
Daughter, Sister, Bride, and Mother: Images of the Femininity of God in the Early Kabbala¹

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JUDAISM HAS ALWAYS been considered the classic monotheistic religion, the source of the western world's belief in the one, the only, and the unchanging God. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, is one God alone," is the solemn declaration in Deut. 6:4, which, as the *Shema' Yisra'el*, became the daily prayer that a number of Jewish martyrs murmured as they went to their deaths. Christianity took over Jewish monotheism and at the same time extended it to include the incarnation of God, his becoming man on earth. It thereby bound Judaism all the more firmly to an abstract concept of God which could then easily be turned into a caricature of the supposedly distant and inaccessible God of the Old Covenant against which the message of the New Covenant could be set off all the more resplendently. As no real dialogue was possible, Judaism was finally forced to

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take over its delegated role in the conflict between the two religions, in which the weapons, as is only too well-known, were unevenly distributed and the result was a foregone conclusion.

The idea of the one, unchanging God doubtless belongs to the fundamental principles of the Jewish religion. And yet the assumption that Judaism amounts to nothing more than rigidly holding fast to the oneness of God is a mistaken impression that owes its popularity not only to ignorance of the historical development of Judaism but also to Christian prejudices. Unlike Christianity, Judaism never let itself be pinned to dogmas, and religious norms that had become all too firmly established could be broken up easily. Something that might appear to claim universally valid orthodoxy could find itself unexpectedly in the minority, and the revolutionary renewal of the minority could suddenly become the accepted norm. However, one had to avoid saying this too loudly: the "new" had to claim to be "old" in order to be accepted as "new"; only if poured into old wineskins could the new wine ripen properly.

The movement in Judaism in which one can best follow such a dialectical development is the Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages, the Kabbala. Already this self-definition is telling, for in fact "Kabbala" means nothing but "tradition," and thus this movement claims that it does nothing but convey well-established tradition generally accepted as binding. Nothing could be less accurate than this claim. In its different manifestations over a period of several centuries the Kabbala revolutionized the religion of Judaism in a way that would have been unthinkable before its emergence (and more than once it brought Judaism to the verge of schism). This revolution concerns the very concept of God. The God of the Kabbala goes quite decidedly beyond the God of the Bible and of Rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity and has little in common with the God of medieval Jewish philosophy, neither in its Neoplatonic version nor (much less) in the form of the emerging Aristotelianism such as expounded in the twelfth century by Maimonides. The Kabbala sublimely ignores all of this, does not even consider it worthy of discussion, and instead develops by way of mythical images, which are not only difficult to understand but also often disparate in nature, a completely new concept of God. Its ideal is not the unchanging God, the unmoved mover of the philosophers, but, on the contrary, the unfolding depiction of the diverse and dynamic life that goes on within God himself. It is true that God remains one and one alone, but he possesses at the same time an incredibly rich inner life; his Godhead unfolds in potencies, energies, emanations (Heb. *Sefirot*), which embody different aspects of God's essence continually interrelating with one another. Whereas the undivided oneness of God, his Being-in-himself, belongs to an area about which no statement is possible (this is

the hidden God, which was soon to be termed *'En Sof*, literally, "Without End"), his inner unfolding into Sefirot (which were very soon fixed at ten) can be described. This is precisely what the Kabbala tries to do—in ever new images.

The beginnings of the Kabbala, i.e., the historical circumstances of its origins, are still largely shrouded in mystery. The historical document in which it first sees the light of day, out of the blue, so to speak, without any warning, is a little book that appeared in Provence towards the end of the twelfth century—the Book Bahir. This book receives its title from the biblical verse Job 37:21: "But now one does not see the light [any more], it shines [*bahir hu'*] in the heavens," and is attributed to an early Jewish mystic of the second century C.E.—the well-tried fiction that is supposed to guarantee its age and thus its "orthodoxy." Modern scholarship assumes that it originated in the Orient in Late Antiquity and that between 1130 and 1170 sections of this early Bahir reached Provence, "where they were subjected to a final revision and redaction into the form in which the book has come down to us" (Scholem 1990:123).

In the Book Bahir the system of the ten inner-divine potencies has not yet developed to its full complexity, as we find it, for example, in the Zohar and in the later Kabbala; it can only be reconstructed from various initial signs and fragments. Nevertheless, the essential characteristics are already there: the ten in number; the clear separation between the three upper Sefirot and the seven lower ones; the tension between God's love and his punishing judgment in the fourth and fifth Sefira, which is balanced out in the sixth; and finally the Shekhina, as the tenth Sefira is called, the female principle. The name of this female principle within God, Shekhina, is only mentioned in passing. The Shekhina (literally, "dwelling") is well-known from classic Rabbinic literature and refers there to the presence of God in the world; she is always synonymous with God, i.e., not a hypostasis, not a different ontological being, not an autonomous feature or activity of God.² In the Kabbala, on the other hand, she is included as a distinctive principle within the inner-divine life—a concept that is completely alien to Rabbinic Judaism—but her influence is also felt, as we shall see, in a special way on earth. The decisive difference, and thereby the completely innovative feature of the Book Bahir, is, finally, that never before (neither in Rabbinic literature nor in Jewish philosophy) is she defined as an explicitly female principle.

² See in detail, Arnold Goldberg. On the first indications of the Shekhina's distinct nature in several late midrashim, see Scholem 1990: 147ff.

