

The Zoharic Proverb: A One-Line Dialogue

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The zoharic proverb is a distinctive four-word aphoristic form embedded in the *Zohar*, a thirteenth-century mystical corpus. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, the article considers how proverbs function as 'external agents' in the text—formally integrated yet marked by an autonomous, quasi-oral voice. Characterized by a formulaic structure, dense alliteration, and archaic or newly coined vocabulary, the proverb combines the resonance of oral utterance with the precision of the writer's craft. Two principal contexts are analyzed: in homiletic passages, the proverb condenses theological ideas into concise, gnomic statements; in narrative dialogues, especially physiognomic (face reading) episodes, it punctuates speech as a diagnostic punchline that reorients perception. Attention to its syntax, rhythm, and distribution shows how the proverb shapes the flow of the zoharic text while remaining set apart from it. By bringing paremiological methods into dialogue with zoharic philology, the study argues that the proverb constitutes a distinct poetic device rather than a stylistic curiosity. Its role in bridging oral and textual registers illuminates the polyphonic dynamics of the *Zohar* and contributes to broader discussions of textuality.



Introduction

The interplay between oral discourse and written text has been examined through various theoretical frameworks. A historical perspective on this dynamic has illuminated the interactions between orality and literacy, with particular attention to transitional periods.¹ Literary scholars have been particularly attentive to how oral forms persist within written texts. A literary perspective, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, shows that echoes of oral discourse, such as dialects, can be traced in the literary text. Misreading the multiplicity of voices within a literary text as belonging to one style, he argues, is like playing an entire symphony using one note.² An attuned reader, suggested Bakhtin, expects the heterogeneity of voices residing in the text. Bakhtin's study of oral traces within the novel has been applied to many other genres and forms. Thanks to him, it is now commonly accepted that these media do not cancel each other out; a potential reciprocity and interplay between the oral and the written forms exists and can be examined. Consider the aurality of an alliteration such as 'be-qittula de-quntara qanteroi iqqatortin'.³ Setting content aside, a written sentence that repeats one consonant at the beginning of nearby words orchestrates its vocality.

This article focuses on a mystical text, the *Zohar* (lit. 'The Book of Splendor'), that naturally offers itself to such analysis. The goal of the discussion is to describe and analyze a quasi-oral text, the four-worded zoharic proverb, and suggest new ideas on textual polyphony. These rare proverbs display an intriguing poetic form and are strategically placed across variants of the printed *Zohar*. In what follows, I discuss eleven representative examples of four-word proverbs from the twenty-five proverbs I have gathered so far.⁴ Although undoubtedly rare, assessing the total number of zoharic proverbs would be premature given the sheer volume of extant manuscripts.

¹ See the studies of Jack Goody, as described by: Daniel Abrams, "Kabbalistic Paratexts," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 26 (2012): 13.

² Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael, (University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

³ In killing with a lance his centurions are conspiring!; בקטולא דקונטירא, קונטריו אנקתסרון (Zohar 2:174b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 5 p. 519). This alliteration is based on a midrash about Merodakh Baladan, son of Baladan, king of Babylon: 'He sought to kill all of his guards' (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, 3 4).

⁴ The four-word proverbs not discussed in the article are: 'Ordained Smoke grasped on earth' (Zohar Vol. 1 94a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 2 p. 97); 'Fortress Quaestor, [are you] sequestered here' (Zohar Vol. 1 128a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 2 p. 222); 'A treasure-chest can be found among preeminent dignitaries' (Zohar Vol. 1 241b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 3 p. 477); 'A potent hammer is known by its smoke' (Zohar Vol. 2 64a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 4 p. 348); 'In a castle of absorption, impressions appear' (Zohar Vol. 2 77a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 4, p. 415); 'A handfull of clusters sunk in a vessel' (Zohar vol. 2 p. 175b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 5 p. 527); 'Chidings of smoke sunk in His bosom' (Zohar vol. 2 178a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 5 p. 568); 'Among supernal mysteries exist constricted caissons' (Zohar Vol. 2 235b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 11 p. 621); 'The castel's dripping entails advice' (Zohar Vol. 3 90b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 8 p. 72); 'Sentinels of lamps, in intertwined mysteries' (Zohar Vol. 3 120; Pritzker ed. Vol. 8 p. 276); 'a slip of plucking appears in its ledger' (Zohar vol. 3 156b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 9 p. 2); 'For a generation's sin, the

The contours of the zoharic proverb are difficult to delineate but what unites them is a distinctive structure. Each proverb contains exactly four words of varying lengths, with a distinct tempo and alliterations. They all contain a construct state—a Semitic grammatical structure in which two or more nouns are joined to express a relationship, often of possession or attribution (the X of Y), followed by a noun, and a verb. For instance: ‘Tifsa de-Shiqla/ be-emza’ita/ qayma’ (The lip of the balance stands in the middle; טיפסא דשקלא באמצעיִתא קיימא).⁵ The fourth word is a syntactical anomaly that breaks, or at least bends, grammatical rules.⁶ At times, the fourth word is not randomly chosen but shares its stem root with those of other proverbs. The precise meaning of some words found in zoharic proverbs remains obscure, raising the possibility that we are dealing with a chain of scribal errors or with foreign-language words. Grouping a selection of these problematic words together in a proverb often results in alliteration, which creates a striking sonic impression. Thus, while structurally consistent and sonically rich, these proverbs present semantic ambiguity.

The unique vocabulary of the proverb appears in other contexts and configurations within the zoharic corpus. And yet, I contend that the zoharic proverb is a distinct literary phenomenon whose contours I set to describe in the following sections. I also argue that its features endow the proverb with formalistic and linguistic characteristics that render it an external agent which operates upon the zoharic text from within.

My search for textual agency within a myriad of texts, including oral and quasi-oral structures, is quite novel in studies of the zoharic corpus. More commonly used are philological, theological, or literary lenses. I begin with a general discussion of proverbs. To appreciate this form both for its literary significance and for its function within the *Zohar*, I then offer several remarks on the *Zohar* as a ‘text in motion’. Finally, I turn to the monologue–dialogue dynamics characteristic of its mystical content, suggesting that searching for oral effects within textual corpora more broadly can be a productive line of inquiry.

righteous are seized’ (Zohar Vol. 3 p. 218a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 9 p. 529). Another proverb, found only in manuscripts, ‘Quz-tifa de-nehorah de-qalditah hakhah’, has been discussed by modern scholars: Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, (Tel-Aviv University Press, 1976) 213 [Hebrew]; Ronit Meroz, *The Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Simeon bar Yochay: An analysis of the Zohar’s Textual Components*, (Bialik Institute, 2018) 392 [Hebrew]. Additionally, I have located three more examples where various forms of periphrasis expand the four-word formula: ‘In a castle of vaporous springs, [two] were embracing above’ (Zohar Vol. 2 178b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 5 p. 573); ‘in blissful bond of a supernal castle [companionship] appears’ (Zohar Vol. 3 65b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 7 p. 429); ‘fastened to [this one’s] ropes is a flickering ember of death’ (Zohar Vol. 3 111a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 8 p. 217).

⁵ Zohar 1:33b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 1 p. 207.

⁶ Haim Weiss, “Did the Straw Indeed Break the Camel’s Back? Three Theoretical Aspects in the Study of Proverbs,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 21 (2001): 171–172 [Hebrew]. See also below note 42.

Proverbs

A proverb is a concise and general statement that expresses a universal truth, rule of conduct, or principle. Proverbs are often moral or philosophical in nature and aim to convey wisdom or offer guidance. The German word for proverb, *sprichwort*, clearly expresses the notion that a proverb is a voiced utterance. Similar to proverbs, apothegms are brief, witty, and pointed sayings or remarks, often attributed to a known person. Like proverbs, they convey truth or insight, but it is typically sharper and more memorable. In the current discussion, which deals with highly cryptic formulas, I will not attempt to distinguish between the proverb and the apothegm. It is sufficient to say that the apothegm, like the proverb, is a closed brief unit, endowed with ‘excess of exactitude.’⁷

The oral and oral-like nature of proverbs creates a Bakhtinian polyphony because it leaves traces when employed in textual circumstances. A proverb has an addresser and an addressee. Shifting its directionality or its context changes its meaning.⁸ The gentle negotiation between the proverb—a closed and compact unit—with its surroundings will be demonstrated below.

