

## Mirror of His Beauty: The Femininity of God in Jewish Mysticism and in Christianity<sup>1</sup>

*The author investigates the Kabbalistic idea that God has a female potency, Shekhina, and locates its development in twelfth century Provence. The reason for the origin of this idea has puzzled scholars. What is proposed here is an approach which has been virtually ignored – the influence of the strongly Christian local context; more specifically, the huge growth in veneration of the Virgin Mary around the same time. He argues that the strong emphasis on Mary, leaning dangerously at times towards deification, may well have influenced the development of a similar idea in Judaism.*

Mysticism, or rather: what we call, in the three monotheistic religions, a mystical approach to God, has a long tradition in Judaism. Most scholars today agree that it begins already in the Hebrew Bible, manifests itself in certain texts of the pseudepigraphic and apocryphal literature as well as in certain strands of Rabbinic Judaism, and finds its first climax in what is termed Merkava mysticism, that discrete mystical movement of late antique Judaism, which centres around magical adjurations and the ascent of the mystic to the Merkava or the divine Throne of Glory in the seventh heaven. As 'mystical' as these early expressions of a direct and immediate contact between human beings and God may be, the technical term 'Kabbala' has been reserved for a peculiar form of Jewish mysticism, which appears in the Middle Ages in Europe and bears some highly distinctive characteristics. It is for this reason that I will be dealing with the Kabbala proper and not with the earliest manifestations of Jewish mysticism as such.

What, then, is it that characterizes the Kabbala, what is new about it? To begin with the term, Kabbala: its original meaning – 'tradition' – already denotes one important characteristic, namely that there is nothing new about it, or rather that its protagonists claim that they do nothing but convey well-established tradition generally accepted as binding. Of course, nothing could be less true than this claim. In fact, the Kabbalists introduce radical new ideas about almost everything, most prominently about the concept of God, but they claim that this is all

1. This article is a revised version of a lecture delivered on several occasions, most recently in February 2004 at St Patrick's College in Maynooth, and in the following September by invitation of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before a circle of invited guests at Regensburg, and then in December 2004 at Tel Aviv University's Mortimer and Raymond Sackler Institute of Advanced Studies. I am honoured to accept Father Vincent Twomey's offer to publish the article in the *Irish Theological Quarterly*, in fond memory of my visit to St Patrick's College. It is based on my book *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, paperback edition 2004).

well-known and well-established, the old-new *Torah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* ('the Torah Moses received from God on Mount Sinai'). Their God goes quite decidedly beyond the God of the Bible and of Rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity, and has little or nothing in common with the God of medieval Jewish philosophy, neither in its Neoplatonic version nor (much less) in the form of the emerging Aristotelianism as that expounded, e.g., 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 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 the later Kabbala termed *'En Sof*, literally: 'Without End'), his 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.

Among these new images belongs the idea that the dynamic inner life of God is not only composed of ten potencies (*Sefirot*), but that one of these potencies is female: while nine are male. This female principle within God is called *Shekhina* (literally 'dwelling'), a term which we know very well from classical Rabbinic literature. There, it refers to the presence of God in the world and is always synonymous with God; as such it doesn't have any female feature (or, to be more cautious, Rabbinic Judaism carefully avoids female characteristics, although it sometimes uses metaphorical feminine language).<sup>2</sup> In the Kabbala, on the other hand, the *Shekhina* is not only included as a distinctive principle within the inner-divine life, but this distinctive principle is explicitly, and quite graphically, described as female.

These two major innovations of the Kabbala in the technical sense of the term – the ten *Sefirot* and among them a female potency – emerge for the first time in history in a small book which appears in the late twelfth century in Provence, in Southern France. It is called the *Bahir*, a title taken from the biblical verse Job 37:21: 'But now one does not see the light (any more), it shines (*bahir hu*) in the heavens.' This book is attributed to R. Nehunya ben Haqana, an early Jewish mystic of the second century C.E. – the well-tried fiction that purports to guarantee its age and thus its 'orthodoxy.' Modern scholarship suggests that an early form of

