerted by the meaning of cultural symbols. Asad points to Geertz' emphasis upon religion's cultivation of a state of mind, of belief, rather than its sway over the field of knowledge. This, Asad observes, results from Geertz' own sense that knowledge falls under the purview of secular science. Referring to medieval Europe, however, Asad notes that knowledge too fell under the Church's dominion and was imposed through mechanisms of power.<sup>39</sup> In short, Geertz, according to Asad, is unable to escape his own cultural context in the very act of attempting to describe others'.

I need make no claims here to the universal validity of Geertz' formulations, only to their usefulness and applicability to the study of Abraham Abulafia. This, I believe, is already apparent from what we have discussed to this point. As to the objection to Geertz' view of religion that is in question at the moment, it is important to note that the view of identity that it posits does indeed preclude the possibility of objective investigation. If we have become sensitized to the fact that identity results, in part or in whole, from processes of othering, then our own identities – that is, those of the anthropologist or the student of religious studies – must be similarly constituted. The extent to which we either, consciously or not, distance ourselves or align ourselves with our academic subjects is contingent upon the needs of our own identity formation processes. This realization precipitates a methodological crisis,

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<sup>39</sup> Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 2 (1983), p. pp. 247, 249.

and the question that arises is an appropriate one: How do we study anyone if our sense of who we are is infinitely contingent?<sup>40</sup> As Khare suggests, one can only approach this vexing limitation with the best of intentions and in a spirit of self-examination.<sup>41</sup>

Given the close connection that we have noted between hermeneutical anthropology and social history, it should not come as a surprise that the latter has as well been forced to confront the same methodological problem, and that the same, perhaps simplistic solution, the determination to seek as much as possible to rise above subjectivity, has often enough been put forward.<sup>42</sup> Linge points to Gadamer as one who, in the realm of historiography, has pointed in a different direction, one that does not shy away from the inevitability of the intrusion of the historian's own identity into his investigations. Gadamer dismisses efforts to derive methodologies that could negate this inevitability, and he declines to see the historian's subjectivity

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<sup>40</sup> Khare, "The Other's Double. The Anthropologist's Bracketed Self: Notes on Cultural Representation and Privileged Discourse," *New Literary History* 1 (1992), pp. 3-5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Following upon the observations of Dilthey, Linge notes that "...the mode of being of the thinker himself is radically historical. The historian is no less immersed in history than his subject matter. If the claims of other men are silenced by the relativity of their perspectives, how can the historicist hope that his own claims will fare any better?" Linge, "Dilthey and Gadamer: Two Theories of Historical Understanding," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 4 (1973), p. 538. Not surprisingly, the solution to the problem offered by Dilthey, as paraphrased by Linge, is tantamount to Geertz' notion of "thick description," which seeks to thwart the observer's subjectivity. Dilthey, Linge writes, believed that "...objectivity in historical knowledge means immersing oneself in the object, in adopting its horizons, not in reducing it to a manifestation of something beyond it." It entails "the *self-transposition* or *imaginative projection* of the knower into the horizon of his subject matter." *Ibid.*, pp. 543, 544.

as simply a limitation. Rather, he perceives a constructive element in the historian's participation in historical-hermeneutical currents.<sup>43</sup>

Understanding is an event, a movement of history itself in which neither interpreter nor text can be thought of as an autonomous part. "Understanding itself," Gadamer argues, "is not to be thought of so much as an action of subjectivity, but as the entering into an event of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must gain validity in hermeneutical theory, which is much too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method."

From Schweiker's exploration of Gadamer's approach to mimesis, we may detect that the latter moves in the opposite direction from those who would seek to first purge one's self of subjectivity in order to then engage in historiography:<sup>44</sup>

...self-understanding is won only through interpreting what is other and not simple reflexive introspection. That other may be a text, person, or even our own past and culture... Interpretation is, first, an interactive conversation with a text. Within this activity there is a temporal fusion of horizons between interpreter and 'text' that marks the historicity of consciousness.

The ability to perceive one's own rootedness in history – to include the apprehension of one's own subjective and mediated perceptions, as well as their sources - here is seen to come always as a consequence of historical investigation, and not prior to it.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 549.

<sup>44</sup> Schweiker, "Beyond Imitation: Mimetic Praxis in Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida," *The Journal of Religion* 1 (1988), p. 26.

Gadamer's position notwithstanding, the colonialist critique of both Western anthropology and history persists. To it we may add as well a psychoanalytic critique. Brickman, for instance, observes in Freud's psychoanalytic approach to religion all of the biases of nineteenth century colonialism.<sup>45</sup> Although this in itself should neither surprise us nor dissuade us from seeking a psychoanalytic perspective purged of these prejudices, Brickman also maintains that modern efforts to do so have not fully escaped the specter of colonialism.

At its root, Freud's approach to religion, as Brickman notes, is linked inseparably with Freud's discussion of human personality development. As a consequence, Brickman suggests, nineteenth century colonialist theories of the racial other as "primitive" are wedded by Freud to the idea that religious thinking represents a regression to an early developmental psychological state, one that is as well "primitive."<sup>46</sup> In this way we may see how Freud's theory of religion acted historically in the service of colonialist discourse, evoking the notion that non-Western cultures lacked the psychological development of Westerners.<sup>47</sup> Freud's approach was such that neurosis could be understood as a regressive psychological condition that was akin to the normal (though pitiable) state of affairs of the typical

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<sup>45</sup> Brickman, "Primitivity, Race, and Religion in Psychoanalysis," *The Journal of Religion*, 1 (2002), p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Writes Brickman, "By adopting the evolutionary framework of his day, Freud conceived of primitive levels of the psyche in terms drawn from colonialist discourse. The double burden of meaning the term 'primitive' continues to hold in psychoanalysis-earliest infancy and cultural others-points to the residue of this colonialist inheritance in psychoanalytic thought." *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.



non-Western, “primitive” adult.<sup>48</sup> Since neuroses, in Freud’s estimation, were to be considered the products of an unresolved oedipal conflict, the “primitive” exercise of religion could be seen as the neurotic reflection of a stunted personality development. As Brickman puts it, “...barbarians, who propitiated gods, were correlated with the oedipal child in thrall to loving and powerful parents...”<sup>49</sup> As to modern adaptations of Freud’s psychoanalytic framework, which dispense with the *cultural* evolutionary model, the developmental framework that persists for the individual psyche, Brickman maintains, “remains susceptible” to the culturally biased modality out of which it was born.<sup>50</sup>

In Chapter Two of this dissertation I will broach the related question of anachronism, raised by Idel, with respect to the application of psychoanalytic approaches to medieval kabbalists. Wolfson’s divergent opinion, as well as his recourse to Lacan as offering a paradigm for psychoanalytic investigation of kabbalistic thought, will there also be considered. Here I will note that, notwithstanding Brickman’s critique of the developmental notion of the Oedipus complex and its perceived colonialist, othering discourse, it is indeed to an oedipal accounting for Abulafia’s evident neuroses that I will turn in Chapter Two. My

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 59. Psychoanalysis, then, could serve as an antidote both for neuroses *and* for religion. Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 73. Though I do not believe that agreement with Freud on the Oedipal complex’s status as a subconscious paradigm need in our time lead to any particular viewpoint with respect to the non-Western psyche, I do believe that Brickman’s study well illustrates the intrusion of this prejudice into Freud’s view of non-Western religious culture. It offers thereby an instructive example of the projection of biases, that is, the “I” of the investigator, upon the investigated subject, a projection that may occur in psychoanalytic work as insidiously as in anthropological or historical work.

reason for doing so is a straightforward one. The terms in which Abulafia articulates his own intense and long-standing fear of castration led me inexorably in this direction. Abulafia, we shall see, gives testimony of his fear of dismemberment at the hands of demonic avengers who are bent upon robbing him of his phallic covenantal insignia as a punishment for his attraction to idolatry. These idolatrous proclivities Abulafia tropes time and again in terms of sexual desire. The dynamic we encounter, then, is one in which Abulafia fears that the penalty of castration will be meted out as a divine punishment for illicit sexual longings directed toward the forbidden other. The sheer persuasiveness of the correlation between this state of affairs and the oedipal complex delineated by Freud is, in my opinion, unavoidable.

I make no effort here to discuss Abulafia's psychological state in terms of the childhood developmental model against which Brickman cautions. And it appears to me that, at least in this case, it is possible to make productive use of the oedipal model without recourse to particular developmental assertions. Nevertheless, that my observations concerning Abulafia's psychological state carry with them implications concerning Abulafia's childhood or concerning his relationships with his parents I acknowledge. It does not seem to me, however, that the data is available to evaluate these implications in terms of Abulafia's early life, nor is it necessary to do so in order to observe the relationship, in Abulafia's case, between the oedipal dynamic and the attraction to the other, the eroticism of which played so central a role in his mystical thought and practice. It is, rather, sufficient to take note of the fact that

Abulafia's anxieties fit a paradigm that runs to the very core of the human psyche.<sup>51</sup> And, indeed, modern psychoanalytical theory does frequently approach the oedipal dynamic in just such a fashion, deemphasizing the interpretation of its recurrence as a reversion to a predevelopmental stage. It is a psychiatric commonplace, one that follows upon Freud's own view, that traces of an oedipal conflict are a latent and permanent feature of the mature psyche. If one considers, then, that this conflict is never fully eradicated from the subconscious, it need not be approached as a reversion to an earlier developmental state, but rather as a typical feature of what may be considered to be a healthy adult personality structure.<sup>52</sup>

In line with this perspective, it is instructive to consider the view offered by Ricoeur. Abulafia synthesized the conception - although we must recognize, as before, that his conception was very much in line with wider kabbalistic thought - that his bitter contention with inner demons might occasion an inner reconciliation. This reconciliation was to take the form of a reconstitution of self, one concomitant with mystical attainment and, indeed, divinization. Ricoeur's perspective on the

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<sup>51</sup> In the forward to *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism*, x, Kakar notes the inherent affinity between mystical and psychoanalytic processes: "Mysticism, I try to show in this book, is a radical enhancement of the capacity for creative experiencing, of the ability to experience 'with all one's heart, all one's soul, and all one's might.' It requires that the mystic undergo a creative immersion in the deepest layers of his or her psyche, with its potential risk of phases of chaos and lack of integration. The mystical regression is akin to that of the analysand, an absorbing and at times painful process at the service of psychic transformation. It differs from most analyses in that the regression is deeper."

<sup>52</sup> Fisher and Greenberg, *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy*, p. 227 n. 22: "However, he [Freud] did indicate in his clinical essays and elsewhere that resolution of the Oedipal dilemma was rarely perfect and that most persons continue to be faced throughout their life span with tensions and conflicts radiating from inadequate and incomplete Oedipal adaptations."

paradigms offered by Freud here becomes most salient. We may look to Rigby's turn to Ricoeur in the service of his Freudian approach to St. Augustine. The former notes that Ricoeur contends that the flaring up of the subconscious – that is, “regression,” in traditional psychoanalytical thought – is as well the occasion for *progression* of the highest order, a type, we should note, that fits perfectly the contours of that sought by Abulafia. Writes Ricoeur,<sup>53</sup>

The progressive order of symbols is not exterior to the regressive order of fantasies; the lunge into the archaic mythologies of the unconscious brings to the surface new signs of the sacred. The eschatology of consciousness is always a creative repetition of its own archeology.

Ricoeur has eliminated from his discussion of the recurrence of subconscious patterns the developmental element emphasized in Brickman's discussion of Freud. This is so because the very notion of such a development suggests a linear temporality to human consciousness. As Wolfson observes, Ricoeur's thought may serve as a springboard to a model of time that is both cyclical and inseparable from subjective consciousness. Wolfson, moving past Ricoeur's conception of time, notes,<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 334, in Rigby, “Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's ‘Confessions,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1 (1985), p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 50. See also, *ibid.*, p. 206, n. 12; p. 208, n. 19.

Time of consciousness can awaken only as consciousness of time, and consciousness of time only as time of consciousness. Precisely because of this circularity in thinking about time, and the reflexivity of consciousness that it implies, we cannot say what time is without being caught in a web of self-referentiality.

For Abulafia, it was the progression in regression of the oedipal crisis, acting through an “archaic mythology,” that occasioned an inner rectification within an “eschatology of consciousness,” as Ricoeur put it, one by which the self-other distinction could be obliterated. For Ricoeur, the summoning of archetypes from the subconscious is interwoven with the act of symbolization. This process, he asserts, continues to “take place in the field of the Oedipal complex.”<sup>55</sup> The act of symbolization, then, is as fundamental to humanity as the oedipal complex itself. And, just as is the latter, symbolization is as well inherently bound to the themes of defilement, guilt and sin.

Far from being an act of simple comparison or representation, there is, on the one hand, a dimension to symbolization that “assimilates us to the symbolized,” such that the symbol serves as a vehicle for internal transformation. Yet symbolization is as well that within which a cosmological extrapolation takes place, such that evil comes to be envisioned as a basic feature of the world, a “concrete universal.”<sup>56</sup> In Ricoeur’s complex modeling of symbolization, we find once more an apt expression

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<sup>55</sup> Rigby, “Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's ‘Confessions,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1 (1985), p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, pp. 10-11, 16-17, 162. See, Alexander, “Ricoeur's “Symbolism of Evil” and Cross-Cultural Comparison: The Representation of Evil in Maya Indian Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 4 (1976), p. 706, following the reading of Ihde.

of the psychodynamics operative for Abulafia. For the evil that Abulafia envisions as the vengeful demon without, projected upon “the field of the Oedipal complex,” is as well the symbolic mechanism through which, by a process of assimilation, regression is recast as progression. Just as human consciousness, for Ricoeur, ever internally assimilates itself with its symbols, so too does Abulafia proclaim the redemptive incorporation within his own being of that outwardly projected other. Abulafia’s understanding of the messianic dimension of this moment dovetails as well with Ricoeur’s aforementioned reference to it as one of the “eschatology of consciousness.” The eschaton here is not the singular one of linear time but the recurrent one of circular time, as Wolfson suggested.

We may note in conclusion the resemblance between this notion of subjectivized time, rooted as it is in the resurgence of the archetypal, that is put forward by Ricoeur, and Gadamer’s sense that there is in historiography a “temporal fusion of horizons between interpreter and ‘text’ that marks the historicity of consciousness.” The resemblance here is not coincidental, and the results, for our purposes, are parallel. Ricoeur, on the one hand, provides us with a psychoanalytical model remarkably close to what we see in Abulafia, one that will render useful for our purposes the oedipal complex as a constructive model. Gadamer, on the other, locates within the historian’s psyche the very processes of identity formation, of othering discourses, that he would seek to examine in others, embracing them as, not simply inevitable, but as the means by which the historian may come to a “self-

understanding” within his historical context. It is to Abulafia and his own historical context to which we may first now turn.

## Chapter I. Refutation and Absorption; Abulafia's Response to the Christian Context

Modern scholarship on medieval Jewish mysticism has set the stage for a thorough investigation of Abraham Abulafia's complicated relationship toward Christianity. The results of such an angle of approach have been fruitful in the past when applied to theosophical kabbalah, and it is apparent that it should be taken with respect to Abulafia's oeuvre as well.<sup>1</sup> Some suggestive observations concerning Abulafia himself in previous scholarship also support the suspicion that there is much to explore in terms of Abulafia's attitudes toward Christianity, and recent work has begun to open this door.<sup>2</sup> These observations collectively suggest the remarkable breadth and depth of the proliferation of bona fide Christian doctrines in Abulafia's

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<sup>1</sup> I refer most specifically to the chapter "Christian Influences on the *Zohar*" in Liebes' *Studies in the Zohar*. The chapter, significantly, investigates two key zoharic features. One of these concerns zoharic representations of a tripartite divine unity, to include a notion of a messianic "son" as logos. The other concerns formulations, applied to the zoharic sage R. Simeon bar Yohai, that are suggestive of a traditional representation of Jesus as the *ṣaddiq*, or demiurgic righteous one. Both of these features are as well deeply important in Abulafia's work, as we shall see below. As well, Wolfson has elucidated the presence of a closely related Jewish-Christian stratum to the *Bahir*, to be discussed below. See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, p. 84; idem, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 146. The latter's more recent work concerning Jewish mystical conceptions relating to the Christian notion of the enfleshed logos will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter. See for instance, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 236-242, which concerns Abulafia specifically. Green asserted that medieval Jewish kabbalists' characterizations of the *Shekhinah*, the female divine presence, were constructed in response to Christian conceptions of Mary. "*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary, and the *Song of Songs*: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context," *AJS Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Apr., 2002), pp. 1-52.

<sup>2</sup> I allude most specifically to Hames' just published *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*. Though he had begun to broach the issue in some earlier work, this book presents a thorough study of what the author perceives to be Abulafia's relationship to the Franciscans of his day and to Joachimist eschatology; Hames believes that Abulafia had close contact with these groups and that their influence may be detected in Abulafia's own messianic doctrines. Hames contends that prior work on Abulafia has tended to eschew contextual investigation in favor of a "primarily phenomenological" approach, with the result that "...the milieu in which he lived and developed his teachings is, surprisingly, almost totally ignored." See p. 4.



written work and suggest the need for a study of the reasons behind this profusion of Christian themes.

Gershom Scholem delineated, in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a position on Abulafia's relationship to Christianity that subsequent scholarship would substantially undermine. Scholem briefly articulated the perspectives that Abulafia was openly hostile toward Christianity and that traces of Christian doctrine in Abulafia's work should not be taken as suggestive of any favorable disposition toward Christianity. Scholem, criticizing the scholarship of Landauer, who in 1845 ascribed fully Christian beliefs to Abulafia, insisted that Abulafia's writings suggest no real attraction to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> "On the contrary," wrote Scholem, "his [Abulafia's] antagonism to Christianity is very outspoken and intense."

Idel would later suggest that Jesus figured prominently in Abulafia's thought, referring to Jesus' presence within Abulafia's conception of a bifold, demiurgic messiah. Idel would continue, however, to emphasize in Abulafia's thought a traditional Jewish hostility to Jesus, one influenced by the polemical text *Toledot Yeshu*.<sup>4</sup> Abulafia, Idel's work indicates, simply added a mystical dimension to this ancient position. There is here little or no indication that Abulafia was actually influenced by Christian notions of Jesus. Berger, by contrast, had already suggested

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<sup>3</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 129; *ibid.*, p. 377-378 nn. 35, 43. See Raz-Krakotzkin, "'Without Regard for External Considerations' – The Question of Christianity in Scholem and Baer's Writings," *Mada'ey ha-Yahadut* 38 (1998), pp. 73-96 (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus" in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, to be analyzed in detail in Chapter Three, below.

in a very brief article the notion that, for all of his animus to the latter, Abulafia's messianic self-conception was deeply influenced by the Christian image of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> This perception that the influence of Christian doctrine on Abulafia was profound would be carried forward in the work of Wolfson, who noted the important place that Trinitarian doctrines occupy in Abulafia's mystical thought.<sup>6</sup> Recently Wolfson has moved on to observe the presence of an incarnational doctrine in Abulafia's thought.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, Hames has suggested that Abulafia had close ties with Franciscans with Joachimite predilections, that he was influenced by them in the formulation of his messianic conceptions, and that he sought to influence them in that regard as well.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Scholem's observation that Abulafia expressed hostility toward Christianity, it is absolutely true that no modern study of Abulafia can ignore this feature of the literature, which recurs time and again; Abulafia's derogations of Christianity are readily found.<sup>9</sup> It is the dimension of Abulafia's thought lying behind this antagonism, clear traces of which also emerge repeatedly and with an undeniable persistence, that will ultimately concern us here. Nevertheless, it must be agreed that

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<sup>5</sup> Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, edited by J. Blau, P. Friedman, A. Hertzberg and I. Mendelsohn (New York, 1959).

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 131-133 n. 101, to be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> See n. 1.

<sup>8</sup> See n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Abulafia's outward position toward Christianity is consistent with that of the theosophical kabbalah, wherein the non-Jewish nations are conceived of as demonic. Wolfson, "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," p. 135.

any consideration of suggestions of ambivalence toward Christianity in Abulafia's thought must first acknowledge the obvious fact of his apparent disdain for Christianity. In this regard, a complete picture of Abulafia's complex relationship toward Christianity, when it encompasses as well a consideration of Abulafia's cultural context, reveals the considerable extent to which the tenor of Jewish anti-Christian polemics are echoed in Abulafia's writings. That being said, even in the midst of his vituperations against Christianity, we will see that Abulafia not infrequently proffers a somewhat nuanced perspective on the relative status of the gentile world vis à vis Judaism.

Scholem ascribed Abulafia's penchant for Christian motifs and doctrines to what he referred to as Abulafia's "predilection for paradox." Abulafia's interest in key Christian touchstones, Scholem seemed to intend here, resulted simply from his unexplained impulse to synthesize outward contradictions; toward that end alone, Scholem maintained, Abulafia juxtaposed Christian-sounding elements with his attacks upon Christianity. Scholem, in this regard, specifically addresses the appearance of Trinitarian doctrines in Abulafia's corpus. Abulafia, Scholem suggested, always provided clues to his ultimate disinterest in such Christian principles: "He sometimes, indeed intentionally makes use – among many other associations – of formulae which sound quite Trinitarian, immediately giving them a

meaning which has nothing whatsoever to do with the Trinitarian idea of God.”<sup>10</sup> As I have already suggested, Wolfson’s study of these elements suggests, far from Scholem’s contention, that they must be taken seriously, that answers should be sought for their wide proliferation in Abulafia’s extant corpus, and that a mere “predilection for paradox” on Abulafia’s part will not suffice as an explanation. The appearance of these Trinitarian doctrines in Abulafia’s writings will ultimately provide us with a springboard, via their interconnectedness to other themes prevalent in Abulafia’s work, to the broader reappraisal of Abulafia’s relationship to Christianity.

As implied above, I believe it is useful to begin an investigation of Abulafia’s attitudes toward Christianity by first placing Abulafia’s anti-Christian rhetoric within its contemporary socio-cultural context. Following this, it will be possible to focus upon Scholem’s observation that Abulafia nevertheless very obviously incorporated Christian motifs into his own thought. Such scrutiny, as others have implied, will begin to suggest that Abulafia’s recourse to Christian motifs, far from being dismissible, in fact must inform any true understanding of the very basis of Abulafia’s mystical thought and practice.

### **Abulafia’s Polemics – and their Mitigating Features**

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<sup>10</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 129. See also, idem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia*, p. 184, where Scholem describes Abulafia’s trinities as “anti-Christian.”

There is little that we can say for certain regarding Abulafia's personal encounters with Christians beyond what he himself tells us (and even there a healthy skepticism is in order). What Abulafia does tell us is that, following his departure from Spain, he was imprisoned by the Pope's forces but, through a fortuitous circumstance, was released shortly thereafter.<sup>11</sup> He also tells us that he had theological discussions with Christians, and, following his departure from Spain, he had some Christian students, of whom he had a favorable impression.<sup>12</sup> Assuredly, these reports from Abulafia relate two radically different modes of experience, occurring within two different social contexts. The former experience bore a violent, coercive cast; indeed, Abulafia, as he relates it, very nearly lost his life in the episode. Contrariwise, the latter encounters, because they did not bring Abulafia into conflict with the Christian political apparatus, appear to imply a salubrious intellectual discourse, one that seemingly produced positive results from Abulafia's perspective. Christians in these instances must have been favorably impressed by some of Abulafia's pronouncements, at least in his own estimation.

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<sup>11</sup> Scholem summarizes Abulafia's account of these events. *Major Trends*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Hames' *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism* puts forth the thesis that Abulafia's contacts with Christian monks and clerics were close enough that Abulafia was able both to learn much about Joachimist apocalypticism and to attempt to influence his Franciscan neighbors, particularly in southern Italy and Sicily. Regarding Abulafia's stated interactions with Christians, see pp. 43, 100-103. Scholem had observed Abulafia's attestation to some level of intellectual discourse with Christians and had noted as well some surprisingly favorable appraisals of some Christians on Abulafia's part. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 129. Idel had noted Abulafia's apparent interest in interacting with Christians. *Messianic Mystics*, p. 99. See also idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 47. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 188-189, to be discussed below.

These two very different types of encounters with Christianity undergone by Abulafia dovetail well with a more broad picture of Abulafia's cultural milieu, one wherein Jews seem to have met with the gamut of possible experiences in their interactions with Christians, ranging from outright violence and religious persecution, on the one hand, to friendly and mutually beneficial contacts on the other. Of particular interest to us should be that context within which Abulafia found himself in the crucial moments leading up to his revelatory and life-changing experiences in the 1270s. Although religious tensions were on the rise in Spain during this period,<sup>13</sup> one cannot overlook the level of interreligious cordiality and cooperation also present in daily life. The picture that Nirenberg presents regarding Aragon in the fourteenth century seems to have held for the late thirteenth as well:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chazan suggests that these tensions, stemming from the increasing aggressiveness of the Christian proselytizing in Spain, may have influenced Abulafia in his development of messianic predilections. Although Abulafia's mysticism, Chazan observes, was naturally disposed to a messianic element and although he was to a certain degree simply a participant in the messianic fervor of the day, "Abulafia also may have been reacting to the new challenges posed by a militant missionizing Christianity..." as may have been the case for the theosophical kabbalists in Spain as well. Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, pp. 190-191. Lasker suggests that the translation of the Jewish polemical work *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer* into Hebrew from Arabic in Spain sometime before 1170 already suggests its need; that is, Christians were already beginning to increasingly apply religious pressures to the Jews at this date. Lasker, "Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point: Jewish Evidence from the Twelfth Century," *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1996), p. 166. By 1170, the Jewish polemical works *Milhamot ha-Shem* and *Sefer ha-Brit* had both appeared.

<sup>14</sup> Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 157. Nirenberg notes the cosmopolitan, urban and thoroughly acculturated quality to the Jews of Barcelona during this period, a quality heightened by the close ties between the Jewish community and the king. Ibid., p. 27. Indeed, such was the level of this acculturation that Nahmanides viewed it as excessive. Ibid., p. 28 n. 33. See also Baer, *The History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, p. 239, regarding the similar sentiment of Todros Halevi. Maimonides had been fearful that intermarriage would too often result from intercourse with gentiles. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, pp. 133-134. Economic interdependence was a significant social force. Ibid., p. 38. For the increasing level of close interaction between Christians and Jews at this time, see also, Marcus, "Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," pp. 209, 223. Nirenberg suggests that violence against Jews was at times more a result of their "insider" than their

Despite repeated ecclesiastical condemnation, Christians, Muslims, and Jews drank together, gambled together, went to war together, lived in the same neighborhoods (sometimes in the same house), established business partnerships, engaged in all forms of commercial exchange, even watched each other's religious ceremonies and processions.<sup>15</sup>

Burns discusses a similar state of affairs for Mediterranean Europe more generally, as against the less tolerant and well-integrated Northern Europe. For the former region, Burns relates, the Jew was "valued...as a significant and active component of its central activity."<sup>16</sup> Burns describes an intensely dynamic, energized and pluralistic culture, particularly during the thirteenth century, before religious

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"outsider" status; as the king's legal property, the Jews became targets for violence focused indirectly upon the king in both France and Spain. Ibid., pp. 48, 72. The level of influence of the Jewish community upon monarchs who benefited economically from their presence is apparent in King James' reversal of policy concerning forced preaching by Christians in synagogues. Chazan posits Jewish lobbying as the reason for James' prohibition of compulsory Jewish attendance at these sermons. Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, p. 85. Chazan observes a broad level of popular hostility toward Jews, one which governments frequently worked to temper. Idem, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, p. 10. As economic conditions worsened toward the end of the thirteenth century, Chazan observes, resentment toward the Jews rose and its influence over the authorities in western Europe increased. Ibid., pp. 313-314. As well, the protected status of the Jew, which came in large measure from Augustine's doctrine of the Jews as witnesses to Christianity's veracity, was to some extent called into question in the 1240s, when the Christian examination of the Talmud commissioned by the papacy resulted in the decision that the Judaism propounded by the rabbis was not the Judaism of Scripture, and therefore was not deserving of the protection advocated by Augustine. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*, pp. 326-329.

<sup>15</sup> Interested in Jewish kabbalistic absorption of marian themes, Green noted the degree to which such Christian devotional symbols would have been visible to Jews on churches, in shrines, and in religious processions, among many other places. Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the *Song of Songs*: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context," *AJS Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Apr., 2002), pp. 27-28. Writes Green, "All this was seen by the Jews, who could not but have been aware of this new outgrowth of pious devotion among their Christian neighbors. While they might have been theologically offended by what seemed like worship of an admittedly human woman...I would suggest that there might also have been an attractive side to the love, beauty and simple piety associated with the cult of the Virgin."

<sup>16</sup> Burns, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: Societies in Symbiosis* (New York: 1984), p. 126.

tensions multiplied.<sup>17</sup> The thirteenth century he sees as a time in which “The equilibrium between Jew and Christian, and the factors of shared experience, for the moment outweighed the elements of difference and hostility.”<sup>18</sup> The Jew’s role in the vibrant economy of the region at that time was, as in many other phases of life, an integrated one.<sup>19</sup> The picture of the Jew as cut off from cultural discourse and rendered a pariah by his designated role as money-lender is, Burns says, an inaccurate one for Valencia.<sup>20</sup>

He [the Jew] was not so isolated a figure as he once seemed, cut off in an onerous financial role, presumably an object of resentment and envy...Even as financier and tax collector in Valencia, the Jew was in the mainstream of a common Christian activity. His operations there assimilated him to, rather than divided him from, his fellow Valencians.

A look to the modern scholarship on the subject reveals that the picture of thirteenth century interreligious relations in Italy and Sicily - the two most important locales for Abulafia’s creative literary output, outside of Spain - is, as with the case of Spain, a complicated one. There is ample evidence for both conviviality and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Burns relates several accounts of Jews and Christians amicably doing business together, and of Jews accumulating impressive wealth in the process. Ibid., pp. 141, 144-145, 148. Baer notes the resemblance between the lifestyles of Spanish Christians and Jews at this time. Baer, *The History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, p. 197. In a number of Spanish towns at this time, there was no separate quarter for the Jews. Ibid., p. 198. Baer also describes wealthy Jews attended to by both Jewish and Christian courtiers. Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> Burns, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: Societies in Symbiosis* (New York: 1984), p. 133.



hostility at both the popular and governmental levels in both the Jewish and the Christian communities in the region.

David Abulafia observes that, during the time of Abraham Abulafia's sojourn in Sicily, Jews continued to speak in Arabic there, despite the Christian accession. Nevertheless, "...they do not seem to have been socially or economically isolated from their Christian neighbors, at least in the smaller towns, until the mid-fourteenth century."<sup>21</sup> They engaged in the same range of occupations as Christians, and, in the case of the Sicilian town of Erice, Jews lived side by side with Christians until the turn of the fourteenth century, when, as with other communities in the region, hostilities began to deepen.<sup>22</sup> Prior to this, the general picture is one of vibrant interaction as well with Catalan Jews, who came to Majorca and then to Sicily in increasing numbers.<sup>23</sup>

A similar picture holds for southern Italy prior to the 1290s. As David Abulafia writes, "There is little evidence for popular hostility to the Jews, whose communities in Apulia were very ancient. All the signs are that this campaign was led from the front by the royal court and by the Dominicans..."<sup>24</sup> The campaign to which Abulafia refers was one of mass conversion of the Jews of the region,

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<sup>21</sup> D. Abulafia, "The end of Muslim Sicily," in *Commerce and Conquest in the Mediterranean, 1100-1500* (Hampshire: 1993), pp. 117-118.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, "Una comunità ebraica della Sicilia occidentale: Erice 1298-1304," in *Commerce and Conquest in the Mediterranean, 1100-1500* (Hampshire: 1993), p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, "Monarchs and minorities in the Christian western Mediterranean around 1300: Lucera and its analogues," in *Mediterranean Encounters, Economic, Religious, Political, 1100-1550* (Burlington: 2000), p. 253.

instituted by Charles II on the heels of his expulsion of the Jews from Anjou and Maine in 1289. Charles' justification for these new policies was three-fold. First, he claimed that Jews sought to lead Christians from their religion. Second, they committed usury. And, third, they engaged in the seduction of Christian maidens.<sup>25</sup>

If there was anything to Charles' charge of sexual promiscuity between Jews and Christians, we do find contemporary evidence for it in both Italy and Spain.<sup>26</sup>

Toaff writes that, in Italy, this phenomenon resulted from a high level of Jewish acculturation to Christendom: "...the Jews of late medieval Italy were dispersed throughout hundreds of small and isolated communities, immersed in a Christian society whose power of attraction could make itself felt well in excess of an already crushing numerical superiority."<sup>27</sup> Though there is comparatively less surviving early textual evidence, Toaff writes, given the greater level of conviviality in the thirteenth- as opposed to later centuries, one would expect that the degree of sexual interaction between Jews and Christians would have been greater during the earlier period.<sup>28</sup> As far as the later testimony is concerned,<sup>29</sup>

Almost everywhere in Umbria we find Jews sentenced to financial punishment for having sexual relations with Christian women...A

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 234, 250-251. Chazan, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, pp. 314-315.

<sup>26</sup> For the situation in Spain, see above, n. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Toaff, *Love, Work, and Death: Jewish Life in Medieval Umbria* (Oregon: 1996), p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 7. For the same state of affairs with respect to documentary evidence in Spain, see Burns, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: Societies in Symbiosis* (New York: 1984), p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

survey of the other Italian regions with centers of Jewish settlement reveals a similar picture at this time...Only rarely did there seem to be any possibility that the accusation might be punished by anything more than a fine.<sup>30</sup>

Toaff writes that “extent and frequency of these relations...is a fact that cannot be ignored by anyone who wants to form an accurate picture of everyday relationships between Jews and Christians in late medieval Italy.”<sup>31</sup>

In other phases of life as well, Toaff points to the level of conviviality between Jews and Christians in Italy. Fourteenth century friars were treated by a Jewish doctor, with whom they also drank wine.<sup>32</sup> The keeping of Christian servants by Jews was a seemingly widespread and commonly accepted practice.<sup>33</sup> On the whole, Toaff maintains that, despite resistance from governmental and religious authorities, “...in daily practice their relations [those of Jews and Christians] were marked by a familiarity and respect...”<sup>34</sup> Again, it would appear that this tendency would have been much more prevalent in the Italy of Abulafia’s day than that of the fourteenth- or fifteenth centuries.

Against this backdrop, we may constructively analyze some key passages from Abulafia’s oeuvre with an eye to discerning how his attitudes may have been

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<sup>30</sup> Toaff does point to a mid-thirteenth century legal ruling in Perugia. There, a Christian woman took up with a Jew and abandoned her family. The woman’s Christian husband found his recourse to legal authorities futile, with the result that he attacked the Jewish man. The court in this case fined the Jewish man 100 lire for adultery, the Christian man 25 lire for assault. Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 79, 166.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

shaped by this wider cultural context. What are most manifest are those overtly negative and hostile appraisals of Christianity of which we have spoken. These conform remarkably well to those attitudes that seem to have prevailed as well in the larger Jewish community. Although more tempered and somewhat more approving remarks Abulafia reserves primarily for Islam,<sup>35</sup> two tendencies will be seen to mitigate against the ostensibly antagonistic stance that Abulafia takes toward Christendom: one is the type of credence that Abulafia does accord to the wisdom possessed by the sages of the seventy nations, a classification which includes Christians, and the other, the chief subject of this dissertation, is the intense influence that Christian theological principles had upon Abulafia's own formulations, an influence which penetrated to the very core of his esoteric doctrine.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The probable influence of the Sufi doctrine of ibn al-‘Arabi upon Abulafia has been discussed by Hames; “A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia’s teachings,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006). A tempered position regarding Islam is occasionally apparent in the *Zohar*. See Wolfson, “Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology,” p. 135 n. 14, p. 150 n. 56. Lasker notes that, on the whole for this period, there are relatively few Jewish anti-Muslim polemical statements, either because the two groups lived cooperatively together, or “because theologically there is not such a great disparity between Judaism and Islam.” Lasker, “The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (1990 - 1991), p. 122 n. 3.

<sup>36</sup> As regards the relationship between cultural interactions and the inevitable penetration of doctrines belonging to the other into one’s own religious identity, see Marcus, “Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe,” p. 210, where the author proffers the notion of “inward acculturation,” in which alien doctrines are internalized without any damage to one’s own identity. This internalization can take the form of a polemical turn or it can occur in a “neutralized manner.” A major theme of this paper, by contrast, will be the psychological threat that such a manifest proclivity for absorption of doctrines belonging to the other did pose, for Abulafia, to his own sense of his Jewish identity. This threat we find evidenced in Abulafia’s writings, in a variety of ways, in the form of anxiety concerning the potential loss of his Jewish identity through the temptations posed by Christianity. As regards “inward acculturation,” Marcus points to the example of a contemporary Jewish text which, he observes, stylized a rabbi as a Christ figure. *Ibid.*, p. 212. This observation is noteworthy in terms of the suggestion, to be discussed, that Abulafia stylized himself as Jesus.

The thirteenth century saw the intensification of rationalistic theological debate between Jews, Christians and Muslims.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Barcelona in the 1270s, the apparent time and place of Abulafia's initial and most seminal mystical experiences, was avowedly a key nexus for this mode of discourse.<sup>38</sup> It was as well one of the locales for forced preaching by Christians in Jewish synagogues.<sup>39</sup> Given that this is the precise moment of the onset of Abulafia's self-characterized battle with his idolatrous inner demons, one should at the very least wonder if it is possible that Abulafia may have been influenced by what he may have heard in the synagogue

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<sup>37</sup> On the role that a rising rationalism played in the polemical religious discourse of the thirteenth century, see Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 15, 17. Glick observes that Christian-Jewish debate appears often to have been impromptu, good natured and cordial. Such an inference is in accord with some of Abulafia's claims regarding his own interactions with Christians. See, Glick, "'My Master, the Jew': Observations on Interfaith Scholarly Interaction in the Middle Ages" in Hames, ed., *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, pp. 158, 160, 178. For the rise of rationalistic polemics beginning with Anslem of Canterbury, see Funkenstein, "Changes in the Patterns of Christian anti-Jewish Polemics in the Twelfth Century," pp. 129-132. Lasker notes the countering of Christian *ratio* with Jewish *sekhel* already in twelfth century Jewish polemical works. Lasker, "Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point: Jewish Evidence from the Twelfth Century," *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1996), p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note Jeremy Cohen's surmise that, in the aftermath of the Barcelona Disputation, it was R. Solomon ibn Adret who debated with the Christian polemicist Friar Raymond Martin. "The Christian Adversary of Solomon ben Adret," *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXI (1980-81). This is significant in that it was Adret who placed the ban on Abulafia for his heretical doctrines. Regardless of whether Cohen's contention is correct (see the cautionary remarks in Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 139-140), it is apparent that Adret was perhaps the single most key figure of his generation in parrying Christian argumentation directed toward Jews. Hames notes that Adret was also involved in theological discussion with the Christian Ramon Lull. *The Art of Conversion*, pp. 109-115. Lull as well presented Christian sermons in synagogues. Adret as well reportedly debated with a Muslim, contending that the messiah had not yet come. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 198. Nahmanides had argued the same point in the Barcelona Disputation, while Abulafia's messianic self-conception would have been offensive to both. For Adret's views of Abulafia and Abulafia's response, see, Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 44-46.

<sup>39</sup> Chazan notes that such forced preaching took place in Barcelona following the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 and that there are additional accounts of such preaching in Barcelona and elsewhere in the 1270s and as early as 1242. *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 43, 46; idem, "Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply," *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), pp. 439, 457.

context, though we must hasten to add that such a scenario as regards Abulafia is purely conjectural. Nevertheless, Abulafia's thought may in some ways be seen to mirror the argumentation propounded by Jewish polemicists such as Nahmanides, as exemplified, for instance, in the famous Barcelona Disputation of 1263, so there is evidence that Abulafia was aware of the polemical discourse in his immediate vicinity.<sup>40</sup>

In terms of the rationalistic thrust of the contemporary polemical discourse, it is noteworthy that the very philosophical framework within which Abulafia's mystical system operates, that of Aristotelianism filtered through a Maimonidean interpretation, lends itself from the outset to the notion that Jewish mystical revelation is of a rational and intellective nature.<sup>41</sup> What Abulafia strives for is the ultimate realization of rationality, nothing other than a conjunction of his own human intellect with the divine Active Intellect. Abulafia understands Judaism as rational

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<sup>40</sup> Note, for instance, that Abulafia sought to present himself to the Pope, seemingly in line with Friar Paul's assertion that the rabbinic aggadah concerning the messiah's presence in Rome, to be discussed below, was to be taken literally. Abulafia, in line with Nahmanides, however, would naturally have maintained that the messiah had not already appeared in Rome in antiquity; rather, the coming messiah (Abulafia himself, in his own estimation) was to do just this. Nahmanides maintained that the messiah would perform signs when in Rome, a notion which Abulafia relates to his own mission. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 128; Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 61; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 55. See also Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 69, 87. Here R. Isaac b. Yedaiah's *Commentary on the Aggadot of the Talmud* is discussed. This mid-thirteenth century text suggests that there was a widely disseminated Jewish belief, following after the talmudic reference to which Nahmanides addressed himself, that the true messiah would present himself in Rome. At times Abulafia deviates from the approach taken by Nahmanides, seeming, in fact, to recast the approach taken by Christians in the Disputation, albeit for his own purposes. So for instance, while Nahmanides blunts the Christian claim that the messiah possesses an ontological status above that of the angels by asserting that all of Israel enjoys this status, Abulafia holds as a core doctrine the notion that he himself has achieved, through his mystical practice, a state that is at once divine and messianic. See Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 91-92 for Nahmanides' argumentation on this subject.

<sup>41</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 79.

and intellectual, as against the carnality and animalism of Christianity, particular insofar as such a conjunction is possible for Jews.<sup>42</sup> Several interrelated passages from Abulafia's *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh* approach these issues. Abulafia constructs an utterly dichotomous picture of Israel and the other nations; while the former is intellectual to the point of being angelic, the latter is brutish and demonic.

To begin, Abulafia explains that *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, one of his commentaries to Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, stemmed from<sup>43</sup>

... my observing that the root is forgotten, and the inconsequential is remembered; and the root is the knowledge of the name, and the apprehension of His actions, and the preservation of His *mišvot*, may He be blessed. Because from this the enlightened one will inherit the final reward, and this is the life of the soul, the eternal life to come. And the inconsequential is all that stands against this, and which obstructs its existence, [so that he] seeks power and honor and pursues pleasure, the sphere of food and drink and sexual intercourse and the cleaving to things of the body. And these are matters which are not natural or necessary; rather they damage and kill the soul, and neither do they sustain the body. And thus they are all evil. And this is as the holy Rav [Maimonides] perceived this evil matter, which is very foreign from our united nation, which was chosen by God in the good days of old. And he [Rav] saw the mass of people who became wise from it, who had already returned the evil sphere mentioned [*'asher kevar shav ha-galgal ha-ra' ha-nizkar*], that is, the sphere of the evil inclination, over lusts. And their sphere is like the sphere of the other nations of the world, which were not chosen by God. Concerning this, the necessity of that true supernal efflux impelled him [*heniy'u 'al zeh hekhrāḥ ha-shefā' ha-hu' ha-'amyty ha-'elyon*],

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<sup>42</sup> Wolfson observes the zoharic contention that the distinctive marker of Judaism, the covenant of circumcision, renders the Jew fully human, while the other nations, consequently, are beasts. See, for instance, idem, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 83, 89.

<sup>43</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 4a-b; printed edition, p. 5.

which chose us from every people and language, to compose that honored book [the *Guide of the Perplexed*].

That base and non-intellective sphere to which Abulafia refers is that of those who do not heed the *mišvot*. Those who do, pious Jews, are those who are enlightened and who merit eternal life. Those who partake of the lower sphere are “obstructed” from receiving the beneficence of the divine sphere. They are wholly given over to carnal matters such as food, drink and bodily pleasures. These indulgences, Abulafia relates, are actually deadly to both soul and body because of their detachment from the intellective sphere, that upon which true and eternal life, that of the soul, depends. The lesser and carnal sphere Abulafia identifies with the evil inclination, which he says here, is the province of the other nations of the world. Maimonides himself, as Abulafia explains it here, exemplifies the intellective status of the Jewish people, because the inspiration for his composition of the *Guide of the Perplexed* stemmed from “that true supernal efflux” whose source is the Active Intellect. Insofar as a conjunction with the divine Active Intellect is at the root of Abulafia’s conceptualization of his own mystical praxis, we may understand his activities, in his own estimation, to represent the very quintessence of the maximization of human intellective capacity. By contrast, the threat of conjunction with the base and carnal – in fact, demonic – aspect of the Active Intellect is, we shall see, one and the same, for Abulafia, as the falling under the sway of idolatry and, more specifically, the influence of Jesus.



Much later in *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Abulafia returns again to the theme of Christendom's carnality. Here, the issue is cast in terms of the Jew's covenantal relationship with God, as against the submission to the idolatrous impulse, the latter exemplified by Esau. Recourse to the figure of Esau as a reference to Christendom, we must bear in mind, is a commonplace in Abulafia's writing.<sup>44</sup> Concerning Deut. 32:8 and the inheritance of the nations, Abulafia writes,<sup>45</sup>

Regarding this it already instructs us concerning the secret of providence with respect to the whole world, and concerning the image of Jacob our father engraved on the throne of glory...And I will explain to you this secret. The image of one father, simple and whole, and his bed is complete, and he "dwells in tents" (Gen. 25:27), meaning a house of study, that is, he studies and teaches Torah. And he had one brother who was born with him from his mother's womb, and thus it reads (Hos. 12:4), "He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he strove with God," because of his dwelling in tents. And from the womb there was between them strife and warfare... "And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger'" (Gen. 25:23). These are Metatron and Sandalfon, who are the two ministering angels, one good and one evil; the name of the righteous one is Jacob, and the name of the wicked one is Esau. And Esau went forth first by means of the blood, and thus (Gen. 25:25), "he was red all over like a hairy garment [*ke-'aderet sayar*]," powerful [*'adir*], mighty and strong like the image of a goat [*se'ir*] and the image of a demon and satan and the destroyer of all, lord of the storm wind. He is a hairy man. "And after that came out his brother, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel" (25:26). "His hand" is his strength [*gevurato*] and power, it attaches to and is connected with and grasps the wheel of his brother Esau. He is the lord of action [or,

<sup>44</sup> Some examples of this will be discussed in Chapter Four. See, for instance, *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 304a; printed edition, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 70a-b; printed edition, p. 123.

perhaps, actualization; *ba'al ma'aseh*). “Heel” [*aqev*] should be read “cubic” [*me'ugav*], and it is the end of the supernal ones. “A hairy [*sa'ir*] man” (27:11): He attacks [*mista'er*], and his end is to die. “[And Esau said, ‘Behold, I am at the point of death,] and what profit shall this birthright do to me?’” And it was because of this that his end was to die. And although he was first-born, “Behold, I am at the point of death,” and he had no birthright and no blessing.

Abulafia initial allusion here to the traditional demiurgical motif of the image of Jacob engraved upon the throne of glory requires some analysis.<sup>46</sup> The superior, indeed divine, status of Israel - the name that designates both Jacob and the Jewish people - to the other nations is here implied. Abulafia's seemingly obscure derivation of this allusion to the image of Jacob, based upon Deut. 32:8, may be understood from his statement that the verse "...relates the twelve diagonal boundaries to the twelve tribes." The reference to the twelve diagonal boundaries is derived from *Sefer Yeşirah*, Chapter One, where the three dimensional created world, encapsulated in the six possible permutations of the letters YHV of the Tetragrammaton, is implicitly conceived of in terms of the twelve diagonal lines comprised in a six sided cube. Abulafia's subsequent statement regarding Jacob, “He is the lord of action [or, perhaps, actualization; *ba'al ma'aseh*]. ‘Heel’ [*aqev*, from Gen. 25:26] should be read ‘cubic’ [*me'ugav*], and it is the end of the supernal ones” may then be understood more clearly. Jacob is associated with that which is “cubic,” on the basis of a letter manipulation, because he is in possession of “the end of the supernal

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<sup>46</sup> See, Wolfson, “The Image of Jacob Engraved upon the Throne,” in *Along the Path*. See also, idem, “By Way of Truth,” pp. 149-150, for this motif as it appears in Nahmanides' thought.

ones.” The “supernal ones” are the *sefirot*, the last of which is *Malkhut* or “Kingdom.” Thus Jacob is as well the “lord of action,” for he represents the Active Intellect, reigning over Creation.<sup>47</sup> As well, Abulafia, following in the theosophical tradition, frequently links the *sefira Tif'eret* with Jacob.<sup>48</sup> Taken together then, Jacob’s heavenly overlordship over the nations is expressed in terms of his divine rulership over *Malkhut* and in terms of his mastery of the three dimensional lower world. The latter is possessed of a cubic geometry, with twelve diagonals, which Abulafia, appropriately, further describes in terms of the twelve tribes stemming from Jacob. We have here already, then, an esoteric proof-text for Judaism’s exalted status with respect to the other nations.<sup>49</sup>

That Abulafia has in mind a sefirotic conception of Jacob is next reinforced by his emphasis on Jacob’s “dwelling in tents.” As Abulafia relates elsewhere,<sup>50</sup> he takes the scriptural phrase, in keeping with kabbalistic tradition, to refer to Jacob’s reconciling within himself the two opposing attributes embodied in the *sefirot Hesed* and *Gevurah*, such that Jacob stands as the perfected androgynous man, reconstituted in the image of Adam. However, the intellective status of Jacob/Israel in this perfected state is expressed in the current context with the idea that the tents

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<sup>47</sup> For the Active Intellect as *Malkhut*, see Idel, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 89 (in Hebrew).

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, *Ve-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, in Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer*, p. 23, to be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere Abulafia frames the relegation of the nations to the physical world, with Israel assigned a higher status, in terms of the attribution of matter to the nations but form to Israel. *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 53a; printed edition, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> See *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 57a-b; printed edition, pp. 61-62, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

symbolize Jacob's endeavors in the *bet midrash*.<sup>51</sup> Jacob's status as the supernal intellectual principle, that is, as the Active Intellect, is next reemphasized with the statement that Jacob is Metatron. This angelic and demiurgic entity Abulafia regularly identifies with the Active Intellect.<sup>52</sup> The identification of Esau with Sandalfon is telling in that this angelic entity Abulafia understands as the demonic component of the Active Intellect.<sup>53</sup> Chapter Three of this dissertation will be largely given over to an analysis of Abulafia's identification of this figure with Jesus. While the Jewish people partake of divine intellection, then, Esau – Christendom – is of an explicitly satanic cast in the current instance.

Esau's demonic nature, in addition to being idolatrous, as expressed earlier in the passage, is as well animalistic. So we find an emphasis placed on the scriptural discussion of Esau as hairy. Esau is also linked here with vaginal blood: "Esau went forth first by means of the blood," writes Abulafia. The significance of this statement rests on two levels. First, to be associated with blood is to be seen as under the sway

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<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Rashi on Gen. 25:27: Jacob studied Torah while Esau pursued idolatry.

<sup>52</sup> Abulafia was preceded in this identification, in Jewish mystical circles, by Isaac ha-Cohen, by members of the *Iyyun* Circle, and by his teacher, Baruch Togarmi. Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 88 (in Hebrew). See also, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 59 n. 167, 71 n. 217, 83 n. 264. It is noteworthy in the current context that Israel is an alternate appellation used by Abulafia to refer to the Active Intellect; *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, Abulafia forges the identification of Israel with Metatron and the nations with Sandalfon through a *gematria*. The phrases "Israel, nations (*goyim*)" and "Metatron and Sandalfon" have the same numerical value (600). *Hotam ha-Haftarah*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 33b; printed edition, p. 127. For Sandalfon as the demonic component of the Active Intellect, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 144 n. 135. Idel, *Studies in Ecsatatic Kabbalah*, p. 77. Sandalfon is referred to as the Prince of the Backside (*'Ahor*), as against Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance; *idem*, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 106 (in Hebrew).

of the animal impulse. This notion of man's base nature being rooted in the heat of his blood is a common one in medieval literature, rooted in medical theory going back to antiquity. Both Christians and Jews traded in accusations that the other was to be linked with attributes associated with blood, and particularly the most unclean blood of all, that of menstruation.<sup>54</sup> Such notions, in turn, were coupled with accusations concerning a proclivity for bloodshed.<sup>55</sup> The animalistic associations for

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<sup>54</sup> For the Christian side of this argument, see Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," p. 275, where anal bleeding, ascribed to some Jewish men and to heretics by Christians, is related to the Christian conception of the Jew as responsible for Jesus' murder. One tradition thus had it that Jewish men bled annually at Easter. The *Zohar* relates that during their sojourn in Egypt, Israelite men and women alike bore the stigma of menstrual impurity. Koren, "'The Woman from whom God Wanders': The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999, pp. 147-148. We may see here both the potential again for men to be associated with the impure feminine blood and the association of the religious other - in this case, Egypt, or, most likely, Christendom - with this feminine impurity; the Israelite men were so afflicted only when in Egypt.

<sup>55</sup> The connection between the impurity of menstrual blood and murder may be seen in the thought of Eleazar of Worms. Although not specifically referring to the gentiles in this instance, he related the blood of the menstruant to murder; menstruation stems from Eve's sin, which led to the mortality of Adam. *Ibid.*, p. 121. In terms of a murderous nature linked specifically to Christians, Abulafia states that the Christians failed to heed his message to them because of their violent tendencies: "But they did not return to God because they trusted in their swords and their bows..." Jellinek, "Sefer ha-Ôt," p. 76; cited by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 43. Nahmanides weds the notion of Christians' perceived murderous nature to their terrestrial ascendancy, essentially debunking the Christian effort to use their power as a proof-text for their having won God's favor. As well, he relates their murderous nature to their wider carnality: "Indeed the Christians spill blood more than the other peoples, while at the same time they are sexually promiscuous." Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 95; Roth, "The Disputation of Barcelona (1263)," *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1950), p. 130. See also Marcus, "Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," pp. 212-213, for a contemporary Jewish discussion concerning an instance of Christian persecution of Jews. There Esau, Christendom, is characterized as violent in nature. See Cuffel, "Filthy Words/Filthy Bodies: Gendering Disgust in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Jewish-Christian Polemic," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2002, pp. 182, 405, 442, for the discussion of Christians as bestial and violent. Nirenberg notes one rabbi's claim, delineated in graphic terms, that Christian sexual skills were superior to those of Jewish men, to the point where Jewish women are lured to Christian men. *Communities of Violence*, p. 157 n. 111. In this we can see both associations of Christians with the carnal and anxiety regarding the sexual temptations posed by the religious other. Anxiety regarding the sexual dimension of the enticements posed by the religious other will occupy us greatly in the next chapter. It appears to have been a major feature of the thirteenth century Spanish cultural landscape. See, *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135, 142, 152, 158. Nirenberg suggests that the prospect of sexual intercourse with the religious other engenders anxiety

Esau are reinforced elsewhere by Abulafia when he characterizes the former as murderous; not only is he a killer, but, even worse, he represents the idolatrous world in its engagement in child sacrifice.<sup>56</sup> In this way Abulafia's argumentation is consistent with the wider polemical milieu. As well, Abulafia conceived of blood, following in the Aristotelian tradition, to be the locus of the imagination, the source of man's evil nature.<sup>57</sup>

The hot-blooded nature of Esau, that is, the carnal predilections of Christianity, is contrasted sharply by Abulafia with a conception of the religion of the pious, the Jews, whose devotion is of an intellective nature:

Worship of God out of love is the most desirable worship and the one received in truth, and it is the most perfect and quintessential, because of which all intellective life was created, and which makes man man. And it is known and apparent to all who possess knowledge that this true worship is nothing other than the knowledge of wisdom and the soul's becoming acclimated to the knowledge of this inner knowledge.<sup>58</sup>

Abulafia contends that it is love that underlies the pietistic lifestyle, love which is drawn here into a connectedness with the acquisition of wisdom and

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because it threatens to break down group identity through the undermining of a sense of distinctiveness from other groups.

<sup>56</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 56b, 57b; printed edition, pp. 60, 61-62, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>57</sup> Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 102 (in Hebrew). The contrast of blood and ink, imagination and intellect, respectively, will be discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>58</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 69b; printed edition, p. 117. Parallel formulations are present in both rabbinic and zoharic literature. See, Wolfson, "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," pp. 138-141.

knowledge, that is, with Torah study, the activity with which Jacob was associated. So it is that the basis for this amorous worship is to be found in the performance of the *mišvot*, a direct contradiction to the Christian perspective that service out of love renders obsolete the literal adherence, embodied in rabbinism, to legalistic intricacies.<sup>59</sup> Acceptance of the yoke of the Torah, that is, adherence to the *mišvot*, refines the soul and renders one fully intellective, that is to say, as we shall see again and again in Abulafia's thought, it precipitates a cleaving to the Active Intellect and affords the pious eternal life in the world to come. Here Abulafia's words may be read as an implicit response to Christian argumentation: Christian might, like Esau's brutish nature, should not be read as an expression of God's favor.<sup>60</sup> Rather, gluttony

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<sup>59</sup> In *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fols. 107b-108a; printed edition, p. 48, Abulafia indicates his awareness of the Christian position on the *mišvot*: "And the Christians say that their messiah said to them, together with his disciples, that the Torah is truthful and that it is proper to honor its words, because its words are the words of the living God, except that some of the *mišvot* that are in it should not be understood literally [*she- 'einam ke-feshutam*]." Interestingly, however, Abulafia suggests that he had conversations with Christians who saw the matter properly, meaning that they understood that there were three levels to an understanding of Torah, the literal, the allegorical and the prophetic: "And there is no doubt that there are among the Christians some sages who know this secret and they spoke with me secretly and revealed to me that this is their understanding without a doubt." Ibid. See Wolfson's discussion of these passages, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 188-189. For medieval Christian anti-legalistic polemics, see Sapir Abulafia, "Jewish-Christian Disputations and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," pp. 109-113. In this context, Jewish legalism is seen as carnal.

<sup>60</sup> Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 11, notes Augustine's argument that the lowly status of the Jew and the rising power of Christendom were indicative of the passage of God's favor to the latter. The twelfth century Jewish texts *Milhamot ha-Shem* and *Sefer ha-Brit* had both addressed this issue, maintaining that the power distribution of the day was merely a temporary state of affairs, pending the messiah's arrival. Ibid., p. 20. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 53, 65 and 64, where Chazan notes that the task of rebutting Christian arguments concerning their ascendancy is a "major preoccupation" in *Milhemet Mišvah*. One Jewish strategy was to point out that the Christians once argued the opposing perspective, that their willingness to suffer marked the truth of their beliefs. Lasker, "The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (1990 - 1991), p. 130.

and all things linked with the terrestrial kingdom are to be associated with this world alone, and not with the reward of heaven, granted to those who are like Jacob.<sup>61</sup>

The second signification of Esau's going "forth by means of the blood" also has an important polemical basis. Jewish polemicists targeted for anti-Christian invective what they described as the unclean nature of Jesus' birth. They placed a strong emphasis on what they insisted must have been a feature of Jesus' birth: the blood normally present during childbirth. They insisted that Jesus was born like any other child, in a state of impurity. In this way they sought to counter the Christian doctrines of the virgin birth and of the corporealized divinity. For how, they argued, could the divine be born into what they characterized as a filthy state?<sup>62</sup> This formed

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<sup>61</sup> In the *Zohar* as well, Esau is associated with gluttony at table. By contrast, the food consumption of the pious Jew is of a spiritual nature. Hecker, "'Each Man Ate an Angel's Meal': Eating and Embodiment in the *Zohar*," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996, p. 221.

<sup>62</sup> For Abulafia's like perspective, see *Maṣṣe'ot ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fols. 123b, 122b; printed edition, pp. 83-84, where the womb is described as a filthy place. See also *ibid.*, 82, where the body is described as "evil" and it is said that life is more properly called "death." See Cuffel, "Filthy Words/Filthy Bodies: Gendering Disgust in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Jewish-Christian Polemic," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2002, pp. 118, 137, for a discussion of this polemical strategy as it pertains to the conception and birth of Jesus. *Milḥemet Mišvah* also points both to the unclean state of Jesus in the womb, as well as to his own unclean bodily functions. This Christian rootedness in the unclean carnal is here contrasted with Judaism. Jews are focused upon the purely spiritual nature of the *mišvot*, according to the text (in marked contrast to the Christian perspective that Jewish literalism, as exemplified in their adherence to the *mišvot*, reflects their carnality), while Moses' fasting is contrasted with the fact that Jesus "defecated, urinated, and flatulated." Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 60, 62; Lasker, "The Jewish Critique of Christianity under Islam in the Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (1990 - 1991), p. 128. For the Christian polemical response, see Sapir Abulafia, "Jewish-Christian Disputations and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," pp. 115-116. Christian women were the targets in Abulafia's day of Jewish invective for their purported uncleanness. Nirenberg, "Love between Muslim and Jew in Medieval Spain: A Triangular Affair" in Hames, ed. *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, p. 131. That this notion relates closely to the possibility of a repressed attraction on the part of Jewish men toward Christian women will be discussed in the next chapter. Charges of physical repulsiveness or uncleanness were levied against the other on both sides of the religious divide. For the Christian perspective, see Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 62. The linkage of



the basis for the contention that Christian doctrine was not only irrational but as well dishonored God. Abulafia here follows this polemical tack rather precisely, in that the figure of Esau, linked with the blood of childbirth, stands for him as a symbolic representation of Jesus.<sup>63</sup> Abulafia in fact counters the Christian claims for Jesus' state of divine purity by implying here that it was Jacob who was born free of the blood of childbirth. In almost all of its particulars, then, from this discussion in *Hayyei ha-Nefesh* Christendom emerges as carnal, idolatrous, violent and demonic, while Judaism is identified with piety, spirituality and rationality.

One of the main sources for Abulafia's implicit charge of Jesus' impurity here, as it was for many Jewish polemicists, was *Toledot Yeshu*. There Jesus is characterized as the bastard son, by a pagan father, of a menstruant woman.<sup>64</sup> The influence of this notion on Abulafia is apparent as well in the following discussion from *Sefer ha-Hayyim*. Here Abulafia is most interested in portraying himself in messianic fashion, a characterization which he seeks to cast into a stark contrast with the traditional invective that he directs toward Jesus. The discussion immediately

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Jews with lepers is noteworthy in that leprosy was regarded as a sexually transmitted disease stemming from an impure womb. Ibid., p. 96. In rabbinic literature as well we find the notion that a child contracts leprosy when his mother conceives him while menstruating. Koren, "The Woman from whom God Wanders: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999, p. 92 n. 88. Christianity itself was linked with leprosy. Cuffel, "Filthy Words/Filthy Bodies: Gendering Disgust in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Jewish-Christian Polemic," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2002, p. 128.

<sup>63</sup> See Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 136-140, for kabbalistic associations of Christendom with the menstruant.

<sup>64</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 45. Charges of sexual impurity are heaped upon Jesus in the Talmud as well. There it is stated that Mary was a prostitute, that Jesus entertained lascivious thoughts as a student and that the Christian cult was based upon orgiastic and occult rites. The Talmud relates that Jesus is condemned to sit in boiling excrement forever, along with Titus, who is eternally burned, and Balaam, who is eternally immersed in boiling semen. Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, pp. 10-13.

preceding Abulafia's mention of Jesus in *Sefer ha-Hayyim* is primarily concerned with the angel Raziel, or with the enlightened figure who is privy to revelation therefrom. Both of these are to be identified with Abulafia himself.<sup>65</sup> As a result of prophetic experience derived from insights gleaned from letter permutations, Abulafia relates that it became apparent that "the messiah who was already born now will come."<sup>66</sup> The messenger of Raziel, or this same messiah, is the seventh of the prophets, commanded to go to Rome to "do all that he did, and if it is revealed it is clearly concealed;" that is, there is an esoteric dimension to the messianic mission to the Pope that Abulafia saw as reserved for himself.

Abulafia continues here, relating that at the age of forty he was shown the likeness of the messiah. The secret of this likeness, Abulafia relates, is the divine name Shaddai. It is at this point that Abulafia begins to address himself to the essential nature of his messianic encounter with the gentile world. Abulafia refers to Balaam's prophetic recognition of Shaddai in Numbers 24:4, suggesting in the person of Balaam the gentile revelation that he apparently expects to ensue from the mission to Rome. He subsequently contrasts this gentile revelation regarding the Jewish messiah, Shaddai himself, with his own reciprocal recognition of the purported gentile messiah:<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 140, 200-201; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 56, 81-82, 167 n. 197, 196.

<sup>66</sup> *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 22a; printed edition, p. 83.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 22a; printed edition, pp. 83-84.

For forty years Raziel ben Samauel punished his limbs, recognizing the blessing and the curse, recognizing the bastard son of the menstruant,<sup>68</sup> recognizing Jesus/Muhammad, the measure of the moon in the border of the sun, and upon them you will build and you will quadruple in threefoldness, and you will understand wonders from it, and the honey that flavors it is the wisdom of the names.

In the midst of Abulafia's prophetic experience, one which results from the permutation of the letters of the names, comes the revelation concerning the true nature of the heretical composite "Jesus/Muhammad." The numerical value of these two names is equivalent to the phrase "bastard son of the menstruant."<sup>69</sup> That Abulafia has made use of the traditional Jewish derogation of Jesus is not surprising. But in the current context he has indeed gone somewhat further, rendering the attack as part and parcel of divine revelation, and he has classified Muhammad as well in these same negative terms. Jesus and Muhammad here are in some sense one two-fold demonic entity.

Yet Abulafia provides another somewhat surprising dimension to these associations: The phrase "the blessing and the curse" is clearly to be seen as operating in parallel with the phrase "Jesus/Muhammad," and, indeed, these two phrases as well share the same numerical value. If we were to parse the two names with respect to blessing and curse, to positive and negative associations, the traditional Jewish linkage of Jesus with the phrase "bastard son of the menstruant"

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<sup>68</sup> See the same phrase in, for instance, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 81b; printed edition, 130.

<sup>69</sup> Both equal 408.

must be given its due weight. If, then, Jesus represents the curse, then in what sense does Muhammad stand as a blessing? The answer is a complicated one. In Chapters Three and, in particular, Four I will explore the manner in which Abulafia ascribes a mercurial nature to the two-fold Active Intellect: It becomes at different times wholly good and wholly evil, while nevertheless, and paradoxically, always maintaining its bipartite nature. In the current context, then, Abulafia considers the Jesus/Muhammad composite to be the evil manifestation of the bipartite Active Intellect. Muhammad stands here as the positive element within the nevertheless demonic constitution of the Active Intellect when the latter is manifest with respect to its linkage to the world of the idolatrous gentile.

The sense in which Muhammad may thus be understood in somewhat positive terms, then, conforms to the discussion of circumcision that we find in *Sefer Melammed*, to be discussed more fully in Chapter Four. There, Esau's (Christendom's) circumcision is described as wholly corporeal and devoid of any spiritual element, while Islam is possessed of a circumcision seen to be at least somewhat spiritual, to the extent that that faith ascribes to a true monotheism.<sup>70</sup> The

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<sup>70</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 304a; printed edition, p. 37. The passage reads in part, "...such as our being sons of Jacob our father, peace be upon him, and the uncircumcised being sons of Esau, he who was circumcised in the phallus and uncircumcised of heart, and the Ishmaelites, sons of Ishmael, who also are circumcised in the phallus and somewhat of heart, with respect to their belief in the unity..." For zoharic evaluations of Islamic circumcision, see Wolfson, "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," p. 135 n. 14. Judah Halevi had sought to dismiss Muslim circumcision for the reason that they have no intellectual understanding thereof. See, Lasker, "Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Thought of Judah Halevi," p. 85. On the vexing question of the gentile who upholds God's unity, Jewish opinions divided. Gluck notes a tolerant attitude on the part of ibn Gabirol concerning gentile sages. Ibn Gabirol, Gluck notes, "...leaves open

covenant of the Jews, of course, is fully two-fold and complete in nature, being both physical and fully spiritual. There is a pointed irony here to the fact that the covenant linked, via Esau, to Christendom is described as purely physical by Abulafia. For Christianity, alone among the three faiths, practiced no form of physical circumcision. The two that did practice some form of physical circumcision, Judaism and Islam, are described, contrariwise, as possessing in varying degree a spiritual circumcision. We may perceive here a counter thrust to the traditional Christian charge that Jewish devotionism is carnal in that the Jews seek to forge a physical covenant, via circumcision, as against a spiritual one.<sup>71</sup>

In any case, in this delineation Islam and Muhammad represent for Abulafia a tempered idolatry. The subsequent reference above to the moon and the sun may thus be understood with respect to the traditional kabbalistic associations of these two heavenly bodies with the female and male elements, respectively, and with evil and good.<sup>72</sup> To reiterate, here again they are applied exclusively to the idolatrous sphere represented by Muhammad and Jesus, so that Muhammad stands for the more positive aspect of the nevertheless demonic world.

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the possibility of different but still valid approaches to God... This is underscored by his acknowledgement that even idolaters attempt to worship God." Gluck, Andrew L. "The King in His Palace: Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides," p. 344.

<sup>71</sup> As noted by Hames, Abulafia elsewhere adopts a more charitable assessment of both Islam and Christianity, saying that these faiths as well believe in God's unity. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 60. See also, *ibid.*, p. 64, concerning a passage to be considered below.

<sup>72</sup> Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," p. 168.

This recourse to *Sefer Melammed* and to Abulafia's discussion of the three covenantal modalities possessed by the three abrahamic faiths is, in still another fashion, by no means a superfluous one for the current context: For Abulafia writes in *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, with no explanation, that with the apprehension of the revelations that he outlines concerning Jesus/Muhammad, "...you will quadruple in threefoldness." Some clue to the proper understanding of this elusive phrase is implied immediately thereafter, when Abulafia begins to elucidate the encrypted meaning of two letter sets. Abulafia writes that the secret of their permutation concerns the "commandment to all of the world to guard the covenant of circumcision." The secret of the phrase "their circumcision," Abulafia writes, is "their learning" – the two phrases have the same numerical value (520). This learning, referring, no doubt, to the Torah, is possessed by the Jews alone; it "is the cause of the circumcision of the heart, which is that which circumcises the blood. And regarding this it says 'overthrow the flesh.'"<sup>73</sup> Circumcision as possessed by the Jews, then, represents the fullest spiritual circumcision, that of the heart, such that the carnal impulse is "overthrown."<sup>74</sup> "Flesh and blood obstructs apprehension," as Abulafia explains it, referring once again to prophetic access to the Active Intellect. The numerical value of the phrase "flesh and blood" is equivalent to that for "angels of death" (552), and the two of them, flesh and blood, are just that, deadly demonic

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<sup>73</sup> מפיל בשרא

<sup>74</sup> Wolfson notes Maimonides' perception that circumcision tempered the carnal impulse; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 90, 219-220. The issue will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four, below.

entities, in Abulafia's estimation. The phrase "their circumcision," by contrast, is numerically equivalent to "life and death." Death, as we shall see at much greater length subsequently, is to be linked with the defective covenant of the idolators, while life inheres in the two-fold covenant of the Jews, life being of the essence of the covenant's spiritual facet.<sup>75</sup>

The phrase "...you will quadruple in threefoldness" alludes as well to circumcision. As we will study at greater length in Chapter Four, Abulafia is much occupied with the bipartite nature of circumcision, a construction that conforms with his conception of the Active Intellect. The procedure of circumcision is itself, following rabbinic tradition, comprised of two steps, or, as it is traditionally put, of warp and woof. The Hebrew for this phrase, *sheti va- 'erev*, Abulafia frequently parses in such a fashion that it yields the words "two and four," *shetayyim va- 'arba*.<sup>76</sup> It is in a similar fashion that Abulafia employs the phrase "...you will quadruple in threefoldness," as we will continue to see. So, despite the caustic reference to Jesus/Muhammad as the bastard son of an impure woman, the two as well comprise an entity that is built from warp and woof. This entity, in fact, as we shall see, is to be understood as cruciform. It is complete, but only as a corporeal and thus a demonic entity. That Abulafia in the current context nevertheless considers it, as elsewhere, to constitute a kind of a covenant, although one grossly inferior to that of the Jews, may be suggested in his remark above that "all of the world" is

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<sup>75</sup> *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 22a, 23b; printed edition, p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, *Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 13a; printed edition, p. 26.

commanded to “guard the covenant of circumcision.” The gentile world is possessed of a covenant that is essentially demonic in nature, while Abulafia’s mission to the Pope could only have been to bring this demonic covenant into a state of conformity with the Judaic spiritual covenant of the heart. That is, Abulafia sought to convert Christendom.

Given Abulafia’s active interest in interacting with the Christian world, particularly as this was reflected in his mission to the Pope, any influence of the Christian side of the contemporary discourse concerning the messiah upon Abulafia are worthy of note. We will examine further and at length how Abulafia’s own self-perception was much influenced by Christian notions of Jesus. However, for the present, some further mention should be made of the Barcelona Disputation of 1263. The Disputation marks the real beginning of opportunistic Christian engagement with rabbinic literature. As is apparent from the extant accounts of the Disputation, there was a Christian eagerness to perceive in the aggadah concerning the messiah’s presence in Rome a literal truth.<sup>77</sup> Friar Paul contended that the aggadah, which relates that the messiah was to be found outside the gates of the city, was to be taken literally. This Christian approach would seem to resonate with Abulafia’s apparent feeling that central to his own messianic work would be a mission to Rome.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See b*Sanhedrin* 98a. Berger, “Captive at the Gate of Rome: The Story of a Messianic Motif.” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 44 (1977), pp. 3-4, 12-13.

<sup>78</sup> Roth suggests that the notion of a messianic mission to Rome must have been in wide circulation at this time, and that Abulafia need not have been “necessarily influenced” specifically by the Disputation. Roth, “The Disputation of Barcelona (1263),” *The Harvard Theological Review* 2



Despite the nonliteral reading of the aggadah favored by Nahmanides during the Disputation, he also accepted the tradition, prevalent in Jewish circles of the day as well, that the messiah was to appear in Rome. As noted by Berger, Nahmanides' nonliteral reading took its place within a lineage of such Jewish approaches to this aggadah, undertaken precisely because of the fodder a literal interpretation offered for christological readings.<sup>79</sup> It may be that Abulafia's sojourn in Rome possessed for him the kind of christological significance with which, we shall see, he frequently sought to enrobe himself, and with which the Christian position at the Disputation imbued the aggadah. Abulafia's imagined conversion of Rome (if that is what he intended) would have echoed the complex kabbalistic doctrine which he presented, within which, as we shall see, he framed himself as Jesus' alter ego, and within which, in agreement with Friar Paul and against the opinion of Nahmanides, he saw the messiah (himself) as possessed of a divine nature.<sup>80</sup>

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(1950), p. 130 n. 24. Of course, the Disputation, which was widely attended – as Roth notes; *ibid.*, p. 135 – would most assuredly have played a large role in disseminating this conception, particularly in Abulafia's town of residence in the 1270s, Barcelona.

<sup>79</sup> See nn. 40, 77.

<sup>80</sup> See n. 40. That Abulafia's messianic conception was influenced by the contemporary discourse may also be apparent from his prediction that the redemption was to occur in 1290. The timeframe of 1,290 years, taken from the end of the Book of Daniel, had traditionally been read as the length of Jewish exile, as, for instance, in Rashi's conception, which was taken up by Joseph Kimhi. Chazan, "Joseph Kimhi's 'Sefer Ha-Berit': Pathbreaking Medieval Jewish Apologetics," *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1992), pp. 427-428. It is noteworthy, however, that Abulafia adhered to the Christian calendar in positing 1290CE, rather than 1358, as the onset of redemption. This may be due, not so much to Christian influence, as to the fact that Abulafia was to turn 50 in 1290. Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, edited by J. Blau, P. Friedman, A. Hertzberg and I. Mendelsohn (New York, 1959), p. 58. See also, Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, p. 177. Most recently, Hames has suggested that Abulafia held to the year 1290 as that of the redemption not only because of the traditions surrounding the 1,290 years and because of his own age, but also because

If we have seen that Abulafia both allowed for some redeeming merit in the gentile world – as in the case of Islam, given what Abulafia perceived to be the nature of that faith’s covenant with God – and that Abulafia may have allowed himself to be influenced by Christendom, in the case of the messiah’s mission to Rome, then perhaps we may already wonder whether Abulafia’s polemical stance with respect to the non-Jew was more nuanced than is first apparent. Indeed, the very idea of a perceived mission to the Pope already suggests a fascination with the religious other. And despite Abulafia’s very harsh appraisal of Christianity, Abulafia does make some surprising mitigating statements when referring to the sages of the nations more generally.<sup>81</sup> All the more noteworthy are these seeming concessions when one observes that Abulafia created a strictly ordered and hierarchical epistemological taxonomy concerning the ability of the sages of the nations, as against the Jewish kabbalist, to apprehend the divinity. Frequently Abulafia will contrast the level of intellectual attainment of Jewish recipients of esoteric doctrine (the *mequbalim*) with that of the philosophers and “scientists.” Although often he

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Abulafia’s Joachimite neighbors believed that date to have momentous eschatological significance, and Abulafia sought to interest them in his messianic mission. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*; see, for instance, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Saperstein points out that there were instances in the thirteenth century of positive evaluations of Christians by Jews and Jews by Christians. The impact of these statements on the modern historian in appraising the interreligious ethos of the time, he suggests, tends to be muted by the more numerous polemical texts and historical chronicles of violent interactions. The positive statements occur especially in the context of exhortations to one’s own group to elevate their level of conduct. Saperstein, “Christians and Jews: Some Positive Images,” *Harvard Theological Review* 1/3 (1986), pp. 236-237. So, for instance, we find a thirteenth century Jewish appraisal of Christians as being more schooled in philosophy – even in Maimonides – than Jews, and another of Christians being more fervent in prayer than Jews. *Ibid.*, pp. 241, 243. Similarly, we find Christians praising Jews for their veneration of the Sabbath and holy days, for their moderate speech, for their devotionism to the point of martyrdom and for their commitment to education. *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 239, 240.

speaks in only general terms of the latter categories, such that Jewish philosophers or scientists may also be included within this taxonomy, it nevertheless becomes apparent that Abulafia seeks to contrast the intellectual and spiritual potentiality of Jews with those of the other nations; in the case of the nations, the highest possible attainments are confined to the philosophical arena, as against the prophetic conjunction with the Active Intellect that may be attained by the Jews.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> In the case of Jewish philosophers, the *potential* is at least ever present for them to penetrate the divine realm more deeply via recourse to Jewish esoteric doctrine. For gentile philosophers, however, the latter doctrine is entirely out of reach. In *Sheva 'Netivot ha-Torah*, the fourth of the seven methods of scriptural exegesis is represented as that of the philosophers, while the first four levels as a whole are common to both Jews and Christians. Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 93. Nevertheless, while it is quite apparent that a Jewish philosopher may well progress to yet higher levels of insight by embracing kabbalah, as Wolfson notes, not even all of the first four levels of interpretation are truly accessible to the gentile, presumably since halakha and other Jewish modalities figure into these methods. *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 76-77. It is clear that Abulafia at times intends for Jewish philosophy to be understood as a step on the path of mystical attainment. Nevertheless, Wolfson notes that a tension is present in Abulafia's doctrine, as kabbalah is at times perceived as philosophically grounded, while at others the two fields are rendered as distinct from one another. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 73, 79. Chazan notes the claim of Abulafia's rival, Solomon ibn Adret, also a kabbalist, that even some philosophers acknowledged the superiority of prophetic revelation to their own. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 146. Adret cites Plato and Aristotle in this regard, but one might recall as well the argument passionately made by Judah Halevi in the *Kuzari*. Significant is Halevi's contention that it is specifically an apprehension of the Tetragrammaton that is out of reach of the philosophers; the lesser cognomen Elohim is apprehensible by them, but the Tetragrammaton may only be grasped by the prophet. H.A. Wolfson, "Maimonides and Halevi. A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes Towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages," p. 318. E. Wolfson has observed that this conception of Halevi's is carried yet further: For Halevi, the prophet, who he equates with the one who has learned the secrets of the *merkabah*, is one who has an actual vision of the Tetragrammaton, an experience beyond that which a mere philosopher may attain. E. Wolfson, "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered," pp. 185, 237-238. Wolfson has demonstrated Halevi's indebtedness to hekalotic mysticism. Halevi's rejection of philosophy is apparent as well in his elimination of the Active Intellect, and its influence upon the human intellect through the imagination, from his notion of prophecy. For Halevi, that which the prophet sees is a real entity in its own right and not an imaginative product, although apprehension of it is nonetheless still channelled through the imagination – the "inner eye" – and the intellect. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-207, 211. Of course contemporary tension over the status of philosophy in Judaism became centered around Maimonides' work. Ravitzky observes how Moses ibn Tibbon rejected, in favor of an approach that always inclined toward the traditional religious perspective, the approach of his father Samuel toward the *Guide of the Perplexed*. The latter had sought to always weigh Maimonides' more Aristotelian assertions against sometimes contradictory religious ones. For ambivalence among early kabbalists toward philosophy,

The philosophers and scientists of the other nations are denied the access to the divine afforded by the methods open to the kabbalist.<sup>83</sup> Writes Abulafia:<sup>84</sup>

And because this supernal wisdom is the pinnacle of all wisdom and knowledge, because it is divine wisdom, it depends upon *'alef bet gimel*, that is, the alphabet, because from it the divine powers are known, which are powers in the body that are called *Ṣva 'ot* [hosts] of God. This wisdom is hidden from all scientists [*hokhmei ha-meḥqar*], who, when they see the matter, it immediately seems to them from the first that within it is much confusion. And this matter is that the human intellect is not able to grasp them...

As Abulafia informs us slightly earlier, the name *Ṣva 'ot* indicates the Prince of the Countenance, that is, the angel Metatron, or the Active Intellect.<sup>85</sup> The other nations, thus, are, in Abulafia's estimation, bereft of the intellectual principle with which the Jewish people may engage. Apparent once more, then, is the relevance of the contemporary polemical ethos to Abulafia's own formulations. For the laying claim to intellectual exclusivity is key in both the polemical and mystical arenas.

Along similar lines, Abulafia relates that, due to their deficient intellects, the nations misunderstand the nature of the status of the source of intellection, the Active Intellect itself, as the divine son. Abulafia explains that the metaphor of sonship with

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see Dan, "Gershom Scholem's Reconstruction of Early Kabbalah," pp. 45-46. See also, E. Wolfson, "Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in *Sefer ha-Bahir*." Philosophical and mythological notions are here seen to be present side by side, and the reaction of kabbalists to philosophy is seen to manifest itself in both a positive and a negative fashion; pp. 152-154.

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, idem, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 73-80.

<sup>84</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 67b, 67a; printed edition, pp. 113-114.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 66a; printed edition, p. 112.

respect to God is appropriate for Metatron, or the Active Intellect, but that it is just that, a metaphor, and nothing more. Clearly Abulafia alludes here to the Christian conception of Jesus as the son of God.<sup>86</sup>

It is not that there is between them [the Active Intellect and God] a closeness at all like that of a father to a son, and understand this, because several nations err. And even if the intellectuals [of these nations] enter into this, they are unable to bear the subtlety of the matter, because the senses somewhat prevail over them, and they are destroyed. And understand this.<sup>87</sup>

It is the essential carnality of Christendom that affects even its sages, Abulafia contends, leading to their ultimate downfall.

Key to the distinction, for Abulafia, between the gentile sage and the Jewish kabbalist is the Hebrew language. More particularly, a facility with the kabbalistic methods of letter permutation that a knowledge of Hebrew makes possible creates this distinction. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that Abulafia believes it possible for the sages of the other nations to engage in letter permutations of a lesser

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<sup>86</sup> It is worthy of note here that, at least by implication, Abulafia suggests an identification between Jesus and the Active Intellect. Christians, he suggests, are correct in referring to Jesus (or the Active Intellect) as the divine son; it is simply that they misguidedly take literally this appellation. As I have already noted, Chapter Three, below, will consider Abulafia's identification of Jesus more particularly with the evil component of the Active Intellect, Sandalfon.

<sup>87</sup> *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, MS Munich-BS 22 fol. 219a; printed edition, p. 130. Abulafia explains somewhat earlier in the text that the son to which he refers is the Active Intellect and the Prince of the World, that is, Metatron. Ibid., MS Munich-BS 22 fol. 219a; printed edition, p. 129; MS Munich-BS 22 fol. 218a; printed edition, p. 127. For Metatron as Prince of the World in Nahmanides, see Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 3 (1994), pp. 312-313. See also, Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 88 (in Hebrew).

order by making use of only the letters of their own alphabets.<sup>88</sup> We must presume that some form of lesser engagement with the Active Intellect results from such a process, which does seem to go beyond the bounds of what Abulafia understands as philosophy and science. Immediately, then, Abulafia's strict taxonomical, indeed ontological,<sup>89</sup> distinction between the Jewish kabbalist and the gentile sage must be read as somewhat more qualified than it appears in Abulafia's more harshly worded declarations. Though Abulafia would never for a moment have conceded that a gentile sage may attain to the intellectual heights of the Jewish kabbalist, still both of their efforts, apparently, may proceed in kind. It is simply that the Jew has at his disposal unique tools: He has the language of Creation itself, Hebrew,<sup>90</sup> and he has as well the *mišvot*, adherence to which brings a distinct covenantal relationship with God and a wisdom of a higher order than that possible for the gentile.<sup>91</sup>

In this regard, it is worth mentioning here another theme that we will soon investigate in greater depth: Abulafia asserts that at the apogee of mystical attainment, the efflux from the Active Intellect enables the Jewish kabbalist to prophesy in all seventy of the gentile languages. There is great significance to the fact that the most distinguishing achievement of illumination of which the Jew is

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<sup>88</sup> Idem, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 101, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 62. Wolfson notes a statement by Abulafia concerning the fact that languages aside from Hebrew also carry an esoteric dimension. Idem, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 188.

<sup>89</sup> It is, in fact, the linguistic superiority of the Jews, endowed as they are with the only language that is natural, and not conventional, that gives rise to their quasi-angelic status. Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>91</sup> As Wolfson summarizes Abulafia's view, "...one may speak of the *mišvot* as the mystical means to attain knowledge of God." Ibid., p. 192

capable, for Abulafia, finds expression in the ability to acquire a divine facility with all of the world's languages.<sup>92</sup> In his drawing of the languages of the nations into such proximity to the Jew's unique moment of revelation, we must observe that Abulafia manifests again an intense interest in bringing the larger world into his kabbalistic messianic discourse. Abulafia's sense of the connectedness between Hebrew and the other languages also suggests an overtly historical messianic dimension. Abulafia felt that the diaspora of the Jews among the nations was divinely orchestrated for the purpose of diffusing the Hebrew language among the nations. Through this global proximity of Hebrew to the other languages, the latter could ultimately be returned to the former, primordial tongue, with redemptive consequences.<sup>93</sup> The exclusivity of Judaism, and of Jewish mysticism most particularly, seems, for Abulafia, only to nurture the fascination that he has with engaging the larger religious world. This, of course, was the same fascination which must have precipitated his revelation concerning a mission to the Pope. It is the intensity of Abulafia's interest in the Christian world that frequently comes to undermine the very ontological barriers that Abulafia himself erects between gentile sage and Jewish kabbalist. All the more apparent will such a blurring of lines seem

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<sup>92</sup> Wolfson observes the tension between Abulafia's notion of the ontological distinction between Hebrew and the other languages and the idea that the "latter are thought to be contained in the former." It is this containment of the other languages within Hebrew that justifies the possibility for the attainment of revelation through a language other than Hebrew; when one achieves revelation through a non-Hebrew language, one has located something of the primordial essence that still survives in that corrupted language. That is to say, one has hit upon something that in its essence is reflected only in Hebrew. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>93</sup> Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, pp. 23, 108.

when we come to examine the similarity between the kabbalist's revelatory conversance with the seventy languages of the nations, as described by Abulafia, and the New Testament apostles' linguistic abilities when under the influence of the holy spirit.

Abulafia appears to suggest that there are difficulties that arise with regard to the ontological barriers that he seeks to erect between the enlightened Jew, who cleaves to the Active Intellect, and the gentile sage, for whom pure divine intellection is impossible.<sup>94</sup> In one passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, Abulafia laments what he perceives to be a confused state in the religious sphere with respect to what constitutes true revelatory intellection. To be clear, it is not that there is any uncertainty regarding the notion that only truly Jewish beliefs and practices can lead to a prophetic encounter with the Active Intellect. It is simply that the improper beliefs held by the gentiles may be difficult, for all but the truly enlightened Jew, to distinguish as such from true and pious beliefs, and so the former may come to

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<sup>94</sup> Idel and Hames offer similar interpretations of Abulafia's story of a pearl that is the inheritance of a man's son, as against his two servants, a variation on the medieval story of three rings for three sons. The single pearl here is the inheritance of the Jews, God's favored ones, as against Christianity and Islam. Idel views the story as implying that Christianity and Islam "are a vain pretense, having no theological basis at all," this because of their status as servants - without rings or pearls of their own - and not as sons. Idel observes that the fact that the pearl is hidden away in Abulafia's telling of the story reveals the sentiment that even the Jews lack full enlightenment. Ultimately, however, with the recovery of the pearl, an ingathering of the nations into Judaism will occur, as Idel reads the story. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 48-50. Hames as well sees the story as suggesting that the Jews enjoy a uniquely superior position, although in the present they are not living up to it, due to their lack of understanding of Scripture. In the eschatological future, through knowledge of the name, this understanding will be realized, and universal forgiveness and unity will be possible. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 66-69. Idel observes that, for Abulafia, Jewish identity is contingent upon knowledge of the name; "'The Time of the End': Apocalypticism and its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology," p. 172. Given that Abulafia considered his generation to be lacking in knowledge of the name, we may see that he understands Jewish identity as unfulfilled.



pervade the latter. There is, Abulafia observes, a cross-pollination between religious faiths, to include Judaism, one that arises in Abulafia's estimation from difficulties in distinguishing that which is intellective from that which is not. And indeed, the significance of this observation on Abulafia's part should not be lost on us given our larger project, which is to perceive precisely this phenomenon in his own work. That is, Abulafia himself has allowed Christian doctrine to penetrate to the very core of his own thought. Inadvertently, perhaps, Abulafia drives home by his own example the inscrutability of the precarious distinction between that which is intellective and that which is purely imaginative. Concerning God's imparting the Torah to the Israelites, Abulafia writes,<sup>95</sup>

And behold, the nearest nations who heard the great good that God, may He blessed, did with us and with our fathers endeavored with all their ability to copy the Torah from one writing to another and from one language to another. Until they found that they copied according to their knowledge and they did not observe whether or not they changed a word of God's. And you know that the matter of the confusion of the religions and bodies of knowledge and faiths is dependent upon matter and forms and times and places and incidents that arise, because it is impossible for any man among men to be apart from these matters...Until many among our nation muddled up and confused even the holy religion, until they say this and that...and they say that this for them is an intellective matter, that God did not command the *mišvot* that are in the Torah as the men of our Torah and our sages explain them. But they have an explanation that is explained as they wish. And if this circumstance happens with that which everyone believes to be divine, derived from the Torah and prophetic, that is, the confusion and changing of beliefs and division of final

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<sup>95</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 44a, 45b; printed edition, p. 78.

divine intentions which are not in doubt for any enlightened one, how does this not happen for that which is believed by its writer to have been written from his own great wisdom, but none of which he was commanded in a prophetic state to write?

Abulafia explains that the nations' efforts to absorb the Torah resulted in errors due to their own dearth of illumination and to the vicissitudes of human history. The errors perpetrated by these nations ultimately are apparently reabsorbed within Jewry, until Jews come to misunderstand their own Torah. What results is that some challenge, in their ignorance, proper performance of the *mišvot*. Were it not for the fact that he refers to Jews, it would appear that Abulafia implicitly levels this charge against Christian interpretation of the *mišvot*, that is, against the Christian notion that prescriptions in the Torah concerning the *mišvot* should not be taken literally. Torah, for those who misinterpret it in this fashion, Abulafia writes, is explained capriciously as regards the *mišvot*; it is explained "as they wish [*k'ršonam*]." Abulafia states here that these errant ones claim to be proceeding in an "intellective" manner, which recalls all the more the Christian polemical perspective that the Torah should be interpreted spiritually with respect to the *mišvot* and not carnally, that is, literally, as do the rabbis.

