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The Foolishness of the Wise and the Wisdom of Fools in Spanish Kabbalah

An Inquiry into the Taxonomy of the Wise Fool

I. Introduction¹

The *talmid hakham*, the student whose wisdom was learned from a sage and found expression through his knowledge of the Written and the Oral Torah, was the ideal persona of rabbinic Judaism.² The title *rabbi* or *rav*—meaning “my master” or “master”—signified the institutional status of the *talmid hakham* and signified his role as the authority who possessed and transmitted the wisdom that God revealed to Israel through the prophets.³ This wisdom was primarily identified with the Written Torah but found its fullest elaboration in the Oral Torah.⁴ Some rabbis not only preserved and transmitted traditions regarding the observance of the commandments (*halakhah*) and other exoteric matters but were involved in the revelation, preservation, and transmission of secret knowledge regarding areas of legal, cosmological, and theological concern, as suggested in M. Hagigah 2:1. This *mishnah* contains injunctions that either limit or prohibit the transmission of certain types of knowledge derived through דרישה (investigation) and that prohibit most cosmogonic, cosmological, and eschatological speculation.⁵

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers whose suggestions and insights helped me to sharpen my argument. I would also like to thank the copy editor, Allyson Gonzalez, for her help in clarifying and shortening the paper. Finally, I am grateful to the Editor, Zion Zohar, for his patience, support, and guidance over the time that I labored on this project. Of course, I take responsibility for all errors that remain.

² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd Ed, s.v. “Talmid Hakham,” where the special relationship between the student and the sage as well as the personal piety of the student are also noted as important qualities of the *talmid hakham*.

³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Rabbi, Rabbinate.”

⁴ For a recent study of this association, see Peter Schäfer, “Wisdom Finds a Home: Torah as Wisdom,” in *Light in a Spotless Mirror: Reflections on Wisdom Traditions in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Michael A. Daise (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 26–44.

⁵ While scholarship has focused much attention on M. Hagigah 2:1 and the talmudic discussion of this collection of rulings regarding the study of esoterica, it is significant that the mishnaic teaching that precedes this passage (1:8) delineates areas of halakhic concern that are identified as “the bodies of the Torah,” which appear to represent the exoteric core of the rabbinic curriculum. This juxtaposition is not lost

In the middle ages, the mishnaic injunctions regarding esoteric interpretations were viewed as evidence that the Oral Torah included esoteric matters; and wisdom, in its identification with Torah, was understood to have exoteric and esoteric dimensions.⁶ As evidenced most clearly in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*,⁷ these injunctions opened the door to modes of speculation and interpretation that augmented the normative interest in the *Talmud* and *halakhah* on one hand, and *midrash* and *'aggadah* on the other, by exploring the esoteric dimensions of wisdom. Philosophy and certain trends generally considered to be representative of Jewish mysticism and often identified by both medieval authors and contemporary scholars as "Kabbalah" were among these innovative modes of speculation and interpretation. The emergence of new methods and principles of speculation and interpretation brought with it the development of new conceptions of the path to the acquisition of wisdom and also new definitions of the *talmid hakham*, often shortened to *hakham* (sage) in these sources. During the thirteenth century these developments sparked controversy regarding the nature of wisdom, the nature of the sage, and the means by which one could become a sage among the Jews of Northern France, Provence, and Catalonia.

While the examination of the relationship between Kabbalah and other hermeneutic approaches to Torah in the context of the Maimonidean controversy⁸ lies beyond the scope of this inquiry, this controversy does constitute the historical backdrop against which the Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia formulated their views regarding wisdom, the persona of the sage, and the process of becoming a sage. Although Maimonides' writings served as a catalyst for the controversy, the second wave of the controversy in the 1230's was less over Maimonides' writings than over hermeneutics more generally,⁹ with advocates of different hermeneutic approaches to interpreting Torah and rabbinic literature claiming the mantle of "tradition"

on some who are interested in the secrets of the Torah. See, for example, *Zohar* 3:152a, and also in text at n. 59.

⁶ This conception of wisdom is much older. See the article cited in n. 4.

⁷ See the introduction to the first part, Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 6–9.

⁸ On this relationship, see, among others, Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 31–82.

⁹ On the competing hermeneutic approaches in the controversy of the 1230's, see Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah*, Harvard Judaic Monographs, 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 76–95.

(*kabbalah*)¹⁰ and true faith for their own methods and doctrines. While the Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia do not generally address the historical particulars of this controversy directly, their discourse is frequently marked by a polemical intention that is evident in their comparisons between competing pathways to sagacity and their descriptions of different possible outcomes of treading these pathways. An important feature of this discourse is that folly and the persona of the fool are ever present as counterparts to wisdom and the persona of the sage. This is not surprising, since “folly” and “the fool” are opposites to “wisdom” and “the sage,” and both biblical wisdom literature and *Sefer Yetsirah*, which inform Kabbalistic discourse, rarely mention wisdom or the sage without reference to folly or the fool. Surprising, however, is the different ways in which these concepts converge in early Kabbalistic literature.

The writings of two Kabbalists from Gerona, Ezra ben Solomon (d. 1238/1245) and his younger contemporary, Azriel of Gerona (d. 1238), both disciples of Isaac the Blind of Provence (d. 1235), are of particular interest in this context. These two Kabbalists offered their readers a particularly clear formulation regarding the path that one who wishes to become a sage ought to follow. They also delineated the obstacles that one might encounter along this path and the possible outcomes of success and failure in the pursuit of wisdom. Whether they wrote their works to spread Kabbalistic teaching by introducing non-initiates to the Kabbalistic path or to help those already initiated along the path, both played a role in the dissemination of Kabbalah in Spain¹¹ and their writings are also broadly representative of the teachings of Isaac the Blind and his other disciples.

Ezra and Azriel reflect on the convergence of wisdom and folly in the personae of the sage and the fool in the context of a discussion of the relationship between mystical praxis and the observance of commandments, particularly prayer and the study of Torah. One goal of this mystical praxis is to master wisdom, i.e., to become a sage. The convergence of wisdom and folly in the person who engages in this praxis produces various species of the genus “wise fool,” and the outcome of the various ways in which wisdom and folly may converge in the persona of

¹⁰ On the polemical use of the term *kabbalah* in the Maimonidean controversy, see Hames, *The Art of Conversion*, 32–34.

¹¹ On this point, see Gershom Scholem, “Te‘udah Hadashah LeToldot Reshit HaKabbalah,” in *Mehkerei Kabbalah (I)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998), 7–34 and Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership,” in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, ed. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998), 15–96.

the sage and the fool constitute the subject of the present inquiry. This is an inquiry into the taxonomy of the “wise fool” inasmuch as it seeks to identify various “species” of the “genus” wise fool that are delineated by Ezra and Azriel, but it is phenomenological inasmuch as the taxonomic inquiry rests on a phenomenological description of wisdom and mystical union as they are presented in the writings of Ezra and Azriel, and where it is helpful, other Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia. Wisdom constitutes the object sought by the would-be sage and mastered by the sage, and mystical union constitutes the transformative process that produces a sage and allows a sage to take the place of the rabbinic *talmid hakham* as the one who receives, preserves, and transmits wisdom. Although the mastery of wisdom defines the sage, it will be shown that, according to Ezra and Azriel, wisdom is inseparable from folly, and the sage is inseparable from the fool. Consequently, the Kabbalistic sage constitutes one species of the genus “wise fool.” But, what is a “wise fool,” and what does it mean to claim that a wise man is, in some fashion, a fool?

From the standpoint of logic, the wise man and the fool, like wisdom and folly, are binary opposites. However, the opposition between wisdom and folly may be disrupted when wisdom and folly coincide as qualities attributed to a single persona¹² or individual. The paradoxical coincidence of wisdom and folly in the personality of the individual, whether this coincidence is attributed to the objective nature of the individual, the subjective perception of the individual, or some combination of objective and subjective factors,¹³ gives rise to the variety of personalities that fall under the genus most often identified as the “wise fool.”¹⁴ Reflecting on this paradoxical term, Walter Kaiser notes,

the idea of the wisdom (*sapientia*) of the fool always stands in contrast to the knowledge (*scientia*) of the learned or the “wisdom” of the worldly (*sapientia mundana*). In this

¹² I use “persona” to signify a class of individuals.

¹³ See an application of these possibilities in the discussion following n. 79.

¹⁴ For a general taxonomy of the species of fools, including “wise fools” along with a discussion of the difficulties of classifying fools, see Vicki K. Janik, “Introduction,” in *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Vicki K. Janik (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 1–22. A brief history of the idea of the wise fool, which is attentive to the paradoxical relationship between wisdom and folly in Western sources can be found in Walter Kaiser, “Wisdom of the Fool,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, exec. ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner, 1973–74), 4:515–20, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhiana.cgi?id=dv4-70>.

respect, the oxymoron, “wise fool,” is inherently reversible; for whenever it is acknowledged that the fool is wise, it is also suggested, expressly or tacitly, that the wise are foolish.¹⁵

Taxonomically, the reversibility of the oxymoron “wise fool,” taken as a genus that includes a variety of species, results from the convergence of two taxonomic families, “the wise” and “the fool,” in a single genus. Consequently, not every wise fool is a fool. Some wise fools are sages, although they are foolish sages. The assessment of various species of the “wise fool” must answer three questions: (1) which family predominates in a particular species of “wise fool?” (2) what is the nature of wisdom and folly? And (3) what is the relationship between wisdom and folly as characteristics of a given species of wise fool? It is also important to take into account the social and historical setting for the application of the taxonomic label “wise fool.” Kaiser’s description indicates that the label “wise fool” often rests as much on the opposition between different conceptions of wisdom (in this case, the “knowledge of the learned” and the “‘wisdom’ of the worldly”) as it does on the difference between wisdom as *knowing* and folly as *not knowing*. This is particularly relevant to the Kabbalists’ interest in the interplay between wisdom and folly in the personality of the sage as part of a polemical thrust that is intended to demonstrate that the Kabbalistic sage is the rightful heir to the mantle of the *talmid hakham*. The Kabbalistic sage appears to be a fool to those who are not privy to the Kabbalist’s understanding of wisdom. However, this appearance is not merely a matter of a subjective judgment by those who lack wisdom; it has a basis in the Kabbalistic understanding of the nature of wisdom itself.