2. See Arnold Goldberg, *Untersuchungen über die Vorstellung von der Shekhinah in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969) and Chapter 4: 'The Rabbinic Shekhinah' in *Mirror of His Beauty*, 79-102.

this book 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'.<sup>3</sup>

What does this first Kabbalistic tractate have to say about the feminine potency of (within) God? Let me briefly summarize some important statements. According to the *Bahir*, God isn't just male but male *and* female, and therefore, because God is male and female, human beings are male and female as well. The biblical proof for this, according to the *Bahir*, is the verse Gen. 1:27: 'God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.' This is a strange verse, indeed, because it first speaks of 'man' (Adam), and then suddenly moves to 'them' (in the biblical context, of course, Adam and Eve). The *Bahir*, however, understands the verse quite differently, reading it literally, in the sense that 'male and female he created them' is an explanation of 'in the image of God': if male and female human beings are created in the image of God, this can only mean, the *Bahir* argues, that God himself must be male and female. Moreover, just as God, in his male and female 'components', remains one God and doesn't represent two or more beings, so Adam and Eve originally were one male/female being, which is illustrated by a literal reading of another biblical verse: 'And they shall be one flesh.'<sup>4</sup> The masculinity and femininity of God, which is the cause and origin of humanity's masculinity and femininity, can be graphically illustrated by the parable of nine (male) palm branches supplemented by one (female) Etrog, the citrus fruit that, along with the palm branch, the willow and the myrtle, belongs to the 'four species' of the Sukkot festival.<sup>5</sup> The Shekhina, i.e., the female potency, is the tenth Sefira within the system of the ten Sefirot. As such she is the 'lowest' in the internal hierarchy of the divine potencies, but at the same time she plays a decisive role in receiving the divine powers, transforming them and directing them back upwards to the upper Sefirot. The dynamic flow of the divine powers within the ten Sefirot and particularly through the tenth Sefira is a constant process, guaranteeing and increasing the vitality of the inner-divine life. Moreover, located at the bottom of the sefirotic system and hence at the borderline between the divine and the earthly realms, the Shekhina is the bridge between two worlds, the divine world of God and the created world of human beings. She even leaves the divine realm and

3. Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: The Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press), 123.

4. All quotations from the *Bahir* are given according to the following editions: Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994), for the Hebrew text, and Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir ...: Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1979, paperback 1989), for an English translation (note that both follow a different count of the paragraphs). The present reference is to Abrams, *Bahir*, # 116 and Kaplan, *Bahir*, # 172.

5. Abrams, *Bahir*, # 117; Kaplan, *Bahir*, # 172.

is sent into the earthly world as God's messenger, while at the same time remaining part of God. A famous parable that illustrates this point portrays her as God's beloved daughter:

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!'<sup>6</sup>

As God's embodiment and emissary on earth the Shekhina has a most significant task: she is the mediator (*mediatrix*) between God and human beings, divine and earthly realms, heaven and earth. As with her role in the system of the inner-divine powers, the Shekhina 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. Symbolically identified with both the Written and the Oral Torah, the Shekhina on earth functions as the Oral Torah, which encompasses all the commandments that Israel must fulfil. In her dual capacity as the feminine part of the divinity and as the Oral Torah, 'she illuminates the world', as the first parable has put it, in a double sense: she makes possible God's presence among human beings, while also enabling Israel to fulfil the Torah. Accordingly, since God has surrendered to Israel through his Shekhina, it is not only Israel that is affected by whether and how it fulfils the Torah, but God as well. Therefore, the Shekhina reacts to Israel's behavior and is herself affected by it. When Israel sins, then the Shekhina, too, suffers; and when they do God's will, then she also benefits:

What is this like? Like a King who had a (beautiful) spouse, and had children from her. He loved them and raised them, but they fell into bad ways. He then hated both them and their mother. The mother went to them and said, 'My children! Why do you (do) this that your father hates both you and me?' (She spoke to them in this manner) until they had remorse and once again 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 remembered<sup>7</sup> their mother.<sup>8</sup>

The king in this parable, of course, is God, his spouse is the Shekhina, and the children are Israel. Thus the Shekhina is portrayed in her dual

6. Abrams, *Bahir*, # 90; Kaplan, *Bahir*, # 132.

7. A gloss in the Munich manuscript (see Abrams, *Bahir*, 146-47, n. 1) reads 'and loved their mother'.

8. Abrams, *Bahir*, # 51; Kaplan, *Bahir*, # 76.

role as female partner in the divine sphere and as the mother of the children of the divine couple. In this latter function she is responsible for the well-being of the children and accordingly 'hated' by her spouse when the children misbehave. As the mother of Israel she has become – despite her divine origins – 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 must 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.

