

A Mytho-Psychological Study of the Biblical Legacy: Based on Parallels between Jewish Mysticism and Alchemic Art

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Abstract

Both C. G. Jung and Gershom Scholem thought that the symbol is a garb for deep truths inaccessible to the conscious mind that can only be discovered through symbolic language. Symbolic language is the vehicle through which the soul expresses itself in dreams, and esoteric doctrines convey their messages. Although both Scholem and Jung used almost identical formulations about the essence and contents of the occult, their paths never crossed. Scholem denied any connection between Kabbalah or Hasidism and psychology. Whenever Scholem mentions depth psychology in his writings, he is highly critical and distant, and largely misconstrues it. For his part, Jung acknowledged the value of Jewish mysticism and even suggested to his students they should delve into the study of the Jewish myth, although he himself never pursued this topic deeply.

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Keywords

Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, alchemy, Jung, Scholem, the Zohar, Idra Zutta, yordei merkavah, holy union, Sefer ha-Bahir.

In 1921, Carl Gustav Jung suggested a surprising interpretation for one of his dreams, which represented a crucial contribution to the formulation of his theory:

Beside my house stood another, that is to say, another wing or annex, which was strange to me. Each time I would wonder in my dream why I did not know this house, although it had apparently always been there. Finally came a dream in which I reached the other wing. I discovered there a wonderful library, dating largely

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from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Large, fat folio volumes, bound in pigskin, stood along the walls. Among them were a number of books embellished with copper engravings of a strange character, and illustrations containing curious symbols such as I had never seen before. (Jung, 1979, p. 202)

According to the psychoanalytic outlook to which Jung was then a partner, he understood that the back of his house symbolized the “back wing” of his soul—the unconscious. The contents of this storeroom, however, did not fit the Freudian conception of the unconscious. The Freudian unconscious contains elements rejected by the “ego” because they are immoral, dirty, and disgusting, whereas here, in the dream, the contents symbolize knowledge and wisdom.

After reading the books of Herbert Silberer, the scholar of religions, and following an exchange of letters between them, Jung came to understand the symbols that had appeared in his dream. These were the symbols of alchemy, the mystical doctrine that had flourished in Europe during the sixteenth century and had been marginalized during the Enlightenment. From then on, Jung devoted time and effort to the rediscovery and decoding of alchemy.

The existence of such a valuable “library” in the “back storeroom” symbolized for Jung the presence of a deeply hidden wisdom, expressing the collective spirit that also pulsates within the individual soul. The “library” is the knowledge accumulated over countless generations that past thinkers, with profound intuition, recorded in their writings and paintings.

At the very time Jung was studying alchemy, Gershom Scholem embarked on his research of Jewish mysticism. Like Jung, he too began his studies in the field of the exact sciences (mathematics), and then made his way into the mystical realm by following a strange path. In a lecture about the journey he had pursued in the study of Kabbalah, Scholem (1975) recounts:

At the beginning of this journey, when I arrived in Berlin in 1922, I discovered that the only scholar of Kabbalah in the generation before me had moved to the town of my birth. I went to visit him. I found an old, vibrant man of eighty-two who had been made professor by Kaiser Wilhelm and had served in the past as the rabbi of Poznan. He welcomed me warmly and said: “You and I, we are the only madmen concerned with these matters.” He showed me his library. At the time, he was the only person in Germany who owned a reasonably large collection of kabbalistic works, among them a large manuscript from the Lurianic school.¹ In my youthful enthusiasm at the sight of the treasures before me, I said: “How wonderful, Herr Professor, that you have read and studied all this!” The old man then said: “What, must I also read all this nonsense?” (p. 64)

Is the coincidence in any way significant? Was this an historical irony? In any event, although these two men—the psychiatrist and the Kabbalah scholar—dealt with different theories of the occult and out of different motivations, the parallel is fascinating. Scholem mentions a book of Luria’s school that developed in the

sixteenth century, the period to which the writings Jung found in his dream also date back. Both Jung and Scholem were concerned with forgotten materials stored away in attics. The Christian mysticism that Jung discovered had been dismissed in the modern era by scientific thinking. The Kabbalah, which had been a living doctrine and its writings part of every Jewish home, had been forgotten during the Enlightenment and no one any longer understood the meaning of its complex symbols. Scholem and Jung invented the research domain that became their life's work. Their motives differed, but the feeling and the experience that accompanied their discoveries were amazingly similar. Jung mentions in his memoirs that, after many years of exploring alchemy, he had an alchemic library in his home no less impressive than the one he had seen in his dream. When Scholem died, he bequeathed a treasure trove of 19,000 volumes to the National Library in Jerusalem, mostly on Jewish mysticism and its offshoots.

In his memoirs, Jung ponders the value of the soul's wisdom that he had discovered in the alchemic texts and notes that, had Silberer known how to apply to his life the psychological knowledge hidden in alchemy, he might have coped with the anguish of his soul and might have refrained from taking his own life.

Scholem (1975) also found that mystical doctrines expressed the dark depths of the soul and its torments:

At that time, my heart opened up and I understood many bodies of knowledge in Jewish history—new fountains of inspiration and truth perspectives opened up for us. This perspective ensures a way to both the heights and the depths—from the stutterings of symbols, the very soul of an entire era spoke to us, and from odd practices and ways of life we learned to understand the terrors of life and the terrors of death in the lives of pious Jews. (p. 64)

Yet, unfortunately, Scholem's wondrous formulations did not draw him any closer to psychology.

Jung and Scholem concluded that the symbol is a garb for deep truths inaccessible to the conscious mind that can only be discovered through symbolic language. Symbolic language is the vehicle through which the soul expresses itself in dreams, and esoteric doctrines convey their messages. Although both Scholem and Jung used almost identical formulations about the essence and contents of the occult, their paths never crossed. Scholem denied any connection between Kabbalah or Hasidism and psychology. Whenever Scholem mentions depth psychology in his writings, he is highly critical and distant, and largely misconstrues it. For his part, Jung acknowledged the value of Jewish mysticism and even suggested to his students they should delve into the study of the Jewish myth, although he himself never pursued this topic deeply.

