

# The Dramatic Element Common to the Gnostic Cosmogonies of the Religions of the Book

by  
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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 14, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1980).  
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## PRELUDE

The second Book of Kings (2 Kings 6:14-17) relates that in that time the king of Syria wanted to capture Elisha. He sent horses, chariots and a strong army that came by night and encircled the city where the prophet was staying. Rising early, the prophet's servant was dismayed to see the threatening presence of the army and the chariots surrounding the city. He quickly informed the man of God; and he received this reply: "Fear not; for they that are with us are more than they that are with them." And Elisha prayed to the Lord to open the young man's eyes. His eyes were opened and "he saw the mountain full of horsemen and chariots of fire round about Elisha".

This incident recalls of course the ascent of Elijah in a chariot of fire, the chariot of his subtle body surrounding his temporary fleshy body (see 2 Kings). The things Elisha's servant saw—the horsemen and the chariots of fire—were invisible to the eyes of the flesh. Since like can only be known by like, the eyes which the Lord had to open for him were eyes of fire.

Our theme affirms and presupposes that gnosis sees things with eyes of fire, that is to say that it perceives what is invisible to scientific scrutiny, something whose perception usually seems outrageous to the eyes of the flesh. This is already enough to protect us from the misuse of the word "gnosis" on the part of some modern scholars, scholars even who are reputed to be serious. One has no scientific or moral right to apply this word to what is precisely its opposite, any more than one has the right to confuse a "theosophy" that explores the mystery of origins rooted in the hidden God with an "ideology" when this would be the last thing with which what nowadays is called an "ideology" would concern itself.

"Gnosis": this word signifies a knowledge which, while revealing to man the irreducibility of evil, is redemptive or salvatory. The Gnostic is a "stranger" who rejects what is accepted as evidence in this world. Gnosis is a knowledge whose *modus operandi* is not by means of discursive thought but through revelation disclosing hidden things, a saving light that in itself confers life and joy, a divine grace that brings about and ensures salvation. To know what one is,

who one is, to know a higher world from which one has come, where our origins are—this already is to be “saved”, and this is gnosis. It is never a theoretical knowledge, but an effective knowledge; that is to say it brings about the transfiguration and rebirth of a created being.

I have spoken about our “origins”. What science (especially paleontology) does is to consider the problem with the eyes of the flesh. Considerable research has been carried out, and impressive results have been achieved. One reckons years by dozens of millions. Yes, but with what sort of Man are these results concerned? Have they anything in common with the gnostic viewpoint and with the problem of Man’s origin as perceived when gnosis explores the mystery with the eyes of fire?

I will illustrate my question by referring to a text by the great theosophist Franz von Baader, who well understood that the book of Genesis begins only with the creation of the visible universe, and that this beginning is not an absolute beginning.<sup>1</sup> Evil did not begin either with or through man, but independently of him. Franz von Baader speaks of cosmic catastrophes, “great cataclysms which were brought about before the coming of man. Our ancestors had committed great crimes, crimes which brought about disturbances in the universe, crimes such as we can no longer commit today and of which we can have no idea. These primitive crimes cannot be denied. In Nature we can find traces of crimes that do not stem from us and that consequently could only arise from beings different from us, who were in possession of Nature before us.”<sup>2</sup>

That the Genesis narrative refers to events which followed an initial catastrophe is something that Jewish and Christian theosophists have always known, and so have Islamic theosophists, notably the Ismailians, on the basis of their meditations on those parts of the Qurān that correspond to the Genesis text. But when did this catastrophe take place and what was its nature? This is precisely one of the questions to which gnosis, in its various forms tries to give an answer, for there is a Jewish gnosis, a Christian gnosis, an Islamic gnosis, a Buddhist gnosis, and so on. There are two ways of conceiving the answer. The cosmic catastrophe can be seen as an attack on the world of Light made by the opposing power of Darkness that is totally external and alien to the world of Light. In Iranian cosmogony, this attack is made by Ahriman on creation of Ohrmazd, the Wise Lord. Creation (*bundahishn*) is then corrupted by an appalling intermixture (*gumehishn*) which can only be resolved when, at the final separation, the hostile Ahrimanic power is cast out into its nothingness. Broadly speaking, this is the “drama in Heaven” as envisaged by Zoroastrian cosmogony and Manichean gnosis. On the other hand, the cosmic catastrophe as a “drama in Heaven” can be seen as provoked not by a cause that is external to the world of Light but by a lapse taking place within the world of Light itself.

The vision of the “drama in Heaven” as taking place within the primordial world of Light

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1. See Eugène Susini, *Franz von Baader et le romantisme mystique*, III. *La philosophie de Franz von Baader*, Vol. 2, (Paris, 1942), p. 302.

2. *Ibid.*, 330.

itself is one of the elements that is common to the Gnostic cosmogonies of the three “religions of the Book”. It is common, that is to say, to the gnosis affirmed respectively by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Now, our initial purpose, here at the University of St. John of Jerusalem, has been, if not to create, at least to prepare a center for the esotericism of the three great religions of the Book, a center that has never before existed but without which a true “Abrahamic ecumenicism” would appear to be impossible. Such an ecumenicism is indeed inconceivable unless we try to make that ascent to which this esotericism summons us, an ascent that goes back to the origins of things.

In spite of the difficulties imposed by the need for brevity, the primary object of this paper will be to examine what constitutes the main features of the “drama in Heaven” of the three cosmogonies concerned. In each we will encounter the idea of an impassable Limit. However, a demented desire tries to go beyond it. Or, there is the idea of a torrent erupting from beyond this Limit that produces the catastrophe. The first is the drama of Wisdom or Sophia in Valentinian gnosis, or that of the third Angel of the world of Light, the angel Adam in the Ismailian gnosis of Islamic esoterism. The second is the dramatic vision of the “breaking of the vessels” in the Kabbalistic gnosis of Isaac Luria. In both cases there is complete disruption: nothing is in its place, everything is in exile. From this disruption our world is born, the present world of earthly man, who should at the same time be the agent through whom everything is restored. In both cases a similar resolution is sought in order to bring the drama to an end. It presupposes interventions and measures whose reality and effectiveness can only be understood on condition that one sees things with the eyes of fire, those eyes that were opened for the servant of the prophet Elisha. Valentinian gnosis, the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, and Ismailian gnosis all invite one to such an opening of the eyes.

## I. Valentinian Gnosis

Valentinian gnosis owes its name to Valentine, a Christian priest of the second century who was originally from Egypt and was the greatest teacher and master of the school of what has come to be called Gnosticism. An account of Valentinian gnosis leads one through the three phases of his dramaturgy: the drama of Wisdom or *Sophia* within the Pleroma; the drama outside the Pleroma; the final resolution. Unfortunately we can only summarize these phases briefly.<sup>3</sup>

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3. This is not the place to give a detailed bibliography of gnosis, or to discuss theories about its origins (Schools of the history of dogma, of the history of religions, Irano-Babylonian theory, syncretist theory, etc., and finally in our times the theory of its Jewish origin). Here we have to concentrate on a particular theme, paying no attention to theories. Essentially it is a matter of seeing, and of persuading the world to see, what a Valentinian gnostic sees, something that cannot be gathered from a person like St Irenaeus. See F.-M.-M. Sagnar, *La Gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irénée (Etudes de philosophie médiévale, XXVI)*, (Paris, 1947), principally pp. 145-198, as well as the numerous texts translated from different sources included in the book. H. Leisegang, *La Gnose*, translated by Jean Gouillard (Paris,

1. *The drama of Sophia within the Pleroma.* I would remind you first of all that the Greek word *Pleroma* signifies a world that is full, complete, perfect, entire in the plenitude of its being. This primordial world is peopled with beings described as Aeons (from the Greek *aion*), a word that indicates both the Age of a world and this world itself.<sup>4</sup> These Aeons are the hypostases of the transcendent—and unknowable—Principle, and they appear as syzygies, that is to say as couples, each male Aeon being united with a female Aeon.

