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Zohar and Iamblichus

Abstract:

The Zohar, the Cabbalistic 'Bible', has a special theory concerning magic. Magic, which for the Zohar is the essence of idolatry, is depicted there as identical in its form with Cabbalistic mystical theurgy, but directed not towards God but towards evil demons. This theory has been labeled in research Hermetic and Neo-Platonic, but only in general terms. This article makes a further step and finds a parallelism between a paragraph in the Zohar and a paragraph in On the Mysteries of Iamblichus, the Neo-Platonic philosopher. The two paragraphs expound the above theory in similar terms, and also cite as their source a similar authority, namely eastern sages or Chaldaean prophets. This parallelism may establish a literary connection between the Zohar and Iamblichus, who may be related also in other respects.

Moshe Idel has reshaped our understanding and image of Cabbala in many ways. One of the major themes of his research is the Hermetic and Neo-Platonic mystical-magical complex of praxis and ideas, dealing with drawing down spiritual forces from supernal entities. Idel dedicated to it much research, demonstrating the major role this theme played in Jewish mysticism and its development from

Cabbala to Hasidism.¹ In the following article, dedicated to Idel and to our friendship, I'd like to make some contribution to this research, by establishing a possible literary connection between a paragraph dealing with this theme in the *Zohar*, the Cabbalistic 'Bible' (written in thirteenth century Spain), and a passage from Iamblichus, the Syrian philosopher of the third and fourth century of the Christian era, the foremost representative of Hermeticism and theurgy within the Neo-Platonic philosophical school.

In propounding its lore about idolatry and magic, the *Zohar* does not pretend to be original. It refers explicitly to its sources, saying:

Come and see: If a person is drawn toward the blessed Holy One – his desire pursuing Him in this world – then afterward, when he departs, he is drawn towards Him and extended a way to ascend, following the attraction drawn daily, aspiringly in this world.²

Rabbi Abba said: One day I happened upon a certain town formerly inhabited by children of the East, and they told me some of the wisdom they

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knew from ancient days. They had found their books of wisdom, and they brought me one, in which was written: "As one's aspiration is directed in this world, so he draws upon himself a spirit from above, corresponding to the aspiration to which he cleaves.³ If his aspiration focuses on a supernal holy⁴ entity, he draws that entity from above to himself below. If he aspires to cleave to the other side,⁵ focusing there, then he draws that from above to himself below."⁶

The same theory is found also in Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries*, and there it is also attributed to similar sources:

I shall tell you, indeed, the account I once heard about these matters from the mouths of Chaldaean prophets.

Whoever are gods in the true sense, they alone are the givers of good things, and associate only with good men, and mingle with those purified by the sacred science, and they remove from them every vice and passion. [...] But as many as are themselves guilty of crime [...] as they are excluded from association with undefiled spirits because of these pollutions, they thus attached themselves to evil spirits, and being filled by them with the most evil inspirations, they become evil and unholy, gorged with licentious pleasures, full of vice, eager for habits foreign to the gods, and to sum up, they became akin to the wicked demons to whom they have become attached.

These, then, being full of passion and evil, draw evil spirits to themselves because of kinship, and are excited by them toward every vice, and so growing together, just like some kind of circle joining beginning to end,⁷ they render in like manner an equal exchange. So, then, of the impious blunder of wickedness, some are introduced in a disorderly manner into the sacred works, while others make a disorderly approach also to what presents itself to them, and sometimes, so it seems, make one god come to their feast instead of another, and on occasion cause evil daemons to enter instead the gods, whom they call "anti-gods". You should never propose those things in a discourse about sacred divination.⁸

The Similarity between the two passages is striking indeed. As the *Zohar* parallels the evil practice of the idolatrous magician with the sacrosanct cult of the observant Cabbalist, so does Iamblichus parallel the evil practice of the magician with the commendable act of a theurgist. Moreover, both sources describe both rites, the good and the evil, in terms of mystical communion, in which the practitioner who is engaged in either rite draws spirits, either holy or unholy, from a god or a demonic evil counterpart, which the *Zohar* calls *sitra ahara*, which means 'the other side' (i. e. other than holy and divine), and Iamblichus calls it in a somewhat similar manner "anti-gods".⁹

But the most striking evidence for establishing literary connection between these two passages is the fact that both rely as authority for this common parallelism pretty much on the same source, namely, sages of the east.