All the aforementioned definitions are part of an entire field of study, paremiology, devoted to proverbs.⁹ Applying these general observations and methodological questions developed for the study of proverbs will illuminate previously unnoticed aspects of both the zoharic text, and the ‘zoharic proverb’ formula.

Proverbs often contain archaic words and dialect, either inherited from earlier periods and cultures¹⁰ or employed as deliberate anachronisms.¹¹ The zoharic proverbs are often multilingual, integrating remnants of Greek and Latin into the Aramaic text. The *Zohar* contains an abundance of neologisms and obscure terminology, making it difficult to determine whether these terms originated within the *Zohar* or circulated independently before entering the corpus.¹² A particularly cryptic family of proverbs appears in the *Zohar*’s abstract, iconic passages devoted to cosmogony. These proverbs

⁷ Ian Fielding, “The Decadent Prehistory of the Jeweled Style,” in *A Late Antique Poetics?: The Jeweled Style Revisited Studies in Late Antique Literature and Its Reception*, eds. Joshua Hartman and Helen Kaufmann, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 16.

⁸ Peter Seitel, “Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor,” *Genre* 2 (1969): 143–161.

⁹ On the wide acceptance of this template, while challenging the scholarly convention as the ultimate one, see: Neal R. Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*, (Mouton, 1985), 51–55.

¹⁰ Neal R. Norrick, “Subject Area, Terminology, Proverb Definitions, Proverb Features,” in *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 21.

¹¹ Weiss, “Did the Straw,” 167–168.

¹² Wolfgang Mieder, “Origin of Proverbs,” in *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 29–32.

engage minimally with their surrounding text, and their literal meaning remains enigmatic. Before analyzing specific examples, I first situate these proverbs within existing scholarship on the zoharic literature and outline my methodological approach.

The Zohar

The *Zohar* is arguably the most influential text of Jewish esotericism, composed in the thirteenth-century Spain. The *Zohar* was copied in manuscript form and first printed in two major editions: Mantua and Cremona (1558–1560). The print editions arranged the homiletic and other texts as commentaries on the weekly Torah portions. *Zohar* scholarship has been preoccupied with identifying the different chains of editing and copying by comparing print editions to manuscripts and collections. When I use the term *Zohar*, I do not mean a specific edition but the body of the work with all its multiplicity and heterogeneity.

Recent scholarship has destabilized its literary status as a uniform work written by a single author. Instead, the *Zohar* is now considered a ‘text in motion’, a polyphonic compilation that was dynamically edited and rewritten time and again. Due to its characterization as a family of multi-voiced texts, the *Zohar* is perhaps one of ‘the strongest examples of literary instability.’¹³ The modularity and dynamism of the medieval text undermine modern assumptions of literary fixation. Not a single page of the *Zohar* is monovocal: it was not written by one hand, nor does it offer the teaching of one individual. This unique multiplicity of times, places, languages and doctrines has been defined in contemporary scholarship as an idiolect that creates its own conditions of expression. Under the pseudo-epigraphical umbrella of the mishnaic sages active in the first century AD, the heroes of the *Zohar* are recast as mystical protagonists in the landscapes of the Galilee, inspired by the later layer of the Talmud manifested in Palestinian or Babylonian Aramaic.¹⁴ The language of the *Zohar* is thus an experimental manifestation of a literary (but not spoken) Aramaic; a literary idiom of linguistic imitation.¹⁵ Influenced by the rabbinic corpuses, the *Zohar* employs the general façade of the characters to create an impression of a live discussion, according to their special profile and voice. The revived characters are part of an artful mixture of homilies and legends, as these scholars are travelling along the landscape of the fantastic valleys,

¹³ Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism*, (Magness Press, Cherub press, 2013), 273–275.

¹⁴ See also Alinda Damsma, “The Aramaic of the Zohar: The Status Quaestionis,” in *Jewish Languages in Historical Perspective*, ed. Lily Kahn, (Brill, 2018), 15–16.

¹⁵ Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, “Are Literary Languages Artificial? The Case of the Aramaic of the Zohar,” *Aramaic Studies* 18, no. 1 (2020): 128–129.

deserts, villages and cities of the Land of Israel. In their travels, these mystical teachers discuss various concepts regarding the godhead and its terrestrial reflections. Nevertheless, these Aramaic dialogues are sprinkled with neologisms and dialects completely disconnected with the Aramaic actually spoken in antiquity (a clear sign for the *Zohar's* medieval source). This discourse is undoubtedly a polyphonic bridge between real and imagined times, places, discourses, dialects.

The mystical and theosophical writings within the *Zohar* playfully integrates oral discourse into elaborate literary forms. Thus, the zoharic web provides a perfect case study on which one can apply a Bakhtinian investigation while expanding its framework. Bakhtin's insights help us discover what can be called the *Zohar's* many voices by considering a previously overlooked aspect, the voice of the proverb, which functions to insulate certain voices from their textual surroundings.

The *Zohar* is home to a wide array of literary styles, modes of inquiry, and poetic devices arranged as a richly colored bricolage.¹⁶ Within this heterogeneous landscape, uniformity or textual integrity was never firmly established. Philological analysis consistently reveals numerous textual variances caused by interventions, omissions, additions or changes. These are all part of the *Zohar's* textual history, as it was often glossed by countless scribes and scholars.

Within the *Zohar's* many forms, the most elementary classification indicates two subbranches of proverbs: the proverb in a homily, offered either anonymously or by a named sage and woven into the text, and a proverb in a zoharic legend, uttered in the context of dialogue occurring within a zoharic narrative.

The Zoharic Proverb

The *sprichwort* sensibility shaped the first generation of academic studies of the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic literatures, and compiled these proverbs in dictionaries and lists.¹⁷ Recitation of apothegms in the zoharic dialogues further indicates that we should think of the proverb in oral terms. The proverb within the story is indeed contextualized and fitting. And yet, isolating the zoharic proverb, and its use in the anonymous context, proves that it is much more than a *sprichwort*.

¹⁶ Eitan P. Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar*, (Oxford University Press, 2018), 222; idem, "Kabbalah as Literature: Theology, Narrative, and Lyric," in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Ken Seignourie, (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 8.

¹⁷ See for instance in Ignaz Stern, "Versuch einer Umständlichen Analyse des Sohar," *Ben Chananja* 3 (1860): 469. More about his *Zohar* extensive research see: Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, 273–275; George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820–1880): The Foundation of an Academic Discipline*, (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 139–147.

The zoharic proverb is first and foremost a linguistical island. Its vocabulary, syntax, semantics and context prove a high degree of independence from its context. Indeed, the zoharic proverb can help focus scholarship on minimal textual units, in line with current scholarly trends that avoid grand assumptions.¹⁸ The micro-textual perspective, however, can be misleading as it overlooks phraseological structure. Searching for the neologism—a common component in zoharic proverb (such as the variations for the root *qtr* or *qstr*, we have seen above)¹⁹—has obscured the holistic structure of the apothegm.

Reducing the proverb into fragmented entries of words and gathering them into special dictionaries has made a valuable contribution to the linguistic study of the Zohar, especially in documenting languages that infiltrated and shaped zoharic expressions.²⁰ Although dictionaries list many of the words that appear in these proverbs—often dispersed across other phraseological settings—they do not register the proverbs as coherent wholes. The unique uncharted cluster of ‘encoded’ words that make up the web of the proverbs require a broader textual perspective than the single word.

