

Paul the Mystic

One of the emphases in my previous book was the connection between the New Testament and the Jewish mystical tradition. So, my first strategy is to undertake a review of these basics, and then we will return to the relevance of 1 Corinthians.

First, it should be noted that there is some controversy as to the origin of the Zohar, The Book of Splendor. Here is what the eminent authority on Jewish mysticism, the late Gershom Scholem, had to say on the issue:

The most radical opinion was put forth by Heinrich Graetz. He declared that all parts of the Zohar without exception to be the work of Spanish kabbalist Moses de Leon, who died in 1305, and the great historian emptied the vials of an exceedingly vehement wrath over him. Very few reputations have come down from the school of Graetz in so battered and pitiable a state as de Leon's...In contrast to this view, the Zohar has been regarded, especially in the preceding generation, as a work altogether without unity, or else one that grew anonymously in the course of time...In either case, Moses de Leon is regarded as the redactor of ancient writings and fragments, to which he may perhaps have added something of his own...**The theory that 'primitive' sources and documents have been preserved in the Zohar, although admittedly in a revised form, is today widespread.**

Zohar: The Book of Splendor. Basic Readings from the Kabbalah, p. xiii

Just how much further back these teachings go is almost impossible to determine. Certainly, no serious scholar will accept the fantastic claims that the mystics had recovered secrets from the Garden of Eden¹. However, other ancient claims do appear more credible, such as linking a small part of the mystical tradition to a much larger body of teachings that became known as the Oral Law, which reportedly originated with Moses at Mount Sinai. Still another scenario sheds almost another millennia off by declaring the prophet Ezekiel as the progenitor of all mystics². What we do know however is that in later centuries the lions' share of *torah she'be'al peh* (Torah that is upon the mouth) ceased being an oral tradition altogether and became compiled into the work we call the Talmud today.

On the other hand, Moses de Leon, the alleged author and certain compiler of the Zohar, himself claimed that his teachings came from an ancient book written by another rabbi who lived in the second century. Additionally, De Leon's rabbi is also credited with helping compile the Mishnah, thus making the case for these other mystical teachings as part of the oral tradition even stronger.

However, in spite of the intense skepticism on the part of Gershom Scholem that Rabbi Simon ben Yonai actually spoke and/or wrote the words attributed to him by de Leon, there are other indications that the mystical traditions stretched back centuries earlier. In particular, another similar collection of writings that held many ideas in common with the Zohar has been traced between the third and sixth centuries of the Common Era. Called *Sefer Yetzirah*, or "Book of Creation", it represents an independent version of the Jewish mystical view, and may even have served as a kind of rough draft for the later and more fully developed works.³

To this mix we must also add one more body of Jewish thought that contains an even earlier mystical memory than either the Zohar or the Book of Creation. Unfortunately, no conventional Jewish scholar would include it because, in spite of copious evidence to the contrary, they did not view it as an authentic Semitic document. Today, we know this vessel of proto-mysticism by another name-- the New Testament -- and the concordance in some cases is striking, as we will show clearly going forward.

In any case, these teachings are of great antiquity, and the evidence suggests that their later suppression by many modern authorities (i.e. since 1600 CE) may have more to do with its agreements with Nazarene Scriptures as opposed to disagreements with Jewish practice. We will also be able to trace how many of these ideas, admittedly in a more primitive form as Scholem said, have actually been part of the Jewish mindset for thousands of years and are derived from that tradition.

With that goal in mind, let us look at how the basic statements of the mystics concord directly with the Scripture. We'll start with a very unique name for God.

Many of you are certainly aware that several names for God are given in the Hebrew Bible (YHWH, Elohim, Adonai, etc.) and that each one imparts something special about His Being or Nature. However, the mystics employ a name that is found nowhere either in Old or New Testaments. They call Him *Ein Sof*, which literally means "without end", because both His Eternity and Infiniteness are basic to His Nature:

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Deuteronomy 33:17

But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain You, much less the Temple I built!