At the origin of origins, Valentinian gnosis “sees” a perfect Aeon, prior to Being and to what can be known and so inaccessible, unknowable, without name or attribute. It is described in many ways, of which the most usual is *Bythos*, the Abyss. His feminine partner, who is his Thought (*Ennoia*) is described as Silence (*Sigé*). From this first couple proceeds a second couple: Intelligence (the *Nous*, the only-begotten Son) and truth (*Aletheia*). Only the *Nous* knows something of the fathomless Principle, and all knowledge that the other Aeons may have of it is mediated by the *Nous*, the only-begotten Son. From this primordial Tetrad two other couples or syzygies emanate. In one of them the partners are called *Logos* and Life (*Zoe*), while in the other they are called *Anthropos* (ideal Man) and *Ecclesia* (typifying the Church on high, that of the Elect initiated into gnosis). The couple *Logos-and-Life* give birth to ten other Aeons. The couple *Anthropos-and-Ecclesia* give birth to twelve other Aeons. This sequence of 8 plus 10 plus 12 Aeons constitutes the thirty Aeons of the Valentinian Pleroma, what might be called the galaxies of this metaphysical universe. Each has its own Name, the significance of which seems to have been somewhat neglected. The hypostases of the Pleroma are neither logical universes nor simple abstractions personified; they are Essences of a personal kind that has no measure common with our own.

The youngest of these Aeons (if one may put it like this when referring to Beings that enjoy eternal youth) is the thirtieth. It is called Wisdom or Sophia, and she is the heroine of the drama within the Pleroma. She cannot accept the unknowability, the inaccessibility, of the original

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1951), pp. 192-202, 209-219 (the composition of the book is slightly confused). One can still read with profit the pages of G.R.S. Mead, *Fragments of Faith Forgotten* (London), principally pp. 294-357. See above all Henri-Charles Puech, *En quête de la Gnose* (Paris, 1978), in two volumes. In addition one can read directly and in full a collection of original texts on Valentinian Gnosis (the title is abbreviated here: it is the *Codex Jung*): *Tractatus Tripartitus*. Pars prima: *De Supernis*...Pars secunda: *De Creatione hominis*...Pars tertia: *De Generibus Ortatio Pauli Apostoli*...*Evangelium Veritatis*, supplementum photographicum. Ediderunt R. Kasser, M. Malinine, H.-C. Puech, G. Quispel, etc. (with a threefold translation) (Bern, 1973-1975), in two volumes. Cf. the report of Antoine Guillaumont in “Revue de l’histoire des religions”, October 1976, pp. 181-185.

4. Cf. the Hebrew word *‘olam*, which means both “eternity” and “world”. The concept has wide connotations. The mystical philosophy that derives from Avicennism proposes that the Sage should himself become an *‘ālam ‘aqlī*, which is translated into Latin as *saeculum intelligibile*, equivalent to the Greek *Aion noétos*. We thus remain within the context of the dictionary of Gnosis. See our book, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée* (Teheran-Paris, 1977), index.

transcendent Principle. She wants to attain it directly, without any intermediary. She makes an incredible “leap”, a literal “journey into the abyss”. Whether this leap was an act of love or madness, it was bound to fail. She attempts it at the risk of her being, because through it her being is stretched, is extended immeasurably in order to pass beyond the whole hierarchy of Aeons that precede her. But this leap is broken by an entity that, significantly, emerges from the Abyss and from the *Nous* that alone has some knowledge of the Abyss. This entity is named “Limit”, *Horos*. “Limit” not only breaks Sophia’s insane leap, she also saves her, because in imposing a limit on her being, in delimiting it, she prevents her from dissolving into limitlessness; and she restores to Sophia her form and rank. Thus Sophia will remain within the Pleroma of Light, but her *Enthymesis*, her thought, her plan, or, rather, her insane Desire,<sup>5</sup> is separated from her and banished from the Pleroma into regions of darkness and emptiness. There in the world of exile, this Desire, this Thought, daughter of Sophia-Wisdom, the higher Wisdom, grows, and becomes the lower Wisdom, *Akhamoth*, another Hebraic word that designates “Wisdom”.

However, Sophia’s plan brought about a disturbance in the whole Pleroma. As a consequence there then emanated from Intelligence and Truth a new couple: the *Christos* (I use the Greek form to differentiate it from the historical Christ of exoterism) and the Holy Spirit (it must be remembered that in this context the Holy Spirit is a female Aeon and that the Semitic word for the spirit, *ruah*, is of feminine gender). This pair, the thirty-first and thirty-second Aeons, will have an initiatic role in relation to the Pleroma, safeguarding it from committing Sophia’s mistake over again. It discloses the mystery of their being to all the Aeons: the cause of the eternal permanence of their being is the unknowable transcendence of the Principle of which they are the hypostases, while the cause of the delimitation that eternally gives their being birth and form is that which is knowable in and by the *Nous*, the only-begotten Son. Their knowledge of their identity as hypostasis and consequently as theophany of the Principle is therefore the only knowledge that they can have of it. At a single stroke Valentinian gnosis posits the presuppositions both of negative or apophatic theology and of the only type of affirmative theology that is possible.<sup>6</sup>

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5. To translate *enthymesis* as thought, intention, seems too inadequate. It connotes an ardent Desire, a translation authorized by the verb *enthymeomai*, which can signify to be in the sway of a passion, to desire fervently. *Ta enthymoumena*: things that one desires. In this context one can invoke the gnostic sense of a Sohrawardi who, in his “Vade-mecum of the Servitors of Love”, represents Heaven and Earth as proceeding from the cosmogonic triad Beauty, Love, Nostalgia. See the translation of this treatise in our collection *The Crimson Archangel* (Paris, 1976).

6. See our three articles: “The paradox of monotheism”, in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 45/1976; “Nécessité de l’angélologie”, in *Cahiers de l’hermétisme* (Paris, 1978); “De la théologie apophatique comme antidote du nihilisme”, in *Actes du premier colloque international du Centre Iranien pour le dialogue des civilisations* (Teheran, 1977; Paris, 1978).

The whole Pleroma of the Aeons of Light now finds itself strengthened in its being and function, and for each of them their being becomes an immense delight. Each of them “brings forth and shares with all the others what is finest in it and is, so to speak, the flower of its substance”, and together they radiate a perfect beauty, as the Star of the Pleroma. This is the “perfect Fruit”, which in the Pleroma has the name Jesus, or *Soter*, the savior, or even the Paraclete. He is both the thirty-third Aeon and the All, since He proceeds from the All. He is the *Christos Angelos*, for the “Angels of the same race as he” are created at exactly the same time, those angels of whom it is said that they are all the Savior himself since they accomplish whatever the Savior accomplishes.

2. *The drama of Sophia outside the Pleroma.* We can now follow the drama outside the Pleroma. Sophia’s mad Desire has been cast out, banished, but since this Desire is essentially an abortive Desire, it is something that still has neither form nor figure, even though this abortive *Enthymesis* is actually the daughter of the higher Sophia. Because of this, the pair Christos and Holy Spirit (here a female Aeon) are sent by the Pleroma to give a form to its substance and to prepare in this exiled Sophia the awakening of her conscience. Then the pair returns to the Pleroma. Sophia awakens and, becoming aware of herself, she becomes aware of the absence of the companion who has helped her and left her.<sup>7</sup> She sets out in search of this Light, but once again Limit holds her back, and she sinks into the desolation of her agony.

It is at this point that the “perfect Fruit” of the Pleroma, the *Christos Angelos*, is sent to her. He comes accompanied by Angels, his pages (*doryphoroi*), who are “of the same nature and age as he” (of the same pleromatic age, that is to say). The mere contemplation of these Angels is enough to bring about in Sophia a spiritual birth of the spiritual seeds that have been present within her from the moment she came into being. These spiritual seeds are all the Gnostics to come, of whom she is the ever-present mother. Then the Savior, the Angel of the Pleroma, provokes in her, as he initiates her into gnosis, a movement of conversion, a return, a mutation. Then he divides from her all the passions of her exile, He cannot destroy them, so he combines them into a solid mass that is still incorporeal but which he endows with the aptitude to become corporeal, to form compounds and bodies. Sadness, stupor, anguish, despair are changed into the material substance of our world. Gnosis, like alchemy, does not isolate the psychic from the physical: physical matter is as it were psychic matter solidified, congealed.

