

TEXTUAL FLESH, INCARNATION,
AND THE IMAGINAL BODY: ABRAHAM ABULAFIA'S
POLEMIC WITH CHRISTIANITY

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It is hardly necessary to assert that *incarnation* is one of the most charged words in philosophical and theological discourse. The celebrated use of the term to denote the foundational dogma of the Christian faith, proclaimed as authoritative in the Nicene Creed, that Jesus is both divine and human, ought to raise questions about the suitability of appropriating it to discuss phenomena exemplified in different religious and cultural contexts. Seemingly, this should be especially so with respect to rabbinic Judaism and its many offshoots, especially in the contentious times of the Middle Ages, inasmuch as this doctrine has been singled out as the key fracture that divided Synagogue and Church.¹ Medieval Jews, as Robert Chazan astutely observed, “disagreed vehemently” with the Christian belief that the Messiah is both human and divine, a combination they considered to be “unthinkable.”² In an accompanying note, Chazan adds that there was no more “divergent element in this complex relationship” between Christianity and Judaism “than the claim of divinity for Jesus.”³ The Christian notion of an incarnate deity and the allied doctrine of the Trinity represented an “ultimate irrationality” that was viewed as corrosive of the very core of monotheism and therefore “responsible for the profound gulf between the two traditions.”⁴

¹ Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 59–61.

² Robert Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity in Medieval Western Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 233. See idem, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 60.

³ Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity*, p. 233 n. 1.

⁴ Ibid., p. 349. Similar observations have been made by other scholars. See Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Litman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), p. 105; David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), pp. 86 and 186.

Setting of Boundary and the Proximity of the Other

The rich scholarly literature of the last few decades has challenged this commonplace. In a number of studies, I myself have explored the Judaic roots of the Christocentric incarnationalism, marking thereby a historical juncture when the chasm between the two Abrahamic faiths may not have been as wide as it was eventually to become,⁵ and in other studies, I have examined incarnational tendencies in later rabbinic and kabbalistic sources that, while engaged polemically with the Christian canon, nevertheless strive to articulate an indigenous Jewish viewpoint.⁶ I am well aware that the incarnational tropes to be extracted from Jewish texts are distinct from and in opposition to the Christian formulations; indeed, in my estimation, it is the disparity that justifies the use of the same nomenclature.⁷ This is not to deny the adverse portrayal of Christians by Jews and Jews by Christians. However, the rejection of the “other” does not mean the other has no

⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Iconic Visualization and the Imaginal Body of God: The Role of Intention in the Rabbinic Conception of Prayer,” *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 137–62; idem, “Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, and Michael Signer (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 239–54; idem, “Inscribed in the Book of the Living: *Gospel of Truth* and Jewish Christology,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 234–71.

⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Tree That Is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993): 31–76, reprinted with slight emendations in idem, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 63–88; idem, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 190–260; idem, “The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005): 479–500; idem, “Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevan Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics,” in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 341–65; idem, “Angelic Embodiment and the Feminine Representation of Jesus: Reconstructing Carnality in the Christian Kabbalah of Johann Kemper,” in *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, ed. Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 395–426.

⁷ This crucial point is missed in the criticism Idel leveled against me (and other scholars) for using the “theologically loaded” term “incarnation”; see *Ben*, p. 60. If, as Idel argues, incarnation should be limited to the belief in a “supernal being taking a human body” and an insistence on the “flesh” as the “locus of suffering” in a “unique historical and theological event,” not to mention the constellation of other ideas connected to it, such as the immaculate conception and virgin birth, then the term cannot be used with reference to Jewish texts. My own analysis, however, is predicated on a different philological assumption fostered by a hermeneutical model that diverges from his own. See below, n. 130.

impact on the formation of one's own sense of self; on the contrary, condemnation of the other bespeaks contiguity with the other, and this is so even when the other has preached intolerance or perpetrated violence in the sociopolitical arena. By utilizing the term "incarnation" in explicating kabbalistic texts I do not mean to paint a monolithic picture. Precisely by deploying one term to ponder disparate phenomena I call attention to the rift that both unifies and splits the two.

In the long and variegated history of Jews and Christians, framed typologically as the struggle between Jacob and Esau, self-definition and definition of the other are inextricably interwoven.⁸ As Derrida sagaciously put it in his depiction of the process of auto-affectation (*Selbstaffektion*), a concept that can be traced to Kant,⁹ "the same is the same only in being affected by the other, only by becoming the other of the same."¹⁰ In accord with this philosophical truism—the referentiality of self cannot be demarcated in isolation from an intricate mesh of social interconnectivity—we find many instances where a Jewish sage has been swayed by the very doctrine or practice that he discards as blasphemous. Just as appropriating from an external environment is often based on resonance with something internal to the Jewish landscape, so the disposing of something from the outside may actually betray an inherent affinity; the very proximity to the "other" demands a sharper demarcation and setting of boundary. The deeper the resemblance, it would seem, the greater the need to discriminate.¹¹

⁸ See Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. xvii. As Yuval notes, his approach bears affinity to the orientation of Daniel Boyarin in *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁹ See references cited in Dieter Lohmar, "Husserl's Type and Kant's Schemata," in *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 121 n. 43.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans., with an introduction by David B. Allison, preface by Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 85. On the notion of auto-affectation, see Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 110–37; Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 4, 188–96, 231–32.

¹¹ Yuval, *Two Nations*, p. 29, notes that "the extremist religious pietism of the Ashkenazic Hasidism may also be seen as a kind of internalization of the world of Christian values, which may also account for their mighty effort to defend themselves against its

This, incidentally, would explain why Jewish authors in the Middle Ages recoiled from using the radical *bsr* in any of its conjugations for their own speculation on divine embodiment, since its principal connotation in their lexicon is the Christological doctrine that they castigated as religiously heretical and theologically untenable.¹² It is thus hardly surprising that this locution was steadfastly avoided as a suitable way to speak about one of the most sublime mysteries of the Jewish tradition. But this does not mean that there was no allure lurking beneath the repulsion. The kabbalistic use of the expressions *hitlabbeshut* or *levush* to denote either the emanation of the infinite in the sefirotic potencies or the indwelling of the divine presence in the physical universe indicates precisely this kind of pull to reclaim the Christian belief as the mystical truth of Judaism.¹³

Even a figure as sober as Moses ben Naḥman, who placed the doctrine of incarnation at the heart of the Jewish-Christian dispute according to his written record of the debate with Pablo Christiani,¹⁴ affirmed the secret of the garment (*sod ha-malbush*), which involved the corporealization of the angelic glory in a human form seen by the “fleshly eyes of the pure souls.”¹⁵ The selfsame idea, therefore, marks discrepancy and coincidence: in its Christological guise, incarnation is offensive and revolting, since it is neither sanctioned by prophetic utterance nor logically defensible; in its kabbalistic guise, however, it communicates the secret at the core of the prophetic vision, which is still available to the spiritual elite.

influence.” Consider the argument about the consumption of bread, emblematic of the body of Christ, in the sacrament of the Eucharist and the Jewish custom of ingesting a honey cake, symbolic of the Torah, as an initiation rite for Jewish schoolchildren, offered by Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 16–17, 83–88, 102–16.

¹² I am here responding to Idel’s comments, *Ben*, pp. 59 and 100 n. 180.

¹³ Compare the observation of Shoshana G. Gershenzon, “A Study of Teshuvot la-Meharef by Abner of Burgos,” DHL, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984, pp. 138–40, on the use of the term *hitlabbeshut* rather than terms related to *basar*, which are more typically employed by Jewish polemicists.

¹⁴ *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Ḥayyim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 1: 311. See David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 352; Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 60–61; idem, *Daggers of Faith*, pp. 80–81; idem, *Fashioning Jewish Identity*, p. 349; Idel, *Ben*, p. 103 n. 186.

¹⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Secret of the Garment in Naḥmanides,” *Da‘at* 24 (1990): xxv–lxix, esp. xxx (English section); idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 252.

A number of historians have argued that polemical othering had a critical role in the identity formation of Jews and Christians through the centuries. For the purposes of this essay let me cite the observation of Israel Yuval: “The dialogical affinity of one culture with its environment does not necessarily impair its uniqueness or authenticity. Specifically, in Ashkenazic Jewry, previously considered a bastion of closure and loyalty to its internal religious tradition, there developed a profound affinity, albeit one mixed with hatred, with its sister religion, Christianity.”¹⁶ Disowning the need of the previous generation of scholars to emphasize the “authenticity” of Judaism as an insular and impermeable phenomenon, Yuval affirms the “dialogic position,” which “sees Jewish life in Christian Europe as involving the absorption and internalization of many values of the environment, along with its body language, ceremonies, and holy time.” Yuval makes an appeal for the uniqueness of the Jews of Ashkenaz, in contrast to the Jews of Spain, on the grounds that the latter “were only one element in a varied and heterogeneous milieu,” whereas the former “were the only alien element in an otherwise rather homogeneous environment.” Belonging to the only minority required building strong barriers, but for this very reason there was a stronger exposure to the majority culture.¹⁷

Kabbalistic sources confirm that the dialogic model can be extended to Jewish fraternities in Provence and Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, precisely the time that Jewish polemical works proliferated across western Christendom in the wake of the amplified vilification of Jews.¹⁸ One could counter that these are still part of Christian Europe, but we are nevertheless speaking about cultural orbits that must be distinguished from Ashkenazic Jews (even if we recognize that there are important channels of transmission of esoteric doctrines, practices, and texts linking these different segments of the Jewish population).¹⁹

¹⁶ Yuval, *Two Nations*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Chazan, *Fashioning Jewish Identity*, pp. 8–10, 356–57.

¹⁹ See Wolfson, *Along the Path*, pp. 1–62, and reference to studies by Dan, Farber, Kanarfogel, Pedaya, Scholem, and Ta-Shema cited on p. 114 n. 21. In addition to the sources mentioned there, see Daniel Abrams, “The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism,” *Shofar* 12 (1994): 67–85; idem, “From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47 (1996): 85–101; idem, “*Ma’aseh Merkabah* as a Literary Work: The Reception of the *Hekhalot* Traditions by the German Pietists and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 5 (1998): 329–45. Also pertinent are various studies by Moshe Idel; see especially “Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona,” *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 5 (2007): 71–113.

Yuval himself addresses this issue, at least for Sephardic Jews, by noting that the medieval sensibilities arise from the rabbinic precedent, the contours of which took shape through rejecting Christianity as a viable path after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the priestly rite; confrontation with the other is at the core of Jewish identity as it is rabbinically constructed. I am not convinced of Yuval's endeavor to see rabbinic Judaism in such a uniform light. But I agree that the controversy between Israel and Edom revolved about the poles of antagonism and attraction, convergence and divergence. In Yuval's felicitous summation: "Self-definition is an extensive and open process, one based not solely on automatic denial, but also on absorbing new religious ideas, ceremonies, and symbols from the outside." Yuval goes on to distinguish the anti-Christian polemic in the rabbinic period, which is characterized by "the processes of appropriation and the struggle over that which is appropriated," and in the Middle Ages, where the "tendency of mutual denial came to dominate."²⁰ The shift from the earlier historical epoch to the later is valid, but even in the medieval period polemic is built on dissent combined with assent.

Congruent Truth and the Irreducibility of Difference

Support for this supposition may be elicited from a plethora of sources, including both the zoharic compilation and the literary corpus of Abraham Abulafia, which are often taken as illustrative of the two dominant trends of medieval Jewish mysticism, the theosophic-theurgic kabbalah and the prophetic-ecstatic kabbalah, according to the Scholemian typology taken over and expanded in contemporary scholarship. For the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on the attitude toward Christianity in Abulafia,²¹ since the topic in zoharic

²⁰ Yuval, *Two Nations*, p. 23.

