

The Seven Veils of Ishtar  
&  
The Ten Sefirot of Israel

“There is a Divine Presence below, just like there is a Divine Presence above.”

- *Bahir*

“He let her in through the first door, but stripped off and took away the great crown on her head.

- Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the great crown [*the symbol of royal divinity*] on my head?

- Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.”

- *Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld*

## 1. Methodology and Introduction

My aim here is to see whether the theory presented by S.Parpola about the Descent of Ishtar stands the test of a comparative reading of the Zohar and the Bahir. In the interest of time, I will summarize my findings *graphically* (in chapter 2), because I firmly believe that a picture is worth a thousand words. I will not provide a general theory of the myth but limit myself (in chapter 3) to a short analysis of Ishtar’s Descent as a Gnostic parable of spiritual death and renaissance. Then, I clarify a few technical details (chapter 4) before arriving at our conclusion (chapter 5).

I have previously analyzed Simo Parpola’s theories of the Tree of Life motif in Assyrian royal ideology in detail. This paper is a continuation of that older work. There, I touched on the figure of Ishtar as an important Divinity, standing in the center of the Cosmic Tree, mediating between Heaven and the Earth. It would be foolish to reiterate here the extent of my general agreement with Parpola’s overall thesis, and that is why I have chosen to limit myself, for the sake of exigency as well as economy, to a specific research topic, namely, to what extent does the sevenfold Descent of Ishtar, as found in the Assyrian myth of the same name, mirror the tenfold doctrine of the emanations of the Godhead, as found in the Kabbalistic texts of the late Medieval period? And to what extent does the myth contain an *unequivocal* dimension of numerological soteriology? I may not have the competence to verify specific Assyrian God correspondences, but I can easily verify *if* and *how* the body parts of the gates of Ishtar correspond logically to the Sefirot.

Our concern, then, shall be that one sequence in Ishtar’s Descent: the stripping of the Goddess of her divine powers and potencies, represented by the royal garments on her body. I will present my findings in *pictorial* form because I think that it helps the mind to form an integrated picture of the whole. Ishtar’s Descent, in this sense, becomes a subject of comparative theosophy.

I have reached my conclusions relatively independently of either Simo Parpola’s or Pirjo Lapinkivi’s research. I wanted to show that it is possible for three scholars – Lapinkivi, Parpola and me – to work toward similar conclusions through independent reading and study. For the same reason, I will quote only very sparingly from Parpola’s writings for corroboration for my views, even though the entire impetus for my program stems from Prof. Parpola’s theories, to which I will only hope to add a footnote in this paper. It was to some surprise when I realized that my own comparative reading of the Bahir and the Zohar stands in almost perfect agreement with Parpola’s (2000) analysis of the significance of the seven gates; even the details seem to match up. Moreover, it seems incontrovertible now. I have reached this conclusion by comparing a few lines of Ishtar’s

Descent that deal with the “disrobing” of Ishtar with what the Bahir and the Zohar say about *the descent of the divine feminine* (in Her descending aspect) down the mystical Tree of Life.

I will later provide a short overview of the Ishtar-Kabbalah parallelisms. But next, I wish to immediately present (in graphical form) a summary of my findings about the *undeniable* connections between the seven gates of Ishtar and the ten emanations of the Kabbalistic Godhead.

