

## INTRODUCTION

This book tells one key part of the history of Western sex magic. While it is not so much in the headlines these days, sex magic is alive and well. There are a number of popular books on sacred sexuality, and it is practiced in many different settings—in Meetup groups, at retreats, by members of the Kabbalah Centre, and even within the structures of traditional Orthodox Jewish marriage. But what is sex magic, and what has kabbalah got to do with it? As it is understood here, sex magic is ritualized human sexuality meant to access divine power for good. Its ritual practices are based in conventional religious feelings of love between human and divine, but they add to that by imagining this love erotically. The erotic dimension of human-divine love is based on the Bible and its commentaries, mainly in the Song of Songs, with its rich and sensual images of love between its two main characters. And while a literal reading would leave eroticism to human beings, even its earliest interpreters viewed it as a model for love between human and divine. The Bible also tells some stories of divine creation by sexual reproduction, which were quite common in ancient Middle Eastern myths. And although these are not always acknowledged by later interpreters, they are present just the same. These biblical myths view the cosmos the same way, so that its elements are gendered male and female, and all interact sexually to create and maintain life. These early myths, developed over time and space, lay the groundwork for medieval and modern practitioners to imagine sexuality as a powerful tool for accessing divine creative power.

To that end, I show how myths of divine creation by sexual reproduction were adapted, elaborated, and ritualized over time and space, and how they were used to imagine sacred sexuality as a means to access divine power. Hugh Urban, one of the most important scholars of modern sex magic, argues that it comes to us by means of “ancient Greek love magic, through early Gnosticism

and Hermeticism, to Jewish kabbalah and Renaissance magic.” According to Urban, all of these traditions link “the mysteries of sexual love with those of magical ritual.”<sup>1</sup> Urban shows that the modern practice of sex magic relies on a synthesis of traditions from different times and places. These include the Western sources named here and many others. This book focuses on only one: Jewish kabbalah. Much modern practice relies on the sefirotic cosmology that defines kabbalah. According to its understanding of the cosmos, God created the cosmos with the ten sefirot. Each sefirah is an aspect of the divine, each is gendered, and each is associated with a part of the human body and the cosmos. The sefirot interact sexually to birth the cosmos and everything in it. In its fully developed medieval form, kabbalah views the cosmos as a three-part microcosm in which the human being, the cosmos, and the divine share the same structure and even the same substance. And because they link all three, the sefirot also make it possible to imagine ritualized sexuality as effective, acting on both God and the cosmos. This book traces the development of a Hebrew microcosm that models the powerful, eroticized interaction of human and divine bodies at the heart of both kabbalah and some forms of modern sex magic. In short, it examines the concomitant innovation of both the myth and the ritual, so that it is possible to probe the relations between them.

Though the mythical and ritual components of kabbalistic sex magic are present in ancient and modern texts alike, their configuration changes a great deal over time, in terms of both the participants and the goals of the rituals. Late antique texts allow fewer participants; they depict a bi-gendered divinity that interacts sexually with itself, and they also show human beings interacting erotically with the divine. This is to say that they allow for two practitioners, one divine and one human. The medieval kabbalistic model of the sefirot allows many more participants: the rituals include two human practitioners rather than one. And they interact with the whole divine pleroma of the ten sefirot, who in turn have their own set of sexual and social relationships with one another. Their social and sexual relationships are key to creating and maintaining the cosmos. This allows two human participants to take up the roles of the sefirot and participate in cosmic relationships. This is the basis for kabbalistic sex magic. So too, the aims of the rituals change over time. Late antique and medieval texts depict rituals meant to bring blessings to the participants, but ultimately they seek to bring the messiah. Later texts and practitioners are not messianic. While they also describe rituals intended to access divine power for good, they are more focused on the here and now than on the hereafter. They are meant to improve society rather than to end time and save the world.

In this book, I follow the kabbalistic branch to its literary roots, looking at late antique and pre-kabbalistic Jewish esoteric texts to find the key components

underlying the practice of some forms of modern sex magic. The literary history of the sefirotic model is key to understanding this. It is a commonplace, even a cliché, that the sefirotic cosmology appeared “out of the blue,”<sup>2</sup> and even today we have yet to understand how it came to be. I show that it emerges from a synthesis of earlier myths and cosmologies from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, and that this synthesis can be traced. Jewish sources include scriptural, esoteric, and scientific literature, while non-Jewish sources include neighboring myths, scientific models, and cosmologies. The writers of Jewish esoteric and eventually kabbalistic texts self-consciously remythologized; they retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined earlier texts, along with neighboring sources, and they showed their work. They began with two-part microcosmic models, in which human beings resembled either the cosmos or the divine, but not both. Over the course of at least seven centuries, they combined these to articulate a tripartite microcosm in which human, cosmos, and divine are structurally similar and substantially connected. And over this same period, the ten sefirot, first mentioned but not described in the fifth- to seventh-century *Sefer Yetsirah*, gradually come to assume their robustly developed kabbalistic forms, as they are synthesized with myths of divine embodiment, myths of creation by means of sexual reproduction, and Hebraized Greek medical literature.

These narratives of divine sexual reproduction appear in the Hebrew Bible somewhat subtly (at least to our modern eyes), but they are better elaborated in late antique Jewish esoteric works such as the *Shi'ur Qomah* and the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and in medieval sources such as the *Sefer Bahir* and the *Sefer haZohar*. Cumulatively, these texts articulate both the cosmic and the ritual structures underlying the modern practice of sex magic, along with their own theories about its effectiveness. Medieval works such as the *Sefer Bahir* and the *Zohar* bring them together to imagine a cosmos in which sex magic is possible. They do this partly by adding layers of commentary to myths of divine embodiment and sexuality, interpreting them both literally and metaphorically. The medieval texts retain earlier conceptions of the sexualized divine body and cosmify it, generalizing the model of creation by means of intradivine sexual reproduction to explain the workings of the cosmos and to elaborate on the human resemblance to the divine. These factors together make it possible to conceptualize the effectiveness of sex magic.