²¹ For my previous explication of Abulafia's engagement with Christian doctrines, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Prophet and Mystic: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), pp. 131–33 n. 101, 188–89 n. 26. Abulafia's relationship to Jesus and Christianity has been analyzed as well by Moshe Idel, *Studies in the Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 33–61 (see additional reference cited below in n. 25), and Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007). Many of my insights have been expanded in my student Robert Sagerman's dissertation, a revised version of which has been recently published as *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life: The*

literature has been treated comprehensively in other studies.²² Not only did Abulafia recognize the part that Christianity played in salvation history, typified, for instance, in the association of Jesus with the sixth day as opposed to the Jewish messiah, who is linked to the seventh day,²³ but there are passages that point to Abulafia's fascination with and appropriation of Christological doctrines, especially trinitarian imagery, even if we accept that these passages are themselves part of his polemical strategy.²⁴ Abulafia's spiritualized messianism, with

Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Response to Christianity (Leiden: Brill, 2011). On the particular theme of incarnation or divine corporealization, see especially pp. 223, 334–40. See also the references to Scholem cited below, n. 24. For the possible influence of the Cathars on Abulafia, see Shulamit Shahar, "Écrits cathares et commentaire d'Abraham Abulafia sur le 'Livre de la Création': Images et idées communes," *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 12 (1977): 345–61, and see Idel's criticism, *Studies*, pp. 33–44. This is but one of several studies by Shahar arguing for the influence of Catharism on the emergence of kabbalah in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For a review of the topic, see Aina Balastegui Medina and Eduard Ponte Pellicer, "Càbala i catarisme: Estat de la recerca a l'entorn de les possibles influències del catarisme en la Càbala del segle XIII en territori de llengua catalana," *Actes del I Congrés per a l'Estudi dels Jueus en Territori de Llengua Catalana* (2004): 173–84. The categorical denial of the influence of Christianity on Abulafia by Raphael Kohen in the introduction to his edition of Abraham Abulafia, *The Book of New Testament* (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 7 [in Hebrew], does not seem to me to be defensible on scholarly grounds. Another edition of the text has been published as *Sefer ha-Berit* in *Mašref ha-Sekhel we-Sefer ha-Ot*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001).

²² From many homilies included in the zoharic literature we discern themes that suggest an affinity to Christological symbols and concepts, for example, the threefold unity of the divine and the iconic depiction of the invisible as the mystery of faith in which the pious adept somatically and pneumatically participates. The very same texts, however, are replete with the demonization of Christianity as the locus of an inherent impurity, often illustrated by the image of menstruation, the earthly embodiment of Satan or Samael, the archangel of Edom or Esau, as well as the theological denigration of Christian piety by identifying it with idolatry. See Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, Penina Peli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 139–61; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 255–60; idem, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 135–54; Daniel Abrams, "The Virgin Mary as the Moon that Lacks the Sun: A Zoharic Polemic Against the Veneration of Mary," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 21 (2010): 7–56.

²³ Abraham Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 64; idem, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 125. On the association of the "secret of the king Messiah" and the seventh day (both expressions *melekh ha-mashiah* and *yom ha-shevi'i* equal 453), who rules over the body of Satan, identified as Tammuz, see Abraham Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, ed. Amnon Gross, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1999), p. 183; Idel, *Studies*, pp. 51–52; Harvey J. Hames, "A Seal Within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings," *Medieval Encounters* 12 (2006): 163; idem, *Like Angels*, p. 79; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 208–9.

²⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954), p. 129; idem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and Abraham Abulafia*, ed.

its emphasis on individual as opposed to collective redemption, which is indebted primarily to the philosophical paradigm of intellectual conjunction,²⁵ may also smack of Christian influence.²⁶ It is conceivable as well that Abulafia's intensified messianic activity was a reaction to the "militant missionizing" and "messianic fervor" of Christianity in the later part of the thirteenth-century.²⁷ Finally, there is the possibility that some of the techniques Abulafia incorporated into his meditative practice reflect hesychastic exercises that he may have learned in his sojourn in Greece.²⁸

In addition to doctrinal issues, Abulafia's complex relationship to Christianity is enhanced by the sporadic comments he offers that reveal the possibility of personal engagement with Christians. In his

Joseph Ben Shlomo (Jerusalem: Akadamon, 1965), p. 184 [in Hebrew]. Scholem's more nuanced perspective, which affirms attraction and antagonism to Christianity on the part of Abulafia, is critical of the one-sided portrayal of him as exemplifying a "special inclination to Christian ideas" (*Major Trends*, p. 129), tendered by thinkers such as Meyer Heinrich Landauer and Simon Bernfeld (see references, *ibid.*, p. 379 n. 35). On Abulafia's "numerical interpretation" of the Christian Trinity, see Idel, *Ben*, pp. 315–18, 330.

²⁵ Abraham Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia: A Tentative Evaluation" in *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities in Jewish History*, ed. Marc Saperstein (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 253; Moshe Idel, "Typologies of Redemption in the Middle Ages," in *Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1983), pp. 259–63 [in Hebrew]; *idem*, *Studies*, pp. 52–53; *idem*, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 209–10; *idem*, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 58–100, 295–307; *idem*, "'The Time of the End': Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia's Eschatology" in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 155–85; *idem*, "Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011): 39–44.

²⁶ Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness," pp. 253–54. It should be noted that in the same essay, Berger concluded that in spite of the "many influences of Christian ideas... in his Messianic self-interpretation, Abulafia saw himself as Antichrist" (p. 252).

²⁷ Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond*, p. 190.

²⁸ Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 14, 24, 40 (in that context, a crucial difference is noted between the contemplative practice of Abulafia, on the one hand, and that of Yoga, Sūfism, and Hesychasm, on the other), 80, 176–77 n. 338. Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, pp. 169–70, suggested that gazing at the navel as a means to concentrate, attested in Abulafia (*Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 164), may reflect a similar technique in Christian Hesychasm, which he characterizes as "the wisdom of permutation in Christian garb and with Christian content," even referring to Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) as the "Christian Abulafia." Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 35, rejects Scholem's hypothesis with regard to this practice, even though he does acknowledge the likelihood of Hesychasm's influence on Abulafia.

prophetic-apocalyptic treatise, *Sefer ha-Öt*, Abulafia states explicitly that Zechariah—an allusion to Abulafia based on the fact that the numerical value of this name is 248, the same as Avraham—was commissioned to communicate the “words of the living God” to the Jews, who are described as being “circumcised in the flesh” but “uncircumcised in the heart.” However, since these impoverished ones, to whom he had been sent and for whom he was revealed, did not turn their hearts to the “form of his coming,” God commanded the prophet to speak “in his name” to the “Gentiles, the uncircumcised of the heart and the uncircumcised of the flesh.” Most astonishingly, Abulafia insists that even though the Gentiles “believed in the message of the Lord,” they did not “return to the Lord, for they relied on their swords and bows, and the Lord hardened their uncircumcised and impure hearts.”²⁹ In my judgment, the reliability of Abulafia’s claims is dubious, but what is important is that they are indicative of his messianic aspiration to deliver God’s message—to seek the truth and to cleave to the name³⁰—to Jew and non-Jew alike. Even though both potential recipients ultimately frustrated his ambition, it is significant that Abulafia expressed the desire to dispense this wisdom to both communities.

Two other extraordinary passages that suggest Abulafia’s contact with Christians are found in the introduction to *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*.³¹ The first one³² occurs in the context of Abulafia’s delineation of the three gradations of human beings—the righteous (*ṣaddiq*), the pious (*ḥasid*), and the prophet (*navi*)—and the corresponding levels of meaning in the scriptural text—the literal (*peshat*), the philosophical or allegorical (*mashal we-ḥiddah*), and the kabbalistic, which is identified further as

²⁹ Adolph Jellinek, “Sefer ha-Öt: Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia,” in *Jubelschrift zum Siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1887), p. 76. Concerning this passage, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 34–35. Idel cites this text as evidence of Abulafia’s “propagandistic activities” and “messianic mission,” which he contextualizes in the broader shift from a more esoteric to a more exoteric orientation regarding the dissemination of kabbalistic lore, related more specifically in Abulafia’s case to contemplation of the divine name.

³⁰ Jellinek, “Sefer ha-Öt,” p. 76; see Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, p. 80.

³¹ The passages are referred to by Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 129. Scholem’s assertion that these texts verify Abulafia’s “connection with non-Jewish mystics” is not borne out by a close reading of the material. There is no indication from Abulafia’s own words in either context that he was talking specifically to Christian mystics.

³² I briefly mentioned this text in *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 188–89, and see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 48 n. 72.

the permutation of letters and names (*ṣeruf ha-otiyot we-ha-shemot*).³³ The gradations are correlated further with three methods of exegesis, the “way of righteousness” (*derekh ha-ṣedeq*), the “way of mercy” (*derekh ha-ḥesed*), and the “way of prophecy” (*derekh ha-nevu’ah*).³⁴ After distinguishing the Torah from all other books, the Jews from all other nations, and Hebrew from all other languages,³⁵ Abulafia relates that there are Christians who say that “their Messiah” maintained that the Torah scroll is true, but that some commandments are not to be taken in their literal sense. Abulafia gives Jesus the benefit of the doubt, so to speak, insofar as he explains the ostensible rejection of the ritual laws as a tactic to lure the heart of the foolish to the Torah. Offering a more sophisticated explanation, Abulafia submits that Jesus did not succeed in adhering to the “true philosophical sages” because he accepted some of the Torah and rejected the rest, and consequently, he did not discern that the first path is entirely for the masses. Abulafia acknowledges that “amongst the Christians there are a few sages who know this secret, and they spoke to me surreptitiously and revealed to me that this is their opinion without doubt. And thus I deemed as well that they are in the rank of the pious ones of the nations of the world, and one should not be concerned with the words of the fools in any nation, for the Torah was not given except to masters of knowledge.”³⁶

In the second passage, Abulafia recounts the experience of a particular non-Jew who confronted him with the following exegetical question: if the Patriarchs and all those who came before Moses were

³³ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, pp. 21–23. See p. 27, where Abulafia extends the three modes of exegesis into the seven paths, which he outlined in greater detail in the epistle *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, published by Adolf Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Heinrich Hunger, 1854), pp. 1–48, and in *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 379–82. See Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 82–109.

³⁴ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, p. 26.

³⁵ The supremacy of Hebrew vis-à-vis the other languages is repeated on many occasions by Abulafia. See my analysis of some of the relevant passages in *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 64–66. Insofar as all the languages are viewed as a corruption of the aboriginal one, it is possible to perform the meditational practice using any language. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 134–35; and the different perspective in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 62–65. See also Idel, *Language*, pp. 3–7, 19–21; idem, “À la recherche de la langue originelle: La témoignage du nourrisson,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 213–14 (1996): 415–42, esp. 423–32.

