

KNOWLEDGE OF
GOD AND THE
DEVELOPMENT
OF EARLY
KABBALAH

Jonathan Dauber

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Knowledge of God and the Development
of Early Kabbalah

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By
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For Sarah:

“You have captured my heart, my dear, my bride.”

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Creativity in the First Kabbalistic Writings	27
Chapter 2 The Philosophic Ethos	61
Chapter 3 Investigating God in Rabbinic and Later Jewish Literature	97
Chapter 4 The Philosophic Ethos in the Writings of the First Kabbalists	135
Chapter 5 Investigating God in <i>Sefer ha-Bahir</i>	191
Chapter 6 The Philosophic Ethos in the Writings of Nahmanides	217
Conclusion	245
Bibliography	253
Index	269

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INTRODUCTION

I

It would be a mistake to refer to the very first Kabbalistic texts of which we are aware—those written in the first half of the thirteenth century in Languedoc and Catalonia¹—as marking the beginnings of Kabbalah. Scholars have increasingly come to accept the claims made by the authors of these texts that their written work records *kabbalot* (traditions) that for generations had been transmitted orally.² Still, it is readily apparent that these Kabbalists did not passively transmit received *kabbalot*. On the contrary, they actively developed and systematized them, combining them with various other intellectual strands, including *Sefer Yetsirah*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, Rabbinic *aggadot*, and philosophic literature. Kabbalah, then, as it takes form in these texts, is not merely, or even primarily, the sum of *kabbalot*, and part of the task of explaining the emergence of Kabbalah in the particular form in which it is first presented in writing, is to account for and explain the impulse to develop and expand the received traditions.³

¹ While we have materials in the names of earlier twelfth-century figures that contain imagery familiar from early thirteenth-century Kabbalistic works, these materials are fragmentary in nature and are not Kabbalistic “works” in any sense of the term. See my discussion below.

² See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 20–22. See also Moshe Idel, “Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, eds. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 138–165; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 390–409; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism,” in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, eds. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 166–224; Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 10–12; Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 2003), 47–85.

³ The fact of the transition from the oral to the written does not, in and of itself, explain the highly creative nature of the first Kabbalistic documents. I fully accept Elliot Wolfson’s contention that the oral transmission of esoteric traditions does not presuppose a conservative stance vis a vis these traditions. [See Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 166–224; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Orality, Textuality, and Revelation as Modes of Education and Formation in Jewish Mystical Circles of the High Middle

This task of explaining the emergence of Kabbalah should not be confused with an attempt to discover the *origins* of Kabbalah. As Elliot Wolfson notes, “The quest for ‘origins’ of kabbalah paradoxically obfuscates the possibility of comprehending the historical emergence of the phenomenon.”⁴ This is because the notion of “origins” suggests that there is a single ground out of which the phenomenon arises and which defines its essence.⁵ Identifying such a ground creates a skewed perspective in which any particular historical articulation of Kabbalah is examined through an overly narrow lens. In fact Kabbalah, like any other historical phenomenon, in its complex and multifaceted nature, defies such essentializing. My goal, then, is not to identify what Kabbalah is but to describe a factor that helped give Kabbalah its historical footing and provided it with the intellectual and religious energy to develop and grow.

Naturally there are many such factors. For example, it seems to me that there is very good reason to see Kabbalistic creativity as related to the creative impulse of the broader western European twelfth-century renaissance.⁶ Similarly, analyses of the development of Kabbalah in light of developments in Christian thought and spirituality are likely to yield important results.⁷ The perspective that I take here, however, is

Ages,” in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*, ed. John Van Engen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 195–197.] The type of creativity that is readily apparent in the first Kabbalistic documents might have occurred even if Kabbalah had not become a written tradition when it did. Therefore, we must look elsewhere for an explanation.

⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 2.

⁵ See *ibid.*, 2–3. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 272–273. For a broader discussion of the notion of “origins” and how it may be distinguished from “beginnings,” as well as for a discussion of the Heideggerian basis of this distinction, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 118–122.

⁶ For a preliminary consideration of this possibility, see Moshe Idel, “On European Cultural Renaissances and Jewish Mysticism,” *Kabbalah* 13 (2005), 46–55.

⁷ For two such related analyses, see Arthur Green, “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review* 26 (2002), 1–52; Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 217–243. For a critique of these studies, see Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press / Cherub Press, 2010), 154–156.

related to the emergence of a Hebrew tradition of rationalist philosophy at around the same time and in the same locale as the emergence of a Kabbalistic literary tradition. Prior to this time Jewish philosophy was primarily the domain of Jews living in Islamic lands, not those living in Christian areas, and the new importation had profound effects.

To state my thesis in broad terms, a major factor that led to the development of Kabbalah was the adoption by the first Kabbalists of a philosophic ethos that, under the influence of the newly emergent Hebrew philosophic materials, had taken root in Jewish communities in Languedoc and Catalonia. This was an ethos in which a sort of meta-reflection on classical Jewish texts and, in particular, the investigation of God as the height of that reflection, was accorded great religious significance. It was their adoption of such an ethos, and the seriousness with which they took it, that spurred the early Kabbalists to actively develop and expand their traditions.

II

The first figures in whose names we have traditions containing the basic terminology that came to be identified with Kabbalah are the Languedocian scholars R. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne; his son-in-law, R. Abraham ben David; and R. Jacob ben Saul, all of whom were active in the twelfth century. These traditions, however, are quite brief and often cryptic.⁸ Gershom Scholem regarded *Sefer ha-Bahir* as the first Kabbalistic work and argued that it became known in Languedoc (after arriving there by means of not entirely clear channels) in the second half of the twelfth century. As I will clarify in chapter five, however, more recent scholarship has shown that the *Bahir* did not in fact become known until the thirteenth century and that, furthermore, its designation as a Kabbalistic work is problematic. Kabbalah, then, did not emerge as a true literary tradition until the first half of the thirteenth century, when the Languedocian and Catalonian students and followers of R. Isaac the Blind, the son of the aforementioned leading Rabbinic figure, R. Abraham ben David, wrote the first Kabbalistic

⁸ These materials are described in Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press, 1987), 199–248. See also Moshe Idel, “Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence,” *Tarbiz* 62 (1992–1993), 265–286 [in Hebrew].

works.⁹ These students include R. Isaac's Languedocian nephew, R. Asher ben David, as well as R. Ezra ben Solomon, who resided in the Catalan city of Gerona. Both of these Kabbalists were his direct disciples. R. Azriel, who resided in Gerona as well, was also, in all likelihood, a direct disciple of R. Isaac. Also of note is another Geronese Kabbalist, R. Jacob ben Sheshet, who was probably not R. Isaac's direct disciple, but was inspired by his teachings.¹⁰ While these Kabbalists did not have identical relationships to R. Isaac, and while they diverged with R. Isaac and among themselves on various important issues, for the sake of convenience, I will refer to them collectively as the circle of R. Isaac. It is the emergence of Kabbalah at the hands of this circle—the first scholars, so far as we know, to refer to themselves as Kabbalists—that is my particular interest here.

Starting slightly before this period, from the middle of the twelfth century and on, and in the same locale, philosophic material was becoming increasingly available. This material included Hebrew writings with philosophic content, such as the works of R. Abraham bar Hiyya, R. Abraham ibn Ezra, and the opening philosophic section of Maimonides' halakhic work, the *Mishneh Torah*. It also included Hebrew translations of the Arabic language classics of medieval Jewish philosophy as well as of general philosophic texts, prepared by members of the Tibbon family and others, which had previously been unavailable to Jews living in an area whose cultural language

⁹ There are numerous specific studies about various aspects of the work of R. Isaac the Blind and his students. Many of these studies will be cited throughout this work. The most significant general account is Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Also of general importance are Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 1:3–35 and Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 36–69. I would note that while there is a very important commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* attributed to R. Isaac the Blind, it seems likely that it was in fact composed by his disciples on the basis of his teachings. For this conclusion, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 453, n. 197 and the literature cited there. Also in his name, although perhaps not written by him, we have a *Commentary on the Account of Creation*, published in a critical edition in R. Asher ben David: *His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought*, ed. Daniel Abrams [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 310–317 and comments on the proper Kabbalistic intentions during prayer published in Moshe Idel, “On R. Isaac Sagi Nahor's Mystical Intention of the Eighteen Benedictions,” in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute, 1994), 25–52. For further discussion of R. Isaac's writings, see the conclusion.

¹⁰ On the relationship of these figures to R. Isaac, see Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 66–69.

was Hebrew.¹¹ As is well known, the Kabbalists in Rabbi Isaac's circle carefully read and considered this corpus of literature, and scholars have long suspected that there is a relationship between the spread of philosophy and the development of Kabbalah.

Two early attempts to connect the two phenomena are those of Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891) and David Neumark (1866–1924), both of which were criticized by Gershom Scholem. Graetz, who saw R. Isaac the Blind as the true father of Kabbalah and doubted the reliability of traditions that ascribe Kabbalistic ideas to earlier figures like R. Abraham ben David, presents Kabbalah as a corruption of Neoplatonic thought that was created in response to the spread of Maimonidean thought.¹² Referring to the controversy over Maimonides' works in the early 1230's in Languedoc and Catalonia, he explains, with the vituperative tone characteristic of his assessment of Kabbalah as a whole, that “through the rupture that arose from the conflict for and against Maimuni, there insinuated itself into the general life of the Jews a false doctrine which, although new, styled itself a primitive inspiration; although un-Jewish, called itself a genuine teaching of Israel; and although springing from error, entitled itself the only truth. The rise of this secret lore, which was called *Kabbala* (tradition), coincides with the times of the Maimonistic controversy, through which it was launched into existence.”¹³

Scholem criticizes Graetz for his starkly negative evaluation of Kabbalah—for presenting Kabbalah, in Scholem's words, as the product of “obscurantists who hated the light that shone forth from the school of the new rationalists” and “raised against it a system that they called Kabbalah,” whose “fantastic and extravagant doctrines, elaborated in overheated brains, were essentially superstitious and contrary to the

¹¹ For a fuller account of the influx of philosophic literature into Languedoc and Catalonia, see chapter two, section 1.

¹² Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1897; repr., Berlin: Arani, 1996), VII:59–82 and the appendix on pp. 385–402. For a Hebrew translation, see Heinrich Graetz, *Divré yemé Yisra'el: mi-yom heyot Yisra'el le-'am 'ad yemé ha-dor ha-'aharon*, trans. Saul Phinehas Rabbinowitz (Warsaw: Ha-'ahim Shuldberg, 1897), V:68–90 and the appendix on pp. 355–367. The appendix, which provides detailed analysis of the development of Kabbalah in support of the conclusions that Graetz draws in the body of the work, is not included in the English translation (see next note).

¹³ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, trans. Bella Löewy (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894; repr., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), III:457.

spirit of Judaism.”¹⁴ Scholem is, no doubt, right: Graetz had no use for Kabbalah. Nevertheless, despite the deeply antagonistic tone of Graetz’s remarks, he also has something more subtle to say, which should not be overlooked. For Graetz, Kabbalah is not merely an obscurantist response to Maimonidean thought—although it is primarily this. It is also a response that is inspired by a dilemma that Maimonidean thought itself created:

That Judaism should teach nothing more than Aristotelian philosophy was an abomination to those whose deep piety regarded every word of the Bible and the Talmud as a divine truth. This is a way of escape from the philosophical consideration of God and Judaism, i.e. to receive everything in naïve faith. This was the method of the Jews of Germany and northern France; it was the rigid Tosafist tendency. But the pious Jews of southern France and of Spain who, as it were, breathed everywhere an atmosphere of philosophy, could not be satisfied with dull literalness. Judaism appeared to them without meaning, if not permeated with deep thought. The religious injunctions of the Law, the ceremonies must have a higher meaning...and as the apparently meaningless laws of the Bible, and the obscure verses of Scripture, so also the Aggadic utterances of the Talmud contain a higher sense, otherwise they would be without rhyme or reason. The Kabbalah is the daughter of embarrassment; its system was the way of escape from the dilemma between the simple, anthropomorphic interpretation of the Bible and the shallowness of Maimonist philosophy.¹⁵

Thus, Maimonidean thought demanded that the classic texts of Judaism should not be regarded as merely presenting a set of ordinances intermingled with seemingly fanciful lore. Rather, they must be seen as the bearers of some deeper meaning, which, in the case of Maimonideans, was Aristotelian thought. While the Kabbalists considered this Aristotelian interpretation shallow, they nevertheless, according to Graetz, conceded the fundamental point that the Bible and Rabbinic works must have a deeper meaning. It was, in Graetz’s view, the attempt to invent such a meaning that explains the impulses that led to the creation of Kabbalah. While Kabbalah may have primarily been created as a negative response to Maimonideanism, it may also, to an extent, be construed, from Graetz’s point of view—even if he would not put the matter in these terms—as a positive response to “an atmosphere of philosophy.” I will return to this insight below.

¹⁴ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 7.

¹⁵ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 3:549.

David Neumark conceives of the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah in a different manner. He contends that Kabbalah developed out of a dialectic internal to Jewish thought. In his view, the esoteric topics of the “account of creation” and the “account of the chariot,” which the *Mishnah* sought to suppress by limiting their study, eventually emerged as philosophy and Kabbalah, respectively. During what he terms the classical period of philosophy—that is, the period until the time of Maimonides (end of the twelfth century)—Jewish philosophers worked to suppress the mythological ideas that would emerge in Kabbalah, which nevertheless functioned as a “hidden movement” that existed parallel to philosophy. Medieval Jewish philosophy battled against this mythological stream, taking mythological concepts, as for example the sefirot mentioned in *Sefer Yetsirah*, and transforming them to suit philosophic concerns. In the period after Maimonides, however, Kabbalah gradually emerged and gained a position of ascendance over the once dominant philosophy. Kabbalah was not, of course, identical to this hidden movement. In Neumark’s view, the matter is more complex. Kabbalah emerged when Jews of a mystical bent remythologized the vestiges of mythological ideas that they discovered in philosophic works and combined them with the materials that constitute this hidden movement. Thus, the very works that sought to vanquish the mythologies became the basis of their reemergence. Neumark charts this history in great detail, arguing, for example, that works which are normally viewed as philosophic or, at least, as tending to the philosophic—namely R. Saadia Gaon’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, R. Bahya ibn Pakuda’s *Torat ha-Nefesh* (in fact, Pseudo-Bahya), and R. Judah ben Barzilai’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*—are, in reality, the starting points of Kabbalah.¹⁶

While Scholem does admit that the type of process that Neumark describes may have, at times, occurred, he criticizes him for his sloppy scholarship. (He “relied almost exclusively upon printed texts and adopted, uncritically, the utterly baseless and completely arbitrary hypotheses of earlier authors with regard to the dating of certain texts.”)¹⁷ Scholem also notes, I believe quite correctly, that however much such remythologizing may have occurred, “it does not at all

¹⁶ David Neumark, *Toldot ha-pilosofiyah be-Yisra’el* (New York: Stybel Publishing House, 1921), 1:43–48, 1:95–97, 1:166–354.

¹⁷ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 10.

follow from the evidence he adduces how, by this methodology, we are to imagine the birth of the fundamental ideas of the Kabbalah.”¹⁸

Scholem, however, offers a more fundamental critique, which he applies to both Graetz and Neumark. He objects to both of their views on the grounds that they insist on seeing the development of Kabbalah in terms of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy. For Graetz, Kabbalah formed as an attempt to counteract philosophy, while for Neumark, it formed out of a process of drawing from philosophic materials. Neither is willing to grant Kabbalah its own internal religious history, apart from philosophy:

The kabbalistic movement in Judaism cannot be described adequately according to the categories of the history of philosophy; it can only be explained in terms of the history of religions, however close its connection with philosophy may here and there turn out to be. Many researchers have succeeded only in obscuring the fundamental fact that it was religious motifs and no other kind that decisively determined the development of the Kabbalah, even in its confrontation with philosophy. To be sure, the history of the Jewish religion did not unfold in a vacuum. The revelations made to the earliest kabbalists, according to their tradition, by the prophet Elijah, also have an historical background and specific terminology into which it is surely legitimate to inquire. However, it is not the history of philosophy that will enable us to understand them; they grew in a different historical humus and originated in circles other than those of the philosophers. In this investigation, we must never lose sight of this simple yet highly important truth.¹⁹

Practically speaking, Scholem’s attempt to chart the internal religious history of Kabbalah apart from the development of philosophy consists, in the first instance, of an invaluable effort to trace the literary history of Kabbalistic materials, which allows him to date the earliest signs of Kabbalistic ideas to the middle of the twelfth century. Beyond identifying the earliest Kabbalistic ideas and texts, Scholem’s attempt to chart an internal religious history of Kabbalah also led him to speculate about what he saw as the Gnostic origins of various Kabbalistic ideas that either made their way into Kabbalistic texts through unclear subterranean channels or, in the case of *Sefer ha-Bahir*—a work that Scholem inaccurately regarded as the first Kabbalistic text²⁰—through

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ I will discuss this problematic characterization of the *Bahir* in chapter five, section 1.

channels that are possible to trace only partially.²¹ As David Biale explains Scholem's project, "Graetz attempted to explain the new Kabbalah as an obscurantist defense of tradition against philosophy, whereas David Neumark suggested that it was the product of the internal dialectical development of Jewish philosophy. Neither was willing to grant the Kabbalah its own unique history and internal etiology. Scholem suggests just such a solution: the thirteenth-century Kabbalah was the product of an underground tradition of Jewish Gnosticism which started in late antiquity."²²

According to Scholem, the gnostically oriented *Bahir* mysteriously emerged in Languedoc in the second half of the twelfth century after undergoing successive redactions in obscure eastern and then German hands.²³ Perhaps together with other Gnostic materials which also somehow made their way to Languedoc, Bahiric concepts were mixed with the newly available philosophic literature—particularly of the Neoplatonic variety. Kabbalah, as it emerges in Languedoc, therefore, is an amalgam of Gnostic traditions and Neoplatonic thought,²⁴ even if it is ultimately the Gnostic elements that he sees as the real essence of Kabbalah.²⁵

Two points need to be stressed about Scholem's position. First, in contrast to the view of Neumark, Scholem believed that Kabbalah was not created as a kind of byproduct of philosophy. Rather it is rooted in Gnostic ideas that are quite distant (in Scholem's view) from the world of philosophy. Second, in contrast to the view of Graetz, for Kabbalah to emerge, no specific historical catalyst, like the ferment over the works of Maimonides, was needed. Rather, at least based on

²¹ Scholem does, however, also allow for the possibility that some of these ideas, while Gnostic in their orientation, bear no historical connection to the Gnosticism of late antiquity. See Moshe Idel, "Subversive Catalysts: Gnosticism and Messianism in Gershom Scholem's View of Jewish Mysticism," in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, eds. David N. Myers and David B. Ruderman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 53.

²² David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 56.

²³ See the discussion in chapter five, section 1.

²⁴ For a summary statement of his view, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 363–364. Scholem's presentation of the emergence of Kabbalah is also summarized in Joseph Dan, "Gershom Scholem's Reconstruction of Early Kabbalah," *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985), 39–66.

²⁵ The extent to which Scholem views Kabbalah as a Gnostic phenomenon is highlighted in Idel, "Subversive Catalysts: Gnosticism and Messianism in Gershom Scholem's View of Jewish Mysticism," 39–76.

his account in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, it seems that the fact that Kabbalah emerged in Languedoc when it did is a happy outcome of the coincidence that Gnostic traditions made it to Languedoc at around the same time that Neoplatonic materials became available and influential. Thus, while the presence of philosophic materials may have been a necessary condition for the emergence of Kabbalah in the particular form in which it took shape in Languedoc, it is hardly a mere reaction to or outgrowth of philosophy.

Moreover, and I believe this is a crucial point, according to Scholem, Kabbalah could have taken on other forms, as it indeed did in the *Bahir*, and still be called Kabbalah. In Scholem's view, the *Bahir* itself betrays almost no influence of philosophic materials, whether Neoplatonic or otherwise. Yet he considers it the first Kabbalistic work. This is the case, it would seem, because, in fact, as we have noted, it is the Gnostic element which, according to Scholem, so pervades the *Bahir* that is the essence of Kabbalah. Indeed, here we see that Scholem is after the "origins" of Kabbalah, in the sense critiqued above, and, as Wolfson notes, the title of his work is revealing.²⁶

In the course of speaking of the *Bahir's* unabashed willingness to employ mythological "Gnostic" imagery, Scholem remarks that "this attitude proves conclusively that the book cannot be explained on the basis of the tradition of philosophic thought in Judaism or as the product of its decline. It has roots in an entirely different world."²⁷ Languedocian Kabbalah, then, just happens to be a philosophically inflected instantiation of Kabbalah. Other later forms of Kabbalah, such as Zoharic Kabbalah, according to Scholem, are closer to the *Bahir* in spirit and thus more purely Gnostic.²⁸ When Scholem states, in the passage already cited above, that Kabbalah "cannot be described adequately according to the categories of the history of philosophy; it can only be explained in terms of the history of religions, however close its connection with philosophy may here and there turn out to be," he is merely applying his ideas regarding the *Bahir* to Kabbalah as a whole. In contrast, then, to Graetz and Neumark, Kabbalah is its own entity and has its own history, which ultimately is independent of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy.

²⁶ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 272.

²⁷ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 57. See also pp. 65–68.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 363–364. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 52–58.

Interestingly, what is lacking in Scholem's discussion in *Origins of the Kabbalah* is an attempt to explain what circumstances made Jews in Languedoc uniquely receptive to a work like the *Bahir* and willing to join its ideas to newly available philosophic ones. Why, that is, is Languedoc the site of the emergence of Kabbalah? In an essay entitled "Kabbalah and Myth," based on a lecture he gave at the Eranos Conference in 1949, in which he depicts Kabbalah as "the vengeance of myth against its conquerors," however, Scholem offers something of an answer to this question:

The more philosophers and theologians strove to formulate a unity which negates and eliminates all symbols, the greater became the danger of a counterattack in favor of the *living* God, who like all living forces, speaks in symbols. Inevitably, men of intense religious feeling were drawn to the full, rich life of the Creator, as opposed to the emptiness, however sublime, of a pure and logically flawless theological formula. And it is this counterattack, this 'reaction,' which has given so much dramatic tension to the history of Judaism in the last 2,000 years. For not only the popular religion responding to the simple Jew's undiminished need of expression, but also the great impulses of Jewish mysticism are to be understood in this light. And this brings us to the special problem of the Kabbalah.²⁹

To a certain extent, this comment would seem to stand in contradiction to Scholem's claim that Kabbalah cannot be described according to the categories of philosophy. It is probable, therefore, that Scholem does not intend, here, to depict Kabbalah as merely a reaction to Jewish philosophy. His intention, rather, is to suggest that Jewish philosophy served as a negative catalyst that made certain Jews in Languedoc particularly receptive to a work like the *Bahir*, with its depictions of a "living God," and not to imply, in a Graetzian fashion, that somehow Kabbalistic ideas were actually formulated in response to philosophic ones. Such a position may also be detected in the comment in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* that "the Kabbalah certainly did not *arise* as a reaction against philosophical 'enlightenment,' but once it was there it is true that its function was that of an opposition to it."³⁰

²⁹ Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah and Myth," in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, Schocken Books, 1965; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 89. Scholem refers to Kabbalah as "the vengeance of myth against its conquerors" on p. 99 of this essay.

³⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, Schocken Books, 1946; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 24 (emphasis in original).

If this is indeed Scholem's position, then, in certain respects, it is close to a position taken up more recently by Moshe Idel, despite various distinctions between their views, which Idel notes.

Idel depicts his theory as a return to that of Graetz with two significant revisions.³¹ The first "is the assumption, totally unacceptable to Graetz and eventually also to Scholem, that pre-kabbalistic views existed for centuries, probably in an unarticulated form, in Jewish tradition, including its classical texts—Talmud and Midrash."³² According to Idel, the traditions which feed Kabbalah "are not Gnostic ones, that is to say, not of Gnostic origin, as Scholem implies, but mythical-cosmogonic and theurgic motifs which eventually might have influenced ancient Gnostic materials and not vice versa."³³ Thus, according to Idel, in contrast to Graetz, Kabbalah does have its own internal history. In contrast to Scholem, however, this history is not a Gnostic one, but a Jewish one. The second revision is that it is not Maimonidean rationalism, in general, that spurred the emergence of Kabbalah, but more particularly Maimonides' claim that the traditional topics of Jewish esotericism already singled out in the Mishnah,³⁴ the "account of creation" and the "account of the chariot," could be equated with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, respectively. According to Idel, the first Kabbalists sought, as it were, to set the record straight—to reveal the *true* "account of creation" and "account of the chariot" in the face of what they saw as a Maimonidean usurpation. To do so, the first Kabbalists presented "pre-kabbalistic" views in a systematized fashion. As Idel puts it, "As a reaction to the dissemination of Maimonides' esotericism, these views crystallized as alternatives which attempted to establish the authentic nature of Jewish theology and esotericism, against the rationalistic-naturalistic formulations proposed by Maimonides."³⁵

Idel, of course, is well aware that traditions that contain terminology that came to be associated with Kabbalah are recorded in the names of mid-twelfth-century figures who predate the spread of Maimonidean

³¹ The fullest presentation of this theory can be found in Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 31–81. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 250–253 and Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, 280–289.

³² Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴ *M. Hagigah* 2:1.

³⁵ Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 33.

esotericism. He also strongly advocates the view that the first Kabbalists were indeed heirs to earlier traditions that they had received orally.³⁶ It would seem, however, that his concern is with the emergence of Kabbalah as it is manifest in the first Kabbalistic writings—my interest here as well—which, as noted, occurred in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Idel's theory, which has been influential,³⁷ is compelling, and indeed I will add further evidence for it in the next chapter. It needs to be underscored, however, that his claim is not that the first Kabbalists rejected philosophy writ large. Thus, for example, throughout his work, he emphasizes the influence of neoplatonic thought on the first Kabbalists.³⁸ Moreover, I would note, the fact that the first Kabbalists had a negative reaction to Maimonides' usurpation of ancient Jewish esotericism does not mean that Maimonidean thought did not simultaneously have a positive impact on the development of Kabbalah.

In particular, accordingly, my contention is that the first Kabbalists did have a positive reaction to an intellectual ethos that Maimonides' influence, as well as the influence of philosophers from various schools of thought, including Kalam and Neoplatonism, helped establish in Languedoc and Catalonia. This is an ethos that saw actively investigating God as a religious imperative of utmost importance. It is an ethos which is directly rooted in philosophic sources and not, as I will demonstrate at length, in traditional Rabbinic ones, but it is one that the members of R. Isaac's circle adopted. As I will show over the course of this book, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle internalized the value of investigating God, and the attempt to develop and expand their received traditions, evident in their works, can be seen, in

³⁶ See above n. 2.

³⁷ See, e.g., Yakov M. Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice: Rabbi Ezra of Gerona on the Kabbalistic Meaning of the *Mizvot*" (PhD, Brandeis University, 2002), 35–48; Hava Tirosh-Samuels, "Philosophy and Kabbalah: 1200–1600," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218–232; Menachem Marc Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford and Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 1–11. Harvey Hames, in his own way, also returns to a version of Graetz's theory. Hames argues that Kabbalah emerged in the context of the Maimonidean controversy, not merely as an elitist esoteric tradition but as an attempt to present an alternative to Maimonideanism that would sway a wider audience. See Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 31–82.

³⁸ See, e.g., the sources listed in ch. 1, n. 8 below.

large part, as a response to the new value accorded to this project. The call to investigate God, if taken seriously, would require precisely the intense creative energies with which the first Kabbalists approached their traditions.

III

Like Graetz, Neumark, Idel, and to a certain extent Scholem, then, I too think that the emergence of Kabbalah as it took form in the first Kabbalistic texts must be seen in the context of the emergence of a Hebrew philosophic tradition at around same time and in the same locale. Rather than focusing on the very real antagonism that many of the first Kabbalists felt towards some of the ideas in the newly emergent philosophic material, however—especially in its Maimonidean form—I propose, in the first instance, to concentrate on a particular aspect of the early Kabbalistic ethos—namely the value of investigating God—which the first Kabbalists adopted from their philosopher counterparts. This focus on ethos will allow me not only to present the emergence of Kabbalah in a new light, but also, in so doing, contribute to the ongoing reconceptualization of the relationship between Kabbalah and medieval rationalist philosophy that is evident in the works of recent scholarship.

My understanding of the way in which an examination of ethos can add to a new conception of the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah is to a certain extent intimated in Graetz's observation, quoted above, that the first Kabbalists were responding to an "atmosphere of philosophy." Graetz's "atmosphere of philosophy" may be related to what I have in mind when I speak of a philosophic ethos. The drive, which according to him results from this atmosphere, to search for the "higher meaning" of Biblical verses and Aggadic material would seem to be part and parcel of the adoption of the value of investigating God. Once investigating God is seen as a key religious goal, all Torah study falls under the rubric of that goal—a point that will be amply demonstrated throughout this work.

As William P. Brown notes, the Greek term "ethos" originally meant "stall" or dwelling.³⁹ By extension, a community's ethos is its

³⁹ William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 10–11. Brown

figurative dwelling place within which it flourishes. It “provides the sustaining environment or context for an ethic to function and for a moral subject to perform.”⁴⁰ To an extent it is possible to see a community’s ethos as its basic values. The values, however, that form an ethos are grounding ones: that is, they create the motivations for the basic way in which a community structures its activities and as such forge the basic character of the community.

In this study I focus on one such grounding value: the value of investigating God, which I argue the first Kabbalists adopted from the newly available philosophic literature. To be sure, one grounding value does not constitute an entire ethos. To fully describe the ethos of the first Kabbalists it would be necessary to consider a whole web of grounding values. Nevertheless, this particular value is central enough that it demands individual study and even a certain foregrounding. It is central, as I will argue, not only because it helps propel the development of Kabbalistic thought, but also because it is an inseparable part of what it means to live as either a medieval Jewish philosopher or a member of R. Isaac’s circle.⁴¹ The commitment to investigate God demands a comprehensive and sustained effort which inevitably shapes the nature of religious life.

Accordingly, as I will show in later chapters, in both the newly available philosophic literature and in the literature of the first Kabbalists, the following four key characteristics predominate. First, investigating God is seen as an act of utmost religious significance. That is, it is not merely a side endeavor but is given a principal spot in defining what it means to live as a Jew. A ramification of this is that investigating God is linked in important ways to other spheres of religious life such as prayer and love of God. Second, it entails a commitment to pursue an active program of investigation of God. That is, it is not something done in a haphazard way, but is part of a considered program of study. Third, it does not just rely on received traditions or revelations, but involves employing intellectual effort. Fourth, it is accompanied

cites Paul Louis Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 23–24 as the source of this observation, but the manner in which I develop it is indebted to Brown, not to Lehmann.

⁴⁰ Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos*, 11.

⁴¹ This does not mean that there is a complete identity between the ethos reflected in the newly available philosophic material and that of the first Kabbalists. Other aspects of the ethos of each may be different. This commonality nevertheless points to a fundamental indebtedness that the Kabbalists have to the philosophic material.

by epistemological analysis: “What type of knowledge of God is possible?” is a question asked at every turn. When I refer, therefore, to ethos in this study, I do so as shorthand for the value of investigating God in all of its ramifications.

IV

Here I would step back and consider the distinction between medieval Jewish philosophy and medieval Kabbalah. Even though, as seen, Scholem described the influence of Neoplatonic thought on the writings of the first Kabbalists, he saw philosophy and Kabbalah as fundamentally irreconcilable.⁴² More recent scholars, however, have provided a far more nuanced account of the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah. Among others, the works of Elliot Wolfson, Moshe Idel, and Haviva Pedaya are good examples, and I will have occasion to refer to their studies throughout this book. These scholars have, after their own fashions, moved away from an essentializing reading of Kabbalah. This has allowed them to present Kabbalah as a complex phenomenon, without, like Scholem, foregrounding certain allegedly purely Kabbalistic tendencies while downplaying philosophic ones. My work builds on their approaches.

Let me highlight an observation made by Wolfson, which serves as a springboard for my own analysis:

Even if one were to accept the opinion of Gershom Scholem that at the core of theosophic Kabbalah is a Gnostic orientation whose mythologizing character is to be contrasted in an essential way with discursive rational philosophy, there is little doubt, as Scholem himself readily admitted, that the mythic teachings of the Kabbalists are expressed philosophically, reflecting in particular the language of Neoplatonism. Beyond the matter of description, however, I would add that the forms of experience are frequently only comprehensible when the formative impact of philosophy on the mystics’ way of being in the world is taken into account. Experiences of God, self, and cosmos, attested in medieval kabbalistic sources were consistently and recurrently mediated by philosophical concepts.⁴³

⁴² See also chapter 1 n. 8 below.

⁴³ “Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in ‘Sefer ha-Bahir,’” *Poetics Today* 19 (1998): 153–154. Cf. Elliot Wolfson’s remarks in “Via Negativa in Maimonides

Often scholars have pursued the distinctions or similarities between philosophy and Kabbalah by highlighting the particular theological opinions of philosophers and Kabbalists—opinions that are part of what I would term their respective worldviews. This, for example, is an important component of Isaiah Tishby’s masterful *Wisdom of the Zohar*.⁴⁴ I, myself, have contributed to such scholarship.⁴⁵ Here, however, Wolfson points out that there is also a need to examine the “way of being in the world” of philosophers and Kabbalists. Such an examination, he suggests, closes the gap between philosophy and Kabbalah.

It seems to me that the “way of being in the world” encompasses not only the texture of the religious experiences, themselves, but also the ethos within which these experiences transpire. Thus, for example, Wolfson notes that the Kabbalistic experience of *devekut* (cleaving to God) is informed by philosophic conceptions of *devekut*.⁴⁶ This observation is complemented by my analysis of the manner in which, according to both philosophic and Kabbalistic sources, *devekut* can only be achieved as the culmination of investigating God. Moreover, I follow Wolfson in suggesting that other perspectives beyond worldview must also be considered when comparing philosophy and Kabbalah.

I borrow the term “worldview” from Clifford Geertz, who famously defines it as “the picture” a group has “of the way things in their sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.”⁴⁷ Geertz contrasts worldview to

and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 435–436.

⁴⁴ *Wisdom of the Zohar*, tr. David Goldstein (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994). In the introductory sections of many of the chapters, he details the relationship between philosophic and Kabbalistic views of particular doctrines. For example, see his discussions on the nature of divinity (vol. 1, 229–242) and on the nature of evil (vol. 2, 447–450).

⁴⁵ “Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah,” in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 57–88; “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 60 (2009): 185–201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 154, n. 12. Wolfson cites Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 42–49. For further scholarship on the matter, see the literature cited in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 140, n. 11. In this context I would also call attention to the important new book by Adam Afterman, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2011). This work offers a comprehensive analysis of the close relationship between philosophic and Kabbalistic presentations of *devekut*. I regret that I received this book too late to incorporate it into my argument.

⁴⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, Basic Books, 1973; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2000), 89. Cf. *ibid.*, 127.

ethos. While the former refers to a people's ideas about the world, the latter refers to "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood."⁴⁸

Wolfson emphasizes that the experiential and theoretical sides of Kabbalah are intertwined.⁴⁹ Ethos and worldview are also intertwined, as Geertz himself stressed.⁵⁰ This suggests that ethos cannot be studied in isolation from worldview, and though I believe that my work will demonstrate the heuristic value of studying them separately, I will have occasion to refer to aspects of the worldview of various philosophers and Kabbalists throughout this work. Meanwhile, it seems to me that neither from the one perspective nor the other can philosophy and Kabbalah be easily distinguished. When the distinction is pursued on the basis of worldview, it is a weak one and needs to be treated with care. When the matter is examined from the perspective of ethos, however, as I will do in this book, the distinction recedes entirely.

After all, for the distinction between philosophy and Kabbalah to have meaning, coherent definitions of both medieval philosophy and medieval Kabbalah are necessary. Is there, however, a single definition that could encompass all, or even most, of philosophy and another that could encompass all of Kabbalah in all of their many respective varieties? I am not suggesting that the division is merely a scholarly construction. Figures considered by scholars as philosophers viewed themselves as such. Similarly, those identified as Kabbalists usually referred to themselves by this name. The distinction thus has some meaning, but it is not at all clear to me that this meaning lies in the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 89. Cf. *ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., "Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, eds. J. Dan and P. Schäfer (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993), 209–235; reprinted in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 111–143; *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 119–124, 278–279, 326–332; "Sage is Preferable to Prophet: Revisioning Midrashic Imagination," in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of Michael Fishbane*, eds. Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186–210.

⁵⁰ "A group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the worldview describes, while the worldview is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life" (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90; cf. *ibid.*, 127).

respective worldviews of philosophy and Kabbalah. It may simply be, for example, that the distinction is primarily related to the acceptance of the authority, by the Kabbalists, of a certain body of traditions that philosophers either reject or did not have access to. That is to say, Kabbalists are distinguished from philosophers insofar as they are the bearers of *kabbalot*. Yet this fact tells us nothing about the manner in which the *kabbalot* are interpreted by different groups of Kabbalists at different times—that is, about the worldviews that form on the basis of disparate interpretations of these traditions. It may also be that the distinction is connected to praxis: Kabbalists generally believe that it is possible theurgically to influence the divine through ritual observance and prayer, while philosophers would have rejected this possibility. But again the theological explanations given for the effectiveness of theurgic actions and the understandings of the precise nature of their impacts on God are hardly uniform among different groups of Kabbalists.

In general the worldviews of various Kabbalistic schools over the centuries are as different from one another as various philosophic schools are from one another, and a particular Kabbalistic school may be closer to a particular philosophic one than to another Kabbalistic one. In the case of the period that I am considering here, the various different schools of philosophy reflected in the newly available literature—Kalam, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, and various hybrids thereof—are arguably as different from one another as they are from that of the first Kabbalists. Even attempts to distinguish between the respective worldviews of Kabbalah and philosophy in broad strokes cannot be consistently maintained. Thus, for example, the notion that philosophers maintain the absolute unity of God defined as simplicity while Kabbalists uphold a dynamic unity in which the coming together of multiple sefirot amounts to divine unity is challenged by a figure like R. Asher b. David who, as I have argued elsewhere, maintained that God's unity is precisely one of absence of composition.⁵¹ Again, while it is perhaps plausible to maintain that Kabbalists tend to think that it is possible to gain greater knowledge of God than philosophers do, even here, it must be borne in mind that there are a plethora of

⁵¹ Dauber, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah."

views on the subject among different schools of philosophers and Kabbalists, such that caution must be taken in overly generalizing. These examples and other similar ones attest to the difficulty of broadly separating Kabbalah and philosophy on the basis of worldview. In the final analysis, perhaps all that is really possible is a comparison between the worldview of a particular Kabbalistic school and a particular philosophic one.

If a general distinction between philosophy and Kabbalah cannot be easily maintained in reference to worldview, it becomes entirely insignificant, at least with regard to the early period, when the study proceeds on the basis of ethos. Moreover, while the examination of worldview highlights the lack of cohesion in the various types of philosophy represented in the newly available literature and between these types and the Kabbalah of R. Isaac's circle, an examination of ethos leads to the conclusion that all of this material is part of the same larger cultural phenomenon. Indeed, as I will explain at the end of this introduction, on the basis of ethos, both philosophy and Kabbalah may be jointly distinguished from various forms of traditional Rabbinic culture.

This is the case both from a phenomenological point of view and a historical one. Phenomenologically speaking, the central value of investigating God has a determining role in the religious life of philosophers and Kabbalists. To repeat, to live as a philosopher or as a Kabbalist is inconceivable without this value. Historically speaking, it also contributed to the emergence of a systematic Kabbalistic tradition in the thirteenth century in Languedoc and Catalonia. Furthermore—although this is not my main theme in this work—it will also become clear that the acceptance of this value was important in the development of a particular Hebrew philosophic tradition in the same time and locale.

Of course, none of this means that my focus on ethos is intended to replace analysis of the Kabbalists' worldview and its relationship to this or that philosophic worldview, which must remain a central focus of scholarship. Thus, while my argument is that the first Kabbalists are part of a cultural phenomenon shared by philosophy, I certainly am not contending, to repeat, that the school of the first Kabbalists had worldviews identical to this or that philosophic school. My claim rather is that it is a shared ethos that provided the framework within which these respective schools could flourish.

V

In chapter one, I will offer some observations about the creative character of the first Kabbalists' work. I will point both to explicit statements that appear in some of their writings about the importance of creativity, and to evidence of it even where it may not be readily apparent. In the course of my discussion, I will give particular focus to the work of R. Ezra of Gerona, who has often been presented as the most conservative member of R. Isaac's circle. On the one hand, I will show that his work demonstrates the correctness of the position that Kabbalah developed in response to the spread of Maimonideanism. On the other hand, I will argue that this response is itself fueled by R. Ezra's wholehearted acceptance of the philosophic ethos that Maimonides' works helped establish.

In chapter two, I describe the great significance accorded to the value of investigating God in the philosophic literature that became available, starting in the second half of the twelfth century, in Languedoc and Catalonia. I show: (1) the manner in which this value is given halakhic (legal) instantiation; (2) that investigating God is made a prerequisite for, or even made part and parcel of, loving God; (3) that investigating God is made a prerequisite for prayer. I also comment on the basic epistemological question that accompanies this value and is frequently discussed in the newly available philosophic literature: given the limitations of the human intellect what kind of knowledge of God is possible?

In chapter three, I turn to examine classical and medieval Rabbinic texts with the aim of showing that, however great the disparities between Rabbinic texts composed in different time periods and locales, the entire Rabbinic corpus is united in that it does not see investigating God as a crucial value that is at the heart of an ethos that defines religious life. I comment on Rabbinic texts that philosophers and Kabbalists claim support the value of investigating God and demonstrate that these claims amount to reinterpretations, which take the original material out of context. I also comment on the key Biblical prooftexts supplied by philosophers and Kabbalists in support of this value and show that they are read in an entirely different vein in Rabbinic literature.

Additionally, in this chapter I argue that the imperative to employ intellectual effort to investigate God is absent in the earliest corpus of

Jewish mysticism commonly known as the “Hekhalot corpus.” It is, however, present, I demonstrate, in the writings of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century German Pietists, who were the near contemporaries of the first Kabbalists. Indeed, I raise the possibility that the development of the theology of German Pietism may also partially be attributed to the adoption of this value from the limited philosophic materials available to the Pietists. Finally, I discuss R. Judah ha-Levi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, which was one of the first Arabic texts to become available in Hebrew translation in Languedoc. Scholars have often assumed a kind of continuity between Ha-Levi’s anti-rationalist stance and early Kabbalah. Unlike the other newly available texts, the *Kuzari*, however, did not accept and indeed criticized the value of investigating God. I will suggest that in adopting this value the first Kabbalists implicitly rejected a key aspect of Ha-Levi’s work.

In chapter four, I detail the manner in which the first Kabbalists adopted the philosophic ethos and argue that this adoption contributed to their drive to develop and expand their received traditions. Following the rubric employed in my discussion of the newly available philosophic literature, I show that according to these Kabbalists, too, (1) investigating God is a halakhic (legal) obligation; (2) there is a link between investigating God and loving God; (3) investigating God is seen as a prerequisite for prayer. I also describe the manner in which significant attention is given to epistemological concerns about the ability of the human intellect to gain knowledge of God.

In chapter five, I turn to the enigmatic *Sefer ha-Bahir*. Building on scholarship that has argued that a late redactional layer of the text was composed by someone with knowledge of R. Isaac’s Kabbalah, or even by a direct member of his circle, I show that while in most of the work there is no sign of the philosophic ethos, it shows up prominently in this late layer.

In chapter six, I turn to R. Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides), a Kabbalist and leading Rabbinic scholar of the thirteenth century who was a younger contemporary of R. Isaac and lived in Gerona with R. Isaac’s students. Recent scholarship has contended that Naḥmanides was not part of R. Isaac’s circle but represented a different Kabbalistic tradition. I add support to this contention by showing that Naḥmanides was ambivalent towards the philosophic ethos. In fact, I argue that his position is closer to that of Ha-Levi than to that of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. To be clear, Naḥmanides did not overtly reject the ethos, and he occasionally does assign value to investigating

God. He does not, however, view such investigation as an important religious goal. A corollary of his ambivalence to the philosophic ethos, I claim, is his complex relationship to Kabbalistic innovation. On the one hand, in various statements, he critiques Kabbalistic creativity. On the other hand, as Elliot Wolfson and Haviva Pedaya have argued, despite these statements, his work nevertheless shows signs of innovation. Nahmanides' ambivalence to the philosophic ethos shows that its adoption by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle was not inevitable. There were other options available, which makes the fact that they adopted it that much more momentous.

Finally in the conclusion, I explain that the value of investigating God helped shape the scholarly type of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. I contend that this value ultimately allowed for the emergence of a particular type of Kabbalist of which the members of R. Isaac's circle were the first historical examples: the Kabbalist whose scholarly work is dedicated solely to the study of Kabbalah rather than to traditional fields of study, such as Jewish law. It is because, I suggest, these Kabbalists saw the act of investigating God as so fundamentally important that they were able to justify a model of scholarship that was primarily devoted to such investigation. As I will also show, it is hardly coincidental that in Languedoc, at about the same time, a class of Jewish philosophers emerged whose scholarly work was devoted solely to the study of philosophy.

VI

In the conclusion of this introduction, I would like to highlight another important way in which a focus on ethos affects the manner in which Kabbalah is conceived. The question of whether Kabbalah should be viewed as a phenomenon discontinuous with classical Rabbinic Judaism and its medieval elaborations or, at least in part, as a development of indigenously Rabbinic ideas has been heavily discussed by scholars of Kabbalah. Here the question of whether or not the first Kabbalists were indeed heirs to older traditions received orally is not necessarily relevant. That is, one may accept this proposition but still wonder how these older traditions relate to Rabbinic views. Scholem, as we saw, identified the essence of Kabbalah with mythological ideas that he saw as Gnostic, and, in at least some of his formulations, he suggested that Kabbalah is, fundamentally, a foreign import into Judaism.

For Scholem, Rabbinic Judaism is essentially not mythological⁵² and, to a certain extent, medieval philosophic rationalism, rather than Kabbalah, can be seen as an accentuation of earlier Rabbinic tendencies.⁵³

Scholem's "Gnostic thesis" suffers on historical grounds. As noted above, Idel has pointed out that aspects of Kabbalah that Scholem thought he discovered in Gnostic materials may, in fact, be traced to earlier Jewish ideas from which the Gnostic materials themselves borrowed.⁵⁴ And in general, recent scholarship has tended to accept the Jewish origins of those mythological elements in Kabbalah, which Scholem saw as Gnostic. Indeed, according to this newer presentation, Rabbinic Judaism itself is viewed as having strong mythological elements, and Kabbalah shares important affinities with certain earlier Rabbinic ideas.⁵⁵

⁵² For this thesis, see Scholem, "Kabbalah and Myth," 87–117 and "Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists," in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, Schocken Books, 1965; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 118–157. See also the analysis of Scholem's view in Idel, "Subversive Catalysts," 39–76; Moshe Idel, "Rabbinism versus Kabbalism: On G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), 281–296.

⁵³ See Scholem, "Kabbalah and Myth," 88.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Moshe Idel, "The Problem of the Sources of the Bahir," in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, ed. Joseph Dan, special issue, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, no. 3–4 (1987), 55–72 [in Hebrew].

⁵⁵ This has been the topic of frequent scholarly discussion. The following bibliography is not meant to be exhaustive. Its purpose, rather, is to highlight some important studies. Elliot Wolfson explicitly addresses the issue in "Images of God's Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism," in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992), 143–181 and "The Face of Jacob in the Moon: Mystical Transformations of an Aggadic Myth," in *The Seductiveness of Jewish Myth—Challenge or Response?*, ed. S. Daniel Breslauer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 235–270. In general, throughout his work, Wolfson shows how Kabbalistic discourse picks up on Rabbinic themes, even while being careful not to efface significant distinctions. Such analysis underlies most of his major works including, *Through a Speculum that Shines; Language, Eros, Being and Alef, Mem, Tau*. Such analysis is also found in many of his individual studies. See, for example, "Female Imaging of the Torah: From Literary Metaphor to Religious Symbol," in *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1–28; "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," in *Circle in the Square*, 29–48, and "Sage is Preferable to Prophet." Yehudah Liebes has also discussed the issue in many places. Many of his relevant studies are available on his website: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/research.html>. Some of his studies on the topic have also been collected in his *God's Story: Collected Essays on the Jewish Myth* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2008). For an English translation of one of his important studies on the topic see "De Natura Dei: On the Development of Jewish Myth," in *Studies in*

But however persuasive this newer presentation is, the upshot for my purposes is that the discussion of the relationship of Kabbalah, and for that matter the various varieties of medieval Jewish philosophy, to earlier expressions of Judaism has proceeded on the basis of examinations of worldview—comparisons of Gnostic or Rabbinic mythologies with Kabbalistic ones and comparisons of allegedly more rationalistic Rabbinic ideas to philosophic ones. To be clear, there is certainly nothing wrong with this approach provided that care is taken to distinguish between various varieties of Rabbinic, Kabbalistic, and philosophic thought. It goes without saying that such study is crucial for understanding the development of the various forms of Kabbalah and philosophy. At the same time, attunement to the shared ethos of the expounders of the newly available philosophic literature and the Kabbalists of R. Isaac's circle reveals a different sort of break with the Rabbis than the one that is otherwise usually investigated.

The ethos that I have been describing here is plainly foreign to classical expressions of Judaism. From the perspective of ethos, therefore, both medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah are part of a common reorientation of Rabbinic culture.

Ultimately, then, to a certain degree, I am returning to a fundamental assumption that underlies the positions of Graetz and Neumark. In contrast to Scholem, I agree with them that Kabbalah must be understood within the “the categories of the history of philosophy.” Neumark and Graetz, however, focused on Kabbalistic theosophy. But if, for the time being, we leave aside the Kabbalists' worldview and focus on their ethos, it does seem to be the case that Kabbalah is a new phenomenon and that its existence is inconceivable without the history of philosophy. Basic components of the first Kabbalists' religious practice, religious mood, and fundamental group identity—that is to say, basic components of what it meant to live as a Kabbalist—are derived from a philosophic ethos.

Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism, trans. Batya Stein (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1–64. Moshe Idel has also written extensively on the topic. Of particular interest are two studies in which he evaluates Scholem's views: “Rabbinism versus Kabbalism,” 281–296 and “Subversive Catalysts,” 39–76. For a nuanced evaluation of Idel's approach and references to other writings by Idel that deal with the matter, see Daniel Abrams, “Phenomenology of Jewish Mysticism: Moshe Idel's Methodology in Perspective,” *Kabbalah* 20 (2009), 35–40, 70–81. Also of significance are the following works: Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004).

CHAPTER ONE

CREATIVITY IN THE FIRST KABBALISTIC WRITINGS

I

Elliot Wolfson remarks that “the history of kabbalism as a religious phenomenon illustrates that the presumed immutability of system occasions novel interpretation. In the wisdom of the tradition, if it is old, it is because it is new, but it is new because it is old.”¹ Thus we should not be surprised that the first Kabbalists were the conservative guardians of *kabbalot* who subjected them to creative development and expansion. I see this creativity as an act of investigating God, in service of an ethos in which such investigation is central. In the following chapters, I will sketch the full contours of this ethos. Here, however, my intention is to provide a glimpse of Kabbalistic investigation of God in action, so that my contention that Kabbalists investigate God does not remain a mere abstraction.

That Kabbalah is a creative enterprise is stated unambiguously in a remarkable passage in R. Jacob ben Sheshet’s *Sha’ar ha-Shamayim*. In this passage R. Jacob describes his approach to writing about the ten sefirot, which are the primary subject of the work:

I will explain matters to the best of my ability. Based on what I received (*ume-’asher kibbalti*) and based on my own efforts and logical reasoning (*me-’asher yaga’ti u-filpalti*), I added and expanded (*hosofti ve-higdalti*). I will not withhold words of truth from those who can understand them, so they will be known in a later generation. Children will be born. They will arise and recount [these matters] to their children. I will bring support (*ra’ayot*) from the words of the Torah of Moses and from the words of our Rabbis of which I am aware. From among the nations, however, there is no man with me. My words will receive no assistance from a man who errs or from a fool.... And I will explain some of these sweet matters, and rebuild its ruins (*ve-harisotav akim*), so that my words enlighten those to whom I leave them. I will open doors; bolts will break and gates will no longer close when I provide for each and every word

¹ *Language, Eros, Being*, 88.

(= sefirot) some of the matters that are similar to it and related to it. [As a result] what remains unexplained will be open to the investigation of all who desire to know. Understand and extrapolate from what is present to what is not present (*haven u-lemad min ha-nimtsa' le-she'eno nimtsa*).²

Here then is a striking pronouncement of the confluence of tradition and innovation in early Kabbalah.³ R. Jacob makes it explicit that his Kabbalistic teachings are based not only on received traditions but also on his own intellectual efforts.⁴ Moreover, he instructs the readers of his work to employ their own intellectual abilities to further develop Kabbalah. As he puts it at the end of the passage, his readers should “understand and extrapolate from what is present to what is not present.” In other words, he directs them to logically deduce information regarding the sefirot that is not provided in the work, on the basis of information that is provided. For R. Jacob, innovation is not at odds with tradition. Rather, it helps further it.

We do not find such forthright statements about the importance of innovation in the works of other members of R. Isaac's circle. The innovative nature of their intellectual enterprise is nonetheless evident. Occasionally their innovative stance is manifest in a willingness to employ logical methods of analysis, characteristic of some philosophic

² Jacob ben Sheshet, “*Sha'ar ha-shamayim*,” ed. Mordechai Mortara, *Ozar Nechmad* 3 (1860), 154–155.

³ Scholars have stressed that R. Jacob, perhaps more than any other member of R. Isaac's circle, regarded Kabbalah as open wisdom that should be expanded and developed. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 367; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael A. Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 161–163; reprinted in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 63–65; Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership,” in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, eds. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 41–42; Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 77–82; Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2006), 307–310.

⁴ I would note that R. Jacob's insistence that he will not receive any assistance from anyone from among the nations (“From among the nations, however, there is no man with me. My words will receive no assistance from a man who errs or from a fool”) is clearly directed against the radical Maimonideans, who are the subject of an extended polemic in this work (*Sha'ar ha-shamayim*, 163–165), whom he regards as having accepted the teachings of non-Jewish philosophy in a wholesale manner. The polemic here, however, should not obscure the fact that R. Jacob himself, in his other works, draws heavily on philosophic sources.

works, to develop and clarify received Kabbalistic ideas. This is the case in R. Azriel of Gerona's *Commentary on the Ten Sefirot*,⁵ as well as, in a more limited fashion, in R. Asher ben David's *Sefer ha-Yihud*.⁶

The most prevalent type of innovation, however, stems from the readiness of all the members of the circle to bring their received traditions into conversation with other forms of discourse. It is apparent, for example, in their attempts to employ the newly available philosophic literature (whose arrival to Languedoc and Catalonia will be detailed in the next chapter) in formulating their ideas. When R. Azriel states, after successively citing what he believed to be a Platonic text and an Aristotelian text (in fact they were Neoplatonic pseudopigrapha), that "the words of the wisdom of Torah [= Kabbalists] and the words of the philosophers (*ba'alé ha-meḥkar*) are as one,"⁷ he is not merely pointing out a similarity between received traditions and philosophic material. He is rather highlighting an agenda, which is realized in his works, of systematically comparing and contrasting the two bodies of material and letting each one inform the other.

Thus the influence of philosophic literature was not merely passive. It is not that the first Kabbalists adopted a philosophic theme here or there. Rather, they actively, and at times methodically, compared their received ideas with philosophic ones, in so doing forging a new body of thought and religious practice. Extensive research has shown their deep indebtedness to the more Neoplatonically inclined works in this body of literature.⁸ Yet it was not only Neoplatonic material that was

⁵ Azriel of Gerona, "*Sha'ar ha-sho'el: perush 'eser sefirot 'al derekh she'elah u-teshuvah*," in Meir ibn Gabbai, *Derekh emunah* (Warsaw: Jehiel Michel Haltar, 1889 or 1890), 3–10. It may be charged that this work is apologetic in nature—that it is merely a flimsy attempt to employ philosophic argumentation to support preconceived concepts and does not really constitute investigation of God. My suspicion is, however, that in the course of R. Azriel's logical thinking through of preconceived concepts, these concepts take on additional nuances that they did not originally contain.

⁶ See chapter four, sections 1 and 5.

⁷ Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem: Mekitsé nirdamim, 1945; repr., Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 145. The true author of the pseudo-Platonic text has yet to be identified. The author of the pseudo-Aristotelian text is in fact the Jewish philosopher Isaac Israeli. See Alexander Altmann and Samuel M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (London, Oxford University Press, 1958; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 130–132.

⁸ Scholem summarizes the matter in the following terms: "In conclusion, we may therefore see that the Provençal Kabbalah functioned historically to unite old gnostic traditions, which originated in the Orient and maintained a kind of underground existence, with medieval Neoplatonism. These Gnostic traditions maintained

significant, but also, as Wolfson has argued extensively, Maimonidean philosophy.⁹ The first Kabbalists' creativity can, therefore, be seen in their willingness to employ a full gamut of philosophic writings as they formed a new discourse.

This type of creativity involved employing ideas that were essentially foreign to both their own particular traditions and to traditional Rabbinic thought. The first Kabbalists, however, also employed more internally directed creative strategies in their investigations of God. First, they extrapolated from their own traditions to reach new understandings, which were not originally contained in these traditions. Second, they read midrashic Rabbinic materials in light of their own traditions and vice versa, allowing each one to shed light on the other.¹⁰ In this chapter my intention is to examine both of these types of creativity

themselves, even grew stronger in certain circles, but were pervaded by elements of another, namely the Neoplatonic, world, which proved to be particularly fruitful here" (Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 363, cf. 221–222). For some examples of studies of the impact of Neoplatonic literature on the thinking of the first Kabbalists, see Gershom Scholem, "Ikhotav shel Gabbriol ba-kabbalah," in *Studies in Kabbalah* 1, ed. Yosef ben Shelomo [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 1998), 39–66; Wolfson, "Negative Theology and Positive Assertion in the Early Kabbalah," *Daat* 32–33 (1994): v–xxii; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 288–306; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 42–49; Idel, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 199–201; Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2005), 41–47; Paul Fenton, "Traces of Mōšeh ibn 'Ezra's' 'Arūgāt ha-Bōsem' in the Writings of the Early Qabbalists of the Spanish School," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), III, 45–81, and my "Pure Thought" in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah," 185–201. Here I would also note that it may not only have been the newly available Hebrew Neoplatonic materials that were influential. In the case of R. Azriel, in particular, it is possible that the Latin Neoplatonism of Johannes Scotus Eriugena left its mark. On this possibility, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 270–272, 314, 318, 344, 375, 422–423.

⁹ "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical 'Wirkungsgeschichte' in Different Cultural Contexts*, ed. Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209–237; "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," 393–442. See also Moshe Idel, "On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School and Some Reflections," *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, eds. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 134–147 for a very interesting case in which Nahmanides makes use of a passage from Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah*, perek *helek*.

¹⁰ Elliot Wolfson has described the manner in which Nahmanides engaged in such creativity. See the discussion in chapter six, section 5. At the same time, however, as I explicate there, a contrast needs to be drawn between Nahmanides' creativity and that of the members of R. Isaac's circle.

and the creativity based on the encounter with philosophic materials as they are manifest in R. Ezra of Gerona's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, a work probably composed in the 1220s or 1230s and, most likely, the very first Kabbalistic text intended for public consumption.¹¹ Based on a careful analysis of this work, I will argue that it displays all of these types of creativity.

My presentation of R. Ezra as an innovative thinker goes against the general manner in which he has been perceived by scholars. In Isaiah Tishby's view:

[R. Ezra's] conservative character stands out in all his writings. He relates to the Kabbalah of his teachers as though it was a traditionally transmitted and complete body of wisdom to which not much should be added.... A large portion of his remarks are nothing other than the transmission of the words of his teachers, as he received them, or with slight changes. His innovations with regard to [Kabbalistic] ideas and symbols are not many.... These characteristics also determine his areas of investigation. The reasons for the commandments and the law of humans are central for him, while the mark of metaphysical issues is less apparent.... His intellectual contact with philosophy is superficial and insubstantial. It is mainly limited to areas that are of secondary importance from the perspective of philosophic study. A serious attempt to

¹¹ There is little question that it was one of R. Ezra's works that was the first extended Kabbalistic work ever composed. It is possible, however, as Isaiah Tishby argued, in *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, that he composed his other chief work, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* (*Perush ha-'Aggadot*), first. [The full-text extant version is found in MS Vatican 441, 1b-74a. It is also partially printed in *Likkuté shikheḥah u-fe'ah*, ed. Abraham ben Judah Almalikh (Ferrara, 1566; repr., New York: privately printed, 1978), 1a-20b. For further manuscripts, see Tishby's comments in his introduction to Azriel of Gerona's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 11-19.] In his French translation of R. Ezra's *Commentary* [*Le Commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969), 17-18 n. 2], Georges Vajda, however, casts some doubt on Tishby's view, and Haviva Pedaya has argued, convincingly, in "'Possessed by Speech': Towards an Understanding of the Prophetic-Ecstatic Pattern among Early Kabbalists," *Tarbiz* 65 (1995-1996), 568-569 n. 2; reprinted in Haviva Pedaya, *Vision and Speech: Models of Prophecy in Jewish Mysticism* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2002), 124-125, n. 3 (further citations of this study are from the reprinted version) that the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is his first work. It is important to note, however, that even if Tishby is correct, the *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* is hardly a work intended for a wide audience. It reads, rather, like an esoteric work intended only for the select few. By all accounts, therefore, the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is the first Kabbalistic work written with a broader audience in mind, which is precisely what triggers R. Ezra's explanation of his decision to write it. For a detailed discussion of the chronology of his works and the dating of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, see Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice," 13-15, esp. nn. 25 and 27.

mix mystical ideas and symbols with the perspectives and concepts of the philosophers is not found in his work.¹²

All of this, according to Tishby, stands in stark contrast to the most creative member of R. Isaac's circle, R. Azriel, in whose writings, "the desire to expand the purview of mystical study and speculation is apparent."¹³

While I agree with Tishby that R. Ezra is more conservative than R. Azriel, and for that matter than R. Jacob, I disagree with his presentation of R. Ezra as a paragon of conservative tendencies. If anything, the fact that R. Ezra casts his work as a mere recording of ancient traditions while, as I will show, simultaneously expanding these traditions, illustrates the confluence of old and new that Wolfson describes.

My disagreement with Tishby has important ramifications for understanding the development of Kabbalah. If this work is perceived of as a mere recording of received teachings, the opening literary act of Kabbalah appears as nothing more than a move from the oral to the written, from the private to the public domain. Once, however, the creative dimensions of R. Ezra's work are appreciated, Kabbalah can be seen as the creative emergence of a new discourse founded on the investigation of God.

II

Wolfson has argued that it was the approaching of the sixth millennium in the year 1240 that was behind R. Ezra's decision to compose his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. This date is one that was the subject of messianic expectations in medieval Jewish literature.¹⁴ Indeed, R. Ezra himself notes its messianic significance in his *Commentary*.¹⁵ As Wolfson suggests, R. Ezra likely regarded the *Song of Songs* as the perfect vehicle through which to disclose esoteric secrets in preparation

¹² Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, 9. Cf. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 374, 376.

¹³ Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, 9.

¹⁴ For the significance of this date, see Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 211–212, n. 51; Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 257–295.

¹⁵ See R. Ezra's comments on *Song of Songs* 8:12 [Chavel, 515 (as in n. 19); Brody, 142 (as in n. 19)].

for the messianic period. This is the case, in the first instance, because in traditional midrashic literature the *Canticle* was read as recounting Israel's *Heilsgeschichte*, culminating in the redemption—a point of view that R. Ezra explicitly adopts.¹⁶ It is the case, in the second instance, because R. Ezra read the *Song of Songs* as the love song between the sixth, masculine sefirah and the tenth, feminine sefirah and, from a Kabbalistic perspective, redemption is predicated on the union of these two sefirot.¹⁷

The messianic explanation for the writing of this work must be coupled with another explanation. As discussed in the introduction, the emergence of Kabbalah has been construed as a reaction to the spread of Maimonideanism. In particular, Moshe Idel has contended that it was Maimonides' claim that the traditional esoteric topics of the "account of creation" and the "account of the chariot" should be identified with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, respectively, that particularly incensed the first Kabbalists and led them to present the "true" versions of these topics. Excellent evidence for this contention may be found in a passage not discussed by Idel. I refer to an important extended passage in the introduction to R. Ezra of Gerona's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which makes clear that he chose to write his work in response to what he viewed as troubling radical Maimonidean tendencies. Indeed it seems quite possible that it was R. Ezra's hope that the messianic period was nigh, that made combating Maimonideans, who might impede the Messiah, so pressing. Thus it may be the case that R. Ezra's desire to combat Maimonideans is intertwined with his messianic expectations.

In the following section, I will examine this extended passage in some detail. This will allow me to, in turn, consider the relationship between R. Ezra's anti-Maimonideanism and his creative posture vis à vis his received traditions. As I will argue, it is not the case that his negative reaction to Maimonideanism led to an attempt to merely present a traditional body of wisdom as he had received it. On the contrary, he responds to it by creatively developing this traditional body of wisdom, at times even borrowing a Maimonidean hermeneutic to do so. Most significantly this response is grounded in a philosophic

¹⁶ Chavel, 480 (as in n. 19); Brody, 28 (as in n. 19).

¹⁷ Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 176–178.

ethos, that Maimonides himself helped establish, according to which investigating God is a crucial religious act.

III

As noted, the *Commentary* is apparently the first Kabbalistic work intended for a wide audience—a fact which requires R. Ezra to offer a justification for recording esoteric materials, which he does in the introduction to the work.

He begins by tracing the transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom, which he describes as “knowledge of the divine name,” from Adam to the destruction of the second temple. After the destruction of the temple, as the situation of the Jewish people deteriorated, this knowledge was increasingly lost, until, in his own time, it was all but forgotten:

The exile continues to worsen and our sufferings proceed, indeed undergoing constant renewal, there being neither anyone to impart knowledge nor comprehend tradition. And thus this wisdom ceased from Israel. Wisdom was lost and with it Torah. No one knew its interpretations and subtleties, its exegesis, and the reason for its commandments. For a powerful connection exists between the commandments’ meanings and the interpretation of the words of Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa,¹⁸ [on the one hand] and this wisdom [on the other hand]. Many passages of Scripture are based on this wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lit. *divrê kabbalah* (words of tradition). This is how Brody in his translation of R. Ezra’s *Commentary* (for bibliographic details see next note) translates the phrase. Vajda in *Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 43, erroneously translates, “la tradition rabbinique.” “Words of tradition” is, in fact, a standard Rabbinic phrase for the Prophets and Hagiographa, as opposed to the Pentateuch. See, e.g., B. *Rosh ha-Shanah* 7a; B. *Bava Kamma* 2b.

¹⁹ A critical edition of R. Ezra’s *Commentary* remains a desideratum. Most scholarly analyses of the *Commentary* have been based on the following deficient “*Perush shir ha-shirim*,” in *Kitvé Ramban*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967), II, 473–548. My translations are based on the translation of Seth Brody [*Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999)], which was prepared in consultation with two manuscripts. I have, however, emended his translations quite liberally as I deemed necessary. In so doing, I consulted Georges Vajda’s French translation, *Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, which is based on six manuscripts. I also consulted MS Vienna 148 1a–47a, which is the manuscript chosen by Yakov Travis as the basis for his critical edition of the excursus on the commandments, which R. Ezra included in his *Commentary*, but was left untranslated by Vajda and Brody. [See Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice.” For Travis’s rationale for choosing this manuscript, see pp. 147–153.] In citing R. Ezra’s *Commentary*, I will provide

The loss of the wisdom of Kabbalah has severe consequences. In this wisdom, after all, lies the true meaning of Torah, including the proper understanding of the reasons behind the commandments. Not only, however, has the wisdom of Kabbalah been forgotten, but in his own generation a new class of scholars has arisen, who have replaced this holy wisdom with profane wisdom.

Instead, interpreters arose possessing neither wisdom nor insight, whether they turned either towards the right or towards the left. They turned words of holiness into profanity, diminishing Scripture, adding, subtracting, enhancing, interpreting passages spoken through the holy spirit, from a quarry of sacred gems, in terms never to be entertained by human consciousness, let alone spoken, and how much more so transcribed in a book. I call such interpreters those who “overturn the words of the living God, the Lord of Hosts” (based on Jer. 23:36). Concerning this dual cessation of wisdom and its nullification in Israel, the prophet, trembling, devastated, and sighing, said: “Many are the days which will pass in Israel without the God of truth and without Torah” (based on 2 Chron. 15:3). By the phrase “without the God of truth,” he referred to the interruption of the knowledge of God, may He be blessed (*hefsek yedi’at hashem yitbarakh*), in Israel.²⁰

R. Ezra’s work, as noted, was probably written in the 1220s or 1230s, that is, at around the time of the Maimonidean controversy, which broke out in the early 1230s,²¹ and I would argue that the “interpreters,” critiqued here, are Maimonideans.²² The role of the Kabbalists in this

references to Brody’s translation, and Chavel’s edition. Where it affects my translation, I will also provide references to MS Vienna 148. The current passage may be found in Brody 22; Chavel, 489.

²⁰ Brody, 22–23; Chavel, 489.

²¹ There have been various differing attempts to reconstruct the details of the controversy. Some significant examples include Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180–1240* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965); Azriel Shohat, “Concerning the First Maimonidean Controversy on the Writings of Maimonides,” *Zion* 36 (1971), 27–60 [in Hebrew]; Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982); David Berger, “Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), 85–100; Wolfram Drews, “Medieval Controversies about Maimonidean Teachings” in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical “Wirkungsgeschichte” in Different Cultural Contexts*, eds. Gorge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Wurzburg: Ergon, 2004), 120–128. For a further discussion of the role of the first Kabbalists in the controversy, see chapter four, section 2.

²² Cf. Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice,” 35–48; Yechiel Shalom Goldberg, “Spiritual Leadership and the Popularization of Kabbalah

controversy, which embroiled both the Languedocian and Catalonian Jewish communities and eventually led to the burning of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the opening philosophic section of his *Mishneh Torah*, is not entirely clear. Elsewhere, I have argued that one of the first Kabbalists, R. Asher ben David, may have, to a certain limited extent, aligned himself with the Maimonidean camp. In contrast, I suggested that R. Azriel aligned himself, with the anti-Maimonideans.²³ It seems that the same is true of R. Ezra. Indeed, his critique of the Maimonideans is familiar from the anti-Maimonidean critiques found in the polemical literature of the controversy.²⁴ In particular, in the above passage, when he accuses the new interpreters of turning "words of holiness into profanity," he seems to be leveling the common accusation that the allegorical reading of scripture, on the part of Maimonideans, has led to the profanation of the holy text.²⁵

Furthermore, the fact that R. Ezra juxtaposes his critique of the new interpreters to his statement, seen above, that with the loss of Kabbalistic wisdom no one knows the reasons for the commandments, suggests that R. Ezra is deeply concerned about another major issue of contention during the controversy: the Maimonideans' historicizing of the reasons for the commandments and the allegedly lax religious observance that it led to.²⁶

in Medieval Spain," *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 2 (2009), 18–19.

²³ Dauber, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," 57–88.

²⁴ I am indebted to Berger, "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times," 85–100, for directing me to many of the citations from the literature of the Maimonidean controversy that appear in the following notes.

²⁵ For example, R. Solomon b. Abraham, the leader of the anti-Maimonidean camp, accuses Maimonideans of "turning the account of creation and the story of Cain and Abel, as well as the remaining narratives written in the Torah into a parable and nonsense" [S. J. Halberstam, ed., *Kevutsat mikhtavim be-'inyané ha-mahloket 'al devar sefer ha-moreh vaha-mada'* (Bamberg: Druck der Max G. Schmidt'schen Officin, 1875), 51–52]. Similarly, R. Joseph ben Todros Ha-Levi Abulafia criticizes those who claim "that all the words of Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa are parables and riddles (*mashal ve-ḥiddah*)" (ibid., 6).

²⁶ For example, Joseph ben Todros in the same letter cited in the previous note mentions that he has heard that even Maimonides himself had regrets regarding the third section of the *Guide*, which offers reasons for the commandments, and that Maimonides wanted to conceal it but was unable to. See ibid., 20. Joseph implies that, as a result of this section of the *Guide*, people viewed themselves "as exempt from prayer and from phylacteries" (ibid.). For analysis and other examples, see Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, 93–95. A similar claim is also made by R. Jacob ben Sheshet in *Sha'ar ha-shamayim*, 163–164. See the discussions in Daniel Matt, "The Mystic and the Mizwot," in *Jewish Spirituality From the Bible Through the Middle*

A further critique leveled at these interpreters, in a statement that appears shortly after the above passage, is also familiar from the literature of the controversy and, at times, is presented in the same breath as the above complaints. Thus, R. Ezra notes, apparently referring to Rabbinic *aggadot* that seem absurd or seem to corporealize God, that the interpreters lack “the knowledge or the insight to say: ‘How is it possible for our sages to have written such things, to have put them into writing in a book, unless a delightful treasure is hidden and concealed within them?’”²⁷ In other words, they fail to realize that there are profound secrets hidden in seemingly inane Rabbinic remarks, and they, therefore, ridicule them. Here R. Ezra is echoing a common accusation made by anti-Maimonideans that the Maimonideans disparaged the seemingly irrational teachings of the sages,²⁸ even if it should be noted that Maimonideans often did try to interpret Rabbinic *aggadot* so as to bring them into conformity with philosophic ideas.²⁹

Ages, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), I, 370–382 and in Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice,” 46–48.

²⁷ Brody, 24; Chavel, 487. Cf. R. Ezra’s comments on *Song of Songs* 4:12 (Brody, 87–88; Chavel, 498).

