MEDIEVAL JEWISH INFLUENCES
ON RENAISSANCE CONCEPTS OF HARMONIA MUNDI

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It is the purpose of this study to present one of the lines of tradition which contributed to the establishment of the concept of harmonia mundi as a dominant world-view in European culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mainly in the context of the variegated phenomena which are sometimes united under the general title "Christian kabbalah". My focus will be on the development, in medieval Jewish esotericism, of the concept of Man as microcosmos into a generalized principle with significant implications concerning the concept of the relationships between God and the universe, the human soul and the human image. The three main stages of this development are to be found in the following texts: a) The Sefer Yezira (Book of Creation), written probably in Palestine in the third century; b) the commentaries to the Sefer Yezira of the tenth century, especially the one written by Rabbi Shabbatai Donnolo in Italy; and c) the works of the esotericists of the Kalonymus family in the Rhineland ("Hasidey Ashkenaz", i.e. German-Jewish pietists in medieval Germany), especially Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus of Worms. A brief analysis will bring into focus the intricate relationship between science and mysticism in this line of development, and a discussion of that problem is presented at the end of this article.

1. From the Sefer Yezira to Shabbatai Donnolo

The centrality of the Sefer Yezira in the development of esoteric concepts of harmonia mundi is well-known and need not be discussed in detail here. Suffice it to say that the work is based on the idea that God created the universe and all that is in it, and that He continues to support and guide it by the power of thirty-two "esoteric paths" (netivot pliot), which are the ten basic numbers (1-10; the zero was unknown in Antiquity), and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. According to this enigmatic work, God tied to each letter a "crown", and made it "king" of three interconnected and harmonial realms: the
first being the cosmos (i.e. celestial bodies, elements, planets and constellations), the second one being the “year” (i.e. time, like days, weeks, months and the seasons of the year), and the third one being “man” (i.e. the limbs, senses, internal organs and moods of a human being). The clear result of this description is that the same divinely-inspired linguistic force governs a segment of the universe, a segment of time, and a part of human physiology. The relationship between macrocosm and microcosm was thus enriched and presented in an elaborate, systematic way, following a basic Jewish rabbinic belief that God has created the universe by the use of the alphabet, and that language therefore contains—both in the individual letters and in the primordial text of Torah—the potential and ideal existence of all creatures, large and small, in general and in detail.

The aspect of this body of ideas which should, I believe, be emphasized most strongly is that we are dealing here with a scientific cosmology rather than a mystical world-view. The Sefer Yezira believes that it is presenting things exactly as they are, uncovering the basic laws which govern existence (for a juxtaposition of this perspective with mysticism see section III, below). Its author picked up a Jewish abstract statement, “the universe was created by ten divine utterances” (Mishna Avot 5:1), and transformed it into a detailed scientific system. If the universe was created by language, this means that the laws of language are the laws of the universe; and therefore the grammar of language is identical with the “grammar” of the universe: physics, astronomy, physiology. The motivation here is not—or not only—to lift one’s soul up to God (although this may also be achieved), but to formulate the handful of basic laws which govern the structure and behaviour of the universe. The ancient author did not deal in this work with any theological question, nor did he present any religious or ethical conclusions. His endeavors are dedicated exclusively to the stages by which the physical universe came into existence, and the ways in which it is sustained by the divine power encapsulated in language. According to this author, in the same way that language includes masculine and feminine genders, all existence is divided between them, and each phenomenon exists in male and female variations. Furthermore, he holds that good and evil are likewise components of grammar; and as a result they are both—and in equal measure—constitutive elements of existence.

For several centuries no reference was made in Jewish culture to this work and its unique ideas and terminology. Suddenly, however, an intense interest

3 Called nefesh in the Sefer Yezira. Nefesh frequently means “soul”, but in this work it means “individual”, according to the frequent usage of the term in the Hebrew bible.

4 Concerning the history of Sefer Yezira in Jewish rabbinic literature and in medieval philosophy and mysticism, see Dan, Jewish Mysticism I, 155-187.