³⁶ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, pp. 48–49.

perfect, what need is there for the Torah that was first revealed by the latter, and if they were not perfect, why are the narratives about them included in the sacred writ?³⁷ What is important for our purposes is the comment at the end of the anecdote. After listening to Abulafia's exposition, the non-Jew congratulated him for offering a rejoinder that exceeded the replies he had previously received from other Jewish sages. So enthralled was the non-Jew that he befriended Abulafia and took upon himself an oath to receive from him "something of the mysteries of the Torah." Abulafia boasts that he "established in his heart the arrow of desire for the knowledge of the name to the point that he confessed and said 'Moses is true and his Torah is true.' And there is no need to reveal more than this about the matter of the non-Jew."³⁸

In gauging the validity of this report, we must sound a note of caution. Abulafia was a man given to fanciful flights of imagination, even blurring his own identity in some treatises by registering the words he wrote under the authorship of Raziel or Zechariah,³⁹ and thus the fictive and factual are not threads that can be easily disentangled. There is just cause to be skeptical about the historicity of the events he alleges transpired. This suspicion is enhanced by the fact that the words attributed to the non-Jew, *moshe emet we-torato emet*, are based on the declaration of the sons of Korah according to a talmudic legend.⁴⁰ It is a bit incredulous to believe that a non-Jew with no knowledge of rabbinic literature would be familiar with these words. Even so, I think it reasonable to presume that Abulafia's story provides plausible evidence of his willingness not only to converse with non-Jews, but to inculcate in some of them the desire to receive the gnosis of the name usually proffered as the exclusive patrimony of the people of Israel, a belief buttressed by both the archaic nexus between circumcision

³⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁹ Both names have the numerical value 248, which is the same as Avraham, Abulafia's first name. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 74a and Sanhedrin 110a. The version in both of these contexts is *moshe we-torato emet*. See also *Bemidbar Rabbah* 18:20. The variant of the statement utilized by Abulafia, *moshe emet we-torato emet*, is found in the version of the Sanhedrin passage preserved in MS Yad-Rav Herzog, Jerusalem (I thank my colleague Jeffrey Rubenstein for this information) and in *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Qorah, 11, and is cited this way in several other medieval sources. Abulafia uses the expression as well in *Hayyei ha-Nefesh* (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 82.

and the Tetragrammaton⁴¹ and the homology of circumcision of the tongue (*milat lashon*) and circumcision of the foreskin (*milat ma'or*) affirmed in *Sefer Yeşirah*,⁴² a text that had an inordinate influence on shaping the phallic nature of Jewish esotericism. To be sure, Abulafia posits a hierarchy such that the covenant of circumcision (associated with Abraham) promotes the perfection of the attributes of the body related to this world and the covenant of the tongue (associated with Moses) promotes the perfection of the attributes of the soul related to the world to come.⁴³ Nonetheless, the literal circumcision of the male organ is not displaced by the metaphorical circumcision of the tongue or, as it is sometimes called, based on Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6, the circumcision of the heart,⁴⁴ because there is no way to be conjoined to the spiritual except through the physical.⁴⁵ Abulafia, as

⁴¹ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 87–90, 216–18; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 139–40; idem, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 63–65. It seems that my focusing on this dimension of the prophetic kabbalah has provoked Idel, *Ben*, p. 371 n. 213, to contrast his “more metaphorical or allegorical” and hence “more universalist” reading of Abulafia and my more “concrete” and “particularistic” reading. This is obviously not the place to reply to this grossly misleading appraisal of my work, but suffice it to say that I do not deny the universal dimension of Abulafia’s prophetic kabbalah. What I do maintain is that the universal is enrooted in and radiates from the particular. See especially the citation and analysis of a passage from Abulafia’s *Imrei Shefer* in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 203–4. I myself have said (*Venturing Beyond*, pp. 64–65 n. 201) that Idel’s approach is more abstract and disembodied than my own to the extent that he is willing to entertain the idea that the term “Jew” for Abulafia allegorically denotes one who has perfect knowledge of the name irrespective of ethnic identity. I recognize that the essence of Judaism consists of this universal knowledge, but I do not agree that Abulafia would have been inclined to divest this knowledge of its cultural-linguistic specificity. The promotion of this knowledge is dependent on the inherently incomparable comportment of the Jew. See Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, pp. 195–96. Appreciably, even after affirming that every human (*kol adam*) is the “fruit” of the divine and thus has the possibility of becoming an immaterial intellect, Abulafia extols the distinctiveness of the Jews and their unparalleled closeness to God at length.

⁴² A. Peter Hayman, *Sefer Yeşira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), § 3, pp. 67–69.

⁴³ Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, pp. 193, 285; idem, *Maftaḥ ha-Ra’yon*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 14.

⁴⁴ Abraham Abulafia, *Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 45; *Maftaḥ ha-Tokhaḥot*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 106. In both contexts, circumcision of the phallus is connected to repentance.

⁴⁵ Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, p. 286, cited in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 66. See also the passage from *Imrei Shefer*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 1999), p. 48, translated there. On the rite of circumcision and esotericism, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 87–92, 194–95, 216–20. Abulafia’s attitude regarding the physical circumcision of the phallus and the spiritual circumcision of the tongue/mouth or the heart is discussed as well by Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 47–48, 160–61, 171–72, 223, 296, 302–3.

other medieval Jews, roundly criticized Christians on this very point.⁴⁶ Just as the Jew cannot reach the covenant of the tongue, which is the Torah or the Tetragrammaton, without the covenant of the phallus, so the non-Jew cannot have the same access to the former, since he has completely disposed of the latter. To cite one of many relevant texts: in *Mafteah ha-Ra'yon*, Abulafia writes that the “divine light is hidden, buried, and concealed from the eyes that are blind, and it is revealed, known, and comprehended by the eyes of the heart that are illumined on account of having been in the class of those who are circumcised in the commandments of the Torah.”⁴⁷ Perhaps reversing the architectural representation in some medieval cathedrals of the *synagoga* as the blindfolded woman carrying a broken staff, Abulafia utilizes the image of blindness to characterize the non-Jews. Inverting another common Christian polemical trope, the Jews are the ones who possess the “eyes of the heart” that are illumined and capable of beholding the divine light in virtue of their being circumcised in the commandments of the Torah, which surely includes the commandment of circumcision.

In the specific case of the non-Jew who won Abulafia’s favor, there is no mention of conversion, but, in the end, he does allegedly affirm—echoing a well-known rabbinic dictum⁴⁸—two of the basic tenets of Judaism, the truth of the prophet and of scripture. It is possible that Abulafia alludes here to one of the most provocative secrets of his

⁴⁶ For example, see Abulafia, *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 2. In expounding the second of the seven hermeneutical paths, what he calls *perush*, Abulafia gives the example of the directive to circumcise the foreskin of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16), which cannot be interpreted literally and therefore is explained as figuratively signifying the need to repent. By contrast, he is disparaging of the Christians, referred to (on the basis of Ezekiel 44:7) as the “uncircumcised of the heart” (*arlei lev*) and the “uncircumcised of the flesh” (*arlei vasar*), for interpreting the physical circumcision figuratively rather than literally. See also *Sitrei Torah*, p. 97: Jesus is described as replacing circumcision with baptism on the “deceptive premise” that Jewish women become pure to their husbands through ritual immersion. As a consequence, those men who follow Jesus alter their gender from masculine to feminine (*nishtanu mi-šurat zakhar le-šurat neqevah*), an idea that Abulafia links to the scriptural expressions *arlei lev* and *arlei vasar*. Discarding circumcision is thus portrayed as a form of castration that effeminizes Christian males. Concerning this passage, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 77. On idolatry and castration in Abulafia’s representation of Christianity, see *ibid.*, pp. 159–72. As Sagerman duly notes, his Lacanian reading is inspired in part by my own reflections in *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 128–131. On Abulafia’s insistence on preserving the rite of bodily circumcision as a possible polemic with Christianity, see Moshe Idel, “The Kabbalistic Interpretation of the Secret of ‘Arayot in Early Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 12 (2004): 167 n. 554 [in Hebrew]; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 67–69.

⁴⁷ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Ra'yon*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ See above, n. 40.

kabbalah. Inasmuch as the Torah, mystically conceived, is the Active Intellect⁴⁹—the last of the ten immaterial intellects in the medieval Aristotelian-Neoplatonic cosmology—it follows that in the moment of conjunction, the prophet (represented prototypically by Moses) is identical with the Torah. In *Sefer ha-Ot*, Abulafia hints at this secret: “Moses engraved all the eternal forms in the Tree of Life, whose script is carved on the tablets, in his likeness and in his image.”⁵⁰

The comment that the script engraved on the tablets is in the likeness and image of Moses only makes sense if we assume that the latter is identical with the Torah, which is the divine name—hence, the letters of *moshe* are transposed into *ha-shem*.⁵¹ As Abulafia put it in the commentary to his *Sefer ha-Edut*, “This is the knowledge of God by means of the name [*yedi’at ha-shem ba-shem*], for Moses knew God through the name [*ki moshe yada ha-shem al pi ha-shem*], and God also knew Moses by means of the name [*we-gam ha-shem yada et moshe ba-shem*].”⁵² That Moses serves as the paradigm for the potential prophetic accomplishment of each individual may be deduced from Abulafia’s characterization in *Oṣar Eden Ganuz* of the last of the seven hermeneutical paths, the “holy of holies” and the “seal within the seal,” as the comprehension of the kabbalistic principle that the Torah in its entirety consists of the names of God, which is based on the premise that each letter is a discrete name and therefore should stand on its own. After having passed through the sixth path, the atomistic deconstruction of verses into their component parts, or in Abulafia’s exact language, the restoration of all the letters to their prime matter,⁵³ one embarks upon the final path, a reconfiguration of the letters such that it is “as if” one “creates the words and their conventional meaning.”⁵⁴ The act of poiesis induces a state of prophetic ecstasy, wherein the

⁴⁹ Idel, *Language*, pp. 34–41, 79–80, 163 n. 33; idem, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 348–50.

⁵⁰ Jellinek, “Sefer ha-Öt,” p. 77. Compare *Sefer ha-Edut*, in *Maṣref ha-Sekhel*, p. 65.

⁵¹ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 285; *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 186; *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 18 (in that context, the letters of *moshe* and *ha-shem* are linked as well to *meṭatron sar ha-panim*, the angelic name of the Active Intellect). See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 139 and 487 n. 209; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 305.

⁵² Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Edut*, in *Maṣref ha-Sekhel*, p. 68. See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, p. 73.

⁵³ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, pp. 379 and 381. Compare *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 4; *Maṣteah ha-Hokhmot*, p. 27; Idel, *Language*, pp. 97–101.

⁵⁴ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 382; Idel, *Language*, pp. 101–2.

difference between internal and external is no longer operative⁵⁵ and one imagines that one has produced the scriptural text in accordance with one's will.⁵⁶

Whether or not Abulafia had this in mind when reporting the aforementioned response of the non-Jew, his insisting that nothing more should be revealed with respect to him clearly suggests something of a very sensitive nature. At the very least, Abulafia intimates that the non-Jew was privy to the kabbalistic teaching generally reserved for Jews.⁵⁷ It is relevant to recall that at the end of *We-Zo't li-Yehudah*, the epistle written to Judah Salmon, Abulafia says there is little difference between the kabbalists who do not attend to the thought of their rational souls, that is, in contemporary scholarly parlance, the theosophic kabbalists, and the "tradition of the kabbalists from the rest of the nations" (*qabbalat mequbbalei she'ar ummot*).⁵⁸ Abulafia does not elaborate on the substance of the kabbalah of the non-Jews, but the passage does seem to bolster the idea that he was cognizant

⁵⁵ See the description of prophecy on the part of the *ba'alei ha-shemot*, as opposed to the *ba'alei sefirot*, in *We-Zo't li-Yehudah*, in Adolph Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, vol. 1 (Leipzig; A. M. Colditz, 1853), p. 16: "until their inner word is conjoined to the primordial word [*dibbur ha-qadmon*, emended according to MSS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 64b and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 1092, fol. 160a] that is in the fountain of every word, and they ascend more from word to word until the inner, human word is a potency in itself, and it prepares itself to receive the divine word, whether from the side of the form of the word itself or from the side of the word itself." On this aspect of Abulafia's kabbalah, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 142; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 238–42.

⁵⁶ See Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 379. In *Mafteah ha-Ḥokhmot*, p. 27, Abulafia describes those who walk on the seventh path as being worthy of "producing [through] it a world, a language, and an understanding" (*lehaddesh lah olam lashon we-havanah*). In *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 4, the seventh path, which is limited to the prophets, is similarly classified as the "holy of holies," the "distinctive path that comprises all the other paths." The understanding of prophecy is based, as Abulafia overtly notes, on the Maimonidean ideal of intellectual conjunction. But the philosophical approach is combined with the Jewish esoteric tradition, and thus prophecy is depicted as the "knowledge of the comprehension of the essence of the unique name," which results in the Active Intellect's creation of the divine word in the mouth of the visionary. For different translations and analyses of these passages, see Idel, *Language*, pp. 103–5.

⁵⁷ For example, in *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 3, Abulafia describes the fifth of the seventh exegetical paths, the one that is related to the wisdom of letter-permutation, as exclusive to Jewish kabbalists (*hakhmei ha-qabbalah ha-yisra'elim*). The first four paths—the literal, commentarial, homiletical, and allegorical—are shared by Jews and non-Jews. See Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 28.

of some Christians promulgating esoteric wisdom, even though the context indicates that he was critical of such efforts.

