

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

LETTER SYMBOLISM AND *MERKAVAH* IMAGERY
IN THE *ZOHAR*

The purpose of this study is to examine more carefully the function of letter symbolism in various sections of the *Zohar*, the central text of medieval Spanish kabbalah.¹ The lack of any such sustained analysis on this crucial chapter in Zoharic kabbalah alone should justify this undertaking. I will not, however, discuss each and every context in the vast corpus of the *Zohar* relevant to this matter. The focus, rather, will be on select passages wherein the mystery of the Hebrew alphabet is interpreted in light of imagery derived from ancient Jewish mystical speculation concerned with the divine chariot, the *merkavah*. In such passages, it will be argued, the author of the *Zohar* not only combined linguistic mysticism with his theosophic conception of the divine pleroma, the ten *sefirot*, but transformed ancient Jewish mystical doctrines concerning the cosmic status of the alphabet and the linguistic composition of the divine corpus. In the *Zohar* one therefore finds a radical transformation of mythological

195*

1 This study is limited to an analysis of the literary sections that comprise the main body of the Zoharic anthology. For previous studies dedicated to aspects of letter symbolism in the *Zohar*, see M. Oron, "The Narrative of the Letters and its Source: A Study of a Zoharic Midrash on the Letters of the Alphabet," in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby on his Seventy-fifth Birthday* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 97-109 [in Hebrew]; E. Wolfson, "Anthropomorphic Imagery and Letter Symbolism in the *Zohar*," in the "Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989): 147-181 [in Hebrew]; Elias Lipiner, *The Metaphysics of the Hebrew Alphabet* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 85-111 [in Hebrew]. Surprisingly, in Scholem's own essay, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 59-80 and 80 (1972): 164-194, hardly any analysis is given to the Zoharic treatment of language.

concepts into more abstract linguistic structures. Such a transformation is by no means unusual for a text of medieval provenance. What is surprising, however, is the way in which this linguistic mysticism yields a new mythology within the Godhead.

The historical channels that may have led to this literary development should come as no surprise to the student of this period. It was first noted by Gershom Scholem that Moses de León (c. 1240-1305), the assumed author of the *Zohar*, was influenced by the early non-theosophic writings of his contemporary, Joseph Gikatilla (1248-c. 1322), a student of Abraham Abulafia, the leading exponent of ecstatic-prophetic kabbalah that is based primarily on meditative techniques connected to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that make up the divine names.² The possible connection between the two Spanish mystics was further established by Alexander Altmann, who suggested that there are direct literary and conceptual links between Gikatilla's *Ginnat 'Egoz* (1277) and de León's *'Or Zar'ua*.³ The picture has been rendered more complex by Asi Farber,⁴ who has argued that in his early career de León belonged to a school of non-theosophic kabbalists who, like Abulafia and Gikatilla, were concerned with the mysteries of the alphabet. However, this school is to be distinguished from Abulafia's circle on certain doctrinal points, such as the identification of Meṭaṭron with either the first or the tenth of the separate intellects.⁵ With the

2 See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1956), p. 194; S. Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism: A Study of the Philosophical-Qabbalistic Writings of Joseph Gikatilla" (Ph.D., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983), pp. 115-123. On Abulafian kabbalah, cf. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 119-155, and the studies of M. Idel: *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1987); *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, 1988); *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1988).

3 Cf. Altmann, *Qoveṣ 'al Yad*, n.s. 9 (1980): 235-240.

4 See A. Farber, "On the Sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon's Early Kabbalistic System," *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature*, pp. 67-96 [in Hebrew].

5 Cf. Farber, op. cit., pp. 79-87. It seems to me that one could view the difference between Gikatilla and de León on this point in terms of an Aristotelian or Neoplatonic influence. That is, in *Ginnat 'Egoz* Gikatilla, basically following the Maimonidean view, identified Meṭaṭron with the Active Intellect or the last of the ten separate intellects, the position taken by Abulafia as well. See Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 140; Idel, *The Mystical Experience...*, pp. 117-119. (As Farber notes, however, p. 85, n. 39, Gikatilla departs from Maimonides inasmuch as he attributes to the Active Intellect the task of moving all nine heavenly spheres and not simply the sublunar sphere.) De León, on the other hand, perhaps influenced by Neoplatonic sources such as Abraham ibn Ezra, identified Meṭaṭron as the first of the intellects. (On ibn Ezra's conception of Meṭaṭron, see A. Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*,'" in *Jewish Medieval*

Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery in the Zohar

historical contours of these different circles in clearer focus, what remains to be done is to delineate in a more precise way the thematic connection between letter symbolism and chariot speculation in these mystical sources with the aim of providing the conceptual framework for a cluster of motifs that are central to the Zoharic kabbalah. In the first part of this essay we shall indicate the correlation between the Hebrew alphabet and *merkavah* imagery found in the earlier sources, and in the second part the ways in which this correlation was incorporated into the texture of the more mature theosophy as expressed in the *Zohar*.

I

The connection between the mysterious quality of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and chariot imagery is made already in the classical texts of *merkavah* mysticism. It is this assumption about the nature of the letters

and Renaissance Studies, ed. Altmann [Cambridge, 1967], p. 230; G. Vajda, "Pour le Dossier de Meṭatron," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. S. Stein and R. Loewe [Alabama, 1979], pp. 345-354; E. Wolfson, "God, the Demiurge, and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham ibn Ezra," *Revue des Études juives* 149 [1990].) Like ibn Ezra, moreover, for de León, Meṭatron has a decidedly demiurgic character. See *Qoveṣ 'al Yad*, n.s. 9 (1980): 261. Although de León uses the Aristotelian expression, *sekhel ha-po'el* (see, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 266), his conception of Meṭatron is closer to the Neoplatonic description of *Nous*, the second hypostasis which emanates out of the One. The identification of the First Intellect with Aristotle's Active Intellect can be traced to earlier sources such as the Longer Version of the Theology of Artistotle; see P. Duhem, *Le Système du monde*, 4 (Paris, 1916): 398-399; S.M. Stern, "Ibn Hasday's Neoplatonist: A Neoplatonic Treatise and Its Influence on Isaac Israeli and the Longer Version of the Theology of Artistotle," *Oriens* 13-14 (1961): 92. For some other medieval Neoplatonic writers who equated the First Intellect and the Active Intellect, see sources cited by H. Davidson, "Alfarabi and Avicenna on the Active Intellect," *Viator* 3 (1972): 126-127; and A. Goldreich, "An Unknown Treatise on Suffering by Abū Al-Qāsim Al-Kirmānī," in the "Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988): 194, 202-204 [in Hebrew]. Finally, in this connection it is of interest to consider a remark in a treatise on alphabetical mysticism incorporated in the *Sefer ha-Ne'elam*, MS Paris 817, fol. 81a (see below, n. 36; concerning this work, see Farber, *op. cit.*, p. 68, n. 2), according to which it is clear that the tenth intellect, identified also as the throne and the upper Chariot, is not considered to be part of the ten separate intellects, but rather above them all. If, as Farber has suggested, we may see in this text a possible source for de León's *'Or Zaru'a*, then this text would strengthen my claim that de León's conception of Meṭatron as the first intellect should not necessarily be interpreted in an Aristotelian manner.

that underlies the dynamic conception of language in these texts. In the throne-world of *merkavah* speculation the letters, which are in reality names,⁶ are on occasion described in terms that befit the celestial beasts or some other angelic power. For example, in *Seder Rabba di-Vereshit* the letters are spoken of as “standing before the crown of the Holy One, blessed be He,”⁷ and when one expounds upon the name of God these letters “fly forth⁸ ... to burn the world.”⁹ In one passage in *3 Enoch* we read that “each and every letter flies off time after time like lightning, time after time like torches, time after time like the appearance of flames of fire, time after time like the rising of the sun, moon and stars,”¹⁰ whereas in another it is stated that when the ministering angels utter the Trisagion “all the sacred names engraved with a pen of flame on the throne of glory fly off like eagles,¹¹ with sixteen wings, and encompass and surround the Holy One, blessed be He.”¹² It is again obvious from a comparison of these two passages that the letters and the names are descriptively and functionally on par. In a passage from the *Midrash 'Otiyyot de-R. 'Aqiva'* this dynamic conception of the letters is placed into a liturgical context. According to this text, all the letters of the chariot, as the *hayyot* and other angelic beings, utter praise and song before God in order to receive the face of the *Shekhinah*. Specifically, two letters, the open and closed *mem*, are singled out as those letters which utter the praise, “Your kingship (*malkhutkha*) is an eternal kingship” and “Your dominion (*umemshaltekha*) is for all generations” (Ps. 145:13). When these letters utter this praise, the Holy One, blessed be He,

takes all the letters in the *merkavah*, brings them together, and ties two crowns to each one, one of kingdom and the other of glory, one of

198*

- 6 Cf. K. Grözinger, “The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature,” in the “Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: Early Jewish Mysticism,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 54-55. For a later development of this motif, see Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer ha-Shem*, MS British Museum 737, fol. 182a.
- 7 Cf. P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen, 1981), § 374.
- 8 The quality of flying is attributed to the letters in aggadic passages as well; see, e.g., b. *'Avodah Zarah* 18a and *Pesahim* 87b.
- 9 *Synopse*, § 841.
- 10 *Ibid.*, § 16.
- 11 Cf. *'Otiyyot de-R. 'Aqiva'*, in *Battei Midrashot*, 2, ed. S. Wertheimer (Jerusalem, 1980): 366: “the names which fly off and surround the *Shekhinah* like eagles of the chariot.”
- 12 *Synopse*, § 57.

dominion and the other of splendor. And afterwards He places them [i.e., the open and closed *mem*] on the right and on the left, and appeases them with words, saying: "My letters which I engraved with My fingers by a pen of fire, it is revealed to you that My kingdom is called only through you as is My dominion."¹³

The letters are thus conceived as hypostatic beings in the world of the *merkavah*.

A particularly striking example of this orientation is found in a later text published in *Sefer Razi'el*, probably deriving from Castile in the second half of the thirteenth century, which combines letter-mysticism with images drawn from chariot speculation. Thus, in one place we read:

If one constantly directs one's attention to God, then one will comprehend His light and His intellect above with the light of the angels ... for this form (הצירור הזה) is engraved on the throne, the exalted throne, and consists of the twenty-two letters of the Torah ... and they are the light for every creature, the angels above and Israel below ... and this form is the form of the '*Alef-Bet* which Moses received from God; as it is written so it is engraved on the throne.¹⁴

The implicit correlation of the Hebrew letters with the celestial beings that fill the throne-world is even more pronounced in a second passage from this text:

Then you will understand how the form of the '*Alef-Bet* is engraved on the throne ... all of them are wonderful powers from the living God, different one from the other ... all these [letters] are in truth called the upper powers (כחות עליונות)¹⁵ ... Know that these are verily the powers of God, called the upper powers that are engraved on the throne ... and they are called the angels of the living God.¹⁶

13 'Otiyyot de-R. 'Aqiva', in *Battei Midrashot*, 2:379.

14 *Sefer Razi'el* (Amsterdam, 1701), fol. 31a. For a slightly different reading, see MS Cambridge Add 671, fol. 84a.

15 Cf. the language in the text attributed to R. Meshullam ha-Šadoqi, extant in MS Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fol. 190b, printed in M. Verman, *Sifrei Iyyun* (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1984), p. 191: "Each and every letter corresponds to the powers above (הכחות) (של מעלה), and the vowels to the powers below (הכחות של מטה)."

16 *Sefer Razi'el*, fols. 33a-b; MS Cambridge Add 671, fol. 88a.

In yet another Castilian text deriving from the same period, the *Sefer ha-'Orah* of R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, images from the chariot vision are transformed in terms of linguistic structures, in this case particularly the vowels:

These letters [*'alef* and *yod*] are a soul without a body,¹⁷ which is not the case in the other letters which are corporeal. [The letter] *'alef* is in the form of יהו"ה [for the *'alef* can be graphically depicted as two *yodim* connected by a *waw*, which numerically equals twenty-six, the numerical value of יהו"ה as well] ... All the vowels are the soul, and the letters a body. And these [vowels] are the very soul: *qamaṣ*, *pataḥ*, *hiriq*, *shewa'*, *ḥolam*, *shuruq*, *šere*, *seḡol*, and the rest. You should know that He, may He be exalted, is in the secret of His chariot. With respect to the matter of the cherubim, [it is written] the one "enthroned upon the cherubim" (cf. Ps. 99:1), and in one place "He mounted a cherub and flew" (II Sam. 22:11). You already know and have contemplated the secret of the two vowels which overflow one to the other, and this is the secret of the cherubim. And the secret of "He mounted a cherub and flew": you already know that the first vowel which receives the influence first from the supernal grade, and this is the secret of "He mounted a cherub."¹⁸

In thirteenth-century kabbalah, however, it is especially in the school of Abraham Abulafia that the connection between throne-mysticism and the Hebrew consonants is reestablished. Indeed, as scholars have already noted,¹⁹ Abulafia referred to his "path of the names," דרך השמות, which is also identified as the "science of letter combination," חכמת הצירוף, as the true "account of the chariot" (the latter term, מרכבה, deriving from the triradical root, רכב, which in one of its conjugational forms can also mean combination). As Moshe Idel has shown, a likely source for Abulafia's mystical technique of letter-combination connected to the divine names is to be found in the writings of Eleazar of Worms.²⁰ For Abulafia,

200*

17 This is a reversal of the standard medieval conception that the letters are the bodies *vis-à-vis* the vowels which are the souls; for references see below, n. 54.

