

“Son of an Israelite Woman and an Egyptian Man” — Jesus as the Blasphemer (Lev 24:10–23): An Anti-Gospel Polemic in the *Zohar**

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■ Introduction

The short biblical story of the blasphemer (Lev 24:10–23) received a unique mystical and mythical interpretation in the *Zohar*.¹ When carefully examined, the zoharic homilies of the story reveal the hidden influences of Jewish polemic anti-gospel traditions. This essay exposes the strong link between the biblical

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¹ *Zohar* 3, Emor. 105b–106a.

blasphemer and Jesus,² as well as between the blasphemer's mother and the Virgin Mary.³ In fact, the zoharic commentary on the blasphemer's biblical story provides a significant understanding of the *Zohar's* ambivalent attitude towards Jesus as Son of God—and of the Virgin Mary as linked to the *Shekhinah*.

Several elements of the early counter-narrative history of Jesus, as it is found in the Talmud, for instance, were developed in Jewish anti-Christian polemical works and folklore formulated from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (mainly in

² Cf. Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 66–72, 91–92, 106–7.

³ Much research has been done on the reaction towards Christianity in zoharic literature. For a complete list of publications see Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2010) 126–34, 154–56; idem, “The Virgin Mary as the Moon that Lacks the Sun—A Zoharic Polemic Against the Veneration of Mary,” *Kabbalah* 21 (2010) 9–13, n. 7–17, 18 n. 26; idem, “Chapters From an Emotional and Sexual Biography of God: Reflections on God's Attributes in the Bible, Midrash and Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah* 6 (2001) 263–86 [Hebrew]; Yitzhak Baer, “The Historical Context of Ra'aya Mehemna,” *Zion* 5 (1940) 1–44; Yehuda Liebes, “Christian Influences on the Zohar,” in *Studies in the Zohar* (trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nackache, and Penina Peli; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) 139–61, 228–44; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Patriarchy and the Motherhood of God in Zoharic Kabbalah and Meister Eckhart,” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Ra'anana S. Boustana and Alex Ramos; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 2:1049–88; idem, “Remembering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the Zohar,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers; Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998) 214–46; idem, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 129–85; idem, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) 63–88; Ellen Haskell, “The Death of Rachel and the Kingdom of Heaven: Jewish Engagement with Christian Themes in *Sefer ha-Zohar*,” *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 38 (2012) 1–31. On the affinities between Mary, the Holy Spirit and the *Shekhinah*, see Arthur Green, “*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review* 26 (2002) 1–52; Peter Schäfer, “Mirror of His Beauty: The Femininity of God in Jewish Mysticism and in Christianity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 45–59; idem, “Daughter, Sister, Bride, and Mother: Images of the Femininity of God in the Early Kabbalah,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000) 221–42; Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990); Yehuda Liebes, “Ha-Omnam Betulah Hi ha-Shekhinah?” (Is the *Shekhinah* indeed a virgin?) *Pe'amim* 101–102 (2005) 303–13; Abrams, “The Virgin Mary.” On the comparison between the messianic figures of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and Jesus, see Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982) 230–32 [Hebrew]; Elchanan Reiner, “From Joshua through Jesus to Simeon bar Yohai: Towards a Typology of Galilean Heroes” (paper presented at the Zohar Workshop on Late Aramaic: The Literary and Linguistic Context of the Zohar, University College, London, 2009).

western Europe). These elements eventually became part of the famous polemical tract known (in its different variants and forms) as *Toledot Yešu* (The life story of Jesus) [henceforth TY].⁴

The article focuses on three central themes of the counter-narrative history of Jesus: 1) the magical and lethal use of the Holy Name; 2) the Egyptian father; 3) the mother as a prostitute/an adulterous woman.

The anti-Christian zoharic homilies should be understood as part of a rise in Jewish anti-Christian polemical works in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages, many of them from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁵ Moreover, as shown in this essay, the zoharic anti-Christian polemics were likely also influenced by Kabbalistic traditions containing polemical material against Christianity, such as the material which can be found in the mystical medieval midrash *'Otiyot dēRabbi 'Akiva* (8–9th cent.), in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (13th cent.), and in *Sefer haPēli'āh* (13–14th cent.).

The story of the blasphemer is described in Lev 24:10–14:

Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the sons of Israel; and the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel struggled with each other in the camp. The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. Now his mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.

⁴ Much of the research on *Toledot Yešu* can be found in *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus; Two Volumes and Database* (ed. Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), and in the volume following the *Toledot Yeshu* Princeton conference (2009): *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (ed. Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson and Yaacov Deutsch; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). For further research, see John G. Gager and Mika Ahuvia, "Some Notes on Jesus and His Parents: from the New Testament Gospels to the 'Toledot Yeshu,'" in *Envisioning Judaism*, 2:997–1019; William Horbury, "The 'Toledot Yeshu' as Midrash," in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations* (ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg; Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013) 159–67; idem, "A Critical Examination of the Toledoth Yeshu," (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1970); Peter Schäfer, "Jesus' Origin, Birth, and Childhood According to the Toledot Yeshu and the Talmud," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome; Jews in Antiquity* (ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 139–61; Yaakov Deutsch, "Toledot Yeshu in Christian Eyes" (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997) [Hebrew]; Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Cavalry, 1902; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1994); idem, *History* (ed. and rev. William Horbury; vol. 1 of *The Jewish-Christian Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789*; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996).

⁵ The most important example is probably *Nizāḥon Vetus* (13th cent.). See David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizāḥon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979). Additional works are Joseph ben Nathan Official's *Sefer Yosef ha-Mekane* (13th cent.); see: *Sefer Yosef ha-Mekane* (ed. Jehuda Rosenthal; Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1970) and *Sefer Tešuva la-Minim*, Oxford Bodleian Library MS Opp. 757, fols. 30a–58a.

They put him in custody so that the command of the Lord might be made clear to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him.

This short story is extremely unusual and stands out in the narrative frame of Leviticus,⁶ raising many questions: Who exactly is this son of Shelomith and an Egyptian man? Who is the Israelite man who fights with him? And most importantly: What exactly does the blasphemer do? And what is the nature of his blasphemy?

■ Midrashic and Philonic Interpretations

The earliest source supplying a narrative context to the biblical story of the blasphemer is found in the writings of Philo (d. 45–50 CE), who describes the blasphemer (the son of the Israelite woman and an Egyptian man) as a bastard (νόθος).⁷ Philo uses extremely strong condemnatory language, describing this product of a mixed marriage as “a promiscuous, nondescript and menial crowd, a bastard (νόθον)⁸ host, so to speak, associated with the true-born.”⁹ Philo sees Shelomith’s son as having rejected his mother’s tradition and having embraced his father’s Egyptian atheism, which included the worshipping of the earth as a challenge to heavenly rule. In a fit of anger, and out of his love for Egyptian atheism, the son of the Egyptian cursed God and was punished by stoning.¹⁰

The following source, supplying a fuller narrative version of the blasphemer’s story, is found in midrash *Vayyiqra’ Rabbah* (5–6th cent. Palestine) [henceforth *VR*]:

In the name of Rabbi Levi: “[*He being the son of an Egyptian man* (Lev 24:10).] He was definitely a bastard. How so? The taskmasters [in charge of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt] were Egyptians and the officers were Israelites. One taskmaster was in charge of ten officers and one officer was in charge of ten [Israelite] men. Thus a taskmaster was in charge of a hundred and ten men [namely, a hundred Israelite slaves and ten Israelite officers].

⁶ See Jacob Weingreen, “The Case of the Blasphemer (Lev. 24:10 ff.),” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972) 118–23; Rodney R. Hutton, “Narrative in Leviticus: The Case of the Blaspheming Son (Lev 24, 10–23),” *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 3 (1997) 145–63; idem, “The Case of the Blasphemer Revisited (Lev. XXIV 10–23),” *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999) 532–541; Louis H. Feldman, “The Case of the Blasphemer (Lev. 24:10–16) According to Philo and Josephus,” in *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism* (ed. Lynn LiDonnici and Andrea Lieber; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 213–26; Mark Leuchter, “The Ambiguous Details in the Blasphemer Narrative: Sources and Redaction in Leviticus 24:10–23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011) 431–50.

⁷ *De Vita Mosis* 2:193. See Feldman, “The Case of the Blasphemer.” The word νόθος can also be translated as a general term for “low class.” I thank Yehuda Liebes for his remarks on the different possible translations of this word.

⁸ The word νόθον does not necessarily translate as “bastard” but also as “of mixed race” (or mixed multitude). See above, n. 7.

⁹ *De Vita Mosis* 1:147. See Feldman, “The Case of the Blasphemer,” 218.

¹⁰ *De Vita Mosis* 2:193–202.

