

CHAPTER ONE



THE PROBLEM

1. The State of Research: The Views of Graetz and Neumark

The question of the origin and early stages of the Kabbalah, that form of Jewish mysticism and theosophy that appears to have emerged suddenly in the thirteenth century, is indisputably one of the most difficult in the history of the Jewish religion after the destruction of the Second Temple. Just as indisputably, it is one of the most important. The significance acquired by the kabbalistic movement within the Jewish world was so great and its influence at times so preponderant that if one wishes to understand the religious possibilities inherent in Judaism, the problem of the specific historical character of this phenomenon appears to be of primary importance. Researchers, therefore, have justly devoted a great deal of attention to this problem and have made diverse attempts to find a solution.

The difficulty does not lie only in the prejudices with which many scholars have approached this problem, although such prejudices—whether of an apologetic or of an explicitly hostile nature—are in no small measure responsible for the prevailing confusion. Two circumstances, in particular, have impeded research in this area. Above all, the original sources, the oldest kabbalistic texts—

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those best suited to shed light on the circumstances under which the Kabbalah made its appearance—have by no means been sufficiently studied. This is not surprising, for these documents contain hardly any historical accounts that could clarify by means of direct testimony either the milieu into which the Kabbalah was born or its origin. To the extent that such accounts do exist, they are mostly pseudepigraphical stories and inventions. Nor is the task of the historian of religion rendered easier by an abundance of detailed mystical texts whose analysis could compensate for this paucity of historical documents. On the contrary, he faces texts that are preserved only in a fragmentary state, rendering them extremely difficult to understand, and that employ concepts and symbols so strange that often they are simply incomprehensible. These difficulties in deciphering the oldest texts are further increased by the style in which they are written; the syntax alone can often drive the reader to despair.

Moreover, these primary sources are few. We are not dealing here with either voluminous works or personal documents that include exchanges of letters or biographical records of the kind that are of such invaluable assistance to the historian of Christian or Islamic mysticism. Nearly all documents of this nature have been lost in the storms of Jewish history. When I was fortunate enough to discover one such letter written by a central figure of the early days of the Provençal Kabbalah, this came as a great and pleasant surprise.

Since the kabbalistic literature appears to turn only its most forbidding face toward researchers, few of them have taken the pains to rescue the manuscripts from the dust of the libraries, publish them, and attempt to uncover their meaning. Adolph Jellinek was the only nineteenth-century scholar to publish at least some texts that bear on the investigation of the Kabbalah of the thirteenth century, and of these only a few relate to the earliest period or to that which immediately followed. The authors who wrote about the Kabbalah were content to study only what the kabbalists themselves had chanced to publish. It does not require much imagination to conceive how unsatisfactory these editions of difficult texts are to the modern researcher and how liable they are to lead him to false conclusions through incorrect readings and other deficiencies. On this difficult terrain, the absence of any painstaking philological

spadework whose conclusions could supply the basis for a comprehensive structure has led to disastrous results.

If I have discussed at some length the difficulties with which the researcher of the Kabbalah must grapple, it has been in order to emphasize that we cannot expect any easy and elegant solution of problems that by their very nature defy elementary and simplistic treatment. Nevertheless, we must stake out a path and unravel with the greatest possible clarity and care the knotty problems along the way. This task is not as impossible as it may appear at first or even second glance. Much more of the kabbalistic literature of the first half of the thirteenth century has survived than had been assumed earlier. Even if these writings do not contain very many of the original sources that antedate the period, they at least make it possible for us to form a precise idea of the state of the Kabbalah in the generation following its entrance upon the scene. The analysis of the different tendencies that then arose and took shape within the Kabbalah can also teach us a few things about what preceded them. Moreover, it was precisely these developments in the first half of the thirteenth century that proved particularly productive for kabbalistic Judaism and that profoundly influenced the following generations.

Unfortunately, the most voluminous kabbalistic work of the thirteenth century, the *Zohar*, namely, the complex of writings included within it, must be entirely eliminated from this discussion of the origin and early stages of the Kabbalah. The contention has often been made, and is still frequently repeated, that this book contains in part, if only in the form of a later redaction or revision, texts of great antiquity whose identification and analysis would thus be of the greatest relevance for our investigation. Most of the writings on the Kabbalah have taken practically no account of the sources and the points of reference of scientific discussion that will be treated here, but have relied almost exclusively upon the *Zohar*. In the chapter of my book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in which I touch upon this point, I presented the results of an extensive and detailed investigation of this work and demonstrated that there is unfortunately no basis for assuming that the *Zohar* contains any ancient texts. The entire work belongs to the last quarter of the thirteenth century and is of no use to us in the discussion that follows. Efforts are still being made in our day to sift out ancient elements of

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one kind or another, but they cannot withstand philological analysis and rather belong to the realm of fantasy.¹ The *Zohar* is based entirely upon rabbinic and kabbalistic literature composed before 1275. If it were possible to prove otherwise in a truly convincing manner, our task would, of course, be greatly facilitated. I once made a serious attempt to do so myself, but this endeavor, to which I devoted a number of years, thoroughly persuaded me that this thesis was untenable. As things stand, we must turn aside from this high road and make do on the thornier path of historical analysis of the texts that are nearer to the origin and first stages of the Kabbalah.

This automatically excludes from consideration certain theories that readily trace the kabbalistic doctrines back to antiquity. These theories in the form in which they have been presented until now—for example, in the widely read book of Adolphe Franck²—no longer merit serious scholarly discussion. Nor is it possible to take seriously Tholuck's attempt to show that the Kabbalah is historically dependent upon Muslim Sufism.³ The philological and historical foundations of these investigations were much too weak to justify their authors' far-reaching results and conclusions. It is thus not surprising that scholarship soon turned its back upon these views. On the other hand, the forms of Jewish mysticism that appeared in the Middle Ages from around 1200 onward under the

1. The earlier literature is noted in the bibliography to chapter 5 of my book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 430–432. The most recent attempt to demonstrate the presence of old sources in the *Zohar* was made by Professor Samuel Belkin in his Hebrew article “The *Midrash ha-Ne ‘elam* and its Sources in the Old Alexandrian Midrashim,” in the annual *Sura* 3 (1958): 25–92. Unfortunately, his argument is completely wanting in its methods as well as its results and represents a definite regression in scholarship, as R. J. Zwi Werblowsky has demonstrated in a detailed critique of Belkin's thesis in “Philo and the *Zohar*,” *JJS* 10 (1959): 23–44, 113–135. Finkel's “reply” to Werblowsky (see below ch. 4, n. 111) hardly deserves to be taken seriously.

2. Adolphe Franck, *La Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* (Paris, 1843; 3rd ed., 1892). Franck arrives at the conclusion (I am citing according to the German translation by Adolph Jellinek [Leipzig, 1844], 287) that “the materials of the Kabbalah were drawn from the theology of the ancient Persians,” but that this borrowing did not detract from the originality of the Kabbalah, for it replaced the dualism in God and in nature with the absolute unity of cause and substance. (Franck took the Kabbalah to be a pantheistic system.)

3. F. A. Tholuck, *Commentatio de vi, quam graeca philosophia in theologia tum Muhammedanorum tum Judaeorum exercuerit. II. Particula: De ortu Cabbalae* (Hamburg, 1837).

name “Kabbalah” are so different from any earlier forms, and in particular from the Jewish gnosis of Merkabah mysticism and German Hasidism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that a direct transition from one form to the other is scarcely conceivable. This difference has not escaped the notice of scholars, who have tried to account for it, each in his own manner. Precisely because the structure of kabbalistic thought was completely unlike that of older or contemporary currents, it engendered explanations that were forced to take that state of affairs into consideration. Two theories, in particular, have been advanced with regard to the formation of the Kabbalah. Their authors undertook to prove their validity as best they could and exerted a considerable influence over the past few generations. I refer here to Graetz and Neumark, about whose conceptions I wish to make a few remarks, even though, or perhaps precisely because, they are so utterly different in both principle and method from those presented in this book.