1 Kings 8:27

God also possesses infinite Mind and Spirit. Therefore, since we are finite beings, any attempt to define God will inevitably bring about a gap between our vision and the reality. It therefore takes infinity to define infinity.

Nevertheless, ancient Judaism does teach that God's infinity is expressed through the finite via attributes of His being. In other words, the Bible does describe emanations of God that can be quantified in spite of His omnipresence. In particular, many "spirits" of God are given formal titles, while other characteristics are simply named directly. When the mystics looked at these key verses and took them to the sod (secret) level, they gave them the term *sefirot*, and then explained how they came from God during the Creation itself. At that time, there was only God (Ein Sof) and Nothingness (represented by the letter Ayin, which is silent). God had the image of the Universe in His Infinite Mind, but, when He decided to bring it into existence, He spoke, just as Genesis says:

And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light.

Genesis 1:3

So God's Word actually brought about the creation, and there will be much more on this point later on. For now, however, the important thing is that within that divine creative light are these same sefirot, with each of their names also enshrined in the Scripture. In this context, all the mystics did then was look at the Hebrew word that described the sefirot and then used that same word as its name⁴. When all was said and done, ten major groupings of related attributes were identified from various biblical sources.

Therefore, so that we can better understand the source for these divine attributes, I will present the actual quotes and terms side by side. With that in mind, let us peel back the curtain.

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him.

The Spirit of *wisdom* (chokhmah--חֵכֶמָה) and of *understanding* (binah--בִּינָה)

The Spirit of...*power* (gevurah--גְּבוּרָה)

The Spirit of *knowledge* (da'at--דַּעַת)

The Spirit of fear of the LORD.”

Isaiah 11:1-2

This quote alone contains four major sefirot titles:

- 1) WISDOM (CHOKHMAH)
- 2) UNDERSTANDING (BINAH)
- 3) POWER (GEVURAH)
- 4) KETER (Crown/Will/Knowledge)

Three additional titles are found here:

Yours, LORD are greatness, might, *splendor* (tiferet--תִּפְאֶרֶת), *triumph* (hod--הוֹד) and *majesty* (netsah--נֹצֵחַ), yes all that is in heaven and on earth; to You, LORD, belong *kingship* (malakah--מַלְכוּת) and preeminence above all.

1 Chronicles 29:11

Thus:

- 5) SPLENDOR/HARMONY (TIFERET)
- 6) MAJESTY/VICTORY (NETSAH)
- 7) TRIUMPH/MAJESTY (HOD)
- 8) KINGSHIP/KINGDOM (MALKUT, also known as SHEKINAH)

Interestingly enough, two separate visions of the concepts of *majesty* and *victory/triumph* are reflected in the sefirotic titles of #6 and #7. In the case of *Hod*, the majesty is married to a sense of honor, as passages from both testaments prove:

Glory and majesty (hod ve'hadar--הוֹד וְהַדָּר) are before him. Strength and splendor are in His Temple.

Psalm 96:6

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be *honor and glory* (aiqra w'tishbukhta--אֵיִקְרָא וְתִשְׁבַּחְתָּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֱבָרָה) forever.

1 Timothy 1:17 (Lamsa, cross-referenced by Andrew Gabriel Roth)

In the case of 1 Timothy 1:17, the word used for "glory" (tishbukhta) derives from the root *shubkh* which also means "praise" and "honor"! In the process also, Paul has done a terrific job of describing Ein Sof (eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God).

As for *Netsah*, its sense of majesty comes from the idea that YHWH overpowers everything else and remains constant in the universe, thus resulting in "victory":

Moreover the *Glory of Israel* (netsah Yisrael--נֹצֵחַ יִשְׂרָאֵל) does not deceive or change His mind, for He is not human that He should change his mind.

