

BODIES OF THE ZOHAR

Kabbalistic Views on the Human Body

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ABSTRACT

Through the Zohar, the major medieval kabbalistic work, the human body is used in order to symbolise the divine structure. Present throughout are also dire warnings against the dangers of the flesh – a sense of anxiety often surrounds matters of the body. This study examines how the central notion of the body as created in God's image relates to the negative zoharic characterizations of the body and further, how notions of gender and Jewish religious affiliation are reflected in the zoharic views of the body. The results show that characterizations of the body can work to reinforce boundaries and define the own group. The female body is valued differently than the male, the Jewish differently than the non-Jewish body. The idealized human body belongs to the circumcised Jewish male who adheres to proper religious behaviour. The aim of this thesis is to enrich our understanding of the human body as depicted in the major kabbalistic tradition of the Zohar.

Keywords

Kabbalah, the Zohar, Jewish mysticism, Medieval, Bodies, Impurity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

My curiosity about the human body in religious imagination begins with this sentiment:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

This well-known biblical statement raises a multitude of questions about gender, the body of God and of course, the nature of the human body. The notion recurs time and again within the Jewish interpretive tradition. Moreover, this narrative implies that the human body manifests the bridge between the divine, eternal and exalted and the earthly, temporal and corporeal. In Kabbalah, a central branch of the broader tradition of Jewish mysticism, these issues find a natural expression. The notion of the human being as a reflection of the divine image is given a significant role not only in the symbolic language of Kabbalah, but also in the viewing of human beings as active participants in the status and well-being of the divine. Bodily actions on earth matter, because they are directly reflected in the divine sphere.

My reading of the Zohar, the major work of the kabbalistic tradition, started with an interest in the demonic figure of Lilith. She is a dynamic female creature in a largely male-centred religious tradition, used by the zoharic writers to express the dangers of improper sexual behaviour and anxieties about reproduction. I found the world of the Zohar fascinating and engaging while also difficult to fully comprehend, prompting me to dive deeper into the text. What I found was a tradition which used human corporeality to communicate its most sacred truths, while also expressing great anxiety around matters of the body – a realization which begat more questions. In the context of the Zohar, the earthly body was at once a mirroring of the divine and the scene of demonic forces and sin. I particularly found uncomfortable ideas about women as lesser, potentially impure beings. I found it difficult to reconcile these ideas with the central kabbalistic belief of the body as a human mirroring of the divine sphere:

The blessed Holy One formed the human being corresponding to the pattern above, all according to wisdom, for you cannot find a single human limb not founded upon supernal wisdom. (Zohar 1:186b)

It became clear that I could not interpret ideas about “man” as referring to a universal being when investigating the human body in the zoharic tradition, but rather had to determine when “man” was just that, a male. In the works of Elliot R. Wolfson, I found a way of relating to the kabbalistic system which resonated with me. In *Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology*, Wolfson argues that the kabbalistic orientation oftentimes is better understood as androcentric, as well as centred around Jewish religious affiliation, rather than generally anthropocentric – the ideal human being is no other than the circumcised Jewish male.¹ I found the clarity of not presenting depictions of men as depictions of *humanity* both refreshing and sincere. This observation allowed me to use the zoharic exclusions of women to highlight their representation or lack thereof, instead of implicitly omitting women’s bodies from the discussion by not clarifying which gender the writers had in mind.

The Zohar presents a broad spectrum of attitudes towards the human sexuality and body. There are inherent tensions regarding the nature of the body, leading to an ambiguous overall impression of what actually constitutes the zoharic view of the body. Some views are however more recurring than others. By focusing on how the notion of the body as created in God’s image relates to other, less positive ideas about the body, as well as how notions of gender and Jewish religious affiliation are reflected in the zoharic views of the body, this complex situation could be further underlined and explored. By taking the androcentric nature of the zoharic discourse into consideration, as well as its centring around Jewish religious affiliation, I aim to depict a more inclusive account of the bodies of the Zohar than previous scholarly portrayals of the issue. In this study, the zoharic depictions of the body are interpreted in relation to the larger zoharic system and its latent exclusions, creating a comprehensive description of the body’s place within this kabbalistic tradition. This subject matter in turn has implications for our understanding of kabbalistic views on sexuality, impurity and identity as well as the broader medieval discourse on bodies. As the body is the bearer of life and tradition, its central place in culture and history cannot be denied – it amounts to more than its parts. Further, the body is a surface where contradictions of the human life are clearly manifested – tensions between bodily impulses and the desire to lead a righteous life in accordance with God’s will are expressed in religious approaches to the human body.

¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology”, *Exemplaria* 12, no. 1 (2000): 143–144, 148–149, <https://doi.org/10.1179/exm.2000.12.1.129>.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ZOHAR

2.1 Tradition and Origin of the Zohar

The primary source material of this study is made up of a selection of zoharic passages, made accessible through the Pritzker Edition, an English translation of the Zohar by Daniel C. Matt.² *The Book of Splendor*, or the Zohar, is a foundational work within the kabbalistic tradition. I will briefly introduce its origin, literary style and composition.

The Zohar is the central work of the kabbalistic tradition. Kabbalah (“tradition”) is a religious movement which exists within the more general term Jewish mysticism. Jewish mysticism can broadly be described as the collected pursuits of a mystical interpretation of rabbinic Judaism.³ The mystical and esoteric tradition deemed Kabbalah made its first known appearance in the 12th century in Provence, southern France. The teachings of the mystics have an esoteric quality – they are not intended to be grasped by everyone. The transformative, revelatory experience is generally central within mystical traditions. These experiences are believed to give the devotee a deep insight which cannot be obtained through a more rational search for knowledge.⁴ The use of symbols within Kabbalah is a way of communicating a reality and knowledge which cannot be disclosed in any other way. The symbol, which can be expressed, represents that which is outside of language and communication. The reality of creation is used to convey the hidden aspects of divinity – this is the secret interpretation of Torah⁵, where the literal meaning can reveal a much higher reality.⁶ That which the Torah conveys to us in human language is the most superficial layer of meaning, according to the kabbalists. They view the Torah as a living organism and search

² Matt’s English translation is translated directly from original Aramaic manuscripts and includes extensive commentaries, such as cross-references and references to related biblical verses and rabbinic writings. The intricate kabbalistic symbolism is commented upon continuously.

³ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5; Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 32. Rabbinic Judaism represents itself as a chain of tradition going back to God’s revelation of the Torah – it proceeds from the story of Moses receiving the Torah at Sinai through both written and oral transmission. Through the first six centuries of the common era, the rabbis, or learned men, codified Jewish law, belief and practice, based on the teachings of the written as well as the oral Torah. The Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud are central pillars of rabbinic literature and tradition. See Jacob Neusner, *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1999), vii–xi, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezp.sub.su.se/lib/sub/detail.action?docID=170475>.

⁴ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 5–6, 15.

⁵ The Torah is a part of the Hebrew Bible. It is made up of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, trans. Joachim Retzlaff, 3rd ed. (Eslöv: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2002), 38, 50–52.

in it for the secret, deepest truth about the nature of God.⁷ The stories of the Torah are its garment, beneath this outer layer lies the deeper meaning, as stated in the Zohar.⁸

The Zohar is a creative compendium composed of mystical and esoteric teachings. The text first began to circulate in Castile around the year 1300, distributed by Castilian kabbalists who presented it as an ancient text that had just been discovered. It was claimed to originate from the talmudic sage Shim'on bar Yoḥai⁹ and his inner circle, who lived in Palestine during the second century. The authenticity of the Zohar has been disputed throughout history, nevertheless, for several centuries its status was very high. It was placed alongside the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud as divinely inspired works conveying religious truth. Only in modern times has the Zohar been excluded from the normative canon of Jewish literature.¹⁰

The question of authorship has been debated ever since the Zohar was first presented. There is no doubt that the text was composed shortly before the time of its first appearance – it seems as though the main body of text was compiled around the 1280's. The kabbalist Rabbi Moses de Leon¹¹ first distributed fragments of the zoharic text, claiming to have copied it from ancient manuscripts. This claim was met with scepticism by some of the learned Jewish men who got hold of the manuscripts, who did not believe in the ancient origins of the Zohar and instead considered de Leon to have authored the work himself, possibly forging it for material gain.¹² The question of single authorship and innovation versus the passing on of older traditions has been disputed ever since. Gershom Scholem concluded from his research that nearly all of the Zohar was written by a single author, no other than de Leon. Contemporary research has revised Scholem's statements, showing that Scholem was right to credit de Leon to a large extent, however, there seems to have been several writers and editors involved. The zoharic literature might be better understood as the product of a mystical school of thought that operated during an extended period of time, rather than of individual authors.¹³

⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 36–37.

⁸ Zohar 3:152a.

⁹ Bar Yoḥai is depicted in rabbinic literature as a righteous sage from the school of the renowned Rabbi Akiva. See Yeruḥam Fishel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Liverpool University Press, 1989), 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1rmkc9>.

¹⁰ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 3–5; Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 185.

¹¹ De Leon played a pivotal role in the publication of the Zohar. Biographical information on him is scarce. However, several of the kabbalistic works he composed around the end of the 13th century are preserved, many of which are stated to have been composed in Guadalajara. His death probably occurred in the year 1305. See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 17–18.

¹² Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 162–163; Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 16.

¹³ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 164–167; cf. Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 197–198, 222.

Regarding the Zohar, and Kabbalah in general, it is important to note that it is a tradition created by and represented by learned men – historically there is a complete lack of known female kabbalists.¹⁴ The medieval kabbalists generally belonged to the rabbinic elite; the exclusion of women is to be expected in this context.¹⁵

2.2 Literary Style and Composition of the Zohar

The Zohar is principally a mystical commentary on the Torah. Its literary style is deliberately anachronistic, the text takes the form of a *midrash*¹⁶, a commentary on scripture, even though this was seen as an antiquated genre at this time and place in history. The senders sought to give authority to the kabbalistic tradition by placing the text in ancient times.¹⁷ The main character of the zoharic narrative is Shim'on bar Yoḥai. We follow the teacher and his disciples through their wanderings in Palestine. The stories are fiction, but it is not impossible that they mirror a true experience of a mystical circle, where a small group would gather around their master. The depiction of bar Yoḥai and his disciples became the norm for subsequent kabbalistic learning.¹⁸

The zoharic corpus, published as *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“the Book of Splendor”), essentially consists of three books, typically divided into five parts in published editions. The main body of the Zohar, meaning the mystical *midrash* on the Torah, constitutes around two thirds of *Sefer ha-Zohar*. It was divided into three volumes when published. The first volume comments upon Genesis, the second on Exodus, and the last on the three remaining books of the Torah. The zoharic literature also encompasses two more books: *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* (“Arrangements of the Zohar”) and *Zohar Ḥadash* (“the New Zohar”). *Zohar Ḥadash* contains works from the zoharic literature that were missing from earlier printed editions. Out of these three main books, only *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* appears as a unified work. The other parts

¹⁴ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 61–62.

¹⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 78.

¹⁶ *Midrash* is a systematic mode of commentary on scripture within the Jewish tradition, it is a form of exegesis. There are different approaches to *midrash*. When used as parable, scripture is interpreted outside of the specific situation that the source itself speaks of, instead, another, deeper meaning is applied to the text. This approach is typical of rabbinic *midrash*. See Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 7–8. The midrashic interpretation of the Zohar is typically mystical, lengthy and intricate. See Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 186.

¹⁷ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 63–64.

¹⁸ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 71–72.

of the zoharic literature are compilations of several compositions, some with separate titles, and some integrated into the main text. Some of these separate expositions do not follow the midrashic structure but will still appear amongst a commentary on the Torah.¹⁹

The language of the Zohar is unique, adding to the mystical and ancient character of the text. Nearly all of the zoharic literature is composed in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. This linguistic choice is interesting – Aramaic was the spoken language of the Jewish people for several centuries, but at the time of the Zohar it was solely a literary language which was rarely used. Composing the Zohar in Aramaic thus gave it an esoteric and archaic quality – to take part in it required a higher effort from the reader. However, *if* the text would actually have been composed by the sage bar Yoḥai in the second century, it is highly unlikely that Aramaic, the vernacular language of the time, would be used over rabbinic Hebrew, which was the preferred literary language.²⁰

Further, according to Gershom Scholem, the Aramaic of the Zohar is not a natural, living Aramaic, such as the dialect that bar Yoḥai and his disciples could have spoken in their time. Scholem characterizes the language of the Zohar as artificial, based solely on literary Aramaic. There are also traces of medieval, 13th century Hebrew, as well as Spanish and Arabic. The writings showcase a limited vocabulary and grammatical mistakes. The grammatical structure appears to largely be derived from the Babylonian Talmud, composed partly in Aramaic, and the Targum Onkelos, the primary Aramaic translation of the Torah.²¹ The description of the zoharic Aramaic as artificial has been challenged by Charles Mopsik and Yehuda Liebes, both scholars of Jewish mysticism. Mopsik argues in *Late Judeo-Aramaic: The Language of Theosophic Kabbalah* that the zoharic Aramaic should be considered an independent idiolect in its own right, as the zoharic language has been passed down, understood and commented on by its readers.²² Similarly, in *Hebrew and Aramaic as Languages of the Zohar* Liebes wants to challenge the labelling of the zoharic language as artificial. While Aramaic was not a living, spoken language in medieval Castile, it was still alive as a written language among those Jews who read the Aramaic of the Talmud and the Aramaic translations and interpretations of the Torah, the *targumim*. The zoharic language

¹⁹ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1–5, 105 n. 3; Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 63, 159–161.

²⁰ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 169–171.

²¹ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 192–195.

²² Charles Mopsik, “Late Judeo-Aramaic: The Language of Theosophic Kabbalah”, trans. Ariel Klein, *Aramaic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 25–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477835106066033>.

does not represent an organic development from a single Aramaic dialect, rather it adopted elements from various literary sources to create its own linguistic character. Liebes thus argues that the zoharic language is natural to the Zohar, it represents a linguistic need and not only a device to give the illusion of ancient times.²³ In addition to the peculiar language, the constant use of symbolism further contributes to the mystical character of the zoharic text. The uninitiated will struggle to grasp what it all means, but to one who is familiar with the symbolic language and the secrets of the Torah, a deeper meaning is revealed.²⁴

3. RESEARCH AIMS

This paper aims to highlight selected ideas central to the Zohar regarding the characteristics and values ascribed to the human body. The zoharic conception of the human body as a reflection of the divine, which in turn enables the use of bodily symbolism for the divine sphere, is discussed along with the negative views on corporeality found in the Zohar. The negative characterizations of the body uphold it as inferior compared to the spiritual aspects of man and as a site which can be corrupted by demonic forces. The reason for the conflict regarding the nature of the body is explored through attention to the contextual norms which dictate how the bodies are valued, especially in regard to the category of *adam*, “human”. The perceptions of bodies are differentiated in relation to this central category. This approach proceeds from the issue of how biases and exclusions relate to the zoharic representations of bodies. More specifically, the research questions are:

1. How does the notion of the body as created in the image of God relate to the negative zoharic characterizations of the body?
2. How are notions of gender and Jewish religious affiliation reflected in the zoharic views of the body?

The main analysis is structured around three overarching themes relating to these questions. The first theme is the concept of *adam* and related terms, the second is the connection between corporeality and the impure, and the last is the body’s relationship to the soul.

²³ Yehuda Liebes, “Hebrew and Aramaic as Languages of the Zohar”, trans. Daphne Freedman and Ada Rapoport-Alber, *Aramaic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 36–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477835106066034>.

²⁴ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 7–8.

4. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

The following chapter introduces the research situation within the subject of the human body, how it has been interpreted by the kabbalistic tradition in general and within the zoharic literature in particular. Scholarly discussions of gender roles and sexuality within medieval Kabbalah are also highlighted, since these issues are closely linked to perceptions of the human body. Further, a selection of notable works that are not directly related to Kabbalah but examine the body within the broader biblical and Jewish tradition are presented.

