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Parpola's 'Tree of Life' Revisited: Mysteries and Myths of *Assyrian Kabbalah*

1. Introduction

If we want to understand the concept of a 'Tree of Life,' we have to make a distinction between two approaches to the same issue. On the one hand, the Tree is a universal symbol of human cultures everywhere, represented in myths and iconography as well as sagas and fairy tales. On the other hand, there exists the more specifically esoteric meaning behind the obvious and more 'vulgar' or commonplace interpretations. It is this view that stands behind the mystical conceptions of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

In the motifs of Assyrian, Canaanite and, more broadly, Middle Eastern religions the Tree figures as part of early Semitic (as well as non-Semitic) cultures and their symbolism. The common perception has tied this idea of a life-giving Tree with various forms of 'fertility cults' and polytheistic agrarian ritual practice. Simo Parpola, in his 1993 article "The Assyrian Tree of Life",[1] strived to question this established viewpoint, by offering a complementary analysis of the Assyrian tree as a symbol of an early form of 'Kabbalistic' mystical knowledge which would not only stand as a bridge between the so-called earlier 'Oriental' polytheism and later, Abrahamic[2] monotheism, but also offer a novel explanation of the roots of Tree imagery in Medieval Jewish mysticism.

My aims here are complex. The precise question of the correctness of Parpola's genealogical account does not primarily concern me. It seems to rely on a matter of faith until conclusive evidence is found one way or the other. The basic problem of the missing archaeological evidence between circa 500 B.C. and 1300 A.D. has not been solved satisfactorily (more on this later). However, I see my main aim to be the clearing of

[1] Parpola, Simo: "The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy" (1993), published in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies 52*, pp. 161-208.

[2] 'Abrahamic' stands here for the triad of Biblical monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Speaking of Abraham, we should not forget that the Bible claims he was born in 'Ur of Chaldea,' i.e. Mesopotamia.

some obstacles standing in the way of acceptance by the academic community of the idea of mystical – largely oral – knowledge transmitted by 'Kabbalistic' circles of initiates.

In other words, I will explore the question: What is Kabbalah, after all? Only after we have some idea of what Kabbalah *is*, what it *was*, what it *claimed to be*, and what it *did*, can we approach our topic with a sufficient openness, and clarity, of mind. To reach that state, we need to climb a few steps on the Jacob's ladder, as it were.

I will first establish the general framework of the 'Tree of Life' as depicted in world cultures since time immemorial (chapter 2). Next, I will define 'mysticism' in terms of secrecy, tradition and interpretation (chapter 3). Then, in a move that is absolutely crucial, we will have a chance to explore the hidden mysteries of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life in more detail (chapter 4). Finally, I will turn to Assyrian myth (chapter 5) and revisit the 'hot' question of Assyrian 'monotheism' in the context of our discussion so far.

By the time we reach Conclusion, I will hope to have shown, at least *prima facie*, the possibility (and likelihood) of the following: 1) the simultaneous overlay and cohabitation of 'vulgar' *and* 'hidden' meanings in popular and sacred mythology; 2) the central role of secrecy in perpetuating advanced illuminism; 3) the mutual dependency but also radical difference between the ideas of the Tree as a *fertility* symbol, on the one hand, and the Tree as a source of *cosmotheological* wisdom, on the other; 4) the higher-order monotheism emergent, or latent, in systematized polytheistic pantheons (e.g. Assyria); 5) the existence of a number of suggestive clues linking together Kabbalah and Mesopotamia.

I want to open up possibilities instead of definite answers, because most often answers are less stable and less lasting than the questions. As stated in the beginning, it seems to me that any 'definite' proof is hard to come by but that suggestive readings of the archaeological and literary record *will* and *do* point to the direction of Parpola's claims.

2. 'Tree of Life' in Myth and Archaeology

It doesn't matter where you come from or what your cultural background is, the chances are that somewhere in the mythology of your culture, whether buried deep or in a prominent position, the Tree can be found as a part of that mythos. From the Yggdrasil of the Nordic peoples to the Great Oak of the Finnish Kalevala, the Tree is certainly not an exclusively "Oriental" or subtropical theme, but a very universal symbol of nature, fertility and stability. Its roots reach deep to the ground and its canopy all the way to the heavens. Its upright position mirrors that of humans. The tree is an invaluable source of raw material

for construction, tools and firewood. Whether for the Lebanese of ancient times or the Finns of today, wood has always been an important vehicle of trade. But more importantly, the Tree Of Life, or the Sacred Tree, has almost always given rise to religious, spiritual, shamanic and mystical interpretations. I will argue *most* of these have arisen independently of each other, but this viewpoint has been challenged by both Parpola[3] and Holmberg[4].

The Tree of Life symbolism extends from Egypt and Mesopotamia to India, Central Asia, Siberia and Western Europe. In Buddhist mythology we encounter the Jambu tree[5], and even the Soma/Haoma myth of the Indo-Aryans can be linked to "a fertile, golden-flowered tree of life" located on "the world's central mountain."[6] Holmberg further draws parallels between Eddic lore, Zarathustran Avestan and Egyptian mythology where the Tree figures prominently. Nonetheless, we have *absolutely no reason* to agree with his conclusions, namely, that "we cannot assume that beliefs so perfectly analogous could have developed separately for different peoples far apart from each other."[7] He argues for a genealogical lineage.[8] Here, I think, we should be very careful. There is no reason to jump to such conclusions. Although some of his theories are plausible on the surface – such as the transfer of Persian paradise mythology to the Tatars of Central Asia and the Shamanic tribes of Southern Siberia – the more obvious answer is right under our noses: common human experience. The tree is an almost unavoidable mythical motif, linked to concepts of majesty, foundations (roots), ascent to the heavens, fertility (phallic sexuality), stability etc. We do not need inventive theories of migration to account for these. What we *should* concern ourselves with is the transfer of specific 'spiritual' interpretations of the tree myth. Such are explored by Parpola in his Assyrian Tree of Life theory.

What most surprised me about the Tree of Life literature was the implicit (and often explicit) assumption that the Tree is a fertility symbol. I think E.O. James[9], for example, is led astray by his overeagerness to interpret everything in terms of natural cycles, harvest rituals and fertility cults. I have no doubt this kind of anthropology owes a lot to Frazer's classic *The Golden Bough*. On one level this assumption is justified: the 'Life' of the Tree is obviously related to vitalistic theories of nature, and its fruit-bearing

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[3] *ibid.* as we know, in terms of the Assyrian-Hebrew connection.
[4] It is the central theme of his *Elämänpuu*: *uskontotieteellisiä tutkielmia*. Otava: Helsinki, Finland (1920)
[5] *ibid.* p.61
[6] *ibid.* p.62; See E.O.James 1966: pp.25-28, for another attempt to tie Soma to the Tree and 'Waters' of Life.
[7] *ibid.* p.66
[8] For example, of some Siberian tales of lush forests and earthly paradise ('Garden of Eden'), he claims that they could only have originated "in Northern India or the Middle East" (*ibid.* p.57) and travelled northward.
[9] James, E.O. 1966: *The Tree of Life, an archaeological study*. E.J. Brill: Leiden, the Netherlands.

