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Kabbalah's Best Kept Secret?

“God as a Trinity? No way!”

“We Jews don't believe in the idea of a divine incarnation!”

“And we don't believe in vicarious atonement!”

“A New Testament?! Are you *mesbugge*?!”

For many Jews, these statements are givens. Or are they?

Over the last several decades, the Jewish spiritual scene has witnessed a resurgence of popularity in the mystical tradition of secret wisdom known as *kabbalah*. Hidden away in corners of the tradition and ignored by contemporary popularizations are stunning parallels to a number of doctrines that most religious Jewish people consider anathema, doctrines that are analogous to New Testament teachings.

However, the parallels did not go without notice when more Jews were kabbalah literate. In 1696, one mystical rabbi (Aharon ben Moshe Ha-Kohen of Krakow) became a believer in *Y'shua* (Jesus) based on his study of kabbalah. He wrote three Hebrew manuscript volumes detailing the numerous parallels he found between the New Testament and the *Zohar* (the classic core text of Jewish mysticism). Yochannan Rittangel (d. 1652), the first translator of the Jewish mystical work *Sefer Yetzirah*, was one of several Jewish believers in *Y'shua* to disseminate Jewish mystical wisdom to a wider audience.

In the early twentieth century, Feivel Levertoff (d. 1954) was one of the translators of what is still the premier English version of the *Zohar* (published by the highly-respected Jewish press, Soncino). A yeshiva-trained Hassidic Jew and a

third-generation descendent of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liada (the founder of Chabad Lubavitch), Levertoff came to believe in *Y'shua* as the Messiah through parallels he found between the New Testament and his Jewish mystical faith.

The Los Angeles-based Kabbalah Centre, one of the best-known popularizers of kabbalah today, frequently makes admiring mention of a non-Jewish scholar of kabbalistic wisdom, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). However, the Centre's spokespersons, books and presentations never mention his ultimate conclusion based on years of exploring the mysterious secrets of kabbalistic wisdom: “There is no knowledge that proves the Divinity of the Messiah better than . . . kabbalah.” [1]

A Compound Unity

The keystone of traditional Judaism is that God is One. A belief in a multiplicity in the Godhead seems to be beyond the pale for many Jews. Yet kabbalah teaches that God is indeed a compound unity.

The over-arching narrative of Jewish mysticism is that the infinite, radically transcendent *Ein Sof* (“Endless” One) is revealed through the *Sefirot*. [2] *Sefirot* are vessels or spheres related to the Creator only through resemblance, [3] and are the

ten most common names for the varying aspects of Divinity. Though they are one with the Creator, they are also the Creator's garments and the "beams of light which it sends out." [4]

The singular, *Sefirah*, shares a root with the word *sippur*; "communication" or "telling." [5] The Sefirot are thus seen as the aspects or attributes of the Creator by means of which Deity communicates with creation. [6]

Knowledge of the lowest seven of the Sefirot is derived from King David's address to God in 1 Chronicles 29:11: "Yours, O God, are the Greatness (*Gedulah*), the Power (*Gevurah*), and the Glory (*Tiferet*), the Victory (*Netzach*), and the Splendor (*Hod*), for all that is in heaven and earth (*Yesod*), Yours O God is the Kingdom (*Malkuth*; sic; Heb=*Mamlachah*)." Two of the remaining three Sefirot, *Chokhmah* and *Binah* (Wisdom and Understanding), are one of the most frequent pairings of attributes of God found throughout the Hebrew Bible. The highest Sefirah, *Keter*, or Crown, signifies God's rule and authority as King of Kings.

As Levertoff, Rabbi Aharon and many others have found, this is not such a far cry from the metaphors used in the New Testament. Both kabbalah and the New Testament hold that God communicates the sublime interrelationships of his various components to limited human beings in terms they can understand from their own experience — concepts like the *Sefirot*, or like the New Testament's Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Not unlike the New Testament (which speaks of One God in three "persons"), kabbalists recognize multiple "grades," "degrees" or "beings" in the Godhead. Expressions of multiplicitous unity (of God, humans, and other entities) are frequent in kabbalistic literature and seemingly pose no theological obstacle to orthodox Jewish mystics:

Said R. Eleazar: "As the four sections of the walnut are united at one side and separated at the other, so are all the parts of the Celestial

Chariot united in perfect union, and yet each part fulfils a special purpose . . ." [7]

Now the tree of life ramifies into various degrees, all differing from one another, although forming a unity, in the shape of branches, leaves . . . and roots." [8]

This kind of mystical logic not only prevails in medieval documents like the *Zohar*, but also persists to the present. The *Tanya*, the fundamental text of modern Chabad Hassidic philosophy by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, states:

"He and His *vivications* are one, He and His *causations* are one. . . . They are all Divinity." [9]

"He and His Name are One . . ." [10]

