

Edom and Eden: remarks on cosmogonic symbolism

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The Kings of Edom¹

It is taught in the *Sifra di-Zeniuta*: Before *Atika Atikin* prepared His attributes, He constructed kings, inscribed kings, and conjectured kings, but they could not survive, so that after a time He concealed them. This is [the meaning of] the verse "And after these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom" (*Genesis* 36:31). ... And if you say that it is written "And he died...and he died..." and [this means] that they were completely annulled, this is not really the case, for whoever descends from the first stage of his existence is referred to as if he had died, as it is said "the king of Egypt died" (*Exodus* 2:23), because he descended from the first stage of his existence. ... But they did not really live until the image of Man was prepared. When the image of man was prepared they resumed another existence, and lived.

(‘The Death of the Kings’, *Zohar* III, 135a-135b, *Indra Rabba*)

Do not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother. (*Deuteronomy* 23:8)

I called my son out of Egypt. (*Matthew* 2:15)

‘Edom’ remarks Leo Schaya, ‘symbolises sometimes the imperfect or unbalanced state of creation preceding its present state—the latter being an ordered manifestation of the *Fiat Lux*’². As Gershom Scholem notes, ‘This conception of primeval worlds also occurs in the “orthodox Gnosticism” of such Fathers of the Church as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, albeit with a difference, in as much as for them these worlds were not simply corrupt but necessary stages in the great cosmic process.’³ According to Kabbalah, the

¹ On the Edomite Kings see *Zohar* III, 128a, 135a, b, 142a, b, 292a, a. See Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1991, p.332-3; Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, pp.107-10; Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, § 41, 56, pp.43, 84-5.

² Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.156, n.1.

³ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.354, n.30.

Edomite kings were constructed of pure Judgment and contained no Mercy. 'Edom (עֲדָם; "red"), derives from the word 'ādām, (אָדָם; "to show blood"), where red, as Isaiah Tishby observes, is the colour of strict judgment.⁴ The "Death of the Kings" refers to the inability of onto-cosmological manifestation to maintain itself before the advent of the image of supernal Man. Tishby: 'The system of emanation had not yet been prepared in the image of the supernal Man, which constitutes a harmonious structure by balancing the opposing forces. In the idea of the image of Man even the forces of destruction of "the other side" are able to survive. ... Once the image of Man had been prepared all the forces that were not able to exist before existed in it.'⁵

Supernal Man: this is *Adam Kadmon* ("principal man"), also called *Adam ilaah* ("transcendent man"). He is the "prototype" upon which the Universe is modelled—'the Universe is a big man and man is a little universe.' This is the Islamic doctrine of *Al-Insān al-Kāmil* ("Universal Man").⁶ In his introduction to al-Jīlī's treatise, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, Titus Burckhardt remarks that, 'With regard to its internal unity, the cosmos is ... like a single being; – "We have recounted all things in an evident prototype" (Qur'an 36). If one calls him the "Universal Man," it is not by reason of an anthropomorphic conception of the universe, but because man represents, on earth, its most perfect image.'⁷ A distinction arises between Universal Man and Primordial Man or Pre-Adamite Man (*al-insān al-qadīm*). This, *mutatis mundis*, is similar to the distinction, in the Chinese tradition, between Transcendent Man (*chün jen*) and True Man (*chen jen*), which is the same as that between "actually realised immortality" and "virtual immortality." René Guénon explains:

"Transcendent man," "divine man," or "spiritual man" are alternative names for someone who has achieved total realisation and attained the "Supreme Identity." Strictly speaking he is no longer a man in an individual sense, because he has risen above humanity and is totally liberated not only from its specific conditions but also from all other limiting conditions associated with

⁴ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1991, p.332, n.252.

⁵ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1991, p.333, n.258, 259.

⁶ See al-Jīlī, *al-insān al-kamīl* (tr.) Burckhardt, 1983; also Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, Ch.12.