²⁸ See, e.g., the continuation of R. Solomon b. Abraham’s comments cited above, n. 25: “we have heard from the mouth of the translator (= Samuel ibn Tibbon), who revealed everything that the Rabbi (= Maimonides)—the memory of the righteous should be a blessing—concealed, that, regarding the Torah, he would say before a crowd that all its stories are parables and all the commandments are matters of convention. With similar claims—it is too awful to recount—I heard people mocking (*mal’igim*) the words of our Rabbis” (Halberstam, *Kevutsat mikhtavim be-‘inyané ha-mahloket ‘al devar sefer ha-moreh vaha-mada’*, 52). [I have corrected the text slightly following the suggestion in Joseph Shatzmiller, “Towards a Picture of the First Maimonidean Controversy,” *Zion* 34 (1969), 129 [in Hebrew].] See also the continuation of Joseph ben Todros’s remarks, cited above n. 25, where he claims that Maimonideans “mock (*va-yal’igu*) the words of our Sages” (Halberstam, *Kevutsat mikhtavim be-‘inyané ha-mahloket ‘al devar sefer ha-moreh vaha-mada’*, 6–7) and the comments regarding the *aggadot* in the anti-Maimonidean letter published in Shatzmiller, “Towards a Picture of the First Maimonidean Controversy,” 139. Unlike some members of the anti-Maimonidean camp, however, R. Ezra did not advocate a literal reading of the *aggadot*. On the contrary, his approach to *aggadot* was actually influenced by Maimonides! See my discussion in the next note and below, near n. 71. For a discussion of the variety of views regarding Rabbinic *aggadot* that were expressed in the context of the Maimonidean controversy, see Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, 75–85.

²⁹ Indeed, Maimonideans who disparaged the *aggadot* were not, strictly speaking, faithful to their master. Certainly, Maimonides, himself, did not, generally speaking, disparage Rabbinic *aggadot*. On the contrary, he believed that many *aggadot* are esoteric presentations of aspects of the “account of the creation” and the “account of the chariot”—that is, of physics and metaphysics. Indeed, as I will explain below (see near n. 71), R. Ezra’s own claim that the *aggadot* contain esoteric secrets is based upon

Considering his remarks as a whole, then, R. Ezra's point is that it was the forgetting of Kabbalistic wisdom that led to this lamentable state of affairs, wherein Maimonidean thought could thrive. In his view, Kabbalistic wisdom and not Maimonidean rationalism provides the true meaning of the Torah. Similarly, Kabbalistic wisdom reveals the true meaning of the commandments, as well as the true meaning of Rabbinic *aggadot*, thus rescuing the latter from the charges of the Maimonideans.

It is, therefore, as R. Ezra explains in the continuation, in response to such Maimonidean interpreters and on account of his own old age that he has chosen to reveal some of the nearly lost Kabbalistic wisdom in the form of a commentary on the *Song of Songs*:

Maimonides' view—even if R. Ezra interpreted the esoteric meaning of the *aggadot* differently. Still, there are places in which Maimonides questions the authority of *aggadot* and speaks of them in negative terms. A case in point is his characterization of a statement attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, found in the third chapter of *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, as “the strangest statement I have seen made by one who follows the law of Moses our Master” [Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 330 (2:26)]. For an account of Maimonides' complex stance towards *aggadot*, see Edward Breuer, “Maimonides and the Authority of Aggadah,” in *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 25–45.

It is of interest that in a letter to a certain R. Abraham, in the context of a critique of Maimonides, R. Ezra discusses Maimonides' interpretation of this statement. [See Gershom Scholem, “*Te'udah hadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabbalah*,” in *Studies in Kabbalah* 1, ed. Yosef ben Shelomo [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 1998), 28.] According to R. Eliezer's statement, the heavens were created “from the light of His garment,” and the earth was created “from the snow under the throne of His glory.” Maimonides, in *Guide* 2:26, takes this as an affirmation of the Platonic view that the world was created from pre-existing matter—a view that Maimonides thinks is contrary to the position of the Torah, according to which the world was created ex-nihilo. R. Ezra, however, maintains that the Platonic view is correct—albeit his interpretation of this view is a Kabbalistic one, which assumes that the world emanated from particular sefirot. In his interpretation, the sefirot, in effect, are viewed as the Platonic pre-existing matter. [For a fuller account of R. Ezra's view, see Alexander Altmann, “A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (1956), 195–206.] While the crux of his disagreement with Maimonides involves this dispute over the nature of creation, it seems that R. Ezra is also exercised by the very fact that Maimonides would make a disparaging remark about a Rabbinic statement. Hence R. Ezra's comment, at the beginning of his critique of Maimonides, that “you should surely know that the words of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, are correct and clear” (Scholem, “*Te'udah hadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabbalah*,” 28). A very similar discussion also appears in R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in his comments on Song of Songs 3:9 (Brody, 69–70; Chavel 493–494). Here, while the relevant material from Maimonides' *Guide* is cited, he is never identified by name.

So I have seen again and again over the course of many years. Yet I kept my silence, placing hand to mouth until I reached my fifth rung (*ba-madregah ha-ḥamishit*)—one year of the years of my life (*shanaḥ eḥad mi-shenot ḥayay*)³⁰—and saw that the days of my life were setting before me, that old age was rapidly approaching. Therefore, I pressed forward to interpret one of Scripture’s twenty-four books, encompassing every delight, bespeaking matters weighty, mysteries and secrets whose memory was lost to Scripture’s interpreters, neglecting its perdurance and splendor: That is the *Song of Songs*. In accord with my strength, I have interpreted it as I have received it from my teachers.^{31, 32}

R. Ezra’s comments thus lend credence to Idel’s interpretation. The rise of Maimonideanism (along with his messianic expectations) is part of what propels R. Ezra to write the first Kabbalistic work intended for a broad audience. As he states, in a passage cited above, the Maimonideans caused “the interruption of the knowledge of God in Israel.” Given the context of this comment, as part of a critique of Maimonidean interpreters, its implication is that true knowledge of God, that is, received esoteric knowledge of the account of the chariot, is in danger of being replaced by foreign and profane philosophic knowledge, that is, Aristotelian metaphysics. R. Ezra, therefore, sees it as his task to present the *true* account of the chariot, which was passed on through a long chain of transmission, to combat the *phony* account of the Maimonideans.

Indeed, it is possible that this whole section of the introduction—the chain of transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom, the comments regarding the danger of its interruption, and the statement of the resulting need to put it into writing—is a rejoinder to the similar comments made by R. Samuel ibn Tibbon in the introduction to his *Commentary on*

³⁰ I follow the reading in MS Vienna 148, 3a. Chavel’s edition reads “*she-ne’emar aḥat mi-shnat ḥayyim*” (as it is said, one year from the years of life). Brody leaves this phrase out in his translation. Vajda, *Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 44, translates “et unième année de ma vie.” The meaning of the entire statement (“until I reached my fifth rung—one year of the years of my life”) is unclear. For different possible interpretations, see Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice,” 13–14 n. 25.

³¹ Heb. *me-rabbotai*. This reading follows MS Vienna 148 3b. It is also followed by Vajda, 44, who translates “de mes maîtres.” Chavel’s edition reads *me-rabbotenu* (from our teachers). Following this reading Brody translates “from our Rabbis” which might be taken to imply, “from our classical Rabbinic Sages.” In actuality, however, R. Ezra means to say that he will interpret the *Song of Songs* based on the teachings of his own personal Kabbalistic teachers.

³² Brody, 24; Chavel, 479–480.

Ecclesiastes, which was likely completed sometime between 1213 and 1221.³³ Ibn Tibbon's comments are, themselves, built on remarks scattered throughout Maimonides' oeuvre,³⁴ and, as Wolfson has noted, R. Ezra, who was no doubt familiar with these remarks, drew on them, as well.³⁵ I would add that it is likely that R. Ezra also polemically borrowed directly from Ibn Tibbon. Ibn Tibbon, who was one of the translators of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, is notable for the kind of radical Maimonideanism that surely would have incensed R. Ezra.³⁶ Ibn Tibbon traces the history of philosophic wisdom from Moses to David to Solomon to Isaiah to Ezekiel and then to the Rabbinic sages:

The sages, that is, the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, also wrote down hints and riddles, scattered and dispersed in their midrashim, that pertain to the subjects of wisdom and ethics.... After the sages of Talmud, however, only very few were moved to compose a book or write a word about these sciences; the composing of books about legal judgments and what is forbidden and permitted was sufficient for them.³⁷

R. Ezra's depiction, seen above, of the dwindling of wisdom is reminiscent of these comments by Ibn Tibbon. For R. Ezra, however, it is not philosophic wisdom that is in danger of being lost, because philosophic wisdom was never part of the Jewish heritage, but Kabbalistic wisdom.

³³ For the dating of this work, see *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, trans. James T. Robinson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 24–25.

³⁴ As noted in *ibid.*, 30, n. 32, these include, *Mishneh Torah*, 'Avodah zarah, ch 1; *Guide* 1:63, 1:71, 2:39, 3:29. To this list, I would also add *Guide* 3: introduction.

³⁵ Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 177–178; Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle," 220–221; Wolfson, "Orality, Textuality, and Revelation as Modes of Education and Formation in Jewish Mystical Circles of the High Middle Ages," 184–196. Some of R. Ezra's formulations seem especially close to *Guide* 1:71.

³⁶ Ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yikavvu ha-Mayim* was, in fact, bitterly critiqued in Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhohim*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Ha'akademyah ha-le'ummit ha-Yisra'elit le-mada'im, 1968). In general, Ibn Tibbon was a particular target of the anti-Maimonideans. See above n. 28, and Joseph Shatzmiller, "The Letter from Rabbi Asher ben Gershon to the Rabbis of France at the Time of the Controversy About the Works of Maimonides," in *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel*, eds. A. Gilboa et al. [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: The University of Haifa, 1970), 139. On Ibn Tibbon's role in the Maimonidean controversy, see Carlos Fraenkel, "The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004), 83–126.

³⁷ *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 163. For the original Hebrew, see James T. Robinson, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes" (PhD, Harvard University, 2002), 547.

In the continuation, Ibn Tibbon makes clear that he sees Maimonides' work, and by extension his own work,³⁸ as key to preserving philosophic wisdom:

But then God saw the poverty of knowledge in His nation, and its great ignorance in everything related to wisdom, and He raised up a redeemer... a master in every area of wisdom. He is the True Sage, the Divine Philosopher, our Master and Teacher, Moses, the Servant of God, son of the great Sage Rabbi Maimon.... Thus he composed yet another treatise—a flawless pearl. He called it, after its utility, the *Guide of the Perplexed*.... In this treatise he explains the entire meaning of the “account of creation,” in order, subject after subject.... He did this with Ezekiel's chariot, as well, explaining it in his Treatise using allusions to show—to those who understand them—that he indubitably knew them and grasped them through the ‘Holy Spirit.’³⁹

It is possible that R. Ezra's above comments should be read as a response to these comments. It is not Maimonides and Maimonideans, like Ibn Tibbon, who saved the “account of creation” and the “account of the chariot” from oblivion. On the contrary, these figures distorted the true meaning of these esoteric bodies of knowledge, and it is the job of R. Ezra to restore the original meaning.

IV

A reader of the excerpts from R. Ezra's *Commentary* presented above might imagine that R. Ezra has a full body of tradition regarding the esoteric meaning of the *Song of Songs*, which serves as the basis of his

³⁸ See James Robinson's analysis in his introduction to *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 31. See also Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Hā'irin into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 7–9, 52–53.

³⁹ *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 163–166 (with a slight emendation). For the original Hebrew, see Robinson, *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 547–548. See also the somewhat parallel account of the history of philosophy in the final chapter of Ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yikavvu ha-Mayim*. In this chapter, he bemoans the fact that non-Jews are familiar with philosophic wisdom, while Jews have forgotten it, even though it was Jewish knowledge first. He, thus, ends the work by noting: “Therefore I revealed what I revealed in this treatise and in my *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*—matters that no man has revealed until now—so that we will not be an embarrassment to our neighbors and objects of ridicule and mockery to those who surround us” [Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar yikavvu ha-mayim* (Presburg: A. fon Shmid, 1837), 175].

exegesis. In fact, however, he makes it explicit that he does not. After presenting his chain of Kabbalistic transmission, R. Ezra offers three introductory statements (*hakdamot*). I will begin my analysis with the second one:

The second introductory statement serves to inform you with words truly reliable that in this text (i.e. the Song of Songs) there are words with no parallels that would assist in their interpretation,⁴⁰ yet which serve as the foundation of its parable (*ha-mashal*) and edifice. Among them are those words whose meaning we have received from tradition; others have been found scattered in the *aggadot* and *midrashim* of our sages, deep wells in which no drop of water is wasted. All their words possess an inner heart free of an obtrusive husk.⁴¹

R. Ezra, then, only has esoteric traditions that explain some of the words of the *Canticle*. Others words need to be explained on the basis of scattered Rabbinic comments. In the continuation of his remarks, R. Ezra discusses words regarding which he has particular traditions. In the course of this discussion, he also provides a number of examples of Rabbinic passages that contain esoteric material relevant to the *Song of Songs*. These examples make it apparent that R. Ezra had to exert considerable creative effort in his attempt to arrive at interpretations of specific verses of the *Canticle* by reconstructing the *true* meaning of Rabbinic statements. Moreover, this discussion also shows that, at times, he arrived at an interpretation of a particular verse, neither by drawing on a tradition that concerns the verse nor by interpreting a Rabbinic statement dealing with that verse, but by employing his own supposition. I will analyze R. Ezra's comments in some detail, because they provide a clear picture of the nature of his creative endeavor.

He begins by explaining that “[regarding] the following words, ‘of the wood from Lebanon’ (Song of Songs 3:9), the ‘scent of Lebanon’ (ibid. 4:11), ‘come with me from Lebanon’ (ibid. 4:8), and ‘flowing streams from Lebanon (ibid. 4:15), we have received (*kibbalnu*) that it is wisdom (i.e. the second sefirah).”⁴² It seems, then, that R. Ezra either learned the true sefirotic reference of these phrases from received tra-

⁴⁰ My reading follows MS Vienna 148 4a, which reads *yesh ba-sefer ha-zeh milot asher en lahem haver lehorot ha-'inyan* (lit. this book has words that have no parallel to give instruction regarding the matter). Chavel's edition reads *sefer* (book) instead of *haver* (parallel). Brody's translation is in keeping with Chavel's text. Vajda's reading (p. 47) is the same as that in the MS: “qu'aucune autre attestation scripturaire.”

⁴¹ Brody, 30; Chavel, 481.

⁴² Brody, 30; Chavel, 481.

ditions that specifically addressed them or, alternatively, that he had a general tradition that the word “Lebanon” is a reference to the sefirah of wisdom, which he applied to the particular verses in the Song of Songs where this word appears.⁴³ He then continues: “this too was the intention of our sages, of blessed memory, when they interpreted ‘of the wood from Lebanon’ (ibid. 3:9) as referring to the counsel of Torah, which is refined (*ha-melubbenet*) in its words (see *Numbers Rabbah*, 12:4⁴⁴).”⁴⁵ Here R. Ezra is following a hermeneutical principle, mentioned earlier in his introduction, and ultimately borrowed from Maimonides—a borrowing, which I will return to below—according to which the Sages, “expound upon this wisdom (i.e. Kabbalistic wisdom) in their midrashim and haggadot in the form of parables (*meshalim*) and riddles (*ve-ḥidot*), so as to hide these matters and conceal them.”⁴⁶ The Sages, in other words, never explicitly state that the term Lebanon, in Song of Songs 3:9, refers to the second sefirah. In fact, we know from a statement in R. Azriel’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* that R. Isaac had already offered this explanation of the esoteric meaning of this Rabbinic passage, and it seems reasonable to assume that R. Ezra learned it from his teacher.⁴⁷ If this is the case, it is

⁴³ He offers no comment on the meaning of the word “Lebanon” in Song of Songs 5:15 and 7:5, the two other verses where it appears. In another one of his works, one of his letters to R. Abraham, R. Ezra also identifies the word “Lebanon” in Song of Songs 3:9 with the sefirah “wisdom.” See Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 28.

⁴⁴ See below n. 47.

⁴⁵ Brody, 30; Chavel, 481.

⁴⁶ Brody, 23; Chavel, 479.

⁴⁷ See Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 172–173: “From where was the light created? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped himself [in a garment] [*Midrash bere’shit rabbah*, eds. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965), I, 20 (3:4). (See, however, Tishby’s comment on p. 172, n. 19)]. The explanation: He received splendor from the overflow of wisdom, which is refined (*ha-melubbenet*) in its words. . . . This is how R. Isaac interpreted [the matter] and these are his words.” It is clear that the expression “refined in its words” is taken from the passage in *Numbers Rabbah* [*Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. Moshe Aryeh Mirkin (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh, 1964–1965), II, 17 (*Naso*’ 12:4)], which is the Rabbinic passage that R. Ezra refers to in his comments on Song of Songs 3:9 (above n. 45). Playing on the assonance between the words *me-’atsé* (of the wood) and *ba-’atsat* (based on the counsel) as well as between the words *levanon* (Lebanon) and *melubbenet* (refined), *Numbers Rabbah* explains that “of the wood (*me-’atsé*) from Lebanon” (Song of Songs 3:9) means “based on the counsel (*ba-’atsat*) of Torah, which is refined (*ha-melubbenet*) in its words, the Holy One, blessed be He, created worlds.” R. Isaac, however, instead of referring to “the Torah, which is refined (*ha-melubbenet*) in its words,” refers to “wisdom, which is refined in its words.” In other words, R. Isaac has interpreted the word Torah in *Numbers Rabbah* as a reference to the sefirah of

interesting that R. Ezra distinguishes between an explicit tradition that he received identifying “Lebanon” and “wisdom,” and a proof for this identification based on a Rabbinic source, even though the latter was also received from R. Isaac. The fact that R. Ezra distinguishes in this fashion may imply that R. Isaac himself never claimed that he had a tradition regarding the meaning of the Rabbinic passage. It may rather have been a conclusion he came to based on his own interpretation of this passage or, perhaps, even one that he arrived at in discussion with his students.⁴⁸

R. Ezra continues, “Similarly, the Aramaic translator followed this path, when he translated ‘this goodly mountain and Lebanon’ (Deut. 3:25) as ‘this goodly mountain and temple’.”⁴⁹ Like the aforementioned Rabbinic passage, the Aramaic translator never makes it explicit that Lebanon is a reference to the second sefirah. Instead, he merely states that Lebanon is a reference to the temple. It was, thus, on the basis of R. Ezra’s own knowledge—perhaps derived from tradition—that “temple” is one of the designations of the second sefirah that he came to the conclusion that this is what the translator had in mind.⁵⁰

wisdom. Based on this interpretation, R. Ezra is able to claim that the sages in *Numbers Rabbah* interpreted the word Lebanon, as it appears in Song of Songs 3:9, as a reference to this sefirah. [As Tishby notes in *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, 172 n. 18, in the version of R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* found in MS Vatican 185, R. Isaac’s explanation is also recounted. This version however, leaves out the words “refined (*ha-melubbenet*) in its words.”] For further elaboration, see the next note.

⁴⁸ It is easy to understand what would have led R. Isaac to interpret the Rabbinic statement, which, to repeat, reads, “‘of the wood from Lebanon’ (Song of Songs. 3:9): based on the counsel of Torah, which is refined in its words, the Holy One, blessed be He, created worlds” [*Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. Mirkin, 17 (*Naso*’ 12:4), as referring to the sefirah of wisdom. First, he likely identified “Torah and “wisdom,” a connection already made in Rabbinic sources, even though, of course, the Rabbinic sources do not have the sefirah of wisdom in mind. Second, as we know from R. Isaac’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, he understood the sefirah of wisdom as the source of the lower sefirot, in potentia. [See, e.g. R. Isaac the Blind, “*Perush sefer yetsirah*, ed. Gershom Scholem,” in *The Kabbalah in Provence*, ed. Rivka Schatz [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Akadamon, 1970), 1 l. 10, 13 ll. 270–271 (appendix).] In light of this understanding, he likely interpreted the Torah, which creates “worlds,” as a reference to the sefirah of wisdom, which is the source of the lower sefirot (= worlds).

⁴⁹ Brody, 30; Chavel, 481.

⁵⁰ Later in the *Commentary* (Brody, 38; Chavel, 484), R. Ezra refers to the sefirah of wisdom as the “holy temple (*hekhhal ha-kodesh*).” For a discussion of temple symbolism in early Kabbalah, see Jonathan Dauber, “Images of the Temple in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah*, ed. Steven Fine (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 199–235.

Next, R. Ezra, once again, cites a specific tradition, which he received, related to the second sefirah. He notes that regarding “‘Your love is more delightful than wine’ (ibid. 1:2), ‘he brought me to the house of wine’ (ibid. 2:4), ‘how much more delightful is your love than wine’ (ibid. 4:10),⁵¹ and ‘I will let you drink of the spiced wine’ (ibid. 8:2) we have similarly received (*kibbalnu*) that it is a figurative reference (*mashal*)⁵² to wisdom (i.e. the second sefirah).”⁵³ Interestingly, however,

⁵¹ Song of Songs 2:4 and 4:10 are not cited in Chavel’s or Brody’s edition. They do, however, appear in MS Vienna 148 4b and in Vajda, 48.

⁵² Brody, p. 30, translates “symbolize divine wisdom,” and Vajda, 48, translates “symbolisient la Sagesse.” Brody is not consistent in his rendering of the word *mashal* as it appears in the second introductory statement. In the opening of the statement (cited above at n. 41), he translates it as “allegory.” He translates a few of the instances of the word in the body of the statement as “figure” [see his translation of R. Ezra’s remarks regarding the words “perfume,” “apple,” and “apples” (p. 31)] and one instance as “refer” [see his translation of R. Ezra remarks on the word “garden” (p. 32)]. Vajda, in contrast, consistently translates *mashal*, as it appears in this introductory statement, as “symbolisient.” The translation of *mashal* as symbol seems impossible to justify. Significantly, for my purposes, a linchpin of the distinction that Scholem draws between philosophy and Kabbalah is that the former employs allegory, whereas the latter employs symbolism. [See, e.g., Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 25–28.] Without entering into the general validity of this distinction, I see no warrant, in the present case, for translating *mashal* as symbol. To do so may suggest a distinction between R. Ezra’s mode of interpretation and a philosophic one, where none exists. For Maimonides, the Arabic term *mathal* (Heb., *mashal*) means parable or allegory, and it seems that the term has a similar meaning in R. Ezra’s work. In the opening of the second introductory statement, I choose to translate *mashal* as “parable” because the reference is to the parabolic meaning of the textual unit as a whole. In passages from the body of the second introductory statement, however, I translate *mashal* as “figurative reference” because this seems more appropriate for a situation in which only one word or sentence is being interpreted rather than a whole textual unit. I also translate the term *mashal* as “parable” in R. Ezra’s description of the manner in which Rabbinic writings conceal esoteric secrets, which is included in his chain of transmission (cited below at n. 75), and in a passage from the first introductory statement (cited below at n. 81). In these cases, the translation of *mashal* as “parable” facilitates a comparison with passages from Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, which I cite following Shlomo Pines’ translation. In any case, I see no evidence that R. Ezra rejects the exegetical technique of allegoresis. Insofar as—in the second introductory statement, in any case—he has a dispute with Maimonidean hermeneutics, it involves the correct allegorical interpretation, rather than the technique, itself. See also Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 219 and Elliot R. Wolfson, “Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95–97; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 348–350. While Wolfson does not specifically address the question of R. Ezra’s use of allegory, his discussion does make clear the manner in which R. Ezra, in one instance, uses what might be termed an allegorical rather than a symbolic approach.

⁵³ Brody, 30; Chavel, 481.

he feels compelled to provide additional support for this tradition based on a numerical play, which he apparently came to himself. He explains that the numerical value of wine (*YaYiN*) is seventy, “which designates the seventy divine names that emanated from wisdom. For wisdom’s numerical value is seventy-three; the meaning of the remaining three⁵⁴ is well-established.”⁵⁵ It is, apparently, based on a Kabbalistic reading of certain Rabbinic sources that he derives the notion that the number seventy is associated with the second sefirah insofar as seventy divine names emanate from it.⁵⁶ Hence, the fact that the word wine happens to have this numerical value offers evidence, in R. Ezra’s view, that it refers to the second sefirah. As R. Ezra explains, “All that which we have mentioned is support (*semakh*) and aid (*ve-sa’ad*) for this matter in addition to what has been received from tradition (*milvad ha-kabbalah*).”⁵⁷ In other words, R. Ezra himself noticed the numerical correlations, which, to his mind, offered additional proof for an interpretation that is already known from tradition.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ What R. Ezra intends by “the remaining three” is unclear.

⁵⁵ Brody, 30–31; Chavel, 481.

⁵⁶ The most important Rabbinic source may be *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim*, which draws a correlation between seventy names of the Torah and seventy divine names. [See Solomon Schechter, “Agadath Shir Hashirim,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 6 (1894), 674, 678.] As already seen in n. 48, from a Kabbalistic perspective, it is easy to associate Torah, which Rabbinic sources refer to as “wisdom,” with the second sefirah, “wisdom.” In a passage in R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, and in the parallel passage in R. Azriel’s *Commentary*, the portion of *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim*, 678 concerning the divine names, but not that concerning the names of the Torah, is adduced. See Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 142 and Tishby’s critical apparatus, there.

I would note parenthetically that twice in his *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth* (pp. 131, 149), R. Azriel cites a Rabbinic teaching according to which “wisdom” has the numerical value of 73 and is correlated to seventy three divine names. R. Ezra also alludes to this Rabbinic statement in his own *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*. See Tishby’s comment in *ibid.*, 141, n. 3. As Tishby points out (*ibid.*, 131 n. 5), while the precise Rabbinic source upon which R. Ezra draws is lost, there is a close parallel in *Midrash Konen*. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, however, R. Ezra seems to ignore this teaching.

⁵⁷ Brody, 31; Chavel, 481.

⁵⁸ I would note that in a passage from R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, cited by R. Azriel in his own *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, 141 (cf. the original in R. Ezra’s commentary in MS Vatican 441, 16a–b), in which he mentions the seventy names of God, he also notes that the Rabbis, at times, added additional textual or logical support for ideas that were already known by tradition. He does not, however, in this context, mention that the numerical value of the word “wine” corresponds to the seventy names. This, as noted, seems to be his own observation. See also below, near n. 68.

Finally, R. Ezra concludes his survey of terms that refer to the second sefirah by pointing to another such term: “Similarly, ‘all choice spices’ (ibid. 4:14), ‘to the beds of spices’ (ibid. 6:2), ‘that any spice’ (ibid. 4:10), ‘that its spice might spread’ (ibid. 4:16), and ‘to the mountain of spices’ (ibid. 8:14) are all figurative references (*ha-kol mashal*) to wisdom. For it constitutes the beginning of the matter (*tehillat ha-davar*) and from there the diffusion of scent commences.”⁵⁹ In contrast to the previous cases, R. Ezra does not indicate that he has any tradition from which he has learned that “spice” refers to the second sefirah. This suggests that he reached this conclusion based on his own reasoning. Most likely, he had knowledge, presumably based on a tradition, that the second sefirah was the source of the beginning of the perceivable emanative flow; drawing on this, he reasoned that this emanative flow was similar to the diffusion of a scent.

After his account of terms that refer to the second sefirah, he turns to a term that refers to the sixth sefirah, and to terms that refer to some of the other lower sefirot. Here, too, in reaching his conclusions, he combines traditions, Rabbinic statements, and perhaps his own reasoning. For the sake of brevity, I will summarize his remarks. He begins by noting that regarding the term “apple,” which appears in the *Canticle*, “we have received a tradition (*kibbalnu*) that it is a figurative reference (*mashal*) to the ‘glory of the *shekhinah*’ (=the sixth sefirah) because of the change of its color from green to red to white, ‘like the appearance of the rainbow within the cloud’ (Ez. 1:28).”⁶⁰ From R. Ezra’s wording, it is difficult to tell whether the explanation for the

⁵⁹ Brody, 31; Chavel, 481.

⁶⁰ Brody, 31; Chavel, 481. Apparently red is a reference to the fifth sefirah (judgment), while white is a reference to the fourth sefirah (lovingkindness). *Yarok*, a word which can be translated as green or yellow, seems to be a reference to the sixth sefirah. The apple whose color changes is a good figurative reference for the sixth sefirah because this sefirah draws from the sefirot of judgment (red) and lovingkindness (white) and, indeed, reconciles these two opposing attributes. In point of fact, however, the only occurrence of the term “apple” in the Song of Songs that he interprets as a reference to this sefirah appears in Song of Songs 2:3. R. Ezra interprets the other mentions of the word “apple” in the Song of Songs differently. First of all, he views the plural form, “apples,” as having a different meaning (see nn. 61–62 below). Second of all, he interprets the only other singular occurrence of the term, “apple” (v. 8:5), as the left cherub, likely a reference to the eighth sefirah (see below n. 62). See also Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 98, and the parallel from R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, cited there, n. 10, as well as Vajda’s remarks in *Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 175.

relationship between the apple and the sixth sefirah was itself part of the tradition or was supplied by R. Ezra to explain the tradition. Moving along, he proceeds to explain that the plural, apples,⁶¹ is a figurative reference to the cherubs—apparently the seventh and eighth sefirot.⁶² In support of this interpretation, he cites a Rabbinic source⁶³ according to which “the scent of the field” (Gen. 27:27) refers to the scent of a field of apples.⁶⁴ It is, however, not apparent how this Rabbinic source relates to his interpretation. Next, he notes that he has a tradition that the word “*shoshannah*,” which appears in a number of verses, is a reference to a flower with six leaves, known as “*liri*”⁶⁵ that “figuratively refer” (*veha-mashal bo*) to the “six supernal boundaries (*ketsavot*)”—that is, the fourth through the ninth sefirot.⁶⁶ Finally he notes, without specifying that he derived this knowledge from a tradition, that the term “garden,” which also appears in a number of verses, is another figurative reference (*mashal*) to the tenth sefirah.⁶⁷

If we look back at the second introductory statement as a whole, where, as we have just seen, R. Ezra notes terms from the Song of Songs regarding which he has received traditions, a few observations are in order. First, it is unclear if R. Ezra meant it to include all or most of the traditions that he had received regarding the Song of Songs or if he only intended to present a few salient examples. If the former is the case—as may be suggested by the fact that he does not note otherwise—the vast majority of R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Song of*

⁶¹ Here I am following MS Vienna 148 4b, which distinguishes between the singular, “apple” (= “glory of the shekhinah”), and the plural, “apples” (= the cherubs). In Chavel’s edition, as in Brody’s translation, the word “apple” is rendered in the singular in both cases. This obscures the meaning of R. Ezra’s remarks. Vajda, 48–49, does, however, preserve the distinction.

⁶² Brody, 31; Chavel 481. Alternatively, in Vajda’s view (*Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 49 n. 21, 192 n. 133) the cherubs refer to the fourth and fifth sefirot.

⁶³ *B. Ta’anit* 29b. In the body of R. Ezra’s *Commentary*, the source is given as *B. Shabbat*, which is apparently erroneous.

⁶⁴ Brody, 31; Chavel 481. Cf. R. Ezra of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, MS Vatican 441 9b [The microfilm of the MS, which I consulted, is difficult to read. I also consulted the version of R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* that is printed in *Likkuté shikhehah u-fe’ah*, 7a], Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 97–98, and Vajda’s remarks in *Le Commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 175–176.

⁶⁵ = *Lliri*, the Catalan term for lily. Chavel’s edition and Brody’s translation read “*lidi*,” which apparently is a corruption. MS Vienna 148 4b and Vajda, 49, preserve the correct reading.

⁶⁶ Brody, 32; Chavel, 481.

⁶⁷ Brody, 32; Chavel, 481.

Songs is the product of his own exegetical talents. Even if, however, we assume that the latter is the case, the discussion shows that his creative effort was considerable. He speculates regarding the original reasoning behind the received traditions. He derives the meaning of verses by deciphering what he takes to be the Kabbalistic hints present in Rabbinic discourses; and, on the basis of received knowledge about the sefirot, he readily interprets additional verses about which he has no received knowledge.

In this context, it is significant to note that the creative manner in which he carries out his own work matches the creative manner in which he assumes the Talmudic sages engaged in the study of Kabbalah. Thus, in his *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, he notes that a Talmudic sage will “at times state a true statement based on a tradition (*mi-tsad ha-kabbalah*) or derived from clear evidence (*mitokh re’ayah berurah*), and [in addition] they will bring a verse, which is the pillar upon which all rests and a peg upon which all depends, to support their words.”⁶⁸ In other words, in R. Ezra’s view, at times, in expounding Kabbalistic ideas, the Talmudic Rabbis relied on received traditions. At other times, however, they derived Kabbalistic ideas from a *re’ayah*—evidence based on logical deduction. Furthermore, R. Ezra also suggests that at times the Biblical verse is not the real source of the Kabbalistic idea, but is merely an added support for an idea that was, in fact, based on tradition or deduction.⁶⁹ In short, according to R. Ezra, even in the Talmudic period, Kabbalistic wisdom was not just a matter of *kabbalot* (received traditions). The Talmudic sages, rather, were, themselves, involved in creative activity similar to that of R. Ezra.

In and of itself, there is of course nothing remarkable about R. Ezra’s creative efforts. They are, however, striking against the backdrop of his claim that he is transmitting traditional wisdom as a bulwark against newfangled Maimonidean interpretation. It is true that, based on my analysis so far, his creativity is fully grounded in received material—that is, it involves applying traditional knowledge to new contexts. As will be seen below, however, some of his creativity is based on more

⁶⁸ I am translating from the version of R. Ezra’s comments as cited by R. Azriel in R. Azriel’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 141. Cf. R. Ezra of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, MS Vatican 441, 16a–b.

⁶⁹ For an analysis of these points in reference to the above passage from the *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* and a related passage, see Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, 33.

recent philosophic sources. Still, even leaving this latter aspect of his creative enterprise aside for the time being, it seems quite likely that in the process of applying traditional knowledge to new materials, new Kabbalistic knowledge is also created. It is probable that a circle forms in which his new interpretation, informed by traditional knowledge, ends up informing this knowledge as well. For example, how might a notion of emanation, received from traditional sources, change when it is compared to the diffusion of a scent? Similarly, how might the conception of the sixth sefirah be altered when the tradition that presents an apple as its symbol is explained on the basis of an apple's changing colors (assuming this explanation was not already part of the tradition)? Owing to our lack of knowledge of the full scope of R. Ezra's traditions, these questions cannot be answered definitively. It does, however, seem to defy common sense to imagine that such creative application of traditions could occur without any alteration in the traditions themselves. In the same vein, it seems obvious that in the process of interpreting Rabbinic statements in light of received traditions, the statements themselves, so interpreted, will end up changing the manner in which the received traditions are understood.⁷⁰

But R. Ezra's creative efforts ultimately go beyond merely applying traditional knowledge to new settings. Surprisingly, some of the hermeneutical techniques that he employs are derived from none other than Maimonides. That is, he employs a Maimonidean hermeneutic even while combating Maimonideanism. Above, I partially cited R. Ezra's comments regarding the appropriate methodology to take when considering Rabbinic texts, which he makes in the course of outlining the chain of transmission. As Wolfson has noted, these comments are based on a Maimonidean hermeneutic.⁷¹ According to Maimonides, in the introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed*, "the Sages, may their memory be blessed, following the trail of these books (i.e. prophetic books), likewise have spoken in riddles (*be-ḥidot*) and parables (*u-meshalim*)."⁷² Slightly later in the introduction, he adds that the

⁷⁰ On the question of the extent to which Kabbalistic readings of Rabbinic literature produce new ideas, see Abrams, "Phenomenology of Jewish Mysticism," 73–81.

⁷¹ Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 177–178; Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle," 220–221.

⁷² *Guide* 1: introduction (Pines, 7). The Hebrew translations here and in the remainder of this chapter are those of Judah Alḥarizi [*Moreh nevuḥim*, eds. Simon B. Scheyer and Salomon Munk (Tel Aviv: Maḥbarot le-sifrut, 1964)], whose translation of the *Guide* was preferred by the members of R. Isaac's circle over that of Samuel

Sages, “when they aimed at teaching something of this subject matter (i.e. “the account of creation” and “the account of the chariot”), spoke of it only in parables (*bi-meshalim*) and riddles (*ve-ḥidot*).... Sometimes the subject intended to be taught to him who was to be instructed was scattered and divided (*mefuzzar u-meforad*)—although it was one and the same subject—among parables remote from one another.”⁷³ I would add that Samuel ibn Tibbon in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, in the course of the passage in which he outlines the chain of philosophic transmission—the very passage against which, as noted, I suspect R. Ezra’s chain of Kabbalistic transmission is polemically directed—similarly explains that “the Sages, that is the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, also wrote down hints (*remazim*) and riddles (*ve-ḥidot*), divided (*meforadim*) and scattered (*u-mefuzzarim*) in their midrashim, that pertain to the subject of wisdom and ethics. Each one [wrote] according to his wisdom in these subjects, and his ability to apply the art of concealing.”⁷⁴ R. Ezra, then, is following Maimonides’ and Ibn Tibbon’s lead when he notes that, “just as it is with the words of Torah and the words of the Prophets and Hagiographa, so is it with the words of our sages of blessed memory, who expounded upon this wisdom in their midrashim and haggadot in the form of parables (*meshalim*) and riddles (*ve-ḥidot*), so as to hide these matters and conceal them. They scattered (*u-fizzru*) one here and one there so as to hide their place. When encountering them, a person does not sense their inner meaning, but instead takes them at their face value.”⁷⁵

Certainly, it may be suggested that R. Ezra employs this Maimonidean hermeneutic in order to subvert the Maimonidean position. That is to say, his point may be to show that the Maimonideans are, indeed, correct that the sages engaged in esoteric writing, yet the secrets which they concealed are not Aristotelian physics and metaphysics but the true revealed traditions of Kabbalah. Yet, it is important to note that R. Ezra, in adopting this hermeneutic, is also rejecting the view of the Northern French anti-Maimonideans and of the leader of the anti-Maimonidean camp in Languedoc, R. Solomon b. Abraham, according

ibn Tibbon. (On this preference, see chapter two, n. 26 below.) This passage appears on p. 28.

⁷³ *Guide* 1: introduction. Pines, 8; Alḥarizi. 30.

⁷⁴ *Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 163. For the original Hebrew, see Robinson, *Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 547.

⁷⁵ Brody, 23–24; Chavel, 489.

to whom *aggadot* must be taken literally.⁷⁶ Indeed, his comments can be seen as a critique of this view, even if this was not his intention, as much as they can be seen as a critique of certain radical Maimonideans.⁷⁷ Furthermore, by granting the Maimonidean hermeneutic, R. Ezra (who, as mentioned, also authored a commentary on the Talmudic *aggadot*) is, in effect, conceding the point that his Kabbalah is not merely a body of received material that was transmitted through the ages. It is at least, in part, rather, material that needs to be derived on the basis of interpretation. Now, it might be suggested that his readings of Rabbinic passages do not recover lost information, but, insofar as they are based on received material, are merely further confirmations or new applications of received materials. Such a suggestion, however, lacks hermeneutic sophistication. It seems obvious that, as already indicated above, as much as his traditions informed his esoteric reading of Rabbinic passages, the Rabbinic passages, having been read in this light, in turn informed and even broadened his conception of the traditions. In short, then, it was a Maimonidean hermeneutic that directed a crucial aspect of R. Ezra's Kabbalistic creativity.

As Georges Vajda has already pointed out,⁷⁸ R. Ezra also borrows another principle of Maimonidean hermeneutics, which he presents as part of his first introductory statement. This, I will argue, was not a subversive move but a genuine borrowing. According to Maimonides, there are two types of parables in the prophetic books. In the first type, every word has significance and, thus, every word must be interpreted. In others, however, the parable as a whole has a general meaning, but certain words are merely there for stylistic purposes and do not merit particular interpretation: "In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning."⁷⁹ Compare these comments to R. Ezra's comments regarding the extended parable that is the Song of Songs:

⁷⁶ See Septimius, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, 76–85.

⁷⁷ On the relationship between philosophic and early Kabbalistic exegesis of Rabbinic *aggadot*, see also Frank Ephraim Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Green, (New York: Crossroad, 1986), I, 333–337.

⁷⁸ *Le Commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 143.

⁷⁹ *Guide* 1: introduction. Pines, 12.

It is filled with many elements provided for the sake of the narrational continuity of the parable (*lekasher ha-mashal*) and for its beauty (*le yofyo*),⁸⁰ rather than for any other purpose or function. For example, let me quote one verse from this book. It states, 'let him kiss me with the kisses...' (Song of Songs 1:2). The kiss is a parable (*mashal*) of the soul's adhesion to God as we will explain. The verse further states '[kisses] of his mouth.' There is no additional meaning here. But, having analogized the soul's adhesion to God with a kiss, the verse is constrained to state 'the kisses of his mouth,' in order to tie the parable to its context. Thus has one of the wise men of the generation (*ehad me-ḥakhmé ha-dor*) already written.⁸¹

While the identity of this "wise man" is unclear (might it be R. Samuel ibn Tibbon?),⁸² it is apparent that he adopted Maimonides' hermeneutical principle. The significance of R. Ezra's aligning himself with the Maimonidean approach must be underscored. As Mordechai Cohen has noted, Maimonides, in articulating this principle, follows an Andalusian tradition of Biblical exegesis that rejects the Rabbinic notion of what James Kugel has called the "omnificance" of the

⁸⁰ Here I follow MS Vienna 148 4a. Chavel's edition reads *u-leyaḥaso* (lit. to relate it), which Brody follows in translating "for the sake... of the context of its imagery". The MS reading strikes me as superior. Vajda, 46, follows this reading and translates "I'orner."

⁸¹ Brody, 29; Chavel, 480.

⁸² For starters, it is difficult to determine what exactly is being attributed to this wise man. Scholem apparently assumes that all that is being attributed to this man is the idea that "kisses of his mouth" refers to the soul's adhesion to God, and he identifies him as none other than R. Samuel ibn Tibbon. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 377–378. [I would point out that Scholem erroneously refers to an unpublished commentary on Song of Songs by R. Samuel ibn Tibbon as the presumed source of R. Ezra's comment. In fact, however, no such work exists. Scholem assumes that this work is the source of R. Moshe ibn Tibbon's (Samuel's son) interpretation of Song of Songs 1:2 as referring to adhesion, which appears in his own commentary on the Song of Songs, where he cites his father frequently. In fact, however, these citations come from Samuel's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. (I thank James Robinson for clarifying this matter.) In this *Commentary*, Samuel does, indeed, interpret Song of Songs 1:2 in this manner. See *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 201, 279. For the original Hebrew see Robinson, *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 568, 616.] This is also the view of Vajda, *Le Commentaire d'Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 144–146 n. 12 and Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 44. It may also very well be the case, though, that R. Ezra wishes to attribute to this wise man not only the notion that "kisses of his mouth" refers to the soul's adhesion to God but also the notion that the word "mouth" is merely there for stylistic purposes. Samuel does not, however, comment on the word "mouth" in *Songs of Songs* 1:2. The wise man might, therefore, be some other, currently unknown, wise man, who did comment on the word "mouth" in this manner. See also the comments of Pedaya in "Possessed by Speech," 152 n. 9.

Biblical text.⁸³ In Kugel's words, "the basic assumption underlying all of Rabbinic exegesis is that the slightest details of the Biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant. Nothing in the Bible, in other words, ought to be explained as the product of chance, or for that matter as an emphatic or rhetorical form."⁸⁴ Even if we grant that Kugel is exaggerating somewhat,⁸⁵ it is clear that R. Ezra, in following a Maimonidean approach to Biblical parables, is rejecting a fundamental Rabbinic approach to Biblical interpretation. There does not seem to be any polemical reason for this choice. On the contrary, one might imagine that R. Ezra, who later in the *Commentary* characterizes the Pentateuch as carved from the divine Name and is emphatic that every letter of the Pentateuch is essential,⁸⁶ would be troubled by a position that identified any Biblical words, even if not Mosaic, as having a merely stylistic function. In adopting this approach, R. Ezra is making a significant exegetical move, which dramatically affects his ultimate interpretation of Song of Songs as a whole since it allows him to gloss over various features of the text. On the one hand, this can be construed as something of a conservative move, in that it prevents over-reading, which might result in unwarranted creativity. On the other hand, it demonstrates that R. Ezra did not receive a traditional hermeneutical rule that would provide guidance on a question as basic as what the parameters are that define the interpretability of the Song

⁸³ Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 179–188. See pp. 186–188 for an explanation of how Maimonides applies this principle in his own analysis of the Song of Songs.

⁸⁴ James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 104.

⁸⁵ There are occasional allowances in Rabbinic literature for the possibility that certain Biblical expressions are matters of literary style. See the analysis in Mordechai Z. Cohen, "The Best of Poetry...': Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 6 (1995–1996), 35–37.

⁸⁶ "There is no single letter or vocalization point that is unnecessary, for it (i.e. the Pentateuch) is entirely a divine structure, carved in the name of the Holy One, blessed be He." R. Ezra makes this point in the excursus on the reasons for commandments that he added to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The excursus was not translated by Brody or Vajda. My translation is based on the critical edition in Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice," 63 (Hebrew Section). In his *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*, R. Ezra construes the Pentateuch as one long name of God. See Gershom Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism," in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, Schocken Books, 1965; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 39.

of Songs, and moreover, that he was willing to adopt a Maimonidean hermeneutical principle to provide such guidance.

Up until this point, I have shown the way in which R. Ezra forges his reading of the Song of Songs by drawing on esoteric traditions, Rabbinic materials, his own analysis, and Maimonidean hermeneutical principles. Importantly, however, he also turns to another philosophic author: R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya (d. c. 1136)—this time, not for hermeneutical guidance, but for theosophic knowledge. As will be discussed at the beginning of the next chapter, Bar Ḥiyya was an early author of philosophic and scientific works in Hebrew rather than in the more standard Arabic. The borrowings from Bar Ḥiyya appear most prominently in the third introductory statement. It is important to underscore that R. Ezra attributes great importance to this statement:

The third introductory statement comes to inform you briefly concerning the principles of Kabbalah inherent in these verses, which serve as the pillar upon which all things rely, the peg upon which they hang, so that the interpretation of this book might be absorbed like water, directing your mind in the proper path.⁸⁷

This, then, is the introductory statement in which R. Ezra introduces significant Kabbalistic principles upon which his exegesis of the Song of Songs relies. These principles are presented in the form of an exegesis of Job 28, a chapter in which, as he writes in a letter to a certain R. Abraham, “all of Kabbalah is explained from its beginning to its end.”⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, he opens with an interpretation of verses 1–2 that he heard from his teacher R. Isaac⁸⁹—that is to say, he begins with the received traditions that we would expect to ground his exegesis of the *Canticle*. Significantly, however, immediately thereafter, without identifying the source, he provides an interpretation of verse 3 that is self-evidently based on Bar Ḥiyya’s *Megillat ha-Megalleh*. He once again bases himself on Bar Ḥiyya’s *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, still without noting the source, when he comments on verse 27. To put the matter in perspective, exegesis based on Bar Ḥiyya takes up approximately

⁸⁷ Brody, 32; Chavel, 481.

⁸⁸ Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 26.

⁸⁹ Brody, 32–33; Chavel, 481–482. In his *Commentary*, R. Ezra does not mention that he received the interpretation of these verses from R. Isaac, but in one of his letters to R. Abraham (Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 26), he attributes the same interpretation to his teacher.

one fifth of the total presentation of the Kabbalistic principles upon which R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* depends.

The particular details of these borrowings⁹⁰ are not as important, in the current context, as is the very fact of the borrowing. In a work that seems to present Kabbalah as a set of traditions handed down for

⁹⁰ I will first summarize R. Ezra's exegesis of Job 28:3, which appears in Brody, 33–34 and Chavel, 482, and then turn to its indebtedness to Bar Ḥiyya. The opening of the verse reads “He sets bounds for the darkness; to every limit man probes.” According to R. Ezra, “it is common knowledge that darkness designates privation (*afisah*)” (Brody, 33)—that is, the privation of light. For R. Ezra, “darkness” or “privation” is a reference to the first sefirah. This sefirah, which is beyond human knowledge, is the source of the lower sefirot, wherein they exist in potential and from which they emanate. This process of emanation is, in R. Ezra's interpretation, described in the verse as the setting of bounds for the darkness. In other words, the undifferentiated first sefirah is given a boundary in the form of the differentiated lower sefirot, which emanate from it. As R. Ezra puts it, “In stating ‘He sets bounds for the darkness,’ the intention is that God set a boundary for darkness, infixing within it border and limit” (Brody, 33). Furthermore, unlike the first sefirah, these differentiated sefirot can be the subject of inquiry, which is what the verse means when it states, “to every limit man probes.” Finally, R. Ezra also explains that “under no circumstances can it (i.e. privation/darkness) be described with the terminology of formation (*yetsirah*), but rather that of creation (*ber'ah*),” and again that “Scripture speaks of darkness in terms of creation, and the light, which exists in the potentiality of darkness (*be-khoah ha-ḥoshekh*), in terms of formation, as it says: ‘He forms light and creates darkness’ (Is. 48:7)” (Brody 33).

R. Ezra's interpretation borrows from Bar Ḥiyya in a few different ways. First of all, Bar Ḥiyya connects darkness to what he calls God's “pure thought,” a term which, as I have argued elsewhere, Bar Ḥiyya understands as a divine intellectual faculty within which future creations first arise in potential. For R. Ezra, as becomes clear later in the *Commentary*, “pure thought” is a designation of the highest sefirah, which he also understands as a divine intellectual faculty within which future creations first arise in potential. [See Jonathan Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 189–197]. In other words, it is apparent that R. Ezra borrowed from Bar Ḥiyya's account of divine thought and its association with darkness in his exegesis of Job 28:3. Furthermore, the notion that darkness is described with the terminology of “creation” and light with the terminology of “formation,” as well as the use of Is. 48:7 as a proof-text of this notion, is taken from Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Megillat ha-megalleh*, eds. Adolf Poznanski and Julius Guttmann (Berlin: Verein Mekize Nirdamim, 1924), 16. The association between light and “formation” and darkness and “creation” is also found in *Sefer ha-bahir*, ed. Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), 123, sec. 10, but the specifics of R. Ezra's remarks (e.g., his use of the term privation, which is missing in the *Bahir*, and his statement that light “exists in the potentiality of darkness,” which is taken directly from Bar Ḥiyya but is missing in the *Bahir*) show that, even though R. Ezra was surely familiar with the Bahiric passage (could he or someone in his circle have been its author?), he drew directly on Bar Ḥiyya. For related analysis, see Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 197–201. See also Vajda, *Le Commentaire d'Ezra de Géronne sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 273; Pablo Martín Dreizik, “Notas acerca de la influencia del pensamiento filosófico de Abraham bar Hiyya en los ‘Comentarios al Cantar de los Cantares’ de Ezra ben Salomon de Gerona,” in *Mossé ben Nahman i el seu temps: simposi commemorativa*

centuries, significant aspects of what are presented as the fundamentals of Kabbalah are informed by Bar Ḥiyya's *Megillat ha-Megalleh*. What is more, Bar Ḥiyya himself does not claim that he is transmitting ancient traditions, but states explicitly that certain unnamed (presumably non-Jewish) philosophers (*ḥakhmé ha-meḥkar*) are the basis of his cosmological views, even if he stresses that the same ideas can also be found in the Torah.⁹¹ R. Ezra, then, is willing to draw on

tiu del vuitè centenari del seu naixement, 1194–1994 (Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 1994), 283–293.

I turn now to Bar Ḥiyya's interpretation of Job 28:27. According to R. Ezra:

‘Then He saw it’ (Job 28:27): He looked in pure thought like a person who estimates (*ha-mesha'er*) an action: First he considers [the action] in his heart and thereafter he begins to carry it out and engage in it [...] and on the basis of the representations (*ha-tsiyyurim*) that were within it (i.e. within ‘pure thought’), he represented within that principle (= the second sefirah) that He made emanate from it (i.e. from ‘pure thought’) (Chavel, 483. The translation is taken from Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 196. Cf. Brody, 37).

It is self evident that R. Ezra had the following passage from Bar Ḥiyya's *Megillat ha-Megalleh* before him when he composed this passage:

All the creations in the world previously stood in potentiality and thereafter became actualised. It is impossible for something to become actualised if it did not stand in potentiality ready to become actualised. Indeed, you see people in their undertakings and in their actions first estimating (*mesha'arim*) the undertaking and the action in their hearts and thereafter beginning to perform it and engage in it. And there is still a level prior to this one, since a person [first] reflects in his heart that he should perform [the action], and thereafter he assesses the action and estimates (*u-mesha'er*) it. If this is the case concerning the action of man, how much more so is it the case concerning the action of the Creator? And on this basis we say that all the things formed in this world, whether bodies that have stable existence, or an accident that changes and passes, would stand in potentiality before they became actualised, and they would arise exclusively in [pure] thought before they were established in potentiality (Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Megillat ha-megalleh*, 8, cited in Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 191).

For a full analysis of these passages and a fuller account of the extent of R. Ezra's indebtedness to Bar Ḥiyya, see *ibid.*, 189–197.

⁹¹ While it is the case that Bar Ḥiyya claims that his understanding of the term “creation” is based on Rabbinic sources (*Megillat ha-megalleh*, 16), he explains that the particulars of his theology, including his understanding of “pure thought” (his view of “pure thought” is described in the previous note), are derived from philosophic sources. At the same time, he stresses that these ideas can also be found in the Torah. See, e.g., Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Megillat ha-megalleh*, 5 and Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Hegyon ha-nepesch ha-atzuvah*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1971), 37–41. Finding these philosophic ideas in the Torah is a project he devotes himself to in the opening section of *Hegyon ha-Nepesch ha-Atzuvah*. He does not, however, claim that he has traditions that enable him to interpret Biblical passages in accordance with the philosophic views. On the contrary, he reads the Biblical passages in light of the philosophic views.

“philosophers”—if only indirectly, through Bar Ḥiyya—in formulating important Kabbalistic principles. In this regard, it is of some interest that Naḥmanides, who, as will be discussed in chapter six, was more averse to the creative expansion of earlier traditions than the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle, even though he engaged in it as well, incorporated R. Ezra’s commentary on Job 28, in an abbreviated fashion, into his own *Commentary on Job*, in the name of “masters of Kabbalah.” Naḥmanides concludes this incorporated commentary with the following remarks, which call into question the reliability of R. Ezra’s Kabbalistic interpretations: “these words, in and of themselves, are praiseworthy and laudable, but we do not know if the text (lit. *the matter*) can support this interpretation, but if it is a tradition (*kabbalah*), we will accept it (*nekabbel*).”⁹²

In all, therefore, R. Ezra’s ostensibly conservative presentation of received traditional knowledge in the face of new-fangled Maimonidean thought, in fact, appears to involve a highly creative process, which requires synthesizing received traditions with his own interpretations of Rabbinic materials, adding his own suppositions, and drawing from philosophic sources.

⁹² *Commentary on Job in Kitvê Ramban*, I, 90. The entire portion of the commentary that is based on R. Ezra’s interpretation may be found on pp. 88–90. My translation accords with that found in Moshe Idel, “We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 56. Herbert Basser, however, contends that *nekabbel* should be translated as “we should understand it kabbalistically.” He sees this translation as lessening the tension between Naḥmanides and R. Ezra. Thus, in his translation the whole passage reads: “Now this is their method of explication of these verses and the ideas in and of themselves are worthy of praise and endorsement. Yet we cannot know if the Joban context can tolerate this method of interpretation. So if it is a Kabbalah, we should understand it kabbalistically.” See Herbert William Basser, “Kabbalistic Teaching in the Commentary of Job by Moses Nahmanides (Ramban),” in *Biblical Interpretation in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Isaac Kalimi and Peter J. Haas (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 105 (see also 105 n. 27 cf. 93). Basser’s translation, however, seems forced. Idel’s (and my) reading is given support by Shalem Yahalom who notes that Naḥmanides’ remarks are similar to remarks made by R. Abraham ibn Ezra who says the following regarding the Rabbinic statement according to which Isaac was thirty seven years old at the time of the binding of Isaac: “If these are the words of Kabbalah we will accept them (*nekabbel*), but if they are based on logical conjecture (*sevar’a*) it is not correct.” Naḥmanides apparently follows this basic linguistic form. Ibn Ezra is only willing to accept the matter if it is based on tradition and not on conjecture. This is Naḥmanides’ point as well. See Shalem Yahalom, “Kabbalah (as Received Tradition) and Innovation in the Writings of Nahmanides and Related Scholarship: The Cases of the Joints of the Sinews and the ‘Killer Wife,’” *Kabbalah* 17 (2008), 206–207 [in Hebrew]. For further discussion, see chapter six, n. 73.

My point, I should emphasize, is not that R. Ezra was hypocritical. He likely viewed his creative exposition as uncovering what was there all along. Still, my analysis calls into question Tishby's aforementioned contentions that "a large portion of his remarks are nothing other than the transmission of the words of his teachers, as he received them, or with slight changes," and that "his innovations with regard to [Kabbalistic] ideas and symbols are not many."

Interestingly, this whole approach of bringing various strands together in reconstructing ancient Jewish esotericism is not so different from what Maimonides himself claims to be doing. Regarding his interpretation of *Ezekiel* 1, the "Account of the Chariot," Maimonides states:

I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the *Sages*, together with the speculative premises that I possess showed me that things are indubitably so and so. Yet it is possible that they are different and something else is intended.⁹³

On the one hand, there is no doubt that R. Ezra's chain of transmission is intended to counteract precisely this claim. R. Ezra certainly has a teacher, R. Isaac, and to an extent he is transmitting ancient wisdom, regarding which he believes there is certainty. Maimonides, in contrast, relies entirely on his own conjecture and supposition. On the other hand, the above analysis shows that R. Ezra, in fact, bases a significant portion of his exegesis of the Song of Songs, precisely, on his own conjecture and supposition.

V

As argued, R. Ezra wrote his *Commentary*, against the backdrop of his belief in the imminence of the messianic period, in order to respond to Maimonidean interpreters, who he believed were misrepresenting the true "account of creation" and "account of the chariot." Yet his solution was not merely to present a body of received knowledge. On the contrary, he engaged in a deeply creative project. What is more,

⁹³ *Guide* 3: introduction. Pines, 416.

he also uses Maimonidean hermeneutical principles to do so. More broadly, if a desire to combat the worldview of Maimonidean interpreters led him to write in the first place, it was, I submit, an ethos that Maimonides helped establish in Languedoc and Catalonia that deeply influenced the nature of the intellectual work that R. Ezra carried out in his *Commentary*. This is an ethos that saw active investigating of God as a religious imperative of utmost importance. It is an ethos which is directly rooted in philosophic sources and not in traditional Rabbinic ones, but it is one that R. Ezra, as well as the other members of R. Isaac's circle, adopted. As I will show over the course of this book, the first Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle internalized the value of investigating God, and the attempt to develop and expand Kabbalistic traditions evident in R. Ezra's *Commentary* can be seen, in part, as a response to the new value accorded to investigating God. The call to investigate God, if taken seriously, would require, precisely, the careful collating of ancient received material and the weighing of it against other types of material.

This call figures prominently in the *Commentary* where it appears in a lengthy excursus, which deals with the reasons for the commandments. R. Ezra writes: "The first commandment among the positive commandments: each man must inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*velatur*) and search (*u-lehappes*) and recognize (*lehakkir*) His divinity and know (*ve-lada'at*) Him."⁹⁴

In the next chapter, I will examine the role of investigating God in the newly available philosophic literature, before turning, in chapter three, to an analysis of traditional Rabbinic literature. There, I will show that this literature does not present investigating God as religiously crucial. This will allow me, in chapter four, to appropriately situate R. Ezra's call to investigate God, as well as similar calls by other members of R. Isaac's circle, in a broader context.

⁹⁴ Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice," 4 (Hebrew Section).

CHAPTER TWO

THE PHILOSOPHIC ETHOS

I

In the first half of the thirteenth century, when the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle were active in Languedoc and Catalonia, a remarkable intellectual and cultural transformation was already well underway in these areas. Prior to the twelfth century, philosophy had been cultivated by Jews living in the Islamic orbit, who were familiar with the vernacular and, therefore, had access to the Arabic philosophic tradition. Even when Jews themselves composed philosophic works, they primarily used Arabic. In contrast, in areas under Christian rule, like Languedoc and Catalonia, Jewish scholarship focused on the traditional fields of Torah and Talmud.¹ By the time the first Kabbalists were active, however, a wide range of philosophic material was available to them in Hebrew, and it is in conversation with this material and its exponents that the first Kabbalists adopted the philosophic ethos.² Accordingly, in this section, I will briefly trace the historical circumstances that led

¹ Recent scholarship has increasingly argued that there was greater awareness of matters of science and philosophy among Jews in Christian lands than has typically been assumed. For a survey of scientific materials available in Christian lands up to the year 1400, see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Was There No Science in Ashkenaz?: The Ashkenazic Reception of Some Early-Medieval Hebrew Scientific Texts," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 8 (2009), 67–92. Still, in broad terms, the basic "Islamic lands versus Christian lands" dichotomy remains firmly in place. For a compelling evaluation of the matter, see David Berger, "Polemic, Exegesis, Philosophy, and Science: On the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of Thought," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 8 (2009), 27–39.

² There is some possibility that at least two of the first Catalonian Kabbalists, Nahmanides (who was not a direct member of R. Isaac's circle, as will be discussed in chapter six, section 1), and R. Ezra, knew Arabic. The evidence for Nahmanides' knowledge of Arabic is adduced convincingly by Raphael Jospe, "Ramban (Nahmanides) and Arabic," *Tarbiz* 57 (1987–1988), 67–93 [in Hebrew]. One of the types of evidence used to support this possibility is Nahmanides' use of Arabic words to define difficult Hebrew ones. On this basis, Jospe makes the tantalizing claim (pp. 89–90) that Nahmanides must have been writing for an audience who read Arabic and that Arabic, therefore, may have been read by some segment of the Jewish community in Christian Spain.

to the development of a Hebrew philosophic tradition, before turning, in subsequent sections, to discuss the manner in which the philosophic ethos is manifest in some of the materials that make up this tradition. While the Languedocian and Catalanian Jewish communities were closely intertwined, the history of the absorption of philosophic culture was somewhat different in each.³ I will, thus, begin with the situation in Languedoc and then move to Catalonia.

A harbinger of the transformation that would lead to the emergence of a Hebrew philosophic tradition in Languedoc was R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya (d. c. 1136), the Barcelonan intellectual and philosopher, mentioned in the previous chapter, who authored scientific and philosophic works in Hebrew, some of which he composed for Jews in Languedoc.⁴ Another crucial channel for the spread of philosophic knowledge into Christian lands was the Andalusian scholar, R. Abraham ibn Ezra, who, for unclear reasons, was forced to leave the Moslem orbit in 1140. He traveled widely across western Europe, sojourning in Languedoc from 1148 until 1154, where he lived first in Béziers and then in Narbonne. Along the way he composed numerous scientific and philosophic treatises in Hebrew, as well as influential Biblical commentaries, also in Hebrew, which drew on a wide range of scientific and philosophic material.⁵

The evidence for R. Ezra's knowledge of Arabic is adduced by Pedaya in "Possessed by Speech," 176. This evidence is less convincing but gains greater weight when taken together with Jospé's observations. Nevertheless, as will be seen in detail, the primary access point of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle to philosophy was Hebrew translations of Arabic works as well as some original Hebrew works.

³ For a discussion of this intertwining, see Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, 26–32. See also the brief account in Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Interpretation and Controversy in Medieval Languedoc* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 14–15.

⁴ For a brief account of the meager details of Abraham bar Ḥiyya's life of which we are aware and of his literary activities, see Geoffrey Wigoder's introduction to his translation of Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *The Meditation of the Sad Soul* (Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1969), 1–33 and the Hebrew version of this introduction in Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *Hegyon ha-nephesch ha-atzuvah*, 7–32. For Bar Ḥiyya's contribution to the spread of science and philosophy to Languedoc, see Gad Freudenthal, "Les Sciences dans les communautés Juives médiévales de Provence: leur Appropriation, leur rôle," *Revue des études Juives* 152 (1993), 36–39 and the shortened but revised English version of this study entitled "Science in Medieval Jewish Culture," *History of Science* 33 (1995), 27.

⁵ Freudenthal, "Les Sciences dans les communautés Juives médiévales de Provence: leur Appropriation, leur rôle," 39–41; Freudenthal, "Science in Medieval Jewish Culture," 27; Gad Freudenthal, "The Introduction of Non-Rabbinic Learning into Provence

The most important catalyst for this shift, however, was the arrival, in the middle of the twelfth century, of Arabic speaking Andalusian Jews fleeing the Almohade invasion, who brought Andalusian philosophy and culture with them to Languedoc. These émigrés included scholars who took up the role of translators of Arabic philosophic works, the most prominent of whom was Judah ibn Tibbon, who came from Granada to Lunel in the 1150's. Indeed a translation movement took root in Languedoc, fueled by R. Judah's descendants as well as other translators, which, over the course of about 150 years, succeeded in making a very significant portion of the Arabic philosophic corpus available to Jews whose cultural language was Hebrew.⁶ The cultural shift that transpired in the wake of these developments was summarized by Isadore Twersky, in his classic study of Languedocian Jewry, in the following terms:

A Torah-centered community, widely respected throughout Jewish Europe for its wide-ranging rabbinic scholarship and deep-rooted piety, whose sages were constantly beseeched for scholarly advice and learned guidance, turned with remarkable zest and gusto to the cultivation of philosophy and other extra-Talmudic disciplines.⁷

in the Middle of the Twelfth Century: Two Sociological Patterns (Abraham Ibn Ezra and Judah ibn Tibbon),” in *Exchange and Transmission Across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean World*, eds. S. Stroumsa and H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem, forthcoming). My thanks to Professor Freudenthal for making this study available to me; Shlomo Sela and Gad Freudenthal, “Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Scholarly Writings: A Chronological Listing,” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 6 (2006), 13–55; Uriel Simon, “Transplanting the Wisdom of Spain to Christian Lands: The Failed Efforts of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 8 (2009), 139–189.

⁶ These developments in Languedoc have been described in numerous studies. See, e.g., Isadore Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” in *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, eds. H. H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettinger (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 185–207; Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*; Binyamin Benedikt, *Merkaz ha-Torah bi-Provans* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1985), 17–24; Freudenthal, “Les Sciences dans les communautés Juives médiévales de Provence,” 29–136; Gad Freudenthal, “Science in Medieval Jewish Culture,” 23–58; Steven Harvey, “Arabic into Hebrew: The Hebrew Translation Movement and the Influence of Averroes upon Medieval Jewish Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 258–280; James T. Robinson, “The Ibn Tibbon Family: A Dynasty of Translators in Medieval ‘Provence,’” in *Be’erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 193–224; Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 37–40; Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture*, 9–25.

⁷ Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” 190–191.

In Catalonia, on the other hand, the transformation may not have been as dramatic. Given its proximity to al-Andalus, the study of philosophy and science was more entrenched at an earlier period,⁸ and, indeed, it is possible that Arabic was still known by some Catalonian Jews in the thirteenth century when the first Kabbalists were active.⁹ Nevertheless, beginning in the first half of the twelfth century, spurred by the continuing progress of the reconquista, which brought Jews educated in an Islamic environment under Christian rule, there was increased interest in science and philosophy in Catalonia.¹⁰ This process accelerated as a result of the Almohade invasion the middle of the twelfth century, which not only brought Andalusian refugees to Languedoc, as seen, but also to Catalonia.¹¹ In short, just before an intellectual transformation was taking root in Languedoc, there is evidence of a more moderate intellectual shift in Catalonia. Interestingly, in the first half of the twelfth century the influence flowed from the south to the north. Thus, as mentioned, the Barcelonan sage, Bar Ḥiyya, composed Hebrew scientific works for Jews in Languedoc. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, however—the period in which the first Catalonian

⁸ As early as the tenth century a small amount of Arabic science, particularly astronomy, made its way into Catalonia from al-Andalus, and Jews may have served a role as translators. See José María Millás Vallicrosa, “The Beginning of Science Among the Jews of Spain,” *Binah* 3 (1994), 30–46 and Marco Zuccato, “Gerbert of Aurillac and a Tenth-Century Jewish Channel for the Transmission of Arabic Science to the West,” *Speculum* 80 (2005), 742–763. For basic surveys of the spread of science among Jews in Spain, in general, and in Catalonia, in particular, see David Romano, “The Jews’ Contribution to Medicine, Science and General Learning,” in *Moreshet Sepharad: The Spanish Legacy*, ed. Haim Beinart (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), I, 240–260; Y. Tzvi Langermann, *The Jews and the Sciences in the Middle Ages* (Great Britain and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999), 1–54; Mariano Gomez-Aranda, “The Contribution of the Jews of Spain to the Transmission of Science in the Middle Ages,” *European Review* 16 (2008), 172–173. For a brief summary of the development of Jewish philosophy in Catalonia, see Warren Zev Harvey, “Aspects of Jewish Philosophy in Medieval Catalonia,” in *Mossé ben Nahman i el seu temps: simposi commemoratiu del vuitè centenari del seu naixement, 1194–1994* (Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 1994), 142–153.

⁹ See above n. 2.

¹⁰ See Elka Klein, *Jews, Christian Society, and Royal Power in Medieval Barcelona* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 70–95.

¹¹ See Yom Tov Assis, *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry: Community and Society in the Crown of Aragon, 1213–1327* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 299–304; Vallicrosa, “The Beginning of Science Among the Jews of Spain,” 44–45; Shlomo Sela, *Abraham ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 6–7; Gomez-Aranda, “The Contribution of the Jews of Spain to the Transmission of Science in the Middle Ages,” 172–173.

Kabbalists were active—the influence flowed in the reverse direction.¹² The new translations of philosophic literature, prepared in Languedoc, were widely circulated in Catalonia, and, in fact, as I will show, this literature had a deep impact on these Kabbalists' conviction that the investigation of God is of crucial religious significance.

II

In an important study, Herbert Davidson argues that it is possible to take a large swath of disparate medieval Jewish philosophic material and draw a picture of a “composite thinker” who is committed to the idea that there is great religious value in philosophically investigating the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God.¹³ Davidson's insight may be framed in terms that are relevant here. The large corpus of philosophic texts available to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, as a result of developments described in the previous section, was hardly of one piece. On the contrary, we are dealing with a disparate set of texts, originally composed in a number of different periods and with varying philosophic orientations, ranging from Kalam, to Neoplatonism, to Aristotelianism, to various combinations thereof. Yet for the most part, these variations, while very important, are matters of worldview. If, however, ethos, rather than worldview, is made the basis of comparison, the differences between these materials all but recede. The whole corpus was united by the conviction that the value of investigating God is central to scholarly and religious life.

¹² There were, however, also translations of philosophic material written in Catalonia in the beginning of the thirteenth century such as those prepared by the Barcelonan sage, R. Abraham ben Ḥasdai. See Jefim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*, edited, supplemented and annotated by Ezra Fleischer [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Ben-Zvi Institute, 1997), 256–278.

¹³ Herbert A. Davidson, “The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation,” in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), 53–68. A significantly revised version of this study appears in Herbert A. Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), 1–14. Subsequent references to this study are from the revised version. For other discussions of the notion that, according to medieval Jewish philosophers, the study of philosophy has religious value, see Warren Zev Harvey, “Averroes and Maimonides on the Obligation of Philosophic Contemplation (*i'tbār*),” *Tarbiz* 58 (1998), 75–83 [in Hebrew]; Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 40–53.

As I noted in the introduction, four features characterize this value and point to its comprehensive nature. First, investigating God is seen as an act of crucial religious importance, and, as such, it is accorded a principal spot in defining what it means to live as a Jew. Indeed, it is linked in to other spheres of religious life, such as prayer and love of God, in ways that reshape these spheres. Second, it entails a commitment to pursue an active program of investigation of God. It is not something done in a haphazard way but is part of a systematic program of study. Third, knowledge of God cannot just derive from received traditions or revelations but must be gained by employing intellectual effort. Finally, investigation of God is accompanied by epistemological analysis. That is, it is not sufficient to claim that God must be investigated. The question of what type of knowledge of God is possible must also be raised.

The fact that these four characteristics are not central in traditional Rabbinic writings, as will be seen in the next chapter, but are crucial in this newly available philosophic corpus, as will be shown in this chapter, and in the writings of the first Kabbalists, as will be demonstrated in chapter four, is enough to suggest that from the perspective of ethos, there is a basic identity between the philosophic and Kabbalistic materials. Let me, however, also highlight a more specific textual feature that points to such an identity as well.

Throughout all of this literature—philosophic and Kabbalistic—the same Biblical verses are used over and over again as textual support for the value of investigating God. These verses, however, are not employed in this manner in traditional Rabbinic materials, as I will also demonstrate in the next chapter. Three Biblical prooftexts, as Davidson already noted with regard to the philosophic corpus,¹⁴ stand out, in particular:

- a. Deut. 4:39: “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.”¹⁵
- b. Jer. 9:22–23: “[22] Thus said the Lord: let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not

¹⁴ Davidson, “The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation,” 6.

¹⁵ Many of the translations of Biblical verses in this book were made in consultation with the Jewish Publication Society translation (Philadelphia, 1985). I have, however, emended the JPS translations quite liberally.

the rich man glory in his riches. [23] But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me. For I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world: for in these I delight—declares the Lord.”¹⁶

- c. 1 Chron. 28:9: “And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and discerns the design of every thought; if you seek Him, He will be available to you, but if you forsake Him, He will abandon you forever.”

Broadly speaking, the first two verses are employed in support of the general value of investigating God, while the third is often used in support of the notion that before worshiping God one must first have investigated God. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I will examine the ways in which the four characteristics enumerated above are manifest in the newly available Hebrew philosophic literature. Throughout, I will highlight the more specific manner in which the above verses are marshaled in support of these characteristics. I add that since my main interest is in the reception of these philosophic works, my discussion will, for the most part, follow the order in which they became available in Languedoc and Catalonia rather than the order in which they were originally composed.

III

General statements of the value of investigating God abound in the newly available philosophic literature. For example, Bar Ḥiyya makes the following statement in the opening of his *Hegyon ha-Nefesh ha-‘Atsuvaḥ* (*Meditation of the Sad Soul*), a work cited by the first Kabbalists:¹⁷

¹⁶ The use of this verse in support of the value of investigating God has an ancient history. It is already used in this manner by Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.–50 C.E). Philo’s reading, however, had no direct influence on the authors of the newly available philosophic material. See Arkady Kovelman, “Jeremiah 9:22–23 in Philo and Paul,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 10 (2007), 162–175. The importance of this verse in medieval Jewish philosophy has been traced in E. Z. Melamed, “Philosophical Commentaries to Jeremiah 9:22–23 in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985), 31–82 [in Hebrew].

¹⁷ For particular references, see Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 185–201.

