

it expresses. But it is not surprising that when the fire out of which these prayers had streamed to heaven had burned low, a host of nostalgic souls stirred the ashes, looking in vain for the spirit which had departed.

## 6

We have seen that the God of the Merkabah mystics is the Holy King who emerges from unknown worlds and descends "through 955 heavens"<sup>78</sup> to the throne of Glory. The mystery of this God in His aspect of Creator of the universe is one of those exalted subjects of esoteric knowledge which are revealed to the soul of the mystic in its ecstatic ascent; it is of equal importance with the vision of the celestial realm, the songs of the angels, and the structure of the Merkabah. According to an account given in the "Greater Hekhaloth", which one is tempted to correlate with a similar passage at the end of the Fourth Book of Ezra, it was even the custom to place scribes or stenographers to the right and left of the visionary who wrote down his ecstatic description of the throne and its occupants.<sup>79</sup> That the mystic in his rapture even succeeded in penetrating beyond the sphere of the angels is suggested in a passage which speaks of "God who is beyond the sight of His creatures and hidden to the angels who serve Him, but who has revealed Himself to Rabbi Akiba in the vision of the Merkabah."<sup>80</sup>

It is this new revelation, at once strange and forbidding, which we encounter in the most paradoxical of all these tracts, the one which is known under the name of *Shiur Komah*, literally translated, "Measure of the Body" (i. e. the body of God.).<sup>81</sup> From the very beginning, the frank and almost provocative anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Komah* aroused the bitterest antagonism among all Jewish circles which held aloof from mysticism.<sup>82</sup> Conversely, all the later mystics and Kabbalists came to regard its dark and obscure language as a symbol of profound and penetrating spiritual vision. The antagonism was mutual, for it is in this attitude towards anthropomorphism that Jewish rational theology and Jewish mysticism have parted company.

The fragment in question, of which several different texts are extant,<sup>83</sup> describes the "body" of the Creator, in close analogy to the description of the body of the beloved one in the fifth chapter of the "Song of Solomon," giving enormous figures for the length of

each organ. At the same time, it indicates the secret names of the various organs with the help of letters and configurations which to us are meaningless. "Whoever knows the measurements of our Creator and the glory of the Holy One, praise be to Him, which are hidden from the creatures, is certain of his share of the world to come." Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiba, the two heroes of Merkabah mysticism, appear as the guarantors of this sweeping promise—"provided that this Mishnah is daily repeated."<sup>64</sup>

What is really meant by these monstrous length measurements is not made clear; the enormous figures have no intelligible meaning or sense-content, and it is impossible really to visualize the "body of the Shekhinah" which they purport to describe; they are better calculated, on the contrary, to reduce every attempt at such a vision to absurdity.<sup>65</sup> The units of measurement are cosmic; the height of the Creator is 236,000 parasangs<sup>66</sup>—according to another tradition, the height of His soles alone is 30 million parasangs. But "the measure of a parasang of God is three miles, and a mile has 10,000 yards, and a yard three spans of His span, and a span fills the whole world, as it is written: Who hath meted out heaven with the span."<sup>67</sup> Plainly, therefore, it is not really intended to indicate by these numbers any concrete length measurements. Whether the proportion of the various figures, now hopelessly confused in the texts, once expressed some intrinsic relationships and harmonies is a question to which we are not likely to find an answer. But a feeling for the transmundane and the numinous still glimmers through these blasphemous-sounding figures and monstrous groupings of secret names. God's holy majesty takes on flesh and blood, as it were, in these enormous numerical relationships. At any rate the idea that "God is King" lends itself more easily to such symbolical expression than the conception of God as Spirit. Again we see that it was the exaltation of His kingship and His theophany which appealed to these mystics, not His spirituality. It is true that occasionally we find a paradoxical change into the spiritual. All of a sudden, in the midst of the *Shiur Komah*, we read a passage like the following: "The appearance of the face is like that of the cheek-bones, and both are like the figure of the spirit and the form of the soul, and no creature may recognize it. His body is like chrysolite. His light breaks tremendously from the darkness, clouds and fog are around Him, and all the princes of the angels and the seraphim are before

Him like an empty jar. Therefore no measure is given to us, but only secret names are revealed to us."<sup>88</sup> In the writings of the second and third century gnostics, and in certain Greek and Coptic texts, which frequently reflect a mystical spiritualism, we find a similar species of mystical anthropomorphism, with references to the "body of the father,"<sup>89</sup> or the "body of truth." Gaster has pointed out the significance of such instances of anthropomorphism in the writings of the second century gnostic Markos (described by some scholars as "kabbalistic") which are hardly less bizarre and obscure than the analogous examples in the *Shiur Komah*.<sup>90</sup>