Beside dictionaries of the *Zohar*, folkloristic anthologies of zoharic aphorisms that contribute to the paremiographic literature may also obscure the uniqueness of the four-word proverb under inquiry.²¹ With ideologic passion and deep curiosity, the inclusive attitude of such collections did not employ any selectivity, and assembled proverbs,

¹⁸ Daniel Abrams, *Sefer Hibbur 'Amudei Sheva by R. Aaron Zelig ben Moshe, Cracow 1675: A Chapter in the History of Textual Criticism to the Editio Princeps of the Book of the Zohar, Cremona 1558 - A Facsimile Edition from the Exemplar of the Collection of N. H. Van Biema of Amsterdam Held in the National Library of Israel*, (Cherub Press, 2017), 11 [Hebrew]; Avishai Bar Asher, “Introduction,” *R. Moses de León's Sefer Mishkan ha-Edut*, (Cherub Press, 2013), 51 [Hebrew]; idem, “Perush shel Meor haQodesh: The Metamorphoses of zoharic Homilies in R. Moses de León's Hitherto Unknown Commentary on the Ten Commandments,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 24 (2015): 143 [Hebrew]; idem, *Journeys of the Soul: Concepts and Imageries of Paradise in Medieval Kabbalah*, (Magnes Pess, 2019), 14–15, 18 [Hebrew]; idem, “The Zohar and Its Aramaic: The Dynamic Development of the Aramaic Dialect(s) of the zoharic Canon,” *Leshonenu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects* 83, no. 3 (2021): 237 n. 63 [Hebrew]; Ronit Meroz, *Headwaters of the Zohar: Analysis & Annotated Critical Edition of Parashat Exodus of the Zohar*, (Tel-Aviv University Press, 2019), 25–26, 191–192 [Hebrew]; Jonatan Benarroch, *The Yanuqa of Rav Hamnuna Sava: Analysis and Critical Edition of the Yanuqa Story (Zohar III, 186a–192a)*, (Cherub Press, 2019), 141 [Hebrew]; Nathan Wolski, “Mystical Poetics: Narrative, Time and Exegesis in the Zohar,” *Prooftexts* 28, no. 2 (2008): 104. Recently, ‘micro-investigation’ was suggested by Leore Sachs-Shmueli, “The Porous Boundaries of the Zohar in the Age of Print: A zoharic Homily on the Sinew of the Thigh as a Signifier of Sexual Threat,” *AJS Review* 47, no. 2 (2023): 369.

¹⁹ Etymological inquiries regarding a long list of neologisms in the *Zohar*, see in the recent series of articles by Gerrit Bos (‘Neologisms and Other Difficult Terms in the Sefer ha-Zohar: Novel Interpretations,’ I–IV in the 55th–60th volumes of *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*).

²⁰ For a critique of overlooking context of the parole see Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 266. For criticism of extracting, decontextualizing, and anthologizing proverbs see Peter Grzybek, “Das Sprichwort im literarischen Text,” *Sprichwörter und Redensarten im interkulturellen Vergleich*, eds. Annette Sabban and Jan Wirrer, (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991), 188.

²¹ A renaissance in the field took place in the first half of twentieth century, inspired by the national revival of Zionism and the literary collective project of the classic *Otzar ha-Hagadah* by C. N. Bialik.

short sayings and aphorism, side by side without any defining criteria.²² Thus, such anthologies include—among their diverse aphoristic materials—do not include the twenty eight examples I have found nor do they give the full list of eleven four-word proverbs discussed in this article. This specific group exhibits a distinctive formula and shares little in terms of content or vocabulary with the homilies that immediately surround them. Given such a complex corpus, the criteria for selection are extremely important.²³ In addition, very few of the four-word proverbs I have identified have been documented in these collections.²⁴

Attention to the distinct nature of the zoharic proverb can be found already in Gershom Scholem's works. An impressionistic yet perceptive research agenda is sketched in the margins of his notes (see **Figure 1**). This document lists a collection of

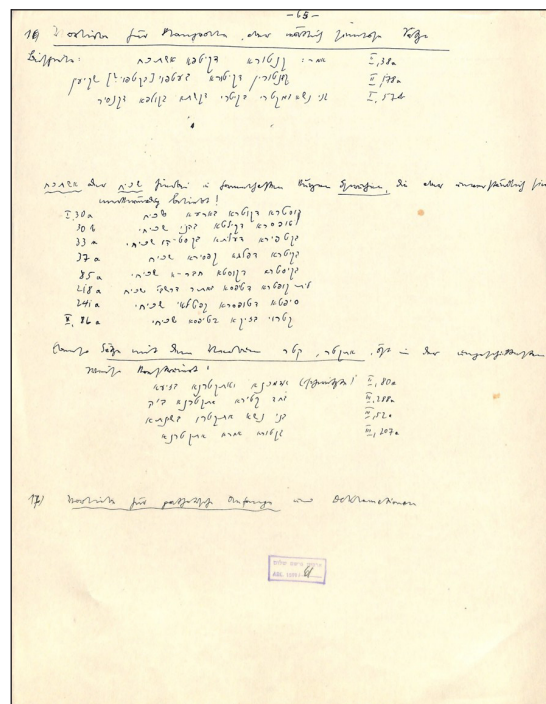


Figure 1: Gershom Scholem, *Torat Sefer ha-Zohar*, chapter 1 (Theosophy), Gershom Scholem Archive *1599 03 62, 7§ *Leshon ha-Zohar*, p. 65.

²² Nehemia S. Leibovitch, *Pniny ha-Zohar*, (Darom, 1931) [Hebrew]; Shim'on Neihausen, *Zoharey ha-Zohar*, (Neuhausen, 1929) [Hebrew].

²³ Later anthologies are not necessarily better. See Moshe Hallamish, *Idioms Collection and Selected Studies*, (Idra, 2021) [Hebrew]. The representative of Hebrew proverbial in The Matti Kuusi international type system and database of proverbs, is very poor, as it includes one source only (containing a total number of three [!]) proverbs <https://www.mattikuusiproverbtypology.fi/m6books/m6books-thp-361/>.

²⁴ In fact, I identified one pair of proverbs in Leibovitch's *Pniny ha-Zohar* (p. 47, §315–§316) and another pair in Neihausen's *Zoharey ha-Zohar* (p. 28, §373; p. 47, §642), with one proverb overlapping between the two. In contrast, I found no four-word proverbs in Hallamish's anthology (*ibid*).

nine zoharic sentences ending with the same root. This personal note collection invites further contemplation. Some of these notes did indeed find their way to his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

Scholem showed that this cluster of apothegms is an example for the virtuosity of the *Zohar*, and its rhetorical expertise in his experiment to capture the attention of the reader (*épater le bourgeois*).²⁵ However, he underestimated this sequence of sentences because he focused exclusively on their stylistic features, which he viewed as compromised by grammatical or syntactic irregularities (perhaps the final verb). As a result, he relegated them to the status of mere *obiter dictum*.

Interestingly, many of these phrases are found in one cluster of homilies about half-way into the section of the *Zohar* on Genesis. Thus, these phrases belong to an identifiable unit. The clustering in the Mantua edition, the source upon which Scholem based the citations listed above, is not found in the Cremona edition where the proverbs are scattered. Without going into an in-depth comparison of these two contemporaneous editions,²⁶ it seems that proverb clustering reflects the coherence of the Mantua version and strengthens the claim that the alternative textual organization of the Cremona version degraded the coherence of the corpus. Proverbs are rare and spread very thin across the *Zohar* yet within only eight folios in the Mantua edition, these formulas appear six times, more than anywhere else in the *Zohar*.

The Mantua version is a clear case of ‘proverb clustering’ which requires only an ‘insertion of two or more proverbs [...] into a non-proverb context.’²⁷ Additionally, as Scholem noted, this cluster does not only end with the same root, it also shares a grammatical structure. This leads to the assumption that we are dealing with a literary genre that was intentionally assimilated into the sermonic unit, with its given theme. In other words, the proverb clustering cannot be a mere coincidence.

