A. Introduction

The temple in Jerusalem was, of course, the site in which God’s presence was thought to be particularly tangible. Indeed, it is this characteristic of the temple that leads various Rabbinic texts to grapple with the theological question of how the omnipresent God could nevertheless dwell in a particular location.¹ This characteristic of the temple was also preserved in the earliest corpus of Jewish mysticism, the pre-Kabbalistic heikhalot or merkavah literature of late antiquity.² With the physical temple now destroyed, the focus of the heikhalot mystics was on the heavenly temple. In fact, this literature describes the mystic as traversing seven heavenly temples until, in the final temple, he has a vision of God enthroned upon the chariot. The experience of God may no longer be possible in the earthly temple, but it remains available to the mystic who ascends to the seventh heavenly temple.³

It is against this backdrop that the temple symbolism employed in Sefer ha-Bahir—a compilation of disparate material, which espouses many elements of the theosophical symbolism that came to be identified with Kabbalah—is so striking. In the Bahir the temple is employed

² For a brief survey of views on the dating of this literature see James Davilla, Descenders of the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 12–21.
as a symbol of the highest of the ten sefirot—the ten aspects of God central to Kabbalistic theology—which the Bahir as well as subsequent Kabbalists describe as infinite. Furthermore, as the Bahir makes clear, insofar as this highest sefirotah is infinite, it is beyond human experience. It is this ostensibly surprising use of the temple to symbolize God’s infinitude and the impossibility of experiencing Him that I wish to explore in this study. As will become clear, this symbolic association did not have staying power in Kabbalah. In Kabbalistic texts the temple is employed as a symbol of various lower sefirot—especially, the third, the sixth, and the tenth—which are, relatively speaking, limited and subject to human experience. Yet something of the Bahir’s conception nevertheless remains. While various gradations of the divine may be experienced via these sefirot, the experience is not a direct one. Even in these Kabbalistic texts, then, the temple is employed as a symbol for a God who may only be experienced in a partial and restricted manner.

Before turning to examine the passages in the Bahir that refer to the temple, let me by way of introduction offer a few brief general remarks about the text itself, which will prove important in my subsequent discussion. The Bahir is a pseudepigraphic work, composed in the guise of a Midrash, whose speakers include some of the heroes of Rabbinic literature as well as invented Rabbinic figures. It was first cited in the first half of the thirteenth century by R. Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona and R. Azriel of Gerona, both of whom were members of the circle of the southern French Kabbalist, R. Isaac the Blind—the first group of Kabbalists to leave extensive writings. Its precise origins, however, are murky. The current scholarly consensus is that it is a composite work, with many textual layers, which underwent a late redaction at about the same time that it was first cited.4

4 The precise time of this late redaction, however, is subject to scholarly dispute. Gershom Scholem contended that this late editing job was carried out in southern France in the middle of the twelfth century. For his fullest presentation of this view see his Origins of the Kabbalah, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1987; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1990), 39–198. Marc Verman, however, has contended that it was carried out in Catalonia in the first half of the thirteenth century. See his The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 165–169, and his “The Evolution of the Circle of Contemplation,” Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After, eds. Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 163–177, esp. 167–173. I would also note that Daniel Abrams has shown that the work continued to be in flux even after this period. See his introduction to his edition of Sefer ha-Bahir (Los Angeles: Cherub Press,