

Reply to Alon Goshen Gottstein [Review of A. Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton, 1997, published in *Kabbalah* 4 (1999)].

I am grateful to Alon Goshen-Gottstein for the attention he has given to my book and his close reading of the first two-thirds of it, the section dealing with texts dating from the first millenium of the common era. Because there are some serious issues between us, I am also grateful to the editors of *Kabbalah* for having given me this opportunity to respond.

First let me say that I find it a somewhat strange business, reviewing half or two-thirds of book, especially when the heart of the book and the purpose for writing it is found in the section ignored in the review. I understand that the reviewer is a scholar specializing in the earlier materials and felt his expertise limited him to that portion of my text. Nevertheless, that leaves a review that misses out on some of the main points. Because these major themes are ignored by the reviewer, I think it appropriate that I state them briefly and directly.

*Keter, The Crown of God*, is a key symbol-term of classical Kabbalah. It is not only the conventional lead term in the cluster of associations that constitute the first *sefirah*; it is also virtually the only positive image or pictorial term the Kabbalists allow to be associated with that recondite realm. This book is an attempt to seek out the origins and meaning of that symbol. The first six chapters of the book deal with the origins of crown symbolism in post-Biblical Judaism. They are devoted mostly to an examination of texts surrounding the giving of a crown to God, an aggadic motif related in turn to the *kedushah* liturgy, and various ancillary matters including the relationship of crowns and *tefillin*, the *tefillin* of God, magical associations of tying, and so forth. These chapters are based on a reading of texts across the divide between 'rabbinic' and 'hekhlot' texts, reflecting the deep linkage I see between the exoteric and esoteric sources of early Judaism. I try to show that various texts found within the 'safe' parameters of the rabbinic corpus in fact reflect mythologomenna which can not be understood without including those texts that explicate them from the esoteric side of early Judaism. The point is (and it is perhaps understated in the book) that the later Kabbalistic symbol emerges precisely from the place where these strands of prior tradition are most closely tied to one another. Chapters seven through nine are something of a digression, in which I examine others aspects of crowns and coronation in early Jewish sources, including the coronation of angels, of brides and grooms, and of Israel at Sinai. Having felt that I had already strayed quite far from my true subject, I did not

deal with crowns of Torah or of letters, an admittedly interesting subject and perhaps one that could be found more germane to my purpose than I had originally thought.

But the book is about the meaning of *keter* as a symbol as well as its early origins. One of its main purposes of the book is an interpretation of the symbology of Kabbalah. The sefirot, a term we first meet in the pre-Kabbalistic *Sefer Yeşirah*, are there presented to us in the form of a circle, 'their end tied to their beginning and their beginning to their end'. In the development of the proto-Kabbalistic imagination, this circle is connected to *keter*, the circular crown of God. But now the circle is broken, the closed circle is opened up, forming a line or a hierarchy. The hierarchical, consecutive presentation of the *sefirot*, I have suggested, is the result of the splitting open of the original circle and its conversion into a 'line'. The two ends of the line, now 'top' and 'bottom,' are both designated as 'crown', (*keter* or *keter 'elyon* and '*aṭarah*') as though to point to the place where the circle was broken. Within the 'space' created by this opening, a place was created in which the Kabbalists could locate symbols and hypostases to their hearts' desire. All the richness of Kabbalistic symbolism exists in this 'place'. But the ultimate goal and true meaning of Kabbalah, at least as it was understood in the early Catalonian sources, is the re-closing of the circle. The last *sefirah*, the one called '*atarah*, the shadow-name for *keter*, in the *Bahir* is identified with that object which God has 'lost'. It now needs to be restored to its place at the very top of the line, bringing all the worlds along with it, showing that the sefirot are a circle after all. The broken circle, with help from below, represented by the spiritual efforts of the Kabbalists, can be restored and its break healed.

This very general interpretation of Kabbalah represents a combination of historical claim and personal understanding, a result of my own work both as a student of text and as one who has spent many years contemplating these symbols. It is here that I find the mystical heart of Kabbalah, the understanding that all is/can be/will be restored to oneness with its hidden source. *Keter* and '*aṭarah*' are meant to be seen as one again, as they always truly have been. That oneness is the re-linked circle, showing no trace of the break that had 'formerly' existed in it. (Or had it?) I believe that such a reading of Kabbalah can be applied to such diverse sources in date and type as the *Bahir* (see chapter thirteen of *Keter*), the early Catalonian *sodot ha-tefillah*, Cordovero's system (including its great simplification in the teachings of early Hasidism), and key themes in the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.