Here it is apposite to mention the section in *Or ha-Sekhel* where Abulafia employs a version of the widely circulated medieval parable of three rings. In Abulafia's version, a king has a pearl that he wishes to bequeath to his son, but when the latter angers him, he hurls the pearl into a pit, waiting for the son to repent. Before the son complies to his father's will, he is tormented by two of the king's servants, who covet the pearl.⁵⁹ The prince obviously refers to the Jews, the two servants to Christians and Muslims. The pearl is the truth that belongs, most properly, only to the Jews. There is no indication that Abulafia embraced an egalitarianism or ecumenism that would categorically dissolve the differences between the three monotheistic faiths. It is surely not immaterial that the leitmotif of the section of the treatise in which the tale appears is the superiority of Hebrew to all other languages. The Jews are compared to a prince, the Christians and Muslims to servants. In the final analysis, Abulafia availed himself of the parable to undermine the credibility of Christianity and Islam as adequate expressions of the truth and to insinuate that even Judaism in its present state did not possess the truth in its entirety. In the messianic future, however, the pearl will be lifted from the pit and restored to the king's son, and Judaism will fulfill its calling to be the "universal religion" (*ha-dat ha-kelalit*), which denotes the propensity through the Hebrew letters to stimulate the "divine overflow that moves the universal word [*dibbur ha-kelali*]."⁶⁰

All three Abrahamic faiths contribute to the cultivation of the truth, but the Jews uniquely possess the knowledge that can bring about the redemption. Just as one cannot ascertain the "intelligible truth" except through the "sensible,"⁶¹ so the particular is necessary for the universal to be realized. Abulafia's interpretation of the messianic promise "for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9) drives home the point that the realization of a more universal state does not eradicate the ethnic particularity and the

⁵⁹ Abulafia, *Or ha-Sekhel*, pp. 34–35. See Idel, *Studies*, pp. 48–50; Iris Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings: A Revision of Its History," *Journal of Medieval History* 23 (1997): 171–72; Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 66–69; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 58 n. 98.

⁶⁰ Abulafia, *Or ha-Sekhel*, p. 34.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

linguistic advantage appended thereto: “all will know the Lord...all will acknowledge from then that the holy language is the privileged of all languages. Therefore, what was known to the prophets was known in the secret of the explicit name, which was not known apart from them to any other individual from the human species.”⁶² Hebrew is the “first matter” (*homer ha-ri’shon*) whence all languages originate and to which they should be returned through the meditational practice,⁶³ an idea supported frequently by the numerical equivalence of *şeruf ha-otiyot* (“permutation of the letters”) and *shiv'im leshonot* (“seventy languages”)—the sum of both is 1214.⁶⁴

I grant that the metaphysical significance of Hebrew as the *Ursprache* is to be sought not in existing semantic morphemes but in its phonemic and graphemic potentiality.⁶⁵ I also concede that Abulafia’s conception of Hebrew as comprising all seventy languages allows him to use Greek, Latin, or Arabic in order to corroborate a point linguistically or numerologically.⁶⁶ The utopian vision led Abulafia to believe that every nation—Christianity and Islam are singled out as representative of all the rest—would acquire knowledge of the name. An interesting iteration of this theme is found in *Mafteah ha-Shemot*. Abulafia links Hebrew, Arabic, and the “script of the Christians” (*ketivat ha-noşrim*), which I assume refers to either Greek or Latin, to the seventy-two-letter name derived from Exodus 14:19–21, since all languages are contained in these three. The manner in which the name is permuted on the basis of these verses signifies that “in the future, in the days of

⁶² Ibid., pp. 35–36.

⁶³ See above, n. 53. See also Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, p. 334.

⁶⁴ Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, pp. 77, 95, 313, 381; *Or ha-Sekhel*, p. 85; *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 17; *Sitrei Torah*, pp. 37, 89, 144; *Imrei Shefer*, p. 183; *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, p. 122; *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, in *Maşref ha-Sekhel*, p. 81; *Mafteah ha-Tokhahot*, p. 106; *Shomer Mişwah*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 16. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 381 n. 53; idem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala,” *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 190–93; Idel, *Language*, pp. 9 and 142 n. 47; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 62; Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 134–35 n. 24.

⁶⁵ Moshe Idel, “The Infant Experiment: The Search for the First Language,” in *The Language of Adam: Die Sprache Adams*, ed. Allison P. Coudert (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 70–71, and my rejoinder in *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 203–4.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, p. 344. See *ibid.*, p. 121: “The faculty of speech is the natural, human form by means of which the human is distinguished from the rest of the living beings. And this faculty is entirely the speech innate in the human in the seventy languages through the permutation of the twenty-two letters, and it is the faculty that is found potentially in every speech and it goes out in its form from potentiality to actuality time after time.”

the final redeemer,⁶⁷ all three will know God through the name, as it says 'For then I will make the nations pure of speech, so that they will invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord' (Zephaniah 3:9)."⁶⁸ While this is surely astounding, Hebrew is still distinguished as the language of revelation. As Abulafia writes in *Sitrei Torah*, "the beginning of the truth of prophecy is the inner speech created in the soul through the seventy languages in the twenty-two holy letters. And all of them are purified [*mešurafim*] in the heart through the permutation of letters [*be-šeruf ha-otiyot*] in potentiality from the aspect of the faculty of speech and in actuality from the aspect of the Active Intellect."⁶⁹ Restating this theme in *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, Abulafia describes the "essence of prophecy in truth and the cause of its existence" as "the word reaching the prophets from God by means of the perfect language that comprises beneath itself the seventy languages, and this is the holy language exclusively, which is subsumed under the twenty-two holy letters."⁷⁰ The universalism of Abulafia's message notwithstanding, he unwaveringly distinguishes Hebrew and the other languages. The messianic future is thus described as a state in which the other nations will attest to the preeminence of Hebrew and, by extension, the Jewish people, a verity based on rational demonstration and scriptural proof.⁷¹ There is a fundamental inconsistency in Abulafia's thinking: all languages are thought to be comprised in Hebrew and yet, the latter alone is tagged as the natural language. Tellingly, in *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, after stating that he follows the view of Averroës and Maimonides regarding the conventionality of all languages with the exception of Hebrew, Abulafia admits that this matter is not

⁶⁷ The title applies to Abulafia, insofar as he is charged with the mission to disseminate the salvific knowledge of the name. See *ibid.*, p. 82, where Abulafia substantiates his messianic duty by offering a kabbalistic exegesis of the verse "Behold my enlightened servant shall be elevated, exalted and raised to great heights" (Isaiah 52:13): "Elevated above Moses, exalted above Abraham, and raised above the ministering angels, higher than all other human beings."

⁶⁸ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 81.

⁶⁹ Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, p. 138.

⁷⁰ Abulafia, *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, pp. 8–9. See the introduction to *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, p. 9, where Abulafia laments that because of the exile Jews speak foreign languages, even when studying Torah, and thus he sets as his task to reinstate the glory of the holy language, the "beginning all existence," to the holy nation. See *ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷¹ *Mafteah ha-Ra'yon*, p. 24.

subject to rational deliberation; it must be accepted on the basis of prophetic authority.⁷²

Further confirmation of Abulafia's bias is found in a passage from *Ošar Eden Ganuz* in which he defends the proposition that Jews are the "chosen nation of all the nations in relation to God" and that their religion⁷³ is "above all the languages." Dismissing the stock argument that Jews are in a depraved and diminished state, Abulafia insists that Israel has not lost its unique standing. Even if their actual condition might not justify this assertion, their potentiality, which derives from the three instruments entrusted to them, the law (*torah*), the oral language (*lashon*), and the written script (*mikhtav*), assures them of their unrivaled supremacy. The possibility of repentance, by which they may reclaim their divine status, is thus always open to them. Responding to the hypothetical query that Jesus and Muhammad both harbored the intention to unify the name, Abulafia writes: "I would say to you that this is true if I could discern from what they innovated a physical, psychical, and intellectual benefit in relation to that from which they separated, for both of them were from the class of our nation, and they innovated things that distanced those who are close to God." Abulafia then goes on to brand many non-Jews as "fools" (*shotim*), but he avows that those who have "already recognized the truth" may be considered "perfect" (*shalem*). These individuals, who are "drawn after" the Jewish people, are designated "the pious of the nations of the world, who have a share in the world to come."⁷⁴

Despite the positive role accorded to Christianity and Islam, a careful scrutiny of the full context of this text patently demonstrates that Abulafia does not abandon the ethnocentric privileging of Judaism as culturally and linguistically exceptional. Even the fact that the righteous

⁷² Abulafia, *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, pp. 16–17. A portion of this passage is translated and analyzed in Idel, *Language*, pp. 12–13.

⁷³ According to the reading *וְדַתֵּינוּ* preserved in MS Oxford-Bodleian 1580, fol. 93a; the printed text (see following note) mistakenly reads *וְעַדֵּתֵינוּ*.

⁷⁴ Abulafia, *Ošar Eden Ganuz*, pp. 192–93. See Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 64–65; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 75–76. On the righteous or pious of the nations of the world attaining the world to come, see *Tosefta*, Sanhedrin 13:2; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a; Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:5; Hilkhot Melakhim 8:11. It is probable that Abulafia was influenced by the Maimonidean formulations, which have been discussed by many scholars. Finally, I note that in *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 49, the "souls of the pious of the nations of the world" together with the "souls of the righteous of Israel" are described as being incorporeal intellects, who are worthy of meriting the life of the world to come.

Gentiles are called the “pious of the nations of the world” (*ḥasidei ummot olam*) is instructive: the pious individual (*ḥasid*) is on a lower level than the prophet (*navi*), a classification that is restricted to the Jewish people. Thus, in the continuation of the passage, he notes that the Jews, who are from the seed of Judah, are called *yehudim*, for they “admit the truth and say ‘More than all the goods of this world, it is sufficient for us to have knowledge of the name.’” The inimitable destiny of the Jews is to cultivate and propagate this soterial knowledge—the letters of the word *yehudim* (יהודים) are rearranged as *yh”w dayam* (יהו דיים), that is, it is sufficient (*dayam*) for them to call upon the name (*yh”w*). Assuredly, this knowledge imparts to Jews a mission of universal proportions, but they can fulfill that destiny only as members of a particular religion, one constrained by specific rites and beliefs that cannot be abrogated. Even if we were to accept that in Abulafia there is a “progression to the true faith based on the knowledge of the Divine name which supersedes the Jewish religion as it is practiced today and will unify humanity,” it is not evident that his “ideal was of a universal redemption and perfection, regardless of the faith that people belong to, in the knowledge of God through knowledge of the Holy Name.”⁷⁵ The universal is not only achieved through the agency of the particular, but its very instantiation preserves the particularity. Knowledge of the name, on this score, does not supersede Judaism but rather expresses its innermost spiritual essence.

Accursed of God: Jesusolatry and the Temptation of Christ

On other occasions Abulafia portrays Christianity with standard derogatory images, for instance, referring to Jesus as the “bastard son of a menstruant” and denigrating those who worship him as idolaters.⁷⁶ Jesus and Mary are explicitly identified as the “alien gods of the land”

⁷⁵ Hames, *Like Angels*, p. 69. The author concurs with Idel’s stance (see p. 136 n. 31). See also Phillipe Gardette, *Djalâl-od-Dîn Rûmî, Raymond Lulle, Rabbi Abraham Aboulafia ou l’amour du dialogue interconfessionnel* (Istanbul: Les Éditions Isis, 2002), pp. 77–86.

⁷⁶ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 130; *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, p. 47; *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, in *Maṣref ha-Sekhel*, p. 83; *Sitrei Torah*, p. 97; Idel, *Studies*, pp. 52–53; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 137 n. 27; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 45–49, 304.

