

MEDIEVAL JEWISH INFLUENCES ON RENAISSANCE CONCEPTS OF HARMONIA MUNDI

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It is the purpose of this study to present one of the lines of tradition which contributed to the establishment of the concept of *harmonia mundi* as a dominant world-view in European culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mainly in the context of the variegated phenomena which are sometimes united under the general title "Christian kabbalah". My focus will be on the development, in medieval Jewish esotericism, of the concept of Man as microcosmos into a generalized principle with significant implications concerning the concept of the relationships between God and the universe, the human soul and the human image. The three main stages of this development are to be found in the following texts: a) The *Sefer Yezira* (Book of Creation), written probably in Palestine in the third century; b) the commentaries to the *Sefer Yezira* of the tenth century, especially the one written by Rabbi Shabbatai Donnolo in Italy; and c) the works of the esotericists of the Kalonymus family in the Rhineland ("Hasidey Ashkenaz", i.e. German-Jewish pietists in medieval Germany), especially Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus of Worms. A brief analysis will bring into focus the intricate relationship between science and mysticism in this line of development, and a discussion of that problem is presented at the end of this article.

1. *From the Sefer Yezira to Shabbatai Donnolo*

The centrality of the *Sefer Yezira* in the development of esoteric concepts of *harmonia mundi* is well-known and need not be discussed in detail here¹. Suffice it to say that the work is based on the idea that God created the universe and all that is in it, and that He continues to support and guide it by the power of thirty-two "esoteric paths" (*netivot pliot*), which are the ten basic numbers (1-10; the zero was unknown in Antiquity), and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. According to this enigmatic work, God tied to each letter a "crown", and made it "king" of three interconnected and harmonial realms: the

¹ The standard work remains Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens*; and see the more recent volume by Dan (ed.), *Christian Kabbalah*.

² Concerning the *Sefer Yezira* see Dan, 'The Language of Creation and Its Grammar'.

first being the cosmos (i.e. celestial bodies, elements, planets and constellations), the second one being the “year” (i.e. time, like days, weeks, months and the seasons of the year), and the third one being “man”³ (i.e. the limbs, senses, internal organs and moods of a human being). The clear result of this description is that the same divinely-inspired linguistic force governs a segment of the universe, a segment of time, and a part of human physiology. The relationship between macrocosm and microcosm was thus enriched and presented in an elaborate, systematic way, following a basic Jewish rabbinic belief that God has created the universe by the use of the alphabet, and that language therefore contains—both in the individual letters and in the primordial text of Torah—the potential and ideal existence of all creatures, large and small, in general and in detail.

The aspect of this body of ideas which should, I believe, be emphasized most strongly is that we are dealing here with a scientific cosmology rather than a mystical world-view. The *Sefer Yezira* believes that it is presenting things exactly as they are, uncovering the basic laws which govern existence (for a juxtaposition of this perspective with mysticism see section III, below). Its author picked up a Jewish abstract statement, “the universe was created by ten divine utterances” (*Mishna Avot* 5:1), and transformed it into a detailed scientific system. If the universe was created by language, this means that the laws of language are the laws of the universe; and therefore the grammar of language is identical with the “grammar” of the universe: physics, astronomy, physiology. The motivation here is not—or not only—to lift one’s soul up to God (although this may also be achieved), but to formulate the handful of basic laws which govern the structure and behaviour of the universe. The ancient author did not deal in this work with any theological question, nor did he present any religious or ethical conclusions. His endeavors are dedicated exclusively to the stages by which the physical universe came into existence, and the ways in which it is sustained by the divine power encapsulated in language. According to this author, in the same way that language includes masculine and feminine genders, all existence is divided between them, and each phenomenon exists in male and female variations. Furthermore, he holds that good and evil are likewise components of grammar; and as a result they are both—and in equal measure—constitutive elements of existence.

For several centuries no reference was made in Jewish culture to this work and its unique ideas and terminology⁴. Suddenly, however, an intense interest

³ Called *nefesh* in the *Sefer Yezira*. *Nefesh* frequently means “soul”, but in this work it means “individual”, according to the frequent usage of the term in the Hebrew bible.

⁴ Concerning the history of *Sefer Yezira* in Jewish rabbinic literature and in medieval philosophy and mysticism, see Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* I, 155-187.

in its teachings developed during the tenth century, when Jewish scholars, philosophers and scientists opened up to the new ideas and concepts which constituted the basis of Arabic philosophy and science. The teachings of the Greek philosophers of Antiquity penetrated into Judaism through the mediation of the Arab translators, thinkers and adapters, and changed the character of Jewish thought. It seems that Jewish scholars of that period found in the *Sefer Yezira* an authentic Hebrew expression of the terms and ideas which dominated medieval science and philosophy, and some dedicated themselves to writing commentaries on the ancient treatise; in so doing, they intended to demonstrate the presence of contemporary concepts of cosmogony and cosmology in ancient Jewish sources. The most influential among these commentaries on the *Sefer Yezira* was written in Arabic, by Rav Saadia Gaon (890-950), and translated into poetic Hebrew in Byzantium at the end of the eleventh century. This work served as a basis for one of the most extensive Hebrew works on the subject, by Rabbi Judah ben Barzilai of Barcelona, who, in the first half of the twelfth century, wrote a detailed exposition of *Sefer Yezira*⁵. Using other commentaries besides Saadia's, he presented Jewish intellectuals with an elaborate system of cosmology in Hebrew.