⁷ Burckhardt, intro. to al-Jīlī, *al-insān al-kamīl*, 1983, p.iv. Elsewhere Burckhardt cites St. Gregory Palamas as saying, 'Man, this greater world in little compass, is an epitome of all that exists in a unity and is the crown of the Divine works' (*An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.76, n.3).

manifested existence. He is therefore, literally, “Universal Man,” whereas “true man”—who has only reached the stage of identification with “primordial man”—is not. But even so, it can be said that “true man” is already “Universal Man,” at least in a virtual sense.⁸

According to Kabbalah, the sefirah *Hesed* (Mercy) corresponds to Abraham, *Din* (Judgment) to Isaac, and *Tiferet* (Beauty) to Jacob. Jacob is the balance of Mercy and Judgment, the harmonised “image of Man” who, in his realised state, is Israel. Yet Jacob was not the first born to Isaac: ‘When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob’ (Gen.25:24-6). The name Jacob, *Ya’aqôb* (יעקב), means “heel catcher,” from the primitive root ‘*âqab* (עקב; “to swell”). The image is of Jacob (order) “swelling” or rising out of the chaotic waters of potentiality (Esau), an image that is common in creation myths. Again, when we think of the “redness” of Esau as “blood” then one is led to think of the swelling of the woman’s belly with the foetal child, which has the same relationship with the “blood” of the placenta as Jacob has with Esau. Esau is potentiality, Jacob is actuality or realisation. Then, as *Genesis* 36:1 tells us, Esau is Edom. The Edomite Kings are ‘the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites’ (Gen.25:31); as Jacob follows Esau, usurps the birthright and becomes the chosen child, so too Israel follows Edom, and so too creation follows the potential for manifestation.

The symbolism of Edom is found with the Exodus from Egypt, for Egypt is commonly identified with Edom in the Kabbalah.⁹ Moreover, the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitsrayim*, is the dual of the word, *mâtsôwr*, implying the sense of “a limit.” As Schuon

⁸ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, 1994, p.124. On the “Supreme Identity” see Guénon, *Man and his Becoming According To The Vedānta*, 1981, Ch.24.

⁹ *Zohar* III, 135a-135b associates the “kings who died” to the “king of Egypt who died” (Ex.2:23). Edom is metaphorically identified as both Egypt and Rome (see Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.156, n.1). From a socio-symbolic level the civilization of Egypt preceded the civilization of Israel and the civilization of Rome preceded that of Christianity, yet each was necessary for the following civilization to emerge.

says, ‘To say manifestation is to say limitation.’¹⁰ In being unmanifest potential, Edom is still the first limitation.

Again, this symbolism is found in the symbolisms of both the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant; both express the “receptacle of Divine Immanence,” which is to say they express the “limits” of manifestation. In the case of the Ark of Noah the state of non-distinction is well expressed by the waters of the deluge. In the case of the Ark of the Covenant this state is expressed by the “desert” or wilderness of the Exodus. Just as the flood lasted forty years, so Israel wandered in the desert for forty years, and so, might it be added, did Christ undergo his testing and “purification” during his forty days in the desert. Both the flood and the desert express the idea of purification through a return to primordial chaos. Again, from a perspective that might be described as “linear,” both the mythology of Noah’s Flood and the story of Moses and the Ark of the Covenant allude to primordial chaos by the “states” described prior to the flood and prior to the exodus. In the first case this is expressed by the age of the Nephilim, the “wicked” generation of Noah. In the second case this is the exile of the Israelites in Egypt. Both of these share in the Kabbalistic symbolism of the “Death of the Kings of Edom”: ‘And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom’ (Gen.36:31).

