

## [Verman on Fishbane, 'The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar'](#)

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**Eitan P. Fishbane.** *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiii + 520 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-19-994863-5](#). 

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*The Art of Mystical Narrative* is a very ambitious and sophisticated analysis of the mechanics of storytelling in the *Zohar*. Given the preeminent status of the *Zohar*, as the crown jewel of medieval Jewish mystical writings, this is a most welcome, insightful, and erudite addition to the growing list of scholarly monographs on this topic. As Eitan P. Fishbane notes in his introduction, much of prior scholarship on the *Zohar* has focused on historico-critical issues concerning the question of its authorship, provenance of composition, or mystical doctrines, pertaining to the history of ideas. Focusing especially on zoharic narrative is a more recent phenomenon. To be sure, Fishbane's agenda is not unique and has been preceded by David Greenstein, Melila Hellner-Eshed, Aryeh Wineman, and Nathan Wolski, among others. What differentiates his approach from these earlier works is the scope of his discussion. He adroitly identifies and methodically analyzes many different themes and motifs, as well as positions his investigation within the broader enterprise of comparative literature, be it in the context of non-mystical Jewish literature or contemporaneous medieval Christian writings.[1]

Fishbane is certainly well equipped to tackle the intricacies of zoharic literature. Not only has he published a number of essays on the *Zohar* itself, but his prior monograph *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (2009) focuses on the writings of R. Isaac of Acco. R. Isaac, who was active at the start of the fourteenth century, recorded the single most important (albeit not entirely preserved) account of the dissemination of the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* purports to preserve the esoteric conversations between the second-century CE rabbinic luminary, R. Shimon bar Yohai, and his disciples. In an effort to ascertain its authenticity, in 1305 R. Isaac met with the Castilian kabbalist, R. Moses de Leon, in northern Spain. De Leon at that time was distributing copies of zoharic compositions that he insisted had been sent back to Spain from Israel by R. Moses b. Nachman. De Leon assured R. Isaac that if he were to visit him in his hometown of Avila, R. Moses would provide him with definitive proof. Unfortunately, as R. Isaac was traveling southward for their rendezvous, he received notification that de Leon had died. Moreover, when R. Isaac reached Avila, he heard conflicting accounts of whether R. Moses engaged in blatant deception for personal gain or perhaps used a form of automatic writing by conjuring a "Writing Name (of God)." As preserved only in a late fifteenth-century work by the Spanish astronomer and historian Abraham Zacuto, R. Isaac's lost diary account ends in mid-sentence, while discussing what he had heard about an elderly individual named R. Jacob, identified as de Leon's principal student who testified "by Heaven and

earth that the Book of the Zohar that RaShBY (R. Shimon bar Yohai) composed....” Zacuto, who was quoting R. Isaac’s chronicle *Divrei ha-Yamim*, appended “and I didn’t find the conclusion of this matter in the book.”[2] It is significant, as Fishbane has documented, that when R. Isaac cites passages from the *Zohar* attributed to R. Shimon bar Yohai in his *’Otzar Hayyim* he does so without hesitation or qualification, implying that R. Isaac takes these attributions as authentic.[3] Interestingly, Fishbane only refers to his monograph on R. Isaac in the present work in a few footnotes, mostly toward the end of his book.

Fishbane divides his monograph into six well-defined chapters preceded by a lengthy introduction that functions as a methodological compass for the book. In his introduction, he addresses central issues that provide relevant background information to his subsequent discussions. In so doing, he surveys prior scholarship on the *Zohar*, thereby underscoring how in some respects he is building on his predecessors and in significant ways he is attempting to break new ground.

Most of content of the *Zohar* either involves lengthy discourses delivered by R. Shimon to his inner circle of disciples or dialogues between specific disciples en route to visit R. Shimon. It is quite useful that throughout Fishbane provides the original Aramaic text of the *Zohar* side by side with his own English translation. Fishbane acknowledges that the Aramaic is taken from Daniel Matt’s indispensable critical edition, accessible online, via Stanford University Press and that although he consulted Matt’s magisterial, multi-volume annotated translation, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (2002-18), also from Stanford University Press, he is ultimately responsible for the English translations.

