

One Perspectives and New Directions

Reflections on the State of Scholarship

On the Anticipation of Audience

In its ideal state, scholarship should aim to converse with multiple audiences at once, accomplishing this most challenging goal through concentric circles of dialogue and learning. For if the innermost of these circles is a highly specialized audience (and this rigorous engagement is crucial to the advancement of knowledge), the outermost circle seeks to reach a much broader intellectual discourse, one in which scholars of diverse specialties and tradition-centers may discover lines of connection in their common quest for an understanding of the human phenomenon—the composition of a collective culture, insight into the intersecting threads of the imagination, the ritual of behavior, and the forms of creativity. With this in mind, I have set out to present my research in this book in a manner that will be of some productive interest to diverse scholars of religion and generally educated readers; such interest will be based on where in the spectrum of concentric intellectual concerns each reader stands. And so, while specialists in the literature of Jewish mysticism may find greater value in an array of textual and field-specific analyses, I hope that my attempts to locate specialized research matters within the larger landscapes of the history and phenomenology of religion will keep the doors of invitation opened wide to colleagues in a much larger panorama of disciplinary homes. Likewise, it is my intention that a general readership will find access here to a cluster of ideas and sources that have much to offer all students of religious culture, devotional practice, and spiritual creativity. 3

4 Context

As the reader may discern from a perusal of the table of contents, this book centers on a series of issues that have much in common with other mystical traditions, on the one hand, and that share in categories central to the broader study of religious culture, on the other. In addition, the scholar of other subfields in the history of Judaism might appreciate the degree to which the topics and text-studies set forth here bear correlation to other (nonmystical) phenomena in the development of Jewish ideas and textuality. This shared intellectual concern is most evident in three recurrent threads of analysis discussed in the present monograph: (1) The representation and contours of contemplative devotional consciousness, and its situation within a typology of ritual practice. A major dimension of the present work, this category has much to contribute to far broader inquiries in the manifold regions of religious studies. (2) Perceptions of interpretive authority and legitimate meaning in the transmission of religious ideas—the interplay between the processes of spontaneous creativity and the articulation of received wisdom. (3) The dynamics of interiority and exteriority with respect to ritual intention, and the manner in which this polarity serves as the groundwork for greater understanding of the intersecting problematics of body, spirit, and religious experience more broadly. In addressing these and other threads of discourse, this work seeks to locate the thought of a prominent medieval Jewish mystic within several matrices of the study of religion and the transmission of knowledge. In offering a close reading of one kabbalist's creativity, my aim is to contribute to a broad interdisciplinary edifice: through the particular, we seek to clarify the more general nature of religious thought and practice.

The Subject

The late thirteenth century was one of the greatest periods of creativity in the history of Judaism. In the Jewish communities of Aragon, the Kabbalah of Nahmanides (the giant of medieval Jewish commentary) continued to flourish through his students and their disciples, while Castilian Kabbalah had reached the summit of its intellectual power and literary craft in the *Zohar* and related works. While the kabbalists of these respective schools were most certainly shaped by a concern with

the mystical contemplation of God, the dominant character of their writings reflects an emphasis on symbolic meaning and an attempt to depict the inner reality and dynamics of Divinity. To be sure, as recent scholarship has demonstrated,¹ the very process of symbol-construction and knowledge of God through the sacred text was conceived to be an event of illumination and (often) ecstatic-contemplative experience. That fact acknowledged, however, the contemplative orientation of these “western” kabbalists did not reach the same pitch of intensity as that of their “eastern” brothers from the other side of the Mediterranean. Indeed, the Jewish spiritual thinkers and practitioners of the East cultivated a distinctively meditative approach to spiritual practice and mystical thought. They were more heavily influenced by the piety and ideas of their Sufi neighbors in North Africa and the Mediterranean basin—a mode of religious life that was marked by an emphasis on meditative practice and a contemplative orientation. Yet perhaps the greatest difference between eastern and western Kabbalah was its relationship to the act of prescription and instruction. To be sure, we do find numerous examples of prescriptive mysticism among the kabbalistic writings of Aragon and Castile, but these pale in comparison (in this respect, that is) to the writings of the eastern thinkers. Best represented by Abraham Abulafia (a kabbalist who spent considerable time in the Land of Israel, as well as in the Greek islands and the Italian peninsula),² the eastern kabbalists sought to present the reader (or disciple) with detailed guidance as to the nature and practice of the Jewish contemplative life. It is this overtly prescriptive element—combined with a vigorous focus on meditative matters—that most concisely embodies the distinction between the two kabbalistic approaches.