Egypt is an analogue of Edom. The identification of the wicked generation of the Nephilim with the Edomite Kings is more obscure. The Nephilim are said to have been a race of “giants”; symbolically the Nephilim correspond to the Titans of Greek legend, the Mountain Giants of Norse legend and the Asuras of Hindu myth.¹¹ In each tradition these represent the “unbalanced” state preceding the “Olympian” order. It has further been suggested that the “war of the Titans” corresponds, *mutatis mundis*, with the “war of the kings” (Gen.14:1-16),¹² where the “war of the kings” is again identifiable with the Edomite kings. *Genesis* 36:31 says, ‘Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom, the name of his city being Dinhabah.’ Tishby explains that ‘the Hebrew word *bela* signifies

¹⁰ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.35.

¹¹ Bentley (*Hindu Astronomy* Pt.1, 1970, pp.18-27) refers to the famous “Churning of the Ocean” (*Mahabharata* 1.15) as otherwise being called the “War between the Gods and the Giants.”

¹² See for example Skinner, *The Source of Measures*, 1982, p.207.

“destruction,” and the whole name is like that of Balaam, son of Beor, who is on “the other side”.¹³ Dinhabah we should understand as related to *Din* (Judgment). Here one might suggest the identification, at least symbolically, of “Bela the son of Beor” with “the king of Bela” (Gen.14:8). Added to this, readings from the *Sefirah Dtzenioutha*, the *Book of Concealed Mystery*, and *Ha Idra Rabba Qadisha*, the *Greater Holy Assembly*, suggest the identification between the Kings of Edom and the kings of *Genesis* 14, albeit in an esoteric way. In the *Book of Concealed Mystery* it is said, ‘Thirteen kings wage war with seven.’¹⁴ These “thirteen kings” are “the measures of mercies,” inasmuch as these represent the unity of the Tetragrammaton. Thirteen answers by Gematria to the idea of unity: ‘For ACHD, *Achad*, unity yields the number 13 by numerical value’¹⁵. The “seven kings” are the seven Edomite kings named in *Genesis* 36:31-40. There are, in fact, eight kings named in this passage; moreover, there are nine principal personages when we recognize the importance of Mehetabel, the wife of Hadar (v.39). However, concerning the first seven kings it said of each that “[He] died.” Chapter 26 of *The Book of Concealed Mystery* explains that after Adam was constituted these seven were ‘mitigated in a permanent condition through him’; they ceased to be called by their former appellations and hence are considered to have “died.” Concerning Hadar and Mehetabel it is taught that they were not abolished like the others because they were male and female, ‘like as the palm tree, which groweth not unless there be both male and female.’ Hence, they did not “die” but remained in a fixed condition.¹⁶ ‘Thirteen kings wage war with seven kings’ and, as we are told, there were ‘nine vanquished in war’ (i.e. the eight kings of Gen.36 and Mehetabel). Consider then: *Genesis* 14:9 is explicit in stressing the odds “four kings against five.” This suggests the nine aspects of Edom (the eight kings and Mehetabel). When the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee (v.10) the odds shift to four kings against three, which reveals the seven Edomite kings who died. The “thirteen kings” who waged war with the seven correspond to Abraham who, as *Hesed* (*Mercy*), is the “measure of mercy.”

¹³ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1991, p.332, n.256.

¹⁴ Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, p.102.

¹⁵ Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, p.47.

¹⁶ See Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, pp.176-7; also Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1991, p.332-33.

The relationship between Israel (actuality) and Edom (potentiality) is complementary. *Deuteronomy* 23:8 says, ‘Do not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother.’ Manifestation can never exhaust the indefinitude of potentiality, which is to say that there is a continuity of potentiality. A Jewish tradition ties this idea to the mythology of Noah. It is said that at the time of the Flood the giant Og begged admittance to the Ark. He climbed on to the roof and refused to leave.¹⁷ In this way the potentiality of the “giants,” the Nephilim, remained with the Ark through to the next generation.

