CHAPTER 3
FROM THE ANCIENT EAST TO THE EUROPEAN MIDDLE AGES

I

EVERY READER of Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism is puzzled that the first chapter of the book is dedicated to Hekhalot mysticism of the Talmudic period, up to approximately the sixth century. The following chapter is dedicated to the Ashkenazi Hasidic movement in medieval Germany, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Was there nothing in between? Did Jewish mysticism freeze in its development after the experiences of the “descenders to the chariot” to be resumed only half a millennium or more later in the Christian countries of medieval Europe?

Scholem did not explore the period between Hekhalot mysticism and the emergence of the early kabbalah in Provence and Spain and of Ashkenazi Hasidism in the Rhineland in the twelfth century in any major study. His most extensive discussion of the subject is to be found in his article on kabbalah in the new Encyclopaedia Judaica, which, because of the limitations of the format of the encyclopaedia, is necessarily
laconic and concise.¹ Yet in many of Scholem's studies this gap in time is discussed.

As far as we know, the long period between the sixth and the twelfth centuries did not bring forth a mystical literature comparable to previous or subsequent periods. We cannot discern whether mysticism lost its impetus within Jewish culture, or whether the works of the great mystics of that period, if indeed there were any, have been lost or consciously suppressed by rabbinic Judaism. All we have from this period are a few remnants of the creative surge of the Hekhalot mystics, and some early indications of the coming great outburst of mystical creativity by the medieval kabbalists.

One of the most perplexing problems Scholem faced whenever dealing with this barren period was whether or not “underground” schools of Jewish gnostics existed, or if there were other, hidden avenues of transmission of gnostic symbols and speculations. The Gaonic period, which lasted from the sixth to eleventh centuries, should be the connecting link between ancient gnostic mythology and its reappearance in medieval Europe in the book Babir and the works of the early kabbalists. But we do not have any texts from the Gaonic period that suggest the existence of such an “underground.” Scholem was quite certain nonetheless that in one form or another there was a series of links between the ancient gnostics and the medieval mystics; he did not rule out the possibility that the circles of the Ashkenazi Hasidim in the late twelfth century received and preserved traditions which reached them from earlier Gaonic sources.² Yet there is no historical record
today of those circles which could have transmitted these esoteric traditions.

Below is an outline of the main avenues of the transmission of mystical and esoteric creativity in this period.

1. Through the continuation of the creative impetus of Hekhalot mysticism in different forms, probably with a greater emphasis on the magical use of the esoteric traditions.

2. Through works in the fields of cosmology and science, written in the Gaonic period but reflecting the approaches and influences of the Hekhalot traditions.

3. Through mystical and mythical elements within Midrashic literature, especially in works written after the advent of Islam which incorporated new traditions taken over from Islam.

4. Through traditions concerning the secret names of God, i.e., the names of 12, 42, and 72 characters. These traditions are known to us from medieval European texts, but they probably developed in earlier periods when commentaries were composed on the various names. In their original or edited forms, these commentaries then reached the Middle Ages.

5. Through compilation of anthologies and collections of mystical material, based mainly on Hekhalot mysticism but also probably containing later mystical material belonging to the Gaonic period.

6. Through the influence of the Sefer Yezirah, through commentaries on it, through cosmological and cosmogonical speculations based on it, and through other motifs and doctrines based on it. These, in turn, were collected in commentaries on the book in the last two centuries of this period.
7. Through speculations concerning the *shekhinah* and other theological-mystical subjects found in the late Midrashic literature of the Gaonic period. These conceptualizations may be the result of the influence of medieval rationalism in its earliest phases.

8. Through the transformations of some philosophical ideas into mystical symbols when they were adopted by Jewish culture. For example, Scholem felt that the influence of Rabbi Judah ha-Levi on Jewish mysticism was more significant than usually assumed. Ha-Levi, besides being an original philosopher, also presented in his works traditional material which he derived from earlier sources.

II

It is very difficult to distinguish between those mystical works included in the *Hekhalot* literature which originated from Eretz Israel in ancient times, between the third and fifth centuries C.E., and those which originated from Babylonia in the Gaonic period, the sixth century and later. Even in those cases where the linguistic characteristics indicate a later origin, there is still some doubt, for while the final language and form might be the work of later editors, the basic concepts could be ancient in origin. Still, Scholem viewed several of the *Hekhalot* texts, especially those devoted to magic and written in Babylonian Aramaic, as the product of the Gaonic period in Babylonia rather than belonging to the first age of the flourishing of Jewish mysticism in Eretz Israel.
Works like *The Sword of Moses*\(^3\) and the *Havdalah of Rabbi Akiba*\(^4\) belong, according to Scholem, to this group of later Jewish mystical texts.

