

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE KABBALAH

The Early Beginnings of Mysticism and Esotericism

The development of the Kabbalah has its sources in the esoteric and theosophical currents existing among the Jews of Palestine and Egypt in the era which saw the birth of Christianity. These currents are linked with the history of Hellenistic and syncretistic religion at the close of antiquity. Scholars disagree on the measure of the influence exerted by such trends, and also by Persian religion, on the early forms of Jewish mysticism. Some stress the Iranian influence on the general development of Judaism during the period of the Second Temple, and particularly on certain movements such as the Jewish apocalyptic, a view supported by many experts on the different forms of Gnosticism, like R. Reitzenstein and G. Widengren. That there was an extensive degree of Greek influence on these currents is maintained by a number of scholars, and various theories have been adduced to explain this. Many specialists in the Gnosticism of the first three centuries of the common era see it as basically a Greek or Hellenistic phenomenon, certain aspects of which appeared in Jewish circles, particularly in those sects on the fringes of rabbinic Judaism – *ha-minim*. The position of *Philo of Alexandria and his relationship with Palestinian Judaism is of special weight in these controversies. In contrast to scholars like Harry Wolfson who see Philo as fundamentally a Greek philosopher in Jewish garb, others, like Hans Lewy and Erwin Goodenough, interpret him as a theosophist or even a mystic. Philo's work, they believe, should be seen as an attempt to explain the faith of Israel in terms of Hellenistic mysticism, whose crowning glory was ecstatic rapture. In his monumental book, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols. 1953–68), Goodenough maintains that, in contrast to Palestinian Judaism which found expression in *halakhah* and *aggadah* and in the esoteric ideas which were indigenous developments, Diaspora Judaism showed little evidence of Palestinian influence. Instead, he avers, it had a specific spirituality based on a symbolism which is not rooted solely in the *halakhah*, but which is endowed with an imaginative content of a more or less mystical significance. He believes that the literary evidence, such as the writings of Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, provides extremely useful keys to an understanding of the archaeological and pictorial documentation which he has assembled in such abundance. Although considerable doubt has been cast on Goodenough's basic theories there is sufficient material in his great work to stimulate investigation into previously neglected aspects of Judaism and into evidence which has been insufficiently examined. His argument on the basically mystical significance of the pictorial symbols cannot be accepted, but he did succeed in establishing a link between certain literary evidence extant in Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and esoteric teachings prevalent in Palestinian Judaism. A similar link between Philonic ideas and the viewpoint of the *aggadah*, including the *aggadah* of the mystics, was also suggested by Yitzhak Baer (*Zion*, 23–24 (1958/59), 33–34, 141–65). Philo's book *De Vita Contemplativa* (*About the Contemplative Life*, 1895) mentions the existence

of a sectarian community of “worshippers of God,” who had already formulated a definitely mystical understanding of the Torah as a living body, and this paved the way for a mystical exegesis of Scripture.

An important element common to both Alexandrian and Palestinian Judaism is the speculation on Divine Wisdom which has its scriptural roots in Proverbs 8 and Job 28. Here Wisdom is seen as an intermediary force by means of which God creates the world. This appears in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon (7:25) as “a breath of the power of God, and a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty... For she is an effulgence from everlasting light, And an unspotted mirror of the working of God, And an image of His goodness” (Charles). In the Slavonic Book of Enoch God commands His Wisdom to create man. Wisdom is here the first attribute of God to be given concrete form as an emanation from the Divine Glory. In many circles this Wisdom soon became the Torah itself, the “word of God,” the form of expression of the Divine Power. Such views of the mystery of Wisdom demonstrate how parallel development could take place, on the one hand through rabbinic exegesis of the words of Scripture, and on the other through the influence of Greek philosophical speculations on the Logos. It should be noted that there is no definite proof that Philo's writings had an actual direct influence on rabbinic Judaism in the post-tannaitic period, and the attempt to prove that the *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* of the Zohar is nothing but a Hellenistic Midrash (S. Belkin, in: *Sura*, 3 (1958), 25–92) is a failure. However, the fact that the Karaite *Kirkisānī (tenth century) was familiar with certain quotations drawn from Philonic writings shows that some of his ideas found their way, perhaps through Christian-Arab channels, to members of Jewish sects in the Near East. But it should not be deduced from this that there was a continuous influence up to this time, let alone up to the time of the formulation of the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages. Specific parallels between Philonic and kabbalistic exegesis should be put down to the similarity of their exegetical method, which naturally produced identical results from time to time (see S. Poznański, in *REJ*, 50 (1905), 10–31).

The theories concerning Persian and Greek influences tend to overlook the inner dynamism of the development taking place within Palestinian Judaism, which was in itself capable of producing movements of a mystical and esoteric nature. This kind of development can also be seen in those circles whose historical influence was crucial and decisive for the future of Judaism, e.g., among the Pharisees, the *tannaim* and *amoraim*, that is to say, at the very heart of established rabbinic Judaism. In addition, there were similar tendencies in other spheres outside the mainstream, in the various currents whose influence on subsequent Judaism is a matter of controversy: the *Essenes, the *Qumran sect (if these two are not one and the same), and the different Gnostic sects on the periphery of Judaism whose existence is attested to by the writings of the *Church Fathers. Some have sought to demonstrate the existence of mystical trends even in biblical times (Hertz,

Horodezky, Lindblom, Montefiore), but it is almost certain that the phenomena which they connected with mysticism, like prophecy and the piety of certain psalms, belong to other strands in the history of religion. Historically speaking, organized closed societies of mystics have been proved to exist only since the end of the Second Temple era; this is clearly attested to by the struggle taking place in this period between different religious forces, and by the tendency then current to delve more deeply into original religious speculation.

Apocalyptic Esotericism and Merkabah Mysticism

Chronologically speaking, it is in apocalyptic literature that we find the first appearance of ideas of a specifically mystical character, reserved for the elect. Scholars do not agree on whether the origins of this literature are to be found among the Pharisees and their disciples or among the Essenes, and it is quite possible that apocalyptic tendencies appeared in both. It is known from Josephus that the Essenes possessed literature which was both magical and angelological in content. His silence concerning their apocalyptic ideas can be understood as his desire to conceal this aspect of contemporary Judaism from his gentile readers. The discovery of the literary remains of the Qumran sect shows that such ideas found a haven among them. They possessed the original Book of Enoch, both in Hebrew and Aramaic, although it is quite likely that it was composed in the period preceding the split between the Pharisees and the members of the Qumran sect. In fact, traditions resembling those embedded in the Book of Enoch found their way into rabbinic Judaism at the time of the *tannaim* and *amoraim*, and it is impossible to determine precisely the breeding ground of this type of tradition until the problems presented by the discovery of the Qumran writings have been solved. The Book of Enoch was followed by apocalyptic writing up to the time of the *tannaim*, and, in different ways, after this period also. Esoteric knowledge in these books touched not only upon the revelation of the end of time and its awesome terrors, but also upon the structure of the hidden world and its inhabitants: heaven, the Garden of Eden, and Gehinnom, angels and evil spirits, and the fate of the souls in this hidden world. Above this are revelations concerning the Throne of Glory and its Occupant, which should apparently be identified with “the wonderful secrets” of God mentioned by the *Dead Sea Scrolls. Here a link can be established between this literature and the much later traditions concerning the *ma'aseh bereshit* and the *ma'aseh merkabah*.

