

Jewish Mysticism in Spain: Some Cultural Observations*

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I

It is a commonplace, accepted by everyone, to envision Spain as one of the most important centers of Jewish culture in Middle Ages. However, I wonder if attempts to describe in detail the contribution of the Spanish Jewry to Judaism would meet the same agreement as the initial remark enjoyed. The most cherished image in modern folklore related to the issue of Spanish Jewry, that of a golden age of Spanish Jewry, is based less on what happened in history and more on the inventory of the really great speculative contributions of Spanish Jews to Jewish culture. As to the more mundane aspects of the Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula, it was more often less than glorious. Indeed, both the Muslim and the Christian attitudes to the Jews were more friendly than that of the third medieval superpower: the Mongols. But even in the comparison with the Tatar hordes reveals a more liberal approach among the Asian-African and European contemporaries, still the sad aspects of Jewish history in the Iberian Peninsula are too numerous to be enumerated: the Almohadi horrible repressions have led Maimonides and his family to flee from Cordova for North Africa, and ultimately for Egypt. Spanish Jews have formulated the dictum «Better under Edom (namely Christianity) rather than under Ishmael (namely Islam)»¹ Would this statement articulate some profound historical insights, we could expect for more substantial impact of Christian Spain on Jewish culture. However, no later than the end of the 14th century, the gains of life under Christian rule become less obvious than it was two

* Ponencia presentada en el Encuentro Internacional de Historiadores En Torno a Sefarad. Toledo, 1991.

¹ See SEPTIMUS, Bernard, «Tahat Edom velo Tahat Ishmael», *Zion*, vol. 47, 1982, págs. 103-111 [Hebrew].

centuries beforehand. Moreover, the last century of Jewish presence in Spain is one of the darkest period in Jewish history in general.

Haunted by both Muslim and Christian religious fanaticism, Spanish Jews have nevertheless succeeded in writing in Spain one of the most splendid pages in Jewish high culture. It would be superfluous to describe in detail the various domains that Jewish culture have reached peaks of its developments in Spain: it will suffice to mention poetry, grammar, exegesis, philosophy, science and last in time, but not in degree, the Jewish medieval forms of mysticism: Kabbalah. As you may suspect it will be this facet of Jewish culture that will preoccupy my further discussions.

In the following, I shall attempt to describe the Spanish Kabbalah from the vantage point of history of culture. Accordingly, I shall avoid using here the history of ideas approach, since the enumeration of the ideas found in Kabbalah in the different phases of its history, interesting as it may be in itself, is not relevant to the cultural context of Spain, which is the focus of our analysis here. Likewise, I shall ignore in this study the question of the earlier Jewish sources of the Spanish Kabbalah or the sociological² or bibliographical-historical approach. At the centre of the following remarks I shall attempt to put the relationship between the Kabbalistic thought and literature and the similar phenomena, Muslim or Christian, in Spain.

Unlike all the other domains of creativity that have attracted the attention and the imagination of the Spanish Jews, Kabbalah emerged and developed only later on, after the beginning of the decline of the Muslim culture in Spain, at a period when the Christian thought was making its first substantial steps. Indeed, from the geographical point of view, this form of mystical lore flourished almost only in the Christian areas of Spain, not only at its inception but also even in later periods, like the 15th century. Andalusian Kabbalists, namely Kabbalists writing in the Muslim Spain, are very rare, and they composed their writings only outside Spain³. Therefore, Kabbalah is to be conveyed as the single most important form of Jewish speculative literatures emerging during the Middle Ages that was not dominated by already existing Muslim models. I do not mean that Muslim influences cannot be detected in Kabbalistic thought; instances of such influences can be easily found, but they belong more to the domain of the conceptual, sporadic impacts, often mediated by Jewish spe-

² For the best and most up-to-date comprehensive description of Kabbalistic literature, of its history and its main concepts see SCHOLEM, Gershom, *Kabbalah*. Jerusalem 1974.

³ See e. g. Rabbi Joseph ben Moshe Alashqar, who was born in Seville, moved to Malaga but has composed all his books in Tlemsen. Cf., Moshe Idel, introduction to *Sefer Tsafanat Pa'aneah*, by R. Yosef ben Moshe Alashqar. Jerusalem 1991, págs. 14-16 [Hebrew].

culative literature, philosophy or poetry. It is only rarely that Spanish Kabbalah drew from Muslim mystical writings, though some of them, like two books of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali were translated in the 13th century in Hebrew⁴. At least one of them, *Sefer Mooznei Zedeq*, was rendered in Hebrew by Rabbi Abraham ibn Hasdai in one of the most important centers of Kabbalah, Barcelona. One cannot but wonder why none of the Spanish Kabbalists I am acquainted with did quote these Hebrew translations⁵. In any case, no counterpart to the theosophical-theurgical system of the Spanish Kabbalah is known among the Arabs, that will come close to this mystical lore in the way the other forms of Muslim creativity come to their Jewish versions. It should be mentioned that, symptomatically enough, only very few Kabbalists have composed their writings in any other language than Hebrew⁶, a fact that is very significant when compared to the situation of Jewish philosophers.

These historical and geographical observations have to be put however in a framework that is again different from what happened in Jewish culture in Muslim Spain. The philosophical, scientific, exegetical, grammatical and poetical writings of the Jews under the Muslim rule were deeply affected by the advanced culture of the Muslims. Indeed, it will be unimaginable to attempt to describe and understand them without assuming them as being in profound dialogue with the corresponding Arabic literature. Sometimes, their models were so influential that the Jewish cultural and religious productions appear to be no more than epigonic repetitions of their Muslim originals. This deep restructuring of Jewish cultural and religious activity did not start in Spain; important first steps took place already in the East, and the impact of the Muslim culture is considerable already before the «floruit» of the Spanish Jewish culture. However, it is in Spain that the tendencies that started earlier, bloomed in an unprecedented manner; To a very great extent, Spain is the place that served as the place where the Jews were able to articulate, to elaborate and to crystallize many of the tendencies that emerged outside the Iberian Peninsula.

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When turning to Kabbalah, one looks in vain for a Spanish Christian prototype that could have inspired any of the various forms of medieval

⁴ See STEINSCHNEIDER, Moritz, *Die Hebraeischen Uebersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher*. Berlin 1893, págs. 342-348.

⁵ Cf. below, par. V.

⁶ Their names are Rabbi Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malka in the 13th Century, who probably was active in North Africa and Rabbi Joseph ibn Wakar who flourished in Toledo in the middle of the 14th Century.

Jewish mysticism. On the ground of the prior remarks, this observation may be a little bit astonishing. However, both from the historical and the phenomenological points of view, this isolation of Kabbalah from its Spanish cultural environment is not so surprising as it could seem «prima facie». Unlike the first documents of Jewish philosophy, which have arrived to Spain coming from the East and subsequently have established a similar phenomenon in southern France, Kabbalah reach Spain coming from the North, and it remained more influential in the Northern part of Spain: Catalonia and Castilia, as long as Jews lived in Spain. Most of the evidence concerning the emergence of the Kabbalah in Spain testify that the first esoteric traditions arrived there coming from the North Provence and Germany⁷. In the 11th and 12th century, there is no substantial contacts between the Jewish thought in these two countries and the Christian one. It would be therefore more than speculative to attribute to the Christian backgrounds in these areas a significant role in the articulation and crystallization of the Jewish esoteric ideas that have arrived subsequently to Spain. In other words, the fact that at least some of the tradition that become later on Spanish Kabbalah, were priorly sponsored by Jewish masters or circles living in Christian environments did not substantially affect the nature or structure of these traditions. Whether these traditions originated in ancient Jewish circles and were traded down, and developed in various directions, for centuries, or if they have emerged out of the infiltrations of Gnostic material in Jewish esoteric circles, is a matter that has little relevance for our question here⁸. If these esoteric traditions are Jewish or Gnostic in their original extraction, in any case they had only very little to do with Christianity as a source of influence⁹. However, the arrival of the esoteric traditions to Spain was not a simple case of «translatio scientiae». It may be assumed that when arriving to Spain, the Kabbalistic lore was already divided in at

⁷ See SCHOLEM, Gershom, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Princeton University Press, Princeton, Philadelphia 1987, págs. 39-40. Relations between early Kabbalah and the Ashkenazi thought were recently explored by some scholars and this is a domain that still requires detailed studies.

