

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY: THE SPIRITUAL QUEST OF THE PHILOLOGIST

by

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IN JULY 1937, Gershom Scholem received a letter from Stephen Wise inviting him to deliver the following year's Hilda Stroock Lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City.¹ Rabbi Wise suggested a series of five or six lectures presenting an overview of the history of Jewish mysticism, a subject Scholem had been teaching at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since 1925. Scholem accepted with alacrity.² He welcomed the opportunity to present, for the first time, the 'principal results'³ of his labors of more than twenty years in the fledgling discipline he had pioneered, the academic study of Kabbala. He had reached a stage in his research where he felt ready, indeed eager, to depart from detailed philological research and make a synthetic statement. After publishing more than a hundred and fifty scholarly essays laboriously dating texts, identifying authorship, and clarifying terms and concepts,⁴ the contours of what he called 'a great and significant chapter' in the history of the Jewish religion had become 'less blurred':

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1 Stephen Wise to Gershom Scholem, letter dated 28 June 1937, Gershom Scholem Archives, The Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, varia 1599, No. 4.

2 See Scholem's enthusiastic reply to Wise, dated 16 August 1937, Gershom Scholem Archive (as above, note 1).

3 *Major Trends*, Preface to the First Edition, p. vii.

4 For a complete listing of the numerous studies that preceded the Stroock lectures, see the *Bibliography of the Writings of Gershom G. Scholem*, Jerusalem 1967.

[Gradually] there emerged from the confusing welter of fact and fiction a picture ... of the development of Jewish mysticism, its inner significance, its problems and its meaning for the history of Judaism in general.⁵

It was no mean task that Scholem had taken upon himself, especially since the lectures would be in English. Hitherto he had written only in German and Hebrew. In a letter of 29 November 1937 to his dear friend Walter Benjamin, he explained his difficulty with a typical touch of irony:

My work at the moment consists of formulating my New York lectures, which I have to deliver in English. That is a very unfamiliar task and costs a lot of time. The art of composing short sentences is not something that attracted my attention in the past.⁶

These lectures served as the basis for Scholem's signal work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.⁷ It is now just over fifty years since the first publication of that volume, which traces the development of Jewish mystical thought from its beginnings in antiquity to the eighteenth-century movement of Hasidism. Few books of scholarship have enjoyed such impact, fructifying the discourse not only of the academic community but also of the educated public at large. With a rare ability to weave dazzling erudition into lucid, engaging prose, Scholem presented a picture that revolutionized the regnant conception of Judaism, its spiritual interior and its religious

5 *Major Trends*, *loc. cit.* (above, note 3).

6 Scholem to Benjamin, 29 November 1937, in Gershom Scholem (ed.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* (English transl. from the German by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere), with an introduction by Anson Rabinbach, New York 1989, p. 210.

7 The second and third chapters of *Major Trends*, although prepared for the Stroock Lectures, were delivered not in that series but on other occasions. The volume's title was suggested by Wise in his letter to Scholem cited in note 1 above.

The Spiritual Quest of the Philologist

consciousness, as well as the role of mysticism in the development of theistic religions in general.

Scholem's Conception of Jewish Mysticism

At the outset of his lectures, Scholem argued forcefully that

there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract. ... There is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism and so on.⁸

To be sure, there are shared characteristics that allow for a comparative analysis of various mystical systems, but nonetheless the mystical experience and quest always take place within the context of a particular religious culture, with its distinctive conceptual universe, mode of discourse, texts, traditions, rites and rituals.

One is reminded of a story told by another student of Jewish mysticism, Abraham Joshua Heschel: An elderly gentleman in Berlin used to take a daily stroll in one of that city's public gardens, and there sit on a bench under his favorite tree, resting in the tranquil environs. One day, however, a stranger appeared at the far end of the bench, holding a fiddle and playing it with a relentless fury. Although disturbed by the cacophonous medley, the gentleman said nothing, and despite the vast expanse of the garden, the fiddler returned every day to share the same bench. Scratching away on his ill-tuned instrument, he seemed oblivious to everything around him. The gentleman held his peace, for after all it was a public garden. Perhaps he hoped that the fiddler would eventually move on, but, alas, he didn't. Exasperated, the gentleman finally addressed his musically inept neighbor. With a refinement becoming his station, he gently asked him: 'Excuse me, Sir, which composer are you playing?' 'Oh, no one in particular,' replied the fiddler. 'Just music in general!'⁹

⁸ *Major Trends*, pp. 5f.

