stern Jewish Hasidism of the thirteenth century, although there is no solid evidence of the intermediary role played by this Jewish Arabic-language literature in the infiltration of Sufism into Kabbalah. It may well be that some Jewish scholars in Galilee introduced Sufic concepts and practices directly from Muslim Sufism, then flowering in Damascus. The possible later influence of Sufic Hasidism on Kabbalah is still a matter for analysis in further studies. S. Pines has recently traced the impact of some Ismaili doctrines on Kabbalah, opening an avenue that seems promising for further research. Finally, the relationship between Kabbalah and such classical Jewish literary genres as Midrash and Halakhah has been largely neglected by modern scholarship, an outstanding exception being Jacob Katz's recent pioneering treatment of the relationship between Kabbalah and Halakhah.

Gershom Scholem's works and the significant contributions of his contemporaries have served to gain considerable respectability for the academic study of Kabbalah. Nevertheless, Kabbalah does not yet enjoy the same degree of honor as Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist mysticism. Only rarely are Kabbalistic concepts or ideas mentioned in comparative studies, and even then discussions are based almost invariably upon secondhand material; the works of Scholem or, in some rare cases, translations of the texts. What is troubling about this state of affairs is not, however, the paucity of references to Jewish mysticism per se but the manner in which it is referred to even by serious scholars. On more than one occasion, some of these scholars, working in the field of Judaica or in comparative religion, have tended to the notion that his views on Kabbalah are tantamount to Kabbalah itself. The usual caution associated with scholarly research seems to be absent here; there is a widespread failure to distinguish between the authentic material and the opinions of scholars on the content of this material. Far more than in other fields, we encounter references to the view of the Kabbalah that are based solely upon Scholem's own assertions. This identification is problematic in several respects, and it may be helpful to elaborate upon the reasons for it.

I. QUANTITATIVE QUANDARIES

First, one generally unnoticed fact is the huge quantity of Kabbalistic works. At present, there is no comprehensive bibliographical survey of this body of literature in its entirety. We are in complete darkness...
as to the number of the thousands of Kabbalistic works and fragments, most of which are still in manuscripts and a great number of which are anonymous or unidentified; furthermore, even a list of the names of the Kabbalists is still unavailable. Great efforts to peruse this literature were made by Scholem, who, from the 1930s, roamed tirelessly through the libraries of Europe to this end. On the basis of these efforts, he produced some important bibliographic studies; one of them, written in 1933, which deals with the genre of treatises devoted to the explanation of the scheme of ten Sefirot, alone comprised at the time 130 entries, most of them extant solely in manuscripts and most of them anonymous. 2

Second, the difficulties involved in mastering this enormous body of writings are numerous; I shall dwell at present only on the most important ones. First, the selection of books chosen to be described bibliographically and to be used in phenomenological analyses itself had a decisive impact upon the picture offered of the field. The concentration of efforts on a particular field immediately gave an unexpected importance to that figure or school. A balanced approach is, in this incipient stage of research in Kabbalah, utopian. To illustrate: Scholem spent years collecting every piece of evidence concerning the various stages of the Sabbatian movement, focusing on every historical detail regarding the lives of Sabbatai Șevi and Nathan of Gaza, whereas, in contrast, influential works of such central mystical figures as R. Moses Hayyim Luzzato or R. Nahman of Bratslav were only rarely mentioned by Scholem.

Another example: Scholem was deeply interested in Abraham Abulafia and his works, devoting an entire chapter in his Major Trends to him, as well as some lectures published in mimeograph form in Hebrew. But in a series of studies on Kabbalistic subjects to which Abulafia’s thought is pertinent, he is not mentioned at all. Thus, Scholem’s discussion of the meaning of the Torah and Kabbalistic hermeneutics omits certain ideas found in Abulafia’s works that are indispensable to a full description of the subject. 3 The same is true of Scholem’s treatment of devekut, as we shall see in chapter 4. When the quantity of material is overwhelming and a scholar is nevertheless interested in providing a comprehensive survey, such an effort is likely to be biased either by technical factors—for example, the greater availability of works in print over those in manuscript—or by conceptual presuppositions on the centrality or importance of a given figure, school, or work. I should like to stress that, in the present state of research, an adequate and balanced description of Kabbalistic lore is impossible, a fault that lies in the very nature of the material.

The fact that Scholem did not write a comprehensive history of Jewish mysticism, but confined his scholarly activity to descriptions of major trends and schools, testifies to his awareness that it would have been improper to attempt such a grandiose project, given the sheer quantity of Kabbalistic treatises that have never been analyzed by any scholar and the continued obscurity of the material in manuscripts. It goes without saying that my attempt here to survey central Kabbalistic concepts suffers from the same deficiencies. It has nevertheless been undertaken in order to supply insights resulting either from my perusal of Kabbalistic material unavailable to Scholem (some has been unearthed only since the late sixties) or from my focusing on portions of the material that were dealt with by Scholem only in passing. The very fact that a substantial number of the quotations cited in the following discussions stem from manuscript sources illustrates the need to return to the path opened by Scholem and explore available manuscripts before attempting more general discussions of the nature of Kabbalah. The need to broaden the range of Kabbalistic literature serving as the raw material for integrative approaches would seem to be an imperative that has often been neglected since Scholem’s basic studies were published.

