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## SON OF GOD

Between Ashkenazi Hasidim and Meister Eckhart

**SUMMARY** – This paper explores the notion of divine sonship in both Eckhart and the Ashkenazi Hasidim. Though we ignore if there was any intellectual interaction between them, it remains interesting that in both the motif of sonship plays a crucial role. Being, or rather, becoming son of God entails a spiritual breakthrough that connects theology and anthropology. However, if Eckhart allows for the birth of God's son in the individual soul as the possibility of eternal rebirth, for the Ashkenazi Hasidim, becoming a son of God entails the eternal task of self-completion and attraction of the Godhead.

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will provide a comparative cross-reading of the motif of sonship in both Eckhart's sermons and in selected key texts of the Ashkenazi Hasidim. These Hasidim (*hasid* = pious, righteous) were a heterogeneous circle of mystical Jews living in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Rhineland and in Erfurt (and possibly also in Northern France).<sup>1</sup> Recent research has pointed out that there were several distinct groups with various interests, e.g. the Kalonymus group (with Judah ben Samuel the Pious and Eleazar of Worms), or the so-called 'Unique Cherub circle', (with Joseph ben Uzziel and Elkhanan ben Yakar). Others, such as Nehemiah ben Shlomo of Erfurt, cannot be associated with any particular group.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Eleazar of Worms, who was born in Mainz, reportedly worked as a *hazzan* (precentor, musician) in Erfurt for some time.

Research about the Ashkenazi Hasidim is ongoing. It is greatly hampered by the scarcity of circumstantial references and the tendency to anonymity and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Peering through the lattices: Mystical, magical, and pietistic dimensions in the Tosafist period*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000, 56f, 214.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Moshe Idel, 'Some forlorn writings of a forgotten Ashkenazic prophet: R. Nehemiah ben Shlomo ha-Navi', in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005) no.1, 183-196: 183, 194.

self-effacement of the authors. What can be stated with certainty, however, is that as of the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a radical metamorphosis of Jewish intellectual thinking took place. This metamorphosis was characterised by waves of unusual hermeneutic creativity and liberality departing from mainstream European Jewry, and by a renewed, foundational use of the ancient *Sefer Yetsirah* for speculative, 'mystical' purposes.<sup>3</sup>

There is no evidence of concrete interaction between Eckhart and these Jewish circles. Although it will not be my purpose in this contribution to prove any intellectual exchange, it seems fairly unlikely that there was absolutely none, given, 1) the spatial proximity of these religious explorers (esp. Erfurt); 2) the task officially assigned to the Dominicans to deal with any form of heresy and non-Christian religiosity, a task obliging them to familiarise themselves with these other religious views; and 3) Eckhart's itinerant life. Whereas Eckhart definitely cannot be held accountable for the persecution of religious minorities, it is, however, highly probable that he was familiar with their respective theologies. In relation to Judaism, Eckhart may well have been acquainted with the Jewish philosopher Bahya ibn Paquda's *Chovot ha-levavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), a treatise written in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century that insists on the decisive importance of equanimity.<sup>4</sup> Eckhart allegedly intensively studied Avicbron's *Fons vitae* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* in all his writings during the last period of his active life. To be true, the fact that Maimonides (1135–1204), who lived well before the Ashkenazi Hasidim, was vehemently opposed to any form of mystical speculation further complicates matters. Suggesting that God and man communicate through 'reason' (*sekhel*), Maimonides went down in history as the father of Jewish rationalism. Attributing *divine* qualities to 'intellect' (*logos, sekhel*), however, opens the doors to its mystical conception. In Judaism, on the other hand, it was the kabbalistic author Abraham Abulafia (±1240–±1290) who gratefully accepted this unintentional invitation, and Eckhart did the same in Christianity with Thomas Aquinas' notion of *intellectus*. Both Abulafia and Eckhart, while ignorant of each other, explored the intrinsic ambiguities of a divinely-coloured 'intellect', each within their own tradition.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle: A school of mystics and esoterics in medieval Germany*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999, esp. Preface, Chs. 1 and 5, and Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980 (orig. publ. 1957), 406 fn.59.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, 'The problem of mystical union in Eckhart, Seuse, and Tauler', in: Andreas Speer & Lydia Wegener (Eds.), *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*, Berlin/New York: Gruyter, 2005, 538-553: 539-541; Dagmar Gottschall, "Man möchte wunder tuon mit Worten" (Predigt 18): Zum Umgang Meister Eckharts mit Wörtern in seinen deutschen Predigten', in: *ibid.*, 427-449: 444. On this point in Abulafia, see Moshe Idel, *Messianic mystics*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1998, 88f, 91, 93f.

I will not, however, address this topic directly. Rather, it is my explicit aim to systematically investigate a notion dear to both Eckhart and his Jewish contemporaries, i.e. the notion of human 'sonship' of God. To do this, I will examine two coherent, though perhaps surprising, motifs: 'language' and 'angel'. 'Language' translates *logos*, which is the divine intermediary between God and man according to both the *Gospel of John* and the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria. 'Angel' represents a state of being which is equivalent, if not equal, to this intermediary *logos*. I will focus on two Hasidim. Firstly, Nehemiah ben Shlomo of Erfurt, who wrote a *Commentary on the Seventy Names of Metatron*. This treatise was probably written in one of the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> I will also study Eleazar of Worms (c. 1176–1238), disciple of Juda the Pious; just as Nehemiah, he resided in Erfurt for a period during his life. Any influence of these Jewish thinkers on Eckhart is possible, but cannot be established with certainty (as opposed to Maimonidean influences). It remains noteworthy, however, that Eckhart was born in Tambach, close to Erfurt, and that he received his first education in Erfurt. On the other hand, one of the strongest counter-arguments against an Eckhartian-Hasidic intellectual exchange would be that the Jewish mystical traditions were fairly esoteric and hardly accessible to outsiders. Consequently, in order to avoid overstatements my aim in this paper will be only systematic, not historical.<sup>7</sup>

