Stern admits that his argumentation is mostly from silence, based on the absence of rabbinc discussions of time. This does not necessarily mean that rabbis were unaware of the Graeco-Roman views or that they deliberately avoided them. Perhaps they were simply not interested in discussing time as such, just as they are not interested in history writing and philosophy. One can certainly not generalise rabbinc views and assume that except for a few very Hellenised upper-class Jews like Philo and Josephus all ancient Jews, whether in Palestine or Babylonia, had a different attitude towards time than Graeco-Roman society. This generalisation is the main problem with Stern's approach. Rabbinc literature can certainly not be seen as representative of ancient Judaism as such. Even if the concept of time is also absent in some other ancient Jewish writings such as the Wisdom of Solomon and Joseph and Aseneth, these writers cannot be considered as representing ancient Jewish society. The provincialisation of Palestine and the Graeco-Roman presence in the Near East must have made Jews familiar with Graeco-Roman thinking. Especially in the administrative realm, Graeco-Roman ways of time-measurement could not be avoided. In the urban areas Jews were active participants in the Roman culture of the Near East. Stern's conclusions based on literary sources might have been corrected or changed if epigraphic and material evidence had been consulted as well. Rather than proving ancient Jews' separation from the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture, the study may indicate that ancient rabbis chose to be out-of-touch with reality in continuing the traditional biblical way of thinking about time.

Catherine Hezser


Daniel Matt's Herculean task, still in progress, has provided the English-speaking reader with an invaluable aid to the appreciation of the Zohar. This translation replaces the older translation made by Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, published by the Soncino Press in 1934, which, although it often succeeds in rendering even abstruse sentences into clear and elegant English, suffers from misunderstandings and other serious defects, not least the omission of large segments of the text. A clear and vivid translation of this difficult and at times ambiguous text is accompanied by a helpful running commentary. However, Matt's most valuable contribution to the understanding of this complex work is the addition of notes detailing and often quoting the earlier exegeses on which the text is based. The verbatim quotation of sources which have substantially contributed towards the formation of a given exegesis makes this edition a pleasure to use.

These sources are vital because of the way the Zohar was composed. The Zohar is a midrash, that is, it is cast in the form of an exegetical commentary on the Bible and also draws widely on the Talmud and earlier homiletics. It is often impossible to understand a given passage in the Zohar without knowing the earlier exegesis on which it is based, as the author or authors often relies on an earlier commentary without quoting it or, at times, inadvertently omits a key phrase or connecting word on the assumption that his reader is as well versed in rabbinc literature as he is. The author of the Zohar is also a particularly successful exegete, distinguished by his sensitivity to

1 Following the work of Yehuda Liebes, scholars are now working on the assumption that the Zohar is not the work of a single author but a literature on the analogy of the Homeric literature. See Yehuda Liebes, 'How the Zohar was Written', in Studies in the Zohar (Albany, 1993).
the text and often appears to have hit on the original meaning of the verse, obscured by lesser practitioners. He is also distinguished by his skill in weaving together complex themes drawn from disparate sources, drawing on one source to illuminate another. The text is constructed like a fugue with layer upon layer of argument and counter argument in which the elements of the composition are themes mined from rabbinic exegesis. The source elements are therefore indispensable to appreciate the aims and methods of this highly innovative and original work.

The exuberance of Matt’s language sometimes leads to inaccuracies, translations which do not clearly convey the meaning of the text, or, as in the case of ‘colonel ember’ (Matt’s translation of the zoharic neologism horpila dtifsa in Zohar I 18a; p. 136), any meaning at all. Tifsa appears in the Zohar altogether approximately twenty times and only on one occasion meaning ember (Zohar I 242a). The most common meaning of tifsa is form or image as it appears in standard Aramaic.² In addition, the same word appears in single instances in other senses: once denoting a threshold (Zohar III 50b); once meaning something to which one ties a donkey (Zohar II 89a), and so on. Horpila, as Matt noted, is thought to have been formed on the basis of the Aramaic rufila meaning a high official. However, in view of the context of the passage, which refers to the creation of the evil spirits and the appearance of tifsa in other places in the Zohar as a figure of the angel of death (Zohar, I 218a),³ I suggest that the most likely meaning of tifsa in this setting is the form of a demon.

I experienced a similar difficulty with the phrase the ‘scribal nexus of the matrix’ (Zohar I 20b, p. 155), Matt’s translation of tufsira dequtra, another zoharic neologism, which appears to be a complex metaphor constructed from diverse images to explain the role of the letters in the process of creation. The meaning of the term ‘matrix’, which is itself not immediately apparent in this context, is hardly clarified by the addition of a scribal nexus. For the term tufsira, I would again suggest the translation ‘form’, not least because the tufsira is found in the letters like the impress of a seal (Zohar I 30b, p. 182).⁴ The emanation of the forms of the letters described in our passage, with this sense of tufsira, is in harmony with other descriptions of the linguistic process of creation in the Zohar. I agree that a knot is a very likely sense of qutra or qitra, particularly as this word is also used by the Zohar in the abstract sense to describe the focus of contemplative unification of either the sefirot or the letters, just as this term is used in a parallel passage (Zohar III 120a). Finally, this word, in this sense, always appears within a wheel (a description is found in Zohar II 235b). The focus of a wheel is of course the hub, the stable centre of activity, and the Zohar may have conflated the images of the form of the letters and the hub of the wheel to describe the focus of the activity of the letters.

Despite this and similar minor infelicities, thanks to Matt’s achievement the English reader is able, for the first time, to appreciate the depth and complexity of this innovative and, at the same time, canonical mystical text.

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³ See also Jehuda Liebes, Chapters of the Zohar Lexicon (Jerusalem PhD, 1976), p. 353, and Zohar III 111a.

⁴ I would translate ‘like the form of a seal’ here, not ‘with the form of a seal’.