

De Natura Dei: On the Development of the Jewish Myth

I. General Characteristics

When encountering Kabbala for the first time, many face it in dismayed trepidation: Can this be Judaism? Where is the pure monotheism we have learned to expect from studies of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Jewish philosophy? The research literature does not solve this riddle and, needless to say, these questions are not discussed in the writings of those scholars who view Kabbala as an alien growth and have a vested interest in stressing them. But even Gershom Scholem, the leading scholar of Kabbala who turned it into a decisive factor in the history of the Jewish spirit, saw it as a new eruption of the myth beginning in the twelfth century. Scholem stressed the vast difference between Kabbala and “the tendency of classical Jewish tradition to liquidate myth as a central spiritual power”¹ and therefore, when searching for the mystery of Jewish “vitality,” could find it only in the Kabbala.² This approach also reflects disbelief in the kabbalists’ pretension to be *baalei kabbala*, namely, guardians of the mythical tradition, and raises the question: How did such a striking innovation find acceptance by an ancient, wise people, at the close of the Middle Ages?

In this essay, I will try to trace the outlines of an alternative answer. Essentially, Kabbala is not a new creation but a reformulation, in different form, of the same myth that has been the very heart of the Torah since time immemorial. The mythical element did not erupt in the Kabbala; rather, that is where it was given systematic formulation and set within rigid frameworks, which may have in fact restrained and weakened its personal, spontaneous vitality. Adapting an ancient myth in accord with the spirit of the times is not particular to Kabbala. This flexibility is in the very nature of myth, which unfolds in line with changing sensibilities and develops complex interactions with the surrounding culture, while preserving its continuity. To the extent that it is flexible, a myth is also conservative,

traditionally transmitted, and evolves through textual interpretation. I have discussed the "external" links of the kabbalistic myth elsewhere,³ and this essay will deal with its internal development. In other words, I will try to show that the characteristic features of the biblical and the rabbinical God have been attired in the guise of the kabbalistic *sefirot*.

But there is a preliminary question: Why are we unaware today of a continuum extending from the biblical to the kabbalistic conception of divinity? We have probably been influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which held the biblical and talmudic God above all myth, construing myth and Judaism as essentially contradictory. This is not just a popular truism, but an assumption adopted by most of Judaism's spokesmen, from philosophers like Hermann Cohen to distinguished scholars and philologists such as Yehezkel Kaufmann and Julius Guttman. Even Moshe David Cassuto, most of whose research was devoted to emphasizing the parallels between the Bible and Ugaritic literature, consistently attempted to show that the Bible preserved idolatry only in form, while pouring new, nonmythical content into the old vessels. If *myth* be defined as a groundless prejudice, then the assumption of an a-mythical Judaism is a total myth. Indeed, a host of scholars, most of them Gentiles, followed the opposite course and highlighted the Hebrew myth as part of the general one. However, these scholars lacked influence—especially in the field of kabbalistic research, which they did not pursue—because their work reflected an unacceptable blurring of Judaism's uniqueness, as well as a rift between biblical and later Jewish literature. Nuances of an anti-Jewish ideology can occasionally be discerned in these writings, either reflecting the Christian attempt to deny rabbinical Judaism its pretence to be the legitimate heir of biblical religion or, in the case of Jewish scholars, expressing the influence of radical Zionist historiosophy or even of "Canaanite" denials of the Exile.

The uniqueness of Judaism may be preserved without severing it from myth—the well-spring of the religious impulse. Myths are shared by all religions but are also the source of each religion's uniqueness, as they are concerned with the particular and concrete rather than with generalizations and abstractions. This emerges from the most general definition of myth, one essentially accepted by most scholars: A myth is a sacred story about the gods expressing that which the abstract word, or Logos, cannot express.⁴ It is because of this sacredness that myths affect life. Those who see the Logos as the central essence have turned *myth* into a derogatory term, denoting trivial and vain inventions whereas those, like myself, who do not

believe that reality can be completely reduced to logical terms, recognize myth as its culmination. Each religion has its own myth into which it absorbs and incorporates influences from other religions, and this is also true for the Jewish religion. Even Judaism's monotheistic essence is not contradictory to myth, and monotheism itself has its own, far-reaching myth. The very declaration of the unity of God is mythical in origin and, Maimonides notwithstanding, does not turn God into an abstract inapprehensible concept. Judaism's mythical elements are not a result of polytheistic influences. On the contrary, philosophical abstraction emerged in fact within Greek polytheism, and thinkers such as Maimonides laboriously attempted to graft it on to the monotheistic texts; this attempt, as we shall see later, often led to the strengthening of myths rather than to their disappearance. There was good reason for the Platonic academy to remain as the last bastion of "pagan" religion during the expansion of Christianity.

Scholars of religion such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade have already pointed out the mythical element in monotheistic religion. Martin Buber went even further and grounded his conception of Judaism in the monotheistic myth.⁵ However, although Buber stressed the human attitude toward the divine as a mythical entity with whom dialogue is possible, the kabbalists were concerned with the mythical features of God Himself. Therefore, while affirming myth, Buber denied the kabbalistic gnosis (the knowledge of God's mysteries). In this essay, I am concerned with the mythical features of the one God that, through their analogy to those of the human being created in His image, enable the dialogue to take place. In my view, this is no affront to the glory of God, the *Adam Ila'a* [Man Supreme] of the Zohar, who transcends even the most sublime idea; I will also show how these features are the source of the kabbalistic gnosis odious to Buber.