Among other topics that Fishbane discusses at some length in the introduction is the significance of setting a late thirteenth-century CE medieval Spanish mystical text in the Galilee region of northern Israel. He initially refers to St. Francis of Assisi traversing the Italian countryside, in imitation of Jesus’s journeys in the Galilee. “For St. Francis, as for the Castilian Jewish mystics, a trans-temporal and trans-spatial correlation was established between the geographical situation of an ancient Galilean holy man (Jesus of Nazareth for St. Francis and the Franciscans; R. Shimon bar Yohai for the composers of the *Zohar*) and a medieval European landscape” (p. 29). Near the beginning of chapter 1 he tantalizingly theorizes that there may even be a veiled anti-Christian polemic at work in situating the narratives in the Galilee. “It is not a great stretch to consider the possibility that the zoharic figure of R. Shimon bar Yohai was invented, at least in part, as a counterpoint to that of Jesus of Nazareth—a saintly, messianic, semi-divine preacher, capable of miracles, wandering about the ancient Galilee with his band of disciples, and whose dramatic death is presented as the theatrical climax of a sacred narrative” (pp. 55-56).

The main body of the *Zohar* comprises some two dozen discrete and identifiable compositions, totaling more than a thousand pages that collectively are commonly referred to as “The *Zohar*.” These treatises are not homogenous and uniform in their style or doctrinal formulations. This has led scholars, such as Yehuda Liebes (*Studies in the Zohar* [1993]), to conclude that the *Zohar* represents an anthology derived from a circle of Castilian kabbalists. Fishbane, on the other hand, eschews the scholarly dissection of the text that has occupied much of zoharic scholarship in recent years. “While I shall seek to be mindful of source-critical concerns and insights where relevant, I will consciously leave that worthwhile project of historical-textual archeology to other scholars” (p. 44). Instead he espouses an approach that at times he labels “redaction criticism.” He offers a holistic reading of the

work and for the most part does not identify which stratum a particular narrative that he is analyzing comes from. Although this makes his task easier, as a reader one is left wondering to which sections of the *Zohar* his analysis applies. This could have at least been partially remedied in his source index of zoharic citations had he identified therein the various strata that he used.

Chapter 1 focuses on “the theatrical/performative dimension of zoharic narration” (p. 50). Fishbane emphasizes that the revelations of esoteric teachings are embedded within identifiable gestures on the part of both the expositors and listeners. These include “the pervasive gesture of kissing in zoharic narrative,” as well as weeping and prostration (p. 87). Zoharic discourse itself constitutes the fundamental *raison d’être* of the text as a whole. Fishbane explores the dialogic dialectic between monologue and dialogue, as a means of uncovering the interior thought processes of the characters. As a result, he views the *Zohar* as if it were a performance piece and he acts much like a theater critic, reviewing the opening night of a new play. All of the expansive staging that forms the core of the text builds to the climactic expositions of R. Shimon prior to his death in the ‘*Idrot*’ sections of the *Zohar*. These kabbalistic homilies, however, are not the focus of this present work.

An important theme that Fishbane introduces in this chapter and that reverberates throughout the *Zohar* is the extraordinary quality of its central figure, R. Shimon. Fishbane writes effusively: “R. Shimon attains a quasi-divine status”; moreover, his disciples “make the pilgrimage to R. Shimon, to stand in his presence as before the very face of God! This language reveals the *Zohar* at its boldest pitch—Shimon bar Yohai is no ordinary human being; indeed he is more comparable to Divinity than he is to humanity. This is certainly related to the companions’ repeated greeting to one another elsewhere in the *Zohar* (‘behold, I see the face of the *Shekhinah!*’)” (p. 60). While the companions’ reverence for R. Shimon is undeniable, equating being in the presence of a Torah sage with beholding the face of the *Shekhinah* (the feminized Divine In-Dwelling) is rooted in a Talmudic expression, not referenced by Fishbane. It is a reaction to the following verse in the Torah: “You, who attach (yourselves) to the Lord, your God, all of you are alive today” (Deut. 4:4). The question is asked in the Talmud: “Is it possible to attach oneself to the *Shekhinah*? Behold it is written: ‘For the Lord, your God, is an all-consuming fire’ (Deut. 4:24). Rather, anyone who marries his daughter to a Torah sage, or engages in business dealings with Torah sages, or allows a Torah sage to benefit from his possessions, Scripture considers it as if they have attached themselves to the *Shekhinah*” (*B. Ketuvot* 111b). Accordingly, interacting with a Torah sage, like R. Shimon, would ensure that one is in the presence of the *Shekhinah*.