SEXUAL SYMBOLISM

The interplay of the ten Sefirot or inner potencies of the divine being is expressed in the Book Bahir through various metaphors and imagery. Amongst these images is a markedly sexual symbolism for masculinity and femininity. The masculine principle is located in the seventh and also the eighth Sefira. Thus it is said of the seventh Sefira that it lies in the "East of the world" and is therefore on the "Eastern" side of the Sefirotic system: "From there the seed of Israel is derived, for the spinal cord stretches from man's brain to the phallus, and from there the seed is derived, as it is written (Isa. 43:5): 'From the East I will bring your seed [and from the West I will gather you].'"³

Corresponding to this is the tenth Sefira, the Shekhina, which is oriented towards the West: "And what [does the verse Isa. 43:5 mean]: 'From the West I will gather you'? From that Sefira⁴ [I gather you] which always bends towards the West. And why is the West called [in Hebrew] *ma'arav*?⁵ Because it is there that all [the] seeds are mixed together. A parable: This matter is compared to a prince who had a beautiful and virtuous bride in his chamber, and he was accustomed to removing riches from his father's house and always bringing them to her, and she took everything and always hid it and mixed up everything" (Scholem 1923: # 104 = Kaplan: # 156).

This illustrates in a very typical way how the divine and the earthly world overlap. The mingling of the seeds in the tenth Sefira describes in sexual imagery the interplay of male and female potencies within God (the "prince" and his "bride") as well as the entrance of human souls into the world that takes place through the tenth and lowest Sefira, standing at the crossing to the earthly world. In his essence God is male and female, and *therefore* man, too, is male and female (and not the other way round), as the following text quite drastically depicts: "I have already told you that the Holy One, blessed be He, has seven holy forms,⁶ and they all have their counterparts in man, as it is written (Gen. 1:27): '[God created man in his image,] in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.' And they are the following: the right and left leg, the right and left hand, the trunk with the place of procreation, and the head. These are [however only] six, and you say seven? Seven they are with his wife, [about

³ Scholem 1923: # 104 = Kaplan: # 155. All translations are from the Hebrew text in Abrams and follow the German translation by Scholem 1923 (Scholem's Munich dissertation) as well as the English translation by Kaplan. The division into sections and their numbering in Abrams follows Scholem.

⁴ Hebrew *middah*, "attribute," which here is one of the ten Sefirot.

⁵ Literally, "mixture."

⁶ The "forms" refer to the Sefirot, in particular the lower seven ones.

whom] it is written (Gen. 2:24): 'And they shall be one flesh'" (Scholem 1923: # 116 = Kaplan: # 172).

Earthly man is the likeness of the divine "body." His "extremities" (legs, arms, trunk with phallus and head) correspond to the seven lower divine Sefirot. As God is only complete with the female tenth Sefira, man, too, needs the complement of the female, which becomes an integrated whole with man's body. In other words: the female belongs essentially to the male; man is incomplete without woman precisely because *God* is male and female!

The femininity of the tenth Sefira is illustrated with various images. Particularly graphic in its sexual symbolism is the image of the Etrog, the citrus fruit that, along with the palm branch, the willow, and the myrtle, belongs to the "four species," the bouquet of Sukkot. (The palm branch, willow, and myrtle are tied together and held in the right hand, while the Etrog is carried separately in the left hand.) In the following parable the palm branch is interpreted as male and the Etrog as female: "It is like a king who planned to plant nine male trees in his garden, and all were date palms. What did he do? He said: If they are all of the same kind, it is impossible for them to exist. What did he do? He planted amongst them an Etrog, and this was one of the nine, of which he had [originally] planned that they be male. And what is [the] Etrog? [The] Etrog is female" (Scholem 1923: # 117 = Kaplan: # 172).

THE POSITION OF THE SHEKHINA IN THE SEFIROTIC SYSTEM

Let us now look more closely at the position of the female Shekhina in the system of the ten Sefirot. What is most striking is its receptive function, which is emphasized again and again and expressed in different images. She is the vessel (*shidda*) into which all the powers of the upper Sefirot flow and at the same time the heart (*lev*) of God which points to the thirty-two hidden paths of wisdom by which the world was created (the numerical value of the Hebrew word *lev* is 32).⁷ She is a valuable precious stone that God loves more than his "kings" (a clear hint at the other Sefirot) and that he hugs, kisses, and sets on his head (obviously as a crown) and loves (Scholem 1923: # 49). In a rich but somewhat bizarre image, she is a beautiful, fragrant vessel that he loves, puts on his head or on his arms (obviously an allusion to the tefillin worn on the forehead and arm), and indeed even lends to his son (Scholem 1923: # 101). This precious stone is itself "crowned," and everything is "contained" in it

⁷ Scholem 1923: # 43; cf. also Scholem 1923: # 67, 75, 97.

(Scholem 1923: # 61). The latter statement, that it absorbs and “contains everything” within it (that is, the powers of all the other Sefirot), is a further distinctive characteristic of the tenth Sefira. In an interpretation of Gen. 24:1 (“And God blessed Abraham with all” [*ba-kol*]), this “all” (*kol*) is interpreted as a “beautiful vessel” that holds “beautiful precious stones,” “which have no equal”—no doubt a further reference to the tenth Sefira, which combines within her all the beauty and power of the other divine Sefirot (Scholem 1923: # 52 = Kaplan: # 78). This explains why, among other things, she is also symbolized by the ocean that contains the water of all the rivers within it, i.e., the forces of all the other Sefirot: “‘All the brooks go to the sea, but the sea is not filled’ (Eccles. 1:7). What is this sea? Let us say that it is the Etrog” (Scholem 1923: # 120 = Kaplan: # 178).

But the positing of the Shekhina as the lowest Sefira is by no means the whole story of its ranking, and its function is in no way limited to pure receptivity. It is true that in the hierarchy of the Sefirot she is located at the bottom, but she is at the same time connected in a strange way with the third Sefira, “understanding” (*bina*). The Book Bahir says explicitly that in reality there are two Shekhinot: “There is a Shekhina below, just like there is a Shekhina above. And what is this Shekhina [below]? Let us say that it is the light which has emanated from first light.”⁸ “Understanding” (*bina*) is the “mother” of the upper world, from which the seven lower Sefirot emanate (Scholem 1923: # 74); it is the primordial light to which the natural light corresponds (Scholem 1923: # 97) or also the Written Tora, from which the Oral Tora originates (Scholem 1923: # 97, 98f.; 131). A perfect harmony seems to exist between the third Sefira (*bina*) as the lowest of the three upper Sefirot and the tenth Sefira (Shekhina) as the lowest of the seven lower Sefirot. Whereas the third Sefira bundles up the powers of the three upper Sefirot and passes them on to the seven lower Sefirot, the tenth Sefira bundles up the powers of the seven or ten Sefirot and transmits them down to the earthly world.