In the *Second Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch* there is yet another intriguing reference to Edom that relates it directly to the Flood myth.¹⁸ According to the story of the birth of Melkisedek (Melchizedek), Nir (“light”)—the brother of Noe (Noah)—to whom the new baby had been entrusted was warned by the Lord that He planned “a great destruction onto the earth” (the Flood), but the Lord reassured Nir that before this event the archangel Michael¹⁹ would take the child and put him in the Paradise of Edem (Eden). Chapter 72 finds Michael taking the child: ‘I shall take your child today. I will go with him and I will place him in the paradise of Edem, and there he will be forever.’²⁰ However in verse nine we find the child placed in “the paradise of Edom.”²¹ Again, Schaya recalls that during the destruction of the second Temple, itself another case of the dissolution of the Judaic “world,” all twelve tribes went into exile in the kingdom of Edom.²²

Another incident that deserves consideration in light of the symbolism of Edom and the “imperfect or unbalanced state” preceding the “ordered manifestation” is the destruction of the original tablets of the Law (Ex.32:19). Here one recognises a similar relationship between Esau-Jacob and Jacob-Israel; allowing for certain differences of symbolism, what Esau is to Jacob, Jacob is to the Community of Israel. Thus, as Jacob ascended and descended the “Ladder”—the *axis mundi*—to become Israel, so too Moses

¹⁷ Pike de Rabbi Eliezer, Ch.23, cited in Rappoport, *Ancient Israel (Vol.1)*, 1995, p.212.

¹⁸ See Andersen (tr.), 2 (*Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch*, Appendix: 2 Enoch in *Merilo Pravednoe*: Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (Vol.1)*, 1983, pp.204-12.

¹⁹ The [J] text has Michael while the [A] has Gabriel. On the relationship of Michael and Gabriel see Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, pp.50-51.

²⁰ 2 *Enoch* 72.5.

²¹ 2 *Enoch* 72.9. It is strange that this apparent anomaly receives no recognition by Andersen.

²² See Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.156.

ascended and descended Mount Sinai bringing the Testimony that transformed the Israelites to the “Community of Israel” as such.²³ But, in conformity with the symbolism being considered, the prototype tablets had to be destroyed before the Law could be brought forth in a perfect state.



Eden

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. (*Genesis 2:10*)

Between Edom and Eden there is a similar relationship as between Esau and Jacob and, by analogy, between the potential of Jacob and the realisation of Israel, or again, between Eden and the Garden. Here it is a matter of the hierarchy of Being and of perspective, from “above” or “below.” According to Kabbalah there is an Upper and a Lower Eden, respectively *Binah* and *Malkhut*, and these are the “upper firmament” and the “lower firmament,”²⁴ the “Upper Mother” and the “Lower Mother,”²⁵ the Upper and Lower Waters.²⁶

The name ‘*Eden* (אֵדֶן)’ derives from the primitive root ‘*adan* (אָדָן; “to be *soft* or *pleasant*”) expressing the sense of “pleasure” or “enjoyment.” However, the *New Jerusalem Bible* speculates that the word Eden may originally have meant “open wastes.”²⁷ This suggests the word *tohu* (“formless”; *chaos*), as in the opening of *Genesis*: ‘Now the earth was a formless void (*tohu* and *bohu*)’. Eden is the sea of potentiality from which creation stems; it is potentiality of fecundity, as the “ground”—Meister Eckhart’s *grunt*—is potentially the garden. According to the perspective adopted, onto-cosmological

²³ The Community of Israel is a cognomen of the *Shekhinah*.

²⁴ *Zohar* I, 85b-86a.

²⁵ *Zohar* I, 247b; III, 7b-8a.

²⁶ It is said: ‘The two letters of the upper firmament called *Mi* are contained within it [the lower firmament, *Malkhut*], and it is called *Yam* (sea)’ (*Zohar* I, 85b-86a). Tishby adds by way of a note: ‘The Hebrew letters of the word *Mi*, i.e., m, y, a designation of *Binah*, are reversed in the name for *Malkhut*, forming the word *yam* (sea)’ (*The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol. 1)*, 1991, p.351, n.453).