Chapter 2 centers on surprising encounters of the companions on their journeys. Fishbane begins by introducing Aristotle’s theory of anagnorisis. In so doing he cites Terence Cave’s characterization: “In Aristotle’s definition, anagnorisis brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge” (p. 129). Frequently in zoharic narratives this “shift” involves what Fishbane characterizes as “the theme of character inversion” (p. 145). A prime example is when the companions enter into a conversation with a donkey driver who turns out to be the enigmatic sage, Rav Hamnuna Sava. One of the more unusual of these unexpected illuminaries that Fishbane analyzes at some length is a seemingly unsophisticated innkeeper’s daughter. Through her act of lighting a candle for the two itinerant mystics, she inspires them to contemplate the verse in Proverbs 6:23 that “the Torah is a light.” This then leads them into an intricate discussion of the kabbalistic doctrine of the *sefirot* (ten intra-divine manifestations). They ponder the lowest level of the *sefirot*, that is, *Shekhinah* and its association with the Oral Torah and then her relationship with the middle *sefirah*, *Tiferet* (Beauty), which is

associated with the Written Torah. Not only is this particular zoharic narrative noteworthy in that it shows that the mystical discourse was inspired by a young woman, but *The Art of Mystical Narrative* also infrequently discusses kabbalistic doctrines. In general, as Fishbane makes explicit, his primary agenda is to focus on the choreography of narrative framework and not on the kabbalistic expositions, per se.

In this chapter it is not only special individuals who are discussed but also nature's wonders, such as shooting stars and the mystical significance of roses. The latter allowed Fishbane to spend several pages exploring the influence of the medieval classic *Roman de la Rose* and its impact on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This is clearly in keeping with one of his principal agendas in situating the *Zohar* within the broader canon of medieval European literature. In the zoharic narrative that Fishbane is analyzing, the two companions are walking when they happen upon some roses. R. Abba picked one and was then met by a third companion, R. Yosi, who commented: "Surely *Shekhinah* is here, and I see that what is in R. Abba's hands [is there] to teach great wisdom." After the three companions sat down "R. Abba inhaled the smell from that rose and said: 'Surely the world's existence depends upon scent!... And this [is the reason for the inhalation of the aroma of] the myrtle [leaves] at the departure of the Shabbat'" (p. 174). Fishbane then provides the kabbalistic background discussion on this account. His comments on the critical act in the narrative are noted as follows: "in which R. Abba dramatically inhales the scent of the rose and remarks on the world-sustaining and soul-sustaining power of aroma—associating overtly to the kabbalistic meaning of scent and inhalation in the *havdalah* ritual" (pp. 176-77). He also footnotes several scholarly articles related to this material.

The centerpiece of chapter 3 is an expansive and illuminating section titled "A Quest for *Shekhinah*." As already evidenced in narratives that were previously discussed, a recurring element in many of these tales is the participation of the *Shekhinah*. She accompanies the companions on their sojourns and confirms that their journeys constitute a sacred enterprise and inspires them to continue onward.

Chapter 4 offers a fascinating exploration of the theme of magical realism in zoharic narratives. Building on the earlier discussion of the companions encountering unexpected transmitters of esoteric doctrines, we read about an anonymous narrator who describes an amazing adventure that he had while walking in a desert. Suddenly he spotted a beautiful tree that had a cave beneath it. As he approached the cave it exuded "fragrances of every kind in the world" (p. 229). The traveler entered only to discover within the precincts of the cave "many trees and fragrances and spices that I could not bear" (p. 230). He then encountered a mysterious guardian of the cave bearing a staff who presented him with a secret text to convey to the rest of the companions. Soon after, the guardian struck the traveler with his staff and he fell asleep, and in an ecstatic dream state he saw troops of soldiers passing by. They too were hit by the guardian and flew into the air. As Fishbane notes, the marvelous nature of this tale is "its wondrous blend of realism and fantasy." He argues that "the *Zohar* has imagined a space, readily accessible through his entry in the desert, wherein the phenomena of the natural world are found, but transformed into an ethereal and magical version of themselves" (p. 233).