It is possible that Abulafia alludes here to nascent Christianity within the Jewish community in antiquity; these were Jews who erred with respect to the *mišvot*, from Abulafia's perspective, and perhaps he intends here to evoke an initially hellenistic influence upon these wayward Jews. Alternatively, Abulafia may be

referring to Jews of his own day, who are swayed by contemporary Christian perspectives concerning Jewish legalism. Regardless of his precise meaning, it does appear that Abulafia views Christianity as a threat to Jews precisely because of the commonality that there is between the two faiths, the fact that they both proceed from the same textual source. A destabilizing effect ensues, as misinterpretation cannot be easily distinguished from proper interpretation. Interestingly, Abulafia proceeds to point to an even greater problem with respect to the Oral Torah. There, the confusion is magnified because the texts themselves do not result from a prophetic state, and the result, he will go on to indicate subsequently, is that the Talmud is full of conflicting opinions on numerous issues emanating from different sages. When one adds to this, he writes, misunderstandings on the part of the readership, confusion only worsens. Abulafia views, he writes, the entire corpus of Maimonides' work as directed toward erasing this confusion, although he singles out *The Guide of the Perplexed* in this regard. It is possible that Abulafia is aware here of the tack taken by Nahmanides in the Barcelona Disputation with respect to the aggadot that Friar Paul brought to bear as evidence for the notion that the Jewish literature attests to the messiah's having already arrived. Among other points, Nahmanides had maintained that these aggadot were easily misinterpreted, and that they were not to be taken as authoritative.<sup>96</sup> It is interesting that Nahmanides addressed these comments concerning the unreliability of the aggadot to Christians,

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<sup>96</sup> Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 96-100. See also p. 140 for the similar concerns regarding aggadot raised by Solomon ibn Adret.

in referring to their own misinterpretation, while Abulafia refers to the difficulty of properly understanding the Talmud in the context of his own discussion of the misinterpretations that have been engendered by Christianity.

The misunderstandings that are perpetrated by the nations or by misguided Jews result, it is apparent from Abulafia's prior pronouncements, from the human susceptibility to carnal modalities. That is, in the absence of a link to the divine, something lacking among the gentile nations, human reason may be diverted by the imagination or by the senses. Such is the case even among the greatest sages of the other nations. Abulafia addresses himself to some important ramifications of this doctrine in another discussion of the shortcomings of the philosophers.

Concerning the question of the soul's relationship to the body, the question that "is the first peg from which the Torah hangs and the pillar upon which the knowledge of man rests," Abulafia declares that "there is a great need for every true intellectual to investigate all of this through clear proofs."<sup>97</sup> Such proofs, he asserts, are beyond the purview of those who do not draw inspiration from the divine. That is to say, philosophers, be they gentile or Jewish, do not have sufficient tools to arrive at true knowledge. He writes,<sup>98</sup> "There is no way to bring a proof concerning what is investigated scientifically [*be-hokhmah*] except through sensory and intellectual [and] divine proof received from the Torah, that is, from secrets of the Torah."

Science can not rival the insight that is open to the kabbalist. Regarding the proofs

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<sup>97</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 32b; printed edition, p. 47.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 32a; printed edition, p. 48.

that are derived from the secrets of the Torah, to which the kabbalist alone may gain access, “not one of them is understood by the masses, and even from most sages they are hidden...And they are received, prophetic, divine proofs from the Torah, and the philosophers do not know these proofs.”

In fact, it is because the uninspired sage or philosopher does not access knowledge through the Active Intellect that his recourse to reason does not exceed the level of apprehension that is offered by the imagination. In polemical terms, even the intellectual efforts of such a one are essentially carnal, and, hence, evil. Writes Abulafia,<sup>99</sup>

And do not let vain ideas sway you, and reasoned opinions concerning what you already apprehend truthfully [*v'da'ot mahshaviyot mimah sh'kevar a'lah b'yadkha b'emet*]...[There should be no] true proof for you except faith and imaginative thought, not a sensory image and not intellectual apprehension and not knowledge received from the people I mentioned. And because of this your reason may be confused, because it may not be in any respect that a true proof contradicts another true proof. Thus you must believe the truth in all that is sought, and no doubt should persist...

Abulafia relates here that peril awaits those who fall victim to the ratiocination of the philosophers. It may be that the anxiety that Abulafia manifests here is grounded in the fact that it is difficult to discern the difference between an “imaginative thought” which is inspired by the intellect and a “sensory image” that is

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 33b; printed edition, pp. 48-49.

not, the latter being the product of man's own mental capacities alone. Indeed, in the preceding passage even the "intellective apprehension" that Abulafia mentions is not, in fact, derived from the Active Intellect.<sup>100</sup>

It is noteworthy that it is the philosopher who poses the threat of throwing one's reason into confusion. The dangers that such a confusion of the intellect poses to the Jewish mystic will be the subject of the next chapter. In essence, however, the threat is demonic. That Abulafia perceives that the philosopher poses imaginative threats to the Jewish mystic in particular is apparent from elsewhere in *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*. The nature of the risk faced in the visionary encounter with the divine, and how that risk conforms with the relative status of the nations, is delineated by Abulafia in this passage from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, which is worth citing in full:<sup>101</sup>

And thus I report to you that the obstruction to apprehension is the material that is clothed in form and which strips off form. And if it is clear and illumined it is called "speculum." Thus it is divided into two kinds in place and height, supernal and terrestrial, shining and not shining. And all of the prophets saw in the speculum that does not shine, and Moses our rabbi, may peace be upon him, saw in the speculum [that shines]. And the name of the vision [*mar'eh*, or, "mirror," *mar'ah*] in the language of the idolators is "speculum," and the name of the glory in the language of the idolators is "cluriya," and so too the name of the brilliance in the language of the idolators is "claro." Thus the name for prophecy is "vision" [*mar'eh*]. And the image, in the apprehension of the prophets and visionaries and seers and the pure of knowledge and the sages of the intellect and the like,

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<sup>100</sup> Hames notes Abulafia's awareness of the difficulties involved in distinguishing true revelation, which rises above any proofs that may be advanced from reason alone; *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 51b, 51a; printed edition, pp. 88-89.

is like him who sees the form of the face of a man in clear water, and another sees it in cloudy water, and another sees it in a clear vision, and another sees it in a muddy vision, and another sees it in the light of a candle by night, and another in the light of the stars, and another in the light of the moon, and another in the light of lightning, and another in the light of a clear stone shining in the night, and another in the light of the sun on a cloudy and foggy day, and another nearby, and another at a distance, and another always in the brilliant light of the sun at midday. And this [last one] is alone the level of Moses our rabbi, peace be upon him...

Abulafia begins here by referencing kabbalistic tradition concerning the perceptual modality of the prophets during their revelatory experiences and that of Moses.<sup>102</sup> Telling here is that the specula through which the prophets and Moses apprehended the divinity are actually referred to as obstructions (*mon'im*). This is so given their material and sensory basis. We will see shortly that Abulafia uses the term repeatedly to refer to the demons who seek actually to interfere with the mystic's efforts to encounter God. That Abulafia would apply the selfsame term for the specula themselves reflects again the tension that is engendered by the fact that both imaginative and intellectual impressions are mediated through the same sensory faculties, which are in their essence of a low, or even evil, order.

What we may already perceive to be an anxiety-producing difficulty in correctly understanding the nature of one's sensory impressions, that is, of discerning whether they are divine or demonic, may be seen as enhanced by Abulafia's lengthy elaboration here upon the multiform and subjective nature of the prophetic

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<sup>102</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 26, 147-148, 151, 214, 344, 353.

experience. In the current context, Abulafia considers only prophecy, and so his interest is not to suggest any ready way to discern whether a visionary experience is of a “muddy” yet prophetic type or whether it is of the idolatrous type to which a gentile would be subject. Nevertheless, we may see from what he has written here that the problem is a pressing one. In fact, in Chapter Two we will observe that Abulafia suggests methods of letter combination in order to arrive at conclusions regarding the ontological nature of that which is encountered during visionary experience.

It is significant that in the current context Abulafia actually points to three words of the gentiles - *especlaria*, *cluriya*, and *claro* - in order to better illustrate the connection between the Hebrew words *mar’eh*, or vision, the *Kavod*, or glory, and the *ziv*, or brilliance. We may be reminded of Abulafia’s point that letter manipulations may be conducted in any language. Recourse to the language of the gentiles in the very context of what will prove to be an effort to establish Jewish exclusivity in the prophetic arena is both ironic and characteristic of Abulafia. For if gentiles are denied true prophecy based on their linguistic inadequacies, how could it be that their language is more conducive to an understanding of prophecy, in the current passage, than is Hebrew? We may conclude that Abulafia’s anxiety regarding the attractiveness of what he refers to as idolatrous influences was, in fact, well placed. Abulafia was a participant in what we should observe to be a rising level of anxiety on both sides of the Jewish-Christian cultural divide, as the perceived threat



of being led astray by the other found expression in a variety of modalities.<sup>103</sup> The proposal that this threat stems at its root from a latent attraction to the religious other, and indeed from the very fragility of the construct of “alterity,” we have already broached.<sup>104</sup>

Abulafia continues in *Hayyei ha-Nefesh* by referring to two other groups among the Jewish people aside from the prophets. Next among them are the sages, below the level of the prophets but still distinguished by their observance of the *mišvot*. These perceive God like one in a dream, in a purely imaginative fashion. The

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<sup>103</sup> Chazan notes the more concerted efforts made by the Church in the thirteenth century to constrain Jewish-Christian daily interactions. The perceived need to mark the Jew as the potentially threatening other by means of mandatory distinctive garb, as demonstrated in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, is one facet of this development. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 31. Significantly, given the topic, to be discussed, of Abulafia’s erotic attraction toward Christianity as a source for his ambivalence, in Spain the Church institution of distinctive Jewish dress was seen as a preventive against interreligious sexual relations. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 133. As the pitch of Jewish anti-Christian polemic rose, prohibitions against the Jews’ blaspheming against Christianity were also instituted. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 32. These one may see in terms, not merely of the need to prevent such disrespectful conduct, but as well of the sensed need to prevent the Jewish perspective in its most emphatic forms from reaching the ears of any susceptible Christians. It was this impulse on the part of the Church that led ultimately to the Talmud trial of 1240. Ibid., p. 34. Nevertheless, the Christian polemical discourse also involved giving credence to those Jewish teachings which could serve as fodder for Christian contentions. Ibid., 68. Such a strategy dates back to the very origins of Christian exegesis of Scripture, but the Jewish witnessing doctrine of Augustine serves as a particularly significant touchstone for medieval Christian polemicists. Nirenberg observes that the Jewish witnessing doctrine did hold sway in Aragon, resulting in the Jews’ being protected. *Communities of Violence*, p. 21. One can see that a dangerous game is entered into by those Christians who sought to uphold only certain aspects of Jewish theological literature, a game which perhaps served to heighten the level of anxiety of some Christians. Chazan notes that the attention of the Church, in the face of the perceived threat posed by Judaism, was directed in the first place toward protecting its own, followed thereafter by polemical and missionizing efforts directed toward a Muslim and Jewish audience. Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>104</sup> See the Introduction to this dissertation. Chazan suggests that the anti-Jewish polemical efforts engaged in by some thirteenth century Jewish converts to Christianity may have been motivated by lingering doubts about their conversions. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 36. If this is the case, then we are met in these instances by souls who have felt the pull of the other on first one and then the other side of the religious divide. We see as well here how the anxiety engendered by attraction to the forbidden other may be sublimated in the form of an attack on this same other, as, I would argue, is the case with Abulafia.

final group is the common folk, who do not obey the *mišvot*. These "...are very far below those mentioned, and they are neither man nor beast, but demons, because they are below the level of man and above the level of beasts in their nature." Just as, given the implications of the preceding passage, the gentile philosopher, who does not observe the *mišvot*, is prey to demonic forces, so here the Jew who does not observe the *mišvot* is likewise classified himself as demonic.<sup>105</sup> This seeming commonality between the gentile nations and the Jew who does not observe the *mišvot* next emerges more explicitly. Regarding the latter group, Abulafia continues,<sup>106</sup>

And these masses see God with their evil imaginations, like he who sees the form of the face of a man drawn on a wall in colors, and it is a partial form. Or like one who sees it drawn impressed or raised upon a seal of gold. And regarding this, it is necessary for most of the nations to draw the vision of the nature of God, may He be blessed, from their evil imagination and their deceitful image, [in] forms of different bodies, upon tree and stone and silver and gold, in their courts and fortresses and palaces and houses of idolatry, in the tops of mountains and hills. These [three types of men, the prophet, the sage, and the commoner] then are the three kinds of sons of Noah, and from them originated all of the world. And they are righteous, intermediate and wicked...And they parallel three groups of ministering angels. One group says "holy," another says "holy, holy," and another says "holy, holy, holy." And this is the very terrible praise, and its matter is that these feel, [these feel and imagine], and these feel, imagine and intellectualize; this among the lower ones. Indeed in the supernal ones these are the intellectualized, these are the intellectuals and the intellectualized, [and these are the intellectuals and the

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<sup>105</sup> See *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:7, regarding this notion and Adam's three sons, to which Abulafia will allude subsequently.

<sup>106</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 52b, 52a; printed edition, pp. 89-90.

intellectualized and the intellects]. And the sons of Noah are Ham, Shem and Japheth. The sons of Shem are angels, and the sons of Japheth are men, and the sons of Ham are demons. And those who resemble angels are intellective and are called completely righteous...And those who resemble men are spiritual and are called intermediate...And those who resemble demons are corporeal, and are called completely evil...

Both the Jew who neglects the *mišvot* and the gentile sees God through his “evil imagination,” as opposed to that imagination to which the prophetic specula relate.<sup>107</sup> Recourse to the evil imagination results in idolatrous tendencies, so that the Jew who falls victim to it sees images of God that are tantamount to the graven images found, among other places, in pagan temples. Abulafia’s earlier interest in the words *especlaria*, *cluriya*, and *claro* becomes apparent here; they relate to the Hebrew triad *sekhel maskil muskal*, intellect, the intellectualizing, and that which is intellectualized. The prophet is the one who unites all of these qualities within himself, or is the one who corresponds to such an angel above. He as well is able to “feel, imagine and intellectualize.” That is, his sensory faculties receive the stimuli that are then imprinted upon his imagination, to in turn be analyzed by the intellect, all operating in the service of prophecy. This is the dynamic which was first

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<sup>107</sup> See also, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fol. 126a; printed edition, p. 92, regarding the conception of the *mišvot* as that which distinguishes the Jews from the other nations. See also, *ibid.*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fols. 124b-125a; printed edition, p. 89, where Abulafia places in the mouth of a gentile the notion that if a single gentile can achieve a state of completion without the Torah – that is, without observance of the *mišvot* – then the Torah is unnecessary. Wolfson suggests a different reading of this passage, to the effect that the gentile nations alone, and not the nonobservant Jew as well, are consigned to the lowest category. *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 61-63. Wolfson does observe, though, that Abulafia will on occasion classify some Jews as beasts. *Ibid.*, p. 63 n. 95.

conveyed through the motif of the gazing into the speculum. The observant Jew is either capable of this, as a prophet, or of a lesser order of imaginative experience, as a sage. The latter's recourse to the imagination is no longer ultimately intellective; regarding such ones Abulafia writes, "these feel and imagine," but they do not intellectualize. Nevertheless, their imaginative encounter with God is still neither impious nor transgressive; they are simply human in their essence, and correspond to the intermediate level of spirit. By contrast, the nonobservant Jew, like the gentile idolator, is wholly evil. He is fully of a sensory and carnal nature and is configured as a demon. We will see shortly Abulafia's many cautionary remarks concerning the risk of falling victim, during the mystical encounter, to the idolatrous temptations posed by demons. In the current context we see clearly the polemical dimension to this conception. The gentile world is wholly demonic and devoted to the flesh, and the nonobservant Jew has already been subjugated by its forces, which are rooted in the senses and the imagination.

In a closely related passage in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia has a good deal more to say concerning the nature of the other nations. In fact, though Abulafia's discussion begins in a familiar vein, the thrust of this passage will ultimately mitigate against his thesis that to be gentile is to be, like a nonobservant Jew, an idolator, possessed of a demonic nature. Just as we have noted some taxonomic distinctions within the Jewish world, we have also already discerned some nuance to Abulafia's appraisal of the non-Jewish world as regards the covenants possessed by Christians

and Muslims; that of the latter harbored something of the intellective or spiritual.<sup>108</sup>

The current passage reflects as well this somewhat more congenial attitude. We will note as well that the polemical implications that we perceived in Abulafia's remarks earlier are in this instance coupled with a clear awareness of the Christian perspective on Judaism.

Abulafia begins by indicating that there are varying degrees of piety and impiety among the gentile nations. To evaluate a nation as a whole, one must scrutinize it in accordance with the three modalities discussed earlier, the intellective, spiritual and corporeal: "...one must examine if their intellect prevails over spiritual matters. And their soul if it prevails over material matters. And their body if it presides over that which is outside of it, or if the thing is reversed."<sup>109</sup> Each successively higher level within the human being must subjugate and control the impulses of that level immediately beneath it, while the lowest level, the corporeal, must remain in control of those material things that are external to the body. By

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<sup>108</sup> The more favorable disposition of Abulafia toward Islam, as against Christianity, is a subject to which we will return. We may see that this attitude is at times reflected as well among Abulafia's kindred Spanish Jews. See, for instance, the notion conveyed by Todros Abulafia that Christian women are unclean while Muslim women are not. Nirenberg, "Love between Muslim and Jew in Medieval Spain: A Triangular Affair" in Hames, ed. *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, p. 131. The trend was matched on the Christian side, where Muslims were often seen as less odious than Jews. Ibid., pp. 142, 151. See also, idem, *Communities of Violence*, p. 195. See also, Glick, "'My Master, the Jew': Observations on Interfaith Scholarly Interaction in the Middle Ages" in Hames, ed., *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, pp. 162. Jews engaged with Muslims in scientific and intellectual interchange at the highest levels. Occasionally, however, the same was true as well of Jews and Christians. Ibid., pp. 164-165, 167, 169.

<sup>109</sup> 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92a; printed edition, p. 189. The passage is also discussed by Hames; *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 62.

suggesting that not all nations are alike, Abulafia has already implicitly conceded that it must be that not all nations are wholly demonic and carnal. The implications of this concession are taken somewhat further. For he suggests rather directly that the higher two levels, the spiritual and the intellectual, which he had placed beyond the purview of the gentile in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, are in fact to some extent attainable by them.

He explains that one must examine those who represent each of the three categories within a given nation, observing the<sup>110</sup>

...good ones that are intellectuals [*she-be-ba 'alei ha-sekhel*] among the nation's people, that is, some of their sages [*miqṣat ḥakhmeiah*], knowing the secrets of the nation; and the good ones that are soulful [*she-be-ba 'alei ha-nefesh*], that is, the righteous sages [*ha-ṣaddiqim ḥakhamim*] such as those who fear sin; and the good ones from among the physically oriented [*she-be-ba 'alei ha-guf*], that is, those who preside over their money and love their bodies more than it.

Abulafia goes so far as to allow for intellectual sages among the gentile nations, or at least “somewhat” so. Needless to say, to such a one can neither demonic nor idolatrous traits be ascribed; rather, he must in some way partake of a proper comportment toward God. These ones, Abulafia suggests, are in possession of the given nation's secrets, by which, given the context, Abulafia certainly must intend esoteric knowledge concerning the divine. To grant to a gentile nation the

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<sup>110</sup> 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92a; printed edition, pp. 189-190

possibility of hidden, pious revelation concerning the divine of a truly intellective order is not only remarkable in itself, but it is utterly out of step with Abulafia's statements in *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*. We have here then an exemplary reflection of Abulafia's ambivalent perspective on Christianity and Islam, both of which he will go on to reference specifically. We should also observe in passing that Abulafia states, with respect to the lowest strata of humanity within a given gentile nation, that one should evaluate whether control over money is demonstrated. Polemical charges flew back and forth between medieval Jews and Christians concerning the other's inability to bridle his avarice and hedonistic proclivities.<sup>111</sup> It is noteworthy here again that Abulafia is tolerant of the notion that a gentile nation may be capable of manifesting proper conduct in regard to the human temptation toward greed.

Abulafia next indicates that he is aware that some will object to the specific evaluations made of a given nation. In fact, he will go on to make direct mention of the interreligious polemical discourse. Regarding the tripartite composition of the Jewish people, he goes on to write,<sup>112</sup>

...we have strong proofs from every side that we are divided into three human levels, and they are the level of *kohen*, *levi*, and *yahadut*... And just as the Israelite nation is God's treasure above all the nations, so the *levi* is God's treasure above all of the other Jews.

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<sup>111</sup> In *Milḥemet Mišvah*, the notion that Christians may be absolved of their earthly sins through baptism or donations is attacked. Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 62. Marcus refers to the "well-known images of the Jew as usurer or as an embodiment of pride." "Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," p. 217.

<sup>112</sup> 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92b; printed edition, p. 190.

And so the *kohen* is God's treasure above all the levites... And the head of the heads of the Israelites is the king. And the head of the heads of the levites is the sage. And the head of the heads of the *kohanim* is the prophet.

The veracity of his tripartite method of evaluating the structure of a nation is here borne out by the model of the Jewish nation itself. The Jewish mystic as prophet - Abulafia himself, in his own estimation, being the chiefmost exemplar of this group - stands at the intellectual pinnacle of all humanity, at the uppermost height of the loftiest nation. Still, Abulafia is aware of the challenges to be expected to his appraisal of the Jewish people. He writes,<sup>113</sup>

And there is no doubt that none of the nations will deny the loftiness of our nation and of our Torah and of our language and of our writing. Rather all attest to these four heights and also attest to what necessarily results from them, that is, in terms of thought and knowledge and action. However, they say that this was so before, but all of that has passed and it is not so today, because there are already other nations who have been brought closer to God than our nation, and thus are closer to Him.

That the Jewish people were uniquely endowed by God, Abulafia says, is universally accepted. The special status of the Jews, he suggests, is distinguishable when one observes their characteristic nationhood as well as their literary and intellectual distinction. These hallmarks manifest themselves in terms of superiority in "thought and knowledge and action," arenas that seem to conform to the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92b; printed edition, p. 191. See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 63.



prophetic, sagacious and kingly spheres, respectively. Jewish superiority to the gentiles at every level, then, was universally accepted, according to Abulafia. The chief point of contention, he states, inheres in the fact that many say that this distinctiveness to the Jewish people has since passed on to other nations. Two streams of Christian thought are perceptible in this contention, as Abulafia frames it. First is one of the most primary tenets of Christianity, that God transferred His covenant from the Jewish people to those who seek salvation in Jesus. The new covenant of the Christians supplanted that of the Jews, and, for the Christian thinker, Christians became God's chosen people. Second, we may perceive some suggestion here that the nation that has "been brought closer to God" is the nation whose apparent status on earth is higher. That is, the nation which appears to enjoy God's favor on earth is the nation that is "closer to Him," as Abulafia appears to outline the argument of the Christian critic of the Jewish perspective. God bestows His beneficence on that nation which is most deserving of it, according to this line of reasoning, and, since Christendom is in a manifestly dominant politico-economic position, as against the down-trodden state of affairs of the wayward Jews, it must have come to exceed the Jewish nation in merit. Abulafia will shortly address this line of reasoning more directly.

Abulafia next seems to manifest some sensitivity to the intention of the Christian polemical campaign of his own day, that being the conversion of the Jews to Christianity:<sup>114</sup>

And their [the gentiles'] belief concerning our status neither raises it nor lowers it for us. Because since the truth is with us, what addition [will result] when he reports anything to us, since the truth is with us? And what subtraction [will result] from anything that he does not report to us? But the use in it is for those who recognize, turning from the lie to the truth. And the harm is for him who stands and holds to this and does not examine himself to find the truth. And know that these who believe bring the Torah to prove what they believe for us concerning our status. And indeed, we bring not only the Torah to this knowledge, but the Active Intellect reports this to us in two intellective ways, and this is by way of the utterance which comes from it in a hidden fashion and the utterance which comes from it in a revealed fashion.

The Jew, Abulafia professes, is immune to the efforts of the gentile to sway him and lead him to the perspective that God's favor has passed from the Jewish people. Indeed, the efforts of such a gentile should serve only to alert the listener to the fallaciousness of such a challenge to Judaism, for the gentile perspective is an unexamined one. The gentile, Abulafia reports, may have recourse to the Torah, seeking proof there regarding the passage of God's favor from the Jews. Here again Abulafia seems quite cognizant of the extent to which Torah interpretation had, from the beginnings of Christianity, come to serve as a polemical battleground; the mining

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<sup>114</sup> 'Oşar *'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92b; printed edition, p. 191.

of Torah for prooftexts of Jesus' messianic status and of the Jews' ultimate condemnation by God were a Christian staple from the religion's first days. Abulafia seeks the means by which to unequivocally defeat the Christian line of argumentation in one stroke, and, not surprisingly, he turns to the Maimonidean approach to Judaic revelation for this purpose. For Abulafia takes it as self-evident that the Jew may access the Active Intellect in the service of his own prooftexts; by this circular argument, the Jew is not dependent solely on prooftexts from the Torah in order to verify the superior intellective status of his religion, since the Jew alone, and not the gentile, may access the truth through his superior intellective endowments.<sup>115</sup> He explains that the revelations from the Active Intellect occur in both concealed and revealed utterances.<sup>116</sup> But here he does not mention that he had professed earlier in the same passage that even a gentile nation may be in possession of intellective secrets. We may see here how Abulafia's own ambivalence stands in the way of his own polemical assertions.

Abulafia concludes in traditional fashion. The Jews' access to the Active Intellect, synonymous with their higher status among the nations, stems from "Abraham's and his sons' after him hearing the voice of God and preserving His laws and commandments and rules and teachings." The Jewish *nomos* renders the

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<sup>115</sup> The use of the Active Intellect by the Jew in elucidating Torah is intimately related to Abulafia's conception of the Torah itself as the Active Intellect. See, Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 33; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 141.

<sup>116</sup> For *dibbur*, or "utterance," as an appellation for the Active Intellect, see Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 92 (in Hebrew).

Jewish people distinctly privileged, this position, of course, contradicting directly the Christian perspective (not specifically enunciated in the current context) that Jewish adherence to the law serves only as an impediment for them, rendering the Jewish people non-intellective and carnal. Indeed Chazan notes that Barcelona during this period saw an intensification of Christian attacks on the illogicality of Jewish legalism, and of a concomitant response from Jewish quarters.<sup>117</sup> Continues Abulafia,<sup>118</sup>

We know this chief status because it is the first cause of our being distinguished from the other nations. So that we say that even today any who is from him [Abraham] and does not follow his way [that of the *mišvot*] is not of his seed. But there are no flaws in it, and he who believes otherwise errs. And this is since it is explained to all of us in received doctrine that this chief's [Abraham's] father, along with all of his family and nation, was an idolator, and he [Abraham] was separated and distinguished from all of them and brought to the true service of God...

The Jews are distinguished by the covenantal *mišvot* received by Abraham, and Abulafia once more appears to target Jews who do not preserve the *mišvot*, suggesting again that they are to be likened to gentiles; such Jews are not truly of Abraham's seed. From this we may understand Abulafia's demonization of the Jew who neglects the *mišvot*. We can only speculate as to the possibility that the type of Christian argumentation to which Abulafia alludes, joined as it was to a new

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<sup>117</sup> Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>118</sup> 'Ošar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 92b; printed edition, p. 191.

aggressiveness on the part of these Christians in their efforts to convert Jews, may have led to the wavering of some Jews' dedication to upholding the *mišvot*. Perhaps this did happen at times, and perhaps Abulafia was aware of it. There is, however, no clear evidence that these Christian efforts had much real impact on their Jewish targets.<sup>119</sup> Abulafia next seeks another logical proof-text for the distinctiveness of the Jews: Since Abraham was set apart from the idolators all around him through the *mišvot* bestowed upon him by God, so too is the Jewish nation set apart likewise, through the *mišvot*, and is brought into "the true service of God."

The polemical challenge posed by Christians in regard to the Jews' historical abasement is next addressed in explicit terms by Abulafia:<sup>120</sup>

But the intellectual ideas are that since it is just for this nation [that of the Jews] to be the most lofty with respect to God of all the nations, and closer to Him, may He be blessed, and more considerate of His concerns and His attributes and His actions, and it is as distant as can be from Him, the secret of the judgment is for it to be humble and lessermost of all the nations and to be ruled and taunted by all who see it. And thus there is no validity to those who challenge us by eliciting the idea of our lesser, humble and lowly status.

Abulafia maintains that the lowly status of the Jews in exile is not to be taken as a proof of their having fallen from their superior relationship to God. Rather, he

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<sup>119</sup> Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 159. Marcus, however, points to a passage from *Sefer Ḥasidim* which suggests a Jewish anxiety that Jewish-Christian polemics could lead to the less sophisticated Jew's being led astray. "Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," p. 215. Marcus also points to a rise in anecdotal evidence for Jews' conversion to Christianity by the mid- to late twelfth century. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>120</sup> 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 93a; printed edition, p. 192.

indicates that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a privileged relationship to God in potentia, if not in actualization. For the moment, the judgment upon the Jewish nation is that it deserves to be downtrodden with respect to the other nations, but this judgment has not stripped from it its potentiality for intellectual actualization, which is the ultimate seat of the nation's uniqueness. "This is the potentiality that is near it with respect to its tools, which are its Torah and language and writing, whose divine loftiness has not and will not depart," writes Abulafia. That which rendered the Jews a nation apart from the time of Abraham continues to do so even in the present day. The fact that the nation is indeed "humble and lessermost of all the nations" in no way conflicts with this essential status. As well, Abulafia's recourse to Jeremiah 24:9 with respect to the "ruled and taunted" state of the Jews in his own day implicitly points to their anticipated redemption.

Abulafia subsequently goes on to reference once again the challenge posed to Judaism by Jesus and Muhammad:<sup>121</sup>

And if you say, "Did not Jesus and Muhammad also, in what they innovated, [seek?] only to unify the name?" I will say to you that you speak the truth to him, if you will show, in what they innovated, corporeal, spiritual and intellectual utility in what distinguishes them. But the two of them were from our nation and innovated matters that diverged from God in these three ways. And it is known that they were not fathers who conducted their sons in the ways of God, but they found nations full of deviant men and released from them the bindings that were there, and they rejoiced in them as if they were

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 93a; printed edition, pp. 192-193. See also, Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 64.

released from prison. Because he found every lion and wolf and bear, himself lacking knowledge and swelled with his fat; so that today they are the fair ones [*ha-tovim*], enlightened ones, according to the masses, among whom they are great charlatans, pursuers of money and haters of the intellectual souls. And for all this, anyone who finds peace through them already recognizes the truth, and with his recognizing the truth he comes to be included among those who are drawn after our nation. And they are those who are called the pious of the nations of the world, who possess a portion in the world to come.

Abulafia again manifests an awareness that Christians and Muslims will make counterclaims equivalent to his for their own faiths. That is, they will maintain that their respective faiths both uphold the monotheistic paradigm and are exemplary in the terrestrial, spiritual and intellectual spheres. Abulafia does not evince any new line of argumentation to counter these rival claims. Rather, he simply asserts the fallaciousness of these positions, suggesting that these two faiths were based upon the flouting of the *mišvot*, and suggesting that their adherents, likened to criminals, were decadent and libertine, reveling wantonly in their new found freedoms, animalistic, ignorant, gluttonous, deceitful and greedy. It is clear once again that central to his entire conception of the distinguishing features of Judaism are the *mišvot*, by which men are “conducted...in the ways of God.” Nevertheless, Abulafia concludes with some interesting remarks. He suggests that for all of the misguidedness embodied in Christianity and Islam, it is nevertheless still possible to derive from these faiths some measure of the truth. The gentile who is able to attain this truth is appropriately termed a pious one, and he does have opened for him a

share in the intellective afterlife of the world to come. At the same time, his intellective attainments will inevitably lead him toward Jewish modalities; he is “drawn after our nation.” One final time, then, Abulafia’s remarks mitigate against the strictly demonic and idolatrous conception of Christianity and Islam.

In a related discussion from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia at the outset considers the issue of sectarian innovation more generally, examining the extent to which sects retain their original larger collective national identity. Once more, adherence to the original law is a key factor. Abulafia deems the patriarch Abraham as well to have been an “innovator,” though one for the good, and not of the type to cause confusion through trickery, as did Jesus (although Abulafia will shortly thereafter refer to the confusion of two nations, thereby including Islam as well). Abulafia will denounce Jesus as one who “gathered many men and confused their minds and knowledge with strange wonders,”<sup>122</sup> and he will once more refer to Jesus as a would-be “liberator of prisoners,” one who merely appeared to have mercifully lightened the legalistic burden of the masses, causing much rejoicing. In truth, however, Jesus exchanged circumcision for baptism, and in so doing “he transformed their form from that of men to that of women, and returned the foreskins of their hearts and the foreskins of their flesh, like women.” This notion taps into the larger theme of the evil,

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<sup>122</sup> The traditional charge of Jesus as a sorcerer was one taken up by Abulafia, as we shall see, and is reflected as well in the contemporary polemical discourse. It even occurs in the context of the Jewish effort to end forced Christian preaching in synagogues. If the Pharisees charged that Jesus was a sorcerer, it is argued, then the Jews cannot legally be forced to violate their own laws by listening to Christian preaching. Chazan, “Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), pp. 442-443.



feminizing power of the religious faith of the other, one that occupies a central position in the medieval polemical discourse.<sup>123</sup> The conception of idolatry as emasculating is driven home as Abulafia derives a proof-text for Jesus' truly idolatrous nature. He does so through a *gematria*: The numerical value of the letters of the Hebrew name for Jesus, "Yeshu," is the same as that for the Biblical phrase "alien gods."<sup>124</sup>

As with the preceding passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia's awareness of the Christian line of polemical reasoning is matched elsewhere, in *Maṭteah ha-Tokhaḥot*. In one section there, Abulafia lays out a set of rationalistic refutations to the charge levied by Christians that it is historically manifest that God has transferred His favor from the Jews to Christendom. In the process as well, Abulafia equates directly the evil dimension of the Active Intellect encountered by the would-be prophet with the nations who persecute the Jews. Here again he effects a linkage between the individualized mystical praxis, which is his fundamental concern, and what he sees as the inherent contention between Judaism - as intellectual - and Christianity - as bestial. Stark as the divide is between these two

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<sup>123</sup> See S. F. Kruger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?" in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*. Gilman, in *Jewish Self-Hatred*, pp. 4-5, notes the Christian ascription of menstruation to Jews, though Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," p. 274, contends that earlier Christian contentions regarding Jewish male anal bleeding did not turn into a doctrine of Jewish male femininity until the early modern period. Nevertheless Johnson points to at least one Christian source from as early as 1302 which refers to Jewish male monthly bleeding. The implications of the Jewish mystical appraisal of Christendom as feminine will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>124</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 774, fol. 142b; printed edition, pp. 96-97. This passage is mentioned by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 134 n. 20. See also, *ibid.*, p. 140 n. 28.

faiths and the two components of the human psyche for which they stand, we have seen and will continue to see Abulafia temper this fundamental opposition, the same course that he will take with regard to the relationship between the intellect and the imagination, which as well will emerge as highly nuanced. Writes Abulafia,<sup>125</sup>

Know that from the days of Abraham, these nations [the gentile nations inhabiting the Holy Land] were at the extreme of wickedness and served idolatrously only the divine attribute that leads each nation. Thus its way [that of each nation] is according to what it apprehends with respect to the Torah, with God, may He be blessed, restraining His anger to the tenth generation. Because thus we found from Adam to Noah that He was angered by idolatry and He restrained [His anger] from them until all the flesh upon the land had corrupted its ways, and He brought upon them the flood. And so too from Noah to Abraham there were ten generations, and were it not for Abraham the world would have been stricken in his generation as had been Sodom and Gomorrah and their ilk in fire. And Pharaoh and his people were stricken in the days [of Moses], and seven nations in the days of Joshua. And the sages of blessed memory say that it says ten generations to announce how He restrained His anger. Not because of there being four or ten as a fixed sum, rather to announce that the restraint of His anger stands for many years. And sometimes He avenges immediately, in particular or in general, according to this or that action. And sometimes upon the sinner himself and sometimes upon his progeny, sometimes near and sometimes distant. And sometimes He restrains Himself greatly, and He extends our exile that stands to this day by a number of years whose sign is “the law of repentance” [*huqat teshuvah*]...

Abulafia is concerned at the close of this passage with explaining how it is that the Jewish exile of his day has lasted for so many centuries, that is, how it

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<sup>125</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 48b-49a; printed edition, pp. 46-47

could be that God would show such forbearance to the wicked gentile nations, given that He showed similar such restraint for only ten generations' duration in the examples enumerated.<sup>126</sup> The immediate context for this discussion concerns another question, "...how is it possible to think that the seven nations mentioned in the Torah were punished with the arrival of the Israelites in their land with destruction, and behold, they to this day are sunk in idolatrous worship and have not been eliminated from it [the Holy Land]."<sup>127</sup> Abulafia explains that their punishment will be carried out upon their descendants. Ultimately, the cause of their destruction will be their idolatry:

...if idolatry is not first purged from the heart it is impossible to hear the voice of God. And it is the cause of the destruction of those who worship [idolatrously], like all of the nations, as if they are completely corporeal, because they worship idolatrously while they are not drawn after the opinions of the souls of the enlightened ones.

Naturally, Abulafia is of this same opinion in regard to the fate of Christendom. Abulafia will refer further to Deuteronomy 9:5, "It is not out of your own righteousness and the rectitude of your own heart that you inherit their land, but it is out of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God bequeaths them to you, and for the sake of the thing that He swore to your fathers." Abulafia recognizes the two explanations provided in the passage for

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<sup>126</sup> See *Masekhet Avot*, 5:2, and Maimonides' commentary, ad loc.

<sup>127</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 48a; printed edition, p. 45.

the Israelites' reward, the oath to the fathers and the wickedness of the gentile nations. These two explanations pose a problem for Abulafia, however, in fathoming the ultimate reason for the Israelites' inheritance:<sup>128</sup>

And here there is a difficulty, for if God decreed upon them in the days of the fathers to annihilate and destroy them, this was not due to their wickedness, but rather due to love of the fathers. And if it was thus because of their wickedness, then it was not due to love of the fathers. And if it was due to the two causes from the days of the fathers, behold, no one of them remains alive in the days of Israel.

Abulafia is apparently not fully satisfied with these explanations, so that he will ultimately have recourse to a yet more recondite explanation for God's judgment upon the Israelites, one that encompasses both their reward and punishment. In the passage with which we began, Abulafia explains that God's restraint need not conform precisely to a duration of ten generations' time. It may be of any duration, and His vengeance may be enacted in any way He sees fit, directly or indirectly, generally or upon particular individuals. Implicit here is the opinion that the duration of the Jew's exile should not cause a loss of faith among Jews; that the end of exile does not in this case conform to the ten generations time frame does not mean that it is not destined to come to pass. Nor, similarly, should the length of the exile provide fodder for Christian argumentation.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 48b; printed edition, p. 46

<sup>129</sup> Chazan notes that, "A number of sources indicate that precisely this theme [the extraordinary length of the Jewish exile] lay at the heart of the energetic Christian missionizing of the middle

Abulafia implies that there is a meaning behind God's choice for the duration of the exile of his own day. It will, he suggests, last for a duration equal to the numerical sum of the phrase "the law of repentance" (*huqat teshuvah*), that is, for 1,221 years. As we shall see in Chapter Four, Abulafia in *Gan Na'ul* will fix the time of exile at 1,222 years.<sup>130</sup> By the *Gan Na'ul* accounting, Abulafia anticipated redemption in the year 1290, with the starting point for exile being the year 68. The "repentance" that Abulafia conceives as crucial to this redemption is to be understood as being that of the Jews. It stands, we may surmise, for their coming into a fully intellectual state.<sup>131</sup> The contrast is apparent between this potentiality of the Jews and that of the gentile nations, whose idolatry places them under only one particular divine attribute (we might perhaps suspect the *sefira Gevurah* here) and whose knowledge of Torah is inherently limited. The onus is upon the Jews for their deliverance; that Jewish "repentance" marks the end of exile signifies that the lofty status of Christendom does not negate the fact that the gentiles are merely passive agents of God's judgment upon the Jews for their own transgressions.

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decades of the [thirteenth] century." Such an argument was apparently raised during the forced Christian sermonizing in the synagogue of Narbonne in the late 1250s or early 1260s. Chazan, "Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply," *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), pp. 451, 457.

<sup>130</sup> *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 327a; printed edition, p. 37. See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>131</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 65-67, for the relationship, in Abulafia's thought, between the messiah, the Active Intellect and redemption. Abulafia conceived of the messiah as the Active Intellect itself, both as an internal human faculty through which an individual may achieve salvation and as an agent effecting historical redemption.

Concerning the apparent difficulty raised by the fact of the persistence of Jewish exile, Abulafia continues,<sup>132</sup>

And we see today that the Christians worship idolatrously, and they do not recognize a word properly; and thus it is not proper to say that there is a difficulty concerning these matters, unless [one does so] because of a deficiency in the apprehension of the gift of the divine attributes. Because the one who recognizes them [the attributes] will not err and will not seek to judge his judge, only will he study the Torah as is proper, and it will explain to him all of its difficulties in matters like these, as we explained this [apparent] difficulty for him [that is, for such a one]. And regarding this it says (Deut. 9:6), “Understand that it is not out of your own righteousness [that the Lord your God gives you this good land...]” and it testifies (Ibid. 6-7) “...for you are a stiff-necked people. Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God in the desert...” And therefore Moses wished to announce to us that it was not through their righteousness that the good land came to them as an inheritance, but because of another thing. And this is the idea that there is a reward that is not [appropriately given] in respect to its being properly possessed by the one who receives it, but in another respect [is it given], and like the sentence of reward so too is judgment and punishment. And this is a great secret that the Torah reveals, and with the admission of the disputant there is no need for witnesses. And thus Moses relates to them the anger and the judgment that infuriated him. And how could God seek to destroy them given his prayers and requests concerning the secrets of the attributes?

Abulafia seeks to explain here that divine punishment and reward need not follow a scheme whose logic is readily apparent to humanity. Just as Israel’s reward, the Holy Land, was not accorded to them out of their own merits, so too is their punishment not simply understood in terms of their conduct. Israel does not receive

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<sup>132</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 49a-b; printed edition, p. 47.

reward and punishment because it deserves one or the other simply and in an obvious way. And in fact, the one who seeks to evaluate the justice dispensed by God in such a fashion is one who seeks to “judge his judge.” This, Abulafia suggests, is what the idolatrous Christians do by approaching the problem as they do, that is, by drawing conclusions from their own observations pertaining to the question of what judgment is appropriately meted out for Israel. Such an approach suggests an estrangement from the divine attributes, just as, in the passage immediately preceding this one, the idolators were adjudged by Abulafia to engage only one of these divine attributes. True attunement to the divine attributes will lead only in the direction of inquiry. The one who communes with the divine attributes (again, the *sefirot*) investigates the Torah to understand the nature of issues such as the meaning of Jewish exile. He does not judge God’s actions but seeks out their explanation in Torah, from which he will discern the reality of a “great secret” concerning the exile. The example of such a one that Abulafia provides is that of Moses himself. It is because, Abulafia explains, of Moses’ “prayers and requests concerning the secrets of the attributes” that God restrains His anger against the Israelites. To be attuned to the divine attributes is to refrain from judgment of God’s actions, which defy normal logic, just as to seek this attunement is to merit God’s mercy.

Abulafia does not ultimately elaborate upon the nature of the “great secret” of God’s imposition of such a lengthy exile upon the Jews. The phrase may refer either to his own calculations concerning redemption, which, we shall see, are indebted to

kabbalistic hermeneutics based upon the Book of Daniel, or it may refer simply to the perspective that the vicissitudes of the Jewish people are comprehensible not through any surface logic but, rather, that they result from the fact that the Jews possess a covenant whose nature transcends apparent justice. Regardless, the Christian approach to the question of the fate suffered by the Jewish people reveals only their own insubordination and detachment from the divine. In addition, conjunction with the Active Intellect, or personal prophetic communion with the divine, stands in direct opposition to the comportment of the gentiles, as is apparent from a full citation of Abulafia's point of departure for this discussion of the destiny of the nations: "See and understand that the aim of the intention is to always hear the voice of God through the secret of prophecy that I told to you. And we learn from its words that if idolatry is not first purged from the heart it is impossible to hear the voice of God." It is precisely because they do not commune with the divine after the fashion of the Jewish kabbalists that the gentiles will be annihilated, while the Jews will be redeemed: "And it is the cause of the destruction of those who worship [idolatrously], like all of the nations, as if they are completely corporeal, because they worship idolatrously while they are not drawn after the opinions of the souls of the enlightened ones."

As we see in *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, it is the success of Christendom that is at least the partial cause, in Abulafia's opinion, of its impiety. Abulafia writes that Christians commit the same error as did Pharaoh, who thought, due to the extent of



his power, that he “was the first god of all creatures.” Christians will be subjected, at the hands of the true messiah, to “harsh judgment” for their idolatrous beliefs, writes Abulafia, for which reason, he contends, the Christians refer to the messiah as “anti-Christ.”<sup>133</sup>

### **Abulafia’s Practice of Speaking in Tongues**

We have been able to observe that the polemical thread in Abulafia’s discussions of Christianity mirrors that of his larger contemporary context. We may detect much the same parallelism when we discern the presence of a degree of tolerance of the religious other in his thought. We have already observed this tendency within Abulafia’s polemic itself, as he concedes a level of wisdom, even to the point of some limited form of divine revelation, to the gentile sages. In fact, however, this tolerance only hints to an attitude that runs even more deeply and irrepressibly through Abulafia’s thought, one that again reflects a wider cultural tendency. I refer to the impulse to imitate and emulate, whether consciously or unconsciously, the religious modalities of the religious other. As mentioned, such a

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<sup>133</sup> *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fols. 81b-82a; printed edition, p. 130. The analogy that Abulafia draws between Pharaoh and Jesus will be discussed further. See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 77-80. Note that the same analogy is also drawn in the Jewish response to forced Christian sermonizing in the synagogue of Narbonne. Chazan, “Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), p. 449. Abulafia’s reference to himself as the Antichrist is discussed by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 26.

tendency has been discerned within the medieval European Jewish community by, among others Wolfson, Liebes and Marcus. The phenomenon as observed by these scholars transcends the more commonly observed fact that external influences impacted both Jews and Christians simultaneously. For instance, that both faiths, following upon the example of Islam, intensified their engagement with philosophy, particularly during Abulafia's lifetime, is readily apparent, as are some of the ramifications of this trend that we have observed in the polemical discourse. To approach these developments with an eye toward determining which religious faith borrowed from the other would be simplistic in the extreme, as a seeming ease in the flow of influence - even a simultaneity - is apparent. However, the case is rather different when one considers the appearance of Christian theological proclivities or even of specifically Christian doctrines within the Jewish mysticism of Abulafia's era, and, indeed, in Abulafia's own corpus.

The two such Christian proclivities or doctrines that have been thusfar observed by Wolfson concern, as mentioned, Trinitarian doctrine and incarnationism. The first of these will, in the remainder of this chapter, set the stage for the bulk of this dissertation. We will consider Abulafia's attraction to Christianity, first with respect to the psychological duress that he himself describes as engendered by this attraction, second, with respect to the conceptual framework within which he locates his own deeply seated identification with Jesus, and, third, with respect to the powerful reflections of Christian symbology and doctrine that

permeate Abulafia's notion of mystical revelation as divine corporealization. These three themes run to the very core of Abulafia's entire mystical system. For the moment, it is appropriate to conclude the consideration of Abulafia in his wider cultural context with some discussion of his absorption of Christian Trinitarianism from the perspective established by Wolfson. To the investigation of this motif I will ultimately add one additional theme, as Abulafia's own Trinitarian doctrine is frequently paired with another central doctrine of Abulafia's own construction, one that may be seen clearly to stem from the Christian notion of "speaking in tongues." I refer to Abulafia's characterization of mystical revelation as the evocation of prophetic speech in the languages of the seventy nations.

Wolfson, in his *Abraham Abulafia - Kabbalist and Prophet*, observes that, for all of his excoriations of the theosophical kabbalists for propounding a sefirotic doctrine that contradicts the notion of God's singular unity, Abulafia himself maintains that God exists in a three-fold state. Just as do his Christian neighbors, Abulafia deflects from himself any charge of polytheistic beliefs. He asserts that this divine triad (itself, ironically, considering his aforementioned critique, seemingly sefirotic in nature) is wholly a unity. That Abulafia's doctrine echoes the Christian one, clear enough in itself, is rendered even more apparent by the fact that Abner of Burgos would identify the same three kabbalistic hypostases with which Abulafia is

concerned - *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding) and *Da'at* (Knowledge) – as the entities which comprise the Christian Trinity.<sup>134</sup>

In the same context, Wolfson observes that Abulafia is critical of the Christian notion of divine sonship. This critique on Abulafia's part renders all the more surprising a particularly suggestive formulation that appears in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*.<sup>135</sup> It elaborates to an unusual degree upon what appear to be the three persons of the Christian trinity, addressing specifically their identities as they appear in Christian doctrine. Furthermore, in its reference to the identity of the first *sefira*, one of the three components of this trinity, the passage already alludes to another Christian conception that will, as mentioned, soon occupy our attention, the motif of speaking in tongues.

The formulation in question is imbedded within a convoluted set of letter operations. Abulafia writes as follows:<sup>136</sup> "...And the sum of 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

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<sup>134</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 131-133, n. 101; Baer, "The Kabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958), pp. 280-284 (Hebrew); Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 142. Abner turns as well to *Midrash Tehillim* for a proof-text of God's triadic essence, referring to three divine names in this regard, which are troped as attributes of God. Related triadic doctrines are present as well in both the *Zohar* and the work of Joseph Gikatilla. See also related triadic doctrines in Idel, "Notes on a Jewish-Christian Debate in the Middle Ages," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1984), pp. 689-698 (Hebrew). Noteworthy as well is that, after the Barcelona Disputation, Friar Raymond of Penafort engaged in synagogue preaching in which he described the Trinity in terms of Wisdom, Will and Power. Roth, "The Disputation of Barcelona (1263)," *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1950), p. 133; Chazan, "Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply," *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), p. 454.

<sup>135</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 14a-15b; printed edition, pp. 27-31.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 14a; printed edition, p. 27.

combined is ‘son.’<sup>137</sup> Because there is no 1,2 there [that is, ’alef/bet, spelling the word ‘father’], because it is hidden in the secret of YH, which is in the likeness of ‘father’ in reverse.”<sup>138</sup> Subsequently, Abulafia begins a discussion of the counting of the *sefirot*, indicating that they are not to be counted in a simple sequential fashion, but in a cumulative one; that is, the second *sefira*, for instance, possesses two “forms,” and so on up until the tenth, which contains ten “forms.” He continues,<sup>139</sup> “...See as well what is essential from the number of the two first *sefirot*, which are 1,2 [again, ’alef/bet, spelling the word ‘father’], and behold, regarding the one, which is the first, it is said regarding it that it is the holy spirit, also called ‘the spirit of the living God’...”<sup>140</sup> Not long thereafter, Abulafia continues,<sup>141</sup>

And indeed it [*Sefer Yeşirah*] says that the first, which is one, is the holy spirit, and it is called the first *sefira*. And with the second their sign is 1,2 [that is, ’alef/bet, spelling the word “father,” as above]. And from the third to the tenth their sign is “son,”<sup>142</sup> whose sign is “Adonai” in general,<sup>143</sup> and he who thinks otherwise cuts the plantings and will be judged, because he has cut the wheel and the plantings. Because the plantings are planted in the wheel, and it is

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<sup>137</sup> The sum of these digits is 52, the same as that for the numerical values of the letters comprising the word “son,” *ben*.

<sup>138</sup> That is, the sequence YH, whose letters represent the numerical values of 10 and 5, is the reverse of the sequence of the numerical values of the letters comprising the word “father,” 1 and 2; 5 is one half of 10 and 1 is one half of 2.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 14b; printed edition, p. 28.

<sup>140</sup> See *Sefer Yeşirah* 1:8.

<sup>141</sup> ’Oşar *Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 15b; printed edition, p. 31.

<sup>142</sup> See n. 137 above.

<sup>143</sup> “Adonai” has a numerical value of 65, that is, 52 plus 3 (the first number in this set, as mentioned by Abulafia) plus 10 (the last number in this set, as also mentioned by Abulafia), although see the continuation of this discussion below.

their root. And the secret is “5 father 5 son,” and behold the hint “the son of David comes” and brings in his hand “prophecy”...

Throughout this portion of *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia identifies the numbers one through ten as the *sefirot*.<sup>144</sup> The third through the tenth *sefirot* comprise the “son,” given that the sum of the numbers three through ten is numerically equivalent to the Hebrew word *ben*, “son.”<sup>145</sup> The letters comprising the word “father” have the numerical values one and two, respectively, although the first *sefira* is to be identified as the holy spirit, notes Abulafia, in accord with *Sefer Yeṣirah*.<sup>146</sup> Abulafia has thus clearly parsed the ten *sefirot* into holy spirit, father and son in descending order, a truly remarkable hermeneutical gesture on his part.<sup>147</sup>

We see that Abulafia nonetheless hastens to affirm his own adherence to the monotheistic ideal, certainly intending here to disavow any relationship between his own trinitarian formulation and Christianity. Abulafia suggests that he who misunderstands the nature of the *sefirot* as he himself presents it is he who posits a

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<sup>144</sup> For the *sefirot* as numbers in Abulafia's thought, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 349 n. 323; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 135. Abulafia's amplification upon the significance of the *sefirot* reveals that he conceives of them as essentially synonymous with the Aristotelian separate intellects. See, *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>145</sup> Note that this formulation is not far afield from the theosophical kabbalists' identification of the *sefira Tif'eret* as the son. Tishby notes the zoharic sefirotic configuration wherein the *sefirot Hokhmah, Binah, Tif'eret and Malkhut* represent, respectively, the father, mother, son and daughter. *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 281-282. *Tif'eret* is the sixth *sefira* in descending order, but it is often identified as embodying collectively the fourth through the ninth *sefirot*. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 358. See also, Green, “*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary, and the *Song of Songs*: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Apr., 2002), p. 38 n.150. See also, *Ibid.*, p. 40 n. 160.

<sup>146</sup> Thus the “father” is presumably relegated to the position of second *sefira*, again in accord with certain theosophical traditions, which also identify the third *sefira* as the mother. See previous note.

<sup>147</sup> Abulafia will return to this same formulation near the end of *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*. MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 158a; printed edition, p. 354.

breach or a multiplicity in the divine realm (a cutting of the plantings<sup>148</sup>), precisely the accusation that Abulafia, elsewhere, levies against Christianity.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, Abulafia, in the context of a very similar parsing out of the divine into a triad, presents just such an argument, along with an imagined polemical exchange with a Christian.<sup>150</sup>

Guard your soul...lest you think that this instructs that the divinity is three-fold, and you will be destroyed with those who are destroyed in faith from humankind. And if [such a] man will say to you that the divinity is threefold, say to him, “lie and deceit,” and indeed “three” by *gematria* is “lie and deceit” [635].

Abulafia’s recourse to mystical hermeneutical methods - that is, to *gematria* – is one that we will continue to see as he attempts to adduce a kind of revelatory and thus unassailable polemical prooftext.

On the whole, we can see that Abulafia attempts to shroud in an aura of anti-Christian piety – certainly in order to deflect from himself the real or prospective aspersions of his fellow Jews - a patently Christian doctrine. To observe the truly unitary quality of the trinity that he presents in *’Oṣar ’Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia suggests, is to recognize its stature as “’Adonai.” This, he implies, forestalls the

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<sup>148</sup> For a survey of scholarly approaches to this enigmatic phrase, see Abrams, “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 3 (1994), pp. 293-298.

<sup>149</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 131. Abulafia warns against committing the error of understanding hypostatic sonship after the fashion of the nations, that is, of Christendom. Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>150</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 27a; printed edition, p. 54. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 380 n. 37.

Christian misreading of the nature of the divine.<sup>151</sup> That is to say, given the proper understanding, the *sefirot* are configured in a wholistic fashion as “five opposite five,” again according to *Sefer Yeşirah*.<sup>152</sup> This doctrine manifests itself in the current passage in the form of a *gematria*; the numerical values for the words “father” and “son,” added to five and five, yield the numerical value for the name “Adonai” (65).

From here Abulafia will proceed to suggest the messianic dimension to this proper apprehension of the triadic sefirotic array. To understand the *sefirot* - or to properly configure them, in theurgical terms - is to bring about the coming of the son of David.<sup>153</sup> We may well understand this to indicate that the mystic who grasps the nature of the *sefirot* himself is or becomes this son of David, the messiah. With the onset of this messianic identity comes as well prophecy.<sup>154</sup> All of these notions are consistent with Abulafia’s contention elsewhere that communion with the Active Intellect – to be identified as well as the holy spirit<sup>155</sup> - brings the mystic to a state of

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<sup>151</sup> This being the same misreading, that of a divine multiplicity, that is proffered by the theosophical kabbalists, according to Abulafia. See above, n. 149.

<sup>152</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah* 1:3.

<sup>153</sup> The phrase “the son of David comes” has a numerical value of 69, equal to the numerical value of the phrase “5 father 5 son,” *he’ ’av he’ ben*, when the number of elements here, four, is also included in the sum (65 plus 4 equals 69).

<sup>154</sup> The numerical value of the word “prophecy” is 69. See previous note.

<sup>155</sup> Later in *’Oşar ’Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia writes, “Know that the attributes depend upon the holy spirit to lead them, which is the leader of all. Thus it is called the first *sefira*, and it is the Active Intellect of all, which is the Prince of the World...And its name is ‘Angel of YHVH’ and it is the angel whose name is YHVH. And this is because all of the attributes are in his hand. And the attribute *Malkhut* [Kingdom] is assigned the name ‘the tenth attribute’ and the attribute *Keter* [Crown] is the attribute that contains three comprising heights [*shalosh ma’a lot kelaliyot*] and one specific comprising one is above all of them...And it is said, David already received *Keter Malkhut* [one of these three heights, referred to as crowns], that is, at the end of all the generations, *Malkhut* will be given to the tribe of



prophetic revelation, a state which possesses as well messianic implications.<sup>156</sup> It should go without saying that, in the current passage, fraught as it is with Christian overtones, Abulafia intends implicitly to usurp the identity of Jesus, as it is conceived of by Christians, as this selfsame messianic son of David. Such a usurpation, expressed paradoxically in terms of a self-identification with he who is to be abhorred - Jesus – will be the subject of Chapter Three, below. It is apparent from the current context that Abulafia considers himself to be the one who truly understands the nature of the trinity; this is what accords him his messianic status. At the same time, Abulafia's apprehension of the true nature of the trinity places him at the utmost opposite extreme from the Christians, from whom he nevertheless manifestly borrows this very trinitarian doctrine. Such is the nature of his ambivalence toward Christendom. We will see, in Chapter Four, a dynamic with respect to the symbol of the crucifix that is quite similar to what we see here with respect to the trinity. In the current context, Abulafia implicitly contends that it is he

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Judah by an oath from God, and to the family of the house of David. That is, to his sons and to his sons' sons until the messiah." *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 71a; printed edition, pp. 139-140. Here we see that the holy spirit is to be identified with the angel Metatron, Abulafia's alter ego, who comes into possession of the *sefirot Keter* and *Malkhut* (even though Metatron is here already identified as the first *sefira*, the holy spirit, nevertheless he comes into possession of *Keter*, also to be understood as the first *sefira*, in its aspect of union with the last *sefira*, *Malkhut*), with messianic repercussions. Abulafia describes the sensation of being anointed – being rendered *mashiah* – that occurs at the time of receiving prophetic revelation. Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 162b; printed edition, pp. 365-366. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 127. For Metatron, see above, nn. 53, 87. See also, Ibid., p. 90. For Metatron as first and last of the separate intellects – that is, the *sefirot* – see also, Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," pp. 155-156. Idel suggests that Abulafia's identification of the holy spirit with the Active Intellect comes from al-Farabi; "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 88 (in Hebrew).

<sup>156</sup> See previous note.

himself who is in possession of the true doctrine of the trinity, and not the Christian, just as, we shall see, he will maintain that it is he who possesses the “true cross,” in the form of his own circumcision, and not the Christian.

We may surmise from Abulafia’s larger doctrine that he perceives his own messianic status to have resulted from a communion with one party of the collective sefirotic trinity that he presents here. This element of the trinity would be that one from which, according to Abulafia, prophetic speech emanates.<sup>157</sup> Prophetic communion results, we learn, from the apprehension of the trinity as an unbroken unity, one to be encapsulated in the divine name “’Adonai.” It is not surprising, then, to learn that the name ’Adonai indicates for Abulafia not only the ten *sefirot* conceived as a trinitarian unity but as well the demiurgic and messianic element within the sefirotic realm, the Active Intellect or holy spirit.<sup>158</sup>

It is important for us to note at this point that it is this same holy spirit that the New Testament Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes as the agent through which the apostles were empowered to speak in inspired fashion in the languages of the nations. We find in Acts of the Apostles 2:4-12:

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<sup>157</sup> Abulafia refers to prophecy as “speaking in the holy spirit.” *’Oṣar ’Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 32b; printed edition, p. 66. Idel notes that Abulafia conceived of prophetic utterance as the Active Intellect’s transmission of revelation, and of the speech through which it is expressed, to the soul of the prophet. Idel, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 299 (in Hebrew).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 33a; printed edition, p. 68.

All of them [the apostles] were filled with the holy spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs - in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Time and again Abulafia discusses the achievement of mystical revelation through the permutation of the letters of the seventy languages of the nations. In some instances the issue – though surprising in itself, given the profane nature of the seventy languages as compared with the *lashon ha-qodesh*, or sacred language, Hebrew – is a simple one: Abulafia will do little more than to suggest that letter permutation may be performed in any of the seventy languages. We find, for instance, a typical passage in *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*: “...And the name of this path contains the secret of ‘seventy languages,’ which is, by *gematria*, ‘letter permutation,’<sup>159</sup> and it is the return of the letters to their prime matter in utterance and in thought through the ten *sefirot belimah*...”<sup>160</sup> Similarly, in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*

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<sup>159</sup> Both phrases yield a sum of 1,214. See, Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 381 n. 53; Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 101; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 108

<sup>160</sup> *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, in Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 4.

we find.<sup>161</sup> “And understand what you wish from the permuted words that go out from your mouth, and in any language that you wish. Because you must return every language to its prime matter.” It is clear here that Abulafia intends that the mystic permute the letters of the language of his own choosing, with the goal of attaining to a communion with their common source, the *prima materia* of the ten *sefirot*.<sup>162</sup> It is amply clear in a number of other cases, however, that Abulafia contends that, with the achievement of communion with the Active Intellect, the mystic is accorded the miraculous capacity to understand and to prophesy in all of the seventy languages.

In one passage in *Sitrei Torah*,<sup>163</sup> Abulafia begins by discussing the three-fold nature of speech. He will parse its tripartite quality in terms of the three elements intellection, the intellectualizing, and that which is intellectualized. These, he says, conform to the “appearance of the man upon it [the throne] above” (Ez. 1:26), the “wheel” (from Ezekiel’s vision as well), and the man below, respectively. The mystic must actualize each. We can see that emergent here already is a strong parallelism with the trinitarian passage discussed above, where prophecy - the likes of which Ezekiel experienced, to use the current example – comes to the mystic who properly fathoms the nature of the trinity. Our observation that this prophecy takes the form of communion with that element of the trinity which is the source of divine

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<sup>161</sup> ‘Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 162a; printed edition, p. 364. See also, *ibid.*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 33a; printed edition, p. 67; MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 69b; printed edition, p. 137.

<sup>162</sup> Idel, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 226 (in Hebrew).

<sup>163</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 38a-b; printed edition, p. 88.

speech, the holy spirit, dovetails well with the thrust of the current passage, which is wholly concerned with the tripartite nature of speech.<sup>164</sup> That three-fold speech here takes the place of the trinity from the earlier passage conforms with our earlier observation that the name 'Adonai indicates for Abulafia both the entire trinity and the potency governing speech. Writes Abulafia,

And from this matter [that of the divine nature of speech] you will know that the linguistic potency that is found in humankind is the highest potency in all of this terrestrial existence, and because of this it is said that he was created in the image of God and the likeness of God...And when he brings forth one of these [three] actualizations found in him in potential, from potential into actuality, the three of them are found in him as one in a final, whole actualization. And he prophesies...And it is one thing without separation at the time of this actualization...And thus we sanctify the name with a three-fold sanctification, and bless the people through the *kohanim* with a three-fold blessing, to announce this great secret, and for the preparation of the matter that bears the utterance prepared in the form of the *prima materia*. Because he who bears the utterance speaks in every language, and this language prepares his primary understanding to receive each and every language, and every language's permutation...And thus it comprises all languages, which contain letter permutations, whose concern is seventy languages.

Again, as in the case of the trinity of holy spirit, father and son, the culmination of the mystic's endeavor is to forge a tripartite unity. This task is reflected as well, in an esoteric fashion, in the *qedushah* and in the priestly blessing, Abulafia reports. The result of the mystic's effort at unifying the trinity here is

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<sup>164</sup> Speech assumes a tripartite nature as well in its finding expression in writing, utterance and thought. *Maftelah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 56b; printed edition, p. 37.

prophecy, conceived of as divine speech, which we may understand, given the prior passage, as a communion with the holy spirit, within which the other components of the trinity are, as it were, subsumed in their oral dimensions. The result of this actualization and unification of the triad here, represented above as the cognizance of the nature of, and subsequent unification of, the three persons of the trinity, is, clearly, that the mystic acquires the ability to speak in the languages of the nations, that is, to “speak in tongues.”<sup>165</sup> He “speaks in every language,” Abulafia unambiguously puts it. Of each of these the mystic gains an “understanding.” Always, the mystic has the unitary purpose of reducing all language to its *prima materia*, which we may understand, from elsewhere, to be the *sefirot*.<sup>166</sup> The triadic configuration that Abulafia conceives of in the current passage clearly conforms to the one composed of holy spirit, father and son in the earlier passage, so we may say that, for Abulafia, when one achieves a communion with this clearly Christian-derived trinity, one acquires a clearly Christian-derived prophetic capacity.

A network of interrelated themes significant to the current context presents itself in a passage from *'Imrei Shefer*. Abulafia refers to the practice of permuting letters in sets of three.<sup>167</sup> These permuted letters derive - as does language itself, as

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<sup>165</sup> See also the following remark from *Mafteah ha-Shemot*: “And the secret of the seventy languages instructs that they concern three, and also they are three-fold in contemplation.” MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 54a; printed edition, p. 28.

<sup>166</sup> Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 33. Wolfson points to the passage from *'Imrei Shefer*, cited below, which refers to the *sefirot* as “the root of all principles,” which contain and give rise to the letters. *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 108-109, n. 44.

<sup>167</sup> *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 109a, 110b, 110b; printed edition, pp. 180-181, 183.

we observed - from the *sefirot*, which bear the numerical values one through ten.<sup>168</sup>

The *sefirot*, as Abulafia understands them, underlie both the alphabet and the numerical values of its individual letters. It is, Abulafia notes, *Sefer Yeşirah* that sets out this method of permuting letters in sets of three. Abulafia also indicates that Hebrew grammar itself suggests this method of permuting letters in this fashion.<sup>169</sup>

This triadic method is significant in its own right, given what we have already observed. For it is letter permutation that gives rise to the prophetic state wherein is revealed the trinitarian structure of the sefirotic world, and so it is logical that the letters, built as they are from the *sefirot*, reveal something of their source when they are assembled into sets of three. Nevertheless, despite the significance of such a tripartite method, there is as well an important two-fold signification at work in the passage. Abulafia permutes the letters of the ten commandments, a gesture which arises from his allusion to the ten *sefirot*. Concerning the significance of the permutation of the letters of the ten commandments, Abulafia writes, “And you must know that all revolves from ‘’El’ to ‘’El.’ And the sign for all of these is (Ps. 22:2), ‘My God, my God [’Eli, ’Eli], why have you forsaken me?’” Here it is likely that the letters *’alef* and *lamed*, comprising the divine name *’El*, are distinguished by the fact that *’alef* begins the first half of the alphabet, while *lamed* begins the second. Indeed,

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 107a, 107b; printed edition, pp. 175-176.

<sup>169</sup> Regarding the significance of this mode of permutation, Abulafia writes, “I will begin by saying that the first great encompassing order of permutations is that of three letters, because it is complete. And this is because the complete verbal roots contain three foundational letters in the holy language...”

Abulafia in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, lays out a letter permutational method of letter pairs based upon this first set of *'alef* and *lamed*.<sup>170</sup> Abulafia in *'Imrei Shefer* will also proceed to analyze the numerical values of the two words for these letters, *'alef* and *lamed*, observing that they are equivalent to the numerical value of the words “generation and destruction.” These, it is explained, are phenomena of the created world, and God enjoins us to engage in letter permutation in order to learn and to study [*le'elof ve-lilmod*] them. Such study yields an understanding of “the identity of the encompassing formation of all of the world and its creation and the secret of its renewal and the extent of its edges...” The two letters *'alef* and *lamed* ultimately are the springboards for subsequent discussion of the dichotomies matter and form, earth and heaven, and the separate intellects as against the Active Intellect. The “generation and destruction” which Abulafia equated with *'alef* and *lamed* come to be located in the earth, comprised as it is of the four elements, which are ever in flux.<sup>171</sup>

It will begin to become apparent that Abulafia's attraction to an exploration of the numerical signification of the phrase “'El, 'El” may have been inspired by the Christian recourse to the Biblical passage that Abulafia cites, “My God, my God [*'Eli, 'Eli*], why have you forsaken me.” This possibility is rendered more apparent

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<sup>170</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 37a; printed edition, pp. 76-77. See also, *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, MS Munich-BS 22 fol. 194a; printed edition, p. 43

<sup>171</sup> *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 107b, 108a; printed edition, pp. 174, 179.



in his subsequent reference to the natural scientists, that is, the gentile sages,<sup>172</sup> whose sphere is that of all things comprised of matter and form. These sages err in two ways, Abulafia says. The first is that the Jews have it as received wisdom that the world is continually renewed by God, while the gentiles, following in the Aristotelian tradition, believe only in its antiquity.<sup>173</sup> The second is that “they testify to the order of conduct and supervision from the intellect upon man, and we establish it.” In this fashion, the Jews proceed from divinely imparted wisdom, while the gentile proceeds only from that which he may logically infer. “The wonder is,” Abulafia continues, “that we who transgress attest to it with our exile and all of our misfortunes. And they who rule atone for it with their dominion and rule, and it is not my intention to explain this here, but it is my intention to reveal the wonderful divine order in permutations, and from them the perfect one will recognize that all is ordered and arranged as is fitting.”

Once again the vexing question reemerges as to how it could be that the Jews, for all of their superiority, are consigned to a lowly fate. We have already seen Abulafia expending no small effort to counter the Christian argument on this score. And indeed earlier in *’Imrei Shefer* itself Abulafia presents some other related points. He indicates that Israel’s seeming downtroddenness among the nations runs counter to the actually lofty status of those who possess the unique knowledge of the divine

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 109b; printed edition, p. 179.

<sup>173</sup> Davidson, “Maimonides’ Secret Position on Creation,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 1, edited by I. Twersky (Cambridge: 1979), pp. 20-21.

name.<sup>174</sup> It is this most lofty status that renders Israel the “soul” of the nations, who are, not surprisingly, relegated by implication to the role of the body.<sup>175</sup> It appears that Abulafia’s recourse to Psalm 22:2 above also contains within it the seeds of a polemic that we have seen before. He discerns within the words “My God, my God” an allusion to the words “generation and destruction,” as observed earlier, but these are to be associated only with the lower, created world, this being the province of the gentile natural philosophers. He seems here to manifest an awareness of the significance of the verse for Christians, seeking, in contrast to its meaning for them, to employ the verse to affirm the limitations of the gentile sage, who are denied revelation. Seemingly as well he seeks to render a critique of the notion of Jesus’ divine incarnation, reinforcing the base and corrupted nature of the corporeal with the selfsame phrase that Jesus utters at the moment of his own destruction.

As mentioned, this discussion of the two-foldness hinted at in the words “My God, my God” is accompanied by one of three-foldness. Beginning with the delineation of the significance of the permuting of letters in sets of three, Abulafia presents a permutational method based on three sequences of the alphabet, comprising sixty-six letters in total, a number whose significance is suggested, among other ways, by its correspondence to the numerical value for the phrase “your God” (*’eloheikha*) and that of the word “revolution” (*galgal*).<sup>176</sup> The three variations

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<sup>174</sup> *’Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 49a; printed edition, p. 8.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 61b; printed edition, p. 48.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 110b; printed edition, p. 182.

on the entire alphabet together comprise a “complete whole,” as Abulafia describes them; they are both three and one. Such is the case as well for each of the letters within a given triad. Writes Abulafia,<sup>177</sup>

And with the complete triads that are revolved you will render three-fold every letter, and you will place each at the end, middle and beginning. [...] And all of them are joined in this way. And thus every letter possesses three forms as it is arranged, but in its essence it possesses only one form.

Each of the letters, understood in this fashion, are both three-fold and unitary, just as with the three-fold permutation of the alphabet. In this connection, Abulafia considers three letter triads proceeding from the beginning of the alphabet, *’alef/bet/gimel, bet/gimel/dalet, and gimel/dalet/he’*. Their numerical sum (twenty-seven), Abulafia observes, is equal to that for the word “my goodness” (*toviy*) from Exodus 33:19, “I will make all My goodness pass before you.” Regarding this, Abulafia explains that “He [God] showed him [Moses] all of existence and its knots, which are the back of God and the face of Moses.” Abulafia suggests here that the permutation of these first triads of the alphabet is as well unitary, alluding to Creation in its entirety, and he implies as well that their permutation – “front and back,” as he frequently puts it - constitutes the means by which the mystic may apprehend the posterior of God. This notion derives from the older Jewish mystical

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 110a; printed edition, p. 184.

conception that the vision of the divine glory is equivalent to the seeing of the divine from behind, a formulation derived in turn, in part, from the continuation of the Exodus theophanic account, which reads (33:23) “...you shall see My back, but My face will not be seen.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, it is the fathoming of the three-fold unity, which Abulafia delineates, to this point, in terms of three different permutational methods, that constitutes the means by which mystical communion, defined here in visionary terms, may take place; by truly grasping the essence of this three-fold unity, the mystic may approach the divine.

Emphasizing the significance of this tripartite essence in yet another manner, Abulafia explains that the three-fold unity is the “secret” behind the structure of a man’s soul, which “possesses one unique form in its singular essence, in the truth of its identity, and it is arranged in a three-fold order...” The three components of the soul are to be found in the head of the liver, the center of the heart, and the rear of the brain, but each is found as well in the head, center and rear of each of these organs, yielding three triads once more. The notion that man is constituted in the divine likeness seems to be evoked here, and Abulafia will go on to reinforce this impression. Concerning this arrangement of the components of the human soul, he writes, “And this is the wisdom of the divine order of permutation, to apprehend thereby the identity of man.” That is, the essential structure of man is as well constituted in terms of the “divine order of permutation.” From this structure of the

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<sup>178</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 26, 131, 133.

soul one may discern hints alluding to divine “laws and righteous judgments and deep secrets,” and from these, in turn, “...you may apprehend something of the divine configuration in its complete arrangements.”

From here Abulafia directly relates the seventy languages of the nations to this same three-fold unity:<sup>179</sup>

And after I relate to you the way of the great [three-fold] permutation, I will tell you that the letters that are called the beginnings of words may all be written from their beginning to their end, their beginnings first, because they may not be exchanged and they may not be changed in any of the permutations of the twenty-two three-fold alphabets. You will complete twenty-two complete heights, each of which contains 484<sup>180</sup> three-fold words, mixing every utterance that may be spoken in seventy languages, in words comprised of three letters. Regarding this we say that “letter permutation” by *gematria* is “seventy languages.”<sup>181</sup> And we thus bring about unity in this way [*ve-yahadnu 'al zeh 'otah ha-derekh*] with the unique name, reading seventy languages in the secret [*liqro' be-sod shiv'im lashonot*], and the secret is “secret,” whose name is seventy, that is sixty-six letters in the three-fold alphabet, and it is one alone. Thus the sign of three and one is “secret,” that is סג"א.<sup>182</sup> And understand this also well.

The three that are one comprise a secret in their tripartite unity, contends Abulafia here, and their “secret” is the number seventy. Letter permutation, engaged in in a tripartite fashion, one that alludes to the divine three-fold and unitary order, thus evokes the secret of the seventy languages that encompass prophetic revelation.

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<sup>179</sup> *Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 111b; printed edition, p. 185.

<sup>180</sup> The square of 22 is 484.

<sup>181</sup> Both phrases yield a sum of 1,214.

<sup>182</sup> That is, “Sixty and three [and] one.” The numerical value of the letter *vav*, “and,” is six, so that a sum of seventy results.

Abulafia suggests here that one should engage in letter permutation in seventy languages, but just as the tripartite method of permutation parallels the divine order itself, as we have seen, so too does permutation in seventy languages reflect the essence of the divine, for the seventy languages are contained within the very divine name, they being thus the “secret” aspect of letter permutation. The essence of prophetic revelation, for Abulafia, then, is encompassed in seventy languages, a notion which differs little from the New Testament conception of the apostles as engaging in revelation from the holy spirit, miraculously, in every language.<sup>183</sup>

In Abulafia’s conception of speech in seventy languages, the multilingual act of letter permutation is paralleled by the efflux of prophecy in these languages. The one appears to bring about the other, as the mystic, who may permute letters in the language of his choice, achieves full linguistic facility in every language with the onset of prophecy. This principle finds expression in *Sefer ha-Hesheq*.<sup>184</sup>

And you will attain the preparation appropriate for the soul, which is the knowledge in the thought of the image of the contemplation of the letters, and he who draws through them thinks that they speak with him as a man speaks to his friend, and as if they are in their essence a

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<sup>183</sup> In a related passage in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, Abulafia writes that, during his mystical encounter with the angel Raziel, he received ten utterances. These he links to the ten *sefirot*. Regarding the utterances themselves, Abulafia writes that they were received “from one voice, and seven languages are in each.” We see here, first, that the seventy total languages are again linked with the structure of the divine world and, second, that Abulafia’s notion of the speaking in seventy languages is not simply a matter of prophesying in any language that one knows, but, rather, that the reception of prophecy in the seventy languages is a revelatory aspect of the mystical experience. *Sefer ha-Yashar*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 26b; printed edition, p. 99. Hames cites this passage in *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 40.

<sup>184</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 8b; printed edition, p. 13.

speaking man who brings forth words from his mouth. And this man knows seventy languages, and knows the known intention intended in every letter and every word...

Abulafia maintains that when one has achieved the capacity to contemplate the letters sufficiently deeply and vividly, the act of letter permutation is transcended and prophetic speech, in the form of the seventy languages, comes to the mystic from a divine source, that is, from the Active Intellect. It is apparent that when Abulafia enters the prophetic state and speaks in Hebrew, he believes that he is speaking in all of the seventy languages; this follows from his contention that Hebrew contains all of these languages. Yet Abulafia makes no mention at all of Hebrew in the current context. He is unambiguous here that he has in mind a revelatory knowledge of the seventy languages; the meaning of “every letter and every word” imparted in these languages is made known to the mystic. We can be certain that Abulafia was not actually speaking in seventy languages during his prophetic states. Indeed, the notion that he actually engaged in prophetic speech in any language besides Hebrew is questionable. However, what is important to observe is that, in this passage as in numerous others, Abulafia frames his prophecy in a fashion that replicates the linguistic achievement described in Acts.

In another passage, from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*,<sup>185</sup> Abulafia discusses God’s concealment of the secrets of the Torah, necessitated by the sinful nature of the

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<sup>185</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fol. 69a; printed edition, p. 121.

world, and the trials that must be undergone before one is rendered sufficiently righteous to be able to unearth these secrets, which are hidden from the unworthy. These trials, Abulafia maintains, take the form of adherence to the *mišvot*. Writes Abulafia,

And it is what I explained to you, that this world is like a “refining pot,” through the Torah, because the truth of existence is the permutation of the letters, whose secret, by *gematria* is [seventy] languages, through the permutation of letters that are called by seventy names and written in seventy writings, and every writing is “seventy.”<sup>186</sup>

The secrets of the Torah are preserved for the righteous adherent to the *mišvot*, that is, for the righteous Jew. The essence of the “refining pot” (*mašref*, from Prov. 17:3, which Abulafia implicitly draws into a connection with the notion of permutation, *šeruf*<sup>187</sup>) that is the world may be discerned through the act of letter permutation, and particularly through that of the letters of the Torah.<sup>188</sup> Abulafia simultaneously articulates the essentially Jewish nature of the enterprise of letter permutation and embraces engagement with the other languages within this practice. In fact, he goes even further. The seventy names contained within letter permutation, and the seventy modes of writing in which it is practiced, are paralleled by

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<sup>186</sup> The numerical value of the sum of the letters of the word “writing” is the same as that for the word “seventy” (422).

<sup>187</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 180.

<sup>188</sup> The belief expressed here that these permutations of the Torah are properly performed in the seventy languages may be tied to the notion of the Septuagint’s origin from seventy Jewish sages.



“...seventy names written in the *hashmal* and sealed in its name and in the names of its seal.” The seventy languages are not merely the practical means through which prophetic vision is achieved. Rather, they are ontologically linked to the very object of prophetic revelation, the *hashmal* being the radiance or “electrum” seen by Ezekiel in the midst of his chariot vision.<sup>189</sup> The languages are part of the stuff of revelation itself, from which we may understand Abulafia’s contention that they are miraculously bestowed upon the mystic at the moment of *devequt*, or of the vision.

The apprehension of the divine name is the crucial aspect in Abulafia’s conception of the essence of the secrets of the Torah.<sup>190</sup> In this Abulafia proceeds from Nahmanides’ doctrine that the Torah is, in its entirety, comprised of divine names.<sup>191</sup> This notion is as well recalled in the above passage from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*. There the mastery of the secrets of the Torah is achieved through both seventy languages and seventy names, these in turn being reflected, we have seen, in the divine realm. A closely related notion emerges in Abulafia’s *Sitrei Torah*. There, he relates that the fullness of the revelation of the divine name cannot, in fact, be achieved without recourse to the seventy languages. From this we may understand Abulafia’s impulse to continually identify so closely the phrases “letter permutation” and “seventy languages.” As well, if the seventy languages are components of the

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<sup>189</sup> Ez. 1:4.

<sup>190</sup> For the significance of the knowledge of the divine name for Abulafia, see, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 73, 77, 89, 93, 164, 166, 172, 191, 216, 222.

<sup>191</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 200. For earlier precedents, see Wolfson, “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study,” pp. 48-51. For possible Christian influence on Nahmanides, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 543 n. 433.

revealed divine name, we may understand better why it is that speech in the seventy languages accompanies revelation. Writes Abulafia in *Sitrei Torah*,<sup>192</sup>

And indeed, in your investigation into the received doctrine and intellection of the matter of the secrets of the Torah, know in truth that you may apprehend from it what no philosopher in the world from the nations may apprehend. And you do not need to see their books at all, and you may understand through it all wisdom and knowledge, and you may grasp the intention of God, may He be blessed, in the giving of the Torah and the *mišvot*, and you may succeed and inherit two worlds, this one and the one to come. And knowledge of this thing depends upon knowledge of the explicit name, which is known through the knowledge of the permutation of letters, within which are contained seventy languages, and it is a mighty secret. And in this manner you will find that this secret is the basis of all wisdom and intellectual thought...And you will know from the secret of “letter permutation” that “all of the *mišvot* are the holy spirit,” and in truth all of the world depends upon it.

Abulafia begins here with the now familiar assertion of the denial of authentic revelation to the sages of the gentiles. Again, it is adherence to the *mišvot* that constitutes the bedrock of the comprehension of the secrets of the Torah, which are realized through letter permutations.<sup>193</sup> These permutations are the key to the knowledge of the divine name, we learn next, from which we may discern once more that knowledge of the secrets of the Torah and knowledge of the name are synonymous. Letter permutations, the basis for esoteric revelation, contain the seventy languages, Abulafia immediately tells us, which “is a mighty secret.” The

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<sup>192</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS Paris-BN heb. 774, fols. 125a-b, printed edition, pp. 37-38.

<sup>193</sup> Wolfson’s observation that Abulafia understood his mystical praxis to be based upon the *mišvot* will be examined in Chapter Four.

nature of this secret is amplified further in the *gematria* that follows. The phrase “letter permutation” is numerically equivalent to “all of the *mišvot* are the holy spirit.”<sup>194</sup> Here is revisited the notion that the holy spirit imparts linguistic facility in the seventy languages. The revelation that ensues from the letter permutations, that is, the communion with the Active Intellect - the latter identified as well by Abulafia with the first *sefira*, as we have seen - is oral in nature, that is, it consists of prophetic speech. From this we may understand the nature of the “secret” that Abulafia invokes; it is that knowledge of the divine name is realized in prophetic speech in the seventy languages. Once more, this is a surprising conclusion to draw concerning an attainment that is limited utterly to the Jewish people, but such a doctrine is nevertheless characteristic of Abulafia. We should note once more how tightly related is Abulafia’s trinitarian doctrine with his formulations concerning the phenomenon of “speaking in tongues.” The first person of Abulafia’s trinity, the holy spirit, is the Active Intellect, the very agent of prophetic revelation and the entity which embodies the oral potency that manifests itself in the mystic’s capacity to speak in seventy languages.

If we have established the close relationship between knowledge of the divine name, the communion with the trinity (conceived of as linguistic potencies), and speaking in tongues, another passage from *Sitrei Torah* will expand further upon

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<sup>194</sup> Both phrases equal 1,214.

these interconnections. There,<sup>195</sup> Abulafia first suggests that language is tripartite, after the fashion of time, which is composed of past, present and future. Every language is comprised of one component which concerns things' essential names,<sup>196</sup> one which concerns names which relate things to one another,<sup>197</sup> and one which concerns names which realize the potential latent within things.<sup>198</sup> Abulafia writes,

And concerning this, I will not speak of the matter of the connection nor of the matter of the actualization, rather of the necessity that instructs concerning the preexistence of God, may He be blessed, and concerning His truth and His eternity, and it is the permutation of the name. Because the secret of the name times three is "lion" and it is "the mighty one" [*ha-gibbur*] and it is "cloud cloud cloud," and each of them is "revolution," and upon it "the holy language is completed," that is, upon the "apprehension of the name and its numeration." Because from it may a man approach his Creator and then desire Him and long for Him with a strong longing."

Abulafia reports that he will concern himself with only the first of the three linguistic components, that concerning the "explicit name" of God. We may see that he intends by this the seventy-two letter name. Though he is concerned with only one part of the triad, he immediately sets about indicating the tripartite whole of which it is one part; thus the seventy-two letter name constitutes one third of the word for

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 35a; printed edition, p. 75.

<sup>196</sup> "...one of it is the essential name, wherein the name instructs concerning the thing's identity and truth in each and every language..."

<sup>197</sup> "And one is the name that joins the thing to another and joins the matter of one existence or the understanding of one of the matters, and instructs concerning the connection..."

<sup>198</sup> "And one is the name that actualizes the thing, instructing concerning the time of actualizations that is hinted to."

“lion” and for “the mighty one,” each of which has a numerical value of 216.

Similarly, the word “cloud” has a numerical value of seventy-two, so that three of them constitute a whole. From this whole stems the consummation of the linguistic faculty – that is, from the assemblage of the three components into a whole whose value is 216, “the holy language is completed.”<sup>199</sup> This completion of the holy language is synonymous with the knowledge of the name, or the “apprehension of the name and its numeration.”<sup>200</sup> This knowledge of the name, Abulafia suggests at the close of the passage, is indicative of mystical communion with God. Once more, it is the apprehension of the trinitarian nature of the divine, expressed here in terms of the three-fold name, that culminates in prophecy. Just as, earlier, the divine trinity was conceived of as essentially linguistic, so now it is language itself that is tripartite, the vehicle to the apprehension of its tripartite object.

That the oral product of prophecy is of a miraculous and revelatory nature, that is, that it is revealed in the seventy languages to the mystic, and that the seventy languages are not simply to be understood as the vehicle employed by him, is suggested in one final passage, this from *Shomer Mišvah*.<sup>201</sup> Abulafia describes a three-fold nature to that mastery of the letter permutational method which, he says

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<sup>199</sup> This phrase may be seen to have a numerical value of 216. In fact, its value is 1,215, but by transposing the digit for one thousand into a single digit, a practice not unfamiliar in Abulafia’s *gematriyot*, one derives the value of 216.

<sup>200</sup> This phrase has as well a value of 1,215. See previous note.

<sup>201</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 51b; printed edition, pp. 16-17. See also, *Maftēah ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fol. 95a; printed edition, p. 22, where utterance occurs “in the divine holy spirit, joined with the human holy spirit.”

once more, may be practiced in any language. Mastery is achieved first in written form, then orally and lastly in an intellectual fashion. The result of the last of these stages is that it will seem to the mystic as if speech is imparted to him by the divine. His role is to transmit it to others without reservation, even if it appears to him as if it reports to him “very strange matters.” Rather than questioning revelation, one should “receive what is heard from the mouth of your teacher, even if he says to you that right is left and left is right...” To do otherwise is to “judge your judge,” the transgression, we may recall, of the gentiles, who lack access to such revelation. Here it is clear again that the prophetic speech in which the mystic engages is not simply the product of letter combinations in the seventy languages; rather, the mystic speaks in a speech that comes to him from divine inspiration in the form of these seventy languages.<sup>202</sup>

It is the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that serves as Abulafia’s model for his prophetic speech in the languages of the seventy nations. The influence of the New Testament upon Abulafia’s own formulation is all but confirmed in that

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<sup>202</sup> See also *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 48a; printed edition, p. 9, where Abulafia writes, “He who apprehends the prophetic utterance recognizes that the word that he apprehends is not from him, rather it is from the actualization within the word that he receives...” In *Sheva’ Netivot ha-Torah*, Abulafia refers to the “utterance that comes from the Active Intellect upon the verbal potency,” again emphasizing that prophetic speech is received from the divine. It is because the Active Intellect bestows upon the mystic a divine linguistic faculty that the prophetic speech that ensues takes the form of seventy languages. Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 4. Nevertheless, see *ibid.*, pp. 7-8, where Abulafia writes, concerning Hebrew, that prophecy is “the utterance that arrives to the prophet from God by means of the complete language that contains under it seventy languages, and it is the holy language alone...” Here we find Abulafia suggesting that prophecy occurs in Hebrew, and that, since Hebrew comprises within itself all of the languages, the prophet who imparts his revelations in Hebrew in fact imparts them in every language.

Abulafia's prophetic speech in the languages of the nations regularly occurs in close connection with trinitarian formulations of the divine and of the nature of prophetic speech. Abulafia relates that prophetic speech comes to the prophet from the divine in a supernatural fashion. It is this central aspect of Abulafia's prophetic speech that reinforces his claim that he receives and imparts his revelations in seventy languages; he maintains that he does this through divine inspiration. Abulafia's ultimate justification for this claim is his contention that Hebrew is comprised of these seventy languages, and that by speaking in Hebrew he is speaking in all of them. But the tendency for Abulafia to refer to prophetic speech in seventy languages, often omitting any mention of his doctrine that they are all derived from Hebrew, suggests that he seeks to create the impression that he actually speaks in all of them, thereby replicating the achievement of the apostles, speaking in tongues.

## Chapter II. Abulafia's Demons; the Psychological Dimension of Abulafia's Relationship to Christianity

Writes Abulafia in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* concerning his momentous first arrival at the level of prophecy,<sup>1</sup>

And I saw many terrible and wonderful visions through signs and wonders, and because of them jealous spirits gathered around me. And I saw imaginings and errors and my reason was panic-stricken, because I could not find a single man who would teach me the way to go. And so I was like a blind man groping at midday for fifteen years, with Satan standing at my right to mislead me.