The fact probably is that this form of speculation originated among heretical mystics who had all but broken with rabbinical Judaism. At some date this school or group must have blended with the "rabbinical" Gnosticism developed by the Merkabah visionaries, i. e. that form of Jewish Gnosticism which tried to remain true to the Halakhic tradition. Here we come inevitably to the question *whose* bodily dimensions are the subject of these fantastic descriptions? The prophet Ezekiel saw on the throne of the Merkabah "a figure similar to that of a man" (Ez. I, 26). Does it not seem possible that among the mystics who wrote the *Shiur Komah*, this figure was identified with the "primordial man" of contemporary Iranian speculation, which thus made its entry into the world of Jewish mysticism?<sup>91</sup> Going a step further we may ask whether there did not exist—at any rate among the Merkabah mystics to whom we owe the preservation of the *Shiur Komah*—a belief in a fundamental distinction between the appearance of God the Creator, the Demiurge, i. e. one of His aspects, and His indefinable essence? There is no denying the fact that it is precisely the "primordial man" on the throne of the Merkabah whom the *Shiur Komah* calls *Yotser Bereshith*, i. e. Creator of the world—a significant and, doubtless, a deliberate designation. As is well known, the anti-Jewish gnostics of the second and third centuries drew a sharp distinction between the unknown, "strange," good God, and the Creator, whom they identified with the God of Israel. It may be that the *Shiur Komah* reflects an attempt to give a new turn to this trend of thought, which had become widespread throughout the Near East, by postulating something like a harmony between the Creator and the "true" God. A dualism of the Gnostic kind would of course have been unthinkable for Jews; instead, the Demiurge becomes, by an exercise of

mystical anthropomorphism, the appearance of God on the "throne of Glory," at once visible and yet, by virtue of His transcendent nature, incapable of being really visualized.

If this interpretation is correct, we should be justified in saying that the *Shiur Komah* referred not to the "dimensions" of the divinity, but to those of its corporeal appearance. This is clearly the interpretation of the original texts. Already the "Lesser Hekhaloth" interpret the anthropomorphosis of the *Shiur Komah* as a representation of the "hidden glory". Thus, for example, Rabbi Akiba says: "He is like us, as it were, but greater than everything; and that is His glory which is hidden from us."<sup>1</sup> This conception of God's hidden glory, which forms the subject of much theosophical speculation, is almost identical, as we have seen, with the term employed for the object of their deepest veneration by the actual representatives of the Mishnaic Merkabah mysticism, among them the historical Rabbi Akiba. One has only to compare it with the relevant passage of the *Shiur Komah* (already quoted above) where it says, "whoever knows the measurements of our Creator, and the glory of the Holy One, praise be to him," etc. The term employed: *shivho shel hakadosh barukh hu*, signifies not only praise of God—in this context that would be without any meaning—but glory, δόξα, *shevah* being the equivalent of the Aramaic word for glory, *shuvha*.<sup>2</sup> The reference, in short, is not to God's praise but to the vision of His glory. Later when the "Glory of God" had become identified with the *Shekhinah*, the "Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba" expressly referred to the "body of the Shekhinah"<sup>3</sup> as the subject of the *Shiur Komah*. The employment of this term is proof that its authors had in mind not the substance of divinity but merely the measurements of its appearance.

*Shiur Komah* speculation is already to be found in the earliest Hekhaloth texts and must be counted among the older possessions of Jewish gnosticism. Graetz' theory that it came into being at a late date under the influence of Moslem anthropomorphic tendencies is entirely fallacious and has confused matters down to our own day.<sup>4</sup> If there can be any question of external influence, it was certainly the other way round. This is also borne out by the assertion of the Arab doxograph Shahrastani—not, it is true, an altogether reliable witness—that these ideas made their way from Jewish into Moslem circles.<sup>5</sup> Still less is it possible to agree with

Bloch's hypothesis that the *Shiur Komah* with "its exaggerations and its dull dryness" (!) was "intended for school children."<sup>97</sup> The curious tendency of some nineteenth century Jewish scholars to treat profoundly mythical and mystical references to God and the world as pedagogical *obiter dicta* for the benefit of small children is certainly one of the most remarkable examples of misplaced criticism and insensitiveness to the character of religious phenomena which this period has produced.