Scholem identified a group of ‘short mystical sentences’ in his early essay on alchemy and Kabbala. Although stylistically distinct from the four-word proverb, his observation constitutes an important scholarly precedent for the current discussion. Attempting to clarify these cryptic phrases, he traced their genealogy and noted that the formulation is not ‘exciting’ but the external form is interesting: ‘The sentences sound like old formulas underlaid with new, fitting meaning.’²⁸ According to Scholem, these sentences create a misleading impression, imagined to be cryptic mystical truths,

²⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (Schocken, 1954), 167.

²⁶ A list of the main differences between the editions, see in Jean Baumgarten, “Imprimer et éditer le Sefer ha-Zohar (Mantoue, 1558–1560),” *Materia Giudaica* 25 (2020): 496.

²⁷ Anna Konstantinova, “Proverbs in Mass Media,” *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 284.

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, Trans. Klaus Ottmann, (Spring Publications, 2006), 37.

because readers lack the necessary context to decipher their function. He suggested reading some of them as magical formula,²⁹ due to their unique structure.

Following Scholem's footsteps, I claim that the sum of the zoharic proverb is greater than its parts. The proverbs which appear in dense cosmogonic passages overshadow the immediate context and should be handled as a poetic phenomenon that bridges the oral and the textual rather than a semantic or linguistic anomaly. The proverb proves its value of integration into various contexts, as it does not lose its own agency while playing important role in each one of them.

The Poetic Value of the Zoharic Proverb

The proverb can be elegantly introduced into the speculative, symbolic, and poetic conditions of the mystical homily. It could have been pulled from a ready-made collection of wisdom sayings, there is no way of knowing for certain; its function in the text, however, is independent of its origins.³⁰ For example, when one sage complains about—and even curses—his daily problems, R. Shimon responds with a concise, carefully crafted four-word proverb:

בנימוסי קסטירין – עלאה שכיח³¹

Be-nimusey qastirin ila'a shachiach

in the laws of the demons – the divine force is present³²

Once these thoughtful words are uttered, the atmosphere of resentment is immediately transformed.³³ Using a proverb, R. Shimon teaches his angry student that the evil realm

²⁹ Scholem used Goethe's terms, *Hexeneinmaleines*. See idem, "Alchemie und Kabbala: Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte der Mystik," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 69 (1925): 25.

³⁰ Anthologies of proverbs derived and collected from the Pseudepigraphic 'Alfa Beta de-Ben Sira' (some of them based over Talmudical proverbs) is also a medieval phenomenon, scribed in manuscripts such as MS Parma, Platina 2457, 22b. see also even in Kabbalistic Codex: MS Vatican Ebr. 62, 90b. regarding a Talmudic cluster of proverbs in the tractate of Baba-Qama see: Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Negotiating Canons: Rabbinic Proverbs between Oral Tradition and Scripture," *Bis dat, qui cito dat: Gegengabe in Paremiology, Folklore, Language, and Literature Honoring Wolfgang Mieder on His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Christian Grandl, Kevin J. McKenna, Elisabeth Piirainen and Andreas Nolte, (Peter Lang Editions, 2015), 163–79. For more on the origin and nature of this apothegm see Eli Yassif, *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle-Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies*, (Magnes, 1984) 41–47 [Hebrew]. More on the Talmudical Proverb, see: Yona Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-aggada ve-ha-midrash*, (Yad la-Talmud, 1990) 395–434; Steven D. Fraade, Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Halakha and Aggada in Tannaic Sources," *The Literature of the Sages: A Re-visioning*, ed. Christine Hayes, (Brill, 2022), 494–496.

³¹ Zohar 3:107a.

³² Matt's translation elaborated the original proverb and blurred the borders between it and the rest of the sentence: 'This serves the world, and one must not treat contemptuously those who are of service to the blessed Holy One, especially since they are fashioned genuinely' (Pritzker ed. Vol. 8 p. 200).

³³ Although the critical sting in R. Shimon words, his response is a cosmic law, not a rebuke. Unlike the proverbial convention of 'better is x than y', common in the Talmudic literature, R. Shimon's response is non-judgmental (Shamir Yona,

includes Divine aspects.³⁴ This corrects the student's impression that the Divine and the evil belong to separate realms. Some sages in the *Zohar*, perhaps with narrower shoulders than R. Shimon's, appear to require broader support in order to introduce a proverb into the discussion. Such support is grounded in wider acknowledgment and social acceptance—sometimes even oral validation. Reciting a proverb as a quotation borrowed from a known pool of folk wisdom — or auditory folklore (as defined by Hasan-Rokem) spoken by many others—is another indication of its roots in oral culture.³⁵ The talmudic formula used to introduce aphorisms, *Hakhi de-amrei Inshey*, meaning 'this is what people say'³⁶ or 'as the people say,'³⁷ appears at times in the *Zohar* as well.³⁸ The translation of the talmudic formula offered by Matt, 'this accords with the saying', misses the oral dimension of the formula. In comparison, the more accurate translation of the talmud points to the proverb as though it is borrowed from the mouths of others. According to Hasan-Rokem, it is used in the Talmud as an additional source of authority for textual sources derived from scripture and underscores the stature? Of the proverb compared to other media.³⁹ It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the oral origin is not a real citation of a popular phrase but a rhetorical device to introduce an aphorism using pseudo-epigraphic discourse.

Nevertheless, the communal nature of the proverb is rarely emphasized in the *Zohar*, which generally prefers to use this formula only to attribute sayings directly to a named speaker. Indeed, a proverb cited by R. Yehudah on one occasion, 'his intermingling with a spirit appears in a form,'⁴⁰ is not attested in other sources—unsurprising given its enigmatic, difficult-to-decipher meaning. In this instance, it seems that the *Zohar* seeks to cloak its own words with the authority of public acceptance by presenting them as a familiar saying spoken by others.

"Rhetorical features in Talmudic literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 77 [2006]: 76–77; Ariel Ram Pasternak, Shamir Yona, "The 'Better' Proverb in Rabbinic Literature," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 17, no. 1 [2014]: pp. 27–40.

³⁴ The famous legend of the pietism of R. Shimon and R. Elazar and their second exit from the cave offers a similar insight (Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*, [Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999], 105–138; Ido Hevroni, "R. Elazar Son of R. Šimon the Thief Catcher (bB. Metz. 83a–84a)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 74, no. 1 [2023]: 7, 18).

³⁵ Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, (Stanford University Press, 2000), 88.

³⁶ Galit Hasan-Rokem, Haim Weiss, "Folklore in Antiquity," *Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2018): 2. Regarding the general concept of recording oral sources in written form, see further "ibid," 2–3.

³⁷ Hasan-Rokem, "Negotiating Canons," 168. For further genealogical expressions emphasizing the proverb's transmission see "ibid," 171.

³⁸ For a short mapping of this introduction, and its role in presenting proverbs, see: Ofra Meir, "Pitgamim be-fi demuyot be-sipure ha-talmud ve-hamidrash," *Sinai* 100, no. 1 (1987): 543–544, esp. note 8 [Hebrew]. For the rare evidence to clear recognition in a folklore as reflected from the talmud, see Dina Stein, "Let the 'People' Go?: The 'Folk' and Their 'Lore' as Tropes in the Reconstruction of Rabbinic Culture," *Prooftexts* 29, no. 2 (2009): 208.

³⁹ Hasan-Rokem, "Negotiating Canons."

⁴⁰ *Zohar* 2:86a; Pritzker ed. 4:86.

The term ‘jeweled style’, coined by Michael J. Roberts to describe the poetic art of focusing on minor ideas or concepts by way of repetition as a source for inspiration, is applicable to the zoharic proverb.⁴¹ The proverb affects the phraseology of the zoharic homilies. Although its linguistic content breaks away from its surroundings, it is not a completely foreign body in terms of spirit. The mystical apothegms fit well with zoharic homilies because they ‘lure us into the ineffable.’⁴²

For instance, commenting on the dark exposition to the creation of the world, ‘And the earth was without form, and void’ (Gen. 1:2), the *Zohar* addresses the mysterious roots of evil. According to the *Zohar*, the demons are part of this liminal reality, but instead of moving to grand depictions of the abyss, the image painted by the proverb is quite minor describing ink sediment:

טופסרא דקולטא בהני שכיחי⁴³

Tufsera de-qulta be-haney schichey

The signet impresses certain patterns⁴⁴

Scholars have explained the cryptic image as follows: sediment which sinks to the bottom of the ink vessel—continually interfering with and contaminating the scribe’s work—is an inescapable characteristic of ink. So too, creation is characterized by the persistent by-product of the Divine craftsmanship: demons.⁴⁵ The short illustration, explicates that the highest forms of the Divine are involved in the lowest parts of the cosmos.