One time a taskmaster paid an early morning visit to an officer and said to him: ‘Go and assemble your group of ten.’ When [the Egyptian taskmaster] entered [the Israelite officer’s] house, [the officer’s] wife smiled at him. He thought, ‘She is all mine!’ He went out and hid behind a ladder. As soon as her husband went out, he entered and disgraced himself with her. [The Israelite officer] turned around and saw him coming out of the house. When [the Egyptian taskmaster] realized that he had seen him coming out of his house, he kept beating him the whole day, saying, ‘Work better, work better!’ He intended thereby to kill him. At that moment, the Holy Spirit stimulated Moses, as is written: *He turned this way and that way* (Exod 2:12). What does this mean? Well, [Moses] saw what [the Egyptian taskmaster] had done to [the Israelite officer] in the house and what he intended to do to him in the field. He said, ‘Not enough that he disgraced himself with [the Israelite’s] wife, but he wants to kill him!’ Immediately, *He saw that there was no man [and he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand]* (ibid.).”

Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nehemiah and *Rabanan* (lit. the rabbis) argued on the meaning of the words *He saw that there was no man*. Rabbi Yehuda says: “He saw that there was no one to stand and be zealous for the name of the blessed Holy One and he killed him.” Rabbi Nehemiah says: “He [Moses] saw that there was no one to stand [against him] and he mentioned upon him the name (ויזכיר עליי את השם) and killed him.”¹¹

The blasphemer described here is a bastard, the fruit of an illicit relationship between his mother (Shelomith) and the Egyptian taskmaster killed by Moses (using the magical power of God’s name). In earlier midrashic sources (from 3rd cent. Palestine) the blasphemer even appears as the only bastard known in his times.¹²

The narrative described here bears an intriguing resemblance to the counter-narrative to the story of Jesus’s birth in the New Testament, as hinted in the Babylonian Talmud:

(Was he) the son of Stada (and not on the contrary) the son of Pandera?

Said Rav Hisda: the husband (*ba’al*) was Stada, (and) the cohabiter/lover (*bo’el*) was Pandera.

(But was not) the husband (*ba’al*) Pappos ben Yehuda and rather his mother Stada [he is Jesus the Nazarene¹³]”?

¹¹ *Vayyiqra’ Rabbah* 32:4 [italics in original]. Based on the translation and comments of Daniel Matt; see Daniel Matt, *The Zohar* (Pritzker Edition; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) 8:192, n. 402. Cf. *Tanḥuma*, *Šemot* 9, *Emor* 24; *Tanḥuma* (Buber), *Emor* 32; *Šemot Rabbah* 1:28; *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eli’ezer* 48.

¹² Mekhilta de-Rabbi Išmael, par. B’o; Masekhta de-Piša, par. 5; Sifra, *Torat Kohanim*, *Emor*, par. 14:1; cf. Midrash Tehilim to Psalms 122 (ed. Buber, Sim. 5).

¹³ Ms. Vatican 108, fol. 47r. See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 149 n. 9. This manuscript, copied by three different scribes in a medium-size, vowel-less and not entirely meticulous Sephardic square script, was probably made in Provence and is datable to the late 13th–early 14th cent. It is possible though that the note on Jesus (written in the margins of the folio) was added by a later scribe.

His mother was [Miriam], (the woman who) let (her) women's [hair] grow long (*megadla* [šē'ar] nešayya). This is as they say about her in Pumbeditha: This one turned away from (was unfaithful to) her husband (*satat dā miba'alāh*).¹⁴

In this passage, Jesus is described as born as a result of an act of adultery. His real father is identified as Pandera,¹⁵ a name almost identical to the one mentioned by Celsus:

Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where the mother of Jesus is described as having been turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera.¹⁶

It is possible that the story about Jesus's Father being a (Roman) soldier named Panthera (or Pantera) influenced the description in *VR*, whereby the Egyptian taskmaster was the blasphemer's father, thus hinting at the counter-narrative life story of Jesus.¹⁷

Moreover, Celsus also mentions the connection between Jesus and Egypt in the context of obtaining Egyptian magical powers:

And he says that because he [Jesus] was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit, because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God.¹⁸

Jesus's escape to Egypt is mentioned in Matt 2:13–16, but here Celsus adds his own counter-gospel narrative of the short period that Jesus spent in Egypt. Schäfer has shown the possible connection between the Egyptian magic used by Jesus (as described by Celsus) and the identification of the magician with the god whom he conjures up. In this context he also mentions the magical use of God's name (in particular, the mention of the Tetragrammaton YHWH), as found in the Greek magical papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt(!).¹⁹ The fact that Jesus achieved magical powers in Egypt is also hinted at in the Talmud, which describes the Son of Stada as bringing magic from Egypt "by means of scratches/tattoos (*biseritāh*) upon his

¹⁴ See Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 16 (according to *b. Šabb.* 104b; *b. Sanh.* 67a); *ibid.*, 149–50 n. 8–14. As the text is only preserved in the uncensored manuscripts and printed editions of the Bavli, Schäfer quotes according to Ms. Munich 95, with some variations.

¹⁵ Cf. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 151 n. 29.

¹⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1:32; translation according to Origen: *Contra Celsum* (trans., introd., and notes by Henry Chadwick; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 28–31; Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 19.

¹⁷ Cf. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 98–99.

¹⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1:32; Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 19.

¹⁹ Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 57–60; Schäfer shows also the possible counter-references in the New Testament about the connection between Jesus and Egypt and his use of magical powers, *ibid.*, 20; cf. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 103–104, 114–16, 124, 132.

flesh.”²⁰ In this context, another important detail mentioned in the midrash from *VR* is the power of the ineffable Holy Name, as a weapon used by Moses to kill the Egyptian man (the blasphemer’s father). By this allusion, as suggested by Scholem, the midrash is possibly hinting at the attempt of the blasphemer to use the magical power of the name.²¹ As is well known, the use of the ineffable Holy Name becomes a central theme in the counter-narrative of Jesus’s life found in polemic Jewish sources.²²

The combination of the various elements in the *VR* story creates a strong resemblance to the counter-narrative traditions about Jesus found in the Talmud and in Celsus: the description of the blasphemer as the most famous bastard of his time; the fact that his father is an Egyptian soldier (who committed adultery with Shelomith); the possible allusion to the magical use of the ineffable Holy Name (which Jesus might have acquired in Egypt, as described by Philo); and finally, the fact that both Jesus and the blasphemer were publicly executed for their acts.²³

■ The Zoharic Homilies on the Blasphemer’s Story

The zoharic homilies on the blasphemer appear in the manuscripts (preceding the first printed editions of the *Zohar*) as part of a separate unit, unconnected to the Emor pericope, with which they are linked in the printed editions (where they appear at the end of the pericope, *Zohar* 3 105b–106b).²⁴

When one takes into account the fact that the contents of these homilies contain some resemblance to the *Rā’ya Mehēmna* and *Tikunei Zohar* (henceforth *RM* and *TZ*),²⁵ it seems plausible to suggest that this material might have its origins closer to the beginning of the fourteenth century.

²⁰ *B. Šabb.* 104b; *y. Šabb.* 12:4 (13d); Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 16. On the Talmud’s assessment of Egyptian magic, see *b. Qid.* 49b: “Ten kabs [measure of capacity] of witchcraft (*kešafim*) descended to the world: nine were taken by Egypt and one by the rest of the world.” See Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 151–52, n. 35.

²¹ See Gershom Scholem, *Sefer ha-Zohar shel Gershom Scholem* [Gershom Scholem’s Annotated Zohar] (6 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 6:2592 [Hebrew].

²² Cf. below pp. 110–14.

²³ For a somewhat similar summary of all the talmudic motifs in describing the counter-narrative life story of Jesus, see Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 113.

²⁴ In the Cremona edition, these homilies appear in *Zohar, Emor*, 51d–52a. See Vatican 199 (15th cent.), fols. 207b–212a; Vatican 207 (15th cent.), fols. 25a–34a; cf. Vatican - Neofiti 24 (16th cent.), fols. 139b–147a; Roma - Biblioteca Casanatense 2971 (16th cent.), fols. 218a–219b. In some early manuscripts (14–15th cent.) which include some commentary on the *Emor* pericope, these homilies do not appear at all; see Cambridge University Library Add. 1023; Paris - Bibliothèque Nationale heb. 779; Vatican 208; Vatican 206; Toronto Friedberg 5-015.

²⁵ Cf. below n. 28.

1. *The bastard, the mixed multitude and the lethal use of the Holy Name*

The zoharic homilies on the blasphemer have many similarities to the midrashic (and Philonic) interpretation of the blasphemer's story. However, these homilies contain some unique additions, which strengthen the anti-Christian allusions to the counter-narrative history of Jesus.

The homily begins with an allusion to the fact that the blasphemer is a bastard:

"The son of an Israelite woman—he being the son of an Egyptian man—went out . . . (Lev. 24:10)."

Went out. Rabbi Yehudah said, "He went out from the sphere of all, he went out from the sphere of faith, and he went out from the sphere of the share of Israel.