⁹ I am grateful to Harold Schimmel for this story, which he heard at a lecture Heschel delivered at the University of Toronto in the spring of 1954.

The melody or melodies of Jewish mysticism, which Scholem sought to resonate in his scholarship, were specific and distinctive to Judaism. Comparative study and the attendant general statements about the nature of mysticism might, indeed, illuminate some of its features and topoi, but in the end Jewish mysticism could properly be understood only as a 'concrete historical phenomenon.'¹⁰

The mystic's quest is always bound to a given historical and religious reality, and the Jewish mystic thus seeks to fulfill the desire to 'taste and see' the divine Presence¹¹ within the context of Judaism: its commandments (*mitzvo*t) and liturgy, and its sacred texts, legal and speculative (*halakha* and *aggada*). The mystic assumes that all the varied spiritual impulses informing the life of Jewish piety constitute a sacred reality, and as such are the matrix for the mystical experience. They are a sacramental universe that, properly approached, may serve to quicken the Presence of God.

Scholem highlights the sacramental attitude of Jewish mysticism by comparing its hermeneutics to those of the medieval Jewish philosophers. The mystic, Scholem observes, was wont to view Judaism's concrete manifestations, including the historical fate of the Jews, as *symbols* pointing to hidden, divine truths, while the philosopher preferred to interpret them as *allegories*, reflecting universal truths of reason. The truths of the philosopher, Scholem emphasizes, are not distinctive to religion, that is, to Judaism, but are independently verifiable. Treated as an allegory, the Torah functions as a unique vehicle of philosophic truth:

The documents of religion are therefore not conceived as expressing a distinct and separate world of religious truth and reality, but rather as giving a simplified description of the relations which exist between the ideas of philosophy. ... In other words, the philosopher can only proceed with his proper task after having successfully converted the concrete realities of Judaism into a bundle of abstractions. The individual phenomenon is to

¹⁰ *Major Trends*, p. 6.

¹¹ Scholem cites the verse 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps. 34:9) and observes, 'it is this tasting and seeing, however spiritualized it may become, that the genuine mystic desires' (*Major Trends*, p. 4).

him no object of his philosophical speculation. By contrast, the mystic refrains from destroying the living texture of religious narrative by allegorizing it.¹²

The concept of allegory, Scholem underscores, assumes that sacred language is representational and expressive of some basic facts or truths, and as such is given to translation. Hence, allegory is understood to be the figurative translation or representation of verities that may be expressed by philosophers — and ultimately more clearly and precisely — in an abstract, conceptually refined fashion. In contrast, the appeal to mystical symbols presupposes that a given expression of the Jew's religious reality is an essential aspect of the truth it is meant to disclose; indeed, symbols are intrinsic manifestations of a truth otherwise inexpressible. The mystical symbol is to be likened to an iceberg: its concrete manifestation is palpable and real, but it is only the 'tip' of a greater, hidden reality.¹³ So it is with the Torah and all its attendant expressions in the 'living texture' of Jewish religious life. Hence, Scholem underscored, while the philosophers tended to ignore all that was not given to allegorization, the mystics regarded all of Judaism as alive with symbolic significance.

Accordingly, since Jewish religious law resisted allegory, it generally remained alien to philosophical reflection. Even for thinkers like Maimonides who were themselves halakhic scholars, it 'furnished no material for [their] thoughts.'¹⁴ For the mystics, on the other hand, the *halakha* was effervescent with symbolic meaning; it was 'transformed [by them] into a sacrament, a mystery rite. ... Every *mitsvah* became an event of cosmic importance, an act which had a bearing upon the dynamics of the universe.'¹⁵ Through the life of Torah and *mitzvot*, the Jews became protagonists in a cosmic drama in which not only the world and Israel are redeemed, but also God Himself.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ The image of the mystical symbol as an iceberg was employed by the late Alexander Altmann in his lectures on Kabbala, which I attended at Brandeis University in the late 1960s.

¹⁴ *Major Trends*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30f.

The kabbalists, then, did not hesitate to introduce myth and theurgy into Judaism. For the mystics, Scholem emphasizes, the living God of Israel was, indeed, a *living* being, and they were thus deeply offended by attempts to present Him as a philosophical or theological proposition. Unlike their philosophical colleagues, the mystics were less concerned with securing God's transcendence than with celebrating His immanence, with 'tasting and seeing' His palpable Presence within creation and human experience. The mystics therefore did not flinch from anthropomorphism, the *bête noire* of the philosophers.