Almost at the same time that Rav Saadia wrote his Commentary in Arabic, another Jewish scholar, Rabbi Shabbatai Donnolo, of Italy, wrote another detailed Commentary, which had an immediate impact among European Jewish scholars because it was written in Hebrew. Shabbatai Donnolo was a scientist, a physician, and one of the earliest Jewish writers on science and medicine in medieval Europe. That he wrote his treatises in Hebrew made him differ from most of his contemporaries, who lived in Islamic countries and whose writings, including their commentaries on the *Sefer Yezira*, were written in Arabic. Donnolo's main work in theology is called *Hakhmoni*, and it is comprised of three parts: an autobiography, in which he recounted his wanderings, a commentary on the verse 'Let us make Man in our image' (Gen. 1:27), and his Commentary on the *Sefer Yezira*. The exegesis of the verse is actually a component of the Commentary, and it is centered around one point: the demonstration, in great detail, that Man and the Cosmos were created in profound intrinsic and external harmony. Everything found in Man (physiological, biological and psychological) can be found in, and has its parallel in, the universe. The basic claim, therefore, is that "God's image", *imago dei*, mentioned in the verse in Genesis is actually the image of the universe. By inference one may deduce that the shape of the universe reflects, in some unstated way, God's image, or at least the images in His thought which gave rise to the creation of

⁵ [Judah ben Barzilai], *Commentar zum Sepher Jezira*.

the universe. The main theological purpose which guided Donnolo in his work was the attempt to deny literal meaning to the anthromorphic expressions in the Hebrew bible, of which Gen. 1:27 is the most outstanding. The concept of a macrocosm-microcosm relationship between the universe and Man was intended to be a substitute for reading that verse as indicating a direct similarity between Man and God.

In his Commentary, Donnolo utilized his vast knowledge of astronomy, physics and physiology in order to present the doctrines of the *Sefer Yezira* as expressing contemporary science in the fullest possible manner. Most of the work is dedicated to a detailed exposition of the realms governed by each of the letters of the alphabet in the celestial realms, in the segments of time which rule the cosmos, and in the physiological structure of human beings. The generalizations of the *Sefer Yezira*, which are often opaque and enigmatic, acquired in Donnolo's book fullness and immediacy, relating directly to every aspect of existence. The harmony between the seemingly-separate phenomena of Man and the world was demonstrated by Donnolo in a most detailed manner. The work thus combined the full power of contemporary science with the authority of ancient tradition, resulting in a world-view which expresses the union between tradition and rationalistic investigation. This potent presentation became authoritative among several Jewish philosophers and scientists⁶; and it held a particular appeal to Jewish esotericists, who rejected the harsh rationalism of the Aristotelian schools which became influential since the second half of the twelfth century, and were attracted by the more spiritual presentation of the nature of the universe as emerging from the divine utterances and the letters of the alphabet. The two most important groups in this category were the Jewish pietists in medieval Germany and the Kabbalists of the Provence and northern Spain.

II. *The Kalonymus School and Rabbi Eleazar's Wisdom of the Soul*

One of the most important chapters in the history of the development of this concept in Jewish thought, and its integration within Jewish esotericism, is to be found in the works of Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus of Worms (c. 1160—c. 1230). In several of his influential writings Rabbi Eleazar continued the tradition of the *Sefer Yezira* and Rabbi Shabbatai Donnolo, while adding elements of his own—most notably the fusion between divine and cosmic unity of structure and the esoteric doctrine of psychology which he developed.

⁶ Yet it was rejected by those rationalist philosophers who denied the concept that the universe was created by language, the most prominent among them being Maimonides.

His works are significant from the historical point of view, because they were read by central figures in the early stage of development of the Christian Kabbalah in the late fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, including Pico Della Mirandola and the Cardinal Aegidio da Viterbo.

Rabbi Eleazar was the most prolific writer of the Kalonymus school of Jewish esotericists and pietists in Germany in the High Middle Ages. The Kalonymus family was the leading family among the Jews of the Rhineland, its roots going back to southern Italy. According to this family's tradition, an Emperor named Carl (it is unclear whether Charlemagne is intended) invited the family to settle in Mainz, and they assumed intellectual and religious leadership of the Jews in that region for several generations⁷. In his writings, Rabbi Eleazar tells us that he received esoteric traditions from his father, Judah ben Kalonymus, and from his teacher, Rabbi Judah ben Samuel, "The Pious", from Regensburg⁸. Rabbi Eleazar wrote an important halakhic work, a presentation of the Jewish legal system, in the book which became synonymous with his name—the book *Rokeah*⁹ (accordingly, he is best known in Jewish history under the name Rabbi Eleazar ha-Rokeah). In this book, and in other writings, he also presented his school's system of ethics and piety¹⁰. His other two major works are relevant to the present discussion: his *Perush ha-Tefilot* ("Commentary on the Prayers"), which is the earliest large-scale, comprehensive commentary on the Jewish prayer-book to have reached us¹¹, and his collection of

⁷ Rabbi Eleazar wrote down the family's tradition of its history, including the miraculous appearance in 8th-century Italy of a magician and carrier of esoteric traditions, Rabbi Aharon ben Samuel of Bhagdad. See Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* II, 19–64. Concerning the Kalonymus tradition about their immigration from Italy to Germany, see Abraham Grossman's detailed analysis.