More generally, concealed within its miniature form, the proverb creates a sense of secrecy and suggests that it holds a trove of insights. Though marked by apodictic clarity, persuasive reasoning, and a tone of certainty, the proverb nonetheless belongs

⁴¹ For Applications of this term in the field of Jewish thought and lore, see studies in classic *Piyyut*: Joseph Yahalom, *Origins of Hebrew Liturgical Rhetoric and Poetics: Magic, Midrash and Merkavah Mysticism*, (De Gruyter, 2024) 202–206; Michael D. Swartz, Yosef Yahalom, *Avodah: Ancient Poems for Yom Kippur*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) 22; Michael D. Swartz, “Translation and The Comprehensibility Of Early Piyyut,” *Giving a Diamond: A Festive Volume for Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata, (Brill, 2011), 48–50; idem, “The Aesthetics of Blessing and Cursing: Literary and Iconographic Dimensions of Hebrew and Aramaic Blessing and Curse Texts,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, 5, no. 1 (2005): 191.

⁴² Gary Morson, *The Long and Short of It: From Aphorism to Novel*, (Stanford University Press, 2012), 14.

⁴³ Zohar 1:30b.

⁴⁴ This translation, suggested by Lenn J. Schramm, translates and paraphrases the *Zohar* and diverges from Matt’s translations which is ‘Scribal patterns of impress appear here by the seal of the signet’ (Pritzker ed. Vol. 1, p. 182). Matt’s translation is problematic because of the ambiguity introduced by the word ‘by.’ Does it mean ‘next to the seal of the signet’? or ‘by means of the seal of the signet’? As Matt writes (*ibid*, n. 613) ‘tufsera’ has two different meanings and Matt used both in his translation. Note that impress is the noun that means impression, stamp, or device.

⁴⁵ *Gershom Scholem’s Zohar with Annotations*, (Magnes, 1992), vol. 1, 126 [Hebrew]; Yehuda Liebes, *Chapters in the Dictionary of the Zohar*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976, “Suspita,” §1 [Hebrew].

in the realm of enchantment.⁴⁶ For instance, the proverb ‘The lip of the balance stands in the middle’ quoted above is deceptively technical. A self-evident observation delivered as a definitive fact emphasizing a moment of absolute precision. While this ‘law of nature’ offers immediate clarity, its manifestation in aphoristic form invites—and indeed demands—a deeper reflection upon its latent meaning. The proverb has even been described as ‘a mystery leading to ever deeper mysteries’,⁴⁷ as its conclusive tone creates a paradoxical maze.⁴⁸ The proverb, whether in a homily or as part of a dialogue, often concludes with confident, authoritative statements.⁴⁹ It does so, however, by grounding its claims in modest, material observations. This combination of boldness and subtlety is part of its charm: representing the wondrous in small details and finding the miraculous in unassuming natural concepts. Rather than clearing away mystery, the proverb engages with it from within, making it especially suited to the *Zohar*’s cryptic style. It functions not as an anecdote or magical incantation, but as a concentrated and self-contained expression of the *Zohar*’s deeper currents. The proverb speaks with confidence in a major key, yet it is grounded in the minor mode of the concrete.

Defining the Quadripartite Proverb in the *Zohar*

The essential character of the proverb is its shortness and ‘expressive concentration’.⁵⁰ Such brevity assures that nothing can be omitted.⁵¹ Extreme but calculated frugality plays a crucial role in the wittiness and sharp deliverance of the apothegm. Classifying the zoharic proverb requires a closer examination of its various features. In general, the zoharic proverb aligns with conventions described in the field of paremiology.⁵² By using the aphoristic, almost elliptical, form of expression, the zoharic literature demonstrates its rigorous line of articulation.

The persistent marker of the zoharic proverb is the repetitive and regulated formula comprising a construct state followed by a noun and verb. This general division creates a simple two-part structure,⁵³ cleaving between the first part, which begins with the

⁴⁶ Norrick, “Subject Area,” 7. In the same vein, the proverb is regarded as a ‘moment of truth’ in John Mark Thompson, *The Form and Function of proverbs in Ancient Israel*, Studia Judaica 1. (Mouton, 1974), 70.

⁴⁷ Morson, *ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸ Regarding the historical marginalization of the aphorism’s inherent obscurity within Greek philosophy, moving from its central role in the thought of Heraclitus toward more rigorous, argumentative discourse, see: Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*, (Princeton University Press, 2019), 44–45.

⁴⁹ On the authoritative effect of the aphorism, see: Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms*, (Routledge, 2016), 11–12.

⁵⁰ Mario Citroni, “What is an Epigram? Defining a Genre,” *A Companion to Ancient Epigram*, ed. Christer Henriksen, (Blackwell, 2019), 39.

⁵¹ Nina Mindat, “Epigram and Rhetoric,” *A Companion to Ancient Epigram*, ed. Christer Henriksen, (Blackwell, 2019), 197.

⁵² On the wide acceptance of this template, while challenging the scholarly convention as the ultimate one, see: Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 51–55.

⁵³ Citroni, “What is an Epigram?,” 39; Tamar Alexander-Frizer, *Words Are Better Than Bread: A Study of the Judeo-Spanish Proverb*, (Ben-Gurion University Press and Ben-Zvi Institute, 2004), 20 [Hebrew]; Weiss, “Did the Straw,” 169.

construct, and the concluding part (noun + verb), supporting its emphatic delivery rather than forming an unmarked sentence.⁵⁴ For example, a physiognomic (face reading) observation or rule, offered as a simple analogy in one place, morphs into a structured zoharic proverb in another. The physiognomic observation reads:

דשעריה קמיט [...] לביה קמיט כטופסא

De-se'arie qamit [...] libey qamit ke-tufsa

One whose hair is curly [...] his heart constricted in frames⁵⁵

The proverb reads:

טופסרא דליבא באנפיך שכיח

Tufsera de-libah be-anfecha schiach

Your heart's configuration is apparent in your face⁵⁶

While the rule is a simple analogy, the compact two-part arrangement in the proverbial form is a catchy equation between 'heart' and 'face', easy to memorize and generalize. Note the move from the objective third person in the physiognomic observation to the direct second person in the proverb. The significance of the second person will be further explored below. Here let us focus on the anomalies and meaning of the last word, שכיח. This verb is common in zoharic texts used conventionally as a concluding confirmation of the statement preceding it.⁵⁷ Yet the fourth element, a verb, is syntactically irregular. In post-biblical Hebrew, it would normally appear in the second position. It would seem that this position also differs from the conventions of dominant branches of Aramaic syntax.⁵⁸ Postponing the verb creates a passive sentence and the final verb then validates what has been already stated.⁵⁹ The order of the sentence sharpens the delivery of the proverb. Ending the proverb with a verb rather

⁵⁴ Marcas Mac Coinnigh, "Structural Aspects of Proverbs," *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 125.

⁵⁵ Zohar 2:70b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 4 p. 393. We can assume that this elementary equation in a state of proverbial equivalence, might have developed in a process of polygenesis.

⁵⁶ Zohar 1:96b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 2 p. 115. For an interesting parallel in the Quran see Robert Hoyland, "Physiognomy in Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005): 363-364.

⁵⁷ For this affirmative-declarative function in the proverb, different than the communicative function, see: Mac Coinnigh, "Structural Aspects," 115-116.