#### ASHKENAZI HASIDIM

To begin with, let me highlight some common features of the German Hasidim, since this group of writers is not well known outside of the circle of experts on Jewish mystical traditions. They should not be confused with the Polish and Ukrainian Hasidim of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, since the latter are a completely different set of people.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, New York/London: Continuum, 2007, 198.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Vajda assumes that communication between 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish rabbis and Latin clerical culture was rare. Cf. his *L'amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du Moyen Age*, Paris: Vrin, 1957, 150 fn.1. However, also cf. Kanarfogel: 'the literature of Jewish-Christian polemic presumes and demonstrates that small-scale disputations and dialogues were commonplace between Jewish and Christian spokesmen and scholars of varying levels' (Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The intellectual history and Rabbinic culture of medieval Ashkenaz*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013, 104. Also see p.85 fn.174-176. Finally, see Haym Soloveitchik, 'Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: Sefer Hasidim I and the influence of Hasidei Ashkenaz', in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92 (2002) nos. 3-4, 455-493.

The name 'Ashkenazi Hasidim' refers to several groups of esoteric Jewish authors who were the immediate progenitors of the ensuing 'kabbalah', which developed some decades later in southern France and northern Spain. They themselves preserved and perpetuated ancient speculative exegetical traditions on *merkabah* (the divine chariot described in Ezekiel 1) and *hechaloth* (the celestial palaces), possibly dating back to the beginning of common era.

To start with, some of the Hasidim held a view of God that underlined God's immanence to the world rather than his kingship. God was seen as a vital force and as the foundation of the world, to be discovered primarily, inwardly and deeply inside the human soul. Gershom Scholem quotes a Hasidic definition of God as being 'the soul of the soul', a conception that was entirely new to Judaism at the time.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, several Hasidim were far more interested in Revelation than in Creation. Revelation was associated with the divine 'glory' (*kavod*), a key biblical notion that became even more prominent in post-biblical traditions. This glory was supposed to be identical not so much with the Creator himself but with his *first* work, a 'creation' so pristine that it was prior even to the six days work recounted in the book of Genesis. It equals 'the great splendor called *shekhina*', or also the 'holy spirit' (*ruah ha-qodesh*).<sup>9</sup> The aforementioned Judah the Pious and his disciple Eleazar of Worms went so far as to make a distinction between two forms of the divine glory: an inner and an outer one. The *kavod penimi* (inner glory), they said, is identical to the *shekhina* or the divine spirit; it is a formless, pure voice or also, pure divine will. The *kavod ha-chizon* (outer glory), on the other hand, is visible and regards the manifest, always transforming world.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, God's visible glory saves this world from being relegated to a realm of pure transience, instability and decay, as in some forms of Platonism or Gnosticism. Rather, it emanates the miraculous cherub referred to in Ezekiel 1, 26-28:

and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. (...) Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

In light of Eckhart's mysticism, which will be discussed further shortly, it is enthralling to see that Ashkenazi theosophy even implies the cherub's being

<sup>8</sup> Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, 119. The manuscript referred to was still unedited when Scholem wrote his book; see 408 fn.97.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 121f. Also see Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle*, 55-58.

emanated *concomitantly* with the human soul.<sup>11</sup> The cherub, so the Hasidim claim, is imbued with the *hidden* divine glory or the shekinah. This idea cannot avoid implying its *co*-divinity, albeit in the form of that of a lesser God. This perplexing implication becomes possible in the Hasidic thinking of Eckhart's esoteric Jewish contemporaries.

On another note, transmitting ancient mystagogic materials to medieval Jewish reflection, the Ashkenazi Hasidim drew particularly on the enigmatic figure of an angel called *Metatron*. This angelic though non-biblical entity was seen in mystical Jewish circles as an intermediary between God and man. As of *3 Enoch* (also called *Sefer Hekhalot*), it was identified with the apotheotic shape of the biblical patriarch Enoch, about whom it is said that he 'walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away' (Gn 5:24).<sup>12</sup>

Another feature of the German Hasidim is that their textual exegesis was extremely daring; they applied hermeneutical procedures such as *gematria*, *notarikon* or *chochmat tseruf*, emphasising the numerical value of words and letters rather than their content. It was this odd exegesis that marked the Jewish mystical tradition, to the point of making it completely inaccessible to those unfamiliar with Hebrew. Scholem holds that half of the Hasidic literature's content was characterised by specimens of its remarkable hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup>

To conclude this brief introductory sketch of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, it should be added that they combined extreme piety and expiatory disciplines with a strong sense of asceticism. This asceticism was never sexual, however. In contradistinction to Christianity, sexual asceticism is unknown to Judaism. Finally, the Hasidim emphasised a complete surrender of the human will to God – yet another theme dear to mystical thinkers.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 123. Scholem refers here to Eleazar of Worms' *Sha'are ha-Sod ha-Yihud weha-Emunah*, a treatise on the unity and incorporeality of God, combating the anthropomorphism of the Haggadah (first published by Adolf Jellinek, and republished by Joseph Dan in *Temirin* 1 (1972), 141-156; reference in Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle*, 101 fn.3).

