

The Sefirotic Tree.
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The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah

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The aim of the present article is to demonstrate the unity of Jewish perception, from ancient times to the most recent developments, of what I shall call the “body of engenderment.” Why this somewhat odd expression? It is meant to designate a cultural and religious fact, with all its diverse speculative and narrative elaborations, concerning the human body as the subject of filiation and, hence, substantially inscribed in a relation to the opposite sex. Insofar as it concerns their collective and individual survival, the relation of human beings to their lineage is one of the most complex and crucial questions for all societies and for each individual in society. The place of the body within this perspective must be carefully understood. It is through the individual body that the life of a people – and the level of humanity they have achieved – perpetuates itself. Modern societies tend more and more to separate the body that reproduces, a link in an immemorial genealogical adventure, from the body that desires, a lonely object, a consumer of briefly gratifying encounters. Thus, modern man has two distinct bodies, using one or the other as he pleases. This caesura is perhaps merely the persistence of a split opened two millennia ago by the ideological victory over one part of the inhabited world of the Christian conception of carnal relation – and of carnal filiation – as separate from spiritual life and devalued in relation to it.

The intention of this article is to go back before this split took place – not only from a chronological point of view, but by examining several examples of a literature whose roots are in Jewish Antiquity and which extends, independently of Christian representations, throughout history, including the Middle Ages and modern times.

Several possible perspectives presented themselves: one could study the conception of the human body derived from practices linked to worship and sacrifice. These

include ritual purification of the “leprous,” rules concerning priests who perform sacrifices (the Nazirites), the purification of parturating or menstruating women and men afflicted with venereal discharges. In short, one could address a great number of practices relating to the use of the body and to its sacred dimension, set forth in Leviticus and amplified and detailed in the rabbinic tradition (particularly in the Taharot treatises of the Talmud).¹ These few examples are enough to remind us that in the Bible the body is not understood as a neutral object whose status, at once physiological and social, is indifferent to its relation to God or to the religious community. These biblical texts and their development within the Jewish oral tradition enable the body itself to speak: man, a being of language from birth – from conception? – is a being of language through his body. All rituals that bear directly on the concrete reality of the body – and there are very many of them in classical Jewish religion as well as in other so-called pagan religions – endeavor to make the conflicts and tensions they somatize accede to language and thereby relieve the anguish that results from these conflicts and tensions. But it is not at this level alone that the closeness of the religion of Israel to polytheistic cults is apparent. In Hebrew religious texts, in the Bible and later writings alike, the divinity is presented as having a body of human form. Of course, several Jewish theologians (not least among them Philo and Maimonides) did seek to reduce what they called “anthropomorphisms” to the level of abstract allegories. But this effort at reductive rationalization should not keep us from reading both the biblical text and the writings classified among Jewish esoteric literature as written – like the passage in which God is presented as a giant of fantastic size whose bodily scale is dizzying. The writings said to be from *Shi’ur Komah* (The Measure of Bodily Scale)² testify to the great power of the conception of the divinity as endowed with a body, even if this body, human in shape, is gigantic. Therein lie many points which will not be taken up in the present study, but which I will mention in passing if only to give an idea of the great richness of the problematics of the body within the framework of the biblical and post-biblical Hebrew tradition. And there is another reason as well. There has been too marked a tendency to make a radical distinction between monotheism and polytheism, whether archaic or still practiced today. Within the human sciences there is such an absolute division between monotheism and polytheism that theologians have been conceded a virtual monopoly over the three religions that stem

from the Bible so that the human sciences can devote themselves exclusively to the elucidation of religions which exercise no magisterium in the West and which have no place in the State. At least where Judaism is concerned, we are able, thanks to the so-called esoteric literature it has produced, to undertake a radical critique of the so-called monotheistic split, a critique that serves the interests of religious reasoning through the theological power of the deepest aspirations of homo religiosus,³ perhaps the highest form of homo sapiens. For is he not the one who takes on the complexity of organic life in his movement toward humanization, that is to say in his access to language?

A simple look at the text of Genesis tells us a lot about the place of what we have called the body of engenderment. A single notion qualifies cosmogonic becoming and human genealogy: in both cases the text employs the term *toldot*, which can be translated as either “engenderments,” “begettings” or “generations.” Thus in Genesis 2.4: “These are the *toldot* of the heavens and of the earth when they were created.” And in 5.1: “This is the book of the *toldot* of Adam.” This linguistic fact is not accidental. The process of creation and the process of procreation, though different, are designated by the same vocable, which implies that the concept of human generation and filiation is rightfully inscribed within the divine creative movement, that procreation merely continues cosmogenesis, that it is a later stage of cosmogenesis. The verb “to create,” *bara*, means “to give birth to” as well.⁴ Moreover, one of the narratives of mankind’s appearance is very eloquent in this regard. “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...’ And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...’ ” (Genesis 1.26-28). Although centuries of theological discourse have tried to empty these words of their content, an impartial reading clearly shows the following: first, as in the religious thought of ancient Egypt, man is made after the divine form; thus, in the wisdom of Merikare (around 2000 B.C.) we find this formula: “Men are images of God that issue from His limbs.”⁵ Second, the same expressions that point out the resemblance of man to God (*tselem* and *demut*) are used to characterize the resemblance of a child to its father: “When

Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth" (Genesis 5.3). The creation of man and man's begetting are merely two moments of a single movement. Third, man, as the image of God, is a combination of male and female; this is also to be found in Egyptian theogonic speculations, Heliopolitan speculations in particular, in which the principle gods are four male-female couples.⁶ Fourth, being the image of God, like God both male and female, mankind is charged with procreation.

It is no doubt through this procreative action that man is in fact made in the image of God, the creator or genitor of heaven and earth. And there can be no doubt that here also is a distinctive feature of the biblical text which has not been sufficiently emphasized by the exegetes: the first thing God said to Adam (that is, to the man and the woman) was not the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Following very logically the mention of the likeness to God the Creator, the procreative power of man is evoked. A random distribution of the narrative elements is certainly not the reason. Immediately after man is described as being created male and female in the likeness of God, he is told to be fruitful and multiply, to procreate. There is a direct connection between the image of God in which man was created and his capacity to engender other men. Undoubtedly, God gave man his own image so that man might procreate that which is human. This likeness can only be the power to engender human bodies. Man's survival as human, as a speaking being, stems from this dual divine image, male and female, which gives him organic form. In fact, throughout the biblical narrative of creation, God expresses himself in the second person while addressing his creatures only twice: in the creation of fish (1.22) and in the creation of man, and both times it is tied to their procreative power. This relation between divine direct address and procreation seems highly significant of the Creator's investment in the process of procreation. Thus, cosmogony does not stop in the first chapter of Genesis, it is perpetuated by mankind who is, throughout the biblical narrative, provided with the power to engender derived from the creative power of God. It is in this sense that the celebrated verse must be understood: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2.24). This one flesh is none other than the child they engender. Here it is the plural – the dual to be precise – which begets the unique and the singular. If one recalls

that it is from this verse that the New Testament drew its teaching to affirm the indissolubility of marriage (cf. Mark 10.2, 9; Matthew 19.4, 6; 1 Corinthians 6.16; Ephesians 5.31, 33), one can measure the distance that separates this notion from the traditional Jewish reading of this verse, as attested to by Rashi.⁷ The one flesh is not the static unity of the human couple, but the fulfillment of its procreative power, the insertion of its geniture in time.