⁸ No writings concerning esoteric matters have survived from his father, Rabbi Judah ben Kalonymus. We do have many treatises written by Rabbi Judah the Pious (see in particular Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, 1567 in Neubauer's Catalogue). As far as I can discern, the body of ideas connected with the concept of *harmonia mundi* does not play a significant role in the works of the teacher, Rabbi Judah the Pious, so that he does not seem the main source and influence on Rabbi Eleazar in this domain. The conclusion should be qualified, however, because Rabbi Judah probably wrote books which have not reached us, among them a Commentary on *Sefer Yezira*. In Rabbi Eleazar's Commentary on that ancient treatise there appears a long quotation from Rabbi Judah; but it is not taken from the lost Commentary but from ms. Oxford 1567, and is not directly related to this subject.

⁹ The Hebrew term (see Ex. 30: 25, 35; 37: 29, often translated as "the art of the perfumer") is numerically identical with Eleazar, as is the title of his other central work, *Sodey Razaya* (see below).

¹⁰ See Marcus, *Piety and Society*.

¹¹ Printed in a traditional edition by Moses and Judah Alter Herschler, Jerusalem 1992, in two volumes. It seems that Rabbi Eleazar kept writing on his commentary throughout his life, changing and adding from time to time. The three manuscript versions which we have (Vienna 108, Oxford-Bodleian 1204, Paris 772) are different from each other, but the changes seem to have been made by the author.

five major treatises presenting his esoteric tradition, the *Sodey Razaya* ("Secrets of Secrets")¹². This collection includes, after an introduction dealing with ethics and pietism, the following works: 1) *Sod M'aseh Bereshit*: an exposition of "The Secret of Genesis", that is of the theory of creation, which, following the *Sefer Yezira*, is actually a commentary on each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet¹³; 2) *Sod ha-Merkavah* ("The Secret of the Chariot"), an exposition of the structure of the celestial and divine realms, which is dependent on ancient Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical literature¹⁴ which Rabbi Eleazar often paraphrased¹⁵; 3) *Sefer ha-Shem* ("The Book of the Holy Name"), the most esoteric work in this collection, which includes hundreds of pages of interpretations of the tetragrammaton and other holy names¹⁶; 4) *Perush Sefer Yezira*: the Commentary on the *Sefer Yezira*¹⁷; 5) *Hokhmah ha-Nefesh* ("The Wisdom of the Soul") which is probably the first Hebrew monograph on psychology¹⁸.

These works by Rabbi Eleazar, although esoteric in nature, became part of medieval and early modern Jewish culture long after the influence of the Kalonymus school had waned, being overshadowed by the doctrines of the kabbalah which emerged from Spain and the Provence and became the dominant Jewish theology after the sixteenth century¹⁹. Even though they were not printed when Hebrew books on kabbalah and esotericism began to be published in this printed form in the sixteenth century, they were widely known and frequently copied, and can be regarded as constituents of the Jewish esoteric tradition in the late Middle Ages and early modern times.

Rabbi Eleazar discussed the structural harmony of the microcosm and the macrocosm in three sections in these treatises. One is found in his "Commentary on the Prayers", in the exposition of the prayer *Nishmat*²⁰, another is in the

¹² The work is found in many manuscripts. See, for example, Munich 81 and British Library 737 (about this manuscript and its copyists, see below). The individual treatises have frequently been copied separately.

¹³ Printed in a traditional edition in Jerusalem, 1988; the first half of this work constitutes the major part of the *Sefer Raziel*, a 16th-century anthology of esoteric and magical works, first published in Amsterdam in 1601 and reprinted numerous times.

¹⁴ On this ancient mystical school, see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*; Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*; Dan, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*; id., *Jewish Mysticism* I.

¹⁵ This work was published in part by I. Kamelhar. See now Liss, *Hilkhot ha-Kavod*.

¹⁶ This work has never been printed. I have translated and analyzed its first part in *Jewish Mysticism* II, 129-178.

¹⁷ Printed by the Hasidic Rabbi Zevi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov in Przemisla, 1883.

¹⁸ First printed by Rabbi Lemberg in 1876 and, in exactly the same format, in Safed in 1913.

¹⁹ Concerning the later influence of these writings, see Dan, 'Historical Fate' [in Hebrew], 87-99.

²⁰ The prayer *Nishmat*, based on the biblical verse 'the soul of all the living will praise you', includes a line expressing praise for the limbs which God has given the human body. In his

Commentary on the *Sefer Yezira*, and the third—which will be analyzed below—in his work on psychology, the *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*.

The impact of Rabbi Eleazar's unified concept of God, the universe, Man and the soul may be understood by the way in which he integrates, in the most profound manner, the traditions of the *Sefer Yezira* and Shabbatai Donnolo with the Talmudic belief concerning the similarities between God and the soul. The Talmudic sages interpreted the five times in which the phrase 'Bless the Lord, O my soul' is found in the opening verses of Psalm 103 as David's expression of the relationship between the soul and God.

In the same way that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, fills up the whole world, so the soul fills up the whole body; in the same way that He sees and cannot be seen, so the soul sees and cannot be seen; in the same way that He feeds the whole world, so the soul feeds the whole body; in the same way that He is pure, so the soul is also pure; in the same way that He resides in the innermost, hidden realms, so the soul resides in the innermost, hidden realms (of the body)²¹.