capacity corresponds to *both* phallic male *and* child-rearing female potencies. So he says: "the induction and impulsion of ever-renewing vitality and the riddance and expulsion of barrenness, aridity and sterility [are] the fundamental elements embodied in the Tree of Life."[10] In this literal, obvious and almost vulgar sense, "the sacredness of trees and plants"[11] stems from agrarian concerns for fertility. His claim, for example, that the sole purpose of the union of Dumuzi & Inanna, or Tammuz & Ishtar, was to "ensure fertility and prosperity of the land"[12] follows from his identification of these deities with "the Frazerian 'dying god'"[13]. OK, perhaps we can see Ishtar and Tammuz, the fertile youth, as consummating the marriage of the newlyweds and fertilizing the soil, but in other instances James's approach falls short, as when he interprets Enuma Elish in purely 'climatological' terms: the salty and sweet waters commingling symbolize the Euphrates/Tigris delta on the Persian Gulf, and the sociological function of the New Years recital ritual "followed the same pattern based on the Tammuz theme"[14] of fertility "as the Tigris & Euphrates merged with the sea to produce the luxuriant growth in the Southern Mesopotamian marches."[15] This reading, in and of itself, has many problems, but the most glaring *error* of James is his claim that Ashur (Marduk), the hero of the poem, "like Osiris in Egypt […] is a dying and reviving god whose restoration to life at the New Year was enacted in the customary ritual and its emblems"![16] Here, without any evidence, the supreme god, represented as a winged disk hovering above a sacred tree, is explained away as a harvest deity! We shall come back to both Ishtar and Ashur, but only after we have dealt with this issue.

We have encountered the limits of the vocabulary of naturalist polytheism. The question whether there is a radical break between polytheism and monotheism (a fact denied by Parpola[17] and Baumann[18]) intersects surprisingly closely with the question of naturalism vs. spiritualism. This is because the modern conception of polytheism is based on a rather simplistic conception of pre-monotheistic religions: "Monotheism is seen as the revelation of God while polytheism is seen as the result of deifying nature."[19] This dualism almost supposes that a polytheist pantheon always represents forces of nature personified.

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[10] *ibid.* pp.vii-viii
[11] *ibid.* p.1
[12] *ibid.* p. 10
[13] *ibid.* p.8
[14] *ibid.* p.10
[15] *ibid.* p.11
[16] *ibid.* p.42
[17] Parpola 2000: "Monotheism in Ancient Assyria?" - see bibliography for details.
[18] Baumann 2006: "Trendy Monotheism? etc." - see bibliography for details.
[19] *ibid.* p.13

But are these two readings – vulgar and spiritual – necessarily mutually exclusive? I would say no; most myths embody several layers of meaning, like archaeological strata, buried under the surface story. These 'deep structures' are the subject of narratology, for example. They figure in Campbellian myth analysis as well as in the Jungian search for archetypes. In this sense, it's perfectly logical to approach the Ishtar myth as a fertility cult – *or* as the representation of the feminine powers of the supreme council of the gods. The Descent to the Netherworld can be interpreted as a seasonal metaphor – *or* as a spiritual journey. And so it goes: the Tree is either a kind of 'maypole' of fertility – *or* a map of the cosmos.

In fact, this ambiguity between 'natural' and 'spiritual' interpretations is evidenced by James's description of Assyrian seals: "In Babylonia and Assyria, again, the sacred tree, notably the date-palm, was the source of life and from its branches and leaves radiated its mystic power and virtue. Being the abode of the god, the tree often portrayed the deity in anthropomorphic form with branches protruding from his body."[20] Here we are on the doorsteps of a Kabbalistic reading. Surely this 'mystic power' of the tree, as 'the abode of the god,' goes somewhat beyond mere fertility symbolism? I surmise that, indeed, the birth of the tree motif in ancient cultures corresponds to certain economic imperatives of agrarian living and forms one of the central symbols of a kind of 'agrarian metaphysics' of fertility, harvest rituals, genetic potency and seasonal regeneration. However, this very basic symbol became almost immediately co-opted into various mythical and spiritual contexts that went far beyond the mundane level of analysis. This, again, is a restatement of the idea that myths can have multiple levels of meaning *simultaneously*. Parpola, in his 2002 review[21] of his 1993 theory, says the following: "Looking back, I now see that the Tree is really no tree at all, but a multi-layered visual symbol, an aide-mémoire, holding not just one meaning but a multiplicity of meanings." It is this 'multiplicity' of interpretations that makes possible the search for deeper and deeper layers of meaning. Such a process of hermeneutical reading forms one of the basic tenets of Kabbalah – or indeed any other mystical tradition that aims to elucidate the 'hidden meaning' of texts.

Holmberg, more than James, understands the 'hidden' meanings of the tree. Whereas James makes (interesting but not very deep) connections to, for example, the *linga*-phallicism of Harappa, the cult of ficus and acacia trees in the Indus Valley and the bodhi-tree of Buddhist lore,[22] Holmberg accounts also for shamanic and spiritual aspects.

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[20] James 1966: p.42
[21] Parpola 2002: "Understanding the Tree of Life" - see bibliography for details.
[22] James 1966: p. 22 (linga-worship), pp.23-24 (Indian tree worship), and p.24 (bodhi-tree)

He recounts how the Tatars of Altai, for example, in their shamanic journey, climb up the nine heavens one-by-one: for the rituals, they set up (writes Holmberg[23]) a special tent at the centre of which stands a birch tree, pointing skyward through a hole in the ceiling. This tree, which symbolises the earth-sky relationship and the shaman's journey into the heavens, is adorned by nine vertical engravings representing the nine layers of the sky. The shaman must rise up the nine steps in order to reach up the heavens. It is clear, I think, that this is a primitive Tree of Life conception unrelated to the Semitic myths of the same. Holmberg finds versions of this motif, with vertical cosmologies of either *nine* or *seven* layers (these numbers tend to recur in the cosmologies of different cultures[24]) representing the psychological and spiritual journey of the adept, across tribes and cultures far apart.

He mentions the step pyramids (ziggurats) of Babylon as representations of man's climb towards the heavens.[25] The usually seven-tiered model of these constructions bears some relation to such 'shamanic' seven-tiered models of the cosmos and the heavens, each step standing for a level of reality, and each step closer to the temple (god) at the top. This 'Jacob's Ladder' motif is reflected in the Sumerian terms[26] 'Duranki' (the bond of heaven and earth) and 'Etemenanki' (the house – temple – of the foundation of heaven and earth[27]). A pyramid could also be seen as imitative of mountains.[28] The Khanty people of Siberia believe in "a seven-tiered mountain of the heavens,"[29] which falls somewhere between shamanic tree cosmologies and Babylonian 'artificial mountains' (step pyramids). Interestingly, the name of this 'central mountain' amongst the Mongols and the Central Asian tribes was "Sumbur, Sumur or Sumer,"[30] which certainly suggests, even if it doesn't prove, a Sumerian connection. At any rate, it is clear that all these towers, pyramids, temples and holy mounts – including the 'pancake' pagodas of the Far East – are important social and physical monuments as well as iconic representations of vertical cosmologies.