⁵⁸ Jonas C. Greenfield, "Aramaic and the Jews," *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches*, eds. Marc J. Geller, Jonas C. Greenfield, Michael P. Weitzman, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

⁵⁹ See for the syntax order between the eastern branch of Aramaic, leaning toward the structure of verb-subject-object against to more flexible tendency in the western Aramaic, as depicted by Greenfield, 'Aramaic and the Jews', p. 14.

than a noun can make that action the result—and not the cause—of what preceded it. In this example, ‘your heart’s configuration reflected in your face’ is what causes the apparent ‘appearance’. Another consequence of postponing the verb is that the third word in the proverb acquires an emphatic quality. If spoken aloud, the third word would be vocally stressed:

קוּסְטְרָא דְקוּטְרָא – בְּאַרְעָא שְׂכִיחַ⁶⁰

Qustera de-qutra *be-ara’ah* schiach

The fortress of vapor is discovered on **earth**⁶¹

The inversion—placing the locative phrase before the verb (*be-ara’ah schiach* rather than *schiach be-ara’ah*)—functions as a rhetorical tool that emphasizes specificity: the discovery occurs *on earth* specifically (and not elsewhere).

These textual observations can be traced in earlier rabbinic texts and other kabbalistic writings. In this body of literature, placing the verb at the end of a sentence is uncommon. An outlier, a poem by kabbalist R. Yosef Gikatilia, suspends the verb for what seems to be rhythmic considerations.⁶² Yet rhyme cannot be the sole reason for structural anomaly of the proverb. Verb deferral does not necessarily create the chain reaction of deferral described above. Consider a saying by R. Menachem Reaccanati, described by Moshe Idel as ‘an extremely difficult sentence, which I have not found an exact parallel in early Kabbalah’:⁶³

הַקּוֹשֶׁר קֶשֶׁר רוּחָנִי קֶשֶׁר

Ha-kosher keshher ruḥani kesharo [or: kashru]

The one who ties a spiritual bond—he [or: they] tied [it]⁶⁴

Although it is hard to decipher its denotative meaning, the poetics are quite clear. The repetitive use of the root קשׁ (or in its Aramaic parallel קט), is very common in zoharic proverbs. Ending the chain with a verb is an obvious proverbial marker.⁶⁵ Thus, this irregular sentence, both in its vocabulary and syntax, can be reclassified as belonging to the family of zoharic proverbs. While the exact meaning remains elusive, the formal

⁶⁰ Zohar 1:30a.

⁶¹ Pritzker ed. Vol 1 p. 178.

⁶² Yosef Gikatilia, *Ginat Egoz*, MS Amsterdam, Rosentaliana 86, 1b.

⁶³ Moshe Idel, *R. Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist*, (Magnes, 1998), 154.

⁶⁴ My translation.

⁶⁵ Mac Coinnigh, “Structural Aspects of Proverbs,” 113.

markers bear a striking similarity to the proverbial characteristics of the Zohar, particularly in their peculiar word order. By identifying it as such, we can understand the linguistic anomalies not as errors, but as a deliberate stylistic choice intended to evoke the authoritative tone of the Zoharic idiom. What appear to be unsolvable gleanings in medieval kabbalistic texts, in fact, help us define the most essential features of the proverb.

Another example of a postponed verb is found in the Babylonian Talmud. Here the governing logic is not rhythmic as in Gikatilia's poem but thematic. In a discussion of the destruction of the temple, God addresses king Nebuchadnezzar, who has just conquered Jerusalem. God chastises the king, telling him that he had only a superficial role whereby the human façade is but an echo of the divine plane:

אריא קטילא קטלת, קימחא טחינא טחנת, קרתא יקידתא אוקידתא⁶⁶

arya ketila katalta kimḥa taḥina taḥanta, karta yaqidta uqidta

It is a dead lion that you killed; it is ground flour that you ground; it is a burnt abode that you burned

The serial chain of three aphoristic images repeats the verb-ending form to flip the arrow of causality: the present has been preordained. Here syntax is employed to echo the conceptual-theological claim. As we shall see, this predetermined spirit—central to the zoharic proverb—is manifested through this specific syntactic order.

Another distinctive attribute of the zoharic proverb is to open with a construct state. In zoharic Aramaic, such constructs often appear as 'frozen construct chains'—set, formulaic expressions that recur throughout the text.⁶⁷ These chains typically serve as attributive modifiers creating dense and symbolic phrases.⁶⁸ For example, the proverb 'your heart's configuration reflected in your face' begins with a construct phrase (the configuration of your heart) which functions as the sentence's subject. The remainder of the sentence (ordered 'in your face, reflected') then predicates something about this subject, locating where this configuration manifests. In this way, the construct state is not merely a grammatical way to begin a sentence but a rhetorical device that establishes a conceptual entity, creating an expectation to be fulfilled as the proverb unfolds.

⁶⁶ *Eicha Rabbah*, 1 41.

⁶⁷ For this phenomenon in the Aramaic of BT see: Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, *Introduction to the Grammar of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, (Ugarit-Verlag, 2013), 59.

⁶⁸ For this modification, as opposed to a possessive modification construct (more common in BT) see: Shamma Friedman, *Studies in the Language and Terminology of Talmudic literature*, (The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2014), 46–48 [Hebrew]. For the close affinities of attributes expressed by the construct state, see Rivka ha-Levi, "Functional Changes of Šel Phrases in Contemporary Hebrew," *Lěšonénu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects* 63, no. 1–2 (2000): 62 [Hebrew].

The Oral Proverb in the Legends of the Zohar

Apothegms within legends are most often narrated in the context of dialogues about physiognomy. The rhetorical qualities of a proverb deliver a sharp, medical-like message. One could think of these sentences as following the literary convention in physiognomy of delivering a list of facial dispositions and its meaning in the mental or social one's fate or reality. This family of proverbs, however, employs the quasi-medical protocol in distinctly non-medical conversations between zoharic sages. Set against the backdrop of shared travels, these dialogues are primarily concerned with developing mystical ideas and concepts in homiletic form. In other words, the proverb allows an otherwise technical description to be integrated into the narrated conversation.

The physiognomic descriptions have the agency to decipher the facial code, or the 'semiotics of the body'.⁶⁹ Such proverbs are quite varied: the enlightened face shining in elevation ('From my Lord's luster the field glows' [מקסטיטורא דמר חקלא נהיר]),⁷⁰ the foggy and dark eyes ('Enveloping smoke appears in our eyes' [עטיפא דקוטרא בעיינין שכיח])⁷¹ or typological impressions ('Your Heart's configuration is apparent in your face' [דליבא באנפיך שכיח]).

The last case is particularly interesting because we can locate parallel vocabulary in a classic physiognomic formula in the *Zohar*, one that appears outside of a narrative or dialogical frame. While discussing the characteristics of hair, it is mentioned that curly hair is a sign of a 'curly heart', in the simple analogy: 'One whose hair is curly [...] his heart constricted in frames' (דשעריה קמיט [...] לביה קמיט כטופסא).⁷² The comparison between the dialogical and non-dialogical appearance is very telling. The hypothetical anonymous patient in the non-dialogical formula is converted to a direct, second-person diagnosis in the proverb. Thus, the dialogical form gives voice to the zoharic sage. The four-word proverb, in this case, fulfills this transformation, serving as a sharp literary tool that inserts medical insight into everyday conversation. It functions as a flexible device for transmitting physiognomic knowledge and integrating it into narrative sections of the *Zohar*.

This shift in content occurs thanks to the dialogical setting, in which interlocutors negotiate different opinions. The diagnosis is adapted for use in oral discourse and is shaped by the unique syntax of the proverb. It adopts jargon reserved for face-to-face

⁶⁹ Joseph Ziegler, "Complexio and the Transformation of Learned Physiognomy ca. 1200-ca. 1500," *Early Science and Medicine* 28, no. 3-5 (2023): 472.

⁷⁰ *Zohar* 1:196b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 2 p. 115.

⁷¹ *Zohar* 3:45b; Pritzker ed. Vol. 7 p. 281.