II. Wisdom

Wisdom is a rich category in Kabbalistic literature that has many characteristics. Among these, wisdom is characterized as: (1) an hypostatized entity that constitutes the second highest of the ten entities¹⁶ identified as *sefirot*, which emanate from *‘ein sof* (the infinite) and constitute the divine attributes; (2) a body of knowledge transmitted from master to disciple, writer to reader, or even from God to human; (3) an object of mystical union; and (4) a quality of the

¹⁵. Kaiser, “Wisdom of the Fool,” 4:517.

¹⁶. This entity is usually identified by the Hebrew word for wisdom, *Hokhmah*. Hereafter, I will use this name when referring to the *sefirah* wisdom. The term *sefirot* may be translated as “enumerations.” See, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 71–72.

human soul that has its source in the second of the ten *sefirot*, *Hokhmah*. The writings of Azriel of Gerona, among others, offers an account of wisdom that includes these characteristics and also exposes the dual nature of wisdom as at once hidden and revealed, unknown and known.

Azriel begins his commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* with a reflection on the pivotal position of *Hokhmah* in the emanative procession of being that begins in the infinite (*'ein sof*) and culminates in the creation of the finite, material world, which is infused with the spiritual power of the ten *sefirot*. Commenting on the opening words of *Sefer Yetsirah*: “בשלשים ושתים נתיבות (פליאות חכמה) (through thirty-two wondrous pathways of wisdom),” Azriel writes:

Through [the letter] *bet*¹⁷ it [i.e., *Sefer Yetsirah*] alludes to *'ein sof*. For within the power of *'ein sof* is the existence of the Highest Height [the first *sefirah*, *Keter*] from which comes the emanation of *Hokhmah*, and from *Hokhmah*, the thirty-two wondrous pathways. Because they [i.e., the thirty-two wondrous pathways] extend to *Hokhmah* from the Highest Height, from *'ein sof*, they are called “hidden” (פליאות), from the language (Deuteronomy 17:8) “כי יפלא” [if a case is too baffling], which is translated [by Onkelos] as “ארי יתכסי” [for it is hidden]. However, because there is a distinction between each pathway they are also called “פלאות,” which is from the language (Numbers 6:2) “כי יפליא” [explicitly utters a vow], which is from the language of separation (הפרשה). Each and every pathway then extends from *Hokhmah* until each and every pathway arrives to be revealed (להראות) within *Binah* [the third *sefirah*, Understanding].

Two distinct yet inseparable structures come forth from the first *sefirah*, here named Highest Height: the *sefirah Hokhmah* and the thirty-two wondrous pathways of Wisdom, which are comprised of the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Azriel points out that the Hebrew root “פלא,” used in *Sefer Yetsirah* to describe the pathways of Wisdom, designates two different states: concealment and differentiation. Azriel teaches that, in their extension from Highest Height into *Hokhmah*, the thirty-two pathways of Wisdom are concealed in undifferentiated unity, but within *Hokhmah* they achieve differentiation so that they are revealed as distinct entities within the third *sefirah Binah*. Thus, *Hokhmah* is like a prism that

¹⁷ The recension of *Sefer Yetsirah* used by Azriel and his contemporaries in Provence and Catalonia opens with the Hebrew letter “*bet*,” which has the numerical value of two. Thus, Azriel suggests that there is a duality to the nature of *'ein sof*, the all-encompassing infinite.

refracts that which is concealed and allows for its revelation. As such it constitutes a liminal point in which concealment and revelation, undifferentiated unity and differentiation, coincide, and this is not the only duality associated with *Hokhmah*.

Just as *'ein sof* has a dual nature as container and content, so too *Hokhmah* has a dual nature as container and content. *Hokhmah*, in its hypostatized state contains and refracts the pathways of Wisdom, which constitute the emanative flow that passes from *'ein sof* through the ten *sefirot*, so that the pathways of Wisdom are contained within the *Hokhmah*. Just as the pathways of wisdom are concealed in undifferentiated unity within *Hokhmah* and revealed by *Hokhmah* through a process of differentiation—though the full realization of their revelation only occurs within *Binah*—*Hokhmah* itself is concealed in its hypostatic position as the second *sefirah*, but revealed in *Binah* as one of the thirty-two differentiated pathways of Wisdom. By positing that the pathways of *Hokhmah* are revealed in *Binah*, Azriel points to the relationship between wisdom as an ontic structure and as a body of knowledge that can be apprehended by divine understanding, but, by extension, can also be apprehended by human thought and understanding. Significantly, Azriel often uses thought as a synonym for *hokhmah*. In line with this dual revelation of *Hokhmah* within *Binah* and within human thought and understanding, *Hokhmah* is not only the liminal point in which the concealed is revealed in the “downward” flow of divine energy, it is also the liminal point in which the revealed is concealed in the “upward” surge of human contemplation.

From the standpoint of mystical experience, *Hokhmah* constitutes the nexus in which the concealment and revelation of human knowledge of the divine being and His will, i.e., the first *sefirah*, *Keter*, converge in a paradoxical unity of knowing and unknowing. *Hokhmah* is simultaneously a site for the esoteric occultation of knowledge of God and the source from which exoteric knowledge of God flows; so, in so much as opposites are contained in undifferentiated unity as well as in differentiated form within *Hokhmah*, knowing is unknowing; unknowing knowing. It is only within *Binah* that the difference between the known and the unknown, knowing and unknowing, the exoteric and the esoteric is sufficient to be discernible. Therefore, the exoteric and the esoteric lie together on a continuum comprised of the emanative flux of the thirty-two wondrous pathways of Wisdom and, within *Hokhmah*, become one. Moreover, *Hokhmah*, as one pathway of itself, is nested within itself in a paradoxical recursiveness of self-concealment and self-revelation. According to Azriel's explanation of *Sefer*

Yetsirah 1:1 and 1:3, access to exoteric knowledge allows the Kabbalistic sage or would be sage to acquire varying degrees of access to esoteric knowledge. Thus, in a passage that reflects a commonly held view among the Kabbalists of Provence and Catalonia, Azriel of Gerona instructs his reader that he “must contemplate (להתבונן) the hidden by means of the revealed.”¹⁸

This instruction comes at the end of Azriel’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:3, which, together with his explanation of *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:1 provides the reader with most of the doctrinal and practical guidance necessary to engage in this form of contemplation. Azriel’s final instruction to his reader implies that just as divine wisdom, i.e., *Hokhmah*, constitutes the liminal point in which hidden wisdom and revealed wisdom coincide; so too, human wisdom is constituted through a corresponding coincidence of the hidden and the revealed in human consciousness. A brief summary and analysis of Azriel’s comments will help clarify this correspondence.

Returning to Azriel’s explanation of *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:1, Azriel describes the emergence of *Binah* from *Hokhmah*, and adds that “the entire structure [of the lower seven *sefirot*], which is called *da’at* (knowledge) comes forth from the potency of *Binah*.”¹⁹ Azriel begins his explanation of *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:3 with a summary in which he notes that “the all” (הכל) is in *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, and *da’at* “in a thing/word (דבר) that is visible to the eye, which is why [*Sefer Yetsirah*] said ‘the number of ten fingers.’”²⁰ “The all” is both a designation for the thirty-two pathways of Wisdom and the ninth *sefirah* Foundation, which has strong phallic associations, the importance of which shall become clear in a moment. Azriel quotes Deuteronomy 4:35, “you have been shown to know...,”²¹ in support of the visibility of *da’at* in contrast to the invisibility of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, and he quotes Job 19:26, “...from my flesh I shall see God”²² to connect

¹⁸ Azriel of Gerona, “Perush LeSefer Yetsira,” in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Chaim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 2:454; Isaac the Blind, “Perush Sefer Yetsirah,” in *ha-Kabbalah be-Provence*, ed. Rivka Schatz, by Gershom Scholem (Jerusalem, 1970), appendix, 6, ll. 126–27; Daniel Abrams, *R. Asher Ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in His Kabbalistic Thought*, Sources and Studies in the Literature of Jewish Mysticism, vol. 2. (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 80.

¹⁹ Azriel of Gerona, “Perush LeSefer Yetsira,” 2:453.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Following the literal alternative in NJPS, which supports Azriel’s point about the visibility of Knowledge in a word/thing.

²² This is a more literal translation than NJPS, and reflects Azriel’s reading of this verse. On the importance of this verse in the history of the Jewish reception of the Delphic Oracle’s command to Socrates to “know thyself,” see Alexander Altmann, “The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism,” in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969).

this idea to what follows, which involves the body as the visible starting point of contemplative activity that leads to knowledge of God. The ten fingers and toes constitute two visible manifestations of the ten *sefirot*, which come forth from *Binah*.²³ Azriel offers the following explanation of the conclusion of *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:3, which states, “the special covenant set in the middle, like the circumcision of the tongue and the circumcision of the phallus:”

“The special covenant.” The tongue is the pattern of ten and it is the balance between the ten fingers of the hands. Included in it are the twenty-two letters and it has within it the power of ten fingers. This is why [*Sefer Yetsirah*] said, “the covenant is set in the tongue.” This is why [*Sefer Yetsirah*] said, “like the circumcision of the tongue and like the circumcision of the phallus.” For [the phallus] has the sign of the holy covenant in it, balances between the ten fingers of the feet, and gives birth to progeny that is formed by the twenty-two letters.²⁴ Therefore you must contemplate the hidden by means of the revealed.²⁵

The beginning of divine wisdom is concealed in the undifferentiated infinitude of *'ein sof*, and in *Hokhmah* it undergoes differentiation. It is then revealed in *Binah*, but only becomes visible in *da'at*. From there it passes into the human body. In another work, entitled *The Gate of the Questioner*, Azriel reflects the fourth characteristic of wisdom listed above by adding the human soul to this path. He associates the fourth through sixth *sefirot* with the “world of the soul” and the seventh through tenth *sefirot* with “the world of the body,” and asserts that “the power of the human soul extends from [the *sefirot*] and from their power.” He then associates the upper five *sefirot* with the five parts of the human soul and the lower five *sefirot* with five parts of the human body. Significantly, he associates *Hokhmah* with the “vital soul,” which resonates with Ecclesiastes 7:12, “wisdom preserves the life of the one who possesses it,” which Azriel quotes

²³. Azriel’s comments on *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:2 are partially aimed at reconciling the various numbers that are associated with the thirty-two pathways of wisdom and reducing everything to tens. The details of this argument are not important for this analysis.

²⁴. This reinforces the presence of God’s word within the human person, and also suggests a relationship between the human body and the Torah as the divine body, an idea that will recur in the passage that will be analyzed in the third section of this paper.

