

Yechiel Shalom Goldberg



Spiritual Leadership and the Popularization of Kabbalah in Medieval Spain

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly analyses of spiritual leadership among the early Spanish kabbalists have focused primarily on two figures: the Provençal kabbalist, Isaac the Blind,¹ and the Catalan kabbalist, Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides).² In a letter that was apparently written in response to a communication that he received from Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi, Isaac the Blind reflected on the risks inherent in the public dissemination of kabbalistic wisdom and responded to a tragedy that came about as a result of the

¹ Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zvi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (JPS, 1987), 253–61.

² Gershom Scholem, “The Authentic Commentary on Sefer Yetsira of Nahmanides,” *Kiryat Sefer* 6 (1929–30), 385–412; Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership,” in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, ed. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998), 15–96. Now see, Moshe Idel, “Leadership and Charisma: Maimonides, Nahmanides and Abraham Abulafia,” *Journal for the Study of Sephardic & Mizrahi Jewry* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2008), 2–34.

popularizing activity of his own disciples.³ Indeed, one of Isaac's disciples, Ezra ben Solomon, sought to disseminate kabbalistic teachings in a relatively exoteric fashion by means of two works: a commentary on The Song of Songs and a commentary on talmudic *'aggadot*. In the introduction to the former commentary, Ezra justifies his activity through an explicit discussion of the conditions that led him to break the esoteric code of his teacher and write the commentary. In the eighth chapter of his commentary, Ezra augments this personal justification of his action with an impersonal portrayal of the kabbalist as a spiritual leader, who ought to share his wisdom with Israel in order to give the nation hope in its exile.

The intention of this study is to examine Ezra's portrayal of the character and social function of the kabbalist. This examination will shed light on shifting attitudes toward the relationship between the transmission of Kabbalah and spiritual leadership in thirteenth century Spain. The examination will also shed light on questions pertaining to the taxonomy of Kabbalah, a form of knowledge and praxis that modern scholars most

³ The letter was first published and analyzed by Gershom Scholem, "*Teudah Hadashah LeToldot Reshit HaKabbalah*," in *Mehkerei Kabbalah* (1) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998), 7–34. Scholem concluded that Nahmanides was not a direct student of Isaac's (12), but that the two were friends (11) and that Nahmanides received Isaac's teachings from Isaac's disciples, especially Ezra of Gerona (12). Scholem refined some of his conclusions regarding this letter in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 393-397. Isaiah Tishby, *Hikrei Kabbalah uSheluhoteha: Mehkarim uMekorot*, Sidrat "Kinus." (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at sefarim 'a.sh. Y.L. Magnes, 1982), 5-9, reinforces Scholem's conclusion that there was a strong connection between Nahmanides' Kabbalah and Isaac's Kabbalah. Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aranson Inc., 1996), 40-41, goes further than either Scholem or Tishby, concluding that Nahmanides was a member of the school of kabbalists who received their Kabbalah from Isaac, and that Isaac's letter accounts for Nahmanides' reticence with regard to revealing kabbalistic teachings. Idel, "Nahmanides," 16-38, challenges this approach to reconstructing the early history of Kabbalah, which he identifies as a unilinear theory, since it suggests that all Kabbalah of the early thirteenth century belongs to a single strand of tradition (18). Idel adduces evidence that demonstrates the differences between the Kabbalah of Isaac and his students and the Kabbalah of Nahmanides. Finally, contrary to Dan, Idel suggests that the initiative to restrict the public dissemination of Kabbalah came from Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi, and Isaac's letter constitutes a defensive response to this initiative.

often classify as Jewish mysticism. Four questions will be of primary interest in the examination of Ezra's portrayal of the character and social function of the kabbalist: What are the formal characteristics of the kabbalist? What is the function of the kabbalist within society? How does the kabbalist perceive non-kabbalists? And how do non-kabbalists perceive the kabbalist?

The first point worth noting in answering these questions is that, contrary to much modern scholarship, in which kabbalists are portrayed as mystics,⁴ Ezra portrays the kabbalist, first and foremost, as a sage, i.e. as a person who possesses wisdom. Three characteristics of kabbalistic wisdom will play an important role in the analysis that follows: it is concealed within exoteric literature, namely, Scripture and rabbinic literature; it is transmitted from teachers to students; and it can only be fully apprehended through the achievement of *devekut*. As I will discuss in greater detail below, *devekut* involves a state of attachment to the *Shekhinah* that Ezra associates with prophecy and that modern scholars have generally associated with mystical union or communion.⁵

⁴ While Gershom Scholem was not the first to engage in research concerning Kabbalah, his syntheses rested on and reinforced the view that Kabbalah was a form of Jewish mysticism, and this appraisal continues to shape the field. Even Moshe Idel's far-reaching critiques and revisions of Scholem's positions on many issues rest on the classification of Kabbalah as a form or forms of Jewish mysticism. Consistent with this classification, the work of both scholars tends to emphasize the characterization of kabbalists as mystics. A similar emphasis is evident in the work of many scholars. This view was reinforced most recently by Rachel Elijor, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom*, trans. Yudit Nave and Arthur B. Millman, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford ; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 57-103. In a different vein, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 276-77, emphasizes the kabbalists' self-characterizations as prophets, while, Boaz Huss, "Jewish Mysticism in the University: Academic Study or Theological Practice?" *Zeek: A Journal of Jewish Thought and Culture*, 1 December 2007, Zeek Media Inc., <http://www.jewcy.com/node/14529>, accessed on July 10, 2008, has argued that scholars should reject the category of mysticism altogether, which entails the abandonment of the scholarly characterization of kabbalists as mystics.

⁵ Much has been written on this issue. See, for example, Joel R. Goldberg, "Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation in Provençal and Catalonian Kabbalah" (PhD diss., New York University,

However, Ezra is not satisfied with a conception of the kabbalist as a sage that emphasizes the kabbalist's personal achievement vis-à-vis the reception and transmission of wisdom within limited circles. Instead, Ezra envisions the sage as a spiritual leader who is obligated to share his wisdom with his co-religionists even though the public dissemination of wisdom involves an element of risk with regard to the ways in which the populace may perceive both wisdom and the sage.

My argument will be divided into two parts. The first part will address Ezra's personal justification for introducing a new model of spiritual leadership and will examine some ramifications of this new model. The second part will address Ezra's impersonal portrayal of the kabbalist as a spiritual leader, concluding with an examination of the relationship between these two portrayals. In the conclusion, I will address some of the taxonomic implications of Ezra's portrayal of the persona of the kabbalist and his role in society.

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AND KABBALAH IN CATALONIA

In the introduction to his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Ezra testifies that for many years he maintained silence with regard to the dissemination of kabbalistic wisdom; but in his later years, he decided to break his silence.⁶ However, neither Ezra's

2001); Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), chapters 3-4; Gershom Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 203-26; and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶ Ezra Ben Solomon, "Perush LeShir HaShirim," in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Chaim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 2:479. I quote the relevant passage below, p. 21.

silence with regard to kabbalistic wisdom nor his decision to break his silence is a personal conceit. His silence is grounded in the teaching of his master, Isaac the Blind, and he attributes his decision to break his silence⁷ to two concerns: an assessment of Israel's existential condition and the recognition of his own mortality. In response to these concerns, Ezra sets out a systematic portrayal of the kabbalist as a sage who is obligated to share his wisdom with his co-religionists as a way to give aid to his people. This involves a shift from a prevailing model of spiritual leadership in which the kabbalistic sage separates his knowledge of wisdom from the teaching of Torah, concealing the former while engaging in the latter, to a model of spiritual leadership in which the kabbalistic sage reveals some portion of his wisdom to the public in the context of teaching Torah to the public.

To appreciate the relationship between these two models of spiritual leadership it is necessary to consider a passage from the letter that Isaac wrote to Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi. In the letter, Isaac responds to reports of two instances in which people disseminated Kabbalistic teachings in an inappropriate manner. Isaac's response to the first instance concerns his own disciples.⁸ After some preamble, Isaac wrote:

⁷ Although Ezra chose the medium of writing to break his silence, he uses the verb *medaber*, to speak, to describe his action. A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-17, discusses the assumed relationship between speech and writing in Western civilization. The relationship between speech and writing in the transmission of Kabbalah bears further investigation.

⁸ The second instance took place in Burgos, but Isaac's account does not directly connect this instance with his disciples. See, Scholem, *Teudah Hadashah*, 22-23.

I have not stood in deceit or in rebellion, and I only speak now from great fear and consternation regarding that which I have seen: sages, men of understanding, and pious men who lengthen their discourse and extend their hands to write great and awesome things in their books and letters. That which is written has no container; for often it will be destroyed or their authors die, and the books get into the hands of fools and scoffers (פתאים ומלעיגים), and the name of heaven comes to be defiled. *So I came to them and while I was with them in life, I warned them many times; but after I was separated from them, a disaster came about through them.* I did not conduct myself in this manner, for my fathers were nobles of the land and disseminators of the Torah to the public, and a word never departed from their mouths. They conducted themselves with them [i.e., the public] as though they were not men who were experts in wisdom. I saw them and I learned a lesson.⁹

The tone of this passage is defensive.¹⁰ Isaac twice denies that his own conduct with regard to “great and awesome things,” which he subsequently identifies as “wisdom,” is problematic. Furthermore, he contrasts his conduct with that of his disciples. In his first denial that he has done anything wrong, Isaac describes his disciples as “sages, men of understanding, and pious men,” which suggests that their knowledge and intentions are

⁹ Emphasis added. Scholem, “*Teudah Hadashah*,” 9.

¹⁰ The defensive tone of this passage supports Idel’s contention, contra Dan, that this letter is not meant to instruct Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi in the code of esotericism appropriate to “wisdom.” See, Idel, “Nahmanides,” 36–38. However, it does not support Idel’s implicit reversal of the roles specified in Dan’s argument. Neither Isaac nor Nahmanides or Jonah Gerondi can be identified as “the real initiators” of a campaign against the public dissemination of Kabbalah. Isaac’s letter bears witness to the likelihood that all three men had an interest in limiting the dissemination of Kabbalah and that Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi wrote to Isaac about incidents involving his disciples that required Isaac to defend his record in this regard.

not suspect.¹¹ Nevertheless, Isaac acknowledges that “a disaster came about through” his disciples, and he expresses his own “fear” and “consternation” regarding the way in which his disciples chose to disseminate wisdom; namely, through extended discourse, particularly in books and letters.¹² Isaac testifies that he warned his disciples about the dangers of disseminating wisdom, particularly in writing, and it is likely that Isaac’s general statement regarding the negative fate of “that which is written” describes what occurred when his disciples disregarded his warnings. That is, after his disciples died¹³ “fools and scoffers” read their writings and engaged in activities that somehow defiled heaven. In light of other evidence in Isaac’s letter, it is likely that the defilement of heaven involves either the rejection of divine unity arising from a misunderstanding of the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten *sefirot* or the rejection of the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten *sefirot* as the true wisdom regarding the divine nature.¹⁴

I would like to emphasize two points that relate to the characteristics of kabbalists and non-kabbalists in Isaac’s first denial: First, Isaac establishes a binary opposition between “sages, men of understanding, and pious men” and “fools and scoffers.” The first class of men, among whom Isaac includes his disciples, has a proper knowledge and understanding of wisdom. The second class of men, which is divisible into two sub-classes, does not. Second, Isaac’s fears with regard to the actions of his disciples concern

¹¹ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 396, drew a similar conclusion.

¹² Note that Isaac’s formulation leaves room for oral along with written discourse.

¹³ Scholem, “*Teudah Hadashah*,” 13–16. Cf. *Ibid. Origins of the Kabbalah*, 395-396.