We have found that most of the early non-Jewish philosophers of discernment, who discussed religious questions—albeit without the privilege of knowledge of the Torah, but according to their own wisdom and conception—have reached the conclusion that the correct method to understand the subject properly is to investigate the fundamentals from which all things have been created. From the knowledge of a thing's basis and origin, its construction can be understood.... The Bible indicates this, when it says (Deut. 4:39): "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other." If you thoroughly comprehend the nature of the heavens above and the earth below, then you must acknowledge that God created it in its intricate structure, that He is one and there is no other God. This is the implication of the verse (Job. 29:26), "From my flesh shall I see God," i.e. from the nature of your flesh and the structure of your organs, you can comprehend the wisdom of your Creator. This indication permits us to investigate the views of the early philosophers and their theories of creation.¹⁸

Here, then, in a move common in the newly available literature, Bar Ḥiyya suggests that the study of the world through philosophic means will demonstrate God's existence insofar as it will provide evidence for the divine design of the world. That such study is desirable, Bar Ḥiyya discovers in Deut. 4:39, a verse that, as noted, is frequently employed in the newly available philosophic literature in support of the value of investigating God. Furthermore, insofar as the design of the world and especially the human body is a manifestation of God's wisdom, the study of this design will offer insight into the nature of God's wisdom. The notion that self-knowledge will lead to knowledge of God, a concept that Bar Ḥiyya finds support for in Job 29:26, is also an important motif in medieval Jewish philosophy, in general, and in the newly available philosophic literature, in particular, which Alexander Altmann has discussed at length.¹⁹

Notably, according to Bar Ḥiyya here, it is the fact that philosophic study leads to knowledge of God that legitimates and even recommends the study of non-Jewish philosophic works by writers who had no access to Jewish tradition. Now the study of such works is central

¹⁸ Abraham bar Ḥiyya, *The Meditation of the Sad Soul*, 37–38. For the Hebrew original, see *Hegyon ha-nepesch ha-atzuvah*, 37–38.

¹⁹ Alexander Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 196–232; reprinted in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), 1–33. Citations are from the reprinted version. Bar Ḥiyya's comment is cited on p. 20.

to Bar Ḥiyya's scholarly program. His focus in the opening of *Hegyon ha-Nefesh*, for example, is to attempt to align Biblical and philosophic accounts of creation, an enterprise that demands both creative exegesis of Biblical passages and careful evaluation of philosophic ones. It is, therefore, the value of investigating God, which undergirds and spurs this enterprise.

A similar statement is found in a passage in Ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora' ve-Sod Torah*, which he composed in London in 1158.

A person is obligated to perfect himself (*le takken 'atmo*) and recognize the commandment of the Lord who created all, and he should strive with all his strength to understand His actions. Then he will know (*yeda'*) his Creator...and the prophet says "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom" (Jer. 9:22). In what type of wisdom should he glory? "Only in this" (Jer. 9:23). And what is it? "That he understands and knows Me" (Jer. 9:23). It is also written, "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart [that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other]" (Deut. 4:39).²⁰

Like Bar Ḥiyya, Ibn Ezra evokes Deut 4:39 as a proof-text for the value of investigating God. He also adds Jer. 9:22–23, another proof-text that often appears in pronouncements of this value. Note how emphatic Ibn Ezra is that knowledge of God's actions—that is, knowledge of His governance, which leads to knowledge of Him—must be pursued with all of one's strength. Mere passive reliance on received traditions is hardly sufficient. Such stress on the intense intellectual effort required to gain knowledge of God is a hallmark of the newly available literature.

Related themes are also highlighted in the works translated by R. Judah ibn Tibbon. For example, in the very first such text, the introduction and opening section of R. Baḥya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*, which R. Judah translated in 1161,²¹ we find among the more forceful articulations of the importance of investigating God.

²⁰ Abraham ibn Ezra, *Yesod mora' ve-sod torah*, eds. Yosef Cohen and Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007), 86–87. Cf. *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Two Commentaries on the Minor Prophets: An Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. Uriel Simon [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1989), I:72–73 (on Hosea 6:3). For further analysis of Ibn Ezra's intellectual ideal, see Yosef Kohen, *Haguto ha-filosofit shel R' Avraham ibn 'Ezra* (Rishon le-Tsion, Israel: Shai, 1996), 231–242.

²¹ For further details on R. Judah's translation of *Duties of the Heart*, which he completed in two parts, see below, n. 40.

Regarding metaphysics, which he defines as “knowledge of God,” R. Baḥya states that “It is our duty to seek this wisdom, in order that we may understand our religion.”²² Similarly, elsewhere in the work, he makes the following statement:

As to the question of our obligation to investigate (*laḥkor*) God’s unity by way of speculation, I say that whoever is qualified to investigate (*laḥkor*) this and other intelligible matters in a reasonable way is indeed obliged to do so, in proportion to his understanding and his discriminative powers . . . We are bound to do so by the Scriptures, which say: “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other” (Deut. 4:39). [A series of verses follow that support this point, including 1 Chron. 28:9: “And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind,” and Jer. 9:23: “But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me.”]²³

R. Baḥya, who predates Bar Ḥiyya and Ibn Ezra, but whose work was not known in Languedoc and Catalonia until after their works were composed, cites the by now familiar verses, Deut. 4:39 and Jer. 9:23, in support of the value of investigating God. He also cites 1 Chron. 28:9, a verse to which I will return below when I discuss the relationship between knowledge of God and prayer. Note, however, that while the passages from Bar Ḥiyya and Ibn Ezra examined above stress the need to come to knowledge of God by investigating the created world—a notion that R. Baḥya certainly also subscribes to²⁴—here R. Baḥya’s focus is on a more direct investigation of God, in particular on the nature of His unity. Indeed, R. Baḥya is clear that those who have the intellectual wherewithal must employ their intellectual abilities to understand the nature of divine unity. As was the case for Ibn Ezra, relying on received views is not sufficient.

²² *Duties of the Heart*, introduction. Unless otherwise specified, in citing from this work, I use *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973; Oxford, UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), with occasional emendations. For the above passage, see p. 86. In absence of a true critical edition of Judah ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation, I will supply citations from the best available edition: *Sefer ḥovot ha-levavot*, ed. Avraham Tsifroni (Tel-Aviv: Hotsa’at maḥbarot le-sifrut, 1964). For the above passage, see pp. 66–67.

²³ *Duties of the Heart* 1:3 (Mansoor, 114–115; Tsifroni, 111–112). Cf. R. Baḥya’s comments in the introduction to *Duties of the Heart* (Mansoor, 92–93, 95–96; Tsifroni, 77–78, 81–82).

²⁴ See the analysis in Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Baḥya ibn Paqūda’s Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 117–145.

In the next generation after R. Judah ibn Tibbon—the period in which the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s school were active—the works of Maimonides would overshadow all of these earlier works, even if the former remained important and were read by the first Kabbalists. Maimonides wrote his code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, in Hebrew, and the opening philosophic section of this work was deeply influential in Languedoc and Catalonia. Maimonides’ other works, however, were composed in Arabic, and their most prominent translator was R. Judah’s son, R. Samuel. The very first work that he translated was Maimonides’ *Commentary on Mishnah Avot*, whose introduction, known as “Eight Chapters,” contains a strong statement of the importance of investigating God:

Man needs to subordinate all his soul’s powers to thought, in the way we set forth in the previous chapter, and to set his sight on a single goal: the perception of God (may He be glorified and magnified), I mean knowledge of Him, in so far as that lies within man’s power. He should direct all his actions, both when in motion and at rest, and all his conversation towards this goal so that none of his actions is in any way frivolous, I mean an action not leading to this goal.²⁵

Consider the far-reaching nature of this sentiment: according to this passage, a human being’s entire life must be directed to the pursuit of knowledge of God.

Similar ideas figure in many places in Maimonides’ work, including in various passages in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, a work translated into Hebrew by both R. Samuel and R. Judah Alḥarizi. (The first Kabbalists, in fact, preferred the translation of the latter.)²⁶ The rendition of this idea that was most influential on the first Kabbalists is that found in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:51. In this chapter, Maimonides offers his famous parable of a ruler in his palace. The ruler’s subjects are in varying proximities to the king. Those, however, “who are present in the ruler’s council” are comparable to “those who set their thought to work after having attained perfection in the divine science, turn wholly

²⁵ “Eight Chapters” in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, trans. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 75 (ch. 5). For R. Samuel’s translation, see *Hakdamot le-ferush ha-mishnah*, ed. Mordekhai Dov Rabinovits (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1960), 184.

²⁶ This preference was already noted in Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 28, n. 82 and is amply evidenced by the numerous examples, some of which will be considered in the course of this book, in which the first Kabbalists either directly cite or allude to passages in this translation.

toward God, may He be cherished and held sublime, renounce what is other than He, and direct all the acts of their intellect towards an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know His governance of them in whatever way it is possible.”²⁷ This high level is reserved for the prophets but is, of course, an ideal—even if not fully attainable—for all those who are intellectually competent.

Elsewhere in this chapter,²⁸ as well as elsewhere in the *Guide*,²⁹ he ties the value of investigating God to Deut. 4:39. Similarly, in *Guide* 3:54, he also cites Jer. 9:22–23 as a proof-text for this value, noting that “the perfection of which one should be proud and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science.”³⁰

Such ideas are found not only in translated works, but also in the writings of their émigré translators. For example, R. Judah, in the opening of his translator’s introduction to *Duties of the Heart*, echoing

²⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of the *Guide* in this chapter and in the remainder of the book come from the translation of Shlomo Pines. I will also provide references to the respective Hebrew translations of Samuel ibn Tibbon, ed. Yehudah Even-Shemuel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2000), and Judah Alḥarizi, eds. Simon B. Scheyer and Salomon Munk. For the above passage, see Pines, 620; Tibbon, 580; Alḥarizi, 864.

²⁸ Pines, 620–621; Tibbon, 580–581; Alḥarizi, 867.

²⁹ *Guide* 1:39 (Pines, 89, Tibbon, 76; Alḥarizi, 151 [= *Guide* 1:38—Alḥarizi’s chapter divisions are somewhat different in certain portions of the *Guide*]); 3:32 (Pines, 526; Tibbon, 485; Alḥarizi, 749).

³⁰ Pines, 636; Tibbon, 597; Alḥarizi, 886. For more on this passage, see chapter three, near n. 24. See also the Conclusion, n. 15, where I discuss the questions that *Guide* 3:54 raises regarding the relationship between intellectual perfection and practical wisdom in Maimonides’ thought. In the context of discussing Maimonides’ commitment to investigating God, I would note that I am aware that his particular case raises a special problem. In 1979 Shlomo Pines published a well-known essay, entitled, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), I, 82–109, in which he argued that despite exoteric statements to the contrary, Maimonides’ position was that true knowledge of metaphysics is impossible. Since then a debate has raged among scholars about Maimonides’ commitment to the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. For a useful overview of the debate and relevant bibliography, see “Aleph Forum: Maimonides on the Knowability of the Heavens and of Their Mover (*Guide* 2:24),” ed. Gad Freudenthal, *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8 (2008), 151–339. Needless to say, if Maimonides’ true position is an agnostic one, his statements regarding the value of investigating God need to be construed as exoteric statements that mask his real esoteric intent. For my purposes, however, it is possible to sidestep this conundrum because, whatever Maimonides’ true position was, it is apparent that the first Kabbalists, as will be seen at length in the next chapter, were influenced by his exoteric statements regarding the value of investigating God.

the work's emphasis on investigating divine unity, explains that what distinguishes the patriarch Abraham from others of his generation is that he possessed the "highest level, which is recognizing the Creator and His Unity, and His worship, for whose sake man was created."³¹ This theme is also repeated by R. Judah's rival translator and fellow Andalusian refugee, R. Joseph Kimḥi, in his *Sefer ha-Galuy*, where he explains that "the highest level of wisdom... is metaphysics (*ḥokhmat elohut*), concerned with knowledge of the unity of the Creator, His teachings, and His commandments."³²

Related views are also found in works composed under the influence of these translators and their translations by scholars born and raised on Christian soil. For example R. Judah's son, R. Samuel, who was born in Lunel, states unequivocally in his translator's introduction to Maimonides' *Commentary on Mishnah Avot* that "there is no doubt that knowledge of God is the goal of man (*takhlit ha-'adam*),"³³ a notion repeated in his independent writings.³⁴

Similarly, the value of investigating God is stressed in *Malmad ha-Talmidim* by R. Samuel's son-in-law, R. Jacob Anatoli. Consider, for example, the following remark:

It is not sufficient for a person to only observe the commandments of the Torah. Rather, he must make himself wise and know what the Torah

³¹ Judah ibn Tibbon's introduction to his translation of *Duties of the Heart*, Tsi-froni, 55.

³² Joseph Kimḥi, *Sefer ha-galuy*, ed. H. J. Mathews (Berlin: Vereins M'kize Nirdamim, 1887), 1.

³³ Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides and Samuel ibn Tibbon on Jeremiah 9:22–23 and Human Perfection," in *Studies in Halakha and Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Beer (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994), 54.

³⁴ See e.g. *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 411–414 (par. 414–436); 561 (par. 682). In these passages, R. Samuel discusses Jer. 9:22–23. See also Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar yikavvu ha-mayim*, 56. In this context, I would also highlight Judah Alḥarizi's introduction to his translation of Moshe ibn Ezra's *Bed of Spices*, since this translation, which he prepared in Languedoc in 1190, influenced the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. [On the translation, see Paul Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse dans le jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn 'Ezra, philosophe et poète Andalou du XII^e Siècle* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47–56. Regarding its influence on the Kabbalists, see Fenton, "Traces of Mōsheh ibn 'Ezra's 'Arūgāt ha-Bōsem' in the Writings of the Early Qabbalists of the Spanish School," 45–81.] In the introduction, Alḥarizi speaks of the intellect "contemplating His creations and the secret of its (=the intellect's) Creator, and discovering, through the proofs that it offers, the glory of its Creator" (MS Vatican Neofiti 11, 215a.) The translator's introduction was also published in Moshe Idel, "Zehuto shel metargem sefer 'arugat ha-bosem le-R. Mosheh ibn 'Ezra," *Kiryat Sefer* 51 (1977), 485–486.

testified to regarding divine unity and love of God, which is that he should strive to know (*she-yishtaddel la-da'at*) all of existence as it actually is, and, as a result, he will recognize Him who spoke and the world came into being.³⁵

In the introduction to *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, Anatoli notes that he gave public sermons at weddings and on the Sabbath in Languedoc.³⁶ As Marc Saperstein explains, while *Malmad* is not a direct transcript of the actual sermons that Anatoli gave in Languedoc, the work reflects “some of the preaching experience he describes in his introduction.”³⁷ This passage, and other similar ones in Anatoli’s work,³⁸ suggests, therefore, that the philosophic ethos was not merely the possession of Andalusian émigrés and those who shared family relations with them, but penetrated into the broader Jewish community.

I will conclude this section by presenting a further example of the reach of the philosophic ethos that comes from the *Commentary on Tractate Berakhot* by R. Asher ben Meshullam. R. Asher was the son of the leading twelfth-century Talmudic scholar, R. Meshullam b. Jacob of Lunel. He was thus not connected to Andalusia by birth or by family relation but came from Languedocian Rabbinic stock. His father is regarded by scholars as a catalyst of the translation movement,³⁹ and it was at his request that R. Judah prepared his first translation: the introduction and first section of *Duties of the Heart*.⁴⁰ R. Asher, who

³⁵ Jacob Anatoli, *Malmad ha-talmidim* (Lyck, Germany: Vereins M'kize Nirdamim, 1866; Israel, 1967 or 1968), 164b.

³⁶ See the second to last page of the unpaginated introduction to *Malmad ha-talmidim*.

³⁷ “Christians and Christianity in the Sermons of Jacob Anatoli,” *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 226. Cf. Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching, 1200–1800: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 15–16.

³⁸ For further examples, see nn. 73, 93, and 102, below.

³⁹ See Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières: A Twelfth-Century Talmudist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1962), 12–14; Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” 195–202; Benedikt, *Merkaz ha-torah bi-Provans*, 19–24; Israel Ta-Shma, *Rabbi Zerahyah ha-Levi ba'al ha-ma'or u-vené hugu* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1992), 50–57.

⁴⁰ See R. Judah’s translator’s introduction at the opening of *Duties of the Heart*, Tsifroni, 57–58. As he indicates in his translator’s introduction to the second section of the work (Tsifroni, 162–165), he translated the remainder of the work at a later date at the request of R. Abraham ben David, R. Isaac the Blind’s father. For an analysis of the interactions between R. Meshullam and R. Judah over the preparation of the translation of *Duties of the Heart*, see Gad Freudenthal, “Causes and Motivations for the Emergence of the Translation Movement in Twelfth-Century Lunel: Judah b. Shaul Ibn Tibbon and his Patrons R. Meshullam b. R. Yaakov and R. Asher b. R. Meshullam,” in *Ta-Shma: Studies in Judaica in Memory of Israel Ta-Shma*, ed.

himself requested that R. Judah undertake another translation project—R. Solomon ibn Gabirol's *The Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul*⁴¹—writes clearly in his *Commentary* that “man was created in order to know his Creator, worship Him, and learn wisdom (*hokhmah*) that will lead him to all this.”⁴² The fact that this value is so clearly stated in a Talmudic commentary, without fanfare, as though it is apparent to all, is a remarkable testimony to how quickly the philosophic ethos came to inform the religious aspirations of at least some quarters of Languedocian Rabbinic culture.⁴³

Numerous other texts could also be cited, but the passages discussed above should suffice to establish the great significance of the value of investigating God in the newly available philosophic literature. Collectively, they highlight some of the main characteristics of this value. The emphatic nature of their calls to investigate God suggest that we are dealing with a fundamental religious value. These calls are programmatic in nature, directing a course in which philosophic investigation of God will be carried out systematically as part of an active program of study rather than in some haphazard fashion. Furthermore, they stress the need for human effort. Relying on received tradition is deemed insufficient.

I would stress that it is not merely that these texts express the value of investigating God. Rather they are themselves manifestations of the value. That is, they are records of detailed philosophic investigations of God and are thus the literary fulfillment of this value. Indeed it seems fair to say that whatever the particular reason that a philosopher gives

Avraham (Rami) Reiner et al. [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Tevnot Press, 2011), II, 657–666; Freudenthal, “The Introduction of Non-Rabbinic Learning into Provence in the Middle of the Twelfth Century.”

⁴¹ See Freudenthal, “Causes and Motivations for the Emergence of the Translation Movement in Twelfth-Century Lunel,” 652–657; Freudenthal, “The Introduction of Non-Rabbinic Learning into Provence in the Middle of the Twelfth Century.”

⁴² I am employing the translation found in Gad Freudenthal, “A Twelfth-Century Provençal Amateur of Neoplatonic Philosophy in Hebrew: R. Asher b. Meshullam of Lunel,” *Chora* 3–4 (2005–2006), 172. For the original Hebrew, see Moshe Idel, “*Sarid mi-perush R. Asher b. Meshullam mi-Lunel li-verakhot*,” *Kovets 'al yad* 11 (1985), 84.

⁴³ Freudenthal, in “A Twelfth-Century Provençal Amateur of Neoplatonic Philosophy in Hebrew,” 172, n. 30, offers the following observation regarding R. Asher's statement: “The notions that man's finality is to know God and that knowing God presupposes studying “wisdom”—*i.e.* philosophy—is distinctively philosophic and new to talmudic thought. It is of course paramount in later Jewish philosophic literature—notably in Maimonides' *Guide* (whence, beginning in the thirteenth century, it diffused also to some traditional literature)—but it is exceptional in a talmudic commentary of the twelfth century.”

for writing a particular text—for example, to edify a patron, as is the case for Ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora' ve-Sod Torah*⁴⁴—a larger goal is to investigate God.

IV

An indication of the significance accorded to investigating God in the newly available philosophic literature is that it was not left as a mere abstract value but was codified as a legal obligation. The Talmud specifies that there are 613 commandments, which are subdivided between 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commandments.⁴⁵ It never, however, enumerates them, leaving later medieval scholars to create their own competing lists. In a number of philosophically inclined texts—both those available in Hebrew in Languedoc and Catalonia and those available only in Arabic, which were not known in these lands—the first two positive commandments were identified, respectively, as the obligation to believe that God exists and to believe that He is one.⁴⁶ In contrast, in what is likely the oldest such list—the non-philosophically inclined list appended to *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*, a work typically dated to the end of the ninth century⁴⁷—as well as in the numerous poetical renditions

⁴⁴ See Abraham ibn Ezra, *Yesod mora' ve-sod torah*, 16–17.

⁴⁵ The most important statement appears in *B. Makkot* 23b. See also *B. Shabbat* 87a; *B. Yevamot* 47b, 62a; *B. Shevu'ot* 29a; *B. Nedarim* 25a.

⁴⁶ A number of scholars have discussed the codification of these commandments, and my discussion draws on their work. See Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 225–237; Warren Zev Harvey, “The First Commandment and the God of History: Halevi and Crescas vs Ibn Ezra and Maimonides,” *Tarbiz* 57 (1988), 203–216 [in Hebrew]; Arthur Hyman, “Rabbi Simlai's Saying and Beliefs Concerning God,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 49–62; Herbert Davidson, “The First Two Positive Commandments in Maimonides' List of the 613 Believed to Have Been Given to Moses at Sinai,” in *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought: Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Rachel Elior and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 113–145 and the revised version, entitled “The First Two Positive Divine Commandments,” found in Herbert A. Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, 15–52 (subsequent references are to the revised version); Albert D. Friedberg, “An Evaluation of Maimonides' Enumeration of the 613 Commandments with Special Emphasis on the Positive Commandments” (PhD, University of Toronto, 2008).

⁴⁷ For a summary of the research on the dating and authorship of this work, see Neil Danzig, *Introduction to Halakhot Pesuqot* [in Hebrew] (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), 175–191. It should also be noted that some have suggested that

of the commandments composed under its influence,⁴⁸ these commandments are not included.⁴⁹ Crucially, for my purposes, according to those lists that did include these commandments, it is not sufficient to merely believe that God exists and that He is One. These beliefs, rather, must be grounded in a philosophically accurate understanding of God. There is, however, a disagreement among the authors of these latter lists regarding the manner in which such an understanding should be acquired. As we will see below, according to one view, such an understanding of God may be gained passively by relying on the explanations of a competent scholar, while, according to another, it must be achieved through active philosophic investigation. In any case, the significance of the codification of these commandments, a move also made by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle as we will see in chapter four, is that it brings the philosophic ethos into normative Jewish life, insofar as it concretizes an amorphous value. This codification, it might be said, provided the new value of investigating God with traditional cover by placing it squarely within the halakhic system so prized by Rabbinic culture. Not surprisingly, this move was rejected on traditional grounds by R. David ben Saul (see chapter four), a leader of the anti-Maimonidean camp during the Maimonidean controversy, and, to a certain extent, by Nahmanides (see chapter six). Perhaps more surprisingly, however, as will be seen below, it was also rejected by R. Samuel ibn Tibbon—a staunch Maimonidean—on the grounds that placing such a key value within the normative halakhic system threatened to undermine its significance by making it seem on par with other commandments.

The first figure to codify at least the first of these commandments may have been R. Samuel ben Hofni (d. 1013), the Gaon of the Sura Academy in Babylonia, only fragments of whose Arabic *Book of*

the author of the list of commandments is different than the author of the main text. See *Hakdamat sefer halakhot gedolot*, ed. Naftali Zevi Hildesheimer in *Sefer halakhot gedolot*, ed. Eziel Hildesheimer (Jerusalem: Mekizé nirdamim, 1971), 1:9, n. 1.

⁴⁸ These poetical renditions include those by philosophically inclined authors who otherwise subscribed to the philosophic ethos, such as R. Saadia or R. Solomon ibn Gabirol. R. Saadia, in fact, composed two such renditions, which are published in *Siddur Rav Sa'adya Ga'on*, eds. Israel Davidson, Simha Assaf and Issachar Joel, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Mekizé nirdamim, 1963), 157–216. Only the first (pp. 157–190) follows the arrangement of *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*. The second (pp. 191–216) links the 613 commandments to the commandments of the Decalogue.

⁴⁹ For further discussions of these poetical renditions and bibliographic references, see Davidson, “The First Two Positive Divine Commandments,” 19–20.

Commandments have survived.⁵⁰ According to R. Samuel, one of the commandments is “(to engage in) reflection which leads to knowledge of God according to the attributes of His essence and His action, as in the verse: ‘Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God’ (Deut. 4:39).”⁵¹ Note that R. Samuel employs the familiar Deut. 4:39 as the Biblical support for this commandment.⁵² This commandment apparently involves establishing the existence of God through rational proofs and understanding the nature of the divine attributes. In the continuation he also stresses the obligation to understand divine unity,⁵³ although he seems to regard it as part of the first commandment rather than as an independent one. In any case, there is no evidence that his work was known in Languedoc or Catalonia.

On the other hand, the relevant portions of the *Book of the Commandments* by R. Ḥefets ben Yatsliah, an obscure figure whose dates are uncertain but apparently lived after R. Samuel ben Ḥofni,⁵⁴ were likely known by the first Kabbalists. Just fragments of his work, originally composed in Arabic, survive.⁵⁵ In the case of his account of the first two commandments, the Arabic original is not extant. This account has, however, survived in a Hebrew translation found in the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* by the leading Barcelonan Rabbinic

⁵⁰ These fragments are published in David Eric Sklare, *Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon and His Cultural World: Texts and Studies* (Leiden; E.J. Brill, 1996).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225, with slight emendations. (For the original, see p. 14 in the Judeo-Arabic section.)

⁵² As David Sklare notes in *ibid.*, p. 225 n. 167, R. Samuel interprets the verse in the same manner in his *Commentary on Deuteronomy*. The relevant passage is printed in Aaron Greenbaum, “*Gidrē ha-teshuvah ‘al pi ha-ga’on Rav Shemu’el ben Ḥofni*,” *Sinai* 77 (1975), 108–110. Interestingly, as Greenbaum, 108, points out, R. Nissim ben Jacob Gaon (11th century) rejects R. Samuel’s claim that God must be proved rationally and dismisses this notion as a Kalam opinion. Cf. Sklare, *Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon and His Cultural World*, 58.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 225 (p. 14 in the Judeo-Arabic section).

⁵⁴ For a discussion of his dates, see Moshe Zucker, “*Keta’im ḥadashim mi-sefer ha-mitsvot le-R. Ḥefets ben Yatsliah*,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1961), 3–10.

⁵⁵ Many of these fragments were published in B. Halper “A Volume of the Book of Precepts,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4 (1913–14): 519–576; 5 (1914–15): 29–90, 345–441; 6 (1915–16): 97–156, and reprinted as a separate volume with the same title (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1915). Subsequent references are to vol. 4. Other fragments were published in Zucker, “*Keta’im ḥadashim mi-sefer ha-mitsvot le-R. Ḥefets ben Yatsliah*,” 16–38.

authority, R. Judah ben Barzillai (late 11th and early 12th century).⁵⁶ This *Commentary* includes important translated citations of philosophic materials as well as statements of the value of investigating God,⁵⁷ and thus, along with the works of Ben Barzillai's contemporary and acquaintance, Bar Ḥiyya, it was important in spreading the philosophic ethos prior to the translation efforts of R. Judah ibn Tibbon and others. According to R. Ḥefets, as relayed by Ben Barzillai:

The first precept enjoins us to concentrate our mind and thoughts on the truth of the matter; to make our Creator exist in our heart, and to consider Him Lord of all things without a shadow of a doubt, and without any other thought; to know that He is a reality; as it is written, "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart, etc." (Deut. 4:39)... The words "and lay it to your heart" imply that you should lay this matter to your mind and to the vision of your heart, as it is written, "And I applied my heart to inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*ve-latur*) by wisdom" (Eccles. 1:13). The proof that laying a thing to one's heart makes one understand is to be found in the words of the prophet, who says concerning a man who does not set his heart to differentiate between the essential and the unessential: "He calls not to heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned half of it in the fire" (Is. 44:19).⁵⁸

Thus R. Ḥefets (like Ben Ḥofni) employs Deut. 4:39 as the proof-text for what he regards as the first of the 613 commandments, to believe in God's existence. His use, as a further proof-text, of Eccles. 1:13, with its call to *inquire* and *seek out*, makes clear that he does not regard it as sufficient to merely believe that God exists. On the contrary, in his view, one must actively seek to prove God's existence, and, indeed, R. Ḥefets proceeds to furnish such a proof.⁵⁹

The second commandment, according to R. Ḥefets, is to understand the nature of divine unity. As he did in the case of the first commandment, here again he makes clear that this understanding should be

⁵⁶ R. Judah ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, ed. S. J. Halberstam (Berlin: Ts. H. Itskovski, 1885), 55–56. This fragment was reprinted with some suggested textual emendations, along with a translation and discussion, by Halper, 548–559.

⁵⁷ The very opening passage of the work includes such a statement: "Through wisdom and Torah the entire holy seed (=Israel) investigates (*hokrim*) and recognizes (*u-makkirim*) our Creator and His unity" (Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 1). See p. 147 for another example in which he ties the value of investigating God to Deut. 4:39. See also n. 62, below.

⁵⁸ I have employed Halper's translation with a few slight modifications. See Halper, 553–554. For the Hebrew, see p. 549. Cf. Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 55.

⁵⁹ Halper, 555–556. For the Hebrew see, 550–552. Cf. Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 55–56.

derived rationally,⁶⁰ and he proceeds to offer a proof that demonstrates that God's unity is that of absence of composition or simplicity.⁶¹ It should also be noted that Ben Barzillai, himself, makes clear that he agrees with R. Hefets that both the belief in the existence of God and the belief in His unity constitute commandments.⁶²

R. Baḥya, for his part, was acquainted with R. Hefets's work,⁶³ but while, as we saw, he regarded investigating God—an act that he states includes studying the nature of divine unity—as an obligation, he did not view it as a technical halakhic one. Instead he viewed it as one of the obligations of the heart, which he distinguished from halakhic obligations.⁶⁴ R. Abraham ibn Ezra's view is less clear. He seems to have at first taken a position somewhat similar to that of R. Baḥya and regarded investigating God as a crucial value but not one of the commandments. Towards the end of his life, however, he apparently came to consider it a commandment, although the precise manner in which he understood its parameters remains obscure.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ "Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said that a man should learn all proofs that might possibly occur to him that He is one and there is no other, as it is said: 'Be diligent to learn the Law so that you may know what to answer a heretic' (*M. Avot* 2:14)" (Halper, 555. For the Hebrew, see 550–551; cf. Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 55). R. Hefets actually makes this statement in the course of discussing the first commandment, rather than the second one, but it is clear that it applies to the latter. I would note that in its original context, the Mishnaic passage certainly does not require developing philosophic proofs for the unity of God.

⁶¹ Halper, 557–558. For the Hebrew, see 552–553. Cf. Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 56.

⁶² Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 55. Cf. p. 15.

⁶³ In the introduction to *Duties of the Heart*, he mentions reading his work. See Mansoor, 88; Tsifroni, 70.

⁶⁴ See the discussion in Friedberg, *An Evaluation of Maimonides' Enumeration of the 613 Commandments with Special Emphasis on the Positive Commandments*, 170–172.

⁶⁵ While in many places in his work Ibn Ezra identifies investigating God as a key value, I am only familiar with one place where this value is presented as a commandment. Above I cited a passage from his *Yesod Mora' ve-Sod Torah* in which he stresses the value of investigating God and invokes Deut. 4:39 as a prooftext for this value. In that passage he does not, however, explicitly identify it as a commandment. Later in the same work (p. 148), however, he states that Deut. 4:39 is a positive commandment. Here it must be noted that Ibn Ezra composed *Yesod Mora'* in London in 1158 towards the end of his life. His position in this work thus reflects his most mature point of view. While he offers no explanation of the nature of this commandment, it stands to reason that he has in mind a commandment to investigate God. This interpretation, however, raises a question. Shortly before explaining that this verse is a commandment, he also indicates that Exod 20:1 ("I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt"), the opening of the Decalogue, is a commandment, which requires that "one should believe with all his heart that the Lord who took him out of Egypt is his God"

Maimonides, on the other hand, did follow R. Ḥefets's precedent in stating that the first positive commandment is "to know that there is a First Existent,"⁶⁶ and the second is to know that God is a unity.⁶⁷ As Maimonides makes explicit, fulfilling these commandments requires

(p. 147). If Exod. 20:1 contains the commandment to believe in God, how precisely is it different than the commandment contained in Deut. 4:39? To answer this question we need to consider some of his earlier writings. As Warren Harvey notes in "The First Commandment and the God of History," 207, the notion that Exod. 20:1 is a *mitsvah* is not found in his earlier writings. On the contrary, in his short commentary on Deut. 5:16 [Abraham ibn Ezra, *Perushé ha-torah*, ed. Asher Vaizer (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976), 3:131], which he wrote in Lucca sometime between 1142 and 1145, and again in his long commentary on Exod. 20:1 (*ibid.*, 2:126), which was composed between 1155 and 1157, most likely in Rouen, he says explicitly that it is not a commandment. For my purposes, it is important to consider his remarks in the long commentary on Exod. 20:1 more closely. There he explains that this verse does not state a formal commandment. It rather presents a concept—belief in God—that is the root of the commandments but is not a commandment itself (see *ibid.*, 2:126, 133). He adds that Exod. 20:1, in fact, contains two messages for two different audiences. The opening of the verse, "I am the Lord your God," applies to the enlightened who must prove God rationally, while the second half of the verse, "who took you out of Egypt," applies to those who are not philosophically trained, whose knowledge of God, therefore, comes from episodes of His intervention in human history (*ibid.*, 2:131–132). In this same discussion, he makes clear that Deut. 4:39 corresponds to the first half of Exod. 20:1 insofar as it indicates that "perfect knowledge" (*ha-da'at ha-gemurah*), something only available to the enlightened philosopher, involves rationally proving "that God is alone" (*ibid.*, 2:132). Here, unlike *Yesod Mora'*, there is no indication that Deut. 4:39 is a binding commandment. On the contrary, it seems to have the same status as the first half of Exod. 20:1: it indicates an important non-halakhic value appropriate for philosophers. Returning then to *Yesod Mora'*, we see that his view has shifted. Now Exod. 20:1 and Deut. 4:39, I would suggest, are each separate commandments. From his description of the commandment indicated by Exod. 20:1 in *Yesod Mora'* (cited above), it seems that his focus is on the aspect of the verse, which, according to his comments in his long commentary on Exod. 20:1, was intended for the non-philosopher masses: believing in God as a result of his intervention in history. Now, however, this belief is not just the root of all other commandments but is legally mandated. What then is the commandment that Deut. 4:39 entails? Should we assume that what in his long commentary on Exod. 20:1 he viewed as an important value for the elite, he now regards as a commandment applicable to all? If so—as unlikely as it may seem—are there two separate commandments: to believe in God on the basis of history or tradition and to actively try to prove God through rational means? Alternatively, perhaps Exod. 20:1 is a commandment directed at the masses, while Deut. 4:39 is a commandment directed at the elite. If so, Ibn Ezra's position is partially similar to the position that would be taken by R. Jacob Anatoli (see below n. 73). See also the discussion in Davidson, "The First Two Positive Divine Commandments," 32–33 and chapter three, below.

⁶⁶ *Mishneh torah, Hilkhot yesodé ha-torah*, 1:1. All citations from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* are based on the edition edited by Isaac Shailat, *Ramba"m meduuyyak (Ma'aleh adumim*, Israel: Hotsa'at Shailat, 2004). Cf. Moses Maimonides, *Sefer ha-mitsvot*, ed. Yosef Kafah (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), 58.

⁶⁷ *Mishneh torah, Hilkhot yesodé ha-torah*, 1:7. Cf. *Sefer ha-mitsvot*, 58–59.

having a philosophically correct conceptualization of God and the nature of His unity,⁶⁸ and his choice to include them is indicative of the religious importance that he accords to philosophic knowledge. Nevertheless, while he advocates actively investigating God in numerous places in his works, he does not, in contrast to R. Ḥefets, make such active investigation a necessary aspect of the first two positive commandments.⁶⁹ It seems rather that the letter of the law may be fulfilled by accepting a philosophically accurate characterization of God on someone else's authority.

Along these lines, it is noteworthy that even though, as we have seen, Maimonides does invoke Deut. 4:39 in a non-legal context in support of the value of investigating God, he does not offer it as a proof-text for the first positive commandment, in the manner that Ben Ḥofni and R. Ḥefets do. Instead, he employs the opening of the Decalogue, "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2, Deut. 5:6), as its source. Maimonides has good reason to choose this verse: according to B. *Makkot* 23b–24a—the main Rabbinic discussion of the notion that there are 613 commandments—the opinion of R. Hamnuna is that this verse designates one of the commandments. While the nature of the commandment supposedly included in this verse is not clarified in the Talmud, it is hardly a stretch for Maimonides to assume that it is belief in God. The interesting question, however, is why Ben Ḥofni

⁶⁸ Regarding God's existence, one must believe that God is a necessary existent who brings everything into existence, and whose existence is unlike any other existence, and who controls the sphere. Regarding God's unity, one must believe that it is that of absence of composition and that God can in no way be physical, since anything physical is delimited and hence divisible into multiple components. See *Mishneh torah, Hilkhoh yesodé ha-torah*, 1:1–7.

⁶⁹ At the same time, however, to a certain extent, Maimonides does maintain that there is an imperative to actively investigate God given that, as we will see below, the third commandment, to love God, requires studying the created world, which will lead to knowledge of God. I would also note that in one further pronouncement in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides refers to investigating God as a commandment. In his "*Hilkhoh kerí'at shema*" 1:2, he explains that in the *Shema*' prayer we recite "Hear O Israel..." (Deut 6:4–9) prior to reciting "If then, you obey..." (Deut 11:13–21) because the former "contains commandments concerning God's unity, the love of God, and the study of God (*u-talmudo*), which is the basic principle upon which all depends." [I am employing the translation found in Menachem Marc Kellner, "Philosophical themes in Maimonides' 'Sefer Ahavah,'" in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, eds. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn E. Goodman and James Allen Grady (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 18.] As Kellner argues in this study (pp. 18–20), while the term *u-talmudo* has often been translated as "and the study of His law," what Maimonides is in fact calling for is the study of God, which he regards as the basis upon which all else depends.

and R. Hefets choose to base the commandment on Deut. 4:39 instead. It may be that they do so because this verse is more activist in tone, while Exod. 20:2 or Deut. 5:6 do not carry the implication that God must be actively investigated.

The above, in any case, is how I read Maimonides' rendition of the first two commandments. R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, however, apparently had a different reading. In a passage from his *Ma'amar Yikkavu ha-Mayim*, which was not included in the printed version of the work but was recently discovered by Carlos Fraenkel, Ibn Tibbon makes the following remarks in response to Maimonides' account of the first commandment:

In my view there is no positive commandment in Scripture to know God by means of true knowledge (i.e. knowledge derived from philosophic investigation)...How could [God] impose a positive commandment concerning [true knowledge of Him] on everyone, when it is known about human beings—even if they are male—that their effort in these obscure matters is in vain and without benefit, for perfection is not possible to them as the master, the teacher of righteousness of blessed memory, said in chapter 34 of the first part of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁷⁰

Thus, in contrast to what seems to me to be the more accurate interpretation, Ibn Tibbon understands Maimonides' rendition of the first commandment as requiring everyone to philosophically investigate God. Ibn Tibbon, however, rejects Maimonides' view, when it is understood in this manner, on the grounds that, as Maimonides himself admits, most human beings do not have the facility to engage in such investigation.⁷¹

⁷⁰ I am employing the translation found in Carlos Fraenkel, "Beyond the Faithful Disciple: Samuel ibn Tibbon's Criticism of Maimonides," in *Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 47–48. The rounded parentheses are my own additions. This study also includes a full discussion of Ibn Tibbon's disagreement with Maimonides, which I discuss below. See also Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 210–213. For the original Hebrew, see Fraenkel, "The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul," 122.

⁷¹ I would add that, accordingly, Ibn Tibbon thought that Maimonides understood "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2, Deut. 5:6), the proof-text used by Maimonides for the first positive commandment, as requiring philosophic investigation. Ibn Tibbon, not surprisingly, rejects this interpretation. See *ibid.*, 122–123 and the discussion in Fraenkel, "Beyond the Faithful Disciple," 49–50. Ibn Tibbon also rejects Maimonides' reading of Deut. 4:39 (in a non-halakhic context in the *Guide*) as a proof-text for the value of actively investigating God. See Fraenkel, "The Problem

In the continuation, Ibn Tibbon explains:

To know God by means of demonstration, however, is not a positive commandment, but certainly a person who is qualified and capable of knowing Him must know Him—the knowledge of God by means of demonstration being superior to the knowledge of Him by way of tradition—and because the knowledge of God is man’s perfection and with regard to everything it is required that some members [of the species] reach perfection.⁷²

On technical grounds, therefore, there can be no commandment to investigate God philosophically, since commandments must apply to all. There is, however, an absolutely crucial obligation, albeit not a legal one, upon those who are capable to engage in such investigation. In other words, in a fascinating reversal, it is because achieving knowledge of God is such an important value that it cannot be codified as a commandment.⁷³ While, generally speaking, it is a testament to the

of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon’s Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul,” 122 and the discussion in Fraenkel, “Beyond the Faithful Disciple,” 49, 51. Now it might be assumed that, since Maimonides did not apply Deut. 4:39 in a technical halakhic sense but only in support of an important value, Ibn Tibbon would not find Maimonides’ application of this verse troubling. After all, if it merely recommends the activity of investigating God rather than actually requiring it, its applicability could more plausibly be limited to a capable philosophic elite. Indeed, in my opinion, this was Maimonides’ own assumption. It is not, however, clear to me that Ibn Tibbon thought that this was Maimonides’ assumption. On the contrary, he seems to imply that Maimonides did, in fact, see Deut. 4:39 as a legally binding statement of the obligation to investigate God—even if Maimonides did not use the verse in a legal context. Thus, Ibn Tibbon refers to Deut. 4:39 as “the verse from which the Rabbi (= Maimonides) derives a person’s obligation (*hiyyuv*) to strive to know God” (Fraenkel, “The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon’s Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul,” 120–121). On the other hand, it is possible that the word *hiyyuv*, as employed by Ibn Tibbon, should not be taken to imply a technical halakhic obligation but a more general religious one. I would also note that R. Jacob Anatoli (see below n. 73) gives halakhic weight to this verse.

⁷² Fraenkel, “Beyond the Faithful Disciple,” 49. For the original, see Fraenkel, “The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon’s Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul,” 123.

⁷³ His son-in-law R. Jacob Anatoli, on the other hand, adopts a position that may be partially comparable to that of R. Abraham ibn Ezra (see above n. 65). Anatoli assumes that there is a commandment to have proper knowledge of God. This commandment, however, applies differently to different types of people. Those who are able must fulfill it by means of philosophic investigation. Others, who are less capable, may fulfill the commandment by relying on correct opinions received from knowledgeable teachers. He puts the matter in the following terms:

cultural importance of the philosophic ethos that some writers regard the value of investigating God as a legal obligation, Ibn Tibbon sees the normativization of this value as its cheapening.

V

In the newly available philosophic literature, the notion that there is a key value to investigate God is accompanied by deep concern with matters of epistemology. “What type of knowledge of God is possible?” is a question that is repeatedly posed. This question is a crucial one because there is basic agreement in this literature that God’s essence is beyond knowledge, and thus, not surprisingly, there is no shortage of comments like the following one from R. Saadia’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*:

[The idea of the Creator] must of necessity be subtler than the subtlest and more recondite than the most recondite and more abstract than the most abstract and profounder than the most profound and stronger than the strongest and more exalted than the most exalted, so that it would be impossible to fathom its character at all.⁷⁴

Indeed, it is a curious feature that a literature that repeatedly presents investigating God as a key value simultaneously maintains that God is

There is a commandment (*mitsvah*) upon all of Israel to accept this (i.e. belief in God) as truth, without any thought of doubt, until that which is represented in their hearts is equivalent to that which they speak, as though they came to know this through an intellectual form of knowledge (*yedi’ah muskelet*). One who is wise of heart, however, has a commandment (*mitsvah*) to investigate (*lahkor*) and know (*ve-lada’at*) this matter through an intellectual form of knowledge (*yedi’ah muskelet*), such that, as a result, he is commanded to contemplate (*lehitbonen*) and know (*ve-lada’at*) all wisdoms, since all are required for this purpose. This was the intent of the text when it said “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart” (Deut. 4:39)” [Anatoli, *Malmad ha-talmidim*, 159b].

Note that, unlike Maimonides, his proof-text is Deut. 4:39. In the continuation (159b), he makes a similar point regarding the commandment to believe in God’s unity: only those who are capable are required to philosophically investigate divine unity. Others may rely on correct information received from those with knowledge.

⁷⁴ Saadia ben Joseph, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 92 (II:Exordium). R. Judah ibn Tibbon’s translation exists in many editions under the title *Sefer ha-’emunot ve-ha-de’ot*. I consulted the version published in Jerusalem in 1961 by *Makor*, which is a reprint of the best available printed version—the one published in Josefow in 1885 by B. Zetser. The above passage appears on p. 86. Further references are to the *Makor* edition.

beyond knowledge. This paradoxical state of affairs is given expression by R. Baḥya: “The essence of your knowledge of Him, O my brother, is your firm admission that you are completely ignorant of His true essence.”⁷⁵ If God cannot be fathomed, what, then, does investigating God entail? What sort of knowledge does it lead to? These questions are not answered in any single way by all of the sources. Indeed, it is the fact that the questions are posed, rather than the particulars of the answers provided, that attests to a shared ethos. Nevertheless, certain general observations are possible.

Since God cannot be fathomed, no knowledge of His nature is possible. That God exists can be known but what God is cannot. One aspect of investigating God, therefore, entails using philosophic argumentation to prove His existence.

Without entering into a detailed discussion of proofs of God, I would note that one such proof is the teleological one, which seeks to prove God’s existence by contemplating the design of the world.⁷⁶ I highlight this proof because studying the created world accomplishes more than just proving God’s existence. As may be seen, for example, in the passage in Bar Ḥiyya’s *Hegyon ha-Nefesh ha-‘Atsuvaḥ* considered in the first section of this chapter, such study may be construed as acquiring knowledge of His wisdom since the design of the world is its manifestation. Indeed, it is this fact that leads the authors of the newly available literature to place such a great emphasis on studying the created world as a primary means of investigating God. Such study affords a kind of knowledge of God, which, however, does not pertain directly to God. As R. Baḥya construes the matter: “You, my brother, should endeavor to exert your soul in the search for truth of its Creator, not by way of His essence, but rather by contemplating His deeds. Contemplation is the way because He is nearest us in His deeds and farthest from us in the form and image of His essence, so that our minds can never reach Him by way of His essence.”⁷⁷

There is, however, also a manner in which investigating God moves beyond the study of God’s wisdom as manifest in the created world and turns to God himself. I have in mind employing philosophic

⁷⁵ *Duties of the Heart*, 1:10 (Mansoor, 143; Tsifroni, 152).

⁷⁶ For more on the theme of contemplating the created world, see Harvey, “Averroes and Maimonides on the Obligation of Philosophic Contemplation (i’tbār),” 75–83; Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, 116–145.

⁷⁷ *Duties of the Heart*, 1:10 (Mansoor, 142; Tsifroni, 151).

argumentation to understand the nature of divine unity. The importance of such study is stressed throughout the newly available philosophic corpus. In more particular terms, such study is aimed at demonstrating that God's unity is one of absence of composition. Now, on the one hand, it is no doubt the case that for philosophers like R. Baḥya and Maimonides such knowledge does not amount to positive knowledge about the nature of God. It is a negation—a way of saying that God's unity is unlike that of anything else—rather than a positive affirmation regarding the nature of God.⁷⁸ On the other hand, as will be further developed in the next chapter, study of divine unity in philosophic literature, nevertheless, focuses on God himself, in a way that has no parallel in earlier Rabbinic literature. In general, as Harry Wolfson has argued, statements in Rabbinic literature that refer to God as one relate to His “external unity”—that is, to the fact that there are no gods besides Him. In the philosophic literature, in contrast, the interest is in His “numerical or internal unity.”⁷⁹

Furthermore, moving beyond the particular issue of divine unity and turning to negative theology, more broadly, I would stress that even negation can be viewed as a form of knowledge. Briefly, negative theology assumes that all positive affirmations about the essence of God are, in fact, negations of privation. Nevertheless, Maimonides sees in his espousal of such a theology the potential for a kind of knowledge of God. In *Guide* 1:59, Maimonides, in fact, raises the question of the manner in which negation leads to knowledge:

If there is no device leading to the apprehension of the true reality of His essence and if demonstration proves that it can only be apprehended that He exists and that it is impossible, as has been demonstrated, to ascribe to Him affirmative attributes, in what respect can there be superiority or inferiority between those who apprehend Him?⁸⁰

To which Maimonides responds:

It has accordingly become manifest to you that in every case in which the demonstration that a certain thing should be negated with reference to Him becomes clear to you, you become more perfect, and that in every case in which you affirm of Him an additional thing, you become

⁷⁸ *Duties of the Heart*, 1:10 (Mansoor, 134; Tsifroni, 142); *Guide* 1:58 (Pines, 136; Tibbon, 116; Alḥarizi, 220 [= ch. 1:57]).

⁷⁹ See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2–3.

⁸⁰ *Guide* 1:59 (Pines, 137; Tibbon, 117; Alḥarizi, 223 [= ch. 1:58]).

one who likens Him to other things and you get further away from the knowledge of His true reality. It is from this point of view that one ought to come nearer to an apprehension of Him by means of investigation and research: namely, in order that one should know the impossibility of everything that is impossible with reference to Him.⁸¹

Maimonides, therefore, construes the fact that positive knowledge of God is beyond reach as leading to a negative knowledge, which is a kind of knowledge nonetheless.⁸²

Finally, let me suggest that there is a hermeneutical side to the investigation of God in the newly available philosophic literature. This can be seen from the discussions, like those in the work of R. Saadia, R. Baḥya, and most notably Maimonides, which look to reconcile philosophic views of God as having no body or form and of His unity as one of simplicity with Biblical passages and Rabbinic traditions that are replete with anthropomorphic depictions of God and descriptions of His multiple attributes. Without discussing, in this context, the various kinds of solutions suggested for dealing with this disparity, in the broadest terms it led to various non-literal interpretations of numerous traditional passages. While such exegetical activity may not constitute direct investigation of God, there is no question that it is a reflection of an ethos where such investigation is crucial. In fact, in what I would refer to as a hegemonic move of the philosophic ethos, the study of traditional materials was made part and parcel of studying God. Biblical and Rabbinic sources were turned into sites within which God could be investigated.

VI

I have described investigating God as a grounding value. This means that various aspects of religious life are brought into its orbit and defined by it. This is evident in numerous discussions about loving God and worshiping Him found in the newly available philosophic literature.

⁸¹ *Guide* 1:59 (Pines, 139; Tibbon, 118; Alḥarizi, 225 [=ch. 1:58]).

⁸² See the discussion in Elliot Wolfson, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," 397–415. For another interesting account of the manner in which, according to Maimonides, negative knowledge is still a type of knowledge, see Diana Lobel, "'Silence is Praise to You': Maimonides on Negative Theology, Looseness of Expression, and Religious Experience," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002), 25–49.

Love and worship are hardly marginal categories. They rather are central aspects of religious life insofar as they dictate the basic ways in which human beings relate to God. Thus, the fact that in the philosophic literature they are intimately linked to the value of investigating God, in manners that I will explore here, is an indication of the extent to which the philosophic ethos fundamentally shaped religious life. Indeed, this linking may be regarded as another instance of a hegemonic move by the philosophic ethos in which deeply important areas of religious life are brought under its control. In this section, I will consider love of God before turning to worship in the next section.

Love of God, like investigating God, is both a general value and a specific commandment, and it is discussed in the newly available philosophic literature in both halakhic and non-halakhic contexts. Unlike investigating God, there was never any doubt that loving God is a commandment, and it was included as such even in traditional, non-philosophic, enumerations of the commandments.⁸³ Yet the linking of this commandment to investigating God is the unique patrimony of philosophic literature.⁸⁴ In the ensuing discussion, I will consider material from halakhic and non-halakhic sources.

The most frequent depiction of the relationship between investigating God and loving God is that the former must precede the latter. That is, love of God is only possible after one has first gained knowledge of Him through investigation. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Ibn Ezra:

The root of all the commandments is that one should love God with all his soul, and should cleave to Him. This will not be fully the case (i.e. one will not be able to fully love and cleave to God) if he does not recognize the acts of God above and below and know His ways. Thus, the prophet said, "But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me" (Jer. 9:23). Then it will become clear to him that "[I] the Lord act with kindness, justice and equity in the world" (ibid.). He will not be able to know God if he does not know his own animal soul (*nafsho*) and his own intellectual soul (*ve-nishmato*).⁸⁵

⁸³ Interestingly, however, R. Saadia does not include it. See Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 233.

⁸⁴ Davidson duly notes the nexus between knowledge of God and love of God in the religious philosophy of the aforementioned "composite thinker," who is representative of a large swath of medieval Jewish philosophy. See Davidson, "Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation," 8–11.

⁸⁵ Abraham ibn Ezra, *Perushé ha-torah*, 2:103 (Long Commentary on Exod. 31:18).

Love of God, then, is viewed by Ibn Ezra as underlying all the commandments. Yet something even more fundamental underlies love of God, namely investigating God, which is carried out in two manners: either by examining God's actions—that is, His governance—or by examining oneself. It seems that the reason investigation must precede love is the simple fact that it is nonsensical to love something of which one has no knowledge. Once one examines God's actions and sees, as the familiar Jer. 9:23 makes clear, that they are actions of “kindness,” “justice,” and “equity,” he will be led to love of God.⁸⁶

The notion that investigating God is a prerequisite for love of God appears elsewhere in the newly available literature, as well, such as in the works of R. Bahya⁸⁷ and R. Saadia.⁸⁸ Most influentially, it was codified halakhically as the third positive commandment by Maimonides, whose views on love of God have been extensively studied by scholars⁸⁹

⁸⁶ For a fuller analysis of Ibn Ezra's view of love of God, see Georges Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Âge* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957), 109–115 and Aaron Hughes, “Two Approaches to the Love of God in Medieval Jewish Thought: The Concept of Devequt in the Works of Ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi,” *Studies in Religion* 28 (1999), 139–151.

⁸⁷ Thus, in *Duties of the Heart* 1:1, R. Bahya, commenting on Deut. 6:4–5, begins by noting that Deut 6:4, “Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is one,” commands us to believe in “the true existence of God,” “that He is our Lord and Master,” and “that He is One and Real” (Mansoor, 110; Tsifroni, 104). As we have seen, in R. Bahya's view, the first and third of these beliefs must be derived rationally. It is only after the Torah commands these beliefs, notes R. Bahya, that, in the subsequent verse (Deut. 6:5: “you shall love the Lord your God”), the command to love God is stated. The reason for this is clear: “After bidding us believe in the three principles just mentioned, the Scriptures pass to their consequences, namely, the pure love of God in our body and soul, with our heart and might” (Mansoor, 110; Tsifroni, 104). Cf. 10: introduction, Mansoor, 426; Tsifroni, 555. In other words, love of God flows naturally from intellectually derived ideas about the nature of God. For further analysis of love of God in R. Bahya's work, see Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Âge*, 92–98; Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 233–235; Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, 219–242.

⁸⁸ In *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* we find a correlation between investigating God and loving God:

Now when a person has achieved knowledge of this lofty subject (i.e. knowledge of God) by means of rational speculation and the proof of the miracles and marvels [mentioned in the Holy Writ], his soul believes it as true and it is mingled with his spirit and becomes an inmate of its innermost recesses. . . . Moreover his soul becomes filled with completely sincere love for God, a love which is beyond all doubt, as Scripture expresses it: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, etc.” (Deut. 6:5) [*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2:13 (Rosenblatt, 132; Tibbon, 103)].

Here, again, love of God is a consequence of knowledge of God.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Âge*, 118–140; Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: A Study of Maimonides' Philosophy of Religion*

and were especially influential on the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. Here is his depiction of the commandment in his "The Laws of the Foundations of Torah" in his *Mishneh Torah*:

It is a commandment to love Him and fear Him, as it is said: "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:5; 11:1) and it said "you should fear your God" (Deut. 6:13, 10:20). What is the path to love Him and fear Him? When a person contemplates His actions and His wondrous and great creations and discerns from them that His wisdom is beyond measure and is infinite, immediately (*miyyad*) he loves, praises, glorifies, and has a great desire to know the Great Name.⁹⁰

In a manner that recalls the sentiments of Ibn Ezra, he explains that when one examines God's actions, which for Maimonides effectively refer to the laws of nature, one becomes aware of their magnificence and is, hence, brought to love Him.

Yet in some articulations Maimonides takes the matter further. Consider the following passage, which appears in "The Laws of Repentance" in his *Mishneh Torah*:

It is a well-known and clear matter that love of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not secured in a person's heart until he is constantly enrapt (*she-yishgeh*) in it in an appropriate manner and abandons everything else in the world, save it, as it is written "[you shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and all your soul" (Deut. 6:5)—[that is] only through the knowledge by which one knows Him (*ella ba-de'ah she-yeda'ehu*). Love will be proportionate to knowledge (*ve-'al pi ha-de'ah 'al pi ha-'ahavah*)—if little, then little, and if great, then great. Therefore a person must devote himself to understand (*lehavin*) and study (*u-lehaskil*) the wisdoms and the sciences that inform him regarding his Maker, insofar as that person has the ability to understand (*lehavin*) and apprehend (*u-lehassig*), as we have explained in The Laws of the Foundations of Torah.⁹¹

Despite the fact that Maimonides refers back to "The Laws of the Foundations of Torah," he seems to extend his argument beyond what is found in that source. In keeping with that source, but more emphatically, he highlights the effort that one must exert in investigating God, using a string of verbs (understand, study, apprehend) to underscore

(Albany, N.Y.: State University of N.Y. Press, 1995), 39–58; Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 225–266; Daniel J. Lasker, "Love of God and Knowledge of God in Maimonides' Philosophy," in *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux*, eds. J. Hamesse and O. Weijers (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 329–345.

⁹⁰ *Hilkhot yesode ha-torah*, 2:1–2.

⁹¹ *Hilkhot teshuvah*, 10:6.

this point. Yet here it seems that it is not merely that the knowledge gained from such investigation makes God appear worthy of love, but that the knowledge is now an aspect of love itself. There is no longer a gap between knowing and loving. Maimonides indicates this when he states that one loves God “through the knowledge by which he knows Him.”⁹² Love of God is thus intellectualist in character. Below, in the context of my discussion of prayer, I will examine another passage in the *Guide* that seems to express this stronger sense of the connection between knowledge and love.

Maimonides’ Languedocian follower R. Jacob Anatoli connects knowledge and love in even more unequivocal terms:

The purpose of all the commandments is to love Him and to worship Him with a complete heart and a complete soul. And it has already been explained that love is wisdom and knowledge of Him.⁹³

⁹² It should be noted that even according to this position, it is not necessarily the case that knowledge is the only component of love. It is possible that other factors, such as practical virtues, may come into play as well. See the analysis in Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 48–61 and in Kellner, “Philosophical themes in Maimonides’ ‘Sefer Ahavah,’” 14–16. See also Menachem Kellner, “Spiritual Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 292–293 reprinted in Menachem Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 345: “Love of God means more than knowing God. True love of God involves knowledge of God, to be sure, but it also involves the direction of all of one’s heart, all one’s soul, and all one’s body to a life lived in the light of the love of God.” In this study Kellner highlights the position according to which love precedes knowledge, which he sees as a corrective of a simple identification of love and knowledge in Maimonides’ thought.

⁹³ Anatoli, *Malmed ha-talmidim*, 165b. Other relevant passages in Anatoli’s work are discussed in Vajda, *L’amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Âge*, 164–178. I would note that Vajda points out (p. 178) that, in many statements, Anatoli does not distinguish between love of God based on tradition and love based on philosophic knowledge. The key point for my purposes, however, is that, as Vajda explains, deriving knowledge from tradition is not a passive affair but requires intellectual engagement with traditional material. That is, it is knowledge borne out of careful analysis of Biblical texts and not mere acceptance of transmitted knowledge. Moreover, I would add that this analysis of Biblical passages must be carried out in light of philosophy. Thus, in the introduction of *Malmed ha-Talmidim*, he states: “The fulfillment [of the obligation] to unify God and the root of love for Him is the intellect. . . . Behold and understand well that there are numerous and continuously binding exhortations in the Torah to know His unity and to Love Him and to observe the commandments as is appropriate, and this is not possible without inquiring into the Torah (*derishat ha-torah*) by means of wisdom (*hokhmah*)” [Anatoli, *Malmed ha-talmidim*, introduction]. (Note: the introduction is not paginated. This passage appears on the 9th page of the introduction.) “Wisdom,” in this context, is a technical term for philosophy.

Taken together the examples presented here are a good indication of the penetration of the philosophic ethos into the religious life of Jewish philosophers. The manner in which a philosopher is emotionally attached to God—that is, a fundamental component of his religious experience—is dictated by the value of investigating God. This is equally true of the manner in which worship is presented in the newly available philosophic literature.

VII

In numerous places, we find the contention that investigating God is a prerequisite for worshiping God. The most frequently cited proof-text for this view is 1 Chron. 28:9 (“And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind”), which is understood as enjoining knowledge of God as a necessary condition for worshiping God.

Above, I cited a passage from Ibn Ezra’s *Yesod Mora’ ve-Sod Torah*, which extols the importance of gaining knowledge of God. In the continuation, Ibn Ezra makes the following brief remark, which exemplifies the philosophic reading of 1 Chron. 28:9:

David said, “know the God of your father” (1 Chron. 28:9) and thereafter “worship Him” (ibid.) because for this reason the world was created.”⁹⁴

Thus, in Ibn Ezra’s view, the first part of the verse presents a stipulation (one must gain knowledge of God) that must be fulfilled before the second part of the verse (the worship of God) may be carried out.

This point is also expressed by R. Bahya who explains that “whoever does not know his master cannot serve him in his heart. Only he can worship Him who knows Him and is certain of the good and evil that come from Him.”⁹⁵ Similarly, R. Saadia explains, “He made it obligatory upon us to learn to know Him, to worship Him and to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to Him, as the saint has said: ‘And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind’” (1 Chron. 28:9).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Abraham ibn Ezra, *Yesod mora’ ve-sod torah*, 86.

⁹⁵ *Duties of the Heart*, 5:4 (Mansoor, 275, Tsifroni, 354).

⁹⁶ *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 3:1 (Rosenblatt, 139; Tibbon, 106).

In these passages, the nature of the worship that must be preceded by knowledge of God is left unclear, but I see no reason to assume that statutory prayer would be excluded. That is, traditional religious praxis is now grounded in the philosophic ethos. Maimonides, however, implicates investigating God in what he views as a supreme form of worship, which does not involve a specific liturgy but, as he outlines in *Guide* 3:51, the intellectual cleaving of the human being to God.

In the opening of this chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides explains that it “is only a kind of conclusion” of the entire treatise, “at the same time explaining the worship as practiced by one who has apprehended the true realities peculiar only to Him after he has obtained an apprehension of what He is; and it also guides him toward achieving this worship, which is the end of man.”⁹⁷ Thus the worship described in this chapter is considered the ultimate goal of a human being. Such worship is only possible after apprehension of God is achieved:⁹⁸

Now we have made it clear several times that love is proportionate to apprehension. After love comes this worship to which attention has been drawn by [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, who said, “This is worship in the heart” (e.g., B. *Ta’anit* 2a; Y. *Berakhot*, ch. 4). In my opinion it consists in setting thought to work on the first intelligible and in dedicating oneself exclusively to this as far as this is within one’s capacity. Therefore, you will find that David exhorted Solomon and fortified him in these two things, I mean his endeavor to apprehend Him and his endeavor to worship Him, after apprehension has been achieved. He said, “And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him” (1 Chron. 28:9) and so on, “if you seek Him, He will be available to you” (ibid.) and so on.⁹⁹

This passage is another example of Maimonides’ position that knowing God through philosophic investigation is an aspect of loving God. Beyond this, Maimonides adds that such knowledge/love is a prerequisite for “worship in the heart,” which amounts to a kind of

⁹⁷ *Guide* 3:51 (Pines, 618; Tibbon, 477–478; Alḥarizi, 863). For these remarks in Alḥarizi’s translation see chapter four, n. 106, below.

⁹⁸ Much has been written about Maimonides’ conception of intellectual worship. See, e.g., Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 297–321; Benor, *Worship of the Heart*; David R. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 102–3, 106–8.

⁹⁹ *Guide* 3:51 (Pines, 621; Tibbon, 481; Alḥarizi’s translation of this passage is not extant in the lone complete manuscript [MS Paris 682] of the translation but is preserved by R. Jacob ben Sheshet. See chapter four, notes 94, above, and 120, below.)

intellectual cleaving (*devekut*) to God.¹⁰⁰ David Blumenthal has controversially described it as “a step beyond intellectual love... the moment when thought fades into mystical experience. It is the transition from thinking-about-God to being-in-the-presence of God. It is a mystical moment or, more appropriately, a mystical-intellectual way of being in the world.”¹⁰¹ Whether or not this mystical characterization of Maimonides’ supreme worship is correct, it is apparent that, broadly speaking, Maimonides draws on a well-defined philosophic tradition in making investigation of God a required first step. His indebtedness to this tradition is further highlighted by his use of 1 Chron. 28:9 as a prooftext.¹⁰²

“Worship of the heart” is a Rabbinic phrase for statutory prayer. Scholars have debated whether Maimonides, by using this phrase to refer to intellectual worship, intends to esoterically hint that, for the elite philosopher, the latter should supersede traditional prayer or whether it is possible to reconcile an espousal of intellectual worship with an espousal of traditional prayer.¹⁰³ Regardless, his evocation of a traditional Rabbinic idiom for a form of worship that is certainly not traditional but is very much enmeshed in the philosophic ethos demonstrates the manner in which this ethos molds religious life.

VIII

The influx of philosophic literature into Southern France and Catalonia brought with it not only a wealth of new ideas, but also new

¹⁰⁰ Shortly before the above passage, Maimonides offers the following explanation of intellectual worship: “If, however, you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting yourself to Him, endeavor to come closer to Him and strengthen the bond (Tibbon: *ha-dibbuk*) between you and Him—that is, the intellect.” (Pines, 620; Tibbon, 480–481; Alḥarizi’s translation is not extant for this passage.) Thus, Maimonides describes this worship as intellectual cleaving.

¹⁰¹ Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 133.

¹⁰² Following in Maimonides’ footsteps, R. Jacob Anatoli adduces the same verse in a similar manner. See *Malmed ha-talmidim*, 159b, albeit, like Maimonides’ predecessors, Anatoli employs this verse with reference to statutory prayer rather than intellectual worship.

¹⁰³ See, e.g. the discussion in Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 63–128. For an interesting discussion of this issue from the broader perspective of the development of Maimonideanism in Languedoc, see Howard Kreisel, “*Mi-du-siah le-hitbonenut: ha-transformatseyah shel mahut ha-tefillah be-parshanut ha-filosofit ha-yehudit be-provans be-yemé ha-benayyim*,” in *Shefa’ tal: ‘iyyunim be-maḥshevet yisra’el uve-tarbut yehudit muggashim le-Berakhah Zak*, eds. Zeev Gries, Howard T. Kreisel and Boaz Huss (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2004), 59–83.

values. In fact, while there were often dramatic differences between the worldviews of various newly available texts, they all shared an ethos which placed the value of investigating God at the center of Jewish life. This was a value which, as I have shown, exerted a sort of hegemonic influence over various aspects of religious life. Indeed, it fundamentally defined the religious life of its adherents.

Arguably the strength of this ethos lies in the fact that, while it does require epistemological reflection about what can and cannot be known about God, it does not demand a particular theological point of view. At base, it merely dictates that one work to acquire such a view, whatever its particulars. It is this characteristic that allows for a range of Jewish theologies to flourish under its influence, including, as I will argue at length, Kabbalah. The momentousness of the adoption of this ethos by the first Kabbalists can only be fully appreciated, however, when it becomes clear that it was foreign to traditional Rabbinic culture. Indeed, an underlying unity between philosophy, in all its varieties, and the Kabbalah of the first Kabbalists becomes apparent when it is realized that this ethos marks a fundamental break with traditional Rabbinic values. It is to Rabbinic tradition that I, therefore, turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

INVESTIGATING GOD IN RABBINIC AND LATER JEWISH LITERATURE

I

I find no evidence in Rabbinic literature that investigating God constitutes a religiously crucial value—certainly not one that forms the backbone of an ethos that defines religious life. By Rabbinic literature, I mean the vast literary corpus that came to define normative Judaism through the centuries. It includes those works whose actual (or, in some cases, purported) speakers are traditionally known as Tannaim and Amoraim, sages who lived from the first century to the end of the sixth century and formulated Rabbinic Judaism. These works were compiled and edited in various locales, well beyond the confines of Palestine and Babylonia, where these sages thrived, and in various time periods, stretching into the High Middle Ages, well beyond the historical period in which they were active. This state of affairs makes it apparent that the various works of Rabbinic literature are quite disparate and certainly do not share a single worldview. Nor is it possible to speak of a single ethos that permeates these works. None of them, however, reflect what I have termed the philosophic ethos.

The difference between Rabbinic and philosophic literature emerges in a compelling fashion through an examination of treatments, in the former, of those Biblical verses that, as we have seen, are used in the latter, time and again, as prooftexts for the philosophic ethos. In the opening section of this chapter, therefore, I examine Rabbinic explanations of these verses with an eye towards contrasting them with philosophic explanations. I then turn to examine Rabbinic passages that were explicitly employed by philosophers and Kabbalists in support of the philosophic ethos and demonstrate that, when viewed in their original context, these passages know nothing of a value to investigate God.

At the end of this chapter, I will also examine the role of the philosophic ethos in types of non-Rabbinic literature, other than philosophic and Kabbalistic, which either were known to the first Kabbalists or

contained parallel teachings. These include the esoteric corpus known as hekhalot literature, the writings of German Pietists, and *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, by R. Judah ha-Levi.

II

In the previous chapter, I noted that the newly available philosophic literature employs three Biblical verses as the primary prooftexts for the philosophic ethos: Deut. 4:39, Jer. 9:22–23, and 1 Chron. 28:9. In this section, I will consider Rabbinic treatments of these verses.

It will be recalled that Deut. 4:39 (“Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other”) is often read in the newly available philosophic literature as stating the imperative—according to some positions, a halakhic one—to investigate God. In Rabbinic literature, in contrast, the sense that this verse contains any sort of imperative is absent. In the philosophic literature, the opening of the verse, “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart,” might be paraphrased as “investigate intellectually,” such that the first part of the verse is seen as enjoining the active attempt to demonstrate the truth and understand the precise meaning of the second part of the verse, “that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.” In Rabbinic literature, however, the verse is read as a proclamation that there is only one God, which demands no particular action, save accepting its truth. From the Rabbinic perspective, accordingly, the verse might be paraphrased, “Let it be known that there is only one God.”

Furthermore, as already noted in the previous chapter, according to philosophic literature, the task of understanding the precise meaning of the second part of the verse requires investigating the nature of what Harry Wolfson referred to as the “internal unity” of God, which necessitates inquiring about the metaphysical meaning of divine unity and raises such questions as how divine attributes may be reconciled with this unity. In Rabbinic literature, on the other hand, the proclamation made by the verse pertains to what Wolfson called God’s “numerical or external unity”—the main meaning of Divine oneness in this literature—that there are no other gods besides Him.¹

¹ See Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*, 2–3.

These distinctions may be illustrated by a few examples. Consider the Rabbinic dispute about whether or not Deut. 4:39 may be included as part of the kingship section of the *mussaf* prayer on Rosh ha-Shannah—a section constructed of Biblical verses that announce divine sovereignty.² Apparently, the view that it may be included is based on the notion that, in stating that there are no other gods besides the one God, the verse functions as a proclamation of God's kingship.³ This verse also appears in the well-known story, repeated in numerous Rabbinic sources, of a woman and her seven sons who choose martyrdom instead of acquiescing to the Emperor's request to bow down to an idol. Before martyring himself, each son recites a Biblical verse that either proclaims God's oneness or forbids idolatry. One of the sons chooses Deut. 4:39.⁴ Here again the verse functions as a striking proclamation of faith in one God.

A related understanding of the verse may also be detected in a passage that appears in the version of *Deuteronomy Rabbah* published by Saul Lieberman:

R. Eleazar said in the name of R. Hosiah: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, I do not deprive any creature of due reward. By your life! You testified regarding Me and said: "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart [that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other]" (Deut. 4:39); so do I testify regarding you and say: "No prophet has since arisen in Israel like Moses" (Deut. 34:10). This shows that The Holy One, blessed be He, does not deprive any creature of due reward.⁵

This source outlines a *quid pro quo*, in which God praises Moses's uniqueness, in response to Moses's praise, in Deut. 4:39, of God's own uniqueness. Here again, therefore, Deut. 4:39 is not taken as requiring any particular action but is seen as a proclamation that there is only one God.

² *Tosefta ki-fshutah*, ed. Saul Lieberman (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), 5:1056 (*Rosh ha-shanah*, ch. 2); *B. Rosh ha-shanah* 32b.

³ The opposing view is apparently based on the fact that the verse does not explicitly refer to God's kingship.

⁴ *B. Gittin* 57b; *Midrash Eichah Rabbah*, ed. Salomon Buber (Vilna: Ha-'almanah vaha-'ahim Rom, 1899), 84 (1:420); *Seder Eliyahu rabbah and Seder Eliyahu zuta*, ed. M. Friedmann (Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1904; repr., Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1969), 151 (*Eliyahu rabbah*, ch. 30); *Midrash zuta 'al shir ha-shirim, rut, eichah, ve-kohélet*, ed. Salomon Buber (Vilna: Ha-'almanah vaha-'ahim Rom, 1924 or 1925), 61 (*Midrash megillat eichah zuta*, 1:21).

⁵ *Midrash devarim rabbah*, ed. Saul Lieberman, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1992), 23 (*Devarim*, 23). Cf. the sources cited there, n. 15.

Elsewhere, the same version of *Deuteronomy Rabbah* presents Deut. 4:39 not as Moses's testimony regarding God's oneness but as God's testimony (as told through Moses) regarding His own oneness:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: you chose me; so too, I choose you—as it is said, “For the Lord's portion is His people, Jacob His own allotment” (Deut. 32:9). On the day when the Torah was given, the Holy One, blessed be He, tore open the heavens and showed Israel what is above them. R. Pinḥas and R. Levi said in the name of R. Simeon ben Lakish: The Holy One, blessed be He, tore open seven firmaments for them, and just as He tore open that which is above, so He tore open that which is below, as it is said, “What is in the heavens above or on the earth below” (Exod. 20:4). He (God) said to them (Israel), “Behold that there is no one else with Me,” as it is said: “It has been clearly demonstrated to you” (Deut. 4:35); “Know therefore this day, etc.” (Deut. 4:39).⁶

In this passage, then, God is depicted as dramatically tearing open the heavens above and the earth below, thereby allowing Israel to see there is only one God and no other. This passage finds Biblical support for this depiction in Deut. 4:39, among other verses. Apparently, the term “know” in the opening of the verse is interpreted as expressing the fact that God visually demonstrated that there is no other God, thus making this fact readily apparent. In this passage, therefore, Deut. 4:39, far from being read as advocating human effort to investigate God, is taken as a reference to God making His oneness apparent by miraculous means.