Thus, by reproducing, religious man imitates the divine work of the original organization of the cosmos and his procreative act is perhaps considered as the ritual reenactment of cosmogony. In this way the primary elements which later converge in the medieval Kabbalah to make a sacred ceremony of the sexual union of bodies, indeed, a sort of sacrificial cult,⁸ can already be found just beneath the surface of the creation story. However, it must be noted that man himself is not presented as the son or offspring of the divinity. It is only much later that God is qualified as "Father," in Deuteronomy 32.6 and, especially, in the prophet Malachi 2.10 *passim*. However belated this qualification, it provides us with an important piece of information: in all biblical instances (in the Old Testament) where this designation appears – and there aren't that many – God as Father is synonymous with God as Creator.⁹ Taking this connotation into account, it is possible to see in the cosmogonic narrative of Genesis that the work of creating the world is assimilated to paternal engenderment: "Father" refers to he who creates something that is perpetuated (see also Genesis 4.21 in which "father" refers to the inventor of musical instruments). The biblical signifiers surrounding a creative activity are often the very ones that speak of engenderment and paternity.

Elsewhere, the biblical book of Genesis may as a whole be considered the narrative of founding marriages and engenderments. The episodes that punctuate the text between the genealogical tables are merely accompanying narratives to the principal matter: the enumeration of begettings and marriages that superintend them. I shall limit my investigations into biblical passages to these few remarks. To summarize briefly: At no point has there been any question of a spiritual filiation so as to reduce its value. On the contrary, it is the engenderment of human bodies that displays the work of creation and which is an integral part of the actualization of cosmogony. The process of human engenderment recounted in Genesis extends the engenderment of the heavens and the earth. The difference between the male and

the female that form the human couple is inscribed within the divine image and, therefore, in God himself, and this is not to be taken as a simple allegory, but as a realistic conception of the nature of the divinity and His creative power. Historians of religion have viewed the ancient Hebrews' attitude toward sexual relations and procreation as "naturalistic."¹⁰ But this judgment is rooted in a shortsightedness about biblical texts that must be seen as laden with a message of monotheism. What is characteristically at stake in these texts is above all an attempt to give human engenderment – a conjugal and genealogical relation – a place in speech. In other words, to free the reproductive instinct from its "natural" dimension in order to humanize the act of procreation, thus allowing for the birth of subjects, each of whom occupies a unique and identifiable place in the chain of begettings that is also the chain of likeness to God, its first link.

Thus carnal engenderment, the survival of what is human, which takes place through women giving birth, is valued for itself insofar as it makes the divine image explicit. Israel is first and foremost the promise made to Abraham that he will have descendants, a promise that is fulfilled through sexual union and corporeal engenderment. In the book of Ruth, for instance, one finds the following blessing made by Boaz on the occasion of his marriage to Ruth: "May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and like Leah, who together built the house of Israel" (4.11). The notion of issuing from a single seed, central to the promise made to Abraham, profoundly structured the ancient Hebrew mind for a reason one should not call naturalistic or primitive. Paul's repeated exaltation of spiritual (authentic) Israel over carnal Israel, ardently expressed in his Epistle to the Romans, made possible the indefinite extension of the design of Israel and its universalization. However, it has led us to lose sight of one crucial fact. It is not as the "natural" son of Abraham that the Hebrew feels himself tied to his people, but as the legitimate son, which is to say the son recognized by his father. The newborn's body is inscribed in the genealogical chain, because the law establishes the principle of his legitimization, his recognition as a link in the chain. It is within the framework of fidelity to this law that this inscription is made possible. And what is the lesson of this law that more than any other leads this coupling into the line of generations? Precisely, it is the sacred character of marriage, of the conjugal act: in fact, the strict fidelity of the wife. When the prophets want to condemn the sins of Israel, to

denounce its denaturations, its lapses, they show a predilection for the metaphor of the unfaithful woman, the adulteress and the prostitute.

These metaphors are significant on two levels: they reveal a woman's fidelity as a symbol of the bond between Israel and its God, and at the same time they show that this fidelity assures the truth of carnal filiation, that is, of the bond with the fathers and mothers who first bore the consecrated seed. Thus, the engendered and engendering body becomes the vector of the divine image. The body is the multiplier of this image as long as the child's mother is the child's father's wife, as long as he can be recognized as the child of a man who was his mother's husband. To put it in other terms, if he recognizes that he owes his birth to the desire that his progenitors mutually gave themselves to, a mutual desire awakened by the law of fidelity, he is inscribed effortlessly in the chain of engenderments. He becomes a unique moment in the process of creation which he in turn will extend still further. The Pauline split turns precisely on this point: spiritual Israel is instituted beginning with the christology that broke the chain of births: Christ's father is not His mother's spouse.¹¹ His father presides over the origin of all genealogy, but He is not one of its links. Thus, the son issues directly from the great Reference, without mediation. The chain of engenderments since Adam is broken. The inevitable consequence is that the individual body is no longer the mirror in which the bodies of preceding generations converge and are reflected; it is merely the occasional guise because Christ Himself did not engender other bodies. He is inscribed neither at the end nor at the beginning of a new genealogical series, but cleaves the body of engenderment in order to deliver its spirit out of time and space. And henceforth in Paul's doctrine, this breach opens a gulf between what is known as the carnal relation and the spirit that has been delivered of the flesh, that is, from what is reproduced along family lines. Death had been overcome by the horizontal extension of humanity — generations — but henceforth is replaced by a vertical extension — an ascension. It seems to me that essentially what is at work in the christology of the Incarnation and in the Pauline rejection of the flesh depends on this rupture in genealogy which until then had been considered the extension of divine creativity.