Standing on the threshold to the earthly world, the Shekhina hands over the divine powers assembled within her to this world and at the same time directs them upwards. As the “crowned precious stone in which all is contained,” she is the foundation stone and yet strives to return back to the place whence she originated, the third Sefira: “‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone’ (Ps. 118:22). And it ascends to the place from which it was hewn, as it is written: ‘From there is the shepherd, the stone of Israel’ (Gen. 49:24)” (Scholem 1923: # 61 =

⁸ Scholem 1923: # 116 = Kaplan: # 171 (the following “which is wisdom” is most probably a gloss: cf. Scholem 1923:124 n. 4. And see Scholem 1990:173-176).

Kaplan: # 91). It is quite obvious that the separation of the tenth from the third Sefira and the strivings of both towards union are not descriptions of chronologically different forms of being of the divine essence—for instance, in the sense that both became separated as a result of a catastrophic event (the inner-divine catastrophe as it is well-known from the later Kabbala) and are awaiting their reunion in a better, i.e., messianic, future—but a necessary and simultaneous condition. Only in her position at the bottom edge of the divine world can the Shekhina fulfil her divinely intended task for the earthly world, i.e., a task intrinsic to God's nature; yet according to her own nature she belongs to the three highest divine potencies. However, we shall later see that the union of the two Sefirot is in no way dependent on these alone but relies on the involvement of Israel and, thus, human beings.

The double function of the tenth Sefira, her orientation towards above and below, is very graphically expressed in the Hebrew concept *daveq u-meyuhad*, which most likely means “united [or connected] and [at the same time] separate.”⁹ Two parables elucidate this special feature in an exegesis from Ezek. 3:12 (“Blessed be the glory of God from his place”):

What is “the glory of God”? A parable: This matter is comparable to a king in whose chamber the queen was, and all his hosts delighted in her. They had sons, who came every day to see the king and to bless him. They said to him: “Where is our mother?” He replied: “You cannot see her now.” They said: “Let her be blessed, wherever she is!”

And what is meant by “from his place”? Because there is no one who knows his place. A parable: There was a king's daughter who came from a faraway place and no one knew whence she had come, but they saw that she was capable, beautiful and refined in everything she did. They then said: “She is certainly taken from the side of light,” for the world is illuminated through her deeds. They asked her: “From whence have you come?” She said: “From my place.” They said: “If so, the people of your place must be great. Blessed be she and blessed be her place!”¹⁰

In the first parable the king is God, i.e., the totality of all the Sefirot, and the queen (Aramaic *matronita*, literally: “[his] spouse”) is the Shekhina, the tenth Sefira. As the king's spouse she clearly assumes a prominent position among the other Sefirot, the “hosts”¹¹ who take delight in

⁹ Scholem 1923: # 89 translates: “*verbunden und geeint*” [“connected and united”], which is linguistically possible, but makes no sense in this particular context. *Meyuhad* means here rather “special, individual,” in the sense of “isolated, separated.” A similar view is offered by Joseph Dan and Ronald C. Kiener: “‘united’ and ‘special’ (meaning here: separated)” (62). E. Wolfson, in an e-mail communication of May 11, 1999, suggests the apt translation “distinct.”

¹⁰ Scholem 1923: # 90 α and β; the English translation follows Scholem 1990: 166.

¹¹ On the heavenly hosts as a term for the Sefirot, see also Scholem 1923: # 90 γ.

her. The sons of the divine couple are the people of Israel: the king they can see and extol daily but not the queen, their mother. They therefore praise the "glory of God," their mother, wherever she is, i.e., without knowing her exact whereabouts. The first parable thus describes the position of the Shekhina within the system of the ten Sefirot. She is God's glory and as such "united" (*daveq*) with God in the innermost chamber of the king. To this humankind, Israel, has no access; the sons cannot see their mother's place of origin.

The second parable tells a different story. Here the Shekhina is described in her function as the king's daughter who, from her position as the tenth Sefira, exerts her powers within the world of human beings. She comes from a faraway land, "from the side of light," which naturally means her divine realm. As the king's daughter, she is at the same time God's messenger, who illuminates the earthly world. Only in this state can human beings see her and speak with her; her actual place, however, the place of her origin, continues to be hidden from their view. The second parable thus describes the position of the Shekhina in her state of isolation (*meyuhad*), in her separation from her divine origin and in her dwelling among human beings. Because the Shekhina is at one and the same time "united" with her divine origin and "separated" from it, she is the outstanding part of the Sefirotic system and, moreover, the power through which the divine sphere exerts influence on the earthly world, through which God communicates with humankind.

MEDIATRIX BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

We need to look at this aspect more closely. The description of the Shekhina as mediator (*mediatrix*) between God and human beings, heaven and earth, is one of the central concerns of the Book Bahir and the Kabbala. Playing a prominent role in all this is the Oral Tora, to be more precise, the separation between Written and Oral Tora. Whereas, as we have seen, the Written Tora is identified with the third Sefira and remains inaccessible for humans in the divine sphere, the Oral Tora is equated with the tenth Sefira and can thus, but only thus, be effective in the earthly world.