²⁷ *New Jerusalem Bible*, 1994, p.19.

potentiality presents either a positive (Eden, “pleasure”; plenitude) or negative (Edom, “open wastes”; chaos) face.

Eden corresponds to the sefirah *Binah*, which is called the “Great Sea.”²⁸ Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that, ‘the Sea, as the source of all existence, is equally the symbol of their last end or entelechy.’²⁹ Mircea Eliade remarks that the symbolism of the Waters expresses ‘the universal sum of virtualities; they are the *fons et origio*, “spring and origin,” the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and support every creation.’³⁰ Peter Sterry poetically describes this as ‘a fountain ever equally unexhausted, a Sea unbounded’³¹. The symbolism of the Sea refers to the “depth” and possibility of the Infinite; this is complemented by the symbolism of Darkness, which refers to the unknowability of the Infinite. The symbolism of the fountain is that of the active Essence that brings life through creation.

‘A river flowed out of Eden’ (Gen.2:10); here again is the symbolism of “the fountain” and “the Sea.” The river that flows out of Eden is the active Essence—the same with the Spirit (*Ruah*) that moved on the Waters and, again, with the *Fiat Lux* that brings light from darkness. In the same way that zero contains the possibility for number and one contains all numbers virtually, so too the symbolism of the word Eden (אֵדֶן) contains the idea of the “river” that flows out of it. The letter *ayn* symbolically expresses the idea of a “fountain” gushing forth; it is also an “eye,” that is, the divine Eye through which the creative Light of the *Fiat Lux* flows out. In accord with the “law of inverse analogy” the human eye is a receptacle through which light, as we perceive it, flows in. *Daleth*, the second letter of Eden, is symbolically a “door”; it is the opening that the river of *ayn* flows through. At the same time this idea of the door partakes of *ayn* inasmuch as it is an eye or opening. The letter *nūn*, which completes Eden, is symbolically a “fish”; suffice

²⁸ Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, p.25.

²⁹ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sea’: *Selected Papers (Vol.1): Traditional Art and Symbolism*, 1977, p.406. Coomaraswamy continues here to say, ‘The final goal is not a destruction, but one of liberation from all the limitations of individuality as it functions in time and space.’ The sea is a common symbol of the spatio-temporal domain.

³⁰ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 1987, p.130; see also *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 1983, Ch.5.

³¹ Sterry, *Vivian de Sola Pinto*, in *Peter Sterry, Platonist and Puritan*, 1934, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.31.

to remark that the fish expresses the potentiality of water in a “living form.” Noted then that Edom expresses a similar symbolism with two informative differences. The first letter of Edom is an *aleph*, symbolically expressing an “ox,” where the ox is a well know symbol of Cosmic Substance.³² The final letter is a *mem*, symbolically expressing “water,” that is to say, it precedes the “living form” (the fish) and highlights the unformed or chaotic nature of potentiality.

Eden is unmanifest Existence in its state of biunity: Essence undifferentiated from Substance—recalling the ambiguity of the words *ayn* and *ousia*. The “river” is the vertical ray of Essence in act upon the horizontal garden (Substance). It is said that the river divided and became “four rivers,” these being the four symbolic directions of a horizontal plane of existence, the same with the “face of the waters” (Gen.1:2).³³ This same symbolism is found in the *Zohar* (II, 13a-13b), with the difference being that in this case it is the Spirit (*Ruah*) dividing into the “four winds.”³⁴ The details we are given concerning these “four rivers” reveal a cosmogonic symbolism. This, of course, is not to deny a geographical reading but simply to recognise the primacy of the cosmogonic reading in this case. In this respect it is enough to recall that the plan precedes the building.