## History of Kabbalah

Although the story of kabbalistic sex magic has yet to be told, there are several adjacent studies to guide us. These include scholarship on the history of

kabbalah, the history of Western sex magic, the history of the microcosm, and theories of myth and ritual. There are several histories of kabbalah, written at different stages in the development of the field and reflecting different ideologies. Gershom Scholem wrote its first definitive study, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (1950). This is a comprehensive work, contextualizing and analyzing many of the same works discussed here, and its importance cannot be overestimated. David Biale, a well-known scholar of Jewish history, writes that Scholem's "studies of Jewish mysticism and messianism have almost single-handedly forced a major revision in the way Jews conceive of their history and religion."<sup>3</sup> Scholem debunks emic histories of kabbalah to assert that it emerged in the Middle Ages and not the ancient period. He writes that "the forms of Jewish Mysticism that appeared in the Middle Ages from around 1200 onward under the name 'Kabbalah' are so different from any earlier forms . . . that a direct transition from one to the other is scarcely conceivable." He ties it instead to the emergence of the *Sefer Bahir* and its cultural milieu, and though he does attend to earlier Jewish esoteric sources, he does not posit a direct literary lineage.<sup>4</sup> Scholem discusses both the *Shi'ur Qomah* and the *Sefer Yetsirah*, but he views them as the products of a Jewish Gnosticism that proved a dead end. Scholem's first sweeping history of kabbalah has defined the field until this moment, and though it has much to recommend it, some parts of his theory have simply been superseded with the emergence of new evidence. This evidence in particular points not to the ancient "origins" of kabbalah but to its cumulative character, with some of the earliest strata emerging in late antiquity as an adaptation of earlier literatures and traditions. This study takes its cumulative development seriously.

Contemporary scholars rarely attempt histories on this scale. This is true in part because Scholem has already laid out his narrative, and we tend to see it as our task to fill in the gaps, and to support or emend different aspects of it. To this end, we often focus on individual writers and themes in particular places. For example, Elliot Wolfson has done several studies on key concepts in kabbalah and on the development of particular aspects of its cosmology.<sup>5</sup> Ronit Meroz has produced a philological analysis of the *Zohar* that shows that its earliest layers probably date to tenth- or eleventh-century Byzantium.<sup>6</sup> Like Meroz, Tzahi Weiss uses literary analysis to better understand the history of the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the *Zohar*.<sup>7</sup> Hartley Lachter focuses on the transmission of kabbalistic literature in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spain, while Jonathan Dauber focuses on one theme to illuminate the history of early kabbalah.<sup>8</sup> This list is by no means comprehensive, but it illustrates the point. My approach combines these two strategies and identifies key moments in the process of remythologizing narratives and cosmological models that define

kabbalah, which are also central to the practice of sex magic. I focus intently on a small selection of texts over a long period of time, in order to find good examples of the remythologizing process at work. It is worth noting that David Neumark, one of the earliest *Wissenschaft* scholars of kabbalah, also argued that kabbalah resulted from a process of retelling and reimagining, but he focused on philosophical concepts rather than mythological ones, leaving out, as Scholem asserts, “the religious process in which factors of an entirely different nature were at work.”<sup>9</sup> In this book, I aim to lay out a mythological road map for both the development of kabbalistic cosmology and the practices of sex magic that rely upon it. In this way, I aim to show continuity between the myths conveyed in earlier Jewish esoteric sources, somewhat too generally designated as “Gnostic,” and the emergence of the sefirotic cosmology of kabbalah. So there is no grand history here, but a few points elaborately plotted on a vast and spottily marked landscape.

### Scholarship of Jewish Magic

The study of magic is a growing field, and there are a number of broad historical studies of Jewish magic along with those that attend to specific practices.<sup>10</sup> However, the most important studies of Jewish magic both theorize it and tell its history. These include Rebecca Lesses’s *Ritual Practices to Gain Power*, Naomi Janowitz’s *Icons of Power*, Gideon Bohak’s *Ancient Jewish Magic*, and Yuval Harari’s *Jewish Magic Before the Rise of Kabbalah*. Crucial to the study of Jewish magic, Rebecca Lesses uses a performance studies methodology to examine Jewish magical adjurations in terms of their social function and meaning. She does pioneering work in understanding the power of speech in social context and how it acts in Jewish magic. Even more, she provides an overview of all existing types of adjuration formulas in Jewish magical literature, elaborating on their meanings and backgrounds. In this way, she articulates a rubric that is useful for identifying magical syntax.

Naomi Janowitz’s work is also crucial to the model of magic used here. Janowitz argues for a substantial relationship between names and their referents, typical of the ancient and medieval world and key to understanding both magical and kabbalistic ritual. In *Icons of Power*, she describes the efficacy of the divine name in late antique Jewish culture: “The name is not an arbitrary word chosen to stand for the deity, hence it is not a symbol. Instead, it represents the deity in the less-familiar way in which an icon ‘stands for’ its subject. Just as a line is formally linked with what it represents . . . so too here the divine name is understood to have a formal, motivated relationship with what it represents

(the deity).<sup>11</sup> Her theory of divine names is key to understanding the *Shi'ur Qomah*, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and all the books that later reference them.