Chapter 5 focuses on an aspect of zoharic narrative that has not been a major concern of prior scholarship, what Fishbane labels "narrative ethics." He offers an edifying array of tales that

admirably succeed in “presenting a view of the virtuous life,” and notes that “the authors of the *Zohar* prescribe and underscore a series of model behaviors, including unilateral forgiveness, hospitality, almsgiving, and the restraint of anger” (p. 335). He ends with a formidable text in which anger is not simply a foible but represents the cosmic force of evil that endangers humanity: “This is anger that rules and is strengthened in the world, entering into human beings and empowering them to do evil.” On this section Fishbane aptly observes: “A rich instance of the zoharic mythology of evil, this passage reveals the degree to which human psychology and metaphysical dynamics were intertwined for the Castilian kabbalists” (p. 334).

Chapter 6 constitutes the capstone of Fishbane’s monograph. Therein he presents his case for considering the *Zohar* not to be a sui generis mystical composition but one that should be considered as an important work of European medieval literature. The first section of the chapter is titled “Locating the *Zohar* in Medieval Iberian Literature.” Therein he contends that “far from being a cloistered and insular rabbinic work that understood itself purely within the stream of midrashic and kabbalistic tradition, the *Zohar* ... was very much a product of its time and place, participating in the folkloric and textual ambience of medieval Castile in profound and striking ways” (p. 337). To substantiate this thesis Fishbane initially cites and analyzes a series of non-mystical Jewish Spanish compositions including works by Abraham ibn Ezra, Joseph ibn Zabarah, Judah al-Harizi, Eliyahu ha-Kohen, and Isaac ibn Sahulah. With each of these writers he offers a useful biographical introduction and then illustrative citations from their works, drawing parallels with narrative themes that he has previously identified in the *Zohar*, occasionally reproducing the zoharic text to better appreciate the similarities. One example is his presentation of ibn Zabarah’s late twelfth-century anthology of tales, *Sefer Sha’ashu’im* (Book of Delights). In an extended narrative a king is perturbed by a dream. He asks his eunuch to seek out a dream interpreter. Upon his journey the eunuch encounters a countryman. In their ensuing conversation the eunuch continually makes remarks that are paradoxical and seemingly absurd. As night approaches the countryman offers the eunuch hospitality for the night. Unable to sleep, the countryman relates the content of his confusing conversation with his wife. His youngest daughter overhears her father’s description and adroitly interprets all of the paradoxical statements of the eunuch. Fishbane then relates this to the zoharic narrative discussed above that he had identified as “character inversion,” as both stories depict a sagacious young girl overturning the norms of “a heavily male-centered culture” (p. 361).

The Spanish Jewish literary compositions that Fishbane effectively presents in this chapter are followed by a sustained examination of King Alfonso X’s *The Cantigas de Santa Maria*. In his introduction Fishbane had already underscored that the kabbalist R. Todros Abulafia was a member of Alfonso’s court and that he had been appointed as *El-Rab*, chief rabbi. Fishbane also discussed Yehuda Liebes’s theory that R. Todros was the model for the figure of R. Shimon in the *Zohar* and noted Elliott Wolfson’s counter-arguments. Fishbane begins his consideration of the *Cantigas* by issuing a cautionary note: “The ‘pious brief narratives’ of the *Cantigas* ... constitute a meaningful parallel to the episodic nature of zoharic narrative that I have observed in earlier chapters (this despite the prominent anti-Judaism that appears throughout the *Cantigas*, thus raising the possibility that if there was direct influence it would have more likely manifested as a veiled form of resistance and counter-narrative)” (p. 404). Although he does not state it explicitly herein, this latter point aligns well with his earlier theory in his introduction that the figure of R. Shimon can be seen as a counterpoint to Jesus.