## 2. From Kether to Malkuth (and back again) goes the Way of the Virgin Bride

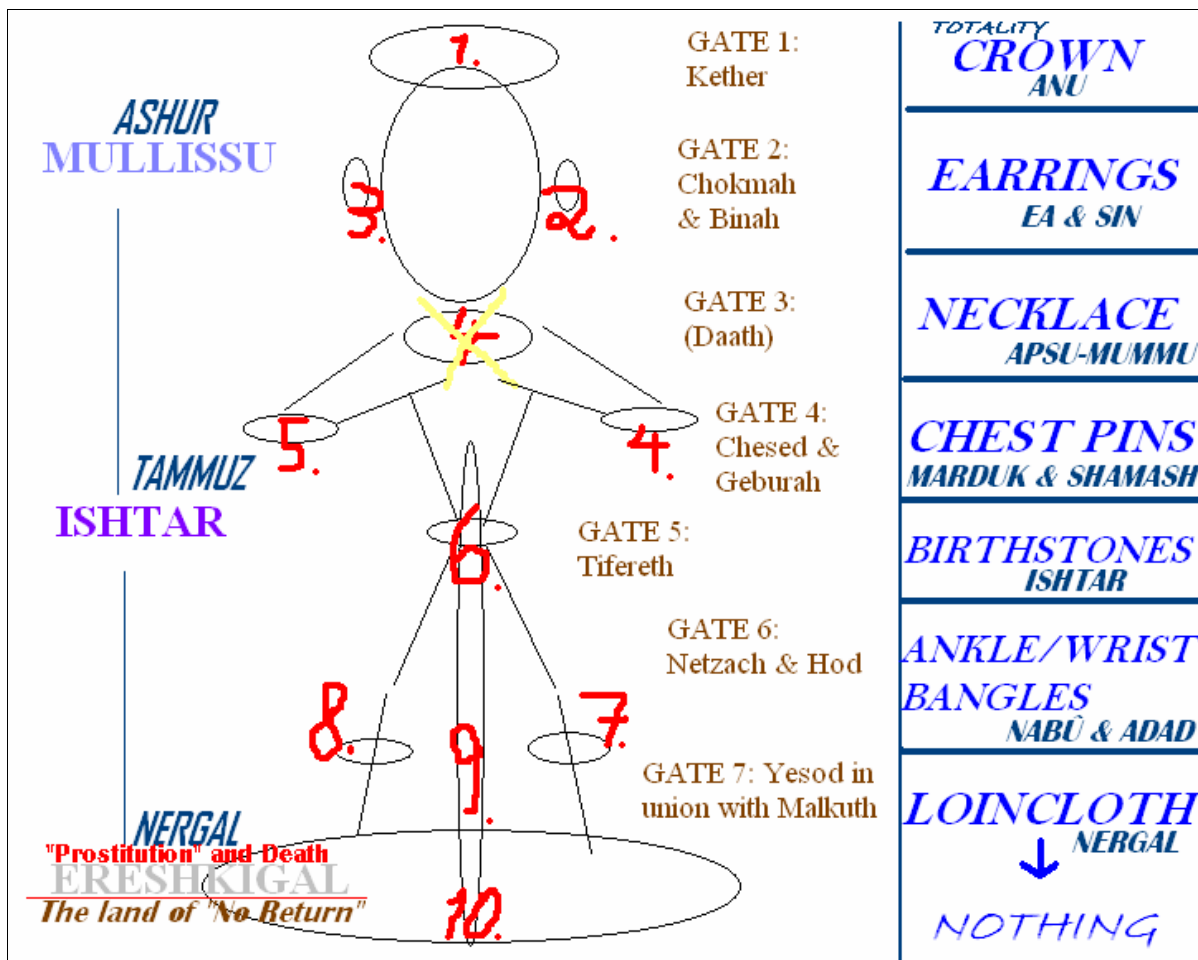
“He let her in through the first door, but stripped off and took away the great crown on her **head**.  
 He let her in through the second door, but stripped off and took away the rings in her **ears**.  
 He let her in through the third door, but stripped off and took away the beads around her **neck**.  
 He let her in through the fourth door, but stripped off and took away the toggle-pins at her **breast**.  
 He let her in through the fifth door, but stripped off and took away the girdle of birthstones around her **waist**.  
 He let her in through the sixth door, but stripped off and took away the bangles on her **wrists and ankles**.  
 He let her in through the seventh door, but stripped off and took away the proud garment of her **body**.

- Gatekeeper, why have you taken away the proud garment of my body?

- Go in, my lady. Such are the rites of the Mistress of Earth.”

