



Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol

Author(s): Elliot R. Wolfson

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*Elliot R. Wolfson*

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The use of sexual imagery to depict religious experience is well attested in the history of religions. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find that the seeing of God, or a Godlike presence, is described in religious texts especially by means of language derived from human sexuality. Such formulation, of course, is not strange to any of the major religious traditions in the Occident or Orient. It is often the case, moreover, that especially the mystics of particular cultures express themselves precisely in this modality. To experience God involves a state of ecstatic union akin to the union of male and female partners in sexual embrace.

This paper will be a study of one particular motif related to this larger issue in the phenomenology of religious experience. We will examine an idea developed in the *Zohar*, the main sourcebook of thirteenth century Spanish Jewish mysticism,<sup>1</sup> concerning the correlation between two apparently unrelated phenomena: circumcision and

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive treatment of the *Zohar* in English remains G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3d ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), chaps. 4 and 5. See also D. Matt, *Zohar, the Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 3–39.

the ability to see the *Shekhinah*, the divine Presence. The causal nexus between these two phenomena is suggested by earlier Rabbinic passages but is given an elaborate treatment in the theosophic system of the *Zohar*. As we shall see, implicit in the Zoharic discussion is the notion that mystical experience involves a type of sexual union between the initiate and the divine. Beholding the face of the *Shekhinah* becomes in the *Zohar* an actual embrace or penetration of the mystic into the divine feminine. Given the normative halakhic sexual mores, it follows that only one who is circumcised can have such a visionary experience.<sup>2</sup> Circumcision is thus an act of opening that not only ushers the circumcised into the covenantal community of God but also places the individual into an immediate—visual—relationship to the divine.

The phenomenological reciprocity between the opening of circumcision and visionary experience of God functions in the *Zohar* as a model for divine-human relations in another way, though in this case as well the sexual implications are evident. It is stated explicitly that only one who is circumcised is permitted to study the Torah.<sup>3</sup> The underlying notion here, as I shall show, is the congruity between textual interpretation and circumcision. Yet, one may well ask, what is it in the nature of hermeneutics that allows the author of the *Zohar*

<sup>2</sup> Conversely, according to the *Zohar*, the Jew who has sexual relations with a non-Jew is guilty of idolatry, i.e., worshiping other gods, which, in Zoharic theosophy, means the forces of impurity. Compare *Zohar Hadash* 21a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Noah); *Zohar* I, 131b; II, 3b, 87b; III, 84a, 142a (*Idra Rabba*). On the connection between idolatry and adultery in earlier rabbinic sources. cf. S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 250. In the preparation of this study the following editions have been used: *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ed. R. Margaliot, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1984); *Zohar Hadash*, ed. R. Margaliot (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, ed. R. Margaliot (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Compare *Zohar* III, 72b–73a, and, *ibid.*, 91b: “The holy Name, which is the Torah, is not made known to one who is not circumcised and who has not entered (the) covenant”; see also *Zohar* I, 236b, where it is said that Simeon and Levi circumcised the inhabitants of Shechem in order to teach them the secrets of Torah. Mention should be made of the fact that the restriction of Torah-study to a Jew is talmudic in origin; see the statement of R. Yohanan in the Babylonian Talmud (BT) *Sanhedrin* 59a, and that of R. Ami, a disciple of R. Yohanan, in *Hagigah* 13a. As far as I know, however, the rabbinic restriction is in no way connected with the issue of circumcision. More poignant, perhaps, is the remark of the Roman satirist, Juvenal (60–130 C.E.), in his *Saturae*, 14, lines 96–104, cited and translated in Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), 2:102–3, concerning Moses’ refusal to disclose the truths of Torah to any but the circumcised. The similarity between the view of Juvenal and that of the *Zohar* was already noted by Y. Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), p. 140, n. 205 (in Hebrew).

(assumed to be Moses ben Shem Tob de León, c. 1240–1305)<sup>4</sup> to link it specifically with circumcision? Or, to invert the question, what in the nature of circumcision leads the author of the *Zohar* to limit textual study of the Torah to one who is circumcised? Although a complete answer to this will not be forthcoming until the latter stages of this analysis, I will outline in a preliminary fashion the elements that serve as the basis for this conception.

Circumcision is not simply an incision of the male sex organ<sup>5</sup> but is an inscription, a notation, a marking.<sup>6</sup> This marking, in turn, is the semiological seal, as it were, that represents the divine imprint on the human body.<sup>7</sup> The physical opening, therefore, is the seal that, in its symbolic valence, corresponds to an ontological opening within God. Hence, circumcision provides the author of the *Zohar* with a typology of writing/reading<sup>8</sup> that is at the same time a typology of mystical experience understood in a sexual vein. The opening of circumcision, in the final analysis, is transformed in the *Zohar* into a symbol for the task of exegesis. The appropriateness of this symbolization lies in the fact that the relation of the visionary to the *Shekhinah* engendered by the opening of the flesh is precisely the relationship of the critic or exegete to the text engendered by the semiological seal. This relationship is simultaneously interpretative and visionary. Through exegesis, that which was concealed, hidden, closed—in a word, esoteric—becomes opened, disclosed, manifest—in a word, exoteric. The uncovering of the phallus is conceptually and structurally parallel to the

<sup>4</sup> See references given in n. 1 above. To those may be added the discussion in Elliot R. Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1986), I:1–46.

<sup>5</sup> The biblical injunction for circumcision (see Gen. 17:10–14, Lev. 12:3, cf. Exod. 12:48), and the normative practice derived therefrom, is clearly and unambiguously directed to the male child. There is documentary evidence in the writings of Strabo of Amaseia (first century B.C.E.–first century C.E.) that some Jews practiced not only circumcision on male children but excision on female children as well. See M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), I:300, 315. Compare, however, L. H. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1985), p. 84, n. 35.

<sup>6</sup> This is based in part on the fact that circumcision is referred to in the Bible (see Gen. 17:11) as an *’ot*, i.e., a sign. The rabbis thus spoke of a “letter” (a secondary meaning of the word *’ot*) which served as the “seal” of the covenant of circumcision, namely, the letter *yod*. Compare *Tanḥuma* (Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, 1964), *Šav*, 14, *Shemini*, 8, and see n. 53 below.

<sup>7</sup> On the “seal” as a designation for circumcision, see G. W. E. Nickelsburg, “Stories of Biblical and Early Post-biblical Times,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. M. E. Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 73, and references in n. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 307–47.

disclosure of the text. The significance of this dynamic for understanding the literary genesis of the *Zohar* should not be ignored.<sup>9</sup> In the closing section of the paper I shall have more to say about this matter.

## I

The nexus between circumcision and the appearance of God is, to my knowledge, first enunciated in the following comment in one of the earliest midrashic compilations,<sup>10</sup> *Genesis Rabbah*, on the verse, "The Lord appeared to him [Abraham]" (Gen. 18:1):

It is written, "This, after my skin will have been peeled off; but I would behold God from my flesh" (Job 19:26). Abraham said, After I circumcised myself many converts came to cleave to this sign. "But I would behold God from my flesh," for had I not done this [i.e., performed the act of circumcision], on what account would the Holy One, blessed be He, have appeared to me? [As it is written] "The Lord appeared to him etc."<sup>11</sup>

The anonymous author of this passage, an astute reader of the biblical text, has noted that the theophany to Abraham at the terebinths of Mamre is preceded in Scripture by the account of Abraham's and Ishmael's being circumcised.<sup>12</sup> The conjunction of these two episodes has forged in the mind of the midrashist a more than casual connection between the act of circumcision and the appearance of

<sup>9</sup> Compare Liebes, pp. 138–46.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Jacob Neusner, *Midrash in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Genesis Rabbah*, ed. Theodor-Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 48:1 (p. 479), and 48:9 (p. 485). Compare Philo, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin* (Loeb Classical Library) 3.49, who writes that circumcision is the sign of election for "Israel, that is seeing God." It is difficult to ascertain if Philo had in mind some midrashic tradition akin to what we have found in the Palestinian *Genesis Rabbah*. On the Philonic etymology of Israel as "one who sees God," cf. P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 115–18 (and other references given there, p. 115, n. 3); G. Dellings, "The 'One Who Sees God' in Philo," in *Nourishes with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, ed. F. Greenspahn, E. Hilgert, and B. Mack (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 27–49. For Philo's views on circumcision, see R. Hecht, "The Exegetical Contexts of Philo's Interpretation of Circumcision," in Greenspahn, Hilgert, and Mack, eds., pp. 51–79.

<sup>12</sup> The whole problematic is presumably eliminated by the form-critical method of exegesis, which ascribes different authorship to the two literary strata: Gen. 17:23–27 is a Priestly document that supposedly follows Gen. 17:1–14, which is P's instruction for circumcision, whereas Gen. 18:1–6 is a narrative complex derived from J (ending in Gen. 19:38). See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 202–4. Yet, one could argue that the crucial question is not that of disparate textual units but, rather, the literary whole achieved by a process of redaction. From this latter perspective, the conjunction of these passages raises the hermeneutical problem addressed by the ancient Jewish exegetes.