1 Samuel 15:29

And this concept is also beautifully summarized here:

Similarly, the gift prophecy is linked with the sefira of Yesod, because it is a condition of the covenant of God, which comes from the foundation of the world. The phrase "discerning of Spirit" actually means "to separate" (*paroshota*), and it is from this word that we get the phrase "Pharisee" (separate ones). In any case, the Aramaic singular usage of the term (Spirit as opposed to "spirits" in the Greek) actually makes the point of discerning God from Satan. The Jewish mystics however teach that there is a difference between *chokhmah*, which is a pure and unified kind of wisdom, and *binah*, which is an understanding derived from classification and analysis. Obviously, this gift stems then from the latter discipline.

Finally, the interpretation of languages relates to the sefirot in two ways. First, eternal words and speech are an aspect of Netsah (divine precepts and prophecy):

Give ear, my people, to my teaching, turn your ear to what I say. I will expound a theme, hold forth the lessons of the past, things we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not withhold them from our children, telling the coming generation the praises of the LORD and His might. He established a teaching in Israel, charging our fathers to make them known to our children, that a future generation might know--children yet to be born--and in turn tell their own children that they might put their confidence in God, and not forget His great deeds, but observe His commandments.

Psalm 78:1-7

And you shall eat your fill and praise the name of the LORD your God who dealt so wondrously with you--My people shall be shamed no more. And you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel: That I the LORD am your God and there is no other. And my people will be shamed no more. After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. I will even pour out My spirit upon male and female slaves in those days, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

Joel 2:26-3:3

Second, since we praise the majesty of YHWH, before whom every knee shall bow as all nations come up to Jerusalem, this is clearly part of Hod:

The time has come to gather all the nations and tongues; they shall come and behold My glory. I will set a sign among them, and send from them the survivors to the nations: to Tarshish, Pul and Lud--that draw the bow--to Tubal, Javan and the distant coasts, that have never heard My fame nor beheld My glory. They shall declare My glory among the nations.

Isaiah 66:18-19

In regards to the last verse in particular, the Hebrew word rendered as "glory"-- *kavod* (כבוד)--is a particularly good synonym for Hod. And finally, we account for the last of these sefirot and cycle back to the beginning again thusly:

כל מה שה' נשאה מה' והנשא מה' היא לחלוקת אה' והה' חסד

But all these gifts are wrought by one and the same Spirit, **distributing to each one according to His will.**

(Sefirot: Keter and Malkut/ Shekinah)

Comments:

There is a very complex relationship between the top of the tree (Keter) which receives power from Ein Sof, and the bottom of the tree (Malkut/Shekinah), which kind of acts as a last stop before these spiritual aspects manifest in the physical world. For more scope and detail than I can provide here, I highly recommend the book *Messiah, Volume 3*, by Avi Ben Mordechai, pages 169-188. Suffice to say for the moment though that the power of Ein Sof ultimately channels from the Kingdom (Malkut) into a manifestation we call "Shekinah", derived from the Hebrew word "to dwell". In the Torah, this was a title given to "cloud of glory" that followed the Israelites throughout their wanderings:

When Moses finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the LORD filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled on it and the Presence of the LORD filled the Tabernacle.

Exodus 40:33-35

In this case, there is an implied word play in Hebrew, since the "tabernacle" is actually *miskhan*, which is also playing off of the "dwell" root as well. It is this glory, manifesting in the physical world, which is recorded also here:

And the Word became flesh and **dwelt** among us, and we saw His **glory**, as the only begotten who is from the Father who is full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Similarly, the Aramaic words used by John here, *hagin* (dwell) and *shubkha* (glory) match up extremely well with their Hebraic counterparts of *shakan* and *kavod*, respectively. These are literally choices separated only by the slightest dialectical differences between Biblical Hebrew and Peshitta New Testament Aramaic, akin to using *bar* instead of *ben* for "son".

However, while Keter represents the Will aspect of the Almighty, Shekinah/Malkut represents the Action portion, or the great implementer, of that Will:

By the Word (*davar*) of the LORD were the heavens made, by the breath of His mouth, all their host.

