

Abrahamic symbolisms of the number 72

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Introduction

The metaphysical and mystical significance of numbers is a well recognised phenomenon throughout the world's religious traditions. In the West, for example, Plato is said to have recognised numerology as the highest of the sciences.¹ The esoteric traditions of the three Abrahamic religions are all marked by number symbolism. In the Hebrew tradition, where letters also serve as numbers, this type of symbolism is of the highest order with the very Name of God intimately associated with certain numbers. These associations are far from arbitrary. The *Shemhamphorasch*, or the 72 lettered name of God, is not simply called this because it has 72 letters, but because of the nature of the number 72. Annemarie Schimmel sees 72 as universally expressing the concept of “plenitude.”² The number 72 occurs across many religious traditions where marked similarities in its use suggest a coherent symbolic underpinning. This should be seen in light of René Guénon's remark that ‘there are symbols which are common to the most diverse and widely separated traditional forms, not as a result of “borrowings,” which in many cases would be quite impossible, but because in reality they pertain to the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’³ Guénon's reference to “the Primordial Tradition” has proven controversial with some arguing for a single “people” from whom all civilization is descended; for our part it may be simpler to say that what is at issue is a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles constituting

¹ *Epinomis* 976 e. It is generally accepted that Plato was not in fact the author of this appendix to the *Laws*; still, even if this is so it nevertheless represents one of the first “Platonisms.” Plato does, however, talk of the “invention of number” as coming from the “supremely beneficial function” of sight, which was a gift from the gods (*Timaeus* 47a-b).

² A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.266.

³ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.27.

the *philosophia perennis*. The symbolism of 72 reveals definite features throughout the world's traditions because of the metaphysical integrity of the number 72. As Plotinus says, 'Numbers exist before objects described by them. The variety of sense objects merely recalls to the soul the notion of number.'⁴ Questions of shared transmission, dependence, or influence are entirely secondary, which is not to deny the value of these types of enquiry, nor to deny that these type of "borrowings" do in fact occur, which quite obviously they do.

The fundamental symbolism of 72 is that of the transmission or transformation from the creative Principle to creation itself. This is not to deny other readings, for true symbolism is multivalent; nevertheless this is "fundamental" in the sense that this is the cosmogonic symbolism, where the cosmogony is the fundamental act of expression and hence the origin of symbolism *per se*. Of course to simply say that the symbolism of 72 is the transmission of Principle to creation hardly does justice to the vast body of symbolisms that this entails and the complex hermeneutics that explicate these. I have considered these ideas in greater detail in my previous exploration of the universal symbolism of 72.⁵ The following is a general overview of the conclusions developed there:

1. 72, like all derivatives and multiples of 7, carries with it the idea of wholeness and perfection.
2. 72 expresses the creative Principle; in some cases, such as the Judaic Name of God, this is explicit.
3. There is a relationship between 70 and 72 as between Principle and manifestation or between cause and effect; as with these "pairs" the expression of this relationship is a matter of perspective—celestial or terrestrial—meaning that these two numbers can be, and in fact are, used interchangeably.
4. The creative Principle manifests, or causes manifestation to come to be, by an "expansion," that can be symbolically described both vertically and horizontally. Throughout the world traditions both of these aspects are consistently described by reference to 72. This is

⁴ *Enneads* 6.6.9.

⁵ 'Remarks on the universal symbolism of the number 72', *Eye of the Heart: A Journal of Traditional Wisdom* 1, Bendigo: La Trobe University, 2008, pp.119-140.

to recognise that what was potential and implicit in the Principle becomes realised and explicit in creation.

5. Creation is defined by the two fundamental aspects of space and time. Spatially, the sphere (the ideal form of three dimensional space) is based on the number 7, while the dodecahedron—Plato’s “receptacle of becoming”—is underpinned by the 72 degrees of each pentagon. Temporally, the measure of a cosmic cycle is expressed by a form of the number 432; this number is in turn an expression of the Principle (symbolised by 72) developed through all of the 6 cosmogonic directions. (i.e. 72×6).

This article explores this symbolism further through an examination of some key occurrences of the number 72 in the Abrahamic religions. Here my aim is to show that various traditions, which often seem to have little or no connection, do in fact share a particular cosmogonic symbolism. This homologous nature is rooted in the metaphysics that underpins these symbolism rather than in historical connections, albeit that these may also exist. Moreover, I am not particularly interested in whether the “author” of these accounts, where such an author might be identifiable, intended the cosmogonic symbolism I am suggesting, or whether they simply transmitted elements of the tradition unconsciously, so to speak. Questions of authorship—identity, date, intention—have historical significance but, again, they are secondary to the metaphysical meaning that resides in the *sophia perennis*.

In referring to the symbolism of 72 in the “Abrahamic traditions” I wish to draw attention to a consistent use of the symbolism of 72 in the three monotheistic religions, rather than any particular connection of this number with the figure of Abraham. If I have focused on the Jewish tradition it is because of the wealth of examples available and because the symbolism under consideration is particularly well developed therein. However, this does not mean that the cosmogonic interpretation of 72 in either Christianity or Islam is any less apposite, as I aim to show.

The story of Babel (*Genesis* 11) sets the stage for our investigation. This is primarily considered in terms of its cosmogonic symbolism. Questions of the relationships between these symbolisms, vis-à-vis primacy, contradiction, inversion, perspective and context, move beyond the scope of this paper. The biblical account of Babel is

explored in detail because it identifies the key elements of the symbolism of 72: the movement from Unity to multiplicity, the principal symbolism of “the Name” (the metaphysical Sound, Language, Word, Breath, Power, Spirit—*creatio per Verbum*), the vertical axis mundi, and the horizontal dispersion or “scattering” of spatio-temporal creation. Similarly the accounts of the ratification of the covenant presented in Exodus 24 and especially Numbers 11 are given close attention for the manner that these develop the relationship between the numbers 70 and 72, explicitly connecting these symbolic numbers to the divine creative Power. As with the account of Babel, Numbers 11 connects the symbolism of 72 with the creative axial descent of God. This passage similarly develops the symbolism of the horizontal expansion of spatio-temporal creation through the pattern of the Israelite encampment. This symbolism is in turn traditionally taken up in the cosmological symbolism of the Temple, which I have only alluded to herein given that it is already so well known.

The second half of this essay takes up two of the key symbolic elements: the axis mundi and the symbolism of the Name/Word. Adopting a more thematic approach, we survey a range of occurrences of 72 (or its variants) in the Abrahamic religions to show how these consistently and often explicitly express these elements.

Babel

In the Abrahamic traditions it is said that the destruction of the tower of Babel splintered the primordial language into 70 or 72 languages. Viewed in terms of cosmogonic symbolism, 70 expresses the creative Act from the point of view of the perfection of its potential and 72 expresses the extension or development of this potential. Neither number is mentioned in *Genesis* 11; rather they are derived, according to haggadic tradition, from the ethnological table given in *Genesis* 10, where 70 grandsons of Noah are enumerated, each of whom, it is said, became the ancestor of a nation and the founder of a language. The *Septuagint*, counts 72 grandsons of Noah, hence 72 nations and languages. The *Sefer ha-Jashar* tells how God sent His 70 ministering angels to confuse the speech of the builders of the tower.⁶ This

⁶ *Sefer ha-Jashar* cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, ed. A. S. Rappoport, London: Gresham Publishing Company, 1995, p.237.

demonstrates a link between this number and the celestial hierarchies, a link that we will see developed further below. St. Augustine prolongs the use of the number 72;⁷ it is in turn repeated by the venerable Bede⁸ and Remigius.⁹ In the *History of the Prophets and Kings*, by the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari, it is Allah who destroys the tower of Babil and confuses the language of mankind, formerly Syriac, into 72 languages.