Graetz⁴ proposed an historical explanation based upon the great events and controversies of Jewish history. According to him, the Kabbalah was essentially nothing but a reaction against the radical rationalism of the Maimonideans—the adherents of the philosophy of Maimonides, who died in Fostat (Old Cairo) in 1204 but had enthusiastic followers throughout the Orient and in Provence as well. There, his principal work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, appeared in the year of his death, translated from the original Arabic into Hebrew. The appearance of the Kabbalah upon the historical scene in Provence at the beginning of the thirteenth century coincides with the birth of this philosophy. Obscurantists who hated the light that shone forth from the school of the new rationalists raised against it a system they called “Kabbalah,” which literally means “tradition.” Its fantastic and extravagant doctrines, elaborated in overheated brains, were essentially superstitious and contrary to the spirit of Judaism. In their battle against enlightenment these obscurantists were not particularly discriminating and therefore did not hesitate to draw upon foreign, imprecisely identified sources for their fundamental ideas. The Kabbalah is not historically continuous with the older mystical movements in Judaism, in particular the

4. Graetz expounded his conception, for the first time, in 1862 in vol. 7, n. 3 of his *Geschichte der Juden*; cf. the 4th ed. (Leipzig, 1908), 385–402: “Ursprung der Kabbala.”

mysticism of the Merkabah. The crude anthropomorphisms of the adepts of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, the doctrine of the mystical figure of the Godhead,⁵ merely furnished the kabbalists with a symbolic vocabulary. Graetz does not exclude the possibility that older materials may have been absorbed into this mystical symbolism, but he never enters into a more direct discussion of this problem, whose importance is nevertheless evident. "It can no longer be said with complete certainty whence the first kabbalists . . . acquired their basic principles, borrowed from Neoplatonism."⁶ But in their struggle against the sublimation of the Talmudic Aggadah and the Jewish ritual law by the adherents of the philosophy of Maimonides, the new "enemies of the light" developed their own theory. It was based upon the supposition that the rituals had a magical effect; its details were drawn from the kabbalistic revelations to which the initiators of this tendency laid claim. It is interesting to note that the possibility of a filiation linking the Kabbalah with ancient Gnosticism, which had appeared so plausible to other authors because it supported their belief in the great antiquity of the Kabbalah, does not play the slightest role in Graetz's theory.

David Neumark's theory in his *Geschichte der jüdischen Philosophie des Mittelalters*⁷ is completely different. He, too, proposed an explanation based upon an immanent process. But according to him this process was not associated with the struggle between the adher-

5. Cf. *Major Trends*, 63–67, as well as section 3 of this chapter.

6. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. 7, 401.

7. Vol. 1 (Berlin, 1907), 179–236. In the Hebrew edition of this work (New York, 1921), 166–354, Neumark more than doubled the length of the chapter entitled "The Kabbalah," thus making it one of the most extensive monographs on the old Kabbalah up to the *Zohar* but also, to be sure, one of the most misleading. A playful but truly uncommon perspicacity proceeding on the basis of fanciful assumptions combines with an astonishing lack of historical sense and sound judgment. Nevertheless, here and there one encounters profound views, which is doubly surprising, as the method is completely untenable. Solemn babble combines with keen insight, which the author by no means lacks. In many places he completely misunderstands the literal meaning of the kabbalistic texts as well as decisive points of the kabbalistic symbolism; and even where this is not the case, he indulges in arbitrary interpretations and establishes philosophic relations of which the critical reader can find no trace in the texts. But it is not inconceivable, I think, that some future rationalist, possessing a greater knowledge of the texts that Neumark treated in such an arbitrary manner and a better understanding of their symbolism, may once again take up this scholar's approach with greater success and in better accord with the demands of philological criticism; for, in itself, his dialectic and manner of thinking offer fruitful possibilities.

ents of Maimonides and his opponents. Rather, he sees the Kabbalah as a product of the internal dialectic that governs the development of philosophical ideas in Judaism. The great events of history play no essential role, and everything is attributed solely to internal processes within philosophic thought. Contrary to Graetz, Neumark assigns an early date to the Kabbalah, which he regards as an intrinsic development within Judaism, requiring no borrowings from foreign sources. This process was a “remythologizing” of philosophic conceptions. In his opinion, the philosophic movement in Judaism issued, on the one hand, from the cosmogonic speculations (*Ma’aseh Bereshith*) of the talmudists, which raised the problem of the primal substance and developed the doctrine of ideas, and, on the other hand, from the Merkabah speculations concerning the world of the divine Throne, in which doctrines of emanations and angelology, that is, of intermediary beings in the process of the creation, were evolved. These two disciplines, esoteric in origin, were engaged in a permanent and increasingly hostile controversy. As the genuinely philosophic contents of these early secret doctrines were formulated they also served as the point of departure for a countermovement, the Kabbalah, which, in this manner, represents a “latent parallel” to philosophy.

The philosophers struggle against the mystical elements and overcome them, but in the intermediate stages of this combat many ideas were conceived, many images were projected and many phrases were polished. These crumbs were gathered up by mystically disposed spirits and mixed with other elements, coming from the old hearth of the doctrine of the Merkabah, to form a new creation. Slowly but surely, this new creation intruded itself into the framework of the old mysticism until it filled all of its enormously expanded dimensions and ornamental twists and turns.⁸

Neumark believed that he could detail this process by means of a demonstrable philosophic chain of literature that reveals the transition from philosophic to kabbalistic conceptions. Many writers still employing the terminology of philosophy really belonged to that latent parallel movement, which gave birth in the thirteenth century to the speculative form of the Kabbalah.

Methodologically, both Graetz and Neumark began by asking

8. Ibid., 181.

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what kind of relationship existed between the Kabbalah and medieval Jewish philosophy, each in his own way placing the Kabbalah in the context of that relationship. The two of them shared a rigorously rationalistic evaluation of the phenomenon; but as a result they also rejected the significance of the role played by the Kabbalah in this connection (without, however, suggesting any alternative links). This may explain the lack of interest, not to say incomprehension, which marks their attitude toward the specifically religious concerns expressed in the Kabbalah.

Each of these theories contains, as far as I can judge, a kernel of truth, but nothing more. It may be said, in particular, that Neumark's thoughtful conception appears to be far superior to Graetz's overly simplistic theory; it deserves attention even though it must be judged a total failure—as appears to me beyond any doubt, since his argumentation is in large part extremely dubious and does not withstand examination. Above all, it does not at all follow from the evidence he adduces how, by this methodology, we are to imagine the birth of the fundamental ideas of the Kabbalah. Besides, in his almost inconceivable naïveté, Neumark relied almost exclusively upon printed texts and adopted, uncritically, the utterly baseless and completely arbitrary hypotheses of earlier authors with regard to the dating of certain kabbalistic texts. Nevertheless, within the philosophic movement there undoubtedly existed currents of the sort he characterized and which, in fact, flowed into the Kabbalah after its emergence, above all in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁹ No legitimate history of the Kabbalah can afford to overlook these currents. And yet, as is proven by an impartial analysis of the kabbalistic literature, to which Neumark all too often does great violence in his interpretations, it is not in this direction that we will find the true solution to the problem of the birth of the movement. Both Graetz and Neumark fell victim to the nineteenth-century illusion of an enlightened conception of religion. Neumark drew far-reaching conclusions from this prejudice and was led to view the Kabbalah as