But the exploration of new material is not the only, or even the most important, object of this proposed return to neglected manuscripts. Even a rereading of texts studied by Scholem may yield interesting new findings; newly discovered manuscripts may offer better readings that will alter conclusions based upon inferior versions, and the study of the context of some quotations cited by Scholem may at times foster different interpretations.

II. LOST MATERIAL

The problems posed by Kabbalistic literature, however, transcend the quantitative quandaries. Even the totality of the printed works and manuscripts, notwithstanding their huge number, hardly encompasses the whole of Kabbalistic lore, for at least two reasons. The more obvious, although less important, reason is the loss of several interesting books written by central Kabbalistic figures, the loss having been caused in part by the vicissitudes of Jewish history; pogroms and expulsions are not conducive to the preservation of unique manuscripts. This seems to be the reason, for example, for the loss of some of the writings of R. Moses of Burgos, R. Moses de Leon,4 R. Isaac of Acre5 and R. Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi. 6

Another important reason for the disappearance of Kabbalistic works was the self-censorship imposed by the Kabbalists themselves. The loss of Abraham Abulafia’s prophetic works,7 the fragmentary nature of the extant portions of Sefer ha-Meshiv,8 and the reduction of R. Joseph Karo’s maggidic revelations
to one-fiftieth of the original, are sufficient examples of the tendency to suppress certain extreme aspects of Jewish mysticism. The survival of certain unique manuscripts in remote corners of the Jewish universe, such as Dublin, Palo Alto, and Melbourne, is evidence of the uncertain fate of these works.

III. THE PROBLEM OF ORAL TRANSMISSION

Yet in comparison to the corpus of Kabbalistic writings in our possession today, the total loss is not so great. Even during the period of the expulsion from Spain and Portugal, when the most important center of Kabbalah was destroyed, a list of the books lost would include hardly more than ten items. More important is the loss of Kabbalistic material that was never written down because it was in principle not intended to be committed to writing. When we attempt to reconstruct the various concepts of the different Kabbalistic schools, we must remind ourselves that these ideas were meant, from the beginning, to be limited to a small intellectual elite. The main medium of transmission of these traditions was, as the Kabbalists themselves indicate time and again, oral teaching. Although this fact is clear from a variety of Kabbalistic sources, modern research has failed to draw the implications from this major characteristic of Jewish mysticism.

There seem to be at least two main conclusions to be drawn from the perception of Kabbalah as an oral teaching during its formative period. The first, and more important, one is the necessity to presume the existence of oral stages preceding the earliest written documents of Kabbalah. The explicit statements of some important early figures are irrefutable evidence for the existence of esoteric traditions several generations before they were first committed to writing. In a document discovered and published by Scholem, R. Isaac the Blind, the teacher of several early Kabbalists, indicates that his father as well as his ancestors were unwilling to commit Kabbalistic matters to writing. Nahmanides, another teacher of Kabbalah and an outstanding figure in the Jewish world generally, likewise warns those interested in Jewish esotericism to study it solely from authoritative masters, as this lore could be revealed only orally. Moreover, such masters of Ashkenazic esotericism as R. Eleazar of Worms refer to a long genealogy of ancestors who handed down the secrets of prayer that were finally committed to writing only by them under very peculiar historical circumstances. The people I just mentioned—R. Abraham ben David, father of R. Isaac the Blind; Nahmanides; and the Ashkenazic Hasidim—exemplify what I suppose to be the conservative mind of medieval rabbinism. It hardly seems likely that these persons would formulate new ideas that they would later present as the esoteric meaning of Judaism. Moreover, the manner in which some of them wrote down the earliest esoteric traditions, whether Provençal or Ashkenazic, attests to the fact that these texts reflect prior stages. We must particularly consider the fact that both the remnants of the works of R. Isaac the Blind and those of his contemporaries, such as R. Eleazar of Worms, are elaborate bodies of mystical thought that, although they may be difficult to understand, nevertheless reflect comprehensive approaches rather than brief insights or remarks. The fullness of these first mystical documents thus reflects earlier stages of development that have eluded historical documentation.

I must note that this remark is not to be understood as an assertion of the antiquity of the Kabbalah. Without here entering into this highly complicated question, I would like to stress that Kabbalah may well be the result of certain religious developments without, however, stemming in its entirety from such earlier periods.