It is when this divide in medieval Kabbalah (particularly with respect to geography) is clarified that the significance of our topic emerges into sharper relief. For the figure I propose to study in this work—Isaac ben Samuel of Akko—is first and foremost remarkable as an example of a *bridge* between these two relatively distinct modes of Kabbalah. His work reflects the dominant influences of both the Nahmanidean

1. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 270–397.

2. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 2–3.

Kabbalah of *sefirot* and the Jewish-Sufi/Abulafian-inspired Kabbalah of the East. This unique blend—which also reflects Isaac’s geographical migration from the northern Land of Israel to the Iberian peninsula in the 1290s—is most evident in *Me’irat ‘Einayim*, a putative meta-commentary to Naḥmanides’ *Commentary on the Torah*. In Isaac’s later work—most notably in *‘Ozar Ḥayyim*³—the eastern kabbalistic element is far more dominant, and the Kabbalah of Naḥmanides has been set on the periphery. Yet in general, and especially in *Me’irat ‘Einayim*, Isaac emerges as one situated on the borderline of two distinct religious trends and creative mentalities. *Me’irat ‘Einayim* is dominated to be sure by the genre of *ביאור סודות הרמב"ן* (“clarification of the secrets of Naḥmanides”), but is nevertheless permeated with passages that transmit kabbalistic teachings on contemplation in prayer and meditative focus. It is a profoundly *prescriptive* work with respect to the contemplative life, and seeks to function as a reliable conduit for prior teachings pertaining *both* to a sefirotic interpretation of Scripture and to received traditions on the methods for contemplation of Divinity. *‘Ozar Ḥayyim*, on the other hand, is marked by a first-person testimonial discourse of creative process and hermeneutical discovery—a rhetoric that may be contrasted with the prescriptive mode dominant in *Me’irat ‘Einayim*, and one that reveals the dynamics of self-perception. As we shall observe in some detail, Isaac’s later work presents a model of autobiographical Jewish mysticism and spiritual life-writing—a modality that is rare in kabbalistic literature, and one that provides insight into an alternate dimension of this mystic’s inner world. This testimonial discourse also documents Isaac of Akko’s deeply contemplative orientation, lending further texture to our understanding of his devotional practice and concerns, to the manner in which a posture of meditative consciousness is cultivated. Given the pivotal position of this kabbalist in the history of medieval Jewish intellectual culture, it is clear that a comprehensive examination of his work is necessary for a full understanding of Jewish mystical trends in the Middle Ages—a fact that stands in marked contrast to what has been conducted hitherto in the way of research.

3. As yet this work is only extant in manuscript, the sole complete version of which is to be found in MS Moscow-Ginzburg 775. Portions and fragments of this text are also preserved in MS Oxford 1911, MS Adler 1589, and MS Sasoon 919.

A note to the comparative scholar and the general reader:

In order to do justice to the important research upon which my own work seeks to build, I shall now enter into a detailed (and somewhat technical) assessment of the scholarship completed to date as it relates to our topic. It is through this narrative that the reader may come to appreciate what is new about my own research. That said, however, the nonspecialist may wish to skip this survey of scholarship, which is chiefly intended for the innermost circle of concentric audiences and centers on matters of relatively narrow concern. The broader discussion resumes with the last section of this chapter, devoted to the directional aims and methodological considerations of the present study.

The State of Research

Relative to the considerable attention given to other important kabbalists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Isaac of Akko has not been a major subject of scholarly study. While two short texts and one voluminous (as well as influential) treatise have been published in critical editions by modern scholars, a large portion of this kabbalist's writing still remains in manuscript. The content of his writings has only begun to be explored, and the significance of his unique cultural position still requires sustained and comprehensive treatment. Despite this fact, valuable advances have been made in several subareas of scholarship, and this chapter will be devoted to a critical examination of them. This discussion will aid in the contextualization of my own research into the subject matter, and will aim to clarify the topics that remain undeveloped and in need of elucidation. The scholarship that has been completed to date may be divided into the following general categories: (1) critical editions and textual/philological analysis; (2) Jewish-Sufism and Abulafian Kabbalah as sources of influence on Isaac; and (3) preliminary analysis of Isaac's contemplative and hermeneutical approach. Additional categories will be treated in subsequent chapters in accordance with specific themes as they arise.