Psalm 33:6

In the beginning there was the Word (*miltha*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (The Word) was with God in the beginning. Everything through his hands existed, and without him not even one thing that has existed. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:1-4 (Younan Peshitta Interlinear Version)

Again, dialect results in choices such as *davar* in the Torah as opposed to *miltha* in the New Testament, although as we saw back in the section on John's Gospel, other factors were also present in that selection. In any case, what we see is the pattern of implementation of Will that results in the emergence of light (the cloud would also be accompanied by a pillar of fire), just as it did in Genesis 1:3. This is the Shekinah, the last stop from the Infinite to the body of Messiah, and the gifts are given, as Paul says, by the same Spirit.

Remarkably though, the last line takes us back to where we started: Keter. Reason being, the gifts are distributed (Malkut/Shekinah) "according to His Will" (Keter).

Finally, there is even a closer Aramaic equivalent to *Shekinah* reflected in Paul's writings:

For Messiah has not entered into the holy place made with hands, which is the symbol of the true one; but he entered into heaven itself to appear before the **presence of God** (parsopa d'Alaha--
כְּפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים) for our sakes.

Hebrews 9:24 (Lamsa)

This word, *parsopa*, will become very important when the topic turns to Aramaic theology and how the truth of the Semitic vision was corrupted in Greek translation. For now however, the salient point is that *parsopa* usually means "person" and is in fact the cognate of the Greek *prosopon*, which is mistakenly applied to elements of the Godhead.

The difference of course is that in Semitic thought "person" can be spiritual and physical (again "I set my face"), whereas Greek, Latin and English tend to lean almost exclusively towards just the latter. So, while God is clearly not a "person", the proper way to translate this occurrence of the word *parsopa* is as "presence", the precise meaning of *Shekinah*.

Nor is this the only time that the apostle Paul refers to the ten sefirot in his writings, as similar parallels are found in Ephesians 1:3-6, 7-12 and 3:14-19, Galatians 5:22, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, Ephesians 3:14-19, and other places as well. Colossians too, as we will see in that section, also goes to great lengths to showcase Paul's mystical studies.

Paul the Mystic Revisited

As we saw in 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul shows himself to be acutely aware of Jewish mystical trends and terminology, which would later reach final form in the work we now call "Kabbalah". We also reviewed how many of the terms for the attributes of YHWH, also known as *sefirot*, had close equivalents from their dialect of Aramaic to the one that Paul uses in the Peshitta text.

However, what Paul began in 1 Corinthians he perfects in Colossians, as we see right here:

כְּפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּרָצוֹן אֲנִי מְבַרְכְּכֶם בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר בְּרָצוֹן אֱלֹהִים הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּרָצוֹן לְפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים

For the **hope** which is preserved for you in heaven, of which you have heard before in the true word of the **Gospel**...

Colossians 1:5 (Lamsa)

Paul begins with another familiar wordplay by once again exploiting dual meanings of the root *sebar* (hope, Gospel). Then, we have this:

כְּפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּרָצוֹן אֲנִי מְבַרְכְּכֶם בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר בְּרָצוֹן אֱלֹהִים הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּרָצוֹן לְפָנֵי אֱלֹהִים

Which has been preached to you as it has been **preached** throughout the **world**. Growing and bringing forth fruits, as it does also in you, since the day you heard it and knew the grace of God in truth.

Colossians 1:6 (Lamsa)

This text then showcases two deep poetic features. First, another meaning of *sebar* is tapped in an implied wordplay with the word *keroz* (preach). Interestingly enough, "preach" is also a synonym for *sebartha* (Gospel)! In fact, the eastern traditions have always referred to the Gospels as *karazuta*, or the preaching of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Second, there is the use of the word *alma*. Generally, this word is translated as "world", and that is an accurate rendering. However, *alma* also has another meaning, that of "age" or "eternity", and this speaks to a very Jewish pattern of describing the "the world to come" or *alam*

haba. In that case, the rabbis knew all too well that there was a wordplay between *alam* (world) and *ahlam* (forever), and so apparently did the student of Hillel's grandson, the apostle Paul. Therefore Paul's point, which is completely lost in Greek, is that what is being preached throughout the *world* is the true revelation of God from *eternity* in the past.