¹⁴ Cf. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 396-398.

their improper behavior with regard to the transmission of wisdom, not their knowledge, understanding, or piety. Isaac's disciples served as accomplices to the crime of defiling heaven. However, the perpetrators of this act are the fools and scoffers who drew wrong conclusions from his disciples' writings.

Isaac's second denial that he has conducted himself in a problematic way reinforces the message of his first denial, but shifts the focus from the contrast between his conduct and that of his disciples to the similarity between his conduct and that of his forbears. One salient element in this second denial of wrongdoing is that his forbears were "nobles of the land and disseminators of the Torah." In other words, they were among the social and intellectual elite of the Jewish community, and they served as spiritual leaders who were involved in teaching Torah to the public, i.e., people who, at the very least, were not among the intellectual elite of the Jewish community. Another salient element in this denial is Isaac's claim that when his forbears interacted with the public they not only refrained from disseminating kabbalistic wisdom, they refrained from letting the public know that they possessed such wisdom! Isaac emphasizes that he observed their conduct and learned a lesson from it. It is this lesson that he passed on to his disciples, including Ezra, when he warned them about the dangers of engaging in lengthy discourse about kabbalistic wisdom and about the dangers of setting this wisdom down in writing. Ezra's explanation of his decision to write a commentary in which he explains kabbalistic symbols and ideas bears witness to the impact that this lesson had on him, while it also offers a justification for abandoning this lesson and introducing a new model. We shall see that the model of spiritual leadership introduced by Ezra involves an

adjustment of the boundaries of kabbalistic esotericism. Consequently, it is important to note that the boundary between concealment and revelation in Isaac's model of spiritual leadership is not as absolute as one might expect. Further reflection on Isaac's letter will allow for a more nuanced picture of the relationship between the teaching of the master and the alteration introduced by the disciple.

In the continuation of his letter, Isaac notes that he has heard reports that people in the city of Burgos explained matters relating to the uniqueness of God and the unity of the ten *sefirot* and the divine name in ways that constituted heresy. Isaac responds by quoting statements from *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:6 that describe the uniqueness of God and the unity of the ten *sefirot* and the divine name. Then he wrote the following explanation of one of these statements: “‘before one’¹⁵ is the great name that is unified with all ten, but I cannot expand on that which you have asked in writing.”¹⁶ However, Isaac does not stop there. Rather, he explains that the ten instances of the word *halleluhu* (praised be he) in Psalm 150 correspond to the ten *sefirot* as they are arranged from above to below. He then analyzes the language of the psalm accordingly, using the context of each successive instance of the word *halleluhu* to link it to a specific *sefirah*. In short, Isaac writes that the great name is unified with the ten *sefirot*, and he explains the symbolic representation of the *sefirot* within Psalm 150. Has Isaac transgressed his own interdictions against a public display of one's expertise in wisdom and against expansive discourse regarding wisdom? The evidence in Isaac's letter justifies a negative answer: no, Isaac has not transgressed

¹⁵ This is part of a question in *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:6: “‘before one, what do you count?’”

¹⁶ Scholem, *Teudah Hadashah*, 9-10.

these interdictions. In order to understand why not, we must consider the boundaries that Isaac establishes for such discourse and we must consider the social context of the letter.

The first boundary that Isaac sets is that a sage should not engage in extended discourse regarding wisdom, whether oral or written. The second boundary is that a sage should not reveal his expertise in wisdom when he teaches Torah in a public setting. These interdictions imply that, when engaged in discourse with other sages, there is no problem with revealing that one is a sage, and that some degree of oral and written discourse with other sages regarding wisdom is acceptable. As a pragmatic matter, if one could not reveal his expertise in wisdom to other sages, then no discourse regarding wisdom would be possible, which would mean that there could be no wisdom tradition. This raises another question. If written communication with other sages is permissible, and under some circumstances, perhaps even necessary, how does one ensure that these writings do not lead fools or scoffers astray? The answer is to limit what one sets down in writing. Now let us return to Isaac's letter and consider these points in context.

To whom is Isaac writing: to experts in wisdom or to the public? After his brief exposition of kabbalistic symbolism, Isaac writes, "I write to you in accordance with the poverty of my knowledge, I know that your knowledge is greater than my own."¹⁷ There is no contradiction between Isaac's declaration that a sage should not let the public know that he is expert in kabbalistic wisdom and his revelation that he is expert in wisdom, since he is not writing for the public, but writing to two other sages. Furthermore, Isaac did not initiate this communication regarding wisdom, he is responding to a letter in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

which he was likely called to account for his disciples' actions, and in which he was asked to answer certain questions with regard to wisdom and to make a trip to Catalonia, perhaps to resolve the crisis created by his disciple's writings. Under these circumstances, Isaac must reveal his expertise in wisdom and defend himself against whatever charges were brought against him. It is striking that Isaac concludes his exposition of Psalm 150 with the following declaration: "you know that I am he who speaks to you, Isaac the son of the master, Rabbi Abraham, may his holy memory be a blessing."¹⁸ Isaac's signature alone does not have sufficient authority to identify him and uphold his innocence. The manner and content of his exposition of kabbalistic doctrine and symbolism is what gives his signature this authority. So, now we must consider the manner and content of Isaac's exposition.

Isaac introduces his exposition of kabbalistic wisdom immediately after reporting that he has heard about incidents that occurred in Burgos, in which kabbalistic wisdom was expounded publicly and people who lacked the appropriate piety were led to heretical conclusions that either involved positing a separation among the ten *sefirot* or positing a separation between the ten *sefirot* and the great name. In either case, Isaac uses the classic Talmudic description of Elisha ben Avuya's heresy as "cutting the shoots" (BT Hagigah 14b and 15a) to describe what occurred in Burgos.¹⁹ Perhaps in connection with this incident, Isaac was asked to explain the unity that exists between the great name and the ten *sefirot*, but Isaac indicates that this unity cannot, or perhaps more accurately,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

should not, be explained at length in writing. Thus, Isaac distinguishes between the brief written formulation of a mysterious dimension of wisdom and expanded discourse aimed at explaining the mystery. To engage in lengthy explanations of the unity of the ten *sefirot* and God's great name can lead fools and scoffers to the heresy of making divisions among the *sefirot* or between the *sefirot* and the great name. Similarly, Isaac's explanation of the way in which the *sefirot* and their structure is encoded in Psalm 150 does not include any justification for the symbolic associations that he delineates, nor does it include any exposition of the logic or mechanics of the unity or difference of the *sefirot*. The most Isaac says is that there is a relationship between a general principle and the particulars of that principle.

In summary, Isaac's model of the relationship between kabbalistic wisdom and spiritual leadership involves two levels of concealment that play out in the social and literary sphere. These levels of concealment are linked to a taxonomy of persons that distinguishes between those who possess expertise in wisdom and those who lack such expertise. The first level involves the concealment of expertise in wisdom from the public, so that discourse regarding wisdom occurs only between sages. The second level involves the concealment of certain mysteries that are inherent in kabbalistic wisdom. Isaac is willing to state general principles with regard to the mystery of the unity and diversity of the entities, be they *sefirot* or divine names, that constitute the essence of the

unique and singular God, but he maintains that these mysteries should never be subjected to extended written exposition.²⁰

Finally, Isaac's taxonomy of persons who possess or lack expertise in wisdom yields four types or personalities, two on each side of the opposition between expertise and lack of expertise. Isaac characterizes his own disciples, who were experts in wisdom and expounded on it with a degree of openness, as "sages, men of understanding, and pious men," reflecting their character as people who possess and comprehend wisdom and live piously, even though they took risks by exposing themselves publicly as sages and by revealing kabbalistic wisdom to the public. Isaac describes his forbears, who were expert in wisdom but withheld their expertise from the public in terms that mask their engagement with wisdom by reflecting their status and role in society rather than their character. Both types serve as spiritual leaders inasmuch as they teach Torah to Israel. Opposite these types, Isaac makes reference to fools and scoffers, who defile the divine name. In the context of his letter, these terms may suggest two different relationships to wisdom. The fool somehow misunderstands wisdom²¹ whereas the scoffer rejects wisdom.

²⁰ Idel, "Nahmanides," 37, questions whether Isaac actually followed the model of esotericism set forth in the letter. Idel notes that Isaac does "not reveal an awareness of esotericism" in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, see Gershom Scholem, *ha-Kabbalah be-Provence*, ed. Rivka Schatz, (Jerusalem: 1970), appendix, or any other extant writings or statements attributed to him. Idel concludes that Isaac's emphasis on esotericism is part of his self-defense. Idel's position ought to be tested further by comparing Isaac's discourse on kabbalistic matters in the letter with the content, as well as the social and literary context of his other writings.

²¹ Isaac elaborates on foolishness in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, see Yechiel Shalom Goldberg, "The Foolishness of the Wise and the Wisdom of Fools in Spanish Kabbalah: An Inquiry into the Taxonomy of the Wise Fool," *The Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 1, no. 2 (October/November 2007), 54-55, <http://sephardic.fiu.edu/journal/index.htm>. In that context, foolishness

Turning to Ezra's *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, we find three of the four personalities from Isaac's letter: the sage, the fool, and the scoffer, or heretic. The disseminator of Torah, who hides his expertise in "wisdom," the representative of Isaac's model of spiritual leadership, is missing. Nevertheless, we do find evidence that Ezra internalized his master's instruction with regard to the revelation of wisdom and the accompanying model of spiritual leadership. But this statement serves as a preamble to a very different model of spiritual leadership. In the introduction to his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Ezra describes a particular set of circumstances that compelled him to rethink Isaac's model of spiritual leadership and embrace a model of spiritual leadership in which the sage reveals his expertise in wisdom by making at least some of wisdom's secrets available to the public.²² Ezra uses the first part of the introduction to his commentary²³ to explain and argue for his need to reveal himself as a sage who can then reveal some of the secrets and mysteries of wisdom to Israel.

arises from the manner in which one who possesses wisdom seeks to extend his apprehension of wisdom, so that even one who has some knowledge of wisdom may become a fool.

²² The model of esotericism that is reflected in this context is primarily social and literary, involving the withholding of certain knowledge from larger audiences and the reading of exoteric texts as cryptograms, whose words encode hidden levels of meaning. Ezra's teachings also embrace an ontological mode of esotericism, which involves the ability or inability of a person to comprehend or participate in different dimensions of wisdom that are reified in the ontology of the ten sefirot. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, Theurgy, Sources and Studies in the Literature of Jewish Mysticism*, (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 9–93, establishes an insightful taxonomy of esotericism in theurgic Kabbalah, ecstatic Kabbalah, and Maimonides' writings. Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), provides an interesting analysis of the history of socio-political forms of esotericism in Judaism, concluding with a theoretical essay on the phenomenology of esotericism.

²³ The introduction is divided into four parts: a lengthy discussion of the transmission of wisdom, and three prefaces. The first preface identifies the secrets and mysteries that are concealed in *The Song of Songs*, the second preface explains certain kabbalistic symbols and reflects on the reading of *The Song of*

In the first part of the introduction to his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Ezra gives two different accounts of the transmission of wisdom. In the context of the first account, Ezra defines the “tradition of wisdom” (מסורת החכמה) as “the knowledge of the divine Name” (ידיעת השם)²⁴ and asserts that it “was transmitted through the tradition of Oral Torah (על סדר הקבלה תורה שבע"פ).”²⁵ Ezra contends that this chain of tradition was unbroken from the time of the revelation of the Torah through his own time. Significantly, Ezra’s description of the transmission of wisdom reflects the structure and, in places, the exact wording of Maimonides’ account of the transmission of the Oral Torah in the latter’s halakhic opus, the *Mishneh Torah*.²⁶ Among other things, this implies that the wisdom described by Ezra is a necessary accompaniment to halakhah.