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Judaism and Myth

When Jung launched into his unique psychological journey and discovered the broad parallels between the language of the dream and the language of myth, he immediately grasped that the thought mechanisms of classical science would not serve him in this endeavor. As a doctor, however, he tried to find a way of validating his ideas, and one of the most important methods for this purpose was cross-cultural research. The attempt to find universal foundations in different mythologies contributed to an understanding of the universalism of the soul. Following the general question as to whether every culture had a myth, a particular question emerged, bearing on our present concern: What is the Jewish myth?

This is a controversial question to this day. Psychologists and philosophers who are fond of mythical thinking and love the Bible tend to join the two and assume that the Bible is the myth of Judaism. Martin Buber is a prime representative of this approach (Buber, 1967, pp. 95–107). So is Franz Rosenzweig, whose profound connection with myth almost led him to leave Judaism, until he discovered myth within Judaism itself (Idel, 1988). At present, Yehuda Liebes (1993) endorses this approach. Other thinkers—Yehezkel Kaufmann (1972) and Gershom Scholem (1952)²—claim that the Bible had expunged all myth and fought against it uncompromisingly. They held that the Bible had associated myth with idolatry and, as part of its struggle to impose monotheism, had removed all traces of idolatry and its related myth.

This academic dispute is not yet settled, and the Jungian perspective can add new dimensions to it by contributing its own understanding of myth. My conclusion, which rests on a psycho-mythological approach, is that the Bible is not the Jewish myth and is not really a myth at all. The Bible contains elements that are obviously mythological, but these were included in the text either to object to them or to serve the Bible's aims: allegiance to the divine ethical message. According to the criteria that the psycho-mythological perspective claims are necessary for the existence of myth, the Bible has no myth. For instance, creation in the Bible is the work of a male God, who creates the world alone. But no such myth exists. In every myth, a male and a female god create the world or, at least, male and female elements are partners in the act of creation.

The conventional argument states that the Bible killed the goddesses, whereas we know of no other myth excluding goddesses altogether. The Bible, however, also killed the gods. The God of the Bible is not a god in the mythical sense. He is not a superman, like the gods, and despite the many anthropomorphic expressions spread throughout the Bible, the recurrent emphasis is on statements stressing divine transcendence: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

The Bible did not provide the Jewish people the "psychological therapy" that myths provided in other ancient cultures. I will not expand on this issue here,³ beyond stating that the Jewish myth should not be sought in the Bible. A longing for myth is indeed present in the Bible throughout, in a different way: whereas the priests, who represent the biblical outlook, preach faith in the supreme God, among the people idolatry was rampant: "Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away; for the people still offered and burnt incense in the high places" (1 Kings 22:44). A legitimate expression of the myth's appeal will emerge only a thou-

sand years later in the Kabbalah, in the occult Jewish literature that preceded the Kabbalah, in aggadic midrashim, and in Talmudic legends. Here we can find all the mythical and psychological elements that were excluded in the Bible.

Kabbalah and Alchemy

Gershom Scholem (1975) argues when discussing the question “What is the essence of Kabbalah?”:

Despite all the changes and transmigrations affecting the various trends of the Kabbalah movement, all share a common denominator....Throughout its methods and forms, we find the same longings for the soul’s return to its source, the same passion for “motherhood,” for the concealed wellsprings of our life, the same yearning for the mystery of our existence. (p. 226)

Academic scholars of the Kabbalah tend to express reservations about psychological interpretations of mysticism. Scholem’s comments, however, invite us to find within the depths of the human soul the unity hiding behind various forms of Jewish mysticism. In their writings, kabbalists urged us to discover in the recesses of the individual soul the mysterious reality they had contemplated. Joseph Gikatila (1985), a thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist who some assume was one of the authors of the Zohar, wrote:

Contemplate the mystery of repentance, which the Torah tells us is the mystery of the soul’s return to the place from which it was uprooted and to which it returns to rest, as if saying “Return to thy rest, O my soul” (Psalms 116:7)...in the mystery of the sefirah of *binah* [understanding], the soul can return and cleave to the place from which it was uprooted. (part 6, *sefirah* 5)

The following discussion of the relationship between Kabbalah and alchemy will focus on an analysis comparing pictures painted by alchemists and kabbalistic texts. All the pictures were painted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most are from the British Museum and some from other collections.

“The Blossoms Appear on the Earth” (Song of Songs 2:12)



One of the most accurate definitions of the essence of the Kabbalah found in the kabbalistic texts themselves and particularly in the Book of the Zohar, states that the Kabbalah is an attempt to unveil the mystery of creation. The Kabbalah is an attempt to plunge into the sources of the universe and of existence to uncover their mystery. The biblical story of the Creation certainly lends itself to this exploration. The Zohar contains numerous interpretations of the opening verses in Genesis, and a vast inventory of images surrounds the account of Creation. One way of discerning how revolu-

tionary the Zohar exegeses actually are is to confront them with the original biblical text. As noted, the Bible describes creation as the work of a male God who creates the world alone, and thus exclusively from a male perspective. The opening verse, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” is male to begin with, in that it is a creation of doing rather than of being. The entire story is pervaded by the verb “made,” as well as by a critical and scrupulous “quality control”: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). At the very opening of the Zohar, a work representing the fullest and most mature product of early kabbalistic thinking, we find that the story of the creation opens with verses from Song of Songs: “Rabbi Hizkiah opened his discourse with the text, ‘As a lily among thorns’ (Song of Songs 2:2)” (*The Zohar*, I:1a, 3).

This is a female opening. The very term “opened,” which is pervasive in the Zohar, implies an open attitude—open to study, to dialogue, to the worlds of feeling. The extremely female opening makes room for a balanced approach, in which the male and female aspects will enjoy equal status and the symbol of copulation will play a crucial role. Further on, the text of the Zohar returns to the secret of creation: “‘In the beginning,’ Rabbi Simeon opened his discourse with the text: ‘The blossoms appeared on the earth’....‘In our land’ implies the day of the Sabbath, which is a copy of the ‘land of the living’ (...the world of souls)” (*The Zohar*, I:1b, 3–4).