4.1 Kabbalah and the Body

Gershom Scholem, the founder of the modern academic study of Kabbalah, concisely discusses the role of the human body and sexuality in the symbolism of the Zohar in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. According to the kabbalistic worldview, the notion of man being made in the divine image implies two things, as stated by Scholem. Firstly, it means that the divine attributes, or *sefirot*²⁵ are present within man. Secondly, it means that the sefirotic structure²⁶ can be represented by the human body – human limbs are essentially depictions of a higher, spiritual realm. The view of the *sefirot* as constituting a body results in frequent use of anatomical symbolism in the Zohar.²⁷ The human being mirrors the divine, she is a blend of all the spiritual forces which operated during creation. Scholem notes that the Zohar expresses that the human being was a purely spiritual creature originally, indicating a hierarchy between the corporeal and the spiritual. Only after the primordial sin did Adam and Eve obtain physical existence, when their supernal beauty diminished.²⁸

The zoharic symbolism is known for its sexual character and anthropomorphic imaging of the divine. On this note, Scholem argues that the mortal's loving devotion to God always appears as asexual and not as a love between romantic partners. There is but one exception to this rule, namely the sexual relationship described between Moses and the *Shekhinah*.²⁹ *Shekhinah*

²⁵ *Ein Sof* ("infinite" or "without end") is the term for the innermost, hidden aspect of the divinity. When *Ein Sof* acts and appears in the world, it takes on the form of the *sefirot*: the ten attributes of the divine. The *sefirot* figure in the world of the Zohar as different stages of the divine emanation and manifestation. They all have symbolic names relating to their functions. See Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 235–237.

²⁶ The sefirotic structure refers to the totality of the ten divine attributes which together constitute the divine manifestation. In the Zohar, the human body is an important symbolic representation of this structure. See Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 240–243.

²⁷ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 243–244.

²⁸ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 259; Zohar 3:83b.

²⁹ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 254–255. See Zohar 1:21b–22a.

is the name often given to the last of the *sefirot*, *Malkhut* (“kingdom”).³⁰ The *Shekhinah* takes a central place in the symbolism of the Zohar as a representation of femininity in its different forms, she is mother, daughter, wife and queen.³¹ The role of this *sefirah* is that of the passive female who receives and transmits the flow from the higher, active male *sefirot*.³²

However, processes within the divine itself is often described with a symbolic sexual imagery. Scholem characterizes the zoharic symbolism as radical to its nature, and specifically mentions the frequently occurring phallic symbolism connected to the ninth *sefirah*, *Yesod* or Righteous One.³³ The general zoharic attitude towards sexuality is deemed as positive by Scholem, given that it follows the religious regulations. Furthermore, he sees this position as decidedly Jewish, in contrast to the exalting of sexual asceticism of the non-Jewish mysticism.³⁴

Isaiah Tishby succinctly summarizes the zoharic views on the corporeal body in the thorough *Wisdom of the Zohar*, highlighting several important zoharic passages connected to this subject. Tishby identifies three main zoharic ideas about the body: 1) The body is essentially evil and beyond redemption, 2) the body is neutral and capable of redemption and 3) the body is a reflection of the sefirotic structure and a means for man to reach the divine.³⁵ Although all of these views are represented, meaning that the absolute nature of the body is ambiguous, it is clear that the body is the locus of man’s evil tendency.³⁶

Concerning the seemingly exalted role of sexuality within the Zohar, Tishby notes that the restrictions are firm, rendering it closer to the view of conjugal sexual relations in the more traditional Jewish sources. The only legitimate reason for intercourse is procreation and only the approved sexual relations have a positive influence on the divine sphere. The act needs to

³⁰ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 240–241.

³¹ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 258–259.

³² In earlier Jewish literature, the *Shekhinah* denotes to the active, divine presence in the world and more specifically among the people of Israel. In Kabbalah, the *Shekhinah* is identified as the ruler of the created world, and as the Assembly of Israel (*knesset yisrael*) in the upper realms. This title communicates that the *Shekhinah* embodies the divine essence of the Jewish people. As the last *sefirah*, the *Shekhinah* is a connective between the upper and lower realms. See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 371–373, 381.

³³ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 255–256. See Zohar 1:162a, 2:128a–b, 3:5a–b, 3:26a.

³⁴ Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 263.

³⁵ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 764.

³⁶ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 767.

be executed with the right attitude in both intention and performance in order for it to have any beneficial effect.³⁷

Charles Mopsik makes several compelling points regarding the body within the Jewish tradition in general, and the kabbalistic tradition in particular in his works *The Body of Engenderment* and *Sex of the Soul*. His insights and innovative phrasing represent a development in the research on Kabbalah, where notions of gender and sexuality are given more attention than previously. He illustrates the importance of nuance when interpreting the gendered kabbalistic symbols. In kabbalistic writing, masculine and feminine are associated with different characteristics: judgment, limitation and darkness are feminine while mercy, deployment and light are masculine, and so on. The feminine is associated with aspects that are troubling and potentially dangerous. Both the masculine and feminine sides of these pairings are however crucial, since harmony can only be achieved by balancing these opposing elements. Mopsik further argues that the *Shekhinah* is the divine attribute which manifests its powers most frequently in kabbalistic writings, which is why the kabbalists have emphasised that this female emanation gains its powers from the higher, active male *sefirot* – in order to avoid turning the *Shekhinah* into an autonomous goddess.³⁸

Mopsik pinpoints the implications of the human body in the following way: for a people, the significance of the body is clear – the survival of both the individual and the group is dependent on it. The body is the bearer of lineage and tradition.³⁹ He further argues that the medieval kabbalistic tradition exalted human engenderment, the act of procreation, to the main way of divine imitation. The very beginning of creation, where the divine manifests itself through a process of emanations, is depicted with a symbolism taken from the spheres of human reproduction and birth. Human procreation is therefore an imitation of the earliest steps of the theogonic process, that is, the gradual divine revelation.⁴⁰ Mopsik contends that this kabbalistic conception constitutes a necessary development of the esoteric interpretation of Torah – if man is made in the image of God, this image has to be pre-existent and originate from somewhere. The kabbalists answer to the question of emergence point is that the

³⁷ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1360, 1363.

³⁸ Charles Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah*, ed. Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 17–19.

³⁹ Charles Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah”, in *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body: Part One*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 49.

⁴⁰ Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment”, 57–58.

primordial image was passed on in the way of human engenderment.⁴¹ Finally, Mopsik makes a statement well worth noting: although the kabbalists ascribe great importance to the human body, the body in itself is not an object of adoration or contemplation. The bodily form is not revered, for example, the kabbalists prefer abstract depictions of the body, never figurative ones. However, the body does obtain a unique position as a representation of a chain of tradition and engenderment whose first link is the divine itself.⁴² Moshe Idel makes a similar statement regarding the significance of the body within historical Judaism: the body in itself was not an ultimate goal, but a means to perform the religious duties.⁴³

Elliot R. Wolfson devotes significant attention to kabbalistic notions of gender and sexuality through his works, such as in *The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment and Language, Eros, Being*. The kabbalistic notion of the embodied, gendered divine structure leads Wolfson to feminist critical theory as a fruitful tool in the study of Kabbalah – marking a clear progression of perspectives within the study of Kabbalah. Wolfson argues that the kabbalistic discourse on the body should be examined in a theoretically sophisticated way, with attention to the relation between biological sex and gender as a cultural construct, in order to avoid simplistic interpretations of the corporeal symbolism.⁴⁴ Wolfson has expressed critique of modern academic interpretations of Kabbalah which sees the female symbols as a genuine celebration of the feminine or of women, arguing that medieval Kabbalah was a highly androcentric tradition where women were largely excluded. The historical context cannot be disregarded when interpreting the symbols – Wolfson argues that the imagination of the medieval kabbalists plainly rested upon phallocentrism and an androcentric bias, where the man was upheld as the more perfect human being in contrast to the less perfect woman.⁴⁵ Idel, however, is critical of Wolfson's position regarding the lack of a true celebration of the female within Kabbalah. He is especially critical of Wolfson's interpretation of the mystical union between male and female as a means to strengthen the male part and eradicate the femaleness of the female, so that the two bodies merge into one male body. Idel, in response to Wolfson, implies that the female in fact does have an independent and vital role within the kabbalistic system.⁴⁶ Idel further argues that one should be careful about making sweeping

⁴¹ Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment", 62.

⁴² Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment", 67–68.

⁴³ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 23.

⁴⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* no. 3 (2005): 479–480, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25470090>.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 47, 373.

⁴⁶ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 128–129; cf. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Woman – the Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne", in *The Other in Jewish Thought and*

generalizations of the kabbalistic teachings based on women's inferior status during the Middle Ages. He contends that the role of the female cannot be reduced to the prevailing social norms and gender stereotypes – it is also dependent on individual relationships between women and the male kabbalists.⁴⁷ While avoiding broad generalizations is reasonable, this statement still underestimates the impact of social and legal power held over women historically, as well as the androcentrism of medieval Kabbalah.

Wolfson identifies the corporeal body as a site of tension for the medieval kabbalists – the human body was at once the scene of the erotic and demonic and a representation of the divine image.⁴⁸ Concerning the place of sexuality within the kabbalistic worldview, Wolfson concludes that there are several zoharic passages in support of the assessment made by Scholem and others regarding the positive viewing of sexuality as a celebration and mirroring of the divine union between masculine and feminine. This positive value ascribed to conjugal sexuality is in turn contrasted by Scholem with the medieval Christian mystics and their life of asceticism. However, Wolfson wishes to counterbalance this dichotomous division by lifting the ascetic lifestyle of some Jewish mystics. Wolfson also emphasizes the fact that human sexuality only receives praise as long as it follows the prescribed regulations, which enables it to be transformed from carnal to spiritual act – the use of symbols from the sexual sphere is not to be understood as a celebration of physical pleasures in themselves.⁴⁹

4.2 The Body of the Biblical God

Francesca Stavrakopoulou explores anthropomorphic, biblical accounts of God in *God: An Anatomy*, arguing that God in these cases is highly corporeal, acting and looking close to a human being. Some of the biblical versions of the divine, particularly from the Hebrew Bible, contrasts with the Platonic and Aristotelian envisioning of the divine as incorporeal and abstract. The notion of an incorporeal deity, separated from the material world, eventually gained greater influence within Jewish and Christian thinking around the beginning of the Common Era. The God of the Bible, however, is often depicted as far from immaterial.⁵⁰ Stavrakopoulou contends that although not every human is privileged enough to experience it,

History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 190–191. The notion of union between masculine and feminine is central in the kabbalistic system.

⁴⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 288 n. 102; cf. Wolfson, “Woman - the Feminine as Other”, 167.

⁴⁸ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 190.

⁴⁹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 312–314, 317; Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 263.

⁵⁰ Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (London: Picador, 2021), 9–11.

the body of God is simply assumed in the Bible – the spectacular is rather that the divine body has been *revealed* to certain privileged human beings.⁵¹ The biblical ban on depictions of God does not indicate an immaterial deity, according to Stavrakopoulou. The notion of God’s hidden body still presupposes that the divine possesses a body. The body of the biblical God allowed him to be a mighty, physical presence in the lives of humans. It was not until later, in the post-biblical religions of Judaism and Christianity, that the hiddenness of God developed into the concept of an immaterial, abstract deity.⁵² Even then, as Christoph Marksches notes in regard to Judaism and Christianity during Antiquity, the effect of the Platonic rejection of an material deity should not be overestimated – Platonism was widespread but not a universally accepted system.⁵³ However, following Antiquity, employing anthropomorphic conceptions of God grew increasingly problematic.⁵⁴ The prominent medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Ben Maimon, or Maimonides, argued extensively against anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine.⁵⁵ Maimonides arguments for the incorporeality of God has had a great influence on both Jewish and Christian thought.⁵⁶ In light of the rational medieval rabbinic Judaism, Scholem expresses the problem of cleansing the divine of all mythical features in the following way: “The price of God’s purity is the loss of His living reality”. The anthropomorphic conceptions of God are what makes him a living deity to his worshippers, it can be argued.⁵⁷ The tension between these differing conceptions of the divine constitutes an important factor in the development of Jewish mysticism – the kabbalists reintroduced myth through bold, often anthropomorphic, images and symbols which described the inner processes of the divine.⁵⁸

If God’s body is assumed in the Bible, that leads us to the implications of his male gender. Stavrakopoulou describes the phallocentrism of ancient south-west Asian cultures as a cultural backdrop of the God of the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁹ In the patriarchal societies of ancient south-west Asia, distinctions were drawn between dominant and submissive, active and passive, those with male sexual organs and those without. Stavrakopoulou terms these ancient

⁵¹ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 16. See Exod 33:11, Gen 32:22–30, Mark 16:19.

⁵² Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 17–18, 25.

⁵³ Christoph Marksches, *God’s Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God*, transl. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 127.

⁵⁴ Marksches, *God’s Body*, 319.

⁵⁵ Marksches, *God’s Body*, 3–4.

⁵⁶ Marksches, *God’s Body*, 6.

⁵⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 88.

⁵⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 89, 96–97.

⁵⁹ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 110–111.

culture as centred around phallogentric masculinity and a cultural privileging of the male sexual organ, where life was generally believed to originate and depend upon the divine male phallic potency. In part, this is a result of the almost exclusively male scribes who wrote down the texts we have access to, centred around men with other men as their prime audience.⁶⁰ The corporeal, masculine deity of the Bible in turn elevates the role of mortal, normative male bodies, as they are understood as closer to the divine image than other bodies.⁶¹ In *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism*, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz explores the implications of God's male gender. He argues that the Jewish monotheistic conception of a male deity in many ways has supported a patriarchal order.⁶² Just as Stavrakopoulou, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that it is the explicit *sighting* of God's body that is extraordinary in the biblical narratives.⁶³ Interpreting these sightings as purely metaphorical may be an anachronistic way of viewing Israelite religion, as it is difficult to dismiss that there could have existed a belief that God actually possessed a physical form.⁶⁴ The biblical idea of God having or appearing in a body has important implications for later Jewish conceptions of procreation, masculinity, as well as the male body and phallus.⁶⁵

4.3 Further Biblical and Jewish Views on the Body

In *People of the Body*, Eilberg-Schwartz explores notions embedded in ancient Judaism which created a set of problems relating to the human body. He argues that the body was a main locus for contrasting and conflicting cultural notions within ancient Judaism, making it a complicated site to navigate.⁶⁶ To proceed from the idea of cultural contradictions means to disregard the idea of Judaism as a unified system and instead embrace the conflicting notions as part of the culture.⁶⁷ Judaism is often portrayed as a religion with less issues with the body than, for example, Christianity. The central commandment of procreation leads to a fundamentally positive view of the sexual body, it can be argued. Eilberg-Schwartz concludes

⁶⁰ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 115–119.

⁶¹ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 125–126.

⁶² Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 2.

⁶³ Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, 60–61. See Exod 24:9–11: “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank”. All biblical quotations in this thesis are taken from the New International Version, a complete English translation of the Bible from the original languages.

⁶⁴ Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, 64–72.

⁶⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, 22.

⁶⁶ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body: The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 1 (1991): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704096>.