The *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* records that the tower of Babel reached a height of “seven mils.”¹⁰ Obviously 70 is a derivative of 7 and, as has been noted, ‘All derivatives or multiples of seven carry with them the idea of wholeness.’¹¹ Also recorded here is the idea that the tower was built by 600,000 men.¹² As Gershom Scholem notes, there are said to be 70 “faces” of the Torah shining forth to the initiate;¹³ however, the sixteenth century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, taught that there are 600,000 “faces” of the Torah, as many as there were souls in Israel at the time of the Revelation.¹⁴ In both cases the number is an expression of the totality of peoples (Israelites) that constitute human existence, which—in the context of Gen.1:27 and the Lurianic *Adam Kadmon*—is to say, Existence *per se*.

The tower of Babel offers us an image of the metaphysical *axis mundi*, the link between earth and heaven.¹⁵ This story then marries this architectural symbolism to a corresponding verbal symbolism. This homogeneity is explicitly recognised in Judaic tradition, as we read in *Proverbs*: ‘The Name of Yahweh is a strong tower’ (18:10). The words used for “name” (*shem*; שם) and “tower” (*migdālāh*; מגדלה) are the same for both Pr.18:10 and Gen.11:4. *Migdālāh* is derived from $\sqrt{g\ddot{a}dal}$, which has the meaning of “to be large,” hence “tower,” but the

⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.3 (527-28).

⁸ Bede, *Commentary on Genesis: Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 118A, 161.

⁹ Remigius, *Commentary on Genesis: Patrologia Latina*, ed. Minge, 131, 81c.

¹⁰ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* Ch.24, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.237.

¹¹ J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, p.867.

¹² *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.24 *ibid.*, p.237).

¹³ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.210. This number comes from the 600,000 Israelites that left Egypt with Moses (Ex.13:37).

¹⁵ On the symbolism of the *axis mundi* see M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

ontological sense is strong also.¹⁶ The idea of the whole world speaking “one language” is associated with the tower that rises to heaven, that is to say, unity is presented as a cognate of the Principle. God is said to have “confused” the languages of the people so that they were scattered over the world. Guénon suggests that the symbolism of that which has been “scattered” refers to the passage from Unity into multiplicity: the act of creation.¹⁷ In terms of the symbolism of the vertical axis this passage is described by the downward movement, while the upward movement indicates a return to Unity.

To view the story of Babel in terms of a cosmogonic symbolism presents certain difficulties. The common reading of this passage is that of a moral warning against hubris, and no doubt this meaning exists. On the surface, the people who spoke “one language” do not fit with the idea of the divine Principle, in that they revolt against heaven and are rebuked and punished by God. However, this symbolism of the cosmogonic revolt is not unfamiliar: one thinks of the story of the revolt of the angels and the mythological war in heaven, which resulted in the expulsion of Sammael (Lucifer).¹⁸ This revolt is rooted in a presumption of equality with God (see *Is. 14:13-14*)—the very definition of hubris. In Christianity hubris is found with the cardinal sin of Pride, the original

¹⁶ *√gādal* properly means “to twist” in the sense of twisting a *thread*. Two cosmogonic symbolisms immediately suggested themselves: weaving (see René Guénon, ‘The symbolism of weaving’ in *Symbolism of the Cross*) and the “churning of the ocean” (for example *Bhāgavata Purāna* 8 and *Rg Veda* 10) in which creation is born out of the “twisting” of the cosmic axis. This “twisting” suggests the image of the ziggurat, as depicted for example in Breugel’s painting. Again this image of “twisting” suggests the spiral of “cosmic currents” that Guénon mentions in his essay, ‘The Bridge and the Rainbow’ (*Fundamental Symbols*); these are the complementary currents (*catabasis* and *anabasis*) of the vertical axis. This idea is found in the traditions of the tower of Babel where we find the workers who carried the bricks up the tower ascended on the east side, while those who descended had to go down on the west side (*Sefer al-Jashar; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch.24, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.237); this does not necessarily contradict the idea of a spiral passage, particularly if one takes the mention of ascending in the east and descending in the west to refer to the movement of the sun, which, because of the rotation of the earth, maps out a spiral ascent and descent between the tropics.

¹⁷ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.204.

¹⁸ See *Yalkut Rubeni*, § 3; Rabbi Behai (Bahya), *Commentary on the Books of Moses*, section *Achare Moth*; Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judentum Vol.1*, p.831, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, p.56, n.1 & 2; see also *1 Enoch* 6-13; *Jubilees* 5:6; and *Rev.12:7-9*.

and most serious of the seven deadly sins, and indeed the cause of Lucifer's expulsion from heaven. These ideas offer two connections to the symbolism of the tower of Babel, the first scriptural and the second typological.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul proclaims that the *parousia* of Christ cannot happen 'until the Great Revolt has taken place and there has appeared the wicked One, the lost One, the Enemy, who raises himself above every so-called God or object of worship to enthrone himself in God's sanctuary and flaunts the claim that he is God' (2Th.2:4). Although there is debate about the nature of this "revolt" and the identity of "the wicked One" it is not implausible to see this eschatological battle as the complementary symbol to the war in heaven.¹⁹ This is strengthened by Paul's use of *Isaiah* 14:13—'I shall scale the heavens; higher than the stars of God I shall set my throne ... I shall rival the Most High'. The parallel to the story of Babel is obvious: 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall' (Pr.16:18). This connection is found again in the Christian tradition with Jesus quoting *Isaiah* 14:13-15 when telling the "72 disciples," whom he sends forth to spread the "word," that they should tell Capernaum 'did you want to be raised high as heaven? You shall be flung down to hell' (Lk.10:15). We will consider the 72 disciples who spread the "word" later; for now it is enough to recognise the scriptural thread that links the 72 disciples of the "word," given us in *Luke*, with the 72 languages born out of the destruction of the tower of Babel, bound by *Isaiah* 14:13-15.

Lucifer's fall is not only moral but, as Guénon observes, it is identified with the symbolism of the "stone fallen from the sky" (*lapsit exillis*).²⁰ In the *Zohar* this symbolism is employed to describe the vertical descent of the cosmogonic act.²¹ This axial descent offers a typological analogy to the axial symbolism of the tower. In *Genesis* 11 the building of the tower is immediately followed and qualified by the

¹⁹ Many Christian Bible commentaries do in fact read the war in heaven as an eschatological vision. In the current essay I am taking the war in heaven as a mythological symbolism of a primordial state, in line with *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch*. Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, treats this myth in the same manner, although it might well be argued that his Satan is a product of Humanism rather than a traditional archetype.

²⁰ See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Ch.46.