## 7

The *Shiur Komah* is not the only subject of mystical vision in this group. There are several others, some of which undoubtedly originated from entirely different sources but were more or less closely mixed up with the *Shiur Komah* during the period when all these various tendencies crystallized in the classical Hekhaloth literature. To the later mystics they presented what appeared to be on the whole a uniform picture. The most important of these deviations from the main current is the Metatron mysticism which revolves round the person of Enoch who, after a lifetime of piety, was raised, according to the legend, to the rank of first of the angels and *sar ha-panim*, (literally: prince of the divine face, or divine presence). "God took me from the midst of the race of the flood and carried me on the stormy wings of the Shekhinah to the highest heaven and brought me into the great palaces on the heights of the seventh heaven Araboth, where there are the throne of the Shekhinah and the Merkabah, the legions of anger and hosts of wrath, the *shinanim* of the fire, the *cherubim* of the flaming torches, the *ofannim* of the fiery coals, the servants of the flames, and the seraphim of the lightning, and He stood me there daily to serve the throne of glory."<sup>98</sup> This Enoch, whose flesh was turned to flame, his veins to fire, his eye-lashes to flashes of lightning, his eye-balls to flaming torches,<sup>99</sup> and whom God placed on a throne next to the throne of glory, received after this heavenly transformation the name Metatron.

The visions of the heavenly traveller Enoch, as set out in the Ethiopic and Slavonic Books of Enoch, have become, in the Enoch book of the Merkabah mystics, accounts given to Rabbi Ishmael by Metatron of his metamorphosis and of the hierarchy of the throne and the angels. It is impossible to overlook the steady line of de-

velopment in this Enoch mysticism; moreover, the Hebrew "Book of Enoch" is not the only link between the earlier Enoch legend and the later Jewish mysticism. Some of the oldest mythical motifs are to be found not in that book but in an extremely interesting—from the mythographical point of view—magical text, the "*Havdalah* of Rabbi Akiba," of which several as yet unpublished manuscripts are in existence.<sup>100</sup> In the "Greater Hekhaloth," on the other hand, we find Metatron mentioned only once in a chapter belonging to the later stratum; the earlier chapters do not mention him at all.<sup>101</sup>

It was after the beginning of the second century A. D., probably not earlier, that the patriarch Enoch was identified following his metamorphosis with the angel Yahoel, or Yoel, who occupies an important and sometimes dominant position in the earliest documents of throne mysticism and in the apocalypses.<sup>102</sup> The most important characteristics of this angel are now transferred to Metatron. We also find Yahoel as the first in the various lists of the "Seventy Names of Metatron" compiled in the Gaonic period (7th to 11th centuries).<sup>103</sup> The Babylonian Talmud contains only three references to Metatron, and the most important of these passages is meaningless if thought to refer to the name Metatron.<sup>104</sup> It refers to a tradition from the beginning of the fourth century, according to which Metatron is the angel of whom it is said in Exod. xxiii, 20 ff.: "Beware of him for my name is in him." The explanation is to be found in the tenth chapter of the Apocalypse of Abraham, already mentioned several times, where the angel Yahoel says to Abraham: "I am called Yahoel . . . a power in virtue of the ineffable name that is dwelling in me." That the name Yahoel contains the name of God is obvious, Yaho being an abbreviation of the Tetragrammaton YHWH, which was used especially often in texts bearing on Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism. The same Yahoel is referred to in Jewish gnostical literature as the "lesser Yaho," a term which at the end of the second century had already made its way into non-Jewish gnostical literature,<sup>105</sup> but which was also retained by the Merkabah mystics as the most exalted cognomen of Metatron, one which to outsiders seemed to border on blasphemy.<sup>106</sup> Also in the Talmudic passage cited above the assumption that the verse in Exodus xxiv, 1 "Ascend to YHWH" refers to Metatron seems to contain an implicit recognition of the latter as the "lesser Yaho," which he becomes explicitly in later texts.<sup>107</sup>