We now have three elements essential to cosmogony and anthropology: (1) At the summit, there is a spiritual substance, a substance that is “pneumatic” (from *pneuma*, spirit). This has issued from the spiritual birth provoked in Sophia by her vision of the Angels accompanying the *Christos Angelos*. (2) At the base, there is a material substance, a substance that is “hyleic” (from *hyle*, matter). This has issued from the passions that have been extracted from Sophia and designated “the left side”. (3) Between these two, intermediate and mediating, there is a psychic

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7. This is expressed in the psalm taken from the book *Pistis Sophia*, cited by Leisegang, op.cit., p. 225.

substance (from *psyché*, soul). This has issued from the conversion of Sophia and is called “the right side”.

Sophia herself occupies the *intermediary* level between the “pneumatic” and the “hylic” levels, between the Pleroma and our world: a level that is the *situs* of the *mundus imaginalis*, itself intermediary between the intelligible and the sensible. From the psychic substance that issues from her conversion she applies herself to the task of forming, in the image of *Nous*, the only-begotten Son, her own Son, the Demiurge, the creator of our world, the King of the beings that are of the same substance as himself (that is to say, psychic beings, deriving from “the right side”), and the King of the beings that derive from passion and matter (from “the left side”). (This puts one in mind of Sohrevardi’s “empurpled Archangel”).<sup>8</sup> Acting upon the psychic substance (“the right side”), the Demiurge creates or, rather, Sophia creates through him, the seven heavens of our cosmology and the Angels that animate them. Acting upon “the left side” he produces all the beings in which the passions detached from Sophia are embodied.

In effect, it is Sophia herself who creates all this through the Demiurge, although the Demiurge is unaware of this because, being of a psychic nature, he cannot know the realities of the Pleroma that are superior to him. He is by no means the malicious and evil God with whom other Gnostic schools, in particular that of Marcion, identified the God of the Bible. For the Valentinians, how can he be an evil God, since, as the son of Sophia, he is the fruit of her movement of conversion? But, ignorant of the higher realities of the Pleroma, he believes himself to be alone, the unique God, and it is this that he declares, as though in a delirium of solitude, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah: “I am the Lord and there is no other. Apart from me, there is no God” (Isa. 45:5). Only our Gnostics have perceived that in this declaration is also a cry of distress, the cry of the Demiurge in exile, secretly awaiting what would deliver and free him from this solitude. This fact is so important that we will find it emphasized again with similar precision in the later Kabbalah, which makes a distinction between the personal God—the Demiurge of our world—and the Supreme Cause.

It is God the Creator who creates man “in his own image and likeness”. He fashions “hylic” man, then, breathing the psychic soul into him, he creates psychic man. But, unknown to the Demiurge, his mother Sophia has sown into this breath the spiritual seeds which the vision of the Angels of the Savior had brought to birth in her. Hence we are presented with the three elements of Valentinian anthropology, the three elements that differentiate the three categories or the three races of men: the “pneumatic” or spiritual; the psychic; and the “hylic”. In the spiritual adepts—the Gnostics—the “pneumatic” and the psychic elements are united in a friendship that permits

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8. See the translation of the visionary recital entitled “Le Bruissement des ailes de Gabriel” in our collection *The Crimson Archangel* (Paris, 1976).

their coeducation.<sup>9</sup> In the Gnostics the coeducation of these two elements leads to the growth of the “pneumatic” element that is in them and that is the true Man; and it prepares it for the final deliverance.

The protagonist of this soteriological *dénouement* is the Christos-Angelos, Christ-Holy Spirit, who unites himself, temporarily at least, to Jesus of Nazareth at the time of his baptism. This view of things accords with Judaeo-Christian Ebionite Christology. Unfortunately we cannot here pause to discuss Valentinian Christology. I would draw attention simply to two points: (1) This whole Christology is elaborated around the idea denoted by the expression *caro spiritualis Christi*,<sup>10</sup> the idea of a spiritual flesh that has nothing in common with ordinary matter, since this latter comes from the dead passions of Sophia. The idea of this *caro spiritualis* involves the idea of a pure spiritual Incarnation. (2) Every account of external events in the Gospels is for the Gnostic an image, a metaphor for the true events which are those of the Pleroma or related to the Pleroma. One should combine the reading of Valentinian texts with those chapters of the Gnostic book, *The Acts of John*, which tell of how, on the evening of Good Friday, the mystery of the Cross of Light that is not the Cross of Golgotha is revealed to the apostle John in a secret cave.<sup>11</sup> (3) The final *dénouement*. We are now in a position to understand to some degree the *dénouement* of the drama that had its beginning in the Pleroma. Mention has to be made of the many Valentinian interpretations of Gospel parables and narratives. Gnosis is a permanent hermeneutic. Among its interpretations of great significance is the way in which it understands the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4), for she is *par excellence* the image of exiled Sophia, She has no husband, she tells Jesus, and she speaks the truth, because her consort is her partner in the Pleroma, although she does not yet know it. “Give me of that water,” she says. Here is the appeal for the gnosis that will initiate her into the mystery of her origin and her return to the Pleroma.<sup>12</sup>

The final *dénouement* embraces the three substances that have been as it were the *dramatis personae* of the cosmogony.

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9. Elsewhere this is referred to as the companionship of the “two cherubims”, one of which represents the imaginative power and the other the intellective power. Cf. Colette Sirat, *Les théories des visions surnaturelles dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* (Leiden, 1969), p. 152.

10. See F.-M.-M. Sagnard, op.cit., pp. 188ff, and H.-J. Schoeps, *Vom Himmlischen Fleish Christi, eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Tübingen, 1951), pp. 5ff.

11. *Acts of John*, Chapters 97 to 102. See M.R. James, *The apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1950), pp. 254-256. See also our article, “L’Evangile de Barnabé et la prophétologie islamique” in *Cahiers de l’Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*, cahier no.3, 1977, as well as our preface, “Harmonia abrahamica” to *L’Évangile de Barnabé*... Text and translation by Luigi Cirillo and Micheal Frémaux (Paris, 1978).

12. The whole conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus lends itself wonderfully to a Valentinian interpretation. See the account in F.-M.-M. Sagnard, op.cit., pp. 494-495, 498-502.

1. “Hylic” substance: the latent Fire hidden in the world will burst into flame and this conflagration will destroy matter, thus reducing to nothing the residue of the passions that had adhered to Sophia after her exile from Pleroma.

2. Psychic substance: this cannot of itself enter the Pleroma. Sophia, initiated into gnosis by the Christos, will be re-admitted into the Pleroma and will bring with her all her offspring, the Gnostics born of her vision of the Angels of the Savior. But the Demiurge formed by her is fundamentally of a psychic nature. On Sophia’s restitution to the Pleroma, he manages to raise himself to a rank that is intermediary between the Pleroma and this world and that had formerly been hers; and he brings with him, in joy and peace, all the just men who have remained at the psychic level, the “psychics”.<sup>13</sup>

Here it is that the Demiurge reveals his true nature, which is entirely in agreement and accord with the Savior. For he himself hastens with all his Angels (he is *Deus Sabaoth*) to meet the Savior and his Angels. We are truly far from the vituperations of a Marcion against the God of the Bible. We are also far from current exoteric representations of the God of the Old Testament. Here he is not the “Ancient of Days”, He is the passable God, younger than “the youngest of the Aeons”, who is Sophia, his mother. Thus what are called his wraths and his mercies appear in quite a different light, if one sees them in relationship to his solitude and his exile. But there is more. A remarkable text shows him as initiated by his mother Sophia from the beginning into the great mystery of the Father and of the Aeons of the Pleroma. He himself says that in declaring himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob he has not revealed the (supreme) Name of God. “I have not revealed the mystery, nor explained who God is, but in secret I have kept to myself the mystery learnt from Sophia”.