²¹ *Zohar* I, 231a-231b; II, 222a-222b.

declaration that the people should ‘make a name for ourselves, so that we do not get scattered all over the world’ (Gen.11:4). The pretension of “making a name for ourselves” is that of claiming equality with God, for the divine Name is synonymous with God.²²

Tradition offers two sources for the name Babel, both of which illuminate a cosmogonic reading. On the one hand, Babel is taken as a Hebrew reading of the Akkadian name *Babilu* (Babylon) meaning “gate of god” (from *bab* = “gate” and *ilu* = “god”). The symbolism of the Gate of God suggests that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the “Sundoor,” which is located, so to speak, at the pinnacle of the *axis mundi*.²³ It is suggested that the Hebrew *babel* can also mean “gate of god” from *bab* = “gate” and *el* = “god.” The word offered here as “gate,” *bab*, is properly *bābāh* (בבה) meaning “to hollow out” or something *hollowed*, as in a “gate.”²⁴ Interestingly this is then used to refer to the *pupil* of the eye, in the sense of it being “hollow”; this suggests a pertinent connection for the Sundoor is also the “eye of the needle” (Matt.19:24, Mk.10:25, Lk.18:25). These connections are informative in the sense that they suggest certain etymological links which operate according to what Hindu tradition calls *nirukta*, folk etymologies of which the value (and truth) resides in their symbolism rather than the accuracy of their historical etymology.

²² In the Islamic tradition we find al-Jīlī declare: ‘the Name is the Named One Himself’ (*al-insān al-kamīl*, tr. T. Burckhardt, Gloucester: Beshara Publications, 1983, p.30).

²³ Further to the web of symbolism being developed, it is worth remarking that the city of Babel is built in a valley in the land of Shinar (Gen.11:1); the name Shinar is suspected to be of foreign origin, however, we might note that the Hebrew (שנער) only differs by a transition from an *ayin* to a *yod*—a symbolic movement from “eye” to “hand,” where God’s “seeing” is related to His “doing”—from the word *S’nyr* (שניר), which means “to be *pointed*” and denotes “a *peak*.” It is at the peak of the cosmic mountain that distinction is resolved into unity through the *coincidentia oppositorum*; this unity is beyond comparative description instead being “described” by such amorphous symbolism as a “cloud of unknowing.” All of this is of course suggestive of the theophany on Sinai.

²⁴ Let us also remark that Babel is built in a “valley” of Shinar, which is to say, a “hollowed out” area. The word translated as “valley” is *biq’ah* (בקעה), deriving from *bāqa’* (בקע) which means “to *cleave*” generally indicating the making of an opening, suggesting the “opening” between the uncreated and the created. In this connection it is worth observing that the primitive root *shānan* (שננ), which is closely related to *S’nyr* (שניר) means “to *point*” and implies “to *pierce*”—this in turn leads one to think of the “pierced one” (Zc.12:10) and of course, Christ, who is the Christian *coincidentia oppositorum par excellence*.

The word translated as Babel is *Bābel* (בבל) denoting “confusion.” This derives from $\sqrt{b\bar{a}l\bar{a}l}$ (בלל) meaning “to overflow,” and thus by implication “to mix,” hence the sense of confusion. What is most interesting is the fact that this root has the specific sense of overflowing with *oil*. Now this is in perfect accordance with the symbolism at hand for the symbolism of oil in Judaism (as in other traditions) is that of the divine Essence that flows forth through the “Gate of God” bringing creation into being.²⁵ Oil is similarly identified with the divine Light that shines forth through the divine Eye.²⁶ The divine Light, in turn, is intimately identified with the divine Sound, as in the symbolism of the *Fiat Lux*. The Persian mystic-poet, Jalāl al-din Rūmī, offers the following image of the creation which beautifully encapsulates these ideas: ‘But when that purest of lights threw forth Sound which produced forms, He, like the diverse shadows of a fortress, became manifold.’²⁷ The connection between *shāman* (שמן; “to shine”) and *shemen* (שמן; “oil”) is further extended to the word *shēm* (שם) meaning “name,” particularly the divine Name. Thus, as we read in *The Song of Songs*, ‘your name is an oil poured out’ (Sg.1:3). The divine Name is the archetype of all “communication” and thus of the principle at the heart of all symbolism of language.

The divine Principle is Unity (one language; one people); this Principle establishes itself in the valley of Shinar (the first Point; the divine Centre), which is “hollow” in the sense of being uncreated. From this primordial and uncreated Point proceeds the irruption of the creative Power (name-language; oil; light). In this context it is worth

²⁵ Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1310), who stands with Moses de Leon as one of the key figures of Kabbalah, observes that the symbolism of “oil” is that of ‘the essence of all the Spheres [the *Sefirot*]’ (*Gates of Light [Sha’are Orah]*, tr. A. Weinstein, Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1994, p.314). Gikatilla cites the vision of Zechariah of the two olive trees from which flow “golden oil” through the two golden “openings” or “tubes” (Zc.4:12). These two olive trees and subsequent two openings express the symbolism of duality, through which the Essence flows forth to enlighten the world, which, moreover, is expressed in Zechariah’s vision by the “seven lamps” (the seven ontocosmological “directions”) that are fed by this oil.

²⁶ *Shāman* (שמן), meaning “to shine,” gives rise to the word *shemen* (שמן), meaning “oil,” especially that of the olive, the allusion being that oil or grease is used to polish and thus to make shine. The creative Light flows forth from the divine Eye; in accord with the “law of inverse analogy” the human eye is a receptacle through which light, as we perceive it, flows in.

²⁷ *Mathnawī* I, 835 (tr. M. G. Gupta, Vol.1, Agra: M. G. Publishers, 1997, p.74).

remarking that these people came to the valley of Shinar by travelling “eastward”; the word here is *qēdmāh* (קדם) from $\sqrt{qādem}$ (קדם) meaning “to *project*.” This projection is symbolically described as “downwards.” Here one might paradoxically describe the construction of the tower of Babel as “inverted” in the sense that the *axis mundi* proceeds (projects) from the Principle “down” into the world (which it in turn symbolises and manifests). This is to view the creative act from a celestial perspective; from a terrestrial perspective the image becomes one of the destruction of the tower from its top to its bottom.²⁸ This architectural symbolism is then aligned to the movement from one language to a “scattered” multiplicity, which tradition describes by 72 languages.

The ratification of the covenant

The use of the “number” 70/72 to describe the descent of the divine Power is again found in the account of the ratification of the covenant in *Exodus* 24 and *Numbers* 11. Here Moses collects 70 elders of the people and positions them around the Tent of Meeting where Yahweh descends in a cloud. Yahweh, we are then told, took some of the spirit that He had placed on Moses and put it on the 70 elders (Num.11:25). The Tent of Meeting is the tabernacle; the tabernacle contains the Temple *in principle*, and by extension and analogy, the Temple contains the cosmos. As Guénon remarks, “The Tabernacle of the Holiness of *Jehovah* in which the *Shekhinah* [“indwelling”; the divine Immanence] resides is the Holy of Holies, which is the heart of the Temple, which in turn is the centre of Zion (Jerusalem), just as Zion is the centre of the Land of Israel and the Land of Israel is the centre of the world.”²⁹ As with the city and tower of Babel we again have the association of the number 70/72 with the architectural symbolism of the *imago mundi*.

As Rabbi Gikatilla remarks, it is ‘through the medium of this *Ohel Moed* (tent) one is spoken to [by YHVH]’.³⁰ Here again the verbal symbolism is encountered. Leo Schaya recognises the connection

²⁸ On this type of symbolism see Coomaswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’ in *Selected Papers Vol.I: Art and Symbolism*, pp.376-404.