⁶⁷ Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body”, 2.

that these general characterizations fail to take into account all the ways in which the body *has* been viewed as a problem within Judaism. Starting with the Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Leviticus, which represents the priestly tradition of the Israelites, regulations for the body are fortified. Notions of bodily purity and impurity are laid out in detail⁶⁸, as well as sexual boundaries.⁶⁹ The concern and anxiety surrounding the body within Judaism hails from these priestly writings, Eilberg-Schwartz argues. These notions were later taken up by the rabbinic tradition.⁷⁰ As expressed by Eilberg-Schwartz, the obsession with the body in the priestly writings aims to reconcile the notion of humans as made in the image of God⁷¹, while also being earthly creatures with bodily impulses. The notion of procreation as a divine command, coupled with the notion of man as created in the image of God, renders the body a complicated site, requiring regulations and control to preserve God's will in matters of the body.⁷²

In *Eros and the Jews*, David Biale discusses Jewish approaches to sexuality from the biblical period into modern times. He argues that the Jewish tradition neither simply affirms nor simply represses the erotic – the answer is unsurprisingly more complex than that.⁷³ For the rabbis of the first centuries of the common era, desire was perceived as a bigger issue than the body itself, since the energy of desire can be channelled both into something constructive or destructive, in turn overpowering the body. However, the body in itself was not an unproblematic site either, although difficult to separate from the problems connected with desire. The female body was a particular cause of anxiety in rabbinic writings.⁷⁴ Moreover, it

⁶⁸ See Lev 12:2–5: “A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding”. See Lev 15:4–6: “Any bed the man with a discharge lies on will be unclean, and anything he sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches his bed must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whoever sits on anything that the man with a discharge sat on must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening”.

⁶⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body”, 4–5. See Lev 18, Lev 20:10–21.

⁷⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body”, 6.

⁷¹ See Gen 1:27: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”.

⁷² Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body”, 21, 23–24.

⁷³ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 1997), 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.5973207>.

⁷⁴ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 35, 45. See BT Berakhot 24a: “Anyone who gazes upon a woman's little finger is considered as if he gazed upon her naked genitals, for if his intentions are impure, it makes no difference where he looks or how much is exposed; even less than a handbreadth”. BT stands for Babylonian Talmud. All quotations from the Babylonian Talmud in this thesis are taken from the William Davidson Talmud, a digital edition which includes Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz English translations.

is interesting to note that rabbinic legislation turned God's call to "be fruitful and multiply"⁷⁵ into a divine command.⁷⁶ The rabbis elevated procreation to an integral part of what it means to be human in this world. The physical pleasure associated with the reproductive act, however, made it a complicated matter, requiring firm control.⁷⁷ Marriage was a central way of controlling the direction of sexual desire, serving as protection against unlawful passions.⁷⁸ In summary, the rabbinic views on sexuality are ambiguous – even within marriage sexuality remained potentially dangerous. Nevertheless, when properly controlled, the sexual body became a site for not only carrying out the divine will but also receiving the divine presence, through the act of procreation.⁷⁹

4.4 Starting Points

The summary above of the scholarly discussion concerning bodies, gender and sexuality within the Jewish tradition, and within the Zohar in particular, serves to establish the research situation as well as the theoretical points of departure of this study. The duality and complexity of the subject is clear from the breadth of differing statements regarding the corporeal body, gender roles and sexuality within the Zohar and medieval Kabbalah. The main points can be summarized as follows: the human body was used by the medieval kabbalists as a representation of the divine structure. However, this does not mean that corporeality or physical pleasure in itself was exalted. The regulations regarding sexuality were strict and transgressing them was considered harmful to the divine. Yet, conjugal sexual relations performed correctly were believed to have a beneficial effect on the divine sphere. Scholarly opinions differ on the role of the woman and femininity within the kabbalistic system. Lastly, the body does occupy a special position as the vehicle for fulfilling the central commandment of procreation – lineage and tradition is upheld by the human body. Because of the symbolic nature of kabbalistic writings, research in the area under discussion has often had a predominant focus on the symbolic usage of the human body, gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the medieval kabbalists cannot be separated from the physical

⁷⁵ Gen 1:28: "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it".

⁷⁶ See BT Yevamot 63b: "Anyone who does not engage in the mitzva [commandment] to be fruitful and multiply is considered as though he sheds blood".

⁷⁷ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 43–44.

⁷⁸ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 48–50.

⁷⁹ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 58. See BT Yevamot 64a: "When your seed is after you, i.e., when you have children, the Divine Presence rests upon the Jewish people, but if your seed is not after you, upon whom can the Divine Presence rest? Upon wood and stones?".

world, since the upper and lower spheres are believed to mirror each other. Lastly, as Stavrakopoulou highlights, the anthropomorphic male god of the Hebrew bible exalts the male body to a divine image. These insights can be applied to the Zohar, given the anthropomorphic nature of the zoharic symbolism as well as the androcentric nature of the zoharic worldview.

5. METHODOLOGY

In the following chapters I present the methodological and theoretical approaches of the study. The primary method used is qualitative content analysis. In addition, History and hermeneutics have also been employed, as they are fundamental tools in this type of textual historic study. This study aims to explore the central ideas represented in the Zohar regarding the characteristics and values ascribed to the human body. The zoharic notions are explored and analysed through careful attention to the medieval and kabbalistic context of the texts, through a theoretical framework that focuses upon notions of the pure and the impure. The conception of this demarcation is retrieved from Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*.

5.1 Methodological Approach

The analysis of this study proceeds from a qualitative content analysis. Content analysis entails the systematic reading of text or other meaningful communication.⁸⁰ It is a method that looks to the messages embedded in the considered text, in order to draw inferences and identify patterns within a genre of texts.⁸¹ The meaning of the text is constructed through interpretation rather than discovered, as the execution is highly dependent on the reader of the text and the perspective of the study.⁸² Content analysis makes a relevant method for religious studies as it moves beyond the surface of texts and dives deeper into the latent content.⁸³

I have strived to explore the messages embedded in the considered text through largely an emic perspective, that is, the perspective that comes from within the medieval, zoharic tradition. I have aimed to disclose the zoharic perspective in an accurate way without applying contemporary values to the medieval text. A qualitative content analysis requires a

⁸⁰ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2013), 10.

⁸¹ Diane M. Badzinski, Robert H. Woods Jr. and Chad M. Nelson, "Content Analysis", in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., eds. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2022), 180–181, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222491-13>.

⁸² Badzinski, Woods Jr. and Nelson, "Content Analysis", 183.

⁸³ Badzinski, Woods Jr. and Nelson, "Content Analysis", 188.

close reading, operating within the hermeneutic circle, of a limited amount of text which is interpreted through a specific framework.⁸⁴ Qualitative content analysis does generally not use statistical analytic methods.⁸⁵ Counting frequency of certain words may not sufficiently capture latent meaning, other analytical methods may therefore be more appropriate.⁸⁶ Frequency may however indicate that a word or theme requires further attention. The zoharic text has many qualities which makes it a fruitful subject of a qualitative content analysis: the meaning of the text is ambiguous – there are several layers of meaning, which means that there is room for different angles of interpretation. As the Zohar is a lengthy work, a method is required that is able to work with large amounts of fairly unstructured text. Further, the meaning of the zoharic text is highly context dependent. Decoding the symbolic language requires a high understanding of the zoharic worldview and its preferred modes of expression.

In addition to content analysis, History and hermeneutics have also been employed as part of the methodological framework. I will here highlight why these methodologies have been necessary for the study. Mythology and history are two variations of historical narratives.⁸⁷ The Zohar creates its own historical narrative which fortifies certain identities, roles, historical circumstances and events. History of Religions is dependent upon these emic historical narratives. Using the earlier narratives as a starting point, new historical narratives are constructed through detailed evidence, which is the practice of History.⁸⁸ Through analysing historical narratives produced by religious groups, exclusions and biases in the emic narratives are highlighted.⁸⁹ One approach to the scientific practice of History is to be transparent about the fact that the evidence does not “speak for itself”, it is selected and represented in a way dependent upon the interest and methodology of the study in question.⁹⁰ The selection of source material limits the possible inferences of the study. When working with historical sources, especially when the author remains anonymous, as is the case of the ambiguous origins of the Zohar, the inferences must to a large extent remain hypothetical.⁹¹ History and hermeneutics go hand in hand, as the historical sources must be interpreted in

⁸⁴ Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 23.

⁸⁵ James W. Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 82, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190215491.001.0001>.

⁸⁶ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 84.

⁸⁷ Jörg Rüpke, “History”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., eds. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2022), 327, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222491-23>.

⁸⁸ Rüpke, “History”, 324.

⁸⁹ Rüpke, “History”, 329.

⁹⁰ Rüpke, “History”, 326.

⁹¹ Rüpke, “History”, 338.

order to move beyond the surface of the content.⁹² When interpreting texts hermeneutically within the field of religious studies, the cultural and social context of the text determines the scope of acceptable readings.⁹³ The goal of interpretation is to say something about the users of a text or of a textual community at a certain time and place in history.⁹⁴ It is crucial to learn about the world of the text and apply this knowledge when interpreting the meaning of the text. Obviously, the choice of contextualisation will impact the reading.⁹⁵ Questioning and highlighting interests and biases expressed in the text is central to hermeneutic interpretation, as well as trying to pose new questions to the material. In order to propose a new reading of a text, one must also be familiar with the earlier readings.⁹⁶

The data of the analysis consists of excerpts from the Zohar. The context in which the text was read was constructed through knowledge of and attention to the medieval and kabbalistic context of the Zohar. This context refers to all prior knowledge that was applied to the zoharic text and in turn related the text to the research aims. The choice of contextualisation was guided by the previous research presented in chapter 4. The analytical construct was retrieved from this context, creating a framework for my inferences.⁹⁷ The inferences concern finding, identifying and explaining themes within the source material. This study seeks to explore and interpret the content and logic of the zoharic text itself. The goal has been to present the source material thoroughly and factually, and in that way validating my inferences.

The Zohar is a lengthy work, meaning that it was advantageous to limit the selection of passages from start. The considered excerpts are restricted to the main zoharic body, the Zohar's principal commentary on the Torah. In Daniel C. Matt's translation, this is found in volumes 1–9. Further, in content analysis, *sampling units* refers to defined sections of a larger body of text. *Recording units* are smaller excerpts of the text which contain content of particular interest. These smaller units are assigned a descriptive label to facilitate the analysis.⁹⁸ In the case of this study, the sampling units are made up of the numbered zoharic passages, while the recording units consists of connected sentences within the sampling units.

⁹² Rüpke, "History", 330.

⁹³ Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, "Hermeneutics", in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed., eds. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2022), 314, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222491-22>.

⁹⁴ Gilhus, "Hermeneutics", 321.

⁹⁵ Gilhus, "Hermeneutics", 316.

⁹⁶ Gilhus, "Hermeneutics", 317.

⁹⁷ See Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 38–41.

⁹⁸ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 41.

The recording units were labelled with titles such as circumcision, *adam*, sexual sin, female bodies, menstruation and so on.

The process of sampling entails how to answer research questions from a large body of text.⁹⁹ It is a crucial step in a content analysis. I have worked from an adjustable and iterative approach, meaning that the sampling was expanded throughout the research process, as the preliminary analysis guided the further sampling decisions. This process ensured a thorough and representative selection. The sampling cycle continued until I reached the point where no new themes or crucial information was found which impacted the ability to answer the research aims.¹⁰⁰

When the sampling process was completed, the data was then coded according to three main categories: the body in connection to the concept of *adam*, the body's closeness to the demonic and impure and lastly the body in relation to the soul. To determine which passage belonged in which primary category, I mainly used explicit content as a guideline, such as specific words or themes. However, the logic which connected the passages in each category was retrieved from the analytical construct, meaning that latent content was also used to some extent to categorize the material. Within these categories, many of the excerpts were found to convey a common content, shared attitude and similar wording. The fact that the general attitudes returned several times increases the accuracy of the inferences drawn from the material, as well as allowing me to reduce the data and highlight the most relevant and representative parts of the text.

The analysis is presented in a narrative form, which is a common form of presentation within qualitative content analysis. In this form of presentation, core themes are identified, summarized and illustrated using quotations from the source material.¹⁰¹ I have referenced the source material thoroughly throughout the analysis and presented quotations that showcase returning attitudes, while also explaining why these attitudes are representative. Passages which may not be directly compatible with the overall attitude have also been presented in order to highlight the pluralistic content of the Zohar. In a narrative presentation, it is crucial to carefully show the reader why certain quotations can be considered representative, further,

⁹⁹ Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 112.

¹⁰⁰ See Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 97, 100–101.

¹⁰¹ Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 109–110.

potentially disconfirming data should also be included in order to answer the research aims in a nuanced way. Lastly, an overall conclusion cannot be drawn from only a small amount of data.¹⁰²

The limitations of the study will now be addressed. As mentioned, the Zohar is not the product of a single author. It is probable that several editors were involved during an extended period of time. In other words, it is not a unified body of text; it represents a variety of voices and opinions. The discrepancy inherent in the Zohar has been highlighted in regard to the subject of this study. This fact requires me to present the spectrum of differing views represented in the Zohar rather than a single, definite voice. As Idel points out in regards to the Zohar in his work *Kabbalah and Eros*; it is useful to consider the possibility of several narratives within the same work before reading it as a unit.¹⁰³ Moreover, one can also argue, like Wolfson does in *Language, Eros, Being*, that there exists a unifying factor which allows us to speak about the Zohar in an overarching way, while still being aware of its ambiguous and scattered origins.¹⁰⁴ I have proceeded with sensitivity in regards to this issue when interpreting the text. The human body is a fruitful starting point, as it allows for a variety of perspectives and focuses. Since the body covers more or less all parts of human existence, from before birth to after death, limitations are necessary as to which aspects of the body are considered. The zoharic conceptions of the body which have been examined in detail are the notions I consider crucial to the research aims and of central importance in the source material. Lastly, as I do not master the original language of the Zohar, I have relied on Matt's English translation. This means that a linguistic analysis of the content has not been possible, which naturally limits the scope of the study. However, when needed, I have referenced and discussed the original Hebrew and Aramaic terms in order to present the zoharic concepts as accurately as possible.

5.2 Theoretical Approach

The analysis of this study comments upon different themes and issues related to the zoharic conception of bodies. The theme which recurs with most emphasis in the considered source material is the idea of impurity; boundaries between what is considered pure and impure are carefully laid out in the zoharic notions of the body. The demonic sphere, which represents

¹⁰² Drisko and Maschi, *Content Analysis*, 110–111.

¹⁰³ Idel, 129–130.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfson, 48.

the unclean and dangerous, is frequently associated with matters of the body. I have interpreted the source material through a framework that focuses on the very idea of impurity versus purity, disorder versus order, in order to connect and clarify the diverse zoharic notions. I have proceeded from Mary Douglas' understanding of impurity in her influential anthropological treatise *Purity and Danger*. First published in 1966, it is arguably not the most recent work on the subject, but it remains a classic. Further, Douglas proceeds from *texts* as source, which is essential for my purposes.

The conception of dirt is made up of a care for hygiene and a respect for conventions.¹⁰⁵ Douglas describes the concept of dirt as disorder. Eliminating dirt is a constructive action aimed at re-establishing order and creating unity. Further, dirt is constructed in the eyes of the beholder; it is not an absolute state.¹⁰⁶ What is dirty is relative – shoes are not in themselves considered dirty, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table.¹⁰⁷ Douglas argues that religiously imposed purity regulations reflect symbolic systems, rather than primarily being concerned with hygiene. If dirt is defined as something being in the wrong place, a system is presupposed, as there has to exist an idea of where things are *supposed* to be.¹⁰⁸ As phrased by Douglas; defilement is never an isolated event, it cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. Therefore, in order to grasp a culture's idea of purity and impurity, this systematic ordering, which presupposes boundaries, has to be taken into account.¹⁰⁹ By aiming to create order, disorder is not only condemned but also recognized as destructive to the system. The potentiality of disorder implies that it is powerful.¹¹⁰

In *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives*, Richard Fardon notes that Douglas is more occupied with the concept of impurity and how to remove it than with what constitutes purity in *Purity and Danger*. Douglas does not focus upon purity as a protection of certain values; it is rather the danger of the disorderly that is given attention. However, it can be argued that the pure can be defined by its opposite.¹¹¹ Douglas' definition of the impure and disorderly can be used as a foundation for categorizing the pure, in need of protection. In *Purity, Sacrifice, and*

¹⁰⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36–37.