9. Above all the highly valuable studies of Georges Vajda (Paris) have in recent years shed a great deal of light upon many currents and figures in whom the philosophic and kabbalistic tendencies meet, unite, or enter into controversy between 1270 and 1370. Cf., above all, the following studies: *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, philosophe juif marocain* (Paris, 1954); *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du moyen âge* (Paris, 1962), as well as his articles in the *REJ* and the *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* (1954 to 1961).

the product of a philosophical and rational process, not as the product of a religious process in which factors of an entirely different nature were at work. He went so far as to found his explanations, in all seriousness, upon this strange supposition: in the early kabbalistic literature there appeared texts of a programmatic character that were meant to be “filled in,” as indeed they were, in the course of subsequent development. It is one of the ironies of research that precisely the “Treatise on Emanation” (*Massekheh 'Ašiluth*), which in his opinion fulfilled such a programmatic function, was by no means composed in the middle of the twelfth century, as Neumark thought, but at the beginning of the fourteenth century, after the development of the Spanish Kabbalah had already reached its peak.¹⁰

The following investigation and the views that find expression in it are based upon an assumption that is in itself quite simple, but that will nevertheless direct us toward important conclusions in matters of detail: the kabbalistic movement in Judaism cannot be described adequately according to the categories of the history of philosophy; it can only be explained in terms of the history of religions, however close its connection with philosophy may here and there turn out to be. Many researchers have succeeded only in obscuring the fundamental fact that it was religious motifs and no other kind that decisively determined the development of the Kabbalah, even in its confrontation with philosophy. To be sure, the history of the Jewish religion did not unfold in a vacuum. The revelations made to the earliest kabbalists, according to their tradition, by the prophet Elijah, also have an historical background and specific terminology into which it is surely legitimate to inquire. However, it is not the history of philosophy that will enable us to understand them; they grew in a different historical humus and originated in circles other than those of the philosophers. In this investigation, we must never lose sight of this simple yet highly important truth. There will be hardly any discussion here of the kind of evidence adduced by Neumark in explanation of the birth of the Kabbalah, and where there is, it will be from an altogether different perspective. We shall be concerned, instead, with arguments for which one

10. Neumark was misled by Jellinek, who ascribed this small work, without the slightest reason, to Jacob the Nazirite. Cf. my article on this tract in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 3 (Berlin, 1929), cols. 801–803. This tract was undoubtedly composed after the *Zohar*.

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searches in vain in his work or that of Graetz. The examination of the correct chronological order of the oldest kabbalistic texts and of the conceptions that can be discerned in them forces us to take a different path. The history of the mystical terminology, neglected by earlier researchers in favor of general ideas, provides the authentic signposts by which research must orient itself; it played a very large part in the elaboration of the views presented in the following pages.

2. Southern France in the Twelfth Century: The Catharist Movement—The Jews of Languedoc

The following questions may serve as a natural point of departure for this investigation: under what circumstances did the Kabbalah step into the light of history, and what was the character of the age in which we first learn of its appearance? As an historical phenomenon in medieval Judaism, the Kabbalah was born in Provence, or more precisely in its western part, known as the Languedoc. It is in this sense that the term Provence will be used in the following text. From there it was transplanted in the first quarter of the thirteenth century to Aragon and Castile in Spain, where most of its classical development took place. It thus constitutes a phenomenon of Jewish life in the Christian Occident; we possess no historical information or direct testimony to its existence or propagation in the lands of Islam. However, we do have an important piece of negative evidence. Abraham, the son of Maimonides, in contrast to his father, had an inclination toward mysticism, as is evident from his work *Kifayat al 'abidin*, preserved in Arabic, which has now been partially translated into English under the title *The High Ways to Perfection*. Writing around 1220–1230, he evidently knew nothing of the Kabbalah, and it was the Sufism of Islam that served as his source of illumination and edification. In connection with the adoption of Sufi rites, he laments that “the glory of Israel has been taken away from him and given to the non-Jews.” The mystical treasure held by Islam was originally destined to be the glory and the special possession of Israel, but it was lost—a conception that is certainly worthy of note. What brought his friend Abraham the Hasid to Sufism and made him adapt it to Judaism were precisely the motifs of theosophical mysticism and Hasidic illumination that were also at work among the contemporary circles of Hasidim and *perushim* in Prov-

ence, though in his case, nothing kabbalistic resulted of it.¹¹ It was only three or four generations later that kabbalistic influence began to be felt in the Muslim lands as well. In Muslim Spain, the Kabbalah played no demonstrable role before it reached its peak around 1300.

In our investigation, we shall therefore not focus our attention upon the developments of the Kabbalah after its passage to Spain. Here, we shall discuss only the initial stage of the process. On the other hand, we shall examine all the more closely the form it had before being taken up and taught by Isaac the Blind and the character it assumed in his circle. To what extent can we draw a posteriori conclusions with regard to older sources? Whatever we know about the earliest kabbalists and their circles comes from the Languedoc. It is in cities like Lunel, Narbonne, Posquières, and perhaps also in Toulouse, Marseilles, and Arles that we find the first personalities known to us as kabbalists. Their disciples then transplanted the kabbalistic tradition to Spain, where it took root in such localities as Burgos, Gerona, and Toledo, and whence it spread to other Jewish communities. Concerning Isaac the Blind as well as the kabbalistic circles intimately connected with him we now have in our possession from an examination of the available manuscripts, sufficient and by no means negligible material that offers a solid basis for research. In the following chapters we shall have to concern ourselves with this material. On the other hand, the problem of the origin of the Kabbalah and its “prehistoric” beginnings, which takes us back to the Orient, remains in all its complexity. It requires—as we shall see in the next chapter—closer examination; and despite the precision of certain results, we cannot entirely renounce the formulation of hypotheses.

Southern France, during the period that interests us here—that is, between 1150 and 1220—was a region replete with cultural and religious tensions. It was one of the chief centers of medieval culture. In order to understand the Judaism of this region, we must see it within its environmental context and not remain content with an analysis of the internal factors active at the time. Provence, and especially Languedoc, was the seat of a developed courtly and feudal culture. An intimate contact was established there (through chan-

11. Cf. N. Wieder, *Melila* 2 (Manchester, 1946): 60–65. S. Rosenblatt’s edition and translation of a part of Abraham’s work appeared in Baltimore in 1927 and 1938.

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nels that are often no longer perceptible or that have only today come within the purview of serious scholarship) between Islamic culture penetrating from Spain and North Africa and the culture of chivalry of the Christian Middle Ages. There, during this same period, the poetry of the troubadours reached its peak. But beyond that, southern France was an area particularly characterized by strong religious tension unparalleled in other lands of Christian culture. In this period, among many circles of Languedoc, especially in the area between Toulouse, Albi, and Carcassonne, it was no longer Catholic Christianity that reigned, but the dualistic religion of the Cathars or Albigenses, whose fundamental character has, not without reason, long been a subject of controversy. Judging from the external forms, one would think that it was a matter of a Christian sect seeking to oppose the corruption of the clergy and of contemporary society by means of ideals held to be more or less those of primitive Christianity. An alternative line of thought, increasingly accepted today, holds that we are dealing here with a religion that, while utilizing certain Christian notions, undermined the very foundations of Christianity. That surely was already the opinion of the Catholic opponents of this powerful heresy, which was brutally extirpated only after a long and extremely bitter crusade by the Inquisition, which, as is well known, was originated in order to repress it.

