

«IN A WHISPER»:
ON TRANSMISSION OF *SHI'UR QOMAH*
AND KABBALISTIC SECRETS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

1. *On Continuities and Discontinuities: Inter-Continental Translatio Secretorum*

More than other forms of mysticism, the various Jewish mystics have been preoccupied with the religious sources of the specific knowledge they were acquainted with, the question of transmission and the very praxis of transmission.¹ Whether or not indeed transmission played historically an important role in the lengthy history of Jewish mysticism is a question which scholars may debate, but rhetoric dealing with transmission and its practices can be discerned in many Jewish sources. The existence of such rhetoric does not mean that such actual practices of transmission ne-

¹ See E.R. WOLFSON, *Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine*, in «Jewish Quarterly Review», LXXVIII, 1987, pp. 77-112; ID., *Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. by Y. ELMAN – I. GERSHONI, London-New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 166-224; ID., *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 234-247; ID., *Circumcision, Secrecy, and the Veiling of the Veil: Phallogomorphic Exposure and Kabbalistic Esotericism*, in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. by E.W. MARK, Hanover-London, Brandeis University Press, 2003, pp. 58-70; ID., *Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Medieval Kabbalah*, in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in Western Esotericism*, ed. by W.J. HAANEGRAF – J.J. KRIPAL, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2008, pp. 65-109. See also M. IDEL, *Transmission in the Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah*, in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions*, cit., pp. 138-164; for some examples of earlier transmission of secret knowledge see ID., *Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names*, in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. by R.A. HERRERA, New York, Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 97-122; ID., *Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona*, in «Hispania Judaica», V, 2007, pp. 69-113; ID., *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, London-New York, Continuum, 2007, *passim* and ID., *Revelation and the 'Crisis' of Tradition in Kabbalah 1475-1575*, in *Constructing Tradition, Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, ed. by A.B. KILCHER, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 255-291.

cessarily existed, but this issue deserves nevertheless a close examination. The historical fact that major chapters in Jewish mysticism have been written in Europe, relatively late, since the end of the first millennium of C.E., was not part of the self-understanding of most of the Jewish mystics, and they were not, at least not consciously, obsessed by the issue of ruptures with ancient Jewish forms of esotericism. However, ruptures there were, and from an historical point of view, many of them were quite dramatical. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there was no continuity at all. After all, in all its phases, Jewish mysticism operated within Jewish societies that survived most of the vicissitudes of history, resorted to the same sacred language, Hebrew, in most of its forms, accepted the authority of the same canonical books, the biblical and the Rabbinic, and of the late antiquity books like *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Shi'ur Qomah*; and, last but not least, those communities followed, practically, the same religious rituals. The existence of these basic cultural conditions, allows the possibility, at least in principle, of the transmission of some ancient secrets, over centuries, and thus some form of continuity in the esoteric aspects of Jewish mysticism. Continuity, however, should be understood properly: in human affairs there is no continuity without change. This is, obviously, the case even in the manner other bodies of Jewish thought, the exoteric ones, were both transmitted and elaborated, especially Halakhah, prayer, or Hebrew language. I would say that continuity in a learning society involves changes, accretions, glossa, misinterpretations in different directions, as part of the continuous consume of texts and their transmission. A living culture is capable to continue by naturally and incessantly changing. A comparison of the bewildering situation of the many variants found Hebrew manuscripts of the same work, especially the Ashkenazi ones, with classical texts of dead cultures, like the Greek one, shows how little those basic texts changed because the society that produced them had vanished and they were not studied intensively by many groups over centuries as part of a substantial actual matter for their life.²

The arrival of Jewish esoterica to Central and Western Europe from the East, both the land of Israel and from Babylonia, is most probably a long process, which took place on more than one channel. Almost no solid evidence as to the specific channels of transmission is available beyond some legends. The most important trajectory seems to be the Byzantine

² See D. ABRAMS, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, Jerusalem-Los Angeles, Magnes-Cherub, 2011.

one, which includes also the Southern Italian regions, already in the ninth century.³ In my opinion, more than one tradition related to esoteric issues can be discerned from the available material from the Jewish Southern Italian material.⁴ At the same time, we have evidence as to the existence of esoteric traditions among Jewish in Lyon, France, which may constitute the earliest evidence for acquaintance with Jewish esoteric topics in Europe.⁵ This process may be better understood as part of the much wider arrival of many forms of knowledge, non-Jewish and Jewish, religious and otherwise, from the Middle East to Europe during the later centuries of the first millennium of the C.E. which has been described by Moses Gaster in some of his studies.⁶ Indeed there are sufficient indications that

³ See R. BONFIL, *Myth, Rhetoric, History? A Study in the Chronicle of Abima'atz* [Hebrew], in *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry, Studies Dedicated to the memory of Haim Hillel ben Sasson*, ed. by M. BEN SASSON – R. BONFIL – J. and R. HACKER, Jerusalem, The Zalman Shazar Center, 1989, pp. 99-135 and ID., *Tra due mondi: Prospettive di ricerca sulla storia culturale degli ebrei nell'Italia meridionale nell'Alto Medioevo*, in *Italia Judaica*, I [1983], p. 149 note 54, and now of the same author: *History and Folklore in a Medieval Jewish Chronicle: The Family Chronicle of Ab ima'az ben Paltiel*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2009, especially pp. 58ff. See also the introduction of Ezra Fleischer to his edition of *The Poems of Shelomo ha-Bavli* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1973, pp. 29-30; J. DAN, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik, 1968, pp. 18-20; I. WEINSTOCK, *The Discovery of Abu Abaron of Baghdad's Legacy of Secrets* [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», XXXII, 1963, pp. 153-159; G. SCHOLEM, *Has Abu Abaron's Legacy of Secrets Been Discovered?* [Hebrew], *ibid.*, pp. 252-265 and the rejoinder of Weinstock, *The Treasury of 'Secrets' of Abu Abaron – Imagination or Reality?* [Hebrew], in «Sinai», LIV, 1964, pp. 226-259. See also: E. URBACH, *R. Abraham ben Azriel, 'Arugat ha-Bosem* [Hebrew], IV, Jerusalem, Mekize Nirdamim, 1963, p. 73 note 4; D. ABRAMS, *The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism*, in «Shofar», XII, 1994, p. 68; S. TZFATMAN, *The Jewish Tale in the Middle Ages, Between Ashkenaz and Sefarad* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1993, pp. 139-142 and pp. 146-148; and more recently, J. DAN, *The 'Unique Cberub' Circle*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1999, pp. 210-212. For transmission in medieval Jewish culture is the two recent monographs by Micha PERRY, *Tradition and Transformation: Knowledge Transmission among European Jews in the Middle Ages*, Tel Aviv, Haqibutz ha-Me'uhad, 2010 (Hebrew) and Talya FISHMAN, *Becoming the People of the Talmud, Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, Philadelphia, Penn University Press, 2011.

⁴ M. IDEL, *From Italy to Ashkenaz and Back: On the Circulation of Jewish Mystical Traditions*, in «Kabbalah», XIV, 2006, pp. 47-94.

⁵ R. BONFIL, *The Cultural and Religious Traditions of French Jewry in the Ninth Century as Reflected in the Writings of Agobard of Lyon*, in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby* [Hebrew], ed. by J. DAN – J. HACKER, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1986, pp. 327-348; E. KANARFOGEL, *'Peering through the Lattices': Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2000, pp. 27-28; M. IDEL, *The Evil Thought of the Deity* [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», XLIX, 1980, pp. 356-357.

⁶ See M. GASTER, *Ilchester Lectures on Greeko-Slavonic Literature*, Truebner & Co., Ludgate Hill, London, 1887; id., *Literatura populara romana*, ed. by M. ANGELESCU, Bucuresti, Minerva, 1983². On his views of Jewish mysticism in general see M. IDEL, *Moses Gaster on Jewish Mysticism and the Book of the Zohar* [Hebrew], in *New Developments in Zohar Studies* («Te'uda», XXI-XXII), ed. by R. MEROZ, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University, 2007, pp. 111-127. For a massive

transmission of esoteric material was already practice by Jews in the East in the 10th century⁷ and claims for such a transmission recur, as we shall see below, also later on in Kabbalah in Europe. This complex process of cultural transmission has its main centers, channels of transmissions, which means geographical trajectories, mobile persons, people concerned with esoteric issues and merchants, and manuscripts and books involved in these processes. It generated a variety of spiritual schools, philosophical and more mystical, esoteric and exoteric, first in the Southern parts of Europe and, with the time, they moved to the more Northern parts of the continent.⁸ There the most elaborated form of Jewish mysticism have been flowered since late 12th century, in Germany, France, Provence, and then Spain, Italy and the Byzantine Empire. Since late 15th century, Kabbalah started to move more and more to the East, creating the most important form of Kabbalah in Safed during the second third of the 16th century.⁹ However, even then the dialogue with Europe did not stop.¹⁰ Later on, Kabbalistic literature, especially the Safedian one, radiated into many centers of the Jewish world, generating Sabbateanism in the 17th century, Frankism and East European Hasidism in the 18th century and since then in many corners of the world.

It goes without saying that the importance of the rhetoric of faithful transmission notwithstanding, much if not all of the older esoteric traditions might be lost, certainly many of the surviving themes misunderstood, or misinterpreted, as part of the historical vicissitudes and of the cultural upheavals related to strong cultural encounters, with Greek, Hellenistic, Christian and Muslim developments. It is futile, in my opinion, to attempt to reconstruct pieces of information that have been transmitted orally over so many centuries ago. Nevertheless, more recently scholars have pointed out to the impact of Jewish theologoumena on ancient Gnostic themes. On

survey of many issues that are pertinent to Gaster's general scheme see the recent analyses of the arrival of the dualistic theories from the East to Western Europe by Y. STOYANOV, *The Other God, Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Catbar Heresy*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 65-123.

⁷ IDEL, *Defining Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 99-103.

⁸ S. SVIRI, *Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: The Cases of Babya ibn Paquda and Judah Halevi*, in «Donaire», VI, 1996, pp. 78-83.

⁹ M. IDEL, *On Mobility, Individuals and Groups: Prolegomenon for a Sociological Approach to Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah*, in «Kabbalah», III, 1998, pp. 145-176.

¹⁰ M. IDEL, *Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy: Toward an Interactive History of Sixteenth Century Kabbalah*, in *Cultural Intermediaries, Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, ed. by D.B. RUDERMAN – G. VELTRI, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 239-269.

the other side the recent studies of some parts of the Qumran literature reveals plenty of secrets that were part of a Jewish sect.¹¹ In writings of early Christian authors, the existence of Jewish esoteric traditions is testified¹² as it is the case in the pseudepigraphic literature in late antiquity, some of Jewish extraction.¹³ In short we should better speak about a «stream of traditions» of Jewish esoteric themes and myths, some ancient, some of late antiquity, which arrived in different waves, to Europe already during the second half of the first millennium C.E. The assumption of such a stream means that older views do not necessarily change in one center, when in a certain part of the Jewish world a certain theme has been treated differently, but we may speak about the coexistence of older themes and their later interpretations in the same body of literature. This is part of the accumulative nature of Jewish culture, and Jewish mysticism as part of it.

2. *The Stream of Jewish Esoterica*

Unlike the two more recent manners of explaining «the origins» of Jewish mysticism in ancient times, that of continuity related to ancient priestly traditions,¹⁴ and that of discontinuity, that presents some of the main texts as a reaction to Christianity,¹⁵ my assumption is that the processes involved are far more complex than either of these two.¹⁶ There

¹¹ S.I. THOMAS, *The Mysteries of Qumran: Mystery, Secrecy, and Esotericism in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2010.

¹² G.G. STROUMSA, *Hidden Wisdom, Esoteric Traditions & the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, Leiden, Brill, 1996.

¹³ See especially *The Wisdom of Solomon, The Apocalypse of Abraham* and the Enochic literature. See A. KULIK, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha, Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham*, Leiden, Brill, 2004. See also several studies of Andrei Orlov on *The Apocalypse* and D. BOYARIN, *Beyond Judaism: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism*, in «Journal for the Study of Judaism», XLI, 2010, pp. 323-365: 353.

¹⁴ R. ELIOR, *The Three Temples. On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*, Oxford-Portland, Littman Library, 2004. The thesis of the priestly tradition was, originally, formulated by Ithamar Gruenwald: see his *The Impact of Priestly Traditions on the Creation of Merkabah Mysticism and Shi'ur Qomah* [Hebrew], in *The Early Jewish Mysticism*, ed. by J. DAN, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 65-120. However, Elior elaborated upon this thesis at great length, and took it well beyond Gruenwald's original scope.

¹⁵ P. SCHÄFER, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, e.g. pp. 32-33, where he envisioned some basic topics in Heikhalot literature as basically a reaction to Christian claims. In my opinion, this hypothesis has not been proved philologically but is part of his more general vision that Christianity and Judaism are ways that never parted.

¹⁶ IDEL, *Ben*, cit., pp. 1-57.

is no reason to subscribe to one single reductive assumption in order to be able to understand the numerous lines of esoteric traditions that cross the diverse forms of Judaism, and some other cognate phenomena, like early Christianity,¹⁷ Gnosticism,¹⁸ Hermeticism,¹⁹ and some forms of esoteric Islam, in order to understand the cardinal role played by the welter of themes that was available in late antiquity in Jewish groups. On the other hand, there are no doubt also additional important influences stemming from non-Jewish sources, on Jewish esoteric.²⁰ We have at our disposition material that may help describing this complexity.²¹ Without taking all the various forms of Jewish esoteric material seriously, it will be quite a precarious academic enterprise.

I assume the existence in late antiquity of a wide spectrum of themes, myths and techniques, hardly part of one systematic structure, or emerging from one single specific group, which survived in a written manner, though

¹⁷ See STROUMSA, *Hidden Wisdom*, cit.

¹⁸ See, e.g., B.A. PEARSON, *Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of the Gnostic Self-Definition*, in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. by E. P. SANDERS, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1980, pp. 151-160; ID., *Jewish Sources in Gnostic Literature*, in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, II, ed. by M.E. STONE, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984, pp. 443-481; ID., *Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature*, in *Armenian and Biblical Studies*, ed. by M. E. STONE, Jerusalem, St. James Press, 1976, pp. 70-80; ID., *Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX, 3), in «Harvard Theological Review», LXXIII, 1980, pp. 311-319; G. MACRAE, *The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth*, in «Novum Testamentum», XII, 1970, pp. 86-101; E.M. YAMAUCHI, *The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism*, in «Tyndale Bulletin», XXIX, 1978, pp. 143-175; R. McL. WILSON, «*Jewish Gnosis and Gnostic Origins: A Survey*», in «Hebrew Union College Annual», XLV, 1974, pp. 177-189; J.C. REEVES, *An Enochic Motif in Manichaean Tradition*, in *Manichaica Selecta, Studies presented to Professor Julien Ries on the occasion of his seventieth*, ed. by A. VAN TONGERLOO – S. GIVERSEN, Lovanii, 1991, pp. 295-98; ID., *Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Manichaean literature: the influence of the Enochic library*, in *Tracing the Threads, Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by J.C. REEVES, Atlanta GA, Scholars Press, 1994, pp. 173-203; ID., *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony*, Cincinnati, HUC Press, 1992.