Gnostic elaborations of Paul's teachings clearly and eloquently testify to this. With this in mind, I would like to discuss a passage from the *Book of the Secrets of John*, also known as the *Apocryphon of John*, a work that belongs to Codex II among

the writings found at Nag Hammadi. In it the Creator-God of Genesis is considered a usurping archon who, with the aid of the 365 powers of darkness that he himself created, makes Adam “forget his heavenly origin and, so as to assure a wider dissemination and therefore a weakening of the particles of light, creates woman who compromises Adam and draws him into the cycle of engenderments.”¹² Here is a brief excerpt from the work in question: “Now up to the present day sexual intercourse continued due to the chief archon. And he planted sexual desire in her who belongs to Adam. And he produced through intercourse the copies of the bodies, and he inspired them with his opposing spirit.”¹³ For the Gnostic author, the Creator-God, creation, the body and the act of engenderment all partake of the same logic: to distance man from his heavenly origin, to perpetuate the exile of the spark of light in the dark universe of matter. The barely discernible desire one finds in this thought is the desire, beyond the series of generations, for contact with the prime authentic entity, the invisible Spirit, as the *Apocryphon of John* also says, which has no organic link to the genealogical process. Sexual reproduction, reproduction of the bodily image, is a product – and the text emphasizes this – of the logic of travesty. It is not even an imitation or a stand-in for immortality as it is for Plato in the *Symposium*.¹⁴ It is the logic of death itself: according to a celebrated Gnostic logion, Jesus answers the question “When will death disappear?” in this way: “When you women no longer bring forth children.”¹⁵ In other words, man is mortal insofar as he prolongs creation and makes creative work of engenderment. The body of engenderment, as elaborated in the Old Testament, is the substratum of mortal causality introduced by the Creator-archon. The body as such is not what is at issue here. Rather, it is the creative concatenation to which it is bound that implies dissemination, dispersal, multiplication, acts of passage. Buddhism has many affinities with this way of thinking. It appears to be more difficult to find anything similar to it in the Essene movement.

In rabbinic Judaism, numerous maxims attest to the development and even to the overvaluation of the act of begetting perceived as that which joins human actors to creative action. Thus, God is associated with the procreative work of the two parents (Nida 31a), the pure conjugal union actualizes the descent of the divine pres-

ence between the two partners (Sota 17a). He who abstains from begetting is seen as diminishing divine likeness (Yebamot 63b). Thus, it is not essentially as a function of a natural imperative, nor as a dimension of normal organic life that the sexual act has its place, but, rather, it is intended to perpetuate the relationship between Creator and creation by extending the image of God in successive generations. One can cite numerous maxims in the rabbinic literature that stress engenderment as enabling God to reside on earth. In this respect his fundamental theurgic role is in the conjugal relation. No other natural process – neither the germination of plants, nor the cycle of the seasons, nor meteorological or astronomical phenomena – gives the Creator the opportunity to take part once again in His creation. The conjugal relation is therefore the key element of an interaction between Creator and creation. It actualizes the beginning of the world and demonstrates that this beginning is an act of God. Much of what one finds in the seven nuptial blessings recited in the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony recalls the act of creation. Quite significantly, procreation has been compared to the Temple, the principal function of which was to bring the divine presence and His blessings into the world, like a captor of the divine forces vested in the cosmos: “Rabbi Abin says: The Holy One, blessed be He, has greater affection for fruitfulness and increase than for the Temple” (Jerusalem Talmud, Ketovot 5.6). In this instance, the engendering bodies effect a singular act of worship: they serve God by procreating men who in turn will uphold his presence in the bosom of his earthly creation. For this reason also, coupling requires the ritual purity of the partners, just as the Temple service requires the purity of the officiating priests.

Taking these elements into account, it is not so surprising to find that during the Middle Ages, in the theosophical and mystical movement called “Kabbalah” that was intended to pass on ancient esoteric teachings, this motif of human engenderment is raised to the level of the principal act in the *imitatio Dei*. A veritable theogony is superimposed on the biblical cosmogony: the beginning itself has a beginning. The Kabbalah is devoted to recounting the various moments in the process of divine emanation, that is, the personal becoming of an unspeakable Absolute conventionally known as “En Sof,” the Infinite. The kabbalists show a marked preference for describing this process of personalization as sexual act and procreation. The thirteenth-century Zohar (The Book of Splendor) is not alone in developing these

representations at great length, but since the thirteenth century this form of hermeneutics has dominated the various writings of the Kabbalah. Thus, to procreate is to imitate – in other words, to reproduce at one’s own level of existence – the principal phases of the theogonic process, prior even to the creation of the world. In this way, the human body as signifier is understood as the structural model of the divine cosmos. For example, it is not unusual in Castilian literature for the masculine aspect of God to be given an appellation such as “Sacred Body of the King.” This name appears in a passage of the Zohar, in conjunction with the Queen – the feminine aspect – in order to engender men’s souls.¹⁶ The carnal act has become the model of souls being born of a bisexual divinity. Or, more strictly stated, the act of mortal flesh only extends and translates a relation of the same order that takes place within divine dimensions. In the thirteenth century the anonymous kabbalist who wrote the *Letter on Holiness*, a mystical treatise on sexual relations, ascribes a double function to the procreative relationship. First, it makes the man who engages in it “the partner of God in the work of creation,”¹⁷ since procreation makes possible the prolongation of the initial demiurgic act. Second, introducing a strictly kabbalistic concept, the conjugal act is seen as the translation to a human level of the union of higher divine entities (for example, that of the *sefirot* Wisdom and Intelligence, called Father and Mother) that results in engenderment, itself viewed as a prolongation in the human universe of the emanation of the *sefirah* Knowledge, sometimes called Son.¹⁸

Before delving further into the kabbalistic universe, some preliminary information is necessary. A few words must be said about the *sefirot* (plural of *sefirah*), a notion of central importance in kabbalistic theosophy: this word refers to the ten emanations issuing from En Sof, the ineffable Infinite, which form a spiritual structure in the shape of a human body. The word *sefirah* itself means “number,” but kabbalists often identify it with the word *saphir*, in order to emphasize the function of mediation or of philter that these emanations take on in relation to the superabundant “light” of the Infinite. What men call God, even the personal God whose actions are recounted in the Bible and to whom the Bible attributes names and psychological qualities, is none other than this emanative structure. Each *sefirah* has one principal, conventional name: from the first called Keter (Crown) to the last known as Malkhut (Kingdom) or Atarah (Diadem). The lexicon of their various appellations

is quite extensive. For our purposes, we shall mention only a few types of nominations: the second *sefirah*, Wisdom, goes by the name “Father” or “Father on High”; the third, Intelligence, is also known as “Mother.” These two *sefirot* form a couple whose relation is constant. As is often expressed in the Zohar, the *sefirah* Father sows in the *sefirah* Mother the primordial seeds or essences of the entire emanative structure of the *sefirot* that I have already described. The Mother is the seat of a process of differentiation through which these seminal essences acquire a certain quiddity, in the image of an embryo that grows and develops in the maternal belly from miniscule seminal particles. The sixth *sefirah*, Beauty, is the point at which all seminal emanations culminate and condense at the center of the structure. In the human body it corresponds to the spinal column, and it also bears the names Knowledge (the point at which the *sefirot* Father and Mother connect) and Son, their initial engenderment. The last *sefirah*, the tenth or Kingdom, gathers all the emanations and is the mirror in which all the lights issuing from the emanative structure are absorbed. It is known as “Daughter” – the principal feminine aspect – which is in direct contact with lower worlds: the world of angels and the material world where one part of human history is enacted. No doubt it is for this reason that the kabbalists identified the tenth *sefirah* with the Shekhinah in earlier rabbinic literature, the divine habitation or presence on earth. Harmony reigns within this structure, whose fundamental dynamism is understood in terms of both relation and sexual physiology, when the *sefirah* Beauty (Tiferet) or Son, the principal masculine aspect, is coupled with the *sefirah* Kingdom (Malkhut) or Daughter. Thus, these *sefirot* form two sexual poles whose phases of union or disunion punctuate the inner dynamics of the emanative structure and then affect the angelic cosmos and the human world.