<sup>12</sup> On this identification and its developments see Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron tradition*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005, esp. Chs. 3-4. 3 Enoch dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, but its identification of Enoch and Metatron could, according to Orlov, be even older. Cf. *Het Boek der Hemelse Paleizen (3 Henoch): Een joods mystiek geschrift uit de late oudheid*, transl. & ed. Pieter W. van der Horst, Kampen: Kok, 1999, 18. Finally, see Daniel Abrams, 'The boundaries of divine ontology: The inclusion and exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead', in: *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994) no.3, 291-321.

<sup>13</sup> Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, 404 fn.31. Also see Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle*, 257ff.

## MAN'S RELATION TO GOD – LANGUAGE

Before turning to Eckhart and his prominent ideas about human sonship and God's birth in the soul, I will make an anticipatory remark here on sonship in Jewish mysticism that only partly follows from what has been said. In Jewish mystical thinking, sonship counts as something positively achievable. The paradigmatic example here is represented by the biblical patriarch *Enoch* who, according to Jewish oral tradition, was 'assumed' and brought on to an almost equal footing with God. We will see below that Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the famous Hasid of Erfurt, makes this claim in his treatise *The Seventy Names of Metatron*.

To contextualise this point, let me make three more general remarks. Firstly, it is important to note that in Judaism generally, man's creation in the image of God (*be-tselem Elohim*) is something that is not given freely, but is always yet to be achieved, whether by development of the human *intellect* (Maimonides, Abulafia) or by *language* (Ashkenazi Hasidim). Man ought to *become* the image of God. A divine likeness cannot be taken for granted, as though man were already endowed with some inalienable, divine property.<sup>14</sup>

Next, it is striking that, compared to Jewish *philosophy* (cf. ibn Ezra, Saadia, Maimonides etc.), notions of 'sonship' are far more prevalent in Jewish *mysticism*. Sonship here refers to an extraordinary intimacy that philosophical 'rationalism' cannot access.

Finally, one cannot overestimate the crucial influence of Philo's doctrine of a primordial *Logos* mediating between God and man, not only on Jewish but also on Christian thought (cf. the *Gospel of John*, *Letter to the Hebrews*, Origen). Obviously, the nature of this *Logos* is not exempt from ambiguity, since according to its Greek meanings it can mean both *intellect* and *language*. In other words, it can be either intelligible or unintelligible, yet still accessible. For the latter case I coin the term 'nonderstanding'. This 'nonderstanding' in my view directly applies to Eckhart (among others), when he states in his famous sermon *Quasi stella matutina* that God speaks his full, consummate word in the human soul, inviting man to be its adverb (*biwort*).<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on the divine *Logos* (announced in the Gospel of John's opening chapter) is here beyond rational intelligibility; 'nonderstandable' though it be, it remains audible all throughout,

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 'It is intellect that makes man a human being and makes him different from animals. Thus, only if man has a developed intellect is he *Zelem Elohim*, the image of God'. K.E. Grözinger, 'Between magic and religion, in: Joseph Dan & Karl Erich Grözinger (Eds.), *Mysticism, magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, Berlin/New York: Gruyter, 1995, 28-43: 35.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Quint (Ed.), *Eckharts Predigte und Traktate*, Zürich: Diogenes, 1979 (first publ. 1963), sermon 10.

and perhaps comparable to what was called God's 'inner glory' by Eleazar of Worms (see above).

#### CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Let us now turn to Eckhart. Eckhart's thinking is denied mystical characteristics by the Bochum school of Eckhart scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Researchers such as Burkhard Mojsisch and Kurt Flasch insist on the completely rational and intelligible character of Eckhart's arguments. My reticence as regards their interpretation may already appear from my earlier remarks concerning the radically ambiguous nature of the divine Logos (either intelligible or 'nonderstandable').

Apart from these scholars' rejection of the mystical essence of Eckhart's writings, any form of *Christian* mysticism as such seems to be inhibited by the recognised doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. The doctrine of Incarnation, for example, seems to somewhat exemplify an inverted mysticism, i.e. a divine anthroposis instead of a human apotheosis. Before studying Eckhart's ideas on sonship and God's birth in the human soul more closely, it would be good to consider the following preconditions of a truly Christian mysticism. Such a mysticism ought to either minimise the role of incarnation (as is done in the work of pseudo-Dionysius), or reconceive of its essence as an extratemporal, spiritual one (as is the case in Eckhart). Human apotheosis and divine anthroposis should fully coincide in order to keep them compatible. For textual evidence of this coinciding we need not look too far in Eckhart's writings. As an example I will quote here a passage from the sermon *Vir meus servus tuus mortuus est*. If the *Fünklein der Vernunft* ('spark of the intellect') is purely conceived in God, Eckhart notes, then and only then will one live.

Dort geschieht die Geburt, dort wird der Sohn geboren. Diese Geburt geschieht nicht *einmal* im Jahre noch *einmal* im Monat noch *einmal* am Tage, sondern *allezeit*, das heißt oberhalb der Zeit in der Weite, wo weder Hier noch Nun ist, weder Natur noch Gedanke. Darum sprechen wir von 'Sohn' und nicht von 'Tochter'.

(*Vir meus servus tuus mortuus est*, 393f)

There is a clear tendency in Eckhart to minimise the historical weight of the incarnation, if not to reduce it to nothing. Surprisingly, Maarten Hoenen notes

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Reinhard Margreiter, 'Mystik zwischen Literalität und Oralität: Meister Eckhart und die Theorie medialer Noetik', in: Klaus Jacobi (Ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen – Redesituationen*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997, 15-42; and also B. Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogie, Univozität und Einheit*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1983, 11f.

in his extensive commentary on the above-mentioned sermon that ‘die Christologie Eckharts ist im Vergleich zu seiner Vernunftlehre viel weniger erforscht’.<sup>17</sup> Rather than examining the mutual implication, implied by Eckhart himself, of notions such as ‘Christ’, ‘logos’ and ‘intellect’, such a remark takes their semantic insulation for granted.