²⁹ Cited in R. Guénon, *The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.112, n.12.

³⁰ Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.30.

between the divine Language/Word/Name and the divine Presence in the world:

Moses erected the tabernacle for God's "indwelling" (*shekhinah*), and Solomon erected the temple for God's "name" (*shem*). Thus their two works were essentially one, just as God is truly present in His name, this being precisely His "indwelling" or "habitation."³¹

The link between the tabernacle and the *Shekhinah* is developed by Rabbi Gikatilla who notes that the 'Aramaic root for *Ohel* is *mishKaN* ["*mishkān*" denotes the tabernacle], which is the essence of [and shares the root of] *Shekhinah*'.³²

The symbolism of the Tent entails the creativity of both sound and light. In the *Zohar* the "Opening of the Tent" is equated with the *Shekhinah*; the *Shekhinah* is in turn symbolised by "light."³³ Adrian Snodgrass observes this symbolism in the Islamic tradition: 'The Tent symbolises the Supreme Intellect, the Nous, identified with the Muhammadian Light (*al-nūr al-Muhammadi*).'³⁴ This symbolism is evident in the very word for "tent," for the Hebrew word *ohel* (אֹהֶל) derives from \sqrt{ahal} (אָהַל) meaning "to be clear" and "to shine."

The account presented in *Numbers* 11 is of particular interest to us as it sharpens the distinction between the numbers 70 and 72. At verse 24 we read: '[Moses] collected seventy of the people's elders and stationed them round the Tent. Yahweh descended in the cloud. He spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit came on them they prophesied',³⁵ at verse 26 we read: 'Two men had stayed back in the camp; one was

³¹ L. Schaya, 'The Meaning of the Temple' in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin 1974, p.360.

³² Rabbi Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.30.

³³ The *Shekhinah* is symbolised by the changing light of the moon, whereas the Principle (the *sefirah Tiferet*) is the Sun (see *Zohar* 111, 248b, *Raya Mehamna*); *Tiferet* is the unchanging white flame of the lamp, *Malkhut* (the *Shekhinah*) is the lower part of the flame, which is constantly changing colour (*Zohar* 1, 50-b-51b). Rabbi Gikatilla refers to the *Shekhinah* as the "light of God" (*Gates of Light*, p.45).

³⁴ A. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990, p.421.

³⁵ As Isaiah Tishby observes, 'the *Shekhinah* was the channel through which prophecy was transmitted' (*The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.406, n.159).

called Eldad and the other Medad. The spirit came down on them; though they had not gone to the Tent, their names were enrolled among the rest. These began to prophesy in the camp.’ The name Eldad (עלדאד) means “*God has loved*”; the name Medad (מדד) also connotes the sense of “*loving*.” Medad derives from *yādad* √דד (“*to throw*”) and this in turn from *yād* (יד; “*the open hand*”), which connotes both *power* and suggests *giving*. This web of symbolism is further developed by the word translated as “*camp*” (Num.11:27), *machāneh* (מחנה; “*an encampment*”), which derives from √חנח (“*to incline*”; by implication, “*to decline*,” especially of the slanting rays of the evening sun); moreover, *chānāh* is used specifically in the sense of “*to pitch a tent*,” recalling this symbolism. *Chānāh* is also the root of the name Hannah and, in turn, Anna. Hannah is the mother of Samuel (שמאאל; “*heard of God*”, but also carrying the sense of “*the Name of God*,” as in *Shēm* = name); Anna according to the *Protevangeliūm of James*, is the mother of Mary, who in turn is the mother of the Word made flesh (Jn.1:14); this symbolism is developed by the idea that Anna and Mary are, to a certain degree, symbolically synonymous: according to Epiphanius, Jesus had two sisters, the name of the first being either Mary or Anna and the second being Salome.³⁶ In the first case there is identification between that from which Jesus “*comes forth*”; in the second case we have Salome who the *Protevangeliūm of James* says was one of the midwives at Jesus’ birth, that is, that which “*brings forth*.”³⁷

The names Eldad and Medad suggest God’s creative Power (*yād*), which is His Giving (Charity and Mercy) and Love. As we read in the *Talmud*:

The Pentateuch begins with an act of benevolence [Charity; *gemiluth chasadim*, “*the bestowal of loving acts*”] and concludes with an act of benevolence. At the beginning it is said, “*And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them*” (Gen.3:21); and at the end it is said, “*And he buried him (Moses) in the valley*” (Deut.34:6).³⁸

³⁶ *Ancor.* 60; *Pan.* 78.8; cited Schneemelcher ed., *New Testament Apocrypha Vol.1*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, p.472.

³⁷ *Protevangeliūm of James*, 20.1-3.

³⁸ *Sotah* 14a, cited in A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, New York: Schocken Books 1995, p.225.

This Power is manifested in our world, the “camp,” which is the extension of the Tabernacle, and here we must recall that the pattern of the Israelite encampment was based on the 12 tribes circling the Tabernacle—the number 12 expressing the spatio-temporal symbolism of cosmological existence. This creative Power is given once, in Eternity (*aeternitas*), and forever (sempiternity); God *has* loved (Eldad) and *is* loving (Medad).

Numbers 11 associates the symbolism of 70 with the Tabernacle, the “location” of the divine creative Power *in divinis* or *in potentia*. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant observe, ‘Seventy is ten times seven—a superlative equal to twofold perfection’.³⁹ But this potentiality is also made manifest *in actua*, and this involves the development of this number in duality (the world of distinction), which is to say, through the “two” (Eldad and Medad); and this brings the “totality” of creation to 72. The number 72 symbolises the manifestation of the created 6 (Gen.1)—the 6 days of creation envisaged as the 6 principal metaphysical “directions”—through and in the spatio-temporal twelve.

The axial symbolism of seventy-two

The axial symbolism associated with the number 72, evident with the tower of Babel, is found in several other Jewish traditions. The *Second Targum of Esther* describes 72 golden lions set out upon the steps of Solomon’s Throne.⁴⁰ The “throne” is analogous with the tabernacle and, as such, is the principle of the temple (*imago mundi*); moreover, the “throne,” as Leo Schaya says, ‘is the first and spiritual crystallization of all creatural possibilities before they are set in motion in the midst of the cosmos. When the “throne” assumes its dynamic aspect and cosmic manifestation begins to move, it is called the divine “chariot” (*merkabah*).’⁴¹ Elsewhere Schaya remarks on the relationship between the tabernacle and the *merkabah*:

The tabernacle had provided the presence of God [*Shekhinah*] with no permanent habitation, for it was set up after the model of his

³⁹ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. J. Buchanan-Brown, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996, p.867.

⁴⁰ *Second Targum of Esther*, cited in *Ancient Israel Vol.3*, p.237; see 1Kgs.10:20; 2Ch.9:17.

⁴¹ L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, tr. N. Pearson, New Jersey: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.84.

heavenly “vehicle” (*merkabah*), in which he would lead His people through the wilderness to the fixed “centre of the world,” Jerusalem.⁴²

The tabernacle and the *merkabah* are *imagines mundi* in dynamic mode. The throne is an *imago mundi* emphasizing the fixed Centre, complete and Eternal, both Transcendent and Immanent.