True, the Jewish myth in its kabbalistic guise may be disturbing. The personal descriptions of God in the Bible and in rabbinical literature may be approached lightly, merely as legends attempting to shape individual attitudes toward God. However, the Kabbala ascribes a more defined ontological meaning to God's attributes and confines them within a conceptual range that, though not rationally apprehensible, weakens the closeness of the "I-Thou" relationship. The biblical myth may be embraced without requiring us to believe in it, but Kabbala makes more stringent demands that reach into the rational realm too; it may be for this reason that wide circles, which enjoy this complacent distinction between myth and mind, feel threatened by it. Moreover, as I shall show later, the somewhat dry and arbitrary systematization pervasive in the Kabbala may evoke a sense of alienation.

These features of the kabbalistic myth are grounded in the exegetical approach to rabbinical *midrashim* that characterize most of the early Kabbala and actually created it. Unlike the philosophical exegesis of Midrash, kabbalistic exegesis did not expound one system according to an already available one; the kabbalistic system was actually created through exegesis of the Midrash. Kabbalists fostered one Jewish myth, that of the “ten *sefirot*,” which after a long development, crystallized into the ten attributes or divine hypostases⁶ and became the organizing framework for the Jewish myth in its entirety. Kabbalists ascribed to a specific *sefira* all mythical references to God’s attributes found in the Bible and in rabbinical literature, in line with the conceptual rigor favored by the medieaval approach and under the influence of philosophy, despite the latter’s attempt to eradicate all mythical traces from Judaism. Philosophy failed in this attempt, but it did have a share in changing the shape of the myth. Philosophy affected kabbalists directly, through ideas such as the *unio mystica* and the neo-Platonic emanation, which in Kabbala fused in the mythical descriptions of attachment (*devekut*) and emanation (*atsilut*). It also affected them indirectly, by evoking their need for self-defense; to protect myth from attacks mounted from the philosophical flank, kabbalists adopted the ways of their adversaries and arrived at more conceptualized formulations of God’s attributes. This conceptualization never reached the point of completely reducing mythical entities: myth always remained the heart of Kabbala and this process only strengthened it, made it more structured, and even raised its ontological status. However, a heavy price was occasionally paid, in the form of a considerable devaluation of the personal and vital nature of the Jewish myth, as we shall see further on.

This was not an inevitable consequence. Organizing the myth in the model of the ten *sefirot* can be potentially fruitful and enriching, providing the individual *mythologoumenon* with a wider range of interesting associations. This was indeed the case with the Zohar and the circles that crystallized around it.⁷ The Zohar was written in a setting of wealth and security; as against the philosophical option, it built a marvelous structure from the ancestral mythical elements, which was only strengthened by the addition of kabbalistic and philosophical components. The Zohar blurs the boundaries between genres, and not in vain was it written in the mold of an ancient *midrash*. Its authors often continued creating living myths in the ancient manner and included the kabbalistic *sefirot* only when necessary and in an appropriate dosage. The *sefirot* are not included for the sake of systematization, but to deepen the old myth through new reflection, because the Zohar recognizes the freedom of mythical

creativity. This freedom is granted only to the kabbalist who is "faithful" to the spirit of religion, not to transgressors "weaving heavens of chaos," as some of the disciples and imitators of the Zohar indeed did.⁸ The writers of the Zohar were wary of this, and it exists in a fruitful tension between the need to spread its message and to conceal it.⁹ The multifaceted character of the Zohar explains the fascination it has exerted over its readers from the time it was written until our own days; a great deal of subsequent kabbalistic creativity is no more than attempts to systematize the zoharic myths. These attempts are not inevitably unimaginative and dull; at times, they reflect a great individual soul, as attested by the wondrous system Isaac Luria developed from the Zohar in Safad.

One need not be perplexed by the assumption that myths can be graded according to their ontological validity. A wide range of possibilities stretches between legends and parables, on the one hand, and an objective, inevitable reality, on the other. Myths do not always lay claim to absolute ontological validity, which may vary widely in line with the literary genres. In my view, it can be assumed that the mythical validity of religions based on canonized Scriptures will be particularly high. Hence, the mythical status of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is even higher than that of the Greek myth, which gave birth to the term. Undoubtedly, in Greece as well, myth was the foundation of ritual and considered a religious truth but, since Greek religion lacked "Scriptures" in the full sense of the term, its ontological validity was lower. The changing course of myth may be traced through several literary genres in Greek religion, both from the perspective of its authors and from that prevailing in later periods. There are great differences between the status of myths in Homer's writings, which was very close to that of "Scriptures," the description of the gods in Hesiod and Orpheus, and the status of myths in the classical tragedies, where they were transformed according to the needs and inclinations of the playwrights. Furthermore, these all differ from the myths that Plato integrated in his philosophical writings.¹⁰