The divine crown is not a key symbol in Biblical religion; in fact it is hardly present there at all. It begins to gain importance in the early post-Christian centuries, partly through contact of Jews with remains of some pre-Israelite 'pagan' cultures still found in Hellenistic world. That renewed contact with the world of late Hellenistic paganism is where the large number of identified 'angels' and the elaborate descriptions of the heavenly halls come from, as has been shown by Gruenwald, Schaefer, and Elior. It is quite natural that the ceremony of divine coronation would have part of its roots there as well.

Crown symbolism first becomes important to Judaism through its connection to a key rite, the daily recitation of the *kedushah*. This rite is shared by the rabbis, by those who became Christians (since it passes into Christian liturgy very early, as witnessed by an extant Jewish-Christian source), and by the *yordey merkavah*. The three groups, however different they are at whatever time you take the snapshot, have this root in common.

The crown is made up of the prayers of Israel, perhaps replacing another sort of ring about the King's head that had been formed by the rising smoke of sacrificial offerings. Now it is true, as Goshen-Gottstein claims, that I can document that the *keter* is composed of *tefillot yisra'el* only from *Shemot Rabbah* II, which is generally taken to be a late Midrashic compilation and from the still *later Midrash Kohen*. But of what is the *keter* offered to God as referred to in Haggigah 13b composed? Sandalphon (elsewhere described as the angel whose height reaches from earth to heaven) puts it on God's head each day! Do we assume that it is made of leaves and branches? Now it could be that the idea that the crown is composed of Israel's prayers is a late gloss on an old myth. It is possible that the 'composition' of the crown was not considered earlier. I recognize that the texts recording it are late ones. But that is not sufficient evidence for me to declare the idea or image late. My guess is that if historic elements enter into this mythic theme at all, we see here the traces of an early need to glorify verbal worship, that ever-inadequate replacement for sacrifice. Such a role could point to an origin much closer to the destruction of the Second Temple. I see no particular reason for it to have been added at a late date. This fits with my (admitted) general bias in favor of early origins of mythic imagery.

One of Goshen-Gottstein's largest concerns is my insistence that 'the rabbis' of the Talmudic-Midrashic tradition and the *yordey merkavah* of the *hekhalot* texts are to be seen as part of a single continuum of Jews in the same period, heirs to the same wide range of traditions, part of the same people, and even (as defined over/against both non-Jews and minim) members of the same broad

'faith community.' Goshen-Gottstein wants me to 'prove' this claim rather than simply asserting it. But as far as I am concerned, the burden of proof lies with the other side. Here are two bodies of Hebrew text from the same period, 3rd-8th centuries: *aggadah* and *merkavah*. They differ in purpose, in spiritual tone, in relation to the common Scripture on which both are based. But they have in common a key ritual (the daily recitation of the *kedushah*), great commonalities of language (Remember that Hebrew in this period is no longer a living spoken language anywhere, insofar as is known to us. So one would have to posit two unrelated groups of Jews, both continuing to write literary/religious texts in rather similar Hebrew), and an essential theology of a God seated in heaven and surrounded by angelic hosts, but who has special love and desire for human, especially Israel's, praise. We also have a body of rabbinic sources, contained within the Talmud, both in the Palestinian and Babylonian versions, that describes *merkavah* interest and activities in a central circle of the rabbinic leadership in a period somewhat earlier than that of our preserved *hekhalot* texts, when *merkavah* teaching was probably less developed. At the other end of the time period, in the 10th century, we have the well-known descriptions by R. Hai Gaon of esoteric practices still apparently current in his day and related explicitly to the *merkavah* tradition, reported without much condemnation. Despite this, I nowhere claim that rabbinic and *merkavah* circles are identical, but that there is contact between them and that the borders between these groups overlap. Some read the Torah, I suggest, primarily with halakhic categories (and the need to justify them via Scripture) in mind. Others saw the Biblical text also (or, for some, chiefly) as a source of the kinds of homiletical and theological creativity we call *aggadah*. Still other read the same text 'al *derekh ha-shemot* or *be-sod ha-otiyot*, seeking in it names of God or treasuries of knowledge about the upper realms that might be helpful in the dangerous act of 'descent' to the realm of vision. These Jews might also have been active as halakhists (a possibility demonstrated by such later examples as Nahmanides or R. Joseph Caro), or perhaps not.

This seems to me entirely reasonable. So I challenge the other side to prove the lack of contact/awareness between these circles in the face of the sources mentioned. The assumption that there existed a separate but otherwise unidentifiable circle of *merkavah* mystics will be a harder hypothesis to defend than the notion that these represent a portion, perhaps a 'fringe' of the rabbinic community.

I appreciate the careful reading of texts that Goshen-Gottstein has brought to my work. In several cases I accept his suggestions and am thankful for them.