²⁵. Azriel of Gerona, “Perush LeSefer Yetsira,” 2:453–54.

elsewhere in a discussion of mystical union.²⁶ He also associates “the all” with the penis,²⁷ making the organ that bears the physical mark of the covenant, circumcision, a prime site for contemplative activity that leads to the revelation of wisdom in human thought and understanding. This ontological extension of wisdom into the human soul and body provides the phenomenological foundation for the human apprehension of and, ultimately, mystical union with, divine wisdom. The locus for this union, as demonstrated by Elliot Wolfson, is the imagination, represented by the heart.²⁸

The beginning of human wisdom lies in the recognition that visible things/words contain and conceal hidden and even invisible things/words. Just as divine wisdom goes through stages, moving from undifferentiated unity to the differentiation of spiritual entities that enter into physical entities, human knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, designated as “thought” by Azriel, allow for the revelation of the divine wisdom that is concealed within the body and the soul and, in some cases, even allow an individual to achieve a mystical attachment or union, which extends into the undifferentiated unity of the thirty-two pathways of Wisdom as it exists within *Hokhmah*, and ultimately, Highest Height and *'ein sof*. In this union, human thought/wisdom, like divine wisdom acts as a prism that refracts and reveals that which is hidden, though, like divine wisdom, it must also conceal that which is revealed. The person who is capable of participating in this process of revelation and concealment is the sage.

So, how does folly enter into this understanding of wisdom? An answer to this question can be found by examining other passages in which Azriel addresses the way in which “the power of the human soul extends from [the *sefirot*] and from their power.” In *The Gate of the Questioner* and in his *Commentary on Talmudic 'Aggadot*, Azriel’s treatment of this issue begins with divine qualities and moves to the manifestation of those qualities in human persons. In the former work, Azriel asks what the quiddity of the *sefirot* is. He answers,

²⁶. *Perush Ha'Aggadot LeRabbi 'Azriel*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 20.

²⁷. Azriel of Gerona, “Sha‘ar haSho‘el,” in *Derekh ha'Emunah*, Meir ibn Gabbai (Jerusalem, 1966–67), 5–6.

²⁸. Wolfson, *Speculum*, 270–306 The importance of the heart for the persona of the wise fool will be addressed in the next section.

The quiddity of the *sefirah*²⁹ is *equivalent* (שוה) *to every thing* (דבר) *and to every exchange* (תמורה). For, if they [i.e., the *sefirot*] did not possess an undifferentiated potency³⁰ (כוח שוה) there would be no potency in anything, just as that which is light is not-dark and that which is dark is not-light. Therefore their quiddity is comparable to the Will of the Soul (רצון הנפש), which is equivalent to all of the desires and to all of the thoughts that extend from it. Even though they are many their source is but one in a thing and in their exchanges (בדבר ובתמורות). So too, the Life of the Soul (חיי הנפש), the intellect, the favor, the lovingkindness, and the mercy; even though they are something from nothing (יש מאין) their somethingness (ישות) is not absolute.³¹

The salient point for this inquiry is that binary opposites are not absolute in their opposition since the multiplicity of things come from a single source, in which they converge in a coincidence of opposites. Azriel's formulation reflects a weakness in the law of the excluded middle by suggesting that light and dark converge through their negations, which constitute a third truth value: if dark=not-light and light=not-dark then light=dark inasmuch as not-light=not-dark. The simultaneous negation of both light and dark constitutes a third state that Azriel describes as "an undifferentiated potency" from which all things acquire their power.

A passage from Azriel's *Commentary on Talmudic 'Aggadot* builds on the latter part of the previous text, which delineates various positive qualities of the soul, and explains how these qualities and their opposites extend from the sefirotic realm to human persons. The different possible bundles of these qualities account for the variety of human personalities.

²⁹. Note that this description is a general statement that applies to each and every *sefirah*.

³⁰. Azriel's use of כוח (lit. power), reflects the Neoplatonic term *dunamis*, which means power but connotes potency or potentiality.

³¹. Azriel of Gerona, "Sha'ar HaSho'el," 5 It is likely that this argument is based on Isaac the Blind's explanation of the seven geminates (consonants that have a hard and soft sound) delineated in *Sefer Yetzirah*. Isaac hints that this explanation may apply to the *sefirot* as well as the letters. See, Isaac the Blind, "Perush Sefer Yetzirah," appendix, 15, ll. 324–29, and Mark Brian Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's Commentary on Sefer Yezirah (Volumes I and II)* (Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I., 1994), 2:148–49. Sendor translates:

Geminates: that each one plus another one are included in their principles. **Soft:** there is softness for good and there is softness which is for evil. **And hard:** there is hardness for good and hardness for evil. So with each and every attribute: there is good that is for evil, and there is evil that is for good. Therefore it is said **geminates which are exchanges**, for the principle itself which is good is exchanged in itself to effect evil, like the wicked, who invert the attribute of mercy to cruelty, and the righteous invert the attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy.

All of the qualities (מדות) are hidden within the Life of the Soul (*Hokhmah*), and they descend in the path of the Spirit of Life (בנתיבת רוח החיים, i.e., *Hokhmah*) in the measure (מדה) that is required by each and every thing. The quality of sleep, the quality of prophecy, and the quality of folly (שטות) are each implanted in the Spirit of Life³² and are mixed within it, as it says (Is. 29:10), “The spirit of torpor,” and (Is. 11:2) “the spirit of knowledge,” and all the remaining qualities that are in a thing and its opposite (שהן בדבר (והפכו).³³

The quality of ignorance is associated with a state of deep sleep that is associated—through the quotation of Isaiah 29:10—with the inability to engage in prophecy or comprehend prior prophetic revelation. Thus, folly is associated with ignorance and is set in opposition to knowledge. Consequently, the potential for folly is included within the pathways of wisdom through its binary opposition with knowledge. The continuation of this passage describes the way in which these qualities actually enter the descendants of the first man.

All of the qualities (מדות) are set within the sons of man (בבני אדם),³⁴ they are emanated (נאצלות) from the supernal qualities (מדות), and they are like the fruit that withers on the tree before it is fully ripe.³⁵

In his “Letter to Burgos,”³⁶ Azriel asserts that the first man, prior to the fall, was not subject to the exchange of binary opposites, instead he was subject to relative diminutions of positive qualities. Azriel writes, “even though there was no death, there was sleep instead of death, the diminution of peace instead of war, the diminution of wisdom instead of folly, the diminution of beauty instead of ugliness, and the diminution of governance instead of servitude.”³⁷ Only after

³² This is another name for *Hokhmah*. All of the associations between Wisdom and life are founded on the exegesis of Ecclesiastes. 7:12, “Wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it.” See, for example, *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 20, 25, 86.

³³ *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 75–76.

³⁴ Although this is generally an idiomatic expression simply meaning a human being, its use by Azriel in this context strikes me as intentional and charged with meaning. Azriel does not identify these qualities with “the man” or with Adam, the first human, who is not, after all among “the children of a human,” having been created by God, alone. Consequently, I have translated it more or less literally.

³⁵ *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 76.

³⁶ Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalot R. Ya‘akov VeR. Yitzhak HaKohen,” *Madda’e HaYehaduth* 2 (1927): 132–41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

the fall and again after making the golden calf did Israel live life “in the ways of the exchange from peace to war, from wisdom to foolishness, from wealth to poverty, from fertility to destruction, from beauty to ugliness, from governance to servitude, and from life to death.”³⁸ Adam and his descendants are not alike, but, in different degrees, foolishness stands together with wisdom as a possible quality of the human personality, and the descendant of Adam who has the potential to become a sage also has the potential to become a fool.

Isaac the Blind, on whose teaching Azriel relies, puts a fine point on the relationship between wisdom and folly in his explanation of the association between the geminates and various qualities of the human personality that occurs in *Sefer Yetsirah* 4:1 Isaac teaches:

Folly (אולת) is foolish ignorance (סכלות) in the sense that סכל (ignoramus) with a *samekh* is the exchange of שכל (intelligence [with a *sin*]). For from the excess with which the man gazes at that which a man cannot grasp, he is one who returns[!] to foolish ignorance (שב לסכלות). So, too, wisdom itself, for one who delves deeply in it beyond his grasp, that wisdom itself becomes folly (אולת) for him.³⁹

The person who is capable of gazing at *Hokhmah*, if he is not careful, may become a fool by attempting to know that which cannot be known, so that his knowledge is transformed into ignorance. Strikingly, wisdom itself, under the gaze of a human who is presumably either wise or wishes to become wise, may become folly for that person. The nature of the exchange is such that the sage who gazes at wisdom in the wrong way “returns to foolish ignorance,” meaning that prior to gazing at wisdom he was deemed an ignorant fool, and even while gazing at wisdom he can return to that state. In these exchanges, the sage and wisdom always retain the potential to become the fool and folly and vice versa, because, in Isaac’s language, “each [geminat] plus another one [i.e., its opposite] are included in their principles.” In one version of Azriel’s language, “The quiddity of the *sefirah* is equivalent to every thing and to every exchange.” Although Isaac’s language and Azriel’s elaboration on it suggests that at any given moment a man is either a sage or a fool, the logic of the singular principle that finds expression in opposite states that are subject to exchange makes possible the paradoxical coincidence of wisdom and

³⁸. Ibid., 236.

³⁹. Isaac the Blind, “Perush Sefer Yetsirah,” appendix, 17, ll. 362–64. My translation draws on Sendor, *Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, 2:172.

folly as qualities of the sage or the fool that produce the species of the “wise fool.” In moving toward a taxonomy of the “wise fool” the next step is to consider the process by means of which a person may become a sage or a fool.

III. Towards a Taxonomy of the Wise Fool

A. Mystical Experience: Becoming Wise, Becoming a Fool

Ezra and Azriel agree that not every person can master wisdom, though failure takes a number of forms, and success comes in varying degrees. This view is reflected in the inclusion of a talmudic dictum attributed to R. Yohanan in both Kabbalists’ commentaries on talmudic *’aggadot*. According to this dictum (B. Berakhot 55a), “The Holy One, blessed is He, only gives wisdom to one who has wisdom within him, as it is said (Daniel 2:21), ‘He gives wisdom to the wise’.”⁴⁰ In their comments on this passage Ezra and Azriel each associate the containment of wisdom within the person with the heart, **לב**, which has the numerical value of thirty-two. The basis for this association may be one of the earliest Kabbalistic texts, *Sefer haBahir*, in which the question is asked: “what is heart?” The answer is: “This is the thirty-two wondrous pathways of wisdom within it.”⁴¹ Ezra’s explanation of the talmudic dictum⁴² begins with a quotation from *Sefer haBahir* that Ezra perhaps introduces in order to identify the thirty-two pathways of wisdom with upper and lower *sefirot*.⁴³ Ezra then emphasizes the importance of understanding the meaning of “heart,” which he then associates with the need to possess wisdom in order to execute justice. It is possible that this is an underdetermined reference to the idea expressed by Azriel that supernal qualities are manifest in the human personality. Ezra offers no account of the acquisition of wisdom, however. In contrast, though Azriel also reflects on the association

⁴⁰ NJPS: “He gives the wise their wisdom.” My more literal translation better reflects the talmudic dictum, which plays on the sense that the wise are wise even before God gives them their wisdom.