Leaving aside mountains and step pyramids for a moment, we have reached one important aspect of mystical knowledge here: the importance of numerology. Not only do most shamans (e.g. Siberian) and mystics (e.g. Kabbalistic, Christian and Islamic) have very precisely cosmological theories of the number of 'heavens' or 'divine realms' or 'higher (lower) dimensions,' they also associate numerical values to specific godly powers.

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[23] Holmberg 1920: pp. 30-31
[24] Bafflingly, many different cultures theorize the existence of precisely seven (or nine) "heavens."
[25] *ibid.* p.34
[26] *ibid.* p.38
[27] The name of the temple in Babylon devoted to Marduk.
[28] *ibid.* pp. 39-41
[29] *ibid.* p.40
[30] *ibid.* p.41; The Indian mythical mountain, called "Mt. Meru" or "Sumeru," seems to be related to this.

It is this association of magical numerology, graded cosmology and tree mythology which gives us impetus to move forward, finally, into the realm of mysticism and Kabbalah.

3. Shamanism, Mysteries and Mystics

Cohn-Sherbok, in his introduction to Kabbalah,[31] asks: "What is mysticism? […] In all likelihood it was derived from the word *muein*, which means to close the lips or eyes." The Greek root of the words 'mysticism' and 'mysteries' suggests that we look at the so-called Eleusian mysteries of Ancient Greece, before entering the world of Kabbalah itself.

In his commentary to Pico, Martikainen quotes Alf Henriksen[32] on the Greek mysteries: "The Eleusian Mysteries were held in every five years, from time immemorial deep into the Christian era; it is entirely possible, then, that the practice survived for some 1500 years. […] The Mysteries lasted for nine consecutive days, during which sacred ceremonies were performed whose true purpose was revealed only to initiates. These, in turn, were forbidden to talk about what they experienced. Amazingly, no one seems to have broken their vows. Later generations know almost nothing, despite the fact that practically all the notables of Athens were counted among the initiated."

1500 years seems like an almost impossibly long time to keep secrets. Even more incredible is the claim that nobody broke that secrecy! Yet where is the counter-evidence? All things considered, this is how things appear to have been. The oral culture of the mysteries seems to have never been written down. It helped the matter, of course, that revealing the secrets was a capital offence – but laws are never perfect. It seems likely that certain secrets were simply *accepted* as being taboo and out of the discussion. They were 'mysteries' (muein) in the sense of 'silent' and 'hidden' but nonetheless 'present.'

The first connection to pursue is the association of Demeter with the Eleusian mysteries. It is commonly assumed that Demeter is a distant relative of Ishtar. After all, her trip to the underworld is mirrored by Ishtar's equivalent journey. We will attempt to show (chapter 5) an intimate connection between Ishtar (under various names), and Tree of Life symbolism in the Levant and Mesopotamia, and here we seem to have Demeter, another lady, as the carrier of divine secrets. Were the Eleusian mysteries linked to Tree of Life mysteries? I will not pursue this question further here, but I see room for future research…

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[31] Cohn-Sherbok: 1995, p.1
[32] Alf Henriksen: *Antiikin Tarinoita* I, pp.366-7 (quoted in Pico/Martikainen 1999: pp.106-7)

There is another interesting connection tying the Eleusian mysteries directly into the orbit of our Tree of Life discussion. It has been argued[33] that, in case the *kykeion* concoction used during the Eleusian mysteries contained entheogenic properties (as a shamanic tool of illumination), one possible source, aside from common ergot fungus, would by the psychoactive *acacia* plant common to the Mediterranean. As we have seen, Holmberg mentions acacia worship in the Indus Valley.[34] Furthermore, it is precisely acacia that has the appellation Tree of Life in the Egyptian Osiris cult: "The acacia was regarded as sacred by the ancient Egyptians. […] Osiris was said to have been killed by being enclosed in a coffin from which acacia tree sprouted; out of this tree Osiris (in other versions, Horus) came out to life."[35] Nor should we forget that the Biblical Ark of the Covenant[36] as well as the Tabernacle[37] were made from acacia wood, suggesting its usefulness and, by application, holiness, or at least divine preference. As it happens, in a recent article[38] Benny Shanon, Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has suggested that "the ancient Israelite religion was associated with the use of Entheogens," namely, "Acacia tree and the bush *Perganum harmala.*"[39] The Zoroastrian 'haoma' has also been associated with the latter plant.[40] Interestingly, the author finds supporting evidence in the Zohar, "rabbinical and kabbalistic literature" and "Jewish hermeneutics."[41] While the evidence, both botanical and hermeneutical, is far from conclusive, herein lies another venue for further investigation; there is still work to be done until the mysteries of the Tree of Life – whether acacia or the date palm – are unveiled.

To return to the Mysteries, I think it goes to show that it is indeed *possible* (if not easy) for a group, or an abstract idea, to perpetuate itself and its mysteries for centuries, even millennia, without implosion or decay. It is less likely, I think, to assume that any group, or any single idea, could survive so long without significant alterations and developments in the course of its dissemination. However, the core ideas may well survive (either in written or orally transmitted form), barely noticed, for a very long time indeed. In fact, Kabbalah itself (if you count the writing of Sefir Yetsirah as its inaugural date[42]) has

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[33] By Ralph Metzner; cf. also Shanon: 2008.
[34] Holmberg 1920: pp.23-24
[35] Shanon 2008: p.63
[36] Exodus 25:10-15
[37] Exodus 25:23-30
[38] Shanon, Benny 2008: "Biblical Entheogens: A Speculative Hypothesis" - see bibliography for details.
[39] *ibid.* p.51; for a more comprehensive breakdown of the chemistry of these two plants, see pp. 56-58.
[40] *ibid.* p.53
[41] *ibid.* p. 68 (Zohar), p.69 (Kabbalah) and p.70 (hermeneutics).
[42] Which Cohn-Sherbok: 1995 does; Scholem (1987), however, starts with much later, with Bahir and Zohar.

already lasted for nearly two millennia – not to mention the religion of Judaism itself. I am convinced that certain 'underground currents' may harbour and transmit wisdom traditions through turbulent years and political changes, only for the practice to resurface at an opportune moment, after a long hiatus, somewhere far and distant. Sometimes the tradition can even 'die' only to be resurrected suddenly much later. The Gnostic revival of recent decades, thanks to archaeological findings, is a case in point.

