



Sefer ha-Bahir

ספר הבהיר

THE BOOK OF CLARITY

Jaromír Hladík

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SEFER HA-BAHIR

*The Book of Clarity
Anthology after the German
of Jaromír Hladík*

Also by the same author, in the same Bibliotheca Hladikiana:

Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation
Hermann Barsdorf, Berlin, 1928.

Defence of Eternity, Volume I.
History of the Conceptions of Eternity.
Prague, 1928.

Defence of Eternity, Volume II.
Critique of Linear Time.
Prague, 1929.

The Idroth, Idra Rabba & Idra Zuta.
Completed 1933, unpublished.

The Jewish Sources of Boehme.
Mánes, Prague, 1934.

ספר הבהיר

The Book of Clarity

*Anthology translated from the Hebrew,
after the German version of*

Jaromír Hladík

(Vienna, 1931)

ÉDITION CLEMENTINIUM

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under the direction of W. D. F.

Sefer ha-Bahir, The Book of Clarity: a kabbalistic anthology translated, introduced and annotated in German by Jaromír Hladík. The present English edition follows that German version (Das Buch der Klarheit), itself established by the author from the Amsterdam editio princeps (1651) and collated with the manuscripts Vatican ebr. 236 and Munich Hebr. 209.

Completed in Vienna in 1931 and accepted by the publisher R. Löwit, the work nonetheless remained unpublished. First edition from the autograph of the Hladík collection (Hradčany), shelfmark H-1931/1. The section numbers follow the division of the modern reference edition (R. Margaliot, Jerusalem, 1951), supplied here by the editor.

Note by the modern editor. The present typesetting (L^AT_EX, EB Garamond, 105 mm × 170 mm of the Collection Clementinum) is the work of the Bibliotheca Hladikiana and does not belong to the original 1931 edition.

NOTE ON THIS EDITION

Jaromír Hladík's Sefer ha-Bahir remained unpublished. Completed in Vienna in 1931 and accepted by the Viennese publisher R. Löwit, the book nonetheless never appeared. The text has come down to us only through the autograph preserved in the Hladík collection (Hradčany): the present edition is therefore the first, established from that autograph (shelfmark H-1931/1).

Hladík thought and wrote this book in German, the cultivated German of the Prague of his youth. We give here the English translation of that German version, whose original text is reproduced in full in the appendix at the end of the volume. The preface, the introduction, the selected verses, their notes and the bibliography are, like the translation, the author's own; we have confined ourselves to carrying them into English, adding nothing to his voice of 1931.

Hladík did not translate the whole of the Bahir: he retained some thirty verses, which he established from the Amsterdam edition princeps (1651) and the manuscripts he consulted in Vienna. The section numbers are those of the modern reference edition (R. Margalio), which the editor has supplied for the reader's convenience; where the author tightened or shortened a passage, a bracketed ellipsis marks it.

W. d. F.

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Vienna, autumn 1931

Three years have passed since I deposited with Hermann Barsdorf, in Berlin, my translation of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The slender volume which emerged from it in the autumn of 1928 scarcely passed beyond the circle of learned kabbalists and of my Prague friends; it nevertheless prompted, to my surprise, two or three exchanges of letters sufficiently prolonged for me to be encouraged to continue the undertaking. The present volume answers those encouragements. In several respects it is the natural companion of its predecessor.

The *Sefer Yetzirah*, it will be remembered, is a brief, austere treatise, concerning whose date (between the third and the sixth century of our era) and author (rabbinic tradition attributes it now to Abraham, now to Rabbi Akiba, both ascriptions being held by modern criticism to be equally improbable) the commentators are not agreed. In a few pages it sets forth the combinatory architecture of a world begotten by twenty-two letters and ten *sefirot*.