⁸ On this issue see e. g. SCHOLEM, *ibidem*, págs. 90, 236, 245, 247, etc., and IDEL, M., *Kabbalah: New perspectives*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 1988, págs. 30-32.

⁹ Though I assume that historical influence of Christian thought on Kabbalah is indeed limited, as I shall attempt to show below, it is still possible that ancient Jewish mythologoumena, that have reverberated in ancient Christian thought, had some repercussions also in later phases of Jewish thought. Likewise, the fact that Christian authors have preserved early Jewish Midrashim, that are closer to Christianity than their versions that are extant in later Jewish literature, is not a sign that these versions are Christian fabrications: see LIEBERMAN, Saul, *Shkiin*, 2nd ed. Jerusalem 1970, págs. 27-83 [Hebrew]; LIEBES, Yehudah, «Christian influences on the book of the Zohar», *Jerusalem studies in Jewish thought*, vol. 11, 1983, págs. 43-74 [Hebrew].

least three types of traditions: a) That represented by one of the earliest Kabbalistic documents: the book of Bahir ¹⁰. b) The Kabbalistic thought of Rabbi Issac Sagi Nahor and his disciples ¹¹, and finally c) the traditions inherited by Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman better known as Nahmanides and continued by his followers ¹², Whether there was an additional and older mystical tradition outside Spain, which is represented by the writings known as the literature of the *Book of Contemplation*, is a matter that still has to be clarified by modern scholarship ¹³, Though the mystical thought of the latter two schools, that of Sagi Nahor and that of Nahmanides, was influenced by the «mythologou mena» of the book of *Bahir*, it seems very improbable that this book was the crucial trigger for the formulations of the Kabbalah that found their expression in the writings stemming from the schools represented by these two masters ¹⁴, Indeed, a bifurcation insofar as a crucial topic in Kabbalistic thought, the mystical intention during the prayer, is evident already in Provence, before the transition of Kabbalah to Spain ¹⁵.

It seems that in Catalonia, Kabbalistic traditions were combined with some elements of Christian thought. This seems to have happened in the Kabbalistic writing of Rabbi Azriel of Gerone, as has been pointed out by G. Scholem and other scholars ¹⁶, On the other hand, in some instances in Nahmanides' theology, though probably not in his esoteric theosophy, there are some influences of Christian theology ¹⁷, However, although these Christian elements are influential, they remain nonetheless secondary in relation to the general economy of the writings of these two Kabbalists: It seems that many of their crucial views are independent of the Christian sources that were known to them.

¹⁰ SCHOLEM, *Origins*, págs. 49-198.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, págs. 199-309, 365-460.

¹² See IDEL, M., «Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Mystical Leadership» [forthcoming].

¹³ SCHOLEM, *Origins*, págs. 309-364.

¹⁴ See DAN, Joseph, *Hug ha-Mekubalim ha-Rishonim*. I. Agassi, Academ. Jerusalem 1976, págs. 178-179 [Hebrew]; IDEL, M., «Sefirot above Sefirot», *Tarbi*, vol. 51, 1982, pág. 239 [Hebrew].

¹⁵ SCHOLEM, *Origins*, págs. 208-216.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, págs. 422-423, 425, 428, n. 149, 439; SED-RAJNA, Gabrielle, «L'influence de Jean Scot sur la doctrine du Kabbalist Azriel de Gerone», *Jean Scot Erigene et l'histoire de la philosophie*. Paris 1977, págs. 453-462; IDEL, «Sefirot above Sefirot», págs. 242, n. 17; 243, n. 20; 246, n. 41; 261, n. 110; 267, nn. 145-148; 268, n. 153; 277, n. 206 [Hebrew].

¹⁷ PINES, Shlomo, «Nahmanides on Adam in the Garden of Eden in the context of other interpretations of Genesis, chapters 2 and 3», *Exile and Diaspora, studies in the history of Jewish people presented to Prof. H Beinart*, eds. A. Mirsky, A. Grossman and Y. Kaplan. Jerusalem 1988, págs. 159-164 [Hebrew].

On the other hand, it is evident, as it emerges from explicit quotes, that Neoplatonic Arabic sources were known by the Geronese Kabbalists¹⁸. However, both in the case of the Muslim and Christian influences it seems that they appertain more to the formation of a complex metaphysical system, rather than in shaping the theurgical stands of these Kabbalists, that are related to their mystical understanding of the ritual of their path of mystical contemplation. It is likewise possible that some other similar influences can be detected also in the literature related to the *Book of Contemplation*¹⁹. By and large, it seems that early Kabbalah was influenced by Christian and Muslim thought in a marginal way, their combined influence being incomparably more modest than the decisive impact of Muslim thought on Jewish philosophy.

The meagre contribution of the Muslim and Christian material to the emerging Kabbalah opens the question as to its unique status of this type of literature in the economy of Spanish culture. It was not only imported from outside, but it has also remained relatively independent of, and in different to, the cultural environment. Since most of these three forms of Kabbalistic traditions are replete with mythical elements, we confront a crucial question as to the relevance of «mythologoumena» that were formulated in other social and cultural environments, to new, and substantially diverse cultural contexts. In other words, if we accept one of the prevalent explanations of the function of the myth as expressive of the social structure and as strengthening it, how is it possible to account for the relevance of Kabbalistic traditions that arrived to Northern Spain, coming from Provence and Germany²⁰. Moreover, since there is only little doubt in my mind that these traditions were not generated by medieval Ashkenazi masters, but may stem from even earlier sources, probably located in the East, the question posed by the transmission of those «mythologoumena» becomes even more urgent²¹. Should we ignore the cultural functions of the myths and «mythologoumena» and advocate the transmission and acceptance of the esoteric lore as unrelated to the particular circumstances of the Span

¹⁸ SHOLEM, *Origins*, págs. 422, 428-430.

¹⁹ GOLDREICH, Amos, «The theology of the Iyyun Circle and a possible source of the term of 'Ahdut Shavah'», *The beginnings of Jewish mysticism in medieval Europe*, ed. J. Dan. Jerusalem 1987, págs. 141-156 [Hebrew].

²⁰ This issue was not sufficiently addressed by modern scholarship of early Kabbalah, which is inclined to adopt the history of ideas approach.

²¹ The weight of the functional question is more prominent if someone assumes that some of the crucial concepts of the emerging Kabbalah stem from ancient, Gnostic sources, composed in the Mediterranean area.

ish Jewish society? Before attempting to offer what seems to me a more complex answer to the question, let me indicate from the very beginning that I believe that it would be counter-productive to assume that all the traditions that were transmitted and accepted have, indeed, a certain, even limited, relevance to the immediate reality of 13th century Spain. Some of them were accepted just because they were considered as pieces of an ancient Jewish esoteric lore.

Let me start with the central fact that it is only in relatively rare cases that we can locate precise parallels to the earliest traditions which occur in Spain. It is an exceptional situation that in the school of R. Isaac Sagi Nahor, where the Provençal Kabbalistic traditions are the necessary background for the further developments in Spain, we can compare, relatively easily, the two phases to each other: the Provençal one to the Catalan. However, in the case of Nahmanides' traditions the existence of antecedents is an inference, based indeed upon the explicit indications of this Kabbalist, but without earlier material that can support such a view. However, the assumption that Nahmanides' Kabbalah is to a great degree his own development, despite the fact that he would vehemently oppose such an accusation of innovativeness, is open to two different readings: one may argue that provided the fact that this Kabbalist has considered the genuine Kabbalah to be only those traditions that were transmitted orally by an authoritative master to the ear of a wise and competent student, none should expect to be able to easily detect Nahmanides' sources in written documents²². On the other hand, someone may doubt his very conservative declarations, assuming notwithstanding that consciously or not he was the trigger of a kind of Kabbalah that diverged from that of his Geronese colleagues²³, I am inclined to accept the first possibility. In any case, however, there is no way to compare the hypothetical pre Spanish version of Nahmanidean Kabbalah to the form it has taken in Nahmanides' writings and those of his school. However, if the pre-history of the Nahmanidean Kabbalah is unclear, we still have in our possession traditions and writings from three generations of his followers, most, if not all of them being, like Nahmanides himself and his master, Rabbi Yehudah ben Ya'qar, experts in Halakhah²⁴. Despite the distribution and minuteous study of the

²² See Nahmanides' Introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*.