There is no longer any doubt that this movement was not autochthonous to southern France. It stood in direct historical relationship with the religion of the Bulgarian Bogomils and their dualistic predecessors; however it is still a matter of debate whether there is any direct historical filiation leading back to ancient Manichaeism (as the Church claimed) or whether the dualistic teaching and the specific organizational forms of this medieval neo-Manichaeism derived from other sources. Another difficult problem that has still not been resolved is that of the possible survival of gnostic, other than Manichaean, influences and ideas in the religion of the Cathars. It is not our task to enter into this discussion, which has had a vigorous revival as a result of the important discoveries of recent years.¹² However, the existence of this extremely strong religious movement whose anti-Catholic tendencies cannot be doubted is also important for our investigation. The Judaism of Provence like-

12. See the presentation of the current state of research in Arno Borst, *Die Katharer* (Stuttgart, 1953), which contains a full critical discussion of the literature. Cf. also chap. 3, p. 234ff., herein.

wise went through a highly fruitful period in the twelfth century. It thus developed in an environment where Catholic Christianity in its orthodox form had to fight for its bare existence and where it had effectively lost much of its influence over wide circles of the dominant feudal and chivalric class and their cultural spokesmen, as well as in the broader social strata of peasants and shepherds. Nevertheless, more recent attempts (since the appearance of the first German edition of the present work) to demonstrate direct Cathar influences on the earliest sources of the Kabbalah are totally unconvincing.¹³

This was a phenomenon unique in Occidental Europe. There appear to have been close ties between many spokesmen of the secular culture—which reached its zenith in the lyrical poetry of the troubadours, seemingly devoid of religious tension—and this radical movement, which touched the hearts of the masses and attacked the foundations of the Church’s authority and its hierarchy. Tolerated or even actively encouraged by many of the great feudal rulers and by a majority of the barons, the movement took root; and it required the intervention of the kings of France, here pursuing their own special interests, to bring the Crusade against the Cathars to a victorious conclusion and to break the power of the movement. In the heart of the Occident, a sect linked at least by its structure and perhaps also by its history to the world of Gnosticism and Manichaeism was able not only to gain a foothold but also to come close to a position of dominance in society.

The old issues that once had determined the physiognomy of the Marcionite gnosis returned to the surface, revealing an indestructible vitality. With varying degrees of radicalism, the Cathars contrasted the true God, creator of the intelligible and of the soul, to Satan, creator of the visible world. In their propaganda, nourished by a profound pessimism with regard to the visible creation, they sought to show to the “perfect” (*perfecti*) a path leading to deliverance of the soul. It is interesting to observe, as more than one historian of culture has noted, that the uncompromising radicalism of the sect built a more solid bridge to the secular culture, which was positively oriented toward life in this world, than had the Catholic Church, with its gradualist system so receptive to compromise. These dialectical relations have attracted the attention of many observers of the domestic situation then prevailing in Provence, and

13. Cf. chap. 3, n. 73, herein.

they may also throw light on the problems connected with the rise of the Kabbalah. It is quite conceivable that the influence exerted by a great movement like Catharism might be reflected in phenomena that, at first glance, appear to be far removed from it.

At that time, Cathar heresy was not, as we have seen, the affair of closed conventicles. The entire land was in commotion. In the streets and markets, the *bonshommes*—called the *perfecti*, those who took upon themselves the yoke of the Cathar demands in all its severity, and thus served as living examples—preached against the corruption of the Catholic clergy, against its social privileges, and against many dogmas of the Church. Following in the footsteps of Marcion, many of them dug an abyss between the Old and the New Testaments, which they regarded as mutually exclusive revelations. Their metaphysical anti-Semitism did not necessarily prevent them from engaging, on occasion, in an exchange of ideas with Jews, who were, like themselves, adversaries of Catholicism.¹⁴ It is nevertheless difficult to judge how much truth there is in the accusations of several thirteenth-century Catholic polemicists who reproached the heretics for their relations with the Jews.¹⁵ However, reading the interesting description of the spiritual state of Provence during that period presented by Jean Giraud in the first volume of his great *Histoire de l'Inquisition au moyen âge*,¹⁶ one becomes convinced that it is inconceivable that the Provençal Jews had seen and observed nothing of the profound agitation that shook the land. In Narbonne and Toulouse, important Jewish centers at that time, there were stormy disputes and incessant clashes between the hostile camps. It

14. L. J. Newman, *Jewish Influences on Early Christian Reform Movements* (New York, 1925), 131–207, “Jewish Influence on the Catharist Heresy,” made some far-reaching assertions concerning the participation of Jews in the Cathar movement or their influence on the Cathars, but they hardly withstand examination; cf. Borst, *Die Katharer*, 99, 105, 125. Neumark’s discussion of the Kabbalah and the Catharist doctrine is, I regret to say, completely irrelevant. With regard to the Passagians, a Jewish-Christian sect that some authors (erroneously) include among the Cathars, see the literature in Borst, *Die Katharer*, 112.

15. Cf. Newman, *Jewish Influences*, 140, extract from Lucas of Tuy, *Adversus Albigenses* (Ingolstadt, 1612), 189–190.

16. Jean Giraud, *Histoire de l'Inquisition au moyen âge*, vol. 1, *Cathares et Vaudois* (Paris, 1935). With regard to the relationship between the ascetic Catharism and the secular culture flourishing at that time in Provence, cf. the bibliographical references in Borst, *Die Katharer*, 107–108. There it is a question of “a confused mesh of Bogomilian doctrine and Occidental life.”

was precisely in these regions that the Kabbalah made its first appearance. However, in this connection it should be noted that the Cathar heresy did not obtain a firm foothold in the major Jewish centers such as Narbonne and Montpellier.¹⁷

The Jewish communities of Languedoc, at least their upper strata, had attained a high degree of cultural flowering. The persecutions of the Crusades had not touched them. In Marseilles, Lunel, Béziers, Narbonne, Perpignan, Carcassonne, and Toulouse the study of the Torah and the Talmud flourished. Narbonne especially could point to a great tradition of Jewish scholarship that spanned several generations. Even before the appearance of the Kabbalah, since the eleventh century, the latest midrashim had their origin or were revised in this city or in the neighboring centers. This was the case for large parts of the *Midrash Rabbah* on Numbers, the *Midrash Bereshith Rabbathi*, and the *Midrash Tadshe*, of particular interest from the point of view of the history of religions. Not only do they show a marked penchant for ideas that are close to or continue the esoteric doctrines of the Talmud in their older forms, but some of their authors, above all that of the *Midrash Tadshe*, were also still acquainted with ancient literary sources that were no longer known elsewhere. Thus it can be shown that the apocryphal *Book of Jubilees* exercised a significant influence upon the *Midrash Tadshe*, without it being possible for us, at present, to decide whether the author drew on an internal Jewish tradition that has otherwise left very few traces in the Occident or upon Christian sources.¹⁸ However, it is evident that the aggadic production in southern France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the substance of which has been deposited in those works, could serve as a kind of vestibule to the subsequent development of the Kabbalah. We still lack a clearer and more

17. Cf. E. Griffe, *Les débuts de l'aventure cathare en Languedoc (1140–1190)* (Paris, 1963), 168.

18. On the *Midrash Tadshe*, also known as the “Baraitha of R. Pinhas ben Yair,” cf. the research of Abraham Epstein and his edition of the text, with separated pagination, in his (Hebrew) *Beiträge zur Jüdischen Alterthumskunde*, pt. 1 (Vienna, 1887), as well as his examination of the relationships between this text, the *Book of Jubilees*, and Philo in *REJ* 21 (1890): 88–97, and 22 (1891): 1–25. Epstein assumed that the author (Moses ha-Darshan, around the year 1000, in Narbonne?) had a certain familiarity with the writings of Philo, which is less convincing. I also consider the supposed relationship with Essene traditions as extremely doubtful. August Wünsche translated this midrash into German in *Aus Israels Lehrhallen*, vol. 5 (1910), 85–138.

precise elucidation of the contribution of those older generations of Languedoc to the religious culture of Judaism. Even if internal factors were at work independently, we must nevertheless consider it certain that they were at the same time stimulated and supported by other Jewish groups. The threads of tradition extended not only from Narbonne to northern France and the Rhineland, with their important centers of Jewish productivity, but also—and this seems to me to deserve particular emphasis—to the Orient, with which there existed close commercial relations. And who can say which ideas or bits of ideas, what kind of notebooks or fragments, were conveyed along these paths and channels, carrying with them the vestiges of old literary materials?