Who these eastern sages are, we do not know. Iamblichus calls them 'Chaldaean (i.e. Babylonian) prophets', so one may assume that his origin was the famous *Chaldean Oracles*, from which he actually draws much,¹⁰ including the very term *theurgos* (= theurgist), which was probably first coined in the *oracles*.¹¹ The magic theory expounded above, suits in fact well the spirit of the *Oracles* (as well as the spirit of the

Corpus Hermeticum, the other major source for Iamblichus' theurgy), but the exact source of the passage from Iamblichus and the *Zoharic* passage can not be found in the fragments preserved (as citations in later writers) from the *Oracles*, the text of which did not come down to us.¹²

The last sentence in the passage of Iamblichus also has a parallel in the *Zohar*, in the continuation of the paragraph cited above.¹³ The *Zohar* goes on there first to expound the above theme in detail, dealing with astrological magic (drawing down of astral powers) and pointing out its resemblance to Cabbala (both magicians and Cabbalists need actions, words and aspirations of the heart), then the *Zohar* goes on to compare the destiny of Cabbalists and magicians (the former become angels after departure, the latter demons).

But in concluding this theme the *Zohar* takes exception at his own very exposition. Now R. Abba exhorts his listeners to shun these books of eastern wisdom, albeit their lore is "close to words of Torah", for the children of the east inherited their wisdom from Abraham, as it is written about them: "To the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still alive, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east".¹⁴

Notwithstanding its Abrahamic source, this wisdom, which was somewhat distorted in subsequent generations, is not recommendable. After Abraham sent the sons of his concubines with their gifts away from his son Isaac, his offspring should not have anything to do with this wisdom but should cleave only to pure Torah, without any mixture. I find this exhortation to resemble a lot the words of Iamblichus in the last sentence of his passage cited above. Iamblichus also concludes his exposition in words of rebuke, taking exception at itself: "You should never propose those things in a discourse about sacred divination".

The 'Neo-platonic' nature of the *Zoharic* lore about magic has been recognized in research, but only in general terms,¹⁵ without adducing textual parallels, and without taking seriously the explicit words of the *Zohar* citing as its source books of eastern wisdom.¹⁶ One may notice here conforming to the view of Gershom Scholem, the father of Cabbala research, who generally doubts the existence of the books the *Zohar* mentions as its sources.¹⁷ But once we know of the Iamblichus' parallel, we now must assume one of two possibilities, each of which entailing considerable consequences for the question of the sources of the *Zohar*: Either the *Zohar* and Iamblichus drew from the same source (conceivably the *Chaldean Oracles*), or that *On the Mysteries* of Iamblichus is the source of the *Zohar*.

It is true that the present state of our knowledge does not provide us with any clue to how the *On the Mysteries* or its source could have possibly reached the *Zohar* circle, so remote in terms of time, space and language. But even so, we should not let our ignorance destroy what we do know from striking textual data.

Iamblichus and the *Zohar* do in fact have much in common. As the *Zohar* combines the Neo-Platonic way of thinking with an eastern religion, namely Judaism, so does Iamblichus, the noble Syrian,¹⁸ who in his *On the Mysteries* accounts in Neo-Platonic terms for the Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious rites (Iamblichus did so against the opposition of other members in the Neo-Platonic school, notably his own teacher Porphyry, as a response to whose attack *On the Mysteries* was written).¹⁹

Moreover, like the *Zohar*, *On the Mysteries* is also clothed in a pseudo-epigraphic guise: The *Zohar* is attributed to R. Simon bar Yohai and his disciples while *On the*

Mysteries is attributed to an Egyptian priest named Abamon.

The name Abamon does not occur elsewhere, and many suggestions have been proposed for its interpretation (most of them find in it the name of the Egyptian god Amon).²⁰ To these I'd like to add the (remote) possibility, that the name Abamon alludes also to Abraham, whose name is derived, according to the Bible, from the Hebrew words *av hamon*,²¹ which mean 'father of many nations', and can be interpreted also as 'founder of many religious rites' (even if this is the case, the element *amon* may still allude also to the Egyptian god).

The figure of Abraham might suit well the goal of Abamon-Iamblichus, for Abraham was considered in Jewish Hellenistic circles as the founder of astrology.²² Moreover, Josephus Flavius connects this aspect of Abraham's figure with the sojourn of Abraham at Egypt, where he held religious-philosophical discussions with the Egyptian priests, and established there the Chaldean astral doctrine.²³ The figure of Abraham and his spiritual role was well known and highly appraised also in pagan circles, from Hecataeus of Abdeira on²⁴ (one of the Roman Caesars even set up in his shrine a statue of Abraham²⁵ – completely ignoring the iconoclastic role of Abraham in Judaism). Iamblichus could therefore have been very well familiar with Abraham, although, admittedly, Judaism is very little referred to in his writings.²⁶

The possibility that the *Zohar* was aware of the supposed connection between Abamon-Iamblichus and Abraham is more tenuous still. This notwithstanding, one may still be nevertheless intrigued by the fact that the theme discussed above, found in the book attributed to Abamon, is attributed in a *Zoharic* close parallel to the gifts Abraham bequeathed to his concubines' sons.