The importance of oral transmission was not drastically attenuated by the appearance of the Kabbala in the historical arena. Evidence of oral transmission can be easily adduced from a multitude of texts, even following the composition of the first Kabbalistic documents. I shall refer to only a few examples. The earliest statements on this subject by R. Isaac the Blind and Nahmanides have already been mentioned. It should be noted, too, that certain Kabbalistic ideas were transmitted orally even to Kabbalists, and only after they attained the age of forty. As late as the early fourteenth century, a Kabbalist such as R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon was ready to compose a supercommentary to Nahmanides’ hints of Kabbalistic secrets, but repeatedly mentioned that there were also matters that could not be revealed. Replying to a letter from one of his students who asked him to explain a certain Kabbalistic matter, R. Shem Tov wrote that he had not revealed it when he was teaching him because the student was then younger than forty; now that he had reached this age, he was far away, and such an issue could not be committed to writing. Thus, we can readily see that, more than 150 years following the emergence of historical Kabbalah, some of its tenets were withheld even from relatively mature Kabbalists.

This example illustrates the need to distinguish carefully between what was understood as Kabbalah according to Kabbalistic masters, who revealed it only fragmentarily, and what contemporary scholars, who assumed that the discipline was disclosed in written documents, believed to be Kabbalah. It is reasonable to suppose that those Kabbalistic matters that were kept secret even from younger Kabbalists concerned sensitive pivotal subjects. Hence, if we do not attempt to uncover the hidden problems of the Kabbalists and to decode
them, our view of Kabbalah may be, at least to a certain extent, misleading. As far as I know, consciousness of this methodological question is absent in modern research of Kabbalah; rather, this lore is described and analyzed on the implicit assumption that all major Kabbalistic views are presented as such in documents in an articulate manner.

Another important indicator of the crucial role of oral traditions can be found in Kabbalistic epistles and responsa, which afford a better understanding of Kabbalah. The short discussions contained in the epistles of R. Isaac the Blind addressed to R. Jonah Gerondi and Naḥmanides, in the letters of R. Abraham Abulafia, and especially in the responsa of R. David ben Yehudah, are the variety of major subjects, some of which are unknown from other sources. At least in the case of R. David, in responsa intended for his students rather than for the public, certain issues are discussed in such a way as to provide clues to his esoteric doctrines. Other Kabbalistic masters who did not write down their views, such as R. Solomon ibn Adret, were frequently quoted by their students, providing conclusive evidence for the oral transmission of Kabbalistic tradition.

At this stage in the research of Kabbalah, it is difficult to evaluate the depth of the changes in our view of Kabbalah that could be brought about by a decoding of some esoteric layers of Kabbalah. It may be possible, through an analysis of R. David ben Yehudah's responsa, to fathom a level of theosophical and mystical doctrines hitherto unnoticed by modern research. The existence of advanced states of ecstatic Kabbalah, taught orally, is suggested by the question the anonymous Kabbalist who authored the book Sha'arey Zedek asked his master: "In heaven's name, can you perhaps impart to me some power to enable me to bear this force emerging from my heart and receive influx from it?" I would suppose that further discoveries of Kabbalists' epistles and responsa will entail major corrections in the academic understanding of Kabbalah. So much for the problems posed by the texts and their transmission.

### IV. AN APPRAISAL OF A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Concentration on the philological-historical approach has resulted in the nearly complete rejection of the comparative study of Jewish mysticism. This concentration on texts and Kabbalistic figures, rather than on concepts and systems, was from the outset Scholem's approach. Despite his vast erudition in a large variety of religious cultures, he apparently chose textology over the comparative approach—a decision easily understood against the background of the need to carry on the hard work of preparing the first detailed inquiries into the entire Jewish mystical tradition. Bibliographical, historical, and textual research demanded a deliberate postponement of more elaborate comparisons of Kabbalah to other religious structures of thought, which would have had to be speculative, hence premature. We find no more than passing remarks on Gnosticism, Catharism, or Christian sources in Scholem's works. Despite his recurrent insistence upon the influence of Gnosticism upon Kabbalah, he never presented in his published works a thorough treatment of the relationship of the two.

What I perceive as a conscious refrain in the founder of modern Kabbalah research, however, became in time a tacit ideology. For most of his students and followers, Scholem's initial commitment to the centrality of text study became an inert ideology of textology. Even when the first stages of historical-textual studies were far in the past, the approach was not enriched by additional perspectives. Despite the great number of studies on Kabbalah published since the late 1940s, mostly in Hebrew, the names of Mircea Eliade or R. C. Zaehner, not to mention Claude Lévi-Strauss, Gerardus Van der Leeuw, Victor Turner, and Paul Ricoeur, have been almost totally ignored. Only such "stars" of research of mystical thought as Ernst Cassirer or Evelyn Underhill occasionally shine in the firmament of these studies. These remarks, it should be noted, refer to the one-sided approach to texts based upon mythical and mystical concepts without taking into account the major developments in recent research of myth, symbolism, and mysticism. A striking lack of novel theories of the nature of Jewish mysticism that differ from those of Scholem is the result of this limited scope. His views have been repeated time and again with no proper attempt to add new theoretical perspectives influenced by modern research in comparative religion.