Mention may be made, moreover, of a further and very striking example of the extreme stubbornness with which ancient traditions are preserved in Jewish mystical literature, often in out-of-the-way places. In the Apocalypse of Abraham, Yahoel appears as the spiritual teacher of the patriarch to whom he explains the mysteries of the throne world and the last judgment, exactly as Metatron does in the Hekhaloth tracts. Abraham is here the prototype of the novice who is initiated into the mystery, just as he appears at the end of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, the "Book of Creation", a document the precise age of which is not known but the character of which I propose to discuss at the end of this lecture. In the Apocalypse we find him being initiated into the mysteries of the Merkabah, just as in the *Sefer Yetsirah* he is allowed to penetrate into the mysteries of its cosmogonical speculation. It is somewhat surprising to read in a manuscript originating among the twelfth century Jewish mystics in Germany that Yahoel was Abraham's teacher and taught him the whole of the Torah. The same document also expressly mentions Yahoel as the angel who—in the above-mentioned Talmudic passage—invites Moses to ascend to heaven.<sup>108</sup> Thus the tradition attached to his name must still have been preserved in mediaeval literature.

If the meaning of the name Yahoel is fairly clear, that of *Metatron* is completely obscure. There have been very many attempts to throw light on the etymology of the word,<sup>109</sup> the most widely accepted interpretation being that according to which Metatron is short for *Metathronios*, i. e. "he who stands besides the (God's) throne," or "who occupies the throne next to the divine throne." Mention of this throne is indeed made in the later (Hebrew) "Book of Enoch," but there is not the slightest suggestion that the author saw any connection between the name of the archon and his throne. The fact is that all these etymologies are so much guess-work and their studied rationality leads nowhere. There is no such word as *Metathronios* in Greek and it is extremely unlikely that Jews should have produced or invented such Greek phrase. In Talmudic literature the word *θρόνος* is never used in the place of its Hebrew equivalent. On the other hand, the reduplication of the *t* and the ending *ron* follow a pattern which runs through all these texts. Both the ending and the repetition of the consonant are observable, for instance, in names like Zoharariel and Adiriron. It must also be borne in mind that *on* and *ron* may have been fixed and typical

constituents of secret names rather than meaningful syllables. It is quite possible that the word Metatron was chosen on strictly symbolical grounds and represents one of the innumerable secret names which abound in the Hekhaloth texts no less than in the gnostical writings or in the magical papyri. Originally formed apparently in order to replace the name Yahoel as a *vox mystica*, it gradually usurped its place. It is interesting, by the way, that the spelling in the oldest quotations and manuscripts is מִיִּטְרֹן—a fact which is usually overlooked; this would seem to suggest that the word was pronounced Meetatron rather than Metatron. As a transcription of the Greek *epsilon* in the word *Meta*, the *yod* in the name would appear to be quite superfluous.

In the often highly imaginative description of the angelic sphere which one finds in the Hebrew Enoch book of the Merkabah period, Metatron's rank is always placed very high. Nevertheless the classical writings of the Merkabah school contain no suggestion that he is to be regarded as being one with the glory that appears on the throne. Throughout this literature Metatron, or whatever name is given to him, remains in the position of the highest of all created beings, while the occupant of the throne revealed in the *Shiur Komah* is, after all, the Creator Himself. No attempt is made to bridge the gulf; what has been said of the relationship of the mystic in his ecstasy towards his God is true also of the supreme exaltation of the prince of angels himself. The latter, incidentally, is also called Anafiel, according to an independent tradition which has found its reflection in the "Greater Hekhaloth," and the characteristics given of this angel make it clear that Anafiel is not simply one more name for Metatron, but is the name of another figure which for some mystics retained that supreme rank.<sup>10</sup>

## 8

Several texts have preserved codifications of the throne mysticism abounding among the Merkabah travellers, and elaborate lists of the problems and questions relevant in this context. These do not all belong to one particular period; subjects which appear to be of great importance in one text are not even mentioned in the other. One such codification of pure throne mysticism, for example, is to be found in the brief "Treatise of the Hekhaloth" which probably

dates back to the eighth century.<sup>134</sup> Here the imaginative description of objects which were originally really visualized, but are now treated at great length purely for the purpose of edification, has already reached baroque proportions.