In contextualizing within his wider corpus Abulafia's autobiographical account of his own initial, protracted struggle against demonic assailants, it becomes apparent that this recounting constitutes but one of a great many discussions on Abulafia's part of the mystic's encounter with the demonic element. How such encounters with this malevolent "evil inclination" from the left – personified variously as Satan, Samael, the serpent, Lilith, Sandalfon, or as a bloodthirsty demon - may be placed within the conceptual framework of Abulafia's mystical system as a whole is worthy of exploration and carries significant implications for our purposes; an understanding of Abulafia's demonology does much to illumine his relationship to Christianity. The connection between Abulafia's demonology and its relationship

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<sup>1</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 165a; printed edition, pp. 369-370. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 127.



to Christianity has not been subjected to a sustained scholarly analysis. It is in recent work by Wolfson that the way has been opened for an extended consideration of this issue. Wolfson has written at length about the zoharic authorship's notions of the idolatrous and demonological implications of the Jewish mystic's succumbing to the temptations posed by the Christian world.<sup>2</sup> In regard to Abulafia, Wolfson, following upon the work of Scholem and Idel, has as well investigated the implications of Abulafia's conception of the bipartite composition of the Active Intellect, and in particular of the nature of the demonic element.<sup>3</sup> These observations concerning Abulafia may be drawn into a close connection with those concerning the zoharic authorship's conception of Christianity as demonic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See above, Introduction, nn. 13-16, Chapter One, n. 9, and the fuller discussion to follow in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Scholem contends that Abulafia views the engagement with demons on the part of the mystic as a falling victim to temptation; Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 179; idem, *Major Trends*, p. 145. Idel, in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, devotes a chapter to the kabbalists' *Mundus Imaginalis*, wherein he observes the threat posed to the mystic by demonic phantasms; pp. 73-89. Wolfson observes the parsing of the Active Intellect, on Abulafia's part, into a number of binaries, all conforming to a division into good and evil components. The latter component Wolfson identifies as the demonic element, to be associated with the human imaginative faculty. The latter must be harnessed by the mystic, and not simply defeated. Until this is accomplished, good and evil forces within the human psyche are continually at war with one another. Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," pp. 150-155. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 97-100. See as well an extended discussion of the bipartite nature of the Active Intellect in Chapter Four, below.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfson appears as well to have had Abulafia in mind behind some of his other recent discussions of kabbalistic conceptions of the demonic. For example, Wolfson refers to the demonic female's manifestation to the kabbalist in the guise of "a rageful warrior wielding a sword of vengeance," a motif favored by Abulafia, to be discussed below; *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 347. See as well, idem, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 102-103, where, in the context of a discussion of the revelatory moment's duplicitous quality, straddling as it does both piety and idolatry, Wolfson references the zoharic motif of the "ever-turning sword" (Gen. 3:24). This sword figures prominently in Abulafia's work, as Wolfson has noted elsewhere; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172-175. For Abulafia, this sword, to be discussed further below, is taken to refer to the letter manipulations through which the mystic engages with the Active Intellect. See also, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 234-235. The presence in the

## Permutation as Refinement

A propitious starting point for a discussion of Abulafia's demonology and of its relationship to Christianity may be discerned within Abulafia's conception of letter permutation as a test or a trial, one which results in a purification or a refinement of the mystic's own being. With respect to the latter notion, that of "refinement," Scholem has observed Abulafia's dual usage of the term "*ṣeruf*," which signifies both "permutation" or "combination" and "refinement."<sup>5</sup> It may be surmised that letter permutation is conceived of by Abulafia as the esoteric dimension of the rabbinic emphasis on the striving toward piety; Wolfson has observed that Abulafia ties into his discussion of "*ṣeruf*" as "combination" and "refinement" the rabbinic assertion that the purpose of the *mišvot* is to "purify" (*lešaref*) the human being.<sup>6</sup> As Wolfson subsequently perceives, letter permutation itself is thereby understood by Abulafia as a "hypernomian" exercise, one representing "the grafting of non-halakhic rituals onto the skin of halakhah."<sup>7</sup>

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*Zohar* of anxiety stemming from the erotic temptation posed by Christianity had been noted by Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 1, pp. 256-257, 259-260, as Wolfson observes; *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 101. Regarding the connection between Abulafia and the zoharic circle, Scholem had perceived a close relationship between Joseph Gikatilla, Abulafia's one-time prized student, and Moses de Leon, whom Scholem had posited as the sole author of the *Zohar*. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 127, 173, 194, 212, 218, 391 n. 81, 395 n. 133. Hames, following Blickstein, offers conjectures regarding possible contacts between Abulafia, Gikatilla and de Leon; *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 180.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209. See also, pp. 197-204, 225.

In one respect, the refinement of the mystic's being, in Abulafia's estimation, comes from the successful passage through the trials posed in the encounter with the Active Intellect, which contains a demonic element whose presence is justified in terms of such trials. In this sense, the trial has a purificatory capacity.<sup>8</sup> In another sense, the mystical trial is simply a mechanism by which the level of the mystic's refinement may be gauged. If the mystic passes through the trial and is found to be worthy, illumination may be imparted to him. The assessment of the degree of the mystic's refinement is left either to God or to the aspirant's spiritual guide, who is faced with the weighty decision as to whether it is appropriate to proceed in the imparting of secrets to his student.<sup>9</sup> The precise nature of the grave consequences of too deep an immersion in the divine efflux too soon and with too little preparation – that is, internal “refinement” – remains to be discussed, but we already get the sense, from Abulafia's autobiographical statements, of the hazards that loom. Thus, in considering Abulafia's intense concern with the mystic's level of refinement, we should bear in mind Abulafia's lamentation that he had no master to guide him through his own very difficult and protracted period of trials. We may well understand that Abulafia looked back on this period as one in which he had

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<sup>8</sup> Idel, for instance, writes of Abulafia's conception of the binding of Isaac as a trial imposed upon Abraham, the meaning of which is “the actualisation of what is in one's potential by means of the deed that the trial involves. This actualisation takes place as a result of the intellect overpowering the imagination, or by the overpowering of the positive inclination over the evil inclination”; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 61. The actualization of one's intellect, alluded to here by Abulafia, is equivalent to the mystical refinement under consideration here. Cf., *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> As well, Idel adduces a passage from *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot* which states that the purpose of the trial is for the mystic to acquire self-knowledge; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 122.

prematurely progressed too far in his mystical exercises with too little personal refinement, rendering him ill-equipped to contend with the demonic threat.

In his *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Abulafia engages in a fairly lengthy discussion of the issue of refinement and the nature of the mystical trial. The trial proceeds on at least two levels. The one pertains to the examination of the mystical aspirant's character and personal attributes, and the other to that which transpires in the midst of the mystical encounter. In the context of a discussion of Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance, we find:<sup>10</sup>

...And from all of this you may understand who the ruling Prince is whom we mentioned, whether he is wholly good. There is in some of his actions evil with respect to the individuals [*ha-peraṭim*]<sup>11</sup> and those things which are acted upon [*ha-nif'alim*], and this evil is good for the perennial beings [*havvayot matmiddot*], and it is improper to dismiss much good because of a little evil. And thus he will see that that good is evil for the individual [*ba'avor ha-peraṭ*], when the individual is a fool and not a sage, and he seeks to judge his judge...And the sage will apprehend in these secrets the reality of God and His unity; then he recognizes in truth who the Prince of the World is and he recognizes who is created from the root. And if He is God, he is not God, and the secret is that it is one spirit, and it is called the "holy spirit," and it in its essence is the Satan [*maṣṭin*]<sup>12</sup> of every satan [*kol saṭan*]. And it is not its way to be the Satan of every angel, because its way is only to be a trial, and so, by *gemaṭria*, it is "holy spirit," the spirit trying every righteous one, because the trial is not enacted if he does not seek the ways of the righteous one, and in his seeking the ways of the righteous one it is fitting to try them in

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<sup>10</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 32b-33a; printed edition, pp. 114-115.

<sup>11</sup> Or, perhaps, "the particulars," although "the individuals" seems to better reflect Abulafia's intention as he proceeds.

<sup>12</sup> Or, "the accuser."

every respect, [to see] whether or not it is proper to make of him a righteous one [*lehašdiqo*].

The discussion of the good and evil actions of Metatron here is a locution for the angelic and demonic aspects of the efflux received by the mystic from the Active Intellect.<sup>13</sup> The perception of evil in the demonic aspect of the efflux from the Active Intellect, Abulafia suggests, is due only to a superficial understanding of its nature.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Active Intellect is imbued with this evil in order that the mystic may be tried, and the utility of evil in this regard explains why it is not truly evil in its essence.<sup>15</sup> To suggest that this evil is really as it appears, in fact, is, in Abulafia's view, to pass judgment on the divine, to judge ones judge, surely an egregious transgression, and the same one, we have seen, that Abulafia ascribes to the gentiles. The nature of this offence is further elaborated, to the effect that it represents a rupturing of the divine unity. The sage, as against the fool, recognizes God's unity and understands the place of both Metatron and Satan.

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<sup>13</sup> Idel discusses Abulafia's, and his disciples, conception of Metatron as comprising good and evil aspects; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 117, 166 n. 219. Wolfson discusses Metatron's identification as both judge, or Samael, and as merciful one. As well, he stands at once for the first and tenth of the *sefirot*; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 59 n. 167, 83, 172 n. 213.

<sup>14</sup> So it is that Abulafia reports that "the demonic efflux," which is the "strange fire," is "the first power" that the mystic receives. *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 292a; printed edition, p. 12. For the further significance of this "strange fire," see below.

<sup>15</sup> Abulafia consistently upholds general principles [*kelalim*] over particulars [*peraṭim*] in his writings, suggesting that the former partake of a supernal nature, while the latter are terrestrial and illusory (the metaphor of being unable "to see the forest for the trees" seems a reasonable way to understand his intent). Thus the human individual, by which I understand his usage of the term *peraṭ* here, is lost in false appearances and does not recognize evil for good, while the hypostases, the *sefirot*, recognize evil for what it is in its essence, good. See *Maṭteah ha-Shemot*: "...it [matter] is good in general but it is called evil in the examination of its particulars..." MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 51a; printed edition, p. 18.

We may understand, then, that to fail to see the divine efflux's evil as good is tantamount to falling victim to idolatry by failing to uphold God's unity, the transgression which Abulafia and other kabbalists refer to as the "cutting the plantings."<sup>16</sup> In fact, inherent in the proper perception of the unified nature of the Active Intellect, notes Abulafia, is, somewhat paradoxically, the recognition of which portion thereof is itself God and which is not. I call this paradoxical in that to recognize the unity appropriately is to perceive what part of the efflux exists apart from God. To do otherwise (by implication only here), would be to transgress by perceiving the presence of "two powers" in heaven. If then, the purpose of the evil component of the Active Intellect is to test the mystic, the latter's failure to recognize its true nature from the outset already represents his falling into heresy.

In fact, Abulafia, equally paradoxically, is empowered to make some rather scandalous-sounding assertions regarding the divine efflux for this very reason. Abulafia's assertion above that the unified holy spirit is itself Satan in its essence he views as verified by the numerical equivalence of the word "one" in the phrase "and the secret is that it is one spirit"<sup>17</sup> with the words "Satan" [*maṣṭin*] and "every satan." Consequently, the seemingly heretical identification of the divine holy spirit – as a whole, here – with Satan (for surely the notion that all prophetic revelation has Satan as its source is a heretical one) becomes the means for ultimate insight and for the

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<sup>16</sup> Wolfson connects this motif directly with his forecited discussion of the representation of the demonic threat as a sword-bearing combatant; *Language Eros, Being*, p. 347.

<sup>17</sup> Abulafia's indication that there is a "secret" here drives the impetus for inferring that Abulafia's perceives the presence of meaningful numerical equivalences.

demonstration of faith. It is by flirting with heresy in this instance that true piety is secured. And indeed, there appears to be a further dimension to this flirtation in the current context. For Abulafia writes in *Sefer ha-Melammed*,<sup>18</sup>

...*Hokhmah* is light and it is the truth of life. Thus we doubt what is written [regarding] which light it is in [the verse] (Gen. 1:3), “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’” And you already know that the Gentiles say that this light is “Lucifer.” And this is the name for the hidden light in Latin, and they call him the angel who governs the good inclination, and bring a prooftext from [the verse] (Gen. 1:4), “And God saw that the light was good.”

That the light referenced here Abulafia understands as the illumination from the Active Intellect may be recognized from his subsequent citation of Maimonides’ declaration that prophecy is implicit in allusions to day and to light, and of the rabbinic affirmation that the light of the first day of Creation is that which is “hidden for the righteous in the future.”<sup>19</sup> Abulafia cites as a Christian doctrine the notion that the efflux from the Active Intellect is to be understood both as the fallen angel Lucifer and as the good inclination, a paradox which is by now familiar to us. An added layer of seeming transgression is thus present: Not only does Abulafia identify, in the passage from *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, the efflux from the Active

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<sup>18</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 302a; printed edition, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Idel notes that the visualization of light during the ecstatic experience figures prominently in Abulafia’s work; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 78, 82. See also, Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 137; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 79, 215, among many other places where this motif receives emphasis. See also, idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, p. 10 where Wolfson notes that, despite the significance of prophetic vision for him, Abulafia nonetheless privileges auditory revelation.

Intellect with Satan, but this very view he, elsewhere, portrays as a dubious Christian doctrine. This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that we see Abulafia's interest in mystical piety manifest itself in terms of an attraction to that which is forbidden, in terms, that is, of a forestalling of the falling victim to idolatry in its very seeming pursuit.<sup>20</sup> It is apparent that, in Abulafia's estimation, it is incumbent upon the mystic to engage himself with a forbidden fire.

To return to the main thread of our discussion of the passage from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Abulafia hints to the presence of one other *gematria* in the excerpt presented above. The phrase "trying every righteous one," referring to the holy spirit, is numerically equivalent to the word "one" in the phrase "and the secret is that it is one spirit," as well as to the words "Satan" [*maṣṭin*] and "every satan." Thus, the identification of Satan with the efflux from the Active Intellect is inextricably bound to its function, which, we learn, is to try the one who seeks to become righteous. Righteousness is a status which is then accorded if the aspirant is deemed worthy. That this individual is tried "in every respect" [*mi-kol ṣad*] is not an expression to be taken lightly – we may understand its true weight from the apparent necessity for the mystic to engage in so close a contact with the heretical.

In the current context of *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Abulafia abruptly shifts from his discussion of the holy spirit's trying of the mystical aspirant to that of the trial undergone at the hands of the teacher. The distinction between these two types

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<sup>20</sup> Wolfson suggests this dynamic in his references to the duplicitous nature of the mystical experience, as one poised between piety and heresy. See, for instance, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 102



of trial is, nevertheless, not a very sharp one for Abulafia. “And as it happens for him with his teacher, so it will happen for him with God,” writes Abulafia regarding the test to which the student of mysticism is subject. Abulafia, we observed, writes of having not had a teacher at the proper time in his own mystical initiation. He did, nonetheless, have an angelic instructor, his alter ego Raziel, whose method of instruction does seem to have corresponded with what Abulafia prescribes for the mortal teacher, as Wolfson has observed.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, this method is one of partial and gradual disclosure, of concealing essential secrets in revealing their outer aspects and of revealing their true natures in the maintaining of their esoteric essences.<sup>22</sup> That Abulafia’s trial was such a protracted and dire one might suggest to us that recourse to a fit human guide affords a greater degree of guidance, control and safety than did his reliance on his own abilities and on Raziel, in fact a projection of his own consciousness. In this regard, there is, in fact, some equivocation, in Abulafia’s approach to the topic of his own instruction, concerning whether he may truly be said to have had a teacher at all. It is only when God took pity on him and eventually intervened, we learn, that Abulafia was finally guided to safety. Perhaps Abulafia lacked the capacity to obtain the assistance of Raziel during the period when his

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<sup>21</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 81-82, 167 n. 197. It is apparent that Abulafia had parted ways with Baruch Togarmi, his teacher in the secrets of *Sefer Yeşirah*, by the time his own period of trials had begun. Togarmi himself writes of the need for caution in imparting secrets to one’s students. Concerning the eroticism of divine rectification, Togarmi writes, “...and this is the secret upon which it is not possible to elaborate in writing, nor to transmit mouth to mouth until its root is first apprehended, after which it may be transmitted in *kabbalah* to those who contemplate His name in fear...” *Sefer Maṭtehot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 82.

necessary encounter, or flirtation, as we had called it earlier, with the heretical threat posed by Satan within the Active Intellect first ensued. Alternatively, Razi'el (that is, Abulafia's own projected subconscious) perhaps perceived the necessity for a most arduous trial; Abulafia may then be said to have perceived the need for a most difficult purgation, one which would have found expression for him in the form of Razi'el's selective revelation of secrets. Expressed another way, Abulafia may have felt himself to be impious with respect to his own response to the demonic threat, for which reason he consigned himself to no small amount of torment.

If Abulafia's own difficult trial is to be understood with respect to a paucity of instruction, a partial answer to the question of why Abulafia produced such a prodigious literary corpus is likely linked as well to the idea that a mystical aspirant may lack sufficient instruction. The issue of the oral versus written transmission of secrets is one that has been carefully probed in modern scholarship. It is the former method of imparting wisdom that is always the preeminent one, in Abulafia's estimation,<sup>23</sup> to the point where it is not always entirely clear what role his written work could have served at all for others, if not merely a non-essential, supplementary one. If this is so, why is it that Abulafia felt so compelled to render in "chapter headings" what may only be fleshed out by an illuminated instructor?<sup>24</sup> We may well

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<sup>23</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 119-120; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 56, 70, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfson demonstrates that the most primary reason for secrecy in transmission of kabbalistic learning is not an elitist posture but a recognition of the material's essential ineffability; see, for instance, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 14-15. This well explains Abulafia's frequent tendency toward circumspection, despite his prolific production. Nevertheless, Wolfson does observe in the same

suspect that his written work would have been understood to have served a central function in certain circumstances. In this regard, following the aforecited statement, “And as it happens for him with his teacher, so it will happen for him with God,” Abulafia explains, “...and thus I felt it appropriate [*ra’iti be-da’ati*] to write explicitly regarding the ways of the trial, why they are thus [*eikh hem ba-niṣayon*], so that he might endeavor with all his heart and all of his ability to be faithful to his Creator...” Certainly Abulafia feels the need to justify his imparting in writing knowledge concerning the nature of the mystical trial. His explanation he links to the insight that God tries the student just as does the teacher. From this we may understand that Abulafia has divulged information concerning the mystical trial for the student who is being tested by God, that is, for the student who does not have a teacher to explain the nature of his ordeal him. Abulafia is of the opinion that his own imparting of information concerning the trial to a mystical aspirant in such a circumstance will assist the latter in being “faithful to his Creator.” And it is faith to

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context that caution regarding transmission of secrets to the unworthy was a hallmark of kabbalists, and this is a tendency that we see Abulafia addressing specifically. Wolfson adduces Abulafia’s cautionary remarks along this lines to the kabbalistic teacher to be found in *Shomer Miṣvah*; *ibid.*, pp. 70-71. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 80-81, where further cautionary remarks, addressed to the teacher, are evinced from *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*. Wolfson suggests an explanation for Abulafia’s extensive literary production that is well-founded: Abulafia believed himself charged with renewing esoteric doctrine regarding the divine names that had been all but lost; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 54-56. Idel explains that Abulafia reveals such doctrine because of his sense of the approaching eschaton; *New Perspectives*, p. 101. Wolfson also observes Abulafia’s feeling that “chapter headings” are sufficient for the worthy, who may employ their intellectual capacity and letter permutation skills to plumb their fuller meanings; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 68-69, 75. Wolfson cites a passage from *Sitrei Torah* wherein Abulafia admits to the inadequacy of writing in the conveying of kabbalistic secrets, although such writing may, however, be able “to arouse the intellect,” *ibid.*, p. 81.

the Creator in the face of the demonic threat that is itself the ultimate mark of passage through the trial.

Abulafia betrays a sensitivity here to questions concerning the prudence of the imparting of such knowledge in writing, yet the issue of the teacher's decision to reveal secrets orally Abulafia also portrays as a most delicate one, one closely tied to the student's progression in his trials. Writes Abulafia in *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, "But if his teacher examines him and he is found to be faithless in all of his trials, it is forbidden from the first to reveal [even] a small part of this wisdom; all the more so a secret thing, for which death would be requisite for the teacher by the hand of heaven." Conversely, the student must be initiated to the limit of his worthiness: "...And if he is found to be faithful, it is incumbent upon his teacher to transmit to him all that he knows to the limit of his knowledge, and not to conceal from him even the last, very deep scintilla. And if he is able to receive it, he will write them for him in hints sufficient for his understanding, and he will transmit them to him in chapter headings mouth to mouth, and he will clarify them explicitly."<sup>25</sup> Once more we may be reminded of the issue of Abulafia's own apparent self-conception as being too "faithless" to merit deliverance from his demons for a full fifteen years, for he understands himself as having been deemed worthy enough by God to be shown the way to the subjugation of the satanic element only after such a period.

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<sup>25</sup> Wolfson evinces this particular sentence in discussing Abulafia's perspective on esotericism. Writes Wolfson regarding Abulafia's view, "The two extremes of revealing what must be concealed and concealing what is appropriate to reveal must be avoided"; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 80-81.

It remains to investigate the nature of the trials themselves and in what manner faithfulness to God, as the criterion for the passage of the trial, may be appraised. A certain aspect of this trial pertains to the student's character; the student demonstrates to the teacher his worthiness through the prevalence of traits such as forbearance, patience, compassion, generosity, honesty, modesty and the like. As well, the student must make manifest that he is motivated only by a love of learning and not by any ambition for worldly gain. It is this love of learning for its own sake which Abulafia terms learning "for the sake of heaven."<sup>26</sup> The student is tested repeatedly for these attributes, and if he is found to be deficient, no secrets may be transmitted to him, and the examination must proceed until the student is at last judged to be fully repentant.<sup>27</sup>

Such a trial appears to be preliminary to the trial that is the "refinement" (*ṣeruf*) that results from esoteric practice, that is, from letter permutation. For the purpose of demonstrating that Abulafia understands letter permutation to be suggested by the rabbinic sages as a *mišvah*, through which a person may be purified, Wolfson adduces a significant passage from *Sefer ha-Ḥesheq*.<sup>28</sup> Here, Bešalel's purported ability to "combine [*lešaref*] the letters through which heaven and earth were created"<sup>29</sup> is said by Abulafia to indicate that such a practice is

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<sup>26</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 34a; printed edition, p. 116. Wolfson mentions the modes of perfection delineated by Abulafia for the worthy student; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 35a; printed edition, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 199

<sup>29</sup> b*Berakhot* 55a.

enjoined “to purify (*lešaref*) human beings.” It is worth continuing further in this portion of *Sefer ha-Hesheq* for our purposes. Abulafia goes on to write,<sup>30</sup>

And a man may not understand and grasp the height of the true examination except according to what you will hear: And it is that you must first believe in your heart, in every way that you are able to believe, that the letters are signs and hints in the likeness of attributes and allegories in their essences. And they are found to be tools for man, to instruct in the way of apprehension. And for us they are in the likeness of strings of a lyre, which, from the bringing out of its voice, with the drawing of the bow in the hand upon the strings, and in the changing of this bowing from string to string, and in the permutation [*šeruf*] of the sounds that are born from it, rouses the soul of the man who seeks to rejoice to joy and pleasure. And it [the soul] will receive from its [the instrument's] delight, and great enjoyment of the soul results from this, because the joy is natural for every man. And if he is not roused to it from the image of thought, the soul will not be moved to joy. And if the man is sorrowful and indolent at the time of the movement of his heart to the goal of receiving the joy, he will not receive it at all. Because the sorrow and lassitude that are engraved in his thought, in one way among others, are very strong, and they are the opposite of joy. And if the opposite is well-founded and strong, how will it be possible to find the opposite in actualization, whose potentiality is in utmost weakness?

Abulafia extends the notion of “permutation” still further here, to that of musical notes, seen as analogous to letters and, likely, their intonations during meditative practice. Scholem has noted Abulafia's interest in this analogy, pointing to its being indicative of Abulafia's removal of the letters from any sense of literary

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<sup>30</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fols. 32a-b; printed edition, p. 63.

or interpretive context.<sup>31</sup> What should be noted in the current context is Abulafia's very strong emphasis on the psychological and emotional states relevant to mystical practice. The first of these is Abulafia's suggestion that the mystic must from the outset place himself in a state of pure belief with respect to the notion that the individual letters bear meaningful implications within themselves; there can be no doubt for the mystic but that the letters all embody significations that must be plumbed.<sup>32</sup> The necessity for the removal of doubt in this significance to the letters is a theme to which we will return. For the moment, we should observe its connection with Wolfson's aforementioned notion of hypernomianism in Abulafia's thought. For if, as we have seen, Abulafia is intent upon a close engagement with the heretical strand within the prophetic efflux, it is only his own belief in the hypernomian veracity of his project that provides him the assurance by which he may interpret his experiences as mystical conjunctions with the divine. And as well, it is only an ironclad belief in the rabbinically-sanctioned significance of his project that may

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<sup>31</sup> *Major Trends*, p. 133. They become, as Scholem describes them, "meaningless," and they come thereby to comprise a "music of pure thought." Idel also notes Abulafia's comparison of letter permutation and music. This stems from the harmony produced between two elements (two letters, or two instruments), from the joy that results from either, and from the fact that each is an external activity that brings about internal effects on the soul. Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 278 (in Hebrew). Prophecy, Idel notes, is for Abulafia like the hearing of music, while music may also serve as a vehicle for prophecy. Ibid., pp. 279-280. See also the parallel discussion, "Music and Ecstatic Kabbalah," in, idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 55-73.

<sup>32</sup> This flies in the face of Scholem's perspective, I believe, on the musical analogy found in the preceding note.

trigger for Abulafia such experiences.<sup>33</sup> It is the belief to which Abulafia points here that is a life-line for the mystic who ventures again and again into seemingly profane territory.

Abulafia's sensitivity to this psychological dimension of the mystical experience is nowhere more apparent than when he moves on to discuss the actual analogy to music. For, notwithstanding all of the emphasis placed upon the human intellect and on the interpretive faculty as springboards to the conjunction with the Active Intellect, it is here that Abulafia is perhaps most clear in explaining that the intellectual component of letter permutation is a trigger for its emotional dimension. It is not simply that an overwhelming joy is an accompaniment to the mystical experience, as would be apparent from some of Abulafia's other descriptions of the mystical experience.<sup>34</sup> In the current context we can see that the mystic's cerebral engagement with the letters and their significations is aimed specifically toward the consummation of the ecstatic state. It is the level of prophecy that is an outgrowth of this ecstasy. Thus Abulafia cites *Shabbat* 30b, "Prophecy does not prevail within grief or lassitude, only within joy." Writes Abulafia regarding those attributes associated with such a state of well-being, "These are without a doubt the attributes

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<sup>33</sup> I follow here again the contours of Geertz' definition of religion, by which "ethos," the aesthetic, emotional and experiential component of religion, and "worldview," a religion's conceptual framework, are seen to be mutually reinforcing; *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 90-100.

<sup>34</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 123, 134.



appropriate for every prophet before the fact [*re'uyot lehiyotan qodemot*].”<sup>35</sup> It is the “image of thought” stemming from letter permutation, in the passage above, which moves the soul to the joy that is requisite for prophecy.

### **The Battle against the Demons of Idolatry**

One impediment in this task, we have seen, is a state of some level of doubt with respect to the significance of the letters.<sup>36</sup> Another, which Abulafia next references in the passage adduced above, is a state of sadness. Abulafia takes it as a simple truism that the ecstatic state cannot be achieved if the mystic embarks upon the undertaking in a downcast psychological state; he rhetorically asks the reader how this could be otherwise. Referring to the “attributes” appropriate to the prophet mentioned above, that is, those pertaining to joy, Abulafia goes on to write, “Their complete opposites are their obstructions [*monei 'hem*].” These qualities that obstruct joy and, thus, prophecy, are, once more, grief or lassitude. The choice of the word “obstruction” for these emotional states is a significant one. It is the same word which Abulafia will use to refer to the demons who assail the mystic during his

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<sup>35</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 32b; printed edition, p. 64. Regarding joy, see above, n. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Abulafia also emphasizes the importance of the elimination of all doubts to success in mystical practice in *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 64b; printed edition, p. 66.

attempted conjunction with the divine. So, for instance, in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot* we find:<sup>37</sup>

Behold the wonders of Torah and how it reveals our nature with respect to the matter near to the animal and with respect to the form of the matter that is near to that which is a power from the powers of demons. And one must atone in them known atonements in order that no harm to the intellective soul will come by means of them because of their being obstructions [*mon'im*] to the power of apprehending the Creator and His attributes and His actions through His names...

Abulafia suggests here that demons and their associated powers are preventives to the apprehension of God and of the knowledge garnered through His names.<sup>38</sup> Such knowledge, we know, is the result of the permutation of the letters of these names, that is, from mystical practice. So the internal state represented as an obstruction to *devequt* in *Sefer ha-Hesheq* is externalized and personified in terms of demons in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*. From this we may see in Abulafia's own word choice what, from a modern perspective, we may already be predisposed to surmise: The demons against whom Abulafia strives are projections of his own psychological

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<sup>37</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 56a; printed edition, p. 59. This passage is analyzed in greater detail in the chapter below concerning Metatron.

<sup>38</sup> See Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 179. Wolfson presents a passage from *Mafteah ha-Shemot* which presents the flipside of this formulation: One must make use of one's intellect to ensnare these demons by means of an "intelligible image," a motif to be discussed shortly. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 163.

landscape, embodying the doubts to which he makes allusion as well as the temptations with which he overtly links them. In *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, we find:<sup>39</sup>

...all that is written, whether according to its contextual sense or its secret, or whether it is said as an allegory and riddle, and even the rules of signs, or in the Torah's being all names, also every utterance and every creature in their being holy names, its use and its truth and its aim are perfected with our being drawn after the divine unique intentionality alone, which in truth is the intention of truth. And it is a thing possible for us to perform and there is no obstruction [*monei 'a*] for us except for the will of Satan alone and his power and his knowledge when he prevails upon our knowledge and power and will. Because in [the] three [of them] we bless the name in the nature that impresses within us what it impresses in Satan himself, and it weighs our knowledge and power and will on a scale balanced with his will and power and knowledge, his name against our essence, to fight with us, and our name against his essence, to fight with him, and the tools of its battle are in our hands. And they are the twenty-two moist, fine letters...

Here Abulafia informs us that the only possible “obstruction” to the successful divination of the divine intention, achieved through an analysis of holy names, is the will of Satan.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, the means by which the divine intentionality with respect to the holy names is discerned is again letter permutation, and the battle of wills that is joined against Satan is as well apparently waged through the permutation of letters. This is suggested by the closing reference to the alphabet. We will examine the precise nature of such warfare presently. In the current context, we

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<sup>39</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 28a; printed edition, pp. 57-58.

<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, *Maṭteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 69b; printed edition, p. 82, it is Sandalfon who is referred to as the obstruction.

should observe that there is an interplay between the portrayal of the struggle as an internal one and its characterization as a war with an externalized Satan. In this particular instance, the battle of wills takes place both in the mystic's mind and in Satan's. Here, then, there is an inward struggle against an outward opponent. Earlier we made an observation relative to the emotional states that impede the joy that comes from music, namely, that the mystic's emotional states are the same "obstructions" that are elsewhere represented as demons. Here again, a fluidity between what is external and obstructive in a demonic fashion and what is internal and obstructive in an intellectual or emotional fashion is apparent. There is, at times, a confessional aspect to some of Abulafia's discussions of these battles, from which their connection to his own monumental struggle against his own demons may be recognized.

In a noteworthy passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, Abulafia discusses at some length the battle against the demonic enemy, framing it in terms of a mercurial internal dialog carried on within the mind of the mystic. The identification of the true nature of these enemies is here also rendered with persistence and clarity. Writes Abulafia,<sup>41</sup>

...And then you will find that He, may He be blessed, will cause all of your enemies to fall beneath you, as He did to Pharaoh and to his people. And the cause of your enemies falling beneath you is (Deut.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., printed edition, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 46a-b; printed edition, pp. 42-43.

7:21), "...because the Lord your God is among you, a mighty and terrible God." And study its speaking of a lofty hint concerning the ban on idolatry in the matter of the [destruction of the idols of the nations, whose] (Deut. 7:25), "...silver or gold that is on them [you should not desire], or take it for yourself, lest you be snared with it; because it is an abomination to the Lord your God. And you shall not bring an abomination to your house..." etc. "All the commandments (Deut. 8:8)..." etc. See what I have said to you, that all is contained in the name of one *mišvah*. And see its mention of the matter of the trial [of the Israelites in the desert] in its saying (Deut. 8:2), "...to humble you, and to try you, to know [what was in your heart], whether you would keep His commandments or not."...And its explanation is to know in the trial of your essence what is in your heart, established in the keeping of the special *mišvah* which we mentioned above, which is the goal of man, whether you will keep it in the turning over upon you [*ba-hithafah 'aleikha*] of evil in the time of the trial of your essence, which is a time of action, and not a time of thought alone. And this is because of what you see externally, from the many obstructions [*ba-rov ha-mon'im*], and internally, from the many thoughts in the heart. Because [*Sefer Yeširah* 6:3], "The heart is in the soul like a king in battle," and the owner of the heart will not recognize its power until he enters the battle in actualization and he defeats those who stand against him in battle. And this is the secret of every trial, and do not believe that a thing is hidden from God, may He be blessed.

The enemies that Abulafia mentions in the beginning of the passage, Pharaoh and the idolatrous nations, are, in fact the very enemies that the mystic faces in his psychic trial.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the temptation posed by idolatry constitutes the basis of the challenge faced by the mystic at the hands of the "obstructions." Abulafia's eliciting of Deuteronomy 7:25 in this context is therefore appropriate, in that the passage enjoins the Israelites not to fall victim to the temptations of idolatry by

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<sup>42</sup> Idel makes this same point with respect to Pharaoh; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 67.

coveting the metals from which idols were made; they are referred to as snares here, a most appropriate metaphor for Abulafia's intent. Counterposed against this possibility is the reference to the *mišvot* in Deuteronomy 8:8. This, Abulafia explains, refers to the "one *mišvah*" that he has discussed earlier in the text: It is the injunction to pursue what is the "final aim" of man's existence, "the prophetic, intellectual apprehension; that is, the endeavoring to apprehend it all the days of the life of man."<sup>43</sup> Thus, Abulafia envisions the trial of the Israelites in the desert, seen as thrust upon them in order to test their fidelity to the commandments, in kind with the testing of the mystic with respect to his pursuit of prophecy in the face of the idolatrous threat. Standing against the achievement of prophecy in his test are the enemies who represent the temptation posed by idolatry. From what we have already seen, this comes very near to an autobiographical insight on Abulafia's part. As well, we may understand why Abulafia believes this to be the mystic's challenge, moving beyond the fact of his own such experiences, in terms of our earlier observation that, for Abulafia, mystical practice appears to necessarily entail a flirtation with the heretical for the precise purpose of resisting it, or of subsuming it within a hypernomian framework; this appears to be the essence of the trial in which he found himself. For Abulafia, whose texts are so replete with Christian borrowings, we may readily recognize that particular faith as his primary target for such an engagement.

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<sup>43</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 45a; printed edition, p. 41.

## The *Mišvot* and the Trial

Abulafia describes the trial of the mystic as one of action and not merely of thought. We may understand this performative aspect of the trial in kind with Abulafia's focus upon the *mišvot*.<sup>44</sup> Since he has subsumed these within the one *mišvah* of conjunction with the divine, in keeping with Wolfson's observation of his hypernomian proclivity, it becomes apparent that Abulafia refers here to mystical practice. That he discusses the "turning over upon you of evil" makes it apparent that he has in mind the activity of letter permutation, which he describes with regularity as a "turning over" of the letters.<sup>45</sup> The result of such practice is – invariably, apparently – the emergence of evil elements, the basis for the mystical test. These take two forms: external visions, the products of the evil "obstructions," and inward thoughts, which lead to an internal struggle. Abulafia's portrait of the mystic is one of a human being possessed of a tortured psyche, and the mention of the "actualization" of the battle with the mystic's enemies, recalling the notion of the performative aspect of the mystical *mišvah*, suggests that the struggle transcends

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<sup>44</sup> Idel makes note of a passage in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'* wherein Abulafia prescribes breathing methods which kill Satan and other demons; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 27. Given Abulafia's perception of the "one *mišvah*," the achievement of prophecy, mentioned above, even such a seemingly purely technical exercise comes into a conformity with Wolfson's notion of a hypernomian basis to Abulafia's project; as well, Abulafia's emphasis in the current passage on performative action as part of the trial by demon could easily include such breathing practices.

<sup>45</sup> The locution is discussed by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172-173, with respect to the "inversion of the attributes."

thought alone. Indeed, we will see that the mystic is engaged bodily in this battle.

With regard to the inward dimension of the battle, Abulafia continues,<sup>46</sup>

...And know that as the heart has two thoughts concerning every matter, and they are the first ones and the opposite ones, it says “yes” regarding one matter in your first thought, and immediately your heart changes to “no,” or “no” before “yes,” because it changes from the prior “yes” to “no.” ...And because of the “yes” and the “no” being in the likeness of the affirmation and the negation in the matters that are thought, the thought requires an arbiter between the two that are borne that are thought as opposites. And sometimes the imagination is sufficient to be the arbiter between “yes” and “no.” And sometimes they require the intellect to arbitrate between them....because of the thoughts of the heart being very many, and they change and are replaced continually, from moment to moment. And they are changed from “yes” to “no” and from “no” to “yes” until it is improper to be certain of imaginative thought, but it is proper to be certain of intellective [thought], because it establishes a strong existence, like the perfect sensory existence in the truth of its apprehension. And regarding this the Torah says, concerning the manna (Deut. 8:3), “...in order that He might make it known to you that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.” And near to this (Deut. 8:5), “Know in your heart, that as a man chastens his son, the Lord your God chastens you.”

Certainly Abulafia proceeds here upon the basis of his own self-reflection; that his own internal dialog was of a deeply equivocal nature is readily apparent here. He seems to point clearly as well to its confounding nature, to the enormous difficulty with which his thought processes were to be controlled and reined in and the dialog ultimately silenced with a proper judgment. In this, Abulafia explains that

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<sup>46</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 46b-47b; printed edition, pp. 43-44.



he places his faith in the intellect as against the imagination. This grasp at clarity poses its own problems, however. One is apparently left with the difficult task of determining whether one has engaged the former or the latter in this process; the difficulty lies, as we see elsewhere, in that both, as Abulafia describes them, employ imagery.<sup>47</sup> Shortly we will see Abulafia grapple further with this problem. Here, Abulafia offers an epistemological perspective with respect to the intellectual thought, suggesting that “it establishes a strong existence,” one which corresponds to “the perfect sensory existence.” The intellectual thought, then, conforms to a true apprehension of reality, one with a sensory component. And indeed, the mystic is here left to determine whether that which is apprehended by the senses is perfect and of an intellectual nature or whether it is imaginative and unreliable. The tenuousness of this undertaking will concern us as we proceed, for it points ultimately to the great difficulty in truly thwarting that aspect of the internal dialog which threatens to lead one in the direction of the idolatrous.<sup>48</sup> It is the distinguishing of the idolatrous, the discernment of the imaginative as against the intellectual component of the Active

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<sup>47</sup> See *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 21a-b; printed edition, p. 5, discussed below, for a discussion of the “intellectual image.”

<sup>48</sup> Idel evinces a passage from *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, in which Abulafia indicates that Satan attempts to create phantasms to distract the mystic, and even to generate physical illusions that may disrupt the mystic's concentration. Nevertheless, because of the rigors required of the mystic in Abulafia's technique, Idel believes that it would have been “almost impossible” for the mystic's attention to wander, for which reason “this danger is not emphasized much in Abulafia's works;” *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 121.

Intellect, that is the primary pitfall in mystical practice, and Abulafia will seek to offer clarification concerning how this is to be done.<sup>49</sup>

In the present passage, it is manna which serves as an example for Abulafia of that which is sensate yet purely intellective. Deuteronomy 8:3 affords Abulafia the means to effect what appears to be a connection between words received from God, that is, prophetic revelation, and the sensory product of the intellect, the manna. Given the fact that Abulafia upholds this notion of manna as exemplifying proper intellective and prophetic discernment, the degree to which his conceptualization of manna is in accord with contemporary Christian ones is most striking. His emphasis on upholding the intellect over the transgressive potentiality of the imagination here crosses immediately into the domain of the transgressive. For Christians, as we will have cause to examine further as we proceed, manna represented the eucharistic wafer, the enfleshed Logos,<sup>50</sup> just as, for Abulafia here, manna represents the materialized divine intellection.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Idel observes the link between the threat from demonic phantasms, to be linked with Sandalfon, and the imaginative faculty. Both Idel and Scholem observe the same tendency in Sufi thought. Idel notes the presence of images, in *Likkutei ha-Ran*, linked to both Metatron and Sandalfon, the former being good images, the latter evil; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 74-76. Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 147. Idel observes as well that, in *Sha'arei Sedeq*, Sandalfon obstructs successful manipulation of names and that he stands behind the demonic threat; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 78.

<sup>50</sup> Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 130, 143; Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, p. 85; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 342. The implicit equation here between materialized intellection and the enfleshed Logos, to be discussed further, is summed up in a suggestion by Altmann that there is a relationship between Maimonides' notion of the Active Intellect and earlier notions of the Logos: "...the medieval Jewish philosophers substituted for it [the Philonic Logos] either Plotinus' second hypostasis...or Aristotle's Active Intellect...Since he [God] is (in Aristotelianism) the supreme Intellect, the essence of man, namely, his intellect, has been stated by Scripture to be in the image of God and in his likeness." Altmann, "'Homo Imago Dei' in Jewish and Christian Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 3 (1968), p. 254. Regarding the Philonic notion of the Logos, for which, Altmann indicates,

The above passage's final allusion to the mystical trial, God's chastening of the son, then, should not merely strike the ear as another christological allusion; it as well points once more to the nature of the trial as necessitating contact with the transgressive. Manna is a product of the mystic's upholding of the intellect over the imagination in practice, of his selection of the intellect as the means by which to govern his own internal dialog. That this restates the nature of the mystical trial is

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Maimonides substituted the Active Intellect, Stroumsa points to mythological associations; he is referred to by Philo as "Man after the Image" and "he who sees God," among other things. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ: For Shlomo Pines," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 3 (1983), p. 279. The thrust of Stroumsa's argument is to suggest pre-Christian Jewish origins for the notion of the anthropomorphic demiurge, which would ultimately coalesce around a notion of Metatron in Jewish circles and would also influence early Christianity. Ibid., pp. 277, 281. See also, Box, G. H. "The Idea of Intermediation in Jewish Theology. A Note on *Memra* and *Shekinah*," for a discussion of targumic representations of the divine word, *memra*, as a physical and spiritual intermediary potency. Box relates this to *3Enoch*'s according of the name "Dibbuirel," ("Divine Word") to Metatron as one of his seventy names. Box, G. H. "The Idea of Intermediation in Jewish Theology. A Note on *Memra* and *Shekinah*," pp. 106, 115-116. See also, Boyarin, "The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John." Boyarin suggests that assertions of difference between Christians and Jews based on Logos theology are revisionist, because various aspects of Logos theology were indigenous to the hellenized Judaism of the early Christian period. See, idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, pp. 89, 92. For the notion that Philo's notion of the Logos was influenced by Gnostic conceptions of the luminous body of heavenly Adam, see, Fossum, "Jewish-Christian Christology and Jewish Mysticism," pp. 266-267. Fossum notes a further parallelism between Jewish-Christian notions of the "Son" and hekhalotic conceptions of the *Kavod*, as well as the *Shi'ur Qomah* tradition of the divine body; see, ibid., pp. 273-274. For conceptions of the *Kavod* in the doctrine of the German Pietists, see, Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*; Wolfson, "Metatron and *Shi'ur Qomah* in the Writings of Haside Ashkenaz." See also, idem, "Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," p. 169 for the notion of the embodied Logos "in a sensible form" in *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The subject will be discussed in greater length in Chapter Four.

<sup>51</sup> A similar conception is present in the *Zohar*. There, manna represents materialized illumination whose source is the sefirotic realm. Hecker, "'Each Man Ate an Angel's Meal': Eating and Embodiment in the *Zohar*," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996, p. 99. A similar conception holds for *maṣaḥ* as well, ibid., p. 97, while both are seen as symbols of the Torah, ibid., p. 114. Torah, we will see, was in turn upheld in its own right as a materialization of the divine Logos. Thus, the consumption of both manna and *maṣaḥ* among the zoharic authorship runs in parallel to the traditions described by Marcus regarding the magical efficacy of the eating of foods marked with letters or with words from the Torah. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*. For a polemic by Abulafia against the eucharist, see Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 81.

rendered apparent in Abulafia's suggestion that he sees this exercise as a trial imposed by God. Abulafia will go on to again relate this trial to the performance of the *mišvot*, following Deuteronomy 8:6. He proceeds to cite portions of Deuteronomy, from 8:11 to 9:1, with little comment of his own, concerning God's testing of the Israelites and His injunction to them to remember the *mišvot* and to not follow after other gods. This portion of Abulafia's discourse ends as follows:<sup>52</sup> "See and understand that the aim of the intention is to always hear the voice of God in the secret of prophecy that I told to you. And we learned from His words that if you do not first remove idolatry from the heart, it is not possible to hear the voice of God." Abulafia thus concludes with a concise statement that the mystic's "obstructions," which he had discussed at the passage's outset in terms of the temptations to the Israelites posed by their enemies, partake of an idolatrous essence.<sup>53</sup>

### **Names, Demonic and Divine**

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<sup>52</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 48a; printed edition, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Hames suggests that Abulafia retrospectively viewed his mission to the Pope, which occurred during his fifteen year period of trial by demons, as a misconception on his part as to the nature of his messianic project. Hames, "Three in One or One that is Three: On the dating of Abraham Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Ot*," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 165 (2006), p. 186. If this interpretation is correct, then we might see the visit to Rome itself in terms of demonic temptation; that is, perhaps Abulafia later felt that the idolatrous impulse, obscuring his righteous inclination, had led him to seek out the Pope.

The commencement of a more focused elucidation of the means by which the mystical trial is undertaken and the “obstructions” overcome is presented in a passage from *Mafteah ha-Ra‘ayon*. Begins Abulafia,<sup>54</sup>

Every enlightened one within whom is the holy spirit is obligated, from the perfect Torah and from the efflux of the truth of wisdom, to investigate and inquire as to which thing brings him to the enjoyment of the splendor of the *Shekhinah*, and to live forever in the life of the world to come, and which thing it is that obstructs him [*mon‘o*] from this. And it is also proper for him to look and to contemplate within himself by which power among his powers and by which spirit among his spirits he is able to grasp this.

Abulafia suggests here that at least part of the task of the mystic, at the time of his reception of the efflux from the Active Intellect, is to endeavor to distinguish properly between those things that lead him toward the realization of his goal and those which are obstructions. In order to do so, the mystic must as well examine features of his own inner psyche, some of which will enable him to make this distinction and some of which will not, in order to again discern the proper versus the improper. This discussion runs parallel, then, to the one we examined in *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, where the intellective thought is to be privileged over imaginary thought in the resolution of the inner dialog. Abulafia continues,

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<sup>54</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra‘ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 21a; printed edition, p. 4.

And in finding it [the proper power or spirit within the mystic], the one who apprehends then may apprehend in it that which is apprehended. And it is known that in this person who apprehends, in the being of the person who investigates its secret and finds it, in it he will apprehend who it is who apprehends. And when he apprehends who it is who apprehends in the apprehension of his intellect, then the success of his apprehension is perfected, with that which is apprehended for him according to the utterance, [which happens] only when he calls the one who apprehends or that which is apprehended a name among the names, like most men who call by a name a thing among things that are found in their imagination and not in reality; and they do not know to distinguish the matter of that name from that upon which it falls.

At the outset here, the consequences of distinguishing the proper inner quality, by which to avoid the obstructions within the Active Intellect's efflux, are expressed in a manner which recalls the unification of knower, knowledge and known during *devequt*.<sup>55</sup> The mystic will come then to an insight regarding the true identity of the one "who apprehends," that is, himself. Likely, Abulafia has in mind the realization of the mystic's self-identification as Metatron, essentially an alternate expression for the mystic uniting within himself knower, knowledge and known.<sup>56</sup> This may happen, Abulafia relates, only when the mystic assigns a name to the one who apprehends – himself, perhaps as Metatron or Raziel – and to the object of this apprehension. The motif of the proper identification and utilization of names during mystical practice will become a central one in our study of Abulafia's efforts to

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<sup>55</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> Scholem discusses Abulafia's description of his visions of his own self projected before him and imparting revelation; *Major Trends*, pp. 141-142; cf. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 90; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 56, 81.

distinguish the evil and idolatrous component of the Active Intellect and to fend it off.

Abulafia refers, at the end of this excerpt, to the misconceptions of “most men” with respect to the names applied to things. They tend to assign names to things that exist only imaginatively, and then they confuse the name for the imaginative thing itself. This naming of imaginative things refers to the names assigned to demonic entities, which Abulafia suggests here to be an erroneous undertaking; in the continuation of this passage, we will see that the demonic name, for Abulafia, has itself only an imaginative existence, from which we may understand his current remark. Abulafia apparently senses in this misguided habit of “most men” a bastardization of a time-honored Jewish mystical principle, that Hebrew, as the sacred *prima lingua*, proffers the names of things that embody their very essence. As Wolfson observes, this notion encapsulates the sense that word and matter are essentially correlated through the sacred language.<sup>57</sup> When the thing itself is an imaginative product, Abulafia implies, the identification of the name with the thing’s essence is a misguided undertaking, since this essence itself is of a dubious nature. The confusion of the name for the demon itself most certainly pertains to Abulafia’s harsh critiques of those who manipulate demonic names because they believe them to possess an innate magical efficacy, and the backdrop of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 197. The further sense of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as components of the body, just as they participate in the divine name, will be examined shortly as well. See, *ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

kabbalistic sense of the essential substance of names provides Abulafia with the means to attack demonic magical practice. We will further examine shortly Abulafia's critiques of such magic. Abulafia continues,

Because this matter that is sought is not from the truth of wisdom, and two like opinions are not found in the truth of the telling of a master of that name regarding the name of a demon. Because there are those that say that it possesses this ability, and possesses a will in this form, until it is changed from what it is to what he wishes; sometimes he portrays it in the form of a real man, sometimes in the form of a man flying in the air, sometimes leaping from one end of the world to the other in a brief moment, sometimes in the form of a real woman, sometimes in the form of a woman flying in the air, sometimes in the form of a small fly, sometimes in the form of living burning fire. And the like to these imaginary forms, among deficient people who think that they are truthful, has no end or limit. But the truly enlightened one knows in truth, by a proof and a sign, that any change to everything that is altered is a deficiency in the examination of the truth of its existence.

Part of the reason, we learn, for the error of assigning names to demons is that the names themselves are so variable for any given demon. This is due to the dubious reality of the demons themselves, which are ascribed many and conflicting fanciful characterizations and attributes according to men's imaginations. Abulafia is quite clear here that this chaotic situation results from the fact that the demons themselves are imaginary.<sup>58</sup> The proof of this status lies in their changeability; they do not possess the hypostatic nature of those entities which possess a bona fide

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<sup>58</sup> Abulafia identified the demonic element with the imagination itself; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 56.



reality to their existence. The demons' possession of what should be called an imaginary or false existence is not the same, however, as their being in a state of nonexistence.<sup>59</sup> Regarding the imaginary forms of demons, Abulafia goes on to write,

And if it [the imaginary form] is above with respect to those beneath in some matters, such as a change in degradation above, this is nothing but a deficiency of [its] matter, which is generated and destroyed in its particulars. Indeed, [for] the supernal matters, in truth, change among them is a degradation, so that no change may be found at all in the separate intellects. Because every movement is a change, and every change is a deficiency and an actualization of potential, and there is not among them a thing such as this.

The imaginary forms of demons are unreal insofar as they are subject to generation and corruption, just as are the things of the terrestrial world, though to a different degree. It is this deficiency resulting from their changeability that makes demons imaginary and not intellective. Nevertheless, they possess an existence much in the fashion of those other things which we perceive around us as real, which are also subject to generation and corruption. The unreality of the demonic element thus coincides with the existence of demons in a kind of compromised status; it is this status that makes them a very real and external threat at the same moment that they remain products of the imagination. The imaginative status of demons carries implications for their names as well. We read on:

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<sup>59</sup> Idel notes Abulafia's play on the words *dimyon* - "imagination" - and "daemon," consisting as they do of the same Hebrew consonants; *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 56.

And when we speak in the name of a demon, the same is said of he who mentions with his mouth the name of God or the name of an angel or the name Active Intellect or *Da'at* or *Binah* or *Hokhmah* or *Mahshavah* or *Raṣon* or similar such names without an intellective image, and their like, because, to the enlightened person, the words are insufficient in the calling of their names. But the enlightened person pursues true apprehensions and does not rest until he apprehends what is possible for him to apprehend of them, time after time, with many investigations...thus it is obligatory to investigate, in every respect, every name regarding its subject or its meaning.

As with the discussion from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, where an “intellective thought” was necessary for the generation of a perfected sensory apprehension, here it is an “intellective image” that is required in the utilization of names by the mystic. It is interesting that the critique here of those who concern themselves with the names of *sefirot* without recourse to an intellective image bears a significant relationship to some of Abulafia’s hostile remarks regarding those kabbalists who, in apparently doing the same, “cut the plantings,” that is, commit the same heresy with respect to the divine unity that is committed by the idolators, the Christians. In *We-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, Abulafia warns of the danger risked by sefirotic kabbalists of disrupting the divine unity, while in *’Imrei Shefer* he explains that the sefirotic kabbalists assign names to the *sefirot* but are confused as to the nature of the *sefirot* themselves.<sup>60</sup> In disrupting the divine unity, these kabbalists are of a piece with those

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<sup>60</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 55 n. 8, 139. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 105, 111-112, 131 n. 101, 133 n. 104. As Wolfson notes, Abulafia does not reject the doctrine of the *sefirot* in total, but only that approach that we understand as theosophical, in which the *sefirot* are conceived of as

who manipulate demonic names, who are to be understood as sorcerers, and hence as idolators as well. An equivalence is established, then, between those who manipulate demonic names - that is, sorcerers - theosophical kabbalists and Christians.<sup>61</sup> They all fall victim to the demonic, imaginative element, a fate eluded by the mystic who proceeds with proper discernment.<sup>62</sup> Abulafia is clear here that names in their own right, be they demonic or sefirotic, are not efficacious, either for mystical purposes or, presumably, even for magical ones; names must be examined intellectually by the mystic in order to forestall the type of malpractice and slippage into heresy that will ensue from a purely imaginative engagement. "Time after time, with many

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hypostases from the divine, in a manner which threatens the unity of the divinity; *ibid.*, p. 102. Nevertheless, Abulafia frequently understands the *sefirot* as embodying God's unity; *ibid.*, pp. 131, 218. From this it may be further evident that it is the improper, non-intellective understanding of the *sefirot* and their names that threatens the unity, and not the belief in the *sefirot* itself. Wolfson observes that Abulafia accords legitimacy to a kabbalah of the *sefirot*, but accords it a status beneath that of the kabbalah of names; *ibid.*, p. 107. Wolfson makes note of a passage from 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz in which Abulafia attacks sorcerers who feel that they have mastered both kabbalah and knowledge of the names; *ibid.*, p. 100 n. 24. There, Wolfson makes note of Abulafia's embattled posture with respect to his contemporaries, relating it to his condemnation by Solomon ibn Adret. As well, we may detect a sensitivity on Abulafia's part to the fact that he places as much emphasis on the mastery and manipulation of names as do the magicians who he abhors. See also, *ibid.*, p. 103 n. 29.  
<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Wolfson does note that there are occasions in which Abulafia refers to sefirotic or theosophical kabbalists with no trace of a critique; *ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>62</sup> In this regard, it is appropriate to note Idel's observation that Abulafia tends very strongly to perceive the *sefirot* to be not only features of the supernal world but to be rooted in the subconscious constitution of the mystic's psyche as well; *New Perspectives*, pp. 144-9, 204. Logically then, recourse to these *sefirot* in a non-intellective fashion would be tantamount to a falling victim to another element of the mystic's psychological landscape, his evil inclination. The failure to understand the psychological dimension of the *sefirot* is logically tied in with the heresy of "cutting the plantings," as Idel implies: unification with the divine, the result of the mystic's upholding of the divine unity, as against the "cutting of the plantings," is contingent upon acting upon one's own inner sefirotic configuration, so as to assume the divine likeness. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 119-122, 145-147, where this point is articulated. See also, *ibid.*, p. 152 n. 157, where the psychologization of *devequt* is expressed, after the work of Altmann, in terms of the maxim, "Know thyself." Distinguishing Abulafia's mysticism from the sefirotic kabbalists' theosophy with respect to the former's psychologization of the *sefirot* is consistent with Jonas' distinction between myth and mysticism as objectification and interiorization, respectively; "Myth and Mysticism," pp. 315, 318.

investigations,” names must be subjected to a mystical hermeneutical process by which insights into their nature and meaning may be elicited.

In a related discussion from *Sefer ha-Melammed*, Abulafia writes of being scandalized by certain magical practices. He relates, by contrast, how names should properly be enlisted in the service of the mystical project. The latter, as we have seen, in that it represents the ultimate fusion of knower, knowledge and known, is the quintessential affirmation of, and self-identification with, God’s unity, enacted in the moment of *devequt*. It consequently stands to reason that any esoteric practice that is not so directed falls under the heading of the idolatrous.<sup>63</sup> Without referring specifically to this idolatrous nature to the improper use of names, Abulafia in *Sefer ha-Melammed* will lean heavily upon the view of Maimonides, in fact attempting to create an even more sharp differentiation between mysticism and idolatrous magic than he does when he pursues his own independent line of reasoning. He writes,<sup>64</sup>

Rav said one exceptional thing, and this is what it is. He said,<sup>65</sup>  
“There is no name with us that is not derived except this, and it is *Yod He’ Vav He’*, which is the complete explicit name; do not think anything besides this. And let not arise in your thought the madness of the writers of amulets, and what you have heard from them or will find in their strange books from the names that they have composed,

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<sup>63</sup> Writes Idel, “While combining letters, the mystic is likely to be inadvertently turned into a magician, by means of the incorrect use of the Names: such an act is a serious distortion of the goal of the Names, and brings about the sinking of the sinner into the material over which he wishes to rule”; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 122. Magic in this context appears to be synonymous with idolatrous practice, particularly with respect to its materialistic orientation.

<sup>64</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fols. 292a-b; printed edition, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:61.

and they will not instruct regarding any matter and not in any respect, and they will call them names and think that they require holiness and purity, and that they will perform wonders. All of these things, it is not fit for a man to hear them, all the moreso to believe them.” Thus are the words of Rav, blessed be his memory, in our language.<sup>66</sup>

At the outset here, Abulafia’s chief objection to magical texts has to do with the demonic or angelic<sup>67</sup> names that they use. He points out, by way of contrast, that only the Tetragrammaton is an essential and not a derived name. Of course, the fact that God’s other names are not essential in the way that the Tetragrammaton is problematizes the distinction that Abulafia pursues here. Nevertheless, Abulafia continues along this line, citing the opinion of Rav that the writers of magical handbooks are “mistaken or misguided men.” The parallel is apparent to the discussion that we analyzed earlier regarding the dubious nature of demonic names, a nature that results from the chimerical character of the demons themselves. Abulafia will go on to render an example of a dubious magical formula, one that makes use of a series of letter triads that derive from the seventy-two letter name of God. He writes,<sup>68</sup>

And it is that I found written, in a book among books whose name I do not wish to mention, that anyone who wants to bring after him a woman and cause her to love him will utter the name יהו ילי סיט עלם

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<sup>66</sup> Altmann addresses Maimonides’ distaste for “practical” mysticism, astrology and the magical use of amulets. “Maimonides’ Attitude Toward Jewish Mysticism,” p. 201.

<sup>67</sup> The distinction in this context is not a significant one, in that, in such texts, a demon is not deemed to be satanic but is simply a potency or a messenger, that is, a *daemon*.

<sup>68</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 292b; printed edition, pp. 13-14.

forward and backward seven times on the fourth night at the first hour of the night, which is the hour of Saturn. And he will adjure Katzpiel, who is the angel who rules over this star, with the aforementioned name. And he will write at this hour the four names upon a deerskin parchment without pausing in the utterance, and he will hang that parchment as an amulet upon his neck. And then the woman, whose name and the name of whose father he uttered, will love him through the power of this name with a very excessive love. And I found very many to the like to these things, almost without limit to their number.

Abulafia goes on to harshly criticize the “great rabbis” who hide such texts as if they were gems and fear them as if they were powerful. He writes, following the influence of Maimonides,<sup>69</sup> that such rabbis lead themselves to madness and death. Abulafia confines himself solely to the names used in the magical formula above, not concerning himself with the elaborate rituals prescribed, taking to task, rather, those who believe that these names are “holy of holies.” He refers again to Maimonides, now regarding the latter’s opinion that these names are not in the least instructive; they contain no “divine wisdom of use to the soul, nor to the corrupt body.”<sup>70</sup> Here we find an echo of the reported necessity of subjecting names to analysis in order for them to yield something of their mystical efficacy, an idea that we encountered in *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, related to both demonic and sefirotic names. Abulafia will make use of Maimonides’ words here to suggest that the names must impart something of their intellectual component to the one who subjects them to a mystical hermeneutic. Analysis of names must give rise to the type of intellectual experience

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<sup>69</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:61-62.

<sup>70</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 293a; printed edition, p. 15.

which leads to conjunction with the Active Intellect; demonic names are, apparently, incapable of providing such an intellectual experience, but only an imaginative one. Concerning this issue of subjecting names to the mystical hermeneutic, Abulafia continues,

And there is no understanding regarding these holy names [the twelve, forty-two and seventy-two letter names of God], which instruct in the divine wisdom, in what the fools think, that they are names to be spoken alone, with an utterance lacking the image of knowledge [*siyur yediy 'ah*]. But the most exceptional intention is the image in what they teach with their eyes. And the next intention is also the utterance in them, like the utterance of the holy words in terror and trembling among those who fear God.

The names are not to be spoken alone, but must be made use of by one who possesses an “image of knowledge.” The result of such proper utterance of the names is an intellectual experience of a visual and an aural nature. How one properly analyzes names, through an intellectual image, in order to extract the wisdom that they possess is finally suggested by Abulafia as follows,<sup>71</sup>

And indeed what I announce to you in the matter of the secret of the permutation is that in your uttering the permuted words, the spirit of God will rest upon you within the warming of the heart, even though you will not understand what these words teach that you will utter. Also, that this is true there is no doubt, but not in the way of uttering the names to perform through them deceitful bodily deeds, but to awaken the soul to the warming of the exceptional learning. And

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fols. 293a-b; printed edition, pp. 15-16.

know in truth that he who does not know how to permute the letters properly, if he boasts to you regarding prophecy, do not believe it in any respect, and even if he performs signs. And take this as a rule, all who are not accustomed to permutation and do not know it are not able to know a thing of the secret of the four letter name, and not of the twelve letter name, and not of the forty-two letter name, and not of the forty-eight letter name, and not of the seventy-two letter name, and not of anything that is called a name, which teaches regarding the divine wisdom, that is known from the twenty-two letters. And after you prove that he is not adept in permutation, know that he does not know the name. And he who does not know the name, know that prophecy among us will be impossible for him to grasp in its truth.

Abulafia is quite clear that an adeptness in letter permutation is requisite for prophecy, or mystical *devequt*. Names - and not only those for God, we may surmise - are to be subjected to letter permutation in order to bring forth their intellectual content. In the current discussion, how it may be determined that the results of letter permutation are intellectual when they may not even be understood by the mystic is a vexing question to which we will return; Abulafia's chief focus in the current context is certainly on the names for God, so he is not focused on this particular problem. He is more concerned with false prophets, or mystical charlatans, who misuse the names of God.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout this passage from *Sefer ha-Melammed*, Abulafia attempts to imply a sense of a clear distinction between foolhardy magical manipulation of names and proper mystical practice by attempting to confine the latter to an engagement with names of God alone. Of course, we know from Abulafia's wider

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<sup>72</sup> Idel makes mention of Abulafia's concern with the mystic's falling into the "temptation to make magical use of the Divine Names;" *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 121-121.



corpus that this is a less than reliable distinction. On the one hand, Abulafia informs us here that the misguided magician will not only concern himself with impotent, imaginative names, but he will attempt to manipulate the names of God without an intellectual understanding thereof. Yet Abulafia suggests that prophecy, stemming from manipulation of the divine names, itself may well constitute a series of utterances that are not understood. Similarly, the strongly emphasized distinction which Abulafia draws based on a facility with letter permutation is a fragile one in that the misguided magician also makes use of permutations; indeed, in the very example of the love philtre that Abulafia cites above, not only are letter permutations employed, but they are themselves based, as Abulafia himself points out, upon the seventy-two letter name for God.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, as we will continue to see, the rightly guided mystic must concern himself with divine or supernatural names beyond those for God. The determination of which are impotent and which are efficacious becomes a deeply subjective one. This judgment is based, as we have seen, on one's use of an internal intellectual versus imaginative image, so we may discern the difficulty: In both cases, an image is being utilized, and a difficult decision is entailed as far as ascertaining whether a given internal image is intellectual or imaginative. My purpose here is not to simply raise objections to Abulafia's finely wrought syllogisms. Rather, it is twofold. I wish to show that we see again and again, firstly, that Abulafia feels compelled to delineate a clear

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<sup>73</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 293a; printed edition, p. 15.

division between his own mysticism and heretical, demonic or idolatrous practice. And secondly, that the tenuous nature of the results of this effort at a distinction are perceptible. It is the very fact of the unfirmness to the footing of the transgressive regions within which Abulafia constantly feels called upon to venture that, on the one hand, gives rise to the anxiety that compels the repeated effort at a justifying distinction and, on the other, opens up the possibility for him to salvage features from the idolatrous realm for his own use, a practice which was, inevitably, to be accompanied by no small amount of inner torment. The struggle in his inner psyche to which he attests certainly results from a self-doubt engendered by the very lack of clarity that I seek to underline here.

On the subject of the permutation of names other than those for God, several interrelated discussions from *Sitrei Torah* merit analysis. Taken together, they speak to the necessity of the application of the mystical hermeneutic with respect to the demonic component of the efflux from the Active Intellect, and introduce the feature, crucial to Abulafia, of grave physical danger threatening the mystic in his efforts at *devequt*. This danger to the mystic, we will see, reflects in yet another form the anxiety that resulted for Abulafia from his ambivalence toward the idolatrous threat posed by Satan within the Active Intellect and from the pitfalls that threaten the mystic from all sides with heresy.

Earlier we surmised that Abulafia believed that all names, be they divine, angelic or demonic, are to be subjected to letter operations in order to discern their

intellective content, if in fact they possess any.<sup>74</sup> Regarding the bringing forth of the esoteric content of names, Abulafia writes,<sup>75</sup>

...if we desire [to inquire] of the letters of that name one matter that is exceptional or a secret or the teaching of why this man is called by this name that is in accord with him, this permission is in our hands to do it. [Here follow the examples of the names “Adam,” “Eve,” “Cain,” and “Abel.”]...And the end of the thing is that the sages of blessed memory called them [referring to Cain and Abel] spirits, and Rav explained them to be demons.<sup>76</sup> And so [it is regarding] the name of his [Adam’s] first wife, who fled from him, [and who] had an existence [reflected in her name], and they taught regarding her that she was Lilith. And this is a received tradition, but she does not have an existence according to the contextual meaning of the Torah. Because we do not have in it a contextual meaning that instructs regarding her, and perhaps it is [intended] as a secret, and it is a name taken from “wailing” [*yelalah*, as in Zeph. 1:10] and from “night” [*laylah*], and if it is [to be understood] as a secret, its number is “the soul of the man,” and understand it. And so too Noah...[Here follow explanations for the names “Noah,” “Abraham,” “Isaac,” “Jacob,” “Israel,” “Reuven,” “Shimeon,” “Levi,” and “Yehudah,”]...And in this way there are wonders in the Torah deeper than the sea and instructing in many of its mysteries.

Most certainly, Abulafia discusses a series of names,<sup>77</sup> but his interest in demonic names is readily apparent. He takes as a springboard Maimonides’ usage of the word “demons” with reference to Cain and Abel, and subsequently explicates the

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<sup>74</sup> Regarding the necessity that a name possess some intellective content, see also *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 35b; printed edition, p. 77. Wolfson discusses Abulafia’s belief that the names of things, assigned during Creation, conceal secrets; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 20b-21a; printed edition, p. 24

<sup>76</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:7. Maimonides refers to these demons, the sons of Adam prior to Seth, as lacking the former’s complete image. Thus, for Maimonides, they are human beings who wrought mischief through their imperfection.

<sup>77</sup> Idel notes Abulafia’s view that the names of the patriarchs should be subject to analysis in order to discern the presence of divine names therein; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 113.

name Lilith, whom Maimonides does not mention. As we shall see, examination of the name Lilith is a theme to which Abulafia returns in the bringing forth of esoteric significations. Abulafia observes that Lilith is nowhere explicitly mentioned in Scriptures, but he indicates that teachings about her may be unearthed on the basis of words in Scripture that bear a likeness to her name. Thus, the secrets of Lilith are part and parcel of the hidden mysteries of Torah; likewise, the letters of her name may be investigated in order to bring forth their hidden teachings. Abulafia seeks to illustrate that the letters of a given name reveal something of the nature of the entity that is called by this name. We had seen earlier that names must be analyzed in order to discern whether they contain an intellectual content. If they contained no such content, they were to be understood as demonic. Here we may modify this proposition of Abulafia's: A demonic name may contain an intellectual content after all, but it will be one that betrays the demonic status of the being who bears it. In this, our primary understanding of the exercise remains intact. A name must be analyzed, as a component of mystical practice, in order to discern whether it is purely imaginative, and hence profane and proscribed. Similarly, a name must be analyzed so that, if it is found to be demonic, the entity with which it is associated may be unmasked and thwarted.<sup>78</sup> Thus it becomes apparent here that Abulafia is referring to the mystic's encounter, within the efflux from the Active Intellect, with entities whose natures are veiled and must be determined.

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<sup>78</sup> In *Maṭteah ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fol. 112a; printed edition, p. 58, Abulafia also writes that "demonic powers may also be good, dependant upon the examination of their essence."

Against this backdrop we may examine another passage from *Sitrei Torah*, where Abulafia is clear that the hermeneutic that accompanies letter permutation is one in which the mystic engages in the midst of his mystical experience. He clarifies further that the hermeneutical exercise is directed toward recognizing the nature of that which the mystic encounters.<sup>79</sup>

And beware in all of your contemplation of the Teli, the Slanderer, in whose hand is the name of the king, and he casts a spell with it. And know that every hill [*tel*] [is a] soul [*nefesh*], and from its power in you is repose [*nefishah*], and she is a sorceress, but the sorceress does not live, because she is death and not life. And so too, her powers are like her, and understand this well. And always beware of the accuser, and this will be in every case in your studying of words that are uttered in wisdom. And no evil power will be able to tempt you, to remove you from the truth so long as you place God between your eyes, and trust in Him and He will do it, because all is in His hand, may His name be praised. “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”<sup>80</sup> And whenever you wish to study and to look into the paths of the permutation of letters that contain the paths of the seventy languages, focus your attention upon understanding what comes to you from the permutation, whether good or evil, whether truth or lie. But understand that [in the case of] the evil, the evil inclination is speaking to you; and desire the good and the good [inclination] will also speak to you, because in truth the two of them are good as one, if you also know how to recognize the path of stripping one’s self of every evil thing. And (Ps. 34:15), “Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”

The passage begins with a discussion of the Teli, the constellation of the serpent, and a motif that we will have cause to examine at some length later. For the

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<sup>79</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 50a; printed edition, p. 144.

<sup>80</sup> Proverbs 3:6.

moment it is sufficient to recognize that, in its status as serpent, the Teli here very obviously represents the evil encountered by the mystic within the efflux from the Active Intellect. In view of our discussion of the potency of names, it is noteworthy that this evil entity actually is said here to engage in sorcery directed against the mystic through the power of a name. A partially concealed allusion to the esoteric dimension of demonic names is actually present here. Abulafia observes that the word *tel*, hill or mound, is to be derived from the name “Teli.” *Tel*, in turn, is numerically equivalent to the word *nefesh*, soul.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the power embodied by the Teli may be said to exist within the human being, surmises Abulafia. Subsequently, through the numerical equivalence of the words “the Teli,” “repose” – *nefishah*, clearly referring again to man’s *nefesh* – and “sorceress”<sup>82</sup> Abulafia draws Lilith into the discussion; she, in fact, is the sorceress to whom Abulafia refers, although he never mentions her by name. We may recall that, in our earlier passage from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia had, by a numerical equivalence, identified the name Lilith with “the soul of man.”<sup>83</sup> It is for this reason, apparently, that, in the current context, Abulafia creates a direct link between man’s soul and this “sorceress,” who is as well identified with the Teli. The female and demonic aspect of the Teli is present within man as well, we learn, a formulation which we will find to have momentous implications in terms of Abulafia’s relationship with Jesus.

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<sup>81</sup> Each has a numerical value of four hundred and thirty.

<sup>82</sup> Each has a numerical value of four hundred and forty-five.

<sup>83</sup> The name and the phrase each has a numerical value of four hundred and eighty. The *gematria* is likely derived from Baruch Togarmi, *Sefer Maftēhot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 237.

Abulafia next urges caution, whenever one engages in mystical contemplation, with respect to the “Accuser,” presumably to be identified with the “Slanderer” discussed above. The former, we learn, seeks to tempt the mystic with falsehoods, against which the mystic is protected by God, or, more precisely, His name, which is to be placed between the eyes. We may understand here an allusion to the talismanic power of the head tefillin, which is understood to stem from the name of God “Shaddai,” the latter being suggested by the letter *shin* inscribed thereon.<sup>84</sup> The mystic is next exhorted to analyze that which he encounters as a result of his letter permutations, in order to determine whether it is good or evil, truth or lie. We have seen the same path suggested earlier with respect to the necessity for the determination of whether the image that the mystic encounters is intellective or imaginative, and we noted that there it was an analysis of names that was proffered as the proper method. Here names are not specifically mentioned, although the passage does itself contain an analysis of a demonic name. Given that Abulafia does not seem to limit the mystic’s heremeneutic, focused upon “what comes to you from the permutation,” to names alone, we may understand that scrutiny is entailed, not only of the names of the entities encountered, but also of that which the entity appears to embody or of the contents of that which it imparts to the mystic. The objective of the mystic is, of course, to ward off evil, although the evil is seen here,

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<sup>84</sup> *Minaḥot* 35b, *Berakhot* 6a. Wolfson notes the tradition wherein the name Shaddai and the tefillin, mezuzah and circumcision were all perceived as apotropaic with respect to the demonic threat; “Circumcision and the Divine Name,” pp. 78-82.

as earlier, to be as one with the good. This notion that “even the evil that is in it [the efflux from the holy spirit] is good”<sup>85</sup> appears again to be rooted in the notion that the evil component of the Active Intellect is present in order to try the mystic, from which may result his refinement.

### **The Nature of the Demonic Threat**

An adjacent passage from *Sitrei Torah* begins to suggest the grave danger that the demonic entity represents to the mystic. This sense of danger is already implicit in the notion that the mystic must make elusive distinctions between the good and intellectual products of the Active Intellect and the camouflaged, imaginative stumbling blocks set in place by demons.<sup>86</sup> As we have seen and will continue to see, these demons seek to throw the mystic into idolatry, from which the latter is protected by acumen with respect to letter permutations and his fealty to God. We read in *Sitrei Torah*:<sup>87</sup>

And, God forbid, if you see within yourself a strong and mighty power, alien to you, calling you by name, do not answer like a humble man, and do not give to it your wholeness, but rely upon God and God will be with you. Only be on guard, and guard your soul greatly, lest much more than what your understanding may bear should come upon you from the intellectual efflux. Because you will not receive it,

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<sup>85</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 49b; printed edition, p. 141.

<sup>86</sup> Idel, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 322 (in Hebrew).

<sup>87</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS Paris-BN heb. 774, fol. 157b; printed edition, p. 145.



and you will not fear its power, but the Lord your God you will fear. And with your seeing the greatness of His goodness and the loveliness of His splendor in your heart, hide your face. And afterwards, answer His question to a small extent, and from this you will ascend to Him, because the great fire guards the gate. And thus the prophets said (Ex. 20:16-17), “‘Speak with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die.’ And Moses said to the people, ‘[Fear] not, for God has come to test you, so that fear of Him will be on your faces, so that you may be without sin.’”

We may note Abulafia’s cautionary notes with respect to the demonic encounter.<sup>88</sup> Shortly we will observe the consequences of falling victim to a demon, but we see here that there is a link forged between the threat of the demon and the overwhelming of the mystic’s intellect from too great an exposure to the Active Intellect. On the face of it, the connection between a demon and an overpowering intellectual influx seems to be an incongruous one, given that the demon is a purely imaginative entity, as we have seen. Nevertheless, demons are components of the Active Intellect, as we have also noted.

Abulafia seems to make the same connection between demons and intellectual inundation in another fashion elsewhere. We have seen that the demon, for Abulafia, is to be understood as an “obstruction” [*monei ‘a*] to the mystic. The same appellation, we noted in Chapter One, was assigned to the specula through which the prophets experienced revelation. In this we understood the imagination’s necessary role in mediating prophecy, despite its obstructive nature. In *Mafteah ha-*

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<sup>88</sup> Idel cites the “great fire” here *vis-à-vis* the danger faced by the mystic. Idel, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 323 (in Hebrew).

*Ra'ayon*, we had seen the term “obstruction” used for demons whose chimerical status rendered them as imaginative products whose names must be the subject of careful scrutiny.<sup>89</sup> Moving beyond the excerpt that we had examined, the passage goes on to discuss the variety of names to be analyzed by the mystic, and what types of things they may teach. In this context, Abulafia goes on to write in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*,<sup>90</sup>

And he who wishes to ascend to the level of the supernal apprehension must investigate in his intellect and must know what thing is possible, for the one who apprehends, to apprehend, what the use is in apprehending it, and what thing is barred [*nimna*'] from the apprehension of the one who investigates. And if he investigates what harms him in his investigation, and which thing the one who apprehends must investigate, his apprehension is obliged to be derived from the Torah and be natural. And in his apprehending the truth of this thing, it is proper that he always pursue the obligatory and flee from the barred [*nimna*'], and he will investigate the possible until its restoration is obligatory, if he is able. And in his doing this, he will succeed in all his apprehensions and God, his Lord, will be with him, and he will ascend to the supernals and he will resemble them and cleave to them in truth.

Here Abulafia uses the same root word when discussing both the demon as an “obstruction” [*monei 'a*] and the particular intellectual investigation which is “barred” [*nimna*'] from the mystic because it threatens to do him harm. In this same context, we learn later that such “barred” investigations are so proscribed because, “The barred, with respect to the soul, is that which is not in its nature to apprehend at

<sup>89</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 21a-b; printed edition, p. 4. See n. 47 above.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 22a, printed edition, p. 6.

all in any way of the ways of apprehending the nature of God, may He be blessed. Because this is barred naturally from all creatures.”<sup>91</sup> Abulafia relates that such barred investigations concern, for example, the final aim of God’s actions, the specific number of kinds of animals in the world, and the end of time or number or the extent of the world. Abulafia explains that, “The one who endeavors to apprehend one of these things and their like is to me like one who endeavors to apprehend his intellect with his imagination.” Thus, it is apparent that too rarefied an investigation is “barred” because it comes to rely too heavily upon the imagination, from which we may understand its relationship to the demonic threat and the possibility for harm.

With respect, then, to the passage that we had been analyzing from *Sitrei Torah*, it seems plausible to infer that one of the ways in which a demon seeks to overcome a mystic is by overwhelming him with matters that exceed comprehension, so that “more than what your understanding may bear should come upon you from the intellective efflux.” The mystic must resist this intellective efflux and “not receive it,” turning to God’s direct influence instead within the efflux. Nevertheless, caution is called for, for when the mystic sees God’s glory, he must hide his face and proceed in his intellective investigation only with great caution. Abulafia in this context elicits above two references to Exodus, one of which suggests the threat of death from such a mystical theophany, the other of which is employed to indicate

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 23a, printed edition, p. 8.

that this theophany is in the nature of God's test of the mystic. The nature of the threat posed to the mystic is here multiplied; he may be overwhelmed both by the trial of the demon and by the one represented in terms of the revelatory theophany. Indeed, there are moments in this passage and its continuation where it becomes impossible to determine of which trial Abulafia is speaking, whether it is demonic or divine. Following his adjuration first to turn to God and away from the demonic influx and next to avoid too great an inundation of the divine influx, which is as well a form of trial, Abulafia immediately goes on to write,<sup>92</sup>

And beware always of the trial, because it stands between your eyes and your heart, like Satan, who dances between the horns of the ox when it rises in Nissan from the reeds.<sup>93</sup> Because it is in the nature of your creation to be examined by him and tried by his hand. And if you are able, answer properly before him, standing before your enemy, who seeks your soul. Because (Prov. 17:3), "The refining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tries the hearts." And these natural and divine letters, that are drawn in all of the world, are the explicit "pot" [*mašref*] and the unique "furnace" for this action, to distinguish (Mal. 3:18), "...between he who serves God and he who does not serve Him." And thus, if you are a man of God in truth, faithful to Him with all of your heart and all of your soul, (Prov. 1:10-11) "...if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, 'Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood, let us lurk for the innocent without cause...','" (Ibid., 1:15) "...do not walk in the way with them, restrain your foot from their path, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood."

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<sup>92</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 774, fols. 157b-158a; printed edition, pp. 146-147.

<sup>93</sup> Compare to Num. R. s. 20, "When a man plans a sin, Satan dances to him until he has done it."

We see here that the satanic trial is now identified completely with the divine one. The trial is effected via letter permutation, and the mystic, it is apparent here, is enjoined to stand against his demonic enemy through the permutation of the letters of the divine names. That God's name is to be employed here is suggested through Abulafia's usage of the words "explicit" and "unique" in referring to the "pot" and "furnace" of the verse from Proverbs; both "explicit" and "unique" are descriptives applied regularly to the Tetragrammaton. It is interesting to note here how, just as the mystic is challenged by the task of identifying whether the entity which he encounters in the efflux from the Active Intellect is divine or demonic, so too there is, in the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, a level of challenge in discerning the source from which the trial to the mystic comes; both may overwhelm the intellect, and both are seen as ultimately imposed by God. The pitfalls faced by the mystic are many, frightening and difficult to distinguish.

In the last instance, the trial initiated by God is framed, via the passage from Proverbs, in terms of the enticements posed by sinners, who seek bloodshed. We may rightly suspect such enticements to indicate the temptations posed by demons, as was the case earlier in the passage. Regarding this temptation, Abulafia writes, "And you should know and understand that if you are obliged to guard yourself from spilling strange blood [*dam zar*], all the moreso you are obliged against spilling the blood of your soul." On the one hand, regarding the spilling of the blood of the mystic's own soul, we may well understand that the threat of Satan, who "seeks your

soul,” is invoked; to fall into the temptation that the sinners pose is to allow Satan to inflict harm upon one’s soul. On the other hand, I have translated the phrase *dam zar*, as “strange blood” here, as against the possibility of rendering it as “the blood of the stranger.” The phrase appears to recall others used in Scripture, such as “strange fire” (Lev. 10:1, Num. 3:4, 26:61) or “strange incense” (Ex. 30:9), with reference to prohibited sacrifices. I suspect that that is Abulafia’s intention in the current context as well: He adapts the bloodshed discussed in Proverbs, such that it alludes for him to prohibited sacrifices, and thus to idolatry.<sup>94</sup> The fall into the temptation posed in the verse from Proverbs is recast as the descent into idolatry, and, once again, the primary threat posed by demons within the efflux from the Active Intellect recurs: They threaten to throw the mystic into this idolatry. Only the mystic’s discernment in the face of a daunting hermeneutical challenge, his skill in letter permutation and his faith in God will save him from this threat.

That the danger to the mystic occurs in the form of the overwhelming of his intellect by the efflux from the Active Intellect is a point to which Abulafia returns. We have seen in one place already that he associates this particular danger with the mischief wrought by demons. Thus he identifies that subject which is “barred” [*nimna*’], exceeding human apprehension, and thereby necessitating the perilous

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<sup>94</sup> We should recall the connection drawn earlier between Christianity, the idolatrous sacrifices that Abulafia linked with Esau, and the shedding of blood, which was also linked to Esau’s violent nature. See Chapter One, n. 53. Idel notes that the nature of the mystical trial, for Abulafia, may be conceived of as the battle to defeat the blood, representative, as we have seen, of ink. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 343. See above, Chapter One, n. 55.

intervention of the imagination, with the “obstruction” [*monei ‘a*] who is a demon, assailant of the intellect, who acts as well through the imagination. Along these lines, one may discern a further point of tension for Abulaifa. He writes,<sup>95</sup>

And if an understood matter comes to you [during mystical practice], guard it and remember it, and if not [that is, if it is not understood], remember it by its number, because it is the holy spirit, and it will direct you to one understood thing. And if you do not understand it today, you will understand it tomorrow, because it is not a vain thing, and if it is vain, it is vain because of you [plural], it is vain because of you [singular]. But it is all holy, and even the evil that is in it is good.

Reiterated is the notion that even the evil within the efflux from the Active Intellect is good, which we had seen related to the notion that the demonic efflux serves the potentially salutary function of trying the mystic. We see as well here that that which exceeds the mystic’s comprehension should not be cast aside by him, but should be remembered for later analysis. That which is incomprehensible is as such only because of the limitations of the mystic, Abulafia explains clearly here. In this resides the further point of tension to which I had alluded. For, though those subjects which are “barred” by their incomprehensibility are tools by which the “obstructions” – demons – seek to overwhelm the mystic’s intellect, nevertheless, that which defies the mystic’s comprehension should still remain the subject of his persistent efforts. In this latter passage from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia has actually

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<sup>95</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 49b; printed edition, p. 141.

paired his discussion of that which is incomprehensible in the divine efflux with one of that which is evil, by which we may see that our reading is not off the mark here: That which exceeds the mystic's intellectual capacities, and thus is to be linked with the demonic, is nevertheless to be the subject for his subsequent scrutiny. The mystic is to throw himself into this type of trial as well, and, if he is successful, the incomprehensible will be understood (within the limits of human capability, presumably) and evil will be for the good. Restated once more, then, is Abulafia's mandating of a dangerous flirtation with the demonic contents of the efflux from the Active Intellect. Most certainly, from what we have seen to this point, falling victim to the incomprehensible efflux, which we have seen to be proffered by demons, takes the form of the falling victim to idolatrous conceptions.

It is worthwhile here to examine a passage from *Sefer ha-Hesheq* wherein Abulafia presents an example of this potential consequence of the misunderstanding of the efflux from the Active Intellect. This example concerns a topic familiar to us from our examination, in Chapter One of this dissertation, of Abulafia's absorption of trinitarian Christian influence. In this instance, Abulafia begins with a discussion of what conceptions may emerge for the mystic from a particular manipulation of letters – that is, from mystical practice - one based upon the contemplation of the



*sefirot*. He then will discuss the particular type of misconception that may emerge for the recipient of these insights. Writes Abulafia,<sup>96</sup>

...And examine it well, and look into the form of these *sefirot* according to these, their levels, and understand their secret...[Here are written the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet.] And here is this unique, simple arrangement of its number in its tripartite totality, and it is necessarily called from three heads according to the teaching of this form...[Here is written a sequence of the letter 'alef alone; first appears a row of ten 'alefs, then one of nine, etc., down to a row containing one 'alef.] When you begin to count this number from one side, you begin from 'alef, because it instructs regarding one simple, unique head. And once more you begin from 'alef as well, and once more you begin from 'alef from a third side. Thus they comprise in your hand three beginnings, whose secret is one plus two [אב], and the remaining are fifty-two [נב]. And this is the secret of “my” great “God” [’Elohi], and if God bestows upon you “one spirit,” which is “spirit of nine” [ruah טט] and it is the “holy spirit.” And its secret contains “three spirits” in the secret of the fourfold triad, about which it is said, three times are one.

The thrust of the passage is one that we have seen before. Nevertheless, Abulafia here gives at least the appearance of being slightly more reticent than earlier regarding the allusions contain within this portion of the passage. What is clear is that he refers to a triad of letter 'alefs. These he parses as one and two (totaling three), thus “אב,” the Hebrew word for “father.” The 'alefs that remain from the ten descending rows of 'alefs, representative of the ten *sefirot*, are fifty-two in number. This latter number Abulafia represents as “נב.” What Abulafia rather

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<sup>96</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fols. 26b-27a; printed edition, p. 54.

halfheartedly conceals here is that he certainly actually intends “בן,” the Hebrew word for “son.” This son is numerically equivalent to “my God,” “Elohi.” As we have come to expect, Abulafia next moves on to a discussion of the last member of the Christian Trinity. The holy spirit is adduced here as bestowed upon the mystic by God. Via numerical equivalences, Abulafia indicates that it is one spirit which nevertheless contains three spirits, a conception consistent with Christian notions of the unity of the Trinity.<sup>97</sup> This combination of three and one, however, Abulafia suggests to be representative of a “fourfold triad,” from which we may recognize an allusion to the Tetragrammaton, in that the latter is a triad of letters (YHV) that comprise a quaternity (YHVH).<sup>98</sup> Along similar lines, Wolfson has noted a zoharic tradition wherein this quaternary quality to the Tetragrammaton is implicitly seen to be superior to the Christian Trinity.<sup>99</sup> Abulafia here also renders the holy spirit as the “spirit of nine” [*ruah* טט], from which we may recognize an allusion to the Active Intellect, as the holy spirit, as encapsulating the other separate intellects. To summarize, Abulafia has wedded some readily apparent references to the Christian Holy Trinity to his own more strictly Jewish mystical framework, which centers upon the apprehension of the divine name, the Tetragrammaton, and upon

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<sup>97</sup> Bonadventure, for instance, conceives of Jesus as consisting of all three persons of the Trinity. Hayes, *Hidden Center*, pp. 59-60. Such a notion is particularly consistent with Abulafia’s here with respect to the holy spirit because, in Abulafia’s system, the holy spirit, representing the Active Intellect, is the Jewish mystic’s intermediary with respect to God, the same role occupied by Jesus in Bonadventure’s thought.

<sup>98</sup> Abulafia alludes as well to this notion a bit earlier, where the letters YHV are seen as a fourfold triad insofar as their numerical total is equivalent to that of the four letters that make up the divine name Ehey (AHYH). *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 26a; printed edition, p. 52.

<sup>99</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 286.

communion with the Active Intellect, the tenth *sefira*. Both of these two latter, less transgressive motifs are associated in this context with a discussion of the holy spirit, and it is this latter entity, common to both Jewish and Christian notions of prophecy,<sup>100</sup> that apparently serves as the point of departure from which Abulafia's hermeneutical associations lead him into Christian doctrine. For the idea of God's bestowing of the holy spirit upon the mystic is common to both faiths, and, indeed, we examined already in Chapter One above Abulafia's interest in adapting to his own mystical system the New Testament recounting of the Apostles' reception, from the holy spirit, of the ability to speak in tongues. Apparently it is a proper understanding of the Tetragrammaton and of the sefirotic Active Intellect that, in Abulafia's estimation, prevents a dangerous misunderstanding of the rest of the hermeneutical speculations that he has presented. For we read next,

You will know immediately that God reveals this, His secret. Only be warned from the error that destroys the souls in this and in its like, because already many have erred in it and been destroyed. And guard yourself and your soul well, lest your reason be unable to bear the secret of the unity, and you think that this instructs on the divinity's being threefold, and you be destroyed with those destroyed in the faith from the sons of men. And if a man should say to you that the divinity is threefold, he speaks a falsehood and a lie to you, because "three" by *gematria* is "falsehood and lie."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Among a number of scriptural examples, see, for instance, Ps. 51:13 with respect to David and Acts 2:4 with respect to the Apostles.