⁷² *Zohar* 2:70b; Pritzker ed. 4:393. As noted by Michael Schneider, (*The Rainbow, The Ladder and the Countenances: The Many Faces of Jewish Mysticism*, [Cherub Press, 2023] 150-160 [Hebrew]) the facial expressions in the *Zohar* are depicted and interpreted as a light or as a text.

diagnosis and reformulates it as a message of wisdom. The physiognomic proverb seems to be an integral part of a medical procedure. The poetics of diagnosis are far from technical; the protocol is artfully crafted. Formulating the diagnosis into a proverb loads its content with explanatory power: both general principle and local diagnosis. Only by considering the proverb in context of a dialogue between sages does its full agency come to light.

While the proverbs' general insights and schematic move for auspicious to inauspicious signs, often lose delicate facial details, this generality might suggest they are merely folkloristic commonplaces. Yet their calculated and persistent form—repeated within this discourse—is not random. Above all, the poetic significance of physiognomic proverbs is perhaps greater than their medical one. Physiognomy operates fundamentally as *scientia a posteriori*,⁷³ depending 'on effects and not causes'.⁷⁴ The core analogical principle—inner conditions are not the cause of external facial signs—establishes a reversed relationship between surface-cause and depth-effect that these proverbs articulate with particular rhetorical force. I shall return to the teleology of the proverb in the final section.

Proverb in Dialogue: Back to Bakhtin

In many cases, the proverb is introduced in the most elementary way: 'R. [...] said:...'. Yet, the attribution is not unimportant. For example, when a proverb is ascribed to Rabbi Shimon bar-Yochai, the head of the Zohar's companionship, it seems particularly significant.

Nevertheless, even while using someone's full intellectual weight and reputation, the proverb allows for a gap between the speaker and the spoken. As Morson suggested:

The apothegm's speaker withholds full responsibility for what he says. He seems to warn: I do not say these words, I only cite them, and they may have meanings I do not suspect. Apothegms are not so much proclaimed as posed.⁷⁵

The limited responsibility of the speaker minimizes the subjective framing and allows the proverb to be experienced as a self-evident, objective truth. Even when proverbs come up in dialogue, its authorship is almost transparent.⁷⁶ The speaker delivers the

⁷³ Joseph Ziegler, "Philosophers and Physicians on the Scientific Validity of Latin Physiognomy, 1200–1500," *Early Science and Medicine* 12, no. 3 (2007): 293.

⁷⁴ Ian Maclean, "The Logic of Physiognomy in the Late Renaissance," *Early Science and Medicine* 16 (2011): 278; Ziegler, "Philosophers," 306.

⁷⁵ Morson, *ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁶ Morson, *ibid.*, 45.

proverb as if it comes from outside himself: ‘The sense of the dictum is: The master has merely discovered the truth, but it does not depend on him, his word, or his personality.’⁷⁷

Both the homily and the storyline proverb have roots in the logic of verbal discourse. In my understanding, the employment of the proverb in both contexts shares the quality of observation from a distance. Even in a conversational context, the proverb has an epidictic tone that does not fully commit to dialogue. As a passive and tautological even when addressed directly to someone, it functions to decipher an inner dynamic within the addressee’s agency—without waiting for his response. The honest, straightforward analysis fills the entire capacity of the conversation. Although being delivered to a specific interlocuter, the proverb remains autarkic. The addresser offers piercing observations mirrored in his discerning eyes and sharp tongue. These preordained laws forced upon all humans, are determined by forces upon greater than man. The inevitability of destiny is mirrored in the elemental form of a proverb.⁷⁸ The proverb cannot foresee the future, yet it does recognize the present state or pattern (reported post facto) and views it free from temporal constraints. The proverb, being ontological rather than causal, leads to no outcome beyond the intermingling of what is now. The proverb is always spoken in the gnomic presence and note in the present tense of the dialogue. Except for the use of the second-person construct, there are no additional signs of active agents.

At this point, we should return to Bakhtin’s analysis of the nature of discourse in the literary text. According to Bakhtin, we can find two fundamental branches in the literary text: authoritative discourse—rooted in political, religious, or pedagogical authority—and internally persuasive discourse, which operates without institutional validation or explicit public sanction. The zoharic proverb, projected in its full force epidictic form is an authoritative discourse, both in its homiletical and narratological appearances.

The ‘authoritative word’, according to Bakhtin, is not something we simply consider or weigh—it demands acknowledgment and internalization.⁷⁹ Its power does not lie in persuasion but in the authority already embedded within it. We encounter it as already elevated, historically validated, and fused with hierarchical distance. It is connected to a past perceived as superior—‘the word of the fathers’—whose authority has long been established. As such, it does not appear alongside competing discourses as one among equals; rather, it resounds from a higher, more remote sphere, far removed from the realm of everyday interaction.

⁷⁷ Morson, *ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁸ Anna Lewandowska, Gerd Antos, “Cognitive Aspects of Proverbs,” *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 173.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 342.

In all forms, it is quite clear that the zoharic proverb forces its agenda and presents its insight expecting no response. As an authoritative discourse, the proverb ‘enters the artistic context as an alien body.’⁸⁰ In stark contradiction to open discussion, the internally persuasive discourse is ‘omnipresent in the context.’⁸¹ Even as part of a dialogue the proverb is not a dialogical but a truly monological argument (or a ‘simulated dialogue’),⁸² delivered to an addressee left speechless, more recipient than an interlocutor. The proverb is a dialogue only in form, presented as part of a conversational exchange, yet eliciting no real response—nor is any response expected. Though it disguises itself within a dialogic frame, it is, in essence, a citation with a distinctly monologic quality, originating from outside the immediate exchange. This is why the zoharic proverb becomes a one-line dialogue.

Its episodic appearance in a conversation is equal to the paradoxical definition of the proverb as ‘indirect speech act.’⁸³ As part of a homily, the answer must be found beyond the confines of the homily. This, in turn, creates the impression of a speaking voice of collective wisdom,⁸⁴ an external voice requiring an agent to deliver it. Its power is discerned from its own circular features that construct tautological sayings where the meaning of the nature of something is the sum of its components.⁸⁵ In the given conditions of both structure and content, no live audience is required to witness the equation. In both the dialogue and the homily, the proverb is spoken by an authoritative voice, one that lacks the livelihood of dialogue and becomes, in Bakhtin terms, a ‘dead quotation.’⁸⁶

At this point, I argue that the main force and strength of embedding of the proverb in the various layers of the *Zohar* is that it allows for an external, separate agency. It is not a coincidence that the zoharic proverb is not fully integrated into the flow of other sentences. Its partial integration results from the very nature of its content – a call coming from outside the context with an external perspective. Its Archimedean

⁸⁰ Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 344.

⁸¹ Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 347.

⁸² Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 22.

⁸³ Peter Grzybek, “Semiotic and Semantic Aspects of the Proverb,” *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds., Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (De Gruyter Open Poland, 2015), 78–79.

⁸⁴ Regarding the public sovereignty of the proverb, see: Weiss, “Did the Straw,” 166.

⁸⁵ E.g. in the verb-ending zoharic principle: “for every species seeks its own kind” (Pritzker ed. Vol. 5 p. 295) ‘זינא בתר זינייה אולא’ (Zohar 2:141a; 3:169a. see also in Leibovitch, *Pniney ha-Zohar*, 44 273§. For possible parallels in Hebrew kabbalistic texts, see: Bar-Asher, “Introduction,” 44; Leore Sachs-Shmueli, *Taboo and Prohibition in Castilian Kabbalah* (Schocken institute, 2024) 117 [Hebrew]; idem, *Sefer Toldot Adam by R. Joseph of Hamadan*, (Ben-Zvi Institute, 2025) 41, 123 [Hebrew].

⁸⁶ Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 344.

position allows the proverb to observe a given situation, react according to an objective, distanced understanding while free from bias.⁸⁷

Cosmogonical Insights and the Laws of Creation: Homiletical Proverbs

So far, we have paid little attention to the context and contents of the *Zohar*. Let us now turn to features unique to proverbs embedded in mystical contexts.