*"Brawled in the camp—*from here we learn: Whoever comes from a filthy seed eventually exposes it before all.

What causes this? The filth of the evil portion within him, for he has no share in the entire sphere of Israel."²⁶

The *Zohar* places the story of the blasphemer in a unique mythical context. The Son is transformed into the mythic figure of the bastard, who was begotten of "a filthy seed" and who therefore has the "filth of the evil portion within him." As demonstrated above, the midrash in *VR* emphasizes the fact that the blasphemer is the sole example of the biblical bastard. The *Zohar*, in its unique hermeneutic interpretation, adds a mythical context to this figure by hinting to his adulterous origin from the seed of the Evil Serpent (symbolizing the *Sitra 'Ahra*, the "Other Side").

The symbolism of the filthy seed is known from earlier sources²⁷ and appears in another zoharic source belonging to *TZ* (or *RM*):

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field (Gen. 3:1). "Subtle ('*arum*') for Evil (*lera*'), "than any beast" – of the world's nations' idolaters (עֲכָרִים), and they are the sons of the Ancient Serpent who seduced Eve. And [they are] the mixed multitude ('*Erev Rav*'), certainly they are [from] the filth [seed] that the serpent had penetrated in Eve. And from that filth was Cain begotten, and [he] killed Abel."²⁸

²⁶ *Zohar* 3, *Emor*, 105b [italics in original]. In all the following citations of *Zohar Emor*, I have relied in part on the translation of Daniel Matt; see Matt, *The Zohar* (Pritzker Edition), 8:189.

²⁷ See *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, (Venice edition of 1544 with variants prepared by Chaim Meir Horowitz) 21:18c; cf. *Zohar* 1:28b; *Zohar* 1:54a–55a; *Zohar* 1:63b; and many more. See Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, "Hava Ayala ve-Nahaš: 'Alilot Aharit ve-Rešit, Mitoš u-Migdar" (Eve, the Gazelle and the Serpent: Narratives of Creation and Redemption, Myth and Gender), *Kabbalah* 21 (2009) 255–309 [Hebrew].

²⁸ Cf. *Zohar* 1:28b. This description appears only in the *Tikunei Zohar* Manuscripts; see Vatican 208, fols. 106a–116a; *Sefer ha-Zohar shel Gershom Scholem* [Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar], 1:94. Cf. *Zohar* 3:82b; *Sefer ha-Zohar shel Gershom Scholem*, 1:121. See Oded Yisraeli, "Cain as the Scion of Satan: the Evolution of a Gnostic Myth in the 'Zohar,'" *HTR* 109,1 (2016) 56–74.

The filthy seed of the Serpent is identified here with the “mixed multitude” (i.e., Israelites mixed with Egyptian origin). In the zoharic homilies on the blasphemer this is connected with the mythic figure of the bastard who was begotten from the Serpent’s filthy seed. Interestingly, the mixed multitude is identified in another zoharic *RM* passage with the figure of Jesus (and Muhammed):

From the side of idolatry *Šābtai* (Saturn) is called Lilith, mixed dung, on account of the filth mixed from all kinds of dirt and worms, into which they throw dead dogs and dead asses, the sons of Esau and Ishmael, in her (and there) *Jesus and Mohammed*, who are dead dogs, are buried among them. She (Lilith) is the grave of idolatry, where they bury the uncircumcised, (who are) dead dogs, an abomination and a bad smell, soiled and fetid, a bad family. She (Lilith) is the ligament, which holds fast *the “mixed multitude”* (Ex. xii. 38), which is *mixed among Israel*, and which holds fast bone and flesh, that is, *the sons of Esau and Ishmael*, dead bone and unclean flesh torn of beasts in the field, of which it is said (Ex. xxii. 31): “Ye shall cast it to the dogs.”²⁹

When combining these three sources (which might all be linked to the later *RM* material), it is plausible that the serpent’s filthy seed, from which the blasphemous bastard was begotten, alludes also to Jesus.³⁰

The zoharic homily also reveals a similar background story to that which appears in the *VR* midrash:

[Rabbi Abba said:] Come and see: It is written *and the son of the Israelite woman and a certain Israelite man brawled in the camp* (Leviticus 24:10). This verse has already been established; but this is the son of another wife of his father, husband of Shelomith.

When an Egyptian man came to her in the middle of the night, [her husband] returned home and realized what had happened: he separated from her and no longer cohabited with her. He took another wife and engendered this one, called *a certain Israelite man*, whereas the other one is *the son of the Israelite woman*.³¹

²⁹ *Zohar* 3, *RM*, 282a [italics added]. In the printed editions the reference to “Jesus and Mohammed” was omitted. See Vatican 606, fol. 116a. See Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud: Midrash, Zohar, and the Liturgy of the Synagogue* (Cambridge, UK: Deighton, Bell, 1893) 40. Cf. below n. 39.

³⁰ In this context it is interesting to note that Schäfer suggests that the name “Stara” (which appears in some manuscripts and printed editions of *b. Sanh.* 67a as the name of Jesus’s mother or her husband, instead of “Stada”)—can be vocalized as “Sitra” (lit. “side”). Schäfer mentions that he does not “want to suggest that ‘Sitra’ could be an allusion to the kabbalistic notion of *Sitra ‘Ahra*, the ‘other side’ of evil, particularly in the Zohar, [as] The Karlsruhe manuscript (13th century) might be too early for such a kabbalistic reading of the Jesus story.” See Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 149. However, this possibility might be a suitable reading of the zoharic homily, alluding to the possibility of the *Sitra ‘Ahra* (symbolized by the serpent) as being the father of the blasphemer, and thus alluding to connection between the blasphemer and Jesus the (bastard) son of “Stara.”

³¹ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics in original], as translated in Pritzker Edition (trans. Matt), 8:192.

This description is very similar to the midrash in *VR*. However, the *Zohar* adds the background story of the Israelite man being the son of Shelomith's husband from his second wife. Another possibility, which appears further on in the homilies, is that the Israelite man is actually Shelomith's husband himself, fighting with his wife's bastard son. The homily continues to expand the narrative, bringing additional information that is not found in earlier midrashic sources:

[Rabbi Abba asks:] "If they brawled with one another, what need is there here for the Holy Name? And why did he blaspheme the Holy Name?"

Well, in the midst of fighting, that *certain Israelite man* said something about the [other one's] mother. Immediately, *the son of the Israelite woman blasphemed* (ויקח, *vayiqqov* [pierced])—as is said: "*Vayiqqov* (he pierced), *a hole in its door*" (2 Kgs 12:10). . . . And [he] cursed in order to defend his mother. . . . Mystery of the matter: *Such is the way of an adulteress* . . . (Prov 30:20).³²

Rabbi Abba reveals that during the fight between the Israelite man and "the son of an Israelite woman" (the blasphemer), the Israelite man said "something about the mother." Clearly it is hinted here that the Israelite man told the blasphemer that his mother was a whore and that he was a bastard.³³ As a result, the offended son, wanting to defend his mother's name, used the Holy Name as a weapon in an attempt to kill (pierce) the Israelite man.

Another detailed description of this fight is found in an alternative homily by Rabbi Yitzhaq:

Alternatively, *The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name, cursing it* (Lev 24:11). . . .

Rabbi Yitzhaq said, "They brawled with one another and he [the 'Israelite man'] said something about the [blasphemer's] mother, and that his [Egyptian] father was the one killed by the Holy Name - as has been established: It is written: *Do you speak to kill me [as you killed the Egyptian]?* (Exod 2:14), for Moses killed him by the Holy Name. So he [the blasphemer] extended a word toward him. . . .

Therefore, *he was brought to Moses* (Lev 24:11) . . . so father and son fell into Moses' hands."³⁴

Rabbi Yitzhaq adds that the Israelite man had not only spoken about the blasphemer's mother (implying her impurity), but had also revealed to him that Moses killed his Egyptian father by the lethal power of the Holy Name. Rabbi Yitzhaq alludes to a midrashic tradition according to which the question: *Do you intend to kill me?* (הלהרגני אתה אומר, Exod 2:14), should be read hyperliterally: *Do you speak* (אומר) *to*

³² *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics in original].

³³ This appears explicitly in the commentary of Rashi (R. Shelomo Yitzhaqi, 11–12th cent.) on Lev 24:11.

³⁴ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics in original].

kill me?—implying that Moses killed the Egyptian taskmaster by voicing the Holy Name (YHWH),³⁵ as mentioned also in the ending of the VR midrash mentioned above. As a result, the blasphemer “extended a word toward him,” that is, he pronounced the Holy Name in order to aim its lethal power toward the Israelite man. Eventually, both his father and he “fell into Moses’ hands.”