To summarize briefly: The Shekhina, God's feminine potency, bridges the heavenly and the earthly realms, not only because of her position on the borderline between the divinity and the human world, but because she is, above all, God's own 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 she herself will return to her divine origin. 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 humankind can be united with God.

This surprising myth of the feminine potency of God and its embodiment on earth, which reached its first climax in late twelfth century Provence, has left scholars puzzled as to its origin. Two lines of reasoning have been pursued. The first concerns the possibility of an inner Jewish tradition that attributes to the predominantly male Jewish God certain female qualities, as hidden and suppressed as these may have been. There can be no doubt that some strands of the biblical and post-biblical Wisdom tradition display some similar characteristics, particularly in the (biblical) book of Proverbs and the (non-canonical) Wisdom of Solomon. The same is true for Philo, who goes furthest in the Jewish tradition in describing a dynamic interplay between God, his (male) Logos and his (female) Wisdom. Yet there can be no doubt that this female Wisdom tradition largely breaks off with Philo. Despite some late Midrashim that not only play with feminine metaphors for the Shekhina but seem to distinguish between God and his (female) Shekhina, it is certainly not carried on in the Jewish philosophical tradition starting with Saadia Gaon in the tenth century and continued with Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona in the eleventh century or Judah ha-Levi and Maimonides in the twelfth century. It is as if the early Kabbala reinvented the feminine aspect of God, which was hinted at in the Wisdom tradition and in Philo, abandoned after Philo's bold speculations, but came again to full force in the book *Bahir*.

The second line of reasoning tries to solve the enigma by looking outside the Jewish tradition, to the powerful Christian Gnostic systems of the first centuries C.E. (presupposing, however, some early Jewish strata) with

their myth that the (female) Sophia was part of the divine realm, but 'fell' into and was subsequently saved from the material world. The theory that Gnosis represents a potential source of influence has been vehemently propagated by Gershom Scholem, the first scholar to deal seriously and extensively with the question of the origin of the *Bahir*.<sup>9</sup> I cannot go into any detail here,<sup>10</sup> but suffice it to say that Scholem's theory of the Gnostic origin of the *Bahir* (and its notion of God's feminine potency) has recently come under attack. There are clearly some striking parallels between the Shekhina in the *Bahir* and the Gnostic Sophia – ironically much less in the texts Scholem used as evidence than in the later published codices from Nag Hammadi – yet the major flaw of Scholem's theory remains: there is no evidence whatsoever that these ancient Gnostic traditions could or did reach late twelfth century Provence. Although Scholem tried very hard, he eventually had to admit that there is no hint of such evidence and was forced to evoke some 'subterranean' channels through which the 'oriental' Gnosis of the first centuries C.E. could have mysteriously reached Southern France in the high Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> Both the inner-Jewish and the Gnostic line of argument leave us with a gap of many centuries between the original context of the respective tradition and its reappearance in twelfth century Provence.

However, there remains still another avenue of approach, which has so far been almost completely ignored: the immediate *Christian* context of twelfth century Provence in which the *Bahir* appeared. Looking more closely at the Christian environment of Provençal Jewry, one immediately comes across a phenomenon that has been completely ignored by Scholem and his followers:<sup>12</sup> the veneration of the Virgin Mary, which grows in western Christendom during the tenth and eleventh centuries and almost explodes in the twelfth century, primarily due to the mediation and ardent promulgation of the monks of the Cistercian order. It was the Cistercians who, with their churches and monasteries dedicated to her and the *Salve Regina, Mater Misericordiae*, sung daily at their compline

9. Already in his Munich doctoral dissertation *Das Buch Bahir. Ein Schriftdenkmal aus der Frühzeit der Kabbala auf Grund der kritischen Neuausgabe von Gerhard Scholem* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1923, reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970) and in more detail in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68-97.