In the West, for Renaissance Humanists, the discovery of ancient wisdom – both real and spurious – was made possible by the increased trade and travel between the Orient and the Occident. As Umberto Eco put it: "The thinkers of the Renaissance sought to deny the ordered, static conception of the world by embracing the mystic Hebraic tradition, the esoteric revelations of the Egyptians, and the disclosures of a Neo-Platonic hermeticism."[43] However, in supplanting the 'ordered' tradition of Catholic dogma, many new 'orders' were soon discovered, whether in astrology, numerology or the doctrine of the *sefiroth*. The Kabbalists themselves thought Zohar represented thousand-year-old wisdom. Many Renaissance thinkers accepted these claims. Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), considered to be one of the most important philosophers of the Renaissance, strived in Medici's Florence where he was given access to various Hermetic and Kabbalistic texts. He specifically "learnt Hebrew in order to read Kabbalistic literature."[44] Pico writes of "the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews"[45] that they ultimately derive from Moses, who received *two* sets of Laws at Mt. Sinai; one for the masses and one for the initiates: "Moses didn't only receive the Law that he left for future generations in his five books, but he also received *the true and secret interpretation* of the Law. God decreed him to publish the Law for the people, but the interpretation of this law should not be written down, nor otherwise be known among the people. Moses should inform Joshua, […] and him only, who in turn should pass on the secrets to the next high priest, and *everything should proceed in total silence.*"[46] (my italics) This difference, between the 'written' Torah and the 'oral' Torah[47], between the 'vulgar' and the 'true and secret' interpretation, is foundational to Kabbalah, or indeed any form of textual hermeneutics. In the 12th century work 'Bahir,'[48] one of the

[43] Umberto Eco 1982: p.82
[44] Pico della Mirandola 1999: p.27 (Tapio Martikainen's introduction)
[45] *ibid.* p.93
[46] *ibid.*
[47] "The oral Torah is the sum total of everything that has been said by [those] who have interpreted the text. […] It performs the necessary role of completing the written Torah and making it more concrete." (Scholem 1969: p.47) Both traditional rabbis and esoteric Kabbalists, as interpreters, contribute to the oral Torah.
[48] "Towards 1180 the earliest Kabbalist document, the Book Bahir […] made its appearance in southern France. *No one knows exactly where it came from.*" (Scholem 1987: p.90, my italics)

first Kabbalistic texts, this relationship is explored: "The written Torah ['Light'] needs the oral Torah, which is a lamp [i.e. that which bears the light], in order to resolve the difficulties and to explain its secrets."[49] Whether or not any 'hidden' secrets 'really' exist, such claims empower the adept to visionary and ecstatic states as they reach deeper and deeper into the mysteries: "Pico apparently saw himself as a magician and Kabbalist privy to secret knowledge."[50] It is no wonder that the religious authorities (primarily Christian) saw him as a dangerous heretic: Pico called the literal Biblical account a "simple story"[51] (!) for the masses: "the most important thing was to veil the secret mysteries and highest divinities under the Law and beneath the clumsy [sic] words."[52] These 'secret mysteries' and 'highest divinities' were – what else – allegorical, personal, psychological, spiritual and mystical interpretations of the religious canon. As Gershom Scholem writes, "when a mystic encounter the holy scriptures of his tradition […] the sacred text is smelted down and a new dimension is discovered in it."[53] In order to preserve and cherish these new dimensions, elaborate rituals and symbolisms are created. One of such elaborate, convoluted systems is Kabbalah (literally 'Tradition'), which Scholem describes as "the sum of Jewish mysticism."[54] It is the interpretative tradition of ecstatic-visionary Judaism: "At the heart of Kabbalah […] God communicates himself."[55]

4. Kabbalah: the Doctrine of the Sefiroth

Parpola, whether writing as a mystic or a scholar, writes: "the story of my acquaintance with the Tree of Life […] could not have ended without my becoming, to some extent at least, an initiate of the Tree."[56] Furthermore, he claims that "one must become both a Kabbalist and an adept of the Assyrian tree in order to understand the latter."[57] It is for this very reason that we must explore the doctrine of Kabbalah in some detail.

"Most if not all Kabbalistic speculation and doctrine is concerned with the realm of the divine emanations or *sefiroth*, in which God's creative power unfolds."[58]

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[49] The anonymous author of Bahir, quoted in Scholem 1969: p.48.
[50] Pico della Mirandola: p.31 (Tapio Martikainen's introduction)
[51] *ibid.* p.93
[52] *ibid.*
[53] Scholem 1969: pp.11-12
[54] *ibid.* p.1
[55] *ibid.* p.95
[56] Parpola 2002
[57] *ibid.*
[58] Scholem 1969: p.35

These emanations constitute "the world of divine attributes" which stands for "divine life itself."[59] These concepts reflect the belief that "the Torah is the concentrated power of God Himself, as expressed in His Nature."[60] But the Torah, as God's "perfect edifice"[61] and as the cosmic body of the Godhead, "is called Tree of Life."[62] How do we approach this?

There are, I think, two keys to Kabbalah: *Light* and the *Tree of Life*. These two concepts form the foundation of all Kabbalistic thought. They are also intimately linked. Although our main focus is the latter concept, we should do well to turn our attention briefly to the meaning of 'Light' in Kabbalah. Here is a quotation from the Kabbalist Ariel of Gerona (of Provence): "Imagine that you yourself are light, and that all of your surroundings, on every side, are also lights."[63] It is clear that he is not only giving instructions for meditation practice, but also visualising the different *sefiroth* as 'lights,' reflecting symmetrically downwards, like crystals, the radiance of *Or Ayn Sof*, whose "light has no end" and "cannot be fathomed."[64] It is clear that this 'light' is nothing other than the 'life force' of the Tree, the 'waters of life' that spring from Eden, the place of the 'dwelling of the presence of God' (Shekhinah; more on this concept later).

It is true that almost all forms of mysticism have a relationship to *light*. Sufis, Christian mystics, Freemasons and all sorts of illuminists have talked about it. It relates to the visionary experiences achieved during the exalted state of trance or meditation. Light implies the experience of enlightenment. More metaphorically, it stands for the ultimate 'source' of light, equated with the Godhead. Perhaps the most important concept in Jewish mysticism is the concept of *Ayn Sof*, the nameless nothingness, which Zohar calls the "never-to-be-exhausted fountain of light."[65] The light that springs from this primal source the Kabbalists call *Or Ayn Sof*, 'the light of ayn sof.' Ayn Sof is by no means simply another name for the Hebrew God. On the contrary, Ayn Sof is *nameless*: "'Nothing' is itself the first and highest of the *sefiroth*. It is the 'root of all roots,' from which the tree draws nourishment."[66] As the Zohar explains, "there is none that understand him. He is not called by the name yod, hey, vav, hey [the Tetragrammaton: YHVH i.e. Jahweh], nor by any other name except when his lights extends itself upon them. When he removes himself

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[59] *ibid.*
[60] *ibid.* p.40
[61] *ibid.* p.45
[62] *ibid.* p.46 (quoting Moses de Leon) and p.56 (quoting Zohar)
[63] Cohn-Sherbok 1995: p.73
[64] *ibid.*
[65] Scholem 1969: p.89
[66] *ibid.* p.103

from them [the assumed forms], he has no name of his own at all."[67] So, it is clear that Ayn Sof is *not* to be equated with Jahweh (or El or Ehyeh), but is rather an even more primordial Godhead, although certainly not in conflict with Jahweh. To be sure, within the Creation (as opposed to the transcendental realm of Ayn Sof), YHWH does rule supreme as the lord of Israel, as the body of the Tree of Life and as the 'soul' animating the letters of the Torah. In the words of Joseph of Gikatila, "a leading Spanish Kabbalist"[68] of the thirteenth century: "The whole Torah is a fabric of appellatives, *kinnayim* – the generic terms for the epithets of God, such as compassionate, great, merciful, venerable [these are also the *sefiroth!*] – and these epithets in turn are woven from the various names of God [such as El, Elohim, Shaddai]. But all these holy names are connected with the tetragrammaton YHWH and dependent upon it."[69] Here YHWH is seen as the progenitor of all the 'appellatives,' i.e. *sefiroth*. All other epithets, i.e. deities in the Assyrian sense, are woven from this fabric of the 'various names of God.' Isn't this how many Assyrian deities functioned, as kind of competing 'epithets', vying for the title of the 'supreme god' (Anu, Enki, Marduk, Ashur…)? Only one epithet – like Ashur or Jahweh – can fill in the 'slot,' *sefirah,* of the Kabbalistic Kether (Crown), reserved for the currently reigning god.