The schools of the *gaonim*, the leaders of the great academies in Babylonia, preserved the tradition of *Hekhalot* mysticism. Rav Hai Gaon, in the beginning of the eleventh century, mentioned in his writings many of the *Hekhalot* texts.\(^5\) It is difficult to know, whether this interest was only literary, or whether there was creative, mystical activity in these schools. The work of editing and preserving many of the *Hekhalot* texts was undertaken in Babylonia in this period, but how much of the material which has reached us was traditional, and how much was the result of the creativity of these editors, we cannot ascertain. Thus, for example, the great anthology of esoteric speculation concerning the alphabet, cosmology, the heavenly realm, the angels and the divine name, known as *The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba* or *The Letters of Rabbi Akiba*,\(^6\) was most probably edited in Gaonic Babylonia. But what parts of this vast collection were ancient, and what were added by the editors, cannot be stated with any certainty. For instance, the work contains a brief description of the story of Enoch and his metamorphosis into the Prince of the Countenance, Metatron, along with a list of the secret names of Metatron.\(^7\) The problem is: Did the brief version, included in the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba*, precede the long, detailed version in *3rd Enoch*, or vice versa? That is, did some late editor compare the abridged version and add it to an already extant anthology attributed to the ancient sage? There are several philological elements which support each of these pos-
sibilities, and a decision either way is impossible at this time.

Similarly, the Sar Torah text appended to Hekhalot Rabbati (The Greater Book of Palaces), is most probably a work written in Eretz Israel in the Gaonic period by a group of mystics who preserved the traditions of the ancient mystics and developed them according to their own needs, relying heavily on the ancient texts of Hekhalot Zutarti (The Smaller Book of Palaces), and Ma'ayan ha-Hochmah. It is possible that the apocalyptic work The Book of Zerubavel, which is connected with the Hekhalot tradition, was written in the early Gaonic period, signifying a new, messianic trend among the Jewish mystics of the period.

The conquests of Islam in the seventh century brought the Jews into contact with a new, vigorous civilization, which left an impact on works they wrote after this period. One of the earliest books which can safely be dated to the period immediately following the conquests of the Arabs is the Pirkey de-Rabbi Eliezer (Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer), a collection of Talmudic and Midrashic homilies adapted into a narrative description of the events told in the books of Genesis and Exodus, and attributed to the ancient sage Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus. Two subjects dealt with in this book had a meaningful impact on later, European, Jewish mysticism. One was the description of the creation, in the third and fourth chapters of the book, which follows Hekhalot cosmology and cosmogony; the other was the story of the events leading to the sins of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the thirteenth chapter. This story contains the earliest appearance of Samael as the satanic power, who took the shape of the snake and did his evil work through him. In earlier Hek-
halot mysticism Samael is described only as the evil representative of the Roman Empire in the divine worlds.

The early Jewish communities in Europe, like some in Babylonia, continued to follow the traditions of Hekhalot mysticism. This is evident from several sources. The archbishop of Lyon, Agobard, in an anti-Jewish polemical work written sometime between 822 and 828, tells in surprising detail what his Jewish opponents believed. His description reflects accurately the text of the Shiur Komah, which, so it seems, was very much an influence on some Jewish circles in early medieval France. A Jewish chronicle written in Italy in the eleventh century, but reflecting older traditions, describes the rabbis and poets of eighth-century southern Italy as studying and following the esoteric secrets of the Hekhalot works. This activity is also attested by the religious hymns written by the early European poets of Italy.

A tenth-century work of cosmogony and cosmology, Rabbi Shabatai Donolo's commentary on the verse "let us make a man in our likeness" and his commentary on the Sefer Yezirah also testify to the vitality of the Hekhalot mysticism in the early awakenings of Jewish culture in medieval Europe. Donolo, who was a physician and who also left several important works in the field of medicine, tried to formulate in his commentaries a coherent cosmological system based on the descriptions of the creation and of the nature of the world as given in the Hekhalot mystical texts. While he was not a creative mystical thinker, his works reflect the importance of the ancient mystical texts to the Jewish communities in Europe, and in return had an impact on later Jewish European mystics and cosmologists. Especially influential was his for-
mulation of the relationship between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, between Man and Creation, based on the ancient traditions.

III

One of the most perplexing problems concerning the development of Jewish mystical speculations in the Gaonic period is the one concerned with the meaning of the concept shekhinah in some texts of this period. There is little doubt that this term, often used in Talmudic and Midrashic literature, meant for the ancient sages nothing but another appellation of God himself. It did have some specific connotations, denoting that aspect of God which was closest to the temple in Jerusalem and to the Jewish people in its sufferings and exile, but there was no distinction between it and the Godhead. By the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers, Ashkenazi Hasidim, and kabbalists all agreed that the shekhinah was a distinct, separate power, which should not be confused with the Godhead itself. When did this idea originate?