10. See Chapter 7: 'Gnosis' in *Mirror*, 137-46.

11. Scholem, *Origins*, 45: 'On the other hand, we are also dealing with the vestiges of an unarticulated tradition that survived in the form of old notebooks and fragmentary leaves; and these came from distant lands or from subterranean levels of the Jewish societies in which they emerged into the light of day.' There can be no doubt that for Scholem these 'fragmentary leaves' that eventually made their way into the Provençal edition of the *Bahir* originated in what he calls the 'Oriental Gnosis'. See *ibid.*, 90-91, 96-97, 123.

12. It is tempting to speculate about why a scholar of Scholem's calibre did not (want to?) see these connections: see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Without Other Accounts: The Question of Christianity in the Writings of Yitzchak Baer and Gershom Scholem', in *Jewish Studies* 38 (1998) 73-96 (in Hebrew); Peter Schäfer, 'Gershom Scholem und das Christentum', in Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (ed.), *Christliche Kabbala* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2003) 257-74.

service, carried the love and veneration of Mary at first through France and then throughout Europe. The service in the monasteries of the Cistercians (and of the Dominicans, from the beginning of the thirteenth century) became the centre of the veneration of the Virgin; Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, was the focus of many of their sermons.

Of course, the veneration of Mary didn't start in the Western Church, but had long been the domain of Eastern Christendom; only slowly and hesitantly was it accepted by Western theologians, coming into full blossom in the High Middle Ages. I can mention only the most important steps in this gradual process.<sup>13</sup> The first decisive step that led to the exaltation and veneration of Mary was taken at the council of Ephesus (431 C.E.), which emphasized the complete 'union' (*henōsis*) of both the divine and human nature of Jesus and concluded that, accordingly, Mary gave birth to neither a purely divine nor a purely human being, but rather to the perfect and unique combination of the two: God made flesh. From this it follows that Mary is not just *anthropotokos* (lit. 'she who gives birth to man') but truly *theotokos* (lit. 'she who gives birth to God'), and hence in the full sense of the word the mother of the God/Man Jesus. At a very early stage the notion of Mary as the *theotokos* was combined with her state of eternal virginity, and Christology progressively inched toward Mariology. Through the physical relationship between her and her divine son, Mary partook in her son's divinity and began to acquire a unique position within the redemption process; she became the necessary *mediatrix* ('mediator') between God and human beings and, together with her son Jesus Christ, assumed the role of *corredemptrix* ('co-redeemer').

The next step in the development of the veneration of Mary is the tradition of her bodily assumption into heaven (i.e., the notion that not just her soul was taken up into heaven, but also her body), which appears in apocryphal legends towards the end of the fifth century (the *De Transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis* legends). These legends circulated in many languages and versions, but were adopted by the Western Church only hesitantly and much later. The first in the Occident to emphasize Mary's mediating role seems to have been Hrabanus Maurus in the ninth century, yet the heyday of the veneration of Mary in the West would not begin until the eleventh century, reaching its climax in the twelfth century. In what follows, I will concentrate on two of the most important Christian theologians of the twelfth century, in close proximity to the appearance of the *Bahir* around 1200.

13. For a more detailed description of the development see Chapter 8: 'Christianity' in *Mirror*, 147-72, and the literature mentioned there. Add now Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Averil Cameron, 'The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making', in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary: Papers Read at the 2001 Summer Meeting and the 2002 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2004) 1-21 (with more literature).

The most ardent propagator of Marian veneration is the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), the major figure of the monastic reform. In his many sermons, particularly his sermons on the Song of Songs delivered between 1135 and 1153, he romanticizes the relationship between Christ, Mary, and humankind. The following interpretation of Cant. 1:1 in a sermon on Mary's assumption to heaven is a fine example of the explicit erotic language he uses:

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 more 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.'<sup>14</sup>

Mary's reunion with her son in heaven is not just the reunion of mother and son, but also that of bride and bridegroom. The imagery of Canticles overpowers the mother-son relationship; Mary and Jesus become the true lovers of Canticles who celebrate their wedding in heaven.