²³ WOLFSON, Elliot, «By the way of truth: Aspects of Nahmanides= kabbalistic hermeneutic», *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, vol. XIX, 1989, págs. 103-178.

²⁴ See IDEL, «Nahmanides» (note 12 above), paragraphs XII-XIII and LIEBERMAN, Saul, *Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature*, ed. D. Rosenthal. Jerusalem 1991, págs. 301-302 [Hebrew].

Nahmanidean material over more than one century, the conceptual developments in his school seem to be marginal, a fact that is connected to what I propose to call the «conservative mode» of his Kabbalah²⁵

On the other hand, despite the apparent advantage offered by the material stemming from the school of Isaac Sagi Nahor, where two different geographical phases are discernable, it is sometimes very difficult to account for the subtle differences between the theories of the master and those of the disciples. As mentioned already above, in Gerona we can perceive a greater concern with philosophical stands than in the Provençal phase, either in the writings of Rabbi Isaac the Blind or in that of his nephew, Rabbi Asher ben David. However, it seems that all the students of Isaac the Blind moved somewhat away from his theosophy toward a more «instrumental» concept of the role of the «Sefirot», in a way that is reminiscent of the views of *Sefer ha-Bahi*²⁶. However, how such a move can be understood as representative of the cultural ambiance of Gerona is very hard to answer. Moreover, the fact that another Kabbalist living in Gerona, Nahmanides, was much closer to Rabbi Isaac's view of the ten sefirot as representing the essence of the divinity, complicates any answer based upon differentiation that are based upon purely geographical considerations. If the fluctuations between nuances in Kabbalistic theosophies are not easily related to the cultural backgrounds, let me attempt to characterize the general attitude of Spanish, and to a certain extent also Provençal Kabbalah, to topics that were crucial for the other important cultural centre of European Jewry: Northern Europe. A comparison of the different treatments of the same topic in the two centres may illustrate the specificity of Kabbalah against the background of its «floruit», but not the specific form a certain version of Kabbalah took in the same geographical area.

III

I assume that a hermeneutical «grille» is active not only in the drastic transformation of the material when transmitted from one centre of culture to another, as in specific acts of selection of the material and its particular interpretation. Let me exemplify the distinct attitudes of the Provençal and Spanish centres to that of the Northern European one using their approaches to two topics that recur in the classical literature shared by these centres: the views of the «Pardes» and these of the «Golem».

²⁵ IDEL, «Nahmanides» (*ibidem*), paragraphs X-XI.

²⁶ See IDEL, *Kabbalah: New perspectives*, págs. 141-144.

Let start with the remark that only very few references to the «Pardes» story are extant in the rich Ashkenazi material, exoteric and esoteric al together. This remark is significant, because it is in the Ashkenazi environment that the «Heikhalot» literature was studied, to a certain extent continued, copied and preserved and nevertheless no substantial efforts to fathom the meaning of the passages on the «Pardes» reached us from this kind of culture. On the other side, the Sephardi literature, mystical and philosophical altogether, was less interested in «Heikhalot» literature in comparison to the Ashkenazi thinkers; however despite this obvious fact, the variety of interpretations offered by Spanish Jews to this story is very impressive. The vast gamut of interpretations may betray an attraction to the story; however, more than reflecting such a fascination, the various interpretations may point at a difficulty to accept the semi-mythological ascent on the high, in the framework of a culture that was interested more in inner experiences or transmissions of energies between man and God rather than in climbing in the bizarre divine suit in order to encounter an anthropomorphic entity. The Ashkenazi reticence to address the problems and protagonists of the «Pardes» story by the Ashkenazi writers of the 12th and 13th centuries is still evident in the much later period; Though there are some important discussions of this topic, like that of R. Shmuel Edeles, and under his influence that of R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the 18th century Polish Hasidism, or R. Yehudah Isaac Safrin of Kormarno's interpretations of the *Zohar*, it is obvious that even they are continuing motifs we found already in the Sephardi texts. Thus, even in later periods, the Ashkenazi literature did not produce a significant innovation concerning this story; as it can be shown, it is only in the late 18th century, and especially in the nineteenth century that a definite turn took place in Jews creating in central and east Europe. This distribution of occurrence of the «Pardes» legend is to be compared with that of the «Golem» topics. As it was proposed elsewhere the Sephardi culture was not interested in this topic, which fascinated, however, the Ashkenazi writers both in the Middle Ages and in more recent centuries. I would like not to enter in more elaborate analyses of the nature of the two forms of European Jewish culture, on the basis of the survey of two themes alone. Many more motifs and themes which dominated the Jewish thought ought to be inspected in details before an attempt to draw more general conclusions as to the structure of the ideical maps of the Ashkenazi of Sephardi communities; for the time being, we are far away from a sustained effort to create a significant map and it is still a desideratum which will wait long time before a substantial cumulative series of research will allow the drawing of such a map.

However, the stability of the divided concerns insofar as the two themes are involved, themes which appear in the canonic literature that predated

the two European Jewish cultures by centuries, is a quandary that seems to be significant enough to be pointed even at this preliminary stage of the attempt to draw a map. Let me therefore offer what is a conjectural comparison of the the significance of the two themes for the understanding of some more in-depth features of the two types of cultures. The Sephardi culture had, in some crucial phases of its development, an acute sense of the religious danger, of the deleterious effects of contamination of the genuine Jewish culture by external influences, or of the efflux of significant fracts of the Jewish «intelligentzia» beyond the boundaries of Judaism. This feeling is conspicuous already in the 12th century, when the creativity of Spanish Jews in many areas was drastically shaped by the Muslim models. The pressures of the Muslim and Christian religions and cultures on the Sephardi one were much greater in comparison to that excersized by the Christian neighbours of the Ashkenazi Jews, though in the case of the later there were much more extreme and brutal expressions of hate in comparison to that encountered by the Sephardi Jewry.

Paradoxically enough, after the cruel pogroms of 1096 caused by the crusades in Ashkenaz, the Jewish culture in these regions was much more secure in comparison to the relatively wellbeing Jewish communities in the contemporary Spain. The insecurity regarding the boundaries of the culture, and sometimes even religion, as the case of the Marranos de monstrate, was one of the reasons for the fascination with the topic of an heretic Elisha Aher who passed the border of his religion. Moreover, the more pluralistic Sephardi culture allowed the concomitent existence of several kinds of superstructures, a fact that could be reflected by the different types of heroes as presented by the «Pardes» legend. Thus both the instability and the insecurity of the Sephardi rich type of culture could attract its spiritual figures to address the «Pardes» as a way of refracting and reflecting upon a deeper historical situation ²⁷. On the other hand, the Ashkenazi culture appears to be much more homogenous, stable and secure, at least as it is expressed by the writings of its major masters. The deep concern with the «Golem», reflects the confidence of the Ashkenazi thinkers as to the efficacy of the religious and magical knowledge of their masters, an act of defiance in the medieval circumstances ²⁸. The «Golem» stands, so I assume, not son much for the weakness and feebleness of Jews who

²⁷ On the various interpretations of the «Pardes» legend see IDEL, M., «Pardes»: *Regaining paradises in Jewish mysticism*, Washington University Press. Seattle (forthcoming).

²⁸ See *idem*, *Golem: Jewish magical and mystical traditions on the artificial anthropod*, SUNY. Albany 1990.

attempted to escape the historical situation by inventing an imaginary mighty helper, but for their conviction that their religion is not only the right one, but also it includes information about extraordinary magical performances ²⁹.