The text then winds around verses from Song of Songs, suggesting many wondrous interpretations of the creation. Many of the symbols mentioned in the text hint at the mysteries of creation (like the symbol of the blossoms), intimating that the reference is to the human soul (“the world of souls”). One of the homilies states: “‘In the beginning’: Rabbi Elazar opened, ‘lift up your eyes on high, and behold who has created these things’” (ibid.). The verse (Isaiah 40:26) serves the Zohar’s author to teach us an important lesson about the mystery of creation. The text alters the role of the word “who” in the sentence, turning it from a question into the subject of the sentence, clarifying the identity of the creator. In other words, not only is the creation a riddle, but the riddle creates a riddle. Elazar, Simeon Bar Yohai’s son, teaches that both the universe and the creator are riddles, and the Book of the Zohar is the riddle dealing with these riddles. The word “these” [*eleh*], together with the word “who” [*mi*], form the word *Elohim*, one of the Hebrew names of God.

Let us return now to the symbol of the blossoms, which appears at the opening of the kabbalistic interpretation of Genesis, and consider the alchemic painting. The immediate impression is that the painter of this strange picture had not intended to paint a laboratory, and may never have seen a laboratory in his life. Since the picture is not accompanied by an explanatory text, its symbols are open to interpretations. This is definitely a symbolic language, linking the painting on one hand to the Kabbalah, which also resorts to symbolic language, and on the other hand, to dreams.

We cannot assume that the picture speaks of a chemical process, although it is permeated with symbols of “process,” and perhaps entirely concerned with “process”: the blossoms are a potential for change and renewal, copulation is a symbol of the creative process, the womb-shaped container symbolizes incuba-

tion, and the waters are the amniotic fluid, the “first waters,” the source of life. The wings symbolize spiritual potential, and the winged infant represents the result and the purpose of the entire process. The painter was certainly thinking about creation when he did this work—its sources, its mystery, and its purpose.

Was the alchemist thinking about the creative processes unfolding in his own soul? Was he thinking about the human process of creation and its laws? We cannot know. From our knowledge about the world of mystics, we may venture that the alchemist would not have agreed to our distinction between these realms of reality, and would view his painting as a description of the creative process prevalent everywhere, from his own personal creation up to the cosmic creation, God’s work.

Turning from here to the realm of the Kabbalah, we will find that the mystics did view creativity as the most primary and widely prevalent motivation. Kabbalistic descriptions of the Creation are rife with symbols referring to human creative prowess, and the Zohar, not coincidentally, opens with the blossoms in Song of Songs. The wonder of divine creation is embodied in the Kabbalah in the wonder of human creation, which also invariably contains an element of creation *ex nihilo*. All the materials, all the colors, all the shades, and all the letters will never come together into a new whole unless they include something that had never been there before. That is the riddle of creativity, that is creation *ex nihilo*. A midrash on Genesis in the Zohar reads:

“In the beginning” (Genesis 1:1): At the very beginning the king made engravings in the supernal purity. A spark of blackness emerged in the sealed within the sealed, from the mystery of *En-Sof*, a mist within matter, implanted in a ring, no white, no black, no red, no yellow, no color at all. When he measured with the standard of measure, he made colors to provide light. Within the spark, in the innermost part, emerged a source, from which the colors are painted below, and it is sealed among the sealed things of the mystery of *En-Sof*. (Tishby, 1989, p. 309)

God himself is described here as a sculptor, carving his world as an artist carves his work. The homily then continues and cites: “And they who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and they who turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). The Zohar’s use of the biblical source is interesting in the present context. The “wise” become, in the Zohar, the disciples of R. Simeon Bar Yohai. They are the circle embodying the soul of God and the soul of the universe. The parallel between the description of God and the description of the circle of disciples shows that they, through their studies, create new worlds: their study is their creation, emerging from them as brightness. The image of God in man is presented here as the creative power—the power of divine creation manifest in the human being (Liebes, 1994, pp. 9, 70).

Furthermore, this could be claimed to be an interesting psychological theory about human nature. Freud saw sexuality as the primary motivating force. Would kabbalists and alchemists have suggested that the primary motivating force is creativity and sexuality merely one of its manifestations or symbols? If so,

it is no wonder that sexual mating is such a recurrent symbol both in alchemy and in Kabbalah. The kabbalistic union between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhinah*, is the alchemic union between Sol and Luna (sun and moon). The act of intercourse at the center of the picture is the symbol of the “process,” the source of creativity. The act of creation takes place within the *vas hermeticum*, the motherly womb. So in alchemy, as shown in the picture, and so in the Kabbalah, which describes the creation of the universe as taking place in the *sefirah* of *malkhut* [kingdom], the lower mother. The act of *tikkun* [restoration] described in Lurianic Kabbalah takes place in the “womb of understanding” [*binah*], which is the third *sefirah*, the supernal mother. The vessel that contains the process in the picture would be described in the Kabbalah as the “womb of understanding.”

The Holy Union [*Ziwuga Kaddisha*]



A familiar yet not well-understood characteristic of Kabbalah is the striking frequency of sexual and erotic symbols in its writings. Despite the criticism that has been leveled at the Kabbalah on this count, kabbalists never tried to conceal or minimize the value of this symbol. Against the background of a spiritual and moralistic perception that played down sexual matters and the body in general, kabbalists viewed even the relationship between the human and the divine as erotic. Eroticism, then, touches upon the holiest of experiences. According to the Kabbalah, the entire world is suffused with erotic relationships, and even the dynamic that characterizes godliness as such is the perpetual union between the divine male (the *sefirah* of *tif'eret* [beauty]) and the divine female (*malkhut*). The Kabbalah introduced a blessing to be recited before all positive commandments: “Behold I perform this commandment for the sake of the *yihud* [unity] between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhinah*”—every

human act serves to advance the communion within the divine.