<sup>101</sup> This *gematria* is cited by Scholem; *Major Trends*, p. 380 n. 37. See also, Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 82.

We may thus say here that Abulafia likely felt, with respect to what seems to us to be an instance of a fairly overt recourse to Christian doctrine, that he had assayed a test proffered by the efflux from the Active Intellect. Such a test would have been of a demonic nature, in that it threatened to throw him into idolatrous heresy. The latter part of the test suggests his passage through the trial with his conception of the divine unity intact, as would be clear to him from his apparently undisrupted fixation upon the quaternary divine name. Abulafia appears to suggest once more here that the mystic's intellectual faculty is threatened by an overwhelming efflux: "...lest your reason be unable to bear the secret of the unity...", he writes. The overwhelming quality to the insight contained within the efflux stems from the revelation that the quaternary divine unity is tripartite without being in any way discontinuous. The threat here, clearly once more that of "cutting the plantings," conforms with the other instances that we have examined wherein demons sought to overload the intellect to similar ends.

To reiterate, we can be clear that the threat that Abulafia perceives in the misinterpretation of the efflux from the Active Intellect is that of the falling into idolatrous heresy. Frequently, this threat he understands as the handiwork of demons, which he sees as functions of the mystic's imagination, possessed of a quasi-existent status. There can be no doubt from the current example that the idolatrous threat is

understood to signify Christianity.<sup>102</sup> Yet, paralleling our observation that that which is received from the Active Intellect but exceeds the intellectual faculty is, on the one hand, potentially demonic and, on the other, inevitably meaningful, for the good, and in need of the mystic's ongoing scrutiny, we see in the current instance that Abulafia proffers a trinity comprised of father, son and holy spirit in the same breath in which he warns against the threat, best represented by Christianity, to the orthodox understanding of God's unity. The threat, he relates, may culminate in the misguided mystic's utter destruction. Nevertheless, Abulafia's own relentless attraction to such transgressive terrain, either rationalized by or justified through the notion that the mystic must be put through a trial, requires of him that he risk this fate.

The necessity of such a trial carries further implications. In this regard, we should note that an attraction to idolatry does not, doctrinally speaking, ensue for either Abulafia or other kabbalists simply out of weakness of will. It is, rather, a crucial aspect of the trial. Engagement with the female - that is, the idolatrous - element is a doctrinal imperative for the Jewish mystic who seeks to reconstitute his own being as androgynous. He must meet this element within himself directly and master it. As in an early kabbalistic text analyzed by Wolfson, failure to integrate the female element in such a fashion leads to the mistaken belief that there are two

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<sup>102</sup> Hames refers to Abulafia's inner struggle between intellect and imagination, framed as the battle between two kings in *Sefer ha-Melis*, to be discussed in the next chapter. Hames links the imagination here to the pope, though elsewhere he suggests Jesus as a party to this inner battle. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 87-88.

powers in heaven.<sup>103</sup> Such a belief is polytheistic and idolatrous. So it is that one must draw near to one's own idolatrous impulse in order, paradoxically, to forestall one's falling victim to it.

We must observe that, in the demonic trial to which Abulafia describes himself as having been subjected for fifteen years, he is, on the one hand, faced with deceptions seemingly related to the falsehoods and lies just discussed in the passage above from *Sefer ha-Hesheq*.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, he seems as well to have been physically beleaguered by these demons. Indeed, the falling victim to idolatrous conceptions does find this other, more visceral form of expression in Abulafia's discourse. It manifests itself in the form of an anxiety concerning physical harm at the hands of demons, an anxiety which we will be able ultimately to link, once again, directly to the threat of idolatry and, more particularly, Christianity. The demonic threat's manifestation in the form of the seductions posed by Christianity, as in the preceding passage, runs very much in parallel with what we may surmise regarding Abulafia's autobiographical account of his own plague of demons; we may infer that it was Christianity with which he was tempted in his own life. This he saw as posing to him a mortal danger.

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<sup>103</sup> Wolfson, "Woman-The Feminine as Other," pp. 173-174.

<sup>104</sup> Hames suggests that the fifteen years of trial undergone by Abulafia was a period within which he was fooled by a Christian-based notion of his own messianic mission. That is, Abulafia's determination to go and see the pope he came to see later as the influence of the demonic impulse's acting on him. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 38.

## Danger to Life and Limb

In another passage from *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, we begin to see a linkage between the danger, now familiar to us, of being overwhelmed by the efflux from the Active Intellect and physical danger. Abulafia classifies the discussion in which he will engage as a “preparation that you must prepare when you wish to speak the name.”<sup>105</sup> This “proper preparation,” we learn, concerns the soul, and it comprises “the knowledge in the thought of the image of the contemplation of the letters.” This locution is clarified somewhat with Abulafia’s reference to an ascending sequence of subjects, where the hierarchically lower property or entity is characterized as matter with respect to that which is higher, which, in turn, is the lower one’s form. Those subjects listed include, in ascending order, the letter, the lover, the image, the human intellect and the divine intellect. Thus, imagination and, subsequently, thought, are rooted in the letters that are permuted. Regarding the entire sequence, writes Abulafia,

And the soul is the potency prepared to bear all of these burdens by means of the body, which is the dwelling for all, and the final matter to all. And its limbs are the tools of the smelter [*šoref*] who refines [*mešaref*] with them the intellect that is refined [*mešuraḥ*] in the permutation [*šeruf*] of letters, because it is the power that is called soul, and within which is the power to enact all these enacted things.

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<sup>105</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 8a; printed edition, pp. 12-13.

Abulafia seeks to convey an intimate connection between the body and letter permutations. For within the body is housed the soul, which is the seat, in this description, of permutation operations directed toward the refinement of the intellect. Abulafia identifies both the limbs of the body and the letters themselves as the tools of this refinement; both are manipulated by the soul. Abulafia suggests that the limbs and the letters are essentially synonymous; when one permutes letters, one is, in fact, permuting the limbs of one's body.<sup>106</sup> Abulafia will continue,

Because it [the tool that is employed by the mystic's will, namely, the letters] is a tool [with which is] drawn what he wants and what he does not want, that is, [it is] drawn in his understanding, and he examines whether it [his understanding] suffers that the drawn in him goes out into actualization, or his understanding does not suffer [it], but leads the will from bringing out the thing...

The intellect, we find, serves as a kind of editor in the process, determining whether the imaginative product of permutation carries with it an intellectual content such that this product should be cultivated further by the mystic and allowed to emerge, actualized. Subsequently, Abulafia suggests the metaphor of the bringing out of the intellectual products of letter permutation as the bringing forth of different types of bread from the earth. This essentially intellectual bread should recall for us both Abulafia's earlier discussion of manna as materialized intellection and the

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<sup>106</sup> For the connection between limbs of the body and letters of the alphabet see, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 138; Idel, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 145 (in Hebrew); Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 285



Christian concept of the eucharistic bread as the corporealized Logos. What we will see as we proceed is that the successful mystic, for Abulafia, perfects his body in the same fashion in which he forms intellective products from the letters that correspond to his bodily limbs. Thus, insofar, in Christian thinking, as the eucharistic bread represents Jesus' body, we should note the further parallel with Christian thought: The body of the mystic, in its semblance to the letters, likewise stands as the materialization of that which had existed in divine form in the linguistic plane.<sup>107</sup>

In the context of this passage from *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, we find that the products of the manipulation of letters and, by extension, those of the manipulation of the limbs of the body may or may not prove fecund in their coming to intellective actualization, which would entail the mystic's arriving at some form of intellective insight in his hermeneutical exercise. We may recall that that which is in the efflux from the Active Intellect but which eludes or overpowers the mystic's intellective faculty is discussed as demonic. Thus we may perceive the first sign of a link between the aspirant's failure in mystical hermeneutics and the opening of his body to the action of demons: Both the letters and the limbs of the body fail the mystic in his strivings when he cannot meet the hermeneutical challenge posed by demons, an

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<sup>107</sup> Shortly we will note a similar instance of such a parallelism with Christian doctrine, this being the kabbalistic notion of the *Shekhinah*'s, or the divine name's, incarnation as Torah, carrying with it the potentiality for the Jewish mystic's own subsequent transubstantiation. See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 255-260. Marcus notes the Jewish awareness at this time of Christian conceptions regarding the significance of the eucharist. "Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," pp. 211, 221.

idea closely aligned with the notion that demons target directly the limbs of the mystic's body during his time of trial.

The premise that the goal of mystical practice is the achievement of the divine likeness, that with which Adam was endowed initially, in his physical embodiment of masculine and feminine aspects, we will see as crucial to Abulafia's sense of the danger that looms for the mystic. For failure in the mystical project signifies, logically, physical impairment. As well, sexual deficiency accompanies this failure, which also flows logically, in this case from the compromised masculinity of the unsuccessful mystic, which results from his physical imperfection, this quality suggesting the unintegrated status of his feminine aspect.<sup>108</sup> For the union of man's two component parts, male and female, is an erotic one, one operating in concert with the erotic union of man with God.<sup>109</sup> Thus, to fall short in this respect is to be sexually deficient in some capacity. Given the added element of threats posed by demons, it is not surprising that Abulafia would construe demons as actively targeting these very elements, the mystic's body and his sexual faculty, as we shall see. As well, given the provenance of the idea that idolatry among Jews signified

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<sup>108</sup> Wolfson notes the zoharic contention that the Torah, the embodiment of the divine name, is the model for Adam's bipartite image, composed as he is of male and female, written and oral aspects, or of male and female sets of commandments. Wolfson indicates that this conception constituted a polemical response to the Christian notion of the enfleshed Logos. *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 257-260.

<sup>109</sup> Scholem had noted already Abulafia's predilection for seeing God, during *devequt*, as groom, while the mystic, or his soul, more particularly, is the bride; *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 165. See also, Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 205.

sexual infidelity on their part with respect to God,<sup>110</sup> it stands to reason that the sin which Abulafia felt to be most closely entwined with the appearance of demons to the mystic, that is, idolatry, should also be linked to a sexual stigma. There is thus an important nexus for all of these notions – the threats to the mystic’s body and sexuality, the menace of demons, the transgression of idolatry, and sexual inadequacy and infidelity – which we will have occasion to explore at some length; they all play an important part in fleshing out a psychological portrait of Abulafia, one which suggests the presence of a powerful fear of emasculation – that is, a castration anxiety. The latter complex we will be able to perceive as operating in concert with Abulafia’s tumultuous internal struggle with Christianity.

At this point it is appropriate to examine a remarkably parallel matrix of interconnected themes to be found in the *Zohar*, as observed by Wolfson.<sup>111</sup> The particular text in question concerns Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, who were destroyed for bringing “strange fire” as an offering to God (Lev. 10:1). The zoharic authors explore what is meant by this scriptural expression, and ultimately relate it to Lev. 16:2, “...do not come at any moment to the shrine.” Priests are to present their offerings at the proper moment, that of the *ṣaddik*, or righteous one, we are told,

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<sup>110</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, pp. 341, 258, 374; cf. idem, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 102, to be discussed below. This erotic perspective on idolatry – that is, on the Christian temptation – was taken up in the Jewish leadership’s response in Narbonne to forced Christian preaching in a synagogue in the late 1250s or early 1260s. Chazan, “Confrontation in the Synagogue of Narbonne: A Christian Sermon and a Jewish Reply,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1974), pp. 443, 457. For the rabbinic antecedents of this conception, see Koren, “‘The Woman from whom God Wanders:’ The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999, p. 67 n. 19.

<sup>111</sup> Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 99-105.

which we know to be representative of the *sefira Yesod* in the sefirotic schema.

Nadab and Abihu, the zoharic authors relate, chose the “other moment,” *’et aḥra’*, to present their offering, a phrase whose resemblance to the *sitra’ ’aḥra’*, the “other side,” that is, the side of the demonic element, is readily discernible.<sup>112</sup> Thus, Nadab and Abihu, as Wolfson parses the zoharic discussion, were guilty of supplanting the *Shekhinah*, the virtuous feminine potency that is united to the divine phallus, the *ṣaddiq*, as the theurgical consequence of the bringing of the pious offering. In fact, they substituted the demonic feminine potency, typically represented as Lilith in zoharic discourse, in this act of unification, resulting, as Wolfson explains it, in the prohibited intermingling of the holy with the unholy.<sup>113</sup>

Wolfson goes on to observe that the zoharic authors related the “strange fire” to the “estranged woman” of Prov. 7:5, such that the demonic female comes to assume an additional valence. Writes Wolfson, “In the symbolic imaginary of the zoharic kabbalists, the expression from Proverbs *’ishah zarah* [estranged woman] alludes more specifically to the Christian woman, for Christianity, the prototypical idolatrous religion (the faith and piety of *sitra’ ’aḥra’*), is associated with sensual lust, the power of eros from the left, which parallels the power of eros from the right...”<sup>114</sup> We would certainly do well to recall our earlier discussion based upon

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

*Sitrei Torah*,<sup>115</sup> where we surmised that the “strange blood” to which Abulafia referred alluded both to prohibited idolatrous sacrifices and to demonic temptations. To forge the thesis that both idolatry and demonic temptation represent the lure of Christianity for Abulafia has been our consistent intention, and we are just arriving at the point where a threat of a sexual nature may as well be discerned in Abulafia’s thought on these subjects. Similarly, Wolfson suggests that the threat for the zoharic authorship resided in the temptation posed by the Christian world, expressed here primarily in terms of the lure of Christian women, such that the zoharic authorship interpreted the story of Nadab and Abihu in such a manner that “...the meaning of their offering a ‘strange fire’ was that they cohabited with gentile women.” Thus, “...symbolically, having intercourse with an estranged woman is on a par with offering a strange fire on the altar.”<sup>116</sup>

Elsewhere,<sup>117</sup> Wolfson refers to a related and equally pertinent zoharic formulation regarding Nadab and Abihu, wherein the zoharic authorship comes to the conclusion that the sin of these sons of Aaron rested in their offering a sacrifice while being yet unmarried. Nadab and Abihu were thus in an incomplete state, one which precluded their erotic unification with the *Shekhinah*; the sacrifice that they

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<sup>115</sup> See above, *Sitrei Torah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 774, fol. 158a; printed edition, p. 146.

<sup>116</sup> Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 102. See as well, Wolfson, “Woman-The Feminine as Other,” pp. 168-169. There a zoharic discussion concerning the Edomite kings – that is, Christianity – is analyzed. Christendom is here presented as emasculated or feminized by dint of being idolatrous. We will find that Abulafia makes precisely the same charge against Christians, that Jesus has brought about their feminization.

<sup>117</sup> Idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 266-267.

offered was consequently a “strange fire,” one which fractured the divine unity after the fashion of our prior discussion of their sin. The rectification of the sin of Nadab and Abihu came, as the zoharic authorship recounts, in their reincarnation together in the person of Pinehas, who, Scripture informs us, avenged Zimri’s cohabitation with a “strange woman.” Here too, the sense is confirmed that the idolatrous transgression of Nadab and Abihu must have been their own cohabitation with Gentile women, by which they defiled their covenant with God and disrupted the divine order in a manner akin to the “cutting of the plantings” to which Abulafia makes mention.<sup>118</sup>

Most certainly, in Abulafia’s writing the lure of Christianity is presented in a remarkably similar fashion, framed as it is as well within an allusion to improper sacrifice. Nevertheless, the striking parallels notwithstanding, in Abulafia’s case it is not entirely clear that the temptation posed by Christianity was embodied by the Christian woman in particular. Abulafia manifests a kind of pathology that appears to be rooted in his tendency to fashion his own thoroughly Jewish self-perceived messianic identity in terms of the model proffered in Jesus. It was this tendency that underlay Abulafia’s conflict-engendering attraction to Christianity. Nevertheless,

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<sup>118</sup> Nahmanides had contended that Jewish men who had sexual relations with gentiles “desecrate the covenant of Abraham.” Nirenberg, “Love between Muslim and Jew in Medieval Spain: A Triangular Affair” in Hames, ed. *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, p. 129. Nirenberg makes note as well of the *Zohar* II 3a-b, 87b, in this connection. See also, idem, *Communities of Violence*, pp. 134-135. Nirenberg observes that Christian taboos against sexual intercourse with Jewish women resulted from the anxiety engendered by the two groups’ relative theological proximity, as against Islam, while there was less hesitancy among Christians toward intercourse with Muslim women. Ibid., p. 140, n. 49. The point is significant here in that Abulafia’s anxiety toward Christianity seems likewise to stem from his attraction thereto, cast in erotic terms. Ivan Marcus observes the evidence that Jews and Christians were sexually attracted to one another. See “Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe,” p. 211.

though the threat posed by Christian women may not be readily apparent in Abulafia's writings, his complicated relationship to Jesus will itself assume a distinctly erotic valence in his discourse, as we shall observe.

Wolfson notes that the zoharic authorship related that the erotic transgression described was situated within the letter *yod* of the Tetragrammaton, the letter linked by tradition with the phallus and with circumcision.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the sin of Nadab and Abihu, and by extension of those Jewish men who fall to the lure of Christian women, represented a debasement of the covenant. Abulafia, we are about to see, is of a like mind on this point as well; he is manifestly fearful of the implications, for his covenant, of the danger of consorting with demons.

Writes Abulafia in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*,<sup>120</sup>

And the messiah is the priest higher than his brothers, and is he who knows the name and blesses Israel through the explicit name, as he writes it in the sanctuary, and with its epithets in the country, according to the received tradition [*qabbalah*] and this divine path of the name, which is written and permuted with ten permutations, five opposite five. And every path instructs in the explicit name, which is wholly perfect, and indeed the five paths go out from the five, and five of them are understood. But they are uttered with one vowel not understood, according to their vocalization, and the one who wishes to utter it must guard his mouth from error with respect to any of its letters, lest he come, God forbid, to danger from his error, according

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<sup>119</sup> Idem, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 5. See also, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 266-267.

<sup>120</sup> *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 13a-b; printed edition, p. 67. The beginning of this passage is discussed by Wolfson; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 206.

to what I will write of the wheels [of letter permutations<sup>121</sup>] by way of explication.

Abulafia here discusses the letter permutations with respect to the divine names manipulated by the mystic, who models himself after the Temple high priest. An allusion is operative here as well to *Sefer Yeşirah* (1:3), to the idea that the *sefirot* are configured “five opposite five.”<sup>122</sup> Through the evocation of the high priest, this sefirotic arrangement is seen implicitly to correspond to the gesture of the *kohen*’s outstretched arms during the Priestly Blessing,<sup>123</sup> so that a connection between the mystic’s body and the divine configuration is here established. That five paths are understood while five are not is somewhat obscure, but we may suspect, given *Sefer Yeşirah*’s implied linkage of five *sefirot* with the right side and with merit, and five with the left side and liability,<sup>124</sup> that the five that are understood would represent those corresponding with the good inclination; we have seen in Abulafia’s thought already a connection between evil and that half of the efflux from the Active Intellect which poses a threat to the mystic by dint of its incomprehensibility. Regardless, Abulafia goes on to affirm that danger comes to the mystic when he mispronounces any of these portions of the name. The fact that they must be properly enunciated

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<sup>121</sup> Idel discusses these “wheels,” based on the seventy-two letter name, and their probable derivation from Ibn Ezra; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 23.

<sup>122</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 135, 140 n. 122, 142.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp. 140 n. 123, 207.

<sup>124</sup> Compare *Sefer Yeşirah* 1:3 with 2:1.



even when one each of their vowels is unclear certainly accentuates the sense of peril to be perceived in the project.

Abulafia, as he notes above, subsequently expands upon these conceptions, in a passage that we will examine shortly. For the present, it is worth observing that, immediately before this current passage from *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Abulafia engages in a closely related discussion. He first relates that it is incumbent upon the Jew to honor the divine name; those who “know this explicit name and guard it in sanctity and purity” will inherit the world-to-come. Conversely, he warns, “But he must beware greatly that he not change a letter or a vowel from its place, because he will alter the limb that was created in that letter from the place of its creation, from your body...”<sup>125</sup> Abulafia is clear here both regarding the threat to the bodily limbs that stems from the mystical error and regarding the source of this threat, the parallelism between the letters and the body.<sup>126</sup> We will have occasion to examine this parallelism further in the next chapter, with respect again to how it compares with the model proffered by Christianity. For, while Jesus represents the enfleshed logos, the Jewish mystic, for Abulafia (and other kabbalists as well), comes to stand as the embodied Torah. The Torah, Abulafia frequently insists, after the teaching of Nahmanides, is entirely comprised of names for God.<sup>127</sup> Thus, in the current

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<sup>125</sup> *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 12b; printed edition, p. 64.

<sup>126</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 138.

<sup>127</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 74, 200. For earlier precedents, see idem, “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study,” pp. 48-51. For possible Christian influence on Nahmanides, see idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 543 n. 433. See also above, nn. 107, 108.

discussion, the correspondence between the mystic's body and the letters of the divine names that he pronounces evokes the successful mystic's coming into the physical likeness of the Torah.<sup>128</sup> A close connection is apparent here as well to the notion that the two hundred and forty-eight limbs of the body conform to the same number of positive commandments in Scripture;<sup>129</sup> the identification of the human body with the Torah's essence, its commandments, is clear in this conception.

To return to Abulafia's discussion from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, he draws again from *Sefer Yeṣirah*, referring now to the latter's consideration of the three "mothers" within the Hebrew alphabet, the letters 'alef, mem and shin.<sup>130</sup> These, Abulafia explains, are assigned to the head, stomach and trunk of man's body, respectively, also following *Sefer Yeṣirah*.<sup>131</sup> Abulafia diverges from the latter text in indicating, first, that the three mothers are to be permuted with the letters yod, he' and vav of the Tetragrammaton, and, second, that fire, water and air, assigned, respectively, to the three mothers in *Sefer Yeṣirah*, are actually angels. Regarding these, Abulafia writes,

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<sup>128</sup> The Torah is also equated by Abulafia to the Active Intellect and to the *sefirot*, both of these latter two being equated as well with the mystic whose intellect has been actualized. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 141; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 33; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 141. See, idem, "The Mystical Significance of Torah Study," p. 55, where the Torah is characterized as the Kavod. As we will see in returning to Wolfson's observations concerning this issue, the mystic's coming into the likeness of the Torah is a kind of a reactivation of the covenant of circumcision, by which his flesh had originally been imprinted with the divine name. See also, idem, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 151, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 237. See also, *ibid.*, p. 241, where Metatron is equated with the Torah.

<sup>129</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 225; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 246, 248.

<sup>130</sup> *Sefer Yeṣirah* (2:1, 3:1-6).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, (3:6).

Be most wary, my son, as your fathers warned you, concerning the fire, that you not be burned, and from the water, that you not drown, and from the air, that you not be harmed, that you not make use of the crown. And all who use the explicit name for his own purposes transgresses against the commandments of God, because it is proper to use it only for His glory, may His name be blessed.<sup>132</sup>

We may surmise from the immediately preceding discussion, that of the linkage of letters to body parts, that the danger presented by these three angels to the mystic, described in terms of specific types of physical harm, is posed to the particular part of the body with which each entity has been linked.<sup>133</sup> Abulafia proffers here a permutation exercise, based on the three mothers and the Tetragrammaton, that necessarily entails the involvement of these angels – and avenging angels they are, if things should go awry for the mystic, such that they serve the same role as do demons in Abulafia's more prevalent parlance. As well, the mystic's body becomes actively involved in the exercise. A trial by demon of a physical nature is thus encapsulated. Passing successfully through the trial is a testimony to the one proper goal of mystical activity, discussed here as an intention directed solely towards God's aggrandizement. We know from our earlier

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<sup>132</sup> *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 12b-13a; printed edition, pp. 64-66. The transgressive use of the crown is referred to in *Masekhet 'Avot* 1:13, 4:5. See also, Maimonides' commentary, ad loc. See also, *'Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, chap. 12; b. *Megillah*, 28b.

<sup>133</sup> Idel evinces several passages from Abulafia which refer to the danger of being burned by fire, while the idea of being drowned by water is ascribed to Abulafia's students; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 121-123. Wolfson discusses the purificatory role of fire in the mystical trial; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 200. Scholem mentions the danger of being burned by fire in connection with the *Hagigah* discussion of engaging in speculation on the *merkabah*; *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 179.

observations that this single goal may also be expressed as the fathoming and upholding of God's transcendent unity, resulting in the mystic's *devequt*, the coming into direct participation in this unity. To do otherwise, we have seen, is to "cut the plantings," as do the Christians and the theosophical kabbalists. We saw these two groups drawn into an association with sorcerers, in that those who fall victim to the imaginative portion of the efflux, making use of demonic names without recourse to the intellect, are likened to those who make similar use of the names of the *sefirot*, a use likewise devoid of intellection. These three misguided approaches to the divine – sorcery, Christianity and theosophical kabbalah – all bespeak a challenge to the unity, and thus signify idolatry. When noting Abulafia's condemnation, in the current context, of the making use of the name for one's own purposes, we should observe as well that, in this instance, the name was combined with the letters designating potentially dangerous angels. The misuse of demonic names – sorcery - runs parallel to the mystical malpractice that Abulafia delineates here. Nevertheless, the practice prescribed by Abulafia here does entail the manipulation of the names of these entities, so that once more the flirtation with idolatry is pointedly proffered;<sup>134</sup> it is the focus on God alone that may obviate the threat of idolatry, which is here aligned with a bodily threat to the mystic. We would do well to note in a preliminary

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<sup>134</sup> In this regard, we should note Abulafia's assertion that the pious kabbalist must embrace the claim of the sages of the nations that nature itself is essentially sorcerous; "*ha-ṭeva' mekashef*." This perspective is "true without a doubt," writes Abulafia. It is only that prophetic revelation affords further insights to the kabbalist which are denied to these sages, whether they be Jewish or gentile, so that science, linked here with sorcery, is but a step in the kabbalist's progression. *Maṭteah ha-Sefirot*, MS Milan-BA 53, fol. 180b; printed edition, p. 90.

fashion, for the moment, that that component of the body of the Jew that, above all, forestalls the threat of idolatry and distinguishes him from the nations is the physical mark of his covenant with God, his circumcision. Thus, if Abulafia conceives of a threat to the body that conforms with the mystic's fall into idolatry, we should anticipate its being located in the phallus.

In Abulafia's discussion from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, cited earlier, concerning the high priest and the vocalization of the divine name, he had promised the reader a subsequent explanation of the dangers that come from errors with respect to the name. I suspect that Abulafia may have had the following passage in mind:<sup>135</sup>

And if he utters the letter and errs, God forbid, in the calling of the letter that rules over that limb, which is in the head of the man who called,<sup>136</sup> God forbid, that limb will be cut off [*ḥayyah netoq*], and he changes its place and he changes its nature immediately, and gives it another form, and the man, because of this, becomes a cripple, and thus the name VHV [the beginning of the seventy-two letter name of God] is sealed with the word MVM [the end of this name, *mum* being the Hebrew word for "crippled"], in order to warn concerning its utterance, and [it is] also the secret of "Elohim" who judges concerning this matter of the glorious and awesome divinity, and thus you will utter them only after you become very expert in them, in the permutation of letters and in all of its divine paths.

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<sup>135</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 14b; printed edition, p. 70.

<sup>136</sup> "...*Asher be-ro'sh ha-'adam ha-qore'*..." Alternatively, one might read this as "...which at first the man who called [it]..."

Here we see that the threat to the limbs of the body is linked directly to the letters in which the mystic errs. The corresponding limb is “cut off,” and the man, far indeed from assuming the divine likeness, is rendered a cripple. Abulafia forges a connection between the divine name Elohim and the word “crippled” based upon their numerical equivalence, but the sense that a judgment is rendered upon the mystic for his error, Elohim representing that divine attribute embodying stern judgment, is significant. It is not simply that a causal relationship is established between the defective letter and the damaged limb. Rather, as Abulafia describes it here, a judgment is rendered upon the man who is unskilled in letter permutation, and he is subsequently punished for his error. We should not be surprised to learn, as we shall, that the execution of this punishment falls to the hand of an angel or demon, as was the case above with respect to the angels of the three elements represented by the three mothers.

### **Idolatry and Castration Anxiety**

It is appropriate here to inquire more deeply into the nature of the injuries described above. The cutting off of a limb by a demon, an entity linked time and time again by Abulafia, as we have seen, to the threat of idolatry, should evoke, as I have already suggested, the severance from the mystic of that which marks him out as distinct from the idolatrous nations. This feature is the covenantal mark of

circumcision borne upon the phallus, which, aside from stamping the Jew with his unique identity, serves as the locus, in mystical terms, for the unification of his male and female aspects.<sup>137</sup> Wolfson observes that, with the tradition of interpreting circumcision as the inscription of the divine name upon the human body, came as well the mystical views that circumcision expressed the esoteric knowledge of the name, represented the mystic's bearing witness to God's unity, and encapsulated *devequt*.<sup>138</sup> The theme of circumcision and, in fact, its surprising Christological signification for Abulafia will, in the context of this dissertation, merit a chapter in its own right. For the moment, however, Abulafia's warnings about the danger of one's covenantal status being cut off should alert us to an anxiety deeply seated within Abulafia's psyche, a castration anxiety, in psychoanalytic terms.

The relationship, for the Jewish mystic, between circumcision and castration has been analyzed in detail by Wolfson. Wolfson points to Lacan's thesis that the phallus - the quintessential signifier, as against the penis - cannot be conceived of in isolation from its relationship to castration. The phallus conceived of as signifier, or as insignia, in the Greek model, already evokes as well the mark that it bears, the insignia that is the circumcision.<sup>139</sup> The resultant inextricable bond between circumcision and castration resides in the fact that the phallus is fully realized in its

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<sup>137</sup> Wolfson has subjected this notion to much careful analysis. See, recently, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 133-141, 381-384. See also, idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 357-377 and other citations to be explored below.

<sup>138</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 87, 89, 216-217.

<sup>139</sup> Idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 128, 129.

virile, signifying status only in its disappearance or absence, so that its ultimate expression, Wolfson notes, after Lacan, is found in its castration. It is in this, observes Wolfson, that one may locate the significance of the symbol of the phallus in kabbalah, where the notion of revelation through occlusion and occlusion in revelation, linked particularly to the phallus, the *sefira Yesod*, and circumcision, figures so prominently.<sup>140</sup> In this regard as well, Wolfson points to the zoharic conception of the kabbalists' metaphorical castration during the weekdays as corresponding with the sefirotic condition of disunity, where male and female potencies do not partake in erotic conjoining at the hypostatic locus of circumcision, the *sefira Yesod*.<sup>141</sup> One may extend this connection between human castration and hypostatic disunity in observing the linkage between Abulafia's notion of the Christian idolatrous heresy of "cutting the plantings," of disuniting the divine realm, and Abulafia's sense of Christianity as fundamentally castrating, to be explored presently.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. 131, 132-5. *Yesod* is referenced in the theosophical kabbalah as the "All," a designation adopted by Abulafia as well. In terms of *Yesod*'s prominence in Abulafia's thought, he refers to the Active Intellect, embodying all of the separate intellects as the "All" as well, such that he implicitly identifies *Yesod* with the Active Intellect. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 144-145, 218 n. 119. As well, both the Active Intellect and *Yesod* are assigned the divine name Shaddai by Abulafia and the theosophical kabbalists, respectively. Abulafia, as we shall see, is explicit in connecting the name Shaddai with the Active Intellect, while his equation of the name Shaddai with the phallus is strongly suggested in his emphasis on the name's procreative propensity. By a *gematria*, the name Shaddai is equivalent to the name Metatron, who represents the Active Intellect. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>141</sup> Most recently, see, *ibid.*, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 319; see also, *idem*, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 130-131.



That Abulafia refers to a particular threat to each of man's limbs, and not particularly to the phallus, in the passages that we have inspected thusfar in no way problematizes the surmise that a castration anxiety is here operative. Indeed, we will shortly see the threat specified more clearly, but for the moment we may make note of a virtual commonplace of contemporary psychology.<sup>142</sup>

As we know, both men and women experience castration anxiety, or the fear of losing a part of one's body. However, the phenomenon is often not as simple as the actual loss of a body part. The loss of function, alteration, or even temporary dysfunction of a body part may also be experienced as a castration threat. Whereas the underlying fantasy may connect to fears of genital injury, this concern is often deeply buried and inaccessible to the adult patient. Any loss of power or strength – regardless of its relation to a surgical procedure or to actual threat of damage or loss of a body part – potentially constitutes an intensely stressful castration threat for some patients. This broader conception of castration fears does not mean that some patients do not sexualize their injuries, treatments, or diagnostic procedures. These patients experience such events as threats to their genital integrity or sexual potency.

The text above describes the anxieties of patients undergoing medical procedures, relating how the perception of a threat to various parts of their bodies emerges from the deeper, psychologically more primary fear of genital injury. The text emphasizes a broader conception of this anxiety as well, suggesting that it may be understood as “Any loss of power or strength,” where preserved is the sense that

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<sup>142</sup> “The Medical Hospital,” Philip R. Muskin, in *Psychodynamic Concepts in General Psychiatry*, edited by Harvey J. Schwartz, with Efrain Bleiberg, and Sidney H. Weissman, Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1995, p. 73.

such a loss is expressive of a feeling of emasculation. This view prevails as well in consideration of the formative childhood stage of castration anxiety, where the fear of emasculation is rendered diffuse and may fixate in any place throughout the child's body.<sup>143</sup>

I do not believe it at all anachronistic to recognize much the same fundamental dynamic operating for Abulafia, simply because the testimony provided by Abulafia in his writings is in such a remarkable level of accord with these modern clinical perspectives. My intention here is to establish a relationship between Abulafia's castration anxiety, the kabbalistic conceptions in which it is embedded, and my ultimate thesis that Abulafia's castration anxiety found expression in his kabbalistic discussions of the nature of the threat posed by idolatry - that is, by Christianity. The theme of ambivalence toward Christianity then may be discerned within the fact that castration anxiety, as well as the guilt feelings with which it is associated, is born, in the Freudian conception, from a deeply seated erotic desire for that which is forbidden. With respect to the methodology of moving back and forth

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<sup>143</sup> See for instance, Jacob A. Arlow, "The Structural Model," in *Textbook of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Edward Nersessian, and Richard G. Kopff, Jr., Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996, pp. 69-70.: "The child fears that he will be punished for these wishes and that the punishment will take the form of bodily mutilation, specifically the loss of his most prized possession, the penis." See as well, Stanley J. Coen, "Sexual Disorders," in *ibid.*, p. 365: "We describe castration (mutilation) anxiety as the talion, or retaliation, punishment via bodily, especially genital, mutilation for incestuous longings and wishes to castrate, in the broad sense of removing the sexual attractiveness, power, and genitals of, the same-sex partner. This danger is similar for both men and women, although, as we have indicated, it is more common for women to experience the danger of bodily punishment and mutilation that is less specifically focused on the genitals." See as well, Gerald A. Melchior, "The Patient With a Neurosis," in *Psychodynamic Concepts in General Psychiatry*, edited by Harvey J. Schwartz, with Efraim Bleiberg, and Sidney H. Weissman, Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1995, p. 202.

between the psychoanalytic perspective on castration, and the anxiety that it engenders, and the kabbalistic-symbolic one, it is worthwhile to note Wolfson's own self-described attitude toward the usage of psychoanalytic concepts, where he favors an "expansive rather than a restricted understanding of the relevant terminology."<sup>144</sup>

From this perspective, it becomes appropriate to observe the inseparable relationship between the psychoanalytic notion of castration anxiety and the mystical understanding (one not confined to Abulafia alone) of what it means, with respect to one's relationship to God, to be rendered emasculated. On this point, Wolfson writes elsewhere, "...the term 'phallus' in my presentation of kabbalistic gnosis represents the imaginary signifier, which cannot be reduced to the biological organ, although I would not sever entirely the relationship between the symbolic and the somatic."<sup>145</sup>

My approach here to Abulafia and his castration anxiety certainly aims as well at maintaining this relationship. Abulafia's writings suggest the appropriateness of a scrutiny of the psychodynamics of Abulafia's relationship to the biological organ as an interpretive starting point, and this relationship to the biological organ must then be perceived to persist within the network of symbols that is woven on top of it.

Wolfson succeeds in liberating the notion of the phallus from the purely biological perspective, but he does not by any means lose the sense of the significance of the

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<sup>144</sup> *Language, Eros, Being*, 126. Here he references specifically the notion of eroticism. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 306, xxi, xxv, regarding the question of anachronistic application of psychoanalytic terminology.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. See also, *idem*, "Gender and Heresy in the Study of Kabbalah," pp. 232-233, where gender attributions are discussed not simply in biological terms but in culturally specific ones, such that masculine and feminine potencies are seen to express active and passive roles, respectively.

latter. Quite the contrary; he returns to this sense again and again. Wolfson's insights in this regard may thus be seen to lend credence to an approach to classical Freudian castration anxiety as a point of departure for Abulafia's subsequent kabbalistic-symbolic extrapolations.<sup>146</sup>

The model offered above of the patient undergoing a medical procedure and redirecting a castration anxiety toward whatever body part is to be treated seems to be particular apt in describing the signification accorded by Abulafia to the mystic's fear of coming into a state of mutilation; as I have suggested, the procedure undergone by the mystic, understood as a punishment appropriate for his transgression, renders him unable to achieve a truly masculine form. This punishment, in Abulafia's conception, comes out of retribution on the part of the divine father for the sins that, we have seen, amount to idolatry. We have noted that

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<sup>146</sup> On this topic, a critique offered by Idel bears analysis. Although Idel refers primarily to a purportedly homogenizing anachronistic approach to medieval kabbalah, wherein psychological modalities, explicable through modern theories, are perceived as currents prevailing widely among groups of kabbalists, there is a critique in his perspective that applies as well to the application of modern psychoanalytic theory even to a medieval individual. See Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 100-101, 129-131. As Wolfson observes, the critique is two-fold, comprising not just generalization but anachronism as well. Wolfson, "Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality," p. 155. My approach to the latter question raised by Idel, that of anachronism, has here been a (hopefully disarmingly) simple one: If the psychological dynamic that Abulafia manifests appears to conform with a remarkable degree of precision to a modern psychological model (as I believe it does), then we would be remiss if we failed to explore the latter for what it might offer as a mode of explication of the former. In this case, the theme of attraction/repulsion to the forbidden other is, I maintain, well served by plumbing its likely psychoanalytic affinities. If I can in do it any justice in such an oversimplified overview, Wolfson, on the question of such anachronism, indicates that kabbalistic production possesses a crucial atemporal component. Innovation takes the form of traditionalism in kabbalah, and vice versa. (Indeed, Wolfson points, among other figures, specifically to Abulafia in this regard.) And likewise does the scholar of kabbalah immerse him- or herself in this atemporal milieu, where the old is the new and the new the old, in his or her own confrontation with the open text. In such a milieu, as Wolfson puts it, "the charge of anachronism itself becomes anachronistic." Ibid., p. 159.

the sexual nature of this latter offense may be placed within the context of Abulafia's religious tradition, though shortly we will see Abulafia broach this connection with sexual transgression directly. We have, then, a dynamic in which a fear prevails of retribution, coming from the father, for an illicit covetousness on the part of the son.<sup>147</sup>

It is clear enough from some of our earliest observations of Abulafia's polemics that he understands Christianity as fundamentally both feminine and feminizing. Jesus stands at the fore of these associations for Abulafia. Of course, in Freudian terms, the son's forbidden desire is for his mother specifically, and not simply toward the feminine generally. It is at this point that we run into the obstacle discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. We do not know enough about Abulafia's early development to say anything at all about whether his feelings regarding the femininity that he perceived as embodied in Jesus and Christianity - feelings of both attraction and aversion, as we have seen - represent a transference of feelings originally associated with his mother. We can recognize that his intense ambivalence is a hallmark of the oedipal complex, however. And the femininity with which Abulafia imbued Jesus, one which parallels that of Eve, the archetypal mother - they both partake of the same relationship to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good

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<sup>147</sup> For the notion of God as father within the oedipal dynamic, see Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp. 182-183, 187; idem, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 24; idem, *Civilization and its Discontents*, pp. 22, 88.

and Evil, in Abulafia's estimation – might remind us that, in Abulafia's day, Jesus stood as Mother for Christendom.<sup>148</sup>

Naturally, the conception of Jesus as Mother for Christians carried with it positive associations of the highest order, while, for Abulafia, maternal transference upon the figure of Jesus would have come out of a mix of unresolved feelings, ones that were dominated at the rhetorical level by distinctly negative declarations.<sup>149</sup> But such an overturning or inversion of a Christian sexual modality by a Jew, with all of its polemical ramifications, runs parallel to a closely related subject observed by Wolfson. The model of monasticism, understood by Christians in terms of masculinization through a kind of spiritualized castration, one expressed through asceticism, was seen rather, from the Jewish mystical perspective, as a form of emasculation and feminization.<sup>150</sup> And indeed, a similar model of spiritualized castration could well be seen to underlie the conceptualization of Jesus in feminine

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<sup>148</sup> Imagery of the suckling and nurturing by Jesus of the faithful constitute an important element in his being conceived of in maternal terms. See, for instance, Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, pp. 115, 117. See also, Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 456 n. 231.

<sup>149</sup> Bynum points out that the maternal imagery associated with Jesus neither resulted from nor did it cause an increased valuation of women by Christian men. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, p. 143. Abulafia, then, merely extended the negative assessment of femininity that prevailed in his day to include Jesus within it as well.

<sup>150</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 302-3, 307, 309-12; see also, idem, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath," pp. 152, 154. Wolfson notes that the *Zohar* links Christianity, and Satan as well, with impotence, femininity and castration; *ibid.*, p. 153. Idel notes that an extreme asceticism, one within which sexual abstinence would figure prominently, would have been antithetical to Abulafia's approach to the imaginative faculty; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 143-144. Wolfson observes the significance of marriage and sexual intercourse for the Jewish mystic in that reconstitution in Adam's image, and thus God's, is dependent upon these; "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath," pp. 154-156. Nevertheless, Wolfson does observe that a reining in of the sexual impulse, a curtailment connected by Abulafia with circumcision, does bear at least some resemblance to the ascetic attitude. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 90, 219-220.

terms formulated by Christians.<sup>151</sup> The picture that results here is one wherein Abulafia's negative reaction to Christian notions of Jesus' maternal status would parallel that of the kabbalists' response to monastic asceticism.<sup>152</sup>

At this point we are forced to leave off from speculation concerning the maternal Jesus; as I have indicated, the data is not present to proceed any further. To return to our main thread, Abulafia, in *Sitrei Torah*, writes with a surprising directness concerning the nature of the physical threat with which demons confront man. He first delineates mystical activity in terms of the "distinguishing between" the good and evil aspects, "the life and the death...the lie and the truth," of the efflux received from the Active Intellect.<sup>153</sup> This, he explains, is executed through permutation of the letters of the alphabet, and it is enacted first in the imagination but eventually through the intellect. Ultimate success Abulafia portrays as the assumption by the prophet of the divine likeness, "...until the partial, human and prophetic returns in the comprehensive, perennial eternal form of his Cause, like him; and he and He will be one thing." *Devequt* is understood to be effected with the mystic's coming into a precise resemblance to God, a state which is achieved through manipulation of the letters and through the resultant recognition of the

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<sup>151</sup> Though the connection is not drawn explicitly, Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, spoke of both monks and Jesus in terms of the feminine. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, pp. 115, 128.

<sup>152</sup> Bynum observes that "...it seems clear that the psychological needs of religious males provide a partial explanation for the Cistercian theme of mother-Jesus and the concern for union that it expresses." *Ibid.*, p. 162. What I am suggesting here is that Abulafia reacted as well to the theme of mother-Jesus in terms of a psychological need, in particular, that is, in terms of his need to transfer a range of emotions onto this figure of Jesus.

<sup>153</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 49a; printed edition, p. 138.

nature of the particular efflux encountered, that is, the distinguishing of whether it is demonic or divine. Thus, the divine likeness is achieved - or rather, reassumed, as Abulafia puts it, likely referring to Adam's original androgynous state - through the hermeneutic by which the mystic recognizes the deadly lies, as Abulafia describes them, of the demonic aspect of the efflux from the Active Intellect. Abulafia continues:

And after I announce this to you, I will show you the entirety of its path, so that you will never forget it. And so it is when you know of your essence, that it is perfected in the perfection of the good attributes that testify to the form of the imaginative potency and to the truth of its identity for you, and you know that it is perfected in the knowledge of God's attributes, within which, it is known, the world is forever conducted; and you constantly pursue your knowledge according to your intellect, to resemble Him in them according to your ability, and you recognize in your intellect that already it cancels the powers that are called superfluous [*mutarot*] from you, and your entire intention is for the sake of heaven, and you fear God to the utmost true fear, as you would fear the angel of death in your seeing him, entirely full of eyes, and in his left hand a burning fire and in his right a double-edged sword "exacting the vengeance of the covenant,"<sup>154</sup> and in his mouth torches of fire consuming fire.

Abulafia first concentrates once again upon the resumption of the divine likeness, here described as the perfection of the mystic's essence, achieved through the knowledge of God's nature and through the pursuit of *imitatio dei* in one's actions. The perfection of one's essence, Abulafia writes, is oriented toward an

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<sup>154</sup> Lev. 26:25.



imaginative form, which is perfected through ratiocination. Abulafia, as will become further apparent, is concerned in this passage with both the bodily and intellective aspects of the interaction with the efflux from the Active Intellect, and it is likely, given the axiomatic relationship, for him, between the imagination and the corporeal, that the imaginative form referenced here is a bodily one. “The perfection of the good attributes,” with respect to the “form of the imaginative potency,” very likely refers here to the perfection, in one’s imaginative faculty, of one’s own bodily form. A type of visualization is apparently alluded to here, an intellective exercise framed around an imaginative consciousness of one’s own body.<sup>155</sup>

Abulafia, in shifting his discussion from that of the achievement of the divine likeness to that of the proper mental attitude – one of fear - on the part of the mystic, introduces the threat of an avenging angel, described here in lurid visual terms. As

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<sup>155</sup> There is a strong connection between such a visualization and Abulafia’s discussions of his visions of a human figure, his own, before him during mystical revelation. Scholem discusses the latter vision; *Major Trends*, pp. 140-142. Regarding these bodily visions, Idel writes, “...we may reasonably assume that the human form is no more than a projection of the soul or intellect of the mystic, who carries on a dialogue with it at the time of pronouncement.” This projection Abulafia also characterizes as “a corporeal intermediary, which is the angel.” Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 90, 95-100. Wolfson cites a discussion of Abulafia’s from *Imrei Shefer* in which he describes the visualization of the *sefirot*, as if in a mirror; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 114 n. 55. Wolfson establishes the link between beholding the *sefirot* configured as anthropos, beholding the divine name and the divine body of the *Shi’ur Qomah* tradition; *ibid.*, p. 167 n. 197. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 207-208, where the figure envisioned is God manifested as Metatron. See also, *idem. Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 238, 241 regarding the imagining of the prophetic body, conjunction with an angel, and the connection between the letters permuted and one’s own body. Wolfson traces the notion of the vision of the divine name, as a manifestation of the *Kavod* (the Active Intellect, for Abulafia), from *merkabah* literature through the work of Eleazar of Worms; “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study,” p. 59. See also, *idem, Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 192, 212, 227, 246-248, 255, 263, where the vision of the divine anthropos, among the German Pietists and in Abulafia’s work, is emphasized. Wolfson observes the identification of the body of the Divine Presence with Metatron as well in *Tiqqunei Zohar*; see, *Along the Path*, p. 16. Scholem observes that the effort to behold a vision of oneself was taken up by Abulafia’s disciples; “*Sha’arei Sedeq*,” p. 129. See also, Gottlieb, “*Hearot, Devekut v-N’vuah b-Sefer Otzar ha-Hayyim*,” p. 247.

we had observed, the path of “distinguishing between life and death,” the latter now embodied in terms of the angel of death, was to be navigated via skillful discernment in letter permutations. Given now this latter discussion, we find paired, and not for the first time, the need for both an intellective approach and proper intentionality in order to thwart such a deadly threat. In the latter discussion, relating to the angel of death, Abulafia enjoins the mystic that it must be the case that “your entire intention is for the sake of heaven.” A similar pairing of an intellective approach with the proper intentionality was operative in the earlier case of the permutation of the name of God with those of the three elemental angels. There, while letter permutation was understood as intellective in nature, the intent of the mystic had to be fixed upon God’s aggrandizement alone.<sup>156</sup> This intent we had related, in turn, to earlier discussions of what Abulafia describes as the lone appropriate mystical intent, the upholding of God’s unity, to be contrasted with the idolatrous alternative pursued by sorcerers, Christians and some kabbalists. And indeed, other cases that we have examined also contrast proper intent with idolatry as the alternative. In *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*,<sup>157</sup> we had encountered a discussion in which the “aim of the intention” was to hear God’s voice, a goal that could not be attained “if you do not first remove idolatry from the heart.” In *Sefer ha-Ḥesheq*, demons threatened to overthrow the

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<sup>156</sup> See above, n. 132, *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 13a; printed edition, p. 66.

<sup>157</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 48a; printed edition, p. 45. See n. 52 above.

mystic's capacity to bear the "secret of the unity."<sup>158</sup> And in *Sefer ha-Melammed*,<sup>159</sup> the appropriate "intention" was akin to "the utterance of the holy words in terror and trembling among those who fear God," as against the idolator's usage of the names without any intellective approach or understanding.

Fear with respect to the proper intentionality is likewise the emphasis in the current passage. Here, the angel of death, threatening those deficient in this fear, represents not simply the execution of God's vengeance. As well, and consistent with the discussions of the alternative to the proper intent in the other passages that we have evinced, the angel of death here stands as an expression of the fall into idolatry. For the angel of death, as contrasted with the angel of life, stands invariably for Abulafia as the evil inclination and the satanic element within the Active Intellect, as we shall shortly see. His vengeful aspect signifies a refusal to permit the mystic's experiential identification with God. This identification had immediately earlier been presented, in bodily terms, as the achievement of God's likeness. And appropriately, the angelic threat is most certainly depicted here as a bodily one. Most noteworthy in this regard is the sword in the avenging angel's right hand, with which the "vengeance of the covenant" is exacted. Upon recalling our discussion of the locus of this covenant, the phallus, it should be rendered apparent that a castration anxiety is manifest in the person of this sword-wielding entity. The connection of the

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<sup>158</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 27a; printed edition, p. 54. In this context, demons are not mentioned specifically but may be understood with respect to the "errors that destroy the soul" by overwhelming the rational faculty.

<sup>159</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 293a; printed edition, p. 15.

demonic threat, suggesting the consequence of the idolatrous intentionality of the wayward mystic, to the loss of the mark of the covenant is vividly apparent here.

Regarding the specter of this avenging angel, Abulafia continues,

And he comes upon you and asks you to give to him his portion from yourself, and he is half of your existence, speaking allegorically, and he seeks to cut off your limbs, one after the other, and you see it all with your eyes. And thus you despise all of your limbs and all of their bodily powers because of the fear of God who gives to the angel of death his fixed portion that is hinted at [in] that he is Satan and he is the angel of death and he is the evil inclination and he is the imaginative power in the heart that rules over your mind, and he is clever in doing evil, and he does not know the doing of good. And he besieges your heart in the matter of confounding [*bilbul*] heart and heart [*lev ve-lev*]. And sometimes he is revealed to you to kill you and to devour your circumcision [*livloa ' milatkha*] if Zipporah, the wife of Moses, does not help you to be (Ex. 4:26) “a bloody bridegroom because of the circumcision;” and she circumcised the foreskin of her son in the taking of a sharp stone and in the cutting of the covenant. And sometimes he is hidden from you until you think that you will not die until you grow old, although he stands before you and sees your essence, and you do not see him, and all of a sudden he turns upon you and asks his portion. And so it is always, time after time, day after day, until the day of your death.

Abulafia explains here that the avenging angel is actually a feature of the mystic's own inner being; it is his evil inclination.<sup>160</sup> In this is recalled our

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<sup>160</sup> Idel refers to another passage, from *Sitrei Torah*, regarding the battle within the mystic between good and evil angels; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 96-97. In another context, Idel writes, “Those descriptions and interpretations of visions which have reached us belong to the ‘positive’ type of experience.” Idel here expresses the belief that the visions that came to Abulafia during his fifteen year ordeal are not of the type that we find in his writings, that only those visions which bear an intellectual content were preserved by Abulafia. *Ibid.*, 145. Although it may be true that Abulafia has not designated any purely imaginative and utterly non-intellectual phantasms as such, I think it perfectly plausible that the detailed description presented here of the avenging angel

observation that demons possess, for Abulafia, a quasi-existent status. The threat that they pose is genuine and mortal, but they nevertheless embody the mystic's own inner predilection toward idolatrous tendencies.<sup>161</sup> These predilections in Abulafia, of course, constitute our main interest, and I have been at pains to indicate that the demons with which Abulafia describes himself as having been beset may be readily perceived as illustrative of his inner conflict with respect to the temptation posed by idolatrous Christianity.

In this portion of the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia adopts a view of the imagination distinctly opposed to the one propounded earlier. Initially, the imagination had been seen as utilized in the modeling of the mystic's attributes after God's likeness, a notion that we took to represent the imaginative bodily resumption of Adam's perfect form. Here, the angel, now understood as Satan, is itself identified as the mystic's personified imaginative faculty, with the result that the mystic's body, inextricably linked to the imagination, as we have suggested, is to be despised. By the same token, Satan, we are informed, is actually entitled to a portion of man's limbs; we may understand this to indicate that Satan may claim that which shares his nature in its corporeality. Satan seeks to sever the mystic's limbs from his body "one

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confronting the mystic, as well as his other accounts of battles undergone against demons, reflects an actual visionary encounter experienced by Abulafia. Since these demons are themselves imaginative entities, it is difficult to categorize these visions as intellectual, insofar as Abulafia recognizes their content, or as phantasms that defy intellectualization.

<sup>161</sup> Altmann observes that a fundamental difference between medieval philosophy and mysticism was their attitude toward evil and the demonic, such that mystics saw demons as real, with the result that they adopted a dualistic perspective. "Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism," p. 210. From this observation, we may perhaps understand Abulafia's assigning of a qualified reality to demons in that Abulafia's attitudes frequently straddled the two worlds of philosophy and mysticism.

after the other.” Nevertheless, despite referring to some number of limbs, only one is ever specifically referenced; in the culmination of the passage we learn that Satan seeks to “devour” the mystic’s circumcision. We find in this a high level of conformity with the psychoanalytic perspective that assumes that the threat to any body part is a superficial expression of the more deeply seated threat to the genitals.

The threat that Satan poses to the mystic’s circumcision is in keeping with that threat described earlier, where the sword that Satan bore was described as directed toward the exacting of “the vengeance of the covenant.” However, in this latter instance, Abulafia describes a threat apparently of an oral nature – the mystic is threatened with having his circumcision “devoured” by Satan. Castration anxiety expressed in terms of an oral threat is invoked here. This is a topos familiar to psychoanalysts. The construal of the mouth as a castrating threat is akin to the same anxiety expressed in terms of the vagina, which not uncommonly is also described by the patient suffering from castration anxiety as possessing threatening teeth.<sup>162</sup> That Satan is described here by Abulafia as masculine is worthy of note. Yet, despite this characterization, we see that Satan’s links to the imaginative faculty, the evil inclination and the body are quite strong in this passage, and all of these are distinctly feminine attributes in Abulafia’s estimation. Indeed, as was also the case with Jesus, Satan epitomizes femininity. Nevertheless, it is possible to perceive the anxiety described as operating within a homoerotic dynamic. For, just as the

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<sup>162</sup> Stanley J. Coen, “Sexual Disorders,” in *Textbook of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Edward Nersessian, and Richard G. Kopff, Jr., Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996, p. 365.

relationship of the mystic to God may be conceived of as homoerotic, notwithstanding the femininity of the mystic's soul, so too may the relationship described of the heretic with Satan be understood as homoerotic, despite Satan's femininity.<sup>163</sup>

This is as well the case with respect to Abulafia's surprising description of his own relationship to Jesus. For, as we shall see in the next chapter, Abulafia perceives the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton (YH) to embody the Jewish messiah – that is, himself – while the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton (VH) embody Jesus. These two elements represent the two facets of the divinity and of the efflux that issues from the Active Intellect, and it is their union that we know to carry with it theurgical and erotic implications. For they represent the front and back of the divinity. The unification of the name, which is implicitly encapsulated by Abulafia in terms of his own relationship to Jesus, signifies the theurgical unification of the divinity Himself, which as we have already seen, is the mark of the mystic's own erotic union with God. The extent to which Abulafia was himself cognizant of the implications of his own writings is, of course, unclear. All the more so is this the case when we consider that some portion of Abulafia's writing comes from a kind of free

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<sup>163</sup> See Wolfson, "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," pp. 312-321, for the construal of the mystic's relationship to God in homoerotic terms. In that context, zoharic texts are considered in which the feminine element within the divine is located in the phallus, such that "...the female images related to God must be transposed into a masculine key;" p. 312. See also, idem, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath," p. 170. See idem, "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," p. 322 for one of several examples in which the zoharic authors conceive of the mystic as feminine with respect to the divinity.

association, governed primarily only by a sense of propriety that accompanied the parameters of the rules of the letter operations that he employed.<sup>164</sup> As we have suggested, with respect to the erotic temptation posed by Christianity, Abulafia appears to have substituted a relationship with Jesus for the one described by the zoharic authors, a relationship with a Christian woman. That the former relationship, Abulafia's with Jesus, was one possessed of transcendent theurgic merit points once more to the essence of Abulafia's dilemma: For Abulafia viewed it as incumbent upon the mystic - far from avoiding it - to venture purposefully into the realm of the forbidden in order to redeem both it and that portion of the mystic's inner being which it embodied through an internal unification that would result in *devequt*. Thus, he both prescribes and proscribes contact of an erotic nature with the demonic element.

In psychoanalytic terms, fearing castration as the imagined culmination to sexual contact stems from guilt and from a fear of punishment for oedipal thoughts, the likes of which we have discussed earlier. Abulafia's pronounced inner conflict over his tabooed attraction to idolatry, the latter suggested in overtly corporeal terms in the current passage, again runs parallel to the psychoanalytic perspective. Abulafia is clear here that the castrating threat occurs when the mystic falls under Satan's sway and becomes confused: "...he [Satan] besieges your heart in the matter of

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<sup>164</sup> Scholem offers a similar description; *Major Trends*, pp. 135-136.



confounding heart and heart.”<sup>165</sup> Certainly this confusion could only allude to the mystic’s falling victim to temptation of an idolatrous nature, a motif that we have seen to be recurrent. What results is the father’s censure and the loss of one’s identity both as a participant in the covenant and as a perfected man, one capable of communion with God.

The fear of the castrating female - Satan here specifically, but, equally plausibly, Jesus as castrating mother - is countered (or sublimated) in Abulafia’s subsequent turn in *Sitrei Torah* to the theme of Zipporah. Circumcision at the hands of Zipporah stands as a talismanic protection against the satanic threat of castration. Abulafia refers to the mystic here as the “bloody bridegroom,” that is, as Moses in the Exodus story. Moses is saved from God’s wrath by Zipporah’s circumcision of his son and by her touching of Moses’ genitals with the son’s circumcised foreskin (Ex. 4:25). Here, for Abulafia, a woman serves as standard bearer for salutary, approved, and normative circumcision, diffusing the castration threat posed by the forbidden female element. Along similar lines, we should observe Freud’s own interpretation of circumcision. For Freud, circumcision itself served as an enactment of castration, engaged in by the father. This may be perceived as the forestalling of the threat of a fully realized castration of the son.<sup>166</sup> In kind then with what we have

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<sup>165</sup> Idel makes reference to Abulafia’s disciple, Isaac of Acre, with respect to the efforts of demons to come to the mystic and attempt to confuse him; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 167 n. 226.

<sup>166</sup> Freud, *Complete Introductory Lectures*, pp. 165, 550-551; idem, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 156; idem, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 189 n. 61. See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 485 n. 173.

seen of the two possible modes of erotic union enacted by the mystic, one with respect to Lilith and one with respect to the *Shekhinah*, so too is the mystic susceptible to two possible circumcisions at the hands of the female element, one – a castration - executed by the feminine male, the demon, and one – of the halakhic variety - executed by the masculine female, the *Shekhinah*.

Nevertheless, despite Zipporah's redemptive act, sometimes the demonic mortal threat may lie permanently in wait, as Abulafia informs us at the end of the passage. It then remains unabated, and imperceptible to the human being. Given Abulafia's prior assessment of this threat as an internal one, indeed, as one half of the mystic's internal makeup, we may understand that what Abulafia suggests here is that the inner struggle is one that, in some cases, is never to be resolved. This suggests that, in psychoanalytic terms, the complex likewise may never abate, as well as the anxieties that it engenders. Given that Abulafia identifies himself elsewhere as Moses, or even as his better,<sup>167</sup> we may venture the assumption that Abulafia at least presents himself as one who has assumed the status of the "bloody bridegroom" and has put the internal crisis behind him.

In our analysis of Abulafia's travails against his demons, we have discerned the presence of a strong castration anxiety, one that confirmed our perspective that these demons stood for Abulafia as signifiers of the threat posed by Christianity, a threat which Abulafia experienced as a consequence of his own forbidden attraction

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<sup>167</sup> See, for instance, Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 140-141.

thereto. In this regard, we took some pains to establish the link of Abulafia's fear of the loss of the phallus to sexual anxiety, related to his attraction to the castrating femininity embodied by Christianity, and to his fear of falling victim to this idolatrous attraction, which found expression in his fear of the loss of the talismanic covenantal insignia. The loss of this insignia would represent, we noted, both the loss of Abulafia's ability to demarcate his own activities and beliefs from those of the nations, as well as the (synonymous) loss of his masculinity. These tendencies in Abulafia's thought manifest themselves through another motif as well that bears examination, this being that of the sins of Adam and Eve. Writes Abulafia in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*,<sup>168</sup>

And the joy will awaken again your heart to add inversion and understanding and joy and great pleasure, and you will hasten to turn around [*lehafokh*], like one who turns around the flaming sword that turns to every side, to wage war with the enemies that surround. Because the imaginings and image of the void thoughts, which are born from the spirit of the evil inclination, are what first go out towards the calculation and surround it like murderers and confound the knowledge of the humble man in the sin of Adam and Eve...

In this context, Abulafia does not mention what the sin of Adam and Eve actually represents, but we may piece together the nature of this sin - or sins, more precisely - from elsewhere in Abulafia's writings. Certainly, at the outset of the passage, Abulafia refers to the act of letter permutation and to the rising ecstasy that

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<sup>168</sup> *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fol. 31a; printed edition, p. 112.

ensues therefrom. The enemies to which he alludes are again the demons who threaten the mystic with bodily harm.<sup>169</sup> These demons, besetting the mystic from all sides in their effort to thwart his own attempt to rationally apprehend the products of his permutation activity, are, Abulafia says, “like murderers.” Abulafia’s description of them as threatening, in particular, the “calculation” [*heshbon*] of the mystic would seem to suggest that they aim to impair his ability to perform operations dependent upon the numerical values of letters, and their homicidal threat, as we have seen, is not merely of a broadly physical, but more particularly of a castrating nature.

As to the sin of Adam and Eve, we may turn first to a passage elsewhere in *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*.<sup>170</sup>

And the secrets of sexual transgression [*sitrei ‘arayot*] are the fornication of the serpent with Eve, because he is the adulterer and is he who projected pollution into her. And Israel when they stood before Mount Sinai terminated their pollutedness, [while] the nations who did not stand upon Mount Sinai did not terminate their pollutedness...And it is said as well that the Other Side [*sitra’ ‘ahra’*], who is Satan, is he who rides upon the serpent and who carries the woman...And he entices the human intellective power before its going into actualization, and prevents him from grasping the truth...Indeed the truly enlightened one who is the man in truth will not be seduced after the knowledge of the woman who is seduced by

<sup>169</sup> Wolfson has discussed the motif of the revolving flaming sword (derived from Genesis 3:24) in its relatedness, for Abulafia, to the “inversion of the attributes,” the transformation of the demonic attributes of the left into the pious ones of the right; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172-175. The revolving of the sword is a motif that certainly alludes to the revolving of letters by the mystic. Wolfson also understands the revolving sword with respect to the mystic’s vision of his projected self, accompanied as this is by its converse, the internalization of that which is external; *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>170</sup> *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 6b-7a; printed edition, p. 53. The first portion of this passage appears in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 194.

the serpent, who was bitten and killed from the poison of death that is in his mouth, but is ever drawn after the *mišvot* of God, may He be blessed...

One aspect of the sin of Adam and Eve, we learn, has to do with *sitrei* 'arayot, or the secrets of sexual transgression.<sup>171</sup> In the current context, Abulafia concentrates on Eve's sexual transgression with the serpent. The link of this sexual transgression to idolatry is noteworthy in the passage: The idolatrous nations of the world bear the impurity that results from this sin, while the Israelites, with the reception of the Torah, had it expunged from their natures. To be a Jew, then, is to be free from the taint that results from Eve's sexual transgression. Similarly, the mystic's replication of the purified state of the Israelites at Sinai can only occur if he refrains from the apparently sexual consorting with the demonic component of the efflux from the Active Intellect, thus avoiding the replication of Eve's sin. We learn that Abulafia has in mind the mystical experience in its relation to Eve's sin in his evocation of the concept of the satanic effort to thwart the actualization of the mystic's intellect, a concept which he then pairs with the poisoning of the woman by the serpent. In this regard, Abulafia's allusion to the death of the woman from the wound inflicted by the serpent recalls once more the mortal threat embodied by the demons encountered by the mystic. As well, our observation that the demonic, castrating threat to the mystic stems from a sexual enticement jibes well with what

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<sup>171</sup> For *sitrei* 'arayot in Abulafia's thought, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 192-195, and see below.

we have seen of the essential femininity of the demonic element and of Christianity, as well as its conflict-engendering attractiveness to Abulafia.

In a closely related passage, from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Abulafia writes,<sup>172</sup>

And the serpent did not approach the man and there was no speech between them, but his approach and his speech was with Eve alone. And Eve murdered her husband through the cunning of the adulterous serpent...And the adulterer hates her because he was cursed because of her, and the adulteress hates him in that she committed adultery, and necessarily received death for her adultery, because of his seduction; because her death was not from the sin of transgressing against a commandment, because she was not commanded, but the man was. As it was said (Gen. 2:16), “And the Lord God commanded the man...” The man and not the woman...And Adam acted evilly, until he transgressed God’s commandments and engaged in idolatry...And thus three kinds of sin were comprised in the beginning of Creation, idolatry, the secrets of sexual transgression and the shedding of blood,<sup>173</sup> and so too in the secret of circumcision are these three, because from it is the beginning of the creation of the species and its perpetual continuance.

Here Abulafia describes Eve’s death as resulting from her role in Adam’s coming into sin, from which he too received death. Clearly distinguished here, but interwoven, are the two types of sin that we have observed Abulafia cautioning against with respect to the demonic temptation: Eve consorted sexually with the demonic element, while Adam committed idolatry. Of course, their sin in Genesis is essentially the same in eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which we may similarly understand that these two sins are two sides of the same

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<sup>172</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, MS Munich-BS 408 fols. 10b, 10a; printed edition, pp. 14-15.

<sup>173</sup> *bSanhedrin*. 74a.

coin.<sup>174</sup> The third type of sin referenced, the spilling of blood, is seemingly encapsulated in the deaths that ensued from Eve's act.

Abulafia does not clearly explain how the three types of sin attributed by Maimonides<sup>175</sup> to the beginning of Creation manifest themselves in circumcision, but his subsequent discussion centers around the three esoteric fields of the secrets of sexual transgression, the secrets of the chariot, and the secrets of Creation, and in fact the latter two of these seem to be fixed about the secrets of sexual transgression as the most primary of the three.<sup>176</sup> We suspect that the sin of idolatry was to be understood as the opposite pole to the secrets of the chariot, while the sin of bloodshed Abulafia implicitly related to the secrets of Creation. Once again, given the thrust of our investigation, it is noteworthy here that Abulafia gathers together the sins of both idolatry and sexual transgression with respect to circumcision. For, in his anxiety concerning castration at the hands of demons, Abulafia fixates upon

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<sup>174</sup> Abulafia characterizes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in terms of the sensory and of lust. *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1686, fol. 111b; printed edition, p. 56. Maimonides describes Adam's sin as a transgression against the 'arayot restrictions; that is, he gave in to his imagination and to sensual pleasures. Idel, "Sitrei 'Arayot in Maimonides' Thought," p. 82. Abulafia's conception of the *sitrei 'arayot* is clearly related to Maimonides', but Maimonides' tendency is, in fact, to rid the 'arayot restriction of the tinge of esotericism, at least in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, while Abulafia accords the *sitrei 'arayot* pride of place among esoteric doctrines.

<sup>175</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed* (2:30).

<sup>176</sup> Wolfson analyzes a closely related passage from *Sitrei Torah*, where circumcision, signifying the secrets of sexual transgression, is seen by Abulafia to comprise within itself as well the head phylacteries, signifying the secrets of the chariot, and the arm phylacteries, signifying the secrets of Creation. Wolfson demonstrates that circumcision thereby stands as "the mark of esotericism par excellence," a distinction encapsulated as well in the exposure of the corona during the procedure; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 88. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 192-195 for several similar examples. The previously discussed theme of concealment and revelation, as it pertains to the phallus and circumcision, well explains Abulafia's concentration upon the *sitrei 'arayot* as the preeminent of the three occult disciplines discussed, as Wolfson indicates. The dynamic of secrecy's relationship to eros is perceived by Wolfson as well among the German Pietists; *Along the Path*, pp. 2-3.

the loss of the distinguishing mark of the Jewish people through idolatry, on the one hand, and the giving in to the forbidden attraction to the demonic – that is, the Christian – that would cause this catastrophic loss, on the other. More than likely in this context Abulafia's reference to circumcision as the source of persistent life, a notion evocative of our prior discussion of the *sefira Yesod*, references the mystic's entry into the eternal life of the world to come, an accomplishment that results from the mystic's assumption of the divine likeness as the perfected man, reconstituted in Adam's original image at the locus of his fecundity, the phallus. The contrary fate, we have seen, stems from the impairment of the mystic's body – his castration – through his submission to the erotic temptation posed by Christianity, a temptation with which Abulafia was forced to contend.



### Chapter III. Abulafia and Jesus; Metatron and Sandalfon

Axiomatic to Abulafia's mystical project is a directedness toward the reconstitution of the mystic's essential being, an achievement that is accompanied by, and tantamount to, a unification with the divine.<sup>1</sup> This reconstitution and the accompanying *devequt*, or cleaving to the divine, results, in Abulafia's conception, from the reconciliation of opposites within himself. We have examined this principle thus far as it pertains in particular to man's male (that is, pious) and female (that is, idolatrous) features, as well as to his intellect and imagination and his good and evil inclinations. Such themes recur repeatedly in Abulafia's thought. I will contend in this chapter that this principle of the internal reconciliation of opposites is inextricably linked with Abulafia's own relationship to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This principle recurs in innumerable guises in Abulafia's writings, in motifs which intertwine to form an intricate overarching network. Such is the centrality of the imperative, for Abulafia, to bring about the complete cohesion of the two opposed aspects of his inner being.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of whether *devequt* for Abulafia indicates a true *unio mystica* will be considered below.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfson, in "Light through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar," p. 76, notes a recurring theme in the latter text: "...one must incorporate evil, even the demonic side, into one's spiritual path." I maintain that the same principle is operative for Abulafia. Wolfson notes that there are two ways, in the *Zohar*, in which this principle appears. One is through a process of "purgation and refinement" and the other is through "containment and unification." These, I believe, are also present in Abulafia's thought. The importance of refinement was discussed in the last chapter, while the theme of unification with the demonic will dominate this one. The goal, for the zoharic authorship, as Wolfson perceives it, is a state "in which evil and good are contained together as one and not one in which evil and good are separated." Ibid., p. 88. Again, we will observe the same objective in Abulafia's thought.

I wish to emphasize that it is essential to our own purpose, that of tracing Abulafia's ambivalence toward Christianity, to note the prevalence of this mode of thinking, as well as its multifarious forms and its fecundity for Abulafia. For in all of its forms we find, I suggest, clear echoes of his attitude toward Christianity. We will be able to observe the status of this theme as a lynchpin of Abulafia's mystical worldview and of his very psychological makeup, the latter being a valence that we had begun to pursue in Chapter Two. The many modes of expression employed by Abulafia in the service of this theme, the reconciliation of opposites within the mystic, all dovetail with his understanding of his relationship with Christianity.

One sustained discussion from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* presents a cluster of motifs, each of which is pivotal in Abulafia's wider corpus to the theme of mystical reconstitution. As is frequently the case in Abulafia's discourse, these motifs all intersect, with the result that an extended analysis of this one passage will be helpful at the outset of our effort.<sup>3</sup> We may pick up the thread of Abulafia's thought in the aftermath of some mathematical elaboration upon the numbers one through ten, certainly tied to one of his conceptions of the *sefirot*, that they are "numerations."<sup>4</sup> Abulafia writes:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In differing contexts and for other purposes, a number of these motifs have been observed by Scholem, Idel and Wolfson, as will be noted as we proceed. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 135, translates a portion of this passage.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfson observes that Abulafia conceives of the *sefirot* as the numbers one through ten; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 83-85 n. 264, 134-135.

<sup>5</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 23b-24a; printed edition, pp. 47-48.

...And this for us is the secret of “forbidden and permitted,” because it “binds the seed,” “and releases the ten words [or “things,” *devarim*].”<sup>6</sup> And revealed from it is the “knot of the arm”<sup>7</sup> of the left that is called the knot of tefillin, which are strings called “threads of the sins” and they are created from “food” of wheat, and it is “thread and blood” and their secret is “raw matter, *Hokhmah* and *Binah*,” “raw matter, sun and moon,” and from there “the mind and the heart and the blood” and the liver and all the limbs, one in the other; and this was revealed before in the matter of the cycle [*ibbur*]. And know that if you wish to release the order [*erekh*] that is made straight [*nehlaf ’el ha-yashar*], you decrease the first number [*ro’sh misparo*] from the second, and remaining in your hand will be three, which are equivalent, or configured upon one root, which is near to equivalent [here follow mathematical operations based on the numbers one, two and three]...And so all the configurations, when you release the knots and their exchange, return to the straight configuration. And from here the sages said that this hints to man in the knots of the world, year and soul, because he is connected to them by nature, and if he will release their knots from him he will cleave in him who is above them, with the preservation of his soul...[Those who accomplish this] are called scattered singular ones, sequestered [*mitbodedim*] to know God, blessed be His name, and they subdue themselves from pursuing worldly desire and guard against being bound in it, like a dog with his mate. And regarding this, when he is accustomed to the isolation [*perishut*] he will add separations and unifications and he will know to unite the one, singular, unique name, “YHVH is one.” And then he will say in truth, “Hear, o Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is one.” And he will answer himself quietly, to bring his heart to think with focus [*lahshov libo be-kavvanah*], “Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom now and forever,” the last letters of which are “His blood, your blood,” the first letters being “בשכמלך,” whose secret is “with all His name.” Therefore, His name is your blood, His blood; therefore, His blood, your blood is His name. And the secret of the beginning and the end is “fifty and one half,” and thus “blow of the

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<sup>6</sup> “Forbidden and permitted” shares the same numerical value as “binds the seed,” eight hundred and eight-eight. “And releases the ten words” has a numerical value of 1,887; however, Abulafia will frequently suggest taking the value of a number in the thousand position and transposing it, adding it to the single digit position, which in this case would yield the value of “forbidden and permitted,” eight hundred and eight-eight.

<sup>7</sup> Having as well a numerical value of eight hundred and eight-eight.

arrow” [*meḥi ḥaṣi*].<sup>8</sup> And thus “His name is the source of life for life,” in the likeness of the “weaving” bound “in the Tanin,” front and back, in the secret of “twenty-two” letters, from which is created “my flesh.” And the hint is (Job 19:26), “from my flesh I will see God,” which is “Prince in me.” And when the perfect man arrives at the straight region, “directly” “he will announce”<sup>9</sup> [to] others, in good lines, if they will listen and if they will refrain from what he also announces [*be-mah she-besarohu gam hu*]<sup>10</sup>, until they apprehend what he apprehends and they rejoice in that which he rejoices. Because the straight region comes from one likeness, corresponding to the supernal likeness which dwells alone, and there is no god apart from Him and there is nothing more apart from Him. And He is the All and from Him is the All, and in Him is the All and He is the beginning of the All...And to Him will return the spirit of the All, with the binding of the parts, and the All is bound in all and from all and all. And in this it establishes the secret of all of the beginnings and the secrets of all prayers. And these are the uses and the great ascents which are gathered within the enlightened person with his knowing the secret of the *sefirot* and the arrangements, which are contained in the songs of ascents and in the orders of the received paths, which answer to the intellective.

Throughout this passage are motifs that correspond to our earlier discussion of the *shefa*, or divine influx. The latter partakes of two attributes, one divine and distinctly pious and Jewish, the other satanic and idolatrous. The passage touches upon a series of examples of opposing aspects of the same quality or entity requiring some type of harmonization.

At the outset of this passage, Abulafia seeks to draw a rough equivalence between that which is forbidden and permitted and knots that are tied and untied.

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<sup>8</sup> I have opted for this translation of this enigmatic expression, מְחִי חָצִי, which could also read something like “my mind, one half” (*moḥi ḥaṣi*) or “one half of a blow” (*meḥi ḥaṣi*). I believe that the expression is meant to suggest insemination, given what follows.

<sup>9</sup> Both of these expressions are permutations of the letters for “Prince in me” and “my flesh.”

<sup>10</sup> *Besarohu* is again a play on *basar*, “flesh.”

That is, the releasing of knots is appraised as a sanctioned action,<sup>11</sup> connected here by Abulafia to the “releasing” either of the ten commandments or of the ten *sefirot*. What is, conversely, bound or restricted is “seed,” as the passage subsequently clarifies; Abulafia intends here the constraining of sexual potency. Dichotomous here, within this discussion of tied and untied knots, are aspects of the intellective capacity within man, embodied in Torah or in the *sefirot*,<sup>12</sup> and man’s imaginative faculty, linked inexorably with the sensual world and, thus, with sexual desire. The knot of the arm tefillin is referenced with respect to the aforementioned binding of one’s seed, and it is linked, via several *gematriyot*, to sin, blood, and crude or raw matter.<sup>13</sup>

An interesting analogy is present here between Abulafia’s perspective on the hand tefillin and man’s imaginative faculty. The latter, we have said, is of a material and sensual, and hence satanic nature. Nevertheless, following the conception of Maimonides, the imagination is indispensable for achieving prophetic revelation. It must be subjugated and then utilized. In this respect, Abulafia’s attitude toward the

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 131 for this theme.

<sup>12</sup> For Abulafia’s equation of Torah with the ten *sefirot* and with the Active Intellect, see, Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 141; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 33; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 149. The linkage of the prime matter with evil is effected through the equivalence that Abulafia draws between the demonic Sandalfon and the prime matter. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 119. Abulafia also adapts the polemic from *Toledot Yeshu* discussed earlier, writing that Jesus was conceived during Mary’s menses, the blood of which is the primordial matter. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 52.

tefillin of the hand is significant.<sup>14</sup> It is a *mišvah* to wear the hand tefillin (and, indeed, Abulafia apparently does so during mystical practice<sup>15</sup>), yet his mystical goal he will characterize, as this passage continues, as an “untying” of what we may presume to be the knot of the hand tefillin. Abulafia surely does not intend to physically untie the knot of the hand tefillin. But the latter’s satanic connotations bring about the impetus for some type of spiritual or psychic “untying.” In one sense, then, Abulafia consummates the *mišvah* of wearing the hand tefillin precisely in its metaphorical undoing. And there is yet further complexity to Abulafia’s conception of the knot of the hand tefillin. The knot stands for the restriction of the base sexual impulse, yet the latter must be liberated in the process of leaving the fetters of the material world.

We see that the knot is an aspect of ritual observance that is representative of a feature of Abulafia’s own being, one which must be successfully integrated or sublimated, despite its link with evil. The same we have already found to be true with respect to the imagination, fraught though it is with idolatrous implications. Thus we saw Abulafia discussing the necessity for the mystic to generate imaginative forms in order to then locate their intellectual content. Here we find that the loosening of this knot is responsible for man’s binding of himself to the divine in

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<sup>14</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 88, 150 n. 153, 194, 224 n. 137, to be discussed more fully below.

<sup>15</sup> See Scholem’s translation of a passage from *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*; *Major Trends*, p. 136.

*devequt*. As we might have suspected, Abulafia views the knot of the head tefillin as the counterbalance to the evil reflected in the hand tefillin.<sup>16</sup>

Consistent with Abulafia's attitude toward the knot of the hand tefillin, raw matter, which Abulafia identifies above with this same knot, or with the "secret" of its strings, though discussed in the context of man's sins and blood, is also seen as a complex of both good and evil, right and left. This is apparent from its linkage to the pairs *Hokhmah/Binah*, belonging to the right and left sides of the sefirotic array, respectively, and sun/moon, which represent these same *sefirot*. Raw matter is an entity which Abulafia associates with the material world and with the satanic potentiality within man. It is matter without form, matter in this connection belonging, in Abulafia's overall schema, to man's imagination, form belonging to the intellect.<sup>17</sup> Thus, once more, that which is satanic carries with it a redeeming, attractive aspect for Abulafia, demonstrable in this instance insofar as raw matter enjoys some fundamental relationship, not just with the left, but with the right side of the sefirotic array as well. This again is reflected in its appearance, in the passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, in the triads "raw matter, *Hokhmah* and *Binah*" and "raw matter, sun and moon."

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<sup>16</sup> See Wolfson's translation of a passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*: "And the secret of the head and hand phylacteries is the two opposites [mercy and judgment]"; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 149-150 n.153. Nevertheless, a different perspective on Abulafia's part will be discussed presently.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 100-101. See above, n. 13, and below for the identification of raw matter with blood, representative of the evil nature of corporeality.

This formulation, suggesting that raw matter partakes of both good and evil, runs parallel to Abulafia's assertions that the *ḥomer ri'shon* - the prime matter or hyle – likewise contains both good and evil. The *ḥomer ri'shon* we will presently discuss in terms of another of its modes of appearance in Abulafia's writings (and in this same passage), that is, blood. It is appropriate to surmise that, in the current context, bread, blood and raw matter are all synonymous, in Abulafia's estimation, with the *ḥomer ri'shon*. In the reference to bread we may perceive again an evocation of the eucharistic bread's two-fold nature, as both corporeal and divine. We should observe as well that Abulafia describes the ultimate goal of letter permutation, in several other contexts, as the reduction of the letters to their prime matter.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the received divine influx, the result of such letter operations, contains a demonic aspect, as we have seen, it is a mark of consistency in Abulafia's thought that the prime matter itself should be seen to possess both good and evil.

The raw matter that Abulafia introduces into the passage he describes as being intertwined with all of man's limbs, a notion that he draws - enigmatically, at first glance - into a relationship with the subject of the *'ibbur*. This latter doctrine of the "cycle," as is apparent from allusions elsewhere, Abulafia views as encompassing both the periodicity of celestial orbits and of the menstrual cycle. The periodicity of the celestial orbits may be related to the limbs of a man's body in

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<sup>18</sup> See Sheva ' *Netivot ha-Torah*, in Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 4, discussed in Chapter One. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 97, 140. Abulafia describes the mystic's repeated derivation of fresh significations for the letters as their returning to their primal state; idem, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 22; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 108.



terms of Abulafia's tendency, in a manner very much in keeping with the conception delineated in medieval magical texts, to perceive of man as governed by the planets, stars and constellations.<sup>19</sup> It is this significance to the *'ibbur* that seems to embody what Abulafia refers to as its "secret." The connection made here of the *'ibbur* with the prime matter (with respect to the celestial world) and the human body (in terms of the material world) emerge as logical, and the *'ibbur*, may be seen to partake of the same bipartite nature as the prime matter and the knots.

As noted, the concept of *'ibbur* refers also to the menstrual cycle, and particularly to the unclean blood of menstruation.<sup>20</sup> Thus the *'ibbur* first addresses the intellect, as it is reflected in the sphere of the celestial bodies, or one aspect of raw matter in the current passage. Next, it addresses the imagination. The latter is indexed in the current passage in Abulafia's reference to man's limbs and organs, signifying man's material and sensual faculties. But the *'ibbur* refers also to unclean and feminine blood, which we would do well to understand here as another feature of man's own constitution, and not simply that of women. Abulafia's entire discourse is addressed, after all, to the male mystic, and we have already examined the feminizing threat present in blood. So, the secret of the *'ibbur* may be understood in

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<sup>19</sup> This is particularly the case with respect to the demiurgic constellation the Teli, to be discussed, within whose knots man is bound.

<sup>20</sup> See above, n. 13, for Abulafia's recourse to the *Toledot Yeshu* polemic with respect to menstrual blood. See also, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 220 n. 124, where menstrual blood is seen as cleansing of the woman after the fashion of the blood of circumcision for the man. This topic will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four. For the zoharic conception of the uncleanness of menstrual blood as the effluence from the left, see Koren, "The Woman from whom God Wanders," pp. 159-162; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 60.

terms of the supernal intellects and the human feminine, that is, satanic, aspect.

Consistent with the tendency that we observed in Abulafia's discussion of raw matter earlier in this passage, Abulafia remains intent on intermingling good and evil aspects, whether in the *shefa* ' which man receives or in man's own being.

Consequently, it is fitting that when Abulafia discusses man's body as entwined with the raw matter, after the manner of the *'ibbur*, he alludes as well to man's mind, the seat of his intellectual faculty.

Abulafia understands the connections of the celestial/intellective and terrestrial/material realms in terms of the knots that are his initial concern. More specifically, the knots of the hand tefillin occupy him, as we have observed. Despite the intellective nature to the celestial world, the binding of the human being, via these knots, to the realm of the planets, stars and constellations represents the ensnarement of man within his material nature. This state is reflective of a further complexity regarding this realm, for its overlord, the Teli, to be discussed below, is at times seen by Abulafia as a wholly base captor.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in the passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia proceeds to a discussion of the untying of the knots (expressed as a "straightening," as of a string).

This liberation Abulafia describes as enacted through numerical operations focused upon the numbers one, two and three. These numbers are to be drawn into an equivalency and "configured upon one root." Such a notion is already familiar to us

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<sup>21</sup> Idel cites a closely related passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* to this effect; *The Mystical Experience*, p. 136.

from Abulafia's discussions of unifying the sefirotic array or the particular triad found therein. Our sensitivities should be aroused once again to the discussion of a unified trinity. Abulafia propounds a permutation operation in the current passage, whose purpose is to forge this triadic unity. That this is seen as the objective of mystical practice is apparent from the fact that Abulafia suggests that a release from the knots of the world, year and soul (the three cosmological categories set forth in *Sefer Yeşirah* [3:3]) will ensue. The mystic is thereby liberated from the fetters of "nature," that is, the material or sensual, and he comes to cleave to the divine. Abulafia explains that it is sequestration and abnegation - that is, a subjugation of one's satanic, imaginative, sensual faculty - by which the elect achieve this liberated state.<sup>22</sup> Here again we may understand that the overcoming of one's own idolatrous impulse, expressed in terms of the need to render a trinity a singularity, is suggested.

The unification that is enacted through the three numbers Abulafia expresses as well in a manner familiar to kabbalistic discourse: this act of unification is seen as expressed through the Tetragrammaton, a project seen as the esoteric subtext of the *Shema*.<sup>23</sup> The latter Abulafia views as an object for mystical concentration. A

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<sup>22</sup> Idel discusses the term *hitbodedut*, used by Abulafia in the current context, with respect to the "specific meaning of 'concentrated thought.'" That is, *hitbodedut* for Abulafia refers, in Idel's opinion, to a method of concentration, beyond a simple sequestration or abstemiousness. Idel is of the opinion that it alludes to letter permutation. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 105, 108-109.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfson discusses Abulafia's view that the purpose of the recitation of the *Shema* is the theurgical unification of the divine realm, reflected as well in the mystic's own intellect; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 150-152. Among many treatments of the kabbalists' theurgical goal of uniting the divine realm through prayer, see, for instance, Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 100-103, 108-109, 116; Dan, "The Emergence of Mystical Prayer;" idem, "Prayer as Text and Prayer as Mystical Experience;" Idel, *New*

parallelism between Abulafia's introduction of the *Shema* ' here and the earlier portion of this extended discussion is articulated through the revelation that the *Shema* ' - and the Tetragrammaton itself - encrypts a reference to the divine (good) and human (evil) blood, seen as blended together in the cleaving of the human with the divine. The phrase "His blood, your blood" Abulafia derives from the last letters of the second verse of the *Shema* ' ; these two bloods he describes as partaking, together, of the divine name. It is through such an understanding on the part of the mystic that "...he will know to unite the one, singular, unique name, 'YHVH is one.'"

Presently we will see again much the same formulation of a bipartite Tetragrammaton. For the merging of the intellectual capacity, expressed as the Tetragrammaton's YH, and the imaginative, idolatrous faculty, embodied in the VH, occurs within the unification of God's name.<sup>24</sup> The conjoining of the YH with the VH in this fashion will emerge as key to Abulafia's sense of his own relationship with Christianity. In the current passage, "life" is the consequence of the unification of the Tetragrammaton. This I believe to be expressed in terms of insemination (the "blow of the arrow"), reflective again of the conjoining of male and female entities. Virility – for both mystic and God - seems to be elicited here as fundamental to the mystic's unification of the divine. Earlier we discussed the polemical valence of the

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*Perspectives*, pp. 191-198; Wolfson, "The Image of Jacob," particularly pp. 37-38; idem, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 209-215; and, most recently, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>24</sup> See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 51-52.

theme of virility for Abulafia, where we saw it as reflective of the mystic's reconstitution of his essentially masculine nature. This model we saw as contrasted with the Jewish mystical perception of Christian monastic celibacy. We noted as well that, for Abulafia, the demonic feminine is the bedfellow of impotence or emasculation, while the man who has successfully reintegrated his feminine aspect within himself is rendered virile.

A merging of the two types of blood, good and evil, Abulafia discusses as the "weaving" together of the front and back of the Tanin, the scriptural creature (as in Is. 51:9) which Abulafia takes to be the demiurgic constellation the Teli. This weaving is accomplished by means of the letters of the alphabet, that is, through letter permutation. From these operations "flesh" is created, but this is a now divinized flesh, as may be understood through the shared consonants of the expressions "in my flesh" and "Prince in me." Procreative implications are apparent in this discussion of the generation of flesh, and the merging of the two types of blood may thus be perceived along the same lines as the merging of male and female emissions during sexual intercourse.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, here again the union occurs within the mystic at the moment of *devequt*, taking the form of a bodily transubstantiation, the likes of which we have considered already with respect to its Christian connotations. It is because this process occurs within the mystic's own

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<sup>25</sup> This is particularly likely given the medieval medical identification of blood with semen. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 155. This identification will receive further attention in Chapter Four.

being that the divinization is discussed as the presence of the “Prince” within the mystic; the “Prince” within is most certainly Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance, whom we will see drawn into an equivalence with the Teli. Thus, *devequt* here takes the form of the merging of the mystic’s own female, satanic blood with his divine and intellective blood.<sup>26</sup>

*Devequt* is next articulated as the return, with the liberation that it engenders, of the “spirit of the All” to the “All” itself. This discussion parallels that engaged in by medieval alchemists with respect to the prime matter, as befits the current passage. The hyle is embodied in its essence in the terrestrial philosopher’s stone of medieval alchemy, and the success of alchemical transmutation resides in a return of the hyle’s lower manifestation to its supernal source.<sup>27</sup> And, indeed, it is apparent that Abulafia conceives of the “All” in terms of hyllic matter.<sup>28</sup> The connection of the

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<sup>26</sup> This latter blood is a topic to which we will return, but is referenced by Wolfson; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n. 167. See also, *ibid.*, p. 220 n. 124, noted above.