At the same time, this divine confession allows us to understand the role of God, exiled like his mother Sophia, in the scheme of salvation. He knows that at the final consummation of things he will be raised up to the station that had been that of Sophia, now reinstated in the Pleroma. “Until then” he watches over the order of the world in the name of the “spiritual” Church, the *Ecclesia spiritualis*, which is formed in the domain of the “psychic” Church until all spiritual substance has been perfected, that is to say, until the number of Gnostics has been completed.<sup>14</sup>

3. When this number has been completed the exile will come to an end—this exile about which Jewish gnosis and Ismailian gnosis will in their turn speak to us. Sophia, reinstated in the Pleroma, is united to the Savior, the Christos Angelos, offspring of all the Aeons of the Pleroma. The pair Christos-Sophia are the bride and the bridegroom of the Bible, and the nuptial chamber is the whole of the Pleroma. And it is now that all the sons of Sophia, the Gnostics, caught in her upward flight, are stripped of their psychic souls, become pure spiritual beings, and unite with the Angels who are their counterparts in the Pleroma and whose offspring they are, since Sophia

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13. Cf. Text of Irenaeus, 7,3, trans. Sagnard, op.cit. pp. 190-191.

14. Cf. Text of Irenaeus, 7,4, trans. Sagnard, op.cit., p. 192.

spiritually gave birth to them as a result of her vision of these Angels. The pair Christos-Sophia is in this way the archetype exemplified in the union of each Gnostic with his Angel (closer in time to us, the sophiology of Jacob Boehme and his followers is another exemplification).

A vision of nuptial apotheosis is disclosed to the “eyes of fire” to the degree to which they have perceived the true dimensions of the cosmic drama, dimensions that elude all science, even theological, which is accessible to the “eyes of the flesh”.

## II. The Kabbalah of Isaac Luria

Valentinian cosmology is dominated by the idea of an exile that has its origins in a “drama in Heaven” which precedes the existence of our world and is the ultimate cause of this world. In the Jewish Kabbalah, which, while permitting many comparisons, displays a profoundly original dramaturgy, we find the sense of this drama elaborated into a cosmic conception of exile. Here we will refer principally not to the *Zohar* but to the new systems of the Kabbalah which, in the sixteenth century, had to find answers to the questionings of the community of Israel. This system was the work of a person described as “the divine Master Isaac Luria Ashkenazi” who was born in Jerusalem in 1534 and who died at Safed, in 1572 at the age of thirty-eight. Safed, in upper Galilee, was the seat of this doctrine according to which exile characterizes not only terrestrial reality in its entirety but also the reality of God. It is unnecessary to stress what boldness and courage are needed in order to give expression to this “vision”. Here we will try to convey its main features as these are given in the works of Gershom Scholem, to whom we, as many others, owe so much in this matter.<sup>15</sup>

1. *Divine contraction (tsimtsum)*. To the question, “How is this world formed?”, one can reply on the one hand according to the doctrine of Emanation as this is propounded by the Neo-Platonist, or on the other according to the Spanish Kabbalists and their original theosophy of Emanation. God, more accurately called *En-Sof*, the primordial Infinite, absolutely inaccessible (like *Bythos*, the Abyss of the Valentinians), “breathes out” the Pleroma of the ten Powers known as the *Sephiroth*. Since they are revelations of the primordial Light one can to this extent relate them to the concept of the theophanies already mentioned. But is it enough simply to speak of theophanies or theophanic Forms, divine emanations and manifestations? Does not the *act* through which and in which *En-Sof* reveals himself presuppose the *passion* of a *divine possibility*? It is this question that is answered in the teaching of Isaac Luria, as we know it from his chief disciples.

For God to reveal himself to others in the created world he has to hide himself, to limit

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15. See, among all his works, Gershom G. Scholem, *Le Messianisme juif, essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme* (abbreviated here to *Messianisme*), trans. Bernard Dupuy (Paris, 1974); Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi, the Mystical Messiah 1626-1676* (abbreviated here to *Sabbatai Zevi*), Bollongren Series XCIII (Princeton University Press, 1973).

himself, to contract himself “in the deepest mystery of his profound nature”. (This contraction, this withdrawal, is designated in Hebrew by the word *tsimtsum*). Unless this happens, the world cannot appear. This contraction, this withdrawal, means that God has to limit himself, to exile himself, to banish himself from the absolute Infinite (*En-Sof*), in order to accept a limit that circumscribes him. It is not simply Creation that has the character of an exile, as is the case in Valentinian gnosis, in which what is involved is an exile from the Pleroma. Here there is something more, for here God exiles himself. His situation approximates to that of the Demiurge in Valentinian gnosis. In effect, for creation to come into being the Divinity himself has to exile himself from his Infinite Absolute, to retreat into himself; for it is at the price of this restriction of himself that God leaves a place for the world, for the existence of something that is *other* than he: this world.

For a space has to be made so that the Divinity can send forth the rays of his Light into it and inaugurate his works there. Hence the idea of a theophany is now involved with a mystery that precedes it and with which it is inextricably bound. In order for there to be a theophany there has also to be at each stage both contraction and emanation. Without contraction, all would again become Divinity. Without emanation, nothing would be created.<sup>16</sup> Each thing therefore is constituted through a duality (let us rather say a *dualitude*):<sup>17</sup> a contraction and an emanation. Together these two opposing currents produce an expulsion and an expansion, and it is through their interaction that things are brought into existence.

2. *The breaking of the vessels (shevirat hakelim)*. The design of Creation presupposed that God first formed vessels (*kelim*) as forms of his revelation to himself, forms of his primordial theophany. Every action, all manifestation, presupposes a garment, a vessel that contains it. All theophany presupposes a theophanic form, without which everything returns to an Infinite that can admit neither gradation nor differentiation. Thus, since the Light has to receive a malleable form from which will emerge the creatures that make up Creation, a huge initial shock draws this Light into the vessels that are to constitute its theophanic forms. But for metaphysical and spiritual reasons about which the Kabbalists have spoken at length, *these vessels are broken*. Sophia’s leap, in the Valentinian Pleroma, was broken by the Limit. Here it is the vessels that are broken under the torrent of the Light cascading from the *Limit of tsimtsum*. It is this “breaking of the vessels” that is here the “drama in Heaven” and which is the dramatic accompaniment of the cosmogony.

This “breaking of the vessels” takes place with the initial revelation of the Divinity to himself, with the dawning of his theophany, before he has revealed himself to others because there are not yet any others. The underlying idea is this: the divine Light, on entering the vessels,

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16. Scholem, *Messianisme*, op.cit., p. 93.

17. I used the word *dualitude* to indicate the two inseparable and interdependent parts of a whole, a *unus-ambo*.

attempted to mould itself in accordance with the capacities and forms corresponding to their theophanic function in Creation. But the vessels were incapable of containing this Light, and they were shattered. Isaac Luria saw an allusion to this initial dramatic episode in the interpretation that the *Zohar* had already given to Genesis 36:31: “These are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel”. These kings of Edom are the shattered vessels, those primordial worlds which, according to an ancient *Midrash*, were created and destroyed before the creation of our present cosmos.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of this disruption, the Light was scattered. Most of it returned to its source. The rest constitutes the sparks of Light that fell downward, dispersing as they fell. The cosmogonic drama is here the basic inner exile of Creation, the drama of the initial act that brought the worlds into being. For subsequent to this act not only is everything in a state of imperfection, but nothing is in its proper place. Everything has been displaced. And nothing has escaped this disruption. All that exists is in a state of dislocation, and it is this that constitutes the exile. The sparks of divine Light have been precipitated into an abyss that is the abode of the forces of Evil against which created being will have to fight. This world of Evil is called the world of “shells” (*qelippoth*), a world of shadows and defilement in which the sparks of divine Light have been held captive since the breaking of the vessels. As Gershom Scholem remarks, we are confronted by a “cosmic conception of Exile”, one that goes beyond the idea of the exile of the divine Presence, of the Shekhinah who is also Sophia, since the beginning of the universe. Hayyim Vital, the great disciple of Isaac Luria, puts it in the following terms: “These sparks of holiness are bound by chains of iron to the lowest depths of the shells; they fervently long to reascend to their source, but they cannot do this without assistance.” “Everything that exists, including God, is in exile.”<sup>19</sup>

3. *The restoration (tiqqun)*. The universe, the totality of worlds visible and invisible, calls for a Redemption with regard both to its divine and to its human aspect. Here the word “redemption” signifies essentially a restoration, a reparation (in Hebrew, *tiqqun*). Things must be brought back to the place and state that would have been theirs had there been no breaking of the vessels. The Kabbalistic conception of the Divinity associates man and God for this task: they are partners fighting the same battle together. After the vessels had been broken, God revealed new Lights. It was Adam’s task to bring about the restoration of the world. Unhappily, the fault committed by Adam produced a second “breaking of the vessels”. The primordial Adam was a cosmic being, a Soul embracing all souls (cf. Ismailian gnosis, *infra*, III). As a result of his error and the new breaking of the vessels, all these souls are dispersed, exiled and imprisoned along with the sparks of the Shekhinah in the tenebrous world of the *qulippoth*, all subject to the same fate. There is thus a twofold disruption, first on the ontological level and then on the level of

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18. Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi*, op.cit. p. 34, referring to *Zohar* III, 127-145.