The question of leaving Judaism in favor of another religion or culture was much more marginal in Northern Europe than in the Southern one. The «conversos» is a typically Sephardi experience, only peripherally relevant for the Ashkenazi culture of the Middle Ages; It is only later on that the Ashkenazi «intelligentzia» experienced the same exposure to a strong and influential culture, a fact that caused the interest in the «Pardes situation» ³⁰. The Ashkenazi fascination with the «Golem», and the Spanish deep concern with the «Pardes» altogether allow a better understanding of the distribution of the modalities of Jewish medieval existence; exclusivity which reduced the cultural paradigms that are available to the religious community in Ashkenaz, or a cultural openness that enriches the religious and cultural life, but exposes a minority religion to the achievements of the majority and erodes the uniqueness, and the conscience of uniqueness in Spain. The gamut of the «Pardes» interpretations displays the variegated alternatives opened for the Jewish Spanish elite but, at the same time, also the basic insecurity faced by this very elite ³¹.

It is, therefore, more relevant to examine the preponderance of the diverse elements in different forms of Jewish culture in order to extrapolate their inner structure. In the case of the Spanish Jewish culture, it is the exposure to a developing culture which, during the 13th century, may attract the Jewish intellectuals, that characterizes the first Kabbalistic writings.

IV

The first steps of the Kabbalah in Spain, more precisely in Catalonia, were made as the result of the introduction of this lore from outside the

²⁹ *Ibidem*, págs. 260-263, 266-267.

³⁰ However, in the Enlightenment period, known as aHaskalah», in central and parts of East Europe, some Jewish circles were deeply influenced by the rational trend of European thought and they were exposed to a culture that is both strong and different from the Jewish culture. It is then, at the end of the 18th Century and especially during the 19th Century, that the Ashkenazi fascination with the «Pardes» starts in the elite which turned to the figure of Elisha Aher as a prototype of an heretic, opposing the traditional vision of religion, a dissident which remained nevertheless interested in Jewish issues. It is the insecurity of the new socio-cultural situation that pushed the Jewish intellectuals to look for a Jewish protagonist for their own dissidence.

³¹ See note 27 above.

Peninsula. There are good reason to believe that this was also the case insofar as some traditions that were committed to writing during what can be designated as the second phase of Spanish Kabbalah, the Castilian one³². Since the middle of the 13th century in Castile, a circle of Kabbalists connected to the ha-Kohen family, Rabbi Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, his younger brother Rabbi Isaac, their student Rabbi Moshe of Burgos, and his student Rabbi Joseph ben Todros Abulafia, produced a rich Kabbalistic literature, where some tendencies, unknown, or at least marginal, in Catalan Kabbalah, play an important role: The demonological world is of paramount importance and it was mapped in a detailed manner³³, an gelyogy becomes much more prominent than it was in the Geronese Kabbalah, especially the role of Metatron³⁴, a mysticism of Hebrew language moves towards the centre³⁵, mystical experiences are implied, though not explicitly mentioned³⁶. Whereas the Account of the Creation, «Ma'aseh Be reshit» was cultivated in the Geronese Kabbalah³⁷, in this circle of Castilian Kabbalists the Account of the Chariot, «Ma'aseh Merkavah» is more evident. It is in this circle that the first quotes from the literature connected to the Book of Contemplation appear³⁸, Though acquainted with, and influenced by both the Geronese Kabbalah³⁹ and the thought of the Ashkenazi Hasidism⁴⁰; it seems that the main gist of their thought cannot be derived from these sources, important as they may be. We must surmise the existence of earlier esoteric traditions, which apparently were very for native, a fact that is explicitly admitted by these Kabbalists⁴¹. It seems that the direct

³² Most of the writings of this circle and its most important concepts were printed and analyzed by SCHOLEM, Gershom, *Le-Heqer Qabbalat R Isaac ha-Kohen* Jerusalem 1934; *idem*, «Qabbalat R. Ya'aqov ve-R. Isaac benei R. Ya'aqov ha-Kohen» *Maddaei ha-Yahadut*, vol. II, 1927, pags. 165-293 [Hebrew].

³³ See SCHOLEM, *Maddaei ha-Yahadut*, *ibidem*, pags. 244-264; *idem*, *Kabbalah*, pags. 55-56 and ORON, Michael, «Was the Kabbalah in Castile a continuation or a revolution? - A study of the concept of Evil in Castilian Kabbalah», *The beginnings* (note 19 above), pags. 383-392 [Hebrew] and note 40 below.

³⁴ See SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, pag. 56.

³⁵ Cf. FARBER, Assi, «On the sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon's early kabbalistic system», *Studies in Jewish mysticism and ethical literature presented to Isaiah Tishby*, eds. J. Dan and J. Hacker. Jerusalem 1986, pags. 67-96 [Hebrew]; ALTMANN, Alexander, «Sefer Or Zaru'a le-R. Moshe de Leon», *Qovetz 'Al Yad* [NS], vol. IX, 1980, pags. 199-293 [Hebrew].

³⁶ SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, pag. 56.

³⁷ See GOTTLIEB, Ephraim, *Studies in Kabbalah Literature*, ed. J. Hacker. Tel Aviv 1976, pags. 59-87. [Hebrew].

³⁸ Cf. VERMAN, Mark, *Sifrei ha-lyyun*, Ph. D. Thesis, Harvard University. Cambridge 1984, pags. 168-169, 173-178.

³⁹ See note 46 below and Oron, note 33 above.

⁴⁰ See DAN, Joseph, «Samael, Lilith, and the concept of Evil in early Kabbalah» *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, vol. 5, 1980, pags. 25-40.

⁴¹ SCHOLEM, *Origins*, pags. 39-40.

role of Muslim and Christian elements in the development of these Kabbalists is negligible⁴².

Important as these new topics were for the further developments of Kabbalah, it is only the next generation of the Castilian, writing between 1275 and 1300 that produced the most influential mystical literature in Spain. In what can be described as one of the most creative and prolific quarters in the history of Kabbalah, some few Kabbalists active in Castile, have contributed to the Kabbalistic literature more writings than written by all the other Kabbalists during the whole century before them. Rabbi Moshe de Leon, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan, Rabbi Isaac ibn Avi Sahulah and some few others, have established Kabbalistic writings as a form of Jewish mystical literature by composing very extensive books. In the same quarter, also the literary activity of another Kabbalist, who will preoccupy us immediately below, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, took pace; though he has visited Castile for a relatively short period, and has been in contact with, and has even taught some of the important Castilian Kabbalists, we do not know for sure whether he wrote any of his extant writings in this region⁴³. Last but not least: It is in Castile and during this period that the most important Kabbalistic writings were composed: the *Book of the Zohar*⁴⁴.

What is characteristic of this period on the Christian arena in Spain is the unprecedented effervescence known as the renaissance of Alfonso Sabio in Castile, and the composition of the mystical writings of Ramon Lull in Catalonia. Unlike the first stage of Spanish Kabbalah, which developed during a period that few notable cultural events took place in Catalonia among the Christians, now Kabbalah parallels, at least from the temporary point of view, the intensive changes in its surrounding. Despite the coincidence of the two cultural and religious developments in Castile: the Christian massive translations and the first literary intensive creation in Castile on one hand, and the Kabbalistic rich and voluminous literature, I wonder whether we can, in the present state of research, establish a methodological framework of reference in order to check the conceptual interaction between the two phenomena. On the contrary: it seems that some of the major tendencies that characterize the translations initiated by Alfonso Sabio, apparently have created an antagonism among the Kabbalists. So, for example, the astral

⁴² See IDEL, «The Sefirot above the Sefirot», pág. 264, n. 116.

⁴³ JELLINEK, Adolph, *Bet ha-Midrash*. Jerusalem 1967, vol. III, págs. XL-XLII.