The example he cites from the *Cantigas* involves a group of pilgrims who became lost in the dark of night in rugged mountains and had a miraculous encounter with the Virgin Mary. “They called on the Mother of God, as is our custom, to forgive them for their grievous sins. At once those pilgrims saw a bright light.... Within that bright light they then saw a woman, very beautiful of form and features, who appeared to them to be a young maiden.... She held in Her hand a resplendent scepter. When the maiden appeared, all those mountains glowed with her bright light, and soon She guided the company straight to Soissons.” Fishbane follows this tale with a lengthy citation from the *Zohar*, which he characterizes as a “remarkable parallel” (p. 405). Therein, the zoharic discussion begins with the significance of the *minhah Tamid* offering during the Temple period, which was administered in the late afternoon. The *Zohar* relates this to a verse from Jeremiah 6:4, when “the day is fading, shadows of evening spread.” This is then connected to the hour that the Temple was destroyed and hence it is an inherently dangerous period, when “Judgment hangs over the world” (p. 406). Next, the *Zohar* begins a story of several companions walking (presumably at the time of *minhah*, late afternoon), and they reach a mountain. “Rabbi Yosi said: ‘This mountain is frightening! Let’s walk on and not linger here because the mountain is terrifying!’” R. Yosi is then reassured by his traveling companion that one only has to worry if one walks alone, “But we are three, and [so] it is fitting that *Shekhinah* not pass away [be removed] from any one [of us].... Come and see: *The angel redeeming me*—this is *Shekhinah* who always travels with a person, never departing, when a person walks in the way of truth and observes the commandments of the Torah” (p. 407).

When one compares these two accounts it is difficult to conclude that the zoharic narrative constitutes a “remarkable parallel” as claimed. It lacks all of the essential elements of the *Cantigas*. Late afternoon is not the dark of night. The zoharic companions were not lost and then miraculously saved. They did not petition Heaven, nor did they experience a celestial epiphany and then be guided by a supernatural light. Fishbane additionally posits that the specification in the zoharic narrative that there were three companions “may be read, I suggest, as a coded counterpoint to the theological power of the Christological Trinity” (p. 408). This too is overreaching. In note 155 he cites a statement from the *M. Avot* 3:2 that when two sit and study Torah the *Shekhinah* dwells among them. A more expansive Talmudic source is *B. Berakhot* 6a, which offers scriptural prooftexts asserting the presence of the *Shekhinah* among ten who pray together, three who function as judges, two who are engaged in Torah study, and even a solitary individual who is studying Torah.[4]

Focusing on R. Shimon bar Yohai and his contemporaries allowed the anonymous authors the ability to cast the zoharic protagonists as significant second-century CE rabbinical sages. Fishbane asserts that the zoharic narratives occurred in the Galilee to draw a parallel in the introduction with Jesus. This was not the only locale where the zoharic protagonists were active. R. Shimon bar Yohai also lived in the central region of the country, specifically Lod. Indeed, one of the first narratives that Fishbane analyzes in chapter 1 begins: “R. Yehudah was walking from Cappadocia to Lod to see R. Shimon who was there” (p. 65). Although Fishbane discusses in some detail the Galilean locale of these tales, he does not address the fundamental issue of why R. Shimon was cast as the nexus of *Zohar*. R. Shimon was not an obvious choice for the leading role in such a mammoth Jewish mystical, pseudepigraphic anthology. The authors of the *Zohar* were well acquainted with the entire corpus of classical Jewish mystical writings of the Talmudic period. These include the *Merkavah* (Divine Chariot) stories, involving Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and his disciples, the *Pardes* (Paradise) narrative, featuring R. Akiva and his colleagues, and the expansive *Heikhalot* (Temples/Palaces) writings, in which, once again, R. Akiva and his colleagues are at the forefront. R. Shimon was a

junior disciple of R. Akiva and did not participate in any of the foregoing classical mystical texts.