God. In disregard of other biblical contexts to the contrary<sup>13</sup> (e.g., Gen 17:1), the author of this comment wishes to state that it is in virtue of the rite of circumcision that God manifests himself to Abraham. "Had I not been circumcised," wonders Abraham, "on what account would God have appeared to me?" That is to say, by means of what deed would he have merited the epiphany of God? The intent of this passage, then, must be seen in light of an idea emphasized time and again in rabbinic literature: without works there is no reward, or, to invert Paul's locution, one is justified by acts alone.<sup>14</sup> Here, as in many other rabbinic sources, it is particularly the act of circumcision that merits a special favor on the part of God.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation is supported by a similar exegesis of the passage from Job: the first clause refers to the act of circumcision, peeling off the skin (i.e., the foreskin), and the second to the vision of God that follows therefrom. "But I would behold God from my flesh," that is, from the flesh of the phallus,<sup>16</sup> the organ of circumcision.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that this is the import of the midrashic statement: by virtue of the merit of circumcision God appeared to Abraham. The divine manifestation demands some prior deed, a *mišwah*, which creates a link between man and God. The rite of circumcision, after all, is the mark of the covenant between God and the (male) children of Israel.<sup>17</sup> Through circumcision, then, one merits to stand in the presence of God, or, to put it differently, the appearance of God is itself the reward for the prior act of fulfilling the divine decree.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This is in keeping with what James Kugel has called the "verse-centeredness" of *midrash*; see his "Two Interpretations of Midrash," in Hartman and Budick, eds. (n. 8 above), pp. 94–95.

<sup>14</sup> A classic study of this rabbinic conception is A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, s.v. "circumcision"; and cf. J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 2:178–79.

<sup>16</sup> The foreskin is referred to several times in the Bible itself as the "flesh of the foreskin"; see Gen. 17:11, 14, 23, 24–25; Lev. 12:3.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on circumcision as the taxonomy for Judaism in antiquity, see Jonathan Smith, "Fences and Neighbors," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. W. S. Green (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), 2:9–15; Schiffman (n. 5 above), pp. 23–24.

<sup>18</sup> Compare *Bereshit Rabbati*, ed. C. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1940), p. 79. See also the commentary of Naḥmanides on Gen. 18:1 (ed. H. Chavel [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1960], 1:106–7): "The disclosure of the *Shekhinah* . . . is a reward for a precept that has already been fulfilled." According to another line of interpretation, the nexus between Abraham's circumcision in Genesis 17 and the theophany at the beginning of chap. 18 is meant to teach us about the virtue of visiting the sick, for God himself in this case serves as the role model insofar as He comes to visit Abraham immediately after the circumcision. See, e.g., BT *Baba Meši'a* 86b, *Soṭah* 14a; *Genesis Rabbah* 8:13 (p. 67).

Yet, there is an additional element alluded to in the above passage from *Genesis Rabbah*. The midrashist asserts that after Abraham was circumcised many converts “came to cleave to this sign,”<sup>19</sup> that is, many desired to convert to the Jewish faith by undergoing the rite of circumcision. We know from other aggadic sources that Abraham and Sarah were viewed as the first proselytizers for God.<sup>20</sup> It may be suggested, however, that in the present context one can find in the portrayal of Abraham as one who encourages conversion through his circumcision a polemic against the dominant claims of Christianity (following Pauline doctrine) that religious conversion is a matter of faith, not works, and that for newcomers into the covenantal community of God (i.e., the Church) circumcision of the flesh was not a necessary initiation rite.<sup>21</sup> Our *midrash* emphasizes, to the contrary, that it was precisely Abraham’s own circumcision that induced more converts into the faith of Judaism. In opposition to the claims of Christianity, the rabbis maintained that the rite of circumcision was not only still viable as a religious duty but was also the central feature of a proper conversion process.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on Abraham’s circumcision and its drawing forth a horde of potential converts to cleave to that sign can only be seen as a tacit rejection of the Christian position that circumcision of the flesh had been replaced by circumcision of the spirit (enacted in baptism).

<sup>19</sup> See the comment of D. Freedman in *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 1:406, n. 4: “Deriving *nikkefu* from *hikkif* [the expression used in Job 19:26], to surround, i.e., proselytes flocked, surrounding him, as it were.”

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 12:5 (ed. E. G. Clarke with collaboration by W. E. Aufrecht, J. C. Hurd, and F. Spitzer [New York: Ktav, 1984], p. 13); *Targum Onkelos ad loc.* (*The Bible in Aramaic*, ed. Alexander Sperber [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959], 1:17); *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch*, ed. Michael L. Klein (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1980), 1:49, 132, 2:11; *Genesis Rabbah* 39:14 (pp. 378–79). For other aggadic sources, see L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913), 1:195–217; M. Kasher, *Torah Shelema* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1949), 3:555, n. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Rom. 2:5–29, 4:9–12; 1 Cor. 7:18; Eph. 2:8–13; Gal. 5:2–6; Col. 2:11; Phil. 3:3. On baptism, or the circumcision of the spirit, as a substitute for circumcision of the flesh, see Col. 2:12–13; Gal. 6:13–14; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.48 (ed. H. Chadwick [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], p. 302); P. Borgen, “Paul Preaches Circumcision and Pleases Men,” in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 37–46. It should be noted that some church fathers had trouble explaining the abolishment of circumcision in light of the fact that Jesus himself was circumcised; see Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses Panarium* 28.5.2 (cited in M. Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1965], p. 90). There is ample Patristic evidence, moreover, that certain Jewish-Christian sects, such as the Ebionites and Nazoraeans, still practiced circumcision and kept the Sabbath; cf. A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 20, 23–24, 29, 35, 37, 39, 42, 44, 51.

<sup>22</sup> See Schiffman (n. 5 above), pp. 23–25; Ginzberg, 5:263–69, n. 318.

That this explanation is indeed plausible is supported by the continuation of this passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, which doubtless was intended by the redactor(s) to drive the point home with ever greater clarity:

1. R. Isaac<sup>23</sup> began/opened [his discourse]: "Make for me an altar of earth etc." (Exod. 20:21). R. Isaac said: If I [i.e., God] appear to the one who builds an altar for my name's sake and bless him, how much more so with respect to Abraham who has circumcised himself for my name's sake. [It is thus written] "And the Lord appeared to him etc."

2. R. Levi began/opened [his discourse]: "An ox and a ram for an offering etc. [for today the Lord will appear to you]" (Lev. 9:4). He said: If I [God] appear to the one who sacrifices an ox or ram for my name's sake, how much more so to Abraham who has sacrificed himself for my name's sake." And the Lord appeared to him etc."

The comments attributed to R. Isaac and R. Levi, both third-century Palestinian Amoraim,<sup>24</sup> underscore the intrinsic connection between the meritorious deed of circumcision and the appearance of God. For both, circumcision is to be understood as an act of sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> If one who builds an altar or sacrifices animals merits the approach (and blessing) of the divine, how much more so Abraham, whose act of circumcision is likened to an act of self-sacrifice.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *Tanḥuma*, ed. Solomon Buber (New York: Sefer, 1946), *Vayera* 4: "R. Isaac Nafḥa." The same reading is found in *Tanḥuma*, *Vayera* 2; *Aggadat Bereshit*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Compare *Genesis Rabbah* 63:13 (p. 698), where it is reported that R. Levi transmitted the following opinion in the name of R. Hama bar Hanina: Esau's rejection of his birthright was tied to his hatred of the blood of circumcision. In this context it is clear that Esau functions as a symbol for the Christian church; see Idris Aminoff, "The Figures of Esau and the Kingdom of Edom in Palestinian Midrashic-Talmudic Literature in the Tannaitic and Amoraic Periods" (Ph.D. diss., Melbourne University, 1981), pp. 131–33. On this midrashic typology, see also Ginzberg, 5:272, n. 19; G. Cohen, "Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 27–30, and references given on p. 27, n. 31. Compare also *Genesis Rabbah* 65:9 (pp. 726–27), where R. Levi and R. Isaac are involved in anti-Christian polemics as well; see Aminoff, p. 136, n. 18, and pp. 217–20. On R. Isaac and R. Levi, as well as other third-century aggadists, as defenders of Judaism against the attacks of the Church found in the Syriac Didascalia, see A. Marmorstein, "Judaism and Christianity in the Middle of the Third Century," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 10 (1935): 236, nn. 75–76, 243, nn. 111–12.

<sup>25</sup> On the connection between circumcision and sacrifices, see G. Vermes, "Circumcision and Exodus IV 24–26," in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), pp. 178–92. Some scholars have even suggested that infantile circumcision in ancient Israel on the eighth day must be seen as a replacement for child sacrifice (see Exod. 22:29, Lev. 22:27); cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:138, n. 3.



