THE SEFER HA-BAHIR AND ANDALUSIAN SUFISM

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Thanks to the pioneering research of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), the Sefer ha-Bahir (Book of Brightness or Clarity) is now widely recognized as the earliest significant literary manifestation of a new type of Jewish mysticism which would become known as the Kabbalah. Scholem in fact began his illustrious career as a scholar of Jewish mysticism by writing his doctoral dissertation, which he completed in 1923, on the Sefer ha-Bahir at the University of Munich. The dissertation was only the first stage of his research on the Bahir, which he pursued throughout most of the remainder of his long life. A quarter-century after completing the dissertation, he published important new findings in Reshit ha-Qabbalah (The Beginning of the Kabbalah), and his definitive statements on the subject appeared in Origins of the Kabbalah, first published in German in 1962, which remains today the most widely accepted study of the Bahir. As David Stern has recently observed, “whatever we know of the Sefer habahir we owe almost exclusively to Gershom Scholem.”

Scholem described the book as follows:

The Book Bahir, whose few pages seem to contain so much that is pertinent to the mystery of the origin of the Kabbalah, has the form of a midrash, namely, a collection of sayings or very brief homiletical expositions of biblical verses. These are not set forth according to any particular organizational principle. Thus the book is devoid of a literary structure. Furthermore . . ., it is only with the greatest reservations that one can speak of a uniform development of thought in the various paragraphs of the text. Everything seems to have been jumbled together haphazardly. Utilizing a mystical terminology that was not known in the ancient midrashim, the book interprets all sorts of biblical passages and aggadot, showing a preference, of course, for those of a cosmogonic and cosmological nature. Moreover, it makes the letters and vowels of the Hebrew language, and even certain accents of the Hebrew script, the objects of its speculation. Alongside fragments concerned with ritual symbolism and the mysticism of prayer that are scattered throughout the text, one finds explanations that obviously derive from the Book

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1 Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1948.
Yeṣirah and that interpret its ideas or develop them in new ways. To these are added passages with a psychological content as well as fragments related to various mystical names of God whose magical tendency is unmistakeable.

The Bahir thus posed as a midrash dating from talmudic times, and it was widely—though not universally—accepted as such. It was often attributed to Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah, the first of many Tannaitic sages cited in it. The book opens with a record of discussions between various rabbis and their students regarding the origins of the universe and the symbolism of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (their shapes, names, order, and numerical values). Great emphasis is placed upon the notion that God created the universe directly, without the intervention of any demiurge.

As David Stern has noted, the Bahir "employs nearly all the techniques of classical midrashic exegesis—puns and word-plays, interpretations of verses through other verses, gematriot, and anagrams. Among these the mashal holds an especially prominent position in Sefer habahir. Its relatively short text contains forty-five parables, and these meshalim touch upon the most profound and original aspects of Sefer Habahir's mystical universe." What is unusual about the parables in the Bahir is that they lack a nimshal—the usual conclusion to a mashal containing its application and prooftext. In Stern's words, "the absence of a nimshal spreads a kind of occluding patina over the mashal's ulterior meaning, further darkening what was already hidden." Indeed, one might say that the title Book of Clarity seems almost perverse; it would be difficult to find a more obscure text anywhere.

The Bahir's greatest claim to originality lies in its rather extensive treatment of the ten "sayings" or "words" by which God created the universe. These are loosely associated with ten divine powers—divided into three supreme words and seven inferior ones—which the Bahir calls sefirot. This constitutes the nucleus or germ of the later Kabbalah's elaborate theory of ten divine hypostases. It was precisely the treatment of the sefirot that led Scholem to consider the Bahir the earliest kabbalistic text. As Elliot Wolfson has recently observed, the essence of Kabbalah for Scholem was "the doctrine of a dynamic Godhead manifest in a decade of powers called most

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3 The English translation has Bahir, but this is obviously a misprint. The 1990 third printing—and first paperback edition—of Origins of the Kabbalah unfortunately failed to correct the many misprints that had appeared in the earlier editions.
5 Interpretations based on the numerical values assigned to the Hebrew letters.
6 i.e., parable.
7 Parables in Midrash, p. 217.
8 Ibid.
9 The term, meaning "countings" (from the Hebrew mispar, number), originated in the Sefer Yeṣirah, where, however, it seems only to designate the first ten numbers.