18 MS Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fols. 102b-103a.

19 See Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 143; Idel, *The Mystical Experience...*, p. 21; *idem.*, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics...*, pp. 50-52. For this usage in the "Circle of Speculation" (*Hug ha-'Iyyun*), see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987), p. 339. And see reference given below, n. 88.

20 See M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 97-103.

however, not only is esoteric wisdom of the divine chariot brought about by knowledge of the various combinations and permutations of the names of God, but vision of the chariot itself consists of the very letters which are constitutive elements of the names. In other words, the ecstatic vision of the letters is not simply the means to achieve communion with God, but the very end of the process.²¹ The secret of the chariot, therefore, is contained in the combination of the holy names.²²

A different, but perhaps not unrelated, association of letters and chariot symbolism²³ can be discerned in de León's pre-theosophic work, '*Or Zaru'a*, in the untitled fragment of de León that is extant in MS Munich 47, in the various anonymous texts on alphabetical mysticism discussed by Farber, and in some of Joseph Gikatilla's pre-theosophic writings, including, most prominently, *Ginnat 'Egoz* and the untitled fragment that is extant in MS JTS 851 (Mic. 1891).²⁴ In his '*Or Zaru'a*, de León divides the whole cosmological structure into four parts: (1) the four bearers of the chariot, i.e., the four archangels Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Nuriel; (2) the supernal chariot, i.e., Metatron or the first intellect which derives from God; (3) the three worlds, i.e., the world of separate intellects, the world of celestial spheres and the world of terrestrial matter; (4) the four corners of the lower world. All of these parts together form one structure which de León identifies as the chariot.²⁵ Atop these cosmological

21 See Idel, *The Mystical Experience...*, pp. 30-37, 100-105.

22 A possible connection between speculation on the secrets of the chariot and the science of letter-combination in the writings of Shem Tov ibn Gaon has been noted by Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 119-122.

23 The use of the word *merkavah* to refer to a form of linguistic mysticism dealing with the combination of letters in the pre-theosophic writings of both Gikatilla and de León has already been noted by Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism," p. 120, n. 35.

24 Concerning this work, see Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 395, n. 133; Gottlieb, *Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah* (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 99-101; Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism," p. 41. In addition to the JTS manuscript, fragments of this work are extant in MS 408 of the National and University Library in Jerusalem (cf. Scholem, *Kitvei Yad ba-Qabbalah* [Jerusalem, 1930], p. 20); MS Paris 793, fols. 246a-253b; MS Munich 22, fols. 227a-229a; MS Oxford-Bodleian 1598, fols. 45a-48a (cf. Gottlieb, op. cit., p. 100).

25 In essence, this reflects Maimonides' interpretation of Ezekiel's chariot vision as set forth in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, III: 1-7. That is, the various aspects of the chariot correspond to different cosmological parts, whereas the charioteer corresponds to the transcendent divine being. Cf., in particular, *Guide*, I: 70 (ed. Pines, pp. 171-173), III: 7 (p. 430). On the central significance of the number four in Maimonides' cosmology, see *Guide*, II: 10 (pp. 271-273), and see the following note. The connection between the number four and the *merkavah* (cf. *Guide*, I: 71 [pp. 174-175]) is made as well by Gikatilla in his untitled commentary on the Torah extant in MS JTS 1891, fol. 67b. Gikatilla divides the first ten letters into

entities, however, is the transcendent God who is identified as the one who rides the chariot. De León further ascribes a letter to each of these parts: the divine is associated with the letter ה (i.e. the fifth),²⁶

five pairs, the sum of each one adding up to ten: א ט כ ה ג ד ה ה (cf. *Ginnat 'Egoz* [Hanau, 1605], fol. 24bff.). He then identifies these five pairs as the "chariot" and the "mystery of the fifth," i.e., the letter *yod*, as the "mystery of the knot" which holds them together and sustains them.

- 26 See *'Or Zaru'a*, p. 282 (and cf. p. 288), where de León uses the image of the one who governs the ship to depict the divine being symbolized by the letter *heh*. Cf. MS Munich 47, fols. 372b-373a, where de León writes: "Therefore the masters of the mystery of the letters (*ba'alei sod ha-'otiyot*) say that the *heh* is the one who governs the ship." This explanation is known from de León's own early work, other texts related to his school, and Gikatilla's pre-theosophic writings. See Scholem, "Eine unbekannte mystische Schrift des Mose de Leon," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 71 (1927): 117, n. 1; Altmann, *'Or Zaru'a*, p. 282, n. 248; Farber, "On the Sources..." p. 80, n. 28. Cf. MS Vat. 441, fol. 186b; MS Paris 770, fol. 210a; MS Paris 817, fol. 83b; MS JTS 1990, fol. 72b. The transcendence of the divine, symbolized by the letter *heh*, from the chariot, symbolized by the first four letters, is the main topic of another fragment extant in MS JTS 1990, fols. 125a-127b. De León's view may have been influenced by the following passage in Maimonides' *Guide*, I:69 (p. 168):

For if the letter Alif is moved by the letter Ba, and the latter is moved by the letter Jim, which is moved by Dal, moved in its turn by the letter Ha, this process cannot go on endlessly. Thus we have to stop for instance at the letter Ha. And there is accordingly no doubt that the letter Ha is the mover of Alif, of Ba, of Jim and of Dal ... In this way every action that occurs in Being is referred to God ... even if it is worked by one of the approximate efficient causes.

From this text it is clear that, according to Maimonides' set of symbols, the letter *ha* refers to God, and the other four consonants to cosmological parts which act as the "proximate efficient causes." This correspondence is strikingly similar to that of de León. An interesting parallel to de León's view is to be found in the *Kitāb al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya fī ma 'rifat al-asrār al-malikīya wa l-mulkīya* of Ibn al-'Arabī (Cairo, 1911), II, 449. According to Ibn al-'Arabī, the divine ipseity, *huwīya* is visualized in the form of the Arabic letter *ha*, shining upon a red carpet; between the two branches of the *ha* gleam the two letters *hw* (*huwa*, He), while the *ha* projects its rays upon the four spheres. Hence, the divine is symbolized by the *ha* (corresponding to the Hebrew *heh*) which shines upon the four spheres (presumably symbolized by the first four Arabic consonants which correspond to the first four Hebrew ones). Cf. A.E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid-Din Ibn al-'Arabī* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 114; H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton, 1969), p. 234 and p. 367, n. 42. Some similarities between thirteenth-century kabbalah and the thought of Ibn al-'Arabī have been discussed by R. Kiener, "Ibn al-'Arabī and the Qabbalah: A Study of Thirteenth Century Iberian Mysticism," *Studies in Mystical Literature* (Taichung, 1982), pp. 26-52. On the tradition of letter *ha* being imprinted on the genitals of the Great Power, i.e., the divine figure, in the thought of Mughīra ibn Sa'īd (d. 736), see S. Wasserstrom, "The Moving Finger Writes: Mughīra b. Sa'īd's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of its Rejections," *History of Religions* 25 (1985): 12.

and the four cosmological parts with אבגד (i.e., one, two, three, four). The first five consonants are numerically equated with the divine name, *YHWH*, for $1+2+3+4=10$,²⁷ and 10 in Hebrew is symbolized by the letter *yod* which, when spelled out, is יוד, i.e., $10+6+4=20$. The fifth consonant, *heh*, can be spelled as ה"א, which is equivalent to 6 (i.e., $5+1$). Hence, the five consonants in their totality equal the numerical equivalence of the divine name, *YHWH*, which is twenty-six. The divine name thus comprises the totality of existence, or, alternatively expressed, the chariot and the charioteer.

Elsewhere in the same text de León links the four consonants of the Hebrew alphabet with the four bearers of the chariot,²⁸ and the one who rides atop them is identified as the first intellect or the letter *yod*.²⁹

27 Needless to say, the mathematical formula of $1+2+3+4=10$ corresponds to the "Tetractys of the Decad" known to the ancient Pythagoreans. Cf. G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 230-231. Cf. Abulafia, *We-Zot Li-Yehuda*, in A. Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* (Leipzig, 1853), p. 7: "The ten *sefirot* are contained in four in accord with the forms of emanation in the manner אבגד." See also *Sefer ha-Šeruf*, MS Munich 22, fol. 200b (cited by Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism," p. 120, n. 35); כ"ב היסודות א"ב ג"ד שהוא סוד המרכבה השלמה שהיא יוד. And cf. Gikatilla's *Sod ha-Nequddah*, in MS JTS Mic. 1990, fol. 70a:

The ten heavenly spheres [lit., the ten parts of the sphere] allude to the ten *sefirot*, and the secret of the *yod* is the *holam* that moves everything ... Thus you will find that the first of the letters of His name [the Tetragrammaton] alludes to the foundation of all things in the world ... and just as the ten *sefirot* rotate in the secret of one, two, three and four, which is the foundation of אבגד ... the ten *sefirot*, and the secret of אבגד which are four.

Concerning the attribution of this text, also called in some manuscripts *Sefer ha-Niqqud*, see Gottlieb, *Mehqarim...*, pp. 102-103. Gottlieb suggested that this text represents a different version of the third part of *Ginnat 'Egoz*. As Gottlieb noted, p. 103, n. 16*, Steinschneider had already considered the relationship of this text to *Ginnat 'Egoz*. To the sources cited by Gottlieb, one might add Steinschneider's description of MS Parma, Cod. 1390, in *Jeschurun*, ed. J. Kobak, 6 (1868): 181-182, XXIII.

28 In *'Or Zaru'a* de León does not list the specific correspondence between the archangels and the consonants. See, however, MS JTS 2156, fol. 51b (cf. MS Vat. 441, fol. 202a) where the following correspondence is found: *'alef* — Michael, *bet* — Raphael, *gimmel* — Gabriel, *dalet* — Nuriel. See also *ibid.*, fols. 53b-54a, where the four archangels, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Nuriel are identified as the "secret of the chariot" (*sod ha-merkavah*) which is also referred to as the first four letters, אבגד. See also MS Paris 817, fols. 81a-82a; MS JTS 1886, fols. 1a-3b. And cf. MS Munich 47, fols. 367a-370a where the correspondence is as follows: *'alef* — Michael, *bet* — Gabriel, *gimmel* — Raphael, *dalet* — Nuriel. Cf. Farber, "On the Sources..." p. 88, n. 50.

29 *'Or Zaru'a*, pp. 283ff., 289-290. Cf. MS JTS Mic. 2156, fols. 54a-b. See also Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen. *Sefer ha-'Orah*, MS Vat. 428, fol. 24a (cf. MS Milano-Ambrosiana 62, fol. 100a;

De León thus makes a clear distinction between the symbolic referents of the letters *heh* and *yod*, although both are depicted as riding on the chariot: *heh* refers to the transcendental aspect of God, and *yod* to the first intellect that emanates from God. As Farber has already noted,³⁰ a similar distinction is to be found in the anonymous text on alphabetical mysticism, extant in several manuscripts³¹ under various names including *Sod Darkhei ha-'Otiyyot*. According to that text, the letter *heh* is identified as the Holy Spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*) or the aspect of divinity — referred to by the expression *shem ha-meyuhad* — that is above the cosmological chain; by contrast, the *yod* is connected with the tenth intellect, which is said to move everything by means of the will of the Creator. This tenth intellect, in reality the first to emerge from the Godhead, is alternatively identified with the first four consonants אבגד, which add up to ten, the numerical value of *yod*.³² A later theosophic reworking of the idea expressed in 'Or Zaru'a concerning these four letters אבגד being a chariot for the letter *yod* is found in the fragment of de León's text that is extant in MS Munich 47: "You will find that the *yod* comprises the four letters, אבגד, for they are a chariot to the letter *yod*."³³ In that context the first four consonants of the alphabet correspond to the four archangels,³⁴ and the *yod* symbolizes the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah* whence all the letters emerge: "All [the letters] are a chariot for the *yod* for you will find that all the

see also *ibid.*, fol. 110b), where *Meṭatron* is identified as the *yod*. But see *idem*, *Perush ha-'Otiyyot*, in G. Scholem, "Qabbalat R. Yaaqov we-R. Yiṣṣaq ha-Kohen," *Madda'ei ha'Yahadut* 2 (1927): 207.

And the form of the *yod*, which is on the back of the *dalet*, alludes to the Holy One, blessed be He, who dwells upon the chariot. And the reason why the face of the *dalet* is not turned towards the *yod* which is after it is to allude to the fact that even though the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells upon the four holy beasts, they cannot gaze upon the face of the *Shekhinah*.