I would like to be properly understood: I prefer a solid textological study to a bad comparative one. But the narrowness of textology when it alone is applied to mystical literature ought to be self-evident. On the other hand, I consider the simplistic addition of some comparative type of studies to textology to be equally pernicious. Let us take, for example, Mircea Eliade's booklets on comparative issues. The generalizations so characteristic of his later stage of research are only rarely sustained by textual evidence. The hybristic endeavors of Eliade to discover the "patterns" of religions can be compared only to the attempts of Jungian psychoanalysis to unfold the archetypes of the human psyche; their Platonic perspectives are highly reductionist and hermeneutical approaches to the variety of religious experiences and concepts. The mechanical application of the results of such types of research to Kabbalistic materials can only obfuscate an appropriate understanding of them. A strenuous effort to
become aware of the possibilities inherent in various fields of modern religious research can, one hopes, fertilize the aridity of the conceptual approach to Kabbalah in the last decades. Only a balanced combination of textual and comparative approaches to Kabbalistic material will contribute to a better formulation of the unique nature of certain Kabbalistic views. The comparative approach, at least as practiced by Eliade, tends to ignore the unique features of any given religious structure; through sound textological examination the characteristics of a given mystical phenomenon can be retained, while its uniqueness, if and where it exists, can be placed in proper relief by its comparison to related phenomena.

Because of scholars' restraint in regard to utilizing current concepts and notions of comparative and phenomenological studies of religion, they have rarely succeeded in integrating the study of Kabbalah into the larger discussion of mysticism. Kabbalah has seldom merited mention in the studies of Joachim Wach, R. C. Zaehner, W. T. Stace, and Frits Staal. Moreover, the structure of Kabbalistic thought has been only poorly elucidated in a conceptual manner, which could fertilize the modern research of religion in general and mysticism in particular. More than any other statements of Scholem, his assertion that *unio mystica* is absent in Jewish mysticism has been repeated by scholars of general mysticism.²⁰

This last observation expresses the possibility or probability that Kabbalah was actually a practical-experiential type of mysticism more than a speculative theory. It was comprehensive, as it commonly included both mystical perceptions of being and attempts to modify it. A scholar who approaches Kabbalistic literature only textologically (almost the single main perspective in present research) is unable to be sensitive to vital aspects of Kabbalistic phenomena. I have already discussed the possible contributions of comparative study to a more precise understanding of this lore. But there is no reason to refrain from careful use of other branches of humanistic studies—for example, psychology. This field has provided a great variety of theories concerning the human psyche and its processes. As some Kabbalists refer covertly or overtly to spiritual experiences, we cannot neglect the contribution of one or another psychological theory to the fathoming of certain Kabbalistic phenomena. Again, Scholem avoided the use of psychological theories or concepts. Indeed, the quotations from Kabbalistic literature and their analysis by one of Scholem's great contemporaries, Carl Jung, are problematic.

Jung's interest in Kabbalah was great, and he even dreamed "Kabbalistic" dreams. But this interest in and even identification with Kabbalistic conceptions cannot mitigate his sheer misunderstanding of his sources and his reductionist approach to these texts. Although the same criticism can hold regarding Jung's analysis of other types of literature, such as alchemic, Gnostic, or Hindu texts, I am doubtful, at least insofar as Kabbalah is concerned, whether anything substantial can be learned from Jung's discussion of the particular passages he quotes in his works. I would like to stress, however, that more careful attempts to use Jungian conceptions may nevertheless be useful for certain aspects of Kabbalistic mysticism, such as, for example, the understanding of the Kabbalistic circle that appeared during revelatory experiences.²¹ Furthermore, analysis of the psychological implications of using Kabbalistic techniques to attain paranormal experiences cannot be avoided. If the approach proposed here to see Kabbalah far more in terms of experiential phenomena than has been previously done is correct, then psychology, as an invaluable tool, must gradually be integrated into future study of this kind of mysticism.

V. BETWEEN SCHOLARS AND MYSTICS

It has been suggested that practical involvement of the scholar of mysticism in the mystical experience itself can contribute to his better understanding of the mystical phenomena. This assertion seems to me problematic, albeit not devoid of some truth. An experience undergone by a given individual may be highly idiosyncratic, so that any use of his own impressions and feelings in order to better understand and express those of another person may be misleading to the same extent that they are helpful. But contact with Kabbalists who both study and conduct their lives in accordance with the requirements of the Kabbalah can enrich the academic vision of what Kabbalah is. Direct contact with the manner in which Kabbalists approach mystical texts during their studies, the sight of Kabbalists praying, and especially, discussions with them regarding mystical issues can substantially contribute to the crystallization of the scholar's perception of Kabbalah. Strangely enough, despite the close proximity of Kabbalistic circles in Jerusalem and Benai Barak to the academic centers for the study of Kabbalah, such contacts are not regarded by the academic establishment as productive, all research in Kabbalah instead being focused exclusively on written texts. For this reason, no up-to-date picture is available on current Kabbalistic thought. More than one hundred years after ethnologists came to regard the collection of data and contact with remote tribes as essential for their descriptive work, and two decades after the introduction of the psychophysiological study of mystical experiences, researchers in Jewish mysticism work exclusively in relation to
texts, without even an awareness of the necessity of making the acquaintance of their close neighbors, the Kabbalists.