Research into the writings of Isaac of Akko, with an emphasis on the editing of manuscript materials with critical annotation and some

analysis, was inaugurated by Gershom Scholem in 1956.⁴ In that year, Scholem published a very short section of text (fewer than twenty pages) by Isaac of Akko in which the latter commented on the first section of *Sefer Yezirah*.⁵ It does in fact seem that this text was originally part of a longer commentary by Isaac on *Sefer Yezirah*, and that this complete text was known to the Spanish exile Abraham ben Solomon Adrutiel.⁶ Regardless, however, Isaac's exegesis on part 1 of *Sefer Yezirah* is all we have. As Scholem states in his brief introduction to the text, Isaac of Akko's work was clearly based on and influenced by the earlier such commentary by Isaac the Blind, one of the very earliest kabbalists in Provence.⁷ Nevertheless, Scholem asserts, there are significant differences in approach and ideas between these two commentaries.⁸ The very fact that a commentary was composed with such visible influence from Isaac the Blind's laconic and enigmatic text, however, reveals the prominence that the latter's text enjoyed among kabbalists several generations subsequent to its writing. Like Isaac the Blind's *Commentary on Sefer Yezirah*, Isaac of Akko's text is deeply contemplative and demonstrates the broad scope of his intellectual activity. At this juncture it is most important to take note of Scholem's own exhortation regarding the importance of Isaac of Akko for a thorough understanding of the history of Kabbalah. He indicated the need (as he did with many other kabbalistic topics) for the pursuit of research on this topic by future scholars—a prescient remark that has been fulfilled by the work of numerous contemporary scholars, and it is a guiding motivation for my own research.

4. Isaac of Akko, "Perusho shel R. Yizhaq de-min-'Akko le-Pereq Ri'shon shel Sefer Yezirah," ed. Scholem, pp. 379–396.

5. The basis for Scholem's critical edition of this passage is MS JNUL Heb. 8° 404, fols. 15b–33a.

6. Isaac of Akko, "Perusho . . ." ed. Scholem, p. 379.

7. The most recent study of Isaac the Blind's commentary is Sendor, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's Commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*."

8. Isaac of Akko, "Perusho . . ." ed. Scholem, p. 380. As Scholem states: "R. Isaac of Akko sought to interpret [*Sefer Yezirah*] according to his own method, and in a very independent manner. And if the complete version of the commentary [to *Sefer Yezirah*] by the 'Hasid'—as R. Isaac the Blind is called here—is published, it will become clear just how far apart most of [Isaac of Akko's] interpretations are from the abstruse intentions of the Provençal kabbalist [i. e., Isaac the Blind]."

A second contribution to textual study bearing on our topic was undertaken by Georges Vajda in an article published at the very end of that same year.⁹ The most important element of this work for our purposes is the appendix of fragments authored by Isaac of Akko, published from manuscripts by Vajda. These fragments are mystical comments by Isaac of Akko on the writings of Judah ben Nissim Ibn Malka, particularly Ibn Malka's *Commentary on Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. It is noteworthy that Ibn Malka's commentary was composed in Arabic, showing Isaac's competence in that language. Vajda has performed an important service to scholarship on Isaac of Akko, insofar as significant mystical passages composed by Isaac are now more accessible. There is not a great deal of commentary or analysis in this article, and its primary value is located in the publication of the Hebrew text along with an annotated French translation. In this regard, let me also acknowledge Vajda's French translation of an important passage from *Me'irat 'Einayim* on the harmonization of conflicting ideas (a theme that I deal with at some length in Chapter 3) in an appendix to one of his major works of scholarship.¹⁰

As this study will give considerable attention to evidence garnered from Isaac's *Me'irat 'Einayim*, it is fitting to devote greater attention to the extensive research on this text performed by Amos Goldreich some twenty years ago as a doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.¹¹ It is no exaggeration to state that the critical edition of *Me'irat 'Einayim* prepared by Goldreich transformed the scholarly study of Isaac of Akko, and presented an exemplary model for the systematic and scientific study of medieval Jewish manuscripts in general. As Daniel Abrams noted in an article surveying and analyzing the development of critical text research on Jewish sources,¹² Goldreich's doctoral work was a pioneering effort in a crucial area of scholarly research. Establishing a reliable text that closely represents the original

9. Vajda, "Les observations critiques d'Isaac d'Acco sur les ouvrages de Juda ben Nissim Ibn Malka."

10. Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale*, pp. 393–395.