The ironic part of this matter however is that in this case the Greek actually does have a term that comes very close to this understanding, and yet it is not used here. In Matthew 28:20 Y'shua says, "And behold I am always with you, even unto the end of the *aion*." This word, fortunately, also has a dual meaning of "world" and "age", and this is more than reflected in the varying English translations from that source, where the rendering is effectively split between the two. However, in this case, the dual meaning of *alma* is not picked up by the Greek redactors, who instead opt for the monolithic meaning that *kosmos* gives. In saying "monolithic" it is fair though to point out that *kosmos* can mean "world" or "universe", but my point is that its definitions do not extend beyond such boundaries to mean "age" like *aion* does.

So much for the general introduction Paul gives here. Now he gets into the heart of the matter:

הַיְדִיעוּתָא דְּכִדְּוִיּוּתָא דְּיֵשׁוּעָא הַיְדִיעוּתָא דְּכִדְּוִיּוּתָא דְּיֵשׁוּעָא
הַיְדִיעוּתָא דְּכִדְּוִיּוּתָא דְּיֵשׁוּעָא הַיְדִיעוּתָא דְּכִדְּוִיּוּתָא דְּיֵשׁוּעָא

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you and to ask that you might be filled with the **knowledge of the will of God in all wisdom and spiritual understanding**.

Colossians 1:9 (Lamsa)

This is the killer line! The reader will probably recall that the first *sefira*--Keter--literally means "crown" but is also given the added title of "will". Paul's usage here however, with the word *tzebinah*, is most significant, because he is both referencing and superseding the mystical traditions in one stroke. Reason being, it is this exact same word that Y'shua uses to describe the Divine Will in the Lord's Prayer, so Paul is substituting that term for *Keter*, even as many mystics interchange the Hebrew *da'at* also with Keter.

Although, as if that point was not strong enough, *da'at* also finds its own interchanging with Paul's mystical writings in the form of its Aramaic cognate *yadata*. In the case of the latter, what proceeds from *the Divine Will* is "knowledge" (*da'at/yadata*), and this form is considered pure, coming straight from the mind of YHWH. Another way of accomplishing this same goal can be achieved by taking *chokhmata* and adding to it through description a higher level of power that turns it into *da'at/yadata*, as was discussed earlier in 1 Corinthians.

The *Will* aspect of *Keter* also comes out in Tanakh and carries over into mystical understanding in this way:

I delight (*chaphetz* -- חָפֵצ) to do Thy will (*ratzone*--רָצוֹן), O my God; Yea, Thy law is in my inmost parts.

Psalms 40:8 (1955 Jewish Publication Society translation of the Holy Scriptures)

The wordplay in this Psalm is also striking as *two words for "will" are used*, and contrasted. For while *chaphetz* can be human--even sexual--desire, *ratzone* is the "Head will" of the Almighty, by virtue of the letter *resh* (ר), which not only means "head" but is actually the "head letter" of the word itself! If that sounds familiar then, it should:

"Father if it is possible let this cup to pass over me. Nevertheless, not as I will (*tzeba*--צֵבָא) but as you (will)."

Matthew 26:39 (Younan Peshitta Interlinear Version)

Kabbalah Sefirot	Colossians Attribute
<i>Gevurah</i> (strength)	<i>Khiyl</i> (strength)
<i>Chesed</i> (mercy)	<i>Mesebreno</i> (mercy)
<i>Hod</i> (majesty/glory)	<i>Shubkha</i> (majesty/glory)

דתיהוה ׀ דתלמא דתא דתתת לנתתא דתיהוה דתתת תתתת
 תתת תת דתתת דתתת דתתת לנתתא דתיהוה דתתת
 תת דתת דתת ל תתת דתתת דתתת

So that you may joyfully give thanks to God the Father, who has enlightened us and made us a worthy inheritance of the saints, and has **delivered us from the power of darkness** and brought us to the **kingdom** of his beloved **Son**.