19. Cf. Scholem, *Messianisme*, op.cit., p. 95.

anthropology.<sup>20</sup> Man's task as the partner of God is to redeem these dispersed sparks of Light from exile, to raise them up and to lead them back to their original abode. In a way it is a task of metaphysical chivalry, giving meaning to man's life here in making him contribute to the preparation of the Messianic redemption. Each of us has his part to play.

It must be remembered, however, that due to the twofold breaking of the vessels there are two kinds of sacred sparks that have to be delivered from the abyss, prison, and exile into which they have fallen.<sup>21</sup> There are the sparks of the Shekhinah-Sophia dispersed after the first disruption, and there are the sparks dispersed after the second disruption, that of the great soul, embracing the universe, of the primordial Adam. It is the same task, but it possesses two aspects and has to be carried out under different conditions.

Each of us can dedicate himself to helping to redeem the sparks of the Shekhinah that he encounters on their various levels. For the Kabbalist, the observance of the Torah and its precepts (the esoteric and the exoteric being inseparable) is the mystical way of freeing the Lights imprisoned in the world of "shells". Such observance operates as a "dissection" separating good from evil, the holy from the impure, thus allowing the Creator to assume his full "stature" (*shiur qoma*).<sup>22</sup> But here it is important to stress another aspect of this observance which is the practice of the *devekut* or "communion" with God. The purpose of all contemplative prayer, of all theosophical meditation, is to guide the Shekhinah-Sophia out of exile back to the summit of the Pleroma, to that exalted place to which she is entitled.<sup>23</sup> From this point of view contemplation can be seen as the highest form of action.

The task is more complex when it is a question of reinstating the sparks of the souls in their original exalted position: this requires a human action of another type. For these souls are linked one to the other: they form an organic order, each occupying the place that it had originally in the subtle body of Adam. "There are families of souls" composed respectively of sparks drawn to one another by virtue of a special affinity because they have what Isaac Luria calls the same "root". And "no one can raise up a spark (another soul) that is not of the same root as himself".

Such, in broad outlines, is the process of a redemption in which the Messiah must not be regarded as the prime mover, in the sense that the redemptive act must necessarily take place on a certain day after the passage of numberless years. The redemption is not the result of a revolution, of a collision between two contrary currents. It is the consequence of everything that

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20. Ibid., p. 96.

21. For what follows, see *Sabbatai Zevi*, op.cit., pp. 267-302, above all pp. 280-282.

22. Cf. Scholem, *Messianisme*, op.cit., pp. 96-97.

23. Initially at the level of the sixth *Sephira*, *Tiph'ereth* (Beauty) as name of the Holy Blessed One and spouse of the Shekhinah-Sophia. His exaltation to the summit of the Pleroma is his exaltation to the first of the ten *Sephiroth*, *Kether* (the Crown). Cf. Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi*, op.cit., pp. 277-278.

has gone before it, of the separation, accomplished by the Gnostics from generation to generation, of the divine Lights from their place of exile. The Messiah is the herald of its consummation: he cannot appear before the work of reparation has been carried out.<sup>24</sup> (There is a similar idea among the Twelver Shi'ites in the concept of the twelfth Imam and his final coming.) The true function of Israel, according to this Kabbalistic view, is to prepare the world of the Redemption, and to gather together the divine sparks scattered to the ends of the Earth in order to bring them back to where they belong. Thus, exile in a world unrelated to such a function is not a punishment or a test of faith: it is a *mission*, that of raising the sparks from the depths of the cosmic exile.

This is why, personally speaking, we would rather not say that the redemption becomes here a “historical” process. In the ordinary sense of the word, history is reduced to a process, evidence for which is left in the documents of archives and in various other external facts and events. If this were the case with the redemptive process, it would be accessible to everyone, just as the campaigns of Alexander and Napoleon are accessible to everyone. But there is no question of this here. The breaking of the vessels and their restoration are the matter of sacred history, of a hierohistory that takes place and is observable only in the intermediary world, *in mundo imaginali*: a history of events that are perfectly real but that can be perceived only by the eyes of fire, not by the eyes of the flesh.

4. *From ancient gnosis to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria*. Now, however, the gnosis of the eyes of fire has penetrated still further into the mystery of the “divine contraction” which lies at the origin of the manifestation of the worlds. The Kabbalah of Isaac Luria envisages the retreat, the withdrawal that takes place in the heart of the Divinity *after* the initial contraction (*tsimtsum*). Going beyond this, Sabbatian Kabbalism, stemming from Sabbatai Zevi, takes a further step in theogonic speculation by inquiring into the mystery of the inner life of the Divinity *before* the *tsimtsum*. But in posing this question the Kabbalah invokes and appropriates the central theme of ancient Gnosis, and in so doing it testifies, to our astonishment, to the element common to the gnosés of the religions of the Book. The nature of this testimony has been analyzed admirably by Gershom Scholem.<sup>25</sup>

To grasp the significance of this decisive moment adequately, one must remember that the ancient gnostics regarded the identification of the God of Israel, creator of the world, with the transcendent God of goodness as the most catastrophic error made by the Jews and the orthodox Christians. In opposition to this, many gnostic currents of the first centuries were militantly hostile to the God of the Bible, in a manner resembling what G. Scholem describes as a “metaphysical anti-Semitism”. Instead, they invoked another, and superior, God, exalted and good. Sabbatian Kabbalism revives this gnostic pattern, but—and this is its great achievement—

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24. Scholem, *Messianisme*, op.cit., pp. 99, 101.

25. For what follows, see Scholem, *Messianisme*, pp. 169-179.

it revives it while inverting its sense: it is the transcendent God of goodness who is the God of Israel. But one would reduce the implications of these revivals of gnosis if one forgot that Valentinian gnosis did not share in the “metaphysical antisemitism” of other gnostic systems, notably that of Marcion. As we have already noted, the Demiurge, the creator of this world, is not in the least a wicked and evil God. Merely he is not either all-powerful or omniscient: and Valentinian eschatology presents him as hastening joyfully to encounter the gnostic Savior. Compared with the idea that many people now have about gnosis, this is an extraordinary fact.

But this fact is perfectly comprehensible if one takes into account that what is basically gnostic in and essentially common to the gnoses of the religions of the Book is the distinction made between the hidden Principle, the supreme Cause, and the personal God. This is indeed the “mystery of the Divinity”, and the theosophy of Sabbatai Zevi regards it as “the very mystery of the God of Israel” and “the faith of our father Abraham”. One of Zevi’s great disciples, Abraham Miguel Cardoso (17th century),<sup>26</sup> has said things in relation to this distinction whose consequences are important in view of the spiritual disintegration of our times. There is the hidden Principle, the first transcendent Cause. One can attain an idea of this Principle by means of philosophy. But, Cardoso vigorously affirms, this Principle is not the concern of the Torah. The Torah speaks of the God of Israel, *Elohei Israel*, who is the creator of the world and who is the First Emanation of the hidden Principle (the *Absconditum*), the supreme Cause. This First Emanation possesses a twofold aspect or, rather, is composed of two hypostases (*partsufim*, in Greek *prosopon*): a masculine hypostasis and a feminine hypostasis known as the Shekhinah or Sophia. It is this First Emanation who, in its bi-unity, creates, reveals itself, and saves.