¹⁰⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35–36.

¹⁰⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 42.

¹¹⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 95.

¹¹¹ Richard Fardon, "Purity as Danger: 'Purity and Danger Revisited' at Fifty", in *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives*, eds. Robbie Duschinsky, Simone Schnall and Daniel Weiss (London: Routledge, 2016), 24, 30, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315529738>.

the Temple, Jonathan Klawans highlights four aspects of *Purity and Danger* which are of lasting importance for the study of religious notions of purity and impurity. Firstly, Douglas confirms that religious avoidance behaviour, that is, notions of what is to be avoided, cannot be reduced to something primitive, irrational or obsolete – modern notions of hygiene are often no more rational. Secondly, Douglas argues that avoidance behaviour should not be considered in isolation from the system from which they originate. Thirdly, this ritual system should be understood as a symbolic expression, relating to notions of the divine, creation and other foundational issues. Lastly, notions of purity serve social functions; they reinforce certain behaviours, statuses and boundaries.¹¹² Klawans also highlights a criticism of Douglas' work – she sometimes takes a big leap from an idea to specific interpretation. As an example of this tendency, Klawans brings up Douglas famous interpretation of the dietary laws of Leviticus. In it, she argues that the rules relate to the categories of living beings presented in Genesis 1; any group of creatures which does not fit neatly into this category is contrary to holiness. This type of single-principle solution is, although engaging, bound to have limitations.¹¹³

In *The Savage in Judaism*, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz comments upon *Purity and Danger* in a discussion of the levitical rules for bodily fluids. Specifically, he mentions Douglas' argument that rituals concerning the body reflect society and perceived societal dangers. In the case of the Israelites, Douglas argues that, as minority people, their view of bodily fluids as polluting reflect threats to the societal body. Further, Douglas points more generally to notions of forbidden relations between the genders as dangerous or polluting, arguing that these dangers *symbolize* the relation between parts of society – rather than expressing an actual relation between the genders. In the context of the levitical regulations for menstrual purity and other issues relating to bodily fluids, Eilberg-Schwartz agrees with Douglas in that the body reflects the societal structure. However, Eilberg-Schwartz highlights that these regulations not only *symbolize* but also *constitute* differences. Rules which discriminate against certain bodies, such as those of menstruating women, constitute a foundation for what it means to belong to a particular group in a society.¹¹⁴ I have adopted this perspective by proceeding from the idea

¹¹² Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 18–19, <https://doi-org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195162639.001.0001>.

¹¹³ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 46; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 56–57.

¹¹⁴ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 189–190; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 3–4, 116, 125.

that the zoharic notions of the body reflect a larger system *while also* fortifying actual ideas about body differences.

Douglas approach to impurity has influenced my reading of notions of impurity and purity regulations in the Zohar – to view these zoharic ideas as an expression of a systematic order enhances the understanding of why a careful handling of impurity, or disorder, is so heavily emphasized. Certain passing states of bodily impurity are a part of life and unavoidable, some are more permanent, and some can be avoided by proper behaviour – what they have in common is that they all express and work within the larger zoharic system. To take into account that something may be impure *in relation to* something else, and not in itself, further clarifies the more obscure ideas of people and conditions deemed unclean. The notions of purity and impurity have a significant role in the zoharic system, as they highlight the central boundaries that not only dictate how a person should act, but also express an idealized idea of unity, which is threatened by disorder.

6. BODIES OF THE ZOHAR

The following chapters present the discussion of the research aims, proceeding from three main aspects of the issue. First out is an analysis of the zoharic views on *adam* (אדם) and similar terms which relate to the human body. Then, the corporeal body and its relation to the impure and demonic is examined. Lastly, the relationship between body and soul is discussed.

6.1 “Happy are Israel, for the blessed Holy One called them אדם” – Bodies of *adam*

Two main ideas are considered in this section. Firstly, selected passages from the Zohar which present *adam* and related terms as a mirroring of the divine structure are explored, in order to highlight the zoharic conception of the human body as a reflection of the divine. Secondly, zoharic definitions of the *adam* category are discussed – who is considered part of the category and who is not. These two ideas taken together may imply that only a part of humanity is truly considered a representation of the divine image and a connective between the earthly and divine realms. For the purposes of the present study, the main focus of the discussion and selected source material is the body as opposed to the spiritual parts of the human being. However, the symbolic content of the considered passages makes a sharp distinction between the material and immaterial problematic. In the symbolism of the Zohar,

the material and corporeal is used to depict the supernal and transcendent. These wordings do not imply that corporeality in itself is exalted, as noted in the review of previous research. As we look into the zoharic references to the human body, it is necessary to take the symbolic nature of the bodily references in mind. Having said that, the symbolism of the kabbalists cannot be entirely separated from physical and social circumstances as a pattern relationship is assumed between the *sefirot* and everything that exists in the earthly realm.¹¹⁵ In the kabbalistic tradition represented in the Zohar, the build of the human body shares an overall structure with the sefirotic realm, and can therefore be used to symbolize the divine structure. This does not mean that these realms are considered to be of equal dignity, but it enables the corporeal symbolism.¹¹⁶

6.1.1 Zoharic notions of *adam*

The Hebrew *adam* (אָדָם) may be translated as “man”, the collective “men” or other similar terms.¹¹⁷ Adam is also the name of the first human being as established in the biblical narrative. He is the template for humanity, the crown of God’s creation. In Genesis¹¹⁸, God creates mankind in his own image. This notion is crucial for the zoharic views on the human being and in turn the human body. Both Adam the person and *adam* as a collective designation figure frequently in the Zohar. Adam can also refer to the anthropomorphic, androgynous configuration of the *sefirot*. In addition to *adam*, the Aramaic expression *bar nash* (בַּר נֶשׁ, “son of man”) is often used as “man”, “human” and related terms in the Zohar.

In *Wisdom of the Zohar*, Tishby considers the zoharic doctrine of the pattern relationship between the human being and the divine, meaning the kabbalistic assumption that human actions performed on earth are mirrored also in the divine sphere. He concludes that the kabbalistic idea of Adam’s creation in “the image of God” as establishing a direct parallel between the human body and the divine cannot be traced directly to rabbinic sources. On the contrary, the rabbis appear to have viewed the biblical narrative of man as created in “the image of God” as a theological difficulty, since it suggests a similarity between man and God.

¹¹⁵ See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 680; Zohar 2:48b.

¹¹⁶ See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 207.

¹¹⁷ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: Brill, 1971), s.v. “אָדָם”.

¹¹⁸ Gen 1:27: “So God created mankind [*ha-adam*] in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”, Gen 5:2: “He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” [*adam*] when they were created”.

In rabbinic literature, the human soul is compared to the divine by way of analogy¹¹⁹, the body, however, is not described in the same way. The zoharic notion of the human being as an earthly mirroring of the divine continued the rabbinic traditions which related to the human soul, however, the zoharic authors expanded these notions far beyond their original context. The connection between the human being and the divine is deepened, it goes beyond analogy. Further, in the Zohar, not only the soul but also the body is believed to reflect the divine realm.¹²⁰ The human being as an earthly mirroring of the divine is a central doctrine of the Zohar. Kabbalah is generally a highly anthropocentric tradition, meaning that the human being is put at the core of the religious system. In the kabbalistic system the world is viewed as having been created for the sake of mankind, the human being sustains the cosmos and was created in the image of God in order to perform this task.¹²¹ This notion recurs throughout the Zohar, in various forms – the earthly, lower and divine higher spheres are interdependent.¹²² The kabbalistic belief of the human body as a mirroring of divinity was a rare notion in the medieval Jewish context, where a Platonic view of physical matter as imperfect¹²³ generally prevailed. The kabbalists often depicted the sefirotic structure as resembling a human body, a representation that strengthens the relation between the upper and the lower, earthly realm. However, the zoharic view of the body is not solely positive or exalted. In fact, according to the Zohar the human body is a main site of temptation, demonic forces and sin. There is an ever-present threat of sexual sin, which is believed to harm the divine structure.¹²⁴ Nonetheless, the complex view of both the body and the sexual sphere did not stop the zoharic authors from using a symbolic language derived from the spheres of human corporeality, including intimacy of various kinds, to describe processes within the sefirotic sphere.¹²⁵ This symbolism constitutes a central part of the zoharic legacy to subsequent kabbalistic traditions.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ See BT Berakhot 10a: “Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, fills the entire world, so too the soul fills the entire body. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, sees but is not seen, so too does the soul see, but is not seen. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, sustains the entire world, so too the soul sustains the entire body. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, is pure, so too is the soul pure. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, resides in a chamber within a chamber, in His inner sanctum, so too the soul resides in a chamber within a chamber, in the innermost recesses of the body”.

¹²⁰ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 681–682; Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 112, 114.

¹²¹ See Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 113; Zohar 1:85b, 1:134b.

¹²² See for example Zohar 1:35a, 1:77b.

¹²³ On the Platonic view on the sensible world, see Alexander Nehamas, “Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1975): 105–117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009565>.

¹²⁴ See Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 114–115.

¹²⁵ See Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 80; Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 255–256.

¹²⁶ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 93.

According to the Zohar, the first human being was created in the divine image as an all-encompassing microcosmos. It is stated that the first Adam was made from the dust of the temple where the four directions of the world coincided. This primordial body was composed of both earthly and divine elements. Just like Adam, every human being is a mixture of that from above and below.¹²⁷ Adam, as the very first human embodiment of the divine image, represents the close link between God and humanity. In one zoharic passage elaborating on Ps 8¹²⁸ God expresses pleasure over his creation, Adam. The earthly Adam resembles the supernal, he is but “little less than God”.¹²⁹ When Adam later sins, he does not only disappoint his creator, he also harms the divine structure:

When Adam sinned in the presence of the Blessed Holy One, violating His commands, sadness appeared before Him. The blessed Holy One said to him, ‘Woe to you, Adam! You have weakened supernal power!’ That moment one light darkened. (Zohar 1:57b)

This interaction extends to all of the Jewish people – when the commandments of the Torah are not observed, the divine presence is withdrawn from earth.¹³⁰ Moreover, transgressions of the commandments removes the supernal image from man. However, one who is free from sin always carries the divine image.¹³¹ For instance, one who wholeheartedly cares for the less fortunate will continue to reflect the image of Adam, that is, the divine image.¹³²

The Zohar states that the first human being was created androgynous: “Let us make a human being— jointly, including male and female”.¹³³ This assessment follows older rabbinic traditions.¹³⁴ Gen 1:27 and Gen 5:2 can be read to imply that *adam* includes both male and female. According to the Zohar, this means that male and female has to be united in order for the divine to be present – one is not even called *adam* unless one is not part of a marital union between man and woman.¹³⁵ In kabbalistic thought, Adam’s creation as both male and female mirrors the androgynous status of the divine.¹³⁶ *Adam* can therefore also refer to the

¹²⁷ Zohar 1:130b, 2:23b. See also Zohar 1:19a, 1:47a, 1:134b, 2:75b.

¹²⁸ Ps 8:3–5: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.”

¹²⁹ Zohar 1:57a.

¹³⁰ Zohar 1:61a. See also Zohar 1:73b.

¹³¹ Zohar 1:71a.

¹³² Zohar 1:13b.

¹³³ Zohar 1:13b. This notion returns frequently, see for example Zohar 1:2b, 1:35a, 1:165a.

¹³⁴ See for example Bereshit Rabbah 8:1; BT Eruvin 18a.

¹³⁵ Zohar 1:55b.

¹³⁶ Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 145–146.

androgynous divine configuration.¹³⁷ Wolfson highlights the androcentric nature of androgyny in the context of the Zohar: as the feminine is considered contained in and ontically derived from the male, the original gender is after all that of the male.¹³⁸ This notion will be further examined.

The kabbalists view the structure of the human body and all of its individual parts as containing *symbols* which reflect spiritual entities. These entities are real and exist within the divine realm.¹³⁹ The human being can be said to constitute a *lower reflection* of the divine structure. There is not a single human limb which is not modelled upon the divine, as expressed in the Zohar – the human form mirrors what is above:

The blessed Holy One formed the human being [*bar nash*] corresponding to the pattern above, all according to wisdom, for you cannot find a single human limb not founded upon supernal wisdom. (Zohar 1:186b)

Since the human being is made in the divine image, every part of the body is filled with supernal mysteries.¹⁴⁰ Further, the number of limbs of the body correspond to the commandments of the Torah. The commandments are present in the mystery of *adam* and *adam* in turn resembles the commandments.¹⁴¹ The closeness between the human being and the divine image allows for symbolic use of bodily features in depictions of divine events. Attributes of the human body are frequently used to describe the sefirotic structure within the Zohar, for instance, the fingers of the hand are used to symbolize the ten *sefirot*.¹⁴² Further, the emergence of the *sefirot* is depicted through the image of a pregnant woman giving birth.¹⁴³ The symbolism surrounding the sefirotic structure is at times decidedly sexual, the life of the divine is portrayed as a relation between male and female.¹⁴⁴ See the following account of the sefirotic flow, employing a phallic symbolism:

¹³⁷ Zohar 2:70a–b; Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 4 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 390–391 n. 72.

¹³⁸ Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 176; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the use of gender in Kabbalistic symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 85.

¹³⁹ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 286.

¹⁴⁰ Zohar 2:75b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 4, 407 n. 140.

¹⁴¹ Zohar 2:162b.

¹⁴² Zohar 1:20b–21a.

¹⁴³ Zohar 1:16b, 1:30a.

¹⁴⁴ See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 288.

Like a male, desiring to cling to a female, and emitting seed of anointing from the top of the brain into the phallus, pouring into the female, who thereby conceives. Thus, all smooth members of the body join the female, and the female embraces all. (Zohar 2:86a)

Frequently, a phallic symbolism is employed in connection to the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, representing the divine phallus as well as the covenant.¹⁴⁵ There are many more instances of the human body being used to represent the supernal structure. The *sefirot* may even be symbolically envisioned as a body named *Adam Kadmon* or Primordial Adam, where *Tif'eret* is the torso, *Yesod* the completion of the body as well as the phallus, and so on.¹⁴⁶ *Adam Kadmon* is the God who reveals himself in the sefirotic world.¹⁴⁷ Tishby deems the zoharic use of *Adam Kadmon* as a way of getting maximum use of anthropomorphic symbols when depicting the divine.¹⁴⁸ However, the anatomical symbolism of the Zohar is not limited to the figure of *Adam Kadmon*, principally all parts of the body are at some point used symbolically.¹⁴⁹

As suggested by Mopsik, the zoharic notion of the sefirotic structure coming forth in the way of a human birth implies that human procreation is an imitation of the earliest steps of the gradual divine revelation. The act of reproduction is therefore a human mirroring of a union in the divine realm. In accordance with this kabbalistic doctrine, the human body can be described as the structural pattern for the divine realm.¹⁵⁰ However, the carnal act is only praised as long as it is performed correctly, with right intention and for reproductive purposes. Correct performance allows the act to be transformed from carnal to spiritual – it is the transcendent dimension that is celebrated and not the corporeal.¹⁵¹ Further, it is important to keep in mind that the many zoharic instances of bodily symbolism in reference to the divine are just that, symbolic – this mode of expression aims to communicate a knowledge which essentially exists outside of what human language can disclose.

As has been noted so far, the concept of *adam* (אדם) and related terms occupies an important position within the zoharic narrative. The image of *adam* is a human embodiment of the

¹⁴⁵ See Zohar 1:162a: “Further, *Blessings upon the head of the righteous one— head of the righteous one* is the name given to the site of head of Covenant, from which bubbling springs gush.”

¹⁴⁶ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 296.

¹⁴⁷ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 295.

¹⁴⁸ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 287.