<sup>27</sup> Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, p. 18. See as well, Pereira, “Heavens on Earth. From the Tabula Smaragdina to the Alchemical Fifth Essence,” *Early Science and Medicine* 2 (2000), p. 137: “The stone that alchemy seeks to find might therefore be compared to the image of matter given in an anonymous twelfth century philosophical commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, where *hyle*, prime matter, is said to be the one and yet double root of everything: father and mother, form and matter of all bodies.” The discussion here naturally recalls the Aristotelian orientation adopted by Abulafia, who is very much concerned with the masculine nature of form, as against the femininity of matter. These, in turn, conform to Abulafia’s conception of blood and ink, to be discussed more fully in Chapter Four. Abulafia perceives these as well to be the two components of the divine name. *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 33a; printed edition, p. 34; *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 328a; printed edition, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> In *Sefer ha-Meliṣ* we find the Active Intellect referred to as “the material, human, hyllic intellect,” MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 13b; printed edition, p. 19. Here we see the connection drawn between the Active Intellect and the hyle. Elsewhere, Abulafia will elaborate further, both on the identification of the Active Intellect with the “All” and of the latter with the hyle. In particular, Abulafia draws an identification between the Active Intellect and the “All” in his discussion of the *sefira Yesod*, to be investigated more fully in Chapter Four. See, *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 335a; printed edition, p. 65, where Abulafia associates *Yesod* with the Tanin with the *hyle*. See also, *Mafteah ha-*

“All” to the *sefira Yesod* by Abulafia is in this respect significant, for the word *yesod* had in Abulafia’s day become the accepted Hebrew term for “hyle” in texts translated from Arabic, as in the case of the anonymous translation of Saadia’s commentary to *Sefer Yešira*.<sup>29</sup> The return of lower matter to the hyle or of the lower manifestation of the “All” to the upper one is reflected in the symbol of the uroborus, which Wolfson has taken as a model for Abulafia’s discussions of the unification of the head and tail of the *sefirot*, that is, of the first *sefira*, *Keter*, with the last, *Malkhut*.<sup>30</sup>

This same head and tail Abulafia discusses tirelessly in terms of the bipartite nature of the Teli, as we shall see.<sup>31</sup> From this we may understand his introduction of the Tanin in the present passage. The notion of the “weaving” together of the two aspects of the Tanin (“front and back,” good and evil, divine and terrestrial blood) reflects Abulafia’s frequent recourse to the motif of warp and woof, *sheti va-‘erev*,

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*Ra‘ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 31a-b, printed edition, pp. 29-30, where the “All” is discussed as the “point” from which matter arises. The “All,” Abulafia relates, stems in turn from the three letters of the Tetragrammaton. Ibid., MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 32a; printed edition, p. 31. See E. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 145, for the identification of the Active Intellect as the “All.” See also, idem, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” pp. 172-174, for the Active Intellect as the “All” and as the *sefira Yesod*.

<sup>29</sup> H. Wolfson, “Arabic and Hebrew Terms for Matter and Element with Especial Reference to Saadia,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 1 (1947), pp. 55-57. Wolfson mentions as well the translations of Samuel Ibn Tibbon.

<sup>30</sup> E. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 143-144. See also, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 271, where the motif is discussed in terms of its autoerotic implications.

<sup>31</sup> Idel mentions Abulafia’s assigning of the Teli’s bipartite nature to Metatron and Sandalfon; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 161 n. 169. See also, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 144 n. 135. Baruch Togarmi, Abulafia’s teacher in Spain, wrote of the two-fold nature of the Teli with respect to its head and tail and the good and evil inclinations, which he classified in terms of religion (*dat*) and blood (*dam*). The words Teli, *dat* and *dam* have numerical values of 440, 404 and 440, respectively. *Sefer Maftehot ha-Kabbalah*, pp. 230, 235, 239. See also, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59.

with respect to the divine unity and to man's completed form.<sup>32</sup> The weaving together of warp and woof is an erotic motif, one which Abulafia relates to the fully constituted phallic potency, which we have already had occasion to analyze in terms of the integration of the female within the male.<sup>33</sup> Abulafia's notion of the All we have already come to understand as well with respect to the phallic potency, the nature accorded to the *sefira Yesod*. We have observed in this passage from 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz that the unification of good and evil aspects, so fundamental to Abulafia's conception of his mystical project, is accompanied by the unification, in *devequt*, of that which exists above and that which is in man. In Abulafia's discussion of the two-fold All he enunciates this relationship succinctly. There, with the liberation that comes from the unification of the two types of blood, the "spirit of the All" returns to the "All" itself. Finally, Abulafia will conclude by informing us that his final articulation of mystical unification, that of the All with itself, is the ultimate mystical purpose of all prayer, and is not the purview solely of the *Shema*.'

I intend for this passage from 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, replete as it is with themes centered around the reintegration within the mystic of his evil, feminine aspect, to serve as a springboard for an analysis of the relationship of mystical reconstitution

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<sup>32</sup> Abulafia refers in this regard to the "perfect man" (*ha-'adam ha-shalem*), an expression that may reflect the influence of ibn al-'Arabi, who believed that his own status as "perfect man" accorded him a messianic status. Hames, "A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's teachings," *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 154.

<sup>33</sup> This will emerge as a major theme with respect to circumcision in Chapter Four. Idel understands *sheti va-'erev* as an erotic motif; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 217 n. 97. See also, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 219.



with Abulafia's ambivalence toward Christianity. We have seen, beginning with the characterizations of Christianity presented by Abulafia in Chapter One, how Jesus and his teachings epitomize the satanic, the imaginative and the idolatrous for Abulafia, and, subsequently, how the evil hallmarks of Christianity nevertheless posed temptations for him. What we will come to observe is that Abulafia's effort toward an inner reconstitution entails the reintegration of that part of his being that is manifestly evil, demonic, and idolatrous. That part of Abulafia's being is, as he understands these qualities, essentially synonymous with that which is Christian in nature. We may note that, as is the case with the passage just analyzed, this mode of thought, in passages where Jesus and Christianity are not specifically mentioned, is replicated with a striking degree of precision, and repeatedly so, in passages where they are directly discussed. Thus, Abulafia's project with respect to Christianity is the selfsame one as pertains to his mystical practice more generally. This observation will enable us to understand the relentless persistence to Abulafia's struggle with the challenge posed to him by Christianity. This struggle, I maintain, prevails throughout Abulafia's copious literary production, whether issues surrounding Jesus and Christianity are explicitly indexed or not.

### **Metatron, the Twofold Teli**

A passage from *Sitrei Torah*, devoted to the subject of “front and rear,” engages several of the themes that we have encountered in *’Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*. These include the nature of Metatron, the tefillin and their knots and the raw matter. Abulafia begins,<sup>34</sup>

The Prince of the Countenance is the thing possessing two faces at once, hidden and revealed. The revealed revolves which of them he wishes, and the hidden obstructs the revolving as well without a doubt, and the Prince is the one who has dominion and rulership and governance over the one who obstructs and over his sphere....

The reference to the Prince of the Countenance here is to Metatron, whom we have considered before as Abulafia’s alter ego, preeminent of the angels in Abulafia’s estimation, to be identified both with the Active Intellect and with the first and last of the *sefirot*.<sup>35</sup> Just as we learned earlier that the Tanin (or the constellation Teli) is possessed of two aspects, front and back, so do we now learn that this is as well the case for Metatron; indeed, as we have already suggested, the Teli and Metatron sometimes appear to be the same entity for Abulafia.<sup>36</sup>

In the current passage, we learn that one of the two aspects of Metatron, that aspect which is concealed, acts as an obstruction to revolving. The reference here is

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<sup>34</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 30a; printed edition, p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfson observes Abulafia’s ascription of the attributes of head and tail, alluding to the first and last sefirot, to Metatron; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 83-85. The same we have seen with respect to the Teli. The two-fold conception of Metatron finds its roots in rabbinic tradition, where we encounter the notion of a two-fold angelic Jacob/Israel, to be elaborated upon by the German Pietists. See, idem, *Along the Path*, pp. 5, 14, 20, 24, 145.

to the revolving of letters in the mystic's activity of letter permutation, as will become apparent as we read on.<sup>37</sup> This conception of an obstruction to communion with the divine on the part of a portion of the Active Intellect conforms precisely with what we have observed earlier regarding the two-fold *shefa* ' , or divine influx; the lower portion is the demonic, idolatrous obstruction which fills the mind of the mystic with deceptive products of the imagination.<sup>38</sup> In the current context, that Prince, or the portion thereof that has dominion over the one who obstructs, naturally, would be the intellectual component of the Active Intellect. In this respect there is a certain mobility to the terminology that Abulafia employs, one which we will encounter not infrequently: The Prince – Metatron - is both the two-fold Active Intellect and only its intellectual portion. This recurring pattern arises from the paradoxical fact that a portion of the "Active Intellect" runs completely contrary to that which is intellectual. Abulafia has contended with this issue already in asserting that that evil portion of the efflux from the Active Intellect is evil only in appearance; it is good insofar as it exists in order to try the mystic. With respect, then, to the mystic's goal of reconstitution, it is the Active Intellect that represents the ultimate integration of the mystic's non-intellectual component. Abulafia continues:<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Idel describes this revolving with respect to the returning of the letters to their prime matter, from which they are subsequently recombined; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Idel has noted Abulafia's equation of the word "daimon" with the Hebrew "dimyon," or "imagination;" *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 30a-b; printed edition, pp. 56-57.

And also according to our words as well [as well as those of Maimonides concerning the front and back of the divine] his [Metatron's] concern is that he is Prince of the World, and thus "Prince of the World" and "the explicit name" are numerically equivalent. And there is no doubt on our part that one of the ways of the matters called "front and back" is that their secret is "spirit of the 'ofanim,"<sup>40</sup> as is written (Ez. 1:20), "Because the spirit of the *hayyah*<sup>41</sup> was in the 'ofanim;" it revolves the Torah, that is, the revolution of the twenty-two letters, and weighs them and exchanges them and permutes them in the first two hundred and thirty-one gates, in pairs of letters, as is written in *Sefer Yeşirah* [2:4]... And regarding this it says there, "Return the revolution front and back. There is no good higher than 'oneg [pleasure] and there is no evil below *nega* ' [plague]"... And you will take whichever of them that you choose in your revolving of the wheel of the letters, because the two powers are in your hand."

We should note first that the title of "Prince of the World" is one that belongs frequently to the Teli.<sup>42</sup> We learn here that the "spirit" of the *hayyah* causes the "wheels" to "revolve," a reference to the idea that the holy spirit is identified by Abulafia with the efflux from the Active Intellect;<sup>43</sup> it is the divine potency that comes to the mystic as a result of his permutation, or revolution, of letters, and it is that through which he will arrive at the level of prophecy.<sup>44</sup> In this portion of the passage Abulafia discloses the fact that "front and back" refers not only to the two

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<sup>40</sup> The angelic "wheels" in Ezekiel's vision of the chariot.

<sup>41</sup> The angelic "living beings" in Ezekiel's vision.

<sup>42</sup> This stems from the latter's appearance in *Sefer Yeşirah* 6:1 in this capacity.

<sup>43</sup> See our discussion of *Sefer ha-Ḥesheq*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1801, fol. 27a; printed edition, p. 54, in Chapter Two, n. 158.

<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere in *Sitrei Torah*, the *hayyot* are perceived to be of an intellectual nature, while the 'ofanim are view as partaking of generation and destruction; MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 52b; printed edition, p. 162. Further on, the 'ofanim are collectively equated with Sandalfon, who is referred to as the Prince of the 'Ahor, the "rear" or "backside"; *ibid.*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 53a; printed edition, p. 164.

components of the Active Intellect. As well, the mystic's letter operations partake of the same nature. On the one hand, revolving the letters one way or another, expressed in the example of '*oneg* and *nega*', is surely intended by Abulafia. As well though, as connoted by these same words, the mystic may choose to permute the letters for good or ill. The idea that the mystic may choose between "the two powers" suggests that the mystic may move in the direction of the satanic, that is, he may fall prey to the idolatrous tendencies of his imagination, those same ones that we have seen as embodied by Christianity. Indeed, the very phrase "two powers" traditionally bears the connotation of idolatry, the sin of assigning a multiplicity to the divinity.<sup>45</sup> We will see further grounds to draw this connection to idolatry, and, hence, Christianity as Abulafia continues.

Abulafia next refers to Maimonides' opinion that the "front" represents the intellectual realm. Abulafia writes,<sup>46</sup>

And he [Maimonides] called the essence of matter and form that which is after it [after the "front"], to distance it from His existence, may He be blessed, and there is no doubt that regarding them it is said in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 7a) "[He showed him] the knot of the tefillin." Because it, according to us, is the back, and the *merkabah* according to us is the front.

Here we learn more regarding Abulafia's conception of the knots of the tefillin. He draws upon a talmudic tradition regarding the knot of the head tefillin

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<sup>45</sup> See Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*.

<sup>46</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 30b-31a; printed edition, p. 58.

being the backside of God that was shown to Moses. In this context, it is the knot of the head tefillin that Abulafia implicitly links with the imaginative aspect of the Active Intellect, as is apparent in his distancing this knot, at the rear of God's head, from His essence. The linkage of this knot with matter and form recalls the earlier discussion from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, where the knot of the hand tefillin was related to raw matter. Lastly, in several places Abulafia will relate the "working of the *merkabah*" to the head tefillin, while the hand tefillin is related to "the working of Creation," as he here does, implicitly, with respect to the knot at the rear of the head tefillin.<sup>47</sup> Abulafia continues:

And the *gematria* [of the expression, "the knot of the tefillin," from *Berakhot*] is "knot of prophecies in the heart of prophecy"<sup>48</sup> and also "knot of the hosts of the sphere."<sup>49</sup> And these [referring to the "hosts"] are those which we were commanded to put aside... As the Torah says (Deut. 4:19), "And lest thou lift up thy eyes to heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, thou shouldst be misled to worship them, and serve them..." And regarding this you should know that it says (Ex. 20:3, Deut. 5:7), "Thou shalt have no other [*'aḥerim*] gods beside me [*'al panay*]," with His speaking in the singular - "Thou shalt not" - and after this speaking in the plural, in truth, regarding the nature of matter and form that are called "backwards" [*'aḥoriyim*, in the plural form], which is one in nature and two by definition [*ba-geder*]. And so it hints "others," whose secret is "backwards," that is, with respect to the *'aḥoriyim*, you will not have additional gods added to me, that is, added to my nature....

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<sup>47</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 88, 194, 224 n.137.

<sup>48</sup> The *gematria* for "knot of prophecies in the heart of prophecy" appears to be four short of the *gematria* for "knot of the tefillin," which comes to one thousand five hundred.

<sup>49</sup> Having the numerical value of one thousand five hundred.

The phrase, “knot of the hosts of the sphere,” derived from a *gematria* intended to refer back to the knots of the tefillin and to prophecy, more than likely alludes to the celestial bodies assigned a status beneath their overlord, the constellation Teli, from which, we have noted, emanate the imprisoning knots of the material world. Through this reference to the celestial hosts, Abulafia manages to effect a transition from a discussion of the backside [*’aḥor*] of the divinity to one of other [*’aḥerim*] gods. Abulafia here reveals that he views that aspect of the Active Intellect (or Metatron) that is “behind,” in kind with the knot of the head tefillin, to be representative of the idolatrous impulse toward polytheism. This transgression, we have already seen, is exemplified most egregiously, in Abulafia’s estimation, by Christianity. That “which is one in nature and two by definition” appears to be matter and form here, such that these qualities are both unified and two-fold. Matter and form are identified ultimately with the “other gods” embodied in the backside of the Active Intellect, in keeping with what we have seen of raw matter’s linkage with the knot of the hand tefillin.

Against the backdrop of Abulafia’s assigning of that to which matter and form partake, the knot of the head tefillin and the idolatrous *aḥor*, it is noteworthy that he should refer to matter and form as “one in nature.” For, insofar as matter and form are identified with the corporeal and intellective spheres, as we have observed, Abulafia may be construed here to be echoing the claims of Christians with regard to Jesus’ status as the incarnate Logos, the very claims that he ostensibly wishes to

deride as idolatrous. Nevertheless, in the continuation of the passage, Abulafia will respond to such Christian doctrine, following the parameters of contemporary Jewish polemics.

Abulafia indicates that God must be understood as distinct from the “sphere” referenced earlier, this sphere being that of the heavenly hosts and, presumably, of the material aspect of the Teli. This sphere, Abulafia reports, is given existence and sustenance by the *shefa*‘, or efflux from God. Abulafia writes:<sup>50</sup>

And there are for us regarding this two faithful testimonies, the divine, separate intellect and the material, emanated intellect, and if they are one, it is that which we received in permuting (Ex. 20:3, Deut. 5:7), “Thou shalt have no other gods beside me.”...And the secret of the passage by *gematria* is “on earth and in heaven,” that is, you will not believe in materialized divinity at all, in all that is in heaven and in all that is on earth...Because it is improper to believe that He is a body or a power in a body, but a separate intellect alone. And from all of this you will understand that he who is drawn after a material thing alone at all, already God has cast him behind Him and, as it were, deprived him of His supervision. But he who is drawn after an intellective thing and seeks to strengthen the cords of wisdom, he alone is before God, may He be blessed, and becomes intellective, not cast away but supervised, and not forgotten even for a moment, because God is within him to help him always, and no evil will afflict him [*yiga*‘, from *nega*‘] at all, because he is always with God and God is forever with him.

Here for Abulafia the notion of a separation between the divinity and the sphere of the celestial hosts is a crucial matter, preserving a distinction between God

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<sup>50</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 31a; printed edition, pp. 59-60.



and the corporeal realm.<sup>51</sup> Matter and form may constitute a unity, as we had earlier observed, despite form's status as partaking of the intellectual realm. In fact, they comprise a unity because of this very nature to form, insofar as represented here is the all-important entry of the intellectual into the material; this likely is what Abulafia means in referring to the lower "material, emanated intellect." But Abulafia will here attempt to assert a distinction from Christian doctrine by maintaining that the truly divine aspect of the intellectual realm, the front of the Active Intellect, remains aloof from the material. To believe otherwise is to believe that God "is a body or a power in a body," that is, to believe in an incarnate divinity. Without a doubt, Abulafia has in mind Jesus here. Our earlier observation that Abulafia definitively links Jesus with the material realm conforms to his statement here that God does not partake of the sphere of the heavenly hosts, that belonging to the material world.<sup>52</sup> The consequence of believing to the contrary, that is, believing in an incarnate divinity, is the loss of God's providence, we learn. However, what we will come to see as we continue is that conception which the current passage already suggests: That which is materialized from within the backside of the divine efflux is not merely material. It partakes of that one of the "two powers" referenced earlier in the passage which belongs to the nature of "evil" and "plague," the satanic power. Thus, the notion of a would-be incarnate divinity represents not merely a

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<sup>51</sup> This distinction is present in Maimonides' thought, as, for instance, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:4. There the celestial spheres, though guided by intelligences, are referred to as corporeal entities.

<sup>52</sup> Abulafia does posit God's existence as apart from and beyond the intellectual sphere; *ibid.*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 34b; printed edition, p. 73.

wrongheaded appraisal of a purely material being, a pretender to divinity. Rather, this incarnate divinity himself is to be understood as demonic.

### **Metatron and Sandalfon**

A number of the subjects that we have just encountered - the front and rear of the divine, the two-fold nature of the divine efflux, the *ḥayyot* and *’ofanim* of Ezekiel’s chariot vision, and the knots of the tefillin – all coalesce, elsewhere in *Sitrei Torah*, around the theme of Metatron and Sandalfon. They do so in a manner that tightly binds the dynamic operating between these two beings with Abulafia’s notions of Jesus. In fact, Abulafia’s conception of Metatron and Sandalfon we may see to reside at the very core of our project of analyzing Abulafia’s relationship to Jesus and Christianity.

Previously we discussed how the angel Sandalfon is linked to the imaginative, and hence demonic, aspect of the efflux from the Active Intellect. In the discussion from *Sitrei Torah* which concerns us now, Abulafia first draws the four *ḥayyot* into a connection with the head tefillin, via the four compartments contained therein. The hand tefillin are next seen to allude to the four *’ofanim*.<sup>53</sup> Abulafia has elsewhere linked the *ḥayyot* with the intellective aspect of the divine efflux, while

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 53a; printed edition, p. 164.

the *'ofanim* he linked with the opposed, corrupted aspect thereof.<sup>54</sup> Thus we may already see a parallel conception to the one with which we began this chapter: The head tefillin are representative of the intellect, while the hand tefillin are understood as signifying the imaginative and demonic dimension of the Active Intellect.

Abulafia continues by observing that there is only one compartment to the hand tefillin for the four scriptural passages it contains, and this, he says, “is the secret of the four *'ofanim*, because there is one likeness for the four of them. And already they are all called one *'ofan*, regarding which it is said that it is Sandalfon, who is taller than his companions by five hundred arm’s lengths.” Abulafia draws here upon a tradition from antiquity regarding the particular *'ofan* who is identified as Sandalfon.<sup>55</sup> Abulafia next refers to Sandalfon as the *Sar ha-'Ahor* or Prince of the Backside, in opposition to Metatron the *Sar ha-Panim* or Prince of the Countenance. The expression “Sandalfon, Prince of the Backside,” Abulafia observes, is numerically equivalent to the phrase “spirit [*ruah*] of the head,” which, he says, “concerns the tefillin of the head.” This linkage of the *'ofan* now with the head tefillin, where before the head tefillin was assigned to the *hayyot*, is not, however, problematic, in that Abulafia has already referred to Sandalfon as the “rear;” clearly

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 52b; printed edition, p. 162: “...because all was in the vision of prophecy without a doubt, and all in the apprehension of the human intellect alone at first that is called the intellectual of forms, called the *hayyot*, and after this he recognizes that man, alone among all generation and destruction, who has a form divided above in two parts, and he receives efflux from two sides, and his efflux is called the Glory of God...” The passage proceeds in parallel with Abulafia’s citations from Ezekiel’s chariot vision, where Abulafia refers first to the *hayyot*, then to the *'ofanim* and then to the enthroned male figure. Thus, the unnamed forms that are generated and destroyed and which proffer an efflux opposite to that of the intellective *hayyot* are the *'ofanim*.

<sup>55</sup> See b*Hagigah* 13b; *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 20.

he is recalling the formulation discussed earlier, where the “rear” is understood as the knot of the head tefillin at the back of the head. We may already infer that the earlier relationship between the “other gods” - and the misguided notion of the corporealized divinity – and the “rear” of the divinity, embodied in the knot of the head tefillin, applies equally well to Sandalfon. That is, Sandalfon represents the same heretical notions against which Abulafia polemicized in a fashion suggestive of a response to Christian notions of Jesus.

In the present passage from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia next concerns himself with the nature of the relationship between Metatron and Sandalfon. “And indeed the number of Metatron is ‘Shaddai,’ and the hidden letters [of the name Shaddai] are יו וד ל”ה,” writes Abulafia. The identification of Metatron with the name Shaddai is widely prevalent in Abulafia’s writings. He notes that the two names have the same numerical value.<sup>56</sup> As well, Shaddai, linked as it is to the *sefira Yesod*, is so located in kabbalistic tradition as to be logically assigned the role of Active Intellect within Abulafia’s Aristotelian framework. In the current context it should be observed that, given that Sandalfon has been identified with the rear knot of the head tefillin, Metatron would be appropriately identified with the front, the actual box itself of the tefillin. The box bears the letter *shin*, the first letter of Shaddai, and is traditionally identified with that name, as we have seen. Certainly Abulafia is mindful here of this relationship being forged between Metatron and Sandalfon.

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<sup>56</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 148.

In the above quotation, Abulafia observes that the “hidden letters” of the name Shaddai - that is, those letters that comprise the spelling of the individual letters of the name, excluding the first letters of each spelling - total five hundred. This number Abulafia has already linked with Sandalfon’s stature, five hundred arm’s lengths. We may perceive a relationship that has been implied before and will continue to emerge in Abulafia’s formulations: Just as the divine efflux enfolds within itself a demonic aspect, so does Metatron, the personified Active Intellect, contain Sandalfon within himself.<sup>57</sup> Abulafia continues:

Because, as the number for Metatron testifies and says, “I was created,” and its secret is, “Understand my hint,” and it instructs in its addition regarding its nature, so too in its permutation and in its number, “He bestows the nature of the blood,” and thus he is “Prince.”

As is so often the case, the “hint” that Abulafia alludes to is an elusive one. However, by working through the *gematriyot*, we find that the expression, “He bestows the nature of the blood,” is equal to one thousand, the same total as for the phrases, “Sandalfon, Prince of the Rear” and “spirit [*ruah*] of the head,” which were discussed earlier. The word “Prince,” which Abulafia next adduces, has a numerical value of five hundred. Certainly, a close interplay is at work between Metatron and Sandalfon beneath the surface of this passage. We have seen blood linked earlier

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<sup>57</sup> Along parallel lines, see, Wolfson, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” pp. 27-52.

with the demonic aspect of the tefillin, so we may expect that Sandalfon is referenced here, an expectation in accord with the numerical values discussed. Yet the word for “Prince” comprises only exactly one half of the numerical value for this phrase; two such Princes would equal this phrase concerning the “nature of the blood.” Does Abulafia intend to imply that the two princes actually comprise Sandalfon, in the same manner in which they comprise Metatron? This may well be the case.<sup>58</sup> Metatron’s apparent statement that he “was created” may contribute to this perception; emphasized here is the fact that Metatron is not seen to be part and parcel of the divinity Himself, but of a somewhat lesser, albeit certainly angelic, order. All in all, the divine efflux’s characteristic satanic aspect is receiving an unusually strong emphasis in this passage. Abulafia continues:

And if you will count “Sandalfon and Metatron,” you will find “knot.” Calculate “the front rear” and you will find, “two that are bound, knot of image of the body,” and it is “knot of the *neshamah*.”

The knots suggested (though not referenced explicitly) in this passage thusfar have both been seen to allude to Sandalfon: The hand tefillin was linked to him explicitly, while the knot of the head tefillin was implied within the reference to the numerical equivalence of the phrases concerning the “*ruah* of the head” and the status of Sandalfon as the “Prince of the Rear.” The binding together now of

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<sup>58</sup> Idel notes that Abulafia elsewhere equates Sandalfon with the prime matter, a notion derived from Maimonides’ conception of the *’ofanim*, the tallest of which is deemed to be Sandalfon, as the prime matter; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 119.

Sandalfon and Metatron would logically refer to a demonic knot, then, a tendency in keeping with the unexpected thrust of the passage. The fact that the knot discussed is that of the “image of the body” and of the *neshamah*, the lower soul, confirms that it partakes of a corrupted and terrestrial nature.

Once again, in this discussion of the binding of Metatron with Sandalfon the numbers tell a tale. The sums for “Sandalfon and Metatron” and “knot” are both six hundred. The sum for “the front rear” is four hundred. The sum for “two that are bound, knot of image of the body” may be parsed out as follows: “two” is four hundred, “that are bound” is one thousand, “knot,” as we have seen, is six hundred, and “image of the body” is four hundred. Lastly, “knot of the *neshamah*” is four hundred plus six hundred, yielding one thousand. All of these words and phrases are thus possessed of a certain mobility; they yield a total of one thousand, the number earlier linked to Sandalfon, when they are combined in different ways. Abulafia goes still further:

And from it you will understand “knot of the tefillin” and it is “knot of so-and-so [*pelonit*].” And I do not know her true name, only this, which I heard, because she has no name “besides negation [*shelilat*] of the soul.” And in this she resembles her creator, as I hinted in secret eleven of the first part,<sup>59</sup> but you should know that she is divided in her nature “into three sections.”

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<sup>59</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 35a-38a; printed edition, pp. 74-86.

Abulafia evidently proceeds from the observation that the letters of the word tefillin may be placed in an alternate sequence to yield the Hebrew word for “so-and-so” in the feminine form. The woman referred to here is the demoness Lilith, as is apparent from the usage of the word *shelilat*. Reinforced once more is the demonic thrust of the entire passage, as the knot of the tefillin which joins Metatron and Sandalfon is itself seen as demonic as well as feminine. The four phrases in this current excerpt that Abulafia subjects to numerical analysis each total one thousand five hundred, suggesting a link with the numbers one thousand, earlier identified with Sandalfon, and five hundred, signifying “Prince” and one half of one thousand. Lilith’s resemblance to her creator is somewhat obscure. Her creator, given the context, may be Sandalfon here. The secret earlier in the text to which Abulafia alludes likely concerns four permutations of the four letters *lamed, lamed, yod, yod*, which there signify day and night in a sequence that changes within a linkage to the seasons in the Jewish calendar. In the same section of the text, Abulafia discusses how the essential name of God, as with all names, also occurs in three modes, just as Lilith, above, possesses three natures.<sup>60</sup>

Earlier we had discussed the demonic danger present within the efflux from the Active Intellect. As has been the subject of some scholarly attention, Lilith in the Middle Ages had become the nexus for a great deal of anxiety with respect to the threats posed by demons. She was particularly reviled as a threat to successful

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 35a; printed edition, p. 74.



childbirth and to the newborn.<sup>61</sup> As well, some of the chronologically earliest anxieties centered around her focused, from antiquity, upon her nature as a sexual threat to masculinity.<sup>62</sup> These two types of dangers posed by Lilith are, in fact, closely related. For sexual intercourse to fail to culminate in the birth of a child, and particularly a boy, was, for the Jewish mystic, tantamount to a failure of the man to reconstitute his masculine identity as comprised of male and female.<sup>63</sup> For the medieval Jewish mind, Lilith stands, therefore, as a demonic and sexually threatening symbol of femininity run amuck.

To be sure, Abulafia explains none of this in his allusion to her. However, he has most certainly seen her as the embodiment of the demonic and feminine aspect of the Active Intellect. Given Lilith's nature, we may understand an important relation to Jesus, one based on our earlier discussion of Abulafia's anti-Christian polemics. There we saw that Jesus as well embodied a threat to male identity; he stripped his disciples of their masculinity and gave them feminine forms. We saw as well that the demons confronting Abulafia posed the same type of threat. We may recall also Wolfson's observation that the sin of Nadab and Abihu, in the mind of the

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<sup>61</sup> See Sabar, "Childbirth and Magic," for the rabbinic background of this conception of Lilith. See also, *Zohar* 1:19b, one of many such examples concerning Lilith. For Lilith as a threat in childbirth, see also Patai, "Lilith," p. 298.

<sup>62</sup> In rabbinic tradition, she was seen to have been expelled from the Garden of Eden for assuming a sexually dominant role over Adam. Sabar, "Childbirth and Magic," pp. 673-674. See also Patai, "Lilith," p. 302, for Lilith as a succubus.

<sup>63</sup> Wolfson discusses procreation in the *Zohar* as the engenderment of masculinity in the husband and as the consummation of the unification of the *sefirot*; "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," in Ostow, ed., pp. 284-285. Part and parcel of this, as we have seen, is the masculinization of the female partner. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 290-296.

zoharic authorship, was their bringing of the divine into an erotic union with Lilith, a theurgical consequence of their consorting with Gentile women. The consequences of such a union are likewise to be seen as emasculating. Abulafia, in the passage under current consideration, makes no mention of Jesus in the context of his allusion to Lilith. However, what should be observed is the commutative property linking Sandalfon, Lilith and Jesus. They function virtually synonymously.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, along the lines of some of our earlier observations, Abulafia in the current passage does not distinguish between a good and an evil, a divine and a demonic knot.<sup>65</sup> He has seemingly identified the Active Intellect completely with the demonic. The knot that binds Metatron and Sandalfon, the knot of the “image of the body” which is the knot of the tefillin, is wholly identified with Lilith. Earlier we observed the synonymy of Metatron and the Teli as the two-fold Active Intellect. We noted as well, however, that the Teli frequently bears only evil associations for Abulafia, despite its being possessed of both head and tail, front and rear. The evil nature assigned to the Teli comes from its being seen as overlord or demiurge of the lower, material plane of existence, holding the world within its omnipresent knots, chief among the celestial bodies in this regard. At times, this view of the Teli is rather at odds with Abulafia’s discussions of this constellation as the demiurgic Active Intellect, and thus as the source of prophetic illumination. In the preceding

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<sup>64</sup> In Chapter Two we had examined a passage from *Sitrei Torah* which had equated Lilith (as “sorceress”) with the Teli.

<sup>65</sup> Earlier, we should recall, he had referred to the mystic’s strengthening of the “cords of wisdom.”

discussion of Metatron and Sandalfon, however, we find much the same dissonance in Abulafia's discussion of the Active Intellect in its personification as Metatron. The latter is invoked first as containing within himself the "rear" or demonic aspect of the Active Intellect. But as the discussion continues this evil aspect seems to overtake the Active Intellect as a whole, and all comes to be embodied within Sandalfon's demonic aspect.<sup>66</sup>

Eventually, as the passage from *Sitrei Torah* continues beyond where we left off, a kind of reestablishment of Metatron occurs. First Abulafia explains that the spirit of God that comes to the "rear," in its aspect as the 'ofanim, arrives there via the "front," the *hayyot*.<sup>67</sup> Already in this formulation the demonic aspect of the Active Intellect is contained and mitigated and subordinated once more. This aforementioned divine spirit of the rear is destined to return to God, a fact which, Abulafia writes, is an expression of the secret that the Prince is placed within man in potentia. Metatron, Prince of the Countenance and of the actualization (of man's intellect, certainly), is next described as the "fount of reward and punishment," from

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<sup>66</sup> Isaac ben Jacob ha-Cohen, a contemporary of Abulafia, appears to put forward a doctrine parallel to the one presented by Abulafia here. Isaac describes a wholly evil interaction of a triad of forces. This triad is comprised of the masculine Samael and his mate, the feminine Lilith, with the Tanin intervening between them. Dan, "Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 5 (1980), p. 38. In Abulafia's evil triad, we find the masculine Metatron and the feminine Sandalfon, with Lilith intervening between them. We find, then, Metatron and Sandalfon - in Abulafia's formulation - paralleling Samael and Lilith - in Isaac's - while Lilith - whom we have recognized as embodying the nature of the Teli in Abulafia's formulation, in that she constitutes the evil knot binding Metatron and Sandalfon together - parallels the Tanin, also known as the Teli, in Isaac's. The notion that we will continue to pursue, in Abulafia's thought, of the oscillation in the Active Intellect between full goodness and full evil is paralleled by Dan's sense that, for his own part, Isaac conceived "...of two systems of divine emanations, similar in many details but one of good and one of evil." *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>67</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fols. 53a-b; printed edition, p. 165.

which we may perceive that he contains both aspects, mercy and judgment, right and left, within himself. The mystic is finally enjoined, via the actualization whose potentiality stems from Metatron, to transcend the destruction embodied in the material nature of the *'ofanim* and to “go to the spirit of God.”

It is important to avoid simply construing Abulafia's shifting perspective on the demonic quality of the Active Intellect as a self-contradiction. Rather, this shifting perspective reflects Abulafia's true sense of the nature of the danger that is posed for the mystic. It is not merely that the Active Intellect contains within itself a demonic aspect to be avoided scrupulously by the mystic. In the radical instability of the Active Intellect that Abulafia proffers the threat is much more dire and treacherous. The Active Intellect in its fundamental nature seems to oscillate between a fully encompassing goodness and a fully encompassing evil. From this we may truly grasp the urgency of Abulafia's many cautionary remarks regarding communion with the Active Intellect for any but the most adept and discerning. Short of transcendence of the Active Intellect and conjunction with God himself, there is apparently no firm footing to be had for the mystic within the disorienting shape-shifting of the divine realm.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> That this transcendence of the Active Intellect is attainable, in Abulafia's estimation, has been a subject of some scholarly debate, but there are certainly passages from Abulafia's writings that imply a cleaving to God and not simply to His lower manifestation as the Active Intellect. Given Abulafia's characterizations of the nature of the Active Intellect, it is difficult to take these statements on Abulafia's part to be merely a shorthand for a cleaving to the Active Intellect. The latter seems far too duplicitous in its fundamental being to be the ultimate objective of the mystic. Wolfson brings one such passage, from *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, in which Abulafia writes that, “There is no intermediary between Him and us except from the perspective that one says to you that we do not have the capacity to attain

Abulafia in the previously examined passage has welded Metatron and Sandalfon tightly together. The battle that he sometimes perceives as raging between them may now emerge more fully, as we see how one or the other may alternately subsume the other and come to be identified fully with the Active Intellect. Thus, Sandalfon is capable of subverting the latter to the demonic in a manner akin to the way in which the Teli, the overlord of this world, may be seen as wholly evil.

### **The Messiah and Jesus, YH and VH**

Having come to more fully understand this dynamic, as well as the threat that it poses to the mystic, we may now examine Abulafia's conceptions of the relationships between the pairings of Metatron and Sandalfon, the head and tail of the Teli, and the Jewish messiah (Abulafia himself, in his own estimation) and Jesus. In this regard, Abulafia engages in an important division of the Tetragrammaton into the two two-letter pairs of which it is comprised, YH and VH.

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the level of His knowledge lest the Active Intellect acts and consequently what is in the potentiality of the intellect will be actualized." Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 151-152 n. 156. The passage seems to suggest that apprehension of God Himself is possible, but the assistance of the Active Intellect is a necessity. On a related note, Idel observes, "Also, because the spiritual nature of this intellect seems to be, according to Abulafia, similar to God, a clear distinction between the union of the human intellect with the *intellectus ages*, or with God, is rather difficult..." Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 7. See also, *ibid.*, p. 10. Idel notes the inconsistent nature of Scholem's opinion on whether *devequt* constitutes *unio mystica*; *ibid.*, p. 3. These may be encapsulated in two statements from *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: "It is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy signifies actual union with God," which leaves open such a possibility, but which is followed by the assertion that even here there is "almost invariably... a sense of distance;" Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 122-123.

Idel enlists two significant passages in the service of elucidating this theme.<sup>69</sup> In one, from *Sefer Mafteah ha-Shemot*, Abulafia writes that Jesus is to be associated with the sixth day of the week, while the seventh day, half of the Tetragrammaton, is to be associated with the Jewish messiah. In the other, from *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Abulafia, as Idel interprets him, links the VH with the messiah, the seventh day, the month of Tebet, and Aries. The YH is linked with Satan, the month of Tammuz, and Libra. In the same passage, Abulafia will also place the month of Nissan and the month of Tishrei in an opposition similar to that of Tebet and Tammuz, respectively.

It is clear from Abulafia's text that, indeed, Tebet, Aries and as well Nissan are to be associated with one another, as against Tammuz, Libra and Tishrei. As well, as Idel notes, Abulafia frequently makes use of a mathematical operation by which to establish the linkage between these two sets and the two halves of the Tetragrammaton. YH squared yields two hundred and twenty-five, the numerical value of the phrase, "the constellation Libra," while VH squared yields one hundred and twenty-one, the numerical value of the phrase, "the constellation Aries." So we have it that the YH is to be linked with Tammuz, Libra and Tishrei and the VH is to be linked with Tebet, Aries and Nissan. As Idel observes in a footnote, "Nissan – the month in which Jesus was killed has a numerical value in Hebrew of 121."<sup>70</sup> So it is here that Nissan, the VH and Jesus are to be linked together, and so is the case as

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<sup>69</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 51. See also, idem, "The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, pp. 413-414 (in Hebrew).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 59 n. 30.

well with Satan, as we see in *Sefer ha-Meliṣ*. There, Satan is associated with Aries, the tail, the evil inclination, and Romulus, the “old king.” Abulafia, the “new king,” puts the “old king” - linked to Rome, and hence, to Christianity and Jesus himself - to flight in battle.<sup>71</sup>

It would appear to be a mark of consistency to assign the YH and VH to the true messiah and to Jesus, respectively, as we have them here. If we have Satan as the evil inclination, as the tail of the Teli and as Aries, and, hence, as Nissan and Jesus as well, as above, then it is logical as well to ascribe Sandalfon, as well the evil inclination and the tail, belonging to the left side, to this same VH.<sup>72</sup> The imagination as well belongs to this side of the Tetragrammaton.<sup>73</sup> As a consequence, it would be logical and consistent to link the Jewish messiah and the YH with the head of the Teli, with the good inclination, with the right side and with Metatron, which also

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<sup>71</sup> *Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 11a, 12b; printed edition, pp. 11, 12, 14. Idel inverts the mathematical values of Aries and Libra at a certain point, with the result that he associates Aries with the YH and Libra with the VH. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 52. This may be a partial explanation for his assigning, above, of the messiah to the VH, although, as we shall see, there is another justification for this. Idel discusses this battle with Romulus, or Jesus, as that between the body, represented by these figures, and the intellect; idem, “The Writings of Abraham Abulafia and His Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976, p. 415 (in Hebrew). The battle between the two “kings” is also one between the two traditional messiahs, Messiah ben Joseph and Messiah ben David; the former stands, in Abulafia’s conception, for the body and for Jesus (Joseph being Jesus’ father), the latter stands for Abulafia himself, the true messiah from the lineage of David. Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>72</sup> Hames notes that in the doctrine of ibn al-‘Arabi, likely influential upon Abulafia, it was probably Jesus who was intended with the epithet “the Imam of the Left.” Nevertheless, for ibn al-‘Arabi, Jesus bore positive associations. Hames, “A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia’s teachings,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 154. For Baruch Togarmi’s association of Aries with Sandalfon, see *Sefer Maftehot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 236.

<sup>73</sup> Hames points out Jesus’ status, for Abulafia, as the imagination; “A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia’s teachings,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 164.

follows logically from the preceding. Abulafia's self-identification as Metatron and as messiah would then partake of the YH.

Abulafia, however, is not so consistent on all of this. As both Idel and Hames observe, Abulafia also links Satan with Tammuz, which suggests the linkage of Jesus (and, hence, Sandalfon) with the YH, and not the VH.<sup>74</sup> As well, Hames analyzes the assigning by Abulafia of Jesus to the sixth day of Creation and of the true messiah to the seventh. Hames explicates, in the passage from *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, the linkage of Jesus with the YH based on Jesus' association with the sixth day - the first letters of the Hebrew words for "Jesus the Nazarene," *Yeshu ha-Noṣri*, are YH, the same letters which begin the Hebrew words for "the sixth day," *yom ha-shishi*. Hames goes on to observe that these are the last two words of Genesis 1:31. The next two words in Genesis, from verse 2:1, the words which begin the section of the text that concerns the Sabbath, begin with the letters VH. Hames observes that Abulafia makes mention of the first of these words, *Va-yekhulu* ("were completed," concerning the heavens and the earth). From this Hames concludes that Jesus is to be associated with the YH, while the entire Tetragrammaton, or the VH, is to be associated with the messiah.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 51-52; Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, p. 79.

<sup>75</sup> Hames refers the entire Tetragrammaton to the messiah in "A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's teachings," *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 163, while the VH he specifically assigns to the messiah in *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, p. 79.



Regardless of this seeming contradiction,<sup>76</sup> what is clear is that Abulafia both parses out the two halves of the Tetragrammaton between the messiah and Jesus, and that these should naturally conform to the parsing out of the Active Intellect between Metatron and Sandalfon, respectively. It is also important to render explicit what is only implied in the passages in question. As Idel astutely puts it,<sup>77</sup> "...the relation between the Messiah and the body of Satan is one of ruler and subject, which, in Abulafia's opinion, expresses the relation between the Jewish Messiah and Jesus." Idel observes that in the two passages that he examines, Satan and Jesus occupy the same positions. Thus, in the lengthier passage, from *Ḥayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, in which Abulafia mentions only Satan and not Jesus, it is appropriate to understand that he has Jesus in mind. As Idel will observe as well, the Jewish messiah and Jesus in this formulation occupy the roles of the human intellect and imagination, respectively. We have observed that Abulafia feels that the prophet or mystic must

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<sup>76</sup> One answer to the apparent contradiction is that it may be that Abulafia is chiefly interested, in the passages adduced by Hames, in associating Jesus with the sixth day and the messiah with the seventh based only on *gematriyot*. That is, he may not be focused on the parsing of the YH and the VH in this context. Indeed, though he does do so in *Maftēah ha-Shemot*, in a like passage from *Maftēah ha-Hokhmot*, also adduced by Hames, Abulafia does not make mention of the words in question from Genesis 2:1, from which, Hames indicates, the VH would be derived. And there is thus also no way to know whether Abulafia had in mind the connection between the first letters of *Yeshu ha-Noṣri*, "Jesus the Nazarene," and of *yom ha-shishi*, "the sixth day," from which the YH would be derived. The *gematriyot* that seems to have more concerned Abulafia go as follows: As Hames also notes, the letters that spell *Yeshu ha-Noṣri* have the same numerical value as those for *yom ha-shishi* (671), while those that spell *melekh ha-mashiah*, "King Messiah," have the same numerical value as those for *yom ha-shvii*, "the seventh day" (453). See, *ibid*. In terms of the inconsistency under discussion, Idel also makes mention of passages from Abulafia's students, and from Abulafia himself, which link the YH with the Jewish messiah, a linkage that Idel notes to be in contradiction to the one that he presents above. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 58 n. 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

harness and ride the imagination as one would a horse.<sup>78</sup> If we play out these notions just a bit further we find again the conception that Jesus stands as a component of the mystic's own psyche, the imaginative half of his nature that must be subdued.

It should be noted that this notion of riding bears erotic implications, particularly when we recognize that the ridden represents the female element, the imagination, while the rider represents the male element, the intellect.<sup>79</sup> This erotic valence to the relationship between the intellect and the imagination, the Jewish messiah (Abulafia) and Jesus cannot be discounted, because it recurs in a prominent fashion in the notion of the YH being united with the VH. For such a union cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of its erotic implications. With respect to the erotic understanding of the unification of the name that prevailed among medieval kabbalists generally, Wolfson, noting its presence among Isaac the Blind and his circle and within the zoharic circle, observes that the sublimation of sexuality into what he terms "holy eroticism" prevailed equally among Ecstatic Kabbalists.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, that the consequences of this transformation resulted in manifestations of homoeroticism with respect to the mystic's relationship to God does not escape Wolfson's notice.<sup>81</sup> Given what we see in Abulafia's conception of

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<sup>78</sup> Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 143, 188.

<sup>79</sup> This notion finds expression as well with respect to Samael's riding of the serpent, a motif that Abulafia references in the context of Eve's sin, of a sexual nature, in the Garden of Eden. See, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 13.

<sup>80</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 263.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 324, 327, 329, 366. This pertains both to the relationship of God and the mystic to the phallicized female, part and parcel of the male divine androgyne.

the unification of the name, all the more prescient is Wolfson's observation that this homoerotic dynamic is, in fact, autoerotic; the unification pertains to two aspects of the divine self, beginning with the necessity to construct an other, configured as feminine.<sup>82</sup> We must note that the homoerotic nature to the union of the YH with the VH in Abulafia's thought should not be construed as necessarily homosexual. In fact, the homoeroticism that Wolfson perceives within the motif of the unification of the name among kabbalists generally he distinguishes from homosexuality in that the former is predicated on the overcoming of carnal sexuality, while the latter instantiates its actualization.<sup>83</sup> And, in fact, we may observe that Abulafia's relationship to Jesus coincides closely with the notion of the male other reconfigured as female, much as contemporary Christians themselves, as we observed, were in the habit of reconfiguring Jesus as mother. The subjugation of the imagination that he propounds, I believe, correlates closely for Abulafia with the classic oedipal dynamic, as discussed earlier, with a powerful castration anxiety being engendered as a result.

To return to the specifics of Abulafia's engagement with the motifs surrounding the unification of the name, in another passage, this from *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia will engage in a discussion parallel to the ones we have examined thusfar. This one centers around the celestial figure of the Teli.<sup>84</sup> Guided by a reference in

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 271, 285, 307.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>84</sup> A portion of this passage is translated by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 150 n. 153.

*Sefer Yeşirah* (6:1) to the dominion of world, year and soul, by the Teli, sphere and heart, respectively, Abulafia writes that there are twelve leaders in both the soul and the year.<sup>85</sup> The latter are the twelve constellations, which govern the months of the year. Regarding the months and their constellations, Abulafia writes somewhat cryptically, “three, three in the nature of the explicit name, which expresses every hidden secret and every secret nature and every concealed wonder that may be apprehended.” Abulafia does not explain this further, but we may understand that in dividing the twelve constellations or months by three, we find that we have four groups – the seasons - which now correspond to the letters of the Tetragrammaton. We may recall that in the passage from *Hayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’* discussed above, the Jewish messiah and Satan were as well assigned to months corresponding to each season, to be linked to the two letter pairs that comprise the Tetragrammaton. We should be reminded as well of Abulafia’s discussion of the letters *yod, yod, lamed* and *lamed*, mentioned earlier, which occur in four permutations corresponding to the four seasons, and which Abulafia regarded as the secret of the demoness Lilith. In that context we noted how the Active Intellect seemed to have been wholly taken over by its evil element. Abulafia goes on to next write in *Sitrei Torah*,<sup>86</sup>

And thus there are in it [the name] two equal signs teaching that God, may He be blessed, leads in His power two seasons of the sun in one equality, in the secret of forty-nine, which revolves from five, and the

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<sup>85</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 23b; printed edition, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 23b; printed edition, p. 33.

two of them together are governors over all of the signs. And their secret is, “You will understand in the head and in the tail.”

We can see that the name is now being divided in half in accordance with the seasons, into YH and VH, and that these are now linked to the notions of the head and the tail and to two “governors.” The numbers forty-nine and five elucidate the meaning of the head and tail: These numbers together equal the numerical value of the word “staff,” and Abulafia will go on to refer to the staff that turns into the serpent in Exodus, Chapter Four. Thus, the head and tail belong to the serpent, which, Abulafia goes on to inform us, we should recognize as the Leviathan of Is. 27:1, the “flying serpent” who is as well the “crooked serpent” and the Tanin. He is of course referring to the Teli, the leader of the world according to the aforementioned passage from *Sefer Yeşirah*.

Thus, the parsing out of the Tetragrammaton into YH and VH may be understood along the lines of the division of the Teli into head and tail. Through these, Abulafia writes, “...you will recognize the secret of the statement (Is. 9:11), ‘The aged and the honored are the head; the prophets who give false instruction are the tail.’” Through this opportune usage of Isaiah by Abulafia, we may see how the linkage of the tail of the Teli to false prophets corresponds precisely with the linkage of Jesus – who Abulafia, we have seen, does specifically discuss as a false prophet – to the VH. The prevalence in diverse forms in Abulafia’s writings of the schema that is again apparent here is, in fact, remarkable.

Abulafia writes that “you will take in your hand,” the staff that changes into the serpent, “with which you will make the signs [*ha-’otot*]; you will act upon matter and form.” Certainly Abulafia intends here mystical activity, and specifically letter permutation. The changeable nature of the staff Abulafia likely sees as expressive of both the inversion of the letters themselves and of the changing insights afforded by their inversion. The performance of signs mentioned Abulafia sees frequently as a prophetic gift, to be discussed further below. The acting upon matter and form we would do well to view along the same lines as the acting upon the two components of the prophetic efflux, the imaginative and the intellective components, as observed above. Thus, Abulafia exhorts manipulation of both of these, which we may understand as YH and VH, head and tail. Clearly as well, Abulafia here prescribes recourse both to the component embodying the Jewish messiah and that embodying Jesus, just as the mystic must engage both aspects of the efflux from the Active Intellect.

Nevertheless, each aspect must be acted upon in their proper measure, as we have observed. The horse that is the imagination must be well-bridled, just as must be the demonic aspect of the efflux from the Active Intellect. Thus, as we have seen, those who perform signs through the Active Intellect while partaking only of its material, imaginative and satanic aspect are sorcerers. It is significant that the staff around which the current discussion centers was used against Pharaoh’s sorcerers. In accord with this notion, we see Jesus, in the tradition reflected in *Toledot Yeshu*,

characterized as a sorcerer.<sup>87</sup> Given Abulafia's obvious absorption of some of the polemical attacks contained in *Toledot Yeshu*, we can see Jesus standing both as a component of the hypostatic realm and as a person who partook of that component, who came to embody it in his psychic composition. The same is also appropriately said regarding the Jewish messiah and the Active Intellect's other component. The added complication here, of course, is that the Jewish messiah nevertheless embodies both aspects within himself at once.<sup>88</sup> Abulafia continues in *Sitrei Torah*,

And it was said (Ex. 4:3), “Put your hand out and seize it by the tail.” And he put out his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand [בכפֿוֹ].” [This should be read] “In twenty-six [כֶּסֶּד וְיָוֶהוּ],” because with six in his hand [כֶּסֶּד וְיָוֶהוּ] are, “In his hand are six [כֶּסֶּד וְיָוֶהוּ].”

Abulafia's play on the last word of the passage from Exodus, “in his hand,” may be translated in several different ways, but two features should be maintained.

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<sup>87</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 59 n. 37. Idel observes that Abulafia characterizes Jesus as overlord of Egypt. See *Maftēah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 71a; printed edition, p. 89, where pharaoh is equated with the Teli; both are personae that we see as associated with Jesus by Abulafia. As well, pharaoh is here linked with hot-bloodedness and the demonic (as well as the sorcerial), an association which recalls Abulafia's labeling of Jesus and Christendom as carnal. See Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>88</sup> Jesus, as a component, then, of the Jewish messiah, may be understood to play some part in the redemption. This surmise, rendered apparent in Abulafia's account of the eschatological battle to be waged between the two “kings,” discussed in *Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, may bear signs of the further influence of ibn al-‘Arabi. The latter had propounded the doctrine that Jesus would arrive prior to the messiah at the end of days. Hames, “A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's teachings,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 160. *Sefer ha-Meliṣ*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 11a, 12b; printed edition, pp. 11, 12, 14. Hames indicates that the messiah's – that is, Abulafia's – mission is to overcome Jesus, who represents the imagination and the material world, in order to bring about a state of conjunction with the Active Intellect. Hames, “A seal within a seal: The imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's teachings,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (2006), p. 164.

The first is the notion that in Moses' grasping of the tail, six are in his hand, that is, six months or constellations. These, we have observed, comprise half of the complete name, its demonic aspect. The second key feature is Abulafia's observation that the same last word of the passage may be seen as the spelling in full of the two Hebrew letters whose sum is twenty-six, such that this last word may be translated as "in twenty-six." Here the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton is suggested, so that we are confirmed in assuming that the relationship of head to tail in this passage is identical to that between YH and VH.

This equivalence brings into sharp focus the insistence with which Abulafia will repeatedly find new modes of expression for the themes in which Jesus, earlier in our discussion, had found a firm place. In fact, Abulafia, in the present passage, will next extol the Torah for containing within itself such a great profusion of secrets, such as those pertaining to the word "in his hand." We must recognize that when themes such as Jesus' relationship to the Active Intellect and to the would-be Jewish messiah loom as large as they do for one who identifies himself as the latter, the opportunities to unearth such themes in Scripture through numerical operations will be limitless.

The current passage from *Sitrei Torah* concludes with Abulafia indicating that the head tefillin bears witness to the throne, while the tefillin of the hand refers



to the tablets.<sup>89</sup> Given what we have already seen with respect to the tefillin of the head and hand, we may understand the throne and tablets as once more paralleling the notion of the opposing nature of intellect and imagination, the latter standing as interchangeable with materiality. Abulafia discusses the secret of the chariot, now seen as embodied in the head tefillin, as culminating in “the man who is upon the throne, who is called *hashmal*.” Regarding this secret, Abulafia writes,

...the rod that changes to the serpent will make known to you the entirety of this secret, and its nature is explained in the secret of the known inversion. And so you will know the secret of the Teli, the secret of the sphere and the secret of the heart. And the matter of the tefillin of the hand and of the head are two worthy witnesses for the whole thing, and they reveal to you the secret of the throne and the secret of the tablets. Because indeed “throne” via [the method of] *’atbash* is “tablets.”

The relationship of the “throne” to the “tablets” has been discussed by Idel.<sup>90</sup> Viewing Abulafia’s derivation, via a letter operation, of “throne” from “tablets” as revealing that the “tablets” possess a hidden dimension represented by the “throne,” Idel notes that, for Abulafia, the secret of the throne is that of “the brain and the heart.”<sup>91</sup> Idel does not explore this theme further, as he is primarily interested in discussing the significance of the tablets in and of themselves. And indeed, in our

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<sup>89</sup> Wolfson notes that, elsewhere as well in *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia identifies the working of the chariot with the head tefillin and the working of creation with the hand tefillin; *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 88, 194.

<sup>90</sup> Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 42-46.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

passage, the letter operation does not proceed in this direction; “throne” does not reflect a secret of the “tablets.” One would be tempted to see the revelation of secrets here as operating in the reverse direction, but, in fact, the revelation of each’s secrets here appears to be reciprocal.

In the current context, it is surely appropriate to see “throne” and “tablets,” respectively, as encoding the working of the chariot and the working of creation. Abulafia has only just mentioned the secret of the chariot and linked it with the throne and the head tefillin. As to the working of creation, Abulafia elsewhere identifies the tablets with the “stones” referenced in *Sefer Yeşirah*.<sup>92</sup> These stones Abulafia understands as the building blocks for letter permutations; that is, they are the letters themselves. Thus, they are the means by which the working of creation is enacted.<sup>93</sup> What Abulafia establishes, in the continuation of the passage from *Sitrei Torah* under consideration, is that the working of the chariot and the working of creation, redolent of the intellect and imagination, respectively, “testify to each other,” just as the head and hand tefillin bear witness to them. The throne and the tablets, as well as the working of the chariot and the working of creation, possess a level of interchangeability here, well attested by the fact of their synonymity via the letter permutation that Abulafia evinces. Thus, the subject of discussion is not simply

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<sup>92</sup> *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, translated in Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>93</sup> Idel notes Abulafia’s conception of the act of creation as a product of speech, executed via the letters of the alphabet; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 107.

that of the imagination's subservience to the intellect; rather, the notion emerges that the two components of the divinity are in a certain way commensurate.

Abulafia observes above that the secret of the man on the throne, who is called "*hashmal*," is made known through the inversions of the serpent. This we may understand as referring, on the one hand, to the process of letter permutation, as symbolized by the serpent's changeability. As Abulafia himself demonstrates, scrutiny of the chapters in Ezekiel using the method of letter permutation brings to light the secrets of the chariot. On the other hand, Abulafia certainly also has in mind the serpent's bipartite nature, composed as it is of head and tail, YH and VH, a composition which has so occupied him in this passage.<sup>94</sup> This nature to the serpent sheds light upon that of the man upon the throne, in that this man himself partakes of a bipartite essence. In Ezekiel (1:27), he is described first from his loins upwards, then from his loins downwards. Abulafia, elsewhere in *Sitrei Torah*, reveals his interest in this aspect of the enthroned figure, stating that it demonstrates the reception of the divine efflux in two aspects.<sup>95</sup> Later, he will suggest that the *hashmal* is divided into components corresponding to the body and the soul.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Wolfson makes reference to Abulafia's equation of the transformation of the rod into the serpent and "inversion," and relates it to Abulafia's collapsing of binaries such as right and left, Israel and the nations and Metatron and Samael; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n. 167.

<sup>95</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 52b; printed edition, p. 162.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 53b; printed edition, p. 168.

Wolfson's observation that, for Abulafia, the *hashmal* represents Metatron<sup>97</sup> is a significant one. We may now observe that, in this passage, the two-fold aspect of Metatron upon the throne is revealed in the nature of the serpent, or Teli, whose tail, the VH of the Tetragrammaton, is identified with "the prophets who give false instruction," and so with Jesus. What should be recognized is that the latter must not be construed merely as an exemplar of satanic and idolatrous religion or even as simply embodying the imagination, to be subordinated to the intellect. In Jesus' epitomization in the tail of the Teli and the VH of the Tetragrammaton, and through the motifs of the hand tefillin and the working of creation, the aspect of the Active Intellect for which Jesus stands is drawn into a close, indeed reciprocal, relationship with the Active Intellect's other half.

Nevertheless, at this juncture we should return to our earlier observation that Abulafia's encounter with the divine efflux from the Active Intellect is frequently described as a battle between the latter's two components as well as between Abulafia's own two inclinations. Indeed, the latter are the lower, internal extensions of the former, along the lines of the aforementioned observation of Wolfson and Idel that Abulafia has a strong tendency to perceive that the components of the hypostatic realm are also elements within the human psyche. Thus, though we have observed what we might describe as a degree of harmony between the two components of the Active Intellect, which "testify to each other," as Abulafia phrases it, in the forms of

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<sup>97</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 198.

the working of the chariot and the working of creation and of the head and hand tefillin, we should not be misled. In *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia relates that the two constellations which embody the head and tail are two messengers of the name who are “always at war” with one another.<sup>98</sup>

In this configuration, we may understand that these two messengers are part and parcel of the YH and the VH, though Abulafia will also go on to characterize one as the essential name of God and the other as merely a descriptive name. Most certainly, these two messengers are as well the two inclinations within the human psyche, and their battle is an internal one, the likes of which we examined in Chapter Two. Thus, Abulafia observes in the same passage that our nature is part and parcel of Satan's. Our nature he also describes as “impressed,” as against the raised nature of God; the language here alludes to a seal and the impression that it creates in wax, but the subtext refers to a feminine aspect – to be linked with evil - possessed by men, as opposed to God's masculine aspect. Thus, the elements in question – or at least the evil one – are within man as well. The battle here Abulafia also describes as one between Satan and God with respect to our blessings, and he reports that the Hebrew letters are the battle weapons, while the names themselves war with one another. Though a battle between names would suggest a conflict in the divine realm, once more this conflict would appear also to be one that occurs during the practice of letter permutation, and, therefore, the head and tail of the Teli are also at war within

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<sup>98</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 28a-b; printed edition, pp. 57-58.

the mystic. The contradiction between the idea that these two elements constitute a harmonious whole and that they are continually at war with one another is a pointed one in terms of what it demonstrates about Abulafia's own psyche: The contention is not merely one between mortal enemies. Rather, it is between this very idea and its opposite, that there should be no contention at all. This captures the essence of Abulafia's struggle with Christianity.

### **YH and VH: "Flesh and Blood"**

The figure on the throne in Ezekiel's vision and its relationship to the Teli is interpreted by Abulafia in another way that bears directly on our analysis of his conflicted attitude toward Jesus and Christianity. In a discussion in *'Imrei Shefer* based upon these themes,<sup>99</sup> we find a provocative point of intersection with the same interest in incarnationism which we had seen Abulafia manifest earlier. Abulafia first announces that he will reveal "the secret of the division of the name into its two parts, 'eḥad eḥad [one one],' which are YH times YH and also VH times VH in the two forms." *Eḥad* has a numerical value of thirteen, so multiplication by two yields twenty-six, the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton. This mode of halving the Tetragrammaton still maintains the notion of unity which Abulafia views as indispensable to the avoidance of heresy. The squaring of YH and of VH, yields the

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<sup>99</sup> *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 71a-b; MS Munich-BS 40 fols. 240a, 241b; printed edition, p. 77.

numerical values for the “constellation Libra” and the “constellation Aries,” respectively, as we have seen before, and Abulafia is clear as this passage proceeds that the proper attributions are as we first rendered them above. But Abulafia will recommend a different procedure as well in this instance. He writes,

But the whole revolution of the first will be two hundred and twenty-five, and it will be, according to its number, that its length, its width and its depth are equal. And that of the second will be one hundred and twenty-one, and it will be according to its number that its length, its width and its depth are equal.

We find that Abulafia regards the squaring of each half of the Tetragrammaton as the multiplying of that half’s length by its width. Now he will advocate multiplying these by their depth as well, that is, cubing each half of the name. He conceives of each half of the name in three dimensional terms. He continues,

And if you wish to know the name, “pronounce” His name “thusly”, because it is “His name.” As well, it is His essence, in the manner of *yod gimel* with *yod gimel*; there is the name twenty-six. And it is two hundred and six, whose secret is “His essence,” and the two of them are born from them “flesh and blood.” Also, “His essence is the source,” and it is the “created will,” and it is the essence of His will.

The words “pronounce” and “thusly” numerically total one hundred and twenty-one and two hundred and twenty-five, so Abulafia maintains the thread of his

prior discussion. Further, these two, added together, yield the value for the phrase “His name.”<sup>100</sup> The letters *yod* and *gimel* have a numerical total of thirteen, so here too Abulafia proceeds along the lines delineated earlier with respect to the word *’eḥad*. Spelling out the letters *yod* and *gimel*, however, yields a total of one hundred and three, which, when repeated after the fashion of the earlier “one one,” gives the numerical value for the phrase “His essence.” Thus, the two halves of the name may be manipulated to yield two conceptually equivalent expressions, “His name” and “His essence.” In this lies the precise point that Abulafia seeks to make: God’s name is His essence. As Wolfson has observed, articulations of this kind are marked deviations from Maimonidean modes of thought, although Abulafia will at other times uphold the position that God is beyond such attributions. In this passage, however, God’s own essence finds embodiment in His name, and thus the divine essence is imbued with an accessibility inconceivable from the apophatic perspective of Maimonides.<sup>101</sup> Abulafia will articulate his own perspective yet more clearly as we proceed.

This rendering accessible of God’s essence has important ramifications when viewed against the backdrop of a Christian cultural milieu, where, of course, Jesus stands as the divine essence manifest in the flesh. Abulafia’s phrase, “the two of them are born from them,” seems to refer to the two parts of the name, which are “born” from “His name,” which is “His essence.” So, we find that the divine essence,

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<sup>100</sup> See also, *ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 64a; printed edition, p. 58.

<sup>101</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 197.



embodied in the name, gives birth to these two components.<sup>102</sup> The latter, we observed, were conceived of in three dimensions, and thus as bodies in their own right.<sup>103</sup> If the expression of their physical birth needed further emphasis, Abulafia supplies it, stating that they become “flesh and blood,” a phrase whose total is equal to that of the two phrases “His name” and “His essence.” This excerpt from Abulafia’s discussion concludes with the restatement that these two physically embodied manifestations of the divine name - which are, we have seen, the head and tail of the Teli - stem from God’s essence: The expression “His essence is the source” is numerically equivalent to “flesh and blood.” The word “source,” in turn, is equal to the words “created” and “will,” such that it is patently clear that the divine will that begets these two manifest entities YH and VH stems from His essence.

To this point we may recognize that Abulafia understands the Teli as the “word made flesh,”<sup>104</sup> to borrow a phrase from Abulafia’s wider Christian context.

For Abulafia, the essence-embodying word is, of course, God’s name. And indeed,

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<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, Abulafia notes elsewhere that the seed (semen) which gives rise to individual corporeality, is spherical in form. Thus its length, width and height are all equal. *’Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 69b; printed edition, p. 70. Regarding these three dimensions, Abulafia observes, in the current context, that they are all equal as well for the YH and the VH when they are cubed. Although in the present instance these two components of the name are themselves materialized, it is likely that Abulafia conceives of them along the lines of the agent of materialization, the spherical seed. This is particularly apparent in that, as Abulafia proceeds in his discussion of the seed, he likens its three dimensions to the three components of God’s name, “Ehye Asher Ehye,” as well as “YHVVH YHVVH YHVVH,” and “*Qadosh Qadosh Qadosh*.” He makes the same association as well with respect to the sefirotic triad of *Hokhmah, Binah, and Da’at*. Thus, all of these triads, the Tetragrammaton being most noteworthy for our current purposes, are linked directly to the notion of corporealization. Indeed, the very idea of a divine triad being linked to corporealization is, of course, once again evocative of Christian influence.

<sup>103</sup> Elsewhere, *ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 69b; printed edition, p. 70, Abulafia observes that every body’s corporeality is contingent upon these three dimensions.

<sup>104</sup> John 1:14

when Abulafia's formulation is summarized after the fashion of the New Testament, the following subsequent statement from Abulafia becomes all the more striking:

And I have already told you that the secret of two hundred and six is "His essence." If so, His essence is *Hokhmah*, and His essence is *Binah*. And thus His qualities are His essence. And also the secret of two hundred and six is "word." If so, His name announces to us the "word" *Hokhmah* and the "word" *Binah*, as is written in a hint (Dan. 1:20), "And in every word of *hokhmah* and every word of *binah*." And so too it is said (Ps. 33:6), "By the word of God the heavens were made." The first letters and the last letters total six hundred and thirteen. And their secret is "the second matter" YH [is] "my name (Ex. 3:15)" [and] three hundred and sixty-five, VH [is] "my remembrance (Ibid.)" [and] two hundred and forty-eight.

Abulafia had previously established in this same context that *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, the two paired *sefirot* from the right and left of the sefirotic array which figure prominently in Abulafia's conception of the upper triad of *sefirot*, as noted in Chapter Two, stood as the YH and VH, respectively, of the divine name.<sup>105</sup> Thus, he is able to identify them as "His essence," a phrase which has the same numerical value as the word "word." Thus, God's essence is the word, which is the name, which is born in the flesh in the form of its two parts, YH and VH. By parsing out

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<sup>105</sup> Abulafia assigns the phrase "this in this" to the YH and VH and then observes that the letters for "this," when spelled in full, have the same numerical value as both "*Hokhmah*" and "*Binah*." "This" multiplied by two has, as well, the same value as "sun and moon," which Abulafia regularly assigns to *Hochmah* and *Binah*, respectively. Referring to the word "in" in the phrase "this in this," Abulafia observes that its single letter, when spelled in full, has the same letters as the Hebrew word for "house." "House," Abulafia next observes, is numerically equivalent to the phrase "it is two," which is as well two hundred and six multiplied by two. The number two hundred and six, of course, Abulafia had already focused on with respect to the two halves of the Tetragrammaton and the phrase "His essence," and it is as well the same value as the word "word."

the verse from Psalms in such a manner as to derive a reference to the six hundred and thirteen commandments, Abulafia also is identifying the word, which is the name, with the Torah.<sup>106</sup> On the one hand, the Torah is itself comprised entirely of God's names, in Abulafia's estimation, following the lead of Nahmanides.<sup>107</sup> On the other, the Torah is, of course, the receptacle and embodiment of God's commandments. Further, the Torah was traditionally viewed in Jewish mystical circles as the physical embodiment of God's presence in the world.<sup>108</sup> The "secret" of the manifested name, in the form of the commandments, Abulafia informs us, is "the second matter," presumably a reference to matter in its final manifestation, since the "first matter" would likely be the hyle. Again the emphasis on physical materialization is noteworthy. Finally, Abulafia deftly links this "second matter" to the two components of the Tetragrammaton, as YH added to the phrase "my name" yields three hundred and sixty-five, the traditional number of negative commandments, while VH added to the phrase "my remembrance" yields two hundred and forty-eight, the number of positive commandments.

Ultimately Abulafia will play out the numerical consequences of ascribing three dimensions to the YH and the VH. The value of YH cubed yields the value of

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<sup>106</sup> See Chapter Two, nn. 107, 108.

<sup>107</sup> See Chapter One, n. 191.

<sup>108</sup> See Chapter Two, n. 107. As well, Idel observes Abulafia's equation of the Torah with the *Kavod*, God's terrestrial manifestation; Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 36. See also Wolfson, "The Mystical Significance of Torah Study," pp. 55, 63-68, for the same perspective among the German Pietists.

the word “*hashmal*,”<sup>109</sup> Abulafia observes. We have already identified the *hashmal* as the manifested Active Intellect and as Metatron. Its value is also *be-shalom*, writes Abulafia, which we may take as suggesting wholeness or, in the mystical context, reconstitution of the self in the divine likeness. This understanding of *be-shalom* is all the more appropriate in that Abulafia links the word not only with the YH but with those who partake of it; he adduces the passage “God will bless His people with peace.” We have noted that Metatron may stand as both the entirety of the bipartite Active Intellect and as its positive half. In this may reside the significance, in fact, of Abulafia’s aforementioned observation that the YH spelled in full yields the numerical value of the whole Tetragrammaton, twenty-six.<sup>110</sup> Thus, the *hashmal* is embodied in the YH, in this instance, as the goal of mystical attainment. From the value of VH cubed Abulafia derives the word for “garb.”<sup>111</sup> Garbing in the mystical context refers, once again, to the rendering as perceptible or corporealized the essence of God.<sup>112</sup> And indeed, Abulafia notes as well the numerical equivalence of *hashmal* with *malbush*, or “garment.” We have seen that a notion of Jesus pervades the conceptualization of the satanic tail of the Teli, or the VH which is Aries; now

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<sup>109</sup> Actually, it yields three thousand three hundred and seventy-five, which Abulafia, in an operation not unusual in his writings, converts into three hundred and seventy-eight by adding the thousands-place digit to the ones-place digit.

<sup>110</sup> See also, *Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 64a; printed edition, p. 57.

<sup>111</sup> By the same method as that mentioned above, one thousand three hundred and thirty-one becomes three hundred and thirty-two.

<sup>112</sup> Baer notes the kabbalistic tendency to discuss God’s being as “garbed” with His names, a tendency which runs parallel with Christian notions of divine corporealization; “The Kabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos,” p. 287. Wolfson discusses Joseph Gikatilla’s notion of God’s disrobing before the mystic as His cognomens are removed to reveal the Tetragrammaton; “Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath,” p. 173.

the very birth in the flesh of the full name in each of its two parts, we see as well, owes much to Christian thought.

Nevertheless, there is as well a countercurrent present in the passage. For when we note that Abulafia enlists the word *be-shalom* to refer to the mystic's coming into the likeness of the *hashmal* or of the YH cubed, we must observe that Abulafia is here tracing the reverse course to what had initially preoccupied him. No longer is he describing the process by which the divine assumes a lower form, the corporealized name. Now he is describing this process as the means by which the mystic is afforded the opportunity to become transubstantiated as the divine name, to become flesh made word. Wolfson has observed the kabbalistic strain of thought in which flesh is transubstantiated as word, or as Torah, the inverse of the Christian modality in which the Logos is corporealized.<sup>113</sup> With respect to kabbalah, this process is troped in terms of the inscribing of the divine name upon the body through circumcision, resulting in its transubstantiation. Despite this significance to circumcision, it is nevertheless the task of the mystic to actualize this transubstantiation in practice. Thus, in the passage that we have examined, we find the striking influence of Christian incarnationism upon Abulafia, one accompanied nevertheless by a Jewish mystical polemical refutation of this doctrine.<sup>114</sup> I would suggest that we find another instance wherein Abulafia's conflictedness with respect

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<sup>113</sup> *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 191. Nevertheless, Wolfson observes this same reverse modality to be present as well in Christian thought; *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>114</sup> Wolfson has analyzed a bahiric refutation of Christian messianic incarnationism; *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 145-152.

to the Christian model is manifest. Yet, something more is suggested as well:

Wolfson observes that the mystical conception transcends the notion of the coincidence of opposites, flesh versus word, yielding an “interflesh.”<sup>115</sup> Abulafia’s having presented us with what are actually *opposed* coinciding opposites should suggest to us this rising above the mere overcoming of dichotomy. And Abulafia’s cognizance of this transcendent perspective could reside as well in his sense that the flirtation with the forbidden is a mystical mandate.

### **Jesus and Shaddai as Serpent**

We have touched upon several interrelated features in Abulafia’s conceptualization of Jesus, all of which seem to center around Abulafia’s perspective on sorcery and its relationship to the Active Intellect. I believe it will be worthwhile to explore this theme in greater detail. Immediately adjacent to the discussion in *’Imrei Shefer* regarding the YH and VH and their corporealization, we find an analysis of the phrase “...that it was good” from the first chapter of Genesis.<sup>116</sup> Abulafia observes that the two Hebrew words that make up this phrase may be related, via a letter permutation (כִּי טוֹב becomes כֹּה יט) to the numerical values of the solar and lunar cycles, twenty-eight and nineteen years, respectively.<sup>117</sup> Here we may discern another allusion to the sefirot *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, and hence to the YH and

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<sup>115</sup> *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 193.

<sup>116</sup> *’Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 71a; printed edition, p. 79.

<sup>117</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 213-214 for a related passage.

VH. Abulafia uses the method of letter exchange called *'atbash* to derive the word “למנפש,” whose numerical value, five hundred, in turn, is equivalent to what Abulafia refers to as the secret of the words “...that it was good.” This secret is “sorcerial effluxes,” each of these words equaling five hundred. These effluxes Abulafia refers to as sealed under the hidden letters of the name Shaddai,<sup>118</sup> whose sum is indeed equal to each of the two words in the phrase “sorcerial effluxes.” As well, Abulafia points out, these hidden letters of the name Shaddai are numerically equivalent to the phrase “Be fruitful and multiply.”

What Abulafia conveys here is that the efflux linked to the corporealized Active Intellect or Teli contains a hidden element to be associated with sorcery. This element, Abulafia relates, represents the concealed aspect of the name Shaddai. The latter was long conceived of in Jewish midrashic tradition as the name to be linked with circumcision, and thus, in esoteric circles, it was regarded as the phallic potency.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, Shaddai, or the *sefira* that it represents, *Yesod*, is regarded as key to the erotic union of the mystic with the divine, a union frequently linked with the phallus' actualization in procreation. For Abulafia, as we observed in Chapter Two, the procreative capacity of Shaddai, as the Active Intellect, is a recurring theme, from which again we may understand the nature of the threat, discussed earlier, posed by Lilith, the “sorceress.” Abulafia's conception of the mystic as ontologically

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<sup>118</sup> That is, the letters that appear when each letter of Shaddai is spelled out, excluding the first letter of each spelled out letter.

<sup>119</sup> See Chapter Two, n. 140.

female in relation to the essential masculinity of the divine is consistent with the phallic perspective on Shaddai.

It is clear, then, why Abulafia engages in the numerical association of the phrase “Be fruitful and multiply” with Shaddai. What is striking here is that Abulafia discusses this capacity of Shaddai in direct connection with its sorcerial faculty. In other words, that aspect of Shaddai responsible for fecundity and, thus, mystical consummation, is, in fact, that half of it which harbors sorcery, that which, to reiterate, had been linked to Lilith earlier. This is its lower, material component, as is logical, but which will become clearer as we proceed. Earlier we had suggested that Abulafia’s recourse to the symbol of Moses’ staff with respect to the Teli evoked the notion of his battling the Egyptian sorcerers, and we noted as well the link of Jesus to Egypt and, traditionally, to sorcery.<sup>120</sup> Thus, we may understand that the sorcery to be linked to the name Shaddai in the current passage, which Abulafia binds intimately to the notion of procreation, may be understood as conceptually affiliated with Jesus, whom we have already seen explicitly linked to the lower aspect of the Tetragrammaton, its VH. What is noteworthy is that, in the current context, the function occupied by the element linked to Jesus actualizes the fundamental role, troped in terms of corporealization – that is, procreation – assigned to Shaddai.

A related discussion of Shaddai, the phrase “Be fruitful and multiply,” and sorcery bears examination here with respect to what it may also reveal regarding

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<sup>120</sup> In this regard, Abulafia conceived of the Exodus from Egypt as the vanquishing of the imaginative faculty. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 69.



Abulafia's interest in engaging with Christian notions of Jesus. In *Maṭteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, referring to the name Shaddai as harboring the secret of the phrase, "Be fruitful and multiply," Abulafia segues into a discussion of the secret of the levirate marriage.<sup>121</sup> He refers first to Boaz and Ruth (although the redemption in this narrative is not, strictly speaking, in fact an example of levirate marriage). Abulafia seems to be most interested in both the notion of redemption in this story and in the progeny that results, which will lead ultimately to the messianic figure of David. With respect to levirate marriage itself, Abulafia perceives in the phrase, regarding a widow's brother-in-law (Deut. 25:10), "The house of him whose shoe was loosened," an encrypted reference to the Teli. Abulafia rearranges the letters of this phrase to read "The shoe is outside [*ḥuṣ*] of the house," such that another passage is recalled (Deut. 25:5), "...the wife of the dead shall not go out [*ha-ḥuṣah*] to a stranger." Abulafia next reconfigures the earlier phrase "The house of him whose shoe was loosened" to read "Outside [*ba-ḥuṣ*] answer the Teli."<sup>122</sup>

Regarding the child of levirate marriage, the phrase (Deut. 25:6) "...[the firstborn] who she bears will be named [after the deceased brother]..." is next the subject of Abulafia's numerical analysis, and the theme of the Teli is prevalent in the string of *gematriyot* that ensues. "The head of the Teli is above," "the Teli is the Prince of the World," "the world is the Prince of the Teli," and "upon the name of the Teli" are some of the results of Abulafia's consideration of the child who is the

<sup>121</sup> *Maṭteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 77a-b; printed edition, p. 94.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 77b-78a; printed edition, pp. 94-95.

fruit of levirate marriage. The brother who has died, Abulafia next demonstrates through a *gematria*, is himself the Teli, who, Abulafia suggests, is given life anew through the remarriage and birth of a child: “His brother who died, the second revives the dead. That is, the second who revives the first who died in procreating ‘who the Teli preceded,’ [from the phrase] (Deut. 25:6) ‘...[the firstborn] who she bears will be named [after the deceased brother]...’” Discussing the essential unity of the two brothers in levirate marriage,<sup>123</sup> Abulafia then discusses Deut. 25:11. The latter verse refers to a woman who defends her husband by seizing his assailant – his “brother,” insofar as they are both Israelites, as Abulafia reads the passage – by the genitals, *bi-mevushav*. This word for genitals Abulafia draws into a numerical equivalence with each word of the phrase “messiah serpent in his names.”<sup>124</sup>

On the face of it, there is no obvious reason for Abulafia to be as intent as he is on linking the motif of the Teli with levirate marriage, so we must examine the passage more deeply. It is Abulafia’s final assertion here that is helpful. He suggests that “serpent” is one of the names for the messiah. Although he mentions only the Teli and no serpent at all to that point, we have already seen that the two are synonymous for Abulafia. This serpent, in Abulafia’s estimation in several other contexts, is both the tempter of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the brazen

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<sup>123</sup> Abulafia first writes, “...the deceased, the brother, is himself the Teli, because he is his brother and his son and know that they are the branch and the fruit joined together with the root.” Following this, Abulafia refers to Deut. 25:5 and 25:11, which refer to “brothers together” and “men together, a man and his brother.” Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 78a; printed edition, p. 96.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 78a-b; printed edition, pp. 95-96.

serpent of Exodus.<sup>125</sup> It is to the latter conception of the serpent to which we must turn to understand Abulafia's discussion.

We have already seen Jesus implicitly linked by Abulafia with the procreative function of Shaddai, and this provides us with a valuable clue in deciphering Abulafia's intent in the current context of levirate marriage, where the same phrase, "Be fruitful and multiply," is again seen to refer to Shaddai. Abulafia's identification of the messiah with the serpent is precisely what we find with respect to Jesus in the Gospel of John (3:13-15): "And no one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John intends that the upright brazen serpent in the desert be seen as a prefiguration of Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>126</sup>

The crux of the matter is that, as in the verses from John, the motif of the serpent for Abulafia is entwined about notions of messiahhood and resurrection. The redemption of the deceased brother through the son born to the surviving brother Abulafia discusses in messianic terms. Abulafia plays upon the last word of Ruth (4:8), "So when the redeemer said to Boaz, 'Acquire for yourself,' he drew off his

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<sup>125</sup> See, *ibid.*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 25b; printed edition, p. 8; *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, MS Milan-BA 53, fol. 179a; printed edition, p. 85.

<sup>126</sup> See, Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 130.

shoe.” Abulafia derives the phrase “locked garden”<sup>127</sup> from the words “in the shoe of the brother-in-law.” We may understand the reference to the garden here as representing the intersection of the notions of mystical practice, as the entering of the Garden of Eden, and Abulafia’s own mystical achievements, the latter entailing a messianic dimension. The messianic subtext to Abulafia’s discourse is rendered explicit at the end of the passage, but it is already suggested in Abulafia’s reference to Boaz’ davidic line. So too, as in the verses from John, the motif of the brazen serpent for Abulafia is accompanied by the notion of resurrection; Abulafia explicitly views the survival of the deceased brother’s name in the brother’s son’s name as a “revival” of the deceased brother, as we have seen.

As I have suggested, though there is no specific reference to Jesus or the brazen serpent in this passage, it is difficult to consider Abulafia’s desire to link levirate marriage with the Teli, in fact identifying the deceased brother as the Teli or serpent, without taking account of the linkage by Christians of Jesus with the brazen serpent. The confluence of messiahhood with resurrection and the serpent in Abulafia’s text runs remarkably parallel with the Christian themes discussed. In view of this connection, it is worthwhile to examine Abulafia’s first observation with respect to Shaddai and the injunction to “Be fruitful and multiply.” He notes that by multiplying the letter *shin* (equalling three hundred) of Shaddai by its remaining letters, *yod* and *dalet* (equalling fourteen), the total of forty-two hundred is reached.

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<sup>127</sup> Song of Songs (4:12).

“Their sign,” he writes, “is *dar*.” *Dar* actually has a sum of two hundred and four, so Abulafia seems to be suggesting that the positions of the digits be altered, and that one zero be eliminated, in order to derive this word.

*Dar* is the precious stone referred to in the *Bahir*,<sup>128</sup> that aspect of the divine indwelling in the lower world, which, the *Bahir* reads, contains the commandments. As such, it, for Abulafia, is the Active Intellect and, particularly, its materialized aspect as the Torah in the terrestrial realm.<sup>129</sup> This stone is seen by the bahiric authors to ascend in the redemptive future to the place of its partner, the stone *Soheret*. *Dar* is, further, ultimately linked in the bahiric passage to Jacob. To this stone, *Dar*, the bahiric authors applied Psalm 118:22, “The stone that has been rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”<sup>130</sup> What is striking about this decision on the part of the bahiric authorship to apply this particular Psalm to *Dar* is the remarkable persistence with which it is cited in the New Testament, as against the relative disinterest with which it was treated in prior Jewish exegetical literature. In the New Testament, as well as in the writings of the early Church fathers, the

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<sup>128</sup> *Bahir*, § 131, 61, 133.

<sup>129</sup> See above, nn. 12, 108.

<sup>130</sup> It should be noted as well here that, in the *Bahir*, the two stones *Soheret* and *Dar* are linked implicitly with the two cantillation signs *zarqa*’ and *segulta*. To both of these pairs are assigned Psalm 118:22 and Genesis 49:24, “From there is the shepherd, the stone of Israel.” *Bahir*, § 61, 131, 133. What is significant about this is that a mystical tradition centered around the *zarqa*’ as the uroburus, the cosmological serpent devouring its own tail. See Wolfson, “Biblical Accentuation,” II, pp. 5-6. Abulafia certainly effects a linkage in many of his discussions between the Teli and the uroburus, so from this it may also be apparent why he was attracted to the idea of linking the Teli with the bahiric stone *dar*.

psalm's stone is taken time and again to refer to Jesus.<sup>131</sup> Abulafia's decision to refer to the bahiric stone *Dar* – indeed, his somewhat tortured struggle to do so numerically – is consistent with what we have seen as far as his predilections with respect to the hidden aspect of the Active Intellect. The latter he understands, in parallel with the bahiric notions of *Dar*, both as the aspect of the divinity concretized in the lower world and as Jacob, whom he references here as Metatron.<sup>132</sup> And, of course, consistent with what we have noted regarding the christological parallel with Abulafia's interest in levirate marriage and its connection to the Teli, Abulafia's attraction to the bahiric motif of *Dar*, fraught as it is with echoes of its own christological parallels, is worthy of note. This hidden aspect of the Active Intellect seems to emerge most frequently for Abulafia when the Active Intellect is troped as the Teli. Then, the parallels with respect to Christian notions of Jesus appear to have been purposefully drawn by Abulafia.

Earlier we noted how Abulafia, in a passage from *'Imrei Shefer*, had put forth the idea of the word incarnate, made “flesh and blood” as the name in the form of the YH and the VH; these he had as well drawn into a close connection with the Teli. In the current passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, one final, related observation should be made. Immediately after his mention of the stone *Dar*, Abulafia writes, “And thus

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<sup>131</sup> See, for instance, Matt. 21:42, Acts 4:11, Mk. 12:10-11, 1Pet. 2:4, 7.

<sup>132</sup> See Wolfson, “The Image of Jacob.” In *'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia equates Jacob with the Teli. The name Ya‘aqov by a letter transposition becomes ‘aqavi, indicating the tail of the Teli, while the letters of Jacob's other appellation, Yisra‘el, may be transposed to spell l'ro 'shi, indicating the head of the Teli. MS Vatican-BA ebr. 233, fol. 98a; printed edition, p. 94.

‘Shaddai speaks,’ and its secret is ‘lofty Gabriel;’<sup>133</sup> the power of Shaddai encompasses the ‘image of God;’ it comprises the level of all speaking creatures.” Abulafia here stresses the verbal component of Shaddai. This is fitting in terms of Shaddai’s status as the locus for the *prima materia*, the letters. In this respect, the “word” from the earlier passage from *’Imrei Shefer* should be understood in like terms. Its constituent parts, the letters, recall demiurgic notions of the logos.<sup>134</sup> This is all the more true in that the Teli recalls the uroburus, itself bearing traditional demiurgic associations. As we have seen, the notion of Jesus as the incarnate Word fits comfortably within such conceptions.

Abulafia’s discussion in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot* of levirate marriage is certainly an intriguing one with respect to its christological overtones. Some of the same motifs found therein are recast by Abulafia elsewhere in the same treatise. We read,<sup>135</sup>

And because God wished to announce to us the nature of blood, He announced first the secret of the *qorban* [sacrifice] in Leviticus. And He announced to us the secret of the altar and its nature and the secret of the sacrifice and its truth and the secret of the sacrificed and its root and the secret of that which is offered and its source. And these are four connected matters and they are the altar which is the place at which the spilling of blood of the *qorban* is always performed, because it is a place fixed and prepared for this. And the blood that is

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<sup>133</sup> Idel observes Abulafia’s equation of Gabriel with the Active Intellect in *Ḥayyei ha-’Olam ha-Ba’*; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 33.

<sup>134</sup> Idel points to a related passage in *Sheva’ Netivot ha-Torah*, in which the efflux from the Active Intellect is referred to as the “Word.” Idel, “Abulafia’s Secrets of the Guide,” p. 305.

<sup>135</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 54b-55a; printed edition, p. 57.

spilled upon the outer altar that is prepared for sacrifice and placed at the opening of the tent of meeting is called the blood of the ‘*olah*. And it [“blood of the ‘*olah*”] is [numerically equivalent to] “tent of meeting” by permutation and its name is the copper [*nehoshet*; the same word may also mean “brass”] altar. And its secret is understood from the name of the serpent who is called brazen [*nehoshet*] serpent. And the secret of “tabernacle” is “pulled”; also it is understood from “*Shekhinah*” and from “bite,” because the serpent bites. And the secret of the copper altar is “thought of the cantor” and in it are “times of repentance” “as *Binah* as repentance [or, return]” “as the rainbow” “as the root” “from repentance [is] *Binah*” “from *Binah* [is] repentance.” And thus the copper altar’s nature is the serpent and it is the place wherein is revealed how Satan will die. Because this is the aim of the intention and he who spills there his blood “kills his Satan [accuser],” and if not, “Satan kills him.”

In his consideration of this same passage,<sup>136</sup> Wolfson notes that the spilling of the blood on this altar represents the defeat of “the imagination or the bodily senses,” symbolized by Satan or the serpent. Wolfson cites the passage as he makes the point that, for Abulafia, as for a number of his predecessors, ritual sacrifice receives a mystical recasting. “In the absence of the Temple, the sacrificial cult is replaced by mystical knowledge of the name,” writes Wolfson,<sup>137</sup> regarding Abulafia’s particular perspective, and, “Both sacrifice and prayer function typologically as rituals of contemplative ascent, which is, after all, the goal of letter-combination and permutation of the divine names.”<sup>138</sup> The mention, not just of sacrifice here, but of prayer as well is significant for us in that Wolfson subsequently observes that, in the passage currently under consideration, this notion of prayer is implied by Abulafia’s

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<sup>136</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 222 n.132.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.



numerical equation of “thought of the cantor” with “the copper altar;”<sup>139</sup> here, prayer and sacrifice are drawn into an equivalence, so that both receive Abulafia’s mystical coloration.

We should note as well that Abulafia identifies the outer, copper altar with the brazen serpent. The serpent, Abulafia has observed elsewhere, both kills and revives. Yet, despite the thematic interrelation here of serpent and Satan, the two are not the same. The brazen serpent in the present context preserves its salutary dimension and is of service in the killing of Satan by the man who engages in the spilling of the blood of the sacrifice.