This section may be regarded as the backbone of the psychology presented in *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh* as a whole. Rabbi Eleazar was familiar with the doctrines of the soul formulated by Jewish philosophers influenced by Arab theologians, who in turn derived much in their descriptions of the soul from Platonic and Aristotelian sources. Rabbi Eleazar even quotes a long section from Abraham Ibn Ezra's "Commentary on the Bible" and other works on this subject²². Yet he did not show great interest in these formulations when presenting his own concepts. For him, the starting point was the ancient belief that the soul is derived from God and returns to Him after the death of the body, a journey explained by its immanent divine nature. The three expositions presented in an English translation at the end of this article (see Appendix), which connect Rabbi Eleazar's psychological doctrines with the concepts of cosmic harmony developed by Donnolo (often using quotations and paraphrases of the latter's work), may serve as pertinent examples.

III. Rabbi Eleazar and the Christian Kabbalah

Three main facts stand out concerning the relationship between the Kalonymus school and the early proponents of the Christian Kabbalah. The

commentary to this phrase, Rabbi Eleazar included a detailed physiological exposition, based on Shabbatai Donnolo's commentary on Genesis 1:27. See Herschler's edition of the "Commentary on the Prayers" II, 503-508.

²¹ *Bavli Berkhot* 10a.

²² He referred to him as Abraham ha-Hoze, "the visionary". See *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh* 29c-30d, and on pp. 5 c-d (without mentioning the author's name), taken from Ibn Ezra to Exodus 23:25.

first is that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola himself quotes from the *Hokmat ha-Nefesh* by Rabbi Eleazar, referring clearly both to the treatise and its author²³. The second is that the best manuscript of the whole *Sodey Razaya* which has reached us, counting many hundreds of pages, was copied by the well-known Hebrew and Yiddish linguist Rabbi Eliyahu Levitas, for the Cardinal Aegidio da Viterbo²⁴. It is most probable that the Cardinal used the manuscript extensively, and it contains hundreds of marginal notes in Latin by the reader. The third is the central place of the esoteric works of the Kalonymus school among the translations made for the Florence Christian Kabbalists by Flavius Mithridates, a Jewish convert to Christianity, whose works are found in several manuscripts in the library of the Vatican²⁵. This library includes, for instance, a translation of the twelve treatises found in ms. Bodleiana 1567, most of them by Rabbi Judah the Pious and two by Rabbi Eleazar²⁶.

It should be constantly emphasized that most of the Jewish sources used by the early Christian kabbalists were not kabbalistic in the proper sense of the term²⁷. The major impact on Reuchlin's spiritual world-view was that of the Talmud and midrash (which he viewed as kabbalistic, aligning himself in this with the Jewish kabbalists themselves, who maintained that their medieval esoteric-mystical doctrines were part of the oral tradition given by God to Moses and expressed in the Talmud and Midrash), and more in particular the concepts of language and exegesis found there. The traditions which were of such central importance to Reuchlin—e.g., the holy names of forty-two and seventy-two letters—are pre-kabbalistic and non-kabbalistic, and have been used by non-kabbalists no less than by kabbalists. The methodologies of *gematria*, *notarikon* and especially *temurah*²⁸ are not kabbalistic (*temurah* is

²³ Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 11-12, 18.

²⁴ Ms. London, British Library, no. 737 in the Margulioth's catalogue. The catalogue's editor copied the long expression of thanks by Levitas to the Cardinal.

²⁵ See the description of Mithridates, his unique career and his translations, in several studies by Wirszubski: 'The Christological Sermon'; *A Christian Kabbalist* [both in Hebrew]. My friend Prof. Giulio Busi, of the Frei Universität Berlin, informs me that Wirszubski's list of the translated treatises is incomplete, and is preparing a comprehensive list.

²⁶ Only the second volume of this translation seems to have survived. In the Hebrew manuscript the title page and the beginning are missing, so that we do not know the general title of this work. From Mithridates we have only the second volume. However, as the late Prof. Wirszubski informed me, it seems that the general title as read by the translator was *De Anima*.

²⁷ Cf. Dan, 'Christian Kabbalah'.

²⁸ *Gematria* is the computation of the numerical value of the letters; *notarikon* is the use of acronyms, including the last letters of words and many other variations; and *temurah* is the substitution of one letter for another according to several different systems.

actually used in the Hebrew bible²⁹). In fact, these techniques are much more central in the writings of the Kalonymus school of esotericists than in many kabbalistic works. The second non-kabbalistic body of literature which influenced the Christian kabbalists are, indeed, the writings of the Kalonymus school: the ones they read, the ones that were copied for them, and the ones that were translated for them by Mithridates. The third is the unique mysticism of Abraham Abulafia, who rejected major kabbalistic concepts (the divine hypostases, the bi-sexuality of the divine world, and the dualism of “emanations of the left”, the Satanic realm, which his contemporaries cherished) and instead developed the linguistic, experiential, alphabetical and numerological world-view which he derived from the *Sefer Yezira*. The combination of these three—Midrash, Kalonymids and Abulafia—distanced these early Christian kabbalists from the myths and theosophical speculations of most of the kabbalists in Spain, the Provence and Italy. It can be said that in their works the *harmonia mundi* of *Sefer Yezira*, Rabbi Eleazar and Abulafia marginalized the *sefirot*, the *shekhinah* and the *sitra ahra* (“the side of evil”) typical of the kabbalists proper.