The establishment of contacts between academicians and Kabbalists involves certain difficulties in comparison with the ethnologists' need to meet members of primitive cultures, but, obviously, it also has its own facilities. The latter are numerous: the scholar and the Kabbalist share a considerable body of knowledge of esoteric religious issues from the outset; they speak the same language—or languages—to the extent that knowledge of Yiddish is widespread among scholars of Hasidism; they have both already studied a certain amount of esoteric literature. But the stumbling blocks are great, although not insurmountable. The Kabbalist is, at the outset, suspicious of the strange "monstrosity" he is going to meet: a nonreligious person—such are most of the scholars of Kabbalah—who is involved in the study of the Holy of Holies of Judaism, a realm reserved, according to the Kabbalists, for the very few and even saintly persons who are already accomplished students of halakhah. But notwithstanding any initial reticence, a dialogue is not impossible, even for women scholars, who are—from the traditional Jewish perspective—not supposed to study Kabbalah at all. More problematic is the great difference in their respective perceptions of texts and concepts, inherent in the difference between the academic attitude and the traditional one. The historian bias of the academic perspective, if not coupled with the sensibility that grows out of the phenomenological effort to understand a mystical phenomenon as an entity in itself, may cut the dialogue short at the beginning. For example, modern research is notorious in religious circles for its denial of R. Simeon bar Yohai's authorship of the Zohar, a very important issue for the Kabbalists. Thus concentration on historical problems may constitute a minefield in the way of further discussion.

One may ask why a Kabbalist would wish to embark on such a suspicious dialogue. The reasons on the part of the academian are obvious. He may enrich himself both as a person and as a scholar through his direct contact with a mentality he attempts to penetrate; moreover, he may learn of traditions that are circulating only orally or of the existence of manuscripts otherwise unknown. On the other hand, the Kabbalists today are in a strange situation: at times they are isolated individuals in their own milieu, even when they are leading figures. Interested in a more nuanced self-definition, they may endeavor to stand face to face even with the "heretical" academy. In addition, the great achievements of academic studies in the fields of bibliography and history of Kabbalah turn the scholar into a potential source of information regarding certain technical details, even for the most erudite among the Kabbalists. The systematic classification of biobibliographical knowledge of Kabbalah in the academic world far outstrips the poor acquaintance of the Kabbalists with this particular area. Now, for the first time, academicians can not only learn from the Kabbalists and their works but also help them by providing information on manuscripts or biographical data on Kabbalists that would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

VI. JEWISH MYSTICISM AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LORE

The impression received from a perusal of the scholarly descriptions of Kabbalah is that of a system of theosophical conceptions, various beliefs, and hermeneutical devices. Kabbalah is often presented as a body of theoretical lore, more a gnosis than a practical or experiential attitude to reality. Before we discuss the problems entailed in this theoretical perception of Kabbalah, it would be helpful to consider the manner in which modern scholars view the earlier, preceding stages of Jewish mysticism.

Scholem repeatedly presented the literature of the Heikhalot or the Merkavah as a body of mystical teachings also embodying descriptions of mystical experiences. Since the beginning of the present decade, however, some scholars have insisted upon the nonexperiential nature of the various works forming this literature. Some, such as E. E. Urbach, have depicted some of the mystical descriptions belonging to the Heikhalot literature as elaborations upon prior discussions in the Talmud and Midrash concerning the experience of revelation at Sinai. According to this view, the proper approach to these texts is literary: the uncovering of their written source transforms these seemingly mystical texts into literary elaborations of earlier material, a perspective adopted as well by David Halperin. Minute inspection of the manuscripts of the Heikhalot texts led Peter Schäfer to the conclusion that these works are redactions of earlier traditions, implicitly reducing the possibility of regarding them as descriptions of authentic mystical experiences. For the time being, this "literary" approach is the dominant one.

The next step in the development of Jewish mysticism, Ashkenazi Hasidism, has been described as an "esoteric theology" rather than a properly mystical movement. There is sufficient evidence, however, to justify the attempt to present the experiential facets of this theology. Various references to figures from the Rhineland and northern France as "prophets" and the existence of techniques implying a deep interest in experimental mysticism are solid proof for the occurrence of mystical experiences also among the Franco-German authors; but again, no one has initiated such a project.
Scholars have analyzed the literary structures of some Kabbalistic treatises and engaged in lengthy discussions on the nature of the Sephirots, of the source of evil, of the feminine aspects in the divine realm, and so on. To understand Kabbalah is, accordingly, seen as tantamount to understanding its tenets. This approach is not new; it has been in use since the Renaissance, when Christian authors interested in occult lore involved themselves in the study of the Kabbalah. For them, Kabbalah was primarily a concealed philosophy whose inner message had to be decoded, owing to the obscurity of its terminology and symbolism. This attitude was also embraced by various thinkers of the Enlightenment period and ultimately adopted by modern researchers of Kabbalah.