⁴¹ Daniel Abrams, *Sefer HaBahir: Al Pi Kitvei Ha-Yad Ha-Kedumim* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), 159, paragraph 67. The last word **בו** (within it), suggests that “heart” is a quality added to the human heart. To “lack heart” would therefore only mean to lack the thirty-two wondrous pathways within the heart, not literally to be without a heart. On the association between heart and intellect and heart and imagination in medieval usage, see Wolfson, *Speculum*, 170–72, 178–80.

⁴² Ezra ben Solomon, “Likutei Shikhehah UFeah,” in *Sefer Likutei Shikhehah UFeah*, prepared by Abraham ben Judah Almalikh (Jerusalem, 1978), 6a-6b.

⁴³ In *sefer habahir* [it says] , “Rabbi Hammah says, ‘glory and heart are numerically one (they each equal 32), except that the glory is called [thus] on account of the action above, whereas the heart [is called thus] on account of the action below. That is the Glory of God and the heart of the heavens.” See, Abrams, *Sefer HaBahir*, par. 91 and *Sefer HaBahir*, ed. Reuven Margaliot, par. 134.

between the heart and wisdom, he contextualizes this reflection within a systematic discussion of the process of becoming wise, which reflects the specific content of the talmudic dictum. Azriel comments:

One who has in himself the nature to become wise, even though he is not-wise, anytime that he desires to become wise, [we/God] give/s wisdom to him⁴⁴ and he distinguishes its pathways. Anyone who does not have in himself this potential (כח) from the root of his creation to become wise does not have knowledge of wisdom (אינו למד חכמה) because [wisdom] is comparable to a light upon which the flame is not dependent. For [the one who becomes wise] is like the wick that is soaked in oil that is warm so that the light is kindled by it since [the oil] is of the same kind as [the light]. Wisdom is compared to the light that is only kindled by the warmth of the wick but not by a wick that has fallen in water. So too, folly is only distinguishable to someone who has in himself the nature of foolishness, like (Proverbs 14:24), “the folly of fools is folly.” Explanation: The nature of the folly that is hidden in him is revealed and this is his folly that goes forth from the potential to the actual. This is what is written (Prov. 14:14), “a backslider in the heart (סוג לב)⁴⁵ reaps the fruit of his ways; a good man, of his deeds.” The verse hints that both the good [person] and the bad [person] draw from the way of nature that is upon them [and] that is hidden within them. Thus, it is written [of Betsalel and Oholiav, who built the tabernacle] (Exodus 35:35), “filled them with the wisdom [of the heart] (חכמת לב)....” ...every [instance of the] word “heart” that is in Scripture [indicates] that wisdom is given in the heart and has in it thirty-two pathways.⁴⁶

Azriel interprets the talmudic dictum by describing three types of people: the person who becomes a sage, the person who has no knowledge of wisdom and the person who becomes a fool. The person who becomes a sage conforms to the model in the talmudic dictum, although Azriel treats the pre-existent wisdom of the person who receives wisdom as an innate potential to

⁴⁴. The phrase נותנין לו חכמה is missing a subject. The plural form could indicate the community of Kabbalists or, paralleling the talmudic dictum, God.

⁴⁵. For this translation, see Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, in collaboration with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), s.v. סוג. Cf. NJPS, “an unprincipled man.”

become wise. Thus, the first sentence “one who has in himself the nature to become wise, even though he is not-wise” is the referent of “this potential” in the description of the person who does not have knowledge of wisdom. This formulation, emphasizing that the person is “not-wise,” even though he wants to be wise, indicates that the innate potential to become wise is part of an exchange with an opposite state, which turns out to be foolishness. The actualization of wisdom can occur when the person is given wisdom. However, the person who is given wisdom must be able to “distinguish its pathways,” which suggests that he must be able to engage in the contemplative activity described in Azriel’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah* in such a way that he distinguishes the pathways of wisdom, yet heeds Isaac the Blind’s warning not to try to apprehend that which cannot be known, which could render him an ignorant fool.

In a text that will be the subject of the next section of this inquiry, Azriel indicates that the way to avoid this folly is to achieve a form of mystical union identified as “the adhesion of thought.” In “the adhesion of thought” (המחשבה הדבקה), human thought is the vehicle for the ascent that accompanies the contemplation of the hidden by means of the revealed, and human thought becomes one with divine thought,⁴⁷ the *sefirah Hokhmah*. The “adhesion of thought” is an epistemic form of union in which the knowing mind achieves identity with the object of its knowledge.⁴⁸ Ezra and Azriel quote Ecclesiastes 7:12, “wisdom preserves the life of him who

⁴⁶. Emphasis added. *Perush Ha'Aggadot*, 29.

⁴⁷. This union is described in *Perush Ha'Aggadot*, 16, 20, and reflects the Neoplatonic idea of the *restitutio omnium rerum ad integrum* (the return of the entire thing to its wholeness). See Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zvi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (JPS, 1987), 299–300.

⁴⁸. In general terms, this reflects Aristotle’s definition of knowledge. The precise nature of the identity between the knower and the known is difficult to discern from the statements of Ezra and Azriel regarding the relationship between wisdom and human thought, and there may be some disagreement between them. See *Perush Ha'Aggadot*, 20, in which Azriel declares that *devekut* is a state that is achieved when a person “causes his thought to adhere to wisdom such that she and he are one thing.” Note that Ezra adds כְּאִילוֹ (as if) before “she and he.” The phrase “such that she and he are one thing” is taken from Maimonides’ *Commentary on the Mishnah* on *Sanhedrin* 10:1. There has also been disagreement among scholars regarding the interpretation of this passage. See Isaiah Tishby, “Fear, Love, and *Devekut* in the Teaching of the Zohar (Hebrew),” *Molad* 19, no. 151–152 (January–February 1961): 51. Also published in Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat Ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1971), 288–89, and published in English in Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), III:982. Cf. Scholem, *Origins*, 303, n. 206, who vociferously rejects Tishby’s position. Also Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 42–43 and 46–47, and, most recently, Joel R. Goldberg, “Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation in Provençal and Catalan Kabbalah” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, New York, 2001), 570–73. Tishby was the first to note the epistemic nature of the union described in this passage, and all subsequent scholarship is in agreement on this point.

possesses it,” in connection with one description of this form of *devekut*,⁴⁹ suggesting that the person who achieves this union becomes a sage insomuch as he “possesses” or “masters” *Hokhmah*, which, in turn, sustains his life.

A statement in Azriel’s “Letter to Burgos” will help to understand the relationship between the person who becomes a sage and the second type of person described in Azriel’s explanation of R. Yohanan’s dictum, namely the person who lacks knowledge of wisdom, and, implicitly, is incapable of becoming a sage even if he desires to become a sage. In the “Letter,” Azriel refers to various *sefirot* by different forms of the Hebrew root אמן, which are associated with the qualities of faith, nursing, instruction, and craftsmanship.⁵⁰ In this passage, Azriel extends the term “nurse,” which signifies *Hokhmah*, to the sage.

Just as He is called “faithfulness” (אֱמִינָה) when he changes the conduct [of the natural order], He is called “nurse” (אִמָּה) when he sustains the conduct [of the natural order], as it is said (Numbers 11:12), “as a nurse carries an infant,” for the nurse sustains the baby. Anyone who sustains the Torah is called “nurse.” *Scripture was not given to Israel, but to the wise man who is called “nurse,”* as it is written (Deuteronomy 17:8), “[i]f a case is too baffling for you to decide....” The explanation of “if a case is too baffling” is according to its translation [by Onkelos], “if it is hidden.” That is, when a thing/word is hidden from you so that you do not know how to clarify whether it is from the way of the nurse, or the way of the faithful (אֱמִינָה), or the way of confidence (אֱמִינָה), do not turn from the way of the nurse who does not argue with his friend, who is called faithful (אֱמִינָה), as it is written, (2 Samuel 20:19), “[I am one of those who seek] the welfare of the faithful in Israel.” Even if they say to you concerning the left that it is right and concerning the right that it is left, do not turn away.⁵¹

This passage suggests that the relationship between the first two *sefirot*, identified as “faithfulness,” i.e., *Keter* and “nurse,” i.e., *Hokhmah*, serves as a model for the relationship

⁴⁹ *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 16 and 20.

⁵⁰ On the possible sefirotic associations of these terms, see K. E. Grözinger, “The Divine Powers of Amen and Their Variations in the Thought of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* VI, no. 3–4 (1987): 299–308.

between the sages and the remainder of Israel. The sage is the one who receives and preserves wisdom in the form of the Torah, and he is also the one who is capable of distinguishing the pathways of wisdom by identifying whether a particular word in the Torah is from the way of the faithful, the nurse, or confidence. Thus, the words of Torah can replace the body as the starting point for the contemplation of wisdom. The passage is addressed to the Israelite who is not a sage and instructs him to turn to the sages when he is unable to interpret a word or passage of the Torah. Just as the nurse/*Hokhmah* sustains the conduct of the natural order in the way that it is set by faithfulness/*Keter*, the nurse/sage distinguishes the pathways of wisdom and reveals the hidden meaning to the Israelites, who are instructed to follow the nurse/sage, who upholds the action of faithfulness. Using the same authority that the rabbis of late antiquity used to justify their authority, namely, Deuteronomy 17:11, the second half of which states, “you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left,” Azriel sets the Kabbalistic sage in the place of the rabbinic *talmid hakham* as the one who is able to reveal the esoteric meanings of the Torah and who has the exclusive authority to do so.