The same phenomenon is found in Jewish literature: the mythical status of the biblical stories of Creation or the Exodus differs in descriptive style and in the authority of its source from that of its midrashic amplifications. The Bible tells a flowing, detailed story in the name of God or Moses, and this authority is accepted and confirmed by the later Halakha; on the other hand, rabbinical *midrashim* are the statements of different rabbis, who are often in mutual disagreement. (Indeed, rabbinical myths themselves appear in various forms. Some were formulated in clearly mythical terms, because of literary considerations and in order to deliver a non-

mythical message, as I have shown elsewhere,¹¹ whereas others have a prominently mythical character and will be discussed later.) However, the biblical myth is itself not the apex of the ontological scale, and this myth too can be removed from its literal context and expounded, whether in allegorical or other terms. Praxis, rather than belief in the details of the biblical myth, is the core of Jewish religion though, as we shall see later, praxis is not divorced from myth. In this regard, the credit for being the most mythical religion belongs to Christianity, which meticulously formulated the details of its myth through a series of disputes, schisms, and even wars and established them as articles of faith to be committed to memory. These features of the Christian myth reflect its contest with philosophy and its adoption of the latter's concepts,¹² in a process similar to the one described earlier regarding Kabbala. However, in Christianity this process culminated in a dangerous fusion—philosophical elements merged with the Paulinian principle of faith, which superseded the commandments and became the key to salvation. Indeed, in his epistle to the Galileans, the emperor Julian the Apostate preferred paganism to Christianity on the grounds that the Christian myth, as opposed to the pagan one, does not allow for allegorical interpretation.

The kabbalists themselves were aware of the high status of their myth. This awareness increased in the course of history and reached its peak in the kabbalistic, messianic awakening of the Sabbatean period. For the Sabbateans, identifying the true God (the "God of truth" in their terms) was a crucial aspect of their activity. Sabbetai Zevi himself had difficulty formulating exactly the nature of his God, given its elusive personal character.¹³ This task became the main concern of Nathan of Gaza, Sabbetai Zevi's prophet; in his profound, extensive, and largely unpublished work, Nathan created an innovative kabbalistic system where the images of God and the Messiah are connected and shaped through their mutual influence. However, the core of Nathan's work is not theoretical definition but rather the emotional bond of faith and love joining the believers, God, and the Messiah. It was the Sabbatean theologian Abraham Miguel Cardozo who raised theoretical definition to the rank of a messianic end, devoting his numerous writings to this purpose,¹⁴ as did his followers. In Cardozo's writings, for the first time in kabbalistic literature, there is a formulation resembling a Christian credo: "I believe with my whole heart and soul that He is the Cause of all Causes, that He is One, the only One, the singular One. . . that He shines through the ten *sefirot* of emanation. . ." ¹⁵

The credal style, which started with Sabbateanism, occasionally appears in later Kabbala in even stronger terms and accompanied

by a ritual instruction to recite it daily. It is interesting that precisely at a time when its influence was on the wane, Kabbala demanded such authority for its myth. The following excerpt appears in the *Sefer Od Yosef Hai*, by the nineteenth century Babylonian kabbalist Rav Yosef Hayyim ben Elyahu Elhakham:¹⁶

Every man should carefully recite these words every day, including the Sabbath and the Holidays, before the portion on the *akeda* [the sacrifice of Isaac]. This declaration is greatly needed for the ways of mystery, and these are its words: "I believe with my whole heart and soul that God Our Lord is the Cause of all Causes, that He created the ten *sefirot* which are *keter*, *hokhma* and *bina*, *hesed*, *gevura* and *tiferet*, *netzah*, *hod*, *yesod* and *malkhut* and His Light is revealed and hidden in the Supreme *Keter*, and from there it shines upon the letter *Yod*, which is *hokhma*". . .

After the kabbalistic description, it goes on to state: "It is my belief and my wish before the Holy One, blessed be He, with my whole heart and with a willing soul, to completely eliminate all strange, unfit, harmful and forbidden thoughts as well as all thoughts which are, God forbid, heretical, and all bad reflections and all bad, unfit, harmful and forbidden images."¹⁷

This text is followed by detailed halakhic instructions concerning the ways of "eliminating" heretic thoughts, borrowed from the laws about the disposal of leavened bread during Passover. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this text was not printed in the prayerbooks and was circulated in a special booklet, undated, printed in Jerusalem several times. We may perhaps infer from this as well that, despite the Kabbala's high ontological status in the kabbalists' eyes, belief in it did not become normative for the general public or for the leadership. The normative status of the kabbalistic myth is lower than that of Maimonides's thirteen articles of faith, which lack a prominently mythical character and were accepted into the liturgy.

