

VI

THE AGE OF *SHIUR KOMAH* SPECULATION AND A PASSAGE IN ORIGEN

At the end of his journey the Merkabah mystic beholds not only a vision of the world of the Merkabah and the throne of God, but also a vision of Him who sits upon that throne—a vision in which He appears to the mystic in “a likeness as the appearance of a man [Ezekiel 1:26].” Whereas all the other visions are of things created, however high their rank, this final vision is of the divine glory itself. The doctrine which grew up around this vision, the doctrine of the mystical “body of God,” *Shiur Komah*, is of special importance in establishing the antiquity of some parts of the Hekhaloth writings.

The doctrine is contained in a fragment of a most puzzling character, the age of which has been the subject of much dispute. It appears, like all these texts, in a pseudepigraphical setting, and is attributed to Tannaitic authorities of the second century, especially R. Akiba and R. Ishmael, to whom it was said to have been revealed.¹ It consists of the description of the limbs of God in the figure of a man and reads like a deliberate and excessive indulgence in anthropomorphism. Small wonder that it has deeply shocked later and more sober Jewish thought. Small wonder also that it was hailed by the Kabbalists of the Middle Ages as the profound symbolic expression of the mysteries of what could be called the Kabbalistic *pleroma*.² Jewish apologetics has always tried to explain it away.³ The measurements

¹ Two parallel versions of שְׁעוֹר קוֹמָה are published in מֵרִכְבָּה שְׁלֵמָה: a) fol. 32a–33b, in the name of R. Akiba; b) fol. 34a–43a (several fragments), in the name of R. Ishmael. A large portion of these latter fragments are hymns and prayers the relation of which to שְׁעוֹר קוֹמָה is doubtful, but which do belong to the Hekhaloth literature. Another fragment attributed to R. Akiba is to be found on fol. 44a–b. Some fragments of Akiba's שְׁעוֹר קוֹמָה are also to be found in הִיכָלוֹת וּמִסְתֵּרֵי. The oldest manuscript known to me is a Genizah fragment in Oxford, Hebr. C 65 (not catalogued in Cowley's), which consists of one leaf, partly damaged, and written in the eleventh century. The original full text of this MS corresponded to מֵרִכְבָּה שְׁלֵמָה, fol. 36a–40b, and contained much better readings. See also the old פִּירוּשׁ on *Shiur Komah* in the writer's הַקְּבָלָה הַקְּבָלָה, pp. 212–238 (based on the text current in Germany in the thirteenth century).

² Cf. the general characterization of these fragments in *Major Trends*, pp. 63–67, which I presuppose here.

³ A. Schmiedl, *Studien über jüdische, insbesondere jüdisch-arabische Religionsphilosophie* (1869), pp. 249–251.

of every limb, and, especially, of the most minute parts of the head are given; and at the same time we are instructed in the secret names of each limb, names which are constructed of seemingly incomprehensible combinations of letters.⁴ The whole doctrine is linked, not only in the separate fragment of it that has come down to us under the title *Shiur Komah* (literally, "The measurement of the body"), but also in the small fragment incorporated into the Greater Hekhaloth,⁵ to the description of the figure of the lover in the Song of Songs: "My beloved is white and ruddy . . . his head is as most fine gold, his locks are curled and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves, etc. [5:11-16]"⁶ Almost all the extant texts of the Hekhaloth books contain some more or less outspoken reference to this doctrine, which is further embellished by several allusions to a *haluk* (garment), a robe of glory with which this mystical body of God is apparently clothed (and about which I shall say something in Section VIII).