The *Sefer ha-Bahir*, customarily rendered as “Book of Clarity” or “Luminous Book,” is later, more diffuse, and more difficult to date with precision. German criticism of recent decades (Scholem in particular) places it around 1180, in Provence, within the circle of Isaac the Blind. To my mind it marks the threshold of medieval kabbalah properly so called: it is within its two hundred or so verses that there are forged, in the state of nascent images, the motifs from which the later tradition was to draw, down to Cordovero and Luria, its sephirotic vocabulary.

Between the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* there lie, approximately, seven centuries of relative silence, seven centuries during which Jewish mysticism nourished itself on Hellenistic, gnostic, and hekhalotic elements without producing a systematic treatise. The *Bahir* closes that silence and inaugurates, by its mere existence, the golden age that will culminate in the *Zohar* at the end of the thirteenth century. The trilogy which my own library is beginning to sketch (*Yetzirah* 1928, *Bahir* 1931, and, I hope, the *Idroth* of the *Zohar* for 1933 or 1934) seeks to offer the reader an abridged course through this tradition, from its tannaitic origins to the summits of Castilian mysticism.

A few words on the present anthology. The *Bahir* contains, in the Amsterdam *editio princeps* of 1651, approximately two hundred verses (the numbering varies according to the editions). A complete translation would have required a philological labour for which neither my strength nor my timetable allows in this year 1931. I have therefore made a *selection*: some thirty verses, chosen for their architectural value within the doctrine of the book, and grouped into seven thematic sections which do not respect the order of the original text. This infidelity to the letter is worth, I believe, a certain fidelity to the sense: it makes legible a work which, in its traditional arrangement, resembles a sequence of utterances without explicit articulation.

Each verse is given in three successive moments: the Hebrew text according to the collated manuscripts, its transliteration in Latin characters, and its translation (which the present edition renders in English where my original gave the German). The brief notes which follow indicate, where useful, the biblical source, the doctrinal bearing, or the philological difficulty. As

to the divergences between the *editio princeps* and the Vatican and Munich manuscripts which I consulted at the Vienna *Nationalbibliothek* (the former Hofbibliothek) in the course of the summer of 1931, the reader will find, here and there, an indication in the notes; a complete critical apparatus would be disproportionate to the ambition of this volume.

I confess, in closing this preface, that the *author* of the *Bahir* remains for me, as for all his readers, an uncertain figure. Tradition attributes the book to Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kana, a tannaitic sage of the first century, whose voice indeed opens the text ("Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kana said: it is written, and another verse says..."); but this attribution is, philologically, untenable. The *Bahir* is, beyond doubt, the work of a medieval compiler who gathered, ordered, and perhaps invented oral traditions retrospectively ascribed to ancient authorities. This ambiguity between transmission and invention is, to my mind, one of the most singular characteristics of kabbalah in formation; it announces, in miniature, the still greater ambiguity that weighs upon the *Zohar* (where Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai speaks in the second century within a work of the thirteenth).

The reader who encounters these difficulties for the first time need not be alarmed by them. Medieval kabbalah is, by its very nature, a literature of *suspended attribution*. It is neither wholly traditional (in the sense that transmission would be an uninterrupted chain) nor wholly creative (in the sense that the medieval author would sign his work like a scholastic philosopher). It presents itself as the late revelation of an ancient truth, without our ever being able to decide what belongs to antiquity and what belongs to revelation.

It is within this ambiguous region that the *Bahir* stands. And it is within this same region, I believe, that the mystical works worth translating have always stood.

Vienna, September 1931.

J. H.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Date, language, manuscripts, posterity

I. The title and its meaning

The word בהיר (*bāhîr*) means in biblical Hebrew “clear,” “bright,” “radiant”; it occurs in the Book of Job (37:21) in the phrase “And now men see not the light which is bright (בהיר) in the clouds,” with which, precisely, the first verse of the *Bahir* opens. The author (or compiler) of the book doubtless chose this word for its ambivalence: it designates at once the *clarity* that illumines and the *clarity* that conceals itself, that is to say, the paradoxical revelation of a light which allows itself to be seen only through its own obscuring.