Such thinking has been current in Judaism for a long time. Orthodox Jewish scholar Raphael Patai notes that the Holy Spirit, identified by the rabbis with the *Shekhinah* (the "dwelling" or "abode" of the glory of God), was seen as a *second person* in the Godhead even in the early Talmudic period. [11]

But the mystics went beyond merely recognizing a two-in-oneness, stating that the Sefirot are actually organized into three "pillars." To the kabbalists, God's ultimate nature is a three-in-oneness:

"Hear, O Israel, *Adonai* [12] *Eloheinu Adonai* is one." These three are one. . . . The mystery of the audible voice is similar to this, for though it is one yet it consists of three elements? fire, air, and water. . . . Even so it is with the mystery of the threefold Divine manifestations designated by *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai* — three modes which yest form one unity. [13]

Embodiment and Incarnation

Would a Jew ever embrace the idea of God incarnate? Many kabbalists do!

Kabbalah teaches that the human body is an outward expression of the indwelling soul, and that all material things are manifestations of spiritual realities extruding into our universe. [14] However, God has a special way of revealing *himself* in our world:

R. Jose said: “How are we to understand the words, ‘and they saw the God of Israel’? . . . They saw the light of the *Shekinah*, namely him who is called ‘the Youth’ (*Metatron* . . .), and who ministers to the *Shekinah* in the heavenly Sanctuary.” [15]

Nachmanides (1194-1270) holds that the Shekhinah can *mitgashem* (incarnate) in an anthropomorphic shape. As an Ashkenazic tradition has it, “Know that . . . ‘An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush’ . . . *refers to God Himself.*” [16] Sometimes, the title *malakh ha-kavod* (Angel of the Glory) is applied to the Shekhinah in kabbalistic texts. [17]

The term *Metatron*, described as “the Youth,” “the Angel of the Glory” and “the body of the *Shekhinah*,” is a Latin title translating the Greek *Praecursor*, or Forerunner — the same word used of Y’shua in Hebrews 6:20. It means lord, leader, guide, one who shows the way, or goes in advance.

The explanation of “They saw the glory of God” given by Rabbi Jose is evocative of the New Testament passages describing Y’shua as “the radiance of the Shekhinah” (Hebrews 1:3), and as the “Forerunner” ministering high priest in the heavenly tabernacle upon which Moses modeled the sanctuary (Hebrews 6:20-8:5).

Several kabbalistic texts reveal that Metatron is not merely an angel, but a manifestation of the Shekhinah in human form; in other words, God himself. For example:

And R. Tam commented that the Holy One blessed be He is himself called *Metatron*, as is said in the *Pesiqta*: “and the Lord walked

before them all the day.” The Holy One said, “I was the guide [Heb. *Metatron*] for my children,” that is, their guard. [18]

Metatron is also spoken of as “the voice of God” in a reference of *Midrash Tehillim* [19] to the passage penned by King David: “The voice of the Lord was over the waters . . .” (Psalm 29:3). Keeping in mind that Metatron is held by kabbalists to be the embodiment of the Shekhinah, note the following observation by Chabad founder Rabbi Zalman:

[It] has been stated in the *Zohar* and *Etz Chayim*, that the *Shekhinah* . . . is called the “word of God” . . . as in the case of human beings, by way of example, speech reveals to the hearers the speaker’s secret and hidden thought. [20]

This passage uncannily reminds one of the opening lines of the Gospel of John’s description of Y’shua: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . . The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his *Shekhinah*.” [21]

So, for both the traditional kabbalists and the New Testament, the Forerunner is identical with the Angel of the Glory, the Name of God, and is the Word of God incarnate. What does the following passage from the *Zohar* indicate about the identity of this Forerunner?: “The ‘spirit of God which hovered over the face of the waters’ is the spirit of the Messiah.” [22]

Could these kabbalists actually be saying that the Godhead is somehow mysteriously composed of three personalities which are, in fact, really One — one of whom is the Word of God in human form, Messiah, the Forerunner-High Priest serving in heaven and embodying the Holy Spirit? Aren’t these the same things the New Testament says about Y’shua? Consider further the following, from R. Yitchaq of Acre:

It is *MoSheH* [Messiah] the High Priest, anointed by the oil, the supernal holy unction, the true Messiah, who will come today, if we listen to the voice of his Master, whose Name is found in him, he will redeem us. . . . “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of His face saved them” [Isa. 63:91] and “And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him” [Isa. 11:2]. Those [verses] and all similar to them hint at *Metatron* [the Forerunner], the Prince of the Face . . . [The] sheep, which is the innocent lamb is — in its entirety — good, and it is *MoSheH*, the Prince of Mercy.” [23]

Do the mystics ever give a name to the Metatron, this Forerunner, the Prince of the Face, High Priest, Word of God incarnate, Lamb who is afflicted in all their affliction, Messiah? A medieval Rosh Hashanah prayer says:

May it be Thy will that the sounding of the shofar may be embroidered in Thy Heavenly Curtain by the Angel who is appointed for it, as Thou has accepted the prayers by the hand of Elijah of blessed memory and through Yeshua the Prince of the Face. [24]

Yehudah Liebes, Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, traces references to Y’shua in traditional Jewish liturgy to Jewish believers in Jesus in the first century A.D.! [25] Daniel Abrams of Bar-Ilan University writes of Liebes’s observations, “Yehuda Liebes has brought to our attention the striking identification of Metatron with Jesus in the liturgy.” [26]

The Mediator

Many Jews today reject the idea of a go-between to make us right with God. The kabbalists, however, have a different view.