A few elements in the zoharic homilies strengthen the possibility that the hidden meaning of these homilies is an anti-Christian polemic alluding to some familiar Jewish counter-narrative traditions regarding the life story of Jesus (in particular some variations of TY). The following sections will discuss a few themes that might be hinted at in the VR midrash that seem to be more explicitly alluded to in the zoharic homilies.

a. The magical and lethal use of the Holy Name

As mentioned above, the magical use of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) is found already in Greek magical papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt.³⁶ In rabbinic literature, aside from the descriptions of Jesus using (Egyptian) magical powers, a censored passage in *b. Sanh.* 106a might hint to Jesus using the power of the Holy Name (through an interpretation of the words of Balaam): “‘Alas, who shall live when God does this! (Num 24:23),’ [R. Simeon ben Lakish said: Woe unto him who makes himself alive *by the name of God*].”³⁷ In our context it should be mentioned that, similarly to the blasphemer, Balaam functions in some rabbinic sources as sort of a (counter) pre-figuration of Jesus.³⁸ In a censored version of a passage in *Tikunei Zohar*, the name of Balaam replaces Jesus’s name, which appeared in the first editions of the *Zohar*.³⁹ Balaam is even described, in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (est. 8–9th cent. Palestine), similarly to the way in which Jesus is described in the

³⁵ See *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*, 20; *Tanḥuma*, *Šemot* 10; *Šemot Rabbah* 1:30. Cf. *Vayyiqra’ Rabbah* 32:4; *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eli’ezer* 48; *Šemot Rabbah* 1:29; Yuval Harari, “Moses, the Sword, and *The Sword of Moses*: Between Rabbinical and Magical Traditions,” *JQR* 12.4 (2005) 311–12, n. 67.

³⁶ Cf. above n. 19.

³⁷ See Travers R. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1903; repr. Jersey City: Ktav, 2007), 75–76, 405 [italics added]; Horbury, *A Critical Examination*, 409–10.

³⁸ Herford entitled the section dealing with the *B. Sanh.* 106a paragraph: “Balaam (Jesus) and the Name of God,” Horbury, *A Critical Examination*, 56–75, 409 n. 1; Ephraim E. Urbach, “Drašot Ḥazal ‘al Nevi’ei Umot ha-‘Olam ve-al Parašat Bil’am Le’or ha-Vikuah ha-Yehudi-Nošri” (Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories in light of the Jewish-Christian debate) in *Me’olamam Šel Ḥakhamim: Kovveš Mehkarim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 537–55 [Hebrew].

³⁹ See *Tikunei Zohar* (Constantinople: N.p., 1740), *Tikun* 69, 97a; cf. Jonatan M. Benarroch, “Sabba and Yanuqa – ‘Two that are one’: Allegory, Symbol, and Myth in Zoharic Literature” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 179 n. 274–75 [Hebrew].

Aramaic texts of TY.⁴⁰ However, in the Aramaic texts of TY Jesus has no knowledge of the Holy Name. He simply uses “words of magic” (מילין דחרשיא), while only R. Yehuda is described as using the power of the Holy Name against Jesus.⁴¹

In his *Maftēah ha-Šēmot* (The Key of Names) written toward the end of 1280, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia draws an analogy between Pharaoh and Jesus, who both pretended to be Gods.⁴² Abulafia explains that the true Messiah (who, according to Abulafia, is referred to by the Christians as the “anti-Christ”) will stand up against all Christians and declare:

What he [Jesus] had said to the Christians, that he is a God and the son of God, is a complete lie. *He did not receive his power from the unique (Holy) Name*, as all his power is dependent (תלוי) upon *the image of the Teli* (בדמות התלי), because he was hanged (תלוי) on the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁴³

It is clear from here that Abulafia knows about the tradition of Jesus using the Holy Name, and he goes against this tradition by explaining that he only used (Egyptian) astral magic connected to the Teli (the astrological figure of the cosmic serpent or dragon),⁴⁴ identified here with Jesus himself.⁴⁵ A somewhat similar critique on the tradition describing Jesus as using the power of the Holy Name appears in *Niṣṣaḥon Vetus* (13th cent.):

⁴⁰ See *Targum Pseudo-Jonatan* on Num 31:8; cf. Horbury, *A Critical Examination*, 475 n. 2.

⁴¹ On the Aramaic texts of TY, see Michael Sokoloff, “The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic ‘Toledot Yešū’ on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology,” in “*Toledot Yešū*” (“*The Life Story of Jesus*”) *Revisited*, 13–26; Yaakov Deutsch, “‘Eduyot ‘al Nusaḥ Kadum Šel ‘Toledot Yešū’” (New Evidence of Early Versions of Toledot Yeshu) *Tarbiz*: 69 (2000) 177–97 [Hebrew]; Willem F. Smelik, “The Aramaic Dialect(s) of the Toldot Yešū Fragments,” *Aramaic Studies* 7 (2009) 39–73. On the resemblance between the Aramaic of Toledot Yešū fragments and zoharic Aramaic, see *ibid.*, 60. On zoharic Aramaic, see Ada Rapoport-Albert and Theodore Kwasman, “Late Aramaic: The Literary and Linguistic Context of the ‘Zohar,’” *Aramaic Studies* 4 (2006): 5–19.

⁴² See *Maftēah ha-Šēmot*, New York - Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. 1897, fols. 81b–82a; printed edition (Jerusalem: A. Gros, 2001), 130–31. On R. Abraham Abulafia’s approach towards Christianity, see Robert Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life: The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia’s Response to Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) ix–x; Moshe Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: a Kabbalist ‘Son of God’ on Jesus and Christianity,” *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought* (ed. Neta Stahl; London: Routledge, 2012) 60–93; *idem*, “Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus,” *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 64–80; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body: Abraham Abulafia’s Polemic with Christianity,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan* (ed. David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 189–226; Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans and Joachimism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130 [italics added]. See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 240 n. 184.

⁴⁴ The Teli is discussed, among other places, in *Sefer Yeširah*. On the Teli in the thought of Abulafia, see Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 139 n. 81.

⁴⁵ Cf. Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 240 n. 184.

The magicians did the like with their spells (Exod. 8:3,14). R. Abraham the proselyte proved from here that Jesus *did not know the secret name of God*, for it was not known even in the generation of Moses, which was a holy one, and certainly not thereafter. Thus, all he did *must have been done by magic*. Indeed, it is written in the Gospels that he was in Egypt for two years, and there he must have learned magic, as the Rabbis say;⁴⁶ Ten measures of magic came down into the world; Egypt took nine and the rest of the world one.⁴⁷

It is evident here that the anonymous author insists on preserving the older traditions (as they appear in the Talmud and in the early Aramaic versions of TY) describing Jesus as using (Egyptian) magic, and he refuses to accept the later traditions describing Jesus as using the power of the Holy Name. It is possible that a dispute regarding this tradition existed in the thirteenth century and that the *Zohar* adopted it (in the blasphemous homilies) while Abulafia and *Niṣaḥon Vetus* refused to accept it.

A Muslim anti-Jewish polemical work (12th cent.) by al-Samaw'al ibn Yahyá Maghribī, *Iḥām al-yahūd* (*Silencing the Jews*), is probably one of the earliest sources mentioning Jesus as using the power of the Holy Name in a polemical context similar to TY. The book quotes the Jewish anti-Christian tradition against Jesus:

We say to them [the Jews]: What say you about Jesus the son of Mary? They will say: The son of Joseph the carpenter by fornication; *he learned God's great name and with its help used to impose his will upon many things*. . . . We say to them: If Moses also performed miracles by *invoking the names of God*, why do you believe in his prophet-hood and reject that of Jesus? They will say: Because God Almighty taught Moses the divine names, whilst Jesus learned them not by inspiration but *from the walls of the Temple*.⁴⁸

This tradition was later developed and integrated in the later versions of TY, which described Jesus as stealing the Holy Name from the Temple.

The first evidence of a TY text describing Jesus as using the power of the Holy Name is apparently found only towards the end of the thirteenth century in Raymond Martini's Spanish text *Pugio fidei*⁴⁹ (1280, or perhaps in mid-13th cent. Germany in *Der Passauer Anonymus*).⁵⁰ Horbury raised the possibility that one of the texts that

⁴⁶ See *b. Qid.* 49b (n. 20 above).

⁴⁷ See *Niṣaḥon Vetus*, par. 32, 64–63 (Hebrew ed.), 23–24 [italics added]; *ibid.*, 252 (notes on line 28—on R. Abraham the proselyte); *ibid.*, 253 (notes on line 1—on Jesus using magic).

⁴⁸ Al-Samaw'al ibn Yahyá Maghribī, *Iḥām al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews* (trans. Moshe Perlmann; New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1964) 42 [italics added].

⁴⁹ See Yaakov Deutsch, *Toledot Yeshu in Christian Eyes: Reception and Response in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period* (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), 37–40 [Hebrew]; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 83 n. 144.