Like his predecessors, Bernard emphasizes Mary's role in the process of salvation. Mary is crucial and indispensable for the course of history. The salvation of humankind, the restitution of the world corrupted through Adam's and Eve's sin, depends solely on her, on her readiness to accept the conception of the Word Incarnate. Accordingly, God's incarnation is not just a divine decree but depends on Mary's consent. Salvation would have been impossible if she hadn't agreed to her decisive role in it.<sup>15</sup> In other words: she takes an *active* part in the process of salvation. She is the *corredemptrix* in the true sense of the word: the redeemer together with God. Mary is the new Eve. Whereas Eve was the tool of temptation (*ministra seductionis*), Mary became the tool of atonement (*ministra propitiationis*): 'the former enticed into transgression, the latter became the channel of redemption' (*illa suggessit praevagationem, haec ingessit redemptionem*).<sup>16</sup>

14. In *Assumptione Beatae Mariae, Sermo 1:4*, in Bernhard von Clairvaux, *Sämtliche Werke lateinisch/deutsch*, vol. 8 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1997) 530-32.

15. In *Laudibus Virginis Matris, Homilia IV:8*, in *ibid.*, vol. 4 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1993) 112-14.

16. *Dominica infra Octavam Assumptionis 2*, in *ibid.*, vol. 8, 596.



As the true *mediatrix* and *interventrix*, she mediates between heaven and earth, and her mediation benefits not only humankind but even God himself.<sup>17</sup>

The culmination of Bernard's attempt to describe Mary's mediating role is the image of the aqueduct. Mary is the aqueduct, which channels the divine blessings to all humankind on earth:

You have already divined, dearest brethren, unless I mistake, to whom I allude under the image of an aqueduct which, receiving the fullness of the fountain from the Father's heart, has transmitted the same to us, if not as it is in itself, at least in so far as we can contain it. Yea, for you know to whom it was said, 'Hail, full of grace!' (Lk. 1:28). But shall we not wonder how such and so great an aqueduct could have been formed, the top of which – like the ladder which Jacob saw in vision (Gen. 28:12) – was to reach to heaven, nay, to be lifted higher than the heavens, and to touch that living fountain of 'the waters that are above the heavens' (Ps. 148:4)? ... In fact the reason why the streams of heavenly grace did not begin to flow down upon the human race for so long a time was this: that the precious aqueduct whereof I speak did not as yet mediate between God and humankind.<sup>18</sup>

God's mercy needs Mary in order to be fully channeled down to earth. Without Mary – and her consent to God's plan of salvation – human redemption becomes impossible. No wonder that Mary is raised to a quasi-divine position. She is the Queen of Heaven, elevated even above the angels, the 'Throne of Grace' of Hebrews 4:16,<sup>19</sup> which humankind approaches 'in order that we receive mercy and find grace' (ibid.). This is a bold transference from Jesus to Mary or, to put it differently, a deliberate play with theological fire, because Bernard certainly did not want to substitute Mary for Jesus but nevertheless does precisely this, if taken literally. In another image she is identified with the 'woman robed with the sun' of Revelation 12:1.<sup>20</sup> Here the sun is understood to symbolize the divinity. Accordingly, unlike the angels or the prophets or any other human being, who are only touched by the divine fire, Mary is robed with it, completely enclosed in it. She is transformed by it and becomes part of it, i.e., part of the Godhead, the Trinity. Bernard, of course, would never use the word 'deification' about Mary, yet he nonetheless comes very

17. Ibid.

18. In *Nativitate Beatae Mariae: De Aquaeductu*, 4, in ibid., vol. 8, 624; the translation follows *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, transl. from the Original Latin by a Priest of the Mount Melleray (Chulmleigh, Devon: Augustine Publishing Company, 1984, reprint 1987) 82-83.

19. *Sententiae* III:87, in: Bernhard von Clairvaux, *Sämtliche Werke lateinisch/deutsch*, vol. 4, 129.