The nexus of ideas is reiterated in a twelfth-century midrashic compilation, *Numbers Rabbah*, but with a strikingly new twist. In addition to viewing circumcision as the deed by means of which one merits the reward of seeing god, this midrashic pericope affirms an even deeper correlation between circumcision and the visual revelation of God based on the physical purity of the visionary. In this case the matter is not merely deontological but, rather, ontological. That is, circumcision effects a change in the very substance of the individual—and not only in his ethico-religious stature—which prepares him for the visionary experience. I will cite the passage in full, ostensibly an interpretation of Song of Songs 3:11, “O Maidens of Zion, go forth, And gaze upon King Solomon, wearing the crown that his mother gave him on his wedding day, on his day of bliss.” Commenting particularly on the first part of the verse, the anonymous midrashist writes:

It is speaking about the time when the Presence [*Shekhinah*] rested in the Tabernacle [*mishkan*]. “Go forth and gaze,” as it is said, “And all the people saw and shouted, and fell on their faces” (Lev. 9:24). “The daughters of Zion,” those [males] who were distinguished [*ha-mešuyanim*] by circumcision, for if they were uncircumcised, they would not have been able to look upon the Presence. Rather, they would have fallen as Abraham fell, as it is said, “Abram fell on his face, and God spoke to him” (Gen. 17:3).<sup>26</sup> Similarly with respect to Balaam, “[Words of him who hears God’s speech, who beholds visions of the Almighty], prostrate, but with eyes unveiled” (Num. 24:4). And thus it says, “Moses said, This is the thing [*zeh ha-davar*] which the Lord has commanded that you do, that the Glory of the Lord may appear to you” (Lev. 9:6). What was “this thing”? He told them about [the rite of] circumcision, as it is written, “This is the reason [literally, ‘this is the thing,’ *zeh ha-davar*] why Joshua performed circumcision” (Josh. 5:4). “Which God commanded Abraham to do.” This<sup>27</sup> may be compared to a shopkeeper who has a friend who is a priest. He had some unclean thing in his house, and he wanted to bring him [the priest] into the house. The priest said to him: If you want me to go into your house, listen to me and remove that unclean thing from your house. When the shopkeeper knew that there was no unclean thing there, he went and brought the priest into his house. Similarly [with respect to] the Holy One, blessed be He, when He wanted to appear to Abraham, His beloved, the foreskin was hanging from him. When he circumcised himself,

<sup>26</sup> This interpretation can be traced to earlier sources; cf. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 17:3 (ed. E. G. Clarke et al., p. 17); *Genesis Rabbah* 46:6 (pp. 463–64), 47:3 (pp. 472–73); *Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha* 20 (p. 23); *Pirquei de-R. Eliezer* (New York: Om, 1946), chap. 29.

<sup>27</sup> The same analogy or parable appears in the lost *Midrash Avkhir* as cited in the midrashic anthology, *Yalqut Shim'oni* (Jerusalem, 1960), vol. 1, sec. 82.

immediately [God] was revealed, as it says, "On that very day Abraham was circumcised" (Gen. 17:26), and afterward "The Lord appeared to him" (*ibid.* 18:1). Therefore Moses said to them, God commanded Abraham, your father, to perform [the act of] circumcision when He wished to appear to him. So in your case, whoever is uncircumcised, let him go out and circumcise himself, "that the Glory of the Lord may appear to you" (Lev. 9:6). Thus Solomon said, "O Maidens of Zion, go forth, And gaze upon King Solomon" (Song of Songs 3:11), the King who desires those who are perfect, as it is written, "Walk before Me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1), for the foreskin is a blemish on the body.<sup>28</sup>

The author of this *midrash*, in a remarkable reversal of the literal sense of the text, interprets the "daughters of Zion" as referring to those [males] marked or "distinguished" (*mešuyanim*, an obvious play on the word *šiyyon*) by circumcision.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, daughters cannot be so distinguished; thus the midrashic reading effectively effaces the literal sense. More significantly, the midrashist forges an unambiguous connection between the capability of beholding the Presence or Glory of God and circumcision: he who is uncircumcised will fall on his face—as Abraham himself did prior to his circumcision—in the presence of God's manifestation. The alleged reason for this is given by the *midrash* itself: the foreskin is a blemish that acts as a barrier separating the individual and God.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the earlier midrashic texts that we examined, there is here an essential link between the act of circumcision and the visionary experience of the divine. Circumcision is not simply one good deed among many in consequence of which the person merits a vision of God. It is precisely and exclusively by means of circumcision that one can see God, for this act removes that potential barrier—symbolized by the cutting of the foreskin<sup>31</sup>—separating human and divine. Circumcision is the vestibule or portal through which one must pass if

<sup>28</sup> *Numbers Rabbah* (Tel Aviv: Moriah, 1960), 12:10; see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 97–102.

<sup>29</sup> Such an interpretation is found in an earlier midrashic source which doubtless served as the basis for this passage; cf. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* (Tel Aviv: Moriah, 1960), on Song of Songs 3:11. The connection of this verse to circumcision was probably also suggested to the midrashist by the words "wearing a crown," the latter being a reference to the corona of the phallus disclosed by the act of circumcision (see n. 53 below).

<sup>30</sup> The equation of uncleanness or impurity with uncircumcision is biblical in origin; cf. Isa. 52:1 and Ezek. 44:7. In rabbinic literature one of the names of the evil inclination is "uncircumcised" or the "foreskin"; cf. Schechter (n. 2 above), p. 243.

<sup>31</sup> On the cutting of the foreskin as a symbol for the excision of sensual desires in the writings of Philo, see Hecht (n. 11 above), pp. 51–79. The connection between circumcision and the weakening of sexual desire was affirmed as well by medieval Jewish philosophers; see, e.g., Judah ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, ed. Y. Even Shmuel (Tel Aviv:

one is to have a visionary experience of God. The opening of circumcision results in an opening up to God, a receptivity, which enables one to stand in God's presence and to behold the Glory.

## II

All that is implied in the midrashic passage from *Numbers Rabbah* is made explicit in the *Zohar*, where it is embellished by an intricate theosophic structure. It is quite clear that in the *Zohar* the nexus between circumcision and the vision of God is reaffirmed and given new layers of meaning. The treatment of this midrashic theme in the *Zohar* must be seen in light of a central category in the kabbalistic (especially Zoharic) conception of religious perfection: man's relation to God, particularly the *Shekhinah*, the feminine hypostasis of God and the last of the divine emanations (*sefirot*), is viewed in a decidedly sexual manner. One who is uncircumcised cannot see God (or the *Shekhinah*), for seeing involves some sort of intimate contact, touching, immediacy, and only one who is circumcised can have such an experience.

The issue of openness/closedness is connected particularly in the *Zohar* with the problem of circumcision and visionary experience. Commenting on Gen. 18:1, "And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham]," R. Abba said: "Before Abraham was circumcised he was closed [*'atim*]. When he was circumcised all was revealed and the Presence rested upon him in its completeness."<sup>32</sup> The closure of Abraham, or, more specifically, Abraham's phallus, has an objective correlate: an obscured vision of the divine. That is, before his circumcision Abraham was closed, and hence God was not fully revealed to him. The act of circumcision, on the other hand, is an opening, a removal of closure, which corresponds objectively to a disclosure of God. The relationship of God to a particular man is dependent upon the physical condition of the latter: if closed (uncircumcised), then the vision is obscured; if opened (circumcised), then the vision is complete. It is highly significant that comprehension is here linked especially to the phallus: when Abraham was uncircumcised, and therefore closed, he lacked comprehension of the divine; when he was circumcised, and therefore opened, all was revealed to him. As Moses Cordovero (1522–70) expressed it in his commentary to this passage in the

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Dvir, 1972), 1:115; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:49.

<sup>32</sup> *Zohar* I, 98b. The nexus of circumcision and cleaving to the *Shekhinah* is alluded to as well in the Zoharic claim that before entering the land of Israel (a symbol for *Shekhinah*) Joshua had to circumcise the people; see I, 93b.

*Zohar*: “Closure brings about the removal of comprehension.”<sup>33</sup> (Subsequently, I shall return to the connection between the openness of the phallus and the possibility of comprehension, specifically understood as a hermeneutical mode.)

Even before his circumcision Abraham merited some vision of the divine realm. This is implied in the above passage: “When he was circumcised *all* was revealed to him etc.” That is, prior to the circumcision there was, at best, a partial vision of God. This is spelled out in another Zoharic passage, attributed to R. Eleazar, which interprets Gen. 18:1, “And the Lord appeared to him,” as referring to a time “after Abraham was circumcised. For before Abraham was circumcised [God] did not speak to him except through the lower gradation, and the upper gradations did not stand over that gradation.”<sup>34</sup> In yet another passage the author of the *Zohar* clarifies the difference between Abraham’s visionary (prophetic) experience before and after circumcision in more detail:

“The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision [*ba-mahazeh*]” (Gen. 15:1). What is [the meaning of] “in a vision”? This is the vision [or mirror, Aramaic: *heizu*], the gradation in which all images [*deyuqnin*] are seen [*’ihazyan*]. R. Shimeon said: Before Abraham was circumcised, one gradation spoke with him. And which one was it? It was the “vision” [*mahazeh*]. . . . When he was circumcised all the gradations rested on this gradation and then it spoke with him. . . . Before he was circumcised those gradations did not rest upon him to speak [to him].<sup>35</sup>

The divine gradation referred to as the “vision” is the last of the *sefirot*, the *Shekhinah*, so named because this gradation is a prism that reflects all the upper colors or forms. Prior to his circumcision, therefore, God spoke to Abraham through the intermediary of the *Shekhinah*. Indeed, even after the circumcision God continued to speak with Abraham through the *Shekhinah*; however, in the latter case the vision was complete, since all the upper gradations rested upon or stood over the *Shekhinah* in the moment of revelation. While Abraham was uncircumcised his visionary experience was restricted to the lowest emanation. In a subsequent passage de León returns to this distinction in an effort to clarify further the theophanic transformation undergone by Abraham:

<sup>33</sup> Moses Cordovero, *Zohar'im Perush 'Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem: Or Yaqar, 1970), 5:4.