But sometimes one can be too careful or cautious in reading every text only within the context in which it is presented in the sources as they have come down to us. This is the case, I believe, regarding Goshen-Gottstein's treatment of the *Sifre Devarim* text that refers to Israel's and the angels' act of *hazkarat ha-shem*. I understand that this text is presented in the *Sifre* in the context of eleven rhetorically related interrogatives. But I doubt that it originated in this context. Seeing it only as part of such a list over-determines the meaning of the statement itself. In any case, my interest is primarily in the technical term *hazkarat ha-shem*. I simply cannot believe that phrase referred to the saying of *adonay* in prayer. The word *adonay* was well-known to the rabbis as a *kinnui*, not as *ha-shem*.. The point is somewhat hard to prove, however, because the later reverence for (and hence sometime avoidance of) this *kinnui* is so universal. But this smacks to me of later *humrah*. Here I was using the *Sifre* text to show that the same term, *hazkarat ha-shem*, is used successively in the same text to refer to angelic and human 'mention' of the name. It seems more likely in the face of such a text to assume that the same act is meant. (I find Goshen-Gottstein's explanation of how this text comes to mention *hazkarat ha-shem* to be quite far-fetched.) Or are we to think that the angels too substitute *adonay* for the name Y-H-W-H in their liturgy?

Another question that divides us regards *hieros gamos* and its place in rabbinic Judaism. I have to agree with the reviewer that the textual evidence regarding coronation as a sign of marriage is somewhat weak. Part of this may well be due to suppression of texts, though I recognize that is a difficult position to argue. I am not bothered as he is, however, by the fact that the angels, rather than God Himself, crown Israel at Sinai. In the later Zoharic literature, where *hieros gamos* is a central feature of the sources, it is often the attendants, both human and angelic, who adorn and crown the bride. But in basing my view on this later development, I in part do give myself away. It is simply hard for me to believe that the Kabbalists recreated this motif on their own rather than 'discovering' it within the rabbinic texts that had come down to them. Of course for the Kabbalists *hieros gamos* is quite different, taking place within God rather than between God and a human partner. But the eros of the Song of Songs is a strong presence in rabbinic descriptions of the relationship between God and Israel. I by no means believe that the passion of what will later be called *zivvuga kadisha* has been fully neutralized for the rabbis by their historicizing *aggadah*. In the rabbis' insistence on the Canticle as a key text for describing this relationship I find ample evidence for a belief in *hieros gamos*, the sacred union of the divine Lover and His earthly beloved. 'If the words of

Torah are impoverished in one place' – describing the bridal coronation of Israel – 'they are rich elsewhere' – in frequently depicting Sinai as 'the day of His marriage, the day of His heart's delight'. I believe we can learn something about Goshen-Gottstein's objections to my reading of the early sources from his interesting suggestion that 'the concept of Israel themselves as the crown of God stems from an alternative emphasis to that of the hekhalot literature, according to which we are to tie crowns for God each day'. Here we have the rabbis safely located back in the role of simple continuers of the Biblical tradition, one going back to Isaiah 49:3 and 62:3. Israel as God's crown may be seen as a purely metaphoric statement, having nothing to do with the powerful myth and ritual enactment depicted by the hekhalot sources and the late Midrashim that may have been influenced (read: 'corrupted') by them. This gives us a rabbinic Judaism that dwells close to the Bible and far from the suspect realms of magic and theurgy.

I would not be unreasonable in response to this suggestion. But that depends on the spirit in which it is offered. If Goshen-Gottstein's voice is that of Urbach, insisting that these are the 'real' and only 'rabbis', or is allied with Shalom Rosenberg, trying to deny the place of myth in the rabbinic mindset, I would object strongly to such an artificially monolithic and narrow view. Then I would turn to a long list of studies, beginning with Neusner and culminating with Liebes and Fishbane, that show mythic themes as central parts of the rabbinic corpus and force us to rethink the placidly rational and legalistic image of rabbinic Judaism retrojected from medieval rationalism. But if he is willing to make the claim as Heschel would, I stand ready to be much more receptive. Heschel would accept the 'School of Ishmael's' view that Israel are God's crown as an inner rabbinic alternative to the 'Akiba' view that the God who 'desires the prayers of Israel' seeks (or even needs) to have them crown Him yet again with each day's renewed praise. While not a strict follower of Heschel's 'Akiva' and 'Ishmael' designations, I learned from him that the spectrum of rabbinic opinion, especially on questions relating to human participation in the great cosmic drama, is wide enough to leave room for two such divergent views of Israel's relationship to the divine crown.

Arthur Green

# Kabbalah

Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts

Daniel Abrams and Avraham Elqayam

Editors

Volume Five

(2000)

*A Cherub Press Publication*

Los Angeles