But the evaluation of Kabbalah as predominantly theoretical rather than practical is misleading. Although the large body of printed Kabbalistical literature indeed deals with theoretical issues, an understanding of Kabbalah based primarily upon this material is highly problematic, as it cannot be aptly appreciated without taking into consideration what seems to me to be the ultimate goals of Kabbalah. According to the perceptions of the Kabbalists themselves, this lore is primarily practical and experiential, and only secondarily theoretical. The practical and experiential aspects, however, are found mainly in manuscript treatises, which were intentionally preserved for the use of the few. It is sufficient to mention here the scores of R. Abraham Abulaia's works, including several handbooks of mystical techniques that were never printed. The many books written by Kabbalists belonging to the school of ecstatic Kabbalah likewise remained in manuscript, including the fourth gate of R. Hayyim Vital's Sha'arey Kedushah, which is heavily influenced by this branch of Kabbalah. Another major example of suppression is the voluminous Sefer ha-Meshi'ah, a text that originally consisted, as I understand it, of several hundred folios. Despite its influence on Safedian Kabbalah as well as on Sabbatarian thought, substantial parts were never published, and others were apparently lost. This work includes divine and angelic revelations, as well as instructions on how to attain them. The Kabbalists considered both the content of the revelations and the techniques—which shall be discussed below—to be sensitive to be published for a large audience. Yet the academic study of Kabbalah has neglected even this masterwork of Kabbalistic mysticism.

Another major genre of Kabbalistic literature that has passed nearly unnoticed by scholars is the extensive literature concerning the rationales for the commandments. As I have already remarked, since Kabbalah's beginnings as a historical phenomenon, Kabbalists produced an impressive number of theosophico-theurgical commentaries on the commandments—several thousand folios. Only a small part of these were published, the other, greater portion remaining in manuscript form. The contents of this field of Kabbalah have been neglected by scholarly research. The publication and detailed analysis of this material, which is of great importance for a more profound understanding of the spiritual aspect of Kabbalah, may contribute to a change in our perception of this lore from a theoretical to a more practical and experiential emphasis. Through performing the commandments with Kabbalistic intentions, a Kabbalist not only was acting according to a prescribed and fixed ritual but also was entering into a particular experience of participating in, and influencing, the divine life. This statement can easily be exemplified through a specific, though common, commandment: prayer.

Although this particular commandment was analyzed more than any other, some of the Kabbalistic commentaries on prayer are still in manuscript, ignored by those scholars who have surveyed mystical prayer in Judaism. Even the scores of commentaries on the prayerbook—some of which are highly interesting, such as those of Moses Cordovero or Naftali Hertz Treves—remained beyond the scope of various studies on prayer. This neglect has affected a large portion of Kabbalistic literature and contributed to the formation of a one-sided image of the nature of Kabbalah. Furthermore, appropriate analyses of these types of literature could catalyze an interesting transformation in our understanding of the role played by the theoretical element in Kabbalistic literature in the Kabbalists' mystical life.

Being for the most part a topography of the divine realm, this theoretical literature served more as a map than as speculative description. Maps, as we know, are intended to enable a person to fulfill a journey; for the Kabbalists, the mystical experience was such a journey. Though I cannot assert that every "theoretical" work indeed served such a use, this seems to have been the main purpose of the greatest part of this literature. I likewise presume that there were Kabbalists who never undertook mystical journeys, but were content to collect, classify, and afterward describe the material stemming from the labors of their predecessors or colleagues, just as one can sketch a map without ever having actually seen the territory involved. This reservation notwithstanding, however, an organic conception of the various bodies of Kabbalistic literature may reveal unexpected affinities among seemingly disparate literary genres; thus, for example, commentaries on the ten Sephirots may serve as aids for the performance of commandments, or for praying, with Kabbalistic intention.
Finally, some historical remarks may be in order here. Scholem's theory of the emergence of Kabbalah in Provence was based on the assumption that this religious phenomenon was the result of the merger of older Gnostic motifs or traditions with Neoplatonic philosophy. This assumption was never substantiated by a separate study of the topic as such, although Scholem did eventually refer to what he considered to be parallels between early Kabbalistic material, mostly in Sefer ha-Bahir, and Gnostic motifs. The latter, however, were only rarely discussed in detail, and the impression left is that Scholem considered the "novel" elements in the Kabbalistic version of Judaism as ancient traditions that infiltrated Jewish circles, were esoterically passed down within these closed circles, and eventually surfaced in late twelfth-century Provence, where they were combined with Neoplatonic concepts. This notion of the emergence of the theories of the Kabbalah theoretically allows for the contributions of the earlier strata of Jewish thought: Talmud and Midrash, Heikhalot literature, piyyut and Jewish philosophy, and, finally, Ashkenazi Hasidism. Practically none of these, however, was envisaged as a major source of those elements that constitute the peculiar physiognomy of the Kabbalistic phenomenon; basically, Kabbalah was seen as the result of an outbreak of new ideas that reinterpreted rabbinic Judaism according to religious categories comparatively alien in the literature of classical Judaism. Scholem's efforts were thus directed toward the uncovering of the Gnostic and Neoplatonic concepts that underlay early Kabbalah; although he considered it a Jewish phenomenon, he endeavored to explain its roots as belonging to non-Jewish intellectual universes. This is, mutatis mutandis, a much more elaborated, detailed, and documented version of the perspective of Adolphe Franck and Heinrich Graetz.