Scholem warmly endorsed Franz Rosenzweig's observation that the 'anthropomorphism' of the Kabbala — and that of the rabbinic *aggada* before it — actually provided a 'protective wall ... [safeguarding] monotheism.' Should biblical faith seek to be utterly pure and resist all forms of anthropomorphism, Rosenzweig explained, it would actually open itself up to the threat of polytheism and its unbridled humanization of divinity:

[For] failing the courage to attribute one's genuinely perceived experiences of God to their genuine and immediate source in God, these experiences [invariably] assume an independent existence and seek for themselves their own supporting entity or entities alongside God Himself whom they had assumed incapable of sustaining them. The farther into the distance God is banished, the more permissible it seems for man to populate with demi-gods and godlings that space between himself and God which is so full of currents of divine energy.¹⁶

Borne by an 'unshakable certitude that everything we experience of God comes indeed from Him,'¹⁷ the anthropomorphism — and attendant mythic images — of the Kabbala, Rosenzweig noted, affirmed Israel's faith in a living God and subtly fended off the intrusion of pagan myth. Scholem concurred with Rosenzweig's

16 F. Rosenzweig, 'A Note on Anthropomorphism' (English transl. by B. Barsky), in F.A. Rothschild (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*, New York 1990, p. 227.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

insight that a living faith in the God of Israel requires a touch of anthropomorphism.¹⁸

Kabbala and Myth

The theistic myth of the Kabbala, according to Scholem, thus not only affirms the living reality of God, but also represents a refined stage of religious consciousness. The most primitive stage, according to Scholem, is indeed the world of pagan myth, in which gods are everywhere; one thus encounters their presence without ecstatic or mystical mediation. In the next stage, in which the monotheistic religions emerge, God is conceived as a transcendent being, thus shattering the 'dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God'¹⁹ and leaving the human being frightfully isolated and alone. This is the classical form of religion, in which the vast gulf between the infinite God and finite humanity cannot be bridged save by the voice of God, through revelation, and by the voice of humanity, in prayer (and obedient submission to God's Word). 'The great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness... of [this] abyss' between a God and humanity.²⁰

Mysticism marks the next stage of religious consciousness, but far from denying the abyss, it is actually sparked by a particularly acute awareness of the distance that separates humanity and God. Eager to draw closer to God than prayer and obedience to the divine law seem to permit, the mystic seeks a hidden path leading to God. Through a more direct communion with God, the mystic also hopes to restore the unity that was disrupted by the advent of monotheistic faith and its projection of God to a transcendent, supernal abode. So myth, primed by the quest to revalorize the harmonious unity between all of creation and the Divine Reality, is born anew within Judaism. But the

18 Scholem voiced his approval for Rosenzweig's views on the anthropomorphic tension inherent in biblical faiths in response to a paper on the subject by Moshe Idel, presented at a conference held in May 1980 in Jerusalem to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Rosenzweig's death. See M. Idel, 'Franz Rosenzweig and the Kabbala,' in P. Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, Hanover, N.H., 1988, pp. 162-171.

19 *Major Trends*, p. 7.

20 *Ibid.*

myth of the mystics, Scholem stresses, is hardly a naive withdrawal to the monistic universe of the pre-theistic mythological sensibility. In Hegelian terms, there is a sublation (*Aufhebung*), a dialectical reconciliation between theistic faith and the intense awareness of God's Presence characteristic of mythic consciousness. As Scholem succinctly puts it, in mysticism 'the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.'²¹ The resulting theistic myth — so rife with paradox — generates tensions and theologoumena that preoccupy Jewish mysticism.

Kabbala and Pantheism

Hence, while attesting to the primordial unity of all existence, a fact grounded in the Unity of God Himself, the mystic is also painfully aware — scandalized, one might say — by the abiding contradictions of quotidian experience, especially the reality of evil and inexplicable suffering that blights human existence. The mystic accepts no easy answers exculpating God. The traditional theodicies will not do. Struggling with the question of evil, even as articulated by the heretical Gnostics, the mystic recognizes evil as a brute, perhaps autonomous reality, while never relinquishing a fervent affirmation of the world as Creation, as a divine blessing. The paradox, Scholem notes, did not bother the mystics; on the contrary, it only fired their rich imagination. It was deepened by the mystics' pull to pantheism, their eager desire to discern the hidden life of God in all of creation. As Joseph Ben-Shlomo indicates in this volume, Scholem showed how most Jewish mystics delicately maintained the fine line between pantheism and a theistic conception of God's transcendence.