This separation between Written and Oral Tora flagrantly contradicts the classical Rabbinic tradition, according to which both forms of the Tora, the Written and the Oral, were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the Rabbis set great store by the statement that nothing from the Tora has been left behind in heaven. Now, the Book Bahir takes this idea and transforms it radically into a powerful myth that goes far beyond the accepted tradition. According to the Bahir, the Shekhina in her divine manifestation is identical with the Written Tora (which stays in heaven), whereas the Shekhina in her earthly manifestation is identical with the Oral Tora

(which comes down to earth). Hence, the Shekhina, which is God's female principle, is located in the innermost essence of the divinity (the Written Tora), and at the same time exposed to the world of human beings (the Oral Tora). That is, the Oral Tora, which has been given to Israel, is not just a book, but God himself who enters the world in the form of his daughter: "This is comparable to a king who had a daughter who was good and comely, graceful and perfect. And he married her to a prince, and gave her garments and a crown and jewelry and great wealth. Can the king live without his daughter?¹² No! But can he be with her all day long? No! What did he do? He built a window between himself and her, and whenever the daughter needs the father and the father the daughter, they join one another through the window. Of this is it written: 'All glorious is the king's daughter within the palace; her garment is interwoven with gold' (Ps. 45:14)."¹³

Here again the king is God, and the daughter is the Shekhina, the tenth Sefira. Most likely the royal prince is Solomon, to whom God gave wisdom (according to 1 Kgs. 5:9ff., 26), another symbol for the Oral Tora. As the king's daughter, the Shekhina belongs to the divine sphere; as the Oral Tora, she is Solomon's bride and thus sent into the lower world. She is separated from the king, her father, and nonetheless is always close to him: through the window they can come together whenever they wish. And, what is more important, even on earth she retains the "glory" of her divine origin, i.e., her divine essence.

A further parable describes more precisely the access of human beings to God that the Oral Tora opens up. It explains the already mentioned thirty-two paths of wisdom concealed in God, by means of which he created the world:

What are these 32? He said: These are the 32 paths. This is like a king who was in the innermost chamber [of his palace], and the number of rooms was thirty-two, and there was a path to every chamber. Did it behoove the king to allow everyone to enter his chambers by these paths? No! But did it behoove him not to show his pearls and jeweled settings and hidden treasures and beautiful things at all? What did [the king] do? He took his daughter and concentrated all paths in her and in her garments, and he who wishes to enter the interior must look at her. . . .¹⁴ At times, in his great love for her, he calls her "my sister," for they come from one place; sometimes he calls her "my daughter," for she is his daughter; and sometimes he calls her "my mother."¹⁵

¹² Literally: "can he live outside his daughter?"

¹³ Scholem 1923: # 36; the English translation follows Scholem 1990:164.

¹⁴ The sentence left out seems to be a gloss that doesn't belong here; see Scholem 1923:45n. 7.

¹⁵ Scholem 1923: # 43 = Kaplan: # 63; the English translation follows Scholem 1990:162f.

This is one of the most important texts about the Shekhina. The thirty-two paths of wisdom are the essence of the heavenly as well as the earthly world; to a certain extent they prefigure in heaven what was transferred to earth in creation.¹⁶ Whoever knows them has access to the king, i.e., to God, and to all the secrets of creation. God did not want to make his heavenly treasures accessible to everyone, but he also did not want to conceal them from the world (in fact, he ends up creating the earthly world in them). He therefore decided to bring them together in his “daughter,” the Shekhina and the Oral Tora: she contains within herself all the paths of wisdom; whoever would like to understand and fathom them must look at her, the Shekhina, i.e., at the Tora. The Tora is the only medium through which God and the secrets of his creation are accessible to all human beings.

Thus, here again we have a parable trying to describe the paradoxical position of the Shekhina as part of both the heavenly and the earthly realm, not in abstract concepts but in the form of the metaphorical language of the parable, something that is characteristic of Jewish mysticism in general and of the Book Bahir in particular. Being the Tora, which is entrusted to Solomon as the representative of all human beings, the Shekhina is God’s daughter; as one of the ten Sefirot she is his sister, a partner with equal rights in the interplay of inner-divine potencies; as mother of his sons, i.e., of Israel, she is his spouse.¹⁷ Only in this last sense, as mother of his sons, can he also call her “mother” in the strange image of the parable (albeit not literally “my mother,” of course).

The *Vorlage* for this wording was quite obviously a parable in the Rabbinic literature, and it is only against this background that the Bahir’s bold statement really becomes clear. The starting point of the Rabbinic parable is the Bible verse Song of Songs 3:11 (“Go forth, you daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon wearing the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding”): “This is compared to a king who had an only daughter, whom he loved very greatly and would call ‘my daughter.’ Not satisfied with that he called her ‘my sister.’ And still not satisfied with that he [finally] called her ‘my mother.’ Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, loved Israel above all else and called them ‘my daughter’ . . . Not satisfied with that he called them ‘my sister.’ . . . Still not satisfied with that he [finally] called them ‘my mother.’ . . .”¹⁸

The subject of this parable is the love of God for Israel; “daughter,” “sister,” and “mother” are nothing but metaphors expressing the excep-

¹⁶ On the thirty-two paths, see also Scholem 1923: ## 62, 67, 75, 97 (the source is *Sefer Yetzira* 1:1).

¹⁷ See also Scholem 1923: ## 51 α and 90 α.