Within the distinctive profile of the zoharic corpus—a mosaic assemblage of primarily theosophical-theurgical and mystical homilies—the apothegm makes its own unique contribution and asserts a distinct literary agency. Its significance lies in its subtle ability to address highly sensitive philosophical issues, often in support of the ineffability and unknowability of God.⁸⁸

Apothegms typically engage with ‘ultimate questions’ that have ‘no solution,’ yet they treat these questions as meaningful pursuits. Their value lies not only in ‘each tentative answer’ but also in ‘the very process of inquiry.’ In this sense, they help ‘train our minds to increase wisdom’. Exploring the mysteries of existence often leads to paradox: the mind, moving ‘beyond its proper domain,’ comes up against ‘contradiction, infinite regress, and self-referential paradox’.⁸⁹

Tackling unanswered questions in a poetical form is particularly relevant for the *Zohar*, which dwells on the secrets of the divine’s most sacred and intimate moments, as its gradual becoming in the theogonic process leads to the unfolding of the Sefirot, the heavens, and the terrestrial land. As such, we can trace the apothegm in some of the most compelling themes of this heterogeneous corpus, such as the account of creation—entangled with essential perplexities and unanswered questions regarding the beginning of time and existence: questions of ontological origin, the measurement of time, pre-existence, the motivation for creation, and dualism. The proverb offers a compelling and calculated device to address these riddles given their fundamental difficulty. In addressing all-encompassing cosmic riddles, we can generalize by saying that the principle of holism (a fundamental abstract issue repeated in many proverbs)⁹⁰ sets the tone by pointing to the very center of the paradox.

In derivative discussions of creation concerned with theodicy, one finds pictorial and symbolically rich aphorisms. These include several proverbs analyzed earlier—‘The

⁸⁷ Compare to most accurate definitions of the proverb: “proverbists demonstrate that they refuse to exempt themselves from the critical gaze they fix on others. By convention, they despise all attempts to occupy an “Archimedean” position outside the world of human flaws they describe” (Morson, *ibid*, 156).

⁸⁸ Morson, *ibid*, 42.

⁸⁹ Morson, *ibid*, 51.

⁹⁰ Lewandowska, Antos, “Cognitive Aspects of Proverbs,” 171–173.

signet impresses certain patterns,'⁹¹ 'The fortress of vapor is discovered on earth,'⁹² 'The lip of the balance stands in the middle';⁹³—as well as new examples: 'dregs of an inkwell in seepage,'⁹⁴ 'in a waterskin of lofts they appear by the pint and endure,'⁹⁵ and even pairings of two proverbs, each consisting exactly four words: 'by the impact of his truncheons, ramparts are revealed; The fortress of vapor is discovered on earth';⁹⁶ 'In a grapple of strife a potentate appears'.⁹⁷ This cluster conveys the message that every created aspect in the world stands parallel to a counterpart. The zoharic symbolism of evil and divine harshness is predominantly present here.

Despite the differences between cosmogony and physiognomy, the basic rules and ideas of physiognomic art fit well with the concept of the apothegm in the Zohar in general. In this corpus, the apothegm most clearly serves to deliver paradoxical principles that manifest logical loops, bending linguistic and temporal order.

In the cosmogonical quadripartite proverb in the portion of Genesis (cited above), it is asserted: 'in a grapple of strife a potentate appears.' According to zoharic symbolism, where a knot is a demonic image, I suggest a possible reading of the proverb: in binding [or unifying] the universe's loose ends demons begin to rise. The apothegm illusively indicates how an attempt to solve the problem only transfers it to another dimension. According to this deep and thoughtful perspective, evil forces are here to stay—regardless of human intervention—and nothing can change this fundamental given fact. This deep nature of reality is a given law of existence, where cause and result, before and after, are all rendered redundant and lose their effect.

This capsule of solid truth, which escapes temporal order or causal logic, but reports and confirms a given fate, fits well with the physiognomic diagnosis in the Zohar which blurs the inner and outer borders of body, soul, reason and outcome. It is not clear if your face dictates your heart's form or vice versa, as long as 'the dispositions of the body one could show the dispositions of the soul'. As the order is unclear, the presence isn't open to any discussion. In that sense, and even with this uncertainty, the late appearance of the verb in the zoharic proverb flips this paradox over its head by endowing a strong tone. The verb always approves the content, and never denies it. Thus, the zoharic proverb becomes a strong, resonating confirmation and reflects a

⁹¹ Pritzker ed. Vol. 1, p. 182. See note 49.

⁹² Pritzker ed. Vol. 1, p. 178. See note 65.

⁹³ Pritzker ed. Vol. 1 p. 207; see note 4.

⁹⁴ Pritzker ed. Vol. 1, p. 181: *suspita de-qamrei go qulto'i*; סוספיתא דקמרי גו קולטוי.

⁹⁵ Zohar 1:33a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 1 p. 202: *be-qatfura di-le'eilta be-qastayhu sheikhchey*; בקטפורא דלעילתא בקסטטיהו שכיח.

⁹⁶ Zohar 1:29a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 1 p. 172: *be-maton qulpoi qastorin yedi'an; qustera de-qutra be-ar'ah shekiach*; מסון מלה; בקולפוי שכיח, קוסטרא דקוטרא – בארעא שכיח.

⁹⁷ Zohar 1:37a; Pritzker ed. Vol. 1 p. 233: *be-qitra de-palga qaspira [qastira] shekhiach*; בקיטרא דפלגא, קספירא [קסטירא] שכיח.

degree of amazement in this miraculous nature of facial signs, a true mirror for one's soul. In these circular terms of discourse, the apothegm is an essential component, assisting it in becoming demonstrative knowledge. This personal diagnosis, delivered in an aphoristic way, is an excellent example of the poetic versatility of the Zohar – presenting its graceful way – even in the medical field of physiognomy.

The proverb's insightfulness features an independent view of the holistic structure of the creation composed of contradictory opposites. Physiognomy can deduce internal problems by identifying superficial facial signs. Encountering a mystical revelation, the possessed individual's voice is mediated by a proverb, as if the self can outsource its own voice. Situated within a given social context, the proverb can swim against the current, and is endowed with self-restraint, admonition and the power of self-reflection. In the mystical theosophical literature of the *Zohar*, the most solid principles are hidden in every detail in the human or terrestrial circulation of life, but the messenger is always a Divine source. Hence, all the formalistic and linguistic characteristics of the proverb make it an external agent working on the text from within.

Conclusion

This article analyzed the zoharic proverb, a distinct four-word aphoristic form embedded within the Zohar. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, the proverb was situated as an 'external agent': structurally integrated into the Zohar's homilies and narratives while retaining an autonomous, quasi-oral voice. Endowed with brevity, archaic diction, rhythmic alliteration, and unusual syntax, the proverb is a unique aphoristic form with distinctive structural and stylistic features. Two classes of proverbs were identified: proverbs embedded in cosmogenic homilies and proverbs appearing within narratives with mystical or physiognomic content. The proverb's compact form allows it to function as an interruptive device: in homilies, it crystallizes complex theosophical teachings into incisive gnomic truths; in narrative dialogues, it functions as a punchline that reframes the conversation. In both settings, the proverb projects an assertive and conclusive tone while standing slightly apart from its surroundings.

Within the *Zohar*, cosmogenic proverbs are clustered in one unit and thematize the account of creation. Description is transformed into confirmation by employing deferred syntax and a fixed four-word structure. As such, the proverb operates as a unique form within the *Zohar*: simultaneously part of the textual fabric and yet external to it, issuing insight from a vantage point that appears to transcend the flow of speech or the homily.

Gershom Scholem acknowledged the presence of these sayings but underestimated their poetic and structural significance. By integrating paremiological methods with zoharic philology, this article has demonstrated that the proverb is not merely a stylistic flourish or linguistic curiosity, but a calculated performance that condenses mystical perception into a distilled, authoritative utterance. In doing so, it contributes to the polyphonic symphony of the Zohar as a distinct, enduring note—one that unsettles the boundary between orality and textuality and exemplifies how a text can embed within itself voices that remain autonomous, resonant, and irreducible.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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