Perhaps the most theologically rich reading of Deut 4:39 in Rabbinic literature appears in the traditional printed version of *Deuteronomy Rabbah*:

The Rabbis say: Jethro attributed reality to idols, as it is said, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods” (Exod. 18:11). Naaman partly acknowledged them, as it is said, “Behold, now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (II Kings 5:15). Rahab placed God in heaven and upon earth, as it is said, “For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh. 2:11). Moses placed Him also in the expanse of the world (*ba-ḥalalo shel 'olam*), as it is said, “That the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other” (Deut. 4:39). What is the force of “There is no other (*en 'od*)”? Even in the expanse of the world (*ba-ḥalalo shel 'olam*).⁷

⁶ Ibid., 65–66 (*Va-'ethannan*, 23).

⁷ *Deuteronomy Rabbah (Devarim Rabbah)*, ed. Moshe Aryeh Mirkin (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh, 1967), 46 (*va-'ethannan*, 28). My translation is based on *The Midrash Rab-*

Here, the end of the verse, “there is no other,” is read as “there is nothing else” and is thus taken as expressing the notion that God fills all the space of the world or, in other terms, His omnipresence. Yet, despite this theologically interesting reading of the verse, there is absolutely no indication that it is understood as promoting any sort of theological investigation.

While it is possible to adduce additional Rabbinic texts, which present similar readings of Deut. 4:39, the above analysis shows that this verse does not play the function in Rabbinic literature that it does in philosophic or (as will be seen) Kabbalistic works. On the contrary, the verse is seen as proclaiming a truth rather than requiring any sort of investigation that would lead to or substantiate that truth.

I turn now to Jer. 9:22–23 (“[22] Thus said the Lord: let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not the rich man glory in his riches. [23] But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me. For I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world: for in these I delight—declares the Lord”), which was also frequently employed in the newly available philosophic literature in support of the value of investigating God. Once again, there is no evidence that the verse was read in this manner in Rabbinic literature. In general, Rabbinic sources read the verse’s reference to “knowledge of God” in ethical/religious terms rather than in cognitive ones. Knowing God does not involve seeking knowledge of His nature, but achieving a basic awareness of His providence, which will inspire proper behavior.

Consider, for example, the following treatment of the verse in *Midrash Tehillim*:

“Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite. I will sing of the kindnesses of the Lord forever” (Ps. 89:1–2). This (i.e. the term *maskil*) [may be explained] by the verse, “But only in this should one glory, that he understands (*haskel*) and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23). Ethan said, “I gained understanding (*hiskalti*).” The Holy one, blessed be He, said to Him, “You gained the understanding (*hiskalta*) [of the truth contained in the verse: ‘for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world’]: for in these

bah: Numbers, Deuteronomy, eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans. Judah J. Slotki (Numbers) and J. Rabinowitz (Deuteronomy), (London: Soncino, 1977), 3:56 with emendations.

I delight' (ibid.). Anyone who praises Me should praise Me only with these [praises].⁸

Here the homilist explains the term “*maskil*,” which introduces Ps. 89. The precise meaning of this enigmatic term, which derives from the root SKL (understanding), is unclear, and the homilist seeks to explain it by turning to Jer. 9:23: “that he understands (*haskel*) and knows Me,” since the word *haskel* is based on the same root. The word *haskel* in Jer. 9:23, of course, refers to the understanding of God. In an interesting reading of the verse, however, the homilist makes clear that the understanding of God of which Jer. 9:23 speaks is the understanding that God desires praise only of those attributes that are mentioned at the end of the verse: “kindness, justice, and equity.” Thus, the verse may be paraphrased: “One should only glory in the fact that he understands and knows that I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world.” In this light, the term *maskil* is employed as an introduction to Ps. 89, because this Psalm is about “the kindnesses of the Lord,” as the second verse of the psalm (“I will sing of the kindnesses of the Lord forever”) makes clear. In the homilist’s view, then, in both Ps. 89, and more importantly for our purposes, in Jer. 9:23, a word deriving from the root SKL does not carry an intellectual connotation but a religious/ethical one. Knowledge of God means awareness of those praiseworthy attributes through which God interacts with human beings. In other terms, to know God is to be aware of and appreciate His providential role.

Another example of a similar reading may be found in *Numbers Rabbah*. This midrash is of special interest for our purposes, because, at least its first part (on Numbers 1:1–7:89), from which the passage below is taken, was apparently redacted in the middle of the twelfth century in Languedoc.⁹ More particularly, the passage below is taken

⁸ *Midrash tehillim*, ed. Salomon Buber (Vilna: Ha-’almanah veba-’achim Rom, 1891; repr., Jerusalem, 1965 or 1966), 381. Cf. ibid., 286 (on Ps. 52). Elsewhere in this midrash (p. 486—on Ps. 112) glorying in the understanding of God is read as glorying in the study of Torah. Only in Torah study may one glory since such study leads to the observance of the commandments. This also gives the verse a religious/ethical flavor rather than a cognitive one. Cf. *Seder Eliyahu rabbah and Seder Eliyahu zuta*, 45 (Ch. 6 in the *Pirké R. Eli’ezer* section).

⁹ Hananel Mack, “Numbers Rabba: Its Date, Location and Circulation,” in *Studies in Aggadic Midrashim in Memory of Zvi Meir Rabinowitz*, eds. M. A. Friedman and M. B. Lerner [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Tel Aviv University, 1996), 91–105; Mack, *The Mystery of Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2010), 171–187. The second part of the midrash, on the remainder of the book of Numbers,

from the proem of the tenth section of this midrash, one of the sections that deals with the Torah portion *Naso*'. Like the other proems on the sections of the midrash on this Torah portion, it apparently is a composition by the twelfth-century Languedocian redactor.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, given its provenance, this midrash was well known to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle who were, in fact, the very first figures to cite it.¹¹ This passage, then, offers a glimpse of a reading of Jer. 9:23 that circulated in Languedoc and Catalonia at the time of the first Kabbalists.

"The Lord by wisdom (*hokhmah*) founded the earth; by understanding (*tevunah*) He established the heavens. By His knowledge (*be-da'ato*) the depths are broken up" (Prov. 3:19–20). "Depths" refers to the sea. "Wisdom" is the fear of the Lord; as you read, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom (*hokhmah*); and to depart from evil is understanding (*binah*)" (Job 28:28). "Knowledge" (*da'at*) means one who recognizes his Creator (*ha-makkir et bore'o*); as you see in the verse, "Because there is no...knowledge (*da'at*) of God in the land" (Hos. 4:1), and as it says, "that he understands and knows (*ve-yado'a*) Me (Jer. 9:23).¹²

Proverbs 3:19–20, the starting point of this passage, refers to God's "wisdom," "understanding," and "knowledge," but apparently the homilist is interested in elucidating the nature of human "wisdom," "understanding," and "knowledge." To explain human "wisdom" and "understanding," he turns to Job 28:28, according to which "wisdom" is the fear of God and "understanding" is departing from evil. To elucidate human "knowledge," he turns to Hos. 4:1 and, significantly for our purposes, to Jer. 9:23. Both of these verses speak of knowledge of God, which leads the homilist to conclude that one is truly knowledgeable if he "recognizes his Creator (*ha-makkir et bore'o*)."¹³ To understand the

is predominantly identical to *Midrash Tanhuma*. It was likely added to the first part shortly after the latter was created.

¹⁰ See Hananel Mack, "Openings in Midrash *Bamidbar Rabba*, Part 1," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999): 41–56 [in Hebrew]. The proem from which the passage below is taken is discussed on pp. 48–49.

¹¹ Hananel Mack, "*Midrash ba-midbar rabbah ve-re'shit ha-kabbalah be-Provans*," *Eshel Be'er Shev'a* 4 (1996), 90–94; Mack, "Numbers Rabba," 94–97.

¹² My translation is based on *The Midrash Rabbah: Numbers, Deuteronomy*, eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 331, with some emendations. For the Hebrew original, see *Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. Mirkin, I, 228–229 (*Naso* 10:1).

¹³ I would note, however, that some manuscripts read *zeh da'at elohim*, "this means knowledge of God." See the variant provided in *Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. A. A. Halevi (Tel-Aviv: Maḥbarot le-sifrut, 1963), I, 342.

manner in which Jer. 9:23 is interpreted here, it is necessary, therefore, to understand the phrase “recognizes his Creator.” Variations of this phrase occur throughout Rabbinic literature, including in the continuation of this passage, which I will cite below.

A brief digression on uses of this phrase is thus appropriate. The phrase is employed not only in Rabbinic literature but also in both the newly available philosophic material and the literature of the first Kabbalists, in the context of discussions of the value of investigating God. In these sources, “recognizing God” requires an active attempt to investigate Him. For example, Maimonides, in extolling the value of gaining knowledge of God’s wisdom through philosophic investigation of the natural world, evokes a Rabbinic statement that uses such a phrase.¹⁴ Similarly, R. Asher ben David, one of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle, makes the following statement: “Moses, our Rabbi, and the prophets, and our righteous Messiah (i.e. King David) warned us to recognize (*lehakkir*) our Creator and understand (*u-lehavin*) and study (*u-lehaskil*) our Maker.”¹⁵ In this context, as will be seen in the next chapter, “recognizing the Creator” means actively seeking knowledge of God.

This phrase is not, however, used in this manner in Rabbinic literature, where, in general, recognition of God implies a basic awareness of God, which may be acquired without any special intellectual effort.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cited below, n. 31.

¹⁵ R. Asher ben David, 118. For a fuller discussion, see the next chapter.

¹⁶ There are, however, highly exceptional passages in Rabbinic literature in which recognizing God involves employing intellectual effort to realize that God exists. Even these passages, however, do not constitute evidence that Rabbinic culture espoused what would become the philosophic ethos. One such passage found in *Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. Mirkin, II, 90 (*Naso*’ 14:2)—the same work from which the original passage discussed above was taken—explains that four figures, Abraham, Job, King Hezekiah, and the Messiah, all recognized (or presumably in the case of the Messiah, would come to recognize) God on their own accord (*hikkir me-’atsmo*). Here we move somewhat closer to the philosophic ethos. Still, there is no sense that sustained intellectual reflection on God is a virtue. Moreover, the passage makes clear that it is four and only four very unique individuals who can succeed in recognizing God on their own accord. As such, it hardly constitutes a broad call to investigate God, or even a narrower one directed at an intellectual elite. It, therefore, stands in stark contrast to certain philosophic and Kabbalistic sources in which Abraham’s coming to God through his own investigations is held out as a model that should be emulated. (See the next chapter.) I would add that it contrasts with the earlier passage that we cited from *Numbers Rabbah*, where there is no indication that recognition of God is limited to a tiny elite. I, therefore, see no reason to assume that the meaning of recognizing God in this second passage from *Numbers Rabbah* has any bearing on its meaning in the earlier passage.

On the contrary, it is a matter of recognizing what should have been obvious all along—that there is a God who directs the world. I will suffice, here, with one example. (Other examples from Rabbinic works will be discussed in other contexts, below.) In a story recounted in *Pesikta Rabbati*, a certain non-Jew realizes that the cow he purchased from a Jew refuses to work on the Sabbath:

The non-Jew was immediately frightened. He said, “if a cow, which cannot speak and has no intellectual ability, recognized (*hikkirah*) her Creator, how could it be that I, whom He formed in His image and gave intellectual ability, do not proceed to recognize (*u-makkir*) my Creator?” He immediately converted and studied and merited the Torah.¹⁷

In this story, recognizing God is not portrayed as a challenging intellectual feat. On the contrary, even an animal can recognize God. Moreover, recognizing God is given the same sort of ethical/religious coloring that, as we saw above, various Rabbinic sources give to Jer. 9:23: for the non-Jew, recognizing God involves an attitude of appreciation to God for having created him, and it leads him to a life of Torah.¹⁸

We may now return to the original passage in *Numbers Rabbah*. It seems to me that the recognition of God mentioned there has a similar ethical/religious connotation. Recall that the passage discusses three intellectual terms, “wisdom,” “understanding,” and “knowledge.”

Another highly exceptional passage appears in a small midrashic work known as *Midrash Temurah*. In this passage, the phrase “recognize the Creator” is employed in a manner that aligns more squarely with the philosophic ethos. At the end of this work, R. Akiva is presented as telling his students: “Just as the house informs regarding its builder, the garment informs regarding its weaver, and the door informs regarding its carpenter, so too does the world inform regarding the Holy One, blessed be He, who created it. Praiseworthy is the man who desires to contemplate (*lehitbonen*) His actions and recognize (*lehakkir*) his Creator” [*Batté midrashot*, eds. Solomon Aaron Wertheimer and Abraham Joseph Wertheimer (Jerusalem: Ketav yad va-sefer, 1989), 2:201]. This sentiment would not be out of place in the newly available philosophic literature. There is good reason for this, however: *Midrash Temurah* is a very late work (likely from the second half of the twelfth century). As Adolph Jellinek notes in *Bet ha-midrash* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1967), 1:20, it reflects the influence of R. Abraham ibn Ezra. Thus, this midrash represents a case where the philosophic ethos has influenced a late pseudepigraphic midrashic creation, and, as such, has no significance for the general discussion.

¹⁷ *Pesikta Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesikta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps*, ed. Rivka Ulmer (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 1:214 (sec. 14, following MS Parma 141b).

¹⁸ Cf. the comments on the phrase “recognizing God” in Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), 341–342.

“Wisdom” and “understanding” are both given ethical/religious significance—to fear God and to keep away from evil, respectively. It follows, therefore, that “knowledge” and accordingly “recognizing God,” which the homilist equates with knowledge, also takes on ethical/religious connotations. This is clarified very shortly after this passage:

....“Majestic (*baḥur*) as the cedars” (Song of Songs 5:13)—such is he who fears and recognizes his Creator (*ha-yar’e veḥa-makkir bore’o*); for such a one is called righteous, and of him Scripture said, “the righteous bloom like a date-palm; they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon (Ps. 92:13), and it also says, “I choose (*baḥor*) them from among all the tribes of Israel, etc. (I Sam. 2:28); and it also says, “Happy is the man whom You choose (*tivḥar*) to bring near” (Ps. 65:5).”¹⁹

In this part of the passage (part 2), too, we find a phrase that speaks of recognizing the Creator (“he who fears and recognizes his Creator”). In the first part of the passage (part 1), which was cited earlier, we saw that the idea of recognizing God is discussed in the same context as the fear of God and refraining from evil; as I have argued above, this juxtaposition suggests that “recognition” has an ethical/religious connotation. The fact that, in part 2, fear and recognition are presented in almost the same breath lends support to this argument. Indeed, the ethical/religious connotations of recognizing God are made nearly explicit. One who recognizes God is now identified with one who is righteous. Presumably, then, as in the case of the non-Jew from the story in *Pesikta Rabbati*, recognizing God implies becoming aware of God, which will, in turn, lead to a life of righteousness. With this in mind, we may finally revisit the key words of Jer. 9:23: “that he understands and knows (*ve-yadoa’*) Me,” as they are employed in part 1. It now becomes apparent that the homilist does not see them as referring to any sort of knowledge of God derived by human effort. On the contrary, he regards them as a call to behave in a manner consonant with a baseline awareness of God. Two further examples of Rabbinic treatments of Jer. 9:23, which offer similar interpretations, will be considered below.

The third verse which the newly available philosophic literature and the writings of the first Kabbalists frequently adduce in support of

¹⁹ *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers, Deuteronomy*, eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 331 with some emendations. For the Hebrew original, see *Ba-midbar rabbah*, ed. Mirkin, I, 229 (*Naso’* 10:1).

the philosophic ethos is 1 Chron. 28:9: “And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and discerns the design of every thought; if you seek Him, He will be available to you, but if you forsake Him, He will abandon you forever.” As we have seen, this verse is usually employed as a proof-text for the notion that one must investigate God prior to prayer. In Rabbinic literature, however, it is cited only infrequently, and nowhere is it employed in a manner that has any relationship to investigating God. In fact, as far as I am aware, the opening of the verse (“know the God of your father”), which is central in the philosophic and Kabbalistic works, receives no comment in Rabbinic literature.

The focus in Rabbinic literature is not on human beings’ knowledge of God (the first part of the verse), but on God’s knowledge of human beings, which is highlighted in the second part of the verse, in the following words: “For the Lord searches all hearts and discerns the design (*yetser*) of every thought.” Playing off the word *yetser*, which means design or formation, some sources explain that the verse teaches that God is aware of human thoughts even before they are formed by the human mind.²⁰ Another source, *Midrash Tehillim*, understands the term *yetser* as a reference to the moral inclination of human beings. It notes that the verse states that “the Lord searches all hearts,” not just a single heart. This is because the Lord searches a human being’s two hearts—the one responsible for the good inclination and the one responsible for the bad inclination.²¹ In only one passage, also from *Midrash Tehillim*, does the exegesis focus on the human being, rather than God—and this one passage is a late addition to the midrash and might even postdate the first Kabbalists. Even here, however, the exegesis does not concern gaining knowledge of God. This source is interested in the words “worship Him with single heart,” which, apparently, it reads as instructing the worshiper to worship with great devotion.²²

²⁰ *Midrash bere’shit rabbah* 9:3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, I, 69); *Aggadat bere’shit*, ed. Salomon Buber (n.p.: Joseph Fisher, 1903; repr., New York: Menorah Institute, 1959), 4 (ch. 2); *Midrash tehillim*, ed. Salomon Buber, 270 (45:4); *Shemot rabbah*, ed. Moshe Aryeh Mirkin (Tel-Aviv: Yavneh, 1959–1960), I, 246–247 (21:3); *Midrash Shemu’el*, ed. Salomon Buber (Krakow: Joseph Fisher, 1893; repr., Jerusalem, 1964 or 1965), 30 (5:5).

²¹ *Midrash tehillim*, ed. Salomon Buber, 111 (14:1).

²² *Midrash tehillim*, ed. Salomon Buber, 492 (119:6). *Midrash Tehillim* on Ps. 119 and following is recognized as a late addition to the midrash. It has even been suggested

No mention, however, is made of investigating God prior to engaging in such worship.

As I will expand upon below, I am not contending that none of the Rabbis ever investigated God, nor even that none of them assigned religious value to such investigation. Rather, I am arguing that this value was not made into a grounding one—one which structured religious life. This is underscored by the fact that, as I have shown, the Rabbis never interpret any of our three verses as commanding the investigation of God, even though they could easily be read as such. In contrast to later Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists, the Rabbis do not see the act of investigating God as a central value; therefore, they have no need to interpret these verses as Biblical support for this value.

III

Philosophers and the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle did not only employ Biblical verses as prooftexts for the philosophic ethos. Since Rabbinic literature was authoritative for them, they also adduced passages from this literature that they understood as supporting the value of investigating God. A careful consideration of such passages, however, suggests that such an understanding involves anachronistically reading a philosophic value into passages that do not share it. Here I consider two such passages, both of which feature interpretations of Jer. 9:22–23.

The first one is cited by Maimonides in *Guide* 3:54. As we have seen, in this chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides elucidates Jer. 9:22–23. In his interpretation, Jer. 9:22 begins by rejecting those perfections that human beings typically, but erroneously, believe are the most important. The verse, he argues, enumerates the perfections in ascending order based on the importance typically assigned to them: it starts with moral perfection (“let not the wise man glory in his wisdom”), moves to perfection of bodily constitution (“let not the strong man glory in his strength”), and culminates with material perfection (“let not the rich man glory in his riches”). It is left to the next verse (Jer. 9:23: “But

that it was not added until the thirteenth or the early fourteenth century. Of course, however, the late addition could be based on earlier material. For a discussion of the dating of this section of the work, see *The Midrash on Psalms*, trans. William G. Braude (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), l:xxv–xxxii.

only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me.”), he contends, to clarify what is the true human perfection, which turns out to be intellectual perfection and may be attained by acquiring knowledge of God.²³ In support of his interpretation of these verses, Maimonides cites a passage from *Genesis Rabbah*, which he claims reads the verses in the same manner:

One verse says: “and all desirable things are not to be compared to her” (Prov. 8:11). Another verse says “and all things that you desire are not to be compared to her” (Prov. 3:15). “Desirable things” refers to commandments and good deeds. “Things that you desire” refers to precious stones and pearls. Neither “desirable things” nor “things that you desire” are to be compared to her, “But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23).²⁴

According to this passage, the value expressed by the words from Jer. 9:23, “that he understands and knows Me,” is more significant than the value of observing the commandments and behaving properly, or than the value of owning material possessions. Maimonides assumes that “that he understands and knows Me” refers to intellectual perfection. Thus, according to his reading, the *Genesis Rabbah* passage suggests that intellectual perfection is superior to either moral perfection or material perfection.²⁵ Since the passage offers no explanation of Jer. 9:23, it cannot be definitively demonstrated that his interpretation is inaccurate. Yet, in the absence of clear evidence otherwise, I see no reason to assume that this passage reads the verse in a manner that di-

perfect sense if the typical Rabbinic reading of the verse is assumed to be operative. On this reading, the homilist’s claim is that material possessions and even good deeds are of no consequence without a basic awareness of God.

Some support for this interpretation may be found in the continuation of the above passage, which appears in some manuscripts of the work, but not all; apparently, this continuation is not original. Rather, it seems to be an interpolation into *Genesis Rabbah* from the *Palestinian*

²³ Pines, 636; Tibbon, 597–598; Ḥarizi, 886. For more on this passage, see the Conclusion, n. 15.

²⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 35:3. I cite this passage in the manner in which it appears in *Guide* 3:54, which differs slightly from the version printed in *Midrash bere’shit rabbah* (ed. Theodor-Albeck, I, 333). My translation is based on Pines, 637 with emendations.

²⁵ Pines, 637; Tibbon, 598; Ḥarizi 887.

Talmud.²⁶ In its present redactional context, however, it is intended as a gloss on the first part of the passage. Thus, while there is no way to be sure that it accurately reflects the meaning of the first part of the passage, it does reveal one way in which it was interpreted. This interpretation differs considerably from Maimonides' interpretation:

Arteban sent our Teacher (R. Judah ha-Nasi) a priceless gem, with the request, "Let me have in return an article as valuable as this." So he sent him a mezuzah (i.e. a piece of parchment with Biblical verses, which, according to Jewish law, must be affixed to the doorpost). He sent back word: "I gave you a priceless object, whereas you returned me something worth but a folar." "My desirable things and your desirable things are not to be compared to her," he retorted. "Moreover, you sent me something which I must guard, whereas I sent you something which guards you while you sleep at ease."²⁷

It may be that in the context of the *Palestinian Talmud*, this passage intended to give the mezuzah a magical reading, as a kind of amulet that would guard the inhabitants of the house upon whose doorpost it is affixed. However, I do not believe that the interpolator had such a reading in mind when he employed this passage in the present context. Apparently, he intended it to serve as a kind of exegesis that would clarify the nature of that which is truly desirable in the eyes of the author of the original passage in *Genesis Rabbah*. In other words, it would elucidate exactly what constitutes, in Jeremiah's terminology, "understanding and knowing God." According to the interpolated passage, the gem given to R. Judah is of no real value in comparison to the mezuzah. R. Judah is made to express this sentiment in the following words: "My desirable things and your desirable things are not to be compared to her." These words evoke the verses cited in

²⁶ See the critical notes in *Midrash bere'shit rabbah* (ed. Theodor-Albeck, I, 333). The passage is found in *Y. Pe'ah* 4:1. There it appears immediately after the following: "One verse says: 'and all desirable things are not to be compared to her' (Prov. 8:11). Another verse says 'and all things that you desire are not to be compared to her' (Prov. 3:15). 'Desirable things' refers to precious stones and pearls. 'Things that you desire' refers to words of Torah." This exegesis of Prov. 8:11 and Prov. 3:15 is obviously related to the passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, but it ends with the conclusion that words of Torah should be the object of true desire—not, as in *Genesis Rabbah*, knowledge of God. Accordingly, Jer. 9:23 is not mentioned.

²⁷ I am following the translation in *The Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans. H. Freedman, (London: Soncino, 1977), I:286, n. 4 (second parenthesis added). Cf. *Y. Pe'ah* 4:1 and the critical apparatus in *Midrash bere'shit rabbah* (ed. Theodor-Albeck, I:333).

the original midrashic passage, Prov. 8:11 (“and all desirable things are not to be compared to her”) and 3:15 (“and all things that you desire are not to be compared to her”). In the original passage, the “her” to which all desirable things cannot be compared is “knowledge of God.” Here, it is the mezuzah. This equation between the mezuzah and knowledge suggests that the interpolator saw the mezuzah as an object that would somehow lead to knowledge of God. But what type of knowledge of God could the mezuzah lead to? It would be forced to argue that the mezuzah somehow functions as a symbol of the need to investigate God.²⁸ The more likely interpretation is that the mezuzah, fixed on the doorpost, serves as a frequent reminder of God and His providence. If so, it seems that the interpolator understood the mezuzah as a source of protection, because it reminds its beholders of God and thus leads them to observe the commandments, which gives them the merit to receive divine protection. (This is quite different from the magical conception of the mezuzah as a protective amulet.) We may now return to the original passage: Apparently, the interpolator understood it as using Jer. 9:23 in the standard ethical/religious vein found throughout Rabbinic literature, and not in accordance with the Maimonidean-style intellectualist reading.

As will be seen in the next chapter, a second Rabbinic passage that comments on Jer. 9:22–23 is cited a number of times in the literature

²⁸ To a certain extent, however, Maimonides does interpret the mezuzah in such a fashion. Even according to him, however, the chief function of the mezuzah is as a reminder of God and His demands upon human behavior. According to Maimonides, in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh tefillin, u-mezuzah ve-sefer torah*, 6:13:

A person must be scrupulous regarding the [commandment of affixing a] mezuzah, since it is a constant obligation upon all. Every time that he enters and exits, he will encounter the unity of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he will remember his love [of God], and he will awake from his slumber and his absorption in temporal vanities, and he will realize that nothing lasts forever, save knowledge of the Eternal Rock. Immediately [upon encountering the mezuzah], he returns to his senses and walks in a righteous path.

As Menachem Kellner points out, when Maimonides states here that a human being “will realize that nothing lasts forever save knowledge of the Rock of the Universe,” he is alluding to the theory of the acquired intellect, according to which “humans achieve immortality only through their intellectual attainments” [Kellner, “Philosophical themes in Maimonides’ ‘Sefer Ahavah,’” 25]. These attainments are, of course, achieved through investigation of God. Nevertheless, Maimonides’ chief emphasis seems to be on the manner in which encountering a mezuzah leads one to refocus his thoughts and his behaviors. In this sense, the mezuzah serves as a baseline reminder of God and of the type of action that God demands rather than as a reminder to engage in philosophic investigation.

of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle in support of the value of investigating God. It appears in both *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim* and *Bere'shit Rabbati*, but is cited by the first Kabbalists from *Midrash Kohelet*, where it is no longer extant:

“Let not the wise man glory [in his wisdom.... But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me]” (Jer. 9:22–23). If a wise man does not recognize (*makkir*) who created him, in what sense is he wise? Even among the wicked there are wise men, as it is said, “Since among all the wise of the nations” (Jer. 10:7). “Ah, those who are so wise, in their own opinion” (Is. 5:21): Human beings are wise because they understand the paths of the sun, the moon, and the constellations—the way in which the sun is greater than the moon. They divided [its path] into months. They decreed the year based on the cycles of the sun.²⁹ And the years act and arrive just as they decreed—no less and no more. They are wise enough to decree this great decree—to know the ways of God upon the firmament—but they did not know how to recognize (*lehakkir*) Him who created them and the entire world. They are wise enough to build countries and cities and to make weapons and instruments of war, to conquer the sea without a path or walking trail [but with] the wind [blowing] over the water—but they were not wise enough to say who made the sea, who causes the wind to blow. Behold, they are wise in every matter, but in one matter they are truly foolish. Their wisdom is as though lost, because they did not recognize (*hikkiru*) the Holy One, blessed be He.... In what does the praiseworthiness of human beings consist? “That he understands and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23): observe and do as I do (*histakkel va-'aseh mah she-'ani 'oseh*). “For I the Lord act [with kindness, justice and equity in the world: for in these I delight]” (ibid.). If you have done all of these acts, then you are like me.³⁰

Let me first comment on the expression “recognize the Holy One, blessed be He,” which is a variant of the expression already considered above. As is the case in the passage in the previously discussed passage in *Numbers Rabbah* and elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, here, too, it does not refer to intellectual knowledge of God. In the newly available philosophic corpus, divine science (metaphysics) is regarded as the most difficult science, which is to be studied only after achieving mastery over preliminary fields, such as mathematics and astronomy.

²⁹ Amended on the basis of “Corrections and Notes to Agadath Shir ha-Shirim,” 743. For the full reference, see the next note.

³⁰ *Bere'shit rabbati*, ed. Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem: Mekitsé nirdamim, 1940), 106–107. Cf. “Agadath Shir ha-Shirim,” ed. Solomon Schechter, 688, ll. 481–505 and the variant provided by Schechter in “Corrections and Notes to Agadath Shir ha-Shirim,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 7 (1895): 743.

In the present passage, however, knowledge of God is taken as something easier to grasp than secular fields. Thus, the passage wonders how one is able to achieve mastery of astronomy and of the technical knowledge required to build cities and design weapons but is not able to accomplish the comparatively easy task of knowing God. This discrepancy between the hierarchy according to the philosophic literature and the hierarchy as presented here can be explained by the fact that knowledge of God implies something different for each. In the philosophic literature, to know God means to investigate the nature of God to the extent possible for human reason. According to the aggada, knowledge of God involves a baseline acknowledgment of the fact that the natural world, which is the subject studied by the secular sciences, was created and is controlled by God.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this passage is the way in which it glosses the words “that he understands and knows Me” (Jer. 9:23). As in the other Rabbinic passages, examined above, these words are not taken to refer to intellectual knowledge of God. They are given no cognitive significance but are interpreted as suggesting that one must engage in virtuous behavior. Thus, understanding and knowing God becomes observing the manner in which God acts “with kindness, justice and equity” and following His lead. In short, when the Kabbalists read this passage as supporting the value of investigating God, they are inserting a philosophic value into a text that does not espouse this value.

In the next chapter, I will have occasion to discuss further Rabbinic statements that the first Kabbalists employed in support of the philosophic ethos. Unlike the passages which we have seen so far, these Rabbinic statements do not refer to Jer. 9:23 or to the other major Biblical prooftexts. Once again, however, the Kabbalists’ interpretations are anachronistic and forced. The same might be said of Maimonides’ use of yet another Rabbinic passage (in which these verses are not mentioned) in support of the notion that love of God requires knowledge of God that has been attained by investigation.³¹

³¹ Maimonides, in both his *Book of the Commandments* (positive commandment 3) and his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot yesode ha-torah* 2:2, cites the following passage from *Sifre on Deuteronomy* as a Rabbinic source for this notion. (He also alludes to it in *Guide* 3:28):

“You should love the Lord your God with all your heart (Deut. 6:5)”: I do not know how one is to love God. Hence scripture goes on to say, “and these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart” (Deut. 6:6), meaning

Given the vastness of Rabbinic literature, it is impossible to discuss every single passage that may have at some point in time been read as supporting the philosophic ethos. Still, it should be apparent that this ethos is no way native to traditional Rabbinic material, spanning from late antiquity to the High Middle Ages.

IV

To be clear, my contention is not that investigations of God are absent in Rabbinic literature. There are certainly plenty of such investigations. (Usually they are based on Biblical exegesis.) Indeed, many of the passages discussed above ponder matters of theology. On any particular theological point, this or that Rabbinic idea may be close to a particular idea found in a philosophic source or one found in a Kabbalistic source. Such comparisons, though—however productive they may be in tracing the genealogy of medieval Jewish thought—are matters of worldview and not ethos.

Moreover, it is not even my contention that there are no statements in Rabbinic literature that assign religious value to investigating God. Thus, for example, there are passages that praise, in fairly strong terms, those who expound upon the “account of the chariot”—that is, upon the first chapter of Ezekiel—which can arguably be construed as praising

take these words to heart, for thus will you recognize (*makkir*) Him who spoke, and the world came into being, and you will cling to His ways [*Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. Reuven Hammer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 62 (piska 33). For the Hebrew original, see *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, eds. Saul Horovitz and Louis Finkelstein (Berlin: Jewish Cultural League in Germany, 1939; repr., New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 59].

The simple meaning of this passage seems to be that the commandment to love God is fulfilled by observing the other commandments. As in the other passages examined above, to recognize God seems to mean having basic awareness of God, rather than seeking to know Him through intellectual effort. Observing the commandments cultivates this awareness, because in so doing one clings to His ways. Therefore, the notion that this passage in any way enjoins philosophic investigation is quite forced. As Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 231, has remarked, “One should not regard Maimonides' citations from the *Sifre* [as] more than an attempt to supply some justification from authoritative traditional texts for his approach to the love of God.” Cf. Warren Zev Harvey, “Political Philosophy and Halakhah in Maimonides,” *Iyyun* 29 (1980), 205–206 [in Hebrew].

investigation of God.³² The crucial point for my purposes, however, is that neither such passages nor other Rabbinic passages, which contain investigations of God, are imbedded in an ethos that places the value of investigating God at the center of religious life. As we saw in the previous chapter, the philosophic ethos structures religious and intellectual life, creating a framework within which it may flourish. In this framework, investigation of God is pursued systematically, with great devotion; various areas of religious life are subsumed under it, such as love of God and prayer. Investigations of God never rise to this level in Rabbinic literature. Thus, while, given the wide geographical area and extended period of time in which Rabbinic literature was produced, it may be impossible to speak of a single Rabbinic ethos, it is apparent that no Rabbinic ethos places investigation of God at its center. In this light, medieval philosophy and the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle mark a sharp break with Rabbinic culture.

V

I turn now to the *hekhalot* or *merkavah* corpus, a body of literature that is representative of an early phase of Jewish esotericism and mysticism, long predating the emergence of Kabbalah as a written tradition. This variegated corpus features, among other matters, magical material, which provides incantations for such things as controlling angels and gaining Torah knowledge, material that provides detailed accounts of the angelic realm, and material that describes visionary

³² See e.g. *Tosefta Ḥagigah* 2:1 (ed. Lieberman, 380) where R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai offers the following praise of R. Eleazar ben Arakh after the latter expounds upon the account of the chariot: "Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel who gave a son to Abraham our father who knows how to understand and expound upon the glory of his Father in heaven." Cf. the parallels in *Y. Ḥagigah* 2:1 and *B. Ḥagigah* 14b. These, and related passages, have been frequently discussed by scholars. See, e.g. Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem*, eds. Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 2–11 (Hebrew section); David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1988), 186–194. For a more recent discussion, see Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 175–242. For another relevant Rabbinic passage, see n. 53 below.

ascents to the divine realm.³³ While the heroes of this corpus include some of the greats of Rabbinic literature, such as R. Ishmael and R. Akiva, it is clearly pseudepigraphic, and scholars have debated both its dating and its relationship to Rabbinic literature.³⁴ Suffice it to say, for our purposes, that it was composed over a long period of time, possibly beginning as early as the second century C.E. and extending into the early Middle Ages.

Significantly, Rachel Elior notes that “Hekhalot literature as a whole reflects the development of a new relationship to the concept of God.”³⁵ One manifestation of this new relationship, she argues, is that “intensive study of the concept of God, and knowledge of the celestial realms are seen as religious imperatives.”³⁶ This literature may reflect a new stage in the history of Jewish mysticism. Nevertheless, it does not seem to me (nor does Elior argue) that it should be regarded as a non-philosophic source for the value of investigating God as it is espoused in the newly available philosophic texts and by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. Indeed, what it means to study God according to this literature is quite different than what it means to study God according to the philosophic and Kabbalistic material.

Let me stress from the outset that while this literature had significant currency and was widely accepted as authoritative in the Middle Ages,³⁷ it (together with the *Shi’ur Komah* tract to be discussed below) was not cited with any frequency by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle—apparently a sign that they did not embrace it.³⁸ Therefore, it can hardly be regarded

³³ For a recent survey of the variegated nature of this corpus, see Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2008), II, 678–715.

³⁴ For a brief survey of views on the dating of this literature and its relationship to Rabbinic literature, see James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 12–21.

³⁵ Rachel Elior, “The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature,” *Binah* 2 (1989), 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷ For a preliminary survey of the circulation of this material in the Middle Ages, see Moshe Idel, “From Italy to Ashkenaz and Back: On the Circulation of Jewish Mystical Traditions,” *Kabbalah* 14 (2006), 47–94.

³⁸ Various scholars have noted that the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle did not embrace this literature. See Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, 24–25; Daniel Abrams, “‘Ma’aseh Merkabah’ as a Literary Work: The Reception of Hekhalot Traditions by the German Pietists and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 5 (1998), 340–342; Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 11, n. 46; Haviva Pedaya, “Review of Rachel Elior, *Mikdash u-merkavah, kohanim u-mal’akhim, hekhal ve-hekhalot be-mistikah ha-yehudit ha-kedumah*,” *Massekhet* 2 (2004), 210–213; Dauber, “Images of the Temple in Sefer

as a major source for their adoption of the value of investigating God. Still, since the first Kabbalists did have access to this literature, the role accorded in it to investigating God demands consideration.

I find no evidence in *hekhlot* literature that “intensive study of the concept of God” is regarded as a religious imperative, if such study is understood as entailing the employment of intellectual effort to gain knowledge of God. Indeed, Elior’s fuller study makes apparent that knowledge of God is achieved through the cultivation of mystical experiences, which lead to the vision of God. That is to say, it is a revealed knowledge, rather than knowledge gained through intellectual effort, as the philosophic ethos would require.

I agree with Elliot Wolfson’s observation that there is an exegetical dimension to the experiences of the *hekhlot* mystics, insofar as “the mystic visionaries seek to reexperience what is recorded in previous documents.”³⁹ Certainly, as Wolfson stresses, the experiential and the exegetical should not be bifurcated too sharply.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, I do not think that this “reexperiencing” amounts to active investigation of God by means of Biblical exegesis. The material does not give the impression of a concerted effort to employ such exegesis to gain knowledge of God.

In fact, a piece of textual evidence that Elior singles out to show that there is an imperative to study God strengthens my contention.⁴¹ This evidence comes from the *Shi’ur Komah* (Measure of the Stature) tract, a pseudepigraphic text in the name of R. Ishmael and R. Akiva, extant

ha-Bahir,” 199–235. I would also note that Maimonides entirely ignored the *hekhlot* corpus in his writings, and scholars have suggested that this amounts to a tacit rejection. See Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*, 19–25 and the studies cited there on p. 25, n. 89. The approach of the Kabbalists is thus somewhat similar to that of Maimonides. With regard to the *Shi’ur Komah* tract (see below), in particular, I would note that, with the exception of R. Abraham ibn Ezra, Jewish philosophers before and including Maimonides adopted a negative stance to this work. For a discussion of the views of Maimonides and Jewish philosophers who preceded him, see Raphael Jospe, “*Ha-Rambam ve-shi’ur komah*,” in *Tribute to Sara: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah*, eds. Moshe Idel, Devora Dimant and Shalom Rosenberg [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994), 195–209.

³⁹ *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 119–124. See also the studies listed in the introduction, n. 49 above.

⁴¹ Elior, “The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature,” 115, n. 4. Cf. the fuller version of this note in the Hebrew version of this study: “The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism,” in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: Early Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan, special issue, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, no. 1–2 (1987), 44–45, n. 9a [in Hebrew]. There Elior cites a passage from *Midrash Mishlé*. This passage is discussed in n. 53 below.

in a number of recensions, which details the gargantuan measurements of the body parts of the Creator. Its relationship to the *hekhhalot* corpus as a whole is unclear. On the one hand, it is included in manuscripts of the *hekhhalot* corpus, but on the other, it also exists in freestanding form.⁴² Joseph Dan has argued that *Shi'ur Komah* is the first Jewish text devoted entirely to a description of God, and that it marks the beginning of systematic inquiry into the nature of divinity in Jewish thought.⁴³ This position is very much in consonance with that of Elior. Yet while in Dan's view this aspect of the text sets it apart from the rest of the *hekhhalot* corpus,⁴⁴ Elior apparently feels that it is representative of the latter corpus as a whole.

I turn, then, to the passage adduced by Elior, and a similar passage which appears elsewhere in the text. While both of these passages have been preserved in differing versions in the various recensions of the text,⁴⁵ and I believe that my conclusion holds true for them all, I will cite the versions that appear in the *Sefer ha-Komah* recension preserved in MS Oxford 1791, since this manuscript was itself copied from an earlier manuscript, composed by a figure whom I will discuss in the next section, R. Eleazar of Worms.⁴⁶

In the middle of the tract, after some measurements of the divine are mentioned, we find the following statement:

He who knows (*ha-yode'a*) this secret is promised that he will be a member of the world to come.⁴⁷

Later in the text we find the passage adduced by Elior:

Rabbi Ishmael said, when I said this thing before Rabbi Akiva, he said to me: "Anyone who knows (*yode'a*) this measure of his Creator and the

⁴² For a recent discussion of the matter, see Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism*, II, 891–892.

⁴³ See *ibid.*, 888.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 908.

⁴⁵ The various versions of the passage adduced by Elior are discussed in Daniel Abrams, "The Dimensions of the Creator—Contradiction or Paradox? Corruptions and Accretions to the Manuscript Witnesses," *Kabbalah* 5 (2000), 35–53.

⁴⁶ On this manuscript and its relationship to R. Eleazar, see Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1985), 9–10. I would note, however, that Daniel Abrams has pointed out that, at least regarding the second of these two citations, R. Eleazar does not follow this version when he cites the passage in his works. See Abrams, "Ma'aseh Merkabah' as a Literary Work: The Reception of Hekhalot Traditions by the German Pietists and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation," 47, n. 50.

⁴⁷ Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, 129.

glory (*ve-shivkho*)⁴⁸ of the Holy One, blessed be He, is protected in this world and the world to come: he will have a long life in this world, and he will have a long life and it will be good for him in the world to come. He will succeed in this world and succeed in the next world.” Rabbi Ishmael said: “I and Rabbi Akiva are guarantors regarding this matter: that in this world [one will have] a good life and that in the world to come [one will have] a good name as long as he studies (*shoneh*) this as a *mishnah* each day.”⁴⁹

These passages place great religious value on attaining knowledge of God, and it is for this reason that Elijah presents the latter one as evidence for an imperative to study God. In a somewhat related vein, Dan stresses that while there is no evidence in this passage that the authors of this text devalued the traditional Rabbinic ideals of Torah study and observance of the mitsvot, these do not reign supreme. The greatest religious goal now becomes knowledge of the secrets about God contained in this literature.⁵⁰ While this sort of intellectualist reading of *Shi'ur Komah* has been criticized by those who stress its magical and theurgic elements,⁵¹ I agree with Dan that the value accorded to gaining knowledge of God is striking. The fact that knowledge of God is now the ideal does bring this material closer to philosophic values. Yet this fact alone does not turn this passage into an early articulation of what would become the philosophic ethos. As is made clear elsewhere in the text, the knowledge of the divine measurements is gained in revelatory fashion. They were revealed to R. Akiva and R. Ishmael by the angel Metatron.⁵² There is no sense that intellectual effort played any role in gaining this knowledge. Furthermore, the above passages, themselves, do not seem

⁴⁸ On the meaning of this word, see Abrams, “The Dimensions of the Creator—Contradiction or Paradox? Corruptions and Accretions to the Manuscript Witnesses,” 37–39.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, 150–152. I translated this passage in consultation with Cohen’s translation that appears in *ibid.*

⁵⁰ See Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism*, II, 908–913 and Joseph Dan, “The Concept of Knowledge in the *Shi'ur Qomah*,” in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History*, eds. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 67–73; reprinted in Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), I, 205–215. The relevant remarks appear on pp. 213–214. See also the comments in Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination: Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 145–150.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983); Asi Farber-Ginat, “*Iyyunim be-sefer shi'ur komah*,” in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 361–394.

⁵² Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, 127, 136.

to demand such effort. On the contrary, the recommendation at the end of the second passage that the measurements of the divine stature be studied each day seems to suggest a rote form of study, in which the *Shi'ur Komah* tract is simply reviewed, as opposed to intellectual investigation.⁵³ In short, the key elements of the philosophic ethos are absent.

⁵³ In this context, let me adduce another passage, which, to a certain extent, parallels the passages from *Shi'ur Komah*. While it appears in *Midrash Mishlé*, it is related to both *hekhlot* and *Shi'ur Komah* material, as already pointed out by Scholem in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 71. It refers to the questions that a person will be asked by God when he comes before Him to be judged:

If the person who comes has [knowledge of] the Talmud in hand, God says to Him, "My son, having studied (*ve-nit'assakta*) Talmud, have you gone on to glance (*tsafiyot*, apparently a corruption of *tsafitah*) at the chariot? Have you glanced (*tsafitah*) at its glory? I derive no greater pleasure from the world that I created than when the disciples of the sages sit and behold and look and see *ve-hogin hegyon* (see the discussion below) all of this great teaching. What is the [nature] of My throne of glory? How does the first leg [of the throne] function? How does the second leg function? How does the third leg function? How does the fourth leg function?... Greater than all, how does Rigyon beneath My throne of glory stand?... More important than these, how do I stand, from My toe[nails] to the top of my head? What is the measure of My hand's span? What is the measure of my foot?... Is this not My glory? Is this [not] My greatness? Is this [not] My might? Is this not My splendor? Is this [not] the splendor of My beauty that My children recognize My glory by this measurement? Of this David said, "How many are the things You have made, O Lord" (Ps. 104:24)! Hence R. Ishmael said: Happy is the disciple of the sages who preserves his learning in his heart, so that he will have the wherewithal to answer God on Judgment day. [*Midrash mishlé*, ch. 10. My translation is based on *The Midrash on Proverbs*, trans. Burton L. Visotzky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 57–58 with some emendations. For the original Hebrew, see Burton L. Visotzky, *Midrash Mishlé* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), 84–86.]

This passage certainly makes clear that gaining intricate knowledge of God is an important ideal, but does it also require active investigation of God? If so, it would be close in spirit to the philosophic ethos. Certainly, R. Azriel of Gerona, who cites this passage without offering any commentary (*Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 124–125), would have understood it in this manner. My above translation follows the main text provided by Visotzky in his critical edition. In R. Azriel's *Commentary*, however, the text appears with a variant, which may lend support to such an interpretation, that is not found in Visotzky's main text (or in any of the variants supplied in his critical apparatus). Thus instead of "My son, having studied (*ve-nit'assakta*) Talmud, have you gone on to glance at the chariot?," R. Azriel's version reads, "My son, having studied (*ve-nit'assakta*) Talmud, why did you not *study* (*nit'assakta*) the chariot?" It is possible that "study the chariot" implies some sort of active investigation of God—a connotation absent in Visotzky's main text (or in any of the variants in his critical apparatus), which mentions *studying* the Talmud but only *gazing* upon the chariot.

Crucial to understanding the relationship of the passage to the value of investigating God is deciphering the words *ve-hogin hegyon*. ("I derive no greater pleasure from the world that I created than when the disciples of the sages sit and behold and look and see *ve-hogin hegyon* of all this great teaching.") Both of these words come from the

This did not, however, prevent these passages from being read as an articulation of this ethos. Both the *hekhlot* literature, in general, and the *Shi'ur Komah* tract, in particular, were embraced by the German Pietists. As we shall see in the next section, the German Pietists took the first of the above passages and read it in the light of the notion, which they received from philosophic material, that there is great religious value in investigating God; thereby, they turned it into a source for this value.

VI

At around the same time as the emergence of Kabbalah as a literary tradition in Languedoc and Catalonia, another esoteric literary tradition also emerged in the German Rhineland. I refer to the literature of the German Pietists.⁵⁴ Like the first Kabbalists, the German Pietists,

root HGY, which can mean either recite or contemplate (or ponder). Moshe Idel in *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, 171, apparently following a variant that just reads *ve-hogin*, translates “ponder.” [This is also the variant reproduced in Moshe Idel, “The Concept of Torah in Hekhalot Literature and Its Metamorphosis in Kabbalah,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), 35 [in Hebrew], which Idel took from the reading supplied in Urbach, “The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period,” 24–25 (Hebrew section). This variant is reproduced, as well, in Visotzky’s critical apparatus and in R. Azriel’s version.] Visotzky, for his part, following the variant *ve-hogin hegyon*, translates the phrase as “contemplate the recitation.” Visotzky’s translation of *hegyon* as “recitation” is perfectly reasonable and finds precedents elsewhere in Rabbinic literature. Indeed, at times in Rabbinic literature, the term *hegyon* is used to signify cursory reading as opposed to engaged study. Thus, for example, in *P. Sanhedrin* 10:1 it is stated that certain works “were intended for *hegyon* (i.e. cursory reading) and not for intense study (*yegi’ah*).” Along similar lines, it is perfectly plausible to translate *hogin* as “pronounce” or “recite” rather than, following Idel or Visotzky, as “ponder” or “contemplate.” Thus, for example, various Rabbinic sources speak of one who “pronounces (*ha-hogeh*) the Tetragrammaton according to its letters (i.e. pronouncing it as it is written, rather than substituting an epithet) (e.g. *M. Sanhedrin* 10:1). Thus the phrase *ve-hogin hegyon* could be translated as “pronounce the recitation”—in other words, read aloud material related to the chariot and the measurements of God’s stature—or (following the other variant) simply “recite.” If this translation is correct, then the passage (with the possible exception of R. Azriel’s variant) does not advocate investigation of the nature of God, but merely the recitation of received facts. Such a translation is in keeping with the end of the passage, where R. Ishmael praises one who “preserves his learning in his heart”—that is, one who memorizes the material. In short, it seems likely to me that this passage is advocating rote recitation of facts regarding the divine chariot and God, which will lead to their memorization. If so, R. Ishmael’s recommendation here is in keeping with his recommendation in the *Shi'ur Komah* text, cited above, and does not involve actively investigating God.

⁵⁴ For surveys of this literature, see Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968); Joseph Dan, *R. Judah He-Hasid*

whose chief expositors include R. Judah the Pious (c. 1150–1217) and R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (c. 1176–1238), also began the process of transferring into writing a set of esoteric traditions that had been transmitted orally. Also, like the first Kabbalists, they expanded and systematized their traditions, combining them with midrashic, *hekhalot*, and philosophic material.⁵⁵ Since there was no translation movement in the Rhineland comparable to that in Languedoc, their access to philosophic material was far more constricted: their main sources of philosophic material were limited to the writings of R. Shabbetai Donnolo, R. Abraham ibn Ezra, and a periphrastic translation of R. Saadia Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* which was different from the translation employed by the first Kabbalists. Notably, under the influence of the works of Ibn Ezra and R. Saadia, the German Pietists also expounded the notion that investigating God is a chief value.⁵⁶

While the first Kabbalists had some knowledge of the works of the German Pietists, including of passages which speak to the value of investigating God,⁵⁷ my claim is not that the former adopted this value from the latter. Each group did so independently, on the basis of partially overlapping philosophic materials. My main interest in the phenomenon of German Pietism, rather, is as a parallel phenomenon to the beginnings of Kabbalah. The nearly contemporaneous emergence of two bodies of discourse with deep interest in the nature of God, both of which systematize and expand often parallel received traditions, is not merely coincidental. On the contrary, it seems that for both, this process is partially connected to the adoption of the value of

[in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2005); Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

⁵⁵ An overview of the literary sources of the German Pietists can be found in Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*, 9–33. Below, I cite some passages from R. Eleazar's *Sodé Razaya*, in which he makes it explicit that he engaged in such synthesis.

⁵⁶ While certain statements in Shabbetai Donnolo's *Sefer Hakhmoni* resonate, in broad terms, with the philosophic ethos [see, e.g., *Sefer hakhmoni*, ed. Piergabriele Mancuso (Florence: Giuntina, 2009), 114, ll. 319ff; 230, ll. 165ff], this work lacks the explicit statements in support of the value of investigating God that are found in the works of Ibn Ezra and R. Saadia. Accordingly, this work cannot be considered a major source for the German Pietists' adoption of the philosophic ethos.

⁵⁷ For example, R. Asher ben David cites a poetic passage from the work of R. Eleazar of Worms. [See *R. Asher ben David*, 121 and the comments of Abrams on p. 17.] This passage ends with the statement, "Know the One and then you will understand [divine] unity." Similarly Nahmanides cites material from R. Eleazar that concerns the value of investigating God. See chapter six, near n. 62.

investigating God. Here, though, I would inject a note of caution. The German Pietists were active in a very different cultural milieu than the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, and my argument is not that they fully espoused the philosophic ethos in all of its ramifications. Nevertheless, the fact that they did adopt the value of investigating God from philosophic sources is significant.

A full evaluation of the wide-ranging work of the German Pietists is impossible here, and, short of such an evaluation, my findings must remain tentative. Rather than discussing the pietistic corpus as a whole, I will focus on the works of R. Eleazar of Worms. While R. Judah also composed theological writings,⁵⁸ it is R. Eleazar who fully established the literary tradition of theological and esoteric thought of the German Pietists. His work is thus of prime significance in understanding the development of German Pietism.

While there are places in his work where he speaks against applying intellectual inquiry to investigate specific divine matters,⁵⁹ in more general terms, he stresses the value of actively investigating God. I will suffice with three examples from his work.⁶⁰

At the opening of his *Sefer Sha'aré ha-Yihud veba-'Emunah* (*The Book of the Gates of Unity and Faith*), R. Eleazar makes the following statement:

We are obligated to know through the knowledge of our intellectual wisdom (*anahnu hayyavin leda' be-madda' sekhel hokhmatenu*) that God is eternal.... We will unify Him in the intention of our heart each day by saying "Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4)... 'Our God' [refers to] the acceptance of His kingship upon us, because so we have shown with our intellects (*ken hor'enu be-sikhlenu*), [as it is written]: "You have been shown to know that the Lord alone is God; there is none beside him" (Deut. 4:35); "Know therefore this day

⁵⁸ His most important theological writing was *Sefer ha-Kavod*, part of which apparently should be identified with the material from MS Oxford 1567 published by Joseph Dan in *Studies in Ashkenazi-Hasidic Literature* [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Masadah, 1975), 148–187. For an example of a passage from this material that stresses the value of investigating God, see p. 154. On the identification of this material with *Sefer ha-Kavod*, see Dan, *R. Judah He-Hasid*, 103–111.

⁵⁹ See the examples cited in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 238.

⁶⁰ For other examples, see Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Sefer ha-rokeah*, ed. Y. E. Rosenfeld (Brooklyn, NY: Y. E. Rosenfeld, 1998), 85 (*shoresh kedushat ha-yihud*); Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Perushé siddur ha-tefillah la-Rokeah*, eds. Moshe Hershtler and Yehudah A. Hershtler (Jerusalem: H. Vagshal, 1992), I, 79; II, 658. See also chapter six, n. 63.

and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other” (Deut. 4:39).⁶¹

In a passage somewhat later in the text, R. Eleazar makes a similar point:

Therefore you should contemplate the Creator and nothing else. For this reason Moses warned you in the Torah: “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God” (Deut. 4:39). And in the Prophets it is written “[But only in this should one glory]: that he understands and knows Me. For I the Lord [act with kindness etc.]” (Jer. 9:23). And in the Writings, David said to Solomon “And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind” (1 Chron. 28:9). Therefore, I will warn you and teach you to solely contemplate, by means of intellectual inquiry, the Creator of the world (*va-hashov be-madda’akha rak ‘al bore’ ha-’olam*), God, and when you know Him, then you will know how to worship Him.⁶²

In these passages, R. Eleazar, following philosophic precedents, strongly advocates the value of investigating God.⁶³ He offers the standard prooftexts in support of this value—including Deut. 4:39 and Jer. 9:23. He also, as in philosophic material, stresses that knowledge of God is a prerequisite for worshipping God, and, to prove this point, he cites 1 Chron. 28:9, the verse used in philosophical material for the same purpose.

In a passage in another work, his voluminous *Sodé Razaya*, R. Eleazar does not invoke the verses standard in philosophic literature in support of the value of studying God. Instead, he alludes to the first of

⁶¹ Joseph Dan, “*Sefer sha’aré ha-yihud veba-’emunah’ le R. El’azar me-vurms*,” *Temirin 1* (1972), 142–143.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶³ It is of interest that R. Eleazar ha-Darshan, the grandson of R. Judah the Pious, polemicized against this viewpoint. In his brief *Sefer ha-Yihud*, R. Eleazar ha-Darshan states: “A person should be careful not to excessively inquire (*lidrosh*) and investigate (*ve-lahkor*) regarding the matter of divine unity (*be-’inyan ha-yihud*)” [Daniel Abrams, “*Sefer ha-yihud le-R. El’azar ha-Darshan*,” *Kovets ‘al yad 12* (1993), 158.] Daniel Abrams notes in “The *Shekhinah* Prays before God: A New Text Concerning the Theosophic Orientation of the German Pietists and Their Method for the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrines,” *Tarbiz 63* (1994), 521 [in Hebrew] that this view may set R. Eleazar ha-Darshan apart from other members of the German Pietists. At the same time, however, R. Eleazar ha-Darshan does affirm that there is a commandment to know that there is a God and a commandment to unify Him [for the text, Abrams, “*Sefer ha-yihud le-R. El’azar ha-Darshan*,” 157]. However, it seems that this commandment does not require investigation, but accepting received views. Cf. Abrams’ related comments in “The *Shekhinah* Prays before God,” 521.

the passages from the *Shi'ur Komah* tract, cited above. As we have seen, the *Shi'ur Komah* passage, in its original context, does not actually preach the value of investigating God. However, it is read in this manner by R. Eleazar:

I will write this work, which is called *Sodé Razaya*, to inform regarding the greatness (*gevurot*) of the Creator of the world; and praiseworthy is he who knows Him (*ve-'ashré ha-yode'ó*). *For everyone who knows this secret (raz zeh) and fears the Lord is promised that he will be a member of the world to come.* And I will write for you, in the form of chapters, all that exists above, so that you will know the unity of the Glory. Place His fear in your heart and bow down to Him, because He is one and has no second, blessed be He.⁶⁴

Here, then, R. Eleazar explains that he has written *Sodé Razaya* to provide knowledge regarding God. It is apparent that R. Eleazar's statement, "For everyone who knows this secret (*raz zeh*) and fears the Lord is promised that he will be a member of the world to come," is a close paraphrase of the first of the passages from *Shi'ur Komah* cited above, "He who knows this secret is promised that he will be a member of the world to come." Thus, R. Eleazar understands this passage as stating the imperative that one must strive to attain knowledge of God.

R. Eleazar does not explicitly state that this knowledge must be derived from investigation and not merely from received tradition. However, in light of passages from elsewhere in his writings, such as those cited above (as well as others, not discussed here),⁶⁵ there is no doubt that this is the case. Indeed, elsewhere in *Sodé Razaya*, R. Eleazar makes clear that he is engaged in the kind of investigation of God that we have seen in the works of R. Ezra of Gerona, the member of R. Isaac's circle. That is, he is engaged in bringing together inherited traditions, Rabbinic materials, and other written material of a more philosophic nature, in developing his theology. This is not the syllogistic reasoning of the philosophers, but it is an attempt to actively investigate God, all the same. For example, he states:

⁶⁴ Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Sefer sodé razaya, ḥelek alef; sefer sodé razaya, ḥelek bet; sefer ha-shem* (Jerusalem: Mekhon sodé razaya, 2004), 10.

⁶⁵ For other examples of passages in which R. Eleazar stresses the value of investigating God, see n. 60 above.

I will write for you the secrets of the chariot as I received from our Rabbi, the pious one, R. Judah, who received from his father, our Rabbi, R. Samuel the pious one. And I have also received from the mouth of my father and teacher, Rabbi Judah—I, Eleazar the small one—and also as I have seen in books and midrashim, each matter as is fitting.⁶⁶

In this passage, R. Eleazar explains that he is drawing on the traditions of R. Judah the Pious and of his own father, as well as on unspecified books, which surely include the periphrastic translation of R. Saadia Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and Ibn Ezra's works—material that he draws on frequently—and, finally, on midrashic works. Similarly, at the end of his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, a section of *Sodé Razaya*, he notes:

This is the conclusion of *Sefer Yetsirah* and its explanation, which I received from Rabbi Shabbetai the son of Rabbi Abraham, the physician, expert, and sage, and as I received from my father and teacher R. Judah the son of Kalonymos. And I have also received from R. Judah the Pious, the son of our Rabbi, R. Samuel. And I have added explanations—I, R. Eleazar, the small one.⁶⁷

R. Eleazar thus explains that his commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* is based on the commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* (*Hakhmoni*) by Shabbetai Donnolo, on teachings that he received from his father, R. Judah, and those he received from his teacher, R. Judah the Pious, and on his own insights.

The upshot of the preceding analysis, then, is that R. Eleazar tied his decision to write his most significant esoteric work, *Sodé Razaya*, to the value of investigating God. It is true that in another work, *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, R. Eleazar cites personal reasons for his decision to record esoteric traditions, namely, the death of his teacher R. Judah and the untimely death of his son, such that he has no one to whom to pass down his esoteric traditions.⁶⁸ However, as noted, R. Eleazar does far more than merely record received traditions. Personal circumstances

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁷ Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Sefer sodé razayya ha-shalem* (Israel: Aharon Barzini u-veno, 2004), 324.

⁶⁸ Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, "Sefer ha-hokhmah," in *Rokeach: A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Chaim Konyevsky [in Hebrew] (Bnei Brak, Israel: Yeshivat ohel Yosef, 1986), I, 11–12.

alone cannot explain his decision to develop and expand these traditions.

There are of course many factors that need to be weighed when considering the emergence of the complex phenomenon of German Pietism. For example, Elliot Wolfson has discussed the impact of the crusades on certain aspects of German Pietism.⁶⁹ A promising approach can also be seen in the work of Talya Fishman, who has discussed the emergence of German Pietism as a literary tradition in the context of a broader turn to textualization in Northern Europe.⁷⁰ In addition to these and other approaches, I suggest that another factor worth considering is the impact of the philosophic value of investigating God. To the extent that it is possible to generalize from the works of R. Eleazar to the broader phenomenon of German Pietism, I would tentatively suggest that one piece of the explanation for the emergence of the literary tradition of the German Pietists is the same force that I believe was at work in the emergence of Kabbalah. I have argued, and will detail in the forthcoming chapters, that in the case of Kabbalah, the influence of the newly-available philosophic material, with its call to investigate God, led the first Kabbalists to develop and expand their traditions. It seems that a similar process may have been at work in the works of R. Eleazar, and perhaps in German Pietism more broadly. Indeed, the above passages from R. Eleazar's *Sodé Razaya* raise the possibility that his attempt to combine received esoteric traditions with other streams of thought was a self-conscious one, directed at forging a new religious discourse in the service of investigating God.

⁶⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Martyrdom, Eroticism, and Asceticism in Twelfth-Century Ashkenazi Piety," in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, eds. J. Van Engen and M. Singer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 171–220. Wolfson stresses the need to avoid a reductive approach to the emergence of German Pietism.

⁷⁰ Talya Fishman, "Rhineland Pietist Approaches to Prayer and the Textualization of Rabbinic Culture in Medieval Northern Europe," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11 (2004), 313–331; Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 182–217. Her discussion includes an insightful analysis of the passage from *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* in which R. Eleazar explains his decision to record esoteric traditions. See "Rhineland Pietist Approaches to Prayer and the Textualization of Rabbinic Culture in Medieval Northern Europe," 329–330; *Becoming the People of the Talmud*, 215–216.

VII

Among the works translated by R. Judah ibn Tibbon was *Sefer ha-Kuzari* by R. Judah ha-Levi (d. 1141), a work in which Ha-Levi creates a fictional exchange between a Rabbi and the king of the Khazars over matters of religious faith. The legacy of this work is difficult to assess. While recent scholarship has argued that the contrast between the *Kuzari* and rationalist philosophic literature should not be exaggerated,⁷¹ in general the *Kuzari* has been treated as a paragon of anti-philosophic sentiment. Accordingly scholars, who see a sharp break between Kabbalah and rationalist philosophy, have drawn a straight line between the *Kuzari* and early Kabbalah, placing both on the same anti-philosophic continuum. Thus, Scholem remarks: “In my opinion there is a direct connection between Jehudah Halevi, the most Jewish of Jewish philosophers, and the Kabbalists. For the legitimate trustees of his spiritual heritage have been the mystics, and not the succeeding generations of Jewish philosophers.”⁷²

Even if we leave aside the question of whether Scholem’s assessment is accurate when it comes to matters of worldview, it seems to me that, from the perspective of ethos, the lines should be drawn quite differently. In my view, both philosophers and the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle stand united in adopting an ethos explicitly rejected by Ha-Levi. In contrast, as I will argue in chapter six, Nahmanides is much closer to Ha-Levi on this score.

⁷¹ See e.g. Howard T. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 94–147 and the sources cited there, p. 96, n. 5; Diana Lobel, “‘Taste and See that the Lord is Good’: Ha-Levi’s God Re-visited,” in *Be’erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 161–178. As Adam Shear has pointed out, it was not until the nineteenth century that the image of the *Kuzari* as a strident critique of rationalist thought became the predominant one. See his *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167–1900* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also Elliot Wolfson’s nuanced evaluation that takes into account “the complicated interweaving of the threads of philosophy and mysticism” in Ha-Levi’s thought” (*Through a Speculum that Shines*, 187. Wolfson’s full consideration of Ha-Levi appears on pp. 163–187). See also Wolfson’s extended discussion in “Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990–1991): 179–242.

⁷² Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 24. A more moderate stance is taken by Adam Shear, who notes that the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle did not adopt the philosophy of the *Kuzari* in any wholesale way. Rather, they used the work as a source for certain conceptual terminology. See *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167–1900*, 72–73.

Ha-Levi's rejection of the philosophic ethos emerges sharply in a very telling exchange recorded by R. Abraham ibn Ezra in his exegesis of Exod. 20:1–2, the opening of the Decalogue, in his long commentary on the book of Exodus. It will be recalled that Ibn Ezra was among the first figures to write on philosophic matters in Hebrew, and his work played an important role in the emergence of a philosophic tradition in Languedoc. According to Ibn Ezra, "R. Judah ha-Levi, may he rest in glory, asked me, why did He say 'I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt' (Exod. 20:2), rather than '[I am the Lord your God] who made heaven and earth, and I made you?'"⁷³ Ibn Ezra explains that the first part of the verse, "I am the Lord your God," is directed at the philosophers, who are able to gain knowledge of God through philosophic investigation of the world. While he is not entirely clear on the matter, he seems to suggest that it will be apparent to one who engages in such investigation that God is the Creator, since such investigation leads to ample evidence of divine design. For such a person, therefore, it would be superfluous for the verse to state that God is the Creator. Now, Ibn Ezra makes clear that he holds that knowledge of God derived through philosophic investigation is the ideal. Indeed, later in the same discussion, he cites the familiar Deut. 4:39 and 1 Chron. 28:9 as prooftexts for this ideal. Yet not everyone is (or can become) a philosopher. Thus, it is in a concession to this reality that the verse concludes, "who took you out of Egypt." This conclusion is directed at non-philosophers, who are only able to gain knowledge of God by observing his miraculous intervention in human history. As Ibn Ezra puts the matter: "He mentioned 'I am the Lord' for the enlightened one, and He added 'who took you out [of Egypt]' so that both the enlightened and the unenlightened will understand."⁷⁴

Ibn Ezra does not reproduce Ha-Levi's side of this exchange, but Ha-Levi presents his own views in the *Kuzari*. In the *Kuzari*, the Rabbi's opening discourse on the nature of Judaism begins with the following statement: "I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles."⁷⁵

⁷³ Abraham ibn Ezra, *Perushé ha-torah*, 2:131.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:132.

⁷⁵ *Kuzari*, 1:11. All my translations of the *Kuzari* are based on *Kitab al Khazari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1905) in consultation with Judah ha-Levi, *Le Kuzari: apologie de la religion méprisée*, trans. Charles Touati (Louvain; Paris: Peeters, 1994). For the present passage, see Hirschfeld, 44; Touati, 8. For Judah ibn Tibbon's translation, see *Sefer ha-kuzari*, ed. Avraham

The response of the Khazar King to this statement mirrors the question that Ha-Levi had asked of Ibn Ezra: “Should you not have said, O Jew, that you believe in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in Him who created and keeps you, and such attributes, which serve as evidence for every believer, and for the sake of which he pursues justice, in order to resemble the Creator in His wisdom and justice?”⁷⁶ In what is both a rejection of Ibn Ezra’s point of view and more generally the philosophic ethos, which makes investigating God a key value, the Rabbi responds in the following manner: “That which you express is logical and political religion, which speculation leads to, but it contains many doubts.”⁷⁷ Following up on these remarks, somewhat further on, he explains:

In the same manner Moses spoke to Pharaoh, when he told him: “The God of the Hebrews sent me to you” (Exod. 7:16); that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For their reputation was well known to the nations, who also knew that the divine⁷⁸ was in contact with the patriarchs, cared for them, and performed miracles for them. He did not say: “The God of heaven and earth,” nor “my Creator and your Creator sent me.” In the same way, God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: “I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 20:2), but He did not say: “I am the Creator of the world and your Creator.” Now, in the same style, I spoke to you, Prince of the Khazars, when you asked about my creed. I answered you as was fitting, and is fitting for the whole of Israel who knew these things, first from visual experience, and afterwards through uninterrupted tradition, which is equivalent to visual experience.⁷⁹

Ha-Levi, then, rejects Ibn Ezra’s reading of Exod. 20:2. He does not split the verse into two components, where the first half (“I am the Lord your God”) relates to philosophers, who must prove God rationally, and the second part (“who took you out of the land of Egypt”) relates to non-philosophers, who only can know God through His intervention in history. He rather sees a unified verse in which the second part clarifies the first part. On this reading, the verse thus proclaims that all should know God on the basis of witnessing his intervention

Tsifroni (Tel-Aviv: Maḥbarot le-sifrut, 1964), 17. Future references to Ibn Tibbon’s translation are to this edition.

⁷⁶ *Kuzari*, 1:12; Hirschfeld, 44–45; Touati, 9; Tibbon, 17.

⁷⁷ *Kuzari*, 1:13; Hirschfeld, 45; Touati, 9; Tibbon, 18.

⁷⁸ Here I follow Touati who translates *amr al-ilāhī* (Tibbon *‘inyan ha-’elohi*) simply as “le divin.” See his comments on p. xiii.

⁷⁹ *Kuzari*, 1:25; Hirschfeld, 46; Touati, 10; Tibbon, 20.

in history or on the basis of uninterrupted tradition recounting this intervention. This is because, from his point of view, only visual or traditional knowledge is assuredly certain. More broadly, the crux of R. Judah's debate with Ibn Ezra is the former's rejection of the notion that philosophic investigation of God is a key value and his emphasis instead on personal religious experience and tradition.⁸⁰

Ha-Levi's primary target here and elsewhere in the *Kuzari* is the attitude that one should investigate God based on the tools of syllogistic reasoning. As noted, while the first Kabbalists do investigate God through these tools, their primary mode of investigation is hermeneutical. I would suggest, however, that Ha-Levi would reject even this type of investigation. As Diana Lobel has argued, Ha-Levi critiques Karaite legal *ijtihād* (lit. striving)—the attempt to develop legislation through human reason—but he also “extends his critique of *ijtihād* to include any human-initiated effort to reach the Divine.”⁸¹ As she explains Ha-Levi's position: “Zealous striving is impressive at first glance, but *ijtihād* can be misleading. Authentic spirituality is expressed not in excessive striving, but in quiet certainty, resting on the bedrock of God-given law and true tradition.”⁸² Thus, even the Kabbalists' mode of hermeneutical investigation would be unacceptable to Ha-Levi since it does not rely merely on tradition or experience, but requires human effort. Indeed the strong statements in the literature of the first Kabbalists that we will sample in the next chapter, which stress the need to investigate God, are unthinkable in the *Kuzari*.

Not surprisingly, Ha-Levi also rejects the notion, central in the philosophic (and Kabbalistic) literature, that there is a relationship between investigating God and loving God. In a key passage in the *Kuzari*, Ha-Levi distinguishes between two divine names, Elohim (usually translated as God) and YHVH (The Tetragrammaton, usually translated as Lord). Elohim is the God of Aristotle, which “can be grasped by means of syllogistic reasoning,”⁸³ while YHVH is the God of Abraham “who cannot be grasped by syllogistic reasoning, but only

⁸⁰ For further analysis of the debate between Ibn Ezra and Ha-Levi, see Harvey, “The First Commandment and the God of History,” 203–209. On Ha-Levi's rejection of philosophic investigation of God, see Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), esp. 55–87.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 68. Cf., 66.

⁸³ *Kuzari*, 4:15; Hirschfeld, 222; Touati, 168; Tibbon, 246.

by that prophetic vision by which man almost separates from his species and joins the species of angels.”⁸⁴ When a man reaches this level, “There vanish all previous doubts of man concerning Elohim, and he despises all these syllogistic proofs by means of which men endeavor to attain knowledge of His dominion and unity. Then he becomes a servant who is passionate for the object of his service and is ready to perish for the sake of love, finding the greatest sweetness in his connection with Him, the greatest sorrow in separation from Him.”⁸⁵ In response to this statement of the Rabbi, the Khazar king remarks: “The difference between God (*Elohim*) and the Lord (YHVH) has become clear, and I understand the difference between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle. To the Lord we yearn, with a yearning of tasting and witnessing, but to God we draw near through syllogistic reasoning.”⁸⁶ Thus, in contrast to the philosophic sources considered above, in which investigating God will lead to love of God (or even is identified with loving God), for Ha-Levi, love of God becomes possible only once one despises such investigation. As Diana Lobel explained, Ha-Levi employs the terms “tasting” and “witnessing” in the manner in which Sufi and philosophic texts use them, where they suggest an immediate perception of God, not dependent on human reasoning.⁸⁷

Further evidence of Ha-Levi’s rejection of the philosophic ethos comes from his rejection of a connection between knowledge of God and prayer. As we have seen, in the newly available philosophic literature (as well as in early Kabbalistic literature), 1 Chron. 28:9 is used as a proof-text for the notion that intellectual knowledge of God must be a prerequisite for worship. (“And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart and fervent mind.”)