A more concise and restrained account of the principal subjects of Merkabah mysticism—apparently based on a Hekhaloth tract—is to be found in the Midrash to Solomon's proverbs.<sup>135</sup> Here, too, Rabbi Ishmael appears as the representative of the esoteric tradition. In this case he enumerates the questions which the doctors of the Torah will be asked by God on the Day of Judgment; the crowning part of this examination are the questions referring to esoteric doctrine:

"If there comes before Him one who is learned in the Talmud, the Holy One, praise be to Him, says to him: 'My son, since you have studied the Talmud, why have you not also studied the Merkabah and perceived my splendor? For none of the pleasures I have in My creation is equal to that which is given to me in the hour when the scholars sit and study the Torah and, looking beyond it, see and behold and meditate these questions: How the throne of My glory stands; what the first of its feet serves as; what the second foot serves as; what the third and what the fourth serve as; how the *hashmal* (seen by Ezekiel in his vision) stands; how many expressions he takes on in an hour, and which side he serves; how the heavenly lightning stands; how many radiant faces are visible between his shoulders, and which side he serves; and even greater than all this: the fiery stream under the throne of My glory, which is round like a stone made of brick; how many bridges are spanned across it, how great is the distance between one bridge and the next, and, if I cross it, over which bridge do I cross; which bridge do the *ofannim* (a class of angels) cross, and which do the *galgalim* (another class) cross; even greater than all this: how I stand from the nails of My feet to the parting of My hair; how great is the measure of My palm, and what is the measure of My toes. Even greater than all this: how the throne of My glory does stand, and which side it does serve on every day of the week. And is this not My greatness, is not this My glory and My beauty that My children know My splendor through these measurements?' And of this David hath said: O Lord, how manifold are Thy works!"

It is apparent from this passage that all these questions were

systematically discussed, although some of them are not mentioned in the texts which have been preserved. Of the bridges in the Merkabah world, for instance, which find almost no mention in the "Greater Hekhaloth" and the Book of Enoch, we have several vivid descriptions.

Among the most important objects which Metatron describes to Rabbi Ishmael is the cosmic veil or curtain before the throne, which conceals the glory of God from the host of angels. The idea of such a veil appears to be very old; references to it are to be found already in Aggadic passages from the second century. The existence of veils in the resplendent sphere of the aeons is also mentioned in a Coptic writing belonging to the gnostic school, the *Pistis Sophia*.<sup>118</sup> Now this cosmic curtain, as it is described in the Book of Enoch, contains the images of all things which since the day of creation have their pre-existing reality, as it were, in the heavenly sphere.<sup>119</sup> All generations and all their lives and actions are woven into this curtain; he who sees it penetrates at the same time into the secret of Messianic redemption, for like the course of history, the final struggle and the deeds of the Messiah are already pre-existently real and visible. As we have seen, this combination of knowledge relating to the Merkabah and the Hekhaloth with a vision of the Messianic end—the inclusion, that is to say, of apocalyptic and eschatologic knowledge—is very old. It dominates the Apocalypse of Abraham and the Book of Enoch no less than the various Hekhaloth tracts four or eight centuries later. All of them contain varying descriptions of the end of the world, and calculations of the date set for the redemption.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, there is a passage in the "Greater Hekhaloth" where the meaning of the Merkabah vision is summed up in the question: "When will he see the heavenly majesty? When will he hear of the final time of redemption? When will he perceive what no eye has yet perceived?"<sup>121</sup>—Incidentally, according to these mystics, that which now belongs to the domain of secret lore shall become universal knowledge in the Messianic age. The throne and the glory which rests on it "shall be revealed anon to all inhabitants of the world."<sup>122</sup> At the same time the reasons, now obscure, of the commandments of the Torah will also be revealed and made plain.<sup>123</sup>

It is safe to say that what might be termed apocalyptic nostalgia was among the most powerful motive-forces of the whole Merkabah mysticism. The attitude of these mystics towards the reality of his-

tory is even more pointedly negative than that of the contemporary Jewish theologians, the Aggadists.<sup>129</sup> The depressing conditions of the period, the beginning of the era of persecution by the Church since the fourth century, directed the religious interests of the mystics towards the higher world of the Merkabah; from the world of history the mystic turns to the prehistoric period of creation, from whose vision he seeks consolation, or towards the post-history of redemption. Unfortunately the sources at our disposal shed no light on the social environment of the founders and leaders of the movement. As I said at the beginning of this lecture, they have been only too successful in preserving their anonymity.