<sup>34</sup> *Zohar* I, 97b.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 88b–89a.

Come and see: before Abraham was circumcised [God] spoke to him exclusively from within the vision [*maḥazeh*], as it is written, "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision etc." (Gen. 15:1). "In a vision," (i.e.) by means of that vision [*ḥeizu*], the gradation in which all the forms are seen . . . and that vision is the secret of the covenant [*raza di-berit*]. If you say it is called *maḥazeh* because it is the vision, (i.e.) the gradation in which all the forms are seen, did you also not say at the outset that before Abraham was circumcised no one spoke to him but that gradation when no other gradation rested upon it? Yet, you now say that [the expression] "in a vision" [*ba-maḥazeh*] refers to that vision [or mirror] in which [are seen] the other gradations! Before Abraham was circumcised it is written, "And the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15:1). Indeed, that gradation is the vision of all the supernal gradations, and it is fixed in the appearance of the supernal gradations. And even though at that time Abraham was not circumcised, that gradation was in the appearance of the supernal gradations, and She existed in all those [upper] colors . . . for She is the vision of all the upper colors that are over Her. And thus in that appearance She stood with Abraham and spoke to him, even though he was not circumcised. When he was circumcised, what is written? "And the Lord appeared to Abram." . . . Thus before Abraham was circumcised that gradation [spoke] to him. When he was circumcised immediately [it says], "The Lord appeared to Abram etc." All the [other] gradations appeared on that gradation, and the latter spoke to him in completeness. And Abraham was bound from gradation to gradation and entered the holy covenant which appeared in its completeness.<sup>36</sup>

One senses the tension in the mind of the author of the *Zohar*, struggling to clarify the difference in vision accorded to Abraham before and after his circumcision. The biblical term used in connection with God's appearance to Abraham (before the circumcision) is *maḥazeh*, vision, which is understood kabbalistically to be a symbol for *Shekhinah*, the prism in which all the forms are reflected. Yet the *Zohar* makes the claim that before his circumcision Abraham did not converse with the *Shekhinah* in Her fullness, that is, as reflecting all the upper lights. This apparent tension has led various commentaries on the *Zohar* to offer several responses,<sup>37</sup> none of which, in my view,

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 91a-b.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Shimeon Lavi, *Ketem Paz* (Jerusalem: Ahabat Shalom, 1981), 1:224: "Before Abraham was circumcised his prophecy was in that lower vision, the image of an image. However, after he was circumcised his prophecy was in the higher vision, as it says, 'And the Lord appeared to Abram.'" The "lower vision" is identified by Lavi as the realm of celestial palaces below the world of emanation, whereas the "higher vision" is the *Shekhinah*, the last emanation which reflects all the upper ones. In addition to difficulties that one may have fitting this interpretation into the text, Lavi contradicts himself, for prior to this passage he wrote: "All the prophecies of the prophets were from the palaces which are below the hidden emanation, below 'Ateret [i.e., *Shekhinah*] except for Moses . . . [whose prophecy] was in 'Ateret itself.'" An

is sufficient. What is clear is that de León is trying to uphold a qualitative distinction in the nature of the vision that Abraham had before and after his circumcision. There is, on the one hand, something about the act of circumcision that effects a change in the individual resulting in a change in his visionary status. On the other hand, as a result of the circumcision there is a change in the nature of the divine itself, particularly the relation of the last gradation to those above Her. In the latter respect, it may be said that circumcision includes a a theurgical dimension.

In the above passage the nexus between circumcision and theophany is reaffirmed by the introduction of another key concept: the identification of the vision, or *Shekhinah*, as the “secret of the covenant,” *raza di-berit*.<sup>38</sup> This should not be construed as an arbitrary or unintentional remark. The biblical term *maḥazeh*, a symbol for the *Shekhinah*, is at the same time the “secret of the covenant.” Hence, vision equals Presence equals secret of the covenant; by the principle of transitivity, then, vision equals secret of the covenant. One would therefore not expect this higher gradation to commune with Abraham prior to his circumcision. The symbolic network thus established calls for interpretation.

We may begin to interpret this symbolism by reference to another standard Zoharic notion concerning the twofold nature of the *berit*. According to the *Zohar*, the covenant in its totality comprises two aspects, masculine and feminine, the ninth and tenth *sefirot*, *Yesod* (“Foundation”) and *Malkhut* (“Kingship”) or *Shekhinah*.<sup>39</sup> The “vision” [*maḥazeh*], spoken of as the *raza di-berit*, “secret of the covenant,” corresponds to only one of these aspects, the *Shekhinah*. Prior to Abraham’s circumcision he could not possibly have merited a complete theophany, but only a partial one related exclusively to the feminine hypostasis of God: the “secret of the covenant,” the

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alternative explanation is offered by Moses Cordovero in his commentary *’Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem: Or Yaqar, 1967), 4:181. According to him, the change in the visionary status of *Shekhinah* had nothing to do with the divine potency itself but, rather, with the level of comprehension of Abraham. Cordovero’s explanation undermines the theurgical dimension of circumcision stressed by the author of the *Zohar* himself, esp. in I, 97a.

<sup>38</sup> Compare Moses de León, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. A. W. Greenup (London, 1911), p. 67: “And contemplate that the secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*, a translation of the Zoharic *raza di-berit*) is universal faith (*derekh kelal ’emunah*). And when the foreskin is removed from the phallus—this is the secret of faith. Yet the removal of the foreskin to enter into the secret of the faith [is not complete] until one pulls down [the membrane] and the corona is revealed. When one reaches the corona one enters into the mystery of the way of faith and is bound to faith.” See below, nn. 44 and 53.

<sup>39</sup> See *Zohar* I, 32a, 47b, 69a, 71b, 72b, 117a: III, 14a, 115b; G. Scholem, “Colours and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism,” *Diogenes* 109 (1980): 69.

“vision,” the “lowest gradation.” After the circumcision, however, Abraham experienced the masculine and feminine aspects of God, for by means of circumcision one enters into both gradations.<sup>40</sup> Only by appropriating the two dimensions could Abraham experience the full theophanic image:

Come and see: before one is circumcised one is not united to the name of the Holy One, blessed be He; when one is circumcised one enters the name and is united to it.<sup>41</sup> And, if you say that Abraham was united to it before he was circumcised, indeed he was, but not as it is fitting, for out of the supernal love that the Holy One, blessed be He, had for Abraham, He drew him near. Afterward He commanded him to circumcise himself and gave him the covenant, the bond of all the upper gradations. The covenant: the bond to tie everything together, to contain one in the other; the covenant: the bond in which everything is tied. Therefore, before Abraham was circumcised [God] spoke with him only by means of the “vision.”<sup>42</sup>

Abraham’s bondedness to the sefirotic realm prior to his circumcision was not “proper” or adequate, for it was only out of God’s love for him that he was drawn close to the divine. By means of circumcision, however, one properly merits union with the divine; the phallus is the place of the covenant or the knot in which all the upper grades are united. Whereas before the circumcision Abraham was addressed by the “vision,” that is, by the *Shekhinah*, after the circumcision he was himself bound to the covenant that binds together the upper forces in the lower grade, that is, the *sefirah* of *Yesod* as united with the *Shekhinah*. In effect, the claim of the *Zohar* is that only one (in this case Abraham) who is circumcised can be united with the *Shekhinah* in Her state of fullness and thereby cleave to the upper realm of the *sefirot*.<sup>43</sup>

However, the circumcision of Abraham also has a theurgical dimension, for it effects a change in the nature of the divine: just as in the fulfillment of circumcision one joins the masculine and feminine

<sup>40</sup> Compare *Zohar* I, 96b, 98b (*Sitrei Torah*); III, 14a. Kabbalists explained the androgynous nature of circumcision in terms of the two procedures required in the circumcision ritual by rabbinic law (cf. BT *Shabbat* 173b): *milah* (incision of the foreskin) and *peri’ah* (uncovering of the corona), which correspond symbolically to the two divine emanations, *Yesod* and *Shekhinah*. Compare, e.g., *Zohar* I, 13a, 32a–b; II, 40a, 60b, 125b; III, 91b, 163a.

<sup>41</sup> On the connection between the divine name and circumcision, cf. *Zohar* I, 95a, 96b; II, 3b, 32a, 87b; III, 91a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, secs. 24 (70a), 22 (65b), 61 (94b). The correlation between circumcision and the Tetragrammaton is made in a host of thirteenth-century texts, the development of which I hope to treat in a separate study.

<sup>42</sup> *Zohar* I, 89a.