This ambivalence is not anecdotal; it announces a fundamental doctrinal feature of the book. The *Bahir* does not distinguish, as later kabbalists will, between a *revealed light* and a *hidden light*; it thinks them together, as two aspects of a single divine reality. This thought of paradox, which will be taken up and systematized by Cordovero in the sixteenth century, here assumes its initial form.

II. Date and place of composition

The first attestations of the *Bahir* are found in Languedocian Provence at the end of the twelfth century: that, beyond doubt, is where it emerges and is transmitted. To attach it more closely to the circle of Isaac the Blind (“Sagi-Nahor,” “rich in light,” by eu-

phemism) at Posquières and Lunel, around 1180–1210, is tempting but remains conjectural: the Provençal milieu is the place of its appearance; its actual composition in Isaac's immediate entourage is not assured. The treatises of Azriel and Ezra of Gerona at the beginning of the thirteenth century cite the *Bahir* abundantly as a book already ancient and authoritative, which implies its composition at least a generation earlier.

Several internal elements confirm this dating: the use of Provençal for a few technical terms, the structure of certain exegeses which recall those of the contemporary *Sefer ha-Iyyun*, and above all the total absence of the doctrinal apparatus that will characterise Castilian kabbalah from 1280 onward. The *Bahir* thus belongs, philologically, to a narrow window: between 1170 and 1190, in Provence, within a milieu of learned rabbis making the transition between Maimonidean philosophy (Maimonides writes the *Guide of the Perplexed* in 1190) and the Neoplatonising mysticism of the first kabbalistic school.

III. Language and structure

The language of the *Bahir* is late rabbinic Hebrew, mingled with Aramaic for a few technical expressions and with a considerable number of calques upon Provençal or Latin syntactical structures. The compiler, no great stylist, has often juxtaposed fragments of diverse origin without always ensuring grammatical coherence between them. This linguistic roughness, disconcerting to the modern reader, is not a defect of composition: it reflects, in my view, the very nature of the work, which presents itself as an *anthology* of traditions rather than as a systematic treatise.

The structure of the *Bahir* is, formally speaking, that of an *ag-gadic* florilegium. Some two hundred brief verses (according to the traditional division, close to that adopted by the modern editors), often nominally attributed to a sage of the tannaitic period (Rabbi Nehunya, Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Rehumai, Rabbi Amorai, etc.), successively address: the hidden meanings of the letters of the alphabet, the structure of the ten divine attributes or “powers” (which the book does not yet call *sefirot*, and which it does not arrange in the ordered and named list that only the later kabbalah will fix), the symbolism of the *tsade*, the *bet*, and the *aleph*, the doctrine of the tree (אילן), the displacement of souls (גלגול), and several other motifs which will become central in later kabbalah.

IV. Manuscripts and printed tradition

The *Bahir* was not printed before 1651, the year in which the Amsterdam *editio princeps* appeared (Asher Anshel ben Eliezer, printer); that edition is defective in several places, notably in paragraphs 95 to 104 (the doctrine of the “ten kings”). The manuscripts preceding it are numerous but often fragmentary; the most complete are Vatican ebraicus 236 (thirteenth century, Italian copy), Munich Hebraicus 209 (late thirteenth century, Ashkenazic copy), and Parma De Rossi 2784 (fifteenth century, Sephardic copy). I consulted the first two at the Vienna *Nationalbibliothek* in July and August 1931, through the kindness of a curator of the manuscript cabinet, who facilitated my access to the photographic reproductions.

For the present translation I have taken as my base text the *editio princeps* (corrected for manifest typographical errors), in-

dicating in the notes the significant variants of the Vatican and Munich manuscripts.