11. Isaac of Akko, "Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim le-R. Yizhaq de-min-'Akko," ed. Goldreich (hereafter cited as Isaac of Akko, *Me'irat 'Einayim*).

12. Abrams, "Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature: Notes on the History and Development of Modern Editing Techniques."

work of the author is of paramount importance for the study of medieval Jewish sources. Without this foundational work, technical as it may be, all inquiries into interesting thematic religious issues rest on dubious ground. In completing his work, Goldreich collected an enormous amount of bibliographical information with respect to the many manuscripts of *Me'irat 'Einayim* that are found scattered among the great libraries of the world, consolidated in the microfilm collections of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. With an eye for minute detail, Goldreich demonstrated that *Me'irat 'Einayim* was copied in a wide variety of scripts and corresponding geographical locations. Dominant among these scripts were the 'Ashkenazic, Sefardic, Byzantine, and Italian methods—a strong indicator of the widespread dissemination of this work. Although Goldreich himself does not reflect in a sustained way upon the fascinating cultural implications of these scribal and paleographical facts, it may be observed that the text's *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception history) is ultimately illuminated by the diversity of handwritings and manuscript copies identified. What is revealed through the range of manuscript sources that Goldreich analyzes is an intriguing picture of a text that exercised powerful influence and enjoyed a prominent cultural life in the hands of the Jewish educated elite in the Middle Ages and beyond. Indeed, in the scholarly world prior to the invention of the printing press, the very quantity of surviving manuscripts indicates the degree to which a certain text was distributed and read by members of the scholarly community. Not least among the reasons for this extensive reception was the purported and self-proclaimed goal of *Me'irat 'Einayim*, that of metacommentary to and mystical clarification of Nahmanides' immensely popular and virtually canonical *Commentary on the Torah*. I shall have much more to say about this aspect of Isaac's work later on.

For a host of reasons spelled out in his work, Goldreich selected MS Gaster (Manchester) 200 for the majority of his edition, a manuscript that Goldreich describes as “not only the source of a majority of manuscripts, but also the most faithful representative of the original work.”¹³ The part of the text missing from MS Gaster 200 is represented by MS

13. See *Me'irat 'Einayim*, ed. Goldreich, English section, p. 9.

Parma 67, a manuscript that Goldreich deems most reliable.¹⁴ In addition to a thorough and elaborate consideration of the manuscripts involved, Goldreich has also provided scholars with a very rich series of historical annotations to parts of the text. The arguments and conclusions in these notes have contributed significantly to the construction of a historical picture of the times, and of the likely influences exercised on Isaac of Akko in the course of his travels. I have made use of these notes in Chapter 2 (on historical profile and context), and my debts to Goldreich's work on this score are documented there. Several historical observations are also put forward by Goldreich in the Introductory Study in the form of excursuses on matters of influence that are detectable from the content of the text and its manuscript foundations. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions reached by Goldreich in these sections of his work is the identification of a specific manuscript source for an important ubiquitous reference in *Me'irat 'Einayim* to a text unnamed other than by the phrase *maz'ati be-yad ḥakham maskil* (I found [written] at the hand of a wise sage). Goldreich argues that this specific formula consistently refers to a manuscript anthology of kabbalistic traditions from the Geronese school of mystics as edited by a mysterious and anonymous Castilian scribe from the latter part of the thirteenth century or early in the fourteenth.¹⁵ The pervasive presence of these traditions in *Me'irat 'Einayim* are a window into Isaac's process of receiving traditions from others—an issue that will be dealt with more extensively later on. Goldreich notes that this manuscript is found in its entirety in MS Oxford Christ Church College 198, and that Isaac of Akko's frequent citations from this source are almost always precisely copied. Goldreich further argues that Isaac must have come into contact with this manuscript on his sojourn in the cities and towns of Castile in the course of his famous search for the *Zohar*. Thus Goldreich links the integration of this manuscript material into *Me'irat*

14. See the discussion of this selection, along with a panoramic analysis of the entire spectrum of manuscript witnesses, in Chapters 1 and 2 of Goldreich's introductory study to *Me'irat 'Einayim*. Also see a full listing of the many manuscripts consulted on pp. 436–441, and see the English section, pp. 3–4.

15. For evidence regarding this claim, see Goldreich's Introduction to his critical edition of *Me'irat 'Einayim*, p. 91.