⁸⁴ *Kuzari*, 4:15; Hirschfeld, 222; Touati, 168; Tibbon, 246.

⁸⁵ *Kuzari*, 4:15; Hirschfeld, 222; Touati, 169; Tibbon, 246.

⁸⁶ *Kuzari*, 4:16; Hirschfeld, 223; Touati, 169; Tibbon, 247.

⁸⁷ Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy*, 89–102. I would note, however, that Lobel has also stressed that the contrast between knowledge of God through philosophic investigation and the knowledge of God championed by Ha-Levi which involves “tasting and viewing Him” should not be exaggerated. After all, Ha-Levi does maintain a “philosophic” understanding of God which entails a Deity free of anthropomorphism whose unity is defined by absence of composition. Moreover Ha-Levi assigns to the intellect the crucial role of translating the visual images of God that the prophet perceives in his imaginative faculty into abstract terms. [See Lobel, “Taste and See that the Lord is Good,” 161–178.] Even, however, if the intellect does, therefore, play some sort of role in loving God, it is apparent that, fundamentally, in Ha-Levi’s view, love of God does not emerge from human effort to understand God, but rather arises from the taste and vision of God that God must bestow.

Ha-Levi, on the other hand, dismisses this notion, and the use of the Biblical verse as a proof-text, labeling it as a Karaite view:⁸⁸

Leave also alone the argument of the Karaites, taken from David's command to his son: "And you my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him" (1 Chron. 28:9). They conclude from this verse that a complete knowledge of God must precede His worship. As a matter of fact, David reminded his son to receive from his father and ancestors the belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose providence was with them, and who fulfilled His promises in multiplying their descendants, gave them the inheritance of Israel, and caused His Shekinah to dwell among them.⁸⁹

This amounts to a categorical rejection of the key understanding of the nature of worship, which is central to the philosophic ethos.

Thus while the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle certainly drew on the teachings of the *Kuzari*, as they developed their worldview, this work did not serve as a source for their adoption of the philosophic ethos. In fact, from the perspective of ethos, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle broke with Ha-Levi.

On the basis of the analysis in this chapter, it is clear that Rabbinic literature also did not serve as a basis for these Kabbalists' ethos. They had wide knowledge of and the utmost respect for this literature. They drew heavily on it—far more so than on the *Kuzari*—in formulating their worldview. Yet, as I have shown, this literature does not present investigating God as a religiously crucial value. Similarly, in the *hekhalot* corpus, of which these Kabbalists were somewhat less enamored, the value of investigating God, understood as employing intellectual effort to gain knowledge of God, does not emerge as a central value. Of the material surveyed in this chapter, only the writings of the German Pietists betray a strong commitment to this value. The Pietists, however, embraced this value under the sway of some of the same philosophic sources that influenced the first Kabbalists.

⁸⁸ For Karaite sources for this view, see Judah ha-Levi, *Le Kuzari: apologie de la religion méprisée*, 234, n. 260. See also Daniel J. Lasker, "Karaite Attitudes Towards Religion and Science," in *Torah et science: perspectives historiques et théoriques*, eds. Gad Freudenthal, Jean-Pierre Rothschild and Gilbert Dahan (Sterling, Va.; Paris; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 119–120 and the literature cited there.

⁸⁹ *Kuzari* 5:21; Hirschfeld, 292; Touati, 233–244; Tibbon, 330.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PHILOSOPHIC ETHOS IN THE WRITINGS OF THE FIRST KABBALISTS

I

In this chapter, I describe the manner in which the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle adopted the value of investigating God. In adopting this value, they were making an untraditional move. As we have seen, the notion that investigating God plays a foundational role in religious life is absent from traditional Rabbinic Judaism. It is, rather, a fundamental innovation imported by medieval Jewish philosophers into Judaism.¹ Yet the Kabbalists, keepers of a long tradition of *kabbalot*, adopted it nevertheless, elaborating their traditions in its light.

A statement on the issue is already found in R. Abraham b. David's *Ba'alé ha-Nefesh*. R. Abraham, it will be recalled, was the father of R. Isaac the Blind. While R. Abraham did not leave any Kabbalistic writings, we have Kabbalistic traditions in his name, and he offers a few allusions to esoteric matters in his works.² Furthermore, R. Isaac received Kabbalistic traditions from him.³ According to R. Abraham:

¹ Herbert Davidson in "The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation," 12, notes, in passing, that Kabbalists share with the philosophers, who are his focus, "The assumption that knowledge of God and His manifestations has at least the religious value of immersing oneself in ritual and civil law, even God-given ritual and civil law." The extent to which this is the case will be made quite clear here.

² See Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières*, 286–300; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 205–226; Idel, "Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence," 265–286; Daniel Abrams, "From Divine Shape to Angelic Being: The Career of Akatriel in Jewish Literature," *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), 55–59.

³ This is implied in a letter by R. Isaac to Nahmanides and R. Jonah Gerondi in which he critiques his own students for disseminating Kabbalistic materials in writing. There he notes that his fathers, presumably a reference to his father R. Abraham ben David and his grandfather R. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, knew esoteric traditions. See Scholem, "*Te'udah hadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabbalah*," 11. As Scholem already noted long ago (*ibid.*, 21–22), this letter corroborates statements made by R. Ezra of Gerona and R. Jacob ben Sheshet in which they transmit teachings from R. Isaac in the name of his father.

The very first [principle] is that a person should know his Maker (*she-yeda' et yotsero*) and recognize his Creator (*ve-yakkir et bore'o*). And he should direct his heart [towards knowing] (*ve-yitten el libbo*) Whom he should worship, Whom he should fear, the commandments of Whom should he observe, and Who warned him [regarding the commandments], as David said to Solomon, "Know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart" (I Chron. 28:9). Even though He is hidden from the eyes of every living creature, He is present in hearts and revealed in thoughts.⁴

That R. Abraham in this passage is indebted to the philosophic ethos is clear, in the first instance, from his use of I Chron. 28:9 as a proof-text for the point that knowledge of God is a prerequisite for prayer and keeping the commandments. As we saw, this verse is used in the same manner in the newly available philosophic literature, but not in Rabbinic literature. Furthermore, when R. Abraham refers to the great importance of knowing and recognizing God, he does not merely employ these verbs, in the manner found in Rabbinic literature, to suggest acknowledging the existence of God. On the contrary, he means actively seeking out knowledge of God. This is implied by the tenor of his rhetoric. "And he should direct his heart [towards knowing]" (*ve-yitten el libbo*) suggests actively engaging the intellect (=the heart).

The active nature of the investigation is also clear from the immediate continuation of the above passage in which R. Abraham proceeds to offer a logical proof of the unity and eternity of God:

Every created being should know that he is neither separated from the Maker nor compounded to Him, for any compound is limited, and anything limited is created. But the Creator has none of these attributes, for He precedes all. He is neither limited nor created.⁵

Recognizing and knowing God means, therefore, not only acknowledging His existence but also understanding that He is a perfect unity, where unity means absence of composition or simplicity. Arriving at this understanding of divine unity involves intellectual effort, as it is derived from a logical proof: God is not a compound of various separable elements, because a compound is, by definition, limited, whereas God is unlimited. As Isadore Twersky notes, this proof is a paraphrase

⁴ R. Abraham ben David, *Ba'alé ha-nefesh*, ed. Yosef Kafah (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964), 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

of comments in R. Baḥya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*⁶—a work, incidentally, whose translation was completed at R. Abraham's urging⁷—and indeed, it seems likely that he had in mind R. Baḥya's strong statements about the need to investigate God when he composed the entire passage.

How far-reaching is R. Abraham's contention that one should investigate God? This passage does not appear in a Kabbalistic context, and, since R. Abraham did not compose Kabbalistic works, we cannot be sure how his sentiments here relate to his esoteric ideas. According to this passage, God's unity is one of simplicity. How, for example, does this conception relate to an esoteric tradition in R. Abraham's name, according to which divine unity means the coming together of multiple aspects of God?⁸ As will be seen below, his grandson, R. Asher

⁶ Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières*, 277. R. Baḥya's remarks which R. Abraham paraphrases can be found in *Duties of the Heart*, 1:7. I cite them in R. Judah ibn Tibbon's translation:

Anything divisible (*nifrash*) is limited (*mugbal*) and anything limited is finite (*yesh lo takhlit*) and anything finite is a compound (*mehubbar*), and anything that is a compound is created (*mehuddash*) and anything created has a Creator (*mehaddesh*). Thus, one who thinks that the Creator is more than one necessitates that He was created (Tsifroni, 128; cf. Mansoor, 125).

See also Warren Zev Harvey, "The Incorporeality of God in Maimonides, Rabad and Spinoza," in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, eds. S. Heller Willensky and Moshe Idel [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), 73–74.

⁷ See chapter two, n. 40, above.

⁸ The text of the tradition was first published in Gershom Scholem, *Re'shit ha-kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1948), 79. Here I use the translation from my study, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," 83, which is based on the translation provided in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 217, with some emendations:

Adam and Eve were created "two-faced." . . . And this is also true of the agents of truth whose action is truth. The reason for the [two] faces is twofold. First, it is known that two opposites were emanated, one of pure judgment and the other of pure mercy. If they had not been emanated as "two-faced," each of them would act in accordance with its own principle. It would then appear as if there were two [independent] principles, and each would act without any link to the other and without its assistance. But now that they were created "two-faced," all their action takes place in an evenly balanced manner in complete unity and without separation. . . . since they were created "two-faced," each of them is close to the other and unites itself with the other and longs to be joined to the other, in order that "the tabernacle becomes one whole" (Exod. 26:6 or 36:13).

Here, then, divine unity involves the coming together of "pure judgment" and "pure mercy." As I have explained in "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," "Apparently, the point is that just as [according to a midrashic account] Adam and Eve were originally created two-faced and then separated, so that their subsequent sexual union would recapitulate their original unity, so too the attributes 'mercy' and 'judgment' were originally created two-faced and then separated so that

ben David (R. Isaac's nephew), in his *Sefer ha-Yihud*, explicitly tries to reconcile the notion of God's multiple sefirot with the notion of unity understood as simplicity. Interestingly, in the course of his argument that the sefirot when understood properly do not violate this conception of divine unity, he paraphrases the very same logical proof used by his grandfather, derived from R. Baḥya.⁹ Elsewhere in *Sefer ha-Yihud*, he again tries to reconcile the sefirot and divine unity, and in so doing he alludes to R. Abraham's esoteric tradition.¹⁰ In general,

their intra-divine erotic union would recapitulate their original unity" (p. 83). Far from being absence of composition, divine unity is, therefore, predicated on the coming together of two parts. Note that this unity is not only compared to the sexual union of Adam and Eve, but also to the tabernacle, which, despite being composed of many components, is of "one whole." For a fuller analysis see *ibid.*, 83–84.

⁹ Here is R. Asher's version of R. Baḥya's proof:

How could it be that there are limited and determined attributes that are nevertheless attached to the Cause of Causes and Foundation of Foundations? For, in truth, everything delimited has a beginning and an end, and anything with shape has a body, and anything delimited can be disturbed, and anything attached can be separated (*R. Asher ben David*, 119. I am employing the translation that I used in my study, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," 79.).

For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 79–80.

¹⁰ According to R. Asher:

His attributes are not divided and separated, nor even conjoined. Rather they are all one, and each one of them is included in the other.... And even though we have found many things conjoined together that are called one, as it is written, for example, regarding the building of the tabernacle, "And couple the tent together so that it becomes one" (Exod. 26:11), and also "And couple the cloths to one another with the clasps, so that the tabernacle becomes one whole" (Exod. 26:6), this conjoining [i.e., of the parts of the tabernacle] is not like this conjoining [i.e., of the attributes of God]. Because the conjoining of the tabernacle was from individual objects, and when they were conjoined one with the other it was as though it was one. But this is not the case because this unity could be divided and become as it was in the beginning, and there would be many different parts, and the same is the case [in the verse] "and they will become as one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). But the one in the verse "Hear, O Israel!" is one from every side, and in all its attributes, without any separation and without any conjoining (*R. Asher ben David*, 61–62. I am employing the translation that I used in my study, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," 81–82.).

R. Asher uses two counterexamples to demonstrate the true nature of divine unity: the combining of the multiple parts of the tabernacle and the sexual union of a man and his wife. In referring to this union R. Asher cites Gen. 2:24. Taken with the verses that precede it, this verse depicts the union of a man and his wife as a kind of recapitulation of the original Adam before Eve was formed from his side: "(22) And the Lord God formed the side he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her unto the man. (23) And the man said: This one is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called Woman, for from man was she taken. (24) Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they will become as one flesh." Unlike both of these examples, which require the coming together of multiple elements, God's unity is defined by simplicity or the

as will be seen in fuller detail below, R. Asher, like R. Abraham, stresses the value of investigating God, and it seems that for him part of fulfilling this value involves reconciling the different senses of divine unity.¹¹ Did R. Abraham also believe that part of the imperative of investigating God involves reconciling his philosophically-influenced notion of divine unity with the notion of unity that was part of his received tradition? More generally, did he see this value as requiring the expanding and developing of received esoteric traditions?

We ultimately do not know enough about R. Abraham's esoteric thought to answer these questions. But however they are answered, both R. Isaac and his students saw the value of investigating God as central to their own Kabbalistic thinking, and ultimately, I will suggest, this value played an important role in impelling them to forge Kabbalah as a literary tradition through the development and expansion of their own traditions.

This becomes clearer in an important statement in R. Ezra of Gerona's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which, as we have seen, is apparently the earliest Kabbalistic work intended for a wide audience.¹² It is thus of special significance that an opening salvo in the emergence of Kabbalah as a literary tradition contains an unambiguous statement of the importance of investigating God. This statement appears in a lengthy excursus within the *Commentary* that deals with the reasons for the commandments.¹³

absence of any kind of composition. R. Abraham, however, in the tradition cited in note 8, describes divine unity precisely in terms of the composition of the tabernacle and the sexual union of Adam and Eve. It seems to me, therefore, that R. Asher is alluding to his grandfather's tradition. It is possible that he alludes to it as a way to criticize it. Alternatively, and more radically, he may allude to it as way of esoterically indicating that his true position is that God's unity involves multiple entities coming together and that his explicit statement to the contrary is just a screen for the public. It seems to me, however, as I hope to explain at length in a future study, that a third possibility is most likely. In my view, his real intention was to signal to initiates, who have knowledge of R. Abraham's esoteric tradition, that it can, in fact, be reconciled with divine unity, understood as simplicity. He kept the tradition esoteric, however, to prevent the uninitiated from erroneously being led to the impression that the Kabbalists denied divine simplicity. This is a tactic that, as I will show in the future study, is employed elsewhere in his work as well. For now, see my discussion in *ibid.*, 75–85. I also discuss this passage in another context below.

¹¹ Indeed, the passage in which he paraphrases R. Bahya comes on the heels of an emphatic declaration of the importance of investigating God (*R. Asher ben David*, 118), which I cite below.

¹² See chapter one, n. 11, above.

¹³ The excursus has been published in a critical edition by Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice." Citations of the excursus are from this

The first commandment among the positive commandments: each man must inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*ve-latur*) and search (*u-lehappes*) and recognize (*lehakkir*) His divinity and know (*ve-lada'at*) Him. And we find it [indicated] as a positive commandment [by the verse], “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God” (Deut. 4:39).¹⁴

I will cite this passage more fully and examine it in greater detail below. For now, however, I merely want to point out how forcefully R. Ezra advocates the need to actively investigate God: he employs a string of verbs (investigate, seek out, search, recognize, know) to underscore the point. In other words, investigating God is not just a matter of accepting received opinions, but requires the kind of active intellectual engagement, which, as I have argued in chapter one, characterizes R. Ezra’s work. Also, note that R. Ezra’s proof-text for the commandment to investigate God is Deut. 4:39. This verse, as we have seen, is frequently applied in the newly available philosophic literature to support the value of investigating God, but it is not used in this manner in Rabbinic literature.

We find a similar sentiment in a passage that appears in the aforementioned *Sefer ha-Yihud* by R. Asher b. David. This work is among the most systematic attempts to present Kabbalah to a popular audience that we possess from the first half of the thirteenth century. It seeks to present Kabbalah as a coherent endeavor to analyze God and, in so doing, draws heavily on received esoteric traditions as well as contemporary philosophic thought.¹⁵ It is thus a prime exemplar of

edition. The excursus is also included in Chavel’s edition of R. Ezra’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. See *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 521–548.

¹⁴ Travis, 4 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 521.

¹⁵ On numerous occasions in his *Sefer ha-Yihud*, R. Asher makes cryptic remarks, which he follows by the phrase “the enlightened will understand.” This phrase indicates that only the enlightened initiate will be able to decipher the meaning of the remark. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 62, 85, 88, 105, as well as numerous other instances. I believe that these hints refer to esoteric traditions that were transmitted along family lines. He also frequently labels a given statement in his work as a “*kabbalah*” (a received tradition). See, e.g., *ibid.*, 63, 72, 100, 116, as well as numerous other instances. In these cases, the statements are presented in relatively clear terms, and it seems that they are traditions transmitted along family lines that R. Asher did not regard as particularly esoteric. Alongside such material, R. Asher draws heavily on philosophic sources. Usually he does so without explicitly citing the philosophic source, as in, for example, some of his discussions of divine unity, where he seems to draw on R. Bahya and on Maimonides. See, e.g., *ibid.*, 61–62 (cited above, n. 10), 119. See also the comments in Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 285; Mark Brian Sender, “*The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on Sefer Yeẓirah*” (PhD,

the way in which the first Kabbalists actively developed their Kabbalistic traditions. In the last section of the work, a section intended as a kind of conclusion and summary of the work as a whole, R. Asher first summarizes the major issues dealt with in the work—a litany of the themes that were of central concern to the early Kabbalists. These include, among others, the unity of the sefirot, their multiple names, and the Tetragrammaton. He then explains:

I have clarified and explained all this to every person of understanding and to every enlightened person—each matter as is appropriate—because we were commanded according to the faith of Moses, our Rabbi, to love God, to fear Him, and to know (*ve-lada'at*) our Creator, as it is written, “Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God” (Deut. 4:39). Thereafter it is [indicated] by the prophets and our righteous Messiah (i.e. King David), as it is written, “Let us go and pursue knowledge of the Lord” (Hos. 6:3).¹⁶ And it is said, “No longer will they need to teach their children, saying: know the Lord; for all of them will know Me, from the least to the greatest” (Jer. 1:33).¹⁷ “And all the land will be filled with knowledge of the Lord” (Is. 11:9). And King David commanded Solomon and said to him, “My son Solomon, know the God of your father, and worship Him with single heart...for the Lord searches all hearts” (I Chron. 28:9). And the reward is explained by Isaiah, “Therefore, my people shall know my name; therefore [they shall learn] on that day that I, the one who spoke, am now at hand” (Is. 52:6). Additionally, according to David, “I will exalt Him for He knows My name” (Ps. 91:14). And it is written thereafter, “When he calls on Me, I will answer him” (Ps. 94:15). Behold, knowledge is dependent on the heart. Therefore, Moses our Rabbi, peace be upon him, said, “For the commandment that I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you” (Deut. 30:11). And it says, “It is not in the heavens” (Deut. 30:12). And it says, “For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to observe it” (Deut. 30:14). The proper execution of his worship requires that his mouth and heart be in accord in loving Him, fearing Him, and unifying Him, truly, faithfully, and with a perfect heart. As a result, he will desire His commandments and will be quick to perform them because of his great love and fear. Therefore he said, “For the thing

Harvard University, 1994), I:303–305; Dauber, “Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah,” 75–85. In one place, however (p. 108), he does explicitly cite unnamed philosophers. Due to the limitations of space, I cannot fully expound upon these issues here, but I hope to do so in a future study.

¹⁶ The verse is cited slightly incorrectly. It in fact reads “let us know and pursue” instead of “let us go and pursue.”

¹⁷ This verse is also cited incorrectly. The original reads “No longer will every man need to teach his neighbor, nor every man his friend, saying: Know the Lord; for all of them will know Me, from the least to the greatest.”

is very close to you” (Deut 30:14). For this reason, Moses, our Rabbi, and the prophets, and our righteous Messiah (i.e. King David) warned us to recognize (*lehakkir*) our Creator and understand (*u-lehavin*) and study (*u-lehaskil*) our Maker, to follow His ways, and to cleave to those who fear Him. And if we do not search (*nehappes*) and investigate (*nahkor*) after Him, how can we fulfill His words with a full heart? [How can we do so] if we do not recognize Him? How can we behave according to His attributes, if we do not know Him (*neda'ehu*)?¹⁸

Like R. Ezra, R. Asher stresses the imperative to actively seek out knowledge of God: “to recognize,” “understand,” and “study” the Creator. He employs prooftexts familiar from the newly available philosophic literature, including Deut. 4:39 and I Chron. 28:9 to support this point. He is emphatic that prayer and ultimately all Jewish life is possible only once one has investigated God. While later in the last section R. Asher offers a second reason for composing his work,¹⁹ it is significant that here R. Asher identifies this imperative as a catalyst that led him to compose his Kabbalistic work. In other words, R. Asher suggests that it is this imperative that helped spur the entire project of developing and expanding earlier traditions, which characterizes his work.

Earlier, I identified four characteristics that I see as central to the philosophic ethos as it appears in the newly available philosophic literature. These four characteristics are also apparent in the way that this value is manifested in the writings of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. First, I noted that investigating God is seen as an act of utmost religious significance. The lofty terms in which R. Ezra and R. Asher present this value show that this is precisely how they view it. Both place investigating God at the center of what it means to live as a Jew—so much so that, as R. Asher has it, it is impossible to follow God’s word unless one first investigates Him.

Second, I argued that the ethos entails a commitment to pursue an active program of investigation of God. As the contents of the larger works in which R. Ezra’s and R. Asher’s remarks appear demonstrate, both of these figures engaged in careful and organized thinking. Indeed systematic thinking was a hallmark of the work of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. In contrast to Nahmanides, who only

¹⁸ R. Asher ben David, 118.

¹⁹ He indicates that he wrote the work to refute aspersions cast against the Kabbalists regarding their views of divine unity. See R. Asher ben David, 120–121.

offered Kabbalistic commentaries on scattered Biblical verses and did not compose extended Kabbalistic works (see chapter six), these Kabbalists carefully analyzed complete texts and composed lengthy Kabbalistic works. R. Isaac apparently explicated the whole of *Sefer Yetsirah*, even if in all likelihood the commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* in his name was recorded by his students on the basis of his teachings.²⁰ R. Ezra commented on the whole of the Song of Songs and on many of the Talmudic *aggadot*.²¹ R. Isaac's students also wrote carefully organized tracts that were not tied to exegetical projects. These include the aforementioned *Sefer ha-Yihud* by R. Asher as well as R. Jacob ben Sheshet's works, which are similarly systematic in nature.²²

The most systematic thinker of the group was perhaps R. Azriel. He also commented on the whole of *Sefer Yetsirah*,²³ penned a complete commentary on the liturgy,²⁴ and one on the Talmudic *aggadot*.²⁵ Other works that he composed, such as his work employing logical reasoning to defend Kabbalistic beliefs²⁶ and his annotated lists of the dogmas and heresies,²⁷ are carefully constructed and ordered. Indeed R. Azriel deserves to be highlighted insofar as his work exemplifies the philosophic ethos in a pronounced manner. His thoroughgoing commitment to investigate God is apparent in everything that he writes. Despite this fact, and for unclear reasons, his work lacks the kind of overt pronouncements of the value of investigating God that are found in the writings of other members of R. Isaac's circle. It is for this reason that I will refer to him somewhat infrequently in this

²⁰ See introduction, n. 9 above.

²¹ See chapter one, n. 11.

²² Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhohim* is a critique of R. Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yikkavvu ha-Mayim* and includes detailed discussions of various Kabbalistic matters. *Sefer ha-'emunah vaha-bittahon*, printed in *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 339–448, explains the nature of belief (*emunah*) and trust (*bittahon*) and also deals with a variety of Kabbalistic themes. His *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* offers a systematic account of the sefirot and polemicalizes against radical Maimonideans.

²³ Printed in *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 449–469.

²⁴ Azriel of Gerona, "Perush ha-tefillah," ed. Martel Gavrin (Hebrew University: M.A. Thesis, 1984) and the French translation, *Commentaire sur la liturgie quotidienne*, trans. Gabrielle Sed-Rajna (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974).

²⁵ Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, ed. Isaiah Tishby. His commentary on the *aggadot* was based on that of R. Ezra. See Tishby's comments in *ibid.*, 1–11.

²⁶ Azriel of Gerona, "Sha'ar ha-sho'el," 3–10.

²⁷ Gershom Scholem, "Seridim hadashim mi-kitvé R. 'Azriel mi-Gerona," in *Sefer zikaron le-'Asher Gulak vele-Shemu'el Klein* (Jerusalem: H'evrah le-hotsa'at sefarim 'al yad ha-Universitah ha-'Ivrit, 1942), 207–214.

chapter, and not because he strays from the philosophic ethos. In any case, taken together, the works of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle show that their commitment to investigate God resulted in a systematic scholarly program.

Third, I suggested that it is not sufficient to rely on received traditions or revelations. One must employ intellectual effort. The string of active verbs that both R. Ezra and R. Asher utilize makes it abundantly clear that they see the use of intellectual effort as central. This point will be further confirmed in numerous examples from the works of the first Kabbalists that will be considered below.

Finally, I explained that, in the philosophic ethos, the value of investigating God is accompanied by epistemological analysis. At every turn, the question is asked: 'What type of knowledge of God is possible?'. The passages by R. Ezra and R. Asher, which I have just cited, do not offer such epistemological analysis. On the contrary, the confidence in the human ability to investigate God that these passages seem to express might be thought to belie such epistemological quandaries. In fact, however, this seeming confidence is tempered by numerous other passages in their writings and in the writings of their colleagues, a few of which I will present below, which discuss the limits of the human intellect's ability to apprehend God. Indeed, I would argue that this seeming confidence is a symptom of the religious centrality that R. Ezra and R. Asher accord to investigating God, rather than an expression of a belief that God is fully open to human knowledge.

II

Gershom Scholem speculated that the leaders of the anti-Maimonidean camp in the Maimonidean controversy of the 1230s, including R. Solomon b. Abraham of Montpellier and his disciple R. David ben Saul, were influenced by doctrines of the German Pietists and early Languedocian Kabbalah.²⁸ This thesis, however, has been difficult to confirm, given the paucity of information we have regarding the theological views of these figures. Recently, however, Carlos Fraenkel published a passage of R. Samuel ibn Tibbon's *Ma'amar Yikkavvu ha-Mayim*, which is not included in the printed edition of this work.

²⁸ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 406–407.

In this passage, R. Samuel cites an extended excerpt from a letter by R. David ben Saul, which was previously only known from *Wars of the Lord* by Maimonides' son, R. Abraham, where it is cited in a more abbreviated form. While Fraenkel concludes that this extended version of the letter confirms Scholem's hypothesis, my view is that a close reading only substantiates one part of Scholem's contention—that R. David was influenced by doctrines similar to those found in the writings of the German Pietists—but not the other part. I see no evidence from this letter that R. David espoused views characteristic of early Kabbalah.²⁹

²⁹ Fraenkel seizes on the following line in R. David's letter, which I cite here in his translation: "And although we say that the great glory has a limit—but that which truly emanated has no limit, and this [the true emanation] is also called 'glory,' and with regard to this [the true emanation] it is said 'the whole earth is filled with His glory' (Isaiah 6:3)" (Fraenkel, "The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul," 92. [The material in brackets are Fraenkel's additions.]). As Fraenkel notes, on the basis of this statement, it seems that R. David conceived of three elements of the divine realm: the "glory," the glory that "has no limit," and, presumably, God, from which the unlimited glory emanated (ibid., 92). To link R. David's statement to German Pietistic views, Fraenkel presents a range of sources from the German Pietists and other esoteric circles, which, while not identical to the statement, do provide a context in which to situate it (ibid., 94–95). To link the statement to early Languedocian Kabbalah, he cites a passage found in the work of R. Asher ben David in which R. Asher cites a statement from the no longer extant commentary on *B. Berakhot* by his grandfather, R. Abraham. Here, in Fraenkel's translation, is the text of this passage, which seeks to explain the problematic anthropomorphic connotations of *B. Berakhot* 6a according to which God wears phylacteries (*tefillin*):

In the treatise *Berakhot* [this is] the explanation of the great Master, R. Abraham ben David, my grandfather [for the dictum:] Whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, puts on tefillin? This refers to the prince of the countenance, whose name is like the name of his Master. *But perhaps there is one above him who emanated from the Highest Cause, and in whom there is supreme power.* And it is he who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, who appeared to Ezekiel in the vision of the man above (cf. Ezekiel 1:26) and to the other prophets. But the Cause of Causes did not [appear], no left and no right, no front and no back. And this is the secret [referred to] in the Account of the Beginning: Whoever knows the measure of the maker of the beginning, can be assured of his share in the world to come, and for this reason it was said: "And let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26) (ibid., 96. The material in brackets was added by Fraenkel. I added the emphasis.). [For the original, see *R. Asher ben David*, 141].

According to Fraenkel, this passage, like R. David's statement, posits three elements in the divine realm: "God, an entity 'emanated' from God, in which 'there is supreme power,' and the prince of the Countenance" (Fraenkel, "The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul," 97). As Fraenkel points out, however, basing himself on the work of Daniel Abrams, who examined the

It may, however, not only be particular theological points that distinguished R. David from the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. There is some evidence from his letter that he also rejected the philosophic ethos. As we saw in chapter two, one marker of the influence of the philosophic ethos is the notion that there is a *halakhic* (legal) imperative to investigate God, which, according to some sources, is grounded in Deut. 4:39, "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God." It is thus of interest that, in his letter, R. David refers to Deut. 4:39 as "the verse from which *they* derive the obligation to know the Creator (*ḥovat yedi'at ha-bore'*)."³⁰ In the context of the letter, "they" refers to Maimonideans³¹—that is, R. David sees such an interpretation of the verse as a Maimonidean one, which he rejects. To be clear, this rejection does not imply that R. David did not have theological views. On the contrary, he describes aspects of his theology in the letter. But it would seem to imply that he did not feel that investigating God was a central religious value in the way that it was both

manuscript evidence, the sentence in italics is in fact a later gloss. (See Abrams, "From Divine Shape to Angelic Being," 55–59.) Without the later gloss, R. Abraham only refers to two entities—God and the Prince of the Countenance—and not three. In fact, as Abrams points out, without the gloss there is nothing particularly Kabbalistic about R. Abraham's comments: "Rabad's (=R. Abraham ben David's) original intent was to describe a transcendent deity who relates to the world through the agency of angelic beings, a doctrine found in Rabbinic literature" (ibid., 57). If the gloss is left out, the parallel that Fraenkel attempts to draw between R. Abraham and R. David no longer exists. Fraenkel tries to avoid the issue when he remarks that "for our present purpose it is not crucial to find a conclusive answer to the question of the sentence's author. More important is the structural similarity between the theology of the version including the gloss and the theology underlying David b. Saul's defense" (Fraenkel, "The Problem of Anthropomorphism in a Hitherto Unknown Passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a Newly-Discovered Letter by David ben Saul," 97). In fact, however, as Abrams shows, the gloss was added to R. Asher's work by a later Kabbalist. The gloss, therefore, has no relevance to events that transpired around the time of the Maimonidean controversy, when R. Asher wrote his work. This being the case, R. David's letter does not show a connection between the theology of the first Kabbalists and that of R. David.

³⁰ Ibid., 115, emphasis added.

³¹ In the previous line, R. David makes the following comment: "He (the Aramaic translator Onkelos) also translated 'blessed be the glory from its place (*mi-mekomo*)' (Ez. 3:12) as 'from the place (*atar*) of the house of His *shekhinah*.' If the meaning of 'from His place' was 'His level (*ma'alato*),' as they say, then he (Onkelos) would not have translated it as place (*atar*)" (ibid., 115). As Fraenkel notes, p. 115, n. 105, the interpretation that "they say" and that R. David rejects is found in *Guide* 1:8. "They," therefore, refers to Maimonideans. Consequently, when, in the immediate continuation, R. David again refers to what "they derive," he must also have Maimonideans in mind.

according to the newly available philosophic literature and according to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. Indeed, against this backdrop, it is striking that, as we have already seen, R. Ezra uses this very verse to support a *halakhic* obligation to actively investigate God.

This state of affairs testifies to the fact that during the Maimonidean controversy there were a variety of anti-Maimonidean sentiments.³² All anti-Maimonideans were not cut from the same cloth. Above, we saw that R. Ezra was strongly opposed to Maimonidean interpreters. Yet, in this particular instance, it seems possible that a significant difference between the anti-Maimonidean stance of R. David and that of R. Ezra is that the former rejects the philosophic ethos, while the latter embraces it. More broadly, while R. David certainly would not have conceived of the matter in these terms, we may say that from a perspective outside of philosophy and Kabbalah—a perspective that I suggest R. David represents—both are part of the same broader cultural phenomenon.

Let me then return to R. Ezra's depiction of the first commandment, which I cite more fully here, and consider it from a *halakhic* perspective:

The first commandment among the positive commandments: each man must inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*ve-latur*) and search (*u-lehapes*) and recognize (*lehakkir*) His divinity and know (*ve-lada'at*) Him. And we found it [indicated] as a positive commandment [by the verse], "Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God" (Deut. 4:39). And all this is hinted at [by the verse], "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2), because knowledge [of God] is the principle (*hayesod*) and root (*veha-shoresh*) of everything. Regarding this, our sages, of blessed memory, said: "If any man has knowledge, it is as though the temple was built in his days" (*B. Berakhot* 33a; *B. Sanhedrin* 92a). The intention of this [statement] is that since he knows how to unify the unique divine name, it is as though he built palaces above and below (see *B. Sanhedrin* 99b). They also said: "Great is knowledge, for it is placed between two letters" (*B. Berakhot* 33a; *B. Sanhedrin* 92a).³³

From the outset, it must be stressed that the fact that R. Ezra cites two Rabbinic statements that appear in *B. Berakhot* 33a and again in *B. Sanhedrin* 92a ("If any man has knowledge it is as though the temple was built in his days;" "Great is knowledge for it is placed between

³² See the discussion in Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, 75–103.

³³ Travis, 4–5 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 521.

two letters”) in support of the notion that there is a legal obligation to investigate God should not obscure the fact that this obligation is linked to a philosophic ethos, which is foreign to the Rabbinic sources he cites. As is the case with the Rabbinic sources discussed in the previous chapter, when the statements here are read in their original context they support no such obligation. In their original context, the knowledge that they mention seems to refer either to general discernment not connected to theology, or to a general awareness of God.³⁴ In interpreting these statements as suggesting that one must actively seek knowledge about God, R. Ezra has recast them in light of the philosophic ethos.

I would add that this is the case even though it seems that R. Ezra has a particular theurgic understanding of the significance of this knowledge: he most likely understands the Talmudic statement that “if any man has knowledge, it is as though the temple was built in his days” as referring to the theurgic augmentation of the sefirotic temple.³⁵ Now

³⁴ See the next note.

³⁵ Two of the Rabbinic statements that R. Ezra quotes in this passage—“If any man has knowledge, it is as though the temple was built in his days” and “Great is knowledge, for it is placed between two letters”—appear in close proximity to each other in two locations in the Talmud: *B. Berakhot* 33a and *B. Sanhedrin* 92a. The two letters to which the Talmud refers in the second of these statements are apparently two divine names. This can be ascertained from the proof-text that the Talmud, in both locations, presents for this statement: 1 Samuel 2:3: “For a God of knowledge is the Lord.” In other words, according to the Talmudic statement, evidence of the greatness of knowledge is the fact that the term “knowledge” is given an honorable place between two divine names, God (EL) and Lord (YHVH). In the same locations, the Talmud also points out (in a passage not cited by R. Ezra) that the term “temple” is found between two divine names in Exod. 15:17: “You made [to dwell in], O Lord, the temple, O Lord.” Thus, both the term “knowledge” and the term “temple” are found between two divine names. On the basis of this parallelism, both Talmudic locations cite R. Eleazar’s deduction (the first of the two aforementioned statements cited by R. Ezra): “If any man has knowledge it is as though the temple was built in his days.” It seems as though R. Ezra understands this statement theurgically: Knowledge of God, i.e. knowledge of the sefirot, will allow one to theurgically influence the sefirah that is the sefirotic analog of the temple, namely the tenth sefirah. R. Ezra clarifies the theurgic meaning in his subsequent comment: “The intention of this is that since he knows how to unify the unique divine name, it is as though he built palaces above and below.” (I would note that this comment is based on a third Rabbinic statement: according to Rav, as explained in *B. Sanhedrin* 99b, if one studies Torah “it is as though he built the palace above and the palace below.”) R. Ezra sees the divine name as a reflection of the sefirot. Uniting the divine name means theurgically creating appropriate unity between the sefirot: in this case, between the two sefirot that may be termed the upper palace and the lower palace. The lower palace is a reference to the tenth sefirah, and the upper palace is, in all likelihood, a reference to either the sixth or the second sefirah. This union between the tenth sefirah and one of the higher sefirot

it goes without saying that the possibility of theurgic action would be rejected by all of the newly available philosophic literature. In fact, R. Ezra may have composed the excursus on the commandments as a sort of critique of or rejoinder to Maimonides' heavily rationalistic explanation of the commandments that appears in the final section of the *Guide*.³⁶ This possibility is made likely by the fact that Maimonides' view of the commandments met with heavy criticism during the Maimonidean controversy. Thus, while Maimonides stresses the social and historical import of the commandments, R. Ezra stresses their theosophic/theurgic import.

What needs to be emphasized in this context, however, is that a value derived from philosophic literature is made a prerequisite for Kabbalistic theurgy. Surely this need not be the case. There is no intrinsic reason that theurgic activity would require the active investigation of God beyond the basic transmitted traditions, which presumably would have

is a sort of rebuilding of the former or, in other terms, a rebuilding of the sefirotic temple. Ultimately, therefore, R. Ezra intends to suggest, on the basis of these citations, that investigating God is a crucial prerequisite for theurgic activity.

Yet the Rabbinic statements themselves have nothing to do with investigating God. This is clear from an examination of the wider context in which they are embedded. Both *B. Berakhot* 33a and *B. Sanhedrin* 92a include extended discussions of knowledge. A careful reading of these discussions as a whole indicates that knowledge is understood in two manners. It is either general discernment, not connected to God, or an awareness of God that does not require any theological speculation. Thus, in *B. Berakhot* 33a, the discussion of knowledge begins with the question of why the *havdalah* prayer (a prayer marking the end of the Sabbath) is included in the blessing of the *'amidah* prayer (a key component of the liturgy) that deals with knowledge. The answer given is that since the *havdalah* prayer "is a kind of wisdom, they included it in the blessing of wisdom." Apparently, the *havdalah* prayer is a type of wisdom because it assumes the ability to discern between a variety of categories that the prayer mentions, such as holy and profane. Similarly, in the context of praising knowledge, *B. Sanhedrin* 92a cites Prov. 24:4 and Obad. 1:8, where knowledge seems to mean general discernment. On the other hand, both sources cite Is. 27:11, which seems to link lack of knowledge and denying God. *B. Sanhedrin* 92a cites Is. 5:13, which also links lack of knowledge and ignoring God. From the fact that the Talmud cites these verses, it may be derived that knowledge is also understood as relating to a basic awareness that there is a God who is active in human affairs. While neither *B. Berakhot* 33a nor *B. Sanhedrin* 92a clarifies the exact meaning of knowledge in the two statements cited by R. Ezra, it stands to reason, given the context in which they appear, that it must either refer to discernment or awareness of God. There is no reason to assume that it is knowledge derived from theological speculation. In presenting it in this manner, therefore, R. Ezra is reading his own ideas, derived from the philosophic ethos, into the Talmudic text.

³⁶ On this possibility, see Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," 42–50; Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice," 32–48. See also Matt, "The Mystic and the Mizwot," 370–382.

included both the theurgic instructions and their theosophic ramifications. In fact, I see at least two possibilities. It may be the case that theurgic activities recommended by R. Ezra, and in other texts of the first Kabbalists, were governed by received traditions and, therefore, that the obligation to investigate God is not intrinsically connected to these actions. If so, the main reason that such investigation is made a prerequisite for the theurgic action may be that it provides a fuller understanding of the theosophy that grounds the traditionally received theurgic directions. Alternatively, it may be the case that investigating God may actually generate new theurgic actions. That is, investigation of God leads to new theosophic insights and hence to new theurgic practices. If so, it is ultimately a philosophic value, culled from the newly available philosophic literature, that allows for an expansion of a key aspect of Kabbalistic praxis.³⁷

Whichever of these or other possibilities prove to be correct, let me repeat that the theurgic elements of this passage should not obscure its indebtedness to the philosophic ethos. In fact, it is striking that while R. Ezra may be subtly critiquing Maimonides' explanation of the commandments, as it appears in the *Guide*, he nevertheless, as Jacob Katz has noted, draws heavily on Maimonides' list of the 613 commandments, which the latter enumerated in his *Book of the Commandments* and the preface to his *Mishneh Torah*. Indeed, R. Ezra mostly sticks to Maimonides' list.³⁸ This is especially important, for my purposes, when it comes to the fact that R. Ezra includes versions of Maimonides' first two commandments: to know that there is a God and to unify God. It will be recalled that most earlier enumerations of the commandments did not include them.³⁹ Here, I shall focus on the first commandment, before turning to the second one, below.

According to Maimonides' account of this commandment, it is not sufficient to simply believe that God exists. Rather, one must also

³⁷ At the same time, a kind of circle might pertain in which the fact that theurgic action is traditionally viewed as desirable might make this philosophic value seem more appealing.

³⁸ Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, Its Various Faces and Social Relevance* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 21–22. Katz suggests that R. Ezra relied on Maimonides' enumeration at the beginning of his *Mishneh Torah* and not on his *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*. See also Travis, "Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice," 156.

³⁹ See the discussion in chapter two, section 4.

have a philosophically correct understanding of God.⁴⁰ For R. Ezra, as well, it is apparent that simple belief is not sufficient; a proper understanding of God is also required. Maimonides' choice to include this commandment in his enumeration is indicative of the religious importance that he accords to knowledge of God.⁴¹ R. Ezra, by following in Maimonides' footsteps, makes clear that he agrees with Maimonides on this score, even if his understanding of God differs dramatically from that of Maimonides.

There is, however, a difference between their respective positions. In numerous places in his work, Maimonides advocates actively investigating God. Yet, as pointed out in chapter two, while in the *Mishneh Torah* he does present basic logical proofs for God's existence, the general tenor of his remarks does not suggest that actively investigating God is a component of fulfilling this commandment. All that is required is accepting an accurate view of God. In contrast, one only need recall the string of verbs with which R. Ezra introduces the commandment to realize that he considers active investigation central: "one must inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*ve-latur*) and search (*u-leḥapes*) and recognize (*lehakkir*) His divinity and know (*ve-lada'at*) Him."

This distinction is highlighted by the respective Biblical verses that they each supply as the source of the first commandment. Maimonides derives the commandment from Exod. 20:2 or Deut. 5:6 ("I am the Lord your God"). R. Ezra, on the other hand, acknowledges only that this verse hints at the commandment,⁴² but he sees its real source as Deut. 4:39 ("Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God"). It would seem that R. Ezra preferred this proof-text precisely because of its active call to investigate God, as opposed to the more passive call of Exod. 20:2 or Deut. 5:6 to simply acknowledge God.

This distinction also raises the possibility that R. Ezra may have had additional sources, other than Maimonides, which guided him as he formulated the first commandment. I have in mind either R. Ḥefets ben Yatsliah's *Book of the Commandments* or R. Bahya's *Duties of the*

⁴⁰ See chapter two, near n. 68.

⁴¹ See the discussion in chapter two, section 4.

⁴² This is in keeping with R. Ezra's stated intention of showing how all of the commandments can be derived from the Ten Commandments. Exod. 20:2 is the first of the Ten Commandments according to the traditional Jewish division of the commandments. See Travis, 2 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 496.

Heart,⁴³ or both. According to R. Ḥefets, it will be recalled, the first commandment requires actively investigating God, and he provides Deut. 4:39 as the proof-text.⁴⁴ While R. Baḥya, for his part, does not view investigating God as one of the 613 commandments, he does emphasize its significance as one of the duties of the heart and, like R. Ḥefets, provides Deut. 4:39 as a proof-text.⁴⁵

Let me now turn to R. Ezra's presentation of the second commandment:

"Who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 20:2). It is hinted here that a man must unify His name, since that redemption did not occur by means of a messenger, whether an angel or a seraph, but by the Holy One, Blessed be He, in His very self and in His glory. Therefore a man must know (*lada'at*) that He is one, and there is no second, as it is written, "There is none other beside Him" (Deut. 4:35), and unify Him with ten sefirot within *En-Sof* (*u-leyahado be-yod sefirot be-en sof*), and it is a positive commandment to unify.⁴⁶

In the newly available philosophic literature, a key component of the value of investigating God is understanding the nature of divine unity. In making understanding divine unity the second commandment, Maimonides codifies this aspect of the value. As is the case with the first commandment, he does not state that one must actively investigate God's unity. All that seems to be required is an accurate understanding of divine unity.⁴⁷ In contrast, R. Ḥefets and R. Baḥya do stress the importance of such active investigation.⁴⁸ Indeed, while R. Ezra does not explicitly stress the need for active investigation, it seems likely to me that the remarks with which he opens his description of

⁴³ The possibility that R. Baḥya was a source for R. Ezra was already noted by Charles Chavel in his critical comments on R. Ezra's remarks. See Chavel, 521.

⁴⁴ See chapter two, near n. 58.

⁴⁵ See e.g. *Duties of the Heart*, 1:3 (Mansoor, 114; Tsifroni, 111). See also the discussion in chapter two, near n. 63.

⁴⁶ Travis, 6 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 521.

⁴⁷ See chapter two, near nn. 23 and 64.

⁴⁸ According to R. Ḥefets, "Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said that a man should learn all proofs that might possibly occur to him that He is one, and there is no other as it is said: 'Be diligent to learn the Law, so that you may know what to answer a heretic' (*M. Avot* 2:14)" (Halper, 555). For the Hebrew, see Halper, 550–551; cf. Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 55. According to R. Baḥya, "As to the question of our obligation to investigate God's unity by way of speculation, I say that whoever is qualified to investigate this and other intelligible matters in a reasonable way is indeed obliged to do so, in proportion to his understanding and his discriminative powers" (*Duties of the Heart*, 1:3; Mansoor, 114; Tsifroni, 111).

the first commandment (“one must inquire, and seek out, and search, and recognize His divinity and know Him”) are meant to be applied to the second commandment as well. Thus, his comment that “a man must know (*lada’at*) that He is one and there is no second” may very well imply that a man must investigate the manner in which this is the case.

The subsequent comment that one should “unify Him with ten sefirot within *En-Sof* (*u-leyahado be-yod sefirot be-en sof*)” seems to emphasize the need to theurgically unify the ten sefirot. This does not, however, negate the need for active investigation since, as suggested, such investigation may help clarify the theosophy that grounds the theurgic action. Indeed, I would suggest that this statement is grounded in a sophisticated attempt to investigate the nature of divine unity. It seems like a *précis* of a conception of divine unity that is elaborately worked out in the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* attributed to R. Isaac, according to which divine unity is rooted in the fact that the lower sefirot are ontologically linked to the first sefirah, which is itself inseparable from *En Sof* (lit. “without end”), the infinite basis of the sefirot.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ According to *Sefer Yetsirah*, “Their end is fixed to their beginning (*na’uts sofan bi-tehillatan*) like a flame attached to a coal. For the Lord is unique and has no second” [*Sefer Yesirah: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, ed. A. Peter Hayman (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 74 (=1:6)]. In the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* attributed to R. Isaac we find the following explication of this passage:

“Their end is [fixed] to their beginning” (*sofan bi-tehillatan*): a spring that spreads. Everything that spreads is from the source (=the first sefirah); and if the source ceases, everything ceases. And since they (=the other sefirot) continuously spread, the beginning has no end (*tehillah en lah sof*). Therefore it (i.e. *Sefer Yetsirah*) said “their end is [fixed] to their beginning”: because many strands [of flame] extend from the coal, which is one. For the flame cannot exist on its own, save by means of something else, because all the things and all the dimensions (*middot*) that appear to be separate (*she-hem nir’ot she-hem nifradot*), have no separation (*en ba-hem perud*), for all is one like the beginning, which unifies all. [This is implied] in the word “unique” (*yahid*). “For the Lord is unique” now refers to a dimension (*middah*) in *En Sof* that has no end from any side. (R. Isaac the Blind, “*Perush sefer yetsirah*,” ed. Gershom Scholem,” 6, 11. 121–125). (Cf. to the translation found in Sender, “The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah,” 2:69–70.)

The spring or the source is a reference to the first sefirah, the endless source of the other sefirot. Here, the endlessness of the first sefirah is understood in terms of the ceaseless flow of the sefirot that emanates from it. Since this flow is endless, therefore “the beginning,” that is, the first sefirah, “has no end.” Moreover, as the end of the passage makes clear, this first sefirah is also endless insofar as it is linked to *En Sof*, the endless starting point of the sefirot. Thus the phrase from *Sefer Yetsirah*, “the Lord is Unique,” is interpreted as a reference to the first sefirah, which is “a dimension (*middah*) in *En Sof*.” It is, however, not only the first sefirah that is endless, but also the other sefirot. This is how R. Isaac interprets the phrase from *Sefer Yetsirah* that is

In general, investigating the nature of divine unity is a major component of investigating God in the circle of the first Kabbalists. I already pointed out in the previous chapter that, as Harry Wolfson notes, “the internal unity” of God is not, for the most part, a concern of Rabbinic thought. Usually, in Rabbinic literature, statements about the oneness of God do not relate to the nature of that oneness, but are intended to indicate that there are no other gods beside Him. It is only in medieval philosophic literature that “internal unity” becomes a concern.⁵⁰ In the case of Kabbalah, it is difficult to gauge whether this concern was a feature of the oral traditions that fed Kabbalah. It may be assumed that insofar as these traditions posited multiple components of God, questions about the internal unity of God would have naturally arisen. I suspect, however, that the systematic attempts to understand the nature of unity that we witness in the works of the first Kabbalists—even if the results of these attempts do not always square with philosophic attempts—are a result of the adoption of a philosophic ethos that stresses the importance of investigating God. Certainly, the halakhic significance accorded to such investigation is reflective of this ethos.

III

The manner in which the patriarch Abraham is presented in medieval Jewish literature is not a mere curiosity. Insofar as he was regarded as

the subject of the exegesis, “their end is [fixed] to their beginning.” This phrase means that, from a certain perspective, the other sefirot themselves, like the first sefirah, are endless: they do not really have an end, for they are merely extensions of the endless beginning. A comparison is then offered to the manner in which flames are merely extensions of the coal, which is their source. That is, the flames are not really distinct from the coal, just as the other sefirot are not really distinct from the first sefirah, whose endlessness they share. This shared endlessness of the first sefirah and the other sefirot is what grounds divine unity. Insofar as all the sefirot partake of the endlessness of the first sefirah, they are not separate from the first sefirah or from one another, but are a perfect unity. A related explanation, albeit in an abbreviated form, is found in one of R. Ezra’s letters to R. Abraham. See Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 32 (cf. p. 31). Such an understanding of divine unity, I suspect, is contained in R. Ezra’s statement in his excursus on the commandments that one must “unify Him with ten sefirot within *En-Sof*.” For further explication of R. Isaac’s understanding of divine unity, see Sandra Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed: ‘Ein Sof’ in Theosophic Kabbalah* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), 139–144.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in chapter three, near n. 78.

the first Jew, he functioned as a figure onto whom various images of the ideal Jewish life could be projected. A well known case in point is Maimonides' depiction of Abraham as a philosopher who came to knowledge of God through philosophic investigation. Maimonides explains in his *Mishneh Torah* that:

When this strong one (=Abraham) was weaned, he began to intellectually explore—though he was young—and to contemplate day and night. He wondered how it could be that the sphere constantly moved without a mover. Who caused it to revolve? After all, it could not revolve itself. He had no teacher or anyone to inform him regarding this matter. Rather, he was ensconced in Ur of the Chaldeans among foolish idol worshipers. His father and mother and the whole nation were idol worshipers, and he worshiped with them. But his heart explored and [sought to] understand until he reached the path of truth and understood the correct way as a result of his right knowledge, and he knew that there is one God who moves the sphere, who created everything, and He is the only God in all that exists.⁵¹

In presenting Abraham in this manner, Maimonides is creating a persona for him that is absent in midrashic materials. While there are certain indications in midrashic literature that Abraham discovered God on the basis of his own investigations, Maimonides goes far beyond any midrashic source when he depicts Abraham as philosophically demonstrating the existence of God on the basis of an argument from the movement of the sphere.⁵² As Daniel Lasker has noted, such a

⁵¹ *Hilkhot avodah zarah*, 1:3. Cf. *Guide* 3:29. For a fuller account of Maimonides' view of Abraham, see Masha Turner, "The Portrayal of Abraham the Patriarch in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Daat* 37 (1996), 181–192 [in Hebrew]; Masha Turner, "The Patriarch Abraham in Maimonidean Thought," in *The Faith of Abraham in the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages*, eds. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher and Yohanan Silman [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 143–154.

⁵² On the relevant midrashic sources, see the studies listed in the previous note and Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 282–283; Ruth Ben-Meir, "Abraham in Nahmanides' Thought," in *The Faith of Abraham in the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages*, eds. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, and Yohanan Silman [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 160; Oded Yisraeli, "The Emergence of Abraham according to the Zohar," *Daat* 60 (2007), 68–69 [in Hebrew]. In some later midrashic sources, there are statements that present Abraham as discovering God on his own accord. See the examples cited in Urbach, *The Sages*, 282–283. These examples, however, do not explain the means by which Abraham came to the discovery. Other late midrashic sources do explain how Abraham discovered God. These sources tell the story of Abraham discovering God after mistaking the sun and the moon for God before finally realizing that there must be a Master who controls their movements. See,

characterization of Abraham is not prominent in the works of Jewish philosophers prior to Maimonides.⁵³ Not surprisingly, therefore, this conception of Abraham is not discussed in the works translated by R. Judah ibn Tibbon—bracketing for a moment R. Judah Ha-Levi's *Sefer ha-Kuzari*.⁵⁴ The Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, however, did adopt a conception of Abraham arriving at God on the basis of his own reasoning—an important indication of their religious ideals—and it seems, therefore, that they were influenced in this regard by Maimonides.

Before turning to their presentation of Abraham, however, let me first consider R. Judah ha-Levi's detailed discussion of Abraham in the *Kuzari*. Ha-Levi rejects any approach that would accord pride of place to Abraham as a philosopher. In the context of his famous discussion of the God of Aristotle versus the God of Abraham, he explains that while Abraham may have started off as a philosopher and originally come to God through logical speculation, he ultimately rejected philosophy in favor of a direct experience of God. Indeed, it was this experience that was the secret of Abraham's faith and allowed him to submit so fully to the divine will—as seen, for example, in the episode

e.g., *Bet ha-midrash*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1967), I:26, II:118–119. While this story bears a certain resemblance to Maimonides' account, it hardly amounts to a philosophic argument for the existence of God.

⁵³ Daniel J. Lasker, "The Prophecy of Abraham in Karaite Thought," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998), 105–106 [in Hebrew]. I would note, though, that R. Judah ben Barzillai, in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, does present Abraham as arriving at belief in God on the basis of his own reasoning. After he came to accept the existence of God, however, God taught him further knowledge. See *Perush sefer yetsirah*, ed. Halberstam, 266.

⁵⁴ It should be pointed out, however, that R. Judah himself notes in his translator's introduction to *Duties of the Heart* that what distinguishes the patriarch Abraham from others of his generation is that he possessed the "highest level, which is recognizing the Creator and His Unity and His worship, for whose sake man was created" (Tsifroni, 55). He does not, however, explicitly state that Abraham came to this knowledge on his own accord. A similar characterization of Abraham may also be found in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Book of the Apple* translated from the Arabic by Abraham ibn Ḥasdai, a Barcelonan sage and supporter of Maimonides during the Maimonidean controversy in the 1230s. See *Sefer ha-tapuah*, translated into Hebrew by Abraham ibn Ḥasdai and into German by J. Musen (Lemberg: S. L. Kugel, 1873), 15–16. I would note, however, that Maimonides himself was dismissive of this work. See Steven Harvey, "Did Maimonides' Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon Determine Which Philosophers Would Be Studied by Later Jewish Thinkers?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 83 (1992), 60–61.

of the binding of Isaac.⁵⁵ As noted, Scholem believed that Kabbalah was the spiritual heir of Ha-Levi. We may discuss to what extent this is correct when it comes to certain matters of worldview. Yet significantly, here, as in other matters pertaining to the philosophic ethos, both R. Ezra and R. Jacob implicitly reject Ha-Levi's position, and instead, like Maimonides, they move well beyond midrashic accounts and present Abraham as one who discovered God through the powers of his own intellect.⁵⁶ In contrast to Ha-Levi, neither gives any indication that Abraham, after coming to God intellectually, subsequently rejected this approach.

As part of his account of the transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom through the generations, which appears in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, R. Ezra explains:

Abraham, our father, peace be upon him, apprehended of the knowledge of his Creator (*hissig me-yedi'at bore'o*) what the earlier ones had not apprehended, and he knew of His truth what his predecessors did not know.⁵⁷

While the matter is not stated explicitly, the implication of this comment is that Abraham came to knowledge of God on his own accord. The very fact that Abraham's knowledge is presented as unique makes it obvious that it was not transmitted to him by a teacher. Nor does it seem that it was revealed to him by God. In the course of his account of the transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom, R. Ezra is careful to specify which figures received this wisdom through revelation or through transmission from a teacher.⁵⁸ The fact that no such specification is

⁵⁵ See *Kuzari*, 4:16–27, esp. 27. See also the analysis in Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy*, 277.

⁵⁶ The same may be true of R. Abraham ben David. See Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières*, 269–270. Similarly, R. Eleazar of Worms presents Abraham as discovering God through the powers of his own intellect. See Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, *Sefer ha-rokeah*, 87–89.

⁵⁷ Brody, 14; Chavel, 477.

⁵⁸ On the basis of R. Ezra's account of the transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom, which he depicts as knowledge of God, it seems that prior to the time of the patriarch Jacob, Kabbalistic wisdom was primarily arrived at through human speculation. While it is possible that transmission from person to person played some role prior to Jacob—R. Ezra is not explicit on the matter—its role became central only starting with Jacob. Similarly, from R. Ezra's point of view, it seems that divine revelation of Kabbalistic wisdom was only a factor from Jacob and on.

The first person whom R. Ezra depicts as achieving knowledge of God is the antediluvian Enoch, who “walked before God to know Him and recognize Him in truth” (Brody, 13; Chavel, 476). The next figure he mentions is Noah: “He also knew his

made here suggests that R. Ezra believed that Abraham reached this knowledge through his own investigations.⁵⁹

God with a perfect knowledge. In wisdom prudence dwells (cf. Prov. 8:12). And as a result he found favor in His eyes” (Brody, 13; Chavel, 476). For neither of these figures is there any hint that knowledge of God was taught or revealed to them. On the contrary, in the case of Noah, it is clear that he achieved this knowledge on his own. Surely Noah, the only righteous man of his generation, did not receive his wisdom from someone else. Furthermore, it is obvious that this knowledge was not revealed to him by God, since it would be nonsensical for Noah to have found favor in God’s eyes as a result of knowledge that God Himself taught him. Following Noah, R. Ezra discusses Noah’s son, Shem: “Shem was chosen, for he was the first to recognize his Creator, to know Him, and to hold fast (*leḥahzik*, following MS Vienna 148 1a) to His faithfulness” (Brody, 13; Chavel, 476). Whereas later on in his account, he specifies that Kabbalistic knowledge was taught by one person to another, here there is no indication that Shem learned from his father to recognize his Creator. This silence does not definitively prove that R. Ezra thought that no such teaching occurred at this point in history. However, at the very least, it does suggest that, in R. Ezra’s view, transmission through teaching was not the only or even the dominant mode of acquiring knowledge of God. Human speculation also played a role. Returning to Shem, I would add that as is the case with Noah, certainly Shem did not derive his knowledge from revelation, because his knowledge preceded his chosenness. In the continuation, R. Ezra explains that both Shem and Eber came to know the commandments “by means of perfect, clear and flawless knowledge” (Brody, 13; Chavel, 477). R. Ezra then turns to Abraham. Following his discussion of Abraham, he similarly describes Isaac as “apprehending of the knowledge of the Creator” (Brody, 14; Chavel, 477). No mention is made of his having been taught this knowledge by Abraham, and there is no indication that there was a revelatory component to his knowledge. It is not until he comes to discuss Jacob that R. Ezra makes mention of the transmission of Kabbalistic wisdom or of its revealed nature: “He studied in the house of Eber for twelve years, and he received from Isaac, our father, and Abraham, our father, knowledge of the Creator, and the Glory of the *Shekhinah* revealed itself to him” (Brody, 15; Chavel, 477). Jacob’s sons, in turn, “recognize the Creator, may He be blessed, and know Him based on what they received from Jacob their father” (Brody, 15; Chavel, 477). These transmitted teachings were thereafter forgotten by the Israelites during their slavery in Egypt, until God revealed them to Moses during the incident of the burning bush. The process of revelation culminated at Mount Sinai: “At that assembly Moses, Nadab, Abihu, the seventy men amongst the elders of Israel, and all of Israel apprehended of the knowledge of His truth and the essence of His Glory, each one according to the level of his perfection, ability and power” (Brody, 19; Chavel, 488). From that time on, continues R. Ezra, this knowledge was continuously transmitted until, as we saw in chapter one, his own generation when the knowledge was largely forgotten.

To repeat, the most important point that emerges from this extended summary is that R. Ezra is careful to state when figures gained Kabbalistic knowledge through transmission and revelation. This suggests that where not stated otherwise, they arrived at this knowledge through their own investigations, even if, as noted, transmission may have also played some role. This point needs to be underscored because it is a measure of the significance that R. Ezra accords to the investigation of God. I would add that it may be possible to see R. Ezra’s own creative activities as a renewal of the activities of the Biblical forefathers.

⁵⁹ Note also that R. Ezra uses the term *hissig* to mean apprehend or perceive intellectually. This is a distinctly philosophic use of this term that is rife in the newly

If this is implicit in R. Ezra's work, R. Jacob makes it explicit:

See what our Rabbis, peace be upon them, said, "Abraham was three years old when he recognized (*hikkir*) his Creator."⁶⁰ They did not say that the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself (*niglah*) to Abraham, but that Abraham recognized (*hikkir*) his Creator, and there is no doubt that the recognition came through wisdom (*hokhmah*), not through prophecy.⁶¹

R. Jacob's comments speak for themselves and require little explanation. When R. Jacob claims that Abraham came to the recognition of God through wisdom, he means that Abraham reached this knowledge by the force of his own intellect. In this matter, as in other cases relating to knowledge of God, the first Kabbalists follow the Maimonidean perspective instead of either earlier Rabbinic perspectives or Ha-Levi's perspective. The Kabbalists, as it were, cast Abraham after their own image, as an investigator of God.⁶²

IV

It is necessary to stress that the methods by which investigation is carried out are separable from ethos. That is to say, the ethos defines a basic value—that there is a need to investigate God—but does not, therefore, dictate how such investigation must proceed. Indeed, just as two groups who share the same ethos may have different worldviews,

available philosophic literature, but absent from earlier non-philosophic literature. For example, it is used with this meaning in both R. Samuel ibn Tibbon and R. Judah Alharizi's respective translations of Maimonides' *Guide*.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., BT *Nedarim* 32a; *Midrash bere'shit rabbah*, 64:5 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, II, 703).

⁶¹ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, 83 (ch. 3, ll. 131–134).

⁶² Oded Yisraeli has argued that Maimonides' account of Abraham's discovery of God may be contrasted with that found in the *Zohar*. According to Maimonides, Abraham discovers God on the basis of his own philosophic investigations. According to the *Zohar*, as well, Abraham strives to discover God—even if the focus is more on Abraham's desire to discover God than on his intellectual quest—but this striving only goes so far. Abraham only comes to know God in a fuller manner when God reveals himself to Abraham. As Yisraeli points out, such an act of God's revelation in response to Abraham's striving is absent in Maimonides' analysis. See Yisraeli, "The Emergence of Abraham according to the *Zohar*," 51–70. However one assesses Yisraeli's argument—in my view, the contrast that he draws between Maimonides and the *Zohar* is exaggerated—it must be noted that, like Maimonides, R. Ezra and R. Jacob do not seem to assume that Abraham's quest to discover God was only complete once God revealed himself.

so they may also have employed different methodologies to arrive at these worldviews. This holds true not only with regard to the difference between the investigative methods employed by the first Kabbalists and those employed by this or that philosophic school, but also with regard to the difference between the methodologies used by one philosophic school and another. Thus, for example, while, R. Saadia and Maimonides may be said to partake of the same ethos, Maimonides, writing from his Aristotelian point of view, harshly critiques the Kalam methods of philosophic investigation characteristic of R. Saadia's work.⁶³

Nevertheless, as I indicated in chapter two, there are certain broadly shared methodologies which cut across the varying philosophic schools, and it is of some interest to compare them to the methods found in the works of the first Kabbalists. Thus, for example, several of the newly available philosophic works use logical argumentation to clarify the nature of divine unity. Such attempts, and indeed the use of logical reasoning more generally, do not play a prominent role in the discourse of these Kabbalists. Still, as we have seen, we do find that logical argumentation is employed in the work of R. Asher to understand divine unity. The same is true in the work of R. Azriel.⁶⁴

I also noted that investigation of God in the philosophic literature often takes the form of examining the created world as a way of gaining insight into God's wisdom. This, too, is not the predominant way in which God is investigated by the first Kabbalists, but it does, nevertheless, play an important role.

According to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, the sefirot serve as a template for the created world, such that the created world is a reflection of the sefirot.⁶⁵ It follows, accordingly, that examination of the created world can offer knowledge of the sefirot. This may be seen, for example, in a work appended to R. Asher's *Sefer ha-Yihud*, which Daniel Abrams surmises is also by R. Asher.⁶⁶ In this work, R. Asher explains that the four elements and associated humors are linked to certain sefirot—a position also maintained by his uncle, R. Isaac.⁶⁷

⁶³ See *Guide* 1:71–76.

⁶⁴ See Azriel of Gerona, “*Sha’ar ha-sho’el*” 4 (question 6).

⁶⁵ For a clear statement of this idea, see *ibid.*, 4 (question three).

⁶⁶ *R. Asher ben David*, 18.

⁶⁷ R. Ezra, in a letter to a certain R. Abraham, attributes the correlation between the elements, humors, and sefirot to R. Isaac. See Scholem, “*Te’udah hadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 26. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Chavel, 481–482), R. Ezra presents the same correlation, without, however, attributing it to R. Isaac.

According to R. Asher, the roles of these elements and humors in the human body “are only known by the enlightened of Israel who investigate the works of the Creator (*ha-ḥokrim ma’aseh ha-bore’*), the remnant whom God calls.”⁶⁸ The “enlightened of Israel” are, of course, the Kabbalists. R. Asher, therefore, defines the Kabbalists as ones who study the created world. They do so, as the wider context of the passage suggests,⁶⁹ to gain knowledge of God. In the particular case at hand, since the humors are reflections of the sefirot, studying the former informs regarding the latter.⁷⁰ Obviously, however, the designation of the Kabbalists as “those who investigate the works of the Creator” has application beyond the particular instance of the humors: the study of any aspect of the created world can offer insight into God.

Whatever the importance of logical argumentation and the study of the created world, the main form of investigation of God employed by the first Kabbalists was, broadly speaking, hermeneutical. It involves, as seen in chapter one, comparing received traditions about God with various other types of thinking about God. Here, too, I see a point of similarity with the philosophic material. In chapter two, I argued that there is also a hermeneutical dimension to investigation of God in the philosophic works, since they contain attempts to square Biblical and Rabbinic traditions with philosophic ideas. The Kabbalists are involved in a similar project, inasmuch as they attempt to reconcile their received traditions with Biblical, Rabbinic, and philosophic materials. In other terms, for both philosophers and Kabbalists, a central component of investigating God involves forging a systematic theology out of very disparate sets of material. To a certain extent, the main distinction between philosophers and Kabbalists, when it comes to such hermeneutical investigation, is that the latter had an additional set of material that the former did not have, namely received esoteric traditions.⁷¹

⁶⁸ R. Asher ben David, 127.

⁶⁹ For example, this is intimated in the following remarks that appear shortly before his characterization of the Kabbalists as those “who investigate the works of the Creator”: “Know that the four elements were placed in the human, and the Creator attached them to him and unified them, and through the power of the intellect that He placed in his heart, he will understand and gain the knowledge that He placed them and situated them” (126).

⁷⁰ Along similar lines, as will be seen below, the Geronese poet, Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera, who was a friend and student of R. Ezra and R. Azriel, writes of self investigation as a means of gaining knowledge of God.

⁷¹ I will further elaborate upon this issue in a study that is currently under preparation.

Still, whatever the similarities between the methodologies by which the first Kabbalists and philosophers investigate God, the latter curtail the type of knowledge that may be gained of God far more severely than the former. In general terms, as we saw, in the newly available philosophic literature only knowledge of the manner in which He interacts with that which is other than Him, rather than knowledge of His essence, is possible.⁷² Needless to say, the first Kabbalists' detailed investigations of the inner life of God go far beyond what is allowed by the newly available philosophic literature. Nevertheless, they share this literature's deep epistemological concerns.

As we saw, a key characteristic of the philosophic ethos is epistemological concerns: at every turn, we find the question: "What type of knowledge of God is possible?" This question is as central for the first Kabbalists as it is in the newly available philosophic literature, even if the answers are not identical. Indeed, it informs these Kabbalists' entire intellectual project. For example, the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* attributed to R. Isaac opens with an attempt to discern what constitutes "all that the apprehension of thought apprehends unto ('ad) *En-Sof*."⁷³ That is, how far up the sefirotic tree can human knowledge reach before arriving at *En Sof*, the unfathomable source of the sefirot?⁷⁴ R. Isaac's answer to this question is that "the beginning of the essences that are subject to thought (*ha-nittanot leḥashev*) are the wonders that are within wisdom."⁷⁵ That is to say, no knowledge of that which is above the second sefirah (the sefirah of wisdom) is possible. In fact, while at times the first sefirah is presented in cataphatic terms as the divine crown (*keter*), at other times it is presented by R. Isaac and his students in a manner, which, as Elliot Wolfson

⁷² For full bibliographical references and a more extensive discussion, see chapter two, section five.

⁷³ R. Isaac the Blind, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 1, ll. 1–2.

⁷⁴ Sandra Valabregue-Perry, in *Concealed and Revealed*, 62–63, notes that in addition to the "exclusive" reading that I propose here, an "inclusive" reading is also possible, according to which "all that the apprehension of thought apprehends unto ('ad) *En-Sof*" suggests that knowledge of some sort can extend to *En-Sof*. See also *ibid.*, 126–132. Valabregue-Perry's remarks about a possible "inclusive" reading are part of her wider claim that scholars have presented *En-Sof* in overly transcendent terms. I will not address this interesting claim here. In my view, however, in this particular context, the "exclusive" reading is the stronger one.

⁷⁵ R. Isaac the Blind, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 1, l. 10.

has noted, resonates with the apophatic stance of Maimonides.⁷⁶ Thus, they often refer to this sefirah in negative terms as “that which thought cannot apprehend” (*mah she-’en ha-maḥshavah masseget*).

Even the second sefirah, however, cannot be known directly—only indirect knowledge is possible: “By means of the fixed essences engraved in it (i.e. the third sefirah *Binah*), he (i.e. the human contemplator) has the ability to contemplate the fixed subtle essences that have no limit (i.e. the essences within the second sefirah).”⁷⁷ Bracketing the specific nature of the engraved essences and the fixed essences, R. Isaac’s overall point is that direct knowledge of the second sefirah is impossible. Instead, only indirect knowledge may be gained of this sefirah by means of the third sefirah.

Similar statements abound in the work of his students. Consider, for example, the following comments of R. Ezra, which appear in his *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot*:

You must know that thought extends and ascends until the point of its origin, and when it arrives [at this point], it stops and cannot ascend further.... And therefore anyone who breaks through (*ha-hores*) to think about that which thought does not have the ability (*she-’en yekholet ba-maḥshavah*) to extend and ascend to, [such a person] will not escape from one of two possibilities: his mind will become confused, and his body will be destroyed, or, as a result of the compulsion of his thought to cleave to that which it cannot apprehend (*lehadbik be-mah she-’eno yakhol lehassig*), his soul will ascend—it will separate and return to its source. Regarding these matters, Solomon, peace be upon him, said in his wisdom, “Do not make yourself overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself (*lammah tishomem*)?” (Eccles. 7:15). The explanation [of *tishomem*]: it is derived from *shemamah* (desolation). That is to say, he will destroy the structure of his body. And it says, “Do not be overmuch wicked, nor be a fool; why should you die before your time? (ibid., 7:17). Regarding this they said, “What is too wondrous for you, do not

⁷⁶ See Wolfson, “Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” 431. A full presentation of the relationship between the thought of the first Kabbalists and the apophatic stance taken in some of the newly available philosophic literature is beyond the scope of this work. In addition to the above study by Wolfson, for other treatments of the role of apophysis in early Kabbalah, see the extensive bibliography listed there on p. 395, n. 5. See also Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed*. Valabregue-Perry argues that there is a greater gap between the thought of the first Kabbalists and negative theology than has generally been recognized by scholars.

⁷⁷ R. Isaac the Blind, *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 1, ll. 11–12. My comments in parentheses are based on the interpretation of Mark Sendor. See his *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, 2:11–12, n. 26.

examine, and what is hidden from you, do not investigate” (*B. Hagigah* 13a, citing *Sir.* 3:21): this refers to the first sefirah, which is called the supernal crown.⁷⁸

According to this passage, the human intellect cannot reach beyond its own source, the second sefirah. While it may suggest that a more direct kind of knowledge of the second sefirah is possible than that which R. Isaac allows, the overall point is that human knowledge is curtailed in its ability to investigate God. It certainly cannot reach, as the end of the passage makes clear, the first sefirah. Any attempt to reach beyond its limits will lead to harm.