It is not just the content of these ideas which is considered esoteric; their authors too hid their own individuality and their names, concealing themselves behind biblical characters like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Baruch, Daniel, Ezra, and others. This self-concealment, which was completely successful, has made it extremely difficult for us to determine the historical and social conditions of the authors. This pseudepigraphical pattern continued within the mystical tradition in the centuries that followed. The clear tendency toward asceticism as a way of preparing for the reception of

the mystical tradition, which is already attested to in the last chapter of the Book of Enoch, becomes a fundamental principle for the apocalyptics, the Essenes, and the circle of the Merkabah mystics who succeeded them. From the start, this pietist asceticism aroused active opposition entailing abuse and persecution, which later characterized practically the whole historical development of pietist tendencies (*hasidut*) in rabbinic Judaism.

The mysteries of the Throne constitute here a particularly exalted subject which to a large extent set the pattern for the early forms of Jewish mysticism. It did not aspire to an understanding of the true nature of God, but to a perception of the phenomenon of the Throne on its Chariot as it is described in the first chapter of Ezekiel, traditionally entitled *ma'aseh merkabah*. The mysteries of the world of the Throne, together with those of the Divine Glory which is revealed there, are the parallels in Jewish esoteric tradition to the revelations on the realm of the divine in Gnosticism. The 14th chapter of the Book of Enoch, which contains the earliest example of this kind of literary description, was the source of a long visionary tradition of describing the world of the Throne and the visionary ascent to it, which we find portrayed in the books of the Merkabah mystics. In addition to interpretations, visions, and speculations based on the *ma'aseh merkabah*, other esoteric traditions began to crystallize round the first chapter of Genesis, which was called *ma'aseh bereshit*. These two terms were subsequently used to describe those subjects dealing with these topics. Both Mishnah and Talmud (Ḥag. 2:1 and the corresponding *Gemara* in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud) show that, in the first century of the common era, esoteric traditions existed within these areas, and severe limitations were placed on public discussion of such subjects: “The story of creation should not be expounded before two persons, nor the chapter on the Chariot before one person, unless he is a sage and already has an independent understanding of the matter.” Evidence concerning the involvement of *Johanan b. Zakkai and his disciples in this sort of exposition proves that this esotericism could grow in the very center of a developing rabbinic Judaism, and that consequently this Judaism had a particular esoteric aspect from its very beginning. On the other hand, it is possible that the rise of Gnostic speculations, which were not accepted by the rabbis, made many of them tread very warily and adopt a polemical attitude. Such an attitude is expressed in the continuation of the Mishnah quoted above: “Whoever ponders on four things, it were better for him if he had not come into the world: what is above, what is below, what was before time, and what will be hereafter.” Here we have a prohibition against the very speculations which are characteristic of Gnosticism as it is defined in “Excerpts from the writings of [the Gnostic] Theodotus” (*Extraits de Théodote*, ed. F. Sagnard (1948), para. 78). In actual fact, this prohibition was largely ignored, as far as can be judged from the many statements of *tannaim* and *amoraim* dealing with these matters which are scattered throughout the Talmud and the Midrashim.

In an age of spiritual awakening and deep religious turmoil there arose in Judaism a number of sects with heterodox ideas resulting from a mixture of inner compulsion and outside influence. Whether Gnostic sects existed on the periphery of Judaism before the coming of Christianity is a matter of controversy (see below); but there is no doubt that *minim* (“heretics”) did exist in the tannaitic period and especially in the third and fourth centuries. In this period a Jewish Gnostic sect with definite antinomian tendencies was active in Sepphoris. There were also of course intermediate groups from which members of these sects gained an extended knowledge of theological material on *ma’aseh bereshit* and *ma’aseh merkabah*, and among these should be included the Ophites (snake worshippers) who were basically Jewish rather than Christian. From this source a considerable number of esoteric traditions were transmitted to Gnostics outside Judaism, whose books, many of which have been discovered in our own time, are full of such material – found not only in Greek and Coptic texts of the second and third centuries but also in the early strata of Mandaic literature, which is written in colloquial Aramaic. Notwithstanding all the deep differences in theological approach, the growth of Merkabah mysticism among the rabbis constitutes an inner Jewish concomitant to Gnosis, and it may be termed “Jewish and rabbinic Gnosticism.”

Within these circles theosophical ideas and revelations connected with them branched out in many directions, so that it is impossible to speak here of one single system. A particular mystical terminology was also established. Some of it is reflected in the sources of “normal” Midrashim, while part is confined to the literary sources of the mystics: the literature of the *heikhalot* and the *ma’aseh bereshit*. Verbs like *histakkel*, *zafah*, *iyyen*, and *higg’ā* have specific meanings, as do nouns like *ha-kavod*, *ha-kavod ha-gadol*, *ha-kavod ha-nistar*, *mara di-revuta*, *yozer bereshit*, *heikhalot*, *hadrei merkabah*, and others. Particularly important is the established usage of the term *Kavod* (“glory”) as a name both for God when He is the object of profound mystical enquiry and also for the general area of theosophical research. This term acquires a specific meaning, distinct from its scriptural usage, as early as the Book of Tobit and the end of the Book of Enoch, and it continues to be used in this way in apocalyptic literature. In contrast, the use of the word *sod* (“mystery”) in this context was relatively rare, becoming general only in the Middle Ages, whereas *raz* (“secret”) is used more often in the earlier texts.

Merkabah terminology is found in a hymn-fragment in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the angels praise “the image of the Throne of the Chariot” (Strugnell). Members of the sect combined ideas concerning the song of the angels, who stand before the Chariot, with other ideas about the names and duties of the angels, and all this is common to the sect of Qumran and to later traditions of the *ma’aseh merkabah*. From the very beginning these traditions were surrounded by an aura of particular sanctity. Talmudic *aggadah* connects exposition of the Merkabah with the descent of fire from above which surrounds the expositor. In the literature of the *heikhalot* other and more

daring expressions are used to describe the emotional and ecstatic character of these experiences. Distinct from the exposition of the Merkabah which the rabbis gave while on earth below was the ecstatic contemplation of the Merkabah experienced as an ascent to the heavens, namely descent to the Merkabah, through entering *pardes* (“paradise”). This was not a matter for exposition and interpretation but of vision and personal experience. This transition, which once again connects the revelations of the Merkabah with the apocalyptic tradition, is mentioned in the Talmud alongside the exegetic traditions (Ḥag. 14b). It concerns the four sages who “entered *pardes*.” Their fate demonstrates that here we are dealing with spiritual experiences which were achieved by contemplation and ecstasy. *Simeon b. Azzai “looked and died”; *Ben Zoma “looked and was smitten” (mentally); *Elisha b. Avuyah, called *aḥer* (“other”), forsook rabbinic Judaism and “cut the shoots,” apparently becoming a dualistic Gnostic; R. *Akiva alone “entered in peace and left in peace,” or, in another reading, “ascended in peace and descended in peace.” So R. Akiva, a central figure in the world of Judaism, is also the legitimate representative of a mysticism within the boundaries of rabbinic Judaism. This is apparently why Akiva and *Ishmael, who was his companion and also his adversary in halakhic matters, served as the central pillars and chief mouthpieces in the later pseudepigraphic literature devoted to the mysteries of the Merkabah. In addition, the striking halakhic character of this literature shows that its authors were well rooted in the halakhic tradition and far from holding heterodox opinions.