## 9

In contrast to the connection between throne mysticism and apocalyptic which, as we have seen, is very close, that between eschatology and cosmogony—the end of things and the beginning of things—is rather loose, at any rate in the writings which have come down to us. In this respect, Merkabah mysticism differs not only from the non-Jewish forms of Gnosticism but also from the Kabbalism of the later period, where the connection between the two is exceedingly close. Moreover, the comparatively sparse account devoted to this subject under the heading of reflections on the *Maaseh Bereshith* is cosmology rather than cosmogony, that is to say, the emphasis is laid—so far as we are in a position to judge—on the order of the cosmos rather than on the drama of its creation, which plays so large a part in the mythology of the Gnostics. One has only to read the “Baraita on the Work of Creation,” which includes some fragments belonging to this period, albeit in a comparatively recent edition, and whose connection with Merkabah mysticism is evident, to become aware of this difference between Merkabah speculation and Gnosticism proper.<sup>130</sup> Its cause is obvious: the realm of divine “fullness,” the *pleroma* of the Gnostics, which unfolds dramatically the succession of aeons, is directly related to the problem of creation and cosmogony, while for the Merkabah mystics, who substituted the throne world for the *pleroma* and the aeons, this problem has no significance at all. The constituents of the throne world: the *hashmal*, the *ofannim* and *hayoth*, the *seraphim*, etc., can no longer be interpreted in terms of a cosmogonic drama; the only link be-

tween this realm and the problem of creation was, as we have seen, the idea of the cosmic curtain. Here we have one of the most important points of difference between Merkabah mysticism and Kabbalism; the latter is distinguished by renewed interest in purely cosmogonic speculation, whose spirit often enough is entirely Gnostic. In the earlier literature—certainly during the phase represented by the Hekhaloth—theoretical questions have no place; its spirit is descriptive, not speculative, and this is particularly true of the best examples of this genre. Nevertheless it is possible that there was a speculative phase in the very beginning and that the famous passage in the Mishnah which forbids the questions: "What is above and what is below? What was before and what will be after?" refers to theoretical speculation in the manner of the Gnostics who strove after "the knowledge of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we are placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed."<sup>121</sup>

As a matter of fact there exists indubitable proof that among certain groups of Jewish Gnostics who tried to stay within the religious community of rabbinical Judaism, Gnostical speculation and related semi-mythological thought was kept alive. Traces of such ideas in Aggadic literature are few but they exist. Thus for instance there is the well-known saying of the Babylonian teacher Rav in the third century A.D.: "Ten are the qualities with which the world has been created: wisdom, insight, knowledge, force, appeal, power, justice, right, love and compassion."<sup>122</sup> Or the following reference to seven hypostases of similar general ideas of the kind so often found in the names of Gnostical aeons: "Seven *middoth* serve before the throne of glory: wisdom, right and justice, love and mercy, truth and peace."<sup>123</sup> What the aeons and the archons are to the Gnostics, the *middoth* are to this form of speculation, i. e. the hypostatized attributes of God.

Much more important are the relics of speculation concerning aeons preserved in the oldest Kabbalistic text, the highly obscure and awkward book *Bahir*, which was edited in Provence during the twelfth century.<sup>124</sup> This brief document of Kabbalistic theology consists, at least in part, of compilations and editions of much older texts which, together with other writings of the Merkabah school, had made their way to Europe from the East. It was my good fortune to make a discovery a few years ago which renders it possible

to identify one of these Eastern sources, namely, the book *Raza Rabba*, "The Great Mystery," which some Eastern authors of the tenth century named among the most important of esoteric writings and which was hitherto thought to have been lost.<sup>129</sup> Fortunately, several lengthy quotations from it have been preserved in the writings of thirteenth century Jewish mystics in Southern Germany, which leave no doubt that the Book *Bahir* was to a large extent directly based on it.<sup>130</sup> It thus becomes understandable how gnostical *termini technici*, symbols, and mythologems came to be used by the earliest Kabbalists who wrote their works in Provence during the twelfth century. The point obviously has an important bearing on the question of the origins of mediaeval Kabbalism in general. It can be taken as certain that in addition to the *Raza Rabba*, which appears to have been a cross between a mystical Midrash and a Hekhaloth text, with a strong magical element thrown in, other similar fragments of ancient writings, with Gnostic excerpts written in Hebrew, made their way from the East to Provence. It was thus that remainders of Gnostic ideas transmitted in this fashion entered the main stream of mystical thought via the Book *Bahir*, to become one of the chief influences which shaped the theosophy of the thirteenth century Kabbalists.