Many more passages could be adduced that would show the importance in the circle of R. Isaac of epistemological questions about the extent to which knowledge of God is possible,⁷⁹ including a particularly important passage in the work of R. Jacob, which is discussed in a different context below. The statements cited here, however, should suffice to make it apparent that such questions are carefully considered and discussed in the works of the first Kabbalists. Such questioning is rooted in a philosophic ethos that places supreme value on gaining knowledge of God, but, at the same time, is acutely aware of the limitations of human reason. Indeed, as Haviva Pedaya points out, in her discussion of the above passage, R. Ezra draws on Maimonides’ comments in *Guide* 1:32 (1:31 in Alḥarizi’s translation).⁸⁰ In this chapter, Maimonides stresses that the human intellect has limitations, and he highlights the danger involved in attempting to exceed these limitations. As Maimonides puts the matter, in Alḥarizi’s rendering, “If you persist in trying to apprehend beyond your ability... you will be lacking in all the forms of lacking, and it will then occur that you

⁷⁸ I am citing from the text of this passage as it appears in Pedaya, “Possessed by Speech,” 126–127. Pedaya transcribed the text from MS Vatican 244. A parallel passage appears in Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 101–102. This parallel passage is also transcribed by Pedaya on pp. 126–127. A related passage appears elsewhere in R. Azriel’s *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth* as well. There he explains that with regard to “the ways of God and their telos” (*darkhé ha-shem ve-sofam*): “One should not investigate (*lahkor*) these matters beyond what the power of thought [allows], for it (=human thought) has no ability to go beyond the limits of its beginning (=the second sefirah), nor to ask what is beyond its limit... and there is no need to say that one should not investigate that which thought cannot apprehend (=the highest sefirah)” (p. 166).

⁷⁹ For some further examples, see R. Asher ben David, 105; Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* in *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 456 (comments on *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:8); Scholem, *Seridim ḥadashim mi-kitvé R. ‘Azriel mi-Gerona*, 207.

⁸⁰ Pedaya, “Possessed by Speech,” 126–127, n. 7.

will be overcome by [erroneous] thoughts and you will turn towards that which is lacking, [towards] abominations and bad [personal] attributes.”⁸¹ While not quite as dire, the echoes of this statement can be heard in R. Ezra’s warning against pushing beyond the ability of human thought, of thinking “about that which thought does not have the ability to extend and ascend to.” Furthermore, as Pedaya also notes, in this same chapter Maimonides supplies Eccles. 7:15 and *B. Hagigah* 13a (citing Sir. 3:21) as prooftexts in support of this point. R. Ezra supplies the same texts.⁸²

To repeat, the first Kabbalists’ response to the question “to what extent can God be known” is different from the responses supplied in the newly available philosophic literature, even as it must be stressed that these latter responses, themselves, are not identical with each other. However, the very fact that such concerns are raised in the Kabbalistic literature is significant in and of itself. Such concerns are not an important part of classical Rabbinic literature, and their pervasiveness in the literature of the first Kabbalists provides yet another example of these Kabbalists’ rootedness in the philosophic ethos.

V

A crucial characteristic of the value of investigating God, as it is presented in the newly available philosophic literature, is that it is not merely a side endeavor, but is given a principal spot in defining what it means to live as a Jew, so much so that the way in which human beings relate emotionally to God is mediated by it. The importance of loving God is stressed in both Biblical and Rabbinic sources, but in the newly available philosophic literature—in what I earlier depicted as a sort of hegemonic move on the part of the philosophic ethos—this religiously desirable emotional attitude towards God is recast and linked to knowledge of God.

Not only is such a linkage not native to Rabbinic literature, but it was also rejected, as we have seen, by Ha-Levi. Therefore, when the first Kabbalists link knowledge of God and love of God they are, in

⁸¹ Alḥarizi, 121.

⁸² Pedaya, “Possessed by Speech,” 126–127, n. 7.

effect, siding with the philosophic ethos and, once again, rejecting Ha-Levi's position.

Isadore Twersky points out that R. Abraham ben David, in his critical glosses on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, lets Maimonides' contention that love of God is proportionate to apprehension of God go without comment. It might be suggested that R. Abraham did not pay close attention to Maimonides' comments in the relevant passage. If so, R. Abraham's silence need not indicate tacit acquiescence. Yet, as Twersky notes, R. Abraham commented on the possible meanings of the enigmatic term *she-yishgeh*,⁸³ which Maimonides uses in the very same passage to characterize a person's love for God. Thus, it is apparent that R. Abraham studied the relevant passage carefully. In Twersky's view this fact suggests his silence does indeed indicate that R. Abraham agreed with Maimonides' view.⁸⁴

If in the case of R. Abraham there is only evidence from silence, in the works of his son's students, there are explicit statements that tie together knowledge of God and love of God. These statements have already been collected and briefly analyzed by Georges Vajda,⁸⁵ and my remarks build on his.

Before turning to such a statement in R. Ezra's work, I will first outline some comments by Maimonides, which I believe served as a source for R. Ezra. We already saw that Maimonides viewed Abraham as a philosopher who came to knowledge of God on his own accord. In chapter ten of the "Laws of Repentance" in his *Mishneh Torah*, he expands on this presentation. Working off his general linking of love and knowledge, he implies that Abraham's love of God was connected to his knowledge of God. After referring to worshiping God out of love as a very high level of worship, he explains that "this is the level of Abraham our father, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, called His lover, since he only worshiped out of love."⁸⁶ I note parenthetically that in stating that God called Abraham His lover, Maimonides is alluding to Isaiah 41:8: "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham My lover." Later in the

⁸³ See R. Abraham's comments on *Mishneh torah, Hilkhot teshuvah*, 10:6. I discuss the term *she-yishgeh*, in the context of a description of the philosophic ethos in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, in chapter five.

⁸⁴ Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières*, 270.

⁸⁵ Vajda, *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Âge*, 191–198.

⁸⁶ *Hilkhot teshuvah*, 10:2.

same chapter, he explains what it means to be a lover of God. In the passage about which R. Abraham was silent, and which we have discussed in chapter two, Maimonides explains that “love will be proportionate to knowledge (*‘al pi ha-de‘ah tihyeh ha-‘ahavah*)—if little, then little, and if great, then great. Therefore a person must devote himself to understand (*lehavin*) and study (*u-lehaskil*) the wisdoms and the sciences that inform him regarding his Maker, insofar as that person has the ability to understand (*lehavin*) and apprehend (*u-lehassig*).”⁸⁷ Thus, Abraham’s love of God was a function of his knowledge of God. In chapter two, I pointed out that while in some articulations Maimonides seems to make knowledge of God a preparatory step for love of God, in others he makes knowledge an aspect of love itself. As I argued there, his articulation here apparently leans towards the latter understanding. I will return to this point below.

As we have seen, R. Ezra appropriates Maimonides’ depiction of Abraham as one who came to knowledge of God on his own accord. He further appropriates his presentation of Abraham as a lover of God. Consider the following statement in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

Since Abraham, our father, took as his portion the attribute of grace (*hesed*) which corresponds to “remember,”⁸⁸ and he knew the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, with a true knowledge (*yedi‘ah amittit*), God called him “Abraham My lover” (Is. 41:8), for the attribute of love is not possible without knowledge being perfect (*ki lo yittakhen middat ha-‘ahavah zutati ha-yedi‘ah shelemah*).⁸⁹

Like Maimonides, R. Ezra picks up on Isaiah’s description of Abraham as God’s lover and claims that this love is connected to knowledge. There is no reason to think that R. Ezra’s comments are limited to Abraham. Rather, he considers all love of God as requiring knowledge of God. Still, Abraham’s love bears particular consideration. Since, in R. Ezra’s view, Abraham arrived at knowledge of God through the

⁸⁷ *Hilkhot teshuvah*, 10:6.

⁸⁸ The reference is to the commandment stated in Exod. 20:7 “Remember the Sabbath day.” In contrast, the parallel version of this commandment in Deut. 5:11 reads “Keep the Sabbath day.” From R. Ezra’s Kabbalistic point of view, the version in Exod. corresponds to the sefirah of lovingkindness (*hesed*), while the version in Deut. corresponds to the sefirah of judgment (*din*). According to R. Ezra, Abraham—God’s lover—is associated with the sefirah of lovingkindness, since it is the source of divine love.

⁸⁹ Travis, 3 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 497.

power of his own investigations, it is apparent that, at the very least, knowledge of God which has been acquired through intellectual effort, as opposed to simply thorough received traditions, can also play a role in love of God. Indeed, given that R. Ezra views it as a halakhic requirement to actively investigate God, it seems likely that knowledge acquired through human effort not only plays a role in fostering love of God, but also is necessary to fully achieve love of God.

We also find the association between knowledge of God and love of God in the following passage from R. Jacob ben Sheshet's *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*:

“[R. Eleazar ben Abina said]: Anyone who says ‘A praise, of David’ (i.e. Ps. 145) [three times each day is promised that he will be a member of the world to come]” (*B. Berakhot* 4b). It must be explained that he meant to refer to anyone who knows (*ba-yode’a*) and understands (*u-mevin*) it, and each and every time that he says it, his love of the Creator, may He be blessed, will increase, since he will contemplate (*she-yitbonen*) what is included in it (i.e. in Ps. 145) of the deep wonders and the wide splendors <?> on every side and in every direction from the wonders of wisdom, and knowledge of the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He.⁹⁰

According to the Talmudic statement of R. Eleazar, which R. Jacob cites at the opening of this passage, anyone who recites Psalm 145 three times a day will merit a place in the world to come. According to R. Jacob's explanation of this seemingly enigmatic statement, what R. Eleazar in fact meant was that one who contemplates what Ps. 145 reveals about God will merit the world to come. In chapter one, we saw that R. Jacob is the most emphatic of any member of R. Isaac's circle in maintaining that esoteric traditions must be developed and expanded. Surely, then, in R. Jacob's view, Ps. 145 is not merely to be engaged passively based on received traditions, but is to be investigated in a creative manner that will unlock its full Kabbalistic significance. Against this backdrop, therefore, it becomes clear that R. Jacob interprets R. Eleazar's statement through the lens of the philosophic ethos as encouraging the investigation of God.

I will turn to the role that reciting this psalm has in loving God in a moment. First, however, it must be noted that in reading R. Eleazar's statement in accordance with the philosophic ethos, R. Jacob ignores the anonymous explanation that the Talmud itself supplies for the

⁹⁰ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, 153 (ch. 19, ll. 1–5).

statement. According to this explanation, Psalm 145 is given special significance both because it is constructed as an alphabetic acrostic, and because of the importance of v. 17 (“You open Your hand, and satisfy every living thing with favor”).⁹¹ Why it is that the alphabetic construction of the psalm is so important is not specified. It stands to reason, however, that it is because the psalm, which is really an extended praise of God, praises God from A to Z⁹²—that is, because its praise of God is complete. Verse 17 is apparently singled out because of its stress on the providential role of God as the provider of sustenance. Absent from the Talmudic explanation, however, is any sense that the psalm’s significance lies in what it can teach about the nature of God. On the contrary, the Talmud’s explanation would seem to suggest that all who recite the psalm, regardless of their intellectual sophistication, merit the reward. However, R. Jacob is bothered by this possibility. Earlier in *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, he makes this clear:

If the intention of the statement of this sage (i.e. of R. Eleazar) is only what is understood on the basis of a straightforward explanation of the passage, it would be easy for anyone from Israel to achieve the world to come. Therefore, I saw fit to explain his statement in this manner: “anyone who says ‘A praise of David,’ etc.”—this is to say, anyone who understands (*she-yavin*) this psalm and studies (*ve-yaskil*) the wonders and the wisdoms hinted in it, and he says it three times a day while contemplating (*mitbonen*) these wondrous matters, which are among the secrets of wisdom, he will be led to cleave to wisdom, and he will accustom himself to be among masters of wisdom and good deeds. As a result, he will end up engaging in abundant Torah study and good deeds, and, in this manner, he will become a member of the world to come.⁹³

Simply reciting the psalm does not cause one to merit the world to come, as a simple reading of R. Eleazar’s statement might suggest. If this were the case, anyone could achieve the world to come. In fact, however, the psalm is only religiously beneficial insofar as one uses it as a springboard to contemplate God. Such contemplation will lead one to further Torah study and to perform good deeds, which will ultimately ensure a place in the world to come. In short, R. Jacob has transformed the statement of R. Eleazar, which according to its

⁹¹ See *B. Berakhot* 4b.

⁹² Except for the letter nun, which is missing in the psalm, a fact noted and discussed in the Talmudic passage.

⁹³ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, 152 (ch. 18, ll. 15–21).

Talmudic explanation appears to be a call to a kind of simple piety—a call to praise God and acknowledge His providential role—into a statement of the value of investigating God.

In the present context, I would like to stress that R. Jacob connects the knowledge of God that one gains through reciting this psalm with love of God. By repeatedly reciting the poem with an eye to understanding its teachings regarding the nature of God, one's love of God will grow. When R. Jacob states that R. Eleazar “meant to refer to anyone who knows (*ba-yode'a*) and understands (*u-mevin*) it, and each and every time that he says it, his love of the Creator, may He be blessed, will increase, since he will contemplate (*she-yitbonen*) what is included in it (i.e. in Ps. 145) of the deep wonders and the wide splendors,” he is effectively echoing Maimonides' claim, seen above, that “love will be proportionate to knowledge” (*'al pi ha-de'ah tihyeh ha-'ahavah*).⁹⁴

Above, I noted that in some passages in Maimonides' oeuvre, knowledge of God is a preparatory step for loving God, while in others it is part and parcel of loving God. While the passage from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* upon which R. Ezra draws seems to maintain the latter point of view, R. Ezra's statement that “the attribute of love is not possible without perfect knowledge (*ki lo yittakhen middat ha-'ahavah zulati ha-yedi'ah shelemah*)” may plausibly be interpreted either way. On the other hand, R. Jacob's statement that anytime one contemplates “the deep wonders and the wide splendors” of Psalm 145, “his love of the Creator, may He be blessed, will increase” may correspond more closely to the latter possibility. However, the most unambiguous identification of love of God and knowledge of God appears in a passage in R. Asher ben David's *Sefer ha-Yihud*:

After [reciting] this verse of the *Shema'* (i.e. Deut. 6:4: “Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”), he begins to speak, and says, “You should love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6:5).

⁹⁴ *Mishneh torah, Hilkhoh teshuvah*, 10:6. Cf. Guide 3:51 in Alharizi's translation: “And we have already explained that love is proportionate to apprehension” (*ha-'ahavah kefi ha-hassagah*). These comments are part of a longer passage which, as noted by the editor of Alharizi's translation (p. 867), is missing in the lone complete manuscript (MS Paris 682) of the translation. The editor, therefore, was forced to interpolate this passage from R. Samuel ibn Tibbon's translation. I was able, however, to recover Alharizi's translation from R. Jacob ben Sheshet's *Sefer meshiv devarim nekho'im*, 183, where it is cited. The above quotation appears on ll. 28–29. The fuller passage is cited below.

This is because when a person unifies [God] with a perfect heart and with the aforementioned appropriate and correct intentionality, it is the perfect love and the perfect and correct unification (*hi' ha-'ahavah ha-shalemah veha-yihud ha-shalem*). This worship is called worship of the heart, whenever his mouth and his heart are in agreement regarding unifying Him in these names (i.e. the three divine names mentioned in Deut. 6:4: Lord, God, Lord), which correspond to His attributes, as I have written.⁹⁵

Here, R. Asher makes equivalent a proper understanding of divine unity, on the one hand, and love of God, on the other. In R. Asher's view, the worshiper who is reciting the first line of the *Shema'* prayer, which refers to the unity of God, must contemplate the correct understanding of divine unity—"the aforementioned appropriate and correct intentionality." R. Asher clarifies the nature of this correct intentionality in an earlier statement. There he notes that the three divine names in Deut. 6:4 correspond to the sefirot of "loving-kindness," "judgment," and "mercy." Since, however, this sefirotic reading may encourage Trinitarian explanations of God's unity, R. Asher explains:

And should you say, perhaps there are many powers, since there are many attributes—therefore, we unify thereafter, and say "one," in order to indicate that His attributes are not divided and separated, nor even conjoined. Rather they are all one, and each one of them is included in the other.... And even though we have found many things conjoined together that are called one, as it is written, for example, regarding the building of the tabernacle, "And couple the tent together so that it becomes one" (Exod. 26:11), and also, "And couple the cloths to one another with the clasps, so that the tabernacle becomes one whole" (Exod. 26:6), this conjoining [i.e., of the parts of the tabernacle] is not like this conjoining [i.e., of the attributes of God]. For the conjoining of the tabernacle was from individual objects, and when they were conjoined one with the other, it was as though it were one. But this is not the case, because this unity could be divided and become as it was in the beginning, and there would be many different parts, and the same is the case [in the verse] "and they were as one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). But the "one" in the verse "Hear, O Israel!" is one from every side, and in all its attributes, without any separation and without any conjoining (*be-lo shum perud uve-lo shum hibbur*).⁹⁶

⁹⁵ R. Asher ben David, 62.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 61–62. I am employing my translation from "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," 81–82.

In this passage, R. Asher interprets divine unity along the lines found in the newly available philosophic literature, as absence of composition. The unity of God, he stresses, does not involve the coming together of multiple parts. While God may appear to have multiple aspects—the sefirot—in actuality God is “without any separation and without any conjoining.” Variations of this last phrase appear in the newly available philosophic literature—including in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*—to express the true nature of divine unity.⁹⁷ It is not possible in the present context to fully describe R. Asher’s theory of the nature of divine unity and the sefirot,⁹⁸ but I would like to stress that it is an understanding based on careful and reasoned thinking. It so happens that this reasoned thinking is based on a philosophic account of divine unity, but even if this were not the case, the crucial point for my purposes is that he arrives at knowledge of God’s unity, which is equated with love of God, through the powers of human reason.

For R. Asher, knowledge of God is not merely a preparatory stage leading up to loving God. On the contrary, the unmistakable implication of his comment—“when a person [unifies] God with a perfect heart and with the aforementioned appropriate and correct intentionality, it is the perfect love and the perfect and correct unification”—is that proper knowledge of the nature of divine unity is part and parcel of perfect love of God.

In all, therefore, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle adopted the position, found in the newly available philosophic literature, which connects love and knowledge of God. In so doing, they implicitly rejected the position of R. Judah ha-Levi, according to whom, as we saw, it is only by despising “all these syllogistic proofs by means of which men endeavor to attain knowledge of His dominion and unity” that one “becomes a servant who is passionate for the object of his service and is ready to perish for the sake of love.”⁹⁹

Here, then, we have yet another indication of the centrality of the philosophic ethos in the Kabbalists’ religious lives. The way in which they conceive of their relationship to God, at the most fundamental

⁹⁷ On this phrase, and for specific references to philosophic texts in which it is employed, see Davidson, “The First Two Positive Divine Commandments,” 38–39.

⁹⁸ For a fuller account see Dauber, “Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah,” 75–85.

⁹⁹ *Kuzari*, 4:15 (Hirschfeld, 222; Touati, 169; Tibbon, 246).

level, is shaped by the philosophic ethos. The same is the case, as I will now show, with regard to their conception of prayer.

VI

In the newly available philosophic literature, gaining knowledge of God is made a prerequisite for worshipping God. Thus, what is arguably the fundamental element of religious life is structured by the philosophic ethos. Under the influence of this philosophic literature, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle also stress that one must investigate God prior to prayer.

Above, I cited R. Ezra's presentation of the first commandment, to investigate God. After explaining this commandment, and before turning to the second commandment (to unify God), R. Ezra interposes the following comments on prayer:

And without knowledge [of God], no aspect of worship is possible, whether it be sacrificial worship or the worship of prayer, as it is written in *Torat Kohanim*: "Any priest who does not know for Whom he dashed (*zarak*) [the blood on the altar] and for Whom he turned [the fat] into smoke (*hiktir*)—his worship is not considered worship."¹⁰⁰ And the righteous one (*he-ḥasid*) said to his students, "When you are praying, know before Whom you are standing" (*B. Berakhot* 28b). Similarly it says, "Know the God of your father and worship Him" (1 Chr. 28:9): after knowledge, the activity of worship will be as is proper (*aḥar ha-yedi'ah tihyeh mele'khet ha-'avodah ke-tikkunah*).¹⁰¹

The passage from *Torat Kohanim*, a designation for the halakhic midrash known as *Sifra*, does not exist in our versions of this midrash. To judge from the passage as it is cited by R. Ezra, however, it seems highly unlikely that, in its original context, it suggested that investigation of God is required prior to sacrifice, the precursor of prayer. As the analysis in chapter three shows, it would be a highly exceptional passage if this were the original intention. It is possible that R. Ezra is in fact paraphrasing the following passage in another halakhic midrash, *Sifré Numbers*, but that either he or a later scribe mistakenly identified it as a passage in *Sifra*: "How do you know that if he dashed (*zarak*) the blood as is proper, but does not know for Whom he dashed it,

¹⁰⁰ No such passage is found in known versions of *Torat Kohanim*. See below.

¹⁰¹ Travis, 4–5 (Hebrew section). Cf. Chavel, 521.

and he turned the fat into smoke (*hiktir*) as is appropriate, but does not know for Whom he turned it into smoke, that the priests bear the guilt for this? Learn it from this verse, ‘You and your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary’ (Lev. 18:1).¹⁰² In this passage, however, there is no indication that the priest must have studied God prior to performing the sacrifice. The main concern of the passage is rather to inveigh against rote performance of the sacrificial rite. The problem with rote performance is not that one lacks knowledge of God, but that one has lost sight of the religious significance of the sacrifice—that is, that one does not realize that the sacrifice is intended for God.

In any case, R. Ezra’s quotation of the above passage from *B. Berakhot* 28b (“And the righteous one [*he-ḥasid*] said to his students, ‘When you are praying know before Whom you are standing’”) is of special importance. In the Talmud, this teaching is attributed to R. Eliezer. R. Ezra, however, places it in the mouth of “the righteous one.” Now “the righteous one” is the epithet commonly employed by R. Isaac’s students to refer to their teacher. I am not aware of any precedent for referring to Rabbi Eliezer as “the righteous one.” I assume, therefore, following the lead of Elliot Wolfson, that when R. Ezra attributes the Talmudic teaching to “the righteous one,” he has his teacher, R. Isaac, in mind.¹⁰³ In other words, it seems to me that he means to indicate that when R. Isaac used to admonish his students regarding prayer, he would employ R. Eliezer’s teaching to do so. Yet, it is apparent that in so doing, R. Isaac changed its meaning. As originally made by R. Eliezer, the statement does not call for investigating God, but is merely a plea to be cognizant that, during prayer, one stands before God. This is how, for example, the eleventh-century commentator R. Shlomo Yitṣḥaki (Rashi) understood the teaching. According to Rashi, R. Eliezer instructs his students to know before whom they stand during prayer “so that they will pray with fear and concentration.”¹⁰⁴ Notice, however, how the meaning of the teaching changes when it is restated by R. Isaac. It will be recalled that R. Ezra cites it immediately

¹⁰² *Sifré de-ve Rav*, ed. H. S. Horovitz (Leipzig: Libraria Gustav Fock, 1917; repr., Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1966), 130 (*Korah*, §115).

¹⁰³ Wolfson discusses this passage in a different context in *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 292. He indicates, in the course of translating the passage, that the “righteous one” is a reference to R. Isaac.

¹⁰⁴ Rashi on *B. Berakhot* 28b.

following his presentation of the commandment to investigate God. This context makes it apparent that R. Isaac employed R. Eliezer's teaching to instruct his students to come to prayer only after having investigated God. Thus, R. Isaac has interpreted R. Eliezer through the lens of the philosophic ethos.

To fully appreciate the relationship of R. Isaac's statement (as well as other similar statements by members of his circle, which I will consider below) to the philosophic ethos, it is necessary to return to chapter 3:51 of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which I already considered in chapter two. This chapter of the *Guide* seems to be particularly important in informing the first Kabbalists' perspective regarding the need to investigate God as a prerequisite for prayer. According to Maimonides, as rendered in Alḥarizi's translation, this chapter sets out to explain "the worship of he who has apprehended the truths particular to God, may He be exalted" (*avodat massig ha-'amittot ha-meyuḥadot ba-shem yit'aleh*).¹⁰⁵ This type of worship is described in thoroughly intellectualist terms. It involves the human intellect's cleaving to God, and it is only achievable after one has apprehended God to the extent that it is possible for a human being to do so.

I would suggest that when R. Ezra states at the end of the above passage that "after knowledge, the activity of worship will be as is proper" (*aḥar ha-yedi'ah tihyeh mele'khet ha-'avodah ke-tikkunah*), he is loosely paraphrasing Maimonides' remark in *Guide* 3:51 that "this final worship, about which we remarked in this chapter, can occur only following apprehension of the Creator by the intellect" (*zot ha-'avodah ha-'aḥaronah asher 'orarnu be-zeh ha-perek, lo tihyeh ella' aḥaré hassagat ha-bore' ba-sekhel*).¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the proof-text that he presents for this point, "Know the God of your father and worship Him" (1 Chr. 28:9), is the same one employed in numerous places in the newly available literature, including by Maimonides in *Guide* 3:51 in the context of his discussion of the "final worship."¹⁰⁷ 1 Chr. 28:9 is not understood in this manner in classical Rabbinic literature. Rather,

¹⁰⁵ Alḥarizi, 863. In this case, R. Samuel ibn Tibbon's translation (p. 578) is identical.

¹⁰⁶ Alḥarizi's translation of these remarks is missing in the MS that underlies the printed edition of his translation but is preserved in Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, 183, 11. 26–27. See n. 94, above.

¹⁰⁷ Pines, 621; Tibbon, 481. Alḥarizi's translation is not extant but is preserved by R. Jacob ben Sheshet. See notes 94, above, and 120, below.

R. Ezra derives this reading directly from the newly available philosophical literature—perhaps, specifically, from Maimonides.

Somewhat later in the excursus, R. Ezra cites another teaching of R. Isaac regarding prayer:

And our Rabbi, the righteous one, of blessed memory, said: The essence of the worship of the enlightened and contemplators of His Name (*'ikkar 'avodat ha-maskilim ve-ḥoshevé shemo*) is “and to Him you shall cleave” (Deut. 13:8). And this is a great principle in the Torah regarding prayer and blessings: to bring his thought into agreement with his belief, as though it cleaves above. To connect the Name in its letters, and include in it the ten sefirot, like a flame attached to a coal. He should enunciate it (=the divine name) according to its epithet, but in his heart he should combine it as it is structured and as it is written.¹⁰⁸

This teaching contains specific theurgic procedures to be carried out during prayer, which have been explained by previous scholars,¹⁰⁹ and need not concern us here. What is significant for my purposes is that the teaching describes the form of worship that is especially suited to the elite Kabbalists, who are referred to as the “enlightened ones and contemplators of His Name” (*ha-maskilim ve-ḥoshevé shemo*). It is possible that R. Ezra (and R. Isaac himself) saw R. Isaac’s teaching as a Kabbalistic analogue to Maimonides’ intellectual worship, which, as seen, the latter describes in *Guide* 3:51 as “the worship of he that has apprehended the truths particular to God, may He be exalted” (*'avodat massig ha-'amittot ha-meyuḥadot ba-shem yit'aleh*),¹¹⁰ both of which involve cleaving (*devekut*) to God. This may be the case even if, as we have seen, for Maimonides this ideal worship occurs outside of the confines of statutory prayer, while R. Isaac’s ideal worship is accomplished while engaged in such prayer.¹¹¹ According to Maimonides, such worship is only possible after one has gained knowledge of God, insofar as it is possible. Perhaps, then, R. Ezra chose to cite R. Isaac’s teaching shortly after he laid out the imperative to investigate God in

¹⁰⁸ Travis, 6–7 (Hebrew section); Chavel, 521–522.

¹⁰⁹ See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 34–35; Idel, “On R. Isaac Sagi Nahor’s Mystical Intention of the Eighteen Benedictions,” 37–38; Moshe Idel, *R. Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 136–137; Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 161–162; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 290–291; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 263–264.

¹¹⁰ Alharizi, 863.

¹¹¹ In his teaching, R. Isaac explains that “this is a great principle in the Torah regarding prayer and blessings.” This is an unmistakable reference to statutory prayer.

order to underscore the point that the ideal form of worship requires one to first investigate God.

The same motivation is apparent in R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot* where he again cites R. Isaac's teaching on prayer. Here the teaching is directly preceded by comments that parallel those in the excursus on the commandments:

"The Rabbis taught: When R. Eliezer fell ill his students came to visit him. His students said to him, 'Our Rabbi, teach us proper behavior.' He said to them: 'Take care with the honor of your companions, and when you are praying know before Whom you are standing, and with this you will enter into the life of the world to come'" (*B. Berakhot* 28b). Similarly, it says: "And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father and worship Him" (1 Chron. 28:9). Anyone who does not know Him cannot worship Him. And in *Midrash Kohelet*: "'Let not the wise man glory [in his wisdom] etc. But only in this should one glory etc.'" (Jer. 9:22–23): "If a wise man does not recognize Who created him, in what sense is he wise?" The essence of the worship of the enlightened and contemplators of His Name is "and to Him you shall cleave" (Deut. 13:8)... (the rest of R. Isaac's teaching follows).¹¹²

As in his excursus on the commandments, R. Ezra cites R. Eliezer's teaching on prayer from *B. Berakhot* 28b. (This time, however, he does not specifically indicate that this passage was employed by R. Isaac.) Also, as in his excursus, he employs 1 Chron. 28:9 as a proof-text for the need to come to prayer with knowledge regarding the nature of God. The rationale that he provides in both places is the same: How can one who does not have knowledge of God pray to God? Interestingly, however, R. Ezra adds an element here that is missing in the excursus: the citation of an aggadic passage from *Midrash Kohelet* immediately before the citation of R. Isaac's teaching on prayer. While this passage is no longer extant in *Midrash Kohelet*, it may be found in both *Aggadot Shir ha-Shirim* and *Bere'shit Rabbati*.

As I showed in chapter three,¹¹³ where I examined this passage in detail, in its original context, it does not advocate investigating God. It speaks rather of having an awareness that God is the Creator, and it gives the key words of Jer. 9:23, "that he understands and knows Me," no cognitive significance. Instead, it reads them as encouraging

¹¹² Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 77–78. (This section of R. Azriel's *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth* is, in fact, part of R. Ezra's *Commentary*. See Tishby's comments in his edition of R. Azriel's *Commentary*, 18.)

¹¹³ See chapter three, near n. 30.

virtuous behavior. Indeed this midrashic passage is a good indication of the way in which Jer. 9:22–23 is understood in Rabbinic literature, in contrast to the manner in which it is employed in the newly available philosophic literature. Against this backdrop, the fact that R. Ezra cites it after citing R. Eliezer's teaching is significant. We see from his excursus on the commandments that R. Ezra understands R. Eliezer's teaching as stressing the need to investigate God prior to prayer. That he cites the midrashic passage after citing R. Eliezer's teaching demonstrates, therefore, that he has not only taken R. Eliezer's statement out of context, but also has turned the midrashic passage into a proof-text of the value of investigating God. Furthermore, the fact that, immediately following his citation of the midrashic passage, R. Ezra cites R. Isaac's teaching on the ideal form of worship strikes me as highly significant. The purpose of this juxtaposition is apparently to underscore that, in keeping with Maimonides' view, the ideal form of worship can only be entered into after having properly investigated God.

The need to investigate God as a prerequisite for prayer is also discussed by R. Jacob ben Sheshet, in two different works, in a manner that makes it apparent that he drew on R. Ezra and perhaps also directly on Maimonides. One of these discussions appears in chapter 28 of his *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, a difficult and not always clear chapter.¹¹⁴ Despite this difficulty, a careful examination of his remarks clarifies his position. In this chapter, like R. Ezra, he cites R. Eliezer's teaching from *B. Berakhot* 28b ("and when you are praying, know before Whom you are standing") without, however, attributing this statement to R. Isaac.¹¹⁵ He regards the statement as a problematic one and addresses a question not addressed by R. Ezra: "We already know that the First Cause (*sibbah ha-rishonah*) cannot be apprehended by the power of the intellect. If so, how can a person pray without knowing before Whom he stands?"¹¹⁶ This question shows that he, like R. Ezra, understands R. Eliezer's teaching as requiring that one investigate God and not merely acknowledge that he stands before God in prayer. If R. Jacob thought that R. Eliezer meant the latter, the teaching would have no bearing on whether or not a person can apprehend

¹¹⁴ The difficulty of this chapter was already noted by Georges Vajda in *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée Juive du Moyen Age* (Paris: Mouton, 1962), 112.

¹¹⁵ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, ch. 28 (182, ll. 1–2).

¹¹⁶ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, ch. 28 (183, ll. 13–14).

the First Cause. As we have seen, the Kabbalists expressed the same type of epistemological concerns as those found in the newly available philosophic literature, and these concerns are at the root of R. Jacob's question.

Note that R. Jacob assumes, at this stage of his argument, that R. Eliezer's teaching instructs one to investigate the "First Cause." In all likelihood, R. Jacob understands this phrase in Kabbalistic terms. In another work, he identifies the First Cause and the first sefirah.¹¹⁷ In more particular Kabbalistic terms, therefore, R. Jacob's question is: if R. Eliezer's teaching is to be understood as requiring knowledge of the first sefirah, how can prayer be possible? After all, in the view of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, the first sefirah is beyond knowledge.

R. Jacob's answer is written in deeply esoteric terms, and is not clear in all its details. His general point, however, seems to be that prayer is not directed to the highest sefirah, which is indeed beyond knowledge, but at lower sefirot that are subject to investigation.¹¹⁸ In other words,

¹¹⁷ See *Sha'ar ha-shamayim*, 156.

¹¹⁸ His answer begins with the following statement:

The answer: it may only be understood through the secrets of prophecy (*sodot ha-nevu'ah*), and it is sufficient for the servant to be like his Master. And it is written, "And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord" (Exod. 19:8) [after the Israelites agreed to obey God and keep His covenant]. He did not have to do this but only did so to teach proper behavior, and they already said in "Chapters of our Fathers," "Without proper behavior there is no Torah" (*M. Avot* 3:17) [*Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim* 183 (ch. 28, ll. 15–17)].

The meaning of these cryptic remarks may be ascertained by considering a parallel passage, which appears in R. Jacob's *Sha'ar ha-shamayim*, 159:

One who has the secret of prophecy (*sod ha-nevu'ah*) in his heart will understand that it is sufficient for the servant to be like his Master... I taught you wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) more precious than pearls, "if you call to understanding (*le-vinah*)." (Prov. 2:3). And I have explained the matter of prayer and supplication, a stake and a cornerstone in wisdom (*be-ḥokhmah*) and understanding (*uvi-tevunah*), and I have explained the reason for enunciating words when speaking in prayer.

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the first passage as "passage 1" and the second passage as "passage 2." As in passage 1, in passage 2 R. Jacob refers to "the secret of prophecy" (*sod ha-nevu'ah*) and uses the phrase "it is sufficient for the servant to be like his Master." In passage 2, however, he adds additional elements: he mentions the second and third sefirot (wisdom and understanding), and he stresses the importance of enunciating words during prayer. These additional elements are not explicitly mentioned in passage 1, but I believe, as I will explain below, that they are alluded to. First, however, I will comment on the issue of enunciating the words during prayer and explain how this issue relates to the sefirot of "wisdom" and "understanding." In a discussion elsewhere in *Meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, R. Jacob provides an explanation for why the words of prayer must be enunciated, rather than just thought: "one must serve Him by means of what He is, that is to say: the One who forms all forms" (p. 154, ch. 19, ll. 36–37). Elliot Wolfson, commenting on this passage, explains: "One

R. Jacob concludes that his initial reading of R. Eliezer's teaching as referring to the first sefirah was erroneous. In fact, R. Eliezer had lower sefirot in mind. This being the case, R. Eliezer's teaching becomes sensible. He is able to teach "when you are praying know before Whom

might be tempted to explain this description functionally, that is, insofar as God is the one who gives form to all forms, and the latter are the letters, the worshiper emulates this capacity of the divine by reciting words of prayer. Although this is a plausible explanation, the discussion that immediately precedes the above citation, which affirms that the letters proceed from *Hokhmah* ("wisdom," the second sefirah) and are engraved in the spirit of *Binah* ("understanding," the third sefirah), suggests an alternative explication predicated on the presumption that the letters are constitutive of the divine physiognomy.... I think it is entirely plausible to propose that Jacob ben Sheshet's gloss 'by means of what He is' should be interpreted ontically and not merely functionally" [Wolfson, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," 418–419 (parentheses added)]. In the preceding remarks to which Wolfson refers, R. Jacob explains that the first sefirah is referred to as *ayin* (naught) and is "a very subtle essence" (p. 153, ch. 19, l. 26). In contrast, "out of *hokhmah* ("wisdom," the second sefirah), all the letters extend, and they are engraved in the spirit of *binah* ("understanding," the third sefirah)" (p. 154, ch. 19, l. 31). In other words, the first sefirah is so subtle that it is beyond language and knowledge, whereas the second and third sefirot mark the beginnings of knowable existence—existence which is both constructed by language (the first Kabbalists consider letters to be the building blocks of existence), and knowable in language. R. Jacob's overall contention is, therefore, that prayer must be enunciated because it is directed at a God who creates and is perhaps constituted by language—that is, it is directed at the sefirot beneath the highest sefirah, or the sefirot that are knowable. It seems that he is expressing precisely the same idea in passage 2, by mentioning the sefirot of "wisdom" and "understanding" in juxtaposition to stressing the importance of enunciating the words of prayer.

I suggest that given the parallels between passage 1 and passage 2, noted above, passage 1 alludes to the same idea. It will be recalled that in passage 1, R. Jacob comments: "And it is written, 'And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord' (Exod. 19:8) [after the Israelites agreed to obey God and keep His covenant]. He did not have to do this, but did so only to teach proper behavior." These comments are based on *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, eds. Saul Horovitz and Israel Abraham Rabin (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrman, 1960), 209–210 (*ba-hodesh*, 2), where it is explained that despite the fact that the all-knowing God surely knew that the Israelites accepted the covenant, Moses nevertheless informed God of their acceptance. R. Jacob, I suggest, employed this concept in order to elucidate the nature of prayer. In particular, his point is that contemporary Jews should behave like Moses when they pray. That is, just as Moses informed God that the Israelites had accepted the covenant even though God was well aware of this fact, so too contemporary Jews should enunciate their words when they pray—since prayer is directed at sefirot below the highest sefirah, which are constituted by language—even though God is well aware of their inner thoughts.

It will also be recalled that both passage 1 and passage 2 include the comment "it is sufficient for the servant to be like his Master," a phrase often employed in Rabbinic literature to suggest that humans should behave like God. The above discussion allows us to clarify what R. Jacob meant by this phrase. Following Wolfson's analysis, the point is that by enunciating the words of prayer, Jews become like those sefirot, beneath the highest sefirah, that are constituted by language.

you are standing” because it is possible to gain knowledge of lower sefirot, even if such knowledge is not possible of the highest sefirah.

In the continuation, R. Jacob cites important remarks from Maimonides’ *Guide* 3:51—the very same remarks that I suggested were in the background of the material from R. Ezra’s work, cited above. I record these remarks as they appear in R. Jacob’s work, which cites the *Guide* in Alḥarizi’s translation. (I would note parenthetically that this passage is missing in the lone complete MS of Alḥarizi’s translation. R. Jacob’s citation, therefore allows us to fill a lacuna):¹¹⁹

The Torah already mentioned that this final worship, about which we remarked in this chapter, can occur only following apprehension of the Creator by the intellect, as it is written, “To love the Lord your God and to worship Him with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut. 11:13). And we have already explained that love is proportionate to apprehension (*ha-’ahavah kefi ha-hassagah*), and following love will come the worship regarding which the Sages, of blessed memory, testified, and said, “It is the worship of the heart.” And this is, in my opinion, to submit the intellect to the First Intelligible (*shi’bud ha-maḥshavah ba-muskal ha-rishon*), and to seclude oneself with it according to one’s ability. For this reason, David commanded Solomon, stressing these two matters—that is, making an effort to apprehend Him, and making an effort to worship Him after having apprehended Him. He said: “And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father and worship Him” (1 Chron. 28:9).¹²⁰

Before citing these remarks, R. Jacob introduces them as insolent (*hatahat devarim*, lit. throwing matters).¹²¹ While his discourse is not entirely clear, it seems (echoing the question he raised regarding R. Eliezer’s teaching) that he views Maimonides’ remarks as potentially insolent, because, when read through a sefirotic lens, they may be taken to imply that apprehension of the highest sefirah (the First Intelligible) is possible. If we leave aside this particular sefirotic reading, in point of fact R. Jacob’s question is a well placed one. The possibility

Returning, then, to R. Eliezer’s dictum to know before Whom you are standing in prayer, it is now clear that it can be fulfilled, because prayer is directed at the sefirot beneath the highest sefirah, “wisdom” and “understanding” (as well as, presumably, the other lower sefirot), which are more open to investigation than the highest sefirah. I would add that in the continuation of passage 1 (not cited), R. Jacob apparently also alludes to the sefirot of *hesed* (lovingkindness) and *din* (judgment), the fourth and fifth sefirot, but his exact intention is unclear.

¹¹⁹ See n. 94, above.

¹²⁰ *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhoḥim*, 183 (ch. 28, ll. 27–33). In chapter two, near n. 99, I recorded these remarks following the modern translation of Shlomo Pines.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 183 (ch. 28, l. 24).

of apprehending God, which Maimonides seems to present here, flies in the face of Maimonides' usual epistemological caution. In any case, if my understanding is correct, we have a remarkable state of affairs. The Kabbalist, who certainly believed that far more knowledge of the nature of God is possible than Maimonides did, is nevertheless worried that Maimonides may be suggesting that some sort of complete knowledge of the highest sefirah is possible.

He concludes, however, that Maimonides does not in fact contradict the notion that the highest recesses of God are beyond knowledge:

The Rabbi, the author of the *Guide*, does not contradict what I wrote, as can be seen from the many statements that are found in the first part of the translation of the *Guide*.¹²²

Here R. Jacob is probably referring, among other chapters, to those chapters in the first part of the *Guide* (50–60) that deal with the question of divine attributes and make clear that these attributes cannot be seen as providing knowledge of God's essence. In other words, while R. Jacob does not explain exactly how he thinks *Guide* 3:51 should be interpreted, he seems to suggest that it cannot be understood as stating that knowledge of the highest sefirah is possible, since such an understanding would contradict many other passages in the *Guide*.

On the one hand, then, R. Jacob, like Maimonides, affirms that investigating God is a prerequisite for worshipping God. On the other hand, again like Maimonides (leaving aside the problematic passage in *Guide* 3:51), he concludes that full apprehension of God is not possible. Of course, he breaks with Maimonides in describing different gradations within God, some of which he believes can be investigated. His basic framework, however, is the philosophic one, which makes investigation of God, despite its inherent limitations, a prerequisite for worship.

A similar passage, which appears in R. Jacob's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, is worth citing, because it confirms my interpretation of his remarks in *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim* and because it is emphatic regarding the need to investigate God prior to worshipping Him. This work, which is composed in verse, discusses the various sefirot, in order of their emanation, and also contains a sharp critique of radical Maimonideans. As part of this critique, he accuses the Maimonideans of laxity regarding

¹²² *Ibid.*, 183 (ch. 28, ll. 38–39).

statutory prayer and of believing that prayer has no effect other than to “purify thought.”¹²³ The following comments occur in the course of his discussion of the third sefirah, *binah*:

One needs to know before Whom he stands and prays—“only in this should one glory” (Jer. 9:23). And from the words of our Rabbis we learn, “When you are praying, know before Whom you are standing” (*B. Berakhot* 28b). And King David also commanded his son, “Know the God of your father and worship Him” (1 Chron. 28:9), even if the Cause of Causes is concealed and hidden from people’s eyes and “those peering through the windows grow dim” (Eccls. 12:3). He is the Former; He is the Creator; “He is called the God of all the earth” (Is. 54:5). He is exalted above all and makes all. “He is the living God and everlasting King” (Jer. 10:10). Those who know the secret of His name and its matters will call Him one. “He made Him the lord of his household, empowered Him over all his possessions” (Ps. 105:21). Unto Him approaches and comes near one who has the spirit of God in him, and as a result of the utmost wisdom he recognizes Him with his intellect (*‘adav yiggash ve-yavo ish asher ruaḥ elohim bo, umi-takhlit ha-ḥokhmah yakkirennu be-sikhlo*) and sees His beginning. “He who foretells the end from the beginning” (Is. 46:16) enacted a covenant with the enlightened one.”¹²⁴ The principle of the matter and the contents of the structure are that while mentioning the Name according to its epithet—how good it (i.e. the Name) is and how beautiful it is—he intends it as it is written and vocalized.¹²⁵

His critique of radical Maimonidean approaches to prayer notwithstanding,¹²⁶ in this passage R. Jacob adopts a Maimonidean perspective. He synthesizes the Kabbalistic material that we have examined on the relationship between investigating God and prayer. He begins by citing the by now very familiar Jer. 9:23, the verse that is featured in the aggadic passage with which R. Ezra introduces R. Isaac’s teaching on the ideal form of prayer, and reads it, as the larger context of the passage testifies, as underscoring the need to investigate God. After citing this verse, he invokes R. Eliezer’s teaching, also mentioned in

¹²³ *Sha’ar ha-shamayim*, 163–164.

¹²⁴ The reference seems to be to the covenant which, according to *Sefer Yetsirah*, God enacted with Abraham. See *Sefer Yeširah: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, 181–183 (=6:8).

¹²⁵ *Sha’ar ha-shamayim*, 158.

¹²⁶ It is important to stress that throughout his *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, R. Jacob claims not to oppose Maimonides, but only his radical interpreters, such as R. Samuel ibn Tibbon. The same might be said here. On the other hand, it may very well be the case that his attack on R. Samuel is merely a screen for his real target, Maimonides.

Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim and by R. Ezra in R. Isaac's name, according to which one must know before Whom he stands when he prays. By juxtaposing another familiar verse, "know the God of your father and worship Him" (1 Chron. 28:9), to R. Eliezer's teaching, he makes it clear that, like R. Isaac and R. Ezra, he understands the teaching as requiring that one investigate God before praying.

Yet, when he explains that one must investigate God "even if the Cause of Causes is concealed and hidden from people's eyes, and 'those peering through the windows grow dim' (Eccls. 12:3)," he is raising the same problem that he raised in *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*. That is, he is highlighting the seeming contradiction between the value of investigating God and the fact that God is beyond knowledge. The fact that his comments occur in the course of a discussion of the third sefirah seems to imply that the solution to this problem is related to the one he offered in the other work: that prayer is not directed at the first sefirah but at the third sefirah, which is subject to investigation.¹²⁷

Perhaps still referring to the third sefirah, but more likely—given his subsequent mention of the divine name, which encompasses all the sefirot—to God, more generally, he states: "Unto Him approaches and comes near one who has the spirit of God in him, and as a result of the utmost wisdom he recognizes Him with his intellect" (*'adav yiggash ve-yavo ish asher ruaḥ elohim bo, umi-takhlit ha-ḥokhmah yakkirennu besikhlo*). This notion of coming closer to God by means of the intellect captures the general flavor of the newly available philosophic material, which sees a human being's closeness to God as directly related to the ability of his intellect to apprehend God. Here, again, *Guide* 3:51 may very well be in the background. Consider, in particular, the similarity between R. Jacob's remarks and Maimonides' pronouncement in *Guide* 3:51, that "once you apprehend the Name and its actions insofar as the intellect can grasp it, thereafter, begin to turn yourself over to Him, and strive to come near to Him, and strengthen the bond between you and Him, which is the intellect" (*ve-hayah ka'asher tassig ha-shem u-ma'asav kefi mah she-yaskilehu ha-sekheh, aḥar ken tathil*

¹²⁷ Apparently, then, he takes the verses that he cites immediately after raising the question ["He is called the God of all the earth" (Is. 54:5); "He is the living God and everlasting King" (Jer. 10:10)] as referring to this sefirah, in particular.

lehitmasser elav ve-tishtaddel lehitkarev lo, u-tehazzek ha-dibbuk asher benkha u-veno, ve-hu ha-sekhel).¹²⁸

At the end of the above passage, R. Jacob alludes to the aforementioned teaching on prayer by R. Isaac, as may be ascertained from the fact that he explains that one must pronounce the divine name according to its epithet, but internally focus on the name as it is actually written and vocalized. This notion is directly taken from R. Isaac's teaching, which states: "He should enunciate it (=the divine name) according to its epithet, but in his heart he should combine it as it is structured and as it is written." It seems, therefore, that R. Jacob is following the lead of R. Ezra. Like R. Ezra, he refers to R. Isaac's teaching on the ideal form of prayer, after first stressing the need to investigate God.

Finally, to round out my discussion, let me cite two further passages from figures who were, in one way or another, connected to R. Isaac's circle, which also accord importance to the notion of gaining knowledge of God prior to prayer. The first is a poem by Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera, a staunchly anti-Maimonidean Geronese poet who was a friend of R. Ezra and R. Azriel and was their student in matters of Kabbalah:¹²⁹

How long will you continue to petition and pray without/ knowing which sefirah [to direct your prayer to] so that [the prayer] of the creature will be answered? / You petition with an animalistic heart without knowing whom [you are petitioning] (*ve-lo' teda' le-mi*). / Your intellect does not investigate the Rock that begot you (*lo' tsur yeladekha da'atkha hokeret*). /

¹²⁸ As the editor of Alharizi's translation of the *Guide* notes, Alharizi's translation is not extant for this passage. Therefore, he uses R. Samuel ibn Tibbon's translation for this passage. See Alharizi, 866–867. Unfortunately, in this case, R. Jacob ben Sheshet's *Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim* does not provide Alharizi's translation.

¹²⁹ See H. Brody, "Poems of Mešullām ben Šelōmō da Piera," *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem* 4 (1938), 5 [in Hebrew]; Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180–1240*, 182–198; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 408–410; Schirmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*, 293–322. Poem 49 in Brody's collection of da Piera's poetry seems to indicate that, at some point, da Piera moderated his anti-Maimonideanism following the lead of Nahmanides, who tried to play the role of a peacemaker during the Maimonidean controversy. See, however, the analysis of James H. Lehmann, "Polemic and Satire in the Poetry of the Maimonidean Controversy," in *Piyyut in Tradition*, eds. Binyamin Bar-Tikva and Ephraim Hazan [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), 93–112, who argues that, on the contrary, this poem should be seen as satirizing Nahmanides' more moderate stance, and, in fact, Meshullam remained staunch in his anti-Maimonidean sentiments.

Unify your God and unite yourself with the [divine] secret (*ve-hityahed ba-sod*). / And engage in inquiry (*u-derosh*) into the tradition that was transmitted to you. Inquire and search (*u-derosh ve-hiddaresh*) until you know the principle / of your soul that is cleft from the [divine] glory.¹³⁰

Like R. Ezra, Meshullam bemoans the fact that there are those who pray without having a proper understanding of God. He critiques those people who pray using their animalistic souls—that is, those who pray without having first used their intellects to achieve a proper understanding of God. Again like R. Ezra, Meshullam suggests that an aspect of this understanding is knowledge of the nature of divine unity. While Meshullam does stress the need to rely on tradition, this does not appear to be a passive reliance but one that requires active inquiry (*u-derosh*). Finally, echoing a motif that is central in the newly available philosophic literature, Meshullam apparently suggests that self-knowledge will lead to knowledge of God.

The second source is from *Keter Shem Tov*, a work that is, at least in part, by R. Abraham ben Axelrad of Cologne. R. Abraham's biography is unclear, but it is possible, though far from sure, that he first studied with the German Pietists. It is certain, however, that he made his way to Catalonia, where he may have studied with R. Ezra.¹³¹ His remarks could reflect both German pietistic influences¹³² and the influence of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. I would note that even if he did not personally study with R. Ezra, he certainly knew his work, as he cites a passage from R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* at the end of *Keter Shem Tov*.¹³³ Here, then, are his remarks:

¹³⁰ Brody, "Poems of Mešullām ben Šelōmō da Piera," 109, ll. 30–34.

¹³¹ Konstanze H. Kunst is currently preparing a critical edition of the text. In a personal communication, she informed me that she believes the work is likely a combination of materials by two authors, Abraham ben Axelrad of Cologne and Menachem of Worms. The latter figure is identified as a student of R. Eleazar of Worms in early manuscripts, while R. Abraham is not identified in this manner until the 16th century. Moreover, in Kunst's view, the influence of German Pietism on the work is not significant. As we know from a responsum by R. Solomon ben Adret [*Teshuvot ha-Rashb"a*, ed. Haim Z. Dimitrovsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), I:105–106 (responso 548)], R. Abraham did make his way to Catalonia, and the content of the work, especially a citation from R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (see n. 133 below), certainly raises the possibility that he studied with R. Ezra while in Catalonia. I thank Ms. Kunst for her insights.

¹³² For the view of members of the German Pietists that investigation of God must precede worship, see the previous chapter. As explained in the previous note, however, his relationship with the German Pietists is unclear.

¹³³ See Adolph Jellinek, "Sefer keter shem tov," *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik* 1 (1853), 47–48. There, a passage that appears in R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of*

It appears that a person cannot worship in a perfect manner if he does not know (*makkir*) his Creator. As it is written, “And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father and worship Him” (1 Chron. 28:9). That is to say, [prior to worship, he must gain knowledge of God] according to what it is possible to apprehend by means of Kabbalah. Therefore, my heart has the desire to inquire (*lidrosh*) and seek out (*ve-latur*) the straight path—perhaps it will be fitting in the eyes of God—and I will have knowledge of God, in order to worship him with a perfect heart.¹³⁴

Despite the fact that R. Abraham says that he will derive his knowledge from Kabbalah, his engagement with Kabbalah is not a passive one. Using some of the same verbs as R. Ezra, in the latter’s account of the first commandment (“inquire” and “seek out”), he makes clear that active investigation is a necessary prerequisite for prayer. Furthermore, he employs 1 Chron. 28:9 in the same manner as R. Ezra to stress that knowledge must precede prayer.

I will conclude this section by recalling that R. Judah ha-Levi rejected the notion that acquiring knowledge of God is a prerequisite for prayer. He explicitly dismisses a reading of 1 Chron. 28:9, such as that seen here, as a Karaite misinterpretation.¹³⁵ That the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle nevertheless read the verse in this matter is indicative, once more, of the fact that from a certain perspective, the first Kabbalists have more in common with the authors of the newly available philosophic literature than they do with Ha-Levi. Put in other terms, the first Kabbalists and the philosophers share an ethos that Ha-Levi rejected. In all, then, even in an aspect as central to religious life as prayer, the philosophic ethos pervades the conception of the first Kabbalists.

VII

The considerable material collected in this chapter demonstrates the importance of the philosophic ethos in the religious life of the first Kabbalists. This is an ethos that is given prominent expression in the newly available philosophic literature, but is absent from traditional

Songs (Chavel, 483) is cited without attribution. See also Dauber, “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah,” 196, n. 48.

¹³⁴ Jellinek, “*Sefer keter shem tov*,” 32–33.

¹³⁵ *Kuzari* 5:21. See the discussion at the end of the previous chapter.

Rabbinic literature. Furthermore, it is an ethos that gained currency among important philosophically inclined members of Languedoc's Jewish community, but not without considerable backlash. Indeed, as suggested, a leader of the anti-Maimonidean camp during the Maimonidean controversy may have rejected this ethos. A similar rejection by another member of the anti-Maimonidean camp will be examined in the conclusion, and in chapter six I will argue that Nahmanides had a very ambivalent attitude towards this ethos. Thus, the first Kabbalists were part of a cultural formation that was contested in Languedoc and Catalonia, and distinctly not traditional. This ethos, moreover, pervades their religious life. It is given tangible halakhic instantiation, and their relationship to God—their love of God and their worship of God—is filtered through it.

Of course, none of this suggests that there are no distinctions between the thought of the first Kabbalists and the thought of this or that philosophic school. On the contrary, from the perspective of worldview, as I have repeatedly stressed, there are significant differences between the ideas of the first Kabbalists and those found in the newly available philosophic literature, even as the ideas in various philosophic works are often as different from one another as they are from Kabbalistic ones. Yet these differences should not obscure the fact that the first Kabbalists lived their life as Kabbalists under the rubric of the philosophic ethos. From the perspective of this ethos, the differences between various philosophic schools and the first Kabbalists are insignificant.

The matter may be taken further. It is not merely that the Kabbalists' adoption of this ethos points to a deep underlying similarity between Kabbalists and philosophers—it is also that it was the adoption of this ethos that made the emergence of Kabbalah possible. As we have seen, there is certainly good evidence to support Moshe Idel's claim that Kabbalah developed as a response to the spread of Maimonidean thought. Nevertheless, notwithstanding this negative response to Maimonides, which Idel had in mind, it seems to me that it was the ethos, which Maimonides himself was instrumental in spreading, that encouraged the first Kabbalists to creatively develop their traditions, often in conversation with philosophic thought—that is, it led them to forge the discourse of Kabbalah. A serious espousal of the ideal of investigating God would naturally lead to such creativity.

This is a thesis which is difficult to prove in fine. We cannot expect detailed announcements that a new discourse is being created as a result

of the espousal of a value foreign to Rabbinic literature—although it is notable that, as we have seen, R. Asher does suggest that the value of investigating God spurred him to write his Kabbalistic work. In my view, however, it is impossible to disassociate the significant emphasis placed on the value of investigating God, in a highly creative body of discourse concerned with God, from the emergence of that discourse itself.

Finally, as discussed in the introduction to this book, there is an ongoing debate in the scholarly literature about the relationship between Kabbalah and classical Rabbinic thought. To repeat, Scholem tended to see Kabbalah as a foreign import into Jewish thought. If anything, in his view, it was Jewish philosophy, rather than Kabbalah, that accentuated Rabbinic tendencies. In contrast, more recent scholarship has argued compellingly that there are significant affinities between Kabbalah and certain trends in Rabbinic thought. Both have been interested in the respective worldviews of the Rabbis, philosophers, and Kabbalists. From the perspective of ethos, however, both philosophy and Kabbalah mark the same sharp break with earlier Rabbinic Judaism.

CHAPTER FIVE

INVESTIGATING GOD IN *SEFER HA-BAHIR*

I

Sefer ha-Bahir is a pseudepigraphic collection of midrashic-style homilies whose speakers include both heroes of Rabbinic literature and invented figures. It was first cited by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle¹ and is often referred to as the first Kabbalistic work. As I will explain, however, this characterization is a misnomer: it is neither Kabbalistic nor is it a work in the usual sense of these terms. Scholars generally view it as a composite creation, consisting of various textual layers. Scholem, who, as we saw, regarded the *Bahir* as fundamentally Gnostic in character, suggested that its earliest layer had eastern origins. He traced a later layer to Germany and argued that the final layer was composed in the second half of the twelfth century, in Languedoc, where, he suggested, it became known to R. Isaac the Blind.² This final layer is of special interest, because Scholem dated it on the basis of borrowings from the newly available philosophic literature, including the writings of R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya³ and R. Judah ibn Tibbon's translation of R. Baḥya's *Duties of the Heart*.⁴

¹ In particular, by R. Ezra and R. Azriel. See the list of citations in *Sefer ha-bahir*, ed. Daniel Abrams, 67–70. (Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Bahir* in this chapter are to Abrams' edition.) See also Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, 187.

² Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 39–68, 97–123, 180–198. It should be noted, however, that Scholem's views on the redaction of the work are not always consistent. For a complete presentation of Scholem's waverings on the matter, see Daniel Abrams' introduction to his edition of *Sefer ha-bahir* 1–34, and Ronit Meroz, "On the Time and Place of Some of Sefer Ha-Bahir," *Daat* 49 (2002), 138–148 [in Hebrew].

³ Bar Ḥiyya's interpretation of the words *tohu* and *bohu* in Gen. 1:2 as matter and form, respectively, is reflected in secs. 2, 9, 93, and 109 of the *Bahir* (following the section numbers in Abrams' edition—see n. 19 below). See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 62–63, esp. notes 22 and 24. Also, the term "pure thought," used by Bar Ḥiyya, may have influenced the use of the term "thought" (*maḥshavah*) as a name for the first sefirah in secs. 48, 53, 59, 60, 94, 103, and 134 of the *Bahir*. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 126–27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62 n. 21. Scholem argued for the influence of *Duties of the Heart* on sec. 46 of the *Bahir*. This section will be discussed below.

Broadly speaking, recent scholarship has affirmed Scholem's thesis, while making certain corrections; thus an increasingly complex portrait has emerged.⁵ While Scholem generally assumed that the origin of many of the *Bahir's* ideas lies in ancient pagan Gnosticism, Moshe Idel has suggested—following more recent research on Gnosticism, according to which Gnostic sources often preserve earlier Jewish concepts—that these ideas may have reached the *Bahir* through internal Jewish channels.⁶ In a somewhat similar vein, Elliot Wolfson has argued that certain portions of the text can be traced to late antique Jewish-Christian contexts.⁷ Ronit Meroz has attempted to place Scholem's thesis regarding the eastern origin of portions of the text on firmer ground by showing that certain passages likely date from ninth- or early tenth-century Babylonia.⁸ Some of her arguments, however, have been called into question.⁹ Scholem's notion of a German layer also seems increasingly likely.¹⁰

For our purposes, it is Haviva Pedaya who has made the most significant contribution. In an important study, she argues for the like-

⁵ For summaries of scholarly views on the redactional history of the *Bahir*, see Abrams' introduction to *Sefer ha-bahir*, 1–54 and his *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 455–464. See also Meroz, “On the Time and Place of Some of Sefer Ha-Bahir,” 137–180.

⁶ Idel, “The Problem of the Sources of the Bahir,” 55–72; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 122–128. As Elliot Wolfson has pointed out, however, Scholem himself equivocated on the matter. At times, like Idel, Scholem assumes that certain motifs found in the *Bahir* have their origin in ancient Jewish traditions. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in Sefer ha-Bahir,” 155, and the sources cited there, n. 15. See, also Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 139–140, 219–220.

⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Tree that is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” in *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 63–88.

⁸ Meroz, “On the Time and Place of Some of Sefer Ha-Bahir,” 137–180; Ronit Meroz, “A Journey of Initiation in the Babylonian Layer of ‘Sefer ha-Bahir,’” *Studia Hebraica* 7 (2007), 17–33; Ronit Meroz, “The Middle Eastern Origins of Kabbalah,” *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 1 (2007), 49–56.

⁹ See Jordan Penkower's critique in his “The Dating of Sections on Biblical Accentuation from *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” *Kabbalah* 14 (2006), 329–345 [in Hebrew]; reprinted in Jordan S. Penkower, *The Dates of Composition of The Zohar and The Book Bahir: The History of Biblical Vocalization and Accentuation as a Tool for Dating Kabbalistic Works* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), 138–151. Abrams has also questioned Scholem's view of the eastern origins of the *Bahir*. See his comments in his introduction to *Sefer ha-bahir*, 27–28 and in his *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 136, 456.

¹⁰ See Abrams' discussion in his introduction to *Sefer ha-bahir*, 14–35 and in *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 136.

lihood of a final Languedocian layer, while also amending some of Scholem's findings. Scholem assumed that this final layer was composed sometime in the second half of the twelfth century, before R. Isaac was active. Pedaya, while not denying that this may be the case for some portions of the text, claims that certain passages were composed or edited somewhat later and that these passages, in fact, reflect R. Isaac's teachings rather than vice versa. These final passages, then, might be the work of a Kabbalist (or Kabbalists) who was under the sway of R. Isaac's thinking.¹¹ I would add that it has become increasingly clear that R. Isaac was not familiar with the *Bahir* at all.¹²

This already complex picture of the *Bahir* is further complicated not only by Daniel Abrams' important recent work, which shows that the *Bahir* continued to undergo revision even after the period of the first Kabbalists,¹³ but also by an examination of its contents. There is no clear organizational structure—so much so that it is often not apparent why one statement follows another. At times, Aramaic is interspersed with Hebrew for no obvious reason, and various passages are contradictory. Much of the work seems to be theosophical in nature, but by no means all of it. Thus, Ronit Meroz has argued, for example, that what she views as the Babylonian layer of the text is not concerned with aspects of God, but with angels, in a manner that is related

¹¹ Haviva Pedaya, "The Provençal Stratum of Sefer ha-Bahir," in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Moshe Idel, Warren Zev Harvey, and Eliezer Schweid, special issue, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990), II, 139–164 [in Hebrew]. See also Idel, "Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence," 284, n. 106, 285–286 on the relationship between the Languedocian Kabbalist, R. Jacob the Nazirite, and the *Bahir*. Pedaya, in the above study, surmises that these passages were added in Languedoc. I would note, however, that Mark Verman suggests, instead, that the work was completed in early thirteenth-century Catalonia. In support of this claim, he notes (among other points) that the first figures to cite the *Bahir* are R. Isaac's Catalanian students R. Ezra and R. Azriel. See Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 165–168; Mark Verman, "The Evolution of the Circle of Contemplation," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, eds. Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 163–177, esp. 167–173. Pedaya has since acknowledged that this possibility requires further consideration. See Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 80–81, n. 38. See also the next note.

¹² See Idel's comments in his preface to Abrams' edition of *Sefer ha-bahir*, 2–3. See also Abrams' comments on pp. 17–18 and the sources cited there, as well as his comments in *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 135, 186–187. See also, Pedaya, "The Provençal Stratum of Sefer ha-Bahir," 142, n. 9.

¹³ Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 118–197.

to the *hekhalot* material.¹⁴ Even the more conspicuously theosophical sections are not of one piece. In fact, Wolfson has pointed to the existence of various theosophies within the text, including theosophies of three, seven, twelve, and seventy-two divine potencies, in addition to the system of ten potencies.¹⁵ This state of affairs may suggest that there are more textual layers than have currently been identified by scholars, or, alternatively, that redactors at various known stages of its textual history drew on disparate materials, originating in various historical periods and reflecting differing theological views.

The foregoing leads to two important conclusions. First, that to refer to the *Bahir* as Kabbalistic is misleading, a point already made in slightly other terms by Daniel Abrams.¹⁶ If read independently of its Kabbalistic (re)interpretations, it cannot, as a whole, be said to espouse the basic Kabbalistic theosophy that we know from the first Kabbalistic works—those by R. Isaac's circle. Thus, rather than treating the *Bahir* as Kabbalistic, it seems to me that it should be treated as a collection of *kabbalot* (traditions), which served as another set of raw material along with oral traditions and other textual sources, on which the first Kabbalists drew in formulating their Kabbalistic theology.

Second, as Abrams has also argued, it is misleading to refer to the *Bahir* as a “work” or a “book,” if these terms are taken to signify a carefully constructed piece of literature.¹⁷ Indeed, even referring to the *Bahir* as an anthology would be erroneous if this designation is taken to imply that there is some sort of clear set of criteria that governed what type of material should be included, beyond that this material must in some way relate to God or the divine world. While I would not deny that certain smaller units may show some evidence of order

¹⁴ Meroz, “The Middle Eastern Origins of Kabbalah,” 49–56.

¹⁵ Wolfson, “The Tree that is All,” 70.

¹⁶ “The *Bahir* is all too often read through the lenses of how later kabbalists first understood the terms found in any theosophic context. The *Bahir*, however, is best placed somewhere between the rabbinic world (and the midrashic genres in which it participates) and the emerging theosophic symbolism which *later* grew out of this collection of enigmatic traditions. My point here is that scholarship's search for the important myths of Kabbalah approach the individual traditions from within a synthetic understanding of a larger myth that was appreciated only at a later stage. Stated more sharply, *in its attempts to uncover and reconstruct kabbalistic myths, scholarship at times creates them*” (Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 152, emphasis in the original).

¹⁷ See especially *ibid.*, 121–122. See also 455–461.

or structure,¹⁸ in broad terms it seems that it is better, given the *Bahir*'s haphazard nature, to refer to it as a repository of disparate materials.

The chaotic nature of the work has an important ramification for my main interest here: the value of investigating God. On the one hand, as noted, a large portion, but not all of the work, deals with the nature of God. It attempts to shed light on God by offering creative readings of various Biblical verses, at times reworking Rabbinic materials in the process. The very fact that there is such a conglomeration of materials about the nature of God—even if these materials are hardly of one piece—is significant, insofar as it suggests that such materials were regarded as worthy of preservation. In this regard, it goes well beyond anything found in Rabbinic literature, which contains plenty of theological material, but not at the same level of concentration. On the other hand, because of its haphazard nature, it can hardly be called a systematic attempt to investigate God. Such a systematic attempt is, however, one of the hallmarks of the philosophic ethos. Accordingly, far from being a literary exemplar of a value rooted in the philosophic ethos, it defies this value by eschewing systemization and rigor. As such, it does not present a particular theology—it is impossible to speak of a *Bahiric* conception of God, but only of numerous competing conceptions—but ended up functioning as source material that could assist the first Kabbalists in developing their own theology.

Yet, while there is no trace of the philosophic ethos in most of the *Bahir*, I will argue in this chapter that there are a few passages where the imprint of the philosophic ethos is apparent. These passages were either identified by Scholem as part of the Languedocian layer or, more specifically, by Pedaya as based on the teachings of the circle of R. Isaac—that is, these passages were composed or reworked by figures with knowledge of the newly available philosophic literature. Of course, this hardly turns the *Bahir* into a paradigm of the philosophic ethos, but it may suggest that certain of its late contributors saw its existing components as valuable resources for conducting

¹⁸ As Elliot Wolfson puts the matter, “*Prima facie*, it may appear, as Scholem concluded, that the homiletical teachings in this collection ‘are not set forth according to any particular organizational principle,’ but rather are ‘jumbled together haphazardly.’ However, a careful reading warrants a more cautious approach: even if one cannot totally eliminate the seemingly chaotic aspect of the literary organization of these fragments, certain patterns and structures can be discerned in the redactional process” (Wolfson, “The Tree that is All,” 64).

investigations of God. Thus, an examination of these passages helps round out my discussion of the philosophic ethos in the thought of R. Isaac's circle.

II

The first place in which the philosophic ethos shows up in the *Bahir* is in section 46.¹⁹ Scholem suggests that this section stems from the Languedocian layer. Here, my contention is not that it derives from the work of someone with knowledge of the Kabbalah of R. Isaac's circle, even though it does reflect the philosophic ethos that pervaded Languedoc. In fact, this passage offers a rather radical account of the relationship of knowledge of God to love of God and to prayer, which goes beyond anything found in the literature of this circle.

46. The students of R. Raḥmai asked him: what is the meaning of "the prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, on *shigyonot*" (Habakkuk 3:1)? "Prayer?" It should be "praise." Rather [the purpose is to teach] that anyone who turns his heart away from activities of the world and peers at the account of the chariot (*kol ha-mafneh libbo me-'iské ha-'olam u-mistakel be-ma'aseh merkavah*) is accepted before the Holy One, blessed be He, as though he prayed the entire day (*mekubbal lifné ha-kadosh barukh hu ke'illu hitpallel kol ha-yom*), as it is written: "The prayer of Habakkuk" (*ibid.*). And what [is the meaning of] "on *shigyonot*"? As it is written: "In her love you will constantly be enrapt (*be-'ahavatah tishgeh tamid*)" (Prov. 5:19). And what is it? The account of the chariot.²⁰

Elliot Wolfson makes the following important observation about this section, which I cite in extenso:

In the mind of the anonymous homilist, the prophet is enrapt in envisioning the chariot, a rapture that has the quality of prayer. One is reminded of the contemplative ideal of *avodah sikhilit*, "intellectual worship," which Maimonides presents at the end of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, an ideal achieved only by the spiritual elite, the philosophically enlightened members of the faith community; for them, true prayer consists of the employment of intellectual thought in constantly loving God, an experience attained preferentially in solitude and isolation (*hitbodedut*). Intellectual worship is characterized by a passionate love (*ishq*)

¹⁹ On these section markings, see Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, 168.

²⁰ *Sefer ha-bahir*, 143.

of God proportionate to one's apprehension of God. This contemplative ideal is called in traditional theological language knowledge of the name, the ultimate datum of divine science, the metaphysical speculation that Maimonides associates with the study of the chariot, an exegetical discipline that some ancient rabbis considered esoteric and hence to be guarded from public dissemination. In this state, the mind is filled with an "excess of love, so that no thought remains that is directed toward a thing other than the Beloved."²¹ Needless to say, the content of the chariot vision presumed in the bahiric text is quite distinct from the Maimonidean understanding, but there is conspicuous similarity with regard to the connection made between prophecy, contemplation of the chariot, and worship that expresses an all-consuming love of God.²²

Wolfson does not comment on whether there is only a phenomenological similarity between the Bahiric passage and Maimonides' notion of intellectual worship, or whether Maimonides actually influenced the *Bahir*. In my analysis, I will add support for Wolfson's observation, while contextualizing it in terms of my own interest in the philosophic ethos, and arguing for the likelihood of actual Maimonidean influence.

I will begin, however, with Scholem's interpretation. Scholem notes that the author of this section considers "the prophet Habakkuk as the prototype of the merkabah (chariot) mystic"²³—that is, the type of mystic with whom we are familiar from the hekhalot literature. This notion, Scholem points out, "must be very old, since the Talmud already (*B. Megillah* 31a) prescribes the third chapter of Habakkuk as *haftarah* for the Feast of Weeks, alongside the Merkabah vision of Ezekiel 1."²⁴ Scholem adds, in reference to this section and other sections, that "an ascetic tendency is occasionally noticeable, in keeping with the character of the old *Merkabah*."²⁵ At the same time, however, Scholem offers a "weighty objection" against an early dating of this passage:

The crucial words in section 46 (no earlier instances are known) correspond *literally*²⁶ (as I noticed only in 1968) to the wording in Yehudah ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation (made in 1161) of Baḥyah ibn Paquda's

²¹ Here Wolfson is quoting from *Guide* 3:51 (Pines, 627; Tibbon, 581; Alḥarizi, 875).

²² Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 139–140.

²³ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 61 (parentheses added).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶ Emphasis in the original.

Book of the Duties of the Heart, introduction to chapter 4, with the difference that the *Bahir* substitutes the vision of the Merkabah for Bahya's *biṭṭaḥon*-inspired abandon to God. This would suggest that the *Bahir* passage was written in Provence after 1161.²⁷

It seems to me that Scholem is correct about a late dating of this passage; however, as I will argue, it is possible that it should be dated somewhat later, to the beginning of the thirteenth century—a possibility that would allow for a direct influence of Maimonides' *Guide* on the *Bahir*, and thus bolster Wolfson's suggestion.²⁸ Furthermore, we are left unclear about how the likelihood of a late dating for this section affects the thesis that Habakkuk is a prototype of a merkavah mystic. In fact, it seems to me that, whatever the earlier association between Habakkuk and merkavah mysticism, his image in this passage, as well as in subsequent passages, has been recast in a mold that makes him a good exemplar of the philosophic ethos.