Gideon Bohak's *Ancient Jewish Magic* provides the first comprehensive history of Jewish magic from the Second Temple to the rabbinic period, and his work shows important continuities in the tradition and examines the role of cross-cultural borrowings. The fifth chapter of his book examines the complex relationship between Jewish magic and mystical traditions in the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the *Shi'ur Qomah*, to show that "although late-antique Jewish magic and mysticism did not stem from the same social circles, and did not share the same body of knowledge, they did not hesitate to borrow each other's technical innovations when these were deemed useful for their own aims and needs."<sup>12</sup> In this way, Bohak demonstrates shared techniques and cosmologies in both mysticism and magic, which is key to my own study. These books are very important for historicizing the emergence of sex magic and understanding how it works.

Yuval Harari's *Jewish Magic Before the Rise of Kabbalah* is wonderfully attentive to both the theory of magic and the history of theorizing magic. Harari is concerned with crafting a method that allows us to use texts to study nontextual ritual practice. To do this, he proposes "a dialectic move that begins by reducing *magic* to a Jewish *adjuration text*, then focuses on the identification of such a text's linguistic characteristics, and culminates in the expansion of magic-Jewish textual circles based on these characteristics." The point is to "enable substantive justification for the choice of a textual foundation in the study of Jewish magic culture (in defined contexts of time and place)."<sup>13</sup> My work on ritual is textually based as well, and I am grateful for his work in clearing the way.

Mircea Eliade and Ioan Couliano write about sex magic specifically, though their approaches differ; Eliade tells a sweeping and universal tale, while Couliano locates the development of the practice in a particular time and place. Eliade's book *The Forge and the Crucible* has theorized the function of sex magic ritual without historicizing its experience. His third chapter offers this definition: "it is the idea of life which, projected onto the cosmos, sexualizes it." As such, he argues, "we are dealing with a general conception of reality seen as Life, and consequently endowed with sex, sexuality being a particular sign of all living reality." He locates these traditions "in primitive myth and ideology."<sup>14</sup> Eliade develops this idea by means of many examples from different cultures and periods, each exemplifying a different element of the theory. This is useful, but it also universalizes the phenomenon. He describes many models but does not necessarily account for the significance of their differences. Ioan Couliano's book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, which contains a foreword

by Eliade, takes on a similar project from a different angle. Couliano describes the imagination of magic in one period and generalizes it to address the question as a whole. In this work he argues, following Ficino, that all magic depends on Eros, and that all love is magic. In this case, he applies the thought of a few early modern theorists to account for the varieties of sex magic. The shared project of both of these authors makes sense in some ways, for if it is possible to name an object as “sexual magic,” then it is also possible to universalize it. This is in part the function of definition. However, in other ways it does not make sense, for its concepts and practices change over time and space, and this calls for historical, textual, and cultural specificity. As these things change, so do their experience.

Hugh Urban’s work is the most comprehensive to date, and it draws upon these earlier works and others to craft a comprehensive history of sex magic in the modern period.<sup>15</sup> Urban’s research shows that there are, and were, several different sorts of sex magic practiced in the past and the present. In *Magia Sexualis*, Urban argues that sex magic has historically served different purposes for different groups. On the one hand, major institutions such as the early church accused their enemies of practicing rituals that they constructed from a complex blend of fears and projections. These offending and often imagined rites included orgies, ceremonial sex performances, ritually imbibing sexual fluids and menstrual blood, anointing objects with sexual fluids, and even infant sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> These accusations served to discredit individuals and groups holding noncanonical views, and it is likely that most groups accused of these things did not do them. On the other hand, people actually did perform rituals of sacred sexuality intended to activate power, but these are little studied in their ancient and medieval forms. As Urban focuses on its postmedieval development, the need for the study of its premodern history is clear.

My study uses a working model of Jewish magic informed by all of these sources and many more. It is first based in Lesses’s understanding of the power of speech in Jewish magic and its social context. It relies on Janowitz’s concept of the iconicity of letters and names, and it is extended to apply to human and divine bodies composed of such letters and names. So too it accepts a composite model of magic that jumps boundaries between artificially constructed disciplines and borders, such as mysticism and magic, native and alien. I view mysticism and magic together as theory and practice, and rather than categories of native and foreign, I employ the concepts of integral and neighboring, with an understanding that in both cases they are often one and the same. Like Harari, I operate on the understanding that we must craft strategies to work with texts (which are often all that is left to us) in order to study ritual practices, which are often closely tied to texts and textualities. I see in action Eliade’s

concepts of a sexualized cosmos, and Couliano's theory of magic as a form of Eros, which are both congenial to the texts studied here. So too, Urban's attention to the rhetorical and political functions of magic is crucial to understanding sex magic and how it acts in the social world. I thus use a working model of magic that is dynamic, polythetic, and culturally situated, and that is not founded on the existence of opposing disciplinary and social categories.

As we can see, scholarship on the history of kabbalah, Jewish magic, and even other forms of premodern sex magic lay the groundwork for this effort. But the story of Hebrew sex magic has not yet been told. The evidence is available for all to see, yet there are both historical and modern constraints on its interpretation. This fits in with larger trends in the history of religion generally. In their book *Hidden Intercourse*, Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal argue that sex magic is foremost among the "things we don't talk about." They explain the scholarly lacuna as the product of a particular sort of intellectual history. According to them, the study of mysticism is tied to the emergence of psychoanalysis. In my mind, this is both the beginning of the study and one of its most serious faults.