204*

- 30 See Farber, "On the Sources...", p. 79, n. 28.
- 31 For references, see Farber, "On the Sources...", pp. 67-68, n. 2. Farber mentions the fact that she is not certain which JTS manuscript Scholem was referring to when he mentioned examining a version of *Sod Darkhei ha-'Otiyyot* in the JTS manuscript collection; see *Madda'ei ha'Yahadut* 2 (1927): 16, n. 2. It is possible that Scholem had in mind the version of this text entitled *Sod Darkhei ha-Shemot* extant in MS JTS 1786, fols. 1-15. See also the *Sha'ar Nequddat Shem ha-Meyuhad*, extant in MS JTS 1990, fols. 71b-73b. The latter corresponds, with some modification, to the *Sha'ar Heleq ha-'Otiyyot* in MS Vat. 441, fols. 185a-201a; MS Paris 770, fol. 209b-211a.
- 32 MS JTS 1990, fol. 73a. Cf. MS JTS 2156, fol. 54a; MS Vat. 441, fols. 200b-201a; MS British Museum 756, fol. 102a.
- 33 MS Munich 47, fol. 370b.
- 34 See n. 27.

letters emerge from *Hokhmah* [the second *sefirah*]. Thus all of them carry the *yod* upon their heads.”³⁵ In the earlier non-theosophic text, the four letters, אבגד, are called the “lower chariot” whereas the one that rides upon them, the letter *yod*, is itself called the “upper chariot.”³⁶ Yet, as we are told, each of the four letters, i.e., the four archangels, “has a chariot in its pattern below itself.” Thus, not only is there a clear connection between the chariot structures and the alphabet, but each of the letters is itself said to have a chariot beneath it. Again, there is a striking similarity between de León’s text and the anonymous *Sod Darkhei ha-Otiyyot*. In that text as well the *yod*, or the tenth intellect, is named the “upper chariot,” whereas the four archangels, symbolized by the first four letters of the alphabet, are referred to as the “lower chariot” or the “bearers of the chariot.”³⁷ In one passage it is stated that “each and every one [of the four archangels or letters] produces a chariot of its own according to the secret of the vowel-point.”³⁸ As it is worked out in that text, each of these angels, or letters, has a corresponding vowel-point, which serves as a chariot in relation to the letter. The significance of this conception in the *Zohar* will become apparent at a later stage of this analysis.

The connection between letter symbolism and chariot imagery which can be ascertained from de León’s early work has its closest parallel in Gikatilla’s *Ginnat ’Egoz* and in an untitled work, the most substantial fragment of which is extant in MS JTS 851 (Mic. 1891), fols. 62a-98a, based largely on the mystical system of the former.³⁹ In the first place, Gikatilla, following a much older tradition attested in the writings of several of his predecessors, including Eleazar of Worms⁴⁰ and Baruch

35 MS Munich 47, fol. 371b.

36 Cf. *ibid.*, fols. 370b, 371b. And see *Sefer ha-Ne’elam*, MS Paris 817, fol. 81a: “The secret of the tenth intellect ... the tenth is holy, and it is the secret of the throne, and it is the upper chariot (מרכבה עליונה).” The terms “lower” and “upper” chariot (in Aramaic: רחיכא תתאה and רחיכא עלאה) are used differently by de León in the *Zohar* and in his other theosophical works: the “lower chariot” refers to the angelic realm below the *sefirot* and the “upper chariot” to the sefirotic realm itself. See Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1971): 416. For other examples of de León transferring terminology from the non-theosophic to a theosophic context, see Farber, “On the Sources...,” p. 80, no. 28.

37 Cf. MS Vat. 441, fol. 204b.

38 *Ibid.*, fol. 203a.

39 See above, n. 24.

40 See *Perush ’al Havdalah de-R. ’Aqiva*, MS Vat. 228, fols. 101a-b, cited by Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics...*, p. 50; see also *Sefer ha-Shem*, MS British Museum 737, fol. 201a.

Togarmi,⁴¹ establishes a connection between the Tetragrammaton and *ma'aseh merkavah* based on letter permutation which he calls *temurah*. Near the very beginning of *Ginnat 'Egoz Gikatilla* writes:

In every place [where it is written] יהו"ה the intention is "the Lord is one" (יהו"ה אחד; cf. Deut. 4:6). And this is the account of the chariot. For in the account of the chariot the name יהו"ה is attested to by the name כו"ו. And the mystery of כו"ו is "the Lord is one" (יהו"ה אחד).⁴²

By means of the ancient technique of letter permutation, א"ב ג"ד, i.e., the correspondence of each letter of the alphabet with the subsequent letter, the Tetragrammaton is represented by the name כו"ו (the letter *yod=kaf*, *heh=waw*, *waw=zayin*, *heh=waw*). Moreover, the numerical equivalence of כו"ו is 39 (20+6+7+6), which is identical to the value of יהו"ה אחד, i.e., 26+13. Hence, the divine name itself — through this transposition of letters — attests to the unity of God proclaimed in the *Shema*, "the Lord is one." This permutation of letters and the specific meaning that it engenders is identified by Gikatilla as *ma'aseh merkavah*. "This is the secret of letter permutation [*ha-temurah*] and this is the secret called the account of the chariot [*ma'aseh merkavah*]."⁴³ Gikatilla here draws upon an older tradition, according to which the secret of the chariot was represented by the permutation of the letters that make up the expression יהו"ה אלהינו יהו"ה in the form of כו"ו במוכסו כו"ו. As I mentioned above, this tradition is found in the writings of figures such as Eleazar of Worms and Baruch Togarmi, and from such channels it undoubtedly passed into the hands of Gikatilla and other members of his circle.⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, the numerical equivalence of כו"ו to the expression יהו"ה אחד is also found in Eleazar of Worms.⁴⁵ Gikatilla explicitly identifies this formula as the essence of chariot mysticism. Thus, in a parallel to the *Ginnat 'Egoz* passage in his untitled commentary on the Torah, he writes:

יהו"ה כו"ו — this is the secret of the honorable and awesome name, in the secret of the account of the chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*) ...

41 Cf. G. Scholem, *Ha-Qabbalah shel Sefer ha-Temunah ve-shel 'Avraham 'Abul'afiyah* (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 237, also cited by Idel, op. cit., p. 51.

42 Gikatilla, *Ginnat 'Egoz*, fol. 4a.

43 Ibid.

44 See S. Blickstein, "Between Philosophy and Mysticism," pp. 93-96; E. Wolfson, "Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine," *JQR* 78 (1987): 96-97.

45 Cf. *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, MS Oxford 1812, fols. 55a, 66a, 71b.

Contemplate that the letters יהוה are contiguous in the alphabet to כוּו, which is the secret of the chariot. You must, however, understand the secret of the letters כוּו ... Know that the secret of כוּו is יהוה ... Twenty-six is [the numerical value of] כו and וו is thirteen [together equalling 39 or the numerical equivalence of יהוה אחד].⁴⁶

Commenting on the oft-cited passage from the aggadic compilation, *Pirquei R. 'Eli'ezer*, that before the world was created God was alone with His name,⁴⁷ Gikatilla cautions the reader that this was not meant to imply that the divine essence was wholly contained in the physical form of letters. Metaphorically, one might say that the letters are vessels that contain the divine just as the sensible realities contain the intelligibles. It is this relation of vessel and that which is contained therein which signifies the real import of Gikatilla's use of *merkavah* imagery to denote the technique of *temurah*. By transposition of the letters of the Tetragrammaton we come up with a name which, by means of numerical equivalence, *gematria*, is identical with the affirmation that God is one. That is to say, therefore, that the mystical significance of the divine name is the divine unity. This transposition of letters holds the key to understanding Gikatilla's idea of chariot speculation. As he puts it in one place, "Know that the matter of the [mystical] orchard (*pardes*) is the mystery of the explicit name (*shem ha-meyuḥad*), the secret of the Tetragrammaton."⁴⁸ To delve into the mysteries of the mystical orchard means to penetrate the essence of the name through these various linguistic techniques, ultimately arriving at a knowledge of divine oneness. Hence, the ancient mystical discipline, *ma'aseh merkavah*, is, for Gikatilla, intricately bound up with this esoteric knowledge of the name.

We may now proceed to those passages where Gikatilla's views bear a closer formal and stylistic resemblance to those of de León, though, as will be seen, there are important substantive differences between them. Thus, in one place Gikatilla writes that the divine name הו, made up of half the Tetragrammaton, moves the chariot. "Contemplate this important matter and you will find hidden matters disclosed in the mystery of א"ב א"ג which is the secret of the chariot. And this is the mystery of the ten parts of the [celestial] sphere which move these [terrestrial] parts.

46 MS JTS 1891, fols. 65b-66a.

47 *Pirquei R. 'Eli'ezer*, chap. 3.

48 MS JTS 1891, fol. 62b.

הו — its mystery transcends the א"ב ג"ד."⁴⁹ Unlike de León, for whom the letters אבגד referred either to the four cosmological divisions or to the four archangels and the letter ה to the transcendent aspect of God, for Gikatilla, the four prime letters refer to the ten parts of the celestial sphere, the nine heavens and the tenth intellect (for the sum of these digits is ten), and the divine name הו, which numerically equals eleven, is that which transcends the cosmic structure (symbolized by ten). According to this passage, then, the chariot is identical with the cosmic structure (= 10),⁵⁰ and He who rides the chariot is the divine being (= 11)⁵¹ outside the natural realm.

In the third part of *Ginnat 'Egoz*, the section dealing specifically with the vowels, *niqqud*, Gikatilla links the cosmological interpretation of chariot imagery to his linguistic conception of the letters and the vowels. "Know that the vowels and the consonants instruct us about the form of the entire world, the mystery of all the properties, and the order of the chariots."⁵² In particular, the cosmic relationship between mover and moved is elaborated in terms of the linguistic relation that pertains between vowels and consonants. "Know that the [separate] intellects govern the spheres and the vowels govern the letters. Thus the intellects and vowels govern the world and the letters ... The vowels correspond to the intellect and the letters to the form of the world."⁵³ Insofar as Gikatilla accepts the standard notion affirmed in a host of medieval philosophical and mystical sources that the vowels are the "soul" of the consonants,⁵⁴

49 *Ginnat 'Egoz*, fol. 23c. Cf. Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer ha-Shem*, MS British Museum 737, fols. 170b and 227a. See also MS JTS 1891, fol. 64a: "[The letter] 'alef is the beginning of action ... and the beginning of motion in the mystery of *yod-alef* [i.e., 11, or the transcendent divine cause]. Yet, concerning the letter *yod*, you already know its essence, for it comprises as well all the parts of existence, in the mystery of the ten parts and the tenth is above [the rest], the mystery of the six dimensions and the four elements." We see from this text as well that, for Gikatilla, the number ten symbolizes the cosmic structure and the number eleven the divine cause which transcends nature.

50 Cf. *Ginnat 'Egoz*, fol. 22a: "The measure of the world (*shi'ur qomat ha-'olam*) is ten and no more ... for the parts of the world do not exceed ten." On the identification of *shi'ur qomah* with the dimensions of the cosmos, see Abraham Abulafia, *Perush 'al Sefer Yesirah*, ed. I. Weinstock (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 33, and n. 24. For such a view in the writings of Abraham ibn Ezra, see Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*,'" p. 230.

51 Cf. *ibid.*, fols. 23a-b.

52 *Ibid.*, fol. 65a.

53 *Ibid.*, fol. 65b.

54 *Ibid.*, fol. 65a. For other references see G. Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir* (Darmstadt, 1980), pp. 87-89, n. 5.

i.e., the former move and sustain the latter, it follows that the vowels will stand in relation to the consonants as the intellects to the spheres. Yet, when one views the whole cosmological structure, including intellects and spheres, as one unified organism, then the vowels, which are the efficient cause, stand in the position of the divine vis-à-vis the consonants which correspond to the cosmos. Thus, Gikatilla emphasizes, "all the parts of the world outside God, movers and those which are moved, the general and the particular, equal ten. Thus you will find how [the cause of] motion cleaves to the first and last of the parts, for the parts [of the cosmos] are ten and the [cause of the] motion is eleven."⁵⁵

This is further worked out in terms of the first ten consonants themselves, from 'alef to yod. These ten, אב גדר הו זח טי, represent the cosmological structure, and the first and last of these letters, 'alef and yod, which numerically equal eleven, represent the ultimate cause of motion, or God. The same structural relationship, moreover, pertains to the vowels and the letters, i.e., the vowels, which move and sustain the letters, comprise the totality of the consonants represented in the first and last of the consonants, viz., 'alef and tav. "Thus the mystery of [the cause of] motion cleaves to the beginning of the parts [of the cosmos] and to their end, and it causes the existence of the parts. So it is precisely with respect to the matter of the motion of the letters ... insofar as the vowel-points, which move the consonants, cleave to the beginning of the consonants and to their end."⁵⁶ It may be said, therefore, that, according to Gikatilla, the vowels are accorded the position of charioteer, and the consonants that of the chariot. Hence, in spite of the doctrinal differences in their respective systems, for both Gikatilla and de León (in the early stages of their careers) there is a clear link between cosmology, on the one hand, and alphabetical symbolism, on the other. This link, in turn, is expressed in terms of language derived from *merkavah* mysticism. This cosmological conception should be distinguished from Abulafia's view regarding letter-combination as the true *ma'aseh merkavah*. Furthermore, as we shall see, the cosmological-linguistic-chariot association functions in an important way in the body of the *Zohar* and in some contexts in connection with the phenomenon of letter-combination.