It should be noted, moreover, that the very name of the seminal book Zohar means 'Splendour' or 'Radiance.' Also, Bahir, the name of the other foundational text of Kabbalah, means 'Brilliance.' It is clear, then, that Kabbalah is a form of light mysticism.

Let us now turn our attention to the primary symbol of our essay, the holy Tree. In Judeo-Christian lore, the Tree of Life is, of course, associated with the story of Genesis. A less well-known fact is that the Tree "not only occurs in the story of man's fall, at the very beginning of the Bible, but also at its very end, in the last chapter of John's Revelations, where the tree growing in the middle of the heavenly Jerusalem is presented as the seal of man's salvation. This remarkable configuration – the Tree is otherwise rarely mentioned in the Bible – makes it the *Alpha and Omega* of the early Christian doctrine of salvation."[70] We can make of this what we will: either we accept the Tree as a central motif in the Bible, or we dismiss it as a peripheral and minor item deserving little curiosity. Whatever it is that *we* do, the Kabbalists chose the first option and focused much of their efforts in taking this concept of the Tree of Life to a level beyond mere Biblical exegesis. And if the Biblical Tree has its origins in a wider Middle Eastern context we can see that

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[67] ibid.
[68] *ibid.* p.42
[69] *ibid.*
[70] Parpola 2002 (my italics)

this Biblical (Torah) and Talmudic material was little more than an excuse to develop and practice a very idiosyncratic form of mysticism, based on very old techniques and ways of attributing various magical, spiritual and cosmic potencies to the Tree.

There are a number of interesting questions about the 'unknown' origins of Kabbalah. It is accepted that "Kabbalah was born in [XII-XIII century] Provence,"[71] around Languedoc, from where it spread to Spain and elsewhere. It is here, in the land of the Cathars (the Albigenses) that Jewish mysticism takes off. Southern France had active connections to the rest of Europe, but crucially also "to the Orient, with which there existed commercial relations."[72] Scholem goes on to speculate: "And who can say which ideas or bits of ideas, what kind of notebooks or fragments, were conveyed along these paths and channel."[73] Indeed: anything is possible. However, we have no evidence that any 'Oriental' literary material formed the basis for books like Bahir and Zohar. Certainly medieval Kabbalah owes a lot to earlier (2nd century) 'Merkabah mysticism', where, based on Ezekiel's revelations involving 'Chariots' ('*Merkabah*'), rabbis wrote down "instructions for obtaining the ecstatic vision of the celestial regions of the Merkabah [which] describe […] the seven heavens and the seven palaces or temples, *Hekhaloth*, through which the Merkabah mystics travels before he arrives at the throne of God."[74] Here we have the rudimentary form of the seven-fold structure of the heavens, comparable to that of the Siberian shamans or the seven-fold step pyramids of Babylonia. More importantly, the heavenward ascent towards 'the throne of God' (Kether) anticipates certain Kabbalistic models where the emanations go both ways, 'up and down,' like in the vision of Jacob's Ladder: "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."[75] Yes, going up and down, like the vital 'currents' of the Tree of Life. Indeed: "The image of a ladder ascending heavenwards became a symbol in later Jewish thought for the heavenly ascent of the soul to the divine realm."[76] Whether it be Jacob's Ladder, Ezekiel's Chariots or the Book of Revelations, the Bible is rife with mysticism.

With all these connections, there are still many unsolved questions. Whether Kabbalah originated in Palestine, Provence, Egypt or Assyria, we can only guess. The dating of works like Bahir and Zohar is equally difficult, although they are said to contain

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[71] Scholem 1987: p.12
[72] *ibid* .p.18
[73] *ibid.*
[74] *ibid.* p.20
[75] Genesis 28:12
[76] Cohn-Sherbok 1995: p.29

"texts of great antiquity."[77] Bahir has been claimed to be "of Oriental origin."[78] Scholem thinks that, "openly or invisibly," Judaism has "absorbed a rich store of traditions."[79] Both Palestine and France were subject to rich "foreign influences"[80] and "underground currents probably emanating from the Orient."[81] In Kabbalistic writing, one can find "vestiges of an unarticulated tradition,"[82] echoes of "distant lands,"[83] traces of "subterranean currents probably emanating from the Orient."[84] Here one may substitute 'Orient' with one's country of choice. I think Egyptian, Greek, Persian and Assyrian influences all play a role.

In a hymn to *ayn sof,* the Zohar speaks of the Tree of Life as the carrier of the Waters of Life: "Master of the worlds, you are the cause of causes, the first cause who waters the tree with a spring; this spring is like the soul to the body, since it's like the life of the body."[85] This theme ties in with Middle Eastern Goddess cults of fertility. Here, surprisingly enough, we encounter a nice segue to enter the lands of Levant and Assyria. For, as we will see, the Assyrian Tree of Life ties intimately with the cult of Ishtar.

5. The Assyrian Tree

It is probably in Canaan and the neighbouring areas that the date palm gained in popularity, thanks to its association with local divinities (such as Baal and Asherah/Astarte), and thus became the primary symbol of the Tree of Life. James points out that "in Arabic *athr* and *athart* are used of palm trees, and, *athara* of water, *athari* meaning 'irrigated soil'",[86] and that these words are linked with the word for Goddess Ishtar/Astarte/Asherah/Athirath. Here we have our first clue that Ishtar, both in her feminine aspects of fertility and nurture (water and soil), as well as in terms of embodying the 'cosmic body' (trunk) of the divine assembly (tree), is integral to our understanding of the so-called Assyrian 'Kabbalah.'

There is a spectrum of (largely feminine) tree-worship religions stretching from seashore Levant to inland Mesopotamia. In details, regional variation was rampant: the tree in question may be the Arabian palm tree or the cedar of Lebanon, and the cult

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[77] Scholem 1987: p.5
[78] *ibid.* p.42; It is further claimed (ibid.) that Bahir came to France, "from a distant land," *in writing*!
[79] *ibid.* p.18
[80] *ibid.* p.22
[81] *ibid.* p.45
[82] *ibid.* p.45
[83] *ibid.* p.42
[84] Scholem 1969: p.89
[85] *ibid.* p.84 (quote from Zohar)
[86] James 1966: p.11

deity any of the many 'Asherim' (Astartes) or, in its male variants, any of the Levantine-Syrian 'Baalim' that were often tied to places as *numina*. The Tree is nurtured by the 'Waters of Life': the sea (Asherah was a Sea Goddess), rivers and springs.