⁵⁰ See Deutsch, *Toledot Yeṣhu be-'Einayim Noṣriyot*, 37 n. 118–20; Horbury, *A Critical Examination*, 4–5. Both *Pugio Fidei* and *Der Passauer Anonymus* are possibly influenced by a version of TY found in a Strasburg manuscript from the 18th cent. (Strasbourg - Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire 3974 - old cat. Hebr. 48), as evident from the mid 13th cent. (1250) Latin manuscript (Paris - Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 16558). See: Ḥen Melekh Merḥavia, *Ha-Talmud be-R'ei ha-Naṣrut*:

Martini was given access to was the shorter version of Wagenseil's TY text.⁵¹ This text, found in a seventeenth-century manuscript in Leipzig,⁵² contains an interesting remark regarding the way Jesus achieved the Holy Name:

And by *magic and the defiled name* he entered the temple [to steal the Holy Name]. If not so, how did the holy priests, sons of Aaron, allow him to enter? But certainly by *magic and the defiled name* he did it all.⁵³

This comment appears after a description of the way in which Jesus had stolen the Holy Name (by writing it on a piece of paper and keeping it within a cut in his flesh). It appears that this comment is an attempt to resolve the tension between the earlier and later traditions: Jesus did use the Holy Name which he had stolen from the temple, but this theft was made possible only through the use of “magic and the defiled name.” Interestingly, in Ibn Shaprut's *'Even Boḥan* (14th cent.), both traditions appear side by side in his TY version; he begins with a description of Jesus hiding the Holy Name in his flesh and continues with the Aramaic version describing his use of magic.⁵⁴

The final source that is extremely relevant in our context is the description of the Holy Name given to Jesus, as described in *Sefer ha-Pēli'ah*:

And know, that any wise man needs to be proficient and knowledgeable in the matters of the wisdom known as *Yeš* (י"ש - lit. substance),⁵⁵ and the gate to enter [this wisdom] is the combination of the unique square [comprised of four letters] [Holy] name [YHWH] (שם המיוחד המרבע) . . . and you should know that God judges his world 'Measure for Measure' (מדה כנגד מדה), and our ancestors have sinned in forgetting the [Holy] Name. Therefore, [*The name*] was given to two Proxies (שלוחים), in order to denounce us, and they are the Masters of Edom and Išmael (שרי אדום וישמעאל), *Yēšu the Christian* and Mohammad the Išmaelite, they are devils (שטנים) and they came as opposed to the true worshippers, the holy Israel who worship the truth.⁵⁶

ha-Yahas le-Sifrut Yisrael še-Leaḥar ha-Mikra ba-'Olam ha-Nošri be-Yemei ha-Beinaim (The Talmud reflected in Christianity: The attitude to Post-Biblical Hebrew literature in the mediaeval Christian world) [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1970) 315 n.18, 318–20.

⁵¹ See Horbury, *A Critical Examination*, 5; Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 27, n. 1; for the complete version of Wagenseil's TY text, see Johann C. Wagenseilius, *Tela Ignea Satanae, hoc est Arcani et Horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christum Deum & Christianam Religionem, Libri [anekdotoi]* (Altdorf, 1681); for an English translation of the text see Wade Blocker, *Tela Ignea Satanae: the Original Latin Text and a New English Translation of J.C. Wageneil's [sic] Introduction to his 1681 CE Book* (Dayton, OH: Blocker, 2001).

⁵² MS. Leipzig – Universitätsbibliothek B.H. 27, fols. 206a–211b.

⁵³ MS. Leipzig – Universitätsbibliothek B.H. 27, fol. 207a [italics added]. This comment does not appear in the Strasburg ms. (See Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 40–41) or in the Yemenite ms. (see *ibid.*, 118).

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, 146–47.

⁵⁵ Cf. Prov 8:21.

⁵⁶ *Sefer ha-Pēli'ah* (Korets 1784), 16c [italics added]; cf. *ibid.*, 20a; Vatican 200, 24a; Vatican 195, 50b; Vatican 88, 21b.

This anonymous Kabbalistic book, probably edited between the mid-thirteenth and late-fourteenth centuries, contains many early Kabbalistic traditions (including, among others, writings by Rabbi A. Abulafia, his student Rabbi Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla⁵⁷ and some zoharic traditions).⁵⁸ The passage quoted above bears some resemblance to Abulafia's description mentioned above; the use of the phrase "wisdom known as *Yeš*" in this polemical context, in particular, seems to resonate with Abulafia's teaching:

And he [pharaoh] thought that he was God, the first of all beings (ראשון לכל הנבראים). As is the mistake of the Christians today in the matter of Yešū Ben Pandira (ישו בן פנדירא), whose mystery is (שסודו, i.e. the numerical value of this phrase is equivalent to): *Yeš Mamzer* (lit. bastard) Ben Ha-nida (ממזר בן הנדה)⁵⁹ (son of the menstruant). He [Jesus] is the mystery of the Prima Materia (חמר ראשון) . . . *Yeš mē-'ain* (*Ex nihilo*, יש מאין)⁶⁰

It is plausible to assume that a tradition on the connection of the mystery of the *Yeš* (and the Prima Materia) to both the Holy Name and Jesus was influenced by Abulafia.⁶¹ Abulafia, as demonstrated above, went against the tradition which described Jesus using the Holy Name. However, the zoharic homilies on the blasphemer and the source from *Sefer ha-Pēli'āh* might be evidence of a shift in medieval Kabbalistic tradition regarding the description of Jesus using the magical powers of the Holy Name. In TY, where this tradition was given its final form, Jesus uses the Holy Name as a lethal weapon (mostly aimed at Judas Iscariot). As shown above, the Holy Name is used as a lethal weapon in the blasphemer's zoharic homilies as well.

b. *The Egyptian father*

I have discussed above some Talmudic and other sources which imply a connection between Jesus and Egypt,⁶² primarily in the form of his having learned Egyptian magic. I have also suggested a possible link made in the midrash in *VR* between

⁵⁷ On R. Joseph Gikatilla as one of the zoharic authors, see Yehuda Liebes, "How the Zohar was Written," in *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 85–138, 194–227.

⁵⁸ See Michal Oron, "The Works haPeliah and haKaneh: Their Kabbalistic Foundations, their Religious-Social Stance and their Literary Shape" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1980) [Hebrew].

⁵⁹ Both equal to the numerical value of seven hundred and thirteen. Cf. "Jesus/Muhammad." The numerical value of these two names is equivalent to the phrase "bastard son of the menstruant." See: *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, MS Munich-BS 285, fol. 22a; printed edition (*Mašref ha-Sekhel*), 83–84; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 46.

⁶⁰ *Maftēah ha-Šemot*, MS NY-JTSA Mic. 1897, fols. 81b–82a; printed edition, 130 [italics added].

⁶¹ See Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 317–34. Moshe Idel suggested to me that this source might be attributed to R. Joseph Gikatilla (Abulafia's student).

⁶² Cf. Matt 2:13–16.

the Egyptian taskmaster and the Roman soldier described by Celsus as Jesus's father. A tradition regarding Jesus's father being a Gentile is found in a mystical medieval misdrash (8–9th cent.):

Ṣaddi, why does it have two heads? Because this refers to Jesus of Nazareth who took hold of two heads, *one of Israel* and the other *of Edom*, and he went and caused people to err. When the Jews saw him they stood over him, captured him, and hung him on the cross. As they interpreted “If your brother, your mother's son, entices you” (Deut 13:7), it does not say “your father's son.”⁶³

This midrash on the graphic meaning of the shape of the Hebrew letter *ṣaddi* (צ) voices a clear polemic against Jesus and is known to have influenced zoharic literature and other medieval kabbalistic sources that possibly also refer to Jesus.⁶⁴ The *ṣaddi* represents Jesus, who governs both Israel and Edom—Jews and Christians—and entices them to sin.⁶⁵ This dual connection of Jesus to Edom and Israel is alluded to again at the end of the passage, in the context of an interpretation of the verse regarding the son who entices others to idolatry (Deut 13:7) as referring to Jesus: he is “your mother's son,” but not “your father's son.” The interpretation of this verse, linking Jesus to the son who entices to idolatry, is common in medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemic literature.⁶⁶ However, in a slightly different version of this midrash there is an added explanation to the interpretation of the verse: “(and) as his Mother was of Israelite origin, and his father was a Nazarene” (וכי אמו מישראל היתה ואביו מן נצרי).⁶⁷ From this extra explanation, it is clear that Jesus is described in this midrash as being the son of an Israelite Mother and a Gentile (Nazarene)⁶⁸ father. Through his mother Jesus was connected to Israel, and through his father to Edom. This tradition, similar to the one found in Celsus, may have influenced the *Zohar* (and even the midrash in *VR*) to link the Egyptian father of the blasphemer to Jesus's Gentile father.