Finally, before proceeding to an analysis of the Zoharic sources, it is necessary to say a few words about letter symbolism and *merkavah* imagery in Gikatilla's mature theosophic works, as in this case too we shall

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

find interesting parallels in the *Zohar*, especially in the sections *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* and the *Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot*.⁵⁷ In the work entitled *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, Gikatilla writes that the twenty-two letters of the Torah are divided into three groups: (1) *hashmal*, "those [letters] which move [others] with an intelligible movement"; (2) *hayyot*, "those [letters] which move [others] with a corporeal movement"; (3) *'ofanim*, "those [letters] which are moved."⁵⁸ This threefold division clearly reflects the medieval Aristotelian classification of the cosmos into three parts: the separate intellects, the celestial spheres, and the terrestrial elements. The former cause motion by way of intellection, the spheres by way of bodily movement, and the latter — in terms of the overall cosmological scheme — do not cause motion at all, but are moved.⁵⁹ The first division of the letters, *hashmal*, corresponds to the separate intellects for they are said to cause movement by an intelligible or rational motion, *tenu'ah sikhlit*,

57 Both the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* and the *Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot* are printed in *Zohar Hadash*, ed. R. Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1978); the former on fols. 1b-7a, and the latter on fols. 37c-41d. Concerning these sections of the *Zohar*, see Scholem, *Major Trends ...*, p. 162; *idem*, *Kabbalah*, p. 216. In the Cremona *Zohar* (1558-60), the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* is included in the section on *Bereshit*, 45-58. The *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud* was composed after Gikatilla wrote *Sha'arei Sedeq* and his own *Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot* but presumably before he wrote *Sha'arei 'Orah*, completed by 1291. It follows, therefore, that the former work likewise was composed sometime before 1291. If, moreover, it is correct to assume that the author of the *Zohar* was influenced by Gikatilla's writings, especially in the aforementioned sections, then one must conclude that these sections were written in the very last decade of the thirteenth century. See the comments of Gottlieb, *Mehqarim...*, p. 98, n. 6; see, however, A. Farber, "Traces of the *Zohar* in the Writings of Joseph Gikatilla," *'Alei Sefer* 9 (1980): 73, n. 15 [in Hebrew], who rejects Gottlieb's conjecture, arguing that the relationship is reversed, i.e., Gikatilla was influenced by the *Zohar*. Farber's position has been challenged recently by Y. Liebes, "How the *Zohar* was Written," in the "Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8 (1989): 20, n. 74. Liebes reverts to Gottlieb's view that the author of the *Zohar* utilized Gikatilla's writings. Gottlieb's conclusion would raise doubts about Scholem's claim that all of the *Zohar* was composed between 1280-86; see Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 186. The view that the *Zohar* was mostly composed in the last decade of the thirteenth century was, of course, espoused by I. Tishby, see *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, I: 106-107; and cf. E. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon's Sefer ha-Rimmon* (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 50-55 (English section).

58 *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, printed in *Sefer 'Arzei Levanon* (Venice, 1601), fol. 33a. The identification of the celestial beasts of Ezekiel's chariot vision with the letters is made subsequently in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 19 (ed. Margaliot, 39b): "The letters are the [celestial] beasts concerning whom it is written, 'they ran to and fro' (Ezek. 1:15)." Cf. also the exegesis of Ezek. 1: 13 in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction (4a).

59 See, for instance, Maimonides, *Guide*, I: 72; II: 10.

the second division corresponds to the spheres for they cause movement by a corporeal or bodily motion, *tenu'ah gufanit*, and the last division corresponds to the lower elements which are moved. Further on in the text⁶⁰ Gikatilla supplies the reader with additional information. *Hashmal* refers to the letters of the Tetragrammaton, *yod, heh* (repeated twice), *waw*; *hayyot* refers to the letters: *shin, mem, yod*,⁶¹ *nun, 'alef, heh, lammed, kaf, tau, waw, bet*; and the *'ofanim* to the remaining letters: *gimmel, zayin, 'ayin, ṣaddi, dalet, qof, peh, resh, het, tet, samekh*.

The four letters of the name, therefore, constitute the ultimate efficient cause of the universe. "Just as the *hashmal* is the mystery of the highest internal comprehension in the account of the chariot (סוד ההשגה הפנימית), (עליונה במעשה מרכבה be He ... are the mystery of the highest internal letters (סוד האותיות הפנימיות) (העליונות) of all the twenty-two letters."⁶² In terms of the linguistic division between vowels and consonants, the former moving the latter, it will follow that these letters function cosmically as vowels. "Know that the four letters of the explicit name [Tetragrammaton] ... stand in the place of the various types of vocalization (*ha-niqqud*) and they move all the letters in the world."⁶³ More specifically, the three consonants which form the name, *yod, heh* and *waw*, are said to comprise all the vowels in the following way: *yod* — *hiriq, ṣere, segol*; *waw* — *ḥolam, shuruq*; *heh* — *pataḥ* and *qamaṣ*. For the purposes of this study, it is important again to stress that Gikatilla interprets the three groups of letters in light of the chariot imagery of Ezekiel's vision. That these letters themselves constituted the very vision of Ezekiel is made clear in the following comment: "Know that the chariot of Ezekiel was divided by three [levels of] comprehension [represented by the expression] 'I have seen' (וארא) repeated three times. The first 'I have seen' refers to the matter of the *hayyot*, the second to the *'ofanim*, and the third to the *hashmal*."⁶⁴ Indeed, Gikatilla goes on to use the expression "chariot of the letters," מרכבת האותיות, whose structure is understood from Ezekiel's chariot. "And you may comprehend the chariot of the letters from all other chariots." What Ezekiel saw was in fact a mystical vision of the cosmological structure understood linguistically. Underlying this correspondence between the divisions of letters and the constituent

60 *Sha'ar ha-Niqqud*, fol. 37a.

61 On fol. 38b Gikatilla discusses why the letters of the Tetragrammaton are included in the second grouping as well as the first.

62 *Ibid.*, fol. 37b.

63 *Ibid.*, fol. 36a.

64 *Ibid.*, fol. 37a.

parts of Ezekiel's chariot is the cosmological function of letters which is an idea affirmed in a variety of ancient Jewish sources. "The order of all the grades of the world," writes Gikatilla, "is dependent on the order of the twenty-two letters."⁶⁵ Insofar as the cosmic grades can be subsumed under the elements of Ezekiel's chariot, it follows that the latter as well is of a linguistic composition.

In three other of his theosophic works, *Perush Mirkevet Yehezqel*, *Sha'arei Sedeq*, and *Sha'arei 'Orah*, Gikatilla again returns to this correlation of *merkavah* imagery and letter symbolism. The context in which this occurs is an elaborate discourse concerning the three divine names, 'El, 'Elohim, and YHWH, which correspond to the three central *sefirot*, *Hesed*, *Din*, and *Rahamim*. In the first instance it should be noted that the use of *merkavah* imagery here is suggested by the fact that these *sefirot* are identified as the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the latter, according to one midrashic tradition,⁶⁶ theosophically transformed by the kabbalists, are referred to as the *merkavah*. Moreover, according to Gikatilla, each of these three names has nine appellatives (*kinnuyim*) attached to it, thus making a total of thirty, i.e., three proper names plus twenty-seven appellatives. These thirty names are alluded to in the "thirty years" mentioned at the very outset of Ezekiel's prophetic vision.⁶⁷ Furthermore, these thirty collectively are identified as the "thirty wings" of the Tetragrammaton, the central pillar in the sefirotic pleroma, for by means of these names God is both hidden and is elevated,⁶⁸ the two primary

65 Ibid., fols. 39a-b.

66 Cf. *Genesis Rabbah*, 47: 6.

67 *Sha'arei Sedeq* (Cracow, 1881), fol. 22b; *Perush Mirkevet Yehezqel*, MS JTS Mic. 2156, fols. 1a-2a; *Sha'arei 'Orah*, 1, ed. J. Ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem, 1981): 221.

68 Cf. *Sha'arei Sedeq*, fol. 21b, *Perush Mirkevet Yehezqel*, MS JTS Mic. 2156, fols. 21a-b; *Sha'arei 'Orah*, 1: 206-207. And cf. *Zohar Hadash*, 40d: "All the appellatives of the names are dependent on the mystery of the holy name [i.e., the Tetragrammaton] ... they conceal the names that are within, and those [names] move about by means of the [appellatives] and are covered by them ... The wings are appellatives which cover the names." See also Moses de León's *Sha'ar Yesod ha-Merkavah*, MS JTS Mic. 1805: "Know that the wings mentioned in this chariot are all coverings in which the names of God are covered ... for there is no name of God which does not have a covering, i.e., the permutation of other letters in which they are covered. And these are called wings." A possible source for de León and/or Gikatilla may have been Isaac b. Jacob ha-Kohen's *Perush le-Mirkevet Yehezqel*, ed. G. Scholem, *Tarbiz* 2 (1931): 203, where the "thirty years" mentioned at the beginning of Ezekiel's chariot vision are interpreted as a reference to thirty grades below the divine pleroma also identified as "thirty wings," in contrast to the *sefirot* which are the internal "faces." See Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 217, n. 104.

functions of a wing being to conceal and to cause motion. Contained within this one name, therefore, are all the names, and indeed all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet which make up those names. The containment of all names and letters within the Tetragrammaton is alluded to in the one name, "Thou," אתה, which includes the first and last consonants of the alphabet, 'alef and tav, and the letter heh which symbolizes the five phonetic groupings of the letters according to *Sefer Yeşirah*.⁶⁹ The most elaborate presentation of these views is given in the following passage from *Sha'arei 'Orah*.

Contemplate that יהו"ה, which is the median line (קר אמצעי) and is called "Thou" (אתה), is the mystery of all the banners of God [i.e., the three proper names] and all the appellatives, for He is clothed and glorified in all of them ... the mystery of "Thou" (אתה) which is the mystery of all the hosts of the world and all the chariots which were created by means of the combination of the letters (בצירוף האותיות) ... Know and understand that by means of the combination of the twenty-two letters the heaven and earth were created, the upper and lower hosts, and all the upper and lower chariots were created by means of their combination ... As the combination necessitated, all the chariots emerged male and female ... as it says in *Sefer Yeşirah*, the masculine in אמ"ש and the feminine in אש"ם.⁷⁰ This is the mystery of the combination of the letters and their permutation (בצירוף האותיות וגלגולן). The one who enters into the depth of the combination of the letters can understand from them the depth of wisdom and the mystery of the creation of all things ... and the structure of each and every chariot, and the mystery of every male and female. And all the combinations and the permutation (הצירופים וגלגול) of the twenty-two letters are concealed in the mystery of "Thou" (אתה), for this is the seal [of] the beginning and end of all the letters and the chariots ... And all is in the mystery of the twenty-two letters [alluded to in the 'alef and tav of the word אתה, the first and last of the consonants] and the five channels of understanding [i.e., the five phonetic sources of the letters alluded to in the heh of אתה], for by means of them were formed all the forms of the chariots and the upper and lower hosts. This is the mystery of the Torah which

69 *Sefer Yeşirah*, 2: 3.

70 *Ibid.*, 3: 6.

[comprises] the twenty-two letters and is [contained in] five books, for the principle of everything is "Thou" (אתה).⁷¹

The Tetragrammaton is thus the "great foundation, and it is everything, the knot of all the holy names and the rest of the appellatives are bound within it, and all are woven from it."⁷² In another context Gikatilla describes the Torah in precisely these terms: "All the Torah is woven from appellatives, and the appellatives from names, and all the holy names are dependent upon and connected to the Tetragrammaton. Thus the Torah in its entirety is woven from the Tetragrammaton."⁷³ Moreover, the particular combinations and permutations of the letters, identified by Gikatilla as chariots, contained in the Tetragrammaton, i.e., the Torah, embrace the entire spectrum of creation. That is to say, not only all the names, surnames and letters but all existence is contained in the one name, יהוה, which is identical with the Torah, for the essential component of any substance, whether divine or mundane, is to be found in its name which, in the last analysis, is derived from an amalgamation of various letters. The whole cosmological structure, therefore, can be viewed in terms of the chariot which, in turn, can be decomposed into diverse linguistic constellations (masculine and feminine) arising from the combination and permutation of the twenty-two foundational letters.

II

From the above analysis of both Gikatilla and de León the following points can be clearly established: prevalent in Castile in the last quarter of the thirteenth century was a linguistic mysticism which employed terminology from the ancient *merkavah* literature as well as linguistic techniques derived from the German Pietists. In the texts that have survived from these circles it may be gathered that the "core" idea interpreted in various ways by different mystics consisted of the identification of the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet, אבגד, as the chariot. The exact origins of this idea are not sufficiently clear, though two essential points

214*

71 *Sha'arei 'Orah*, I: 270. The passage is cited in David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid's *Sefer Mar'ot Zove'ot*. See D. Matt, *The Book of Mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot Zove'ot* (Chico, CA, 1982), p. 12 (Introduction) and p. 223 (Hebrew section).

72 *Perush Mirkevet Yehezqel*, MS JTS Mic. 2156, fol. 1b.

73 *Sha'arei 'Orah*, I: 48; see *ibid.*, 201. And cf. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1969), pp. 42-43.

can be asserted: first, the number four was a basic component of chariot speculation as determined already in the Book of Ezekiel; second, the sum of these four integers is ten. Both of these aspects are exploited in the mystical texts that were discussed in the first section of this paper. More importantly, whether it was maintained that the first four letters correspond to the four archangels or the different links in the cosmological chain, in either case these letters serve as the chariot that bears the divine reality that is outside the world. Underlying this cosmology, therefore, is a dynamic conception of language which maintains that letters are the chariots that move the divine spirit. The use of the ancient terminology was certainly meant to contextualize this semantic dynamism within the parameters of the history of Jewish mystical speculation.

This dynamic view of language plays a central role in the classic text of Spanish kabbalah, the *Zohar*. In the remainder of the paper I shall treat the correlation of letter symbolism and *merkavah* imagery as it is developed in the body of the *Zohar*. I will discuss this correlation specifically as it appears in passages in the *Zohar* relating to two main topics, the dynamism of the letters that comprise the prayers uttered by the angelic hosts and Israel, and the secret of language as it unfolds in the creative process.