I have limited myself to the schematic and partial in order to give a brief idea of the totality of the system of *sefirot*. One should also know that the kabbalists depict the process whereby the *sefirot* essences emerge through the totality of the emanative structure as both an engenderment and a movement of progressive manifestation: each new apparition of a *sefirah* is a birth. Thus, one may legitimately speak of theogony: the arrangement of the ten *sefirot* is the genesis of the human body’s form through which and in which the Infinite becomes divine. One may also speak of theophany: the totality of the *sefirot* and each *sefirah* at its

own level manifest a previously hidden essence of this divine becoming. Furthermore, since all the *sefirot* together constitute a single being – the One of Jewish monotheism from which the ten *sefirot* are essentially indissociable – it is also necessary to speak of self-generation. At first glance the advantage of this esoteric representation of the biblical God over exoteric theological representations resides in the great flexibility of the system, in the semantic richness of this One, given the extreme abstraction and great poverty of the exoteric One, which often risks petrification in what Henry Corbin, in *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, has called the metaphysical idol of orthodox monotheism. Let us remember that for the kabbalists, the dynamic articulations of this One that manifests itself (the system of *sefirot*) are principally unions of a sexual nature, copulations and births. It is easy to understand why conjugal relations in the human world have been a permanent object of concern and meditation for the kabbalists, especially because human acts are invested with a theurgic power of intervention in the world of the *sefirot*, where they exercise a harmonizing influence at the center of the theophanic cosmos.

I would like to quote a brief passage from the work of a sixteenth-century kabbalist, Rabbi Moses Cordovero, that summarizes kabbalist ideas quite well:

No other commandment exists that would have the relation between man and woman resemble the coupling from on high in all ways as does this one. The other commandments of the Torah allude to the image and likeness from on high in order to unify the *sefirot*. It is, however, a very distant allusion. Whereas the secret of male and female is in truth the secret of the higher *sefirot*, as it is said, “Let us make man . . .” [Genesis 1.26]. The union and coupling of man and woman is a sign of coupling from on high, as it is said in the Midrash: “The two are not together without the Shekhinah,” when coupling is far removed from all unseemliness. It is not without reason that the first instruction uttered in the Torah is, “Be fruitful and multiply.” (*Tefillah le-Moshe*, p. 213a)¹⁹

As a sign and cipher of invisible and divine realities, coupling is unlike anything else. A parallel may be drawn between this concept and the hermetic philosophy that originated in Egypt and was furthered by the worshippers of the Roman god Asclepius.²⁰ But coupling is still more significant. It harmonizes so well with the intradivine process of uniting masculine and feminine aspects that it serves as the initiating agent of this union. And in return this action makes coupling the vessel of the

Shekhinah, the divine presence. Here again it is the creative nature of physical coupling that is advanced.

Why this extension and passage from the creative human body of engenderment to the emanative divine body of engenderment? As written, the texts we have do not explicitly speak of an *imitatio Dei* at the level of conjugal union. However, we are invited to consider human engenderment as continuing and extending divine engenderment to a greater degree of dissemination, that is, as theogony itself, through which the divinity is made manifest to itself before it is revealed to human beings. In fact, kabbalistic sources lead us to the idea that through human engenderment the divinity accomplishes one more step in the process of its manifestation. After self-generation, the theophany of self to self, the divinity is made manifest to others by borrowing the path of the succession of generations. Thus, mankind does not imitate a parallel process that takes place in a higher world. By engendering, mankind participates fully in the movement of theophanic realization through which the primordial theogony reaches its fulfillment. Indeed, for the kabbalists, man's creation responds to an inner necessity of the divine. It is a crucial stage in the movement that gradually leads the divine to revelation and personal expression. If man has a sense of imitating a higher process (however often the kabbalists refer to it as such), it is in fact merely an illusion. By mating and procreating man furthers the theophanic lineage; he makes it possible for this lineage to progress toward its realization. Each new generation is thus a stage of hiero-history, of the manifestation of God in time. This insertion of the theogonic process into temporality is the exact opposite of an incarnation. God does not fulfill His being in one individual at one unique moment. In order to move toward His fulfillment, in order to be personified, He must pass into time's texture woven by the thread of engenderments. Each new conception, each new birth is inscribed as an indispensable stage on the path that leads to divine manifestation, both eschatological and messianic. The body of engenderment is, therefore, a body of passage. Like the eye of a needle, it allows the thread of theophanic becoming to move through time and weave its fabric. A thirteenth-century kabbalist, Rabbi Joseph de Hamadan illustrates this idea perfectly when he writes:

He who has children extends as it were the existence of the chain of likeness which is the Chariot [the Divine]. Indeed, the latter is called the "chain of likeness." . . . He who

is without children lessens as it were the chain of likeness. Thus, every man who has children fulfills the Chariot on high....²¹

This “chain of likeness” here refers to the system of ten *sefirot*, in other words, the primordial theogonic structure. To beget is to enable another link of this “chain” to enter the light. Consequently, to abstain from begetting amounts to depriving this chain of a degree of expression, to diminish the extension of this likeness – the Chariot or self-generated divine structure – in the temporal field which it must enter in order to arrive by degrees at its full actualization.²²