The overarching solution the kabbalists found to this vexing paradox is characterized by Scholem as panentheism: the world is manifestly within God, but not identical with Him. By thus affirming God's abiding transcendence, the Kabbala preserved the monotheistic conception of history. In contrast to pagan and pantheistic myth, which, lacking a concept of a transcendent God, did not pose a divine scheme of history (*Heilsgeschichte*), Jewish mysticism continued to regard history as the arena in which humanity's relationship to God

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

is fully realized, and in which redemption takes place. The tensions unique to kabbalistic doctrines of redemption, as understood by Scholem, are discussed in Joseph Dan's contribution to the volume.

Kabbala and Hasidism

Within the history of both Kabbala and messianism, the phenomenon of Hasidism — the popular mystical movement that arose in the eighteenth century and transformed the spiritual physiognomy of much of Eastern European Jewry — is often regarded as *sui generis*. Not only did the movement popularize esoteric teachings that had hitherto been entrusted to a spiritual elite, but it effectively counteracted trends toward messianic activism. The popularization of the often recondite kabbalistic doctrines was achieved, according to Scholem, by conflating mystical and ethical values, thus rendering Kabbala a personal creed accessible to the simplest of Jews; Hasidism, in the pithy characterization of Martin Buber, was 'Kabbala become ethos' ('Ethos gewordenen Kabbala'), a formulation Scholem approvingly cited.²² With respect to messianism, Hasidism 'neutralized'²³ intense apocalyptic expectations of an imminent advent of the Redeemer — such as those that swept parts of the Jewish world with the seventeenth-century Sabbatean movement — by placing the *zaddiq* or *rebbe* at the center of its spiritual life. Generally a charismatic personality who served as a mystical teacher and soteriological agent, the *zaddiq* aided his followers or Hasidim in attaining a degree of spiritual (as opposed to historical) salvation in the here and now. Scholem sought to explain the unique position of Hasidism in Jewish spiritual history, as Rivka Schatz explains in this volume, by exploring the phenomenological significance of the new form of religious leadership represented by the *zaddiq*. Schatz also shows how Scholem's approach to the study of Hasidism was determined by his ambivalent evaluation of Buber's interpretation of the movement.

22 Cf. M. Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (English transl. from the German by Maurice Friedman), with an introduction by P. Mendes-Flohr and Z. Gries, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1988, p. 10; cited without source reference by Scholem in *Major Trends*, p. 342.

23 *Major Trends*, p. 329.

Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

The remarkable ability of Hasidism — as of Kabbala in general — to introduce bold innovations in Jewish doctrine (and practice) while remaining within the pale of tradition was, Scholem avers, due principally to its hermeneutics, its reverential but daring interpretation of the sacred texts informing the cognitive and normative horizons of the tradition. Unlocking new, hidden meanings in those texts, the kabbalists allowed the tradition to unfold as a dynamic process, accommodating new impulses and responding to new historical and cultural realities confronting the Jew; in their hands, Jewish tradition became a dialectical interplay of normative and novel, even heterodox ideas. Significantly, Scholem pointed out, the very term Kabbala means tradition, or literally ‘that which is received’ — a secret, hence somehow deeper knowledge of God’s Word, received from the past. The Kabbala does not present itself as an alternative tradition, but rather as offering insight into the more profound levels of meaning embedded in the teachings that have guided Israel since Sinai. It is a general characteristic of mysticism as a phenomenon of historical religions, Scholem argues, to regard itself as conforming with tradition:

It lies in the very nature of mysticism as a specific phenomenon within historical systems of religion that two conflicting tendencies should converge in it. Since historical mysticism does not hover in space, but is a mystical view of a specific reality; since it subjects the positive contents of a concrete phenomenon such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam to a new, mystical interpretation without wishing to come into conflict with the living reality and traditions of these religions, mystical movements face a characteristic contradiction. On the one hand, the new view of God and often enough of the world cloaks itself in the deliberately conservative attitude of men who are far from wishing to infringe on, let alone, overthrow tradition, but wish rather to strengthen it with the help of their new vision. Yet, on the other hand, despite this attitude of piety toward tradition, the element of novelty in the impulses that are here at work is often enough

reflected in a bold, if not sacrilegious, transformation of the traditional religious contents. This tension between conservative and innovationist or even revolutionary tendencies runs through the whole history of mysticism.²⁴