Further evidence of the high status of the kabbalistic myth may be found in its liturgical uses; from the sixteenth century onward, kabbalistic excerpts were extensively included in prayerbooks. These excerpts range from short allusions, such as the formula *leshem yihud* [for unity], stated before performing the commandments, all the way to long passages meticulously describing kabbalistic beliefs. Many of these excerpts appear in the first anthology of kabbalistic liturgy, *Sha'arei Zion* [The Gates of Zion], which Nathan Neta Hanover compiled shortly before the advent of Sabbateanism. In this anthology

we find, for instance, the passage *Petah Eliyyahu* from the introduction to the *Tikkunei Zohar*, which precedes the prayers in Sephardi communities; this passage, though not worded as a credo, is a general summary of the kabbalistic myth. We should also include under this rubric the well-known book *Hemdat Yamim* [The Beloved of Days]—unquestionably Sabbatean—which suggests that kabbalistic *kavanot* [devotional intentions] be turned into a text to be recited aloud. Indeed, this process began even earlier, as attested by the many kabbalistic *piyutim* [ritual songs] for various occasions; although of lesser liturgical validity, some of these *piyutim* were occasionally printed in prayerbooks.

The first kabbalists were already aware of the ontological importance of myth, even if they did not establish it as a dogma or integrate it into normative liturgy. By liturgy I refer to words and deeds, not to intentions—which are obviously the core of Kabbala since its inception—or to practices adopted by closed circles at its early stages of development.¹⁸ This awareness of the importance of myth is expressed in the very claim that Kabbala constitutes a distinct phase in the understanding of religion that is different from textual or midrashic interpretation, as well as in the names ascribed to it, such as *Derekh Emeth* [The Path of Truth] in Nahmanides' Commentary on the Bible; *Orah Keshot* [The Path of Truth], *Raza de-Hokhmeta* [The Mystery of Wisdom], or *Raza de-Meheimanuta* [The Mystery of Faith] in the *Zohar*. It is also reflected in the precautions and secrecy in which the first kabbalists shrouded their knowledge,¹⁹ as well as in their consistent abstention from introducing any innovations in the body of knowledge handed down to them. The latter approach was prevalent among Gerondian kabbalists and their leader Nachmanides,²⁰ as against the creativity displayed by circles associated with the *Zohar*, to which we referred earlier.

In this essay, my concern is with myth itself, as it is revealed in the texts. I am not concerned with the sociological or psychological role of myth, or with the circumstances of its creation. Therefore, I will not be relating to the whole field of research on these aspects of myth, from Jung extending to Levi-Strauss and their disciples as well as their opponents, which has recently elicited a tremendous volume of work. I am interested in precisely those facets of myth that cannot be reduced to general concepts. Furthermore, I do not use the term *myth* in the amplified meaning adopted by the social sciences, where it includes additional concepts, ideologies, and spiritual approaches, which would obscure my intention. I adhere to the original meaning of the word, which denotes a story about the gods and their nature, adapted to the one God of Jewish religion. God's unity

determines His nature; it also has a mythical aspect that, in my eyes, is the source of life of the Jewish religion.

II. Talmud and Kabbala: God's Actions as Reflected in His Attributes

We shall first examine several passages of rabbinical literature exposing the character and attributes of the talmudic God, in order to illustrate the continuities and contrasts between the Talmud and the Kabbala noted in the previous section. Obviously, we can no more than touch on this diverse and monumental body of literature, created by widely different circles over many centuries. I use the conventional term *rabbinical* as a matter of convenience although, in every respect, delimiting this literature is an impossible task due to the difficulties of defining the time span, social strata, scope of relevant literature and literary genre, as well as the rabbis' concepts and beliefs.

Examples were chosen mainly from the Babylonian Talmud and its tannaitic *beraitot*, given the Talmud's central place in Jewish literature and its quality as a clear, early document, less influenced by outside currents of thought and marked by stronger mythical leanings. I will show how these examples blend into a myth with uniform features, albeit not one formulated as a fixed and articulated credo. These features assume various guises, in accordance with the needs of the exegete and the "mythological validity" of his claims. The recurrence of these features and their close integration into the halakhic and religious ethos, as well as the continuity between the Bible and the Kabbala that we shall discuss later, will point to a myth in the full sense of the term. It will then become clear that these are not vain assertions, as alleged by those intent on "purifying" and blurring the essence of religion.

Still, it is not my claim that this myth is "the rabbinical view," as there is no "rabbinical view." Broadly different and even mutually contradictory statements appear in this literature, including the Talmud, and I intend only to indicate and describe a living myth from which the Kabbala developed. Such a description is missing from the extensive work dealing with rabbinical beliefs, because even serious talmudic scholars have been unable to altogether avoid the influence of those preconceived notions that describe rabbinical Judaism as legalistic and opposed to mysticism and myth. The first to spread this libel, which many Jews construed as praise, were the Christians, starting with Paul. Therefore, most scholars dealing with mythical

descriptions such as the ones following, often see them as only explicit or implicit forms of a message belonging in the human realm, failing to combine them into a complete, credible myth (though support for various forms of the talmudic myth has indeed been voiced over the last few years). I have chosen the opposite path and granted priority to celestial beings for, as we shall see, the rabbis thought that human religious behavior must spring from the mythical essence of divinity. I believe that this claim is self-evident and the onus of proof is on those claiming that the rabbis were “flippant,” so to speak, precisely when they came to describe their God.

The first example will serve to link various genres of talmudic-midrashic literature, as well as show the affinities between this literature and Kabbala. It is from the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 7a:

R. Ishmael b. Elisha says: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw Akathriel Yah, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me: Ishamael, My son, bless Me! I replied: May it be Thy will that Thy mercy may suppress Thy anger and Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes, so that Thou mayest deal with Thy children according to the attribute of mercy and mayest, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice! And He nodded to me with His head.