We may affirm, then, that the Kabbalah did not make its appearance in a stagnant milieu, but in one full of strife and tension. Nor was it a backward milieu with respect to the general development of Judaism. Openly or invisibly it had absorbed a rich store of traditions.

*3. The Esoteric Doctrine of the Creation
and the Merkabah in Pre-kabbalistic Judaism:
The Literature of the Hekhaloth and Jewish
Gnosticism*

Having arrived at this point, we must inquire into the situation of Jewish esotericism and mysticism before the appearance of the Kabbalah upon the stage of history. We have already mentioned previously the ancient cosmogonic speculations of the talmudists as well as their throne-mysticism. It is now necessary to determine to what extent these speculations were still known to the Jewish tradition of the twelfth century and which literary or direct oral sources it had at its disposal. For, as has already been remarked, however great the distance between these ancient ideas and the Kabbalah, the latter nonetheless not only claimed to be the legitimate successor of these ancient esoteric doctrines of the Creation and the Merkabah but also pretended to represent their actual content in its own teaching.

On this point, too, research has made substantial progress in the course of the past generation. Until several decades ago, most researchers supposed—with the notable exception of Moses Gaster—that two completely different stages of development should be as-

sumed. On the one hand, there existed between the first and the third centuries, above all in the circles of the talmudists, the two esoteric disciplines attested to in the Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1, concerning the Creation, *bereshith*, and the divine chariot of Ezekiel 1, the Merkabah. We possess some scattered and fragmentary information, in large part unintelligible, about these doctrines in certain passages of the talmudic literature and in old midrashim.¹⁹ These traditions were held to have fallen more or less into oblivion and to have disappeared. On the other hand, during post-talmudic times, in the Gaonic period (from the seventh until the beginning of the eleventh century), a new mystical wave is said to have swept over Judaism, particularly in Babylonia, and stimulated a broad literature of Merkabah-mysticism and kindred texts. This literature—it was averred—had not very much more in common with the old doctrines than the name and a certain number of talmudic traditions of which it made literary use.

Today we can state with certainty that this separation that places the late mysticism of the Merkabah very close to the formative period of the medieval Kabbalah cannot be maintained. I have elsewhere dealt at length with this Merkabah-mysticism of the so-called Hekhaloth literature, and shown that a genuine and unbroken chain of tradition links these writings to the secret doctrine of the Talmud. Large parts of this literature still belong to the talmudic period itself, and the central ideas of these texts go back to the first and second centuries. They are thus directly connected with the productive period during which rabbinic Judaism crystallized in the midst of great religious ferment, asserted itself, and prevailed over other currents in Judaism.²⁰ To be sure, these texts, which in their

19. Much but by no means all the material was collected by Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*; see the references in the index, vol. 4, s.v. "Merkaba," "Thron." In addition, cf. also the monographs of H. Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum* (Krotoshin, 1846); M. Joël, *Blicke in die Religionsgeschichte zu Anfang des zweiten christlichen Jahrhunderts*, vol. 1 (Breslau, 1880), 103–170; M. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen, 1898); Erich Bisehoff, *Babylonisch-Astrales im Weltbilde des Thalmud und Midrasch* (Leipzig, 1907); G. Castelli, *Gli antecedenti della Cabbala nella Bibbia e nella Letteratura Talmudica*, *Attes du 12^{me} Congrès des Orientalistes 1899*, vol. 3 (Turin, 1903), 57–109.

20. Cf. my exposition in *Major Trends*, 40ff. and 355ff., as well as, above all, my more recent investigations in *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960; revised and [in the appendix] enlarged ed., 1965). Further progress in this area has been made by Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah*

present form belong in part to the genre of apocalyptic pseudepigraphy, are not always as old as they pretend to be. But even in these later adaptations, the underlying traditional material dates back to the period indicated. The mystical hymns found in several of the most important texts may definitely be traced back at least to the third century; here it is the literary form itself that militates against the idea of a later revision. The conceptions that find expression here surely were not developed later; in fact, they may date from a much earlier time.²¹

These writings contain instructions for obtaining the ecstatic vision of the celestial regions of the Merkabah. They describe the peregrinations of the ecstatic through these regions: the seven heavens and the seven palaces or temples, Hekhaloth, through which the Merkabah mystic travels before he arrives at the throne of God. Revelations are made to the voyager concerning the celestial things and the secrets of the Creation, the hierarchy of the angels, and the magical practices of theurgy. Having ascended to the highest level, he stands before the throne and beholds a vision of the mystical figure of the Godhead, in the symbol of the “likeness as the appearance of a man” whom the prophet Ezekiel was permitted to see upon the throne of Merkabah. There he receives a revelation of the “measurement of the body,” in Hebrew *Shi’ur Qomah*, that is, an anthropomorphic description of the divinity, appearing as the primal man, but also as the lover of the Song of Songs, together with the mystical names of his limbs.

The age of this *Shi’ur Qomah* mysticism, which scandalized the consciousness of later, “enlightened” centuries, may now be fixed with certainty. Contrary to the views that once prevailed, it must be dated to the second century, and certainly not later.²² It is undoubtedly connected with the interpretation of the Song of Songs as a mystical allegory of God’s relation with Israel. Just as in the earliest days God revealed himself to the entire community of Israel, as was the case at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, where he was

Mysticism (Leiden, 1980), who has made use of newly discovered material and has posed new questions for the research agenda. Among these, the problem of Jewish elements in Gnosticism figures prominently. On this issue, lively discussions have been taking place since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts.

21. *Jewish Gnosticism*, sec. 4, 20–30.

22. Cf. with respect to this important new conclusion *ibid.*, 36–42, 129–131, as well as appendix D; *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 29 (1960 [Zurich, 1961]): 144–164.

visibly manifest upon his Merkabah (this idea is attested in midrashic interpretations that undoubtedly go back to the tannaim),²³ so is this revelation repeated in the relations between God and the mystic initiated into the secrets of the Merkabah. The most important fragments of these descriptions transmitted in the *Shi'ur Qomah* make explicit reference to the depiction of the lover in many passages of the Song of Songs; this depiction thus offers a biblical veneer for what are evidently theosophic mysteries whose precise meaning and exact connections still escape us. There can be little doubt that we are dealing here, in stark contrast to the notion of an imageless and invisible God always so energetically maintained by Jewish tradition, with a conception that knows the projection of this God as a mystical figure. In this figure there reveals itself, in the experience of a theophany, the "great Glory" or "great Power" mentioned in several of the Jewish apocryphal books and apocalypses as the highest manifestation of God. To be sure, this Glory or Power is not directly identical with the essence of God itself but rather radiates from it. It is not possible, for the moment, to determine with certainty to what extent foreign influences derived from speculations on the heavenly primordial man acted on those ideas, which apparently could be held at that time even in strictly rabbinical circles. Impulses from the outside are, of course, entirely conceivable; they are already proven by the symbolism of the chapter of the Merkabah, Ezekiel 1, for the time of the prophet himself, and there certainly was no lack of channels through which similar influences could make their way to Palestine. On the other hand, we must reckon far more seriously with the possibility of an immanent development and elaboration of such impulses that may have been much more intense than is generally assumed.