¹⁹ B.A. PEARSON, *Jewish Elements in Corpus Hermeticum I [Poimandres]*, in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel*, ed. by R. VAN DEN BROEK – M.J. VERMASEREN, Leiden, Brill, 1981, pp. 336-348; M. PHILONENKO, *Une Allusion de l'Asclepius au livre d'Enoch*, in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Graeco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. by J. NEUSNER, Leiden, Brill, 1975, pp. 161-163; G.G. STROUMSA, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*, Leiden, Brill, 1984, pp. 137-143. For the impact of Hermeticism on Judaism see M. IDEL, *Hermeticism and Judaism*, in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. by I. MERKEL – A. DEBUS, New Jersey, Cranbury, 1988, pp. 59-76; ID., *Hermeticism and Kabbalah*, in *Hermeticism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by P. LUCENTINI – I. PARRI – V.P. COMPAGNI, Thournout, Brepols, 2004, pp. 389-408.

²⁰ For an Iranian example see IDEL, *The Evil Thought of the Deity*, cit., pp. 356-364.

²¹ M. SCHNEIDER, *The Appearance of the High Priest: Theophany, Apotheosis and Binitarian Theology From Priestly Tradition of the Second Temple Period through Ancient Jewish Mysticism* [Hebrew], Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2007.

part of them have probably been transmitted also orally. Thus, it is better to assume a variety of continuities and discontinuities; some of the earlier themes radiated from the ancient centers of Jewish cultures, and affected medieval forms of Jewish mysticism and were affected by their inclusion within wider types of order.²²

In some of my studies, I proposed to distinguish between two vectors that cross most of the phases of Jewish mystical literatures: the theophanic and the hypostatic.²³ Let me adduce some few data related to one of the earliest available document that deeply informed Jewish thought over centuries, which is an important part of what I call the theophanic vector in Jewish mysticism, *Sefer Shi'ur Qomah*.²⁴ The booklet deals with the gigantic sizes of the divine limbs and with the mysterious names related to them. It has been interpreted in a variety of directions by many Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists, but we may discern some basic trends, represented by more than one individual writer: 1) the book deals with the anthropomorphic structure of the world of angels, a theory that runs through the history of Jewish mysticism;²⁵ 2) the book deals with one or more divine powers within the theosophical structure of the Kabbalists. Especially important is an epistle of the late 13th early 14th century R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, which assumed that the anthropomorphic structure, including the concept of *Shi'ur Qomah*, is found within the highest divine level, a view that influenced Kabbalists in Safed;²⁶ 3) It reflects some form of allegory for the sizes of the cosmology.²⁷

Its content and date have been a challenge to modern scholarship. The book, in the various manuscript formats it reached us²⁸ has been described

²² M. IDEL, *On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah*, in «Daat», L-LII, 2003, pp. XXXI–LVIII.

²³ See IDEL, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, cit., pp. 1-7 and the footnotes, where earlier studies have been mentioned.

²⁴ Below I adduce only what seems to me to be serious and original contribution to the topics found in this book, which is vast and requires a separate analysis, which cannot be done here.

²⁵ See M. IDEL, *The World of Angels in Human Form* [Hebrew], in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism Philosophy and Ethical Literature*, cit., pp. 1-66. The later article has been reprinted and updated in my *Angelic World – Apotheosis and Theophany* [Hebrew], Tel Aviv, 2008, pp. 19-73.

²⁶ See ID., *The Image of Man above the Sefirot: R. David ben Yehuda he-Hasid's Theosophy of Ten Supernal sabbat and its Reverberations*, in «Kabbalah», XX, 2009, pp. 181-212. See below the discussions in section 5 and especially in the *Book Temunah*.

²⁷ A. ALTMANN, *Moses Narboni's Epistle on Shiur Qoma, Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. by A. ALTMANN, Cambridge Mass., 1967, pp. 225-288. See also below note 43.

²⁸ See M.S. COHEN, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1985, who printed not only the different versions of the text but also some of its reverberations and variants

by the above mentioned Moses Gaster as quite ancient,²⁹ counteracting the view of his revered teacher, Heinrich Graetz, who envisioned this book as a later, post-Islamic forgery.³⁰ Gaster's early datation has been confirmed by a series of serious studies, which may be summarized as Gershom Scholem did by describing it as to be «counted among the earliest possessions of Jewish Gnosticism³¹». ³² More recently, Howard Jackson has pointed out the ancient sources of divine figures that possess gigantic sizes, some of Mesopotamian origins, and related them to *Shi'ur Qomah*,³³ Shmaryahu Talmon noticed the existence of the phrase *Shi'ur Qomah* in a Qumran Psalm,³⁴ while Charles Mopsik pointed out to the plausible possibility that the expression *Shi'ur Qomah* was found also in the New Testament.³⁵ Especially interesting are the affinities between the very title of the book and phrases found the Slavonic version of Enoch.³⁶ Affinities between

in the Middle Ages and ID., *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, Lanham – New York – London, 1983; see also D. ABRAMS, *The Dimensions of the Creator – Contradiction or Paradox? Corruptions and Accretions to the Manuscript Witnesses*, in «Kabbalah» V, 2000, pp. 35-53 and J. DAN, *The Concept of Knowledge in Shi'ur Qomah*, in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History, Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Alabama, 1979, pp. 67-73; and see especially M. SCHNEIDER, 'Joseph and Osnat' and Early Jewish Mysticism [Hebrew], in «Kabbalah», III, 1998, pp. 302-344: 325-326, 333-338.

²⁹ M. GASTER, *Das Shiur Komah*, in «Monatschrift fuer Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums», 37 (1893), pp. 213-230, reprinted in ID., *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, II, London, 1925-1928, pp. 1330-1353.

³⁰ See H. GRAETZ, *Gnosticismus und Judentum*, Krotoschin, 1846.

³¹ The term Gnosticism in the specific context is no more accepted by scholars.

³² G. SCHOLEM, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, Schocken Books, 1960, pp. 63-67, especially p. 66 and ID., *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960, pp. 36-42, especially p. 37 note 7 (see also Saul Lieberman's Hebrew «Appendix», *ibid.*, pp. 118-126) and ID., *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, New York, Schocken Books, 1991, pp. 15-55, especially p. 33; I. GRUENWALD, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden-Köln, Brill, 1980, pp. 213 note 14 and R. LOEWE, *The Divine Garment and Shi'ur Qomah*, in «Harvard Theological Review», 58 (1965), pp. 153-160.

³³ H.M. JACKSON, *The Origins and Development of Shi'ur Qomah Revelation in Jewish Mysticism*, in «Journal for the Study of Judaism», XXXI, 2000, pp. 373-415.

³⁴ S. TALMON, *Hebrew Apocryphic Psalms in Qumran* [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», 35 (1966), pp. 223-224.

³⁵ C. MOPSIK, *La datation du Shiour Qomah d'après un texte néotestamentaire*, in «Revue des Sciences Religieuses», II, 1994, pp. 341-361, reprinted in ID., *Chemins de la cabale*, Paris-Tel Aviv, l'Éclat, 2004, pp. 309-319.

³⁶ See SCHOLEM, *The Mystical Shape*, cit., p. 29, where he pointed out to the occurrence of the very expression parallel to *Shi'ur Qomah* in the *Slavonic Enoch*; A.A. ORLOV, *Without Measure and Without Analogy: Shiur Qomah Traditions in 2 (Slavonic) Enoch*, in «Journal of Jewish Studies», 56 (2005), pp. 224-244, or A. SCHMELOWSZKY, *A la recherche d'un dialogue perdu: les*

the anthropomorphic aspects of the book and an untitled Gnostic text preserved in Coptic have been pointed out by scholars.³⁷ Thus, the sources of the concepts and of some descriptions found in the extant versions of this book, whose date of composition is far from clear, are ancient, and related to Jewish esoterica, even if there are some plausible earlier sources in Mesopotamia.

In some of these more recent studies written in Hebrew the importance of the names of the divine limbs in the extant Hebrew versions of *Shi'ur Qomah* has been put in relief.³⁸ The book remained available for most of the phases of Jewish mysticism. This is obvious in the various schools flowering in Germany in the 12th and 13th century.³⁹ Important for our topic here is the fact that this book, as well as other, was described by R. Eleazar of Worms, as transmitted as a secret.⁴⁰ Though the more mature Maimonides was highly critical of this book, many philosophers did not.⁴¹ There is evidence that sometimes before 1275, a Kabbalist even at-

antécédents du débat sur Origène, in «Kabbalah», 6 (2001), pp. 11-44. Compare also to G.G. STROUMSA, *Savoir et Salut*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1992, pp. 65-84, especially p. 69.

³⁷ See SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, cit., p. 364 note 72, p. 365 note 89; M. IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1988, p. 115, p. 120, p. 192, p. 329 note 23, p. 333 note 64, p. 334 note 86, pp. 371-372 note 147; ID., *The Image of Man above the Sefirot*, cit., p. 196; MOPSIK, *Chemins de la cabale*, cit., p. 321 note 6; A. GREEN, *Keter, The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 30 and p. 42, note 2.

³⁸ See, especially, the excellent study dealing with the series of names in *Shi'ur Qomah* by A. FARBER-GINAT, *Inquiries in Shi'ur Qomah* [Hebrew], in *Massu'ot, Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. by M. ORON and A. GOLDBREICH, Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik, 1994, pp. 361-394 and M. IDEL, *The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah* [Hebrew], in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 1 (1981), pp. 23-84; ID., *The World of Angels in Human Form*, cit. In this last study I reviewed the major interpretations of this book, see pp. 1-2 (now 19-20), including the view that it has to do with the sizes of angels, a topic to which I dedicated the entire article. Compare, however, now the claim of SCHÄFER, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, cit., pp. 32-33 and pp. 306-317. As to my warning, which became a prediction, against the neglecting Assi Farber-Ginat's important article by scholars writing on Heikhalot in English, see already my *Ben*, cit., p. 123.

³⁹ See G. SCHOLEM, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah* [Hebrew], Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, Schocken, 1948, pp. 212-238; DAN, *The Esoteric Theology*, cit., pp. 138-139; E.R. WOLFSON, *Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of Haside Ashkenaz*, in *Mysticism, Magic, and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, ed. by K.E. GROEZINGER – J. DAN, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1995, pp. 60-92; E. KANAR-FOGEL, *Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz: the Case of Anthropomorphism*, in *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics, Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, ed. by D. FRANK – M. GOLDISH, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2008, pp. 117-159, and A. AFTERMAN, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew], Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2011, pp. 130-131.

⁴⁰ See the passage from R. Eleazar of Worms's writings, to be discussed below in section 2.

⁴¹ R. JOSPE, *Maimonides and Shi'ur Qomah* [Hebrew], in *Tribute to Sara: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Presented to Professor Sara O. Heller Wilensky*, ed. by M. IDEL – D.

tributed to the *Guide of the Perplexed* an interpretation related to *Shi'ur Qomah*, which may indeed reflect an attempt to counteract the anti-anthropomorphic approach of the *Guide*.⁴² Even a more faithful commentator on Maimonides' *Guide*, R. Shem Tov ben Joseph, described one of his chapters, I:72, as dealing with the *Shi'ur Qomah* of the world, assuming that Maimonides transferred the theological depiction of the original book to cosmology.⁴³ Needless to say, Kabbalists were much more positively inclined to this book.⁴⁴ As to the apothotic vector, related to the Enochic literatures and its reverberation, is represented by a vast amount of discussions, where Enoch is openly described as a paradigmatic figure, which have been discussed already in some of my studies and by others,⁴⁵ and I would like not to repeat the issue here.⁴⁶ Within each of the developments in the two vectors there were substantial changes, a fact that does not mean there was no continuation. Indeed, as a major scholar of late antiquity formulated the situation in Christianity, the Middle Ages are a direct continuation of late antiquity.⁴⁷ Let me emphasize that the antiquity of the secrets and their hypothetical continuous transmission do not mean that

DIMANT – S. ROSENBERG, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1994, pp. 195-209 and M. KELLNER, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Jewish Mysticism*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 54, 181, 281. See the more positive reception discussed in D. BLUMENTHAL, *A Philosophical-Mystical Interpretation of a Shiur Qomah Text*, in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism; Proceedings of Regional Conferences Held... in 1978*, ed. by J. DAN and F. TALMAGE, Cambridge MA, Association for Jewish Studies, 1982, pp. 153-172.

⁴² See the critique of R. Zerayah ben She'altiel Hen of Barcelona, active however in Rome, printed by R. KIRCHEIM, *'Otzar Nehmad*, II, Wien, 1857, p. 133. On this passage see M. IDEL, *R. Abraham Abulafia's Writings and Doctrine* [Hebrew], Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976, p. 40 note 28, and A. RAVITZKY, *History and Faith, Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, Amsterdam, J.G. Gieben, 1996, pp. 265-266 where a different English translation of this text has been offered. See also now M. IDEL, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011, pp. 159-160.

⁴³ See *The Guide of the Perplexed* with four commentators (Jerusalem, 1960), fol. 110a. See already the anonymous Kabbalist who authored the ecstatic treatise *Ner 'Elohim*, ed. by A. GROSS, Jerusalem, 2002, p. 72, where he speaks about *Shi'ur Qomah* as *Shi'ur ba-'Olam*, since the consonants of *Qomah* and *'Olam* amount to the same numerical valence, 151.

⁴⁴ Some few aspects of this issue will be dealt with immediately below. This is a very rich topic and much material is found in many manuscripts, and I hope to deal with it elsewhere.

⁴⁵ V.D. ARBEL, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkabah Literature*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2003, or A.A. ORLOV, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 2005.

⁴⁶ See IDEL, *Ben*, cit., especially pp. 118-124 and 645-670, and my earlier studies in Hebrew mentioned there. Also in the case of Enoch's ascent on high, as in his speculation about *Shi'ur Qomah*, Peter Schäfer sees a reaction to Christianity: see his *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, cit., p. 33. See, however, plenty of scholars he does not refer to, who hold the opposite view, and especially now, after the publication of Schäfer's book, in BOYARIN, *Beyond Judaism*, cit., p. 357.

⁴⁷ See the introduction of Henri-Irénée Marrou in ID., *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, Paris, É. De Boccard, 1983.

they are Jewish, namely that they were not influenced by other cultures. Like in late antiquity, also earlier Jews interacted with a variety of other cultures, and this interaction remained a constant in the development of Jewish mysticism in the various cultural contexts.

3. *Three Types of Transmission of Esoterica*

Let me distinguish between three type of transmission of Jewish esoteric: that of specific books, which I call the cultural one, or what I called macro-chains; that of secrets, either related to books or not, which is oral and is close to initiation, what I call micro-chains,⁴⁸ and finally the diffuse transmission, namely the penetration of esoteric topics in literatures, which are not esoteric, like the Talmud and Midrash, some parts of the poetic literatures since the sixth century up to 13th century, and in some forms of magic. The first has been described tentatively in the previous sections, and it is too complex to be dealt with here since it consists of vast literatures. *Shi'ur Qomah* as a specific text was indubitably transmitted on three continents already toward the end of the first millennium C.E. The third type of transmission assumes that some themes taken from the esoteric books, but they were disseminated while incorporated later on in exoteric books. In the case of *Shi'ur Qomah*, for example, the Talmudic discussions of the gigantic size of the angels, reflect a mode of thought that is characteristic of *Shi'ur Qomah*.⁴⁹ In the case of the poetic literature and its traditional commentaries, the existence of views about the gigantic size of the Torah, reflects this type of thought. This is true in the case of Palestinian poetry of the sixth century and later, and of Ashkenazi poetry since the 11th century, and their commentaries, much of which is still in manuscripts.⁵⁰ Likewise, discussions on the transmission of divine names or of the qualities necessary to receive esoteric knowledge occur in many cases in Talmudic literature, some of which not found elsewhere, as we shall see below. This is the reason why too neat a distinction between the various

⁴⁸ For the two concepts see IDEL, *Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah*, cit., p. 139.