Several scholars felt this passage was incompatible with their own approach. In a paper attempting to define and limit the scope of the mystical element in rabbinical literature, Ephraim Urbach, the most comprehensive scholar of rabbinic thought in our time, dismissed it as part of the *Hekhalot* literature and of the “mysteries of the Chariot watchers, who were far from the ways of the first *tannaim*.”²¹ This passage is indeed related to the tradition of *Hekhalot* literature, as can also be inferred from the names of its two protagonists: the divine one (Akathriel Yah . . .) and the human one (Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest), as Urbach pointed out. *Hekhalot* literature resembles kabbalistic literature on various counts, and precisely for this reason, we shall not be devoting special attention to it in this essay, where we are concerned with the mainstream midrashic tradition and the continuum linking it to Kabbala. I have chosen this passage to show that noting its closeness to *Hekhalot* literature is not, in and by itself, sufficient to remove it from the realm of rabbinical literature. In the following pages, we will compare it with others of professed “midrashic” quality and thus further our understanding of its special features as well as its links with the other examples.

True, the preceding passage has a quasi-kabbalistic character unusual for the Talmud: God's attributes²² seem to be independent entities, "suppressing" and "prevailing" over each other and actually controlled by a man, Rabbi Ishmael, just as the Kabbala speaks about the ten *sefirot* that the kabbalist can affect. However, it is immediately apparent that the image of God is not wholly kabbalistic. A personal God requesting a blessing is revealed to Rabbi Ishmael beyond the attributes, whereas no God is found in the Kabbala outside the *sefirot*, as the emanating *Ein-Sof* is neither a personal image nor the object of a religious relationship.²³ Evidence of this difference can also be found in the kabbalists' exegeses of this passage: not satisfied with the slight overlap between the attributes and their own *sefirot*, they made "Akatriel" himself part of the scheme, and precisely as the lowest *sefira*, which is beneath the attributes.²⁴

But are the attributes indeed independent entities, separate from God? Let us consider this question by looking at another talmudic passage, which appears immediately before the previous one:

R. Johanan says in the name of R. Jose. . . hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers. What does he pray?—
R. Zutra b. Tobi said in the name of Rab: "May it be My will that My mercy may subdue My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice." (Berakhot 7a)

This passage is much more in line with the general features of talmudic style. There is no "Akatriel" and no "Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest" from *Hekhalot* literature but rather an ordinary statement by a famous *amora*, without hinting at human influence on the divine attributes. Although Rabbi Ishmael's blessing is reproduced literally, in this passage it appears as a prayer that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays by Himself, to Himself and for Himself. Can we still adhere to a description of the attributes as independent entities mechanistically linked? Were this the case, God should have acted directly on the attributes rather than pray to Himself "May it be My will. . ." and, most certainly, so should Rabbi Ishmael, whose blessing too begins with "May it be Thy will. . ." Whereas at first we could have ignored this formula, which seemed a polite form of address to God that masks direct human interference with the divine attributes, we now find that God Himself requests "May it be My will" and the euphemistic argument cannot be applied to Him.

We may infer from this “self-prayer” that the attributes are only psychological characteristics typical of human beings, who are prey to their instincts and need to struggle in order to overcome feelings such as pity and anger. True, the attributes occasionally appear as independent entities, but the rabbis also depicted the *yetser ha-ra* [evil inclination] as a fly dwelling between the two entrances to the heart (Berakhot 61a), and the collective *yetser ha-ra* of the people of Israel as a young fiery lion coming forth from the Temple’s Holy of Holies (Yoma 69b).

But . . . may we speak of God’s evil inclination? Indeed we may. We can understand Rabbi Ishmael for choosing not to: It is disrespectful to mention His evil inclination to Him even as we are blessing Him, and the term does not suit the exalted tone of the passage. However, we find this explicit phrase elsewhere:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness. [For] Moses had come and said (Deuteronomy 10:17): “The great God, the mighty and the awful.” Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His awful deeds? Hence he omitted [the attribute] the “awful.”²⁵ Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds?²⁶ Hence he omitted the word *mighty*.²⁷ But they came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds that He subdues His inclination, that He extends long suffering to the wicked. Therein lie His awful powers: For but for the fear of Him, how could one [single] nation persist among the [many] nations! But how could [the earlier] rabbis [meaning Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to Him. (Yoma 69b)

The usage “His inclination” was unacceptable to some of the copyists, who wrote “His wrath” instead, whereas the Gaon of Vilna opted for “His will,” but this usage still appears in the main printed edition. Evidence of its accuracy is also furnished by the parallel verse in Avot 4:1: “Who is a hero? He who subdues his inclination.”²⁸ Indeed, the same verb appears as well in Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha’s blessing (“That Thy mercy may subdue Thy anger”) and from the parallel version of this passage it is clear that no external suppression was intended there either. Moreover, even the use of “prevail” adopted by Rabbi Ishmael (“Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes”)

lacks a mechanistic connotation regarding the attributes. In the Aramaic version of the Bible we find “his mercy prevailed” as a translation of “his affection was kindled” (Genesis 43:30)—spoken of Joseph, a human being.