The “steps” leading “up” to Solomon’s Throne are analogous to the rungs of the celestial ladder (Jacob’s Ladder). In discussing the symbolism of the ladder, Guénon distinguishes between the “axial” nature of the two vertical posts, leading both up and down, and the more “peripheral” passage through the hierarchic states one by one ‘even though in both cases the final goal is necessarily the same.’⁴³ It should come as little surprise then to find the Midrash describe the ladder of which Jacob dreamed as having 70 rungs, upon which angels of each nation descended and ascended.⁴⁴

A close homologue of the ladder is the celestial tree, one of the most common symbols of the *axis mundi*. The rungs of the ladder equate with the branches of the tree. The *Greater Holy Assembly* of the *Zohar* talks of the “Tree of Life” as having 70 branches: The “holy tree,” it is said, ‘was perfected in the earth ... similar unto the Supernal One, in having twelve limitations and seventy branches’⁴⁵ S. L. MacGregor Mathers notes that this is the Tree of Life (*Autz Chaiim*) ‘composed of the *Sephiroth* and the *Shemhamphorasch* [the 72 lettered name of God], the former being ten and the latter seventy-two. The twelve limitations are the twelve sons of Jacob, and the seventy branches the total number of the combined families.’⁴⁶ This “branch” symbolism is again found with Josephus, where the Temple menorah is comprised of 70 parts. According to Josephus, if one looks upon the description of the

⁴² Schaya, ‘The Meaning of the Temple’, p.360.

⁴³ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.266.

⁴⁴ *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayetze 2*: ‘Said Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman: “These are the princes of the nations of the world..which the Holy Blessed One showed to Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended 70 rungs and descended. Of Medea, 52 and descended. Of Greece, 100 steps and descended. Of Edom, it ascended and it is not known how many...”’

⁴⁵ *Ha Idra Rabba Qadisha* 692 in MacGregor Mathers tr., *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991, p.197.

⁴⁶ MacGregor Mathers tr., *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, p.197, note.

tabernacle and the Temple, “without prejudice and with judgment,” one will find these ‘made by way of imitation and representation of the universe.’⁴⁷ He interprets the 70 parts of the candlestick as the astrological *Decani* (the 70 divisions of the planets); the 7 lamps as the course of the planets; the sardonyxes as the sun and the moon; and the 12 stones as the Zodiac.

The association of 72 with a symbolism that is both axial and astro-temporal is again found in an Islamic tradition, narrated by Al-Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib:

I was sitting in al-Batha with a company among whom the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) was sitting, when a cloud passed above them.

The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) looked at it and said: What do you call this? They said: *Sahab*.

He said: And *muzn*? They said: And *muzn*. He said: And *anan*? They said: And *anan*. AbuDawud said: I am not quite confident about the word *anan*. He asked: Do you know the distance between Heaven and Earth? They replied: We do not know. He then said: The distance between them is seventy-one, seventy-two, or seventy-three years. The heaven which is above it is at a similar distance (going on till he counted seven heavens). Above the seventh heaven there is a sea, the distance between whose surface and bottom is like that between one heaven and the next. Above that there are eight mountain goats the distance between whose hoofs and haunches is like the distance between one heaven and the next. Then Allah, the Blessed and the Exalted, is above that.⁴⁸

The word *anan* that is used in this *hadīth* to describe the “cloud” corresponds to the Hebrew *‘ānan* (אָנָן; “to cover,” hence “a cloud”). Interestingly *‘ānan* is closely linked—differing by the shift from the final *nun* to a final *pe*—to the word *‘ānaph* (אָנָפֶה) which indicates “a branch.” It is easy to see how the branches of a tree may be said to cover the world. Furthermore, the Hebrew male name, Chanan, is said to mean “cloud,” where this meaning obviously derives from the root

⁴⁷ *Antiquities*, 3.7.7 (180).

⁴⁸ Sunan Abu Dawud, Bk.40, *hadīth* 4705, tr. A. Hasan (University of South Carolina Compendium of Muslim Texts: Hadith Database, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA>).

chānah (“favour”) in the sense that the bestowing of God’s “favour” is manifested by the falling of “rain,” which, as Guénon, observes, ‘is frequently used to symbolise this descent of celestial influences.’⁴⁹ ‘Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the clouds pour down saving justice’ (*Isaiah* 45:8). As mentioned, *Chānah* is also the root of the name Hannah, generally taken as meaning “grace.” This is God’s Grace or Mercy,⁵⁰ His creative Power descending from on high. Moreover, the rain pouring from heaven is synonymous with the “declining” (*chānāh*) rays of the sun, reaching down to earth.⁵¹

The Arabic term given above as *anan* derives from ‘*amā*’, which indicates “a cloud.” In the hands of Ibn ‘Arabī ‘*amā*’ becomes “The Cloud,” which he identifies with the Breath of the All-Merciful; it is the *Barzakh* standing between God and nothingness, and in which the entire cosmos takes shape.⁵² This type of cloud symbolism is recognisable in the theophany on Mt. Sinai (*Ex.19:9*) and again in the mystical tradition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to Ibn ‘Arabī’s intention, it is not simply the case that God manifests within or under cover of a cloud, distinct from the created world; rather God *manifests* “within” the Cloud and that manifestation is Creation itself; the “Cloud,” in turn is none other than the unlimited ontological Substance, the *material prima* of alchemical tradition.⁵³ In *Exodus* the cloud in which Yahweh is said to reside is described precisely as a “pillar” (*Ex.13:22*). This pillar expresses the axial symbolism that is described in the above *hadīth* as the distance between Heaven and Earth,⁵⁴ and in turn explained in terms of the symbolism of 71/72/73. Moreover, this “pillar of cloud,” is itself identified—as we shall see below—with the angel Metatron,

⁴⁹ Guénon, *The Great Triad*, p.97, n.2.

⁵⁰ In the Qur’an rain is a symbol of Allah’s “Mercy” (*Sūrah* 7:55).

⁵¹ See Guénon, ‘Light and Rain’ in *Fundamental Symbols*.

⁵² See *Futūhūt* 310, 311, 420; see W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 125-126.

⁵³ See J. Morris’ note on this subject in Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations Vol.1*, New York: Pir Press, 2002, p.321, n.31. Morris observes that Ibn ‘Arabī is referring to the following *hadīth* concerning the Prophet’s response to the question “Where was our Lord before He created the creation?": “He was in a Cloud [*amā*], without air above it and without air below it, and He created His Throne upon the Water” (tr. Morris, found in the collections of Ibn Māja, Tirmidhī and Ahmad b. Hanbal).

⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī refers to ‘the state of His being in the “Cloud”’ as the same as ‘the state of His being upon the earth and in heaven (Qur’an 43:84, etc.)’ (tr. Morris, *Futūhūt* 367 [*The Meccan Revelations Vol.1*, p.208]).

who is intimately related to the 72 Names of God and again expresses an axial symbolism.