In mystic circles particular conditions were laid down for the entry of those fit to be initiated into the doctrines and activities bound up with these fields. The basic teachings were communicated in a whisper (Ḥag. 13b; *Bereshit Rabbah*, Theodor-Albeck edition (1965), 19–20). The earliest conditions governing the choice of those suitable were of two types. In the *Gemara* (Ḥag. 13b) basically intellectual conditions were formulated, as well as age limits (“at life’s half-way stage”); and in the beginning of *Heikhalot Rabbati* certain ethical qualities required of the initiate are enumerated. In addition to this, from the third and fourth centuries, according to Sherira Gaon (*Ozar ha-Ge’onim* to *Ḥagigah* (1931), *Teshuvot*, no. 12, p. 8), they used external methods of appraisal based on physiognomy and chiromancy (*hakkarat panim ve-sidrei sirtutin*). *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*, chapter 29, quotes an Aramaic *baraita* from the Merkabah mystics concerning physiognomy. A fragment of a similar *baraita*, written in Hebrew in the name of R. Ishmael, has been preserved, and there is no doubt that it was a part of Merkabah literature. Its style and content prove its early date (see G. Scholem in *Sefer Assaf* (1953), 459–95; the text itself is translated into German in *Liber Amicorum*, in honor of Professor C.J. Bleeker, 1969, 175–93).

Esoteric Literature: the *Heikhalot*, the *Ma’aseh Bereshit*, and the Literature of Magic

This literature occupies an extremely important place in the development of esotericism and mysticism. It is connected at

innumerable points with traditions outside its boundaries, in the Talmuds and Midrashim, and these traditions sometimes explain each other. In addition, esoteric literature contains a wealth of material that is found nowhere else. Many scholars, including Zunz, Graetz, and P. Bloch, have tried to show that a vast distance, both in time and subject matter, separates the early Merkabah ideas from those embedded in Talmud and Midrash, and they ascribed the composition of Merkabah literature to the geonic era. Even though it is quite possible that some of the texts were not edited until this period, there is no doubt that large sections originated in talmudic times, and that the central ideas, as well as many details, go back as far as the first and second centuries. Many of the texts are short, and in various manuscripts there is a considerable amount of basic material quite devoid of any literary embellishment. (For a list of the books belonging to this literature see *Merkabah Mysticism.) Of great importance are the texts entitled *Heikhalot Rabbati*, whose main speaker is R. Ishmael; *Heikhalot Zutrati*, whose main speaker is R. Akiva; and the *Sefer Heikhalot*, which has been published under the name of the Third Book of Enoch or the Hebrew Enoch. The traditions assembled here are not all of the same kind, and they indicate different tendencies among the mystics. We find here extremely detailed descriptions of the world of the Chariot, of the ecstatic ascent to that world, and of the technique used to accomplish this ascent. As in non-Jewish Gnostic literature, there is a magical and theurgic aspect to the technique of ascent, and there are very strong connections between Merkabah literature and Hebrew and Aramaic theurgic literature from both this and the geonic period. The earliest stratum of the *heikhalot* strongly emphasizes this magical side, which in the practical application of its teachings is linked to the attainment of the "contemplation of the Chariot." It is very similar to a number of important texts preserved among the Greek magic papyri and to Gnostic literature of the *Pistis Sophia* type which originated in the second or third century C.E.

The *heikhalot* books mentioned above refer to historical figures, whose connection with the mysteries of the Chariot is attested by Talmud and Midrash. On the other hand, there also existed early sources containing traditions attributed to various *tannaim* and *amoraim*; as some of them are almost or completely unknown, there would have been no point in appending their names to pseudepigraphical writings. In the Cairo *Genizah* a few fragments of a tannaitic Midrash on the Chariot were discovered (Ms. Sassoon 522), and the short fourth-century text *Re'iyot Yehezkel* belongs to the same category. It could be inferred from this that the mystics did not always try to conceal their identities, although in most cases they were inclined to do so. The ascent to the Chariot (which in the *Heikhalot Rabbati* is deliberately called "descent") comes after a number of preparatory exercises of an extremely ascetic nature. The aspirant placed his head between his knees, a physical position which facilitates changes in consciousness and self-hypnosis. At the same time, he recited hymns of an ecstatic character, the texts of which are ex-

tant in several sources, particularly in the *Heikhalot Rabbati*. These poems, some of the earliest *piyyutim* known to us, indicate that "Chariot hymns" like these were known in Palestine as early as the third century. Some of them purport to be the songs of the holy creatures (*hayyot*) who bear the Throne of Glory, and whose singing is already mentioned in apocalyptic literature. The poems have their own specific style which corresponds to the spirit of "celestial liturgy," and they have a linguistic affinity with similar liturgical fragments in the writings of the Qumran sect. Almost all of them conclude with the *kedushah* ("sanctification") of Isaiah 6:3, which is used as a fixed refrain. *Isaac Nappaḥa, a third-century Palestinian *amora*, puts a similar poem in the mouth of the kine who bore the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 6:12), in his interpretation of "And the kine took the straight way" (*va-yisharnah*, interpreted as "they sang"; Av. Zar. 24b), for he sees a parallel between the kine who bear the ark singing and the holy creatures who bear the Throne of Glory with a glorious festive song. These hymns clearly show their authors' concept of God. He is the holy King, surrounded by "majesty, fear, and awe" in "the palaces of silence." Sovereignty, majesty, and holiness are His most striking attributes. He is not a God Who is near but a God Who is afar, far removed from the area of man's comprehension, even though His hidden glory may be revealed to man from the Throne. The Merkabah mystics occupy themselves with all the details of the upper world, which extends throughout the seven palaces in the firmament of *aravot* (the uppermost of the seven firmaments); with the angelic hosts which fill the palaces (*heikhalot*); the rivers of fire which flow down in front of the Chariot, and the bridges which cross them; the *ofan* and *hashmal*; and with all the other details of the Chariot. But the main purpose of the ascent is the vision of the One Who sits on the Throne, "a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above" (Ezek. 1:26). This appearance of the Glory in the form of supernal man is the content of the most recondite part of this mysticism, called **Shi'ur Komah* ("measure of the body").

The teaching on the "measure of the body" of the Creator constitutes a great enigma. Fragments of it appear in several passages in the *ma'aseh merkabah* literature, and there is one particularly long section which has come down separately (an early *genizah* Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Heb., c. 65). Such passages enumerate the fantastic measurements of parts of the head as well as some of the limbs. They also transmit "the secret names" of these limbs, all of them unintelligible letter combinations. Different versions of the numbers and the letter combinations have survived and so they cannot be relied upon, and, all in all, their purpose (whether literal or symbolic) is not clear to us. However, the verse which holds the key to the enumeration is Psalms 147:5: "Great is Our Lord, and mighty in power," which is taken to mean that the extent of the body or of the measurement of "Our Lord" is alluded to in the words *ve-rav ko'ah* ("and mighty in power") which in *gematria* amount to 236. This number ($236 \times 10,000$ leagues, and, moreover, not terrestrial but celestial leagues) is the basic

measurement on which all the calculations are based. It is not clear whether there is a relationship between speculations on “the greatness of the Lord of the world” and the title *mara di-revuta* (“Lord of greatness”) which is one of the predications of God found in the Genesis Apocryphon (p. 2, line 4). The terms *gedullah* (“greatness”; e.g., in the phrase “*ofan* [wheel] of greatness”) and *gevurah* (“might”) occur as names for God in several texts of the Merkabah mystics. We should not dismiss the possibility of a continuous flow of specific ideas from the Qumran sect to the Merkabah mystics and rabbinic circles in the case of the *Shi'ur Komah* as well as in other fields. The paradox is that the vision of the *Shi'ur Komah* is actually hidden “from the sight of every creature, and concealed from the ministering angels,” but “it was revealed to R. Akiva in the *ma'aseh merkabah*” (*Heikhalot Zutradi*). The mystic, therefore, grasps a secret which even the angels cannot comprehend.