This intellectual history coincides with institutional history as well. Kripal and Hanegraaff argue that because of the androcentrism of religious institutions, they tend to suppress heterosexual mystical structures in favor of homoerotic ones, as "male same-sex structures" are integrated into religion, while "those that featured an active or explicit heterosexual symbolism . . . became heterodox or heretical." Consistent with social history, religious institutions tend to exclude the feminine theologically as well. At the same time, this is reinforced by trends in the scholarship of religion. Kripal and Hanegraaff assert that the emergence of Freudian analysis opened the route to studying taboo subjects, such as mysticism and sex magic. But it suppressed those elements that did not locate meaning in the male body, and in relations between men. This is crucial, for while psychoanalysis is tied to the emergence of the study of mysticism, it also situates mysticism within its own phallogocentric structures of meaning.<sup>17</sup> In this way, scholarly analysis of sex magic accords with those structures already in place in both religious institutions and psychoanalytic discourse, reinforcing the long-standing exclusion of the feminine aspects of divinity crucial to the operation of the system. The same occurs in the study of kabbalah: the Freudian bent of the discipline, which locates meaning in the male body, encourages the masculinization of a bi-gendered cosmos such that it fits into modern religious cosmologies situated in a gendered social hierarchy. Along these same lines, kabbalah scholarship tends to simplify these complicated works, and to privilege masculinity as a site of power and meaning. This is based in both medieval and modern interpretive strategies.



But at the same time, as late antiquity becomes the Middle Ages, and as Jewish mysticism becomes kabbalah, we see the emergence of a dual commentary tradition on these early texts. Alongside kabbalistic sources, rationalist writers allegorized the text to eliminate the literal meanings and their effective powers. Sources at the base of the rationalist interpretive tradition include philosophical works by Saadya Gaon (tenth-century Egypt, writing in Sura and Baghdad) and Moses Maimonides (twelfth-century Iberia and Egypt). These authors read allegorically to suppress notions of divine embodiment and effective ritual in Jewish texts. As a group, they insist that God does not have a body, that an encounter with the divine occurs imaginally and not materially. Rationalists also efface the effective purposes of earlier texts, some of which literally promise beauty, knowledge, luck, and grace in the eyes of human and divine. Rationalist writers read these same texts theosophically, to imagine that they were meant to convey secret knowledge, which changes minds rather than material. Thus, to the two groups, and even within them, early Jewish esoteric texts meant very different things.

With important exceptions, many modern scholars of kabbalah take up the interpretive practices of medieval rationalists, just as they absorb the concerns and the structures of meaning of psychoanalysis. Some of the most important scholars of kabbalah follow the medieval rationalists in rejecting divine embodiment and sexuality by privileging the allegorical over the literal. Speaking of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, Alexander Altmann calls myths of divine embodiment “obnoxious.”<sup>18</sup> Incorporating the ideas of both rationalism and psychoanalysis in his earlier work, Moshe Idel labels them “immature.”<sup>19</sup> And Joseph Dan views the description of the divine body in the *Shi'ur Qomah* as “*reductio ad absurdum*,”<sup>20</sup> while its sexuality must, according to these schemes, be rendered metaphorical because it is impossible. Elliot Wolfson accepts that the texts describe an embodied divine but ultimately rejects the possibility of a bi-gendered divinity when he argues along psychoanalytic lines that “the myth of the divine androgyne in kabbalistic sources, as in the Gnostic compositions of Late Antiquity, is yet another expression of the socially dominant androcentrism.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, Wolfson projects a modern psychoanalytic androcentrism backward onto texts that articulate a far more complicated notion of gendering. At the same time, it is not possible to overestimate the contributions of these scholars—as a group they have helped to found the discipline and to develop the work of the earliest scholars, picking up where they left off and challenging limiting assumptions in the field. However, contemporary scholarship minimizes divine embodiment, and when gender is acknowledged, its feminine elements are subsumed into its male ones. In this way, God either has no body or has one from which the feminine

aspects are eliminated. Within the confines of these readings, sex magic is either impossible or ridiculous.

And yet there are very important exceptions to this trend, especially in the work of Martin Cohen and Moshe Idel. Cohen's erudite books on the *Shi'ur Qomah* stand out for their careful attention to both the literal and the metaphorical meanings of his sources, faithfully placing them in cultural context.<sup>22</sup> In these books, he situates early Jewish mystical sources in relation to integral and neighboring textual traditions and embodied practices. This is based in his understanding of the text as an icon with effective power. According to Cohen, "the revelations described in the great mystic passages of the bible are almost entirely visual."<sup>23</sup> The experience of vision is thus rooted in a biblical tradition. But it is also rooted in neighboring iconic conventions, and Cohen asserts that "the technique of anatomical description going from the ground up was a known technique in the Graeco-Roman literary corpus."<sup>24</sup> In this, Cohen attends to the embodied and implicitly erotic nature of the experience of this sort of vision. His work brings out the intradivine and human-divine eroticism upon which these texts operate. And in so doing, he shows the beginnings of the fluid genderings and embodiments at the base of the kabbalistic cosmology, without the need to assimilate their meanings into later rationalist models. The present study would be impossible without his fine and attentive work.

Moshe Idel's 2018 book *The Privileged Divine Feminine* is an important remedy to this entrenched habit of simplifying textual traditions to masculinize and disembody the cosmos and the divine. And while I started this project long before Idel's much-needed book was published, he describes his inclusive methodology in a way that very much resonates with my own. As such, it is worth quoting in full:

My methodology, less dependent on certain modern intellectual fashions, tries to shed light on the plurality of voices that informed Kabbalistic and Hasidic material, without ignoring the weird ones or harmonizing them by simplifications that betray stereotypes. In a search for theologies and intellectual systems that can be highlighted and categorized in scholarly terms, academics have marginalized many aspects of the prevalent mundane, concrete, performative, and thus particularistic dimensions of religious life in Judaism, which were also the concerns of most Kabbalists.<sup>25</sup>

Idel's attention to the multiplicity of the kabbalistic corpus, its varied depictions of its feminine-gendered elements, and its emphasis on practice is crucial, providing an important corrective to dominant trends in its study. And like the

more recent works of some of the scholars discussed here, Idel's work clearly shows that interpretations are changing quickly. Together, Cohen and Idel show the importance of the study of gender and sexuality in the history of kabbalah.