- *Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld*

Below you find a graphical summary of the Tree of Life structure of the Descent of Ishtar. The picture attempts to sum up Parpola’s model of the myth and my own findings on it. The main correspondence explored is the unity between the Seven (Gates) and the Ten (Sefirot).



“The Heaven is My throne, and the earth is the hassock for My feet” (Bahir: 64).

Next, to clarify, a short exposition of this cosmic, anthropomorphic representation of Ishtar:

The main design element in that graph is the superimposition of the Tree of Life with the Divine Body of Ishtar. In the middle, you find the Ten Sefirot (plus the hidden “quasi-sefirah” of Daath) represented as nodes in the Tree Trunk, corresponding to different body parts and ornaments on her body. Above Kether one finds (although it is omitted from this picture because it is truly “transcendental”) the Infinite Being which escapes all description, corresponding to *the hidden source of her crown*, whatever that may be (perhaps Ashur himself, or the concept of *divinity* as such). On the left hand side, I have situated the three bridal aspects of Ishtar across the corresponding dominions: Heaven, Earth and Underworld. These correspond to the relationships that Ishtar enjoys to Assur, Tammuz and Nergal respectively. On the right hand side, one finds the correspondences between the ten Sefirot and the seven gates of the netherworld that Ishtar passes through, according to the myth itself. This aspect of the graph should be self-explanatory. The names of the pieces of clothing are straight from the myth. This unity between the *seven* vertical layers and the *ten* scattered attributes I call the correspondence of 7 to 10 to 7.

To corroborate the thesis that this correspondence is a strong and natural link and not some arbitrary whimsy, I provide the following table (where the two columns on the left hand side are lifted from Kaplan’s Bahir commentaries, p. 145) to offer some extra evidence. So, with a little help from Kaplan, the pieces seem to fall into place. See how easily the *ten* and the *seven* co-exist:

<b>Sefirot and Anthropomorphic Representation (according to Aryeh Kaplan and the Bahir)</b>		
<b>SEFIROH:</b>	<b>BODY PART(S):</b>	<b>Corresponding Body Part(s) and Gates in Ishtar's Descent:</b>
<b>1. Kether</b>	top of the head, crown	(GATE I) top of the head, crown
<b>2. Chokmah</b>	skull, mind, eyes, the masculine supernal senses	(GATE II) right ear and left ear, skull, head
<b>3. Binah</b>	right brain, feminine understanding, ears, passive sensing	(GATE III: Daath - "neck")
<b>4. Chesed</b>	left brain, heart, "right hand of the Blessed Holy One"	(GATE IV) breast plates (connecting to both hands)
<b>5. Geburah</b>	"left hand of the Blessed Holy One"	
<b>6. Tifereth</b>	body, torso	(GATE V) body, torso, waist
<b>7. Netzach</b>	right foot, right kidney, right testicle	(GATE VI) right foot and left foot, right hand and left hand
<b>8. Hod</b>	left foot, left kidney, left testicle	
<b>9. Yesod</b>	(male) sexual organ	loins, torso, sexual organs (GATE VII) [androgyny]
<b>10. Malkhut</b>	mouth (of organ), womb, vagina	complete body, nakedness, vagina (also: womb of "rebirth")

(reproduced from Kaplan (ed.): The Bahir (1979), p. 145, with modifications by the current author. The right-hand column based on Parpola (2000), pp. 197-198.)

Little needs to be said about the table above. I let it speak for itself.

My idea is that these two tables of correspondences that I have provided in the above should be used as *heuristic* devices, even as *pedagogical* tools, for spreading information about the Kabbalistic correspondences inherent in Mesopotamian myths. We can thus show the fundamental structural links between Ishtar's seven gates and the antropomorphized divine attributes/powers, without recourse to extensive verbal description or rhetorical argumentation. One would hope that visual cues would be more persuasive than words, although one can never know.