⁴⁴ See LIEBES, Yehudah, «How the Zohar was written», *The Age of the Zohar*, ed. J. Dan. Jerusalem 1989, págs. 1-73 [Hebrew].

magic and astrology in general, were not accepted by most of the Castilian Kabbalists, who preferred the more «genuine», Jewish forms of magic, based upon linguistic magic⁴⁵. The more philosophical and scientific approaches that transpire from some of the translated texts are not represented among the Kabbalists. It is during these decades that a growing disentanglement of Kabbalah from philosophy took place. Curiously enough, the preoccupation with the occult, that was so characteristic of the Alfonsian renaissance did not produce, as far as I am acquainted with the material, any translation of Jewish mystical texts composed just in this period in the immediate vicinity of the royal court. Moreover, while some Jews were deeply involved in the cultural activity of translation, especially from Arabic, it seems that none of them was a Kabbalist, neither did the Kabbalist mentioned their names in the Kabbalistic writings. It is possible that both from the conceptual point of view, and that of the persons involved in the two cultural developments, there was no overlapping between the Spanish Jewish and Christian renaissance. However, despite what can be considered *prima facie* a strange dissociation between the two phenomena, I believe that on a more vague, though still significant, level the Castilian renaissance in Alfonso's court had some impact on the Kabbalistic one.

A phenomenon that did not attract the due attention of the modern scholars was the arrival to Castile of several Jewish persons involved in studies of mystical topics. One of Nahmanides' disciples, Rabbi David haKohen, arrived to Toledo, and played an official role there⁴⁶. He was acquainted also with the Geronese Kabbalah, which was combined with the concern in the «evil side», characteristic of the Castilian Kabbalah⁴⁷. It is quite reasonable to assume that Nahmanidean traditions arrived to Castile also in written forms, as some collectanea of Kabbalistic traditions extant in manuscripts seem to demonstrate⁴⁸. The Ashkenazi culture was represented in Castile by an eccentric figure, Rabbi Dan Ashkenazi⁴⁹ and an occultist coming from Cologne, a certain Rabbi Abraham⁵⁰. Recently, the

⁴⁵ On Zoharic magic see COHEN-ALORO, Dorit, «From the supernal wisdom to the wisdom of the leaves of the tree: Witchcraft in the Book of the Zohar as the result of Adam's Sin», *Daat*, vol. 19, 1987, págs. 31-65 [Hebrew].

⁴⁶ See GOLDREICH, Amos, *Sefer Me'irat hnayim by R. Isaac of Acre*, Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1981, págs. 361-364 [Hebrew].

⁴⁷ Cf. IDEL, M., «The Evil thought of the deity», *Tarbk*, vol. 49, 1980, pág. 360, n. 11 [Hebrew].

⁴⁸ E. 9. Ms. Vatican 202, Ms. Oxford, Bodleiana 1610, etc.

⁴⁹ See TE-SHEMA, Israel, «Rabbeinu Dan Ashkenazin», *Studies in Jewish mysticism, philosophy and ethical literature presented to Isaiah Tishby*, eds. J. Dan and J. Hacker, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1986, págs. 385-394 [Hebrew].

⁵⁰ See RASHBA, *Responsa*, vol. 1, no. 548, ed. Hayyim Dimitrovsky, *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1990, págs. 105-106.

existence, and impact of the Ashkenazi Halakhah in the book of the Zohar has been disclosed⁵¹. The ecstatic Kabbalah of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia was represented by its very founder. Moreover, mystical material from all the mystical circles mentioned above has arrived to Castile even before 1275, due also to the visit of Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen in France⁵². Therefore, there are two main reasons for the religious effervescence in Castile in this period: the arrival on new material and the encounters between representatives of other forms of Jewish thought, previously unknown there⁵³. However, the reason of this intensive and rapid enrichment is far from being clear: none of the visitors in Castile would explain the reasons for his arrival there, and even less instructive are the texts and the traditions that reflect types of thought that flowered elsewhere. Provided the fact that we have here a special phenomenon that demands some sort of explanation, I would like to propose to consider the cultural effervescence in Castile during the sixties and seventies of the 13th century as one major factor for the arrival of the diverse types of Jewish mysticism. In general, it seems that we witness a phenomenon similar to what happened in other cases of cultural development: Berlin of the 18th century attracted Jews from outside, who were influential in establishing a new version of Judaism. Vienna of the 19th and 20th century attracted Jews who took part in the cultural flowering just as it happened in the twenties of our century in the domain of painting in Paris and to what happens today in New York. I surmise that the particular aspects of the Alfonsian renaissance, with its emphases on the occult, could attract Jewish masters from Catalonia and Germany, who were interested in this type of lore and encouraged, at least indirectly, the already existing Kabbalists in this area to collect germane material from outside. The arrival of this different types of thought in a very restricted geographical area, during a very limited period has caused, so I assume, encounters between diverse types of thought that fertilized the already-existing Kabbalah in Castile.

From the little of know on some of the persons who have visited Castile, Abraham Abulafia, Rabbi Dan Ashkenazi and another Ashkenazi figure, it seems that there are two issues relevant to our discussion: a) leaving the

⁵¹ See e. g. TA-SHMA, Israel M., «Be'erah shel Miriam», *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. IV, 1985, págs. 267-270 [Hebrew]; *idem*, «Pores Sukkat Shalom - Berakhah ve-Gilguleiah» *Assufot*, vol. II, 19881 págs. 186-189 [Hebrew].

⁵² See note 46 above.

⁵³ As to the importance of encounters between diverse forms of Jewish mysticism for the effervescence of the Safedian Kabbalah see IDEL, M., *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, SUNY. Albany 1988, págs. 126-140.

place where they have studied their particular types of mystical lore, they could easier enter, while living in a new place, into a deeper type of interaction with unknown types of mystical disciplines. After all the type of an errant scholar, which is not so characteristic in some forms of Kabbalah⁵⁴, may reflect something in the eccentricity of the person. b) This eccentricity is testified by what modern scholars have to say about some of these immigrants. The encounter between different types of Jewish mystical lore, when presented by itinerant people who may be more eager to change their mind, or to adopt other theories, in a dynamic environment, seems to characterize Castile after the first years of the seventies.

One of the major results of these encounters was the emergence of what I propose to designate as «creative» or «innovative» Kabbalah. By this term I mean the assumption that was conceived now not only a received mystical tradition, or even not a generic description of all the different received traditions, but also the mystical literature or concepts that were created by the Kabbalists using hermeneutical devices accepted in canonical Jewish writings as well as contents revealed to Kabbalists, dealing with esoteric topics. In other words, the accumulation of a critical mass of Kabbalistic different traditions in a certain area has created an explosive mass, which caused new intensive processes that stand behind the creation of the luxuriant Kabbalistic literature. The book of the *Zohar*, allowing as it does the expression of a variety of mystical, and non-mystical⁵⁵, type of thought may be considered as reflecting this diversified religious ambiance of Castile during the last quarter of the 13th century. Another issue that is to be briefly mentioned here, although it is not characteristic only to the Castilian Jewish ambiance, is the possible impact of the eschatological mood that surfaces among Jews in Europe as the result of the rumors related to the invasion of the Mongols, who were mistakenly conceived by the Jews as ten lost tribes, who are coming to save the dispersed Jews. How such a messianic effervescence has impacted the European Jews, and in our particular case Kabbalah in Spain, is an issue that still have to be studied in details.

The above tentative description of the intellectual life in Jewish Castile assumes a correlation between the surrounding cultural processes, initiated by the Christians and assisted by some Jews, and those taking place in Castilian Kabbalah, without, however, surmising that the specific contents

⁵⁴ IDEL, M., *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, SUNY. Albany 1988, págs. 9-10.

⁵⁵ See note 51 above.

of the Kabbalistic thought are dependent upon the specific concepts dominant in its environment. This type of correlation refuses to disentangle the development of Kabbalah from historical context, but it attempts to avoid a reductionalist attitude to the emergence of the contents of a certain type of thought to the impact of external factors.

Seen from the previous point of view, the more ecumenical attitude of the *Zohar*, a book in fact a series of different treatises that was able to transcend the narrow systematic thought of a certain Kabbalistic school, allowing the encounter between several Spanish forms of Kabbalah, as well as its openness toward Ashkenazi customs and ritual, is the result of the variegated fabric of Castilian Jewry during the quarter when this book was composed⁵⁶.