<sup>43</sup> Compare *ibid.*, II, 61a, 86a, 216a; III, 73a–b.

potencies in oneself, so too one brings about such a unification above. The *Zohar* exegetically connects this mystery to Gen. 18:1 as well:

Come and see: Before Abraham was circumcised nothing but the [lowest] gradation was upon him, as we have said. After he was circumcised, what is written? "And the Lord appeared to him" (Gen. 18:1). To whom? It is not written, "And the Lord appeared to Abram," for if [God] appeared to Abraham, what more praise is there now than in the beginning, before he was circumcised? For it is written, "And the Lord appeared to Abram" (Gen. 17:1) [i.e., before the circumcision]. This is rather a hidden secret. "And the Lord appeared to him," i.e., to that gradation that spoke with him [Abraham], which did not take place before he was circumcised. For now [after the circumcision] the Voice [sc. *Tif'eret*, "Beauty," the sixth emanation, the central pillar in the divine edifice] was revealed and united with the Speech [*Shekhinah*] when the latter spoke to Abraham. "And he sat in the opening of the tent." "And he" [the verse] does not reveal who. The [Torah] here revealed wisdom, for all the gradations [the *sefirot*] rested upon that lower gradation [*Shekhinah*] after Abraham was circumcised.<sup>44</sup>

The secret of the verse alludes to the fact that Abraham's circumcision initiated a change in the *Shekhinah* in relation to the other *sefirot*. Before Abraham's circumcision, only the *Shekhinah* conversed with him; after his circumcision She was united with Her masculine consort, *Tif'eret*, and the latter was revealed to Abraham through the *Shekhinah*. This is the mystical meaning of Gen. 18:1, "And the Lord," *Tif'eret*, the masculine potency or the attribute of mercy, "appeared to him," that is, to that gradation that spoke to Abraham, the feminine *Shekhinah* or the attribute of judgment. The post-circumcision theophany involved the unification of the Voice (*qol*) and Speech (*dibbur*),<sup>45</sup> the masculine and feminine. At that time, therefore, all the upper grades rested upon the lowest one.

In another context the *Zohar* expresses Abraham's transformation in slightly different terms but in a way that further elucidates the conceptual link between visionary experience and circumcision. "Come

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., I, 98a. The connection between circumcision, visionary experience, and therapy is brought out clearly in the following comment of de León in his *Sefer ha-Mishqal*, ed. J. Wijnhoven (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1964), p. 133: "The foreskin is the shell standing on the outside and the phallus is the core on the inside. . . . This is the secret of the proper matter when a person enters the secret of faith. Concerning this secret it says, 'All your males shall appear before the Lord your God' (Deut. 16:16). For one must cleave [to God] and show that place [the phallus] in its Source, the branch in its Root, to unite everything in the bond of the secret of His unity, with one bond and in one secret, so that 'the Lord will be one and His name will be one' (Zech. 14:9)."

<sup>45</sup> Compare *Zohar* I, 36a, 145b; II, 25b.



and see: when Abraham was circumcised he emerged from the foreskin and entered the holy covenant and was crowned in the holy crown, and entered the foundation upon which the world stands."<sup>46</sup> By circumcising himself Abraham thus departed from the realm of the demonic powers (symbolized by the foreskin) and entered the holy realm.<sup>47</sup> Entrance into the latter comprises two elements: the first gradation is referred to alternatively as the "holy covenant" or the "holy crown," that is, the feminine *Shekhinah*, and the second as "the foundation upon which the world stands," that is, the masculine *Yesod*. The possibility of seeing God is now understood as being dependent upon a transference from the demonic to the sefirotic worlds. Before his circumcision Abraham could not fully apprehend God because his body was still encased in the demonic shell, the foreskin covering the phallus.

Like the midrashist in *Numbers Rabbah*, the author of the *Zohar* here conceives of circumcision as a removal of the impure obstacle (though in the case of the latter this has become a symbol for a satanic force) that separates man from God and prevents a complete visionary relationship. Moreover, circumcision is an opening up of the human body: "R. Yose said, Why is it written, 'And the Lord will pass over the door [*ha-petaḥ*]' (Exod. 12:23)? . . . 'Over the door,' over that very opening [*ha-petaḥ mamash*], that is, the opening of the body [*petaḥ ha-guf*]. And what is the opening of the body? That refers to [the place of] circumcision."<sup>48</sup> The physiological opening, in turn, structurally parallels the opening in the sefirotic realm, the last gradation, *Shekhinah*,<sup>49</sup> through which one enters into relationship with God. This, according to the *Zohar*, is the theosophic significance of the scriptural claim that Abraham—after his circumcision—was

<sup>46</sup> *Zohar* I, 91b. On Abraham's flirtation with the demonic in the *Zohar*, see E. Wolfson, "Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (1986): 34, n. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Compare *Zohar* I, 103b (and the parallel in de León's *Sefer ha-Mishqal*, pp. 131–32): "Come and see: before Abraham was circumcised his seed was not holy for it emerged from the foreskin and clove to the foreskin below. After he was circumcised the seed emerged from holiness and clove to the holiness above." On the separating of the foreskin from the phallus as an enactment of the separation between the holy and demonic, cf. *Zohar* I, 13a, 95a–b; II, 255b; III, 72b–73a; Wolfson, "Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study" (n. 4 above), I:122; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 67 (cited above, n. 38); *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar, Haqdamah* (11a), sec. 37 (78a); J. Wijnhoven, "The Zohar and the Proselyte," in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. M. Fishbane and P. Flohr (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 124–25.

<sup>48</sup> *Zohar* II, 36a.

<sup>49</sup> On the *Shekhinah* as "the opening," *ha-petaḥ*, or "the gate," *ha-sha'ar*, cf. *Zohar* I, 7b, 11b, 37a, 47b, 54b, 97b, 103a–b; II, 36a, 158a, 237b, III, 14a, 71b, 256.

“sitting at the opening of the tent [*petah ha-'ohel*]” (Gen. 18:1), that is, the *Shekhinah*, “the place which is called covenant, the secret of faith.”<sup>50</sup> Circumcision is thus an opening up of the phallus that eventuates in the opening up—the disclosure—of the divine. “Come and see: before Abraham was circumcised he was closed and concealed [*'atim ve-satim*] from every side. When he was circumcised he was opened with respect to everything and was not closed or concealed as before. This is the mystery, as we have taught, ‘And he [Abraham] was sitting at the opening of the tent’ (Gen. 18:1), for the *yod* was revealed.”<sup>51</sup>

To appreciate fully the import of this passage one must bear in mind that the letter *yod*, already in classical midrashic sources,<sup>52</sup> was conceived of as the letter or mark of circumcision imprinted, as it were, on the phallus. In Zoharic terms, the letter *yod*, the seal of circumcision, the *'ot berit*, corresponds to the *sefirah* of *Yesod*.<sup>53</sup> By disclosing the *yod* on one's body, the corona of the phallus, the *yod* in the upper realm is likewise disclosed. The result of this process is alluded to in the end of Gen. 18:1, “And he [Abraham] was sitting at the opening of the tent.” Two meanings are implied here: Abraham below sat at the tent's entrance, which itself reflects the condition of openness he found himself in on account of the circumcision performed on his body. Theosophically, Abraham symbolizes the *sefirah* of *Hesed* (Love) and the opening of the tent, *Shekhinah*. When the *yod* (*Yesod*) is revealed, then *Hesed* is united with the *Shekhinah*, and the forces of judgment are ameliorated.<sup>54</sup>

### III

The Zoharic reworking of the midrashic motif can now be fully outlined. By means of circumcision one is opened up in such a way

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., I, 97b (*Sitrei Torah*) also 103a–b (trans. Matt [n. 1 above], pp. 65–68).

<sup>51</sup> *Zohar* II, 36a.

<sup>52</sup> See n. 6 above.

<sup>53</sup> Compare *Zohar* I, 13a, 56a, 95a; II, 36a; III, 142a (*Idra Rabba*), 215b, 220a; Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study*,” 2:242; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 63. In some Zoharic contexts the letter *yod* refers to the *Shekhinah*, which is said to correspond to the corona of the phallus. (The later symbolism is based on the fact that the word for the corona, *'atarah*, literally crown, is a technical name for *Shekhinah*.) Compare *Zohar* I, 93b, 255a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); II, 258a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); III, 256a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*), 257a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*), 263a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, secs. 13 (29a), 18 (31b), 19 (39b), 21 (62b), 30 (73b), 47 (85a), 70 (120a).