Of course, the directive not to turn away from “the way of the nurse” also takes on a dual sense, since “the nurse” represents both divine wisdom and the human sage. Thus, some among Israel, in turning to the sage who transmits divine wisdom, may discover that they are able to distinguish the pathways of wisdom without the aid of a human sage, while others, who lack the appropriate root in the sefirotic realm and therefore lack knowledge of wisdom, will still be in need of the human sage in order to have a share in wisdom. Individuals who fall into this latter group can read the words of the Torah, but they cannot discern the sefirotic references in the text. Obviously, individuals in this second class of person are not sages, but Azriel gives no indication that they are fools either. Azriel’s description of the fool, which is the third class of person that he describes, helps to clarify the status of the second type of person.

The third type of person actualizes his potential to become a “fool,” meaning that he must have the capacity to distinguish folly, which, as noted above, is found among the pathways of wisdom as the opposite of knowledge and the exchange of wisdom. To distinguish folly means to actualize the potential for folly, but the potential for folly is, in fact, identical to and one with the

⁵¹ The last sentence paraphrases Sifri to Deuteronomy, Shoftim, 11, where it is formulated as glosses interpolated into Deuteronomy 17:11. Azriel’s “Letter to Burgos” is published in Scholem, “Kabbalah,” 236.

potential for wisdom, since *Hokhmah*, as a *sefirah*, must be “equivalent to every thing and its exchange.” According to Azriel, *Hokhmah* is manifest in human beings in the form of the degraded qualities that emanate from the supernal qualities, and these qualities also manifest things and their exchanges or opposites. In Azriel’s explanation of R. Yohanan’s dictum, these qualities are represented by “לב, “heart,” which, through its numerical value of thirty-two represents the thirty-two pathways of Wisdom. Azriel’s discussion of the emanation of the qualities suggests that every person possesses every thing and its exchange that emanates from *Hokhmah*; however, by associating the potential to become a sage with “the root of his creation,” Azriel points to a different conception of human ability, which he explains in a number of passages in his *Commentary on Talmudic ‘Aggadot*; namely, different souls are rooted or stored in different levels within the sefirotic realm prior to their entry into bodies, corresponding to the innate qualities of those souls. In other words, as Azriel suggests in his discussion of R. Yohanan’s dictum, not all souls, and not all people, share the same set of capabilities.⁵² Indeed, in this passage, Azriel explicitly argues that the person with the potential to become a sage possesses “heart,” and he implies that such a person also has the potential to become a fool.

The determination that someone possesses or lacks “heart” is made in two ways. Ontologically, it is made in terms of the origin of an individual’s soul within the sefirotic realm, as indicated by Azriel’s reference to “the root of his creation” in the description of the person who lacks knowledge of wisdom.⁵³ Exegetically, it is made in terms of the inclusion of “heart” in biblical descriptions of different types of people, as indicated in the final sentence of the quotation, in which Azriel writes that “every [instance] of the word “heart” in Scripture [indicates] that wisdom is given in the heart and wisdom contains thirty-two pathways.” Although Azriel formulates this principle in relation to the positive value, wisdom, his juxtaposition of verses that describe the sage as “wise of heart” and the fool as a “backslider in the heart” indicates that the fool, like the wise man, has “heart,” and that it is the possession of

⁵² See, for example, *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 98. Referring to the midrashic idea (Bereshit Rabbah 1:4) that Israel was present in God’s thought before anything else, Azriel writes, “all of these were stored in thought, and when they arose in thought, the light that was suitable for their qualities was made and stored. Some of them above the Torah, some of them in the Torah, some of them in the throne of glory, some of them below, some of them in the Temple, the place in which each one was stored corresponded to the quality that would be in it, for all of the souls were created and in a time that is suitable for them, they will be placed in a body that is suitable for them.”

⁵³ On the root and name of the soul, see *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 98, 105.

“heart” that constitutes both the innate potential to become wise and the innate potential to become a fool. The heart, that is the thirty-two pathways of wisdom, contains folly as the opposite of knowledge, as discussed above, and constitutes the “undifferentiated potency” that can be turned to goodness and wisdom or wickedness and folly, rendering the person who has heart either a sage or a fool and leaving the person who has no knowledge of wisdom in a different state of ignorance. The ignorance of the wicked fool is derived from his attempt to distinguish the pathways of wisdom, in which, for him, wisdom is distinguished, through its exchange, as folly. Importantly, Azriel does not detail the conditions under which a person with “heart” might, in fact, distinguish folly, whereas he indicates that such a person can become a sage when he desires to do so and is given wisdom. Whether this gift of wisdom takes the form of revelation or transmission from master to disciple or both need not detain us here. A more important point in this context is that the medium of “heart” opens the way to the possibility that the sage could be a fool and the fool a sage, and that wisdom and folly may somehow reside together in the personality of the person with “heart.” This forms the foundation for the taxonomy of the “wise fool” as it relates to those who desire to become sages.

Returning to the second type of person, who lacks “heart,” it is now evident that such a person can be neither a sage nor a fool in the same sense that the person who has heart can be a sage or a fool; but, as Azriel’s explanation of the relationship between the “nurse” and the “faithful” and the sage and other Israelites suggests, this person can participate in wisdom and folly through his relationship to the sage. Faithful adherence to the teaching of the sage, more specifically, the Kabbalistic sage, constitutes a lower form of wisdom, and turning away from the teaching of the Kabbalistic sage constitutes a lower form of folly. We shall see that Ezra of Gerona identifies the former stance as faith and the latter as heresy.

It should now be clear that, for Azriel of Gerona, wisdom and folly interact with one another on two different levels in two distinct types of personalities. It is also evident that wisdom and folly coincide inasmuch as wisdom contains folly, but can also become folly. Moreover, wisdom is the point in which knowing and unknowing coincide, and, at least in Isaac the blind’s definition, wisdom is knowing, while folly is ignorance, one variation of which is unknowing. Now it is possible to begin to consider the conditions under which wisdom and folly coincide in various species of the “wise fool.”

B. Pneumatic Interpretation and the Nature of the Torah

In the remainder of this inquiry, I shall examine a passage that appears in somewhat different forms in the commentaries of Ezra and Azriel of Gerona and not only demonstrates that the person who distinguishes the pathways of wisdom may be classified as a species of “wise fool,” but demonstrates that Ezra and Azriel, in interpreting Isaac the Blind’s definition of foolishness in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah*, set forth a taxonomic account of the possible outcomes of the process of distinguishing the pathways of wisdom, to use Azriel’s phrase. It is worth noting at the outset, that the taxonomy that emerges not only delineates four species of the “wise fool,” but these species can be understood as reflecting different hermeneutical approaches that were part of the Maimonidean controversy, yet the delineation of these species does not reflect the historical particulars of the controversy, rather it reflects the rabbinic model of the story of the four who entered *Pardes*. In this case, *Pardes* is the study of Torah as prophetic revelation, and as in that story, one person goes insane, one person dies, one person becomes a heretic, and one person succeeds. In Ezra and Azriel’s reworking of that story, each of these persons corresponds to a different species of “wise fool.”

The text in question takes an aggadic text in the second chapter of B. Ta’anit as its starting point. As quoted in Ezra’s and Azriel’s commentaries, this text addresses the act of covering a Torah scroll⁵⁴ with ashes as a sign that God feels the distress of His people. In Ezra’s version, this passage appears as a collection of loosely related talmudic *‘aggadot* and other traditions. This collection of traditions appears to hint at some deeper meaning, but Ezra does not tip his hand as to his true intention. However, this collection is followed by a discourse on Kabbalistic hermeneutics that guides the reader on the path that one must follow in order to properly interpret the Torah in its exoteric and esoteric dimensions. Azriel copied this passage from Ezra’s commentary and, with the addition of significant commentary and aggadic material, and some subtractions and substitutions, turns it into a more coherent “essay”⁵⁵ on Kabbalistic hermeneutics. I will call the hermeneutic path that is described in this passage “pneumatic

⁵⁴. Standard editions of the Babylonian Talmud read “תיבה,” ark, not “ספר תורה,” Torah scroll. See B. Ta’anit 16a.

⁵⁵. The passage lacks a formal introduction and a conclusion, but it is a protracted discussion that develops themes with a logical progression. For convenience, I will refer to it as the “essay” in this discussion.

interpretation,”⁵⁶ since the interpreter must enter into the state of mystical union identified as “the adhesion of thought,” discussed previously, in order to acquire the wisdom that is necessary to understand the wisdom that is revealed in the Torah. The use of “pneumatic” can be justified philologically by the fact that, in other contexts, Ezra and Azriel identify *Hokhmah* with the Spirit (רוח);⁵⁷ and *Hokhmah* is the object of the union that is identified as “the adhesion of thought.” Thus, the proper interpretation of the Torah is arrived at by means of the spirit or *pneuma*. Be that as it may, Azriel’s revision of Ezra’s work identifies the wise man as the pneumatic interpreter of Torah whose life is also sustained by the Torah. This idea derives from material included by Ezra, but Ezra never offers any hint that he has such a reading of this material in mind.

In both versions, this “essay” can be divided into four parts. The first part uses aggadic material to establish a wide range of principles regarding the nature of the Torah. The second part warns about the limits of human thought and the dangers of attempting to exceed those limits. The third part describes the path followed by the prophets but constructs this path with reference to the way in which the “early pietists” engaged in prayer, described in *Berakhot* 30b and 32b, and the revelatory experience enjoyed by ben Azzai as he engaged in an act of midrashic interpretation, described in *Shir haShirim Rabbah* 1:10. Only in the conclusion of this part does it describe the practice of biblical prophets directly. The fourth and final part returns to the themes of the opening part but opens with a description of the prophet’s religious experience and then only implies that the way to acquire a full understanding of Torah in its exoteric and esoteric meanings involves following the same path that was followed by the prophets.

The first taxonomically interesting feature of this passage is found in the material added to the first part by Azriel that describes the relationship between “the wise men” and the Torah. The passage takes up themes introduced in the *’aggadah* from *Ta’anit* 16a:

⁵⁶ I have adapted this term from Idel, *New Perspectives*, 234–39. The themes dealt with in this section are developed in great detail in the scholarship of Elliot R. Wolfson. For example, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: *Peshaṭ* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed. M. Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 155–203 and Wolfson, *Speculum*.

⁵⁷ For examples, see *Perush Ha’Aggadat*, 133, the index to sefirotic names.

Reish Lakish said (Isaiah 63:9), “He was troubled,” He was troubled for His name, which is called “book” (i.e., Torah scroll). While placing ashes on it [i.e., the Torah scroll]⁵⁸ the bodies of the wise men trembled on account of the fear of “the bodies of Torah,”⁵⁹ which is called “name,” for they [i.e., the bodies of Torah] restore life (נפש) to the body. Since the Torah is the restorer of life to the body, the bodies of the wise men trembled.