V. Kabbalistic posterity

The influence of the *Bahir* upon later kabbalah is immense. The first great Castilian kabbalists (Moses de León, who will compose the *Zohar* around 1280, and Joseph Gikatilla) borrow from it a considerable part of their images and intuitions. The sephirotic system as it will be fixed by Cordovero and Luria is not to be found in the *Bahir*; but it descends from it, in an indirect line, through the development and systematisation of the “powers” and the “tree” that the book is content merely to sketch.

More broadly, the *Bahir* is, to my mind, the first text to set forth, in the form of images, the motifs that Jewish mysticism will develop over the following six centuries: the masculinity and femininity of the divine, the idea of an intra-divine exile, the displacement of souls, the cosmic value of letters and names. This must be insisted upon, for it is the whole object of the present anthology: the *Bahir* sows these doctrines, it does not yet *contain* them. To read it is to read the germ, not the fruit, of medieval and modern kabbalah.

I. THE TITLE AND THE HIDDEN LIGHT

§ I.

אמר ר' נחוניא בן הקנה: כתוב אחד אומר (איוב ל"ז כא) ועתה לא ראו אור בהיר הוא בשחקים, וכתוב אחד אומר (תהלים י"ח י"ב) ישת חושך סתרו ואומר (תהלים צ"ז ב) ענן וערפל סביביו קשיא, בא הכתוב השלישי והכריע ביניהם (שם קל"ט יב) גם חשך לא יחשיך ממך ולילה כיום יאיר כחשיכה כאורה:

Transliteration

'āmar R. Nəḥunjā ben ha-Qānā: kātūv 'eḥād 'ōmer (Ījōv 37,21) wě-attā lō' rā'ū 'ōr bāhîr hū' ba-šəḥāqîm, wě-kātūv 'eḥād 'ōmer (Tēhillîm 18,12) jāšet ḥōšek sitrô wě-'ōmer (Tēhillîm 97,2) ānān wa-ārāpel sēvîvāw, qāšjā; bā' ha-kātūv ha-šēlišî wě-hikrîā bēnēhem (šām 139,12) gam ḥōšek lō' jāḥšîk mimmekā wě-lajēlā ka-jôm jā'îr ka-ḥāšēkā kā-'ōrā.

Translation

“Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qana said: one verse says (Job 37:21): *And now men see not the light, bright though it is in the clouds;* and another verse says (Psalms 18:12): *He made darkness his hiding-place,* and it says further (Psalms 97:2): *Cloud and thick darkness are round about him:* a contradiction. Then comes the third verse, which decides between them (ibid. 139:12): *Even the darkness is not dark to thee, and the night shineth as the day; the darkness is as the light.*”

NOTE BY J. H.

The book takes its name from this first doctrinal word: *bahir*, “bright,” gathered from Job. The difficulty is set down at once as a dispute of verses, after the manner of the schools: Scripture attests now a light withheld from sight, now darkness as a dwelling-place. The third verse does not abolish the opposition, it resolves it, by showing that before God darkness and brightness do not differ. Here already stands the thesis that all that follows will unfold: the first light is hidden not from deficiency but from excess, and the shadow is only a name that our gaze gives it. I note that the language of the *sefirot* has not yet appeared; the structure, nonetheless, is there, prior to its names: this is what, in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, I called the letters precede the sentences, and what, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*, may be put thus: the structure precedes.

§ 2.

אמר ר' ברכיה מאי דכתיב (בראשית א' ב) והארץ היתה תהו ובהו מאי משמע
היתה, שכבר היתה תהו

Transliteration

'āmar R. Bērekhyā: ma'i di-khtiv (Bērēšit 1,2): wě-hā-āreṣ
hāyētāh tōhū wā-bōhū. ma'i mašmā hāyētāh? še-keṽār hāyētāh
tōhū.

Translation

Rabbi Berekhia said: what does it mean, that which is written (Genesis 1:2): “And the earth was (*hayetah*) tohu and bohu”? What does “was” mean? That it had already been tohu.

NOTE BY J. H.