(Deuteronomy 31:16).⁷⁷ For Abulafia, the charge of idolatry is to be understood in the Maimonidean sense of ascribing corporeality to the divine, which is an epistemological error that arises from a false imagination.⁷⁸ The belief in Jesus as the incarnation of the divine epitomizes the demonic potential of the imagination, a point accentuated by the fact that the words *dimyon* and *daemon* are made up of the same letters.⁷⁹ In *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, Abulafia decodes the word *saṭan* as an acrostic for *sekhel* (intellect), *ṭeva* (nature), and *nefesh* (soul); the title “absolute Satan” is applied to the soul prevented from comprehending the influx (*shefa*) of the divine in the universe. Although no mention is made of Jesus or Christianity, I do not think it inappropriate to apply this characterization to the Christian topos of incarnation of which Abulafia is severely critical.⁸⁰

One of the more strident reproaches appears in *Mafteah ha-Shemot*. Abulafia writes that the “Greek Christians” call the Messiah “anti-Christ,” for he “stands opposite [Jesus] to notify everyone that his saying to the Christians that he is God, and the son of God, is a complete lie, for he did not receive the power from the unique name but rather all his power hangs on the image of the Teli, which is hanging on the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.”⁸¹ The true Messiah, by contrast, is suspended from the Tree of Life. It would seem that the intent of this text is that Abulafia is the Jewish messianic figure who rises to expose the deceit of the Christian savior and therefore he is called the anti-Christ;⁸² the former corresponds to the Tree of Life, the intellect

⁷⁷ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 125. In *Sitrei Torah*, p. 97, the expression “alien gods” is applied to Jesus alone based on the fact that *yeshu* and *elohei nekhar* both equal 316. See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 77.

⁷⁸ Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, pp. 59–60, and compare the analysis of this text in Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 196–97. See also Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 62, 97–99; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 61–62; idem, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence: Angelic Embodiment and the Alterity of Time in Abraham Abulafia,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 18 (2008): 162–63. On the false imagination (*dimyon ha-shiqri* or *dimyon shiqri*), see Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, p. 110; *Mafteah ha-Ra'yon*, pp. 16 and 24; and *Sefer ha-Melammed*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 17.

⁷⁹ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 121; Idel, *Language*, pp. 21, 56–57; idem, *Studies*, pp. 35–39; Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” p. 147.

⁸⁰ Idel, *Ben*, pp. 61 and 330.

⁸¹ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 130.

⁸² Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness,” p. 252; Idel, *Studies*, p. 52; Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 80–81; and Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 83 n. 144. The presumption that there were actual Christians who proclaimed Abulafia to be the anti-Christ insofar as he exposed the spuriousness of Jesus is preposterous. We have once again an

or form, and the latter to the Tree of Knowledge, the imagination or matter, also represented by the astrological image of the Teli, the astral serpent-dragon.⁸³ In *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Abulafia invokes the numerological equivalence of the words *ha-naḥash* and *ha-mashiah* (both equal 363) to ground the idea that the serpent who deceived Eve and brought transgression to the world is a prefiguration of Jesus, a point validated by the fact that the numerical value of the word *arum*, “cunning,” which describes the serpent (Genesis 3:1), when written out in full, *ay”n r”sh w”w m”m* (70 + 10 + 50 + 200 + 300 + 6 + 6 + 40 + 40 = 722), is the same as the expression *arum min yeshu* (70 + 200 + 6 + 40 + 40 + 50 + 10 + 300 + 6 = 722), which signifies that the williness of the snake derives from Jesus, that is, the serpentine craftiness is related to the power of magic, echoing the longstanding polemical depiction of Jesus in particular or the Christians more generally.⁸⁴

To return to the text of *Mafteah ha-Shemot*: Abulafia satirically interprets the eucharistic images of the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, which are correlated typologically to the dreams of the baker and cupbearer of Pharaoh as interpreted by Joseph (Genesis 40:5–19). The bread is identified as the *corpus daemones*, which is glossed as the “bodies of demons [*gufei shedim*], the opposite of *dominus*, whose matter is spiritual and divine.”⁸⁵ Rather than being the body of God, *corpus domini*, Jesus is the body of the demon, the force of Satan, which, for Abulafia, connotes the imaginative faculty that has the capacity to deceive. Christians are denigrated as “fools” for thinking that the powers they venerate are divine; the bread, which is a

example of Abulafia fabricating reality in order to make a didactic point. It is striking how little self-reflection there has been on the part of scholars assessing the claims to factuality made by a man of such considerable imaginative skills as Abulafia.

⁸³ See Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, p. 144; *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 85, where the Teli is connected to the “copper serpent” (Numbers 21:9), whose power is magic; *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, p. 8. On the astrological symbol of the Teli in Abulafia, see Idel, *Studies*, pp. 77–78; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 145 n. 135. This image, and especially its connection to Jesus, has been explored most extensively by Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 139–40, 185, 187, 189–90, 191–97, 204, 208, 211–16, 218, 220, 222, 227–29, 233, 239–42, 245–46, 248, 253, 255–61, 263, 265–66, 308, 326, 332–33, 349–50; and see reference to Hames in the following note.

⁸⁴ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, pp. 64–65. See Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 77–78. On the association of Jesus and/or Christianity and magic, see sources cited in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 44 n. 112, 140–41, and further reference to Abulafia cited on p. 141 n. 47.

⁸⁵ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 131. I mention this text briefly in *Venturing Beyond*, p. 63 n. 195.

matter of carnal desire, is offered as a *sacrificio*, but it is, in fact, *sheqer officio*, that is, “false worship” (*avodat sheqer*). By deifying Jesus, therefore, Christians are guilty of bearing false witness, as their *sacramentum* is veritably *sheqer mendo*, an “erroneous lie.” The *secreto* (שקרִיטו) can be transposed into the name *christo* (קרשטו), which Abulafia construes as a hybrid of the Hebrew *sheqer* and the Latin *tu*, that is, “you are a lie.” On the basis of this wordplay, the fallacy of the Trinity is laid bare: “Thus they say to him ‘you are a lie’ [*sheqer attah*], for [the word] *sheloshah* [three] is numerically equal to *sheqer we-khazav* [lie and deception].⁸⁶ Whoever thinks that God is divisible into two, three, or more persons, is an idolater and a heretic.”⁸⁷ Abulafia similarly undermines the eucharistic symbol of the wine by transposing (through the principle of numerical equivalence) the word *ha-sarigim*, “vines,” into *sarei moah*, “archons of the brain,” or *sarei yovel*, “archons of the jubilee,” which is also *sar magiyah*, “archon of magic.”⁸⁸

In a passage from *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, Abulafia offers a philosophical critique of the Christian incarnation in the context of elucidating the admonition against heeding the enticement of a prophet or a dream-diviner to worship another god, even if a sign or portent that he named comes true (Deuteronomy 13:2–6):

As far as the claim of the Christians concerning that man who is known,⁸⁹ Jesus, that he performed wonders, and their reason is to be able to worship him as a god, it is possible to say that “[your God] is testing you” (*ibid.*, 4). With respect to every perfect sage, and all the more so the true prophets, that God will be materialized [*she-yitgashem ha-shem*]

⁸⁶ That is, the numerical value of both expressions is 635. The numerology appears as well in Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, ed. Amnon Gross (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 54: “If a man should say to you that the divinity is three [*ha-elohut sheloshah*], tell him [that is] *sheqer we-khazav*, for [the word] *sheloshah* is numerically equal to *sheqer we-khazav*.” See also *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 26; *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 87.

⁸⁷ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, pp. 132–33. The passage is partially translated and discussed in Hames, *Like Angels*, p. 82. In *We-Zo’it li-Yehudah*, Abulafia’s compares the delineation of the ten emanations by the “masters of the sefirotic kabbalah” (*ba’alei ha-qabbalah ha-sefirot*) to the trinitarian belief of the Christians (Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 19). See Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 974; Idel, *Studies*, pp. 55–56 n. 8; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 131.

⁸⁸ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 134.

⁸⁹ In this instance, the Hebrew expression *ha-ish ha-yadu’a* is likely meant to echo the well-known Latin phrase *ecce homo*, the Vulgate translation of the words ascribed to Pontius Pilate, *idou ho anthrōpos* (John 19:5) when the scourged Jesus appears before him wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe.

is absolutely impossible [*nimna be-takhlit ha-meni'ah*]. No wondrous deed is sufficient to refute the knowledge of this faith, and there is no rational proof at all in the hand of those who believe in the incarnation [*ma'aminei ha-higashmut*].⁹⁰

On the face of it, Abulafia ridicules the literal understanding of the incarnation on both rational and supernatural grounds. Addressing directly the death of Jesus and the accusation by Christians that the Jews are guilty of deicide, Abulafia contrasts the death of Moses by a kiss⁹¹ with the punishment of crucifixion handed to Jesus because he was a false prophet, a sentence justified scripturally by the words *ki qillat elohim taluy* (Deuteronomy 21:23), which Abulafia reads as “the accursed of God will hang.”⁹²

Serpent/Rod: Overcoming the Polarity of Truth and Deception

Jesus personifies the supreme deception and the Jewish messiah the supreme truth. But if the mystery of the name dictates, as Abulafia insists, a coincidence of opposites, can the extreme dichotomization of truth and deceit be upheld? The paradoxical conception is expressed ontically by the androgynous image of Metatron as angelic and satanic, and psychologically as the good and evil inclinations in each person. The soul transformed into this angel—the figurative way that Abulafia labels conjunction with the Active Intellect⁹³—imitates the divine by integrating opposites in its own being,⁹⁴ a process referred

⁹⁰ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, p. 66.

⁹¹ See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 180–84; Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 39–44.

⁹² Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Tokhaḥot*, pp. 76–77.

⁹³ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 139–40; Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 116–19.

⁹⁴ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 172–73 n. 213; idem, “Kenotic Overflow,” pp. 150, 155–57. See Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 113, where the rank of angel (*mal'akh*) is attributed to one who “returns from opposite to opposite.” I don’t mean to deny that there are passages in Abulafia’s writings where he portrays truth and deception in a more dichotomous fashion. For example, in *Sitrei Torah*, pp. 96–97, the Christians are described as not having the “scales of wisdom” in their hearts to “discriminate truth and deception.” See also the first paragraph of *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 43, where Abulafia instructs his reader “to love truth and to despise deceit.” The introduction is not found in all the manuscripts of this treatise; see, for example, MSS Moscow-Günzberg 133 and Braginsky 251, available at <http://www.braginskycollection.com/start.php> (I thank Avi Solomon for drawing this manuscript to my attention). Assuming

to as the “secret of inversion” (*sod ha-hippukh*) or as the “inversion of attributes” (*hithappekhut ha-middot*).⁹⁵ In one striking passage in *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia applies the former expression to the transmutation of the rod cast by Aaron before Pharaoh into a serpent (Exodus 7:8–10). That the serpent in this context alludes to Jesus, and the rod, by implication, to the power of the Jewish redeemer—the status of Aaron as the high priest is not insignificant, since for Abulafia the scripturally mandated rite of anointment juxtaposes the messianic and the priestly⁹⁶—may be teased out from the web of verses spun by Abulafia’s exegetical dexterity:

When you discern the serpent, who is called the “fleeing serpent” [*naḥash bariah*] and the “crooked serpent” [*naḥash aqallaton*], you will discern the secret of what is said: “The prominent⁹⁷ elder is the head; the prophet who teaches lies is the tail” (Isaiah 9:14), “The Lord will make you the head, not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13), “Take in your hand the rod that turned into a serpent” (Exodus 7:15), and it says “[he cast it on the ground] and it became a serpent, and Moses recoiled from it” (ibid., 4:3), and it says “[Then the Lord said to Moses,] ‘Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail,’ and he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his palm” (ibid., 4)... The entire secret of the rod that turned into a serpent is made known to you, and its reality is explained in the secret of the inversion.⁹⁸

The twofold description of Leviathan as the “fleeing serpent” and the “crooked serpent” (Isaiah 27:1) refers to the twofold nature of the demonic force. The serpent is identified further as the tail that is set in contrast to the head, the former designated as the prophet who gives false instruction and the latter as the elder of the prominent countenance. To decipher this we must bear in mind that the images of the elder (*zaqen*) and the youth (*na’ar*) denote the Janus quality

these words were written by Abulafia, we can still make the following distinction: in the initial stage of entering the path, the language of polarity is appropriate, but at a more advanced stage, there is a collapse of that very polarity in the discernment that the opposites are identical. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that only by separating truth and deception can one come to apprehend that there is no truth without deception and no deception without truth.