In the lines preceding this, Azriel equates the Torah with God’s name and God’s name with God’s essence. The bodies of the wise men tremble in fear of the bodies of the Torah, which are God’s body manifest in the written form of the commandments in the Torah scroll. On one hand, this seems to allude to Psalm 111:10, “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord;” on the other hand, the trembling symbolizes a mystical union between the wise men and Torah, which restores life to the body. This reflects Ezra’s and Azriel’s reading of Ecclesiastes 7:12, “wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it.” After establishing the status of the wise men as those whose wisdom derives from their fear of God and His commandments, and as men whose life is sustained by Torah, i.e., God, Azriel goes on to discuss matters that relate to the structure of the Written Torah as a physical object.⁶⁰ For Azriel, and for the Talmudic passages he cites, every word of the Torah has a purpose and is of equal value. The exoteric presentation of the Torah is of one piece with the esoteric meaning of the Torah, and the wise men are those who have mastery over the exoteric and esoteric understanding of the Torah, and who recognize that the written structure of the text, accessible to all, is a seal and hint that contains and points to a hidden secret. To change one letter or point in the text would not only change the revealed

⁵⁸. The Talmud reads “ark” instead of “Torah scroll.”

⁵⁹. M. Hagigah 1:8.

⁶⁰. Azriel writes: “Since the Torah is called “name” and she is the one who restores life, she contains sections, chapters, and divisions. For there are opened and closed sections, the pattern of a complete structure. Just as man has connections of the hand, foot, and parts, and just as there are limbs upon which the soul (נשמה) depends, and there are limbs upon which the soul does not depend even though there is no addition and no subtraction in the creation of the body; so too, there are sections in the Torah and verses that appear as though they should be burned to those who do not know the reasons for their explanations(!); but, to one who apprehends, knowing their explanation, it appears that they are bodies of the Torah, so that one who removes even one letter or one point from them is as though he removed the entire body.” In this line, Azriel indicates that “the bodies of the Torah” are not merely topics in Jewish law that correspond to groups of commandments, as in the Mishnah, but that they are literally the structure of the Text as written on the parchment that constitutes the Torah scroll.” Azriel immediately continues the passage with, “There is no difference between the generals of Esau and the ten commandments, for the whole is one thing and one structure.”

meaning, but the concealed meaning as well.⁶¹ Just as wisdom contains the hidden and the differentiated pathways together as one, the Torah contains the hidden secret and the revealed text together as one.⁶² Azriel's explanation of the trembling of those who are wise indicates that the level of mastery ascribed to the wise men rests on more than mere human intellectual ability. It rests on the ability to achieve *devekut*, or mystical union, with the bodies of Torah, which is equivalent to *devekut* with God's name and God's being, since the bodies of Torah=God's name=God's being.

This description of the sages establishes the abilities and benefits that accompany being a sage, namely, access to the secrets of the Torah. This access not only defines the class of sages but offers incentive to the reader to achieve this goal.

C. The Limits of Thought: Between Wisdom and Folly

As Ezra and Azriel turn their attention from the nature of Torah and its secrets to the path that one must follow to acquire those secrets and join the sages, they also caution their readers regarding the inherent risk of contemplating wisdom. The impact of Isaac the Blind's interpretation of "foolishness" is evident here. Azriel prefaces the second part of this "essay"

⁶¹ Azriel writes: "Go and learn that the one who reads the Torah recites (Genesis 36:12), 'Timna was a concubine,' and after this concludes the reading and blesses the Torah, saying, 'who gave us the Torah of truth.' Concerning this it is said (Psalm 19:8), 'God's Torah is perfect.'" Cf. B. Sanhedrin 99a. This talmudic passage cites Genesis 36:12 in the context of a discussion of the mishnaic statement (M. Sanhedrin 10:1) that "he who says that the Torah is not given by Heaven" is among those who "have no share in the world to come." The Talmud presents Menassesh ben Hiskia engaging in an offensive form of aggadic activity in which he suggests that verses such as Genesis 36:12 are not worthy of having been written by Moses. The talmud then offers the following explanation of this verse: "But what means in reality the verse 'Lotan's sister was Timna?' Timna was a princess, as it reads [Gen. xxxvi. 40]: 'Duke Timna,' and a dukedom is a kingdom without a crown; and she desired to become a proselyte, but Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not accept her. And she went and became the concubine of Eliphaz b. Esau, saying it is better to be a servant in this nation than to be a princess of another. And the offspring from her was Amalek, who troubled Israel as a punishment to their parents, who ought not to have driven her out." *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Michael L. T Rodkinson (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 1918), Accessed August 23, 2007, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/t08/t0814.htm>. The point being that this seemingly unimportant verse has an important lesson to teach regarding the reason that Amalek became the archetypal foe of the Israelites. Azriel adds: "Therefore the wise men are experts in the exclusions and additions, that which is written but not read, read but not written, the closed and the open sections, the large and small letters, for there is nothing in the Torah that is unnecessary, nothing missing, nothing added, nothing foreign. The whole [Torah] is given to be examined (להדרש) and it has an explanation, but they each have a hidden and sealed hint and secret." See, *Perush Ha'Aggadot*, 37–38.

⁶² On the idea that *peshat*, the plain meaning, and the *sod*, the secret meaning, are one, see Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes."

with a prescription that suggests that prophecy can be achieved through prayer, and he reflects on the difference between the infinitude of the divine word that is revealed to the prophet and the finitude of the human mind. With Ezra,⁶³ Azriel cautions that human “thought extends and rises to the place from which it came forth, and when it arrives there it stops and is *unable* to ascend further.” The two Kabbalists then describe what will happen if a person ignores this warning. The following is the version preserved in Ezra’s commentary:

All who wish (Azriel: dare) to think about a matter to which thought is unable to extend itself or to ascend cannot escape from two things: (1) to confuse his mind and ruin his body or (2) due to the great exertion of thought to attach itself to that which it is unable to apprehend, his soul will ascend and be torn away [from his body] and return to its root.⁶⁴

Solomon mentioned these two things in his wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:16), “do not be overly wise, for you may be stupefied.” For “תשומם” is from the language of ruin. The structure of the body will be ruined (יהרס).

And it says (Ecclesiastes 7:17), “do not overdo wickedness and do not be a fool for you may die before your time.” Concerning this it said,⁶⁵ “do not probe that which is hidden from you, do not investigate that which is concealed from you.” This is the first *sefirah*, called Supernal Crown.⁶⁶

The continuation of this text describes the path followed by the person who recognizes the limitations of human thought. Ezra and Azriel describe success in the following terms:⁶⁷

The early pietists would cause their thought to ascend to the place of its coming forth and they would recite the commandments and the things/words, and from the recitation and the adhesion of thought,⁶⁸ the things/words would be blessed and enhanced, and be received from the negation of thought, like a man who opens a pool of water and it

⁶³. *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 39. Ezra does not introduce the issue of infinitude, he merely instructs his reader, “you need to know that thought...”

⁶⁴. The version preserved in the MS of Azriel’s commentary reverses the order of the two consequences and places the statement beginning “all who wish...” and “due to the great exertion...” before both consequences. This eliminates the distinction between the two consequences.

⁶⁵. B. Hagigah 13a, quoting Ben Sira.

⁶⁶. Ezra ben Solomon, “Likutei Shikhehah UFeah,” 7b. The final line is excluded from Azriel’s version.

⁶⁷. This follows Azriel’s text. Ezra includes interesting details, but the point remains the same.

spreads here and there, for the adhesion of thought is the source, the blessing, and the spring that shall not stop.”⁶⁹

The early pietists know that by attaching their thought to its source and reciting words of Torah, that which is beyond intellectual apprehension will be received by thought from “the negation of thought.” To understand the implications of this process it is necessary to identify the “place of its coming forth” and “the negation of thought.”

Ezra’s reference to *Keter* as that which should not be investigated suggests that *keter* is “the negation of thought.” However, Azriel omits this identification and the earlier analysis of Azriel’s understanding of *Hokhmah* suggests that “the negation of thought” certainly includes *Keter*, but it extends into *Hokhmah* as well. Recall that *Hokhmah* is only apprehensible as an object of thought in its extension to and revelation in *Binah*. As the liminal point in which concealment and revelation coincide, *Hokhmah* is both “the negation of thought” and “the place of its [i.e., thought’s] coming forth.” Note that “the adhesion of thought” is described as “the source, the blessing, and the spring that shall not stop.” *Hokhmah* only becomes available as an object for mystical union when the adhesion of thought is achieved. *Binah* must mediate this process, since *Hokhmah* and its pathways only achieve full differentiation in *Binah*.

When contemplation of the revealed words of the Torah or prayer leads to the apprehension of hidden things the achievement of “the adhesion of thought” makes it possible for thought to apprehend that which it otherwise could not apprehend, namely, *Hokhmah* in its concealment and in its differentiation. In “the adhesion of thought” human thought itself participates in the prismatic function of divine Thought or *Hokhmah*, by “enhancing,” and “receiving” the things/words that come “from the negation of thought.” This is prophecy.

But how is “the adhesion of thought” possible if human thought cannot apprehend the hidden dimensions of *Hokhmah*? The answer to this question is found, most succinctly, in a passage of Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* that describes the union between *Binah* and *Hokhmah*, in which Isaac notes:

⁶⁸. Leaving out ביותר in accordance with Ezra’s version.

⁶⁹. *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 40.

No created being is able to contemplate except the one who suckles from it. For the way of contemplation (התבוננות) is the way of suckling (יניקתו) and not the way of knowing (ידיעה).⁷⁰

“The way of knowing” is intellectual apprehension. “The way of suckling” suggests a more intuitive and direct means of receiving that which becomes knowledge once it undergoes differentiation. This distinction reverberates throughout the writings of Ezra and Azriel, as well as Isaac’s other disciples.⁷¹ To acquire wisdom, the person who prays or studies Torah must allow thought to rise to its source, but he must not allow it to go beyond its source. He must leave off discursive processes of intellectual apprehension, which involve differentiation, and engage in the intuitive activity of suckling. Suckling involves receiving the infinitude of *Hokhmah* without trying to differentiate that which is beyond differentiation. To attempt to differentiate that which cannot be differentiated is foolish in so much as it involves the attempt to know that which cannot be known and leads to ignorance rather than knowledge. To distinguish folly means to attempt to separate the unknowable from the knowable in the encounter with wisdom, by attempting to apprehend the unknowable, rather than receive it. Wisdom and prophecy are ultimately divine gifts, and the achievement of “the adhesion of thought” requires that the sage surrender to the influx of the divine word, rather than try to wrest it from God.