The Jewish myth changed between the biblical and the rabbinical periods and the passage from Yoma, attributed to the period of the Great Assembly, shows awareness of this change. In the biblical period God still had external enemies although, indeed, none as great and powerful as He: “Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the gods?” (Exodus 15:11). God could not be vanquished by His enemies but, nonetheless, it was still God’s glory to defeat them and He was praised by the men of the Bible for His past and future victories: “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15:1) or “On that day the Lord with His sore and great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan the flying serpent, and Leviathan that crooked serpent; and He shall slay the crocodile that is in the sea” (Isaiah 27:1). This is not the approach of the Midrash, where both the human enemies and the monsters of the sea have been brought low and are not seen as worthy adversaries. The war with the Leviathan becomes Gabriel’s task, and the battle ends following God’s intervention (Baba Bathra 74b–75a): “Gabriel is to arrange in the future a chase of Leviathan. . . . And if the Holy One, blessed be He, will not help him, he will be unable to prevail over him.” Indeed, there are still angels and a celestial retinue who argue sometimes with their Creator, mainly because they envy mortals, but their whole nature is to serve. God’s arguments with them might lead Him to hesitate, but not to external war. Outwardly (as is already the case in several biblical instances), God is Almighty; His real wars are only waged within Himself.

Therefore, according to this passage, when Jeremiah and Daniel felt that God appeared to have been defeated by His enemies, they ceased His praises since they were false and “they would not ascribe false [things] to Him” or, in the version of the Jerusalem Talmud, “flatter Him.”²⁹ After all, these praises continue those of Moses (Deuteronomy 10:17): “a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, who favors no person, and takes no bribe.” The men of the Great Assembly thus changed the prophets’ ways and reverted to the full wording: “a great God, a mighty and a terrible.”³⁰ Why the reversal? We could explain it in the spirit of the biblical myth and ascribe it to the political and religious improvements in the wake of the Return to Zion but, for the rabbis, this would be out of character. Indeed, unlike the prophets, the men of the Great Assembly could never imagine God’s defeat at the hands of His enemies, but neither would they consider

it an heroic deed for God to defeat them. In order to be called a *hero*, God must overcome. What, then, must He overcome? The men of the Great Assembly introduced their psychological myth and “restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness”: They restored the myth of God’s heroism. To the extent that the biblical God was a hero, He is now a hero of heroes because “Who is a hero? He who subdues his inclination.” What does this mean? It means extending “long suffering to the wicked” (an expression also found in the Sanhedrin passage later, p. 18), when God lets His enemies rule over His house and His people and seems defeated.

It is noteworthy that the Jerusalem Talmud expresses reservations about this myth as well and ascribes it, though in a more subtle form and without the words “His inclination,” to the prophet Jeremiah. Unlike Daniel, Jeremiah did say “mighty” because, according to the Jerusalem Talmud version: “He should be called mighty, that He sees His house destroyed and is silent.” However, the men of the Great Assembly did not follow Jeremiah because, for abstract theological reasons, they opposed all mythology—man is incapable of grasping God’s ways or, in their words: “Does flesh and blood have the power to measure these things?!” The rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud also expressed views in this spirit when they dealt elsewhere with the formula of “great, mighty and terrible God.” Angry at those attempting to add a chain of adjectives to these three, in the spirit of the *Hekhalot* literature, the rabbis stated that even these, “had not Moses our Master mentioned them in the Law and had not the men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them in the prayer, we should not have been able to mention them.”³¹

Saadia Gaon’s approach is worth noting in this context. He also compared the words of Jeremiah and Daniel to the biblical verse and commented on the absence of “mighty and terrible.” Although this comparison was obviously inspired by the Talmud, he totally ignored the rabbinical pronouncements in this regard and settled the issue in totally nonmythical fashion!³²

During the biblical period, when God still had external enemies, He could request help from man, at least in ancient rhetorical devices such as?

And He saw that there was no man,³³ and was astonished that there was no intercessor; therefore His arm brought salvation to Him; and His righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon His head and He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak, according to their deeds, so

will He repay, fury to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies; to the islands He will repay recompense. (Isaiah 59:16–18)

What help can God expect from flesh and blood creatures? Verbal encouragement, as in the words of the prophet: “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art Thou not it that has cut Rahav in pieces, and wounded the crocodile? Art Thou not it which dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?” (Isaiah 51:9–10)

But what is Rabbi Ishmael’s role? Is the expectation that man should help God also found in the rabbinical period? How can man interfere with God’s attributes? The talmudic God too asks man for help, real and crucial help, even if many talmudic scholars are uncomfortable with this request. Help again appears as verbal encouragement, despite the fact that God struggles against His own attributes. As human beings need help and support in their struggle against their passions, so does God, and this parallel is explicitly mentioned when summarizing the passage on Akatriel and Ishmael: “Here we learn that the blessing of an ordinary man must not be considered lightly in your eyes” (elsewhere the Talmud learns the same rule from stories about biblical figures).³⁴ That is, we may learn from God’s request about human nature and about the proper conduct toward humankind in general since, despite claims to the contrary, the ethos of the rabbis is grounded on their myth but does not replace it.³⁵

Rabbi Ishmael’s blessing even entered the liturgy and is included in the morning prayer after the reading on the binding of Isaac; to encourage God further, Abraham is presented to Him in the prayers so that his memory may be preserved in reward for his actions, and also as a paragon for the subdual of passion:

Master of the world! Even as Abraham our father held back his compassion in order to do Thy will with loyal heart, so may Thy mercy hold back Thy anger from us; let Thy mercy prevail over Thy attributes. Lord our God, deal with us kindly and mercifully; in Thy great goodness, may Thy fierce wrath turn away from Thy people, Thy city, Thy land, and Thy heritage. . .