When we take into account the kabbalists’ psychology, their frequent references to sexual symbols become somewhat clearer. The all-encompassing quality of the kabbalistic conception leads to a discovery of the divinity precisely at the sensual, instinctual levels, in the sense of “but while I am still in my flesh...I would see God” (Job 19:26). No other experience is as total as the sexual experience, involving every human element, as Nietzsche (1973) wrote: “The degree and kind of a man’s sexuality reaches up into the topmost summit of his spirit.” (p. 75). The kabbalists discovered this much before him and, in our picture, the process is described through the transformation into the winged couple, whose mating brings out the spirituality.

A significant contribution toward our understanding of the Kabbalah’s erotic nature emerges from the parallels with other mystical doctrines. Surprisingly, mystical schools evolving in distant and quite dissimilar symbolic contexts share the very same symbol, and disregard of this finding will preclude understanding

of the symbol and its complex meanings. When Jung suggested viewing sexuality as largely a symbol, Freud countered that Jung was repressing his sexuality. This argument, however, could not be raised against the mystics. They viewed sex as an important and multifaceted symbol, but, as their paintings show, they were certainly not afraid of contemplating sexuality per se. The paintings we see here are extremely sensual, yet the couple and copulation are clearly symbolic, as evident, for instance, in the sun and the moon accompanying the king and queen (in the upper painting), who lie in a womb-like pool.

An additional motif linked to copulation is the motif of death. Expressions such as “kiss of death” or “death marriage” are well known in all cultures and identify death as union with the source, as a return to the womb, as communion with God.⁴ Intercourse as birth and intercourse as death symbolize the life span and the entire spiritual course. The famous Eleusinian mysteries are tied to the story of Persephone’s descent into Hades and her rebirth. The story of Dionysus (who features in the mysteries as well) is also connected to birth and death. Not fortuitously, the Eleusinian mysteries are also linked to the Moerae, the Fates: Clotho spun the thread, Lachesis measured it, and Atropos cut it. This is the law of the thread of life, which binds even the gods. The mysteries connect the span of life with the symbol of death and renewal.

This association of death with holiness, however, is alien to the biblical spirit. The Bible (Numbers 19:14) indicates that any contact with the dead makes one impure. The biblical text views pure and impure as a dichotomy, and describes a complex procedure enabling release from impurity resulting from contact with the dead and return to a state of purity.⁵ This intensifies even further the subversiveness of the mythical elements discussed here ascribing holiness to death, which appear in the Zohar in connection with the story about the death of R. Simeon Bar Yohai.

According to kabbalistic tradition, the *Idra Zutta* is the climax of the entire book. The *Idra* is part of the Zohar’s exegesis on the biblical portion of *Ha’azinu* (Deuteronomy 31–32), where Moses is told: “Go up into this mount Avarim...and die in the mount into which thou goest up, and be gathered to thy people” (Deuteronomy 32:48–50).

As usual, the Zohar uses the biblical contents symbolically. It devotes scanty attention to Moses’ death, shifting the entire exegesis to the death of R. Simeon Bar Yohai. His death assumes mythical proportions, and includes the rich symbolism of the death motif in ancestral mythologies and in folklore rituals. The *Idra Zutta* is the encounter (*Idra* [encounter] *Zutta* [small]) of a group of disciples, who gathered together to be told hidden secrets before their rabbi’s death.

In the first section of the *Idra*, R. Simeon Bar Yohai expounds his symbolic approach to the concept of death:

Rabbi Simeon wrapped himself in his cloak and sat down. He began by quoting: “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that descend to silence (*Dumah*)” (Psalms 115:17). “The dead do not praise the Lord.” This is certainly true of those who are called “dead,” for the Holy One, blessed be He, is called “living”; and He dwells among those who are called “living” and not with those who are called “dead.” (Tishby, 1989, p. 163)

R. Simeon Bar Yohai draws a distinction here between “dead” and “living” based on a symbolic understanding of the terms: the living are the mystics, and the dead are those whose souls are closed to the spiritual message arising from within them. Hence, he only addresses the “living,” who are those worthy of hearing hidden mysteries. The text continues:

And this is the secret: “therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11) for then all is one complete body, for the queen cleaved to the king and they became one body, and that is why the day is blessed. Hence, whoever lives without a male or female is called a half-body, for no blessing descends upon the blemished and flawed, but upon a place that is whole, upon a thing that is whole and not upon a half-body, and a half-body never prevails, and is never blessed.

After the text presented the basic principles of existence and creation and introduced the symbolism of the king and queen, which fits the alchemic symbolism discussed above, it expands upon sexual metaphors based on these principles:

The male’s phallus is the tip of the whole body. And it is called *yesod*, and it is that which delights the woman. All the man’s desires for the woman are in this *yesod*, which enters the woman at a place called Zion, for that is the woman’s cover, the place of the woman’s womb...

It is written: “For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation” (Psalms 132:13)—after the mistress departed and joined the king face to face, on the eve of the Sabbath, all became one body.

... no license is given to enter the holy of holies, only to the High Priest who comes from the realm of *hesed*, since no one is allowed to enter that place on high, but he who is called *hesed* and enters the holy of holies.

This rich and lush description of intercourse in all its aspects and at all levels, portraying “Zion” as a divine vagina, “the holy of holies,” and the High Priest as the divine phallus, is followed by the description of R Simeon Bar Yohai’s death. This description, the end of the *Idra Zutta*,⁶ is pervaded by conflicting emotions: mourning for his departure while also celebrating the “*hilullah* of R. Simeon.” The feast is the wedding, the holy union, the hieros gamos.⁷ In his death he returns to the cave, to the womb of the earth, and reunites with the source of his mystical doctrine that was written while he had been in a cave with his son Elazar.⁸ This suggests that his exit from the cave after a delay (incubation) was his second birth—a motif frequent in the world of mystics.⁹ This is the description of his death at the end of the *Idra*: “When the bier came out of the house, it went up into the air and fire flared out in front of it. They heard a voice saying: Come and assemble for the feast of Rabbi Simeon: ‘He enters in peace. They rest on their beds’ (Isaiah 57:2)” (Tishby, 1989, p. 165).