## 10

The existence of speculative Gnostic tendencies in the immediate neighborhood of Merkabah mysticism has its parallel in the writings grouped together under the name of *Maaseh Bereshith*. These include a document—the *Sefer Yetsirah* or Book of Creation—which represents a theoretical approach to the problems of cosmology and cosmogony.<sup>131</sup> The text probably includes interpolations made at a later period, but its connection with the Merkabah literature is fairly evident, at least as regards terminology and style. Written probably between the third and the sixth century, it is distinguished by its brevity; even the most comprehensive of the various editions does not exceed sixteen hundred words. Historically, it represents the earliest extant speculative text written in the Hebrew language. Mystical meditation appears to have been among the sources from which the author drew inspiration, so far as the vagueness and obscurity of the text permits any judgment on this point. The style is at once pompous and laconic, ambiguous and oracular—no wonder,

therefore, that the book was quoted in evidence alike by mediaeval philosophers and by Kabbalists. Its chief subject-matters are the elements of the world, which are sought in the ten elementary and primordial numbers—*Sefiroth*, as the book calls them—and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These together represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of creation; they are the “thirty-two secret paths of wisdom,” through which God has created all that exists. These *Sefiroth* are not just ten stages, or representative of ten stages, in their unfolding; the matter is not as simple as that. But “their end is in their beginning and their beginning in their end, as the flame is bound to the coal—close your mouth lest it speak and your heart lest it think.” After the author has analysed the function of the *Sefiroth* in his cosmogony, or rather hinted at the solution in some more or less oracular statements, he goes on to explain the function of the letters in creation: “[God] drew them, hewed them, combined them, weighed them, interchanged them, and through them produced the whole creation and everything that is destined to be created.” He then proceeds to discuss, or rather to unveil, the secret meaning of each letter in the three realms of creation known to him: man, the world of the stars and planets, and the rhythmic flow of time through the course of the year. The combination of late Hellenistic, perhaps even late Neoplatonic numerological mysticism with exquisitely Jewish ways of thought concerning the mystery of letters and language is fairly evident throughout.<sup>128</sup> Nor is the element of Merkabah mysticism lacking; the author appears to have searched the Merkabah for a cosmological idea, and not without success, for it seems that the *hayoth* in the Merkabah described by Ezekiel, i. e. the “living beings” which carry the Merkabah, are for him connected with the *Sefiroth* as “living numerical beings.” For, indeed, these are very peculiar “numbers” of which it is said that “their appearance is like a flash of lightning and their goal is without end; His word is in them when they come forth [from Him] and when they return; at His bidding do they speed swiftly as a whirlwind, and before His throne they prostrate themselves.”

Various peculiarities of the terminology employed in the book, including some curious neologisms which find no natural explanation in Hebrew phraseology, suggest a paraphrase of Greek terms,

but most of the details still await a full clarification.<sup>129</sup> The precise meaning of the phrase *Sefiroth belimah* which the author constantly uses and which may be the key to the understanding of what he actually had in mind when speaking of the *Sefiroth*, is a matter of speculation. The second word *belimah* which may be taken to denote or to qualify the specific nature of these "numbers" has been explained or translated in accordance with the theories of the several writers or translators: infinite *Sefiroth*, or closed, abstract, ineffable, absolute *Sefiroth*, or even *Sefiroth* out-of-nothing. If the author of the book wanted to be obscure, he certainly succeeded beyond his wishes. Even the substance of its cosmogony, as set forth in the chapter dealing with the *Sefiroth*, is still a subject of discussion. On the question whether the author believes in the emanation of his *Sefiroth* out of each other and of God it is possible to hear directly conflicting views. According to some writers, he identifies the *Sefiroth* directly with the elements of creation (the spirit of God; ether; water; fire; and the six dimensions of space). Others, with whom I am inclined to agree, see in his description a tendency towards parallelism or correlation between the *Sefiroth* and the elements. In any event, the *Sefiroth* which, like the host of angels in the Merkabah literature, are visualized in an attitude of adoration before God's throne, represent an entirely new element which is foreign to the conception of the classical Merkabah visionaries.

On the other hand, one cannot overlook the connection between the "Book of Creation" and the theory of magic and theurgy which, as we have seen, plays its part in Merkabah mysticism.<sup>130</sup> The ecstatic ascent to the throne is not the only element of that mysticism; it also embraces various other techniques which are much more closely connected with magical practices. One of these, for example, is the "putting on, or clothing, of the name," a highly ceremonious rite in which the magician impregnates himself, as it were, with the great name of God<sup>131</sup>—i. e. performs a symbolic act by clothing himself in a garment into whose texture the name has been woven.<sup>132</sup> The adjuration of the prince or archon of the Torah, *Sar Torah*, belongs to the same category.<sup>133</sup> The revelation sought through the performance of such rites is identical with that of the Merkabah vision. The "Prince of the Torah" reveals the same mysteries as the voice which speaks from the throne of fire: the secret of heaven and earth, the dimensions of the demiurge, and the secret names