From this perspective, as Scholem often emphasized, Kabbala serves to remind us that there is no 'essence' of Judaism, no normative, fast definition:

[It] cannot be defined according to its essence, since it has no essence. Judaism cannot therefore be regarded as a closed historical phenomenon whose development and essence came into focus by a finite sequence of historical, philosophical, doctrinal, or dogmatic judgments and statements.²⁵

Primed by an ongoing rereading and thus subtle reformulation of the tradition, Judaism is rather a 'living entity,' whose 'systematic truth' is to be comprehended only in the 'totality' of its historical manifestations.²⁶

Because of their insistent efforts to weave their experience and vision into the tradition and especially into its sacred texts, Scholem held, Jewish mystics rarely found their voice in personal mystical

24 'Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists,' in *Kabbala and Symbolism*, p. 118.

25 G. Scholem, 'Judaism,' in A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds.), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, New York 1987, p. 505.

26 See Scholem's October 1937 birthday greeting to the publisher Salman Schocken, in D. Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge 1979, pp. 76 (English) and 216 (German). Scholem's non-essentialist view of Judaism parallels that of the German Christian historian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). Opposing Adolf von Harnack's argument in his exceedingly popular volume *What is Christianity?* (1900), Troeltsch declared that Christianity can only be understood in its 'totality'; Christianity is its history. Thus the essence of Christianity can be understood only as the productive power of the historical Christian religion to create new interpretations and new adaptations — a power that lies deeper than any historical formulation which it may have produced. Cf. E. Troeltsch, 'The Dogmatics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,' *American Journal of Theology* (January 1913), pp. 12–13.

testimony or ecstatic confessions.²⁷ They tended rather to articulate their experience through a highly creative hermeneutical fantasy, frequently directed to theosophical speculations probing the inner life of the Godhead palpitating just below the surface of the texts, indeed the entire texture of existence. The Kabbala thus 'comes to the rescue of tradition,'²⁸ freeing it from the dangers of spiritual stagnation and desiccation. Re-interpreting the sacred texts, the mystics revalorize Jewish tradition, endowing it with a new vitality, an intellectually and existentially engaging content.

Scholem and Buber's Erlebnis-Mysticism

The primacy that the kabbalists gave to the hermeneutic moment over the mystical experience *per se*, in Scholem's judgment, was the source of its creative power *within* Judaism.²⁹ This view corresponds to his own personal position that for any religious experience to have cultural resonance, it must be grounded in a tradition and its sacred texts. Specifically, the contemporary renewal of Judaism must begin with the retrieval by its deracinated sons and daughters of Jewish textual literacy — a conviction that crystallized already in Scholem's youth. Emerging from the assimilation of his parental home, his initial steps toward Judaism and a Zionist commitment to the renewal of a Jewish national identity and culture drew him, like so many of his generation of young Jews, to the teachings of Martin Buber. In this period, Buber addressed central-European Jewish youth estranged from what they perceived as the moribund traditions of Judaism. He taught that the tradition need not be an impediment to a meaningful relationship to Judaism, for it could be circumvented

27 As Scholem says on p. 15 of *Major Trends*, 'The Kabbalists ... are no friends of mystical autobiography.'

28 *Major Trends*, p. 23.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 23: 'The secret of the success of the Kabbalah lies in the nature of its relation to the spiritual heritage of rabbinical Judaism. This relation differs from that of rationalist philosophy, in that it is more deeply and in a more vital sense connected with the main forces in Judaism.' Kabbalah remains attuned to these forces — viz., the *halakha*, *aggada*, and liturgy — by the art of rereading the sacred texts such that they now reflect new insights, values and meaning.

by tapping Judaism's core primal experience (*Urerlebnis*), which he vaguely but alluringly described as an intense emotional experience (*Erlebnis*) — as opposed to a purely conceptual understanding — of the fundamental unity of life, despite one's ordinary, sensate experience (*Erfahrung*) of its fragmented, divisive character.³⁰ One had only to live in accord with this *Urerlebnis*, seeking a consistency between one's inner affective life and one's outer deeds. Stated with the inflections of the then fashionable Expressionism, Buber's message fascinated the young Scholem, as it did countless others. But as Rivka Schatz notes, Scholem soon grew wary of Buber's teaching; suspicious of what he regarded as its self-consciously aestheticized, affected manner, he sensed a nigh-total lack of real content.