1. Liturgical

The theurgical-magical significance allotted to the utterance of charms and the chanting of hymns in the *heikhalot* corpus can only be understood in light of the linguistic assumption concerning the divine power implicit in the Hebrew letters which make up the words of the prayers and the names of God.⁷⁴ Given the dynamic conception of letters as hypostatic elements, it follows that human speech below, especially through the utterance of prayers, oaths, and hymns, can effect changes above, causing the letters in the upper realm to move about in countless ways. In the *Zohar* this ancient tradition, as is the case with so many earlier traditions, is transformed into a new mystical doctrine. Thus, in one context the camps of angels which surround the divine throne — a standard image of *heikhalot* speculation — are said to be moved by “inscribed letters” (אתרון רשימן) and then utter

215*

74 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 56; *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1965), pp. 75-83; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden, 1980), pp. 104-105. See also reference to article by Grözinger given above, n. 6; and cf. R. Elijor, “The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism,” in the “Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: Early Jewish Mysticism,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 20-24 [in Hebrew].

song and praise before God. The *Zohar* goes on to describe a complicated linguistic process which I shall cite in full:

When those letters disperse in the ether of the spirit, [the one] appointed over everything, then those [camps of angels] move and the song is mitigated. One letter strikes from below, and that letter goes up and down and two letters fly above it. And that letter from below raises the order [of angels] below to above. And it joins them and they are three letters. They correspond to the letters יהו , which are three within the speculum that shines [i.e., *Tiferet*]. From these [letters] three orders [of angels] disseminate. Those two letters and the letter that rises and joins them are three. Come and see: the two letters above that rise in the ether, they are contained one within the other, mercy in judgment. Therefore, they are two and they are from the supernal world [i.e., *Binah*] in the mystery of the masculine. The one that rises and joins them is the feminine [*Shekhinah*], and she is contained in the two of them like a female contained in two sides, right and left, and joined to them. So here that letter is the feminine which is joined to the two other letters which are on the two sides. Those [two] are above and this one below. They are all one, male and female. When the world was created those letters from the supernal world generated all the actions below in their actual form. Therefore, the one who knows them, and is careful with respect to them, is beloved above and below. R. Shim'on said: These letters are male and female, to be contained as one, in the mystery of upper and lower waters ... All is one, and that is the complete unity ... Come and see: just as there are supernal letters of the supernal world [*Binah*] so there are other letters below [within *Shekhinah*]; great letters above and small letters below. One is in the form of the other. All these secrets are in the mystery of the male and female, all is one perfection.⁷⁵

216 *

Implicit in this passage is a highly dynamic view of language, for the letters, parts of the divine name, are viewed as decidedly mobile. Drawing upon older aggadic images, the author of the *Zohar* describes the letters as moving about in order to join together to form words. The liturgical context here is evident as well from the fact that the old *merkavah* image of the angels uttering song and praise before the throne serves as the

75 *Zohar I*: 159a-b.

backdrop for this complex linguistic process. The *Zohar* adds its familiar stamp by describing the letters in terms of a masculine-feminine polarity.⁷⁶ For the author of the *Zohar*, all reality, including the divine, is understood in terms of this polarity. The letters, thus, are given an added dimension of personalization. Most interestingly, they are described in language that calls to mind sexual activity: going up and down, one striking against the other, and so on. An interesting use of this dynamic view of letters, combining theurgy, mystical intention in prayer, and cosmology, can be found in the following Zoharic passage:

He who wants to go out on a journey should get up at the break of day, and look momentarily in a mirror (באסתכלותא) towards the east. And he will see the appearance of letters that strike in the sky, one goes up and the other goes down. These are the sparks of the letters through which heaven and earth were created. If he knows the secret of these letters, that they are the secret of the holy name of the forty-two letters,⁷⁷ and he mentions them properly with the

- 76 To be sure, in early kabbalistic sources, such as the *Sefer ha-Bahir* itself, gender is attributed to the letters. See *Sefer ha-Bahir*, ed. R. Margalio (Jerusalem, 1978), §§ 83-86. As is the case with other kabbalistic motifs, however, the author of the *Zohar* elaborates on older ideas and describes them in more explicit sexual terms. It is possible that already in the *Otiyyot de-R. 'Aqiva'* (see above, n. 13), the gender of the open and closed *mem* is implied.
- 77 In this passage the author of the *Zohar* is particularly influenced by the Iyyun-circle; see esp. *Sefer ha-Yihud ha-'Amiti*, MS JTS Mic. 1882, fol. 6a: "The letters of the forty-two letter name fly in the air upward until the essence of the chariot, and they are pillars of light that are united in the great brightness." Cf. *Zohar* 2: 136b, 229a; 3: 165a, and elsewhere. In general, it may be said that the convergence of linguistic and light mysticism evident in the *Zohar* is based in great measure upon the writings of the Iyyun-circle. See, e.g., *Sod we-Yesod ha-Qadmoni*, MS Munich 54, fols. 290a-291a; Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 325-326. The conflation of light and name symbolism is also pronounced in the fourteenth-century kabbalistic work, *Berit Menuḥah*, which reflects as well the particular influence of the Iyyun-circle. The forty-two letter name is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin* 71a, but its exact nature is not specified. It is generally assumed that, according to the oldest traditions, this name consists of seven groups of six letters each, the first two groups being אבג יחז. Concerning this divine name, see J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, 1939), pp. 94-95; L. Schiffman, "A Forty-two-Letter Divine Name in the Aramaic Magic Bowls," *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1973): 97-102. According to later traditions, the forty-two letter name was identified as the name by means of which heaven and earth were created; see *Tosafot*, b. *Hagigah* 11b. s.v. אין דורשין במעשה. אבג יחז. Cf. *Zohar* 1: 1a, 39a-b; 2: 175b, 234a (and see 234b where it is said that both the upper and lower worlds were created by means of these forty-two letters); 3: 256b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); *Tiqunei Zohar*, § 21 (66b). The *Zohar* also follows a widely attested tradition according to which the forty-two letter name is derived from the first two verses in Genesis,

intention of his heart, then he will see within the light of daybreak in the sky six *yodin*, three on the right and three on the left, and three *wawin* that go up and down and flash in the sky. These are letters [derived] from the priestly blessing [cf. Num. 6:24-26].⁷⁸ Then he should pray his prayer and go out on his journey, and the *Shekhinah* will surely be with him.⁷⁹

The letters then are not simply chariots that bear the divine but are constellations of the divine energy itself. The technique recommended in this passage is meant to maximize one's success on a journey. Significantly, one can be certain of the presence of the *Shekhinah* if one merits to see the letters of creation, the forty-two letters of the divine name, moving up and down. By mentioning these letters of the divine name with the proper intention, one merits further to see letters derived from the priestly blessing

for there are forty-two letters from the first letter of the Torah, the *bet* in בראשית, to the letter *bet* of the word ובהו in the second verse. Cf. e.g., *Sod Shem ha-Meforash*, MS JTS 1990, fol. 88b, which is dedicated to an exposition of the name according to this tradition; and the commentary on this name in MS Munich 54, fol. 296a (= MS Munich 215, fol. 210a). See also *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, MS Oxford 1812, fol. 54a, where Eleazar of Worms reports such a tradition in the name of Hai Gaon; and similarly in Moses of Burgos' commentary on the forty-two letter name, published by Scholem, *Tarbiz* 5 (1933-34): 52.

78 According to b. *Qiddushin* 71a, the connection is made between the name of twelve letters and the priestly blessing. According to a tradition reflected in the traditional prayer book, in a prayer to be uttered at the conclusion of the priestly benediction, the name of twenty-two letters is said to emerge from Num. 6: 24-26. See Trachtenberg, op. cit., pp. 92-94; and a magical amulet from the Genizah, TS K1.127, published by L.H. Schiffman and M.D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah* (forthcoming). The connection between the forty-two letter name and the priestly blessing on Yom Kippur is made in an authentic responsum of Hai Gaon on this name; see J. Müller, *Einleitung in die Responsonen den Babylonische Geonen* (Berlin, 1891), p. 221, n. 27. See also *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, MS Oxford 1812, fol. 54a; *Sod Shem ha-Meforash*, MS JTS 1990, fol. 88b; and an anonymous commentary on the forty-two letter name in MS Oxford 1943, fols. 94a-b. Mention should also be made of the commentary on the forty-two letter name, extant in MS British Museum 755, fols. 53b-55a, which bears the title "Sod Yom Kippur"; cf. Scholem, "R. Mosheh talmido shel R. Yiṣṣaq," *Tarbiz* 4 (1932-33): 60.

79 *Zohar* 2: 130b. The connection between the visionary experience of the *Shekhinah*, the priestly blessing, and the letters of the divine name, is made in other sources as well. See, e.g., Eleazar of Worms, *Perush ha-Tefillot*, MS Paris 772, fol. 84b; *Perush ha-Roqeah 'al ha-Torah*, 3 (B'nai Brak, 1986): 24-25; *Zohar* 3: 147a; Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur 'al ha-Torah*, ed. C.D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1981), Exod. 17: 12, p. 156; Num. 6:27, p. 34.

going up and down and flashing about in the sky. This is a sign that he should pray and that the Presence will indeed accompany him that day. The efficacy of prayer is here tied to the intrinsic dynamism of the letters of the divine name with which the world was created. It is the same dynamism that is entailed in the letters of the priestly blessing that likewise possesses intrinsic theurgical and creative power.

At the conclusion of the first passage from the *Zohar* cited above, the reader is introduced to one of the characteristic doctrines of Zoharic linguistic theory. There are two configurations of letters which parallel one another: the "big letters" which evolve out of the third divine gradation, *Binah*, and the "small letters" which evolve out of the tenth gradation, *Shekhinah*, the upper *vis-à-vis* the lower are masculine and the lower *vis-à-vis* the upper feminine.⁸⁰ The connection between this theosophic doctrine and the older *merkavah* image is especially apparent from another context. In the opening paragraph in his commentary to the Book of Leviticus, the author of the *Zohar* notes that the earlier generations, in contrast to the later,

contemplated the upper wisdom and knew how to combine (לצרפא) the letters which were given to Moses at Sinai ... and they knew from the upper letters and the lower letters the proper wisdom to control events in this world. Each and every letter that was given to Moses was crowned and ascended on the heads of the holy upper beasts (חיות). And all the [celestial] beasts were crowned by the letters and they [the letters] flew off into the air that descended from the upper subtle ether that is not known.⁸¹

The nature of the letters is such that they "go up and down," for there are the supernal letters that emerge from the upper hidden palace (*Binah*) and the smaller letters that emerge from the lower palace (*Shekhinah*). It is by means of these letters that the beings who inhabit the celestial realm move about. Hence, in the continuation of the passage the *Zohar* describes a complex process to explain how the letters of the first word of Leviticus, ויקרא, were combined. Each of the consonants of the word is assigned a place atop the head of a respective angel, e.g., the 'alef on Šadqiel, the

80 Cf. *Zohar* 1: 3b, 159a; 2: 132a, 174a, 180b, 205b, 228b; 3: 2a, 165a, 220a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 66c. And see *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 69, 116a (cf. *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut* [Mantua, 1558], 22a) where big, medium, and small letters are distinguished.

81 *Zohar* 3: 2a.

resh on Raziel and *qof* on Yofiel, and the angelic hosts below each of these angels are said to move by that very letter.⁸² The letter, therefore, acts as a chariot to move the angels that are aligned under the chief angel who is crowned by the particular letter.⁸³ In this text, moreover, we see that the combination of letters is designated as a special sort of wisdom by means of which events in the world can be controlled. As the author of the *Zohar* puts it elsewhere: "The combination (צירופא) of letters, one with another, causes good and bad events. According to this mystery is the combination of the letters of the holy names, and so the letters themselves cause the upper secrets to be seen."⁸⁴

That the author of the *Zohar* understood the esoteric discipline of *ma'aseh merkavah* in terms of a linguistic process of combining letters is particularly underscored in one text. The relevant passage occurs in the context of a lengthy discussion concerning the unity of all the celestial palaces, *heikhalot*, especially as they are joined in the seventh palace of the upper Eden, i.e., the *Shekhinah*. In characteristic form the author of the *Zohar* emphasizes that the function of human prayer is to unite all reality in one bond within this seventh palace. "The one who combines one thing with its kind and knows how to bind a thing in its knot, the palace in its palace, the grade in its grade, has a portion in the world-to-come... and this is the highest perfection."⁸⁵ After stating this, the author of the *Zohar* goes on to make the following observation:

When one thing is completed with another, and everything is one act, a thing with its own kind, there emerges from that perfection that which is called the account of the chariot (מעשה מרכבה). And this is the mystery, "And the Lord God formed Adam" (Gen. 2:7), [by means of] the complete name [יהו"ה אלהים].⁸⁶ And Adam is the

82 Ibid., 2b-3a.

83 The correspondence between angelic beings, letters, and chariots is also affirmed in *Zohar* 2: 209b-210b. It is stated there that the firmament over the lower Paradise has four openings, and four letters, מר[נ]ג, corresponding to four angels, Michael, Raphael (or Boel), Gabriel, and Nuriel, are attached to these openings. When the letters move up and down, the chariots of these different angels emerge from above. On the parallel four openings of the upper Paradise, identical with the *Shekhinah*, see *Zohar* 2: 212a-b.

84 *Zohar* 2: 179b.

85 *Zohar* 2: 260a.