The question that concerns us is this: Is this doctrine, which gives a bodily appearance to the *Kabod*, 'the glory of God' (also described as the גוף השכינה, 'the body of the Shekhinah'), an early ingredient of Jewish mystical teaching later adopted by some Christian Gnostic circles? Or is it a later recrudescence of an extravagant anthropomorphism of which the earlier mystical tradition of the rabbis of the first and second centuries is innocent? It is true, of course, that a close parallel to the *Shiur Komah* is to be found in the Gnostic Markos' description of the "Body of Truth" (σῶμα τῆς ἀληθείας). This text, written in the latter part of the second century, has impressed many readers as giving some older symbolism an allegorical interpretation of a rather Kabbalistic character.⁷ But the source from which Markos could possibly have gotten the material he interpreted accord-

⁴ The Genizah fragment of שעור קומה seems to have retained these *ephesia grammata* in much better shape. Sometimes the structure of a name that is hopelessly corrupt in the later MSS is still clearly recognizable; e. g. the name of the right arm is here גברא רחמיא and is obviously constructed on an alphabetic principle, like the names of the limbs in the fragments of Markos the Gnostic. The printed version (מרכבה שלמה, fol. 37b, l. 14) has גברא רחמיא.

⁵ גברא רחמיא, Chap. 10; מרכבה שלמה, fol. 38a; היכלות וזרחי, MS Oxford 1531, fol. 45a.

⁶ This explains the fact that God is called in several of these fragments by the specific name *Jedidiah*, as for example, ידידיה מרי עלמא (in היכלות רבתי), or ידירוח (in מרכבה שלמה, fol. 34b; cf. also the writer's הקבלה, p. 221). ידידיה also appears in היכלות וזרחי, MS Oxford 1531, fol. 43a.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeres.*, I.14.2. The names of the limbs are αω, βψ, etc., i. e. אבבש—combinations! Cf. also Moses Gaster, "Das Schiur Komah," in his *Studies and Texts*, II, 1330-1353, particularly p. 1344. Gaster, many mistakes notwithstanding, was basically right in his defense of a high age for the שעור קומה.

ing to his own fancy has remained an unsolved riddle. This problem can now be resolved, in my opinion, in favor of our first hypothesis, to wit, that the teachings of the *Shiur Komah* do indeed represent a second century Jewish tradition.*

The existence of this tradition in that period is attested to by Origen in a curious passage in the introduction to his commentary on the Song of Songs; and I wish here to offer my own interpretation of this passage. Origen writes:⁸

It is said that the custom of the Jews is that no one who has not reached full maturity is permitted to hold this book in his hands. And not only this, but although their rabbis and teachers are wont to teach all the scriptures and their oral traditions [*Mishnayoth*; Origen uses the Greek term *deuteroses*] to the young boys, they defer to the last [in the original: *ad ultimum reservari*] the following four texts: The beginnings of Genesis, where the creation of the world is described; the beginning of the prophecy of Ezekiel, where the doctrine of the angels is expounded [in the original: *de cherubim refertur*]; the end [of the same book] which contains the description of the future temple; and this book of the Song of Songs.

There is no doubt but that this quotation refers to the fact that esoteric teachings were connected with the four texts enumerated. We know from the Mishnah that the creation and the first chapter of Ezekiel were considered texts of esoteric character par excellence, and were, therefore, forbidden to be taught publicly or before a man had reached a distinguished station in life.⁹ With reference to the last chapters of Ezekiel, it is possible that these chapters could have been linked to apocalyptic speculations, and the fact that they obviously contradict statements about the temple formulated in the Torah would naturally have tended to limit their study. It may well be, although we have no definite knowledge, that the contradictions between the two sources were resolved in some kind of esoteric teaching. On the other hand, the book of Canticles was interpreted by the Synagogue as an allegory of the love between God and the Community of Israel and was considered a legitimate text for study for all groups. It was, in fact, a favorite subject for the public aggadic teachings of the rabbis in the second and third centuries.

Thus far, no satisfactory explanation has been offered for Origen's

⁸ "Prologus in Canticum," in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne, XIII, 63. What I call the original is, of course, the Latin translation of the lost Greek text.