I could stop here, since I have already expressed my main findings, but I better say a few more words on the correspondences between this myth and Kabbalah (in chapter 3). Also, I feel that I need to explain the 7=10 correspondence a bit deeper, and shall do so soon (in chapter 4).

I must confess that I have found literally dozens and dozens of parallels of the Ishtar myth in the Zohar and the Bahir, but I will have to limit myself – alas - to a few scattered comments about some general points of similarity. I really wish I had 10 more pages to write, because I feel sorry for all the notes I've assembled and all the quotes that I have gathered but have no use for. One wonders if unused citations end up in heaven or hell... Perhaps they descend to Kurnugi?

### 3. The Descent of Ishtar in Light (“Or”) of Kabbalah

First, what is the myth *really* about?

As Kaplan writes, “all revelation ultimately comes through Malkhut-Kingship, which is the Female. This is also the Divine Presence (Shekhinah). Therefore, it is primarily through the Daughter that the Thirty-two paths [of Wisdom] are revealed.” (Bahir: 129) The Daughter of *Revelation* (Prophecy), then, is also the Daughter of *Wisdom* (in the Mesopotamian context: Enki), and the wife/sister/daughter of the Male principle of creation and kingship, of Ashur and Tammuz. Even though Kaplan is talking about Kabbalah (or precisely for that reason), his words ring true for Assyrian theology: “The King is Chokhmah-Wisdom [=Enki!], while his daughter is Malkhut-Kingship [=Ishtar!], the archetypal feminine element. She is bound to the Male [=Tammuz!] [...]. It is this daughter that gives birth to all creation” (123), through the sexual potency of Yesod [Nergal] penetrating mystically the Malkuth [Ereshkigal]. This Ereshkigal-Nergal union is the infernal aspect of the Ishtar-Tammuz “royal” union, which itself is a “middle world” (tree trunk) reflection of the celestial union of Ashur and Mullissu. The Descent of Ishtar is really the descent of Ashur-the-Godhead into matter, which results in the spiritual sacrament of matter's ultimate salvation through death and resurrection in the “womb” of the infernal receptacle of the nocturnal mother fertilized by the Divine Wisdom (Enki) through his “seed,” i.e. the “waters of life” of the cosmic waters of Apsu.

Ishtar is the “heart” of the Tree who contains all the royal mysteries in her garments: The King, the master of the Sefirot, “touches the Daughter, and includes all the [Thirty-Two] paths [of the Tree of Life] in her and in her garment. One who wants to go inside [the Holy Palace] should gaze there” (p.23). Her clothing is folded to contain all the mysteries of Kabbalah. She is the garment and fallen crown of the King: “It is written (Lamentations 2:1): ‘He threw the beauty of Israel [i.e. Ishtar] from heaven to the earth.’ [...] What does this resemble? A king had a beautiful crown [Kether] on his head and a beautiful cloak [Tifereth] on his shoulders. When he heard evil tidings, he cast the crown from his head and the cloak from his shoulders” (p.12). Thus, Israel is the castaway, and Ishtar the fallen angel, a fallen royal garment, the *crown* that needs to come off when royal garb becomes too heavy to wear (e.g. when passing through the first gate of Ishtar's Descent). When worn, a divine “garment serves two purposes, to conceal and to reveal. With respect to God, the concept of ‘garment’ conceals his true essence, while at the same time, attenuating it so that it can be revealed” (p.119). Ishtar, by been forced to reveal *all* her mysteries (in all nakedness), collapses and dies. “The Virgin of Israel [Scholem specifies: ‘The Divine Presence’] is fallen” (Zohar: 109). This means that God has to, seasonally, *become* naked, *become* human, in order to be able to reconstitute itself as transcendental (royal, immortal, divine). It also means that it is not possible to ever see En Sof, the Godhead, except *via* his/her/its attributes (“garments”). Through her

sevenfold striptease and her sevenfold backward ascent, “The Virgin of Israel is blessed sevenfold” (*ibid*: 109). The penitent God is like “a king who in anger against his queen banished her from his palace [...]. And when he found her, she was in the dust. Seeing her thus trampled, and yearning anew for her, the king took her by the hand and raised her up, and led her back to the palace, and promised on his oath he would never again send her away” (110) into the netherworld, into exile, into the spiritual desert where her crown and garments were cast down with her.