The master does not read an absolute beginning but a perfect tense: *hayetah*, “it was,” presupposes a prior state, an earth that had already been *tohu* before returning to *bohu*. This is, in germ, the whole thought of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*: behind the visible, a condition already given. The structure precedes the unfolding, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*.

§ 10.

אמר רבי בון מאי דכתיב (משלי ח' כ"ג) מעולם נסכתי מראש מקדמי ארץ, מאי מעולם, שצריך להעלימו מכולי עלמא דכתיב (קהלת ג' י"א) גם את העולם נתן בלבם, אל תקרא העולם אלא העלם, אמרה תורה אני קדמתי להיות ראש לעולם שנאמר מעולם נסכתי מראש

Transliteration

'āmar rabbī Būn ma' di-ktīv (Mišlê 8,23) mē-ḏlām nissaktī mē-rōš mi-qadmē 'āreš, ma' mē-ḏlām, še-ṣārīk lēḥālīmō mi-kūllē 'ālmā' di-ktīv (Qōhelet 3,11) gam 'et ḥā-ḏlām nātan bē-libbām, 'al tigrā' ḥā-ḏlām 'ellā' ḥā-ēlem, 'āmrāh tōrāh 'ānī qādamtī libyōt rōš lā-ḏlām še-ne'ēmar mē-ḏlām nissaktī mē-rōš

Translation

Rabbi Bun said: what is the meaning of that which is written (Proverbs 8:23): “From eternity I was established, from the beginning, before the earth”? What does “from eternity” (*mē-ḏlām*) mean? That it must be hidden (*lēḥālīmō*) from the whole world, as it is written (Ecclesiastes 3:11): “he has also set eternity in their heart”; do not read “the eternity” (*ḥā-ḏlām*) but “that which is hidden” (*ḥā-ēlem*). The Torah said: I went before, so as to be the

head of the world, as it is said: “From eternity I was established, from the head.”

NOTE BY J. H.

The play upon the three consonants \square ayin-lamed-mem is the main-spring of the whole passage: one and the same skeleton \square lm carries at once \square ôlām (eternity, world) and \square elem (that which is hidden, withdrawn from sight). To read the one within the other is to say that what founds the world remains withheld from it. The Wisdom of Proverbs 8, already identified with the Torah by rabbinic tradition, is here the “head” (*rôš*) of the world: she does not enter into time, she precedes it and orders it. One will recognize the motif I never cease to encounter, that the structure precedes the existent; the *Bahir* does not yet possess the word *Hokhmah* as a fixed degree, but the threshold is there, and from this threshold the language of the sefirot will later be born. So too, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*, the structure precedes: what orders a thing is not given within it but goes before it.

§ 13.

ועוד ישב ר' בון ודרש מאי דכתיב (ישעי' שם) יוצר אור ובורא חושך, אלא אור שיש בו ממש כתיב בו יצירה, חשך שאין בו ממש כתיב ביה בריאה, כמה דאת אמר (עמוס ד, יג) יוצר הרים ובורא רוח.

Transliteration

wē-ōd yāšab R. Būn wē-dāraš ma' di-ktīb (Yēšāyāhū šām) yōšer 'or ū-bōrē' ḥōšek, 'ellā' 'or šē-yēš bō mammāš kētīb bō yēšrāh, ḥōšek šē-'ēn bō mammāš kētīb bēh bērī'āh, kēmāh dē-'at 'āmar (Āmōs 4,13) yōšer hārīm ū-bōrē' rūaḥ.

Translation

And further, Rabbi Boun sat and expounded: what does it mean that it is written (Isaiah 45:7): “he forms the light and creates the darkness”? Now, of the light, in which there is substance, Scripture employs the word “to form”; of the darkness, in which there is no substance, Scripture employs the word “to create”, just as you say (Amos 4:13): “he forms the mountains and creates the wind”.

NOTE BY J. H.