⁴⁹ See *Hagigah*, fol. 13a and the discussion in FARBBER-GINAT, *Inquiries in Shi'ur Qomah*, cit., pp. 365-366.

⁵⁰ See IDEL, *The Concept of the Torah*, cit., pp. 34-47 and E.R. WOLFSON, *Along the Path*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 4-9. For another remarkable reverberation of this book in poetry see T. MALAKHI, *The Shi'ur Qomah of the Holy Beasts and the Seat of Glory in the Poem of Yeshbu'a bar Khalfab* [Hebrew], in «Mahut», 2/VII, 1990, pp. 129-132.

Jewish corpora, necessary to understand some specific aspects of the stream of Jewish esoteric, in general it is both artificial and often times unhelpful.⁵¹ However, studying the occurrence of the individual themes found in esoteric treatises, in contexts that are exoteric, may help dating the history of those books or at least help in a history of ideas related to Jewish esoterica.

We are concerned here not so much with the content of historical and cultural transmission, which consists basically of transition of books, or the very image of such an event, but with the second type, that deals with the transmission of oral secret knowledge from one person to another, what I call micro-chain of transmission. While cultural transmission may take place between individuals that did not even read the books they bring from one place to another, the esoteric transmission is a matter of two or more individuals, who are concerned with the secret topics to be taught, and this is basically an oral event. This is the reason why the transmission related to the micro-chain, deals more with unwritten material than with written books, though in the following we shall be concerned with the transmission of secret meanings found within or related to canonical books. It is more a matter of initiation than of passing knowledge or information from one individual to another. There are sufficient sources to realize at least the fact that such a transmission was imagined to have been important by Jewish mystics, in some cases even we may assume that such a transition may indeed take place, and the nature of the topics that were imagined to have been transmitted have been mentioned, though not necessarily the specific details that were transmitted.

In addition to the cultural and the esoteric transmissions, which assume a contact between cultures before the emergence of the main schools in European Jewish mysticism, there are also cases of the surfacing of books in Europe, after the emergence of some esoteric Jewish schools, and they two may be a significant factor in the continuity of medieval Jewish mysticism and earlier Jewish ways of thought not adopted by Rabbinism. Such an example is the quotes from the pseudepigraphic ancient Jewish book *Wisdom of Solomon* in Catalonia of mid-13th century.⁵² I assume that also

⁵¹ See IDEL, *Ben*, cit., pp. 110-112.

⁵² On this issue see A. MARX, *An Aramaic Fragment of the Wisdom of Solomon*, in «Journal of Biblical Literature», 40 (1921), pp. 57-69; G. SCHOLEM, *On The Major Wisdom of Solomon and R. Abraham ha-Levi the Older* [Hebrew], in «Kiryat Sefer», 1 (1924/1925), pp. 163-164; D. ABRAMS, *The 'Book of Illumination' of R. Jacob ben Jacob Hacoben* [Hebrew], Ph.D. diss., New York, New York University, 1993, pp. 216-17. For another example, which has to do less

other books surfaced during the 13th century, like Enochic books,⁵³ and they contributed to the emergence of Kabbalistic creativity, and to their pseudepigraphic *imaginaire*.

4. *Transmission by Whispering concerning Shi'ur Qomah: Two Non-Kabbalistic Cases*

In a series of Rabbinic statements, it is said that a certain tradition regarding the creation of the world from the primordial light, has been received in a whisper and it should be transmitted in a whisper.⁵⁴ In the Talmudic list of qualities, required in order to receive the secret topics also the biblical phrase *Navon labash*⁵⁵ is mentioned, which means «someone who understands [things] transmitted in a whisper»,⁵⁶ namely that he is able to receive esoteric matters, which are transmitted orally, in a whisper.⁵⁷ This means a one-to-one type of transmission, mentioned also elsewhere when dealing with the Account of Merkavah.⁵⁸

When dealing with the transmission of the divine names, an issue discussed in many different sources, we learn from Gaonic sources, written toward the end of the first millennium C.E., was done from the mouth of a Rabbi to that of another.⁵⁹ When dealing with the technique of contemplating the divine chariot of the Hekhalot literature, whispering of names is mentioned again.⁶⁰ However, I am more concerned here with

with a book as with a theme see, e.g., Y. LIEBES, *The Kabbalistic Myth as Told by Orpheus* [Hebrew], in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume*, I, ed. by M. IDEL – W.Z. HARVEY – E. SCHWEID, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 425-459 and the abridged English translation in Y. LIEBES, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 65-92.

⁵³ See IDEL, *Enoch is Metatron* [Hebrew], in «Immanuel», XXIV-XXV, 1990, pp. 220-2240 and ID., *Ben*, cit., pp. 414-416.

⁵⁴ See *Leviticus Rabba* XXXI:7, *Midrash Tevilim on Psalm 104, Palestinian Talmud, Beit-zab*, fol. 9a, and the important remarks by A. ALTMANN, *A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation*, in «Journal of Jewish Studies», 6-7 (1955/1956), pp. 195-206: 203-205; SCHOLEM, *Jewish Gnosticism*, cit., p. 58; WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum*, cit., pp. 234-247; IDEL, *Defining Kabbalah*, cit., p. 102 and ID., *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 207.

⁵⁵ See *Isaiah* 3:3.

⁵⁶ *Hagigab*, fol. 13a.

⁵⁷ SCHOLEM, *Jewish Gnosticism*, cit., p. 58.

⁵⁸ *Mishnah, Hagigab*, II:1. On this passage see D. HALPERIN, *The Merkabab in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1980, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁹ See IDEL, *Defining Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 99-103.

⁶⁰ See the report found in the passage of R. Hai Gaon, as discussed in M. IDEL, *The Mystical*

the response of R. Sherira Gaon and his son, R. Hai, two important legalistic authorities active in Babylonia at the end of the 10th and early 11th century. When asked about the meaning of *Shi'ur Qomah* by unidentified persons in Fez, Northern Africa, whether R. Ishm'a'el heard it from the mouth of his master, and the master from his master, as Halakhah to Moses from Sinai their answer is:

it is impossible to explain this matter clearly and in full but just some general principles [*kelalim*]. God forbid, that R. Ishm'a'el said it from his mind! From what source can those reasons⁶¹ emerge out of the mind of a person? Even more so that our Formator, is more sublime and superior that He will possess limbs and sizes according to the plain sense of the words, since to whom is He resembling, and what image should be attributed to Him?⁶² But these are indeed words of wisdom, which conceal understandings greater and higher than the highest mountains, and very wondrous indeed, and these [words] have their hints and their secrets and their concealed, hidden things, which may not be transmitted unto every man, but only unto those who possess the proper qualities that have been transmitted to us, and even the heads of chapters [cannot be transmitted] even less their details....And we tell you this, for you are very dear to us, but we cannot discuss such matters in writing, and not even orally, except to those who are worthy.⁶³

Therefore, it is obvious that we have here the claim that for understanding the content of the book, an oral transmission is necessary, and this cannot be committed to writing. Orality is the medium of the esoteric transmission and the recipients are conceived of to be quite few. Nevertheless, the two Ge'onim, have something to say about the manner in which *Shi'ur Qomah* should be understood. In the same responsum they wrote, after quoting the Talmudic passage that the heads of the chapters are not transmitted but to someone who is wise in whispering:

And by whisper[s] he is whispered and [general] principles [*kelalot*] are given to him, and he runs with them, and from heaven is shown in the recesses of his

Experience in Abraham Abulafia, tr. J. CHIPMAN, Albany, SUNY Press, 1987, pp. 15-16 and the pertinent footnotes; ID., *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, cit., p. 90; ID., *Absorbing Perfections*, cit., p. 210; WOLFSON, *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., pp. 85-86.

⁶¹ *Te'amim*.

⁶² Cf. *Isaiab* 40:18.

⁶³ *'Otzar ha-Geonim*, IV (on *Hagigah*), ed. by B. LEWIN, Jerusalem, 1931, pp. 11-12. Cf. M. HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism and Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 34-35 and SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, cit. pp. 35-36.

heart, as the Midrash states 'one who understands the whisper'. One who understands means that he can derive the implications of what he is told.⁶⁴

Three distinguished phases of the process are described here. The first one is the transmission of the principles, *kelalot*, or *rashai peraqim* to someone who is prepared to receive them in accordance to the Talmudic requirements, and others, belonging to the Heikhalot literature.⁶⁵ Then someone should use them in one way or another, and we shall return to it immediately below; and finally he is shown, in Hebrew *mar'in lo*, from heaven, something within his own heart, *be-sitre levavo*. I understand the last phase as speaking about an internal vision, which means that the *Shi'ur Qomah* is an internalized revelation, which does not take place in the external world, by an ascent of the soul to the divine palaces and the ocular vision of the size of God. The oral instructions are therefore not the final aim of the book, but rather an indispensable component of a broader process, which should culminate into a more experiential event.

This internalization of the Heikhalot ascent on high, conceived to take place by the ascent of the soul to the supernal palaces, is found also in another responsum of R. Hai Gaon; when asked about the Heikhalot literature, he answered:

Many scholars thought that, when one who is distinguished by many qualities described in the books seeks to behold the Merkavah and the palaces of the angels on high, he must follow a certain procedure. He must fast a number of days and place his head between his knees⁶⁶ and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts are known from tradition. Then he will perceive within himself and in the chambers [of his heart] as if he saw the seven palaces with his own eyes, and as though he had entered one palace after another and seen what is there.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* See **FARBER-GINAT**, *Inquiries in Shi'ur Qomah*, cit., p. 374 note 70.

⁶⁵ The literary sources for those qualities are brought by the ge'onim later on in the responsum. See the important discussion of Gershom Scholem in **ID.**, *Devils, Demons and Souls* [Hebrew], ed. by E. **LIEBES**, Jerusalem, Makhon Ben Zvi, 2004, pp. 246-275.

⁶⁶ On this practice see **IDEL**, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, cit., pp. 89, 91, and P. **FENTON**, *La 'Tête entre les genoux': Contribution à l'étude d'une posture méditative dans la mystique juive et islamique*, in «Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses», 72 (1992), pp. 413-426. See the resort to the Elijah posture in order to receive secrets, in a passage from early 14th century *Gates of the Old Man*, translated and discussed in **WOLFSON**, *Beyond the Spoken World*, cit., p. 183.

⁶⁷ *'Otzar ba-Geonim*, cit., IV, pp. 11-12; **IDEL**, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, cit., pp. 90-91, idem, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism*, Budapest-New York, Central European University, 2005, pp. 32-35, where more material and bibliography have been brought. For a more comprehensive view of R. Hai's theory of revelation see C. **SIRAT**, *Les théories des visions surnaturelles dans la pensée juive du Moyen Âge*, Leiden, Brill, 1962, pp. 33-35.

Here, the last two phases mentioned briefly in the prior passage are elaborated a little bit more.

Though the first stage, that of whispering, the head-chapters is not mentioned, but whispering is, though in a totally different context, as part of the second phase, as a technique to induce some form of revelation.

Interestingly enough, another contemporary of the two authorities, an anonymous Jewish pilgrim who arrived from France, described the book as «If from the mouth of the Dynamis». ⁶⁸ Thus at the turn of the first millennium a high esteem toward the book can be discerned on three different centres of Jewish diaspora, found in three continents. All this despite the sharp critiques of the Karaites against the book, and the more ambivalent attitude toward it by R. Sa'adya Gaon, some generations earlier, which reverberated in some later authors. ⁶⁹

Let me address now a text written more than two centuries later in another continent, in Southern Germany, where R. Eleazar ben Yehudah of Worms, an eminent writer who committed to writing a series of secrets he claimed that were part of an esoteric tradition he inherited, writes about the manner of transmission of the core texts of late antiquity Jewish esoterica:

Do not reveal the secret of the Merkavah, ⁷⁰ but in a whisper...«there is no rock as our God» ⁷¹ this is the Account of Creation [*Ma'aseh Bereshit*] and *Sefer Yetzirah*, ⁷² and it is said close to it «Do not speak so loudly [*gavoah gavoah*]» ⁷³ but in a whisper ⁷⁴ because the glory ⁷⁵ of God [cons]is[ts in] hiding the thing ⁷⁶

⁶⁸ See the discussion of the passage in S. LIEBERMANN, *Shkiin* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, Wahrman Books, 1970, p. 11.

⁶⁹ See 'Otzar ha-Ge'onim, cit., I (on *Berakhot*), p. 18; A. ALTMANN, *Saadya's Theory of Revelation, its Origin and Background*, in *Saadya Studies*, Manchester, 1943, pp. 4-25, and DAN, *The Esoteric Theology*, cit., pp. 109-110.

⁷⁰ D. ABRAMS, *Ma'aseh Merkavah as a Literary Work: The Reception of Hekhalot Traditions by the German Pietists and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation*, in «*Jewish Studies Quarterly*», 5 (1998), pp. 329-345.

⁷¹ I *Samuel* 2:2.

⁷² See already the commentary of Rashi, on *Hagigab*, fol. 13a, discussed in KANARFOGEL, 'Peering through the Lattices', cit., p. 146 and note 35, who put together *Ma'aseh Bereshit* with *Sefer Yetzirah*.

⁷³ The consonants of these two words amount in gematria 32 like *Kavod*, namely Glory.

⁷⁴ On the transmission of the divine name and esotericism see DAN, *The Esoteric Theology*, cit., pp. 74-76 and WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum*, cit., pp. 238-241.

⁷⁵ The term is *kavod* like in the expression found later in the text as seat of Glory. However, the meaning here may also be 'honor' of God.

⁷⁶ *Proverbs* 25:2.

and what is written «as the appearance of man on the seat».⁷⁷ And the book of [Shi'ur] *Qomah*, 've-rav koah'.⁷⁸ This is not [to be] transmitted but in a whisper. And if someone does so, He will make him sit on the seat of Glory, like Adam the first [man]. This is the reason why the endletters of the words⁷⁹ 've-kisse' ka-vod yan^hilem' form [the consonants of the word] 'adam'.⁸⁰

The structure of this seminal passage is based on the existence of three main esoteric books, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and *Sefer ha-Qomah*, namely *Shi'ur Qomah*. Each of them is related to a certain verse in the Hebrew Bible, and in each of the three cases the practice of whispering is explicitly mentioned, in the first two cases the form is *be-labash*, in the third *be-lebishab*. The quote shows that some books on esoteric issues had been conceived of as being so sacred that their proper disclosure in a whisper is followed by the elevation of the initiator to the rank of Adam and be sit on his seat.⁸¹ We may assume that this is not a case of murmur-

⁷⁷ Ezekiel 1:26.

⁷⁸ Psalms 147:5. This verse when understood according to *gematria* points to the size of the divine body in the book of *Shi'ur Qomah*.

⁷⁹ Of the verse *ISamuel* 2:8. For the Midrashic interpretations of this verse and a Christian appropriation of an ancient Jewish stand see *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration*, ed. by B. HILTON – C.A. EVANS, Leiden, Brill, 1997, pp. 457-458. For an appropriation of the interpretation of this verse by R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, see his *The Commentaries to Ezekiel's Chariot of R. Eleazar of Worms and R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen*, Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2004, ed. by A. FARBBER-GINAT – D. ABRAMS, pp. 110-111 and WOLFSON, *Along the Path*, cit., pp. 25, 35-36.