Ishtar’s Descent obviously has a fertility dimension to it, just like even the annual celebration of Jesus has aspects of agrarian rituals to it: the main Christian celebrations, after all, correspond to the movements of the sun and the seasonal crop festivals. Nonetheless, as little as the story of Jesus, the story of Ishtar and Tammuz can scarcely be reduced to this dimension *alone*. Soteriology always functions by adding a layer of meaning to a “simple” story – or rather, a simple story always functions by reducing the multiplicity of meanings down to the lowest common denominator so that even children and vulgar peasants can be taught to worship the right God.

Even the story of Jonah and the whale, as discussed in the Zohar (103-106), can be read soteriologically, representing the fall, death and resurrection of the divine soul through the process of spiritual rebirth of the sinner: First, “Jonah descends into the ship: this is parallel to man’s soul descending to enter his body in this world” (103). This is the *first* descent: from heaven to earth. There is a *second* descent, however, from earth to the underworld (from the world of the living to the land of the dead): “in truth, the fish that swallowed Jonah is the grave; and ‘Jonah was in the belly of the fish’ (Jonah 2:1), which is identified with ‘the belly of the netherworld,’ as we see by the passage: ‘out of the belly of the netherworld cried I’ (Jonah 2:3).” (105) Here Jonah has descended from the earthly Kingdom to its infernal counterpart. Like Jesus or Ishtar, Jonah remains “dead” (in spiritual exile) for approximately three days until gets resurrected: “‘Three days and three nights’ (Jonah 2:1): which means the three days that a man is in his grave [...]. And, three more days having elapsed, the *man is punished in each organ*, in his eyes, his hands, his feet. For thirty days, then, the soul and the body receive punishment together. Therefore does the soul tarry during this time on earth below, and does not ascend to her sphere, *as a woman is isolated through the period of her impurity*” (105-106, my italics). So, the soul’s descent is seen as the descent of the divine feminine principle (of the “Slutty” Virgin Bride, *Shekhinah*) to a state of “impurity.”

Furthermore, compare Jonah’s punishments above with the punishments that befell Ishtar: “[Erekshigal, through Namtar, sent] out against her [i.e. Ishtar] sixty diseases [:] Disease of the eyes to her eyes, disease of the arms to her arms, disease of the feet to her feet, disease of the heart to her heart, disease of the head to her head, to every part of her[...].” Like the Descent of Ishtar, the Kabbalistic story of Jonah contains an *allegorical* soteriological aspect, where the spiritual fall, death and resurrection of the sinner are depicted in detail. Ultimately, Ishtar and Israel (Jacob, Abraham or Jonah) are interchangeable; both are equated with the bride of the God, *Shekhinah*, i.e. the community of Israel/Assur. Ishtar, likewise, is the “*land*” that regenerates through penitence.

So, we can look at the story of Jonah as one possible parallel of the story of Ishtar. Jonah/Ishtar/Israel, in exile, suffers from the shattering of the divine vessels which correspond to the different exposed and vulnerable body parts of Her Divine Presence. The soul’s “death” and “diseases” correspond to the “naked” parts of Ishtar’s (soul’s) exposed form, which are susceptible to corruption. She is no longer covered by the Seven Layers of Adornment/Cloth which belong to her Divine Garment, because she was stripped of these on her way to the netherworld (“to the belly of the whale”). She is exposed to the corruptibility of the body, to the corruptibility of the Divine Essence. In a sense, Ishtar represents the imperfection and inherent fallenness of mankind, the separation of the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden (the source of the seven streams). In a sense, the very fact of *divine mediation* (mediating the non-presence of God) *is* sinful, even if it is *necessary*. This is why Ishtar, as the mediating figure in the Tree of Life, represents both fall and ascent, because she represents man’s separation from, but also our possibility of contact with, God. She represents the divine conduit between Anu (ultimately Ashur) and Nergal, and is married to

both in different aspects of her being. The seven layers of separation between “hither” and “thither” correspond to the seven heavens and/or the seven underworlds that mediate between the pure source of everything and the impure emanations of the Godhead; these seven layers of separation are the Ten Sefirot, in their vertical dimension, from Kether to Malkuth, and from Malkuth to Kether.