Eckhart’s attempt to de-historicise incarnation might to some extent betray his profound admiration for Maimonides. This claim is made by those Eckhart scholars who are familiar with the great Jewish rationalists, such as Yossef Schwartz, Alessandro Palazzo or Joseph Koch.<sup>18</sup> Unlike any other Jewish philosopher, Maimonides put all the emphasis on God’s unity beyond the plurality of Being itself. This divine unity was further explained by Maimonides as God’s absolute transcendence entailing the need of a radically negative theology. Interestingly, this did not induce Maimonides to speculate about man’s potential to access this unity, let alone his inner coinciding with it. Instead, Eckhart’s reverence for the famous Jewish thinker inspired him with a mystical audacity that the latter would have unquestionably sternly condemned.

#### ECKHART AND THE BIRTH OF GOD IN THE SOUL

The ‘birth of God in the soul’ or *theogenesis* is one of most recurrent themes in Eckhart’s sermons. This theogenesis is identified with God speaking his word into the human soul. Obviously, behind this process is the Johannean logos theology developed in John 1, a theology that has been central to the majority of Christian philosophies, from Origen, Clement and Augustine, to Eriugena and Hegel; the ambiguity of the concept of logos allowed it to oscillate between its intelligible and its linguistic overtones. It was certainly *not* Eckhart who introduced it, nor was he the last to dwell on it.

Even the Gospel of John itself, however, may not have been original in introducing its theology of ‘logical’ ambiguity. This theology should rather be attributed to its philosophical predecessor, Philo of Alexandria, who in his turn used

<sup>17</sup> In: Georg Steer & Loris Sturlese (Eds.), *Lectura Eckhardi II: Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003, 97 fn.4.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Yossef Schwartz, ‘Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides: From Judaeo-Arabism to Christian mysticism’, in: Jeremiah M. Hackett (Ed.), *A companion to Meister Eckhart*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013, 389-414; id., ‘Zwischen Einheitsmetaphysik und Einheitshermeneutik: Eckharts Maimonides-Lektüre und das Datierungsproblem des “Opus tripartitum”’, in: Speer & Wegener, *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*; Alessandro Palazzo, ‘Eckhart’s Islamic and Jewish sources: Avicenna, Avicbron, and Averroes’, in: *ibid.*, 259-279: 253; Josef Koch, ‘Meister Eckhart und die jüdische Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters’, in: *Kleine Schriften I*, Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1973, 349-365: 352ff, 365.

ancient Greek logos speculation to account for the correlation between the transcendent God and the world. While the origin of logos in the human heart was familiar to Greek thinking, its being *generated* by God and the concomitant *sonship*, however, were not. As of Philo and the Gospel of John, the intimate connection of divine and human logos and their common 'fate' become part and parcel of the Christian theological tradition. Examples abound, and here I will quote only two. Ambrosius writes in his treatise *De virginibus* (III,1,3): 'Ex utero generavit (Pater) ut filium, ex corde eructavit ut Verbum ([the Father] generated from the womb a son, from the heart he uttered a Word)'. And Irenaeus says (*Adversus haereses* III, 19, 1): 'εἰς τοῦτο ὁ Λόγος ἄνθρωπος ἵνα ἄνθρωπος τὸν Λόγον χωρήσας καὶ τὴν ὑιοθεσίαν λαβὼν υἱος γενήται θεοῦ (the Logos [became] man so that man could put on the Logos, assume sonship and become a son of God)'.<sup>19</sup>

Eckhart's ideas as such about the inner generation of the son are in themselves certainly not revolutionary. They are in line with the Christian tradition. Eckhart only gives that tradition a particular twist, leading him to the assumption of a soul susceptible to *de-creation*, a soul that, once de-created, becomes identical to the Son or the divine Logos.<sup>20</sup> Let us have a look at three typical passages. The first passage deals with the word (*Wort*, logos), the second with the intellect (*Vernunft*), the third with the surrender of will. Interestingly, in two of them we encounter the *angel* motif.

At the end of his well-known sermon, *Quasi stella matutina*, Eckhart distinguishes three kinds of 'word'. First, he says, there is a generated (*hervorgebrachtes*) word: this is the angel, man, and all creatures. Its characteristic is to be outside God. Next, Eckhart continues, there is an intelligised and produced word (*gedacht und vorgebracht*) enabling us to have concrete things before our mind: this is human thinking or imaginative cognition. It is inside man though still outside God. The third word, Eckhart concludes, is an unproduced and unintelligised (if not unintelligible) word that never becomes external (*sowohl unvorgebracht wie ungedacht... niemals austritt*). It always remains within him who speaks, i.e. God. Being conceived in God, this word remains fully within. It is eternally inwardly generated without ever becoming exterior.

Eckhart concludes his sermon by highlighting the moral implication of this threefold existence of the word. The human soul (i.e. action and thinking), he

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Hugo Rahner, 'Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi im Herzen des Gläubigen', in: *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 59 (1933), 333-418: 338, 344.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Dietmar Mieth, 'Kontemplation und Gottesgeburt: Die religiöse Erfahrung im Christentum und die christliche Erfahrung des Religiösen bei Meister Eckhart', in: Walter Haug & Dietmar Mieth (Eds.), *Religiöse Erfahrung: Historische Modelle in christlicher Tradition*, München: Fink, 1992, 205-228: 215ff.