Boun’s first lesson on Isaiah 45:7: Scripture weighs its two verbs. Where there is *mammāš*, substance, it says “to form” (*yôšēr*); where there is nothing to fashion, it says “to create” (*bôre*). The light is therefore spoken, and the darkness only decreed: this is already, beneath the veil of a grammatical exegesis, the hierarchy that will later be called that of the emanated degrees. The structure precedes the name, just as in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the letters precede the sentences, and just as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity* that the structure precedes.

§ 16.

אמר ר' רחומאי האורה קדמה לעולם שענן וערפל סביביו שנאמר (בראשית א' ג) ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי אור

Transliteration

'āmar R. Reḥūma'i: hā'ôrāh qādmāh lādlām, še-ānān wa-ārāfel sevīvāw, še-ne'ēmar (Berēšit 1,3): wa-yō'mer 'ēlōhīm yehî 'ôr wa-yehî 'ôr.

Translation

Rabbi Reḥumai said: the light preceded the world, for “cloud

and thick darkness surround him” (Psalms 97:2), as it is said (Genesis 1:3): “And God said: let there be light, and there was light.”

NOTE BY J. H.

Here Reḥumai states the first theorem of the book: the light is prior to the world. The master does not read the “let there be light” of Genesis as a beginning, but as the manifestation of a brightness already present, which “cloud and thick darkness” (Psalms 97:2) serve to veil rather than to deny. This hidden light, whose name is not yet fixed in the vocabulary of the *sefirot*, is the threshold at which those are to be born: the structure precedes, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*. I note the deliberate slippage between the ’ôr of Genesis and the dark surroundings of the Psalm: it is from their tension that the *Sefer ha-Bahir* draws its doctrine of the light withdrawn from sight.

II. THE LETTERS

§ 14.

למה ב סתומה מכל צד ופתוחה מלפניה ללמדך שהוא בית לעולם והיינו דקב"ה
 מקומו של עולם ואין העולם מקומו, ואל תקרא ב אלא בית הדא היא דכתיב
 (משלי כ"ד ג) בחכמה יבנה בית ובתבונה יתכונן

Transliteration

*lāmmā bêt sētûmā mi-kol ṣad û-fētûḥā mi-lěfānêhā? li-lammed-
 kā še-hû' báyit lā-ḏlām; wě-haynú di-quḏšā' bērik hú' mēqômô šel
 ḏlām wě-'ên hā-ḏlām mēqômô. wě-'al tiqrā' bêt 'ellā' báyit, hādā'
 hî' di-ktîb (Mišlê 24,3): bē-ḥokmā yibbāne báyit û-bi-tbúnā
 yitkônān.*

Translation

Why is the *Bet* closed on every side and open only in front? To teach you that it is the house of the world; and this is the meaning: the Holy One, blessed be He, is the place of the world, but the world is not His place. Do not read *Bet*, but *báyit* (house), for it is written (Proverbs 24:3): “By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established.”

NOTE BY J. H.

The second letter of the alphabet, open only toward the front, figures the world: closed on every side, it opens only toward that which precedes it. The rabbinic formula that the *Sefer ha-Bahir* gathers here, “the Holy One is the place of the world, but the world is not His place,” overturns the spatial obviousness: it is not space that contains God, it is God who contains space. The play of *Bet* and *báyit*, letter and house, is

no ornament: the house is already built by *Hokmā* and established by *Tēbūnā*, those two powers that the book does not yet name *sefirot* but that it already sets as the framework of the real. That the house should be said to be built before it is inhabited is, in germ, the thesis I took up elsewhere, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*: the letters precede the sentences, the structure precedes.

§ 15.