20. *Dominica infra Octavam Assumptionis* 3, in ibid., vol. 8, 598. The English translation follows *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 209-10.

close. Again, he plays with the possibility and probably even crosses the borderline. Mary becomes fully absorbed into the divine light, and by this she is distinguished from all other angelic and human beings, a creature of her own, belonging to both the human and the divine worlds.

The female counterpart of the Benedictine and Cistercian monks and abbots of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), the Benedictine nun, visionary, and abbess. Hildegard, after the approval of her literary activities by Pope Eugenius III (himself a Cistercian and disciple of Bernard), became a celebrity and a restless propagator of monastic and clerical reform. Her many published works and her vast correspondence with the highest levels of society, clergy and laity alike, made her one of the most influential figures in the twelfth century. One of the luminaries of the age, with whom she corresponded since 1147, was Bernard of Clairvaux, who took great interest in her visions and interceded on her behalf with Pope Eugenius.

Among her writings is a collection of liturgical poetry and music, composed between 1148 and 1158 and arranged in a cycle under the title *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* ('Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations'). In her poems extolling the Virgin, Hildegard joins the Marian theologians of her time in drawing a close link between Mary and Wisdom, thus associating Mary with the very beginning of creation and with God's predetermined plan of salvation. As a matter of fact, as Barbara Newman has observed, the very arrangement of the liturgical pieces in a manuscript of the *Symphonia*, which seems to have been produced under Hildegard's personal supervision, points to Mary's role 'as the centrepiece of God's eternal plan, his beloved from before all time'.<sup>21</sup> The manuscript begins with two antiphons directed to God the Father, followed by no less than 12 songs to Mary, three to the Holy Spirit, one to Caritas, and one to the Trinity. There is no poem at all addressed to Jesus; instead, Mary has taken his place between the Father and the Holy Spirit – a clear indication that Mary is elevated among the Trinity and assumes the function of Jesus, in the sense that his work of salvation was made possible only through her active participation!

Most important in Hildegard's Marian theology is Mary's function as *reparatrix* or even *recreatrix*, the one who completes or rather recreates creation:

O resplendent jewel  
and unclouded beauty of the sun  
which was poured into you (*qui tibi infusus est*),  
a fountain springing  
from the Father's heart,

21. Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, paperback 1989) 161.

which is his only Word,  
 through which he created  
 the prime matter of the world (*mundi primam materiam*),  
 which Eve threw into confusion.

For you the Father fashioned  
 this Word as man,  
 and therefore you are that luminous matter (*lucida materia*)  
 through which his very Word breathed forth  
 all virtues,  
 as in the prime matter he brought forth (*ut eduxit in prima materia*)  
 all creatures.<sup>22</sup>

This beautiful and delicately structured hymn outlines Mary's essential role in the process of creation. The key-word is *materio*: through his only Word the Father created the *materia prima* of the world which, unfortunately, was thrown into disorder (*turbavit*) by Eve. This is the dramatic conclusion of the first strophe. Then begins the new creation – not just of the world but even of the Word! The Word, through which the failed creation was made, had to be recreated in order to enable a new, successful creation: it had to become man. In the bold shift from the Word through which God created the prime matter of the world to the new, 'luminous' matter through which the new Word was fashioned, Hildegard assigns Mary an enormous importance in the process of history and salvation. She is the *lucida materia*, which transformed the Word so that it could successfully complete its creation. Only through the *lucida materia* of Mary could the Word take on the form that made creation successful; in other words, it is Mary, and only Mary, who guarantees the success of God's creation.

In another poem Mary is called the 'golden matrix' (*materia aurea*) through which God created – or rather recreated – his Word Incarnate:

O how great  
 in its powers is the side of man  
 from which God brought forth the form of a woman (*de quo Deus formam mulieris produxit*),  
 which he made the mirror  
 of all his beauty (*quam fecit speculum omnis ornamenti sui*)  
 and the embrace  
 of his whole creation (*et amplexionem omnis creature sue*).<sup>23</sup>

22. Barbara Newman, *Saint Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia. A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988, 1998) # 10, 114-15.

23. *Ibid.*, # 20, 128-31.