Abraham Cardoso regards this distinction between the supreme Principle and the personal God as constituting the essence of Judaism, and it is this that has been forgotten as a result of later confusion and demoralization. However, if the Jewish people are guilty of this forgetfulness, the same is true where the other religions of the Book are concerned, for these too have identified the transcendent Principle, the supreme Cause, with the personal God. This is no less than a spiritual disaster, for which, in the case of Judaism, Cardoso holds Saadia Gaon, Maimonides and other philosophers responsible. And we would add that neither Christianity nor Islam has escaped this disaster, at least in all those places and in all those forms of monotheism in which the gnostic element has been ignored.

Thus it is that by virtue of this typically gnostic distinction the divinity appears to the Kabbalist as three hypostases, designated in the doctrinal terminology of the *Zohar* and the Lurianic Kabbalah. There is the first Cause, the transcendent Principle, the *Absconditum*, who is the “Holy One of Ancient Days” (*atika qadisha*). There is the personal God, the God of Israel, who is the “Holy King” (*malka qadisha*). And there is the *Shekhinah* or Sophia. (Without ignoring the difference in structure, one can see an analogy, *mutatis mutandis*, with the

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26. On A.M. Cardoso, see Scholem, *Messianisme and Sabbataï Zevi*, index.

Valentinian triad: the *Bythos* or, rather, the *Nous*, *Sophia*, and the Demiurge). The God of Israel, the personal God, creator or demiurge of our world, is not, therefore, the supreme Principle or Cause, the *Absconditum*, for this latter is beyond all personalization. One cannot make him the object of a cult or enter into “communion” (*devekut*) with him. Moreover, the Kabbalists as a whole agree in identifying Yahweh, the personal God, with *Tiph'ereth*, the sixth of the *Sephiroth*.<sup>27</sup> All this remains to be considered at length.

In short, we are here in the presence of an effort common to the religions of the Book, a moving attempt to go beyond the paradox inherent in all monotheism that, through identifying the Supreme Cause with the personal God, tends to substitute, in the eyes of the Kabbalists, another, albeit unique, idol for the idols that it has denounced. Faced with this danger, the gnostic is forced to reaffirm, as it were, God against God, forced to free the personal God from the status and function of the supreme Principle and Cause, for these do not belong to him. This position and function have been attributed to him by every politico-religious *magisterium* so that this God to whom it attributes supreme power may in His turn guarantee the delegation of this power to it.

In the end the day comes when this God of the non-gnostic monotheistic religions is declared to be dead. But the God that men know is involved with them in the same cosmic exile, the God of whom they know that they are the partners in the struggle to escape with him from the same peril—this God does not die. What inspires gnostics and Kabbalists in the struggle in which they give support to their God in exile is the idea that the Revelation is not yet completed, any more than the Redemption which has already begun is completed. The Shekhinah must manifest herself by degrees. In the end the Holy One, blessed be he, the “Holy King”, “will help her to arise from the dust”.

### III. Shi'ite Ismailian Gnosis

1. *The Pleroma*. In this third part of our study we will explore the elements in Islamic gnosis that correspond to what we have learnt from Valentinian and Judaic gnosis. Unfortunately the limits of the present essay impose extreme brevity and force us to refer to earlier publications. We are confronting not Islam in general, but its esoteric aspects. We could approach this confrontation through the vast works of the great visionary theosophist Ibn 'Arabī (d.1240),<sup>28</sup> but we are already aware that his theosophy leads us by various paths to what originally and essentially constitutes the esoteric realm of Islam, namely, Shi'ism in its double form: Shi'ism of the Twelve Imāms or Twelver Shi'ism, and Ismailian Shi'ism.

In Twelver Shi'ism we are presented with a Pleroma which corresponds to that of Valentinian gnosis. It is called “Muhammadan Light” (*Nur Muhammadī*), Light of glorification

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27. Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi*, op.cit., pp. 120ff., pp. 861-862.

28. See our study, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabī*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1977).

or “Metaphysical Reality of the prophecy” (*Haqīqat Muhammadiya*), and it is formed by the hypostases (or people of Light, *ashkhās nūrūniya*) of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones.<sup>29</sup> In Ismailian Shi‘ism we find the same idea of a primordial Pleroma (‘*alam al-Ibdā*’) formed by ten angelic beings whose hierarchic disposition is reflected and manifested in this world by the esoteric hierarchy of the Ismailian brotherhood. This latter owes its origin and name to the seventh Imām of the Imāmic Pleroma, the Imām Ismā‘il, son of the Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d.765). It is above all in Ismailian theosophy in its Yemenite period that we find the dramatic element common to the gnosés of the religions of the Book. In concluding this study we will therefore concentrate on this theosophy.<sup>30</sup>

In Ismailian Shi‘ism as in Twelver Shi‘ism we find the same apophatic theology, that is to say the affirmation of the total unknowableness of the supreme Principle, the Abyss of Valentinian gnosis, the *En-Sof* of the Jewish Kabbalah. Ismailian gnosis calls it “Mystery of Mysteries”, “that which the audacity of thought cannot reach”. As is the case with other gnosés, it is from this inaccessibility that the Pleroma of the Aeons in Valentinian gnosis, the Pleroma of the ten Sephiroth in Jewish gnosis, the Pleroma of Imamic beings in Twelver gnosis (‘*erfān-e shi‘i*’), the Pleroma of archangelic being of Cherubims (*Kerubim*) of the primordial world in Ismailian gnosis. And it is equally this Pleroma that is the *imaginal* place of the “drama in Heaven” in which our world originates and whose reflection in this world is, as we have seen, the confusion of the supreme Principle with the personal God.

It is against all confusion of this kind that the Ismailian conception of *tawhīd*, as affirmation of the Unique and as symbol of monotheistic faith, is an immediate defense. Already the theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī puts us on guard against confusing the theological *tawhīd* with the ontological *tawhīd*.<sup>31</sup> Ismailian gnosis gives us a definition of *tawhīd* that might well startle an exotericist: “The *tawhīd* is the spiritual knowledge (*ma‘rifat*) of levels (*hodūd*, literally, ‘limits’, dignitaries) in the supernal hierarchy (that of the celestial Pleroma) and in the hierarchy below

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29. See our work, *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques* 2nd edition (Paris, 1978), vol. IV, index. For the Shi‘ite concept of the First Emanation, see our work, *La philosophie iranienne islamique depuis le XVIIe siècle jusqu’ à nos jours*, Vol. I (Paris, 1979), above all Book II, chapters XVII, 4 and XIX, 7.

30. See our *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Part I, above all pp. 124ff.; our *Trilogie ismaélienne*, Bibliothèque Iranienne, 9 (Teheran-Paris, 1961), chiefly the second treatise, that of dā‘i yomemite Sayyid-nā Hosayn ibn ‘Alī (d. 667/1268); then our successive studies: “Le temps cyclique dans le mazdéisme et dans l’Ismaélisme” in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 20/1951, chiefly pp. 172ff., 192ff.; “Epiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne”, *ibid.*, 23/1954; “Un roman initiatique ismaélien du Xe siècle (le *Kitāb al-‘ālim wa’l-gholām*), in *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, University of Poitiers, XVth year, nos. 1 & 2, Jan.-June 1972; “The Ismā‘ili Response to the Polemic of Ghazālī” in *Ismā‘ili Contributions to Islamic Culture*, ed. S.H. Nasr, (Teheran, 1977), pp. 69 to 98.

31. Cf. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, op.cit., vol. IV, index: Haydar Amoli, *rabb, tawhīd ontologique, tawhīd théologique*.

(that of the Ismailian brotherhood), and to recognize that each of these levels is *unique* in its respective position”.<sup>32</sup> It is in some way a *tawhīd* hierarchized according to the grades of a monadology. The Unique is the *unific* of each uniqueness; each uniqueness has its Unique. In an extraordinary discussion, the master teaches his disciple: “Your God has also his God...”<sup>33</sup> “Your God” is not therefore the supreme Principle, the *Absconditum*.