ולמה ב' דומה, לאדם שנוצר בחכמה שסתום מכל צד ופתוח מלפניו והאל"ף
 פתוחה מלאחריו, לומר זה זנב הב' שפתוחה מלאחריו, שאלמלא כן לא יתקיים
 האדם כך אלמלא בית בזנבה של א' לא יתקיים העולם

Transliteration

*û-lāmmā bêt dômā, lē-'ādām še-nôṣar bē-ḥokmā še-sātûm mi-kol
 ṣad û-pātûaḥ mi-lē-fānāw wē-hā-'ālef pētûḥā mi-lē-'aḥārāw,
 lômar ze zēnav ha-bêt še-pētûḥā mi-lē-'aḥārāw, še-'ilmālē kēn
 lô yitqayyēm hā-'ādām; kāk 'ilmālē bêt bi-znāvāh šel 'ālef lô
 yitqayyēm hā-ḏlām.*

Translation

And to what is the Bet likened? To a man formed in Wisdom, closed on every side and open in front; and the Aleph is open behind. This is to say that the tail of the Bet is open behind; for were it not so, man would not endure. Likewise, were there no Bet in the tail of the Aleph, the world would not endure.

NOTE BY J. H.

The Bahir reads the very shape of the letters as a cosmology: the Bet, closed on three sides and gaping in front, figures the man “formed in Wisdom,” that is, the one open to what is coming. The whole argument is graphic, for the square letter bears a “tail” (the foot of the ב, the lower stroke of the כ) that affords an opening toward the rear: what stands behind the letter is what is left unsaid. Let us note that the Bet and the Aleph uphold one another, as do man and the world: the second letter (bet) already dwells in the tail of the first (aleph). The letters precede the sentences, and the One is never without the Two it carries within itself, a theme that my *Defence of Eternity* took up under another name, where the structure precedes.

§ 17.

ישב ר' אמוראי ודרש למה אל"ף בראש, שהיא היתה קודמת לכל, ואפילו לתורה

Transliteration

yāšab rabbi 'Amôrai wě-dāraš: lāmmāh 'ālef bā-rôš, še-hî' hāyētāh qôdemet la-kkôl, wa-'afillû la-Tôrāh.

Translation

Rabbi Amorai sat and expounded: why does the aleph stand at the head? Because she preceded all things, and even the Torah.

NOTE BY J. H.

The question is one of pure grammar and the answer one of pure metaphysics: the aleph opens the alphabet not by some accident of order, but because she is prior to that which she serves to write, prior even to the

Law itself. I note that the *Bahir* speaks here of the aleph in the feminine, *še-hī* , as of a lady or a root; this personification of the letters, still unsettled, has not yet received the fixed *sefirotic* vocabulary that will come later. This is our thread: the letters precede the sentences, the letter precedes the book, just as I argued elsewhere, in my *Defence of Eternity*, that the structure precedes.

§ 26.

א"ל למה"ד למלך שהיה לו דירות נאות ושם שם לכל אחד ואחד מהם וכולן זו טובה מזו, אמר אתן לבני דירה זו ששמה אל"ף, גם זו טובה ששמה יו"ד גם זו טובה ששמה שי"ן, מה עשה אספן כל השלשה ועשה מהם שם אחד ועשה מהם בית אחד

Transliteration

'āmar lô: lě-mā ha-dāvār dômê? lě-melek še-hāyā lô dîrôt nā'ôt
wě-šām šem lě-kol 'eḥād wě-'eḥād mehem, wě-kullān zô ṭôvā mi-zô.
'āmar: 'ettēn li-wnī dîrā zô še-šēmāh 'ālef, gam zô ṭôvā še-šēmāh
jôd, gam zô ṭôvā še-šēmāh šîn. mā āšā? 'āsāfan kol ha-šēlōšā wě-
āšā mehem šem 'eḥād wě-āšā mehem bāyit 'eḥād.

Translation

He said to him: To what may the matter be compared? To a king who possessed beautiful dwellings, and he gave a name to each one of them, and each was more beautiful than the last. He said: "I shall give to my son this dwelling, whose name is Aleph; yet this one too is beautiful, whose name is Yod; and this one too is beautiful, whose name is Shin." What did he do? He gathered the three together, made of them a single name, and made of them a single house.