The first river is Pishon, *Pîyshôwn* (פִּישׁוֹן; “dispersive”).³⁵ This word is closely related to the word *Pîythôwn* (פִּיתוֹן; “expansive”), which derives from the root *pothâh* (פתה; “to open,” as implying a secret place). Pishon is said to ‘wind all through the land of Havilah’ (Gen.2:11), where Havilah, *Chavîylâh* (חַוִּילָה), means “circular” from *chîyl* (חִיל; “to whirl”). To whirl in a circular manner: the image here may be compared to the

³² See “ox,” “bull” and “cow” in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996, (pp.730; 131 & 237).

³³ As Guénon observes: ‘a degree of Existence can be represented by a horizontal plane of indefinite extent’ (*Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, p.58; see Ch.11).

³⁴ According to *hadîth* in the Moslem tradition (Muslim, *îmân*, 264; Bukhārî, *bad’al-khalq*, 6), there are four rivers flowing forth from the *sidra* tree (Qur’an 53:14). The *sidra* or “Lotus of the Limit” is the *barzakh* between manifested and unmanifested existence. Ibn Sina says that these four rivers or “seas” are the ‘ideal realities (*haqîqat*) of substantiality, corporeality, Matter, and Form’ (see Corbin (tr.), *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 1960, p.175).

³⁵ On the symbolism of dispersion or “scattering” see Guénon, ‘Gathering what is Scattered’, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.48.

analogous symbolism of the Masonic plume line (the vertical axis) set swinging in increasing or “expansive” continuous spirals.

The second river is Gihon, *Gíchôwn* (גִּחֹן), from *gôach* (גָּח; “to gush forth” or “to issue,” in the sense of labour). Gihon moves through the land of Cush. The sense here is more obscure. *Kûwsh* (כּוּשׁ) is generally associated with Cush, the son of Ham (Gen.10:6). This is far from inconsequential, for Ham plays an active role in the cosmogony as expressed in the story of Noah. On this point, the name Ham, *châm* (חָם; “hot,” to be inflamed) expresses a similar sense as the bringing forth of the ontological waters, where fire and water are recognised as analogous symbols of the state of undifferentiated Being. It is worth noting the similarity here between *Kûwsh* (כּוּשׁ) and *kûwr* (כּוּר), which means “to dig” but particularly to dig “a furnace.” The two words differ by their final letters, which are subsequent letters in the Hebrew alphabet. *Kûwr* has as its final *resh*, symbolically a “head.” *Kûwsh* has as its final *shin*, symbolically a “tooth.” One might say that the tooth is in the head as the heat is in the furnace. This symbolism of the furnace echoes the alchemist’s athanor (Arabic *at-tannûr*; “oven”) and the Kabbalist’s Urn, which are not irrelevant here, for they are both homologues of the Ark of Noah.

The third river is Hiddekel, *Chiddeqel* (חִדְקֵל). The Hebrew here is of uncertain derivation. In Persian this is *Tigra*, which becomes *Tigris* in Greek, as the *Septuagint* calls it. In the old language of Babylonia this river was termed *Idiglat* or *Digla*, meaning “the encircling.”³⁶ The Hiddekel is said to run to the east of Ashur, which is the same name as Assyria. This name carries the sense of “stepping or coming forth”—suggesting the coming forth of manifestation from unmanifest potentiality; this comes from *’âshûr* (אֲשׁוּר; “a step”), which itself comes from the primitive root, *’âshar* (אָשַׁר; “to be level”). In this context there is an etymological similarity between Assyria, *’Ashshûwr* (אֲשׁוּר)

³⁶ Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 1965: *Ti’gris*, p.1096. Although the name *Chiddeqel* is of uncertain derivation, if one takes the “Chi-” as a typical vowel prostheis, then the consonant series D-Q-L is, in phonological terms, intimately related to T-G-R (*Digla*).

and the word *'ashûwyâh* (אשׁוּוּיָה), which derives from an unused root meaning “*foundation*.” According to sefirotic symbolism, *Yesod* is called “*Foundation*,” as it is the foundation upon which *Malkhut* (the Kingdom) is built; in this connection, note that *Yesod* is symbolically described as a “river.”³⁷