Songs as a symbolic text, and the third preface contains a commentary on Job 28, which Ezra describes as “the pillar upon which all things rely, the peg on which they hang” (481, 32).

²⁴ In some places in Ezra’s commentary, this phrase refers specifically to the divine name and at other times it refers more generally to the divine person.

²⁵ Ezra Ben Solomon, “*Perush LeShir HaShirim*,” 2:478; *Rabbi Ezra Ben Solomon of Gerona: Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kabbalistic Commentaries*, trans. Seth Brody (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1999), 20. I have used Brody’s translation, with occasional variations. Hereafter, I will note page numbers in parentheses in the format (Chavel, Brody), e.g., (478, 20). All page numbers from Chavel are in volume 2.

²⁶ On the relationship between Ezra’s *Commentary on The Song of Songs* and Maimonides’ writings, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism,” in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 178. This article also offers a different account of Ezra’s reasons for writing his commentary, which emphasizes Ezra’s messianic expectation of the end of the exile. Wolfson offers a more detailed comparison of the rhetoric used by Ezra and Maimonides with regard to esotericism in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, (Germany: ERGON Verlag, 2004), 220–221. In the introduction to Ezra’s commentary, it is possible to find formulations that reflect specific language and ideas from a number of Maimonides’ writings, including, the “Introduction” to the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and the essay on the thirteen principles of faith, which appears in Maimonides’ *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin X. It is likely that Ezra co-opts these materials to legitimate his own framing of Jewish wisdom as preferable to that of Maimonides.

This description of the transmission of the wisdom tradition leaves the impression that all is well with Israel, which possesses wisdom together with Torah. At this juncture, however, Ezra changes tack and argues that all is not well with Israel.

In apparent contradiction of his claim that “there never ceased to be a generation of Israel to which the tradition of wisdom...was transmitted through the tradition of the Oral Torah (478, 20), Ezra asserts that, following the destruction of the second Temple

the number of sages has dwindled, wisemen have ceased, and the pious and saints for whose sake miracles were wrought are no more. The exile continues to worsen and our sufferings proceed, indeed undergoing constant renewal, there being neither anyone to impart knowledge nor comprehend tradition. *And thus this wisdom ceased from Israel. Wisdom was lost and with it Torah* (479, 22, emphasis added).

Next, Ezra explains that the wisdom associated with the divine name is necessary for a proper understanding of the reasons for the commandments and for a proper understanding of Scripture and rabbinic tradition.

These contradictory accounts of the transmission of wisdom each have a function in Ezra’s argument. The first account is intended to lend authority to Ezra’s implicit claim that he possesses the requisite knowledge of the divine name to discover and expound the secrets and mysteries concealed in The Song of Songs. The second account is part of Ezra’s justification for breaking the esoteric code that undergirds Isaac’s model of spiritual leadership. Together, these accounts form the mythico-historical foundation for Ezra’s model of spiritual leadership.

One observation about the historical context in which Ezra formulated this argument may illuminate the intention behind Ezra's contradictory accounts of the transmission of wisdom. It is likely that Ezra wrote his commentary in the 1220's or early 1230's, proximate to the second intensification of the controversies surrounding Maimonides' philosophical version of Jewish wisdom, which Maimonides variously identifies with knowledge of the divine and the secrets of Torah. Viewed in this context, the contradiction between Ezra's two accounts of the transmission of the wisdom tradition functions as a polemical device that authorizes his version of wisdom, i.e., knowledge of the divine name, and invalidates claims to wisdom or knowledge of the divine name on the part of other commentators of his day.

Evidence that Ezra is responding to the reception of Maimonides' writings by European Jewry lies in Ezra's co-option of Maimonides' account of the transmission of the Oral Torah, making wisdom, not only Halakhah, the object of that account and of Ezra's careful, if logically inelegant, reworking of Maimonides' justification for writing about "secrets of the Torah."²⁷ Whereas Maimonides describes the loss of the "secrets of the Torah," Ezra describes the loss of wisdom, which he associates with secrets and mysteries. Like Maimonides, Ezra uses his own impending mortality as partial justification for his action; but, unlike Maimonides, Ezra uses a claim to hoary tradition to lend authority to his version of wisdom. Maimonides relieves himself of the need to resort to tradition by openly admitting that whatever ancient wisdom existed is, in fact,

²⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 415-416. The quotes that follow are all from these two pages.

lost, and that he is following “conjecture and supposition.” Maimonides states that “no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher.” Although Ezra makes no general statement regarding those from whom he received wisdom, nor does he make any explicit claim regarding a personal revelation, we shall see that Ezra does consider himself a sage who has received wisdom from a teacher and through personal enlightenment.

Returning to Ezra’s introduction, Ezra gives three examples that illustrate the consequences of the loss of wisdom and Torah. Two of these examples involve the elite, who either interpret Torah or read rabbinic literature. The third example involves the people of Israel as a whole. In Ezra’s account, the latter group faces a crisis that is compounded by the former group. Ezra’s description of the consequences of the loss of wisdom and Torah among these groups provides him with an immediate justification for his decision to break his long held silence, since he can restore Israel’s lost wisdom. Reflecting on the loss of wisdom, Ezra writes that

interpreters (המפרשים) arose who possess neither understanding nor enlightenment, whether they turned towards the right or the left.²⁸ They

²⁸ I have altered Brody’s translation. As Chavel notes, Ezra’s formulation reflects Isaiah 30:21, “and, whenever you deviate to the right or to the left, your ears will heed the command from behind you: ‘This is the road, follow it!’” This language also resonates with Sifri on Deuteronomy, Shoftim, 11, which glosses Deuteronomy 17:11 “you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left,” with the words, “even if they demonstrate before your eyes regarding left that it is right and regarding right that it is left, listen to them!” In these cases, Israel receives guidance from worthy leaders, who either keep them on the path or are deserving of Israel’s trust even when their guidance seems to invert reality. Ezra’s point is that interpreters arose who did not possess wisdom, so they transform holy words into an unholy path. It is clear from another statement of Ezra’s, which I will quote below, that such people are fools and lead others into heresy.

turned words of holiness toward the path of the profane,²⁹ diminishing Scripture, adding, subtracting, enhancing, interpreting passages spoken through the holy spirit from a quarry of sacred gems, in terms never to be entertained by human consciousness, let alone spoken, and how much more so transcribed in a book. I call such interpreters those who “overturn the words of the living God, the Lord of Hosts” (Jeremiah 23:36). Concerning the dual cessation and nullification [of wisdom] from Israel, the prophet, trembling, devastated, and sighing, said: “Many are the days which will pass in Israel without the God of Truth and without instruction” (Isaiah 30:21). By the phrase, “without the God of Truth,” he referred to the interruption in the knowledge of God, may He be blessed, in Israel. “Without instruction,” designates that on account of this evil situation, they shall lack clarity concerning the reasons for the Torah’s commandments and its mysteries. Just as it is with the Torah and the words of tradition (i.e., Prophets and Writings), so is it with the words of our sages of blessed memory, who expounded upon this wisdom in their homiletic compendia and narratives in the form of parables and riddles,³⁰ so as to hide these matters and conceal them they scattered one here and one there, so as to hide their place. When encountering them, a person does not sense their inner meaning but instead takes them at their face value. He does not contemplate the inner dimensions of their details, pays no heed, lacks the knowledge and understanding to say: “how is it possible

²⁹ Brody leaves out “the path of.”

³⁰ Brody translates *hiddot* as “ciphers.” However, “riddles” are commonly recognized features of wisdom literature, although, interestingly, biblical wisdom literature refers to riddles without generally posing riddles. See, James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 22–27. Ezra’s use of *hiddot* also resonates with biblical descriptions of prophecy, most famously in Numbers 12:8, in which the Israelite god describes his communication with Moses: “With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles.” Significantly, Habakuk 2:6 and Psalms 78:2 link riddles to *meshalim*. The kabbalist’s reception and employment of the categories of *mashal* and *hiddah* from biblical and rabbinic usage is an issue requiring further investigation.

for our sages to have written such things, to have put them into writing in a book, unless a delightful treasure is hidden and concealed within them?"

Ezra then observes:

So have I seen again and again over the course of many years. Yet I kept my silence, placing hand to mouth until I reached my fifth rung and saw that the days of my life were setting before me, that old age was rapidly approaching. Therefore, I pressed forward to interpret one of Scripture's twenty-four books, encompassing every delight, bespeaking matters weighty, mysteries and secrets whose memory was lost to Scripture's interpreters, neglecting its perdurance and splendor: that is the Song of Songs. (479-480, 23-24)

The first part of this passage describes the crisis that compelled Ezra to set out a new model of spiritual leadership. The second part describes Ezra's personal response to the circumstances that arose because of the loss of wisdom and Torah. This is the first step in Ezra's delineation of a new model of spiritual leadership.

Although the main focus of Ezra's description of the circumstances that arose with the loss of wisdom is the problematic, even heretical, hermeneutics that arose among interpreters of Torah and readers of rabbinic literature who lacked wisdom, the pivotal element in this description is the prophet's lament concerning Israel's existential situation. As interpreted by Ezra, Isaiah 30:21 signifies that Israel exists in a state of spiritual exile that is, in important respects, more problematic than the nation's physical exile. According to Ezra's second account of the transmission of the tradition of wisdom,

the hardships of geo-political exile following the destruction of the second Temple have robbed the people of their wisdom tradition by depleting the supply of sages who preserve and transmit that tradition. Consequently, the physical hardship of exile is exacerbated by a spiritual exile in which the people of Israel are not only separated from their land and deprived of political autonomy, but they are separated from the knowledge of the divine and deprived of a clear understanding of his instruction, i.e., Torah. The reason for this spiritual exile is that Israel's spiritual leaders, the interpreters of Torah and the readers of rabbinic literature, lack wisdom. Therefore, they are incapable of providing Israel with the wisdom that it needs to persevere in exile.

Ezra responds to these circumstances by breaking his silence and speaking out, in writing, about the wisdom that Israel needs to overcome its spiritual exile. As a medium for this action, Ezra chose to explain a Scriptural text that encompasses “every delight, bespeaking matters weighty, mysteries and secrets whose memory was lost to Scripture’s interpreters.” The Song of Songs gave Ezra a platform to counter the heretical interpretations of other commentators so that he can grant Israel access to the traditional wisdom associated with the divine name through which Israel can overcome its spiritual exile. In light of the distinction that Ezra draws between the interpretation of Scripture and engagement in the study of rabbinic texts, it is worth recalling that Ezra also wrote a lengthy commentary on select Talmudic *aggadot* and midrashic texts.³¹

Against the backdrop of Ezra’s explanation of and argument for the need to publicly disseminate kabbalistic wisdom, we can begin to answer the questions regarding

³¹ See the beginning of the next section for bibliographic details.

Ezra's portrayal of the kabbalistic sage raised in the introduction to this paper. In the passage that we have been considering, Ezra positions himself opposite interpreters of Torah who lack the understanding and enlightenment to properly discern the wisdom concealed within Scriptural texts. Consequently, in their attempts to clarify the holy writ, they transform holy words into profane, ordinary words. Ezra also positions himself opposite people who take parables and riddles in rabbinic literature at face value. These people lack the knowledge and understanding to ask the right questions, which would reveal the wisdom that the rabbinic sages concealed within their words. In the next section, I will adduce texts in which Ezra classifies the interpreters of Scripture described here as heretics and the readers of rabbinic literature described here as fools or people who are confused. Ezra then asserts that he will interpret a text that contains the wisdom that is forgotten by those who interpret Scripture. The implication of these oppositions is that Ezra possesses the knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment that allows him to access the forgotten wisdom within these different literatures. The reason to expose elements of this hidden and forgotten wisdom is that this is the only way to rescue Israel from its spiritual exile since, with this wisdom, Israel can recover the knowledge of the divine and acquire a clear understanding of Torah. If those who lack knowledge, wisdom, and understanding are classified as heretics or fools, then those who possess these qualities may be classified as sages, men of understanding, and pious men, borrowing Isaac's characterization. Ezra implicitly places himself in these latter classes.