⁹ *Hagigah* 13a; cf. the condition laid down in *Kiddushin* 71a for the transmission of the Tetragrammaton (another piece of secret lore), where the candidate is required to be עומד בחצי ימיו.

inclusion of this book in his list. A. Marmorstein and S. Lieberman have tried to interpret it in the light of some much later midrashim of a pseudepigraphical character that would place the study of the Song of Songs in the same category as the study of the Merkabah, and that state that it was no longer fit for public study during the period of Exile because the handmaid (meaning the Christian Church) had usurped the place of the mistress (the Community of Israel).¹⁰ Saul Lieberman has rightly observed that this must be understood as a reference to the fact that the Church had begun, in the third century, to interpret the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love of Christ and the Church. While Lieberman's interpretation holds good for these later pseudepigraphical statements, it can hardly be accepted as an explanation of Origen's original statement. Origen refers to something current in Jewish usage; but the rabbis before his time could not have known about a Christological interpretation of Canticles that might have caused them to declare the book unfit for general study. They could not have known of such a Christological interpretation for the simple reason that it gained acceptance in the Church only through Origen's famous commentary itself.¹¹ We cannot assume that the Synagogue in the second century, or at the beginning of the third century, could have relegated a book to oblivion because it was given a Christological interpretation that actually came into general use only at a later time.

It seems to me, therefore, that Origen's statement calls for another explanation. I have said that the Song of Songs—because it contained a detailed description of the limbs of the lover, who was identified with God—became the basic scriptural text upon which the doctrine of *Shiur Komah* leaned. But it is clear that the authors of our fragments of *Shiur Komah*, instead of interpreting the Song of Songs as an allegory within the framework of the generally accepted midrashic interpretations, saw it as a strictly esoteric text containing sublime and tremendous mysteries regarding God in His appearance upon the throne of the Merkabah. Indeed, by virtue of these strange revelations *Shiur Komah* comes to be considered, in the fragments that

¹⁰ These midrashim are quoted from unknown sources in a Hebrew and Arabic commentary on Canticles from the thirteenth or fourteenth century that was published by M. Friedlaender in *Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstage Moritz Steinschneiders* (1896), Hebrew Section, pp. 52–53. Cf. A. Marmorstein, "Deux Renseignements d'Origène concernant les Juifs," *REJ*, LXXI (1920), 195–199; and Saul Lieberman, מדרשי חזון (Jerusalem, 1940), pp. 13–17.

¹¹ Hippolytus of Rome interpreted Canticles in a similar vein some time before Origen, but his work never gained the authority of the latter's commentary; cf. Friedrich Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien* (Wiesbaden, 1958), p. 15.

have been preserved, as the deepest chapter opened up to the Merkabah mystic for his inspection and speculation.* For, as the Lesser Hekhaloth puts it, *Shiur Komah* speaks of "God who is beyond the sight of His creatures and hidden from the angels who minister to Him; but who has revealed Himself to R. Akiba in the vision of the Merkabah."¹² R. Ishmael and R. Akiba are even made to promise the initiate, who is encouraged to study this "Mishnah" every day after his prayer,¹³ that "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."¹⁴

The Song of Songs, then, in order to have been included in Origen's list, must have been known in Palestine in his time, and even for some time before, as a text linked to esoteric teachings about the appearance of the Divinity; just as, in general, the doctrine of the Merkabah was linked with the first chapter of Ezekiel. Moreover, if it is thus true that Origen's statement and our fragments of *Shiur Komah* explain each other, there can no longer be any valid reason to assign a late date to the sources from which these fragments derive.¹⁵

The only conclusion to be reached from these analyses is that at least three particularly important parts of the Hekhaloth literature must be ascribed to either the Tannaitic or the early Amoraic period. These three parts, or, rather, strata, are:

1. The description of the ascent to heaven and its dangers, connected with the talmudic passage concerning the four who entered paradise.
2. The celestial hymns preserved in the Greater Hekhaloth.
3. The *Shiur Komah*.

Moreover, in the light of the foregoing remarks, we may even draw some further conclusions. S. Lieberman was the first scholar who saw that a Baraita quoted in the treatise *Bekhoroth* 44a, according to which the length of the nose is like the length of the little finger, was identical with a statement in the main fragment of the

¹² Lesser Hekhaloth, MS Oxford 1531, fol. 45b.

¹³ הפילה בכל יום אחר החפילה; in the Lesser Hekhaloth, *ibid.*, fol. 45a.

¹⁴ מרכבה שלמה, fol. 38b.

¹⁵ Professor S. Lieberman has kindly put at my disposal a searching study of Tannaitic and early talmudic statements concerning Canticles as an esoteric text, which can be found as Appendix D to this volume. His contribution greatly strengthens the view of the Tannaitic origin of the *Shiur Komah* Gnosis taken in these pages.