## Study of the Body

So too, the study of sexuality in kabbalah is dependent on our understanding of embodiment, both human and divine. In the history of Jewish studies, the perception of a relationship between human and divine bodies is too often miscategorized as anthropomorphism. This is based on the assumption that likening human and divine bodies is a projection of human qualities onto the deity, beginning with embodiment and including its corollaries of gender and sexuality. This is an anachronistic argument projecting twelfth-century minority rationalist views onto earlier and even contemporary material that was not congenial to it. Some scholars of kabbalah do focus on the body, attending to the function of the analogy between human and divine bodies. While anthropologists discuss the body's function as a source and a conduit for social information, most studies of the Hebrew microcosm focus on its underlying theology and its rhetorical function. These scholars generally historicize the idea of the microcosm; they summarize the meaning of the doctrine, and they usually situate it in the context of Neoplatonism transmitted via Muslim philosophy.<sup>26</sup> Scholars attending to the rhetorical function of the microcosm are interested in the way that the form opens a discursive space for certain kinds of debates.<sup>27</sup> Others devote their attention to the function of the analogy between human and divine bodies. Still others attend to embodied rituals in the kabbalah, among them Charles Mopsik, Elliot Ginsburg, Joel Hecker, and Ellen Haskell, who rely mostly on the anthropological symbolic functionalists<sup>28</sup> and on performance studies models of ritual. These scholars work toward the reintegration of the body into scholarship in kabbalah.

It is worth noting here that this corporeal turn in scholarship is based in social change. Our scholarship has changed because our anthropologies have changed; earlier writers understood an encounter with the divine as an affective and embodied experience. They saw this experience as transformative, changing the appearance of the body, its social standing, and even its ontological status. While the Middle Ages is, as they say, a direct continuation of antiquity, new conceptions of the self emerged with the development of Christianity and then Islam. As these new religions sought to institutionalize, they progressively disembodied encounters with the divine, while those with no such

goals retained the embodied, social, and affective dimensions of the experience. Today, as institutions weaken, as therapeutic and medical discourses hold greater authority than they once did, and as scientists come to understand the body more and more as the locus of experience, we turn to the corporeal once again.

Though we approach the body differently than the ancients did, our anthropology and our social structure now privilege the body as a site of experience. So too does our current economic model, which monetizes and medicalizes the body. This happens on several different levels, first with the apparent observation that while capitalism operates by means of the extraction of surplus value, that value is extracted from the human body. The exploitation of the human body is accompanied by the injunction “to enjoy” and to consume conspicuously. Bryan S. Turner writes that our current scholarly interest in sex and the body results from “the emphasis on pleasure, desire, difference and playfulness which are features of contemporary capitalism.”<sup>29</sup> He also argues that because of the prevalence of the medical industry, the body is medicalized as a site of profit. In this way, the discourse of medicine, also central to the emergence of kabbalah, wields tremendous economic and social power. Some scholars attribute importance to this change and its resonance with the past, but some do not; thus we see major differences in their methodologies. But this change has happened nevertheless, such that embodiment is an important mode of our experience of other powerful discourses, such as myth, both antique and modern.

## Theories of Myth and Ritual

I have heard it said recently that there is no new theory on myth. And yet there are several open questions in its study, the most pressing of which, to me, are relational. These have largely to do with the interactions of myth with ritual and with other authorized discourses, especially medicine and astrology. These dominant cultural narratives play a key role in the process of remythologization, which shows the development of both kabbalah and sex magic. Its relation to ritual is also an important, unresolved question. We have long known that myth is not a discrete object with one set of functions but something more like a living being, serving as a companion to think with, socializing with this or that mode of thinking and doing, eating this dish and rejecting that one, speaking in one way to one group and another to its neighbors, and doing different sorts of work in different settings. Most theories of myth have to do with its construction and its function. There are those who view myth as a

narration of ritual, and though this is a view that has been more or less forgotten, it is not without utility.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, Bruce Lincoln believes that rituals and practices enact myths.<sup>31</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that myths arise as a response to contradiction and that mythologizing is a dynamic and continuing process for the simple reason that social contradictions may never be fully resolved.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, J. Z. Smith adds to his work the notion that myth is a tool for thinking and for organizing experience.<sup>33</sup> Mary Douglas's work is helpful for understanding the principles by which neighbors' myths are integrated into the canon of a particular culture.<sup>34</sup> Her call to inquire into the means by which external ideas and practices are accepted or rejected is important to this work. Still others, such as Donovan Schaefer and Thomas Tweed, see myth's key functions in cultivating affect and attributing meaning to experience, especially threshold experiences of status change and of the moments between life and death. If affect is important, so too are the bodies from which it arises. In these processes of responding to cultural contradiction, interacting with other discourses and those of other cultures, and in its passage from one person to the next, myth is changed, just as it changes those who interact with it. The main question here is where one might find a model for myth that accounts for all of these things, for some myths assuredly do.