The most important difference, however, concerns their attitude towards mysticism. The Christian kabbalists were first and foremost theologians and scientists, not mystics. The world-view in which cosmic harmony is central is based on an intuitive conception that there is a structural similarity and interdependence governing all realms of the known and unknown universe, and that this similarity and interdependence is the result of there being one common source, one dominant creative power, from which everything has emerged. When the ancient Pythagoreans described the universe as expressing the relationship between numbers, and tried to listen to the resulting music of the spheres, they laid the foundation for the mathematically-oriented teachers of the *harmonia*. When the anonymous author of the *Sefer Yezira* described the universe as resulting from the powers endowed by God to the letters of the alphabet and the primary numbers, he created another such foundation. When the classical neo-Platonists described in a systematic manner the evolvment of all that is from the layers of emanated divine light, the source of which is the infinite light of God, they provided this concept with some of its most powerful tools and terms. The concept reached its most creative and influential stage in the history of western culture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centu-

²⁹ See Jeremiah 25:25 and 51:41. The second verse reads: ‘How is Sheshakh taken and how is the praise of the whole earth surprised, how has Bavel become an astonishment among the nations’. The fact that both Bavel and Sheshakh are mentioned in the same verse proves that this is not a way to hide the real subject of the prophecy in an esoteric code, but rather a rhetorical use of the *temurah* version as a synonym.

ries, in the work of European scholars who are often called esotericists, who assimilated in their all-encompassing systems at least three previously independent sciences—astrology, alchemy and magic—and transformed them into integrated components of their *harmonia mundi*.

The main obstacle to the understanding of this phenomenon is the modernist tendency to regard this whole realm of speculation as superstition, magic, and especially mysticism, perceived as something which opposed and hindered the development of “true” rational, experimental science over the last few centuries. Yet, contrary to the intuitions implanted in all of us by our modern prejudices, when closely examined, this domain can be shown to be first and foremost a scientific one, while the mystical elements included in it are few and scattered.

Numerous mystics, from Moses de Leon, the author of the Jewish kabbalistic *Zohar*, to Jacob Boehme, can be described as adherents to the theories of *harmonia mundi*. Yet there is a vast difference between the mystic and the scientist, although they may both present the same systems. The *harmonia mundi* scientist describes the universe as he believes it really is. The mystic believes that truth cannot be described in words. He may regard *harmonia mundi* terminology as the best approximation available in language to denote the hidden, meta-logical and meta-linguistic divine, mystical truth³⁰. The scientist believes that his formulations—which demonstrate the harmony and interdependence of human, worldly, universal and divine phenomena—do represent what really happens, what makes the world go round, and what explains the myriad details of every realm of existence. This is what makes him a scientist. He believes that his conclusions have the ability not only to explain, but to predict. According to him, understanding these relationship means deciphering the secrets of existence, which can be put to human use. In this he may even be regarded as a technologist. He believes in the close connection between the signifiers used in his treatises and the signifieds of which the universe is comprised. The *mundus*, as a signified entity, really behaves according to the rules set by his harmonial system.

The mystic, on the other hand, views the terminology and systems of *harmonia mundi* as signifiers which have only a tenuous, imprecise and undefinable connection with the hidden, unknown signifieds in the divine world. The harmonial terminology is a useful ‘metaphor’ which can hint—but never express—the relationship between the human soul and its divine source; it is a great mistake to accept these term literally, as defining such a relationship. In the same way that sexual relationships may indicate, in an imprecise

³⁰ On the concept of “mysticism” used here, cf. Dan, ‘In Quest of a Historical Definition’.

way, processes going on in the divine world, but should never be taken literally, so the harmonial relationships between components of existence should never be regarded as “really” describing the nature of the connection between God and Creation.

It is a meaningful historical fact that the early roots of many *harmonia mundi* ideas are to be found in the same proximity of time, place and cultural environment as those of mysticism. The *Sefer Yezira* was written most probably in the same time that the early works of the Jewish “descenders to the chariot” were taking shape, in third-century Palestine. The hermetic treatises—among the earliest and most complete expressions of a *harmonia mundi* world-view—were probably written approximately in the same time, in second- and third-century Egypt, very close in time and place to the early Christian mystics and their desert monasteries. This was also the time in which various gnostic texts peaked in their influence and creativity in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Such proximity can go a long way in explaining similarities of attitudes and intuitions, of cultural concepts and terminology. It cannot be regarded as proof of identity.

It is often very difficult to distinguish between hermetic *harmonia mundi* conceptions and mystical ones. The prevailing error of regarding the *Sefer Yezira* as a work of mysticism is a good example of how difficult it is to distinguish between them. The same goes for the meaningful difference between the Kalonymus school of esotericists and the early kabbalists in the High Middle Ages. My insistence on distinguishing between them is motivated by the apprehension that, if we do not do so, both realms—the one of mysticism and the one of the multitude of hermeticist and esoteric ideas—will lose their unique identity and position in the history of human thought and religiosity. They have a great deal in common, yet they represent vastly different attitudes towards language and experience; and it is the duty of historical scholarship to give each of them its rightful place in the history of the human quest of understanding and relating to the universe and its Ruler.