We can now compare Ezra's rationale for breaking his silence about wisdom with Isaac's rationale for keeping silent about wisdom. Both arguments involve observations

about events or situations within the Jewish communities of Catalonia. Moreover, both arguments rely on the opposition between sages and heretics or fools. However, the circumstances observed by each man differ. Isaac believed and observed that when those he deemed fools or scoffers learned kabbalistic wisdom they either engaged in blasphemy or heresy; so, Isaac concluded that it is their inability to comprehend the mysteries of kabbalistic wisdom that leads fools and scoffers astray. These observations support the veracity of the practice that Isaac ascribes to his forbears, namely, a refusal to even admit that they are expert in wisdom when teaching Torah to the public. In contrast, Ezra observes that men who interpret Scripture or read rabbinic writing and have no knowledge of kabbalistic wisdom may offer heretical readings of Scripture, and they may either show themselves to be fools or become confused as they attempt to understand rabbinic literature. This confirms Ezra's belief that the mysteries of Scripture and rabbinic literature can only be understood through the lens of kabbalistic wisdom. Consequently, Ezra concludes that the right thing to do is to reveal enough of this wisdom to Israel to set those with the ability to comprehend this wisdom on the right path.

In order to gain a better understanding of Ezra's portrayal of the character of the sage as a spiritual leader who possesses knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment we need to delve deeper into Ezra's negative portrayal of those who lack these qualities.

SAGES, HERETICS, AND FOOLS: READING SCRIPTURE AND RABBINIC LITERATURE

In the description of “Scripture’s interpreters,” quoted above, Ezra characterizes the words of Scripture as “words of holiness” that can be made “profane” by those who lack either understanding or enlightenment. Ezra makes a similar claim, using different terms, in his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*.³² There, Ezra wrote, “because the multitude think that the literal meaning of the verse is heretical, they add or subtract [from the text], and that which they think is heresy is faith.”³³ Faith and heresy in the latter source correspond to “holiness” and “the path of the profane” in the *Commentary on The Song of Songs*. These two passages appear to render a subjective judgment regarding the status of Scripture and the character of those who read Scripture. From Ezra’s perspective, that which the multitude views as heresy, namely, the sometimes nonsensical letter of Scripture as written, is, in fact, faith, and that which those who “possess neither understanding nor enlightenment” view as holiness, namely, the emended text, is, in fact, profane. From the perspective of those whom Ezra describes as emending Scripture to make sense of it, the sanctity, and therefore the wisdom, of the text lies in its outward message and reorganizing the text to discern that message is the path to wisdom. Furthermore, according to this reasoning, faith lies in recognizing that the divine

³² A version of this commentary entitled “*Likutei Shikhehah uFe’ah*,” published in Ferrara in 1556, is included in *Sefer Likutei Shikhehah Ufe’ah*, prepared by Abraham ben Judah Almalikh (Jerusalem: 1978). For a listing of other manuscripts of Ezra’s commentary, see *Perush HaAggadot LeRabbi ‘Azriel*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983).

³³ *Perush HaAggadot*, 41. See the critical apparatus on lines 9-11 for Ezra’s version. Also, cf. Ezra ben Solomon, “*Likutei Shikhehah uFe’ah*,” 8b.

word cannot be nonsensical, so all steps must be taken to render its surface meaning comprehensible, even emending the text. In order to combat this approach, Ezra establishes an “objective” foundation for the discernment of faith and holiness in the reading of Scripture by pointing to the status of the text as divine revelation, and arguing that as divine revelation the text has a necessary and unalterable structure. Thus, at the end of the explanation of the commandments that he incorporates into his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Ezra wrote:³⁴

You should know that the Torah is entirely clear, spoken by the divine *gevurah* (power),³⁵ containing not a single letter or vowel that is not needed. All of it is a divine structure, hewn out through the name³⁶ of the blessed Holy One...³⁷ Let this be implanted in your heart and inscribed within you. Protect yourself from becoming a heretic and lend no ear to [those who] say that Ezra the Scribe added things of his own accord as he copied [the Torah]...³⁸ This is total heresy, that of which the rabbis spoke in the chapter called “A Portion,”³⁹ on the verse “For he has despised the

³⁴ Although this work within a work appears as part of Ezra’s explanation of The Song of Songs 4:11, Chavel published it separately after Ezra’s commentary. See *Kitvei Ramban*, 2:521–48. Brody omitted all but the end of this work from his translation. See Brody, *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, 84–85.

³⁵ Lit. power. Brody translates it as “*dynamis*,” reflecting Greek terminology. *Gevurah* is a name for the fifth highest sefirah, associated with judgment and with the limitation of the infinite. For a discussion of the history of this term, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 157–66.

³⁶ Brody suggests amending the text to read “hewn out from the name.” My translation of the prefixed bet follows the usage of this prefix in some versions of Sefer Yetsirah, in which it indicates instrumentality.

³⁷ I omit material taken from Sanhedrin 99a, which addresses verses in the Torah that seem superfluous.

³⁸ I omit verses that exemplify this phenomenon.

word of the Lord” [Numbers 15:31]: “This refers to one who says ‘Torah is not from heaven’” (548, 84-85).

“Structure” is a technical term in Ezra’s vocabulary. It refers not only to the physical form of Scripture as God’s word set in writing; but to the arrangement of the *sefirot*, which are signified by the words of Scripture, and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from which the words of Scripture are constructed.⁴⁰ Scripture is not only written (hewn) through the divine name, but Scripture contains the “structure” of the *sefirot*, which contain the divine name.⁴¹ Tampering with the revealed structure of the written text renders the text profane by breaking the link between the letters, the *sefirot*, and the divine name; and the person who engages in this act is a heretic since such tampering shows a lack of faith⁴² in the inherent, albeit hidden, meaning of the text in the

³⁹ Sanhedrin 99a.

⁴⁰ In the third preface appended to his introduction, Ezra writes concerning Job 28:27, “‘then he saw it and he gauged it’: the three primal ‘books’ (Sefer Yetsirah 1:1)—Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge. ‘He measured it’—the existences were not arrayed in accord with the order of the sefirotic structure (על ן סדר תכונות הבנין). Rather God, be He praised, brought the existences into being, arrayed them in order, transformed them into a structure (בנין), after combining, measuring, and transposing the twenty-two letters, binding each and every one to its colleague, so that they paralleled one another. ‘And he probed it’ (Job 28:27): He affixed boundary to the sefirotic qualities, rendered them accessible to probing, although they in principle possessed no boundary from their beginning” (483-484, 37-38).

⁴¹ Ezra correlates the ten *sefirot* with the 72 letter name of God in his explanation of The Song of Songs 1:3 (485, 40-41).

⁴² In Ezra ben Solomon, “*Likutei Shikhekha uFe’ah*,” 8b, Ezra writes that Scripture “contains an allusion and a hidden and sealed secret. When you read verses and it appears to you that the letters are joined to one another, but you are unable to explain them, then know and contemplate that there are hidden matters, and they are said in this way out of necessity. Concerning this, David said (Psalms 119:18), ‘turn my eyes and I will see wonders from your Torah.’” “Wonders” is an intertextual reference to the “thirty-two wonders of wisdom,” a phrase used in *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:1 to refer to the ten sefirot and twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet that are contained within divine wisdom. The statement about faith and heresy, quoted above, follows shortly after this statement.

precise form in which it was revealed through divine fiat, symbolized by the divine *gevurah*.

Ezra employs TB Sanhedrin 99a, a *locus classicus* in rabbinic literature for discussion of faith and heresy, to describe the nature of the heresy of tampering with the structure of Scripture. Amending a Scriptural text that seems nonsensical results in two negative outcomes. First, it transforms the text from a holy, divinely revealed text into a profane text, produced by the human mind. In Ezra's view, one who is willing to engage in such activity spurns the wisdom that is contained within the divine word, as indicated in Numbers 15:31. This verse uses the verb "בִּזָּה," the meaning of which is best captured by the constellation of English words "spurn," "scorn," and "despise," to indicate the action of the heretic. This verb appears again in verses associated with Ezra's portrayal of the kabbalistic sage as a spiritual leader and of Israel as the nation he ought to lead. Second, emending a Scriptural text is tantamount to denying that the text was divinely revealed. Since the word of revelation has a necessary and, presumably, perfect⁴³ structure, changing that structure signifies not only scorn for the divine word but rejection of divine revelation as the source of the divine word. Changing the structure of Scripture is heresy and the one who engages in this act is a heretic.

Turning from Ezra's treatment of Scripture and its interpreters to rabbinic literature and its readers, Ezra emphasizes the "parables and riddles" found within this literature, although he does not reduce the whole of this literature to these genres. It is

⁴³ Ezra makes this claim explicitly with regard to rabbinic literature, see below. It is implicit in his treatment of Scripture.

likely that Ezra emphasizes this dimension of rabbinic discourse since the discourse of parables and riddles is a discourse of concealment. Parables make their point through the use of simile and metaphor, leaving the reader to determine the true object of the narrative. Riddles put the burden on the reader or listener to figure out the answer to a question or the meaning of a statement that is intentionally worded in an enigmatic manner. Generally, knowledge of the subject of the riddle is required to figure out the answer. It is clear that Ezra does not think highly of parables and riddles as modes of discourse unto themselves. Thus he asserts that those who lack “knowledge and understanding” not only fail to sense that the rabbis’ words contain a hidden message, but they fail to ask “how is it possible for our sages to have written such things, to have put them into writing in a book, unless a delightful treasure is hidden and concealed within them?” This suggests that writing parables and riddles is not an activity that is worthy of sages unless these parables and riddles conceal wisdom. Of course, not all parables and riddles do conceal wisdom, since parables and riddles can also be used for entertainment.⁴⁴

Another passage in Ezra’s *Commentary on The Song of Songs* clarifies his attitude toward parables and riddles and those who delight in them, by explaining the meaning of an extended parable in chapter four of *The Song of Songs*. In that passage, Ezra interprets the locked garden of *The Song of Songs* 4:12 in sefirotic terms as a description of *Shekhinah*, which is both “the beginning of the differentiated universe” and the garden

⁴⁴ It is interesting that Ezra ignores the use of parables in Scripture in this context, since he treats *The Song of Songs* itself as an extended parable that describes the history of the relationship between God and Israel on one hand and the relationship between God and the soul on the other.

that is watered by the higher *sefirot*, starting with *Hokhmah* (wisdom), which flow into *Shekhinah*. Ezra then parses The Song of Songs 4:15 as a description of the patriarchs who correspond to the central *sefirot*, *Hesed*, *Din*, and *Tiferet*, and receive their sustenance from *Hokhmah*. More important than the symbolic decoding of the parable itself is the programmatic reflection that follows it:

Contemplate the wonders of this parable⁴⁵ and you will know and you will be enlightened⁴⁶ by that which our sages wrote, the manner in which their words constitute the height of completeness and perfection. Such truly befits sages like these, whose every word was uttered through the holy spirit in allusion (ברמז), so as to arouse the heart⁴⁷ of the enlightened recipients of tradition (המשכילים המקובלים) [but] does not [befit] ignorant fools (לפתאים הכסילים) and those who are confused, who think their words are fox fables! (498, 87-88)

Whereas those who do not recognize the “treasures” concealed within rabbinic parables “lack knowledge and understanding,” the person who comprehends these “treasures” acquires knowledge and achieves enlightenment. Here we encounter a description of the

⁴⁵ Brody translates משל as “symbolism,” which weakens the impact of Ezra’s argument.