The fourth river is Euphrates, *P^erâth* (פֶּרַת; “to *break forth*”; “*rushing*”). We might compare this with the word *pôrâth* (פֶּרַת), which is the same with the primitive root *pârâh* (פָּרָה; “to *bear fruit*”; to be, or cause to be). An interesting connection is suggested here, for *pârâh* derives from *par* (פָּר), which means “a *bullock*,” where the bullock, like the ox, is a universal and common symbol of *prima materia*.³⁸ Moreover, *Strong’s Dictionary* suggests that this itself comes from the idea of either “*breaking forth in wild strength*” or, perhaps, from the image of “*dividing the hoof*,” and this from *pârar* (פָּרַר; “to *break up*”). Again, *pâras* (פָּרַשׁ), which differs to *pârar* by the shift from the final *resh* to a final *shin*, also means “to *break apart*” in the sense of “to *disperse*,” which returns us to the symbolism of the first river, Pishon.

Schuon offers the analogy of a wheel to describe Divine Substance: ‘expressed in geometric terms, the Substance is the centre, Radiation is the cluster of radii, and Reverberation, or the Image, is the circle; Existence or the “*Virgin*,” is the surface which allows this unfolding to take place.’³⁹ The symbolism described by the “four rivers” is suggestive of this analogy, excepting in this case the radii appear to be described as “*spirals*,” which is, in a sense, more exact.

The description of “*encircling*” described by both the name Havilah and the Babylonia word *Digla* remind one of the numerous world encircling rivers of mythology, of which the Greek Oceanus is maybe the most familiar. One feels it is fair to say that this passage contains an esoteric expression of the cosmogony, as opposed to Von Rad who claims

³⁷ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1989, p.433, n.24.

³⁸ As for example in the mythology of Mithras.

³⁹ Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.55.

that this passage ‘has no significance for the unfolding action’ of *Genesis*.⁴⁰ All of the details presented are expressed in the symbolism of the *ayn*, a fountain, which synthetically contains the word Eden.

The Hebrew Scriptures give only the names of the four rivers that divided from the original river yet not the name of this source river. However, according to *Ha Idra Zuta Qadihsa*, the Lesser Holy Assembly, this river is called *Yobel*: ‘What is *Yobel*? As it is written, Jer. xvii.8: “VOL IVBL, Va-El *Yobel*, And spreadeth out her roots by the river”; therefore that river which ever goeth forth and floweth, and goeth forth and faileth not.’⁴¹ The word *yôbêl* (יֹבֵל) means literally “a *blast* from a trumpet,” and comes from a primitive root, *yâbal* (יָבַל) meaning “to *flow*,” as a river. The connection of *Yobel* with the sound of a trumpet suggests the idea of creation through the emanation of the primordial sound, the “Word,” which is again the “Name,” analogous by a shift in symbolism with the *Fiat Lux*. In this connection, *Yobel* is also said to be the same as the angel *Yahoel*, which is the first of the “Seventy Names of Metatron.”⁴² According to the Babylonian Talmud, Metatron is the angel who is given the same name as his master.⁴³ This name is *Shaddai* or “Almighty,” which has the same numerical value as “Metatron.” According to the *Zohar* the name *Shaddai* is related to the word *sadai* or “field,” as in Psalm 104: ‘Who sends forth springs into the streams ... they give drink to every beast of the field’ (11-12). *Zohar* III, 18a: ‘This is [the significance of] the verse “and from thence it was parted and became four heads” (*Genesis* 2:10); these four heads are the beasts of *sadai* ... *Sadai*: do not pronounce it *sadai*, but *Shaddai* (the Almighty), for he receives and completes the name from the foundation (*Yesod*) of the world.’ As Tishby remarks, “the beasts of the field” (*sadai*) are the four beasts of the Chariot.⁴⁴ Concerning the connection between the primordial sound and the primordial light, both

⁴⁰ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 1963, p.77.