In my thoughts about myth and ritual, I adapt Alfred Gell's theory of art to argue that they too can function as agents, like living beings interacting with their audience in ritual situations. In *Art and Agency*, Gell approaches art anthropologically as an object with agency or "as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it." *Art and Agency* describes the interaction between works of art and their viewers as similar to that of living beings who distribute their influence by means of interaction. He theorizes the agency of an artwork as the power to influence its viewers, to make them act as if they are engaging not with dead matter but with living persons.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the meaning of a work is always relational and changing with its audience. Gell was very clear that this theory was meant to apply to visual art and not to the written word, but Warren Boutcher makes a strong argument for extending the theory to literature, which I would extend to include almost any sort of enduring cultural production.<sup>36</sup> In this way, it is possible to conceptualize myth relationally, to its audience and to other cultural forms.

If myth can be likened to a living being, how does ritual work with myth? In this book, I focus on narrative, mythological texts. Yet these texts often contain significant passages of ritual description, sometimes embedded in the narrative, sometimes accompanied by commentary, and sometimes apparently just tacked on. This raises questions about the nature of their relationship: is myth

the servant of ritual, is it the other way around, or do they act together? Most scholars agree that the point of ritual is to effect change in the cosmos, in society, and in individuals. The pressing question is how it does so. I will show that ritualizing is an ongoing process that occurs in dialogue with integral and neighboring myths, along with other powerful discourses such as those of science and philosophy. In this, the definition of ritual is easily applicable to many magical practices as well. Victor Turner views ritual as a drama and a process that transforms its operators and their community, and Stanley Tambiah likewise views it as a culturally constructed and scripted performance.<sup>37</sup> Ronald Grimes attends to the embodied and experiential beginnings of ritual. Grimes's work is particularly useful because it attends to the formation of ritual and the understanding that while it may be repeated, ritual begins (and continues) in bodies situated in a time and a place and in relation to people, places, things, and stories.<sup>38</sup> Themes of affect and embodiment are key to this, for the telling of stories evokes feelings, which set minds and bodies in motion. Brent Plate sees the "sensational operations of human bodies" as the foundation of religious cosmology, such that the body, both human and divine, plays a crucial part in the generation and the enacting of myth and ritual.<sup>39</sup> It is arguable that magic, as another mode of religious ritual performance, does the same thing. In this way, the texts depict a variety of relationships between myth, ritual, and dominant cultural discourses, but in all of these scenarios, the texts narrate embodied actions meant to evoke feeling and to effect change on human and cosmological levels. And, like a living being, myths change with situated, embodied, and affective experience, and as they encounter other sorts of narratives. So too do they change others in this way. This ritual genealogy focuses on some affective aspects of myth, ritual, and magic as they act with and on bodies. This project is thus, on a theoretical level, a tripartite inquiry into how myths change, how ritual develops, and how its effectiveness is imagined and experienced.

## The Sources

The materials studied here originate geographically in the various centers of Jewish esoteric thought in Byzantium, Persia, Iberia, and southern France. The first two chapters focus on late antique Byzantine and Babylonian Persian works from the fifth to the seventh centuries. The third chapter discusses tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine and Iberian sources. The fourth chapter discusses the *Sefer Bahir*, with two layers dating to tenth-century Byzantium and twelfth-century Ashkenaz, each of which draws upon all of the earlier

sources discussed in this book. The fifth chapter shows the continuity of elements of these earlier cosmological and ritual models in New Age North American sex magic practices. I deliberately leave out early modern materials, first because this book compares medieval and modern Jewish esoteric practices, and second because Western esoteric works generally Christianize and adapt pre-Renaissance texts for their own purposes, without engaging post-sixteenth-century kabbalistic materials. As such, each chapter of this book focuses on a crucial development in this tradition, up to its articulation as part of a system in the kabbalistic literature of the late thirteenth century.

Together, these sources provide the mythological and ritual components crucial to the development of a kabbalistic cosmos and the modern practice of sex magic, both in the Middle Ages and in the present, and they come from a number of traditions, including biblical sources, Persian and ancient Middle Eastern culture, and the commentarial traditions that engage those myths and traditions. Together, they construct the kabbalistic, sefirotic cosmos at the base of the model, and this book traces their appearances and shows how they were synthesized from preexisting elements. The elements of the kabbalistic cosmos include, first, the conception of an embodied and gendered deity or deities; second, myths of divine creation by means of sexual reproduction; third, rituals facilitating interaction between human and divine bodies; fourth, the idea of a tripartite microcosm consisting of divinity, cosmos, and human being; and, finally, a sefirotic cosmos that combines all of these.

Late antique sources take up this model. The fifth- to seventh-century *Shi'ur Qomah* (*The Measure of the Body*) develops the notion of divine embodiment as it is understood in its Middle Eastern and possibly Persian milieu, as well as the eroticism that attends it. The sixth-century Persian *Sefer Refuot* (*Book of Remedies*) purposefully integrates the medical microcosm into the Hebrew myth so that it can be acted on in effective acts such as healing. The fifth- to seventh-century *Sefer Yetsirah* (*Book of Formation*) integrates the medical microcosm into Hebrew traditions of letter magic as it retells the story of the creation of the universe with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the ten sefirot, introduced here for the first time and developed extensively in its interpretive literature. Tenth- and eleventh-century commentaries respond to these earlier works in light of a Jewish rationalist reinterpretation of Genesis, asserting that God has no body and that human beings cannot resemble the divine in that way. They keep the idea of a tripartite microcosm, but they shift their understanding of the human resemblance to the divine according to their engagement with these new ideas, focusing on the education of the faculties and senses to cultivate attributes and affects that resemble the divine. The tenth- and twelfth-century *Sefer Bahir* (*Book of Brilliance*) synthesizes all these earlier