⁴⁶ Brody translates ותשכיל as “understand,” but this verb is a technical term for enlightenment by the *sefirah hokhmah*, and is the same verb used in the passage regarding that which “Scripture’s interpreters” lack, in the introduction.

⁴⁷ Brody translates לב as “consciousness,” but לב is a technical term referring to the imagination as a particular faculty of human consciousness. See Wolfson, *Speculum*, 280, 290–91, 293, 296, 300, 308–9, 317, and also a symbol for the manifestation of the ten *sefirot* within each human individual. See the next paragraph in this study. Ezra hints at a connection between the heart and the acquisition of wisdom in his *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadot*. See Ezra ben Solomon, “*Likutei Shikhehah uFe’ah*,” 6a. His younger contemporary, Azriel of Gerona, elaborates on this point in some detail; see *Perush ha’Aggadot*, 29.

sage. Enlightenment occurs when the human soul is illuminated by the light of divine wisdom. The process that leads to enlightenment, הדבקות בשכינה (the attachment to the *Shekhinah*), will be discussed below. The knowledge that is acquired is knowledge of the divine name, which corresponds to the seven *sefirot* from *Hesed* through *Shekhinah*. Understanding, which Ezra leaves out of this passage, comes about by entering into a relationship with *Binah*, the *sefirah* that mediates between *Hokhmah* and the lower seven *sefirot*. In the third of three prefaces appended to his introduction,⁴⁸ Ezra associates enlightenment, understanding, and knowledge, in that order, with the three books mentioned in *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:1, and he associates these epistemic functions with the divine act of arranging the ten *sefirot*. In this context, the person who achieves enlightenment reenacts that process as he contemplates the ten *sefirot*, and the order of those terms that appear here is reversed so that knowledge precedes enlightenment. This signifies the shift from a “top down” divine perspective to a “bottom up” human perspective. The heart that is aroused within “the enlightened recipients of tradition” is a dimension of the human soul that corresponds to the thirty-two pathways of wisdom, an idea also derived from *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:1, and based on the gematria (numerical value) of “לב” (heart), thirty-two. In a related passage in his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*, Ezra emphasizes that the heart is a sign of human and divine wisdom.⁴⁹ Ezra establishes this connection in different terms in the same preface to the *Commentary on The Song of Songs* (481-482, 32-33) mentioned above, by establishing a link between the four

⁴⁸ See n. 40 for the text.

⁴⁹ See fn. 47.

elements, the four humours of the human body, and four “spiritual elements,” which are the four *sefirot*, *Hesed*, *Din*, *Tiferet*, and *Shekhinah*.

In sum, the rabbinic sages produced their parables under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the kabbalistic sage, who we shall see also enters into a relationship with the Holy Spirit, is able to uncover the wisdom hidden within the rabbis’ words. In contrast, those who lack wisdom read the words of the rabbis as though they were fox fables, stories about animals, often foxes, intended to teach lessons about human conduct. Rather than characterize such people as lacking the qualities necessary to acquire wisdom, Ezra asserts that such people fall into one of two categories: some are “ignorant fools” and others are “confused.” But how do these categories relate to the category of heretic? To answer this question we must examine Ezra’s assertion that fools and those who are confused read rabbinic literature as fox fables more closely.

In the thirteenth century, “fox fable” referred to a literary genre that included Aesop’s fables along with other fables of varied provenance.⁵⁰ It would seem that the reading of rabbinic literature as “fox fables” should not serve as warrant to label someone an ignorant fool, as a degree of discernment is necessary to recognize the moral of the fable. It is not even unreasonable to classify the morals of many fables as practical wisdom. So, how is the perception of rabbinic literature as fox fables different from the perception of rabbinic parables as concealing treasures?

⁵⁰ It is possible that Ezra knew fox fables through Rabbi Berekhiah haNakdan’s *Mishle Shu’alim*. The seminal study of this interesting rendering of Aesop’s fables and other fables that may be of Jewish origin in Biblical Hebrew is Haim Schwarzbaum, *The Mishle Shu’alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore* (Kiron, Israel: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research, 1979).

The answer lies in the source from which fox fables and rabbinic parables derive and in the referents of these fables and parables. Fox fables are the product of the human imagination as it reflects on human character traits and seeks to inculcate certain values in an edifying fashion. Rabbinic parables often use human characters and often seem to address human situations, but the source of rabbinic parables, according to Ezra, is the Holy Spirit, not the human imagination. Moreover, the objects of rabbinic parables are not human traits, but divine qualities reified in the ten *sefirot*. Thus, rabbinic parables teach lessons about the divine nature and the proper relationship that human beings ought to have with the divine. The folly of the ignorant fool is that he is ignorant of the wisdom that would allow him to sense the divine wisdom concealed within rabbinic parables.⁵¹ As a further consequence of his lack of wisdom, he fails to recognize that rabbinic literature is the product of prophetic revelation, so he confuses this literature with fox fables. The ignorant fool and the person who is confused may not be two categories, but two ways of referring to the person who misconstrues the nature of rabbinic literature on account of his foolish ignorance.

To summarize, heretics and fools share two characteristics. They lack kabbalistic wisdom acquired through oral or literary channels and tempered by *devekut* and, lacking this wisdom, they see only the literary dimension of the texts they seek to interpret. Thus,

⁵¹ In his *Commentary on Talmudic 'Aggadot*, Ezra includes the following talmudic dictum attributed to R. Yohanan, "The Holy One, blessed is He, only gives wisdom to one who has wisdom within him, as it is said (Daniel 2:21), 'He gives wisdom to the wise'" (B. Berakhot 55a). Ezra associates this dictum with the possession of heart, which is comprised of the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. See, "*Likutei Shikhehah uFe'ah*," 6a-6b. Ezra's younger contemporary, Azriel, elaborates on this passage with specific reference to the intellectual and metaphysical conditions necessary for the acquisition of divine wisdom. See, Tishby, *Perush HaAggadot*, 29. For an extended analysis of this text, see Goldberg, "The Foolishness of the Wise," 55-61.

heretics break faith with the necessary structure of Scripture by emending Scripture when they cannot comprehend its meaning and fools find wisdom in the literal meaning of rabbinic parables and riddles but, in doing so, wittingly or unwittingly deny that rabbinic literature, like Scripture, is a product of divine revelation that conceals divine wisdom. In contrast, those who possess wisdom are able to perceive the revealed wisdom concealed within texts that, literarily, either seem like nonsense or purvey a form of wisdom that one who is wise regards as the province of fools. It is worth emphasizing the paradox that Ezra finds kabbalistic wisdom concealed in texts that are profane, nonsensical, and even heretical or foolish from one perspective while they are holy, infused with meaning, and expressions of faith and wisdom from another perspective. The kabbalists' wisdom is grounded in the faith that Scripture and rabbinic literature are products of divine revelation and, as such, contain divine wisdom, albeit in a concealed manner. As "enlightened recipients of tradition," kabbalistic sages are disciples who have received knowledge of the divine name from masters, according to the chain of transmission that Ezra describes in the introduction to his commentary. Consequently, their hearts are aroused by the hints of wisdom in rabbinic literature and they also recognize that the literal text of Scripture has a necessary structure that they must penetrate to unlock the divine wisdom contained in Scripture. It is already apparent from Ezra's references to enlightenment and revelation that mere knowledge and intellect may be insufficient to unlock this wisdom; and it is also apparent that the sage is quite different from the heretic and the fool in his approach to Scripture and rabbinic literature. Ezra's personal reflections on his decision to write a commentary that unlocks secrets contained in The

Song of Songs leaves us with two questions: how does the kabbalist access divine wisdom? What is the sage to do with this wisdom when he finds himself surrounded by people whose lack of wisdom has led them to become heretics or ignorant fools? Ezra's answer to these questions is bound up with his prescription of a new model of spiritual leadership, a model that is both described and enacted in his commentary.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT: THE EMERGENCE OF A SPIRITUAL LEADER

As we have seen, faced with co-religionists whom he deems heretics and fools, Ezra decided that he must break his silence and write a commentary that gives exoteric expression to esoteric wisdom. But this requires a different model of spiritual leadership than the model put forward by his master, Isaac the Blind. Instead of acting as though he is not “expert in wisdom”⁵² when he teaches Torah to the public, in his self-appointed role as spiritual leader Ezra teaches Torah as one who is “expert in wisdom.” To this end, he frames his commentary as a link in the chain of the transmission of wisdom, but he also frames it as a primer in kabbalistic doctrine and praxis.

It is, however, important to note that Ezra's commentary is not truly an exoteric work, despite its exoteric elements. While he offers his reader many keys to decipher the wisdom encrypted in Scripture and rabbinic literature, there are many ciphers that remain encrypted if the reader only has access to this one text. Consequently, his commentary is written for both the novice and the expert in wisdom, and each reader will find different

⁵² See the quote from Isaac's letter on p. 7.

statements significant and will find different significations in the same statements, in accordance with the degree of familiarity each reader has with other works and traditions that inform Ezra's commentary.⁵³ In addition, like other esotericists, Ezra scatters references to some matters through different parts of his commentary, requiring that the reader make necessary connections to construct the entirety of an idea. We have already seen how material from different places in Ezra's commentary and even from another work of Ezra's compliment and complete one another. A similar process of collection and analysis is necessary to complete our recovery of Ezra's portrait of the kabbalistic sage.

THE KABBALIST AND ALL ISRAEL ARE SCORNE

In his commentary on The Song of Songs 8:7-8, Ezra juxtaposes a description of the kabbalistic sage, who is scorned for his loving devotion to the wisdom that is concealed in Torah, to a description of the people of Israel, who are scorned on account of their departure from the wisdom contained in Torah.

The Song of Songs 8:7 reads, "if a man offered all his wealth for love, they would utterly scorn him."⁵⁴ A man who shows such devotion is scorned by others for his single

⁵³ Of course, this is true, in some measure, of all literature, but in this context the reader requires specific, privileged knowledge to unlock some elements of Ezra's text. General immersion in medieval Jewish culture is insufficient, even if it includes knowledge of works such as *Sefer Yetsirah*. For example, Ezra's delineation of the transmission of wisdom prior to the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt chronicles not only the "historical" transmission of this wisdom; it chronicles the unfolding of the sefirotic structure, which constitutes wisdom, within the godhead. A reader unfamiliar with kabbalistic symbolism will not recognize this, but one who has read Ezra's other writings, the remainder of his commentary, and, perhaps, certain passages in *Sefer haBahir* and *Sefer Yetsirah*, would pick up enough hints to figure out the rest. As Ezra himself notes, the reader must first be sensitive to the presence of wisdom within a text; the revelation of wisdom will follow.

⁵⁴ The text reads "בזו יבזו לו." The doubling of the verb "scorn, they would scorn" is an emphatic form of expression. NJPS translates "He would be laughed to scorn." NRSV translates "it would be utterly

minded devotion to his beloved. Ezra uses three glosses to reveal another message in the verse:

“If a man offered all his wealth:” all his heart, all his life, and all his might. **“For love:”** the adhesion to the Divine Presence (הדבקות בשכינה). **“They would utterly scorn him:”** he would sanctify His name publicly; glory and splendor would be his; his horn would be raised with honor; and he would rise to the highest level to be acceptable and counted among the recipients of the face of the divine presence (מקבלי פני השכינה) (514, 139-140).