The damage caused by attempting to apprehend the infinite within the confines of finite human thought are best described by another disciple of Isaac the Blind, Asher ben David, who offers the following explanation of the need for God to reveal himself through the finitude of the ten *sefirot*, which are also called “measures” (מדות):

Therefore they are called “measures,” for that which is bounded is unable to endure a thing that is not bounded. For also, when [a person] sees an object that is unusual, he will be afraid and tremble, and his soul will come close to death and his heart will race, and his limbs will come apart, and his light will be darkened.⁷²

This explains the less extreme of the two consequences of trying to think about that which thought cannot apprehend. The more extreme attempt yields a more extreme result.

⁷⁰ Isaac the Blind, “Perush Sefer Yetsirah,” Appendix, 1, ll. 15–16.

⁷¹ See Goldberg, “Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation,” 570, 578, 656–63.

⁷² Abrams, *Asher Ben David*, 66.

IV. Classifying Successes and Failures: A Taxonomy of the Wise Fool

A. Failures

Ezra and Azriel describe two species of wise fool who fail to acquire wisdom: the “foolish wise man” and the “wicked wise fool.” The “foolish wise man” sins and suffers; the “wicked wise fool” is a sinner and dies. The interplay between wisdom and folly in these two species of “wise fool” is signified by the way in which they approach the apprehension of divine thought, the consequence for their action, the outcome of their action, and the moral judgment applied by the prooftexts used to support the relationship between their action and its consequences.

A quotation from *ben Sira* renders the principle that thought is only able to ascend to its source as a commandment. The other texts are parts of a proverb found in Ecclesiastes 7:

^[15]In my own brief span of life, I have seen both these things: sometimes a righteous man perishes in spite of his righteousness, and sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness. ^[16][So, do not overdo righteousness,]⁷³ do not be overly wise, for you may be stupefied. ^[17]Do not overdo wickedness and do not be a fool for you may die before your time.

These verses counsel moderation in light of the injustice that may accompany reward and punishment.

The warning against being “overly wise” in verse 16 augments the description of the righteous man in verse 15 and the beginning of verse 16 by associating righteousness with wisdom. The person who wishes or dares to think about matters that thought cannot apprehend, but does not engage in too great an effort, is identified as both righteous and wise. His folly lies in thinking about the hidden pathways of Wisdom. Why he does this is unclear, but the verse implies that his error is an innocent though costly one. Although the person who makes this error is not explicitly labeled a fool, the fact that he suffers mental and physical debilitation give expression to the wise man’s folly by giving him qualities that would make him seem like a fool

⁷³. This phrase is not quoted by Ezra or Azriel.

to himself and others.⁷⁴ The physical affliction provides an outward expression of the inner, mental, disorder, and it also serves as a form of punishment for failing to heed the commandment in ben Sira, i.e., “do not probe that which is hidden from you.” I would label this species of wise fool as “the foolish wise man.” The suffering of this type corresponds to the suffering of Ben Azzai, who was “afflicted” (נפגע) in the story of the four who entered *pardes*.

By contrast, the person who forces himself to think too hard about the hidden pathways of Wisdom is not only identified as the “wicked” person who overdoes wickedness, but he is explicitly identified as a fool for his excessive wickedness. In light of the moral judgment applied to this person, it seems that his folly lies in the intentional nature of his action. The statement that he engages in “great exertion of thought” suggests that this person is aware of the limitation of human thought and ben Sira’s injunction, but he insists on thinking about that which he knows cannot be apprehended by human thought. In this case, however, the fool is also a wicked person, a sinner, due to his insistence on doing wrong; his sin is punished by death. It is significant that in his death, the soul of such a person returns to the very source that he sought to transcend. The fact that the soul of this person does not simply cease to exist is probably a sign of the wisdom of this fool, who is, after all, capable of raising his thought to its source, even though he insisted on pushing his thought beyond its source.⁷⁵ The species of wise fool that is manifest in such a person is that of “the wicked wise fool.” The complexity of this type is captured in its correspondence to ben Zoma, whose death is described by the Talmud, through a proof-text (Psalms 116:15), as the death of the righteous. Either the apparent correspondence between the talmudic model and the Kabbalistic use of the model is imperfect, or a relationship of exchange between righteousness and wickedness is implicit in the difference between the proof-text used by Ezra and Azriel and the proof-text used by the Talmud. The fact that the soul seems to enjoy the fate of the righteous in death supports the possibility that the wickedness of

⁷⁴ On mental and physical conditions associated with fools, see *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Vicki K. Janik (Westport [Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998], 1, 7–8.

⁷⁵ Precedents do exist for the idea that the soul is destroyed along with the body in death. For example, Maimonides defined the biblical punishment of *karet*, being cut off, in a manner that implies that the soul of the sinner deserving of this punishment ceases to exist along with the body (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah*, 8:1.) and there is no reason to doubt that Ezra and Azriel were familiar with Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, in which this view is expressed.

the wicked wise fool is only relative as compared to the wickedness of the heretic, although neither Ezra nor Azriel explicitly addresses the fate of the heretic in their versions of the “essay.”

B. Success

Just as there are two models for failure, there are two models for success: the pneumatic interpreter and the prophet. The pneumatic interpreter is represented by the early pietists, and by Simeon ben Azzai, the early 2nd century tanna; the prophet is represented by the biblical prophets.

“The adhesion of thought” and the resulting revelation of hidden things that is attributed to the early pietists and ben Azzai is described as comparable to “the extension of prophecy.” Thus, the prophet and the pneumatic interpreter are closely related types. The difference between them lies in their relationship to revelation. The biblical prophets are the original recipients of God’s word, whereas the pneumatic interpreter engages a text that is already revealed, and his revelation consists of new insights into the secrets concealed within the revealed text.⁷⁶ Azriel describes the prophets in the following terms:⁷⁷

The prophet would sequester himself, direct his heart, and attach his thought above. In accordance with the adhesion of prophecy the prophet would see and know that which was to come. The prophets would be divided according to their level, knowledge, and adhesion. They would recite the words as if⁷⁸ they had received them from above and as if they were caught on the word; like fish that are caught on a hook. You already know how it was with Balaam, the one who hated Israel and wanted to curse [Israel] but was only able to say words of the holy spirit, which were planted in his mouth and his tongue.... So too, the prophets of Israel said (Jeremiah 20:9), “I said, ‘I will not mention Him, No more will I speak in His name’—But [His word] was like a raging fire in my

⁷⁶ On this theme, see Daniel C. Matt, “‘New-Ancient Words:’ The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” in *Gershom Scholem’s “Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism” 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1993), 181–207.

⁷⁷ Ezra’s version includes some expansions, but they are not significant for the purposes of this inquiry.

⁷⁸ The use of “as if” in this statement is worthy of further analysis. See Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes.”

heart, Shut up in my bones; [I could not hold it in, I was helpless].” Therefore there is nothing missing or added to all of their words and all are said of necessity.⁷⁹

The prophets succeed in making the transition from discursive knowing to the adhesion associated with suckling, meaning that they become wise, as is signified by the fact that “they would recite the words as if they had received them from above.” One might think that the prophet is the wise man *par excellence* and escapes all possible association with folly and fools. Remarkably, this is not the case. The prophet is not a fool in the sense that he turns wisdom or knowledge to ignorance. The prophet takes on the qualities of a fool in two other ways. First, although the prophet directs the process by means of which he achieves prophecy by sequestering himself; directing his heart, which likely refers to contemplation of the thirty-two pathways of Wisdom; and attaching his thought above; the content of the prophecy itself is entirely out of the prophet’s control. The appearance of being a fool that accompanies this fact of the prophetic vocation is amply exemplified by Balaam. Not wholly satisfied with an example of a non-Israelite prophet to make the point, Ezra and Azriel turn to the words of an Israelite prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah 20:9 gives poignant expression to the prophet’s lack of control over the words of his prophecy. I presume, however, that Ezra and Azriel were also aware that the feeling of helplessness expressed by the prophet at the end of the verse points back to the preceding two verses, which make clear that just as the prophet does not control his words, he does not control the way in which people respond to him or his message. In these verses, Jeremiah complains:

[7]You enticed me, O Lord, and I was enticed;

You overpowered me and You prevailed.

I have become a constant laughingstock,

Everyone jeers at me.

[8]For every time I speak, I must cry out,

Must shout, “Lawlessness and rapine!”

For the word of the Lord causes me

Constant disgrace and contempt.

⁷⁹. *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 40–41.

The idea that the prophetic messenger may be viewed by himself and others as a fool and that his message may be received as foolish is indicated by the immediate reiteration of the principle that underlay Azriel's treatment of the wise person in part one of the "essay," namely, the principle that the words of the prophet are uttered in a precise and necessary way, and there is no deficiency in the form or content of the message revealed through the prophet. This principle is now enhanced by the further principle that the prophet does not control the form or content of the divine message. Since the prophet has no control over his message and appears to himself and others to be a fool, his folly has both objective and subjective qualities. We may call the prophet the wise man who appears to himself and others to be a fool, but this is only partially accurate, since it is his wisdom that creates this appearance. Objectively, his foolishness involves ignorance of a different kind from the person who turns wisdom to folly by attempting to apprehend that which is beyond the grasp of thought. The ignorance of the prophet lies in the fact that he is "caught on the word," that he can only utter the message that he is given to utter. His own thought helps him achieve the necessary "adhesion" that allows this to occur, but then his thought is negated in suckling and replaced by the divine thought that produces the divine word. It is, therefore, reasonable to label the prophet a wise fool because his foolishness is an inescapable quality and consequence of his wisdom. Just as wisdom and folly, knowing and unknowing coincide in *Hokhmah*, so too, they coincide in the person who becomes one with *Hokhmah* and becomes its earthly representative. He both is and appears to be a fool precisely because he is wise and he is wise precisely because he is a fool, that is, someone whose thought is overpowered by divine thought and is helpless to do anything other than receive and transmit the divine word. The adhesion of thought involves a union in which human thought yields to divine thought in a kind of unknowing that is clearly superior in quality to the ignorance of the true fool, but constitutes a species of ignorance, nonetheless. While the family of "the wise" is clearly dominant in the persona of the prophet and the pneumatic interpreter, it coincides with the family of "the fool" in such a way that the individuals that exemplify this species of "wise fool," which one would be inclined to describe as a form of foolish wise person, represent the species, rather than the genus, of the wise fool, *par excellence*, since their wisdom arises precisely from their particular expression of foolishness. The paradox is inescapable.