Colossians 1:12-13 (Lamsa)

To "deliver from the power of darkness" is the literal definition of *netzah* (נצח) or "victory":

He will swallow up (be victorious over--נצח) death forever. My LORD God will wipe the tears away from all faces and will put an end to the reproach of His people over the earth, for it is the LORD who has spoken.

Isaiah 25:8

In addition, the reason Paul substitutes *netzah* with *porqana* is the same reason why he did so in Ephesians, since *porqana* is where the Aramaic term for "Savior" comes from, and in his mind Y'shua as the Savior is the ultimate *netzah* (victory) over death! However, the final manifestation of that victory is also found here:

תת דתת דתת ל תתת דתתת דתתת

By whom we have obtained **salvation** and forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:14 (Lamsa)

Can that be *another wordplay*? This time Paul is exploiting the dual meaning of *porqana* (deliver/salvation)! However, we still have to get back to 1:13 to deal with some more divine attributes. Notice that in that section I have highlighted "kingdom" and "Son", because these terms lead to two more sefirot. "Son", meaning Messiah who is called the "Son of Yah" in many mystical writings, is also a direct manifestation of the sefira known as *Yesod* (foundation). In fact, Y'shua himself makes this point here:

"I will open my mouth in parables, and bring out secrets that were from before the **foundation** of the world."

Matthew 13:35 (Younan Peshitta Interlinear Version)

The word for *foundation* here, if it is permissible to allow Paul to get a slight assist from Matthew since it is the source of Paul's inference, is *tormita* (תורמיתא), a word Paul uses in this precise context while alluding to this very secret, mystical knowledge we have been discussing:

For from the very creation (foundation-- תורמיתא) of the world, the invisible things of God have been seen and understood by His creations, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

function. Like the heart in a human body, *Tiferet* gives life to all the branches around it and causes them to act in unity and peace, kind of like this:

And through him were created all things that are in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible; whether imperial thrones or lordships or angelic orders or dominions, all things were in his hand and were created by him; and he is before all things, and by him all things are sustained. And he is the head of the body, the congregation; for he is the beginning, the firstfruits of the resurrection from the dead, that in all things he might be first; **for it pleased God to complete all things in him.**

Colossians 1:16-19 (my personal translation)

My only divergence from Lamsa here is that he uses the word "church". While this is fine on the surface, I have felt that a lost Semitic linkage needs to be re-connected in this case. In Aramaic the word *eidta* is actually the equivalent of the Hebrew *adat*, meaning "congregation". The usage of *adat* then throughout Tanakh to describe holy assemblages of Israelites during sacred rites and festivals is a much more accurate picture than the plain English "church" surely connotes. In all other respects though, this is a very good reading.

Regardless of that issue however, the main point is that to "complete all things" is an extremely apt and accurate description of what *Tiferet* does. As a result, it is more than appropriate that Paul puts it last here, even if it is slightly out of order from the traditional mysticism he knew.

Kabbalah Sefirot	Colossians Attribute
<i>Tiferet</i> (complete harmony of all things)	<i>Kuleh molia lmaimar</i> (complete [dwelling] of all things)

Finally for this section, the greatest agreement between Paul and the mystical writings is this:

For in him is embodied all the fullness of the Godhead.

Colossians 2:9

¹ See [The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism](#) by Daniel Matt, p. 2.

² See [The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies](#), by Louis Jacobs, p. 8. The vision of Ezekiel is also one of the most precisely dated events in the Bible, having happened on July 28, 593 BCE.

³ [The Essential Kabbalah](#), p. 4,

⁴ The following is derived from the preface of [The Essential Kabbalah](#).

⁵ Once again, Lamsa is sheepish in distinguishing between Lord Y'shua and THE LORD (YHWH). I have therefore made the proper insertion into his English translation.

⁶The word choice for "light" (*menhar*) has a dual symbolism. First, "*menhar*" is intended to remind the reader of the *menorah*, or branched candlestick that was a foundational symbol of Judaism. Second of course is what we have discussed several times earlier, that being the linkage between light (*aur*) and Torah (*aurayta*) that YHWH is revealing to Man.