In giving birth to the Word Incarnate Mary is the 'mirror of all his beauty' and the 'embrace of his whole creation'. This language strongly calls to mind *Sapientia Salomonis 7:25f.*, where Wisdom is called 'a clear affluence from the glory of the Almighty', the 'radiance that streams forth from everlasting light', and the 'flawless mirror of the active power of God'. Mary mirrors God's beauty and reflects it to the earth and to humankind. This again emphasizes her creative role, her part in God's creation of the new world and the new humanity. Through her, God reaches down to earth and 'embraces' his world.

Finally the hymn culminates with the highest possible title for Mary: *salvatrix*, 'saving Lady', honouring her salvific function and putting her on one and the same level with her son Jesus:

Hence, O saving Lady (*o salvatrix*),  
 you who bore the new light (*novum lumen*)  
 for humankind:  
 gather the members of your Son (*membra Filii tui*)  
 into celestial harmony.<sup>24</sup>

The beneficiary of this process, of course, is humankind, but it has its repercussions for the divine world as well. Hildegard is very restrained about this subject, but at least she hints at it:

O what great felicity is  
 in this form (of the femininity),  
 for malice,  
 which flowed from women –  
 women thereafter rubbed it out,  
 and built  
 all the sweetest fragrance of the virtues,  
 and embellished heaven  
 more than she formerly troubled earth (*ac celum ornavit plus quam  
 terram prius turbavit*).<sup>25</sup>

Here again we have the well-known Eve-Mary typology. One woman, Eve, troubled the earth, the other, Mary, mended the original fracture caused by Eve. But Mary's 'healing power' does not just extend over the earth (i.e., humanity) but even affects heaven (i.e., the Godhead itself). In enabling God to become man, Mary inaugurates a new stage within the Godhead, something which would have been impossible without Eve's failure and Mary's success.

Let me now summarize the major characteristics of the eleventh and twelfth century peak of Marian theology:

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, # 16, 120-21.

1. Although all statements about Mary have to be seen and evaluated within the framework of Christology – and from a dogmatic Christian point of view are clearly subordinated to a comprehensive Christology – there can be no doubt that the elite of the church of the eleventh and in particular of the twelfth century moved in the direction of Mary's deification. This deification process extends between two poles: Mary's identification with Wisdom, the 'Firstborn before all creation', and her assumption into heaven. The former not only makes her a predetermined participant in the process of salvation, but also elevates her to a heavenly status before her actual birth as a human being on earth. The latter posits her return to a 'divine' status after her death and includes her in the holy Trinity. Transformed by divine fire and seated to the right of Jesus on the throne of grace, with all the power given to her, she assumes a salvific function that was originally reserved for Jesus.

2. Several of the statements employ very explicit erotic imagery, drawn mostly from the Song of Songs. The bridegroom is always God/Jesus and the bride, although she can be identified differently, is often Mary. As such, Mary is simultaneously the daughter of God and the mother as well as the bride of Jesus. When Jesus and Mary reunite in heaven, it is not just the reunion of mother and son, but also of bride and bridegroom. The heavenly reunion of the divine couple is frequently described in graphical erotic language.

3. Mary's function as mediator between heaven and earth, God and humankind, is expressed in ever bolder terms. The frequent triad *mediatrix* – *interventrix* – *reparatrix* leads to *corredemptrix* and finally (in Hildegard of Bingen) to *salvatrix*. Mary is a necessary and active participant in the process of history (which is the process of salvation). Without her consent God's plan for humanity's salvation would have proved futile.

4. Mary is the crucial point around which heaven and earth revolve. All the divine blessings are channeled through her (the image of the aqueduct). God loves us and reaches down to us through her. This movement from above to below is supplemented by a reciprocal movement from below to above: Mary's intercession on behalf of humanity is so important that we even confess our sins to her. Although she has made God our brother, it is still easier to turn to her, rather than directly to her son.

5. Mary is the new Eve. Whereas Eve spoiled the first creation, Mary made the second successful creation possible. As such she is the new 'matter' through which God created his new world. But, in providing the new 'matter' for the new world, Mary also provided the 'matter' for the new God. Through her not only the new world was created but also, as it were, the new God, the God/Man, the Word Incarnate.