says, ought to always be inner-oriented, it ought to gravitate around this inner word and be its adverb. ('Dort soll die Seele ein "Beiwort" sein und mit Gott ein Werk wirken'.)<sup>21</sup> This being-an-adverb, Eckhart significantly adds, is even central to his entire preaching: 'Dies ist es, auf das ich's in all meinen Predigten abgesehen habe'. Remarkably, illustrating this human adverbiality a little earlier Eckhart refers twice to 'angelic being' (*des Engels Sein*): 'Ein Meister sagt: Gottes Vernunft ist es, woran des Engels Sein gänzlich hängt'. And further on: 'Des Engels Sein hängt daran, dass ihm die göttliche Vernunft gegenwärtig ist, darin er sich erkennt'.<sup>22</sup> Combined with the sermon title's text quotation from *Jesus Sirach*, which is in praise of the steadfast high priest Simeon, it becomes enticing to connect, if not *identify*, 'high priest', 'angel', and the man or woman acting as an adverb to God's word. This connection may not be compelling at first sight, however, since one could just as well interpret Eckhart here in line with the classical Thomist, Lombardean, or even pseudo-Dionysian angelology entailing the existence of angels as infallible intermediaries between man and God. At second sight, though, the radically 'mystical' implications of human adverbiality minimise the weight of any *distinct* angelology, to the point of virtually extending angelhood to human nature as such.<sup>23</sup>

Let us now have a more explicit look at Eckhart's notion of the 'intellect' (*Vernunft*). We have already noticed that it is identical to 'logos' and 'sonship'. Again, as we will see, we encounter the angel motif here. 'Intellect', Eckhart claims, rather than 'rationality', is the human capability of receiving God's being, *beyond* his predicates. It is comparable to the highest angels in God's immediate presence. I will quote here a passage from the sermon *Vir meus servus tuus mortuus est*:

Hierin gleicht die Vernunft der obersten Herrschaft der Engel, die die drei Chöre umfassen: Die Throne nehmen Gott in sich auf und bewahren Gott in sich und ruhen in ihm. Die Cherubim erkennen Gott und beharren dabei. Die Seraphim sind der Brand. Diesen (Engeln) gleicht die Vernunft und bewahrt Gott in sich. Mit diesen Engeln nimmt die Vernunft Gott in seinem Kleidhause, nackt, wie er unterschiedlos eines ist.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Quint, *Eckharts Predigte und Traktate*, 200.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. 'Die höchsten Engel nehmen Gott nach seinem Wesen rein in sich auf und sind zugleich die Botschafter, die die göttlichen Nachrichten an die Welt überbringen. Eine ähnliche doppelte Bewegung gilt auch für die menschliche Seele'; Hoenen, in: Steer & Sturlese, *Lectura Eckhardi II*, 105. Also cf. *Jesus Sirach* 36, 11: 'Have mercy, o God, upon the people called by Thy name, upon Israel, whom Thou hast likened to a first-born son (ὁν πρωτοτόγονω ὡμοιωσας)', quoted in Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Quint, *Eckharts Predigte und Traktate*, 393.

The intellect is layered, it has a tripartite structure in conformity to the decreasing forms of intimacy with God's being. One may well recognise here, albeit following an inverted hierarchy, the triple structure of the word described earlier. The two types of angels, *cherubim* and *seraphim*, correspond to two forms of God-relatedness. The former infinitely contemplate divine nature and reflect the intelligised and produced word (*gedacht und vorgebracht*) mentioned in *Quasi stella matutina*: pure human thinking; the latter represent celestial conflagration, i.e. love, and could be said to refer to the generated (*hervorgebrachtes*) word, or outer creation. The *thrones* represent the unproduced and unintelligised (if not unintelligible) word that never becomes external.<sup>25</sup>

The final example of this tripartite structure I will provide here comes from the sermon *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum*, one of Eckhart's most penetrating mystical accounts. Virtuous life, we hear, affects the human will in three ways. *Sensuous* will ('*sinnlicher*' *Wille*) requires instruction by a true, veracious teacher. *Intellectual* will ('*vernunftferhellter*' *Wille*) requires orientation on the works of Jesus and the saints in word, work and business (*Wort, Wandel und 'Gewerbe'*). *Eternal* will ('*ewiger*' *Wille*) is one with God's will: 'Wenn dies alles erfüllt ist, dann senkt Gott ein weiteres in der Seele Grund (...). Dann spricht der liebe Vater sein ewiges Wort in die Seele'.<sup>26</sup> Eternal will, the most profound level, can only be equivalent here to what is called 'thrones' in the previous passage. If it is, a word unheard-of before is heard, a word so unique that cannot be understood 'intellectually'.

#### ASHKENAZI HASIDIM AND LANGUAGE – ELEAZAR OF WORMS

Let us now turn once more to the Ashkenazi Hasidim, and more specifically, to Eleazar of Worms and Nehemiah ben Shlomo of Erfurt. As previously stated, we have no historical evidence of any form of encounter between Eckhart and

<sup>25</sup> As opposed to Hoenen I am inclined to thinking that Trinity represents this triplicity, rather than the other way round (which would be a dogmatic, non-Eckhartian approach). Cf. Hoenen: 'Die drei Chöre gelten als die erste und höchste Abbildung der Trinität, die aus der Gnade Gottes geboren ist': Steer & Sturlese, *Lectura Eckhardi II*, 105. To quote Otto Langer: 'das Eckhart seine Trinitätslehre nicht *more geometrico* darstellt, sondern sie mit dem geistlichen Leben in enge Beziehung setzt', 'Eckharts Lehre von der Gottesgeburt und vom Durchbruch in die Gottheit und seine Kritik mystischer Erfahrung', in: Margot Schmidt & Dieter R. Bauer (Eds.), *Eine Höhe, über die nichts geht: Spezielle Glaubenserfahrung in der Frauenmystik?*, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann/Holzboog, 1986, 135-161: 139.