⁴¹ Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, 1991, p.288.

⁴² On the angel *Yohoel* see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, pp.68-9. Note the interchange between there being 70 and 72 names of Metatron, see Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (Vol.1)*, 1983, p.313, n.48D.a. On the 72 lettered name of God see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1989, p.313, n.114; also Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, Ch.VIII.

⁴³ See B.T. *Hagigah*, 15a; B.T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a; B.T. *Avodah Zarah*, 3b.

⁴⁴ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1989, p.436, n.60.

the Midrash and the *Zohar* says that the *Fiat Lux* of *Genesis* 1:3 is the light of Metatron.⁴⁵ He is called ‘the light of the luminary of the *Shekhinah*’⁴⁶. Metatron has been identified with Melchizedek,⁴⁷ who is seen as prefiguring Christ (Heb.5:7); yet even without this identification having been made it is not hard to see the relationship between the creative sound and light in the Christian tradition. Christ is both the Word and the “light of the world” (Jn.8:12). Jalāl al-Din Rūmī offers the following image of the creation which beautifully sums up all we are considering here: ‘But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’⁴⁸

Schaya remarks that *Yobel* is the “divine state”: ‘the state of supreme illumination and identity, of total union with God.’⁴⁹ He further recognises *Yobel* as *Binah*, the Upper Mother.⁵⁰ We have said that the Upper and Lower Mothers are *Binah* and *Malkhut*, but from another perspective they are also *Binah* and *Yesod*, which, as Tishby says are both symbolically “rivers.”⁵¹ Furthermore, *Yobel* is the Hebrew word for “jubilee,” the fiftieth year beginning on the Day of Atonement (*kol shofar*, the “voice of the trumpet”). Accordingly *Binah* is conceived of as having 50 gates through which Mercy flows as a river.⁵² It is by the way of the 50 gates of *Binah* that all creation is manifested. In this context it should be noted that the Hebrew word *kol* (“all”) has the numerical value of 50.⁵³ Furthermore, according to Kabbalah, the world is created in and through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Manifestation, in both its potentiality and actuality, is thus to be found expressed by the number 72 (50 + 22), which reveals, in part, the meaning of the “Seventy-Two Names of Metatron.”

⁴⁵ *Midrash ha-Ne'elam; Zohar Hadash, Bereshit*, 8d.

⁴⁶ *Zohar* II, 65b-66b.

⁴⁷ Z'ev ben Simon Halevi, *Kabbalah The Divine Plan*, 1996, p.14; *The Way of Kabbalah*, 1976, p.16.

⁴⁸ *Mathnawī* I, 835 (Gupta (tr.), *Vol.1*, 1997, p.74).

⁴⁹ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.135.

⁵⁰ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, p.44.

⁵¹ See Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar (Vol.1)*, 1989, p.433, n.24.

⁵² Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light (Sha'are Orah)*, 1994, p.245.

⁵³ See Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, pp.19-20, in particular n.8.

Rabbi Gikatilla observes that it was the angel Yahoel who “performed the slaying of the firstborn”⁵⁴ (Gen.12:29-34). Considering the cosmogony as expressed by the Exile, the slaying of the firstborn and the subsequent Exodus symbolise the “slaying” of cosmic potentiality and the coming forth of Creation. The slaying of the first-born is prefigured in the “rejection” of Ishmael and again the relinquishing of his birthright by Esau, who, as noted, is Edom (Gen.36:1). In this context, the *Zohar* recognises Jacob as “a river of praise” and more explicitly says that he is the “river going out of Eden.”⁵⁵ Jacob, who is Beauty (*Tiferet*) and Order, is the river that flowed out of Eden to water the garden of Creation, expressed, at this level, by a horizontal plane of existence, which in turn is symbolised by the four rivers “breaking forth” in ever “expansive” spirals.

⁵⁴ Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light (Sha'are Orah)*, 1994, p.35.

⁵⁵ *Zohar* I, 247b.