The provocative anthropomorphism of these passages perplexed many rabbis, and was the object of attacks by the Karaites – so much so that even Maimonides, who at first regarded the *Shi'ur Komah* as an authoritative work requiring interpretation (in his original Ms. of his commentary to the Mishnah, Sanh. 10), later repudiated it, believing it to be a late forgery (*Teshuvot ha-Rambam* (1934), no. 117). In fact, as G. *Scholem and S. *Lieberman have demonstrated, the *Shi'ur Komah* was an early and genuine part of mystic teaching in the days of the *tanna'im*. The theory does not imply that God in Himself possesses a physical form, but only that a form of this kind may be ascribed to “the Glory,” which in some passages is called *guf ha-Shekhinah* (“the body of the Divine Presence”). *Shi'ur Komah* is based on the descriptions of the beloved in Song of Songs (5:11–16), and it apparently became a part of the esoteric interpretation of this book. The early date of the *Shi'ur Komah* is attested by allusions to it in the Slavonic Book of Enoch, chapter 13 (ed. Vaillant (1952), p. 39), which still reflects the Hebrew terminology in its translation. Similarly, the Gnostic teaching of Markos (second century), on “the body of the truth” is a spiritualized Gnostic version of the *Shi'ur Komah*. Perhaps the idea of the “tunic” and garment of God also belonged to the *Shi'ur Komah*. This “tunic” is of great significance in the *ma'aseh bereshit* of the *Heikhalot Rabbati*, and echoes of this idea can be found in the rabbinic *aggadot* concerning the garment of light in which the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped himself at the moment of creation.

The ascent and passage through the first six palaces are described at length in the *Heikhalot Rabbati*, with details of all the technical and magical means which assist the ascending spirit and save it from the dangers lying in wait for it. These dangers were given much emphasis in all Merkabah traditions. Empty visions meet the ascending soul and angels of destruction try to confound it. At the gates of all the palaces it must show the doorkeepers “the seals,” which are the secret Names of God, or pictures imbued with a magical power (some of which are extant in the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia*), which protect it from attack. The dangers especially increase in number at the entrance to the sixth palace where it appears to the Merkabah

mystic as if “one hundred million waves pour down, and yet there is not one drop of water there, only the splendor of the pure marble stones which pave the palace.” It is to this danger in the ecstatic ascent that the words of R. Akiva refer in the story of the four who entered *pardes*: “when you come to the place of the pure marble stones, do not say ‘water, water.’” The texts also mention a “fire which proceeds from his own body and consumes it.” Sometimes the fire is seen as a danger (*Merkabah Shelemah* (1921), 1b) and at other times as an ecstatic experience which accompanies the entry into the first palace: “My hands were burned, and I stood without hands or feet” (Ms. Neubauer, Oxford 1531, 45b). The *pardes* which R. Akiva and his companions entered is the world of the celestial Garden of Eden or the realm of the heavenly palaces and the ascent or “rapture” is common to several Jewish apocalypses, and is mentioned by Paul (11 Cor. 12:2–4) as something which needs no explanation for his readers of Jewish origin. In contrast to the dangers which attend those who, although unfit for them, indulge in these matters and in the magical science of theurgy, great emphasis is laid on the illumination which comes to the recipients of the revelations: “There was light in my heart like lightning,” or “the world changed into purity around me, and my heart felt as if I had entered a new world” (*Merkabah Shelemah* 1a, 4b).

An early passage enumerating the basic subjects of the mystery of the Chariot is to be found in the Midrash to Proverbs 10, and, in a different version, in R. *Azriel's *Perush ha-Aggadot* (ed. Tishby (1945), 62). The subjects mentioned are the *hashmal*, the lightning, the cherub, the Throne of Glory, the bridges in the Merkabah, and the measurement of the limbs “from my toenails to the top of my head.” Other subjects which are of great importance in a number of sources are not mentioned. Among these are ideas concerning the *pargod* (“curtain” or “veil”) which separates the One Who sits on the Throne from the other parts of the Chariot, and upon which are embroidered the archetypes of everything that is created. There are different, highly colored traditions concerning the *pargod*. Some take it to be a curtain which prevents the ministering angels from seeing the Glory (Targ. of Job 26:9), while others hold that “the seven angels that were created first” continue their ministry inside the *pargod* (*Massekhet Heikhalot*, end of ch. 7). There was no fixed angelology, and different views, and indeed complete systems, have been preserved, ranging from those found in the Ethiopic Book of Enoch to the Hebrew Enoch found among the literature of the *heikhalot*. These ideas occupy a considerable place in the extant Merkabah literature, and, as would be expected, they reappear in various forms of a practical nature in incantations and theurgical literature. Knowledge of the names of the angels was already part of the mysticism of the Essenes, and it developed in both rabbinic and heterodox circles up to the end of the geonic period. Together with the concept of the four or seven key angels, there developed (about the end of the first or the beginning of the second century) a new doctrine concerning the angel *Metatron (*sar ha-panim*, “the prince of the Pres-

ence”) – who is none other than Enoch himself after his flesh had been transformed into “flaming torches” – and the place assigned to him above all the other angels. There are some sources which contain little or no reference to this subject or to other views associated with it (e.g., concerning the angel *Sandalfon), while others like the Hebrew Enoch (ed. H. Odeberg, 1928), dwell on it at length. At the beginning of the tannaitic period speculations are found concerning the angel who bore within him the name of God Himself, the angel Yahoel, who occupies a dominant position in the Apocalypse of Abraham. Everything said here of Yahoel was transferred in another circle to Metatron, to whom the mystics assigned many other secret names, most important of which were Yahoel and “the lesser YHWH.” While traditions concerning Yahoel and the lesser YHWH reappeared in different forms among the Gnostics, the subject of Metatron remained confined to Jewish circles for a long time. Metatron also took upon himself several of the duties of the angel *Michael, and from the amoraic period onward he was identified with the “prince of the world.” His title *ha-na'ar* (“the boy”) refers to his role as servant of God and is based on the linguistic usage of the Bible. Several extant passages of the *Shi'ur Komah* include references to Metatron and his role as servant of the Chariot.

In Merkabah literature the names of the angels easily intermingle with the secret Names of God, many of which are mentioned in the fragments of this literature still extant. Since many of these names have not been completely explained it has not yet been possible to ascertain whether they are meant to convey a specific theological idea – e.g., an emphasis on a particular aspect of God’s revelation or activity – or whether they have other purposes which we cannot fathom. Fragments of *heikhalot* literature mention names like Adiriron, Zohariel, Zavodiel, Ta’zash, Akhtriel (found also in a *baraita* emanating from this circle in Ber. 7a). The formula “the Lord, God of Israel” is very often added to the particular name, but many of the chief angels also have this added to their names (e.g., in the Hebrew Enoch) so it cannot be deduced from this whether the phrase refers to the name of an angel or to the name of God. Sometimes the same name serves to designate both God and an angel. An example of this is Azbogah (“an eightfold name”) in which each pair of letters adds up, through *gematria*, to the number eight. This “eightfold” name reflects the Gnostic concept of the *ogdoas*, the eighth firmament above the seven firmaments, where the Divine Wisdom dwells. In the *Heikhalot Zutarti* it is defined as “a name of power” (*gevurah*), i.e., one of the names of the Divine Glory, while in the Hebrew Enoch chapter 18 it becomes the name of one of the angelic princes; its numerical significance is forgotten and it is subject to the customary aggadic interpretation of names. The same is true of the term *ziva rabba*, which from one angle is no more than an Aramaic translation of *ha-kavod ha-gadol* (“the great glory”) found in the apocalypses and also in Samaritan sources as a description of the revealed God. But it also occurs in the lists of the mysterious names of the angel Metatron, and it is found with a similar meaning in Mandaic

literature. Just as non-Jewish Gnostics sometimes used Aramaic formulae in their Greek writings, so Greek elements and Greek formulae found their way into Merkabah literature. The dialogue between the mystic and the angel Dumiel at the gate of the sixth palace in the *Heikhalot Rabbati* is conducted in Greek (J. Levy, in *Tarbiz*, 12 (1941), 163–7). One of the names of God in this literature is Totrossiah, which signifies the *tetras* of the four letters of the name YHWH. The reverse parallel to this is the name Arbatiao which is found frequently in the magic papyri of this period.