The historian of religion is entitled to consider the mysticism of the Merkabah to be one of the Jewish branches of Gnosticism.²⁴ However rare the references in the extant texts to gnostic myths, or

23. Cf. Saul Lieberman's exposition in *Jewish Gnosticism*, appendix D, 118–126.

24. The discussion as to what exactly is to be understood by "gnosis" has gained in prominence in scholarly literature and at conferences during the last decades. There is a tendency to exclude phenomena that until 1930 were designated gnostic by everyone. To me it does not seem to matter greatly whether phenomena previously called gnostic are now designated as "esoteric," and I for one cannot see the use or value of the newly introduced distinctions (for example, gnosis—Gnosticism and the like).

abstract speculations on the aeons and their mutual relations, certain fundamental characteristics of Gnosticism are nevertheless fully congruent with the kind of mysticism we find in the Merkabah writings: the possession of a knowledge that cannot be acquired by ordinary intellectual means but only by way of a revelation and mystical illumination; the possession of a secret doctrine concerning the order of the celestial worlds and the liturgical and magical-theurgical means that provide access to it. According to Anz,²⁵ the central teaching of Gnosticism consists of methodical instructions for the ascent of the soul from the earth through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos to its divine home. Even if, taking into account more recent research on Gnosticism we do not go as far as Anz, the fact remains that precisely these ideas were affirmed in the heart of an esoteric discipline within the Jewish tradition, and not only among Jewish heretics, even though the role of the pagan planet-angels is here assumed by other archons. These archons threaten the ecstatic visionary at the gates of the seven celestial palaces, and—entirely in keeping with the doctrines of various gnostic writings of the same period—can only be overcome and compelled to permit him to pass by the display of a magic “seal,” through the recitation of hymns, prayers, etc. One can still discern plainly the relation to late Jewish apocalyptic writings, whose ideas evidently form a plausible transition to both Jewish monotheistic Gnosticism and the heretical Gnosticism that tended toward dualism.²⁶

In the *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation, the mystical figure appears upon the throne as the creator of the world, *yosher bereshith*; from his cosmic mantle, which is frequently spoken of here, the stars and the firmament shine forth.²⁷ But this representation of the demiurge proceeds from a thoroughly monotheistic conception and completely lacks the heretical and antinomian character it assumed when the Creator God had been opposed to the true God. Here the throne of God is, in Jewish terminology, the home of the soul; it is there that the ascent of the ecstatic is completed. The world of the Merkabah

25. Wilhelm Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus* (Leipzig, 1897).

26. Cf. R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York, 1959). Grant strongly emphasized these relations in the face of the zealotry with which hypotheses of direct pagan influences have been maintained.

27. Cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, sec. 8, 57–64.

into which he “descends” is closely related to the world of the *pleroma* of the Greek gnostic texts. However, in place of abstract concepts personified as aeons, we find the entities of the throne-world as they have entered into this tradition from the book of Ezekiel. At the same time, there are direct contacts between these texts of Merkabah Gnosticism and the syncretistic world of the magical papyri. We possess Hebrew Merkabah texts that read as if they belonged to the literature of magical papyri.²⁸ The boundaries, at least regarding Judaism, were not as well defined as those drawn by many recent authors writing on Gnosticism who were bent on differentiating between Christian Gnosticism and the syncretistic magic under discussion.

We have no reason to believe that this gnostic theosophy still possessed any creative impulses of a decisive character after the third century. The productive development of these ideas evidently occurred on Palestinian soil, as the analysis of the Hekhaloth texts proves. At a later date in Palestine as well as in Babylonia, we still encounter literary elaborations of this old material, some of which underwent metamorphosis into edifying tracts. But we no longer find any new ideas. The practical realization of these heavenly voyages of the soul and the “vision of the merkabah,” *sefiyyath merkabah*, maintained itself also in the post-talmudic period, and some scattered reports concerning practices of this kind, which are by no means to be regarded as mere legends, have come down to us from as late as the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries from France and Germany.²⁹ These old texts, augmented by all kinds of later additions, were known to the Middle Ages in the form given to them in the late talmudic and early post-talmudic periods as “Greater Hekhaloth,” “Lesser Hekhaloth,” *Shi’ur Qomah*, *Book of the Merkabah* and under other titles as well as in different versions. These texts were considered to be ancient, esoteric paragraphs of the Mishnah, and in the superscriptions of the oldest manuscripts they are here and there designated as “halakhoth concerning the Hekhaloth.”³⁰

28. I published one of these texts in *Jewish Gnosticism*, appendix C, 101–117, on the basis of two manuscripts.

29. For authentic reports on Merkabah-mysticism type of celestial voyages by the French talmudists, see chap. 3, n. 86, herein.

30. As, for example, in the manuscripts that Yehudah ben Barzilai had before him the beginning of the twelfth century, as he attests in his commentary on the Book *Yeṣirah*, 101. In many thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts from Germany the various paragraphs of the “Greater Hekhaloth” are designated as halakhoth.

They enjoyed great authority and were in no way suspected of heresy. Manuscripts of these texts and the related theurgical literature were known in the Orient, as is proven by many fragments in the Cairo Genizah, but also in Italy, in Spain, in France, and in Germany.³¹ In the twelfth century, texts of this kind circulated precisely in learned circles, where they were considered authentic documents of the old esoteric doctrines.³² It was therefore only to be expected that the earliest kabbalists would seek to establish a relationship with the traditions that enjoyed such high esteem.

4. The "Book of Creation"

Besides these literary monuments of the Merkabah gnosis, there was another, extremely curious text which circulated widely during the Middle Ages, exercising a great influence in many lands and in diverse circles: the "Book of Creation," *Sefer Yeşirah*. Concerning the origin and spiritual home of this work, which numbers only a few pages, divergent opinions have been voiced, although to date it has been impossible to come to any reliable and definitive conclusions.³³

31. Thus Ms. Oxford Heb. C 65 contains a large fragment of the *Shi'ur Qomah*; Ms. Sassoon 522 contains a fragment of an unknown and very ancient Merkabah midrash and a folio of the *Shi'ur Qomah*. The extant remains of the "Visions of Ezekiel," *Re 'iyyot Yehezqel*, of the fourth century, which I discussed in *Jewish Gnosticism*, 44–47, all come from the Genizah. A new critical edition and commentary have been published by Ithamar Gruenwald in *Temirin*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem, 1972), 101–139; see also Gruenwald's *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 134–141. At the beginning of the twelfth century, mystical and theurgical texts could also be bought from a bookseller in Cairo whose catalogue has been partly preserved in the Genizah; cf. the text in Elkan Adler, *About Hebrew Manuscripts* (Oxford, 1905), 40 (nos. 82 and 83). Most of the manuscripts of this type of literature originate, however, in Italy and Germany.

32. These writings are frequently cited in the responsa of the geonim, the heads of the Babylonian academies, as well as in the rabbinic and philosophic works of the early Middle Ages. The Karaites took special delight in making them the targets of their attacks, without the rabbinic apologists' disavowing them. The most important Gaonic materials concerning the traditions of the Merkabah, etc., were collected by Benjamin M. Lewin, *Otzar ha-Geonim, Thesaurus of the Gaonic Responsa and Commentaries*, vol. 4, fasc. 2, *Hagigah* (Jerusalem, 1931), 10–27, 53–62.