With these elements in mind, let us take up the question posed at the outset. I would like to point out why I am inclined to believe that the developments of the medieval Kabbalah, numerous and increasingly elaborate and complex, constitute a necessary evolution in the movement of thought initiated by the biblical text and the rabbinic tradition. As esoteric thinkers committed to studying the inner motivations of the text of the Torah, with little interest in its ideological or supposedly ideological background, the kabbalists understood deeply what the notion of creation (which emerges from the relation between the world’s creation described in the opening passages of Genesis and the creative process of human engenderment) implies as a conception of the divinity. If, as the biblical text states, man is created in the image and likeness of God, it is because this Creator-God himself – like man – is subject to a creative process whereby he comes into being and emerges from nothingness. Or, if you prefer, this image of God that man offers to scrutiny is the very one that appeared to the kabbalists as His first manifestation, a revelation upon hindsight of creation’s initial truth: its seat is in the bosom of the Creator from the beginning. More simply, if God created man in His own image, it is because this image is not created at the same time as man. It existed prior to man and, consequently, we would do well to determine its point of emergence. And to do this we need only follow the logic of the biblical narrative itself: man passes on his image, which in the first instance is the image of God, through the act of engenderment. The implication is that this image has been passed on primordially, has come about through a process identical to that revealed by human engenderment. The creation of this “image,” a creation kabbalists often prefer to call “emanation” (*atsilut*), was understandably deciphered from the facts provided by the mode of human generation over time. The kind of interpretation of the biblical text that made such an

approach possible, and even necessary, is based above all on a rigorous account of semantemes and the logic of their appearance in the narrative thread, as well as on independence from any artificially applied logic, whether philosophical or theological in nature. This mode of reading is reminiscent of the ideal juridical treatment of a law text. Meaning is discovered in the text itself, strictly within its framework, concealed within the recesses of each of its propositions. No other sphere of meaning should interfere, no intellectual or cultural interest should subordinate the intratextual play of deciphering. In this way, the kabbalists overcame the shock their conception of divinity might arouse in the medieval culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a culture in which there was anxiety about conformity to the principles of an implacable monotheism. Appearances notwithstanding, the resemblance of certain concepts of the Kabbalah to those of ancient or polytheistic religious systems is not the result of an unlimited interpretive freedom or, indeed, freedom from the biblical text itself. On the contrary, the kabbalists stayed as close as possible to this text and did not impose readings on it that sought to accommodate theological truths elaborated centuries after the Bible was written and whose fundamental ideas it did not share. Hence, they were able to discover the primitive strata of the narrative. Theirs is not the approach of the historian or the archeologist. And it is here that this digression on the kabbalistic method of interpretation returns to our subject: as is known, Kabbalah signifies tradition, reception, transmission. It is not a body of doctrine passed down since Antiquity by Jewish esoteric philosophers, just as it is not merely a corpus produced with each new conception. What is transmitted is nothing other than the power to transmit. The power to adhere to the text, the power to engender: tradition, like the body of engenderment, is the point of passage through which the invisible allows itself to be glimpsed, through which the unspeakable allows itself to be spoken, through which the flux issuing from the Infinite takes form, link by link.

One issue remains. Becoming is here perceived as eminently positive and constructive. The power to engender makes life unfold. However, in Gnosticism becoming is seen explicitly as synonymous with alteration, corruption, death. That which evolves, moves or is disseminated is doomed to disappear, whereas the immutable being who is neither produced nor reproduced enjoys eternity and knows nothing of the shadow of death. These antithetical perceptions must be dealt with. Is engender-

ment the work of death or life? The answer is not as clear as the question leads us to believe. To declare that engenderment is the propagator of life in the name of a naive vitalism is meaningless in the face of the disconcerting strength of the Gnostic vision, for which the engenderment of a body is the engenderment of a tomb (*sōma-sema*), whereby the soul is chained to a mass of obscure matter. In order to take up this formidable line of questioning, we must turn our attention to the kabbalistic conception of the human soul in relation to the body. We must first describe briefly the manner in which the kabbalists or certain kabbalists have understood the soul. To them the soul is a spiritual entity that issues from the *sefirot* or divine emanations. The *Zohar* speaks of souls as being engendered by the union of the masculine and feminine aspects, Tiferet and Malkhut, King and Queen. But not all souls proceed from the same celestial region. Each soul's degree of elevation, the spiritual zone from which it is loosed in order to enter the world, is determined by the quality and purity of its parents' sexual relations at the moment of conception. Certain kinds of souls, those of proselytes, are engendered by the postmortem coupling of the just, men and women, in the heart of Eden, an act of copulation that procreates pneumatic lights destined for new converts whose soul is not an inheritance from their parents as it is for those who are Israelites by birth (*Zohar* 3.167b ff.). In the writings of Rabbi Joseph de Hamadan, souls are spoken of as being assembled in the celestial garden of Eden by family and family groups in a genealogical order nearly symmetrical to that which they knew on earth. The doctrine elaborated in Safed by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, based on ancient sources, views the totality of human souls – past, present and future – as originating in the mystical body of the first man where they were distributed in each of his organs. Sin caused the dispersal of these souls which, as they pass to earth over generations, gradually repair the damage that was done to them. The lowest souls, those in the feet, indeed in the heels of the first man, will be the last implanted in earthly bodies before the coming of the Messiah (see *Sefer ha-Guilgulim*, chs. 1 and 2). These reminders serve merely to demonstrate the existence of a constant in the various doctrines of the kabbalists: even before it has an earthly destiny, the soul is attached to corporeality, even if there is yet no body with which it is to share an existence. And this corporeality that exists prior to the body is a corporeality of engenderment as well. The realm of the spirit, if it can be distinguished from that of the material body, remains inhabited by the cor-

poreal order that gives it its formal dimensions. The individual body is integrated by rights into the heart of this larger corporeality of which it is a part. It is not an accident of the light but a necessary passage in its propagation. As such, it has played the role of natural text in which a knowledge of higher realities is inscribed.

In order to give the reader an idea of how the kabbalist understood the body as the place of knowing – the site of *gnōsis* – I shall cite several lines from the introduction to the major work of a celebrated Italian kabbalist of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Moses Hayim Louzatto, who commented on several phrases from a passage in the Zohar on the Song of Songs:

The second form of knowledge [which follows the apprenticeship to the theogonic system set out in the preceding paragraph] consists in “knowing one’s body, etc.” Here begin the essential forms of knowledge which follow the forms of knowledge having to do with the tree [i.e., with the complex structure of emanative configurations and the *sefirot*]. The first consists of the knowledge of the body’s secret according to the totality of its form and its organs, of all the elements of its functioning and of how it takes root in the higher *sefirot*, all of which converge toward the level that is Adam’s likeness [*demut*]. That is why he was the final creation [in the Book of Genesis], for all things move toward this goal. The truth is that all things converge toward [the body] in order that it may be the sole agent of free choice. Indeed, even the soul can have no free will apart from [the body]. “What is he?” What is man upon whom the whole work of creation is incumbent? [By asking this question] one can easily understand wherein he is the end of all creation; one can understand all the ties between the *sefirot* and him. All parts of the work depend on this knowledge. “How he was created.” How this body emerged. Here one understands the pathways whereby material realities emerge, the principal one being the body. “What is he thereafter?” How does his history evolve from the beginning of his being until its end...? “How the body is perfect.” Wherein one comprehends the secret of this likeness, what it is according to the intentions placed in it. This is what is treated throughout the *Idra Rabba*, the *Idra Zuta* and the *Tikkunim*.²³ In other words, the relation among *sefirot*, the law of their functioning, is the same as the law of the functioning of the body in all its parts. From this comes our understanding of the verse “Yet in my flesh shall I see God” [Job 19:26], in order to see and comprehend all the doings of man and the whole of his movements, all of which have their roots deep in the *sefirot*. (*Addir ba-Marom*, Jerusalem, 1968, p. 2a)