Scholem's friendship with Walter Benjamin was sealed by his discovery of their mutual disaffection with Buber's *Erlebnis*-mysticism. In an entry in his diary, Scholem records his impressions of his first meeting with Benjamin, which quickly led to their lasting friendship. They met in August 1916 through mutual acquaintances at the Bavarian resort of Seeshaupt, and over a period of several days the nineteen-year-old Scholem and the twenty-four-year-old Benjamin engaged in a marathon discussion about matters of mutual concern:

During our entire period together we spoke an awfully lot about Judaism: about going to Palestine and 'agrarian Zionism,' about Ahad Ha-Am and 'justice,' but mostly about Buber, from whom after these four days not so much as anything remained. Benjamin was not wrong, when as he bade me farewell he said, were I to meet Buber I should give him in our name a barrel of tears (*Tränenfass*). Not that I learned anything in this matter from Benjamin. On the contrary, for more than nine months I thought exactly the same as he; only one point now became also

³⁰ See M. Buber, *Drei Reden über das Judentum*, Frankfurt a/M 1911, and 'Addresses on Judaism,' in idem, *On Judaism*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (English transl. by E. Jospé), New York 1967, pp. 11–55. Cf. G. Scholem, 'Buber's Conception of Judaism,' in *Jews and Judaism*, pp. 126–171; and see also P. Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber and the Transformation of German Social Thought*, Detroit 1989, pp. 49–82.

verbally clear to me: the repudiation of the value of *Erlebnis*. From here is the question, the 'key-question,' one may say: 'Have you already had the Jewish *Erlebnis*?' ('Haben Sie schon das jüdische Erlebnis gehabt?') ... Benjamin sought to induce me to include in [an article I was to write on Buber and his youthful followers],³¹ a decisive rejection of *Erlebnis*-cronies: Down with *Erlebnis*!³²

Benjamin and Scholem concluded that an immediate experience of God, independent of tradition, is ultimately elusive. For Jews such as themselves, products of the purgatory of assimilation and secularization, the divine reality could only be experienced via the mediation of traditional texts, bearing as they do the traces of a numinous reality informing them. One thus reads those texts with the hope of revalorizing that reality for oneself.

Overcoming History by History

But the texts are now encrusted by the relativizing sneer of modern historical scholarship, which denies the events and creations of bygone ages privileged access to absolute values and truth. How then, Scholem asked himself, is a person burdened by the modern historicist bias to gain entry to the past and the truths to which it laid claim? The young Scholem set out upon the path of historical reconstruction, employing the most rigorous tools of the philologist to peel away the debris of time and recapture the voices hidden in the texts he studied. Here he assumed a task he regarded as inherently ironic — using the historian's tools to overcome history and the curse of relativism.³³ In the first of his 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbala,' written in 1958, he pondered whether the 'philologist' — as he preferred to call himself because of his exacting attention

31 Cf. G. Scholem, 'Jüdische Jugendbewegung,' *Der Jude*, I (1916–1917), pp. 822–825.

32 Idem, unpublished diaries, entry dated 23–24 August 1916, cited in G. Smith, *Benjaminiana*, Giessen 1991, pp. 56–59.

33 Again, as suggested in note 26 above, Scholem may be compared to Troeltsch, who spoke of 'overcoming history by history.' See note 65 below.

to linguistic and conceptual detail — did not compound ‘the mist’ that shrouds the past:

Does there remain for the philologist something visible in this mist ... or does the essential [aspect of that which is studied] disappear in this projection of the historical? The uncertainty in answering this question is inherent in the nature of the philological enterprise itself and thus the hope, from which this works draws its life, retains something ironic which cannot be severed from it. ... But is not such irony that much more when it resides already in the subject matter itself, Kabbala, and not only in its history?³⁴

For the Kabbala speaks of hidden truths, which at most can be but inadequately transmitted. How, then, can the historian ever hope to behold these truths? For the historian as for the kabbalist, *mutatis mutandis*, ‘authentic tradition remains hidden; only the decaying tradition (*verfallende Tradition*) falls upon (*verfällt auf*) a subject and only in its fallen state (*im Verfall*) does its greatness become visible.’³⁵

34 ‘Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,’ pp. 70–71.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 71. In his commentary on Scholem’s aphorisms, David Biale judiciously points out that the analogy between the historian and the kabbalist must be understood metaphorically:

The problem of the historian differs fundamentally from that of the Kabbalist. Although both confront truths which are inaccessible to ordinary sense perception, the secrecy of Kabbalistic truth is a result of the *transcendence* of God, while the historian deals with events which are part of the world. Historical truth is only ‘secret’ in the sense that what lies beyond the temporal horizon of the historian is unknowable in the perceptual sense of the word, while Kabbalistic knowledge is secret because God is essentially absent. Thus, only by metaphorically conceiving of the past as somehow parallel to the hiddenness of God does the analogy between the historian and the Kabbalist make sense (*ibid.*, p. 72).

The analogy, however, can be taken more literally if we assume, as indeed seems to have been the case, that Scholem understood his own ultimate objective as an historian of Kabbala as being not only to recover the meaning of the texts he investigated but also to retrieve the divine truths or reality that inspired those texts.

Kafka as a Secularized Kabbalist

Here is where the kabbalist and the modern historian meet: both, in Scholem's view, are heirs to a fallen — decayed, corrupted — tradition. In his 'unhistorical' aphorisms, Scholem removes the professorial robes of the historian and speaks in a quasi-autobiographical voice, bearing witness to his personal, existential agenda as a student of Jewish mysticism. In the tenth and last aphorism, he elliptically alludes to his affinity to Franz Kafka, noting that the writings of the Czech-Jewish author are in effect a 'secularized presentation of a kabbalistic world-feeling.'³⁶ Significantly, he traces Kafka's spiritual lineage back to the Prague Frankist Jonas Wehle (1752–1823). As Scholem admiringly remarks, this exponent of a heretical Kabbala and nihilistic messianism, speaking in the language of the Enlightenment, was 'the first to pose the question (answering in the affirmative) whether with the banishment of humankind from its midst Paradise had not lost more than humankind itself.'³⁷ Kafka implicitly asks a similar question, and this, Scholem suggests, is no mere coincidence: 'Perhaps because we do not know what has happened with Paradise, Kafka ... regarded any consideration of "why the good" to be "in a certain sense hopeless".'³⁸ Another reference to Kafka appears in Scholem's 1937 birthday greeting to Salman Schocken, disarmingly entitled 'A Candid Word about the True Motives of My Kabbalistic Studies':

Many exciting thoughts had led me [in the years 1916–1918] ... to an intuitive affirmation of mystical propositions [*Thesen*] which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism. I later [found in Kafka] the most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line, an expression which, as a secular statement of the kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka's writings in the halo of the canonical.³⁹

36 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,' p. 88 (translation is mine).

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Cited in D. Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History* (above, note 26), p. 75 (I have slightly emended Biale's translation).

For Scholem, Kafka was emblematic of the modern Jew whose feeling is of clinging skeptically, yet reverentially, to the thin strands of a frayed tradition. It was this ambivalence of a secularized Jew with an abiding religious sensibility that lay behind Scholem's definition of himself as a 'religious anarchist.'⁴⁰ As Rivka Schatz illuminates, Scholem's brand of religious anarchism was different in kind from Buber's, of which he was highly critical. He was an anarchist not out of abstract principle but because of his metaphysical uncertainty, and his consequent existential anguish regarding the source of religious authority.⁴¹ He therefore saw in Kafka a kindred soul, as he explained in a detailed epistolary exchange with Benjamin. Along with one of his letters, he sent Benjamin a copy of Kafka's *The Trial*, enclosing with it, on a separate sheet, a poem in which he recorded his vision of Kafka in epigrammatic verse:

Are we totally separated from you?
Is there not a breath of your peace,
Lord, or your message
Intended for us in such a night?

Can the sound of your word
Have so faded in Zion's emptiness,
Or had it not even entered
This magic realm of appearance?

The great deceit of the world
Is now consummated.

⁴⁰ See 'Dialectic of Continuity and Rebellion' (an interview with Scholem), in E. Ben-Ezer (ed.), *Unease in Zion*, New York 1974, pp. 279f.

⁴¹ Cf. Scholem's statement at a July 1939 meeting of a Jerusalem study circle, *Ha'ol*:

Our anarchism is transitional. ... We are the living example that this [anarchism] does not remove one from Judaism. We are a generation not without commandments (*mitzvot*), but our commandments are bereft of authority. But I don't have an inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the Orthodox. We are no less legitimate than our forefathers, they simply had a clearer text. We are perhaps anarchists, but we are opposed to anarchy.

