
Ellen Haskell’s *Mystical Resistance* studies the seminal thirteenth-century work of Jewish Mysticism, the *Zohar* (‘Book of Brilliance’) in light of the Jewish-Christian relations of the time in Southern France and the Spain, with particular attention to the polemical passages in the work. Haskell demonstrates that the authors of the *Zohar* use coded language to satirize key figures and undermine central dogmas of Christian dogma. She frames her study using James Scott’s theory of the “hidden transcript,” reading the *Zohar* as “a dissident subculture’s efforts to engage in self-expression beyond majority surveillance” (3). According to Haskell, the *Zohar* was a “hidden space” in which the authors criticized the Christian majority’s treatment of Jews and the core tenets of the state religion.

In the first chapter, “Contesting the Kingdom of Heaven: Rachel as Counterpart to Christ” (15-38), Haskell demonstrates how the *Zohar* depicts Rachel as a para-Christ figure whose death heralds the coming of the Shekhinah, the female presence of God who brings about the Jewish people’s redemption from exile. While Christian polemicists of the time read Jewish texts primarily the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud as proof of Christian supremacy, the authors of the *Zohar* invert this strategy, reading Christian texts and subverting Christian symbols as proof of Judaism’s supremacy.

In Chapter two, “Cleaving to the Other Side: Conversion to Christianity” (39-65). Haskell demonstrates how the *Zohar* resists Christian missionizing by identifying Christian figures and religious practice with the *Aher*, or *Sita Ahra* (the ‘Other’ or the ‘Other Side’), terms used in Zoharic discourse for the dark side of existence. In veiled language, the *Zohar* and other Jewish texts of the age describe Christians, and especially Jewish converts to Christianity (who were among the most aggressive proselytes) in these terms in order to delegitimize and vilify them. The authors identify the Christian *Aher* with historical oppressors and enemies of Jews, such as the Romans of antiquity and with Edom of the Hebrew Bible.

In the third chapter, “A Moses for the Idolaters: Balaam as Christ” (66-84), Haskell continues to show us how the *Zohar* subverts Christian dogma by satirizing key figures in Christian theology. Here the Biblical prophet Balaam (who appears in both Jewish and Christian exegetical tradition) is identified with well-known Jewish traditions of Jesus as a corrupt magician, rendering him a sort of anti-Moses who brings not the true law of God, but a corrupt doctrine of sorcery and demon worship.

Chapter four, “The Ascension of Balaam: Subverting Christian Sacred Stories” (85-106), centers on an episode in the *Zohar* in which Balaam (identified with Jesus) flies to and attempts to enter heaven, is killed in an aerial battle with the Jewish warrior Tzelyah, and returns to earth where his body is not buried. This narrative strikes at heart of Christian thought: the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. In the *Zohar*, the Balaam/Jesus is a powerful sorcerer whose power is no match for that of the true God and his champion Tzelyah. In version, the signs of Christ’s divinity are rendered mundane, and often, ridiculous. Again, Haskell demonstrates how the *Zohar* takes an idea common to both traditions and uses it to delegitimize Christianity.

The final and fifth chapter, “In the Palace of Images: Responding to Christian Art” (107-142) relates how the authors of the *Zohar* ‘read’ works of Christian art in public spaces and reframed the narratives they represented in order “to bolster Jewish faith and undermine...
Christian claims" (107). Haskell demonstrates how the Zohar countered Christian art’s “important public transcript of domination” (129) by reasserting Jewish readings and privately (and in writing) refuting Christian claims made publicly in art, “painting pictures with words as vivid as the painted sculptures that adorned the great cathedrals among which they lived” (145).

Haskell’s argument is original and timely, appearing two years ahead of Eitan Fishbane’s *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (2018), which also looks at the aesthetics of the Zohar in the context of the dominant Christian culture of the times. She brings abundant, compelling insights in her arguments, which are lucid and very well organized. In particular, the final chapter on public Christian art is a very welcome companion to other studies by art historians on interreligious relations in Church art such as Vivian Mann’s *Uneasy Communion* (2010), Pamela Patton’s *Art of Estrangement* (2012), and Cynthia Robinson’s *Imagining the Passion* (2013), and points the way for future research on how cultural practice not only reflects, but negotiates religious difference.

Speaking as a scholar who often relies on a healthy dose of supposition in my own work, there are moments where Haskell presses the evidence a bit too hard. For example, Haskell hangs part of her argument on the supposition that the Castilian authors of the Zohar reacted to a sculptural representation of the Church toppling the Synagogue in far-away Saint Gilles, France (110). While this is certainly plausible, it would be more convincing to limit this kind of very specific argument to works in Castile or perhaps Aragon.

This is my sole criticism, and a minor one in any event. Overall, Haskell’s book goes a long way toward situating the (very difficult and enigmatic) Zohar in the dominant Christian culture of the Iberian Peninsula. Her arguments are original and convincing, her prose lucid and readable, and she brings together innovative readings of sources brought together for the first time in the scholarly record. *Mystical Resistance* —a great title, by the way— will be very useful for scholars interested in religion, medieval art, interreligious relations, history, as well as general readers with an interest in Jewish mysticism (of which there quite a few, I am told).

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Works Cited