<sup>26</sup> Quint, *Eckharts Predigte und Traktate*, 286f. For a marvelous commentary on the Eckhartian themes discussed above see Gerard Visser, *Gelatenheid: Gemoed en hart bij Meister Eckhart*, Amsterdam: SUN, 2008.

the mystical German rabbis. Eckhart scholars, inasmuch as they are familiar at all with the Jewish tradition, only refer to Maimonides and Avicbron (Shlomo ibn Gavirol, author of *Fons vitae*) as Jewish influences on the Dominican preacher. On the other hand, none of the scholars of medieval Jewish thinking (e.g. Julius Gutman, Gershom Scholem, Yossef Schwartz, Moshe Idel, etc.) speak about any form of Hasidic interaction with the Christian mystic, nor even about any form of indirect influence on him. While silence or ignorance neither prove nor disprove anything, it is not my aim to contradict their scholarship. My intention is merely systematic, without however excluding Eckhart's acquaintance with the German mystics who lived in his immediate environment.<sup>27</sup>

Let me start by setting out some basic assumptions implicitly made by some major Hasidim. Without an explication of such preliminaries, the risk of incomensurabilities and anachronisms when dealing with Eckhart and his mystical Jewish contemporaries will only increase.

First, as opposed to the Christian thinkers, the Jewish esoterics did not have a word, or even a concept, for 'mysticism'.<sup>28</sup> The absence of such a concept outside the Greco-Roman-Christian tradition gives food for thought, for it can be equally indicative of this very Greco-Roman-Christian tradition's inability to adequately express religious experience.

Second, to the Hasidic writers, a substitute for this apparent 'lack' presented itself: language. Their conception of language, however, is completely foreign to the Greco-Roman-Christian tradition (that is, in so far as the latter had not yet availed itself of such a conception, as would be the case much later, in Hamann, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Benjamin, Heidegger, Derrida, etc.). In line with the enigmatic *Sefer Yetsira* (a highly influential 3<sup>rd</sup> century Jewish-neo-Pythagorean treatise on Creation), the Hasidim saw language as God's first creation, preceding even the material world's. To quote Joseph Dan, the famous scholar of the Ashkenazi Hasidim: 'Language is not an attempt to describe existing things; rather, existing things are the unfolding of powers which lie within language. (...) Language is the source, reality is the outcome'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf however Joseph Dan: 'Towards the second half of the thirteenth century, the works of Judah the Pious and Rabbi Eleazar of Worms became so well-known in Germany, and even to some extent in Spain, that it is unimaginable that their terminology and ideas would have left no trace in the works of Jewish esoterics and mystics'. Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Cf Dan, *The 'Unique Cherub' circle*, vii.

<sup>29</sup> In: 'Language of the mystics in medieval Germany', in: Dan & Grözinger, *Mysticism, magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, 6-27: 8. Also cf. 'The great discovery of some modern philosophers – the independence of the text and the irrelevance of its context – has been made by the talmudic sages a millenium and a half ago.' Also cf. Irene E. Zwiep, *Mother of reason and revelation: A short history of medieval Jewish linguistic thought*, Amsterdam: Gieben, 1997.

The perspective from which I will consider 'language' here is as follows: it is susceptible to representing sonship, in a way that comes remarkably close to Eckhart's 'birth of God in the soul' or 'God speaking his divine word into the soul'. The main difference, however, between Eckhart's verbal influx and the Jewish esoterics' idea of language is, that the latter is still *analogical*, strange though this seems, to common parlance.<sup>30</sup> The Jewish esoteric conception of language, originating in the *Sefer Yetsirah* (if not in the Hebrew bible itself) comes down to its pre-creation, it having been the basic substance out of which the material world has been taken. Accordingly, human language holds a trace of this archetypal language. Within the confines of this article, I cannot do justice to this extremely foreign and unusual conception of language, for even the attempt to 'explain' it already presupposes the predominant alternative, 'Platonic' conception (which was also Eckhart's). Perhaps the work of Jacques Derrida could be helpful here, though it would lead us too far off track to turn to it now.<sup>31</sup>

Since each single passage quoted from the Hasidim requires an extensive commentary for being so dense and idiomatic, the following fragment from Eleazar's *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* (*Book of Wisdom*) should suffice here. Lest the reader will be fully confused I will introduce this fragment, mostly relying here on Moshe Idel's hermeneutic and partly adding some explanatory remarks of my own.

For one thing, the passage I will quote below comments upon God's creation of man 'in his own image'. To the surprise of generations, the Hebrew consonant text uses the plural (*na'aseh adaam betsalmenu*, 'let us make man in our image') instead of a singular (*betsalmo*), as one would expect. Removing the letter *nun* designating the plural (as suggested by the author) would immediately restore a singular meaning. The 'inverted nuns' mentioned in the quote below probably relate to several lost manuscripts in which the n's were indeed inverted, with this being indicative of more ancient quandaries about the divine plural. For another

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Burkhard Mojsisch, 'Die Theorie des Ich in seiner Selbst- und Weltbegründung bei Meister Eckhart', in: Christian Wenin, *L'homme et son univers au Moyen-Age*, Paris/Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters/Vrin, 1987, 267-271; Angela Schiffhauer, "'nos filii dei sumus analogice': Die Analogielehre Meister Eckharts in der Verteidigungsschrift", in: Speer & Wegener, *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*, 356-389. Schiffhauer makes a case for analogy in Eckhart, criticising Mojsisch. I tend to disagree with her.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. 'Car la pensée de la chose comme ce qu'elle est se confond déjà avec l'expérience de la pure parole; et celle-ci avec l'expérience elle-même'. 'L'écriture est l'angoisse de la ruah hébraïque éprouvée du côté de la solitude et de la responsabilité humaines'. 'Ecrire [c]'est aussi ne pouvoir faire précéder absolument l'écrire par son sens'. J. Derrida, 'Force et signification', in: *l'Écriture et la différence*, Paris: Seuil, 1967, 9-50: 18, 19, 21. Also cf. Dan, 'The language of the mystics in medieval Germany', passim.

thing, the ‘correspondences’ mentioned in the section refer to (Hebrew) letter identity, or to *gematria*, i.e. the identical numerical account of the Hebrew letters – which is untranslatable, obviously. Thirdly, reference is made to the rabbinical doctrine of the ‘fifty gates of understanding’, implying fifty human qualities that bring man closer to God’s son, who possesses ‘fifty-two’.