Scholem does not identify which passage in Ibn Tibbon's translation of *Duties of the Heart* "corresponds literally" to the key words of section 46, other than to say that it is found in the opening of the fourth section of the work. Apparently, he has the following passage in mind, which praises one who trusts God:

He who trusts in God, his trust will lead him to turn his heart away from matters of the world and to direct his heart to matters of worship (*yevi'ehu biṭṭhono lefannot et libbo me-'inyené ha-'olam u-leyaḥed levavo le-'inyené ha-'avodah*). He will resemble the alchemist in the rested nature of his soul, in his wide heart, and his lack of worries—that is, one who knows how to turn silver into gold, and bronze and tin into silver by means of wisdom and action.²⁹

Apparently Scholem sees a correspondence between R. Bahya's comment that "his trust will lead him to turn his heart away from matters of the world and to direct his heart to matters of worship" (*yevi'ehu*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62, n. 21. This note was apparently added by the editor of the English version of *Origins of the Kabbalah* (which was published after Scholem's death) on the basis of handwritten notes that Scholem added to his copy of the original German version. See the editor's preface, p. xiii.

²⁸ This, of course, was a possibility that Scholem did not entertain given his contention that the final redaction of the *Bahir* took place in the second half of the twelfth century. Maimonides, after all, did not complete the *Guide* until 1190, and R. Samuel ibn Tibbon did not complete his translation until 1204. Cf. Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, 167–168.

²⁹ *Duties of the Heart*, 4: introduction (Tsifroni, 281).

bithono lefannot et libbo me-‘inyené ha-‘olam u-leyahed levavo le-‘inyené ha-‘avodah) and the *Bahir*’s comment that “rather [the purpose is to teach] that anyone who turns his heart away from activities of the world and peers at the account of the chariot (*kol ha-mafneh libbo me-‘iské ha-‘olam u-mistakkel be-ma‘aseh merkavah*) is accepted before the Holy One, blessed be He, as though he prayed the entire day (*mekubbal lifné ha-kadosh barukh hu ke’illu hitpallel kol ha-yom*). While an ideational correspondence is obvious, it is quite difficult to understand how Scholem could regard this as a literal correspondence. Even leaving aside the difference that Scholem points to—that R. Baḥya discussed trust in God, while the *Bahir* discusses peering at the chariot—the words of each source are different: R. Baḥya talks about “*matters (‘inyené) of the world*” while the *Bahir* talks about “*activities (me-‘iské) of the world.*”

The possibility of R. Baḥya’s influence should certainly not be dismissed. Nevertheless, there is a passage in *Guide* 3:51, the crucial chapter of the *Guide* whose influence on R. Isaac’s circle has been noted several times and the chapter to which Wolfson alludes in the above citation, which partially corresponds to the *Bahiric* passage. It is possible that it is in this passage, rather than in R. Baḥya’s work, that we should locate a direct influence on section 46. I cite the passage in the *Guide* (in italics), together with the remarks that precede it according to the translation of Ibn Tibbon, since Alḥarizi’s translation of this passage is not extant:

This cleaving [of the human intellect to God] will only be strengthened when you use it (i.e. your intellect) to love God and when your intention is directed toward Him (as we have explained),³⁰ but its weakening will occur when you place your thoughts on that which is other than Him. And know that, even if you were the wisest amongst human beings in your [knowledge] of the truth of divine science, once you turn your thoughts to necessary food or to necessary activity, you have already caused the cleaving between you and God, may He be blessed, to cease. At that moment you are not with Him, and, similarly, He is not with you. For that relationship between you and Him had already actually ceased at that moment. For this reason, the righteous ones would be very careful regarding the hours in which they were not thinking about God...*Know that [regarding] all of these acts of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the remainder of the commandments—their ultimate purpose is only to train one to engage in the commandments of*

³⁰ Parentheses in the original.

*God, may He be blessed, and to turn away from matters of this world, and it is as though you engaged in [the study of] Him and refrained from anything that is other than Him. (ve-da' she-ma'asé ha-'avodot ha-'ellu kul-lam ki-keri'at ha-torah veba-tefillah ve-'asot she'ar ha-mitsvot en takhlit kavvanatam rak lehitlamed lehit'asek be-mitsvot ha-'elohah yitbarakh u-lehippanot me-'iské ha-'olam, u-khe'illu attah hit'assakta bo yitbarakh u-vatalta mi-kol davar zulato.)*³¹

Maimonides here highlights the ideal of contemplating God during all possible times. This contemplation is viewed as a form of loving God and is said to allow for a cleaving to God, which is broken the minute a person engages in thinking about things other than God. In the italicized portion of the passage, where I see a parallel to the *Bahir*, Maimonides claims that the entire purpose of acts of worship, which he describes as prayer, Torah study, and the commandments, is to serve as a sort of training ground for devoting all of one's thoughts to God. This is the case insofar as engaging in such worship leads one to "turn away from the matters of the world" (*u-lehippanot me-'iské ha-'olam*) and is tantamount to contemplating God: "it is as though you engaged in [the study of] Him and refrained from anything that is other than Him" (*u-khe'illu attah hit'assakta bo yitbarakh u-vatalta mi-kol davar zulato*). In other words, as Maimonides' subsequent remarks (not cited here) help clarify, even though engaging in traditional worship is not precisely contemplating God, it is tantamount to such contemplation. This is because when a worshiper worships with the proper intention, he is led to focus on God, and thus becomes accustomed to a lifestyle in which turning one's attention to God is paramount—and ultimately to intellectual worship, which requires actual contemplation of God.

If we turn now to compare the two statements side by side, we see that the *Bahir's* statement is the obverse of Maimonides' statement:

Maimonides: Know that [regarding] all of these acts of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the remainder of the commandments—their ultimate purpose is only to train one to engage in the commandments of God, may He be blessed, and to turn away from matters of this world, and it is as though you engaged in [the study of] Him and refrained from anything that is other than Him (*u-lehippanot me-'iské ha-'olam, u-khe'illu attah hit'assakta bo yitbarakh u-vatalta mi-kol davar zulato*).

³¹ Tibbon, 582.

Bahir: Anyone who turns his heart away from activities of the world and peers at the account of the chariot (*kol ha-mafneh libbo me-iské ha-olam u-misttaker be-ma'aseh merkavah*) is accepted before the Holy One, blessed be He, as though he prayed the entire day (*mekubbal lifné ha-kadosh barukh hu ke'illu hitpallel kol ha-yom*).

If for Maimonides, engaging in acts of worship—including statutory prayer—involves turning away from matters of the world, and is equivalent to contemplating God, then the obverse—as the *Bahir* has it—is also true: contemplating the account of the chariot (another way of saying contemplating God), which also involves turning away from matters of the world, is equivalent to statutory prayer.

It is important to stress that, slightly earlier in the same chapter, Maimonides himself upholds the obverse of his statement. He explains, in a passage already discussed in chapters two and four, that the ideal form of worship, the intellectual worship that Wolfson describes (as opposed to statutory prayer), follows from contemplating/loving God: “Following love will come the worship regarding which the Sages, of blessed memory, testified, and said, ‘It is the worship of the heart.’ And this is, in my opinion, to submit the intellect to the First Intel- ligible (*shi'bud ha-maḥshavah ba-muskal ha-rishon*), and to unite with it according to one’s ability.”³² As noted in chapter two, Maimonides here turns a Rabbinic statement, which in its original context applied to statutory prayer, into a statement about his conception of intellec- tual worship. When the *Bahir* states, therefore, that “anyone who turns his heart away from activities of the world and peers at the account of the chariot is accepted before the Holy One, blessed be He, as though he prayed the entire day,” it is effectively echoing Maimonides’ claim. The only difference between Maimonides and the *Bahir* is that for the former, “the account of the chariot” would refer to Aristotelian phi- losophy, while for the *Bahir*, it would refer to theosophic teachings.

Let me take the comparison between the *Bahir* and Maimonides one step further. The *Bahir* comments on the word *shigyonot*, a difficult word, in Habakkuk 3:1 (“the prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, on *shigyonot*”). It creatively finds the meaning of the word in Prov. 5:19: “in her love you will constantly be enrapt” (*be-'ahavatah tishgeh tamid*),

³² Alḥarizi’s rendering is missing in the lone complete manuscript (MS Paris 682) of the translation but can be recovered on the basis of R. Jacob ben Sheshet’s *Sefer meshiv devarim nekhohim*, 183 (ch. 28, ll. 29–31). See chapter four, n. 94.

and proceeds to explain this love as referring to the “account of the chariot.” Put in other terms, as Wolfson suggests, the contemplation of the account the chariot, which is equivalent to prayer, is also equivalent to love of God.

The similarity to Maimonides’ above comments is apparent: for both the *Bahir* and Maimonides, it is not merely that contemplating God and worshiping God are connected, but that the act of contemplating God is also seen as equivalent to loving God. In fact, while Maimonides does not allude to Prov. 5:19 in the *Guide*, in the following passage in the *Mishneh Torah* (already cited in chapters two and four), where he discusses love of God, we hear echoes of this verse:

It is a well-known and clear matter that love of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not secured in a person’s heart until he is constantly enrapt (*she-yishgeh*) in it in an appropriate manner and abandons everything else in the world, save it, as it is written “[you shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut. 6:5)—[that is] only through the knowledge by which one knows Him (*ella ba-de’ah she-yeda’ehu*). Love will be proportionate to knowledge (*ve-al pi ha-de’ah al pi ha-’ahavah*)—if little, then little, and if great, then great. Therefore a person must devote himself to understand (*lehavin*) and study (*u-lehaskil*) the wisdoms and the sciences that inform him regarding his Maker, insofar as that person has the ability to understand (*lehavin*) and apprehend (*u-lehassig*), as we have explained in The Laws of the Foundations of Torah.³³

When Maimonides describes a person as being “constantly enrapt (*ad she-yishgeh ba tamid*)” in his love of God, he is echoing Prov. 5:19: “In her love you will constantly be enrapt” (*be-’ahavatah tishgeh tamid*). As in the *Bahir*, this love involves turning away from matters of the world and contemplating God.

Therefore, in the final analysis, section 46 of the *Bahir* adopts a point of view that resonates in striking fashion with the philosophic ethos, which the first Kabbalists adopted. In a certain respect, section 46 of the *Bahir* adopts this ethos in a very radical fashion. According to the Kabbalistic literature of R. Isaac’s circle, which we have examined in the previous chapter, gaining knowledge of God is viewed as preparatory for statutory prayer. However, Section 46 of the *Bahir* seems to go beyond this literature and suggests that contemplating God is

³³ *Hilkhot teshuvah*, 10:6.

equivalent to statutory prayer, in a manner that resembles Maimonides' claim that "worship of the heart" is not traditional prayer, but intellectual worship. Does such a position take section 46 beyond the bounds of what would have been considered acceptable in R. Isaac's circle? Perhaps it does—especially when we take into account that figures like R. Ezra and R. Jacob critique the spiritualization of the commandments by radical Maimonideans.³⁴ Regardless, however, of how this question is resolved, section 46 is a striking example of the incursion of the philosophic ethos into a text that was near and dear to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.

III³⁵

Section 48 continues the discussion of section 46 by offering an exegesis of the next verse in Habakkuk: "Lord, I have heard of your renown; I am afraid; O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years" (Habakkuk 3:2).³⁶ I will begin by citing the first part of section 48 and then return to its conclusion below:

48. Why did he say "I am afraid" (Habakkuk 3:2): since the ear is in the form of the [letter] *alef*, and *alef* is the beginning of all the letters. Moreover, *alef* causes the existence of all the letters, and the *alef* has the form of the brain. Just as when you announce the letter *alef* you open your mouth, so when you think of [divine] thought, it is without end or termination (*mah alef keshe-'attah zokhero attah poteah pikha, kakh ha-maḥshavah keshe-'attah ḥoshev le-'en sof ve-takhlit*). And all the letters emerge from the *alef*—thus, you can see that it is at their beginning. But it is said (*ve-'omer*) "And YHVH is at their head" (Micah 2:13). And it has been established that [in the case] of every divine name that is written YHVH, the Holy One, blessed be He, is unified and sanctified in holiness. What is the meaning of "in holiness?" In the holy temple (*be-hekhal ha-kodesh*). And where is the holy temple? Let it be said in

³⁴ See the discussion in chapter one, near n. 26, and in chapter four, near nn. 36 and 123.

³⁵ My discussion in this section is adopted from Dauber, "Images of the Temple in Sefer ha-Bahir," 199–235.

³⁶ Section 47, which also comments on Habakkuk 3:2, deals with themes related to those dealt with in section 48 and may be seen as part of the same textual unit. It is beyond, however, the purview of the present chapter to comment on this section.

thought (*ba-mahshavah*), which is *alef*, as it is written, “Lord, I have heard of Your renown; I am afraid” (Habakkuk 3:2).³⁷

Pedaya has suggested that this section reflects the redactional hand of a member of R. Isaac’s circle, or someone whose Kabbalah was close to the Kabbalah of this group.³⁸ In fact, as she shows, the depiction of the *alef* in this section is remarkably similar to its depiction in a passage from R. Asher’s work,³⁹ and indeed, it is quite possible that someone with specific knowledge of his teachings contributed this section.

In general terms, as Pedaya suggests, this section seems to present an abridged version of a more elaborate theosophic process central to R. Isaac’s thought. This process involves the sixth sefirah (the Tetragrammaton, YHVH) ascending to the third sefirah, which is itself joined to the first sefirah (the letter *alef*, which stands for the divine name *Ehyeh*). However, the intermediary step of the third sefirah is left out in section 48.⁴⁰

According to the section, the *alef* is identical to “thought,” that is to say, divine thought (*mahshavah*), which is a reference to the first *sefirah* in both the *Bahir* and in certain works by members of R. Isaac’s circle.⁴¹ The *alef* is depicted as the first *sefirah*, because just as the *alef* is the source of the letters (as the section puts it, it “causes the existence

³⁷ *Sefer ha-bahir*, 145.

³⁸ Pedaya, “The Provençal Stratum of *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” 149–153.

³⁹ The passage is cited in n. 66, below. See also Eitan P. Fishbane, “The Speech of Being, the Voice of God: Phonetic Mysticism in the Kabbalah of Asher ben David and His Contemporaries,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008), 496–497. I would note, however, that R. Asher identifies divine thought with the second sefirah. As I will explain below, in this section it is identified with the first sefirah, a position in keeping with R. Isaac’s view. On the sefirotic identity of divine thought according to the first Kabbalists, see below n. 41.

⁴⁰ Pedaya does not discuss the full theosophic process in “The Provençal Stratum of *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” 151–152. There, she merely compares this passage of the *Bahir* to the comment in the *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* attributed to R. Isaac, that “the Name (=YHVH) is elevated to the *alef*.” (See R. Isaac the Blind, “*Perush sefer yetsirah*,” ed. Gershom Scholem,” 15, l. 32.) She does, however, present this passage from R. Isaac’s *Commentary*, with a detailed exegesis and a full discussion of the theosophic process, in *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 78–102.

⁴¹ On divine thought in the *Bahir*, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 126–131. R. Isaac the Blind, himself, identified the highest *sefirah* with “thought.” See e.g., his *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 3 l. 54; 14 l. 302. This identification seems to have been retained by his student, R. Ezra. See, e.g., *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Chavel, 483. R. Isaac’s nephew, R. Asher, however, identified “thought” with the second *sefirah*, “wisdom.” See *R. Asher ben David*, 106. This approach was also followed by R. Isaac’s student, R. Azriel. See *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth*, 116, 155. For further examples see my “‘Pure Thought’ in R. Abraham bar Hiyya and Early Kabbalah.”

of all the letters”), so the first *sefirah* is the source of the lower *sefirot*, and ultimately of all of existence. Yet the section offers a seeming contradiction to this presentation of the *alef*: the notion that *alef* is at the beginning is apparently contradicted by Micah 2:13 (“And YHVH is at their head”), which seems to identify the Tetragrammaton, and not *alef* (or the divine name *Ehyeh*), with the first *sefirah*. According to the section, the solution to this seeming contradiction lies in the fact that “it has been established that [in the case] of every divine name that is written YHVH, the Holy One, blessed be He, is unified and sanctified in holiness.” Holiness turns out to be a reference to the “holy temple,” which, in turn, is identified with thought or *alef*—that is, with the first *sefirah*. If so, the section apparently means to indicate that there is no contradiction between the notion that *alef* is at the beginning and the notion that YHVH is at the beginning. Indeed, YHVH is at the beginning, but this is the case only insofar as it is unified in holiness—that is, insofar as it is unified with the first *sefirah* or, to put the matter in the terms of the holy temple imagery, insofar as YHVH resides within the holy temple, which is the highest *sefirah*. Thus, as in the view familiar from the thought of R. Isaac, the Tetragrammaton is united with its source, the *alef*; or, to put the matter in sefirotic terms, the sixth *sefirah* is united with the first *sefirah*.

I would like to call particular attention to this section’s statement that “just as when you announce the letter *alef* you open your mouth, so when you think of [divine] thought, it is without end or termination” (*mah alef keshe-’attah zokhero attah poteah pikha, kakh ha-mahshavah keshe-’attah hoshev le-’en sof ve-takhlit*). There is a certain ambiguity in the statement, which may be intentional. What does “without end or termination” modify? On the one hand, these terms might be adjectives, intended to characterize divine thought as infinite—a notion which would parallel R. Isaac’s contention that divine thought “has no measure” (*en lah shi’ur*).⁴² On the other hand, they may be seen as adverbs modifying human thought, which thinks endlessly when it contemplates divine thought. I would suggest that both of these possibilities must be upheld: Since divine thought is endless, so the attempt to think it continues endlessly. Yet such endless thinking of endlessness is, in fact, no thinking at all. Divine thought is thus that which cannot be thought by humans.

⁴² *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 3 l. 54–55.

Elliot Wolfson draws attention to a parallel passage in section 53 of the *Bahir*, which also comments on Habakkuk 3:2 (“Lord, I have heard of your renown; I am afraid”). Given the closeness between section 53 and section 48, it stands to reason that this latter section is also the work of a redactor with knowledge of R. Isaac’s Kabbalah.⁴³ According to section 53, the “renown” referred to by the verse is a reference to the first *sefirah*. It is the endlessness of this *sefirah* which scared Habakkuk:

What did he understand that made him afraid? He understood the thought (*maḥshavto*) of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as the thought (*maḥshavah*) has no end, since a person who thinks [of divine thought] descends to the end of the world, so too the ear has no end, and will not be satiated. As it is written, “The ear cannot have enough of hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8).⁴⁴

As Wolfson explains, in the view of this section, “just as divine thought has no limit and consequently cannot be thought except as unthought, so the path to attain it can have no boundary and hence cannot be approached except as the unapproachable.”⁴⁵

It seems to me, therefore, that both passages 48 and 53 are expressions of another key aspect of the philosophic ethos—the notion that despite the need to investigate God, the essence of God remains beyond knowledge. As we have already seen in writings of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle, this basic unknowability of God is expressed in terms of the unknowability of the highest *sefirah*. Whether or not sections 46, 48 (and 53) were written by the same author, we find an interesting progression of thought which is very much in keeping with what we have seen in the work of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. Section 46 extols the importance of contemplating God, which is then followed by section 48 (and 53), which places limits on human ability to engage in such speculation.⁴⁶

⁴³ See also Pedaya, “The Provençal Stratum of Sefer ha-Bahir,” 150, n. 37.

⁴⁴ *Sefer ha-bahir*, 149.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 142.

⁴⁶ I would also like to note that section 135 of the *Bahir* may be related to the philosophic ethos. This section also makes clear that investigation of God is crucial but, nevertheless, notes the limits of human ability (in this case, the ability of Moses) to engage in such investigation. Pedaya, in her analysis of this section, shows its relationship to conceptions about human knowledge of God found both in the work of R. Abraham ibn Ezra and in the work of R. Isaac. See “The Provençal Stratum of Sefer ha-Bahir,” 156–160.

In the continuation of section 48 of the *Bahir*, the manner in which God can be known, despite the unknowability of the first sefirah, is explained:

Therefore Habakkuk said: "I know that my prayer was accepted with pleasure, and I also had pleasure, and when I arrived⁴⁷ at such and such a place and I understood Your renown, I was afraid." Therefore, "O Lord, revive Your works in the midst of years" (Habakkuk 3:2), in Your unity. A parable: to what may the matter be compared? To a king who is trustworthy, wondrous, and concealed (*amun mufla' u-mekhusseh*), who entered into his palace, and commanded that no one ask for him. Therefore anyone who asks for him will be afraid that the king will know that he is violating his (i.e. the king's) command. Therefore he (=Habakkuk) said: "I am afraid; O Lord, revive Your works in the midst of years" (*ibid.*). Thus said Habakkuk, "since Your name is in You and such is Your name, Your action will always be through it."⁴⁸

It seems to me that the palace of the king described in the parable should be seen as representing the "holy temple," (the first *sefirah*), mentioned in the first part of the section. The king, who is hidden in the palace, should be seen as representing the sixth *sefirah* or the Tetragrammaton, which is concealed within the first *sefirah*, the holy temple. Thus, the parable presents the unity of the sixth and first *sefirot*, described in the first part of section 48, as the concealment of the former in the latter.

After the parable, section 48 turns to the second half of Habakkuk 3:2 ("O Lord, revive Your works in the midst of years"), which it had not yet commented upon. I propose that section 48 reads this part of the verse as the supplication that Habakkuk offers in the face of the concealment of the Tetragrammaton (the sixth *sefirah*) within the first *sefirah*. In his statement, "O Lord (YHVH), revive Your works in the midst of years," Habakkuk turns to the Tetragrammaton and requests that despite its concealment in the highest *sefirah*, it should nevertheless make itself known in the midst of years.⁴⁹ It seems to me that "in

⁴⁷ Following the emendation in the margins of MS Munich 209, reproduced by Abrams in *Sefer ha-bahir*, 144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 145. The citation of Habakkuk 3:2 at the end of the passage is added on the basis of the emendation in the margins of MS Munich 209, reproduced by Abrams in *ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Sefer ha-bahir*, p. 147 (section 51), which reads Habakkuk 3:2 in a similar manner. In this section, however, the Tetragrammaton is not mentioned, and it is apparently the divine name, *el*, which is concealed in "holiness."

the midst of years” can either be understood as a reference to the lowest *sefirah*⁵⁰ (or the lower sefirot more generally)⁵¹ or as actual human years⁵²—that is, as human history. If the latter is correct, Habakkuk’s request is that the Tetragrammaton should express its governance in the human plane. If the former is correct, his request is that the Tetragrammaton should make itself known in the lowest *sefirah* (or lower sefirot).⁵³ In either case, Habakkuk’s supplication is that the Tetragrammaton not only be unified with the highest *sefirah* in a concealed fashion, but also be revealed below in a more knowable fashion.

The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive since the lower sefirot are also the sources of divine governance.⁵⁴ Thus, section 48 of the *Bahir* may be indicating that while the essence of God is beyond knowledge, insight into God may still be gained by examining His governance of the world; this would be very much in keeping with the paradigm of the philosophic ethos, as reflected in both philosophic and Kabbalistic materials.

IV

I turn now to the opening passage of section 96 of the *Bahir*:

96. What are the ten utterances (*ma’amarot*)? One: The supernal crown, greatly blessed (*barukh u-mevorakh*) are His name and His nation. And who is His nation? Israel, as it is said: “Know (*de’u*) that the Lord is our

⁵⁰ This is the implication in section 49 of the *Bahir* (pp. 145–148). See the next note.

⁵¹ In this case, we should assume that section 49 has no bearing on section 48 but comes from a different stratum of the *Bahir*. When “in the midst of years” is explained, in accordance with section 49, as referring to the lowest *sefirah*, the key words that are being interpreted are “in the midst.” Thus, according to section 49, “in the midst of years” refers to “in the midst of that jewel (=the lowest sefirah) that gives birth to years” (p. 145). According to the interpretation that “in the midst of years” refers to the lower sefirot, more generally, the key word that is being interpreted is “years.”

⁵² Here again the key word being interpreted is “years.” See the previous note.

⁵³ This might be the force of the word “in your unity,” which the *Bahir* adds after “years” when it first cites this part of the verse, immediately before presenting the parable. In other words, speaking of the Tetragrammaton (the sixth *sefirah*) making itself known in the lowest *sefirah* might be a way of describing the union of the two. This union became central to Kabbalistic theology, according to which the providential divine overflow could only flow to the human plane if this union were established. Thus, either interpretation of the term “years” leads to the same basic conception.

⁵⁴ See the previous note.

God, He has made us, and we did not [make] ourselves (*ve-lo' anahnu*), [His people, and the flock of His pasture]" (Ps. 100:3)—to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-leda'*) the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names (*aḥad ha-aḥadim ha-meyuḥad be-khol shemotav*).⁵⁵

This passage begins a textual unit that describes the ten utterances with which (according to *Mishnah Avot* 5:1) the world was created. Scholem assumes that this unit was part of an early eastern layer of the *Bahir*, although this assumption is questionable.⁵⁶ At the same time, he argues, without providing a full explanation, that the words “the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names” (and presumably the infinitives that precede them, “to recognize and to know”) are a late addition by a twelfth-century Languedocian author.⁵⁷ More recently, Eitan Fishbane, building on the work of Pedaya, has suggested that this passage might have been redacted by someone with knowledge of R. Isaac’s Kabbalah.⁵⁸ In my discussion, I will further develop Scholem and Fishbane’s arguments. In particular I will provide support for Scholem’s contention that the aforementioned words are a late addition. They are of particular interest because they arguably articulate the value of investigating God. In fact, in keeping with Fishbane’s analysis, I will raise the possibility that they are even later than Scholem surmised and were perhaps added by someone with knowledge of the Kabbalah of R. Isaac’s circle. I will also raise the possibility that not

⁵⁵ *Sefer ha-bahir*, 181.

⁵⁶ Scholem discovered that one of the descriptions of the seventh utterance (there are three such descriptions), as well as those of the ninth and tenth utterances, are based on a work known as *Sod ha-Gadol* (*The Great Secret*), of which only fragments are preserved in a thirteenth-century text, which Scholem thought was identical to a lost work, entitled *Raza Rabba*. He dated *Raza Rabba* somewhere between the fifth and eighth centuries. Scholem assumed that the whole textual unit—not only the description of these particular utterances—was based on this work, even while he allowed for various interpolations (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, 105–123, 143, 146–147). Scholem’s assumption is far from proven. For example, Abrams has questioned the identification of *Sod ha-Gadol* and *Raza Rabba*. See his introduction to *Sefer ha-bahir*, 27–28. Furthermore, since most of *Sod ha-Gadol* has not been preserved, there is no way to verify with any certainty that the account of the first utterance in section 96 (not preserved in the extant passages of *Sod ha-Gadol*) can be traced to this source.

⁵⁷ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 125–126. See also Arthur Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 135–136.

⁵⁸ Fishbane, “The Speech of Being, the Voice of God,” 496–500. Fishbane shows that the passage bears a particular closeness to the thought of R. Asher ben David and suggests that R. Asher, himself, may have had a hand in its redaction. See n. 66, below.

only these words but also an element in the words that precede them reflect R. Isaac's Kabbalah.

Let me begin with some basic exegesis. As Scholem notes,⁵⁹ the description of the first utterance as “greatly blessed,” with which the *Bahiric* passage opens, seems to draw on the description of the first sefirah in *Sefer Yetsirah*—the earliest text to use the term “sefirot”—where it is written: “The first: the spirit of the living God, greatly blessed (*barukh u-mevorakh*) is the name of the Eternally Living.”⁶⁰ The passage also refers to this first utterance/sefirah as the supernal crown, a designation for the first sefirah that became common in Kabbalistic sources. Now, the term sefirot in *Sefer Yetsirah* is enigmatic, but it does not seem to refer to aspects of God, as it is understood by the first Kabbalists. Not surprisingly, therefore, in *Sefer Yetsirah*, as Scholem points out, the phrase “greatly blessed” modifies God, not the first sefirah. However, in the *Bahir* it does modify the first sefirah. In other words, a praise that would seem appropriate to God is applied to a sefirah.⁶¹ Thus, even if we assume, along with Scholem, that most of the passage was written well before the emergence of Kabbalah, it may be surmised that its original author did view the first utterance/sefirah as an aspect of God, and, presumably, he would have also viewed the remaining nine utterances as aspects of God.

Following the praise of the first utterance/sefirah, the passage states that “Israel is His nation.” It provides Ps. 100:3 as a proof-text for this point. This verse reads: “know that the Lord is our God, He has made us, and we did not [make] ourselves (*ve-lo' anaḥnu*), [His people, and the flock of His pasture]” (Ps. 100:3). The verse, as translated here, serves perfectly well as Biblical evidence that Israel is God's nation, insofar as it affirms that “the Lord is our God.” The translation supplied here of *ve-lo' anaḥnu* as “and we did not [make] ourselves” follows the written form of the verse (*ketiv*), as opposed to the masoretic reading—the official reading intended to be used by the reader (*keri*). It is likely, however, that the homilist also has the latter in mind. According to masoretic tradition, the *keri* of the words *ve-lo' anaḥnu* treats the first word as if spelled *vav lamed vav*, rather than the actual written spelling in the verse, *vav lamed alef*. Thus, in accordance with the *keri*,

⁵⁹ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 125.

⁶⁰ *Sefer Yeṣirah: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, 80 (=1:9).

⁶¹ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 125.

the phrase should be translated as “we are His.” The verse would then literally translate as: “Know that the Lord is our God; He has made us, and we are His.” When read in this light, the verse serves as an even stronger proof-text for the notion that Israel is God’s nation. Finally, it is possible that the homilist also has a more creative interpretation of the *ketiv* in mind, which relies on the orthography of that form, but not on the literal translation of that orthography. Perhaps the homilist reads, *ve-lo’* (*vav*, *lamed*, *alef*) *anaḥnu* (lit. “and we did not [make] ourselves) as “*ule-’alef anaḥnu*” (and we belong to the *alef*).” *Alef*, of course, is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and therefore stands for the first utterance/sefirah. The verse would thus specify that Israel belongs to the first utterance/sefirah.⁶² However, the notion that the *alef* is the highest sefirah is not at all common in the *Bahir*, but, as we have seen, plays an important role in the thought of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. If this exegesis of Ps. 100:3 is indeed implied in this passage of the *Bahir*, the possibility must be tentatively raised that this component of the passage was authored or at least reworked by someone with knowledge of R. Isaac’s Kabbalah. On the other hand, an association between the first utterance/sefirah and the letter *alef* is logical enough, so it is possible that the author of this component arrived at this notion even without knowledge of Kabbalah.

For reasons that will become clear below, the words that follow—“to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-leda’*) the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names (*aḥad ha-’aḥadim ha-meyuḥad be-khol shemotav*)”—were identified by Scholem as deriving from the Languedocian layer of the text. Here I will argue, more particularly, that these words, more obviously than the ones that precede them, reflect the Kabbalah of R. Isaac. They present an interesting reading of Ps 100:3 that offers an additional dimension not included in the exegesis up to this point. The verse begins with a command, “know” (*de’u*). This is glossed as “to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-leda’*).” Next the verse specifies “that the Lord (YHVH) is our God (*Elohim*),” which, in turn, is glossed as “the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His

⁶² In some versions of the *Bahir*, this reading is made explicit, in what is apparently a later interpretive gloss added to the text. See, e.g., the version of the *Bahir* printed by Reuben Margalioṭ (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977 or 1978), 62. According to the title page of this version, it is based on four manuscripts. These manuscripts are not, however, identified. The gloss also appears in the first printed edition of the *Bahir* reproduced by Abrams in his own edition (p. 277).

names (*aḥad ha-ʿaḥadim ha-meyuḥad be-khol shemotav*.)” In other terms, from the perspective of this gloss, the verse specifies that there is no difference between Lord and YHVH. These names do not refer to two separable entities; rather, they are one and the same. Finally, I suggest that there is also an implied gloss of the next section of the verse, read in the creative fashion detailed above as “He made us, and we belong to the *alef*” (*ule-ʿalef anahnu*.)” I suggest that the “One of Ones” interprets the *alef*. To belong to the *alef* may mean, therefore, “to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-ledaʿ*)” that the *alef* or the first utterance/sefirah is the “One of Ones,” because it is the source of divine unity, insofar as the divine names YHVH and Elohim become one within it.

The notion that the letter *alef*/first sefirah is the source of divine unity is a key component of the thought of R. Isaac’s circle. According to R. Isaac’s Kabbalah, all the sefirot are united within the highest sefirah, since they existed within that sefirah in potential before they were formed and because they are ontologically linked to it even after being formed. This point is made in various places in the work of R. Isaac’s circle,⁶³ at times in passages where the first sefirah is specifically referred to as the letter *alef*. One such example, as Fishbane notes, is a passage in R. Asher’s *Sefer ha-Yiḥud* that is closely connected to the *Bahiric* passage.⁶⁴ There are various possibilities available in the literature of this circle for identifying the divine names, YHVH and Elohim, with particular sefirot.⁶⁵ Whatever the particular identifications here, I would suggest that “One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names” can be taken to mean more specifically, therefore, that the first sefirah is the source of the unity of two of the lower sefirot identified by the divine names YHVH and Elohim. Taken together, the

⁶³ See chapter four, n. 49. For another example, see Azriel of Gerona, “*Sha’ar ha-sho’el*,” 4.

⁶⁴ See n. 66, below. For another example, see Scholem, “*Seridim ḥadashim mi-kitvé R. ‘Azriel mi-Gerona*,” 218.

⁶⁵ According to Rabbinic tradition, the Tetragrammaton refers to the attribute of mercy, while *Elohim* refers to the attribute of judgment. (See, e.g., *Sifré on Deuteronomy*, eds. Saul Horovitz and Louis Finkelstein, 41, sec. 26). Accordingly, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle interpreted the Tetragrammaton as a reference to the sixth sefirah, mercy and the related fourth sefirah, lovingkindness. They interpreted *Elohim* as a reference to the fifth sefirah, judgment. For these interpretations, see, e.g., *R. Asher ben David*, 61. Other interpretations of *Elohim* are also found in the literature of this circle. Thus, for example, in R. Isaac’s *Perush sefer yetsirah*, 1, l. 11, *Elohim* is apparently a reference to the third sefirah.

evidence, therefore, points to the possibility that the words “to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-leda'*) the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names (*aḥad ha-ʿaḥadim ha-meyuḥad be-khol shemotav*)” were composed by someone with knowledge of R. Isaac’s Kabbalah, presumably at some point in the first half of the thirteenth century.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ It is significant that an exegesis of Ps. 100:3 that is quite similar to the one in the *Bahir*, as I have interpreted it, is found in R. Asher ben David’s *Sefer ha-Yihud*:

It would have been fitting for the *alef* to appear and be referred to as the last in the order of the letters, since it is more internal and concealed than all of the other letters. It is only first so as to reveal its stature and to inform that those which come after it suckle (*yonekot*) from it... and it hints at unity more than the remaining letters, and even though there is no proof for the matter, there is a reminder of the matter, as it is written “know that the Lord is our God, He has made us, and we did not [make] ourselves (*ve-lo’ anahnu*), His people etc.” (Ps. 100:3). “We did not” (*ve-lo’*) is written with an *alef*, but it is read with a *vav*. The manner in which the text is read is significant, and the manner in which the written text is received is significant. Thus the explanation of *ve-lo’*, as it is written with an *alef*, is “*u-le’alef anahnu*” (and we belong to the *alef*)—that is to say, to the perfect unity from which all is continuously blessed without cessation. And *ve-lo* as it is read with a *vav*: the intention is that we are His nation [that is, the nation of the] One, who is hinted at in the written version, and of no other [R. Asher ben David, 104–105, amended slightly on the basis of MS Paris 763, which is supplied in *ibid.*, 230].

There is little doubt that this passage bears some sort of relationship to the opening passage of section 96 of the *Bahir*. R. Asher maintains the correctness of both the written and read versions of Ps. 100:3. He also sees the letter *alef* in “*ve-lo’ anahnu*” as expressing the notion that we belong to the *alef* or the first sefirah. Moreover, R. Asher goes further and identifies the *alef* as the basis of divine unity. Pedaya in “The Provençal Stratum of Sefer ha-Bahir,” 153, assumes that R. Asher borrowed from section 96. This is certainly possible, but the reverse possibility should also be considered. Perhaps, someone familiar with R. Asher’s Kabbalah (or the Kabbalah of R. Isaac, if we assume that R. Asher learned this explanation of Ps. 100:3 from his uncle), or even perhaps R. Asher himself, as Fishbane suggests [“The Speech of Being, the Voice of God,” 500], reworked sec. 96 of the *Bahir*.

A number of factors give added support to this (admittedly highly speculative) suggestion. First, this same passage in the work of R. Asher also closely parallels section 48 of the *Bahir* (discussed above), and there is good reason to think, as seen, that section 48 may have been redacted by someone with knowledge of R. Asher’s Kabbalah. Second, in my “Images of the Temple in Sefer ha-Bahir,” 216–221, I show that the influence of R. Asher’s work can also be seen in another section (section 103) of the extended textual unit dealing with the ten utterances.

I would add also that R. Azriel seems to allude to both section 48 and the opening passage of section 96 together (in the same line) in his *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, 118. There is no way, however, to be sure from the brief allusion, which does not even mention the *Bahir*, how much of these sections he had before him. Indeed, it is possible that he is not alluding to the *Bahir* at all, but merely borrowing material from R. Isaac’s teachings that is also reflected in R. Asher’s work, in a fuller fashion, and in the *Bahir*. See also Fishbane’s comments in “The Speech of Being, the Voice of God,” 500, n. 42.

Irrespective of whether these words were, in fact, added by such a person, it is clear that they reflect philosophic sources and the philosophic ethos. A number of factors suggest that their author had access to philosophic material. First, as was noted by Scholem, the phrase, “Who is unified in all of His names,” has parallels in philosophically inclined material, including one of R. Saadia’s *bakkashot* (supplicatory prayers) and R. Judah ben Barzillai’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*. It was these parallels that led Scholem to assign these words to the Languedocian layer of the *Bahir*.⁶⁷ Second, according to

⁶⁷ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 125–126. For reasons which he does not specify, Scholem assumes that the *Bahir* borrowed the phrase from R. Saadia and not from Ben Barzillai. In my view, however, this latter possibility is indeed more likely. At the same time, I would point out that these possibilities may not be mutually exclusive. There is no reason why a single author could not have been familiar with both R. Saadia and Ben Barzillai’s work. An examination of the relevant passages in their works will strengthen my contention that the words with which the passage concludes, “to recognize (*lehakkir*) and to know (*ve-leda’*) the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names (*ahad ha-’ahadim ha-meyuhad be-khol shemotav*),” are related to the philosophic ethos.

It will prove helpful to cite the entire opening of R. Saadia’s *bakkashah* in which the relevant line appears:

Indeed today I know, and I have laid it to my heart (*gam ha-yom yada’ti va-hashivoti el levavi*), that You, Lord, are one, and there is none other with You in Your kingdom and Your domain. And there is none other who can perform actions and great deeds like You. And anything else that is other than You is created and new. And how could it be compared to You, when You formed it, or be valued like You, when You created it? Therefore, hearts will believe and souls will know that You, Lord, are one in all Your names (*lakhen ya’aminu ha-levavot ve-teda’nah ha-nefashot ki attah YYY ehad be-khol shemotekha*), and exalted in all Your ways, and wondrous in all Your actions, and hidden from the eyes of all living creatures, and an eye will not behold You [*Siddur Rav Sa’adya Ga’on*, 64].

As Scholem suggests, R. Saadia’s line “You, Lord, are one in all Your names” (*ki attah YYY ehad be-khol shemotekha*) is parallel to the *Bahir*’s “the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names” (*ahad ha-’ahadim ha-meyuhad be-khol shemotav*).

The *bakkashah*, which (together with some of R. Saadia’s other poetry) is among the first examples of the blending of philosophy and poetry in Jewish literature [see Joseph Tobi, *Proximity and Distance: Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Poetry*, trans. Murray Rosovsky (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 65–116, esp. 90–93], lacks an explicit statement of the need to investigate God. It does, however, reflect this value, insofar as it presents a detailed theological account of God, which is obviously based on R. Saadia’s philosophic investigations, even though—as we should expect in a liturgical poem—the details of these investigations are not supplied. For example, in the opening of the *bakkashah*, cited here, R. Saadia alludes to a logical argument, without fully supplying the details of this argument. Thus, he explains that anything other than God must be created, whereas God, by implication, is uncreated. Furthermore, he suggests that if everything is created by God, God must be fundamentally different from all that is created, and, hence, He must be one. The connection drawn between these three points—God as creator, His fundamental difference from His creations, and His

R. Saadia, the intention of the verse “know that the Lord is our God” (Ps. 100:3) is to refute a dualistic point of view, according to which

oneness—may roughly allude to a philosophic argument for God’s oneness which appears in R. Saadia’s *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 2:1:

Since the Creator of all bodies cannot be the same species as His creatures, and since the bodies are many in number, it follows of necessity that He be one. For if there were more than one, there would apply to Him the category of number, and He would fall under the laws governing bodies (Rosenblatt, 96. Cf. Tibbon, 88).

Moreover in the opening of the *bakkashah* (“Indeed today I know, and I have laid it to my heart, that You, Lord, are one, and there is none other with You in Your kingdom and Your domain”), R. Saadia obviously paraphrases Deut. 4:39 (“Know therefore this day and lay it to your heart that the Lord alone is God”), a key prooftext for the obligation to investigate God in the newly available philosophic literature. R. Saadia thus, in effect, begins the *bakkashah* by stating that its contents are the result of investigating God.

Now, R. Saadia’s *bakkashot* were widely disseminated across Europe over a long period of time. [See *Siddur Rav Sa’adya Ga’on*, 33–41.] If, then, this *bakkashah* is in the background of the opening passage of section 96 of the *Bahir*, it hardly constitutes solid evidence that the aforementioned phrase was added in Languedoc in the second half of the twelfth century, as Scholem thought. It certainly, though, does increase the likelihood that this statement emerged from a milieu suffused with the philosophic ethos.

If, however, the borrowing comes from Ben Barzillai’s *Commentary on Sefer Yet-sirah*, a work widely known in Catalonia and Languedoc, then it is certain that, at the earliest, it was added in the second half of the twelfth century. Let me then consider R. Judah’s remarks:

We are faithful witnesses in our hearts, in our souls, in our bodies, and in all of our thoughts, that our Creator, who created all, is One and unified in all His names (*ehād u-meyuhād be-khol shemotav*) (Ben Barzillai, *Perush sefer yet-sirah*, 13).

It should be noted that the *Bahir*’s wording (the One of ones, Who is unified in all of His names/*aḥād ha-’aḥadim ha-meyuhād be-khol shemotav*) corresponds more precisely to Ben Barzillai’s wording (one and unified in all His names/*ehād u-meyuhād be-khol shemotav*) than to R. Saadia’s wording (one in all your names/*ehād be-khol shemotekha*). These differences are slight, but the very fact that R. Saadia’s *bakkashah* was widely known makes even this slight deviation more significant. If the author of these words in the *Bahir* was citing from a well-known poem, it is likely that he would have done so with greater accuracy.

In any case, as was already noted in chapter two, Ben Barzillai’s *Commentary* is replete with statements tied to the philosophic ethos. Consideration of the wider context in which the passage that contains the key phrase appears in Ben Barzillai’s work makes it apparent that it, too, is grounded in this ethos. Slightly before this passage, Ben Barzillai affirms that God is beyond knowledge, but nevertheless states that he will explain, regarding the account of the chariot—that is, regarding metaphysics—“a little, so that it will be a starting point for those who understand knowledge, and for all those of faith” (*ibid.*, 13). Somewhat after this passage, in keeping with various philosophic texts surveyed in chapter two, he affirms that knowing that God has no image and knowing that God is unified are, respectively, the first two commandments (*ibid.*, 15). He further explains that the fact that God has no image can be proven both on the basis of the Torah and on the basis of logical reasoning (*ibid.*, 16). In short, this extended section in Ben Barzillai’s work is a prime exemplar of the philosophic ethos at work. If the author of the concluding words of the opening passage of section 96 did draw from this source, his rootedness in the philosophic ethos becomes apparent,

the Lord (YHVH) and God (Elohim) represent separate entities.⁶⁸ The *Bahir*, as we have seen, makes a similar point.

Finally, and most significantly, the interpretation of Ps 100:3 bears the imprint of the philosophic ethos. Like the three verses discussed in the previous chapters, this verse is employed in philosophic sources in support of the philosophic ethos, albeit less frequently. Thus R. Baḥya presents not only Deut. 4:39, Jer. 9:23, and 1 Chron. 28:9 as evidence that “there is an obligation to investigate God’s unity by means of speculation,” but also Ps. 100:3.⁶⁹ Similarly, in *Guide* 3:51, Maimonides cites this verse, alongside Deut. 4:39, as a proof-text for the importance of investigating God.⁷⁰ Naturally this verse is not used in this manner in Rabbinic literature. In all, therefore, this opening passage of section 96 clearly reflects the philosophic ethos. More particularly, it seems possible that it (especially its final words) is another example of the penetration of the philosophic ethos into R. Isaac’s circle.

V

In the final analysis, therefore, the *Bahir* as a whole cannot be regarded as a systematic attempt to study God. Its haphazard and contradictory nature belies any sense that it reflects a coherent attempt to investigate God, in keeping with the philosophic ethos. As I have shown here, however, there are a number of passages—probably late Languedocian or Catalanian additions to the text—that do seem to express the philosophic ethos. Indeed, it is possible that these passages should be seen as self-reflective additions of late redactors, who were trying to navigate through the thicket of the *Bahir*. In this light, by proclaiming the value of studying God, sections 46 and 96 can be seen as affirming the potential of this unique collection of materials to provide knowledge of God. Section 48, on the other hand, can perhaps be seen as a response to the fact that these materials seem unencumbered by the epistemological questions that are central to the philosophic ethos. Thus, it points out that such materials must be subjected to the appropriate epistemological questioning.

and it is confirmed, as noted, that he added them, at the earliest, during the second half of the twelfth century.

⁶⁸ *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2:3 (Rosenblatt, 99; Tibbon, 90).

⁶⁹ *Duties of the Heart*, 1:3 (Mansoor, 114–115; Tibbon, 111).

⁷⁰ Pines, 621; Tibbon, 581; Alḥarizi, 867.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PHILOSOPHIC ETHOS IN THE WRITINGS OF NAḤMANIDES

I

R. Moses b. Naḥman (Naḥmanides) was a leading Rabbinic authority of the thirteenth century. He was a younger contemporary of R. Ezra and R. Azriel who, like them, resided in the Catalonian city of Gerona before moving to Palestine towards the end of his life. His vastly influential scholarship covered all areas of traditional Jewish study, including legal study and Biblical exegesis. Moreover, he also was a Kabbalist. According to certain late traditions, R. Ezra was Naḥmanides' Kabbalistic teacher; however, these traditions have been proven false.¹ Not only was R. Ezra not Naḥmanides' teacher, but recent scholarship has also shown that although Naḥmanides was in close contact with members of R. Isaac's circle,² he ultimately represents a separate tradition of Kabbalah.³

Naḥmanides differed with the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle not only regarding technical theosophic matters, but also, more broadly, regarding basic attitudes towards the nature of Kabbalah. First, although R. Isaac opposed the public dissemination of Kabbalistic secrets,⁴ his students, as we have seen, wrote Kabbalistic works intended for public consumption. In contrast, Naḥmanides for the most part did not write Kabbalistic works, but only hinted at Kabbalistic matters in cryptic allusions scattered throughout his works. Second, Moshe Idel and

¹ Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, 8–9. It should be noted, however, that Naḥmanides does refer to R. Ezra as one of his companions. See n. 73, below.

² R. Isaac corresponded with Naḥmanides (and R. Jonah Gerondi) in an important letter printed in Scholem, "*Te'udah ḥadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabbalah*," 7–39. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous note, Naḥmanides referred to R. Ezra as one of his companions.

³ Idel, "We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This," 56–60, 67–68; Idel, "Naḥmanides," 15–96.

⁴ R. Isaac makes this clear in his letter to Naḥmanides and R. Jonah Gerondi mentioned in n. 2.

Moshe Halbertal have argued that Naḥmanides viewed Kabbalah as a closed corpus of traditions, which is not subject to expansion or innovation, nor open to logical analysis.⁵ I would note, however, that Elliot Wolfson and Haviva Pedaya have shown that Naḥmanides is actually far more creative vis-à-vis his received traditions than his explicit pronouncements suggest.⁶ I will return to this point below. For now, though, I would stress that Naḥmanides' stated attitude, in any case, contrasts with that of the members of R. Isaac's circle, who prized creativity. Third, I will contend here that Naḥmanides was ambivalent toward the philosophic ethos that was central to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.⁷ In particular, I will show that while, in numerous places in his work, Naḥmanides extols the value of recognizing or knowing God, he does not see this value as necessitating the investigation of God. Rather, in line with the Rabbinic material examined in chapter three, his conception of the value involves believing in God and having an awareness of His providence.

II

As we have seen, certain key verses, including Deut. 4:39, Jer. 9:23, and 1 Chron. 28:9, appear repeatedly in the newly available philosophic literature, and in the works of the first Kabbalists, as prooftexts for the value of investigating God. These verses are not, however, employed in this fashion in Rabbinic literature. Strikingly, these verses are cited extremely infrequently in Naḥmanides' oeuvre, and in the few instances in which they are cited, they are not interpreted in a manner that bears any relationship to the philosophic ethos.⁸

⁵ See the sources listed in n. 65, below.

⁶ See the discussion in section 5, below.

⁷ Interestingly, however, there is some evidence that Judah ben Yakar, the Barcelonan sage who is thought to be an important teacher of Naḥmanides, not only regarding halakhic matters, but also regarding Kabbalah, did embrace the ethos. See, e.g., Judah ben Yakar, *Perush ha-tefillot veha-berakhot*, ed. Shmuel Yerushalmi, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: n.p., 1978 or 1979), I, 41, where he seems to interpret Jer. 9:23 ("that he understands and knows Me") as involving "apprehending" God. See, also, II, 23.

⁸ Deut. 4:39 is partially cited in Naḥmanides' commentary on Deut. 4:32 in the context of a discussion of God's miracles during the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai and as a prooftext for the need to fulfill God's commandments. See *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1959–1960), II, 365. Jer. 9:23 is referred to in Naḥmanides' comments on

There are, however, a number of places in his work where Naḥmanides explicitly states that God created the human being so that he would “recognize his Creator” (*she-yakkir et bore’o*). For him, though, this verb does not suggest that one must investigate God, as it often does in the newly available philosophic literature and in the literature of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle. Rather, he employs it in a manner that recalls its Rabbinic usage. For him, “recognizing God” implies acknowledging that He exists and acknowledging His providential role—not actively speculating about His nature.⁹

Take, for example, the following passage in Naḥmanides’ sermon, “*Torat ha-Shem Temimah*”:

Consider in your heart that the Holy One, blessed be He, created all lowly things for the enjoyment and use of Adam, because there is no

Deut. 17:20 (*ibid.*, II, 425). Naḥmanides uses it, there, as a proof-text to show that haughtiness is a bad quality; he explains that one should not glory in himself, but only in God. However, he gives no indication that glorying in God involves any sort of investigation of God. Part of Jer. 9:23 (“for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world”) is also referred to in Naḥmanides’ *Derashah* (homily) on *Ecclesiastes* (*Kitvé Ramban*, I, 204), in the course of extolling the virtue of charity. Here, again, there is no connection to the philosophic ethos. In Naḥmanides’ commentary on Is. 52:13–53:12, he interprets the final words of Jer. 9:23 (“For in these I delight—declares the Lord”) in a manner that is somewhat closer to the philosophic ethos. There, these words are used to describe a time when the Messiah will “teach all the nations to understand (*lehaskil*) and know (*ve-lada’at*) God” (*Kitvé Ramban*, I, 325). However, it is not clear whether the Messiah will teach the nations detailed knowledge about God or simply make them aware of God. Obviously, the former possibility is closer in spirit to the philosophic ethos. Yet, even if this possibility is correct, there is no indication that the Messiah will arrive at his own knowledge of God through investigation, nor is there any indication that he will encourage the nations of the world to investigate God. See also n. 64, below. A portion of 1 Chron. 28:9, “For the Lord searches all minds and discerns the design of every thought,” is cited several times. See, e.g., his *Commentary on Job* in *Kitvé Ramban* I, 18 (intro); I, 108 (35:7). However, this portion of the verse is not relevant to the philosophic ethos. I have only found one citation of the portion of the verse that is relevant to the philosophic ethos: “Know the God of your father and serve Him with a single heart.” This citation occurs in a letter that Naḥmanides wrote to one of his sons (*Kitvé Ramban*, II, 370). There, however, he does not use the verse to suggest the significance of coming to prayer with knowledge of God, but, more generally, to extol the virtue of keeping the commandments.

⁹ Cf. David Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 42: “Knowledge of God, for Naḥmanides, is knowledge of God’s power and will to accomplish all things. It is anticipation of providence and its works before God’s will is actually manifest in a particular situation.” Cf. also Bezalel Safran, “Rabbi Azriel and Naḥmanides: Two Views on the Fall of Man,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.

reason for the creation of the lowly animals and plants, who do not recognize their Creator (*she-'enam makkirim et bore'am*), save this. And He created the human to recognize his Creator (*she-yakkir et bore'o*), may He be blessed. And if a person entirely does not know that He created him, and, all the more so, if he does not know that a certain act is chosen and desired by his Creator, while another act is distanced and repulsive, this person is like an animal, and the purpose of his creation void. This is what the Rabbis, of blessed memory, intended, when they often said: "Had Israel not accepted the Torah, He would have returned the world to chaos."¹⁰ That is to say, if they did not desire to know and to learn the knowledge of their Creator (*yedi'at bore'am*), and that there is a distinction, before Him, between good and bad, the result would be that the purpose of the creation of the world would be nullified.¹¹

Here, Naḥmanides explains that human beings were created to recognize their Creator. However, the distinction that he draws between human beings and animals makes it apparent that he is not suggesting that the goal of the former is to actively investigate God. The contrast is between animals, who lack the intellectual capacity to be aware that God exists, and human beings, who were created with this capacity. It is not between animals who are aware of God's existence, yet lack the ability to investigate him, and humans who have such ability. Indeed, far from advocating investigation of God, Naḥmanides makes clear that recognizing God involves realizing that He is concerned with and has set out particular requirements for appropriate human behavior.

Later in the sermon, Naḥmanides again returns to the theme of the purpose of the creation of human beings:

Behold, it has been clarified that the well-known miracles that occurred during the exodus from Egypt instruct regarding creation, [divine] knowledge, and providence. Therefore, we were commanded to make a reminder for them on the stones,¹² on the lintels of doorways when one comes and goes, on the phylacteries of the head and of the arm, in the recitation of the morning and evening *Shema'*, in the *succah*, on Passover, and in other similar instances. All of the commandments are found to be very delightful and pleasant, for in every instant that a person sees them or performs them, he gives thanks to his God (*modeh le-'elohav*)—this is the purpose of creation, since there is no other reason for the creation of the human being, and God desires nothing else of the lowly ones

¹⁰ See, e.g., 'Avodah Zarah 3a; B. Shabbat 88a.

¹¹ "Torat ha-shem temimah," in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 142–143. Cf. *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, I, 20 (Gen. 1:10); II, 97 (Lev. 17:11).

¹² See Deut. 27:1–8.

(i.e. humans), save that a human being know and give thanks to God for creating him (*she-yeda' ha-'adam ve-yodeh le-'elohav she-bore'o*).¹³

Thus, Naḥmanides explains here that the purpose of the creation of the human being is that he “know and thank God for creating him.” To understand exactly what he has in mind, it is necessary to consider the passage as a whole. In this passage, he suggests that it is the performance of certain commandments that allows for human beings (or, more accurately, Jews) to fulfill this purpose. By performing these commandments, one is brought to recall the exodus from Egypt. For Naḥmanides, God’s miracles—most notably, those performed in the context of the Exodus—testify that God has an active role in the world, and as such serve to instill three foundations of the Torah, each of which relate to God’s activity in the world: that God created the world, that He has knowledge of particulars, and that He exercises providence. To say, then, that the purpose of creation is to “know and thank God for creating him” is merely a shorthand way of saying that human beings were created to acknowledge this role.

It is of course true that having awareness that God is the Creator, has knowledge of particulars, and exercises providence, amounts to a kind of knowledge of God. Still, Naḥmanides’ chief concern is not to acquire knowledge of God, but to foster an awareness of God’s role in human history. Furthermore, these propositions are not arrived at through active investigation, but by witnessing (or recalling, via the performance of the commandments) times in which God intervened in human history.¹⁴

In a passage in his *Commentary on the Bible*, Naḥmanides presents the idea that the purpose of the creation of human beings is to recognize the existence of God and His governance in a nationalistic context:

God created the human being below so that he would recognize (*she-yakkir*) his Creator and give thanks (*ve-yodeh*) to His name. And He placed permission in his hands to do bad or good, but when they (i.e. human beings) willfully sinned, and they all denied Him, all that remained was just this nation (=Israel) [who was dedicated] to His name. He publicized, by means of them, with signs and wonders that He is the God of gods, and the Master of masters, and in this manner

¹³ “*Torat ha-shem temimah*,” 152–153. Cf. *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, II, 347 (Exod. 13:16).

¹⁴ See, further, in section three, below.

He became known to all the nations. And behold, if He should then destroy them (= Israel), the nations will forget His signs and His deeds, and they will no longer be recounted. If someone should mention them (= God's signs and deeds), people will think that they are the result of the power of the constellations and the stars, which has passed and gone by. And behold, the purpose of creation will be entirely nullified, since no one will remain who knows (*yodea'*) his Creator. Only those who anger Him [will remain].¹⁵

According to this passage it is through Israel that the human purpose will be fulfilled. The miracles that God performs for Israel will bear testimony to God and His activity in the world, so that He will be recognized and known. While the sin of the nations is to deny God, it is Israel that ensures that God cannot be denied. Therefore, here again, it is obvious that recognizing or knowing God does not suggest investigating and gaining knowledge of God, but only being aware of His existence and His control of human affairs, as opposed to denying these facts.

A number of other passages could also be adduced, in which it is clear that Naḥmanides believes that recognizing or knowing God implies only accepting his existence and governance and does not require any active investigation.¹⁶

There is, however, also, what Bezalel Safran refers to as a "higher level" of recognizing God. This level goes beyond merely acknowledging God's existence and governance and entails cleaving to the *shekhinah* (the tenth sefirah). In Safran's words, "It consists in an intimate knowledge of God, not merely through theoretical assent, but through being worthy of the gift of mystical union with the Shekhinah."¹⁷ Nominally, this notion corresponds to Maimonides' intellectual worship and R. Isaac's "worship of the enlightened," in which, as we have seen, investigation of God is linked to cleaving to Him. There is, however, absolutely no indication that Naḥmanides sees such a linkage. Indeed as Safran explains, for Naḥmanides "devekut (= communion with God) is not an active human gesture. It is a divine gift that comes from without, and then only as a result of a certain

¹⁵ *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, II, 489 (Deut. 32:26).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Naḥmanides' letter regarding the Maimonidean controversy printed in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 331; *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, I, 20 (Gen. 1:10); II, 97 (Lev. 17:1).

¹⁷ Bezalel Safran, "Rabbi Azriel and Naḥmanides: Two Views on the Fall of Man," 105.

way of life. Devekut with the Shekhinah comes at the end of a process, a process of spiritualizing the body. Spiritualizing the body means denying the body overindulgence in this-worldly pleasures, to which it is attracted.”¹⁸ In short, this higher level of recognizing God is achieved through appropriate behavior, rather than through intellectual investigation.

Consider, for example, Naḥmanides’ description of certain pious people who are able to cleave to God at all times, even while engaged in mundane activities. People who achieve this state are afforded a special level of divine providence. While this passage does not mention the *shekhinah*, it is in keeping with Safran’s observations:¹⁹

Since a person recognizes his God (*makkir et elohav*), He providentially watches over him and protects him. This is not the case for other creatures, who cannot speak, and do not know their Creator (*ve-’enan yode’ot bore’am*). And for this reason, he protects the righteous: since when their heart and eyes are always with Him, then the eyes of God are on them “from the beginning of the year until the end of the year” (Deut. 11:12). This can reach such a point that the completely pious one (*he-ḥasid ha-gamur*), who constantly cleaves (*ha-davek*) to his God, and whose thought is not separated from its cleaving to Him, even while he is engaged in any matter of the matters of this world, will always be protected from any of the accidents of time, even those that occur naturally, and he will be protected from them through a miracle that will always be performed for him. He will be considered as though he is one of the upper beings who are not subject to generation and corruption due to the accidents of time. In proportion to his closeness [to God, which he has achieved] by cleaving to his God, will he be protected with a superior protection. But one who is far from God in his thoughts and deeds, even if he does not deserve death on account of the sin that he committed, will be cast out and left to accidents.²⁰

Here Naḥmanides repeats the distinction, seen above, between animals, who do not know God, and humans, who do. As explained earlier, his claim is not that animals do not investigate God, while humans do, but that while animals are not aware of God, humans are. He adds, however, that there is a type of recognizing God that moves beyond mere awareness of God. It involves cleaving to God.

¹⁸ Ibid., 83–84. The parenthetical explanation is my own addition.

¹⁹ I would note that in a somewhat parallel passage in *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, II, 395 (Deut. 11:22) *shekhinah* is mentioned.

²⁰ *Commentary on Job*, in *Kitvé Ramban* I, 108–109 (Job 36:7). Cf. 106–107 (Job. 35:11).

Apparently, part of maintaining this cleaving requires constantly recognizing God, such that God always occupies a dimension of one's consciousness. It is possible that achieving this state requires theosophic knowledge—although Naḥmanides does not state that this is the case. Even, however, if this is the case, there is absolutely no indication that such knowledge is achieved as a result of any sort of investigation of God.

Naḥmanides' discussion largely paraphrases Maimonides' comments on providence in *Guide* 3:18 (cf. 3:51), and, in the continuation of the discussion, Naḥmanides notes that "this matter was clarified by the Rabbi [=Maimonides] with a good explanation in the book, *Guide of the Perplexed*."²¹ Indeed, Maimonides in the *Guide* explains that the level of providence one receives is correlated to the extent to which one knows God, which, for Maimonides, requires a careful program of study. However, as David Berger has already pointed out, Naḥmanides entirely neglects the intellectual component of Maimonides' view.²² According to Maimonides, the one who merits providence is the philosopher who has investigated God to the fullest possible extent. Naḥmanides calls for no such investigation.

In short, therefore, for Naḥmanides, recognizing God, in the first instance, means acknowledging His existence and affirming His governance, and, in the second instance, involves cleaving to God. However, there is no evidence that either type of recognition is achieved by active investigation.²³

²¹ Ibid., 109.

²² David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 120.

²³ In this context, I would highlight two other relevant contrasts between Naḥmanides and the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.

First, Idel in his "*Nishmat eloha: 'al elohiyut ha-neshamah etsel ha-Ramba'n veva'-askolah shelo*," in *Ha-ḥayyim ke-midrash: 'iyyunim bi-psikholohiyah yehudit*, eds. S. Arzy, M. Fachler and B. Kahana (Tel-Aviv, Israel: Yedi'ot aḥronot, 2004) notes that Naḥmanides rejected the view found in various philosophic sources that the human soul derives from the active intellect. Instead, he sees its source directly in the sefirotic realm. In contrast, according to Idel, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle do not emphasize the source of the soul in God and are thus closer to the view of the philosophic sources. Rather than claiming, as Naḥmanides does, that the soul is already divine, they argue that the soul needs to *become* divine. It seems to me that this debate should be viewed in light of the larger debate about the philosophic ethos. In fact, this may be a case where ethos and worldview are very much intertwined. Let me first put the matter in terms of how ethos might reflect worldview. It seems possible that the radical bridging of the gap between God and humans, which Naḥmanides' position

III

As we have seen, one example of the manner in which the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle adopted the philosophic ethos is R. Ezra's contention that investigating God is the first of the 613 commandments. In making this contention he was, in part, following Maimonides' lead, but he took the matter further. While, according to Maimonides, to fulfill the first commandment—to know that there is a First Existent—requires having a philosophically accurate conception of God, active investigation is not required. In contrast, R. Ezra is adamant that active intellectual engagement is crucial.

Maimonides was something of a trailblazer in making knowledge that there is a First Existent one of the commandments—in particular, the first positive commandment. While, as noted, he had certain precedents, this commandment is not included in the list appended to the very important code, *Halakhot Gedolot*. It is against this backdrop that I turn to Naḥmanides' analysis of Maimonides' codification of this commandment. Naḥmanides' remarks can be found in his *Hassagot* (critical comments) on Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*. Naḥmanides accepts Maimonides' view and rejects the position of *Halakhot Gedolot*.²⁴ Nevertheless, Naḥmanides concedes that the position of the latter has some merit (*yesh lo panim*), and offers a defense of it. I will suggest that this defense is telling regarding Naḥmanides' stance towards the commandment of believing in God and his view of the philosophic ethos more generally:

implies, might lessen the sense of God as something other, who must therefore be investigated. In contrast, in the case of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, for whom the gap between God and humans is preserved to a greater degree, investigating God may serve as a means of traversing the gap. The matter can also be stated in terms of how worldview might reflect ethos. Insofar as Naḥmanides did not put particular stock in investigating God, it is not surprising that he would develop a worldview according to which the human soul comes directly from God, thus obviating the need for such investigation.

Second, Halbertal shows that Naḥmanides rejects a Maimonidean understanding of prophetic vision as intellectual apprehension, while the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle uphold such a reading. See Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition*, 198–211, esp. 207–209.

²⁴ Note that while scholars have raised the question of whether the list of commandments appended to *Halakhot Gedolot* is by the same author as the body of the text (see above chapter two, n. 47), Naḥmanides assumed that it was. For the sake of convenience, therefore, in this chapter I will refer to this list as by the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*.

It appears that according to the opinion of the author of the *Halakhot* [*Gedolot*], the 613 commandments are only His decrees, may He be exalted, which He decreed upon us: either to perform or to prevent us from performing [something prohibited]. But belief in His existence, may He be exalted, of which He informed us through signs and wonders and through the revelation of the divine presence (*shekhinah*) before our eyes, is the principle (*ha-ikkar*) and the root (*veha-shoresh*) out of which all the other commandments are born. It is not included in the count [of commandments]. This is [based on the] statement of the sages: “They (i.e. the servants of a king as recounted in a parable) said to him (i.e. to the king): ‘Decree decrees upon us.’ He said to them: ‘No! Once you accept my kingship, I will decree decrees upon you [for if you do not accept my kingship, how will you keep my decrees.’ Thus God said to Israel, ‘I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before Me. (Exod. 20:2). Am I not the one whose kingship you took upon yourselves in Egypt?’ They said: ‘Yes.’ ‘Just as you accepted my kingship, accept My decrees: ‘You shall have no other gods before Me (ibid).’”²⁵ They (the Sages) made acceptance of the commandments into a matter unto itself, and the decreed commandments are related to this same matter (*me-’oto inyan*).²⁶ Furthermore, there is no distinction between this utterance (i.e. the opening of the Decalogue: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt” [Exod. 20:2], which is Maimonides’ Biblical source for the first positive commandment) and what He said, may He be exalted, regarding honest apportioning [in business transactions]: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt (Lev. 19:36). That is to say, since you accepted My kingship as a result of the exodus from Egypt, now accept My decrees.... This is the opinion of the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*, and it has some merit (*yesh lo’ panim*).²⁷

²⁵ *Mekhilta de-rabbi Yishma’el*, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 222 (*ba-hodesh*, ch. 6).

²⁶ This is the reading that appears in the MS that underlies Charles Ber Chavel’s edition. It is somewhat difficult to parse. Assuming it is correct, the implication is apparently that the acceptance of the commandments (i.e. the acceptance of God’s kingship, since such acceptance underlies and is the basis of the acceptance of the commandments) is not a commandment, but that the actual commandments themselves nevertheless derive from it. In contrast, the standard printed editions read: “They (i.e. the Sages) made the acceptance of the kingship into a matter unto itself, and the commandments decreed by Him, may He be exalted, into another matter.” See *Sefer ha-mitsvot leha-Rambam: ‘al-pi defus rishon kushta 270, ‘im hassagot ha-Ramban*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2000), 152, nn. 16–17. This reading is far clearer, although the basic intent is the same: Nahmanides’ point is to suggest that, according to the reasoning of the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*, accepting God’s kingship is not itself a commandment, but is the basis for all the commandments.

²⁷ *Sefer ha-mitsvot leha-Rambam*, ed. Chavel, 152.

Naḥmanides thus suggests that in the view of the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*, commandments require either taking an action or desisting from an action. In contrast, belief in God requires neither. It is rather a matter of accepting the fact of God's existence. This acceptance requires no action, such as, for example, using syllogistic reasoning to prove that God exists. Instead, it is a matter of accepting what is well known in any case, as a result of the miracles that God performed for the Israelites. Drawing on a parable of a king and his servants, which appears in the *Mekhilta* (a halakhic midrash on the book of *Exodus*), Naḥmanides suggests that in the view of the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*, Exod. 20:2 (the opening of the Decalogue and Maimonides' proof-text for the first positive commandment to believe in God) mentions the exodus from Egypt in order to imply that it was as a result of the miracles performed in connection with the exodus that the Israelites accepted God's kingship, and only after this acceptance could God now decree decrees. Thus, rather than proclaiming a commandment which requires an action, Exod. 20:2 merely asks that we accept the existence of God, and this acceptance sets the groundwork that allows God to enact commandments.

As the following sources will demonstrate, it seems that regarding the issue that is crucial for my purposes—the extent to which there is a commandment to actively investigate God—Naḥmanides does not disagree with the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*. He disagrees only on this point: while the author of *Halakhot Gedolot* is of the opinion (according to Naḥmanides' reading) that mere acceptance of what is already known through observing God's miracles cannot constitute a commandment, Naḥmanides thinks that it can. This emerges from Naḥmanides' comments in his *hassagah* to the fifth negative commandment, as listed by Maimonides in his *Book of the Commandments*, a commandment prohibiting idolatry:

It is proper in my eyes regarding this entire issue that we should count "I am the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:2) as a commandment, as the Rabbi (i.e. Maimonides) said. I have proof of this from the comments of the sages in the *Mekhilta*. . . and similarly they also explained there: "they said: why did the [text] say 'you shall have no other God before Me' (Exod. 20:2) if it already said 'I am the Lord your God' (ibid.) A parable of a king who entered into a kingdom. "His servants said to him, 'decree upon us decrees.' He said to them, 'No! Once you accept my kingship, I will decree upon you decrees, for if you do not accept my kingship, how will you keep my decrees.' Thus God said to Israel, 'I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before Me

(Exod. 20:2). Am I not the one whose kingship you took upon yourselves in Egypt?’ They said, ‘yes.’ ‘Just as you accepted My kingship, accept My decrees: You shall have no other gods before Me (ibid).’²⁸ ... They have thus explained many times that the utterance of “I am” is the acceptance of His kingship, that is to say, belief in God. And that which they said, “[whose kingship] you took upon yourselves in Egypt,” is intended to explain that they already believed in God in Egypt. ... And He reminded them of this belief now (i.e. at Sinai when Exod. 20:2 was stated), and they accepted it upon themselves, and said regarding it: “Yes! Yes!” This is because they believed and accepted upon themselves to uphold the belief that there is an existent God who is the God who took them out of Egypt: that is to say, that He has will (*he-hafets*), He is the Creator (*ha-mehaddesh*) and He is able (*ha-yakhol*). If so, it is clear that the first utterance [of the Decalogue] is appropriately counted as the first commandment.²⁹

In order to show that “I am the Lord your God” is a commandment, Naḥmanides employs, strikingly, the same parable, from the *Mekhilta*, of the king and his servants that he used to justify the view of the author of *Halakhot Gedolot* that this verse is *not* a commandment!³⁰ Naḥmanides is not blatantly contradicting himself. On the contrary, while he concedes that—as the parable indicates—Exod. 20:2 does not require any action, beyond merely affirming what is already known from witnessing God’s miracles, he nevertheless contends that it constitutes a commandment. That is, his disagreement with the author of *Halakhot Gedolot* is over the definition of a commandment, as something that requires performing a particular action or desisting from performing an action. Naḥmanides thinks that no particular action is required, such that even Exod. 20:2 can be deemed a commandment. Now this view may correspond to that of Maimonides (even if, more generally speaking, Naḥmanides is ambivalent about the philosophic ethos while Maimonides champions it), but it certainly does not correspond with the view of R. Ezra, who believes that the first commandment requires actively investigating God. Indeed, as we have seen, R. Ezra, unlike Maimonides or Naḥmanides, sees Deut. 4:39, rather than

²⁸ *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma’el*, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 222 (*ba-ḥodesh*, ch. 6).

²⁹ *Sefer ha-mitsvot leha-Rambam*, ed. Chavel, 260–261.

³⁰ Similarly, Naḥmanides begins his comments on the first positive commandment (prior to the passage cited above) by citing the same Rabbinic passage as proof for Maimonides’ contention that “I am the Lord your God” is a commandment. See *Sefer ha-mitsvot leha-Rambam*, ed. Chavel, 151.

Exod. 20:2, as the source of the first commandment, likely because of the more activist tone of the former verse.

Now it is certainly true that according to Naḥmanides, the first commandment requires believing certain things about God. In particular, as he explains here, one must believe that God has will, is the Creator, and has infinite ability. Yet, as in the passage considered in section two, even these beliefs are not reached through any form of active investigation, but are simply a natural corollary of witnessing God's miracles—in particular, the miracles surrounding the Exodus.

Naḥmanides expands upon the nexus between the first commandment and the beliefs it requires, on the one hand, and the Exodus, on the other, in his commentary on Exod. 20:2. He begins by explaining that “this utterance [of the Decalogue] is a positive commandment.”³¹ He proceeds to explain that the beginning of the verse, “‘I am the Lord’, instructs and commands them to know and believe that there is a God, and that He is their God—that is to say, He is eternal, all came from Him by means of [His] will and ability, and He is a God to them, Whom they must worship.”³² In Naḥmanides' view, the continuation of the verse, “who took you out of the land of Egypt,” offers evidence for these beliefs:

Their exodus from there instructs regarding His existence and will, because it is through His knowledge and providence that we left there. It also instructs regarding the creation of the world, because if the world were eternal, its nature could not change. And it instructs regarding His ability, and His ability instructs regarding His oneness, and He said: “In order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world” (Exod. 9:14). And this is the explanation of “who took you out [of the land of Egypt]”: because they are the ones who know and are the witnesses to all of these things.³³

Commenting on this last passage, Arthur Hyman notes that “while Naḥmanides uses a number of metaphysical and historical attributes describing God, one gains the impression that he inclines toward the conception of God who manifests His influence in history.”³⁴ Hyman suggests that Naḥmanides' position is comparable to that of R. Judah

³¹ *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, I, 388.