Scholem devoted several essays to this problem, holding that its solution was to be located in a section of the Midrash on Proverbs. In this Midrashic source the homilist repeats an old Talmudic story about the fate of King Solomon after his death, a story found in many versions in classical rabbinic literature. The version of the Midrash on Proverbs is, however, different. According to it, "the shekhinah prostrated herself in front of God" and asked for mercy for Solomon. There
can be no mistaking that the *shekhinah* was regarded by the homilist who introduced this novel element into the familiar story as a divine power separated from God himself and acting on her own.

It is very difficult to ascertain when this version of the homily was written. The entire *Midrash on Proverbs* is most probably a late composition which was then edited in Europe in the ninth or tenth century.\(^6\) This, however, does not necessarily mean that the concept of the *shekhinah* as it appears in this section is as late as that. The editor of the Midrash undoubtedly used material from several literary periods. Scholem was certain that this concept of the *shekhinah* was independent of the philosophical developments concerning the meaning of the *shekhinah* which began to appear early in the tenth century.\(^7\) Sometime in the Gaonic period Jewish mystics introduced an element of division in their concept of the divine world, probably by following and developing *Hekhalot* traditions. Thus they created one of the most powerful and profound symbols of Jewish medieval mysticism.

The early Jewish philosophers in Babylonia and in Europe who studied this concept and used it also contributed, unknowingly, to the richness of this symbol in the works of later Jewish mystics. Rav Saadia Gaon, like other rationalists in the tenth century (some of them belonging to the Karaitic sect, which opposed Saadia and rabbinic tradition and relied directly on the Bible), found in the concept of the *shekhinah* an answer to their difficulties with the anthropomorphic verses in the Bible and Talmud. They used this symbol to attribute all anthropomorphic descriptions of God not to the Godhead
itself but to a lowly, created power, an archangel, which the Bible called *kavod* or "divine glory," and the rabbis called *shekhinah*.\(^{18}\)

To achieve the goal of cleansing the sacred books from any hint of anthropomorphism these philosophers had to attribute descriptions of God in the Bible and Talmud to two different principles, one divine and eternal, God himself, and one angelic and created, the *shekhinah*. The distinction, however, survived even after their original rationalistic aims were lost. Thus, the Jewish mystics of medieval Europe proceeded in their interpretations of Biblical verses as relating to several different divine powers, creating thereby the pleroma of medieval Jewish mysticism.

This task was facilitated further by another development which occurred, most probably, in the Gaonic period: the concept of the hidden, esoteric names of God. In the important early works of the Jewish mystics in Europe in the twelfth century and onward the belief in the existence and importance of esoteric names of 12, 42, and 72 letters is presented as an old, traditional concept. Both the kabbalistic book *Bab'ir* and the Ashkenazi Hasidim incorporate these traditions.\(^{19}\)

Several traditional commentaries on these names were known, some of them attributed to sages of the Gaonic period such as Rav Hai Gaon.\(^{20}\) The name of 12 letters is usually interpreted as a three-fold repetition of the four letters of the holy Tetragrammaton; the name of 42 letters, *AVGITAZ KRASATAN* etc., which consists of seven groups of six letters each, has not been satisfactorily explained, and the European mystics did not have a consistent tradition concerning its origin.\(^{21}\) The name of 72 letters is formed out of the combina-
tion of three verses in Exodus (14:19–21), each of which contains exactly 72 letters, so that the name consists really of groups of three letters each. There are very few hints to indicate that these names could have been known in antiquity, and it is most probable that this tradition developed only later. Unlike many other names in the mystical tradition, these were not used primarily for magical purposes, though examples, though rare, can also be found. It seems that they had a deeper, mystical and theological significance, denoting the inner structure of the divine world and giving the mystic who knows them access to the most hidden secrets of the Godhead. The commentaries on these names was undoubtedly one of the most salient manifestations of ongoing Jewish creativity in the realm of mystical speculation in the Gaonic period.

IV

The commentaries on Sefer Yezirah are a direct source from the early Middle Ages. They were used by the medieval mystics and preserved unbroken the chain of esoteric traditions in Jewish thought. The first kabbalistic work by a kabbalist whose name we know is the commentary on Sefer Yezirah by Rabbi Isaac Sagi Nahor, written in southern France in the early thirteenth century. It reflects the tradition of commentaries on this ancient text begun centuries earlier.

The most influential among these works was Rav Saadia Gaon's commentary, which was first written in Arabic but later translated into Hebrew by an unknown eleventh-century
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scholar who minimized the rationalistic and scientific elements in the work while giving it a poetic, exalted style which endeared it to the mystics. Saadia, in his attempt to explain the cosmogony and cosmology of the ancient text, introduced into Jewish esoterical thinking several terms, which, stripped of their rationalistic origin and intent, served later as profound mystical symbols. Similarly, Shabatai Donolo's commentary, though written by a physician and a scientist, became a profound text of esoteric traditions for the Ashkenazi Hasidim and other medieval mystics.