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L'influence de la pensée juive médiévale sur la notion d'"Harmonie du Monde" à la Renaissance

Cet article traite de l'évolution d'un concept. Celui, dans l'ésotérisme juif médiéval, d'Homme considéré comme microcosme. Ce concept a évolué pour devenir un principe général, aux implications significatives pour ce qui concerne les rapports entre Dieu, l'univers, l'âme et l'image humaines. On peut repérer les trois étapes principales de cette évolution dans les textes suivants : a) le *Sefer Yezira* (ou *Livre de la Création*), écrit probablement en Palestine au troisième siècle ; b) les commentaires, au dixième siècle, du *Sefer Yezira*, particulièrement celui qu'écrivit Rabbi Shabbatai Donnolo en Italie ; c) les œuvres des ésotéristes de la famille des Kalonymus en Rhénanie ("Hasidey Ashkenaz", c'est-à-dire des piétistes de l'Allemagne médiévale), notamment Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus, de Worms. L'article se termine par des considérations sur Rabbi Eleazar et sur l'évolution de concepts ressortissant à l'*Harmonia mundi* dans la Kabbale chrétienne. Jean Pic de la Mirandole a tiré de *Hokmat ha-Nephesh*, de Rabbi Eleazar, des citations, et *Sodey Razaya*, de ce dernier, a été copié par Rabbi Eliyahu Levitas pour le cardinal Gilles de Viterbe, lequel se trouve avoir fait un large usage de cet ouvrage. Enfin, les œuvres ésotériques de l'école des Kalonymus occupent une place centrale parmi les traductions que Flavius Mithridate fit pour les kabbalistes chrétiens de Florence. L'idée générale développée par l'auteur est que le *Sefer Yezira* a été interprété à tort comme un texte mystique. En fait, son

objet est d'exposer une cosmologie scientifique. Les théories scientifiques portant sur l'*Harmonia mundi* prétendent décrire l'univers tel qu'il est réellement, alors que les descriptions mystiques, en revanche, posent que la vérité ne saurait, en dernière analyse, être décrite par des mots, si bien que la terminologie de l'*Harmonia mundi* est seulement la meilleure approximation dont le langage dispose pour signifier la vérité divine et mystique cachée, méta-logique et méta-linguistique. L'auteur souligne combien il est important de faire la différence entre ces deux attitudes (à savoir, scientifique d'une part, mystique d'autre part), si l'on veut éviter des erreurs d'interprétation dans l'étude des matériaux dont on traite, que ceux-ci ressortissent au judaïsme ou à la Kabbale chrétienne.

APPENDIX

1. *The Depth of the Work of the Soul*³¹ and the Analogy of its Employs and the Universe³²

The soul's residence is above the brain; it sits there like a monarch on his throne. The skull is structured like the firmament, as it is hinted: 'the heaven that is over thy head shall be brass' (Dt. 28:23). In the same way that the Creator covered the waters by the heavens, as it is said: 'who lays the beams of his chambers in the waters' (Ps. 104:3), he [also] emanated the *shekhinah* [= residence] of his glory in the upper heavens, above the firmament which is above the holy beasts³³. The name of this firmament is *harari*, as it is said near the end of [the midrash] *Tadsheh*³⁴, that God placed the spirit of life in the tissue surrounding the brain, on the moisture there. He created this moisture around the brain, in the skull, to prevent the drying of the brain by the heat of the intestines, heat which ascends upwards from below, and reaches the head.

You should know that the residence of the spirit is on the brain, and because of this, if the tissue surrounding the brain is punctured, the body immediately dies. The brain is placed in the back of the head, behind the ears, and in the same way his *shekhinah* is in the west³⁵. The ears were created and placed

³¹ "The work of the soul" is a rare expression which has been construed as a parallel to "the work of the chariot" and "the work of Genesis". The main purpose of this section (and of many others in the book) is to demonstrate the parallel structure of these three "works": the divine realm, the cosmos, and the soul.

³² *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, 31 a-b

³³ Ez. 1: 22 ('And over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of a firmament'). Eleazar describes here three layers of analogical structures: the soul above the brain, the heavens above the waters, and the divine glory (the *shekhinah*) above the heavens.

³⁴ The term is corrupted in the text, yet this seems to be a reference to a late midrash on Genesis, *Midrash Tadsheh*, published in Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash* III.

³⁵ Talmudic tradition places the *shekhinah* on the temple mount in the west; this is why the surviving western wall of the temple is regarded as the holiest place in Judaism. Eleazar finds an analogy to this in the place of the brain in the head.

there so that the individual will listen to the commandments of the Creator, as it is said: 'and wilt give ear to his commandments' (Ex. 15:26); 'and thy ears will hear a word behind thee' (Is. 30:21)³⁶. This is because the body will comprehend what it hears by the power of the soul which is near to that place, for everything reaches a person by means of the soul.

The white brain descends from the entrance of the skull and spreads all over the spine. The spinal cord with the bone of the coeliac, and the twelve portions of the body and the ribs, and all the limbs of the body are connected to it, either from this side or from that side. The top of the brain is in the head, and its tail in the backbone and the phallus.

You should know that the soul controls the body and directs it, but the body does not control the soul, for when the spirit of life leaves the body, the body cannot move itself and it will be 'as a carcass trodden under the feet' (Is. 14:19), 'and the spirit returns to God who gave it' (Eccl. 12:7). So we understand that the body is controlled by the soul. When the soul is inside the body it penetrates it, both the body and the skin, from the inside and from the outside, from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. The soul is connected to the sinews of the brain until its Creator decrees that it should leave the body, and then the body dies.