⁸⁰ See *Soddei Razayya'*, ed. by S. WEISS, Jerusalem, 1991, p. 135, and R. ELEAZAR BEN YEHUDAH OF WORMS' *Commentary on the Merkavah*, MS. Oxford-Bodleiana 1921, fol. 5a and the late 13th century Ashkenazi manuscript MS. Roma-Angelica 46, which contains a version of this passage. See now *The Commentaries to Ezekiel's Chariot of R. Eleazar of Worms and R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen*, *ibid.*, p. 70; M. IDEL, *Adam and Enoch According to St. Ephrem the Syrian*, in «Kabbalah», 6 (2001), pp. 183-205; *Id.*, *Ben*, cit., p. 230 and *Id.*, *An unknown Liturgical Poem for Yom Kippur by R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet* [Hebrew], in *From Sages to Savants, Studies Presented to Avraham Grossman*, ed. by J.R. HACKER – Y. KAPLAN – B.Z. KEDAR, Jerusalem, Shazar Center, 2010, pp. 237-261: 258; see also WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, cit., p. 191 note 8 and p. 238 note 202; *Id.*, *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., p. 86. See also the crucial assessment by the same Ashkenazi author, who claims that Adam was destined to be like a Cherub and Ma'aseh Merkavah and is found «under the seat of Glory»: cf., *Sefer Hokhmat ha-Nefesh*, ed. by N.E. WEISS, Benei Beraq, 1987, p. 88.

⁸¹ On the throne of Adam in ancient Jewish literature see N. DEUTSCH, *Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, Brill, 1999, pp. 60-61. For a comprehensive analysis of the sitting at the right hand of God as a supreme status in ancient texts see M. HENGEL, *Studies in Early Christology*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1995, pp. 119-225; M. BLACK, *The Throne-Theophany Prophetic Commission and the 'Son of Man'*, in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquities: Essays in Honor of W.D. Davies*, Leiden, Brill, 1976, pp. 57-73; *Jesus in Context*, cit., pp. 458-459, and the collection of articles edited by M. PHILO-NENKO, *Le Trône de Dieu*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1993.

ing secrets to oneself, but a distinct disclosure one disclose to another person in a whisper. Indeed there are also other clear instances when esoteric topics, especially the divine name have been transmitted according to the same R. Eleazar, orally, from mouth to mouth, though the practice of whispering is not mentioned.⁸² My assumption is that it is not the very texts that are disclosed in whisper, but some secrets related to them. It should be emphasized that while the first two topics: the account of Creation and the account of the Chariot, are part of the Rabbinic esoterica, it is nevertheless *Shi'ur Qomah* that is considered to be higher. In any case, the writings of R. Eleazar are replete with mentioning the existence of secrets in general, and he claims to have been initiated in secret writings.⁸³ Let me point out that the content of this passage is not indebted to the responsum of the two Ge'onim we discussed above, but represents a somewhat different type of practice, which assumes the possibility of an apotheosis, an issue hardly acceptable by the authors of the responsum.

Concomitant to the speculations on *Shi'ur Qomah* in the Qalonimus school, to which R. Eleazar belonged, a special interest in this book is obvious in the writings of R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the prophet of Erfurt.⁸⁴ However, it seems that he obtained much of the information he had from special variants of the Heikhalot literature, different from those we have in the Qalonimus tradition.⁸⁵ However, the question of transmission of this

⁸² See G. SCHOLEM, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 135-137; WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, cit., pp. 236-238, especially p. 238 note 202; DAN, *The Esoteric Theology*, cit., pp. 74-75.

⁸³ D. ABRAMS, *The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism*, in «Shofar», 12 (1994), pp. 67-85.

⁸⁴ See M. IDEL, *R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the Prophet from Erfurt's Commentary on the Poem 'El Na' le-'Olam Tu'aratz* [Hebrew], in «Moreshet Israel», 2 (2005), pp. 19-25. Especially important is a passage by R. Moshe Azriel bel Eleazar ha-Darshan, who wrote a commentary on *Shi'ur Qomah*, and was influenced by R. Nehemiah, and claims that there are principles, *kelalim*, related to the pronunciation of the names in *Sefer Shi'ur Qomah*, and how they emerge from biblical verses. See SCHOLEM, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, cit., pp. 205-206, but there is no discussion of oral transmission or esotericism. See also note 114 below.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., his discussions in *Sefer ha-Navon*, reprinted now in J. DAN, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism, The Middle Ages*, VI, Jerusalem, Shazar Center, 2011, pp. 834-835 and pp. 846-856. For the authorship of this book, printed originally by Dan anonymously, see M. IDEL, *Some Forlorn Writings of a Forgotten Ashkenazi Prophet: R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi*, in «Jewish Quarterly Review», 96 (2005), pp. 184-186. The importance of this text as well as others of R. Nehemiah as representing a different version of *Shi'ur Qomah* traditions than the ordinary one has not been recognized in scholarship and will be the subject of another study. See, meanwhile his various discussions of topics from *Shi'ur Qomah* in his *Commentary on the Seventy Names of Metatron*, which I attribute to him: See *ibid.*, pp. 187-190. See also M. IDEL, *On R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet's Commentaries on the Name of Forty-Two and*

text or of other esoterica, does not occur in the extant writings of this author, neither do such an issue occur in the small texts dealing with what is called the secret of the nut, from Ashkenazi background which, according to Joseph Dan, have perhaps their source in *Shi'ur Qomah* traditions.⁸⁶

5. *Shi'ur Qomah at the Beginning of Kabbalah*

As seen above, from the passage of R. Eleazar of Worms, the interest in *Shi'ur Qomah* as the potentially highest form of esoteric topic, was obvious. Indeed, a discussion related to *Shi'ur Qomah* is found in the very first historical Kabbalist we know, the late 12th century R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres.⁸⁷ He was one of earliest authorities who reacted against Maimonides' anti-anthropomorphic statements, and in a more positive manner, he wrote in one of the few short texts extant in his name, preserved by his grandson R. Asher ben David:

In the [Talmudic] treatise *Berakhot*,⁸⁸ the words of the great Rabbi, R. Abraham ben David, my grandfather, on the passage «from where do we learn that the Holy One, Blessed be He, dons phylacteries». This refers to the Prince of the divine countenance, whose name is like the name of his master.⁸⁹ And it is he who appeared to Moses in the bush, and who appeared to Ezekiel in the vision of the man above.⁹⁰ But the Cause of the Causes did not appear to any man, and neither are [the categories of] left or right, front or back [pertinent]. And this is the secret, of which it is said in the *Ma'aseh Bereshit*: «Whoever knows the measure of the Creator of the Beginning [Yotzer Bereshit] can be assured etc.», and it is of him that the verse «Let us make man in our image»⁹¹ speaks about.⁹²

Sefer ha-Hokhmah Attributed to R. Eleazar of Worms [Hebrew], in «Kabbalah», 14 (2006), pp. 157-261: 178, note 109.

⁸⁶ See DAN, *The Esoteric Theology of the Ashkenazi Hasidism*, cit., pp. 257-258, but see, however, D. ABRAMS, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation in Medieval Germany: A Study of Sod ha'Egoz Texts*, Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 1997, p. 7, note 21.

⁸⁷ The most comprehensive presentation of the thought of this master is I. TWERSKY, *Rabad of Posquieres, A Twelfth-Century Talmudist*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962.

⁸⁸ Fol. 6a.

⁸⁹ Here there is a glossa, where it is written: «Or perhaps there is one greater than him, emanated from the Supernal Cause, and within him there is a supernal power».

⁹⁰ *Ezekiel* 1:26.

⁹¹ *Genesis* 1:26.

⁹² See D. ABRAMS, *R. Asher ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought (Including the Commentaries to the Account of Creation by the Kabbalists of Provence and Gerona)*, Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 1996), p. 141, and see his analysis in *From Divine Sha-*

As R. Abraham's son testified, he never committed to writing esoteric traditions.⁹³ Therefore it is a family oral tradition that has been committed to writing by the grandson. This is a collection of anthropomorphic biblical verses, to which the *Shi'ur Qomah* tradition is added, and attributed to a great angel.⁹⁴ Interestingly enough, though denying the special dimensions of the first cause, he does not deny of having a form or its corporeality.

Also his contemporary Provençal figure, R. Jacob ben Shaul of Lunel, resorts in the Kabbalistic traditions quoted in his name to a major concept found in *Shi'ur Qomah*, *Yotzer Bereshit*, «the formator of Genesis work», to whom parts of the liturgy should be addressed, as part of a ditheistic attitude.⁹⁵ Thus, the first two known Kabbalists have in common, among other few things, a concern with concepts found in the book *Shi'ur Qomah*.

Interestingly enough, in a poem written around 1240, the poet R. Meshullam ben Shlomo da Piera⁹⁶ (known by the Spanish name Envidas) of Gerona, described his teachers, R. Ezra, R. Azriel and Nahmanides as follows: «They knew the size of their creator but they stopped their words out of the fear of the heretics».⁹⁷ The Hebrew original verse uses the term *Shi'ur Yotzram*, which I take as an expression of *Shi'ur Qomah* specula-

pe to Angelic Being: The Career of Akatriel in Jewish Literature, in «The Journal of Religion», LXXVI, 1996, pp. 43-63: 56-60. This version does not include the accretion found in other versions and translated in SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 212-213; see also: TWERSKY, *Rabad of Posquieres*, cit., pp. 289-290; W.Z. HARVEY, *The Incorporeality of God in Maimonides, Rabad and Spinoza*, in *Studies in Jewish Thought* [Hebrew], ed. by S.O. HELLER WILLENSKY – M. IDEL, Magnes, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 63-87: 69-74. See also M. IDEL, *Enoch is Metatron* [Hebrew], cit., reprinted now in IDEL, *Angelic World* [Hebrew], cit., p. 101.

⁹³ See the translation of R. Isaac's epistle in SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, cit., p. 394.

⁹⁴ See IDEL, *Ben*, cit., pp. 22-23, and the accompanying footnotes.

⁹⁵ See M. IDEL, *Kabbalistic Prayer in Provence* [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», 52 (1993), pp. 265-286.

⁹⁶ On this poet and his poetry see now the updated version of J. SCHIRMANN, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France* [Hebrew], edited and supplemented and annotated by E. FLEISCHER, Ben Zvi, Magnes, 1997, pp. 293-298.

⁹⁷ H. BRODY, *Poems of Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera* [Hebrew], in *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem*, IV, Berlin-Jerusalem, 1938, pp. 12-117:104. My translation here is more literal than that found in SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, cit., p. 409, who was not mentioning the issue of *Shi'ur Qomah* but that of corporeality. Indeed, it is surprising that Brody, an expert in medieval poetry, pointed out the quite plausible fact that the poet refers to *Shi'ur Qomah*, but Scholem ignored those footnotes, and disregards the material found in the poems in his long essay on *Shi'ur Qomah*, translated in *On the Mystical Shape*. See also M. IDEL, 'We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This', in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity* ed. by I. TWERSKY, Cambridge Mass., 1983, p. 72 n. 74. On da Piera and the Geronese Kabbalists see also M. IDEL, *Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakha and Spiritual Leadership*, in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership*, ed. by M. IDEL – M. OSTOW, Jason Aronson, Northvale, 1998, pp. 21-23.

tions. Conspicuous is also the esoteric dimension of these speculations. In another poem, the same poet wrote:

The wise men of the time received *rashei peraqim* – and learned them from the mouth of scholars.⁹⁸

They knew the secrets though they did not stand in the council of God – They know the form⁹⁹ [of God] though they did not measure.¹⁰⁰

By putting the verses together, it becomes obvious that he hints at a living tradition concerning the secrets of *Shi'ur Qomah*, which were transmitted, but kept in secret. This was perhaps part of the controversy around the books of Maimonides, whose spiritualistic view is attacked, when da Piera writes in another poem:

Who will accuse those who gives a limit and who corporalize? – but the wise men accept corporeality.

But legends testify about the size [*shi'ur*] – and corporeality is proven from the verses.¹⁰¹

Again as Brody remarks ad locum, *Shi'ur Qomah* is involved here. Most probably, the wise men mentioned in the verse are again Nahmanides, Ezra and Azriel, who are mentioned by their names later on in the poem as the source of traditions they delivered to the poet.¹⁰² However, before mentioning the three he mentions also a certain R. Abraham, who had students who participated in the counter-philosophical agitation.¹⁰³ All the scholars who dealt with this line assume that this is no other than R. Abraham ben David, and it seems that this is a plausible solution.¹⁰⁴ In any case it fits the Rabbi of Posquieres's critical attitude to Maimonides and his own position as mentioned above.

Elsewhere in another poem, when dealing again with legends, this poet writes: «Softly – you will find fault with the *'aggadot*? Perhaps they are se-

⁹⁸ *Mi-pi soferim*.

⁹⁹ *Tavnit*. As Brody correctly pointed out in a footnote there, the poet hints at *Shi'ur Qomah*.

¹⁰⁰ BRODY, *Poems of Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera* [Hebrew], cit. p. 18.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91. It is quandary, if indeed the Geronese Kabbalists can be labeled as believing the corporeality of God.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁰⁴ See BRODY, *Poems of Meshullam ben Shelomo da Piera* [Hebrew], cit., n. 24, and the discussion in his preface, p. 6.

crets not to be discussed». ¹⁰⁵ I would say that we have here, again, a reference to the *Shi'ur Qomah* topics, conceived of as secrets, not to be addressed in public. Several decades later, R. Yedayah ha-Penini, a thinker of Bezier, is complaining, ironically enough as we shall see below, to R. Shlomo ibn Adret of Barcelona, regarding R. Meshullam da Piera: «See this grand malady, that those who remove the size ¹⁰⁶ [*Shi'ur*], are heretics in his eyes». ¹⁰⁷

Thus, there are sufficient evidence to assume that in Gerona, *Shi'ur Qomah* was an esoteric topic, that was kept secret also as part of the controversy with the philosophical spiritualization of the traditional Jewish texts. ¹⁰⁸ In any case, Nahmanides himself was acquainted with the responsum of R. Sherirah and Hai Ga'on discussed above, as he quotes a part of it that we did not deal with. ¹⁰⁹ Indeed, some of the followers of Nahmanides, refer to *Shi'ur Qomah* as an important esoteric topic. ¹¹⁰ One of them, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, argues many years after dealing with Nahmanides' secrets, in the context of the fate of the family of Lot, that

it reveals a part of the exceedingly hidden matter. And I know that someone will not be capable to understand it by his own mind but by means of a tradition he received mouth to mouth. But I shall hint at to whomever merits, and a sage will wait, in order to come to it, and peer in its window, if he was an expert in *Shi'ur Qomah*, by the vision of the prophets I could not reveal it in my book *Keter Shem Tov*, out of its great modesty, and its secret was stored in [the verse] ¹¹¹ «We shall make Adam». ¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁶ From God.

¹⁰⁷ See A.E. HARKAVI, *Hadashim gam Yesbanim* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, Carmiel Press (re-print), 1970, p. 247.

¹⁰⁸ On the question of divine anthropomorphism and corporeality in this period see KANAR-FOGEL, *Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz: the Case of Anthropomorphism*, cit., pp. 117-159, and C. FRAENKEL, *The problem of anthropomorphism in a hitherto unknown passage from Samuel ibn Tibbon's Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim and in a newly-discovered letter by David ben Saul*, in «Jewish Studies Quarterly», 11 (2004), pp. 83-126.