This vision of Kabbalah as Jewish Gnosticism is an organic sequel to Scholem's understanding of Heikhalot literature as a "Gnostic" phenomenon. This "Gnostification" of Jewish mysticism—which was later continued in Scholem's view of Sabbatianism—took place in a particular intellectual atmosphere, in which Hans Jonas's works had begun to be influential. It is worthwhile examining the relationship between Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism against the background of modern studies on Gnosticism. Research undertaken in recent decades seems to have contributed a novel approach to the long-debated problem of the origins of Gnostic thought. Far more than did scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, contemporary scholars of Gnosticism refer to Jewish influence on the emerging Gnostic literature; the reality of Jewish Gnosticism against the background of modern studies on Gnosticism.

If the parallels noted by Scholem are indeed more than accidental resemblances, but reflect historical affinities, then I would propose another explanation: ancient Jewish motifs that penetrated Gnostic texts remained at the same time the patrimony of Jewish thought and continued to be transmitted in Jewish circles, ultimately providing the conceptual framework of Kabbalah. This theory postulates a long series of links that cannot be proven by the extant Jewish texts; however, this difficulty also holds if we accept Scholem's theory that the earliest Kabbalistic documents derived from ancient Gnostic traditions. Furthermore, the assumption that the so-called Gnostic elements that were formative factors in early Kabbalah were originally non-Jewish cannot explain why Jews were interested in absorbing them in general and how they came to be understood as the esoteric interpretation of Judaism. Furthermore, if such a metamorphosis indeed took place in antiquity and remained subterranean, it is hardly reasonable to assume that the first Kabbalists, some of whom were members of the rabbinic establishment, would be prepared to accept these traditions as constituting an authoritative understanding of Jewish texts. Such experts in texts as R. Abraham ben David, Nahmanides, or R. Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret can hardly be described as naive thinkers who would accept, as the mystical core of Judaism, traditions that were in principle unrelated to it. Because such a stance would have been highly uncharacteristic of these men, the misreading is a strange one.

It is, however, possible to assume that, if the motifs transmitted in those unknown circles formed part of an ancient weltanschauung, their affinities to the rabbinic mentality would be more organic and easily absorbed into the mystical cast of Judaism. According to this hypothesis, we do not need to account for why ancient Jews took over Gnostic doctrines, why they transmitted them, and, finally, how this "Gnostic" Judaism was revived in the Middle Ages by conservative Jewish authorities. Furthermore, an attempt to study Jewish mysticism along the lines I have proposed has a manifest methodological advantage: it postulates a relatively organic evolution of Jewish mysticism that can be demonstrated by using Hebrew material found in the various layers of Jewish literature and that, consequently, can also be rejected.
of philological or historical analysis of the texts. It is obvious that my proposal is consonant with some of the assertions of the Kabbalists themselves, who repeatedly asserted that the Kabbalah is a genuine ancient tradition which is an esoteric interpretation of Judaism. This self-perception has been systematically disregarded by modern research of Kabbalah, with no detailed analysis. The traditional understanding of Kabbalah needs, therefore, to be carefully re-evaluated and checked against findings in the related fields of Gnosticism, Midrash, and Talmud. All these types of literature could provide relevant material for what I assume was a silent growth of ancient Jewish esotericism. I do not propose to neglect Gnostic material but rather to examine it in order to extract evidence for the existence of Jewish views that were partially or totally neglected by ancient Jewish texts. The most serious work, however, must be invested in Jewish texts, which need to be meticulously inspected as relevant sources for later mystical or mythical motifs.

VIII. AN APPRAISAL FOR RECONSTRUCTION

The affinities between Kabbalistic concepts, mainly theosophical ones, and the earlier Jewish material are important for more than one reason. Not only can they provide evidence for the antiquity of some of the Kabbalistic views, as I have pointed out; these medieval mystical treatises elaborate upon seemingly ancient concepts that can eventually provide important clues for the better understanding of their meaning or of the structures in which they were incorporated. Theosophical Kabbalah is, as a whole, a systematic exposition of a worldview, which surpasses the fragmentary treatment of theological topics either in the Talmud and Midrash or in Gnostic literature. If Kabbalah preserved some material historically linked with ancient Jewish concepts that can still be detected in ancient literature, it is also plausible that early Kabbalistic literature preserved other ancient material no longer extant in other bodies of literature. This is a highly hypothetical assumption, but one that cannot be rejected without more profound examination.