⁶³ Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva B, on the letter Ṣaddi. See *Battei Midrašot* (Wertheimer), 2:343–418 [italics added]; see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 146. Regarding this passage and its connection to early Aramaic versions of TY, see Elkan N. Adler, “Un fragment Araméen du Toldot Yéschou,” *Revue des Études Juives* 61 (1910) 129–30; Alian Katrer, “Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva (A-B): The Essence of this Midrash, its Orientation, its Ideas and Connections to Ideological Streams in Judaism and Christianity” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005) 85–89, 311–14 [Hebrew].

⁶⁴ Liebes suggested that Yod-Nun in the zoharic text serves as an acrostic for Yešū Nošri. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 154–58; See Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 146–47.

⁶⁵ See Katrer, *Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva*, 311, 313 n. 25.

⁶⁶ See *Niṣṣaḥon Vetus*, 75: “And on him [Jesus] said Moses: ‘If your brother, your mother's son, entices you’ (Deut. 13:7)—this is Jesus who denied his father [God], and said that he has a mother and not a father, and that he is the son of God”. Cf. *ibid.*, 147; *Sefer Tešuvat ha-Minim*, MS. Oxford – Bodleian Library MS Opp. 757.

⁶⁷ See Katrer, *Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva*, 311.

⁶⁸ Cf. Acts 24:5.

Another important Kabbalistic source which strengthens the connection between Egypt and Jesus is found again in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, who identifies Jesus as the overlord or the Pharaoh of Egypt.⁶⁹ Moreover, as shown by Sagerman, Abulafia also alludes to the possible identification of Jesus with the Egyptian taskmaster (the blasphemer's father), whom Moses smites.⁷⁰ In an earlier work I have similarly demonstrated the affinity between the Egyptian man and Jesus (or Christendom), as can be found in some zoharic homilies.⁷¹ It is very plausible that these zoharic homilies, including the homilies on the blasphemer, were influenced by the teachings of Abulafia⁷² (perhaps through his disciple, Joseph Gikatilla).

Finally, one of the most important pieces of evidence regarding the identification of Jesus's father as an Egyptian man can be found in the late Huldreich (Huldrico) edition of TY.⁷³ The Huldreich version of TY combines some of the earliest and some of the latest TY traditions (with some additional ones being unique to this version) and was probably edited around the fifteenth to sixteenth century.⁷⁴ After the rabbis accuse Jesus of being the son of a menstruant, the son of a prostitute, and a bastard, R. Akiva asks Jesus which town he comes from. Jesus replies:

I am from Nazareth, and the name of my father is "Egyptian" (מצריא) and the name of my mother is Qarāhāt⁷⁵ (קרחת). . . . R. Akiva went to Nazareth and asked the people of the town: Where is the home of the Egyptian (בית מצריא) and his wife?⁷⁶

After R. Akiva finds out that these are not the real names of Jesus's parents⁷⁷ (which were changed after they escaped to Egypt and returned back to Nazareth),⁷⁸ he provides his own explanation for the father's new name:

⁶⁹ See *Mafteah ha-Šemot*, New York - Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. 1897, fol. 71a; printed edition, 89; *Gan Na'ul*, MS Munich-BS 58 fol. 330b; printed edition, 46–47; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 213; Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 59 n. 37; cf. above n. 42, 60.

⁷⁰ See *Sitrei Torah*, MS. New York - Jewish Theological Seminary Mic. 2367, fol. 57a; printed edition, 185–86; Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills*, 303–4.

⁷¹ See Benarroch, Sabba and Yanuqa, 233–52.

⁷² Among some other similarities, both Abulafia and the *Zohar* create a strong linkage between Moses and the Egyptian (המצרי). According to Abulafia they are both numerically equivalent to three hundred and forty-five, also equal to *el šadday* (אל שדי). In *Zohar* 1:6b both of them are identified with Yehoyada (or his son Benayahu), who is mentioned also in the blasphemer homilies (as the one who pierces a hole in the chest).

⁷³ Johannes Jacobus Huldricus, *Historia Jeshuae Nazareni a Judaeis blaspheme corrupta* (Leiden, 1705).

⁷⁴ See Adina M. Yoffie, "Observations on the Huldreich Manuscripts of the 'Toledot Yešu,'" in *Toledot Yeshu Revisited*, 77.

⁷⁵ A play on the word for "bald." See Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 23.

⁷⁶ Huldricus, *Historia Jeshuae Nazareni*, 20, 24.

⁷⁷ Cf. Gager and Ahuvia, "Some Notes."

⁷⁸ Jesus's escape to Egypt is mentioned in Matt 2:13–16.

He told her: He changed his name to “Egyptian” because he acted like the Egyptians (עשה מעשה מצרים).⁷⁹

From this evidence it seems reasonable to assume that the Huldreich tradition preserved older polemic traditions which identified Jesus’s father with Egypt by naming him “Egyptian,”⁸⁰ and which associated him with “Egyptian acts” (hinting at his impure sexual behavior).⁸¹ Interestingly, the Huldreich version also repeatedly describes Jesus as a blasphemer (מגדרף) who curses (מחררף) the God of Israel.⁸² This might be another indicator of a known polemic tradition identifying the biblical blasphemer with Jesus.

c. *The mother as a prostitute/an adulterous woman*

The portrayal of Jesus’s mother as a prostitute is known already from early Christian sources, as found, for instance, in the writings of the Christian theologian Tertullian (2–3rd cent).⁸³ It appears also in rabbinic sources—in midrash *Pēsiqta Rabbati*—as the attribute “*bera di-šenuta*” (lit. son of the whore).⁸⁴ Even the name by which Jesus is known in the Talmud, “son of Pandera,” might be interpreted as “son of the whore.”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Huldricus, *Historia Jeshuae Nazareni*, 26.

⁸⁰ See *ibid.*, 9 n.11, 24 n.10; Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 13.

⁸¹ Cf. Lev 18:3; cf. *Vayyiqra’ Rabba, Acharei Mot* (Margaliyot edition), 23:7.

⁸² See Huldricus, *Historia Jeshuae Nazareni*, 48, 69, 80, 87, 115; Shay Alleson-Gerberg, “From Polemic to Proximity: A Rereading of Sefer Toledot Yeshu in light of the Christian Culture in Medieval and the Early Modern Period” (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014) 34 n.133 [Hebrew].

⁸³ See William Horbury, “Tertullian on the Jews in the Light of De Spectaculis XXX.5–6,” *JThS* 23 (1972) 455–59; *idem*, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 176–79; Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 112, 151 n. 31.

⁸⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 21 (ed. Ish Shalom, 100a); see Menachem Kister, “‘Panim be-Fanim’: Tefisot Dmūt ha-’El ba-Midrašim u-Kišreihen le-Tekstim Nošryim,” (The Manifestations of God in the Midrashic Literature in Light of Christian Texts) *Tarbiz* 81 (2013) 141 n.171, 114–15 n. 59–60;

See Friedmann’s comment in his edition of the *Pesiqta Rabbati* 101a n. 31; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 39; William Horbury, “Rabbinic Perceptions of Christianity and the History of Roman Palestine,” in *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine* (ed. M. Goodman and P. Alexander; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 371–72; Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 109–11.

⁸⁵ See F. Nitzsch, “Ueber eine Reihe talmudischer und patristischer Täuschungen, welche sich an den mißverstandenen Spottnamen Ben-Pandira geknüpft,” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 13 (1840) 115–20; Samuel Krauss, “The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers,” *JQR* 6 (1894) 143: “Yeshu bar Pandera would thus mean Jesus, the son of the prostitute”; Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 98, 157 n. 8.

As mentioned above, Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaqi), the twelfth-century medieval biblical commentator, had already suggested that Shelomith (the blasphemer's mother) was a prostitute.⁸⁶ Moreover, the *Zohar* itself clearly alludes to the adulterous nature of Shelomith in the lines which follow immediately after the explanation of the mystery of the blasphemy:

[The blasphemer] cursed in order to defend his mother. . . . This is uttered for the Reapers of the Field. Mystery of the matter: *Such is the way of an adulteress* (Prov. 30:20). Happy is the share of the righteous, who know the matter and conceal it!⁸⁷

My claim is that portraying the blasphemer's mother as a whore and as an adulterous woman alludes to the polemical counter-narrative of Jesus's birth by Mary and against the Virgin's veneration, as will be further discussed below.⁸⁸ Moreover, the verse from Prov 30:20 serves as an internal code, which could be decoded only by the "Reapers of the Field," the righteous men, who are warned to keep the mysteries of the blasphemer and his adulterous mother concealed. This kind of "warning" is repeated four times during these short homilies.⁸⁹ It seems plausible to assume that these "warnings" serve as internal censorship of the anti-Christian polemics concealed in these homilies.

A clear reference to Mary as the adulteress woman described in Prov 30:20 appears in the late-thirteenth-century polemical anti-Christian work of R. Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne, *Milhemet Mišvah*:

(Prov 30:20) *Such is the way of an adulteress woman; she eats, and wipes her mouth, and says, I have done no wickedness. . . . A great insinuation is hinted here on a woman that will in future say this, and there is no truth in her words, and it came [this verse] to teach you not to fail in believing her.*⁹⁰

It is possible that anti-Christian Jewish polemics such as *Milhemet Mišvah*, have transmitted a clear reference to Mary as the adulteress woman described in Prov 30:20 into the *Zohar*.