¹⁰⁹ See SCHOLEM, *Devils, Demons and Souls* [Hebrew], cit. n. 65 above.

¹¹⁰ R. SHEM TOV IBN GAON, *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 80b, where he wrote about this concept: "I was not allowed to hint at." See also: R. MEIR IBN AVI SAHULAH, *Commentary on Nahmanides's Secrets*, Warsaw, 1875, fol. 7a and the anonymous commentator quoted as «Da'at he-Hakham» printed in Y. KORIAT, *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, Livorno, 1839, fol. 43a, and in the anonymous *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha'Elobut*, Mantua, 1558, fol. 144a. See also ed. A. GOLDBREICH, *R. Isaac of Acre, Sefer Me'irat 'Einayyim*, Jerusalem, 1984, pp. 39-40.

¹¹¹ *Genesis* 1:26.

¹¹² See *Baddei 'Aron*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 840, fol. 78a.

Therefore, even when his two teachers, about whom we shall elaborate in the next section, were dead for several years, he continued to keep the topic of *Shi'ur Qomah* as a secret he only hints at, without disclosing it. This is in line with his approach of oral transmission, as we shall see in more details below. In the Nahmanidean sources, the main view is that the term *Shi'ur Qomah* refers to the last *sefirah*, *Malkhut*, though in the case of R. Isaac of Acre, it is understood as pointing to the seven lower *sefirot*. In the same book, R. Shem Tov enumerates ten conditions for the transmission of secrets, and afterwards he writes:

if he received from the mouth of a famous Kabbalist, the *Book of Yetzirah*, the *Book of Bahir* and the chapter¹¹³ *Shi'ur Qomah* after those abovementioned conditions, they are a perfection for him, and he should cleave to an illuminates, in order to remember the principles,¹¹⁴ so that the words and chapters he received will be inscribed on the tablet of his heart, by a pen of iron and lead, so that he should not need any book when he will read with a melody and will repeat with music, and he will talk about the lower but he will hint at the higher, his eyes are [turned] on low, and his heart on high.¹¹⁵

This is an outstanding evidence that around 1325, the concept of transmission is imagined to be related to what were conceived of to be ancient books, and again *Shi'ur Qomah* is mentioned as the highest among the three books. As we shall see in the next section all the three books were not part of Nahmanides' oral traditions related to esoteric transmitted in his circle, though he quotes the first two them as reliable. In fact later on in his book, R. Shem Tov explicitly mentions that he was not introduced to the *Book of Yetzirah* by his two mentors, the disciples of Nahmanides, though after their death he nevertheless was.¹¹⁶ However, the meaning of the oral transmission is described here in quite an interesting manner, as intended to inculcate those books in the memory of the Kabbalist, who will be capable to repeat them by heart. The melody mentioned in this context is presumably part of a mnemotechnic practice. What however, are the «principles» that were given to the recipient by the illuminate, was not disclosed. It should be pointed out, that unlike the specific secrets,

¹¹³ The term chapter refers to the fact that this book is part of the Heikhalot literature, which is referred in many cases as the *Chapters of Heikhalot*.

¹¹⁴ *Kelalim*. See above, the geonic source referred by notes 63, 64 and the Ashkenazi author R. Moshe Azriel ben Eleazar, above note 64.

¹¹⁵ *Baddei 'Aron*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 840, fol. 17a.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 187b.

including *Shi'ur Qomah*, that ibn Gaon claims that he received from the mouth of his masters, and we shall see below much more about it, here we have, perhaps, an hypothetical situation, in which not a secret is mentioned but the transmission of three books and of principles. Nevertheless, it reflects the possibility that ibn Gaon was acquainted with traditions about the transmission of *Shi'ur Qomah*, which have been surveyed above, and even assumes that there are «experts» in matters of *Shi'ur Qomah*.

It should be pointed out that the topic of *Shi'ur Qomah* is an important issue also in the 13th century Kabbalistic literature related to the *Book of Speculation*,¹¹⁷ but what seems to be more salient for our topic here is the fact that the founder of another Kabbalistic school R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, active in Castile during the second third of the 13th century claimed that he received secrets related to *Shi'ur Qomah*, from ancient sources: «as I was taught and explained, and it was not known to the ancients, but to two or three...this is what they transmitted to me».¹¹⁸

It should be pointed out that an anthropomorphic theosophy is found in the book of *Zohar*, though the resort to the phrase and the terminology of *Shi'ur Qomah* are more prominent in the later layer of the Zoharic literature, in the composition called *Tiqqunei Zohar*.¹¹⁹ In the Kabbalistic writings of R. Abraham Abulafia, R. Moses de Leon and R. Joseph Gikatilla, *Shi'ur Qomah* play only a very marginal role. The history of the multifaceted interpretations offered to *Shi'ur Qomah* in Kabbalah, rather as a book and as a concept, is long and complex and it still requires a detailed analysis, which cannot be done here. In 16th Safed, the most important centre of Kabbalistic creativity together with 13th century Spain, *Shi'ur Qomah* as a concept is quite evident. However, the aura of secrecy that is also related to oral transmission is hardly reverberating outside the Nahmani-dean school, a topic which will be addressed in the next two sections.

¹¹⁷ Cf. M. VERMAN, *The Book of Contemplation, Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1992, *passim*.

¹¹⁸ See especially the text printed by Gershom Scholem in «Mada'ei ha-Yahadut» 2 (1927), p. 243 and another version I printed from a manuscript in my article *The Sefirot above the Sefirot* [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», 51 (1982), pp. 250-251 which is translated here. For its possible impact on the *Zohar* see *ibid.*, p. 253. See also the commentary of the disciple of R. Jacob's brother, R. Isaac ha-Kohen, R. Moshe of Burgos, on the Thirteen Divine Attributes [*middot*], which deals with the *Shi'ur Qomah*. See G. SCHOLEM, *R. Moshe of Burgos, the Student of R. Isaac* [Hebrew] «Tarbiz», 5 (1933), p. 305 ff. and p. 305, note 3, as well as Idel, *The Sefirot above the Sefirot* [Hebrew], cit., pp. 255-256. En passant, GASTER, *Das Shiur Komah*, cit., pp. 229-230, printed this text as if an ancient one.

¹¹⁹ See especially *Tiqqunei Zohar*, fol. 134a. Here a theurgical approach to *Shi'ur Qomah* can be discerned.

6. Oral Transmission in Early Kabbalah: Nahmanides and His Kabbalistic School

Let me turn from the discussions of oral transmissions related to *Shi'ur Qomah*, to oral transmission of Kabbalistic secrets in general. In a text written by an early 12th century author in Barcelona, who was acquainted with the earlier sources, R. Yehudah Barzilai Barceloni's *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah* we encounter, probably for the first time in Europe, the explicit nexus between the term *Qabbalah* as an esoteric tradition and the divine name.¹²⁰ However, for our purpose here, another passage found in this book, dealing with some metaphysical issues, namely the creation of the Divine Spirit or the *Shekhinah*, is important: it introduced the discussion as follows

The sages did not deal with it explicitly in order that men would not come to ponder over¹²¹ [issues] concerning «what is above»¹²² and many other things related to it, and that is why they were transmitting this thing in whisper and in secrecy,¹²³ as [an esoteric] tradition¹²⁴ to their pupils and their sages.¹²⁵

The terms «in whisper» and «in secrecy», point to two different issues: it should be done in a low voice, and it should also be done in privacy. It is obvious that the Barcelonese author intends to distinguish between oral transmission and speculation. In order to prevent the latter activity, the special form of transmission has been recommended. This is an important point I have not seen together anywhere beforehand. Though interdictions to ponder on some issues are found earlier in Rabbinic literature, as well as the matter of «whisperial initiation», the causal relation seems to be unique in the Jewish literature that precedes Barceloni. I wonder whether Barce-

¹²⁰ R. YEHUDAH BARZILAI BARCELONI, *Perush 'al Sefer Yetzirah*, Berlin, Mekizei Nirdamim, 1885, p. 128. On this commentary see J. DAN, *R. Yehudah ben Barzilai Barceloni's Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah: Its Character and Tendencies* [Hebrew], in *Massu'ot, Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. by M. ORON – A. GOLDBREICH, Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik, 1994, pp. 99-119.

¹²¹ *Lo yavo'u le-barber*. I translated it in a rather literal manner.

¹²² *Hagigah*, fol. 11b.

¹²³ *Be-lahash u-ve-tzine'ab*. See also below n. 161.

¹²⁴ *Be-qabbalah*.

¹²⁵ BARCELONI *Perush 'al Sefer Yetzirah*, cit., p. 189. See already D. NEUMARK, *Geschichte des juedische Philosophie*, Berlin, 1907, I, p. 392; G. SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. ARKUSH, ed. R.J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY, Philadelphia, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 47, 261-262 and WOLFSON, *Beyond the Spoken World*, cit. p. 175.

loni's rather positive attitude to speculative literature may be the reason for the interdiction to speculate, and I am inclined to see in the above passage the reverberation of an earlier position.

At the beginning of the seventies of the 13th century, we may discern a dramatic development in the history of Kabbalah, that I would describe it as the «window of opportunity» of Kabbalah in Spain and at large.¹²⁶ In one single city, Barcelona, we may discern the existence of at least three forms of the traditions that conceived themselves to be Kabbalah, and indeed became part of the Kabbalistic literature afterward.¹²⁷ The most powerful one was that of Nahmanides, who was an inhabitant of the crown of Aragon until 1267, and the leading Jewish figure of his age. He presumably inherited some of the esoteric traditions from R. Yehudah ben Ya'qar, presumably in Barcelona.¹²⁸ The second one, are writings of R. Isaac, the son of R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres, who came to Gerona sometimes at the beginning of the 13th century, and generated a school of Kabbalists active in the region until the sixties of that century, which have been mentioned already in the previous section. Their writings were known by the Kabbalists belonging to the school of Nahmanides in Barcelona. These two schools, which at the beginning developed in roughly speaking the same period and in geographical vicinity, by people who knew each other, as seen above, differ however from many conceptual points of view.¹²⁹ And, last of not least: since late sixties and early seventies, in Barcelona Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240-c. 1291) studied twelve commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*, some of Ashkenazi, Catalan and Castilian extraction, and developed his own brand of Kabbalah, which will be known as

¹²⁶ M. IDEL, *The Kabbalah's Window of Opportunities: 1270-1290*, in *Me'ah She'arim, Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. by E. FLEISHER – G. BLIDSTEIN – C. HOROWITZ – B. SEPTIMUS, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 2001, pp. 171-208.

¹²⁷ See M. IDEL, *La historia de la cabala a Barcelona*, in *La Cabala*, Barcelona, Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, 1989, pp. 59-74. For a longer English version see my *The Vicissitudes of Kabbalah in Catalonia*, in *The Jews of Spain and the Expulsion of 1492*, ed. by M. LAZAR – S. HALICZER, Lancaster (Calif.), Labyrinthos, 1997, pp. 25-40. For the cultural background of the activity of the Kabbalists in the city see B. SEPTIMUS, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 369, 390.

¹²⁹ B. SAFRAN, *R. Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man*, in *Moses b. Nahman (Ramban)*, cit., pp. 75-106; IDEL, «We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This», cit., pp. 56-73; ID., *The Land of Israel in Medieval Kabbalah*, in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. by L.H. HOFFMAN, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, pp. 170-187; ID., *On Jerusalem as a Feminine and Sexual Hypostasis: From Late Antiquity Sources to Medieval Kabbalah*, in *Memory, Humanity, and Meaning; Selected Essays in Honor of Andrei Plesu's Sixtieth Anniversary*, ed. by M. NEAMTU – B. TATARU-CAZABAN, Cluj, Zeta, 2009, pp. 75-85.

the prophetic or the ecstatic Kabbalah. Though phenomenologically different, the former two of the three schools were aware of each other, while we may assume that the latter, was acquainted with the two earlier ones.

Each of the three schools adopted its own strategy of disseminating its specific esoteric knowledge. Nahmanides' school preferred the oral transmission, and only much later, some attempts at hinting to some of its secrets in a written form emerged. The Geronese schools, which hid indeed the concept of *Shi'ur Qomah*, as seen above, nevertheless produced a series of written Kabbalistic documents: commentaries, epistle, and more systematic treatises, which were disseminated also in Barcelona and in Castile.¹³⁰ The ecstatic Kabbalah chose both the written and the oral forms of transmission. However, unlike the Barcelonese one, transmission was not done as part of a specific form of ritual, by whispering secrets on specific topics in the Bible, but by instructing students how to use some forms of techniques in order to reach experiences described sometimes as prophetic, sometimes as ecstatic. All the three schools were acquainted with a pseudepigraphic Kabbalistic Midrash, known as *Sefer ha-Bahir*, whose teachings were adopted, in rather limited ways, in different forms by those schools.¹³¹ Later on, in the eighties of the 13th century, additional forms of Ashkenazi esoteric knowledge arrived to Barcelona, – and afterwards to Castile – adduced by Ashkenazi figures, dealing mainly with divine names, which were imparted to some of the Spanish Kabbalists, who adopted them as part of Kabbalah.¹³²

¹³⁰ M. SENDOR, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: R. Isaak the Blind's Commentary on Sefer Yezirah*, Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1994; Y.S. GOLDBERG, *Spiritual Leadership and the Popularization of Kabbalah in Medieval Spain*, in «The Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry», 2 (2008-2009), pp. 2-58; G. VAJDA, *Le commentaire d'Esra de Gerone sur le cantique des cantiques*, Paris, Aubier, 1969; G. SED-RAJNA, *Commentaire sur la Liturgie Quotidienne*, Leiden, Brill, 1997; J. DAN, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics*, New Jersey, Northvale, 1996, pp. 34-41, and more recently for another view ABRAMS, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory*, cit., pp. 441-442.

¹³¹ About this book, which has been mentioned in the quote adduced above from R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon's *Baddei 'Aron*, see G. SCHOLEM, *Das Buch Bahir*, Leipzig, 1923 and ID., *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 49-198; D. RIPSAN EYLON, *Reincarnation in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY, 2003; D. ABRAMS, *The Condensation of the Symbol 'Shekhinah' in the Manuscripts of the Book Bahir*, »Kabbalah», 16 (2007), pp. 7-82; E.R. WOLFSON, *The Tree that is All; Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in the Book of Bahir*, in «Journal of Jewish Thought», 3 (1993), pp. 31-76: 71-76; C. GOETZEN KRIEG, *The Feminine Aspect of God in the Book Bahir*, in *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text*, ed. by Y. SHERWOOD – D. BIRD, Aldershot, Ashgate, Burlington, 2005, pp. 15-28.

¹³² IDEL, *Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona*, cit. See also D. ABRAMS, *From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique*, in «Journal of Jewish Studies», 47 (1996), pp. 85-101, and M. IDEL, *Incantations, Lists, and 'Gates of Sermons' in the Circle of R.*

In his preface to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Nahmanides describes the transmission of the Torah as follows: «the entire Torah from *Beresbit* to the ‘eyes of Israel’»,¹³³ has been pronounced from the mouth of the Holy One blessed be He, to the ear of Moses...and those hints cannot be understood but from mouth to mouth up to Moses at Sinai». ¹³⁴ Here there are two elements that are quintessential for understanding transmission in his school: disclosure is oral, and it is impossible to attain a real understanding of its hidden dimension without an oral tradition. This is also the message formulated in a passage found in the same preface that had a huge impact on the history of transmission in Kabbalah, and attracted the attention of many scholars¹³⁵ and in some of my studies,¹³⁶ where Nahmanides declared:

I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Kabbalist [speaking] into the ear of an understanding recipient; reasoning about them is foolishness; any unrelated thought brings much damage and withholds the benefit.¹³⁷

I have little doubt that the conception as expressed in Barceloni’s passage, though not necessarily its terms, constitutes some form of back-

Nehemiah ben Shlomo the Prophet – and Their Impact [Hebrew], in «Tarbiz», 77 (2008), pp. 475-554; 499-507 and A. GOLDREICH, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic and Modernism* [Hebrew], Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2010.

