OCCULTATION OF THE FEMININE AND THE BODY OF SECRECY IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH*

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Perhaps truth is a woman
who has reasons
for not letting us see her reasons?
Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science

Dis/Closing the Secret Secretly

The occult tradition of Judaism, which by the High Middle Ages is referred to most frequently by the generic term kabbalah, literally, “that which has been received,” is usually studied under the rubric of mysticism. A far better term, however, to capture the nature of this phenomenon is esotericism. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the mystical dimensions expressed in Jewish sources—and here I extend the scope to include more than just kabbalistic texts—are contextualized within the hermeneutical framework of esotericism.1 Here it is relevant to recall as well that in the first of his ten unhistorical aphorisms on the history of kabbalah, Gershom Scholem duly noted the central concern with the issue of secrecy in the kabbalistic sources. He remarked that the fundamental problem that presents itself is that, on the one hand, the kabbalists presume that truth is transmitted from generation to generation, but on the other hand, the truth of which they speak is secretive and thus cannot by nature be fully transmitted. In his inimitable style of ironic paradox, Scholem wrote, “Authentic tradition (echte Tradition) remains hidden; only the fallen tradition (verfallende Tradition) falls (verfällt) upon an object and only when it is fallen does its greatness become visible.”2 The truly esoteric knowledge cannot be divulged if it is to remain

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1 E. R. Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral tradition and Written transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism,” to be published in the proceedings of a conference on orality held at the University of Pennsylvania, May 1996.

2 The original German text and translation are cited from D. Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah,” in Gershom Scholem, ed. H. Bloom (New York, 1987), pp. 103–104.
esoteric, and thus a secret tradition that is transmitted is by definition a fallen (as opposed to an authentic) tradition.

The fascination with secrecy, which has held great power over the Jewish imagination through the generations, is often linked exegetically to the verse, “To investigate the matter is the glory of kings, but to conceal the matter is the glory of God” (Ps. 25:2). It is not an exaggeration to say that the words of the psalmist served as an oracle posted on the walls of the small elitist circles wherein specific secrets pertaining to both symbols and rites have been transmitted orally and in writing. This is true even though the eventual proliferation of the latter usually posed a challenge to the explicit injunction against disclosing secrets publicly. To be sure, not every written exposition of occult knowledge is in defiance of this injunction, for there were kabbalists who mastered the art of concealing secrets by revealing them. This, in my mind, is exemplified in the zoharic literature, wherein mysteries of Torah are disclosed through being hidden, an exegetical pattern that the zoharic authorship discerns in the Torah itself. The exoteric and esoteric layers are distinguishable, but one can only be expressed through the other. The way to the secret is through the letter of the text, not by discarding it. One passage worth particular mention is a text wherein

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3 On the centrality of esotericism in the history of Jewish mysticism, consider the perceptive remarks of W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, 1960), p. 57: “The degrees in which mystics tend thus to cloak their experiences from the public view vary with individual temperaments and also with the traditions of the particular culture, religion, or society. The most extreme secrecy was observed…among Jewish mystics.”