¹⁴⁹ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 296.

¹⁵⁰ Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment”, 57–58.

¹⁵¹ See Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 313; Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1360, 1363.

divine image. This notion lends a certain dignity to the human body and allows for bodily symbolism in connection to the divine. These conclusions are supported by Scholem's assessment of what the notion of man being made in the divine image implies in the kabbalistic context: firstly, it means that the *sefirot* are present within the human being and secondly, that the human body can be used to represent the sefirotic structure. Human limbs are reflections of the supernal realm, this view is clear from the doctrine of the anthropomorphic divine figure *Adam Kadmon*.¹⁵² Further, the interdependency between the divine and earthly realms is illustrated through *adam*, as human behaviour, such as the sin of Adam, has tangible consequences within the divine realm. Human sin can weaken the supernal powers and remove the divine presence from man. With this in mind, we turn to zoharic definitions and demarcations of the collective *adam*.

6.1.2 Who is *adam*?

In *Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology*, Wolfson argues that the medieval kabbalistic sources convey a negative view of “the other”, a view naturally affected by historical circumstances which shaped the kabbalistic communities.¹⁵³ In the zoharic literature, Israel, meaning the Jewish people, is the holy seed¹⁵⁴, while the non-Jewish people originate from the demonic realm.¹⁵⁵ This portrayal is informed by the idea, found in rabbinic sources, that *adam*, here meaning humanity, refers solely to Israel and not to the non-Jewish people of the world.¹⁵⁶ Wolfson interprets the following zoharic verse, which deems that only the Jewish people are called *adam*, as conveying that only the Jewish people are considered ontologically human in the fullest sense:

These lights depict a figure below, arraying a figure of all those included in the category *human* [*adam*], an intrinsic figure. Every intrinsic figure is so called, so every figure comprised in this expansion is called *human*, as is written: *You are human* (Ezek 34:31). *You are human*; the other nations are not. (Zohar 1:20b)

¹⁵² Scholem, *Den judiska mystiken*, 243–244.

¹⁵³ Wolfson, 133.

¹⁵⁴ See Isa 6.

¹⁵⁵ Wolfson, “Ontology”, 134–135.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfson, “Ontology”, 138. See BT Yevamot 61a: “The graves of gentiles do not render items impure through a tent, as it is stated: “And you My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are men [*adam*]” (Ezek 34:31), from which it is derived that you, the Jewish people, are called men [*adam*] but gentiles are not called men [*adam*]”.

The following verse expresses the same idea:

Rabbi Shim'on taught: "Happy are Israel, for the blessed Holy One called them אָדָם (*adam*), human, as is written: *You, My flock, flock of my pasture, are adam, human* (Ezek 34:31); *When adam, a person, among you brings an offering to YHVH* (Lev 1:2). Why did He call them *adam*? Because it is written: *you, cleaving to YHVH your God* (Deut 4:4)—*you*, and not other nations. Therefore, *you are human* (Ezek 34:31)—*you* are called *human*; other nations are not called *human*". (Zohar 2:86a)

The first Adam, the template for humanity, is the idealized Jew who mirrors the divine image.¹⁵⁷ Hence, in this context, the term *adam* principally refers to the Jewish people. In addition, Wolfson argues that the Aramaic expression *bar nash*, essentially a synonym to *adam*, also refers to the Jewish people in particular in its zoharic use.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, in the zoharic writings these terms generally have an even more precise meaning – *adam* and *bar nash* oftentimes refer specifically to the circumcised Jewish male.¹⁵⁹ The following passages illustrates *bar nash* as referring to no one other than the circumcised Jewish man:

Rabbi Hamnuna said, 'Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin' (Eccl 5:5), for a person [*bar nash*] should not let his mouth lead him to an evil thought, which will cause him to sin with respect to the holy flesh upon which is inscribed the holy covenant. (Zohar 1:8a)¹⁶⁰

In the zoharic corpus, circumcision and belonging to the category of *adam* are closely related. Since the holy covenant between the Jewish people and God is represented by circumcision, it is principally restricted to the men – they have the covenant physically inscribed in them.¹⁶¹ Below, I will present a selection of passages from the Zohar which define *adam* as well as highlight the central bodily aspect of this category, circumcision.

The Zohar states that everything in this world was created for the sake of *adam*. Before *adam*, nothing could exist, since the divine image had not yet emerged. *Adam* is described as perfection, complete and consummation of all, in contrast to *ish* (אִישׁ), "man", who is lacking

¹⁵⁷ Wolfson, "Ontology", 139–140.

¹⁵⁸ Wolfson, "Ontology", 141.

¹⁵⁹ Wolfson, "Ontology", 145–147.

¹⁶⁰ Here, Wolfson's translation is used (found in "Ontology", 146) in order to emphasize the use of the term *bar nash*.

¹⁶¹ See Wolfson, "Ontology", 146–147.

perfection. The distinction between *adam* and the lesser *ish* indicates that *adam* has a much more precise meaning than “man” in general.¹⁶²

The foreskin is used to symbolize the demonic throughout the Zohar.¹⁶³ Male circumcision, the removal of foreskin, therefore confirms that the new-born is not of demonic origin.¹⁶⁴ It also distinguishes male from female¹⁶⁵; one *becomes* male in this moment. Circumcision renders the male *tamim* (תמים), meaning “complete” or “unblemished”.¹⁶⁶ As stated in the Zohar:

When was he *complete*? The moment he was circumcised; for one becomes male, and is recognized, only by the place called *tamim*. What is that? Sign of the covenant, by which male is distinguished from female, as is said: *a righteous man—he was tamim* (Gen 6:9). (Zohar 1:246a)

The differentiation between male and female is placed in the genitals.¹⁶⁷ The covenant, represented by *Yesod*, is physically located and inscribed in the circumcised Jewish male.¹⁶⁸ The Zohar states that the male Israelite enters the covenant when he is circumcised. This brings him closer to the *sefirot*, envisioned anthropomorphically as *Adam Kadmon*, and allows him to be called human, *adam*. Circumcision grants entrance into the covenant and then, through fulfilling the commandments, the Jewish male works towards becoming a complete *adam* and approaches the anthropomorphic divine structure further:

When an Israelite son is circumcised, he enters the covenant that the blessed Holy One made with Abraham—as is written: *YHVH blessed Abraham with all* (Gen 24:1), and it is written: *חסד (Hesed)*,¹⁶⁹ *Loving-kindness, to Abraham* (Mic 7:20)—and he begins to enter this *adam*, human. Once he succeeds in fulfilling the commandments of Torah, he enters this *adam* and cleaves to the body of the King and is called *human*. The seed of Israel are called *human*.

¹⁶² Zohar 3:48a.

¹⁶³ Zohar 1:35b; Matt, *Zohar*, Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 89 n. 679.

¹⁶⁴ Zohar 1:13a.

¹⁶⁵ Mopsik argues that the biblical commandment of circumcision primarily serves to perfect new-born boy by affirming his male gender, see *Sex of the Soul*, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Zohar 1:246a; Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 508 n. 915.

¹⁶⁷ See Zohar 1:246a, 2:137a.

¹⁶⁸ Zohar 1:73b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 1, 434–435 nn. 705–706.

¹⁶⁹ *Hesed*, here translated as *Loving-kindness*, is the name of one of the ten *sefirot*.

/.../ But the seed of Israel, fulfilled in all, are called *human*—*human*, really! (Zohar 2:86a)¹⁷⁰

This reasoning communicates that *adam* is a designation that has to be earned and maintained. It is interesting to note that even the Jewish male is not born as a complete *adam*, according to these zoharic notions. Through circumcision, a cultural mark of the body, one is distinguished as a male *adam*. Without this mark, one is incomplete as a human male. It can also be inferred that women occupy a secondary position regarding the covenant and the title *adam*, as their bodies are not an embodiment of the covenant. It is however stated that it is possible for a female to be *temimah* or “unblemished” through the power of the male *Yesod*.¹⁷¹

The Zohar states that the non-Jewish people, or gentiles, are not called *adam*. The souls of these people derive from the demonic. Their bodies are considered impure as well, as they clothe the impure souls. Although the other people are considered impure while alive, once the non-Jewish person dies and the demonic spirit emerges from the body, the impurity of the body ceases.¹⁷² Because of the impurity of the gentiles, sexual relations between Jewish men and non-Jewish women are deeply condemned by the zoharic writers:

Therefore whoever cleaves to a woman of the other nations is defiled, and the son born to him receives an impure spirit. Now, you might say ‘Look! On his father’s side he descends from Israel. Why should he receive an impure spirit?’ Come and see: He became defiled previously, the moment he cleaved to that woman who is impure. Since he was already defiled and became impure and that woman is impure, all the more so the son who is born will receive an impure spirit. (Zohar 1:131a–b)

As the holy covenant is inserted into a foreign woman, the man defiles not only himself but also the sefirotic structure, more specifically the union between *Shekhinah* and *Yesod*.¹⁷³ The theme of the major immorality of sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews appears several times in the Zohar. This forbidden sexual union implies that the holy covenant enters a foreign domain, resulting in violation of the covenant.¹⁷⁴ The Jewish man has to guard the covenant, meaning to avoid forbidden sexual activity, to keep the status of *adam*. Betraying

¹⁷⁰ See Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 4, 484–485 nn. 425–427 for an explanation of the symbolism used. See also Zohar 1:96b, 1:162a: “Further, one who succeeds in guarding the sign of the holy covenant and enacts the commandments of Torah is called Righteous, so called from his head to his feet”.

¹⁷¹ Zohar 1:246b.

¹⁷² Zohar 1:20b, 1:131a, 2:86a.

¹⁷³ Zohar 1:131b; Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 236 nn. 260–262.

¹⁷⁴ See Zohar 2:3b, 2:60b–61a.

the covenant through sexual sin is considered the gravest transgression before God.¹⁷⁵ It is likely that the warnings against this unapproved sexual behaviour serves to maintain sexual boundaries,¹⁷⁶ which in turn ensures the survival of Jewish identity, life and tradition.

Moreover, priests, Levites and Israel¹⁷⁷ are unlike the gentiles called *adam*, because of their proper religious devotion.¹⁷⁸ From the above considered passages we can gather that belonging to the Jewish people, male circumcision and proper religious behaviour constitutes requirements for the *adam* category. Circumcision is the covenantal sign as well as a confirmation that one is not from the demonic realm, while the bodies and souls of the non-Jewish people are considered impure – hence they cannot be deemed *adam*.

The Zohar further states that one is not called *adam* unless male and female are united as one, meaning husband and wife together. This assessment follows older rabbinic traditions based on Gen 1:27 and Gen 5:2.¹⁷⁹ In the Zohar, “male and female” is further interpreted as balance between male and female potencies. Since the human being mirrors the sefirotic structure where masculine and feminine are united, this is also the ideal state for humanity.¹⁸⁰ This doctrine may be perceived as strive for equality or as a valuing of men and women as equally *adam*, that is, as an embodiment of the divine image. However important this doctrine is in the Zohar, there is reason to think of it as an expression of a male spiritual strive rather than of equality.¹⁸¹ The verses discussing the importance of union between husband and wife, where a connection between *Shekhinah* and earthly woman is presumed, follow the perspective of the male devotee:

For all females of the world abide in the mystery of *Shekhinah*. Whoever has a female, She dwells with him; whoever has no female, She does not. So, he mended himself before Her to be restored, and resolved to marry; afterward, *he prayed to YHVH*. (Zohar 1:228b)¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵ Zohar 2:214b; see Wolfson, “Ontology”, 147.

¹⁷⁶ Through the Middle Ages, sexual relations between Christians and Jews or Muslims were deeply condemned – these sexual boundaries were upheld by Christian theologians, Jewish rabbis and Muslim jurists alike. See David Nirenberg, “Conversion, Sex, and Segregation: Jews and Christians in Medieval Spain”, *The American Historical Review* 107 no. 4 (2002): 1071, <https://doi.org/10.1086/532664>.

¹⁷⁷ Israel refers to the Jewish people.

¹⁷⁸ Zohar 1:64b. See also Zohar 2:23a: “Whoever is circumcised and guards this sign of the covenant is called righteous”.

¹⁷⁹ Zohar 1:55b, 3:5a–b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 1, 314 nn. 1536–1537.

¹⁸⁰ Zohar 1:55b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 1, 313 n. 1533.

¹⁸¹ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 48–49, cf. Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1358. Tishby argues that the woman’s position is exalted in this context, since she is seen as a reflection of the *Shekhinah*.

¹⁸² See also Zohar 1:228b, 3:37b.

The reason for this doctrine is to help the man strengthen his faith and receive the presence of the *Shekhinah*. The value of the woman lies in her facilitating the spiritual life of her husband. Further, as is stated in connection to this matter: “When a woman is joined with her husband, she is called by his name”, indicating that the woman is subordinate within the union.¹⁸³ It is similarly stated that whenever male and female unite, they are both referred to in masculine language.¹⁸⁴ In connection to *adam*’s creation as male and female, the female is described as being *included* in the male, which signals the woman’s secondary position.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, it is declared that at blessings, males should be blessed first – women can only receive blessings through their husbands.¹⁸⁶ The Zohar also states that the Torah was given exclusively to males, meaning that women are exempt from all commandments.¹⁸⁷ This implies a major exclusion of women from religious life.

Because of the zoharic assumption of a pattern relationship between the sefirotic and the earthly realm, male dominance is predominant also in the divine sphere.¹⁸⁸ It is stated that although female parts exist within the sefirotic body, such as the *Shekhinah*, the body in its entirety is male. *Yesod*, the completion of the body or the phallus, renders the entire body male.¹⁸⁹ The following passage illustrates the superiority ascribed to the divine male:

Wherever male and female appear, praise belongs only to the male. So, Israel offered their praise to the male, not to the female, as is written: *This, is my God, and I will glorify Him* (Exod 15:2). For wherever male and female appear, praise pertains only to the male. (Zohar 2:38b)¹⁹⁰

Union between male and female is idealized, however, the male has clear precedence. This notion expresses that veneration for the female in itself is rejected and that the male part is superior in the androgynous state of the divine.¹⁹¹

6.1.3 Reflections on *adam*

To summarize the above discussion of requirements within the *adam* category, the requirement of Jewish religious affiliation stands out as the most clearly stated condition for

¹⁸³ Zohar 1:49a–1:50a.

¹⁸⁴ Zohar 2:147b.

¹⁸⁵ Zohar 3:19a.

¹⁸⁶ Zohar 1:233b.

¹⁸⁷ Zohar 1:126b. Wolfson deems this particular zoharic stance as drastic even given the historical context, see *Language, Eros, Being*, 58.

¹⁸⁸ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 170.

¹⁸⁹ Zohar 1:246b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 4, 509 n. 917.

¹⁹⁰ See also Zohar 2:39b, 3:183b.

¹⁹¹ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 385.

being deemed *adam*, along with the requirement of marriage. As *adam* in the precise sense refers to the human embodiment of the divine image, it can be deduced that gentiles, with their impure body and soul and uncircumcised males, do not reflect the divine structure. As follows, we may safely assume that the certain value ascribed to the human limbs as a reflection of the supernal does not apply to humanity in general. Further, the fact that circumcision renders the man complete and confirms that one is not of demonic origin signifies exclusion of women from certain domains, as this covenantal sign does not apply to their bodies. Man's intimate relation to God, which goes through the female *Shekhinah*, is dependent upon circumcision, the sign of the covenant.¹⁹² In the androcentric, and even phallogentric world of the Zohar, the lack of a circumcised male sexual organ means imperfection. The passage advocating the exemption of women from the commandments further suggests that women are, to a large extent, excluded from the religious life. Moreover, the instances where women are not mentioned in regard to *adam* and the covenant is also telling of a latent exclusion. The requirement of Jewish religious affiliation is more obvious than the androcentric aspect of *adam*, however, both of these conditions are detectable.