The Account of the Chariot [*Ma'aseh Merkavah*]

The term *ma'aseh merkavah* assumed prominent status in Jewish tradition, especially among mystics. Although the term pertains to the vision revealed to Ezekiel, the word *merkavah* never appears in his prophecy:

The appearance of the wheels and their work was like the color of an emerald: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went toward their four sides: and they turned not when they went. As for their rims, they were so high that they were dreadful, and their rims were full of eyes round about them four. And when the living creatures moved, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. (Ezekiel 1:16–19.)

Over time, the compound *ma'aseh merkavah* assumed two different, mutually related meanings: *merkavah* in the sense of a complex system, and in the sense of a horse and chariot.

The mystery concealed in the *ma'aseh merkavah* was considered highly significant already in the Mishnah, in the well-known saying:

Forbidden relations may not be expounded before three persons, nor the story of creation before two, nor the chariot before one, unless he is a sage that understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever gives his mind to four things, it were better for him if he had not come into the world—What is above? What is beneath, what was before time? And what will be hereafter? And whosoever takes no thought of the honor of his maker, it were better for him if he had not come into the world. (*The Mishnah*, 1933, M. Hagigah 2:1.)

In this saying we find one of the few and earliest allusions to occult doctrines in talmudic literature, and even then with a warning not to dabble in it. The saying bundles together issues of incest, the creation, and the account of the Chariot. The intention in combining the three together is altogether unclear (in contemporary terms, incest is perhaps a Freudian issue, the mystery of *ma'aseh merkavah* is a Jungian issue, and the mystery of Creation touches on Relational Psychology). The text, however, suggests an escalating, increasingly deeper mystery, from incest up to the *merkavah*. In other words, issues related to *ma'aseh merkavah* are even deeper and more unfathomable than Creation, and their discussion is more dangerous than discussions of the other two.

Mystic sects living in the Judean desert toward the end of the Second Temple period made the *merkavah* symbol central to their doctrine. They sensed they were living at an historical turning point, when the Jewish people were about to lose their religious freedom and their political autonomy (they themselves, as a separatist group, had already been banned from priestly positions in the Temple). This experience hung heavily upon them and greatly influenced their thinking. Does

this move to the heavenly temple, to the chariot lifting the believer to heaven, hint at the beginning of a profound interest in the human soul, an interest that had been alien to the author of the Bible and to halakhic thought?

Although the *merkavah* symbol features frequently in the Midrash and particularly in mystical writings,¹⁰ it is still unclear how and why Ezekiel's vision of holy beasts and the wheels turning within each other became a chariot harnessed to horses. The first *locus* of this change is apparently the *Septuaginta*, the Greek translation of the Bible, where the verse "And the appearance of the vision [*mar'eh*] which I saw" (Ezekiel 43:3) is translated as "And the appearance of the chariot [*merkavah*] which I saw."¹¹

Attempts to trace the sources of the *merkavah* symbol will lead us to another Greek source, of vast importance: Plato's *Phaedrus* (we can safely assume that Plato was well known to the translators of the Bible into Greek). In this dialogue, Plato deals at length with the nature of the soul, and particularly with the attempt to prove it is immortal. After a long and persuasive (to those already persuaded, of course) discussion that indeed proves this, a brief passage follows where Plato answers the obvious question: What is the soul? His answer is most interesting. He states that the nature of the soul cannot be defined in simple human language, but can be described through a figure:

Let me speak briefly and in a figure. And let the figure be a composite—a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the winged horses and the charioteers of the gods are all of them noble and of noble descent, but those of other races are mixed; the human charioteer drives his in a pair; and one of them is noble and of noble breed, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble breed; and the driving of them of necessity gives a great deal of trouble to him. (Plato, 1924, vol. 1, *Phaedrus*, p. 246)

Plato's "definition" of the soul appears to be the most concise and to the point so far. Unquestionably, this definition hovers above many descriptions of the soul and of the *merkavah* that have since appeared in philosophical thought and, as I will show below, also in alchemy. In the figure, Plato presents what we would today call "ego" in the shape of the charioteer, the "id" in the shape of the horses, and the statement about "a great deal of trouble" to suggest that suffering is the human lot. All have parallels both in the Kabbalah and in alchemy, and now provide a key to the understanding of the *merkavah* symbol in Judaism. The mystical sect of the priesthood that draws away from Judaism at the end of the Second Temple period when sensing the precariousness of the surrounding reality may have shifted their focus of interest to their soul, finding encouragement and consolation in mystical-psychological explorations. They were the first to turn redemption into an individual process, and the motif of freedom into an inner experience of the soul. The beginnings of Jewish mysticism can be traced back to their doctrines. In their wake came the literature whose writers referred to themselves as *yordei ha-merkavah* [descenders of the chariot], a term hinting at the descent into the inner soul (even though the *merkavah* vision describes an ascent). The term *yordei ha-merkavah* appears to be derived from the verse in Song of

Solomon 6:2 “My beloved is gone down into his garden,” and from the subsequent mystical literature, when the descent into the garden is the descent into the hidden depths. We will now go down in a different chariot, the chariot of alchemy.



This picture portrays a vision in three scenes. We will read the story from the top anti-clockwise. The upper picture depicts a most dramatic situation: the king, who is trying to drive his chariot, discovers that the reins are not in his hands—a black demon has grabbed them and immobilized the vehicle. On the assumption that the alchemists were versed in contemporary philosophical traditions (they even used to call themselves “philosophers”), we can identify the picture as describing psychic situations and processes. The king driving the chariot is a symbolic representation of the conscious “self” who, with his powers and his logic, is trying to control the course of the soul and the instinctual drives and failing in the attempt: a dark entity with roots in the unconscious has taken over the soul and paralyzed it. In our terminology we would speak of a depressive state, when spiritual energies are unavailable and everything is pulled downward.