the knowledge of which gives power over all things. It is true that in addition these magical practices also hold out a promise of other things, e. g. a more comprehensive knowledge of the Torah, chiefly reflected in the fact that the adept can no longer forget anything he has learned, and similar accomplishments: Matters which to the Hekhaloth mystics were important but not vital, much as they tried to remain in conformity with rabbinical Judaism—a tendency which finds its expression in the emphasis laid in the “Greater Hekhaloth” on the link with Halakhic tradition. These theurgical doctrines form a kind of meeting-place for magic and ecstaticism. The theurgical element is brought to the fore in various writings which display manifold points of contact with the Hekhaloth tracts, as, to take some instances, *Harba de-Moshe*, “The Sword of Moses,” the “*Havdalah* of Rabbi Akiba” and the recipes that are preserved in the book *Shimmushe Tehillim*, the title of which means “The magical use of the psalms.” The latter have had a long, if not quite distinguished career in Jewish life and folklore.<sup>134</sup>

## 11

If Merkabah mysticism thus degenerates in some instances into magic pure and simple, it becomes subject to a moral reinterpretation in others. Originally, the ascent of the soul was by no means conceived as an act of penitence, but in later days the ancient Talmudic saying “great is repentance . . . for it leads to the throne of Glory” came to be regarded—e. g. by the Babylonian Gaon Jehudai (eighth century)—as a reference to it. In this conception, the act of penitence becomes one with the ecstatic progress through the seven heavens.<sup>135</sup> Already in one of the Hekhaloth tracts the first five of the seven palaces through which the soul must pass are placed parallel to certain degrees or stages of moral perfection. Thus Rabbi Akiba says to Rabbi Ishmael: “When I ascended to the first palace I was devout (*hasid*), in the second palace I was pure (*tahor*), in the third sincere (*yashar*), in the fourth I was wholly with God (*tamim*), in the fifth I displayed holiness before God; in the sixth I spoke the *kedushah* (the trishagion) before Him who spoke and created, in order that the guardian angels might not harm me; in the seventh palace I held myself erect with all my might, trembling in all limbs, and spoke the following prayer: . . . ‘Praise be to Thee

who art exalted, praise be to the Sublime in the chambers of grandeur'.<sup>126</sup>

This tendency to set the stages of ascent in parallel with the degrees of perfection obviously raises the question whether we are not faced here with a mystical reinterpretation of the Merkabah itself. Was there not a temptation to regard man himself as the representative of divinity, his soul as the throne of glory, etc.? A step in this direction had been taken by Macarius the Egyptian, one of the earliest representatives of fourth century Christian monastic mysticism. "The opening of his first homily reads like a programme of his mystical faith. It offers a new explanation of the obscure vision of Ezekiel (i. e. of the Merkabah) . . . according to him, the prophet beholds 'the secret of the soul which is on the point of admitting its master and becoming a throne of his Glory'.<sup>127</sup>" We find an analogous reinterpretation of the Merkabah among the Jewish mystics in the thrice repeated saying of the third century Palestinian Talmudist Simeon ben Lakish: "The Patriarchs (i. e. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob)—they are the Merkabah."<sup>128</sup> The author tries to justify this bold assertion by an ingenious exegetical reasoning based on certain Scriptural phrases, but it is plain that the exegesis provided only the occasion for making it, not the motive; the latter is genuinely and unmistakably mystical.

It must be emphasized that these tendencies are alien to the spirit of Hekhaloth literature; we find in it none of that symbolic interpretation of the Merkabah which was later revived and perfected by the Kabbalists. Its subject is never man, be he even a saint. The form of mysticism which it represents takes no particular interest in man as such; its gaze is fixed on God and his aura, the radiant sphere of the Merkabah, to the exclusion of everything else. For the same reason it made no contribution to the development of a new moral ideal of the truly pious Jew. All its originality is on the ecstatic side, while the moral aspect is starved, so to speak, of life. The moral doctrines found in Hekhaloth literature are pale and bloodless; the ideal to which the Hekhaloth mystic is devoted is that of the visionary who holds the keys to the secrets of the divine realm and who reveals these visions in Israel. Vision and knowledge, in a word, Gnosis of this kind, represents for him the essence of the Torah and of all possible human and cosmic wisdom.