I. Introduction: Beginnings, Centers, and Schools of Thought

A wide variety of religious positions, and occasionally even opposing viewpoints, are reflected within the extensive kabbalistic literature now in our possession. Consequently, we can infer that the “Kabbalah” had diverse starting points. Scholars have tended to award special importance to its phenomenological beginning and consequently they avidly sought evidence which would confirm the first appearance of the symbolic system, convinced as they were that this system expressed for the Kabbalists the hidden meaning of the Jewish tradition. I refer to their efforts to disclose the earliest kabbalistic documents, those that could clearly attest to the existence of the theosophical system. Study of these documents confirmed for them that the Kabbalah first appeared in the second half of the twelfth century in Provence, the locale that, according to these scholars, the first historical personalities known to be Kabbalists, as well as the first book considered to be kabbalistic, Sefer ha-Bahir, were detected.1 According to the accepted academic description, some of these kabbalistic ideas spread to the cities of Gerona and Barcelona, both in Catalonia, and from there continued to disseminate reaching Castile where, in the second half of the thirteenth century, they underwent dramatic development. Before us lies the scholarly assumption which proposed that the Kabbalah developed in a linear trajectory. The question of the dissemination of kabbalistic literature beyond the borders of the Iberian Peninsula did

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not especially preoccupy these scholars. The paths of transmission of kabbalistic traditions from one center to another were, for them, only secondary concerns subsumed within the larger historical picture of the development of the Kabbalah.

Nevertheless, from the middle of the thirteenth century there is solid testimony of the existence of kabbalistic traditions, sometimes of meaningful proportions, to be found in five additional geographical centers: North Africa, Franco-Germany, Italy, Sicily, the Byzantine Empire, and the Land of Israel. We are not speaking merely about the transmission of ideas but about beginnings that enjoyed continuity, about the establishment of centers of study which proved to be historically significant since they continued to produce kabbalistic works well after the disappearance of the Spanish center. In other words, already by the second half of the thirteenth century a linear description of the transmission of the Kabbalah proves irrelevant for fostering a deep understanding of the development of the Kabbalah. In my opinion, even prior to this historical period this type of description poses an essential difficulty. The important variations that existed between kabbalistic traditions found in Provence and those found in Catalonia to my mind give proof of the existence of different antecedent sources. Assuming the existence of different esoteric trends

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