The different tendencies of Merkabah mysticism established ways of contemplating ascent to the heavens – ways which were understood in their literal sense. Their basic conception did not depend on scriptural interpretation but took on its own particular literary form. The magical element was strong in the early stages of *heikhalot* literature only, becoming weaker in later redactions. From the third century onward interpretations appear which divest the subject of the Chariot of its literal significance and introduce an ethical element. Sometimes the different palaces correspond to the ladder of ascent through the virtues (e.g., in the *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, para. 9, ed. by Scholem in *Jewish Gnosticism...* (1965), 107); and sometimes the whole topic of the Chariot completely loses its literal meaning. This kind of interpretation is especially evident in the remarkable mystic utterance of the third-century amora *Simeon b. Lakish: “the patriarchs are the Chariot” (Gen. Rabba, 475, 793, 983, with regard to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Statements like these opened the door to the type of symbolic interpretation which flourished afterward in kabbalistic literature.

The first center for this type of mysticism was in Palestine, where a large part of *heikhalot* literature was written. Mystical ideas found their way to Babylonia at least as early as the time of *Rav, and their influence is recognizable, among other places, in the magical incantations which were inscribed on bowls to afford “protection” from evil spirits and demons, and which reflect popular Babylonian Judaism from the end of the talmudic period to the time of the *geonim*. In Babylonia, apparently, a number of magical prayers were composed, as well as treatises on magic, like the *Harba de-Moshe* (ed. Gaster 1896), *Sefer ha-Malbush* (Sassoon Ms. 290, pp. 306–11), *Sefer ha-Yashar* (British Museum, Margoliouth Ms. 752, fol. 91ff.), *Sefer ha-Ma'ilot*, *Havdalah de-R. Akiva* (Vatican Ms. 228), *Pishra de R. *Hanina b. Dosa* (Vatican Ms. 216, fols. 4–6), and others, some of which were written in Babylonian Aramaic. In all these the influence of Merkabah ideas was very strong. In Palestine, perhaps at the end of the talmudic period, the *Sefer ha-*Razim* was composed, which contains descriptions of the firmaments greatly influenced by *heikhalot* literature, while the “practical” part, concerning incantations, has a different style, partly adopted verbatim from Greek sources. From circles such as these emanated the magical usage of the Torah and Psalms for practical purposes (see JE III, s.v. Bibliomancy). This practice was based on the theory that essentially these books were made up from the Sacred Names of God and His

angels, an idea that first appeared in the preface to the *Sefer Shimmushei Torah*; only the midrashic introduction, with the title *Ma'yan ha-Hokhmah*, has been printed (Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash*, part 1 (1938), 58–61), but the whole work is extant in manuscript. Of the same type is the *Sefer Shimmushei Tehillim*, which has been printed many times in Hebrew and also exists in manuscript in an Aramaic version.

The poetical content of the literature of the *ma'aseh merkabah* and the *ma'aseh bereshit* is striking; we have already noted the hymns sung by the *hayyot* and the ministering angels in praise of their Creator. Following the pattern of several of the Psalms, the view was developed that the whole of creation, according to its nature and order, was singing hymns of praise. A hymnology was established in the various versions of the **Perek Shirah*, which without any doubt derives from mystical circles in the talmudic period. Connected with this poetical element is the influence that the Merkabah mystics had on the development of specific portions of the order of prayer, particularly on the morning *kedushah* (Ph. Bloch, in *MGWJ*, 37, 1893), and later on the *piyyutim* which were written for these portions (*silluk*, *ofan*, *kedushah*).

Jewish Gnosis and the *Sefer Yezirah*

In these stages of Jewish mysticism, the descriptions of the Chariot and its world occupy a place which in non-Jewish Gnosticism is filled by the theory of the “aeons,” the powers and emanations of God which fill the *pleroma*, the divine “fullness.” The way in which certain *middot*, or qualities of God, like wisdom, understanding, knowledge, truth, faithfulness, righteousness, etc., became the “aeons” of the Gnostics is paralleled in the tradition of the *ma'aseh bereshit*, although it did not penetrate the basic stages of Merkabah mysticism. The ten sayings by which the world was created (Avot 5:1) became divine qualities according to Rav (Hag. 12a). There is also a tradition that *middot* such as these “serve before the Throne of Glory” (ARN 37), thus taking the place occupied by the *hayyot* and the presiding angels in the Merkabah system. The semi-mythological speculations of the Gnostics which regarded the qualities as “aeons” were not admitted into the rabbinic tradition of the Talmud or the Midrashim, but they did find a place in the more or less heterodox sects of the *minim* or *hizzonim*. To what extent the growth of Gnostic tendencies within Judaism itself preceded their development in early Christianity is still the subject of scholarly controversy. Peterson, Haenchen, and Quispel, in particular, along with several experts on the Dead Sea Scrolls, have tried to prove that Jewish forms of Gnosis, which retained a belief in the unity of God and rejected any dualistic notions, came into being before the formation of Christianity and were centered particularly around the idea of primordial man (following speculation on Gen. 1:26; see **Adam Kadmon*). The image of the Messiah, characteristic of the Christian Gnostics, was absent here. These scholars have interpreted several of the earliest documents of Gnostic literature as Gnostic Midrashim on cosmogony and Haenchen in particular has argued that their basic Jewish character is

clearly recognizable in an analysis of the teaching of Simon Magus, apparently the leader of Samaritan Gnosis, a first-century heterodox Judaism. Even before this, M. **Friedlaender* had surmised that antinomian Gnostic tendencies (which belittled the value of the Commandments) had also developed within Judaism before the rise of Christianity. Although a fair number of these ideas are based on questionable hypotheses, nevertheless there is a considerable measure of truth in them. They point to the lack of Iranian elements in the early sources of Gnosis, which have been exaggerated by most scholars of the last two generations, whose arguments rest on no less hypothetical assumptions. The theory of “two principles” could have been the result of an internal development, a mythological reaction within Judaism itself, just as easily as a reflection of Iranian influence. The apostasy of the *tanna* Elisha b. Avuyah to a Gnostic dualism of this kind is connected in the Merkabah tradition with the vision of Metatron seated on the Throne like God. Mandaic literature also contains strands of a Gnostic, monotheistic, non-Christian character, which many believe originated in a Transjordanian Jewish heterodox sect whose members emigrated to Babylonia in the first or second century. The earliest strata of the *Sefer ha-**Bahir**, which came from the East, prove the existence of definitely Gnostic views in a circle of believing Jews in Babylonia or Syria, who connected the theory of the Merkabah with that of the “aeons.” These early sources are partly linked with the book **Raza Rabba*, which was known as an early work at the end of the geonic period; fragments of it can be found in the writings of the **Hasidei Ashkenaz*. Concepts which did not originate exclusively in Jewish mysticism, like the idea of the *Shekhinah* and the hypostases of stern judgment and compassion, could easily have been interpreted according to the theory of the “aeons” and incorporated with Gnostic ideas. The “exile of the *Shekhinah*,” originally an aggadic idea, was assimilated in Jewish circles at a particular stage with the Gnostic idea of the divine spark that is in exile in the terrestrial world, and also with the mystic view of the Jewish concept of the *keneset Yisrael* (“the community of Israel”) as a heavenly entity that represents the historical community of Israel. In the elaboration of such motifs, Gnostic elements could be added to rabbinic theories of the Merkabah and to ideas of Jewish circles whose connection with rabbinism was weak.