Among the elements worth remembering are the following: first, it is only when introduced into a body that the soul gains freedom, here considered a positive dimension. Second, the human body occupies a special place at the heart of the material universe. It is not a random assemblage or construction among the elements of matter. Third, the human body is structured anatomically and functions physiologically in a manner perfectly homologous to the system of *sefirot* and the laws governing their relation. Fourth, therefore, studying and learning about his own body enables man to gain knowledge of the divinity, whose system of powers and emanations are governed according to the same characteristics. The soul is not imprisoned in a dark and mortal abode. By passing into a human body it reaches the dimension of free will that paradoxically brings it closer to its divine model. In a body the soul can freely accomplish a task that enables it to reach a higher level. This task is itself a piece of work that is necessary for the full unfolding of the divine emanation. In order to move closer to the kabbalists' conception, when one compares it with that of the ancient Gnostics who in the end did nothing more than radicalize Christian thematics, particularly those of Paul and John,²⁴ one must remember that in the eyes of the faithful inheritors of ancient rabbinic traditions, the death of the body is not a definitive situation. In this context the concept of resurrection is essential. For us, this is what it implies: to engender a body is not to engender a tomb since this body has a future beyond its ineluctable death. Many kabbalists consider the resurrected body an eternal, imperishable body. Of course, the latter is not engendered by other bodies, by its parents, but it nevertheless results from the former, perishable body; it is a transfiguration of and reconstruction from the dust and bones of the engendered body. Therefore, and in a second degree, procreation initiates an irreversible process within the very order of life, a life that knows a dark passage.

One early seventeenth-century kabbalist, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, whose importance cannot be underestimated, clearly describes his fundamental vision of the couple comprising body and soul:

In one regard, body and soul are both equal, which is to say are both spiritual, as was the first man before the fall and as he will be in the future . . . even earthly matter will again become spiritual and both will have equal value once again, which is the desired end: [that body and soul be eternal]. . . ." (*Shenei Lulhot ha-Berit*, vol. 1, p. 20a, marginal note)²⁵

The first couple's sin merely clouded and veiled the essential reality of the nature of matter and, therefore, of the body. It opened a temporary breach within a single spiritual substance. In the eschatological future, the spirituality of matter will be recaptured and body and soul will form one eternal being. The vision of the world implied by such a conception reflects a categorical optimism of which the ancient Gnostics were entirely incapable. It is astonishing in its radicality and in the reversal it urges upon the reader regarding the classification of body and soul within ordinary hierarchies. But it is this very radicality, and it alone, which is provocative and powerful enough to stand up to the equally powerful conception of Christian Gnosticism. It implies all this vis-à-vis the body of engenderment, a body dedicated to life, to eternal life. The taint of death is not its last term nor its final destination. It is a passage.

It is useful here to point out one important fact. However central a place kabbalistic thinkers have given the body – for them the point of acquiring *gnōsis* about the supercelestial worlds, the divine structure itself, a body capable of theurgic action in these sacred realms – this body never became for them an object of plastic exaltation or aesthetic contemplation. In my ventures into the writings of the Kabbalah, I have never come across any evidence of adoration of the bodily form. This bodily form remains above all the bearer of signatures of the divine order; it is the vector of knowledge but it is not the object of visual fascination. This explains the restraint shown in the abundance of drawings and other diagrams produced by the kabbalists to illustrate their at times very complex speculations. They always avoid figurative representations and prefer abstract drawings.

Just as the kabbalists have searched for the beginning of beginnings in the order of the past, so they have set out to find the end of ends in the order of the future. But in essence these elaborations are merely a long detour that leads back to the biblical narrative of the first day of Genesis. With great simplicity, Genesis presents man as having been created in the image of God and, therefore, fundamentally immortal like God, even in bodily form. It is to their great credit that the kabbalists have upheld, as far as possible and often against the readings of fashionable theologies, the calm daring of this verse from Genesis, which has been the source of fertile medi-

tation for generations of esoteric thinkers. Therefore, they enable us, as modern readers of the Bible steeped in learned, abstract and reductive constructions of theological doctrines, to recapture lost glimmers of meaning in an over-explicated, over-commented-upon text which every cause has been quick to make its own without regard for what it leaves unsaid, that is, for what the totality of what is said seeks to express without being either willing or able to do so. The esoteric view of the biblical text differs profoundly from the exoteric view. It is attentive in the extreme to all that is waiting to be revealed. For the esoteric thinker, Revelation is a matter of daily effort, it is not a moment of historical foundation.

This article has been limited to generalities. In order to understand just how many multiple and detailed elaborations have arisen from meditation on the body and its complexity, one must immerse oneself in the nearly six thousand works, printed books and manuscripts that the kabbalistic tradition has produced over seven centuries. For kabbalists, understanding the body as the fated locus of their advance toward knowledge of God has not been a simple formula. They have precisely and unceasingly explored all paths opened to them by the human body with all its organs and humors, its functions and movements. In order to appreciate the extent to which this is true, we need only turn to the diagrams they have left us which establish the correspondences between the various parts of the body and the *sefirot*. Yet there can be no doubt that if the body has been able to occupy such a unique place in a school of thought developed in the West, it is because in the eyes of the kabbalists, the genealogy of bodies makes manifest an invisible chain whose first links constitute the divine order itself, the creative activity brought forth in human procreative activity.

NOTES

1. The Talmud (literally "study") is the redactional sum of the oral tradition worked out in rabbinic circles, in Babylonia or Palestine, between the first and sixth centuries. The treatise in question is devoted to the various problems concerning the pure and the impure and practices of purification.

2. Gershom Scholem devoted a chapter of his book translated into French under the title *Le mystique juive, les thèmes fondamentaux* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1985) to the history and content of the literature of the *Shi'ur Komah*. He was the first modern thinker to recognize its antiquity.

3. This term is taken from Mircea Eliade. See esp. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York, 1968).

4. The literal meaning of *bara* is "to carry beyond," "to take out." In Aramaic, which is very close to Hebrew, *bar*, *bera*, comes from the same root as *bara* ("to create"), and means child, offspring.

5. The idea is both one of likeness and one of filiation: men are images of the divinity because they are the issue of his members. Likewise, a child resembles his father because he derives from him. That is all the text of Genesis says: if man is created in the image of God, if he is like Him, it is because he proceeds from Him as His offspring.

6. See C. Desroches Noblecourt's *La femme au temps des pharaons* (Paris: Stock/Laurence Pernoud, 1987), p. 21ff.

7. Rashi is the name, formed from the initials of Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac, of the first Jewish biblical exegete in the Middle Ages (tenth-eleventh centuries), who often did little more than reinstate the most common rabbinic reading. See also the reading given by Pierre Legendre in *L'inestimable objet de la transmission* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), p. 255.