According to the Babylonian Talmud, there is an angel who is given the same name as his master: this angel is Metatron.⁵⁵ Metatron, in turn, is portrayed as having an angel who is his “brother,” Sandalfon (the name is Greek, συνάδελφος = “co-brother”).⁵⁶ Sandalfon, one of the oldest angel figures of *Merkabah* mysticism, is described as “the tallest of the angels”: ‘He stands upon earth and his head reaches to the level of the *Chayyoth* [the celestial creatures of Ezekiel’s vision]. He is taller than his fellow-angels by a space equal to a journey of five hundred years.’⁵⁷ According to the *Zohar* it is Metatron who is higher than the creatures by a distance of “five hundred years.”⁵⁸ As Isaiah Tishby notes, Metatron also represents the *sefirah Yesod*, a homologue of “the Tree of Life”;⁵⁹ moreover, Tishby observes that in the *Raya Mehemma* and the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* Metatron is even said to be the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁶⁰ Sandalfon is conflated with the prophet Elijah, which is in accord with the axial role Elijah plays in ascending to heaven in a “whirlwind/chariot (*merkabah*) of fire” (2Kgs.2:1-13).⁶¹ Sandalfon fits a universal archetype epitomised by “giants,” such as Atlas, who act as *pontifex* between earth and heaven. He is also the conduit through which God’s creative Power, symbolised by His Name, flows “down” from heaven to earth, which explains this aspect of his relationship with Metatron.⁶²

⁵⁵ See B.T. *Hagigah*, 15a; B.T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a; B.T. *Avodah Zarah*, 3b. Scholem remarks that the explanation to this tradition is to be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where the angel Yaheol says to Abraham, “I am called Yahoel ... a power in virtue of the ineffable name is dwelling in me.” The name Yaheol is the first in the various lists of the “Seventy Names of Metatron” and it appears that many of the attributes of Yaheol are transferred to Metatron (see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp.68-69).

⁵⁶ Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 53; see Naphtali Herz (‘*Emek ha-Melek*, p. 104a) and Jellinek (*Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, p. 5) cited in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*: ‘Sandalfon’ (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>)

⁵⁷ *Chagigah* 13b, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ *Zohar Hadash*, *Yitro*, 39d-40a.

⁵⁹ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.2*, p.643, n.53.

⁶⁰ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.2*, p.629.

⁶¹ Moses Cordovero, *Hekaloth*, Ch. 14; also *Mahzor Vitry*, pp. 324 et seq., and *Yalkut Hadash* ed., Presburg, pp. 66-69 cited in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*: ‘Sandalfon.’ (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>).

⁶² In light of our previous comments on rain it is interesting to note that Guénon observes one of the most interesting hypotheses advanced for the origin of the name

The Name of God

The Name of God is not other than God.⁶³ This identity between the name and the thing named—which is at the heart of all theurgy—has its pre-eminent principle in this divine prototype. In discussing the Kabbalism of Abraham Abulafia, Gershom Scholem observes that the Name of God is ‘something absolute, because it reflects the hidden meaning and totality of existence’.⁶⁴ Elsewhere he says that ‘the whole of the Torah, as is often stressed by the author [of the *Zohar*], is nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.’⁶⁵ Rabbi Menahem Recanati remarks, ‘that the kabbalists say that the Holy One, blessed be His name, is the Torah.’⁶⁶ The Torah, it will be recalled, has 70 “faces”; similarly the Divine Name is associated with this symbolism, there being the 72 lettered name of God (the *Shemhamphorasch*) and alternatively 70 and 72 Names of God.⁶⁷

Shem ha-Mephorash (“divided name”) is an epithet for the 72 letter Name of God derived by medieval kabbalists from *Exodus* 14:19-21:

¹⁹ And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them:

²⁰ And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness [to them], but it gave light by night [to these]: so that the one came not near the other all the night.

²¹ And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Yahweh caused the sea to go [back] by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry [land], and the waters were divided.

Metatron is its derivation from the Chaldean Mitra, ‘which means “rain,” but relates through its root form with “light”’ (The Lord of the World, Moorecote: Coombe Springs Press, 1983, p.15).

⁶³ For universal examples of this idea see W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, pp.1031-1036.

⁶⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.133.

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.210.

⁶⁶ Rabbi Menahem Recanati, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mizvot* (Basle 1581), 3a, cited in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, p.284.

⁶⁷ There are other forms, such as the 42 letter Name, the 12 letter Name and the Tetragrammaton.

ויסע מלאך האלהים ההלך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם ויסע 19
עמוד הענן מפניהם ויעמד מאחריהם:
ויבא בין | מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן והחשך ויאר 20
אתהלילה ולא-קרב זה אליזה כליהלילה:
ויט משה את-ידו עליהם ויולך יהוה | אתהים ברוח קדים עזה 21
כליהלילה וישם אתהים לחרבה ויבקעו המים:

Each verse is composed of 72 letters; a further 72 “names” are found by reading the letters of the three verses following boustrophedon form so that the second line is reversed, and then grouping the letters in columns of three.⁶⁸

The angel who went before the camp of Israel is described as a “pillar of cloud” and a “pillar of fire” (Ex.13:21-22) and identified with the angel sent to precede and guard Israel (Ex.23:20). Yahweh proclaims of this guardian angel that ‘My name is in him’ (Ex.23:21), which leads to his identification with Metatron.⁶⁹ The images of the “pillar of cloud” and “pillar of fire” suggest the ascension of Elijah who is taken up to heaven by a “whirlwind” (2Kgs.2:1) that is also a “chariot of fire” (2Kgs.2:11). This is not unconnected for, as noted, Elijah is conflated with Sandalfon, who is Metatron’s “co-brother.”

The ascension of Elijah places him in the direct tradition of Enoch, who is said to have ascended alive to heaven: “Enoch walked with God, then was no more, because God took him’ (Gen.5:24). According to apocalyptic tradition, the ascended Enoch was transformed into Metatron (*3Enoch* 4.1-3). This blessing was increased with Metatron being given “72 wings”: ‘36 on one side and 36 on the other, and each single wing covered the entire world’ (*3Enoch* 9:3). The symbolism of 72 is found throughout the literature of Enoch. It is in *3Enoch* that we find the 70 names of God (48B), and, the 70 names of Metatron (48D). Metatron’s 72 wings correspond to the 72 kingdoms (*3Enoch* 17:8) of which Metatron is in charge (3:2). The kingdom’s are under the supervision of 72 angels who act under the angel Rahati’el to control the cycles of the constellations (17:6). These are identified with the 70 “shepherds” given control of the exiled “sheep” (*1Enoch* 89:59); these sheep are immediately the exiled people of Israel after the destruction

⁶⁸ The total number of letters in the whole passage leads to a further 216 lettered Name.

⁶⁹ B. T. *Sanhedrin*, 38 a.

of Jerusalem; they also appear to be derived from the fallen angels (88 & 89 *passim*.) and are in turn related to the 70 nations created with the “burning of the tower” [of Babel] (89:67).

Metatron is not only the Name of God, but also the recorder and transmitter of this divine knowledge. In the heretical vision of Elisha b. Abuyah Metatron is described as the Heavenly Scribe.⁷⁰ In the Babylonian Talmud Metatron is described as co-operating with God in the teaching of the young.⁷¹ These descriptions lead to the identification of Metatron with the Biblical priest-king Melchizedek (Gen.14.).⁷² Recall then that Metatron is considered to be the transmogrification of the ascended Enoch. This tradition bears a marked similarity with that of the ascension of Melchizedek (2*Enoch* 72.1-11). In both instances the protagonist is removed to safety to avoid the destruction of the Flood. According to the account we are given in *Genesis*, Melchizedek bestows or transmits God’s blessing to Abraham. As noted in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, a ‘blessing is an effective and irrevocable word which, even when pronounced by a man, produces the effect which it expresses, since God confers the blessing.’⁷³ The blessing *par excellence* is none other than the blessing of the creative Word—*creatio per Verbum*. God’s blessing is His creative Power, and this is the Power and knowledge of his Name. Hence the bestowal of God’s blessing is also the transmission of the knowledge of His Name; this idea leads to Melchizedek also being portrayed as a “teacher,” again drawing a parallel with Metatron. This link between Melchizedek and Metatron—whose name is the same as his Master—is further developed in the Midrash where Abraham questions his *teacher* “Shem-Melchizedek” on the virtue that merited the saving of his father, Noah, and his brothers on the ark.⁷⁴ In the Jerusalem Targum it is similarly said that it was Shem ‘who was now priest of the most high God and ruled at Salem under the name of Melchizedek’.⁷⁵ The name *shēm* connotes the divine Name, so that the identification of Melchizedek with Shem explicitly indicates the

⁷⁰ *Chagigah* 15a, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, pp.53-54.