works with medical embryologies and sexologies to articulate the beginnings of a sefirotic, microcosmic cosmos in which all entities are gendered and capable of interacting sexually. The text stresses both the affect and the salvific power of the affect associated with eroticized human-divine relations. Later texts, such as the thirteenth-century *Zohar* and Moshe Cordovero's sixteenth-century *Prayer of Moses*, actually include instruction for sex magic ritual, and from there the models moved from Jewish kabbalah to Christianity, and then into the stream of Western esotericism. For this reason, I examine these late antique and medieval texts cumulatively, to show how each draws upon the earlier sources, reimagining them to eventually articulate the kabbalistic cosmos and the rituals that operate on it. Together, the texts analyzed in the first four chapters plot a genealogy of kabbalistic sex magic ritual from late antiquity to the thirteenth century, with a view to its practice in the present. In this way, I identify the most important stages in its development, from the fifth century to the thirteenth, to the point at which the ritual may be practiced by two human operators.

The fifth and final chapter of this book examines the use of medieval and early modern models for kabbalistic sex magic in modern self-help books and in teaching and therapeutic settings. In so doing, it makes both a historical and a methodological break with the previous chapters. This is dictated by the material, as the most significant changes to the model for sex magic are tied to differences in milieu and medium. Specifically, the deepest changes occur with the development of New Age religion, tied to the emergence of late capitalism in the twentieth century. So too, chapters 1–4 are restricted to textual analysis, because, with some exceptions for diagrammatic representation, that is all that's left to us. This is not the case when we study the present, of course, which affords us not only firsthand experience of ritual and ritual innovation, but also the opportunity to learn from practitioners. This allows us to theorize the process of ritual experimentation at the core of ritualizing, both in the distant past and as it happens here and now.

## Overview of the Book

The first two chapters develop ideas about a tripartite microcosm, positing structural and substantial relationships between an embodied divine, the cosmos, and the human body. They show how this microcosm is constructed by means of reinterpreting earlier myths and medical narratives. At the same time, these two chapters analyze ritual descriptions included in the examined texts to show the development of key components in modern sex magic ritual.



Chapter 1 analyzes the *Shi'ur Qomah* (*The Measure of the Body*). This is the most important Jewish esoteric text for the study of divine embodiment and, with it, the Hebrew tradition of sex magic. It was written in Hebrew, between the fifth and seventh centuries, most probably in Byzantium.<sup>40</sup> The text consists of a series of hymns describing the divine body, providing the names and dimensions of each part and the material of which it is made. In this way, the *Shi'ur Qomah* narrates an iconography of the beautiful divine body in gendered and sexualized terms, which are key to its power.<sup>41</sup> Even more, it directs the reader to recite this iconography as a hymn and to activate its power for a wide range of practical purposes. To its late antique and medieval readers, this text held the same sort of power that many other amulets and magical objects did; it could protect, beautify, convey knowledge, and secure a good position in this world and the next. The text also provides its readers various means of activating its power, including visualization, recitation, and ritual inscription. Neither these gendered, sexualized terms nor these magical conventions are accidental; instead, they point to a common ancient and medieval Middle Eastern understanding of divine nature and the human relationship to it. My analysis shows, first, that the text directs the reader explicitly to visualize God's beautiful body to cultivate an aesthetic and affective experience, interacting with it through the senses of vision and touch. Second, this experience is sexualized, and it serves as a source of power for the reader. Third, the relation between power and the experience of the divine body is grounded in integral and neighboring myths, iconographies, and ritual/magical practices. I thus argue that the *Shi'ur Qomah* is a magical text depicting the divine body as an eroticized magical object, operating on late antique magical conventions and erotic affect.

Chapter 2 examines two late antique Hebrew works that synthesize their views of the human body and its power from Hebrew and Greek myth. These are the fifth- to seventh-century Byzantine esoteric *Sefer Yetsirah* (*Book of Formation*) and the fifth- to seventh-century Persian medical work the *Sefer Refuot* (*Book of Remedies*). In this chapter, I argue that these two texts combine biblical myths of human creation in the divine image with those of the Greek medical microcosm to imagine a tripartite microcosm in which human, cosmos, and divine are structurally and substantially similar, such that acting on and with human bodies makes it possible to act on the cosmos and the divine. Grafted onto the theology of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, this process of remythologizing underpins the construction of Hebrew sex magic. Both works draw upon Genesis 1, the book of Job, and Greek theories of the medical microcosm to describe a body that resembles both the cosmos and the divine. Greek medicine has a strong astrological component important to its understanding of the

relation between body and cosmos. The two works use these models differently; the *Sefer Refuot* uses retellings of Genesis 6 to combine Greek cosmological models (including medical astrology) with Genesis 1:27, depicting a body that is a microcosm of the cosmos but resembles the divine when human beings use technology to access divine power and to heal. In contrast, the *Sefer Yetsirah* combines Jewish and Middle Eastern traditions of letter magic with biblical narrative and the Greek medical microcosm (also astrological) to depict a human body that resembles both the cosmos and the divine. This is so because, in this work, both the human being and the cosmos are constructed of letters and these constitutive letters are made of divine substance. In the *Sefer Yetsirah*, human beings also resemble the divine when they perform ritual; just as God ritually creates with letters, so do they. In this way, both texts theorize the interaction of human and divine bodies according to the model of the microcosm. Both see that interaction as a source of power, and both use technology and ritual practice to access that power. These works thus depict ritual and embodied interaction as a means of exercising divine power.