Doubts may still remain as to whether this is not an unusual motif in rabbinical literature that only appears here because of the mentioned links between the Akatriel story and *Hekhalot* literature.

The following parallel passage, of impeccable midrashic credentials, should help to allay them:

R. Joshua b. Levi also said: When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, tying crowns on the letters [of the Torah]. Said He to him, "Moses, is there no [greeting of] Peace in thy town?" "Shall a servant extend [a greeting of] Peace to his Master!" replied he. "Yet thou shouldst have assisted Me," said He. Immediately he cried out to Him, (Numbers 14:17) "And now, I pray thee, let the power of the Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken." (Shabbath 89a)

Although this passage resembles the Akatriel-Ishmael story in content, in its literary approach it is diametrically opposed. In that case, as usual in *Hekhalot* literature, the dominant tone is mystical and formal, creating a distance between God and His creatures. Akatriel and Ishmael, a product of this literature, feature as protagonists. In this case, the protagonists are familiar and close to every Jew—the Holy One, blessed be He, and Moses. There is a close link between the identity of the protagonists and the contents of the stories: The first tells of a High Priest who enters the innermost part of the sanctuary to offer incense, when God officially addresses him and requests a blessing. The second tells of an intimate conversation between God and Moses, conducted as a psychological contest full of cunning and misunderstandings.

In the Akatriel-Ishmael story, as in other accounts of ascents to Heaven from *Hekhalot* and apocalyptic literature, God's nature is revealed in the very statement about His attributes or about celestial entities. Ostensibly, this is the main "content" of the story. But here, in the personal myth, God's psychological dilemma is also sharply expressed in the "background story," the story of the meeting between Moses and God. God tries to protect His honor as Lord and Master while trying to obtain Moses' help, and His request for a blessing thus seems like an admonition, seemingly phrased in simple, popular language: "Moses, is there no [greeting of] Peace in thy town!?" Is it not the custom to extend peace greetings where you grew up!? Moses truly believes that God is protecting His honor and does not understand that, in fact, He is asking for his help. Therefore, Moses' reply is in the spirit of God's admonition: "Shall a servant extend [a greeting of] peace to his Master?" God then sees that hints will not suffice—He humiliates Himself and makes His request explicit: "Yet thou shouldst have assisted Me." Only now does Moses understand what is being asked of him and he blesses God in the words of the

verse, wishing that His power, which is identical with His attributes of mercy, may grow.

God's attributes of mercy appear in the next biblical verse, which the Talmud reader is supposed to have completed in his mind: "And now, I pray Thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken, saying, The Lord is long suffering, and great in love. . ." The mention of His attributes of mercy attests that, in this case as well, it is intended to have mercy "prevail over His attributes"; however, identifying His attributes of mercy with "His power" may point to their actual nature as characteristics of God rather than separate entities, as could have been understood from the Akatriel story.

The very mention of the attributes through a biblical quote helps to soften the formal style and the mythical overtones of Rabbi Ishmael's phrasing ("Thy mercy may prevail over Thy other attributes"); by contrast, the understatement characterizing the encounter between God and Moses accords the myth a more personal and primitive bent. The story of Akatriel seems to be nothing but a formal, exalted formulation and a conceptualized abstraction of this primitive myth, intended to hide God's "human weaknesses" under a cloak of distant glory in order to adjust it to the mystical style of *Hekhalot* literature. The alternative—turning the story of Akatriel into a personal myth—is inconceivable. We do occasionally find in *Hekhalot* literature expressions of an intimate bond between God and His worshippers, often to the chagrin of the ministering angels; the contrast created after the breach in the cloak of distance makes this bond seem even more powerful. We will see in section III that, in rabbinical *midrashim* too, the angels fulfill a similar literary role).