³² *Ibid.*, 388.

³³ *Ibid.*, 388.

³⁴ Hyman, “Rabbi Simlai's Saying and Beliefs Concerning God,” 55. See also Harvey, “The First Commandment and the God of History,” 212.

ha-Levi,³⁵ who (as we have seen) rejects the philosophic ethos.³⁶ In *Kuzari* 3:11, Ha-Levi presents Exod. 20:2 as one of the “commandments of the soul (*ha-torot ha-nafshiyot*).”³⁷ Hyman notes that Ha-Levi, like his predecessors R. Saadia and R. Baḥya, thinks “that there are miḥvot dealing with beliefs concerning God, but he differs from them concerning the conception of God forming the content of these beliefs.”³⁸ Whereas the former are concerned with beliefs that have metaphysical content, for Ha-Levi “in the passage under discussion³⁹ the belief required is one of God’s knowledge of particular human beings and in divine reward and punishment.”⁴⁰ Hyman compares Ha-Levi’s comments in *Kuzari* 3:11 with those in *Kuzari* 1:11–15—a passage that I partially discussed at the conclusion of chapter two—“where, arguing against the metaphysical conception of God embraced by the philosophers he states that Jews believe in a God of history who exercises individual providence as described in the Torah.”⁴¹

In fact, Hyman’s suggestion that Naḥmanides’ position is comparable to that of Ha-Levi is given explicit confirmation by Naḥmanides himself. In his sermon, “*Torat ha-Shem Temimah*,” Naḥmanides again discusses Exod. 20:2. He notes that it mentions the Exodus, because it shows that

...He is the Creator of the world who providentially watches over His creations and does good to those who follow His will and ill to those who break His will, for all of this has been clarified for you in the

³⁵ Hyman, “Rabbi Simlai’s Saying and Beliefs Concerning God,” 55.

³⁶ Ha-Levi’s influence on Naḥmanides has been noted by numerous scholars. Consider, for example, the following comment regarding Naḥmanides’ view of science: “In my opinion Naḥmanides’ views are representative of an approach towards science that has a long history in Jewish thought. Its origins may be traced to Yehudah ha-Levy’s *Cuzari*” [Y. Tzvi Langermann, “Acceptance and Devaluation: Nahmanides’ Attitude Towards Science,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (1992), 224]. My addition is that this influence does not relate only to matters of worldview, but also to those of ethos. In this context, I would note that Diana Lobel has shown Ha-Levi’s influence on Naḥmanides’ conception of *devekut* (cleaving to God). See Diana Lobel, “A Dwelling Place for the Shekhinah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 90 (1999), 103–125. See also Michael Nehorai, “Nahmanides on Miracles and Nature,” *Daat* 17 (1986), 23–31 [in Hebrew].

³⁷ Tibbon, 150.

³⁸ Hyman, “Rabbi Simlai’s Saying and Beliefs Concerning God,” 52. As noted, however, precisely speaking, R. Baḥya does not view the commandment to believe in God as one of the 613 commandments, but sees it as a commandment of the soul.

³⁹ I.e., *Kuzari* 3:11.

⁴⁰ Hyman, “Rabbi Simlai’s Saying and Beliefs Concerning God,” 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

exodus from Egypt. And this is what is written in the beginning of the Ten Commandments:⁴² “I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt” (Exod. 20:2). And Rabbi Judah ha-Levi already asked this in *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, of which he is the author, or perhaps the question was asked by the Rabbi who converted the Khazar king to Judaism, whose name was Isaac ha-Sangari:⁴³ why did [God] say “who took you out of Egypt,” and not “who created the heaven and earth and all their hosts,” in the same manner that He said, “I am the Lord who made everything, who alone stretched out the heavens and unaided spread out the earth” (Is. 44:24)—for this would have been more appropriate.⁴⁴

This question from the *Kuzari* (1:25), to which Naḥmanides refers here, is part of an extended discussion that begins in *Kuzari* 1:11—the very same discussion cited by Hyman. In this discussion, when the Khazar King asks about the nature of Jewish belief, the Rabbi notes that Jews believe in the God of the patriarchs who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. The King is surprised by this answer, and wonders why the Rabbi did not mention that he believes in the “Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in Him who created and keeps you, and such attributes, which serve as evidence for every believer, and for the sake of which he pursues justice in order to resemble the Creator in His wisdom and justice?”⁴⁵ To which the Rabbi replies “That which you express is logical and political religion, which speculation leads to, but it contains many doubts. If you ask the philosophers about this matter, you will find that they do not agree on one action or one principle, since some propositions can be established by demonstrative arguments, while others only by convincing arguments, and still others not even by convincing arguments, let alone demonstrative arguments.”⁴⁶ In contrast to the doubts raised by philosophic investigation, the Rabbi notes that he has chosen to relate historical events, which were witnessed and well known, in which God’s providence was apparent. In the continuation of the discussion, the Rabbi explains that it is precisely for this reason that God chose to evoke the

⁴² Here I am employing the variant provided by Ephraim Kupfer in “The Concluding Portion of Nahmanides’ Discourse *Torat ha-Shem Temima*,” *Tarbiz* 40 (1970–1971), 82 [in Hebrew], which is slightly different than Chavel’s edition. Chavel’s edition reads: “And this is what is written in the Commandments.”

⁴³ According to medieval legend, Isaac ha-Sangari is the Rabbi (*haver*) who was questioned by the Khazar King, as described in the *Kuzari*.

⁴⁴ “*Torat ha-Shem temimah*” in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 151.

⁴⁵ *Kuzari*, 1:12; Hirschfeld, 44–45; Touati, 9; Tibbon, 17.

⁴⁶ *Kuzari*, 1:13. Hirschfeld, 44–45; Touati, 9; Tibbon, 17–18.

Exodus in Exod. 20:2, rather than the creation of the world.⁴⁷ While Nahmanides does not supply Ha-Levi's answer to this question, the context of the discussion shows that he approves of this answer and that he himself has substantially the same point of view. Thus, in the continuation of same passage of the sermon, he explains that Exod. 20:2 also states "'who took you out [of Egypt],' to remind them that they already knew, and that it became clear to them in the exodus from Egypt, that there is a God who created the world, and He has knowledge of particulars and providence over them."⁴⁸

In keeping with Nahmanides' citation of Ha-Levi, the former does not see in Exod. 20:2 an imperative to actively investigate God, but, on the contrary, in his view, the commandment merely calls for acknowledging what God's well-known intervention in Jewish history makes apparent in any case.⁴⁹

As we saw in chapter two, R. Abraham ibn Ezra recounts that he discussed with Ha-Levi the very question of why, in Exod. 20:2, God evokes the Exodus rather than the creation of the world. From Ibn Ezra's point of view, the second part of the verse, which invokes the Exodus ("who took you out of Egypt"), is a concession to the non-philosopher who can only gain knowledge of God by observing his miraculous intervention in human history. The first part of the verse ("I am the Lord your God"), however, is directed at the elite philosophers and hints at, what is the ideal from Ibn Ezra's point of view, intellectual knowledge of God that one arrives at through philosophic investigation of the created world. Ha-Levi's analysis of Exod. 20:2 is thus a repudiation of Ibn Ezra's view and along with it of the philosophic ethos. It is striking that Nahmanides aligns himself with Ha-Levi on this score.

At the same time, I would stress that, unlike Ha-Levi, Nahmanides never overtly critiques the philosophic ethos. Indeed, as I will argue in the next section, the picture is somewhat more complicated.

⁴⁷ See *Kuzari* 1:25; Hirschfeld, 46; Touati, 10; Tibbon, 20.

⁴⁸ "Torat ha-Shem temimah," in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 152.

⁴⁹ For a related analysis see Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented*, 44–45.

IV

In contrast to what we have seen thus far, there are various places in Naḥmanides' work where he does, to a limited extent, seem to embrace the philosophic ethos. I would begin by noting that although Naḥmanides, in his commentary on the first chapter of *Sefer Yetsirah* (he apparently only wrote a commentary on this chapter), rejects certain explanations of R. Isaac's circle,⁵⁰ the commentary as a whole is very much in line with the philosophic ethos.⁵¹ Much like R. Isaac and R. Azriel's own commentaries, Naḥmanides' commentary is a work of creative exegesis intended to elucidate what this chapter of *Sefer Yetsirah* reveals about God and about the epistemological constraints on gaining knowledge of God.

Naḥmanides' commentary on the first chapter of *Sefer Yetsirah* is, however, unique in his oeuvre. Scholem suggests that he wrote this work early in his career, when he had a more open approach toward the dissemination of Kabbalistic knowledge. According to Scholem, Naḥmanides' sensibility changed later in his career. He now preferred to present Kabbalistic matters in only the most esoteric of terms.⁵² While I see no necessary correlation between esotericism and the adoption or rejection of the philosophic ethos, it does seem possible that Naḥmanides underwent a general change in his evaluation of Kabbalah, which also included a rejection of the notion that there is value in actively investigating God.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in Idel, "Naḥmanides," 24–26.

⁵¹ This work was published and discussed by Gershom Scholem in "Perusho ha-'amitti shel ha-Ramba"n le-sefer yetsirah ve-divré kabbalah aḥadim ha-mityyahasim elav," in *Studies in Kabbalah* 1, ed. Yosef ben Shelomo (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 1998), 67–111.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 72–73. In this context, I should also mention Naḥmanides' very brief "Sermon for a Wedding," which is published in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 131–138. This work is also Kabbalistic in character, although, in my estimation, its Kabbalistic ideas are presented in a somewhat more allusive and esoteric manner than those in the commentary on the first chapter of *Sefer Yetsirah*. I also do not think that it is as much of an exemplar of the philosophic ethos as the latter. While it does include a discussion of the human ability (and its limitations) to apprehend God (*ibid.*, I, 134–135), it does not display the same sort of drive that we find in the commentary on the first chapter of *Sefer Yetsirah* to gain knowledge of God. In any case, as Chavel suggests (*ibid.*, I, 131), it is also apparently an early work. Chavel derives this from the fact that, in its opening (*ibid.*, I, 133), Naḥmanides requests permission from his teachers, who were present at the assembly, to commence his discourse. As Chavel notes, we do not find a similar request in his other sermons.

Nevertheless, even in his later works, there are occasional examples where Naḥmanides adopts the philosophic ethos, to a certain limited extent. In a passage that appears in his *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* (the final section of *Torat ha-'Adam*),⁵³ he does seem to see religious value in investigating God. Indeed, he even refers to it as an obligation (*hovah*), albeit not a halakhic one. The passage, which deals with the religious problem of theodicy, comes on the heels of a discussion of the book of Job and details various exoteric possibilities of dealing with this conundrum, as well as hinting that the esoteric solution lies in the mystery of metempsychosis:

If you ask: since there is a hidden matter regarding [God's] judgment, and we have to believe in His righteousness, insofar as He is the truthful judge, may He be blessed and exalted, why would you bother us to study the explanations that we expounded, and the secret at which we hinted (i.e. metempsychosis), rather than rely on the conclusion which we will ultimately reach, that "there is no mistake and no forgetting before Him" (*M. Avot* 4:22) but, instead, all of His words are just? This is the argument of the fools, who despise wisdom,⁵⁴ because we will benefit ourselves through engaging in the aforementioned study by becoming wise men, as well as knowers of God, may He be blessed, on the basis of His actions (*ve-yod'elohim yitbarakh umi-derekh ma'asav*).⁵⁵ Furthermore, we will believe and trust in His faithfulness and in what is revealed and concealed, more than others do. For we will learn what

⁵³ My analysis of this work is based on the following edition: *Torat ha-gemul*, ed. Yehudah Aizenberg (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at haskel, 1981), 60. This edition is an eclectic one, which takes into account a number of manuscripts (including MS Paris héb 763, the earliest MS of *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, copied in 1284) as well as Charles Ber Chavel's edition, but is primarily based upon MS Munich 327, 11a-41a, a manuscript copied in 1382. Chavel's edition (in *Kitvé Ramban*, vol. 2) is also an eclectic edition, based upon printed editions and two unidentified JTS Manuscripts (presumably JTS 1207, copied in 1578 and JTS 2430, copied in 1566) and on a British Museum manuscript (presumably London—British Library Add. 26894, copied before 1405). See Chavel's remarks on p. 10 n. 5. It is clear that a critical edition of the text is a desideratum. For a partial list of MSS, see Benjamin Richler, "Manuscripts of Moses ben Naḥman's 'Torat ha-Adam,'" *Koroth* 8, no. 7-8 (1983), 265-267 and the Hebrew version of the study ("*Kitvé ha-yad shel sefer torat ha-'adam le-Ramba*") on pp. 217-218 of the same journal. On p. 267 of the English version of his study, and on p. 218 of the Hebrew version, Richler identifies MS JTS 1207 as one of the manuscripts used by Chavel.

⁵⁴ As David Berger notes ("Miracles and the Natural Order in Naḥmanides," 110-111, n. 15), while the ultimate source of the phrase "fools who despise wisdom" is Prov. 1:22, its proximate source may be a similar discussion in R. Saadia's *Book Of Beliefs and Opinions*, 1:3 (Rosenblatt, 13; Tibbon 41).

⁵⁵ Chavel's edition (p. 281) reads "knowers of God, may He be blessed, on the basis of God's ways and His actions" (*ve-yod'elohim yitbarakh mi-derekh ha-'el umi-ma'asav*). On the different editions, see above n. 53.

is hidden from what is revealed (*nilmad satum me-meforash*) so that we will know the righteousness of [the divine] ruling and the justice [of the divine] judgment. Thus, it is the obligation (*hovat*) of every creature who worships out of love and fear to seek out in his thought (*latur be-da'to*) to justify [divine] judgment and show the correctness of the [divine] ruling, insofar as he is able. [This justification should be derived from] the approaches of the sages that we explicated, so that his mind will be satisfied regarding this matter. And the judgment of his Creator will appear to him as correct, in the same manner that he exculpates that which he is able to apprehend (i.e. other matters not related to theodicy). And he will recognize the justice in that which is hidden from him (i.e. theodicy).⁵⁶ All the more so the aforementioned esoteric explanation will not leave a question in the heart of man, and no remotely meaningful objections will remain for him. If he wants to suffice with this explanation, he is permitted to do so, since the explanations [mentioned in Rabbinic writings] are not sufficient [for understanding] all [of God's] governance of the creatures (*mi-pené she-'en ha-te'anut maspikot le-kol hanhagat ha-beru'im*).⁵⁸

Naḥmanides is emphatic that it is not sufficient to simply dismiss the problem of theodicy by arguing that since God is perfect, there must be sense to His actions even if this sense is inscrutable. Instead, the matter must be investigated on the basis of Rabbinic pronouncements on the matter, which will allow the investigators to become “knowers of God, may He be blessed, on the basis of His actions,” and not “fools, who despise wisdom.” Here, there is no doubt that Naḥmanides is espousing something of the philosophic ideal of investigating God. The idea of knowing God “on the basis of His actions” particularly

⁵⁶ My admittedly tentative translation of these two sentences is based on the text provided in Aizenberg's edition, which, in this case, as he notes, follows the version in MS Paris héb 763. As noted above (n. 53), MS Paris héb 763, which was copied in 1284 is the oldest manuscript of *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*. See Richler, “Manuscripts of Moses ben Naḥman's ‘Torat ha-Adam,’” 266, and the Hebrew version of the study, 217. The underlying Hebrew reads “*ve-yit'ammot elav din bore'o ke-matsdik mah she-yassig ve-yakkir ha-din be-mah she-hu' ne'elam mi-mennu*” (p. 30). Chavel's edition (p. 281), which is somewhat easier to parse, reads: “And the judgment of his Creator will appear to him as correct. In the same manner that he exculpates that which he recognizes and knows, he will also recognize the justice and the righteousness in that which is hidden from him (i.e. theodicy) (“*ve-yit'ammot elav din bore'o ke-matsdik mah she-yakkir ve-yeda' yakkir ha-din veva-tsedek be-mah she-hu' ne'elam mi-mennu*”).

⁵⁷ Chavel's edition (p. 281) reads: “since these are sufficient explanations [for understanding] all [of God's] governance of the creatures” (*mi-pené she-hem te'anut maspikot le-kol hanhagat ha-beru'im*). For the significance of this variant see below n. 59.

⁵⁸ Naḥmanides, *Torat ha-gemul*, 30. Cf. *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 281.

resonates with the contention found repeatedly in the newly available philosophic literature, that God can be studied through investigating His attributes of action, which reveal His governance. Furthermore, the notion of learning “what is hidden from what is revealed” implies an activist stance towards the investigation.

At the same time, however, Nahmanides is not advocating investigating God as an independent value. His concern here, rather, is very much allied to the concern that is found in various other places in his work: the need to affirm God’s active providential role. I would suggest that what drives the need to investigate God’s behavior, when it comes to the problem of bad things befalling the righteous and good things befalling the wicked, is the fact that this state of affairs seems to challenge the notion of God’s providence. It would seem that for this reason alone, Nahmanides advocates active investigation. Thus, his remarks in this instance should not be regarded as generalizable. They are only meant to apply in a specific case in which God’s providential role is called into question.⁵⁹

Nahmanides also seems to embrace the philosophic ethos, to a limited extent, in his well-known letter to the northern French Rabbis, which he wrote during the Maimonidean controversy. In this letter, he plays the role of peacemaker and asks the French Rabbis to at least partially rescind their ban of Maimonides’ works.⁶⁰ In the course of the letter, he notes that one basis of the French Rabbis’ objection to Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Madda*‘ is its affirmation of the incorporeality

⁵⁹ I would also note that at the end of the above comments, Nahmanides apparently lessens the sense that it is necessary to investigate God to solve the problem of the theodicy. He states: “If [however] he wants to suffice with this explanation, he is permitted to do so, since the explanations [mentioned in Rabbinic writings] are not sufficient [for understanding] all [of God’s] governance of the creatures.” If this is the correct version of Nahmanides’ text, he is suggesting here that it is acceptable for one to merely rely on the esoteric explanation, which is only known through a received tradition, instead of studying various explanations for the problem of theodicy. This is the case because any other explanation cannot really give a full accounting of God’s providence. If, however, Chavel’s edition (see n. 57) is correct, the meaning of Nahmanides’ statement is reversed. In this case, Nahmanides’ point is that one may rely on examining Rabbinic explanations because these explanations are sufficient, and there is no need to turn to the esoteric meaning.

⁶⁰ See the analysis in David Berger, “How did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?” in *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, eds. Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 135–146.

of God.⁶¹ To bolster his contention that the incorporeality of God is a strong Jewish belief and that the concern of the French Rabbis is baseless, he approvingly cites a number of passages from R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer Sha'aré ha-Yiḥud veba-'Emunah* (*The Book of the Gates of Unity and Faith*), including the following one:

The bounds of the heavens, lands, and seas do not circumscribe Him, nor do they deduct from Him. Thus, it is said, "Therefore you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God" (Is. 43:12), [which means] you should know [these principles] by means of the intellect and the knowledge of your heart (*teda' be-sekhel madda' libbekha*). You should know (*ve-teda'*) and discern (*ve-taskil*) that the Creator of the world has no bounds, limits, end, or acquisition. [He has] no standing, no sitting, no walking, no ascending, no descending, and no motion.⁶²

Here, the knowledge of God referred to does not merely amount to an awareness of God's existence, as in some of the other texts we have considered. On the contrary, this passage is unequivocal that there is an imperative to actively investigate God. As we saw in chapter two, R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer Sha'aré ha-Yiḥud veba-'Emunah* also contains other strong statements about the value of investigating God, even though Naḥmanides does not cite them.

In a broader sense, Naḥmanides' letter is an act of cultural translation. It is an attempt to show the northern French Rabbis the deep roots that a certain philosophic kind of culture had in Languedoc and Catalonia.⁶³ His citation of R. Eleazar's work is apparently meant to demonstrate not only the acceptability of a of God, but also of this philosophic culture more generally, by showing that it is espoused by a figure closer to the cultural sphere of the French Rabbis.

⁶¹ See Joseph Perles, "Nachträge über R. Moses ben Nachmann," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 9 (1860), 190–191. Cf. *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 345.

⁶² My translation is based on Nahmanides, *Ramban (Nahmanides) Writings and Discourses*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel, (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1978), II, 403–404, with some emendations partially based on the original Hebrew as published by Perles in "Nachträge über R. Moses ben Nachmann," 192. For his translation, Chavel relied on the inferior version that he published in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 347. Cf. Dan, "*Sefer sha'aré ha-yiḥud veba-'emunah' le R. El'azar me-vurms*," 153.

⁶³ See Bernard Septimus, "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Naḥmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 24–25.

Part of this philosophic culture, as I have been arguing here, involved the commitment to the value of investigating God. Still, it must be cautioned that Naḥmanides does not make the statement himself, but only through citing the work of another. Furthermore the polemical thrust of the letter must be taken into account. When dealing with the northern French Rabbis, who were quite removed from philosophic culture, Naḥmanides may have felt more compelled to defend a cultural ideal that he himself did not fully espouse.

I would note that several other passages, which contain sentiments related to the philosophic ethos, also bear consideration.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ First, in *Ma'amar 'al Penimiyyut ha-Torah*, a short work attributed to Naḥmanides, there is a statement that resonates with the philosophic ethos. This statement extols the value of gaining knowledge of God. It offers the following exegesis of Prov. 2:5 ("Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God"): "At first, if you understand the path of fear (=the sefirah of *shekhinah*), which is along the path of the emanation... thereafter you will ultimately understand the way of its varying levels, which are the secrets of the concealed matters and the mysterious matters... and he (=Solomon) said: "And attain knowledge of God" (Scholem, "*Perusho ha-'amitti shel ha-Ramba'n le-sefer yetsirah ve-divré kabbalah aḥadim ha-mityyaḥasim elav*," 67–111). Early in his career, Scholem tended to accept the attribution of this work to Naḥmanides (see *ibid.*, 78–89), but later on he was more guarded. In a note that Scholem added by hand to the original version of his article on Naḥmanides' Kabbalistic writings, and which was subsequently appended to the article when it was reprinted, he notes that Ephraim Gottlieb argued in *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, ed. Joseph Hacker [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, 1976), 128–131 that *Ma'amar 'al Penimiyyut ha-Torah* is, in fact, by R. Joseph Gikatilla. Regarding Gottlieb's contention, Scholem simply writes "maybe." See Scholem, "*Perusho ha-'amitti shel ha-Ramba'n le-sefer yetsirah ve-divré kabbalah aḥadim ha-mityyaḥasim elav*," 109, n. 21. See also Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 109, n. 21. If Gottlieb is correct (and I find his argument convincing), then we may exclude this work from our discussion.

Second, Naḥmanides' account of the Messiah in his comments on Is. 52:13–53:12 (*Kitvé Ramban*, ed. Chavel, I, 322–327) may also be connected to the philosophic ethos. On the basis of Is. 52:13 ("Indeed, my servant will understand (*yaskil*); he shall be exalted and raised up and very high"), the Messiah is described as having even greater knowledge of God than Moses. Furthermore, he is "exalted" in his intellect, with which he understands (*yaskil*) God, may He be blessed, in a great manner. 'And raised up and very high' in knowledge of His name, may He be blessed, more than any prior creations." (p. 323) He is also described "as recounting to them [to the Jews in his generation] and informing them of the ways (*derakhé*) of God, may He be blessed" (p. 324), and as teaching the "nations to understand (*le haskil*) and know God" (p. 325). The Messiah is one who has detailed theosophic knowledge, at least some of which he will transmit to the Jews of his generation. However, as I noted in n. 8, I am not sure whether he will also transmit such information to the non-Jewish nations or will merely persuade them of God's existence and governance. Regardless, there is no indication that the Messiah will arrive at his knowledge of God through investigation, nor that he will encourage others to engage in such investigation.

Thus, in the final analysis, it is true that several passages in his work seem to lend support to the notion that there is value in investigating God. He does not, however, present this value as a centerpiece of an entire way of life, in the manner found in the philosophic material and in the literature of R. Isaac's circle. For instance, it has no bearing on worshipping God or loving God. On the contrary, it is only applicable in limited circumstances. Thus while Naḥmanides did not regard investigating God as an act that bears significant religious importance, he did not entirely reject it. His stance, therefore, should be characterized as one of ambivalence rather than one of outright rejection.

V

It seems to me that Naḥmanides' ambivalent attitude towards the philosophic ethos is related to his stance on innovation. To understand this relationship, we must consider his views on innovation more closely. As noted, Idel, and in his footsteps Halbertal, have contended that Naḥmanides saw Kabbalah as an essentially closed system of knowledge, which could merely be transmitted as it was received, but not developed or elaborated.⁶⁵ This is clearly the case at the rhetorical level, even if he may have been more innovative vis a vis his received traditions than his pronouncements suggest.

A number of such pronouncements can be found in his work. I will suffice with citing just two. In his introduction to the book of Genesis, in his *Torah Commentary*, in the course of referring to the cryptic allusions to Kabbalistic secrets that he often includes in his *Commentary*, Naḥmanides makes the following statement:

Finally, a number of statements in a poem (*Kitvé Ramban*, I, 433–434), based on the thirteen divine attributes mentioned in Exod. 34:6–7, are worth considering. I will list the relevant statements: “In You are all my ruminations (*ma’yanaï*)”; “Your unity is tied together in my thoughts (*keshurah be-ra’yonaï*)”; “in knowledge of Your ways (*be-da’at derakhekha*), I found consolation.” While these statements can be read as extolling the value of investigating God, they can also be understood as merely affirming the need to be aware of God and His governance.

⁶⁵ See Idel, “We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” 51–74; Idel, “Naḥmanides,” 15–96; Idel, “Leadership and Charisma: Maimonides, Naḥmanides and Abraham Abulafia,” *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 1 (2008), 12–15. See also Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, 297–333; Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 69–92.

[One should not] offer a logical conjecture (*le-val yisbor sevarah*), nor think thoughts about any aspect of the hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah. Because I trustworthily inform him that my words will not be apprehended, and they will not become known at all through the use of any intellectual means or through understanding (*be-shum sekhel u-vinah*), save from [what is spoken] by the mouth of a wise Kabbalist to the ear of a Kabbalist who understands. And logical conjecture (*sevarah*) regarding them is folly—a deceptive thought causing great damage, without benefit.⁶⁶

Nahmanides here implicitly critiques Maimonidean philosophers who used human reason to try to uncover the secrets of the account of the chariot and the account of creation. The critique, however, could also apply to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.⁶⁷ Idel notes that the distinction between "logical conjecture" (*sevara*) and received tradition that Nahmanides makes here is influenced by Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*⁶⁸—another example of Nahmanides' indebtedness to Ha-Levi. In particular, Idel singles out a passage in the *Kuzari* that contains a critique of the Karaites for relying on "*sevara*" rather than received tradition (*kabbalah*)—even though, of course, Ha-Levi did not intend Kabbalistic tradition. In Ha-Levi's words, as translated by R. Judah ibn Tibbon: "the opinion of the [Rabbinic] sages is based on the tradition (*ha-kabbalah*) [received] from the prophets, whereas [the opinion] of these [=the Karaites] is based on logical conjecture (*sevara*) alone."⁶⁹ If Idel is correct, we can point to an interesting symmetry. Earlier we saw that the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle adopted the philosophic reading of I Chron. 28:9, "Know the God of your father, and serve Him with single heart," according to which gaining knowledge of God must precede worship. We noted that in so doing, they ignore and implicitly reject Ha-Levi's claim that this interpretation is a Karaite one and must be avoided. Here, in contrast, Nahmanides accepts Ha-Levi's critique of the Karaites, and employs it in his own critique of deriving esoteric knowledge through the use of human reasoning—something that the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle did quite freely.

Consider as well the following statement that Nahmanides makes with regard to the issue of theodicy—surprisingly, the very issue, regarding

⁶⁶ *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Nahman*, I, 7 (introduction to the book of Genesis).

⁶⁷ Cf. Idel, "Nahmanides," 58–59.

⁶⁸ Idel, "We Have no Kabbalistic Tradition on This," 59, n. 33.

⁶⁹ *Kuzari*, 3:38 (Tibbon, 180).

which (as we have seen above) Naḥmanides partially embraces the philosophic ethos:

In truth, there is a great secret regarding this issue, from amongst the secrets of the Torah. They cannot be apprehended (*lo' yassigem*) by the understanding of a thinker, but only by one who merits them, who learns from the mouth of a teacher, extending back to Moses, our Rabbi, peace be upon him, [who learned them] from the mouth of God, may He be Blessed.⁷⁰

The secret to which Naḥmanides refers, as seen earlier, is that of metempsychosis. But as his use of the plural (“they cannot be apprehended”) suggests, his larger point is that Kabbalistic wisdom, in general, is not open to human reason.

Yet, as Elliot Wolfson and Haviva Pedaya have detailed, despite such pronouncements, Naḥmanides’ work was indeed innovative. Wolfson, for example, has shown that Naḥmanides’ innovation can be seen in his attempt to piece together Kabbalistic traditions, Rabbinic passages interpreted through a Kabbalistic lens, and *Sefer ha-Bahir*.⁷¹ Pedaya, for her part, has stressed, among other things, that Naḥmanides’ innovation lies in the fact that he took a body of oral traditions not necessarily linked to Biblical verses and applied them to Biblical verses as he carried out his exegetical enterprise—an activity that, of necessity, produced innovation.⁷²

We are, then, left with a gap between Naḥmanides’ conservative rhetoric and his actual practice that requires explanation. I have argued that Naḥmanides’ attitude toward the philosophic ethos was one of ambivalence rather than outright rejection. Perhaps this gap is a sign that his attitude toward innovation was similarly one of ambivalence rather than outright rejection. I have suggested that the embrace of the philosophic ethos by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac’s circle spurred their creative enterprise. Conversely, I would suggest that Naḥmanides’ ambivalent attitude toward the ethos was correlated to his ambivalent attitude toward innovation.

⁷⁰ *Commentary on Job*, in *Kitvé Ramban*, I, 23.

⁷¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Naḥmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic,” *AJS Review* 14 (1989), 154–178.

⁷² Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text*, 59–77, 120–205, esp. 173–178, 191–193. For further discussion of innovation in Naḥmanides, see Yahalom, “Kabbalah (as Received Tradition) and Innovation in the Writings of Nahmanides and Related Scholarship: The Cases of the Joints of the Sinews and the ‘Killer Wife,’” 201–231.

I would add that the particular form that Naḥmanides' innovation took, when viewed in comparison to the form it took in the case of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, accords well with his ambivalent attitude to the philosophic ethos. There is perhaps a case to be made that however significant Naḥmanides' innovation was, it lacked the depth of innovation that we find in the works of most of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle. In the case of R. Ezra, however, who, as we have seen in chapter one, does adopt a rhetoric of conservatism somewhat closer to that of Naḥmanides, the distinction in terms of depth of innovation may not be as pronounced. After all, like Naḥmanides, his innovation is characterized by an engagement with Rabbinic materials and an attempt to employ Kabbalistic principles in a new exegetical context.⁷³ Moreover, there are no clear criteria according to which the extent of a particular figure's innovation may be measured. At best, we are left with impressionistic observations. I would thus draw the distinction between the nature of innovation reflected in the works of R. Isaac's circle and in those of Naḥmanides along other lines.

⁷³ In this regard, it is also interesting to note that in *Perushé ha-torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, II, 121 (Lev. 19:19), Naḥmanides refers to R. Ezra as "one of our companions." [On this reference, see Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and its Branches*, 7; *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 474, n. 11; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 368.] Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Naḥmanides was skeptical of R. Ezra's Kabbalistic work. As we have seen in chapter one (near n. 92), in Naḥmanides' *Commentary on Job*, he cites a Kabbalistic explanation of Job 28, in the name of "the masters of Kabbalah," (*ba'alé ha-kabbalah*), which is, in fact, borrowed from the introduction to R. Ezra's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. As we have also seen in chapter one (near n. 87), in that introduction R. Ezra offers an extended exegesis of this chapter. He introduces his exegesis by explaining that it "comes to inform you briefly concerning the principles of Kabbalah inherent in these verses, which serve as the pillar upon which all things rely, the peg upon which they hang" (Brody, 32; Chavel, 481). Similarly, in one of his letters to R. Abraham, he describes Job 28 as a chapter in which "all of Kabbalah is explained, from its beginning to its end" (Scholem, "*Te'udah ḥadashah le-toldot re'shit ha-kabbalah*," 26). As noted in chapter one (near n. 91), it is of significance that despite the importance that R. Ezra accords to his exegesis of Job 28, he relies heavily on the work of R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya in this interpretation—although interestingly (and perhaps intentionally), Naḥmanides omits the sections that draw on Bar Ḥiyya. In other words, R. Ezra's commentary on Job 28 is a prime example of innovative Kabbalah. Therefore, it is notable that Naḥmanides writes, upon concluding his citation of R. Ezra's commentary: "These words, in and of themselves, are praiseworthy and laudable, but we do not know if the text (lit. the matter) can support this interpretation; but if it is a tradition (*kabbalah*) we will accept it (*nekabbel*)" (*Commentary on Job*, in *Kitvé Ramban*, ed. Chavel, 1, 90). Naḥmanides' comments must be considered closely. He is careful not to critique the Kabbalistic ideas that R. Ezra discusses in his *Commentary* on Job 28. He questions only their application to a new context, where, apparently they were not native. Here, then, we find that Naḥmanides takes a skeptical attitude towards R. Ezra's innovative stance.

The innovation of the members of R. Isaac's circle, as we have seen, was programmatic in nature. It involved reading complete works—such as the Song of Songs, *Sefer Yetsirah*, or the liturgy—in a Kabbalistic key. It also involved writing systematic treatises that brought together Kabbalistic ideas with various other intellectual trends, such as R. Asher's *Sefer ha-Yihud* or the works of R. Jacob. In contrast, Naḥmanides' innovative efforts were not so comprehensive. He did not comment on complete works but on a relatively limited number of Biblical verses and aggadic passages. Nor did he compose systematic Kabbalistic treatises.

Two key characteristics of the philosophic ethos are that investigating God has a central role in defining what it means to live as a Jew and that the investigation cannot be pursued in a haphazard way but must be part of a considered program of study. Thus it is not surprising that, in the service of gaining knowledge of God, the creative efforts of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle were thoroughgoing and systematic. By the same token, it is to be expected that Naḥmanides, who did not unambiguously argue for the religious value of investigating God and did not pursue an active program of investigation, would take a narrower approach to innovation.

VI

In the final analysis Naḥmanides' ambivalence towards the philosophic ethos sets its embrace by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle in sharper relief. There was nothing inevitable about their adoption of this ethos. It is not that they were unsuspecting players, caught in the tides of cultural change. On the contrary, they had options from which to choose. Naḥmanides chose (to a certain extent) the path of the one work of newly translated literature that rejected the philosophic ethos, Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*. In contrast, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle implicitly rejected this work and chose the path of the vast majority of texts of the newly available literature and its exponents. Once again, from the perspective of ethos, the lines that separate different groups of thinkers must be drawn otherwise than how they usually are. If it might typically be assumed that all Kabbalists of the first half of the thirteenth century should be grouped in opposition to philosophers, the study of ethos suggests that the matter is far more complex.

CONCLUSION

I

In the concluding pages of this book, I will argue that the philosophic ethos not only propelled the emergence of Kabbalah, but also was instrumental in forging the scholarly type of its first exponents. The Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle are notable for the fact that their scholarship focused entirely on matters of Kabbalah and not on the traditional fields of Talmud and Jewish law. It seems to me that the philosophic ethos gave legitimacy to this scholarly type.

R. Judah ben Joseph Alfakar, a leading member of the anti-Maimonidean camp during the Maimonidean controversy, claims, in the context of an exchange of letters with the Maimonidean supporter, R. David Kimḥi, that the Maimonideans “cajoled many with blandishments to set aside the discussions of Abbayé and Raba, and to strive [instead] to ascend to the chariot.”¹ “The discussions of Abbayé and Raba”—two Talmudic sages—is a reference to legalistic Talmudic study. “Ascending to the chariot” is a reference to the study of Aristotelian metaphysics, which Maimonides identified with the traditional esoteric topic of “the account of the chariot.” Therefore, R. Judah's critique of the Maimonideans is that they abandon the study of Talmud for the study of divine science.

To a certain extent, it seems to me that the critique leveled by Alfakar, who was not a Kabbalist, but a philosophically educated anti-rationalist, “who rejected not the permissibility, but the primacy of philosophical study,”² could also be applied to the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, even though this was not his intent.

This takes us to another aspect of R. Isaac's circle. A corollary of the adoption of the value of investigating God was a lessening of the centrality of traditional Jewish study. While members of this circle surely had knowledge of traditional subjects, and there is no reason

¹ “*Iggrot kanna'ut*,” in *Kovets teshuvot ha-Rambam ve-'iggrotav*, ed. Abraham ben Aryeh Lichtenberg (Leipzig: H.L. Shnui, 1859), 4b. Cf. 2c.

² Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah*, 92.

to think that they were antagonistic to halakhic study, their scholarly efforts were apparently primarily devoted to the study of Kabbalah, which they viewed as the “account of the chariot.”

As seen, R. Isaac’s forebears, including his father, R. Abraham, and his grandfather, R. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, transmitted esoteric traditions. However, their primary scholarly activity centered on Talmudic study. R. Isaac chose a different path. We only definitively know that he composed two documents. On the other hand, there are numerous teachings preserved in his name, which may have been recorded by other Kabbalists.³ These teachings are all Kabbalistic in character. Of the two documents that he did author, one is obviously Kabbalistic. I refer to a short letter written to his Catalonian counterparts, R. Jonah Gerondi and Naḥmanides, which deals with the need to preserve the esotericism of Kabbalistic traditions and offers a Kabbalistic exegesis of Ps. 150.⁴ The second document is not self-evidently Kabbalistic. It is another letter, which deals with a halakhic matter: the appropriate ending of one of the blessings of the *Shemoneh ‘Esreh* prayer.⁵ This letter, which quotes extensively from halakhic sources, demonstrates that R. Isaac was well versed in halakhic literature, as we would expect from the son of R. Abraham. For my purposes, however, the crucial point is that although the letter does not make the matter explicit, it is apparent that he chose to write it for Kabbalistic reasons.⁶ That is to say, his pursuit of this halakhic issue was in the service of Kabbalah. In general terms, then, his knowledge of Jewish law

³ See introduction, n. 9.

⁴ Printed in Scholem, “*Te’udah ḥadashah le-toldot re’shit ha-kabbalah*,” 7–39.

⁵ R. Isaac argued that the blessing regarding Jerusalem in the *Shemoneh ‘Esreh* prayer should conclude, “God of David and builder of Jerusalem,” instead of the more usual “builder of Jerusalem.” The text is printed in Shraga Abramson, *‘Inyanut be-sifrut ha-Ge’onim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1974), 150–155. R. Isaac’s view on the matter is noted by the Kabbalists in his circle. See Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadah*, 83 and the material presented, there, n. 5; Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer ha-’emunah veba-bittahon*, in *Kitvé Ramban*, II, 396.

⁶ R. Isaac saw “David” (see the previous note) as a reference to the tenth *sefirah*, *Shekhinah*. For a full elaboration see Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, 17–20; Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 148–177, esp. 164–169. It is also relevant to remark that, according to Scholem, R. Isaac’s letter “is in fact full of kabbalistic allusions” (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, 254). However, this point is not readily apparent, and unfortunately, Scholem did not elaborate on it.

notwithstanding, he served, as Scholem already noted,⁷ as an authority on Kabbalah and not on legal matters.

Unlike R. Isaac, the other members of his circle produced numerous Kabbalistic works. Like their teacher, however, their scholarly efforts were focused on Kabbalah and not on matters of Talmud and Jewish law. We are aware of no works composed by R. Isaac's students concerned with any topic other than Kabbalah.⁸

In this regard, the first Kabbalists are similar to the first Jewish philosophers active in Christian lands, who devoted their primary scholarly efforts to the study and propagation of philosophy. Here the most significant examples are all members of a single family—the Tibbon family—including R. Judah, his son R. Samuel, Samuel's son, R. Moses, R. Moses' brother-in-law, R. Jacob Anatoli, and R. Moses' nephew, R. Jacob ben Makhir.⁹ While R. Judah himself was eclectic in his philosophic interests, his descendents were committed, roughly speaking, to a Maimonidean brand of philosophy and, as such, can be regarded as part of a single philosophic stream. In any case, like their counterparts in R. Isaac's circle, these figures, who were instrumental

⁷ *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 254. Cf. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, 17. Here I would note that Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind*, 57–59, has looked to lessen the impression that one may get from Scholem and Katz that R. Isaac was not “a man of halakhah.” In reference to his letter on the appropriate ending of one of the blessings of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* prayer, referred to above, she points out that it is unlikely that R. Isaac decided on his own to change the wording of the blessing for Kabbalistic reasons and then, after the fact, looked for precedents in earlier material to justify his change. On the contrary, Pedaya argues, it may be the case that he inherited this particular wording from his forefathers. From her perspective, therefore, R. Isaac was not trying to impose an innovation based on Kabbalistic ideas, but rather offer a halakhic justification for a received tradition which, given its Kabbalistic significance, is of special importance to him. According to her, then, R. Isaac should not be viewed as pursuing a radical Kabbalistic agenda at the expense of the traditional halakhic process. I fully agree with Pedaya's observations. I am certainly not claiming that there is any deep antagonism between the theoretical underpinning of R. Isaac's scholarly type—at least in its early stages—and the notion that the study of halakhah is significant. It is quite possible that R. Isaac spent a considerable portion of his time engaged in “mundane” Talmudic study. My point is only that R. Isaac's authority involved matters of Kabbalah and that in the one place where he does make a written pronouncement on a matter of halakhah—the above mentioned letter—he has good Kabbalistic reasons for doing so.

⁸ While, as discussed, R. Ezra included an excursus on the commandments in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, the purpose of this excursus is to offer Kabbalistic interpretations of the commandments and not to deal with the intricacies of Jewish law.

⁹ On these figures, see Robinson, “The Ibn Tibbon Family,” 193–224.

in spreading the philosophic ethos in Languedoc, did not compose halakhic works.

Although, in all likelihood, they, like the Kabbalists, were well trained in the traditional fields of Talmud and Jewish law, they functioned as scholars of philosophy, and not as scholars of traditional fields, just as the Kabbalists functioned as scholars of Kabbalah and not of traditional fields. I am not the first to recognize this common trait. Idel already noted it with regard to the figures that I am interested in here.¹⁰ Other scholars, such as Isadore Twersky, have explored this trait as it has played out throughout Jewish intellectual history.¹¹ In an important study, Jacob Katz offered a partial explanation for it. As Katz puts it, from the perspective of philosophers and Kabbalists, “Why deal with the expression of the Creator’s will (= Jewish law) when the path is open to come into contact, whether through understanding or experience, with the Creator Himself?”¹² In other words, from the point of view of both philosophers and Kabbalists, the study of Jewish law, which merely deals with ascertaining God’s will, pales in comparison to the study of either philosophy or Kabbalah, each of which takes investigating God as a central task. If, in fact, the study of God was viewed as a high ideal by both philosophers and Kabbalists, it is not difficult to see why they would primarily devote their scholarship to these ends.

¹⁰ Idel, “Nahmanides,” 76, 84.

¹¹ Isadore Twersky, “Religion and Law,” in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), 69–82; Twersky, “Talmudists, Philosophers, Kabbalists: The Quest for Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Cooperman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 431–459 and Twersky, “Law and Spirituality in the Seventeenth Century: A Case Study in R. Yair Hayyim Bacharach,” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 447–467. Various other studies also deal with this trait. Jacob Katz discusses it in both Kabbalists and philosophers in Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, 17–20, 70–101. Aviezer Ravitsky has discussed this trait among philosophers of the Maimonidean school, throughout his work. See, most recently, Aviezer Ravitsky, *Maimonidean Essays: Society, Philosophy and Nature in Maimonides and his Disciples* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing House, 2006), 40–58. See also Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 50–79 109–151; Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 101–124.

¹² Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, 76.

The philosophic ethos thus led not only to the formation of new discourses, but also to the emergence of two scholarly types in Languedoc and Catalonia: the Jewish philosopher, who devoted his energy primarily to the study of philosophy, a type that had existed in the Islamic domain, but was new in Christian lands; and the Kabbalist, who devoted his energy primarily to the study of Kabbalah, an entirely new type. Indeed, to properly assess the emergence of these discourses, it is crucial to understand this fact.

In Hava Tirosh-Samuelsón's study of happiness in pre-modern Jewish thought, she remarks regarding the elitism among Jewish philosophers in the Islamic milieu: "This elitism was not new in Judaism, since the Judaism of the rabbis itself was the product of what a small intellectual elite imposed on all Jews. The philosophers, however, changed the focus of rabbinic elitism when they shifted the emphasis from mastery of halakhic tradition to mastery of philosophy and its related sciences. To be good Jews, all had to aspire to become good philosophers who *know* God appropriately."¹³ As Tirosh-Samuelsón points out, these scholars, in effect, embraced the Aristotelian preference, at least according to one reading of Aristotle, of theoretical wisdom over practical wisdom.¹⁴ This model was transferred to Languedoc by figures like R. Judah ibn Tibbon.¹⁵ Moreover, my claim here is that it was also effectively embraced by the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.

¹³ Hava Tirosh-Samuelsón, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003), 190.

¹⁴ Tirosh-Samuelsón provides an excellent overview of the differing interpretations of Aristotle, regarding this question, in *ibid.*, 9–54.

¹⁵ In this regard, it is interesting to briefly highlight R. Samuel's critique of Maimonides' comments in *Guide* 3:54. Maimonides, in this chapter of the *Guide*, seems on the one hand to maintain that philosophic contemplation of God is the ultimate human perfection—a position he bases on the beginning of Jer. 9:23, "But only in this should one glory, that he understands and knows Me." On the other hand, at the end of the chapter, he seems to back away from this assessment. Seizing on the divine attributes of "kindness," "justice," and "equity" mentioned at the end of the verse ("For I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world: for in these I delight"), he suggests that after contemplation, one must turn to virtuous behavior, in a sort of *imitatio Dei*. Scholars have struggled with this ambiguity in Maimonides' work and have debated whether or not Maimonides in the final analysis saw practical wisdom as taking precedence over intellectual perfection. [See, e.g., Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," 97–100; the studies collected in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990; Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990)] Maimonides' true opinion is not my concern here—although, needless to say, even if Maimonides feels that the former is the higher

In the final analysis, then, the philosophic ethos had not only an important role in forging the discourse of Kabbalah, but also in the development of a particular type of Kabbalist—two mutually reinforcing phenomena. This is not the only type of Kabbalist who would help shape the history of Kabbalah. Kabbalists, such as Nahmanides, who were leading figures in the study of Jewish law, also had significant roles. Yet, the history of Kabbalah is inconceivable without the scholarly type of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle.

II

Accounting for the emergence of Kabbalah requires accounting for the vastly innovative endeavor of the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle, who developed, expanded, and systematized their received traditions, and in so doing forged a new religious discourse. I have argued here that a partial explanation for this phenomenon lies in these Kabbalists' adoption of a philosophic ethos, which had penetrated their locales, Languedoc and Catalonia, as a result of a cultural transfer, initially spearheaded by Jewish émigrés from Islamic lands. This was an ethos in which the investigation of God was a key value, and it was only natural, therefore, that under its influence, these Kabbalists would undertake their creative efforts. In examining Kabbalah through the lens of ethos, my study differs from many previous studies, which have focused on worldview.

Various ramifications emerge from this shifting of focus from worldview to ethos. Historically speaking, it leads to the conclusion, contra

value, the regard with which he holds the latter is not in question. For my purposes, however, it is of interest that R. Samuel, in his brief introduction to his translation of Maimonides' Commentary on *Mishnah Avot*, does assume that Maimonides gives a certain priority to virtuous behavior and is perturbed by this fact. Ibn Tibbon clearly finds this backing away from intellectual perfection, as the ultimate perfection, problematic, and he offers an alternative reading of Jer. 9:23, which affirms the superiority of intellectual perfection. I would suggest that this move is not surprising, because it is in keeping with the model of scholarship that R. Samuel adopted: one that focuses on the study of philosophy. See Kellner, "Maimonides and Samuel ibn Tibbon on Jeremiah 9:22–23 and Human Perfection," 49–57. For more on this issue, see Ravitsky, *Maimonidean Essays: Society, Philosophy and Nature in Maimonides and his Disciples*, 40–58; *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man*, 76–111; Fraenkel, "Beyond the Faithful Disciple," 47–53. Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon*, 207–208.

Scholem, that there is a causal relationship between the emergence of Kabbalah and the emergence of a Hebrew philosophic tradition in the same locale at around the same time. Yet the nature of this relationship turns out to be quite complex. It is no doubt the case that the emergence of this tradition—and particularly of Maimonidean thought, as Idel has argued—served as a negative catalyst for the emergence of Kabbalah, a fact that comes into view, for example, as a result of the investigation of the work of R. Ezra undertaken in chapter one. Yet, at the same time—and this is the point that must be highlighted—it served as a positive catalyst insofar as it spread the philosophic ethos that was important for the emergence of Kabbalah.

My focus on ethos, however, allows not only for the presentation of the specific historical relationship between the spread of philosophy and the emergence of Kabbalah in a new light, but also contributes to the ongoing broader reconceptualization of the relationship of the two. If worldview serves as the basis of analysis, we are left with numerous competing philosophic schools, which must each individually be compared to Kabbalah. In contrast, from the perspective of ethos, the newly available philosophic material (in all its variety) and the Kabbalah of R. Isaac's circle are part of the same cultural phenomenon. Both share the notion that investigating God is central, both are committed to the epistemological questioning that goes with this notion, and both structure basic elements of their religious life, including love of God and prayer, under its influence.

This ethos did, though, meet some opposition. In the twelfth century, R. Judah ha-Levi systematically critiqued it. Ha-Levi has at times been perceived as a progenitor of the first Kabbalists, but to the extent that this is true, it is only in relationship to worldview. By embracing the philosophic ethos, the Kabbalists in R. Isaac's circle effectively broke with Ha-Levi. Importantly, however, one exceptional Kabbalist, Nahmanides, did follow Ha-Levi's path to a certain extent. Thus, while he was not hostile to the philosophic ethos, he was markedly ambivalent toward it, a fact which I suggested is manifest in his, similarly, ambivalent attitude toward innovation.

Finally, the ethos shared by both medieval Jewish philosophy and the Kabbalah of R. Isaac's circle sets both apart from traditional Rabbinic culture, in its various forms and articulations, where this ethos is uniformly absent. The ideational relationship between traditional Rabbinic culture, on the one hand, and medieval philosophy or Kabbalah, on the other may be a matter of scholarly dispute. I have argued,

however, that, from the perspective of ethos, the latter two are part of a shared break with that culture.

In all, the members of R. Isaac's circle were guided by an ethos that led them to investigate God, that helped shape their religious lives, and that defined them as scholars. Attentiveness to this ethos thus furthers our understanding of the complex process of the emergence of Kabbalah.

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INDEX

- Abbayé and Raba (Talmudic sages), 245
- Abraham, 73, 154–159, 155–156ⁿ52–54, 158ⁿ58, 166–168
- Abraham bar Ḥiyya, 4, 55–58, 56–57ⁿ90, 62, 64, 67–69, 70, 191
- Abraham ben Axelrad, 186–187, 186ⁿ131
- Abraham ben David, 3, 135–139, 135ⁿ3, 166–167
- Abraham ben Isaac, 3, 135ⁿ3, 246
- Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, 145
- Abraham ibn Ezra
 on Exod. 20:2, 232
 on investigating God, 69, 70, 76, 80, 80ⁿ65
 Judah ha-Levi and, 129–131
 on love of God, 89–90
 philosophic tradition and, 4, 62
 worship and, 93
- Abraham ibn Ḥasdai, 156ⁿ54
- Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim*, 46ⁿ56, 112, 177
- R. Akiva, 116, 117, 118–119
- Alef*, interpretation of term, 203–205, 211, 212
- Alḥarizi, Judah, 71, 72–73, 164–165, 175, 181, 199
- Almohade invasion, 64
- Anatoli, Jacob, 73–74, 92, 92ⁿ93, 247
- Animals, human beings vs., 220, 223
- Apple, explanation of term, 47–48, 47ⁿ60
- Arabic language, 4, 61–62ⁿ2, 63, 71, 76
- Aristotle, 6, 19, 249
- Asher ben David
 alef, meaning of term, 204
 created world and, 160–161
 on divine unity, 19, 137–139, 138–139ⁿ8
 epistemological analysis and, 144
 esoteric traditions and, 140–141ⁿ15
 innovation and, 29
 intellectual effort and, 144
 investigating God and, 140–142, 189
 Kabbalistic scholarship and, 4
 love of God and, 170–172
 Maimonideanism and, 36
 Psalm 100:3 and, 213ⁿ66
 recognizing God and, 104
- Asher ben Meshullam, 74–75
- Astronomy, 64ⁿ8
- Azriel of Gerona
 anti-Maimonideanism and, 36
 creativity and, 29, 29ⁿ5, 32
 knowledge of God and, 120ⁿ53
 Lebanon, explanation of term, 43
 logical argumentation and, 160
 philosophic ethos and, 143–144
 Sefer ha-Bahir and, 213ⁿ66
- Ba'alé ha-Nefesh* (Abraham b. David), 135
- Bahya ibn Pakuda
 divine unity and, 87, 138
 hermeneutical techniques of, 88
 investigating God and, 69–70, 80, 86, 137, 151–152
 love of God and, 90, 90ⁿ87
 on Psalm 100:3, 216
 Sefer ha-Bahir and, 198–199
 worship and, 93, 198
- B. Berakhot*, 145ⁿ29, 147–148, 148–149ⁿ35, 174, 177, 178
- Bere'shit Rabbati*, 112, 177
- Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (Saadia ben Joseph), 85, 90ⁿ88, 126
- Book of the Apple* (Abraham ibn Ḥasdai), 156ⁿ54
- Book of the Commandments* (Ḥefets ben Yatsliah), 78–80, 83, 151–152
- Book of the Commandments* (Maimonides), 150, 225, 227–228
- Book of the Commandments* (Samuel ben Ḥofni), 77–78
- Canticles*. See *Song of Songs*
- Catalonia, philosophic tradition in, 21, 64–65, 67, 95–96, 249
- Chariot, account of the
 Kabbalah study and, 7, 246
 Maimonides on, 33, 39, 41, 59
 Nahmanides, 240
 Rabbinic treatment of, 114–115
 Sefer ha-Bahir and, 199, 201
- 1 Chronicles 28:9
 Abraham ben Axelrad on, 187
 Abraham ben David on, 136

- Abraham ibn Ezra on, 129
 Asher ben David on, 142
 Bahya ibn Pakuda on, 70
 Eleazar ben Judah on, 124
 investigating God and, 67
 Judah ha-Levi on, 132–133
 Rabbinic treatment of, 98, 106–108
 worship and, 93, 95, 175, 177
- Commandments. *See also* Halakhic obligations
 First Existent and, 225
 investigating God and, 76–84,
 80–81n65, 147, 150–151, 227–229
 love of God and, 89–91
 reasons for, 36, 36n26, 60, 149
 worship and, 177
- Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Samuel ibn Tibbon), 39–40, 51
Commentary on Job (Naḥmanides), 58, 242n73
Commentary on Mishnah Avot (Maimonides), 71, 73
Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah (Eleazar ben Judah), 126
Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah (Isaac the Blind), 44n48, 162
Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah (Judah ben Barzillai), 7, 78–79, 153, 214, 215n67
Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah (Saadia Gaon), 7
Commentary on the Bible (Naḥmanides), 221–222
Commentary on the Song of Songs (Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona)
 Abraham, depiction of, 157
 Abraham bar Ḥiyya and, 55–56
 commandments, reasons for, 60
 creativity in, 31, 48–49, 59
 as early Kabbalistic work, 31, 31n11, 34, 38–39, 139
 esoteric meaning in, 41–42
 investigating God and, 139–140
Keter Shem Tov and, 186
 love of God and, 167
 messianic significance in, 32–33, 59–60
Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot (Azriel of Gerona), 43, 46n56, 46n58, 213n66
Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadot (Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona), 46n56, 46n58, 49, 163–164, 177
Commentary on the Ten Sefirot (Azriel of Gerona), 29, 29n5
- Commentary on Tractate Berakhot* (Asher ben Meshullam), 74–75
 Created world, studying of, 86, 160–161, 161n69
 Creation, account of, 7, 41, 59, 240
 Creativity in first Kabbalistic writings, 2–3, 21, 27–60
Commentary on the Song of Songs and, 32–34
 esoteric traditions and, 34–41
 Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona and, 41–60
- David ben Saul, 77, 144–147, 145–146n29
 Decalogue, 82
 Deuteronomy 4:39
 Abraham bar Ḥiyya on, 68–69
 Abraham ibn Ezra on, 69–70, 80n65, 129
 Asher ben David on, 142
 David ben Saul on, 146
 Eleazar ben Judah on, 124
 Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona on, 140, 151, 228–229
 Hefets ben Yatsliah on, 79, 83, 152
 investigating God and, 66–67
 Maimonides on, 72, 82, 83–84n71
 Naḥmanides on, 218–219n8
 Rabbinic treatment of, 98–101
 Samuel ben Ḥofni on, 78
Deuteronomy Rabbah, 99–101
Devekut (cleaving to God), 17, 222–223
 Divine names, 46, 46n56, 46n58, 131, 185. *See also* Tetragrammaton
 Divine unity
 investigating God and, 152–154
 knowing God and, 136–139, 137–139n8
 logical argumentation and, 160
 love of God and, 171–172
 in philosophic literature, 79–80, 87–88
 Donnolo, Shabbetai, 126
Duties of the Heart (Bahya ibn Pakuda), 69, 72–73, 74, 90n87, 137, 151–152, 156n54, 191, 198
- Ecclesiastes 1:13, 79
 Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, 118, 122, 123–127, 237
 Eleazar ha-Darshan, 124n63
 R. Eliezer, 174–175, 177, 178–181, 183–184

- Elohim, 131–132, 212
 Enoch, 157n157
En Sof, 153, 162
 Epistemology, 85–88, 96, 144, 162–164, 179
 Esoteric traditions, 12–13, 34–41, 140–141n15, 161, 168
 Exodus 20:1–2, 80–81n65, 130, 151, 227–230, 232
 Exodus from Egypt, 229–230, 232
 Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona
 Abraham, depiction of, 157–159, 158n58
 anti-Maimonideanism and, 33–34, 35–38, 49, 59, 147
 apple, explanation of term, 47–48
 Arabic language and, 61–62n2
 Commentary on the Song of Songs and, 32–33, 143
 creativity of, 21, 31–32, 41–60, 242, 242n73
 epistemological analysis and, 144
 hermeneutic technique of, 50–55, 60
 intellectual effort and, 144
 investigating God and, 60, 125, 139–140, 142, 147–153, 148–149n35, 225, 228
 on Kabbalistic wisdom, transmission of, 157, 157–158n58
 Kabbalistic work and, 4, 31n11, 34, 38–39
 Lebanon, explanation of term, 42–44, 43–44n47
 love of God and, 167–168, 170
 mashal, meaning of term, 45n52
 Nahmanides and, 58n92, 217
 on parables, 52–54
 on Rabbinic *aggadot*, 37–38n29
 Samuel ibn Tibbon and, 40–41
 on sefirot, 44–47, 163–164
 spice, interpretation of term, 47
 theurgic activities and, 150
 wine, interpretation of term, 45–46
 worship and, 173, 178, 183, 185
- First Cause, investigation of, 178–179
 First Existent, 225
 First Kabbalists. *See* Philosophic ethos and first Kabbalists
- Genesis Rabbah*, 109–110, 110n26
 German Pietists, 22, 98, 121–127, 133, 144–145, 145n29
 Gnosticism, 8–10, 12, 24–25, 192
- God. *See* Investigating God; Love of God; Recognizing God
Guide of the Perplexed (Maimonides)
 burning of, 36
 commandments, explanation of, 149, 150
 hermeneutical techniques and, 50
 human intellect and, 164
 investigating God and, 71, 72, 87
 Jeremiah 9:22–23 and, 108–109
 knowing God and, 182
 love of God and, 92, 202
 mashal, meaning of term, 45n52
 on providence, 224
 on Psalm 100:3, 216
 Samuel Ibn Tibbon on, 41
 Sefer ha-Bahir and, 198, 199
 translation of, 40
 worship and, 94, 175–176, 181, 184–185
- Habakkuk, 196–198, 201, 203, 206, 207–208
 Halakhic obligations, 80, 146–147, 168.
 See also Commandments
Halakhot Gedolot, 225–228, 225n24, 226n26
 R. Hamnuna, 82
Haskel, meaning of term, 102
Hassagot (Nahmanides), 225
Havdalah prayer, 149n35
 Hebrew language, philosophic works in, 4–5, 61, 71, 76
 Hefets ben Yatsliaḥ, 78–83, 80n60, 151–152
Hegyon ha-Nephesh ha-Atzuvah (*Meditation of the Sad Soul*) (Abraham bar Ḥiyya), 67–68, 69, 86
Heilsgeschichte, 33
Hekhalot literature, 22, 98, 115–121, 133, 194
 Hermeneutics, 50–55, 60, 88, 161
 Human beings, purpose of creation of, 220–221
 Humors, study of, 160–161
- Ibn Tibbon. *See* Judah ibn Tibbon; Samuel ibn Tibbon
 Idolatry, 99
Ijtihād, 131
The Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul (Solomon ibn Gabirol), 75
 Incorporeality of God, 236–237

- Investigating God
 Abraham ibn Ezra on, 69, 70, 76, 80, 80n65
 Anatoli on, 73–74
 Asher ben David on, 140–142, 189
 Bahya ibn Pakuda on, 69–70, 80, 86, 137, 151–152
 epistemology and, 85–88
 Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona on, 60, 125, 139–140, 142, 147–153, 148–149n35, 225, 228
 love of God and, 88–93
 Maimonides on, 60, 71–72, 72n30, 81–83, 82n69, 83–84n71, 87–88, 151, 225
 Nahmanides and, 77, 225–232
 obligation of, 76–85, 144–154
 philosophic literature and, 15–16
 in Rabbinic literature, 21, 97–133
 in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 191–216
 value of, 65–71, 75–76, 96, 135–144
- Isaac the Blind
 Abraham ben David and, 135, 135n3
alef, meaning of term, 204, 205
 created world and, 160
 on divine name, 185
 divine unity and, 153
 Lebanon, explanation of term, 43–44, 44n48
Sefer ha-Bahir and, 191, 193, 195, 209–211, 213
Sefer Yetsirah and, 143
 on sefirot, 162–163, 164, 212
 worship and, 174–175, 176–177, 178, 183–184, 222
- R. Ishmael, 116, 117, 118–119
- Jacob (patriarch), 157n157
 Jacob ben Makhir, 247
 Jacob ben Saul, 3
 Jacob ben Sheshet
 Abraham, depiction of, 157, 159
 creativity and, 27–28, 32, 243
 epistemology and, 164
 Isaac the Blind and, 4, 143
 love of God and, 168–170
 on radical Maimonideans, 28n4, 143n22, 183, 183n126
 on Kabbalah as open wisdom, 28n3
 worship and, 178–181, 179–181n118, 182, 183–185
- Jeremiah 9:22–23
 Abraham ibn Ezra on, 69
 Bahya ibn Pakuda on, 70
- Eleazar ben Judah on, 124
 investigating God and, 66–67, 177–178
 Jacob ben Sheshet on, 183
 love of God and, 90
 Maimonides on, 72
 Rabbinic treatment of, 98, 101–105, 108–114
- Job, Book of, 55, 56–57n90, 58, 68, 234
 Jonah Gerondi, 246
 Joseph ben Todros, 36n25, 36n26, 37n28
- Judah ben Barzillai, 7, 79, 80, 214–215n67
- Judah ben Joseph Alfakar, 245
 Judah ben Yakar, 218n7
- Judah ha-Levi
 Abraham (patriarch), conception of, 156–157
 Abraham ibn Ezra and, 131
 on Exod. 20:2, 229–230
 love of God and, 132n87, 165–166, 172
 Nahmanides and, 230n36, 232, 240, 243, 251
 philosophic ethos and, 128–133
 relationship to Kabbalah and, 22, 128, 133, 157–159, 172, 187, 243, 251
 worship and, 187
- Judah ha-Nasi, 110
- Judah ibn Tibbon
 Abraham, depiction of, 156
 philosophy, study of, 247–248, 249
 translations of, 63, 69, 74–75, 79, 128, 191, 198, 199–200, 240
- Judah the Pious, 122, 126
- Kabbalot* (traditions), 1, 19, 27, 135, 194
 Kalam, 13, 19
 Karaites, 133, 240
Keter Shem Tov (Abraham ben Axelrad), 186–187
 Kisses, interpretation of term, 53, 53n82
- Languedoc
 Anatoli's sermons in, 74
 philosophic tradition in, 21, 62–65, 67, 75, 95–96, 249
Sefer ha-Bahir in, 3, 9–11, 196, 214, 216
 Lebanon, explanation of term, 42–44, 43–44n47–48
- Love of God
 Abraham ibn Ezra on, 89–90
 Asher ben David on, 170–172
 Bahya ibn Pakuda on, 90, 90n87

- Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona on, 167–168, 170
 investigating God and, 88–93
 Jacob ben Sheshet on, 168–170
 Judah ha-Levi on, 132n87, 165–166, 172
 Maimonides on, 90–92, 113–114n31, 166–167, 170
Mishneh Torah (Maimonides) and, 91, 166, 170, 202
 philosophic ethos and, 88–93, 165–173
- Ma'amar Yikkavu ha-Mayim* (Samuel ibn Tibbon), 83, 144–145
- Maimonides
 Abraham, depiction of, 155–157, 159, 166
 on chariot, account of the, 33, 39, 41, 59, 245
 on commandments, 36, 36n26, 149, 150–151
 divine unity and, 87, 172
 esotericism of, 12–13
hekhalot literature and, 116–117n38
 hermeneutical techniques of, 50–55, 60, 88
 on human intellect, 164
 investigating God and, 60, 71–72, 72n30, 81–83, 82n69, 83–84n71, 87–88, 151, 225
 on Jeremiah 9:22–23, 108–110
 Kabbalah as reaction to, 33–39, 49
 knowing God and, 181–182
 love of God and, 90–92, 113–114n31, 166–167, 170
 Maimonidean controversy, 5–6, 144–145, 147
mashal, meaning of term, 45n52
 methodologies of philosophic investigation and, 160
 mezuzah and, 111n28
 philosophic tradition and, 4, 7, 30, 41
 on providence, 224
 on Psalm 100:3, 216
 on Rabbinic *aggadot*, 37–38n29
 recognizing God and, 104
Sefer ha-Bahir and, 196–198, 200–203
 worship and, 94–95, 95n100, 175–176, 200–201, 222
- B. Makkot*, 82
Malmad ha-Talmidim (Anatoli), 73–74
Mashal, translation of term, 45n52
Maskil, meaning of term, 101–102
Megillat ha-Megalleh (Abraham bar Hiyya), 55, 57, 57n90
Mekhilta, 227, 228
Merkavah literature. *See* Hekhalot literature
 Merkavah mysticism, 197–198
Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim (Jacob ben Sheshet), 168, 169, 178, 179–180n118, 182, 184
 Meshullam ben Jacob, 74
 Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera, 185–186
 Metatron, 119
 Metempsychosis, 234, 241
 Mezuzah, 111, 111n28
Midrash Kohelet, 112, 177
Midrash Mishlé, 120n53
Midrash Tehillim, 101–102, 107
Mishneh Torah (Maimonides)
 Abraham, depiction of, 155
 commandments and, 150
 divine unity and, 172
 in Hebrew, 71
 investigating God and, 151
 love of God and, 91, 166, 170, 202
 philosophic section of, 4, 36
 Moses, 99–100
 Moses b. Naḥman. *See* Naḥmanides
 Moses Maimonides. *See* Maimonides
Mussaf prayer, 99
- Naḥmanides, 22–23, 217–243
 Arabic language and, 61n2
 Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona and, 58n92, 217
 innovation, stance on, 239–243, 242n73
 investigating God and, 77, 225–232
 Judah ha-Levi and, 128
 as Kabbalist, 217–218
 philosophic ethos and, 188, 233–239, 238–239n64, 243
 recognizing God and, 218–224
 Neoplatonism, 10, 13, 19, 29–30, 29n8
 Noah, 157–158n157
Numbers Rabbah, 43–44n47, 102–103, 104n16, 105–106, 112
Palestinian Talmud, 109–110
 Parables, 52–55, 71–72
Pesikta Rabbati (Ulmer), 105, 106
 Philo of Alexandria, 67n16

- Philosophic ethos, 21, 61–96. *See also* Philosophic ethos and first Kabbalists
- epistemology and, 85–88, 96
- Hebrew philosophic tradition, development of, 61–65
- investigating God, obligation of, 76–85
- investigating God, value of, 65–67, 75–76, 96
- Kabbalah, development of, 3, 14–15, 17–20, 23–25
- Kabbalah scholarship and, 245–252
- of Naḥmanides, 188, 217–243, 238–239n64
- reach of, 67–76
- in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 196–203, 216
- strength of, 95–96
- worship and, 93–95
- Philosophic ethos and first Kabbalists, 22, 135–189
- Abraham (patriarch) in, 154–159
- investigating God, obligation of, 144–154
- investigating God, value of, 135–144
- love of God and, 165–173
- methodologies of investigation and, 159–165
- worship, conception of, 173–187
- Pietists. *See* German Pietists
- Prayer. *See* Worship
- Providence, 224, 236
- Psalms 100:3, 208–216, 213n66
- Psalms 145, 168–170
- “Pure thought,” meaning of term, 56–57n90
- Rabbinic *aggadot*, 37–38, 37–38n29
- Rabbinic literature, investigating God in, 21, 97–133
- 1 Chronicles 28:9 in, 98, 106–108
- Deuteronomy 4:39 in, 98–101
- Jeremiah 9:22–23 in, 108–114
- overview, 97–98
- philosophic ethos in, 114–115
- Rashi (Shlomo Yitshaki), 174
- “Recognizes his Creator (*ha-makkir et bore’o*),” interpretation of phrase, 103–106, 104–105n16
- Recognizing God, 103–106, 104–105n16, 218–224
- Rosh ha-Shannah, 99
- Saadia ben Joseph Gaon, 7, 85, 88, 90, 93, 126, 160, 214–216, 214–216n67
- Samuel ben Ḥofni, 77–78, 82–83
- Samuel ibn Tibbon, 39–41, 51, 73, 77, 83–84n71, 83–85, 144–145, 183n126, 247
- B. Sanhedrin*, 147–148, 148–149n35
- Sefer ha-Bahir*, 22, 191–216
- divine thought and, 203–208
- as first Kabbalistic work, 3, 8
- Gnosticism and, 9–10
- innovation and, 241
- overview, 191–196, 194n16
- philosophic ethos in, 196–203, 216
- Psalms 100:3 and, 208–216
- Sefer ha-Galuy* (Kimḥi), 73
- Sefer ha-Ḥokhmah* (Eleazar ben Judah), 126
- Sefer ha-Kuzari* (Judah ha-Levi), 22, 98, 128–133, 156, 230–231, 240, 243
- Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*, 76–77
- Sefer ha-Madda’* (Maimonides), 236–237
- Sefer ha-Yiḥud* (Asher ben David), 29, 138, 140, 143, 160, 170–171, 212, 213n66
- Sefer ha-Yiḥud* (Eleazar ha-Darshan), 124n63
- Sefer Sha’aré ha-Yiḥud veba-’Emunah* (*The Book of the Gates of Unity and Faith*) (Eleazar ben Judah), 123–124, 237
- Sefer Yetsirah* (*Ḥakhmoni*) (Donnolo), 126, 143, 153–154n49, 210, 233, 243
- Sefirot
- first sefirah, 56n90, 153–154n49, 162, 179
- second sefirah, 43–47, 44n50, 46n56, 162–164
- third sefirah, 163, 184
- fourth Sefirah, 47n60
- fifth sefirah, 47n60
- sixth sefirah, 47–48, 47n60
- created world and, 160–161
- divine thought and, 204–208
- divine unity and, 138, 153, 171–172
- En Sof* and, 162
- knowledge about, 27–28
- Sefer ha-Bahir* and, 210–212
- worship and, 179–181, 179–181n118, 183–184
- “Sermon for a Wedding” (Naḥmanides), 233n52
- Sha’ar ha-Gemul* (Naḥmanides), 234–235
- Sha’ar ha-Shamayim* (Jacob ben Sheshet), 27–28, 182–183
- Shekhinah, 222–223. *See also* Sefirot
- Shem (son of Noah), 158n157

- Shema'* prayer, 171
Shemoneh 'Esreh prayer, 246, 246n5
She-yishgeh, meaning of term, 166
Shigyonot, meaning of term, 201
Shi'ur Komah (Measure of the Stature),
 117–121, 120–121n53, 125
 Shlomo Yitshaki (Rashi), 174
Sifra, 173
Sifré Numbers, 173
Sodé Razaya (Eleazar ben Judah),
 124–126, 127
 Solomon ben Abraham, 51–52, 144
 Solomon ibn Gabirol, 75
 Song of Songs, 33, 41–43, 47n60, 52–55,
 243. *See also Commentary on the Song
 of Songs*
 Spice, interpretation of term, 47

 Talmud, 76–77, 168–170
 Tannaim and Amoraim, 97
 Ten utterances, 209, 209n56, 210–211
 Tetragrammaton (YHVH), 131–132,
 141, 203–205, 207–208, 211–212
 Theodicy, 234–235, 236n59, 240–241

 Theurgic activities, 19, 148–150, 176
Torah Commentary (Naḥmanides),
 239–240
Torat ha-Shem Temimah (Naḥmanides),
 219–221, 230–231

 Unity. *See* Divine unity

Ve-hogin hegyon, interpretation of
 phrase, 120–121n53

Wars of the Lord (Abraham ben Moses
 ben Maimon), 145
 Wine, interpretation of term, 45–46,
 46n58
 Worship, 93–95, 173–187. *See also
 specific prayers*

Yesod Mora' ve-Sod Torah (Abraham
 ibn Ezra), 69, 76, 80–81n65, 93
Yetser, meaning of term, 107
 YHVH. *See* Tetragrammaton

 Zoharic Kabbalah, 10