⁷¹ B.T. *Abodah Zarah* 3b.

⁷² See for example Z’ev ben Simon Halevi, *Kabbalah: The Divine Plan*, HarperCollins, New York, 1996, p.14; *The Way of Kabbalah*, Rider & Co., London, 1976, p.16, n.73.

⁷³ *New Jerusalem Bible*, see 14:19 note h.

⁷⁴ *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Genesis*, 8: 16.

⁷⁵ J. T. *Genesis Rabba* 44.

homology of Metatron and Melchizedek. In turn Melchizedek is conflated with the archangel Michael,⁷⁶ who is hierarchically aligned with Metatron.⁷⁷

The types of homologues we are considering can become unhelpful, if not dangerous, if we are seduced into trying to find “identifications” of the sort that see the archangel Michael equated with Christ⁷⁸ or, in fact, Metatron equated with God!⁷⁹ What we are interested in is the web of symbolism that evolves from these connections and the manner in which it informs our appreciation of the symbolism of the number 72, and hence the symbolisms associated with this “number.” This is important to note because, of course, Melchizedek is subsequently seen as prefiguring Christ (Heb.5:6). Now Christ is both “the Word” (Jn.1:1) and the “light of the world” (Jn.8:12). This connection between the divine Word and the divine Light, is similarly found with Metatron with the Midrash and the *Zohar* describing the *Fiat Lux* (Gen.1:3) as the “light of Metatron.”⁸⁰

In Jewish tradition the Power of God is found in the divine Name; in Christianity this is expressed by the Word ‘through whom all things came into being and without which not one thing came into being’ (Jn.1:3). We are given this formulation by the evangelist John and this in itself offers us an interesting connection to the symbolism of 72. René Guénon suggests that the symbolism of the name John (Ιωάννης), from the Hebrew *Yōwchānān* (יוחנן), is what is really at issue when we

⁷⁶ M. De Jonge & A. S. Van der Woude observe that ‘This identification is only found in certain medieval Jewish texts. W. Lueken mentions *Jalkut chadasch* f.115, col. 3 num. 19: של מִיכָאֵל נִקְרָא מַלְכֵי מַעְלָה צִרְקָדְכֵהוּ אֶל עֲלִיּוֹן שְׁהוּא כְהֵן שֶׁל מֶלְחִיזֶדֶק...the priest of the Most High who is priest above’ and M. M. Kasher quotes the following tradition on Gen.xiv. 18 from *Midr. Haneelam Lech*. 25: “R. Hiyya the Great taught: When the soul of the righteous who led others to repentance leaves the body, Michael, the great prince who sacrifices the souls of the righteous to the Creator, goes forth and bids it welcome. For it says: *And Melchizedek*, etc. Now, this is none other than Michael, head keeper of the gates of righteousness” (‘11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament’ from *New Testament Studies* 12, 1966, p.305)

⁷⁷ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p.92. De Jonge & Van der Woude note the description, in *11QMelch* of an *other* shepherd [who] writes down everything, identified with Michael (‘11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament’, p.304, n.2) which bares a marked similarity to Metatron as the Heavenly Scribe.

⁷⁸ As for example associated with the Seventh-day Adventist’s prophet, Ellen G. White.

⁷⁹ Hence the heretical nature of Elisha b. Abuyah’s vision.

⁸⁰ *Midrash ha-Ne’elam; Zohar Hadash, Bereshit*, 8d. Metatron is also called ‘the light of the luminary of the *Shekhinah*’ (*Zohar* II, 65b-66b).

consider the connection between John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, and in both cases this must be seen in terms of the sense of the “bringing forth” of the Word, that is to say, the act of creation.⁸¹ In the case of John the Baptist this is signalled, so to speak, by the descent of the dove. Now the Hebrew term for “dove,” *yōwnāh* (יונה), is the same as the name Jonah, *Yōnāh* (יונה). J. Ralston Skinner remarks on this while also claiming that the name *Yōnāh* is the same as the name John.⁸² Philologically the identification of *Yōnāh* (יונה) with *Yōwchānān* (יהונן) is questionable at best, although Skinner is not alone in suggesting this connection.⁸³ Nevertheless, considered in terms of their symbolisms the “identification” of these two words is most interesting. According to *gematria* the value of יונה (Jonah, dove) is 71, a variation on 72. The descent of the dove gives us an obvious axial symbol. The dove is also well recognised as being the Spirit, which is the transformative “power” of God. The baptism offered by *and through* John is a transformative and even cosmogonic process with obvious parallels to the passage through the waters which Jonah undergoes. As John Metford observes, Christian tradition recognises Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish (Jon.2:1) as typologically symbolic of Jesus’ entombment, a parallel made by Jesus himself (Matt.12:39).⁸⁴ These three days and three nights give us a period of 72 hours. In the case of Jesus’ entombment there is some debate that this could not have been 72 hours given that Jesus is said to have died on Friday and been resurrected on Sunday, which it is argued cannot allow for an exact

⁸¹ See also Guénon, ‘Concerning the Two Saint Johns’ in *Fundamental Symbols*.

⁸² J. R. Skinner, *The Source of Measures: Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery* (1894), San Diego: Wizard’s Bookshelf, 1982, p.219.

⁸³ As Clayton Bowen (‘Was John the Baptist the Sign of Jonah?’, *The American Journal of Theology* 20.3, 1961, pp.414-421) observes, Wilhelm Brandt suggested this identification in his *Die Evengelistische Geschichte* (1893, p.459, n.2); Brandt was followed in this by Canon Cheyne (‘John the Baptist’, *Encyclopedia Biblica* II, col.2502) and Alban Blakiston (*John the Baptist and His Relation to Jesus*, 1912, pp.220 f., n.54); independently and on different lines the same identification was argued for by Prof. B. W. Bacon (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 1902, p.232; *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate*, 1910, p.350; *Christianity Old and New*, 1914, p.160). Bowen rejects the philological arguments but recognises the attention this idea warrants based upon Jesus’ allusion to “the sign of Jonah” (Matt.12:39, Lk.11:30). Bowen eventually rejects this identification.