Satan’s death, as Wolfson observes, is here tantamount to mystical attainment; in this the references to a return to the *sefira Binah*, an ascent fraught with a messianic and redemptive significance,<sup>140</sup> are readily understandable, particularly in the light of Wolfson’s observation that, for Abulafia, the mystic’s own thoughts are seen to ascend in the form of the sacrifice.<sup>141</sup> As well, the death of Satan is expressed in terms of the experience of the individual mystic; the mystic’s sacrifice, his mystical operation, results in the death of “*his* Satan,” or, if it fails, in his own death. In this is encapsulated as well the sense of the danger that inheres in the mystical project.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 222 n.132.

<sup>140</sup> See, most recently, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 359-360, 364.

<sup>141</sup> Idem, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 221.

When discussing Abulafia's interest in the precious stone *Dar*, we had noted that the bahiric authors describe the stone's destiny, a redemptive ascent or return to its origin. For later interpreters, as we see explicitly in the above passage from Abulafia, the place of mystical return generally is the *sefirah Binah*. So we see a certain parallelism in the linkage of the notion of return, this bahiric stone and the Teli or serpent<sup>142</sup> in the earlier passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot* on the one hand, and the notion of return, sacrifice located at the outer copper altar and the brazen serpent, on the other. Of course we noted as well, in the former context, Abulafia's apparent interest in the Christian themes surrounding Jesus' identification with the brazen serpent and in the *Bahir*'s recourse to the christologically evocative Psalm 118:22. We may now follow upon an observation set out by Fossum. He observes that the author of the Gospel of John (the same text in which the motif of the brazen serpent was linked to Jesus) seeks to equate Jesus with the Temple's altar stone. At John 2:19, Jesus equates himself openly with the Temple. Later, at John 7:38, Jesus associates himself with salvic waters, a notion in keeping, Fossum observes,<sup>143</sup> with the tradition of such waters as flowing from the Temple, and, more particularly, from the altar stone.<sup>144</sup> Finally, at John 10:35, during the reconsecration ceremony of the

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<sup>142</sup> We had noted as well the link in the *Bahir* of the cantillation sign *zarqa*, interpreted as the uroburus or cosmological serpent in kabbalistic tradition, with the text's discussions of the stone *Dar* (or, more specifically, likely with *Dar*'s companion stone, *Soheret*).

<sup>143</sup> Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God*, p. 131,

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 131. The altar stone in this regard is taken as well to be the "foundation stone" which stops up the waters of the deep. The similarity of this motif with that of the "chief cornerstone" from Ps. 118:22 should be noted.

altar stone, Fossum observes that Jesus refers to himself as the reconsecrated one, implying his self-identification with the altar stone. Within this network of interrelated motifs we may now properly contextualize Abulafia's own interest in equating the brazen serpent with the altar stone.

I do believe that Abulafia was conscious of the interplay of these motifs. What he ultimately intends here will require some further attention; that he immediately moves from an identification of the outer altar with the brazen serpent to a discussion of satanic associations we may not read simply as a polemical gesture. For the outer altar, we must remember, assisted in the dispatching of Satan. Likewise, though the linkage made by Wolfson of Satan here with the imagination's role during mystical practice is consistent with what Abulafia has specifically observed regarding Jesus' sorcerous and idolatrous nature, the role of the imagination in mystical practice, to reiterate, is seen as indispensable by Abulafia. Continuing, Abulafia writes,

And thus the blood spilled on the brazen altar is the blood of "accusers [satans] of death." And indeed the golden altar, which is the inner altar, is not fit for spilling of blood, only for incense, and thus its place is before the ark of testimonies...And know that it [incense] is made from four kinds of spices, and their sign is "table," or, it is said, "for the serpent"...

Abulafia contrasts the sacrifices of the outer altar, which are blood offerings, to be linked to the battle against Satan, and those of the inner altar, which, he will

later go on to indicate, in their bloodlessness are to be seen as removed from the base sensory world. In the excerpt above, the inner altar may be placed before the ark only because its sacrifices are bloodless. The two aspects of the mystic's constitution and the nature of his bipartite operations are here expressed. Yet with respect to the inner altar Abulafia refers again to the serpent, this time in relation to the spiritualized, or, more fittingly, intellectual, incense. The four spices, which we may take as a counterpoint to the "four connected matters" mentioned at the outset of Abulafia's discussion of the outer altar, are seen here to yield an acrostic for the word "table," whose letters are rearranged to read, "for the serpent." Thus the serpent must be linked not only with the outer altar, where it figured so prominently, but with the inner one, where it still receives a mention, as well. We may understand this as yet another expression of the bifold nature of the serpent, embodying head and tail, messiah and Jesus, God and Satan. Yet as we have indicated, the lesser aspect of the Teli, to be linked with the shedding of blood, still maintains a positive valence. This lesser aspect of the Teli is linked with Satan only insofar as he is engaged as the mystic's opponent in relation to the outer altar. The references to the serpent in its two aspects, with respect to the inner and outer altars, are *both* salutary, and in this Abulafia's ambivalence toward the sorcerous aspect of the Active Intellect is once more apparent. I do not intend to imply that Jesus, in his parallel identification as the altar and the brazen serpent, is looked upon with favor by Abulafia. The opposite is certainly true. But I do believe that the positive implications seen here are a

noteworthy outcome of Abulafia's thought, one reflecting Abulafia's profound psychological ambivalence toward Christianity.

By extension, this ambivalence finds expression as well in Abulafia's parallel discussion of blood. We have seen that the copper altar is relegated to a position outside of the tent of meeting because blood is spilled upon it. Thus, it is profane by comparison to the incense of the inner altar. Nevertheless, Abulafia immediately indicates the spiritual nature of blood, noting Deuteronomy (12:23), "...the blood is the soul..." It is this aspect of blood, Abulafia indicates, that makes it an essential part of offerings of atonement, following Leviticus (17:11). Referring to the latter passage and its requirement to set aside blood, while flesh may be eaten, Abulafia writes,

Behold the wonders of Torah and how it reveals our nature with respect to the matter near to the animal and with respect to the form of the matter that is near to that which is a power from the powers of demons. And one must atone in them known atonements in order that no harm to the intellective soul will come by means of them because of their being hindrances to the power of apprehending the Holy One, blessed be He and His attributes and His actions through His names within which all was created and written and sealed. Thus, permitted is the flesh and the blood is forbidden...this announces in its words the power and nature of flesh and the power and nature of blood...

Abulafia has made earlier mention of the Yom Kippur offering to the demon Azazel, and here he clearly suggests that offerings of this type to demons, or their mystical analogs, protect the intellective soul during mystical practice directed

toward both the *sefirot* and the names. The eating of flesh as against the prohibition of drinking blood appears to be connected here, respectively, with base matter and with its form. The latter, nevertheless, is of a demonic nature. It is a “power,” in which respect it appears to be of a higher order than the utterly material flesh in which it inheres, after the fashion of blood which is of the soul, but it is demonic, after the fashion of the blood which is offered to propitiate demons. Overall, Abulafia’s complicated attitude toward blood is apparent. It is inferior to the intellectual incense. It is of the soul. And it is, or may be, demonic. As well, it is conceived of as part of a mystical analog to an idolatrous practice, the blood sacrifice to demons, one advocated by Abulafia but proscribed in one of the very passages (Lev. 17:7) which he adduces.<sup>145</sup> In the midst, then, of Abulafia’s ambivalent appraisal of the nature of blood, we find once more a recurrence of the assigning of an important place in mystical practice to that which partakes of the idolatrous.

Some final thoughts on the nature of sacrifice and its relatedness to notions of Jesus for Abulafia are in order here. We have noted Abulafia’s interest in conceiving of the *sefirot* in anthropocentric terms,<sup>146</sup> as against the theocentric thrust of the theosophical kabbalah. Wolfson nevertheless preserves Abulafia’s perspective on the *sefirot* as components of the divine realm, as in the latter’s discussion of ritual sacrifice. And indeed, Abulafia is explicit regarding both dimensions of the *sefirot* in

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<sup>145</sup> The scriptural sacrifice to Azazel was not a blood sacrifice. Such sacrifices to demons were expressly forbidden.

<sup>146</sup> See, for instance, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 123, 145.

a passage that Wolfson adduces from *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*.<sup>147</sup> In this context, Abulafia explains that redemption of the soul, as against the body's exile, is a consequence of the mystical equivalent of the *qorban*.

The case that Abulafia puts forth for inspection in this regard is that of Abraham, whose soul was redeemed and who came into possession of a covenant with God, all through the “drawing near [*leqarev*, a play on the similarity of this word to *qorban*, which share the same root consonants] of the divine potencies to the human potencies.”<sup>148</sup> This covenant was enacted through the change in Abraham's nature, the integration of the feminine element within him, that came through the addition of the letter *he* ' to his name. Abraham stands here as paradigmatic for the successful mystic, who realizes his covenant and is made whole through his “drawing near” to the divine. Naturally, then, the patriarch Abraham stands particularly for his namesake, Abulafia himself. This understanding of Abulafia's intent may be integrated with a remark from Wolfson:<sup>149</sup>

It is undeniably true, as Idel has already noted, that Abulafia has removed the bahiric expression [regarding the “wordplay of *qorban* and *leqarev*”] from its original theosophical framework and interpreted it as a metaphor for the act of cleaving to the divine...[However,] despite the obvious shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric perspective, there is still a significant claim being made about the nature of the divine powers.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>148</sup> See also, Ibid., p. 221. Here Wolfson presents a passage in which Abulafia equates thought with the sacrifice.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

Wolfson refers here to Abulafia's sense of a theurgical dimension to the sacrifice as accompanying its mystical one. One may be reminded here of the Christian conception of Jesus, not only as the altar stone, but as himself embodying and as standing as the replacement for Temple sacrifice.<sup>150</sup> That is, the ancient theocentric perspective on Temple sacrifice, where human participation extends only as far as the presentation of an offering that may ameliorate divine judgment, is supplied with a manifestly anthropocentric dimension in the figure of Jesus. In Abulafia's thinking, it is the mystic who "draws near" as the substitute for traditional ritual sacrifice.<sup>151</sup> More specifically, it is Abulafia himself, as "Abraham," who represents the transformation that we know to understand as a divinization. In his conception of the sacrifice, then, Jesus in this regard is the appropriate model for Abulafia. In this, Wolfson's insight that the sense of the *sefirot* as components of the divine realm in the sacrificial dynamic must be preserved is prescient; the mystic himself, and particularly Abulafia in his proto-Christological messianic self-

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<sup>150</sup> Paul is most explicit in this regard. See 1 Cor. 5:7: "...Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed." See also Eph. 5:2, where Jesus is described as "...an offering and sacrifice whose fragrance is pleasing to God." See also, Heb. 9:26, 13:11-12; in the latter example Jesus is equated directly with the sin offering made by the Temple high priest. For Jesus as a model for others in this regard, see Rom. 12:1: "...I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice..."

<sup>151</sup> Brody cites Azriel of Gerona's notion of the high priest's angelicization and ascension as a result of the sacrificial ritual; "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights," p. 150.



conception, is divinized and comes to a hypostatic participation of his own in the divine realm.<sup>152</sup>

### **Moses' Rod and Eve's Serpent: Mysticism and Sorcery**

At this point it is appropriate to return to two themes that we had temporarily put aside, these being the nature of the verbal element with respect to the Active Intellect and the Teli's representation in the guise of Moses' rod. In a passage from *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, Abulafia, referring to Numbers (20:7), concerning Moses' procuring water from a rock, writes, "...Because God, may He be blessed, sought to announce to Israel that in two forms it has the ability to alter specific natures, and they are with a blow with the rod and with speech with the tongue..."<sup>153</sup> Both of the modalities cited by Abulafia, the "blow with the rod" and speech, should remind us of our prior discussions of the Active Intellect, with respect to Moses' rod, as the Teli and as the verbal potency. The ability to "alter specific natures" recalls the wonder-working that Abulafia sees as the gift of the prophet and of the mystic.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Wolfson as well observes the transformation of the mystic into an angel. See, for instance, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 148. Fishbane notes that Ibn Ezra as well conceived of himself as the Yom Kippur sacrifice; *The Kiss of God*, p. 93. Another of the modes by which this hypostatic participation in the supernal sefirotic realm is discussed by Abulafia is within the aforementioned motif of the divinized figure of Jacob; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 128-129. See also, *ibid.*, pp. 146, 150.

<sup>153</sup> *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, MS Milan-BA 53, fol. 179a; printed edition, p. 84.

<sup>154</sup> Scholem notes Abulafia's view that the only truly efficacious magic is "spiritual and inward," that is, in keeping with Abulafia's kabbalah of names, and that the claims made by those who use the names with a different orientation are lies; *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 181. See also, *idem*, *Major Trends*, p. 145, where Abulafia's practice is termed a "magic of inwardness." This perspective is similar to the one observed earlier with respect to the manipulation of demonic names. Idel likewise

Since Abulafia thus likely has mystical practice in mind in his treatment of this passage, we would do well to observe that the vehicles for the achievement of the natural signs that Abulafia refers to are the rod and the tongue. These correspond well with the loci on the male body of the two circumcisions mentioned in *Sefer Yeşirah*. There, the text, referring to the circumcisions of the tongue and the phallus, suggests that they are the means by which the depths of the *sefirot* may be plumbed.<sup>155</sup> Although the reference to the tongue in Abulafia's treatment of the passage from Numbers is explicit, Abulafia refers only to Moses' "rod." However, shortly we will examine another passage, from *Maḥṣar ha-Tokhaḥot*, where this motif's phallic connotation is revealed more explicitly.<sup>156</sup> For the time being we may recall our earlier observation of the dangerous femininity embodied by Jesus and Sandalfon, the VH or satanic component of the Active Intellect. Moses' action in the passage from Numbers, as a symbol for the action of the masculine mystic, we would expect to signify the virile phallus, just as Shaddai, as the Active Intellect, Abulafia repeatedly links to the phrase "Be fruitful and multiply." In the current context, Abulafia does not elaborate upon the significance of the rod, but that he sees

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observes Abulafia's accordance, in *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, of the ability to "change any aspect of nature" to the highest level of prophecy; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 105. Idel notes Abulafia's indebtedness to the Midrash to Psalms, where wonder-working and the ability to resurrect the dead are seen as the gift accorded the one who is capable of placing the Torah in its proper order. This act is taken by Abulafia to refer to letter permutation, although, as Idel notes, Abulafia's specific interest in his adaptation of this notion is not in wider acts of magic but specifically in the resurrection of the dead. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 81. See also, Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer Temunah*, p. 177.

<sup>155</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah* 1:3, 4.

<sup>156</sup> *Maḥṣar ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 25b; printed edition, p. 8.

it as the serpent should be apparent from our prior discussions, and, as I say, it will be specifically illustrated presently.

Abulafia continues by tracing the course, through Numbers, of the story of the Israelites in the desert. Referring to the loss of faith in God of the Israelites, Abulafia writes,<sup>157</sup>

The verbal holiness, which is the root of faith for the holy people, was not sustained then by the will of God, and Moses and Aaron were the cause of the absence of this holiness, which is the cause of faith and the cause of this absence was the transgression of disobedience... And indeed after this comes the subject of Edom (Num. 20:14), hinting to its being the cause of all deception, and after it comes immediately the matter of Aaron's being gathered to his people (Num. 20:26) and the replacement of man [Aaron] by man [Eleazar], and Eleazar filled the place of his father Aaron. And also after their destruction of the Canaanites, again they returned to their disgrace in compassing the land of Edom (Num. 21:4).

Abulafia evidently sees the loss of "verbal holiness," given that a mystical interpretation to these verses has already been implied, as God's rendering inaccessible the Active Intellect as a result of Israel's loss of faith.<sup>158</sup> The conformity here to our prior discussion of the role of belief, for Abulafia, in the mystical hermeneutical practice is striking. There we had observed that the mystic depends upon his own certitude with respect to the propriety of his mystical activity; his

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<sup>157</sup> *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, MS Milan-BA 53, fol. 179a; printed edition, pp. 84-85.

<sup>158</sup> Idel observes the prominence in Abulafia's writings of the notion of divine speech coming to, or through, the mystic during the ecstatic experience; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 83-85. See Chapter Four, below, for some discussion of this issue.

interpretive faculty must afford him the assurance that he is not partaking of the demonic, and doubt betrays the possible presence of heresy. Thus, in Abulafia's mystical practice, "verbal holiness" – proper hermeneutical activity with respect to the letters of the alphabet during letter permutation – depended, we noted, on faith, and we sensed in the inherent danger in this project the threat posed by Christianity. In the current context this perception is reinforced, for Abulafia regards it as significant that the loss of faith of the Israelites is followed closely by a discussion of Edom. Abulafia writes that Edom is the "cause of all deception," and thus of Israel's loss of faith. Thus we may understand that it is Edom – that is, Christianity - that results in the "deception" that Abulafia mentions – discussed earlier in terms of obstructing demons – which delude the mystic and lead him from "verbal holiness" into heresy.

Referring to the Israelites' speaking out against God (Num. 21:5), Abulafia writes,

And thus the very wonderful secret was clarified and explained. And they sinned verbally, inverting the sin of Moses, because Moses sinned when he did not speak and they sinned when they spoke, and the serpent with Eve sinned verbally, and thus their punishment was from the serpent's bite.

Here we find that the earlier linkage of Moses' mystically efficacious "serpent" - his rod - with the potency embodied in speech has a sinister analog, that

of evil speech linked both with Eve's serpent and with the avenging serpents of Numbers (21:6). The notion that Eve's sin with the serpent was of a sexual nature renders the analogy all the more striking; Moses' serpent represents masculine virility, Eve's stands as emasculating sexual transgression. We noted earlier Lilith's appearance in Abulafia's discussion of the demonic knots of the tefillin. There, she, too, represented the demonic threat posed to the mystic's reconstituted masculinity. Insofar as Abulafia has just linked the loss of "verbal holiness," with Edom, we may note the recurrence here of the linkage of emasculation with Christianity, as a parallelism is now generated between Edom and Eve's serpent, as against the serpent/rod of Moses and his prophetic capabilities. Abulafia continues, referring to the salvation of the Israelites by means of the brazen serpent erected by Moses,

And it comes in a received doctrine that the serpent kills or the serpent gives life; when Israel looks above and raises their eyes to there they are healed. And thus it is known that he who looks above and sees the Teli, which is the brazen serpent according to the shared noun that is decreed, and it is known that its power is nothing other than the power of sorcery, and he recognizes his Creator, he is healed.

The two-fold aspect of the motif of the serpent Abulafia here addresses specifically. That he has had in mind the Teli is clarified as well. The latter, we have observed, stands as the Active Intellect, which Abulafia understands as well as God's Glory or as the *Shekinah*, from which we may derive a significant common link to earlier Hasidei Ashkenaz mystical practice. The German Pietists had propounded a

method of cleaving to the Glory in prayer by focusing their mental energies on God Himself.<sup>159</sup> Abulafia here addresses the healing power perceived as latent in the constellation the Teli, but he delineates a heretical threat there as well. For the Teli is sorcerous in nature, and, consistent with the notion that recourse to the power of the stars represents idolatry, Abulafia insists that the human being must recognize that the healing power of the Teli is conferred by God. When he does so, he is healed. Presumably, if he is deluded by the appearance of the Teli and does not recognize God's hand, he falls into sorcery. The links between Jesus and sorcery, on the one hand, and the Teli and the Active Intellect, on the other, have already been established. Our prior observation regarding Abulafia's parallelism with the model set forth in the Gospel of John, where Jesus represents the brazen serpent, is here also significant. From this network of interconnected notions it is apparent that Abulafia views the demonic and sorcerous threat imbedded in the nature of the Teli as encapsulated once more in the person of Jesus.

We see as well a profound and familiar ambivalence on Abulafia's part regarding the Teli. We had noted earlier that it is comprised of both head and tail, of both a divine and a demonic nature. Here we see that its potency, though genuine and salutary, is demonic. Thus, contending with the Teli in mystical practice is as perilous as grappling with the imagination, whose nature, in the current context, it seems to encapsulate. God's guiding hand behind the Teli would seem to indicate the

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<sup>159</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 246-263.

higher, intellectual component of the Active Intellect operative behind the necessary products of the imagination. The implications in terms of Jesus are striking indeed, as he comes again to stand as the heretical threat which is nonetheless indispensable for the mystic.

That the head and tail of the Teli should be understood as Moses' rod and Eve's serpent seems to be implied in a passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*.<sup>160</sup>

Referring to the constellation Teli and its movements with respect to the other stars, Abulafia writes,

And this is the place of the sorcery of the world, in the ingathering of the powers of the Teli in the wheel in the edifice of its moon and in [its] entrails and in the likeness of the form of the serpent in its revolving, and, in its placing of its collected tail, its body will proceed until the tail will return to the midpoint of the wheel of its body, and its head is the beginning of its wheel. And it is known that its movement is to its two sides, and thus sometimes it will stand straight in the likeness of a rod, and from this he who understands will understand the secret of Eve's serpent and the secret of the rod of Moses and the secret of the brazen serpent. And this secret is the joining of this aforementioned course according to the elements air, fire, water, earth; fire, air, earth, water... One must join this with this until this is acted upon by this and this is acted upon from this. Therefore it will be at the hands of the ministers which are the seven roving stars which are intermediaries between the constellations and the elements.

It appears that the "two sides" of the Teli are indicated by Eve's serpent and by Moses' "straight" rod. It is less clear where to assign the brazen serpent, although

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<sup>160</sup> *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 25b-26a; printed edition, p. 8, mentioned above, n. 114.

it appears that all three motifs are related to the joining of the four elements in two possible sequences. This action is based upon the movement of the Teli with respect to the other constellations, each of which is conceptually linked to one of the elements.<sup>161</sup> Once more the Teli is explicitly linked, in this passage, with sorcery. It is apparent that Abulafia perceives the relationship of the Teli to the other constellations and the elements to have a magical efficacy. We may suspect that the changing of “specific natures” by Moses (that is, supernatural acts), referred to in *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, effected through his rod and speech, bears a relationship with the “joining” of the Teli and constellations, or of the elements, in the two different possible ways suggested. Abulafia does not provide additional information here, but given that there are two sequences of the four elements, we may venture the conjecture that one of these indicates a pious operation, one demonic. This conjecture seems supported by Abulafia’s immediately preceding discussion of Michael and Gabriel as embodying the two inclinations in man, while as well representing water and fire, respectively.<sup>162</sup>

A perceptible tenuousness to the distinction that Abulafia seeks to draw between proper and improper occult practice is an important feature of this discussion. For, in this passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, both types of practice seem to be oriented toward the Teli and the other heavenly bodies; only the two

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<sup>161</sup> The seven migrating stars seem to have a significant role in this as well, though the specifics are not clear.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 23b-24a; printed edition, p. 5. Uriel then represents air, and Rafael earth. See, Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 27.



sequences presented of the four elements, conforming in some fashion to the two “sides” of the Teli - one masculine and erect, one feminine and flaccid - seem to distinguish one practice from another. We have noted Jesus’ link, in Abulafia’s mind, with sorcery, while observing, of course, Abulafia’s penchant for doctrines with close parallels to christological motifs. The tendency on Abulafia’s part, suggested above in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, toward astrological conceptions that seem to blur the boundary between condoned mysticism and condemned magic may be viewed as part and parcel of his apparent dilemma with respect to Christianity. This blurring of the boundary may be construed as either an actual attraction on Abulafia’s part to magic, which he nonetheless expressly views as forbidden, or as a practical difficulty in clearly distinguishing pure from impure operations. Observing the precariousness of Abulafia’s categorical differentiation of his own mystical practice, with its astrological overtones, illumines another aspect of Abulafia’s inner conflict with respect to sorcery, idolatry and Christianity, all of which emerge in his works as essentially synonymous.

A series of interrelated discussions in *’Imrei Shefer* sheds further light on this topic. In one,<sup>163</sup> Abulafia begins with a consideration of the phrase “two faces,” observing that God created man as an androgyne. *’Ish* and *’ishah*, Adam’s two components, Abulafia parses out to read “fire of *yod*” and “fire of *he’*,” such that the name YH may be derived. This name we have already observed to embody the

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<sup>163</sup> *’Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 66b; printed edition, p. 62.

messianic aspect of the Tetragrammaton, and here we find that it also embodies this androgynous aspect of Adam. Abulafia next observes that, just as the letter *he'* of the name YH (one half of the Tetragrammaton) is one half of the value of its other letter, *yod*, so too, in the phrase “two faces” the value of the word “faces” is one half of the value of the word “two,” and the letters *kaf* and *he'* of the word “*kohen*” are one half of the word’s other letter, *nun*. Thus, the priest, who in Abulafia’s understanding may represent the mystic himself, as we have seen, is of a two-fold nature, after the fashion of Adam, and he partakes of the messianic YH.

Abulafia next rearranges the letters of the words “two faces” to derive the word “soulful ones” [*nefshaniyim*]. This, in turn, is equal to the word for “sorcerous ones” when the latter is “in the power of thirty.” Abulafia continues, “And the sages of blessed memory said (Snh. 67b), ‘Why are they [sorcerers] called *kashafim*? Because they contradict the heavenly ministers [*pamaliya* ].’ And it is that the letter *lamed* [whose numerical value is thirty] testifies to it. Because ‘study’ [*limud*] is the aim of the creation of the child.”

The “two faces” of the priest, the mystic and, as well, the messiah, we see, partake of a spiritual or soulful and a demonic or sorcerous aspect. Abulafia provides two bases to distinguish these aspects in this passage. One is the talmudic testimony that sorcerers are disobedient to God’s angelic ministers. What Abulafia himself intends by this will bear further scrutiny. The other centers around the letter *lamed*. His implication is that when this *lamed* is added to sorcery, it is rendered soulful and

pious. The *lamed* stands for study, and so it is that study - certainly with regard to Torah - sets apart the mystic from the sorcerer. The distinction of mystic from sorcerer thus lies more in the nature of the former's understanding of the proper intentionality in occult practice than it does within some difference between the two types of practice themselves, as we had suspected from the fragile practical distinction drawn in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*. This observation lends itself to an integration with our earlier analysis of one of the purposes of Abulafia's hermeneutic, in which he engages in the midst of the mystical encounter. For this hermeneutic is at least in part given over to the goal of dispelling doubt that one's intentionality has strayed toward the transgressive. In Abulafia's writings this purified intentionality is troped as the vanquishing of one's demons.<sup>164</sup> The latter represent both idolatry in the form of a temptation posed by Christianity and self-doubt regarding the degree to which the mystic's intentionality is, in fact, purified. So, in the present context, the "study" that distinguishes the mystic from the sorcerer is appropriately understood as the hermeneutic with respect to Torah which banishes the specter of Jesus and Christianity, that is, of sorcery.

The first of the two bases mentioned to distinguish between pious mysticism and sorcery was disobedience toward the heavenly ministers on the part of the sorcerer. The precise meaning of this notion for Abulafia seems to be clarified in

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<sup>164</sup> Idel indicates that, with the motif of the "loosening of the knots," Abulafia implies as well the "removal of doubts," or the overcoming of the imagination; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 137.

another passage from *'Imrei Shefer*, where he discusses the angelic cadre, now referring to them as “princes,” seemingly in connection with the *sefirot*. Writes Abulafia,<sup>165</sup>

...And all tens, the intention in all of them, derived from the Torah, is to announce to us that He, may He be blessed, is the cause of all causes, in every respect, and from every corner....And indeed, the one thousand bodies of the men of the host, they are one hundred tens, which are in their essence ten one hundreds. And if so, there is for all of them a high prince over them. And to each one hundred of them, there is a prince beneath. Thus ten princes, one high, and nine beneath him. And to each fifty of them, a prince below rules one hundred, thus twenty princes, one prince and nineteen beneath him. And to each ten of them, a prince below rules fifty. Thus one hundred princes, one prince and ninety-nine beneath him. And to each one thousand, one prince of hosts, and he is called by the name Metatron, Prince of the Countenance. And all the princes mentioned are beneath him. And the prince of the thousand and fifty, his name is Sandalfon, Prince of the Backsides [*sar ha-'ahorim*].

Abulafia implicitly links these angelic hosts to the *sefirot*; this is particularly apparent with respect to the division of the set of ten higher princes into nine with one above them. The *sefirot*, which Abulafia knows as the separate intellects of the Aristotelian cosmology, are configured similarly; of the ten separate intellects, the Active Intellect enjoys a higher status. The latter stands as Metatron for Abulafia, from which we may understand his status at the head of this angelic host. Likewise Sandalfon's appearance here, as the other aspect of the Active Intellect, is

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<sup>165</sup> *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 59a-b; MS Munich-BS 40 fol. 231b; printed edition, pp. 42-43.

understandable, although the precise configuration of the angelic host is elusive. Abulafia's Aristotelian cosmology is tripartite, composed of the world of the separate intellects, which he also identifies as the world of the *sefirot*, the world of the heavenly bodies, and the sub-lunar world.<sup>166</sup> In the Aristotelian model, the separate intellects are the angelic intelligences guiding the movements of the heavenly bodies.<sup>167</sup> Insofar as, in this discussion of Abulafia's, such beings appear to be linked to the *sefirot*, they may be seen to serve to effect the union between the intellectual and the celestial worlds. Abulafia continues,

And this secret is "sowing of seed." And this secret is, "intercourse." And he who recognizes that the secrets of these princes' leading of all of the worlds, [is] from the mouth of the leadership of the divine attributes, he alone will grasp the matters of the divine intentions mentioned, and he alone may prophesy following the preparation...

The two secrets alluded to are as follows: The numerical value of "Metatron, Prince of the Countenance," is equal to that of "sowing of seed," while the numerical value of "Sandalfon, Prince of the Backsides," is equal to that of "intercourse." We have already seen, in the discussion of levirate marriage, the Active Intellect, as Shaddai, in connection with the phrase "Be fruitful and multiply," identified by Abulafia with the Teli. The procreative dimension, discussed in the current context, of Metatron and Sandalfon, I would argue here refers to their union with each other

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 40 fols. 229a, 230b; printed edition, pp. 37-38.

<sup>167</sup> See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:4-10 and Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude Toward Jewish Mysticism," p. 212.

through their conjunction with the mystic, resulting in the theurgical reconstitution of the divine name from its two halves.<sup>168</sup> The connection of these motifs with that of the head and tail of the Teli is not mentioned here but should be borne in mind as we continue.

What Abulafia also articulates in the current context is that the princes, and Metatron and Sandalfon in particular, are intermediates between the “divine attributes,” a locution for the *sefirot*, and the lower world. Confirmed here is what we had suspected regarding the angelic host’s governing role, as representatives of the *sefirot*, with respect to the heavenly bodies. The human aspirant, Abulafia professes, must understand this relationship if he wishes to attain the level of prophecy. What we may begin to perceive is that an understanding of the presence of the *sefirot* beyond the heavenly bodies is what distinguishes proper mysticism, troped earlier in terms of Moses and his rod, from sorcery. In this respect, the danger posed by the serpent that is the Teli may be clarified; when its demiurgical role is not perceived as subordinate to God’s leadership, expressed through His attributes, the *sefirot*, idolatry results. This notion is a direct analog to that seen earlier in *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, where it was said that the healing power of the Teli, which is the brazen serpent, is conferred only when the human being who gazes up at it recognizes that its power is sorcerous and acknowledges his Creator. Given that the idolatrous

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<sup>168</sup> Idel points to Abulafia’s identification of the efflux from the Active Intellect as “seed,” and he suggests that the ecstatic experience is one of impregnation; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 191-195. See also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 66.

associations of the Teli find expression in a christological fashion in Abulafia's thought, as we have seen, the sorcerer who contradicts the heavenly ministers, as the Talmud phrased it, is one who, for Abulafia, falls victim to the idolatrous and christological facet, in particular, of the Teli, the constellation which nevertheless harbors a bona fide messianic aspect.

To return to the passage from *'Imrei Shefer*, Abulafia proceeds from the statement that the secret of Metatron and Sandalfon involves procreation to a discussion of the drawing of the lot<sup>169</sup> that determines whether male or female progeny will be the result. Writes Abulafia,

Know that the secret of "lot" is "apostate," or "exalted," comprising the joining of "the unclean and the clean" together. And thus the secret of the name is wholly explicit, because it is that which joins the being and the body, unclean and defiled, and joined to it is the soul, which is clean and purified. And when you understand this secret, you will understand the secret of the calf and the secret of the red heifer, and why it purifies the unclean and defiles the clean.

From the reference to the name as comprising the clean and unclean we may infer that Metatron and Sandalfon, whom we have seen elsewhere as embodying the name as YH and VH, respectively, are still being addressed here by Abulafia. Now they are discussed in terms of the soul and the body, respectively, which are joined in the bringing forth of progeny. The unification of Metatron and Sandalfon, soul and

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<sup>169</sup> Abulafia refers specifically to the festival of Purim, "lots," and to Mordecai and Esther as embodying the male and female child, respectively. For a discussion of Mordecai and Esther with respect to unification with the Active Intellect, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 148.

body, as well signifies mystical conjunction, the perfection of the mystic's being, for which the fecundity of the Active Intellect serves as a metaphor. The natures and powers of Metatron and Sandalfon are here addressed in terms of the transformations effected by the golden calf and the red heifer, representing idolatry and religious piety, respectively.

This sense of equal but opposite powers is sustained as Abulafia continues his discussion. He next refers to the sons of the concubines of Abraham, who Abraham sent away with gifts (Gen. 25:6).<sup>170</sup> These gifts, Abulafia relates, were “names of defilement.” This, we are told, “is the secret of every sorcery and every magician and enchanter and astrologer.” That is, these illicit occult sciences derive from the first patriarch of the Jews, and they went to Abraham's unclean progeny. Regarding Abraham's pure offspring, Isaac, Abulafia writes,

“And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac (Gen. 25:5).” That is, just as he had nothing other than the explicit name, and it is the forty-two letter name, and from there may be understood “El Shaddai,” the name for procreation, so to Isaac he transmitted this unique name. And the secret of every “prince” is “Be fruitful and multiply,” and it is the secret of the name “flesh and blood”...

Naturally, the clean names were bestowed upon Isaac, and, given the earlier context of the procreative potency of Metatron and Sandalfon, the occurrence here of the name Shaddai, accompanied once more by the phrase “Be fruitful and multiply”

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<sup>170</sup> *Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 60b; MS Munich-BS 40 fol. 231a; printed edition, p. 45.



is not unexpected. From Abulafia's prior discussion of the phrase "flesh and blood,"<sup>171</sup> we know that he conceived of it as the corporealized YH and VH, and that its numerical value alluded to the words "His name" and "His essence." Once more in this current passage, Abulafia returns to the motif of "every 'prince'" in terms of the divine procreative capacity.<sup>172</sup> We had seen these princes as the separate intellects, intimately related to the governance of the heavenly bodies. Thus again, whereas those sons of Abraham who engage in sorcery and astrology have no cognizance of these princes, it is through these princes, that is, through a recognition of God's providence via the *sefirot*, that the name is united and corporealized. Immediately thereafter, Abulafia continues,

...And know it from the seventy-two letter name, which is the name of "your son." And it is the secret of "the three," "and the unity," in the secret of "one, one, one." [This] hints to "dew," that in the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will revive the dead through knowledge of His name. And it is the secret of "redemption," three times "these," which are half of the two hundred and sixteen letter name, because it is perfect.

The secret of the name "flesh and blood," that is, of the corporealization of the YH and VH, we now learn, is encrypted in the numerical value of the seventy-two letter name, which is equivalent to the value of the phrase "your son." The

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 71a; printed edition, p. 77.

<sup>172</sup> Note that Munich BS 285, 60b reads "every name" and not "every prince," although the numerical value of the phrase "Be fruitful and multiply" is equal to that for the word "prince" (500) and not to that for the word "name."

corporealized product of the Active Intellect is this “son.”<sup>173</sup> As well, entwined about the motif of the incarnate son in this passage are notions of a trinity, of resurrection of the dead, and of redemption. Particularly in view of the fact that the incarnate son’s source in this context we may understand alternatively as the Teli, fraught, as we have seen, with christological associations of its own, one would be hard pressed to overlook the allusion to Jesus in this passage.

Given what we have observed in this passage as the essential parallelism between the clean and unclean potencies and names, and the mystical and idolatrous practices oriented, respectively, toward them, expressed ultimately in terms of Abraham’s diametrically opposed yet mutually reflective sons, we may see here that Abulafia has extended the notion of an ordered parallelism to the point where he may delineate what he perceives to be a non-idolatrous homology to Jesus and the trinity within the realm of what he understands as the esoteric dimension of normative Judaism. This Jewish mystical trinity is both a cooptation on Abulafia’s part of core Christian doctrine, and a subversion, as it were, of idolatry, and it sheds further light on the examples that have already been considered of trinitarian modalities in Abulafia’s thought. For, in the context of the current discussion, we have observed the difficulties involved, at times, in rendering a sharp distinction between actual practice in the mystical and sorcerous spheres, as well as, at other times, Abulafia’s pointed efforts to portray the two spheres as elegantly symmetrical. In this respect,

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<sup>173</sup> Idel observes Abulafia’s equation of the intellect and imagination with the son and daughter, respectively; *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 45.

starkly apparent absorption of Christian influence is thinly masked by the logic, in Abulafia's apparent estimation, of discerning, within an acceptably Jewish framework, a palatable counterpoint to some of the most transgressive and idolatrous of Christian doctrines. For if there are clean and defiled efficacious names, why should there not be both a clean and a defiled trinity, an acceptable and an idolatrous "son" in the divine realm? Such a logic renders tolerable what we have already recognized as an irresistible attraction on the part of Abulafia to the doctrine of the religious and cultural other. We may also perceive an implicit polemical dimension to this discussion. In the current context, Abulafia does not mention that other son and that other trinity. But by mentioning only the acceptably Jewish ones, we may understand where the others must fall within the schema that Abulafia puts forth; they belong in the realm of the defiled. Thus, Abulafia's strategy simultaneously represents both an attraction to and a repulsion from the modalities of the other. Presently, we will see Abulafia engage the motif of the cross with a like strategy.

Elsewhere in *'Imrei Shefer*, Abulafia takes up the issue of sorcery and astrology in a somewhat different manner. He writes,<sup>174</sup>

Every prophet who is a prophet of God must know first the power of sorcery and its nature, and whence its existence is incumbent upon him. And because it is necessary for the prophet to know this knowledge, the prophets who instruct their sons and students in the ways of prophecy must transmit to them first the nature of their body.

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<sup>174</sup> *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 56b; printed edition, p. 33.

And thus, the way of the science of healing, because it is built completely, without a doubt, upon natural science, its ways are advantageous to man in the knowledge of God. Also, because the entire body possesses enumerated limbs, and they are thirteen ribs, cleaving to the right side in the vertebrae of the spinal cord, which are eighteen. Also [there are] thirteen ribs on the left side. And all of this is the number for a wonderful matter counted by the scribe....The one who teaches prophecy to his students must teach him the science of number. Because, behold, the limbs are two hundred and forty-eight, and each possesses a number, and it is the rule of the learned science. And thus it is necessary to study the science of measure and the science of understanding, to understand what the efflux teaches when he receives the actualization from it. But the divine science one must know in any case as is proper, because of the preservation from error. Also, the craft of logic is useful for this. Also every prior science, because of this depth.

Here sorcery receives a recasting as the science of the body, which is inseparably tied to natural science generally. All of the profane sciences, in fact, insofar as they are contingent upon the lower, material world, are sorcerous in their natures in Abulafia's estimation. Nevertheless, they are indispensable to the prophet. In this respect, Abulafia has couched a rather remarkable assertion in scientific terms: As he states explicitly, the prophet must first be proficient in sorcery. Not only is sorcery necessary for the practice of medicine, but also for actual mystical practice. During the encounter with the Active Intellect, the mystic must use the sciences classed as sorcery in order, seemingly, to grasp something of the nature of the numerical measurements that are a part of the revelation received by the mystic. We may surmise that one must understand their relationship to the measurements known in the material world. But we see again that that aspect of the Active Intellect

that partakes of the sorcerous is perilous; one must apply the “divine science” during the mystical experience, which we may understand as the science of letter permutation. That is, the mystic engages in the generation of exegetical associations derived from the understanding of these measurements as letters and words, which are then subject to the usual repertoire of letter operations. Logic as well is seen to be valuable in guarding against the errors inherent in approaching the divine efflux with only natural scientific knowledge. In this we hear an echo of the advice encountered earlier, to dispense with hermeneutical conclusions that seem to be patently incorrect or heretical, and thus illogical.

Clearly, measures and numbers undergird Abulafia’s understanding of what constitutes sorcery or the natural sciences, as well as the beginnings of the mystic’s self-knowledge, expressed above in terms of the limbs of the body. As he continues, Abulafia refers to the numerous measurements and numerations to be found in Scripture:<sup>175</sup> “And indeed, many sciences are hinted to in the Torah, and they are transmitted in the particular received knowledge, such as number and measure and many like these. And the Torah utters wonders in the science of number.” He stresses the importance of such measurements and numerations, in that they possess an esoteric significance which the kabbalistic hermeneutic may bring forth, the same notion that we saw above with respect to the mustering of the “divine science” at the time when the efflux from the Active Intellect is received. The significance of such

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 56a; printed edition, p. 34.

numbers, Abulafia explains, resides in their carrying cosmological implications. He writes,

And these [measures and numbers] are the things based upon which the world is led, and how could the prophet be without them? And indeed there are as well other sciences that are necessary to the prophet. And he who knows the secret of the spheres and the stars and the constellations is prepared to prophesy with the general received knowledge [*im ha-qabbalah bi-khlal*], because the leadership comes from them to the world of man.

Abulafia professes the necessity for the prophet, that is, the mystic who achieves prophecy, to be proficient in astrology. The influence of the heavenly bodies upon the lower world is, of course, a given of both medieval magical and philosophical speculation. However, as we have seen, it is the role of the *sefirot*, as God's attributes in this schema, that renders it acceptable, and not idolatrous, for Abulafia to conceive of the celestials as leaders of men. Abulafia merely conceives of these bodies as intervening between the world of the *sefirot* and the world of man, along with the angelic ministers. Nevertheless, nothing is mentioned in the current context in regard to the *sefirot* or any other particularly kabbalistic conception, for that matter. The only means to discern the hand of a kabbalist here is in the assertion that astrological insights are encrypted in Scripture's discussions of measures; the conception of astrology itself and of the stars' potency appears as generic. Abulafia is genuinely on the mark when he refers in this context to the

mystic's indebtedness to sorcery. For the astrology that Abulafia describes is markedly commensurate with both gentile religion and philosophy, which he has identified with the pejorative term "sorcery." Abulafia continues,

And how could the prophet be without knowledge of God's leadership of His creations and not recognize the quality of His supervision of them, and God send him and he behave well in His eyes? [This recalls] the allegory of when a king sends a messenger to a king regarding matters that are between them, and the messenger is foolish and simple in the eyes of the king who sent him. And will not the utmost shame come to the messenger from this, when he asks him about the conduct of his king, and he does not know how to answer? All the moreso the messenger of God, blessed be He. And not only this, but He sends him to a wise nation which will examine his message. And thus no sage doubts this, that every prophet must be a great and wonderful sage in the sciences, and all the moreso in knowledge of the name.

Abulafia turns to an acknowledgment of God's placement over the stars, a thesis that would again find a comfortable place in the works of gentiles the likes of Plotinus.<sup>176</sup> In his allegory of the king, Abulafia suggests that it is a shameful prophet who would bring a message to the people from God while he himself is lacking in an understanding of God's providence over the spheres and stars. Abulafia reports that Israel among all the nations will scrutinize prophecy for evidence of such an understanding. Here again Abulafia expresses the necessity that any prophecy, that

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<sup>176</sup> Plotinus describes a cosmology wherein the Universal Soul is in some way bound to the "body" of the Cosmos, the stars, while it also influences man directly. *Enneads*, § 83. He bases his thesis on Plato's *Timaeus*, where God exerts His influence through the Soul, and the stars exert their own influence as well. *Ibid.*, § 82.

is, any product of a mystical operation, must be seen to fall within a presumed normative Jewish framework. However, those products of the mystical experience which Abulafia admits to be sorcerous in nature (that is, partaking of the natural sciences, in this discussion) are not simply chaff to be separated from the wheat, the products of the “divine science,” and discarded. Quite the contrary, prophecy in the present discussion is seen to itself originate from the sorcerous domain of astrology. The latter science is stated to be a necessary preparation for the prophet. What Abulafia straightforwardly accepts as sorcery within mysticism, in the case of natural numbers and measures, is to be embraced but brought to heel under the science of letter permutation, in the same fashion in which astrology is to be accepted but incorporated within a monotheistic model.

Abulafia’s illustration of his meaning through the allegory of a shameful prophet to the Israelites is, of course, telling. In Abulafia’s estimation, every prophetic revelation, whether imparted to others or not, stems from what he ultimately mentions at the conclusion of the passage, “knowledge of the name.” This, he stresses, is the chief criterion of legitimate prophecy. Thus, the prophet who comes to the Israelites without knowledge of God has not properly utilized the “divine science” of letter permutation, which is, as we have seen, founded upon the notion that Torah is composed entirely of names of God. Thus, the prophet who is lacking in knowledge of the name is, for Abulafia, the mystic who has not subordinated sorcery to the divine science. This prophet is essentially a sorcerer, and



his message stems from the demonic nature of the Active Intellect, embodied by Sandalfon and by Jesus as well, as we have seen. In this regard, the shameful, false prophet to the Israelites par excellence is, naturally, Jesus. We may observe that what appears to satisfy Abulafia as an engagement with astrology that embraces a knowledge of the name is, in fact, the schema that we have seen earlier, where the YH and VH, the name itself, is parsed out in terms of the Teli, Libra and Aries. Here, the two components of the Teli, one of which is itself demonic, encapsulate the two halves of the name and are examined with respect to their movements through the heavens and conjunctions with constellations and the wandering stars. False prophecy, in fact an alternate articulation for the idolatrous threat that haunts Abulafia, is contingent upon a deficient knowledge of the name, one which is tantamount to an engagement with the VH alone.

## Chapter IV. Warp and Woof; Circumcision, Crucifixion and Divine Embodiment

In the previous chapter we discussed an identification by Abulafia of the constellation Teli with Jesus, suggested via the motif of the brazen serpent. Along these lines we may scrutinize the name “Teli” itself. Its relationship to the Hebrew word *talui*, which indicates hanging or suspension, may be understood in terms of the constellation’s perceived demiurgic role: Creation itself is suspended from it and depends upon it.<sup>1</sup> However, the term *talui* is also used to refer to hanging as a mode of execution, and, in fact, Jews - Abulafia included - applied the term to Jesus’ crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> We may wonder whether the name Teli itself - at least for Abulafia, if not for some of his predecessors as well - already evoked, through both of its meanings, notions of Jesus.

We also considered at some length in Chapter Three the significance for Abulafia of the head and tail of the Teli. These, we noted, represented both the two halves of the Tetragrammaton, the Jewish messiah and Jesus, respectively, and masculinity and femininity. We observed that, in *’Oṣar ’Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia referred to the front and back of the Tanin (the Teli) as being woven together “in the

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<sup>1</sup> The demiurgic connotation for the Teli may be gleaned from *Sefer Yeṣirah*, Chapter Six.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia,” in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, edited by J. Blau, P. Friedman, A. Hertzberg and I. Mendelsohn (New York, 1959), p. 57.

secret of ‘twenty-two’ letters, from which is created ‘my flesh.’”<sup>3</sup> This weaving together of these two aspects of the Teli we understood, after Idel and Wolfson, in erotic terms. The latter frames this erotic dimension as the reconstitution of the phallic potency achieved through the integration of male and female dimensions, from which we may understand Abulafia’s reference to his “flesh” – that is, his phallus - in the aforementioned passage. As well, the equation, via *gematria*, of “my flesh” with “twenty-two” letters results, we saw, from the mystic’s divinization subsequent to his phallic reconstitution, represented as the weaving together of the head and tail of the Teli. This is achieved via recourse to the mystical manipulation of the letters, which conform directly to the mystic’s own body. Abulafia conveys the notion that a divinization occurs by indicating that the expressions “in my flesh” and “Prince in me” share the same consonants. That the Prince – Metatron – dwells within the mystic is representative of the latter’s coming into both a divinized and a messianic status.

### ***Sheti va-‘Erev, Warp and Woof***

The term which Abulafia employs with regularity to indicate the woven quality to the Teli and to the nature of the reconstituted mystic is *sheti va-‘erev*, warp and woof. This term will carry momentous implications for our investigation into

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 24a; printed edition, p. 48.

Abulafia's attitude toward Christianity and will occupy us for much of this chapter. The usage of the term *sheti va- 'erev* with respect to the head and tail of the Teli occurs already in the writings of Shabbatai Donnolo. Donnolo draws upon the *Baraitha of Samuel*, which referred to the Teli, as the *axis mundi*, as a "weaver's beam." He describes the planets as joined to the Teli as warp to woof, although he also suggests that the two opposed aspects of the Teli itself, its head and tail, are themselves this warp and woof.<sup>4</sup> It is conceivable that Donnolo's focus is already not purely astrological, and that some mystical elements are already at work.<sup>5</sup> Donnolo discusses the Teli as the spinal cord, joining the brain, or the righteous end of the Teli, with the genitals or its own evil end. The Teli may thus be seen to reconcile or unite the intellectual aspects within man as well, as the microcosmos, with his base and lustful ones. A traditional linkage of the Teli's tail with Sagittarius and thus with sexuality – evoked in the notion of the firing of arrows, a theme we touched upon in the last chapter – may inform Donnolo's conception. Given that Donnolo places these notions within the context of a treatment of *Sefer Yeşirah*, he must have seen this function to and configuration of the Teli in terms of the mystic's following of Abraham's model, the latter having achieved an erotic union with the divine by the conclusion of the text. There, *imitatio dei* apparently resulted in the achievement of a balancing of the *sefirot*, with the covenant centered in their midst. The nature of the

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<sup>4</sup> Sharf, *The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo*, pp. 33-38, 43-45, 55, 58, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfson observes in Donnolo's thought an interest in a theosophical gnosis pertaining to the *sefirot*, in their connectedness with God, that transcends astrology. *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 138; idem, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo," pp. 286, 290, 294, 297.

Teli as comprised of an integrated warp and woof should then, for Donnolo, already have suggested the paradigm for the mystic's reconstitution of his own microcosmic nature.<sup>6</sup>

Though, in the passage cited above from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia evokes the woven quality to the components of the Teli without recourse to the term *sheti va-'erev*, we do find a related and complex treatment of the term in the commentary to *Sefer Yeṣirah* that is ascribed to Abulafia. Here, Abulafia first reasons<sup>7</sup> that just as we, in God's image, are comprised of two causes, these being our fathers and our mothers, so too the unique and explicit name that instructs with respect to the first cause - that is, the Tetragrammaton with respect to God<sup>8</sup> - is as well of a bipartite nature. At times, God or His name acts toward us as a father to a son, and at others as a mother to a son.<sup>9</sup> To this point, Abulafia's discussion should recall for us that of the nature of the Tetragrammaton as comprised of the two components YH and VH, embodying masculinity and femininity, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Abulafia continues by indicating that that component indicated by the word *'av*,

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 127-144. Here Donnolo's commitment to a notion of a *demut*, an invisible likeness ascribed to God, is examined. God possesses such a *demut*, in Donnolo's opinion, but its anthropomorphic status, as well as its visibility, is in an important way challenged. Thus, despite the likeness between the human body and God's configuration with respect to the *sefirot*, knowledge of the *sefirot*, and hence of God, is described by Donnolo as inaccessible. Ibid., pp. 142-144. See also, idem, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo," pp. 290, 293, 298-299.

<sup>7</sup> Weinstock, *Perush Sefer Yetzirah 'Almoni mi-Yesodo shel Rabbi 'Avraham 'Abul'afiya*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Weinstock as well observes the bipartite nature of the Tetragrammaton; *ibid.*, p. 22.

father, is “the beginning of all that comes after it.”<sup>11</sup> The secret of the word *’av*, Abulafia relates, is “one, two, which are three,” a reference to the letters *’alef* and *bet* which comprise the word. Regarding the maternal component of the name, Abulafia parses the word for mother, *’aim*, in a similar fashion. “Its secret is forty-one,” Abulafia writes, “and the secret of ‘mother’ is one fourth of the point whose secret is called ‘the small one.’” Abulafia derives the term “one fourth” from the fact that the letters of the words “forty-one” are the same as those of “mother [is] one fourth.” Just as Abulafia was interested in deriving the number three from the word for father, so too we may perceive that he was interested, with respect to the word for mother, in deriving the number four. We will see presently why the numbers three and four were of significance for him, for he provides no immediate explanation for the significance of the derivation of these two numbers.

What Abulafia does suggest is the fact that “mother,” via *gematria*, is one fourth of the word “point,” indicative of the *sefira* which Weinstock appropriately perceives to be *Binah*.<sup>12</sup> Abulafia indicates that the word “point,” in turn, is equivalent to the word “the small one.” The “small one,” we next learn, stands for the smallest of the letters, the letter *yod*. Writes Abulafia, “It is incumbent upon us in this respect to call the beginning of the name of God with the smallest of the letters, [which is as well] the largest of all of them [of all of the first ten numbers] in its

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<sup>11</sup> Weinstock observes that the father and the mother refer to the two *sefirot* *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, which are also signified here in the allusion to *sefirot* as “points,” *nequdot*; *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> See previous note.

numerical value...” Abulafia has here drawn the discussion of the mother and father into a connection with the Tetragrammaton; the “mother,” *Binah*, is one fourth of the letter *yod*, itself one fourth of the Name, and this relationship between the mother and the *yod* provides a springboard to the revelation of the two-fold nature of the letter *yod*, as both the most diminutive (in its female aspect) and greatest (in its male aspect) of the letters and numbers.<sup>13</sup> Here the earlier theme of the bipartite and androgynous nature of the name is rephrased in terms of its first letter. Next, the same bipartite nature is seen to inhere in man as well. We are, Abulafia explains, the microcosmos (*‘olam qatan*), “...and it [the *‘olam qatan*] is the secret of the World to Come, which depends upon [*talui*] a point.” The reference here to a point – that is, to a *sefira* – is, once more, to the female *Binah*, understood as the World to Come.<sup>14</sup> A resonance with traditions concerning the Teli is present here, suggested in Abulafia’s choice of the word *talui*, insofar as both *Binah* and the Teli tend to have demiurgic overtones.<sup>15</sup> In this, we may tentatively, for the moment, suggest that the linkage of the Teli with the female aspect of the name and thus with Jesus, as in our earlier discussions, is invoked. At the same time, Abulafia continues, we are as well the macrocosmos (*‘olam gadol*) “...in our grasping the truth of the point which is

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<sup>13</sup> See Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” pp. 174-175.

<sup>14</sup> For this association of *Binah* and the World to Come, see as well Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, pp. 299, 306.

<sup>15</sup> As well, the Teli, as the Active Intellect, is appropriately thought of as both the first and tenth, first and last, of the *sefirot*. For the Active Intellect as both first and last, see *‘Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 86b-87a; printed edition, pp. 177; MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 154b; printed edition, p. 348.

renewed in truth, whose name is *yod*, whose number is ten and whose form is half of a circle; and their secret is the tenth splendor.” We are to be linked with the greater aspect of the letter *yod* as well in the latter’s status as the consummation of the *sefirot* (here, the ten “splendors”) a notion which ensues from the letter’s numerical value. A linkage to the *sefira Hokhmah* - the male counterpart to *Binah* in the sefirotic array - is apparent due to the traditional linkage of this *sefira* with the letter *yod* of the Tetragrammaton, while *Keter*, the first *sefira*, standing as the uppermost scintilla thereon.<sup>16</sup>

To this point, one aspect that emerges from Abulafia’s discussion is the notion that man comes to embody the structure of the divine with his attainment to the two relevant *sefira*; attaining to the microcosmic *Binah* is linked with the arrival at the World to Come, while the macrocosm is reached through a grasping of the nature of *Hokhmah*. The resultant structure that man assumes, in his coming into the status of flesh made word, as we had called it earlier, following Wolfson, is androgynous. That structure Abulafia will subsequently relate to the components head and tail, as the letter *yod* is at the tail of the Hebrew letters corresponding to the single digit numbers in our decimal system, while it is at the head of those that correspond to the two digit numbers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> On the correspondence between the *sefirot* and the Tetragrammaton in Abulafia’s thought, see also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 113 n. 54, 132 n. 101, 157. See also Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, pp. 211, 346-347.

<sup>17</sup> Weinstock, *Perush Sefer Yetzirah 'Almoni mi-Yesodo shel Rabbi 'Avraham 'Abul'afiya*, p. 28.



Abulafia will extrapolate to several other sets of letters, seeming to describe a meditational practice which “...draws the thought to the *’Ein-Sof* [the “Limitless”], because He, may He be blessed, is the beginning of all existence and its end.”<sup>18</sup> What is grasped from such a practice, Abulafia relates, comes in three forms: in the form of images, of names associated with that which is imaged and likewise of associated numbers. The latter two forms, names and numbers, are as well to be understood in terms of letters and numbers, as is apparent from Abulafia’s subsequent discussion. “...The beginning of the apprehension is the reception of the transmission of the letters, with their names and with numbers,” he writes. In this resides the secret of the thirty-two paths of wisdom discussed in *Sefer Yeşirah*. The words “With thirty,” with which the latter text begins, indicates both the esoteric doctrines of Creation and of the chariot, according to Abulafia. The next words, “and two,” contain the same letters, Abulafia indicates, as the words “ten names,” which are, he explains, the *sefirot*. Abulafia is proceeding from the more straightforward designation of the thirty-two paths as the ten *sefirot* and twenty-two Hebrew letters, attempting to parse out the words themselves “with thirty and two” into these same categories, those of letters and of numbers. “And all of them [the thirty-two paths],” Abulafia writes, “are in the likeness of warp and woof [*sheti va ’-erev*].” Abulafia here establishes the connection between the thirty-two paths and the phrase *sheti va ’-erev* through the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

numerical equivalence of the words “with thirty and two” and “likeness of *sheti va-‘erev*.”<sup>19</sup>

We next learn that “their secret,” by a similar numerical equivalence, “is the four-fold and three-fold likeness.” The thirty-two paths are composed of warp and woof in the same manner in which the Teli was “woven” of two components, male and female, in the earlier passage from *’Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*. The letters and numbers of these thirty-two paths, keys to the meditative process that, we learned, may bring the mystic to the *’Ein-Sof*, are consonant with God’s bipartite nature as father and mother and as first and last, with the *sefirot Hokhmah* and *Binah*, with the bipartite nature of the letter *yod* of the Tetragrammaton, with the Tetragrammaton itself as YH and VH, and with the mystic’s own perfected androgynous status as both macrocosm and microcosm. The numbers three and four, which had appeared first with no real explanation in Abulafia’s discussion of the father and mother, now recur with respect to the phrase *sheti va-‘erev*, from which we may see the ultimate interrelatedness of this entire discussion. All of these dichotomous pairings, in fact, are *sheti va-‘erev*.

At this point Abulafia’s discussion begins to take a turn. From the words “fourfold” and “and threefold,” Abulafia derives the words “moist” and “dry.” The former of these two, he writes, gives rise to the latter<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Weinstock’s note, *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> The respective numerical values of “fourfold” and “and threefold” are 312 and 676. These words, therefore, Abulafia explains, derive from the “names of twelve and twenty-six,” twenty-six multiplied

...in the likeness of the writing that he is at first moist, and he ran and after this became dry. And anyone who is ashamed<sup>21</sup> to speak of the truth of these wise matters, which it is proper to announce (*ledabber be-'elu ha-hokhmot be-'emitatam ha-re'uyah lehodiyah*), only errs. Because it is proper to announce that warp and woof (*sheti va-'erev*), which is without a doubt the covenant of Esau,<sup>22</sup> is the Prince of Abomination<sup>23</sup> who rules from the Torah at the gate of chaos.<sup>24</sup> And they [*sheti va-'erev*] are twelve tens,<sup>25</sup> and their sum is "Orion".<sup>26</sup> And this in its secret aspect is gate and house,<sup>27</sup> because within it is the gathering of the fruits of the bodies.<sup>28</sup> And he is the head of corners,<sup>29</sup> and he is the Prince in elements,<sup>30</sup> because the flesh instructs concerning the secrets of nakedness.<sup>31</sup> And its matter is that he is the foundation of the flesh, front and back,<sup>32</sup> and contains visions of fire, and he is woven in time, amassed in completion. Indeed the curls of his head contain two angels, right and left. And thus the unique name is the beginning of the revolving. And when you explain "In the beginning," whose matter is "in wisdom," immediately you will find the Prince of Opening, whose opening is

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by twelve yields 312, while twenty-six squared yields 676. See Weinstock's notes ad loc. These two divine names yield the word "moist." Twenty-six plus twelve yields thirty-eight, the numerical value of the word "moist," *lah*. The word "dry," *yavash*, which "comes from moistness," according to Abulafia, has a numerical value of 312; thus the two divine names that compose the word "moist," when multiplied together yield the word "dry."

<sup>21</sup> The text should read "*mitbayyash*," as Weinstock notes, a word with the same root letters as those for the word for "dry."

<sup>22</sup> "*Brit*" has a numerical value of 612, "Esau" of 376. Note the transposition of numbers, or the intertwining, more appropriately, from the numbers with which we began, 312 and 676.

<sup>23</sup> "*Sar ha-To'eivah*," with a numerical value of 988.

<sup>24</sup> "*Be-sha'ar ha-tohu*," comprising the same letters as "*Sar ha-To'eivah*," see Weinstock ad loc.

<sup>25</sup> "Twelve tens" has a numerical value of 988.

<sup>26</sup> "*Kesil*," which may also be interpreted to mean "fool." *Kesil* has a numerical value of 120, that is, "twelve tens."

<sup>27</sup> "*Sha'ar ve-bayit*," with a numerical value of 988.

<sup>28</sup> "*Kibush peri ha-gufot*" has a numerical value of 988.

<sup>29</sup> "*Ro'sh pei'ot*" has a numerical value of 988.

<sup>30</sup> "*Sar be-yesodot*" has a numerical value of 988.

<sup>31</sup> "*Ha-basar moreh ha-sodot she-be-'arayot*." The phrase "of nakedness" (or "that are in nakedness"), "*she-be-'arayot*," has a numerical value of 988, while "the flesh" and "the secret," "*ha-basar*" and "*ha-sodot*," together have a numerical value of 988. See Weinstock ad loc.

<sup>32</sup> "*Yesod ha-basar, panim ve-'ahor*" has a numerical value of 988. See Weinstock's note, ad loc., for the remaining *gematriyot*.

open, and you will be able to say, “I found an open gate;”<sup>33</sup> in your understanding [this is] the virgin who is the beginning of his house. And know that the prince who opens is the prince who closes in this way.

The recurring theme of the bipartite nature of the divine name, of the efflux from the Active Intellect, and, indeed, of the reconstituted mystic himself, encapsulated in the phrase *sheti va-‘erev*, is here first reappraised by Abulafia as the “covenant of Esau.” Insofar as one component of the bipartite divine structure we have already seen associated with Jesus, the VH or demonic and imaginative dimension of the Active Intellect, we may understand initially why at least a portion of the divine warp and woof would be linked to Jesus. For indeed, that Esau in the phrase “covenant of Esau” stands as a symbol for Jesus and Christianity should be apparent both from the immediate context of the passage at hand and from elsewhere in Abulafia’s writings. Abulafia in the current passage refers to Esau as the “Prince of Abomination” and as the “foundation of the flesh.” Abulafia’s explicit linkage of Jesus with idolatry has already been established, as has the parallel linkage of Jesus with the imagination, and thus with the corporeal, a polemical turn on the Christian theme of the corporealized divinity. It is in this association that the significance of the phrase “foundation of the flesh” inheres.<sup>34</sup> Another polemical dimension to the current passage is apparent in the reference to Jesus as the “Prince of Opening.”

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<sup>33</sup> b*Ketubot* 9b.

<sup>34</sup> For Christendom as Esau, see *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 304a; printed edition, p. 37.

Abulafia maintains here that “the virgin,” Mary, is indicated in the talmudic phrase “I found an open gate.” In its rabbinic context, the “open gate” is that of a bride who has been found to have been violated.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Abulafia draws again upon the Jewish tradition that impugns Mary’s purported chastity. Of course, such an attack upon Mary further draws Jesus into the sphere of lasciviousness and of the bodily.<sup>36</sup>

The link of both the warp and woof of the *sheti va-‘erev* construct with Jesus and the covenant of Esau requires further investigation. We may recall that this construct in its entirety, and not just its posterior, analogous to the VH, had already been troped as the demiurgic Teli, which, we had already implied, seemingly bore christological associations for Abulafia. And the Teli was, we saw, represented by Abulafia as the brazen serpent, the latter being a motif fraught with christological overtones in Christian exegesis. In light of this, we may begin to approach a second question raised by the current passage. For, having established the significance of the person of Esau for Abulafia, we are left still to consider the nature of the former’s covenant. What this covenant is, in Abulafia’s estimation, may first be gleaned from the idea that Jesus was “hung” (*talui*) from the corporeal Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Similarly was the Teli placed, in its metaphorical status as the brazen

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<sup>35</sup> See Jastrow, “פתח,” p. 1252.

<sup>36</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 122 n. 78 for a discussion of openness, representing masculinity, and closedness, indicating femininity, in Abulafia’s thought. Certainly the last sentence of the current passage, “And know that the prince who opens is the prince who closes in this way,” plays into these conceptions. Regarding kabbalistic polemics concerning Mary’s virginity, see Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 145-149 (where the theme of openness and closedness is also discussed), idem, “Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath,” p. 152. See also, Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 60.

serpent, upon a pole.<sup>37</sup> Both of these motifs may be understood in terms of the crucifixion. And so indeed does the very phrase which to this point we have translated only as “warp and woof,” that is, “*sheti va-‘erev*.” When Abulafia states that Esau’s covenant is *sheti va-‘erev*, we must understand him to mean that this covenant is “cruciform” in its essence; that Abulafia intends the notion “cruciform” with the phrase “*sheti va-‘erev*” may be surmised both from the placement of the phrase within the context of the motifs already mentioned and from an investigation of a few of the phrase’s other appearances in a particularly relevant medieval text. We will take a brief look at some of these instances. We will also have occasion shortly to make reference to Abulafia’s *Sefer ha-Brit*, where he appears to parse out the YH and the VH, the two *sheti va-‘erev* components of the Tetragrammaton, in terms of the two axes of a geometrical cross.

It is *The Book of the Pious* of the Hasidei Ashkenaz that provides an especially useful glimpse into the implications for medieval Jews – and, more specifically, for at least some circles of Jewish mystics – of the phrase “*sheti va-‘erev*.” The phrase occurs several times in this important text with reference to the Christian sign of the cross. It is unsurprising, but still worth observing, that in each of these appearances of the phrase the authors manifest an anxiety with regard to the perceived idolatrous dimension of the cross. In the first of these we find the

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<sup>37</sup> Num. 21:8.

following:<sup>38</sup> “If on a bowl or a cup or vessel the Gentiles made a cross [*sheti va-‘erev*], for as long as the cross is upon it do not use it until it is scratched off, and needless to say if there are faces on it.” Elsewhere<sup>39</sup> we find: “If a man is in a synagogue and he sees out the window a church or a cross [*sheti va-‘erev*], he should place something in the window so that he won’t see it.” Two other occurrences of the phrase in *The Book of the Pious* address the cross’ appearance on Christian coins. The first of these<sup>40</sup> reads: “A man should not carry even pocket money with a cross [*sheti va-‘erev*] on it, nor cloth that is used for idolatry like coarse silk and the like.” Lastly, we find:<sup>41</sup> “The sages say that a man may bundle coins at the end of a cloth in which tefillin are bound, but this cloth [must be such that] they [the coins] are not together with the tefillin. But if on the coins there is a cross [*sheti va-‘erev*], he will not bind them to the cloth of tefillin [at all].”

That Abulafia’s usage of the phrase *sheti va-‘erev* occurs at the nexus of his discussion of several christological themes and motifs should leave little doubt that by this phrase he intends the meaning “cruciform,” as with the authors of *The Book of the Pious*. This, then, is the nature of Esau’s covenant for Abulafia: it is cruciform. The motif, as it appears in Abulafia’s writings, will bear further investigation. Before we move on to several other passages related to the notion of a “covenant of Esau,” there is more still to observe in the above passage from the commentary to *Sefer*

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<sup>38</sup> *Sefer Hasidim*, § 277. The passage is repeated at § 901.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, § 437.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, § 773.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, § 900.

*Yeşirah*. We had noted in the preceding chapter a discussion of the two components comprising the two-fold nature of the Teli, of Metatron and Sandalfon together, and, by extension, of the Tetragrammaton. Insofar as these two components were seen to belong to the evil demiurge, they were both seen by Abulafia as evil.<sup>42</sup> This, we observed, runs counter to Abulafia's other, more prevalent thesis that the Active Intellect contains both good and evil components. In the current instance we find a model related to the former one; the evil demiurge himself is here assigned two components, this, of course, being the meaning of his composition as *sheti va-'erev*. Of significance here, however, is that Esau, the "Prince of Abomination," linked in the passage with the body, flesh, nakedness, and the elements, is nevertheless not considered by Abulafia to be wholly evil. To the contrary, we learn that he is comprised of "two angels, right and left;" these, presumably are good and evil, just as his containing of "front and back" carries a similar implication. That this cruciform demiurge is Jesus we have already established. Calling him "the head of corners," likely an allusion to Psalm 118:22,<sup>43</sup> and a theme applied by Christians to Jesus beginning with the Gospels, as discussed in the last chapter,<sup>44</sup> only reinforces this identification. So we are left with the surprising surmise that Jesus, idolatrous and demonic as he may be, comprises within himself the good as well. We will have occasion to return presently to this observation and to some relevant considerations

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Two above.

<sup>43</sup> "The stone that has been rejected has become the head of the corner," or the "chief cornerstone."

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter Three, n. 131.



offered by Wolfson. We may observe for the moment that Abulafia does not here engage in mere anti-Christian polemic, but he presents a notion commensurate with one we have seen earlier, that the evil imagination is nevertheless the mechanism through which one attains to a conjunction with the Active Intellect. Indeed, in the current case, evil is no longer truly evil, so long as it contains a “front” or a “right” side. Abulafia’s view of Jesus, then, may be seen, after a fashion, to be quite consistent with the Christian one; both regard Jesus’ corporeal manifestation as proffering the means to union with the divine.<sup>45</sup> This may be part and parcel of the very “secret of nakedness,” of the flesh, to which Abulafia makes reference in the context of his discussion of this bipartite Prince of Idolatry.

### **Jacob and Esau, Moses and Amaleq**

In Abulafia’s epistle, *Ve-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, we find some related notions concerning the idea of a “covenant of Esau.” The relevant passage begins with a warning concerning the *sefirot*.<sup>46</sup> The beginning of the passage is unclear, but suggests that there are two names, one that saves from danger associated with the *sefirot*, and one that does not.<sup>47</sup> The passage implies a linkage between the names or

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<sup>45</sup> See Wolfson’s reference to Abulafia’s conception of the imagination, though satanic, as the “angelic intermediary.” “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> *Ve-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, in Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer*, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> *Šarikh lehazhir min ha-middot ha-mithayyot min ha-sefirot, ha-yesh shem mašil mi-hem, ve-’et ha-shem ha-’omer, ve-’ein mi-yadei mašil...*

the *sefirot* and hands, from which we may understand that the right and left sides of the sefirotic array may be under discussion, the linkage of the array with the hands in this fashion being a commonplace of both kabbalah generally and of Abulafia's doctrine. The passage goes on to consider the hands of Esau. These, Abulafia writes,

...return to be blessed and to bless in action, what with their being quarrelsome, spilling blood by the hands of Amaleq.<sup>48</sup> "And the hands of Moses were heavy...and it was that his hands were steady until the sun went down," (Ex. 17:12) and the secret depends upon its saying, "when Moses raised his hands [Israel prevailed, and when he rested his hands] Amaleq prevailed." (Ex. 17:11) And regarding this, in our saying "voice," [this is] the voice of Jacob in the uttering of the name as it is written, in the sanctuary, with "the hands" being the hands of Esau in the supernal ones. And we place a single covenant, the arbiter between them, and it is the covenant of the tongue. And so too with the lower ones with the covenant of circumcision. And we join the utterance that instructs students with the actions, and the power that instructs sons with the movement, such that hand and foot hint to two matters in the power of the twenty-two letters that reveal the secret of the *sefirot* in truth, not incidentally. Immediately we take together the gathering of powers, and we raise "the banner of Jerusalem" in the name of God, and the exiled are assembled, and the banished of Israel God gathers for the sake of His name, as it is written "Not for your sake do I do this, [house of Israel,] but for the sake of My [holy] name [Ez. 36:22]..." And here the full secret hints to the absence of the *Shekhinah* from our city and from amongst us and its existence that contains ten *sefirot* together...

The passage follows the schema laid out in *Sefer Yeşirah*, wherein the covenant of the tongue is centered between the two hands, while the covenant of the phallus is fixed between the two legs. What is remarkable in the passage from

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<sup>48</sup> ... 'im hayyotam ba'alei ha-riv, shofkhei damim, be-yadei Amaleq.

Abulafia is that the two hands belong to Esau, such that the covenant of the tongue between them we might expect to be related, in kind with the passage from the commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah* analyzed above, to the theme of a “covenant of Esau.” This covenant of the tongue is described in the current passage as the supernal covenant, while that of circumcision is the lower one. Abulafia operates through an identification of Genesis Chapter 27 with *Sefer Yeşirah*’s notion of the covenant of the tongue between the two hands. In particular it is Gen. 27:22 that seems to interest Abulafia: “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” The outcome of this exegetical strategy is some type of association of Esau, or his hands, with this upper covenant. Nevertheless, Abulafia seeks to establish clearly that Esau’s hands are to be understood as profane and as inimical to Judaism.<sup>49</sup> Thus the connection is effected between Esau’s hands and Amaleq’s, Amaleq being the enemy of Moses. It is the latter whose hands, in fact, are typically associated by kabbalists with *Sefer Yeşirah*’s discussion of the two hands flanking the covenant of the tongue. It is with respect to the role of Moses’ hands in the battle with Amaleq that this is accomplished. Abulafia makes use of the theme of Moses’ raising of his hands in his battle against Amaleq, but not, however, for the more conventional purpose, following the discussion in the *Bahir*, of linking Moses’ hands with those

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<sup>49</sup> Wolfson notes that, in some medieval Jewish polemical literature, the reference in Gen. 27:22 to Esau’s hands and Jacob’s voice is employed as a springboard for the discussion of Christendom’s violent nature. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 133.

discussed by *Sefer Yeşirah*.<sup>50</sup> Rather, Abulafia references Moses' battle with Amaleq in order to suggest a comparison between the covenantal power latent in Moses' hands and that murderous power exerted by Esau's. That murderous power, we may understand, is to be associated with Christianity. Thus, while Moses' hands play a crucial role in the proper configuring of the *sefirot* and of the upper covenant in conventional kabbalistic discourse, here we see contrasted the malevolency of Esau's (Christendom's) hands. The power exerted by Esau's hands is the profane and, by extension, most certainly also the demonic counterpart to that of Moses'.

The voice between the hands of Esau in Abulafia's discussion is, following after Gen. 27:22, nevertheless the voice of Jacob. It enunciates God's name, from which, apparently, the redemptive ingathering of the Jews from exile among the nations ensues. This, so the end of the passage suggests, is to be accompanied by the restoration of the *Shekhinah* to its place in Jerusalem and, thus, by the apparent rectification of the *sefirot*, as suggested as well in the conclusion of the passage. The covenant of the tongue between Esau's two hands thus may be understood to thwart the latter's role in the exile and in the persecution of the Jews; thus, the covenant belongs to Jacob, representative of the central *sefira Tiferet*, and it enacts the mystico-theurgical redemption that encapsulates as well Esau's, or Christendom's, ultimate defeat. To be sure, no "covenant of Esau" is specifically mentioned in this

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<sup>50</sup> *Bahir*, § 135, 137. *Zohar* 2, 57a, 66a-67a.

passage; only his hands, flanking the covenant of the tongue, are mentioned.<sup>51</sup>

However, the connection between this passage concerning Esau's two hands and that from the anonymous commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah*, which concerned Esau's covenant, should be clear enough, given that Esau's hands are here drawn directly into the discussion of the covenant of the tongue. The ultimate purpose of this current passage appears to be to contrast the redemptive aspect of Moses' and Jacob's covenantal relationship with God,<sup>52</sup> exercised through Jewish mystical practice, with the evil potency ascribed to Esau. We will have occasion to revisit this discussion later of Esau's two hands; a related passage considers both Jacob and Esau, respectively, each in terms of the *sefirot* and of a bifold nature.

Three other passages, these from 'Oşar 'Eden Ganuz, may now be considered in their own turn. Each of these make mention of the bipartite nature of the covenant of Esau, composed as it is of warp and woof. One issue that must occupy us in each of these passages is the fact that the phrase ברית עשו, an anagram of the phrase *sheti va-'erev*, can have two meanings. It may at times be read as "covenant of Esau," as has been the case above, or, as has been observed by Wolfson, it can be read as "they made a covenant."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> We will see presently a parallel passage from 'Oşar 'Eden Ganuz which does make mention of Esau – or at least of the phrase ברית עשו – in apparent connection again with the covenant of the tongue.

<sup>52</sup> Jacob is himself described as *sheti va-'erev* in 'Or ha-Sekhel, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 233, fol. 98a; printed edition, 94.

<sup>53</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 140.

The first passage to be considered from 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz has something of the quality of automatic writing, of a stream of consciousness operating through a series of *gematriyot*, and it is thus difficult to render a literal translation, but it will be useful to paraphrase the passage. The section that concerns us<sup>54</sup> begins with a discussion of the phrase *sheti va- 'erev*. Its numerical value is added to the number eleven by Abulafia, in connection with a prior allusion to this latter number as one half of the twenty-two letter alphabet. The value for *sheti va- 'erev* plus eleven, Abulafia relates, "is a great secret: 'the conversion of male and female;' 'He created male and female, granule [גרנול]." The numerical total of the phrase *sheti va- 'erev* added to eleven yields nine hundred and ninety-nine, the same value as the subsequent two phrases which concern the male and female. Thus we see that Abulafia intends to convey that the warp and woof referenced in the phrase *sheti va- 'erev* represent the opposed poles of masculinity and femininity. This is subsequently elaborated upon with respect to heaven and earth, the two inclinations in man, two unspecified but opposed *sefirot*, two opposite thoughts within the angel Michael, and the opposed words pleasure ('*oneg*) and plague (*nega* ').<sup>55</sup> The numerical value of the phrase "flax and wool" - making up, by implication, the warp and woof of a *shatnez*

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<sup>54</sup> 'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 33b-34a; printed edition, pp. 69-70.

<sup>55</sup> Derived from *Sefer Yeṣirah* 2:7. We should note a related passage from Baruch Togarmi's commentary to *Sefer Yeṣirah*, where he characterizes both the covenant of the tongue and of circumcision as bifold, each being composed of the good and evil inclinations. Among the subsequent dichotomies associated with these inclinations are Adam and Eve and Jew and Gentile. *Sefer Maṭtehot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 234.

garment - is employed to derive a connection to the phrases “face of two inclinations” and “unique and explicit, permuted.” The latter phrase alludes most certainly to the Tetragrammaton, and probably, given the context, more specifically to its two parts, the YH and VH. These, in line with our earlier discussions, conform to the qualities of masculinity and femininity, as well as to the angelic and demonic components of the efflux from the Active Intellect, conforming to man’s two inclinations. *Sheti va-‘erev* here, then, encapsulates most of what we have also seen of the essential nature of the Teli.

We learn next, in the current passage, something of what this duality implies with respect to the covenant of circumcision. For the phrase *sheti va-‘erev* is here related to the anagrammatic expression ברית עשו. This covenant is then described as a “complete covenant,” the latter phrase having the same numerical value as that for both *sheti va-‘erev* and ברית עשו. As well, the phrase “circumcision of the flesh” is drawn into a like equivalence. This circumcision of the flesh, Abulafia tells us explicitly, “is *sheti va-‘erev*,” such that we may understand that the nature of circumcision is that it partakes of the opposed aspects discussed above. We may extend this understanding further, to surmise that circumcision brings the Jewish man into the likeness of the bipartite Teli. From the first two words of Psalm 33:21<sup>56</sup> Abulafia subsequently derives the numerical value three hundred and fifty-two.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “For in Him (our heart shall rejoice, because we have trusted in His holy name).”

<sup>57</sup> From the two words in the passage כי בו Abulafia derives the equation sixteen times twenty-two, yielding three hundred and fifty-two, based on permuting the letters as such: יו כב.

This number, Abulafia observes, is also, inter alia, the result of the *gematriyot* of the words “in the intellect” and “[the] accuser.”

That the covenant of circumcision here brings man, as we have observed, into a likeness to the Teli suggests a strong parallel with the discussion from the commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah* analyzed previously, where the phrase ברית עשו appeared in much the same context, that of the two-fold nature of the Teli. In both passages, the nature of this bipartite structure was amplified in a series of *gematriyot*. The one difference between the two passages is that there was no ambiguity in the commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah* to the fact that עשו referred to Esau and did not there mean “they made.” The fact that that passage mentioned עשו in connection with the Prince of Abomination, with the corporeal Prince and with the “head of corners” appeared to bear this out. Here that same clarity is absent. And, indeed, it is perhaps easier to understand that the phrase “they made” is here intended, rather than “Esau,” because the thrust of the passage simply concerns the relationship between circumcision and the motif *sheti va-‘erev*, and there is not very much present by which to understand a reference to Esau.

Nevertheless, there is one juncture at which there may be some relevance between this discussion and the others we have seen which overtly reference Esau, and that is in Abulafia’s mention of the “accuser” towards the end of the passage, drawn as it is into a numerical equivalence with the phrase “mixed in my power.” Abulafia here refers most certainly to the demonic, idolatrous component of the



efflux from the Active Intellect, a notion confirmed by the appearance of the phrase “in the intellect,” possessing the same numerical value. This component of the Active Intellect we have already seen linked to Jesus and Christianity, and hence an allusion to Esau here is conceivable. This possibility, to reiterate, is opened up by the discussion of *sheti va-‘erev* with respect, much more overtly, to a covenant of Esau elsewhere.

However, if the covenant, in its being *sheti va-‘erev*, is comprised of both components of the Active Intellect, as it certainly is in Abulafia’s estimation, then referring to it as the “covenant of Esau” poses an obvious problem. For Esau can symbolize at most only the bodily portion of the covenant, perhaps the physical act alone. This idea represents an interesting inversion of expectations, for to associate Christianity with physical circumcision, devoid of spiritual content, ostensibly flies in the face of the obvious fact that Christians do not partake of bodily circumcision. Indeed, they forswore it precisely because of their avowed perception that it lacked spiritual content, the latter being what they claimed to have sought in their dispensing with the physical act.<sup>58</sup> In this we may see the beginnings of another polemical turn on Abulafia’s part, one whose outlines we will continue to delineate. This is his implication that Christianity, contrary to appearances, embodies a base, physical covenantal modality in its dedication to a corporealized divinity; the physical covenant of which Christians partake is therefore denuded of its all-

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<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Rom. 2:28, 1Cor. 7:19, Gal. 5:2, 6.

important spiritual content. Abulafia refers in the current passage to circumcision, in its state of completeness, as being *sheti va-‘erev* - ברית עשו, *brit shalom*, and *sheti va-‘erev* all have the same numerical value. This conception of the covenant as complete refers on the one hand to the two-part procedure, *sheti va-‘erev*, that Abulafia observes in the act of circumcision.<sup>59</sup> But it also refers more than likely to circumcision’s possession of two components, a spiritual and a material dimension. This notion is developed specifically in the next passage to be considered.

As I have suggested, if we perceive in the phrase ברית עשו in the current context another reference to Esau, then we are faced with the problem that Abulafia would be describing Esau’s covenant as “complete,” a notion inconsistent with the statement that Christianity is devoid of the spiritual dimension of the covenant. This, however, is not a problem that is unfamiliar to us when we recall what we have seen elsewhere in Abulafia’s corpus. For we have already observed that the Teli, in its evil capacity, and Sandalfon, the demonic component of the Active Intellect, is described by Abulafia in a fashion that suggests that each comprises the whole of the divine Active Intellect. We have noted that the bipartite entity that is *sheti va-‘erev* appears to oscillate, in Abulafia’s conceptualization or experience of it, between the wholly good and the wholly evil. There is, furthermore, visual evidence from the manuscript rendering of Abulafia’s *Sefer ha-Brit* that the cross should be understood

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<sup>59</sup> For kabbalistic interest in this aspect of circumcision, see Wolfson, “Woman-The Feminine as Other,” pp. 186-187.

as complete and *sheti va-‘erev*. Abulafia appears there to link a geometric cross with the YH and VH and, as a result, with the complete configuration of *sheti va-‘erev*.<sup>60</sup>

### The Spiritual Covenant

The second passage from *’Oṣar ’Eden Ganuz* to be considered reads as follows:<sup>61</sup>

...And behold the hidden letters of [the name Shaddai] *yod, nun; lamed, tav; vav, dalet*; and they are “Prince,” and the secret of Shaddai is Metatron. Behold, together it is “Metatron, Prince of the Countenance,” and it is “spilling seed [*shikhvat zera ’*]”...It is fitting to cut among ourselves the “covenant of circumcision,” whose secret is the “four *ḥayyot*,” because from them is our identity,<sup>62</sup> and the covenant is cut in the form *sheti va-‘erev*. And it is fitting to cut this corporeal covenant and to cleave to that which is spiritual in it, which is the knowledge of the name, because it is not possible for the name to be revealed until its paths are taken *sheti va-‘erev*, which is ברית

<sup>60</sup> In *Sefer ha-Brit*, a portion of the text of the manuscript is itself arranged in the form of a cross. The phrase “and cut a new covenant (*v’karat brit ḥadasha*)” make up the cross’ lateral axis. Abulafia observes that the first and last letters of this phrase are VH, the second half of the Tetragrammaton, following which he records a set of letter transpositions of the complete Tetragrammaton. We may surmise that he conceived of the vertical axis of this cross in terms of the first half of the Tetragrammaton, YH, just as, as we have seen, he viewed the Tetragrammaton as cruciform, *sheti va-‘erev*. Abulafia’s critique of the Christian covenant may be apparent in the text itself that comprises the cross’ horizontal axis, “and cut a new covenant,” by which he likely sought to imply the insufficiency of the Christian covenant. The VH of the Tetragrammaton, we have seen, corresponds for Abulafia with Christendom. That Abulafia conceived of the vertical axis in terms of the YH is apparent: He derives the words “and it was so” from the four letters that begin and end that axis’ first and last lines (*yod, kaf, yod* and *nun*), combined with the letters *vav* and *he’*. The latter two letters, we recall, come from the cross’ other axis. Together, this phrase, Abulafia reports, is the secret of “the existence (*ha-havayah*),” the word *havayah* being comprised of the same letters as the complete Tetragrammaton. *Sefer ha-Brit*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 36b; printed edition, pp. 54-55.

<sup>61</sup> *’Oṣar ’Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 130a; printed edition, p. 286.

<sup>62</sup> This is so with respect to man’s four bodily humors, as Abulafia had mentioned previously.

עשו. That is to say, if man does not understand the actions of God, he does not understand Him, and that which he understands of Him is through the covenant of the holy language. And that which testifies to His sabbatical actions and to its signs, which are the repose and the gathering and the cleaving and the cessation [*shevitat*] of the action of dispersal, it is the second sign, and the Sabbath is the sign of repentance [*teshuvah*], and the sitting [*yeshivah*] is the sign of study, and the motion, its sign is weariness and fatigue [*yegiy'ah ve-'ayefot*], and there is no end save in repose. And “the day of repose” hints to eternal and sworn [*mushba'at*] repose. And regarding this comes the mentioning of “in the rainbow” to mention the covenant of world, year and soul, for which it [the rainbow] was a sign. And so too the tefillin were for a sign and a remembrance and the intention behind every sign and wonder that comes in any place is as a remembrance, so that we will not forget what we have forgotten.

The conception that the “paths” of the divine name are *sheti va-'erev* is comprehensible when we consider that the Tetragrammaton is the name referenced. We have already seen the Tetragrammaton drawn into the discussion of the motif of *sheti va-'erev*, based upon its perceived bipartite composition. Knowledge of the name is here itself the consummation of the covenant of circumcision, Abulafia explains; the spiritual content of this act consists of this knowledge, and the act represents a coming into possession of the name.<sup>63</sup> For the covenant of circumcision, just as is the name, is *sheti va-'erev*. This parallelism between circumcision and knowledge of the name goes far in explaining the appearance of the phrase ברית עשו alongside the phrase “*sheti va-'erev*,” they are composed of the same letters, and the former phrase, in its covenantal evocation, elucidates the esoteric meaning of the

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<sup>63</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 89, for a discussion of the connection, for Abulafia, between circumcision and the Tetragrammaton.

latter. All of this is sufficient to understand the former phrase, in this instance then, as “they made a covenant,” and not as “the covenant of Esau.”

Nevertheless, further inspection yields an additional possibility. In discussing the prior passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, we had noted that Abulafia references the “completeness” of the covenant that is cut *sheti va-'erev*, and we had suggested that the spiritual and physical components of the covenant together embodied that completeness. This is commensurate with the analogy drawn in the current instance between the bipartite name and the bipartite covenant, for the two components of the name we saw in the preceding chapter to be spiritual and corporeal. It is in the passage under current consideration that Abulafia makes specific reference to the requirement that the covenant possess a spiritual component in order to be complete. One must, he says, “cleave to that which is spiritual” within the “corporeal covenant.” And that which is spiritual therein, fittingly, is intellective in nature; that is, it partakes of the intellective dimension of the efflux from the Active Intellect, as opposed to that which is corporeal, and hence, as we have seen, imaginative, demonic, and to be associated with Jesus and Christianity. We may understand that Abulafia intends this intellective efflux when he refers to the spiritual dimension of the covenant because he identifies it explicitly with “knowledge of the name.”

I am already suggesting that a polemical subtext is operative here, and we shall see it stated explicitly as we proceed. For the moment we may observe that Abulafia goes on in the current context to proffer the possibility of the complete

covenant, that is, one that comprises not merely the corporeal but the spiritual dimension as well, to the Jews alone. For he next sets about defining what is entailed in the knowledge of the name, that knowledge standing as the spiritual component of the covenant. First, Abulafia relates that an understanding of God's actions is essential to this knowledge of the name. Recalled here is the Maimonidean contention that God may be understood only through His actions and not in His essence, and that His names are representative of His attributes and not of His essence.<sup>64</sup> For both, a linkage is apparent between God's names and His actions. Abulafia subsequently specifies what he intends in this reference to the understanding of God's actions. He refers in particular to actions with respect to the Sabbath. These include cessation from labor and, by extension, the study of Torah, the latter being signified as well in the injunction to rest ("yeshivah" in the current passage, which implies for Abulafia both sitting and studying). The means to understand God's sabbatical actions are found within "the holy language," as Abulafia puts it. Since almost invariably for Abulafia the calling up of the esoteric significations of Scripture or of a word or of a name operates on the basis of letter operations, we may understand that this is what he intends by his allusion to Hebrew. All of these elements to the knowledge of the name – honoring of the Sabbath, Torah study and skill in heremeneutical operations based upon Hebrew letter operations –

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<sup>64</sup> See, for example, *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fols. 62b, 63b, 65b, 67b, 71b-72a; printed edition, pp. 29, 31, 33, 37, 42, where Abulafia references Maimonides' conceptions in this regard. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 161-164.

already act to confine access to the spiritual dimension of the covenant to the Jews. Abulafia will as well go on to refer to the *mišvah* of tefillin as a sign requisite for the remembrance of the covenant.