86 In *Genesis Rabbah* 13: 3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 115), and 15: 1 (p. 135), the expression "complete name," referring to the combination of יהו"ה and אלהים, is used in connection with Gen. 2:5 and 8, and not verse 7. See, however, Bahya ben Asher, *Be'ur 'al ha-Torah*, Lev. 12:1, ed. Chavel, 2: 470, who cites the following midrashic interpretation of 'And the

act of that chariot (עובדא דהאי מרכבה), for he combined one thing with the other (דארכיב דא כדא), an act of completeness. And when one thing is completed with the other, then [it is written] יהו"ה אלהים, the complete name. Praiseworthy is one who knows how to bind the knots of faith and to unify the proper unity.⁸⁷

The word *merkavah* here, as in other thirteenth-century mystical sources, especially Abulafia, is understood in the sense of combining.⁸⁸ Specifically, the human being represents the *ma'aseh merkavah*, the "work of the chariot," for in the creation of man all the forces were combined. Hence, with respect to the creation of man Scripture uses the complete name which symbolizes the complete perfection of masculine (יהו"ה) and feminine (אלהים) potencies within the divine. The linguistic dimension of this passage becomes apparent when one bears in mind that man is said to be able to recreate the creative process by combining through prayer the various levels of reality, one thing to its kind. Language — and, in particular, liturgical language — is the medium by which one can again participate in the creative process of uniting cosmic forces, the act of *ma'aseh merkavah*.

The liturgical-*merkavah* background of this dynamic view of language can be further adduced from another passage which is a mystical commentary on the chariot hymn, אל אדון על כל המעשים,⁸⁹ traditionally recited in the Sabbath morning prayers:

אל ברוך: the arrangement of the lower world [*Shekhinah*] which consists of the twenty-two smaller letters. For there are big letters and small letters. The small letters are from the lower world [*Shekhinah*] and the big letters from the world-to-come [*Binah*] ... Each and every letter is in a chariot that is appropriate for it (כל את ואת ברכיכא דחזי ליה). As, for example, the hymn of Sabbath, אל אדון על כל המעשים ברוך

221*

Lord God formed Adam: "a complete name upon a complete world." And see M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 2 (New York, 1944): 208, n. 127.

87 *Zohar* 2: 260a.

88 Cf. A. Farber-Ginat, "The Concept of the Merkavah in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Esotericism — Sod ha-'Egoz and Its Development" (Ph.D., Hebrew University, 1986), p. 240, n. 40 [in Hebrew]. See above, n. 19.

89 Cf. S.D. Luzzato, *Toledot ha-Shirah be-Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv, 1948), pp. 12-13; M. Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah we-Heikhalot* (Ramat-Gan, 1987), pp. 99, 115-117.

ומבורך בפי כל נשמה.⁹⁰ The [first two] letters ['alef and bet] have five words [in each verse] which [correspond to] the fifty gates of the world-to-come.⁹¹ The two last letters, *shin* and *taw*, each have six words [i.e., שבה נותנין לו כל צבא מרום. תפארת וגדולה שרפים ואופנים] which [correspond to] the six extremities [i.e., *Hesed* to *Yesod*] of the world-to-come [*Binah*] ... All the other letters which are in the middle have four words, for they are in the secret of the upper chariot. The first [two] and last [two] letters are the completion of the twenty-two letters, for in [the verses connected with] these there are twenty-two words corresponding to the twenty-two letters. There remain eighteen other letters which rise in their chariots (דקא סלקין ברתכייהו), each one [comprising] four [verses]. Their total is seventy-two words, which is the mystery of the holy, inscribed name of the seventy-two holy letters in which the Holy One, blessed be He, is crowned. The name crowns the Community of Israel [*Shekhinah*] ... And the sign of those [first two and last two] letters ... is א"ת ב"ש. 'Alef in five [words], *taw* in six, *bet* in five, and *shin* in six. Thus is the mystery of א"ת ב"ש, that which contains the twenty-two letters (כללא דכ"ב אתוון) which are the crown of the thirty-two paths [of wisdom]. And the sign of those other letters that ascend in their chariots is גר. Begin with *gimmel* and end with *resh*. All [of the letters] are the mystery of the holy chariot (רזא דרתיכא קדישא) א"ת גר — the secret of the holy name. גר — the mystery of the holy chariot that adds up to seventy-two, and from it is produced the holy name to crown the Community of Israel within the upper chariot. Therefore, the seventy-two letter name comprises the secret of the Patriarchs, right [*Hesed*], left [*Din*] and the median [*Rahamim*]. And She [*Shekhinah*] is crowned by them to be a holy name, but not as the supernal names of the supernal world [*Binah*] which are united above. The forty-two letter name: its mystery is the Patriarchs [*Hesed*, *Din*, and *Rahamim*] who are crowned by the supernal world [*Binah*]. And the supernal world is what is above, it goes up and not down, crowned in the supernal Thought [*Hokhmah*].⁹²

90 Cf. parallel passage in *Zohar* 2: 205b and *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de León's Sefer ha-Rimmon*, p. 124 (Hebrew section).

91 Based on the talmudic notion of fifty gates of understanding (see b. *Rosh Hashanah*, 21b). In kabbalistic parlance, understanding, *Binah*, is also referred to as the world-to-come. Hence, the Zoharic usage: fifty gates of the world-to-come.

92 *Zohar* 2: 132a.

From this passage the reader gets a good idea of how the author of the *Zohar* combines the various strands of mystical speculation, to wit, letter symbolism, *merkavah* imagery, and theosophic kabbalah. The central focus is again liturgical insofar as the linguistic process is ultimately concerned with the elevation of divine potencies to their highest source through the recitation of a hymn. The tenth *sefirah*, *Shekhinah*, is elevated to the third *sefirah*, *Binah*, and the latter is elevated to the Infinite. This twofold process is associated with two of the divine names: the forty-two letter name crowns the upper chariot (*Binah*) and the seventy-two letter name crowns the lower chariot (*Shekhinah*). Moreover, letters here are described specifically by terminology derived from *merkavah* speculation, for example, "each and every letter is in the chariot that is appropriate to it," or again, "the letters rise in their chariots." The reader is not told to what this expression actually refers. It is of interest to note in passing that the use of the term chariot in a similar linguistic context occurs in a kabbalistic commentary on the 'Alenu prayer contained in a letter on the same subject attributed to Hai Gaon.⁹³ "R. Menaḥem b. Ishmael said: Great is the praise of Joshua^{93a} for he instituted within it [i.e., the 'Alenu] five chariots (רִתְיָיִן⁹⁴); for each and every word there is a chariot (רִתְיָא⁹⁵)."⁹⁶ Though we shall have occasion to discuss the nature of the chariot in more detail later on, suffice it here to say that what is intended is some sort of linguistic apparatus which moves the respective letters in the divine realm and is thus similar to, though not identical with, the vowels.⁹⁷

93 It is my opinion that Moses de León is the real author of this letter and commentary; I hope to discuss the matter at length in a separate study. After working on the various manuscripts of this text, I came to learn that Dr. M. Kushnir-Oron had worked on the same text some time ago. I thank Dr. Kushnir-Oron for handing over to me her unpublished material, including a transcription of the text as it appears in MS Vat. 195.

93a This follows a widely-attested medieval tradition which proposed that Joshua composed the 'Alenu prayer upon entering Canaan. See references cited in J.D. Eisenstein, *Oṣar Dinim u-Minhagim* (New York, 1938), s.v. 'Alenu, p. 322. See also E.N. Adler, "'Alenu," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, I: 337; L.J. Liebrich, "Aspects of the New Year Liturgy," *HUCA* 34 (1963): 159, n. 99; M.D. Swartz, "'Alay le-Shabbat: A Liturgical Prayer in Ma'aseh Merkabah," *JQR* 77 (1987): 186, n. 20.

94 Cf. the corrupt reading in the version of this text published in J. Coriat, *Ma'or wa-Shemesh* (Livorno, 1839), 9b: רִתְיָא. This version is based on MS Paris 181, fols. 245b-247a. The same reading occurs in MS JTS Mic. 3216, fol. 2b.

95 In Coriat: רִתְיָא. See also the manuscripts referred to in the preceding note.

96 MS Oxford 1565, fol. 5a; MS Vienna 113, fol. 5b; MS Paris 835, fol. 114a; MS Vat. 195, fol. 8a.

97 Cf. Todros Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-Razim*, ed. M. Kushnir-Oron (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 74, where the vowel-points are identified as the "wheel of the chariot" for they move the letters.

Hence, it may be said that, the structures of *merkavah* mysticism and theosophic kabbalah are brought together under the one umbrella of language. By means of letters the one world interacts, indeed merges, with the other.

2. *Cosmological*

A linguistic conception of creation is one of the oldest motifs affirmed in classical rabbinic sources. Furthermore, in earlier forms of Jewish mysticism, especially the *Sefer Yeşirah*, language is viewed both as the medium of divine creativity and the stuff of which reality is composed. The *Zohar* employs all of these earlier strands of speculation in the context of various treatments of *ma'aseh bereshit*, the account of creation. What is of especial interest to us is the use of *merkavah* imagery in some of these contexts. In particular, there are two passages in which the emanative process is concomitantly described in terms of letter symbolism and chariot images. The first of these passages is found in *Zohar* 2:179b 181a (*Teşaveh*), and the second in one of the more difficult strata of Zoharic literature, the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* ("Secrets of the Letters"), printed as part of the commentary on *Bereshit* in *Zohar Hadash*.⁹⁸ Whereas the former occurs in the context of a discussion of the building of the tabernacle, the latter is a complicated description of the process of divine auto-genesis through the medium of letters. Far from being a mere coincidence, the selection of these two contexts by the author of the *Zohar* is based on a well-established rabbinic tradition which affirmed that the building of the tabernacle was achieved through a linguistic process that approximated the creation of the world.⁹⁹ For the purposes of this analysis we shall focus on the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* text, making reference to the other passage only for the sake of comparison and further clarification.

224*

At the very beginning of the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot*, after the initial citation of two biblical verses (Ps. 106:2 and Jer. 10:7) which mutually extol the wondrous nature of divine creativity, the author of the *Zohar* makes the following correlation between the letters and the *merkavah*:

98 See above, n. 57. A critical edition and study of this text has been published by S. Wald, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name: An Introduction to Classical Kabbalistic Theology* (Atlanta, 1988).

99 B. *Berakhot*, 55a. Cf. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 71. For Zoharic references, see in particular *Zohar* 2: 152a (where it is stressed that the Tabernacle and the Temple were both built by means of the letters through which the world was created), 159a-160a, 243b.

Within inscribed letters that are incised upon the concealment of the impression (or side)¹⁰⁰ of existence¹⁰¹ (סתימו דסרטא דקיומא) the chariots go up as holy chariots. Each and every chariot goes up in an inscribed letter. The letter is inscribed in its place, the chariot goes up through that letter. Each and every letter stands in the place of the chariot that is appropriate to it.¹⁰²

The *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* is a discourse on the mystical nature and emergence of the letters of the divine names as well as on the process of genesis in general. In the first instance, the *Zohar* is concerned with the emanation of the letters of the Tetragrammaton which, in their mystical essence, refer to the totality of the sefirotic pleroma. Each of these letters is said

- 100 The edition of Margaliot presents two possible readings: סרטא or סטרא. The former reading is attested by the Cremona edition of the *Zohar* and the first edition of *Zohar Ḥadash* (Salonika, 1597), whereas the latter reading was introduced in the Venice edition of *Zohar Ḥadash* (1658). Subsequent editions, such as that of Munkacz (1911), preserve both readings. While the meaning of the latter reading in its standard Zoharic usage is clear, the precise meaning of the former is not at all obvious. It should be pointed out that the word סירטא, a nominal form derived from the root סרט, which means to mark or to make an incision, appears several times in Talmudic literature; see, in particular, *Tosefta, Shabbat* 11: 6 (ed. S. Lieberman, *The Tosefta: Mo'ed* [New York, 1962], p. 47), where the term סרטה [cf. the variant from the MS British Museum Add. 27.296 cited al loc.: שירטא] seems to be used as a synonym for רישם, i.e., an impression made with a writing utensil which does not yet have the form of a specific letter). See Wald, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name*, p. 98. This possible etymology is accepted by several commentators on the *Zohar*. See, for instance, Simeon Lavi, *Ketem Paz* (Djerba, 1940: Jerusalem reprint 1981), fol. 263c, who explains that סרטא has the meaning of the inscription, רשימו, as in the expression המסרט על בשרו, the one who scratches one's flesh. The whole expression in Lavi's view thus refers to a "tablet of inscriptions," לוח הרשמים, upon which the forms of the letters are incised. He further notes that this tablet or table refers to *Keter*, the first *sefirah*, which is the divine Thought in which the chariots go up and down. Cf. Liebes, *Peraqim be-Millon Sefer ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1976), p. 381, n. 97, who suggests that סרטא דקיומא may be an Aramaic form of the Qur'anic *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*; hence the meaning of the Zoharic expression is the "straight path" or perhaps the "ladder of ascension" (for a discussion of the development of the latter conception in Islamic and Jewish sources, see A. Altmann, "The Ladder of Ascension," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday* [Jerusalem, 1967], pp. 1-32). I am not certain what the meaning of the passage would be assuming Liebes' suggested etymology.
- 101 On the meaning of קיומא in the *Zohar* as an abstract noun for existence or reality, see Liebes, *Peraqim*, pp. 356-357, n. 4.
- 102 *Zohar Ḥadash*, 1b. For a different rendering of this difficult passage, see Wald, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name*, p. 73, and see the critical text with some significant variants, established on p. 153.

to emerge by a process of self-differentiation into what the *Zohar* calls "pillars," סמכין,¹⁰³ which, as it were, support or uphold the letter. The pillars beneath the letter are also referred to as that letter's chariot, רתיכא. The meaning of the term "chariot" in this context, therefore, must be understood as that which bears or carries another.¹⁰⁴ These chariots, as we said above, refer to some sort of linguistic apparatus connected to each of the letters. In the words of the *Zohar* itself: each letter is inscribed within the chariot appropriate to it. These chariots or pillars, then, are said to carry the letter up and down in various stages of the process of emanation.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, the movability of the chariot in some sense is determined by the letter inscribed within that chariot. If the chariot moves the letter, so the letter moves the chariot. Established herein is a relationship of reciprocity which breaks down any linear cause-effect sequence. It may be said, therefore, that just as in his pre-theosophic mystical speculation de León connected *merkavah* imagery with letter symbolism, so too in the mature theosophic speculation. In the latter case the connection is based on a complicated linguistic theory according to which each letter is said to be supported by its own chariot.