8. On this last point see my work *La lettre sur la sainteté: La relation entre l'homme et la femme dans la cabale* (Paris: Verdier, 1986), p. 151.

9. This is no longer the case in the New Testament where divine paternity is disconnected from its creative work and connotes a different register.

10. See, for example, G. Parrinder, *La sexe dans les religions du monde* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1986), p. 191. The chapter devoted to Hebrew concepts is an example of the all-powerful influence of righteous theological discourse on a study that takes itself to be historical, scientific and impartial.

11. It is not insignificant that a comparable equation presides at the birth of Alexander of Macedonia three centuries before Christ. He is mystically believed to be the son of the god Zeus-Ammon; indeed, his mother Olympiā maintained that Alexander was not the son of her husband Philip, but that he was the fruit of the god with whom she had been intimate (see A. Weigal, *Alexandre le Grand*, Paris: Payot, 1976, pp. 46-56, 97-98, 146, *passim*; P. Jouguet, *L'impérialisme macédonien et l'hellénisation de l'Orient*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1972, p. 17). This would lead one to think that a direct filiation with a god (or God), outside the genealogical route, whereby the mother claims that her child's father is not her husband, plays a considerable role in the production of certain heroic figures in history.

12. *Cahier Evangile*, supp. no. 58, "Nag Hammadi," with an introduction by R. Kuntzman and J.M. Dubois, p. 40.

13. *Apocryphon of John* 1.24.23-27 (trans. F. Wisse), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James Robinson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978).

14. See 207c-210b. However, the superiority of immortality achieved through procreation is strongly emphasized by a Zoroastrian text. See *Datastan-i dénîk*, in *La naissance du monde*, "La naissance du monde dans l'Iran préislamique," trans. Marijan Molé (Paris: Seuil, 1959), pp. 313-14.

15. Quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.9; see *Évangiles apocryphes*, trans. F. Quéré (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 61.

16. See, for example, Zohar 1.245b.

17. Mopsik, *La lettre sur la sainteté*, pp. 233-34 n.8.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

20. See *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. A.D. Nock, trans. A.J. Festugière (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973), pp. 320-23 (pars. 20 and 21). See also the Coptic text, in *The Nag Hamadi Library*, pp. 300-01.

21. Mopsik, *La lettre sur la sainteté*, pp. 102ff.

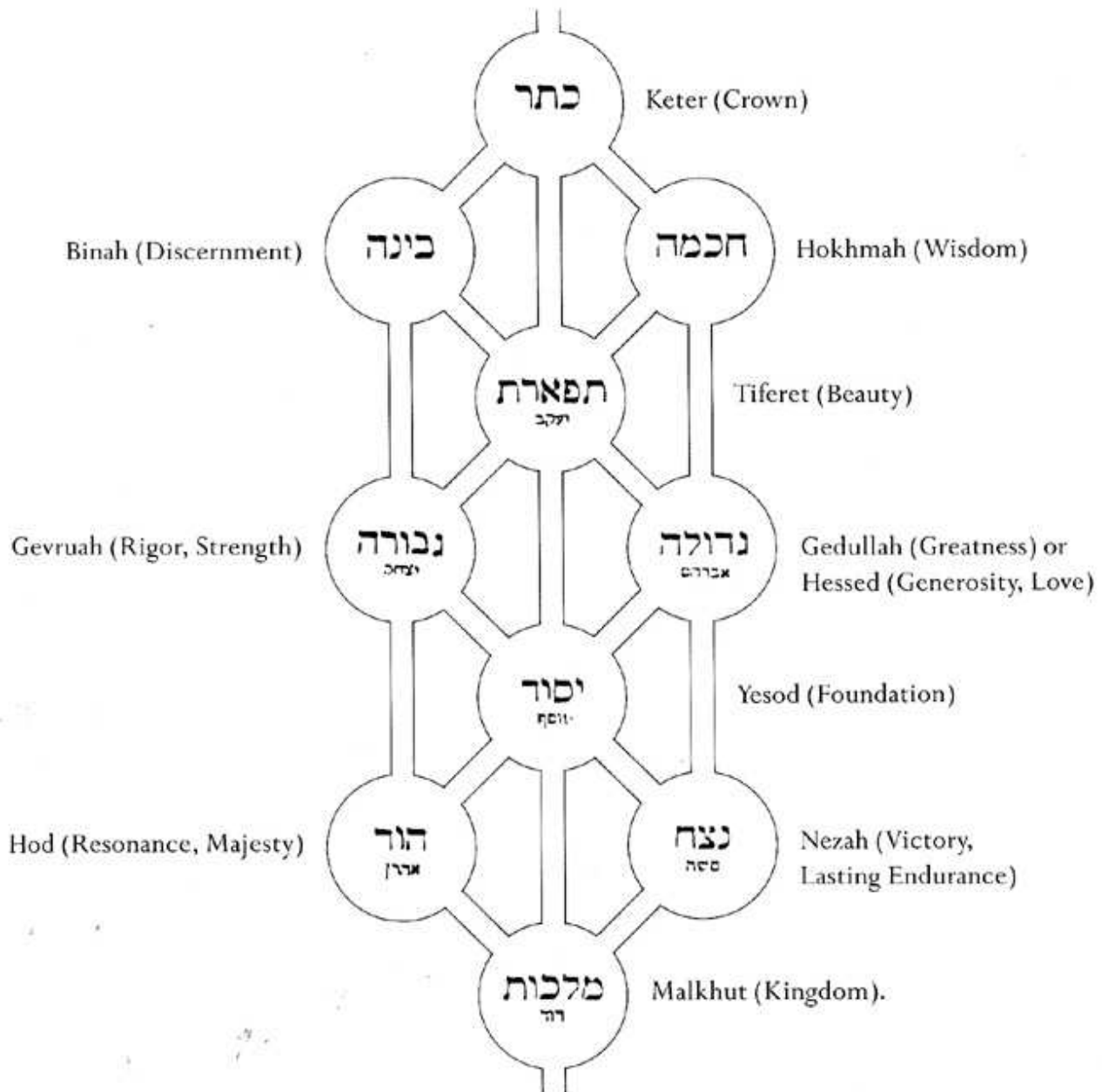
22. This expression is borrowed from Henry Corbin. It is worth noting that in the final lines of the *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*, the Letter on Holiness, the ten generations preceding the birth of King David spoken of in the Book of Ruth (4.8) are presented as manifesting the plenitude of the *Shi'ur Komah*, the divine body composed of the ten *sefirot*. Thus, the mystical body of the divinity sung in the hymns of ancient Jewish sources is considered to be made manifest by the body of engenderment, which becomes the source of revelation at the level of the human world and its history of the divine body (Mopsik, *La lettre sur la sainteté*, pp. 256 and 323). It is obvious that this theophanic aptitude of the body of engenderment is conferred upon it essentially through a submission to ritual and ethical practices which preserve its holiness and the sacred of which it is the bearer. Without these protections, the body of engenderment would lose its theophanic and theogonic power, thus forgetting its destiny, it would split into an engendering body and a desiring body and thus obliterate the essential unity of the desire for pleasure and the desire to procreate.