THE *SEFER YEZIRAH*. Speculation on the *ma'aseh bereshit* was given a unique form in a book, small in size but enormous in influence, that was written between the second and sixth centuries, perhaps in the third century, in a Hebrew style reflecting that of the Merkabah mystics. In early manuscripts it is called *Hilkhot Yezirah* (“Halakhot on Creation”), and later *Sefer Yezirah* (“Book of Creation”; uncritical edition by L. Goldschmidt, 1894). We should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that the *hilkhot yezirah* mentioned in *Sanhedrin* 65b and 67b could be one early version of this text. There is here an independent adaptation of the concept of the *ma'aseh bereshit* conceived in the spirit of the Pythagoreans of the tal-

mudic period. On the one hand the book is closely connected with Jewish speculation on “Divine Wisdom,” *Hokhmah*, and with the traditions concerning cosmogony, and on the other hand it introduces new concepts and an original plan of cosmogony far removed, for example, from the *baraita* of the work of creation. The “32 secret paths of Wisdom,” by means of which God created His world, are nothing more than the “ten *Sefirot*” added to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The *Sefirot*, a term which first appears in this text, are merely the primordial numbers of the later Pythagoreans. They are created powers, and not emanations from within the Divine. They also fulfill a decisive role in both the creation and the order of the world. When he describes their work the author uses expressions purposely taken from the description of the *hayyot* in the first chapter of Ezekiel. The first four *Sefirot* represent the four elements of the entire world: the spirit of God; ether – the spirit which is the world’s atmosphere; water; and fire. The following six *Sefirot* represent the six dimensions of space. The *Sefirot* are described in a style full of mysterious solemnity almost without parallel in Jewish tradition. This enigmatic style enabled both philosophers and kabbalists of a later age to base their ideas mainly on the first chapter of the book, interpreting it in their own individual ways.

In the rest of the book there is no further mention of these *Sefirot*, and there follows a description of the parts that the letters play in creation. The whole work of creation was enacted through the combinations of the Hebrew letters that were inscribed on the sphere of heaven and engraved into the spirit of God. Every process in the world is a linguistic one, and the existence of every single thing depends on the combination of letters that lies hidden within it. This idea is very close to the view mentioned in *Berakhot* 55a in the name of the *amora* Rav, that there are “letters through which heaven and earth were created,” and that Bezalel built the tabernacle (which, according to some, was a microcosmic symbol of the whole work of creation) through his knowledge of the combinations of these letters. Perhaps this view can be seen as the ultimate conclusion of the theory that the world was created through the Torah, which is made up of letters and which contains these combinations in some mysterious way. At this point an element common to the concepts of the *Sefer Yezirah* and to ideas concerning the practice of magic through the power of letters and names and their permutations clearly emerges. The author compares the division of the letters according to their phonetic origin with the division of creation into three areas: world (place), year (time), and soul (the structure of the human body). The relationship of the letters to the *Sefirot* is obscure. The whole of creation is “sealed” with combinations of the name Yaho (יָהוּ), and the emphasis on this name in the *Sefer Yezirah* recalls Gnostic and magical speculations on that same name, in its Greek form *Iáω*. Through “contemplation” of the mysteries of the letters and the *Sefirot* Abraham attained a revelation of the Lord of All. Because of this conclusion the authorship of the book was attributed to Abraham, and in some manuscripts it is even entitled “The Letters of our Father Abra-

ham.” The Ḥasidim of Germany (see *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz) read the book as a manual of magic, and they connected it with traditions about the creation of the **golem* (see G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (1965), 165–73).

Mysticism in the Geonic Period

The mishnaic and the talmudic periods were times of irrepressible creativity in the field of mysticism and esoteric inquiry. In the geonic era (from the seventh to the 11th centuries) little that was essentially original emerged, and the various streams already mentioned continued to exist and to intermingle. The center of mystical activity shifted to Babylonia, although its continuing influence in Palestine is evident in several chapters of later midrashic literature and particularly in the *Pirkei de-R. *Eliezer*. The poems of Eleazar *Kallir, which are greatly influenced by *Merkabah* literature and also by the *Shi’ur Komah*, belong to the end of the earlier period or were composed between the two eras. The poet made no attempt to conceal ideas which had been transmitted through old esoteric theories. As mysticism developed in this period, in both Palestine and Babylonia, it followed the pattern of the earlier period. Apocalyptic writing continued with great momentum; examples are extant from the time of the *amoraim* almost to that of the Crusades, and they were collected in Judah Even-Shemuel’s great anthology, *Midreshei Ge’ullah* (1954²), most of them from the geonic period. They display a marked connection with the *Merkabah* tradition, and several have been preserved in manuscripts of works by mystics. Simeon b. *Yohai appears here for the first time, side by side with R. Ishmael, as a bearer of apocalyptic tradition (in the *Nistarot de-R. Shimon b. Yohai*). Apocalypses were also attributed to the prophet Elijah, Zerubbabel, and Daniel.

At the other extreme there grew and flourished in these circles an angelology and a theurgy which produced a very rich literature, much of it extant from this period. Instead of, or in addition to, the contemplation of the Chariot, this presents a many-sided practical magic associated with the prince or princes of the Torah, whose names vary. Many incantations addressed to the angel Yofiel and his companions, as princes of wisdom and of Torah, are found in a large number of manuscripts of magical manuals, which continue the tradition of the earlier magical papyri. There was also a custom of conjuring up these princes particularly on the day before the Day of Atonement or even on the night of the Day of Atonement itself (see G. Scholem, in *Tarbiz*, 16 (1945), 205–9). Formulae for more mundane purposes have also been preserved in many incantations written in Babylonian Aramaic by Jewish “masters of the Name,” and not always on behalf of Jewish customers. Concepts from the *Merkabah* mystics’ circle, as well as mythological and aggadic ideas – some unknown from other sources – filtered through to groups which were far removed indeed from mysticism and much closer to magic. A demonology, extremely rich in detail, also grew up side by side with the angelology. Many examples of these (published by Montgomery, C. Gordon, and others) were found on clay

bowls which were buried, according to custom, beneath the thresholds of houses. They have important parallels among the incantations transmitted through literary tradition in the fragments of the *Genizah* and in the material which found its way as far as the Ḥasidim of Germany (e.g., in the *Havdalah de-R. Akiva*). The theology and angelology of the incantations were not always explained correctly by their editors, who saw in them a heterodox theology (for an example of this see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), 84–93). It was in Babylonia also, apparently, that the book *Raza Rabba* (“The Great Mystery”) was composed. Attacked by the Karaites as a work of sorcery, the book does indeed contain magical material but the extant fragments show that it also has some Merkabah content, in the form of a dialogue between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael. As the angelology in these fragments has no parallel in other sources, it would seem that the work is a crystallization of an early form of a theory of the “aeons” and of speculations of a Gnostic character. The style, quite different from that of the *heikhalot*, indicates a much later stage. These fragments were published by G. Scholem in *Reshit ha-Kabbalah* (1948), 220–38.