Thus, for example, it is said¹⁰⁶ that hidden under the letter *yod*, the first point of emanation, corresponding to the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, is a nut (אגוזא) which is covered and concealed; this nut is further identified as the chariot¹⁰⁷ "that stands under that concealed secret (i.e., the letter *yod*). The nut, we are then told, has six pillars which support it on six sides. "Those six sides [or dimensions] are concealed within that

103 The usage of the word סמכין here undoubtedly reflects, as Wald has already observed, op. cit., p. 64, the Targumic translation of ארנים in Exod. 36: 24-26 which refer to the sockets for the planks of the Tabernacle. That my translation, "pillars," is accurate may be gathered from standard Zoharic usage where the Hebrew word עמודים is rendered as סמכין (the singular עמוד is rendered as סמכא). See, e.g. *Zohar I*: 82a, 186a.

104 Cf. *Ketem Paz*, fols. 263a and 263c. For a different explanation, see Wald, op. cit., p. 64.

105 Cf. *Zohar 2*: 132a, 210a; *Zohar Hadash*, 1b (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*).

106 Cf. *Zohar Hadash*, 1b (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*).

107 In identifying the nut and the chariot, de León was influenced by a conception found in the writings of the German Pietists. See A. Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, 1969): 161-171; J. Dan, "Hokhmah Ha-'Egoz, its Origin and Development," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (1966): 73-82; *idem*, *Torat ha-Sod shel Hasidut 'Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem, 1968), pp. 207-210. And see the comprehensive study of A. Farber-Ginat referred to above, n. 88. For references in the *Zohar* and other writings of de León where a specific connection is made between 'egoz and *merkavah*, see Altmann, op. cit., p. 162, n. 6.

nut."¹⁰⁸ Hence, "from the side of that letter [*yod*] a holy chariot emerges, and it is a hidden chariot which is only revealed when the light of that hidden nut shines." In the continuation of the text the reader is told that the *yod* is in fact supported by nine pillars¹⁰⁹ which constitute a chariot in relation to the letter. The nine pillars are said to comprise nine sparks which emerge in groups of three from the three "knots"¹¹⁰ of the letter. When the letter is supported by the nine pillars, eight other pillars shine within the letter. The nine pillars, moreover, are called *'Ein-Sof*. "These nine pillars below have a name and do not have a name for those nine, which are called *'Ein-Sof*, exist and do not exist, and they are not known, and they are called and not called."¹¹¹ The pillars are called by the name *'Ein-Sof*, for just as the Infinite Godhead supports and moves all that which is below it, so the pillars support and move that letter above them. Thus, in another context, in a passage belonging to the *Sitrei Torah* stratum, we read: "Nine points of the Torah [i.e., *Hokhmah*] emerge and divide within the letters and by means of them the letters move ... These nine rule over the letters, and the letters spread forth from them. What remains are the vowel-points to elevate them ... these are in the secret of the Infinite."¹¹² Here the "nine points of the Torah," i.e., nine subtle lights within *Hokhmah*,¹¹³ which move or carry

108 One is tempted to explain the nut as referring to *Binah*, the *sefirah* below *Hokhmah* and the six sides within it as referring to the six lower *sefirot*, *Hesed* to *Yesod*, which exist in *potentia* within *Binah*. It must be noted, however, that elsewhere in the *Zohar*, the cosmological-ontological structure is such that the lower gradation is symbolized as a shell in relation to that which is above it which is the core of the nut. See *Zohar I*: 19b-20a; Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 1: 292-293, 383. It would thus be difficult to call *Binah* a "nut" vis-à-vis *Hokhmah* insofar as the latter is on a higher ontic level than the former.

109 Cf. Moses Cordovero, *Zohar 'im Perush 'Or Yaqar*, 10 (B'nai Brak, 1976): 136, who explains that the nine pillars supporting the *yod*, or *Hokhmah*, refer to the nine *sefirot* from *Hokhmah* to *Malkhut*. See also the commentary of Shalom Buzaglo, *Miqdash Melekh*, 1 (B'nai Brak, 1974): 202b.

110 Cf. *Zohar* 3: 10b.

111 *Zohar Hadash*, 1b (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*).

112 Cf. *Zohar I*: 100b. On the rabbinic expression, "ten points in the Torah," which refers to the ten dotted places in the Torah scroll, cf. S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962), pp. 43-46.

113 Cf. *Zohar I*: 65a where the "palaces," or lights, within divine Thought are called *'Ein-Sof*. Concerning this text, see Liebes, *Peraqim*, pp. 174-175, n. 24; M. Idel, "The Image of Man Above the Sefirot," *Da'at* 4 (1980): 43, n. 23 [in Hebrew]. See also the anonymous text extant in MS JTS Mic. 1822, fol. 11a, which begins with an explanation of this Zoharic passage, alluded to in the words: "I have found in the hidden work [the Hebrew reads: גינני] of R. Shim'on ben Yoḥai." Elsewhere in this text, fol. 13b, there is a direct citation from

(i.e., transport) the consonants are called *'Ein-Sof*. In yet another passage, the nine points of Torah are identified specifically as the nine pillars supporting the letter *yod*.¹¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the nine pillars enumerated in the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* text, also called *'Ein-Sof*, are identical with the nine points of Torah mentioned elsewhere. The terminology of “points,” as well as their general description in this passage, would seem to suggest that the author has the standard Hebrew vowel-points in mind.¹¹⁵ This interpretation is corroborated by a parallel passage to the one cited above from the *Sitrei Torah* section that has been erroneously published as part of the *Tiqqunim* in the collection, *Zohar Hadash*. There too we are told that the nine points of the Torah, called *'Ein-Sof*, move the letters.¹¹⁶ In the *Sitrei 'Otiyyot*, however, no explicit identification is made between the pillars supporting and moving the letters and the standard vowels. Thus, it is possible that the term “chariot” here has a connotation different from that of vowel-points. In any event, we are told that the point, which corresponds to *Hokhmah*, is completed by the nine pillars called *'Ein-Sof*. As it is written in another Zoharic context, “every point exists in the mystery of ten, for there is no point that is not completed in ten, for every point has nine pillars [which are] chariots, and the point is completed in ten.”¹¹⁷ There is here an

'Idra' Rabba' (cf. *Zohar* 3: 135a) with the introductory words: “And this is made explicit by RaSHBI in his gathering and in his prayer (באדריה ובצלותיה).”

114 *Zohar* 2: 180a.

115 This is precisely the way that the anonymous author of *Tiqqunei Zohar* understood this expression; see e.g., *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 70 (129a). And cf. Gottlieb, *Mehqarim*..., p. 198. On the medieval use of the word *nequddot* (literally, points) for the vowels in the *Zohar*, see M. Kaddari, *Diqduq ha-Lashon ha-'Aramit shel ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 149, n. 77. Indeed, the notion that the vowels move the consonants became a commonplace in the linguistic conception of the medieval writers.

116 *Zohar Hadash* 104c (cited as part of *Sifra di-Şeni'uta* in Ḥayyat's commentary on *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohut*, fol. 22b). See Liebes, *Peraqim*, p. 175. In this text as well the vowels are called *'Ein-Sof*, for they move the letters like a soul in the body. See Ḥayyat's own remark, *ibid.*, 23b: “The vowels allude to *'Ein-Sof*, for just as the *'Ein-Sof* moves everything [below it] so the vowels move the letters.”

117 *Zohar* 2: 181a. In that context (180a) we further learn that the nine pillars supporting the point, or the letter *yod*, are really eight for they are arranged like a square with three points on each of the four sides. Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, § 19 (39a) and § 70 (134b), where this configuration is applied to the *miqveh*. There are nine dots on four sides in the shape of a square or final *mem*, with a dot in the center of the square which is to be counted four times corresponding to each of the sides. This makes a total of forty dots which allude to the 40 *se'ah*, the required measurement for the *miqveh* (cf. esp. *Numbers Rabbah* 18: 17: ארבעים סאה של שעור מקוה). Hence the *miqveh* (מקוה) is said to contain the secret

interesting conflation of mathematical and linguistic conceptions: the letter *yod* symbolizes *Hokhmah*, for this emanation is the starting-point of the process of emanation and *yod* is graphically depicted like a point. But *yod* numerically equals ten; hence the point is only complete in ten. Thus, the one point is supported by nine pillars — its chariot — and together the point and its chariot equal the number ten.

With respect to the other letters of the divine name the process is far less complicated. The second letter of the name, *heh*, has five pillars which produce another five, resulting therefore in ten. Each of the five comprises ten which are referred to as the "fifty wonders"¹¹⁸ of *Binah*, the third *sefirah* symbolized by the letter *heh*.¹¹⁹ The third letter of the name, the *waw*, is supported by five pillars, and the fourth letter, the second *heh*, by four which correspond to the four celestial beasts or the archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Nuriel.¹²⁰ Employing terminology from *merkavah* mysticism, therefore, the author of the *Zohar* has set out an elaborate hierarchical system in which each gradation is a chariot for that which is above it. It is in terms of the relationship between letter and chariot, moreover, that the manifestation of the letters of the divine name is conceived. Hence, each letter of the name has a chariot to bear it:

With respect to every holy name [composed of] the inscribed letters, there is no letter in that name that does not exist in a chariot that supports it, and that chariot is its support. For there is no king who

of the *sh'ur qomah* (שׁוּר קוֹמָה), the measure of the divine stature. The connection between *miqveh* and *sh'ur qomah* is found in earlier kabbalistic sources, such as R. Jacob b. Jacob ha-Kohen. See Scholem, *Madda'ei ha-Yahadut* 2 (1927): 243; and the extended discussion in M. Idel, "The Sefirot Above the Sefirot," *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 250-253 [in Hebrew].

118 An obvious reference to the rabbinic conception of fifty gates of understanding; see above, n. 91.

119 *Zohar Hadash*, 1c (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*). A bit later on in the text the author mentions another notion, viz., the twenty-five chariots that "ascend upon the letter *heh* [i.e., *Binah*] from below to above."

120 *Zohar Hadash*, 1c, 2b-c (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*). This is clearly a reworking of the earlier cosmological conception according to which the letter *heh* corresponds to the transcendent being and the first four consonants of the Hebrew alphabet to four parts of the cosmological structure; see above, n. 26. In particular, in a text extant in MS JTS 1990, fol. 127a, it is stated that the chariot comprises the first four letters and after the chariot is the letter *heh*, that which rides upon the throne, which is described as the central point. The same structure is employed in *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* with respect to the final *heh*, i.e., *Shekhinah*, which is described as the central point surrounded by the four chariots which correspond to the four angels.

travels without his armies, and he is never found alone. Thus it is written, the Lord of Hosts (יהו"ה צבאות), all as one, for the chariots [symbolized by צבאות] do not separate from the holy name [יהו"ה]. Each and every letter contains within itself its chariot. Thus they all constitute the holy name.¹²¹

Yet, the name in *toto* is a chariot that bears the Godhead. Thus, while "each and every letter has a chariot contained within itself and inscribed in that very letter," the "four letters [of the name] comprise the mystery of the chariot for the One who is not known," i.e., the Infinite.¹²² In addition, each of the names is said to have chariots which are the various appellatives by which that gradation corresponding to the name is known.¹²³ With respect to this last idea there is a striking parallel to de León in the theosophic works of his contemporary and colleague, Gikatilla.¹²⁴

It will be noted that in the opening passage from *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* translated above, it is said that the ascending of the chariots is determined by the letters which are inscribed upon the "concealment of the impression (or side) of existence." The choice of this imagery, no doubt, is meant to convey the sense that the letters — in their primordial state — are etched upon this impression which lacks specificity and determination. Yet there are two other images employed here as well to convey the nature of this writing process within the divine. The first of these images consists of the process of measuring or weighing.¹²⁵ Thus, in the above context, each of the chariots is said to "emerge from the spark¹²⁶ of the flame when it metes out a measure," ואיהו נפקא מגו נציצו דבוצינא כד משחתא מדיד.¹²⁷ The "flame" is a shorthand reference to an entity elsewhere called in the *Zohar* the flame-of-darkness, בוצינא דקרדינותא.¹²⁸ The function of this

121 *Zohar Hadash*, 2b (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*).

122 *Ibid.*

123 Cf. *ibid.*, 2c-3c.

124 See above, n. 57.

125 The image of weighing or balancing connected with the formation of the letters is already evident in *Sefer Yesirah*, 2: 2 (ed. Gruenwald, "A Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yesira*," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 [1971]: 148, no. 19).

126 According to the reading in the standard text: בוצינא. See, however, the reading in *Ketem Paz*, fol. 261c: בוצינא. Concerning this variant, see Y. Liebes, *Peraqim*, pp. 161-164.

127 *Zohar Hadash*, 1b; and cf. *Zohar* 2: 180a.