Shiur Komah.¹⁶ As long as the age of the *Shiur Komah* could not be determined, this could be explained as a mere coincidence or, perhaps, as a quotation from the Baraitha in the *Shiur Komah*. With our present knowledge, however, we may assume that the true relation of the two passages is just the reverse. That is to say, the application of this rule about the nose in a halakhic context was but a quotation from the *Shiur Komah*, the composition of which preceded the talmudic speaker, who quotes it, quite rightly, as a Baraitha.*

It may be appropriate to observe here as well that the Judeo-Christian, possibly Ebionitic, source of the Pseudo-Clementinian Homilies knows of a similar teaching according to which God has bodily form (*morphē*).¹⁷ Again, this Judeo-Christian tradition and the *Shiur Komah* explain each other. It may therefore be surmised that the Gnostic Markos took the variant of the *Shiur Komah* that he used for his doctrine of the "Body of Truth" from sources of a strictly Jewish character.*

A criterion for the time at which such Jewish Gnostic traditions were taken over by non-Jews, and especially by Christian Gnostics, is furnished by the following facts. I have shown in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* that Jewish speculation about Metatron as the highest angel who bears, in a way, the name of God, and who is called אֲרִי הַקָּטָן or יְהוֹה הַקָּטָן (the Lesser Tetragrammaton), was preceded by an earlier stage in which this Angel of High was not called Metatron, but Jahoel; a fact which explains the talmudic references to Metatron much more convincingly than any of the older attempts.¹⁸ (The statement that Metatron "has a name like the name of his Master"¹⁹ is incomprehensible except when it is understood to refer to the name Jahoel). Now, whereas this Jewish speculation about Jahoel was taken over by early Christian tradition and by those pagan circles in Egypt, strongly influenced by Jewish esoteric traditions, who have left us the magical papyri,²⁰ the metamorphosis of Jahoel into Metatron has left no imprint on Christian speculation or on those syncretistic magical recipes and incantations as we have them in Greek and

¹⁶ מרכבה שלמה, fol. 38a. Cf. Saul Lieberman, שקיעין (Jerusalem, 1939), p. 12. The *Shiur Komah* fragment reads: אֲרִי הַקָּטָן אֲרִי הַקָּטָן אֲרִי הַקָּטָן אֲרִי הַקָּטָן.

¹⁷ *Pseudo-Clementian Homilies*, ed. Rehm (1953), p. 59 (3:7), and especially pp. 232-233 (17:7-8).

¹⁸ *Major Trends*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ *Sanhedrin* 38b: שְׁמוֹ כֶּסֶם רַבּוֹ.

²⁰ Forms like Jaol, Joel, and Jael all represent the same name. The origin of the name might be traced to a period when יהו was still used as an independent name of God. In the Elephantine papyri we frequently find the combination יהו אלהא. From this form to יהוואל was a short step.

Coptic. There can be no doubt, for instance, that the concept of Jahoel as we find it in Chapter 10 of the Apocalypse of Abraham²¹ was an esoteric one and belonged to the mystical teachings on angelology and the Merkabah. The borrowings from esoteric Judaism about Jahoel must have been made, therefore, before the metamorphosis into Metatron took place. This brings us back again into the late first or early second century and makes a case for connecting the Hekhaloth strata of the late second or early third century with this even earlier stage of Jewish Gnosticism, one which was striving equally hard to maintain a strictly monotheistic character. The continuity of tradition at these several stages is, consequently, to be taken into account no less than the fact that novel elements, too, made their appearance.

²¹ In this Jewish book he is said to be the guide of Abraham, in the same fashion in which Metatron is R. Ishmael's guide in the Hebrew Book of Enoch, and is defined by the same formula that is later used in connection with Metatron: "a power in virtue of the ineffable Name that is dwelling in me." The context of the book plainly contradicts Box's assumption that "the name Yahoel (Jaoel) is evidently a substitute for the ineffable name Yahweh, the writing out of which in full was forbidden." Cf. G. H. Box, *The Apocalypse of Abraham* (1919), p. 46.