In the first gloss, Ezra paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:5, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your life,⁵⁵ and with all your might,” so that it describes the man of the verse from The Song of Songs.⁵⁶ The juxtaposition of these two verses creates an intertextual reference⁵⁷ to a mishnaic gloss of Deuteronomy 6:5,⁵⁸ in which

scorned.” My translation combines elements of both translations, but preserves the subject. One could argue whether the object of the verb is the action or the person doing the action. Ezra’s interpretation implies that the subject is the person, although he does not address the language of this part of the verse directly. There is nothing in the context that suggests laughter.

⁵⁵ NJPS: “soul.” This translation is misleading since there is no evidence that the biblical use of *nefesh* to refer to the essence of a person, i.e., the self, involves the kind of sharp dichotomy between spirit and matter that is found in the Greek distinction between the soul and the body. Although *nefesh* is the principle that animates the body, it is associated with both bodily and mental functions, such as breath, blood, and emotions; and, at times, it stands for the whole person. See Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, in collaboration with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), S.V. נפש.

⁵⁶ Ezra’s paraphrase changes the indirect objects of the Deuteronomic verse from second to third person.

⁵⁷ On the phenomenon of intertextuality, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁵⁸ See M. Berakhot 9:5, cf. Sifrei on ve’ethanan 7.

“with all your might” is read as “with all your money.” However, Ezra’s use of Deuteronomy 6:5 to explain the opening of The Song of Songs 8:7 suggests that monetary commitment is only a portion of the commitment that the man who “offered all his wealth for love” makes to his beloved. The mishnaic reading of Deuteronomy 6:5 glosses “with all your heart” as “with your two inclinations, with the good inclination and with the evil inclination,” and “with all your life” as “even if [God] takes your life.” The man who offers all his wealth for love is a man who devotes the totality of his moral, bodily, and financial resources to the love of his god: he observes his god’s commandments, is willing to be a martyr, and demonstrates his devotion to his beloved through ritualized poverty, i.e., poverty that is chosen rather than poverty that comes about through lack of either ability or opportunity to earn money.

The second gloss equates באהבה (for love) with the technical expression הדבקות בשכינה (the adhesion to the Divine Presence). This technical expression identifies the beloved and describes the relationship between the lover and the beloved. The grammatical parallel between the biblical lemma באהבה and the second word of the gloss בשכינה implies that the godhead, in its manifestation as the most imminent of the ten *sefirot*, *Shekhinah*, is love. The technical expression הדבקות בשכינה signifies a form of mystical union between the human soul and the *Shekhinah* in which *Shekhinah*, the tenth *sefirah*, is a lower manifestation of the second highest *sefirah*, *Hokhmah*, wisdom.

In his explanation of The Song of Songs 1:2-4, Ezra describes the relationship between *Hokhmah* and *Shekhinah*, setting this explanation within the context of דבקות

(attachment)⁵⁹ between the human soul and the divine *sefirot*. Ezra interprets the opening words of The Song of Songs 1:2, “Let him give me of the kisses of his mouth!” as an allegory for the emanation of light through the ten *sefirot*, which are themselves light.⁶⁰ On the one hand, Ezra writes that the words of The Song of Songs 1:2 express the desire of the divine Glory (the ninth *sefirah*, *Yesod*) to be illuminated by a formless, supernal light, which assumes form in divine thought, i.e., *Hokhmah*. On the other hand, Ezra defines the “kiss” as a symbol for the mystical attachment of the soul to “the source of life,” which also signifies *Hokhmah*. Ezra asserts that this union between the soul and *Hokhmah* results in “the expansion of the Holy Spirit,” which corresponds to an outpouring of light from *Hokhmah*. This outpouring of light strengthens the soul. In his explanation of The Song of Songs 1:3, Ezra adds that the *Shekhinah*, in its attachment to *Yesod*, serves as the conduit by means of which the union between *Hokhmah* and the soul occurs. Consequently, הדבקות בשכינה is one stage in a larger phenomenon, which culminates in the illumination of the soul by the unformed light that is filtered through

⁵⁹ Scholars identify *devekut* as a mystical phenomenon. There is a large bibliography on this issue, but most of the parameters and debates involved in the analysis of this phenomenon are well represented in the following works: Gershom Scholem, “Devekut, or Communion with God,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 203–26; Idel, *New Perspectives*, chapters 3 and 4; and Wolfson, *Speculum*. Recently, debate has turned to the question of the appropriateness of the category of mysticism for the study of Kabbalah. See, for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law & Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Boaz Huss, “The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism,” (Hebrew) *Pe’amim* 110 (2007): 9–30; and Huss, “Jewish Mysticism in the University.” Wolfson does not challenge the usefulness of the construct of mysticism, but he challenges the ability of scholars to form a proper taxonomic structure within which to place mysticism. I will address Huss’ argument that scholars need to abandon the category of mysticism altogether in the conclusion.

⁶⁰ On the importance of Ezra’s explanation of the kiss for zoharic literature, see Joel Hecker, “Kissing Kabbalists: Hierarchy, Reciprocity and Equality,” in *Love—Virtual and Real—in the Jewish Tradition*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean A. Cahan (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2008), 176.

Hokhmah and illuminates the soul that is joined to the *Shekhinah*.⁶¹

A few lines later,⁶² Ezra returns to the theme of “the expansion of the Holy Spirit,” and notes that the rabbis identify “the satisfaction that is derived from the pleasure of the extension and the expansion,” as “eating.” Ezra quotes *Vayyikra Rabbah* 20:10, which teaches that those who saw the God of Israel and ate and drank (Exodus 24:11) “nourished their eyes from the *Shekhinah*.” According to this Midrash, R. Yohanan identifies this act as “actual eating.” Ezra offers a more extensive explanation of this midrashic text in his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*, where he prefaces a description of *devekut* between human thought and divine thought, i.e., the *sefirah*, *Hokhmah*, with Ecclesiastes 7:12, “Wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it.” In this context, Ezra notes, “that by strengthening the power of the soul through the attachment to its creator (בהדבקה בבוראה) the senses that are thirsting for the pleasures of the lower world are nullified.”⁶³ Consequently, the divine light received through הדבקות בשכינה satisfies hunger by nullifying the physical sensations associated with hunger and by providing spiritual sustenance for the soul. This suggests that ritualized hunger, i.e., fasting, may accompany ritualized poverty as an expression of devotion to the beloved. The man who offers all of his wealth for love exchanges the earthly, material means of

⁶¹ Ezra’s analysis of these verses is rich with detail and connections to other passages in his writings. For an interesting analysis of another dimension of illumination that addresses the reward for observance of the commandments in Ezra’s thought, see Moshe Idel, “In the Light of Life: An Inquiry in Kabbalistic Eschatology,” (Hebrew) in *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom: Studies in the Memory of Amir Yekutiel*, ed. I. M. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 1992), 191–212.

⁶² On The Song of Songs 1:7.

⁶³ *Perush ha’Aggadot*, 77; Wolfson, *Speculum*, 294. Also Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah*, Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 73.

sustenance, i.e., money and food, for a spiritual means of sustenance, i.e., light, which is the wisdom that “preserves the life of him who possesses it.”⁶⁴

The attachment to the *Shekhinah*, which is achieved through piety, asceticism, and contemplation, results in the enlightenment of the human soul by the light of divine wisdom. This achievement has two consequences: the life of the soul is sustained by the source of life, i.e., *Hokhmah*, and the person whose life is sustained in this way receives prophetic wisdom in the form of the expansion of the Holy Spirit. In short, the sage whose life is sustained by divine wisdom is also a recipient of prophetic revelation.

Although the tone of Ezra’s portrayal of the person who engages in הדבקות בשכינה is impersonal, it contains textual and conceptual links back to passages in the introduction to his commentary. Tracing these links will demonstrate that Ezra identifies himself as one who engages in הדבקות בשכינה. I would like to get there by asking a broader question: who is Ezra describing in this impersonal passage?

To answer this question we need to consider who receives prophetic inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Ezra takes note of the fact that King Solomon wrote The Song of Songs through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ Solomon, however, does not fit the ascetic model established in Ezra’s glosses on The Song of Songs 8:7. Another candidate is the lover described in The Song of Songs 8:7. In his gloss on the final words of that

⁶⁴ It would be interesting to compare Ezra’s discussion of the expansion of the divine spirit in his *Commentary on The Song of Songs* and his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot to Zohar 2:61b-62a*, which describes the nourishment that the kabbalists receive from the sefirotic realm in the form of *matzah* and *mana*, which are associated with *Shekhinah* and *Hokhmah*, respectively. *Hecker, Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 88-90.

⁶⁵ “The first preface is to inform you that Solomon composed the book in his old age through the holy spirit” (480, 27-28).

verse, Ezra identifies the lover as one of the “recipients of the face of the *Shekhinah*,” and we have just seen that this person receives the Holy Spirit through הדבקות בשכינה. In the introduction to Ezra’s commentary, we find another reference to people who receive the *Shekhinah*. In that context, Ezra equates the “recipients of the *Shekhinah*” with “the sages of Israel” and presents them as those who know the correct way to interpret The Song of Songs. He concludes his description of this group with the words:

I have therefore directed my attention and proposed in my mind and thoughts to reveal in my commentary that true principle which our sages have transmitted through allusion. I have established it upon the pillars of their words, supported it upon the pedestals of their exegesis, and the enlightened will understand (והמשכילים יבינו). (480-26)⁶⁶

The “true principle” that Ezra promises to reveal in his commentary is concealed in the writings of “the recipients of the *Shekhinah*,” i.e., the rabbinic sages. Here, Ezra includes himself among this group. In his programmatic statement regarding the concealment of the *sefirot* within rabbinic parables, Ezra noted that the “enlightened recipients of tradition” will have their hearts aroused by the words of “our sages.” It follows that “the enlightened” who “will understand,” are identical with the “enlightened” who are “recipients of tradition” (המשכילים המקובלים), who are sometimes referred to by the shortened title מקובלים, recipients of tradition, or kabbalists. In other words, the kabbalistic sages receive their wisdom from the rabbinic sages and, like the rabbinic sages, become “recipients of (the face of) the *Shekhinah*.”

⁶⁶ I changed “wise” to “enlightened” in the last line of Brody’s translation.

The reception of wisdom, however, appears to involve a number of stages, which I present in no necessary order. The sage must receive kabbalistic teaching. Ezra emphasizes the oral nature of such reception when he writes that The Song of Songs “possesses words whose meaning is not revealed by any book, yet which serve as the foundation of its allegory and edifice” (481, 30). Ezra identifies words that refer to the *sefirot*, *Hokhmah* and *Shekhinah*. The sage must understand how these oral teachings derive from parables in rabbinic literature,⁶⁷ a point that Ezra addresses in the programmatic statement analyzed above, and to which Ezra dedicated his entire *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*. The sage must engage in “the attachment to the *Shekhinah*,” through which he achieves the enlightenment that is necessary to properly interpret biblical prophecy.