Let us look at the Genesis. The fourfold rivers of Eden[87] (representing the four corners of the world) – two of which are Tigris and Euphrates – are depicted as stemming from a central pivot, a primal source: the Tree of Life[88] (the Throne of God). In the Apocalypse, we find an account of "a stream which runs clear as a crystal from the throne of God and the Shepherd."[89] This, according to Holmberg, because the writers of the Bible associated a) the throne of God, b) the Edenic Paradise, c) the central 'mountain' of the world (rising to heavens) and d) the Tree of Life. At least *a*, *b* and *d* are obvious.[90] We could add to this a Kabbalistic reading: The 'streams' of God are the 'emanations' of the *ayn sof*, whose origin is at the 'throne' (Kether) of the Tree of Life, personified as Christ's (Shepherd's) body and throne, representing the cosmic man and the unity of the *sefiroth*. We may, in this instance, recall the Tree of Life in the Mesopotamian Myth of Etana: "In the shade of that shrine a poplar was growing [] / In its crown an eagle settled, / A serpent settled at its root." Parpola's analysis of this myth[91] is impeccable. Suffice it to say that we are dealing with the Tree of Life here, too, representing the 'throne' of God.

The idea of 'world's navel' (the *omphalos* of the Greeks) could be tied to this idea of "primal springs"[92] – Edenic springs – and thus to the idea of fertile rivers of honey and milk representing the plentiful source, Mother Goddess (Magna Mater, Venus, Astartes, Ishtar), and this in turn could be connected to the life-giving properties of the 'womb' of the Tree of Life. Here, then, we have a perfect union of the 'vulgar' and 'spiritual' interpretations, as the 'waters of life' springing forth form the fertile 'Tree of Life' stand for the emanations of the Godhead into the visible realm as Edenic currents.

As we have discussed previously, these 'waters' and feminine emanations have a certain meaning as fertility symbols if understood in the deep, mystical sense; more on this realm - and Ishtar - later. For now, let us take a look at 'Assyrian monotheism'.

Parpola writes that "the basic equation underlying the Assyrian concept of god was "'God' = '(all) the gods.'"[93] According to Parpola, Ashur's cosmological status as

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[87] Holmberg 1920: p.75
[88] Actually there were TWO trees – of Life and Knowledge – but this matter is too difficult to deal with here.
[89] *ibid.* p.79
[90] The fact that Holmberg insists on the 'mountain' symbolism has to do with his Altaian and Siberian biases.
[91] Parpola 1993
[92] Holmberg 1920: p.97
[93] Parpola 2000

a god unlike the others (a status sometimes allotted to Anu, the supreme god of heaven) is suggested in the Babylonian/Assyrian cosmogeny of Enuma Elish, where Ashur/Marduk's transcendental status is rather similar to the Kabbalistic supersensory, beyond-the-beyond, transcendent *ayn sof*: "AN.ŠÁR [in contrast to the other gods] emerges from nil through the pair Lahmu and Lahamu denoting binary oppositions, [and thus] has nothing to do with the limited physical universe"[94]. So, unlike the 'lesser' (but still truly 'great') gods of the established pantheon of the elder gods, Assur (or AN.ŠÁR) has a status on the edge of the temporally marked universe as the god-before-the-gods, and his place (represented by His 'throne' and 'crown' in the Tree) is veritably supreme in both absolute and relative terms. As Parpola puts it, "he was an abstract metaphysical entity, a transcendent 'God beyond gods,' who could not be known directly."[95] This, of course, corresponds to the Kabbalistic conception of *ayn sof*, situated simultaneously both outside (above) *and* within (at the top of) the tree structure of Kabbalah, as the paradoxical 'source' of divinity who is prone to hide himself in the same breath that he ('it') reveals himself through his ('its') multilayered emanations. This concept of a revealing-hiding Godhead, in Jewish and Assyrian lore, is somewhat different from the "negative theology" of the Buddhist tradition, as Parpola well points out. Instead of distancing God as the unsayable and unnameable, both Assyrian and Kabbalistic theosophies embrace, and draw near, the godly presence as manifested through his presence in the physical world (the Malkuth of Kabbalah), the composite of the sky and the earth – or AN (*Anum*) and KI (*Ershetum*) – as the ruler (EN = *Beel*) and king (*šarrum*) of all the realms and *sefiroth* that make up the world.

At any rate, Parpola continues[96]: "The doctrine of Aššur as the 'sum total of all the gods' is unequivocally attested since the mid-eighth century BCE in the personal name Gabbu-ilani-Aššur, 'Aššur is all the gods.'" This he rightly compares to the Biblical *Elohim*, one of the terms for God in the Bible. In Genesis, *Elohim's* plural meaning is etymologically retained even when the word obeys singular grammar and syntax, standing (in one plausible interpretation) for the 'assembly of the gods' familiar to us from Enuma Elish. More specifically, Elohim represents the *singular* (monotheistic) Will of the *plural* (pantheistic) realm of the gods. Parpola even finds uses of the plural form "gods" (standing for Ashur) in conjunction with singular verbs, which helps to make the case for the connection Elohim-Ashur even stronger. However, Parpola's claim that 'the multiplicity of

[94] *ibid.*
[95] *ibid.*
[96] *ibid.*

gods venerated in Assyria was conceived as a single deity' (ibid) is contested by many scholars. We could perhaps account for certain attestations of irregular grammar by bad copyists or sloppy scribes? Nonetheless, it seems that the various etymological readings of Aššur – 'The Only God,' 'God is One,' 'The Hidden God'[97] – are certainly persuasive enough. Even if the monolatry or monotheism built around Ashur is only partial, his association with the Tree of Life symbolism of the Assyrian seals certainly suggests continuity with Kabbalah.

I will not go into the details of the numerical attributions of Parpola's theory. Why? Mainly, because I lack the expertise to double-check his distribution tables where each god is allotted a place, number and value in the Kabbalistic Tree.[98] However, from my understanding of Kabbalah, and my knowledge of Mesopotamian myths, the associations seem intuitively appropriate for the most part, and the numerical distribution, if correct, certainly fits a nice pattern based on a sexagesimal table of numbers. While fully acknowledging that Parpola's theory largely rests on this very point, I will nonetheless claim that we do not *need* to accept all the minor details of his theory in order to validate Assyrian and Oriental influences into Kabbalah. The main theory can also be stated in words.[99] Next I will turn to my own analysis of Ishtar, based on Kabbalah and the anthropological evidence of Oriental Goddess cults. The starting point is Parpola's analysis of the Ishtar myth, but I will develop it further, and offer a deeper analysis of the *placement*, *movement* and *emanation* of 'Ishtar' within the structure of the 'Assyrian Tree.'