The only Talmudic tale that testifies to R. Shimon's involvement in the supernatural is the famous story in *B. Shabbat* 33b. Fishbane initially mentions this account in passing while discussing the multiple occurrences of cave tales in the *Zohar*. He notes that this element of zoharic narrative was "clearly alluding to the famous legend concerning the hiding of R. Shimon bar Yohai and his son R. Elazar from the Romans." In note 67 therein, he lists the relevant Talmudic source and mentions several secondary discussions of this tale, including Rubenstein's assertion that this story established R. Shimon's credentials as "a miracle-worker and zealot for Torah ... characteristics that are most certainly integrated into the much later zoharic portrait of R. Shimon as a mystical hero" (p. 208). While this conclusion is accurate, given that Fishbane does not bother presenting even a summary of the story, this important assertion has not been substantiated.

In Fishbane's brief reference he notes that R. Shimon and his son were "hiding from the Romans" in a cave (p. 208). Perhaps Fishbane assumes that all of his readers are familiar with the details of this tale and not worth recapping its highlights. Numerous details of the Talmudic account in *B. Shabbat* 33b that are directly related to various discussions in *The Art of Mystical Narrative* are worth noting. R. Shimon disparaged the achievements of the Romans and was sentenced to death. This compelled him and his son to initially hide in a *Beit Midrash* (study hall), and then as the manhunt intensified they took refuge in a cave. Thereupon, "a miracle occurred and a carob tree and well-spring were created for them." They spent the next twelve years living in the cave and occupying their time exclusively in study and prayer. At the end of this period Elijah, the prophet, stood at the entrance of the cave and said: "Who will tell Bar Yohai that Caesar has died and the decree has been annulled?" They exited the cave and spied people ploughing and sowing. R. Shimon said: "They are forsaking eternal life for a temporary existence." The account continues: "Everywhere they looked was instantly burnt. A heavenly voice proclaimed to them: 'Did you exit to destroy My world? Return to your cave!' They turned and went. They dwelt [there] for another twelve months. This is why they say that the punishment of the wicked in Gehinnom is twelve months. A heavenly voice proclaimed: 'Leave your cave.' They departed. Wherever R. Eleazar afflicted, R. Shimon healed.... As Sabbath eve approached, they saw an old man carrying two bundles of myrtle and running as the sun was about to set. They asked him: 'What are they for?' He said to them: 'For honoring the Sabbath.' 'Wouldn't one be sufficient?' One is for 'Remember' and the other is for 'Guard.' [5] He said to his son: 'See how precious are the [biblical] commandments to Israel.' Their minds then became calm. R. Pinchas b. Yair, his father-in-law, heard and went to greet them" (*B. Shabbat* 33b).

R. Shimon had to go into hiding after insulting the Roman Empire. For medieval Jewry "Rome" became code language for Christianity and Fishbane might have used this story in support of his thesis that there is a veiled anti-Christian polemic embedded in zoharic narratives. Also, it is unclear from the wording of the account as to the location of the tree and well-spring. If they were positioned outside the cave, why was it necessary to stipulate that the creation was miraculous? Presumably, the miracle was that the tree and spring existed inside the cave, so that they never had to leave it and needlessly expose themselves to their pursuers. That they never left the cave is also implied by Elijah's standing at the entrance and their eventual punishment of having to return to the cave. Assuming that this reading is at least a possibility then it can be seen as a source for the "magical realism" narrative discussed above by Fishbane, concerning the cave with trees inside. Furthermore, that Elijah intervened on their behalf would have had special significance for a medieval Jewish

audience. The phenomenon of *gilluy Eliahu* (the revelation of Elijah) was seen by the early kabbalists as indicative of heavenly legitimization of their mystical endeavors.

Additionally, the tale that Fishbane analyzes in chapter 2 where “R. Abba inhaled the smell from that rose and said: ‘Surely the world’s existence depends upon scent!... And this [is the reason for the inhalation of the aroma of] the myrtle [leaves] at the departure of the Shabbat,’” clearly is alluding to our Talmudic narrative wherein an old man is carrying the myrtle branches to honor the Sabbath, an act of devotion that calms the minds of R. Shimon and his son and stops their destructive impulses (p. 174). Just like the zoharic narratives that Fishbane analyzes, we see here a similar case of “character inversion” in which a chance encounter with a seemingly simple old man teaches R. Shimon, who had been assiduously studying for thirteen years, the significance of proper Sabbath preparations, based on peculiarities in phrasing in the Torah. Finally, as in the start of the *Zohar*, after exiting the cave they encounter R. Pinchas, who locates them after having mysteriously “heard,” though what and from whom the Talmud does not say.