To conclude, let us venture another look at the Bahiric concept of the Shekhina from a Christian point of view (as well as at the Christian doctrine of Mary from a Jewish point of view). For a Christian observer the

myth of the *Bahir* – and for a Jewish observer the doctrine of Mary – could be read as follows:

God's unity is multiple, threefold in the Christian Trinity and tenfold in the *Bahir*. In his love of humankind God exposes himself to the human world, which has been corrupted by 'evil', in order to lead it back to him. In Christianity the redeemer is God's son; in the *Bahir* it is God's daughter, his feminine potency. In order to perform his task of redemption, the son of God, who has been sent to earth, has to become man (yet remains God); the daughter of God in the *Bahir*, who has been sent to earth, remains part of the Godhead and does not become a human being: there is no incarnation of God's daughter in Judaism corresponding to the incarnation of God's son in Christianity.

No one, of course, would expect speculations in Judaism about the divine and human nature of God that are comparable to the dogmatic speculations in Christianity. However, certain structural or phenomenological similarities between the concepts of the Shekhina and Mary/Jesus cannot be overlooked. True, the female aspect of the Godhead is much more dominant in the *Bahir* than in the Christian doctrine. In the *Bahir*, the feminine potency is included among the ten Sefirot, and quite prominently so, whereas there is nothing female attached to the three divine powers in Christianity. The Christians let God, as it were, acquire his feminine quality on earth, through a human being. However, this human being, Mary, is on the one hand related to the preexistent Wisdom and on the other hand elevated to heaven to be (re)united with the divine Trinity. Hence she undergoes a process of deification that very much resembles the Shekhina's position in the *Bahir*.

Both concepts are closest to one another when we consider the function of the Shekhina and of Mary on earth. It is only through the Shekhina that humankind has access to their Father. She channels the divine blessings down to earth, and she is responsible for their well being and well doing – and in the end her success also affects her and the Godhead. Similarly, Mary is the *mediatrix* and *interventrix* of all human beings. She is the receptacle of the divine blessings and directs humankind's prayers and request for forgiveness to God. Moreover, her active participation in the salvation process not only transforms humankind but also herself – and God.

If we finally consider the development in Judaism from the biblical Wisdom tradition to the *Bahir*, and in Christianity from the New Testament to the theologians of the twelfth century, we discover a remarkable symmetry. In abandoning the concept of Wisdom and focussing on the Logos, Christianity shifts the figure of the saviour from the female Wisdom to the male Logos/Jesus – just to start the process again of gradually reintegrating the feminine through Mary. Likewise Judaism almost completely gives up the feminine dimension of God after Philo – only to 'rediscover' it all the more vehemently in the *Bahir*, the

first Kabbalistic tractate. Whereas the process of reintegration seems to occur more slowly and gradually in Christianity and more suddenly in Judaism, both reach their climax in the second half of the twelfth century in (Southern) France.

Do we have here then, in the concept of the Shekhina, Christian influence on the unknown Jewish editors of the book *Bahir* in Provence toward the end of the twelfth century C.E.? Even the question may sound heretical in view of what we know about the history of Judaism and Christianity, all the more so as there exists no positive literary evidence for such an encounter of Jews and Christians in Southern France. But on the other hand, can we really expect positive literary evidence for Christian influence on the Jewish myth of the divine Shekhina's mission on earth? I don't think that such a proof is what we can expect and should look for. 'Influence' does not only realize itself in hard-core literary facts – this is too naive and positivistic an approach. One probably will have to resort to sociological models, prominent among which is that of the centre of gravity, which draws forces into it from the periphery. Dominant cultural centres tend to develop gravitational forces which, to a certain degree, absorb or influence weaker cultural clusters, even against their will. And there can be no doubt that in twelfth-century Southern France the Christian culture was a powerful culture, which might easily have tempted Judaism, consciously or unconsciously, to develop ideas similar to those in the mighty and triumphant daughter religion – or to put it differently and in more cautious terms: to develop ideas, which were somehow dormant in its own tradition, into a direction similar to the 'newest' and most 'fashionable' trend in Christianity.