⁸⁴ J. C. J. Metford ed., *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1983, p.145.

period of 72 hours. This type of literalism entirely misses the point of the rich symbolism of the number 72 and is far from the mindset of the people for whom this tradition was first recorded. In fact the symbolic period of 72 hours is again found in the mummification process of the Egyptians and in the Biblical mourning period (Gen.50:3).⁸⁵

The Hebrew word “dove,” *yōwnāh* (יונה), offers us a further development of the symbolism of 72 that links the Christian Word (*Logos*), the Judaic Name (*Shēm*) and the symbolism of the 72 sects in Islam, which, in turn, implicitly return us to the biblical story of Babel and the division of humankind in to “72” groups. Thus, according to Strong *yōwnāh* is most likely derived from the unused root *yayin* (יין), which means “to effervesce,” hence “wine” and by implication “inebriation.” According to *gematria* the value of יין (wine) is 70. The connection to wine immediately suggests the Eucharistic mystery, which is perfectly in accord with the principal symbolism under consideration, for wine is to bread as ontological Essence is to ontological Substance. Moreover, the Hebrew word for “mystery” (*sōd*, סוד) has the value 70. Thus we may see the descent of the dove (71) as analogous, *mutatis mutandis*, to the operation of the wine (70); both of these then express the mystery (70) of creation.

Wine, in turn, returns us to Melchizedek who not only offered Abraham the mystery of initiation, which is to say, new birth and hence creation, but “also”—for these are homologous—offered bread and wine (Gen.14:18).⁸⁶ Melchizedek is identified with both Shem (Shem-Melchizedek), who is the Name of God, and Metatron, whose “name”—the 72 names of Metatron—is the same as his Master. Christ, who is ‘of the order of Melchizedek’ (Heb.5:6, from Ps.110:4), and

⁸⁵ The symbolic division of 72 into three “days” or distinct units brings to mind the following obscure account from the *Babylonian Talmud*: ‘Rabbi Jonathan said: “A third of the tower was burnt, a third sunk, and a third is still standing”’ (*Sanhedrin Folio* 109a, ed. Rabbi I. Epstein, London: Soncino Press, 1935-1948).

⁸⁶ According to St. Cyprian of Carthage: ‘in the priest Melchisedech we see the sacrament of the sacrifice of the Lord prefigured...The order certainly is that which comes from his [Melchizedek’s] sacrifice and which comes down from it: because Melchisedech was a priest of the Most High God; because he offered bread; and because he blessed Abraham. And who is more a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when he offered sacrifice to God the father, offered the very same which Melchisedech had offered, namely bread and wine, which is in fact His body and his blood! (*Letters* 63:4).

whose flesh and blood is the Bread and Wine, is also the Word, 'through whom all things came into being and without which not one thing came into being,' which is identical with the divine Name. The divine Mystery (70) is the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Name, which is the Word. Thus Origen says:

That bread which God the Word confesses to be His own body is the Word that nourishes souls, the Word proceeding from God the Word... and that drink which God the Word confesses to be His blood is the Word that gives drink and excellent gladness to the hearts of those who drink... For not that visible bread which He held in His hands did God the Word call His body, but the Word in the mystery of which that bread was to be broken. Nor did He call that visible drink His blood, but the Word in the mystery of which that drink was to be poured out. For what else can the body of God the Word, or His blood, be but the Word which nourishes and the Word which gladdens the heart?⁸⁷

Wine is the blood or essence of the grape; by extension to the cosmological plane, wine is a symbol of ontological Essence; from another perspective wine is *gnosis*. One might say that these two readings are identical for, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr remarks, 'The essence of things is God's knowledge of them'.⁸⁸ The state of inebriation, viewed positively and from a principally symbolic position, is a state of indistinction, a return to the primordial unity. St. Cyprian of Carthage says,

the chalice of the Lord inebriates us as Noah drinking wine in *Genesis* was also inebriated ... the inebriation of the chalice ... is not such as the inebriation coming from worldly wine ... actually, the chalice of the Lord so inebriates that it actually makes sober,

⁸⁷ Origen, *In Matt Comm Ser.* 85. Elsewhere he says, 'Now we are said to drink the blood of Christ not only in the way of Sacraments, but also when we receive His words, in which life consists as also He Himself said, "The words which I have spoken unto you are spirit and life." Therefore He Himself was wounded, whose blood we drink, that is, receive the words of His teaching' (*In Num Hom* 16:9).

⁸⁸ S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p.21, n.61.

that it raises minds to spiritual wisdom, that from this taste of the world each one comes to the knowledge of God.⁸⁹

Again, St. Augustine: ‘The light of truth passes not by, but remaining fixed, inebriates the hearts of the beholders.’⁹⁰ In Sufism, particularly the Sufic poetry of Persia, wine is a common symbol for divine *gnosis*, the “drinking” of which brings unity with the divine Mystery. In fact Hafiz draws many of these ideas together when he declares that he could not care less about the strife of the 72 sects as long as he has his glass of wine!⁹¹ In this poetic flourish Hafiz recognises the relationship between the spatio-temporal realm of cosmological existence (the 72 sects) and its divine Principle (wine, 70, the divine Mystery). Moreover, wine is not something to “know” discursively but only through the experience of Unity.

Jesus is himself the Wine and the Word. Jesus then, as we are told, appointed 72 (var.70) to go out before him (Lk.10:1)—these are sent out “in pairs,” i.e. 36 pairs, reminding us of the wings of Metatron. Jesus then declares that ‘their names are written in heaven’ (Lk.10:20) from which we might draw the obvious parallel of the 72 names of God and the 72 angels/shepherds in heaven. As noted above, a scriptural connection between these 72 and the 72 languages of Babel is suggested through *Isaiah* 14. In our current context the symbolism of the 72 languages is that of the manifestation of the creative Principle, the primordial and metaphysical Language-Word. In Christianity this is Christ, the Logos. The 72 disciples in *Luke* are thus the transmission of the metaphysical Word. Let us also note that the symbolism of the “word” transmitted by “72” is also found in Josephus, who ascribes to Aristaes a letter written to Philocrates, describing the Septuagint

⁸⁹ St. Cyprian from Hamman ed., *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, 1967, cited in Urban, ‘*Oblatio Rationabilis*: Sacrifice in East and West’, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 8.1, 2002, p.183.

⁹⁰ St. Augustine, *In Ps. XCIII*, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p.638. For numerous other examples of the positive symbolism of wine and drunkenness see Perry, pp.637-640.

⁹¹ Following Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 1993, p.266. I believe Schimmel is referring to *Divan*, 101; see C. F. Horne ed., *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, New York: Parke, Austin, & Lipscomb, 1917, Vol. VIII: *Medieval Persia*, pp. 331-378, although Hafiz may make this connection more explicitly elsewhere.

translation by 72 translators, who are then said to have completed their task in exactly 72 days.⁹² In this case the “word” is the Torah, which is “nothing but the one great and holy Name of God.”⁹³

Concluding remarks

For those that have “eyes to see and ears to hear” the traditions we have been considering speak for themselves. The exegete who surrenders to this symbolism is drawn outward from the isolation of their individuality and connected with the net of homologous symbols which declares the unity in multiplicity of all creation. Simultaneously they are focused ever more inward upon Unity and in turn transported in an anagogic manner, upwards rung by rung, step by step, moving through the 72 stations, which are the entirety of our created existence, to reach the Throne at the Heart of the Cloud from whence issues the Word and Name of God.

⁹² *Antiquities* 22.2 *passim*.

⁹³ These comments are not intended to suggest that Josephus was working from Luke or vice versa, questions of textual transmission, dependence, or influence being entirely secondary here. Without then denying the idea of influence it should be enough to recognise that Luke’s reference to *Isaiah* tends to suggest that he was aware of these symbolic connections, and Josephus of course presents numerous examples of his appreciation of this type of symbolism.