The story continues in the picture at the bottom left: the king has already lost his crown, the symbol of rule and government, and is being placed in a coffin by a woman. The female appears here linked to one of its most distinctive symbols: the symbol of death. Because the woman knows the secrets of birth, the ancients ascribed to her knowledge of the secrets of life and, by implication, knowledge of the secret of death. The sense of death, the fixed escort of depression, is not the end of the story; its continuation, according to our painting, suggests that when death symbols appear, they may be only part of a full course, part of a “process.” The process does indeed continue on the right: the king is reborn—again through a woman.

The picture, then, describes an entire cycle of death and rebirth. If it is indeed describing one of the basic processes in the human soul, several interesting conclusions emerge, in two directions: when symbols of death appear in our dreams, our fantasies, and our fears, an underlying process of renewal and development could be at work, which we do not know how to interpret and understand. The second direction that interests us here touches on the kabbalistic interpretation. If the process that the alchemists painted was correctly interpreted here as a psychic process, we should expect symbols of death and rebirth to appear in every mystical theory. The process of death and rebirth indeed emerges as a crucial kabbalistic element; more than that, renewal processes of this type are one of the most important and daring innovations of the Kabbalah. The idea of transmigration first appears in Jewish tradition in the Kabbalah. The interpretation of this idea in the Kabbalah is far beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief comment is in place: popular interpretations of transmigration are a complete distortion of the kabbalistic idea. Populist interpretations merely concerned with ensuring the continuity of life do not rest on knowledge of psychic processes but on the fear of death familiar to all of us.

In *Sefer ha-Bahir* [The Book of “Bright”], the first kabbalistic text,¹² the idea appears as an exegesis of the talmudic expression “a generation goes and a gen-

eration comes.” The *Sefer ha-Bahir* states: “Rabbi Akiva said: What does this mean? A generation goes and a generation comes means a generation that has already come,” namely, the generation that goes is the one that comes. The same souls depart and return.¹³

As noted, the Bible never hints at the idea of transmigration (Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones is a metaphor of life out of death, but makes no allusion to the eternity of the soul and to the idea of transmigration). By contrast, in the Kabbalah the idea appears in various forms and could be viewed as a longing for the myth of transmigration, which the soul knows well from within and from which biblical monotheism had been estranged. We thus find the full continuum of death and birth as a central motif in the myth of Lurianic Kabbalah. The central symbol of the “process” is described there as the creation of the world, its destruction and restoration. The leading symbols are: “*tsimtsum* [contraction], *shvirah* [breaking], *berur* [inquiry], and *tikkun* [restoration].” This is the basic framework of Lurianic theory.¹⁴

The alchemic chariot painting, then, which highlights the complexity of a change process requiring descent into and return from Hades and a renunciation of the old—“death”—in order to enable rebirth, appears in the Kabbalah with its own symbols.¹⁵ We see that the essence of the idea of transmigration is not, as in other mystical doctrines, the promise of immortality but rather the link to the infinite stream of existence. The mystic renounces immortality and thereby touches eternity.

“The First Light That Is Wisdom”

The best-known woman in alchemical tradition is the Jewess Maria Prophetissa. Many alchemic inventions are ascribed to her, including some that became part of chemistry (such as a device for holding vessels in order to boil liquids, and even the discovery of hydrochloric acid). Some viewed her as a prophet and hence her name.



The picture shows Maria when pointing to the dynamic relationship between heaven and earth. Kabbalistic texts portraying the relationship between the upper and nether realms could serve as a detailed description and an apt interpretation of the painting.

One such text appears in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The disciples are asked a question addressed to their rabbi: “From up downwards we understand, but from down upwards we do not understand.” The discussion that follows clarifies that the topic is the creation of the world and its order. The disciples tell the teacher that the order from up downwards is known and clear to them (since this is how creation is described in the Bible), according to the familiar pattern: the Creator conceives the world and creation unrolls downwards, and God also coerces his creatures to accept the Torah. The question, however, shows that the teacher had thought of another move that is no less significant, rising upwards—and this move they do not understand. They are therefore asking a question concerning the existence of a bi-directional flow between the divinity and the nether worlds, a new issue that is introduced and discussed at length in the Kabbalah. The rabbi’s answer is both interesting and surprising: “R. Amorai explained that

the *Shekhinah* is down below just as it is up above. And what is this *Shekhinah*? It is the light emanating from the first light, which is wisdom, and surrounds everything, as is written, ‘the whole earth is full of his glory.’”

The teacher explains to them that the link between the upper and nether worlds is maintained through the female element, the *Shekhinah*, which is found both in the upper realms, in the divinity, and in the nether realms, the world. Furthermore, he tells them that the source of the female is in the first light, the light of “and there was light,” which is the light of wisdom in Jewish tradition. The light of wisdom is confined here to the female principle—to the *Shekhinah*. Only in our time did a radical feminist outlook of this type develop outside mystical schools.

The alchemic drawing describes the flow between the upper and lower vessels, and the vessel depicted in the painting is female. In kabbalistic tradition, the flow of the divine light and the vessels containing it are a symbol of the world order and the pattern of creation; the relationship between the vessels and the flow contains the secret of existence and extinction. According to the Lurianic myth, when the vessels are too narrow to contain the divine light they break, but without the divine light there would be no vessels, which indeed generate and contain the flow but are also created by it. If we ask what else follows a similar pattern, we will find that this is how feeling works. Feeling is contained within the psychic structures, but also creates them. Expressions of feeling between human beings not only articulate what is but also create it, clarifying why this flow moves within a female system of symbols.

We see that in both mystical systems the flow of the divine light, symbolizing the flow of feeling and of emotional understanding (“emotional intelligence”) belongs to the female principle. According to the passage above, the order of up and down in the female mystery is the source of the kabbalistic principle “and the whole earth is full of his glory.” The presence of God in the world is a female principle; this is the symbolic essence of the *Shekhinah*. Whereas the male does and creates (doing), the female is present, senses, and feels (being). Parallel to the kabbalistic principle of “up and down,” the *Shekhinah*, responsible for the presence of the God and the flow of divine light, dwells both in the upper and nether worlds.