The preceding quotation also supports my contention that Ezra’s commentary is not an entirely exoteric document. On one hand, Ezra declares that he will “reveal...that true principle which our sages have transmitted through allusion.” On the other hand, he concludes by declaring that only “the enlightened will understand.” This could mean one of two things. Either the commentary, like rabbinic parables, conceals wisdom in a form that will not be comprehended by those who lack wisdom, or the wisdom in the commentary can only be fully comprehended by one who achieves the enlightenment that comes with *הדבקות בשכינה*. In addition, these two readings are not mutually exclusive. Ezra positions himself as a new kind of spiritual leader by setting his esoteric

⁶⁷ On the relationship between orality and textuality in the writings of the early kabbalists, see Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 193–206.

commentary in an exoteric framework that signals a shift toward teaching Kabbalah to the multitude but not a complete abandonment of kabbalistic esotericism.⁶⁸

Finally, it is striking that Ezra attaches his exposition regarding the kabbalistic sage to a verse that identifies the lover who seems overzealous in his love as one who is scorned by others. Though Ezra ignores these words when he glosses them, the implication of these words is that just as heretics and fools scorn the divine word, heretics and fools may scorn the kabbalistic sage, observing his asceticism and claims to prophetic enlightenment, but missing the revealed wisdom concealed within the sage's seemingly heretical or foolish actions and words. Ezra's glosses on The Song of Songs 8:7 clearly and succinctly challenge this attitude toward the kabbalistic sage. The first two glosses establish the sage's credentials as a pious ascetic who is privy to revelation. The final gloss reverses the judgment in the verse by extolling the person who behaves in the manner described as one who is honored by his god as well as by other men, and establishing his persona as one who has received revelation through the *Shekhinah*. This characterization of the sage rests on the presupposition that the kabbalistic sage is known to the public and Ezra's explanation of The Song of Songs 8:8 explains why the kabbalistic sage must make known his expertise in wisdom.

Ezra's explanation of The Song of Songs 8:8 shifts the focus from the individual sage to the people of Israel and the nature of their exile, but concludes with a reflection on the role of the kabbalistic sage as a prophetic figure with a message for Israel:

⁶⁸ This differs from Nahmanides, who hints at the existence of esoteric teachings in Scripture, but does not provide a key to decode these hints. Cf. Idel, "Nahmanides," 38.

We have a little sister: The allegory refers to Israel in exile, “scorned and humiliated (נבזים ושפלים)⁶⁹ (Malakhi 2:9).

Whose breasts are not yet formed: They have no place to suckle (מקום) (הנקיה)⁷⁰ since they go forth from the land of life and are separated from the place of Torah. As it is written: “Torah shall go forth from Zion, God’s word from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3). Concerning the exile it is said: “For many days Israel will be bereft of the God of truth and Torah” (II Chronicles 15:2).

What shall we do for our sister when she is spoken for?: What shall we do for them? How shall we sustain them? How to provide them with a future, with hope in their exile? (514, 140)

Ezra does not identify the person or entity who speaks these words as he does in so many other instances in his commentary, but the verse clearly implies a speaker who is older than and superior to the “little sister whose breasts are not yet formed.” Ezra treats the little sister as an allegorical representation of Israel in exile. The quotation from Malakhi 2:9, again, uses the verb “scorn, בזו.” But, here, this verb is applied to Israel instead of the divine word or the kabbalistic sage. In order to understand what Ezra means by describing Israel as “scorned and humiliated” while in exile, consider the context from which Ezra takes the words “scorned and humiliated.” In Malakhi 2, the Lord of Hosts issues a covenantal charge to the priesthood to be His messengers, meaning that they

⁶⁹ NJPS: “despicable and vile.” Humiliated better captures the sense of שפלים.

⁷⁰ Brody translates “nurse.” I prefer “suckle” since nursing is a developmental process that culminates in weaning, whereas “suckling” is the act of attachment to the breast which involves the drawing forth of life-sustaining milk. Ezra’s argument rests on the ongoing need to draw sustenance from God. Weaning would be problematic in this metaphor.

should use their knowledge of God's teachings to make judgments regarding the obligations of the people under the covenant between God and Israel.⁷¹ However, in Malakhi 2:8, the priests are accused of turning away from this charge, and, in verse 9, the Lord of Hosts declares: "And I, in turn, have made you *despicable and vile*⁷² in the eyes of all the people, because you disregard My ways and show partiality in your rulings." The source of Israel's denigration in exile is identified in the words "you disregard My ways." It is this theme that Ezra takes up in his explanation of the description of the little sister as one "whose breasts are not yet formed."

Ezra identifies the unformed breasts as "the land of life" and "the place of Torah." The uninitiated reader could be forgiven for taking these terms as references to the physical land of Israel and being confused by Ezra's reference to suckling, perhaps even judging Ezra's words as nonsensical or even foolish. However, in the theosophic symbolism of Ezra's Kabbalah, "the land of life" refers to the *sefirah Hokhmah* as channeled through *Shekhinah*;⁷³ and "the place of Torah" refers to *Shekhinah* as the repository from which the two *torot*, oral and written, were given to Israel.⁷⁴

Ezra spiritualizes the concept of exile by describing exile as a state in which Israel has "no place to suckle." In Ezra's commentary, as in the writings of other Provençal and

⁷¹ Malakhi 2:7: "For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, / And men seek rulings from his mouth; / For he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts."

⁷² Following NJPS, which I have altered to fit the context in the preceding paragraphs.

⁷³ *Shekhinah* is the land, and *Hokhmah* is the life that is in the land.

⁷⁴ In his comments on The Song of Songs 1:11, Ezra equates the Written Torah with the *sefirah hesed* and the Oral Torah with the *sefirah din*, and then adds, "the two teachings (*torot*) were given by the *shekhinah*." Ezra Ben Solomon, "*Perush LeShir HaShirim*," 2:487.

Catalonian kabbalists, the image of suckling indicates an intimate and contemplative mode of knowing the ten *sefirot*, especially the hidden dimensions of *Hokhmah*. Suckling transcends intellectual processes and penetrates depths of wisdom that pose a danger to the person who attempts to contemplate them by means of the intellect.⁷⁵ Ezra explains that Israel has no place to suckle since the Israelites “go forth from the land of life and are separated from the place of Torah.” In the context of Malakhi 2, the statement that “they go forth from the land of life” must mean that Israel, like the priests of Malakhi 2:8, turns away from the wisdom of Torah. Israel is the subject of the verb “go forth” in Ezra’s commentary so it is Israel who stops suckling. The statement that Israel is “separated from the place of Torah,” which uses the passive voice, must mean that, as with the priests in Malakhi 2:9, God scorns and humiliates Israel by separating Israel from the Torah. With bitter irony, Ezra quotes Isaiah 2:3 in support of this latter proposal. In Isaiah, the words “for from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem,” are part of a description of the future salvation of Israel, which involves the dissemination of God’s word to all the nations. However, Ezra uses the verse to argue that it is on account of Israel’s departure from Torah that God removes Torah from Israel. The second proof text, II Chronicles 15:2, makes the point more explicitly: “for many days Israel will be bereft of the God of truth and Torah.” It is important to note that Ezra formulates his argument in the present tense, which suggests that Israel’s exile continues because Israel continues to “go forth from the land of life,” so that Israel remains “separated from the place of Torah.”

⁷⁵ See *Perush HaAggadol*, 82, n. 7.

Ezra's characterizations of heretics and fools, examined above, were marked by a certain ambivalence with regard to the culpability of heretics and fools. Ezra attributed their inability to discern the wisdom concealed within Scripture and rabbinic literature to their lack of knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment. However, this could be attributed to the demise of Israel's sages and the cessation and loss of wisdom after the destruction of the second Temple (479, 22). The interpreters could be blamed for their failure to discern this wisdom in Scripture and rabbinic literature to the extent that they grew insensitive to its existence within the treasure chest of Scripture and rabbinic literature, which signaled a failure to pay attention to the revealed nature of the texts that they sought to interpret. However, they could hardly be blamed for their failure to find treasure when they lacked a key to open the treasure chest. Ezra's account of the transmission of wisdom in the introduction to his commentary rests on the contradiction between this claim regarding the disappearance of wisdom and another claim, namely, that wisdom was transmitted without surcease from the time of its revelation at Mount Sinai down to Ezra's own day. Ezra's description of Israel's spiritual exile in this context holds Israel responsible for the loss of its own wisdom, arguing that Israel scorned the divine word by failing to keep faith with its sanctity as revelation when interpreting it. Consequently, Israel was scorned by its God, who withdrew his presence and, with it, access to the wisdom of his Torah. Despite the irreconcilable contradiction in the introduction, Ezra's commentary proceeds from the premise that the allegedly lost wisdom is preserved in Scripture and rabbinic literature and that a few sages remain, Ezra among them, who possess oral traditions relating to this wisdom. However, as evidenced

in Isaac's letter to Nahmanides and Jonah Gerondi, these sages conceal their wisdom when they instruct their followers. Ezra is no longer satisfied with this approach to spiritual leadership.

The end of The Song of Songs 8:8 gives Ezra the opportunity to ask: "What shall we do for them? How shall we sustain them? How to provide them with a future, with hope in their exile?" Ezra allows these questions to hang rhetorically, without direct answer. The first question serves as a call to action, and the second and third question identify the needs that action must address and ask about the means to fulfill those needs. The needs are sustenance, a future, and hope in exile. The substance and form of Ezra's commentary constitutes Ezra's answer to these questions. At the point at which Ezra asks these questions, the enlightened reader will recognize that wisdom provides day-to-day sustenance by negating desires that relate to the physical world. The wisdom taught by the kabbalistic sage also provides hope in exile inasmuch as it provides Israel with a way to end the spiritual exile that accompanies physical exile. Finally, wisdom offers Israel knowledge regarding the messianic age. Ezra addresses the two dimensions of exile in a striking statement about the wisdom hidden within The Song of Songs, which appears in the first preface appended to his introduction:

At the conclusion [of The Song of Songs] he [Solomon] concealed, indeed sealed, the work with an allusion to the exile's end and the fact that Israel would hold fast to their Torah and stand firm in faith in every location, *even when suffering from intensified destruction and evil decrees.* (emphasis added, 480, 28).

Ezra looks forward to the end of Israel's physical exile, but until that time comes, Israel can regain its dignity by overcoming its spiritual exile and becoming a nation of faithful sages.

In another statement, which addresses the way in which the kabbalistic sage fulfills his role as a Spiritual leader, Ezra collapses the distinction between the sage who engages in the attachment to the *Shekhinah* and the *Shekhinah* herself. He interprets The Song of Songs 1:7-8 as a conversation between the *Shekhinah* and the divine Glory regarding salvation. The *Shekhinah* asks how to rejoin the divine Glory (*Yesod*), which has ascended to the "highest heights of heaven" (*Tiferet* or even higher in the sefirotic realm) making real Israel's exile. In one part of the Glory's reply, the Glory instructs the *Shekhinah* in the way to lead her children to her cities and her place:

Go follow the tracks of the sheep—direct your children with goodly instruction—in rectitude, fear of heaven, and propriety, so that they might hold fast to My service and faith and follow the practice of the patriarchs and shepherds rather than the nations' laws, which are vain and deceitful...Daniel promised that throughout this lengthy period of exile, Israel would observe Torah and hold fast to their faith, as it is written: "The enlightened will shine like the radiance of the firmament and those who lead the multitudes to righteousness will be like the stars forever." (Daniel 12:3) (486-487, 46).

Through the reception of the face of the *Shekhinah*, the kabbalistic sage imitates the *Shekhinah*, becoming her prophetic surrogate and showing Israel the way to return to the land of life and the place of Torah. This passage redefines membership in Israel, such

that the true members of Israel are those who “hold fast to Torah and stand firm in faith” or “hold fast to their faith” and achieve enlightenment, which is tantamount to spiritual salvation while still living in physical exile.