33. The older literature on the "Book of Creation" is collected in the articles of L. Ginzberg, *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906), s.v. "Yezira," and G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), 23–30. To this must be added A. M. Habermann, "'Abhanim le-Heqer Sefer Yeşirah," *Sinai* 10 (Jerusalem, 1947); Leo Baeck, *Sefer Jezira, Aus drei*

This uncertainty is also reflected in the various estimates of the date of its composition, which fluctuate between the second and the sixth centuries. This slender work is also designated in the oldest manuscripts as a collection of “halakhoth on the Creation,” and it is not at all impossible that it is referred to by this name in the Talmud. In the two different versions that have come down to us, it is divided into chapters whose individual paragraphs were likewise regarded by medieval tradition as mishnaic.³⁴

The book contains a very compact discourse on cosmogony and cosmology. The verbose and solemn character of many sentences, especially in the first chapter, contrasts strangely with the laconic form in which the fundamental conceptions and the cosmological scheme of things are presented. The author undoubtedly wished to bring his own views, clearly influenced by Greek sources, into harmony with the talmudic disciplines relating to the doctrine of the Creation and of the Merkabah, and it is in the course of this enterprise that we encounter for the first time speculative reinterpretations of conceptions from the Merkabah. The attempts by a number of scholars to present this book as a kind of primer for schoolchildren³⁵ or as a treatise on the grammar and structure of the Hebrew language³⁶ cannot be taken seriously. The book's strong link with Jewish speculations concerning divine wisdom, *hokhmah* or Sophia, is evident from the first sentence: “In thirty-two wondrous paths of

Jahrtausenden (Tübingen, 1958), 256–271; Georges Vajda, “Le Commentaire kairouanais sur le ‘Livre de la Création,’ ” *REJ*, n.s., (1947–1954): 7:7–62; 10:67–92, 12:7–33, 13:37–61.

34. The title *Hilkhoth Yesirah* is attested by Saadya and Yehudah ben Barzilai. Habermann published the oldest manuscript text that has been preserved to this day, basing himself upon a tenth-century Genizah manuscript. The version Saadya took as the basis for his Arabic commentary, ed. Mayer Lambert (Paris, 1891), deviates appreciably from most of the later texts. The first edition (Mantua, 1562), contains the two most important recensions. A critical revision of the text is a very difficult desideratum of research. The so-called “critically edited text” in the edition and translation of Lazarus Goldschmidt (Frankfurt, 1894) is patched together in a completely arbitrary manner and devoid of any scientific value. Considerable progress, however, is represented by the publications of Ithamar Gruenwald in *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 132–177, and *REJ* 132 (1973): 473–512.

35. As, for example, in S. Karppe, *Étude sur les origines et la nature du Zohar* (Paris, 1901), 164.

36. Phineas Mordell, *The Origin of Letters and Numerals according to the Sefer Yetzirah* (Philadelphia, 1914).

wisdom³⁷ God . . . [there follows a series of biblical epithets for God] engraved and created His world." These thirty-two paths of the Sophia are the ten primordial numbers, which are discussed in the first chapter, and the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet, which are described in a general way in chapter 2 and more particularly in the following chapters as elements and building blocks of the cosmos. The "paths of the Sophia" are thus fundamental forces that emanate from her or in which she manifests herself. They are, as in the old conception of the Sophia herself, the instruments of creation. In her or through her—the Hebrew preposition permits both translations—God, the master of the Sophia, "engraved" Creation. The symbolism of the number thirty-two reappears also in some Christian gnostic documents,³⁸ but it is in this text that it seems to be established for the first time and in the most natural manner. Mention should, however, be made of Agrippa von Nettesheim, who informs us (*De occulta philosophia* 2:15) that thirty-two was considered by the Pythagoreans as the number of righteousness because of its well-nigh unlimited divisibility. More recently Nicholas Sed³⁹ has discussed in a remarkable essay the relationship of the symbolism of the Book *Yesirah* with the Samaritan *Mēmar* of Marqah.

The ten primordial numbers are called sefiroth—a Hebrew noun, newly formed here, that bears no relation to the Greek word *sphaira*, but is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to count." Steinschneider's contention (*Mathematik bei den Juden* [Hildesheim, 1965], p. 148) that the original term acquired its specific kabbalistic meaning as a result of the similarity to the Greek word is not borne out by an analysis of the oldest kabbalistic texts. By introducing a new term, sefirah, in place of the usual *mispar*, the author seems to

37. *Nethibhoth pil'oth hokhmah*. Proverbs 3:17 knows of the *nethibhoth* ("paths") of Wisdom. Here, however, we have the paths of the "mysteries" of *hokhmah*, or the "mysterious paths" of the *hokhmah*—both translations can be defended. There is no connection between the *Yesirah* and the linguistic usage in the Qumran texts. The combinations *pil'oth hokhmah* or *raze hokhmah* are not found in the texts that have become known so far.

38. Cf. the epithalamium of the Sophia in Preuschen, *Zwei gnostische Hymnen* (Giessen, 1904), 10. Preuschen says: "It is therefore impossible to interpret the number thirty-two, to which one finds no parallel" (p. 41). I shall return later, pp. 92 and 96, to this number in the nuptial mysticism of the Book *Bahir*.

39. "Le Mēmar samaritain, le Sepher Ješirā et les trente-deux sentiers de la Sagesse," *RHR* 170 (1966): 159–184.

indicate that it is not simply a question of ordinary numbers, but of metaphysical principles of the universe or stages in the creation of the world. The possibility that the term refers to emanations from God himself can be excluded in view of both the wording and the context; it could only be read into the text by later reinterpretation. Each of these primordial numbers is associated with a particular category of creation, the first four sefiroth undoubtedly emanating from each other. The first one is the pneuma of the living God, *ruah 'elohim hayyim* (the book continues to use the word *ruah* in its triple meaning of breath, air, and spirit). From the *ruah* comes forth, by way of condensation, as it were, the “breath of breath,” that is, the primordial element of the air, identified in later chapters with the ether, which is divided into material and immaterial ether. The idea of an “immaterial ether,” *'awir she'eno nithpas*, like the other Hebrew neologisms in the book, seems to correspond to Greek conceptions. From the primordial air come forth the water and the fire, the third and the fourth sefiroth. Out of the primordial air God created the twenty-two letters; out of the primordial fire, the Throne of Glory and the hosts of angels.⁴⁰ The nature of this secondary creation is not sufficiently clear, for the precise terminological meaning that the author gave to the verbs *haqaq* and *hasab*, which belong to the vocabulary of architecture, can be interpreted in different ways. He does not utilize the Hebrew word for “create,” but words that mean “engrave” (is this to designate the contours or the form?) and “hew,” as one hews a stone out of the rock. The Aristotelian element of the earth is not known to the author as a primordial element.

The last six sefiroth are defined in an entirely different way; they represent the six dimensions of space, though it is not expressly stated that they emanated from the earlier elements. Nevertheless, it is said of the totality of these sefiroth that their beginning and their end were connected with each other and merged one into the other. The primal decade thus constitutes a unity—although its nature is not sufficiently defined—but is by no means identical with the deity. The author, no doubt intentionally, employs expressions borrowed from the description of the *hayyoth*, the animals bearing the Throne in Ezekiel's vision of the Merkabah. *Hayyoth* means literally “living

40. The author thus combines the doctrines, and interpretations concerning both esoteric disciplines, *bereshith* and Merkabah.

beings,” and it can be said of the sefiroth that they are the “living numerical beings,” but nonetheless creatures: “Their appearance is like that of a flash of lightning⁴¹ and their goal is without end. His word is in them when they come forth [from Him] and when they return. At His bidding do they speed swiftly as a whirlwind, and before His throne they prostrate themselves” (1:6). They are the “depths” of all things:⁴² “The depth of the beginning and the depth of the end, the depth of good and the depth of evil, the depth of above and the depth of below—and a single Master, God, the faithful king, rules over all of them from His holy abode” (1:5).