Parpola associates – rightly – Ishtar with *Tifereth* (Beauty). However, we could also see Ishtar as *Yesod* through the concept of Shekhinah, defined in Talmud as the 'feminine' receptive principle of the dwelling of the higher *sefiroth* in the physical 'world' of pious people and fruitful land. Even if Parpola is eager to dismiss out of hand the fertility cult explanations given about the Ishtar myth, I claim that Ishtar offers a possible Kabbalistic connection, if we tie the idea of land's feminine receptivity (in the 'womb' of Ishtar/Shekhinah) with the "cosmic seed" of the divine male principle emanating ('being sown') from the higher *sefiroth*. Her love with Tammuz certainly suggests identification with the fertile potencies of regeneration, agriculture and all things earthly[100]. But in fact, in her battle with Nergal, a certain secondary identification is suggested: Ishtar is the feminine corollary of Nergal (whom she supplants), as the mediator between the overworld

[97] Parpola 2002
[98] Parpola 1993
[99] See, for example, Parpola 2000 and 2002; see also Baumann 2006.
[100] As discussed by James: 1966

and the underworld, as the principle of earth's dual nature as life-giver (the fertile ground) and life-taker (the principle of decomposition). Nergal represents "destructive" (male) sexual telluric energies whereas Ishtar represents the positive, "constructive" (female) sexual energies. Their planetary assignment to Venus and Mars confirms this. It is curious, though, that the duality of War and Love is inherent in the very nature of Ishtar, and this further suggests that Ishtar and Nergal and very closely related thematically, even synonymous and co-extensive in certain regard. After all, it was Mars who was the god of war in Rome, not Venus[101]. These roles were 'switched' over time, which implies that, on certain level, Ishtar=Nergal. We should remember that Ishtar was Nergal's mother, i.e. of the same substance. The conclusive evidence is the fact that their holy numbers are 15 and 14 respectively[102]. Clearly, 'Mars' and 'Venus' were near-identical relatives, mortal enemies and lovers all at the same time.[103] The Middle Pillar of the Tree, composed of Kether, Tifereth, Yesod and Malkuth, is dominated in the Assyrian model by the lineage Ashur-Ishtar-Nergal. Remember still James's assertion that Ashur (and Tammuz) was a "dying god"? Well, this becomes meaningful only if we accept that Ashur descends to the underworld (Nergal) *through* Ishtar. In this sense, the 'dying' of the God means simply the downward process whereby divine emanations, in ever weaker forms, permeate, reflect and reach down to the physical realm of Yesod-Malkuth. The light dims on its way to 'Hell'.

More mystically, Ishtar is the "bride" of the supreme God (or gods), and also of the initiates (comparable to Catholic nuns 'marrying' Jesus). To again compare her to the mystical female principle of divine presence we find in Talmud, Shekhinah (a feminine word in Hebrew which literally means 'dwelling' or 'settlement'), we find that Ishtar's place in the Assyrian Tree of Life is equally 'central' as is Shekhinah's in the Kabbalistic Tree, where she is understood as the 'heart' or 'womb' of the Cosmic Body. Ishtar, or Shekhinah, is literally 'central' to the Tree, denoting the double aspect of 'being *open* in the centre of' and '*enclosing* by means of *grounding*.' Ishtar dwells among the people (as Shekhinah) and thus grounds divinity. Parpola mentions this 'central' role of Ishtar in passing: "The genealogical relationships of the gods reveal a three-tiered generation

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[101] It is interesting to note that the warlike aspects (however downplayed) of Ishtar-Aphrodite-Venus were still celebrated and recognized in parts of Greece and Rome under the honorary appellation "Venus Victrix."
[102] According to Parpola: 1993
[103] It would be possible also to draw out some connections between the Roman and Babylonian creation myths. From the union of "sky" (ANSAR) and "earth" (KISAR), the eldest of the gods Anu is born, who is further supplanted by Marduk (the heroic rebel associated with Jupiter). Likewise, in Roman myth, from the union of sky (Ouranos) and earth (Gaia), the eldest of the titans Cronus is born, who is further supplanted by Zeus (the heroic rebel who is associated with Jupiter). The forces of "Chaos" in the Greek myth are correlated with the Babylonian pair Apsu/Tiamat. (Some connections are genetical, others surely accidental.)

hierarchy *oriented around* the goddess Ištar, who was known as "the convener of the assembly" and was (under different names) 'married' to all the 'great gods.'"[104]

This 'womb' aspect of Ishtar is further suggested by the persistent imagery in oracular literature linking her as the mother of all Assyrian kings. These portray "the king as a baby suckled, comforted, tended, carried, reared and protected by the goddess [Ishtar]."[105] The earthly King, as the representative of Ashur/Anu, is reared in the 'womb' of the goddess. This corresponds to the emanation of the unfathomable power of the godhead (Aššur */ en sof*), from the divine central 'crown' (of Anu / Kether) down the Tree to the lower *sefiroth* residing in the immanent world. In other words, God grants his power through the 'branches' and 'trunk' of the tree, so that the king is firmly 'grounded' (through the 'womb' of the feminine nurturing principle) into the 'foundation' (*Yesod*) of the earthly 'kingdom' (*Malkuth* in Kabbalah). King is acting on divine mandate, as the last and lowest layer or stratum of the cosmic hierarchy of dominions. It may seem 'humbling' to consider kingship as but the lowest of the orders, but we should remember that 1) Anu's power is ultimately reflected *immanently* in the king's actions, and that 2) the physical realm *in its entirety* is subdued under the ruler's will, because the 'angelic' and higher levels are not of *this* world, except implicitly and except as mediated through the king's actions who thus becomes Aššur himself. It now becomes easy to agree with Parpola's conclusions that Ishtar's "representation as a node in the middle of the trunk of the sacred tree (the heart of the 'cosmic man') symbolizes her as a power connecting heaven and earth and bridging the gulf between god and man."[106] Through this oscillation between Love and War, between Overworld and Underworld, between Tifereth and Yesod, we may understand Parpola's claim about Enuma Elish that "the weapon by which Marduk defeats Tiamat actually is Ištar,"[107] in terms of *world creation* (the poem, after all, is a creation myth): 'The womb (Shekhinah) through which Marduk/Ashur/Anu (Kether) overcomes nothingness (ayn sof) is the balancing channel of the Middle Pillar, held together by Ishtar as *both* Tifereth (Beauty) *and* Yesod (which also has a male principle, Nergal, associated with it).' It is through this act of creation of the physical world that emanations reach the earth. Ishtar, as Tifereth, is 'Venus;' as Yesod, 'Mars.' Indeed, Kabbalah equates the ninth *sefirah* (Yesod) with the "sexual organ"[108] of the cosmic man. Tifereth is its 'heart' or

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[104] Parpola: 2002, my italics
[105] *ibid.*
[106] *ibid.*
[107] Parpola: 2000
[108] Cohn-Sherbok 1995: p.10

'torso' (i.e. womb). The 'foundation' (Yesod) of the Tree, as the 'erection' of its trunk, corresponds to male virility, while Tifereth nurtures, through its feminine sexual potency, all the interrelated *sefiroth* of the whole Tree in its 'womb' (and balances them). This whole axis of Tifereth-Yesod-Malkuth reverberates the sensual presence of Shekhinah.