⁹⁵ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n. 167.

⁹⁶ Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 94–97.

⁹⁷ I am translating the Hebrew *nesu panim* in accord with what I take to be Abulafia’s own understanding. The literal sense relays the more negative connotation of practicing partiality.

⁹⁸ Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, pp. 33–34. I mentioned this text briefly in *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 59 n. 167, and see the analysis in Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 236–37.

of Metatron, the “fount of the double life” (*meqor hayyim kefulim*).⁹⁹ Abulafia divulges the secret of the dual deportment in sundry ways, for example, the first and last of the ten separate intellects;¹⁰⁰ the angel of the moon with her dark and light phase;¹⁰¹ the draconic constellation of the Teli, which is associated, as we have seen, with the figure of Jesus;¹⁰² and the Torah as an elixir of life or as a drug of death.¹⁰³ It is reasonable to assume, moreover, that the deceptive prophet is an allusion to Jesus and the prominent elder to the Jewish messiah. This conjecture is strengthened by the images of the rod and the serpent: the latter symbolizes the demonic potency of the feigned messiah, and the former the divine potency of the genuine messiah.¹⁰⁴ Abulafia anchors this idea in the scriptural claim that the serpent became a rod in the palm of Moses, *wa-yehi matteh be-khappo* (Exodus 4:4), for the word *be-khappo* can be read as *be-kaf waw*, that is, “by means of twenty-six,” an allusion to the Tetragrammaton, whose numerology is twenty-six, marked in Hebrew characters as *kaf waw*. Through the power of the name, entrusted to the hand of Moses, the “first redeemer” (*go’el ha-ri’shon*), the serpent becomes the rod. Inasmuch as Abulafia understood his mission messianically as disseminating the mystical regimen

⁹⁹ The image is derived from Abulafia’s description of the source of the letters in the poem *emet sullam ber’o sur lehorot*, which begins the second part of *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 5. I hope to translate and comment on this poem in a separate study.

¹⁰⁰ Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 117–18, 165 n. 206; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 83–85 nn. 263–64, 140 n. 123, 143–44 n. 135.

¹⁰¹ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 56; idem, *Hotam ha-Haftarah*, in *Mašref ha-Sekhel*, p. 112, previously cited and analyzed in Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” pp. 155–56 n. 85. In the first passage, the good and evil aspects of Metatron, the light and dark side of the moon, are connected to the attributes of mercy and judgment, and in the second passage, to Mordecai and Haman. Abulafia refers to the rabbinic custom (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b) that one should become so inebriated on Purim that the distinction between the hero Mordecai and the villain Haman is blurred, an idea supported by the numerical equivalence of the expressions “cursed is Haman” (*arur haman* = 502) and “blessed is Mordecai” (*barukh mordecai* = 502).

¹⁰² See above, n. 83.

¹⁰³ Abulafia, *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 8. See Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” p. 161 n. 109.

¹⁰⁴ See Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, p. 84. Commenting on God’s instruction to Moses and Aaron to take the rod in hand and to speak to the rock in order to draw water therefrom (Numbers 20:7–8), Abulafia sets the parallel between the rod and the tongue such that hitting the rock by means of the former is equivalent to speaking to it by means of the latter. Abulafia’s recasting of the biblical images is reminiscent of the two covenants specified in *Sefer Yeširah* (see above, n. 42), as noted by Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, p. 237. On the role of these covenants in Abulafia’s mystical scheme, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 87–90, 194–95, 216–20; idem, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 63–69.

that culminates in knowledge of the name, it is not unreasonable to assume that he saw himself as Moses *redivivus*, the “final redeemer” (*go’el ha-aḥaron*).¹⁰⁵

The dualistic tone of passages such as these is unmistakable, but there are others in which Abulafia enunciated a far more harmonistic perspective. This is implied in the aforementioned text from *Sitrei Torah* where one thing is described as turning into its opposite. In another passage from this treatise, the principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is applied specifically to the relationship between Jews and non-Jews:

The bodies of all the nations on the face of the earth are uncircumcised [*gufam arel*], and they are nothing but amorphous mass and dust [*golem we-afar*].¹⁰⁶ ... Therefore, we inherited the splendor of the festivity to distinguish us from every nation, which is profane in relation to him and we are holy unto him. They are the blood and we are the religion, for “From his right hand was a fiery law” (Deuteronomy 33:3). He revealed to us that the attribute of his right is the attribute of his left, and the attribute of his left is the attribute of his right, for there is no left¹⁰⁷ above. “Your right hand, O Lord, is glorious in power, Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy” (Exodus 15:6).¹⁰⁸

The obligation on the Jews to commemorate the three annual festivals distinguishes them in their holiness from the mundane status of the Gentiles. The discord between the two is underscored by allocating the term “religion” (*dat*) to the Jew and the term “blood” (*dam*) to the non-Jew. Abulafia closes the gap, however, by interpreting the description of

¹⁰⁵ Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 109, and see above, n. 67. On Abulafia’s self-perception in relation to Moses, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 140–41. On the connection between Moses and the Messiah, see the recent survey, which includes references to previous scholars, by Semadar Cherlow, “How Moses Became the Messiah? From *Tikkunei-Zohar* to Rav Kook’s Mystical Mission,” in *Moses the Man—Master of the Prophets in the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages*, ed. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, and Hanokh Ben-Pazi (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 449–81, esp. 449–54 [in Hebrew].

¹⁰⁶ That is, the letters of *gufam arel* are the same as *golem we-afar*.

¹⁰⁷ The printed edition (see n. 105) reads here “no left or right,” but I have followed the version preserved in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale héb. 774, fol. 153a, which is a more accurate rendering of the rabbinic text to which Abulafia is referring (see n. 109).

¹⁰⁸ Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, p. 132. In the introduction to the same treatise, p. 9, Abulafia insists that for the “masters of truth” (*ba’alei ha-emet*) the “true intention” of the wisdom of letter-permutation is to discern the difference between truth and falsity and between good and evil. It is for this reason that opposites are contained in the combination of letters.

the Torah as a “fiery law” (*esh dat*) that comes from the right hand of God, that is, the quality of fire, which is usually associated with the left, is here apportioned to the right, whence we know that “the attribute of his right is the attribute of his left, and the attribute of his left is the attribute of his right.” To shore up his argument, Abulafia summons the rabbinic teaching that there is no left above,¹⁰⁹ which signals that the dichotomy between sacred Israel and the unholy nations is surmounted by the paradoxical identification of the right and left.

The adept who acquires mystical insight discerns that the two aspects, which appear antinomical from the more pedestrian point of view informed by the law of contradiction, are in reality identified. In *Sefer ha-Meliş*, Abulafia transmitted the secret in the following way: “And this is the spirit of Samael, and know that its opposite¹¹⁰ is the angel, and from him you will know that the merciful one is the judge and also that the judge is the merciful one.”¹¹¹ As Abulafia expressed the esoteric wisdom in *Ish Adam*, one who visualizes Metatron in the “countenance of the living man” comes to know that “death is life, and that life, too, is death, and that if the living die, the dead shall live.”¹¹² Reiterating the theme in *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia writes: “And the eminent secret that one must know is that his head is in the tail and his tail is in the head.”¹¹³ Elsewhere in this treatise, Abulafia ties this insight to the characterization of the *sefirot* in the first part of *Sefer Yeşirah*,¹¹⁴ “their end is fixed in their beginning, and their beginning in their end, like the flame bound to the coal”: “The secret of the ‘coal’ [*gaḥelet*] is ‘truth’ [*emet*], and the secret of the bond [*qesher*] is deceit [*sheqer*], as in the matter of our existence, that is, in deceit there is truth [*ki ha-sheqer bo emet*].”¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:13.

¹¹⁰ I have here followed the reading *temuro* in MS Munich 285, fol. 15a, rather than *homro*, “his materiality,” according to the printed text (see following note).

¹¹¹ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Meliş*, p. 28. It is of interest to note that in the same text, Abulafia uses the image of “circular ladder” (*sullam agol*) to portray visually the mystical comprehension of the Tree of Knowledge (ibid., p. 30). See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 109–11. Without entering into the details of this image, I merely note that it corresponds precisely to the idea of linear circularity that I have articulated in “Kenotic Overflow” in an effort to characterize the nature of temporality in Abulafia’s kabbalah.

¹¹² Abraham Abulafia, *Ish Adam*, in *Maşref ha-Sekhel*, p. 44.

¹¹³ Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, p. 243.

¹¹⁴ Hayman, *Sefer Yeşira*, §6, pp. 74–75.

¹¹⁵ Abulafia, *Oşar Eden Ganuz*, p. 20. This passage, as well as the one referenced below at n. 117, have been previously cited and analyzed in Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” pp. 154–55.

The mystery of the coincidence of opposites is deduced from the uroboric representation of the *sefirot*, an idea that is substantiated exegetically by the numerical equivalence of *gaḥelet* (3 + 8 + 30 + 400 = 441) and *emet* (1 + 40 + 400 = 441), and by the transposition of *qesher* into *sheqer* (they are composed of the same consonants and thus both numerically equal 600). The unity of the *sefirot* illustrates that in every falsehood there is truthfulness; by the logic of the paradox, we must suppose the inverse as well, and thus in every truthfulness there is falsehood.¹¹⁶ For the prophet, there is no binary opposition; the three matrix letters delineated in the second part of *Sefer Yeṣirah*—*alef*, *mem*, and *shin*—form the acrostic *emet makhri'a sheqer*, “truth mediates deception,” and hence the “deceptive truth” (*ha-emet shiqri*) is the “truthful deception” (*ha-sheqer amitti*). Through the faculty of the intellect, the enlightened one (*maskil*) can make the deception true (*ye'ammēt ha-sheqer*) and the truth deceptive (*yeshaqqer ha-emet*).¹¹⁷

(Dis)incarnating the Flesh into Word

The ruse associated with Jesus, as we have seen, is the fallacious belief in the somatic incarnation, which is fostered by a faulty imagination that conceives of God anthropomorphically, but, like all deceptions, in this one there must be truth. The deceptive truth—the true fiction, as it were, the truth that is true because of the untruth of its truth—is related to the imaginal form of the angel, the concretization of the divine efflux, which is envisioned by the individual who has been ecstatically transmogrified into an angelic body through knowledge of the name. This transmogrification is facilitated by the permutation of the letters, a process that is referred to by one of Abulafia's disciples as *malbush*, the taking on of the garment.¹¹⁸ This knowledge, and not

¹¹⁶ The logical inference of the reversal was not always drawn by kabbalists. For instance, compare *Sefer ha-Peli'ah* (Przemyśl, 1883), pt. 1, 32b: “From the lie the truth will be clarified, for the truth is contained in the lie, but the lie is not contained in the truth.” The asymmetry implied in this statement is not logically defensible, for if truth is contained in the lie, then, analogously, the lie should be contained in the truth.

¹¹⁷ Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, p. 111. Compare *Sheva Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 9, where Abulafia describes the Tree of Life, in contrast to the Tree of Death, that is, the Tree of Knowledge, as revealing truth and falsity. Truth consists of affirming the “existing reality,” whereas falsity is the “privation of existence.” To discern this difference constitutes partaking of the eternal life.