CONCLUSION

One objective of this study was to determine the formal characteristics of the kabbalistic sage and to determine his function within society. Ezra paints a portrait of the kabbalistic sage as a person who shows his love for his god through total devotion to the commandments, a willingness to give his life for his god, and ascetic practices that include voluntary poverty and fasting. The compensation that the kabbalistic sage receives for his sacrifice is wisdom that sustains him by providing light in the darkness of exile. The sage achieves this wisdom by means of “the attachment to the *Shekhinah*,” which involves the reception of prophetic inspiration through the Holy Spirit together with imitation of the *Shekhinah*, who shares wisdom/Torah with Israel. The social function of the kabbalistic sage is to share his wisdom with Israel so that Israel can be sustained in exile and also find hope in a better future in which spiritual salvation, symbolized by the return to the land of life and the place of Torah will be accompanied by the physical redemption of Israel, culminating in a return to the land, the resurrection of the dead, and, ultimately, in Ezra’s vision, an end to the present historical cycle. Ezra’s justification for disseminating kabbalistic doctrine in a public manner is not limited to the practical observation in the introduction. In the commentary, it is given greater authority as a model of spiritual leadership that stems from the commandment to attach oneself to

the divine (Deuteronomy 13:5). Attachment to the divine involves the “expansion of the Holy Spirit,” which provides the kabbalistic sage with his enlightenment, but also involves *imitatio dei*, which requires that the sage share his wisdom in order to return Israel to its land, whether that land is spiritual or physical.

Through the process of “the attachment to the *Shekhinah*,” the kabbalistic sage becomes a container that conceals yet reveals divine wisdom. But how should the kabbalist carry out this task? Ezra’s answer is that the kabbalistic sage should take on the role of a spiritual leader and teach kabbalistic wisdom when he teaches Torah. Ezra models this approach by writing the very commentary in which he argues that the sage must share his wisdom with the multitude, namely, his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*. Ezra’s argument calls for the production of a new body of wisdom literature, that is, literature that reveals and conceals divine wisdom. The “true principal” that ought to underlie this new literature is Israel’s wisdom tradition, which, according to Ezra, is part of the Oral Torah and has been transmitted through the generations, even when it seems to have disappeared. Ezra’s willingness to reveal some kabbalistic wisdom may be grounded in his view that the salvation promised by access to this wisdom does not come about through mere discursive knowledge. Salvation is achieved when the reader becomes one of those who “receive the face of the *Shekhinah*.”

Another objective of this study was to determine how Ezra portrays the kabbalist with reference to the kabbalist’s perceptions of non-kabbalists and non-kabbalists’ perceptions of the kabbalist. We have seen that Ezra criticizes the interpreters of Scripture and readers of rabbinic literature of his generation as people who lack faith in

the inherent wisdom of Scripture and rabbinic literature. He identifies them as heretics and fools, respectively, accusing them of denying the divine origin of these writings. Ezra argues that such people scorn the divine word by treating it as heretical or as profane, and, in doing so, prolong Israel's spiritual exile, by leading Israel away from the wisdom concealed in Scripture and rabbinic writing. It is, of course, that wisdom which would allow Israel to return to its god and his teaching and allow Israel to achieve the spiritual salvation that comes with knowing the source from which to suckle on life giving wisdom. In regard to the reception of enlightened kabbalists by those he deems heretics or fools, Ezra recognizes that by exposing himself and the wisdom that he possesses to the public, the kabbalistic sage risks the scorn of those in his audience who may not recognize his prophetic status or the prophetic root of the wisdom that is concealed within his message. In other words, the enlightened kabbalist may suffer the same scorn as Scripture and rabbinic literature when exposed to those who lack wisdom. Ezra counters this possibility through his reading of The Song of Songs 8:7. Through the choice of this verse as a peg upon which to hang his description of the kabbalistic sage, Ezra implicitly acknowledges that those whom the sage instructs may find his words nonsensical or even foolish, and, it is possible that they would label him a heretic or a fool; but Ezra's rhetoric allows him to avoid ever explicitly attaching the terms heretic or fool to the sage, even in a setting that is only concerned with the way in which others may perceive the sage. The kabbalistic sage and the wisdom that he professes, whether orally or literarily, are, therefore, subject to the same dynamics of exotericism and esotericism, wisdom and foolishness, faith and heresy, holiness and profanity, as Scripture and rabbinic literature.

For Ezra the guarantor of the objective truth of the kabbalists' wisdom against the subjective truth of interpreters who lack wisdom is the prophetic inspiration that the kabbalist achieves through "the attachment to the *Shekhinah*" and the subsequent "expansion of the Holy Spirit." One who claims to be a recipient of tradition, but lacks enlightenment, in Ezra's view, also lacks authority. Thus, he identifies the sages, whether rabbinic or kabbalistic, as recipients of the face of the *Shekhinah*" and "enlightened recipients of tradition."

Finally, Ezra draws Israel into the dynamic relationship between wisdom and heresy or foolishness that is associated with the verb "בוז," scorn, in his description of Israel's relationship to its god. In this case, when Israel chooses the path of the heretic or fool who scorns divine wisdom, then Israel is scorned by its God. But, when Israel chooses the path of wisdom, then Israel is nourished by its god and finds hope in the present and gains knowledge of its future, in which the physical exile will end as the spiritual exile ended when Israel found the place from which to suckle wisdom. Faith in divine wisdom is rewarded by faithfulness on the part of Israel's god. The basic dynamics of the covenant between Israel and its god are reaffirmed, and all who are Israel are enlightened sages of one degree or another. Ultimately, for Ezra, to be Israel is to be a "recipient of the face of the *Shekhinah*." The task of the enlightened kabbalist, who stands in the tradition of the prophets and the rabbinic sages, is to show those who are of Israel, but not yet fully Israel, how to live as Israel who has a god and who has that god's teaching, Torah.

The approach that I have taken in this study has been largely expository, seeking an answer to the questions posed at the beginning. Many theoretical issues are raised by Ezra's portrait of the kabbalistic sage and of Israel as the multitude who either follows or rejects the divine wisdom offered by the kabbalistic sage. One of my goals in answering these questions has been to flesh out categories that emerge in Ezra's writing, although I have also noted categories introduced by modern scholarship. This approach is helpful in the context of the ongoing reappraisal of taxonomic categories in the study of sources that scholars traditionally identify as representative of "Jewish mysticism," and it is also helpful in the reappraisal of the classification "Jewish mysticism" as a way of identifying the field. A number of scholars over the years have questioned received categories and sought to reshape and even rename this sub-discipline of Jewish studies. For example, Elliot Wolfson has argued that Kabbalah is best classified as "Jewish esotericism;"⁷⁶ and, more recently, Boaz Huss has argued that the category of mysticism and, with it, the designation of a field of study as "Jewish mysticism" ought to be dropped from scholarly discourse altogether on grounds that mysticism is a purely theological category, grounded in Christianity, so that it is not suited to use in academic studies in general and in Jewish studies in particular.⁷⁷ I will conclude by making a few observations on ways in which this study might contribute to this discussion.

In his *Commentary on The Song of Songs*, Ezra frames Kabbalah as a wisdom tradition and establishes the kabbalist, whom he describes variously as an "enlightened

⁷⁶ Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet*; Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word."

⁷⁷ Huss, "Jewish Mysticism in the University."

recipient of tradition,” a “recipient of the face of the *Shekhinah*,” and as one of the “sages of Israel,” as a link in the chain of the transmission and interpretation of wisdom. According to Ezra, the wisdom possessed by the kabbalistic sage is concealed in exoteric texts such as Scripture and rabbinic literature, and is also subject to an internal tension between revelation and concealment, so that even the most exoteric expositions of this wisdom retain elements of esotericism, which finds expression in the literary formulation of wisdom and also in the ontology of the entities that are the subject of literary allusions, e.g., the ten *sefirot* and the divine names, which are finite manifestations of an infinite being.⁷⁸ Therefore, one who receives oral and written traditions and studies them may be a “recipient of tradition” but may not be an “enlightened recipient of tradition.” Enlightenment only comes about through “the attachment to the *Shekhinah*,” which adds to the knowledge and understanding of the sage and culminates in “suckling,” a form of knowledge that transcends discursive knowledge. Taxonomically, if my reading is accurate, Ezra classifies *hakabbalah* as a wisdom tradition not a mystical tradition, and he classifies the kabbalist as a sage not as a mystic. The wisdom that constitutes the content of *hakabbalah* participates in a dialectic between revelation and concealment that is typical of esoteric traditions, and full comprehension of this wisdom only comes about through processes that most scholars would identify with mysticism, which, in general terms, is usually thought to involve some form of experience or consciousness of divine presence and some form of intimate relationship between the practitioner and the divine presence. When Ezra categorizes those who engage in *devekut*, he categorizes them as

⁷⁸ See fn. 40.

enlightened, as sages, and as recipients of prophetic revelation via the Holy Spirit, not as mystics.

Taxonomically, wisdom serves as the controlling concept in Ezra's exposition of Kabbalah. Esotericism is a characteristic of wisdom, and *devekut* provides the fullest access to wisdom as knowledge and as an entity and to the benefits of wisdom as a source of nourishment, hope, and a future. Wolfson's approach to Kabbalah as Jewish esotericism contributes significantly to the understanding of the nature of the wisdom that concerns many kabbalists and also addresses connections between kabbalistic discourse and philosophical discourse. Indeed, further examination of Ezra's commentary would show that, for Ezra, Kabbalah and philosophy are viewed as competing, yet intimately related, wisdom traditions, yet the description of Kabbalah as Jewish esotericism draws attention away from the centrality of wisdom as the entity and knowledge that is concealed in acts of revelation, whether literary or ontological.

This also has implications for Huss' argument. Huss emphasizes that he does "not deny the existence of the texts and practices that scholars include in this problematic category [mysticism]; nor [does he] oppose their study as significant historical and social formations....Rather, [his] argument is directed against the assumption that these are all expressions of 'Jewish mysticism', and against the research practices that ensue from this assumption, mainly the use of comparative and phenomenological methods that are common in the study of religions." Ultimately, Huss doubts that there is "any common factor (or factors) that is exclusive only to" cultural formations or other phenomena "that

modern scholarship perceives as “mystical” in various cultures.”⁷⁹ Without comparative study there is no way to assess Huss’ own ultimate claim, which is comparative; nor is it possible to devise a category that lacks the theological background and implications of mysticism, yet addresses structural similarities between certain phenomena in different religio-cultural settings.⁸⁰ What light does the present analysis of Ezra’s commentary shed on Huss’ argument?

Wisdom, not mysticism, serves as the central classification in Ezra’s exposition of Kabbalah; therefore, any analysis of phenomena within the commentary that scholars have classified as mystical ought to be contextualized within the larger framework of the relationship between the kabbalist *qua* sage and wisdom. To classify Ezra’s commentary as representative of “Jewish mysticism” is reductive since it isolates one element in the reception and transmission of wisdom, drawing attention away from the broader context in which that process takes place. However, Huss’ argument leaves the scholar with fewer options when it comes to analyzing phenomena that most scholars would classify as mystical, e.g., “the attachment to the *Shekhinah*.” Huss disallows the kinds of comparison that allow for the establishment of a carefully constructed, non-theological classification of phenomena that presume the reality of interactions between human persons and transcendent spiritual entities. The analysis of such claims by scholars with any sophistication rests neither on the acceptance nor the rejection of such claims, but on

⁷⁹ Huss, “Jewish Mysticism in the University.”

⁸⁰ An important theoretical counter to Huss’ objections appears in the anthology *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), which explores the different ways in which light imagery is used in different historical and cultural settings. The introductory and concluding essays are of particular importance in this connection.

the careful study of the conditions set out in the sources, in some instances with reference to theories of human consciousness and experience. Moreover, the classification of such claims as mystical need not be based on an essential definition of mysticism. In short, to classify Ezra's commentary as representative of "Jewish mysticism" distorts the thrust of the commentary itself, but to eliminate the application of the terms "mysticism" or "mystical" to certain elements within the commentary impoverishes the possibilities inherent in modern study of Ezra's work by insisting that an important feature within that work has no place in any larger framework of human existence that transcends the specific religious, cultural, or historical context of the work.