Rabbi Judah ha-Levi included an almost complete commentary on the Sefer Yezirah in the fourth part of his major theological work, the Kuzari. This commentary became one of the most important treasuries of symbols and concepts for later Jewish mystics. Scholem even found an answer to one of the more perplexing problems concerning kabbalistic terminology. 23 Ha-Levi almost certainly preserved in the Kuzari (as well as in some of his poems and hymns) some old traditions, which were passed in this way to the medieval mystics. (Scholem also studied the impact of another poet-philosopher on Jewish mystical symbolism, Rabbi Solomon ben Gabirol, though his influence was probably less manifest than that of Ha-Levi.) 24

The commentary on the Sefer Yezirah employed to the greatest extent by medieval mystics one written by Rabbi Judah ben Barzilai of Barcelona. This great halachist collected every piece of esoteric text or tradition that he could find, and assembled all of them into his commentary. His commentary is thus more of an anthology than an original work. This vast treasury of ancient mysticism and esotericism

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was collected no more than two generations before the emergence of the kabbalah. It served as one of the most meaningful links between the ancient mystical traditions and the new eruption of mystical creativity in the Jewish communities of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The long centuries that separate the peak of creativity of Hekhalot mysticism and the emergence of the new schools of mystics in Europe still hold many secrets. But Scholem's detailed studies have demonstrated a hidden continuity in the mystical dimension of Jewish culture even in this period.

NOTES

1. The most recent and detailed survey of this period written by Scholem is to be found in Kabbalah (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 30-42.


4. See ch. 2, n. 38.


6. The text has been published several times. See S. Wertheimer, ed., Battei Midrashot (Jerusalem: Ketav ve-Sefer, 1968), vol. 2, pp. 343-418. Wertheimer published two rescensions of the text. See ch. 2, n. 5.

7. Wertheimer, op. cit., pp. 351-53. This section was also included in the Hebrew book of Enoch; see Hugo Odeberg, 3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), pp. 71-74 (Hebrew text) and his commentary, pp. 172-79. Concerning the names of Metatron in this section and the possible antiquity of some of the traditions included in this passage, see J. Dan, "The Seventy Names of Metatron," Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem, 1982), vol. 3, pp. 19-23.

8. See Ithamar Gruenwald's remark concerning this text in Apocalyptic
and Merkabah Mysticism (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), pp. 169-73. It is remarkable that while all earlier speculations concerning the “Sar Torah” are connected in some way with traditions attributed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, this text relies on a revelation of the Shekhinah to the builders of the Second Temple at the time of Zerubavel, thus disregarding Moses and the ancient prophets.

9. See J. Even-Shmuel’s edition in Midreshei Ge’ulah (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), pp. 55–88. The editor believed, like all previous scholars, that this work was written in the Byzantine period, a short time before the onslaught of the Arabs in the early seventh century. The relationship between this work and the Hekhalot has not been studied yet. The divine power which reveals the secrets of the messianic age to Zerubavel in this text is called in some versions Metatron, and in others Michael. Scholem discussed in detail the impact of this work on later Jewish mysticism; see G. Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi—The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676, translated by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 8–15, 737–38.


16. Concerning the date of this midrash, see Encyclopedia Judaica (Berlin, 1932), s.v. “midrash.”

17. See Scholem’s discussion in Reshit ha-Qabbalah, pp. 33–36 and


19. See R. Margaliot, ed., *Sefer Babir* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1951), sec. 107–112, pp. 47–50. [Cf. G. Scholem, *Das Buch Babir* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970), par. 76–81, pp. 77–84.] The most important Ashkenazi Hasidic work on the subject is R. Eleazar of Worms’s *Sefer ha-Shem* (*The Book of the Holy Name*), extant in several manuscripts (Munich 81, British Museum 737), which is a treasury of traditions collected by the author as well as of his and his circle’s own speculations. A group of commentaries on the holy names is included in R. Eleazar’s *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* (*The Book of Wisdom*).


22. The Holy Name is created by writing the three verses in long lines, one below the other, with the second verse being written from end to beginning, and each group of letters being read vertically. [Cf. Rashi, *T.B. Sukkah* 45a, s.v. “Ani ve-hu.”]

23. See Scholem’s discussion of this name in *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 83–84; *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, p. 86 and p. 164.

24. See G. Scholem, “Traces of Gabirol in the Kabbalah” (Hebrew), *Me asef Sofrei Eretz Yisra el* (Tel Aviv, 1940), pp. 160–78. The paper deals especially with the possible influence of Gabirol on the thirteenth-century kabbalistic school which Scholem named “the lyyun circle.”