In the first decades after the compositions of the diverse layers of the *Zohar*, its earlier strata were accepted by Kabbalists who were in the immediate circle where it was written. As Yehudah Liebes has recently proposed, it is probable that the greatest part of the *Zohar* was composed not by one author alone, the well-known Kabbalist Moshe de Leon, but also by some contributions of Kabbalists like Joseph Gikatilla, Joseph of Hamadan or Rabbi David ben Yehudah he-Hasid⁵⁷. In any case, the later strata of this book, *Sefer Tiqqunei Zohar* and *Ra'ya Meheimna*, were composed by another, unknown, Kabbalists⁵⁸. However, whereas the earlier parts of the *Zohar* were already quoted in the early eighties of the 13th century, the later compositions, written at the very end of the 13th century, surfaced only at the middle of the 14th century, when the first quotes by Kabbalists are extant. Therefore, we can speak about a gradual emerging of the Zoharic literature, and a growing process of the canonization. At the very beginning of the 14th century, the earlier parts of the *Zohar* have inspired other Kabbalists, who not only have copiously quoted from them, but also imitated and translated significant parts⁵⁹. Hence a partial canonization of the *Zohar* took place already in the generation next to the composition of its latter layers.

However, only during the 15th century, a next round of the canonizing processes took place, which involved this time also *Sefer Tiqqunei Zohar*⁶⁰. As the result of a diminution of the creative drive of the Spanish Jewry in

⁵⁶ IDEL, *Kabbalah: New perspectives* págs. 211-212.

⁵⁷ See LIEBES (note 44 above), págs 20-65.

⁵⁸ SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, págs. 59-60; TISHBY, Isaiah, *The wisdom of the Zohar*, Oxford University Press, vol. 1. Oxford 1989, págs. 1-7.

⁵⁹ See SCHOLEM, *ibidem*, págs. 60-61.

⁶⁰ IDEL, M., «Kabbalistic material from the circle of R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid», *Jerusalem Studies in the Jewish Thought*, vol. 11, 1983, pág. 191, n. 109 [Hebrew].

matters of Kabbalah during the hundred and fifty years before the expulsion⁶¹, the tendency to turn to canonization is easier understandable.

It is in the generation of the Expulsion that the canonization of the *Zohar* reached its peak. In my opinion, such an extreme sanctification, served both the generation before the expulsion and that followed it. The paramount importance of this book, apparently also including its latter layers, is visible already around 1470, in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*. It is the book of the *Zohar* that is described as replete with secrets that were lost, and will be restored with the advent of the Messiah, an event that the anonymous Kabbalist believed that will take in his lifetime⁶². Indeed, as it is expressly to the Kabbalist by God Himself⁶³. Its secrets have to be kept from those who are not worthy to receive them, and those who interpret it, apparently in an inadequate manner, are strongly criticized⁶⁴. Rabbi Isaac Mor Hayyim, one of the most influential Kabbalists wrote, in the eve of expulsion, that «the Kabbalah of all the sages of Sefarad, blessed be their memory, agree, unanimously» to the Kabbalah he received, concerning his theosophy of the Sefirot as exposed by the book of the *Zohar*⁶⁵. He attacks il. Menahem Recanati's interpretation of this book, and he promises to write an entire treatise in order to demolish his incorrect interpretation. This fight over the meaning of the *Zohar* is indicative of his canonical status already before the expulsion. Rabbi Yehudah Hayyat, one of the most distinguished among the exiles, believed, as he expressly said, that he was capable to survive all the painful ordeals of the expulsion only because he devoted himself beforehand to the collection of the disparate parts of the *Zohar*⁶⁶. It is significant that not only the theological importance of the book is implied in Hayyat's conception, but also its apotropaic dimension, a fact that shows that the canonization was already a fact, not a process at its inception.

This process of canonization is, in my opinion, to be seen in a larger perspective of the development of Spanish Kabbalah. There are two different directions of the processes that affected the nature of Spanish

⁶¹ More on this issue see below, par VI.

⁶² See SCHOLEM, Gershom, «The Maggid' of R. Joseph Taitachek and the Revelations Attributed to Him», *Sefunot*, OS, vol. 11, 1972-1978, págs. 76-78, 103 [Hebrew].

⁶³ See SCHOLEM, *ibidem*, pág. 102.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, pág. 78.

⁶⁵ See YA'EL NADAV, «An Epistle of the Qabbalist R. Isaac Mar Hayyim concerning the doctrine of "Supernal Lights"», *Tarbiz*, vol. 26, 1957, pág. 458 [Hebrew].

⁶⁶ *Sefer Minhag Yehudah*, printed in *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*. Mantua 1558, introduction of the author. For a detailed analysis of this issue see IDEL, M. «Encounters between Spanish and Italian Kabbalist in the Generation of the Expulsion» (*forthcoming*).

Kabbalah. As seen above, it was open to mystical traditions introduced from outside. Consequently, a diversity of traditions and schools flourished in both Catalonia and Castile. Moreover, the emergence of the creative Kabbalah at the end of the 13th century bears evidence to this pluralistic proclivity in Spain. However, at the same time, there are several fundamental examples of opposite kind of processes: some Kabbalists attempted, and often succeeded to silence different Kabbalistic voices and impose a more unified Kabbalah in their environment. So, for example, the Provençal Kabbalah as represented by the traditions stemming from Rabbi Isaac Sagi Nahor and exposed by his Catalan followers was not continued as a living tradition after the middle of the 13th century. However, Nahmanides' esoteric Kabbalah remained influential in a restricted group, which can be dated up to the middle of the 14th century⁶⁷. I am strongly inclined to attribute this different fate of the two forms of Catalan Kabbalah to the victory of one school on another, and the successful party is, at the same time, the Halakhic establishment in Catalonia⁶⁸. Nahmanides' successor as the religious leader of the Catalan Jewry, Rabbi Shimon ben Abraham ibn Adret, known under the acronym of Rashba, has launched another assault against an eccentric type of Kabbalah, the ecstatic one, which will be described immediately. Though this form of Kabbalah started its career in Spain, it is only after its establishment in Italy, especially in Sicily, that the confrontation between its leader and Ibn Adret took place⁶⁹. Although the main reason for this confrontation seems to have much to do with Abraham Abulafia's claims to the titles of prophet and Messiah, during the controversies that exploded a conflict between two types of Kabbalah became evident. We should not be concerned here with the various details of this fateful rupture between two forms of Spanish Kabbalah; it is sufficient to indicate that Spanish Kabbalah during the 14th and 15th centuries has avoided systematically any mentioning of the name of the ecstatic Kabbalist or quotes from his books. This effective and complete banishment of the ecstatic Kabbalah from Spain affected the spiritual configuration of the Spanish Kabbalah, which refrained from emphasizing the mystical techniques and the extreme ecstatic and mystical goals that characterize ecstatic Kabbalah. Again, Spanish Kabbalah has chosen between a much more pluralistic structure and a more unified one and it fell on the side of a more homogenous form of Kabbalah: the theosophical theurgical one.

⁶⁷ IDEL, «Nahmanides» (note 12 above), par. XIII.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, par. XIV.

⁶⁹ See note 50 above.

The canonization of the Zohar in Spain ⁷⁰ may be regarded as another case of unifying Spanish Kabbalah. However this time it was not the choice of a leading figure, even not of a school which succeeded to prevail over another, but the unanimous predilection of the Spanish Kabbalists to focus on the central concepts of the Zoharic literature. This collective choice is to be understood as the result of the reaction of some important segments of 15th century Jewry, who attempted to distance itself from the more philosophical interpretations of the Kabbalah, and from philosophy in general. It is partially the result of a reaction to what were considered to be the deleterious effects of the study of philosophy on the behaviour of some parts of the Jewish elite during the painful events of 1391 ⁷¹ and the Tortosa controversy ⁷². The critiques addressed to Jewish philosophy, even by some Jewish philosophers, are emblematic for the more conservative move in 15th century Spanish Judaism, which preferred a more homogenous religious culture to a more pluralistic one.