¹³³ The end of the Pentateuch.

¹³⁴ NAHMANIDE, *Commentary on the Torah*, ed. by CH. D. CHAVEL, Jerusalem, 1959, I, p. 2-3.

¹³⁵ B. SEPTIMUS, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 113-114; D. ABRAMS, *Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides: Preserving and Interpreting Esoteric Traditions and Texts*, in «Jewish Studies Quarterly» 2 (1995), pp. 85-102; H. PEDAYA, *Nahmanides, Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [Hebrew], Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 2003, p. 125; HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation*, cit., pp. 83-85 and his *By Way of Truth, Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, Hartman Institute, 2006, p. 311-312; B. HUSS, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of its Symbolic Value* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, The Ben Zvi Institute –The Bialik Institute, 2008, pp. 75-76, 80-81, 219-221 and, for another approach to Nahmanides’ exegesis see E.R. WOLFSON, *By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic*, in «Association for Jewish Studies Review» 14 (1989), pp. 103-178.

¹³⁶ M. IDEL, ‘We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This’, cit., pp. 51-73, and *Nahmanides*, cit., pp. 15-96.

¹³⁷ NAHMANIDE, *Commentary on the Torah*, cit., I, pp. 7-8.

ground for Nahmanides' strong recommendation. Though using different terms for the negative mental activities, the two passages juxtapose speculation and oral transmission. The fact that both texts were written in Catalonia strengthens the possibility of the historical connection between the circles that formulated the two passages. The question is whether the similarities are a matter of the impact of the earlier text on the latter one, or there is a continuity of praxis in the city over almost two centuries. I would assume that for Nahmanides, Barceloni was not conceived of as being a Kabbalist, though some forms of esoteric material are found in this lengthy treatise. Let me point out that Nahmanides' passage constitutes not only a programme for transmission of knowledge in an oral manner, but more specifically, referring to some form of initiation, related to a secretive transmission, thus being a phenomenon that is more specific than just orality, as well learn also from the following passage:

The Account of Creation [*Ma'aseh Bereshit*] is a profound secret, which cannot be understood from the [biblical] verses, and cannot be known *in toto* but by the way of the [esoteric] transmission, up to Moses [who received it] from the mouth of the [divine] Dynamis. Those who know it are obliged to hide it.¹³⁸

Let me insist on the issue that original revelation is involved in the emergence of the esoteric dimension of the biblical treatment but it already happened in the glorious past, and since then only oral transmission by a series of reliably authorities ensures reliability and the continuity. Nahmanides points out that the knowledge of the Kabbalah «remained in the possession of the few [*Yehidim*], as a tradition from Moses from Sinai together with the Oral Torah».¹³⁹ This statement may well constitute Nahmanides' conviction as to the original source of his esoteric traditions. However, at the same time it is also counteracting Maimonides' statement as to the fact that the secrets of the Torah have been lost because of the vicissitudes of the exile,¹⁴⁰ and he reconstructed them, as well as the somewhat similar view of Nahmanides' contemporary in Gerona, the abovementioned Kabbalist R. Ezra ben Shlomo.¹⁴¹ Nahmanides, however, embraces the theory of

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9. See also O. YISRAELI, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar* [Hebrew], Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2005, p. 241 and HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation*, cit., pp. 86-87.

¹³⁹ NAHMANIDE, *Commentary on the Torah*, cit., I, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ See HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation*, cit., pp. 49-60.

¹⁴¹ Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kab-*

continuity of the esoteric traditions by oral transmission, as we learn also from another comment «in this argument there is a secret transmitted to the men of Torah and Kabbalah [tradition] and it is hinted in the words of our masters and it is included in the secret of the 'Ibbur, which is transmitted by the sages to their worthwhile disciples».¹⁴² I assume that a similar, perhaps identical issue is hinted at when Nahmanides' wrote later on in the same book: «this is a secret among the secrets of the Torah that disappeared, with the exception of those who merit them from Kabbalah. And their written interpretation is interdicted in a written manner and the hint to it is useless».¹⁴³ In a third treatment in which the term 'Ibbur occurs in the same book, in a manner reminiscent of the discussion concerning R. Akibah:

And if he sees that a righteous perishes in his righteousness he should first attribute it to the scant number of sins he did.¹⁴⁴ Also he should think in the case of the serene wicked that his serenity is dependent upon charity or a good deed that he did. Afterward he should turn to someone who perishes though he is an absolute righteous, with plenty of merits, without any sin and with a pure heart...and he will see a totally absolute wicked that is successful in all the causes. He who thinks so should attribute the vicissitudes of this righteous or the serenity of this wicked to the above-mentioned secret¹⁴⁵ which is included in the secret of the 'Ibbur. And if the Lord will cause him to merit to know it from the mouth¹⁴⁶ of the faithful Kabbalah after he has been cautious not to falter and err, because not many people understood it and if did not hear it he should attribute [the meaning of] it to those who know it. And he should think either he know it or does not that after all there is an absolute justice in it and a good reason in the Lord's judgment according to the occult aspect.¹⁴⁷

balistic Commentaries, tr. Seth Brody, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, 1999, pp. 20-22. See also: PEDAYA, *Nahmanides*, cit., pp. 125-126; HALBERTAL, *Concealment and Revelation*, cit., p. 182, note 8 and WOLFSON, *Beyond the Spoken World*, cit., pp. 178-179.

¹⁴² *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, ed. by CH. D. CHAVEL, Jerusalem, Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963, II, p. 275; see also IDEL, *Nahmanides*, cit., pp. 77-78. See also SCHOLEM, *Devils, Demons and Souls* [Hebrew], cit., p. 193.

¹⁴³ *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, cit., II, p. 279.

¹⁴⁴ Otherwise he would become a wicked. The fact that someone died as a righteous indicates his high rank.

¹⁴⁵ Apparently the discussions on *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, cit., II, pp. 275, 279.

¹⁴⁶ *Mi-piy*. *Nota bene* the emphasis on orality.

¹⁴⁷ *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, cit., II, pp. 280-281. For Kabbalah as secret understanding of the commandments see Nahmanides' passage and the discussion in IDEL, *Nahmanides*, cit., pp. 66-68.

Let me start with the obvious though very important dimension of the three texts: the topic that is not revealed but can certainly be nevertheless revealed, as it is the case of the few who are entitled to this tradition. Thus, we should better speak about secrets, not resort to the category of mysteries, which is pertinent indeed for some discussions in the Zoharic literature, but much less for other forms of Kabbalah, which are dependent on the transmission of more precise forms of information.¹⁴⁸

As mentioned above, the rhetoric of secrets transmitted orally is explicit in several instances and it has been duly recognized by scholars. However, what seems to me important is that several passages found among some of the disciples of Nahmanides, indicate the existence of a rather shared praxis of whispering the secrets, which has not been addressed in the available scholarship. The existence of such a practice seems to be paramount both for understanding Nahmanides' school and what happened there but also of the reactions against it among other Kabbalists, as we shall see below. R. Shlomo ben Abraham ibn Aderet, the main disciple of Nahmanides in both matters of Halakhah and Kabbalah, testifies in the context of this secret that is quintessential for Nahmanides' Kabbalah, the secret of impregnation. He said as follows: «the intention of Onen's destruction of his semen, are things that are not said but mouth to the ear, as [just] as we received it in a whisper and shall not say it but in whisper. And this is a secret out of the secrets of impregnation».¹⁴⁹ According to the testimony of ibn Adret's student, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon «I asked the Rashba, the paragon of the generation, may God safeguard him, about the matter of the serpents,¹⁵⁰ about whom our masters said that 'He castrated the male and cooled the female and salted its for the righteous in the future'.¹⁵¹ And he told me, from mouth to ear».¹⁵² As in other cases, the precise details of the secret have not been divulged. It would be hard to assume that ibn Adret shouted in ibn Gaon's ear, and indirect as the formulation is, we have here another instance of whispering secrets by a member of Nahmanides' school.

¹⁴⁸ See IDEL, *Absorbing Perfections*, cit., pp. 166-170.

¹⁴⁹ R. SHLOMO BEN ABRAHAM IBN ADERET, *Responsa*, I, ed. CH.Z. DIMITROVSKY, Jerusalem, Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1990, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵⁰ On this topic see M. IDEL, *Leviathan and Its Consort: From Talmudic to Kabbalistic Myth* [Hebrew], in *Myth in Judaism*, ed. by I. GRUENWALD – M. IDEL, Jerusalem, Shazar Center, 2004, pp. 145-186: 164-166.

¹⁵¹ *Bava Batra*, fols. 74b-75a; IDEL, *Leviathan and Its Consort* [Hebrew], cit., pp. 152-154.

¹⁵² *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 73b.

Let me notice that the Hebrew translated here as impregnation, *'ibbur*, has two main meanings in Rabbinic culture: it is related to the woman's becoming pregnant, and with the secret of intercalation of the year, namely some form of calculation that regulate the Jewish calendar, that depends on the lunar and solar years. However, at the beginning of Kabbalah, the phrase *sod ha-'ibbur*, has been understood as pointing to some secrets, either the impregnation of the divine feminine power, *Shekbinah* or, in Nahmanides' Kabbalistic school, some more general secrets, which includes also a vision of metempsychosis, which was indubitably one of the major secrets of this school and thus transmitted in a special manner.¹⁵³

Both Nahmanides and ibn Adret were indubitably, classical representatives of what I call first elite.¹⁵⁴ This is, however, less obvious in the case of the second important follower of Nahmanides, who is known basically as a Kabbalist, R. Isaac Todros. The student of ibn Adret and of R. Isaac, R. Shem Tov ben Abraham ibn Gaon, testifies in his *Keter Shem Tov*, a commentary on Nahmanides' secrets: «And what I hinted at that I received from the mouth of my teacher, blessed be his memory, in a whisper, to the created glory, I already announced to you its issue».¹⁵⁵ Thus, also the other direct disciple of Nahmanides, R. Isaac, is described as trading down secrets in a whisper. It should be mentioned that R. Isaac was well-acquainted with Ashkenazi material, as he quotes, without mentioning the source, a passage of R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer ha-Shem*, about the transmission of the divine name, though there whispering is not mentioned.¹⁵⁶

Elsewhere in his commentary R. Shem Tov speaks about the nature of the «world of the souls» as an issue that refers to the world after resurrection, describing it a matter that is not permission to reveal but «in a whisper, from mouth to mouth».¹⁵⁷ Indeed, there is no reason to question the authenticity of the testimonies adduced above. This is also the case with

¹⁵³ On this issue see, for the time being, M. IDEL, *The Secret of Impregnation as Metempsychosis in Kabbalah*, in *Verwandlungen, Archaeologie der literarischen Communication IX*, ed by A. and J. ASSMANN, Munich, 2006, pp. 349-368.

¹⁵⁴ M. IDEL, *Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain*, in «Mediterranean Historical Review», 9 (1994), pp. 5-19.

¹⁵⁵ *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 84b. On esotericism in R. Shem Tov see M. IDEL, *On the History of the Interdiction against the study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty*, in «Association for Jewish Studies Review», 5 (1980), pp. IX-XI (Hebrew Section), and HALBERTAL, *From Oral Tradition to Literary Canon: Shem Tov Ibn Gaon and the critique of kabbalistic literature*, in ed. by M. FINKELBERG – G. STROUMSA, *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond; Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 253-265.

¹⁵⁶ See his *Commentary on the Mahzor*, Ms. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale 839, fol. 203a.

¹⁵⁷ *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 102a.

another student of ibn Adret's, R. Bahya ben Asher Hallewah, who testifies in the nineties of the 13th century that he received a secret tradition, this time from an Ashkenazi source:

If you will understand the vocalization of the three [consonants of] *Yod* [in the verse] *Yevarkbekba, Ya'er Yissa'*, «you will understand the awe of God and you will find the knowledge of the holy ones»¹⁵⁸ because their vowels as they are pronounced hint at the pronunciation of the divine name according to its matter and you should understand it. However, the tradition of Ashkenaz [*Qabbalat Ashkenaz*] that I received in a whisper [is related to the vocalization of the words] *Habarab, Ha-rodeph, Yiredoph*. And the illuminatus [*maskkil*] will understand.¹⁵⁹

Thus, it seems that in Barcelona, at the end of the 13th century both Kabbalistic and Ashkenazi esoteric traditions were handed in whisper. We have therefore reliable evidence for the existence of a practice of transmission in whisper, not only in the Nahmanidean school but also of some unidentified Ashkenazi masters active in Barcelona.¹⁶⁰ Needless to say, in this Kabbalistic school there are plenty of references to the oral transmission of secrets, though the act of whispering is not mentioned more.¹⁶¹ It

¹⁵⁸ The formulation is reminiscent of *Proverbs* 2:5. It seems that R. Bahya or his source distinguishes between two different achievements found in the biblical verse: one of the awe of God, the other being the knowledge of the Holy, which may stand for the angels. Insofar as the former is concerned, there is an important parallel in R. Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer ha-Shem*, where the reference to the Tetragrammaton as the sublime name, is strengthened by the gematria. See R. ELEAZAR OF WORMS, *Sefer ha-Shem*, ed. by A. EISENBACH, Jerusalem, 2004, p. 8. Therefore, it is not only the testimony that a tradition comes from Ashkenaz, which follows the citation of the verse, but also some more precise correspondence to a theme that occurs beforehand in the quoted passage, that is found in R. Bahya's passage. The nexus between the knowledge and I assume also the pronunciation of the divine name and awe, assumes that the very act of recitation implied a numinous type of experience. It should be mentioned that R. Eleazar's connection between divine name and awe stems from his master R. Yehudah he-Hasid. See ABRAMS, *From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique*, cit., pp. 96-97, especially note 58 and pp. 98-99 especially note 70.

¹⁵⁹ *Commentary on the Torah*, cit., III, p. 34. Understandingly enough, the other members of the circle of ibn Adret were quite reticent of disclosing the secret of the vocalization of the Tetragrammaton. See, e.g., R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 106b. It should be mentioned that R. Bahya mentions twice that he heard from R. Dan, an Ashkenazi figure, some matters, which however do not include esoteric issues. See I. M. TA SHMA, *Knesset Mehqarim* [Hebrew], Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik, 2004, II, p. 158. Compare, however, another instance when R. Bahya resorts to the verb *qibbalenu*, «we have received» in a context that may betray an Ashkenazi tradition. See his commentary on *Numbers* 33:32, ed. CHAVEL, III, pp. 228-229. See also the commentary on *Deuteronomy* 29:28, ed. CHAVEL, III, p. 436, where a view which may stem from Ashkenazi sources is mentioned.

¹⁶⁰ On whispering in Ashkenaz see in section 4 above.