For the full citation and a commentary, see P. Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity*, Detroit 1991, pp. 400f.

Give then, Lord, that he may wake
Who was struck through by your nothingness.

Only so does revelation
Shine in the time that rejected you.
Only your nothingness is the experience [*Erfahrung*]
It is entitled to have of you.

Thus alone teaching that breaks through semblance
Enters the memory:
The truest bequest
Of hidden judgment.

Our position has been measured
On Job's scales with great precision.
We are known through and through
As despairing as on the youngest day.

What we are is reflected
In endless instances.
Nobody knows the way completely
And each part of it makes us blind.

No one can benefit from redemption.
That star stands far too high.
And if you had arrived there too,
You would still stand in your way.

Abandoned to powers,
Exorcism is no longer binding.
No life can unfold
That doesn't sink into itself.

From the center of destruction
A ray breaks though at times,
But none shows the direction
The Law ordered us to take.

Since this sad knowledge
Stands before us, unassailable,
A veil has suddenly been torn,
Lord, before your majesty.

Your trial began on earth.
Does it end before your throne?
You cannot be defended,
As no illusion holds true here.

Who is the accused here?
The creature or yourself?
If anyone should ask you,
You would sink into silence.

Can such a question be raised?
Is the answer indefinite?
Oh, we must nonetheless live
Until your court examines us.⁴²

In a subsequent letter to Benjamin, Scholem offers his own commentary on the poem: 'Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but a revelation seen of course from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness.'⁴³ Scholem goes on to explain that it is our very inability to fulfill the Law, which by virtue of our secular sensibility is refracted back into its supernal nothingness (in mystical parlance, the primordial abode of God), that 'offers the key to Kafka's work.'⁴⁴ Kafka's problem — and Scholem's — is 'the fact that it [the Law] can not be *fulfilled*.'⁴⁵ Shrouded in nothingness, the revealed Word of God cannot be deciphered.⁴⁶

In his perceptive commentary to Scholem's 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,' David Biale observes that

the notion of the hiddenness of the source of revelation was surely kabbalistic, but where the Kabbalists claimed to be able

42 Letter of 9 July 1934, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (above, note 7), pp. 123–125 (I have somewhat revised the translation).

43 Letter of 17 July 1934, *ibid.*, p. 126.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 For a comprehensive discussion of Scholem's reading of Kafka, see Stéphane Moses, 'Zur Frage des Gesetzes: Gershom Scholems Kafka-Bild,' in K.E. Grözinger, S. Moses, and H.D. Zimmermann (eds.), *Franz Kafka und das Judentum*, Frankfurt a/M 1987, pp. 13–34.

to penetrate these secrets, the secular Jew [as represented by Kafka] remained impotently paralyzed outside the first gate of the Law.⁴⁷

Sharing this sensibility, Scholem went one — or several — steps beyond Kafka. He became a committed Zionist and a historian.

Scholem and the Historian's Task

Inspired by a powerful intuition that Kabbala held within it 'the secret life of Judaism' — where the soul of the Jew struggles with the most exigent questions of faith and perhaps achieves an understanding, however fragmentary, of God's Word — Scholem resolved to write 'not the history but the metaphysics of the Kabbala.'⁴⁸ To achieve that goal, he realized that he would first have to penetrate 'the misty wall of history' that beclouds our view of the Kabbala.⁴⁹ This decision, as we have already noted, was not free of ambiguity, and it left him pondering, 'Will I get stuck in the mist, will I, so to speak, suffer a "professorial death"?'⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the youthful Scholem concluded that 'the necessity of historical criticism and critical history cannot be replaced by anything else.'⁵¹ It is only through 'the singular mirror of philological criticism' that one has 'the hope of a true communication from the mountain.'

Scholem set upon the task he assigned himself with a breathless earnestness. He faced a legacy of neglect fostered by the contemptuous attitudes of nineteenth-century Jewish scholarship toward all that did not conform to a rationalist conception of Judaism. As Scholem was quick to acknowledge, the founding generations of modern Judaic Studies, marching under the banner of what they somewhat bombastically called the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*), had made impressive strides in presenting an academically credible accounting of Judaism, particularly its rich religious and

47 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,' pp. 88f.

48 Scholem to Schocken, letter of October 1937, cited in Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History* (above, note 26), p. 75.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

51 *Ibid.*