However, it is possible that the move toward a classic, canonic book, and the reticence from other forms of Kabbalah and philosophy in general, represent a tendency toward a unifying vision, which does not leave too much room for dissident views. We can compare this installation of the Zohar, and the critical attitude toward philosophy and philosophical Kabbalah, as a process similar to the unifying efforts of the Catholic kings. The fears of the different, the attempts to establish an unequivocal focus of thought and belief, have a close parallel in Rabbi Yehudad Hayyat's compilation of what can be called the first Jewish index, a list of Kabbalistic books not to be studied, because they combine Kabbalah with philosophy ⁷³. The propensity toward purism, a spiritual counterpart to the concept of purity of blood, seems to inform two different, but concomitant, religious moves within the two religions ⁷⁴.

⁷⁰ Compare, however, the view of TISHBY, *The wisdom of the Zohar* (note 58 above), vol. I, pág. 25 that the *Zohar* was canonized after the expulsion from Spain.

⁷¹ See BAER, I. F., *A history of the Jews in Christian Spain*. Am Oved 1965, págs. 358-363 [Hebrew].

⁷² See TALMAGE, Frank, «Trauma at Tortosa: The testimony of Abraham Rimoch», *Medieval Studies*, vol. 47, 1985, págs. 384-385.

⁷³ See a detailed analysis of this issue in IDEL, «Encounters...» (note 66 above).

⁷⁴ This drive toward homogeneity is to be compared to the Italian openness to a variety of recently discovered texts, the Neoplatonic, Pythagorean and Hermetical literatures, that moved to the centre of the interest exactly during the generation of the expulsion from Spain.

V

During the period when Castilian Kabbalah reached its peak, another form of Kabbalah made its crucial steps as an independent mystical phenomenon: the ecstatic, or prophetic Kabbalah. Its founder, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, born in Saragozza but raised in Tudela, has studied the rudiments of his special Kabbalistic system in Barcelona, around 1270. Shortly afterwards, he visited Castile where he was attempted to disseminate his own Kabbalistic thought. In contact with two central figures of Castilian Kabbalists, Rabbi Moshe ben Shimon of Burgos and Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, he was not able to persuade them to follow his particular path. He apparently left Castile, and Spain, for ever at the middle of the seventies, and the later elaborations of his thought did not affect Spanish Kabbalah in a significant manner.

However, for a better understanding of the Spanish Kabbalah, and of its impact on Spanish mysticism, it would be important to survey the scant data related to Abulafia's Kabbalistic studies in Barcelona. An inventory of the books Abulafia studied is a very instructive way to do it: his studies, and apparently those of the circle of Kabbalists with whom he studied, were focused upon one book and its various interpretations: *Sefer Yezirah*. According to his own testimony, he has studied twelve commentaries on this book, which include two commentaries written by Ashkenazi masters⁷⁵. Only one of them is extant, that of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, while the other commentary, that of Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid, is no more in our hands, though there is no reason to believe that Abulafia has fabricated the existence of the commentary, as its existence can be corroborated by independent evidence⁷⁶. Therefore, it seems that in Barcelona, at the beginning of the second half of the 13th century, Ashkenazi material was known, studied and influential. In the case of Abulafia, it seems that these studies have resulted in the adoption of techniques, used by the Ashkenazi masters in order to create a «Golem»⁷⁷, in order to reach an ecstatic experience. The crucial impact of the Ashkenazi masters on Abulafia concerns two major points: the particular exegetical devices, based upon numerical techniques⁷⁸, and the combinatory technique, which ultimately

⁷⁵ JELLINEK (note 43 above), págs. XLII-XLIII.

⁷⁶ See SCHOLEM, Gershom, *Kitvei Yad be-Qabbalah*. Jerusalem 1930, pág. 112 [Hebrew].

⁷⁷ Cf IDEL, *Golem* (note 28 above), págs. 96-118.

⁷⁸ See IDEL, M., *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, SUNY. Albany 1989, págs. 95-109.

stems from Sefer Yezirah, but was articulated by the Middle Ages masters in Ashkenaz ⁷⁹.

The existence of, and the influence exercised by these two commentaries is important not only for tracing the sources of the ecstatic Kabbalah: they may have influenced also the thought of another contemporary of Abulafia, who lived in the very vicinity of Barcelona: the great mystic Ramon Lull. It is very reasonable to assume, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, that the combinatory techniques exposed by Lull are indebted to their Jewish parallels as they were articulated by the Ashkenazi masters, and in the Kabbalistic sources related to the ecstatic Kabbalah ⁸⁰. This seems to be a relatively exceptional case in the Middle Ages, when Jewish mysticism was influential on, though not influenced by Christian mysticism.

Another topic, that is much more elusive, should nevertheless be mentioned here. As noticed above, at least one description of Sufism was available in Hebrew in Barcelona at the end of the first half of the 13th century: Al-Ghazzali's *Mooznei Zedeq*. Though Abulafia is not reluctant to mention his sources, even when they are not Jewish, Al-Ghazzali of his book is never quoted by Abulafia in his books. Thus, the following observation is very tentative. In his description of the Sufis, Al-Ghazzali proposes a certain rapprochement between the experiences of these Muslim mystics and what he calls prophets: let me adduce the pertinent quote:

«...the end of Sufism being total absorption in God. The intuitions and all that precede are, so to speak, only the threshold for those who enter. From the beginning, revelations take place in so flagrant a shape that the Sufis see before them, whilst wide awake, the angels and the souls of the prophets. They hear their voices and obtain their favors. Then the transport rises from the perception of forms and figures to a degree which escapes all expression, and which no man may seek to give account of without his words involving sin. Whoever has had the experience of the transport knows of the true nature of prophetism nothing but the name... Yet God has brought prophetism near to man in giving them all a state analogous to it in its principal characters» ⁸¹.

The comparison between the Sufis and the prophets assumes the affinity between the mystical experience and prophetism. This is also one of the major claims of ecstatic Kabbalah: the ultimate role of the mystical techniques is to bring the mystic to an ecstatic experience that was desig-

⁷⁹ See IDEL, *Golem* (note 28 above), págs. 54-95.

⁸⁰ IDEL, M., «Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A preliminary observation», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 51, 1988, págs. 170-174.

⁸¹ Quoted from JAMES, William, *The varieties of religious experience*. New York, N. D., págs. 395-396. See also IDEL, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, págs. 106-110.

nated as prophecy⁸². Abulafia indeed considered himself to be an accomplished prophet, and even wrote prophetic books: «Sifrei Nevu'ah»⁸³. Moreover, the spiritual interpretations of eschatology as mystical states of consciousness, so characteristic of Abulafia, is reminiscent of the parallel phenomena in Al-Ghazzali⁸⁴. Last but not least: the importance of pronunciations of the divine name, mental concentration and solitude, as described in Mooznei Zedeq, is reminiscent of the role played by these elements in Abulafia's Kabbalah, despite the fact that there are some divergences between them⁸⁵.

It should be mentioned that the next stage of the development of ecstatic Kabbalah, which took place mainly in the Middle East, was much closer and open to Sufic influences, a fact that shaped its much more mystical physiognomy, in comparison to the Spanish Kabbalah⁸⁶.

VI

As implied above, the century between 1330 and 1430 did not witness the composition of any classic of Kabbalistic literature in Spain. Though elsewhere, in the Byzantine empire, some important Kabbalistic books were composed: Sefer ha-Temunah and its commenary, and Sefer HaQanah, and *ha-Peliah*, whose impact on Kabbalah was considerable, no counterpart is to be found in Spain. It seems that the 14th century Jewish masters preferred to offer a synthesis between Kabbalah and philosophy, which produced only works of secondary importance. This weakness of the Spanish centre of Kabbalah at the beginning of the 15th century can be exemplified not only by the absence of novel and extensive books, but also by an explicit statement of a fulfilled Kabbalist, may be the most known one in the first half of the 15th century Spain, Ilabbi Shem Tov ben Shem Tov; when he started to study Kabbalah, he could not find even one teacher in matters of Kabbalah, and he had to recourse to books alone⁸⁷. Coming from a devoted Kabbalist, who lived in the most important

⁸² See IDEL, *The Mystical Experience* (note 54 above), págs. 12-52.