NOTE BY J. H.

The parable, under the image of a king apportioning his dwellings, states a doctrine of the letters: three dwellings bearing for names Aleph, Yod, and Shin, each more beautiful than the one before, are at last united into a single name and into a single house. In this composite name one recognizes the three consonants of *Isch*, scattered and then gathered up; yet the *Sefer ha-Bahir* does not yet put it so, preferring the fable of the king, in which the multiplicity of names is only a detour toward their unity. What I retain above all is the gesture: the king does not choose among his dwellings, he gathers them. Where one would expect a division, the text sets down a reunion; and the house of the son is beautiful only because it is made of all of them. The vocabulary of the *sefirot* has not appeared, but the idea of a structure that precedes its names and gathers them is already wholly present in this threefold dwelling: the letters precede the sentences, as the structure precedes, just as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity* and noted again in my comments on the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

§ 61.

שאלו אותו מאי צד"י, אמר להם זה נר"ן יו"ד צד"י אף זוגו נר"ן יו"ד הה"ד (משלי י' כה) וצדיק יסוד עולם:

Transliteration

šā'ālū 'ôtô: ma'î šādê? 'āmar lāhem: zê nūn jôd šādê, 'af zûgô nūn jôd; hādā' hū' di-khtîv (Mišlê 10,25): wě-šaddîq jēsôd ôlām.

Translation

They asked him: what is the *šadê* (the letter *š*)? He said to them: it is *nun-yod-šadê*, and its consort likewise *nun-yod*; and this is what

is written (Proverbs 10:25): “And the righteous is the foundation of the world.”

NOTE BY J. H.

The letter is questioned not about its shape but about its full name: the *šadé* is spelled *nun-yod-šadé*, and it has a “consort,” a companion, which unfolds in the same way through *nun-yod*. I hear here the two figures of the letter, the bent *šadé* within the body of the word and the upright *šadé* of the ending: two forms for a single value, male and female coupled, as the master will say elsewhere of the letters. The verse from Proverbs seals the reading: the *šadé* bears the *šaddîq*, the righteous one, the “foundation of the world,” that pillar which the later tradition will name *Yēsôd*. The scriptural word names *jēsôd* already; what is not yet there is the technical name of the sefirah Yesod. The word is not yet there; the thing already is. The structure precedes its name, as I argued in my *Defence of Eternity*.

III. THE TEN POWERS

§ 27.

שאלו לו תלמידיו מהו דלי"ת, א"ל מלה"ד לעשרה מלכים שהיו במקום אחד, וכלם עשירים, ואחד מהם עשיר אך לא כאחד מהם, אע"פ שעשרו גדול דל נקרא לגבי העשירים:

Transliteration

šā'ālū lō talmîdāw: mahû dālet? 'āmar lāhem: māšāl lēmā ha-dāvār dôme? la-āšārā mēlakîm še-hājû bē-māqôm 'eḥād, wē-kullām āšîrîm, wē-'eḥād mē-hem āšîr 'ak lō' kē-'eḥād mē-hem; 'af-āl-pî še-ōsrô gādôl, dal niqrā' lē-gabbê hā-āšîrîm.

Translation

His disciples asked him: "What is the *dalet*?" He said to them: "To what may the matter be likened? To ten kings who were in one and the same place, all of them rich, but one of them rich though not so much as each of the others; and although his wealth was great, he is called poor in comparison with the rich."

NOTE BY J. H.

The letter *dalet*, fourth of the alphabet, has the value four and carries in its name the word *dal*, "poor, needy." The master explains its rank by a parable of the court: ten kings in one place, that is, ten powers equal in dignity, and yet one of them, measured against the other nine, is called "poor." The poverty of the *dalet* is no absolute lack but a relational indigence, a position and not a substance. I note that the "ten" powers appear here without the word *sefirot*, and that one of the ten is already marked as the one that receives and possesses nothing of its own: what