“God Has Made the One as well as the Other” (Ecclesiastes 7:14)



In the picture we see a space shaped as an opening receptacle, intended to represent the inner part. The obvious question is: the inner part of what?

The mystic will say that everything has an inner part, and the inner discovery is the discovery of everything in the world, including the human soul. The picture expresses a dialectical outlook dominated by polarity, and the dialogue between the poles is the source of power and creativity. On the left side we see a group of sages—the philosophers.

The alchemists viewed themselves as philosophers in the deep sense of the word. Study and inquiry stemmed from the love of wisdom (philo-sophia) and from the spiritual urge to discover and understand the mystery of creation.

If we shift to the Kabbalah, we will find that the Zohar is often presented as a description of the life and discussions of a group of R. Simeon Bar Yohai's disciples. This group, through its way of life and mutual relationships, symbolizes the world and all that is in it.¹⁶ Bar Yohai's biography is extremely important in the Zohar. Although he is the hero of the Zohar, at times the disciples appear to be the protagonists. No contradiction is thereby involved: Bar Yohai's soul is incorporated into the souls of his disciples, and the concern with the disciples' group is thus tantamount to the concern with the soul of R. Simeon bar Yohai and its history, which is actually tantamount to discussing the essence and history of the universe's soul.¹⁷ All these kabbalistic symbols emerge as associations to the group of disciples in the alchemic picture.

Whoever finds that this picture resonates with the "spiritual" trends of the "New Age" prevalent today and evident in the popularity of study courses on the Kabbalah will be gravely mistaken. The spiritual is only part of the picture. On the right, a man is working, describing physicality and sensuality. On the left is the realm of contemplation, on the right the realm of action and, according to the mystical outlook, everything in the world must include both elements. That has been the view of alchemy and the view of the kabbalists throughout history. Idlers in "search of the self" in the garb of a kabbalistic concern distort the Kabbalah. In a well-known story, Luria is said to have been impressed by a disciple arriving at dawn at the house of study. When Luria found out as they were talking that his student had forgotten to feed the chickens in his eagerness to study, he sent him away. According to the principles of mysticism, we cannot ascend the rungs of holiness unless we go down the steps of the real world. The dialectic dialogue between the poles, the physical and the spiritual, is the source of divine light; it is the alchemic "work" (the *opus*). The kabbalistic parallel is the verse "But whilst I am still in my flesh...I would see God" (Job 19:26), attesting to the open and tolerant attitude of the Kabbalah to the body and its functions.

In our picture, the melting takes place at the center, in a furnace catching the fire, which is the cleansing, melding, refining, purifying force. In the center of the picture is the alchemic process—out of the dialectic relationship between the physical and the spiritual. The verse "truth will spring out of the earth" (Psalms 85:12) recurs very often in the Kabbalah. Truth grows precisely from physical, earthy existence (see Zohar 1:25b). One of the kabbalists' favorite biblical stories is that of Jacob's ladder: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12).

Freud held that the human foundation is in the instinctual realm. Even the spiritual dimension, according to Freud, derives from the instinctual through sublimation. By contrast, Jung concluded that the spiritual principle has deep roots in the human soul, just like the instincts, and making everything contingent on one of these two poles is therefore wrong. Studies of alchemy and other mystical theories supported this dualistic view of the soul.

The Shadow and the *Nigredo*



One of Jung's most significant contributions was his identification of the dark side of the personality as an ontological reality. The term "shadow" shed much light upon the dark recesses of the soul. When the starting point is consciousness, as in Freudian theory that places the "ego" at the center, the dark part of the personality is defined in negative terms: that which is not conscious. Jung, however, was uncompromising in his view of evil as an ontological entity rather than as an "accident" or a malfunction of the "good." The dark side generates the contrasts, prompts action, and is connected to the primary sources, the alchemical *prima materia*.¹⁸

In the mystical outlook that Jung adopted, the unknown is the source of all sources; correspondingly, the dark becomes the source of growth and renewal. From this position, Jung came to discover "the illuminated sides" of the darkness, the creative forces hidden within them, and hence the imperative of a constant dialogue with this part of the personality. This revelation explains the continuous search of mystics in all cultures for the link with the dark side, the shadow. In alchemic writings, the shadow is the healing power, the antidote to disease. As the epitome of opposition, it is also symbolized by figures whose essence is "the other," such as the woman to the man and the man to the woman.¹⁹

Jung's understanding of the symbolic meanings of the "shadow" led him to a profound interpretation of a wide range of alchemic symbols. The shadow appears in the shape of animals such as the wolf or the snake. It is symbolized by everything that is strange, threatening, and exciting (such as the dragon in the picture.)



This discussion will help us to understand the appearance of evil in the Kabbalah. Striving to expose evil's deeper roots, kabbalists did not look for them in human deeds but in higher spheres, to the point of ascribing evil, albeit very cautiously, to the divinity itself. In the Kabbalah, the devil becomes *sitra ahra* [the other side]. The term *sitra ahra* legitimizes evil as a dimension in the revelation of the divine. The *Sefer ha-Bahir* reads: "It teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, has a quality known as bad, and it is to the north of the Holy One...and it has many offshoots, all named 'bad bad,' and they are big and small and they destroy the world." Given the biblical description of creation, which assumes that the world is fundamentally and generally good—"and God saw that it was good"—this kabbalistic attitude attains further significance.