The final paragraph of the “essay” shifts the focus from the apparent foolishness of the prophet to the apparent foolishness of the prophetic message. This also shifts the focus from the prophetic messenger to the recipient of his message:

Therefore there is nothing missing or added to all of their words and all are said of necessity. If our knowledge lacks the apprehension [needed] to understand all of this, David, peace be upon him, said (Psalms 119:18), ‘Open my eyes and I will see wonders from your Torah.’ In the case of a verse for which our knowledge does not apprehend [the way] to explain it, never cause Scripture to depart from its plain sense and do not explain it in a roundabout way.... The one who does not know how to establish the words as they are, he subtracts or adds, changes, reverses, and does not apprehend the knowledge of the plain meaning of the word, [the reason] why it is said in this way and not in another way.⁸⁰

Ezra’s commentary has an alternative to the last sentence that is relevant to this discussion:

For the multitude add or subtract [from the verse], because they think that the plain meaning (פשוט) of the verse is heretical. That which they think is heretical is faith.”

The apparent foolishness of the divine word is associated with the impression that the word is meaningless, nonsensical, or incomprehensible. But, the phrase “if our knowledge lacks the apprehension...” signifies that the apparent foolishness of the divine word reflects a deficiency in the knowledge of the person who wishes to apprehend the meaning of the divine word, which is also divine wisdom, not a deficiency in the divine word.

Compare the phrases used to describe the inability to understand Scripture, which begin: “if our knowledge lacks the apprehension...,” to the phrases used to describe the limits of the ascent of thought: “to think about a matter to which thought is unable to extend and to ascend” and “the great exertion of thought to attach itself to that which it is unable to apprehend.” The former phrases express the inability of “knowledge” to apprehend the revealed, differentiated, words of Torah/Wisdom. The latter phrases express the inability of “thought” to apprehend the hidden, undifferentiated infinitude of the Torah/Wisdom. What is the difference between

⁸⁰. *Perush Ha’Aggadot*, 41.

“knowledge” and “thought”? Knowledge represents the content of thought, which is already differentiated. Thought represents the capacity to engage in discursive reasoning, which involves making distinctions. In the second part of the “essay” Ezra and Azriel were interested in the attempt of some to think about something that is in a form that is not apprehensible by thought. At the end of the “essay,” Ezra and Azriel are interested in the process of apprehending the plain meaning of the revealed text, which means gaining knowledge of the meaning of the revealed text. It is only through this knowledge that a person could hope to acquire knowledge of that which is not directly apprehensible by thought. So, in this final paragraph, Ezra and Azriel address the challenge of gaining knowledge of wisdom, that is, knowledge of that which thought cannot apprehend by first knowing that which thought can apprehend. Such knowledge allows for proper, i.e., Kabbalistic, interpretation of the biblical text.

Ezra and Azriel position themselves with their readers as the subjects who face the challenge of understanding Scripture, without knowing if they are capable of becoming sages or not. As in the second part of the “essay,” they begin with a principle, namely, the Torah in its written form has a necessary and unalterable structure and the hidden meaning is before the reader in the words and structures of the text, if only the reader can avoid the folly of mistaking that which looks incomprehensible for nonsense. The evidence offered in support of this principle is Psalm 119:18, “Turn my eyes, and I will see wonders from your Torah.” Azriel’s interpretation of “wonders” as the “hidden” and “differentiated” states of the thirty-two pathways of wisdom in his *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* certainly applies to this verse. The Written Torah is the written expression of the differentiated pathways of Wisdom, and the peculiarities of the words and structures of the biblical text are hints that conceal secrets. The literal appearance of the written words of Torah, and, more broadly, Scripture, is one with its hidden meaning. Scripture, like *Hokhmah* itself, is both container and content. In the reciprocal relationship between the container and its content, in which the content is also the container, the dichotomy between the hidden and the revealed collapses into paradoxical unity. To posit a separation of that which is hidden from that which is revealed in Scripture is destructive of all meaning, hidden and revealed.

A person who encounters the prophetic text could fall into one of three categories, (1) he could discover that he is capable of pneumatic reading and, assuming he has the appropriate guidance, he could become a sage by achieving some degree of prophecy, or he could discover that he has no knowledge of wisdom and no ability to become a sage. In this case he could either

(2) become a heretic or (3) he could faithfully adhere to the interpretation of the sages. A person imbued with the latter type of personality will find it impossible to learn wisdom in the technical sense that he will not succeed in achieving the adhesion of thought and distinguishing wisdom's pathways. In his desire to become wise he will certainly encounter the difficulties in the text of the Torah. Such a person must then choose how to respond to those difficulties. If he appreciates the necessary nature of the prophetic process he may choose to believe that the plain meaning simply alludes him, but the text, even though seemingly foolish, is endowed with wisdom. Such a person, in Ezra's view, and implicitly Azriel's as well, walks the path of faith. Such a person does not learn traditional wisdom at first hand like those who are capable of becoming wise, but he may learn and accept wisdom at second hand as a recipient of the explanations offered by the sages. Alternatively, such a person can try to resolve the problems in the text by coming up with explanations that deviate from the words of the text or rearrange the words of the text. Such a person, in Ezra's and Azriel's views, walks the path of heresy. Such a person does not participate in the same level of wisdom and folly in which the pneumatic reader or the prophet participates, but his adherence to the teachings of the sages is a lower form of wisdom and his heresy is a lower form of foolishness. Therefore, the person who walks the path of faith finds another avenue to the world of the wise man who appears to others to be a fool, he might be called the faithful wise fool, whose folly lies in his inability to learn wisdom as well as his appearance to others, and whose wisdom lies in his desire to become wise and his exercise of faith in the absence of true wisdom. The heretic is the one case in which folly seems to be completely severed from wisdom, although in deeming himself faithful, he would claim that he is wise, while disregarding the need to be concerned about folly.

The fact that Ezra and Azriel group themselves and their readers with those who must overcome the initial inability of their knowledge to apprehend the wisdom that is Torah by the use of the first person plural suggests that the Kabbalist, the one who stands in the line of received tradition, which includes the written words of Scripture and their "oral" interpretation, may either be: (1) the person who maintains faith in the literal meaning of the Torah, which is, of course, the deepest secret of the text, or (2) the person who, through his own intimate encounter with the wisdom that is Torah, relives the prophetic experience and reveals anew the plain meaning of the text for a new generation. In either case, Ezra and Azriel offer their reader a path to share in the wisdom of Kabbalah. Indeed, they invite their readers to become sages, knowing that

this is an invitation to become a wise fool.

V. Conclusion

This inquiry into the taxonomy of the wise fool in texts that are representative of the Kabbalah of Isaac the blind and his disciples has demonstrated that the genus of the wise fool is present in early Kabbalistic thought and practice, and three species of wise fool have been identified: the foolish wise man, the wicked wise fool, and the wise fool *par excellence*.

In terms of Azriel's reflection on the personality of the person who can become wise, it is worthwhile to note that all three species of wise fool share the innate ability to become wise, although only members of the third species succeed in actualizing this desire. The differences between members of the three species arise from the way in which they pursue their desire to become wise. Azriel's reflection on the personality of the sage and the fool also exposes another genus that constitutes an alternative to the genus of the "wise fool:" the genus that includes people who lack the innate ability to become wise. Such people participate in the interplay between wisdom and folly in a derivative way in which faithful adherence to the teaching of the true sages offers a secondary form of wisdom that brings with it a secondary form of folly, while heresy constitutes a distinctly foolish path that excludes wisdom altogether, though it confuses faith with heresy. The person who opts for faithful adherence to the teaching of the sages shows wisdom by his choice, and, ironically, appears foolish to those opting for the path of heresy. So, in an inferior way this sort of person also participates in the genus of the "wise fool."

In terms of the historical setting in which these ideas were set forth, it is likely that the foolish wise man and the wicked wise fool represent philosophers of varying degrees of commitment to rationalist principles that place intellectual apprehension above other means of acquiring knowledge. The wise fool *par excellence*, represented by the prophet and the pneumatic reader also includes the Kabbalistic sage, who is able to relive the prophetic experience and offer new insights into the old revelation. These are the sages, who Ezra and Azriel clearly associate with the *talmidei hakhamim* or rabbis of the Talmud. However, those among Israel who are incapable of becoming sages may still participate in the wisdom of Kabbalah by following the teachings of those who inherited the Oral Torah of Israel, which, as far as Ezra and Azriel are concerned, includes what modern scholars identify as Kabbalah. Finally, whether a person has the ability to become wise or not, if he lacks the desire to learn

Kabbalistic wisdom, he is labeled a heretic. Heresy involves the outright rejection of the idea that wisdom, as revealed in the Torah, involves the coincidence of the exoteric word and the esoteric significance of the word, which are both wisdom. While Ezra and Azriel present the Kabbalistic path of suckling as the path to wisdom and reject philosophical intellectualism that privileges the making of distinctions over the surrender of human thought to divine thought as a route to success, they group Kabbalah and philosophy together in opposition to approaches to wisdom that reject the existence of an esoteric dimension of the Torah. Those who pursue these latter paths to wisdom are labeled heretics.

While immediate historical circumstances are likely reflected in the taxonomy of the wise fool, I noted earlier that the construction of this taxonomy is not guided by these circumstances alone. Instead, I suggested that rabbinic tradition shapes the taxonomy of the “wise fool.” The fourfold taxonomy of the wicked wise fool, the foolish wise man, the heretic, and the wise fool *par excellence* resonates with the four characters in the story of the four who entered *Pardes*. The foolish wise man is ben Zoma, who looked and was stricken, the wicked wise fool is ben Azzai, who looked and died. The heretic is the heretic *Aher*, who cut the shoots, a term used by the Kabbalists to signify the separation of the *sefirot* from one another, accomplished, in this case, by rearranging the words of the Torah. The sage whose wisdom is inseparable from his folly, and whose seeming folly is the manifestation of his wisdom, is R. Akiva, who not only entered and exited the garden of Torah in wholeness, but issued the seemingly nonsensical warning that “when you arrive at the pure marble stones, do not say, ‘water, water.’”⁸¹

⁸¹. B. Hagigah 14b.