‘Let us make Adam in Our Image and Likeness’ to those are three inversed [letters of] *Nun*, correspond to the verse ‘but teach them to your sons, and to the sons of your sons’ {Deuteronomy 4,9}. Since the Holy One blessed Be He said: ‘Let make Adam and I shall give to him the fifty gates of understanding’. There are fifty-two gates and this is what has been said: ‘A wise son [*ben hakham*] will cause the rejoice of a father’ {Proverbs 10,1}. He [God] gave fifty gates to Adam, according to the account of *ha-Adam* but two more of the amount to *YWD HH VV HH* and this has been written in Psalm {8,5} ‘thou hast made him a little lower than “Elohim”’ as it is written: ‘*Yismehu ha-shamayim we-tagel ha-’aretz*’ {Psalm 96,11} the acronym is *YHWH* and the last letters [of the verse] are *TzaLMW*, and this [the meaning of] what is written ‘because He made Adam in the image of Elohim’ and gave to him the gates of understanding which amounts to *ha-’adam*. This is the reason why the *Nun* is [written] inverse.<sup>32</sup>

As said, texts such as these cannot be accessed without thorough scholarly explanation. I will draw here on Moshe Idel’s. The ‘demonstration’ of the need to exclude the three plural n’s, Idel notes, takes advantage of a remarkable ‘correspondence’ in Psalm 96,11 ‘*Yismehu ha-shamayim we-tagel ha-’aretz*’ (the *translation* of which, i.e. ‘Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad’, is totally irrelevant here): whereas this verse’s words’ first letters read *YHWH* (the tetragrammaton, or God’s name), its last read *TSLMW*: *tsalmo*, ‘his image’.

Another indispensable elucidation of this extremely dense section given by Idel regards the fifty-two gates of understanding. ‘Fifty-two’ stands for the Hebrew word *ben*, ‘son’, and it similarly equals two times 26 (which is the numerical value of *YHWH*); finally, it is the value of the Tetragrammaton *spelled out* (*YWD HH VV HH*). On another note, *ha-’adam* equals 50 (likewise represented by the Hebrew letter *nun*). To make things even more complex: *ben* (‘son’) closely resembles *bina*, ‘understanding’. Also, since the Hebrew letter *b* can indicate the preposition ‘by’, and the letter *n* stands for ‘50’, *ben* could just as well mean ‘by 50’.<sup>33</sup>

To make all this a little more concrete, with the help of the hermeneutic genius of Moshe Idel: while ‘man’ (*ha-’adaam*) stands for 50 (i.e. gates of understanding), both God’s name (i.e. *YHWH*) and the son (of God, *ben*) represent

<sup>32</sup> *Sefer ha-hokhma*, quoted in Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 219. The in-text references between { } are mine; Idel mentions them in footnotes.

<sup>33</sup> Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 219ff.

52. It is suggested that the son of God is intrinsically connected to God. Adam-man was created *in* God's image, which enabled him to develop himself *towards* God. Sonship is not a divine gratuitous gift but the result of human effort. Moreover, sonship entails something *linguistic* rather than holding a share of the divine substance. Idel calls this 'morphonominalism' or 'linguistic iconism'.<sup>34</sup> *He* (and only he) will be son of God who is a bearer of his name. However, to understand this correctly we should not tacitly reintroduce the Platonic approach of language. To become a bearer of God's name entails appearing in a figure that is *sui generis*, non-referential, ultimate.

In light of Eckhart's *throne* metaphor representing the unproduced and unintelligised word that never becomes external, the following gematria offered by Eleazar is perhaps illuminating. After having warned to rather whisper about God than talk aloud, Nehemiah informs us that God makes the one who does so 'sit on the seat of Glory, like Adam the first [man]. This is the reason why the end letters of the words *'we-kisse' kavod yanhilem* form [the consonants of the word] *'adam'*.<sup>35</sup> The quoted Hebrew comes from 1 Samuel 2,8: '[God] has them inherit a throne of honour'. This passage seems to imply an original state of Glory characteristic of Adam before his Fall. Adam's 'throne', however, is different from Eckhart's, since it is still distinct from God's.

#### ASHKENAZI HASIDIM AND THE ANGEL – NEHEMIAH BEN-SHLOMO

Whereas Eleazar of Worms suggests a form of sonship which is linguistic, and achievable through the enhancement of the 'gates of understanding' (if not through a return to Adam's throne of glory), we find a different form in Nehemiah ben-Shlomo of Erfurt. In his *Commentary on the Seventy Names of Metatron*, the suggestion of sonship by *adoption* is made.

We have already seen that the mythological angelic figure of Metatron, very present in medieval Jewish esotericism, functions as an intermediary between God and man. He is equated with the biblical Enoch. Nehemiah continues a tradition that dates back at least to 3 *Enoch/Sefer Hekhalot* (between ±300-700) and perhaps even earlier.<sup>36</sup> Enoch, we read in the *Commentary*, 'became as a brother to the Holy One, blessed be He, because he judges in the firmament after the Holy One, blessed be He'.<sup>37</sup> As Metatron, he becomes an angel standing

<sup>34</sup> Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 222.