In alchemy, the black or *nigredo* is symbolized by sulphur. It is the odorous, the stranger, the dark, the putrid and decaying, the *prima materia*. Every alchemic process has to pass through the *nigredo* stage. Everything has to return to its source in order to regenerate. The old rots away and disintegrates in order to make room for the new. Out of the black the couple will emerge, the union, the newborn child, as we see in the painting (which belongs to the same series as the first one in this chapter). And in the Kabbalah we read:

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Come and see, the thing above does not awaken until the thing below awakens first, in order to then be ruled by the thing above. And the mystery of this is that the black light does not grasp the white light before it awakens first. After it awakens, the white light immediately prevails. (Zohar I:77a)

Tsaddik Yesod Olam



The sefirah of *yesod* [foundation] is linked in kabbalistic tradition to the figure of the *tsaddik* [righteous leader] according to the verse in Proverbs 10:25: “The righteous is the foundation of the universe.” The sefirah of *yesod* in the Kabbalah embodies the male principle symbolized by the channel of divine light—this is God’s organ (as noted in the passage from the Zohar quoted above: “The male’s phallus is the tip of the whole body. And it is called *yesod*”). The male organ symbolizes both physical and spiritual vitality. The *tsaddik* as the male organ is the one who implements the divine light, as a beautiful homily in the Zohar explains:

The Holy One, blessed be He, sowed this light in the Garden of Eden, and He arranged it in rows with the help of the Righteous One, who is the gardener in the Garden. And he took this light, and sowed it as a seed of truth, and arranged it in rows in the Garden, and it sprouted and grew and produced fruit, by which the world is nourished. This is the meaning of the verse “Light is sown for the righteous.” (Tishby, 1989, p. 442)

The sexual symbolism connected to the *tsaddik* is taken in the Kabbalah to the point of equating the hiddenness of the *tsaddik* with the hiddenness of the sexual organ. This open and blatant appearance of a sexual symbol in Judaism is surprising and, quite expectedly, evoked strong resistance in rabbinic circles. But the comparison with alchemy clarifies that this matter is not purely sexual. Parallel mystical texts reveal deep facets of the phallic symbol, from the physical to the most spiritual, widening understanding of the broad and profound meanings of sex, which are not exhausted by physical sexuality. One isolated remnant of this symbolism in Judaism remains in the rite of circumcision, where the most spiritual covenant is enacted with the sexual organ (the “organ of the covenant”).

In the picture we see the growth of a tree as a phallus out of a dead body. The phallus is the symbol of renewal, as we also saw in the Zohar passage. Perhaps the hand in the upper left corner of the picture originates in Jewish symbolism. In Judaism, this hand symbolizes the binding of Isaac and the intervention of God’s hand in preventing Isaac’s sacrifice, which is in fact his rebirth out of his death.

In concluding this discussion of the parallels between alchemy and the Kabbalah, I will quote an interesting homily on the word “gold.” Anyone seeking a relationship between any theory and alchemy will obviously search for the gold, which is the most important symbol of the alchemical *opus*—the aim of the

process. And indeed, even gold did we find in the Kabbalah, interestingly connected to the symbolism of the coniunctio, the symbol of the union. We read in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*:

And why is its name gold [*zahav*]? Because it includes three qualities: Male in the *zayin* [the first letter in the word *zahav* as well as the male organ], the soul in the *hey* [the second letter]...and *beth* [the third letter], which is their existence, as it is written, “*Bereshith bara*” [In the beginning God created].

This passage, then, finds in the three letters of the word *zahav* the perfect union: the *zayin* is the male, the *hey* the female, and the *beth* the union between them.

Notes

- 1) The reference is to Isaac Luria Ashkenazi [ha-Ari], founder of the Safed school of Kabbalism at the end of the sixteenth century.
- 2) See, in particular, Scholem (1976, p. 87).
- 3) On the Bible's attitude to myth in light of analytical psychology, see Micha Ankori and Ohad Ezrahi (in press), *The Secret of Leviathan* (Tel Aviv: Modan), which devotes an entire chapter to this question.
- 4) As far as I could find, the term “death marriage” appears in the literature only in the meaning of death of the bride during her marriage. The symbolism of becoming united with God during the death appears in many cultures. See Marie-Louise von Franz (1979). To my opinion it is right to use the term death marriage for this symbolism.
- 5) Note that, in time, further and radically different connotations were ascribed to the term “impure,” and in the Talmud, impurity is connected with the holy.
- 6) My friend Dr. Gustav Dreifuss tells me that Elizabethan English used the same word for death and copulation, a psychologically reasonable notion since orgasm is a momentary death of the ego.
- 7) *Hilullah* from the word *kelulot* [wedlock].
- 8) According to the talmudic legend, R. Simeon Bar Yohai and his son Elazar spent twelve years in a cave at Meron, and mystical tradition holds it was at this time they wrote the Zohar.
- 9) See William James (1929, p. 79), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House), who quotes Francis W. Newman (1852, pp. 89, 91), *The Soul: Its Sorrows and Its Aspirations*.
- 10) See Elior Rachel (2003), *Mikdash u-Merkavah, Kohanim u-Malakhim: Heikhal ve-Heikhalot ba-Mistika ha-Yehudit ha-Kedumah [Temple and Chariot, Priests and Angels: Sanctuary and Heavenly Sanctuaries in Early Jewish Mysticism]* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press).
- 11) In the writings of Judean desert sects, the linkage between Ezekiel's vision and the heavenly chariot appears about the same time.
- 12) The book was discovered in Provence, Southern France, in the twelfth century. It is ascribed to the tannaitic sage Rabbi Nehuniya ben ha-Kanah, but the author's identity remains unknown even today. Gershom Scholem worked on the deciphering of this text as part of his doctoral thesis.
- 13) For a discussion, see Scholem (1966, pp. 222f.).
- 14) See *Sefer Etz-Hayyim*, Part 2-12.
- 15) The chariot symbol could also be highly useful in the interpretation of *Sefer Yetsirah* [The Book of Creation], a task that has engaged scholars since Sa'adiah Gaon in the tenth century and until the present.

16) See, for instance, *Zohar, Aharei Mot*, and also the *Idra Rabba*.

17) This is clearly evident in the *Idra Rabba* and the *Idra Zutta*.

18) See Jung, *CW 12*, para. 425.

19) See Jung, *CW 14*, para. 148.

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