Kabbalists see the angelic Prince of the Face as intermediary between God and his people. Recalling R. Yitzhaq of Acre’s equating of the

afflicted Forerunner with the Messiah who saves Israel, the following passage from the *Zohar* almost sounds like an epitome of the New Testament’s assertions about Y’shua’s mediating, vicarious atonement:

When the Messiah hears of the great suffering of Israel in their dispersion, and of the wicked amongst them who seek not to know their Master, he weeps aloud . . . as it is written: “But he was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). . . . The Messiah . . . calls for all the diseases and pains and sufferings of Israel, bidding them settle on himself, which they do. . . . As long as Israel were in the Holy Land, by means of the Temple service and sacrifices they averted all evil diseases and afflictions from the world. Now it is the Messiah who is the means of averting them from mankind. [27]

Investigating the Secret for Yourself

Do these passages from the mystics prove the New Testament is correct, that Y’shua is Messiah of Israel, God in the flesh, who makes atonement for our sins? No. But they do demonstrate that there have been Jews (many, famous kabbalists), whose orthodoxy no one would question, who held beliefs startlingly like those that Jewish believers in Y’shua affirm.

If this exploration of kabbalah has piqued your curiosity, why not explore what the New Testament has to say about these things? In the Hebrew Bible, God states that he will establish a New Covenant: “See, a time is coming declares the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

The Hebrew word *brit*, translated here as “covenant,” may also be translated “Testament.” The kabbalistic text *Otiot de’Rabbi Akiba* says regarding this passage: “And the Holy One . . . will expound to them the meanings of a new

Tora which He will give them through the Messiah.” [28]

Jewish mystics for Jesus, kabbalists who actually believe in a Triune God, a bodily incarnation of the Deity, and a vicariously atoning Messiah? Who *knew*?! Feeling like you’ve been let in on a pretty well-kept secret? Could Y’shua, the Prince of the Face who sits on God’s throne, the

End Notes

1. Pico Della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia* (Basle, 1572), I, p. 105, no. 9, quoted in Charles B. Schmitt, et al., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 270.
2. Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), pp. 7-10, and Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), p. 206.
3. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Babir* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1989), p. 88.
4. Scholem, op. cit., p. 214.
5. Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997), p. 21.
6. Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 21.
7. *Soncino Zohar*, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 15b.
8. *Soncino Zohar*, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 193a.
9. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liada, *Likutei Amarim/Tanya* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1996), Igeret Hakodesh, Ch. 20, p. 497.
10. Ibid., *Igeret Hakodesh*, Ch. 7, p. 425 n. 5.
11. Raphael Patai “The Shekhinah,” *The Journal of Religion* 44:4 (1964): 286.

Messiah, be the biggest mystery you’ve yet to unriddle?

12. The spelling TETRAGRAMMATON has been modified to Adonai in these passages to reflect current usage.
13. *Soncino Zohar*, Shemoth, Raya Mehemna, Page 43b.
14. *Soncino Zohar*, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 65b; *Tanya*, Shaar Hayichud, Chapter 1.
15. *Soncino Zohar*, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 82a.
16. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 256, italics added.
17. Wolfson, op. cit., p. 262.
18. Daniel Abrams “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 87:3 (1994): 299, 300.
19. George F. Moore “Intermediaries in Jewish Thought,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 15:1 (1922): 63.
20. Zalman, *Likutei Amarim*, Ch. 52, p. 273.
21. John 1:1, 2, 14, Stern’s *Jewish New Testament*.
22. *Soncino Zohar*, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 240a.
23. Sefer ‘Otzar Hayyim, in Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 303, 304.

24. *Machzor Rosh Hashanah v'Yom Kippurim k'Minbag Sefarad* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company), prayer translated by Rachmiel Frydland. (Editor's note: You can view one version of this prayer in Hebrew at <http://www.afii.org/OJB.pdf> [Orthodox Jewish Bible], page 1227.)

25. Yehudah Liebes, "Who Makes the Horn of Jesus to Flourish," *Immanuel* 21 (Summer 1987): 67, footnote 28.

26. Daniel Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," *Harvard Theological Review* 87.3 (1994): 317.

27. *Soncino Zohar*, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 212a.

28. *Midrash Otiot de Rabbi Akiba*, Beit ha-Midrash 3.27-29, quoted by Raphael Patai in *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 252.