¹¹⁸ The text is cited and analyzed in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 234–36. Although my name is not mentioned, Idel, *Ben*, p. 103 n. 187, evidently has me in mind

belief in the messianic savior, the hypostasis of the triune God, is the mechanism that brings about “eternal salvation” (*teshu‘at olamim*).¹¹⁹ As Abulafia remarked in *We-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, “When I attained [the knowledge of] the names, and when I loosened the knots of the seal, the Lord of everything was revealed to me, and he disclosed to me his secret, and he advised me of the termination of the exile and the time of the beginning of the redemption, and of the redeemer of blood.”¹²⁰ The expression *go’el ha-dam* is the scriptural idiom for the one who avenges the blood of a relative who has been murdered (Numbers 35:10–28). For Abulafia, it signifies the messianic task of liberating matter or the imagination represented by the image of blood, which is usually paired with ink, the symbol of form or the intellect.¹²¹ There may also be a subtle jab at the Christian belief in the redemptive value of the sacrificial blood of Jesus.¹²² The true redeemer of blood is not

when he writes that “Abulafia’s view of the concept of *Malbush*—the garment—is in my opinion quite different from incarnation. It deals with the imaginary representation of the mystic’s self as part of a revelation or an experience.” For further elucidation of this theme, see Natan ben Sa’adyah Har’ar, *Le Porte Della Giustizia: Ša’are Šedeq*, ed. and with an essay by Moshe Idel, Italian edition ed. Maurizio Mottolese (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 2001), pp. 245–49. It behooves me to respond that a careful reading of my analysis shows that I state unambiguously that, for Abulafia, the object of vision is not a physical body but an internal psychic image projected outward. I contend, however, that the heart of the prophet or mystic is a “translucent mirror” in which the internal is externalized at the same time that the external is internalized, a double mirroring in which the “difference of identity between seer and seen is overcome in the identity of their difference” (*Language, Eros, Being*, p. 235). To do justice to my point of view, one must take full measure of this paradox. See below, n. 125.

¹¹⁹ Jellinek, “Sefer ha-Ōt,” p. 76. Compare Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 126: the messianic coming is delineated as the mentioning of the name (*hazkarat ha-shem*) on the part of the redeemer. The word *hazkarah* is linked through numerical equivalence to *harkavah* (both have the value of 237) to indicate that it is through letter-combination that the messiah mentions the name and brings about the light of remembrance (*zikkaron*), which dispels the darkness of forgetfulness associated symbolically with Amaleq. On the messianic nature of the revelation of Abulafia’s kabbalistic path, see also the self-justification in *We-Zo’t li-Yehudah*, in Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 18.

¹²⁰ Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 18.

¹²¹ Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 96–99, 112–13, 157–58 n. 138; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 443–44.

¹²² An implicit polemic against Christianity may be found in the following passage from *Sitrei Torah*, pp. 170–71: “Know that Adam and Eve [*adam we-hawah* = 45 + 25 = 70] numerically equal ‘my father and my mother’ [*avi we-imi* = 13 + 57 = 70], and their secret is blood and ink [*dam wi-deyo* = 44 + 26 = 70]. . . . Know that a *taw* is engraved on the forehead of one who is righteous and a *taw* is engraved on the forehead of one who is guilty, a *taw* of blood on this one and a *taw* of ink on the other. And the secret of the *taw* of blood [*taw shel dam* = 406 + 330 + 44 = 780] is that she is born [*she-muleted* = 780]. Its matter is the *taw* of blood [*taw dam* = 406

he who died on the Cross, but the one who broadcasts the divine secret, which consists of knowledge of the name, and thereby unfeters the intellect from its physical internment. The following passage from *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh* illumines Abulafia's intent. Commenting on the verse "And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be my name forever, this my appellation for all eternity'" (Exodus 3:15), Abulafia writes:

It is known that this prophecy was for Moses our master, peace be upon him, the beginning of his prophecy, and it came to him to publicize the redemption of Israel, that is, the exodus from Egypt. God instructed us that by means of the knowledge of his name the redemption comes. And thus the name when expressed in full numerically equals *dam ha-ge'ullah*, which is in truth the avenger of the blood [*go'el ha-dam*] of one who has murdered accidentally on account of which a man is exiled [*goleh adam*], and every imagined body [is the] body of the Lord from the blood through which he augments his existence.¹²³

The mystic confronts the Active Intellect in the shape of Metatron, a human figure that is formed in the imagination of the visionary.¹²⁴ In the epiphanic moment, the boundary between inside and outside disintegrates—the self mirrors the angelic guide that mirrors the self, a double mirroring prompted by the prior individuation of the universal through the universalization of the individual.¹²⁵ Moreover, insofar

+ 44 = 450] and its secret is the image [*demut* = 450], the implication being that it precedes the existence of man. From it comes 'your soul' [*nafshekha* = 450], and every magician [*kashfan* = 450] will turn to the path of magical acts [*keshafim* = 450]. And the one who does this spills blood [*shofekh dam* = 406 + 44 = 450]. And the secret of the *taw* of ink is that she gives birth [*she-yoledet*]. Thus you have one form that is born and another form that gives birth." The text is translated differently and without any reference to Christianity by Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 99. See, however, the examination of a similar text from "Sefer ha-Öt," p. 82, in Hames, *Like the Angels*, pp. 130–31 n. 85.

¹²³ Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, p. 62. On the pairing of the expressions *mashiah* and *go'el ha-dam*, see *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, p. 86.

¹²⁴ Abulafia, *Ḥayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 49: "It is known that we, the community of Israel, the congregation of the Lord, know in truth that God, blessed be he and his name, is not a body or a faculty in a body, and he is never materialized. However, his overflow created a corporeal intermediary, that is, the angel, in the moment of the prophecy of the prophet." See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 89–90, 95–100.

¹²⁵ See sources translated and analyzed in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 239–40. In that context, I contemplated the matter in light of Corbin's notion of the "essential theophanism," which implies that "every form of theophany has the form of

as the Active Intellect is identified as the Torah,¹²⁶ we can speak of a *linguistic embodiment*,¹²⁷ the configuration of the Tetragrammaton, which encompasses all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in the form of an anthropos. The body of which I speak is imaginal rather than material, that is, a theophanic apparition that assumes shape as virtually real within the imaginative faculty.¹²⁸ Kabbalistically, the imaginal body intimates the conception of semiotic enfleshment. It is precisely this notion that justifies thinking of incarnational tendencies in the Jewish mystical sources that are distinct from—albeit in dialogue with—the predominant Christian creed. I hasten to add that the precise period when kabbalah begins to emerge as a defined historical phenomenon is one in which there is much theoretical deliberation about the mystery of incarnation, inspired by the growing scholastic sentiment regarding the indivisibility of faith and reason.¹²⁹

For medieval Christians, the paradoxical conjunction of the mundane and the sacred was mediated by the Eucharist, the central priestly ceremony believed to occasion liturgically the presence of Christ. Jews and Muslims provided alternative narratives to explain the commingling of the corporeal and incorporeal, the visible and invisible. In spite of insurmountable differences, underlying the logocentric and

an angelophany” (reference is cited on p. 536 n. 331, and see other references cited in nn. 330, 332–34). For Corbin, the invisible God becomes manifest through the figure of the Active Intelligence, the angelic totality that individuates itself in the features of a definite person whose soul has been incorporated in or conjoined to the imaginal body of that intellectual form. See also Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” pp. 145–47, 160.

¹²⁶ See above, n. 49.

¹²⁷ The expression “linguistic embodiment” was used by Edmund Husserl in his essay “The Origin of Geometry,” appended to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans., with an introduction, by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 358. For a critique of Husserl’s notion of “linguistic flesh” or “linguistic incarnation,” see Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans., with a preface and afterword, by John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 76–79, and compare the analysis in Michael O’Sullivan, *The Incarnation of Language: Joyce, Proust and a Philosophy of the Flesh* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 15–30.

¹²⁸ Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” p. 147. In n. 53, ad locum, I mention that my thinking is indebted to the incarnational element of Corbin’s thinking, and refer the reader to Elliot R. Wolfson, “Imago Templi and the Meeting of the Two Seas: Liturgical Time-Space and the Feminine Imaginary in Zoharic Kabbalah,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (2007): 121–25.

¹²⁹ Saadia R. Eisenberg, “Reading Medieval Religious Disputation: The 1240 ‘Debate’ Between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and Friar Nicholas Donin,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2008, pp. 179–94.

ontographic perspectives is a shared juxtaposition of the theomorphic rendering of the human and the anthropomorphic rendering of the divine. The Jewish and Muslim conception (especially pronounced in kabbalistic and Sūfic teaching) necessitates the transfiguration of flesh into word, which should be positioned alongside the Christological transubstantiation of the word into flesh. Needless to say, it is contrived to distinguish these positions too sharply, for the tenability of the word becoming flesh rests on the assumption that flesh is, in some sense, word, but flesh can be entertained as word only if and when word, in some form, becomes flesh. The logic of this reversal and the empirical evidence to substantiate it are compelling, but the distinction should still be upheld in an effort to elucidate the incongruities in the narratological frameworks of the three traditions.

Simply put, my taxonomic categorizations “textual embodiment” and “poetic incarnation”¹³⁰ are based on the assumption that the utilization of anthropomorphic imagery to delimit the divine and of theomorphic imagery to delimit the human is meant to convey the ontological claim that the Hebrew letters assigned to each of the pertinent limbs constitute the reality of the body on both planes of being. Indeed, as any number of scholars have discerned, a rudimentary principle of Jewish esotericism, which runs its course from Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the present, consists of the conviction that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are not only instruments of divine creation, but that they comprise the hyletic stuff of being.¹³¹ As I noted above, Abulafia presumes that all languages are comprised within Hebrew. This view is certainly an intriguing innovation, but it does not diminish the ascendancy of Hebrew. Abulafia does not depart substantially from the bias of Jewish esotericism. The visionary imagination he espoused—and with regard to this matter the typological

¹³⁰ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 190–260. Although my name is not specified, it seems fairly obvious that Idel, *Ben*, p. 61, is criticizing me when he writes that “a more complex understanding of the various forms of informment and embodiment will help in understanding the specificity of incarnation and sonship. There is no reason not to create more adequate categories, in order to account for the huge variety of religious phenomena, rather than fall time and again on the same quite conceptually and religiously loaded nomenclatures regarding incarnation, and then have to qualify them by terms like ‘poetic’ or other similar terms.” My name is mentioned explicitly, *op. cit.*, pp. 100 n. 180 and 101 n. 182.

¹³¹ As Abulafia puts it in *Sitrei Torah*, p. 160, in the manner that material reality fortifies the truth of what exists for the philosopher, so the Hebrew letters instruct the kabbalist about the nature of being.

distinction between theosophic and ecstatic kabbalah is of no consequence—attests to this confluence of letter and anthropomorphic symbolism. In Abulafia's contemplative praxis, the name is visualized in concrete and embodied terms as an anthropos. The matter is expressed succinctly in *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*: “Prepare your true thought to imagine God, blessed be his name, and his supernal angels, to imagine them in your heart as if they were human beings, standing or sitting around you, and you are in their midst like the messenger the king and his servants want to send. . . . And after you imagine all of this, prepare your intellect and your heart to comprehend in your mind the many things or actions that the letters contemplated in your heart will bring you, and contemplate them in their generalities and in their particularities like a man who is informed of a parable, a riddle, or a dream, or as if he contemplated in a book of wisdom a matter too deep for his comprehension.”¹³² Only one who transforms the coarse physical body through ascetic renunciation into an ethereal or angelic body is capable of imaging the divine form somatically.¹³³ The materialization of the immaterial depends on the immaterializing of the material.

The crucial difference between the incarnational perspectives adopted by the prophetic kabbalist and his Christian counterpart turns on understanding the text of the Torah as the imaginal body of the divine as opposed to understanding the living body of Jesus as the text of the divine. Since the nature of body is determined by the Hebrew letters, corporeality belongs ideally to those who are incorporated into the Active Intellect, the *Shekhinah*, or the Community of Israel. Such a person, emulating Moses and Elijah, receives the “divine name [*shem ha-elohi*] that is in its secret [meaning] the name of the son [*shem ha-ben*],” and thus he is called the “son of God [*ben*

¹³² Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, pp. 146–47. Compare a parallel description in *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, p. 16. Both passages are cited in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 207. See also Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 159, where the Hebrew letters, identified as the “matter of prophecy,” are said to “appear in the mirror of prophecy as if they were dense bodies that speak to a man mouth to mouth in accord with the abundance of the rational form that is contemplated in the heart that converses with them, and they appear as if they are pure, living angels that move them.” Compare a similar formulation in *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, p. 10. These passages are previously cited in Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow,” p. 143. See now Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, pp. 53, 56–58.