¹⁸ *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 3, 11 # 2.

tionality and the intensification of this love: God loves Israel as someone loves his daughter, sister, or mother. The highest form of love is mother-love; therefore he calls Israel even "my mother." Totally different, much bolder and more concrete is the parable in the Book Bahir. Here the "daughter" of God is really his daughter, namely, the Shekhina who has been sent to human beings; his "sister" is really his sister, and the "mother" is his spouse as well as the mother of his sons. If one transfers the Rabbinic parable to the parable in the Book Bahir, one might argue that it is this last function of the Shekhina as wife and mother in which the highest form of the love relationship between God and his female partner takes concrete form. This is certainly implied, but the tenor of the Bahir parable is directed primarily at the function of the Shekhina as daughter and thereby at God's embodiment in the world. With his female force, the Shekhina, God enters the world.¹⁹

What precisely is the task of the Shekhina as the embodiment and emissary of God in the world? The same thing holds true here as with her role in the system of the inner-divine powers: she is not only God's passive presence among human beings, but she also plays an active part in their destiny; she helps Israel gain access to God. This is based, as we would expect, on her capacity as the Oral Tora which brings together all the Commandments that Israel has to fulfil.²⁰ In her twofold capacity as part of the divinity and as the Oral Tora "she illuminates the world" in a double sense: she makes possible God's presence among human beings, and she helps Israel to fulfil the Tora. Whether and how Israel fulfils the Tora therefore affects not only Israel but also God (Scholem 1923: # 90 β); the Shekhina reacts to Israel's behavior and is herself influenced by it. When Israel sins, then the Shekhina also feels bad, and when they do God's will, then she feels good too: "What is this like? A king had a beautiful wife, and had children from her. He loved them and raised them, but they went out to bad ways. He then hated both them and their mother. The mother went to them and said, 'My children! Why do you do this? Why do you make your father hate both you and me?'" [She spoke to them in this manner] until they had remorse and did the will of their father. When their father saw this, he loved them as much as he did in the beginning. He then also remembered²¹ their mother" (Scholem 1923: # 51 α = Kaplan: # 76).

Again the king is God, his spouse the Shekhina, and the children are Israel. Thus the Shekhina is again portrayed in her dual role as female partner in the divine sphere and as the mother of the children of the divine

¹⁹ The verse Song of Songs 3:11 would then be understood in the sense of the Bahir: Solomon was crowned by his mother, the third Sefira, with the crown of the Tora, the tenth Sefira.

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Scholem 1923: # 131.

²¹ A gloss in the Munich manuscript (see Abrams: 146) reads "and loved their mother."

couple. In this latter function she is responsible for the well-being of the children and accordingly "hated" (a strong expression) by her spouse when the children misbehave. As the mother of Israel she has become—despite her divine origins—a part of Israel; in fact, she is identified with Israel so much that her own destiny is dependent on them (her children). As a result she is the one who has to persuade Israel to fulfil the Commandments and to atone for their sins so that God will again love them *and their mother*, for only through her does God love Israel and only through Israel does he love her. Although this interpretation may go too far, the parable almost conveys the impression that God loves Israel more than the Shekhina, that the most important task of the mother is to reconcile the children with their father. Only when the children repent and return to their father does he "remember" their mother, i.e., only then does he set her up again in her position as his beloved spouse.

Another mythical image of the three-way relationship between God, his spouse and mother of his children, as well as Israel, rests on the distinction between the primordial light of the creation (Gen. 1:3) and the natural light that separates day and night (Gen. 1:14). As we have seen, the hidden primordial light is identified with the third Sefira, "understanding" (Scholem 1923: ## 131, 133), and the natural light that illuminates the earthly world is identified with the tenth Sefira, the Shekhina and the Oral Tora (Scholem 1923: ## 97-99). The following exegesis describes the intimate connection between the two lights and Israel: "And the glow (*noga*) will be like light ('*or*).' One day the glow that was taken from the first light will be like [the] light [itself], if my children keep the Tora and commandments that I gave to teach them, as it is written (Prov. 1:8): 'Hear my son, the discipline of your father, and do not abandon the instruction (*tora*) of your mother.' And it is written (Hab. 3:4): 'Rays go forth from his hand, and his hidden force is there.' What is 'his hidden force'? This is the light that he stored away and hid, as it is written (Ps. 31:20): 'that you have hidden away for those who fear you.' What remains for us is that which 'you have accomplished for those who find shelter in you (*ibid.*)'—in this world, who keep your Tora, observe your commandments, and sanctify your great name, uniting²² it secretly and publicly" (Scholem 1923: # 98 = Kaplan: ## 147f.).

Although the primordial light and the natural light, the third and the tenth Sefira, are separated, they can nevertheless be united, if Israel keeps the Tora. Israel's fulfillment of the Tora leads to the union, or better still, the re-union of the natural light with the primordial light, the Oral Tora with the Written Tora, the Shekhina with "understanding" (*bina*). When

²² *Meyahadin*, "confess as one (name)."

Israel sanctifies God's great name, they unite it, which here can mean nothing else but that they unite the ten Sefirot: the Shekhina will return to her original place (the third Sefira), and all the Sefirot will become one. Whether this is possible any time or only in the future (in the messianic period of redemption?) is not specified. However, it does seem as if the accent is placed more on the present, i.e., on the act of unification of the Sefirot which is always possible (as well as the opposite movement, their unfolding anew into the ten divine potencies).²³

To summarize this part briefly: The Shekhina is God's female force and, as such, the lowest and, to a certain extent, weakest of the divine forces in their dynamic interplay with one another, but at the same time she is the most important and strongest, because she unites within herself the flow of all the other energies. She forms a bridge over the heavenly and the earthly realms, not only because of her position on the borderline between the divinity and the human world but above all because she is God's embodiment in the world. Through her, God enters the world, and her only task is to unite Israel with God. If she succeeds in this, she will not only lead Israel to God but will herself return to her divine origin. By taking up residence amid the people of Israel, she has made Israel's destiny her own. She is responsible for Israel and Israel likewise for her. Only through her does Israel have access to God, just as her (re-)union with her divine spouse depends in the end on Israel. Because she alone belongs to both worlds, it is only through her that the earthly world can be reconciled with the heavenly one and only through her that humans can find their way to God. The female force is the key to both worlds. Without her the heavenly world would be incomplete, and the earthly world would neither have been created nor be able to find its way back to its creator.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITION

Modern scholarship still stands in astonishment before this powerful myth about God's femininity and has not gotten very far in attempting to explain its origins. Scholars agree that it represents not just a revision but a unique transformation of various, well-known Jewish traditions.²⁴ One of these (traditions) is the Rabbinic Shekhina; however, although the Shekhina of the Bahir is identical with the Rabbinic Shekhina, it is at the same time full of new content. An older idea, one of the roots of the

²³ What speaks for this view is the phrase "in this world"; cf. also Scholem 1923: # 137, where likewise no eschatological connotation is indicated.