The beginnings of new trends in this period can be discerned in three areas:

(1) The utterances employed in the creation of the world were conceived either as forces within the Chariot or as “aeons,” *middot*, or hypostases. To what extent this speculation is associated with the view of the ten *Sefirot* in the *Sefer Yezirah* is not altogether clear. It is evident, however, that in Jewish Gnostic circles the concept of the *Shekhinah* occupied a completely new position. In the early sources “*Shekhinah*” is an expression used to denote the presence of God Himself in the world and is no more than a name for that presence; it later becomes a hypostasis distinguished from God, a distinction that first appears in the late Midrash to Proverbs (Mid. Prov. 47a: “the *Shekhinah* stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said to Him”). In contrast to this separation of God and His *Shekhinah*, there arose another original concept – the identification of the *Shekhinah* with *keneset Yisrael* (“the community of Israel”). In this obviously Gnostic typology, the allegories which the Midrash uses in order to describe the relationship of the Holy One, blessed be He, to the community of Israel are transmuted into this Gnostic concept of the *Shekhinah*, or “the daughter,” in the eastern sources which are embedded in *Sefer ha-Bahir* (G. Scholem, *Les Origines de la Kabbale* (1966), 175–94). Gnostic interpretations of other terms, like wisdom, and of various talmudic similes in the spirit of Gnostic symbolism, can be understood as going back to the early sources of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (*ibid.*, 78–107). Several of the book’s similes can be understood only against an Oriental background, and Babylonia in particular, as, for example, the statements concerning the date palm and its symbolic significance. The ascent of repentance to reach the Throne of Glory is interpreted in a late Midrash (PR 185a) as an actual ascent of the repentant sinner through all the firmaments, and so the process of repentance is closely connected here with the process of ascent to the Chariot.

(2) In this period the idea of the transmigration of souls (**gilgul*) also became established in various eastern circles. Accepted by Anan b. *David and his followers (up to the tenth century) – although later rejected by the Karaites – it was also adopted by those circles whose literary remains were drawn upon by the redactors of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*. For Anan (who composed a book specifically on this subject) and his followers the idea, which apparently originated among Persian sects and Islamic Mutazilites, had no mystical aspects. It is apparent, however, that the mystics’ idea of transmigration drew upon other sources, for in the sources of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* it makes its appearance as a great mystery, alluded to only through allegory, and based on scriptural verses quite different from those quoted by the sect of Anan and repeated by Kirkisāni in his *Book of Lights* (pt. 3, chs. 27–28).

(3) A new element was added to the idea of the Sacred Names and angels which occupied such a prominent position in the theory of the Merkabah. This was an attempt to discover numerological links, through *gematria*, between the different types of names and scriptural verses, prayers, and other writings. The numerological “secrets,” *sodot*, served two purposes. They ensured, firstly, that the names would be spelled exactly as the composers of *gematriot* received them through written or oral sources – though this system did not entirely save them from mutilation and variation, as is clearly shown by the mystical writings of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz. Secondly, by this means they were able to give mystical meanings and “intentions” (*kavvanot*) to these names, which served as an incentive to deeper meditation, especially since many of the names lacked any significance. This process seems to be connected with a decline in the practical use of this material during preparation for the soul’s ecstatic ascent to heaven. Names which originated through intense emotional excitement on the part of contemplatives and visionaries were stripped of their meaning as technical aids to ecstatic practice, and so required interpretations and meanings on a new level of *kavvanah*. All the names, of whatever kind, have therefore a contemplative content; not that ascent to the Merkabah completely disappeared at this time, for the various treatises in many manuscripts on the methods of preparation for it testify to the continuity of their practical application. However, it is clear that this element gradually became less significant. Another new factor must be added to this: the interpretation of the regular prayers in the search for *kavvanot* of this numerical type.

It is impossible to determine with any certainty from the evidence that remains where the secrets of the names and the mysteries of prayer according to this system of *gematria* first made their appearance. The new interpretations of prayer link the words of phrases of the liturgy generally with names from the Merkabah tradition and angelology. Perhaps this link was first formulated in Babylonia; but it is also possible that it grew up in Italy, where the mysteries of the Merkabah and all the associated material spread not later than the ninth century. Italian Jewish tradition, particularly in the popular forms it assumed in *Megillat *Aḥimaʿaz*, clearly shows that the rabbis

there were well versed in matters of the Merkabah. In addition it tells of the miraculous activity of one of the Merkabah mystics who emigrated from Baghdad, namely Abu Aharon (see Aaron of *Baghdad), who performed wonders through the power of the Sacred Names during the few years that he lived in Italy. The later tradition of the Ḥasidim of Germany (12th century) maintained that these new mysteries were transmitted about the year 870 to R. Moses b. *Kalonymus in Lucca by this same Abu Aharon, the son of R. Samuel ha-Nasi of Baghdad. Afterward, R. Moses went to Germany where he laid the foundations of the mystical tradition of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, which grew up around this new element. The personality of Abu Aharon remains obscure in all these traditions, and the recent attempts (in several papers by Israel Weinstock) to see him as a central figure in the whole development of the Kabbalah and as author and editor of many mystical works, including the *heikhalot* literature and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, are founded on an extreme use of *gematriot* and on dubious hypotheses (see *Tarbiz*, 32 (1963), 153–9 and 252–65, the dispute between I. Weinstock and G. Scholem, and Weinstock's reply in *Sinai*, 54 (1964), 226–59). In any event, there is no doubt that at the end of the geonic period mysticism spread to Italy, in the form of Merkabah literature and perhaps also in the form of the above-mentioned theory of names, which served as an intermediate link between the orient and the later development in Germany and France. These ideas reached Italy through various channels. The magical theurgic elements in them came to the fore, while the speculative side became weaker. This latter was represented in the main by the commentary of the physician Shabbetai *Donnolo to the *Sefer Yezirah* which was indisputably influenced by the commentary of Saadiah b. Joseph *Gaon to the same work. It is impossible to say to what extent theosophic writings of a Gnostic character, in Hebrew or Aramaic, also passed through these channels, but this possibility should not be denied.

From the numerous remains of mystical literature extant from the talmudic and geonic periods it can be deduced that these types of ideas and attitudes were widespread in many circles, wholly or partially restricted to initiates. Only on very rare occasions is it possible to establish with certainty the personal and social identity of these circles. There is no doubt that, apart from the individual *tannaim* and *amoraim* whose attachment to mystical study is attested by reliable evidence, there were many whose names are unknown who devoted themselves to mysticism and even made it their chief preoccupation. In addition to the rabbis that have already been mentioned, R. *Meir, R. *Isaac, R. *Levi, R. Joshua b. *Levi, R. *Hoshaiah, and R. Inyani b. Sasson (or Sisi) were also involved with mystical ideas. The identity of those who studied theurgy (who were called, in Aramaic, “users of the Name,” and only from the geonic period onward “masters of the Name,” *ba'alei ha-Shem*) is completely unknown, and most of them, of course, did not come from rabbinic circles. Our knowledge of the exponents of mysticism and esotericism in the geonic period is even more limited. Geonic responsa re-

veal that esoteric traditions did spread to the leading academies, but there is no proof that the foremost *geonim* themselves were steeped in these teachings or that they actually practiced them. The material touching on Merkabah traditions in the responsa and in the commentaries of the *geonim* (the greater part of which were assembled by B.M. Levin in *Ozar ha-Geonim to Hagigah* (1931), 10–30, and in the section on commentaries 54–61) is notable for its extreme caution, and occasionally for its forbearance. The main attempt to link the theories of the *Sefer Yezirah* with contemporary philosophical and theological ideas was made by Saadiah Gaon, who wrote the first extensive commentary to the book. He refrained from dealing in detail with the subject matter of the Merkabah and the *Shi'ur Komah*, but at the same time he did not disown it despite the attacks of the Karaites. In several instances Sherira b. Ḥanina *Gaon and Hai *Gaon set out to discuss matters in this field, but without connecting their explanations with the philosophical ideas expressed elsewhere in their writings. Hai Gaon's opinion in his well known responsum concerning some of the Secret Names, such as the 42- and the 72-lettered Name, led others to attribute to him more detailed commentaries on these subjects, and some of these came into the possession of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz (see J. Dan, *Torat ha-Sod shel Ḥasidut Ashkenaz*, 1968). The words that Hai Gaon addressed to the rabbis of Kairouan show that the esoteric teaching on names had an impact even on the more distant Diaspora, but they also demonstrate that there was no tradition and little textual distribution of the literature of the *heikhalot*, of which the *gaon* says “he who sees them is terrified by them.” In Italy this literature did spread, particularly among the rabbis and the poets (*paytanim*), and an important section of the work of Amittai b. Shephatiah (ninth century) consists of Merkabah poems. As these traditions passed into Europe, some circles of rabbinic scholars became once more the principal but not the only exponents of mystical teaching.