Another interesting example from the Kabbalistic tradition describing Jesus's mother as a whore and adulteress appears in the writings of Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan (13–14th cent.), who might even be the author of some parts of zoharic literature.⁹¹ In his *Ta'amei ha-Mišvot* (lit. reasons for the commandments) he writes:

⁸⁶ See above, n. 33.

⁸⁷ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics in original].

⁸⁸ Cf. Huldricus, *Historia Jeshuae Nazareni*, 20.

⁸⁹ Cf. the opening of the *Idra Rabba*, *Zohar* 3, Naso, 127b–128a.

⁹⁰ See R. Meir ben Simeon of Narbonne, *Milhemet Mišvah*, MS. Biblioteca Palatina Parma Italy Cod. Parm. 2749, 148b [italics in original].

⁹¹ See Liebes, "How the *Zohar* was Written." On Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan, see Ephraim Gottlieb, *Mehkarim u-Mekorot be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah*, (ed. Joseph Hacker; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976) 248–56 [Hebrew]; Iris Felix, "Theurgy, Magic and Mysticism in the Kabbalah of R. Joseph of Shu-shan" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005) [Hebrew].

Until a bad faith had risen in the nations of the world, “new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not” (Deut 32:17), and this is the faith of the abominable and detestable villain Jesus of Nazareth, the evil person, who had created a faith to believe in (ושם אמונה להאמין) and appointed himself as a God (ושם עצמו אלוה). . . . And “Thou shalt have no (other gods before me)” is opposed to “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” hinting at this evil person who went out and declared himself a God. . . . Any place in the book of Proverbs where we find “adulterous woman” or “whore” hints at the defiled sect and the idolatrous sect, and regarding this it is said: “Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house.” (Prov 5:8)⁹²

It is clear that Rabbi Joseph of Hamadan alludes here to the Christian devotion of Mary as representing the idolatrous “defiled sect” worshiping the “adulterous woman” or “whore.” In this context, it is important to mention that the final part of the zoharic homilies on the blasphemer is focused on the mystery of the verse: “There shall be among you no strange god, and you shall not bow to an alien god” (Ps 81:9). This might be another allusion to the hidden anti-Christian polemical contents of these homilies.

2. *Mythical-theurgic aspects of the zoharic blasphemer homilies*

The main addition of the zoharic homilies, which is absent in the *VR* midrash, is their unique mythical-theurgical interpretation of the blasphemer’s narrative.

These homilies offer the following interpretation of the verb *vayyiqqov* (ויקיב, lit. pronounced) in the scripture’s description of the blasphemy:

The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name (Lev 24:11). What is meant by *vayyiqqov* (pronounced)? Rabbi Abba said, “*Vayyiqqov* (pierced), surely—as is said: *Vayyiqqov*, he pierced, a hole in its door (2 Kgs 12:10) – *piercing* (*naqqiv*) *what had been sealed* (בקיב מה דהוה סתים).”⁹³

This passage provides a unique explanation to the verb *vayyiqqov*, by comparing it to the identical verb used to describe the piercing of a hole in the temple’s door by Yehoyada the priest (in order to collect money for the temple).⁹⁴ The same interpretation is given here: the act of the blasphemer is “piercing what had been sealed.”⁹⁵

This raises a few questions: What is the meaning of the piercing in the context of the verse in Lev 24:11? In addition, what is the “matter that is sealed” which was “pierced” by the blasphemer?

⁹² MS. Moscow - Russian State Library, Ms. Guenzburg 248, fol. 70a. I thank Leore Saks Shmueli for sharing with me her findings presented at a lecture in the conference on zoharic literature (12 June 2014) held at Ben-Gurion University.

⁹³ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics added], as translated in Pritzker Edition (trans. Matt), 8:191.

⁹⁴ Cf. n. 71 above and n. 101 below.

⁹⁵ On the phrase *pronounced*—or: *pierced*—*the Name*, see *Zohar* 1:37a; 3:113b, 191b. Cf. 3:176b; Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, 360.

The homily continues to provide unique answers to these questions:

His mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri (Lev 24:11).

Until this point, Scripture *concealed his mother's name*; once it is written, ויקבו (vayyiqqov)—(he) *pierced (naqqiv) his mother's name*.⁹⁶

The “piercing” (*naqqiv*) is enacted by pronouncing the name; but instead of focusing on the act of pronouncing the ineffable name of God, the focus here is on the blasphemer's pronunciation of his mother's name. She is the “matter that is sealed” which her son, the blasphemer, “pierced.” Until this point in scripture, the blasphemer's mother is referred to only as “the Israelite woman” (Lev 24:10); therefore, her identity is “concealed.” Once her son “pierced/pronounced her name,” she is named “Shelomith daughter of Dibri” (Lev 24:11). By “piercing” the Holy Name, the blasphemer also “pierced” his mother's “sealed” name.

This matter receives a mythical-theurgical explanation in the continuation of the homily:

The mystery of the matter: He [the Israelite woman's son] took the [last] letter ה (*He*) of the Holy Name YHWH (יהוה) and cursed (לייט) *in order to defend his mother*.

This is piercing (נקיבא, *nēqqiva*), for he pierced (נקיב, *naqqiv*) the Holy Name.⁹⁷

Here the *Zohar* reveals the theurgic act of the blasphemer. After his opponent insulted him (by referring to the adulterous nature of his mother), he pierced the Holy Name. By this act he harmed the sacred union between the Divine Male and Female symbolized by the four letters (YHWH); separating the last letter *he* (the Divine Female, the *Shekhinah*) from the letters YHW (the Divine Male).

In this mythopoetic interpretation, the *Zohar* associates Shelomith (the blasphemer's mother) with the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Female,⁹⁸ as being the sealed matter which the blasphemer had pierced. This sealed matter is actually the Holy Name (YHWH),⁹⁹ the union of the Divine Male and Female. This sexual union is complete only when it is kept “sealed” and unrevealed; otherwise—if revealed (or magically misused)—the unity is disrupted and the Male is separated from the Female. Through this separation, the *Shekhinah* becomes vulnerable and eventually violated by the *Sitra 'Ahra* (the “Other Side”), symbolized by the mythic evil serpent (identified in the beginning of the homilies with the Egyptian man). When united with the serpent she becomes an adulterous woman:

⁹⁶ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics added].

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* [italics added].

⁹⁸ Cf. n. 101 below.

⁹⁹ Cf. n. 106 below.

This is uttered for the Reapers of the Field. Mystery of the matter: *Such is the way of an adulteress* (Prov 30:20). Happy is the share of the righteous, who know the matter and conceal it!¹⁰⁰

The “Reapers of the Field” are those who guard the mystery of the Holy Name (the “sealed matter”) from falling into the wrong hands and from being separated (or “pierced”); thus preventing the *Shekhinah* from becoming an adulterous woman. As justly explained by Matt in his commentary on this passage: “It is as if *Shekhinah* became an *adulteress*, like Shelomith—or as if She turned into Lilith, the demonic female who threatens to steal the flow of emanation.”¹⁰¹

However, the *Zohar* adds that the blasphemer did all of this “in order to defend his mother.” Matt has interpreted this as “he sought to defend his mother by associating her with the Divine Female, *Shekhinah*, who is symbolized by the last letter of יהוה (*YHVH*): ה (*he*).” I would go one step further and argue that the Divine Female, referred to by the blasphemer, is not only the *Shekhinah* but also the Holy Virgin Mary. My argument is that the complex anti-Marian polemic here is executed by mythicizing Shelomith into a Divine Female entity identified with both the *Shekhinah* and Mary: when united with God she is the *Shekhinah*; but when separated from God and united with the “Other Side” (the evil serpent), she is identified with Mary the “adulterous woman” (associated with Lilith).¹⁰²

Furthermore, as argued at length above, the blasphemer here is strongly associated with Jesus, as he is described in the polemic anti-gospel Jewish traditions: after being insulted by being called the son of an adulteress (and a *mamzer* [bastard]), he defends his mother by associating her with the Holy Virgin who was conceived by God, his father. Moreover, he made magical use of the ineffable Holy Name in an attempt to defend his mother and keep her “sealed” as a Virgin.¹⁰³ Instead, unknowingly, he harmed his mother, the *Shekhinah*, separating her from God, causing her to be “pierced” by the “Other Side,”¹⁰⁴ thus transforming her into Mary/

¹⁰⁰ *Zohar* 3, Emor, 106a [italics in original].