²⁴ On the question of what he calls the "mythic/Hebraic" and the "philosophic/Hellenic" strands of wisdom traditions and their particular "cultural mix" in the Bahir, see most recently Wolfson 1998.

Rabbinic Shekhina, in fact, is the concept of the divine wisdom (in Hebrew *hokhma*, in Greek *sophia*), which is developed in some of the later books of the Bible and repeatedly cited as the source of the female nature of God. It is found for the first time in the eighth chapter of the Book of Proverbs, which belongs to the latest redactional stage of the Book (post-exilic period):²⁵

The Lord created me (= Wisdom) at the beginning of his way,
 As the first of his works of old.
 In the distant past I was fashioned,
 At the beginning, before the origins of the earth. . . .
 When he measured the foundations of the earth,
 I was his "confidant,"²⁶
 I was his delight every single day,
 Playing always before him.
 I played on his universe,
 And my delight it was to be with humankind. (Prov. 8:22-31)

Here we recognize some of the ideas that also hold true for the Shekhina in the Book Bahir: wisdom, apparently understood to be a female quality, is with God before the creation of heaven and earth; she is his confidant and sees being with humankind as her task. The most important difference is that despite her extreme closeness to God she is quite clearly not his spouse but was created—it is true, before the creation of the world, but indeed just created.²⁷ Also, in the Book of Job (completed in the third century B.C.E.) the praises of wisdom are sung (ch. 28), but in her capacity as the wisdom of all knowledge and all cognition and not at all as an aspect or part of God. Judaism rather preferred to continue to follow this line of scholarly, textually oriented wisdom that reached its first climax in the (non-canonical) book Jesus (ben) Sirach [Ecclesiasticus], which was composed between 180 and 170 B.C.E. There the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, which was created before the world, is expressly equated with the Tora (Ecclus. 24:23): "All this [i.e., everything that is said about wisdom in Proverbs] is the book of the covenant (*biblos diathêkês*) of God Most High, the law (*nomos*) which Moses gave to us to be the heritage of the assemblies of Jacob." Here, wisdom is the Tora, a book, no more and no less; there is no mention of its (female) embodiment in God.

²⁵ Cf. von Rad: 144-176; Gilbert: 283-324; Lang; Murphy: 135-139.

²⁶ Hebrew *amon*—"child" or "craftsman." Both translations are possible and supported by the tradition, but "child" is more likely because of the context ("playing before him"); see von Rad: 152f.; Lang: 93-95; Murphy: 136-139.

²⁷ Cf. Lang: 90f., 95-100.

It is possible to notice a first step in the direction of wisdom being the female partner of God in the likewise non-canonical book of the Wisdom of Solomon (*Sapientia Salomonis*), which was composed in the first century B.C.E., presumably in Alexandria,²⁸ and above all in the works of the Jewish philosopher Philo, who also flourished in Alexandria in the first century C.E., i.e., in the cultural milieu of Hellenistic Jewry. In his essay on drunkenness Philo writes: “Now ‘father and mother’ is a phrase which can bear different meanings. For instance we should rightly say and without further question that the architect who made this universe was at the same time the father of what was thus born, whilst its mother was the knowledge (*epistêmê*)²⁹ possessed by its Maker. With his knowledge God had union, not as men have it, and begat created being. And knowledge, having received the divine seed, when her travail was consummated bore the only beloved son who is apprehended by the senses, the world which we see” (*De Ebrietate*, # 30).

If at first glance the doubling of God in father and mother and the mother’s giving birth to the mutually conceived son (Israel) seems to be very close to the ideas of the Bahir, we should be careful about drawing too far-reaching conclusions. Not only is the image of father and mother taken from the Bible text interpreted by Philo (Deut. 21:18-21: the unruly son, whom father and mother press charges against, instead of defending him), Philo can also, and equally nonchalantly, make Sophia masculine if the biblical context seems to warrant it. As the Book Bahir does later, he also refers to Sophia as God’s daughter and applies to her the biblical name Betuel (from *bat*—“daughter” and *el*—“God”). However, because Betuel in the Bible is clearly a man—in fact, he is the father of Rebecca—Philo sees himself forced to reach the following conclusion (which is a marvelous example of Philo’s misogyny): “He called Bethuel Rebecca’s father. How, pray, can Wisdom, the daughter of God, be rightly spoken of as a father? Is it because, while Wisdom’s name is feminine, her nature is manly . . . For pre-eminence always pertains to the masculine, and the feminine always comes short of and is lesser than it. Let us, then, pay no heed to the discrepancy in the gender of the words, and say that the daughter of God, Wisdom, is not only masculine but father, sowing and begetting in souls aptness, discipline, knowledge, sound sense, good and laudable actions” (*De Fuga et Inventionem*, 50-52).

²⁸ See, e.g., Sap. Sal. 8:3: “She adds lustre to her noble birth, because it is given her to live with God (*symbiōsin theou echousa*); the Lord of all things loved her (*ēgapēsen autēn*).” In 9:4 she is called the *parhedros*, “coadjutor” of God.

²⁹ In Philo’s writings, the equivalent of Sophia.