<sup>54</sup> Compare *Zohar* III, 142a (*Idra Rabba*): “Everything is dependent upon the opening of the phallus which is called *yod*. And when the *yod* is revealed, the opening of the phallus, the upper *Hesed* [Mercy] is revealed . . . and this [gradation] is not called *Hesed* until the *yod* is revealed . . . Come and see: Abraham was not called

that God may be revealed; the physical opening engenders a space in which the theophany occurs. Indeed, only one who is circumcised can withstand the manifestation of God. In the *Zohar*, however, circumcision is not only a prerequisite for the vision of God, but the place of circumcision, the phallus, is itself the locus of such a vision: one sees God from the circumcised flesh or, put differently, from the semiological seal of the covenant imprinted on that flesh. In one passage de León interprets the same verse from Job, “This, after my skin will have been peeled off; but I would behold God from my flesh” (19:26), which was interpreted in an altogether different way in the section from *Genesis Rabbah*,<sup>55</sup> which I discussed at the outset:

He began another discourse and said, “But I would behold God from my flesh” (Job 19:26). Why [is it written] “from my flesh”? It should be rather “from myself”! It is, literally, “from my flesh.” What is that [flesh]? As it is written, “The holy flesh will be removed from you” (Jer. 11:15), and it is written, “And my covenant will be in your flesh” (Gen. 17:13). It has been taught: he who is marked with the holy seal of that sign [of circumcision] sees the Holy One, blessed be He, from that very sign itself.<sup>56</sup>

The flesh whence one beholds God, according to the verse from Job, refers to the flesh of circumcision, the seal of the covenant. One is said to see the Holy One from the sign of the covenant inscribed in one’s flesh, the letter *yod*. As we have seen, in the case of the *Zohar* the letter *yod* is not understood simply as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel but is the very sign of the Holy One himself. The double function of the word *’ot* in Hebrew holds the key to unlocking the meaning of the kabbalistic doctrine: *’ot* is both a sign and a letter. One sees God from the sign on one’s body, but that sign is nothing other than the letter *yod*. Here we meet a convergence of anthropomorphic and letter symbolism: the physical organ in its essential character is interchangeable with the letter, and the letter with the physical organ. The rite of circumcision thus ushers the individual into a semiological—as well as ontological—relationship with God: the seal of the covenant itself is the divine letter (or sign) inscribed on the flesh. This is the mystical sense of the Jobian claim that from the flesh—that is, from the phallus or place of the covenant—one beholds God.

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complete with respect to this *Hesed* until the *yod* of the phallus was revealed. And when it was revealed, he was called complete, as it is written, ‘Walk before Me and be complete.’”

<sup>55</sup> The connection of this Zoharic passage to that of *Genesis Rabbah* was already noted by Lavi (n. 37 above), see n. 29, fol. 230b.

<sup>56</sup> *Zohar* I, 94a.

The dynamic of circumcision, which I have discussed above—the play of closure/openness—informs us about the nature of mystical hermeneutics as well: that which is hidden must be brought to light, and the medium of disclosure is the seal of the covenant. In various ways the author of the *Zohar* establishes a structural affinity between the act of disclosing esoteric truths and that of sexual ejaculation, or in other words between the phallus and the mouth, the covenant of the foreskin and the covenant of the tongue.<sup>57</sup> Thus, for example, the *Zohar* interprets Eccles. 5:5, “Don’t let your mouth cause your flesh to sin,” as referring either to sins of a sexual nature<sup>58</sup> or to the sin of disclosing esoteric truths that one has not received from one’s teacher.<sup>59</sup> The impropriety of illicit sexual behavior is parallel to the impropriety of revealing hidden truths that one has not properly received.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in one place de León interprets the prohibition

<sup>57</sup> The correspondence between a “covenant of the foreskin” and a “covenant of the tongue” was first articulated in the Jewish mystical and cosmological text, *Sefer Yesirah*, 1:3 (concerning this text, see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [n. 1 above], pp. 75–78). See the reading established by I. Gruenwald, “A Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yesira*,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 141, and the English rendering, “Some Critical Notes on the First Part of *Sefer Yesira*,” *Revue des études juives* 132 (1973): 486; “Ten *sefirot belimah*; ten corresponding to the number of the ten fingers, five against five, and the covenant of the oneness is constituted in the center [as expressed] in the circumcision of the tongue and the mouth and in the circumcision of the foreskin.” Compare further *Sefer Yesirah* 6:4, where it is said that God made a covenant with Abraham “between the ten toes of his feet and it is the covenant of circumcision” and a covenant “between the ten fingers of his hands which is the tongue.” Some scholars assume that the covenant of the tongue or the mouth refers to a vow of secrecy, mentioned explicitly in *Sefer Yesirah* 1:8, not to disclose mystical truths in public; see Gruenwald, “Some Critical Notes,” pp. 487, 490–91; see n. 79 below.

<sup>58</sup> Compare *Zohar* I, 8a.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 87a; cf. *Zohar* III, 79a, 105b, 106b, 128a (*Idra Rabba*). In III, 159a the verse is used to support the view that one must not inquire about certain things that are hidden from finite minds and are known only by God. The last usage may reflect the fact that this verse is applied to the apostate Elisha ben Abuya in the famous rabbinic legend of the “four who entered Pardes”; see BT *Hagigah* 15b and parallels. The emphasis on the need to keep truths hidden and the impropriety of revealing a truth that has not been received directly from a teacher stands in marked contrast to the general impression that one gets from reading de León’s writings, wherein the mystical imagination seems to have had an almost unbounded reign over disclosing esoteric matters. On this “innovative” approach of de León, in contrast to the more “conservative” approach of other mystics, such as Nahmanides, see M. Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” in *Rabbi Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 51–73. In his discussion of de León, Idel did not take into account these Zoharic passages, which emphasize secrecy and the esoteric quality of mystical truths; see, in contrast, Liebes (n. 3 above), esp. pp. 138–51. Compare also the passage from de León’s *Mishkan ha-Edut*, cited by Scholem in *Major Trends*, pp. 201–2, and my extended analysis of the same passage (with a fresh translation) in “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” 1:18–27.

<sup>60</sup> It is impossible to make sense out of this unless one assumes that there is some basic kinship between the phallus and the mouth and that emission through one is like

against idolatry in Exod. 20:4 as the sin of “lying in the name of God.”<sup>61</sup> Yet there are two explanations offered for this: one who lies in God’s name is either one who reveals secrets of Torah (for Torah equals name of God)<sup>62</sup> or one who has sexual relations with a non-Jew (for phallus equals the name).<sup>63</sup> As Yehuda Liebes has pointed out, the common denominator here can only be that both sorts of sin involve the phallus.<sup>64</sup> Liebes has further shown that, according to the *Zohar*, the mystic exegete below is the symbolic correlate of the *sefirah* of *Yesod* (the phallus) above. When the time is ripe, the exegete, the *Šaddiq* in the world, discloses what has been concealed. “It has been taught: In the days of R. Shimeon people would say to one another, ‘Open your mouth and illuminate your words’ (BT *Berakhot* 22a). After R. Shimeon died, they would say, ‘Don’t let your mouth cause your flesh to sin.’”<sup>65</sup>

The relation of the phallus and disclosure/concealment of mystical truth is made even clearer in the following remark:

R. Shimeon opened [his exposition] and said, “A base fellow reveals secrets, but a trustworthy soul conceals the matter” (Prov. 11:13). . . . Concerning him who is not settled in his spirit and who is not faithful, the word that he hears goes inside him like that which revolves in water<sup>66</sup> until it is cast

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that of the other. Such a relation was in fact exploited by the kabbalists; cf., e.g., Gikatilla, *Ginnat Egoz* (Hanau, 1614), 25b: “Just as a person has the covenant of the mouth between the ten fingers of his hands, so you will find he has the covenant of the foreskin between the ten toes [literally, fingers] of his feet. . . . Contemplate that *peh* [i.e., mouth] corresponds [numerically] to *milah* [circumcision].” Gikatilla thus interprets the famous passage from *Sefer Yešira* (see n. 57 above) in light of a numerical equivalence between the word for mouth, *peh*, and the word for circumcision, *milah*, insofar as both equal eighty-five. See the theosophic reworking of this numerical equivalence in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 18 (32b): “The Oral Law [*Torah she-be’al peh*] is where the lower *Shekhinah* is. She is called mouth [*peh*] from the side of the *Šaddiq* [*Yesod*], for the numerical value of *peh* equals that of *milah*.”

<sup>61</sup> *Zohar* II, 87a–b.

<sup>62</sup> Compare Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 37–44 (and references to the *Zohar* given on p. 39, n. 3).

<sup>63</sup> Compare *Zohar* II, 87b, and n. 41 above. On sexual relations between Jew and non-Jew in the period of the *Zohar*, see Y. Baer, *A History of Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1978), 1:246 ff.

<sup>64</sup> Liebes (n. 3 above), p. 136.

<sup>65</sup> *Zohar* III, 79a, 105b. Compare *Zohar Ḥadash, Tiqqunim*, 94b: “The one who reveals secrets of Torah [to the wicked] causes the spring to be removed from the *Šaddiq*, who is the foundation of whom it is said ‘The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him’ (Ps. 25:14), and from the *Shekhinah*, as it is written, ‘The waters of the sea fail, and the river dries up and is parched’ (Job 14:11). At that time the righteous (*Šaddiqim*) below are impoverished from everything, impoverished from secrets of Torah and impoverished in the body. Whoever reveals secrets to the righteous causes the *Šaddiq* to shine with secrets of Torah.”