¹³³ With respect to this matter, Abulafia follows Maimonides, especially the ideal of intellectual worship in *The Guide of the Perplexed* 3.51. See Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, p. 61. On asceticism in Abulafia, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 143–44, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 89–91.

ha-shem], and its secret [meaning] is in the soul [*ba-neshamah*].”¹³⁴ Abulafia detects in the names of both Moses and Elijah a reference to their divinization:

The hidden letters of the name Moshe are “from nothing” [*me-ayin*],¹³⁵ which indicate that “I am from God” [*ani me-ha-shem*],¹³⁶ and this is the truth. The hidden letters of the name Eliyahu are *lpm*”*d wda*”*w*, and its secret is the “man and his guide” [*adam u-melamdo*], for the mouth is the *mem*, and Eliyahu is *elohi* [“my God”], and concerning him it says “he is mine” [*li hu*]¹³⁷ ... and the numerology of Eliyahu is *ben*. Thus, his secret is that he is the son of man and his guide.¹³⁸

From Abulafia’s vantage point, to deprive Judaism of the doctrine of incarnation would be to remove from its spiritual economy the means to access the ultimate mystery, the secret of the divine that is the carnality of the cosmos.¹³⁹ In this connection it is of interest to consider the

¹³⁴ Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 93. See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 91–92; idem, *Ben*, pp. 295–96.

¹³⁵ That is, when the letters of the name *moshe* (משה) are written out in full, *mem shin he* (הא שין המ), the hidden letters are *myn*”*a* (מינא), which can be transposed into *may*”*n* (מאין) and vocalized as *me-ayin*, “from nothing.”

¹³⁶ According to MS Oxford-Bodleian 1582, fol. 23a, the precise text is *mh*”*sh* (מה”ש), which corresponds to the fifth triplet of the seventy-two-letter name derived from the 216 letters in Exodus 14:19–21, then followed by the variant “or I am Moshe” [*אני משה*]. From the context, however, it is clear that the correct reading should be *me-ha-shem*, for the letters of the name *moshe* (משה) and its hidden letters (מאין) can be transposed into *ani me-ha-shem* (אני מהשם), “I am from God” or “I am from the name.” Compare MSS Moscow-Günzberg 133, fol. 60a, Braginsky 251, fol. 33a.

¹³⁷ Exodus 13:2. The letters ל”י הוא are the same as the name אליהו.

¹³⁸ Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 94.

¹³⁹ An interesting articulation of this idea is found in Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, pp. 86–87: “The numerical sum of the three names [YHWH, Elohim, and Adonai = 26 + 86 + 65] equals 177, and their secret is *gan eden* [3 + 50 + 70 + 4 + 50 = 177], mentioned above in the secret of the three gradations, which allude to the three worlds, for the providence in them, in general and in particular, is to establish what is worthy of being established in perpetuity, and the secret is the name *el olam* [1 + 30 + 70 + 6 + 30 + 40 = 177], and his name is delight for the righteous and the prophets. And the secret of the two names alone [Elohim and Adonai = 86 + 65 = 151] is *ha-olam* [5 + 70 + 6 + 30 + 40 = 151], and the secret of *ha-olam* is *qanna* [100 + 50 + 1 = 151] and also *qomah* [100 + 6 + 40 + 5 = 151].... However, the secret of the two names [whose numerical value is] twenty-six [YHWH] and sixty-five [Adonai] is *mal’akh* [40 + 30 + 1 + 20 = 91] *ha-elohim* [5 + 1 + 30 + 5 + 10 + 40 = 91], and his name is *el qanna* [1 + 30 + 100 + 50 + 1 = 182], and his secret is *ya’aqov* [10 + 70 + 100 + 2 = 182].” I cannot here enter into all the details of this rich passage, but let me simply note that the expression *el olam* is to be decoded in the construct state as the God of the world, that is, it signifies the divine providence in the cosmos. The expression “the world” (*ha-olam*) is linked numerically to the two terms *qanna* and *qomah*. I suggest that *qanna* is an abbreviated reference to *el qanna*, the “impassioned

diagram of a cruciform that appears in Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Berit*.¹⁴⁰ The lateral axis is made up of the words *we-kharat berit hadashah*, "and he will decree a new covenant," which are derived from Jeremiah 31:30. The upper half of the horizontal axis is made up of the words *yimlokh yhw h le'olam*, "the Lord will reign eternally," which are based on Exodus 15:18, and the lower half of the words *le'ammo*, "to his nation," and *u-shemo ye'amen*, "and his name will be fulfilled." An analysis of this text in all of its intricacies cannot be pursued here, but the main point is clear enough: Abulafia undermines the scriptural foundation of Christianity by affirming that the real "new testament" consists of the gnosis of the name YHWH, which is the unique and eternal heritage of the Jewish people. An allusion to this is found in the fact that the first and last letters of the expression *we-kharat berit hadashah* are *waw-he*, the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton. Moreover, the first and last letters of *yimlokh* at the top of the cross are *yod* and *kaf*, and the first and last letters of *ye'amen* at the bottom are *yod* and *nun*; all four together spell *yakhin*. When the letters *waw* and *he* are added to these four, the result is the expression *wa-yehi khen*, "and so it was," the "seal of the account of creation" (*hotam ma'aseh bere'shit*), the "secret of being" (*sod ha-hawayah*).¹⁴¹ The combination of *yakhin* and *waw-he* spells *wa-yehi khen*, the slogan that terminates the sixth day of the creation story (Genesis 1:30), and thus Abulafia refers to it as the secret of being—both expressions numerically equal 101. It is likely that the latter phrase denotes as well the mystery of the name, since

God" (Exodus 20:5), which is mentioned later and associated (through numerological equivalence) with the angel of God (*mal'akh elohim*) and Jacob (*ya'aqov*); the term *qomah* signifies the stature or measure, perhaps related to the notion of the *shi'ur qomah*. By juxtaposing *ha-olam*, *qanna*, and *qomah*, Abulafia wishes to convey the idea that the measure of the world is Metatron, or alternatively, that the measure of Metatron is the world. On the identification of *qomah* and *ha-olam*, see also *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, p. 92, and see my comments in "Kenotic Overflow," p. 184 n. 196. Finally, I note that Maimonides cites the words *be-shem yhw h el olam* (Genesis 21:33) as an epigraph to each of the three parts of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. On this matter, see Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Schwartz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), pp. 298–99 n. 14 [in Hebrew].

¹⁴⁰ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Berit*, p. 54. For a detailed exposition of the passage, related especially to Abulafia's notion of the warp and woof (*sheti wa-erev*), see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 273–75 (the relevant folio from MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 285 is reproduced on p. 272). See also Kohen, *The Book of New Testament*, pp. 3–4, and the conclusion he reaches on pp. 7–8: "R. Abraham Abulafia can be compared to Jesus, but unlike him he did not bring a new religion or a new gospel, but rather testimony of God, testimony that is found in the explicit name."

¹⁴¹ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Berit*, p. 55.

the letters of *hawayah* (הויה) are the same as YHWH (יהוה). Abulafia seems to be intimating that the name is made flesh in the being of the universe, and that this cosmological corporealization of the divine effluence constitutes the new covenant that is the real cross, the intersection of the two lines that signify the paradoxical materialization of the immaterial in the concatenation of the chain of becoming.¹⁴² Again we see the ingenious way that Abulafia concurrently appropriated and rejected Christological symbols and doctrines. In the memorable language of the passage itself, the task is “to straighten what is bent and to bend what is straight” (*yishsher he-hafukh we-happekh ha-yashar*).

In the recovery of this messianic secret, one can discover the theological depth of Judaism through which, ironically enough, the very threshold of theism may be traversed. We might say, therefore, that the incarnational doctrine culled from Abulafia sheds light on the disfiguration that is the final objective of the monotheistic configuration. The quietistic divestiture of self by which the human becomes divine corresponds to ridding the imagination of images that confabulate the divine as human, but the path beyond the image is through the image. The overcoming of the division of humankind into separate religious factions would require an undoing of the theistic personification of God. This, I propose, is the eschatological import of the cosmological myth of incarnation advanced by Abulafia, an atemporal truth he sought to implement within the vicissitudes of time.

The pretense of Abulafia’s messianic prominence, which reached a crescendo of sorts in the report in his *Sefer ha-Edut* (as well as the intimations in *Sefer ha-Ot*) of the aborted attempt—whether imagined or real—to gain the audience of Pope Nicholas III in Rome,¹⁴³ is tied to

¹⁴² For a different, but not totally unrelated, explanation, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 296–97.

¹⁴³ Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 128; idem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, pp. 113–15; Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness,” p. 253; Moshe Idel, “Abraham Abulafia and the Pope: The Meaning and the Metamorphosis of an Abortive Attempt,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 7/8 (1982/1983): 1–17 [in Hebrew]; idem, *Studies*, pp. 46–47; idem, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 97–99; idem, *Kabbalah in Italy*, pp. 43–47, 79; Hames, *Like Angels*, pp. 42, 84–85, 88, 90–94, 99–101. For additional references, see Idel, *Studies*, p. 55 nn. 3, 4, and 8, and *Messianic Mystics*, p. 361 nn. 149–50. Previous scholars have taken Abulafia at his word that he is recounting actual events, but I am somewhat dubious. The evidence that Idel adduces from the zoharic passage that describes the appearance of the Messiah in Rome at the time that the ruler of that city perished (*Studies*, p. 46) or from the Latin texts that describe the papal death (*Messianic Mystics*, p. 98) indicate, at best, that Abulafia’s tale is woven from some historical threads; it is not sufficient to prove the veracity of all the details

the dominance he could claim vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam. More than other human beings, he considered himself wise in the ways of the other religions. As he boldly states in *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*, “Raziel, the son of Sham’uel, discerns the blessing and the curse, he discerns the bastard son of a menstruant, he discerns Jesus/ Muhammad.”¹⁴⁴ Just as all created entities derive from God and yet are distinct, so, too, the nations share a common nature but each is diverse. Abulafia argues, accordingly, that every ethnic group had to remain faithful to its own religious customs and cultural-linguistic vocation. In the days of the “final redeemer”—an expression that is likely self-referential¹⁴⁵ and thus points to a futurity proleptically realized in his own lifetime—all three liturgical communities will know the name of God.¹⁴⁶ Such knowledge, in turn, would result in the disincarnation of the incarnate through the unveiling of the world as the incarnation of the disincarnate.

of his report. The same can be said of the suggestion of Abba Hillel Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel From the First Through the Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. 146 n. 145, and repeated by Scholem (*Major Trends*, p. 127; idem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, p. 113) and Idel (*Studies*, p. 55 nn. 3 and 7), that Abulafia may have been inspired by the comment of Nahmanides in his disputation with Pablo Christiani that the Messiah “will come and command the Pope and all the kings of the nations in the name of God ‘Let my people go that they may worship me’ (Exodus 8:16). And he will perform signs and many, great wonders in relation to them, and he will not fear them at all, and he will stand in their city Rome until he will destroy it” (*Kitvei Ramban*, 1: 312). This provides more literary evidence to explain Abulafia’s story, but it does not demonstrate the facticity of what is alleged to have occurred historically.

¹⁴⁴ Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*, p. 83. See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 46–47.

¹⁴⁵ Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness,” p. 251.

¹⁴⁶ Abulafia, *Maḥteah ha-Shemot*, p. 81. See Berger, “The Messianic Self-Consciousness,” p. 252; Idel, *Studies*, p. 50.

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