In Genesis, God creates mankind without a female counterpart.¹⁹³ This ability, Stavrakopoulou argues, amplifies the potent hyper-masculinity of God's body, and communicates the notion that the fertile divine male is the source of all life. This power in turn elevates the role of mortal male bodies.¹⁹⁴ Stavrakopoulou contends that the divine phallus was more than a masculine decoration – it was a “corporeal manifestation of the divine thrust of all life”.¹⁹⁵ This elevated position of the male body and phallus is visible in the central notion of male circumcision as the sign of the covenant between God and his people.¹⁹⁶ According to the religious elite of ancient Jerusalem, the uncircumcised man was defective. Further, this cultural norm excluded those without a phallus to circumcise from parts of religious life – including women and those deemed as eunuchs. These flawed bodies needed special treatment to neutralize their inherent flaw.¹⁹⁷ Male circumcision in ancient societies was a way of creating and manifesting social identities, there is little to no evidence that it was originally performed for medical purposes.¹⁹⁸ Further, in *The Savage in Judaism*,

¹⁹² See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 41; Zohar 2:61a, 2:86a.

¹⁹³ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 123–124; Gen 2:7.

¹⁹⁴ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 125–126.

¹⁹⁵ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 163.

¹⁹⁶ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 136.

¹⁹⁷ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 134.

¹⁹⁸ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 130–131.

Eilberg-Schwartz points to another central aspect of the Israelite tradition of circumcision: through this practice, continuity of tradition amongst men is manifested; it connects men in an unbroken chain across generations.¹⁹⁹ These tendencies are visible also in the zoharic corpus: the exaltation of the Jewish, male circumcised body as well as the inferiority ascribed to women and non-circumcised males. The sefirotic body is rendered entirely male by *Yesod*, the divine phallus, which communicates the precedence ascribed to the male body. Moreover, the patrilineal passing on of tradition and identity through male circumcision well describes the kabbalistic way of imparting knowledge exclusively between circumcised men.

Wolfson is critical of the scholarly portrayals of the zoharic worldview as universally anthropocentric, as he argues that it is not humans in general the zoharic authors had in mind – *adam* in this context refers to Israel. For instance, Tishby's rendition of the nature and status of the human being within the Zohar is guilty of interpreting "man" as humanity in general. Tishby discusses the anthropocentric view of the human body and soul as reflecting the *sefirot* without explicitly distinguishing who is considered fully human in this context.²⁰⁰ Awareness of the historical context and worldview represented in the Zohar, including questionable ideas about "the other", improves the chances of historical accuracy when investigating ideas pertaining to the human being. Naturally, these zoharic conceptions arose in specific historical circumstances, which were rooted in the exclusively male, rabbinic tradition and the complex encounters and exchanges with other religious traditions, above all Christianity.²⁰¹ In conclusion, interpreting *adam*, *bar nash* and related terms as humankind in general without deeper reflection generates an incomplete understanding of the zoharic doctrines regarding the human being and body. The limited worthy values attributed to the body, insofar as the body is considered a reflection of the divine image, do not by default apply to every human being. It is reasonable to assume that the fact that gentiles are considered impure impacts how their bodies are viewed and valued within the zoharic system. In the precise sense, to be *adam* means to carry the divine image. It is an honorary designation which has to be earned – therefore, it cannot reference humanity in general, as that would disrupt the zoharic system.

¹⁹⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 171.

²⁰⁰ Wolfson, "Ontology", 143–144 n. 41; Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 677–722.

²⁰¹ On the often strained relationship between the Jewish population and the Christian majority in the area now called Spain during the later Middle Ages, see Nirenberg, "Conversion, Sex, and Segregation".

6.2 “Why are all kinds of witchcraft and sorcery found especially in women?” – Impure Bodies

In this section, zoharic ideas about the body’s relation to the impure and demonic are considered. The points made regarding *adam* and related terms in the previous section serve as a framework, specifically the established notion of *adam* as an honorary title which has to be protected and earned, as well as the exclusion and secondary position of women within the worldview of the Zohar. The focus of the present discussion is the corporeal body in relation to the demonic. The chosen zoharic passages relate to women and their relation to the impure, regulations for sexual activity as well as general notions of the body and the demonic.

The flesh of the body is especially associated with the demonic, its impure nature making it a target for evil spirits. The idea of evil and the demonic is crucial to the zoharic worldview. During the Middle Ages, the problem of evil and its origin was a central question for Jewish philosophy. The general tendency was to interpret this issue from a Neoplatonic²⁰² perspective, meaning that evil as a real, independent power was denied.²⁰³ The main understanding of evil in the Zohar, however, relates to Gnosticism²⁰⁴, where evil is seen as both real and fearsome, in contrast to the Neoplatonic view of evil as illusory. The term *sitra ahra*, “the other side”, figures frequently in the Zohar as a realm of impurity and demonic forces. This unclean realm is the opposing enemy of the forces of holiness and the principal antagonist of the divine. The dualistic tendencies of the Zohar are evident from the fact that the demonic realm is believed to mirror the sefirotic structure, with ten corresponding lower *sefirot*.²⁰⁵ *Sitra ahra* gains and loses its independent power depending on the state of balance in the cosmos. The evil and demonic is often embodied in characters such as Samael and Lilith, a demonic couple in the zoharic literature known individually from earlier Jewish

²⁰² Neoplatonism refers to the Platonic philosophy as interpreted by Plotinus in the second century, and further developed in later centuries. According to this school of thought, the source of everything which exists is not an anthropomorphic deity, but the Neoplatonic First Principle, or One. This One is good and perfect and produces things that are too, resulting in a derivative or secondary role of evil. See Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), 1–7, 42, 47, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezp.sub.su.se/lib/sub/detail.action?docID=1886905>.

²⁰³ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 448.

²⁰⁴ Gnosticism refers to the ancient dualistic movement, partly rooted in a Judeo-Christian background, which circulated in the first centuries CE. According to Gnostic writings, the world as we know it came about through a mistake – the creator failed to make a perfect world. Evil is therefore real and hails from the divine creation itself. Plotinus expressed critic towards the Gnostic worldview. See Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 2–19, 54–56.

²⁰⁵ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 449–450.

traditions.²⁰⁶ In the zoharic narrative, Samael is a demonic angel of destruction, while Lilith is an evil spirit with human features who engenders demons. Together they personify the demonic system.²⁰⁷ Lilith is sometimes identified with the snake, the animal most often used to embody the demonic powers within the Zohar, particularly those of a sexual nature.²⁰⁸ The character of Lilith within the Jewish tradition has existed and developed over a long period of time in various sources. Her character can broadly be summarized as an embodiment of ideas about the demonic female, fears regarding improper sexuality and threats to the engendering of new life.²⁰⁹ Her portrayal in the Zohar is consistent with this characterization. The demonic has strong connections to the human body and sexuality within the zoharic worldview, as this corporeal realm is always at risk of being corrupted by evil spirits. Human sin, especially sexual transgressions, nourishes the demonic and gives it the power to reproduce.²¹⁰ The *Shekhinah* has a special relation to the *sitra aħra*, as this realm approaches her in its desire to reach the divine and gain its power.²¹¹ The position of the *Shekhinah* within the sefirotic system is dependent upon human action in the lower world – human sin separates her from the sefirotic system and joins her to the *sitra aħra*.²¹²

6.2.1 Impure Women

Women are associated with a set of negative characteristics in the zoharic literature pertaining to the unclean and demonic. The Zohar clearly states that women are especially prone to witchcraft and sorcery. The reason for this originates from the narrative of Adam and Eve. According to the tradition represented in the Zohar, the serpent in the garden had sexual relations with Eve, leading to all women having a particular closeness to the impure realm:

Rabbi Yose asked, “Why are all kinds of witchcraft and sorcery found especially in women?” He replied, “So we have learned: ‘When the serpent copulated with Eve, injecting her with slime’—injecting her, not her husband.” (Zohar 1:126a)

²⁰⁶ Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 119–120; Joseph Dan, “Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah”, *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1486451>.

²⁰⁷ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 464.

²⁰⁸ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 467–468.

²⁰⁹ See Jocelyn Hellig, “Lilith as a Focus of Judaism’s Gender Construction”, *Dialogue & Alliance* 12, no. 1 (1998): 41, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezp.sub.su.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=reh&AN=ATLA0001003297&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²¹⁰ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 517 n. 39.

²¹¹ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 373.

²¹² Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 378–379.

The connection between women and witchcraft has roots in rabbinic literature, as does the notion of Eve and her inappropriate relation with the serpent.²¹³ According to the rabbinic tradition the Zohar here comments upon, the infection Eve received from the serpent ceased when Israel received the Torah. However, the gentile's infection did not cease, as they did not receive the Torah. The Zohar further states that only the men of Israel obtained the Torah – the women are exempt, or excluded, from the commandments. This implies that the women of Israel were not cleansed from their sin in the thorough way the men were:

Torah was given only to males, as is written: *This is the Torah that Moses set out before the sons of Israel*²¹⁴ (Deut 4:44), for women are exempt from commandments of Torah.

Furthermore, after they sinned they all slipped back into their slime as before, and it is harder to eliminate slime from a woman than from a man. So women are more commonly engaged in witchcraft and this slime than men, for women derive from the left side and cling to severe Judgment.²¹⁵ As has been said, this side clings to them more than to men, since they derive from the side of Severe Judgment; everything clings to and follow its species. (Zohar 1:126b)

In other words, women hail from the sphere of the demonic. The very nature and origin of women makes them more prone to witchcraft than men. Further, the woman is considered impure during her days of menstruation. If she practices witchcraft during this time, she will be more successful than normally, as she is even closer to the demonic side during her days of impurity. The idea of the severe impurity of menstruation goes back to the sexual regulations of Lev 15:19–24²¹⁶ and Lev 18:19²¹⁷, which states that anything a woman touches during this

²¹³ See BT Sanhedrin 67a: “The verse: “You shall not allow a witch to live” (Exod 22:18), does not refer only to a female who practices sorcery; both a man and a woman are included. If so, why does verse state “a witch”? This is because most women are familiar with witchcraft”, BT Shabbat 145b–146a: “Why are gentiles ethically contaminated? It is because they did not stand on Mount Sinai. As when the snake came upon Eve, i.e., when it seduced her to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, it infected her with moral contamination, and this contamination remained in all human beings. When the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, their contamination ceased, whereas gentiles did not stand at Mount Sinai, and their contamination never ceased”.

²¹⁴ *Benei yisra'el* (בני ישראל), literally “sons of Israel”, can be understood as “Israelites” or “children of Israel”, but is here interpreted literally as only referring to males.

²¹⁵ The *sefirot* of *Gevurah*, or *Din* (“judgment”), located on the left side of the sefirotic table, is the source of the demonic. *Din* is associated with the feminine. See Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 2, 218 n. 121.

²¹⁶ Lev 15:19–24: “When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, they will be unclean till evening. If a man has sexual relations with her and her monthly flow touches him, he will be unclean for seven days; any bed he lies on will be unclean”.

²¹⁷ Lev 18:19: “Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period”.

period is deemed impure. Sexual relations at the time of menstruation is strictly forbidden and renders the man impure as well, according to both the biblical and zoharic accounts.²¹⁸ The impurity of menstruation returns several times in the zoharic corpus. In an enumeration of human actions which drive away the divine presence from earth, all actions relate to sexual sins. Having sexual relations with a menstruant is mentioned first. According to this passage, menstruation is the strongest form of defilement which exists in the world. If a man comes near a menstruating woman, all of his limbs absorb the impurity. The fact that chances of conceiving during menstruation are low, meaning that sexual relations during this time does not serve the commandment of procreation, may be one of the reasons for the strong condemnation.²¹⁹ The grave sin of having sexual relations with a non-Jewish woman is listed in second place. As this was discussed in the previous section, I will not go into detail of this notion. Lastly, causing or performing an abortion is mentioned third. This action is deeply condemned, as it counteracts the commandment of procreation.²²⁰

A Jewish man has to guard himself from sexual sins in order to protect the covenant and strengthen the sefirotic configurations in the divine realm, according to the Zohar. This view relates to the aforementioned idea that man must guard and earn his status as *adam*. In yet an enumeration of sins, all relate to forbidden relations with women. The man has to refrain from intimate relations with menstruating women, female slaves, gentiles and prostitutes in order to protect the *sefirot*.²²¹ These sins all concern women, however, they are laid out from the perspective of the male devotee – the impurity of these particular groups of women is apparently contagious to the male kabbalist. The destructive potential of the female corporeal body is clear from these types of dire warnings against improper sexual behaviour.

The voice of a serpent may join with the voice of a woman, as stated in the Zohar. However, there are only two types of women to whom this may happen: one who does not follow the regulations for menstrual purity, and one who delays sexual relations with her husband after the period of impurity to inflict suffering upon the husband. If the voice of a serpent joins a woman's voice and the woman gives birth, the evil Lilith assigns a spirit to take control of the infant child. This may result in the child being killed.²²² Again, the impurity of menstruation

²¹⁸ Zohar 1:126b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 2, 219 n. 124.

²¹⁹ BT Niddah 31b exhibits some fertility awareness in regard to menstruation.

²²⁰ Zohar 2:3a–b.

²²¹ Zohar 2:60b–61a.

²²² Zohar 2:110b–111b; Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 5 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 101 n. 288.

is here emphasised by the possibly fatal consequences of not adhering to the purity regulations. Interestingly, it is equally sinful to prolong the days of impurity in order to postpone sexual relations with one's husband. The days of impurity are clearly limited, as the woman changes from impure to pure proper sexual relations are encouraged, even required.²²³

The hitherto highlighted passages all convey that women are particularly associated with the impure and demonic realm. These associations especially relate to corporeal aspects such as menstruation, childbearing and sexuality. The closeness between women and the demonic realm is believed to originate from Eve's improper sexual relation with the serpent. This tale, which elaborates upon the biblical and rabbinic narratives, conveys the destructive potential of female sexuality. In most of the passages which have been considered, the female inclination towards the impure is discussed from the perspective of the danger it poses to men and to the divine structure. As expressed by Wolfson, Lilith and *Shekhinah* are two opposing facets of women's character within the zoharic literature, representing both demonization and veneration of the feminine. The strict regulations for menstrual purity illustrate the view of women's bodies as both pure and impure. Moreover, the alleged demonic origin of women warrants the distinction between men and women in regard to bodily purity.²²⁴ From the androcentric viewpoint of the Zohar, the destructive possibilities of female corporeality is principally an issue for the sanctity of the men. Further, it also poses a danger for the engendering of worthy children. This is a crucial point, as the commandment of procreation is central and anything that may challenge it constitutes a grave sin. The Zohar states that the married woman should remain in the house, not venturing outside, in order to remain chaste and suitable to bear children.²²⁵ A woman's chastity can thereby be said to mainly protect her husband and their potential offspring, as her impurity can pose a danger to the family. Moreover, inappropriate sexual relations have the possibility of harming the divine. The notion of wrongful human actions having the possibility of harming the divine structure increases the risks of engaging in improper sexual behaviour and not adhering to the purity regulations.

²²³ See also Zohar 1:50a: "Similarly, when a man's wife undergoes days of impurity and he waits for her fittingly, supernal coupling couples with him all those days, so he is male and female. Once his wife is purified, he should delight her anew—joy of *mitzvah*, supernal joy!"

²²⁴ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 59–60.

²²⁵ Zohar 1:116a.