But there is more to be said regarding the significance of God's sabbatical actions. For Abulafia writes here that the Sabbath signifies "gathering," "cessation of the action of dispersal," and eschatological "return." Sabbath refers, apparently then, to the messianic ingathering of the Jews and likely as well to the return of the *Shekhinah* from her exilic state. Once again a confinement to the Jews of the spiritual covenantal signification is apparent. And striking here is the parallel to the passage we had earlier examined from *Ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*, where Esau had been overtly referenced. There, the covenant between the latter's two hands was that of the tongue with respect to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We saw in that instance that the ingathering of the Jews and the return of the *Shekhinah* to Jerusalem were discussed specifically as a consequence of this covenant and of the Hebrew alphabet. The power of the twenty-two letters, there associated by Abulafia again with both the covenant and with study, led to a unification of the *sefirot*. This, Abulafia explained, is to happen in God's name and for the sake of His name. Thus, in these two passages a remarkable similarity is apparent, as a link is effected between letter permutation, God's name and the proper knowledge thereof, and the covenant. Only in the passage from *'Ošar 'Eden Ganuz* are we given to understand more particularly that the spiritualized component of the complete covenant, that

component which is confined to the Jews, is under special consideration. In the passage from *Ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*, we may recall, the covenant of the tongue, associated with the alphabet and thus with the eschatological ingathering described, was placed between the hands of Esau. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that, in the passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, the knowledge of God's name which concerns Abulafia is achieved through the "covenant of the holy language," that is, through the same covenant of the tongue described in *Ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*.<sup>65</sup> Based on this series of parallels, we may have reason to consider an additional valence to the phrase, in the passage from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, ברית עשו. For the covenant of the holy tongue there described may be construed as partaking of one final parallel with the passage from *Ve-Zo't li-Yehudah*, in that עשו here may once more refer to Esau, whose hands, in the earlier passage, flanked this covenant.

In this we return again to the now familiar problem of a covenant, in some way linked with Esau, being termed complete and bipartite, just as we had encountered the same concern at times with respect to the Teli and the evil component of the Active Intellect. We are left either to accept this difficult paradox – rendered all the more troubling in that the entire thrust of the current passage is to suggest that the Jews alone, as opposed to Esau (Christianity), possess the complete

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<sup>65</sup> Wolfson associates Abulafia's discussions of the covenant of the tongue with letter permutation and with the separation of the soul from the body. "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," p. 167.



bipartite covenant – or we must venture a different reading of the passage. To quote again part of the passage,

...because it is not possible for the name to be revealed until its paths are taken *sheti va-‘erev*, which is ברית עשו. That is to say, if man does not understand the actions of God, he does not understand Him, and that which he understands of Him is through the covenant of the holy language.

When Abulafia here writes “that is to say [*ke-lomar*]...,” it is conceivable that he means to suggest that ברית עשו refers to the misunderstanding of God and of His actions that is discussed immediately thereafter, as well as to the concealment of the name discussed before. This misunderstanding and ignorance, then, would be part and parcel of the covenant of Esau, a covenant devoid of the spiritual component allocated only to the Jews and thus rendered incomplete and merely corporeal. Abulafia will provide us with no further suggestions in this regard. However, it is appropriate before continuing to return momentarily to the first passage that we examined wherein the phrase “the covenant of Esau” appeared, the one found in the commentary to *Sefer Yeşirah*. That passage read in part, “...warp and woof (*sheti va-‘erev*), which is without a doubt the covenant of Esau, is the Prince of Abomination...” There the paradox that we may feel inclined to struggle against is rendered in a stark fashion; idolatry and Christianity are overtly discussed as bipartite, that is, *sheti va-‘erev*, which is to say, cruciform. Thus our effort in the

current context to seek a reading more consistent with the notion of the incompleteness of the covenant of Esau may be a misguided one.

### **The Four *Ḥayyot* and the Apotropaic Blood of Circumcision**

The last of the passages from *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* to be considered reads as follows:<sup>66</sup>

Were it not for the covenant of circumcision, the covenant of the tongue could not be sustained, and were it not for the covenant of the tongue, the covenant of circumcision could not be sustained. And behold “ten *sefirot belimah*,” their secret is “ten is the end of the covenant of circumcision.” And behold “they made [a] book [concerning] the covenant of circumcision,” whose secret, we find, is the four *ḥayyot* which contain heaven and earth. And every tetrad is ten after the fashion of one, two, three, four joined together and counted, and therefore it was that “[the] reward of circumcision, [is that] they made a covenant [ברית עשו],” which is *sheti va-‘erev* to announce this, that in this way do we make this covenant: We cut into the flesh of desire to honor God, and we reveal the crown and cut the excess flesh, warp and woof. And we possess the complete covenant, and in the circumcision we cut the warp of the weave and with the uncovering we cut the woof of the weave. And the blood is for us a sign that is on the two doorposts and on the lintel. And God saw the blood and passed “over the door, and did not allow the destroyer to come into” our houses to smite us (Ex. 12:23). And God passed to smite the Egyptians, and the rest is understood from this. And from the expression “to smite” [*lingof*] the secret is understood that the destroyer smites the bodies [*ha-gufim*]. And he who is within his house is saved from the destroyer when the wrath passes over. And the member that is a tool of procreation is not destroyed because of

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<sup>66</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fols. 4b-5a; printed edition, p. 9.

circumcision; rather, it is restored according to that which is intended for it, as will be said in its place, God willing.

In this translation I have rendered the phrase ברית עשו as “they made a covenant,” and there seems little basis on which to complicate the matter in this instance. The fact that the phrase, for Abulafia, proclaims the manner in which “...we make this covenant...” certainly suggests that it is the perfected covenant of the Jews that is under discussion. There are, however, other resonances in the passage that merit our attention. In the passage from *’Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz* that we examined immediately prior to this current one, Abulafia drew the four *ḥayyot* of Ezekiel’s chariot vision explicitly into his discussion of circumcision, pointing to the numerical equivalence between the phrases “four *ḥayyot*” and “covenant of circumcision.” In the current passage he does much the same thing. He suggests that the four *ḥayyot* are connected with the number ten by way of the pythagorean tetractys, that is, by observing that the sum of the numbers one through four is ten. This observation of Abulafia’s is relevant because the passage begins by asserting the relationship between circumcision and the ten *sefirot*; circumcision represents the completion of the *sefirot*. Thus, to assert the connection between the *ḥayyot* and the *sefirot* is to do the same between the *ḥayyot* and circumcision.

There is a further reason apparent for drawing the four *ḥayyot* into the discussion of circumcision, and it is the fact that the latter is *sheti va-’erev*. A clue to this is apparent as the passage continues. “And the blood is for us a sign that is on the

two doorposts and on the lintel,” it reads. Blood here refers at once to the blood placed by the Israelites on their homes to protect them in the Exodus story and to the blood of circumcision.<sup>67</sup> Abulafia here modifies Exodus 12:23 slightly, so that the reference to the two doorposts (*shtei ha-mezuzot*) now appears before that to the lintel. More than likely this is because he is concerned with the motif *sheti va-‘erev*, and he seeks a correspondence between this motif and the “*shtei*” doorposts and single lintel. It is not difficult to conceive of the doorposts and lintel, being that they are at right angles to one another, as conforming to a structure of warp and woof. Abulafia has in mind a geometrical correspondence between the doorposts and lintel and the motif of *sheti va-‘erev*, an approach which, we have seen, as well informs the theme of *sheti va-‘erev* when it is conceived of as cruciform. In this, in fact, we may understand, more than likely, a further significance to the recurrent appearance of the four *hayyot* in the context of these discussions. For when we conceive of *sheti va-‘erev* in terms of two lines intersecting at right angles we may as well be mindful of the four endpoints of these lines. And indeed, the continuation of the discussion lends further support to this contention. Immediately following the discussion of the blood on the doorposts and lintel with respect to circumcision, Abulafia goes on to make mention of the structure of man’s body with regard to the ten *sefirot*. These themselves are *sheti va-‘erev*, he relates, and they parallel

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<sup>67</sup> We may be reminded here of the talismanic apotropaic function of circumcision discussed in Chapter Three; in either of the readings of the blood here, protection from demons is an outcome. This is not Abulafia’s immediate concern here with respect to circumcision, but we have seen this view expressed elsewhere, and it is certainly implicit here.

...the four winds that are in the world, and they are on one side East/West, two [that are] a line revealed above, after the fashion of the sun in the day, and a line hidden below, after the fashion of the moon at night. And the side [which is] South and North, the two are a line revealed above, after the fashion of the moon [sun?] in the day and a line concealed below after the fashion of the moon at night. And this is reversed according to the movements in summer and winter...<sup>68</sup>

Just as the covenant of circumcision, which is *sheti va-‘erev*, or cruciform, represents the summation of the *sefirot*, so too does man’s entire body, the microcosm, conform to the sefirotic macrocosm. The latter Abulafia refers to specifically in terms of two perpendicular lines, that is, to a *sheti va-‘erev* or cruciform structure. One line runs East/West, the other South/North. These correspond to the “four winds” of the world. These in turn we may now see to parallel quite well the four *hayyot* that were linked earlier to circumcision.<sup>69</sup> Thus, we may understand that these *hayyot* represent for Abulafia the four endpoints of the two intersecting lines that comprise the *sheti va-‘erev* structure of circumcision.

To conceive of this configuration in visual terms is to come to a surprising discovery. Christian tradition had had it since late antiquity that the four apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were to be represented by the four faces possessed by the *hayyot* of Ezekiel’s vision in the desert. These were the faces of an ox, an

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<sup>68</sup> *’Oṣar ‘Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 5a; printed edition, p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Thus we find in *Sitrei Torah* the notion that man’s own form follows the pattern of the four *hayyot*. MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 33b; printed edition, p. 68.

eagle, a lion and a man.<sup>70</sup> The profusion of early and medieval Christian examples of visual representations of the four apostles, represented as the four creatures whose faces are those of the scriptural *ḥayyot*, is overwhelming. The apostles are time and again portrayed as the *ḥayyot*, surmounting the endpoints of the cross or surrounding a mandorla with Jesus in the center, themselves, in the latter examples, visually comprising the cross.<sup>71</sup> A survey of Snyder's *Medieval Art* yields many such examples.<sup>72</sup> We may see, then, that when Abulafia conceives of the *sheti va-'erev* covenant as surmounted on four sides by the *ḥayyot*, we are confronted by a striking parallel with the widely popular representation of the cross surrounded by the symbols of the four apostles. It is difficult to hold to an explanation of this parallelism that does not acknowledge the likelihood that Abulafia was influenced by the Christian imagery that he saw around him.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ez. 1:10, and see also Rev. 4:7.

<sup>71</sup> Idel and Wolfson both discuss a parallelism between Christian notions of the luminous mandorla and contemporary Jewish mystical conceptions. Idel, "Some Remarks," pp. 120-121, Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 256. The configuration that I describe here in the Christian imagery, of a divine and luminous body surrounded by four *ḥayyot*, should recall the structure of Ezekiel's chariot vision, the mandorla being analogous to the *ḥashmal*.

<sup>72</sup> We find, for instance, the *Maiestas Domini* in the Vivian Bible (p. 221), the covers for the Pericopes of Henry II and the Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram (pp. 226-227), the front of the Altar of Saint Ambrose in Milan (p. 227), the Enthroned Christ in the Codex Aureus of Speyer Cathedral (p. 243), the *Maiestas Domini* in the Saint Sever Beatus of Liebana (p. 252), the *Maiestas Domini* relief in Saint Sernin, Toulouse (p. 266), and the *Maiestas Domini* tympanum of the west façade of Chartres Cathedral (p. 364). We might add to these such important works as the Book of Kells, the Archepiscopal Chapel ceiling in Ravenna, and the façade of the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi.

<sup>73</sup> Of the locations of the works listed in the previous note, we know only of Abulafia's presence in Ravenna, and we do not know whether he would ever have had occasion to see the Archepiscopal Chapel ceiling. We may observe, however, that the motif in question is sufficiently common that Abulafia could have come across it at any time in any place during his extensive travels, or that it may have been described to him by a Christian associate.

A related passage from elsewhere in *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz* helps to bear out the notion that Abulafia approaches the theme of *sheti va-'erev* in geometric terms, and that this approach is operative in his conceptualization of the four *hayyot*. He writes,<sup>74</sup>

*Sheti va-'erev* is “two and four [שתים וארבע],” because they are lines and planes, because the line is two points and the plane is two lines, which are four points, and the body is two planes, which are eight points. And for all of their points, the secret concerning the first ones is one, two, four, eight, [א ב ד ה] and their hint is “in one [באהד].”

Abulafia will next go on to observe that the numerical total of באהד is fifteen, the same as that for the divine name YH. Certainly the geometric concern with regard to the theme of *sheti va-'erev* is very much in evidence in the passage.<sup>75</sup> Abulafia is quite specific that he perceives in the phrase a structure of two lines and four points, just as we had perceived it above. He adds to this an observation concerning a material body, and how it as well fits into the discussion of lines, points and planes. Ultimately, all of the points enumerated together yield the name YH and allude to God's unity. This is consistent with what we have observed with regard to Abulafia's conception of the completed circumcision; its *sheti va-'erev* structure

<sup>74</sup> *'Oṣar 'Eden Ganuz*, MS Oxford-BL 1580, fol. 13a; printed edition, p. 26.

<sup>75</sup> A closely related passage appears in *'Ish 'Adam*. The secret of “עשר,” we are told, is “*sheti*, which are the two inclinations, *va-'erev*, which are four, thus six, containing fire, air and water, to the six extremities.” Here, the geometry of the six spatial directions is applied to the created world through the use of a *gematria*; the numerical value for the word “six” is the same as that for the words “fire, air and water (*'esh, ruah, mayim*)” (605). All is related as well to the phrase *sheti va-'erev*. *'Ish 'Adam*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 19a; printed edition, p. 46.

represents the unity of the *sefirot*, and, implicitly in the earlier passage, of man's body as well. We may surmise then that Abulafia conceives of the name YH as reflecting the completed covenant. Since it is only one half of the Tetragrammaton, and since the completed covenant is ultimately consummated only by means of its spiritual half, and since we have seen that the YH portion of the Tetragrammaton represents the positive, male and intellectual component of the Active Intellect, we may understand that the YH in the current passage likewise stands for the completion of the *sheti va-'erev* configuration. The VH of the Tetragrammaton, logically then, stands for Abulafia as the material component of the completed covenant – as the physical act of circumcision in isolation from its spiritual dimension, or as the defective, corporeal Christian covenant of Esau. So then do we find the following in *Sitrei Torah*:<sup>76</sup> "...And indeed, the YH that is inscribed testifies to Him about whom it is said that He is neither a body nor a potency in a body, and this is what I say to you, its one half judges its [other] half." That is to say, the YH is spiritual in nature, the VH corporeal.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 35b; printed edition, p. 77.

<sup>77</sup> Elsewhere, in *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, Abulafia again brings together the motifs of circumcision and of the four *hayyot* in a manner that once more suggests the configuration *sheti va-'erev*. He writes, "...And this is what I revealed to you concerning the ten *sefirot*, five of them are heavenly and supernal and five of them are terrestrial and beneath, as I described to you. And thus 'the limb of procreation' is 'the limb of the covenant of circumcision of the uncircumcised,' prince without the covenant, prince of the four *hayyot* whose secret is ב"ב. That is, that they are joined two [and] two and revert to one body, like the working of Creation and as well the working of the chariot." *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 88b; printed edition, p. 116. The phrase *sheti va-'erev* is never mentioned here, but, in view of what we have seen regarding Abulafia's other discussions of the *hayyot* in connection with circumcision, it should be apparent that the pairing of the *hayyot* in two sets, again in connection with circumcision, here too suggests the *sheti va-'erev* configuration. The



To return to our starting point then, the passage from 'Ošar 'Eden Ganuz that considers the *sheti va-'erev* nature of the doorposts and lintel of Ex. 12:23, one should observe that Abulafia makes specific reference to the nature of the fate undergone by the Egyptians. They are struck down bodily: "...And from the expression 'to smite' [*lingof*] the secret is understood that the destroyer smites the bodies [*ha-gufim*]." That a polemic is operative here should be apparent, given our analysis to this point. As discussed earlier, Egypt symbolizes for Abulafia the gentile world generally, and Jesus and Christianity specifically.<sup>78</sup> To say that Christendom is smitten bodily while the Jews, by dint of circumcision, are saved from this fate is consistent with the notion that the Christian covenant, being incomplete, is purely corporeal in nature. The Christian thus suffers a punishment which operates precisely in the nature of his initial transgression, that of idolatry; his service is rendered to the body, so that his penalty itself is a corporeal one. In this we are reminded of that which the Christian crucifix actually represents; it stands for the fate suffered by Jesus himself, his bodily crucifixion. For Abulafia, then, this fate stands as a judgment upon Jesus rendered for his own epitomization of idolatry.

Further, we observed earlier the threat that Abulafia perceives in the temptations posed by idolatry. This threat is a bodily one, but it particularly takes the

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reversion of the *hayyot* to one body would then imply the completion of the covenant, as before. This notion is reminiscent of that just discussed from 'Ošar 'Eden Ganuz, where the phrase "in one" was derived from the sequence of points and lines seen by Abulafia to be implicit in the phrase *sheti va-'erev*.

<sup>78</sup> Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 69; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 59 n. 37.

form of punishment by castration. In the current context, since we are considering the bodily punishment undergone by the Egyptians, in contradistinction to the preservation afforded the Jews by dint of their phallic apotropaic device – their circumcision, the blood of which adorns their *sheti va-‘erev* doorposts and lintels - it is not difficult to surmise that the punishment to the Christians that Abulafia has in mind takes the form of a maiming, of a castration. This again is consonant with the idea that to be a Christian male is to have been feminized. In this we may understand the ramifications of the continuation of Abulafia’s discussion. Abulafia specifically suggests that the Jew is spared the fate of castration. To the contrary, through his circumcision the phallus of the Jew is augmented: “...And the member that is a tool of procreation is not destroyed because of circumcision; rather, it is restored [*nitqan*] according to that which is intended for it...” In its restoration through circumcision, the phallus of the Jew assumes a status beyond that which it possessed before. Once again, the unification of the *sefirot* is implied here, and the reference to restoration evokes the notion of communion with the *sefira Binah*, a communion that carries with it theurgical implications for the sefirotic array as a whole.<sup>79</sup>

In the same context, Abulafia writes that “...he who is within his house is saved from the destroyer when the wrath passes over.” Placed as this idea is alongside the ideas of the maiming or castration of the non-Jews and the protective circumcision of the Jews, it is not unreasonable to observe a like significance to the

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<sup>79</sup> See, for this notion of *Binah*, Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p. 286.

safety accorded the Jew by his being in his house. Analyzed in depth by Wolfson, Abulafia's contemporaries deemed marital relations as crucial to the theurgical unification of the *sefirot*, the latter being a theme which we have observed several times now to be central to the passage at hand.<sup>80</sup> Framed as it is alongside a discussion of the phallus restored through circumcision, we would do well to read the notion of protection from maiming being afforded by being in one's house in similar phallic terms. That is, the phallus that is itself safe in its house is protected and completed and accomplishes the unification of the *sefirot*. This "house" - or housing, perhaps - is, naturally, the wife, the terrestrial embodiment of the *Shekhinah*, who in sexual intercourse herself serves to complete the phallic configuration.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the reference to the house and the safety it affords serves for Abulafia as another means by which to make the same point; the completed phallus – the phallus which is *sheti va-'erev* – represents a communion with the *sefirot* and a spiritualized covenant denied to idolators – Christians – who have essentially lost their male status through their corporeal preoccupation. Wolfson, we have noted, observed the polemical dimension for kabbalists of the erotic nature of the theurgy that they described; since this theurgy entails physical sexual intercourse with one's

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<sup>80</sup> See the discussion in Chapter Two concerning Nadab and Abihu as well as the larger zoharic conception of the role of marital relations in staying off the demonic threat.

<sup>81</sup> We may be reminded here as well of Wolfson's framing of the Lacanian discussion of the occultation of the phallus. For Lacan, the latter's role as signifier is ultimately consummated in its becoming absent in the act of intercourse. Here, in similar fashion does the phallus become absent when it is placed in its housing, and likewise is its fulfillment accomplished in its concealment. See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 128-135.

wife, the Christian monastic ideal of celibacy is tantamount to the inflicting upon one's self of the destruction described by Abulafia in the current passage. It is for the same reason that the *Zohar* enjoins against sleeping alone.<sup>82</sup> To do so is to open one's self to the demonic threat, identified there chiefly with Lilith, which again is analogous to the one described here by Abulafia. In the *Zohar*, the threat of idolatrous fornication with demons ensues. For Abulafia, the threat of emasculation, concomitant with idolatry, results from the same infraction, the failure to unify the *sefirot* through intercourse with one's wife. In the *Zohar*, one is essentially proffered a choice, cohabitation with the *Shekhinah* – and theurgical unification, achieved through one's wife – or idolatrous cohabitation with demons. For Abulafia, the choice is of theurgical unification through one's wife, represented by the restoration of the phallus as *sheti va-'erev*, or dismemberment along the lines of the Christian model.

In this respect, Abulafia's statement in the current context, "We cut into the flesh of desire to honor God," appears to suggest one final polemical gesture. Wolfson observes that circumcision was deemed by Maimonides as a protective device against idolatrous behavior to the extent that it tempered a man's lustful feelings.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the circumcised Jew is protected from the temptations that plunge the non-Jew into sexual lasciviousness and idolatrous conduct. The cutting into "the flesh of desire" that results in the Jew's honoring God is, then, a cutting into his

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<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, *Zohar* 1:19b.

<sup>83</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 90, 219-220.

desire itself. Thus, God is honored in the proper sexual conduct that results, conduct which effects the preservation of this same covenant, that of the phallus, while the non-Jew, denied this protection, defiles himself and his already incomplete covenant.

We have managed to deduce from the preceding passages concerning the theme *sheti va-‘erev* and concerning a covenant of Esau that the latter may be considered in two ways: It is cruciform, that is, *sheti va-‘erev*, and as such it partakes in some way of the completeness with which Abulafia associates that configuration, as is particularly apparent when he discusses the nature of circumcision. Yet the covenant of Esau is nevertheless incomplete, being purely physical in nature, lacking the spiritual component of the covenant of the Jews, the latter embodied in, but not confined to, physical circumcision. Doubtless, Abulafia has in mind here the Christian commitment to a corporealized divinity.

In one sense at least, then, both of the covenants under consideration, that of Esau and that of the Jews, may be considered *sheti va-‘erev*. Concerning that of the Jews, Abulafia is unambiguous on this point. Concerning that of Esau, though the incompleteness of his covenant is a recurring theme, nevertheless that covenant is as well *sheti va-‘erev*, just as the crucifix is *sheti va-‘erev*. Through this observation, I believe we may understand the following passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*. The passage begins by linking the demonic both with that which is animalistic within man and with the blood of animals, which is not to be consumed. The flesh is appropriate for consumption, while the blood should be spilled upon the sacrificial

altar.<sup>84</sup> This latter concern leads Abulafia into a discussion of Abraham's binding of Isaac and how it distinguishes the Jews from the idolators, who boast of their gods and sacrifice their children.<sup>85</sup> Jacob is next considered, as the third of the three patriarchs. The *sefirot* corresponding to the latter are clearly being alluded to by Abulafia as he writes, "Three that are one [ג נ ט]: 'emet, *hesed*, *din*."<sup>86</sup> In this Abulafia appears to invoke a trinity in contradistinction to the one proffered by the idolatrous Christians. This is particularly apparent in his adoption of the Christian idiom, "three that are one."<sup>87</sup> Abulafia continues:<sup>88</sup>

...The attribute 'emet is found with the power of growth. And the explanation of this is that, with the growth of much study, the truth is revealed, and not, by any means, without much study. And thus study is mentioned explicitly with respect to the attribute and concern of Jacob, and with respect to Esau his brother hunting is mentioned, because it [hunting] is corporeal growth in two respects. As it says, "...and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field" (Gen. 25:27). Thus there are two respects, "a cunning hunter" is one, in hunting animals, "a man of the field" is the second, concerning trees and grasses that are born in the field. "And Jacob was a humble man, dwelling in tents" (ibid.), is also two respects, the revealed one is "a humble man", the concealed one is "dwelling in tents". 'Man of *belimah*, 'man of vanities,' studying Torah, all of which is full of vanities. "From the breath [*hevel*, sharing the same consonants as the

<sup>84</sup> *Maṣteḥ ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 55b-56a; printed edition, pp. 58-59.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 56b; printed edition, p. 60. The notion that the idolators, in misunderstanding the sacrifice of Isaac, "boast of their gods and sacrifice even their children," juxtaposed, as it is, shortly thereafter with a discussion of Esau, appears to allude as well to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, considering that Christians interpreted the sacrifice of Isaac as presaging the crucifixion.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 57a; printed edition, p. 61.

<sup>87</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 131-133, n. 101.

<sup>88</sup> *Maṣteḥ ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fols. 57a-b; printed edition, pp. 61-62.

word “vanity”] of school children.”<sup>89</sup> And also, “Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecc. 1:2).

The passage continues by indicating that Esau spilled both animal and human blood, drawing a contrast with Jacob’s conduct. Similarly, Esau was hairy while Jacob was bald. The passage concludes by indicating that by becoming acclimated to study one may invert one’s animalistic tendencies.

Abulafia never mentions the concept *sheti va-‘erev* in this passage.

Nevertheless, his allusion to the mutually opposed *sefirot Hesed* and *Gevurah* can readily be seen to conform to the concept. Indeed, we have already seen the *sefirot* as a whole described as *sheti va-‘erev*, and we have also seen that the discussion of the covenant of the tongue, conforming to the *sefira Tif’eret* and linked with Jacob’s speech between Esau’s two hands, suggested in some manner the *sheti va-‘erev* “covenant of Esau.” But it must be acknowledged that, in the current passage, but for one significant addition, a reading that never diverges from the kabbalistic commonplace of a discussion of *Tif’eret*’s role as arbiter between the *sefirot Hesed* and *Gevurah* would be entirely plausible. That significant addition, not surprisingly, concerns Esau. When Jacob is described as partaking of two attributes, one encrypted in the phrase “a humble man”, the other in “dwelling in tents,” it is his internalization of the *middot* of Abraham and Isaac, that is, *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, that

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<sup>89</sup> b*Shabbat*, 119b.

is intended.<sup>90</sup> What then is intended when Abulafia relates that Esau as well partakes of two attributes, one encrypted in the phrase “a cunning hunter”, the other in “a man of the field”? In this we may be able to understand how it was that Jacob and Esau’s covenants were paired in the earlier passage concerning the covenant of the tongue. We see that, in that case, there was only one nexus for those covenants, *Tif’eret*. We may well understand the current passage, then, to be offering much the same paradigm. Jacob’s two-fold nature finds its expression in *Tif’eret*, and so must that of Esau. That Abulafia has in mind here the duplicitous – to use once again the term employed by Wolfson – composition of the Active Intellect is indubitable.

Thus, we have once more the situation where the *sheti va-‘erev* nature of the Active Intellect is not to be conceived merely in terms of the harmonization of good and evil, spiritual and material, components. Rather the Active Intellect as a whole oscillates entirely between its good and its evil, its angelic and its demonic, its pietistic and its idolatrous, and hence its Jewish and its Christian manifestations. In either of these manifestations it is inherently duplicitous and cruciform. This conception provides a useful context for the idea that Jacob’s nature is as “three that are one.” This rather overt nod to the Christian Trinity reflects a logical surmise on Abulafia’s part; if there is a debased and idolatrous triadic essence to Christianity, then the three-fold construct of *Hesed*, *Gevurah* and *Tif’eret* must be considered in equal and opposite terms. The two triads must be conceived of as opposing

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<sup>90</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 118-121.



expressions of the same basic entities. Further details of the passage at hand then emerge in clarity. For instance, both Jacob and Esau are linked by Abulafia to the concept of “growth.” In this we may easily recognize their mutual identification with – or *as* - each other. Jacob is linked to the “growth of much study,” that is, with that which is spiritual and pietistic in nature, while Esau is linked with “corporeal growth.” Thus each reflects one component of the *sheti va-‘erev* Active Intellect, though Abulafia will next elucidate the *sheti va-‘erev* nature of each in his turn. The conception of Jacob as bald, Esau as hairy is an apparent rearticulation of the notion that Esau is to be linked with that which is animalistic, while Jacob represents man’s nobility.<sup>91</sup> And thus it is that Esau is as well linked with bloodshed, seeming to effect a linkage with the passage’s initial topic, the savage conduct of idolators in their sacrifices.<sup>92</sup> That which is represented in Esau’s duplicitous constitution is thus to be shunned, from which we may understand that the wholly Christian, yet duplicitous, dimension of the Active Intellect is abhorrent. And so it is that we are exhorted by Abulafia to turn to study, that is, to the righteous dimension of the Active Intellect, by which, apparently, we may curtail the latter’s oscillations towards its idolatrous constitution.

Regarding these oscillations, and particularly the fact that the divine Active Intellect may become associated wholly and completely with evil, Wolfson makes

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<sup>91</sup> The association of hairiness with the demonic and baldness with purity is found as well in the *Zohar*. See, *Zohar* 3:48b-49a.

<sup>92</sup> Another polemic is being rendered here. Esau, that is, Christendom, is considered here to be barbaric in its recourse to sacrifice, the sacrifice of Jesus, of course, being central to Christian dogma.

some trenchant observations. He notes that Abulafia believed that each of the two inclinations within man had an appropriate time “allocated” to it, within which it held complete sway. “A time for this one and a time for that one,” is how Abulafia puts it.<sup>93</sup> This alone is helpful in seeking to understand how the bipartite Active Intellect may be seen to alternate as a whole between its two attributes. However, Wolfson discerns as well a false dichotomy in our conception of these two attributes; for Abulafia, Wolfson observes, “the difference between the good and evil inclinations is minimal” insofar as the periods within which each dominates are infinitesimally small.<sup>94</sup> In this manner, the opposition between the two extremes is ultimately overcome and effaced. So the discomfort that we may feel at the notion of a complete covenant being nevertheless wholly evil and corporeal may be assuaged; for that which is wholly evil ultimately becomes indistinguishable from its companion within the Active Intellect, that which is wholly good.

### **Partial and Complete Covenants**

On the subject of the theme *sheti va-‘erev* and its implications with respect to a “covenant of Esau,” there is one final passage to be considered. The passage, from *Sefer Melammed*, bears analysis in some depth because it is framed within a larger anti-Christian polemic. Abulafia engages in a sustained epistemological discussion.

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<sup>93</sup> Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” p. 151.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-152.

He notes disagreement between Jews and the other nations concerning calculations of the age of the world, but he relates that all agree that the world was created and is not preexistent, and likewise all agree that the first man was "...created from dust and not from a father and mother like us, and she [Eve] as well."<sup>95</sup> He reasons that this agreement is due to the fact that no animal in the world today is derived from dust; all are born from a father and mother. He continues, "And according to this understanding a man must examine whether such a matter happened alone for Adam and Eve, his wife, or if anything like this happened among all living things whose nature is to be born from seed, or if all of them were created after the fashion of worms, multiplied from the ground." Abulafia's sarcasm is in evidence here, it being quite apparent that humans aside from Adam and Eve (and other creatures as well) do not spring from the ground like worms. He will go on to demonstrate that in Genesis all of the world's animals are described as being created as entire species; only Adam and Eve are described as having been created individually, a fact that is due to their having been created in a unique fashion, that is, from the dust. Abulafia's polemical implication is apparent here. Regarding one who is said to have arisen without parents, in the first place Genesis denies this possibility, and, in the second, such a one may be likened to a worm. Abulafia refers here to Christian notions of the virgin birth, an interpretation that is all the more assured considering the context of

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<sup>95</sup> *Sefer ha-Melammed*, MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 303b; printed edition, p. 36.

his remarks, that being a discussion of where Israel and the nations agree and disagree.

Abulafia goes on to observe, however, that despite the scriptural prooftexts that he has evinced, there are only “wonderful observations” to be made, and that

...we have no [divine] proofs for any of them...there is no knowledge except in the intellect or in the senses, about which the intellect testifies, and regarding which it will bring many doubts in the heart. And also, because no prophet shows us sensory or intellectual signs today, so that we will know the truth of that which we receive from our fathers and from the sages of blessed memory, that is, from their excellent books.

An epistemologically tenuous situation has come to prevail in Abulafia’s own day, he explains, because of the absence of divine revelation, the likes of which was described in Scripture. Man has recourse to his reason and to his senses, and the latter is the subject for some skepticism at that. This, then, explains the divergence between the opinions and beliefs of Israel and those of the nations, and we may understand that, in terms of Abulafia’s larger view, the linkage of Judaism with the intellectual portion of the efflux from the Active Intellect, as against the idolators’ linkage with the sensory or imaginative element, harmonizes here with the sense that Israel’s appropriate understanding stems from its commitment to reason. Contemporary Jews, Abulafia observes, have as well the advantage of being able to turn to the illumination of received traditions, but the latter must be accepted on the

basis of faith and, presumably, of reason, given that there are again no divine revelations that may serve to verify any traditional perspective. It is the eminence of these traditions which, apparently here, obviates the need for contemporary divine revelation.

Now appears what is, for our purposes, the crux of Abulafia's discussion.<sup>96</sup>

And thus it remains to received doctrine concerning what has come to pass – indeed, concerning what is today as well, in respect to how it responds to what has come to pass. Such as our being sons of Jacob our father, peace be upon him, and the uncircumcised being sons of Esau, he who was circumcised in the phallus and uncircumcised of heart, and the Ishmaelites, sons of Ishmael, who also are circumcised in the phallus and somewhat of heart, with respect to their belief in the unity; there is no one who can deny that the matter is so, as the Torah relates it. Because thus we have it regarding this, and the intellect does not contradict a word of it. And if so, we have no way to deny it.

Abulafia explains first that Jewish notions of the relationships of the three abrahamic faiths to God are based, in the absence of contemporary divine revelation, upon the aforementioned traditions. So it is that Abulafia appears to somewhat concede that this view is denied the imprimatur of prophetic verification. And this, after all, is the larger epistemological theme of the passage. But this is a concession that may surprise us: For it is to the level of prophecy that the kabbalist attains in his cleaving to the Active Intellect, and this is the very state whose seeming absence,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., MS Paris-BN héb. 680, fol. 304a; printed edition, pp. 37-38.

paradoxically, emerges as the subject of the passage at hand. We may understand from all that we have seen that the completed covenant initiates a perfected state of union with the Active Intellect. This, Abulafia here explains, is the state enjoyed by the Jews. If it is true, then, that the Jew attains to divine revelation through his completed covenant, as Abulafia asserts time and again, then, ipso facto, it must also be divinely confirmed that the Jew possesses this very covenant. That is, this covenantal status is confirmed through prophetic experience and need not simply be accepted on the basis of received doctrines. From the thrust of Abulafia's core doctrines, this is a conclusion that would be impossible to overturn.

Yet the entire theme of the passage at hand concerns differences of opinion that result from the contemporary absence of divine revelation. We must explore whether this issue of divided opinions relates implicitly or overtly to Abulafia's own certainty or only to his ability to demonstrate the correctness of the Jewish opinion to others. If the issue is one of epistemological hesitation for his own part, then this must be so with respect to the two other abrahamic faiths that Abulafia discusses. For it is through a received doctrine, one seemingly lacking divine confirmation, that Abulafia asserts that the two other covenants are imperfect; Abulafia's revelatory mystical experiences would have constituted a sufficient prophetic proof regarding the nature of the Jewish covenant. Regarding the other two covenants, the basis for an unavoidable shadow of doubt on Abulafia's part with respect to their true status does find some degree of confirmation in what we have already observed: As we

have seen, the most inferior of the three covenants, that of the Christians, is described elsewhere as *sheti va- 'erev*, that is, complete. The quandry that we have met with before in the form of the question of how the Christian covenant can be *sheti va- 'erev*, duplicitous and thus complete - much after the fashion of the covenant of circumcision, in fact - if it is wholly corporeal, and thus lacking its crowning element, may lie behind Abulafia's apparent admission here that the position that the Christian covenant is incomplete lacks the impervious stamp of a divine demonstration. That it is possible to contend that Abulafia has some level of doubt concerning the inferiority of the Christian covenant, to reiterate, flows from the fact that the entire passage concerns the inability to achieve unassailable proofs due to the suspension of divine revelation. The logic of the passage leads Abulafia to his point regarding the three covenants – he perceives the same dilemma when it comes to appraising these relationships to God. This conforms notably with our earlier discussion concerning the temptations toward idolatry which, Abulafia admits, caused him great tribulation. We may discern here a shakiness to the edifice of belief that was crucial to Abulafia's conception of himself and of his mystical project. In this we may perhaps better understand how it is that, for Abulafia, the divine efflux may spontaneously transform itself in a moment<sup>97</sup> into that which is wholly evil; Abulafia's grip on what he describes as the purely pious aspect of this efflux was at best insecure, and revelation itself did not suffice to ameliorate the situation.

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<sup>97</sup> See Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," pp. 151-152, to be discussed shortly.

We may continue on to ask why it is that, if the argument that Abulafia articulates here is simply that the Jews are correct and the *goyim* are incorrect, the Jews lacking only some divine demonstration of the veracity of their position, and so being unable to convince the *goyim* of their error, Abulafia fails to mention that his own experiences are themselves divine proofs. At the very least at the time of his writing of this passage, Abulafia seems to have lacked some measure of confidence in the status of his or other kabbalistic revelations as truly prophetic proofs. Elsewhere he does speak of the proofs and signs wrought by the kabbalists, but not here. And certainly at other junctures, as when he undertakes a mission to the pope, his assurance in the prophetic – even messianic – nature of his calling must have been a good deal stronger.

Yet it is inconceivable that such a discussion on Abulafia's part would end in the concession that we have our knowledge on the basis of received doctrine, which will have to suffice in the face of the challenges posed by the nations. Rather, the passage ends with firm declarations concerning the ironclad nature of the proofs that the Jews have at hand. Concerning the textual, traditional sources for truth, Abulafia specifies that it is the very Torah itself upon which he relies. And most certainly the Torah is the textual prooftext par excellence; indeed it is difficult to draw any distinction between divine revelation and Torah. In keeping with the thread of his earlier discussion, Abulafia goes on to say that logic as well affirms all of the perspectives that he has culled from the Torah. So it is, Abulafia maintains, that,



even in the absence of prophetic revelation, clear certainty in the Jewish perspective on the matter of the covenants is wholly attainable. This is so despite his earlier contention that the “wonderful observations” derived from Scripture, as in the case of the prooftexts with respect to the uniqueness of Adam and Eve, depend upon recourse to the intellect and upon the perspectives offered in the wider traditional corpus. That is to say, observations drawn from Scripture remain of a manifestly lesser quality than divine proofs. The certitude of Abulafia’s closing statement is thus to some extent qualified by his earlier remarks.

To leave aside now these epistemological questions and their wider implications for Abulafia’s troubled relationship to Christianity, we have a more specific point to consider. This concerns the purported Christian covenant. For I have been assuming that this passage bears a strong connection with those others that we have examined which discuss the ברית עשו, or covenant of Esau. In the current passage, such a covenant is again mentioned by Abulafia. Esau’s physical circumcision is discussed, and it is stated that he lacks the circumcision of the heart. This latter component constitutes the spiritual element of the covenant discussed earlier,<sup>98</sup> which is to say, according to the current passage, Esau’s covenant is not *sheti va-‘erev*. His physical circumcision may have been so, but this does not

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<sup>98</sup> See *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, MS Oxford-BL 1605, fol. 84a; printed edition, p. 106, regarding the circumcision of the heart’s status as “the basis of the whole covenant.” See also, *‘Or ha-Sekhel*: “...the revealed circumcision is the cause of the circumcision of the heart, and the circumcision of the heart is the cause of the life of the world to come for the heart and for the soul of those who love God.” MS Vatican-BA ebr. 233, fol. 48b; printed edition, p. 45.

comprise the entirety of the complete covenant. Thus the Christian covenant – for Abulafia’s language does indeed suggest the presence of such a thing, in that it invokes that covenant of which the “sons of Esau” in a general sense are heirs – is not *sheti va-‘erev*. That is to say, it is not cruciform. This is an extraordinary thesis on Abulafia’s part. The complete covenant, that is, the True Cross, belongs not to Christians but to Jews, and it finds its physical expression in the covenant of circumcision. This contention is all the more striking when one considers the reliquary culture prevailing in Christian Europe. In the midst of Christian society given over to devotional fervor concerning relics, none of whose renown exceeded that for fragments of the True Cross, Abulafia proclaims the latter’s true locus.

What Abulafia has to say about Islam here is interesting as well in its own right; their covenant is less complete than that of the Jews – they are only to some certain extent circumcised of heart. But it is superior to that of the Christians, who possess no element whatsoever of this circumcision of the heart. Hence, it is apparent that the Islamic covenant is perceived as to some extent cruciform. But Abulafia’s contention about Islam as well clarifies something of the nature of his critique of Christianity. For Islam has redeeming merit to the extent that it embraces belief in God’s unity.<sup>99</sup> Christianity, therefore, does not embrace the unity in the least.<sup>100</sup> Just

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<sup>99</sup> That Abulafia’s appraisal of Islam here seems to reflect a wider Jewish view is apparent from a statement by Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi, who reported that some Jews recited the *Shema*, the liturgical profession of God’s unity, while worshipping with Muslims and “testifying to their unitary faith.” Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, p. 189. Similarly, in the *Zohar* we find the attribution of at least a human status to Muslims, based upon their possession of what is at least a partial

as a unification of the *sefirot*, as we have seen, is to be associated with the completed *sheti va-‘erev* configuration, so then does Christian polytheism here reflect an incomplete covenant. Christianity’s identification with idolatry, in Abulafia’s estimation, follows from the insinuation that it does not profess God’s unity.

Abulafia again implies the earlier critique of Christianity as espousing a corporealized divinity, and it is this error, for Abulafia, that results in Christianity’s identification with the body. So it is that Christendom comes to possess only that half of the covenant associated with the body, while the spiritualized portion eludes it.

We have seen that Abulafia’s fascination with Christianity is equivalent to an attraction to idolatry, fraught with implications with respect to erotic transgression. This attraction represents a falling under the sway of bodily enticements, insofar as Christianity is mired in a sinful fixation upon the base and corporeal, as is idolatry generally. As we have seen, it is the crucifixion that symbolizes for Abulafia this

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circumcision, while Christians are relegated to the status of beasts. Nevertheless, the zoharic authorship will at times reverse this judgment, declaring that exile among the demonic Muslims is worse than among the (also demonic) Christians. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 51, 58. The status of human or “man” (*‘adam*), that is, the divine likeness, is achieved only by the Jews, because only the Jews are circumcised. For the rabbinic background to this notion, see Gottstein, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature.” See also the comment on the preceding in Aaron, “Shedding Light on God’s Body in Rabbinic Midrashim: Reflections on the Theory of a Luminous Adam.” The notion of this perfected human form in the divine likeness has other antecedents. The divine luminous body in Jewish-Christian thought is discussed in Fossum. “Jewish-Christian Christology and Jewish Mysticism.” Fossum relates the “Son” in this context, referred to as the “Great Power,” to the *Kavod* in the hekhalotic tradition, which is similarly identified; see p. 273. As well, the “Hidden Power,” identified with Jesus, is also present in the *Shi‘ur Qomah* tradition; *ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>100</sup> In *Sefer ha-‘Edut*, in the context of a discussion of the permutation of the letters of the Tetragrammaton forwards and backwards, Abulafia reports that “the nations” write backwards, while Jews and Muslims write forwards. The linkage of Islam with Judaism, as against Christianity, is again apparent here. Since Abulafia addresses once again the head and tail of the Teli in this context, we may also surmise that Abulafia associates here Judaism and Islam with the YH and Christianity with the VH. *Sefer ha-‘Edut*, MS Munich-BS 285 fol. 43a; printed edition, p. 77.

fixation; Jesus was crucified on the “material” tree, that of the knowledge of good and evil. It would not be unfair, therefore, to perceive the same type of temptation toward that which is corrupt and corporeal that he abhors in Christianity in Abulafia’s own absorption of the cruciform motif into his symbolism for a Jewish apotheosis. Since his attraction to Christianity bears the imprint of erotic fascination, it is fitting that Abulafia locates the true cross in the phallus. We might fairly say that Abulafia covets what the Christians possess in their doctrine of the crucifixion, and that this envy becomes centered for him around notions of the phallus.

### **Blood, Semen and Sexual Desire; Moses and “The Egyptian”**

How it is that Abulafia could be contending with what, in Freudian terms, suggests penis envy is understandable when we recall that Abulafia was grappling with a powerful castration anxiety. If he felt himself to have been in some respect emasculated by his encounters with demons – demons which represent the same idolatrous impulse about which we’ve been speaking – then we can fathom how a penis envy could manifest itself in Abulafia’s psyche. If his virility was perceived to have been robbed from him by his attraction to idolatrous, castrating Christianity, it was as well the masculinity of Christianity – a masculinity which he nevertheless vehemently denied it – that he envied and sought for himself. In this manner, Abulafia’s vituperations against the stated feminine nature of Christianity may have

amounted to projections of his own castration anxiety, accompanied as they were by his envious cooptation of the Christian phallic symbol. Alternatively, Abulafia may be understood to have sought a subconscious way to redeem his relentless attraction to the sensuality, even lasciviousness, embodied in Christianity, a way that did not require him to abandon the object of his illicit desire. The cross that he locates in his own person, then, may be understood as the transfiguring mark of an illicit eroticism that has itself been transmuted and clothed in sacrality.

What we may surmise is that both trees of the Garden of Eden, for Abulafia, assume a phallic valence, just as each, in a different respect, is cruciform. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is cruciform in that it is the tree upon which Jesus, for Abulafia, was crucified. It represents the material fixation that lies at the root of Christianity, the reason for which Jesus received his harsh but symbolically appropriate judgment. Abulafia's subconscious envy of Jesus, exemplified in the former's cooptation of the crucifixion motif, begins to suggest the phallic dimension of this tree. By contrast, the tree of life, antithetical to the death with which the other tree is identified, would stand for the perfected and spiritualized, that is, Jewish, covenantal relationship with God, and so would be commensurate with that cruciform circumcision whose completion transcends the physical, incorporating within itself what we have seen Abulafia describe as the "circumcision of the heart"

that is, the spiritual circumcision.<sup>101</sup> The following passage from *Sitrei Torah* lends credence to this line of reasoning:<sup>102</sup>

And the secret [of the two trees] is ‘the mouth is male and the membrum is female. And<sup>103</sup> the two trees are supernal and lowly.’<sup>104</sup> And the secret of ‘garden’ is ‘body, soul,’<sup>105</sup> in the two of which is ‘divine wisdom.’<sup>106</sup> And the locution ‘garden’ is as a place that receives all kinds of growth, and so too ‘the mind’<sup>107</sup> is a place that receives all manner of image [*siyur*], but testimonies come from it and tell us its [the image’s] powers, and they are the two trees, and every ‘tree’ is ‘an image [*selem*],’<sup>108</sup> and every ‘efflux’ is ‘a likeness’<sup>109</sup> ...And in truth one tree adds wisdom and the other adds lust. ‘And the tree of life adds wisdom [*hokhmah*],’<sup>110</sup> ‘and the tree of knowledge adds sciences [*hokhmot*].’<sup>111</sup> ‘And the tree of life is a lot [*goral*],’<sup>112</sup> ‘and the tree of knowledge is lots [*goralot*].’<sup>113</sup> One lot is for God, and one is for Azazel; the first one is for good and the middle is for chance [*efsharut*] and the last one is for evil. ‘And the tree of life adds an embryo [*golem*],’<sup>114</sup> and the tree of knowledge adds barrenness [*galmud*].<sup>115</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Scholem refers to the idea that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is understood in kabbalistic discourse as the “tree of death,” as against the tree of life. The former is to be associated with the *Shekhinah*’s exile, perpetrated by demons, while the latter represents sefirotic unity. *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 107.

<sup>102</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 47b; printed edition, p. 130.

<sup>103</sup> The numerical value of the expression is 576 to this point, equal to the numerical value of the words ‘two trees.’

<sup>104</sup> The numerical value of the remainder of the expression is again 576.

<sup>105</sup> The secret is based upon the consideration of the word “garden” as an acrostic for the words “body, soul.”

<sup>106</sup> This latter phrase has the same numerical value as “body, soul,” 519.

<sup>107</sup> “Garden” and “the mind” have the same numerical value, 53.

<sup>108</sup> “Tree” and “image” have the same numerical value, 160.

<sup>109</sup> “Efflux” and “likeness” have the same numerical value, 450.

<sup>110</sup> The phrase “and the tree of life” has the same numerical value as “adds wisdom,” 239.

<sup>111</sup> The phrase “and the tree of knowledge” has the same numerical value as “adds sciences,” 645.

<sup>112</sup> The phrase “and the tree of life” has the same numerical value as “lot,” 239.

<sup>113</sup> The phrase “and the tree of knowledge” has the same numerical value as “lots,” 645.

<sup>114</sup> The phrase “and the tree of life” has the same numerical value as “adds an embryo,” 239.

<sup>115</sup> A peculiarity ensues here. Were we to find גלמות here instead of גלמוד (as is the case in JTS MS 2367) then we would find a numerical equivalence between the phrase “and the tree of knowledge” and “adds גלמות,” both yielding 645. גלמות, however is not easily understood, the plural for *golem*

When, with respect to the Garden's two trees, Abulafia speaks of the mouth and the membrum, he alludes to the circumcisions of the tongue and membrum from *Sefer Yesirah*. We may recall these modes of circumcision having been discussed earlier. For between the hands of Esau Abulafia located the circumcision of the tongue, which he had linked to Jacob; it was understood to be a covenant of a higher order than the circumcision of the phallus.<sup>116</sup> And elsewhere we also noted Abulafia's reference to a "covenant of the holy language," one that appeared to coincide in all respects with the circumcision of the tongue. Thus it is not surprising that we should find a mention only of the mouth in the current context; the link of the mouth to both the tongue and to language is readily apparent. And we find, consistent with our earlier observations, that one circumcision is divine and one terrestrial; one tree, thus, represents the complete and spiritual circumcision, while the other is purely corporeal. This conforms to the passage's division of the Garden into two components, one identified with the "soul" and the other with the "body." In both of these is "divine wisdom" to be found; that is, each is a component of the efflux from the Active Intellect, the former being intellective, the latter imaginative, to return to the contours of our discussion from the preceding chapter. That the lower tree - that linked to the body, the imagination and the inferior circumcision - would

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being masculine in form. "*Galmud*" makes contextual sense but disrupts the numerical equivalence of the two phrases.

<sup>116</sup> See Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence," p. 167.

stand here as the tree upon which Jesus was crucified, that of the knowledge of good and evil, is clear.

Each of these trees, or components of the Garden and the Active Intellect, Abulafia treats, in the current passage, as a “likeness,” while that which is received from them is an “image” found in the mind of the mystic subsequent to his reception of the divine efflux. It is noteworthy, given our concern with the notion that both of these trees represent crosses for Abulafia, that the word for “image” here, *selem*, has a common second meaning, “cross.” I would suggest that Abulafia is deliberate here in his word choice. The fact that both trees, crosses or components of the Active Intellect are responsible for the generation of a “likeness” in the mind of the mystic demonstrates what we had discussed at length earlier, the impossibility of circumventing the human mind’s idolatrous imaginative faculty, regardless of which of the two routes is taken.

One other key observation should be made. At the very outset of the current passage, the inferior circumcision, that of the membrum, is categorized as female. Thus, as he in one place propounds a doctrine suggesting a deeply seated envy of the phallic dimension of Christian crucifixion, Abulafia in another derides that hallmark of Christianity, the lower and inferior circumcision, that of the phallus, as emasculating or feminizing. We may reconcile these opposing attitudes through the recognition that Abulafia’s anxieties, stemming from the threat of punishment for his own temptations, are projected by him onto the focus of his envy, the phallic nature



that he perceives within Christianity. That Abulafia here links the lower tree with “lust” [*ta'avah*] is reflective then of the true nature of his own attraction to Christianity; it is sexual at its root. His reference to lust, on the one hand, illustrates the polemical argument that the idolatrous lusts of the Christian man render him female. This idea is reflected as well in the passage’s closing point. There it is suggested that the tree of life gives rise to progeny, the sign of fully actualized masculinity, while the tree of knowledge proffers only barrenness or sterility. On the other hand, however, the lustfulness that Abulafia ascribes to the inferior tree and covenant is the apparent touchstone for Abulafia’s envy;<sup>117</sup> this lustfulness evokes a perceived sexual promiscuity latent within Christianity, one which, apparently, held some significant level of seduction for Abulafia.

In a related passage, from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, Abulafia writes,<sup>118</sup>

...The intention of creation was completed only after the giving of Torah. And he who was created was not completed until he circumcised himself and removed from himself his foreskin. And two contained covenants were brought, and they are the covenant of circumcision, to complete within it the creation of the attribute of the body, and the covenant of the tongue, to complete within it the creation of the attribute of the soul. And the covenant of circumcision came to completion at the hands of Abraham our father, and the covenant of the tongue at the hands of Moses our rabbi. And thus the two of them are called by the names of teachers; we say that this one is our father and this our rabbi. And this is the secret of divine kabbalah, and understand this.

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<sup>117</sup> On the link between the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and shameful sexuality, see Idel, *Mystical Experience*, p. 204.

<sup>118</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291; fol. 25b, printed edition, p. 14.

The thrust of the passage concerns the essential completion and perfection of the human being, and, along these lines, Abulafia will go on to discuss the perfected man's microcosmic nature.<sup>119</sup> This perfection is attained through the consummation of the two covenants already discussed, that of the tongue, linked, as before, to the soul, and that of the phallus, linked to the body. It could only be the Jew, given our prior investigation, who embodies the complete covenant, *sheti va- 'erev*. And true to this notion, Abulafia associates each of these covenants with a Jewish patriarch.<sup>120</sup> Already the polemical element is apparent to the thread of Abulafia's discussion.

Abulafia will go on to suggest a slightly different notion of the "circumcision of the heart" than that which we considered earlier. Here<sup>121</sup> he explains that the circumcision of the heart, seat of life and Torah, is the "arbiter" discussed in *Sefer Yeşirah*, corresponding to the air that moderates between fire, symbol for the covenant of the tongue, and water, from which the belly was created and with which the covenant of circumcision is to be linked. Thus the circumcision of the heart represents the spiritual completion of the covenant, while that of the tongue is now only one part, the higher, linked to the soul, as before, as against the bodily circumcision of the phallus. From this we may understand a notion from our earlier

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 26a; printed edition, p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> Wolfson observes Abulafia's association of the covenant of the tongue with Moses and that of the phallus with Abraham. He observes as well that the circumcision of the heart mediates between those of the tongue and phallus. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 67-69; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 139.

<sup>121</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 25b-26a; printed edition, p. 15.

translation of the passage from *Sitrei Torah* that might have been opaque to us before: "...One lot is for God, and one is for Azazel; the first one is for good and the middle is for chance [*'efsharut*] and the last one is for evil." The passage, we may recall, referred to the two trees in the Garden of Eden and to the two covenants to which they are linked. In this excerpt, lots are designated for these two elements as well, but a kind of arbiter, a third lot, partaking of either one of the others, is introduced between the good and evil natures of the two trees and two covenants. We may surmise that Abulafia, more than likely, conceived of this arbiter again as the circumcision of the heart. The *Sitrei Torah* passage aside, it is clear from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon* that the duplicitous nature of the complete covenant, or its cruciform status, is centered about the circumcision of the heart.

In this regard, there is a significance to the assigning of Moses to the spiritual component of the covenant, that of the tongue. This becomes apparent when one considers several related passages concerning Moses. In these, the polemical dimension of Moses' spiritual circumcision is apparent. One such passage is to be found in *Sitrei Torah*. There, Moses is contrasted with "the Egyptian." What each represents may be understood contextually. The most significant section, for our purposes, reads as follows:<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 57a; printed edition, pp. 185-186.

...you know that your first matter is proximate to the efflux of your father and mother, and its name is “effusion of semen” [*shikhvat zera*] or “drop of semen,” and it is “fetid drop” [*tippah seruhah*], whose “end is repentance” [*haratah*]. And it is “earthly” [*aphariyot*] and contains “ten *sefirot*,” and the secret is “time and fruit” and its concern is “the uncovering of the circumcision” that contains the “counting of the Torah.” [This is the] 613 *misvot* of the Torah, and it is “circumcision of the nakedness,” and behold still “they did not reveal [their] nakedness.” But “effusion of semen” is “רצו” [999]. And he is born “incidentally” or [from] pollution [*qeri*], and it is the name that comes “from the inclination” and it is “the Egyptian” who “Moses” struck; and he is “El Shaddai.” And his secret in full is, ‘alef, lamed, shin, dalet, yod; count it and you will recognize it [999]. And if he merits “the name,” he is “Moses,” he who “draws [its] form” [*mešayer riqmah*]; he is very dear.

Moses and the Egyptian who he smites are placed in opposition to one another, although some similarity - or even mutual identification - is delineated as well, as is suggested immediately by the fact that the numerical values for “Moses” and “the Egyptian” are the same.<sup>123</sup> The Egyptian is born out of “pollution,” or out of the happenstance or incidental nature (*miqreh*) of the lower, impure world, as against the essential nature of the supernal world. This characterization of “the Egyptian” follows upon a discussion of sexual intercourse and of the pollutedness that, for Abulafia, is its hallmark; the character of semen is as the “fetid drop,” wholly terrestrial (*aphariyot*, in the passage) and described in terms of the dishonoring or the rendering unchaste of the circumcision (*ervat ha-milah*, in the passage).

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<sup>123</sup> Both equal 345.

It is not surprising to find an Egyptian rendered in such terms, given what we have already seen regarding the identification that Abulafia makes between Egypt and Christendom. And indeed, Abulafia does refer to Jesus himself, the “bastard son of the menstruant,” as “the secret of the first matter” in *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, at the same time identifying him with Pharaoh.<sup>124</sup> So we may begin to suspect here as well that a more specific symbolism is at work; if Moses represents the Jewish people, and “the Egyptian” stands for Christendom, then it is likely that Jesus himself is intended. In this sense may we understand Abulafia’s intention with respect to the dishonoring of the circumcision, for Jesus, we have already come to see, failed to fulfill the covenant through its spiritual consummation. And likewise is Christianity, with respect to its idolatrous practices and beliefs, to be associated with sexual transgression, as we have seen. For the Jew, such idolatry is tantamount to the desecration of one’s own circumcision, so we may see once again in Abulafia’s discussion of “the Egyptian” here a reflection of Abulafia’s own anxiety with respect to his attraction to the evil one who he nevertheless identifies with Moses.

Entwined, however, within Abulafia’s discussion of the corruption latent within sexual procreation is precisely the opposite quality as well. Abulafia refers in this regard to the “circumcision of the nakedness,” an inversion of the words for the “uncovering of the circumcision” just discussed.<sup>125</sup> Though the two phrases possess

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<sup>124</sup> *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 81b; printed edition, p. 130. See Chapter One, n. 54 regarding the *Zohar*’s association of menstruation with Egypt.

<sup>125</sup> *Milat ha-’er’vah* versus *’er’vat ha-milah*.

the same numerical value (766), the former suggests the sanctification of the male organ and, thus, of the sexual act. This sanctifying circumcision is drawn into a numerical association with the Torah and *mišvot*, as was its opposite expression.<sup>126</sup> The latter is as well linked numerically by Abulafia to the phrase “ten *sefirot*.” This next phrase, we then find, contains nearly the same letters as – and has the same numerical value as – the word for “earthly” (*‘aphariyot*).<sup>127</sup> From this it is apparent that Abulafia seeks to demonstrate that two moral valences are present within the act of procreation, one heavenly and consecrated, one terrestrial and debased. This formulation follows from Abulafia’s immediately preceding discussion, not quoted here. There, he discussed the divine and terrestrial natures, what he refers to as the intellectual and the material, with respect to the ox and the ass. The ox, a clean animal, is linked to the *merkabah* by the fact that an ox’s face is one of those possessed by the *hayyot*, while the ass, an unclean animal, possesses the same consonants as the word “matter.” The corrupted nature of the ass is somewhat qualified, just as is that of the material or imaginative component of the efflux from the Active Intellect, by the fact that the messiah will ride upon, that is, subjugate and harness, an ass (Zech. 9:9).<sup>128</sup>

Just, then, as these two components are entwined within the Active Intellect, so too are the natures of Moses and Jesus. Both are to be associated with the

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<sup>126</sup> Both phrases are numerically equivalent to the phrase “counting of the Torah,” which, Abulafia implies, refers to the number of *mišvot*.

<sup>127</sup> עפריות versus ספירות.

<sup>128</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 242. Idel, *Mystical Experience*, pp. 143, 188.

procreative act, Jesus with its corrupted performance and Moses with its consecrated expression. The latter point is amplified by Abulafia when he goes on to note that Moses, through a numerical equivalence, is to be identified with “’El Shaddai.”<sup>129</sup> The significance of this point inheres in the fact that ’El Shaddai is the name linked, by both Abulafia and by the theosophical kabbalists, to the *sefira Yesod*, the phallic potency within the sefirotic array.<sup>130</sup> Thus Moses stands here for the supernal procreative faculty, as against Jesus’ purely physical endowment. That Abulafia intends this procreative aspect of the name ’El Shaddai becomes clear when he observes that the numerical value of the letters of this name, when each is spelled out in full, is equal to the numerical value of the prior phrase “effusion of semen” (999). A passage from *Gan Na ’ul* bears out the linkage of the *sefira Yesod* with the covenant of circumcision as well as with the procreative faculty:<sup>131</sup>

And after this [discussion of the lowest *sefira*, *Malkhut*] contemplate the second [*sefira*], which is the ninth *sefira*, and it is the root of the tenth, which is the last branch of all the *sefirot*, and its name is *Yesod*. And it is hinted at in the covenant of circumcision, and from the power of this ninth *sefira* the tenth produces fruit.

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<sup>129</sup> “Moses” and “’El Shaddai” both have a numerical value of 345.

<sup>130</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 228, Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 130-131, idem, “Circumcision and the Divine Name,” pp. 85, 98, idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 42-47, idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 133, Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 7.

<sup>131</sup> *Gan Na ’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 319a; printed edition, pp. 11-12. See also *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 41a; printed edition, p. 58 for the identification of *Yesod* with circumcision.

*Yesod*'s giving fruit to the lower world is as well implied in the passage at hand from *Sitrei Torah*, where "time and fruit" were linked with circumcision, temporality here being as well a feature of the material world.

In the continuation of the *Sitrei Torah* passage, Abulafia declares that he who merits "the name" is "Moses."<sup>132</sup> Undoubtedly, meriting the name is to be understood as the attaining to a state of cleaving with the Active Intellect, which, as with the *sefira Yesod*, is as well referred to by Abulafia with the name Shaddai.<sup>133</sup> Just as, elsewhere, the mystic who accomplishes this is transformed into the angel Metatron, so here we see him transformed into the hypostatic Moses. We saw earlier that this divinized state is the result of the perfection of the covenant of circumcision, completed in the form *sheti va-'erev*, so we may well understand the association here between the Active Intellect and the phallic potency. It is not entirely clear what Abulafia intends when he writes above that the one who achieves this mosaic stature "draws [its] form" (*mešayer riqmah*), but we have already seen that the form to be associated with the Active Intellect is cruciform, *sheti va-'erev*. This form, then, may be Abulafia's intent. He may also be referring to the idea that we encountered earlier, that the reception of the Active Intellect's *selem*, "image" (or "cross"), takes the form within the recipient of the *demut* or "likeness."

It is as well the demiurgic nature of the Active Intellect that is underscored through its being associated with the phallus, just as it is apparent, in the passage

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<sup>132</sup> Both expressions have the same numerical value.

<sup>133</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 131 n. 100, 148, 204, 205.



rendered above from *Gan Na 'ul*, that *Yesod*'s giving of fruit to the lower world (*Malkhut*) should be understood in demiurgical terms. Abulafia will, as the passage from *Sitrei Torah* continues, refer to the four tablets received by Moses. These he connects both with the name 'El Shaddai and with the four colors red, white, black and green.<sup>134</sup> In turn, these are associated with the four bodily humors, with day and night, and with creation's extraction from nothing (*yesh mei- 'ayin*). Here, then, we find Moses as demiurge, in a parallel with Christian characterizations of Jesus as this same figure, as well as as the phallic potency.<sup>135</sup> Moses' parallel but superior status with respect to his near-namesake, "the Egyptian," is thus apparent in this passage, as, once more, is Abulafia's self-identification with Jesus, the figure whose expression within himself Abulafia seeks to control.

### ***Yesod, the Šaddiq or Righteous One, as Alpha and Omega***

A related passage, from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*,<sup>136</sup> bears scrutiny. It refers to the man who, apparently, has attained to the perfected state of conjunction with the Active Intellect. Such a man becomes "first and last," following the model of the letter 'alef. The 'alef is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but it is also referred to as last by Abulafia when he considers it to represent the 'elef, with the same

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<sup>134</sup> The first letters of each of these colors, when combined with the letter *dalet*, signifying the number four, spell the name 'El Shaddai.

<sup>135</sup> See Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 145-147.

<sup>136</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 37a-b; printed edition, p. 47.

consonants but indicating the number 1,000. When such a man comes into a likeness with the letter 'alef, he resembles, for Abulafia, the enthroned prince, Metatron, as well as both Adam and God Himself. This man is called "one," and he becomes the one pillar in the world on which the all depends.<sup>137</sup> His name is *ṣaddiq*, the righteous one. The passage goes on to associate the letter 'alef with a tripartite configuration, stemming from its orthographic form but suggested as well in that it embodies within itself the three numbers 1, 10 and 100.<sup>138</sup> Similarly is man tripartite, composed of body, soul and intellect, while the human male body itself is also tripartite, composed of head, stomach and lower body [*geviyah*].

In view of the statement that such a man is both "first and last," one notion from the passage just discussed from *Sitrei Torah* may now be elucidated. This was Abulafia's highlighting of the fact that the phrase "effusion of semen" had a numerical value of 999. Abulafia had transcribed the number in terms of the letters for the three numbers 9, 90 and 900, but without explanation. We may see now that if the man who has perfected his circumcision and exercised his procreative faculty is reflected in the letter 'alef and the numbers 1, 10 and 100, as in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, these being numbers associated with his being "first," so then is he "last" in his somehow embodying the terminal number nine and the triad of 9, 90 and 900, as

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<sup>137</sup> See b*Hagigah* 12b, b*Yoma* 38b, the *Bahir*, § 102, *Battei Midrashot* 2:3, 4.

<sup>138</sup> In the theosophic kabbalistic tradition, as well as elsewhere in the work of Abulafia and his disciples, the letter 'alef is discussed in terms of its tripartite nature. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 544 n. 450.

in *Sitrei Torah*.<sup>139</sup> We may recall that the number 999 was again highlighted there by Abulafia when he observed that the letters for the name 'El Shaddai, when they are spelled out in full, yielded this sum. So it is that the number 999 is linked by Abulafia with the demiurgic *sefira Yesod*. That Abulafia intends a demiurgic understanding of the perfected man whom he references in the passage from *Maftēah ha-Ra'ayon* is rendered apparent in several ways. First, this man is seen to sustain the world after the fashion of a supporting pillar, a notion drawn from the Talmud regarding the righteous of every generation.<sup>140</sup> Second, the word that Abulafia chooses to denote the world's dependence on the righteous man is "*talui*." This choice is most certainly intended by Abulafia to allude to the function of the demiurgic "*Teli*," from which the world devolves and is suspended or "hangs."<sup>141</sup> This connotation to the name itself for the Teli we have already considered.

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<sup>139</sup> I draw this connection with *Sitrei Torah* because, in the passage from *Maftēah ha-Ra'ayon*, there is some degree of ambiguity in terms of how the "last" is to be understood with respect to the '*alef*'. In the previous note it was explained how the '*alef*' is "last" when it represents, for Abulafia, the number 1,000, but as Abulafia continues the '*alef*' is not again associated with the "last" number, 1,000, but only with the numbers 1, 10 and 100. It is from this and from the appearance of 9, 90 and 900 in the same connection in *Sitrei Torah* that I infer that '*alef*' is essentially "first," because of its placement with respect to the single digit numbers, while the number nine, or the letter *ṭet*, is last for a similar reason.

<sup>140</sup> See n. 137 above.

<sup>141</sup> Insofar as the *ṣaddiq* may be thought of as the *axis mundi*, we may understand as well his association with the Teli. See, for instance, Green regarding R. Simeon of the *Zohar* as both the *ṣaddiq* and as the *axis mundi*; Green, "The *Ṣaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 3 (1977), p. 336. We should note a closely related discussion on the part of Abulafia's teacher, Baruch Togarmi. The latter, addressing *Sefer Yeṣirah*'s reference to the *sefirot* as *belimah*, writes, "The moon [*levanah*, having the same numerical value as *belimah*, 87] is the beginning of the lower ones in one respect and the end of the upper ones as well. And thus the *yesod* depends [*talui*] upon the mouth in one respect and in one respect upon the *milah*." Togarmi here integrates a notion of the two-fold aspect of the demiurge, accompanied by the latter's identification with the two covenants, and an identification of this demiurge both with the *sefira Yesod* and, by implication, with the Teli. *Sefer Maftēhot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 232.

Elsewhere, Abulafia will link the Teli with his discussions of the *sefira Yesod*.<sup>142</sup> That Abulafia refers to the world here as “the All” recalls gnostic notions of the demiurge as the progenitor of or from the pleroma, notions that Abulafia has doubtless garnered from the *Bahir*.<sup>143</sup> Last in Abulafia’s implications of a demiurgic nature to the perfected man in *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon* is his referring to him as the *ṣaddiq*. For the *sefira Yesod* is understood as the *ṣaddiq* time and again by kabbalists, and we have already come to understand this *sefira*’s demiurgic signification,<sup>144</sup> particularly with respect to the symbolism of circumcision and the fecundity with which it is linked.<sup>145</sup>

We perceived an allusion to Jesus operative in the discussion of “the Egyptian” in the passage from *Sitrei Torah*, and we noted the close identification of this defiled figure with the one who is as well his opposite, Moses. Something similar is operative in this current case, in that the righteous man is identified as “first and last,” a phrase, derived from Isaiah (44:6), that, given Abulafia’s discussion of first and last letters, is highly suggestive of the Book of Revelation’s discussion of Jesus as the letters alpha and omega.<sup>146</sup> That the alpha and the omega are the first and last Greek letters clarifies further Abulafia’s interest in the Hebrew

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<sup>142</sup> *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 335a; printed edition, p. 65.

<sup>143</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>144</sup> See, *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Nahmanides referred to *Yesod* as the All. Wolfson, “By Way of Truth,” pp. 166-167. He referred as well to the *Shekhinah* as the All, embodying as it does all of the higher *sefirot* within it. We should note that this unification with the higher potencies is achieved through the conjoining of *Yesod* with the *Shekhinah*, realized, as mentioned earlier, in circumcision. See *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>146</sup> Revelations 1:8, 17, 21:6, 22:13, and see next note.

letter 'alef in the current context, as well as his interest in the numerical sets 1, 10, 100 and 9, 90, 900, when we take together the passages from *Sitrei Torah* and *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*. We might almost anticipate a statement by Abulafia that the *ṣaddiq* is “the 'alef and the 'teṭ,” the latter letter denoting the number nine, last of the single digits.<sup>147</sup>

We should not fail to notice that the christologically suggestive evocation of the letter 'alef is accompanied by the assertion that the letter is tripartite – or trinitarian – just as is the man who embodies this letter.<sup>148</sup> As well, Abulafia clearly suggests that such a man is divinized; he bears the likeness of both Metatron and of God. As to the nature of this likeness, we noted earlier how the *sheti va-'erev* configuration with respect to the perfected circumcision may be accompanied by a third element, the circumcision of the heart, reflecting the fully spiritualized circumcision. In this sense, then, the *sheti va-'erev* configuration of the circumcision is itself not simply bipartite but tripartite as well, just as is the righteous man, with all of the phallic connotations to be linked with him in terms of the signification of the *sefira Yesod*. But we observed as well earlier that the covenant of Esau is not

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<sup>147</sup> Wolfson discusses the influence of emergent Christian doctrine regarding Jesus as the alpha and the omega on the formulation in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* concerning God and the letters 'alef, mem and tav. *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 164-165. This significance to the letter teṭ does follow from Abulafia's conception of the 'alef as embodying the numbers that begin the numerical sets that add one decimal place, 1, 10, and 100. The number nine, or the letter teṭ, thus represents an end, while the 'alef is a beginning. Marcus notes the “highly suggestive” similarity between the Christian eating of the eucharistic wafer, representing God, “the alpha and the omega,” and the medieval Jewish practice of having children eat cakes inscribed with the alphabet. Jewish absorption of this Christian motif is here suggested. “Jews and Christians Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe,” p. 221; idem, *Rituals of Childhood*.

<sup>148</sup> For Abulafia's interest in trinities, see again Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 131-133, n. 101.

infrequently itself understood as complete and as *sheti va-‘erev*, although its lower and corporeal status persists despite its completeness. The current passage from *Mafteah ha-Ra‘ayon* may help us to understand this conception. For the perfected man is described as possessed of the completed triad that is body, soul and intellect, this then embodying the fully spiritualized covenant, while the body itself is described in triadic terms in its own right. It is this latter triad – or trinity – that must then correspond to the completed corporeal covenant of Esau, embodied in the crucifix. It is highly significant to note, in closing our examination of the passage from *Mafteah ha-Ra‘ayon*, Wolfson’s examination of the likely source material for the bahiric authors’ discussion of the demiurge. For he observed that Jewish-Christian doctrine from antiquity apparently referenced Jesus as the *ṣaddiq*.<sup>149</sup> Given all that we have examined in terms of Christian evocations from the current passage to this point, and taking it together with the prior passage from *Sitrei Torah*, which identified the phallic, demiurgic Moses with the evil “Egyptian,” it would be difficult to avoid the conjecture that Abulafia was aware of the association of Jesus with the figure of the demiurgic *ṣaddiq*.

To this point, we have discussed the cruciform nature of the covenant of circumcision and how it evinces Abulafia’s intense and ambivalent feelings toward Jesus and Christianity. Abulafia’s abhorrence of the notion of a corporealized divinity and of the idolatrous worship of the crucified human being is balanced by

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<sup>149</sup> For Jesus as the *ṣaddiq* in *’Otiyyot de-Rabbi Aqiva* and in the *Zohar*, see Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 146, Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 154-158.

his interest in rearticulating this very corporealization and this same idolatrous image in Jewish terms, and in a manner which he may associate closely with his own identity in particular.<sup>150</sup> We observed the connection between his treatment of the theme of the cruciform circumcision and the theme's hypostatic projection with respect to the *sefira Yesod*. The phallic, demiurgic nature of this *sefira*, discussed above with respect, for example, to Moses and with respect to the *ṣaddiq*, both of whom are indelibly linked – or even identified – with Jesus by Abulafia, serves as a vehicle to extend further the pattern that we have observed consistently in Abulafia's psyche. His cooptation of a christological identity suggests a phallic envy linked powerfully with a castration anxiety, the latter born out of a vexing attraction to the erotically illicit charms of idolatry. Abulafia has as well, in apparent revulsion at his own weakness in the face of the seductions of Christianity, not failed to vilify the Jesus who he envies at every turn, and in the very strongest of terms.

Earlier, in examining a discussion from *Sitrei Torah* regarding the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil,<sup>151</sup> we noted how Abulafia characterized the former in terms of virility and fecundity while the latter, that being the one linked

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<sup>150</sup> It is worth noting a parallelism between Abulafia's notion of the divinization achieved through circumcision and a vision of Catherine of Siena. She associated Jesus' foreskin, seen in this vision, with the eucharist. In her vision, she wore the foreskin as a wedding ring. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," p. 408. Suggested here is the view that it is through circumcision – Jesus', vicariously – that Catherine comes into her intimacy with the divine. We may also sense an echo of the notion, discussed earlier, that the assumption of the divine likeness is fulfilled – in Jesus' case, here – with his circumcision. See above, n. 99.

<sup>151</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 47b; printed edition, p. 130.

to Jesus' cruciform nature, represented sterility and impotence.<sup>152</sup> This theme finds expression as well in a section of *Gan Na 'ul* which again deals with Moses and Jesus and their identification in terms of the phallic potency *Yesod*. If *Yesod* and Jesus in some important respects share the same identity for Abulafia, an identity that is commensurate with Abulafia's covetousness of christological motifs, we see as well Abulafia reacting strongly against the positive implications that this identification may be construed as harboring for Jesus. For, as Abulafia suggests, Jesus, in fact, is to be understood in precisely the opposite terms that the identification with the phallic *Yesod* suggests. Inasmuch as Jesus embodies the evil portion of the two-fold, divine Active Intellect, he represents as well an impotent nature to the phallic potency, that nature which, demonstrably, caused Abulafia considerable anxiety.

This discussion from *Gan Na 'ul*<sup>153</sup> revolves specifically around the theme of darkness with respect to the Exodus story. Abulafia begins by delineating a kind of a magic square constructed from the names of the third, sixth and ninth of the ten plagues; these are vermin, boils and darkness respectively. As he will write explicitly,<sup>154</sup> it is apparent that he understands the scriptural treatment of the ten plagues to encrypt clues concerning the ten *sefirot*. He writes,

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<sup>152</sup> The two were encapsulated by the words *golem*, for embryo, and *galmud*, for barrenness, respectively.

<sup>153</sup> *Gan Na 'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fols. 329a, 330b; printed edition, pp. 45-47.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 329a; printed edition, p. 45.



Behold, already you see that these [three plagues are] mentioned through the signs three, six, nine, which are the third, sixth and ninth. Because they are without a doubt three three three, and the tenth, which is one, is separate and alone, and upon this the entire secret of *Sefer Yeşirah* depends.

It is apparent that Abulafia is considering the *sefirot* in their configuration of three hierarchical triads, with the lone *sefira Malkhut* beneath, and that he perceives this configuration in terms of the ten plagues as well. Thus, the ninth plague, darkness, corresponds to the ninth *sefira*, with which we have been much concerned, *Yesod*. Abulafia next notes the presence of the word “plague” (*nega* ‘) in Exodus 11:1,<sup>155</sup> apparently drawing a connection between its appearance there and its appearance in the aforementioned *Sefer Yeşirah*.<sup>156</sup> There, the word pair of ‘*oneg* (pleasure) and *nega* ‘ was enigmatically evoked. Here it seems that Abulafia intends *nega* ‘ to indicate the tenth *sefira*.<sup>157</sup> For he goes on to refer to pharaoh’s sending of the Israelites from Egypt, in the same verse from Exodus, as hinting to “the first exile.” The idea that the tenth *sefira*, also represented in terms of the *Shekhinah*, may be perceived to be in an exilic state, or a state of separation from the supernal *sefirot*,

<sup>155</sup> “*Ve-hu’ she-qara’ ha-shem nega’, she-ne’emar...*”

<sup>156</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah*, 2:7.

<sup>157</sup> It is also possible that Abulafia understands the positive and negative connotations of ‘*oneg* and *nega* ‘ to refer to aspects of each respective *sefira*; those negative aspects are to be understood as having the character of a “plague.” This notion is particularly relevant to a consideration of the ninth *sefira*. For *Yesod*, as Abulafia describes it, is closely associated with the Active Intellect, whose bipartite nature has been essential to our analysis of Abulafia’s construal of an idolatrous element within the divine efflux received by the mystic.

is one to be found frequently in kabbalistic discourse.<sup>158</sup> This state of separation is one in which the *Shekhinah* is bereft of the life-giving efflux from the phallic and demiurgic *sefira Yesod*.

The “first exile,” for Abulafia, is indicated in the Exodus 11:1 in the part of the verse which reads, “Yet I will bring one plague more upon pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here.” A “last exile” is suggested, for Abulafia, in the last part of the verse, the part that reads “...he shall send you altogether...” (*ke-shalho kalah*). The word “altogether” (*kalah*), by a letter transposition, Abulafia reads as *ha-kol*, “the All.” He writes, “The sign at the end [is] for the last exile, because it is at the end of ‘the All,’<sup>159</sup> hinted at in his [pharaoh’s] sending.” We have already observed the close connection between the notion of the All and *Yesod*, so we may discern here the idea that this last exile is sefirotic in nature, referring to the separation of *Malkhut* from the other nine *sefirot*, as discussed. The letters for “he shall send you” (*ke-shalho*) Abulafia will next transpose to derive “and the darkness” (*ve-la-hoshekh*). He writes, “‘And the darkness he called night’ (Gen. 1:5) is the name of Satan. Also night is his name, because he is the angel who rules over pregnancy, who restrains the white seed.” Abulafia here makes use of a numerical equivalence between “and the darkness,”

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<sup>158</sup> Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, pp. 107-109. See as well the passage from Abulafia examined earlier, *Ve-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, in Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer*, p. 23.

<sup>159</sup> Or, “in the end.”

“Satan” and “white seed.”<sup>160</sup> The darkness or night that is linked with the exile of the *Shekhinah* and the cessation of the flow of the divine efflux is satanic in nature.<sup>161</sup> And Abulafia is clear toward the end of this passage that this disruption in the sustaining flow of the phallic efflux is to be understood either as barrenness or as impotence, a restraining of semen, “the white seed.”

The “end of the All,” or the impotence of the phallic *Yesod*, is essentially satanic in nature. We have already observed that Jesus is described by Abulafia in terms of the material and corrupt aspect of semen, the “earthly” “fetid drop.” Though in this respect he is not to be understood as impotent, but only spiritually so (as against Moses and the quality of semen with which he is associated), we may recall the earlier reference in *Sitrei Torah* to the barrenness to be linked to the tree upon which Jesus hung, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this, then, we find a noteworthy parallel to the current discussion of a satanic – or christological, for we will shortly find Jesus specifically referenced - *Yesod*, particularly insofar as the tree, as crucifix, bears for Abulafia the phallic associations already discussed. That the satanic element in the current case is not simply itself impotent but actually propagates impotence only serves to highlight Abulafia’s own state of anxiety.

We should understand that, for Abulafia, the notions of impotence and of the base and corrupted state of the “fetid drop” or semen that is linked to the demonic

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<sup>160</sup> Each has a numerical value of 364, but with respect to “white seed” this is only so when one removes the prefix letter *he’* from the word *ha-levanah*.

<sup>161</sup> See again Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 107.

are equivalent. Both are to be contrasted with the virility of the *ṣaddiq* or of Moses, and both are linked inextricably with death. So, just as we found Jesus tied to the theme of impotence in terms of the feminizing nature of his idolatry, so too do we find the following:<sup>162</sup> “And behold the tree of knowledge preserves the drop and upon it is engraved the particular name and it is the name of idolatry, because he is prince of the bodies, prince of every body, prince of the body of man.”<sup>163</sup> The close identification of Jesus with the tree of knowledge of good and evil has already been established. Here we see that the tree is linked with “the drop,” subsequently identified once more as the “fetid drop,” whose “secret is sexual intercourse from the left.”<sup>164</sup> That the “prince” to be linked with such demonic sexual intercourse is Jesus is more than likely, given the identification of this prince with the tree upon which Jesus was crucified.

To return to *Gan Na‘ul*, Abulafia drew the connecting link between what he perceived as a discussion in Exodus of sefirotic exile and Satan based upon the word “darkness.” He goes on to elaborate further on this darkness as it relates to *Yesod*, returning to the theme of the ninth plague. Abulafia had ascribed this darkness and the impotence that results to Satan, and he goes on to do something similar in discussing Exodus 10:22 with respect to the phrase “thick darkness.” The other

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<sup>162</sup> *Shomer Miṣvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 41a; printed edition, p. 4.

<sup>163</sup> The phrases “tree of knowledge,” “preserves the drop,” “the particular name,” “the name of idolatry,” “prince of the bodies,” “prince of every body” and “prince of the body of man” all have the same numerical value, 639.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* The words “fetid drop,” “sexual intercourse” and “from the left” all have the same numerical value, 373.

plagues Abulafia describes as partaking of light; the ninth alone lacks a bona fide existence insofar as it partakes of pure darkness.<sup>165</sup> Abulafia draws for a proof-text upon the statement (Ex. 10:23) that the Israelites “had light in their dwellings” when the Egyptians did not. A correspondence between the letters in the words “light in their dwellings,” from the verse, and “light in their names” suggests, in Abulafia’s estimation, that the other plagues partake of luminosity. How the perceived connection to the word for “their names” proves this is never explained by Abulafia. But it is likely that he is thinking once more of Scripture’s encryption of the *sefirot* as the plagues, such that divine names are perceived as being alluded to here.<sup>166</sup> If this is the case, then linking the darkness of the ninth plague to unreality may be understood with respect to the nature of the ninth *sefira* and the Active Intellect. The latter’s demonic component is, as we have seen, imaginative in its essence. Though the danger it poses is real, it is nonetheless founded on chimerical deception, comprised as it is of only evil phantasms. We understood the real threat that it poses to be a castrating one, one very much in line with the peril that we have just seen as epitomized by Satan, that of impotence. Thus the reference to darkness in this case continues to bear upon Abulafia’s conception of the Active Intellect.

Along similar lines, Abulafia will next examine the words “three days,” the duration of the darkness mentioned in Exodus 10:22. These three days are

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<sup>165</sup> A closely related notion is observed by Wolfson in a similar passage, that from *Sitrei Torah*. *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n. 167.

<sup>166</sup> That Abulafia is considering divine names here becomes apparent in that he will next refer to “forty-two names,” evoking the forty-two letter divine name.

...day and night, whose secret is Samael, hinting to the three days of thick darkness during which no luminous heavenly body had yet been created.<sup>167</sup> Because on the fourth [day] they were created “from the attribute of curses” [*me-’eirot*]; “The word [*’imrat*] of the Lord is tried, He is a shield to those who trust in Him” (Ps. 18:31).<sup>168</sup>

The creation of the heavenly bodies “from the attribute of curses” may be explained by the fact that the thick darkness has been linked here to the demon Samael; this evil precedes the radiance of the bodies that are created in its midst.<sup>169</sup> Not all of the *gematriyot* that Abulafia intends here are clear,<sup>170</sup> but the link to the divine names with respect to the *sefirot* upon which we had just speculated seems to be implicit again. For the words “word of the Lord” (אמרת יהוה) from Psalms may be translated as “the word ‘YHVH,’” that is, the Tetragrammaton itself is a shield that protects, presumably from the threat of Samael. Here, then, the divine names are again linked with light, the letters of the word “curses” being transposed to those of “word” with the creation of the heavenly bodies, which in some sense themselves

<sup>167</sup> Abulafia refers to the Genesis creation story. Although God’s first act is, in fact, the creation of light, the heavenly bodies are not created until the fourth day.

<sup>168</sup> See a closely related passage, *Zohar*, 1:19b. It is because of this parallel that I have rendered מַמְדַּת מְאֻרוֹת as “from the attribute of curses” and not as מַמְדַּת מְאֻרוֹת, “from the attribute of lights,” though Abulafia clearly intends the implicit connection between the words *me’ir* (luminous) and *me-’eirot* (curses).

<sup>169</sup> By a letter transposition Abulafia had also linked “thick darkness” to the words “potency of anger,” suggesting a link between the darkness and harsh judgment. The *Zohar* explains the same essential wordplay in terms of the cursed, or impaired, state of the moon. See previous note.

<sup>170</sup> The words “three days” have a numerical value of 1,130, while “day and night” have a value of 137 and “Samael” has a value of 131. Perhaps Abulafia intends the omission of the prefix “and” in the phrase “day and night,” so that its numerical value would be equivalent to that for “Samael,” which in turn is comprised of the same digits as the value for “three days;” Abulafia does occasionally draw equivalences between numbers such as these (1,130 and 131). The numerical value of the phrase “from the attribute of curses” is 1,125, five less than that for “three days.”

stand here for the *sefirot*. Since the plagues as well stand for the *sefirot*, as Abulafia will again assert presently, the notion of the demiurgic quality of *Yesod* may underlie Abulafia's thinking here. Since, as Abulafia has already explained, the *sefirot* underlie his current speculations, then the ninth one, characterized in demiurgic terms, would likely again be his chief concern. The link of this demiurgic *sefira* with evil is, then, consistent, for example, with the earlier discussion of the Teli and its relationship to *Yesod*.<sup>171</sup>

That Abulafia has Jesus in mind in the course of this discussion is soon rendered explicit. Regarding the verse that precedes the Exodus mention of the "thick darkness," he writes of God's instructions to Moses as follows:<sup>172</sup>

And it is said there, "...Stretch out your hand toward heaven" (Ex. 10:21); 'the dead.' "Stretch out your hand;" 'writ of judgment' 'Satan descends' "toward heaven" 'spirit of Satan' 'who kills' "...that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness which may be felt" (ibid.) whose 'power is solar,' whose 'name [and] power are equivalent,' 'may his name and memory be blotted out,' and his name is like the name 'land of Egypt' and let there be darkness upon 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

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<sup>171</sup> That Abulafia intends for *Yesod* in particular to be understood as progenitor of the other *sefirot*, it must be noted, is a somewhat awkward possibility, given its position as the ninth of the ten *sefirot*. What Abulafia seems to be doing here as well as elsewhere is blurring together several facets of his understanding of the Active Intellect: It is demiurgic with respect to the lower world, it is the phallic potency (represented in sefirotic terms by the ninth *sefira*, *Yesod*), and it is both the first and last of the *sefirot*, *Keter* and *Malkhut*. It is in this way that the Active Intellect could at once be understood by Abulafia as both the progenitor of the other *sefirot* (as *Keter*) and as the ninth, phallic and demiurgic *sefira* (as *Yesod*).

<sup>172</sup> *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 330b; printed edition, p. 47.

The first portion of this passage is somewhat difficult to parse. However, Abulafia's effort to discern the satanic element in the verse is clearly carried forward through the use of *gematriyot*.<sup>173</sup> This satanic element is ultimately equated by Abulafia with Jesus, who, not surprisingly, is drawn specifically into a close connection with the darkness that has been Abulafia's running theme.<sup>174</sup> We may recall that earlier in this excerpt from *Gan Na'ul* the nocturnal element was linked with Satan and with the threat of impotence.<sup>175</sup> Here we see Abulafia's intention rendered more clearly; it is Jesus that he has specifically in mind. But we have already observed that Abulafia has couched this discussion within a consideration of the ninth *sefira*. So it is that we see that Jesus once more represents *Yesod* in its state of phallic dysfunction, represented as darkness. The darkness that falls upon Egypt, which explicitly represents the ninth *sefira* (or its demonic dimension, more specifically) is in some sense here its own undoing. It is that which it destroys, or darkens ("kills," as Abulafia puts it here); it is demonic, and yet it darkens Egypt and Jesus as well, or at least Abulafia

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<sup>173</sup> "Toward heaven" is numerically equivalent to the phrases "the dead" and "who kills" (495). Abulafia appears to imply a correspondence between "stretch out your hand" and "writ of judgment," although this is not true numerically (their values are 593 and 578 respectively). Nevertheless, there is a numerical correspondence between "writ of judgment," "Satan descends," and "spirit of Satan."

<sup>174</sup> The phrase "name [and] power are equivalent" Abulafia derives (along with the phrase "power is solar") from a letter transposition based upon the words from Exodus, "...darkness which may be felt." Abulafia next discerns the presence of an acrostic in the word "equivalent" within the phrase "name [and] power are equivalent." The word is seen to be constructed from the first letters of "may his name and memory be blotted out." The same word "equivalent" is as well constructed in its entirety from the same three letters that spell the name Yeshu, such that the name itself is read as an acrostic for the phrase "may his name and memory be blotted out." Lastly, the name Jesus of Nazareth is observed by Abulafia to have the same numerical value as does the phrase "land of Egypt" (671).