⁸³ See IDEL, M., *The works and doctrines of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia*, Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1976, págs. 13-15 [Hebrew].

⁸⁴ LAZARUS-YAFEH, Hava, *Studies in Al-Ghazzali*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1975, págs. 425-429.

⁸⁵ IDEL, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, págs. 106-107.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, págs. 126-127.

⁸⁷ See the untitled text extant in Ms. British Library, 775, fol. 129a, printed and discussed by Gottlieb, *Studies* (note 37 above), págs. 350-351. For the cultural atmosphere among the Castilian Jews in the 15th Century see HACKER, Joseph, «On the intellectual character and self perception of Spanish Jewry in late 15th Century», *Sefunot*, NS, vol. II, 1983, págs. 21-95 [Hebrew].

centre of Kabbalistic creativity, in Castile, this confession is highly significant. There is no reason to doubt its validity, since no serious Kabbalist would voluntarily acknowledge that his acquaintance with Kabbalah is not the result of a study with a master, as he did not inherit oral traditions, but was extracted in its entirety from books. It shows that Kabbalah was still a very esoteric phenomenon, which did not fertilize the thought of even greater segments of the Spanish Jewish elite. With the exception of Rabbi Shem Tov's writings, Spanish Kabbalah did not contribute any first rank Kabbalistic text up to the seventies of the 15th century. The crucial role of the *Zohar*, including already quotes from the latter layer of the *Zohar*, *Tiqqunei Zohar*, is evident in Rabbi Shem Tov's writings, which are a major evidence for the course of the canonization of this book. At the same time, this Kabbalist expresses overt anti-philosophical attitudes.

Around 1470, a group of Spanish Kabbalists, whose precise location cannot, for the time being, be determined, conspired in producing a much more significant Kabbalistic literature⁸⁸. The only historical name which is connected to this group is that of the notorious Jewish Kabbalistic magician, Rabbi Joseph della Reina⁸⁹. However, there is good reason to believe that he, and the anonymous Kabbalist who wrote *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, or *Sefer Ha-Malakh ha-Meshiv*, were not solitary figures, but had some companions of students⁹⁰. Likewise, immediately after the expulsion from Spain and additional Kabbalist, who wrote a commentary on the Psalms and other classical Jewish writings, expressed views closely related to those prevalent in the pre-expulsion circle⁹¹. While previous Kabbalists, between the *Zohar* and 1470 have written voluminous treatises, the texts related to this circle constitute an entire literature, which might have amounted in their original to thousands of folios; Extant, however, are only several hundreds, but they seem to be only scant remnants from much large books⁹².

⁸⁸ SCHOLEM, «The "Maggid"=» (note 62 above), págs. 67-112; IDEL, M., «Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer Ha-Meshiv*», *Sefunot*, NS, 11(17), 1983, págs. 185-266 [Hebrew].

⁸⁹ SCHOLEM, Gershon, «On the legend of Rabbi Joseph della Reina», *Studies in Jewish Religion and intellectual history presented to Alexander Altmann*, eds. S. Stein and R. Loewe, University of Alabama Press, University of Alabama 1979, págs. 101-108 [Hebrew]; IDEL, «Inquiries», págs. 226-232, 244-250; DAN, Joseph, «The story of Rabbi Joseph della Reina», *Safed volume*, eds. I. Ben-Zvi and M. Benayahu. Jerusalem 1962, vol. 1, págs. 311-326 [Hebrew].

⁹⁰ IDEL, «Inquiries», págs. 246-247.

⁹¹ See IDEL, M., «The attitude to Christianity in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*», *Immanuel*, vol. 12, 1981, págs. 77-95.

⁹² I hope to elaborate on some recently discovered manuscripts in a monograph devoted to the literature of this article. See meanwhile, IDEL, «Inquiries», págs. 185-192.

Judging from the extant texts which constitute the *Sefer ha-Meshiv* literature, some other texts written under its influence shortly after the expulsion, and some few fragments attributed to Rabbi Joseph della Reina, we can describe, in a rough manner, the main ideas of the circle as follows:

- a) The prevailing feeling of these Kabbalists was that they live at the eve of the coming of the Messiah, and that they are requested to play a certain role in his advent⁹³.
- b) One of the main topics that recurs is the importance of what was designated as «practical Kabbalah» namely Kabbalistic magic. A great variety of magical issues are discussed again and again in these texts, starting with devices purposing to induce oneiric experiences, connected to the composition of Kabbalistic books⁹⁴ and ending with alchemical recipes⁹⁵. Kabbalistic magic is involved also in the abortive attempt, whose alleged protagonist was Joseph della Reina, to combat the demonic forces as part of the eschatological struggle⁹⁶.
- c) Strong anti-Christian feelings were expressed in these texts, which are combined with a fascination with demonology and antiphilosophical and anti-scientific approaches⁹⁷.
- d) These books, and some of the post-expulsion Kabbalistic writings influenced by them, are deeply concerned with questions related to revelations, which are deemed to be the direct source of these writings⁹⁸. Either revealed, actually dictated, by God, or by some revered archangels, these Kabbalistic writings open a closed avenue in Spanish Kabbalah, which was previously reticent toward revelatory experiences.

This unique renaissance of Kabbalah at the eve of the expulsion is the most important legacy of Spanish Kabbalah before its disappearance from the Iberian Peninsula. The end of the Kabbalistic history in Spain with such a pessimistic and particularistic accord is the result of the ongoing deterioration of the state of the Spanish Jewry in their homeland. The strong emphasis on eschatology, the retreat into particularism and the reticence from

⁹³ *Ibidem*, págs. 226-232.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, págs. 202-226.

⁹⁵ IDEL, M., «The origin of Alchemy according to Zosimos and a Hebrew Parallel», *Revue des Etudes Juives*, vol. CXLV, 1986, págs. 117-125.

⁹⁶ See SCHOLEM, «On the legend» (note 89 above), págs. 102-103; IDEL, «Inquires», págs. 244-250.

⁹⁷ IDEL, *ibidem*, págs. 232-243.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, págs. 202-206.

external influences are symptoms of the new phase, a traumatic one, of Spanish Kabbalah. The absence of a dialogue between the religious, and in very many cases also the intellectual, elites of the two religions⁹⁹, the growing persecutions of Judaism and the feeling that the time runs out, have contributed to the acute «sense of an ending», which demands a drastic effort to accelerate, by the means of magic, the course of history. The demonization of Christianity, like that of Judaism among the Christians, symbolizes an irreparable rupture between some parts of the Jewish elite and Spanish culture. The expulsion was not so much the starting point of a traumatic experience, but the seal of an agony. The geographical separation between the Spanish Kabbalists and the Spanish reality is not to be understood, from the merely cultural point of view, as a paralyzing shock, but as the liberation of the Jews from an extreme religious terror and as the preamble of a phase of vigorous creativity in general and in matters of Kabbalah in particular.

Spanish Christian culture strove to get rid of the Jewish element and it has succeeded; the Jews were forced to leave. Departure, it is said, is something similar to death, for both those who leave and those who remain. But, at least in the domain of mysticism, death is sometimes a new birth. Tragic as the expulsion was for the Jewish Sephardi Kabbalists, as well as for some other forms of Jewish creativity, it was nonetheless also a new starting point; by creating, and creating intensively, they defied fate and antagonism. They have reasserted their trust that their mystical lore stands above history. Interestingly enough, after the violent dissociation between the two cultures, also the Spanish one started to develop in an unprecedented manner. In matters of mystical literature, the sixteenth century was, for both Jews and Spaniards, a period of intensive creativity, which can be described, at least marginally, as the result of the disentanglements between the deadly embrace of the other. It is interesting to remark, that both the Jewish Sephardi culture, and the Christian Spanish one, have cultivated, exactly during the same period in the 16th century, conspicuously mystical tendencies, either in Castile or in Safed. In both cases, the role of the more universalistic thought is secondary, as the marginality of the Renaissance elements in those corpora of writings convincingly demonstrates.

⁹⁹ It should be mentioned that starting from the beginning of the 80's of the 15th Century, a geographical separation between the lodging of the Jews and Christian was imposed formally by Christian authorities.