There is thus a deep meaning in the fact that the *tawhīd*, graded in this way, determines the hierarchic order of the successive Emanations that constitute the Pleroma of primordial Beings. In the gnosis of Twelver Shi‘ism, it determines the order of emanation of the fourteen beings of Light: that of the Prophet, that of Fātima, his daughter, who corresponds to the figure of Sophia (but without being involved in a drama in the Pleroma), and that of the twelve Imāms.<sup>34</sup> In Ismailian gnosis it determines the order of emanation of the cherubic Intelligences, to each of whose levels there is a corresponding level in the esoteric hierarchy on earth. And it is at one of the moments or levels of these repetitions of the *tawhīd*, modified from grade to grade in accordance with the particular demands of each grade, that the “drama in Heaven”, as represented in Ismailian gnosis, takes place.

The supreme Principle, ineffable and inaccessible, beyond Being, without Name or Attribute, eternally establishes (*ibdā’*) a Primal Being that is called the First Intelligence and that alone is able to know something of the supreme Principle, or rather to understand its unknowability.<sup>35</sup> It is in fact to this First Intelligence that the name *Allāh* is applied, because Ismailian theosophists trace this name back to a root (*walaha*) that connotes the idea of sadness, of nostalgia. This nostalgia is that of Primal Being before the Unknowable. And it is by means of the exclusive knowledge that Primal Being has of its Principle that the Pleroma achieves some knowledge of this Principle. The analogy with the *Nous* of Valentinian gnosis (the pair Intelligence-Truth) is striking. With the First Intelligence emanation properly speaking (*inbi‘āth*) begins, each Intelligence embracing in itself a whole pleroma. A second Intelligence emanates from the First: its *tawhīd* takes the form of knowledge and recognition of the unique level of that

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32. Cf. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne*, op.cit., second treatise, p. 148 of the French translation.

33. The discussion in question is that between Qostā ben Lūqā and ‘Amalāq the Greek (although the origins of the discussion between the people bearing these names have not yet been established). It is a fine text. See Corbin, *En Islam iranien...* op.cit., vol.II, pp. 133-134. Complete translation in our study, “Epiphanie divine...” (see above, note 30), pp. 33-234.

34. The gradations of the *tawhīd* determine both the hierarchic order of emanation of the fourteen Immaculate Ones and that of the worlds which proceed from it. See our work, *Corps spirituel et Terre céleste: de l’Iran mazdéen à l’Iran shi‘ite*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1979), part 2, chapter II, 1, as well as the references given above (note 29) to our work *La philosophie iranienne islamique...*

35. As in the case of our earlier researches, we refer chiefly for all that follows to the great work of dā‘i yemenite Idris ‘Imadoddīn (15<sup>th</sup> century) entitled *Zahr al-ma‘āni* (in manuscript, still unedited), chapters XVIII and XX. See also R. Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte der Ismā‘iliten* (Göttingen, 1943).

which precedes it. In its turn a third Intelligence emanates from the second, and it is at this point that the drama develops.

2. *The “drama in Heaven”*. This third Intelligence among the Cherubims of the Pleroma is the metaphysical Adam (*Adam rūhānī*, spiritual Adam), and his error will have the same consequences as the error of the cosmic Adam in the gnosis of Isaac Luria. As though self-dazzled by his own being, the third Archangel of the Pleroma refuses to fulfill his own *tawhīd* at the level which is his level. That is to say, he refuses to recognize the two intermediate and mediating levels or “limits” that come before him: Instead of this he claims to attain, and claims that his *tawhīd* attains, the supreme Principle directly, thus destroying the Unique that is congruent with his own level. In short, he behaves exactly like an exoteric monotheist who confuses the supreme Principle with his personal God. In this respect, he commits the same fault as Sophia when she attempts her destructive leap, a “flight into the abyss”, within the Pleroma of Valentinian gnosis. Again like Sophia, he comes up against a Limit, the Limit here being the level (*hadd*, the Greek *horos*) that is immediately above him and by which he is limited and delimited (*mahdūd*), and imbued with Form. And because he is a cosmic being, embracing, like the Adam of Isaac Luria, the total pleroma of souls, the consequences of his own fault will be of a similar magnitude. For while, stupefied by his self-intoxication, he remains immobilized, “suspending” the regular emanative process of the Pleroma, seven other Intelligences emerge. The “drama in Heaven” is accomplished, the primordial Paradise is lost. The third Archangel of the Pleroma finds himself at the level of the tenth (who, according to Sohrawardi, is also the *crimson Archangel*, as Angel-Holy Spirit, Angel of Humanity).

Let us keep in mind this distance measured by an interval of *seven*: this figures esoterically the “retardation of eternity” provoked by the intoxication, the error of the celestial Adam, a retardation resulting in the fall of our world into time. The cycle of this world, regulated by the number seven, will lead towards the re-conquest of this “retarded eternity”. This will require the great Cycle of the cycles. The Seven Intelligences that have emerged are the divine “Seven Words” mentioned in the Qurān as having encountered and assisted Adam immobilized in his state of suspension. With their help he himself uproots this Darkness that has issued from himself against himself, and he hurls it into the abyss from which it re-emerges from cycle to cycle in the satanic manifestations of Iblīs-Ahriman. But, as with the Adam of the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, Adam is himself a whole pleroma: he embraces all the human souls of which he is the Angel; and it is to this Pleroma that he makes audible the prophetic appeal (the *da’wat*) to the *tawhīd*. Some answer it, others hesitate, but most remain in a state of rebellion, refusing to acknowledge his supremacy as well as that of the higher levels, the “limits” which are their protection, and so rejecting the redemption of their Angel. Then their Angel realizes that they cannot any longer remain in the pure spiritual world. He causes their refusal to condense into a Darkness that terrifies them. The triple movement which they try to make in order to achieve their liberty only coarsens their being still further, giving it the three dimensions of material solids. Henceforth they will be prisoners of the Darkness.

Thus, just as the Desire of Sophia was shattered on the Limit that was also her protection, and as this Desire was banished from the Pleroma, while the passions inherent in this abortive Desire became the substance of our world—so the negativity of the pre-existential refusal of humans to acknowledge their Angel is shattered on the Limit which had been their protection, and their refusal condenses into the substance of our physical world. But in both cases it must be understood that, as in Manichean gnosis, the physical world is regarded as an immense instrument of salvation, making it possible for souls who pass through the ordeal to rise again to their original realm.

3. *The Great Resurrection.* As we have already said, this ascent constitutes the whole secret history of humanity, a sacred history that does not derive from empirical evidence and the documents of archives. It cannot be perceived by the eyes of the flesh, for these see only such evidence and investigate only such documents. This hierohistory is made up of an alternation of epiphanic cycles (*dawr al-kashf*) and cycles of occultation. A cycle of occultation is composed of seven periods, reckoned esoterically as seven millenia. Let us examine our own. Six periods have already passed. Each is called by the name of the prophet who ushered it in. The first was that of our Adam, whose error symbolically repeated that of the celestial Adam. Then came the periods of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each period ends with a resurrection (*qiyāmah*) convoked by the last Imām of the period that is coming to an end and announcing the advent of the next period. These six periods are the six days (*hexameron*) of the creation of the religious world, of the prophetic universe, and we live in the expectation that the Seventh Day will dawn.

Shi‘ism is imbued with the sense of this expectation, which keeps it orientated towards the future, while for Sunnism the religious history of humanity has been concluded with the last Prophet. So Sunnism halts at the sixth day, while Shi‘ism is the religion of the Seventh Day. This Seventh Day is already in preparation. It will dawn with the call of the last Imām of our cycle, proclaiming the Great Resurrection, the Resurrection of Resurrections (*Qiyāmah al-Qiyāmāt*), which will mark the transition to a new *Aeon*, a new Age of the world. As for the messianic vision of the Kabbalah to which we have referred, the work of the Resurrection is being accomplished here and now throughout the cycle by means of the cooperation of all the Gnostics.