¹⁶¹ See e.g. R. BAHYA BEN ASHER, *Commentary on Exodus* 31:17, ed. CHAVEL, II, p. 325, where transmission from mouth to mouth is connected also to the term *tzin'a'*, like in Barcelona's

is in this school that an important letter, found in an anonymous manner, refers to the transmission by whisper. Gershom Scholem, who printed the epistle whose addressee is not specified, assumed that he is Nahmanides. This may indeed be correct, but I assume that it is someone from his school, perhaps R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon. In any case, in it some details regarding the intention during prayer are discussed, the writer confesses, that a certain issue, is not known by him, but «I rely only on what I shall heard from your mouth, my master, and would I merit, I will receive it by whisper, from mouth to mouth».¹⁶² This is evidence that the practice of whispering was used in more than one instance, and constituted in this school the main channel for studying Kabbalistic issues. In fact, later on in the epistle, the anonymous Kabbalist mentions a book of R. Azriel, but claims that he is confused.¹⁶³ In any case, in a passage of R. Shem Tov, he writes to one of students: «The remnants that God calls who receive from mouth to mouth, and transmit to their students in awe, in tremor, in shiver, in trepidation, in terror and in silence, from mouth to ear».¹⁶⁴ If my suggestion as to the addressee is correct, than we have evidence for the practice of transmission in whisper one generation more, namely sometimes in the first quarter of the 14th century.

Those quite explicit statements from some of Nahmanides's followers, should contribute to a more serious understanding of the passage cited above from his introduction to the commentary on the Torah, as to the understanding of an aspect of oral and reliable transmission, is not just as a matter of recommendation but it is describing a practice in his school, especially in Barcelona. As a continuation of this specific approach to transmission of esoterica, the interesting passages from the anonymous book known as the *Gates of the Old Man*, analyzed by Elliot R. Wolfson, should be understood.¹⁶⁵ They imitate, let me emphasize, not only the rhetoric of Nahmanides, about the necessity of oral transmission, as Wolf-

passage quoted above; **IBN GAON**, *Keter Shem Tov*, Ms. Paris Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fols. 83b, 102a-b, 111b; **R. MEIR AVI SAHULA**, *Commentary on Nahmanides' Secrets*, fol. 29b, or the anonymous *Ma'arekhet ha'Elohub*, Mantua, 1558, fol. 142b. See also **IDEL**, *Nahmanides*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁶² See **SCHOLEM**, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, cit., p. 250. I hope to print an epistle written by R. Shem Tov to an unknown student, who may be the author of the epistle printed by Scholem as if addressed to Nahmanides. See **M. IDEL**, *On the History of the Interdiction against the study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty*, cit., pp. x-xi.

¹⁶³ **SCHOLEM**, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, cit., p. 251.

¹⁶⁴ Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 838, fol. 82a, and Ms. Munchen 11, fol. 287a-287b.

¹⁶⁵ See his **WOLFSON**, *Beyond the Spoken World*, cit., pp. 182-183.

son duly mentioned, but also details of practices that are reminiscent of what happened in the circle of ibn Adret, as we have seen in some of the examples in this section.¹⁶⁶ If indeed these passages depict a real group around the anonymous elderly man or we face here a fictitious situation is, however, another issue which cannot be dealt with here.

My assumption is that the form of oral transmission is related to details and the need of precision, less with the exposition of a way of thought that the student can ask about, and develop beyond what he received. Not general principles that should be understood and applied, abstract rules, or exegetical methods, but a disclosure of a kind of information, rather than a form of instruction, that is intended. As such, we may assume that this was a monosemic message, backed by the authority of the source, which claims the existence of even earlier sources. Fidelity, precision, and to a great extent inertia, are the values that ensure the importance of the information, which is related in many cases with «insights» into the meaning of the biblical passages.

7. *On the Status of Oral Transmission in Ecstatic Kabbalah*

It is again in Barcelona that another author, Abraham Abulafia, started his career as Kabbalist in 1270/1271.¹⁶⁷ It is most probably there that he studied twelve commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah* and forged his Kabbalistic system based on a synthesis between some of techniques of combining letters found in some these commentaries and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which he studied much earlier in Italy with the Jewish philosopher R. Hillel of Verona. The fact that he explicitly recognizes that he is the

¹⁶⁶ WOLFSON, *ibid.*, following other scholars, dated the *Gates* correctly to early 14th century. However, more recently, in the introduction to his edition of most of the Hebrew original extant texts, he proposed another datation earlier with at least a generation, namely between 1280 to 1290. See his *The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets – New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle*, in «Kabbalah», 19 (2009), pp. 151, 155-183. I hope to return to this issue in a separate study, where additional data will be introduced.

¹⁶⁷ On this Kabbalist see E.R. WOLFSON, *Abraham Abulafia: Kabbalist and Prophet, Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy*, Los Angeles, 2000; H.J. HAMES, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism*, Albany, 2007; R. SAGERMAN, *Ambivalence toward Christianity in the Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia*, Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, New York, 2008; M. IDEL, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. Menachem Kallus, SUNY Press, Albany, 1989; ID., *Sefer Yetzirah, Twelve Commentaries on Sefer Yetzirah, and Remnants of R. Isaac of Bedershi's Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah in Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew] forthcoming in «Tarbiz», 79 (2011).

author of this synthesis, is quintessential for understanding his Kabbalah as dramatically diverging from Nahmanides' one, with his claims of the antiquity of the esoteric lore.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, in matters of esotericism, Abulafia explicitly refers to the Kabbalists' interdiction to reveal secret of the Torah, in quite a critical manner, and writes toward the end of the year 1285:

despite the fact that I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they are that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue, I shall care neither about their thought not about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this is very different from, and even opposite to theirs.¹⁶⁹

Immediately afterwards Abulafia «discloses» the view that *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, namely the account of the chariot, which is one of the most important esoteric topic in Jewish mysticism, should be understood neither as a visionary experience, like in the first chapter of Ezekiel, nor as an allegory for metaphysics, like in Maimonides, but as a matter of combination of letters of the divine names, namely as a technique of interpretation, and perhaps also as a mystical technique.¹⁷⁰ The sharpness of his awareness of the disparity between his approach and the approach embraced by the other, unnamed, Kabbalists is obvious. He describes it as «opposite». This is certainly not the only instance in which the conceptual divergences between Abulafia's thought and other Kabbalistic systems are explicitly acknowledged.¹⁷¹ However, here we have not just a conceptual divergence, which is quite regular in Kabbalistic literature between schools or even members of the same school, but with the express consciousness of transgressing an explicit strong interdiction issued by a major Kabbalist like Nahmanides, with whose views he was surely acquainted. It is not just a conceptual dis-

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 55a, and IDEL, *Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah*, cit., p. 148.

¹⁷⁰ On this issue see IDEL, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, cit., pp. 51-53. Let me point out that Abulafia refers to the term *Shi'ur* in the phrase *Shi'ur Qomah*, as referring to the concept of name. See his *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, ed. A. GROSS, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 344. This is just an example for the reception of the *Shi'ur Qomah* in accordance to the more general structure of one's thought. See also n. 43 above. The concept of *Shi'ur Qomah* in Abulafia and early Gikatilla will be discussed in a separate study.

¹⁷¹ See e.g. ID., *The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah* [Hebrew], in «Kabbalah», 12 (2004), pp. 89-199. For a somewhat harmonistic understanding of the relationship between Abulafia and the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists see the approach of E. R. WOLFSON, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2000.

cord but a transgressive deed that is involved here. Indeed, Abulafia already put in practice his policy of exotericism years before he formulated the above confession in 1285/1286. Already in the opening poem of his major book, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, written in Rome in 1280, he recommended:

You should vivify the multitude by the means of the name *Yah*,
and be as a lion who skips in every city and open place.^{172 173}

More than a prescription, this seems to be a description of his propagandistic activity.¹⁷⁴ This does not mean a total break with oral transmission, but Abulafia conceives it as the lowest form of acquiring esoteric knowledge. So, for example, we learn again from his *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*:

it is appropriate to write down, out of what I knew from the mouth of writers, and from the mouth of books, and from the mouth of God, how to behave with them at the time of the combination or in the moment of pronunciation so that he will not be wavering about anything he can know, ...the beginning of my announcement the principles of the sciences of the divinity, by [means of] names and letters and I shall transmit to you afterwards the key to open every lock and reveal every obscure and sealed issue, and I shall open by it the wonderful and awesome chambers of chambers.¹⁷⁵

Abulafia capitalizes on a relatively widespread dictum, in Hebrew *mi-pi soferim ve-lo' mi-pi sefarim*, namely it is preferable to receive from the mouth of writers than from books. This is part of a more general predilection for direct teaching, rather than study from written books.¹⁷⁶ However, Abulafia's axiology is opposite: the oral is conceived of as inferior to the written, which is subordinated to the reception of a revelation from God. This triple source of Kabbalistic knowledge is most probably a fixed scheme in Abulafia. It occurs elsewhere in the same book, where Abulafia

¹⁷² In Hebrew *migrash*.

¹⁷³ The poetic opening to his book *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, ed. by A. GROSS, Jerusalem, 1999², p. 45.

¹⁷⁴ For the propagandistic activity of Abulafia see also his *Commentary on Sefer ha-Yashar*, Ms. Roma-Casanatense 38, fol. 41a.

¹⁷⁵ ABULAFIA, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, cit., p. 133.

¹⁷⁶ R. JOSPE, *The Superiority of Oral over Written Communication: Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari and Modern Thought*, in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism, Intellect in Quest of Understanding, Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. by J. NEUSNER – E.S. FRERICHS – N.M. SARNA, Georgia, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989, III, pp. 127-156.

distinguishes between the «human Kabbalah», the matters that are obtained from an intellectual reflection, and finally, what someone receives from the descent of the influx on the mystic.¹⁷⁷ In his commentary on Exodus written in 1289, he wrote «It is impossible for me not to write a small part of what has been revealed to me concerning the topic of the name of 72 [letters], part from the mouth of writers, part from the mouth of books, part from the mouth of the Dynamis».¹⁷⁸ Let me compare it to a later view, occurring in a book Abulafia wrote in the same year. When describing what the *Qabbalot*, or the higher traditions mean, he declares, in a more sophisticated manner than in the earlier discussion:

In order to understand my intention regarding [the meaning of] *Qolot* [voices] I shall hand down to you the known *Qabbalot*, some of them having been received from mouth to mouth from the sages of [our] generation, and others that I have received from the books named *Sifrei Qabbalah*, composed by the ancient sages, the Kabbalists, blessed be their memory, concerning the wondrous topics; and other [traditions] bestowed on me by God, blessed be He, which came to me from *Thy*¹⁷⁹ in the form of the «Daughter of the Voice», these being the higher *Qabbalot* [*Elyonot*].¹⁸⁰

There is here a hierarchy starting with the lowest form, the oral reception, than the written one, while the highest is imagined to be the secrets that are revealed directly to the Kabbalist, namely Abulafia himself. His original interpretation of traditions, *Qabbalot* as *Bat Qol*, the daughter of the Voice, reflects what is in his opinion, the highest human development of the three. However, the mentioning of the oral instruction is not just a matter of its subordination to the revelation, but also a strong shift in comparison to the Barcelonese practices as analyzed in the prior section. This shift is, let me insist, not only a matter of subordination but also of changing the aim of the oral transmission. In a seminal text for our subject, that is found in one of his commentaries on the secrets Abulafia believes are found in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which has been probably written sometimes between 1277-1279 in the Byzantine Empire, we read:

¹⁷⁷ ABULAFIA, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, cit., p. 146.

¹⁷⁸ ABRAHAM ABULAFIA, *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, ed. A. GROSS, Jerusalem, 2001, p. 92. See also *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁹ I read the two letters as pointing in a short form to *theos*, namely God. Abulafia uses the form *THYW* in order to point to God already in his early treatise *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*; see IDEL, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁸⁰ *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, MS. New York, JTS 1801, fol. 4b.

You should take the esoteric [sense] as worthy and you should leave the plain one as unworthy, and on those things Solomon said: «Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasure»¹⁸¹ namely the secrets of the Torah and they are secrets said in whisper and are intended to the intellect,¹⁸² out of much thought, and they are stolen and hidden from all the multitude, and are all hidden, testifying on the two urges and they are on the plain level one of the commandments, which are for the sake of amending the body or of amending the soul, necessary or useful, and regard, the plain sense is the key to open by its means the gates of the esoteric. And behold it [the plain] is part of the esoteric by genus but not by species, because the amendment of the body is a preparation for the amendment of the soul, and the amendment of the soul is a preparation for the ultimate perfection, which is the aim of the ultimate divine intention, which is the comprehension of God.¹⁸³

Let me start with the distinction between species and genus. The latter constitutes the broadest category, in our case the amendment of the body, while the former is one sub-category of the genus, namely the spiritual and the intellectual. If I understand the passage correctly, the spiritual amendment, namely that of the soul, is of a species that differs from that of the intellect. The secrets, which constitute the esoteric level, are related to thought, to whisper, to the intellect, to the gate and to comprehension of God, while the plain sense and the commandments are related to body and soul, and to the notion of the key. They correspond to the good and evil urges, respectively.¹⁸⁴ However, unlike the Maimonidean concept of whispering, based on producing distinct intellectual speculations, for Nah-

¹⁸¹ *Proverbs* 9:17.

¹⁸² See *Guide of the Perplexed* I,34, and see the discussion of WOLFSON, *Murmuring Secrets*, p. 90 note 90. Maimonides' passage has been referred explicitly in Abulafia's epistle *Sheva' Nativot ha-Torah*, ed. A. JELLINEK, *Philosophie und Kabbalah*, Leipzig, 1853, p. 12.

¹⁸³ See ABULAFIA, *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, cit., p. 15, translated and discussed in WOLFSON, *Abraham Abulafia*, cit., p. 191, and in his *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., pp. 86-89, and discussed again, though taken in another direction, in IDEL, *The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest*, pp. 160-162. Here I address other aspects of Abulafia's passage. For the transmission of secrets, especially the divine name, in whisper, after it was received in whisper, but it is directed, again, to the knowledge of the recipient, see *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, cit., p. 157. On the transmission of the divine name in a whisper in the Talmudic time to several disciples, perhaps at the same time, see A. ABULAFIA *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, ed. A. GROSS, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 72.

¹⁸⁴ On the inner battle between the two urges as a major topic in Abulafia's spirituality see M. IDEL, *Inner Peace through Inner Struggle in Abraham Abulafia's Ecstatic Kabbalah*, in «Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry», 2 (2008-2009), pp. 62-96 and for a fuller Hebrew version see ID., *The Battle of the Urges: Psychomachia in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew], in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture*, ed. by A. BAR-LEVAV, Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar, 2006, pp. 99-143.

manides and his followers such speculations are superfluous, as seen in the previous section. Abulafia adopted here an opposite stand to the Nahmanidean school, by connecting whispering with thinking.¹⁸⁵ He resorted to the notion of two amendments he took over from Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*,¹⁸⁶ but subordinated them to the third and highest intellectual perfection, conceived of to be the ultimate felicity.¹⁸⁷ These three amendments correspond, according to the context of the abovementioned passage, to three topics of Jewish Rabbinic esotericism: the lowest is, according to Abulafia's discussion, the account of Creation, corresponding in Maimonides' vision to Aristotle's physics, the second to the account of the divine Chariot, which corresponds again in Maimonides to Aristotle's metaphysics, while the highest is the secret of incest, formulated by Abulafia, as the revelation of the esoteric meaning of the incest.¹⁸⁸ However, this hierarchy differs from the rabbinic one, according to which the interdiction of incest is the lowest secret, followed by the account of Creation and that of the Chariot. Thus, we have again an inversion of the traditional axiology, which has been adopted also by Maimonides, the figure whom Abulafia revered.¹⁸⁹ To these two inversions, of the written as higher than oral instruction, and of the secret of incest as higher than the two accounts, we may add also the deconstruction of the ordinary conception of Kabbalah as a transmitted type of knowledge, as seen about, to its vision as an oral instruction emanating from above and, in a conspicuous irony addressed to Nahmanides' school, also the assumption that oral instruction is intended to one's thought or intellect, namely to speculation. In a way, the traditional mode of transmission, especially in the form known in Bar-

¹⁸⁵ See also additional sources for this nexus adduced by WOLFSON, *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., p. 90. Let me point out that the experience of revelation as portrayed in some Abulafian texts, as conversation between the mystic and his imaginary double. See IDEL, *The Mystical Experience*, cit., pp. 86-100. However, this is a dialogue between the intellect and the power of imagination, which is not the highest form of experience Abulafia proposed in his writings, that being the union of the human to the agent intellect.