‘*Einayim* to the year 1305, when Isaac (by his own admission, preserved in a passage from Abraham Zacuto’s *Sefer Yuhasin*, cited and discussed in the next chapter) was in Castile.

Most of the *maz’ati be-yad ḥakham maskil* citations, which Isaac supposedly only encountered on his visit to Castile in 1305, are well integrated into *Me’irat ‘Einayim*, thus suggesting that much of the treatise was composed later.¹⁶ As Goldreich himself notes, some of these citations were appended to the text of *Me’irat ‘Einayim* after Isaac had completed a fair amount of his text (thus indicating that at least some of Isaac’s writing was completed *prior* to 1305), but the overwhelming majority were integrated into the flow of writing in such a way as to suggest that they were available to Isaac before he began to write those sections (thus *after* 1305). Goldreich observes that while numerous citations from the *ḥakham maskil* manuscript were appended to Isaac’s commentary on the book of Genesis (included right at the end), this does not occur at all with respect to the other books of the Pentateuch. For the subsequent four biblical books, Isaac was able to integrate the citations into the flow of the text itself. The logical conclusion that Goldreich draws is that Isaac encountered the *ḥakham maskil* manuscript *after* he had already completed writing most of his commentary on Genesis—a time frame directly linked to the year 1305. Of course, this entire hypothesis rests on the reliability of the testimony preserved in *Sefer Yuhasin*, that Isaac first traveled to Castile in 1305, and that it was there that he came into contact with the texts of the *ḥakham maskil* (this second deductive point is asserted by extension in Goldreich’s analysis—it is not itself discernable from the *Sefer Yuhasin* passage). As Goldreich also notes, however, we have no reason to doubt the historical legitimacy of this evidence.

While the above-mentioned advances in text-critical scholarship are indispensable in the construction of a solid portrait of Isaac of Akko and his mystical thought, the most substantial treatment of Isaac’s larger cultural position has come in the form of discussion of his role in the impact of Jewish-Sufi piety on medieval Kabbalah. Isaac was one of a select few Jewish mystics who bridged the distinct cultural worlds

16. See *Me’irat ‘Einayim*, ed. Goldreich, Introduction, pp. 98–99.

of eastern and western Jewish mystical circles, two arenas that exhibited markedly separate spiritual concerns. We encounter in him a fascinating cross-cultural combination of ideas and approaches to the mystical life as they were practiced in these two geographical zones. This domain of scholarship has been pursued by Moshe Idel¹⁷ and Paul Fenton,¹⁸ with special attention to a practice known as *hitbodedut* (literally, “seclusion”) in kabbalistic and other pietistic documents. These scholars have shown the practice of *hitbodedut* to be a meditative technique of special concentration, intimately related to a discipline of ascetic detachment and emotional equanimity. Both Idel and Fenton focus on the place of Isaac of Akko in the history of this practice in Jewish mystical piety, and their research has revealed the likely influence of Sufi-inspired Jewish mystics upon Isaac.

Let us now briefly consider three studies that deal directly with Isaac of Akko. The first treats aspects of Isaac’s conception of mystical experience, and the other two deal with the subject of kabbalistic interpretation in Isaac’s work. The last of these studies, in accord with a new awareness among scholars of Kabbalah,¹⁹ seeks to clarify the interconnected nature of contemplative experience and interpretive modalities in parts of Isaac’s writing. The first article was composed by Ephraim Gottlieb,²⁰ and for many years was the only scholarly discussion of Isaac’s contemplative orientation. Though only a preliminary foray into the field, Gottlieb’s study offers a valuable selection of textual fragments from Isaac’s *‘Ozar Hayyim*, as well as pioneering insights into their typologization, and it is the point of departure for my analysis of numerous issues and themes. The early seeds of thematic work undertaken by Idel and Fenton (particularly with respect to *hitbodedut* and its textual evidence in Isaac’s writings) may also be found in this seminal

17. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73–169.

18. Fenton, “Solitary Meditation in Jewish and Islamic Mysticism in the Light of a Recent Archeological Discovery.” Cf. id., “La ‘Hitbodedut’ chez les premiers Qabbalistes en Orient et chez les Soufis.”

19. See M. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, pp. 105–122; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 234–249; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, pp. 326–333.

20. Gottlieb, “Illumination, *Devequt*, and Prophecy in R. Isaac of Akko’s *Sefer ‘Ozar Hayyim*.”