The fact that the theory of the significance of the twenty-two consonants as the fundamental elements of all creatures⁴³ in the second chapter partly conflicts with the first chapter⁴⁴ has caused some scholars (for example, Louis Ginzberg) to attribute to the author the conception of a kind of double creation: the one ideal and pure brought about by means of the sefiroth, which are conceived in a wholly ideal and abstract manner; the other one effected by the interconnection of the elements of speech. According to some views, the obscure word *belimah*, which always accompanies the word sefiroth, is simply a composite of *beli mah*—without anything, without actuality, ideal. However, judging from the literal meaning, it would seem that it should be understood as signifying “closed,” that is, closed within itself. I am inclined to believe that here, too, an as yet unidentified Greek term underlies the expression. The text offers no more detailed statement of the relationship between the sefiroth and the letters, and the sefiroth are not referred to again. While the numerical-mystical speculation on the sefiroth probably has its origin in neo-Pythagorean sources—Nikomachos of Gerasa, the celebrated author of a mystical arithmology who lived around 140 C.E.,

41. The image *ke-mar'eh ha-bazaq*, as well as the *raso' wa-shobh*, employed immediately afterward but reinterpreted in a speculative sense, are evidently derived from Ezekiel 1:14.

42. Depth probably has the meaning of “extending itself in the depth” that is, dimension. But the word could also signify “hidden depth” (cf. Daniel 2:22), or perhaps also “deep foundation, principle.” The expression “depth of good and evil” would only correspond to dimension in a very figurative manner. The “depth of evil” also makes one think of the “depths of Satan” in the book of Revelation 2:24.

43. The text speaks of *'othiyyot yesod*; each of the two nouns renders one of the two meanings of the Greek *stoicheia*, which denotes letter as well as element.

44. Cf. Neumark, *Geschichte der jüdischen Philosophie*, 1:115.

came from Palestine east of the Jordan—the idea of “letters by means of which heaven and earth were created” may well come from within Judaism itself. In the first half of the third century it is encountered in a statement of the Babylonian amora, Rab, originally of Palestine.⁴⁵ It is perfectly conceivable that two originally different theories were fused or juxtaposed in the author’s doctrine concerning the thirty-two paths. This range of ideas would fit well in the second or third century in Palestine or its immediate environs.⁴⁶

All reality is constituted in the three levels of the cosmos—the world, time, and the human body, which are the fundamental realm of all being⁴⁷—and comes into existence through the combination of the twenty-two consonants, and especially by way of the “231 gates,”⁴⁸ that is, the combinations of the letters into groups of two

45. *Berakhoth* 55a; cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, 78–79.

46. There is no compelling linguistic evidence for assigning a later date to this book. In the otherwise complete absence of early philosophical writings in Hebrew we naturally have nothing to compare to its technical terminology. The language shows many points of contact with that of the tannaim and the oldest Merkabah texts. An analytical study that remains to be made of the concrete relationship between this work and late Greek speculation would no doubt permit a better determination of its age. Leo Baeck’s hypothesis that the author wished to reproduce in Hebrew garb Proclus’s doctrine of Henads, seems unsubstantiated, and its author has to resort to forced interpretations. Nevertheless, on some points of detail Baeck’s interpretations appear plausible and valuable.

47. It is certain that this division and the exactly corresponding division into *mundus, annus, homo* in cosmological statements and illustrations of Latin authors of the early Middle Ages such as Bede go back to a common source. Harry Bober collected interesting material on this subject; cf. *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 19–20 (1957): 78 and illustration 11. The sources utilized by Bede and Isidore of Seville remain to be identified.

48. “Through 231 gates everything goes forth. It is found therefore, that every creature and every speech [language] goes forth out of *one* name” (2:5). Does this mean that the alphabet, in its sequence, constitutes a mystical name? Of such a conception of the alphabet, Franz Dornseiff (*Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 2d ed. [Leipzig, 1925], 69–80) collected abundant testimonies from the Greek and Latin sources; cf. also A. Dieterich, *ABC—Denkmäler, Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 56 (1900): 77–105. In the *Wiener Jahreshefte* 32 (1940): 79–84, Joseph Keil published an important Hebrew-Greek amulet that contains, with an obviously magical intention, the Hebrew alphabet in Greek transcription in the so-called *at-bash* order. In this order the alphabet is written in two rows boustrophedon and two letters are vertically connected in pairs. The amulet should be dated between the second and fourth centuries, but certainly no later. (I was able to identify clearly, though with some effort, the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 28:58, which was in one of the three lines that neither Keil nor Ludwig Blau—to whom he showed the amulet in 1926—was able to decipher. It is only natural that the view that the alphabet constitutes “*One* name, to wit the name of 22 letters” should have passed into the early Kabbalah, as is attested

(the author apparently held the view that the roots of Hebrew words were based not on three but on two consonants). Among the three realms there exist precise correlations, which no doubt also expresses relations of sympathy. The twenty-two consonants are divided into three groups, in accordance with the author's peculiar phonetic system. The first contains the three "matrices,"⁴⁹ א, מ, ש 'alef, mem, and shin. These in turn correspond to the three elements deduced in the first chapter in connection with the sefiroth—ether, water, fire—and from these all the rest came into being. These three letters also have their parallel in the three seasons of the year (again an ancient Greek division!) and the three parts of the body: the head, the torso, and the stomach.⁵⁰ The second group consists of the seven "double consonants" that in the Hebrew phonology of the author have two different sounds.⁵¹ They correspond, above all, to the seven planets, the seven heavens, the seven days of the week, and the seven orifices of the body. At the same time, they also represent the seven fundamental opposites in man's life: life and death, peace and disaster, wisdom and folly, wealth and poverty, charm and ugliness,

by the *Commentary on the Prayer Book*, composed about 1260, by the (anonymous?) commentator *Sefer ha-Manhig* on the *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, Ms. British Museum, Margoliouth 743, fol. 96b.

49. This is how the word has generally been read ('*immoth*) and understood at a later date. Saadya and the Genizah manuscript, on the other hand, did not read '*immoth* but '*ummoth*, a relatively rare noun attested in the Mishnah, where it signifies "foundation;" cf. Lambert's translation, p. 44. The choice of these three consonants seems to reflect an ancient division related to the quantitative force of articulation of the consonants, in explosives, aspirates, and nasals. In ' , the passage of air is completely interrupted by the vocal chords; in *sh* it is obstructed in a "whistling" manner, as the book says, by an effect of contraction, and in *m* the air passes freely through the nose. On the phonetics of the Book *Yesirah*, cf. M. Z. Segal, "Principles of Hebrew Phonetics" (*Yesode ha-Phonetica ha-'Ibhriyth*) (Jerusalem, 1928), 96–100. From the phonetics of the book, as from its Hebrew, one can conclude with a considerable degree of certainty that it had a Palestinian origin.

50. *Gewiyah* must here signify the upper part of the torso, namely, breast. In his division of the body into parts, Philo too distinguishes between the head, the torso, and the stomach, *De opificio mundi*, 118. On the three seasons cf. Robert Eisler, *Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt*, vol. 2 (Munich, 1910), 452, where the author also refers to *Yesirah*.

51. On the much discussed inclusion of *r* among the consonants with a double pronunciation, cf. now the valuable study of S. Morag, "'Sheba' Kefuloth B G D K P R T," in the jubilee volume for Professor N. H. Tur-Sinai, *Sefer Tur-Sinai* (Jerusalem, 1960), 207–242. J. Weiss drew my attention to the fact that in the Stoic theory of language the consonants *b g d k p t* were likewise thrown into relief; cf. Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften* 6:col. 1788.

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