6.2.2 Demonic Presence in the Sexual Sphere

The zoharic attitudes towards sexuality are variegated. There is the central commandment of procreation, to “be fruitful and multiply” as stated in Gen 1:28, which constitutes the single most important factor for the survival of the people and the tradition. The Zohar states that one who does not engender new life weakens the sefirotic structure, the judgment against such a person is in other words harsh.²²⁶ The purpose of the human life on earth is to procreate, which strengthens unions both in the lower, earthly and upper, divine sphere:

This is why the blessed Holy One creates coupling, casting souls into the world, so companionship prevails above and below, and the source of all is blessed. This is why the Holy One made the human being: to strive in His ways, to never cease his source and spring. If he ceases this, when he departs this world, that person does not enter the curtain nor obtain his share in that world. (Zohar 1:186b)

Marriage is understood as a central institution which renders the human being whole, it is a way for man to mirror the divine relationship between God and the *Shekhinah*.²²⁷ This conception gives marriage, as well as the conjugal sexual act, a sacral aspect as an embodiment and strengthening of the divine sphere – the *Shekhinah* only dwells where man and woman are united.²²⁸ Nonetheless, the zoharic writers exhibit a great fear of inappropriate sexuality. As procreation requires sexual relations, there are naturally regulations for how this act should be carried out in order to preserve the sanctity of engendering new life. These restrictions serve as protection against the demonic – inherent is the idea of the corporeal body’s closeness to the impure. As noted by Eilberg-Schwartz, the commandment of procreation, coupled with the notion of man as created in the image of God, turns the sexual body into a problematic site. Both of these biblical conditions are central within the Zohar, making the human act of procreation more than merely a human, earthly interest – it is a carrying out of the divine will through a vehicle resembling the divine.²²⁹ It is therefore no wonder that the sexual body is surrounded with some anxiety within the zoharic literature, requiring strict boundaries. Below, I present a collection of prohibitions and conditions for sexual relations. The content of these zoharic passages convey a sense of the negative and

²²⁶ Zohar 1:13a. See also Zohar 1:66a.

²²⁷ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1355.

²²⁸ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1357. See Zohar 1:49b–50a.

²²⁹ See Eilberg-Schwartz, “People of the Body”, 21, 23–24.

even demonic potential associated with the corporeal body. The positive associations related to marital sexuality are also highlighted below.

By combining rabbinic motives, the Zohar states that intercourse performed by the light of a lamp results in epileptic children. Since epilepsy is associated with the demonic, the epileptic child born out of this wrongful act becomes possessed by demons.²³⁰ When a man has relations with his wife, he has to focus upon the divine holiness and declare a spell to protect the act from the evil Lilith. After the act, he should pour water around the bed for protection. The presence of Lilith is a serious threat during sexual union – she is harmful to the new life about to be conceived, and steals semen in order to engender new demons.²³¹ Further, it is forbidden to engage in intercourse during daytime.²³² To only engage in intercourse during certain prescribed times, and to focus upon cleaving to God during the act, is a way for humans to distinguish themselves from animals. To perform the reproductive act with right intention results in the fetus attaining a holy soul. However, if one is absorbed by the evil impulse and does not focus upon the divine, the fetus attains a soul from the demonic realm.²³³

Performing the conjugal sexual act at specific times allows the act to be elevated into a spiritual one:

One who desires to sanctify himself according to the will of his Lord should perform conjugal union only from midnight on, or at midnight; for at that hour the blessed Holy One appears in the Garden of Eden, and supernal holiness is aroused, so that is the time to sanctify oneself.

This is for other people. As for disciples of the wise, who know the ways of Torah—midnight is their time to rise and study Torah, coupling with Assembly of Israel to praise the Holy King. And on Sabbath eve, when complete favour prevails, then is their coupling—to bring forth the fervor of the blessed Holy One and Assembly of Israel. (Zohar 3:81a)

The relationship between God and *Shekhinah* is reflected at the earthly level in the relationship between man and woman in marriage, according to the notion of the lower realm

²³⁰ Zohar 1:14a–b; Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 1, 102 n. 762.

²³¹ Zohar 3:19a; Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 7 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 120 n. 362.

²³² Zohar 1:49b.

²³³ Zohar 3:49b.

mirroring the upper. Marriage is seen as the perfect, ideal human condition, one who is not married is not complete.²³⁴ If a man is away from his wife, *Shekhinah* temporarily dwells with him, so that the union of male and female remains intact. Once the married man returns to his wife, he is obligated to engage in intercourse. This act has a positive effect both in the divine and earthly realm. In this highly regulated, conjugal context, human sexuality is a positive force which strengthens the divine configurations.²³⁵ For the husband, not uniting with his wife upon return is considered an insult to the *Shekhinah*:

Is it a sin if one does not attend to his wife? Certainly so, for he diminishes the splendor of supernal coupling coupled with him, engendered by the lady of his house. (Zohar 1:50a)

It is stated that God provides a man with his wife – an intelligent wife is a divine gift, which indicates an exalted view of marriage. A happy marriage has to be earned, as sinful behaviour will result in marriage with a bothersome woman, deriving from the demonic side.²³⁶

As has been highlighted, the conjugal sexual sphere is strictly regulated, but it is nevertheless a divine command to engage in intercourse within the marriage. Correctly performed marital sexual relations thus brings with it certain positive aspects. Now, we turn to sexuality outside of the conjugal context, more specifically the act of “wasting seed”. As this act exists outside of what is permitted and counteracts the commandment of procreation, it is deeply condemned and highly associated with the demonic. The zoharic viewing of wasting semen for non-reproductive purposes as an abhorrent sin has its roots in the biblical tradition as well as rabbinic literature.²³⁷

One who engages in the act of masturbation is called evil, as stated in the Zohar:

Rabbi Yose said, Isn't *evil* the same as *wicked*? He replied, No. One is called *wicked* even if he merely raises his hand against his fellow without harming him at all, but one is only called *evil* if he wastes his way, defiling himself, defiling the earth, empowering the impure spirit called *evil*,

²³⁴ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1355. See Zohar 3:81b.

²³⁵ Zohar 1:49b–50a.

²³⁶ Zohar 1:229a.

²³⁷ See BT Niddah 13a: “As Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Anyone who emits semen for naught is liable to receive the punishment of death at the hand of Heaven, as it is stated with regard to Onan, son of Judah: “And it came to pass, when he engaged in intercourse with his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. And the thing that he did was evil in the eyes of the Lord, and He slew him also” (Gen 38:9–10)”.

as is written: *nothing but evil all day*. He never enters the palace nor gazes upon the face of *Shekhinah*, for on account of this *Shekhinah* withdraws from the world. (Zohar 1:57a)

This act means wasting seed, defiling oneself and the earth as well as strengthening the demonic sphere. It results in *Shekhinah* withdrawing from the earthly realm. The sin of spilling seed is highlighted as one of the gravest sins, the defilement extends from the earthly realm into the afterlife. The reason for the serious condemnation is principally that this act counteracts procreation. Wasting seed equates to killing one's own children, which is even worse than murdering other humans. The Zohar goes as far as stating that all sins can be repented, except for this one – one who sins in this way can never see the face of *Shekhinah*.²³⁸ Biale argues that the zoharic writers take the condemnation of masturbation to an even greater level than the talmudic writers.²³⁹

There are more passages on the subject which could have been brought up regarding the act of wasting seed, however, I think that the zoharic message has been made clear. The passages we turn to now exemplify the negative associations of the corporeal body, most of all the flesh, in a more general way.

The sequence of events in Gen 6:1–2²⁴⁰ is interpreted by the zoharic writers as the root of human sin in the generation of the Flood, which lead to them being wiped out from the earth. Their sin was of a sexual nature, they were drawn towards the evil impulse, rejected faith and defiled themselves.²⁴¹ This reasoning clearly showcases the fear of unlawful sexuality and the serious repercussions of these actions.

The idea that the *sitra aħra* has to be bribed in order to avoid conflict with the demonic side appears several times through the Zohar.²⁴² Interestingly, the demonic, which is sometimes called *End of all flesh*²⁴³, only has power over the human body and not over the soul, according to the following passage:

²³⁸ Zohar 1:57a, 1:62a, 1:88a, 1:219b.

²³⁹ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 110.

²⁴⁰ Gen 6:1–2 “When human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose”.

²⁴¹ Zohar 1:62b.

²⁴² Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 453.

²⁴³ Matt, *Zohar*, vol. 1, 380 n. 288.

This *End of all flesh* desires nothing but flesh constantly, so flesh is arrayed for him constantly, and He is called *End of all flesh*. When he rules, he rules over body, not over soul. Soul ascends to her site, while flesh is given to this site. (Zohar 1:65a)

This passage expresses that the demonic rules over the body after the death of the human, while the soul ascends above. In another passage explaining the structure of the human body, it is similarly stated that the flesh of the human body derives from the demonic side, while the bones, organs and skin originate from the side of holiness. Therefore, the bones constitute the basis of the body, not the flesh. Since the flesh has a demonic origin, it runs the risk of being corrupted by evil spirits. After death, when the flesh has perished and only bones remain, the demonic no longer has any power over the body.²⁴⁴ This verse advocates that there are tensions inherent in the body, as it is a mix of holy and impure forces. The flesh is strongly associated with the demonic and clearly distinguished from the rest of the body.

6.2.3 Reflections on the Impure Body

To conclude this discussion of the body and the demonic within the Zohar, it is obvious that the sexual body is a main site of the demonic reign. The Zohar continued and expanded upon the notions of the anxiety and danger surrounding the corporeal, sexual sphere already presented in the Talmud. Because of the theological importance put upon marital sexual union between man and woman within the Zohar, it follows that the dangers of improper sexuality are more extreme than in the talmudic predecessor.²⁴⁵ Tishby notes that the zoharic view on the nature of the body as either good or evil is not coherent, however, it is clear that man's evil inclination dwells in the corporeal body and launches its attack from within the body.²⁴⁶ According to the zoharic writers, the body is constantly at risk of being corrupted by demonic forces, which is why proper behaviour, especially pertaining to sexuality and purity, is crucial to stay protected and sanctified.

Women are especially prone to witchcraft and close to the demonic powers. The androcentric viewpoint of the Zohar is evident in the passages relating to women – the impurity of women is principally discussed and determined from the perspective of the male devotee and the danger it poses to him. Men have to abstain from sexual relations with these impure women,

²⁴⁴ Zohar 3:170a.

²⁴⁵ See Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 110.

²⁴⁶ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 767.

such as the menstruant and the non-Jewish woman, as their defilement is contagious. Furthermore, improper sexual behaviour can harm the potential offspring as well as the sefirotic structure. Only proper conjugal relations strengthen the sefirotic sphere – the positive values ascribed to sexual activity are highly limited. Its central aspect is the engendering of new life, which is a divine command. Unconditional celibacy was not an option for the kabbalists, similarly, the image of the virgin was generally not idealized in Jewish texts from late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The commandment of procreation excludes a total renunciation of the physical.²⁴⁷ However, present throughout the Zohar is a great fear of the negative effects and aspects of the corporeal body and all that it brings. To return to the previous discussion of the *adam* category, we can assume that the notion of preserving sanctity in order to be called *adam* relates to the ideas of the demonic and sinful flesh which have been discussed here. Man has to protect his status as *adam*, as well as the covenant, by avoiding the sexual sins deemed abhorrent by the zoharic authors. Considering the degree to which they are condemned, it is no wonder that the honorary title *adam* is threatened as a result of sexual sin and that the supernal structure is weakened when the condemned actions are performed. Defilement of the covenant is the most serious sin to commit before God. As the covenant is inscribed in the male sexual organ, sexual sin quite naturally follows as a serious threat to God's relationship with his people. This notion fortifies the body as a problematic and possibly destructive site. Further, it turns potential illicit sexual partners into a threat of a deeply condemned sin. In the androcentric and heteronormative worldview of the Zohar, this threat takes the form of women deemed unfit for intimate relationships – mainly, non-Jewish women or women in other ways considered impure, such as during their period of menstrual impurity.

It is significant to view the various zoharic notions of women as a whole: the seemingly overall secondary status attributed women, their exclusion from the commandments and their association with the demonic. As the corporeal body generally has strong negative connotations within the worldview of the Zohar, it is hardly surprising that female corporeality is victim to the unfavourable associations which have been highlighted here – the impurity of a menstruating woman is so serious that a man coming near her will absorb the impurity in all of his limbs. It is the duty of the devoted male kabbalist to abstain from relations with impure women in order to sanctify himself and protect the sefirotic structure.

²⁴⁷ Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 265, 309.

From this perspective, the corporeal body is largely a threat and an obstacle in the pursuit of a dedicated religious life.

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that dirt is essentially disorder. On an obvious level, religiously enforced ideas of impurity serve to reinforce certain behaviours and deter from improper behaviour, or disorder. Moreover, ideas of what is dangerous reflect society – Douglas argues that notions of impurity can express a view of the larger social order. For instance, ideas of sexual dangers can be interpreted as symbols of a more general relationship between different parts of society.²⁴⁸ If impurity is disorder, it can be argued that the zoharic notions of sexual boundaries serve to uphold social order. Boundaries between different social groups are reinforced through these rules. The forbidden, individual sexual relationship between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman can thus be interpreted as symbolizing the social relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Further, the regulations for the sexual sphere, fortified by the threat of the demonic, protects the divine commandment of procreation, as well as the normative social order where people are expected to marry within their own faith, have children and not venture outside of the marriage. In addition, Eilberg-Schwartz points to the fact that notions of differences between male and female bodies not only constitutes *symbols* of societal relationships but also prerequisites for what it means to be a man and a woman in a particular culture.²⁴⁹ We cannot exclude the possibility that, for example, the zoharic regulations around menstruation actually affected the view of women within the medieval kabbalistic community and reinforced gender differences.

6.3 “But surely, the human being is nothing but soul!” – Body covering the Soul

Within the zoharic understanding of the human being, body and soul are clearly distinguished from each other. The aforementioned notion that the *End of all flesh* only has power over the human body, and not over the soul, illustrates this division. In this section, the distinction between body and soul is examined in more detail. The basic nature of the soul according to zoharic doctrine will be laid out as well as the relationship between the soul and the corporeal body. The discernible hierarchy between body and soul, the two building blocks that make up the human being, will be highlighted.

²⁴⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 2–4.

²⁴⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 189–190.

6.3.1 The Structure of the Soul

In the main zoharic body, it is generally assumed that the soul consists of three parts: the *nefesh*, *ruah* and *neslama*. The *nefesh* is the lowest part of the soul, nourishing and supporting the body. The *nefesh* is dependent on nourishment from the *ruah*, which in turn is sustained by the *neslama*. The *neslama* is the highest part, which receives its light from the divine realm. It is this level of the soul which enables man to study Torah and adhere to the commandments. The function of the *ruah* is less clear than the other two parts, its role is that of an intermediary. The tripartite soul is, just like the body, considered to be a mirroring of the *sefirot*.²⁵⁰ The soul is engendered by the male-female union between the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*, which is described through the image of human intimacy and sexuality:

Desire of female for male generates soul; desire of male for female generates soul; passionate desire of male for female and his cleaving to her pours forth soul. He encompasses desire of female, absorbing it, so lower desire is comprised within desire above, becoming one passion, undivided. Then female absorbs all, is impregnated by male, both desires cleaving as one. (Zohar 1:85b)

However, not all of the souls originate from the sefirotic sphere. The level of elevation of each soul is determined by the moment of conception, that is, by whether the prospective parents adhered to the proper regulations or not.²⁵¹ By proper sexual union, the child about to be conceived attains a holy soul drawn from above, while wrongful actions attracts a soul from the *sitra aħra*.²⁵² Further, as stated in the previous chapter, the souls of non-Jewish people are considered to originate from the demonic sphere:

Similarly on the other side, side of impurity: the spirit spreading through the other nations emerges from the side of impurity. It is not *human*, and so does not attain this name. The name of that spirit is Impure, not attaining the name *human*, having no share in it. (Zohar 1:20b)²⁵³

The Zohar states that every human being is composed of both above and below, meaning both earthly and spiritual matter. At death, body and soul return to their respective origins: the body returns to earth while the soul departs above.²⁵⁴ In other words, the body derives from

²⁵⁰ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 684–686. See Zohar 1:83b.