23. Various writings belonging to the literature of the Zohar.

24. This is the general thesis of the work of Simone Pétrement, *Le Dieu séparé, aux origines de gnosticisme* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1984).

25. There is ample material for a study devoted exclusively to the theme of Moses' body in the Kabbalah, which occupies a central place in it. Rabbi Salomon Halevi Alkabets, for example, a sixteenth-century kabbalistic thinker, maintains that the body of the greatest prophet of Israel was already a resurrected body (see *Berit Halevi*, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 42d).

Translated by Matthew Ward.

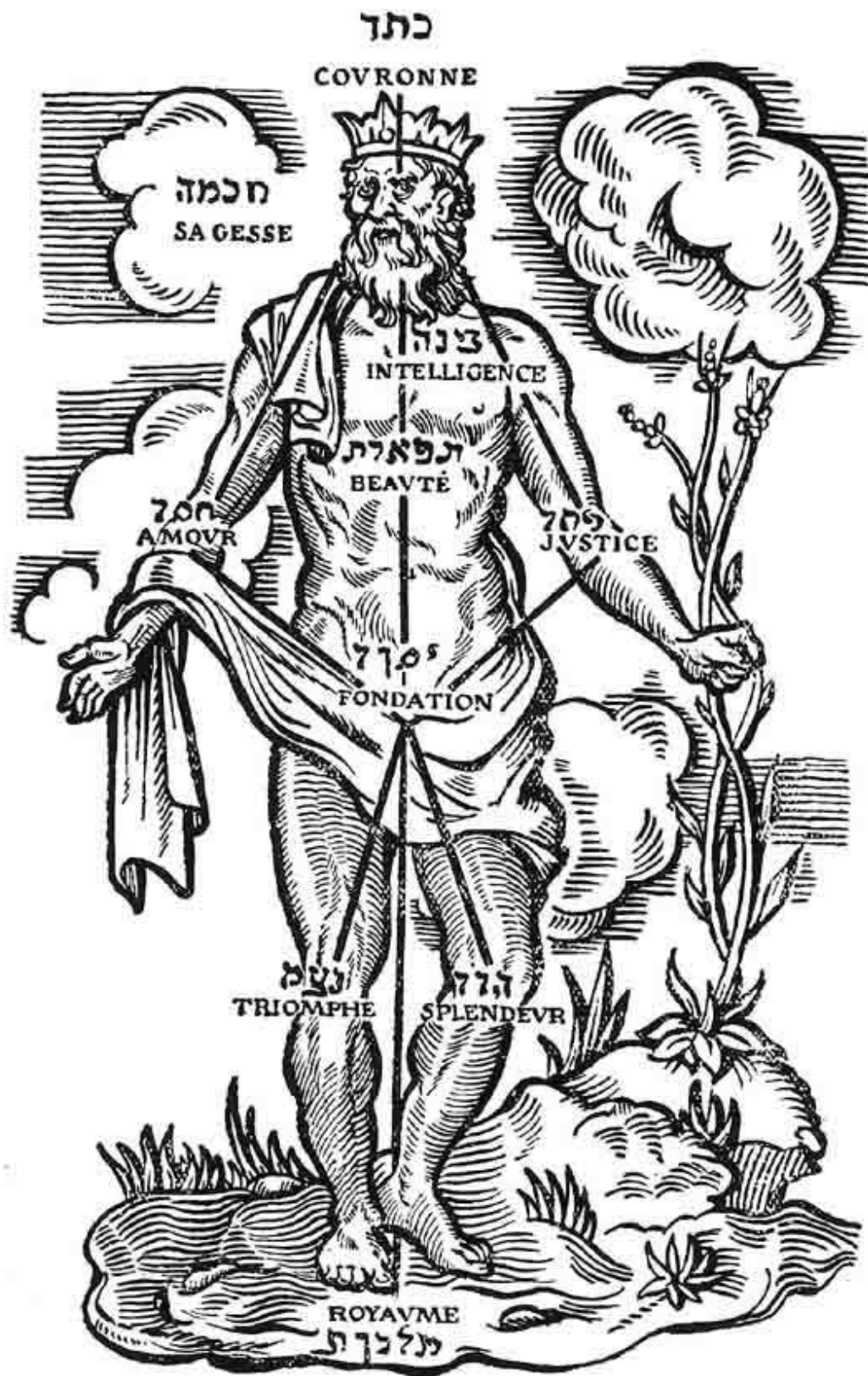


A classic chart of the ten *sefirot* from the *Ketem Paz* (c. 1570) of Rabbi Simeon Labi (Djerba, 1940). It should be noted that the upper and lower extremities are open: the inner structure of the divine constitutes a totality opened by En Sof (the Infinite). The light of En Sof passes through these openings and becomes a seminal flux which takes the form of a genealogical system realized by the main figures of the biblical narrative. The kabbalists most likely called these illustrations the “tree of the *sefirot*” or the “tree of emanation” – since the thirteenth century, that is – with reference to the development at that time of more and more complex family trees.



Illustration by Rabbi Joseph Gikatila from his *Sha'arei Orah* (The Doors of the Light), Warsaw 5643/1883, ch. 5. In this illustration of the ten *sefirot*, Da'at (Knowledge) is represented as a vertical axis which connects the summit to the whole of the sefirotic body, to the image of the spinal column through which move the divine influxes like a seed from the head down through the entire organism, according to the ancient physiological representation. The central line of writing reads, "Da'at, which is Tiferet (Beauty), which is YHVH blessed be He, which is the middle line. To Tiferet belong the epithets of mercy in the name YHVH, blessed be He, blessed be He." One can see that Da'at unites right and left, high and low, masculine and feminine: it is the great unifier of the *sefirot*.

Translation of terms: 1. Keter (Crown) 2. Hokhmah (Wisdom) 3. Binah (Discernment) or Tevuna (Intelligence) 4. Da'at (Knowledge) 5. Gedullah (Greatness) or Hessed (Generosity, Love) 6. Gevruah (Rigor, Strength) or Pahad (Dread) 7. Nezah (Victory, Lasting Endurance) 8. Hod (Resonance, Majesty) 9. Yesod (Foundation) 10. Malkhut (Kingdom)



This figure is taken from a modern work, published in 1947 by Henry Serouya entitled *La Kabbale* (Paris: Grasset). It is meant to represent Primordial Man, each of whose members is a particular *sefirah*. This type of figurative representation is not found in the original writings of the kabbalists. It is found in several texts of Christian kabbalism and, more recently, in popularized works intended for a readership of amateur occultists.