¹⁰¹ Matt, *The Zohar* (Pritzker Edition) 193 n. 403. On the relationship between *Shekhinah* and Lilith, see *Zohar* 1:122a–b, 131b, 190b, 204a; 2:60b–61a, 96a–b, 117b–118b (*RM*); 3:47a, 69a, 72a, 266a, 279b (*RM*); *TZ*, intro, 2a; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 120–22. On the relation between *Shekhinah* and the demonic realm, see also Isaiah Tishby and Yeruham Fishel Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts* (trans. David Goldstein; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 1:373–79. A somewhat similar explanation is given by Rabbi David Ibn Zimra, in his interpretation to these homilies; see David Ibn Zimra, *Magen David* (Munkács, 1912), Letters *Dalet* and *Reš*.

¹⁰² On *Shekhinah* and Lilith, cf. n. 101 above; Lea Moris, “Šifḥa Ki Tiraš Gevirtah” (forthcoming).

¹⁰³ On the kabbalistic polemic against the christological doctrine of the virginal conception and the “sealed Mem,” see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 146–52; Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 147–48.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Zohar* 3, Tazri‘a, 47a: “Then, *segiru*, closing, entirely, with no one to open. Of this is written: ‘Such is the way of an adulteress . . .’ (Prov 30:20). What is an adulteress? An adulteress, surely! She eats and wipes her mouth, and says, ‘I have done no wrong’ (ibid.)” It should/must be mentioned that in some early manuscripts these homilies on the mysteries of leprosy appear in the ending of the *Emor* pericope, in place of the blasphemer homilies. See Cambridge - University Library Add. 1023; Paris - Bibliothèque Nationale heb. 779 (cf. n. 24 above).

Lilith.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, instead of being the Messiah, the son of God and the *Shekhinah*, he becomes the anti-Messiah, the son of the “Other Side” (“The Egyptian Man”) and the “adulterous woman” Mary/Lilith.

Similarly, the thirteenth- through fourteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac of Acre interprets the mythical-theurgic act of the blasphemer as follows:

He spoke against above, and made *from one–two*, and he spoke against the *Shekhinah*, which is named ‘*Šem*’ (lit. name) in many places “He cursed the name,” and “blasphemed the name”—all referring to the ‘*atara*’.¹⁰⁶

Making “from one–two” is a clear allusion to the heretical notion of converting the belief in one God to a binitarian belief in two Gods. This is a clear allusion to the Christian belief in God and his Son, as can be found in midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati*: “if the son of the whore [Jesus] tells you: ‘there are two Gods,’ tell him: ‘I am [the God revealed] on the sea I am [the God revealed] on Sinai.’”¹⁰⁷ This argument is strengthened by the homily that appears at the end of the blasphemer’s zoharic homilies. This homily deals with the punishment of one who curses God, as a sign of heresy and idolatry.¹⁰⁸ It is plausible that this also alludes to the hidden anti-Christian polemical nature of these zoharic homilies.

Moreover, R. Isaac of Acre adds that the blasphemer spoke against the *Shekhinah*. In the Christian polemic context this might also be a reference to the zoharic polemic homily on harming the *Shekhinah* by transforming her into Mary.

In the continuation of the zoharic homily we find that, as a result of the blasphemer’s act, the *Shekhinah*, who became Mary/Lilith, punishes her son:

The final η (*he*) was the female, *suckling of two sides*. Consequently, she took the weapons of the King to wreak her vengeance. *Take out the one who cursed* (Lev 24:14). Thus it is written: “*Every man shall revere his mother and his father*” (Lev 19:3), reverence for *one’s mother* preceding that of one’s father. Blessed are Israel in this world and in the world to come!¹⁰⁹

The *Shekhinah* has the potential of being influenced by both sides: right and left, mercy (*hesed*) and judgment (*din*), at times associated also with the blessed Holy One and the “Other Side.”¹¹⁰ After being “pierced” by the “Other Side,” filled with anger, she wreaked vengeance on her son who caused her to be so “pierced.” From the verse alluding to the *Shekhinah* (Lev 19:3) it is clear that the son’s sin was that he was not careful enough in revering his mother.

¹⁰⁵ This is another proof to the strong linkage between *Shekhina* and the Virgin Mary; see Green, “*Shekhinah*, the Virgin Mary.” At the same time this also emphasizes the differences between the sexualized *Shekhina* and the Virgin Mary; see Liebes, “Ha-Omnam Betulah Hi ha-Shekhinah?”

¹⁰⁶ Rabbi Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat ‘Einayim*, par. Kedošim [italics added].

¹⁰⁷ Cf. n. 84 above.

¹⁰⁸ A clear connection between idolatry and Jesus is found in *TZ*; see n. 29 and n. 39 above.

¹⁰⁹ *Zohar* 3, *Emor*, 106a [italics added].

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Zohar* 2, 28b.

This could be understood as another complex way in which the *Zohar* polemicizes against the flourishing cult of the Virgin (which was widespread in 13–14th cent. Castile). The blasphemer (Jesus) wanted to glorify his mother, portraying her as the Holy Virgin, the Divine Mother. However, he was not careful enough with his devotion to his mother; instead he “pierced” her by the “Other Side.” At the same time, this could allude also to an inner kabbalistic polemic regarding an exaggerated devotion to the *Shekhinah*.¹¹¹ In other words, over-“defending” the Mother might lead to harming her, by replacing the devotion to God, the Father, by a devotion to the Mother (as happened as a result of the Christian devotion to Mary).

This reading is strengthened by a similar interpretation of the blasphemer’s acts given by the fourteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Joseph Angelet, who quotes parts of these zoharic homilies (or who might even be one of their authors) in his homily.¹¹² He argued that the motivation behind the blasphemy is that “he [the blasphemer] wanted to strengthen the Mother’s power, to be the same as the Father’s power.”¹¹³ These words are easily interpreted as a polemic against over-strengthening the Divine Female, possibly alluding to the danger of the similarity between an over devotion to the *Shekhinah* and the cult of the Virgin.¹¹⁴

■ Concluding Remarks

This essay reveals a hidden anti-Gospel polemic in the zoharic homily regarding the blasphemer, influenced by ancient and medieval anti-Christian Jewish polemical works. This polemic is specifically targeted towards the figures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. By revealing this polemic, this essay provides a better understanding of the ambivalent zoharic attitude towards Jesus as Son of God—and of the Virgin Mary as linked with the *Shekhinah*.

The essay attempts to demonstrate one of the complex ways in which the *Zohar* deals with the representation of Jesus as son of the *Shekhinah*; and particularly the ambivalent zoharic attitude towards the idea of Mary’s virginity as a virtue, as opposed to a glorification of the idea of the sexualized female, who is engaged in sexual unity with God.

¹¹¹ See Tzahi Weiss, “‘Rov ha-To’im ba-Malkhut Hem To’im:’ ‘Avodat ha-Šekhina ba-Kabbalah ha-Mukdemet’ (‘Most of the Errant Err in Malkhut:’ The Worship of the Shekhinah in Early Kabbalah), *Tarbiz* 82 (2014) 319–34 [Hebrew].

¹¹² See Ronit Meroz, “Rabbi Joseph Angelet u-Ktavav ha-Zohariyim” (R. Joseph Angelet and his Zoharic Writings) in *Ĥiduše’i Zohar: Mehkarim Ĥadašim be-Sifrut ha-Zohar* (ed. Ronit Meroz; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2007) 303–404 [Hebrew]; Iris Felix, *Chapters in the Kabbalistic Thought of R. Joseph Angelet* (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991) [Hebrew].

¹¹³ See R. Joseph Angelet, *Livnat haSapir*, London - British Library Add. 27000, pp. 386b–387a. I thank Iris Felix for this valuable source.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Weiss, “Rov ha-To’im ba-Malkhut Hem To’im,” 323 n. 16, 330 n. 44.

In the larger context, the zoharic commentary on the biblical story of the blasphemer is an example that provides a better understanding of the influence of the polemical tract TY (in its different variants and forms) on the *Zohar* – an influence which has never before been examined.

Finally, as I have shown elsewhere, this polemical anti-Christian interpretation of the blasphemer's story is spelled out explicitly in the exegesis of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century kabbalistic commentators on the *Zohar*.¹¹⁵ In light of this essay, I believe these commentators managed to reveal and preserve the original anti-Gospel polemic hidden in the zoharic homilies on the blasphemer.

¹¹⁵ See Jonatan Benarroch, “‘Naqqiv ma de-Hava Satim’: Sipur ha-Megadef ha-Noqqev ’et ha-Šem (Lev. 24: 10–16) Ve Toledot Yešu; mi-Drašot ha-Zohar ve-‘Ad va-Avo Hayom ’el ha-‘Ain” (‘Piercing what has been sealed’ – The Blasphemer (Lev. 24: 10-16) and Toledot Yeshu: From the homilies of the Zohar to “*And I Came this Day unto the Fountain*”), in R. Jonathan Eibeschütz, “*And I Came this Day unto the Fountain*”: Critically Edited and Introduced by Paweł Maciejko (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014) 243–77 [Hebrew].