#### 4. 7=10=7

Why seven heavens and gates of the underworld? There are, to be sure, *ten* Sefirot, but actually only *seven* “layers” to them, because six of them are arranged in “pairs”, i.e. binary opposites across the Pillars of Mercy and Judgement. The three paired Sefirot (Chokhmah-Binah; Chesed-Geburah; Netzach-Hod) represent dualities (e.g. left and right, past and future, male and female) that collapse to each other, like particle and anti-particle, when *horizontal differentiation* is not taken into account. Netzach and Hod, for example, “always work as a pair, and the essence of the two is always mixed” (Kaplan’s commenary, in Bahir: p. 178). Likewise, Binah and Chokhmah are the feminine and masculine “mentalities” which always seek to commingle their waters. The last pair, Mercy and Judgment, are the hands: “It is thought that ‘the left hand pushes away, while the right hand draws close’” (121), but it is Ishtar’s role, in Tifereth, to mediate these contrary pulls and bring them to balance. And as Malkuth, she “brings peace between them” (Job 25:2, in Bahir: 56), i.e. between the two Pillars of “water” and “fire.” Overall, she never leaves the central pillar to wander off to the sides. And that is why we can take all these conjoined binaries, e.g. Wisdom and Understanding, as simply the left and right *aspects* of the same divine layer (“gate”) of emanation.

Another reason why Ishtar represents the number 7 and not the number 10 is that Ishtar, as the androgynous mediator, overcomes sexual opposition and, thus, mediates between Understanding and Wisdom (Heavenly Bride and Bridegroom), Judgment and Mercy, Splendour and Victory and all the other “sexually loaded” dual attributes, including Yesod (Nergal) and Malkuth (here: Ereshkigal). This also reflects her balancing power within the Tree.

Ishtar, as *vertical* descender/ascender, has no need for any *horizontal* divisions (L and R): “the [vertical] cause-effect, Crown-Kingship relationship was the primary relationship” (106).

Ishtar, then, represents the vertical aspect of the Tree of Life across the *middle pillar* (of “Balance”), and as one descends down the center, one encounters only seven “stops” from the Crown to the Kingdom, but *three times* during one’s descent down the middle pillar (or ascent, for that matter), one is illuminated *from both sides at once*: these are the six paired Sefirot that we have discussed earlier. In anthropomorphic terms, the three centers of “two-sided illumination” correspond to one’s *ears/eyes* (in the divine triad above), *sides/hands* (in the “trunk” i.e. “torso” of the Adam Qadmon in the very middle of the Tree) and *feet/testicles* (in the lower, chthonic end of the Tree). Thus, seven contains ten. In standing thus, aligned devoutly, one’s right side is in perfect unison with one’s left side, and one’s male energies align with one’s sensuous *anima*. Then, in perfect balance and perfect grounding, Netzach and Hod, the feet of Ishtar, “are like the two wheels [that] reach down to the [...] last of the **seven earths** down below.” (Bahir: 178, my emphasis)

So, the seven layers of the Underworld *do* correspond to the Ten Sefirot of the Tree of Life. That is why there are “only” seven *gates* that Ishtar has to pass through, but nonetheless ten *attributes* that one has to account for. Ishtar passes through seven intermittent couples and loners.

As “2” collapses into “1” (as in androgyny), 7 becomes 10 becomes 7.

1+2+2+1+2+1+1 *makes* ten, but it *consists of* seven (“steps” or “gates”).