The only other brief passing reference that Fishbane makes to this seminal Talmudic tale is by way of introducing a short account in which a bird conveys a note to R. Pinchas, informing him that R. Shimon and his son have already exited the cave. Fishbane introduces this passage as follows: “At this point in the narrative, RaShBY is just emerging from the cave with his son, R. Elazar—the cave in which they hid from the Romans” (p. 263). His note 81 on this sentence merely refers the reader to Matt’s translation of the *Zohar* “and the rabbinic and zoharic sources cited there” (p. 263n81).

Although Fishbane’s principal interest in presenting this text is as an example of “magical realism,” wherein humans and birds mysteriously communicate, the location of this story in the *Zohar* itself is of great importance. It is found near the start of the *Zohar* in the “Introduction to the Zohar” stratum (*Zohar* 1:11a). In general this section does not include narratives but is composed of a string of esoteric expositions of biblical verses. This particular passage, however, constitutes a fully formed narrative, the first truly creative instance in the *Zohar*. As Fishbane notes, it begins with R. Pinchas visiting his friend R. Rechumai. The latter advises R. Pinchas to seek out their friend Yochai, who possesses a precious jewel, which shines like the radiance of the sun. R. Pinchas then boards a boat accompanied by two others and is about to set sail to find R. Shimon. It is at this point that he sees two birds and enlists their help in locating R. Shimon. They comply by flying seaward and then returning, whereupon one delivers a note that R. Shimon and his son have exited the cave. R. Pinchas then went and met them. This offers a supernatural explanation for the puzzling Talmudic assertion that R. Pinchas “heard” that R. Shimon and his son had left the cave, which enabled R. Pinchas to locate them. More significantly, all subsequent zoharic narratives function as a continuation of the Talmudic tale, by describing what happened after R. Shimon left the cave.

For all of Fishbane’s meticulousness in explaining what he is doing and why, he never explicitly identifies his audience. His goal of situating the *Zohar* within the broader context of medieval literature is certainly admirable. As he argues at the start of chapter 6, he views the *Zohar* as more than an “insular rabbinic work that understood itself purely within the stream of midrashic and kabbalistic tradition” (p. 337). Nevertheless, by glossing over the pivotal Talmudic narrative of R. Shimon and the cave, as well as other relevant rabbinic sources, Fishbane deprives the reader of the very rich rabbinic background to the zoharic narratives that he has chosen to analyze. Presumably, he assumes that his readers are either already familiar with these sources or that, if they are not,

they will take the trouble to track them down in earlier presentations of the *Zohar* (the erudite notes in Matt's *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* being the single best resource). In conclusion, *The Art of Mystical Narrative* offers a thought-provoking exploration of the intricacies of narrative strategies in the *Zohar*, complementing and enhancing prior scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, David Greenstein's edifying and engaging presentation in *Roads to Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) focuses exclusively on one specific motif, "the walking stories" and Melila Hellner-Eshed's *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) views the interactions between the main protagonist, R. Shimon bar Yohai, and his disciples as a guide book for the reader to also participate in the kabbalistic quest for mystical knowledge of the Divine.

[2]. See Abraham Zacuto's *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem* (London, 1857), 89, accessed from HebrewBooks.org.

[3]. Eitan P. Fishbane, *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

[4]. Further support for the special quality of three individuals engaged in a communal act is found in the ritual of *zimmun*, that is, an invitation to recite the *Birkhat ha-Mazon* (the blessings after a meal) together; see the Mishnah, B. Berakhot 45a and the various scriptural supports cited therein.

[5]. "Remember" is the initial word of the Sabbath commandment in the first version of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:8 and "Guard" is the initial word in the second version, Deuteronomy 5:12. In a well-known *baraita* the Sages contend that God pronounced both of the words simultaneously (see *B. Shevuot* 20b). Early on, the *Zohar* 1:5b offers a kabbalistic interpretation of these two words, associating "Remember" with *Binah*.

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