<sup>175</sup> We should note that in the aforecited passage from the *Zohar* nocturnal sexual threats appear as well, though they are personified there in terms of Lilith and her demonic progeny.



would have it so (“may there be darkness upon Jesus of Nazareth,” he writes). But Jesus himself stands clearly as this demonic component of the *sefira Yesod*. And this may be the thrust of Abulafia’s derivation of the phrase “his power is solar” from the scriptural words “darkness which may be felt.” Jesus is endowed with that potency ascribed earlier to Satan, that which brings darkness. Jesus, thus, is possessed of the capacity to occlude the sun. The same evil potency is both the destroyer and the destroyed here.<sup>176</sup>

A significant point regarding incarnationism seems here to be articulated by Abulafia. Latent within the very evil and idolatrous idea of Jesus’ incarnation is the notion of his death by crucifixion. The death that is propagated in the world by this idolatry is thus refracted back upon this idolatry’s very object. Abulafia’s fixation upon death is understandable not simply by its association with Satan, but also by its opposition to *Yesod* in its proper role as the giver of life. Jesus, for Abulafia, thus again epitomizes death. A further polemic is at work in terms of Christian incarnationism, one that will play itself out as Abulafia continues. The Christian notion of Jesus’ corporealization, of the God rendered animate, is turned on its head. In Abulafia’s estimation, the idolatrous notion of the corporealized god is the gateway to death alone. But a cooptation is once more at work as well, as the role ascribed by Christians to Jesus accrues, for Abulafia, to

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<sup>176</sup> From a suggestion by Hames regarding another passage, we may suspect that Abulafia’s allusion to the solar power of Jesus may also refer to the solar Christian calendar, as against the Jewish (and Muslim) lunar one. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 74.

Moses. For it is the latter who signifies both life, as a kind of divine progenitor, and divine corporealization, since he is to be linked with the phallic potency. This potency we know to be reflected in the consummation of circumcision, so that the divine phallus, as represented by Moses, is replicated – and in cruciform fashion, we may recall – in the circumcised Jewish man.

### **The Righteous and Fetid “Drop;” Abulafia, Jesus and the *Prima Materia***

If we see the theme of Jesus’ corporealization being coopted here by Abulafia, with the continuation of his discussion we may note what may well be another cooptation of Christian notions, or at the very least the articulation of some remarkably parallel themes. These center around what was perceived by Christians to have been the sacred nature of Jesus’ blood. This notion found its point of origin in the idea expressed in the Gospels that Jesus’ blood was possessed of a sanctifying nature.<sup>177</sup> The point of contact between this theme and one that we discussed earlier, concerning the blood placed on the posts and lintels of the doors of Israelite homes during the Exodus story, should be apparent. Jesus, for Christians, represents the paschal sacrifice. He is the lamb, and thus, for Christians, his is the blood on those doors. For Abulafia, the

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<sup>177</sup> See for instance Matt 26:28: “...for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Note as well here how Jesus characterizes his own blood as covenantal. Abulafia’s interest in a positive valence to blood is focused as well, we have seen, upon that blood which is covenantal.

structure of the posts and lintels of those doors signified circumcision (itself fraught with christological overtones). Thus, implicitly in that earlier case, the blood of circumcision was imbued with precisely that aura of sacrality, by Abulafia, that Christians ascribed to Jesus' blood.<sup>178</sup> Both constitute the paschal sacrifice, and this motif is used to imply the divine nature within the particular subjects discussed by each community. The one addresses the issue of divine sonship, the other the divinizing impact of circumcision.

In the context of Abulafia's discourse in *Gan Na'ul*, some of these same issues reemerge. Abulafia shifts from a discussion of Jesus to one of Moses. He writes,<sup>179</sup>

And this is the secret of the redemption, and because the ten *sefirot* are explicated from the Torah from the secrets of the ten plagues, because each *sefira* acts to alter nature in the world, year and soul, I must speak of them in chapter headings; and study them well from the Torah. And the first concern is that God said to Moses, "See, I have made you a god to pharaoh" (Ex. 7:1). 'YH in full for the dust of God.' Because Moses is the name called 'El Shaddai who guards the four tablets of the first, central, comprising drop, which is understood

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<sup>178</sup> For Christ as the paschal sacrifice, see Mk. 14:16, 24; Heb. 12:24; 1Cor 5:7, 8; John 1:29; 1Peter 1:18-19; Rev. 5:6, 13. Wolfson observes the positive valence to the blood of circumcision and the blood of the paschal sacrifice in *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*. *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n.167. See also pp. 90, 219-220, for the positive valence to the blood of circumcision. In the latter case, it is the removal of blood during circumcision that is construed as positive. See also the note above concerning the locution in Matthew, "my blood of the covenant." Bynum observes that Christians focused, for their own part, on the blood of circumcision, that is, Jesus'. She notes the many painted portrayals of blood coursing from Jesus' wounds down into his groin as effecting the connection between the salvic blood of his sacrificial death and the blood of his circumcision, which presaged this. Similar such themes, she observes, occur in many medieval sermons. Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," pp. 408, 413.

<sup>179</sup> *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fols. 330a-b; printed edition, p. 47.

as the fount called the roots of the tree. And the tablets are four, and these are the four colors red, black, white, green, and the secret of their endings is ‘horns;’ it is written “hoofs” (Ps. 69:32); ‘books,’ as I hinted above.<sup>180</sup>

The exile that Abulafia had first linked to Satan earlier in this excerpt from *Gan Na‘ul*, and ultimately, by association, to Jesus, is now contrasted with the redemption that is linked with Moses. We find again, then, Moses being contrasted with Jesus. We are also given to understand once more that it is the *sefirot* that constitute this discussion’s subtext. Thus it is apparent that, when Abulafia again establishes the connection between the names Moses and ‘El Shaddai, it is *Yesod* that is his focus. Abulafia maintains that secrets regarding the *sefirot* are to be discerned in the scriptural verses concerning the Exodus story, and his example here is focused chiefly upon the words “a god to pharaoh” from Ex. 7:1. The phrase that he derives from the letters of these words via letter transposition, “YH in full for the dust of God,” is enigmatic to say the least, but his allusion to a prior discussion is helpful.

In the present context he derives the word “horns” from the final letters of the words for the four colors mentioned. “Horns” he relates to the word “hoofed;” they share the same numerical value (390) and they appear together in Ps. 69:32.<sup>181</sup> In Abulafia’s prior discussion, he had observed that “horns” in the Psalm appears in the singular form (*maqrin*); regarding these two horns, then,

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<sup>180</sup> See *ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 326a; printed edition, p. 34.

<sup>181</sup> “And it shall please the Lord better than an ox or a bullock that has horns and hoofs.”

“the two of them are one equal number.”<sup>182</sup> The significance of this singular nature to the horns lies, we learn, in that numerical equivalence of “horns” to “hoofs” (*mafris*). By letter transpositions, the latter yields both “ten is the number” and “books,” but, most importantly, it shares the same numerical value as the phrase “male and female.” The appearance of “hoofs” in the singular in the psalm, then, alludes to androgyny, a word itself that, Abulafia will subsequently observe, is numerically equivalent to the words “male and female.” Abulafia will next bring us back to the subject that we had encountered in the exegesis concerning Moses, that being the name YH. The name YH when its letters are spelled out in full yields the value 26, the same as that for the Tetragrammaton. This, then, is likely Abulafia’s springboard for his discussion of the four tablets in the current passage, since the Tetragrammaton, so closely related to the name YH, is as well fourfold. In the passage that discusses the androgynous nature of the word “hoofs,” Abulafia observes as well that the numerical value for YH (15) multiplied by 26 yields 390, the same value as that for “male and female.” It becomes apparent that in Abulafia’s derivation of the name YH and, ultimately, of the word “horns,” and in the discourse that accompanies this in his exegesis concerning Moses, the subject of androgyny is his overriding interest.

Concerning Moses as well, we find in the current passage another motif that we had examined earlier. Moses is associated – once more in connection

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<sup>182</sup> *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 326a; printed edition, p. 34.

with his identity as the phallic potency - with the “drop” of the *ṣaddiq*, a righteous semen, as against the “fetid drop” of Jesus. Both are to be understood as the *prima materia*, the essence of the created world, for which the demiurge is responsible. In the current passage the “drop” is characterized as “first,” “central” and “comprising,” and also as “the fount” and “the roots of the tree.” It is, then, this *prima materia*, and it, as mentioned before in connection with *Yesod*, is also the All.

In this regard, Abulafia’s discussion of androgyny reveals another significant feature. Among the phrases that, Abulafia observes, are equivalent to the numerical value for “male and female”<sup>183</sup> is the phrase “source of the blood.” This phrase Abulafia mentions twice here, and he includes as well the phrase “name and blood.” The significance of blood is not here illuminated, although its vivifying role, and thus its connection to Abulafia’s discussion of semen, is readily apparent. In fact, “righteous” blood and “righteous” semen are essentially equivalent for Abulafia, as are base blood and semen.<sup>184</sup> All of these are identified with the *prima materia*, either in its good or evil guise. We find in this, then, another instance of a strong correspondence between Christian notions of

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<sup>183</sup> These include “*Shekhinah*,” “the All [is] Mt. Sinai” (suggestive once more of Moses’ identity with respect to the *sefira Yesod*), “every name,” “the name of the man,” “name of the father and mother,” “a boy will be born” and “source of birth.”

<sup>184</sup> For this equivalence, see, for instance, *Gan Na‘ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 331a; printed edition, pp. 49, 51-52. See also *Sheva‘ Netivot ha-Torah*, in Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, p. 17, where semen is referred to as “the other blood, that is male and white in color,” likened to ink and to the *prima materia*, while red blood is deemed to be female; the two of them together comprising the name ’El Shaddai. Nirenberg explains that semen was regarded in medieval medical theory as heated blood. *Communities of Violence*, p. 155.

Jesus' corporealization and Abulafia's conception of the *sefira Yesod*, or of the righteous one who is conjoined to the Active Intellect. For, just as the paschal blood was understood for Abulafia to be the blood of circumcision, as against the Christian conception of its identification with the blood shed by Jesus, so too is blood in general, in its righteous manifestation, identifiable, for Abulafia, with the semen that flows from the *sefira Yesod*. In this regard as well, then, a sacrality to blood, for Abulafia, is bound to notions of the demiurge. By implication, blood in its demonic manifestation is similarly to be linked with the demiurgic *sefira*, but in association with its evil component.

The issue of androgyny within which Abulafia's interest in blood (a subject which we will yet consider more fully) occurs is one that bears examination. For by implication androgyny is a significant underlying issue in Abulafia's speculations upon Moses and the sefirotic discussion that he contends is encrypted in the Exodus story. Already we may surmise something of what this androgyny may indicate for Abulafia. For the Active Intellect, we have seen, is comprised of male and female aspects, the latter being identified with Jesus, the former with the Jewish messiah, who as well stands as the integration of both. Such a notion is indeed recalled in the present discussion of androgyny.

Abulafia draws upon Genesis 49:11 in this regard: "Binding his foal to the vine, and his ass' colt to the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes." The words "in wine" and "in the blood" from

this verse Abulafia considers with respect to the phrase “name and blood.” The latter phrase we had noted earlier, and here Abulafia suggests that, since the numerical value for “in wine” is 72, suggestive of the seventy-two letter name of God, it may substitute for the word “name” in that phrase “name and blood.” So it is that the verse from Genesis here appears to suggest for Abulafia the issue of androgyny, as well as its apparent relationship to blood; he has substituted the Genesis words for the ones used earlier. He next derives the word “Eden,” whose numerical value (124) is equal to that for the words from the Genesis verse, “in wine” and “in blood,” taken together. A linkage of Eden with blood and with androgyny is thereby implicit. Subsequently Abulafia combines the values for the words “vine” (*gafen*) and “choice vine” (*shereiqaḥ*) from the same verse, indicating that they together comprise the same value as that for the word “garden” taken together with the words “Prince of the Countenance” (738). The equation between the Garden of Eden, blood and androgyny is joined to one, then, between the Garden and Metatron. Thus we see that the cleaving to the Active Intellect on the part of the mystic, equivalent to his self-identification with Metatron, is indeed the subtext of Abulafia’s discussion of androgyny. Blood constitutes an essential element in this symbolism; and we find through these associations that the divinization of the Jewish mystic, that is, his hypostatization as Metatron, is intimately tied to this theme of blood. A parallel to the Christian



fixation upon the divine blood of Jesus<sup>185</sup> is apparent. Just as striking as this parallel is the fact that Abulafia begins his exegesis of the Genesis verse above by pairing together wine with blood, the substances equated to one another by Jesus, with respect to his own divine blood, at the Last Supper.

Abulafia's interest in Eden with respect to androgyny is significant in that it suggests the theosophical understanding of the *sefira Tif'eret*, seen to be comprised of male and female components and also identified by theosophical kabbalists with the Garden of Eden.<sup>186</sup> And Abulafia does, immediately subsequent to his mention of the Prince of the Countenance, begin a discussion of *Tif'eret*. He observes that the numerical values for the names Jacob and Isaac total 390, the same as for the words "male and female." Indeed, the secret of the latter phrase, he explains, consists in this fact. The phrase, he relates, contains fifteen names. We may recall that the value of the name YH when its letters are spelled in full, twenty-six, when multiplied by the simple numerical value of the same name, fifteen, as well yields 390. But Abulafia intends more here than another reference to the name YH. For the number fifteen Abulafia writes as comprised of the letters *zayin* and *het*, the *zayin* standing for the word *zekhut* or merit, to be associated with Jacob, the *het* standing for the word *hovah* or guilt, to

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<sup>185</sup> See, for instance, Neu Watkins, "Two Women Visionaries and Death: Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich" *Numen*, Vol. 30, Dec. 1983, pp. 180-183.

<sup>186</sup> See for instance, Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, pp. 150, 154, 168, 236, 299.

be associated with Isaac. These two patriarchs stand as well for the two *sefirot* *Tif'eret* and *Paḥad*, respectively.

Abulafia observes that *Tif'eret* denotes the attribute *'emet* or truth, a point that will concern us shortly. Among other notes regarding *Tif'eret*, a string of *gematriyot* ultimately identify *Tif'eret*, in succession, with the phrases “crown of Jacob,” “holy spirit in the Garden of Eden” and “man and woman [are] witnesses in the garden.”<sup>187</sup> Thus we see a clear identification of *Tif'eret* both with the Garden of Eden and with androgyny. Both androgyny and *Tif'eret* are typically associated with *Sefer Yeṣirah*'s theme of the balancing of merit and guilt.<sup>188</sup> In this instance Abulafia links *Tif'eret* with androgyny, but only with merit, and not with merit and guilt together. In this we see reflected the issue that we have encountered frequently in Abulafia's thought, one that, we might say, encapsulates his ambivalence regarding the demonic element. For the man who has entered into communion with the Active Intellect – or, in theosophical terms in this case, the man who attains not merely to *Yesod* but to *Tif'eret* – is wholly good, but may be understood in this light because he has reconciled good and evil within himself.

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<sup>187</sup> Abulafia suggests that the number of letters in the ten commandments (620) is equivalent to the numerical value of the word “crown.” Additionally, there are 172 words in the ten commandments. If one adds the number ten, for the number of commandments themselves, to these other two sums, the resulting sum is 802, the same as that for the words “crown of Jacob” and for “holy spirit in the Garden of Eden” (if one discounts the letter *vav* from either the word for “holy” or “spirit”) and “man and woman [are] witnesses in the garden.”

<sup>188</sup> *Sefer Yeṣirah* 2:4.

The attainment to the attribute of *'emet* or truth - that is, to the *sefira Tif'eret* - may be understood within the context of Abulafia's discussion of Moses, the demiurgic *sefira Yesod*, and the *prima materia*, either semen or blood. For, with respect to the theosophic paradigm of the hypostatization of the righteous in the *sefira Tif'eret*, *Yesod* figures prominently. It remains the divine phallic potency within this conceptual framework; *Yesod* is wielded by the male entity *Tif'eret* in the course of its erotic union with the divine female element, the *Shekhinah* or the *sefira Malkhut*.<sup>189</sup> Thus, Abulafia's discussion has not strayed far from our main concern, as it pertains to *Yesod*, and his discussion of *Tif'eret* will serve to directly inform our reading of what we find shortly thereafter concerning notions of messiahship and the *prima materia*.

For Abulafia will next turn these themes toward a discussion of himself. His starting point is a series of letter operations.<sup>190</sup> The letters for "He created them" (*bara'am*) – likely recalling Genesis 5:2, "male and female He created them," particularly given the preceding discussion of androgyny – he transposes to derive the name Avram, the first reference to himself in this passage. By this alone Abulafia has made a claim for himself concerning his own status as having achieved the state of conjunction just delineated. He continues by deriving, by numeric equivalence, the words "I will bless his hand [*yado*]." Regarding this phrase, he writes,

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<sup>189</sup> See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 133.

<sup>190</sup> *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 327a; printed edition, p. 37.

...that is, the ink [*diyo*] of the time of exile, the number of whose years will be א'רכב, 1,222 years, and it will be completed in the fiftieth year. And the Christians will complete it [as] the year 1290.

The last word of the phrase, “his hand,” he transforms into the word “ink,” which will conform to what we see subsequently concerning the theme of the inscription in writing of prophetic pronouncements. Here he simply says that the ink is in some fashion to be ascribed to the period of Jewish exile. Another valence upon the significance of this ink is noteworthy; Abulafia will frequently pair the words blood and ink (*dam ve-diyo*), blood representing base corporeality in such a context, ink standing for intellection.<sup>191</sup> This latter sense may be intended here, insofar as the reference to blood occurs within the context of the articulation of Abulafia’s own prophetic revelation concerning exile. The letters for “I will bless” he considers as numbers (taking the letter *’alef* for *’elef*, or one thousand), yielding what he contends will be the number of years until the end of the exile. It is apparent that the year 68CE is his starting point for the exile, because he considers its end to be the year 1290 of the Christian calendar, and he declares that it will last 1,222 years. The note regarding the “fiftieth year,” the

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<sup>191</sup> See, for instance, just a few pages later, *ibid.*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 328a; printed edition, p. 41. See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 150 n. 153; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 342-343, 443-444.

year 1290CE, refers to what will be his own age at that time.<sup>192</sup> Earlier, he had referred to the fiftieth year with respect to the redemptive jubilee year, as discussed in Leviticus 25:10.

As with his earlier allusion to the significance of his own first name, Abulafia, with his reference to the redemptive import of his own age, writes himself again into his prophecy regarding collective Jewish redemption. He continues,

And this is what is hinted at in the saying (Dan. 10:21), “the inscription in true [*’emet*] writing.” Because within its words it says that Daniel (Ibid., 7:1) “had a dream vision and visions of his head [*rei’sheih*] as he lay upon his bed; then he wrote the dream and told the sum of the matter [or, the “beginning of words,” *rei’sh milin*].” And they, [the letters] *’emet*, are the beginnings of words [*ra’shei teivot*], yielding one thousand [א] two hundred [ב] ninety [כ], “he told the sum of the matter” [or, “the beginnings of words,” *rei’sh milin*]; ‘from the land of Israel’...

At this point Abulafia discusses the prophecies inscribed in writing by Daniel, so it is possible that by his earlier reference to ink he intends to draw the analogy between his own prophecy and Daniel’s. The words *rei’sh milin* from Daniel 7:1 Abulafia takes to mean *ra’shei teivot*, the “beginnings of words.” He perceives that Daniel wrote his prophecy in the form, then, of an acrostic, and so he turns to the word *’emet* from verse 10:21 and pronounces it to be composed of the first letters of

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<sup>192</sup> See Berger, “Messianic Self-Consciousness,” in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron*, edited by J. Blau, P. Friedman, A. Hertzberg and I. Mendelsohn (New York, 1959), p. 58.

the words for one thousand, two hundred and ninety; thus the word encrypts his own declaration regarding the end of the Jewish exile. That he chooses the word 'emet, truth, as the focus of his attention is significant. We observed earlier that the *sefira Tif'eret*, the androgynous potency, is known by the cognomen "truth." Since in this current passage Abulafia has already referred to both androgyny and the word "truth," we may understand that his own attainment to the *sefira Tif'eret* he considers to be the basis for the coming jubilee, or messianic redemption. The picture of Abulafia's cooptation for Judaism, conscious or not, of Christian motifs concerning the messiah - including, but not limited to, the latter's shedding of his salvific blood for the benefit of humanity, this blood's equivalence to the paschal sacrifice and to wine, and as well to the demiurgic life-giving *prima materia* - is rendered complete when we are given to understand here that Abulafia considers himself to be that very figure who is the true messiah, antithetical to Jesus.

Abulafia extends the current discussion yet further with a reference to the last of the themes just mentioned, that of the *prima materia*. Above, Abulafia had noted that the numerical value for the words "he told the beginnings of words" is equivalent to the words "from the land of Israel." He goes on to explain that the land of Israel is named "the inheritance of the nations" (perhaps a reference to Ps. 111:6), and notes a numerical equivalence between this latter phrase and the phrase "the virgin drop" (547). This drop, he writes, "is called 'living creature,'" the numerical value for the sum of the words "drop" and "living creature"

together being equivalent to that for the words “the inheritance of nations.” The words “living creature” Abulafia relates to the verse (Genesis 1:24), “(Gen. 1:24), “Let the land [*ha-’ares*] bring forth living creatures after their kind,” And the word “land” in the same verse he uses to bring us back once more to the phrase “land of Israel.” The numerical values for the letters of the word “land” – one (or one thousand, in this case), two hundred and ninety – constitute once again for Abulafia a clue to the time of redemption, the year 1290CE.

Throughout this discussion, Abulafia sets the stage for what will become a dominant theme, a preoccupation with bipartite and dichotomous entities. He begins this by contrasting Israel with the other lands - which, he says, are not as high - but his concern will return ultimately to that of the “drop” mentioned above. In the present context, he discusses only the “drop” to be associated with the land of Israel and with the propagation of life. This drop most certainly stands for the righteous semen discussed earlier in connection, for example, with Moses and the *ṣaddiq*. Here, since an evocation of *Tif’eret* and its androgynous and messianic nature is apparent, the reference to “Israel,” the other name given in Scripture to Jacob, likely alludes to the latter’s aforementioned symbolic masculine role among the *sefirot*. Thus it is appropriate for the life-giving drop to figure in this discourse, as it suits the demiurgic and phallic nature of the messiah (Abulafia himself), as we have seen.

The aforecited reference to the “living creature” is significant in that it becomes the springboard for much subsequent discussion. First Abulafia considers the contrast between land and sea creatures. What follows thereafter is elaboration upon the related oppositions between the elements earth and water, the planets Saturn and Jupiter, the constellations Virgo and Pisces, and, ultimately, the two components of the Teli. That the Teli stands as one of Abulafia’s preeminent symbols of the bipartite demiurge and of the Active Intellect, communion with which is synonymous with messiahship, we have already discussed at length. And such themes related to the Teli form the backdrop for the thoughts which conclude this portion of Abulafia’s discussion:<sup>193</sup>

And know that the secret of the “inheritance of the nations” [is] ‘Gabriel, fire’ and his appearance is ‘the appearance of fire,’ ‘and Israel,’ ‘will be sealed in his power’ in the saying (Deut. 33:2), “From His right hand went a fiery law for them.” And it is the ‘particular matter’ [*homer peraṭi*], and thus ‘his hand will wipe out the drop.’ Because when Israel performs the will of God, and seeks to know His great name, immediately the left is made right. And the drop, from which humankind is inscribed in the attribute of harsh judgment and in the palm of guilt, is erased, and it is written in the reverse and opposite place, and it is the drop sealed in the attribute of strong mercy and [it is] engraved in the palm of merit.

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<sup>193</sup> *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 328b; printed edition, p. 39.



Abulafia returns one final time here to the phrase “inheritance of nations.” By *gematriyot*,<sup>194</sup> Abulafia derives references to Gabriel – recalling his earlier interest in the prophecies contained in the Book of Daniel – to fire, and to Israel and its connectedness to God. The allusion to fire and Israel sets the stage for his recourse to Deuteronomy 33:2, such that Israel, through the law, is to be associated with God’s right hand. The notion of Israel’s link with the right hand reflects Abulafia’s prior elaboration upon Jacob and Isaac. Jacob there was related to merit, as against guilt, which was ascribed to Isaac. That Abulafia had in mind *Sefer Yeşirah*’s discussion of the “palm of merit” and the “palm of guilt” is now rendered explicit. Jacob, then, belongs to the right side, the side of merit, while Isaac belongs to the left, the side of guilt. We must keep in mind, nevertheless, in the course of this discourse that, in keeping with its status among the theosophical kabbalists as a *sefira* that harmonizes within itself both the left and the right,<sup>195</sup> *Tif’eret* had been linked by Abulafia with androgyny. This is the nature of its ultimate righteousness, as well as of the fecundity of its “drop.”

Earlier we had discerned that Abulafia associated Jesus and his corporeality with the “fetid drop,” while the Jewish messiah, Abulafia himself, bore a relationship to the drop in its aforementioned righteous state. We had

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<sup>194</sup> The phrases “inheritance of nations,” “Gabriel, fire,” “the appearance of fire” and “and Israel,” and later “particular matter” and “will wipe out the drop,” all have a numerical value of 547. The phrase “will be sealed in his power” has a value of 546.

<sup>195</sup> We noted earlier the difficulty involved insofar as *Tif’eret*, the *sefira* referenced here in the person of Jacob, is, in fact, a middle *sefira* and not one of the right side of the sefirotic array. The middle *sefirot* are seen to incline toward the side of mercy in their harmonization of left and right.

observed that this conception dovetailed with the notions of evil and righteous blood, respectively, as Abulafia countered Christian notions of the sacrality of Jesus' blood with his own complicated view of the *prima materia*. The notion of the two types of semen suggested therein is rendered clearly in the current passage. On the one hand, there is a "drop" to be associated with the side of guilt. This drop, the right hand, the one of which Israel partakes, "wipes out" (*timḥeh*). The verb "wipe out" (or "blot out") is the same one that Abulafia used earlier when he expressed the desire that Jesus' name and memory be blotted out, and it is as well the verb used in Deuteronomy 25:19, where God demands the blotting out of the memory of Amaleq, himself a symbol, for medieval Jews, of Christendom. The connection of the corrupted semen discussed in the current context with Jesus is thus apparent.

Further, Abulafia refers in the current passage to "the 'particular matter'" [*homer peratī*] with respect to this base semen. As we noted in an earlier chapter,<sup>196</sup> Abulafia ascribes to the particular or to the individuated (*peratī*) a low, terrestrial status, as against that which exists in a collective fashion (*kelal*) as a general category, as that which may be understood in terms, perhaps, of a platonic form. It is logical, then, that in the current context the matter that is part and parcel of the corrupted semen is "particular." In a similar fashion did we

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<sup>196</sup> See Chapter Two, n. 10 regarding *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 32b-33a; printed edition, pp. 114-115.

find, in *Shomer Mišvah*,<sup>197</sup> that the “name of idolatry” for the “prince of the body” from the tree of knowledge – references to Jesus, almost certainly – is as well “particular.”<sup>198</sup> It is thus apparent from these clues in the current context that the corrupted semen of the left, the side of guilt, is to be linked directly with Jesus. On the other hand do we find the semen of mercy. In the earlier case of the Jewish messiah’s harmonization and reconstitution within himself of the YH and the VH, we noted how this righteous figure could stand as both the YH and as the entire Tetragrammaton. Similarly, in his discussion of Jacob, Abulafia demonstrates that he understands the true demiurgic corporeality of the Jewish messiah, in his realized state of androgyny, to inhere in his overcoming of the opposition between the two types of semen described here.<sup>199</sup> This feat leads, naturally, to an inclination toward the meritorious and the masculine, an inclination that we see reflected in the end of this passage.

Presented here is an alternate model to the one observed earlier wherein Esau – representing, as we saw, Christendom - stood for the two hands that surrounded Jacob, the latter representing the covenant of the tongue. In that case as well, Jacob, or *Tif’eret*, represented the harmonization of the polarities embodied by the *sefirot* of the left and right. In the current case Jacob stands for the right side, while Isaac, and not Esau, stands for the left. The notion that Jacob

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<sup>197</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 41a; printed edition, p. 4.

<sup>198</sup> *Shem peraṭi* is the phrase used there by Abulafia.

<sup>199</sup> Wolfson discusses the notion, present in *’Iggeret ha-Qodesh*, of *semen virile*’s bestowing of form upon matter. “Woman-The Feminine as Other,” p. 201, n. 66.

is representative of the perfected Jewish messiah is further reinforced by integrating the two modalities from the two passages, the one concerning Jacob and Esau, the other Jacob and Isaac. Jacob stems from the side of goodness or mercy, and he represents as well the fully realized covenant. We have seen that that covenant, that of the tongue, is superior to but arises from the covenant of circumcision; the former stands as the latter's spiritual consummation. So we may understand once more in the current passage the connection of the Jewish messiah to the phallic potency. Jacob, who stands, we have noted, for the Jewish messiah - Abulafia himself – represents the covenant of the tongue, which is inexorably bound to the covenant of the phallus. This offers us once again a way to understand the conceptual link forged by Abulafia between Jacob and the righteous semen. To reiterate the point that we had made earlier, and which will reemerge momentarily, Abulafia's estimation of the significance of the semen of the messiah is matched by identical conceptions regarding blood. These constitute a close parallel to Christian notions regarding Jesus' blood, from which notions Abulafia's own likely proceeded. This possibility will suggest itself more strongly as Abulafia continues.

To conclude, however, with the excerpt currently under consideration, if it appears improbable that the patriarch Isaac could serve as a substitute for Esau as a symbol by which to represent Jesus and Christendom, Abulafia will go on to dispel any such doubts. It is first apparent that what Abulafia is describing with

respect to Jacob is the mystical permutation of letters, resulting in a conjunction with the Active Intellect. For he refers to the effort to attain to knowledge of the name, as well as to a process by which a reversal or inversion takes place (*hafekhah ve-ḥalufah*), one by which the left is transformed into the right. This process of reversal or inversion is the identifying hallmark of his letter permutation methodology, whose very goal is knowledge of the name. He goes on to write, “And from what I wrote in the revolution of many matters [*begilgulei ‘inyanim*], jumping [*medolagim*] and skipping [*meqofšim*] from this to this, and hinting, you will understand my intention...” Here again, Abulafia employs the language that he uses when referring to letter permutation. Letters are permuted by revolving them, suggested plainly here, and also by manipulating the successive outcomes of permutations in a process referred to as “skipping” or “jumping.”<sup>200</sup> And indeed, shortly thereafter, in the context of a discussion of varying levels of attainment, Abulafia refers to the goal of actualizing the intellect, and to the process by which this is accomplished:<sup>201</sup>

One must revolve [*šarikh legalgal*] all of the Torah, because it is [comprised of] the names of the Holy One, blessed be He. And one must innovate [from] every letter and every word new wonders from moment to moment. And one must contemplate one word and connect it with another, and then put aside [*lehaniyah*] the second and seek a third to connect with it. And again with another, sometimes with half of them, sometimes with their beginnings, sometimes with their ends.

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<sup>200</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>201</sup> *Gan Na‘ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fols. 328a-b; printed edition, pp. 40-41.

And sometimes with their numbers and sometimes with their permutations [*be-temuroteihem*], until it is necessary that he go out from all of his first thoughts and innovate other new revealed ones from them, ever one after another. And with all of this that he does, for as long as the holy name is sealed within his heart, he will not feel, until he moves from his source and his place, and his blood will not flee from him from the attribute of fear with the attribute of joy still [upon him], and no thing from all of the prophetic apprehension will arise in his hand [otherwise]. But it is known that when the name, whose secret is ‘blood and ink,’ begins to move within him, and he senses it, like one who recognizes a place from a stone that is within it, then he will know that knowledge of the name acts within him. And it begins to bring him from potentia to actualization.

Abulafia provides here a detailed description of the means by which the earlier “fetid drop” is transformed into the righteous one. Those means are his usual technique of letter permutation accompanied by the interpretive methods by which prophetic revelation, and conjunction with the Active Intellect, is achieved. The name whose secret is “blood and ink” is presumably the seventy-two letter name,<sup>202</sup> but we may recognize the relevance of our prior observation that with the pairing of blood and ink Abulafia intends to allude to the corporeal and the intellectual spheres, respectively. For Abulafia contrasts as well the “fleeing of the blood” from the “attribute of fear” - that is, from the *sefira* of the left side, *paḥad*, earlier linked with Isaac and the impure “drop” – with the prophetic experience linked with the “attribute of joy.” In this, then, blood is again contrasted with intellection. This is consistent, further, with the contrast

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<sup>202</sup> The numerical value of the phrase “blood and ink” is 70. As Abulafia will do on occasion, adding one for each word of the phrase yields 72.

between Isaac's impure "drop" – of semen - and Jacob's righteous one. Blood and semen are thus discussed, once more, in parallel. Abulafia continues,

And from here and thereafter he will be judged in each of the attributes. And he must stand strong in their battle, because they are supernal messengers, examining and trying his power. As it is said (Deut. 13:4), "For the Lord your God tries [*menaseh*] you." And he will beware that he will not think idolatrously at all, lest he perish from this world and the world to come. And he should pray and entreat continually to God the glorified one to save him from the examination of the attributes...

Clearly recalled here is our earlier discussion of Abulafia's inner struggle against the idolatrous impulse. In the current instance we see that Abulafia has related this struggle to the *sefirot* linked with Isaac and with Jacob, that is, with *Paḥad* and *Tif'eret*. Given that this passage proceeds directly from the prior discussion of the two kinds of "drops," it is apparent that the battle described as raging within the psyche of the mystic is as well that between the impure and pure semen. From the excerpt cited now, it is clear that Abulafia intends idolatry - that is, Christianity - for the former. The evil corporeality of Jesus, reflected in the notions of impure blood and impure semen, thus tempts the mystic (Abulafia himself, assuredly) from within. It must be overcome, with God's help, if the mystic is to not only achieve a conjunction with the Active Intellect, securing for himself the status of Jacob among the *sefirot*, but if he is even to survive the encounter with his examiners.

That section of *Gan Na'ul* that has been of interest here concludes with specific allusions concerning Jesus, blood and the demiurgic potency. Considering Exodus 7:12, “And every man [of the Egyptian sorcerers] cast down his rod, and they turned to snakes, but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods,” Abulafia observes a numerical correspondence between the phrase “every man his rod” and the phrase “Jesus the unclean.”<sup>203</sup> The implicit connection here between Jesus and the Egyptian sorcerers is significant in itself; it has polemical roots going back into antiquity.<sup>204</sup> As to the nature of the sorcerers themselves, Abulafia indicates that they too “act from an unclean spirit.” Abulafia presents a string of phrases numerically equivalent to the phrase “magicians of Egypt” (*ḥartumei miṣrayim*), among which are included “killers of the sons of man” and “princes of day and night.”

Regarding the latter phrase, Abulafia explains that the words (Ex. 7:11) “sorcerers of Egypt with their secret arts (*be-laḥateihem*)” should be understood in terms of the flaming sword (*laḥaṭ ha-ḥerev*) of Genesis 3:24. This sword Abulafia refers to regularly, in its revolving action, as a symbol for the procedure of letter permutation.<sup>205</sup> Abulafia explains that the phrase “prince of day and

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<sup>203</sup> Both yield 371.

<sup>204</sup> Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 45.

<sup>205</sup> Wolfson discusses this motif as representative of the mystic’s transformation of the attribute of judgment into that of mercy, these attributes representing Metatron’s two faces. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172-173 n. 213. In the passage from *Gan Na'ul* just examined, letter permutation was associated by Abulafia with the overcoming of the attribute of fear by that of joy, the two being analogous to imagination and intellect, respectively. Thus, the significance of the revolving and



night” “...hints to the flaming sword that revolves from day [to] night, from night [to] day, from light to darkness, from darkness to light.” The Egyptian sorcerers, hence, are seen to engage in the identical but oppositely directed activity of the one discussed above, which had referred to the transformation of the “fetid drop” into the righteous one, and of the left into the right, by means of letter permutations and of the hermeneutics that accompany them. The activity of letter permutation, we saw, suggested the mystic’s entering into a messianic communion with the Active Intellect, so it is easy to read the activity of the Egyptian sorcerers as a coming into communion with the demonic aspect of the same Active Intellect. This, we have seen, Abulafia identifies with Jesus, so the connection between the sorcerers and the idolatrous messiah is herein reinforced.

As to the numerical value of the words “with their secret arts” from the aforecited Exodus passage concerning the sorcerers, Abulafia observes an equation with the words “with their blood,” as well as with the phrase from the beginning of Genesis “And it was so.” The former connection, of the sorcerers with the theme of blood, we will examine shortly. As to the latter, in his reference to Genesis Abulafia more than likely has in mind an earlier observation of his own. The pair of phrases from Exodus 7:9-10, “it will turn into a snake (*yehi le-tanin*)” and “and it turned into a snake (*va-yehi le-tanin*),” in Abulafia’s words, “hint to the secret of ‘...let there be light. And there was light.’ (Gen.

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flaming sword with regard to the transformation of judgment into mercy may be understood in terms of the revolution of letters.

1:3)” In the cases of the activities of both the sorcerers and of Aaron (who is the one referenced in Ex. 7:9-10), a link is established, then, with the acts of creation described in Genesis. Further, the phrase “And it was so” Abulafia refers to as the “seal of creation (*yeširah*).” It is likely, then, that Abulafia understands the activities of the sorcerers and of Aaron as in kind with those suggested in *Sefer Yeširah*, particularly insofar as these pertain to letter permutations.

In the case of the sorcerers, Abulafia implies some limitation to their abilities, writing, “...but they [the sorcerers themselves, seemingly] are without a separate existence in [their] action.” The same limitation is not applicable in the case of Aaron. Regarding Aaron’s stature, as against that of the sorcerers, Abulafia first writes that the transformation of the rod into the serpent and back again<sup>206</sup> proceeds in this order of necessity; the latter act is accomplished by Moses and Aaron, “that is,” writes Abulafia, “by the first man.” The phrases “Moses and Aaron” and “the first man” are numerically equivalent.<sup>207</sup> One may discern that Abulafia understands this “first man” as the perfected androgyne that he had discussed earlier in the text, comprised, as Adam was, of “male and female.” And the continuation of the current passage will confirm this understanding. For Abulafia will remark<sup>208</sup> that the final letter *nun* of the word Satan is “the *nun* of the name Aaron.” Similarly, Abulafia writes that this final

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<sup>206</sup> Abulafia reads this reverse process into Ex. 7:12.

<sup>207</sup> Both equal 607

<sup>208</sup> *Gan Na’ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 331b; printed edition, p. 50.

*nun* is “Placed as a seal in the breastplate [*hoshen*, ending with a final letter *nun*] of judgment [worn by Aaron], and it is inverted in the word serpent [*naḥash*].” We know from our earlier discussion that Abulafia conceives of Moses in terms of the *ṣaddiq* and of the flow of the righteous semen, but he is paired here with Aaron, who, in this limited context, is linked with the demonic aspect of the Active Intellect through the evocation of Satan and of the serpent. It is in this way that Moses and Aaron represent Adam, the first man, comprised of male and female. So too do they represent the man who has perfected himself in Adam’s likeness and conjoined with the Active Intellect. The contrast is a pointed one then with the sorcerers, whose actions, though distinctly parallel to those of the pious mystic, are in an important way to be associated with Christianity, and whose results are illusory in their idolatrous quality.

As mentioned, the sorcerers are discussed not only in terms of their permutational activity, but also in terms of “their blood.” In the continuation of the passage, regarding Jesus and the connection established between the phrases “every man his rod” and “Jesus the unclean,” Abulafia writes, “‘But Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.’ (Ex. 7:12) ‘Their rods,’ that is written, is ‘blood of the Teli,’ ‘blood of the dead,’ ‘blood of sorcery’ ...” The equation here of “their rods” with “blood of the Teli”<sup>209</sup> is an important one, for the sorcerers with their rods from the Exodus verse have already been equated with Jesus. As in our

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<sup>209</sup> Both phrases, along with “blood of the dead” and “blood of sorcery,” have a numerical value of 445.

preceding chapter, then, we find Jesus being associated with the Teli. Here, though, Abulafia refers specifically to the blood of the Teli. Righteous blood – as we saw in our discussion of the paschal blood and its relation, for Abulafia, to circumcision - stands for the realized Jewish covenant. As such, it is to be linked with Moses, who was placed in a demiurgic context with respect to the *sefira Yesod*. Conversely do we now have Jesus, whose blood also partakes of a demiurgic essence, as we see here in the reference to the Teli, but whose nature is again not life-giving but deadly. Jesus as the Teli, furthermore, is described as accessed by the same means by which the pious Jewish mystic may attain to his own messianic status. The misdeeds of the sorcerers, then, may be seen to run parallel to the potential misdeeds of the well-meaning mystic, should he be swayed by the idolatrous impulse. Ultimately, then, Abulafia speaks here in autobiographical terms once more, as he himself manifestly and avowedly wages this very same battle in his own practice.

Several of the aforementioned concepts are underscored by Abulafia as he continues in *Gan Na'ul*. He writes,<sup>210</sup>

“...And all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood.” (Ex. 7:20) And the turning of ‘the water...to blood’ [is] ‘from the blood of circumcision.’ And it is the first letter [or “sign,” *’ot*] decreed from the secret of man, ‘circumcision,’ and it is the first letter [or “sign,” *’ot*] decreed from the secret of ‘the foundation.’

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<sup>210</sup> *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 331a; printed edition, p. 51.

The sacred power of the blood of circumcision is here overtly discussed; it is the source of the turning of the Nile to blood, just as it had been implicitly identified earlier with the protective blood of the paschal lamb on the doors of Jewish homes. As to the meaning of the remainder of the passage, I would suggest that the mention of the secret of the first letter as it pertains to man recalls the passage from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon* that we examined earlier.<sup>211</sup> There, the letter 'alef stood for the man who was both "first and last," who resembles Metatron, Adam and God, and who is called "*ṣaddiq*," alluding to the *sefira Yesod*. In the current passage, if the first letter 'alef is separated from the remainder of the word for "man," 'adam, the word for "blood," dam, remains.<sup>212</sup> The theme of the current passage, of course, pertains to circumcision, whose blood marks the coming into perfection of a man in the model of the *ṣaddiq* and of *Yesod*, all themes present in the discussion of the 'alef from *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*. And *Yesod* is subsequently referenced in the current passage; Abulafia draws a connection between the words "circumcision" and "the foundation" (*ha-yesod*), as both have the same numerical value (85).

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<sup>211</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 37a-b; printed edition, p. 47.

<sup>212</sup> The correctness of this approach to the passage seems to be confirmed by another, this from 'Or ha-Sekhel: "And the blood is the first thing created in man, and thus 'man' ['adam] and 'blood' [dam] are related in their concern. Also 'imagination' [*dimyon*] includes them, also 'earth' [*adamah*], also 'likeness' [*demut*] and 'silence' [*demamah*]." MS Vatican-BA ebr. 233, fol. 42a; printed edition, p. 38.

The “secret” linked to the first letter of “the foundation” is somewhat difficult to pin down. If Abulafia is referring to the letter *he*’, then perhaps he intends to allude to the expression that we have seen earlier from *Sefer Yeşirah*, “five opposite five,” which once more alludes to the configuration of the perfected man. Just as likely, Abulafia refers not to the *he*’ but to the letter *yod* of the word *yesod*. Wolfson has elucidated in depth the kabbalistic signification of the letter *yod* in terms of the corona of the phallus and the covenant of circumcision.<sup>213</sup> Since Abulafia is establishing a connection between the words “circumcision” and “*yesod*,” this could easily be his intent with respect to the letter *yod*. In any case, we can see that the “righteous” demiurgical and messianic blood of circumcision held, for Abulafia, a central symbolic role in his reading of the Exodus story, just as did the unclean blood of the demiurgical Teli, or Jesus. Overall, it seems apparent that Abulafia has taken to heart Christian notions concerning the blood of the messiah, integrated them within the Aristotelian framework concerning the Active Intellect and the mystical means by which it is attained, and transferred them to notions of the Jewish messiah, at the same time leaving Christianity with the demonic mirror image of its original conception.

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<sup>213</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 73, 137, 186, 267, 365, 379, idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 336-345, 357-377, 384-392, idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 29-48. Wolfson makes another observation that is noteworthy in the current context, referring to a doctrine by which the letter *yod* is conceived of as both an orthographic and a hypostatic component of the letter ‘*alef*. Idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 282-283.

## The “Damned Body” and Divine Corporealization

As we have seen, there is an intimate relationship between Abulafia’s doctrine of circumcision, as well as that of the bodily fluids blood and semen, and Christian thought. These doctrines hinge upon associations of the divine with corporeality.<sup>214</sup> Abulafia frequently abjures against any notion of God’s confinement within a body, but he does, we will see, reserve an important place in his conception of the divine realm for some form of material incarnation. In particular, it is God’s name that very often bears the hallmarks of bodily manifestation. This should not surprise us overly in at least one respect. Wolfson has examined in great detail the notion of the visionary manifestation of the divine name, often conceived of as the revelation of the divine body, during the Jewish mystical experience.<sup>215</sup> Perhaps most often this manifestation is understood to occur after the fashion of prophecy, wherein

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<sup>214</sup> See Chapter Two n. 50 concerning the corporealization of the Logos. There it was observed that notions of the corporealization of the Logos are present on the Jewish side of the Jewish-Christian divide. In terms of its place in kabbalah, see the notes below. Note as well Twersky’s observation that R. Abraham ben David of Posquières objected to Maimonides strident contention that those who spoke of God in anthropomorphic terms should be deemed heretics. Rabad noted that there were outstanding sages who had done just that, and suggested the need for a more nuanced stance on the question. Twersky, Isadore. “Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières: His Attitude to and Acquaintance with Secular Learning,” pp. 188-192.

<sup>215</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 219, 257; idem, “God, the Demiurge and the Intellect,” pp. 88, 108; idem, *Along the Path*, pp. 29, 44; idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 192, 198, 202, 263. Intimately connected to this notion is another, that the divine name is identical with the Torah, which in turn is conceived of as the divine corpus, or, at times, as the divine hypostatic feminine element. Idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 205, 223, 250, 256; idem, “The Mystical Significance of Torah-Study,” pp. 53-54, 57-63, 61-66, 73-77; idem, “Metatron and Shi’ur Qomah,” p. 74; idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 248, 263; idem, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 63, 167, 212; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, pp. 37, 39-50, 58; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 227-230; idem, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, pp. 33, 36.

the prophet is granted a sensory experience of that which ordinarily transcends the senses for his benefit alone. That is to say, God, or the divine entity that manifests itself, such as the *Kavod* or the *Shekhinah*, does not truly exist in the form beheld by the prophet, but it appears as such only in order that it might be rendered in some way accessible to human apprehension.<sup>216</sup> Such a conception often bears the hallmarks of Maimonides' adaptation to Scripture of Aristotelian thought concerning the Active Intellect.<sup>217</sup> Not always is it the case, however, that the mystics in question scrupulously distinguish the manifestation of the divine entity in bodily form from its transcendent essence.<sup>218</sup> And not always is it the case that the divine name, for example, is clearly disassociated in its true nature from the corporeal. In Abulafia's writings do we find such an absence of clarity regarding an essential immateriality to the divine name. And, in fact, we find assertions that run quite to the contrary. We will examine some of these, particular those that appear to be especially reflective of Christian influence.

We have already examined at length Abulafia's perspective on the lesser portion of the Tetragrammaton, the VH. We noted Abulafia's insistence upon its link to the material. Such a link was accompanied by associations of that portion of the divine name with Jesus and with the idolatrous, in Abulafia's estimation, conception

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<sup>216</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 110-116.

<sup>217</sup> Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude Toward Jewish Mysticism," p. 204; Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*, pp. 27, 29; Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 139; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 44-47; Idel, "Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide," p. 295; idem, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, p. 45; Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and the Philosophical Esotericism*, pp. 119-121.

<sup>218</sup> See, for instance, Scholem's discussion of the *Shi'ur Qomah* precedent; *Major Trends*, pp. 63-67.



of the incarnate deity. In this sense, Abulafia manifests a negative attitude toward that corporeal dimension of the divine realm. One passage from *Sitrei Torah* delineates Abulafia's attitude toward corporeality generally, touching upon both the question of the VH of the Tetragrammaton and upon corporeality in the material world, and alluding at the same time to Christianity. Abulafia begins his discussion along the lines of Maimonides, referring to the notion of the "death by the kiss."<sup>219</sup> Writes Abulafia,<sup>220</sup>

All who weaken the powers of the body and extinguish the fire of lust, his intellect will be strengthened and his light will be magnified and his apprehension will be meritorious and he will rejoice in that which he apprehends, so that when the man comes to the completion of his days and approaches death, he will add to this apprehension a powerful addition and he will magnify the joy in this apprehension and the desire to be apprehended [*ve-ha-hesheq le-musag*], so that the soul will be separated then from the body at this time of pleasure.

From the outset, the human body is understood as the corrupt receptacle for the intellect. The former occludes intellectual clarity through carnal desire and prevents the human being from partaking of the divine. The divide between the corporeal and sensual and the immaterial and divine could not be rendered more starkly. The link that we had observed previously between sexual desire and idolatry is implicit here, as true communion with the divine, discussed here with regard to the ascent of the soul of the righteous man after his death, is possible only through the

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<sup>219</sup> Fishbane, *The Kiss of God*, pp. 24-29.

<sup>220</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 31b; printed edition, p. 61.

forswearing of those impulses which lead men away from pious, intellective worship. Abulafia will proceed from here to explain how the conception of the soul thus outlined constitutes the basis for a proper understanding of the afterlife. He who errs in this understanding, believing in a bodily afterlife, and "...sins with regard to the revival of the dead, is he who dies, and he has no portion in the world to come."<sup>221</sup> To believe in bodily resurrection is itself to fall prey to the seductions of corporeal delusion. One who does this sins, as Abulafia states it here, but he may also be understood to have fallen short with respect to an intellective apprehension of the divine. Such a one, consequently, is cut off from the divine; he is, as Abulafia puts it, a "lover of the imaginative," as against that which is intellective. He "aggrandizes love of sensual, imaginative and bodily matters over love of intellective, divine matters separate from any body, according to the belief of every enlightened one, [every] master of the Torah of God..." Hence, the soul of the man who transgresses in this fashion remains forever mired in the thrall of the body.

Abulafia continues,<sup>222</sup>

I and those like me, from among those who are drawn after the prophets and after the sages who received [the doctrine] from Moses, our rabbi, peace be upon him, and from God, may He be blessed, [know] that it is not proper to believe in anything other than intellective truths received from God, may He be blessed, and from His prophets. And this is because God forbid that I should believe that the goal of the intention for the existence of man from God is for him

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 31b; printed edition, p. 62.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 32a; printed edition, p. 63.

to live forever with this lowly, woeful, foul, cursed, damned body, which God damned and cursed with the curse of the earth in its saying (Gen. 3:17), “cursed is the ground for your sake.” For how can it be that He curse the tree and its fruits not be damned, since its fruits are parts of the tree, and it testifies that all of us die because of our being parts of Adam, who was cursed with death.

Abulafia’s opinion of the deplorable nature of man’s corporeal existence is articulated here in the strongest of terms. Abulafia speaks of the cursed nature of the body, but he goes on as well to liken this nature to the cursed quality of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and, ultimately, to the curse that is death. We should not fail to observe that this is the tree, according to Abulafia, upon which Jesus suffered his own corporeal death. The link between idolatry and Christianity and the bodily is implicitly reinforced, then, by dint of this tree’s connection to both Jesus, the corporealized divinity, and to man’s impure body. As well, the contrast between the eternal life of the intellectual soul and the death that is to be linked with the prevailing of the corporeal and imaginative over the intellectual is notable. Just as, above, the sin of imaginatively misconstruing the nature of man’s intellectual afterlife results in death, so too does an idolatrous association with the god who dies mean death to the misguided.

It is fair to surmise that Abulafia has Jesus in mind here. He goes on to discuss the objections raised to the doctrine of the purely intellectual afterlife of the

soul on the part of those who point to Enoch and Elijah.<sup>223</sup> These objections stem from the fact that “...even the nations believe that the two of them will descend from the heavens in the time of redemption.” The nations believe, as do some Jews, that these two figures demonstrate the corporeal nature of resurrection, since all accept that the two will return bodily to earth with the redemption. Certainly Abulafia is aware that the same doctrine held currency among Christians concerning Jesus, who, in kind with these two figures, as well was perceived to have ascended bodily to heaven. It is unlikely that Abulafia would have brought up for consideration the point regarding Enoch and Elijah in the same context in which he discusses the tree that he elsewhere explicitly associates with Jesus if he was not thinking of the latter in the current context as well. The added fact that he refers specifically to the beliefs of the “nations” on these issues reinforces this probability. The objections based on Enoch and Elijah are accorded some level of legitimacy by Abulafia. He acknowledges some level of mystification on the question.<sup>224</sup>

And perhaps this was a great matter, and it is very strange, that there were among this humankind men much more honored than these two according to the testimony of all the books, and yet it is not said of them that they [have] life in the form of the lives of these two according to what the masses believe as it concerns them.

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<sup>223</sup> Lachs notes R. Abbahu’s response to a heretic’s challenge concerning the hypostatization of Enoch and Elijah in *Genesis Rabbah*. R. Abbahu, Lachs interprets, is sensitive to the implicit connection between Enoch, who at least by the time of *3Enoch* was seen to have been transformed into the divine Metatron, and Jesus, and so he refutes the claim that Enoch was hypostatized. Lachs, “Rabbi Abbahu and the *Minim*,” p. 202-3.

<sup>224</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 32a; printed edition, pp. 63-64.

It is because of the fact that greater men than Enoch and Elijah are not characterized as designated to return bodily to earth that Abulafia is able to hold to the argument that such a destiny is reserved only for these two and not for a group of the elect.<sup>225</sup> Why these two are accorded this destiny is unclear to Abulafia. But his belief in the intellective nature of the afterlife of the soul remains secure in the face of this challenge posed by the nations, as well as by some Jews. It is self-evident that he lends a certain credence to the notion of bodily resurrection in the cases of Enoch and Elijah that he would in no way grant to Jesus, but even still he is undeterred in his contention that that which is corporeal is a thing of the imagination and not of the divine realm. Those who make claims to the contrary concerning the afterlife “...bring proofs that are not intellective but imaginative, and not received in truth as those who raise objections think. And thus we must believe that we sleep in the dust, and (Ps. 103:14) ‘He remembers that we are dust’...”

Abulafia refers to our flawed perception concerning corporeality as “...the screen that separates between us and God, may He be blessed.” The dedication to the corporeal being, again, forestalls contact with the divine. Abulafia, despite his

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<sup>225</sup> The discussion bears some resemblance to an influential passage found in the polemical work *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, which points to Biblical figures more worthy of divinity than Jesus. See, Lasker, “Jewish-Christian Polemics at the Turning Point: Jewish Evidence from the Twelfth Century,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (1996), p. 167; Rembaum, “The Influence of *Sefer Nestor Hakomer* on Medieval Jewish Polemics,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978), pp. 176, 181.

stridency on the subject, goes on to present a somewhat more sympathetic tone concerning the human predilection to err in this fashion. He writes,<sup>226</sup>

But we seek to establish this materiality which God, may He be blessed, did not wish to establish eternally in its particularity, but in its generality, and we wish to create people that God did not create, and certainly we wish to establish their existence in our imaginative thought alone, and He will not do so in our place.

The impulse to project the material into the divine realm appears to be described here as a universal one, but one which represents a failure of the intellect and which precipitates a state of detachment from God and, ultimately, both a material and a spiritual death.

Nevertheless, a notion of corporeality in the divine, in Abulafia's own wider doctrine, is readily apparent when one considers the aforementioned notion of the VH of the Tetragrammaton. Although it is an avowedly demonized corporeality that is presented, Abulafia's conception of the evil component of the Tetragrammaton does evince a bodily dimension within the divine world, one present in God's very name itself. And the association, for Abulafia, of this aspect of the divine with Christianity is patently clear, this connection going to the very core of Abulafia's worldview of Jesus as the Teli or as the demon Sandalfon.

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., MS NY-JTSA Mic. 2367, fol. 32b; printed edition, p. 64.

## The Materialization of the Divine Name

As is so often the case with Abulafia, however, that Christian notion against which he polemicizes in one place is in another embraced and recast. So it is that we find that Abulafia will link the divine name, unaccompanied by any negative assertions, with the corporeal. In this regard, we examined earlier<sup>227</sup> a discussion from *'Imrei Shefer* in which Abulafia conceived of each half of the Tetragrammaton in terms of three dimensions. Through letter operations, a relationship to the phrases “flesh and blood” and “His essence” was also established. We observed that the sense that God’s essence becomes manifest through the name runs counter to Maimonides’ position, a theme to which we will return shortly. We saw as well the identification of God’s “word,” His name, with the Torah, so that the Torah stands as the embodiment of the divine word, the “word made flesh.” Along similar lines - those of the consideration of the divine name with respect to the corporeal - Abulafia engages in two complex discussions, one in *Maftēah ha-Ra‘ayon* and the other in *Shomer Mišvah*, that bear analysis.

In *Maftēah ha-Ra‘ayon*, Abulafia analyzes *Sefer Yeširah*’s discussion of the permutations of the letters *yod*, *he’* and *vav* of the Tetragrammaton. In *Sefer Yeširah*, God is described as having used these letters to “seal” the six spatial directions; it is

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<sup>227</sup> See Chapter Three, n. 99; *'Imrei Shefer*, MS Munich-BS 285 fols. 71a-b; MS Munich-BS 40 fols. 240a, 241b; printed edition, p. 77.

also already implicit there that these six directions correspond to six *sefirot*.<sup>228</sup>

Abulafia is intent upon tying an analysis of bodily dimensionality with this portion of *Sefer Yeşirah*. For he understands that “the world is a created body,”<sup>229</sup> and so he sees the latter text’s discussion of the creation of the physical world as being in kind with the creation of physical bodies. His discussion of the letters of the Tetragrammaton clearly suggests that they themselves together possess the attributes of a physical body. It is not merely that they give rise to such bodies, but that such bodies arise through their correspondence with the essence of these letters. Given the close identification of God’s name with His being (a relationship we will examine further), Abulafia in the course of this discussion is thus forced to confront directly the challenge to God’s incorporeality that his treatment of *Sefer Yeşirah* appears to raise. Writes Abulafia,<sup>230</sup>

Know my son that every body has three extensions, and they are length, breadth and depth. And the forms of the three letters of the name are like these, that is, line, plane and body, because they are length, breadth and depth. And every body has depth in its form in a point, because the point is that which instructs concerning the root of the depth of the body, and it is the All [*ha-kol*]. And so the *yod* in its essence is like a point and it is the body and it is the vessel upon which all of the depth depends [*talui*]. And the form of the *he*’ is broad, and it instructs concerning the plane that is in the body, which is the breadth. And the form of the *vav* is long and it instructs

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<sup>228</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah*, 1:12-13. The text delineates a four-fold process of emanation – breath, breath from breath, fire from breath, water from fire – which seems to correspond to four *sefirot*, given that six spatial directions are next considered.

<sup>229</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 32b; printed edition, p. 33.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fols. 31a-b; printed edition, pp. 29-30.



concerning the line, which is the length. And from these three forms all the world is built, [it is] built and sealed with them...You will know from this that the six seals [are for the] six sides, and the bodies are the three elements air, water and fire.

Abulafia is clear in his assertion that bodily existence, as well as the physical presence of the world as a whole, possesses a nature which corresponds to the constituents of the Tetragrammaton, the three letters *yod*, *he'* and *vav*. These may be considered in terms of the three spatial dimensions - length, width and height - as well as with respect to the geometric building blocks of tri-dimensionality, the point, line and plane. In fact, the indispensability of these qualities to bodily existence inheres in the nature of the three letters themselves and their possible permutations. Consistent with the idea that physical existence is created from these letters, the demiurgic quality to the letter *yod*, which we have encountered before, is indicated here. But Abulafia is clear here that the three letters give rise to the created world and to its physical bodies by dint of the fact that the nature of these letters themselves is imbued with the attributes of physicality: The *yod* "in its essence is like a point and it is the body." The *he'*, because it possesses breadth as an inherent quality, "instructs" concerning the plane. And the *vav*, which possesses the attribute of length, "instructs" concerning the line.

Abulafia will proceed next to discuss the three elements air, water and fire. These too are seen as the building blocks of creation, in kind with the letters *yod*, *he'* and *vav*. "From them [these three elements] was created the All [*ha-kol*]," writes

Abulafia.<sup>231</sup> These three elements are now brought into a conformity with the three components of the world, the intellectual component, represented as the holy spirit here (corresponding to air), the heavenly component, discussed in terms of fire (Abulafia drawing here upon scriptural descriptions of angelic beings as fiery), and the “lower ones,” discussed in terms of water. Abulafia will continue from here by returning to his discussion of the *yod*, *he*’ and *vav*. Likely he intends here to parallel the progression in *Sefer Yeşirah* itself, suggesting that the six permutations of the letters *yod*, *he*’ and *vav* stem from the upper four emanations, which correspond to the three elements mentioned.<sup>232</sup> Ten emanations are thus enumerated, suggesting that it is the *sefirot* which are being considered here in *Sefer Yeşirah*. Abulafia, in his ensuing discussion of the letters *yod*, *he*’ and *vav*, details further their correspondence with the properties of length, width and height, and indicates how each of the six permutations of the three letters emphasize one or another of the six spatial directions.

Abulafia appears to be well aware of the seeming implications of his discussion, that the letters of the Tetragrammaton together comprise a physical body, in fact if not in name. He thus seeks to assert a distinction between the properties of corporeality possessed by these letters and corporeality itself. In this regard he refers to a distinction between the form of letters and the actual inscription, using physical ink, of the same letters. He thus may be seen to be implying that the letters of the

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 32a; printed edition, p. 31.

<sup>232</sup> There are two types of “breath,” or air, here, as mentioned.

Tetragrammaton, in this respect, are the unconcretized forms of letters. Nevertheless, one must observe, somewhat paradoxically, that the very ink with which these letters would be physically inscribed, as with any physical body, would itself, by Abulafia's logic, be composed of these same letters. So it is that his effort at a distinction between the near-corporeality of the letters of the Tetragrammaton and corporeality itself is elusive. He writes,<sup>233</sup>

...Although it is known to every enlightened one that these three extensions [length, breadth and depth, with which the "world is sealed"] are not a body except incidentally from the incidence of quantity, and there is to them also a portion from the incidence of quality. But the body is that which is composed from matter and form, and the matter is in ink. And it is known that they require a place and time, and the place is the boundary within which the body moves or rests. And there is a place for the place, until the arrival at the first place, which has no place, only position [*ma'amid*]. And this position is called "*belimah*," place, with a shared name [*shem meshutaf*]. Because that which is not a body nor a potency in a body has no place, and has no boundary, and does not fall under time. Because time is composed of parts, and they do not occur in time, and they are moments and hours and times and days and nights and weeks and months. And the movement moves in a place, and time instructs regarding what happens from the movements of the moving body...

Abulafia writes that the three constituents of corporeality do not themselves inherently comprise a body. They do so only incidentally, and through the attributes of quality and quantity. We may understand Abulafia to be suggesting here that the three dimensions are preconditions to corporeality, but that they act to constitute

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 33a; printed edition, p. 34.

actual physicality only when accompanied by the elements of quality and quantity. Regardless of his precise meaning, it is clear that Abulafia seeks to contend that there is a difference between these three attributes and bona fide physicality. He then adds to this discussion the elements of matter and form. The latter, as we mentioned, seems to be implicit in the preexistent letters themselves. Form, as in the example of the written letter, is that which exists prior to physical presencing, and is that which is infused into matter in order to lend to it actual physical existence. And indeed, Abulafia has elaborated at some length upon the forms of the preexistent letters as the basis for all subsequent physical manifestation. In this, however, the presence of matter is problematized; how it is to be understood as essentially different from those entities which are only “incidentally” material, the letters of the Tetragrammaton, is not clear. And what matter is, prior to its being infused with form, if not a feature itself of the three letters of the Tetragrammaton, is equally unclear. All of this serves to indicate that Abulafia has delineated a notion of the Tetragrammaton that is difficult indeed to sever from notions of corporeality.

Abulafia proceeds next to discuss the additional elements of time and place, suggesting how these too are hallmarks of the bona fide corporeality which the Tetragrammaton’s letters transcend. Abulafia contends that that which is the source for subsequent place – and presumably he refers here to the letters of the Tetragrammaton – resides itself in a place called *belimah*. This term is used in *Sefer*

*Yeşirah*, seemingly, to describe the incorporeality of the *sefirot*.<sup>234</sup> Abulafia suggests the presence of a correspondence between the words “place” and *belimah*.<sup>235</sup> Thus, the letters of the Tetragrammaton stand in a place that lacks the features to be associated with corporeality, namely, as we have seen, tri-dimensionality, in that this place is *belimah*.<sup>236</sup> Yet tri-dimensionality, in turn, is inherent to any notion of place. Thus, the letters of the Tetragrammaton, through their identification with the *sefirot*, are seen here to reside in a place that is no place. Abulafia refers to the location of these letters as well as not a “place” but only a “position.” They fall outside of the notion of place, whose attributes, nevertheless, are indelibly imprinted in their natures. This is because “...that which is not a body nor a potency in a body has no place, and has no boundary...” The presence of this description of the letters, as being entities which are neither bodies nor potencies in bodies, Abulafia employs regularly to refer to both purely intellectual entities and, particularly, to God Himself.<sup>237</sup> In this we may perceive a further complexity, for the divine name, which

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<sup>234</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah* 1:2-8, 14.

<sup>235</sup> *Belimah* has a numerical value of 87. *Maqom*, “place,” has a numerical value of 186. If, with respect to the latter value, one takes the digit for the number one hundred, changes it to the single digit one and adds it to the total sum of the numerical values of the letters for that word – an operation not unfamiliar to Abulafia – the numerical values for *belimah* and “place” are equal.

<sup>236</sup> Wolfson discusses Abulafia’s drawing of an equivalence between *be-milah* (“with circumcision”) and *belimah*, such that knowledge of the name is attained through the covenant. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 89. In the context of the current passage the connection with circumcision would once again evoke notions of the immateriality of the higher covenant, as against the purely corporeal one. We should note the insistence of Baruch Togarmi, who instructed Abulafia concerning *Sefer Yeşirah* in Spain, that the divine essence is in no way to be associated with the *sefirot*: “God, may He be blessed, is not Himself counted among the *sefirot* and is not at their level; rather He is above all of them.” *Sefer Maṭtehot ha-Kabbalah*, p. 231.

<sup>237</sup> Among many examples, see *Ḥayyei ha-‘Olam ha-Ba’*, MS Oxford-BL 1582, fols. 4b-5a; printed edition, p. 49, regarding God, the “souls of the pious of the nations” and the “souls of the righteous of

is only with difficulty distinguished from the corporeal, is here as well rendered nearly indistinguishable from God's actual essence, a problem to which we shall return.<sup>238</sup>

Abulafia will go on here to describe how true corporeality inheres not only in the attribute of place, but in temporality and motion as well. He alludes, then, to the notion of that which is "hypostatic," that entity which resides beyond such qualities. To refer to the letters of the divine name as hypostatic, or as constituents of the intellectual realm, should not be seen to pose any real difficulty for Abulafia. What we must observe here is that Abulafia falls back upon these assertions because he has already made very different claims for the essential nature possessed by the letters of the Tetragrammaton and for their resultant relationship to place and to corporeality. And indeed, later in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon* Abulafia will appear to contradict himself regarding the three letters that seal the six spatial directions. He writes,<sup>239</sup>

It is His nature, may He be blessed, that He wishes and desires to seal in it [the name] six sides, and He is the seventh, because He sets up the six, and the six have movement and tendency, and the seventh does not have in its essence either movement or tendency because it is in all of them and all of them are in it.

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Israel." The locution derives from Maimonides, as in his discussion of the Active Intellect in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II:18.

<sup>238</sup> We may observe, however, that the three elements fire, water and air, related above by Abulafia to the three letters comprising the Tetragrammaton, are elsewhere identified by him as "resembling" the Teli. *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, MS Milan-BA 53, fol. 181b; printed edition, p. 93. So it is that, by implication, the Tetragrammaton and the Teli may be seen to share the same identity, so that the former has a kind of an independent demiurgical existence, one with yet apart from God.

<sup>239</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 42b; printed edition, p. 62.

Here we can see that God is no longer to be identified so closely with the letters of His name, which nevertheless are infused with His essence (and vice versa) and which nevertheless serve the same demiurgic function as before. Here, however, the letters of the name are seen to be imbued with motion, which Abulafia had observed earlier to be a distinguishing feature of that which possesses corporeality. Only God Himself, at the center of these six extensions, is possessed of true immobility.

Ultimately what we may discern is that Abulafia is well aware of the seeming difficulties raised by his efforts to associate the divine name with the realization of corporeality. He will deliberately assert that corporeality is in no way to be linked with the letters of the Tetragrammaton at the same time that his discussion leads to some very different conclusions. However, Abulafia does seek to resolve these difficulties. Again in *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, Abulafia considers the difference between the utterance and the inscription of letters. In the case of speech, where no physical embodiment of the letters occurs, the latter are understood to be purely intellectual.<sup>240</sup> This is particularly the case if they are not even heard. Constructing an analogy to intellectual letters of this type, Abulafia writes,<sup>241</sup>

And so, images of what is neither a body nor a potency in a body possess an image neither in relief nor in inscription nor inbetween, but

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<sup>240</sup> Wolfson observes Abulafia's tendency to privilege the phonetic utilization of letters over the graphic; *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 67.

<sup>241</sup> *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, MS Vatican-BA ebr. 291, fol. 43b; printed edition, p. 64.

it is an image in truth that God, may He be blessed, draws. And He, may His name be blessed forever, will call it an image or a form, although He, may He be blessed, does not act. But you may say regarding Him that He draws Himself, because if He did not draw Himself He would not have recognized Himself, and the image is the essence of His truth and His being; and His essence is drawn by Him just as He, may He be blessed, is in His being. And this is like our saying that He is the intellect, the intellectual and that which is apprehended by the intellect; or it is said as well among us that He is the knowledge and the known and the knower...

In the coincidence of opposites described here, that which is a product of pure intellection is seen to be indistinguishable from God, even if it is realized in a lower form, as in the case of an image. Abulafia is alluding to activity involving letters here, so we may surmise that the product of the letter that is purely intellectual - and there is none moreso than the preexistent letters of the divine name - is itself inextricably bound to God's essence. Thus, even the created world, analogous to the realized image, is in this sense part and parcel of the divinity.

In *Shomer Mišvah*, Abulafia makes reference once again to the issue of the sealing of the six directions of three dimensional space with the three letters of the Tetragrammaton.

“Behold,” he writes,<sup>242</sup> “the whole world is sealed in them [in God's names] in the power of YHV, whose foundation, according to its square, totals ‘truth’ [’emet]. ‘And YHVH is the true God [Elohim ’emet] (Jer. 10:10).’” Abulafia notes here that the numerical value of the letters YHV squared (441) is equal to the

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<sup>242</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 53b; printed edition, p. 19.



numerical value of the word “truth,” and this serves as the basis for his understanding of the verse from Jeremiah, where he perceives a equivalency being established between the Tetragrammaton and the word “truth.” But Abulafia is here actually seeking to forge a connection between the materialization of the world through God’s name and the priestly blessing. For he refers earlier to the “secret of the raising of the palms” of the priests, five fingers opposite five, conforming to the proper configuration of the *sefirot* according to *Sefer Yeşirah*.<sup>243</sup> He notes that

...five times five yields twenty-five, five times twenty-five yields ‘*kohanim*.’ And behold, five instructs regarding the simple length of a line, and twenty-five instructs concerning the equal length and breadth. And thus it is said (Num. 6:23), “In this way you shall bless” [*koh tebarekhu*] ‘twenty-five blessings,’ twenty-five letters whose secret is יהי [“Let there be”], within which light was created...

The same mathematical operation, squaring, that he performed on the letters of the Tetragrammaton he performs here on the number five, symbolic of the five fingers of the priest’s hand. He alludes to length and breadth, with regard to the square of five, but omits a reference to height, which we might have expected as a result from his then cubing the number five, an operation which results in the numerical value of the word “*kohanim*” (125). Nevertheless, it is apparent that Abulafia is considering the dimensions that he describes, as well as the significance of the blessing itself, in cosmogonic terms. For the square of the number five, he

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<sup>243</sup> *Sefer Yeşirah*, 1:2.

notes, is equal to the numerical value of “Let there be,” the utterance by which light was created. It is this significance to the squaring and cubing of the number five that then leads him to perform the same operation upon the three letters of the Tetragrammaton which we first examined. This, he notes, also bears a cosmogonic signification, the sealing of the world.

### **The Intermediacy of the Divine Name**

If we see interconnections here between the creation of the physical world and the priestly blessing, on the one hand, and the divine name, on the other, a slightly earlier discussion from the same text delineates more specifically the conceptual basis for these connections. Abulafia writes,<sup>244</sup>

...And thus I say that this name instructs concerning the differences that are between us and God, and instructs concerning that which connects us with God. And the differences are powers, all of which possess matter, upper and lower, and those things which connect are spirits and do not possess materiality at all. And [this is] because of God’s being utterly immaterial and our possessing lower matter. And He, may He be blessed, bestows upon us His light and His goodness and blesses us with His blessing, and commands us to bless His name in order that we might be blessed by it. And because the blessing comes to us via intermediaries - some of them being bodies and some of them being powers in bodies and some of them being spirits without bodies - He commands us that they [the *kohanim*] bless us, [with a blessing] containing all. And understand from this matter that

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<sup>244</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 52a; printed edition, p. 17.

we say what our sages of blessed memory said: “Every *kohen* who does not bless is not blessed, and every *kohen* who blesses is blessed,” as it is said (Gen. 12:3), “And I will bless them who bless you.”

Abulafia refers at the outset of this passage to the divine name **אֱלֹהֵינוּ**, a twenty-two letter name synthesized from the first five words of the priestly blessing, Numbers 6:24-26.<sup>245</sup> Abulafia is particularly concerned with those entities, angelic and demonic, that establish or disrupt, respectively, man’s relationship with God, and he states that this divine name has much to say on this subject. Those disruptive powers are material in either a heavenly or a terrestrial manner, while those that behave as intermediaries between man and God are utterly immaterial, after the fashion of God Himself. Involved in this dynamic as well is the divine name itself, which is also an intermediary, in that our blessings should be directed toward it, and from it we, in turn, are blessed. This returned blessing is brought to us by one of the intermediate beings; such beings, we are told, may be to some extent or other corporeal, or they may be incorporeal. Given Abulafia’s earlier statement that those that are corporeal disrupt the flow of blessings, we may assume here again that only the incorporeal entities transmit blessings, although the ambiguity in Abulafia’s writing is apparent: “...the blessing comes to us via intermediaries - some of them being bodies and some of them being powers in bodies and some of them being spirits without bodies...”

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<sup>245</sup> The intricate method by which letter operations are used to construct this name based on these words is detailed in *Pardes Rimmonim*, ch. 21, sect. 14.

The *kohanim* are responsible for the blessing that ultimately results in the blessing that the Israelites in general receive. But that blessing itself, Abulafia has explained, comes through the divine name. So it is that the divine name exists in some intermediate capacity as the recipient of the blessing of the *kohanim*, which is itself both a kind of intermediate agent and a divine name, the synthesized twenty-two letter name. It is apparent that Abulafia is intent upon the role of the divine name or names as intercessor(s). We may surmise here, nevertheless, that Abulafia does not see the divine names as corporeal – in fact, he explains, as noted, that incorporeality, being the mark of similitude with God, is necessary for intermediacy. Thus, in *Shomer Mišvah*, Abulafia asserts, on the one hand, the role of the divine name as both demiurge and intercessor; it is for the latter reason that the priestly blessing is itself understood to be a name and is linked operationally with the Tetragrammaton, and it is for the former reason that the priest's raising of his hands is seen to have a cosmogonic significance. On the other hand, the thrust of Abulafia's line of reasoning in this discussion suggests that the divine name in no way partakes of man's corporeality, and must therefore be regarded as essentially removed from that which it begets and that for which it serves an intermediary role.

The intermediacy of the divine name, for Abulafia, is at the core of his notion of prophecy, which is itself, he contends, nothing other than the fully realized knowledge of the name.<sup>246</sup> As he writes in *Shomer Mišvah*,<sup>247</sup>

...his [man's] body was created only because of his soul. And this is because his soul was created only for knowledge of the Creator through His name, may His name be blessed. And the knot that binds these five [sections, concerning knowledge of the name] that we discussed is the matter of the connection between man and God with respect to knowledge of the name, because there is for man no higher height. And it for every perfect sage, in truth, brings [a man] to the hands of prophecy.

Abulafia is clear here concerning the intermediacy of the name in his conception of his own mystical praxis. But his initial mention of the body is not casual, but is significant as well. For it follows another, very relevant discussion. Slightly earlier, Abulafia writes,<sup>248</sup>

He who comes to receive knowledge of God should not set his thoughts on His attributes, but he must set and establish His attributes according to his intellect.<sup>249</sup> Because it is proper to draw the attributes after the intellect and not the intellect after the attributes, because the attributes are like matter and the intellect is like form, and it is fitting and proper that he draws the matter after the form and not the form after the matter.

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<sup>246</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 54, 73, 77, 89, 93, 107, 164, 166, 175, 186, 191, 196, 211, 216, 221; Idel, *Language, Torah, Hermeneutics*, pp. 101, 105-106; idem, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 33-34, 40, 116, 136; idem, "Defining Kabbalah," pp. 101-104; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 51.

<sup>247</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN heb. 853, fol. 67a; printed edition, p. 35.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., MS Paris-BN heb. 853, fol. 65b; printed edition, p. 33.

<sup>249</sup> See b*Kiddushin* 71a.

Wolfson has marked the distinction that is to be drawn between Abulafia and Maimonides with regard to their conception of the relationship between God and His names. Abulafia follows Maimonides in the latter's insistence that the divine names describe only God's attributes - which may be recognized only through His actions - and not His essence, which is utterly inaccessible. For Abulafia, however, the Tetragrammaton is the lone divine name that, frequently, refers directly to God's essence, and is, therefore, the legitimate means to apprehension thereof.<sup>250</sup> In fact, Abulafia states this case somewhat earlier in his discussion in *Shomer Mišvah*.<sup>251</sup> He differs from Maimonides, then, in his assertion that, though the lesser names of God are to be identified with His attributes, the Tetragrammaton is to be identified with His essence. Against this backdrop, we may examine the passage above concerning the attributes and the intellect. Man must approach the knowledge of God not through an effort to perceive His attributes, but rather through an intellectual apprehension. Nevertheless, it is the lesser divine names that are identified with His attributes. Abulafia notes that the reason to be wary of this avenue of approach to the divine is the similarity in the nature of these attributes with matter. So it is that Abulafia will remark later,<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172, 196-197.

<sup>251</sup> *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 62b; printed edition, pp. 29-30.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 66a; printed edition, p. 34.

And be warned that following the knowing [of the name] and the preserving in purity [of the knowledge] are matters that instruct that man should guard himself, after he knows God by name, for the sake of his life, without thinking after His attributes in any manner.

A distinction is suggested here between seeking after the divine name and seeking after His attributes. We might conclude that Abulafia refers in the latter case to the pursuit of God's lesser names, were it not for the fact that Abulafia is so frequently preoccupied with these as well. What we may understand, however, is that there is at least an aspect to the divine names, for Abulafia, that is of a lesser and a material nature. Pursuit of this aspect of the names leads one into a fixation upon materiality and, apparently, leads one into the same encounter that we examined earlier with that which is idolatrous and which threatens life and limb.

So it is that, in the passage brought earlier from *Shomer Mišvah*, which discussed the body and soul of man, it was the soul's dedication to knowledge of the name that brought man to prophecy. This was contingent upon the subordination of the body to the soul, a subordination which we may understand to be analogous to the repression of the temptation to seek after God's attributes. Submitting to the latter temptation would, in turn, be tantamount to the pursuit of

a non-intellective approach to the divine names.<sup>253</sup> Thus we found that, in one place in *Shomer Mišvah*, that concerning the priestly blessing, Abulafia sought to establish that the intermediacy of divine names is devoid of a material dimension, while in another the names are seen as possessed of a dangerous corporeal quality. The parallel between this latter idea and the one examined earlier with respect to the VH of the Tetragrammaton is noteworthy. In the case of the VH, Jesus, the evil and corporeal aspect of the divinity, and the fraudulent divine intercessor, was invoked. In the current case, the divine intermediacy of the names is invoked, along with warnings concerning their material propensities. Abulafia's thinking is here once more fraught with the influence of the notion of the corporealized divine intercessor.

In regard to the pervasiveness of Christian notions in Abulafia's interest in a corporeal dimension to the divinity, one final passage bears scrutiny. The passage is brought by Wolfson and is framed in terms of the exploration of the visual perception of the divine in Abulafia's thought. It is as well Abulafia's deviation from the Maimonidean epistemological perspective on the ungraspability of the divine

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<sup>253</sup> See Wolfson's discussion concerning those who may be understood to be engaging in the non-intellective approach to the divine names. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 99. Some ambivalence on this point in Abulafia's thought is noteworthy and, perhaps, indicative of a struggle regarding the question of the propriety of seeking after the *middot*, which, as we see, bear corporeal associations for Abulafia. For, later in *Shomer Mišvah* Abulafia will describe the knowledge of the attributes as the "root of all wisdom." It is achieved through the performance of the *mišvot*, which, in turn, are dependant upon man's bodily limbs. *Shomer Mišvah*, MS Paris-BN héb. 853, fol. 67b; printed edition, p. 37. The connection of the attributes with corporeality is thus again established, this time through man's own limbs, though it is given a positive interpretation by dint of the restraining effect of the performance of the *mitzvot*.



essence that concerns Wolfson here.<sup>254</sup> Both the mystic's imaging of the divine and the notion that the divine essence is susceptible to a kataphatic approach already suggest the notion of a perceptible divine embodiment, and so merit our attention. The passage, from *Mafteah ha-Shemot*,<sup>255</sup> addresses the Passover recitation of the phrase "this is the bread of affliction." Abulafia draws an analogy between the indexed bread and the divine name, which is pointed to by someone who seeks to instruct a student regarding its nature. Writes Abulafia,

One points to it [the name] with his fingers, and this matter is [like the verse] "This is my God and I will glorify Him" (Ex. 15:2) concerning which they said that it indicates that they pointed to Him with a finger. This is the matter of the knowledge of the name...

Apparent here, in addition to the visual dimension to this mode of apprehension,<sup>256</sup> is the blurring together of God's name and of God Himself. By knowing or pointing to the name, one recognizes or points to God's person, an

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<sup>254</sup> See also above, n. 250.

<sup>255</sup> Translated in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 166, from MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fol. 65a.

<sup>256</sup> Wolfson refers to both rabbinic precedents for this pointing to God with one's finger, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 166 n. 193, and to other instances in Abulafia's work where the visual apprehension of God's name is suggested, *ibid.*, p. 167 n. 197. We may add to these insights the observation that Abulafia here distinguishes between a proper and an improper mode of visually apprehending the Tetragrammaton. He writes, "And behold I was shown YH YHVH VH YHVH VH YHVH YH....And God spoke to me at the time of my seeing His explicit and unique name in the blood of my heart to distinguish between blood and ink and between ink and blood." Apparent here is the notion that prophetic seeing must entail the capacity to distinguish between the YH and the VH of the name, corresponding respectively, as we have seen, to ink/semen/the masculine and blood/the feminine. These correspond as well, Abulafia suggests, to the "image" and the "likeness" of God that he beheld. Abulafia indicates that a battle ensues in the heart of the would-be prophet between ink and blood, and, for the successful prophet, ink prevails, resulting, we may understand, in the subordination of the VH to the YH. Jellinek, "Sefer ha-Öt," p. 81.

epistemological perspective at odds with that of Maimonides. Striking here is the sense in which God may be perceived once more to be incarnated corporeally in His name. If that notion resonates with Christian doctrine, the parallel becomes all the more striking when one considers the equation that is being drawn here by Abulafia between God's name, or corporeal manifestation, and the unleavened bread of Passover. For is this not precisely the equation made by Jesus when he indicates this same bread at the Last Supper, a Passover *seder*, and proclaims, "This is my body..."?<sup>257</sup>

Regarding the related notion of the kabbalistic equation of the Torah with the name and with the divine body, Wolfson, in another context, writes,<sup>258</sup>

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...nevertheless, it behooves one to note the obvious affinity of the mythic understanding...with Christological beliefs.

I believe that, in the case of Abulafia's discussion of God's body/name and the unleavened bread of Passover, we have another such "obvious affinity" with Christian doctrine. In the case at hand, I would venture to say that the origin of Abulafia's kabbalistic motif is to be found in the New Testament, whether or not

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<sup>257</sup> Matt. 26:26, Mk. 14:22, Luke 22:19, 1Cor. 11:24.

<sup>258</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 256.

Abulafia may have derived his own formulation of it from an earlier rabbinic or a kabbalistic source.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> See also *ibid.*, p. 543 n. 433, regarding other Jewish and kabbalistic motifs indebted to Christian notions of the Eucharist. See also Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, concerning medieval Jewish practices of consumption of bread or cake that has been transmuted through the application to it of Hebrew letters. The practice recalls magico-mystical notions exemplified in Hekhalotic and *Sar Torah* literature.

## Conclusion

Abulafia slips from our view in the 1290s, some time after his messianic expectations failed to bear fruit in the anticipated year of 1290. We can only guess what fate befell him. Hames suggests that Abulafia's disappearance might have had something to do with an acute disappointment that the messianic age had not dawned as Abulafia had expected.<sup>1</sup> We might recall as well our earlier observation that the 1290s saw dramatic deterioration in the tenor of Jewish-Christian relations in Italy and Sicily. Aside from the possibility of either material hardship or worse, perhaps such a climate accentuated all the more Abulafia's discouragement, since his messianic mission had been oriented toward effecting an inter-religious unification, an ingathering into Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, what turned out to be the non-event of 1290, and, indeed, the subsequent regression in the Jews' social condition, must have been as great a disappointment as had been Abulafia's earlier failure to convert the pope to his messianic message.

Undoubtedly, Abulafia would have been somewhat heartened to see that his work would ultimately impact the papacy greatly - this in the person of Egidio da Viterbo, Pope Julius II's chief theological advisor and the foremost Christian kabbalist of the Renaissance – although this development would not occur for

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<sup>1</sup> Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter One, n. 94.

another two centuries.<sup>3</sup> Most certainly a kindred spirit of Abulafia's, Egidio's hopes for a messianic age were kindled by the fervent belief that his own incorporation of kabbalistic doctrines – including those of Abulafia himself<sup>4</sup> – into Christianity was of momentous significance.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, given Hames' hypothesis that Abulafia sought the favor of Joachimists and adjusted his teachings accordingly, it is important to note that Egidio himself was an ardent Joachimist, and that he would find little difficulty in effecting a like synthesis of kabbalistic and Joachimist doctrines.<sup>6</sup> Noteworthy in this regard is Hames' note that Joachim may have himself been influenced by kabbalah; such a circumstance would make it apparent how first Abulafia and then Egidio would find so powerful an affinity between the two doctrines.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere I have posited that Egidio saw the realization of his kabbalistic, syncretic project in the Sistine Chapel Ceiling program in messianic

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<sup>3</sup> For Egidio's unrivalled stature in the court of Pope Julius II, see O'Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, pp. 6, 9, 91. Hames mentions Egidio's part in arranging an audience for two would-be Jewish messiahs, David ha-Reubeni and Solomon Molcho, with the pope; *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, p. 89. Egidio would certainly have drawn a connection between these figures and Abulafia.

<sup>4</sup> The positing of an equivalence between Metatron and Jesus, drawn from Abulafia, for instance, became a recurring feature of Christian kabbalah. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 54. See also, idem, "Egidio da Viterbo e gli scritti di Avraham Abulafia," *Italia* 2 (1980): 48-50. The motif finds its way into Egidio's *Scechina*. Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," pp. 317-318 n. 98.

<sup>5</sup> O'Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform*, p. 74; Secret, *Les kabbalistes chretiens de la Renaissance*, pp. 117-119.

<sup>6</sup> For Abulafia's active engagement with Joachimists, see Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 26, 28, 43-44, 89-96. On Egidio's interest in synthesizing Joachimism with kabbalah, see, O'Malley, "Giles of Viterbo: A Reformer's Thought on Renaissance Rome," pp. 6-7. On Egidio's intense interest in Joachimism, see Bull, "The Iconography of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," pp. 602, 604-605.

<sup>7</sup> *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism*, pp. 15 n. 10, 105-106.

terms similar to Abulafia's.<sup>8</sup> Evidence for such a messianic view of syncretism on Egidio's part is readily apparent in his oratory of 1507.<sup>9</sup> It is apparent that it was Abulafia's recourse to Christian modalities, which had already caught the attention of Egidio's predecessor, Pico della Mirandola, that fed Egidio's belief that kabbalah held the key to the messianic advent.<sup>10</sup>

For all of this, it is the synchronic dimension of Abulafia's messianic thought that endures beyond his own and Egidio's thwarted expectations. This dimension we encounter at the hermeneutical level, in the confronting of Abulafia's complex doctrines with an eye toward their disentanglement. The puzzling out of the intricacies of Abulafia's thought brings with it the discovery that the goal of eradicating dichotomies ran to the very core, not only of his messianic doctrine, but of his very consciousness. Such a goal, which Abulafia saw in terms of the reconstitution of self, we may understand as the experiential recognition that the

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<sup>8</sup> Sagerman, "A Kabbalistic Reading of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," pp. 91, 99, 175-177.

<sup>9</sup> The *Libellus de Aurea Aetate* of 1508, published in 1969 by O'Malley, was written by Egidio at Julius II's request, and was based on an oration delivered by Egidio in St. Peter's Cathedral in 1507. O'Malley, "Fulfillment of the Christian Golden Age Under Pope Julius II: Text of a Discourse of Giles of Viterbo, 1507," p. 267. O'Malley notes the intensive engagement with numerology on Egidio's part in the *Libellus*. Ibid., pp. 269 n. 13, 273. I have discussed Egidio's derivation of these numerologies from kabbalistic sources, including from Joseph Gikatilla, Abulafia's protégé. Sagerman, "The Syncretic Esotericism of Egidio da Viterbo and the Development of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling Program," pp. 54-57. Egidio's syncretic impulse in the *Libellus* encompasses Roman Classicism, Hermeticism, and kabbalah. See, for instance, *Libellus* 25v. This integration under Christianity signified for Egidio the arrival of the messianic Golden Age, a parallel to Abulafia's messianic and universalist expectations for Judaism.

<sup>10</sup> Pico's fondness for Abulafia is known. Aside from his engagement with Abulafia's letter permutational methods, Pico's derivations, for instance, of the Christian Trinity and of Jesus' name from the Tetragrammaton, discussed in his *Nine Hundred Theses*, may have been indebted either to the *Zohar* or to Abulafia. See Scholem, "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der christlichen Kabbala," in *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck*; Wirszubski, "Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism."

category of other is inseparable from that of self, and that the process of self-definition through the other takes place on the stage of each individual psyche. The messianic ingathering of the faiths into Judaism that Abulafia sought on the world stage he sought as well to enact within his own being.

If we have seen the category of other as indispensable to the category of self, we may also see that Abulafia sought not merely to found his identity on the holding of self and other in a kind of balanced suspense. Abulafia did not simply accept the detestable idolatrous element as a necessary part of himself. Rather, we may understand Abulafia as having been directed toward undoing the process by which self is constructed out of dichotomy. We may say that he sought to reestablish his identity on the basis of a synthesis and not on that of a permanent, uneasy relationship of antitheses. Although at times, we have seen, Abulafia spoke of vanquishing the imaginative element, we see as well that he did not reject the attraction to the religious other that that element engendered. This attraction assumed an important role for him; it did not represent alone an inner weakness to be overcome. It pointed as well to the possibility that the other had a place to occupy in an undifferentiated internal whole.

As to the constitution of this whole, we may look to Abulafia's tireless and unabated declarations of the absolute unity of the godhead, expressed in terms of the holistic nature of the Tetragrammaton. From this we may recognize that the place of the VH in the YHVH was ultimately not construed by Abulafia to be one held by a

coexistent, evil element. To perceive the divine in this fashion, to hold its two components together in suspense, would be, essentially, to posit a multiplicity in the divine, a notion against which Abulafia inveighs, taking both Christians and his fellow kabbalists to task on this count. To perceive the idolatrous VH as a counterposed element within the Tetragrammaton was, then, to commit that very heresy of idolatry which it epitomized. For Abulafia, then, that element - which signified Christendom above all else - was somehow to be embraced, in no way any longer as other, but as self. From this we may come to understand that Abulafia, at a deep level, confronted his Christian milieu with the sense that to experience heresy strictly as such was the quintessential heresy.



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