In Kabbalah, the Ten Sefirot that make up the body of the Adam Qadmon are the body of Israel. In the same way, Ishtar represents the collective spiritual body of the Assyrian “Kingdom” in its relation to the Divine above and the Infernal below. For the individual cultist and mystic, Ishtar represents the vessel of potential salvation, and the target of identification and meditation. As the Bahir says, “One who gazes into the vision of the Chariot *first descends* and then ascends” (Bahir: 32, my italics). Unless one has perfect control over Malkuth, one cannot reach Kether!



#### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research**

It has become palpably clear that there exists an almost perfect correspondence between the structure and purpose of Ishtar's descent (in one of its dimensions) and the structure and purpose of the Tree of Life (in one of its dimensions) as explicated in the Bahir and the Zohar. I would have liked to have explored the Ishtar parallels in Kabbalah even deeper, because it just happens that the Ishtar-like concept of a Divine Presence (divine feminine) descending and ascending is a mainstay in Jewish mysticism (see, e.g. Lapinkivi 2004). Suffice it to say that Ishtar's Descent is almost like a blueprint for Gnostic and Kabbalistic "ascent to the Godhead" – precisely when it appears as nothing more than an agrarian fairytale about a hopeless and impetuous deity who has too much time on her hands to visit the underworld for no real purpose whatsoever. I have not even touched the myth of Gilgamesh or the myth of Etana, both of which contain lots of hidden dimensions for a systematic study of correspondences that I hope to undertake in the future.

How to sum up? Even when myths are supposed to contain nothing but antiquated ways of behaviour and primitive modes of thinking, we should learn to appreciate the one thing that a global crisis (or whatever sort, be it the Global Flood of Utnapishtim or the Wall Street Crash of 2008) may unwittingly teach us: namely, that the path of Wisdom is cheap, timeless and rewarding.

"One who gazes into the vision of the Chariot first descends and then ascends"... This means that one first has to reach the *limits* of one's knowledge (the absolute *low*) before opening up the head-crown for boundless, limitless ascent into thought which has no ending whatsoever. The mystic encounters the path of knowledge as a descent (of Wisdom and Understanding: the heavenly bride and bridegroom) into the root and foundation of the Earth, World and Paradise (but also the Netherworld). This is the vision of the ego-death, where the world "blows up" into full Divine Presence, until it evaporates into gravitationless limitless ascent which effects the reconnection between the Kether and the Malkuth, between the Heavens and the (Under)World, between the Heavenly Father and his Daughter/Sister/Mother/Bride [Israel or Ishtar] in the Sacred Marriage of the Holy Tree whereby the vision of form (Hod) is figuratively "married" to the formless gnosis (Daath) of boundless divine light. Wisdom and Understanding thus consummate their marriage.

Such a cultivation of structured ancient knowledge is not a matter of money or time, but of will and effort. The only thing it needs from the external world is *a tradition* (lit. Kabbalah) within which to cultivate itself. Such a tradition operates on a timeless domain where there is no "best before" date. We are no wiser in this regard today than we were 3000 years ago. Even if we have learned to distinguish between external reality and internal fantasy, we have, by the same token, failed to separate between progress and amnesia, and we suffer dementia accordingly.

#### **Bibliography:**

Kaplan, Aryeh (1979) (translation, introduction and commentary by): "The Bahir - Illumination." Weiser Books, Boston USA.

Lapinkivi, Pirjo (2004): "The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence" (State Archives of Assyria Studies, vol. XV). The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Finland.

Parpola, Simo (2000): *Monotheism in Ancient Assyria*, in "One God or Many? Concept of Divinity in the Ancient World" edited by Barbara N. Porter. Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, Volume 1, USA.

Scholem, Gershom G. (1970, 1949) (edited and selected by): "Zohar - The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah". Schocken Books, Inc. USA.

+ English translation of "Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld" from <http://www.piney.com/BabIsht.html> (May 2009).