Chapter 3 shows the transformation of the late antique medical microcosm discussed in chapter 2. Here, I examine different models of the microcosm and their various functions in three tenth- and eleventh-century Jewish works: Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century Byzantine work *Sefer Hakhmoni* (*Book of Wisdom*), Solomon ibn Gabirol's eleventh-century Iberian *Tikkun Midot haNefesh* (*Improvement of the Moral Qualities*), and Bahya ibn Paquda's eleventh-century Iberian *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot* (*Duties of the Heart*).<sup>42</sup> All of these writers ritualize the microcosmic relation between human and divine, and all use multiple iterations of the microcosm, in Hebrew known as the *Olam Katan* (the small world), to interpret the biblical assertion that humans are created in the divine image (Genesis 1:26). These writers engage emergent philosophical rationalism to negotiate the occasionally problematic earlier ideas about material resemblance between human and divine, to articulate different conceptions of the meaning of the human body, and to instantiate a dialogue between them. This dialogue serves to develop earlier conceptions of the microcosm to enhance their affective content and to perform it in ritual meditation. So too, these thinkers developed the ethical component of the microcosm inherent in Greek medicine and the Jewish commentarial tradition, employing it in shaping the human body, its senses, and its appetites to better resemble the divine.<sup>43</sup> These texts model the human body on the cosmos and on the divine body to facilitate an interaction between them, key to the development of kabbalah. These works draw on earlier sources such as the *Sefer Refuot* and the *Sefer Yetsirah* to make their points, and as such they serve as a

bridge between them and the kabbalistic works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Chapter 4 shows the continuing processes of reinterpreting earlier works as it analyzes the *Sefer Bahir* (*Book of Brilliance*). This book consists of two main layers, the first composed around the turn of the tenth century in the Middle East and the second most probably in twelfth-century Ashkenaz (northern France or Germany). These two layers have very different goals; the first focuses on the cultivation of affect based on the confounding of taxonomic categories, while the second is often understood to create categories and to work (at times) toward the articulation of a cosmological system later understood as the *Adam Kadmon* myth. Most scholars agree that the *Sefer Bahir* is central to the development of kabbalah, specifically to its conception of human and divine embodiment. Gershom Scholem has identified the *Bahir's* tree as the source of the sefirotic doctrine that distinguishes kabbalah from earlier forms of Jewish esotericism. Following Scholem, most believe that the *Bahir* holds the key to the development of kabbalah as we now know it. But it did not appear “out of the blue,” as others have argued.<sup>44</sup> Instead, it is a retelling of older myths to make a new cosmological model, which takes on a life of its own. It arrives at this model by means of a multilayered process of reinterpretation to create new myth. The first, tenth-century layer deeply engages the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the *Shi'ur Qomah*, positing an embodied divine accessible through erotic affect. The second, twelfth-century layer reinterprets the first, along with its understanding of the function of eroticism, as it is filtered through the texts of the third chapter, through their conception of the microcosm and its attendant embryologies and sexologies, and through the very different theologies of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, or German Pietists. In this way, I argue that the writers of the *Bahir* reinterpret most of the works discussed here to arrive at this model, and that sexologies and embryologies play a key role in this process. The role of sexuality is different in each layer, as is the affect attached to it, but both are required to construct the sefirotic model at the base of kabbalah and its sex magic tradition.

The book as a whole traces, first, the depictions of human and divine bodies; second, the power activated by their ritual interaction; third, the continuing ritualization of those models; and, finally, their expression in the crafting of the model of the sefirot. The concluding chapter compares these models to the ones articulated in modern New Age sex magic. To reiterate, late antique writers read the human and divine bodies as structurally similar but categorically different. New Agers efface the distinction between these categories. Their conception of the divinized human body fuses the separate models articulated

in earlier sources, using similar rhetorical strategies to different ends.<sup>45</sup> In their view, the human body is not only a microcosm for the divine but contains it. In this chapter, I compare these earlier models for sex magic from medieval and early modern texts to modern sources, and show how Jewish practitioners have acted on these models to generate new sex magic rituals. Specifically, this chapter analyzes a selection of instructions for ritualized sexuality to show precisely how this is done in medieval, early modern, and modern sources. It explores the assemblage of earlier models of messianic sex magic as they are rewritten into their modern utopian form, used by religious and secular practitioners alike. This chapter is divided into five sections, each examining the articulation and employment of a Jewish esoteric model for sex magic. The first section reviews elements of the model appearing in the sources discussed so far, including the *Shi'ur Qomah*, the *Sefer Refuot*, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and the *Sefer Bahir*, and then shows how they are taken up in medieval and early modern Jewish works. These include the three works discussed in chapter 3: Shabbetai Donnolo's *Book of Wisdom*, ibn Gabirol's *Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, and Bahya ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart*.<sup>46</sup> The second section shows how later medieval and early modern works act on the cosmologies and ritual models articulated in the works discussed thus far. It briefly discusses passages from the thirteenth-century Iberian *Sefer haZohar* and Moshe Cordovero's sixteenth-century *Prayer of Moses*. These last two works contain instructions for ritualized sexuality acting on the cosmos articulated in the earlier texts. The third section examines modern books on sacred sexuality, including two New Age kabbalistic sources: Yehuda Berg's *Kabbalah Book of Sex* and Shmuley Boteach's *Kosher Sutra*. The fourth analyzes original interviews with modern teachers of sacred sexuality, focusing on the process of ritual innovation. The fifth and final section theorizes the construction of new ritual, bringing together the theorists of myth and ritual discussed throughout. In this book as a whole, then, I show the development of Jewish forms of sex magic, the kabbalistic cosmology to which they are attached, and the ways in which they are used in the present. In this way, I theorize the process of remythologizing and ritual innovation and try to better understand how people imagine that it is possible to access divine power with stories and their bodies.