In the more aloof version of the Akatriel-Ishmael story the mystic's influence on the divine attributes seems to be a quasi-magical or, more accurately, a quasi-theurgic act; however, in the personal story, it appears more likely that Moses influences his God through his words of encouragement. This idea is found explicitly in an earlier version of this story, where Moses' words to God ("And now I pray Thee, let the power. . .") are compared with the cries of support with which spectators encourage athletes in the arena:

"enhances strength" (Job 17:9). . . applies to Moses who enhanced the strength of the Almighty, as when he said "And now, I pray Thee, let the strength of the Lord be enhanced. . ." so that the measure of mercy [may] prevail over the measure of justice. . . A strong man was exercising with a block of stone that came from a stonecutter. A passer-by saw him and said: "Your power is

marvelous. You are strong and brave," as is written: "And now, I pray Thee. . ." R. Azariah, citing R. Judah bar R. Simon, said: Whenever righteous men do the Holy One's will, they enhance the strength of the Almighty. Hence Moses' plea, "And now, I pray Thee. . ." On the other hand, when men do not do His will, then, if one dare say such a thing, (Deuteronomy 32:18):³⁶ "The Rock that begot thee, thou dost weaken."³⁷

In a sentence preceding this passage, the Midrash suggests another option: "'enhances strength. . .' is the Holy One who enhances the strength of the righteous to enable them to do His will." Indeed, in the account of Moses' ascent to heaven cited in the Shabbath passage (p. 16), the parties were also ambivalent. God and man are meshed and need each other. It is not only God who needs to be encouraged by Moses to abandon justice and embrace mercy, but Moses too needs God's prodding to become aware of the need for mercy, first through a hint ("Is there no [greeting of] peace in thy town?") and then explicitly ("Yet thou shouldst have assisted Me"). This appears even more clearly in another talmudic version of the encounter between God and Moses, where Moses speaks of the attribute of mercy relying on the same biblical verse, but God makes it explicitly clear that it is He who holds the copyright on the idea of mercy:

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting and writing "long suffering." Said he to Him, "Master of the World! Long suffering to the righteous?" He replied,³⁸ "Even to the wicked." He urged, "Let the wicked perish!" "See now what thou desirest," was His answer. "When Israel sinned," He said to him, "didst thou not urge Me, [Let Thy] long suffering be for the righteous [only]?" "Master of the World!" said he, "but didst Thou not assure me, Even to the wicked!" Hence it is written, "And now, I pray Thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken, saying." (Sanhedrin 111a-111b)

In this passage, the relationship between God and Moses seems more complex and delicate than the biblical one. This dialogue would not fit the style of the biblical myth, which is more aloof and unequivocal. In the biblical context, Moses seems to be consistently on the side of mercy, as it is said (Psalms 106:23): "Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath, lest He should destroy them." We even find God imploring Moses (Deuteronomy 9:14):

“Let Me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven: and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they” but Moses does not leave Him alone and, as we shall see later, “ignores God’s command.” As usual, the Talmud added a daring mythical picture:

R. Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing. . . [This formula serves to license the pursuit of a very bold line in the development of the biblical myth. Although this direction is already latent in a literal reading of the text, it entails an exaggerated concretization of the phrase “let Me alone”] this teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment and said before Him: Master of the World, I will not let Thee go until Thou forgivest and pardonest them. (Berakhot, 32a)

The Zohar developed this idea through the use of kabbalistic symbolism. As usual, it amplified the myth while leaving its personal intensity undiminished, and described Moses as embracing the King, wrestling with Him and pinning Him down by His arms.³⁹ According to Exodus 33:34, when God would not come up in the midst of His people Moses forced Him to reveal to him the secret of His attributes of mercy, through which He might be brought to change His decrees. This biblical description already seems to contain all the seeds of the blunt myth on which the *Selihot* ritual is grounded:

R. Johanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like the reader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them. . . A covenant has been made with the thirteen attributes that they will not be turned away empty handed. (Rosh Hashana 17b)

In talmudic sources however, Moses is ambivalent in his commitment to the attribute of mercy, as we saw earlier. The reasons will become clearer as we delve further into Moses’ character in the Talmud, where we find another description of his meeting with God:

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in tying

crowns to the letters. Said Moses, "Master of the World, Who stays Thy hand?" He answered, "There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws." "Master of the World," said Moses; "permit me to see him." He replied, "Turn thee round." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was weakened, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied "It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai," he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, "Master of the World, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!" he replied, "Be silent, for such is My decree." Then said Moses, "Master of the World, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward." "Turn thee round," said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market stalls. "Master of the World," cried Moses, "such Torah, and such a reward!" He replied, "Be silent, for such is My decree." (Menahot 29b)

This famous passage, widely regarded as the archetype of the relation between the Written and the Oral Law, replicates the situation presented in the two previous ones (pp. 16 and 18). In itself, the very appearance of a story in three different versions is proof of its "mythical validity," close to that of a personal legend and far from the rank of an "article of faith." This passage opens like the one in Shabbath and Moses encounters God as He is engaged in tying crowns to the letters but, whereas in the passage in Menahot the crowns are the story's substance, in the Shabbath passage the crowns are never mentioned again. However, were we to join to the Shabbath passage the "long suffering" quote from Sanhedrin (p. 18), the meaning of the crowns in the former would become clearer. Crowns are added to letters, in the same way that the attribute of mercy is added to justice, but Moses cannot grasp this. In Menahot he is presented as a slightly inadequate man; he not only fails to grasp the meaning of the crowns, needing to be "telescoped" into the future, but he also fails to understand the discussions between Rabbi Akiba and his students, till "he is weakened." It is interesting to note that the Talmud chose to use the very expression used in reference to God.⁴⁰ Moses is "comforted" when hearing the argument quoted in his name, but his sense of justice compels him to return to God and request that the Torah be given through Rabbi Akiba, a wiser man. However, God