<sup>66</sup> Aramaic: *ḥizra be-mayya*. Compare BT *Baba Mešia* 60b: *mayya de-ḥizra* (see M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumin, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [New York: Pardes, 1950], s.v. *ḥizra*).

outside. Why? Because his spirit is not a firm spirit [*ruḥa de-qiyyuma*]. But he whose spirit is a firm one, concerning him it is written, “a trustworthy soul conceals the matter.” “A trustworthy soul” [*ve-ne’eman ruah*], one’s whose spirit is faithful [*qiyyuma de-ruḥa*], as [it is written], “I will fix him as a peg [*yated*] in a firm place” (Isa. 22:23). The matter is dependent on the secret [*be-raza talya milta*]. It is written, “Don’t let your mouth cause your flesh to sin.” The world only exists through the secret.<sup>67</sup>

The one who keeps the secret is the “trustworthy soul,” *ne’eman ruah*, which is rendered by the *Zohar*: *qiyyuma de-ruḥa*.<sup>68</sup> There can be no doubt that this is a reference to the *Ṣaddiq*, the symbolic correlate below to *Yesod*, whose status as a righteous person is particularly related to the phallus.<sup>69</sup> Such a person is here called *qiyyuma de-ruḥa*, which may be translated “the pillar of the spirit,”<sup>70</sup> for he is one who sustains the spirit, holds it in its place. The word *qiyyuma* functions in the *Zohar*, *inter alia*, as a phallic symbol<sup>71</sup> and may have that shade of meaning in this context as well. The faithfulness or steadfastness of one’s spirit is therefore a condition especially connected to the phallus. This interpretation is further substantiated by the proof-text from Isaiah wherein the word *yated*, peg, also must be seen as functioning as a phallic symbol. This symbolism, moreover, enables us to decipher the remark that the “matter is dependent on the secret,” that is, on the phallus or its symbolic correlate, the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, which is appropriately called secret for it is the divine gradation that is hidden and concealed from the eye.<sup>72</sup> Hence, R. Shimeon admonishes his comrades, “Don’t let your mouth cause your flesh to

<sup>67</sup> *Zohar* III, 128a (*Idra Rabba*).

<sup>68</sup> Compare Y. Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1976), p. 377, n. 88, and p. 381, n. 96 (in Hebrew).

<sup>69</sup> It is one of de León’s innovations to define the righteous person, the *ṣaddiq*, solely in terms of sexual propriety. Compare *Zohar* I, 59b; Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study” (n. 4 above), 2:232; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 62; *Sefer ha-Mishqal*, p. 74.

<sup>70</sup> On the meaning of *qiyyuma* in the *Zohar* as pillar, see Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*, p. 360, n. 20, and “The Messiah of the *Zohar*” (n. 3 above), p. 138, n. 202.

<sup>71</sup> See Liebes, *Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*, p. 358, n. 13, p. 361, nn. 23–24, pp. 371–73, n. 68.

<sup>72</sup> The theosophic connection between the word “secret,” the Aramaic *raza*, which is a translation of the Hebrew *sod*, and circumcision is based ultimately on Ps. 25:14, “The secret [*sod*] of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and to them He makes His covenant [*berito*] known.” Compare *Zohar* I, 2b, 236b; III, 43b (*Piqqudin*); Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” pp. 230–31; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 60–61. See Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar*,” pp. 138 ff. For the possibility that these two words are in fact etymologically connected, see Jastrow (n. 66 above), s.v. *sod*. Finally, it should be mentioned that already in classical midrashic sources, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 49:2 (pp. 488–89), Ps. 25:14 is interpreted to mean that circumcision is the “mystery” of God given to Abraham.

sin,” for the world exists only through the secret, sustained by means of that foundation or pillar (*Yesod*) which must be concealed. Just as the proper disclosure of esoteric truth is bound up with the flesh, with the phallus or the *sefirah* of *Yesod*,<sup>73</sup> so too an improper disclosure is a sin bound up with this limb.

Textual interpretation, as circumcision, involves the dynamic of closure/openness: as the one who is circumcised stands in relation to the *Shekhinah*, so the exegete—through interpretation—enters into an intimate relation with *Shekhinah*. The duplicity of the text as that which simultaneously conceals and reveals—indeed conceals as that which reveals and reveals as that which conceals—is a thoroughly appropriate metaphor to convey the erotic quality of hermeneutical stance.<sup>74</sup> Inasmuch as there is this structural affinity between the interpretative task and the phallus,<sup>75</sup> the exegete must be circumcised, for penetration into the text is itself an act of sexual unification. This dynamic doubtless underlies the Zoharic prohibition of Torah study for the uncircumcised:

R. Abba said: Praiseworthy is the portion of Israel, for the Holy One, blessed be He, desired them more than all the idolatrous nations. And on account of His love for them He gave them His laws of truth, planted the Tree of Life in their midst, and placed His *Shekhinah* amongst them. Why? For Israel are marked by the holy sign [*reshima qadisha*] on their flesh, and it is known that

<sup>73</sup> In this regard it is of interest to note that in one of his Hebrew theosophic works, *Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah* (Basle, 1608), sec. 12, de León refers to the proliferation of kabbalistic lore as the flowing or spreading forth of the “spring of mystery,” *ma’ayan ha-sod*. The text is cited by Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (n. 1 above), p. 396, n. 150, and an English translation appears on p. 201. In the critical edition of the same work, *Sefer ha-Mishqal* (see n. 44 above), the established reading is *me’inyan ha-sod ha-zeh*, “from the matter of this secret,” rather than *ma’ayan ha-sod ha-zeh*, “the spring of this mystery.” Compare Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 201, who interprets this passage as a “veiled reference” to the dissemination of the *Zohar*; and see my criticism in “*Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study*,” 1:15–17. In any event, the “spring” is an obvious phallic symbol, which would thus be an appropriate symbol for *Yesod*. It follows, therefore, that even in this passage, if we accept the reading of the *editio princeps*, de León, perhaps unwittingly, links the disclosure of esoteric truth with a phallic symbol, namely, the pouring forth of the fountain or spring.

<sup>74</sup> Compare the famous parable of the Princess (the Torah) and her lover (the mystic exegete) in *Zohar* II, 99a–b, where the hermeneutical relationship is depicted in terms of an erotic game of hide-and-seek. On the erotic quality of reading as a dialectic of concealment and disclosure, see R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), pp. 9–10, 14. See also the curious expression of Moses de León in his *Mishkan ha-Edut, likhtov u-lignoz*, “to write and to conceal.” The expression has been discussed by Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 201–2, and cf. my extended criticism in “*Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study*,” 1:18–27.

<sup>75</sup> See Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar” (n. 3 above), pp. 138–45.

they are His, from those who belong to His palace.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, all those who are not marked with the holy sign on their flesh do not belong to Him; it is known that they all derive from the side of impurity.<sup>77</sup> It is therefore forbidden to join with them and to converse with them concerning words [or matters] of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is also forbidden to instruct them in words of Torah, for the entire Torah is the name of the Holy One, blessed be He,<sup>78</sup> and each letter of the Torah is bound to the Holy Name. It is forbidden to instruct the person who is not marked by the holy sign on his flesh in the words of Torah. How much more so to be engaged [*le-'ishtaddela*] in it!<sup>79</sup>

One who is uncircumcised cannot study Torah, for the Torah is the name of God, and study thereof involves unification with the name. Only one who is circumcised can be united with the name, and hence only such a person can study Torah. The final remark, that it is forbidden to be engaged in the study of Torah with one who is uncircumcised, serves to emphasize that the esoteric dimension of the tradition cannot be divulged to anyone who does not have the holy sign inscribed on his flesh. The aspect of hiddenness or secrecy is indicative of the very essence of the *sefirah* which corresponds to the phallus.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the word *sod*, secret or mystery, is attributed specifically to the divine gradation of *Yesod*. Secrets of Torah, therefore, cannot be transmitted to one who is uncircumcised:

R. Abba opened [his exposition] and said: "The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him [to them He makes known His covenant]" (Ps. 25:14).

<sup>76</sup> Compare the parable in *Zohar* I, 245b, and its parallel in Wolfson, "Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study," 2:304:16–22 (see also 1:113–14, 119).

<sup>77</sup> The ontological distinction between Jew and non-Jew, the soul of the former deriving from the right, holy side, and that of the latter from the left, demonic side, is one of the basic assumptions of de León's anthropology. Compare *Zohar Hadash*, 78d (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Ruth); *Zohar* I, 20b, 131a, 220a; II, 86a; Wolfson, "Sefer ha-Rimmon: Critical Edition and Introductory Study," 1:118–20, 2:214–15.

<sup>78</sup> See n. 62 above.

<sup>79</sup> *Zohar* III, 72b–73a. Compare Gikatilla, *Sha'arei 'Orah*, ed. Ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978), 1:114–16: "The covenant of *Binah* [Understanding, the third emanation] is the covenant of the mouth, the covenant of the tongue, the covenant of the lips. . . . And the covenant of the living God [*Yesod*, the ninth emanation] is called the covenant of peace . . . the covenant of Sabbath, the covenant of the rainbow . . . the covenant of circumcision. The covenant of *Adonai* [*Shekhinah*, the tenth emanation] corresponds to the covenant of the Torah. . . . And this is the secret: The covenant of the tongue and the covenant of the foreskin. . . . If Israel had not received the covenant of the flesh [circumcision] they would never have merited the Torah which is the covenant of the tongue. . . . Therefore the Torah is only given to one who has received the covenant of the flesh, and from the covenant of the flesh one enters into the covenant of the tongue, which is the reading of the Torah." Gikatilla's remarks are a theosophic exposition of *Sefer Yeşirah*, 1:3; see nn. 57, 60 above.