<sup>35</sup> *Soddei Razayya*, quoted in Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 230.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron tradition*, 335f.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 203. Note that the mystical dimension of Enoch was also known in Christian circles, cf. Wybren Scheepsma, 'Hendrik van Leuven,

at the right hand of God on the throne. He is equally endowed with redemptive or salvific virtues (as he was supposed to have been present at the liberation of the Jews from Pharaonic Egypt). In that respect, Metatron is also seen as a paradigmatic *high priest*, comparable to Simeon in the *Jesus Sirach* passage that lends its name to Eckhart's sermon *Quasi stella matutina*.<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, we find attempts in Nehemiah's *Commentary* to describe the apotheosis (or, angelification) of Enoch by using gematria of the Hebrew word *ben/Son* = 52. I will briefly mention some examples of Metatron's names brought together by Nehemiah and that have the numerical value of 52. Again, I will be drawing on Idel's analyses. 1) Yahoel; 2) Eliyahu/Elijah (the Old Testament prophet who ascended to heaven without dying, usually seen as the harbinger of the Messiah); 3) YHWH WHYH ('and the Lord was');<sup>39</sup> 4) YWD HH WW HH (the full spelling of the letters of God's name); 5) *we-'Elohiy* (and God's), an expression referring to the divine realm.<sup>40</sup>

The implications we can infer from this alternative effort to think sonship are hardly different from those we saw in Eleazar of Worms. To start with, human apotheosis is possible, man can become a Son of God (see Enoch's example). Next, 'sonship' does not upgrade one to a higher, divine form of being, for the son remains *subordinated* to the Father. To borrow an expression from Peter Brown quoted by Idel, sonship relies on 'mystical solidarity' rather than on generation. Finally, sonship does not rely on incarnation but on embodiment. The divine name is *imposed* on the son rather than it being his original property. Sonship is *morphic*, not carnal. Embodiment means that it is a 'result of divine dwelling within human beings'.<sup>41</sup>

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Dominican, visionary, and spiritual leader of Beguines', in: F.J. Griffiths & J. Hotchin (Eds.), *Partners in spirit: Women, men, and religious life in Germany, 1100-1500*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, 271-302: esp. 280ff.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. for example 'Metatron bears the world by his great power and he depends upon the finger of God' (*Sefer ha-cheshek* 24; quoted by Idel, 'Some forlorn writings of a forgotten Ashkenazic prophet', 190) and 'Ein Meister sagt: Gottes Vernunft ist es, woran das Sein des Engels gänzlich hängt'. Eckhart, *Quasi stella matutina*, in: Quint, *Eckharts Predigte und Traktate*, 199.

<sup>39</sup> It would be interesting to compare this Metatronic name with the passage 'and he war' in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, commented extensively by Jacques Derrida. Cf. *Ulysse gramophone: Deux mots pour Joyce*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 197-218.

<sup>41</sup> Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 59, 60. Also cf. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a speculum that shines: Vision and imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism*, Princeton: PUR, 1994, 255ff.

## ECKHART AND JEWISH ESOTERICISM – ORIGINAL OPENNESS OR NEED OF ATTRACTION?

Let us in conclusion highlight some important issues. Comparing a Christian mystic to Jewish esoterics tends to blur dogmatic distinctions. Eckhart minimises the role of the traditional Christian dogmas of Trinity and Incarnation; instead, he emphasises their psychical nature, inasmuch as their essence lies in their virtually eternal repetition in the human soul. The core of salvation history, in Eckhart, is psychical in kind, liable to unremitting experience. Furthermore, this salvific repetition in the soul elevates man to an angelic, cherubic status: man will experience the immediate presence of God, to which man will be a witness. The ‘birth of God’ in the soul (‘theogenesis’) repeats an *original* event: man ought to be an *adverb* to God’s preceding word. As the latter’s witness, man bears testimony in his behaviour to this ‘theogenetic’ event.

So far Eckhart and Askenazi Hasidim can understand each other fully. Sonship entails an eternal possibility for each and every single human being. ‘Intellect’, in the sense of rationality, has no share in this possibility, unless it is rooted in the act of *receiving* God’s incipient word.

On the other hand, however, in the Ashkenazi Hasidim (as opposed to Jewish *philosophers* such as Maimonides or ibn Ezra), there seems to be no ontic equivalent to Eckhart’s *Vernunft* or *Fünklein in der Seele* (which expresses human receptivity for God). Man’s susceptibility to language (i.e. God’s word), his capacity to *listen*, enables man to become associated with God, to become his son. For Eckhart, this capacity to listen is part of man, it is his unity with God himself: ‘Wenn dies alles erfüllt ist, dann senkt Gott ein weiteres in der Seele Grund (...). [D]ann spricht der liebe Vater sein ewiges Wort in die Seele’. For the Hasidim, man is as yet unfinished, incomplete, he has yet to become complete, or rather, to complete himself by *attracting* the divine name; this is the condition for man’s becoming God’s image, as we have seen. To quote Idel: ‘the presence of the letters of the divine name within an anthropoidic figure ensures its vitality’.<sup>42</sup> Or Eleazar of Worms in his *Commentary on the Merkavah*: ‘knowledge of the divine name coupled with upright behaviour causes someone to be “like one of the ministering angels, and he is received from camp to camp, for he is like an angel and his soul is bound to the high and exalted throne”’.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 227.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Idel, *Sonship and Jewish mysticism*, 229.