²⁵¹ See Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment”, 64.

²⁵² Zohar 3:49b.

²⁵³ See also Zohar 1:131a.

²⁵⁴ Zohar 1:130b.

earth while the soul has a heavenly origin. The soul's divine origin necessitates a descent into the earthly realm when the soul is to inhabit a body. As phrased by Tishby; this is not just a matter of a change in location, it implies a serious decline in status for the soul. A zoharic passage clearly states that the soul is aware of this decline and wishes to stay in its original place. However, upon divine command, the soul eventually has to fulfill its destiny, descend to earth and enter a human body.²⁵⁵ Another, more mystical reason for the soul's descent into the world is that the soul's perfection in the earthly realm works to strengthen the *Shekhinah* – good deeds on earth vitalizes her and stimulates the sefirotic flow.²⁵⁶

6.3.2 The Essence of the Human Being

While one might think that the human being mainly consists of skin, flesh, bones and sinews, the body is simply a garment – the real essence of the human being is the soul, according to the Zohar. The body serves the purpose of a protective barrier; bones and sinews cover the innermost core of a human, mystery of *adam*:

When the human was created, what is written? *You clothed me in skin and flesh* (Job 10:11). What then is the human if not skin and flesh, and bones and sinews? But surely, the human being is nothing but soul! And these that we have mentioned—skin, flesh, bones, and sinews—are all merely a garment; they are a person's clothing, not the human. And when this human departs, he is stripped of those garments that he is wearing. (Zohar 2:75b–76a)

The body is the garment the soul is clothed in, in order to be able to exist in the earthly world.²⁵⁷ This is a central function of the corporeal body within the Zohar. A hierarchical order is implied by the fact that the soul is considered the true essence of man. Tishby argues that the Zohar upholds the view of the soul as man's true essence, while the body has no relevance in the fundamental human structure, its role is that of a garment.²⁵⁸ Further, at death, when the soul is separated from the body, the human is allowed to attain a vision of the *Shekhinah*:

²⁵⁵ Zohar 2:96b; see Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 752–753.

²⁵⁶ Zohar 1:235a; see Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 754.

²⁵⁷ Zohar 1:66a. See also Zohar 1:20b: "Flesh is the garment of the *human*".

²⁵⁸ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 680.

On the day when a human's days have been completed, so as to leave the world—that day when the body is broken and the soul is about to depart—permission is granted the human to see what he was not permitted when the body prevailed vigorously. (Zohar 1:79a)

It was impossible to have this experience during life, when the soul was still controlled by the body. This notion strongly implies that the body limits a person's spiritual opportunities and that freedom from the body elevates one's spirituality. The following passage expresses the same idea:

He tests the righteous. Why? Rabbi Shim'on said, Because when the blessed Holy One delights in the righteous, what is written? *YHVH delights in crushing him by disease* (Isa 53:10). This has been established, but the reason is that the delight of the blessed Holy One focuses only on soul, not on body; for soul resembles soul, while body is incapable of uniting above—even though the body's image abides in supernal mystery.

Come and see: When the blessed Holy One delights in a person's soul, deriving pleasure from her, He strikes the body so that the soul can dominate. For as long as soul corresponds with body, soul cannot prevail; but once body is broken, soul becomes dominant. (Zohar 1:140a–b)

The fact that the human body as a divine image is underlined here, in a context where the superiority of the soul is emphasized, conveys the complex and ambiguous view of the body within the Zohar. It is however clear the soul is valued higher than the body in the eyes of God. God can purposefully weaken the body of the righteous in order to let the soul prevail:

Now, you might say that the blessed Holy One executes judgment upon a person unjustly. But as already explained, when judgment befalls someone who is innocent, this is because of His love for him. For the blessed Holy One loves him passionately, drawing him near. He crushes the body to empower the soul; then the person is drawn to Him in love fittingly, the soul dominant, the body weakened. One needs a weak body and a strong soul, invigorated vitally; then he becomes the beloved of the blessed Holy One. When the soul is weak and the body strong, he is the enemy of the blessed Holy One, who takes no pleasure in him. (Zohar 1:180b)²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ See also Zohar 3:168a.

The Zohar frequently depicts body and soul as two separate entities which are in opposition; the soul is considered to be trapped in the earthly realm. It is assumed that everything longs back to its origin, therefore, the soul wants to free itself from the body and go back to its source. This longing can only be temporarily fulfilled during lifetime, through strong religious experiences that allows the soul to catch a glimpse of the *Shekhinah*. However, in order to attain true freedom, the soul needs to separate from the corporeal body. These zoharic ideas on the soul are rooted in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought and were taken up into Jewish thought before the birth of Kabbalah.²⁶⁰

Tishby enumerates three main ways in which the relation between the natural world and the divine is expressed in the Zohar, the first being the pattern relationship. This principle assumes that everything in the upper world is reflected in the lower world, it is a basic pillar of kabbalistic symbolism. The second type of relationship is the activity of the *sefirot* as present in the natural world – a stormy sea is interpreted as the result of sefirotic movement. The third and last relationship is the idea of nature, particularly the sky, as a garment to God. All of these notions assume a closeness between the divine and the natural world, there are however also several passages which portray the physical existence in a negative way.²⁶¹ The garment-relationship is especially interesting for our purposes, as the symbolism parallels the zoharic notions of the body's relationship to the soul – the heavens are described as the garment clothing the *Shekhinah*.²⁶² The relation between body and soul parallels the concealment and revelation of the divine.²⁶³ The Zohar states that *Ein Sof* is hidden from us just like the soul is hidden from our earthly perception, yet, through the *sefirot* we are able to learn about the divinity. Similarly, the soul is revealed to us through the body; without the body, the soul is unknowable:

The human soul is unknowable except through smooth members of the body—rungs carrying out what the soul designs. So she is known and unknown. Similarly, the blessed Holy One is known and unknown, for He is soul of soul, spirit of spirit, hidden and concealed from all, but through those gates, openings for soul, the blessed Holy One becomes known. (Zohar 1:103b)

²⁶⁰ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 683.

²⁶¹ Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 654–655.

²⁶² Zohar 3:152a.

²⁶³ See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 766.

6.3.3 Reflections on Body and Soul

The notion of the body as the soul's garment implies that the soul is the innermost, true core of a human that needs to be protected – the garment cannot be as valuable as what it protects. According to the Zohar, the earthly body limits the spiritual possibilities in this life. In regard to the essence of man, the body is clearly subordinate to the soul, it appears to have no intrinsic value. God can deliberately weaken the body in order to let the divine soul of a righteous person dominate over the body. This notion ties in with the previously discussed view of the body's high corruptibility and closeness to the demonic side. In contrast to the body, the soul has a more consistent value thanks to its divine origin. However, as the garment to the soul, the body is in fact essential. It is crucial in order for the soul to be able to exist in the earthly realm. This function mirrors the way the *sefirot* reveal the concealed *Ein Sof* – through the body, we can know the divine soul. To return to the category of *adam*, just as the seemingly exalted value of the body as a reflection of the divine structure does not apply to humanity in general, the same can be said of the soul. Not all of the souls have a divine origin – the souls of the non-Jewish people are believed to derive from the demonic sphere and because of this, they are not called *adam*. The divine soul is restricted to the Jewish people and further, proper sexual union is crucial so as not to attract a soul from the *sitra aħra*.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This thesis examines central notions of the human body within the Zohar, the main medieval kabbalistic work, with special attention to biases in the text, above all related to gender and Jewish religious affiliation. Zoharic notions of impurity, as well as of preserving purity, recur throughout the analysis. By tying together different threads mentioned in passing in previous research on this issue, I aim to present an extensive and inclusive description of the body's place within this kabbalistic tradition. The questions which have been examined are the following:

1. How does the notion of the body as created in the image of God relate to the negative zoharic characterizations of the body?
2. How are notions of gender and Jewish religious affiliation reflected in the zoharic views of the body?

Three different aspects of these issues are discussed in the study. In the first part of the analysis, the concept of *adam* and related terms is explored based on what it tells us about views of the human body. *Adam* represents the intimate relationship between the human being and God – the dignified values ascribed to the human body relate to this title. It is a central and multifaceted concept in the Zohar, its use showing identity markers and exclusions. I have inferred that *adam* in the Zohar is an exclusive category restricted to the Jewish people, since the non-Jewish people are considered to be of demonic origin. Further, to some extent *adam* and related terms only applies to the Jewish, circumcised man. Circumcision grants entrance into the covenant and allows the man to be called *adam* and further approach to the divine. A man who is un-circumcised is incomplete. Moreover, a phallic symbolism is frequently employed in connection to the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, which represents the covenant. Within the logic of the Zohar, the deep meaning attached to the circumcised phallus exalts the male, Jewish body and marginalizes the role of women within the mystical life, as their female bodies lack this covenantal sign. Women are ascribed a secondary position in the religious and spiritual life, not to mention their demonic association, which further fortifies the view of women as less perfect than men. To some extent the female is viewed as a subordinate part of the male. This notion has implications for the *adam* category. As voiced by Wolfson; if the feminine is considered contained in and derived from the male, ontologically the original and independent gender is after all the male.²⁶⁴ Belonging to a marital union between man and woman is a prerequisite for being called *adam*, but the demand principally relates to the position of the male. The zoharic perspective on issues regarding women is distinctly androcentric. It is clear that the male authors were not targeting a female audience, as women were excluded from the kabbalistic community. With all of this in mind, it is hardly surprising that Jewish women are ascribed only a secondary status as *adam*. Although not fully and explicitly excluded from the *adam* category, their position is not in itself independent or of crucial importance, which is why women as a separate group are largely excluded from discussions of requirements relating to the title *adam*.

The views on circumcision within the Zohar are in line with Francesca Stavrakopoulou's remarks on circumcision in ancient Jerusalem and the scribal community of the Hebrew Bible: as a man, the lack of a circumcised sexual organ means that you are incomplete physically, socially and religiously, resulting in exclusion from certain spheres. Male

²⁶⁴ Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 176; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 85.

circumcision embodies normative devotion to God, which in turn elevates the mortal male body as closer to the divine body. This further marginalizes those without a phallus to circumcise. These flawed bodies require special care, such as in the form of rituals, to neutralize the danger they personify.²⁶⁵ We recognize this tendency from the zoharic characterizations of women and gentiles as naturally closer to the demonic and impure than circumcised Jewish men.

The second part of the analysis discusses how the corporeal body relates to the demonic – however, all of the chapters relate to the demonic to some extent. As has become evident, a focus on bodies within the zoharic tradition quickly leads to the demonic sphere. A recurring theme of the Zohar is the presence and threat of demonic powers. These demonic forces corrupt humans through the body, as a result of bodily actions or conditions considered impure. Wrongful human actions not only attract the demonic, they also harm the divine structure. Women are viewed as closer to the demonic than men, especially during the impurity of menstruation. The androcentrism of the Zohar is showcased in the passages pertaining to women, as the impure woman is perceived largely as a threat and an obstacle for the Jewish man trying to lead a dedicated, pure religious life. This chapter also highlights ideas of preserving purity within the sexual, reproductive sphere. Inherent in these prescriptions is the potential danger of the sexual, impure body as well as the importance of fulfilling the commandment of procreation according to God's will.

In the third and last chapter, zoharic notions of the soul are highlighted, with a focus on how the soul is distinguished from the body. In the Zohar, body and soul are perceived as fundamentally different and it is clear which one has precedence. The body is described as the garment in which the soul is clothed, further, God will weaken the body if it leads to a righteous soul being strengthened. From the considered zoharic passages, it can be inferred that the soul has a more consistent and intrinsic value thanks to its divine origin, while the value of the body is purely instrumental. However, not all of the human souls share this exalted value, as there are souls originating from the demonic sphere as well. Lastly, from reading the passages distinguishing between body and soul, I find that a true exaltation of the human body within the Zohar can be ruled out.

²⁶⁵ Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 134, 136.

One of the main research aims of this study is to explore the relation between the symbolic uses of the human body as well as the notion of the body as a divine reflection – which on the surface appears to exalt the human body and some of its bodily functions – and the recurring negative characterizations of the body within the Zohar. This dissonance can in part be explained by the sharp line drawn between impure and pure bodies and bodily activity. The forbidden or unclean, whether be it conditions, actions or whole groups of people deemed unclean, poses a threat to the idealized order. In the Zohar, a clear distinction is often made between *adam* and not *adam*, the perfect, idealized body and the impure body. The same goes for permitted and forbidden sexual activity. Sexual relations must be carefully controlled in order to be permitted, which allows the act to be transformed from carnal to spiritual. The body, along with sexual activity, is not elevated or revered in itself, and the threat of demonic corruption is always present. It can be safely assumed that the zoharic symbolic use of these features only employs the idealized and pure versions – such as the circumcised phallus, people considered *adam* and the correctly performed marital, reproductive act. Anything outside of these boundaries would be considered disorderly and dangerous. Moreover, the use of a symbolic language derived from the sphere of human corporeality does not equal an exalted view of the corporeal body or the sexual act in itself, a point which has been emphasized in previous research on the issue.²⁶⁶ Rather, appropriate aspects of the human body are allowed to be used symbolically to describe processes within the divine sphere. The anthropocentric symbolic language of the Zohar creates a vivid and captivating image of the divine, engaging its readers in the mystical system.

The zoharic corpus does assume a closeness between the human form and the divine, as the human being constitutes a lower reflection of the divine sphere. These two spheres are however *not* of the same dignity. The demonic connotations of the body, as well as the notion of the body as less integral than the soul, largely overshadow the positive values. Further, the limited worthy values are conditional and apply only to *adam* and related terms, which admittedly does not include humanity as a whole. The body is nonetheless the central vehicle for fulfilling the commandment of procreation, and therein ensuring the survival of life and tradition. The importance of the commandment of procreation within the Zohar cannot be overstated, which requires a way of relating to the sexual body while staying pure. Thus, when the marital, sexual act is performed correctly, it is elevated from physical to spiritual

²⁶⁶ See Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment”, 67; Wolfson, *Language Eros, Being*, 317.

act. Human beings have the possibility of both harming and strengthening the divine, through actions performed by their bodies. The analysis additionally examines how ideas of gender and Jewish religious affiliation are showcased in the zoharic characterisations of human bodies. Bodies, bodily attributes and activities of women and non-Jewish people are on several occasions associated with the impure, such as menstruation and foreskin. This fact indicates that the body of the circumcised Jewish male represents correct order, the standard. Even for the Jewish male, circumcision is crucial in order to be considered a complete man, a part of *adam*. Proper religious devotion and sexual behaviour is also essential in order to keep the elevated status ascribed to the circumcised Jewish male, but the starting position is undeniably better than for other groups.

From these inferences, the importance of ingroup and outgroup within the zoharic scribal community has been highlighted. Identity is defined and reinforced throughout the zoharic narrative. The zoharic descriptions of bodies can act to justify and mark the boundaries of who can partake in the kabbalistic knowledge and who is excluded. The results of the study further indicate that when considering notions of the human being and body within medieval Kabbalah, it is crucial to recognize the exclusions in the text, and not directly interpret “human” as a universal category. The exclusions in the Zohar can be both latent and explicit, which is why a careful reading – which takes the historical and religious context of the text into account – is crucial. Isaiah Tishby’s summary of the zoharic ideas of the body is a good starting point, but it fails to differentiate between different bodies and instead assumes that these notions applies to all bodies to the same extent.²⁶⁷ I have followed a line of interpretation which assumes that the androcentric views of the zoharic community, as well as their centring around Jewish religious affiliation, needs to be taken into account in order to stay relevant in relation to the source material. I believe that the inferences of this study further emphasize the importance of highlighting latent biases in religious textual narratives.

²⁶⁷ See Lachower and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 767.

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