Throughout the cycle the Angel of humanity and all human beings who respond to his call share—like the personal God of the Sabbatian Kabbalah and the souls of Light—in the same struggle. The purpose of the struggle is their return to the Pleroma, the re-conquest of the lost Paradise. The Angel of humanity, the spiritual Adam, who through his error fell to the tenth and last level of the Pleroma, must regain his original station, and with him the whole of spiritual humanity whose support and guide he is. Valentinian gnosis has shown us Sophia reoccupying her station in the Pleroma on the appearance of the Savior, while the Demiurge, her son, succeeds to the station that she had occupied. In the same manner, in Ismailian gnosis, on the coming of the Imām of the Great Resurrection, that is to say, at the conclusion of each cycle, the

Angel of humanity rises up with all his followers in a way that brings them closer to their original station, while the last Imām succeeds to the station that he had occupied.

The “Sublime Temple of Light” of the Imām of the Great Resurrection brings together, integrates, all the “Temples of Light” of the Imāms who have preceded him in the course of the cycle; that is to say, all the forms of Light, all the spiritual beings of whom the Imām is the support. From cycle to cycle this “sublime Temple of Light” is carried in an upward movement from one level to the next as these are re-conquered by the Angel of humanity. At each Great Resurrection, at each advent of a new Age of the world, the Angel of humanity with all his followers comes closer to the station that had been theirs before the eruption of the “drama in Heaven”; and the “Temple of Light” of the Imām who follows in his tracks awaits the ascents still to come. The fall into time as a consequence of the fault of the Third Angel had been a “delay of eternity”. When, through the succession of the cycles, this delay has been made good, eternity will no longer be delayed and time will come to an end. Then the reconquest of the lost Paradise will be accomplished.

The final act of the Ismailian dramaturgy of the world opens onto this majestic perspective.

### EPILOGUE

Because of its concision, this sketch may constitute a challenge. I am well aware that the comparison of the dramatic elements common to the gnososes of the religions of the Book requires not one volume alone but several volumes. Nonetheless, I have thought it worth attempting even in this short form.

Before concluding, there is one question to which an answer should be given. Is it right to speak, as is often the case, of the pessimism of gnosis? Such a judgment assumes that one has forgotten what the struggle of the gnostic is about, what its origin is and what its outcome will be. This outcome makes it clear that if gnosis despairs of this world it is in the form of a *desperatio fiducialis*, a confident desperation. One can say the same thing with reference to Zoroastrian and Manichean cosmic dramaturgy. Where, then, is the optimism of this despair rooted?

For this optimism is in contrast with the grandiose but hopeless perspective of the heroic Nordic epic, with its eschatological vision of *Ragnarök*, the Fate of the Gods. There too the Gods are the allies of men, and both together are partners in the same struggle against monstrous cosmic powers; but they know that they will finally be killed by these monstrous powers, and that after that the world will be destroyed. “The victors are Chaos and Insanity, but the Gods who will be defeated consider that the defeat is not a refutation... They offer absolute resistance, perfect because without hope...”<sup>36</sup> Certainly the predominance of Darkness is not a refutation of

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36. W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (1904), cited by Ursula Dronke, “Beowulf and Ragnarök”, in *Saga-Book*, vol. XVII, Part 4, 1969, pp. 302ff.

the Light. But inversely, when the Light prevails over Darkness, is this a refutation of Darkness? Does Darkness allow itself to be refuted? Will the Light simply be its refutation?

I would like to reply to these questions with the aid of a recent work, Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings". I think that this is the first time since the conclusion of the Grail cycle that there has appeared in the West an epic at once heroic, mystic and gnostic, the events of whose narrative can enchant the wise both young and old because they will recognize its hidden meaning. Throughout, the epic is dominated by the theme of the maleficent ring mislaid in the country of Light. This ring continually incites the best among the beings of Light to submit to the temptation it represents: the desire for power. Indeed, the temptation to put the evil desire for power at the service of the Light is extremely impelling. Moreover, it is not in the Darkness that the temptation of the Darkness can become virulent, but in the realm of Light. It is in the world of Light that the drama, which for all gnoses initiates the cosmogony, has its origin.

But the world of Light absolutely must not resort to the evil desire for power in order to ensure its victory over the Darkness. To resort to that desire would be to ensure the triumph of the Darkness. It is not even enough to hide, to bury the ring in some secret and unknown place in the realm of Light: its malefic influence will continue to operate. It must be not simply rejected but destroyed. But to destroy is a negative action, and the world of Light does not permit negativity.

The weapon of the Light is of another order: it is to compel the Darkness to destroy itself, to accomplish its negation by the negation of its own negativity. To destroy the evil ring, representative of the desire for power, is to cast it back into the Darkness, so that the Darkness destroys what has issued from it. A fearless hero, overcoming the most terrifying apparitions and traps, must carry the ring back to its place of origin: to the furnace which is in the crater of the mountain of the Lord of the Shadow, in the land of Darkness. When the hero finally casts the ring into the abyss, the world of Light is delivered from the evil desire for power. This is the theme of Tolkien's epic.

What the hero performs in this epic appears as a Quest in the reverse direction to that for the Holy Grail. But at the same time this Quest seems to be a necessary prelude, a Quest without which the Quest for the Grail cannot succeed. Parsifal's speech, at the end of Book 15 of Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic, warns us that "no one can obtain the Grail except him whom God himself has appointed". From this time, Wolfram tells us, "this word traveled across all lands, that no one could win the Grail by fighting for it, and so many knights gave up searching for it." For the Elect are not appointed by God to become "possessors" of the Grail by force of arms. They must first of all renounce such possession, and this is to destroy their desire for power through their own powerlessness. Only then can they attain the vision of this *elsewhere* to which they must commit themselves. "This is why the Grail still remains hidden to all eyes," Wolfram tells us.

We know what he means: it is hidden to all eyes of the flesh. The epic of the Grail ends in

occultation. Parsifal carries it back to a mystical East (to the New Titurel) that is not on our maps, or it is taken from this world and withdrawn to the “spiritual Palace” (Galahad). Must we then speak of the pessimism of the Grail cycle? To do so would be to forget, as in the case of the pseudo-pessimism attributed to gnosis, what the nature of the struggle is that opens the way towards the Grail, and what the eyes are that perceive this way. The world in which the Grail is occulted is still visible to the eyes of fire, and that is why there will always be secret Knights-Templar who pursue the Quest for the Grail. And the law that they follow is the same as that to which the gnostics are obedient, for it is not with the weapons of the desire for power but through knightly service that one is the partner of a God in exile and that one sets free the sparks of light imprisoned in the *qelipboth*, the world of shadows and defilement.

Only we have to choose the eyes with which we look, and I am well aware that the nihilism of our times can no longer confront men with this choice: they have a horror of choosing. They would rather ask us what criterion we have for differentiating and distinguishing between the powers of Light and the opposing forces of Darkness. And what if we deceive ourselves? It is so much simpler to forget the sense even of words, and to speak at random of Manichaeism (instead of saying simply dichotomy or dualism) in cases that have nothing whatsoever to do with Manichaeism.

A criterion? Do not let us look for it in some ratiocination of a “philosophy of history”; let us look for it in what I have tried to indicate in taking from the start of this essay, as a kind of leitmotiv, the vision of the knighthood of fire bestowed upon the servant of the prophet Elisha when his eyes were opened.

Doubtless we will all say to ourselves: but the prophet Elisha is no longer here. Who, then, will pray to Heaven that our eyes of fire may be opened? Let us again refer to the prophet Elisha, on the occasion when the king of Israel, distressed by the threat of the enemy, sought the help of his vision (2 Kings 3:15): “Bring me a minstrel”, said the prophet. “And it came to pass that when the minstrel played the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha.” That is to say: his eyes of fire were opened.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is taken from *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*, cahier no.5, pp. 141-173. Thanks are due to Mme. Stella Corbin for permission to publish this English translation.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*Someone complained to Meister Eckhart that no one could understand his sermons. He said, “To understand my sermons a man requires three things: He must have conquered strife and be in contemplation of his highest good and be satisfied to do God’s bidding and be a beginner with*

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*For you must know that to the soul in her perfection goodness would come quite natural; she would not merely practice virtues, but virtue as a whole would be her life and she would radiate it naturally. We seem to be vicious or virtuous from being now the one and now the other. This should not be: we ought to be always in a state of perfection. That is one thing to note.*

Eckhart.