And there is still something more general to say about the communion of Iamblichus and the *Zohar*. The figure of Iamblichus and his company, traveling in the Golan, as depicted by his biographer Eunapius, is similar in many ways to the *Zoharic* descriptions of the hero of the *Zohar*, R. Simeon b. Yohai and his company. This I tried elsewhere to demonstrate in detail.²⁷

Notes

¹ Moshe Idel, *Hasidism – Between Ecstasy and Magic*, SUNY, Albany 1994. See also Moshe Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance', *Jewish Thought in the sixteenth Century* (ed. Bernard D. Coopermann), Harvard University Press 1983, pp. 186-242; Moshe Idel, 'Hermeticism and Judaism', *Hermeticism and Renaissance* (eds. Merkel & Debus), Associated University Presses, 1988, pp. 59-76; and many other publications.

² Cf. *Zohar* 3:288a, where R. Simeon bar Yohai, the *Zoharic* hero himself, testifies to this in the day of his departure.

³ See *TB Shabbat* 104a: "If ones come to defile himself, he is provided an opening; if one comes to purify himself, he is assisted." Cf. *TB Makkot* 10b: "One is led on the path one wishes to take." See *Zohar* 1:54a, 56b, 62a, 125b, 169b, 198b; 2:50a; 3:47b. (The note is taken from the translator's [Matt's] note.)

⁴ Matt omits "holy".

⁵ *Sitra ahara*. See below.

⁶ *Zohar* 1:99b. This English translation from the *Zoharic* Aramaic is taken from the *Zohar*, Pritzker Edition, Translation and Commentary by Daniel C. Matt, Stanford University Press 2004, vol. 2 pp. 121-122.

⁷ It is similar to the *Ouroboros*, the snakes who devours its tail. This symbol is used elsewhere in this book: Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Translated with an introduction and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P Hershbell, Atlanta 2003, p. 309, note 407. This symbol appears also in the *Zohar*, 2:176b. For its significance there see my book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira* [in Hebrew], Schocken publishing house, Tel-Aviv 2000, pp. 135-13; and in my article 'Earth Shaker: Rashbi's Aloneness' (in Hebrew). *Judaism: Topics, Fragments, Faces Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka hurwitz* (eds. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir), The Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007, pp. 346-354. This article, as all my articles mentioned below, may be read also in my website: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar>

⁸ *On the Mysteries* (mentioned above), pp. 196-199. This good English translation stands there in the counter pages of the Greek original.

⁹ The editors note here correctly, that *antitheos* (=anti-god) was originally a Homeric epithet meaning "equal to a god" and only in a later stage took on its evil meaning. The case of *sitra ahara* is quite similar. This seems to be a *Zoharic* coinage, but even in the *Zohar* it may mean just a neutral 'other side', though in most places it takes on the evil meaning, as a technical term for the world of Satan and its demons. The Greek term *antitheos* might conceivably play a role in the crystallization of its *Zoharic* counterpart *sitra ahara*.

¹⁰ See the editors' introduction to the above-mentioned *On the Mysteries*.

¹¹ See *The Chaldean Oracles*: Text, translation and commentary by Ruth Majercik. Brill 1989, introduction, p. 21, note 56.

¹² All the fragments are collected in the above-mentioned *The Chaldean Oracles*.

¹³ *Zohar* 1:99b-100b.

¹⁴ *Genesis* 25:6. For this interpretation of the verse cf. *TB Sanhedrin* 91a.

¹⁵ See Dorit Cohen-Alloro, *Magic and Sorcery in the Zohar* (in Hebrew), Doctoral Dissertation (under the supervision of Prof. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer), Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 100-104, 229 (our *Zoharic* passage is cited there on page 101).

¹⁶ Cohen-Alloro (*ibidem*), p. 101, says that the *Zohar* 'represents' (*matsig*) this secret as included in eastern books of wisdom, and in page 369 note 10 she talks about the literary 'motive' of finding wisdom in ancient books.

¹⁷ See Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish mysticism*, Schocken, New York 1961, p. 174: "The whole book [namely: the *Zohar*] is full of fictitious quotations and other bogus references to imaginary writings..."

¹⁸ His name is Semitic, and means: 'He shall be king'.

¹⁹ See the editors' introduction to the above-mentioned *On the Mysteries*.

²⁰ See *ibidem*, pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.

²¹ *Genesis* 17:5. The pronunciation in Iamblichus' time may still have been: *ab hamon*, which in Greek, that does not have an h in the middle of a word, becomes *Abamon*.

²² See my above-mentioned book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, p. 297 note 57.

²³ Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, I 161-168.

²⁴ See my above-mentioned book *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, part 4; and my article 'A Greek Contribution to the Faith of Abraham' (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 71, 2002, pp. 249-254.

²⁵ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, 'Severus Alexander', xxix 2.

²⁶ See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1980, vol. 2, pp. 484-485.

²⁷ See my 'Eros and Anteros on Jordan River' (in Hebrew), in: *Life as a Midrash: Perspectives in Jewish Psychology* (eds. S. Arzy, M. Fachler, B. Kahana), Yediot aharonot / Sifrei Hemed, Tel-Aviv 2004, pp. 158-167.