One last thing I want to touch upon is the debate between 'monotheism,' on the one hand, and something like "situative monolatry"[109] or "insulated monotheism"[110] on the other. For it seems to me that we are reaching a fairly interesting scholarly consensus here: a) the 'monotheism' of the ancient Hebrews was much more 'polytheistic' than supposed; b) the 'polytheism' of ancient Babylonians was much more 'monotheistic' than supposed. In this sense, some old boundaries are become blurrier. Now, of course we should not forget the essential distinction between an *explicit* theology of monotheism (like rabbinical Judaism) and an *implicit* one (like the so-called 'Assyrian Kabbalah'). Nonetheless, reading the 'Elohim' of Genesis as 'an assembly of gods' (as Parpola does) takes us closer to an appreciation of the common roots of Semitic myth. Baumann also discusses von Soden's idea of 'equalizing theology,' the idea of assimilating gods together: "This could have been a model for the Old Testament, as in the context where YHWH is identified with Baal or El, [or when] the attributes of a host of deities were assimilated into YHWH, e.g. aspects of a storm god and a sun god." [111] She also points out that the "Old Testament in its entirety as a closed and subsequently reworked literary work belongs to a different source genre than the ancient Near Eastern texts."[112] The apparent polymorphism of Mesopotamian texts, for example, reflects simply the lack of editorial control. So, if the uniformity of Hebrew theology is largely a result of later editorial work, and if the apparent plurality of Assyrian theology was already being worked (*via* an oral mystery tradition) into a more coherent structure of unitary cosmology by priests and schools of initiates, we have found all the more evidence to support the idea that Semitic monotheism, any less than Medieval Kabbalah, did not 'grow' out of nowhere, but had deep 'roots' in history. History, like the Tree of Life itself, can branch out into various directions, but its roots, largely hidden from the surface, remain rooted still, ready to sprout old and new wisdom.

To summarize, we have managed to combine the two approaches to myth, the 'vulgar' and the 'mystical', by our systematic correlation of 'nature' and 'fertility' worship with certain *sefiroth* of the Tree of Life, through interpreting Goddess Ishtar as *Shekhinah*.

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[109] Baumann 2006: p.17
[110] *ibid.* p.18
[111] *ibid.* p.20
[112] *ibid.* p.21

6. Conclusion

I have tried to show that in addition to the 'vulgar' level of interpretation – the literal, down-to-earth meaning of texts or symbols – there is the level of 'mystical' interpretation, which is latent in any sacred tradition. This corresponds to the difference between 'popular' and 'elite' interpretations, whether 'elite' is here understood in terms of political power of simply spiritual devotion. The Tree of Life symbolism of Kabbalah – tied to a kind 'polytheistic' model of divine emanations[113] – is subject to precisely this kind of dualism: It is both a symbol of fertility (through Shekhinah/Ishtar), and a symbol of abstract cosmologies (through the manifold distribution of the *sefiroth*).

There are still glaring holes in the archaeological record. It is not enough, I think, to just say that Kabbalah was 'secret' knowledge carried 'orally,' because this seems to me to be begging the question. The circular argument, according to which the absence of written evidence only *confirms* the hypothesis that such an oral tradition exists, is not very convincing. Parpola writes that "even adducing comparative evidence is not enough. One must immerse oneself into it and meditate on it in order to grasp the essence of the underlying thought and recognise the points of contact with a different religious and cultural frame of reference."[114] Perhaps so; at the very least, we have established, through comparative analysis of religions, texts and cultures, that there are no *prima facie* obstacles to the existence of such a continuity. Furthermore, any serious study of the Tree of Life will agree[115] that we are dealing with a very complex and multifaceted religious symbol, rich in meanings, uses and implications. The shamanistic cosmic trees of Siberia, the Canaanite-Phoenician worship of fertile tree goddesses, the Assyrian and Middle Eastern symbolism of the date palm as the Edenic Tree of Life, the Kabbalistic mysticism of the Tree as the channel of divine emanations downwards and soul's ascent heavenward… All of these embody spiritual, shamanistic and mystical dimensions.

We have seen that the authors of Kabbalah never tired of emphasising the Oriental origins of their craft. The points of contact between the Hebrews and the Assyrians/Babylonians were many, from Babylonian exile to the striving Jewish communities in medieval Babylon. If we admit Biblical 'loans' from such Mesopotamian epics a Enuma Elish (The Creation Myth) and The Epic of Gilgamesh (The Flood Myth),

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[113] Scholem (1969: p.94) reports that precisely such accusations of "polytheism" were levelled at Kabbalah.
[114] Parpola 2002
[115] Holmberg 1920; James 1966; Parpola 1993

and if we accept the 'Elohim' of Torah as deriving from the Babylonian 'divine council', we would be surprised indeed if such an 'assembly of the gods' were *not* also spiritually and mystically represented in the various exegetic and hermeneutical Jewish traditions. Such a 'plural-singular' divinity (one-in-many or many-in-one) represents the emergent 'monotheism' of Assyria as well as the surviving 'polytheism' of Kabbalah. The 'many' of this Semitic pantheon are then seen as the 'attributes' or 'potencies' of the supreme God, emanating from the nameless, infinite 'ayn sof' of Kabbalah. Such a conception of a supra-divinity that goes even beyond the Tetragrammaton goes beyond all *names* of god. Mystics know this; for they, in God's presence, have gone beyond the sensible and beyond words.

Let me - lastly - come back to the issue of secrecy. Pico della Mirandola cites Dionysius the Areopagite: "the founders of our religions spread secret mysteries *ek nou eis noun dia meson logon*, i.e. from soul to soul, without writing, in spoken word."[116]

There are many reasons for being silent: religious persecution, public derision, failure to communicate, inability to express the 'ineffable,' willingness to keep one aspect of human experience sacred and untouchable… Pico della Mirandola died an early death, possibly of poisoning; Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake... Although the practice of Kabbalah and the willingness to study it are tolerated in today's society, many preconceptions and prejudices remain. Esoteric knowledge is esoteric for a reason. Parpola explains: "Having done my best, often in vain, to explain the meaning of the Tree in scholarly articles I can understand why the ancients chose to keep it as secret knowledge. No written words can adequately express the complex ideas conveyed by a powerful visual symbol; on the contrary, they tend to obscure and distort its basic message that can be intuitively and instantaneously grasped in contemplation, and may even render it ridiculous. Keeping the meaning of the Tree as a secret disclosed only through allusions and riddles powerfully added to its efficacy and attraction."[117] This does not, I hope, mean that we should give up on scholarly debate. However, it does imply that the study of complex symbols is not easily managed by 'rational' means; at the very core of the mystical experience, after all, is the encounter with something utterly transcendental.

Truly, I wish to direct the attention of Assyriologists to Kabbalah, first as an object of study, second as a methodology of a kind of comparative theology. After all, the study of mysticism has proven, time and time again, the deep universality of the religious

[116] Pico della Mirandola 1999: p.94
[117] Parpola 2002

impulse and the spiritual experience. Gods and Goddesses may populate the Earth no longer, but the Tree of Life still stands in majesty as the union of heaven and the earth.

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