<sup>80</sup> See n. 72 above.



“The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him”: the Holy One, blessed be He, has not given the upper secret of the Torah except to those who fear sin. To those who do fear sin the upper secret of Torah is disclosed. And what is the upper secret of the Torah? I would say, it is the sign of the holy covenant [*ot qayama qadisha*], which is called the secret of the Lord, the holy covenant.<sup>81</sup>

The secret of the Lord given to those who fear sin is the holy covenant of God, the *berit qodesh*, that is, the *sefirah* that corresponds to the phallus, *Yesod*. The secrecy and concealment of this particular emanation is emphasized by de León in his Hebrew theosophic writings as well. Thus, for example, in *Sefer ha-Rimmon* he writes that *Yesod* is “called secret, *sod*, for its matter is secrecy, a hidden mystery of the Creator.”<sup>82</sup> The process of circumcision, the removal of the foreskin and the uncovering of the corona, is a disclosure of the secret. In the disclosure of the phallus, through the double act of circumcision, the union of the masculine and feminine aspects of God is assured. “When the holy sign [*Yesod*] is uncovered it overflows and the bride [*Shekhinah*] . . . then stands in completeness and her portion is illuminated.”<sup>83</sup> Circumcision, therefore, is here viewed as a necessary precondition for studying Torah—exoteric and esoteric—just as in other contexts it is depicted as a necessary precondition for visionary experience or prophetic theophany. He who is closed—uncircumcised—cannot open the text just as he cannot behold the divine Presence. The relationship of exegete to text is like that of the visionary to the *Shekhinah*. Indeed, it may be said that, according to the *Zohar*, insofar as the Torah is the corporeal form of the divine, textual study itself is a mode of visionary experience.<sup>84</sup>

The opening of circumcision is thus not only the opening through which one may see God, but it the opening through which one may study the holy text, the Torah. The particular relation between the covenant of circumcision and the activity of Torah study is further brought to light in the following passage:

<sup>81</sup> *Zohar* I, 236b.

<sup>82</sup> Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” 2:231. And cf. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 61.

<sup>83</sup> Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” 2:232.

<sup>84</sup> I have treated this topic at length in “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: A Study in Kabbalistic Symbolism” (1987; typescript). Compare *Zohar* I, 9a, 94b; II, 163b; Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar*” (n. 3 above), pp. 98–99, 130–32. The idea that the *Shekhinah* is connected to those engaged in the study of the Torah is a motif found in earlier aggadic sources; see BT *Berakhot* 6a; *Mishnah Avot* 3:6; *Midrash Tehilim* on Ps. 105:1, ed. S. Buber (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 448; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (Tel Aviv: Moriah, 1960), 7:2; *Zohar* I, 72a, 92b, 115b; II, 200a.

R. Jose asked R. Shimeon: It is taught that words [such as] *va-'agidah*, *va-yaged*, and *va-yagidu*, all [point to] the secret of wisdom [*raza de-hokhmata*]. Why does this word [the root *ngd*] allude to the secret of wisdom? He [R. Shimeon] said to him [R. Jose]: Because [in] this word the *gimmel* and *dalet* are found without any separation [between them]. And this is the secret of wisdom, a word that comes in completeness in the secret of the letters. Thus it is when they [the letters] are in wisdom, but *dalet* without *gimmel* is not completion, and so *gimmel* without *dalet*, for the one is bound to the other without separation. And the one who separates them causes death for himself; and this secret [the separation of *gimmel* and *dalet*] is the [cause and result of the] sin of Adam. Therefore this word [*ngd*] is the secret of wisdom. And even though at times there is a *yod* between the *gimmel* and *dalet*, there is not separation [in that case], for all is one bond.<sup>85</sup>

The root *ngd*, to tell or speak, alludes to the secret of wisdom, for in this word the letters *gimmel* and *dalet* are contiguous. Symbolically, the *gimmel* corresponds to *Yesod* and the *dalet* to *Shekhinah*, for *Yesod* is that which “bestows upon” (*gomel*) the *Shekhinah* who is the “poor one” (*dal*).<sup>86</sup> The secret of wisdom, therefore, involves the unification of the ninth and tenth *sefirot*, *Yesod* (masculine) and *Shekhinah* (feminine). It is this (sexual) unification, moreover, that constitutes the nature of telling, speaking, in a word, discourse. Speech (*ngd*) is thus understood by the same structural dynamic that characterizes the play of divine sexuality and the dual nature of circumcision. By means of circumcision the *gimmel* is uncovered and consequently pours forth to the *dalet*. The *yod* that is between them is the sign of the covenant (corona) that acts as a bridge uniting masculine and feminine. Indeed, the three consonants, *gimmel*, *yod*, *dalet*, spell the word *gid*, which in rabbinic literature<sup>87</sup> is sometimes used as a euphemism for the phallus. This, no doubt, is the underlying meaning of the concluding statement that, “even though at times there is a *yod* between the *gimmel* and *dalet*, there is no separation, for all is one bond.” It is from the union of *gimmel* and *dalet*, *Yesod* and *Shekhinah*, that discourse (*aggadah*) proceeds, and the secret is disclosed.

I can now sum up the various steps that have been taken along the way in this analysis. Already in rabbinic *midrash* a clear nexus is established between circumcision and the visualization of God, or a Godlike appearance. In the earlier midrashic passage it seems that

<sup>85</sup> *Zohar* 1, 234b.

<sup>86</sup> The letter symbolism is derived from BT *Shabbat* 104b; see *Zohar* 1, 3a, 244b; Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” 2:232 and n. 10.

<sup>87</sup> See, e.g., BT *Yevamot* 8b.

this nexus is focused on a deontological conception well known from many rabbinic sources: through the doing of good deeds, that is, through fulfilling God's commandments, one is rewarded. In this particular case the good deed is circumcision and the reward the epiphany of God. In a later midrashic context the nexus is reasserted, this time however based on the ontological criterion that only one whose sexual organ is circumcised can stand in the presence of God's glory. This is because it is necessary for one to remove the unholy foreskin before one can withstand the manifestation of God. The author of the *Zohar* further develops this mesh of ideas in the framework of his theosophical conception. Visualization of God, as study of the Torah, involves the unification of man with the feminine potency of the divine; therefore, only one who is circumcised can be said to either see God or study the Torah. Moreover, just as the act of circumcision itself comprises two elements that correspond to the masculine and feminine dimensions of God, so too an act of seeing God—prophetically or textually—comprises these very elements. The opening of circumcision is an opening of the flesh that is, at the same time, an opening within the divine. When the foreskin is removed and the phallus uncovered, then the corresponding limb above, the divine phallus or *Yesod*, likewise is uncovered. In this uncovering the secret of God is disclosed. The hermeneutical process is a structural reenactment of circumcision, involving as it does the movement from closure to openness.<sup>88</sup> The opening of the flesh eventuates in the opening of God, which is reexperienced as the opening of the text.

In conclusion, it may be said that the writing of the *Zohar* itself, a disclosure of hidden layers of meaning, may be understood in light of the various structures that we have sought to uncover. The particular relation established between the phallus (*Yesod*) and secret (*sod*) lends further support to the view that the very process of textual interpretation undertaken by the author of the *Zohar* was understood in terms of this dynamic of closure/openness. The bringing forth of that which was hidden—which is, after all, the *raison d'être* of this classic of Jewish mysticism—can only be comprehended in light

<sup>88</sup> It is of interest to consider *Zohar* I, 93a, wherein the discussion on the mystical significance of circumcision culminates with an actual visionary experience. After the comrades complete their discussion on circumcision, the man in whose house the discussion ensued says to them: "The completion of what you have said tonight will take place tomorrow. He said to them: Tomorrow you will see the face of the 'master of circumcision' [i.e., the prophet Elijah] . . . for he will come to circumcise my son. . . . R. Abba said: This is a request to [fulfill] a commandment and we shall sit in order to see the face of the *Shekhinah*." In other contexts in the *Zohar* the seeing of the *Shekhinah* is connected particularly with the study of Torah in accord with kabbalistic principles; see n. 84 above.

of this dynamic. Yet, as we have seen, the transition from closure to openness is itself characteristic of divine revelation. It can be assumed, therefore, that the writing of this text proceeded from some such experience of divine immediacy—in a word, exposure to God. Students of Jewish mysticism are apt to lose sight of the deeply experiential character of this work. While it is true that the *Zohar* is nominally and structurally a *midrash*, that is, a commentary on Scripture, I have tried to show that in this text the hermeneutical mode is inseparably wedded to the visionary. This paper has provided one vantage point through which this merging of epistemic modes can be understood. Both visualization of God and the hermeneutical task are predicated upon a physiological opening that corresponds to an ontological opening within the divine. Disclosure of what has been concealed—through the opening of the flesh—is the basic structure common to visionary experience and mystical hermeneutics.

*New York University*