¹⁸⁶ *Guide of the Perplexed* III, 27. On the topic of the two amendments see M. GLADSTON, *The Purpose of the Law According to Maimonides*, in «Jewish Quarterly Review», 67 (1978), pp. 27-51, and W.Z. HARVEY, *Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics*, in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, ed. by I. ROBINSON – L. KAPLAN – J. BAUER, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1991, pp. 1-15.

¹⁸⁷ On the topic see H. TIROSH-SAMUELSON, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-being*, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 2003.

¹⁸⁸ *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, ed. Gross, p. 15.

¹⁸⁹ See M. IDEL, *Sitre 'Arayot in Maimonides' Thought*, in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. S. PINES – Y. YOVEL, Dordrecht, 1986, pp. 79-91.

celona, that was intended to strengthen tradition, is formulated in a manner that subverts tradition, a phenomenon that can be documented in another case in Abulafia.¹⁹⁰

Is this triple hierarchy of perfections paralleling the three sources of acquiring Kabbalah, we have seen in the two passages quoted above? It is obvious that the highest form of obtaining knowledge by an act of revelation corresponds to intellectual perfection that culminates in the knowledge of God. Are the oral and the written instructions, corresponding to the corporeal and spiritual perfections? Let me add another distinction between three ranks:

The Divinity also intended that human beings should be righteous and that they should learn so that they will become wise. And when they observe the ways¹⁹¹ of righteousness and wisdom they ought to become sages. And further, there is a third intention: God intended that after human beings become sages they should attain to prophecy, for this is the epitome of the capacity of human intellectual grasp in this world, and it is for this end that God originally intended the creation of man in this form.¹⁹²

Here the shape of body is no more isomorphic with God, but rather the human intellect. I would say that the righteous and the wise correspond to the two lower ranks of perfection, while prophecy is understood as transcending both.

Indeed, the possibility to receive revelations in the present is one of the major claims of his Kabbalah, as we learn, for example, from the following passage:

We and all those who follow our intellectual Kabbalah [*Qabbalah muskkelet*] [attain] prophesy by means of the combinations of letters, it will teach us the essence of reality as it is, in an easier way in comparison to all the [other] ways in existence in the world, despite the fact that the knowledge of the essence of reality is apprehended by much thought. What brings it about [this knowledge] is the combination [of letters], and this combination induces it [the knowledge] as im-

¹⁹⁰ See **ID.**, *The Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia* [Hebrew], in *Aviezer Ravitzky Festschrift*, Jerusalem, 2011.

¹⁹¹ The use of *derekb*, path or way, for the first two types of perfection, may imply that there is also a third way that of prophecy, *derekb ha-nevu'ab*. This expression is found already in Maimonides and was adopted also by Abulafia. See e.g. his *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, ed. A. **GROSS**, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 115.

¹⁹² *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, Ms. Parma, de Rossi 141, fol. 7; see also, *Mafteah ha-Hokhmot*, ed. A. **GROSS**, Jerusalem, 2001, pp. 21-22 and **IDEL**, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, cit., pp. 109-110.

mediately as a youth studies the Bible, then the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*, he will indubitably achieve it quickly, with perseverance, being better than any [other] thought.¹⁹³

Here, the followers of ecstatic Kabbalah strive for an intellectual experience, defined by Abulafia as prophecy, induced by a certain technique, and much less the knowledge of the secrets of the text. In a similar manner he writes in his *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*:

those are wonderful things that I wrote in the circles,¹⁹⁴ that emerge out of the sublime and awesome name, in order to thank, to praise and to glorify his name, blessed be He, by intellectual divine providence, and by a prophetic forms and providence, it will be very easy to you if you will reflect on them by a perfect reflection, in order to achieve from them the supernal influx, with the keys I have delivered to you, it is in your hand to do what is appropriate for you to do by the knowledge of the name and its providence, performed out of the reflection, combination of letters and their permutation, and the combination of their words and their inversion,¹⁹⁵ and their calculation, gematrias and acronyms, and reflection on their extreme secrets, because their secrets are infinite, but the prophetic influx is emanated from them to whomever knows how to investigate its supernal paths.¹⁹⁶

In the last two passages, both the concept of an easy manner to acquire revelations by combinations of letters, and the topic of intellectual activities, occur.¹⁹⁷ They represent the third way of obtaining Kabbalah, as a matter of revelation. The techniques enumerated in these passages, which constitute one of the most important issues in Abulafia's Kabbalah, are devices of subverting the normal order of the biblical texts by a radical exegetical approach, and a technique to reach a mystical experience by linguistic manipulations. These two different devices have been transmitted without, however, being part of a process of initiation by whisper, from the master's mouth to the student's ear, as we learn from the description of R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Har'ar, the author of the treatise *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, a student of Abulafia's at the beginning of the eighties in Mesina.¹⁹⁸ When

¹⁹³ 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, cit., p. 182. On the different meanings of the term Kabbalah in Abulafia see M. IDEL, *On the Meanings of the term 'Kabbalah': Between the Prophetic Kabbalah and the Kabbalah of Sefirot in the 13th Century* [Hebrew], in «Pe'amim», 93 (2002), pp. 39-76.

¹⁹⁴ The circles are found in the text of the book, as part of a mystical technique.

¹⁹⁵ On *gilgul* and *hippukh* see also ABULAFIA, *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, ed. GROSS, cit. p. 112.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 98.

¹⁹⁷ See IDEL, *Defining Kabbalah*, cit. pp. 112-113.

¹⁹⁸ On the identity of this student see M. IDEL, *R. Natan ben Sa'adya Harar, Le Porte de la*

dealing with the nature of the *devequt*, namely the intimate union of the human intellect to God, he wrote:

The essence of this issue cannot be conceptualized, *ex definitio*, neither discussed by mouth, even less in a written form, and this is the reason why it is called Kabbalah and heads of chapters namely the principles, since the meaning depends upon the receiver to [understand it] in detail and divest [his soul] from corporeality] and delight. The Kabbalah is not transmitted but by [the way of] 'heads of the chapters' alone.¹⁹⁹

Here we have an assumption that only technical issues can be transmitted while the experience is ineffable. In any case, there is here a weakening of all the forms of transmitted knowledge, as being some form of narrative, as against the supreme status of the experience. Unlike the structure of Nahmanides' secrets, which situated the objective narrative or practice at the center, be it the esoteric sense of the Bible or of the commandments, with Abulafia and his followers, secrets are conducive to something that is more subjective and individual, and finally more important. It is the recipient that plays now the central role in the event of transmission, as we may discern from the last quoted passage.

8. *Conclusions: From Oral Transmission to Written Creativity*

As pointed out above, Abulafia openly acknowledged that he disapproves the esoteric tendencies of some Kabbalists, and it is hard to doubt that he hinted at Nahmanides' school. This was a matter of principle, not part of a living controversy with its main representative, ibn Adret that started several months later.²⁰⁰ The concept of infinite secrets that was adopted by Abulafia is an important issue that distinguishes the Nahmanidean approach to the secrets found in the Bible, as limited in their scope, in fact a monosemic approach, in comparison to Abulafia's polysemic one,

Giustizia, tr. M. MOTTOLESE, Milano, Adelphi, 2001. For an English translation of the manner in which he began to study Kabbalah see his text as translated by SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, cit., pp. 149-150.

¹⁹⁹ See R. NATHAN BEN SA'ADYAH HARAR, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, ed. by J.E. PORUSH, Jerusalem, 1989, p. 9. See also Idel, *Transmission in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 149-150.

²⁰⁰ M. IDEL, *The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: The History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic* [Hebrew], in *Atara le-Haim: Studies in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, ed. by D. BOYARIN et al., Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2000, pp. 235-251.

which means that from the same verse it is possible to extract more than one single secret meaning. In such a polysemic type of discourse, what is important are the transmission of techniques of «extracting» meanings, or of inducing experiences, sometimes described as keys,²⁰¹ much more than precise and rather scant type of precise information, as in the earlier forms of Jewish mysticism, as seen above. While for the Nahmanidean type of transmission, the secret is revealed only once, for the Abulafian type this is a continuous and ever-changing process that the Kabbalist can cultivate it alone, creating new secrets without a master. While for Abulafia the techniques of discovering, in fact of innovating secrets are transmitted, though not so much a specific conceptual secret, in Nahmanides there is no technique of discovering secrets and it seems that only specific details are revealed in whisper.

However, Abulafia's reaction by lowering the status of oral transmission in Nahmanides' school and his encouraging the fabrication of secrets, is not the most important event for the history of Kabbalah in the context discussed above. Much more influential is the sudden emergence and the special nature of the voluminous Zoharic literature, which turned canonical in a short period. In a very sensitive study, Elliot R. Wolfson has pointed out that passages dealing with whispering secrets are to be found in the *Zohar* in several occasions, and it is sometimes related to an erotic overtone.²⁰² Let me refer to what is plausibly a case of reaction toward the authoritative approach dominant in the Nahmanidean circle, in a manner I pointed out this book does also in another context: that of the masculine Kabbalist being initiated by a supernal feminine figure, thus subverting the masculine authority.²⁰³ In order to illustrate another similar shift let me translate a Zoharic passage:

R. Shimeon²⁰⁴ wept and said: «One word from those words whispered to me by the head of the academy of Paradise, that were not said openly, this word is a secret and I will say to you, my beloved sons, my sons the beloved ones of my soul,

²⁰¹ Abulafia's writings resort many times to the issue of "keys" that are transmitted and they refer to techniques. See e.g. IDEL, *Hieroglyphs, Keys, Enigmas: on G. G. Scholem's vision of Kabbalah between Franz Molitor and Franz Kafka*, in *Arche Noab: Die Idee der 'Kultur' im deutsch Jüdischen Diskurs*, ed. by B. GREINER – Ch. SCHMIDT, Freiburg i.Br., Rombach, 2002, pp. 227-248. For Gikatilla, one of Abulafia's students resort to keys see E. MORLOK, *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Hermeneutics* Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 2011, *passim* and especially pp. 39-41.

²⁰² WOLFSON, *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., pp. 91-104.

²⁰³ See IDEL, *Revelation and the 'Crisis' of Tradition in Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 255-261 and in a more general terms HUSS, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, cit., pp. 38-42.

²⁰⁴ The alleged author of the *Zohar*, the second century R. Shimeon bar Yohai.

what shall I do? They said it to me in a whisper and I shall say it to you openly? But in the future²⁰⁵ when we shall see one another face-to-face, all the faces will rely²⁰⁶ on it».²⁰⁷

The secrets are, therefore, no more a matter of human oral transmission from a living master to another person in this world, but they may be received as part of a revelation from a dead authority, or someone found in Paradise. The initiation is less a matter of transmission than one of revelation, which took place in the «present» and there is no need of a long pedigree that validate the content. Here the head of the *yeshivah* is transposed or projected to another realm, here the Paradise, and like in the case of Abulafia, the source of Kabbalah is now supernal. While still holding to the practice of oral transmission, the Zoharic passage nevertheless subverts it. Now, it is the face rather than the mouth that stands at the center of the imagery in this passage. Let me point out that unlike the Nahmanidean and Abulafian approaches to transmission, which assumes a one-to-one situation, what I called the micro-chain, the Zoharic situation deals much more with informing the group of Kabbalists by means of solemn sermons, dealing with secrets, and sometimes mysteries. In any case this is a more public and loud voice type of transmission.

The two different subversions of the human oral transmission mentioned above generated two extensive Kabbalistic literatures, which produced a variety of new secrets, as part of what can be called «the window of opportunities of Kabbalah» or the full blooming of what I call the innovative Kabbalah.²⁰⁸ The temporary weakening of the Rabbinic authorities outside Catalonia, especially between 1270-1295, in Castile, Italy and the Byzantine empire, allowed the relatively uninhibited creativity of the secondary elite Kabbalists, and those figures did not mention any significant Rabbinic master who initiated them in the secrets of Kabbalah or with whom they studied substantial Rabbinic topics.²⁰⁹ It is this social-intellect-

²⁰⁵ In my opinion, according to this discussion it is only in the future that the face-to-face situation will be accompanied by the disclosure of the secret, but not in the present.

²⁰⁶ Here the version is not so clear. In other editions, a verb occurs that may be translated as “hidden.”

²⁰⁷ *Zohar*, II, fols. 190b-191a. See also *ibid.*, fol. 191b. Compare to the somewhat different translation and analysis in WOLFSON, *Murmuring Secrets*, cit., p. 92.

²⁰⁸ IDEL, *The Kabbala's Window of Opportunities*, cit., pp. 171-208; ID., *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, cit., pp. 200-234; ID., *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 280-313 and HUSS, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, cit., pp. 80-81.

²⁰⁹ IDEL, *The Kabbalah's Window of Opportunities*, cit., pp. 174-179.

tual stratum that dealt the greatest blow to the concept and perhaps to the practice of oral transmission, as part of the struggle for the intellectual capital related to the control of the secrets of the Torah. More than the first elite, those second elite Kabbalists reinterpreted the late antiquity esoteric books, including *Shi'ur Qomah*, in a written manner and in different conceptual directions, each reflecting the overall structure of thought of the respective school.²¹⁰ While claiming that secrets are important, their source is now much less an issue of inter-human communication, rather than receptions of messages from supernal worlds. Though Nahmanides' thought and perhaps practice were concerned also with experiences of *devequt*, they are not conceived by him or his followers as part of Kabbalistic lore.²¹¹ Nahmanides' limited set of secrets, which can be faithfully transmitted, are therefore dealing with esoteric aspects of texts, not with mysteries can be hardly understood, less with the ineffability of experiences or the manner in which they are induced. From this point of view, it is Abulafia that is closer to the experiential approaches we have seen in the responsum of R. Sherirah and R. Hai Gaon, or of R. Eleazar of Worms, where some forms of experience are mentioned, than Nahmanides' school was. Even R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, who remained faithful to Nahmanides' theory of secrecy even in what is probably his last work, long after the death of his teachers who were disciples of Nahmanides, nevertheless confesses in his *Baddei 'Aron* that he enjoyed some form of mystical experience.²¹²

MOSHE IDEL

²¹⁰ So, for example, in an anonymous manuscript Ms. New York JTS Acc. 0940 Micr 8114, fol. 73b, there is a tradition of the name of the sword of God, whose name is Matzmatzit, «as it is written in in secret of *Shi'ur Qomah*, and I received it from the mouth of R. Isaac the Pious of France». Later on on the same page Nahmanides is mentioned as part of a certain chain of transmission.

²¹¹ IDEL, *Nahmanides*, cit., p. 74; and AFTERMAN, *Devequt: Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought*, cit., pp. 286-333.

²¹² See M. IDEL, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1989, pp. 119-128.