The tissue covering the brain is like a dome, its shape is sloped and it has power like fire, for the head has the power of fire and heat. In the same way, from the sky come heat and fire. The brain is structured like three portions, and so is the divine throne; the brain is round, and so is the throne from behind. The brain comes out as if overflowing its container, and in the same way the throne is reflected in all the heavens, as it is written: 'The Lord has established his throne in the heavens' (Ps. 103:19), in every firmament the glory of the throne is reflected, as Rabbi Meir Shatz has stated in his hymn, "His Glory is the Sign for the Multitudes of the Angels", and it is found in the Midrash³⁷.

I, the humble one, found in the "Book of the Chariot"³⁸ the following: To you, the Lord of the universe, He who resides on the seven supreme firmaments, on seven thrones of glory His *shekhinah* of power, he resides and sustains all the generations. The poet has written that there are thrones in all the firmaments, as it is written: 'the Lord God shall be exalted' (Is. 5:15)³⁹.

³⁶ In Hebrew, the name "ear" is homonymical with the verb "to listen" (*ozen*, *ha'azen*).

³⁷ Rabbi Meir Shatz (an acronym for "messenger of the community", i.e. a cantor), was a poet from the Rhineland who lived in the 10th century. This famous theological hymn has been interpreted in detail in Rabbi Abraham barabai Azriel's *Arugat ha-Bosem*, which quotes this section of *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh* (see the edition by E.E. Urbach, vol. I).

³⁸ This is a reference to a text from the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature, in which such hymns abound.

³⁹ Literally: "elevated".

We find that the placement of the soul over the brain is like the residence of the divine glory on the throne of glory. The spirit can get out of the head, and it floats among the eighteen thousand worlds, as it said in the talmudic tractat of *Avoda Zara*⁴⁰. The hair of the head is rooted in the brain and derives its sustenance from it, and in the same way the angels are sustained by the divine glory.

There are seven [openings] in the head: two ears, two nostrils, two eyes and the mouth, and in the same way there are seven rivers of fire around the divine throne, as it is written: 'The floods [=rivers] have lifted up' (Ps. 103:2). The sinews in the head are white yet full of blood. Similarly, the throne of glory is of brilliant red fire.

2. *The Physiology of Madness*⁴¹

The soul resides over the brain in the head. When the brain becomes substantial, the *da'at* [= intelligence] is established. But when the brain is weakened, the *da'at* is diminished. When the whole body is eager [?] to serve it and strengthen it, the brain also is established in its residence and becomes ready to strengthen and establish the whole body in good health, endow it with intelligence, and lead it in a perfect way. When the soul is "sweetened" the heart is better prepared to benefit the whole body, for the heart is the source of the soul. The soul rises from the heart to reside over the chambers of the brain in the head, and from there it descends again to the lower chambers of the body where *da'at* and intelligence dwell.

In the middle of the [lunar] month, when the moon is full, then the brain is increased in power and all its chambers become full. Because of this, the soul finds it more difficult to ascend and descend to the brain in the head, because the chambers of the brain are full. At that time the soul is harmed, because its sources of sustenance have been blocked, and the brain causes the soul to suffer. This is the reason why [at that time, i.e., the full moon] a person is shaken and breaks out of the boundaries of reason and will speak in madness and the *da'at* disappears, because the soul is suffering when the brain is increased in this way. At such a time all the people who know that person will say that he is crazy, influenced by demons, but this is not the case. It is the suffering of the soul and the power of the black temper which has increased as a result of the strengthening of the brain which blocked the sources of the soul. When the moon is diminished, and the brain is weakened, this state will pass. But if the black temper continues to increase and ascend towards the soul, then

⁴⁰ *Bavli Avoda Zara*, 3a.

⁴¹ *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, 19 c-d.

the suffering of the soul will grow until reason disappears completely. Then the person's mouth will froth, he bites his tongue, grates his teeth, and the person falls down like a madman, his hands and feet flailing in all directions on the ground. Sometimes such a person will throw stones at other people, behave mindlessly. This is because the spirit of the soul has not reached its residence in the chambers of the brain and allowed the black temper to ascend and block the sources of the soul and make the soul and the spirit to suffer in the bitterness of this state. So when suffering is increased in the upper part of the body, the *da'at* becomes a captive of the state of madness. This may happen also when the moon is halfway in its cycle, or in its beginning, and sometimes it happens at the end of the cycle. From this we conclude that the residence of the *da'at* is in the brain, and the residence of intelligence is in the heart, and the residence of fear is in the "thought" of the body, a place in which it is in conflict with the black temper. Because of this, a person should control his temper, so that terror will not overcome him, then he will have nothing to fear. All this we have learned from the cycle of the moon, in its beginning, in its fullness and its diminishing, and the influence of this process on the ascension of the spirit to the brain.

The lung receives the spirit of the soul, and it is like the violin of the soul. The lung is the source of spittle and moisture, and within it the soul comes and goes. The voice emerges from the lung; there are four kinds of voice: the first is loud and strong and broad; the second is low and heavy; the third is small, almost silent, and the fourth is thin, like that of an organ, and the fifth [sic] is a moderate voice, which mediates between all of them.