GNOSIS AND CHRISTIANITY

The search for Jewish precedents of God's femininity in the Book Bahir proves in the end to be unsatisfactory, and so scholars have increasingly been on the lookout for other sources that could possibly have influenced the Bahir's mysticism. It is Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, who with vehemence and suggestive power presented his thesis: namely, that the Gnosis of Late Antiquity represents the sought-for connecting link between the early Jewish speculations about wisdom, the Rabbinic ideas about the Shekhina, and the concept of the femininity of God in the Bahir. In this he refers to the Gnostic school of Valentinus in the second century C.E., which distinguishes between an "upper" and a "lower Sophia." Whereas the one is located at the very top of the realm of the divine *pleroma*, the other, the "daughter of light," is positioned at its very end. By submitting to the seduction of the *hyle* ("matter"), this second Sophia tumbles down into the lower material world and has been in exile ever since (Scholem 1990:91). This myth concerning the fall of the Sophia reminds us of the parable in the Bahir about the king's daughter who came "from faraway," "from the side of light," and whose exotic beauty men admire. Scholem sees here direct parallels with the bridal hymn of the Gnostic Acts of Thomas and other Gnostic hymns³⁰ and concludes that the idea of the Shekhina in the Bahir, i.e., precisely the feature that makes the book so revolutionary and innovative comes from the Gnosis: "Our investigation therefore constrains us to admit the assumption that Oriental sources originating in the world of Gnosticism influenced the elaboration of the symbolism of the Book Bahir or that fragments relating to the Shekhinah in that work themselves belong to such a stratum of sources" (1990:96f.). Thus, this very concept of the feminine side of God and her presence in the earthly world was already included, according to Scholem, in the leaves of the original Bahir, which somehow made a winding and no longer traceable journey to the Jews of Provence in the twelfth century (1990:123).

This is an ingenious and, as I said before, suggestive interpretation, but increasingly doubts have been expressed about it.³¹ What speaks against it is not only that the enthusiasm for Gnosis waned, an enthusiasm that all too obviously buoyed up Scholem's research and that was heavily influenced by Hans Jonas's *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist*,³² but some quite

³⁰ Scholem 1990:94f.; 1992:168. Scholem relies mainly on the bridal hymn of the Sophia and the Hymn of the Pearl, which are both problematic (the Hymn of the Pearl most probably doesn't have anything to do with the Sophia).

³¹ Cf., e.g., Wolfson 1995:63f.

³² Published for the first time in 1934 (first volume) and 1954 (second volume); see also Jonas 1963.

concrete observations also advise caution. Scholem himself points out that in no way can the interpretation claiming that the Gnostic hymns were dedicated to the lower Sophia be taken for granted, for they could also apply to the Gnostic redeemer or to the souls of men which have their origins in the divine sphere (1990:94f.). Much more significant still is the clue that nowhere does the mysticism of the Bahir reveal the dualistic component that is so characteristic of the Gnosis. Finally, and this pertains concretely to the Shekhina, nowhere in the Bahir is there any reference to the *downfall* or *exile* of the Shekhina. But this is exactly the point on which Scholem quite substantially bases his comparison of the Bahir with the Gnosis, and once this central element is no longer applicable, a decisive link in his argumentation disappears.³³

Thus we are back at the beginning again. There is no doubt that the Bahir's mysticism, and in particular the idea of the feminine manifestation of God, contains elements that correspond to Gnostic ideas, but the parallels do not go so far as to reconstruct literary dependencies or even Gnostic layers of an original Bahir.³⁴ It is equally possible that the editors of the Bahir, by creatively resorting to tradition, developed thoughts that were very close to those of the Gnosis.³⁵ (Scholem suggests a possible link in the Catharist movement in southern France, but nothing there indicates a proximity to the femininity of God as described in the Bahir; 1990: 234-238.)

Much closer than the "Gnosis," it seems to me, is a parallel to which, oddly enough, scholars up to now have hardly paid any attention: the parallel with Christianity. Scholem insists on the heretical elements of the Gnosis and conspicuously avoids putting the Book Bahir into the Christian context where it originated.³⁶ The Jews of twelfth-century Provence did not live in a ghetto or in other-worldly conventicles but in the midst of Christian surroundings characterized by two revolutionary developments, one of them secular in nature, the other religious. The secular element is

³³ Scholem 1990:93: "Here it is important to note that the identification of the Shekhinah as a divine hypostasis, with the Gnostic Sophia, could make use, as the most important *tertium comparationis*, of the idea of exile in the lower world." In Scholem 1992:167, he tones down this comment: "*Sefer ha-Bahir* does not call this an exile of the *Shekhinah*—such a notion is not really developed in this book—but rather seems to imply that it is her destiny to dwell in the lower realms."

³⁴ The whole question of gnostic "influences" and "parallels" to the Bahir has to be reopened, not least in view of the new sources to which Scholem did not have access.

³⁵ Scholem was well aware of this; see his more cautious formulation in *Mystical Shape of the Godhead*: "The images used for this relationship [of the Shekhina to God] in the *Bahir* appear in all their original freshness, whether they were taken from the legacy of Gnostic speculation in late antiquity or whether they took shape in the course of the creative reflection of anonymous Jewish God-seekers of the twelfth century upon the meaning of the images of their own tradition" (1992: 170f.).

³⁶ The suggestively proposed identification of the female "congregation of Israel" (*keneset yisra'el*) with the "body of the Shekhina" and the parallel drawn with the church (*ecclesia*) as *corpus Christi* in Scholem 1990:161 are problematic in premise as well as in application to the Bahir.

that of the love poetry of the troubadours, which blossomed in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in southern France (in Provence and in Languedoc). The religious element is the veneration of Mary, the Mother of the Son of God, which in the mid-twelfth century reached Western Christianity from Byzantium and was spread, among others, by Bernard of Clairvaux and his Cistercian order, first in France and then throughout the whole of Europe.³⁷ Mary, the queen, bride, and mother, takes her proper place next to her divine son; she is the beloved of the Song of Songs who has united with Christ, her lover. In one of his sermons on Mary's assumption to heaven, Bernard says:

However who would even be in a position to imagine how the glorious queen of the world left us today, with what reverential love the whole host of celestial armies rushed to meet her, with what hymns she was led to the throne of glory, with what radiant face, with what a cheerful expression, with what divine kisses was she taken up by her son and elevated above all creation! . . . Yes indeed, blessed were the kisses which the mother pressed upon the lips of the infant, while she smiled at him as he sat on her virgin's lap. But shouldn't we deem even happier those kisses which in blessed greeting she receives today from the mouth of him who sits on the throne to the right of the father, when she ascends to the throne of glory, sings a nuptial hymn and says (Cant. 1:2): "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."³⁸

This exuberant veneration of the Virgin Mary could not have been hidden from the Provencal Jews any less than the love poetry of the troubadours; both shaped the spiritual climate of their time, in the churches and at the courts of the nobility.³⁹ The assumption that the Jews would not have noticed any of this is not only naïve: it arises out of an extremely uncritical picture of how Jews lived in a Christian environment.⁴⁰ It is a quite different matter, however, to inquire whether one can infer from this a Christian influence on the Jews, i.e., that troubadour songs and the veneration of the Virgin Mary were not only perceived by the Jews in Provence but also, consciously or unconsciously, were transposed into the peculiar myths of the Bahir, into the Jewish world of ideas.

Let us look at the idea of the Shekhina again from the point of view of Christianity. To a Christian observer the myth developed in the Bahir can

³⁷ From the rich literature I refer to the following only: Delius; Warner; Bynum; Atkinson; Fulton; Schreiner 1994.

³⁸ *In Assumptione Beatae Mariae*, Sermo primus, 4. My translation follows Bernhard von Clairvaux, *Sämtliche Werke (lateinisch/deutsch)*: 531f.

³⁹ On the question, whether these two movements influenced each other, see Warner: 134ff.

⁴⁰ I am preparing a monograph on the subject of the feminine side of God in the Jewish tradition from the biblical wisdom literature to the Bahir, which will deal also with the Christian surroundings of the Bahir and in particular with parallels to the veneration of Mary.

be interpreted as follows: God's oneness is manifold, though not threefold, as in the Christian Trinity (it is not by chance that the Christian Kabbala later saw the Trinity prefigured in the three upper Sefirot). Out of love for humankind God goes into the earthly world to lead it back to himself. In Christianity it is the Son of God; in the Bahir it is his daughter, his female potency. To put it pointedly, one could even say that in the Bahir the functions of Jesus and his mother Mary coincide. The Shekhina who has been sent to earth represents God's presence in the world; and she is God's feminine manifestation which is missing in Christianity (though the description of Mary as the bride of Jesus and her union with her divine son and bridegroom in the quotation from Bernard of Clairvaux's sermon comes very close to a deification). Only through her do human beings have access to their divine Father—here too we have a close parallel to Mary's position as mother, not only of the divine Son but also of the human race, as humankind's advocate and mediator before God, whom the Cistercians pay homage to in the vespers with their *Salve Regina, mater misericordiae*. On a decisive point, however, the comparison no longer works: the Son of God sent to earth in Christianity becomes man; the daughter of God sent to earth in the Bahir continues to be part of the divinity—at least nowhere is it expressly said that she becomes a human being. In the beautiful parable about the king's daughter who "came from faraway," although she dwells in human form among human beings, no mention is made of her incarnation. On the other hand, one would surely be pushing the comparison too hard to expect speculations in Judaism about the divine and human nature of God. Most statements about God in the Bahir are rendered linguistically in the form of parables, and on this level the Shekhina is the king's beautiful daughter on earth, whom people see and with whom they speak. The Book Bahir, and Judaism, could go no further; but it could hardly have come closer to the idea of the incarnation of God in the world.

Is it therefore possible for us to determine Christian influences on the unknown redactors of the Book Bahir in Provence at the end of the twelfth century? The very question alone might seem heretical in view of the all too familiar dogmatic boundaries drawn between Judaism and Christianity, in view of anti-Jewish Christian and, not least, anti-Christian Jewish polemics. Jewish polemics against Jesus and Mary go back as far as the Talmudic period,⁴¹ and Christian legends dating already from the sixth century C.E. tell of the disgraceful disturbance of Mary's funeral procession by jealous Jews.⁴² Others dating back to the seventh century mention

⁴¹ Cf., e.g., b Shabb 104b/b San 67a; on this critically, Maier: 238ff. The connection with Mary is unambiguous in the post-Talmudic *Toledot Jeshu*; cf. Krauss: 274f.

⁴² Cf. Kreidl-Papadopoulos: 136-182; Schaffer; Schreiner 1998.

an unbelieving Jew from Constantinople who threw a picture of the blessed Mary into a toilet and covered it with his own feces (Mickley: 53f.). (Both legends were later preserved for posterity in images that made a lasting impression on their viewers; Schreiner 1998: 17f., 23). This, too, certainly did not escape the attention of the Jews. Isn't it, therefore, sheer boldness to want to find *positive* Christian influences in the myth of the sending of the divine Shekhina down to earth, when there is no extant literary evidence for such "influences"?

These are, of course, weighty objections, even if the mere existence of a polemical stance against a certain phenomenon does not necessarily exclude its positive reception. But I would regard as more problematic, for methodological reasons, the categories of influence and of dependency themselves, categories whose role as an infallible touchstone of historical argumentation is becoming increasingly shaky, and rightly so, in my opinion. "Influences" presuppose static entities that exist side by side in monadic self-containment, but nonetheless occasionally open up, and that can only be regarded as convincingly proved if the historian can document without a gap their way from A to B. The inner dynamics of a cultural climate, however, the spiritual or intellectual atmosphere of an era, will be only inadequately fathomed in such a model of influences and dependencies, and this also holds true for the co-existence of Jews and Christians in the High Middle Ages in Provence. Yet in the endeavor to delineate the possible areas of intellectual contact and to describe the variety of interactions without recourse to the usual clichés and prejudices, scholars are still very much back at square one.

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