Aggadot and Midrashim with angelological and esoteric tendencies were also written in this period. The *Midrash Avkir*, which was still known in Germany up to the end of the Middle Ages, contained material rich in mythical elements concerning angels and names. The remains of it which appear in the *Likkutim mi-Midrash Avkir* were collected by S. Buber in 1883. Various parts of the *Pesikta Rabbati* also reflect the ideas of the mystics. The *Midrash Kohen* is made up of different elements (Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash*, pt. 2 (1938), 23–39, and, with a commentary, in *Sefer Nit'ei Na'amanim*, 1836); the first part contains a remarkable combination of ideas concerning the Divine Wisdom and its role in creation and the theory of the *Shekhinah*, while the rest of the work includes different versions of angelology and a version of *ma'aseh bereshit*. An element of *gematria* also appears. Judging from the Greek words in the first part, the extant text was edited in Palestine or in southern Italy. In the tradition of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz (British Museum Ms. 752 fol. 132b) a fragment of a Midrash survives concerning the angels active during the Exodus from Egypt, which is also based to a large extent on the exegesis of

gematriot, and it would seem that there were other Midrashim of this type whose origin is not known.

While many ideas concerning God and His manifestation are expressed or implied in the Merkabah literature, no particular concentrated attention is paid in these early stages of mysticism to the teaching about man. The emphasis of the Merkabah mystics is on the ecstatic and contemplative side, and man interested them only insofar as he received the vision and revealed it to Israel. Their speculations contain no specific ethical theory nor any new concept of the nature of man.

Hasidic Movements in Europe and Egypt

Religious impulses which were mystical in the sense of involving man's powerful desire for a more intimate communion with God and for a religious life connected with this developed in the Judaism of the Middle Ages in different places and by various means; not all are associated exclusively with Kabbalah. Such tendencies resulted from a fusion of internal drives with the external influence of the religious movements present in the non-Jewish environment. Since their proponents did not find the answer to all their needs in the talmudic and midrashic material which purported to bind man closer to God – although they utilized it as far as they could and also at times based far-fetched interpretations on it – they drew extensively on the literature of the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, and on the devout Christian ascetic tradition. The intermingling of these traditions with that of Judaism resulted in tendencies which were regarded as a kind of continuation of the work of the *Ḥasideans of the tannaitic period, and they stressed the value of *ḥasidut* as a way of bringing man nearer to *devekut* ("communion" with God) although this term was not yet used to designate the culmination of *ḥasidut*. Extremism in ethical and religious behavior, which in the sayings and literature of the rabbis characterized the term "*ḥasid*" ("pious") as against "*zaddik*" ("righteous"), became the central norm of these new tendencies. They found their classical literary expression, first and foremost, in 11th-century Spain in *Hovot ha-Levavot* by *Bahya ibn Paquda which was originally written in Arabic. The material dealing with the life devoted to communion of the true "servant" – who is none other than the *ḥasid* yearning for the mystical life – is taken from Sufi sources and the author's intention was to produce an instructional manual of Jewish pietism which culminated in a mystical intent. A Hebrew translation of the *Hovot ha-Levavot* was made on the initiative of *Abraham b. David of Posquières and the early circle of kabbalists in Lunel. The book's great success, especially in Hebrew, shows how much it answered the religious needs of people even beyond the confines of the Kabbalah. The obvious connection with talmudic tradition, which served as the point of departure for explanations of a remarkable spiritual intent, was a distinguishing feature in works of this kind, which also clearly reveal neoplatonic philosophical elements. Such elements facilitated the creation of formulations of a mystical character, and this philosophy became one of its most powerful means of expression. Several of the poems of Solomon ibn

*Gabirol, Bahya's older contemporary, evidence this trend toward a mystical spirituality, and it is expressed particularly in the concepts of his great philosophical work, *Mekor Ḥayyim*, which is completely saturated with the spirit of neoplatonism. The extent to which his poems reflect individual mystical experiences is controversial (cf. the view of Abraham Parnes, *Mi-Bein la-Ma'arakhot* (1951), 138–61). In Spain, after a century or more, these tendencies intermingled with the emerging Kabbalah, where traces of Gabirol may be seen here and there, especially in the writings of Isaac b. *Latif.

Parallel with this was a growth of *ḥasidut* of a mystical bent in Egypt in the days of Maimonides and his son Abraham b. Moses b. *Maimon; this, however, found no echo in the Kabbalah, remaining an independent occurrence of a Jewish Sufi type which is recorded as late as the 14th or even the 15th century. No mere figure of speech, the epithet "Ḥasid" was a description of a man who followed a particular way of life, and it was appended to the names of several rabbis from the 11th century onward, in both the literary and the personal records that survived in the *Genizah*. The Egyptian trend of *ḥasidut* turned into "an ethically oriented mysticism" (S.D. Goitein), particularly in the literary productions of Abraham b. Moses b. Maimon (d. 1237). The mystical aspect of his book *Kifāyat al-ʿĀbidīn* (ed. S. Rosenblatt, 2 vols. (1927–38), with the title *The High Ways to Perfection*) is entirely based on Sufi sources and bears no evidence of any similar Jewish tradition known to the author. The circle of Ḥasidim which grew up around him stressed the esoteric aspect of their teaching (S.D. Goitein), and his son, R. Obadiah, also followed this path (G. Vajda, in *JJS*, 6 (1955), 213–25). A much later work of the same kind was discussed by F. Rosenthal (*HUCA*, 25 (1940), 433–84). What remains of this literature is all written in Arabic, which may explain why it found no place in the writings of the Spanish kabbalists, most of whom had no knowledge of the language.

An essentially similar religious movement grew up in France and Germany, beginning in the 11th century. It reached its peak in the second half of the 12th and in the 13th century, but it continued to have repercussions for a long time, particularly in the Judaism of the Ashkenazi world. This movement – known as the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz – has two aspects: the ethical and the esoteric-theosophical. On the ethical plane a new ideal developed of extreme *ḥasidut* linked to a suitable mode of life, as described particularly in the *Sefer Ḥasidim* of Judah b. Samuel *he-Ḥasid, extant in two versions, one short and the other long. Along with specific pietistic customs there grew up a particular method of repentance which, remarkable for its extremism, had a marked influence on Jewish ethical behavior. The common factor in all the ḥasidic movements of Spain, Egypt, and Germany was the violent opposition that they aroused, attested by the Ḥasidim themselves. A Ḥasidism which does not arouse opposition in the community cannot, according to their own definition, be considered a true one. Equanimity of spirit, indifference to persecution and ignominy; these are the distinguishing traits of the Ḥasid, to whichever particular circle he belongs. Although the Ḥasidei