Speech is derived from five places: from the gutter, from the tongue, from the cavity above the tongue, from the teeth, and from the lips.

The heart is the home, the chamber of the soul, and it serves like the oven which warms the blood. It is the heart which thinks and reflects and investigates, and it is also the source of desire. There, in the heart, the depths of wisdom and intelligence are born. Because of this the heart should be in the middle [of the body], deep in its chamber, in a hidden place. The heart receives its power from the liver and from the red moisture, and also from above, from the brain in the head. The heart has two "guts", one which contains the blood, which gives life, and it is located on the right side and it makes the blood flow in the arteries. The second controls the spirit of the soul, and it is located on the left side, and it is the source of the spirit of life. The 'wings' of the heart are like the ears of the heart, and they are the orifices of these "guts". The blood travels from the heart, in the arteries and it brings life to [the parts of the body]. The spirit of life resides, in an almost unsubstantial way, within the heart. In this way the blood heats up, in the heart and throughout the body.

3. *Physiology and Humility*⁴²

The soul constantly thinks about its creator. This induces in it humility and reverence of God. The spirit of man should not elevate itself in pride; it should ponder the nature of its creator, which is the earliest of all early things and the last of all later things. ‘He is unchangeable, who can turn him?’ (Job 23:13). When a person observes his own self, and ponders his body and its origins, [he will realize how humble he is]. He observes how he was created from dirt, from a drop of semen, which later turns into a piece of meat, and then a spirit from above is inserted into him, making bones to emerge and take shape, sinews are stretched and arteries become full of blood and the bones become full, and then a skin envelops all of them. He ponders how the features of the face take form and his stature is fixed. The nose is made, and the nostrils, which contain holes which lead to the throat, to enable breathing and smelling. Ears are formed, able to hear, and the eyes, the mouth, the throat, the gutter; the tongue extends and the lips are drawn, able to open and close [the mouth]. He observes the work of the cheeks and the jaw, the two doors of the mouth, the place where the teeth are implanted and the two lips. He ponders the structure of the arms and the legs, the cavities of the body and the fingers, their joints and their nails, how they are different from each other.

He thinks about his imprisonment for nine months, and how he emerges after that period naked and lame and blind and deaf. He then asks himself: who is it that opened your eyes, made your ears hear, who put speech into your mouth, who enabled you to walk and who gave you the ability to use your hands and feet? Who is it that gave you wisdom and intelligence? When you were young, who made your hair and beard black? At that age, if you wash your hair with every kind of soap you cannot make even one hair white. You should then give the creator his due⁴³, for it is He who brought about all this.

This is [the meaning of the verse]: ‘Know therefore this day and consider it in thy heart that the Lord he is God’ (Dt. 4:39). That which is made does not resemble its maker. He created all this, and everything is full of him. The spirit of man is in the working heart; without the heart there is no wisdom. ‘But the word is very near to thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart that thou mayst do it’ (Dt. 30:14). This is the reason why it is called heart, *leb*, for the torah begins with the letter *beth*, *bereshit*, and ends with the letter *lamed*, in the word ‘Israel, in the sight of all Israel’ (Dt. 34:12)—this is *leb*. Because of this, the Book

⁴² *Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, 26 b-c.

⁴³ Eleazar uses here a phrase from the *Sefer Yezira*: *hasev yozer al mchono*.

of Creation begins with the statement: 'By thirty-two (*lb*) paths the universe was created'⁴⁴.

The heart should think: It is God who created me and is united in all my essence, and he testifies that I was created from my father's and mother's drops. There are ten things which constitute my body, which are: skin, flesh, sinews, bones, brain, blood, hair, nails, the black in the eye and the white in the eye⁴⁵. God also gave me ten things which belong to him: a soul, the countenance of the face, the hearing in the ear, the vision in the eye, the sense of smell in the nose, the pronouncement of the lips, the movement of the tongue, the use of the hands, the power of the legs to walk, wisdom and intelligence. Because he gave me all this, I love him with all my heart.

Man governs and sustains the whole body in the same way that wind [or spirit] sustains the whole world, because man is a small world, a microcosm⁴⁶. There is no air without wind. Therefore a person should reflect: I should be very happy, because I was created in the form and image [of God], and was endowed with the power of speech, to enable me to worship the glorious king. He gave me a spirit, which is entrusted with him; if I shall commit a sin, he can, if he wished, to draw it out of my body, like a sword from its sheath. I should worship God with happiness, and rejoice in his love. In order to worship him I should deny the pleasures of this world, and expect the pleasures of the next world.

God placed the heart in the middle, above the middle of the stomach, because from there comes the spirit—from the heart which is in the middle between the lung and the wind-pipe. This is because the holy spirit comes out of the throne, which is in the middle, between the celestial camps. This is the spirit of God. In the same way, the holy ark is in the middle between the camps [of angels], and from there the spirit comes out to the prophet.

⁴⁴ *Sefer Yezira* 1:1. These 32 "paths" are the 22 letters of the alphabet and the ten primary numbers, from 1 to 10. It should be noted however that the *Sefer Yezira* itself does not associate this number with the word "heart", as Rabbi Eleazar does here and in many other places. The first work of the kabbalah, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, written about 1185, also makes use of the numerical identity of "heart" with the *Sefer Yezira* cosmic principles.

⁴⁵ See *Bavli Nidah*, 31a.

⁴⁶ See *Tanhuma Pequdey*, 3.