On the basis of a series of studies published in recent years, I should like to propose what I call the reconstructionalist approach, which may be described as an attempt to use the more elaborate conceptual structures of the Kabbalah in order to examine various ancient motifs and to organize them in coherent structures. This approach is based on the assumption that not only unrelated motifs of ancient extraction reached medieval Kabbalah but also more complex structures, no longer extant in other texts. The use of Kabbalistic literature both as a source of material that may contribute to better understanding of individual motifs and as a source of inspiration for constructing larger structures to permit a broader understanding of ancient mysticism is certainly complicated and must be attempted only with great caution. A prudent and meticulous examination of both the Kabbalistic material and the pre-Kabbalistic traditions may yield significant results. But if one assumes that ancient Jewish mystics, who exerted some influence on Gnosticism, were in the possession of a more complex notion of divine reality and of Jewish tradition, one will only rarely find more elaborate discussions on these issues in ancient texts. I assume that Kabbalah has probably preserved some ancient conceptual structures that supply a more unified view of the otherwise unrelated and sometimes unintelligible motifs and texts. This reconstructionalist approach mostly concerns the pre-Kab-balistic texts, the understanding of which can be improved by applying a previously unexpected conceptual structure to an ancient text. The adequacy of this method, however, is indirectly important for the question of the antiquity of the Kabbalah; the possibility of approaching some ancient material with the help of modes of thinking preserved in Kabbalah may demonstrate that this lore not only makes use of older motifs but also continues more comprehensive intellectual patterns.

I cannot exemplify this methodological approach here, but I have made use of it in several articles in which I have attempted to show that anthropomorphic perceptions of the angelic world preserved in the Torah preserved in an explicit and elaborated way only in Kabbalah can illuminate our understanding of earlier midrashic, talmudic, and Gnostic texts, as well as certain remarks found in the Heikhalot literature. Similarly, the Kabbalistic equation of Metatron with the “supernal anthropos” is corroborated by several ancient texts, which reflect the existence of a notion of Enoch’s ascent as a return to the lost state of Adam, viewed as a cosmic anthropos.

The treatment of the topics that follow is conducted in accordance with the above-described approach. I shall check the earlier Jewish sources for both the conceptual attitudes of Kabbalah and the mystical techniques it employed. This task is by no means an easy one; the potentially relevant material is spread over hundreds of treatises, including talmudic, midrashic, and poetic literature in Hebrew, and apocryphal works in a variety of languages. The main stumbling block, however, is not the huge quantity of material but the fact that it has been treated to date in a peculiar way; the mythical elements inherent in its conceptual structure were neglected by scholarly analyses that commonly preferred a nonmythical reconstruction consonant with the theological inclinations prevalent in the rationalistic approaches to Judaism of the Wissenschaft des Judentums. Without a new understanding of the mystical,
mythical, and theurgic motifs and concepts or the broader intellectual structures found in the ancient and early medieval Jewish literatures, Kabbalah is doomed to remain a medieval revolution that enigmatically exploded in the bosom of "nonmythical" rabbinic centers. Romantic and charming as such an explanation may be, it does not take into serious consideration the conservative trend of the rabbinic mind or its critical acumen toward texts; nor can the scholarly evaluation of Kabbalah as a novelty explain how it came to be accepted—first in a few elite circles and later on by a wider public—without significant opposition during the first hundred years of its appearance as a historical phenomenon, and with only limited and ineffective protests after the late fifteenth century. There seems to be a great gap in the estimation of the Kabbalah between its popular understanding as an ancient authentic esoteric Jewish lore and the scholarly disenchantment with this phenomenon as an intrusion of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism under the misleading guise of esoteric Judaism.

If mysticism is the quintessence of religion, the quintessence of mysticism is the sense of union with God. The intensification of religious life that characterizes most forms of mysticism culminates at times in paranormal experiences, whose literary expression appears in descriptions of unitive relations with supermundane beings and sometimes ultimately with God himself. Without taking a stand in the dispute over the ultimate nature of mystical experience as such, a scrutiny of its expression in the literary medium reveals rather limited forms of semantic articulation: erotic imagery, noetic propositions, and unitive phrases constitute most of the stuff of these descriptions.

Stemming from standard religious terminology or from philosophical texts, these statements attempt to convey an experience that surpasses ordinary states of consciousness. The assumption, implicit or explicit, that these documents describe experiences that transcend normal consciousness is generally accepted by both mystics and scholars of mysticism; however, little attention has been paid by the latter to the implications of such an assumption for the study of mystical experience. At its best, the mystic's testimony is a veil covering a psychic process that as such must remain beyond the scope of textual studies. At worst, it reflects conventions accepted in their social and religious milieu and may be helpful for the understanding of their intellectual parameters.

It is my conviction that psychological or psychoanalytical approaches to mystical texts must be employed with care, given the reductionist tendency inherent in their hermeneutical techniques. The chance of