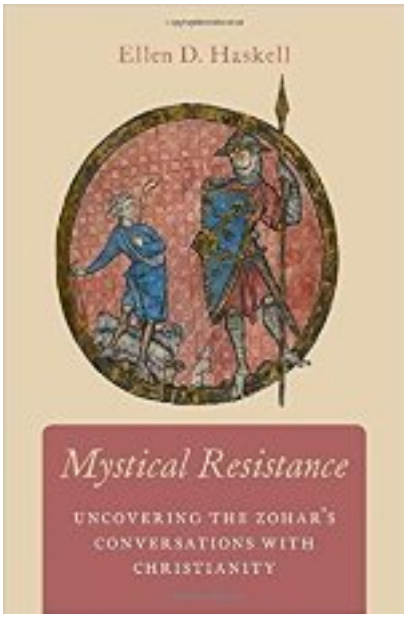
Mystical Resistance

30.04.2017 | Federico Dal Bo

Ellen Davina Haskell:Mystical Resistance: Uncovering the Zohar's Conversations with Christianity. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.256 pp. $99.00 (cloth)



Scholarship in Jewish studies has progressively assimilated Michel Foucault's assumption that religious discourse—just any other kind of human discourse—expresses power relationships in society through language and practices. Only recently has scholars' attention actually been devoted to Jewish mysticism and its complex relationship with its non-Jewish environment, whether pagan, Christian, or Islamic. Dr. Haskell's recent work, *Mystical Resistance: Uncovering the Zohar's Conversations with Christianity*, belongs to this innovative way of addressing Jewish mysticism. It is an important contribution to the field.

This short volume—less than 150 pages long, footnotes excluded—succeeds in offering an agile, compact investigation on a relatively uncovered aspect of contemporary scholarship on the *Zohar*, the canonical text of Jewish mysticism: its relationship with its Christian-Iberian environment at the time of the *Reconquista*. Haskell's leading assumption is that the *Zohar*—despite its complex structure, artificial Aramaic language, and possibly multiple and yet still obscure authorship—exhibits a quite genuine theological-political character from a Jewish perspective; in concealing its theological-political expectations, the *Zohar* posits itself as a source for covert "counterarguments" against Christian rising power in thirteenth-century Spain. Accordingly, Haskell remarks that "the invasion of increasingly grandiose messages of Christian domination into the visual space in which medieval Jews conducted their daily lives prompted a response from the *Zohar*'s authors, who, famed for their theosophical intent to create worlds within worlds of words, strove to create a space for Jewish solidarity and resistance" (p. 145). This assumption is proven both on theoretical and historical grounds.

On the one hand, Haskell builds on the speculative heritage of Leo Strauss's seminal investigation on "writing and persecution" and assumes that the *Zohar* is a "subtle hidden transcript" (p. 36) that cannot offer but covert, coded, and therefore hermeneutically challenging "counterarguments" to

the Christian ideology of the *Reconquista*. As far as secular Christian powers are succeeding in establishing a “secular” power in “this world,” the *Zohar* cautiously but eloquently claims for a “Reign of Heaven,” which would eventually accord primacy and sovereignty to the Jewish people. On the other hand, Haskell finds in coeval medieval Jewish polemic literature—especially in the notorious *Toledot Yeshu* and the relatively less known *Milkhamot ha-Shem, Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, and *Nitzakhon Vetus*—possible historical-textual sources of inspiration for the authors of the *Zohar*, who were conversant at least with some aspects of Christian theology (as occurring in the Gospels) and therefore intended to react against them, by claiming for Israel’s religious superiority.

This agile volume could not address every possible aspect of the Jewish-Christian relationships through the lenses of the *Zohar*; therefore, it offers the analysis of a selected number of texts that synthetically provide the argument that Jewish mysticism also expresses both a “work of resistance” against a non-Jewish environment and theological-political expectations (or other specific representations of power) from a Jewish perspective. This complex argument is developed—often in plain and accessible terms—in five chapters that intend to show how the *Zohar* elaborated on Rachel’s “child pangs” as a messianic counterpart to Christ (chapter 1), stigmatized the conversion from Judaism to Christianity as a metaphysical passage to “the Other Side” (chapter 2), treated the biblical figure of Balaam as a means for “deconstructing” the life of Christ (chapters 3 and 4), and eventually tried also to respond to Christian art on church facades, on which Jews are notoriously represented as “blind people” (chapter 5).

In chapter 1, Haskell mobilizes some gender issues and assumes that the recasted figure of the biblical Rachel should not be considered a mirrored figure of Mary but rather a female counterpart to Christ, despite blatant—but, in the end, not decisive—differences: “Rachel and Shekhinah’s textual function as correlates of Christ demonstrates neither a masculinization of Rachel nor a feminization of Jesus, but rather a medieval perception of common religious typologies that transcends modern assumptions regarding the importance of gender boundaries” (p. 34).

In chapter 2, Haskell elaborates on the *Zohar*’s famous assumption that there is a sterile and unfruitful “Other Side”—albeit still included in the same divine perimeter and therefore still “divine”—to which Christianity and every Jewish convert to Christianity shall be ascribed, as she/he has eventually chosen a monastic life: “the convert’s great sin in becoming Other to Judaism is that he artificially swells the ranks of the Other God’s infertile forces, which otherwise would be constrained by anti-procreative ideology and lack of sexual function” (p. 51).

In chapters 3 and 4, Haskell shows how the *Zohar* elaborated on the biblical figure of Balaam as a representation of Christ by introducing intertextual readings from Jewish polemic literature—as exemplified by the notorious notion of “Abominable Bread,” modeled on a biblical expression (Mal 1:7) but clearly resonating with the Eucharistic Bread in Christianity—and therefore claiming for Israel’s intrinsic superiority, both in religious and eschatological terms. While accurately analyzing Balaam’s ascension, Haskell shows how the *Zohar* pursued “a creative deconstruction of Christian characters, symbols, and stories combined with these stories’ redeployment to support Jewish claims” (p. 102).

Chapter 5 leaves the field of strict textual hermeneutics and offers a convenient description of facades from Christian Iberian churches in the region of León, where the alleged main author (or editor) of the *Zohar*, Moshe de León, lived and thus eventually “incorporate[d] and refute[d] themes drawn from sculpted Church facades” (p. 137).

This concise volume illustrates with help of a good selection of texts from the *Zohar* how Jewish mysticism was engaged in the theological-political “discourse” of its time. Not differently from what coeval Spanish authorities did both ideologically and politically on behalf of Christianity, so did the *Zohar*—often in a covert and hidden way—do in favor of Jewish preponderance, by claiming that

Copyright JCRelations

Judaism would both be the only true religion and offer the paradigm for future society. Haskell's clear use of primary sources and pertinent references to essential secondary literature—both from Jewish studies and other academic fields such as philosophy, gender studies, and art history—makes this volume an efficient introduction to a number of relevant topics in Jewish mysticism and surely is a commendable basis for further studies.

Federico Dal Bo is PhD in Jewish Studies, PhD in Translation Studies and was postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI Berlin); currently he is a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellow at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain).
Source: H-Net Reviews; this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.