

Zohar Appendix II

THE COSMIC SCHEME OF THE ZOHAR

In the terminology of the Zohar, a prominent part is played by three pairs of correlative terms which, taken from the language of ordinary life, are frequently used by it with an esoteric significance. These pairs are (a) male and female; (b) right and left; and (c) upper and lower. These terms are worthy of special consideration, because they embody, more than any others, the cosmology of the Zohar, and so lie at the root of its philosophy and ethics; and what is more, a proper understanding of them will be found to afford a clue to some of the most puzzling symbolism of the Zohar.

(a) Male and Female. These terms are applied by the Zohar in a mystic sense to certain generative pairs—the one member imparting and the other receiving—the union of which is holy. The first of such pairs are the two primordial grades of the Godhead indicated in the first verse of Genesis by the words Reshith and Elohim, and commonly designated by the Zohar Father and Mother, and by the Cabbala Wisdom (Hokmah) and Understanding (Binah). The Father imparts to the Mother the plan or design of creation, and the product is the creative instrument, the Voice. The Voice, again, indicated, according to the Zohar, by the word ‘heavens’ in the first verse of Genesis, combines with the inchoate material called ‘earth’, as male with female, to produce the six days of Creation. A little lower in the scale, a male and female pair is constituted by the ‘upper waters’ and ‘lower waters’, which produce the vegetative power of the earth. The chain of holiness is completed in the union of the first human pair.

The terms male and female are further applied to the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ worlds in a sense which will be considered later.

(b) Right and Left. The terms ‘right’ and ‘left’ are used by the Zohar, first of the twin qualities of the Godhead, Kindness and Rigour, and then of the instruments by means of which these qualities are exercised. This distinction assumes in the Zohar many ramifications which will be best understood if we trace it to its basis in the Biblical text, as follows.

The second verse of Genesis, according to the Zohar, describes what might be called the first approaches to one another of heaven and earth, which produced not actual ‘being’, but a kind of ‘being-about-to-be’. The earth in this stage is said to have been of two qualities: (a) ‘formless’ (tohu), and (b) ‘inchoate’ (bohu). Correspondingly, the heaven was of two qualities: (a) ‘darkness on the face of the deep’ (t'hom, identified by the Zohar with tohu), and (b) ‘the spirit of God moving over the face of the waters’ (identified by the Zohar with bohu).

Thus the material of creation was of two qualities, and correspondingly the product was of two qualities. From the ‘spirit of God hovering over the waters’ issued light, characterized as ‘good’, and forming the content of the first day under the aegis of the divine attribute of Hesed (kindness, or mercy). From the ‘darkness on the face of the deep’ issued the firmament, not characterized as good, and forming the content of the second day under the aegis of the divine attribute of Geburah (force, or rigour). Though luminous in itself, the firmament is dark by the side of the primordial light. And the fact that the formula ‘God saw that it was good’ is omitted from the account of the second day may be taken as a sign that the work of that day was not devoid of evil.

The whole of this exposition is not found in the Zohar as we have it, but it fits in with the general scheme of the Zohar, and it does at least explain why, in the Zohar, evil and darkness are so often associated with the grade of the second day, and why that grade is always supposed to be in latent if not open conflict with the grade of the first day. Certain it is that we have a constant contrast between Hesed, light, good, on the one side, and Geburah, darkness, evil, on the other. Why these two sides are called respectively right and left is not explicitly stated in the Zohar. We may find a reason in the Biblical verse: ‘O that his left hand were under my head and his right hand were embracing me’ (S. S. II, 6), which in various places in the Zohar is applied to the relations of the grades Hesed and Geburah to the Shekinah.

(c) Upper and Lower. The terms ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ are frequently used in a more or less popular sense in the Zohar, to indicate the distinction between heaven and earth, between God and angels, between angels and men, between the future world and this world, and so forth. More specially, the term ‘upper’ is sometimes applied to the three primary grades of the Godhead to distinguish them from the seven secondary grades. There is, however, a further highly characteristic use of the terms which demands more particular consideration.

The Zohar, as has been explained in the Appendix to Vol. I, draws a distinction between the seventh of the secondary grades and the preceding six, corresponding to the distinction drawn in the first chapter of Genesis between the seventh day and the preceding six. The essence of this distinction, according to the Zohar, is that the six grades are active creative or controlling forces, whereas the seventh is by comparison passive, merely reflecting the work of the others. It is what might be called the self-consciousness or introspective faculty of the Godhead. It thus stands to the others in the relation of the moon to the sun, and is therefore frequently

designated 'moon' without more ado. It is also regarded as 'female' in relation to the other grades, which thus become 'male'. The world reflected in this 'moon', which is also the Shekinah, is 'lower' in relation to the actual, real world of the other six grades. But it is of this reflected world that the soul (neshamah) of man forms a part, or at any rate an emanation; and hence the extraordinary importance which is attached to it in the Zohar. The 'upper world', though complete in itself, is regarded as lacking its final consummation without the lower (a hint of this is found by the Zohar in the letter beth with which Genesis commences), and hence the relation between the two worlds is often pictured by the Zohar in language of eroticism based on the Song of Songs.