128 For a discussion of this and related terms in the *Zohar*, see Y. Liebes, *Peraqim*, pp. 145-151, 161-164.

flame is to give shape and determination to the otherwise boundless divine aura. In most contexts¹²⁹ it would appear that this flame is an entity that acts upon the *sefirot* but is not one of them, whereas in at least one context it is identified as the *Ze'eir 'Anpin*, the Short-Faced or Impatient One,¹³⁰ i.e., the sixth emanation, *Tiferet*.¹³¹ In light of its function of measuring, the flame is also called in the *Zohar*, on the scriptural basis of Jeremiah 31:39, the line-of-measure, קו המדה.¹³² The

129 See *Zohar 1*: 15a (cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, §§ 5 [19a], 18 [37b], 19 [38b]), 18a, 172a; 2: 133b, 233a, 258a.

130 For this translation, see Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 270. In certain sections of the *Zohar*, especially the *'Idrot*, this countenance comprises the *sefirot* from *Hokhmah* to *Yesod*, whereas in the other parts it refers exclusively to the sixth emanation, *Tiferet*, which is the body of the sefirotic tree. In contrast, *'Arikh 'Anpin*, i.e., the Long-Faced or the Patient One, is in all contexts identical with the first *sefirah* or *Keter*.

131 Cf. *Zohar 3*: 48b-49a. See also *Zohar 1*: 18b, where the measurement of the flame-of-darkness is connected with the six words of the *Shema'* (cf. Deut. 6: 4) and the six words of the response, *barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-'olam va'ed*. The six words of the *Shema'* must be understood as a reference to the six extremities or the central *sefirot* from *Hesed* to *Yesod*, whereas the six words of the liturgical response refer symbolically to six gradations below *Shekhinah* which structurally parallel the former. Inasmuch as the six extremities are all contained in *Tiferet*, it may be said that here, too, we have an implicit connection between the flame-of-darkness and this emanation, though in this case they are not identified. In that passage, moreover, the measurement that is measured by the flame-of-darkness is connected with Genesis 1: 9, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area." According to the *Zohar*, the "measure of the creator," שעורא דיוצר עלמין, contained in this biblical text is specified as the Tetragrammaton spelled out as י"ד ה"א ו"ו א"ה (= 45). That is to say, the measure of the creator is the totality of the *sefirot* comprised in the Tetragrammaton whose numerical equivalence is forty-five which is the numerical equivalence of אדם (i.e., anthropos) as well. Concerning the kabbalistic identification of the *sefirot* as the *shi'ur qomah*, see A. Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomah*,'" pp. 235ff. The flame-of-darkness is connected with the *Shema'* in *Zohar 2*: 133b, and in the section called *Qaw ha-Middah* which is an exposition of the *Shema'*; see the following note.

132 Cf. *Zohar Hadash* 56d-58d. In one place (58b) we find the expression בוצינא קו המדה. Cf. *Zohar Hadash*, 12b-c (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*), where the image of the קו המדה is connected with the midrashic image of *šimšum*, i.e., the concentration of something into one particular place. (See Wald's analysis of this passage, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name*, pp. 54-57. His argument that this text already anticipates the Lurianic understanding of *šimšum* as self-limitation is unconvincing and represents a rather tendentious reading of the Zoharic text.) Specifically, God's act of gathering the waters into one place is compared to his act of constricting his Presence to the Temple. See also *Zohar 2*: 233a, where the author distinguishes between קו המדה and קנה המדה. Both terms refer to the same entity, but on different levels of existence in the hierarchy of being. The former, which is identified further as the בוצינא דקרדינותא, is in the sefirotic realm, whereas the latter is basically the same tool

flame thus acts as a plummet used by God to give form to the amorphous and indeterminate lights.¹³³ Inasmuch as in kabbalistic theosophy the attribute of judgment is that which limits and defines, it follows that this spark is a vehicle of divine judgment.¹³⁴ For our purposes, it is significant to note that the “chariots” which support the letters of the name are said to emerge from the spark¹³⁵ that goes out from this flame. This lends further support to the interpretation of this image which was suggested above, namely, the chariot is that which holds and thus binds the letter, thereby bestowing specific form and shape upon it.

The second image is that of striking or knocking against an object.¹³⁶ This process also involves the flame-of-darkness.¹³⁷ Specifically, in *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* the emergence of the third *sefirah*, *Binah* is described in these terms:

This letter [*yod*, i.e., *Hokhmah*] ascends upward in these pillars, and the one who strikes strikes, for he is not known and there is no end [to his power]. He shines but does not shine. And [the letter *yod*] descends but does not know from whom it is illuminated. When it descends the pillars are contained within it, and it spreads forth. When it spreads forth, one light [i.e., *Binah*] comprised of everything goes out, and [the letter *yod*] is covered by it as one

employed in the angelic realm below the divine emanations. Cf. *Ketem Paz*, fol. 262b; Liebes, *Peraqim*, p. 146. To date, in de León's Hebrew theosophic writings, I have come across but one reference to the doctrine of the *qaw ha-middah*, cf. *The Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 11 (Hebrew section). In that context, as in several Zoharic ones, the key scriptural text that is cited is Isa. 40: 12.

133 Cf. Liebes, *Peraqim*, pp. 146, 163.

134 Cf. Liebes, *Peraqim*, p. 147. See the passage from *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* in *Zohar Hadash*, 12c, discussed in n. 127.

135 See Liebes, *Peraqim*, p. 148, who suggests, on the basis of *Zohar 3*: 135b (*'Idra' Rabba'*), that the spark which emerges from the flame-of-darkness is to be identified as the second *sefirah* or *Hokhmah*. On *Hokhmah* as the source of the letters, cf. *Zohar Hadash*, 73a-b (*Shir ha-Shirim*); *Zohar 1*: 15b; MS Munich 47, fol. 359b; Moses de León, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. A.W. Greenup (London, 1911), p. 111; *The Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 84, 191 (Hebrew section).

136 It is of interest in this context to compare the remarks of J. Derrida on the etymology of *kolaphos* at the beginning of his “Plato's Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago, 1981), p. 63. On the phallic character of knocking, see esp. *Zohar Hadash*, 117c (*Tiqqunim*).

137 Cf. *Zohar 2*: 133b: “A light emerged from the concealment of the upper world and that light struck within the flame-of-darkness and split into seventy lights.” The expression “strike and does not strike” is associated elsewhere in the *Zohar* with *Keter*; see, e.g., 2: 126b.

who enters a palace ... And those nine pillars shine within that palace [*Binah*] and the letter *yod* is concealed within that palace ... which is called *heh*.¹³⁸

With respect to this image of knocking, it is of interest to mention the following passage in the section of the *Zohar* on *Shir ha-Shirim*, which focuses on the punctuation of the letters through the emergence of the vowels:

The vowels came forth from the mystery of the brain to establish the letters according to their pattern ... The flame-of-darkness, when it strikes against the pure ether of the brain, it strikes and does not strike; it reaches the brain and vanishes from it, it reaches and does not reach. When that striking reaches the letters from the brain, the letters are punctuated.¹³⁹

Whereas in the passage from *Sitrei 'Otiyyot* the striking of the flame-of-darkness is connected with the ascending of the letter *yod* in its chariots, in the text from the commentary on *Shir ha-Shirim* the emergence of the vowel-points is connected with this same striking activity. It is quite clear that the striking, as the metaphor of weighing, is an alternative way of expressing one linguistic process. By the act of striking or weighing, it may be said that the letters emerge or are punctuated — in either case a process of specification, differentiation, and determination is implied.¹⁴⁰ As language in general, whether oral or written, involves the limitation, indeed fragmentation, of a voice into discrete comprehensible sounds, so too the divine speech.

The connection between the letters and chariot mysticism must be

138 *Zohar Hadash*, 1b-c (*Sitrei 'Otiyyot*).

139 *Zohar Hadash*, 73b (*Shir ha-Shirim*).

140 One might ask: is there a common denominator between the activities of engraving, measuring, and striking? It is possible that the three images are meant to convey the sexual act. In the former and the latter case, this is obvious: to engrave involves an act of cutting into or penetration which is implied in the act of striking or knocking as well. But what of measuring? It will be recalled that the apparatus used for weighing is a scale with a tongue hanging in the middle and two weights on either side. It is not implausible that the tongue of the scale is meant to function in this case as a phallic symbol, and the very act of measuring as achieving a balance which is sexual in nature. Cf. *Zohar I*: 33b. It may be said, therefore, that the act of writing, according to the *Zohar*, is a decidedly erotic process.

understood against this background. That is, the author of the *Zohar* has conceived of an intricate hierarchical process by means of which the letters come to be and are further vocalized. This is a state that occurs in the uppermost realm of the divine, prior to the emanation of the lower seven gradations, or the “*sefirot* of the edifice.” The letters are carried up and down by means of these chariots, the exact nature of which we are never explicitly told. It is clear, however, that the function of the chariots is akin to the vowels, which also can be said to carry or transport the letters. Indeed, as I have already noted, in one Zoharic context the chariot for the letter *yod* is referred to with the term *nequddin*,¹⁴¹ the same word frequently used in medieval texts to connote the vowel-points. Yet, it is also clear that the two are not identical in substance, even though their function is so similar. These pillars, or chariots, in addition to transporting the letters, are part of their structure or form. It seems to me that the “points” which make up the chariot should be understood as numerical configurations of the letters akin to the ancient esoteric tradition of writing the letters of the Ineffable Name in the form of dots, the so-called *ketav ‘einayim* (literally, eye-writing).¹⁴² That is, just as these dots comprise both the numerical and structural form of the letters, so too the pillars or chariots in the *Zohar*. Hence, in one passage the letter *yod* is said to be configured both as three dots (in the form of the Hebrew vowel *segol*) and as nine dots — with three on all four sides — that form a square (or the shape of the final *mem*).¹⁴³ The chariot, then, is a mathematico-linguistic configuration which functions in relation to the letter as a vowel-point.

The linguistic process in the *Zohar* is intrinsically bound up with the dynamic outlined above. Whereas in a former passage from *Sitrei ‘Otiyyot* the chariots that bear the letters are said to emerge from the spark or flame-of-darkness, in some instances precisely the formation of the letters themselves is so described. Thus, in the *Sifra di-Šeni’uta*, for example, the first three letters of the divine name, יהו, are characterized as follows:

The upper *yod* [*Hokhmah*] which is crowned in the crown of the Ancient One [*Keter*] is the upper membrane which is purified and concealed. The upper *heh* [*Binah*] is crowned in the breath of the nostrils of the nose which goes out in order to give life. The

141 See above, n. 110.

142 Concerning this tradition, see Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 322, n. 253, 328-329.

143 *Zohar* 2: 180a.

upper *waw* [the root of *Tiferet*] is the flame-of-darkness which is crowned with its crowns; the letters then spread forth and are contained in the Short-Faced [or Impatient] Countenance [*Tiferet*]. As they were in the skull so they spread out in the body, to perfect everything.¹⁴⁴

In this context the flame-of-darkness is identified specifically with the letter *waw*, a notion which is developed in more detail in *Tiqqunei Zohar*.¹⁴⁵ In the passage from *Sifra di-Šeni'uta*, this letter must be understood as the upper root of *Tiferet*, the sixth emanation, symbolized by the letter *waw* on account of the fact that it is said to comprise the lower six *sefirot* from *Ḥesed* to *Yesod*. *Tiferet* is also identified here as the Short-Faced (or Impatient) — in contrast to the Long-Faced (or Long-Suffering) — Countenance. Most significantly, the emergence of the letters is a process tied to this flame-of-darkness. The letters are said to arise in the cavity of the brain, i.e., *Keter*, and then to spread out in the body, i.e., *Tiferet*. All that is contained in the skull will be found in the body. We are not told about the details of this process, but from other contexts it is possible to conjecture that the letters emerge through the action of the *waw* which gives shape to each particular configuration. The letters, thus, are crystallizations of divine energy worked into definite form by this instrument. In the lower stage of emanation, *Tiferet*, the letters have already assumed fixed forms.

In sum, then, it may be said that, for the author of the *Zohar*, the use of chariot imagery to depict the nature of the Hebrew letters, in both liturgical and cosmological contexts, is meant to convey a highly dynamic view of language. While it is certainly true that the primary focus of this mystical text is a theosophic conception of God based on the received tradition concerning ten potencies or gradations, the *sefirot*, it is nevertheless the case that speculation on the mysteries of the alphabet figures prominently in the mind of the author of the *Zohar*. One can clearly discern in this kabbalist an effort to combine theosophic and linguistic mysticism. In the final analysis, according to the *Zohar*, language is a completely appropriate medium to attain gnosis of the divine and ultimately achieve communion therewith, for, from the kabbalistic perspective, the twenty-two foundational letters of the Hebrew alphabet

¹⁴⁴ *Zohar* 2: 177a.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, §§ 5 (19a); 18(37b); 19 (38b, 41a).

constitute the very substance of God, at least the manifest aspect of the divine, *deus revelatus*.¹⁴⁶ Letters are simultaneously the vehicles which carry the divine spirit and the matrix from which that spirit is formed. In terms of the ancient *merkavah* imagery, letters comprise the nature of both the chariot and charioteer, the supernal man in whose image the human being is said to have been created.

¹⁴⁶ See, e.g., the statement of Sefer ha-Temunah as printed in *Sefer ha-Malkhut* (Casablanca, 1930), fol. 6b: "These twenty-two letters with which the Torah was written ... are without doubt the true image (התמונה האמתית), as it is written, 'he beholds the image of the Lord' (Num. 12: 8), and this is the secret of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He." For a fuller analysis of this motif from the particular vantage point of the *Zohar*, see my study referred to above, n. 1.

'ALEI SHEFER

Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought

PRESENTED TO
RABBI DR. ALEXANDRE SAFRAN

edited by
MOSHE HALLAMISH

1990



BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY PRESS